Go Off the Deep End

by DarkAcey

Summary

"It was unreasonable, insane really, to love a man who wanted to kill him. Silas knew that. But if they were meant to be together, the fact that Erick was breathing underwater next to him should have been enough proof. It had to be."

Erick takes to the sea to hunt down his parents' killers - mysterious pirates who slaughter sailors and destroy every ship that crosses their path. Everyone believes they are just bloodthirsty humans, but Erick knows the truth. They are merfolk, monsters more fish than human. But when Erick catches a young merman, fate pulls him under into a life he could only imagine in his worst nightmares.

*Currently undergoing extensive revisions* Follow me on Twitter @DarkAcey for updates.

Notes

I began this story when Crumbcake put her Teen Wolf fanfic, "Under Your Scales" on hold. Even though I'm not a fan of Teen Wolf, I enjoyed her characters and the story she created too much to let it go unfinished. As a warning, however, I have a bad habit of not finishing stories too, so we will see how far I go. I will also edit chapters as necessary, so don't be surprised if you read a chapter once and find it completely different later.
*UPDATE* Since Crumbcake's account has been deactivated, I've removed the tag including my work in the Teen Wolf fandom. I've renamed all of my characters and have since completely diverged from Crumbcake's story, so it didn't make sense to keep it now that her story isn't online anymore.

*UPDATE* I made a tumblr! Check out http://darkacey.tumblr.com/ to see my art and fan art of my characters. Drop me a comment here if you check it out.

*UPDATE* I'm on Twitter now @DarkAcey. I post some drawings, but mostly it's updates about my writing and life.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

A man harasses his best friend at work.

Chapter Notes

~ Sept. 23, 2019 ~
Hello, friends! After a very long wait (January to September 2019), I'm finally updating this story by replacing the opening with four new chapters. They may be familiar from my other version of this story, Other Side of the Water, but they've been revised to reflect changes I'm going to be making through the rest of my work.

I will be honest, it will be a long time until I have properly new material rather than just revisions. However, to continue this story, I know now that I need to change a few key details. If you want to reread as old chapters get replaced or moved to make space for new sections, subscribe to see updates or follow me on Twitter @AceyDark. I tweet about my writing process and things that I find interesting/relevant to my work.

As bells rang distantly from the Aelloian chantry and the canning factories on the west end of Anvil Point, signaling the end of the day, Erick jogged down the gangplank of a fishing boat into the crowd of people returning home. He angled sideways often as he went, cutting between fellow fishermen, sailors, or dockworkers. His head bobbed above most of the men he rushed past. Several cursed at him when Erick’s broad shoulders bumped into their backs, but their ire couldn’t dampen his elated mood. His spirit was with the seagulls cawing above him in the fading blue to orange sky. The ebb and flow of voices, normally a force that dragged him down, went over and around him as it ran through the busy docks and coastline streets.

Ahead of Erick lay a large, half-barrel shaped building at the end of the docks. It was one of many buildings that comprised the shipyard. Entering through its massive open doors, Erick looked up at the scaffolding around a half-built tanker ship. The shipwrights didn’t seem to have made a lot of progress since the last time he had come. Then again, it had only been about a fortnight ago. Dozens of people were putting away tools and climbing down rickety ladders, making their way past Erick. The wide space echoed with the clang of metal, footsteps, and people wrapping up their work.

When Erick spotted a woman with a long braid of raven hair tied up with a purple bandana, he waved his hand and called, “Talia!”

Talia hadn’t heard him as she made her way back to the ground. She jumped down the last few feet and disappeared into the receding wave of her fellow shipbuilders. Erick lifted his chin to better see over the crowd, despite that his height already afforded him a better view than most people. He called Talia’s name again before he spotted her heading towards him and the exit. Several strands of her black hair had fallen out of her thick braid and bandana. When she noticed him and his
unusually cheerful expression, Talia halted in her tracks. She grimaced, rolling her almond-shaped eyes skyward. Shaking her head, she continued again, but picked up her pace and veered away from Erick.

“Talia, don’t be like that,” Erick said as he jogged over to intercept her. “I—”

“Erick, I swear to god, if you’re gonna try to talk me into hunting mermaids again, I will clock you with a sledgehammer.” Talia stopped to glare at him, challenging her friend to let her prove her threat. The people passing them looked amused or unsurprised and indifferent.

Erick held up his hands in defense, even though she didn’t have her tools and was half his weight. He knew she always kept a knife hidden on her belt. “Hey, I never said you would have to do the hunting part—”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not interested?” Talia said. “I’m not going to help you find a ship or a crew!”

“You don’t need to anymore,” Erick answered. “My uncle promised me that he’ll let me use The Gentian if I can get people to join me, and I found some this morning!”

Talia’s eyebrows knotted together as she gave him a look of disbelief. “That crusty hard-ass is actually going to let you play with that old thing?” The Gentian was a schooner Erick and his uncle used to sail during Erick’s teenage years. Talia had been allowed to join only one of their outings. It had been an enjoyable experience until Talia and Erick’s uncle got into an argument over the Aelloians suppressing the rights of queer people. Their argument ended when Talia pushed Ivan overboard. Though it had been satisfying and she didn’t really regret it, it did permanently solidify the antagonism between them.

“Yeah, I can hardly believe it either.” Erick grinned.

“There has to be a catch. Who’d you manage to talk into this?”

“Dunley,” Erick answered. “You know, my drinking buddy from my fishing crew?”

“Really?” Talia said, arching her eyebrow. “I thought he had a better head on his shoulders than that.”

Erick gave Talia a peeved expression for implying they were both crazy. “Must you still doubt me? He doesn’t really think we’ll find any mers either, but he’s at least open to the possibility and likes the idea of not gutting fish all day for a while.”

“Ah.” Talia pressed her lips into a thin line, facing the ground with an exasperated look. “That explains it.”

“It’s a good deal whether or not we catch anything, so you can’t complain. He thinks he can get two of his friends to be deckhands, and his wife knows another woman who can be our cook. That means I only need a first mate now. I want that to be you.”

“Of course,” Talia grumbled. She brushed back her stray hair and held her temples. “It sounds nice and all that Dunley and your uncle are agreeing to this, but it’s not going to accomplish anything. You’re just getting a vacation and pretending its work.”

Erick frowned at the jab. “It’s not a vacation. It’ll be easier than my job now, but someone has to find out why these wrecks keep happening and stop it.”
“But you’re not going to. It’s just going to waste your money and make yourself look like a fool all over again.”

“So? My reputation was already beyond saving,” Erick retorted, becoming short with her. “And it wouldn’t be my money I’d be wasting anyway. My uncle said he’d fund everything.”

“Then you’re just being a spoiled fool.”

“No I’m not!” Erick said, stepping forward to lean over her. “Do you realize how hard I worked to get my uncle’s approval? How many meetings I’ve had to dress up for and make my case? You might not believe it, but I really have been cutting back on drinking to prove I can be responsible. I haven’t been arrested for over three months.”

“Gee, so you’ve finally caught up with the rest of functioning society?” Talia tilted up her head to sneer at him. “That’s not something to brag about.”

Erick’s face darkened. “Well, it’s a big deal to me.” He turned away. “Call me crazy all you want, but getting this ship and crew together is the only reason I have right now to keep my act together. Don’t you at least care about that?”

“I would care more if it didn’t involve chasing after fairytale monsters.”

“They’re not a fairytale!” Erick balled his hands into fists.

“Then why has no one seen them but old sailors?” Talia asked. “They’re just stories drunks and Aelloians tell to mess with us, like Father Winter or garden fairies.”

“My uncle isn’t like that.”

“Are you really that certain? He only told you about merfolk after your parents died. Why can’t you just accept it was just some freak accident instead of murder?”

“Because it wasn’t an accident! Their ship was targeted just like the ones sinking now, and I’ll be damned if I let it continue.”

“You’re damning yourself by not letting this go.”

Erick set his jaw and fumed silently, debating how to refute her. Talia merely stared in return and didn’t waver. She was right to doubt him, Erick knew, despite not wanting to admit it. His obsession with getting revenge was what had caused him to become a drunk in the first place and start fights with everyone who mocked him for it. He resigned himself years ago to the fact that no one in town would ever let him live it down and had given up trying to convince people to believe him, but then ships all across the coast recently began sinking mysteriously just like his parents’ did.

Eventually, Erick sighed and turned away his head. “Maybe I’m just supposed to be damned either way then. But you ought to at least give me the chance to prove I’m right. If we can’t find anything, then things will just go back to the way they were before. But if we can catch these fiends, it’ll save lives.”

“Why can’t there be an option where you stay sober and move on?”

“Because I would’ve picked that already if I had any other reason to care,” Erick answered. “This city is shit and the rest of the world is no better. Nothing will change if I can’t prove everyone wrong.”
“You can’t…” Talia cut herself off, hanging her head. “Fine. Whatever.” She held up her hands. “Continue being a dumbass.”

Erick stared at Talia for a moment before shaking his head. “Okay,” he sighed. “But my offer still stands. I need a first mate, and there’s no one else I trust more than you, despite how little faith you have in me.” He paused, noticing then how almost all of the shipbuilders had vacated the building. Looking downcast at Talia, he added, “I was just hoping we could do this together.”

“If I have to watch you fall apart again, I don’t think I can.”

“Then just jump ship if I do.” Erick shrugged, at a loss. “You don’t need to keep bailing me out and I’m not asking you to either. Joining me is supposed to benefit both of us, not just be a favor.”

Erick waited for Talia to respond, but she remained silent. “Just please at least think about it,” he said eventually. “I’m going to meet Dunley and his friends tonight at a bar called The Footsore Roebuck. I’d like it if you’d join us.”

“I’d rather just go home,” Talia answered without looking up at Erick. “I’ve had a long enough day as-is.”

“I guess that’s fair,” Erick said, nodding. “If you change your mind, you can always come by my apartment later.”

“I doubt I will.” Talia took a step to leave. “If I visit, it’ll be to steal all your alcohol.”

Erick smiled wryly. “I’m not trying to go completely sober.”

“You should, though.” Talia looked towards the docks, where furled sails and rigging lay distantly silhouetted against the deepening red sunset. “It’s stupid that you needed your uncle to bribe you with a whole ship just to make you cut back at all.”

“He’s not really bribing me. He knows how important it is for me to be out there.”

Talia rolled her eyes. “Whatever you say.” She pat his shoulder as she walked past him. “Have fun with your little hunting crew.”

“I’d have more fun if you’d join us,” Erick said, holding out his hands as he turned to watch her leave.

“It’s not gonna happen,” Talia called without looking back. She gave him a backhanded wave goodbye as she disappeared into the crowd.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

A young merman explores a sunken ship with his salvaging crew.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of the coast of Anvil Point, several leagues under peaceful waves, rested the broken hull of a sunken ship. Half of its keel was buried in the sand. Two of its three masts had snapped from a long since passed storm. What little rigging was left had grown greyish-green coral. The sight of it slowly revealing itself behind the blue haze of the ocean left a young merman breathless as he swam towards it. His crimson, gold, and topaz tailfin rippled with excitement. As he began to be able to pick out its masts under a tangle of ropes and yardarms, his bright amber eyes widened. “It’s huge.”

“It’s a whaleship,” Monty said, delighted by Silas’ awe while he swam beside him. The older, gaunt merman had a nasal voice, an amputated forearm, and an unruly mane of pale blond hair. The two other members of their salvaging crew, Doris and Iara, followed behind them. Their scaled tails glimmered red-gold, yellow-grey, indigo, and fuchsia respectively under the sunlight filtering through the waves above.

Silas glanced over at his mentor, shocked. “How can you tell?”

“See the trywork behind the foremast?” Monty pointed at the base of a coral-crusted brick furnace built into the top deck. It had two giant holes at the top. “That’s where some big pots would go to render blubber into oil, but it looks like other salvagers already picked them up.” Pointing to boats Silas mistook for unusually large life rafts hanging near its stern, Monty added, “Those are its whaleboats. They normally have harpoon cannons mounted on their bows.”

“Wow.” Silas didn’t know whether to be more awed or horrified to see one of the worst feats of human invention. Whales were sacred to merfolk. They were sacred to merfolk. It was forbidden for mers except those employed by the king to hunt them, and even then, the right was given only under especially important circumstances. Humans, however, hunted whales indiscriminately, barbarically bleeding them to death. Many mers had tried to stop their hunting, but most ended up being killed or captured. Those who did succeed in sinking whaleships hardly made a difference. Humans always sent out new ones.

“Is it really worth it to go in?” Iara asked, nervously tugging a lock of her long auburn hair. It flowed over her back and fuchsia tail like a cape. “If it’s already been explored, we’re not likely to find anything anyway.”

“Huh?” Silas turned towards her in disbelief. “We can’t just not check it out! Even it’s a sand hole, I want to see what it’s like inside.”

“But it looks cursed.” Iara continued twisting her hair around her hands. “Whaleships are always creepy.”
Doris laughed and swam closer to her partner to rub her slender back. “Darling, have more faith in the gods.” Doris readjusted her salvaging bag to push it back behind her ample, indigo-scaled hips. “If there were any bad spirits there, Krastasius or Bellune would have found them and sent them to the abyss already.” She was referring to the gods of salvagers and hunters, both of which were often invoked by mers who explored the open ocean.

Iara continued to look doubtful, so Silas swam ahead to face her. “It’ll be okay. Nothing can hurt us as long as we stick together.” Looking over at his mentor, he added, “Right, Monty?”

“Of course,” Monty answered. “Even if you want to wait outside, Iara, Silas needs the experience. He won’t become a seasoned salvager if he doesn’t explore all the wrecks we can find.”

“I know…” Iara sighed. “I was just hoping we’d find something nice, like a carrack or galleon.”

“Then you’re too picky,” Silas said. “I’m just happy we found something already.”

“That’s the spirit.” Monty grinned and tousled Silas’ golden blond hair.

“Hey!” Silas laughed and batted away Monty’s hand. “It’s not like it’s hard to have fun when I’m with you guys.”

“That’s true!” Doris said, grinning as she wrapped her arm around Iara and pulled her over to hug Silas too. “You’re my favorite two shrimps!” She squeezed the more slender mers together with her thick arms. Monty smirked at the three of them, quite content to keep the water in his gills.

“Dory!” Iara squealed, failing to wriggle out of her partner’s grip. “You’re going to tangle my hair.” Her auburn locks twisted around them, becoming less like a cape and more like a personal kelp forest.

Doris rubbed her nose against Iara’s forehead without letting go of Silas or Iara. “I’ll help you braid it up then. We wouldn’t want it to get snagged on the ship.”

Silas looked up at Doris with an eager smile. “Can I help too?”

“Sure, squirt.” Doris let go of them and swam behind Iara. While they continued swimming, she began combing her fingers through Iara’s hair. “Gather up the left side and I’ll get the right.”

“Got it.” Silas followed Doris’ lead, carefully watching how she braided Iara’s hair. They divided it into three braids before uniting them into one much thicker and shorter braid.

Iara patted her hair to make sure the two of them got it all tied up before she smiled at Doris. “Thank you, darling.” She gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek and petted Doris’ short, dyed-pink hair. “A shame I can’t braid yours.”

Doris nuzzled Iara’s face with her own. “At least it still matches you,” she said, glancing down at the scales that covered Iara’s chest and tail.

Silas watched the two of them flirt as his smile faded, envious. He didn’t have a romantic partner, and hadn’t been able to find anyone he liked in that way at all yet, despite having already come of age last year. Back home in Peleran, his best friend, Gale told him it was because he never spent enough time in the shoal, but Silas didn’t see the appeal of living sheltered as a pearl. He liked exploring the ocean too much to stay within the bounds of their coral homes.

When the four of them reached the whaleship, Silas found it was bigger than his and his neighbors’ houses combined. After they swam around its perimeter to survey its openings, they entered
through the top deck. They took out glowing, blue-green algae lamps from their bags to illuminate
the dark cavern within the hull of the ship. Crabs skittered away as they swam over broken oil
barrels and sand that had drifted inside. Small fish darted around calcified, crooked support beams
like dust motes. When Silas spotted an upturned table against a slanted wall that used to be a
ceiling, he grinned and spun around in the water to orient himself with the ship’s original position.

Though half of the ship was buried in sediment, Silas mentally swept it away and righted the table
in his mind to picture sailors playing a dice game. He didn’t know if humans played the same
kinds of games as merfolk, but he liked to think that even whalers would enjoy them if given the
chance. That was the trouble of forbidding contact between humans and merfolk on their side of
the sea. No matter how many relics Silas could find in their sunken ships, he couldn’t expect a
pocket watch to tell him what humans liked to do in their free time.

Doris laughed when she saw Silas floating sideways. “What are you doing?”

“Hm?” Silas twisted to face her, ending up upside down. “Just thinking about the sailors that had
been here. Do you ever wish you could meet a human?”

“Not particularly,” Doris answered. “The ones around here would probably try to put us in a zoo or
something.”

“Yeah, but what if there were humans here that wouldn’t do that, like in the northeast?”

“Dunno.” Doris shrugged and turned to follow the others, who had gone further into the ship. “I
wouldn’t know what to talk about. They’d probably think we’re weird for obsessing over their
junk, don’t you think?”

about you? Would you want to meet a human?”

“Meet one, on this side of the sea?” Monty laughed. “I’ve already lost an arm. I don’t need to go
losing my tail too.”

Silas pouted. “They can’t all be bad.”

“No, but it’s not worth the risk,” Monty said. “There’s a reason we only trade with them in the
northeast. They got contracts and rules and keep out any humans that can’t be trusted. Staying
away from them is just easier.”

“More like more boring,” Silas muttered, though he let the subject drop. Even if his crew wouldn’t
agree with him, he knew there had to be others that would.

Chapter End Notes

The first version of this chapter was posted in Other Side of the Water, but I’ve since
updated for Go Off the Deep End by replacing the man o’ war ship Silas finds there
with a whaler instead. It helps hammer home the antagonism between human and
merfolk much earlier.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Erick meets his new crew members and explains what he knows about merpiracy. He later finds an unexpected guest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So, Talia’s not joining us?” Dunley asked, sitting at the bar as Erick came and sat down beside him. Dunley’s friends were sitting on his other side. Behind the four of them, candles burned on the round tables and oil lanterns hung between the rafters. The bottles lining the back of the bar glittered in their warm, dull light. It made Dunley’s beard look almost brown instead of its usual intense ginger.

“Not tonight, at least,” Erick answered. He rolled up his sleeves to his elbows and folded his arms on the bar. The white of his sleeves looked stark against his deeply tanned, olive skin. “She still thinks all this is just a waste of time.”

“Ah. Sorry to hear that.” Dunley stroked his ginger beard with a thoughtful expression. “It’s a waste not to join. You’re basically offering us a paid vacation.”

Erick looked peeved at Dunley. “You could at least pretend to take this seriously.”

Dunley laughed. “I am, but you can’t deny we’re going to have a lot of free time while we look for your mermaids.”

Rolling his eyes, Erick said, “Fine.” He then leaned forward to better see the two men Dunley brought. “Anyway, will you introduce me to your friends?”

“Of course.” Dunley leaned back and gestured to each of them in turn over his rotund waist. “Erick, this is Flynn and Eustace.” While Flynn was nearly as tall as Erick, he was hardly even half as wide, as skinny as he was. Due to his fair complexion, he was also perpetually sunburned. Eustace looked the opposite, being short and stout with deep, umber-brown skin. He had knotted a white bandana over his head and pulled it down low over his groomed eyebrows.

“It’s a pleasure making your acquaintance,” Flynn said, reaching over Dunley to shake Erick’s hand.

Erick accepted it and nodded to Eustace as well, as he couldn’t reach his hand. “Thank you both for coming. I assume Dunley has told you the gist of why I’m recruiting you two?”

“Yes, sir,” Flynn said. “You needed some deckhands to fill out a mermaid-hunting team?”

“That’s basically it,” Erick said. “Did you two have any questions before I run through the details?”

“Yeah,” Eustace said. “Why you want to hunt them down? Ain’t all this a lot for a storytelling thing?”
Though Erick had expected that question, it nevertheless annoyed him since it was largely common knowledge among all the men he started fights with in bars. He was a tempting target, especially for the men who held animosity towards Erick’s uncle. The fact that Erick had been able to avoid getting arrested for three months now had less to do with his self-restraint and more to do with him avoiding going to bars entirely.

With a sigh, Erick said, “It’s not just ‘a storytelling thing.’ Merfolk killed my parents when I was ten. They sunk their ship, and now they’re sinking other people’s ships. Dunley and I saw it.”

“Technically we only saw a wreck, not any mermaids,” Dunley clarified.

“Yeah, but you agreed with me that it was weird.” Erick turned to Flynn and Eustace. “It was a perfectly clear day, but it was completely destroyed. Mere cannon fire couldn’t have done it, and pirates wouldn’t want to sink everything anyway. And we’re not the only ones who’ve seen wrecks like it. They’ve started happening a lot around here.”

“Okay?” Flynn scratched his eyebrow. “How’s a mermaid supposed to do that?”

“They enchant the sailors,” Erick answered. “My uncle has seen them do it.”

Eustace frowned, skeptical. “Why should we believe him?”

“My uncle is one of the richest people in Anvil Point,” Erick answered flatly. “He used to own a big trading company and was a captain of his own ship before then. When he traveled northeast to Hazavasi, that was when he saw what those fish freaks can do, and he swore he’d never go back there.”

Flynn began to look uneasy. “Really?”

“Why do they even sink ships?” Eustace asked.

“They think it’s fun and they want the stuff we have.” Erick sat back. “As soon as they can get a sailor in the water, they’ll take anything valuable off of him and fight over it.”

Dunley chuckled. “You’re making them sound more like wolves than seductresses.”

“Well, they are,” Erick said. “My uncle used to tell me all the time about how they all have sharp teeth and long, greedy fingers. They’re all more fish than human.”

“All right then,” Eustace said, nodding. “Say we do find them – how do we know they won’t sink our ship?”

“I’m going to outfit it with harpoon cannons and nets,” Erick answered. “If they try to attack us, we’ll be able to fight back, and if they try to enchant us, we can just plug up our ears. We shouldn’t have to worry about either though because they only seem to target merchant ships. Any fights we get into will probably just to stop them from attacking other sailors.”

“Sounds fair enough,” Flynn said, leaning forward with his elbows on the bar. “When can we start?”

Erick shrugged. “It depends on when I can get Talia onboard. I don’t really want anyone else.”

“Why not?” Eustace asked. “She your girlfriend or something?”

“No,” Erick answered, shaking his head. “It’s not like that. We’ve just been friends since we were
kids, and she knows way more about sailing than me. She was married to a captain a few years ago and was his first mate, but he died at sea during a storm. She hasn’t been able to get work on another ship since then, but I’m not sure she’s really been trying that much either.”

Dunley gave Erick a sober look. “If she doesn’t want to go back to sea, then we ought to try finding someone else. If you’ll have me as first mate, it shouldn’t be too hard to find another deckhand. We can put up a bulletin or something. And if we don’t find anybody, we probably don’t even really need more people.”

“I know. It’s just that neither of us has actually run a ship. We’re just seasonal fishermen.”

“Yeah, but we can learn as we go,” Dunley said. “It’s not like we’re trying to go anywhere in particular or have a specific schedule. We just have to make sure we don’t get lost or sail out too far.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

Dunley pat Erick on the back. “Don’t worry about it so much. Whether she joins us or not, we’re already going to be having a lot more fun with this than gutting fish every day. Just buck up and be glad we get to do this at all.”

Erick sighed, but nodded. “Okay.” He waved over the bartender to get a beer. “We’ll figure this all out one way or another.”

* * *

When Erick returned to his studio apartment, he was confused when he unlocked the door and saw his lamps were lit. “What the…?” He stepped inside cautiously. Then he saw his unexpected guest and laughed. “Talia, what are you doing here?”

She was sitting on his couch with her legs propped up on the coffee table, reading one of the books from his shelves. An opened bottle of beer sat on the end table beside her. Lowering the book, Talia gave him a poker face. “What does it look like? I’m stealing all of your alcohol.”

“Uh-huh.” Erick tried and failed to hold back a grin as he put his hands on his hips. “You’re not being very efficient about it, are you?”

Talia shrugged and tossed aside the book onto one of his couch’s pillows. “I figured you’d take longer.”

Erick shook his head with a chuckle. “Of course.” He went to sit on his bed across from her. His apartment had his bedroom space and living area facing each other. His kitchen stood in the back. The large window behind the dining table overlooked the docks, where hundreds of lanterns hanging from boats and street lights were just barely visible through the reflection of his apartment on the glass. It mirrored Erick as he leaned back on his hands on the bed and stretched out his legs. His feet almost reached the coffee table. “You know breaking into people’s places is rude, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s more rude to harass people at their workplaces.” Talia pulled her legs off the coffee table and sat up. “How’d things go with Dunley’s friends?”

“Good, you know.” Erick tipped his head to the side. “They’re all onboard with the idea. Dunley says he’ll be my first mate if you won’t.”

Talia scoffed. “Does he even know how to use a sextant?” She picked up her beer and took a drink.
“I don’t know, but I could probably try to teach him. Ivan’s taken me sailing plenty of times.”

“Only once at night, though.” Talia pointed at him with her hand still holding the neck of her bottle. “Can you read the stars?”

“Yeah, though it’s been a while, I’ll admit. I can probably get Ivan to give me a refresher course.”

Talia rolled her eyes. “You talked him into giving you a ship and you don’t even remember everything about navigating beyond the coast?”

“I leave sight of land almost every day.”

“But you’re not in command of your fishing boat.” Talia shook her head and rested her arms on her knees. She tapped her bottle against her leg. Sighing, she looked back up at Erick. “Are you really going to go out there with nothing but your teenage experience sailing and a rag-tag crew?”

“I mean… Yeah?” Erick held up his hands, sheepish.

Talia lowered her head again, muttering a curse. She hit her hand on her knee. “Fine then.” Sitting up, she said, “If you’re all going to be such a dumbasses, I’m going to have to make sure you all don’t fucking kill yourselves out there.”

Erick grinned. “So you will join us?”

“More like babysit, but sure.”

“Yes!” Erick did a fist-pump. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Talia finished off her beer and stood up. “You don’t have to gloat about it.” As she walked to the door, she said, “I’ll put in my two weeks and all that tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Talia.” Erick jumped up to open the door for her. “I promise, you’re not going to regret it.”

“I better not.” As she glanced back up at him, her poker face faltered with a smirk. “You’re gonna owe me big time, you hear?”

“Loud and clear, first mate.”

Chapter End Notes

A few of the key changes to the story so far that I want to point out here:
- Erick now knows merfolk can enchant people, but still doesn’t quite get how
- The northeast I kept ambiguously talking about is now named Hazavasi
- Talia’s issue with joining Erick’s crew is no longer related to the trauma of her husband dying, but instead her concern for Erick that hunting merfolk is just going to further alienate him from society
- The Aelloians are a new group that will become more important later. Kudos to you if you can guess where the name comes from and how they might affect the plot.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Monty tells Silas he’s going on a trip without him. Silas struggles to kill time in the shoal. He later comes across a wreck with his best friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What am I supposed to do while you’re gone?” Silas whined, dramatically slumping his shoulders at Monty while they minded the shop of one of their mutual friends, Jeb. The market chasm where mers could buy and sell just about anything that could be found in the ocean was having a slow morning. Few mers passed Jeb’s shop and fewer still stopped to look at the salvaged goods they sold. While they waited for Jeb’s return, Monty explained to Silas that he would be leaving Peleran for a few weeks with all of his old salvager friends as a kind of reunion and last hurrah for those deciding to officially retire. Though Silas understood and was happy for Monty, it didn’t change the fact that he would be stuck home.

“Why don’t you try working with Gale?” Monty suggested. “Getting some practice in the reef fields isn’t a bad idea.”

“But it’s boring.” Silas turned to fold his arms on the shop counter and pouted. “Collecting crabs and starfish isn’t as fun as finding coins or other stuff.” Not to mention, it was also still too close to home for Silas’ liking. The reef fields were barely beyond the edge of the shoal. A third of all of their food and coral goods came from the reefs that surrounded them. The other two thirds came from the open ocean to the north and east of them and the kelp forests along the southern coast. If Silas wanted to practice collecting food, he would have sooner joined the hunters or the workers in the kelp forest. However, Silas preferred to support himself by having Jeb sell most of the things he salvaged.

“I agree, it isn’t, but it’s still important to know how to forage beyond the shoal. You never want to be out exploring and run out of food.”

“Yeah, I know,” Silas answered. “But I got the basics down already and most of what we cross isn’t reefs.”

“True,” Monty conceded. “It would make your father happier if you at least gave it a try.” Silas groaned. “So?” He glanced back over at his mentor. “Was he bothering you again about me working with you?”

Monty laughed. “No, but he’s talked to me about it often enough. I imagine he’ll be pleased when you tell him about my reunion trip.”

Silas dropped his forehead onto the counter. “Pleased and be annoying about it.” Though Silas became one of Monty’s apprentices when he was fifteen, two years before he even came of age, his father, Ronan still didn’t fully approve. He saw it as a dangerous pastime for eccentrics, people who tended to cause trouble or get into trouble because of their obsession with human relics. The missing half of Monty’s arm evidenced the hazards of exploring shipwrecks. Sharks commonly
prowled around their waters. Ronan allowed Silas’ chosen profession because he trusted Monty’s experience and knew it made Silas happy, but it did not stop him from nagging Silas to take up a safer occupation.

“He can’t help it,” Monty said sympathetically. “You are all he has left.”

“I don’t care. I’m not a baby anymore.”

Monty stared at Silas for a moment, smirking at the irony of Silas’ pouting. “Maybe not a baby, but perhaps still more a child.”

“No I’m not,” Silas protested, sitting upright. “I’m eighteen – plenty old enough for him to stop treating me like a kid.”

“Well, if you try humoring him while I’m gone, maybe he’ll stop.”

“Doubt it. He’ll just think he’s winning.”

“Perhaps.” Monty shrugged. “But you might as well try anyway. Doing something different for a while will be good for you. All salvagers have to take odd jobs now and then between trips.”

“I guess.” Silas couldn’t argue with that, but it didn’t make him any happier.

* * *

After Monty left on his trip, Silas spent the first few days mainly with Jeb in his shop, if only to remain surrounded by human trinkets. When that lost its appeal, he wandered the shoal. That, too, quickly grew old. On a particularly dull morning, Silas went to Doris and Iara’s house to see if they would be willing to go for a little excursion outside the shoal, just a quick jaunt to sift the sand beyond the reefs and come back before dinner. Their answer dismayed him.

“We’re sorry, Silas,” Iara said, guiltily wringing her long hair. “But Doris and I were planning on going to a party today.”

“There isn’t really any point to play around in the sand either,” Doris added. “Just stop going stir crazy and try to enjoy being home. Don’t you have other people you can hang out with?”

“Just Gale, but he’s always busy with work or his other friends.” Silas settled on the floor of their living area. “And his mom, I guess, but I wouldn’t want to bother her either. The same goes for all of my dad’s friends.”

“Why don’t you try meeting someone new?” Iara offered.

“How?” Silas asked. “I don’t socialize. Nobody my age likes human stuff, and I annoy everybody who’s older than me.” He hugged his tail against his chest. “Gale is the only person I know who’s my same age, and that’s just because his mom was friends with both of my dads. Monty and Jeb are both old enough to be grandparents, and only I know you two because of Monty.”

Iara and Doris looked at each other, both frowning. Silas didn’t blame them for being unsure how to respond. They had already tried many times to bring Silas into their group of friends, but Doris and Iara tended to hang out with other couples or singles looking to settle down. They always gossiped about who was sleeping with who, which couples were expecting, or family dramas that Silas couldn’t keep straight. Gale’s friends tended to talk about similar subjects or sports. Silas mainly enjoyed spending time with Monty and Jeb and the other old salvagers because they all had
great stories about noteworthy wrecks, but Silas felt more often than not like an outsider whenever they reminisced about old times or got into arguments about politics.

“Well,” Doris said after a moment, “Monty’s taken on other ’prentices. Aren’t you friendly with any of them?”

“Sort of, but not enough to feel like asking them to hang out with me. And half of them are exactly the kind of people that give my dad reason to think of all salvagers as miscreants.”

Doris snorted. “Yeah, but since when did you care?”

“I don’t, but I don’t want to give him something new to nag me about.”

“Fair enough,” Doris conceded.

“How about we hang out tomorrow and try to figure out something you can do?” Iara asked. “In the meantime, I’m sure Gale’s not so busy that he can’t spend time with you. Have you even asked yet?”

Silas shook his head. “No.”

“Then go ask him,” Iara chided gently. “If he can’t do anything with you today, you can at least find out when he’ll be free.”

With a sigh, Silas said, “Okay.”

* * *

“How in the abyss is this more fun than literally anything else we could be doing back home?” Gale asked while he watched Silas chip away at a rock that he thought looked like a cannonball. His burgundy tail flicked impatiently. Since Gale turned out to be free after all, Silas had managed to convince him to leave the shoal so he could search the seabed for wayward artifacts. Gale followed like a long-suffering big brother, rolling his eyes at Silas’ odd enthusiasm and yet still unable to refuse him.

“It’s more fun because you never know what you’ll find,” Silas answered. “Everything back home always stays the same.”

“The people don’t. There’s always plenty to talk about.”

Silas looked up from his rock to stare petulantly at Gale. “Gossiping is nothing like salvaging and you know it.”

Gale laughed. “Nuh-uh. You like digging in dirt, and I like digging into rumors.”

“But you can’t do anything with a rumor,” Silas answered. “You can hold human stuff, look at it, and sell it to find more stuff.”

“What’s the point of looking at it if you can’t talk to it?”

Silas glowered at Gale before looking back down at his rock. Deciding that it wasn’t a cannonball after all, he tossed it aside and put his chisel back into his bag. As he continued swimming, he said, “The point is that I can imagine where it might have been used on land, or who might have owned it, or how far it might have traveled. I want to figure out that stuff.”
“But you’re never going to be able to, not unless you move to one of the shoals in the northeast.”

“Well, maybe I will one day.” Silas shrugged, looking off into the endless blue expanse ahead of them. The surface was barely a lighter blue haze above them.

“That’s an awfully far way to go just to satisfy your curiosity.”

“So?” Silas didn’t feel like arguing that it wasn’t just curiosity that propelled him. He had tried to explain and failed many times. It was something more like an obsession, though he wouldn’t use that word. It was closer to a calling, a nameless feeling that his search had some purpose. Not all merfolk believed in fate, but Silas liked to think it was real.

“I’m just saying you make things harder than they need to be,” Gale said.

“You just don’t like working.”

“Yeah? Nothing wrong with that.”

Silas rolled his eyes. Before he could think up a retort that wouldn’t also be telling off himself for refusing to do anything that didn’t involve salvaging, he noticed a dark spot near the surface ahead of them. “Huh?” Silas angled upwards. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” Gale followed after him. As they grew closer, his eyes narrowed. “It looks like pieces of a ship.”

Silas’ eyes widened. “You think?” he asked, glancing back at him.

“What else would it be?”

“Let’s check it out!” Silas darted ahead.

“Wait, Silas!” Gale swam after him.

When they neared the surface, Silas froze. In the mess of broken wood and tangled ropes floated the face-down bodies of humans.

“What…? Oh, gods.” Gale stopped beside Silas. “Are they all dead?”

“I… I don’t know.” Silas shook his head disbelievingly, eyes picking through the wreckage. He swallowed hard and continued swimming up. “Help me look.”

“Are you serious?” Gale looked horrorstruck. “Silas, even if any of them are alive, what are we supposed to do?”

“I don’t know!” Silas stopped beneath one man, but put his hand over his mouth against the urge to throw up. The man’s throat was slit open. Tearing away his gaze, Silas darted to another man. His neck was also cut. One of his earlobes was torn as well, as if someone had ripped out an earring. The third man he found was stabbed through the chest. As he continued checking each body, he said, “All of them were killed.”

“Holy shit.” Gale watched Silas at a distance, unable to make himself go near the dead bodies. “We shouldn’t be here. Sharks are going to smell the blood.”

“Then keep an eye out for them.” Silas circled the wreckage again as he finished looking over the bodies. His initial horror was fading to pity. There were no survivors. This was not his first time encountering the remains of dead humans, but he had never seen them so fresh. Silas inclined his
head. Putting a fist over his heart, he murmured a prayer to Kazima to guide their spirits and help
them find refuge with her in the abyss. He didn’t know if humans who died on land went to the
same place as merfolk, but he couldn’t fathom them going anywhere else if they died at sea.

When Silas finished his prayer, he turned back to Gale. “Come on.” He began swimming down.
“There’s probably stuff in the sand beneath them.”

Gale gaped at him. “You still want to salvage stuff?”

Silas shrugged, subdued. “Yeah. I can’t save any of those people, but their things are still worth
being preserved.” When Gale continued looking appalled, Silas said, “Just because these people
died more recently doesn’t change the value of their belongings. Every single thing a salvager finds
belongs to people who died. I know not all of us respect the dead like we should, but saving their
things is how I try to honor their lives.”

Gale glanced back up at the wreck as he followed Silas to the ocean floor. “But doesn’t it freak you
out to be so close to them?”

“What are they going to do, Gale? Their spirits have already passed on. The only thing we have to
worry about now is sharks, and I don’t see any around here yet.”

“Still.”

“Just try not to worry about it,” Silas said, taking back out his sieve to begin searching the sand.
“Praying for them might make you feel better.”

Gale made a face. “Why would I? Humans don’t belong in the abyss.”

Silas frowned back at Gale. “When they die at sea, they deserve to find rest just as much as we
do.”

“Doesn’t mean they have to go the same place as us.”

Scowling, Silas said, “You’re the worst sometimes. You know that?”

Gale smiled wryly. “So are you.”

Chapter End Notes

One of the big things I wanted to address with my revisions is why Silas was hanging
around a wreck with dead people. It felt like a huge, unresolved point of conflict with
his characterization, but this last scene resolves that issue and helped give me space to
introduce Gale much sooner.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Erick finds Silas in the wreck and their fates become entwined.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Erick stood at the bow of *The Gentian* with his elbows leaning on the railing and the toe of his boot resting behind his other heel. The wind blew against the back of his neck and tugged at his loose white shirt. His ship creaked as it cut through the water, rising and falling gently with the waves. The afternoon sun glinted at the edge of his peripheral vision, making Erick squint his viridian green eyes. He stared with a frown at the endless blue horizon.

Behind him at the map table near the helm, a ruckus was raised as Reena, the cook Dunley’s wife recommended, put down her hand of cards for Flynn and Eustace to see. The bachelors groaned in defeat. Erick glanced over his shoulder and saw Flynn begin to unbuckle his pants. He rolled his eyes and made a mental note to never play poker against Reena. Flynn and Eustace had already lost their shirt and shoes, and Eustace had one sock left before he would lose his pants too. Reena had only removed her apron and was looking innocently smug.

Laughing, Talia called, “Atta girl, Reena!” She was sitting on the port railing near the stern, keeping a watch on the sails.

“Aw, c’mon,” Flynn said, dropping his pants with the rest of his clothes and sitting back down in just his underwear. “Can’t you spare some support for us instead?” He picked up the new hand Eustace laid down in front of him.

“That’s what you get for underestimating the little lady,” Dunley said from his seat behind the helm, though he was busy working on a crossword puzzle in a newspaper. He folded over the paper to pencil in a column. “Didn’t I mention she used to wait tables in a gambling house?”

“No,” Flynn answered. “But that would have been nice to know.” He slumped in his seat when he examined his hand. “Aw, fuck.”

Eustace leaned over the table to look at Flynn’s cards. Looking rueful, he said, “Damn. Good luck with that, buddy.”

More playful than serious, Reena said, “Hey, no cheating.”

“Can’t I just tap out?” Flynn sat up to look at Erick at the bow. “Captain, why don’t we trade places?”

“I’m busy actually working.” Erick glanced back over at them with a scowl. “You’re supposed to be helping me find wrecks.”

“And we are, but you can’t blame us for biding our time while we sail,” Flynn answered.

“We’ve all been keeping an eye on the horizon,” Eustace added, reorganizing his cards. He sat
back in his seat and spared at look up at the ocean. “There’s just nothing to see.”

Talia hooked her feet under the railing and turned her face into the wind. “Just let them have their fun. The weather’s nice and I don’t need them for anything right now.”

Erick sighed and hung his head. “But I’m not paying them to play cards,” he muttered under his breath, reaching for the hip flask in his pocket. He took a swig and quickly hid it again before Talia could turn back around. Erick savored the burn, trying to distract himself. He knew his frustration was not with his crew, but with their lack of results.

They had been patrolling the coast for merpirates or shipwrecks for four months now, and summer was nearing its end. Since they began that spring, seventeen more ships had sunk in waters that should have otherwise been safe. Fishing boats had discovered most of them. Erick and his crew had come across only one wreck so far, far too late to have been any use. All of the bodies they found were stabbed to death and maimed by sharks. If they didn’t catch anything soon, he didn’t know how much longer he would be able to justify his uncle’s funding.

When Flynn lost the next hand, Reena thanked them for the game and went below deck to make lunch. The bachelors put back on their clothes and reshuffled their cards to play gin rummy. Dunley sharpened his pencil and filled in another column in his crossword puzzle.

A quarter hour later, Erick got lunch and returned to the bow to keep scanning the horizon for shipwrecks. When he noticed a spattered brown patch on the blue sea, Erick jumped and scrambled for his telescope. He peered through the lens and recognized the curve of a ship’s keel, belly-up on the water.

“We have a wreck!” Erick shouted, not looking away. “Turn us to starboard side, Talia!”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Talia answered, going to take the wheel from Dunley. She barked orders to him, Eustace, and Flynn. Reena came up from the kitchen below deck to lean over the railing and try to see the wreckage herself.

Erick examined the water, searching for any signs of life, human or otherwise. He spotted a body floating face-down, and then another one. His stomach churned at the sight and his jaw clenched. Too late again. By a broken chunk of the deck, Erick then saw someone surface and hoist himself onto the flotsam. Erick tensed. He had pale skin, gold hair, and a scrap of cloth slung over his shoulder as a makeshift bag. Erick opened his mouth to shout that there was a survivor, but then a fiery red tail flicked up and splashed water across his slender back.

* * *

Silas pulled himself up onto a piece of the deck to admire his favorite find of the day, a gold necklace with a coin-sized locket. He had dredged it up from the sand beneath the wreck, as well as a handful of other trinkets he had tucked into the satchel hanging over his shoulder. Gold always looked much better in sunlight than in the murky depths, Silas thought with a smile. Even though he couldn’t breathe very well above water, he kept his gills wet by flicking water onto himself.

Gale surfaced beside Silas with a scowl. His black hair looked comically flat on his head out of the water, as it normally floated like seagrass. “Now you’re just begging for trouble,” he said, glancing at the bodies hardly a dozen yards away. “I could put up with you digging for their stuff beneath them, but hanging out at the surface is completely insane.”

“I’ll just be a minute,” Silas answered. “As soon as I’m done looking, we can go home.”
“Well, hurry up.” Gale looked over the horizon and recoiled when he noticed an approaching schooner. “Silas! There’s a ship headed over here right now!”

Silas glanced up. “Really?” His expression lit up with delight. “Whoa,” he breathed, staring. The full sails seemed to almost reflect the afternoon sun, pulling the ship nimbly over the ocean. Its keel cut through the waves like a shearwater.

“No, not whoa,” Gale retorted. “Humans are bad news.”

“Only if they see us.” Silas shrugged. “It’ll take them a while to get over here.” He reached into his satchel to put away the necklace and took out a brass caliper compass. Opening it like an albatross’ beak, he grinned when he imagined how his salvaging crew would react. Human navigation equipment didn’t often find its way to the market chasm. Pointing the compass’ points at Gale, he pretended to make it talk at him as he said, “They probably can’t see us yet anyway.”

“So?” Gale glared at the caliper compass. “They will soon, and they’ll think we’re the ones who killed these people,” he argued. “I don’t want to be around when they start firing cannons.”

“Okay, just let me finish looking at the rest of my finds.” Silas put back the caliper compass and took out a spoon. Unlike the others in his collection, it wasn’t crusted with a dull patina yet. “It’s impossible to really appreciate them underwater, you know.”

“And it’s also impossible if you’re dead,” Gale snapped. He looked back up at the ship and could now see the men aboard. The largest of the men was waving his arm forward at the mermen, as if the gesture could make the ship sail faster, while another man rolled over a cannon. “Gale, we need to go!”

“Gale, relax.” Silas waved the spoon at him. “You’re just being a sourpuss.” He lifted his tail to splash himself again. “They’re not—” The cannon went off. Silas looked up as a harpoon speared his crimson and gold tail. He slid off the broken deck with a shout and dropped the spoon. He grabbed the harpoon to pull it out, but the hooked end tore at his flesh. “Gale!” he cried.

As the rope on the harpoon suddenly grew taut, Gale took his obsidian knife from his belt and seized the harpoon. The men aboard were reeling in Silas as easily as a fish.

“I’m sorry, Gale, I’m sorry!” Silas started crying. The harpoon kept pulling his tail out of the water.

“Shut up and stop flailing,” Gale shouted, struggling to get a good grip on the rope. His curved blade barely splintered the thick, wet fibers.

Another harpoon fired, narrowly missing Gale, followed by a net lined with weights. Ropes attached to the four corners ensnared the net around the two mermen.

“Gale, stop! They’re going to get you too!”

“I don’t care,” he retorted.

“Gale, please!” Silas begged. “I’m sorry. Get help. Both of us won’t have a chance unless you get help.”

They were now within twenty feet of the boat, and Silas could hear the crew going crazy. Gale kept hacking at the rope even as the net started pulling them out of the water.

“Gale, go!” Silas pulled him off the rope and pushed him to the edge of the net. Before Gale could grab the harpoon again or even Silas, he slipped backwards and splashed back into the water.
Gale resurfaced, eyes wide. “Silas!” The crew aboard made angry and disappointed shouts. His grip tightened on his knife.

“Get my dad!” Silas shouted back. “I’ll be okay!”

“No, Silas!” One of the men threw a harpoon at him as another tossed a net. A woman in an apron jumped up and down in excitement, leaning on the railing as she watched the others continue to hoist up Silas. The largest of the men reached into the net and seized Silas’ arm. Gale ducked under the water and swam back out of range. Even if he risked enchanting the sailors to sleep, he knew he couldn’t knock out all of them, especially when they were all riled up like this. He surfaced again. “I’ll come back for you, Silas! Just… Just hang in there!”

Silas couldn’t answer now. The crew had dragged him onto the deck and were pinning down his arms and fin. Gale looked on helplessly. He disappeared back under the water when another harpoon was thrown at him. Gale circled the ship, trying to commit to memory the shape of its sails and every barnacle on the hull. When he saw the men dump Silas into a giant iron-bound tank, he felt a small pang of relief. They weren’t going to kill him. Not yet, at least. Gale held onto that thought as he sped off back home.

* * *

Erick cursed when the second merman slipped out of the net. He threw a harpoon at him and Dunley tossed a net, but he easily dodged both. It was no use to keep trying. They caught one, and that was all he needed. Erick ordered Talia to remove the oiled tarp from the tall, six by three foot glass tank they kept filled just for this occasion. Makeshift stair steps had been built and placed beside it. As soon as she unbolted the grate on the top and propped it open, he told her to go below deck to fetch the surgeon’s kit.

They pulled the merman up to the edge of the deck. Erick reached down to grab his arms, but the merman slapped at him and pushed back against the net.

“Come here, you damn fish!” As Eustace and Dunley continued pulling up the net, Erick hooked one leg around the railing and reached down again. He grabbed hold of the merman’s wrist and wrenched him forward. The merman dug his nails under Erick’s fingers, frantically scrabbling to free himself, but Erick gritted his teeth and held on. Erick kept pulling him forward even as the merman screeched and seized his elbow. Erick screamed when the merman bit his arm. He released his hold, stumbling back as he held his own wrist up to his chest. The fiend’s knife-sharp teeth cut deep into the flesh of his arm.

“Erick!” Talia rushed up to Erick’s side with the surgeon’s kit. Seeing his bloody arm, she said, “It bit you?”

“Yes, now hold down the fucking thing and give me that!” Erick took the surgeon’s kit and set it down. As his crew manhandled the merman onto the deck, Erick hastily bandaged his arm. He used his teeth and his free hand to knot it tight.

The deck was slick with blood and seawater when Erick bent down to remove the harpoon. They had pulled the net off his tail and pushed aside the sailcloth bag slung over his shoulder. Talia held down the end of his fin, Eustace straddled his back, and Reena and Dunley held down his arms. Even with all of them together, they struggled to hold him still. Flynn was still trying to get the second merman.

Erick unsheathed his knife and sawed off the rope on the harpoon. Without bothering to be gentle,
he took the sharp end of the harpoon and pulled it the rest of the way through. The merman shrieked, bucking harder against his captors. His tailfin slipped out of Talia’s hands and she fell back. His tail struck Erick across his face and splattered them with blood.

“Ah, fuck!” Erick wiped off his mouth with the back of his hand and spat. It smeared across his cheek. The taste of the merman’s coppery blood lingered on his tongue. “Goddamn fiend, hold still!” Talia wrangled his tail again and called over Flynn to help her. Pulling the surgeon’s kit closer, Erick took out a needle and a spool of catgut. He sutured the merman’s wounds carelessly, choosing speed over precision as the merman kept bucking. His struggling waned with every passing second. He was running out of oxygen. As soon as Erick closed both sides, he firmly wrapped a linen bandage around his tail and tied it off.

“Done,” Erick stated, standing up. “Get him in the tank.”

His crew picked up the merman together and pulled off the bag slung over his shoulders. Keeping an eye on the boon so they wouldn’t hit their heads, they unceremoniously dumped him into the stale, sun-heated water. Before the merman could come back up to the surface, Talia closed the grate and bolted it shut. The merman grabbed the bars and shook them. Finding it fastened, he pounded on the glass. After a moment of staring, the crew began cheering and slapping each other on the back.

Erick did not cheer, but held his injured arm to his chest and smiled grimly at his catch. The merman was a lot less fishy than he expected him to look, but no one would be able to deny the truth. Merfolk were real, and they were sinking ships. As soon as he and his uncle brought this specimen to the Navy Admiral, they would have the necessary manpower to really get the hunt started. The work the Aelloians began would look like child’s play in comparison.

If only his head wasn’t spinning from the throbbing in his arm. Now that the adrenaline rush was wearing off, the pain spiked beyond anything Erick had experienced before. It radiated up his shoulder and through his chest. As his knees went weak and time seemed to slow down, he wondered if merfolk could enchant or kill people without singing. Toppling forward, Erick saw Talia turn to face him. Her joyous expression contorted into horror. He faintly heard her shout his name before he hit the deck.

Chapter End Notes

~ Sept. 23, 2019 ~
Wow, I've come such a long way from my original first chapter. Erick started out as such an edgelord, brooding by himself. I'm glad I was able to cut all of my info dumping and replace it with some fun characterization to better develop his crew.

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Thank you for reading the first chapter! I always love feedback and questions, so please comment. I will do my best to respond to everyone. Expect updates to be weekly until I start running out of steam. Then it'll be more like once a month.

*6-9-2017 Update*
I fixed the formatting and corrected a couple typos.

*7-6-2017 Update*
I've revised this chapter so it opens with more action instead of info-dumping. If you're
rereading, let me know what you think of the changes.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Erick and Silas each suffer Talia's wrath after their initial encounter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The moment Silas splashed into the tank, he gasped for breath and was shocked at the warmth of the water. He spun around to get back out, but a woman with black hair slammed a grate in his face. Silas tried to get it open just as she bolted it shut. He turned to pound his hands on the glass, but the crew began cheering. Silas searched their faces for any amount of compassion, but they were only clapping each other on the back or pointing at him. Silas then noticed a man standing farther back, the one he bit. Blood was already soaking through the hastily tied bandage on his arm. More was streaked across his face, but Silas realized that was his own. He pressed his hands to the glass. Momentarily forgetting the pain in his tail, he watched the man go glassy-eyed and collapse.

The woman shouted a word that sounded like a name and ran to him. The other people’s mirth vaporized when they saw him face-down. The woman repeated his name as she flipped him onto his back, holding his head. She shouted more words at the crew and grabbed a box sitting on the deck. It had bandages in it like the one they put on Silas' tail, and he realized it must have been some kind of healer’s supply box.

As the woman untied the bandage on his arm, another man came back with a brown bottle. She uncorked it with her teeth and dumped it over the wound. Silas touched his own teeth, cringing at the sight. Two dotted half-circles continued bleeding profusely even as the amber liquid washed off the blood. Silas hadn’t realized how badly he had bitten him. He felt a small pang of remorse, though it was tempered by his throbbing harpoon wound. The woman tightly wrapped up Erick’s arm again.

By now, the other crew members were glaring at Silas. He shied back as a skinny man shouted, gesturing at Silas. Another one with dark skin complained, but then the woman snapped back at them. She got a barrel-chested man and the dark-skinned one to help her carry Erick below deck. Another woman wearing a dirty apron followed them down. The skinny man stayed on deck. He shot Silas a withering look before fiddling with some ropes.

A little while later, the black-haired woman came back up with the two men. She marched up to Silas’ tank and put her hands on her hips.

“I don’t care how much we need you alive,” Talia said, fuming. “If Erick dies because of you, I will kill you. Do you understand?”

Silas didn’t understand, but the hate in her eyes scared him more than the anger he had seen in the men. He hesitantly lifted his hand and put his fingers back on the glass. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Please, I didn’t think I could hurt him that badly. I didn’t kill those people either, I swear.”

Talia’s stomach twisted at the sight of the merman looking so hurt and scared. Erick had always
said they were more fish than human, but the merman’s face looked entirely human except for the
tapered, fan-shaped fins where his ears should have been. His amber eyes held human intelligence,
but they were as round and bright as newly-minted copper shillings. If Talia judged his face based
on human standards of aging, he couldn’t have been more than a teenager.

“What did your bite do to him?” she demanded. “Are you venomous or are your filthy teeth just
ridden with disease?”

Shoulders sinking, Silas said, “I don’t know what you’re saying.” It sounded like she was asking
questions, but he had no idea what she would be asking. He guessed that she was interrogating him
to find out where Gale was going, but for all he knew, she could just as easily be asking how he
liked his tank. He pressed both hands to the glass. “Please just let me go. This water is too hot.”

Talia frowned. The merman’s language was like nothing she had ever heard before. It was lilting
like a song, with few consonants, and his voice was further distorted by the water and glass
between them. She wondered if it was even a language, or if he was just making noises like some
animal. She turned away and faced Dunley.

“It’s time to chart a course back to land,” Talia said. “It didn’t look like there were any survivors at
the wreck, and we’re not going to get anything else from this fish. All we can do now is deliver
him to Erick’s uncle and get Erick to a hospital.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Dunley answered. He tugged on his ginger beard, looking concerned. “But do you
think Erick is going to make it there?”

“He damn well better.” Talia turned on her heel. “I’m going to stay with him until he wakes up. If
any more complications arise, someone has to be there to help.”

“Of course.” Dunley shook his head. When he noticed the sound of the merman beginning to cry,
he turned to their sea charts and muttered, “God speed to us.”

* * *

Erick woke in his cabin. The porthole beside his berth was darkening with sunset. The pain in his
arm had lessened to a dull throbbing, but his head ached like hammers were striking his temples.
He groaned, unable to muster the energy to sit up.

“Erick?” Talia stood up from her seat on the stair-step bench beneath his berth.

“Talia?” he asked, turning his head towards her voice. “What happened?”

“You passed out after the merman bit you,” she answered, worry creasing her eyes. She stepped
onto the bench and sat against the end of his berth, resting her hands on the wood. “You don’t
remember?”

“Merman?” Then the memory hit him. Erick huffed a laugh, grinning weakly. “Right. We did it.
Oh God, we did it.” He looked up at the ceiling like an Aelloian angel was floating over him.

“Yeah, we did.” Talia hoisted herself up to sit by his feet, half-smiling. The worry hadn’t left her
eyes. “I can’t believe you were right.”

“I was right,” he echoed. “Ivan will love it.” Rolling onto his side, he pointed to the cabinet
beneath his nightstand. “We have to celebrate. I have some bourbon in here.”
“What?” Talia followed his gaze before gaping at Erick. “You’ve been keeping a secret liquor stash in here?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” he said, waving away her worry before trying to reach down to open the cabinet. “I just have it for nightcaps and to refill my flask.”

“You… Goddammit, Erick.” Talia face-palmed and gripped his blankets. “Have you been day drinking behind my back this whole time?”

“Huh?” Erick faltered and turned back towards Talia.

“Don’t give me that look! You told me you were cutting back.”

“I am!” Erick scooted back to sit up and grimaced when his head started spinning again. He rubbed his temples. “I did. I haven’t gotten blackout drunk once this summer.”

“Oh my god,” Talia groaned, resting her head on her hand. “That’s like only the bare fucking minimum of what you should be doing.”

“What more do you want from me?” Erick retorted. “You didn’t have any complaints until now.”

“Because I didn’t know you were lying until now!”

Erick turned his face away. Her volume was making his headache worse. “I never said I was going completely sober.”

“Yeah, but you sure as hell let me think you were more sober than this.”

“What does it matter? I’m functioning fine, we’ve had no problems with our crew, and we’ve finally caught a goddamn merman! I see nothing wrong here.”

“Except that he knocked you unconscious and we have no idea what else he can do.”

“So? I’m fine now.”

“Are you really?” Talia asked. “You still look sick as a dog.”

“That’s because you’re giving me a headache. Just lay off.” Erick ran a hand over his face and rubbed between his eyes. His mouth and throat were starting to feel uncomfortably dry. “If you don’t want to celebrate, would you at least pass me a glass of water?”

Talia sighed. “Fine.” She got up and poured him a glass from the pitcher on his nightstand. Handing it over to him, she sat back down at the foot of his berth. “When we get back to land, we’re going to need to keep talking about this.”

“No, we don’t. You don’t have to keep mothering me.”

“Sure.” Talia rolled her eyes and watched Erick gulp down his water. “Do you have any ideas why the merman’s bite affected you like this? None of us can decide what happened.”

“No.” Erick put his emptied glass down on his nightstand. “Ivan never told me anything about their bites being able to that.”

“Could it be an enchanting thing?” Talia asked.

“Maybe?” Erick shrugged and put his hand over his bandages and gently squeezed it. “I don’t think I heard either of them singing, though. Did you?”
“No, but the one we caught seems like he can talk, even though we can’t understand him.”

“Really?” Erick frowned in confusion at the thought of merfolk being able to communicate like people. “How is he now, the merman?”

“Dunley’s watching him now,” she answered. “He’s still alive, last I checked.”

“Go make sure.” Erick avoided looking at her. “We need him alive, otherwise people will think we just grafted a fish tail onto a human being.”

Talia nodded slightly, pursing her lips. “Of course.” They were both quiet for a moment before she hopped down and went to the door. “Should I have Reena bring you dinner now?”

“Go ahead, I suppose, but I’m not that hungry.” The water had helped his parched throat, but his headache was making him nauseous now.

“All right then.” Talia paused. “I’ll send her along with an update on the merman.” She left his cabin and closed the door behind her.

When her footsteps faded, Erick buried his face in his hand.

Chapter End Notes

~ Sept. 23, 2019 ~
Reading over my old notes, it's cute how I was so obsessed with kudos and updating often. I miss being able to reward my readers' engagement. Even though it might be confusing to new readers by leaving up my old notes, I'd rather keep the record of my thoughts than delete it with my old work here. (I'm archiving everything on my computer for nostalgia's sake, so nothing is really being lost.)
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That wraps up chapter 2! What do you all think of the characters so far? I'm enjoying Erick most right now because I have a soft spot for cranky characters.

Now, regarding my posting schedule. I've written up through chapter 5 now, but I'm going to wait to post them so I have a buffer. From this point forward, this story will update every Wednesday.

[I deleted the old chapter 3 because I combined it with the new chapter 5, but I'm saving the old note I had at the top here]
Now that I've written through chapter 11, I am considering doing a double upload next week. I'm writing faster than I had even dared to hope, so I want to be able to have you be able to be closer to where I'm at now in the story.
If I can get 25 kudos before next Wednesday (June 21st), I will upload two chapters instead of one. If I get 25 after then, I'll probably still do a double upload the following week. So, if you all want more, share this story! :)

*EDIT (1/29/2018)* I'm going through my old chapters to update wording/details, and I'm leaving a note on this chapter to point out that I still want to revise the second section of this chapter. It's bothering me that I portrayed Talia as a rejected love interest, but I'm not sure how to fix this section to better show her character. She's supposed to be hurt that Erick put this divide between them and ashamed that she
didn't believe him about merfolk, but they're also just best friends. I'll update this chapter again when I have something better to replace this scene.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Silas wakes up Erick and his crew by singing for help.

Chapter Notes

The first version of this chapter appeared in Other Side of the Water, but I realized during revision that it worked well in this story too. The main changes here relate to the description of the space beneath The Gentian's deck. Since I got to go on a real schooner this past summer (2019), I learned the proper terms I should be using and got a better understanding of their layouts.

Late that evening, Erick was sleeping fitfully when he noticed the eerie sound of something singing. It had the timbre of a human voice, but a lingering resonance like a whale song. Its pitch rose and fell with a forlorn tone and slow beat. Knowing it was coming from the deck, Erick groaned. He pressed his palms over his eyes. Just when he thought the merman couldn’t cause him more trouble, it had to keep him up now.

Before Erick could decide whether or not it was worth getting out of bed, Talia quietly knocked and stepped into his doorway. “Erick?” Seeing that he was awake, she said, “Should we be worried about the merman singing?”

“Possibly?” Erick answered before coughing. His throat felt uncomfortably dry again. He sat up and tried swallowing to alleviate it. Pouring himself a glass of water, he said, “I still feel lucid. You?” He took a sip from his glass and rubbed between his eyes to try to fend off his returning headache.

“Yeah.” Talia rested her hands on the back of her hips. Glancing out the door while Erick drank more water, she said, “He woke up me and Reena, but neither of us feel particularly compelled to free him.”

Erick rested his glass in his lap. “Are the others awake?”

“They were stirring when I came over here, so I think so.”

“Dammit.” Erick took another drink before he put his glass on his nightstand. “None of us are going to get any sleep unless we shut him up.”

“You have a plan?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No, but it can’t be anything a little intimidation can’t solve.” Erick tossed off his blankets and stepped into his boots. He stood unsteadily, his legs feeling weak. Mentally cursing, he figured yelling at the merman would at least help him vent some frustration.

When Erick left his cabin, Reena was standing in the doorway to the ladies’ cabin. Eustace and
Flynn were sitting up in their settee berths on either side of the saloon table, and Dunley had come out his cabin beside the galley.

“What’s going on?” Flynn asked first, pushing aside his lee cloth to get to his feet.

“Is that the merman?” Eustace asked, looking up at the deck.

“Yeah, it’s the damn fiend.” Erick leaned against the wall for the stairs across from his door as The Gentian pitched gently under the waves. “He’s finally awake again and now he’s trying to keep us up all night.”

Flynn and Eustace shared a doubtful look. Dunley frowned at Erick and said, “He just sounds sad to me, Erick.”

“Well, I don’t care if he’s sad,” Erick said as he went upstairs. He found himself needing to lean on the handrail. “He’s coming back to land with us whether it likes it or not.”

On the deck, Erick marched up to the merman’s tank. “Hey!” he called, making the merman flinch. “My crew and I are trying to sleep.” The merman clenched his hands in front of his chest, shrinking away from the glass. “Well? Are you going to keep quiet now?”

Silas watched the human shout with increasing worry. “I’m sorry. I just want to go home.” He curled his tail around himself, wincing slightly as it pulled on his stitches. It hadn’t stopped hurting. Though the sun setting helped greatly, the tank’s warm water still felt heavy in his chest.

Erick hit the tank with his fist and rested his arm above his head against the tank, irritated that he couldn’t understand the merman’s attempt at language. “Is that supposed to be an apology or a question?”

Frowning again at the sound of his hand against the glass, Silas said, “Please, I don’t know what you want. I’m just trying to help my family find me.”

All merfolk had two voices, one for speaking and one for siren singing. Their siren voices were like whale songs in both their sound and how they could be heard over vast distances. It was how many merfolk stayed oriented with each other while they navigated the ocean. Silas had been singing a signal song that meant, “I’m lost. Help me,” hoping that his siren voice would be able to carry down to the water below the ship. It was a slim chance because their voices didn’t carry very well above water. If he didn’t try at all, though, he worried that Gale wouldn’t be able to find him. But if he didn’t quiet down, he feared that it would give Erick a reason to hurt him again.

Erick scowled at the merman. It was obvious that the merman did actually know some kind of language, but Erick had no idea if he was just trying to trick him or if he truly didn’t understand him at all either.

Silas stared back at the human, equally at a loss, but was trying to decide what his plans for him were. He knew plenty of horror stories of what happened to merfolk who got captured by humans. Most of them ended up dead, but those who lived were usually put on display in private collections or traveling freak shows. Since his captors seemed to want him alive, Silas could only assume that they were going to try to make money off of him. To do that, they would need to make sure he stayed presentable. How much they were willing to do to keep him healthy was another question entirely.

Hesitantly, Silas uncurled his tail and pointed at his stitches. “This hurts. Do you have medicine?” He pantomimed rubbing a salve over his wound. “Please?”
Erick frowned. “Your tail hurts?” At his questioning tone, the merman pointed more insistently at his tail. “I guess we never did give you painkillers.” He turned back towards the stairs below deck, where Talia and the others waited. They were all giving him judgmental or concerned looks for yelling at the merman. “What?” he demanded. “Would you all have rather listen to him whine all night?”

Flynn and Eustace escaped back downstairs. Reena remained behind Dunley while he sighed and shook his head. Talia rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, answering, “We’d rather you be nicer to the thing. You’ve proven merfolk exist, but it just feels like we’ve kidnapped some kid instead of a monster.”

“You shouldn’t let his appearance get to you. Just because his face looks human doesn’t mean he’s actually like us.”

“So you say, but he sure is cowering a lot for a monster.” Talia turned on her heel and headed back below deck.

“If you’re going to argue, would you at least bring back up the surgeon’s kit?”

“Fine,” she called back up.

Dunley walked up beside Erick and looked more closely at the merman now that he was awake. Glancing over at his captain, he asked, “What exactly is our plan with this kid?”

“We’re taking him to my uncle and then showing him to the Navy Admiral and anyone else who matters,” Erick answered curtly. “That’s always been the plan.”

“All right, but can we actually keep him in a tank this small?” Dunley gestured to how the merman’s tail couldn’t lay flat against the bottom, as it had to curl around the edge or up against the side.

“Ivan has a pool at his estate. I’m sure he can pour some more salt into it to make it work for him,” Erick said, nodding towards the merman. “He seems fine for now.”

“So you do plan to keep him? We’re not going to bring him back to the ocean?”

“Why would we?” Erick asked. “There must be dozens of people who’d want the chance to study him.”

Dunley tugged on his beard, lowering his eyebrows.

Erick sighed. “Look, I know all of you think I’m crazy, but I have been trying to catch these fiends for years. You all knew that when I brought you aboard. I’m not about to just let the first one I’ve ever caught go free again so easily.”

“We caught him, and all we saw him do was look at stuff from the wreck.” Dunley turned to return below deck as Talia came back with the surgeon’s kit. “We’ll help you get him to your uncle, but I won’t stand for you or anyone else mistreating him any more than we are already.”

Erick shook his head, but said, “Fine.” He took the surgeon kit from Talia and opened it up. “I’m caring for him now, so you all can stop looking at me like I’m the bad guy here.” He shook out two pills from a bottle and passed the kit back to Talia. “I know none of you thought we’d actually catch one, but you could at least be a little happier for me.”

“It’s hard to be happy when the fish is guilt tripping us,” Talia said as she watched Erick climb up
the steps to the top of the merman’s tank.

“He just wants you to feel bad so we let him go.” Erick rapped his knuckles against the grate over the top of the tank. “Hey, fiend, come get your medicine.”

“I’d do the same if you put me in a fish tank,” Talia said, looking over at the merman as he pushed himself up from the bottom of the tank.

Silas hooked his fingers over the grate and lifted his head above the water. He pushed his hair away from his face and looked at the strange, white pills in the human’s hand. It seemed like medicine, but Silas worried that it could just make him feel worse.

“Swallow this.” Erick picked up one of the pills and lowered his hand through the grate towards the merman. To make his point more clear, he swallowed it dry since he needed it for his headache anyway and then pointed back at the one in his hand. It seemed for a moment that the merman wouldn’t take it, but then his hand cautiously lifted out of the water beneath Erick’s. Erick dropped the pill onto his palm. “That’s all we have to help your tail, so you’re just going to have to suck it up if it’s not enough.”

Silas tilted his head at the human, wondering what he said before he looked back down at the pill. Its chalky texture was melting in the water on his skin. Frowning somewhat, Silas murmured, “Thank you.” He knocked it back before his courage could fail and grimaced at its bitter taste. “Bleck!” Silas stuck out his tongue and quickly sucked up some water to rinse out his mouth. Looking indignantly at his captor, he said, “That was disgusting. How do you humans stand this stuff?”

Taken aback by the merman’s over dramatic reaction, Erick laughed. “Don’t be mad at me. I could’ve just let you suffer.”

Silas lowered his head so his nose went underwater. He exhaled bubbles and scowled at him.

The merman’s petulant look only made Erick laugh more. “Jeez, you are really grumpy now.” He looked down at Talia. “Look at him, can you see his face?”

“Not really, and I don’t particularly want to laugh at him.”

“Killjoy.” Erick climbed back down the steps, keeping his hand on the side of the tank in case he stumbled from the weakness in his legs. “Let’s just hope he stays quiet now.”

“I doubt he will, but I’ll leave it to you to deal with it if he doesn’t.”

“Fair enough.” Erick gestured for her to go on and he followed her back below deck. Erick settled back into his bed just as the merman began singing again. With a groan, Erick rolled over and put his pillow over his head. They would only have to listen to it for two more days. He could let the dumb fish have that little mercy.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Erick gets told off by his crew for not resting and Silas realizes why Erick is ill.

Chapter Notes

Wow, 10 more kudos already! We didn't reach 25 this week, but I'm sure we can make it there soon. This chapter is a little on the short side, but I hope you will forgive me. I'm taking my time with this story to make sure I don't burn out and quit.

As for other news, I'm updating my previous chapters again to take out the indented tabs. I thought I should have them because I like formatting my writing in Word with tabs, but it makes reading online a lot clunkier.

The following morning, Erick managed to get out of bed, but nearly tripped on the sick bucket Talia had left by his berth. He felt more unsteady on his feet. His throat was painfully dry, so he downed his pitcher of water without even realizing how much he was drinking until he emptied it. He slammed the pewter pitcher onto his nightstand. Leaning on it for support, he cursed the merman using every bit of colorful language he knew. The last thing he wanted was to leave his room, but Talia probably had let him sleep in too much already. His crew was undoubtedly worried about him. He had to show them he was fine.

First Erick made his way down to the galley. He kept his hand on the wall as his legs threatened to give out. He found Reena carving wavy stripes into the handle of a wooden spoon. When Erick knocked on the doorframe, she jumped and lowered her carving blade.

“Erick, you’re up?” Reena asked, surprised. She stood and brushed wood shavings off her apron.

“Yeah.” Erick tried to look casual as he leaned on the door frame. “I’m assuming you saved me some breakfast?”

“Of course.” Reena put down her work and went to the stove. “Why would I ever forget you?” She uncovered a steaming pot and began spooning oatmeal into a bowl. “Are you feeling better?”

“Considering we finally caught one of those fish freaks, I’ve never been better.”

Reena smiled. “That’s good to hear. Talia was saying that she was going to kill the merman if you died.” She held out his bowl of oatmeal.

“Now that would be a waste,” Erick said, accepting the bowl. “Killing him is fine, but she should wait until Ivan’s made good use of him first.” He gave her a wry smile. “I wouldn’t want my death to be in vain, after all.”
“Neither would I,” Reena said, looking uncomfortable, “but I wouldn’t speak so lightly of death. You passed out yesterday, and we still don’t know if you’re out of the woods just yet.”

“I’m fine, Reena.” Erick turned away to sit in the saloon. “Your job is to cook, not worry about me.”

“Very well, Captain.” Reena lowered her head. “For all our sake’s, just please go easy on yourself. I’d rather like to keep this job.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

After Erick ate, he only marginally felt better. His throat was slightly less parched and the food helped bolster his strength. Standing upright still felt shaky, however, forcing him to continue leaning on the wall or nearest surface to him. His failing sea legs was the most concerning part of his condition. He wondered if he should follow Reena’s advice after all, but when he thought about the merman, he knew he couldn’t. He had to see the fiend himself.

Taking his time going up the steps to the deck, Erick shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand. It felt hotter than usual, but he couldn’t tell if it was just the weather or him being sick.

Talia saw him come up and passed the helm to Dunley. Running up to Erick, she asked, “Why are you up? You should be resting.”

“I’m done resting,” Erick answered, waiting by the stairs. “I’ve come up to see the blasted fish freak.”

“All right, but he’s not doing much.” Talia led the way to his tank. “Since he stayed up so late singing, I think he’s finally trying to get some sleep.” She put her hand on her hip and leaned her weight on one leg when they stopped in front of him. “I dug through his bag, by the way,” she said, glancing over at Erick. Her expression wordlessly questioned Erick when he reached up and put a hand on the boon to steady himself. “There wasn’t really anything useful.”

“What was in it?” Erick ignored her prying gaze and looked into the tank. He the merman was sitting at the bottom. His tail was curled up against the walls of the tank. His chest rose and fell quickly with shallow breaths, making the gills along his ribs flutter each time he exhaled.

“Just his spoils from the wreck,” Talia answered. “It was all junk except for a gold necklace.” She crossed her arms as she watched the merman. “He was probably just a scavenger picking off whatever was left. If he had been one of the killers, he would have had some kind of weapon.” She nodded towards the stairs. “His bag’s in my room if you want a look.”

“Hm.” Erick stepped forward and leaned his forearm against the tank. He rested his forehead against it while he continuing to study the merman. The glass was warm under his arm, which occurred to him as odd. Erick then noticed that the merman’s face looked flushed. His eyebrows rose. “Oh, shit.”

“What is it?”

“The fish is burning up.” Erick went up the steps beside the tank and put his fingers in the water. It was as warm as a bath, practically boiling in comparison to the sea. The merman looked up at him with barely any energy. Erick squinted back up at the sun. “We need to get some shade over him, now. Get someone to pull up some fresh water too.”

“On it.” Talia shouted orders to Flynn and Eustace. She then looked back at Erick and saw him sitting down on the steps. He closed his eyes and rested his temple against the tank. The merman
noticed and turned over. He put his fingers on the glass over his cheek, staring at him. The merman’s exhausted expression tightened into a concerned look that took Talia aback. She couldn’t understand why he would show sympathy for any of his captors.

“Erick?” she asked.

He immediately sat back up. “Yes?” The merman pulled back his hand and faced Talia too.

Talia stared at the merman for a moment, then returned her attention to Erick. “Go back to bed,” she told him, scolding him like a child. “Your tough act isn’t fooling me.”

“But Talia—”

“I don’t care. As your first mate and best friend, I’m telling you that it is in the crew’s best interest that you get more rest. We’ll take care of the merman. You take care of yourself, okay?”

Erick wanted to argue, but he knew she was right. “Fine.” He pushed himself up and stepped down the tank’s stairs. “I want hourly reports on the merman, and I will check on him again myself before dark. He probably eats fish, so someone needs to try catching him something to eat. I also want to see his bag.”

“All right. Can I help you back to your room?”

“No, I can get there myself,” Erick snapped. He stepped forward, but then swallowed back a wave of nausea. “Aello’s mercy,” he muttered. “My water pitcher needs to be refilled too.”

“Consider it done then, Captain.” Talia put her hand on her hip. “We’ll take care of everything.”

* * *

Silas watched Erick leave, blearily wondering why Erick looked so ill. He hadn’t seemed that bad last night, but then again, he did pass out yesterday. For all Silas knew, humans could have just been more sensitive to blood loss than merfolk. The puzzle gave him a welcome distraction from the ache in his tail and the hot water. The medicine had helped while it worked, but its effect wore off around dawn. He didn’t have the energy to try asking for more now, despite that it wouldn’t have been difficult to get the attention of anyone on deck.

The grate opening surprised Silas. He looked up just as the black-haired woman lowered a bucket into his tank’s water and passed it to the man with the thick, ginger beard to dump overboard. Narrowing his eyes in confusion, he watched her continue to take water out of his tank. Silas turned his attention back to the other people on deck. The skinny and stout men were unfolding a spare sail. Staring at them as they finished spreading it out and began threading ropes through its corners, Silas hardly noticed his tank’s water level lowering until it was half empty.

When the black-haired woman dumped a bucket of fresh seawater over him, Silas flinched at the temperature difference. “Huh?” He turned up his head and watched her exchange the empty bucket for a full one from the bearded man. She dumped the second bucket and Silas leaned his face into the refreshing downpour. The two of them continued refilling his tank as the other two pulled the spare sail over his tank. Once it was up, Silas realized it was to keep the sun off of him. He felt about ready to cry in relief.

The men went back to managing the sails. Silas leaned back against the wall of his tank and folded his tail against the opposite side, careful not to bend his tail near his stitches or press them against the glass. Closing his eyes, he let himself bask in the reduced temperature and think back over his
situation. Now that his captors were getting better at caring for him, he was less worried about being mistreated. However, almost a full day had passed since he had been captured. His hopes of being rescued dwindled the longer he remained stuck.

Silas glanced back up at the top of the tank. The grate was closed again, so he had lost his chance to try to climb out. The knowledge annoyed him, but he sighed and let it go. There was nothing to be done about it now. If he faked being ill, though, would he have another chance to get free? The idea was tempting, but realistically, he doubted it would work. Even if he managed to pull himself out, it was a long way to drag himself across the deck. The crew would just immediately grab him again. He didn’t think he was strong enough to fight them off, even if he wasn’t weakened by blood loss and the fact that he hadn’t had anything to eat since yesterday.

Opening his eyes to look sidelong at the ship’s helm, he saw the bearded man standing at the wheel. The other two men were still supervising the sails. He noticed the black-haired woman had disappeared and assumed she went below deck, joining the other woman and Erick. The thought of the man he bit made Silas frown. He still didn’t understand how one bite could have made him so ill. Erick had collapsed so quickly, it was like the gods themselves had pushed him down. Silas wondered then if the gods or lesser spirits could have had anything to do with it. As far as he was aware, they never intervened unless prompted by a siren song. But then he remembered blood binding, the one magic merfolk had that didn’t require a song.

“There’s no way,” Silas muttered, even as he considered the possibility. The tradition dated back to the days when the gods swam among merfolk, when all of them could practice mystic arts as easily as breathing. A blood binding was usually the final step in merfolk marriage ceremonies. Couples would each draw blood from the other and then kiss the wound as a promise to always care for each other and show the gods their commitment. If they were truly meant to be together, the gods would bless their union with a sign during the first full moon after their binding. And, if the union was between a human and mer, stories said the gods could transform one of them to match the other.

The more Silas thought over the idea, the more dread filled him. He and Erick had both hurt each other. Did biting him count as a kiss? Silas didn’t want to think so, even as he remembered bloodying Erick’s face with his tail. If that counted as a kiss, his bite surely would. It was an utterly ridiculous notion. The gods couldn’t possibly recognize that random set of accidents as a proper blood binding. But if Erick was sick not because of some weird human frailty, but because he was transforming into a merman, Silas couldn’t ignore the implications.

“Gods…” Silas pushed his hand through his hair and stared at the bandage on his tail. “Erick can’t be the one for me, can he?”

His tank went quiet. The creaking of the ship reverberated through the water, but Silas remained otherwise alone with the terrifying question.

Chapter End Notes

~ Sept. 28, 2019 ~
This chapter doubled in length after I revised it because I added a whole new section after the break. Previously Silas knew right away that the blood binding was the cause, but it made more sense to bring in his realization later.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Erick looks through Silas’ bag and his crew ponders Erick’s condition.

Chapter Notes

We reached 25 kudos! *shoots fireworks* Since I'm too excited to wait, I'm posting your extra chapter now. I'll release chapter 6 on Wednesday. I think I may continue to do double uploads for every 25 kudos, so when I reach 50, I'll post another extra chapter. I'm currently working on chapter 22, so I feel comfortable shrinking down my buffer a little. I am also still editing little things as I write, but I will let you all know if I make any major changes.

Anyway, I'm considering using these chapter notes as a little blog space. Would any of you be interested in my day-to-day happenings? If so, I'll share, but otherwise I'll keep my distance.

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~ Sept. 29, 2018 ~
I'm glad that I decided to talk about my daily life in these notes. I've made friends here because I opened up, and this story wouldn't be here without them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Talia stopped by Erick’s room to pick up his water pitcher, she returned with it refilled and the merman’s bag. “Here you go,” Talia said, setting the pitcher back on his nightstand. She handed the bag to Erick on his bed. “Shout if you need anything. Reena will be just down the hall.”

“Thank you.” Erick set the bag on his lap and scooted up against his pillows to sit up a bit. He had climbed under his covers, despite that he was starting to feel feverish on top of everything else. Once Talia left, he sat up fully and dumped the bag’s contents on his blanket.

The first thing he recognized was a tarnished brass caliper compass. It was in working condition, so he set it aside to decide what to do with it later. Next he picked up what looked like a flour sieve, but the handle was made of smooth coral. Confused, he then looked at a chisel and hammer, but they were made with heavy black glass instead of steel. The hammer’s handle was whalebone. Erick couldn’t imagine that these things had any practical use, so he assumed that they must have been decorative items. He set them aside with the compass and picked up a pinwheel-shaped black rock. The smooth surface also felt like glass, but it was much lighter than the hammer, as if it was hollow. He guessed it must have been a weird paperweight.

Erick tossed the black rock back into the bag and looked back at the remaining mess on his blanket. The strangest item left was a glass ornament filled with spongy algae. He picked it up by the braided loop attached to its top and studied it for a moment before putting it with everything else. Carefully pushing aside pieces of broken blue glass and few assorted coins, he found the gold
necklace Talia mentioned. He untangled the chain and held up the pendant in the light from his porthole window. His eyes widened. It was a simple locket, but it was nearly identical to one his mother wore. His mother’s necklace had a diamond in the center of an eight-pointed star, but this one had a dark emerald instead.

Erick hesitated to open it, but couldn’t resist looking inside. He found himself disappointed to find that it was empty. The inside of his mother’s locket had a miniature painting of a shearwater, the most popular symbol of the Aelloains. Their prophetess, Aello was a local martyr whose voice was blessed to spread the wisdom of their land’s god, the Most Valorous Spirit of the Wind and Air. Those who weren’t enraptured by Aello thought she was a witch creating a cult, so they attempted to burn her at the stake. As the story goes, when the smoke overtook her, Aello’s god transformed her into a shearwater so she could fly safely into his embrace. Erick didn’t really believe she existed, but his parents had been believers and his uncle converted after their death.

When his mother died, her locket had gone with her. Erick shut the locket and squeezed it. The edges cut into his palms. After a moment, he forced his hand to unclench. He undid the clasp and put it on. He gripped the locket again, hating to think that there could be some little boy ashore who had yet to discover that his mother was dead.

Kicking off the broken glass and coins onto the floor, Erick lay back down and beat his pillow. His chest and legs were hurting and his headache hadn’t lessened yet. Every breath felt like breathing sand. Not for the first time, he worried about what that merman had done to him.

* * *

Talia came down to check on Erick and give him the hourly report on the merman as he had ordered, but she found him sound asleep. Stepping carefully around the broken glass scattered across the floor, she went up to his berth and rested the back of her hand on his forehead. She frowned at his temperature, but decided against waking him. She picked up the glass shards and coins and put them back into the merman’s bag. Looking around the room, she found the merman’s other spoils on his nightstand, but couldn’t find the necklace. Talia hoped it was still in his cabin somewhere. It looked expensive, so she was planning on selling it if Erick let her keep it. She hadn’t shown the rest of the crew the bag’s contents yet.

Talia went back to the pitcher and poured a bit into his washbasin to soak a washrag. She wrung it out and folded it to lay over Erick’s forehead. She noticed something glint on his collarbone. “Well, how about that?” She pulled the locket out from underneath his shirt and gave it a closer look. The dark emerald glimmered as she tilted it. Bemused, she asked, “Since when do you accessorize?” She set it back down and pulled up his blanket. She would be sure to tease him about it when he was feeling better. “Sleep well, you dumbass.”

Talia returned to the top deck and looked back at the merman. Now that they had had set up a sunshade and refreshed his tank, the merman was much more awake now. He had a pensive expression while he watched the crew going about their jobs. Catching Talia looking at him, he waved and pressed his other hand to the glass. It looked like he was wanting to tell her something. Narrowing her eyes at him, Talia went to the tank. “What do you want?” she asked. His human face still unnerved her, but it weirded her out more when she looked at division between his stomach and tail. The skin over his hipbones transitioned smoothly to rose gold scales. It was hard to tell exactly where skin ended and scales began.

Silas was surprised the woman actually came to his tank. Now he had to work out the hard part. Hoping she would understand him, he pointed to the stairs below deck and asked, “Erick?”
Talia flinched. “How do you know his name?”

Tilting his head, Silas’ eyebrows knotted. Based on her reaction, he guessed he was right in assuming Erick was the man’s name. He pointed at the stairs again and repeated himself.

“What do you want with Erick?” Talia asked, glaring at him. “He’s bedridden because of you.”

Silas shied back. “Why are you getting angry? I just need to know what’s happening to Erick. He could be turning into a merman right now.” He continued pointing at the stairs and repeated Erick’s name with more emphasis. “Please, if he is, he needs to get to water!” Silas hit his hands against the glass.

“I don’t know what you want,” Talia said. “I’m not bringing up Erick just do you can play charades with him. He needs to rest.” She started to turn away, but the merman shouted and pounded harder on the glass.

“No, please!” Silas said. “I don’t want him to die!”

“Stop it!” Talia snapped. “Erick will check on you whenever he damn well feels like it, but I’m not waking him up for you.” The merman’s distraught expression was starting to get to her, so she quickly went back to the helm where Dunley stood. The merman kept shouting, but she refused to look back at him. Her pity for him dried up when she realized Erick wasn’t getting any better.

Dunley glanced over at the frantic merman before training his gaze on Talia. “What did you say to the poor thing?” He leaned on the wheel and folded his arms around one of the spokes.

Talia crossed her arms as she leaned against the mizzen mast. “I don’t know. He wanted Erick for some reason, but I’m not waking him up just so some fish can babble at him.”

“How could you tell he wanted Erick?”

“He figured out his name somehow, so he was saying it and pointing at the stairs.” Talia shook her head. “I just don’t get why he cares.”

Dunley hummed, thoughtful. “Maybe he knows what his bite does.”

“I don’t doubt that, but why would he care? Seriously,” Talia said, holding up her hand palm-side up, “we harpooned him and shoved him into a fish tank. If that bite kills Erick, shouldn’t that make him happy?”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Dunley turned his head to stare at the merman. He had sunk down to the bottom of the tank and was currently pulling on his hair. “If he really is a kid, he might not have ever killed anyone before.”

Talia rolled her eyes. “You’re still sympathizing with him.”

“And?” Dunley raised his bushy eyebrows. “People up northeast got tales about mermaids rescuing drowning men, falling in love and giving up their fins to live with them on land. I find it hard to believe they’re all as bad as the Aelloian’s stories say.”

“So, basically you’re saying that this merman actually wants to help Erick?”

“Sure.” Dunley shrugged. Gesturing towards him, he said, “I mean, look at him. Does that look like a bloodthirsty killer to you?”
Grudgingly, Talia looked over her shoulder. The merman was hugging his tail now, rubbing the knot on his bandages. Had he been a human holding a pair of legs, Talia would have said he looked just lost and scared. Talia looked away again.

“No, but still. We have no way of knowing what he really wants, and I have no idea how he would even try to help Erick. I doubt his teeth have some sort of anti-venom.”

“True. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Chapter End Notes

So, who has any guesses as to why Silas had a chisel, hammer, and a "useless paperweight" in his satchel? These things come into play much later, but I'm trying to work in more foreshadowing. I always enjoy stories that hide hints like these because it makes rereading more fun, so hopefully I'll be successful.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Erick gets worse and Silas tries to help.

Chapter Notes

I posted this chapter later than usual today, but it's also extra long at about 2,300 words. I've been obsessively checking my kudo count since last week, so believe me when I say that every kudo and comment make me insanely happy. I enjoy all feedback, so please consider sparing a moment to give me your thoughts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Erick,” Dunley said, knocking on Erick’s door as he opened it. “I brought you lunch. You still asleep?”

Erick’s eyes cracked open and he turned his head towards his second mate. He put his hands on either side of his berth and groaned as he pushed himself up. “Do I look asleep to you?”

“No, you look like shit.” Dunley’s mustache curled up with his smile. Passing over a bowl of pea soup with salted pork, he asked, “Are you feeling better at all?”

Erick took the bowl and set it on his nightstand. “No. Don’t tell Talia, but honestly I feel worse.” He rested his forehead on his fist. Sitting up was making him lightheaded. “My chest is killing me and my legs are burning with pins and needles.”

Dunley’s eyebrows rose. “That can’t be good. Are you having difficulty breathing too? What about paralysis?”

“Breathing hurts, but water helps,” Erick answered without looking up. “I can still move my legs and all my toes.”

Dunley went to the nightstand and poured Erick a glass of water. “Well, that’s good at least.” He passed over the glass and Erick immediately began gulping it down. “I’ve never seen this kind of reaction to an animal bite before. Do you think it’s just an infection, or are merfolk somehow venomous?”

Erick finished off the glass and held it out for Dunley to refill. “Talia asked me the same thing. I have no idea. My uncle never said anything about their bite other than that they have sharp teeth.”

“Hm, figures.” Dunley refilled his glass. “Eustace and Flynn were placing bets.”

“Really?” Erick deadpanned at him, but knew he shouldn’t have been surprised. Leave it to those two to make a gamble out of anything. “What side were you on?” He took a normal sip, trying to restrain himself.
“Well, I was thinking infection because he doesn’t have fangs.” Dunley leaned back against the wall and folded his arm over his ample waist, holding out his other hand. “Eustace agreed with me, but Flynn bet venom because you went down so quickly. He’s also just as inclined to believe it’s a magic curse, though.”

“Now that would be something.” Erick held his glass with both hands. “Curses and hypnosis? He hasn’t done the latter yet, though, so maybe he can’t?”

Shrugging, Dunley said, “Your guess is as good as mine, if not better. Your uncle is the expert.”

“True.” Erick looked up at Dunley. “How much longer will it take us to reach land?”

“If the wind holds up, we should make it back by tomorrow morning.”

Erick nodded. “Good.” He sipped his water again before lowering his glass. He pressed his fingers along the rim, watching its contents tip with the ship. “How is the merman doing?”

“Oh, he’s doing a lot better now,” Dunley answered. “Or at least not dying anymore. He keeps asking for you, though.”

“Really?” Erick asked, furrowing his brow as he looked up.

“Yeah.” Dunley chuckled. “He figured out your name. He keeps saying it whenever we pay too much attention to him.”

Erick frowned into his glass. “Make sure to ignore him then.”

“You sure about that?” Dunley asked, raising an eyebrow.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean this merboy doesn’t seem like a bad kid.” At Erick’s skeptical expression, Dunley continued, “I know, but I really don’t think he meant to get you sick.”

“His bite sure felt like he meant it,” Erick retorted. “Don’t let his human face fool you.” He lifted his water to finish it.

“You’re just sour because you’re stuck in bed.”

“I am not!” Erick slammed his glass on his nightstand and glared at Dunley. “You have no idea what kind of creature we’re dealing with.”

“Do you?” Dunley raised his eyebrows dubiously. “You’re so blinded by hate that you won’t even consider the possibility that merfolk could be just like regular people.”

“If you keep talking to me like that, I’ll get Talia to toss you overboard.”

“We both know you like me too much to do that,” Dunley said, getting off the wall. “Even if you get a whole fleet of merfolk hunters, you’re not going to get rid of me that easily.”

Erick scowled at him. “Don’t press your luck.”

“All right.” Dunley held up his hands and turned to leave. “Do you need anything else?”

“No, I’ll come up in a bit.” Erick picked up his bowl of pea soup. “I want to know what that fish fiend wants with me.”
After Erick finished lunch, he stood and his legs immediately buckled beneath him. Swearing, he caught himself on the wall, but his knees hit the floor. His legs had seized up with severe charley horses. Erick gripped his calves, struggling to relax his cramped muscles. He forced himself to stand. Fighting to ignore lingering pain, he continued leaning on against the wall as he tried to catch his breath. Breathing too deeply made his ribs ache.

“I’m going to kill that fish as soon as I’m done with him,” Erick muttered. He slipped on his boots even though the leather chaffed his ankles, then made his way upstairs. The sun felt too hot again. He could practically feel his skin crisping under its arid glare.

As soon as Erick laid his eyes on the tank, he saw the merman press his hands to the glass. He cried Erick’s name, making it sound more like “Erie” through the water. Erick gritted his teeth. He marched up to the tank and slammed his fist onto the glass. “What do you want with me?”

Silas flinched, shrinking back, but didn’t take his eyes off Erick. He searched his face for signs of his transformation, hoping that he was wrong. The blood on his face might not have been his own. Erick might not have actually gotten it in his mouth. Even if he did, it still couldn’t really count as a blood binding, could it?

The man’s olive skin looked pallid. His fist on Silas’ tank seemed like it was the only thing holding him upright. And if Silas wasn’t mistaken, the shape of his ears were starting to flatten out slightly and develop a blueish green tint. It was all the proof he needed. If Erick’s ears were already turning into auditory fins, he was probably developing gills too. Silas had no idea how his legs would turn into a tail, but he knew his pants would definitely complicate the process.

“Hey,” Erick said, rapping on the tank. “Stop staring at me like that!”

Silas hesitantly put his fingers on the glass over Erick’s hand. Hanging his head, he said, “I’m sorry. If I had known, I wouldn’t have…” But he couldn’t finish the thought. He wouldn’t have what? Stayed at the wreck even though Gale warned him? Not have bitten him? Silas wanted to think that he would have acted differently, but a tiny part of him whispered, what if Erick really was the one meant for him? Even though Erick was a human and hated merfolk, Silas was already looking at him in a new light. The man’s viridian eyes were downright mesmerizing despite the anger behind them. It was like being caught in an undertow, and he couldn’t swim out of the current.

“I don’t know what game you’re playing at, fiend,” Erick growled, “but I’m not buying it. You can trick everyone else into pitying you, but I know what kind of monster you really are.” His throat itched and he coughed, wincing as pain shot through his ribs. His lungs felt like they were collapsing and his sides were burning. Clutching his chest, he said, “As soon as I’m done with you, I’m going to enjoy killing you.” He started coughing again and turned away to hide his pained expression.

“Erick!” Silas bent down to try to meet his eyes and pressed his forehead against the glass. As Erick kept coughing, the large bearded man rushed over to him. Silas swam up to face him. “Please help him!” Silas begged. “He needs to get to water.”

The bearded man only looked confused at Silas before putting his arm around Erick. The other two deckhands looked on with concern, and the black-haired woman at the wheel shouted something. Erick stopped coughing and lifted his hand away from his mouth. Blood speckled his palm.
“No…” Silas felt sick. “Oh gods, Erick!” Silas held his head and looked around frantically. None of them understood him. They weren’t going to put Erick in water. Silas looked up, then immediately turned around to whip his tail against the grate. Water splashed out, knocking off the sailcloth shade. Pain spiked along his stitches. The bearded man yelped as he and Erick got soaked. Silas braced his hands against the bottom of the tank and continued sending out waves of water. The effort made his tail throb anew, but Silas grit his teeth against the pain. Erick staggered away from the onslaught while the bearded man held him. When they got out of range, Silas turned back around.

“Stop, please!” Silas shouted. He had tossed out a quarter of the water in his tank. “Erick is going to die!”

Erick heard the merman shouting, but didn’t look back. He had let down his guard for one second, and the cheeky thing had tried to drown him. But even as his chest ached and his legs threatened to give out again, the water felt like cool silk on his skin. He must have been more feverish than he thought. Ignoring Talia shouting at him, Erick let Dunley help him back below deck.

When they got back to Erick’s cabin, Dunley helped Erick settle onto the bench below his berth and said, “I’ll go get you a blanket to dry off.”

“Don’t,” Erick answered, resting his elbows on his knees. ‘The water feels good.”

Dunley paused a beat. “It does?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“Yeah. It’s helping me cool off. I think I have a fever.”

“Oh.” Dunley’s eyes widened, looking up at the ceiling as if he could see through the deck to the merman’s tank.

“Just go calm down Talia,” Erick said, waving him off. “I don’t care how bad I look, I’m not keeling over.”

“Hm?” Dunley turned back to Erick. “Oh, right.” He nodded. “Well, if the waters’ helping, I’ll bring you down a wash bucket.”

“Thanks, but it’s not necessary.”

“Necessary or not, it’s still worth trying.”

Dunley returned to the deck and felt all his crewmates staring. Talia in particular seemed ready to hold him at knifepoint. Looking at each of them in turn, he said, “The captain is all right for now. He just needs more bedrest.”

“He’s been resting all day,” Flynn said, sitting on the deck against the portside railing. He had propped up one leg and rested both hands on his knee. His skinny shins poked out from his too short pants.

“Yeah, and he just about passed out coming up here,” Eustace said from his perch in the starboard rigging. He readjusted the white bandana that covered his pursed eyebrows. “Just give it to us straight, Dunley. Is Erick dying?”

Dunley sighed. He turned his head towards the tank and saw the merman staring at him too, just as worried as the others, if not more so. “Look,” Dunley said. “I don’t want to beat around the bush, but I really don’t know. Erick definitely isn’t doing well. I’m not going lie about that. But all we can do is get to land as quickly as possible.”
“Fine, but what then?” Flynn asked. “What doctor is going know how to deal with a bite from that thing?” he said, pointing at the merman.

“I don’t know,” Dunley answered. “But Erick’s uncle is supposed to be an expert on merfolk, and he’ll know who can help him. If there’s nobody local, I would bet he can bring in somebody.”

Eustace leaned forward in the rigging. “What if they don’t get here in time?”

“Then we pray for our captain and try to get our old jobs back.” Dunley went back to the helm. Picking up the sextant from the navigation table, he asked Talia, “Are you going to bother me about Erick too?”

“No,” Talia answered, facing the sails. “I know you’re being honest.” Her expression was unreadable as the wind played with her flyaway strands of hair.

“Thank you.” Dunley fiddled with the pendulum on the sextant. He had already checked their position before lunch, so he would check again in the next hour. “Erick said all that water actually made him feel better, by the way.” He glanced over at the merman’s tank. “I’m certain now that he’s trying to help.”

Talia followed his gaze and pursed her lips. “Why would getting Erick wet help him?”

“He said it was helping with his fever.” Dunley put back down the sextant.

“I see. Erick did feel hot last time I checked him.”

“So you agree with me then?” Dunley asked.

“Possibly.” Talia shook her head. “I’m still not entirely willing to trust this merman, but I can’t deny him the benefit of doubt. Erick did attack him first.”

Dunley chuckled. “True. When Erick gets better, we can tell him that’s what he gets for being a bully.”

Chapter End Notes

~ Sept. 29, 2019 ~
This chapter and the previous have both only had minor edits focusing on adding detail and revising sentences to fix the flow. I don't think I'll make a note every time I make minor revisions, but you can tell when a chapter has been revised if it has a chapter summary. I didn't bother with summaries when I first began uploading this story, but now I'm including them to ease the process for people wanting to reread.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Erick's crew brings him and Silas to Erick's uncle, and they discover why Erick is ill.

Chapter Notes

We're so close to 50 kudos! As soon as we hit that 50 mark, I will post a bonus chapter. (Though I may post extra anyway because I've already written through chapter 32...)

I want to thank all of you who have read this far and liked my work. It really means the world to me, so I hope I will continue to meet or surpass your expectations.

When The Gentian docked at Anvil Point the following afternoon, Talia wrapped up the merman’s tank with a tarp. She sent Eustace to find the nearest telephone booth and notify Erick’s uncle of their arrival. Dunley went to get his truck from his wife’s house. Reena went home. Erick wanted the merman to be a surprise, so despite his crew’s protests that he should go straight to a hospital and let them deliver the merman, Erick remained on the ship. He sat at the navigation table behind the helm, burning in the sun, as he fanned himself with a folded sea chart. He had long since emptied the water pitcher that Dunley had brought out for him, but Erick didn’t want to request another.

Eustace returned first thirty minutes later, letting Erick know that his uncle was eagerly awaiting his visit, but worrying about his nephew’s sudden illness. Erick had forbidden Eustace from giving his uncle any details about his condition because he didn’t want his uncle to send him to a hospital either. After how long Erick waited to catch a merman, he wanted to see his reaction in person.

Dunley returned with his truck an hour later. With the help of a crane, he worked with the rest of Erick’s crew to load the tank onto his trunk. They had hooked chains to the tank’s four corners through slits in the tarp. Even though the tarp made it more difficult to move, Erick didn’t want to show the public the merman until Ivan had seen it first.

Water spilled from the tank when it landed heavily on the truck bed. Talia shouted at the crane driver to be more careful. He called back for her to repeat herself louder over the noise of mule-drawn carts, buggies, and dockworkers. Erick watched them work, glad that Talia could do all the yelling for him. Despite feeling like he was going to pass out at any moment, everything was going as smoothly as Erick could hope.

As soon as they unhooked the crane’s chains from the tank, Dunley went to the front to wind up the engine. Talia called to Erick, “We’re ready to go!”

“Finally,” Erick muttered. Flynn and Eustace came back onto the ship. As Eustace went to double check all the knots, Flynn came up to Erick.
“Can I help you to the truck, Captain?” Flynn asked.

Though Erick wanted to say no, his legs refused to hold him up anymore. He had needed Dunley’s help up the stairs to the deck earlier that afternoon because couldn’t stand more than a minute on his own without collapsing. His muscles felt like wet rags tied around sticks.

Using the table to push himself up, Erick answered, “Yes, but don’t go slow for me. I’m not an old man.”

“I know.” Flynn put his arm under Erick’s shoulders. He grunted as he took Erick’s weight, feeling like a stick about to break under a toppling tree. Dunley had been much better equipped to hold him. “I don’t want to draw this out any more than I need to either.”

Talia and Dunley were already in the truck when Flynn brought Erick over. As soon as he helped Erick squeeze in next to Talia, Flynn closed the door and leaned over the open window. “We’ll keep care of The Gentian while you’re gone, Captain. Even if you get to command a whole bunch of ships out of this deal, I hope we can keep sailing together.”

Erick forced a smile against his aching ribs. “I’d like that too. I couldn’t ask for a more loyal crew.”

Flynn laughed. “Well, that’s what happens when you give us easy jobs and short travels.”

“And here I thought it was because you actually liked me,” Erick said, deadpanning.

“Eh, maybe a bit of that too.” Flynn lightly punched Erick’s shoulder. “Get better soon. Let us know as soon as you find out if it was venom or infection.”

“Of course.” Erick rolled his eyes. “Dunley told me about your little bet with Eustace.”

“Oh.” Flynn smiled sheepishly.

“It’s fine, Flynn.” He waved him off. “Just don’t gamble away all your earnings. I’m not paying you two to go into debt.”

“Okay, Captain.” Flynn patted the truck and stepped back. As Flynn returned to the ship, the truck puttered down the packed cobblestone street. Both people on foot and other vehicles crowded around them. Water continued sloshing out of the tank as they kept stopping and starting. All the jostling wasn’t doing Erick any favors either. The city stank with rubbish and too many close bodies, but Erick couldn’t close the window. The truck seemed as hot as an oven. Closing his eyes, Erick gripped the door handle and tried not to be sick. When he started to drift off, Erick welcomed the rest. An hour later, when they got out of the worst of traffic and turned onto a gravel road, it only took them fifteen more minutes to reach Ivan’s estate.

The truck passed a brick wall topped with an iron fence and pulled into a wide circle driveway. A koi fish pond with a fountain babbled in the middle of the yard. Trees surrounded the ivy-covered house. In its entirety, the estate was a surprisingly spacious plot among a neighborhood of other lavish houses.

Dunley got out of the truck first. Talia gently shook Erick’s arm. “Hey, time to get up,” she said. Erick’s head lolled forward. “Erick?” Her eyebrows pursed together as Dunley circled around to the passenger door.

“Is he asleep?” Dunley asked, opening the door. Erick fell out, but Dunley caught him. “Oh! Whoa there.” He pushed him back into his seat and lifted up his head. Erick mumbled incoherently,
barely opening his eyes. Dunley put his hand to his forehead. “Shit, he’s burning up.”

“You’re serious?” Talia felt his forehead too. She swore through her teeth. “I thought he was just resting. Help me get him inside.” As Dunley put Erick onto his back, Talia said, “Erick, we’ll get you cooled off. It’ll be okay.” Erick mumbled again. “What’s that?” she asked. Talia climbed out of the truck after Dunley had Erick’s legs secure under his elbows.

Louder, Erick croaked, “Water.” He turned his head into Dunley’s neck to hide his face from the sun.

“Water?” Talia repeated. “Of course, we’ll get you some.” She followed close behind Dunley as he walked to the front door’s stairs. Noticing Erick’s strangely pointed ears and bluish tint, she was about to speak when the front doors opened. An older man with Erick’s same sharp jawline stepped outside. His debonair expression fell into concern as soon as he saw Erick on Dunley’s back.

“What happened?” Ivan asked, hurrying down the stairs. “Is he unconscious?” Despite being in his late sixties, Erick’s uncle walked with a straight back. His greying hair had more pepper than salt. Only the deep worry lines around his eyes betrayed his age.

Dunley answered, “Not quite, but he’s not fully here either. We need to bring down his temperature. Can you get a bath started?”

“Ivan looked at the covered tank on the truck. “Do we need to deal with whatever is in that now?”

“It can wait,” Talia answered. “We need to take care of Erick first.”

“Very well.” Ivan looked far from reassured. He followed close beside Dunley as he carried Erick up the steps. Pointing to his bandaged arm, he asked, “What happened there?”

“A merman bit him,” Talia said, staring at Erick. His face was locked in a grimace as he continued mumbling. She couldn’t tell if he was even aware of his surroundings.

Ivan stumbled. “A what?”

“Erick wanted to surprise you.” Talia glanced back at the tank. “We caught a merman, but he bit Erick when we were bringing him aboard.”

“Oh, sweet Prophetess.” Ivan followed her gaze. “Is he…?”

“Yeah, he’s on the truck. Nobody knows but us and the rest of our crew.”

“I see,” Ivan said with a tremor in his voice. “How prudent.” After they went inside, Dunley carried Erick up another flight of steps into the nearest guest room. Ivan turned on the water in the adjoining bathroom and returned with a towel. “Set him on the bed there,” Ivan said to Dunley, though he was already doing so. Ivan faced Talia. “You may wait downstairs. If you want refreshments, one of the servants will fetch you whatever you may want.”

Talia hesitated to leave. Her stare lingered on Erick as Dunley set him down and wiped his brow. “All right,” she said. “Don’t make me wait long.”

As soon as Talia left, Ivan bent over his nephew. Erick was still mumbling for water. “Hush now, I’m here,” Ivan said, wiping sweat off Erick’s forehead. “You’re overheating, so we need to get you into a cool bath.” He untucked Erick’s shirt and pulled it up over his head.
“Holy shit.” Dunley pointed to Erick’s chest. “Are those…?”

Ivan looked down. The color drained from his face. “Gills,” he breathed.

Chapter End Notes

#sorrynotsorry for that cliffhanger. Enjoy the suspense until next week!
Dunley and Ivan stared at Erick’s chest. Three inflamed slits along each side of his ribs opened and closed in time with his shallow breaths. Blood leaked out at their edges.

Dunley fell into the desk chair, open-mouthed. “They can’t be real,” he said, shaking his head. “He must have cut himself or—”

“They’re real.” Ivan clenched his jaw. He finished pulling off Erick’s shirt and paused in surprise when he saw the locket around his neck. He picked it up and popped it open. Seeing it empty, he snapped it shut and dropped it with an unreadable expression. “I thought not,” he muttered, reaching for Erick’s boots. When he tugged off one, Dunley swore again. Erick’s toes had spread out into the start of a turquoise fin. Translucent cerulean scales covered the arch of his foot.

“How?” Dunley struggled to find words. “It was just one bite. We cleaned the wound.”

“One bite would not have done this,” Ivan said, pulling off the second boot. He then sat beside Erick again and began removing his pants. “Tell me what exactly happened when you caught the merman.”

“Well, Erick shot him with a harpoon.” Dunley averted his eyes as soon as he saw more scales on Erick’s hips. “There were two, but we only caught the one. We fired off a net and reeled him in. When Erick grabbed him to pull him aboard, the merman bit him. Then we got him onto the deck. Talia got the surgeon’s kit. The merman was flailing a lot while Erick stitched him up.”

“Did Erick get his blood in his mouth?”

“Huh? I don’t know, maybe? I think his tail hit his face,” Dunley answered, lifting his shoulders. “Is that important?”

“Yes,” Ivan snapped. He knotted the towel around Erick’s waist. “Help me get him into the tub.”

“Uh, right.” Dunley picked up Erick again and carried him into the bathroom. The feeling of Erick’s scales on his arm unnerved him like snake skin. “Is it safe to, um…?”

“Just put him in, damn it!” Dunley flinched, but obeyed. As Dunley stepped back, Ivan said in a
low voice, “There is a legend about a ritual that can turn humans into merfolk.” Haltingly, he continued, “If a human and a mer draw blood from each other and… consume it… the human can become a mer as well.”

“Oh my fucking…” Dunley turned away, but snapped back at Ivan, “Why the hell didn’t you tell Erick?”

“I didn’t believe it was true!” Ivan retorted. More quietly, he said, “At least I didn’t want to believe it.”

“And so you didn’t tell him, and now he’s turning into a goddamn merman!” Dunley paced the bathroom, then stopped suddenly. “The merman knew! God dammit!”

“What do you mean?” Ivan grabbed Dunley’s shoulder.

“He knew!” Dunley twisted away from Ivan’s hand. He continued pacing the bathroom. “He was crying after Erick our entire trip back. To think I was pitying the damn thing…”

“Dunley!” Ivan grabbed Dunley’s shoulder again, eyes wide. “Stop pacing and explain.”

Dunley stopped and tightened his hands into fists. “After Erick was bedridden, the merman started calling his name, trying to get us to bring him to him. When Erick came up to see what he wanted, he started splashing him. I thought he was trying to help with his fever, but he was trying to soak his gills. God, how long have they even been there?” Dunley looked down at Erick. Now that his chest was submerged, Erick’s pained expression had softened, though he was still oblivious to their conversation. “Did he know?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Ivan answered. He folded his arms and held his elbows. His expression had a faraway look. “If he did, he certainly would not have wanted any of you to know.”

“But why?” Dunley’s shoulders fell as he stared at his friend. “We wouldn’t…”

“Wouldn’t what? Cast him away?” Ivan demanded. “There’s nothing here for him anymore! He will be confined to a tank for the rest of his life if we keep him here.”

“You think this is permanent?”

“Of course.” Ivan shook his head. “This is old magic. Anyone on land who could undo such work has been dead for centuries.”

A heavy silence filled the room. Only the sound of Erick’s raspy breathing broke the quiet stillness.

“So, what then?” Dunley asked, holding out his hands. “We dump him into the sea with the monsters that did this to him?”

“It’s not ideal—”

“Not ideal?” Dunley repeated, facing Ivan with disbelief. “Yeah it’s not ideal, this is Erick. He hates merfolk more than Death himself.”

“And I wish he didn’t!” Ivan hung his head. “Dear lord,” he said, voice cracking, “I wish I hadn’t set him against them.”

“Then why did you?” Dunley asked. “Were his parents even killed by merfolk?”
“They were, but it’s complicated.”

“Then un-complicate it.” Dunley stepped forward. “I’m not a violent man, sir, but I am getting mighty close to breaking something and I can’t promise it won’t be your neck.”

Ivan pinched the bridge of his nose. “You must understand, I was a broken man after Erick’s mother died. My sister, she was everything to me. I wasn’t on the best of terms with the merfolk before her death, but after…”

“Wait, are you saying you actually knew them? Like personally?”

“I have had closer encounters with them than I have admitted, yes, but—”

“So you’re just a liar,” Dunley spat. He stepped back and shook his head.

“It wasn’t all entirely untrue,” Ivan argued. “But the point I’m trying to make—”

“Is that you’re a lying dirt bag who dragged his nephew into his grudge against merfolk. That about cover it?”

“That isn’t the whole story.”

“Then what more do I need to know?” Dunley shouted. He gestured to Erick, who was still unconscious. “This is your fault. When he wakes up, because he better, or so help me God…” He curled back his hand. “You’re going to have to explain all of this.”

“I know.” Ivan wrung his hands. “But right now, I’m more concerned with making sure he does wake up. He can’t survive in bathwater.”

“Okay, but we’re not taking him to the ocean,” Dunley said. “We can’t keep care of him out there.”

Ivan bent down beside the tub. His hands trembled as he brushed back his nephew’s short, thick brunet hair. “I know.” He rubbed his thumb across Erick’s temple. It felt damp and feverish. He leaned over to kiss his forehead, then stood up. “Wait here with him. I need to see the merman.”

Dunley nodded. His anger unclenched at the heartbroken look in Ivan’s eyes. “All right. Talia will help you.” He sighed heavily as he sat on the toilet seat. “God, she doesn’t know yet. She really will kill the merman for this.”

“Ivan paused on his way to the door at that. “I will make sure he’s out of her reach before she finds out then” he said before leaving the bathroom. When he left the bedroom, he turned down the hall rather than proceed down the stairs. He rung for a servant in his room. As Ivan waited, he rubbed his temples.

When a maid came up, he ordered her in a low voice to get his two estate guards to lock the door to Erick’s room and stand outside. No one was to enter or leave until further orders. When she darted off, Ivan opened his nightstand drawer. He stared inside it, hesitating. He fought through the shock of Erick’s situation to collect his thoughts. It was unlikely that Erick would remain unconscious for long. If he woke here with a tail… Ivan considered his options, disliking every idea until he came to a final, grim thought. It would have to work.

Ivan reached down into his nightstand drawer and picked up a pistol. He tucked it into his waistband and smoothed his shirt out on top. He then went to his desk and unlocked a cabinet in the back. Inside were two wiretop bottles, one filled with sand, the other empty, and a leather notebook. He took out the notebook and sat down. Opening it up, he reached for a fresh piece of
parchment and hesitated when he noticed one of his figurines of Aello on top of his desk. He gave it a grieved look and took it down, tossing it into the unlocked cabinet. He then took out his pen and laid down the blank parchment. He had much to write but too little space and time.

When he finished, Ivan hurried downstairs and found Talia in the sitting room.

“Dunley is caring for Erick now,” Ivan stated as he walked in. He masked his pain behind a hardened expression. “Show me the merman.”

Talia immediately rose from her seat on a plush couch. “Is Erick going to be okay?”

“I can’t answer that yet,” Ivan answered. “I need to see the merman first.”

“Okay.” Talia led Ivan back outside. She climbed up onto the truck and lifted up one side of the tarp. The merman looked overheated again from the long drive in the sun. “He doesn’t look like much now, but he’ll perk up again when we get him into some cool water.”

“I see.” Ivan stepped up to the tank and rapped his knuckles on the glass. “Boy, wake up,” he said sharply.

Chapter End Notes

I really enjoyed writing Ivan in this chapter. I see him as a retired super villain, but one with morals. He's still cunning as fuck and a bit of an asshole, but you just gotta love him anyway.

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~ Sept. 29, 2019 ~

Now that I've figured out Ivan's backstory, I had to tweak a lot of things with his characterization in these early chapters. He's still very much a retired super villain, but now he's so much more.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Ivan coerces Silas and Dunley to follow his plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Silas roused with a start at the rapping on tank. He turned his head towards the sound and saw a man who looked like an older version of Erick. His brow and jawline were near identical, but he had grey eyes and a hawkish nose. Silas sat up to face the familiar yet unfamiliar man, despite being exhausted from the heat and his aching stitches. “Do you know Erick?” He tried to look around the tarp, but only saw trees, a house, and an odd stone fixture spitting water into a pond. “Please, where is Erick?”

Ivan stared at the merman, his face unmoving as he struggled momentarily to translate the merman’s questions. It had been over a decade since the last time he spoke mertongue, and the merman had a regional accent Ivan didn’t recognize. Ivan looked up at Talia again as she stood behind the tank. “Fetch me a fire poker or some other implement so that I may examine the merman’s teeth.”

“Got it.” Talia hopped down from the truck. “I’ll be right back.”

As soon as Talia went inside, Ivan climbed onto the truck and faced the merman through the grate on top of his tank. He gestured quickly for him to rise. Silas rose hesitantly. When his head breached the surface, Ivan asked, “What is your name?”

Silas jaw dropped. “You speak mertongue?” It took him a moment to understand because of his heavy accent, but Silas recognized that it was from the northeast. Outlanders from their area occasionally visited his shoal.

“Yes, but I haven’t the time or the finesse with your language to explain,” Ivan answered shortly. “I am Ivan Mikailov, Erick’s uncle. Tell me your name. What do you want with Erick?”

“I-I’m Silas,” he answered in a rush. He hooked his fingers through the grate to lift himself higher. “Erick is going to die if we don’t get him to the sea. It’s because of our blood binding. It’s a ritual —”

“I know what a blood binding is, you damn fish!” Ivan hit his fist on the edge of the tank. He pressed his lips into a tight line and exhaled forcefully through his nose, looking away momentarily to regain his composure. “Do you actually care for Erick?”

Silas cowered and looked away. “I… I don’t know. I guess? I don’t think he likes me, but I don’t want him to die.” He timidly faced Ivan again. “It was an accident. I don’t know why—”

“I don’t care how or why this happened,” Ivan snapped. “We don’t have time for that. Will you help him survive this?”

Silas hesitated to answer, but nodded. “Uh, sure. I’ll do whatever I can, but I don’t—”
Ivan’s attention abruptly turned to the house and he waved at Silas to be silent. Talia was coming out with the fire poker.

She stopped at the truck. “Here you go,” Talia said, handing it over to Ivan.

Ivan held up his hand, refusing it. “I don’t need it anymore.” He climbed down and started walking back to the house. “I got a good enough look at his teeth while he was screeching at me.”

“You did?” Talia lowered the fire poker and frowned at the merman’s tank. He had sunk back down and was staring at Ivan with a worried expression. “Okay then,” she said, giving him a look of suspicion. As she followed Ivan inside, she asked, “So, what did his teeth tell you?”

“That I have very little time to fix this mess.” Ivan hailed his butler and said, “Ready a car for this woman and send her home.”

Talia stopped cold. “You’re kicking me out?” She watched the butler go down a hallway before looking back at the stairs. “I can’t leave Erick like this.”

“You will and you must.” Ivan straightened his jacket cuffs. “There is nothing more you can do for him now.”

“Horseshit. I can at least wait by his bedside. He needs to be around people who care about him, not just doctors.”

“I care about him, and that is enough.”

“What about Dunley?” Talia retorted, gesturing towards the stairs. “He gets to stay, but I don’t?”

“No, he will be leaving as soon as I get the merman off his truck.”

“Then let me help. That tank is a heavy son of a bitch.”

“My men are more than capable,” Ivan answered. He turned to his butler as he returned with his footman. “I will have Dunley update you of any further developments when he leaves.”

“I’m not leaving, dammit.” Talia shot a glare at his butler and footman before facing Ivan again. “I don’t care how much you hate me, Erick is my best friend.”

“And this is my house,” Ivan stated. “If you do not leave voluntarily, I will remove you from the premises with force.”

“You can’t be serious,” Talia said, but Ivan was already motioning for his footman to apprehend her. “Don’t you dare touch me!” The footman grabbed her arm and Talia elbowed his stomach. “Ivan, what the hell is wrong with you?”

Ivan watched stone-faced as his footman struggled to get Talia’s arms behind her back. “I am doing what needs to be done for my nephew.”

“You need a reality check.” Talia smacked the back of her head into the footman’s face. He cried out in pain and grabbed his nose. She sprinted up the stairs.

Ivan folded his arms behind his back and sighed. Talia gave a startled shout when the guards outside Erick’s room caught her. Ivan called up to them, “One of you bring her down here, please.”

Talia writhed in the guard’s grasp, but he didn’t even flinch as she kicked his shins. “Dunley!” she shouted. “Help, Ivan’s gone insane!”
“Talia?” Dunley called back. “What’s going on?” The bedroom door shook, but it was locked from the outside. “The hell? I can’t get out!”

The guard holding Talia dragged her down the stairs. “Bind her wrists and put her in the car.” To his footman, he said, “If you are still fit to drive, take her home. If she does not volunteer her address, leave her at the docks for her to find her own way.”

Holding a handkerchief over his bleeding nose, his footman nodded in shock. “Yes, sir.” He followed the guard outside.

Ivan waited for the guard to return. “Now we deal with Dunley.”

Dunley was still shouting for Talia when Ivan returned up the stairs. “Dunley,” Ivan said facing the door. “I have two options for you. You can help me get Erick into the merman’s tank, or I will have my guards lock you in another room and have them help me instead.”

“Why?” Dunley hit his hands on the door. “What are you going to do with Erick?”

“He can’t stay on land with us. He needs to go back to the sea.”

“No! Ivan, you can’t!”

“Would you rather he be treated like the monsters he hates?” Ivan demanded. “Locked in a tank, nothing more than a zoo animal?”

“It’s better than abandoning him,” Dunley retorted. “We’ll figure something out, together. You can’t just decide Erick’s fate for him.”

“I am his guardian! He is my responsibility.”

“He’s a grown-ass man, not a child.”

“I will not allow him to waste away here when he can have a second chance under the sea. We cannot remove this curse from him here on land, but the merfolk might still have a way to help him.” Ivan smoothed the front of his shirt and jacket, brushing off invisible dust. “Now, you can help me or not, but make your decision now. I would rather not have Erick manhandled by strangers.”

Dunley gritted his teeth and hit his forehead on the door. “God, why?” he whispered. He looked back to the bathroom where Erick still lay in the tub. Dunley stood straight again. “Fine,” he said. “But I’m coming with you.”

“Very well,” Ivan answered. He had his guards unlock the door and enter the room with him. They stared at Erick in shock, but knew better than to comment on the situation. Ivan turned to his guards. “I know this must be hard to take in, but I will require you both to keep everything you see and hear today an absolute secret. Am I clear?”

The guards agreed, though they still looked baffled. “Good,” Ivan said, turning to the bathroom. “Dunley, get Erick now, and be careful with his towel. The last thing we need is to carry him about nude.”

“Right.” Dunley rolled up his sleeves to lift Erick back out of the tub. Putting his hands into the water, he whispered, “I’m sorry, Erick. I’ll stay with you, so don’t worry.” Erick didn’t respond. If he wasn’t still barely breathing, Dunley might have thought he was dead. Dunley struggled a bit to get Erick out of the water because his scales had become slippery, but he hitched him up and
turned back to Ivan. “Let’s go,” Dunley said, setting his jaw.

Chapter End Notes

I think a lot about all the different ways I could have written this chapter. It was difficult trying to stick with Ivan's plan because Dunley makes very compelling points, but I didn't want to diminish or try to force either side too much. Morally grey areas interest me the most.

Also, I'm currently toying with the idea of writing a spin-off alternate story where Silas turns human instead of Erick turning into a merman. Would anyone be interested in it?

If I started a spin-off, there wouldn't be any guarantees that I'd actually finish it. (Not that I'm guaranteeing anything with this one, but still... I've written up through chapter 33. I'm currently stuck on 34, but I should get unstuck long before I run out of my insanely large buffer.)
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Ivan and Dunley take Erick and Silas to the ocean.

Chapter Notes

~ Oct. 9, 2019 ~
The main changes for this and the previous chapter were revising Ivan and Dunley's dialogue. Dunley used to curse a lot more than necessary, and Ivan's justification for sending Erick to the ocean had to be tweaked.
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Forgive me for the late update! I had one of my wisdom teeth removed on Tuesday, and recovering took more out of me than I expected. I was supposed to get both of them removed, but pain was more than I bargained for because I opted for local anesthesia instead of going under. I'm not sure when I'll be able to get the other one out, but hopefully it doesn't interfere with my update schedule again.

Silas continued staring at the house even after Ivan and the black-haired woman went inside. He was still in disbelief that a human knew mertongue in this country. Silas knew plenty of humans traded with shoals in the northeast, but he never thought any of them would come to this side of the sea. He couldn’t fathom why any would. To move would mean leaving a place where merfolk were accepted or at least regarded with respect in order to live in a country that only viewed merfolk as aquatic demons. It was only within the past two centuries that the humans stopped actively hunting merfolk, when merfolk learned to keep their distance.

When a man left the house, Silas watched him fetch one of their loud metal carriages. Silas imagined whatever creature was inside the strange contraption must have been angry to make that much noise. When the front doors opened again, Silas’ eyes widened. The black-haired woman was being dragged down the stairs by a large man. The man from earlier was holding a bloody handkerchief over his face.

Silas pressed his hands to the glass. “Hey, what are you doing with her? Stop it!”

The man with a bloodied face recoiled at the sight of him, but the large man said something to bring back his attention. He pushed the black-haired woman into the strange carriage and slammed the door. Silas met the woman’s terrified eyes as they drove past him. When they passed the iron fence, Silas turned back to the house and saw the large man return inside.

A few minutes later, Silas was more shocked to see Erick in the bearded man’s arms. His wet skin and the cerulean scales on his legs shone in the sunlight, but thin trails of blood leaked out of his gills. He had been out of water for too long. When Silas noticed Ivan, he flooded with anxious relief.

Silas surfaced and called, “Hurry up!” The bearded man was practically dragging his feet.
Ivan walked ahead of Dunley and climbed onto the truck. He shared the merman’s impatience as he pulling the tarp the rest of the way and lifted up the grate on top. “Give him here, Dunley,” Ivan said, reaching down.

Dunley gaped at the merman. “You’re putting Erick in there with that thing?”

“Of course, I wasn’t going to just leave Erick on his own. This merman will look after him.”

“So you’re releasing both of them into the sea?”

“Yes,” Ivan said, exasperated. “How was that not obvious?”

“After all the hell we went through to catch him, we’re just going to let him go?” Dunley asked.

“What about proving to everyone that merfolk exist?”

“You want to start a hunting spree with Erick in their midst?” Ivan shook his hands at Dunley.

“Give me Erick.”

Dunley swore under his breath, but lifted up Erick so Ivan could hook his arms under his shoulders. Ivan struggled to lift him up.

Silas leaned out over the edge of the tank. “Let me help,” he said, reaching for Erick.

“Fine, take him,” Ivan grunted in mertongue, making Dunley’s brow furrow. When Silas took his weight, Erick nearly slipped out of his hands before Ivan caught him and pushed him back up. “I said take him, not drop him!”

“Sorry!” Silas pulled Erick headfirst into the tank. As he sunk down, Silas turned him right-side up and pushed his head back up above the surface. He didn’t know if he could fully breathe underwater yet, so he was afraid of drowning him.

Ivan replaced the grate and looked down into the water. “It is a long drive back to the sea,” he told him. “Will you be able to hold him up the whole time?”

Silas took hold of the grate and wrapped his other arm around Erick to continue holding him. “I think so.” He turned his head toward Erick’s face. Erick’s head lolled forward, so Silas shifted his grip to make him face up again. “He’s not so heavy in the water.” Silas looked back up at Ivan. “When will he be able to breathe through his gills?”

“I don’t know. I’ll let you decide that.” Ivan pulled the tarp back over the tank and climbed down from the truck. He ignored Dunley’s accusatory stare as he went to the driver’s seat. “Let’s go.”

Dunley shook his head and climbed into the passenger seat. Slamming the door, he said, “Of course you’re trusting the merman. You can talk to him.”

Ivan turned on the engine. He focused on the road as he pulled out of the drive circle.

“Hello?” Dunley demanded. “Are you at least going to tell me where we’re going?”

“There’s a small cove forty miles north of here,” Ivan answered, gripping the steering wheel with both hands. “We’re going to release them there.”

“That’s over an hour away.”

“I know. The farther we take them away from human settlements, the safer they will be.”
Dunley rested his elbow on the windowsill and pressed his knuckles to his temple. “Erick would be safest with us. He can’t understand the merman like you.”

“He will learn.”

“What if he doesn’t want to? I can just see it now, him dragging himself onto the beach and suffocating in the sand.”

Ivan didn’t answer. They passed a carriage and more tall iron fences like the one outside his estate. Ivan stopped at an intersection. When the road was clear to turn, he resumed driving and said, “The merman won’t let that happen.”

“How are you so certain?” Dunley asked. “Even if he actually does feel bad about turning Erick into a merman, he’s just a kid. He can’t keep care of Erick.”

“If he can’t, there are others who will,” Ivan answered. “Merfolk live in tight-knit communities. Silas said he will protect him, so that means his shoal should accept Erick even if they don’t like him.”

Dunley glanced through the rear window to the covered tank. “The merman’s name is Silas?”

“Yes.” Ivan softened his voice. “If it eases your conscience, he really does care about Erick’s wellbeing.” Dunley made a dismissive sound. “I may still dislike merfolk, but I know they’re not all truly the monsters I’ve made them out to be. Don’t let this misfortune blacken your heart against them too.”

“Then why did you let Erick hate them?”

“I didn’t know how to dissuade him without losing his trust.” Ivan paused, searching for words. “After his parents died, Erick was so completely lost, and I was so angry. I thought I was giving him a way out of his grief, giving him something to blame so he could move on with his life. It had brought us closer at first, sharing our hatred. But then his need for revenge began consuming him more than his grief. He got involved with rabble like that woman and drifted away from me so quickly. It was all I could do just to keep him out of prison, much less reform him.”

“If you didn’t hate Talia so much, he might not have drifted so far away.” Dunley looked sidelong at him. “I got to know her well under her command. Her poverty never made her a bad person and you’re wrong to insult her like that.” He leaned back in his seat and sighed. “I think you’re just getting rid of Erick so you don’t have to own up to your lies.”

Ivan remained silent.

“You know I’m right, so why are we still doing this?” Dunley asked. “Even if the merfolk can make him human again, it should be Erick’s choice to try.”

“No.” Ivan shook his head. “I know my nephew. Now that he’s been cursed like this, it’s too late. If I try to tell him the truth, he will only hate me and continue to hate merfolk. He will never give them the chance to help him if we don’t put him in their hands.”

“But this is cruel.”

“I know. I will never forgive myself for letting this become necessary.” Ivan tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “Now be quiet before I stop this car and leave you on the side of the road.”

“This is my truck!”
Ivan pulled out the pistol he had hidden in his waistband and pointed it at Dunley. “Do you want to keep arguing?”

Dunley froze, staring down the barrel.

“I didn’t think so.” Ivan lowered the gun, but kept it on his lap. He had taken it from his nightstand fully expecting that he would have to threaten Dunley at some point during their trip. “When we return, I will let you go free. Even if you tell your crewmates about Erick, no one else on this side of the ocean will believe you. I will tell whoever asks that Erick developed consumption and that we’re sending him to a sanatorium for treatment. If you collaborate with my story, I am willing to compensate you.”

Dunley gritted his teeth. It was all so perfectly planned. Even retired, Ivan was still terrifyingly cunning. It was no wonder to him now why so many men in town hated him, and how he had nearly every noble and merchant wrapped around his finger. His fortune was not the kind to have been earned bloodlessly.

“You don’t have to decide now,” Ivan continued. “You can even talk it over with your crewmates. If they want to collaborate too, the more the merrier,” he added bitterly.

Dunley had no idea how to respond. He let the rest of the trip pass in silence.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Silas takes Erick into the ocean.

Chapter Notes

Another short chapter this week, but I have good news for those with dirty minds. Chapter 12 will finally bring on the smut and romance, so stay tuned and kudo this work if you want chapters quicker! We're already at 64 -- we only need 11 more kudos before I post a bonus chapter.

Silas’ arms were sore by the time the truck stopped. He and Erick rocked with the sloshing water. He heard doors squeak open and slam closed. The vibration went through the tank. Footsteps crunched gravel as Ivan and the bearded man walked around to the back of the truck. Faintly he heard the ocean over the sound of his and Erick’s labored breathing in their small pocket of air. Silas had adjusted his hold on Erick several times during the trip to give himself breaks, but it made little difference. His tail still hurt too.

Silas winced when Ivan pulled off the tarp again, momentarily blinded by the setting sun. “How is Erick?” Ivan asked as he lifted up the grate.

Silas looked down at Erick’s face. “He still hasn’t woken up at all, but his bleeding stopped.” Silas then surveyed their surroundings. They were parked near the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean. The sun glowed red like a mountain sinking into the water’s horizon.

“Good. We’re going to take you two down to the water now,” Ivan said, gesturing to the cliff. “It’s a bit of a walk. How long can you hold your breath?”

“A while, I guess, especially if my gills stay wet.”

“All right then.” Ivan rolled up his coat sleeves and held out his hands. “Pass Erick to me.” Silas did so, but struggled somewhat to get him over the tank’s edge. The towel around his waist flipped up, but Erick’s legs had already fused together and spread out at the end into a wide tailfin. Being put in saltwater allowed his blood binding to complete his transformation. Ivan passed Erick over to Dunley, then reached for Silas. “Your turn.”

“Okay.” Silas ducked back under the water to take a deep breath and exhale. He breathed in again and grabbed the edge of the tank. He pulled himself up and swung over his tail. Ivan put one arm under his tail, then Silas hooked his arm around Ivan’s neck before letting go of the tank entirely. His stomach lurched when Ivan climbed down from the truck. He felt heavy and much weaker out of the tank. Water seeped out of his gills uncomfortably, bubbling air into his lungs.

Ivan panted as he carried Silas down a narrow path along the cliff. Even though Silas was significantly lighter than Erick and helped offset most of his weight by holding his neck, Ivan
cursed that age had taken so much of his strength.

At the bottom of the path, Ivan followed Dunley into a flooded tide pool. The waves lapped over their knees. Dunley lowered Erick into the water and kneeled beside him to hold up his head. Silas simply twisted out of Ivan’s arms and splashed down. He glided over the rocky bottom of the tide pool back to Erick’s side. Silas sat up and faced Dunley. Hesitantly holding out his hands towards Erick, he asked, “Can I take him now?”

Dunley looked back at Ivan. “What is he saying?”

“He wants you to give him Erick,” Ivan answered, walking over to them despite the water soaking more of his pants and further ruining his shoes. “It’s time to let him go.”

“Oh.” Dunley studied Silas’ expression for a moment before lowering his gaze to Erick’s face. “Can you at least tell him that I will come back?” He lifted his face toward Ivan. “Please? I don’t want this to be the last time I see him. Talia will have my head if she never gets to see him again, and you know Erick will be miserable without us too.”

Ivan looked up at the darkening sky. “I know.” The full moon was rising. The sight made him frown and he sighed. Looking to Silas, he said, “We’re leaving you with Erick now, but we will return on the night of the next full moon. If you should be unable to meet us then, we will come again on each full moon after that.”

“I promise I’ll bring him back,” Silas answered. He looked down at Erick solemnly. The former human finally seemed to be sleeping peacefully as the waves ran over his chest and new gills. The ocean’s movement tugged at his tailfin, as if trying to pull him out to sea. Hesitantly, Silas asked, “If you don’t want him to leave forever, why are you giving Erick to me?”

“Now that Erick is one of your kind, he needs to learn the truth about merfolk from your people,” Ivan answered. “I taught him that you were monsters because I was a bitter man, so he will never trust anything I have to say now. I am being selfish, I know, to ask you to fix my mistakes. Yet I am begging you, do not give up on my nephew. He will fight tooth and nail to kill you and come back home, but do not let him return until he learns I was wrong.”

The weight of Ivan’s plea sunk in Silas faster than an anchor. “Oh. Okay, uh… No problem.” Silas gave a hollow laugh, but couldn’t bring himself to smile. “I can do that. Totally.”

Ivan stared grimly at him. “You’re not inspiring me with your confidence.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.” Silas rubbed the back of his neck and looked back down at Erick. “It’s just a lot to take in, you know? I never would have thought…”

“Stop dragging this out,” Ivan said. “Can you find your way home from here?”

Silas looked back at the sea. “If I can find a landmark to orient myself, I think we’ll be okay.”

“That’s all I need to know.” Ivan reached into his jacket and took out knotted sock filled with coins and one of the wiretop bottles that had been in his desk. A letter was pressed against the inside wall of the bottle, weighted by sand. Passing both to Silas, Ivan continued, “Do not open this bottle. The parchment is not your waterproof kind. When you have safely returned to your shoal, give this to Erick so he can read it and understand why I am leaving him with you. This pouch has some money to cover the expense of his care.”

Silas accepted the bottle and coins gingerly, looking curiously at the strange letters legible through the glass. “Oh.” He became visibly reassured. “This’ll make explaining everything a lot easier.”
“I was not going to send you off completely unprepared.” Ivan faced Dunley. “You can give Erick to Silas now. I told him we’ll return on the night of the next full moon.”

“That long?” Dunley eyed the coin pouch and bottle curiously. “That sounded like you talked about a whole lot more than just when we’ll come back.”

Ivan turned away. “I will explain on the way back.”

Despite wanting to press further, Dunley let it go and said, “Fine.” He reluctantly untied the towel from Erick’s waist and let Silas take Erick into his arms. After Dunley stood back up, Silas let Erick’s head go under the water and pulled him out into the sea.

Ivan watched them disappear into the dark water. His eyes misted over, but he furiously wiped his face and swallowed back the lump in his throat. He quickly climbed back up the path to avoid Dunley seeing his tears.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Content/Trigger warning: rape/non-con scene.

Silas finds a place to spend the night with Erick.

Chapter Notes

~ Oct. 10, 2019 ~

The main changes I needed to make with this chapter were continuity fixes (making sure to mention the things from Ivan) and rebalancing Silas' culpability while he and Erick were under the effects of the blood binding. The explicit scene is much closer to dubious consent now rather than outright rape, but I'm leaving the warning in place just in case. Keep in mind, too, that all chapters beyond this point do not get this explicit again. If you want more smut, see my other works.

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Gah! Another late update. I've been helping my friends move this past week, so everything's been really hectic for me. I hope you all enjoy this chapter, though. For those of you who aren't interested in gratuitous smut/trIGGERING material, the worst follows the second set of three astericks (** *). For those who have been waiting... well, this is my first time writing explicit material, so please let me know if it works. ;)

*UPDATE 4-29-18* I got a comment that the explicit scene is rape/non-con and not just dubious consent, so I've gone ahead and updated that tag.

Silas took Erick past the tide pool down into a kelp forest. As they went deeper, Silas put his auditory fin to Erick's chest to make sure he was still breathing. His breaths were sluggish, but even. It would take his lungs a while to get used to pumping water instead of air.

When they reached the bottom of the kelp forest, Silas began looking for somewhere to spend the night. There were dozens of little alcoves and tunnels perforating the stone wall below the tide pools, but none of them were quite big enough for him, much less Erick. The last thing Silas wanted was to sleep out in the open, but he supposed if he had to, he could anchor themselves to the kelp stipes. He continued swimming along the stone wall with Erick in his arms. The sea was quickly darkening. The towering kelp forest muted what little moonlight filtered through the water.

Eventually, Silas found a cave opening just big enough for both of them to squeeze through. He swam inside to check its depth. It was on the narrow side and bumpier than Silas would have liked, but long enough to lay down. Silas cleared out the urchins and sea snails that had been living inside and brought in Erick. As soon as Erick had settled down, Silas also put down the bottle and pouch Ivan gave him in a little divot near his tailfin. He didn’t want to bump his head against them while they slept.

To make the cave more comfortable, Silas went back out to gather kelp fronds to cushion its
bottom and walls. He ate several as he worked since he was starving. For the two and a half days he had been on Erick’s ship, they had only given him a slices of a fruit he’d never seen before and a strip of tough meat that Silas wasn’t entirely sure was supposed to be edible. Two of the crewmembers had tossed the toughened meat into his tank and laughed at his reaction when he took a hesitant nibble. When he had decided to eat it after all, the shorter of the two passed a coin to his friend.

When Silas had filled the cave to his liking, he broke a spiral seashell he found in the sand and used it to pry out snails from their shells and crack open the urchins he had tossed out of the cave. Urchins and snails weren’t his favorite, but he didn’t have a net or spear to catch any of the rockfish swimming around. He might have tried to catch them barehanded if his tail wasn’t still healing.

After Silas finished his dinner, he swam back up to the cave. Before he went inside, he put a fist over his heart and sent a quick prayer to Krastasuis to protect him through the night. The kelp fronds he had stuffed inside tickled his back, but they kept the rough edges of the cave from scraping his skin. The only thing Silas worried about now was how close he would have to sleep next to Erick. Laying side by side, the cave was only wide enough to give Silas one hand-span of space between himself and Erick. If Erick woke while he was asleep, Silas feared what he might do. Silas could only hope that he would still be too tired to actually hurt him.

As the night wore on, Silas listened to Erick breathing and the ambient hum of the ocean. He stared at Erick’s stunning new cerulean tail. Despite the dark muting its color, his night vision supplemented his memory of it in the tide pool. Its color was deeper and more vibrant than the sky. His turquoise scalloped fin swayed gently in the current. Silas traced his fingers up Erick’s muscled arm over his shoulder to the necklace around his neck. His eyebrows furrowed when he recognized that it was the one he had salvaged at the wreck where they had first encountered each other. After Erick’s crew had taken his satchel, Silas didn’t think he would see any of his finds again. To see that Erick had apparently taken a liking to Silas’ favorite find from that day was especially surprising. Erick hadn’t seemed like a man who wore jewelry.

Silas let go of the necklace and looked up at Erick’s sleeping face. All of the pain and anger had completely faded away, making him look much younger than Silas first thought he was. It was as if he had become a completely different person. Silas’ heart ached with the thought that he might not ever see Erick look this peaceful again.

Their accidental blood binding had quite literally thrown Erick into Silas’ arms, but he had no idea if he would be able to hold onto him. Staring at Erick now, Silas felt sure he had never been so attracted to anyone else before, yet he had no idea if it was just fate or wishful thinking toying with his feelings. It was unreasonable, insane really, to love a man who wanted to kill him. Silas knew that. But if they were meant to be together, the fact that Erick was breathing underwater next to him should have been enough proof. It had to be.

Silas curled up in the crook of Erick’s shoulder and twisted his crimson and gold tail around Erick’s cerulean tail. His stitches still ached whenever he moved his tail, but he was too exhausted to do anything about it. He wrapped his arms around Erick’s waist and pressed his face into the side of his chest. Erick smelled like the sun, all warmth and strength. Holding him filled Silas with the same bubbles of joy he felt when he was salvaging treasures from sunken ships, making him think he would suffocate in them. It wasn’t fair.

“Why did it have to be you?” Silas whispered.

Since his coming of age last year, Silas had been dreaming about who he might fall in love with.
He didn’t particularly like that many people in his shoal, Peleran, except for Gale and his salvager friends. Only salvagers and outlanders understood his fascination with human trinkets, but those who visited were never Silas’ age. Silas found himself wishing that he was the one that had turned human. He would have hated leaving behind his dad, Gale, and his salvaging crew, but then he wouldn’t have had to worry so much about Erick hating him. Despite how terrifying it was being trapped in a tank, Silas couldn’t deny that in hindsight, his glimpse of the world above water was amazing. If Ivan took back Erick, part of Silas hoped that he would take him again too.

As Silas thought how he would get home and help Erick adjust, he drifted off to sleep with Erick in his arms.

* * *

(Following sections are sexually explicit)

Erick woke in a dreamlike haze. His chest felt heavy, but warm arms held him. A face was nestled against his side. Its quiet presence felt small and precious. Erick folded his arm over the nymph and pulled it closer. Its slender body fit against his like a broken piece sliding back into a fractured whole. His legs felt weird. They were tightly fixed together under a gossamer skin. He was laying on something bumpy but slick. He ran his fingers over its smooth, layered surface, then turned to hold the nymph with both arms. Its wavy hair tickled his chin. Erick nuzzled the top of its head.

Soon nuzzling wasn’t enough. Erick pressed the nymph against his stomach and tightened his arms around it. Something twinged beneath his waist, like an itch he couldn’t reach. He groaned and curled his bound legs around the nymph’s tail. Sliding his hands down the nymph’s back, Erick rocked his hips against the nymph’s. His grip on the nymph tightened as his need to fill the void within him increased, but his clumsy grinding only made it worse. He didn’t even know what he wanted, only that its lack was driving him mad.

* * *

Silas woke to a painful grip on his hips and recoiled when he saw Erick humping him. He shoved his hands against Erick’s chest, but he only growled and pulled Silas against him again.

“Oh, gods, you have to be kidding me!” Silas tried to twist out of Erick’s hands, but the small confines of the cave prevented him from escaping. “Erick, stop! What has gotten into you?”

Yet even as Silas asked, he felt his own groin stirring. His face flushed. It had to be the blood binding again, Silas realized. This was the sign that occurred on the first full moon after bindings, the event couples always talked about in hushed voices but never described. If Silas had intentionally bonded with Erick, this was supposed to be their honeymoon. Silas didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Even though he already knew the basics in theory, he hadn’t even had ‘the talk’ with his dad about anything like this yet. The only previous experience he had was his awkward practice alone in his bedroom.

Erick continued grinding against him, but he hadn’t even popped out his cock yet. It struck Silas then that of course he hadn’t. Whatever humans had between their legs must have been completely different from mers’ tails.

“C’mon, Erick,” Silas said. “You can’t be thinking clearly right now.”

If Erick even heard anything Silas was saying, he was too lost to listen. Silas tried to pull off
Erick’s hands again, but the former human was astoundingly strong despite having been ill and unconscious for so long. Silas’ slim arms were no match for Erick’s strength.

“Okay, fine!” Silas slid his hand down Erick’s abs. “I’ll get you off one way or another.” He rubbed along his scales until he found the fold of skin that hid the entrance to his urogenital slit. Lifting it back, he stuck one finger inside Erick. He gasped at the invasion and tensed. Silas began stroking his inner walls. When his fingertip grazed a nub, Erick’s hips bucked. He moaned against Silas’ auditory fin and rocked into his hand. His arms moved up to hold Silas against his chest.

“Holy scrapes,” Silas breathed. It was hard to believe this was actually happening. His mind felt fizzy. He shook his head, squeezing shut and reopening his eyes to try to stay focused. Knowing that he had found Erick’s cock, Silas continued rubbing the nub to coax it from its sheath. He pressed and curled his finger back and forth against Erick’s unsteady rhythm. His own member started swelling within him uncomfortably. Silas slid his other hand to his entrance to push it back down, but his touch sent ripples throughout his body. He exhaled shakily. His hand hesitated a beat before he started fondling himself, never letting up on Erick’s ministrations. If he could just satisfy Erick, then they could both go back to sleep until there was enough daylight to travel. If Silas satisfied himself too, he figured it couldn’t hurt. He hoped so, at least, since he didn’t think he could stop now. It felt like the gods were more in control of his hands than he was.

Erick’s little nub was slow to extend, but Silas’ cock quickly sprung out. Grasping his shaft, Silas pushed a second finger into Erick. He scissored his fingers, spreading him open, and pushed in and out. Silas rubbed up and down his cock at the same time. His member grew hard. Erick’s thrusts against his fingers sped up. Both of them panted in the quickly warming water.

Silas pushed in a third finger. Erick’s walls clenched around his fingers, pulsing as Silas hit his nub. It grew tender and leaked slick, lubricating his walls. A faint sense of surprise colored the thickening haze in his mind. He then imagined what Erick would feel like squeezing his cock and moaned. He couldn’t. It wasn’t right. But his hand was not enough and Erick didn’t seem about to stop anytime soon. His arms were wrapped tight around Silas, hands clutching Silas’ hair and back. The moon made them drunk with lust.

Silas jerked out his fingers and Erick whimpered. “Just give me a minute,” he huffed, putting both hands on his dick. He needed to climax now, otherwise he knew he’d do something he’d regret. Yet before he could get back into a rhythm, Erick’s hands moved back to Silas’ hips. Silas made a startled sound as Erick pulled him against his waist. Silas’ cock pressed against Erick’s stomach.

“H-hey! No, Erick!” Silas lifted up his hands to try to push Erick away, but he took the opportunity to line up his cock with his entrance. “Wait!” Silas thrashed his tail, but Erick’s arms and his grip on his hips was stronger.

Erick plunged Silas’ cock inside himself and moaned. His walls quivered around the new appendage, stretching farther to embrace Silas’ length. Silas groaned, torn between pleasure and terror. His cock bottomed out just before Erick’s walls engulfed him.

Erick clutched Silas’ waist and pulled out halfway with his hips. He impaled himself again, then rocked harder against Silas’ cock. Silas wrapped his arms around Erick’s waist and gripped his shoulder blades. He pressed his face into his chest. “Ah, ah, ah…” he moaned in time with Erick’s thrusts. His member throbbed under the assault. Even if he wanted to pull out now, he was completely at the larger merman’s mercy. The cave scratched Silas’ back as the agitated water dislodged the kelp fronds, but the pain was a ghost to the pleasure filling his body.

Erick sped up to a frantic pace. His hands were bruising Silas’ hips, but Silas could no longer care. His entire being centered on his cock striking Erick’s core, over and over again. Sparks like stars
buzzed through his head. The moon’s quicksilver power poured into him, utterly overwhelming his body.

Silas came in a rush. His seed filled Erick and spilled over. It spread over their skin and scales. Erick shuddered, groaning, but thrust forward a few more times. His rocking tapered out to stillness. His grip on Silas relaxed and his hands moved up to hold him loosely against his chest. Silas’ arms went limp. They floated together, still coupled, with only their heavy breathing breaking the silence of the sea.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Silas reunites with Gale and Erick wakes up.

Chapter Notes

We made it to 75 kudos! Thank you all so much for all the support and praise you've given me so far. I've written plenty of other stories, but this is my second attempt at sharing my work online. I never would have believed that 75 people would read and enjoy my work without being forced into it for a class. I really do love every kudo and appreciate every comment. I probably would have given up on this story if it wasn't for readers like you, so thank you.

If/when we make it to 100 kudos, I'm going to release another bonus chapter, but I'm trying to think of something else I can do to make it more special. I might make a one-shot chapter of fluffy smut since y'all seem to like that. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Silas woke the following morning and cursed loudly and repeatedly. He darted out of the cave and stared at the entrance. His heart ran like he had been harpooned again, yet it was the knowledge of what had happened that pieced him. He fucked Erick. He not only fucked him, he shot his seed into him. He had been too horny to think, too freaked out by the fact that Erick was humping him to realize why Erick's cock hadn’t popped out. Erick wasn’t just poorly endowed. Erick was a breeder, capable of getting pregnant. And Silas fucked him.

It was just Silas’ luck that Erick wasn’t a stud like him. With as large and masculine as he looked, it never occurred to Silas that Erick could have been anything else. All mers were hermaphrodites, but they tended to identify babies’ genders based on the size of their tail fins and whether or not scales covered their chest. Boys’ fins were almost always significantly larger or wider than girls, and scales usually covered girls’ chests.

When mers turned seventeen, they would participate in the coming of age celebration. A healer would formally determine whether the new young adults were breeders or studs, but most found out on their own before then. Girls and feminine boys usually ended up as breeders, whereas boys and masculine girls would be studs. It was usually a two to one ratio with studs and breeders. A stud could still impregnate another stud, even though stud pregnancies often resulted in complications. Breeder couples usually needed fertility medicine to be successful because breeders rarely ever produced viable seed on their own, likely in order to prevent impregnating themselves. Their cocks couldn’t extend very far past the opening of their urogenital slit, if at all, unlike studs.

Since Silas was a stud, it was all too likely that Erick would get pregnant. As if it wasn’t bad enough that he turned the man into a merman. He had to knock him up too.

Silas pulled on his hair as he swam back and forth. He wasn’t sure when Erick would wake up, but
he had heard breeders would often sleep much longer than studs after copulating. Some said their post-sex lethargy gave their partner’s seed a better chance to settle and take root, but others said it was because their bodies were expending extra energy to prepare for childbearing. Either way, the longer Erick stayed asleep, the more certain Silas became that he was going to be a father. He had no idea how to take care of Erick, much less a child.

This revelation only added to his urgency to get home, as if he wasn’t worried enough before. He wanted to see Gale because he was terrified, but now he needed his dad’s advice more. Silas just hoped that his dad wouldn’t put him under house arrest first. They fought so often over Silas’ obsession with human trinkets, he half-expected that his dad really would make him abandon Erick.

After making himself calm down with deep breaths, Silas went back into the cave. “Erick?” he asked, gently shaking his arm.

Erick murmured something, but rolled over to continue sleeping.

“It’s time to go now,” Silas said a little louder, but he was afraid of actually waking Erick. Even if he wouldn’t remember last night, he would definitely freak out about being underwater. Silas’s back and hips were still sore with the scratches and bruises Erick had caused. Silas did not want to find out what his hands could do when he was fully awake. Since Erick didn’t respond, Silas took his tail and pulled him out of the cave. He hooked his arm under Erick’s shoulders and held his back against his waist.

“Okay, you just keep sleeping then.” Silas turned and reached back into the cave to fetch the bottle and the sock full of coins Ivan gave him. The coins somehow hid itself under kelp fronds in a crevice at the bottom of the cave. Silas didn’t see the bottle. “Come on, I know I put it in here.”

Silas swept out as many fronds as he could reach, but still couldn’t find the bottle. “No, this can’t be happening,” he said, becoming increasingly more worried. “It couldn’t have fallen out while we were asleep, could it?” Silas looked beyond the cave, where the fronds he had swept out gently drifted away with the current.

“Shit.” Realizing it might have gotten knocked out while they weren’t in control of themselves, Silas pulled Erick’s back against his chest and darted down to search the sand. He swam up and down the wall of the cliff, pushing aside kelp stipes and rocks to look under and around them. Shrimp and sea stars shied away from his frantic search. The farther he swam from the cliff, the harder it became for Silas to hold back his panic. He lost the one thing he needed to explain to Erick why he was in the ocean.

Silas continued searching for over an hour with no luck. He had no idea how it could have disappeared so completely. The bottle was weighed down with sand, so it shouldn’t have floated away. Unless a lobster took it for some unfathomable reason or Silas wasn’t as practiced as he thought he was with finding human objects, he couldn’t imagine where it could have gone.

Dismayed with himself, Silas finally gave up his search. He tied the sock of coins around his wrist and started swimming towards the open ocean. “I’m sorry, Erick. All I can do now is get us back home.”

As Silas swam, he shifted to his siren voice to call for any other merfolk in the area. He used the same signal song he sung on Erick’s ship, “I’m lost. Help me.”

When Silas reached the edge of the kelp forest, he parted them and faltered. He didn’t recognize any landmarks across the immensity of the open ocean. Sunbeams from the surface illuminated
outcrops of rock scattered across the ocean floor. Flounders kicked up sand as crabs crawled along
the base of broken stone columns littered with tufts of brown sea anemones. Silas had explored its
expanse more times than he could count, but he always had his salvaging team or Gale with him
and had known where home was behind him. He had no idea which direction he should take now.
Silas was about to turn back and swim along the coast when he heard the faint sound of an
answering siren song. “I’m coming. Stay there.”

Relief flooded Silas and he hugged Erick tighter. The former human grumbled softly, but didn’t
move. Silas switched songs to say, “I hear you. I’m staying here.”

As the answering siren song grew louder and clearer, Silas was even more elated to realize it was
Gale’s voice. The gods were finally offering him a break. Silas thanked the stars.

Silas swam to a rock column and laid Erick down on top. He continued singing his song until he
spotted Gale swimming towards him. Silas rushed to meet him, leaving behind Erick.

The mermen collided in a hug. They gripped each other tightly, as if trying to suffocate each other.
Silas started crying as he apologized over and over. His face felt hot with helpless relief. He could
hardly breathe between his sobs and apologies.

Gale hushed him, saying, “It’s okay, I’m here.” He rubbed his back and held Silas’ head under his
chin. “What happened to you? How did you escape?”

Silas struggled to even out his breath. “I messed up, Gale. I turned one of them into a mer.”

“You what?” Gale took Silas’ shoulders and held him out at arms’ length. “How?”

“It was an accident,” Silas said, turning away his face. “I didn’t mean it, but I bit him. He somehow
got my blood in his mouth—”

“Wait, hold up!” Gale let go of Silas. “Are you talking about a blood binding? With a human?”

“Yes.” Silas broke down into sobbing again. He buried his face in his hands.

“Okay, hey now.” Gale pulled Silas into his arms again. “Just calm down and explain from the
beginning.” He continued rubbing his back. “Who did you turn into a mer?”

It took Silas a while to catch his breath, but he collected his thoughts and told Gale what happened.
As he explained the events on the ship and at Ivan’s house, Gale stared with a stony expression.

When Silas said that Ivan had left him and Erick in the ocean, Gale interrupted, “Wait, then where
is he?”

“L left him back there,” Silas answered, pointing in the direction of the rock columns.

“You dumbass!” Gale turned to get him. “How could you just leave him there?”

“I don’t know,” Silas answered, quickly following Gale. “I was just so happy to see you again, I
wasn’t thinking.”

When they reached the rock, panic leapt in Silas’ chest. “He was right here.” Silas darted around
the column and called, “Erick!”

“Are you sure?” Gale asked, looking around them.

“Yes, I set him down right here,” he answered, pointing at the rock column. “He was still asleep
“You did what?” Gale exclaimed as Silas was about to call Erick’s name again.

Silas cringed. “It was the blood binding. After Ivan released us, I found a shelter and it just kind of happened.” He lifted and dropped his hands. “I couldn’t control myself. Neither of us could.”

“Gods above…” Gale muttered, face-palming. “I hate to ask, but…”

Face reddening, Silas said, “Erick is a breeder.”

Gale swore. “You really are a dumbass. Don’t you know what that means?”

“Of course I do,” Silas snapped. “I’m scared out of my mind. Now help me find him!” Silas swam away from the rock and cupped his hands around his mouth. “Erick!”

Silas swam out farther and called his name again. He noticed something move below him and looked down. Erick tackled him like a shark. He grabbed Silas’ hair and slammed his face into the rock column. His nose cracked. Erick seized Silas’ neck and cut his cry short. Blood clouded the water in front of Silas’ eyes.

“You! What the hell did you do to me?” Erick shouted.

Chapter End Notes

When I was figuring out how merfolk reproduction works, I debated a long time whether or not I wanted to use Alpha/Omega dynamics or studs/breeders. I eventually stuck with studs/breeders because I wanted to avoid most of the tropes associated with Alpha/Omega dynamics, such as heat cycles, pheromones, and omegas being second-class citizens. I enjoy a lot of Alpha/Omega stories, but it just didn't work with my vision of mer society.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Erick attacks Silas and Gale leaves to get help.

Chapter Notes

Holy bleep, people! How are we already at 100 kudos? That's more people than I know in real life. Even though I'm sure plenty of people have way more kudos here, it's a big number to me. I never would have thought that I'd reach triple digits, especially with an original work. So, thank you all so much.

I want to give a big shout out to the people who've commented more than once. As much as I like kudos, comments mean so much more to me. Seeing your praise and feedback makes the numbers feel like there are real people behind them. I'm writing for you, my lovely commenters. I hope my story won't disappoint you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Get off of him!” Gale shouted, diving between Silas and the human turned merman.

Erick lashed out at the second merman, but he evaded his fist. “Don’t get in my way!”

“Why did you have to bite this human?” Gale snapped at Silas. “You couldn’t have bonded with one that isn’t trying to kill you?”

Silas put a hand over his bleeding nose. “Yell at me later, okay?” He faced Erick again and shied back when he saw his hand pulled back to punch him. “Erick, please!” Silas said, hoping he would understand the sentiment.

Erick grit his teeth at hearing the foul fiend say his name. It must have understood him – it had to. “Tell me what the hell you did!” Keeping one hand on the back of Silas’ neck, he jabbed his finger at the blue tail that had covered his legs. “I know this is your fault somehow. Fix it. Now.”

Silas looked down at his tail and looked back at Gale helplessly.

Gale held up his hands. “What do you want me to do? He wants to know what happened to his legs.”

“I know!” Silas groaned, looking back at Erick with pained sympathy. “But he doesn’t understand us.”

“Do you understand him?”

“No, why would I? I wasn’t on his ship that long!”

Erick tightened his hold on the merman’s neck and pressed him harder against the rock wall. “Stop
speaking in your fish tongues and answer me!” He glared at Silas, then glared at Gale too.

Gale face-palmed and rubbed between his eyes. “Okay then, let’s try this.” Gale pointed at Erick’s arm. Erick’s brow furrowed and Gale jabbed at it again until Erick glanced down. “Good,” Gale said slowly. “Silas,” he continued, pointing at him now, “bit your arm.” He pointed back at it. For emphasis, Gale pantomimed biting his own arm.

Erick narrowed his eyes at him. “Yeah, your fish friend bit me. What does that matter?”

Gale swam back a bit and put his hands to his neck to fake choking. He pretended to pass out. Floating limp for a second, he jerked back up and fanned out his burgundy tail, gesturing to it with both hands with a look of an exasperated, sarcastic, “Ta-da!”

Erick’s glare turned into a confused frown. It was the bite that did this, he realized dumbly, remembering how his arm had stung. His blood ran colder than the ocean water around him. “You can’t be serious,” he said. “If he bites me again, would that turn me back?”

Gale tilted his head at him, glancing over at Silas. “I can’t tell what he’s asking now.”

Erick made a frustrated noise, realizing he would have to play along with their charades game. He wrenched back the merman’s head to shove his face against his arm, then pulled him away to point at his fin again and mimic ripping it in half. “Will another bite fix it?” he demanded, feeling the urge to scream. “I’m not one of you! I’m human!”

The merman still had his hand over his bleeding nose. His amber eyes looked even more distraught at Erick’s near-pleading voice. Erick told himself it wasn’t sympathy. He was just in pain. “I’m human,” Erick repeated, pointing at himself. “Hu—man.” He jabbed his fingers at them. “You’re merfolk. Mermen. Don’t you get it?”

“No!” Erick jerked back, eyes widening. “This can’t be permanent!” He looked at Silas, but his head was bowed in shame. Erick’s jaw clenched. “I’ll kill you!”

Erick rushed forward, but Gale intercepted him. “Stop!” Gale wrapped his arms around his stomach and struggled to hold him back. Erick swiped blindly at Silas, flailing his tail, and Gale was glad Erick wasn’t used to his tail yet. If he could swim with finesse, Gale had no doubt that he could twist out of his grip. “Silas didn’t do this on purpose! I want you to go back as much as you do, so quit it!” Erick’s fists hit Gale’s waist and hips. “Silas!” Gale snapped. “Do something about your goddamn mate!”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Anything! Ow!” Erick knocked him soundly across the jaw, making Gale lose his grip. Erick charged at Silas again.
As Silas darted out of reach, he shouted, “Erick! I’m sorry. Please don’t hate me.” He ducked behind the outcrop of rocks and faced him. “It was an accident, Erick.”

“Stop saying my name, you monster!” Erick twisted to swim over the rocks and chase him again, but the merman curved effortlessly through the water with his crimson tail, twirling like a ribbon. Had Erick not been intent on killing him, he might have called his swimming graceful. In contrast, Erick swam like he had human legs strapped to a wooden plank.

“I want to help you, Erick,” Silas said, looking back over his shoulder as he circled around him. “If you just stop chasing me, I’ll do everything I can.”

Gale swam up to watch them chase each other in circles. “Silas, face it. He’s not going to listen. He hates us too much.”

“No! I can’t just give up on him. The gods mated us, for grief’s sake!” And he was probably going to end up with his child, Silas added mentally, cursing himself.

“Mate or not, he’s going to kill you if he gets his hands on you again.”

“I don’t care!” As he answered, Silas noticed Erick started to move even more stiffly, growing exhausted by the effort of chasing him. He wasn’t used to swimming, not by a long shot. “Even if my dad locks us both up, I’m going to take care of him.”

Gale’s shoulders slumped. “You’re really serious?”

“Yes.” Silas ducked behind the rock outcrop again, and Erick floated down onto its edge, panting. He clenched his hand into a fist as he hung his head. “Go ahead and get him. I don’t know if we’ll be able to get Erick to come with us without force.”

“Are you sure? Who says your dad will even want to take him?”

Silas swallowed hard, looking at Erick. “I know he won’t, but he will for me. He has to.”

Reluctantly, Gale said, “Okay. Will you be okay here on your own?”

“I think so. Erick looks too exhausted to keep chasing me.”

“All right then. The shoal isn’t far from here, so I’ll be back soon.” Gale gave one last look at Silas and Erick before speeding off home.

Chapter End Notes

Now, I said something about a smutty one-shot to celebrate 100 kudos, did I not? :) I'm currently torn between writing Silas having a wet dream, or writing some scenes of Erick as a teenager. Erick's backstory would involve copious drinking and the discovery of his bisexuality. Which would you rather see? (Or if you want both, I might just write both.)
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Silas tries to teach Erick mertongue and upsets him.

Chapter Notes

Here's the weekly update! I'm still taking suggestions for what I should write about in a smutty one-shot chapter, so please comment with your preference. I'm currently learning towards a chapter focusing on Erick's backstory.

Also, I will release another bonus chapter when we make it to 125 kudos. With how quickly we jumped from 75 to 100, I assume we'll make it there before long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Alone now, Silas cautiously swam closer to Erick and floated over the outcrop of rocks, remaining just out of his reach. “Erick?” he said hesitantly, leaning down to see his face. Silas’ tail fanned out above him, swaying with the current. His fin waved just enough to keep him in place.

“Tch.” Erick glared at him. “Why did you turn me into a freak? Was it just revenge?” He grabbed his necklace and held it up. “To get your stolen treasures back?” He watched the merman’s eyes go down to the necklace and look away again. The merman still looked ashamed, and it was getting harder for Erick to deny that he seemed genuinely sorry. Tough shit, Erick thought. He didn’t get to be sorry when his legs were fused together under ridiculous blue scales.

“I don’t want that necklace anymore,” Silas said. “I want you to keep it.” He let himself drift down onto the rocks and lay stomach-down, folding his arms and resting his chin on top. His nose still stung, but the pain was bearable. His tail hurt worse from the effort of swimming so fast. Staring at Erick’s face, he wished even more fiercely that they had met under better circumstances. Even now, Silas found himself admiring Erick’s viridian eyes and sculpted body. He chastised himself for letting himself lose his head again so quickly.

Erick dropped his necklace and wondered if he should try chasing the merman again. He was way more agile than he had expected. Even though Erick was much larger than him, it didn’t mean a thing if he couldn’t keep up. His only other options then were to continue listening to this fish freak blubbering at him or go back to the surface and try to find land.

When he had woken up, Erick thought he was dreaming. He saw stone, felt it beneath him, and stared at the faint ethereal light undulating over its surface. He lifted his head and his eyes widened. An endless void of blue extended before him. It hazily glimmered. His eyes followed the sunlight flickering through and he recognized the sparkling, mirror-like sky was the underside of the ocean’s waves. He gasped, and it was then he felt the weight of the cold and the water in his lungs.

Erick swam to the surface in a panic. His first gasp of air felt like choking, and he coughed and
sputtered above the water. He couldn’t seem to kick his legs. Treading water with his arms barely helped. Nothing but empty waves surrounded him. He whipped his head back and forth, wishing his eyes were deceiving him, before he noticed the bubbles passing through his new gills. Then he realized that his legs were not tied up, but encased under blue scales. He fell back under the water with a scream. He scratched at the line of scales at his hips to try to slide the tail off, but couldn’t get his nails underneath. Tumbling down deeper, he tried pulling on the end of his tail instead, but squeezing his fins together hurt, like bending a finger too far backwards. The nightmare became terrifyingly real then.

Erick swam back up to the surface to shout for help, but the waves remained oppressively empty. He dove down to the corals, looking for anything, anyone that could help him. He literally didn’t even have the clothes on his back. All he had left was the merman’s stolen locket. When he heard the merman call his name, he had thought for a second that his crew had come to rescue him. But it was just the fish freak that bit him.

Remembering his crew struck Erick with new terror. He couldn’t remember how he ended up in the water. The last thing he remembered was passing out in the truck to his uncle’s house and a vivid, disturbing dream about copulating with a nymph. Something must have happened on the drive over. Were they attacked?

Heartbeat speeding up with the thought, Erick looked up at the merman and asked, “Where is my crew? Talia and Dunley, do you remember them? You saw them and Flynn and Eustace more than me.” The merman only stared in confusion. “They were with me before I passed out on the way to my uncle Ivan’s house.” The merman’s eyes lit up with recognition. “What?” Erick frowned at him. “Did I actually say something you understand?”

Silas still had no idea what Erick was saying, but he heard him mention his uncle’s name. “Ivan?” he asked, making sure that he was talking about him. By Erick’s surprised expression, Silas assumed he was right. “Ivan is okay. He left you with me to keep care of you. I was supposed to give you a letter from him, but I lost it.”

“What does that even mean?” Erick pressed his face into his hands, trying to think of how he would pantomime his question. If the merman knew Ivan, the truck must have made it to his uncle’s estate. Erick’s fin grazed the side of the rock column. The feel of the rough stone on his scales startled him with its realness. It occurred to him that if the merman’s bite was what turned him into a fish freak, it must have also caused his illness. Did he turn into a freak in the truck? Erick’s stomach flipped. He imagined how Talia and Dunley must have reacted, looking at him in horror. He couldn’t decide whether Ivan would have been more ashamed by him or heartbroken. Was he so disgusted by his tail that they threw him into the sea? If so, why would they free the merman with him?

“Erick?” Silas asked gently, his voice tight with concern.

“Is that all you can say?” Erick snapped. “Erick, Erick, Erick – You can’t just keep saying my name like that’s all you need to make me understand you.”

Silas flinched and slid back slightly. He had touched a nerve somehow. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.” He then sat up and folded his tail underneath him. If he was going to make things work between them, he needed to get Erick to learn his language. Pointing at himself, he said, “Silas.” He pointed back at Erick and repeated Erick’s name, then pointed back at himself. “My name is Silas.”

Erick frowned at the merman. “Silas?”
Despite himself, Silas couldn’t help but smile at the sound of his name. “Yes, Silas! I’m Silas, you’re Erick.”

Erick groaned. “Great, I’ve learned its name.” He ran a hand over his face. It was an utterly useless piece of information in his opinion, but it was also the only thing he had been able to get out of the merman so far. He grudgingly faced him again. “What was your friend’s name, Silas?” The merman perked up once more, annoying Erick. The last thing he wanted was to make this fish happy about anything. “What is your friend’s name?” Erick pointed to where he swam off, then gestured to himself. “I have Ivan.” He pointed back at Silas and then nodded back to the open ocean. “Who is he?”

It took Silas a moment to put together what Erick was saying. “Oh. You’re wondering about Gale.” Silas pointed to the ocean and repeated his name. “Gale is my best friend. Our parents are good friends, so we grew up together.”

“Okay, so his name is Gale.” Erick wondered if they were brothers. They both had reddish tails, even though Gale’s was dark burgundy and Silas’ was scarlet mixed with orange and gold. Its pattern reminded him of the koi fish in Ivan’s pond. Erick began wondering if it would be better to look for land, despite the immensity of the ocean. Even if his tail wasn’t permanent, Silas and Gale clearly weren’t going to fix it. He thought he would have been angrier about this fact, but he realized it meant he no longer needed to bring Silas back to land at all. He himself was now living proof that merfolk were real. Erick could still hunt down merfolk, just not in the way he expected.

As Erick’s expression grew thoughtful, Silas wondered what else he could teach him before Gale returned. He knew it would take Gale a while to get back home, find his dad at work, explain what happened, and convince him to bring Erick home. He had no idea what to do after that. He didn’t have to worry about his dad being able to handle Erick because he was captain of the guards, but it would still be like swimming against the current to teach Erick everything he would need to know about living with merfolk. Silas also didn’t want everyone to find out he was human. As much as Erick hated them, Silas knew some mers hated humans just as much. He would have to keep him safe and keep him from attacking anyone else. At least Erick only seemed to want to kill him, even if he wasn’t trying to right now.

Silas got up from the rock. “I guess all I can do now is teach you some other words.” Erick watched Silas as he darted to the edge of the kelp forest, tore off a kelp frond, and swam back. “This is kelp,” Silas said, holding it up. “Kelp.”

Erick pushed himself off the edge of the rock column and faced Silas. He used the jutting edges of the stone as handholds to lower himself rather than try to swim down. “Kelp?” he repeated, using the merman’s word.

“Yes, exactly,” Silas said, nodding.

Erick replied back in English, “That’s seaweed.”

Silas repeated the human’s word questioningly, pointing at it.

Looking baffled, Erick asked, “What are you going on about?”

“Do you call this a seaweed?” Silas repeated more insistently, tapping his finger on it. “I call this kelp.” He held it out towards Erick. “Kelp.”

Erick stared at the kelp and then up at Silas. His confusion became more concern for Silas’ sanity.
Silas groaned, pulling on his hair. Enunciating slowly with clear breaks between each of his words, Silas said, “I am trying to teach you mertongue.” He went through their names again, pointing at himself, Erick, the direction where Gale went, and finally at the surface. Erick followed his finger as he reviewed them. Silas then pointed at the kelp once more, repeating its name.

Erick felt like an idiot when he realized what Silas was doing. “Oh. You call that kelp?”

“Yes!” Silas cheered, lifting his fists in celebration. “Now you’re getting it.”

Erick glared at him again. “Why should I care what it’s called? For all I know, you’re talking about the color or saying it’s food.”

Silas was unfazed by Erick’s annoyance. He let go of the kelp and darted down to the ocean floor. He scooped up a handful of sand and swam back up. Just like he did with the kelp, Silas named it and had Erick repeat after him, then repeated Erick’s word for sand. Silas went back down to pick up a rock and do it again.

After Silas dropped the rock, he looked around for more things he could name. There were a few fish flittering around the rocks, but catching one would take a bit of work. He glanced at the sock full of coins still had tied around his wrist. He could open it and tell him the word for gold, but he was afraid Erick would somehow recognize that it was from Ivan and get the wrong impression.

Erick watched Silas look for a new item to name, wondering how he could use this game more productively. He didn’t need to know the merman’s words for rocks and sand, but the things he wanted to know couldn’t be picked up and pointed at. He rubbed between his eyes and sighed.

“Silas,” Erick said, getting his attention when an idea occurred to him. “What do you call this?” He gestured towards his tail.

“Oh, that’s your tail,” Silas answered. He took hold of the end of his own tail and traced around the fluted end. “This is your tailfin.” After Erick repeated him, Silas pointed to the gills on his chest and named those. He named the rest of the parts of his body. When he got to his nose, Silas said, “You broke my nose when you ran into me.” It was still tender to the touch, but at least it wasn’t bleeding anymore.

Realizing it was an opportunity to explain an abstract concept, Silas purposefully pressed on it and winced. “That’s pain,” he said. “It hurts.” He pointed to Erick’s arm where he bit him. “Pain? Does it hurt?”

Now that they had been practicing both vocabulary and forming simple sentences, Erick quickly caught on to what he was saying. “No. This no hurt,” he said, using Silas’ language. “Not anymore anyway,” he added in English. His arm had completely healed in his transformation. He told Silas his word for hurt.

Silas smiled sadly. “I’m glad. I really am sorry.”

Since Silas had been constantly saying the word sorry, Erick repeated it questioningly. “What does that mean?”

Though Silas understood what he was asking, he wasn’t sure how to answer. “Um… Sorry means that I know I did something wrong,” he said, rubbing the back of his head. “Sorry means I was bad.” At Erick’s still confused expression, he continued, “Silas hurt Erick.” He pointed at his arm again and gestured broadly at everything, then pointed at his contrite expression. “I’m sorry.”

It clicked in Erick’s mind then, startling him. “Sorry?” he repeated in disbelief. Silas cowered.
“No! You can’t just say you’re sorry like that fixes anything!” He waved his hands in front of him, as if trying to banish Silas. Using the few merfolk words he knew, he continued shouting, “No, Silas! You hurt Erick. You merman, I human!”

“Erick—”

“No! I won’t forgive you,” Erick said, bitterly glad that he had wiped the smile from the merman’s face. “You turned me into a freak, and your kind killed my parents. The only family I had left just dumped me in the ocean because of you.”

Silas felt like he was going to cry. He had been finally starting to get through to Erick, but now he was already using the words he learned against him. Silas could only assume that everything he was saying now was just a barrage of insults.

“Erick, I’m sorry. Please,” Silas pleaded. He reached out to him without thinking.

Erick grabbed his wrist, then seized his throat. He threw him against the rock column again. Squeezing his neck, Erick snarled, “Your apologies aren’t going to stop me.” Silas clawed at the hand at his throat, trying to twist his wrist out of Erick’s grip. His tail flailed madly between Erick and the rocks. Erick struggled to stay up in the water and keep him against the rock wall. “I’m going to kill you and find Ivan. If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll hunt down and kill every last one of you.”

Silas made a choked sound. His gills were still giving him enough oxygen, but Erick could still snap his neck. Erick’s fingers began bruising his skin and he frantically struggled harder. As soon as Erick realized he couldn’t simply choke Silas to death, Silas knew he would remove his hand from his wrist to finish the job.

Chapter End Notes

Man, Erick just can't keep his hands off of Silas. ;
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Silas returns home and we meet his father and Gale’s mother.

Chapter Notes

Another week, another chapter, and I'm still loving all of your continued support. I decided to stick with Erick's backstory for the one-shot chapter to celebrate 100 kudos, and you all should be happy to hear that it's already almost 4,000 words. ^-^; I really wasn't planning on it being more than 2,000, but I ended up really liking the guy Erick meets, so... yeah. I was hoping to have it done by today to have it go up with today's update, but it looks like it'll be a little while longer.

“Silas!” Gale shouted, rushing forward as soon as he saw Erick choking him. Silas’ father, Ronan followed close behind. The older merman had a dusky orange tail and wore the uniform of Peleran’s guards: a bronze-colored helmet, breastplate, vambraces, and a belt holding a scimitar. All of his armor and the blade of his sword was made with song-forged glass.

Erick looked up just as Gale tackled him. He wrapped his arms around his waist. Erick raised his fist to strike Gale, but Ronan caught Erick’s wrists. Erick spat curses and thrashed in their grip.

Coughing, Silas tentatively touched his tender neck. “I’m fine,” he croaked. Seeing Erick struggle in his father’s arms, Silas couldn’t hold back his tears anymore. “I’m sorry, Dad. Please don’t hurt him.”

Ronan looked up, stunned. “This man was trying to kill you!”

“I know.” Talking hurt his throat even more, but he had to make sure Erick would be okay. “But we mated. No matter what you do with him, he might carry my child – your grandkid.”

Ronan looked horrorstruck before his expression hardened. He wasn’t sure if he wanted a feral human or merman’s spawn for a grandchild, but he couldn’t say that to Silas right now. Not when he had already been through so much.

“All right, I won’t hurt him,” Ronan said, taking Erick form Gale now that his wrists were bound. “But I am locking him up until we know what else to do with him.” Erick could do little more than flail in his grip. He snarled in fury, whipping his head side to side as if trying to head-butt the guard captain. Ronan merely looked sidelong at him with disdain. Despite that it was a job normally handled by his subordinates, decades of practice meant Ronan had no issue manhandling resistant mers.
“Thank you.” Silas began crying in earnest now. Gale went to comfort him.

As Gale rubbed Silas’ back, he glared at Erick. The former human bared his teeth, staring daggers back at him.

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It was still four hours until sunset when they arrived at Peleran’s prison. It was set into an underwater mountain overlooking the shoal, far enough away from the coral-covered, domed houses below for most mers to forget about the prisoners inside. Since Silas asked, Ronan made sure to keep Erick’s origins a secret. Ronan told Erick’s new warden, a green-tailed guard named Hal, that Silas had escaped the humans who caught him when they accidently tipped his tank overboard. Erick was another merman who the humans had captured, and his aggression and inability to communicate with them was apparently due to being raised by humans. They were going to hold him at the prison until Ronan could find a professional to deal with him. Though Hal seemed skeptical of the story, he didn’t press questions. He trusted Ronan and Silas too much to suspect anything malicious.

While Ronan took Erick to a private cell, Gale took Silas to his house so Gale’s mother, Merise could check on Silas’ injuries. They found her in the half of their house that had been converted into an apothecary. It occasionally doubled as an infirmary for neighbors and friends of their family who needed extra attention. She was sitting at a workbench in the middle of mixing medicines. Her mortar and pestle was filled with crushed ingredients from assorted glass bottles mounted on a wall rack. When Gale called for her attention, she jumped up and looked relieved to see Silas. She ushered him to a sickbed that was divided from the rest of the house by a weighted sailcloth curtain. Her wavy brown hair rippled behind her, and her short mauve tail beat with swift stokes.

As Merise reset Silas’ broken nose and looked over his bruised neck, she said, “As bad as this looks, I’m amazed that this is the worst of it considering how long you were missing, Silas. I’d count yourself lucky.” She removed the bandage over his tail to look at the stitches Erick had made to close his harpoon wound, but found them to be serviceable. Removing them now to even them out would be more trouble than it was worth.

Silas nodded dumbly. He was thinking about Erick getting thrown into a cell all alone. He hoped that his dad would be kind enough to give him a sponge mattress rather than let him sleep on bare stone, but knew the prison wasn’t likely to have any on hand.

Merise glanced up at her son, but Gale was similarly quiet. “Well,” she said, getting a jar of a healing salve from a shelf near the sick bed, “let’s put this on you so you can get some rest.” She scooped up half a handful of the thick paste and gently massaged it onto Silas’ wounds. He winced as her fingers pressed on his bruises, but he didn’t protest. She deftly massaged his injuries until the sharp pain and sore spots dulled to numbness. Merise was one of many mers in Peleran who could use her siren voice to sing healing magic into her medicines. Though all merfolk could use their siren voices to communicate long-distance, particularly gifted individuals could use theirs to practice the mystic arts. There were songs to create all manner of things, such as the guards’ glass armor or preservation jars that could always hold a bubble of air, but Merise specialized in healing songs.

“Okay, all done,” Merise said, reclosing the lid on the salve jar. “Do you want to stay here tonight, Silas? Or would you rather go home?”

Silas bit his lip, looking down. “I should probably go home.” His voice still sounded raspy with the effort of talking, but the salve took the edge off the pain. “My dad is going to have a lot of
“All right.” She handed Silas the salve jar. “Rub on more of this whenever you need it, and try not to talk too much until you’re better.”

Silas nodded, tightening his hands on the jar.

“C’mon, Silas,” Gale said, putting his arm around his shoulders. “I’ll go home with you.” Looking back at his mom, he said, “I’ll be back soon.” After they left, Gale told Silas quietly, “I’m going to have to tell my mom the truth about Erick, you know. She’s not going to believe the story we gave the warden, and if he has a baby… Well, we’ll want her help to keep it healthy.”

Even though Silas knew he was right, he didn’t want to think of how disappointed she’d be in him. She was almost like another parent to him, just like how his dad was like a second father to Gale. Both of them had lost their other parents. Silas’ maternal father died young due to his weakened health after Silas’ birth, and Gale’s dad died three years ago in a hunting accident.

“What if she doesn’t want to help?” Silas asked. He was glad that his raspy voice helped mask his worry.

“What? Silas, of course she’ll help,” Gale answered. “Just because you royally fucked up doesn’t mean she’ll stop loving you.”

“Yeah, but…”

“But nothing. I’ll talk to her, and I’ll make sure she doesn’t prod you about all this later.”

“Thanks.” Silas looked up at his house. The stone building was shaped like three bubbles pressed together. Blue and pink cactus coral sat on each side of the front door, much like the other mer houses in the neighborhood. Glass windows patterned like insect wings dotted the front and roof. “At least that’s one less person I’ll have to explain all this to.”

“Exactly.” They stopped outside the entrance. “Should I come back over later today?”

“No, I’ll find you tomorrow. I’m still too rattled by everything that’s happened.”

“All right then.” Gale half-smiled and patted Silas’ shoulder. “Get some rest.” He swam off back to his house.

Silas looked back at his front door and took a breath, letting the water filter out through his gills slowly. He wasn’t looking forward to getting lectured by his dad.

Chapter End Notes

~ Oct. 13, 2019 ~
I made a ton of changes to this chapter and the following four. The old last third of this chapter was moved to be its own chapter, bringing the current number of chapters to 105 rather than 104, and I rearranged a lot of other scenes to fix the pacing between Silas’ scenes and Erick’s. It used to be all Silas, then jump back in time to see what Erick was doing, then finally see them together again. Now the timeline will happen more concurrently with more jumping back and forth, which I hope will help with the dramatic tension between how they’re each handling this new situation.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Content/Trigger warning: self-harm, suicidal thoughts

Ronan puts Erick in Peleran’s prison. Erick has a panic attack and harms himself.

Chapter Notes

We made it past 125 kudos! Seriously everybody, it feels like these kudos just keep adding up faster and faster. I'm going to run out of my buffer if you all keep loving this story so much, lol. I'm a lady of my word, though, so here is another bonus chapter as promised. It's going to get dark, but I hope you all enjoy it.

Also! I forgot to mention it with yesterday's update, but I did post a mini-chapter about my merfolk mythology. I was going to include it in the main story, but their gods/goddesses don't add anything to the conflict. It's titled "The History of the People of the Sea," and you can find it in a series I've created called "Go Off the Deep End and companion works." I'd love it if you all would check it out. I'm going to post the one-shot celebration chapter there as well when I finish it.

Ronan cut the binding on Erick’s wrists and shoved him forward into a long and narrow cell. Before Erick could spin around and attack him, Ronan slammed the cell door shut. The lock clicked as bubbles dispersed. The cell door was made of black glass bars woven across each other into a solid stone cave. The only notable features in Erick’s cell were a small hole in the back wall to filter out excrement and a raised bit of rock that could be called a bench or a place for a narrow mattress.

“Let me go!” Erick shouted, grabbing the bars. The gaunt-faced man before him had the same amber eyes as Silas and a similar small chin. “You can’t keep me here!”

Ronan stared at Erick, sizing him up as the former human shouted unintelligibly. He had felt how strong he was when he had wrestled back his arms, but he could see his strength in his broad shoulders and tanned abs too. It was a strange sight considering most mers in their part of the sea tended to be pale and slender. Merfolk rarely spent so much time in the sun or worked on their upper body strength. He definitely wasn’t built like a typical breeder either, given his size. His deep cerulean tail flared out to a wide fin, promising that he would be a fast swimmer, as stiff and awkward it looked on him at the moment. If he ended up giving him a grandchild, Ronan hoped it would take after his son’s personality.

“Stop staring at me!” Erick shook the cell bars, but the glass was more solid than iron. “I swear I’ll kill you for this after I kill Silas.”

Ronan recognized his son’s name, but decided he had better things to do than argue with an incoherent human. Returning to his son was at the top of the list. Turning away, he said, “Go to
sleep. I’ll decide what to do with you tomorrow.”

“What was that, you fish freak?” Erick called after him as he left. “I’m not done with you!” But Ronan disappeared down the hall lined with empty cells. “Hey! Get back here!” Erick slammed his hand against the bars. “You can’t just fucking leave me here!”

The armored merman did not return. Algae lamps attached to the ceiling glowed silently. Nothing answered him. He remained alone. The other prisoners must have been kept in another part of the prison. Erick pressed his forehead against the bars. “You god damn bastard…” His voice choked.

Erick turned around and floated down with his back against the bars. He stared at the small hole in the wall, mentally cursing. The reality of his situation began to sink in slowly. He was caught trying to kill one of their kind, so of course they would jail him. Would they execute him too? he wondered. Or would they just make him rot in this watery hell hole for the rest of his life?

Clenching his fists against the ground, Erick leaned his head back and fought tears. He was never one to cry if he could help it, but he didn’t even know if he could cry now that he was underwater.

His dark hair brushed against the tips of his alien ear fins as a soft current flowed through the prison. His whole body felt wrong, from his new pointed front teeth to the end of his tail.
Everything all felt too cold and heavy and strange – the glass bars, the rough stone floor, his skin and scales. Numbing weight pushed down all around him. He tried not to think about the loss of his legs, tried to ignore the feeling of his tail on the cold floor, but his scales felt the hard stone as clearly as the rest of his skin. The iridescent casing below his waist was too thin. The membrane of his tailfin caught each subtle shift in the water, twitching or turning restlessly despite his efforts to hold it still. There was nothing he could use to cover himself, no blanket or clothes or sheltered corner to hide away in.

Erick didn’t want to think about Ivan or his crew, but they had to be worrying about him right now. At least he hoped so, because the alternative, that they had purposefully abandoned him, was worse. Even if they didn’t leave him on purpose, the thought of any of them seeing him like this still hurt too. He had become his worst nightmare. He could still try to hunt down merfolk, but he could never return to a normal life. It was worse than being dead.

Erick’s face grew hot as his tears dissolved into the water around him. He tried to hold back his sobs, but there was no one to hear him. The realization broke his resolve and he bawled like a child. His voice sounded stuttered and pathetic. He hated the sound and himself for it, hated how his gills fluttered against his sides with every halting breath. He couldn’t breathe deep enough. The water – not air, never air again – kept seeping out before he could fully exhale. He curled up instinctively, trying to fold himself over his knees, but his chest touched his scales. He flinched hard, hitting his back against the bars. His tail whipped to the floor. It felt like the belly of a basilisk, slick and chilling to the touch. He hugged himself and flinched again from his gills touching his arms, opening and closing like choking mouths.

Crying out with a whimper, Erick gripped his face. His nails dug into his forehead. The pinpricks of pain were too muted to drown out his mental cacophony. He couldn’t hold himself and couldn’t hold his legs. His tail beat the floor, responding to his attempt to kick his feet, but the rough stone hurt his tailfin.

When it scraped his tail for the fifth time, Erick snarled and raked his nails across his scales. They glided across harmlessly, so he changed direction and pulled up against the grain.

“Give me back my legs!” Erick cried, ripping at his tail. His nails tore out his scales, stripping them from his skin. They glided backwards in quick succession, digging backwards before splintering free.
The pain balanced the agony in his soul, so he continued tearing them out. They flaked off, translucent, and flickered in the streams of blood blossoming under his fingers. The skin beneath his scales was dull black, but was quickly laced with a startling raw pink.

The pain began to overwhelm Erick when he had scoured off plate-sized patches over where his thighs and knees had been. They were riddled with long, jagged tears across his dull and inflamed skin. Blood and scales were lodged underneath his fingernails. Hyperventilating, he stared at his tail and gripped the floor to fight off mounting nausea and the pain building in his chest. He wanted to look away, but horror had him trapped. His legs weren’t under his scales. They were gone.
Swimming into his house, Silas found his father’s armor hanging beside the door. His father was sitting at the back wall of their living area, rocking his dusky orange tail anxiously. The lack of his uniform made him look thinner. Silas wished he hadn’t taken it off. It was when his father wasn’t wearing his armor that Silas felt the most anxious around him. It signaled when Ronan was done with work, when he was usually exhausted from the day and yet still had enough energy to reprove Silas’ life choices or nag him about being careful.

Reluctantly, Silas swam into the living area. Like most mer houses, theirs was predominately a concave space lined with sea sponges to sit on and entertain guests. To the right was a kitchen with a small stone table, four chairs, and a wall with dozens of little holes stocked with preserved fish, pickled crab, and other cured foods because neither of them liked cooking. Set into the counter beneath a row of shelves, they had a covered hole that could suck away food waste in place of a sink, and instead of a stove, they had a large, brown glass pot. In the left wall were three small cave openings to their bed alcoves, each partitioned off with sailcloth curtains embellished with mother-of-pearl and coral beads. Gale used the third bedroom whenever he stayed over, which was often considering how often Merise had patients in their house. Silas wondered if he should have taken up Merise’s offer to stay at her house after all.

“Silas,” Ronan said, rising to greet him. His eyes looked him over and lingered on his injuries. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” Holding up the salve jar, Silas added, “Merise gave me this.” He put the jar into one of the many holes in the kitchen wall and avoided looking at his father. “She said I shouldn’t talk until my throat’s better.”

“Hm,” Ronan grumbled, nodding. “You can be mute later. Right now we need to talk.” He waved him over to join his side.

“Can’t I just go to my room, please?” Silas drifted down to the sea sponges across from his father. He hugged his tail to his chest and folded his fin over his arms. “I know I shouldn’t have gone to the surface. I’m already paying for that mistake, so do you have to lecture me about being stupid too?”

“Silas…” Ronan sighed. “I’m not here to lecture you.” He sat forward and folded his tail beneath himself. “I just need to know what happened to you on that ship. As soon as Gale told me he found
you, I didn’t ask questions. I just followed him as quick as I could. All he told me was that Erick was human, and that you got free because his uncle let you two go for some reason. I don’t even understand how you managed to have a blood binding by accident.”

Silas tightened his hold on his tail. “It was because I bit him. Erick and his crew were taking me onto his ship, and I couldn’t get him to let me go…” He put his forehead to his red and gold scales to hide his face. “After he pulled out the harpoon, I hit him with my tail. I think that’s when I got my blood in his mouth.”

“Gods,” Ronan muttered, staring at the stitches in Silas’ tail. “So then they put you in a tank?”

“Yeah. Erick got sick really quickly after that. When we got to land, they covered up the tank. I don’t know when Erick fell unconscious, but he had gills and scales the next time I saw him.”

“Their uncle took you back to the sea?”

“Yes. He knew what was happening to Erick,” Silas answered, lifting only his nose above his tail. “I don’t know why, but he knew mertongue and had a northeast accent despite living over here. He told me that he taught Erick lies about merfolk because he disliked us for some reason, but he wanted me to teach Erick that he was wrong since he became a merman.”

“Well, that’s certainly a lot to ask of just a boy,” Ronan said bitingly. He looked out the window, where fish swam around the corals planted beneath it. “He’s the one with two tongues. Why couldn’t he teach his nephew himself?”

“I don’t really know.” Silas sighed. “When we set free, one of Erick’s friends came with us. He didn’t want to let me take him.”

“To be honest, son, I wish you didn’t.” Silas sunk behind his tail again. Ronan watched with sympathy. “I know you don’t want to hear me say it, but his uncle was really damn irresponsible letting you two loose on the full moon. If he knew about blood binding, he should have known to at least keep you two apart until after it passed.”

Silas didn’t answer, but his face burned in shame.

“I know it’s not your fault that you couldn’t control yourself,” Ronan continued. “I should have talked to you about what to expect before this all happened, but I just didn’t think…” He trailed off, pushing his hand through his thinning blond hair. He stared at the floor for a long moment. “I’m just sorry that this all had to happen for you like this. It should have been special. It should’ve been with someone you love, not some violent human.”

Silas tightened his hold on his tail. “Don’t talk about him like that.”

“Why?” Ronan frowned at his son. “You can’t actually like him like that, can you?” Silas remained silent again. Ronan swore under his breath and rubbed his eyes. “Silas, what kind of life do you see yourself living with this man?”

“I don’t know,” Silas answered, barely above a whisper. “But when he was asleep, he just looked so… I don’t know. Like he could be gentle, or kind, or happy. When he’s awake, that’s all gone, but I saw what he could be. If we just teach him we’re not all bad, he could be that person. I don’t know what Ivan told Erick about us, but it must be awful if he’s this hurt and angry at everything.”

“I don’t care what he thinks about us, he was trying to kill you,” Ronan said. “I hate a lot of mers and I’ve had to fight a lot in my life, but I don’t ever resort to violence like that.”
“So? He probably just doesn’t know any better,” Silas argued. “He just—”

“No, you cannot make excuses for his behavior. Humans can’t be so different from us that they don’t understand the value of a person’s life.” Ronan paused to let his words sink in. “Ivan may have lied to him, but it was Erick’s choice to attack you. I know you want to believe it’s possible, but son, I don’t think you can win over this man.”

“I don’t care.” Silas met his father’s eyes. “I have to try.” Ronan looked away. Silas continued, “I want to see him again in the morning.” Silas pushed himself up and swam over to his bed alcove. He took hold of the curtain in front of it and stared at the beads weighting down the end with a distant expression. “Erick may be against us, but he didn’t deserve this.”

Ronan rose to go to his alcove too. “Fine.” He shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck. “We’ll need to talk more about how we’re going to make this all work, especially if he does end up with child, but you can go to bed now.”

Silas didn’t even want to think about how that conversation would go. He pushed back the curtain to his alcove and settled onto his sponge mattress. Tucked into all the nooks and crannies on one side of his bed, his dozens of shipwreck souvenirs surrounded him. He untied the sock full of coins Ivan gave him and added it to his collection. He stared at it for a moment, thoughtful, and looked back at the rest of his things. He wondered if Erick would accept anything as a peace offering.

He had silver forks and spoons coated in a green patina, chipped crystal decanters, coins from both countries on each side of the sea, an intricately embossed compact mirror, glass bottles, a solid gold seal, and dozens of gold and silver pieces of jewelry with gemstones in every color. A small fortune was stuffed in these walls. He picked through his jewelry and pulled out a plain gold ring set with a round, bevel cut emerald, the same color as Erick’s eyes. Erick seemed to like that gold necklace, so maybe he would like a ring to match?

As the sunlight filtering through the sea died down to the blue-green glow of the algae lamps in the living area, Silas twirled the ring around his slim fingers. He eventually set it into a nook all by itself where it could catch the light from his lamp. It would make a fine gift, but he would wait until the time was right.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Silas and Ronan learn Erick hurt himself.

Chapter Notes

Now we get to see the aftermath of our most emotional chapter yet, and it's a long chapter at 2,500 words. I'm pleasantly surprised that you all had so much sympathy for our poor, star-crossed lovers. It will be fun to see how I can continue wrenching your hearts, haha.

As for other news, the one-shot chapter is up! For those of you who noticed, I actually posted it on Saturday in the series with the merfolk mythology. My sister also drew some fan art of Erick and Silas, so be sure to check out her drawings as well! I'm thinking of drawing my characters too, but I will probably post them on my deviantART page. (My username there is the same here, DarkAcey. If you check it out, comment here. I'm not really active on dA anymore.)

It was pure exhaustion that finally let Erick escape his living nightmare into a dreamless sleep. His warden, Hal found him the following morning with his tail barely scabbed over. Startled by the sight, his choice curse words woke Erick. The former human grimaced at him, lashing out with unintelligible verbal abuse. Hal attempted to calm him down before pain overtook Erick again. He howled in agony, dragging his nails across the floor, half-delirious from his self-inflicted injuries. Hal stared, horrified, before hurrying out of the prison.

“Ronan,” he shouted, banging on his front door. “You need to come to the prison! The guy you brought in has gone crazy!”

Silas woke with a start and twisted out of his bed alcove. His father emerged from his room and dragged a hand over his face. Opening the door, Ronan asked, “What do you mean crazy, Hal?” Though Ronan knew most of his guards well, Hal was also one of his friends. It was why he placed Erick under his care.

“He scratched off his scales and was raving mad at me when I tried to figure out what was going on,” Hal answered, distraught.

Silas paled. “You’re serious?” he asked, his voice even more scratchy and high in terror.

Ronan’s eyes widened and turned furious. “How could you let this happen?” he roared. He grabbed his chest armor and helmet, putting them on vehemently. “You were supposed to be watching him!” He shoved past Hal to exit his house, snatching his sword belt and vambraces on the way out.

“I know, but I didn’t think—”
“Don’t give me excuses.” Ronan buckled his belt with a sharp tug to tighten it. “Go get Merise, now!”

“Right.” Hal hurried to her house.

As Ronan turned to leave while slipping on his vambraces, Silas said, “Dad, I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not,” Ronan snapped. “We’re going to have to take him out of his cell for Merise to treat him, and I don’t want you near him unless he’s restrained or behind bars.”

“But I’m the only one that cares about him!”

“You’re also the one he wants to kill!” Ronan bellowed back.

“Only because he thinks this is all my fault.” Silas balled his hands into fists. “I have to make it better. The gods had to have put us together for a reason, so let me help.” He met his father’s glare with a determined expression.

Ronan fumed silently before swearing under his breath. “Fine!” He adjusted the buckles on his vambraces. “Go with Hal to get Merise. When you get to the station, stay in my office until I say you can come.”

Silas wanted to keep arguing that that wasn’t enough, but he knew his father wasn’t going to budge further. The longer he kept him here, the longer he would take to get back to Erick. “Fine,” Silas huffed. As soon as his father left, Silas headed over to Gale’s house.

On his way over, Silas ran into Hal and Merise. She looked at him in surprise and her worried expression immediately turned to sympathy. Silas’ stomach twisted. He noticed Gale standing at his door behind them. Knowing that he would want Gale’s company while he waited for his father’s permission to see Erick, he turned his head to avoid her gaze and hurried to Gale.

“Silas!” Gale called when he saw him. “I heard Erick is hurt bad – he wouldn’t really do that to himself, would he?”

“Hal wouldn’t lie to my dad,” Silas answered, shaking his head. He turned back towards the mountain holding the prison. He imagined having his scales torn out and the image revolted him. For Erick to have done so emphasized how much Silas underestimated his situation. Dread filled him like a black cloud of squid ink. He pushed his fingers into his blond hair and pulled. “Gods, I knew he hated merfolk, but I didn’t think he’d mutilate himself! How could I let him get locked up all alone?” Silas buried his face in his hands. “If he can’t kill us, he’s going to kill himself.” His voice broke with tears. “Gale, what am I going to do?”

“Hey, calm down,” Gale said, pulling Silas into a hug. “My mom is going to take care of him. We won’t leave him alone again, okay?”

“But he still hates us,” Silas cried. He pressed his face to Gale’s chest, unable to stop his sobbing. “He could have killed himself last night, and it would have been my fault.”

“No, don’t say that, don’t you ever say that, Silas.” Gale pulled him closer. “This isn’t your fault.”

“But I bit him. I let myself get caught.”

“No you didn’t.” Gale pet Silas’ head and back. “If anything, it’s my fault for not dragging you off that flotsam when I had the chance. Stop blaming yourself.”
“I can’t…” Silas trailed off, his throat hurting too much now to keep talking. The pain in his neck reminded him of how much he failed Erick and made him cry harder. He was sick of crying so much, but he couldn’t stop.

Gale continued rubbing his back and made shushing sounds. He stared at the mountain, feeling his anger with Erick grow hotter every second for creating the sobbing mess in his arms. The former human didn’t deserve Silas’ concern. He wasn’t even worthy to carry his child like some seahorse. Gale found himself wishing that Erick had killed himself, but then mentally beat himself for the thought. Killing him would only hurt Silas more. The fact made his blood boil, that Silas was completely lost now to a man who wanted him dead.

* * *

After a whole hour of waiting, Hal found Silas and Gale in Ronan’s office. He told them that Merise finished bandaging his tail, but Erick had attacked Ronan when they were taking him out of his cell. Hal had to help get Erick off of him, and together they restrained him on the bench in his cell so Merise could enchant him to sleep and do her work. Merise wanted him to take some medicine too after they were done, but he refused to eat anything, including breakfast. Whether it was because of the language barrier or just a lack of trust, Hal couldn’t say.

When Hal brought Silas and Gale outside the cellblock entrance, Ronan was waiting for them. “Silas,” he said in greeting, nodding at him. He had a puffy eye and a bruised cheekbone.

Silas gaped at him and Gale clenched his jaw. “Your face…” Silas said, unable to finish the thought.

“I know,” he said, rubbing the stubble on his chin. “Merise already treated it, so don’t worry. We have real problems here.” Ronan looked down the hallway. “There’s no reasoning with this man at all. I have half a mind to believe he was actually raised by sharks.”

Gale snorted, sardonic. “That would explain why he’s so fighty.”

Silas frowned at both of them. “You have to give him another chance. Erick wasn’t like this at all on his ship.”

“Then what was he like?” Ronan asked. “A human who harpooned you is hardly different than a merman who tried to strangle you.”

Scowling, Silas answered, “He did what he could to care for me. When I was overheating in that tank, he made his crew cool me down. When I couldn’t sleep and woke everyone with my signal song, he gave me medicine that helped the pain in my tail. All this he did while our blood binding was slowly killing him.”

Gale rolled his eyes, about to make a snide comment before Ronan said, “Very well, but that doesn’t change the fact that he lashes out at everyone who so much as looks at him. I don’t think it will help him or be in your best interest to see him.”

“I don’t care. I still have to try.” Silas glanced down the hallway. “Hal said Merise wanted Erick to take some medicine. Was she not able to give it to him while she had him asleep?”

“No, she was hoping he’d take it with breakfast.” Ronan sighed. “I don’t want to force them down his throat, but if he keeps being belligerent we’ll have to do something. The salve Merise used on him isn’t going to be enough.”
“Let me try to make him take it,” Silas said. “After Gale left to get you, I got him to talk to me for a while. If I can get him to work with me again, I can do it. I know I can.”

Ronan looked about to refuse, so Silas continued, “Please. You don’t even have to let him out of his cell. Just let me talk to him and prove he can be more than this.”

Shaking his head, Ronan said, “Okay, but I’ll still need to supervise.” He gestured for Silas and Gale to go down to Erick’s cell, surprising both of them. “Merise is watching him right now to make sure he doesn’t pull off his bandages.”

“Thank you.” Silas hugged his father before hurrying ahead. Gale gave Ronan a dubious look, wordlessly expressing his concern. Ronan shrugged in return. Despite all of his big talk, he could rarely stop Silas from whatever he set his mind to do.

Ronan showed them down to the end of the hallway. Merise was sitting on a stool outside Erick’s cell, talking about the great mer cities and other wonders of the ocean. When they got close enough to see Erick, Silas couldn’t tell if he was actually listening to her or not. His eyebrows were low and he had a brooding frown, but Silas knew that it was practically a good mood for him based on how rarely Silas had seen Erick smile on his ship.

“Merise,” Ronan called. Erick immediately looked up and his expression hardened. “Silas wants to try talking Erick into taking his medicine.”

“I hope he has better luck than us,” Merise said as she rose from her seat. Erick glanced over at her as she left, his frown deepening. “Even if he doesn’t understand, I think he liked having me talk to him.”

Gale raised an eyebrow before rolling his eyes. “Sure, Mom. You just like talking.”

She smiled, chuckling under her breath. “Maybe so, it could just be wishful thinking. I should get going now, though.”

“Of course,” Ronan said. “Thank you again for coming so quickly.”

“Yeah, thanks for helping Erick,” Silas said. “I hope he didn’t hurt you too.”

“Oh, no, not at all,” Merise said, waving away his concern. “His fin caught me once when we were getting him onto the table, but he stopped wriggling after I sung him to sleep. Bandaging him was the easy part.”

“I see,” Silas said, understanding. He had watched her sing to heal people on multiple occasions, usually when she was teaching Gale how to use his siren voice to do the same.

“Silas wants to try giving Erick his medicine,” Ronan said. “Can you show it to him?”

“Oh? Of course.” Merise looked pleased as she took out a folded parcel of cloth. “Here you go.” She passed it to Silas and he unfolded the cloth to see two bladderwrack capsules filled with different shades of green-tinted liquid. “This one is to help with pain,” she said, pointing at the pale one. Moving her finger over a brownish one, she said, “This is a mild sedative to calm him down.”

“Okay.” Silas nodded and looked at Erick. He hadn’t stopped glowering at them while they talked. Glancing back at Gale, Merise, and his father, he asked, “Can you move back a bit? Maybe pretend you’re leaving? I think all of us together will be too much for him.”

Ronan was about to answer, but Merise held up a finger in front of his mouth. “Let’s trust your son
on this one.”
“But—”

“Gale can stay with him and you can wait around the corner,” Merise said more firmly, using the tone she used with stubborn patients. “We’ve scared Erick enough for one day. Let our boys have a chance.”

Ronan deflated. Turning to Silas, he asked, “Will you two be alright on your own?”

Gale looked doubtful while Silas nodded. “We’ll be fine.”
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Silas gives Erick medicine.

Chapter Notes

~ Oct. 13, 2019 ~
I forgot my rearranging also split text into another chapter, so now we're at 106. I wasn't completely done editing this chapter, but I need to post it so the next chapter still makes sense for those not waiting for me to finish all of my updates.

When Ronan and Merise left, Silas gingerly approached Erick’s cell. Gale stayed close to his tail, floating just behind Silas’ shoulder. “Erick?” Silas said. He wondered if he noticed how rough his voice sounded from his bruised throat. Using English, he asked, “You hurt?”

Erick crossed his arms and refused to look at Silas. The merman’s shoulders slumped. “Please, Erick,” he tried again, and Erick noted his raspy voice with a prick of satisfaction. He did do some damage after all.

Silas lifted his hands to hold the bars, but Gale grabbed his shoulder. Giving him a pointed look, Gale asked, “Is that really a good idea right now?”

Erick glanced up, noticing Gale’s hand holding back Silas. By Gale’s reprimanding tone, Erick saw that he at least realized how much he hated Silas. The dumb, amber-eyed monster was still naïve enough to think he wouldn’t attack him again. The only reason he wasn’t trying right now was because he was tired and his tail hurt too much to move. That was what he was telling himself, anyway.

Silas looked away. “He’s already behind bars. He can only do so much.”

“Much is still enough to strangle you again.” Gale released his hold. “What were you asking him? That wasn’t mertongue.”

“It was his language,” Silas answered, surprising Gale. “Before you and my dad came back, I was trying to teach him ours and learn his. It was going fine until I taught him what sorry meant.” Silas touched his neck, holding his other arm by his side. “You saw that he still doesn’t forgive me.”

“Oh.” Gale leaned back. “And here I thought he just caught you unaware again.”

Silas scowled at him. “I’m not that careless.”

“You were literally just about to put yourself within arms’ reach of him again.”

“So?” Silas retorted. “He’s just sitting there, ignoring me now!” he said, gesturing to him without looking away from Gale.
“And who says he’s not just faking it? He’s probably just waiting for—”

“Hey!” Erick shouted, startling both of them. “I know you’re talking about me. If you’re going to keep arguing, why don’t you just leave me the hell alone?”

Gale glared at him and looked back at Silas. “Do you understand anything he’s saying now?”

“No, we barely covered anything useful.” Silas ran his hands through his gold hair, sighing in exasperation.

“Hey, I said get the hell out!” Erick shouted again, earning another glare from Gale and a sorry look from Silas. “If you have to keep watching me, bring back that purple mermaid instead. She at least treats me like a fucking human being.” Since Silas continued staring, Erick pushed himself up off the floor. He grabbed the bars to hold himself upright so he wouldn’t have to move his tail. Whatever they had put under the bandages hadn’t helped very much with the pain, and moving made it worse. Gale put his arm in front of Silas to push him back.

“Silas, leave,” Erick said as clearly as he could, jabbing his finger at the exit. He rested his elbows on the bars and held up his hands to flap them like talking mouths. He then jabbed his fingers at his auditory fins before making the same talking motion. “Hurt ears,” he stated in mertongue. He pointed back at the exit. “Leave. You’re annoying the shit out of me.”

Gale’s mouth dropped at Erick’s use of mertongue, but Silas only looked disappointed. “Okay. I’m sorry. We’ll ‘leave,’” Silas said, repeating his word. He lifted up the folded parcel of medicine, making Erick finally notice and look suspiciously at it. “I just wanted you to take this.” Silas started to hold it out, but Gale grabbed his hand. Silas jerked it back and snapped, “I can give him his medicine! Stop babying me.”

Gale didn’t budge. After a moment, he shook his head, then lowered his arm. “Fine.”

Erick folded his arms over the bars, looking curiously at the antagonism between Silas and Gale. He understood Gale’s overprotectiveness, but his constant glaring was getting on his nerves. As Silas held out the parcel again and unfolded it, Erick rested his forehead against the bars. Erick recognized the weird egg-looking things in his hand as the same medicine that the mermaid tried to give him. Like hell he was going to let them drug him. Whatever the mermaid did to put him to sleep was already bad enough.

“Eat,” Silas said, holding it out to him again. He pointed at the capsules, then gestured to his mouth.

“I know you want me to eat them,” Erick retorted, annoyed at how things had flipped. He wished he never gave Silas that pain medicine. “I’m not eating your fishy shit.” To make sure his meaning was clear, he said in mertongue, “No eat,” and cut his hand through the water like it was the end of the discussion.


Erick scowled at him, but answered, “Yes.”

Silas shook the medicine. “Eat. No hurt. This is medicine.” When Erick continued staring at him, Silas sighed and picked up the brownish sedative. “Medicine,” he repeated. “It tastes bad, but it’s safe.” He put it in his mouth and quickly swallowed, grimacing slightly. Gale frowned at him. Then Silas opened his mouth wide and stuck out his tongue. “See? No hurt.”
Erick grimaced at the sight of his tongue poking between his sharp teeth, then looked down again at the remaining egg-looking capsule. If Silas was willing to eat it, it couldn’t have been that bad. Not much could have been worse than his tail killing him, anyway. Despite that the darker side of him wished it really would, he was getting sick of dealing with the pain. Erick unclasped his hand from his arm and reached over to pick up the capsule from Silas’ outstretched hand. Actually holding it now, he found the texture was firmer than he expected. He then realized they were just gas sacs from seaweed, not eggs. His brow furrowed, and then he felt stupid for thinking they would make him worse. He glanced back up at Silas and saw him watching him hopefully.

“Bossy stupid fish,” Erick muttered. He put the capsule into his mouth and knocked it back.

“Happy now?”

Silas grinned, relief clear across his face. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to look that happy,” Erick grumbled. He pulled his arms out of the bars and let himself sink back down the ground. He twisted around to lean his head back against the bench seat and folded his hands over his waist. His tail curled up along the opposite wall and his fin hung over his hands like a palm tree. Noticing Silas stare at him with a weirdly melancholic expression, Erick gave him a pointed look and lifted one hand to shoo him away.

The motion startled Silas. “Right, sorry.” He turned away. He had been staring at Erick’s stomach, thinking about their possible future child. They wouldn’t know for certain if anything was inside him for at least several weeks. “C’mon, Gale. We should go ask my dad if Hal is back yet.”

“Right,” Gale said, still astounded that Silas actually got Erick to take his medicine. Ronan was quietly surprised that Silas was able to convince Erick, but merely told him good job without any other comment. Hal returned to take over watching Erick, so Ronan excused himself to return to his own work. After they bid each other goodbye, they left the prison and stopped outside.

Looking over the town since from the prison’s entrance in the underwater mountain, Gale admitted, “I didn’t think you would be able to get through to him.”

“To be honest, I didn’t think I would either.” Silas looked up at the dappled, sparking surface. “It had to be because I was using his language.”

“Are you sure?” Gale asked, skeptical.

“No, but that’s the only thing I can think of that I did differently from our parents.” Silas glanced at Gale before turning his gaze back to the prison. “Erick needs to learn how to understand us, but teaching him the names of things one by one isn’t going to be enough.”

“It’s been working so far, though, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, but you heard how broken his mertongue is.” Silas shook his head. “I know it’s only been two days, but I’m worried it’s never going to get much better.”

“Well, if he doesn’t want to learn, you can’t make him,” Gale said, shrugging. “I don’t see what else you can do.”

Silas looked back at the surface. “There is one way…”

Gale followed his gaze and said, “Oh no, no way are you going back up there. There is no fucking way I’m letting you talk to more humans!”

“But how else am I supposed to learn?” Silas protested.
“Just talk to Erick! It’s bad enough you want to learn his stupid human language, but you can at least stay safe while doing so.”

Silas glared at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean your obsession with human junk is what got you into this mess,” Gale snapped. “You collect their trash, you mated with one, and now you’re trying to talk like them too – it’s like you don’t even want to be a merman anymore!”

Silas flinched at the jab, staring at Gale open-mouthed. He then clenched his jaw and balled his hands into fists. “Well maybe I should be human then! If you’re just going to act like I’m some traitor, I might as well look the fucking part.”

Gale’s anger burned out into horror. “Silas—”

“Just shut up, Gale! You think I didn’t notice how you were looking at Erick? I thought I would only have to worry about my dad accepting him, but it turns out you hate him more!”

“Can you blame me?” Gale retorted. “You’ve been nothing but miserable since you came back.”

“Yeah, because I forced a man to become the thing he hates most! I know Erick captured me, but he never once laid a hand on me while I was on his ship. He could have tortured or even just killed me, but he didn’t.”

“And that makes him a saint? Silas, just listen to yourself!” Gale pleaded. “For all you know, he was going to sell you to a circus or sex traffickers or whatever else sick humans do for fun. You wouldn’t have been the first mer caught and sold just like the fish in their fishing nets.”

“And for all you know, maybe he just wanted my help. Merfolk still sink ships, Gale, even though it’s illegal now. He found us salvaging a wreck, so he could have been investigating what happened. If humans and mers work together, we could stop merpiracy.”

“Why should we? Humans trash the sea and treat us like animals.”

“You’re acting worse than an animal!”

“It’s still better than this madness you’re spouting,” Gale spat back. “I should take you to my mom to get your head checked again.”

“Calling me crazy isn’t going to change my mind.” Silas turned to leave. “I don’t want you anywhere near Erick anymore, so don’t come back here.”

“I can’t just let you see him alone—”

“Then I’ll go with my dad or someone else! I’m going home. Don’t follow me.” Silas sped off before Gale could continue arguing.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Silas tries to improve Erick’s stay in the prison.

Chapter Notes

We've passed 150 kudos! I swear, you all are eating through my buffer faster than caterpillars in a garden. It's awesome, don't get me wrong, but I have much less time to write now that school has resumed. I'm also still stuck in the middle of writer's block. Because I don't want to run out of buffer, thus leaving you without updates, I've decided that I won't post another bonus chapter until we reach 200 kudos. It means we're switching to a bonus every 50 instead of 25 kudos. I really hate to pull back as we're gaining speed, but I can't imagine anything worse than running out of buffer and having no idea when updates would resume.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sedative started to take effect when Silas returned home, so he went back to his bed alcove to sleep it off and give his injuries time to heal. He tried not to think about his argument with Gale, but he knew Gale had a point. Silas really didn’t know what Erick had planned to do with him. Silas desperately wanted to think that he wasn’t all bad, so he knew his bias would cloud his judgement, but at the same time, the only thing he could do was hope for the best.

Silas woke back up late in the afternoon, so he had lunch, rubbed on more of Merise’s healing salve, and considered how to spend the rest of the day. He knew Erick wouldn’t want to see him again any time soon, but he doubted that Hal would be able to keep him entertained all by himself. His father was unlikely to remember or have time to get Erick a mattress, and he didn’t think that Hal would be able to get him anything else to improve his stay either, being the only one Ronan enlisted to watch him. Merise was probably too busy to visit him too, and Silas had already told Gale not to see him again. That meant Silas was the only one left who could try to make things better.

It took Silas a few minutes to decide what to bring. Getting Erick something to sleep on was the easiest part, as he only had to pull out the sponge mattress from the spare bed alcove. Finding him something to do was tougher, as all the games he knew required explaining rules. He didn’t think Erick would want to play with any of his old toys. He didn’t have any parchment or pens to draw pictures with him, so he couldn’t do that to try to teach him more mertongue. Then he remembered his beadwork bag. Silas dug it out from the shelves in his room, where he had hidden it away and almost forgotten about it.

The colorfully woven pouch was made by his maternal father. On days when he hadn’t even been strong enough to leave their living room, Silas and his papi spent hours making and unmaking elaborate beaded belts, bracelets, and wall-hangings together. Most of the ones they ended up keeping were in his father’s bed alcove, but a few were on display in the rest of their house and at
friends’ places. The pieces ranged from intricate patterns to detailed pictures about the gods and goddesses. Silas’ strong faith was because of his papi’s love for their stories. Hugging his beadwork bag to his chest, Silas smiled with nostalgia. He rolled up the mattress under his other arm and returned to the prison.

When Silas arrived at Erick’s cellblock, Hal greeted him and Silas said, “I have some things for Erick. That okay?”

“Oh?” Hal seemed surprised, but smiled. “Sure, I don’t see why not.” The green-tailed guard shrugged, glancing down at Erick. He was laying on the ground with his cerulean tail pointing to the back of his cell, arms crossed behind his head. Bandages covered most of his scales. “He’s been quiet since you left this morning.”

Silas smiled back sadly. “I guess that’s better than I hoped.” He turned to Erick, who lifted his chin to scowl at them upside-down.

“Hey, Erick.” Silas couldn’t help but smile bashfully as he held up the rolled mattress. Erick looked cute laying on the floor. “I brought you something more comfortable to lay on.” He tried not to stare, but Erick’s arms behind his head gave Silas a good view of his pecs and abs.

Erick frowned at the weird blanket of sea sponges. “Is that for me?” he asked, putting down his arms to push himself up. He turned around and took hold of the cell bars to get a better look, but the green-tailed guard held up his hand and a set of keys. He made a waving motion to make Erick back away from the door.

Rolling his eyes, Erick humored the guard pushed himself back. He waved his hands through the water to stay upright. He still couldn’t stay balanced with just his tail and didn’t want to use it again anyway, even though it didn’t hurt very much anymore. The guard took the sponge blanket from Silas and unlocked the door, then set it inside Erick’s cell. It slowly fell over and unrolled as the guard relocked the door.

“Do you like it?” Silas asked. “You can sleep on it.”

Erick stopped waving his hands to sink back to the floor. Before touching down, he cautiously poked the sponge blanket. His hand over the springy surface, then picked it up to give it a squeeze. It was surprisingly soft despite its density. He laid it back down on the floor and laid himself stomach-down on top of it. He folded his arms and turned his head to rest. He hummed contentedly. His auditory fin felt weird against his arm, but it was fine to ignore. Compared to the stone floor, the sponge felt like lying on a cloud.

Silas smiled. “Looks like you do like it.” He sat down in front of Erick’s cell and opened up his beadwork bag. “Do you want to try making a bracelet with me, Erick?”

Erick looked up at the sound of his name. His gaze fell onto the coil of string Silas had taken out. He folded his arms under his chin and stared with a suspicious expression. The merman then opened up a jar of coral beads and held it out to him. Raising his eyebrow, Erick reached through the bars and picked one out. He turned it over with his fingers, examining it. The tube-shaped bead was surprisingly smooth, and he wondered if Silas had pilfered the beads from some sunken ship. He couldn’t imagine that merfolk had the tools underwater to carve anything so fine.

As Erick studied the coral bead, Silas measured out mollusk silk string using the length of his forearm to make two bracelets. Silas hadn’t done any beadwork since he was eight, when his papi died, but he remembered the basics. He cut the strings with an obsidian knife. Holding a piece out to Erick, he said, “Take this.”
Erick looked quizzically at the string, but took it. Like the bead, the material confused him. Unlike normal string made out of twine or spooled cotton, it was smooth like silk but slightly stiff like a reed. He tugged on it to test its strength and found it was surprisingly durable.

Silas cut a length for himself and set the knife aside. “Erick, watch me.” When Erick looked up again, Silas held up his string to show him how he folded it in half and knotted the folded end into a tiny loop. “Do this,” he said, pointing at the knot.

Erick deadpanned at him. “You’re teaching me arts and crafts.” He face-palmed with a groan. Lowering his hand, he noticed the knife on the ground. His brow furrowed. He had never seen one made entirely out of glass before. The intricately carved handle transitioned smoothly to a curved blade. It looked startlingly similar to the tools he found in Silas’ bag. He wondered if merfolk made glass knives like these with stolen steel knives, or if they had some other method. The glass jail cell bars and Silas’ strange tools suggested the latter since they weren’t like any glass he had seen on land.

Erick saw him looking at the knife and quickly moved it out of his reach. “No, you can’t have that. You’ve already hurt me and yourself enough without weapons.”

Erick glared at him. “I was just looking at it,” he said, but he couldn’t blame Silas for his reaction. As much as he hated to admit it, the bandages on his tail and the bruises on Silas’ neck proved he couldn’t be trusted.

Erick’s glare unnerved Silas, but he chose not to dwell on it. Silas picked up four beads and threaded two on each side of the knot. When Erick grudgingly did the same, Silas added four more beads onto one side, then threaded the other side’s string through the same four beads in the opposite direction. “This is the first row in the bracelet I’m making,” he said. “We’re going to keep making more rows until we get to the end. Okay?” Silas took out a second jar of beads made out of whalebone to make a pattern on his bracelet.

Though Erick never would have thought it, he found a small part of him actually enjoyed beadwork. It wasn’t too difficult in theory, but in practice the delicate work challenged him. His hands kept trembling each time he lined up the tip of the string to go through the beads. It occurred to him that his trembling fingers was probably alcohol shakes, but he forced the thought from his mind and focused on counting beads. It helped clear his mind of his other anxious thoughts, and it was satisfying to watch a piece of string and some beads become a bracelet. He stuck with a simple striped pattern, but Silas made diamond shapes in his bracelet.

The merman didn’t talk much while they worked, but Erick preferred it that way. He was still mad at Silas. Even though the merman was being nothing but kind to him now, he couldn’t let go of the fact that he wasn’t on land or on his ship because of him. That was what he told himself, anyway. He didn’t want to believe that Ivan or his crew had abandoned him. It was easier to blame Silas than to think that they would have betrayed him like that.

When they finished their bracelets, Silas then showed Erick how to use just colored mollusk silk string to make knotted bracelets. They spent the rest of the afternoon crafting together. Hal left to take a dinner break and returned with food for Erick. Handing Erick his dinner, he asked if Silas was planning on staying longer. Since Silas was reluctant to leave now that Erick was tolerating his presence, he asked Hal to bring him dinner too.

Erick ignored Silas and the guard talking as he grimaced at the crab shell he was given. He reluctantly opened up its carapace and found that it was stuffed with a pulpy raw mass of its white and orange flesh, strips of kelp, and purplish lumps that might have been snails or the crab’s entrails. A broken piece of its leg shaped like a scoop was tucked on the side. It looked worse than
the cuts of raw fish they had given him for lunch. Even though they still had silvery skin on them, he was able to eat them because the texture was somewhat similar to a rare steak. It also helped that he had been starving, having refused both his dinner the night before and breakfast that morning after they bandaged his tail. The mush they had given him now looked like somebody had already chewed it up and spat it out.

It took all of Erick’s self-control not to throw the crab shell against the cell bars and yell at the guard. Instead he set it aside, pulled himself to the back corner of his cell, and curled up with his head and shoulder leaning against the wall. It was stupid to want to cry over gross food, but all he wanted right then was a beer and real steak and potatoes. He had been living on ship food for the past week, and he never got the chance to have an actual meal on land before he woke up in the ocean.

When Hal left to get Silas’ dinner, Silas looked back at Erick and his heart sunk at the sight of him curled up in the corner. Silas swam up and held the bars. “Erick? What’s wrong?”

“Leave me alone,” Erick snapped. He crossed his arms and refused to look at Silas.

Silas flinched. “What did I do?” He glanced down at the crab bowl he had left by the cell bars. “Is it your dinner?”

“Just go away, fish freak.”

“Erick…” Silas bent down to pick up the crab bowl. “Do you not want this?” In English, he asked, “No eat?”

“No,” Erick answered, glaring at him. “It’s disgusting.” He turned away again. “Everything here is weird and I don’t understand anything. I just want to go home.”

“We can get you something else, Erick.” Silas put back down the crab bowl. “You don’t have to eat it if you don’t want it.”

“I don’t care whatever you’re saying, just leave me alone.” To make sure he understood, Erick looked back at him and said more firmly, “Silas, leave.”

Silas recognized the word. He hung his head. “Okay, Silas leave.” He began putting away his bead-working supplies. When Hal returned with another crab bowl, Silas said to him, “Erick doesn’t want his dinner. What did he have for lunch?”

“We gave him rockfish fillets, but I don’t think he liked them much either,” Hal answered. “He peeled off their skins like a picky kid. He wouldn’t touch anything else we’ve given him.”

“Oh,” Silas said, not surprised. The food on Erick’s ship was vastly different from theirs.

“Why do you care about this guy?” Hal asked. “Your dad asked me not to pry, but I’m dying to know what happened with you and the humans.”

Silas bristled. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Oh, no need to put barbs up about it,” Hal said, holding up his hands. Pointing his thumb at Erick, he continued, “I just don’t see why we’re keeping him here. Even though your dad hasn’t said as much, I know he’s only keeping him here for you.”

“That isn’t true,” Silas said, but he knew he wasn’t being entirely honest. They had to keep Erick here because Ivan left him with no other choice, but Silas wanted to stay with him regardless now.
“Then why are we keeping this guy?” Hal asked. “There have to be professionals or something that know how to deal with feral mers. If he was captured like you, we should help him get home or find a new place to stay.”

“I wish we could, but we can’t right now even if we wanted to,” Silas said with more bite than he meant. “My dad and I are already doing everything we can. Unless one of us can figure out how to understand him or make him understand us, I don’t know how to better help him.”

“Hm.” Hal nodded. “Well, you could try talking to some of the outlanders. One of them might know his language, so you could ask if any of them would be willing to try translating.”

Silas doubted it, but said, “That’s an idea. I suppose I can ask around tomorrow.” He already knew where the outlanders liked to hang out. He often traded human trinkets with them at the market chasm. Silas looked down at his beadwork bag. “Do you think I could leave this with Erick? There’s a knife inside to cut the string, but if I cut some lengths of string for him and take the knife, do you think he’ll try to hurt himself with anything else?”

Hal held out his hand to take the bag and looked inside. “I suppose it should be fine if we keep an eye on him,” he said, rifling through the contents. “Giving him something to do could help.”

“Okay.” Silas took back out his string and quickly cut several pieces long enough to make a handful of beaded bracelets. He put them inside and closed his bag. Pushing it through the bars in Erick’s cell, he said, “Erick? I’m letting you keep this for now.”

Erick glanced over at Silas as he set down his bag. He knew it had to be some kind of peace offering, giving him the materials to make more bracelets, but he didn’t care. He had given up trying to figure out what Silas was talking about with the guard. His best guess was that they were talking about other disgusting things they could make him try. He really didn’t mind fish when it was cooked, but they seemed to eat everything raw like animals. That was all they were, really, he thought bitterly. Fish with human faces.

Silas backed up after he set down his bag. “Well, I guess I’ll see you later then.” He looked back at Hal. “I’ll come back tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” Hal answered. “Merise will be here in the morning to check on him again, but I’ll be here whenever you return.” He held out Silas’ crab bowl. “Do you still want this?”

“Sure.” Silas took it. “Thank you.” Silas looked back at Erick, but his attention was on the wall again. Silas let his stare linger before he turned to leave.

Chapter End Notes

~ Oct. 14, 2019 ~
Main change I want to highlight is the added info about Silas’ maternal father. I didn't include a lot of detail about him in the previous iteration of this story, so I'm glad I could work in more tidbits of backstory, given his importance to Silas' childhood development.
The following morning, Silas came into the hallway of Erick’s cell just as Hal was letting Merise in to examine his tail. Surprised, Silas hid back behind the corner to watch.

“Good morning, Erick,” Merise said brightly, sitting down beside him. Erick was sitting on the floor, leaning against the bars next to the wall. Hal closed the cell door behind Merise.

When Erick turned his head to face her with a sullen expression, Silas pressed himself against the wall to avoid being seen.

“Still not feeling great, huh?” Merise said. Erick continued being morosely silent. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. You’ve had a rough time, leaving somewhere you’ve always known and ending up in a place where you don’t understand anyone.” She reached for his hand. “Can I take your pulse?”

Thought it was hard for Silas to see because Merise’s long, dark hair and back covered her and Erick’s hands, she seemed to pantomime feeling her own pulse before Erick grudgingly put his wrist in her palm.

“Here we go. Let me count for just a few seconds.” The two of them remained still for some time before Merise let Erick go. She hummed thoughtfully before asking, “Can I check your temperature now?” Like before, she put her hand to her own forehead before pointing at Erick’s. He frowned, but nodded his consent. He averted his eyes when Merise touched his forehead.

Merise didn’t keep her hand on Erick for very long. “No fever thankfully, but your heart rate was still a bit high and your hands are shaking too much for my liking.” She sat back and folded her hands over her mauve tail. She looked over the rest of him. “It’s a shame I can’t ask you any questions to narrow down the cause.” Turning to Hal, she said, “I’m ready to come out now.”

“Alrighty,” Hal said, opening up the cell door again so she could swim out. “Any idea why his heart rate’s up?”

“Oh, I have many.” Merise went to her medicine bag and took out more bladderwrack capsules. “The problem is I don’t know if he has a chronic condition or if something else is wrong.” She closed her bag and faced the green-tailed guard again. “How was he after I left? Did he sleep
“Fine, far as I could tell,” Hal answered with a shrug. His armor clinked against his chair by Erick’s cell as he leaned back. “Silas brought him that mattress and made beaded bracelets with him. He seemed to enjoy doing it, but he didn’t make any more after he left. He just fidgeted with one of the ones he made with him.”

“I see.” Merise looked at Erick, who was still sitting with his back to them, but he had turned his head to watch them guardedly through the corner of his eye. She offered him a soft smile. “Did you have fun with Silas?” she asked.

At the second mention of Silas name, Erick scowled and turned away again. He slumped down slightly and crossed his arms.

Merise chuckled. “You sulk just like Gale.” She knelt down and put her hand through the bars, holding out his medicine on her palm. “Will you take this?”

Erick looked sidelong at the medicine. He glanced up at her face, then reached for the capsules. He swallowed them in quick succession before sitting back against the bars.

“Oh, thank you!” Merise clapped her hands together. “You’ve been so good today. I wish I had a way to treat you.”

Erick narrowed his eyes at her, insulted by her patronizing tone. Hal stifled a laugh behind his hand. “If he is anything more like Gale, just bring back Silas. I don’t get the deal between them, but obviously Erick doesn’t hate him as much as he acts like it.”

Merise smiled at the thought. “I hope you’re right.”

“Yeah. Well, will you watch him for a minute while I get us breakfast?”

“Sure. I have some extra time today.”

Hal got up and let Merise take his seat. When he came around the corner, he was startled to find Silas. “Oh, good morning. Merise just finished giving Erick his check-up.”

Silas looked sheepish. “I saw.” He held his elbow and his arm against his side. Glancing back down the hallway, he added, “I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Hal smiled in understanding. “That was kind of you.” He pointed his thumb back towards Erick’s cell. “You’re free to visit Erick now if you want.”

“Okay.” Silas nodded his thanks as Hal continued down to the kitchens.

When Silas swam down to Erick’s cell, Merise sat up. “Oh, Silas! Hal and I were just talking about you.”

“Yeah, I heard.” Silas looked at Erick, who was glowering at his arrival. “Do you really think Erick doesn’t mind me anymore? He still looks pretty angry.”

“Well, he is behaving now, so I think we’re at least on the right track.” Looking from Erick to Silas, Merise asked, “Do you think you could show me how you taught him some of our words? Gale told me last night that you managed to translate some things.”

“Oh, sure? I don’t know if he’ll cooperate with me, but I can try.” Silas sat down in front of Erick’s
“Hey, Erick.” In his language, he asked, “You hurt?”

Erick stared at Silas, but sighed and answered, “I’m fine. No hurt.” The fresh dose of pain meds was already helping his tail.

Merise gasped in awe, trying not to draw attention to herself, but it attracted Erick’s ire regardless.

“You’re going to make him clam up,” Silas chided, making her look rueful. He faced Erick again and said his name to regain his attention. “This is Merise.” He pointed at her and repeated her name more slowly. To make his meaning more clear, he looked at Merise and pointed to Erick, stating, “Merise, this is Erick.”

Erick released his annoyance and stared at Silas. “Merise?” he asked, checking his pronunciation.

“Yes, Merise.” Silas smiled and nodded.

“Hmph.” Erick grudgingly nodded. Pointing down the hallway where Hal went, he asked in mertongue, “What is this?”

“That was Hal.” Silas answered before repeating his name.

Erick echoed it back. When Silas grinned at him getting it right, Erick rolled his eyes and turned his back to Silas. Though he couldn’t deny that it was good to know the names of his doctor and warden, he didn’t particularly want to continue playing Silas’ name game.

“That was amazing,” Merise said. “You taught him that all by yourself?”

Bashful, Silas said, “Yeah? But he helped me too by repeating what I said in his language, so it wasn’t really all by myself.”

“Even still. If we can keep this up, we may be able to let him out of the prison soon.”

“But where would he go?” Silas asked. “He can’t live on his own until he becomes fluent. He still has too much more to learn.”

“I know, but one of us can probably take him in.”

“You and my dad are both too busy, and I don’t know if I would be able to handle it.”

Merise looked sympathetically at Silas. Petting his shoulder, she said, “You’ve already proven that you’re more than capable. We only need to make sure Erick will remain willing to learn.”

“If you say so.” Silas wanted to believe Merise was right, but he only needed to hear his own rough voice or look at Erick’s bandaged tail to doubt himself again.

Before Merise could continue trying to reassure Silas, Hal returned with his and Erick’s breakfast. He thanked them for watching Erick and resumed his watch so Merise and Silas could leave.

After they swam out together, Merise gave Silas a hug. “Everything will work out, okay? I’ll be praying for you and Erick.”

“Thanks.” Silas hugged her back and gave her a wry smile. “I’m not sure either of us would appreciate any more divine intervention right now, though.”

Merise laughed. “Perhaps not if they try to do something so dramatic again, but I should think that they will restrain themselves from now on.”
“I hope so.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Silas meets his friend Jeb in the market chasm

Chapter Notes

~ Nov. 2, 2019 ~
I was very busy last week with prepping for Halloween, but I'm back to working on merfolk. Most of the revisions in this chapter involved tweaking the info about merpiracy and adding more details about the northeast.

Tomorrow is my birthday! (on the 31st). I have no idea how I'm going to celebrate it, but I have class and work stuff, so... I probably won't get to do anything fun until this weekend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Silas left the prison, he swam to the market chasm. It was as loud and crowded as he remembered it. Hundreds of algae lanterns and pennants hung on lines strung between the walls of the chasm, illuminating the depths with their bioluminescent light. Shoppers perused the bottom where hunters showed off their fresh-caught tuna and swordfish, and foragers showcased baleen baskets full of urchins, starfish, and snails from the kelp forests and reefs. Crabs and lobsters crawled about in woven cages nestled between their stalls. In the hundreds of niches lining the chasm walls, artisan vendors stacked above, below, and side by side one another hawked their wares.

Silas swam past embroidered sailcloth curtains swaying under a stream of bubbles, pottery vessels in every shape and size sitting on twenty-foot tall shelves, and glass knives, spears, other weapons glimmering on stone display stands. Large signs framed with algae lights over shops advertised kitchen utensils, home goods, and potted coral plants. A group of young mers came out of a clothing accessory store, laughing and talking loudly, adorned with bangles, beaded net skirts, and colored glass gorgets.

Darting around the shoppers, Silas headed to the back of the chasm to the salvagers’ section. Here primarily older mers flaunted their finds, ranging from corroded scrap metal to extravagant gold jewelry covered with precious stones. Some showed off vast collections of ship figureheads carved like land animals, birds, harpies or merfolk, while others only had assorted chipped plates and mismatched silverware. One seller had devoted his entire stall to cannons and guns, even though they were useless weapons underwater. As Silas passed, he remembered the wreck he had found before Erick caught him, and he wondered how many of the salvaged goods he saw came from merpiracy.

None of the salvagers wanted to admit it, but a decent portion of all salvaged goods came from merpiracy, whether it was from ancient attacks or more recent, now illegal incidents. It was all too
easy for merfolk to enchant sailors, despite that part of the King’s guards job was to patrol the ocean and prevent such conflicts. Merfolk could compel humans into dumping their cargo or even to jump ship with nothing but their voices. They used those same hypnotic enchantments to tame dolphins and to keep humans away from certain shores.

It was only within the past decade that the ban against enchanting humans was enacted thanks to their previous king’s decree and promise to enforce it with the royal guard. If he had not done so, the other regions would not have had the resources or willingness to protect sailors. Few mers saw any reason in breaking their isolationist practices. Humans had plenty to gain from partnerships with merfolk, but the majority of human goods were useless underwater. Their main import of any value was preserved fruits and vegetables. Old-fashioned salvagers only wanted their other things if they could find in a wreck. They appreciated the search as much, if not more than, their actual finds.

Eventually Silas found his favorite trader, Jeb. The grizzled old merman had a mane of grey hair, which was tinted green with algae scum and braided with bone beads. His speckled black and green tail was missing half of his tailfin. A tiger shark had bitten it off when he was salvaging inside a coral-encrusted warship, and Jeb would tell the story of the climactic end to his salvaging career every time anyone would humor him. When Jeb saw Silas, he opened his arms wide and swam out from behind his stall lined with coins, pocket watches, and ladies’ hair accessories. His half-tail compensated by flicking twice as fast.

“Silas!” he called, capturing the slender merman in a suffocating grip. “We thought you were done for, lad!”

“I know,” Silas choked out with a grin. “Good to see you too.”

Jeb held him out at arms’ length. Looking over his broken nose, bruised neck, and stitched tail, he asked, “What happened to you? You look like you got tossed on the rocks.”

“Yeah, I feel like that too. It’s a long story.” Silas looked back at the market chasm. “Are the others in the market today? I didn’t see them on my way over.”

“No, Monty and his gang haven’t come back from their salvaging trip yet, and Doris and Iara are still out trying to get you back,” Jeb answered. “As soon as Gale told us you got captured, they went northeast to get help.”

“Really?” Silas’ eyes widened. “When will they be back?”

He hadn’t expected Doris and Iara to go so far just for him. The northeast was known for the Breakwater Alliance, a coalition of shoals who actively lived and worked with humans. Mers in the northeast originally only worked with mers who became human through blood bindings and their families, but they expanded business just over a century ago to allow trading with select humans beyond their domain. Because of their close ties to the land, the Breakwater Alliance was the first to advocate outlawing the use of siren songs against humans across the entire ocean.

Jeb scratched his unkempt beard, pulling out a piece of kelp. “I don’t know, maybe in half a month or so? Unless we try to send someone after them, anyway.” He tossed the kelp piece out of his stall to let it drift through the chasm. “The currents will be against their favor on their way back, so they’ll have to swing around to the south to avoid it.”

“Oh.” Silas looked down, frowning. Even if Doris and Iara came back with someone who could speak to humans, he had no idea if the humans living in the northeast even spoke the same language as Erick.
“It’ll be all right, lad.” Jeb pulled him against him again and rubbed his arm. “It’s a long trip, but they’ll be relieved to see you.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” Silas pulled away from Jeb. “Can we talk inside?”

“Hm? Sure, let me just close up my stall.” Jeb sensed that this was not a conversation to interrupt with customers, so he covered his wares with a black sailcloth and tied down the ends. He led Silas into a cave behind his table and closed the curtains. He shook glass lamps with bioluminescent algae to wake them up, and soon the back of his stall lit up with their bluish light. He sat on one of the many large pots crowding the narrow space and said, “Now, what’s eating at you?”

Silas sat down across from Jeb. He started explaining slowly, twisting his fingers together as he tried to downplay how terrifying his capture was. Though Silas half-expected Jeb to interrupt and start roaring about human heartlessness, Jeb listened intently and didn’t ask too many questions.

“So, now Erick’s locked up and we can’t really communicate with each other at all,” Silas said, finishing his story. “I need to find someone that can talk to him so I can explain everything.”

“Hmm, that is a pickle.” Jeb had crossed his arms and nodded his head solemnly. “But I think you won’t have to worry about talking to him. There’s a shoal thirty clicks south of here called Teleyan that supposedly knows every language in the sea. They raise special oysters with siren songs to make pearls that collect languages like the luster on their sand cores.”

“Really?” Silas sat up. “So one of these pearls can teach Erick mertongue?”

“I would think so, but you’d have to ask them yourself. Far as I’m aware, they only make them for big names like the King and the Breakwaters.”

“Well, they have to make an exception for me.” Silas rose. “Do you know anyone who could take me?”

“Not right now, no, but I think you can find them on your own. They’re not too far from the shore. If you don’t want to go alone, why don’t you take Gale with you?”

Silas’ expression darkened. “I don’t think he would want to go with me. We’ve already had a fight about me wanting to learn Erick’s language.”

“That so?” Jeb frowned. “Can’t say I’m surprised, but this is important to you. He ought to know that.”

“Yeah, I know.” Silas sank back down into his seat. “I thought he understood, but he hates Erick for hurting me so much.”

“Well, then you know he has a reason.” Jeb said, holding out his hand. “Gale just cares about you. Talk to him again and see if you can sort this out. I personally would love to see Erick get over his bone to pick with us. I have a lot of questions about things on land that I’d like to ask him about.”

Silas couldn’t help but smile sadly at that. “Okay. Thanks, Jeb.”

“No problem, lad.” Jeb grinned. “Just keep me posted on how things work out.”

Chapter End Notes
Even though I'm finally going more into detail about merpiracy now, I make no promises that the history I've outlined here is going to stay 100% the same. I might actually change things so Silas and the rest of his shoal don't actually know it's a problem. I wanted them to be aware of it because cool drama reasons, but it's creating plot holes and just.. ugh. I'm still trying to figure out how Silas and Erick are supposed to stop these baddies once they know about them too and I'm struggling to work out the timeline of events, but I feel like I have a better grip on it now than I did last week. The merpirates are pretty much the sole reason for my writer's block right now, so I'm planning on roasting them alive in fiery hell for it. Good news is, though, I did get past 38/39, and I've written through chapter 41. It's a small bit of progress, but it's better than nothing.

~ Nov. 2, 2019 ~

Even a year later, the merpirates are still the biggest thorn in my side and main reason for my edits now. The changes I want to make at the end of this story requires a different set up than what I started with. So, because I have to update these things, I'm fixing everything else that had been low-key bothering me too.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Silas and Gale leave Peleran and hear something strange.

Chapter Notes

I think I've more or less figured out how merpirates work now, so I'm going to need to revise the next few chapters before they go up. They should all stay on schedule, so knock on wood that I don't lose track of time again.

Silas hurried to Gale’s house, but only Merise was home with a patient. When Silas asked her about Gale, she told him that he had gone to the squidball court to play with his other friends. Silas wasn’t surprised. It would have been his second place to look. The squidball court was a large, sunken oval arena with two stone arches at each end. Stone rings were suspended in tightly woven nets stretched between each of the arches, and the goal of the game was to throw a squid-shaped rock through the rings past one of the two goalies on either side of the arch’s opening. It was traditionally played with live cuttlefish, but they had a tendency to swim out of the field or ink the court.

Swimming over the court, Silas saw Gale in the middle of a game. He had a green bandana tied over his bicep and was swimming after a mermaid with a red bandana on her arm. She had the squidball in her hands. The mermaid tossed the squidball to another red team member. It glided through the water, quickly slowing into a nosedive. A green team intercepted the catch and darted back to the red team’s arch. Silas continued watching them play as he settled into the nearly empty stands. This was a game for fun, so the only people watching were probably friends of the players. Silas didn’t particularly like playing or watching squidball, mostly because the people he and Gale ended up usually playing with were always too competitive, but he knew the rules enough to follow what was going on.

When Gale’s team finally scored a point, Gale noticed Silas in the stands. He called for a timeout and swam up to meet him. “What are you doing here?” Gale asked, unable to keep the lingering bitterness out of his voice. “I thought you only cared about Erick now.”

“Gale, don’t be like that, please,” Silas said. “I talked to Jeb to see about finding someone who can translate for us, and he said there’s a shoal south of here that can teach Erick our language with enchanted pearls. I want to see if I can get one, but I don’t want to go down there alone.”

“Okay?” Gale looked unconvinced by the idea. “I’m in the middle of a game right now.”

“I know,” Silas said, stung by the fact that he was putting his game before Erick. He looked away. “I can wait for you to finish, but I would rather leave sooner than later. If you don’t want to come, I won’t make you.”

Gale sighed. “No, I’ll come,” he said, shaking his head. “Let me go trade out my place with
somebody.” He returned to the court and took off his armband. After he got a girl to come down from the stands to play in his stead, Gale went back to Silas.

“Before we leave,” Silas said, swimming with Gale back to his house, “I want to get some things.” While Gale waited outside, Silas dug out his old salvaging satchel from his bed alcove shelves. This one was threadbare and had been mended several times, but he had lost his better bag on Erick’s ship along with his salvaging tools. He had spent a lot of money on his song-forged glass chisel and hammer set, since they were necessary tools for salvagers to chip off calcified coral from ancient relics, so he mourned the fact that he would probably have to replace them. He did have extra ink bombs, though, so he put one into his bag. The pinwheel-shaped glass bubble was filled with pressurized ink. If he twisted the center bead, ink would shoot out of the four points and cause it to spin out a black cloud and deter anything that might attack him while exploring wrecks, such as sharks. Silas wasn’t planning on searching for any wrecks on their trip, but he would hate to come across one and not be prepared for a quick glance over.

Because he didn’t want to travel unarmed again, Silas put his beadwork knife into his bag too. He didn’t have a better weapon since he disliked fighting and hunting, but getting harpooned had made him realize how helpless he had been. After this trip, he told himself that he would see if his dad would still be willing to teach him how to use a knife. His dad had tried teaching him the art of self-defense multiple times, but Silas had always wimped out on the lessons.

Finally, Silas sorted through his shipwreck collection to find pieces he would be willing to trade for a language pearl. He had no doubt that he would have to pay handsomely for one considering regular pearls were fairly expensive normally, but he had no idea if any of his salvaged finds would be worth anything to them. The coins Ivan gave him were an obvious answer, but he decided against it. Erick could need them later. If he couldn’t pay with his salvaged finds or Ivan’s coins, that meant he didn’t have much actual money. Whenever merfolk didn’t simply trade goods, they usually exchanged beads made from mother-of-pearl, whalebone, or cowry shells. The beads worked as currency as much as they did for jewelry. Particularly wealthy mers liked to drape themselves with as many beads as possible.

Silas ended up tucking away the little money he had on hand, since most of the beads he had were in the beadwork bag he had left with Erick, and three of his best gold rings. He didn’t think a pearl would be that expensive, but he wanted to stay on the safe side. A thirty-click trip would take them all day. He didn’t want to arrive and find he didn’t have enough.

After Silas packed the salve jar, he came outside. “I’m ready. Do you want to get anything before we leave? We’ll have to spend the night there.”

“Yeah, I should get my bag too,” Gale said. “Have you told your dad that we’re leaving yet?”

“No, but I should,” Silas answered. “I think I want to ask your mom if she can keep Erick company while we’re gone. When she was checking on his bandages this morning, Erick didn’t fight her at all.”

“Well, she is a healer,” Gale said. “I guess he realizes that she’s not a bad guy at least.”

“I hope so. She’s the only one who’s really helped him at all besides me, and I don’t count because I got him into this mess.”

“Yeah, that’s fair. Let’s go find them then and get going. I don’t want to arrive after nightfall.”

“Same,” Silas said. They went back to Gale’s house first to get his bag and ask Merise about Erick. When she agreed to spend some time with him in the afternoon, they went to find Silas’ dad. He
was busy making rounds with the guards, so they left a message for him with the receptionist in his office. They had nothing more to do, so they left Peleran and headed out into the open ocean.

They swam for a while in silence, unsure of what to say to the other. Silas knew Gale was only coming with him out of guilt, not because he really cared about Erick. He wished he could convince Gale to give Erick another chance, but he already did, twice really. Gale had seen Erick attack him two times, and he had watched Erick only grudgingly accept his medicine. He wasn’t there when Silas had convinced Erick to make bracelets with him, and he didn’t see how much just a crab bowl had upset him. Silas wanted to prove him and his father wrong, that Erick could be more than a violent human, but the only other person giving Erick even the chance to change was Merise. These thoughts occupied Silas while he swam and tried to put his feelings into words.

An hour passed with barely any conversation. Gale tried to talk about other things, like his squidball team or his work as a gatherer in the reefs, but Silas couldn’t play along. He wasn’t good at small talk, and Gale was only trying to avoid the conversation Silas did want to have.

When Gale brought up his squidball team for the third time, Silas was about to snap at him before he noticed the sound of a distant siren song. He cocked his head, trying to pinpoint where it was coming from.

Gale’s eyebrows had furrowed as he did the same. “Do you hear that?” he asked.

“Yeah, but I can’t tell what they’re singing yet.”

“If it’s a distress call, we should check it out.”

Silas agreed. He identified that the song was coming from the open ocean ahead of them. After a few more minutes, he realized it was a chorus of at least five different mers. They were singing, “Come here,” and another tune Silas didn’t recognize. He only knew the most basic siren signals because salvagers didn’t need specialized songs.

“Are they hunters?” Silas asked. He hadn’t ever heard of hunters fishing this close to shore, mainly because the best fish were much farther out, but foragers wouldn’t have been in the area. The kelp forests and reefs were behind them.

“They must be,” Gale answered. “They’re singing to prepare for attack.”

“Oh.” Silas stared out into the open ocean. He hadn’t ever seen hunters at work before. Gale had gone on a couple hunting trips with his friends, but he wasn’t a fast enough swimmer to keep up with their serious work. It was why he worked as a gatherer, even though his mom was trying to teach him how to be a healer like her.

Gale followed Silas’ gaze and frowned. More siren songs began answering the call of the first one. After a moment, he said, “We should stay out of their way.” The cacophony of voices easily numbered more than a dozen at this point. More continued to join.

“Are there always that many?” Silas asked.

“No, this party seems bigger than normal.”

“What are they catching?”

Gale faced the sea floor, thinking on it. “It sounds like whatever they’re after is a bird, but I know that can’t be right.” Gale listened for a while again. “It’s hard to tell what they’re all singing because their voices are overlapping so much.”
“Hm.” Silas didn’t like that answer. He turned his head away from the open ocean. “We’ll probably see them soon.”

They continued swimming for the next thirty minutes, listening to the hunter’s songs echo around them. Gale named the signals he recognized for Silas, explaining that the songs were coming from about five separate search parties currently regrouping. The parties slowly merged together, their separate harmonies blending into a single call.

When the last group rejoined the whole, the sea fell silent.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Silas discovers something that did not want to be known.

Chapter Notes

200 kudos! You all constantly amaze me. I wasn't expecting to reach that goal until at least Wednesday, so thank you so much for sticking with me. I'll post the next bonus chapter when we reach 250.

“That’s weird,” Gale said, furrowing his brow as he continued swimming. His voice sounded oddly loud now without the sound of the hunters’ singing.

“Huh?” Silas looked over at Gale. “Why’s it weird?” His expression mirrored his concerned confusion.

“Hunting parties don’t go silent like that.” Gale faced the open ocean. “If they’ve surrounded their prey, we should be hearing them trying to catch it.”

“They could be using their normal voices,” Silas suggested.

“Yeah, but that would be inefficient. With a group that big, they’d want to use their siren voices to communicate. Whether they’re using nets or spears, they have to have spread out to make sure they don’t lose whatever they’re catching.”

“Maybe they’re trying to be stealthy?”

“No, hunters aren’t salvagers. It’s impossible to be stealthy in the open ocean.”

“Okay, then I got nothing,” Silas said, shrugging.

“Clearly.” Gale paused, looking down with a troubled expression. “Let’s try to hurry up. I want to know what’s going on.”

“Didn’t you just say we should stay away?”

“Yeah, but that was before they went quiet.” Gale picked up his speed.

Silas frowned, but sped up too. They had already been at a brisk pace, so Silas hoped that they wouldn’t have to rush for very long. It strained the stitches in his tail, and they still had a long way to go before they reached Teleyan. Wasting all of their energy now would make them take even longer to get a language pearl for Erick.

Soon they saw a flurry of movement under something dark at the surface. As they hurried closer,
Silas heart rose to his throat. Blood was clouding the water. “Oh gods…” He immediately swam up and breached the surface, followed by Gale. Silas’ mouth dropped. Gunfire and shouting rang out from the deck of a massive galleon in the distance. The height and angle of the deck obscured the fighting men, as well as puffs of smoke from their guns. One man toppled overboard.

“No…” Silas dove back under and darted to the ship.

“Silas, stop!” Gale swam after Silas and grabbed his arm.

“But that man—”

“He’s either dead or about to be. Look,” Gale said, gesturing back to the bloody water. “Those aren’t sharks attacking them.”

“What?” Silas froze. He looked again at the flurry of movement and saw the silhouette of a merman with a curved sword. His armor and scales winked in the sun. He stabbed a sailor trying to swim back up to the surface. Silas gasped, then immediately started forward again.

“Silas, no!” Gale pulled on his arm, dragging him away. “We can’t do anything.”

“But—”

“Do you want to be killed?” Gale snapped.

“No, but listen!” Silas twisted out of his grip. “Those sailors are being attacked on their ship too. Nobody is singing, so why are they fighting?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to stick around to find out. As soon as they see us, there is no way they are going to let us live.”

“Then we just won’t let them see us,” Silas retorted. “C’mon.” He swam back after the ship.

“Silas!” Gale caught him again and grabbed both of his arms. “I am not losing you again!” He pulled Silas’s back against his chest and gripped him like they had fallen into a whirlpool.

“Let go of me!” Silas flailed his tail, struggling with his arms pinned to his sides to grab Gale’s wrists.

“No!”

“Please, Gale!” Silas turned his head towards him. “I just need to see the deck.” He twisted around to see him better, but Gale had his face pressed against Silas’ neck. “Please. I need to know for Erick.”

Gale clenched his jaw and tightened his hold on Silas’ arm. “Everything’s for Erick now,” he spat. He released Silas and pushed him away. “Fine. We’ll go see, but I decide how close you can get,” he said, pointing to himself before jabbing his finger at Silas. “Stay close to the surface but don’t breach until I say so.”


“Shut up and stay quiet.”

Silas winced at the rebuke, but obeyed. Gale sped off toward the ship. Silas followed in his wake. When Gale stopped a minute later, he held up his hand to make Silas wait. He poked his head out of the water, then ducked back under.
“Okay,” Gale said. “Look fast, then we need to leave.”

“All right.” Silas rose and looked up at the deck. He could just barely make out the faces of the men aboard now as the ship pitched forward under a wave. The sailors were fighting pirates wearing black glass chest plates, pauldrons, vambraces, and sealskin gladiator skirts. Their armor and swords were clearly forged with siren songs, but the pirates looked completely human. Then one of the sailors kicked a pirate in the chest, knocking him over the railing.

Silas went under the water as he splashed down. The pirate sheathed his sword on his back and kicked deeper into the water. As he twisted back upright, his bare legs fused into a tail.

“They can shift?” Silas exclaimed. He turned to Gale. “Did you just see that? They—”

“Time to go!” Gale shouted, grabbing Silas’ hand. He torpedoed off, dragging along Silas. “We’ve been spotted.”

Swearing, Silas hurried beside Gale and looked over his shoulder. One of the merpirates had called over two others and went after them.

“Gale…”

“Just keep going!”

“We’re not going to outrun them!”

Gale tightened his grip on Silas’ hand. “We’re going to try, dammit!”

One of the three merpirates in pursuit began singing the signal for, “I’m coming. Stay there.” The siren song sent chills through Silas when he remembered how happy he had been when he had heard Gale sing the same signal, answering his call for help. Now the call filled him with terror.

Silas looked down at the ocean floor. The sheer amount of water between them and the bottom obscured his view, but there were rocky corals. Silas dived. Pulling Gale with him, he said, “Come on! We can’t outrun them, but we can maybe lose them.”

“Lose them where?” Gale asked. “There’s nothing but coral down there!”

“Exactly, it’s better than open water,” Silas answered. “Think like a salvager and trust me.”

They continued diving, gliding down deeper and deeper. The speed of their descent made Silas’ chest ache with the pressure. The merpirates continued chasing them. The distance between them was quickly closing, but Silas bet that the merpirates’ armor had to be dragging them down. When Silas could make out a little gully in the coral towers, he reached into his bag and pulled out an ink bomb.

Silas cracked the ink bomb and flung it towards the merpirates. It exploded with a rapidly expanding black cloud. Gale swore in surprise, but Silas said, “We’re hiding in the coral. The ink will fade in a few minutes, but those pirates will swim through it first.” He led Gale to the gully and swam down into the narrow gap. “We have to spread out. Stay close to the wall and don’t move.”

Hesitant, Gale nodded. “Okay.” He let go of Silas’ hand and took his knife out from his sheath.

Silas hurried along the gully, scratching his shoulders and tailfin on the rough corals. He squeezed into a particularly narrow section partially sheltered by table coral. Taking out his little beadwork
knife, Silas prayed to the gods that he wouldn’t be seen. Gale’s tail was dark burgundy, so he would blend into the shadows between the stony corals more easily, but Silas’ was bright crimson and gold. Jeb and his other salvager friends had always teased him about his flashy tail, but Silas had never wished until now that it was a bland, neutral color.

Heart racing, Silas clutched his knife and waited. The merpirates switched their song to “Come here,” but he couldn’t pinpoint where they were. He only knew that their voices were drawing closer. Silas hoped that Gale wouldn’t attack them if either of them were found. Since Silas would be useless in a fight, it would be three against one. Silas had his gold rings, so he hoped that he could buy their mercy, but it was just as likely that they would loot his dead body.

The merpirates’ singing grew bone-achingly loud. Silas was certain they would find them. Their hiding places were obvious, too exposed. But then he heard another siren song. “Come here,” it sung too, but with another signal Silas didn’t know. It sounded farther off in the direction of the ship. The nearby song stopped. Silas held his breath.

One of the merpirates swore and said to the others, “We can’t just leave them.” His voice was directly above Silas. “They saw us.”

“They’re just two mers,” the second replied.

“And they used a coward’s cloud,” the third added. “They gotta be salvagers. It’s not like they’re going to complain.”

Silas bristled at that, but pressed himself more firmly against the coral.

“Fine,” the first one said. “But I’m giving their descriptions to the boss. If they are salvagers, we’ll find them in the trade markets. Somebody has to know that red and gold one.”

The merpirates left, but Silas didn’t move. The ocean echoed with the merpirates’ voices and Silas’ memory of the men screaming. He didn’t move even after explosions rocked the water and all the merpirates’ songs ended.

Chapter End Notes

I was particularly pleased with this chapter because Silas finally gets his chance to shine. He hasn’t had many opportunities to be an Active Protagonist (tm) with Special Skills (tm), so I like showing off how salvagers aren’t useless trash diggers.
“Silas?” Gale called. He left his hiding spot and his eyes widened as he looked back at the ship. It had broken in half and was sinking. The pieces of the hull floated back up to the surface while the sailors’ bodies and forgotten ropes, pulleys, lanterns, and other items landed among the corals. Gale realized the merpirates must have found the source of the humans’ explosive weapons onboard and used it to blow up the ship. The iron-stench of blood had drawn sharks, but their arrival had been their saving grace. The merpirates left with their spoils just as the sharks began circling the bodies of the dead sailors. No matter how talented the merpirates were with their weapons, only the bravest or dumbest hunters would tangle with sharks.

Gale pulled his gaze away and called Silas’ name again. Swimming along the gully, he spotted his tail poking out of a narrow crevice between the corals. “Silas?” he said, placing his hand near the stitches on his tail. The sight still embroiled his rage, but he held it back. “Are you stuck?”

“No,” Silas answered in a small voice. He wriggled back out of the corals and righted himself. He glanced at Gale before facing his beadworking knife. “You heard them talking, right?”

“Yeah,” Silas held his arms and bit his lip. “I can’t believe this. I knew merpirates used hypnosis songs, but I didn’t think they’d find another way to kill people after the songs were banned.”

Gale nodded, pensive. “Are you certain they were actually on the ship? Maybe they did something else besides singing to make the sailors fight each other.”

“No, I saw one shift. His legs changed into a tail exactly like Erick’s did, but it happened instantly.” Silas glanced back at the sharks going after the dead sailors, but quickly lowered his gaze. He
tightened his hold on his arms. “Besides, you saw their armor. It was made to work on land and in water.”

“True.”

Neither one spoke for a moment. With a heavy sigh, Silas pushed his hands through his hair. “Gods, you know what this means, don’t you?”

“That it is possible for Erick to be human again?”

“Well, yeah, but this also proves Erick had a reason to attack us. Mers aren’t just enchanting humans and being a nuisance, they’re killing them. There’s been rumors for ages, but now we know it’s true and who’s doing it.” Silas gestured widely towards the wreck. “We can stop them now. All we have to do is find out who has armor like that, tell my dad—”

“Whoa, just slow down a minute,” Gale said, holding up his hands. “Even if he believes you, who else would? There haven’t been shifters in centuries. And besides, reporting these guys is only going to give them more reason to hunt you down. They’re clearly trying to keep this secret, and they obviously have no qualms against killing people.”

“If I don’t report them, how else are we supposed to find out how they became shifters?” Silas retorted.

“I don’t know, but we can’t be stupid about this.”

“I’m the one that got us out of that mess!”

“And you’re the reason they were hunting us to begin with,” Gale snapped. “I wanted to leave them alone, but you keep sticking your nose into places you shouldn’t be.”

“You’re the one that let me go.” Silas scowled. “If we can find out how they became shifters, you can make Erick go back home.”

“But would you leave too?” Gale asked, his eyes looking hurt. “I mean it, Silas. I really don’t want to lose you again. None of us do. When your dad and all of our friends found out you were captured, it was like I was telling them you died.”

“But I didn’t die,” Silas said. “And if I go back to land, that doesn’t mean it would be forever. We don’t even know yet if I ever will be able to go, so stop worrying.”

“I can’t help it.” Gale shook his head. He stared down at the coral. “I still think of you as a kid, not a mated adult or whatever you want to call this thing with Erick.”

“Well, I don’t really feel like an adult either,” Silas said, holding out his arms, “but I’m trying my best to deal with all of this.” He let his hands fall to his sides. “I’m not going to run away like it’s not happening. So learn to deal with it too, okay? I’m glad you came with me today, but I just wish it was because you actually cared about helping Erick too.”

Gale sighed. “Okay.” He turned to swim out of the corals. “Let’s just get going. At this rate, we’ll be lucky to find somewhere to sleep tonight.”

“There’s always somewhere. It just might not be as comfortable as a sponge mattress.”

Gale rolled his eyes at that, but smiled wryly despite himself. “Not everybody likes thinking like a salvager, you know.” He tousled Silas’ hair as they swam back out into the open ocean.
I broke off the end of this chapter to separate it into its own new chapter, so we're up to 108 chapters now.
Night had fallen when the two mermen arrived at Teleyan, but glowing glass bubbles anchored between all the domed buildings filled the shoal with light. Gale hailed one of the patrol guards and asked where they could spend the night. After she directed them to an inn, Silas asked her about the language pearls.

“You can see about getting one over there,” the guard answered, pointing toward the underwater cliff that hung over the shoal. “Merfolk in the Basin and the northeast order them a lot. I don’t know if they’ll have any available for you, but Saoirse is in charge of enchanting them. You’ll want to ask her or one of her apprentices.”

“I see,” Silas said. “Thanks.” He bid her goodbye. As he swam to the inn with Gale, he said, “I’m wondering if I underestimated how much this will cost after all.”

“What did you bring to pay for it?” Gale asked.

“A bag of beads and three of my best rings,” Silas answered dejectedly, patting his bag. “I don’t even know if they’ll take salvaged stuff though.”

Gale sucked water through his teeth, wincing at the possibility. “Yeah. If we can’t get one, we can always ask around to find a translator.”

“But I want to be able to talk to Erick without some stranger between us.”

“I know, but don’t put all your fish in one net.”

“I’m not.”

“Then stop worrying.” They arrived at the inn. Before they went inside, Gale said, “I’ll cover our rooms, all right? We’ll go find this Saoirse in the morning and figure it all out.”


The two mermen woke early the next morning. After they had a quick breakfast and got better directions, they swam over to the pearl farm. Like Peleran, most of the shoal’s buildings were
decorated with coral and stipes of kelp. The main difference was its smaller size and proximity to the shore. As soon as Silas and Gale went around the cliff that jutted into the middle of Teleyan, they saw vast oyster reefs growing right up to the tide pools. Rods jutting out of the cliff wall held weighted ropes with hundreds of woven pouches attached to its length. Every pouch was filled with oysters. Dozens of guards patrolled the area around the oyster ropes. Below the guards, at the base of the cliff, stood a tall, cone-shaped building tiled with mother-of-pearl. Its lustrous exterior gleamed in the dappled sunlight through the ocean’s surface.

The innkeepers had told them that Saoirse and her apprentices lived in the pearl house, so Silas and Gale angled downward to the entrance. Inside, they found a merman behind a stone desk carved with waves. The rest of the building was walled off by hanging beaded strings tautly attached to the floor. While Silas admired a mosaic depicting the great merfolk cities of the seven seas, Gale went to the front desk and asked if they could get a pearl.

“Of course,” the sallow-faced merman answered, “but we currently have a waiting list for the next six months.”

Silas abruptly turned away from a mosaic. “Wait, six months?”

“Yes. Will that be all right?” the merman asked.

“No,” Silas answered, shaking his head. “Isn’t there a way I could get one sooner?”

“You would have to speak with Saoirse herself, but we rarely make exceptions. We understand the demand for languages can be very high, so we hope that you will understand that we have to be fair to all of our buyers.” The merman gestured to the beaded strings. “Every one of those beads you see represents an enchanted oyster growing on the ropes outside. The majority of them will not be ready for at least another two months. Because we don’t use seed pearls to create our language pearls, each one takes at least two years to form.”

Silas visibly deflated. “You’re serious?”

“Yes.” The merman folded his hands on the desk. “Is there anything else I can help you with today?”

Since Silas was too crushed to answer, Gale said, “Yeah, can you get us Saoirse?”

“Certainly.” The merman rose. “Please give me a few moments to fetch her.” He disappeared down a hallway to the right of the desk.

Silas swam to sit against the mosaic wall. Sinking down to the floor, he gripped his hands against the back of his neck and hung his head. “Why did I ever think this would be easy? Clearly the gods are against me.”

Sitting down beside him, Gale put his arm over Silas’ shoulders. “Well, I can’t really argue against that.” He scratched the corner of his mouth, staring at his tail. “Waiting a little while can’t be that bad, though. We can still get a pearl.”

“So?” Silas retorted. “Erick could be heavy with child before then, and I really don’t want to try explaining that with charades.”

Gale cringed, nodding. “Good point.”

“Exactly.” Silas let his hands fall. “Besides, I wouldn’t even really need a pearl anymore before then because Erick’s uncle wants me to bring him back on the next full moon. We’d have to wait
almost an entire month, but he can translate for us if we can’t find anyone else.”

“Right, I almost forgot about him.” Gale looked up at the front desk as the merman returned. He let them know that Saoirse was busy at the moment, but that she would come to see them shortly. They mulled their thoughts in silence. After a minute, Gale turned back to Silas and said more quietly, “What do you think that bottle’s letter even said?”

“I have no idea.” Silas slumped down and folded his arms over his waist. He wished that Gale hadn’t reminded him about how he lost the one thing Erick needed to understand why he was put into Silas’ care. If he hadn’t lost that bottle, if Erick had been able to read Ivan’s letter, would Erick still have tried to choke him? Silas wanted to think that he wouldn’t have, but Silas also didn’t think one letter could have really justified Ivan’s decision to send Erick away without his consent. Nothing short of a book likely would have been enough to fully explain whatever history Ivan withheld from his nephew.

Gale leaned back against the wall and rubbed Silas’ shoulder reassuringly. “Whatever it said, it probably wouldn’t have made a difference. Drama like that only gets worse with half-measures.”

“You think?” Silas looked up at Gale.

“Of course. I can’t blame him, though.” Gale shrugged. “Why own up when you can dump your problems onto somebody else?”

Silas rolled his eyes. “Thinking like that is how you find broken cups in the closet.” He sighed. “I just want to know why he hated us so much.” He lifted his hands and splayed his fingers. “If it’s just about merfolk sinking ships, that makes sense, but he wouldn’t have learned our language if he wasn’t on good terms with us at some point. His accent’s obviously from the northeast, so he had to have been a one of their human traders.”

“I hadn’t thought about that.” Gale’s expression grew thoughtful. “You’ll have to ask him about it when you take Erick back.”

“Yeah, that and like a dozen other things.” Silas crossed his arms. “My dad’s pissed at him for freeing us on the full moon, but I’m just mad at myself for leaving at all. I should have realized Ivan was asking way too much.”

“You wanted to get back home. You can’t blame yourself for that.”

“Why not? Half of the mess I’m in right now could have been prevented if I had just stayed a little longer to ask Ivan more questions.”

“Well, yeah,” Gale said. “But if you didn’t come back, when would you have? What if you stayed and Ivan decided that he wouldn’t take you back after all?”

Reluctantly, Silas answered, “I don’t know.”

“See? You can’t change the past, so just be glad you’re home now. No matter what Ivan told you, Erick isn’t your responsibility. He’s the one that caught you, not the other way around.” Gale leaned forward to better see Silas’ face. “You keep beating yourself up about all of this, but honestly, Erick probably deserves a lot of it.”

“You’re just saying that because you hate him.”

“Maybe, but you understand why I do. That man’s more shark than mer or human.”
Silas curled up his fin. “Stop talking about him like that. He wasn’t so bad yesterday, and I made bracelets with him the day before then. He can be nice.”

“Nice or just biding his time?” Gale pressed. “Even if we do actually get to talk to him, I don’t know how much we can trust what he says.”

“Gale, please,” Silas said. “Just give him another chance. What will it take to…?” He trailed off when Gale looked back up at the desk.

“I’m sorry to keep you both waiting,” a silver-haired mermaid said, swimming over to them. Her seafoam green scales glimmered with iridescent colors. “I’m Saoirse. I was just in the middle of enchanting a new batch of oysters with my apprentices.”

Silas and Gale rose to greet her. Politely bowing his head, Silas introduced himself and Gale. “I’m sorry to interrupt your work, but I really need a language pearl sooner than six months. I have some money, so if you’d just let me explain, I really hope you can help.”

Saoirse looked over the two of them with an appraising eye. Silas held his hands stiffly at his sides, hoping he didn’t look as desperate as he felt. Saoirse turned away, then nodded. “Very well, let’s hear it in my office. Follow me.” She bid them with her fingers as she swam back over the desk.

Chapter End Notes

While we wait to find out what Saoirse (pronounced SEEr-sha -- it's Irish) has to say to our boys, don't forget to comment!
Chapter Summary

Silas and Gale talk to Saoirse.

Chapter Notes

The update is finally here! Thank you for your patience. There's a local mini comicon happening at my college this weekend, and I've been working nonstop to finish my cosplay. I'm going as Link from Breath of the Wild, but I'm going to be the newbie version instead of guardian version. I'm equipping myself with the Old Shirt, Boko Shield, and a Boko Spear. I'm going to wear a wig for the first time, so we'll see how it goes.

If the outside of the pearl house had been extravagant, Saoirse’s office was like being in the heart of an oyster. Another mosaic on the ceiling surrounded the glass lantern hanging from its center. Tasseled silk pillows cushioned the circular bench in front of her desk. The desk’s surface was empty except for an ink-filled bladder pen set into a stand and a conch shell weighting down a curled stack of shark parchment scrolls. Even more scrolls were stored in the dozens of alcoves in the wall behind her.

“So, what brings you two here to beg for a language pearl?” Saoirse asked, settling behind her desk. She curled her tail around her large pink cushion. Her silver hair floated around her like a smoky haze. “I dare say I’ve heard just every excuse too many times to count.” She tapped her fingers one by one as she continued, “Eager explorers, pompous academics, smitten secret admirers, impatient traders… All of them only looking for the easy way past the language barrier.”

Silas gripped his hands on his tail. “If I had another way, I wouldn’t be here.” He took a breath to steady himself. “Four days ago, I was captured by humans while salvaging a recent shipwreck. When they were pulling me aboard their ship, I accidentally did a blood binding with one of the men.”

Saoirse’s eyes widened, but otherwise kept her surprise in check. “Well, that’s certainly a first.” She rolled her hand at him. “Do continue.”

And so Silas did, trying to keep to the most essential details. Though Silas tried to portray Erick favorably, Gale didn’t hesitate to point out Silas’ stitches and bruises even though they had largely faded thanks to Merise’s healing salve. As Silas summarized his story and described his limited success with learning Erick’s language, Saoirse had put her fingers together over her lips.

“If I can’t get a pearl,” Silas said at last, “then we’re going to have to keep Erick in his cell until we can take him back to his uncle. But even if we can convince Ivan to translate for us, I don’t even know if he’ll actually let him return to land. He might just abandon him again. And if he does, that means I’ll have to keep trying to learn his language with no teacher, or somehow make Erick learn ours.”
“That is quite the drama.” Saoirse leaned back on her cushion. She regarded Silas with her head slanted to the side, resting her chin on the first two knuckles of her hand. “I have to admit, you have my sympathy. You may be fighting for a lost cause, but it’s a noble one.” Folding her hands on her lap, she said, “When I first started enchanting our pearls, I never dreamed it would become the business that it is today.” She looked off into space. “I wanted to herald peace and unity between all the ocean’s people, bridge cultures – all that romantic nonsense. But people don’t care about that.” She waved her fingers as if dusting away the thought. “It’s all about money now.”

“But I don’t care about money.” Silas took out his gold rings and put them on Saoirse’s desk. “This is what I brought to pay. They’re the best rings I have from my collection. If you don’t accept salvaged finds, I can sell them and come back. Just tell me what you need so I can help Erick.”

Saoirse picked up one ring and examined its deep red ruby surrounded by tiny diamonds. Its stones sparkled faintly in the light of her lamps. “What I need?” she echoed thoughtfully. As she set it back down, she said, “If Erick and his uncle are from the lands south of here, their native tongue is likely one I do not yet know. Do you think you could get either of them to enchant a pearl for me?”

Silas’ eyebrows rose. “Uh, maybe? I can ask at least.”

“Hm.” Saoirse pushed the ruby ring back towards the other ones on her desk. “Very well then. I will have my jeweler appraise your rings. After I know what they are worth, I will give you a pearl.”

“Really?” Silas leapt from his seat.

With a demure smile, Saoirse answered, “Yes, so long as you promise to return. Your story fascinates me, and that ruby one should be plenty to cover the pearl. I will charge you extra, though, to skip the wait list.” She rose from her cushion. “If you come with me to the front, I can get someone to fetch my jeweler and I can tell you how the pearls work.”

“Great!” Silas picked back up his rings and followed Saoirse out of her study. He felt like swimming backflips, but restrained himself to shaking with relief. Gale grinned at his joy, clapping him on the shoulder.

The jeweler didn’t take long to arrive. After he appraised Silas’ rings, they agreed to trade two of Silas’ rings for a pearl and gave him two strings of beads in return as change. Saoirse went outside to take down an oyster from the ropes hanging from the cliff. When she returned to them waiting above the pearl house, Saoirse held out the oyster. It looked like any other ordinary clam, making Silas half wonder if this was a scam.

As Silas accepted it, Saoirse said, “To infuse the pearl inside with your language, all you have to do is open the oyster, eat the flesh, and place the pearl under your tongue. Let it sit there until you feel it anchor itself, as if something is pushing down on it gently. Resist the urge to move it. The enchantment will hold the pearl in place, but only enough to prevent it from slipping out while you sleep and talk. After the pearl anchors itself, you will have seven days exactly to say every word you want Erick to know. He will only learn the meanings to whatever you say during this time. Any word or phrase you do not say while the pearl is under your tongue, Erick will have to learn on his own.”

Silas blanched at the task. “How will I know when I’ve said everything? What if I don’t say enough words?”

“I’m sure you will be fine,” Saoirse answered. “Even if you just speak normally for the next week, the pearl will collect enough information to give Erick a rudimentary understanding. If you want
him to be able to speak fluently with multiple people, have conversations yourself and others. Talk about the past, the present, and the future. Make up stories. Ask questions. Repeat what other people say if you have to. His vocabulary is less important than his understanding of sentence structure. It’s much harder to teach grammar than to teach individual words.”

“Okay then,” Silas said, somewhat reassured. “What do I do after the seven days are up?”

“You will have to make Erick put the pearl into his mouth.” Smiling impishly, she added, “Some people transfer the pearl directly through a kiss.”

Silas reddened at the thought. “I don’t think Erick would let me do that.”

“It’s just a thought,” Saoirse said, clearly enjoying teasing him. “Just be sure get the pearl to Erick as soon as possible after it detaches from your tongue. The enchantment will quickly fade away after it leaves your mouth.”

“Okay.” Silas nodded. “So, talk a lot, focus on sentences instead of words, and give it to him immediately after seven days.” He was already dreading what this would do to his vocal cords. His throat had nearly completely healed thanks to Merise’s salve, but talking for a week would exhaust him. He wasn’t as sociable as Gale. Part of him wanted to ask Gale to infuse the pearl for him, but he knew that Gale wouldn’t want to do it, and it felt wrong to ask anyway.

“Good luck you two,” Saoirse said, bidding them farewell. “I’ll look forward to doing business with you again.”
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Silas begins infusing the language pearl for Erick.

Chapter Notes

On chapter 23 I asked you all to tell me your favorite character so far. Here are the results:

- Silas: 2
- Gale: 2
- Erick: 1
- Merise: 1
- Ivan: 1
- Dunley: 1

That makes the winners a tie between Silas and Gale! I have to say, I was surprised by the love for Gale. I didn't think he stood out that much, so I'm really glad that you all like even the characters I didn't expect. Because these two were the winners, I'll do some brainstorming to see what kind of one-shot story I can write about them. It'll probably have to do something with salvaging or siren-singing, so I may finally get to show off Silas' other salvaging friends besides Jeb.

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~ Nov. 6, 2019 ~
I never really ended up writing that one-shot, but my revision of the beginning did give Gale more screen time, and I got to bring in Silas' salvaging crew. Because it's been two years since the popularity poll I did, I should do another one on Twitter soon. I just don't know how it'd work because I have so many characters. Should it be more like a tournament then?

Before they began their trip back to Peleran, Silas rubbed on more of Merise’s healing salve over his neck and split open the oyster. Its flesh tasted like any other clam, but his mouth and throat quickly began tingling. The pearl was the oddest part of the oyster. It was entirely opaque, and its luster gleamed with unnatural movement. He pushed it under his tongue. When he felt it sink down slightly, he poked it with his finger. It remained in place. The tingling faded.

“Well?” Gale asked. “Is it working?”

“It’s sticking at least,” Silas answered. The pearl felt uncomfortable, but not unbearably so. He imagined this was what it was like for the oyster to have it stuck in its shell. “I guess we’ll only know if it works when I give it to Erick.”

“You better not end up overdoing it. You’re going to go hoarse again if you go crazy.”

Silas couldn’t help but smirk at that. “Me, talk too much? I’m just worried about talking enough.”
Already he found himself thinking over every word he said. He wondered if Erick would pick up anything he said incorrectly too. Would he end up talking the same as him, or would he retain some sort of accent from his other language? Silas wasn’t sure if he would prefer Erick to have an accent or not. The thought of him having one made him inwardly blush.

“Good point.” Gale laughed, unaware of Silas’ self-consciousness. “I’ll just have to recruit my friends. Between me, them, your friends, and our parents, I’m sure we can get you to talk enough and not go overboard either.”

“I hope so.”

On their way back home, Silas was thankful that Gale was putting his conversation skills to good use. Gale made up a game where he pretended to be made-up characters and people they knew, then had Silas play along as they created little stories for each of them. They played other games, like ‘twenty questions’ and ‘would you rather,’ but grew bored of them quickly. Eventually the two of them ended up trading random words, saying whatever popped first into their head in response to the other’s word.

When they returned, Silas made it back home in time to have dinner with his dad. They had red algae cakes and starfish they pulled out from a basket on the counter. Silas spent the evening telling him about Teleyan and the merpirates. Understandably, Ronan frowned when he learned about their close encounter.

“I’ll ask the guards look into the matter,” Ronan said, “but I don’t know how much we will be able to do. Anyone with that kind of armor is only circumstantially linked to the shipwrecking.”

“Then have someone tail them.” Silas split open another arm from his starfish using more force than necessary. “We can’t just keep letting these people kill humans.”

“Silas, I’m captain of Peleran’s guards, not the entire ocean. Unless any of these merpirates live in Peleran, they are out of my jurisdiction.” Ronan lowered the knife he was using to split his starfish. “As it stands, this is something only King Adonis can really address.”

“Can you ask Lord Kaui for help then?”

“Sure, but I don’t think it will do much good either.”

Silas scowled at his dinner. He had never questioned merfolk politics before, but right then he hated that he couldn’t do anything just because of their rulers’ apathy. King Adonis ruled their seventh of the world’s oceans. Despite that he took the throne just under two years ago, replacing the king who had enacted the enchanting ban, he rarely acknowledged anything to do with humans. Instead he seemed to avoid the question, always echoing sayings about separating shores and the gratitude merfolk should have for the life their gods provided them.

Lord Kaui wasn’t much better, but neither were most of the other leaders in the southern half of the sea. All of them remembered their elders’ harrowing stories of how their human neighbors used to hunt them. Their acceptance of the enchanting ban had more to do with avoiding provocation than it did with the protection of humans. Even if Ronan could convince Kaui to take a stand against the resurgence of merpiracy, Peleran was only one shoal out of dozens. They would need the support of many other shoals besides the Breakwater Alliance to have a chance of getting King Adonis to pay attention.

The rest of their dinner passed with updates about Ronan’s work and how Erick was doing. The former human was still surly but behaving for Merise and Hal. Ronan dealt with the usual
paperwork associated scheduling guard patrols and processing arrest reports. After they finished eating, neither of them stayed at the table much longer. Ronan always had to be up early for work, and Silas was exhausted from his trip.

As Silas lay on his mattress, he picked up the emerald ring he had set aside for Erick and twirled it in his fingers. Quietly, so his dad wouldn’t hear him, Silas said, “You could become pregnant. You might be with child. We might have a baby on the way.”

Saying those words aloud somehow made the possibility even more terrifyingly real, but Silas needed Erick to know what they meant when he told him the truth. He didn’t know if he would even have the courage to tell him himself, or if he would have to make someone else tell Erick for him. He hoped that he wouldn’t even have to admit anything, that Erick wouldn’t get morning sickness or start growing. It would be better to tell him before anything like that happened, but if it didn’t, not saying anything would save them a lot of embarrassment. Even though Silas didn’t know if or when he would have to tell him, he said aloud every possible way to break the news and explain mer anatomy.

When he couldn’t think of anything else to say, one more phrase occurred to him. Silas bit his lip. Gripping the ring, he whispered, “I love you.”

It wasn’t true yet, but the possibility was there. At most, Silas only had a guppy crush on Erick. The cerulean-tailed merman’s body captivated him. He couldn’t deny that he had spent last night at the inn thinking about their moonlit coupling. It made him hot just thinking about it again, and his heart ached over how contented Erick had looked when he was asleep. Silas had seen a hint of that serenity when Erick was making bracelets with him. While Erick was distracted by his beadwork, Silas had stared at him more than he would have liked to admit.

Until Silas fell asleep, he whispered sweet nothings he wished he might be able to say to Erick one day. He rolled onto his side and curled up. Cupping his hand around Erick’s ring, he blushed with every word he said and bashfully smiled. It had to be wrong for his heart to be fluttering in his chest so much, to be this stupidly happy when Erick was miserable, but he couldn’t help himself. Fate be damned, he wanted this more than anything he could imagine.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Silas spends time with Erick and other people in the shoal to infuse the language pearl.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for the late update again! I should probably just change the updates to every Thursday or Friday, but I'm still hoping I can stick with the Wednesday schedule.

Now that we're getting into midterm season, school is taking more and more out of my time to write. I recently began roleplaying with one of my friends again, so that has also taken time away from finishing this story. I'm so close to the end, but it's still a struggle to figure out how I want to get from point A to B. I've always been much better at starting stories than finishing them, but I want to finish this one if only because I don't want to disappoint you, my readers.

The following morning after Silas put the pearl in his mouth, Silas visited the prison again with Merise. Hal left Erick in their care so he could take the morning off. While Merise gave Erick his check-up and medicine, and Silas told them about his trip to Teleyan. Even though Erick couldn’t understand, Silas wanted to think he appreciated their attempt at including him. It at least gave him a reprieve from the prison’s silence. Hal had told them he had given up trying to talk to Erick. He wasn’t being paid enough to only talk to himself. Erick simply sat against the wall, drumming his fingers as if to an unvoiced song, and didn’t smile or show any indication that he was listening. It didn’t dissuade Silas, however. The fact that he wasn’t telling Silas to leave was all the encouragement he needed. When Hal returned with cod filets for lunch, Silas stayed until they finished.

Silas went to visit Jeb next despite Gale’s warning to stay away from the salvager’s section. The old merman embraced him as always and listened to Silas’ concerns about the merpirates, then promised that he would investigate them with his network of contacts. With both Silas’ dad and Jeb looking into them, Silas felt hopeful that they would be able to find out something. Whether it was just names of members or the secret to their shifting ability, anything would help. It was the one thing Silas could do that would definitely help win over Erick’s trust. If he could stop these merpirates from killing humans, it would prove that he really didn’t mean Erick any harm.

Over the course of the next four days, whenever Silas wasn’t visiting Erick or hanging out with Gale and his other friends, Silas wandered the shoal and pretended he was alone with Erick. He talked about everything he saw and whatever else came to mind. If his father let Erick free, Silas wanted to be able to give Erick a full tour of Peleran.

On the afternoon of the sixth day, Silas returned to the prison after having spent all morning at the reef fields with Gale. Merise met him outside the prison, having just left herself. Her eyes were downcast with a troubled expression.
“Hey, Merise,” Silas said, catching her attention and matching her worried look. “Did something happen with Erick today?”

“No, not exactly,” Merise answered. “It’s just Hal told me that he still barely eats anything, and I’m not convinced that it’s only because he doesn’t like our food. I’m going to have to give him nutrient supplements if he doesn’t start eating more.”

“That isn’t good.” Silas bit the corner of his lip. “He’s still okay with us visiting him, though, right?”

“As far as I can tell.” Looking back at the prison, she said, “The problem is that I’m worried our visits are helping him less and less. I know he’s never exactly been very responsive, but he’s all but completely ignoring me now, even when I use words in his language. It’s discouraging, to say the least.”

Silas nodded. “I get what you mean.” Erick had been ignoring him the same way, even as he tried his best to teach him hand games and give him other things to do. Silas had brought Erick some of his old toys, like a ribbon wand and a hand spinner, but Erick scoffed at them like the offer was insulting.

“At least this is the last day he’ll be unable to understand us.” Merise’s expression lightened. “The pearl is supposed to be ready tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Silas smiled nervously at the prospect. “I’m excited to finally be able to properly talk to him. He’s been so good even though he’s been so depressed. I don’t think we’ll have to worry about him being bad again.”

“Wouldn’t that be something?” Merise pulled him into a hug, catching Silas slightly by surprise. As she released him, she patted his shoulder. “I hope everything works out with you two. I’m really proud of you, Silas, for handling all of this so well. Your willingness to forgive is a rare gift.”

Blushing, Silas rubbed the back of his head. “Thanks, but I’m just doing what I think anybody else would do in my situation.”

“If you were anyone else, you might have abandoned him in the open ocean or simply let the guards take him off your hands.” She paused to give him a gentle, pointed look. “I hope everything works out with you two. I’m really proud of you, Silas, for handling all of this so well. Your willingness to forgive is a rare gift.”

Embarrassed, Silas shrunk under her praise. He felt simultaneously pleased and disappointed that his kindness to Erick could be considered amazing. Despite Gale’s insistence that Erick wasn’t his responsibility, it never really occurred to Silas that plenty of other people would have agreed with Gale. Silas wished that forgiveness could have been the more common response.

After Merise bid Silas good luck with trying to cheer up Erick, Silas went into the prison. Hal waved in greeting and rose from his seat against the wall to let Silas take his place. Erick was playing with a set of worry beads he made using rounded red coral. He slid beads one by one across the string to a large knot. When he ran out on one side, he flipped it around and began sliding each one over again. He didn’t look up or stop even when Silas stopped outside his cell door.

“Hey, Erick,” Silas said hesitantly. He sat down on the floor as Hal disappeared down the hall. “It’s good to see that you’re still using my beadwork kit.”

Erick barely glanced over at the merman. He didn’t understand why Silas kept trying to talk to him. Merise’s visits made sense since it seemed like her job to make sure he didn’t hurt himself.
again, but Silas had no reason to care about him. He was in prison for trying to kill the dumb merman, after all. No matter how much he tried to make it clear that he wanted nothing to do with him, he continued showing up at his cell.

“It won’t be long until we can actually talk,” Silas said, trying again to make Erick respond. “I’ll finally be able to explain everything tomorrow.” He then pointed at the worry beads, saying, “You like playing with those a lot, don’t you?” No answer. “Erick?”

Erick lowered his worry beads to give Silas a deadpan stare. “Why do you keep coming here?” Silas’ eyebrows scrunched up. Erick lowered his gaze to stare at his tail. “Why am I even bothering to talk to you? You don’t understand. You’ll never understand anything.”

Throwing the worry beads, Erick turned his back to Silas and crossed his arms. The beads landed softly on the ground. The lack of force only further soured Erick’s mood. He had decided that Ivan and his crew had thrown him away after all. Ivan had enemies, but the chance that they were actually attacked by them was slim. Even if they had been, their attackers wouldn’t have put him and Silas back in the ocean. There were too many ways they could make money from a pair of mermen to waste them like that. So, the only explanation left was that everyone he cared about hated him now. They couldn’t stand having a merman for a captain or a nephew, but none of them had the balls to just put him out of his misery. Getting rid of Silas too made sure there would be nothing left for them to remember what happened to him.

Erick couldn’t fault them for abandoning him, though, and that was the worst part. If Silas had bitten anyone else, even Talia, Erick hated to think of what he might have done. He couldn’t ever imagine killing any of them, but he wouldn’t have been able to look at them again without thinking of the monsters that did it either. Even now, looking at his own bandaged tail, he still wanted nothing more than to rip it in half. He wasn’t sure how much longer he would be able to restrain himself from trying, even with his warden’s constant supervision. He already had to consciously fight the urge to keep his hands off his gills and not suffocate himself. He still couldn’t ignore how the water flowed through them against his arms.

“Erick?” Silas leaned on his cell door bars. “What did I do now?” Erick didn’t speak again. Sighing, Silas put his forehead to the cell bars. “I’m sorry. Please just wait a little longer. Do you want me to leave?” In English, he asked, “Silas leave?”

“Yes, Silas leave,” Erick answered, too tired to even be angry anymore.

Somehow Erick’s quiet voice hurt Silas more than being choked. Silas clenched his hands, but rose to leave. “I promise I’ll make this up to you, Erick. Just wait one more day.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Silas gives Erick the language pearl.

Chapter Notes

Well, here's the update finally. School is really kicking my ass right now. Since I know already that I won't update on time on Wednesday, I'm posting Wednesday's update today too. Think of it as an apology for the super late updates.

Late on the morning of the seventh day, Silas and Gale were sitting in the stands of the squidball court, watching Gale’s friends play. They were talking about who Gale wanted to have in his intramural team when the pearl dislodged itself from under Silas’ tongue.

“Oh!” Silas said, spitting it out before he accidentally swallowed it. “It’s ready!” He broke into a grin.

“It is?” Gale looked down at the pearl in Silas’ hand. “Oh, wow. It didn’t used to look like that, right?” The formerly opaque pearl had turned a light pink color.

“No, it’s full of all the words I’ve said.” Silas quickly closed his fingers around it and floated up from his seat. “I’m going to give it to Erick now.” Before leaving, he looked sheepishly at Gale. “Do you want to join?”

Gale glanced down at his friends in the squidball court. His team had lost control of the ball and were chasing it down again. He shook his head, but smiled and faced Silas again. “Sure. I want to see for myself if it works.”

“Yes!” Silas threw his arms around Gale and hugged him tightly. “Thank you.” He let go again and darted out of the stands. “C’mon, you jellyfish!”

Gale laughed. “Slow down, I’m coming.”

Soon they arrived at the prison and returned to Erick’s cell. Like yesterday, Erick hardly even glanced at Silas or Hal as he left, but his stare lingered on Gale questioningly. It had been over a week since the last time they saw each other.

Silas swam up to the cell door and stuck his arm through the bars. “Erick,” he called, opening his hand to reveal the pearl. “I brought you something. Look!”

Erick frowned, but pushed himself up into the water. He held his hand against the wall to keep himself upright. He was expecting to see another seaweed capsule full of medicine since Merise had given him one every morning since he arrived, so the gleaming object in Silas’ hand confused him. “A pearl?”
“Eat,” Silas said, reaching out his arm further for Erick to take it.

“Eat?” Erick repeated flatly, raising his eyebrows.

“Yes, Erick eat.”

Erick face-palmed. “That’s not edible, you dumb fish. Ladies make jewelry out of those.”

Silas knew he sounded silly, but he had no idea how else to make Erick put it in his mouth. “Please, Erick.” He pointed at the pearl, then pointed at his own mouth. “Eat.”

Erick simply stared at him, wondering if this was supposed to be a joke. He looked at Gale, but the other merman had crossed his arms and was leaning against the wall. He wasn’t glaring at him anymore, but wasn’t smiling either. He watched the exchange between Erick and Silas like a navigator trying to read the sky on a cloudy day.

When Silas repeated himself again, Erick glared back at him and said, “I’m not going to eat it. It’s weird enough crapping through one hole. I don’t want to see it in my shit.” Despite that Erick had raised his voice, Silas only repeated himself more insistently. “Aello’s mercy, what is your problem?” Since Silas didn’t seem like he was going to leave him alone, Erick said, “Fine.” He picked up the pearl and gave Silas an exasperated look. “I’ll play pretend. Will that make you happy?”

Erick popped the pearl into his mouth. As soon as the pearl touched his tongue, it instantly dissolved. He recoiled and coughed at the tingling sensation that filled his mouth. “What the fuck?” He held his fingers over his lips, carefully running his tongue over his pointed teeth, but felt nothing left of the pearl.

Silas gripped the cell bar with both hands. He didn’t understand Erick’s outburst. Timidly, he asked, “Can you understand me now?”

Erick flinched when Silas spoke. His words sounded exactly the same as before, but he had the freakish certainly that he just asked if he understood him. “What did you just say?” he asked, but he clapped a hand over his mouth the moment the question left his lips. It wasn’t in English. “How?” He moved his hand and stared at his palm. “Why am I…?”

“It worked!” Silas fist-pumped the air, then pressed his face through the bars. “You have no idea how much I’ve been wanting to actually talk to you.”

Erick’s head jerked back up. “What the hell did you do?” He found himself even thinking in mertongue before he switched back to English. “Can I still talk normally?” he asked himself, finding that he could. “Holy shit.”

“It was the pearl,” Silas answered. “I had to keep in it my mouth for seven days to infuse it with our language.”

Erick looked repulsed at him. “You tried to make me eat something that was in your mouth for a week?” He started sinking back in the water, so he waved his arms to right himself again.

“You tried to make me eat something that was in your mouth for a week!” Silas splayed his hands at him. “We can finally talk.” He folded his arms around the bars and wagged his tail. “I’ll finally be able to introduce you to everybody properly and I can show you around, take you to the market chasm—”

“Silas, calm down,” Gale said, swimming up next to him. “We haven’t even talked to your dad about letting him free yet.”
“But he won’t attack me again.” Silas looked back at Erick. “Right?”

Erick gaped at him in disbelief. “You turned me into a freak. Why would I want to go anywhere with you?”

Silas’ shoulders and tail sunk. “But it was an accident.”

“So?” Erick retorted. “I’m still stuck here instead of on land. Why am I in the ocean?”

Silas shrunk back farther. “Your uncle Ivan wanted me to keep care of you.”

Erick dove at the cell door. “You liar!” Gale yanked back Silas before he could reach him. “My uncle hates all of you just as much as I do.”

“But I’m not lying.” Silas held his arms up over his chest, leaning back into Gale. “He told me himself that—”

“How? You couldn’t understand us!”

“He knows mertongue, just like you now.”

“That’s impossible.” Erick grit his teeth. “If that was true, why wouldn’t he have told me?”

“I don’t really know, but he said he lied about us because he was bitter about something. He wanted me to show you we’re not all bad because he didn’t think you’d believe him if he tried to explain.”

“Bullshit!” Erick gripped the cell bars. “He abandoned me because of you! All of my crew, everyone I cared about – gone! If any of them really cared about me, they should have shot me dead and killed you too.”

“You can’t mean that,” Silas said, eyes wide. “Please…”

“Do you still not understand even in your own tongue?” Erick shouted. “I hate you! You freaks killed my parents and you’re still killing people.”

Gale tightened his hold on Silas’ arm. “Silas,” he said warningly.

“But that’s not my fault,” Silas answered, ignoring Gale. “I know who’s sinking ships now—”

“Then why don’t you stop them?” Erick demanded. “Seventeen ships have sunk just this year alone – almost fifteen hundred lives lost.”

Silas’ mouth dropped. “That many people have died?”

“You never bothered to count the dead, have you? You’re too busy robbing wrecks to even look twice at them.” Erick gripped the cell bars tighter. “There were dead men in the water when I caught you, you know! Did you even care?”

“Of course I care! Just because they had legs doesn’t mean their life was worth any less than a mer’s.”

“And yet you have no qualms against stealing from them.” Erick held up his necklace. “This belonged to someone. Just because they were dead doesn’t mean you can take it from their corpse!”
“I found that in the sand,” Silas retorted.

“And that makes a difference?”

“Yes, because I didn’t kill anyone. I’m a salvager, not a pirate. I find what’s been lost and save it. If I had a way to return everything I find, I would.”

Erick continued fuming, but didn’t have a response.

“You can hate me all you want, but that’s the truth,” Silas said, lowering his voice. “You can keep yelling and trying to hurt me and everyone else, but I am only going to keep trying to help you.”

“You’re insane.” Erick shook his head, staring at him. “You can’t help me. Why would you even want to try?”

Silas hesitated. *Because I like you,* he wanted to say, but he knew that wouldn’t help. “Because it’s the only thing I can do,” he eventually answered, hanging his head. “I know I can’t change your mind just in one day. I probably can’t even in another month. But I will try because Ivan asked, and he let me go free with you.” Silas paused. “If you really don’t want to stay, Ivan is going to come back to the ocean on the next full moon, back where he freed us. When I take you back to see him, you can ask to go back to land with him.”

“Why should I believe you?” Erick asked. “Just take me back to land now. I can find someone to find him or my crew.”

“I can’t. Ivan didn’t want you to go back until then. I have no reason to lie.”

“Until I hear it from him or my crew, I’m not going to believe you.”

“But—”

“Silas,” Gale said, “just give it a rest.” He held out his hands imploringly. “If he’s not going to listen, we might as well leave.”

“We can’t just leave him now that we can talk to each other.”

“It’s not like he’s going anywhere,” Gale retorted. “We can wait until he calms the fuck down.”

Erick glared at him. “I’m right here, you know, and I have every goddamn right to be angry. You go ahead and leave, see if I care.”

Gale didn’t answer, but stared daggers in return. As they glowered at each other, Silas said, “Erick, if you want me to leave, I will. If not, I’d really like to know more about you and your crew.”

Erick turned his glare onto Silas, but his scowl lessened somewhat. He looked down at the floor. “I don’t want to talk about them right now, so you might as well go.”

“Is there anyone else you’d like to talk to?” Silas asked. “You don’t mind Merise, right?”

Erick let go of the cell bars and let himself sink back down onto his sponge mattress. “The mermaid with the purple tail?”

“Yeah,” Silas answered. “She’s been worried about you too.”

Resting his elbows on his tail, Erick put his forehead on his knuckles and rubbed between his eyes with both of his thumbs. “If she wants to come by, I don’t care.”
“Okay.” Silas nodded. “We’ll ask her to visit you again then.” He continued lingering. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“A book or beer would be nice, but I doubt you have either here.”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t even know what those are.”

“Then just forget it.” Erick dropped his hands onto his lap. “Just leave me alone.”
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Erick talks to Hal and Merise.

Chapter Notes

And here is the chapter for this Wednesday (Oct. 18). Erick can finally talk to people!
Yay! *waves little flags, collapses into a pile of goo*

Erick picked back up his worry beads after Silas left. As he moved the beads from one side of the string to the other, he heard Silas tell the guard at the end of the hall that Erick knew mertongue now. Erick didn’t really understand how the pearl worked, but it proved without a doubt that merfolk knew how to use magic. He might have been able to write off his tail as some weird infection caused by Silas’ bite, but now it was obvious that it was magic too. The only magical thing he had been prepared for was enchanting, but he had yet to see it in action. He wondered if that was just another thing his uncle got wrong.

Thinking about Ivan again made him grip his worry beads. It couldn’t have been true. There was no way Ivan could have known mertongue. Yet even as he told himself this, he remembered his surprise when he saw how human Silas looked. His uncle always said they were more fish than human, but he knew now that wasn’t really true. And Silas knew Ivan was his uncle. Their family resemblance led most people to think Ivan was Erick’s father, not uncle, so the only way Silas would have known was if someone had told him. If Ivan didn’t, Erick had no idea who else could have.

A rapping on Erick’s cell bars startled him out of his brooding thoughts. “So, you can understand us now,” the green-tailed guard said. “My name is Hal. Silas says your name is Erick, right?” He held out cuts of a pale pink fish wrapped in seaweed. Ever since Erick refused the crab bowl, the guard had only brought him random pieces of fish wrapped in various kinds of seaweed.

Erick put his worry beads around his wrist and reached up for his lunch. “Yeah.” He unwrapped the seaweed and grimaced at having fish again.

“What, you don’t even like tuna?” Hal rested his forearm on the wall as he looked down at Erick. “What do you eat on your side of the sea?”

“We eat cooked food, and I’m not from the sea.” Erick answered, picking up one of the fish fillets. “I’m human.” He glanced at his bandaged tail. “Or I was, anyway.”

“You’re serious?” Hal did a double-take. “Silas told everybody that you were captured like him.”

“Then he’s a lair. The dumb fish bit me and turned me into one of you fiends.” Erick took a tentative bite. Finding it wasn’t awful, he continued eating.
“He bit you…?” Hal’s eyes widened further. “Oh. Wow, okay. That explains a lot.”

Erick raised his eyebrow at him. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t know about blood binding, do you?” Hal asked.

“No, is it supposed to be a curse?”

Hal laughed. “No. Gods, no, the opposite.” He shook his head, his smile fading. “I’d explain, but I can imagine why Silas would want to keep it a secret.” He seemed like he had more to say, but decided against voicing it.

“Why?” Erick put down his lunch and lifted himself up to the cell bars. “You better explain, or so help me…”

Hal held up his hands and backed up. “No way, I am not getting in the middle of this.”

“In the middle of what?” Erick demanded. “What the hell is a blood binding supposed to mean?”

“Ask Silas or someone else. It’s not my place to explain.” He turned to leave again.

“Hey!” Erick pulled himself to the edge of his cell door and leaned forward to watch Hal swim away. “What do you mean, not your place?” Hal didn’t respond as he continued down the hall. “Hello? Don’t you run away! Get back here!”

Hal disappeared around the corner. Muttering curses, Erick sank back down to the floor. The opposite of a curse was a blessing, but Erick couldn’t imagine how biting someone would be a good thing. If turning him into a merman was supposed to be a gift, though, that would explain why Silas said it was an accident.

About two hours later, Erick guessed because he couldn’t keep track of time in his cell, he saw Merise swim down the hall to his cell. She had knotted her long brown hair into a thick ponytail.

“Good afternoon, Erick,” Merise said, stopping outside his cell. She grinned. “I hear I’m your favorite.”

“Only because you haven’t given me a reason to dislike you,” Erick answered impassively. He brushed his fingers over his bandages.

“That so?” Merise’s eyes followed Erick’s fingers. “How is your tail doing? It should be safe to remove your bandages now, but your tail will be extra sensitive until your scales fully grow back.”

Erick frowned. “Do we have to remove the bandage?”

“No, but your scales will grow back faster if we uncover your tail,” Merise answered. “If it’s still sore, I can give you more pain medicine.”

“No, it’s not that.” Erick looked away to the back of his cell. “I just hate looking at it. Did Silas not tell you I was human?”

“No, I knew,” Merise said softly. Her eyes creased with sympathy. “Gale told me. He’s Silas’ friend and my son.”

Erick’s head whipped back around to face her. “That hothead is your son?” he asked, stunned.

Merise laughed. “Yes. He’s made it very clear how much he dislikes you, so I’m not surprised you
“don’t get along.” She sat down and held one of the cell bars. “Gale is very protective of his friends, especially ever since his father passed. He treats Silas like a little brother because they grew up together. They’re only three years apart in age.”

“Huh.” Erick put his back to the cell bars. “I guess I can see that. He acts like I’m some rabid animal.”

Giving Erick a pointed look, Merise said, “Is that far from the truth? You’ve attacked Gale, choked poor Silas, broke his nose, stabbed him with a harpoon, and gave his father a black eye when he was trying to get me to take care of your tail.”

“I had no idea what was going on,” Erick retorted. “I won’t apologize for harpooning him, but you can’t blame me for freaking out. When I woke up underwater, I thought I was drowning. All I knew was that I wasn’t on land and that it was Silas’ fault. I resisted treatment because I had no way of knowing whether you were going to help me or make me worse.” Crossing his arms, Erick continued, “I’ve done nothing wrong since then.”

Merise raised an eyebrow. “Gale told me that you wished your crew had killed Silas. Is that not wrong?”

Erick hesitated to answer. “Even if it is, I don’t care.” He slumped against the wall and bowed his head. “He turned me into a fish freak.”

“But it wasn’t on purpose.”

“So? Unless I can get my legs back, I won’t forgive him.” Erick glanced back over at her. “Will you tell me what a blood binding is? The guard said that’s what Silas did, but he refused to explain what that means.”

Merise’s eyebrows rose. “Oh. I can,” she said reluctantly, turning away, “but don’t get mad at me when I tell you.”

“I’m already mad, so just spit it out.”

“All right then,” Merise answered. “A blood binding is what lovers do when they want to prove they are meant for each other.” Erick’s mouth dropped. Merise continued, “Two mers draw blood from each other, and then they kiss each other’s wounds. If the binding is between a mer and a human, the binding can transform one of them if their love is true. In this case, you became a merman, but it was just as likely for Silas to have become human.”

“This has to be a joke.” Erick pushed himself up and scooted farther back into his cell. “You think that I, and him…” he sputtered, unable to even articulate the thought.

“I’m not saying that either of you like each other in that way right now, but there’s a strong possibility that you will.”

“There’s no way in hell that I could ever… It’s disgusting.” Erick shook his head. “He’s a stupid, spineless, sappy fish.”

Merise smiled sadly. “If you give him a chance, you might change your mind.”

“No, it’s not going to happen.” Pushing both hands through his hair, Erick put his back to the wall again and slid down. “Is that why he keeps trying to be nice? Because he actually thinks…? God, he’s more insane than I thought.” He dropped his face into his hand.
“Be that as it may, you don’t have that many people on your side down here. If you want to leave this cell before the next moon, you’ll have to accept Silas’ help. Silas’ father, Ronan, is captain of the guards. It will be his decision to let you go free.”

“God dammit,” Erick muttered. “I really don’t have a choice then, do I?”

“I’m afraid not.” Merise smiled.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Erick makes a promise to Silas’ father.

Chapter Notes

I've officially decided to move updates to every Monday instead of every Wednesday. Since I now have a Tuesday evening class, I'm always too worn out to remember to post on time. Mondays are easier because that's when I'm most organized.

Anyway, I'm excited to finally show all of you Erick and Silas finally getting to know each other. If you thought the flow of relationship was rough before, get ready for some rapids, lol.

After Merise left, Erick was left alone with his thoughts again. Hal eventually returned and brought him dinner. He asked about what foods Erick liked, but Erick ignored the question and asked if it was true that Ronan could keep him in the prison as long as he wanted.

“Well, now that’s a complicated question,” Hal answered. “We first detained you because you attacked Silas and Gale, but if that were still the case, you should have had a hearing a while ago. After you hurt yourself, Ronan deemed that you were incapacitated and decided you would be a ward of the shoal until we could determine where you lived or who could take care of you. Not really a prisoner anymore, but not really free either.”

“Then am I still a ward of the shoal?” Erick asked. “I’m not incapacitated, and you know where I’m from.”

“See, that’s the problem. Now that you can talk and I know the whole story, we could charge you for kidnapping, attempted murder, assault, the whole deal. But Ronan asked me to keep my mouth shut about the fact you were human because he and Silas don’t want to take you to court.”

“So I’m stuck here either way.” Erick leaned his head back against the wall. “If I was found guilty, what would be the sentence?”

“Hmm, I’d say a minimum of twenty years.”

“Holy fuck,” Erick breathed.

“Yeah, we take that stuff pretty seriously,” Hal said with a shrug. “If it wasn’t for the fact that you had a blessed blood binding with Silas, I wouldn’t hesitate to go above Ronan and get you tried. But I trust the gods, and Silas is a good kid. He wouldn’t be sticking up for you if he didn’t think you were worth it.”

Erick didn’t answer, but he couldn’t help but marvel at his situation. His future depended on the
Hal settled into his chair. “Just remember this. Ronan has been captain of the guards for over thirty years, so nearly the entire force has watched his kid grow up. If you do hurt Silas again in any way, none of us will care what he thinks. We will lock you up for good.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Erick rubbed his temple. Though he was already regretting that he caught Silas, he found himself regretting it even more.

* * *

Silas joined his father to visit Erick the following morning. They found him still asleep on his sponge mattress, curled up on his side with his arm folded under his head. He slept with his mouth parted slightly, making Silas smile at the sight.

“See, he’s not so bad like this,” Silas said, glancing up at his father.

Ronan harrumphed. “A shame we can’t keep him asleep.” He banged on the cell bars. “Hey, wake up!”

Erick jolted awake. “What…?” he said groggily, sitting upright. He blinked at Silas and the dusky orange-tailed merman beside him. By his mostly faded black eye, he recognized that the merman was Silas’ father. “Oh, you.” Erick rubbed the bridge of his nose. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Ronan answered, “I’ve come to properly introduce myself and get your side of things. As Hal has probably told you, I’m Peloran’s captain of the guards and Silas’ father. It’s up to me whether or not you get to see the light of day again. Right now I don’t have a very good opinion of you, but I’m giving you the chance to try to change that.

“So, let’s start from the beginning.” Ronan rested his hand on his sword. “What were you doing when you shot my son with a harpoon?”

Erick inwardly cringed, but forced his face to look professional. He sat up straighter, folding his tail to the side. He would have preferred to stand, but seeing as he couldn’t stay upright in the water without holding something or waving his hands like a damn bird, sitting upright was the next best option.

Meeting Ronan’s eyes framed by his helmet, Erick stated, “I was patrolling the waters approximately three hundred miles from land on the lookout for shipwrecks. My crew and I were trying to stop pirates, human or mer, defend ships in the event of an attack, and rescue survivors. I found Silas and Gale in a wreck and assumed they were either responsible or associated with the attackers. The only way I could capture either of them was with a harpoon.”

Silas seemed impressed and looked up at his father, but Ronan stern expression didn’t budge. “What were you planning to do with Silas?”

Erick pressed his hand against his tail, but kept his voice steady. “I was going to take him to the Navy Admiral, the man responsible for defending my country’s waters, to prove merfolk exist. No one believes you’re real except for my uncle, myself, and a sect of people generally considered cracked. If I showed him Silas, I could have convinced him to mobilize ships and hunt down your kind.” Seeing Silas’ horrified expression, Erick averted his gaze.

Ronan’s armor clinked as he adjusted his grip on his sword. “If you were successful, would you have freed him?”
Erick didn’t look up. Reluctantly, he answered, “No, I probably wouldn’t have. I know that doesn’t help my case, but I doubt you would have believed me if I tried lying.”

“True, I wouldn’t have,” Ronan said, “but I appreciate your honesty.” He went quiet for a moment, studying Erick’s bowed head and low shoulders. The former human was repeatedly pressing his thumbnail into the side of his fingers. “If I let you go back to land right now, would you still try to hunt us down?”

Again, Erick hesitated to answer. “I don’t know.” He struggled to find his next words. “I thought all of you were just savage monsters, but I know your language now.” He lifted his hands up helplessly before dropping them back over his lap. Gripping his fist with his other hand, he said faintly, “I don’t even know what to think anymore.”

“I see.”

Erick remained silent. His folded tail ached, but he didn’t dare move. His chest tightened with worry. What did Ronan think of him now? In his eyes, he gone from an apparently feral mer to a vicious hunter to just a dupe who believed the lies of his uncle. Erick hoped Ronan would take pity on him and take him back to land, but he had no idea how he would live there anymore if he actually did so. His only purpose was to prove merfolk existed, but he didn’t really want to hunt them indiscriminately anymore. Without some goal, he didn’t see a reason to continue living at all. Would it be a kinder mercy to kill him so he wouldn’t have to quietly do it himself by suffocating alone on some forsaken beach?

Ronan continued studying Erick for a minute before expression softened. “I don’t know what you should think anymore either, but Silas wants to teach you. If you’re willing to learn, I will let you out.”

Erick lifted his head with a stunned expression. Ronan gave him a faint smile. “Yes, I’m not a complete hard-ass. Against my better judgement, you’re going to be Silas’ responsibility now.” He nodded towards his son, who was grinning to his auditory fins and flicking his tailfin in joy. “I’m not allowing you to go find your human friends just yet, but you can do whatever else you want with Silas’ permission. However, if you so much as lay one finger on my boy…”

“I get it,” Erick said, running a hand through his hair, struggling to process this unexpected turn. “You’ll lock me back up and throw away the key. One of your guards has already threatened to do the same.” Erick then reined in his frustration and looked back up at Ronan. “Thank you for your leniency. I promise I won’t hurt Silas again.”

“Good, but don’t thank me. Silas wouldn’t stop pestering me unless I let you go.” Ronan held up a set of keys. “Now, pack up your things. You’ll be staying at our house from now on.”

As Erick fumbled to roll back up the sponge mattress, Silas leaned on the cell bars. “I hope you like it,” Silas said. “As soon as you settle in, I want to take you to meet Jeb. He’s the best salvaging trader in the chasm and knows about almost everything, so he should know more about those merpirates I mentioned yesterday.”

Ronan opened Erick’s cell door and looked back over at his son. “I thought you were supposed to be avoiding the salvager’s section right now.”

“Well, yeah, but nobody’s going to jump me if I’m with Erick,” he said, gesturing towards him as if his size and muscles alone could deter even sharks.

“I wouldn’t be so certain of that,” Ronan said. Erick finished rolling up the sponge mattress, so
Ronan reached to take it and handed it over to Silas.

“What’s wrong with the salvager’s section?” Erick picked up Silas’ beadwork bag and looped his worry beads around his wrist. “And what is it?”

Silas answered, “It’s where all the salvagers sell and trade their finds in the market chasm.” Erick’s expression remained confused, so he elaborated, “When I saw the merpirates with Gale, they saw us and said they were going to look for me there. We don’t know if they were trying to kill us or not to prevent witnesses, but Gale’s afraid that they’ll try to do something if they find me again.”

“I’m worried too, you know,” Ronan added. “Why don’t you take Erick to the squidball court instead?”

“Because that’s boring, and Erick can’t play anyway until his tail finishes healing.”

“I’d rather learn more about these merpirates too, honestly,” Erick said, awkwardly swimming out of his cell. He had no idea what to make of the market chasm or whatever squidball was, and it was all he could do just to literally keep up with them in the water. He had avoided using his tail completely during his stay, so moving with it still felt wrong. He kept trying to kick his nonexistent legs instead of using the entire fluid length of his tail.

Ronan sighed. “Fine. If you must go, don’t wander around. Just go straight to Jeb’s stall and back.”

“Okay,” Silas groaned, rolling his eyes. He took his beadwork bag from Erick, then wrapped his arms around the sponge mattress. “Let’s get going.”
Feeling completely unmoored, Erick followed Silas and Ronan out of the prison. Outside, he ogled at all of the domed houses below the prison’s cliff. When they had taken him to the prison, he had been too angry and busy with fighting his restraints to really take in the view. Now he marveled at the coral gardens and kelp trees growing throughout the shoal. Instead of roads, carved stone arches and towers with more mer dwellings inside seemed to serve as waypoints to guide traveling merfolk.

As they swam, Silas pointed out features like the squidball court’s wide, sandy field and the long, glowing crevice of the market chasm. Erick simply listened as he talked about Peleran, trying to take in everything. Silas’ sheer enthusiasm amazed him. Considering how timid Silas used to be, he hadn’t expected the fiery-tailed merman to be so excited. Yet, remembering what Merise told him about blood binding, Erick supposed he was still under the delusion that there could be anything between them. Despite how much it baffled him, it didn’t matter if Erick thought his stupid grin was admittedly just a little bit endearing. Erick didn’t belong in the ocean. Even with gills and a tail, there was no way he could ever feel at home under the sea.

Soon they arrived at their house. The pink and blue cactus coral on either side of the door reminded Erick of candy. Since Ronan had to return to work, he left the young mermen and reminded Silas that if he needed anything, he could find a guard or go to Gale’s house. Silas assured him that they would be fine while Erick swam into the living area.

As Silas put the sponge mattress back into their guest alcove, he said, “This is where you’ll sleep.” Erick glanced over at him as if surprised, as he was distracted by all of the jars and baskets lining the shelves in the kitchen. “Do you like it?”

Erick swam over to the guest alcove and pushed aside the sailcloth curtain to look inside. The narrow opening made him think the cave would be small, but he found that there was just enough room to spread out his arms. The wall niches on one side were empty save for a sponge pillow tucked into the bottom. A shuttered lantern hung at the back.

“It’s nice, I guess,” Erick answered. He set down his worry beads inside since he had no other possessions besides the locket he stole from Silas. He had left the other bracelets he made in Silas’ bead-working bag. “Do you not use blankets?” At Silas’ confused expression, he added, “They’re like these curtains, but softer. Humans wrap themselves up in them when we sleep to stay warm.”
“Oh. No, I don’t think anyone would bother,” Silas said, shrugging. “The temperature doesn’t ever change down here, and they sound like they’d make it hard to breathe anyway.”

Erick glanced down at Silas’ gills. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Yeah. Want to see my room?” Silas swam over to it and lifted up his curtain. “I keep my salvage collection here.” Erick followed. Silas slipped into his room and scooped up his assorted jewelry. He twisted around and poked his head back out. Leaning his elbows on the edge of the entrance, he said, “These are the most valuable pieces of my collection.” He picked up a gold hoop earring. “This was my very first gold finding. I’ve found a whole lot more, obviously, but some of these I got through trades.”

Erick stared open-mouthed. The last time he had seen that much gold was during one of Ivan’s dinner parties. Silas set down the earring, then picked up a bracelet. As he rambled about how he found the rest of his collection, Erick looked up from the jewelry in his hands to examine the merman’s face. Now that he understood what he was saying, Silas’ animated facial expressions didn’t seem so odd. He stared curiously at his amber eyes. Somehow he never noticed how bright they were, like coins glimmering in the sun. He wondered if all mers’ eyes were that vividly colored.

Silas caught Erick’s stare and faltered. Smiling sheepishly, he asked, “What? I’m not boring you, am I?” He closed his hands over his collection and looked away. “If you don’t care, I get it.” His smile faded. “You still think I’m just some thief, right?”

“No, it’s not that.” Erick rubbed the back of his neck, pointedly avoiding Silas’ eyes now. “I mean, I still think it’s wrong, but I have a lot on my mind.”

Silas tilted his head. “Like what?”

“My uncle, mostly,” Erick answered. It was half-true. “Can you explain what happened before I woke up in the ocean? The last thing I remember was riding in Dunley’s truck.”

“Sure, but who’s Dunley?”

“He was the big bearded guy, my second mate.” Erick sat down on the floor beneath Silas’ bed alcove. His gaze wandered back towards the kitchen as his memory returned to The Gentian. “Talia has black hair and always wears it in a braid. She was my first mate. Flynn is skinny as a beanpole and Eustace is short and dark. They were my deckhands. Reena was our cook, but you probably didn’t see much of her.”

“Oh.” Silas folded his arms and rested his chin on top as he looked down at Erick. “I remember Talia and Dunley pretty well. They really didn’t want to leave you.”

“Then why did they?” Erick asked, hunching in his shoulders.

“I don’t think Ivan gave them any choice.” Silas then explained all he knew, starting with when Ivan first questioned him in his tank. He described how Ivan’s guards had manhandled Talia into a weird carriage, which Erick explained was called a car, and how Dunley didn’t want to let go of him at the tide pool. When Silas mentioned that Ivan had given him money and a letter that he lost, Erick asked to see the coins.

Silas reached back into his alcove shelves and took out the sock of coins. Unknotting it, he held it out for Erick and said, “I’m sorry I lost your uncle’s letter. After our first night… Well, I looked for it for a long time.”
Erick looked into the sock and stared grimly at the sheer amount of gold Ivan gave Silas to take him off his hands. He wanted to believe Silas was making up all of his story, but given how accurately Silas was able to describe Ivan’s house, Erick knew he was telling him the truth. The fact that Erick was supposed to have gotten some kind of explanation did little to alleviate the feeling that his uncle basically bribed Silas. It shouldn’t have surprised him. Ivan solved all of his problems with money. Dumping him and a handful of gold into the ocean was probably the more frugal choice compared to building expensive, long-term accommodations on land.

“I didn’t use any of the money he gave me,” Silas stated quietly. “I figured you might need it more than me.”

Sighing, Erick passed it back to Silas. “I don’t want my uncle’s hush money.”

Silas took it back with a frown. “He wasn’t trying to get rid of you. Ivan left you with me because he didn’t want you to spend the rest of your life hating us.”

“Well, his plan backfired, because now I just hate him.” Erick pressed his nails into his palms. He went quiet, trying to imagine his uncle as he made the decision to cast off his nephew. It hurt more when he realized Talia and Dunley would have kept him on land if they could have. It was too easy to imagine how Talia would handle thinking that she failed him. Erick sighed. “Why couldn’t he have at least let Talia say goodbye? He knows how much she means to me, even though he never liked her.”

“I don’t know.” Silas turned his chin to tuck his nose into his elbow. “I wish I had asked more questions, but I guess I was just too scared. I was afraid that if we stayed any longer, he would have changed his mind. And you were still unconscious. I didn’t even know if we had gotten you in the water in time.”

Hiding further behind his arms, Silas continued, “I didn’t realize what was happening to you until after your crew cooled down my tank. I didn’t want to believe it. But then I saw you coughing blood and I knew you were dying, but I couldn’t get any of you to understand that you needed to get into water. It’s why I started splashing you.”

“And here I thought you were just trying to drown me.” Erick shook his head. “Merise told me what blood binding means, by the way.” He glanced up at Silas. “You know I don’t feel like that about you, right?”

Silas felt his face go lobster red. He slid back deeper into his room. “I-I know…”

Erick stared at the entrance to his alcove, baffled. “But you actually like me like that?”

In a tiny voice, Silas answered, “Maybe…”

Erick swore under his breath. Turning away, he held his temples with his thumb and fingers. “After everything I’ve done to you? Really?”

“I can’t help it!” Silas covered his head with his arms. “You’re just… ugh.” He pulled on his hair. “Why did Merise have to tell you?” he groaned. “Did she tell you everything? Even the about the full moon?”

“No, what about it?” Erick’s eyebrows furrowed as he looked back up. “She just said blood binding is a thing lovers do.”

Silas cringed with his whole body, curling up his tail to his chest as he slunk to the farthest part of his room. He mentally swore repeatedly.
“Silas?” Erick took hold of the opening into Silas’ room and pulled himself up to look inside. “What are you freaking out about?”

Behind his hands, Silas said, “You don’t remember our first night in the ocean at all?”

Uncertainly, Erick answered, “No. What happened?”

“Well, you… Merfolk know, after they do a blood binding and all… On the first full moon, they get a sign. And it, um…” Silas peeked at Erick between his fingers, then curled up tighter. “Stop staring at me like that.”

“What are you going on about?” Erick asked. “I’m only staring because you’re making no sense.”

“Well, it’s not my fault that it’s really awkward to tell someone that you had sex.” Silas flinched when the words left his mouth. “Oh gods, I didn’t mean to say it like that, please—”

“What the hell?” Erick shouted, recoiling. “You’re saying you fucked me? When I was unconscious?”

“You weren’t exactly—”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I-I couldn’t…”

“Couldn’t what, practice some self-control? You’re disgusting, you filthy, vile—”

“I’m sorry!” Silas broke. Clutching his tail against his chest, he cried, “I’m sorry. Please…” He struggled to breathe. “I knew, but I couldn’t… And you wouldn’t let go. I should’ve tried… But I just… I’m sorry, Erick… I’m sorry.” His apologies dissolved into senseless sobbing.

Erick stared, dumbstruck. He had been ready to throttle Silas. Now his shoulders sank, and he couldn’t decide if he wanted to run away because of some twisted kind of guilt or just revulsion. He told himself that the merman was only trying to manipulate him with his tears. But then he remembered his disturbing dream, the one he had nearly pushed to the recesses of his mind and forgotten. Nausea overcame him.

Turning away from Silas’ room, Erick covered his mouth. “Oh, God,” he breathed, remembering it now. It washed over him, the feel of the nymph in his arms, pressing himself against their slender waist. The space they shared had been so dark and cramped. He could almost even smell the moment, brackish stone and seaweed and a faint, musky sweetness. The rough points of the walls jabbed his back and side, but the nymph had felt so soft and smooth beneath his hands, so satisfyingly filling inside him. The heat in his core had been overwhelming when they came.

Erick rushed outside and threw up.

Chapter End Notes

Muhahaha! If y’all thought Erick's life couldn't get any worse, prepare to be amazed.

Bonus! Erick's official theme song: "I won't say I'm in love" from Disney's Hercules, specifically this version here -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIjqsWiUoR4. I
legitimately listened to this song on repeat while writing at least the next several chapters because it fit so well. Also, the muses would definitely be Jeb and Merise, and the comments on this song are hilarious.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

We reached 250 kudos! I'm still baffled by the amount of love I'm getting for this story. The 4-month anniversary of the first chapter is coming up next week, and it's amazing to me that I've kept up with this story for so long. I've written other, longer works and stuck with other stories for longer too, but I never really expected to do anything significant with this one. It was only meant to be a silly exercise to keep me writing, but it's become so much more than that. If/when I get to the end, I might actually consider seriously revising it to be publishable, but that's an entire 'nother project in itself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Erick emptied his stomach over the corals outside Silas’ house. His breakfast floated in the water, making Erick continue to dry heave at the sight. He took deep breaths. His gills filtered out water each time he tried to exhale through his nose, making him feel winded despite gaining back his energy. When his stomach settled, he turned to go back inside and drifted onto the sponges in the living area. Silas had stopped crying, but he hadn't left his room yet. Erick folded his arm over his eyes. He wanted to sink into the sponges and disappear.

After a few minutes, Silas poked out of his room. The curtain draped over the top of his head. Erick hadn’t left his spot on the floor.

“Erick?” Silas asked, gripping the edge of his sponge mattress. “Are you still mad?”

“I thought it was a dream,” Erick stated, not moving his arm from his face. “I tried to forget it. I wouldn’t ever… So why did it happen?”

“It was the blood binding,” Silas said quietly. “On the first full moon after binding, my dad said that couples are overcome by their need to, you know. It’s supposed to celebrate marriage.”

“But we’re not…” Erick didn’t know how to finish the sentence.

“I know.” Silas hid his chin behind his folded arms. “There’s something else I should tell you. I’ve been wanting to avoid it, but you might as well know now.” Silas hesitated. “Merfolk are all intersex. Our genders don’t determine who can get pregnant.”

Erick stiffened. Removing his arm, he sat up and gaped at Silas. “You’re joking.”

“I wish I was. I had two dads. My maternal father died when I was just a kid, but I still remember him.”

Erick gaped at him before staring at his own waist. “There’s no way I’m letting your fish spawn grow in my stomach. I thought you freaks laid eggs.”
Silas bit his lip, shaking his head. “No, we give birth. Mer pregnancies are pretty much just like human ones.”

“Except guys aren’t supposed to have the parts for it!” Erick massaged his temples. “Is there any way to make sure I don’t end up with fish spawn? We can stop it, right?”

Silas balked at him. “We can’t kill it! I don’t want to be a father either, but that’s for fate to decide.”

“No, I’m pretty sure that should be up to me,” Erick retorted. “It’s bad enough I have a tail. I don’t want to get fat with a tiny freak too!”

“You don’t care about it at all?” Silas asked.

“Why the fuck would I?”

“Because it would be a living being that we created,” Silas answered, near pleading. “You wouldn’t have to raise it.”

“It’d still be in my stomach for nine months!”

“What would be so wrong about that?”

“Everything!” Erick shouted in Silas’ face. “I don’t want it. How am I supposed to go back home if I’m carrying your spawn? Tail or not, I don’t belong here.”

Silas cowered back. He met Erick’s eyes and couldn’t speak.

Erick turned away. He dragged his hand over his face. “Why can’t you understand how much I hate it here?” he asked, his voice rough with emotion. “I miss the sun on my face, the wind in my hair, even just wearing a fucking shirt and pants. I’m sick of eating fish every single goddamn day. I thought my uncle would always have my back, but he threw me away without a second thought. I don’t even understand half of my own thoughts anymore because you shoved your alien language into my head.”

Erick gestured to his stomach. “Now you’re telling me, on top of everything else, that there could be something growing inside me right now? Some tiny little thing that doesn’t deserve all this?” He dropped his arms by his sides. “I barely even know how to swim down here. If I don’t get rid of it, I’m just going to fuck it up somehow.”

“Erick…” Silas cautiously moved closer. “No you wouldn’t. I know you don’t like it here and everything is confusing, but I’ll help you through it. I don’t care if you’ll never like me back, and I don’t care even if you don’t end up with child. Call me crazy all you want, it doesn’t matter. Maybe there is something wrong with me. But I’m not going to give up, okay?”

Erick couldn’t answer. He was fighting back tears, torn between wanting to break something or curl up somewhere and hide. “Why?” he eventually asked. “Why me? What did I ever do to make you care so much?”

“I don’t know,” Silas answered. He faced his tail. “I guess it’s not so much about what you’ve done, but what I think you could be. I already know now that you’re not a bad person. You’ve proven that to me just because of how much you care about people dying in shipwrecks.”

“But I wanted to kill you. I even tried, multiple times.” Erick hid his face in his hands, pushing his fingers through his sable hair. “How does that make me any better than the mers killing people?”
Silas was silent for a moment. “Well, you’re sorry about it, right?”

“I guess? But you’re making it really hard to be sorry right now.”

“Sorry,” Silas said, tipping his head apologetically. “But that’s what is different about you from them.” He paused, remembering the slaughter he witnessed. “Those merpirates didn’t care. They killed all those people, sparing nobody. They only wanted treasure. But you just wanted to stop mers like them.”

“You think too highly of me.” Erick leaned back, staring at the ceiling. “I wanted to stop them, but I wanted revenge more than anything else. I still do. My parents were killed by merfolk when I was ten years old. No storm or normal pirates could have sunk their ship. At least that’s what Ivan told me.”

“How was he so certain?”

Erick shook his head. “I don’t know. I believed him because he was my only family left. He used to show me scary drawings of your kind, but they don’t look anything like the real thing. After I caught you, I thought it was because his telescope distorted his view.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know.” Erick raised and dropped his hands by his sides. “I don’t like thinking that Ivan lied to me all these years, but there isn’t really another explanation, is there?”

“Yeah.” They were both went quiet. The living room was silent save for the ambient noise of the water around them. Then Silas said, “I’ve been wondering… How old are you? I just turned eighteen last month.”

Erick stared at him, taken aback by the innocent question. Then he laughed. It was a sardonic, cut-short sound that dwindled in his chest. “Christ, you really are just a kid,” he said, putting his fingers on his forehead. “I’m twenty-six.”

“Oh.” Silas grinned, realizing it was the first time he heard Erick laugh. The sound filled his chest with happy bubbles. “That’s not so bad. I was worried you’d be a lot older.”

“Yeah, well you’re older than you look. I thought you were like fifteen.”

“Really?” Silas pouted. “I know I’m skinny, but I’m not that small.”

“No, you’re definitely a shrimp.” Glancing at his colorful tail, Erick added, “Or a goldfish, really. I bet you’d fit in a fishbowl with plenty of room.”

“Now you are just teasing me,” Silas said, but he couldn’t help but smile. “What’s a goldfish?”

“It’s a freshwater fish about this big,” Erick answered, putting his fingers together to indicate its size. “People keep them as pets. They’re the same gold that’s in your tail.”

“I think I’d like one then. I’d name it Junior.”

Erick face-palmed, but laughed again at that. “Getting a goldfish requires going back to land, you know.”

“So? I would like to see it again honestly.”

Erick’s eyebrows rose. “You would?”
Nodding, Silas said, “Yeah. I think human stuff is neat.”

“Okay, but you wouldn’t be able to see much from a tank.”

“Actually,” Silas said, smirking, “I’m hoping that we’d have legs by then.”

Erick jerked back. “I can become human again? Why the fuck didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Silas flinched. “Because I don’t know if it’s actually possible yet. I didn’t think it was until I saw the merpirates. They were shifters.”

“Meaning?” Erick demanded.

“Meaning they could change back and forth from mer to human in seconds,” Silas answered, trying to make himself smaller. “The ability to shift was supposed to have been lost hundreds of years ago, but they somehow rediscovered it. It’s how they attack ships. They went onto the deck, killed the men aboard or knocked them into the water, and then they drowned or got stabbed by someone else.”

“Jesus Christ,” Erick muttered. “How long have you known?”

“That they’re shifters? Only about a week. Gale and I saw them when we went to get you that language pearl.”

“Then you’ve told your dad, right?” Erick asked. “He’s doing something about them?”

“Um, sort of?” Silas cowered, preparing for another outburst. “He’s going to talk to Lord Kaui, the leader of our shoal, but my dad can’t really do anything else. The open ocean belongs to King Adonis, and he hasn’t said anything about merpiracy.”

“So you’re telling me this king knows that merfolk are sinking ships, and he doesn’t care?”

“Pretty much.” Silas lifted his shoulders, unsure what else to say. “There isn’t much reason to stop merpiracy because humans can’t retaliate.”

“Horseshit!” Erick hit his fist on the sponges. “I’ll knock his teeth in myself.”

“You can’t say that about the king!”

“He’s not my king,” Erick retorted. “I’ll say whatever I damn well please about that bastard.”

“Erick, my dad literally just let you out of prison,” Silas said, holding out his hands. “Do you want to go back for treason?”

“If it means I make him give a fuck, then sure. Lock me up again.”

Silas hit his forehead with both hands, groaning. “That wouldn’t help anything.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Look, for now, let’s just talk to Jeb, okay? It’s been while since I last saw him, so he might know something more about the merpirates now. The more information we can get about them, the better chance we have of getting King Adonis to do something about them.”

Erick tightened his fist, but said, “Fine. It’s better than sitting around doing nothing.”

Chapter End Notes
With this chapter I was struggling with the balance between Erick's resistance to change and his inherent goodness making that change possible. Is it believable that he is warming up to Silas this quickly? Or were you expecting him to be more resistant? My sister thinks I should make Erick hate merfolk longer, or at least be more antagonistic to believing everything they have to say, but I'm not sure how.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the feedback on these past two chapters, my lovely commenters. As we continue forward, I'd love to continue hearing how things are working.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Silas swam beside Erick to the market chasm, he frowned when he noticed Erick still swam with jerky stokes. Rather than move his whole tail like a wave, he propelled himself stiffly with only the lower half of his tail.

“Isn’t that exhausting?” Silas asked, pointing at his tail.

“Huh?” Erick followed his gaze. “A bit, I guess.”

“Relax your tail then.” Silas swam ahead and twirled around to face him. “Swim like this,” he said, exaggerating how he curved up his entire tail and flicked his fin at the end of each stoke. “At the pace we’re going, you shouldn’t feel tired at all.”

“Moving like that feels weird.”

Silas tilted his head at him. “Why?”

“It reminds me that I don’t have knees anymore,” Erick answered. “Legs can only bend in one spot and in one direction, but tails bend in all directions. It creeps me out.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought about that.” Silas pursed his lips, thinking as he continued to swim backwards. “Maybe you’ll get used to it? If you keep swimming like that, you’ll never be able to keep up with everyone else.”

“Well, what if I don’t care?” Erick retorted, but he knew Silas was right.

“Then that’s your choice.” Silas shrugged. “I can’t make you swim differently.”

When Silas turned back around, Erick forced himself to try moving his tail like Silas’. It still felt weird. As he tried to figure out a rhythm, he found it a bit easier to move his whole tail if he swam with his stomach muscles too. It gave his abs a bit of a workout, but it relieved some of the strain from his tail.

In the market chasm, Erick slowed down to gape at everything. Hundreds of mers swam along all levels of the chasm. Many had woven shopping bags slung over their shoulders or hanging from belts on their waist. In lieu of belt pouches or satchels, some had small purses strapped onto their upper arms. As they continued swimming, it surprised Erick to see that the vendors were stacked upon each other along the walls of the chasm, but it made sense. Merfolk weren’t bound to the ground underwater like humans were on land. There was no need for stairs or ladders when they could swim wherever they liked.

Silas had kept swimming for a moment before he noticed Erick had fallen behind. He grinned at his amazement. “Do humans not have markets like this?”
“No,” Erick answered, staring up at the lines of lanterns crisscrossing the space between the chasm walls. “We have markets too, but everything is lot more spread out here.”

“That so? If merpirates weren’t looking for me, I’d show you around.”

“Right,” Erick said, sobering. He caught up to Silas. Giving him a deadpan look, he said, “If we do run into any, I’d love to kick their ass.”

Silas laughed. “I feel safer already.”

“What irony.” Erick’s mouth quirked up, but then his expression fell. How was he already bantering with a merman he had fantasized killing little more than a week ago? Erick wondered if the language pearl had addled his brain too. It was the only thing he could think of that would explain his confusing feelings. Even though he knew he should be glad that he was finally free of his prison cell, he didn’t think he was supposed to feel this lighthearted. They were going to find out more about a group of ruthless killers, after all, and he still had the pregnancy problem at the back of his mind. Part of him still insisted that it was impossible, that Silas was lying and he shouldn’t worry about it, but plenty of things had already changed in his life. Anything seemed possible now.

“There’s Jeb’s stall,” Silas said, hurrying up when he spotted it. “C’mon!”

Erick followed Silas down to a stall with a striped green and white awning over a table of assorted salvaged goods. As soon as they had swum below the awning, Erick jumped when a large merman with thick, greenish grey hair shouted Silas name. The older merman swam out to greet Silas, and Erick couldn’t help but stare at the missing half of his green and black spotted tailfin.

“This is Erick,” Silas said, making Erick look up. “Erick, this is Jeb. He taught me everything I know about salvaging.”

“Ha, and then some too!” Jeb beamed at Erick and held his arms out wide. “So you’re the scoundrel that caught our little Silas, eh?” He inclined his head to him. “Good to see you aren’t trying to strangle him anymore.” Tousling Silas’s hair, he said, “I always told this lad to get some more meat on his bones, but did he listen? No! Bet you reeled him in like he weighed nothing.”

“Jeb,” Silas complained, twisting away from the assault on his head, but his grin showed he didn’t mind. “He didn’t catch me that easily.”

Though taken aback by Jeb’s teasing, Erick smiled lightly. “No, it wasn’t hard at all really. His bite hurt like a bitch, but getting him into the tank didn’t take long. The toughest part was getting him to stay still so I could stitch up his tail.”

Jeb laughed and Silas pouted at Erick. “I like this one already,” he said, clapping Erick on the shoulder. “Come behind my stall with me, tell me what I’ve missed. I sorely believe this mer was as awful as you described, Silas.”

“Oh, he was bad,” Silas said. “Don’t doubt that. But he knows I’m not his enemy, so everything’s good now.” He glanced back at Erick. “Right?”

“So long as you don’t give me a new reason to hate you, I suppose so,” Erick answered dryly.

Narrowing his eyes at him, slightly worried, Silas said, “I hope you’re joking.”

“I might be,” Erick answered, but he smirked a bit. “I’m told I’m bad at it.”
Silas groaned. “You just can’t make anything easy for me, can you?”

“There’s apparently not.” Erick chuckled under his breath. He followed Silas and Jeb into the back of Jeb’s stall. While Jeb leaned back on the counter, Silas pulled up a pot to sit. He told Jeb about Ronan’s requirements for freeing Erick and asked about the merpirates.

“I’m afraid I haven’t found much,” Jeb answered. “I’ve been asking around and had some friends look for merfolk with the armor you described, but nobody’s seen anything yet.” He started twirling a strand of his grey beard between his fingers. “If you saw anything they had taken from the wreck, that would have been a much better lead.”

“Ugh, really?” Silas slumped forward. “Jeb, why’d you have to let me down?”

Erick looked sidelong at Silas’ exaggerated disappointment, but shared the sentiment.

“I’m sorry, lad, but these guys probably know better than to draw attention to themselves. Only guards and soldiers wear armor around here.”

Erick’s expression darkened. “Who says they’re not soldiers?”

Both Silas and Jeb looked surprised at the accusation. Silas stuttered, “But the King wouldn’t…”

“You’ve already told me he doesn’t give a damn about humans,” Erick said. “Since ships started sinking around here, have either of you noticed a big influx of salvaged goods?”

Jeb tucked in his chin, crossing his arms in thought. “Now that you mention it, no. There have definitely been a lot better finds this year, but quality aside, nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Then where would the cargo of at least seventeen ships go?” Erick pressed. “If not the markets, then to the King’s coffers.”

Jeb nodded, solemn. “That’s a big assumption, but I can’t deny that you got good reason.”

Silas looked horrified. “If the King himself is profiting from this, there’s no way we can stop him.”

“Maybe you can’t,” Erick said, “but I sure as hell will try. Stopping merpiracy is the only thing I’ve ever cared about.”

“But how are you supposed to stop the King?” Silas asked. “You’re just one guy.”

“I don’t care,” Erick snapped. “I’ll talk to your dad, see about talking to your shoal’s leader. Just don’t you dare tell me to give up, Silas. You can’t take this from me.” He lowered his voice. “If there was ever a reason for me to become a mer, this is it. I couldn’t do anything from my ship, but I can do something down here. So just let me have this, dammit.”

Silas expression turned to sympathy. He wanted to hug Erick, but instead curled his fingers against his tail. “Okay. I wouldn’t want to stop you anyway. I care too.”

“Well, good.” Erick shifted uncomfortably on his seat, suddenly self-conscious of how Silas and Jeb were staring at him. “Glad we agree. Is there anything else we need to do here? Or can we go now?”

“Um, well I was kind of hoping we could stay and talk with Jeb more,” Silas said. “My dad probably won’t be free to talk until this evening.”

Erick mentally swore, but said, “Okay then. I guess I’ll wait.”
So, I'm curious to hear your predictions for the future chapters/end of this story now. The ending I have in mind seems too cliché (and therefore no fun to write), so I want ideas to make it more interesting. What are some things you want to see happen? What do you not want? Leave your answers in the comments! :)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 41

Jeez, this past week has been crazy for me. All of my teachers decided to have ALL THE PROJECTS due before Thanksgiving break, so updating completely passed my radar.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Silas and Erick spent the rest of the morning at Jeb’s stall. They asked Erick to tell them about life on land, having him explain things like what a horse was and why humans wore clothes. Erick described for Silas the kinds of foods humans ate and how they cooked them even though it made him homesick and hungry. Jeb had him translate engravings on pocket watches and teach him the English alphabet.

After Silas and Erick left Jeb’s stall to head back to Silas’ house, Silas asked, “So, what did you think? Talking with Jeb wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Erick stared straight ahead as they swam back through the market chasm, veering upwards to escape its depths. “No, he was nice. Friendlier than I expected, but not bad.” They passed an impressive display of stained glass window panes, but he didn’t even turn his head.

“That’s good. So…” Silas looked over at Erick, but couldn’t read his impassive expression. “It was nice learning about stuff on land. It makes me want to see what it’s like up there even more.” Erick didn’t respond. They swam above the top line of vendors, reaching the rocky uppermost edge of the chasm. Silas bit his lip. “Did I do something to make you mad again?”

“No.” Erick stopped. Looking down at the chasm floor, hardly more than a dark blur dotted with the blue-green glow of lanterns, he said, “I just miss home.”

“Oh. It won’t be that long until the next moon,” Silas said, leaning forward to try to see Erick’s face better.

Erick turned away to avoid meeting his eyes. “Seeing Ivan isn’t going to change the fact that I breathe underwater now. I can’t go back to my old life until we know how those merpirates learned how to shift.”

Silas’ shoulders fell. “I guess that’s true. But there’s sti—”

Erick looked up. The butt of a knife struck his cheekbone. Swearing, he recoiled as the knife swung back around to slash at his chest. Erick dodged and faced a merman with long hair tied in a ponytail. His attacker stabbed at him again. Erick knocked away the knife and punched the merman’s jaw. Erick grabbed his hair and yanked down, reflexively trying to knee him in the nose, but his tail jerked up and hit the merman’s stomach instead. He caught the merman’s knife hand and struck his elbow. The joint snapped backwards. The merman screamed. His knife fell from his hand. Erick caught it and spun around to find another merman racing away with Silas hanging limp under his arm.

“Silas!” Erick darted after them. He caught up and cut the merman’s back, noticing a tattoo
between his shoulder blades. Silas’ abductor swore and twisted around. He slashed his knife at Erick’s throat, but Erick caught the blade on his forearm. It struck bone. Erick cursed through his teeth and lunged. The merman moved Silas like a living shield. Erick barely avoided cutting Silas’ waist. The merman swung again, slicing across Erick’s ribs. As he pulled back to stab his chest, Erick swung under the merman’s arm and buried his knife into his gills. He screamed, missing Erick’s chest, but stabbed his shoulder instead. Erick twisted his knife and flicked his wrist to cut through his back. The merman released Silas to clutch his side.

Erick grabbed Silas’ arm and pulled him against his chest. He lashed out at the merman again, but he reeled back and turned to flee. Erick looked back at his first attacker, but he had already disappeared. Looking again at the retreating merman, Erick nearly dropped Silas to chase him. He knew their attackers had to be merpirates. If he followed them, he could learn their secrets and go home. He wouldn’t have to wait for Ronan’s help.

But Erick held onto Silas. He tightened his grip on his stolen knife, clenching his jaw. His wounds burned as his blood clouded the salt water around him. Knowing the chasm was no longer safe, Erick hurried up and out into open water. He cradled Silas under his arm, holding his stolen knife ready in case anyone pursued them. The whole of Pelaran rose before him, but he had no idea how to find Silas’ house. Erick continued swimming. Every breath hurt his chest as the cut stretched and closed. His cheekbone ached from their attackers’ attempt to knock him out. He was mainly worried about the deep cut on his forearm and his stabbed shoulder, though. His blood trailed away in long ribbons over Silas’ tail.

After a minute, Silas lifted his head and made a small, whimpering noise. Erick immediately stopped and lowered his arm to look down at Silas’ face. “Silas?” he asked, his voice tight.

Silas winced and touched his temple. His head throbbed with a splitting headache. “Ow…” he moaned. He looked up and was struck by the worry in Erick’s eyes. “What happened?”

“Merpirates.” Erick’s expression hardened. He averted his gaze. “They attacked us and tried to kidnap you.”

“What?” Silas’ eyes widened. He then noticed the cut across Erick’s chest and flinched. “Oh gods, you’re bleeding!”

Erick deadpanned at him. “Yes, what an astute observation.”

“Erick!” Silas twisted out of his arms. Seeing his other wounds, he asked in disbelief, “How many were there?”

“Just two.” Erick held up his stolen knife. “Believe me, they look much worse.”

Nausea overcame Silas, but he wasn’t sure if it was from horror or moving so quickly. “Y-you didn’t… kill them, did you?”

“No, I think they’ll live,” Erick answered. “I broke one’s arm and stabbed the other in the gills. Merise healed me so quickly, I imagine that they’ll be fine in no time.”

“Oh.” Silas felt faint with relief, but Erick’s wounds still terrified him. “Okay.” He pushed his fingers through his bangs. “We should find Merise. She can help. Yeah. She always knows what to do.”

“Then lead the way and stop panicking,” Erick said. “I’m losing blood, not dying.”

“Isn’t losing blood just as bad?”
Erick growled, “Silas…”

“Right, okay. Sorry.” Silas looked back at the shoal. “It’s this way.” He hurried to Merise’s house. Erick moved his knife to his other hand to hold his injured arm.

When they arrived outside, Silas immediately went in and shouted, “Merise! Erick’s hurt!”

Merise swam out from behind the infirmary curtain. “What happened?” As soon as Erick came up behind Silas, she gasped. “Oh, that doesn’t look good. Come here.” She turned to grab a box from one of the niches in the wall.

Erick went over and settled down on the floor below the shelves. He leaned back his head, feeling lightheaded.

“Okay, let me take this now,” Merise said, taking the knife from his hand. She gave it to Silas and bent down to examine Erick’s chest. “This looks shallow, but you’ll still need stitches. Let me see your arm.” Erick lifted his hand. “Oh my, that is really bad. Silas, put pressure on that, would you?” Silas obeyed, leaving the knife on the ground as he watched her get to work. Merise opened the box she took down and took out a needle. As she began threading it, she started singing a healing song.

Erick sighed as her voice washed over him. It numbed the pain and made him drowsy. He hardly felt Merise’s needle as she closed his wounds. When she finished, she stopped singing and spread a healing salve over his stitches and bruised cheek. She wrapped his chest, cutting the excess around his gills, then wrapped his arm and shoulder.

“Let’s get you into a cot to rest now,” Merise said, putting her arm under Erick’s shoulders. He barely stirred. Her song had put him to sleep. She pulled Erick behind the infirmary curtain and laid him down in one of the two carved stone cots attached to the wall. It was curved and cushioned not unlike a cradle. Merise swam back out into the living area.

“So, what trouble did you get into this time?” Merise asked.

Silas hung his head, looking back at the knife on the ground. “We were attacked by merpirates in the market chasm.”

“Well, now that’s certainly a turn of events.” Her tone softened. “Didn’t Gale want you to stay away from the market for this very reason?”

Reluctantly, Silas said, “Yeah, and my dad too. But I didn’t have any problems when I went to see Jeb last time. I didn’t think anything would happen this time either since I had Erick with me.”

“Given the state he’s in, you’re lucky he was with you. Were you hurt at all?”

Silas shook his head, but cringed. His headache still hadn’t gone away. “No, but one of them knocked me out. I didn’t even see it coming.”

“You should have been more aware of your surroundings. A head injury can be just as bad as knife wounds. Let me see where they hit you.” Silas pushed back his hair to show her his bruised temple. “How long were you unconscious?”

“I don’t know, probably not long. You’d have to ask Erick.”

“Hm.” Merise let Silas lower his hand again. “Well, he should wake up in a few minutes. Why don’t you tell me about your visit with Jeb while we wait?”
“Okay.” Silas sat down beside Merise. He was still reeling from his close call, but all he could think about was how Erick had looked at him when he woke up. Even if it was just out of fear of his dad locking him up again, Silas hoped it was because Erick actually did care about him.

Chapter End Notes

Oh ho ho, the plot thickens! I just really like injuring our merbabies, lol.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

What's this? An update that's actually on time? It is!

I've loving the great feedback I'm seeing in the comments. It's really encouraging to see how much you're all invested in this story. Your predictions and hopes for where it goes have put into focus what I was doing with later chapters, so I'm now tentatively planning on cutting five chapters to explore a new direction. I've already added a new chapter where I once just had summary. All these changes are just on my end, but hopefully it will make for more polished chapters when they come down the pipeline.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Erick woke, he groaned and rubbed his hand over his eyes. His wounds ached even with the salve. Looking down at himself, he thought wryly that he almost had more bandages than bare skin now. He only vaguely remembered Merise singing while stitching him up before he had fallen unconscious, but he didn’t know why he had passed out. Blaming it on blood loss seemed plausible, but unlikely. She had sung the last time she patched him up too, making him believe there was something after all to the myths of sailors being hypnotized by merfolk.

Erick sat up and looked at the infirmary curtain. He heard Silas and Merise talking on the other side. He was about to get up and tell them he was awake, but he hesitated when he heard Silas mention his name.

“…and Gale hate each other,” Silas said, sounding upset. “I know I shouldn’t be mad at Gale because he’s just worried, but Erick isn’t bad. He’s just… closed-off and scared, I guess. And I mean, who wouldn’t be? He didn’t want to be here. I want to think I’m helping, but I just don’t know how much I can do.”

“I think you’re helping a lot,” Merise said gently. “Even if he won’t say it, I’m sure he must appreciate everything you’re doing.”

“But does he really? He knows I like him now because you told him about blood binding.” Silas sighed. “Erick has to think I’m stupid, thinking I could ever have a chance with him.” His voice became muffled, as if he hid his face in his arms. “It’s so awkward, I hate it. I keep staring at him when he’s not looking, but he never wants to look at me. I can’t tell if he’s just awkward too, or if he still just hates me because it’s my fault he’s here.” Silas grew quieter. “It’s terrifying, thinking that he might still want to hurt me. Every time he gets mad, I’m scared he’ll hit me or something again.”

Erick tensed, frowning with guilt. He told himself that he shouldn’t care. It should have been a good thing, making Silas keep his distance. There was no point getting attached to the amber-eyed merman. Even if they could go back to land together, human men couldn’t openly love each other. The fact that Erick was attracted to both men and women only made him a freak in his eyes.

“Silas, Erick wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t have gotten himself cut up like that if he didn’t care even a little.” Merise paused. “It may just be because I think you two are cute together, but I believe that there’s something there.”
Heat rose in Erick’s face at that.

“Ugh, don’t get my hopes up.”

Merise laughed. “But it’s true, you would make a cute couple. For a while I thought you would end up with Gale, but clearly you prefer the brooding type.”

“Oh gods, stop!” Silas whined. Erick similarly cringed. “You’re going to make me die right here.”

“It’s okay, I won’t tell Gale,” she teased.

“That doesn’t help and you know it,” Silas retorted. “I’m going to see if we can wake up Erick now. You better not embarrass him too.”

With a chuckle, she said, “I’ll try to restrain myself.”

Erick immediately lay back down and closed his eyes. A moment later, he felt the water ripple over his skin as Silas swam over him.

“Erick? It’s time to get up now,” Silas said, poking his uninjured shoulder.

Pretending to still be groggy, Erick yawned and stretched. He looked briefly up at Silas before moving his hands to sit up. “How long was I out?” he asked.

“Not long,” Silas answered, drifting over to float beside Erick’s cot. “Do your cuts still hurt? Merise can give you pain medicine if you need it.”

“That would be nice.” Erick looked over at Merise as she swam into the infirmary area. “Was it your singing that put me to sleep?”

“Of course,” Merise answered, getting him a seaweed capsule. “I wouldn’t knock you on the head like those merpirates.”

“But you weren’t just singing, right? You were using magic.”

Merise looked quizzically at him as she handed over his medicine. “Well, yes, that is one way to put it. As an enchanter, I can use my siren voice to call spirits for their aid. Magic belongs to them and the gods, not merfolk.”

“Spirits?” Erick asked. “You don’t mean dead people, do you?”

“Goodness, no.” Merise laughed. “Some spirits may have been living once, but they’re not like us.” Growing thoughtful, she said, “I suppose they are like jellyfish at the whim of the currents, simply existing until the gods or a siren song pulls them in a certain direction.”

Erick stared at her, baffled. “How do you know they exist? Has anyone seen them?”

“Well, no, but we know they must exist because our songs wouldn’t work otherwise.”

At Erick’s doubtful look, Silas asked, “Is it really that hard to believe? How do humans explain magic?”

“Well, stories say witches got their power from the Devil, but holy men could perform miracles with the grace of God,” Erick answered. “The only spirits some people believe in are lost souls who never passed onto heaven.” He shrugged. “I never really believed any of it. After my parents died, I gave up on religion.”
“Oh.” Silas frowned, biting his lip. “So humans only know one god? But you don’t believe in him?”

“Not really. Frankly I’m more inclined to believe in your pagan gods, much as I dislike them now. It’s hard to argue their existence when I’m living proof of their supposed work.”

Silas couldn’t help but smirk at that. “True.”

“Why did the blood binding work anyway?” Erick asked. “You didn’t sing.”

Silas lifted his hands, scrunching his mouth to show he didn’t know. “The gods are unpredictable.”

“Blood binding is unique in that spirits will recognize it without a song,” Merise answered. “The Pearl Idol, Lucero taught the first people of the sea how to perform blood bindings in order to foster kinship among merfolk and reconnect with people on land. It’s meant to be symbolic, to show that even though hurting each other is inevitable, love heals all wounds.”

“I didn’t know that,” Silas said. “It sounds a lot nicer now that you put it that way.”

Merise smiled. “Exactly, it’s not just a test. It’s supposed to be a promise.” She looked over at Erick, but he avoided her gaze.

Scratching his eyebrow, Erick said, “Well, that’s all nice. You sing and have blood rituals to use magic. Is there anything else I should know?”

“Hmm, I don’t know if it’s necessarily important,” Merise said, “but enchanter can also use glyphs to sustain certain enchantments, like the light glyph lamp-makers put in our lanterns to make algae glow.”

Erick glanced up at one of the glass orbs on the wall. “Really? What does it look like?”

“It looks a bit like the sun, like this.” Merise drew in the water with her finger a flower with teardrop-shaped petals, then added straight lines radiating out between each petal. “I use glyphs in medicine making too.” She picked up a salve jar and pointed at the lid, showing Erick a squashed teardrop with vertical lines pressing down on it. “This condenses the salve and prevents it from dissolving if I don’t use all of it at once.”

“Amazing,” Erick said, impressed for a moment before furrowing his eyebrows. “Are there a lot of glyphs like these then?”

“Of course, they’re necessary for a lot of things.” Merise’s expression turned wistful. “Merfolk used to know hundreds of them, but we’ve lost the songs to awaken most of them, and many glyphs were simply lost altogether when the scrolls or tablets with their image were damaged.”

“Glyphs don’t just work on their own?”

“No, an enchanter must sing an awaking song to make the spirits take notice of the glyph,” Merise answered. “Then the spirits will care for it unless it’s disfigured or an enchanter puts the glyph back to rest.”

“I see.” Erick bit the inside of his cheek, thoughtful. He lifted back up his head. “I think I know how to stop the merpirates now.”

Silas tilted his head. “What do you mean?”
“The one kidnapping you had a tattoo that looks like those glyphs,” Erick answered. “If my guess is right, then that tattoo is what lets merpirates be shifters.”

“You think so?” Silas said, eyes widening.

“Yeah, it makes sense, doesn’t it?” Erick asked. “If the tattoo is a glyph, all we’d have to do to stop the merpirates is cut up their backs.”

“Gods, you’re a genius, Erick!” Silas back-flipped. “This means we can turn you human again too. I could go to land!” He leaned into Erick’s face. “Do you remember what it looks like exactly?”

“More or less,” Erick answered, caught off-guard. “It was three teardrop shapes stacked together with some extra lines to look kind of like the head, torso, and tail of a mermaid. But what about the song that awakens it?”

“Oh, right.” Silas floated back down. “Well, I’m sure my dad can interrogate these guys to find out,” he said, waving away his concern. “Let’s go find a guard now and report them. It shouldn’t be too hard to find somebody with a tattoo, especially since you injured them too.”

“I hope you’re right.” Erick slid off the cot. When they passed the infirmary curtain, he noticed his stolen knife on the ground. “We should bring that with us. It’s evidence.”

“Good point.” Silas picked it up. Looking back at Merise, he said, “Thank you for helping us.”

“Always a pleasure,” Merise answered. “Let me know how the investigation goes. I’ll keep an eye out for mermen with the injuries you described.”

Silas thanked her, and Erick followed him out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Now that we're getting more into the nuances of merfolk magic, I really wish there was some kind of foolproof way to describe music/singing in writing. My only musical experience was about three years of choir in middle/high school, but I never learned how to actually read music sheets or how scales worked specifically. The only novel where music was written well (in my opinion) was in Patrick Rothfuss' The Name of the Wind and its sequel, The Wise Man's Fear. However, that was focused more on the feel of the performance than the specific notes Kvothe played.

I'd really like to make a definitive list of music sheets with each of the siren songs/signal calls I've created, but I suck at writing music. Currently I just mentally equate the ocarina songs from The Legend of Zelda with their songs. Each ocarina melody is short and distinct, but they can be worked into full songs really well too. I wish I could just say something like, "Gale sung [some signal], which sounded the same as Saria's Song," but that gets into copyright stuff and kind of breaks the fourth wall.

If anybody has any suggestions, I'd love to hear them. Otherwise I'll just keep plodding along.
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

I’m going to be swamped with stuff to do tomorrow and Monday, so I’m posting the update early this week. It’s a bit on the fluffy side, but our merboys still need to get to know each other better.

Erick and Silas returned to Silas’ house after they reported the merpirates’ attack. The guard they spoke to assured them that he would pass on their attackers’ descriptions to the rest of the force as soon as possible, but he couldn’t promise that they would find them right away. A messenger would fetch them when they would need to return.

Since it was time for lunch, Silas went to the pantry shelves and asked Erick, “What looks good to you? I don’t have any fresh fish fillets, but we have cured herring and mackerel.” Silas pointed out two jars packed with cuts of fish. Erick frowned at them, but noticed both jars had glyphs similar to the ones Merise described. “I know you don’t like crab, but are you okay with shrimp or lobster?”

“I actually don’t mind crab or other shellfish usually,” Erick answered, surprised that Silas remembered his reaction to crab bowls. “They’re fine when they’re cooked, but serving them raw and all mashed up is disgusting.”

“Well, we can’t cook anything underwater, but these aren’t mashed.” Silas picked up a jar filled with preserved krill. “I like snacking on these with algae cakes.” He took one out and held it up to Erick. “Want to try one?”

Grimacing, Erick asked, “You eat it with its shell intact?”

“Yeah?” Silas tilted his head. “The legs are the best part.”

“You’re making me lose my appetite.” Erick turned to look at the rest of the jars. The sight of pickled eels and sea cucumbers nauseated him further, so he lowered his gaze to the floor. “Are algae cakes like bread?”

“Maybe?” Silas ate the krill and put back the jar. He grabbed a basket with greenish-brown patties. “They’re made by pounding different kinds of seaweeds into a paste and pressing them in cake molds.”

Reluctantly, Erick took one and tried a bite. The texture reminded him of a custard tart, but it was salty and somewhat bitter instead of sweet. “It’s not bad, I guess. Better than just plain raw fish again.”

Silas grinned. “Awesome. Let’s see if we can find anything else you like.”

“Good luck,” Erick said, looking sidelong back at the shelves. “If it doesn’t have a head still attached, you’re on the right track.”

“You’re just really picky.” Silas swam up to look into the higher shelves. “What do you do with the parts of animals you don’t eat?”
“We throw them away or use them for other things.” Erick continued nibbling on his algae cake. “Most entrails aren’t edible.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Silas found a clay pot with a cork lid. “Plenty of things have poisonous parts, but we never let anything go to waste if we can help it.” He uncorked the pot and said, “I think these are coco-plums. The outlander I got them from said they grow on beaches in the northeast.”

“What do they taste like?”

“They’re pretty sweet.” Silas took out one of the pale fruits. It looked swollen like a pickled peach. “You can eat the seed in the center too.”

“I see.” Erick took the offered fruit and tried a bite. Its flesh reminded him of a nectarine, but it was less sweet. He closed his eyes and savored the taste. “Mmm… Finally something that isn’t salty or fishy.”

“You can have the rest of them if you like,” Silas said. “I’ll ask Gale to see if he can get more land foods at the market.”

Staring down at his coco-plum, Erick briefly smiled. “Thanks.” He shook his head, sighing. “Of all the things I could miss, it’s stupid that I’d miss normal food the most. I can’t even bring myself to care about my crew right now.”

Silas set down the pot of coco-plums. “Well, that just means you’re not worried about them, right? That they’re okay without you?”

“That’s the thing, I don’t really know.” Erick answered. “I imagine that Talia would want to take over command and continue patrolling for pirates, if only because that’s what I’d do, but The Gentian only sails with Ivan’s blessing. I argued with him and his benefactors for weeks just to convince them that looking for pirates wouldn’t be a wild goose chase. But since then, we’ve only found remains of wrecks, not any actual pirates.” Erick shrugged, morose. “Talia will have a hard time convincing Ivan to let her continue in my stead.”

“Oh.” Silas was silent for a moment. “Why doesn’t Ivan like Talia?”

Erick exhaled heavily. “Is it not obvious? She was a street rat and I was part of a wealthy family. When we were kids, we’d get into all sorts of trouble together. It wasn’t becoming of someone like me to run around with someone like her. As we got older, Ivan became certain that she only liked me for my money.” He paused, reminiscing. “She wasn’t like that, though. Talia was ambitious, but she never wanted my money. God knows I tried to help with her debts, but she wouldn’t have it.” Smiling, he added, “When Ivan started bugging me about settling down, I did humor the idea of proposing to her just to get back at him, but she’s more like a sister to me.”

“I hope I’ll be able to properly meet her then,” Silas said. “You’re going to have to teach me English so I can talk to her.”

“Can’t you just get another one of those pearls?” Erick asked.

“I could, but they’re expensive and we’d have to wait six months,” Silas answered. “Only reason I was able to get one for you was because the head enchantress there made a special exception when I explained why I needed it.”

Erick’s eyebrows rose. “I almost had to wait six months just to understand you?”
“Yeah.” Silas smirked. “We were afraid that we’d have to find Ivan again just to translate for us.”

“No kidding.” Silas looked back at the shelves. “So, are you just having algae cakes and coco-plums for lunch? Or is there anything else you’d like to try?”

“Pick out whatever you want, I suppose,” Erick answered. “I’ll try whatever doesn’t look awful.”

Silas chose to take out cured cuts of the mackerel for them. As they sat down to eat, Erick taught Silas how to greet people and introduce himself in English. Practicing his new bilingual skills still felt weird, but hearing Silas speak in English was exasperatingly adorable. His mertongue accent made his English vowels rounder, like he was talking around a piece of candy in his mouth. The water also made consonant sounds like K and T harder to pronounce.

As Silas struggled with a tongue twister, Erick hid his smile behind his fingers. “Is it really that hard?”

“Yeah, it’s easy for you because you don’t have an accent.” Silas inhaled and tried again. “Peter Piper picked a peek… Peter Peeper…” He groaned.

Erick chuckled under his breath. “Come on, say it with me: ‘Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.’”

Silas slowly repeated him. When Silas could repeat it three times without tripping up, Erick taught him other tongue twisters and more words in English. They moved to sit side by side in the living area. As they spent the rest of the afternoon talking, Erick continued avoiding looking at Silas too much. Every time he caught himself staring at Silas’ multicolored tail, his gold hair, or his expressive hands, he would find something else to look at on the wall or floor. He tried not to think about how Silas looked at him or how his averted gaze hurt him. He didn’t care if some love god thought they were supposed to be together. Romance like that only belonged in fairy tales.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Guess who's been working on this story instead of the two essays that were due today? *points thumbs at myself* This dumbass! *laugh-cries*

Why is that I can only get fun writing done when I have actually important things to do instead? It's like my creative side refuses to cooperate unless I'm sacrificing my grades.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Silas had been in the middle of playing a dice game with Erick when a knock on the door interrupted them.

“Silas, are you home?” Gale called through the door. “My mom told me you got attacked.”

“Yeah, just a second.” Silas rose, leaving Erick with the dice and cups, and opened the door. “I’m fine, though, really.”

“Getting knocked unconscious isn’t fine!” Gale swam in and faltered when he saw Erick. “Gods, that could have been you.” He stared at his bandages for a moment before facing Silas again. “How do you keep doing this? Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

“No, I just have bad luck, okay?” Silas reached to hold his arm. “Just calm down.”

“Why should I if you won’t listen to me?” Gale retorted, smacking away his hand. “I swear, it’s like every time I take my eyes off of you, you find another way to give me a heart attack.”

“I’m not trying to worry you.”

“Then stop giving me reasons to be worried!” Gale glanced back at Erick. The former human was rolling a die between his fingers. He gave Gale a pokerfaced stare, making Gale avert his gaze. In an undertone, Gale added, “Why is he even here? Last time I saw him, he was wishing his crew killed you.”

Silas frowned, hunching in his shoulders. “I know, but we’ve gotten over that now.”

“Really, everything’s all just fine now?” Gale asked bitingly. “He stabbed and strangled you. That doesn’t matter anymore?”

“No, it doesn’t,” Silas snapped. “Erick literally just saved me from those merpirates. We’re on the same side now. Everyone else has forgiven him, so why can’t you?”

Gale glared darkly at him. “You can’t just forgive someone at the pop of a bubble after they’ve tried killing you. It doesn’t matter if you’re on the same side now. There’s no guarantee it’ll last forever.”

“I don’t need a guarantee,” Silas shouted, throwing out his hands. “Seriously, Gale, Erick and I were having fun before you barged in here. Stop acting like a shark and actually talk to him instead of yelling at me.”
“I don’t have anything to say to him.”

Erick dropped his die into his cup and gripped the rim. “If you don’t have anything to say, then shut up and listen. Yes, I tried to kill Silas. I was angry, and I know that doesn’t justify it, but you have to understand that I am still learning how to handle all of this. For the larger part of my life, I was told merfolk were no better than demons, that they wouldn’t hesitate to drown even children if they thought there was something they could steal from their corpse.

“Now I’m in your shoes, or tail rather, and I know that’s not true.” Erick picked up his dice cup and squeezed it with both hands. Gale’s dark expression hadn’t changed, but Erick had his attention. “I really don’t blame you for not wanting to forgive me. I wouldn’t either. I’m a shit human being and an even worse merman. I don’t deserve Silas’ kindness. He is the nicest person I have ever met, but I’ve only treated him like shit and I know I still am. I don’t plan on sticking around here any longer than I need to. As soon as I get my legs back, I’m going to stay on land.”

“Erick…” Silas eyebrows knotted with a mix of emotions, torn between the fact that Erick complimented him and that he thought so lowly of himself. “You don’t mean all that, do you?”

“No, I do,” Erick answered. “I appreciate everything you’re doing and I plan to repay you somehow, but that’s it. There isn’t going to be anything more between us.”

Silas turned away, biting his lip. He held his elbow against his side and didn’t speak.

Gale sighed. The tension fell out of his shoulders as he recognized Silas was close to crying. He glared at Erick, but said, “Well, I’m glad to hear that.” Gale faced the door. “The sooner you go home, the sooner everything can go back to normal.” He looked back at Silas, but he wouldn’t meet his eyes. “Silas, if you want to come over when your dad comes home, you’re still welcome. I’ll try not to yell at you anymore, okay?”

In a quiet voice, Silas answered, “Okay.”

“All right then.” Gale hesitated. “See you later.”

When Silas sat down again, he put more space between him and Erick. “So,” Silas said, attempting to sound lighthearted, “where were we? I think you were winning by four points, right?”

Erick set down the dice cup. “Yeah,” he answered, but knew Silas was fudging the points in his favor as a concession for Gale’s hostility. It was a kind but empty gesture, considering that it didn’t change Gale’s opinion and wouldn’t stop Silas from winning back those points. But Erick continued playing, content to ignore both facts.

* * *

When Ronan returned, he frowned at Erick’s bandages. Silas immediately got up to greet him at the door and said, “I know it looks bad, but I can explain.”

“I already heard,” Ronan said, holding up his hand to stem Silas’ worry. “One of the guards let me know what happened after you filed the report.”

“You’re not mad?”

“I gave you permission to go to the salvager’s section, didn’t I?” Ronan went to the kitchen to get dinner. “I just blame myself.” Looking over at Erick, he added, “I have to say though, Erick, I’m impressed you fought off two armed mers and got Silas back without a scratch on him. How did you learn to fight like that?”
Erick remained on the sponges in the living area. “I learned swordsmanship and boxing from private tutors, but most of my practice came from bar fights and street fighting when I was a kid.” He ran a finger over a stone game piece. After they grew bored of dice games, Silas had taken out a board game similar to checkers.

Silas followed Ronan to the kitchen, but glanced back at Erick. “Did you fight with Talia?” he asked. Ronan looked confused, so Silas explained who she was.

“Sometimes,” Erick answered, “but it was usually for practice. We never seriously fought each other. Usually she had to save my ass whenever I got too reckless.”

Silas frowned. “I’m hoping that wasn’t often?”

Erick wryly smiled and pushed himself up to swim over to the kitchen table. “It was more often than I care to admit. I’ve definitely gotten rusty, though, and the water and this tail made maneuvering tricky.” He rested a hand on his stabbed shoulder. “I might’ve been able to avoid this if I could have moved more easily.”

Ronan looked over at Erick with a thoughtful expression. “I see. For being in unfamiliar territory, I’d say you did well.”

Silas asked Erick what he wanted for dinner. After he answered, Silas asked Ronan, “Dad, do you think you can try teaching me to fight again?”

Ronan’s eyebrows rose. “You actually want to learn now?”

“Well, yeah,” Silas said, reaching for the jar of pickled herring. “I’ve been attacked how many times now?”

“Five,” Ronan answered. “Three times by Erick, and a fourth if you count your first close call with those merpirates.”

Erick hunched his shoulders, repentant. Silas pouted at his father. “You don’t have to actually keep count.”

“I’m your father, it’s my job.” Ronan took down a jar with octopus tentacles. “I’ll see when I can make time to teach you, but it would probably be easier to let you join training for the new recruits. They’re working on more advanced practice now, but you can still watch.” Taking out two tentacles and setting them on a plate for himself, he added, “Also, until we apprehend the mers that attacked you, you’re not going anywhere without a guard or Gale.”

“What?” Silas put down the jar of herring on the counter. “You have to be joking. Erick can protect me just fine.”

“You got lucky last time, and he’s injured now. I don’t want to risk your safety again.” At Silas’ request, he put a tentacle on Silas’ plate next to a piece of herring. Silas had put only fish on Erick’s plate.

“What if I stay away from the market tomorrow?” Silas asked, taking his and Erick’s plates to the table.

“That would be preferable, but I still don’t want you on your own.” Ronan sat down across from Erick and began cutting up his octopus. Erick grimaced at the tentacles and focused on his own plate. “If you just go to the training grounds, you won’t need an escort.”
Grumbling, Silas rested his hand on his cheek and his elbow on the table. “I guess that decides what we’re doing tomorrow then.”

“You’ll thank me when we catch these guys.”

“Sure, Dad.” Silas poked his fish with his fork.

Chapter End Notes

Gale is that one yappy dog that refuses to let strangers near you when you're on a walk. Erick is the sad German shepherd that just wants to sit on the couch with you. Silas is the kind of dumb lab that turns itself green by rolling in fresh cut grass.

...I'm going to end up with another au of this story at this rate.
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

Hello my lovely readers! Finals week is upon me, and I can finally see the edge of break on the horizon. I hope to get a lot of writing done before spring semester starts back up, but knowing me, I always tend to write best when I have due dates for other papers.

After they finished dinner, Silas went back over to Gale’s house to make sure things were still okay between them and to ask him to update Jeb about the merpirates’ tattoos. To avoid having to spend any time alone with Ronan, Erick claimed that he wanted to get to bed early because of his injuries and retreated into his room. Ronan had asked Erick probing questions during dinner about his crew and life on land, but his attempts at conversation still felt more like another interrogation. Despite the fact that Erick had protected Silas, Erick knew Ronan still saw him as a potential threat. It didn’t matter that they were playing nice for Silas’ sake. Erick’s admission that he used to participate in street fighting likely didn’t help Ronan’s opinion, but it couldn’t be helped. Erick wouldn’t pretend to be a better person when he couldn’t even believe the lie himself.

In his bed alcove, Erick played with the lamp’s shutters for a bit before leaving them mostly dim. His tan skin looked ghostly blue-green in its light. He picked up his worry beads and stared at the cave’s ceiling as he pushed the beads across the string. His crew occupied his thoughts. Now that he knew Talia had no hand in his forced exile, he wished that he could go find her and tell her about everything. She would know what to do about the merpirates. Erick tightened his grip on his worry beads. She always seemed to have a plan, even when everything went wrong.

When Erick heard Silas return late that night and go into his bed alcove, Erick remained awake. He couldn’t sleep. Was it really only yesterday that Silas gave him the language pearl? It felt like it had been weeks since then.

Erick rolled onto his side and folded his arm under the sponge pillow. Its porous surface felt weird pressing against his auditory fin, but that was mostly due to the fact he had fins instead of ears. He set down his worry beads and traced his finger over his other auditory fin. His skin sliding across the membrane between two spines made a soft white noise like waves sliding across sand, so he continued stroking it. The almost-familiar sound was comforting, but made him more homesick.

Looking down at his tail, Erick flicked his tailfin just to watch it move and feel it push water against the curtain at the end of bed alcove. The turquoise membrane threaded with cerulean gleamed in the lamp’s pale light. He wanted to pretend that he was just moving his feet, but his tailfin was too flexible to deceive him. He shifted his gaze to the bandages still covering his tail. Erick took a breath and lowered his hand to brush over the bandages. The coarse material chafed at his skin, or scales rather. He still couldn’t quite wrap his head around the fact that something so alien covered the lower half of his body. Hesitating, he slid his fingers under the bandages and pushed them off. He tried not to look, but morbid curiosity beat him.

As his bandages gathered in wavy loops around his tailfin, Erick stared at the new dusting of scales coving his once raw and inflamed skin. It shimmered like blue glitter on black velvet. The new
scales didn’t fully cover the dark under layer yet, so it gave his tail a piebald appearance. He gingerly touched the dark spot. It was cool, like the rest of his skin, and slightly warmer than the water around him. His heart beat faster as he remembered how he attacked himself, the feel of scales under his fingernails and the cleansing burn as he tore them out. His fingers curled up into a fist and pressed into the sponge mattress.

Erick turned his face into his pillow, gritting his teeth. He wanted to tear out his scales again, make the rest of his tail black and blue, but he couldn’t bear the thought of Silas seeing him like that, bloody and broken. He never wanted anyone to see him like that, but somehow, imagining Silas’ reaction was worse. It was because Silas seemed too innocent, Erick told himself. The amber-eyed merman was too good to be corrupted by the seething scars in his heart.

Like speaking of the devil, Erick’s chest ached. He remembered how terrified Silas looked when he pulled him onto his ship, how he screamed and clawed at his grip. His crimson and gold tail flared in the sun like fire as his blood spilled onto the deck. The pain in his voice that Erick ignored then sounded so clear now. How could he have seen him then as a monster? The only fiend on his ship that day was himself.

Erick couldn’t breathe for fear of crying out, so he clutched his pillow like it was flotsam in a storm. His gills spasmed. The water felt too heavy in his chest. The cave walls were too close, adding to the crushing pressure of being leagues beneath the sea.

He was drowning. Erick knew it as certainly as his own name, even as he tried to deny it. The little warmth left in his cold-blooded, cursed body leached away. Whatever turned him into a merman wasn’t permanent after all. It was just a cruel trick. He’d never see Talia again, never get to tell Ivan sorry for being a shitty nephew. The gods were turning him human again, but only his dead body would return to land, if it returned at all. His worthless life could never do anything good.

But Erick didn’t die. He remained in his bed alcove, trembling from his rapid pulse slowly coming down. He took a shaky breath as he realized his gills and tail weren’t changing. Forcing his fingers to unclench, he took another deeper breath. He opened his eyes. Still taut from terror, he measured his breaths in counts of three, focusing on the repetition to calm down.

As the stiffness in his muscles faded to limp exhaustion, Erick dumbly realized that he had another panic attack. His last one was the night he tore out his scales, but he barely remembered the last time before then.

The first time had been almost a decade ago, when he was still a teenager and had decided to become a sailor. Ivan wanted him to find work on land and avoid the sea, but Erick never could give up on the idea of getting revenge. He had joined a fishing boat on the off-chance that they would catch a mer. His panic attacks started when he realized his life was going nowhere. Every year when fishing season ended, Erick would drink himself under the table and get into fights with everyone who called him crazy for believing in merfolk. His panic attacks stopped when he grew resigned to being a belligerent drunk. It was only when the shipwrecks started on their side of the sea that Erick finally started to feel like his life had a purpose again. He cleaned up his act to prove to Ivan that he could trust him with the job of hunting down pirates.

Erick didn’t want to spiral out of control again, but he could almost physically feel the futility of fighting against it. Even if he stopped the merpirates, there was nothing else for him under the sea. Silas would be better off without him. Yet as he considered what he would do if he got back his legs, Erick knew there wasn’t really anything for him on land anymore either. Everything would be the same. No one believed in merfolk. Having spent years trying to convince people that monsters existed, it seemed pointless to try to convince anyone that the monsters were actually people.
Erick rolled back onto his other side and pulled off the bandages tangled around his tail. He stuffed them into one of the shelves around his bed and picked back up his worry beads. He rubbed the beads as he tried to fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

I debated a long time whether or not to cut this chapter. On one hand, we get to see a lot more of the angst Erick is feeling and provide context for the next chapter, but on the other, I feel like this chapter is all telling and that I've done a poor job of writing what a panic attack is actually supposed to be like. I've never experienced one myself (I just dissociate sometimes), so I'm afraid that I've probably misrepresented them.

So, my question: did this chapter work for you? If any of you have experienced panic attacks, did I give Erick's experience justice?

The main reason I'm questioning this chapter so much is because my sister said it was boring, and she's my primary beta reader. Whenever she thinks something's wrong, there usually is. Usually I can pinpoint the problem, but this time I can't. So, dear readers, let's see if you can help me again.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

It's officially winter break for me! Thank you to everyone who commented on the last chapter - it was a confidence boost I needed.

Also, next Monday is Christmas! I had vague hopes of writing a special holiday one-shot, but I've had no time/motivation to write much at all this past month. I might still write something fun, but otherwise, expect the usual update and consider reading my winter one-shot about Erick's backstory, titled "His Braid Swings with the Rhythm" (I've linked it to this story under "works Inspired by this one"). I've noticed that despite the relatively stable increase in kudos I see with every update on this story, that one-shot has been pretty much ignored. I'm really curious to know why, so comment why you might not have read it or why you think other people haven't.

Are y'all just worried about spoilers? Or are y'all here just for the merfolk? The one-shot is spoiler-free and still M/M, so I just don't get it.

Erick and Silas arrived outside the training grounds early that morning, having been escorted by Ronan to the guard academy. Two dozen new recruits sparred in groups of two in a field of seagrass outside an austere oval building. After Ronan introduced them to their teacher, Imogen, he swam off to go to work.

“Currently we’re practicing attacking and disarming techniques,” Imogen said, nodding towards her students. “Each of them are taking turns playing the aggressor or defender.” Her slate grey eyes watched each pair, evidently unimpressed with their progress. An assistant teacher corrected the form of one of the pairs and swam over to answer a question from another pair.

Erick focused on the students attacking with sheathed knives. By their wide swings and ill-aimed jabs, it was obvious they weren’t treating their knives like actually bladed weapons. Erick wondered if this was their first experience with knife fighting. None of the students looked much older than Silas.

“That doesn’t look so bad,” Silas said, looking at the defending students. “You just have to catch their knife hand, right?”

“More or less,” Imogen answered, “but it’s harder than it looks. If you want to spar with your friend, I can get you to a training knife and teach you the basics.”

“I’d like to,” Silas said. “Erick, do you feel up for it?”

“Sure, so long as I don’t overwork my shoulder.” The cuts on his arm and chest had stopped hurting unless he pressed on his stitches thanks to Merise’s medicines, but his shoulder still ached every time he moved it. Erick really just wanted to go back to sleep, but he didn’t want Silas to know that he had been up most of the night after his panic attack. Just having Silas comment on how he had removed his bandages was enough to make Erick close up and only answer in curt sentences. He tried to play it off as him not being a morning person, but Silas didn’t seem to buy it.
While Imogen went to get another training knife from a table set out in front of the students, Erick and Silas went into the field a little ways away from the others.

As Erick began stretching his arms, Silas said, “I should probably be the one defending since you already know how.” He smiled a bit. “You’ll go easy on me, right?”

Erick nodded. “Yeah.”

“Awesome. I can’t promise I’ll go easy on you, though,” he joked, but Erick’s morose expression didn’t change. Silas swung his arms, feeling awkward at Erick’s continued quietness. He couldn’t help feeling like he did something wrong again, but he guessed that Erick’s brooding was probably caused by Gale’s lack of forgiveness.

Imogen returned and handed the training knife to Erick. “Even though the blade is blunted and padded with this sheath, be careful not to strike too hard,” Imogen instructed. “It can still leave a mark.”

“I understand,” Erick answered. “I know how to use a knife.”

“Good, that’ll make this easier,” Imogen said, turning to Silas. Using Erick to demonstrate, she showed Silas how to catch Erick’s knife hand and the ways Silas could attempt to disarm, restrain, or otherwise incapacitate him. Even if Silas couldn’t get the knife out of his attacker’s hand, as long as he controlled where he was in relation to the location of the knife, he could minimize the danger of getting cut. When Imogen finished, she asked if she needed to go over anything again.

“No, I think I’m ready to try,” Silas answered.

“All right then, holler if you need help.” Imogen returned to her students.

“Okay.” Silas held up his fists, hunching in his shoulders. “I’m ready.”

Erick took one look at his form and said, “No you’re not.” He gestured to his arms with the knife. “Relax your shoulders, turn to the side a bit, tuck in your chin, and keep your hands open.” Silas followed each order, looking startled by the rapid-fire instruction. “You can cup your fingers if you want, but defending is easier with your palms than with your fists. Your goal is to stay back and redirect my attacks, not overpower mine. You’re too small to win in a strength contest.” Glancing down at his tail, Erick continued, “I don’t know what you should be doing with your tail, but when people fight on land, they square their feet to stay balanced and give more power to their punches.”

“Oh.” Silas followed his gaze, then fanned out his tailfin more to stabilize himself. “Am I good now?”

Erick studied his stance for a moment. “It’s good enough.” He held up the knife at an angle in front of his chest, keeping his other hand open near his navel. “Tell me when to start.”

“I’m—”

Erick lashed out. Silas yelped and immediately cowered with his hands in front of his face. Erick halted the knife before it touched Silas’ arms. He pulled back his hand. Sighing heavily, Erick rubbed between his eyes.

“That wasn’t fair!” Silas lowered his hands. “You caught me by surprise.”

“Nobody who wants to hurt you will wait until you’re ready,” Erick answered. “I was hoping your gut reaction would be to get out of range, but instead you still just freeze up. If you actually want to
learn how to defend yourself, you have to train yourself out of that instinct to roll over and beg for mercy.”

“I wasn’t begging,” Silas retorted, petulant.

“But you have before.” Erick turned away. “I may not have known mertongue before, but I still understood your tone of voice.”

Silas felt his heart sink. “Erick…”

“You should see if one of the other students will be willing to spar with you.” He thumbed the covered blade of his knife. “I shouldn’t have agreed to this.”

“What do you mean?” Silas asked. “You’re a great teacher.”

Erick didn’t look up. “You’re still scared of me,” he answered in a low voice.

“What? Erick, I’m not—”

“I heard you talking with Merise, when you two thought I was still asleep.” Erick hesitated. “I know that you’re afraid I’ll hurt you again. I understand. If you weren’t worried, I would honestly be more concerned about your sanity.”

Silas didn’t respond. He folded his arms over his waist and held his elbows.

“It will be easier for you to practice with someone else. They can tell you what to do with your tail, and I should be resting anyway, with my cuts and all.” Erick held out the knife handle-side towards Silas. “I’ll watch from the sidelines.”

“No.” Silas didn’t take the knife. “I don’t want to be scared of you. I don’t care if learning with someone else would be easier. I’d rather learn with you.”

“Silas, don’t be difficult,” Erick said, massaging his temples with his thumb and forefinger.

“Why? You were fine with teaching me just a minute ago.” He held out his hands. “Just because I flinched a bit doesn’t mean we should stop.”

“That wasn’t flinching. You were cowering like a whipped dog.”

“Then just don’t catch me off-guard again!” Silas retorted. “I can handle this.”

“Maybe you can, but I don’t want to see you scared again because of me.” Erick gripped the knife, rubbing his thumb over where the sheath met the handle. “I’ve already hurt you enough.”

Silas bit his lip. He watched Erick continue to play with the knife’s sheath. “If you really don’t want to try again, I won’t make you. But maybe helping me learn can help you forgive yourself too.”

Erick swallowed hard. He turned the knife around and held it back out towards Silas. “I don’t want to keep talking about this. Just take this thing, please. Maybe I can teach you some other time, but I really just can’t right now.”

Reluctantly, Silas took the knife. “Okay. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. You haven’t done anything wrong.” Erick swam away to sit off to the side before Silas could answer.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas! I know this update is early, but I wanted to get it posted before I got caught up in my folks' holiday festivities and inevitable mayhem.

Wherever you are, no matter what holiday(s) you celebrate, I hope you're enjoying everything this season has to offer, surrounded by people who love you. Thank you for sticking with me and this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the training session for the guards’ new recruits ended for the morning, Silas and Erick returned home. While they had lunch and played games again for the rest of the day, Erick continued teaching Silas English. In return, Silas began teaching Erick about merfolk’s gods and goddesses and other parts of mer life, such as holidays. Erick had been able to pull himself back together, allowing himself to even tease Silas about his pronunciation and the oddness of some merfolk traditions, but his refusal to help Silas learn how to defend himself hung between them. They both pretended it didn’t matter. Silas didn’t want to press Erick, and Erick just didn’t want to deal with it.

The next day passed in much the same way. Silas joined the new recruits again. Erick stayed on the sidelines, claiming that his shoulder hurt too much. Silas tried suggesting that they could get more medicine from Merise, but he refused. They returned home without discussing it, and Silas didn’t ask Erick again to join him the following day.

When the recruits had a day off, Silas decided to show Erick around Peleran. Despite that they still had to have a guard escort them everywhere they went, Silas didn’t let it deter his enthusiasm. He first took Erick to Temple Park, an open pantheon where the shoal celebrated holidays, weddings, and other community events. Encircling a buffed white coral floor interspersed with pots of aquatic plants, tall pillars supported a glass dome made of thousands of multicolored fragments. The rainbow light filtering through the dome rippled across the floor and their skin. Since nobody was celebrating anything, a few mers sat around stone tables to socialize or play tile games.

“So, what do you think?” Silas asked, grinning at Erick’s dumbfound expression as he stared up at the stained-glass dome. Their escort floated off to the side, giving them space.

“It’s… I feel like we’re in a palace,” Erick eventually said. He glanced over at Silas. “Everybody can really just come here whenever they want?”

“Yeah. Temple Park belongs to everyone in Peleran,” Silas answered. “You should see this place when we decorate for Homingtide. They hang a glass mobile of Naia and Hanawa beneath the dome, and we wrap the pillars in colored sailcloth and pin pictures and decorations.”

“That sounds like Christmas,” Erick said, thinking of how Ivan always decked the halls of his house with living evergreen and gilded red ribbon. The mobile of the First Enchantress and the Great Whale was almost like a Christmas tree. He then chuckled and asked, “Does that make Hanawa Santa Claus?”
“Maybe, but I’m guessing he’s not also a whale?”

Erick fully laughed at that. “No, but he is fat. Santa kind of looks like Jeb, actually, if Jeb cleaned
the algae out of his hair and wore a red coat.” He paused, thoughtful. “I suppose Hanawa is more
like Santa’s elves, if you think of him teaching Naia siren singing as like making toys. Naia would
be more like Santa then since she taught the rest of the mers siren singing.”

Silas didn’t understand what elves were or what they had to do with making toys, but he felt
buoyed by Erick’s mirth and the fact that he was actually learning about merfolk culture and
enjoying it. The image of celebrating Homingtide with Erick popped into Silas’ mind then, and he
bit his lip against the bittersweet notion. The full moon would return in less than two weeks. Even
though Erick insisted that he couldn’t go home until he got back his legs, Silas worried that seeing
his crew again would change his mind.

Noticing Silas’ fallen mood, Erick asked, “What is it?”

Silas held his elbow and looked at the floor. “Nothing. I was just remembering that you will
probably leave long before Homingtide.” He attempted a smile. “It’s okay, though. Do you want to
tell me more about what Christmas is?”

Erick stared at Silas a moment, knowing full well that he wasn’t okay, but only sighed. “Sure.” He
swam over to one of the empty tables so they could sit and talk.

Over the next several days, Silas alternated between going to combat training and showing Erick
around the rest of Peleran. He introduced him to mers he knew outside the market chasm and took
him to shrines throughout the shoal to see statues of each of the gods and goddesses. When Silas
ran out of things to show Erick around Peleran, they went to the squidball court to play catch and
work on Erick’s coordination underwater since he still tended to use his hands to stay upright.
Because Erick and Gale still preferred to avoid each other, Silas only visited Gale in the evening
whenever he wasn’t completely worn out by training.

During dinner one evening, Ronan told Silas and Erick that a choral group would be performing at
Temple Park. Excited by the chance to take Erick to an event, Silas convinced Erick to join him.

On the night of the performance, the potted plants had been pushed to the edges of the stone floor
and a stair-step stage was set up on one side of the pantheon. A clamshell-shaped backdrop served
to amplify and bounce back the chorale’s voices to the audience. When Silas and Erick arrived, the
floor and open spaces between pillars were already filled with a kaleidoscope of mers. Their
rainbow tails shimmered in the dusky glow of lanterns hanging beneath the stained-glass dome.

Since both Silas and Erick were wary of the crowd, they stayed to the back of the pantheon against
a pillar. The choral group of thirty mers soon swam up into the stands of their stage. They began
with an uplifting, danceable song about swimming with dolphins. As they continued through the
rest of their performance, moving to slower, more emotional songs, Silas leaned back against the
pillar. His slender arm brushed against Erick’s bicep.

They both startled slightly at the touch. Blushing, Silas scooted over and murmured, “Sorry.”

Erick didn’t answer. He turned his face back to the singers, but his mind wandered. The last time
he and Silas touched each other was when he rescued him from merpirates, but Silas left his arms
the moment he woke up. Before then, it was the night Silas took Erick into the ocean, saving him
in a way from the air itself. Erick grew hot thinking of what happened that night.

Even not touching now, their physical nearness became too much. The warmth radiating from the
crowd reminded him too much of his younger days, of his body tangled in blankets and the limbs of strangers, drink on his breath and sweat on his skin. It still taunted him, the need to be close to anything but silence and his own mind.

Erick sat forward and jumped up. “Sorry, I just… I’ll be right back,” he said, darting away from the crowd, the heat, the emptiness filling the space between his skin and Silas.

“Erick?” Silas leaned around the pillar to see him swimming away down a hill of coral. “Wait! Where are you going?” He got up and followed after him.

“I just need a minute!” Erick snapped, stopping. He gripped his forehead and temples with his hand over his eyes. “Go enjoy the concert.”

Silas flinched, but stopped a tail-span away from him. “I barely touched you,” he said, incredulous and hurt. “I didn’t mean it.”

“I know!” Forcing himself to take a breath, Erick repeated more gently, “I know, all right? I just remembered something, and I just… Please, just leave me alone.”

“What could you remember that’s so bad?” Silas asked, drifting closer.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why?”
“Because I don’t!” Erick shouted, throwing down his hands and looking back at Silas. The choral group continued singing, repeating the chorus of a love song about longing. Erick turned away again and groaned, pushing his fingers through his hair to press his nails into his scalp. “Being here, this concert… There’s just stuff I’d rather forget about. Just give me a minute to cool my head.”

Silas hesitated. He felt struck by the need to hold Erick again, as if his arms could ward away the bad memories, but he feared how badly Erick would react to a hug if he was so upset just by a glancing touch.

“Oh, okay,” Silas eventually said. “I’m sorry.”

Erick watched Silas return to their spot behind the pillar. He wrapped his arms around himself, cursing his body betraying him again. It was bad enough it had to grow gills and a tail. Why couldn’t it have given up its need for closeness?

After taking deep breaths, Erick pieced back together his impassive expression. He returned to Silas’ side as the singers finished another song.

When the performance ended, Silas knew better than to ask again what had made him so upset.

Chapter End Notes

*UPDATE* To see more of Silas' perspective from this chapter, check out my series of companion works based on this story. Chapter 39.5 shows a day that got skipped over in the time skip, and you can find it here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/13766679
When I added this chapter, it ended up being a happy coincidence that I got to at least get Silas and Erick to talk about Christmas right in time for the actual holiday. I may not have ended up writing a special holiday short for them, but I can still imagine what they'd do for Christmas or Homingtide.

Side-note, Homingtide is more like Thanksgiving or Valentine's Day in my mind, at least in how it's celebrated. It's less about presents and more about having a chance to meet someone new or to reconnect with family/friends you haven't seen in a long time. Whales migrate to warmer waters every winter to mate, so it'd make sense that merfolk would recognize that and make a holiday around it. I imagine they probably have other holidays for each of their other patron gods and goddesses, but I haven't given much thought to those because I don't have a reason to put them in the story. (They'd be more relevant in the after-story I'm kinda-sorta planning after I finish the main conflict here.)
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Here is the last update of 2017. It's amazing how this year turned out. A lot of things are going wrong with the U.S. right now, but I can at least say I got more writing done these past few months than I have in a long time.

I'm not one for making new year's resolutions, but I'd like to see myself finish this story before the end of next year. I already feel so close to the end, but I just keep finding more things to write between now and where I see this story ending. It's a good thing, though. If our merboys stopped surprising me, I'd have no reason to continue. I just have to trust the story and keep pressing forward. I hope you, my lovely readers, will stick with me into the new year.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Silas finished another morning of training the next day, Silas returned to Erick on the sidelines as usual. Stretching his arms behind his head, Silas said, “All this practice is exhausting. No wonder I always gave up.”

“It gets easier when you get used to it.” Erick got up to follow him back home.

“What if I’m just destined to be a wimp forever?” Silas started swimming up out of the training field. “I could be doing all this practice for nothing.”

“With any luck, you won’t actually need it.” Erick looked over at the market chasm as they swam. It looked like a dark canyon in the distance. Most of the shoal wasn’t recognizable as a city unless he was in its midst. “Do you think the guards will catch those merpirates today?”

Silas followed his gaze. “I don’t know. It’s only been a few days.”

“It’s been over a week. How hard can two mers be to find?” Erick asked. “This place isn’t any bigger than my hometown.”

“My dad can’t just have the whole force look for them, and you’re forgetting that they might not even be in Pelaran anymore. As much as we want to find them, they’re probably not really a priority for him.”

“Then we should be looking for them ourselves.” Erick stared down as they passed over houses blending in with rocky corals. The landmark towers and glass windows were the only thing that revealed the mers living below. “I’m getting sick of avoiding the chasm and waiting for something to happen.”

“I know, but looking for them isn’t a good idea,” Silas said. “Not only would my dad be pissed, I still can’t defend myself that well. I don’t want you to get cut up for me again.”

“We wouldn’t let them sneak up on us.” Erick looked over at Silas. “C’mon. If you don’t want to look, we can at least hang out with Jeb for a change. He might be able to tell us about the merpirates’ tattoos.”
Reluctantly, Silas answered, “Yeah, but a guard might see us and tell my dad.”

“That you can just tell your dad he’s not the boss of you. Aren’t you an adult?”

“Yeah, technically I guess.” Holding his elbow, Silas said, “I just don’t like upsetting him. He’s gotten better since I’m older, but honestly I’m surprised he’s been so understanding in all of this. After my maternal dad died, he used to be really protective and strict. If he was as bad as he used to be, he would’ve put me under house arrest, not just insist we have an escort.”

“Then your dad was a dick and you still shouldn’t care. Why do you even still live with him if he was that bad?”

Silas hunched his shoulders like a turtle, self-conscious. “Most mers don’t move out of their parents’ house until they’ve mated. If things were different…” He turned up his hands, unable to finish the thought.

“Oh.” Erick let the thought hang in silence. He recognized a landmark with a star-shaped boulder. He still couldn’t pick out Silas’ house from the dozens of other houses below them, but the landmark meant they would find it soon. “Since you’ve brought that up, even though I would still rather just go to the chasm… We need to talk about what happens if I get, you know… Pregnant. Were you actually serious?”

Silas cringed at the question. “Yes. I wouldn’t be here if guys getting pregnant wasn’t possible.”

“Yeah, but I was human, and you’re so much younger than me—”

“Eight years isn’t that big of an age difference.”

“It is to most humans,” Erick answered. “I’m just saying that it can’t be a for sure thing, right? Not all sex leads to pregnancy.”

Silas rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess.”

“Okay, so if I take something to make sure I can’t get, well, pregnant,” Erick said, speaking quickly, “that wouldn’t necessarily hurt anything. And if there is something there, it’s not like an actual baby. Nothing’s probably there yet anyway.”

“Erick, I don’t care,” Silas snapped, sounding more upset than he meant to. “You can make all the excuses you want, but I’m not going to agree. Even if there’s only a small chance that you’ll get pregnant, it’s still a chance that deserves to live.”

“But I don’t want it,” Erick argued. “What would you even do with a baby?”

“I don’t know, raise it?” Silas said scathingly. “My dad and Gale and everyone else I know would help.” He angled down to his house, having spotted it.

Erick followed him. “But what am I supposed to do before it’s born? I’m not staying here, and guys can’t be pregnant on land.”

“We still don’t even know that you can go back,” Silas answered. “Even if the guards catch the people who attacked us, it isn’t a guarantee that they’ll tell us about shifting.”

“So? I’d find another lead, ask around the market. I’ll search the open ocean until I find them like you did if I have to, but I can’t do anything if I get fat with your kid.”
Silas stopped outside his front door. He faced Erick and said, “It would be your kid too, you know. No matter how much you don’t want it, you would still be the maternal father.”

Erick pinched between his eyes. “I don’t care. Everything would be easier for both of us if we just didn’t have to worry about this.”

“I agree, but I’m not going to be a coward about it.”

“You’re not the one that would have to carry it,” Erick retorted. “Why can mermen get pregnant anyway? What is the fucking point of having guys and girls if you all can get knocked up?”

“I don’t know, that’s just how it worked out.” Silas went inside, not bothering to hold open the door for Erick. “It probably has something to do with the fact merfolk all started out as humans.”

“But that’s stupid.” Erick came in and shut the door with more force than necessary. “Being human first shouldn’t make that big of a difference.”

“And guys having kids isn’t a big deal to mers, but I’m not complaining about humans thinking that’s stupid.”

“It sounds like you’re complaining right now.”

“Then maybe I am!” Silas swam to the kitchen and glared at the shelves, but he wasn’t hungry for lunch anymore. “If all humans are as thickheaded as you, I’d be better off staying here.”

Erick settled onto the floor of the living room and crossed his arms. “You’d probably get hit by a car before you actually had to talk to anyone anyway.”

Silas groaned, turning away from the shelves, but not joining Erick in the living room. “Why are you always like this? I thought things would be different after you learned mertongue, but you’re still always angry or moody. The only time you smile is when you make fun of me.”

“Yeah, well that’s just who I am!” Erick scowled at the floor. “I’m not your soulmate or boyfriend or whatever you think I’m supposed to be because some love god thought it would be fun to give me a tail. My whole life has been some sick joke.” His voice grew rough as he continued, “I’m tired of giving a shit about anything because none of this matters. Here or on land, I’m still just a fuck-up. The sooner you understand that, the better off you’ll be.”

“Well maybe you wouldn’t be a fuck-up if you stopped acting like a jerk.” Silas turned to continue shouting, but froze when he saw Erick. He was staring at the new scales that now covered the dark patches on his tail, pressing his fingernails into the edges of the old shadows. His jaw and the muscles in his neck were taut, as if they anchored invisible threads restraining his fingers. Silas’ heart leapt into his throat. “Erick? I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Just stop.” Erick jerked back his hands and put his head against the wall, facing his bed alcove. “I don’t care. Just leave me alone.”

“But…”

“I don’t care!” Erick pushed himself off the floor and used the wall to pull himself towards his room. He threw back the curtain in front of the alcove entrance and dove inside. As the curtain floated back down, blocking Silas from Erick’s view, he said, “Go hang out with Gale or find another human you can turn into a merman. It doesn’t matter, just go away.”

Silas remained anchored in place, barely moving his tail to stay upright. The stillness of the room
pressed around him. Silence closed up his throat, almost physically choking him. Silas’ hands
found his arms and gripped his skin. He looked between the door and then the curtain to Erick’s
room, unable to choose. His mind raced through what-ifs of every possibility. He could leave and
hope they could continue pretending nothing was wrong, or stay and risk making everything worse.

Silas turned to the door. It would be so easy to just go to Gale’s house and ask him or Merise for
advice. Either of them could tell him how he was supposed to fix a broken person. He could wait
out the storm sucking the water out from his chest. It wouldn’t last long if Gale was there to calm
him down.

But if Silas left, Erick would be alone. Again. Just like the night he stripped his tail of its scales.
The night he might have done worse.

Taking a deep breath, Silas faced Erick’s room again.

Chapter End Notes

Gosh, I agonized over this chapter for such a long time. I love writing these two
arguing, but it's also so draining to get what they say just right. The only question is,
will Silas know what to say, or will he just make things worse?
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

We're so close to hitting 300 kudos! I imagine that after I post this, I'll get that last kudo and have to post another chapter tomorrow.

In other great news, my master copy is officially over 90,000 words. This silly mer fic has gotten bigger than the only novel I've ever completed, and it's not even finished yet. So long as I don't need to cut or rearrange anything, this story will continue to have steady updates until the start of April. Woot!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Erick?” Silas stopped in front of the curtain separating him from Erick’s bed alcove. Squeezing his arm, he said, “I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m just frustrated too, I guess. I keep thinking and hoping everything can just work itself out, but I keep underestimating everything you’re going through. Even though we can talk now, I feel like I still don’t understand you at all.”

Silas turned to sit beneath Erick’s bed alcove. He floated down onto the stone. Only his tailfin reached the sponges lining the living room’s concave floor. “You’ve told me a lot about what it’s like to live on land, but you’ve barely told me anything about your life there. You keep mentioning stuff like bar fights and I get that not everything was great there either, but I have no idea how I’m supposed to help.”

“I don’t want your help.” Erick hugged his sponge pillow, wishing he had blankets to put another barrier between him and Silas. The thin curtain was not nearly enough.

“I know,” Silas said, throwing his arms at the floor, “but you obviously need it.”

“No I don’t!”

“Then explain to me why.” Silas folded up his tail and held it against his chest. Despite its fiery colors, it did nothing to warm his cold terror. “If it’s just because it’s me, then maybe Merise can help.”

Through his teeth, Erick answered, “She can’t help me either.”

Silas went silent. He curled and uncurled his tailfin, watching the ends sway like seaweed. He considered his words carefully before he asked, “Would Ivan or your crew be able to do anything?”

Erick didn’t answer. Despite how badly he wanted to see Talia, he wasn’t sure if he could survive her seeing him like this. He knew he wouldn’t be able to keep it together if he saw Ivan again. Even if Ivan had thought abandoning him would actually help, Erick couldn’t forgive him. His uncle dumped him in the sea with no choice, no explanation, and it was his fault Erick had to worry about getting pregnant in the first place.

“Erick?” Silas asked, glancing up at the curtain dividing them. “Please answer me. If they can help you, I’ll talk to my dad.” Hesitating a beat, he added, “The only reason he wasn’t letting you go back was because I didn’t want you to leave. I was trying follow what Ivan told me, keeping you
Silas wrapped his arms tighter around his tail. “I thought I was.” Voice cracking, Silas continued, “I know now that isn’t true. I’ve only made everything worse.” He fought back his tears, but couldn’t stop them. “Please… Just let me help.” He pressed his face against his tail. “I’m sorry. It’s not fair that I keep asking so much from you. I’ve taken away everything – your legs, your crew… I just want to make things right.”

Erick still didn’t move or answer as he listened to Silas cry. Every stuttering breath he took twisted Erick’s heart. Erick pressed his face into his pillow. He wanted to flee, but his room had him trapped. The only way out was past Silas.

Swearing under his breath, wondering why he couldn’t convince himself to stop caring, Erick let go of his pillow. He turned around and pushed aside the curtain. The sight of Silas curled up beneath his room wrenched his heart further. Silas’ back shuddered with his quiet sobs. His floating, wavy gold hair obscured his face.

“I’ve hurt you again,” Erick murmured, folding his arms over the edge into his room.

Sniffling, Silas looked up at him. “What?”

Erick turned away his face. “I hurt you again.” He closed his hand into a fist, tucking it behind his arm. “This is why I can’t stay here. Even when I’m not trying, I still keep hurting you.”

“Erick…” Silas turned around and sat up on his folded fin. “This isn’t your fault. I’m crying because I’ve been keeping you from going home.”

“I took you from your home first, and I didn’t even have a good reason like you did.” Erick took a breath, clenching his jaw. “You don’t have a single ounce of evil in you.”

“How can you say something like that?” Silas asked. “I’m not perfect, and you’re not evil either.”

“You’ve said it yourself that I’m fucked up. I can’t help but act like a jerk.”

“You’re not being a jerk right now.”

“That doesn’t mean I won’t be again.” Erick glanced down at Silas before avoiding his eyes again.

“So?” Silas rose to try to see Erick’s face, but he hid behind his folded arms. “Everybody acts like a jerk sometimes. Just because you’ve messed up more often than other people doesn’t mean you can’t try to be better. Stop focusing on all the stuff you regret and believe in the part of yourself that’s good. I know it’s there.”

“If that was true,” Erick said, struggling to keep his voice even, “then why did I try to kill you?”

“Because you didn’t know me!” Silas spread out his hands. “Erick, seriously. We’ve been over this. You thought I was just a monster that killed people.”

Erick pulled away from the edge to sit against the wall in his bed alcove. Curling his tail beneath himself, Erick said, “But it’s obvious now that you’re not. I should have been able to see that.”

Silas pushed back the curtain and leaned inside. “Maybe, but the fact is you didn’t. You know better now. Can’t that be enough? We can figure this all out, but nothing is going to get better if you keep wallowing in self-pity like this.”
“I don’t care.”

“Yes, you do care.” Silas pulled himself further inside, sitting on the edge of the alcove. Only the span of a tailfin separated them. “You wouldn’t be this upset if you didn’t.”

Erick moved farther back into the corner. He grabbed his pillow and held it against his chest. “Then I don’t want to care. Why can’t you just fucking leave me alone?”

Silas looked down at his own tail. He had a bumpy scar where the harpoon stitches used to be, hidden partially by his multicolored scales. “I don’t know. Because I still like you, even though it’s stupid. Because I can’t ignore it when someone is in pain.” He hesitated. “And because I’m still worried about what happens if you do end up with child. I’m thinking about them too.”

Erick pressed his nails into his pillow. “That only makes me feel worse.”

“Yeah, I know, but it’s the truth.” Silas shrugged, lifting and dropping his hands. “I don’t know how I can change your mind. I don’t even know if I can. I just want you to actually think about it, okay?”

“What makes you think I haven’t already?” Erick asked thickly. “I am terrified, Silas. I can’t sleep at night because I am so out of my depth here, in literally every sense of the meaning.” He took a breath to keep his voice steady. “If you were going to carry it, it would be a different story, but I can’t. I just can’t, Silas. My body has already changed enough as it is. I can’t deal with it changing again.”

Silas pinched his fingers, gripping the joints until it hurt. He stared at how Erick clutched his pillow, how he still stiffly folded his tail like his legs were under his scales. Silas bit his lip. A long silence stretched between them. Turning away his head, trembling, Silas eventually said, “If you’re that certain, you should talk to Merise.” He slid out of Erick’s bed alcove, but his hand lingered on the edge. “We can go over whenever you’re ready.”

The curtain drifted down once Silas left. Erick watched it settle and go still. He hugged his pillow tighter, gritting his teeth until his jaw ached from the strain. His pillow pressed against his stomach. The illusion of a weighted presence made him feel sick, but he couldn’t unclench his muscles. He stayed curled up in the corner, praying to whatever gods that cared that he would suddenly wake up and discover that this had all been a long nightmare. Talia or Dunley would bang on his door, tell him he overslept and that he just had a bad bowl of pork soup. Everything would go back to normal.

Yet he remained in his bed alcove. The house stayed silent.

Chapter End Notes

Dun-dun-DUN! The things Silas will sacrifice to help Erick... lol

I'm such a terrible person.
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

Bonus chapter! It didn't even take a full day to hit 300.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Erick slowly released his grip on his pillow. He set it aside and turned towards the curtain. His hand hesitated to push it aside, but he pulled himself out and righted himself outside his room. Silas was sitting at the kitchen table, holding his head in his hands. He wasn’t crying anymore, but Erick guessed that was only because he had already spent all of his tears. Erick sighed. Steeling his voice, he said, “I’m ready to go.”

Silas’ arms folded onto the table. He nodded dumbly. As if weighed down by sandbags, Silas pushed himself up and swallowed back the lump in his throat. “Okay.”

Neither one spoke on the way to Merise’s house. When they arrived, Silas held his elbow against his side and said, “I don’t want to hear whatever Merise will have to say. Do you think you can find your way back to my house?”

Erick looked back down a narrow, sandy path weaving around domed houses encrusted with coral. Despite the blue haze of the water, he recognized the blue and pink cactus coral around Silas’ house. “I can see it from here, so I’ll be fine.”

“All right then.” Silas hesitated to leave, staring at tiny fish darting around a bush of staghorn coral. “I’m still hoping you’ll change your mind. You don’t have to decide right now, you know. Either way you choose, Merise can tell you more about what to expect.”

Erick also stared at the tiny fish. His gaze followed a blue one that swum in circles up around a branch of coral, as if racing up a spiral staircase to escape a dungeon. Flatly, he answered, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Silas nodded, biting his lip. He looked like he wanted to say something more, but instead turned to return home.

After Erick knocked on the door, Merise opened it and said, “Oh, hello there, Erick.” She looked past each of his elbows before swimming up to look behind him. “Where’s Silas?”

“He went back home.” Avoiding meeting her eyes, Erick said, “I’m here to ask about contraceptives.”

Merise’s eyebrows rose. “Oh.” She moved aside and opened the door wider. “Well, come inside.” Once Erick swam in, she closed the door and asked, “Is Silas actually okay with this?”

“No really.” Erick stayed in the middle of the room, unsure if he was supposed to sit in the living room or not. “He wants to keep it if anything is there.”

“I see.” Merise pulled over a chair from the kitchen table and went to sit at her workbench. Unlike the table set with stone seats at Silas’ house, she had frosted glass chairs. She sat and folded her hands over her tail. “Can I ask why you don’t want it?”
Erick sat with his arm over the back of his chair. He leaned against her worktable and stared at the floor. “I just don’t want to deal with the pregnancy. It would never work. I can’t worry about a kid if I want to stop the merpirates and go home.”

“How would being pregnant prevent you from doing either of those things?” Merise asked, her voice gentle. “If you conceived, it would take months before you actually started showing.”

Grimacing at the thought, Erick answered, “It doesn’t matter. With all the shit I get into, I’d probably miscarry anyway. There’s no point keeping it if it won’t make it.”

Merise looked at his bandaged arm and chest. Though he would be able to remove them soon, it proved his point. “Maybe so, but you’re still young and healthy. There’s no reason you would miscarry if you stayed out of trouble.”

“But I can’t promise that I will. I’m not going to stop hunting down the merpirates.”

Merise hummed, thoughtful. “These are perfectly valid reasons, but what if the pirates weren’t an issue? Pretend they don’t exist. Would you still want to prevent this pregnancy?”

“Of course,” Erick answered, but he crossed his arms. “I’m a man, for God’s sake. I don’t care if mermen can get pregnant, human guys can’t. I already feel like a freak. I don’t need a fat stomach to make it worse.”

Merise smiled lightly. “I won’t deny that being heavy with child can be uncomfortable, but the time goes by faster than you’d think.” She looked wistfully at the bedroom alcoves. “When I was pregnant with Gale, I was so happy the first time I felt him kick.” Her hand fell onto her flat stomach. “He was a rambunctious baby, always squirming around even before he was born. It sounds unpleasant, but there really is nothing better than the feeling of knowing your body is creating a tiny, precious life. I always wished I could have had more children with my late husband, but it was a miracle I even had Gale because of my fertility problems.”

Erick glanced at the hand on her stomach before turning his gaze onto himself. It was hard to imagine losing his abs to a baby bump. The image felt completely wrong. Yet despite his disgust, a small, morbidly curious part of him wondered what it would be like.

“If you still think childbearing isn’t for you,” Merise said after a moment, “I can give you medicine that will prevent it. I have rarely needed to make it, and it’s meant for stillborn cases, but I will make an exception for your case because I have already treated you for self-harm once before. I don’t want to see you attempt to stop it improperly by yourself and end up getting hurt again.”

Erick lowered his head and put his hand over his eyes to hold his temples. “Okay. How long will it take you to make this medicine?”

“I’ll need to get some fresh ingredients, but it should only take me a day after I get them,” Merise answered. “While you wait, I would like you to use this time to think more about what you want besides stopping these pirates. You can have a baby and stop them. It doesn’t have to be one or the other.”

“I’ll be sure to take that into consideration,” Erick said, quickly rising to leave. “Thank you for listening.”

Merise rose to follow him out. “Anytime. You’re always free to come see me if you need anything.”

“You’re too kind to me.”
Smiling, Merise said, “Perhaps, but you could say it’s just part of my job. I never stop worrying about my patients.”

Erick didn’t have a good answer for that, so he bid her goodbye and left. Outside, he rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. He knew he was supposed to go back to Silas’ house now, but he dreaded the thought of having to endure more awkward silences. It occurred to him then, that in spite of all of his efforts to put distance between himself and the amber-eyed merman, he wished he hadn’t succeeded so well.

Since Erick wasn’t as brave as he pretended to be, he swam up and sat down on the roof of Merise’s house. She had skylights in a circle around the stone top, so he curled up his tail away from the glass so she wouldn’t notice him sulking. Leaning back on his hands, Erick turned up his head to stare at the shifting, sunlit surface. He wondered if it was a clear day above the water, or if there were cumulus clouds on the horizon. It hadn’t rained yet as far as he was aware, but he guessed that storms probably didn’t affect the shoal very much.

Thinking of storms reminded Erick of Talia again, and of Silas’ offer to take him back to land. The next full moon was coming up in a few days. Now that he knew the mers sinking ships were shifters, he had been rethinking all of his previous assumptions on how and why merfolk sunk ships. He had thought they just drilled holes to flood hulls because they were vindictive monsters. But if they simply climbed up onto decks and took over ships like any other pirates, that meant they could just as easily walk on land. Erick could have seen them in port and never realized it.

Erick tried to recall if he had ever seen anyone on land with a tattoo like the one he had seen on his and Silas’ attackers or if he had ever heard someone speak with a mertongue accent, but he didn’t think he did. Another thought came to him then, worrying him. Could the merpirates be targeting specific ships? Erick had tried to find patterns in the attacks multiple times before, humoring Ivan’s investors on their assumption that the pirates were human, but they were random as far as he could tell. The only thing the ships had in common was that they all were merchant vessels, carrying more goods than passengers.

Lowering his head to rest his chin on his hands, elbows on his tail, he knew then that he would have to talk to Ivan after all. Now that Erick was stuck underwater, Ivan was the only person that could review the full list of sunken ships again with the knowledge that the pirates were shifters. It would be like starting from scratch, but Erick knew he needed all the leads he could get. Peleran’s guards were no closer to finding their attackers, and Erick seriously doubted that they ever would. All they had to work with were basic descriptions and rough sketches because fish leather couldn’t hold details as well as paper. It was just another thing he hated about being underwater.

As Erick debated whether or not he should return to Silas’ house and ask to go to land, his thoughts were interrupted by a shout calling his name.

Chapter End Notes

With these past few chapters, I’ve been having to think a lot about what merfolk think of abortion and my own personal stance on the matter. I know I’m probably getting technical terms wrong, but I’m trying to portray each side of the debate equally so I don’t get called out for trying to push one side or the other. That, and I want to keep up the suspense about what Erick will do about this possible pregnancy. Holding that mystery captive is one of my many pleasures with this story. >;)
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

I go back to school this week, but I'm hoping to keep up my writing streak for a little while longer before homework starts piling up again. I'm thinking of revisiting the tags I've put on this story. Is it better to have a bunch or just a few specific ones? Do you think I should add or remove any? Opinions please.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Erick?” Gale called, swimming down to him. “What are you doing on my house? Why isn’t Silas with you?” He drifted to a stop in front of Erick, frowning at him as he floated.

Feeling like he was caught red-handed despite doing nothing wrong, Erick answered, “Silas is at home. I’m not doing anything.”

“That still doesn’t answer why you’re here.”

“I know, but would you lay off me for once, please?” Erick dragged a hand over his face. “I was talking to Merise about contraceptives. She’s going to make me some medicine to prevent pregnancy.”

“Oh. Well, shit.” Gale eyes had widened in surprise. He turned away and ran his fingers through his black hair. “I mean, that’s good, but I didn’t think Silas would let you.”

It was Erick’s turn to be surprised. “You wanted me to stop it?”

“Yeah.” Gale shrugged, his expression turning downcast. “I didn’t want to tell Silas this, but he’s too young to be a father. I’m three years older than him, but even I don’t think I’d be ready for a kid.”

Erick nodded, sharing the sentiment despite that he was older than both of them. “It would be a lot of work.”

“Exactly. Besides, you’re going to be leaving hopefully sooner than later. It wouldn’t be fair to saddle Silas with that alone. He’d never be able to find anyone else and move on.”

Erick’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you can imagine what people would think, right? Him having a kid but no partner?”

“Right,” Erick said, picturing the depressing possibilities.

“It’d be even worse if people found out it was because of a blood binding,” Gale continued. “Accident or not, it’s pretty damning. Nobody does a binding more than once unless their partner dies or they didn’t get a sign the first time.”

“By sign you mean…?”

“The reason you have to worry about being knocked up,” Gale answered, looking pointedly at him.
like he thought it was obvious. “The moon doesn’t affect all couples like that.”

Erick considered that for a moment. “If that’s supposed to be enough proof for everybody,” he asked, keeping his tone carefully impassive, “why don’t you think Silas and I are supposed to be together?”

Gale tossed up his hands. “You’re from land and you keep putting Silas in danger. Everything was fine before you yanked him out of the ocean. Now he can’t go anywhere without worrying about getting cut up or kidnapped again, but he’s acting like it’s all fine, like it’s some kind of story-time adventure.” Turning to look at Silas’ house, he added, “What Silas needs is somebody stable. He has to grow up eventually and learn that he can’t just explore shipwrecks all the time.”

Erick mentally bristled at the implication that he wasn’t stable, but ignored it because he was more annoyed by Gale assuming he knew what was best. “What’s wrong with exploring wrecks? I find fault with it because it disturbs the dead, but I didn’t think merfolk cared about that.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, it’s just that he’s too obsessed,” Gale answered. “Silas doesn’t have any friends his own age because he goes out on so many salvaging trips. It’s like pulling teeth when I try to get him to hang out with my friends.”

“I see.” If Gale’s friends were as judgmental as him, Erick could see why Silas would dislike them. Erick himself had beat up too many people to count because of his obsession with merfolk. The reasons behind their obsessions were vastly different, but Erick couldn’t help but note the irony in it.

“Anyway…” Gale put his hands behind his head. “You won’t tell Silas any of this, right? He’s mad at me enough as it is.”

Erick narrowed his eyes at him. “I don’t see why I shouldn’t. If you’ve been lying to him about being willing to help him raise a kid, he should know to stop putting his trust in you.”

Gale’s mouth dropped. “Excuse me? I never said I wouldn’t help him.”

“Acting like you know everything doesn’t help.”

“Oh, and you do?” Gale retorted. “You’ve barely been here for three weeks. While you were a locked up, raving lunatic, I had to hold Silas while he cried over and over because of you. I’ve watched him grow up, kept care of him after his second dad died because Ronan was too busy to watch him himself.” Spreading out his arms, he said, “You think you know anything? You don’t know a fucking thing about Silas or this place. Stop pretending that you do.”

Erick clenched his hands into fists as Gale shouted, his jaw growing taut with the effort of not interrupting him. He took a deep breath through his nose before speaking. “I won’t deny that I still have a lot to learn, but I know enough to know that the way you’re acting is only hurting Silas.”

“Only because he won’t fucking listen to me! I seriously think you must have messed up his head while he was on your ship. He wouldn’t be this rock-headed if it wasn’t for you.”

“If you think that, then it’s clear to me that we understand Silas very differently,” Erick said with a low, dark intensity. “He’s not a child. What I thought was naivety is a conscious effort to be positive despite everything against him. The fact that he can still smile and is still trying to help me proves that he is more mature than you will ever be.”

“How can you talk about being mature if your solution to everything is to punch it?” Gale spat back. “Admit it: if you didn’t have Ronan threatening to lock you back up, you’d have attacked me
already for pissing you off.”

Erick gritted his teeth, but didn’t answer.

“You can’t say anything because you know I’m right. Silas can’t help you because you’ll never be anything but a shark.”

Erick’s hands hurt with the force of his nails digging into his palms. His entire body had gone rigid against the fury of emotions threatening to rip through his skin. He could hardly breathe from the effort of holding his stony expression.

Turning to go into his house, Gale said, “I hope you do find those merpirates, I really do. If you learn how to shift or get yourself killed, either way, you can get the fuck out of our lives.”

As soon as Gale disappeared inside, Erick bit back a scream and pressed his nails into his scalp. He wanted to tear out the coral around Gale’s house and use it to break his windows. Since he couldn’t, he slammed down his hands to propel himself up to the surface. He speared his hands above his head and beat his tail as fast as he could.

Erick burst into the air, roaring at the sky. He fell back in and surfaced again. He pounded on the water, breaking it into frothy waves. It sprayed his face with every strike. His clawed fingers raked across it, as if trying to rip it into tattered shreds. Bubbles like shattered-glass followed the wake of his nails. He cursed with every bit of foul language he knew in both of his tongues. His throat hurt from the force of his cries. The air made him go hoarse, but he didn’t dive back underwater.

When he grew exhausted from his assault on the water, Erick finally let himself fall back under. He let his body go limp as he stared up at the glimmering, unchanged surface. His pulse thrummed through his veins as his heartbeat slowed down. The brightness of the sun grew dimmer and dimmer as he continued sinking. His sable hair waved with his fall. The last of the air he had pulled into his lungs slipped past his lips. As he watched his last breath bubble up to the surface, Erick wondered if this was what it was like to die. Everything quiet, a heaviness pressing into his bones, the world going dark. If only he didn’t have gills, he could simply drift away into nothingness.

Before Erick could sink the rest of the way to the bottom, he rolled over and took in the sight of the shoal. He couldn’t recognize Silas’ house from this height, but he could see the shadowy crack on the sea floor that made up the market chasm.

“I hope you do find those merpirates,” Gale’s voice echoed in his head. Erick glared at the chasm. He thought about how useless Peleran’s guards were, at how Ronan technically never said he needed an escort. He was only worried about Silas’ safety.

Erick angled down towards the market chasm. He didn’t look back.

Chapter End Notes

Gale has yet again broke the record of being the biggest asshole, haha. Arguably Ivan could still be considered biggest asshole for dumping Erick in the ocean, but he at least had (somewhat) good intentions.

Side note, on the subject of Ivan -- I’ve actually finally figured out Ivan's deal with merfolk. I didn't really have a good reason for him to hate them until like literally last
week, so I hope the backstory I came up with works and isn't too cliché. It'll be explained around chapter 57, so you all will have a long time to wait to see what it is.
When Silas returned to his house after leaving Erick at Merise’s, he sat back at the kitchen table and cradled his head in his hands. He hoped Merise would tell Erick he should accept whatever the gods decide, that she would take Silas’ side and convince Erick that a baby wouldn’t be a bad thing, but he had no idea if she would. Whatever they decided was out of his control now. He couldn’t tell if he regretted that or not yet.

Minutes passed into an hour, and still Silas waited. He snacked on krill and paced, wondering why Erick was taking so long to return. If Erick was actually just talking to Merise as Silas had suggested, it meant that there was still hope that he could change Erick’s mind. But if that wasn’t the case, if Erick was just waiting for Merise to make whatever medicine he needed, then Silas would have to stop hoping and move on. He figured it probably wouldn’t be that hard. He hoped so, anyway.

Before he met Erick, Silas didn’t even think he wanted to have a kid. He was happy just being a salvager. But the idea that he could actually raise a little person of his own, that it was a real possibility, somehow made the prospect appealing. Having it dashed away left him with an emptiness he could only compare to the loss of his maternal father. Despite the difference of the lives lost, a final exhale and a closing door both ended with silence.

As another hour passed, Silas kept himself occupied by playing dice games by himself. He picked up each die and dropped them one by one. His hand scooped them back up and again they tumbled softly to the table.

Eventually Silas dropped the dice back into the cup and didn’t pick them back up. Something must have gone wrong. He tried telling himself that Erick was fine with Merise, that she would have gotten him if they ended up arguing too, but the worry gripping him said otherwise.

It took Silas several more minutes to work up the courage to go back to Merise’s house. He didn’t want to interrupt if Erick was just talking to Merise, but he couldn’t wait any longer without knowing.

Outside Merise’s house, Silas faltered when he heard Gale siren singing. It took Silas only a few measures of the lilting melody to recognize it was a song for rejuvenation. Merise must have been making Gale practice enchanting again, but Silas couldn’t imagine that Gale would sing with anyone watching him, much less Erick. Gale disliked having his mother correct every mistake he
made in front of other people, so he only grudgingly let Silas join his lessons.

Curious to see if Gale had finally gotten over his animosity with Erick, Silas peered in through the window. Gale was sitting across from an elderly mermaid with cropped grey hair. He sung with his eyes closed while Merise listened beside another elderly mermaid. Silas recognized the aged couple from Gale’s previous lessons. They came to Merise regularly to treat their arthritis, making them the perfect mers for Gale to practice healing songs.

Since Silas didn’t see Erick at the table, he looked around the rest of the house. Erick wasn’t in the living area. Unless he was hiding behind the infirmary curtain or in the guest alcove, he wasn’t in Merise’s house. Silas gripped the windowsill.

Gale finished singing and pushed back away from the table. Half-smiling, he asked the mermaid, “Anything still aching?”

The mermaid stretched out her knobby fingers and grinned. “No, good as new, dear. You’ve really got such a lovely voice.”

Gale held the back of his neck, acting coy with a smirk. “I don’t know about that…”

“No, really,” she continued, “I could just bottle you up and have you sing for me all day.” She looked over at her partner. “Don’t you think so?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “He’s getting better than his mother, I’d say.”

Merise laughed. “Wouldn’t that be a blessing? Keep that up, and maybe you’ll convince him to quit his reef work and work with me seriously.”

“Mom,” Gale groaned. “I like being a gatherer.”

“No, you like talking to your friends whenever your boss isn’t looking,” she teased. To the couple, she said, “It’s been a pleasure as always. Need anything else before you go?”

The couple said they were fine, so they rose from their seats. Silas backed away from the window before they could notice him. After the mermaids left, Silas swam up to the door.

Merise saw Silas as she waved goodbye. Noticing his worried expression, she asked, “Silas, is something wrong?”

“I don’t know. Is Erick still here? He never came back after I left him.”

Merise gasped. “He didn’t?” She spun around and shouted, “Gale!”

“What?” Gale came to the door, but shrunk back as soon as he saw his mother’s face.

“Erick never went back to Silas’ house,” Merise stated, putting her palms on her hips. “You said he did.”

“I thought he did!” Gale held out his hands. “Where else would he go?”

“Wait, what?” Silas stared wide-eyed at them. “What happened?”

Merise answered, “After I told Erick I would make medicine for him, Gale found Erick on top of our house and got in an argument with him.”

“Over what?”
Gale frowned at the floor. “Nothing. It was just something stupid.”

Merise gave him a pointed look. “Stupid, certainly, but it was hardly nothing.” Turning to Silas, she said, “I couldn’t hear everything they said, but Gale was blaming Erick for causing trouble between you and him.”

“Seriously?” Silas faced Gale, but he didn’t meet his eyes. “Gale, why? You hating him is why we keep fighting.”

“But I’m just—”

“I don’t care if you think it’s for my own good!” Silas snapped. “Gods above, what made you think it would be a good idea to yell at him?”

“I don’t know, he just pissed me off,” Gale answered, shaking his head. “Acting like he knows better than me, he should’ve known I’d get mad.”

“He should’ve?” Silas repeated incredulously. “Gale, do you have any idea how much he hates himself? How guilty he is that he hurt me? He’s been bloody suicidal ever since he came here, and you keep undoing everything I keep trying to do to help him!”

“I can’t be making him that much worse if he’s already got so many problems,” Gale retorted.

“You’re the reason he’s missing!” Silas threw up his hands and turned around. “Now I have to find him before something happens to him.”

“He can take care of himself. You still have crazy people hunting you down.”

“I don’t care,” Silas said. “They could be hunting him now too for all I know. If he gets in trouble, he still doesn’t know how to get back to my house.”

“Then it’s his fault for being an idiot and running off,” Gale answered. “Just get one of the guards to go find him. I’m sure your dad would spare somebody.”

“Even if he does, I’m not going to just sit around.”

“Silas,” Merise said, cutting in. “I’m worried about Erick too, but Gale has a point here.”

“Now you’re taking his side?” Silas retorted.

“This isn’t about taking sides,” Merise answered. “We just don’t want you to get hurt again.”

“What am I, five? Stop acting like a need a babysitter.”

“I’m not saying you need one,” Merise said, softening her voice. “It would just be a good idea to stay with someone until we know it’s safe. Think of it like the buddy system.”

Silas tempered his glare into a scowl. “That isn’t any better.”

“Maybe not, but try to be patient. I’m sure your dad will find the people who attacked you sooner than later. In the meantime, can either of us go with you to the guard station?” Merise asked.

Silas glanced at Gale before looking at Merise again. “I guess I’ll go with you.” To Gale, he said, “Until you apologize to Erick, I don’t want to hang out with you anymore. I didn’t want to have to pick a side, but I don’t know how else I can convince you to forgive him. I’m sorry.”
Gale muttered a curse through his teeth. “Fine then,” he said, turning to go back into the living room. He looked over his shoulder. “Just please don’t get caught up in trouble again, okay?”

“I promise I won’t. I’ll let you know as soon as we find Erick.”

Silas left with Merise. As they swam to the guard station, Silas prayed that Erick would be okay.
Erick dove down into the market chasm. As he swum past the lanterns hanging on pennant lines, he checked the back of every mer he saw, looking for the merpirates’ shifter glyph. Now that he was actively searching for tattoos, Erick noticed that they were more common than he expected. Dozens of mers had inked tribal armbands or abstract art on their skin. Many mers decorated themselves in other ways too. They wore coral bracelets and glass bangles, salvaged gold necklaces and earrings on the membranes of their auditory fins, and attached beaded charms to the ends of their tails. Some mermaids even tied gossamer scarves like skirts around their waist or wore halter shirts made from beaded open netting.

The bustle of so many mers and the noise of the vendors shouting and bargaining with customers helped drown out the lingering turmoil in Erick’s chest. He let himself blend into the crowd. Without Silas with him, he took his time exploring and looking at everything for sale. He had no money, but he supposed if he was desperate, he could probably sell the locket he still wore, the one that Silas had found.

It occurred to Erick then that he should have given it back to Silas. Even though the amber-eyed merman hadn’t asked for it back, he never said he could keep it either. Erick wondered how much it was actually worth to merfolk. It certainly wouldn’t have been a small expense on land, even where gold could be mined and melted. If it was expensive, that was only more reason to return it. The locket was all he could give back since he had no idea what happened to the rest of Silas’ things. Talia might have kept Silas’ bag of salvaged finds, but she could have just as likely thrown them away. It was just another thing he would have to ask her when he returned to land.

Erick reached the bottom of the chasm where the hunters and foragers sold fresh fish and other edible creatures from the reefs and kelp forests. Erick’s stomach grumbled at the thought of food, and he remembered that he never ended up having lunch because of his argument with Silas. He cursed himself for starting their fight before they had eaten. He didn’t want to sell his locket for something as stupid as food, but he also didn’t know how to get back to Silas’ house. As he had swum to the market, he had a vague idea that he could just get a guard to show him the way back. Now he knew that was a dumb idea. His pride would never let himself admit that he had run off and got himself lost like some child.

Swimming back up away from the food market, Erick faltered when he noticed a tiny, young mer
tied to a leash in the hand of a merman with a pumpkin-orange tail. The lemonade-pink-tailed merman was straining against the leash, darting back and forth above her father like a kite in gusty weather. She could not have been more than four years old. Erick had a flash of worry about what would happen if her leash snapped or if she accidentally dive-bombed onto the stone floor of the cavern. He followed the leash down to her father’s hand to make sure he had a good grip and his breath caught in his throat. Her father was only looking at the selection of fish swimming about in a woven cage, but he had rested his free hand beneath the swell of a heavily pregnant stomach. His thumb massaged his taut skin as if trying to calm a wriggling baby inside.

Erick stared for an indecently long time, trying to wrap his head around the image of a pregnant man. His stomach was too round to be mistaken for a beer belly. He was slight in statue like Silas, making Erick briefly wonder if he was just a masculine woman, but the lack of scales on his chest proved that wasn’t the case. After the pregnant merman made his decision, the fishmonger pulled out his pick. As the monger snapped its neck so the merman could put it in the shopping basket on his elbow, the merman called up to his daughter so they could move on. The little mermaid swam down and hugged her father’s forehead. She nuzzled her nose into his hair while they continued shopping.

Tearing away his gaze, Erick sighed heavily and told himself he was being stupid. Little kids like her were only cute from a distance. When he was on his ship, Dunley had told him plenty about the horrors of children, being a father of two with a third on the way. Dunley’s mother-in-law had to help care for all of them and his wife while he was away at sea. Erick hoped that Dunley had found another job now that Erick was no longer captain. Half the reason Erick had even brought him onto his crew was because he wanted to help him get a job that stopped at port more often than merchant ships. Dunley had already missed too many years of his children’s lives.

While he swam along the chasm, Erick couldn’t help but wonder what Dunley would think of him having a kid of his own. If he had knocked up a girl, he probably would have offered him tips on fatherhood. But since the one possibly knocked up was himself, Erick would never be able to tell him. Dunley didn’t even know he was bisexual. Aside from the few other queer people he knew from drinking too much and sleeping around during his youth, the only person he had told was Talia. She teased him about it, but kept his secret. The thought of Ivan finding out terrified him.

Erick found himself in the salvager’s section when he pulled himself back out of his thoughts. Remembering Jeb, he wondered if the old merman would have anything for lunch. If he didn’t, Erick would at least be able to ask him about the merpirates’ tattoos. That was assuming Gale had actually updated him as Silas asked, though.

Jeb’s stall soon came into Erick’s view. When the old merman spotted him, he called, “Erick, is that your grumpy mug I spy?” Jeb noticed Silas wasn’t with him and his brow furrowed. “Where’s our little lad?”

Erick stopped and rested his hand on his table to hold himself up without needing to move his tail. “Silas is at home. I’m trying to avoid him right now because we got into an argument.”

“That so, eh?” Jeb took hold of the white and green awning above his table and hung from it. “Any spat with Silas never lasts long, but still, anything I can help with?”

“Not really, unless I can bum lunch from you.”

Jeb laughed. “Sure thing.” He reached under his table and picked up a large jar. “How do you like goose barnacles?” he asked, holding it out to him.

Erick leaned away and made a face at the dark tubes with pale ruby crowns. “Barnacles are
“Not all of them, but these are.” Jeb took one out and pulled the mussel out by its ruby crown from its stone sleeve. The inner flesh went from purplish grey to bright orange at the end. “It won’t kill you, landlubber.”

Erick gave him a peeved look for the small insult, but reluctantly took the barnacle. Even though he had been slowly getting used to merfolk food and was starting to appreciate the variety of differences in all the kinds of fish to eat, it was still a struggle to make himself try anything new.

Jeb set the jar on the table and rested his elbow behind it. “So, besides today, how’ve things been with you and our little lad?”

Making himself swallow his bite, Erick answered. “Everything’s fine, I guess.” Since the goose barnacle wasn’t awful, he reached into the jar to take out another. “It’s just a pain being around him all the time.”

Jeb smiled. “We all got different limits. It’s good to know you’re both all right. After Gale came and told me about you two getting attacked, I’d been worrying. I was about ready to close up my shop and come visit.”

“I wish you had.” Erick started making a little pile of the barnacle casings. “I’ve been dying to know if you found out anything about their tattoos.”

“I found out quite a bit about them actually,” Jeb said. “I can’t say anything to your theory that they’re glyphs, but I know it’s the mark of the Diving Peregrines’ guild. They’re a cocksure bunch of salvagers that work mostly on the south side of Cradle Basin.”

Jumping upright, Erick asked, “You’re serious?”

“Now don’t get too excited,” Jeb said with a chuckle. “You can’t just start bashing skulls because you got a name.”

Erick glowered at him. “Don’t treat me like some thug. I don’t use my fists for everything.”

Surprised by his sudden ire, Jeb held up his hands and said, “Okay, I didn’t say you do. I’m just trying to temper your expectations.” He sat and leaned back against the wall. “Did your fight with Silas have something to do with your penchant for action?”

“No.” Erick crossed his arms. “Not exactly.” He groaned in frustration. “I just got in an argument with Gale too. He said I’d never be anything but a shark.”

“Did your fight with Silas have something to do with your penchant for action?” Jeb slapped the table with both hands. Erick flinched. “That spiteful boy! Don’t you listen to him,” he said, pointing his finger at Erick, making him lean away. “Throw out that rubbish and go panning somewhere else. You aren’t a shark and you never have been.”

Erick looked at him with disbelief before withdrawing into himself. “You might believe that, but you’ve never seen me at my worst.” He pressed his thumbnail into his finger.

“Lad, I’ve fought real sharks and lived to tell the tale,” Jeb answered. “I’ve known folks who’ve done far worse than anything you might’ve done, but they turned themselves around. Nobody’s beyond irredeemable.”

Erick didn’t answer.
Jeb sighed. “Look, let me tell you something a lot of folks don’t know about salvagers,” he said, folding his arms on the table. “Salvaging’s a business that draws in lost folks. We’re the ones who don’t fit with other people. Sure, some of us are just in it for the dream of riches, but most of us don’t care about that. We look for forgotten, unwanted trinkets all crusted with age, and we find them and clean them up. It takes a lost person to appreciate lost things.”

Inclining his head to the side, Jeb continued, “You got the makings of a salvager in you. Gale can’t see past all the history eating at you, but Silas and I know there’s something there worth cleaning up. We want to see you shine, but the problem is that people aren’t trinkets. It’ll be up to you if you pull yourself up out of the sand or not.”

“What if I don’t think I can?” Erick asked in a quiet voice. “I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. Everything used to be so simple, but now…” He lifted and dropped his hands.

Jeb patted Erick’s back. Erick tensed at the fond gesture, but didn’t pull away. “It’s all right, lad. You’re not alone.” Reaching under the counter, he said, “I got something you can help me with, a new engraving I just got yesterday.” Jeb took out a scratched-up wedding band. “Can you translate it for me?”

Erick shook his head, but he breathed a laugh. “Sure.” He swung his tail over Jeb’s table to sit facing inside his stall. “Hand it over,” he said, holding out his hand.

Chapter End Notes

Jeb is the grandpa I always wish I had. Also, fun fact: I picture him with a heavy Scottish accent. I'm not sure how much of that actually comes across in my writing, but he's always had that accent since I first came up with him.

I considered phonetically writing his dialogue to reflect it, but I've had two different teachers tell me that's racist/Not Cool to do that and none that have supported it. One of them taught linguistics and the other taught creative writing, and basically it was bad to write phonetically because it's almost impossible to write other cultures' languages/accents authentically without resorting to stereotypes. Rather than make it look like they're uneducated, which is what writing phonetically also does, it's much better to research sentence patterns and phrases/vocab that people of a certain culture would actually use. Or, if that's too much work, simply state they have an accent if it's relevant to their characterization. Since I'm only loosely basing my story in our world, I wanted to avoided naming any other real-world places. Really, I wanted to take out English and references to Christianity entirely as well, but I haven't bothered developing the countries on land very much. England is just a filler right now.
Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

Update is a little late today, but still. Happy Monday, everybody. This chapter marks the start of the rewrites I made about a month or so ago, and I'm so thankful that I went with my new direction. I would not have been able to make the progress that I've made if I hadn't cut those chapters. However, if anyone is interested, I could upload them as a separate post since I saved them to my cut file. Even though I didn't like the direction I was taking, there are some great scenes with Jeb, Erick, and Gale that I was sorry to scrap.

After Erick spent a little over an hour chatting with Jeb, he asked him where Cradle Basin was so he could start tracking down the Diving Peregrines’ guild.

“The Cradle’s the capitol,” Jeb answered. “That’s a few day’s trip from here.”

Erick frowned at that. “Do you have any maps to point it out?”

“Hm, I should somewhere.” Getting up to go dig through his storage, Jeb said, “The only other place I can think of for you to look is at Harpy’s Hole. Folks see them hanging around there sometimes.”

“Is that closer?”

“Yeah, it’s a tavern here in the chasm.” Jeb sorted through a large jar full of rolled fish leathers before pulling out a map as long as his spread arms. “Here we go.” Being without a table, Jeb spread the map out on the ground. It resembled a topographic map, but it took Erick a moment to realize that the lines referred to the valleys and mountains underwater rather than those on land.

“Holy shit.” Erick folded his tail beneath himself to look more closely at the map. Blank shapes stood for land, making the area charted completely opposite from maps he had used on his ship. “Sailors would pay a fortune for this.” His finger traced along the edge of land where The Gentian made port, Anvil Point.

Jeb laughed. “I ain’t selling it. I’ve marked this here map with every wreck I’ve ever explored.” Pointing to one of the dozens of tiny circle marks, he said, “That spot there is where I found my biggest haul – a man o’ war that was as long as this chasm is wide.” Beside each circle had little curly lines, letters of merfolk language.

Erick’s eyes widened. “Wow.” Then his brow furrowed as he looked to the south of his home town’s port. Jeb had circled several wrecks there too. His blood ran cold. Erick sat back and found himself grabbing the locket he still wore. “Jeb… Did you ever find a galleon named Philomela?”

“I might have, but I wouldn’t know if I did,” Jeb answered, apologetic. “Even if I could have read the ships’ names, not all wrecks are easily identified.” Gently, he asked, “Did you lose someone on it?”

Erick made himself take his hand off his locket. “My parents,” he answered, staring at the
indecipherable lines. He pointed at the map. “My uncle told me their ship went down somewhere around here.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Looking at the area Erick pointed out, he said, “I searched those waters in my younger days. If their ship sunk within the past twenty years or so, I probably haven’t seen it.”

Erick didn’t know whether that made him feel better or not, that Jeb hadn’t looted his parents’ ship or seen their saltwater-stripped corpses. But it meant that other salvagers probably found them instead. After the merpirates had taken their spoils, it became just another anonymous wreck, no more personal than the corals around the shoal.

Hesitant, keeping his tone carefully neutral, Erick asked, “What do salvagers do when they find the remains of people?”

“What a question.” Jeb sighed. “I wish I could tell say we all say words or something else for them, but the best we do is just leave them be. It’s not for merfolk to disturb them.”

“Even if there’s something valuable on them?”

Jeb lifted his shoulders, rueful. “Salvagers save what they can. To leave anything is to let the lobsters or the next salvager have it.”

“I see.” Erick clenched his jaw. He stared at the map, but moved his eyes away from where his parents’ ship sunk. “So, where is Cradle Basin then?”

Jeb pointed to the deepest part of the ocean, the center between Erick’s country and the lands in the far northeast. The closest bit of land was a cluster of tiny islands to the east of the basin. “Right there. King Adonis lives there too, right where all merfolk began. Hard to believe an island used to be where the palace stands now.”

“That story is true?” Erick asked, thinking of the origin story Silas told him. The merfolk used to be islanders who worshiped the spirit of a volcano, but when they started seafaring, the spirit felt betrayed and abandoned them. The islanders only survived because the goddess of the ocean’s abyss turned them all into merfolk.

“I believe it is,” Jeb answered. “The gist of it anyway. No one’s actually talked to spirits or gods since those days of old.” Pointing to a spot just north of Anvil Point, Jeb said, “Here’s where we are.” About two knuckle-widths separated Peleran from land, but two entire hand-spans closed the distance between Peleran and Cradle Basin.

Erick studied the distances between each. “How long does it take to get to land from here?”

“Hm, less than a day. Peleran grew to the size it is today because of how close we are to the kelp forests, and because we have the chasm for traders.”

“I’ve been that close to land this entire time?” Erick asked, incredulous.

“Aye, Silas didn’t tell you?”

Erick glowered at the map. “No. I suppose he wasn’t planning on saying anything about it until the full moon. How many days is that from now?”

Jeb thought on it for a moment. “Four days, I think. That’s when you were going to see your crew again, weren’t it?”
“Yeah.” Erick found it hard to believe he had already spent almost an entire month underwater. The days he had spent with Silas had gone by so quickly. If he could find out the merpirates’ secret to shifting in four days, he would be able to go back home as soon as he reunited with his crew. “Silas is supposed to take me back then.”

“Well, that’s something to look forward to,” Jeb said.

“Only if I get my legs back first.” Erick moved away from the map to sit against the wall and stretch out his tail. “If I don’t get rid of this thing, I don’t know how I’ll be able to face my crew again.” He looked out towards the chasm over Jeb’s stall table. “So, since the Basin’s too far, where can I find Harpy’s Hole?”

“It’s toward the bottom of the chasm,” Jeb answered, rolling back up his map. “Want me to lead you there?”

“Sure.” Erick got up and swam out of Jeb’s stall. After Jeb closed up and hung a sign, he grabbed a belt with a pouch on it and showed Erick to the tavern.

Gesturing down towards a carved masthead in the shape of a bird with a woman’s screaming face, Jeb said, “There it is.” A couple mermen sat in front of a bar hanging over the chasm floor. The rest of the tavern was hidden beneath a blue awning under the harpy carving. Jeb handed Erick the belt and pouch. “There’s some money in there if you want to get yourself anything while you’re here.”

“Oh, thanks.” Surprised but grateful, Erick put on the belt and checked the pouch. It had a good handful of cowrie shells, but he only had a vague understanding of how merfolk money worked. Silas hadn’t been very good at explaining how shells compared to coins.

“You’re welcome.” Jeb smiled, then patted Erick’s shoulder. “If you need anything, I’ll be back at my stall.”

After Erick bid him goodbye, he swam down to go into Harpy’s Hole.
Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

Here is my biggest chapter yet at a whooping 3,100 words! It started as a normal-sized chapter, but then I had to go back and plant some elements that would be necessary later.

Also, an update on my total word count: my master document has crossed 121,000 words! I now have updates lined up all the way through the middle of July, and I'm really pleased with my current progress. I'm getting a bit stuck as I'm definitely nearing the end now, but I'm thinking of increasing updates anyway to two times a week or bringing back bonus chapters at every 25 kudos instead of 50. I like having a big buffer, but I also want to reward you for sticking with this story. Do you have any preferences? More updates? Other bonuses like other short stories? Just more fan art? Let me know in the comments.

Beneath the blue awning, Erick looked into Harpy’s Hole. On the walls hung salvaged port windows, ship wheels, and an eclectic display of glass bottles and silverware. Glowing algae lamps were suspended in macramé slings over the bar and small tables throughout the room. The afternoon lunch rush had ended, so only a few mers snacked on krill or seaweed salads. Most of them had cocktail glasses filled with what looked like various colors of caviar or egg yolks. Erick wondered if the gelatinous bubbles were supposed to be the merfolk equivalent of alcohol.

“Sit wherever you like,” a passing waitress said. “I’ll be with you in a bit.”

Erick was about to say he was just looking, but then he spotted a tattoo on the back of a green-tailed merman sitting alone at the bar. Erick froze. The merman was hunched over his glass as if he had sat down to drown out a long day of work. Though he was unarmed and potential witnesses surrounded them, Erick had been in too many bar fights to discount the chance of broken glass or bystanders picking sides. As he swam to the bar, he mentally prepared himself for the worst.

“Excuse me,” Erick said, coming up behind him. “I—Hal?” Erick did a double take when his former warden looked up from his glass. Without his armor, Erick hardly recognized him.

“Holy shit.” Hal grabbed the bar to turn and face him. “Erick?” He laughed. “You startled me. I didn’t think I’d see you here.” He shrunk somewhat under Erick’s incredulous glare. “There something I can help you with?”

“Yeah,” Erick said, planting himself in the seat beside Hal’s. He rested his elbow on the bar and leaned towards him. “Why the fuck do you have that tattoo?”

“Holy shit.” Hal grabbed the bar to turn and face him. “Erick?” He laughed. “You startled me. I didn’t think I’d see you here.” He shrunk somewhat under Erick’s incredulous glare. “There something I can help you with?”

“Yeah,” Erick said, planting himself in the seat beside Hal’s. He rested his elbow on the bar and leaned towards him. “Why the fuck do you have that tattoo?”

“This?” Hal asked uneasily, jabbing his thumb towards his back. “Why are you asking?”

“Don’t play dumb,” Erick retorted. “It’s a glyph, isn’t it?”

Hal paled. “Quiet!” he said, holding up his hand to hush him. “How did you find out?”
“It’s not hard to put two and two together!” Erick snapped. “As soon as Merise told me about glyphs, it was obvious.”

“How…?” Hal started to ask, but then his eyes widened. “Oh.” He grimaced and hissed a curse. “So you know what it does then.” He swore again and rested his forehead on his fingers. “Of course Silas would have told you.”

“That he saw goddamn merpirates that can shift?” Erick asked. “No shit. Now, you’re going to tell me how I get one of those tattoos and why the fuck you’re in league with these psychopaths, or so help me god, I will fucking stab your eye with that thing,” he said, pointing to Hal’s glass.

“Just because I’m off duty right now doesn’t negate the fact that you’re threatening to assault a guard.” Hal put his hands back on the table and straightened his back. “If you attack me here, you would go back to prison.”

“Then convince me why I should care.”

Hal frowned. “Look, it’s a really complicated situation, and there are people I’m much more worried about pissing off than you.”

“Sounds like a challenge to me,” Erick deadpanned. “Should I try to prove I’m worse?”

“No, I deal with worse physical threats every day at the prison,” Hal answered. “I can try to explain, but I’m not going to here where someone can overhear us.”

“You think I trust you enough to go anywhere with you?” Erick asked. “Your fucking guild mates already attacked me and Silas once.”

“Yeah, and I’m sorry that happened, really.” Hal showed Erick his palms, contrite. “Those guys didn’t know it was Silas. As soon as I heard and realized it was him, I got them to call off the search.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better?” Erick retorted. “We’ve been avoiding the chasm for the past week because we thought he’d get attacked again.”

“What else could I have done?” Hal asked, lifting his shoulders with his hands out. “We couldn’t just send an apology letter or something. You wouldn’t have believed it.”

“So? You still have that fucking tattoo and would know why I’d need it. If you couldn’t have told us about the merpirates, you could have at least told me about it.”

“It’s not that simple,” Hal groaned. “I’m not anyone important to them. I just recruit people at the prison.”

“Yeah, people that go to murder hundreds of people that I could know.” Erick shook his head, disgusted. “How many guards are in on this?”

“Enough that you’d have a hard time doing anything about it.”

“Does Ronan know?”

“No,” Hal answered, looking at his glass filled with grape-sized, red caviar. “Most of what we do isn’t technically illegal, though.”

“It’s still fucked up.” Erick stared at him. “How can you sit there with a straight face and try to
Hal hesitated to answer. “I don’t know. I’m not trying to. I know it’s wrong, but I’m not the one who does any of that stuff. If I don’t do what they want, they’d just find someone else.”

“Those are just excuses and you know it.”

“What else do you want me to say?” Hal asked. “Sorry?”

“That could be a fucking start!”

Hal winced. “Please stop yelling.” He glanced around the tavern at people giving them sidelong stares. “I’m scum, I know, but I can’t do anything if you make a scene. The only reason I joined their guild was because my brother talked me into it. Anyone who backed them got a share of their profits. I thought they were like normal salvagers.”

“Then when did you find out they kill people to salvage the ships they sink?” Erick asked. “That didn’t make you think for one second that maybe you shouldn’t be helping them?”

“It did, but what was I supposed to do about it? There’s no going back after you get the tattoo. Everyone who tries to get the secret out ends up dead.” Hal faced Erick. “They were going to kill Silas and Gale. Now they might anyway because you know about the tattoos. They could deal with Silas telling people tall tales, but if he or you or anyone else who knows starts talking, we’re all shark food.” He noticed the waitress coming over, but he held up his hand to wave her away.

Erick sighed through his teeth. He mentally tallied everyone who knew about his now-proven theory. Besides Merise, they had told Jeb, Ronan, and Gale. Jeb had been skeptical, so he was unlikely to have told anyone else. Though Ronan thought it was possible, he had dismissed his theory because they didn’t have proof and decided against sharing it with the force since it wasn’t relevant to the search against Silas’ attackers. When Silas told Gale, Gale apparently thought it was too simple to enable something as complicated as transfiguring a tail and gills into legs and lungs.

“Nobody’s going to be shark food,” Erick said. “I don’t think anyone I’ve told is going to be an issue. How did you realize it was Silas that saw them and not some other guy that looked like him?”

“When Silas and Gale left to get you that language pearl, it was the same time the hunters were spotted,” Hal answered. “I didn’t know that they had been seen at all, much less that they were looking for anyone, until you reported the assault against you and Silas. The guy that recorded your report works for the guild too and told the rest of us guards. It’s also why the people who attacked you haven’t been brought in. As soon I heard that the second person who had seen them matched Gale’s description, that’s when I knew it was them.”

Hal picked up one of his red caviar drops. “I was afraid of what they’d do when I told them. I almost didn’t at all, but I couldn’t let someone else attack him again or worse.” Hal swallowed the drop and picked up another. “When all of the guys who are guards found out, I thought there would be a mutiny. I wasn’t kidding when I told you how much we care about Silas.” Glancing at the faint scars left from Erick’s stitches, he added, “I wanted to thank you for protecting him, by the way. I think the gods made the right choice, picking you.”

“Thanks, but I still think they choose wrong,” Erick muttered, letting some of his anger simmer down. “So what stopped the mutiny then?” he asked. “You could have ended the guild right there.”

Hal scoffed, a bitter laugh on his breath. “Yeah, right.” He popped another drop into his mouth,
making Erick think that they were definitely alcoholic after all. “Adriel would never let it end that
easily.” Hal hesitated a beat, second-guessing his admission. But then he continued in a whisper,
“He’s the one that enchants the tattoos and leads everything.” He chewed his lip, staring at the bar.
“His siren voice is like nothing I’ve ever heard before. I bet he could even get the gods to do his
bidding if he tried.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Erick asked. “I get that not all mers can use magic, but how
different can enchanters’ voices be?”

“Let me put it this way,” Hal said. “Just like everybody’s speaking voice is different, some siren
voices just sound better than others. The more beautiful or unique it is, the more likely spirits take
notice of it.” Erick stared at him with a furrowed brow. Hal sighed. “Okay, you know Merise,
right? From what I’ve seen her do, she’s the best there is at sanative and somnolent songs. How
long did it take her to put you to sleep?”

“Less than a minute, probably,” Erick answered, thinking of the two times she had treated him.

“It usually takes other healers up to five minutes,” Hal said. “Merise is good at what she does
because the spirits love her voice and she knows how to hit each note exactly right. Adriel is the
same way, but he doesn’t sing healing songs.”

“Then what does he sing?” Erick asked, already fearing the first possibility he considered because
of siren stories.

Hal finished the last of the drops in his glass. Putting his elbows on the table, he rested his head in
his hands. “Take a guess.”

“Hypnosis?” When Hal didn’t respond, Erick swore under his breath. “So merfolk can control
people’s minds?”

“Yes.” Hal swallowed hard. “It’s been illegal to use it against humans for a few years now, and it’s
always been forbidden to use it against other mers, but hunters learn the songs to control dolphins
all the time. Adriel brags about how he could get a whole pod to do flips for him.”

“That’s insane.” Shaking his head at the idea, Erick said, “People on land always called sailors
crazy if they said they were enchanted.”

“They probably weren’t actually lying. It used to be a popular pastime for a lot of hunters to play
with humans like puppets,” Hal said. “On long trips, what better fun could they have than to make
sailors jump overboard or act like fools?”

Erick held his forehead in his hand. “Jesus, if that had happened to me…” He didn’t know how to
complete the thought, but it occurred to him then that it could have actually happened to Ivan. It
could certainly be one reason why his uncle hated merfolk so much, though it still didn’t explain
why he knew mertongue.

Hal nodded. “It’s hard to imagine, I’m sure. But as bad as that sounds, mesmerists can do worse.”
He hesitated to continue again, but he said, “None of us know for sure, but a lot of us think that
Adriel enchanted all of us with a suicide switch if we turn on him.” He traced his finger over the
rim of his glass. “I don’t actually remember getting this tattoo. I remember lying down so he could
do it and waking up when it was done, but nothing in between. It might have just to prevent us
from learning the awakening song, but the possibility is still there.”

“Jesus Christ.” Erick’s eyes widened. “So you think that you’ll…?”
“I don’t currently want to kill myself or you, but yes, I am afraid that I might,” Hal answered. “Hence why I had you guess first, and why I’m saying anything at all – you already figured out our biggest secret. I’m telling myself that I’m not really revealing too much of anything just in case it’s true.”

Erick ran his hand through his hair, staring at the bar in disbelief. “This is so fucked up.”

“Do you understand now why I didn’t just leave or do anything?”

“Yeah. And amazingly enough, I think I hate the gods and spirits even more now.” Erick folded his arms on the bar. “I never had to worry about this shit on land.”

“I never had to either until I got roped into it.”

Neither one spoke for a while. Hal ordered another caviar cocktail. Erick brooded over this new information, beginning to comprehend just how hard it would be to actually end merpiracy.

Eventually, Erick asked, “If Adriel knows songs to control people like this, why use shifting instead?”

“It’s not illegal,” Hal answered simply. “It’s loophole. With an operation this big, Adriel has to play by the book. Mers who get caught enchanting sailors get thrown into prison, but every time the King’s patrols see shifters, they let them go because no law says they can’t. Humans don’t own the oceans. Sailing their ships without the King’s direct permission is basically trespassing. He has no obligation to protect them.”

“You have to be kidding me,” Erick said. “How the fuck are humans supposed to get permission if merfolk won’t even tell us you exist?”

Hal shrugged, helpless. “I don’t know. That’s probably the main reason they don’t want everyone to know about the tattoos. If everyone was able to cross shores, it’d end the whole business.”

“What if I talked to the King myself to get protection for these ships?” Erick asked. “My uncle can literally get an audience with most members of the royal court on land. We can work something out that can benefit everyone.”

“You think the King cares about changing the law?” Hal asked, looking at him in disbelief. “Our former king might have, but King Adonis knows about shifting already. Adriel is part of the reason he’s in power now at all, with all the underhanded work he did for him. The King’s more than happy to keep it all secret as long as Adriel lines his pockets. Ever since he took the throne, relations with humans have been declining again. Our last king was the one to outlaw just enchantments against humans, but it wasn’t a popular decision.”

“If King Adonis and everyone else cares so little about humans, why doesn’t he just repeal the law against enchantments?” Erick asked. “Using shifting and keeping it secret is the most ridiculous work around I’ve ever heard of.”

“Repealing it would probably cause a civil war between us in the south and the mers in the northeast. They’re the ones that pushed for it so much in the first place because they actually trade with some humans. As everything stands now, the King benefits either way. If Adriel keeps sinking ships, the King can profit and continue his one-sided vendetta against humans until he can get more support to openly repeal their protections. If the secret gets out, he can blame everything on Adriel because he’s a mesmerist and make humans pay through the nose to cross the ocean. If you ask me, small-scale piracy is better than an all-out war for travel rights.”
Erick mentally swore a long string of curses. “Why can’t this side of the sea just be nice to humans like the northeast? Why is everything so different over here?”

“There are a couple different reasons, but it’s mainly a religious problem,” Hal answered. “The gods abandoned humans. Conservative mers are afraid that associating with them will bring the same fate to us. It’s the main reason the King dislikes them.”

“Wait, so just because humans can’t use magic, mers think they can kill us?”

“Basically. No one really knows why humans lost their voices, so it’s as good as any other reason. That plus the fact we’re self-sufficient down here is why no one on this side of the sea bothers to associate with humans.”

“But what about the mers who do want to, like Silas?” Erick asked. “How come nobody has tried?”

“I’m sure plenty have, but they usually end up never being seen again. You’d know better than me what humans think of merfolk.”

Erick frowned, but conceded, “If they weren’t killed, they probably would have ended up in freak shows.” He paused. “So everything just sucks both ways. That doesn’t change anything. I still want to get my legs back.”

Hal nodded, but then looked surprised at Erick’s stare. “You think I can help?” he asked, pointing to himself. “I don’t know the tattoo’s awakening song. Adriel is the only one who does.”

“Isn’t there some way you could find out?”

“No, not unless I had a death wish,” Hal answered. “The best I can do is just recruit you. Everybody still thinks you were captured by humans like Silas. No one would question it if you said you wanted to get revenge.”

“You want me to join these people?” Erick said, recoiling at the idea.

“It’s the easiest way for you to get a tattoo.” Nodding his head to the side, Hal added, “Granted, I don’t know what hoops they’ll make you jump through to get it, but I don’t see any other options. I got mine pretty easily because I was already working at the prison when my brother recruited me. They never needed me to join the hunting.”

“But what if they want me to?” Erick asked. “I can’t kill people. I won’t.”

“Then maybe you can get out before they make you,” Hal said. “You can escape to land, and it sounds like your uncle can protect you with the connections he has.”

Erick rubbed between his eyes. “Maybe, but I need to think this over.”

“Fair enough.” Hal waved over the waitress. She had been avoiding them since he shooed her away. “I can be back here tomorrow for you to let me know what you decide. Is that enough time?”

“It’ll have to be.” Erick got up from his seat.
So, who completely forgot about Hal? Haha, maybe it should be too big of a coincidence realistically to use him, but I always prefer using existing characters when I can rather than make up new ones.

Also, reminder that I have a tumblr (@darkacey) now for all of the art related to this story. Be sure to check it out!

Again, to reiterate my first note, I still want to do something to celebrate making it this far in this story. If you want more art, one-shots, updates, or whatever else, let me know.
Happy Monday, everybody! It makes me so happy to see your comments asking for more updates. I'm going to resume posting bonus chapters with every 25 kudos, so you'll get two updates this week!

“Erick!”

Hearing his name, Erick faltered on his way back to Jeb’s stall and looked down the chasm. “Silas?” His shoulders fell. “Oh, fuck me,” he muttered, dragging his hand over his face.

Silas rushed ahead of Jeb and the guard escorting him to cross the distance between him and Erick. He fanned out his arms and flicked his tail to come to an abrupt stop in front of him. “You had me worried sick. What were you thinking, running off like that?”

“I don’t know,” Erick snapped. “I shouldn’t have to get your permission to do everything.”

Silas flinched at the jab. Holding his elbow, he said, “I know, but you could have said something before you left. It’s barely been two days since you got all of your bandages off. I don’t want Merise to have to patch you up again.”

“She won’t have to anymore soon.” Glancing over at Jeb and the guard, he said under his breath, “I have a way to get one of the merpirates’ tattoos.” Silas’ eyebrows rose. Before he could ask how, Erick said, “I’ll tell you when we get back to your house.”

Silas frowned uncertainly. “Okay,” he said, “but I’m not liking the sound of this.”

Drily, Erick said, “Neither do I, but no surprise there. I haven’t liked much of anything down here.”

“I wish you’d stop saying things like that,” Silas muttered as they swam back to Jeb and Silas’ escort.

When they rejoined them, they bid Jeb farewell and returned to Silas’ house. After Silas’ escort left, Erick swam into the living room and settled onto the sponge floor. He folded his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling.

“So?” Silas said, sitting on the floor beside him. “What did you find out at that Harpy’s place?”

Erick glanced sidelong at Silas before looking back up at the ceiling. “Hal works for the merpirates. He recruits people at the prison for them. He can recruit me too so I can get a tattoo.”


“He has a tattoo. He says a lot of guards are part of their guild, but that Ronan doesn’t know.”

Silas sat back on his hands, processing it. “I can’t believe it. He’s friends with my dad. He’s been to our house.”
“If it makes you feel better, he claims that he never was one of the ones that attack ships,” Erick said. “Point is, this group is bigger and more fucked up than we thought. The King is apparently in on everything, but he’s turning a blind eye to it because he doesn’t care, their boss pays him off, and it’s somehow not illegal to climb onto ships and attack sailors.”

“But it should be. If everyone knew—”

“Then the King would have to pass laws against it or do something else, I know.” Erick gripped his hands into fists behind his head. “Here’s the most fucked up thing about all this: Hal says that if the secret about shifting gets out, the King would use it as an excuse to put tariffs on all ships that cross his waters. Rather than piracy, we’d then be dealing with an economic nightmare.”

“He wouldn’t seriously do that, would he?” Silas asked. “No king or queen has ever tried to stop ships from crossing the ocean like that.”

“There’s always a first for everything.” Erick shrugged, lifting his elbows. “I’ve heard nothing good about this King so far, but I have really no idea whether or not it’s a serious concern. My uncle is the one that knows politics, not me.”

“So what are we supposed to do then? We’re still going to try to stop them, right?”

“I don’t know.” Erick sighed and closed his eyes. “The more I find out, the more impossible it all seems. It makes me sick thinking of joining these people, but I need to get their tattoo to do anything.”

“There isn’t another way?”

“No. Hal said their boss is the only one who knows the awakening song. He scares the shit out of Hal because he’s apparently some wiz at hypnosis songs.”

“Gods, you’re serious?” Silas asked, wide-eyed. “Erick, that is really bad. It’s impossible to trust mesmerists. The few mers who are still allowed to learn those songs have to be monitored by the guards to make sure they don’t use them against other mers.”

“How can the guards tell if they do?” Erick asked. “How do these songs work?”

“The main one hunters learn has to be sung continuously to work, but as long as they sing, they can make their target do literally anything they want,” Silas answered. “They use it to make dolphins herd fish into prey balls for them.”

“So, that would be the one hunters used to make people into puppets then, right? Do people know they’re being controlled when it happens to them, or can they fight against it?”

“I don’t know if they can fight it, but they definitely know when it happens. It’s rarely used against other mers for that reason, because it’s so easy to get caught.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad then,” Erick said. “Hal said he was worried about their boss enchanting them with a ‘suicide switch’ if they turned against him. Is that actually possible?”

“Yeah, probably,” Silas answered. “It sounds like the song they used to use to train dolphins. Instead of having to sing continuously, hunters could just put a dolphin into a trance to teach it trigger words to obey different instructions. After they end the trance, they could just hum single notes to make them do all sorts of things. The last time somebody was caught using it on another person, her victim had been manipulated into doing stuff like paying for her meals and making them sleep with her whenever she said certain words. It took months for her victim to realize they
were being controlled. Cases like that is why it was banned.”

“Jesus.” Erick gaped at Silas.

“If this guy actually knows that song, there’s no telling what kind of trigger words he could be teaching everyone. I doubt anyone is keeping him in check if he’s running this kind of thing.”

Sitting up, Erick shook his head. “Even if that’s true, it doesn’t change the fact that this is the only way I can get a tattoo and go back to land.”

“But how am I supposed to get one then?” Silas asked. “Have Hal recruit me too?”

“No, of course not,” Erick answered, growing frustrated. “These people would kill you.”

“They could kill you too! Would you start valuing your own life for once and think this through?”

“What is there to think through?” Erick snapped. “I’m not going to spend the rest of my life in this watery hellhole. I finally have a chance to get my legs back, but you’re still just trying to find reasons to make me stay.”

“No I’m not!” Silas shouted. “This isn’t about me wanting you to stay here, it’s about making sure you don’t end up dead because you’re so desperate to leave.”

“If it’s my choice, it shouldn’t matter! I don’t need you telling me what to do.” Erick took a breath to try to calm himself down. “I wasn’t telling you all of this to try to talk me out of it. When Hal told me everything, he also said that he got them to call off the search for you and Gale. You don’t have to avoid the chasm anymore. So long as we don’t start telling everyone about their tattoos being a glyph, you’ll be safe. That’s all I care about. Getting me out of here is part of that.”

“And what if I don’t care?” Silas retorted. “We keep going in circles about this. You keep wanting to leave because you’re afraid of hurting me, and I keep wanting you to stay because I don’t want you hurting yourself.” He held out his arms. “Can’t you see how stupid that is? Even if you don’t like me the same way I like you, obviously we’re doing something wrong here.”

“Then what’s your solution?” Erick asked, giving Silas a scathing look. “I have plenty of other reasons to go back to land. What other reasons do you have to keep me here?”

“I don’t know.” Silas pressed his palms against his eyes and pushed his fingers through his hair. “I just keep feeling like I’m doing everything wrong, and you won’t help me figure out what I’m supposed to do.”

“Just let me go. Stop worrying so much about me.”

“Why don’t you tell yourself that if you’re going to make such a big deal about protecting me?” Silas glared at him. “The way I see it now, if joining these pirates is the only way to get to land, I’ll just have to join too.”

“Silas, don’t be stupid. None of the guards who are already a part of their guild are going to believe you would actually be willing to hurt people.”

“Maybe there’s other jobs I can do for them,” Silas said. “Like, you know English. If we tell them you know it, maybe they can use that instead of make you hurt people.”

“And how am I supposed to explain that without revealing I was human?” Erick asked. “Hal said I could just play up the fact that they think I was captured like you.”
“You could say that you were captive a lot longer than me, like that you were kidnapped as a kid and grew up in a tank.”

Erick gave him a skeptical look. “Do you honestly think they’d believe that?”

Silas lifted up his hands. “I don’t know. But it could be worth a shot.”

“Not if it’s an all-or-nothing shot,” Erick retorted. “I’m not going to do anything that makes me stand out more necessary. After I get the tattoo, I can go back to land and get Ivan’s advice on what we should do next.” Erick paused as another thought occurred to him. “I might not be able to stop merpiracy, but I can at least I can tell the Navy Admiral about shifters and make him aware that it’s a problem. Once merchants know to expect merpirates as a risk, they can equip themselves against them.”

“Why do you have to get legs to be able to tell him that?” Silas asked. “Can’t you just tell him as you are or get Ivan to for you?”

“Maybe, but I imagine he’ll need proof beyond just the fact that your blood binding gave me a tail,” Erick answered. “I’ve only met him once, and I know he didn’t have a very high opinion of me, given my history.”

Silas scowled. “Okay, but still. There are a lot of things that could go wrong if you join these guys.”

“Then you can help me figure out how to prepare for them,” Erick said. “I’m joining regardless of whether or not you think I should, so you can either work with that fact or let me figure this out on my own.”

Silas continued scowling at Erick, but then lowered his gaze. “Fine,” he said, shaking his head, “but I still don’t like it.”
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

Here is the bonus chapter for reaching 325 kudos! I'll post the next chapter either next Monday (Feb. 26) or when we reach 350 kudos!

*UPDATE* If any of you noticed my chapter count jumping up to 50 temporarily, it's because I was trying to figure out how to add a chapter in between two existing ones. I thought I had accidentally deleted one, so I was freaking out for a bit until I realized that it just pushed all the chapter numbers up. So, if you were ever wondering if you could put chapters in the middle of your work, you can! Just be prepared for *every* *single* *chapter* after that to be one number higher.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Silas moved to sit across from Erick. “If I really can’t talk you out of joining these pirates, you can at least try to prepare for the worst. The biggest problem I see right now is that you still don’t completely know everything about how merfolk live.” Counting off his fingers, he said, “For one, they’ll probably expect you to know how to navigate the open ocean, or at least just the shoal.”

“It’s not my fault you people cover everything in coral,” Erick said. “It’d be a lot easier to find my way around if you just used street names and made your houses look more like actual houses instead of rocks with windows.”

“What is the point of streets if we just swim over everything anyway?” Silas countered. “I don’t see how you can’t tell the difference between houses and reefs. Houses are way more organized.”

“Whatever method you have for that chaos is beyond me.” Erick shrugged. “As for the open ocean, I can navigate that just fine if I have charts and the tools for it.”

“Except that the tools humans use are different from the ones merfolk use,” Silas said. “Salvagers mostly use landmarks underwater rather than sea charts, and your measuring systems don’t make sense to us. Yours are based on distances on land, but merfolk use distances based on how far different sounds travel.”

“Okay, well, I can’t really do anything about that. I’ll just blame it on the fact that I’m not from around here.”

Silas gave Erick a pointed look. “Can you use that same excuse for siren singing? They’re going to expect you to know basic signal songs, but you’ve never even tried learning yet.”

“So? I probably can’t anyway,” Erick said. “I’ve never been any good at singing.”

“Siren singing isn’t the same as using your speaking voice.” Gesturing towards his throat up to his lips, Silas said, “When we talk normally, it comes from our neck up through our mouth.” He then pointed to his chest. “Siren singing comes from the heart, and you feel it in your bones.”

Erick’s eyebrows knotted. “That doesn’t make any sense. I thought the only difference between normal singing and siren singing was that one was magical.”
“No, all merfolk have siren voices,” Silas said, shaking his head. “It’s just that not all siren voices can get the spirits’ attention. Mers like Gale and Merise have a natural gift for it, but other mers like me would have to practice a lot to sing like them.”

“Do these voices sound any different?” Erick asked. “I don’t really remember what Merise sounded like because she always knocked me out so fast, but that concert we went to didn’t seem that special.”

“The concert singers were using their speaking voices,” Silas answered. “You can’t say actual words with your siren voice because you don’t use your mouth. It’s like humming through your gills instead of your throat.”

“Okay?” Erick said, leaning back to give Silas a confused look. “That still doesn’t really explain how I’m supposed to do it.”

“Well, I can try to show you.” Silas sat up straighter. “Everybody’s taught this song as soon as they can carry a tune.” He took a breath and exhaled. Staring at the floor, he began humming a steady, forlorn melody. His soft, tenor voice resonated through the small living room. The tumbling notes fell and jumped, dropping down to a broken murmur before starting again.

Erick felt more than heard Silas’ siren singing. Though quiet, it enveloped him and ran through his skin. It pressed against his chest like the beat of a drum without the deafening thunder. As Silas waved his head side to side with the repetition of the short song, Erick stared. Silas’ wavy hair swayed with him, floating like spun gold.

Silas stopped. He looked back up at Erick. Half-smiling, he said, “That song means, ‘I’m lost. Help me.’”

Erick let go of the breath he didn’t realize he was holding and looked away. “Oh. It…” He cleared his throat. “It sounded pretty sad.”

“Yeah.” Silas nodded. “A lot of people call it the children’s song. It’s supposed to help kids find their parents if they get separated. Even if they’re not close enough for their parents to hear them, whoever else hears it knows that they have to help.” His eyes brightened as he added, “It’s a hopeful song for the hopeless.” Since Erick only hummed in agreement, Silas asked, “So, want to try learning it?”

“I don’t know,” Erick said reluctantly. He rubbed his finger over his other thumbnail. “I would sound ridiculous.”

“No you wouldn’t. Why would you think that?”

“Because I’m not a performer or anything.” Erick scooted back against the wall, hunching in his shoulders. “It’s weird to sing for no reason.”

“No it isn’t,” Silas said. “Signal songs aren’t like songs people sing for fun. They’re just what we use to communicate over long distances.”

“If you say so, but it still just seems… I don’t know.” Erick shrugged. “When humans sing, when they’re not singing for an actual audience, it’s more like a personal thing. People sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to their friends. Mothers sing lullabies to their babies. I can’t really see it as the same as just talking.”

Silas tipped his head, thoughtful. “If you think that, why don’t you think it’s weird when Merise sings?”
“I don’t know,” Erick answered. “Probably because I ended up unconscious both times I’ve heard her.”

“Is it weird listening to me sing?”

“Yeah.” Crossing his arms, Erick said, “I’ve never really heard you sing before.”

Silas considered that. “Well, I guess I never really had a reason to before because we haven’t left the shoal. But I don’t see anything weird about it.” He sat back on his hands. “Gale gets annoyed when I listen to him practice enchanting, but that’s just because he doesn’t like having Merise correct what he does wrong in front of me. Is it like that for you?”

“I guess?”

“Okay, well I won’t judge you if you mess up,” Silas said. “Nobody sings right the first time.”

“I know, but…” Erick sighed. “Messing up is one thing, but I just don’t think I’d sound any good. I haven’t grown up singing like you or Merise.”

“So? I’m sure you’d sound fine. It’s really rare for people to be tone deaf, so you probably don’t have to worry about that.” Since Erick didn’t answer, Silas then said, “How about I just sing again and you try to hum along with me? If you don’t like it, we can stop.”

Erick looked sidelong at Silas, but said, “All right then.”

“Awesome.” Silas grinned. ‘I’ll teach you the part that means ‘I’m lost’ first.” Sitting back up straight, Silas began humming again.

Getting over his initial awe, Erick tried to focus more on the notes of Silas’ song rather than how it had an almost physical presence. With such an ethereal voice, Erick found it hard to believe that spirits could ignore Silas’ singing. The amber-eyed merman might as well have been a spirit himself.

When Silas finished one repetition of the first half of the children’s song, Erick hesitantly joined with his baritone voice. To his own ears, it felt hollow, weightless, nothing at all like siren singing. He matched Silas’ melody, but his voice quickly faded with each note while Silas’ floated in the room. Cautiously growing bolder as they repeated the song, Erick closed his eyes and hummed a little louder, but he still couldn’t feel his own voice. It was only a failing imitation, a ghost in the presence of Silas’ song.

Silas looked up at Erick when he noticed his voice join his. Almost faltering as he listened to his gentle humming, Silas smiled. It was like the slow rumble of rain on the ocean, turbulent skies hiding behind the tranquil depths of the sea. The full strength of the storm had yet to raise waves.

Erick stopped singing and dropped his head into his hands. “It’s not working,” he groaned, making Silas cut his song short. “I can’t siren sing.”

“What?” Silas said, caught off guard. “Erick, you were doing fine.”

“No I wasn’t,” Erick answered without looking up. “I don’t sound anything like you.”

“That’s just because you were still using your speaking voice.” Silas leaned forward to try to see Erick’s face. “Just try to sing down more in your chest instead of your head.”

“I don’t understand how I’m supposed to do that!” Erick snapped. “It might seem obvious to you,
but this isn’t second nature for me.”

“I know, but I’m trying to help.” Silas paused, staring at Erick’s tensed arms and clenched hands. “Why are you getting so mad? We’ve barely even started.”

“I don’t know,” Erick said, knowing it wasn’t about his inability to siren sing. “I shouldn’t have to learn this. I won’t need it when I’m back on land.”

Silas frowned, turning away his head. “Do you really think that?” he asked quietly.

“Yes, people on land just send each other letters or telegrams to communicate over long distance.”

“But what if you decide to come back here?” Silas asked. “You don’t have to stay on land if you get their tattoo. You’d be able to go back and forth.”

“So? I’ve already told you that I don’t care. I’m not going to come back, not if I can help it.”

Silas clenched his jaw, stung by Erick’s affirmation. “How can you still say that after everything you’ve learned about being underwater?” he asked, glancing over at him. “You’ve liked some things here, like Temple Park. Would you really want to leave everything? To never see Merise or Jeb or me ever again?”

Erick didn’t answer. He crossed his arms and stared at the floor, pressing his lips into a thin line. “I can’t live in two places, Silas,” he eventually answered. “My life is on land, just as yours is here.”

“Not everything has to be a one or the other choice,” Silas retorted. “I don’t know who you’re trying to convince with this nonsense. I get wanting to go back to land because you do have stuff to sort out there, but I can’t understand why you’re trying to cut ties with everything here so much.”

“Well I’m sorry then, I don’t have a good answer for you.” Erick glowered at the floor, unable to say all the inarticulate thoughts locked on his tongue. “I’m just trying to focus on one thing at a time here.”

Silas sighed. “Fine. So do you really not want to keep trying to learn siren singing?” he asked, frustrated. “Obviously I’m no good at it, but Merise would be able to teach you if you still want to try.”

“I don’t want to have to bother her again,” Erick answered. “Besides, Hal wanted my answer tomorrow. I don’t want to put this off by trying to learn something I probably won’t even need.”

“You’ll need it if you don’t want to stick out. No matter what part of the ocean you pretend to be from, all merfolk know at least a few basic signal songs. It’s one of the few things the ocean’s kingdoms can all agree on.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll just have to go with your story about being raised in captivity,” Erick said, holding up his hands. “I don’t have time to learn everything. I’ve already spent almost a month trying to. Whatever I’m still missing aren’t things I’ll be able to get any time soon, if I even can at all.”

“So you’re just going to join like that, without a plan?”

“How can I plan anything?” Erick asked. “Hal doesn’t know what they’ll make me do. The only thing I’m pretty certain of is that I probably won’t get to stay in Peleran. Jeb said they work mostly around Cradle Basin, so I’ll probably have to go there.”
“What am I supposed to tell my dad then if you leave?” Silas said. “He’s not going to like this idea either. As soon as he finds out that the guards are with the merpirates, he’s going to be pissed.”

“Then don’t tell him until I get their tattoo,” Erick answered. “We can’t have Ronan firing everybody. The guards in this guild are the only reason you’re safe right now.”

“So I’m just supposed to lie and sit on my tail until you come back?” Silas asked. “No way. You can’t make me stay and cover for you too if you won’t even promise to come back. Pick one – either I come with you or I tell my dad.”

“Silas, you’re being ridiculous,” Erick argued, sitting up to scowl at him. “If you tell your dad, you’ll just piss off these people and give them a new reason to kill you.”

“And if I join, we can avoid that and get me a tattoo too.” Silas held up his hands. “Sounds like a win-win situation to me. If the guards that are a part of this guild have a problem with me joining, I’ll just remind them that my dad is their boss.”

“You would seriously blackmail them?”

“Why not?” Silas retorted. “I can’t fight like you. Outsmarting people is the only thing I can do.”

“Except lording it over everyone is going to lose you friends.” Erick gave Silas a pointed glare. “The last thing you want to do is test the guards’ loyalty for you.”

“I’m not going to make them do anything unreasonable,” Silas said. “They just won’t be able to tell my dad anything, which is what you want.”

“What about all the people who aren’t guards?” Erick asked. “Before they called off the search for you, they were willing to kill you. If you try to join now, there is no way they’ll trust you.”

“Then I can just pretend I’m some random person,” Silas answered. “Plenty of people sell charms to change tail colors. I’ll get one and then only the guards would know who I am.”

Erick face-palmed. “There are so many ways that can go wrong, I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Then don’t. Even if I don’t bother to hide my identity, plenty of the guards will still know who you are since we’ve had to be escorted everywhere. If you try to join on the premise of getting revenge against humans, I don’t see why I can’t do that too. We won’t really be able to hide the fact that we know what their tattoos do. Don’t you think they’d rather keep an eye on their loose ends then let us stay free?”

Rubbing between his eyes, Erick answered, “I guess, but I can’t see why they would want you to join.” He lowered his hand and faced his palm. “Me, I can do their dirty work or I guess be some kind of informant since I know English, but you can’t fight or speak English yet.”

“Yeah, but I’m still a salvager,” Silas said. “I can appraise stuff and pick out what falls to the ocean floor. Somebody has to clean up after the hunters.”

“Okay, but still. Anybody could do that.”

“Not really,” Silas said, shaking his head, insulted he could suggest such a thing. “It takes practice to know where to look, how to sift the sand and clean off coral, not to mention that we also have to know how to watch out for sharks and venomous fish and navigate unfamiliar waters. Salvagers have to know the same things gatherers and hunters do. Just because we’re not getting food doesn’t
mean we can’t be taken seriously.”

“Okay, okay,” Erick said, holding up his hands to stop Silas’ rant. “I get your point, salvagers aren’t useless.”

“So will you admit that I should come too then?” Silas asked. “At the very least, I want to talk to Hal before you go off anywhere with him.”

“Fine, we can talk to Hal together tomorrow, but that’s it. Will you get off my case about it now?”

“Sure.” Silas grinned. “I’ll just continue pestering you tomorrow.”

Erick groaned, leaning back against the wall.

Chapter End Notes

So, I've been playing around with a dumb, smutty one-shot about Erick and Silas. How do y'all feel about size kinks and unbirth? (Specifically Silas being Erick's "baby" in this scenario...) This story would be written as a weird dream Silas has, but if nobody's interested, I don't want to bother writing it.
Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

Here's the weekly update and more news! I did end up writing another smutty short story, but I also ended up writing an extra chapter that goes into Silas’ fears and how his maternal father died. Both of these extras take place during the time skip in chapter 39, so be sure to check them out! You can find both under my companion works series. (This is where I put all the extras related to this story, so there's a lot more there to look at!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That’s the place?” Silas asked as Erick led him to Harpy’s Hole. He recognized the carving of the screaming bird-woman above the entrance since he had passed by it countless times, but he and his salvaging crew always went to different bars.

“Yeah,” Erick answered, swimming down to it. “If Hal isn’t here yet, I’d like to try some of those caviar drop things everybody had while we wait.”

“They’re just called caviar cocktails.” Silas glanced at Erick’s waist before looking sidelong at him. “You know they are usually alcoholic, right?”

“I guessed as much.” Erick looked over his shoulder and caught Silas’ disapproving stare. Rolling his eyes, Erick said, “The medicine Merise is making me will be ready tomorrow. I don’t have to stay sober.”

“Considering we’re about to discuss the merits of joining a guild of murderers, you should stay clearheaded anyway.”

“One drink is not going to get me anywhere close to being buzzed,” Erick answered. “You might be a lightweight, but it takes a lot more than that to get me drunk.”

“I don’t care,” Silas said as they reached the entrance to Harpy’s Hole. “You can get a caviar medley that’s not alcoholic.”

Erick shook his head, but chuckled under his breath at Silas’ uptightness. “All right then.” Inside they found that they had arrived early after all. While they waited for Hal, they sat at the bar and ordered two caviar medleys. To Erick’s pleasant surprise, the caviar drops he ordered were sweet like the coco-plums he tried. The smaller drops were chewy like gummy candy, but the larger drops burst in his mouth with syrupy liquid.

Smiling at Erick enjoying his treat, Silas pointed at a fat green drop in his glass and asked, “Can I try one?” He had gotten a different mix of drops, preferring the more mellow taste of herbs and seaweed instead of fruit.

“Sure.” Erick picked up the green drop and held it out. Silas reached to take it, but then Erick pulled it back and grinned. “What do I get for it?”

“Erick!” Silas pouted at him, fighting back a matching grin. “If you want some of mine, we can
“But I don’t want yours.” Erick put the drop within Silas’ reach only to dash it away again. He laughed at Silas’ peeved look.

“Then what do you want?” Silas floated off his seat to try to snatch the drop away from Erick, but he grabbed the bar and leaned out of his reach.

“I don’t know. Just take it,” Erick said, taunting Silas with it.

Silas lunged again at the drop, but Erick dodged. Trying once more, Silas said, “I’d take it if you’d let me!” Erick easily defended the drop with his other hand, cupping it behind his fingers. Silas let himself sink back onto his seat to narrow his eyes at Erick.

“How am I not letting you?” Erick asked, laughing. “It’s right here.” He held the drop in front of Silas’ face, barely a hand-width away.

Silas stared at the drop, pursing his lips. Before Erick could pull it away again, he nimbly ate it right out of his fingers. As the bright taste of green apple burst in his mouth, Silas laughed through his nose. “Got it,” he said, swallowing the bite.

Turning red, Erick clapped his hands over his face. “Jesus Christ,” he muttered into his palms.

“What?” Silas asked, still giggling. “Didn’t think I’d outsmart you?”

“No, you just…” He dragged his hands over his eyes and let them fall back to the bar. Shaking his head with an uncomfortable smile, he said, “Just when I think you can’t be more ridiculous, you go and embarrass me like that.” He struggled to find another word besides ‘cute.’

“Oh. Sorry?” Silas tilted his head.

“No, it’s fine.” Erick held his temples with one hand, waving away his apology with the other. “I just forget how silly you can be.”

“You’re the one that was teasing me with the caviar drop,” Silas answered.

“Yeah, but still.” Erick looked back up at Silas and then noticed Hal coming in. Lifting his hand to catch his attention, Erick noted his annoyed expression when he saw Silas.

Sitting down beside Silas, Hal asked, “Why are you here? Don’t tell me Erick roped you into this too.”

Erick scoffed. “Don’t blame me. He’s the one who wouldn’t stay at home.”

Hal frowned at Erick. “Except you’re the one that told him about me.”

“You didn’t say I couldn’t,” Erick answered, shrugging. “I’m still living at Silas’ house.”

“You are?” Hal then looked worried, pressing his fingers against the bar table. “You didn’t tell Ronan too, did you?”

Silas looked skyward, annoyed, but answered, “No, but I still want to.” He faced Hal. “Show me the tattoo.”

Reluctantly, Hal twisted around to show him his back. The three teardrops and radiant lines that made the mermaid shape rested squarely between his shoulder blades, small enough to fit in the
length of his hand. Silas realized as he looked that he had seen it before, but never thought anything of it.

Turning back around, Hal said, “There you go – the damning mark.” He shook his head. “You can’t tell your dad about this. If he knew we were with people who could have killed you, he would never forgive us.”

“So?” Silas retorted. “What is the worst you think he can do? If there are as many guards in this guild as Erick says you say there are, I doubt he’d really fire everyone with a tattoo.”

“No, but he’s close to Lord Kaui, and he’s someone we really don’t want finding out about the tattoos.” Hal glanced around the tavern, checking to make sure no one was eavesdropping. “Kaui would tell the other lords in the King’s court, and he’d definitely try to leverage it to get him a better seat or spread the secret anyway to get trade started with humans. The chasm’s close enough to land that they could own the entire market for human goods on this side of the sea.”

Silas stared at Hal, then raised his eyebrows pointedly. “Both of those possibilities sound fine with me.”

“I’m going to have to actually agree with Silas here,” Erick said. “If Kaui can get tattoos for everybody, then I don’t need to deal with joining your guild.”

“Except you’re forgetting that Adriel is still the only one who knows the awakening song for the tattoo,” Hal said. “What’s to stop him from going to land and keeping that secret for himself? If he gets away, that’s it. No second chances.”

Erick sighed in frustration, looking down at the bar. “Can’t the guards just put him in the prison to make him give up the secret?” Silas asked.

“No, because as I told Erick, shifting and killing humans isn’t illegal,” Hal answered. “We can’t bring Adriel in for crimes committed against a law that doesn’t even exist yet. Besides, since he discovered the song, he basically owns it. Like the song to make language pearls, mers don’t have to share songs they discover with everyone.”

Scowling, Silas said, “That’s stupid. Shifting shouldn’t be something you can just keep for yourself.”

“Optimistically speaking,” Hal said, “if the secret gets out, Kaui might be able to bargain with Adriel to get shifting just for mers in Peleran, but I have really no idea how any of those negotiations would work.”

“How about this then?” Erick asked. “I join, get the tattoo, and try to find out the awakening song if I can. If I can’t get it or I take too long, you can be the whistle-blower on this thing and get shit started. Get the guards to band together to protect yourselves and Silas if Adriel and the others decide to do something.”

“How would we coordinate something like that?” Hal asked. “I don’t want you to get caught in the crossfire if I tell and you’re still stuck in the middle of the ocean.”

“And you’re forgetting that I still want to go with you,” Silas added.

Hal looked started. “You do?”

“Yes,” Silas answered, dramatically rolling his eyes and floating backwards with his arms hanging behind him. He put his hands back on the bar to face Hal. “I want to go to land, and I want to make
sure Erick doesn’t do anything stupid.”

Erick glowered at Silas. “You’re the one being stupid wanting to follow me.”

“Am not!”

“Guys,” Hal interrupted. “It’s one thing if I’m recruiting Erick, but Silas, how am I supposed to explain you wanting to join?”

“Just say I had a change of heart after I was captured,” Silas said. “I’ve already had to argue with Erick about this. Why is it so hard to just let me join?”

“Because this just isn’t the kind of work we want you to get involved in,” Hal answered.

“It’s not up to you what I can or can’t do!” Silas retorted. “I am an adult now, same as you and Erick and everyone else I know. I don’t need you coddling me.”

Hal pressed his lips into a line, staring at Silas a moment before glancing at Erick. The former human was rubbing the bridge of his nose between his eyes. Hal lowered his gaze back to the bar. “If you’re sure about this, I’ll talk to the other guards, see what they think about you joining and getting the secret out. None of this will work unless we have enough support from the inside.”

Erick looked up. “How long will it take to touch base with them?” he asked.

“A few days, maybe longer,” Hal answered. “I can’t just round up everyone all at once, so I’ll have to organize a few different meetings to get everything sorted out. I can tell you now that not all of the guards are going to be onboard with this idea, so it’s going to be a headache trying to convince them. Even I’m hesitant to agree with it.”

“Assuming you can get everyone to agree, what would happen next?” Erick asked. “Will we have to go to Cradle Basin?”

“Yeah, probably. Adriel enchants the tattoos and has all the new recruits learn how to walk on some deserted islands out there, but he’s actually coming to Peleran because of all the trouble Silas started by seeing the hunters. I doubt he’d initiate any new members here because the closest bit of land has too many humans.”

Erick’s eyebrows rose. Remembering the tiny islands by the Cradle on Jeb’s map, he asked, “How does Adriel keep those islands secure? Does he sink ships that go near them?”

“I don’t know. He probably just keeps up some cloaking enchantments like other coastal shoals,” Hal answered. “There are glyphs that can keep humans out of places by creating never-fading fog or a veil that makes them feel uneasy, like that it’s haunted or more dangerous than it appears.”

Erick pinched his upper lip, thinking. “I see. If I get my crew to keep their distance, they could be able to pick me up there so I wouldn’t have to come all the way back to Peleran after I get their tattoo.”

“That’s assuming you can get away without Adriel’s guys following you,” Hal said. “No matter how well-equipped your ship might be, your crew wouldn’t be a match against them.”

“I know,” Erick said. “The last thing I want to do is needlessly endanger them, but I don’t know how crossing the ocean works underwater. Going back with them is probably easier if I can.”

Sitting up, Silas said, “I know plenty about cross-ocean traveling, so we can talk to your crew to see which would work better.”
“Keep in mind you won’t be going to the Cradle alone,” Hal added. “I always send off recruits with a guide. They’ll take you to the guild house to be initiated before Adriel ultimately decides whether or not you can go to the islands. Getting recruited is just the first step. You’ll have to prove yourself to whoever ends up being your guide and whoever else helps Adriel make his final decisions.”

“Great,” Erick groaned. Drily, he said, “At least I got the bloodthirsty killer act down. Swap merfolk for humans – shouldn’t be any different.”

Silas frowned at Erick before facing the bar.

Hal looked down at Silas. “Having second thoughts about joining now?”

“No,” Silas protested. Then more hesitantly, he added, “Maybe. If I have to act like Erick used to, I don’t think I’d be able to convince anyone.”

Erick rolled his eyes skyward and then held his hand palm-side up. “That’s what I’ve been trying to get you to understand. You’re too honest to pull off some tough guy that’s fine with killing. Even if you can play the part, you just don’t look it.”

Silas scowled at Erick, but folded his arms on the bar and flopped his chin on top. “I don’t just want to sit around and wait for you though.”

“Then we’ll figure out something else for you to do here,” Erick said. “Hal needs to talk to the guards anyway, so we have time.” Looking over at Hal, he asked, “Will you need either of us to be with you when you talk to them? I’m more than willing to talk to them for you if you can round them up.”

“I need to see if any of them are even interested first,” Hal answered. “Once I know that, I think I would rather you talk than me, seeing as it’s your idea.”

Erick nodded. “All right then. Should we meet back here again when you know? Or would you rather just tell Jeb whenever you get something arranged?”

Hal’s shoulders sunk, a little dismayed. “Does Jeb know about all this too? What part of secret guild do you not understand?”

“Jeb is the one that told me about your guild in the first place, so it’s not as secret as you think,” Erick answered. “He wasn’t sold on the idea that you were all shifters, but your tattoos are easy to recognize.”

“Gods,” Hal sighed, shaking his head. “Fine, I’ll just find him whenever I need you guys.”

“Thanks.” Erick let himself smile somewhat. “This might actually all work out after all.”

Silas looked sidelong at him, not lifting his head from his arms. “Saying stuff like that is going to jinx it, you know.”

Erick rolled his eyes. “Your gods have been assholes to me long enough. I deserve a break.”

“You’ll get a break – some broken bones probably.”

“Where did your optimism go?” Erick waved over the bartender to pay for their caviar medleys. “C’mon, we can go see Jeb now so he’ll know to expect Hal later.”
“My optimism is back home, where I’m going to be stuck waiting for you,” Silas answered.

“You’re not going to ever let that go, are you?”

“Nope.”

Here's the link to the series with all of my companion works for this story: http://archiveofourown.org/series/796323.

Chapter End Notes

I've hyperlinked my companion works series in the chapter above because I can't insert links in chapter notes. If you read Chapter 39.5, I'm welcome to suggestions for how to work it into the main story.
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

We're getting close to another bonus update! I nearly forgot to update this week because I have been swamped getting for two big weekends. I have to finish making my princess mononoke cosplay for a local comic convention this weekend, and next weekend I'm going to Tuscon for the Granger Leadership Academy. I'm really excited for both events, but it'll be a struggle to prep for both and get all my homework done... This story is taking a backseat to all of that right now, but thankfully that's what I have a big buffer for.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How was your day, boys?” Ronan asked when he got back home that evening.

Silas looked up from the tile game he was playing with Erick in the living room. “It was good,” Silas answered, lowering his gaze back to the game board. “We visited Jeb.”

“You did? Without an escort?” Ronan pulled off his helmet and hung it on the wall. As he took off his vambraces, he said, “I heard you didn’t visit the guard station today.”

Erick placed a tile piece. “We don’t need an escort anymore,” he said. “We’ve had no problems for over a week now, and I’ve gotten my stitches out. Silas was fine when he came to find me at the chasm yesterday. There’s no point to keep taking your guards from better work.”

“I don’t have a problem sparing anyone for your wellbeing.” Ronan swam over to look at their game board.

“You mean Silas’ wellbeing,” Erick stated without looking up at him. The fact wasn’t meant to sound like an accusation, but Erick didn’t mind if it was a touch more resentful than he intended. “I can take care of myself and him just fine.”

Ronan frowned. Judging by the tile pieces, he noticed Silas was losing this game. He faced his son. “Silas, are you okay with this? Don’t you think it’s too soon to say you’re safe?”

“No, it’s fine.” Silas bit his lip, staring at his tile pieces, but he wasn’t thinking about the game. He was biting back the words he wanted to say about Hal and the merpirates’ guild. “I didn’t like having an escort.”

“I know you didn’t, but you know it was in your best interest. Erick’s not, and I mean no offense to you,” Ronan said, glancing at him before facing his son again, “but Silas, he’s not a fully trained guard. He ran off without any explanation. I don’t tolerate that kind of behavior with my guards, and I shouldn’t have to with Erick if he insists he can protect you.”

“Dad, he left because he got into an argument with Gale,” Silas answered. “It’s not like he abandoned me in the middle of town. You can’t blame him for getting upset.”

“He’s too old to let that be an excuse, and the same goes for you.” Ronan swam over to the kitchen. “I don’t like the idea of you going out on your own when we still don’t know why you were
attacked. I talked to Kaui again, but he still doesn’t know anything more about these merpirates you saw.”

“You did?” Silas asked, sitting up.

“Yes.” Ronan took down a jar of filleted flounder. “He’s been sending members of his personal guard to look for them where you and Gale had seen them, but he told me today that two of his men have gone missing. He needed me to recommend replacements for him.” He sighed heavily. “We suspect that they were probably killed, so it only makes me more worried about you.”

Silas looked at Erick, shocked. Erick met his gaze with equal concern, but subtly shook his head to remind Silas not to say anything.

“He also found out that those tattoos are tied to some salvaging guild called the Diving Peregrines. They’re from Cradle Basin, so now we’re waiting for his guards to pay them a visit. At the very least, we might get a better lead on the two mers who attacked you.”

“Oh,” Silas said in a small voice, worried now for the guards Kaui sent to investigate the guild. He doubted that they would return to Peleran. “That’s, uh… good. I didn’t think you were still trying to find them.”

“Of course I am,” Ronan said. “I’m not so busy that I would forget about people who hurt you. Why don’t you leave your game and come have dinner now?”

Reluctantly, Silas said, “Okay.” He and Erick shared another glance at each other, both knowing that Kaui’s scrutiny would complicate Erick’s plans on joining their guild. It also proved that leaving Silas alive was causing the merpirates more trouble than they probably expected.

As they got food for themselves and joined Ronan at the table, Erick asked, “Did you tell Kaui about my theory about their tattoos?”

“I did, and he’s inclined to believe you,” Ronan answered. “He’s set his enchanter to experiment with it.”

Erick frowned, nodding slightly. “I see. Do you think they’ll be able to figure out the awakening song?”

“I doubt it.” Ronan cut into his flounder fillet. “It’s like trying to pick out one name out of a million possibilities, and there’s no telling if they even got the glyph copied right.” He looked over at Silas. “Did Jeb find out anything for you? He was looking into these merpirates too, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Silas halfheartedly poked at his fish. “He figured out their tattoos were related to that guild too.”

“We’re definitely on the right track then.” Ronan finished a bite and started cutting another. He let his fork go still when he noticed Silas’ quietness. Though he had come to expect Erick’s stoic demeanor, Silas’ morose mood gave him pause. Shaking his head, Ronan said, “Silas, you can’t pout just because I still want you to stay with escorts. You should be happy we’re making progress hunting down these people. As soon as Kaui’s men come back from the Cradle, we’ll learn even more.”

“How are you so sure they will even come back?” Silas asked. “These merpirates have already killed two people.”

“We don’t know for certain that’s what happened to them,” Ronan said. “Assuming it was, they
were ill-prepared for the force they found. The people Kaui sent know what they’re getting into.”

“Do they?” Silas countered. “How many people are going there?”

“Just two, but they’re only going to scout out the area,” Ronan answered. “He can’t send more than that just to follow a rumor.”

Silas stabbed his fork into his flounder. “It’s not a rumor. I saw what they can do. Kaui is sending those men to be killed.”

“Silas, don’t say things like that,” Ronan snapped. “You’ve only just begun training with the guards. I’ve been doing this since before you were born. If you have so little faith in them, I ought to bring you back to the prison to see the kind of mers we detain every day. Hal would be more than happy to give you a tour, I’m sure.”

Silas flinched at his father’s yelling and hunched in his shoulders. Now that he knew Hal was part of the merpirates’ guild, he doubted that Hal would be as willing as Ronan thought. Staring at his plate, Silas said, “You don’t have to do that. I know the guards can keep care of themselves. It’s just… what if it’s not just merpirates we have to worry about?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ronan asked.

Before Silas could answer, Erick said, “He’s just worried about getting their tattoo for me. We might be able to catch these guys, but that doesn’t guarantee I’ll get my legs back.”

Ronan narrowed his eyes at Erick before looking back at Silas. “That true?”

Silas hesitated a beat, but said, “Yeah.”

“Hm.” Ronan stared at Silas a moment, sensing something was amiss, but returned his gaze to his plate. “Well, you can rest assured that Kaui wants to get their secret as much as you two. If he can get it, he’ll share it with you.”

“I just hope nobody else has to get hurt for it.”

“As do I,” Ronan said. After a lull in their conversation, he added, “Also, I almost forgot, but I’m going to be home late tomorrow, so don’t wait up for me. I’m playing dice games with the guys from work. I’ll probably ask them about this whole merpirates business and see what they think of it.”

Knowing that the guys his father played dice with included Hal, Silas said, “They probably wouldn’t be able to help.”

“I know, but I can at least complain about it.” Ronan half-smiled. “What’s the point of getting drunk if I can’t gripe about work?”

“I guess you have a point there,” Silas reluctantly agreed. He sent a silent apology to Hal, wondering and half-hoping the guard would confess and save him and Erick the trouble of having to break the secret to Ronan themselves. If Hal ended up not saying anything, Silas told himself that he would.

Chapter End Notes
On the subject of my trip to Tuscon... Anyone have any advice for someone flying for the first time on their own? I've done a lot of research, but I'm still worried about forgetting something or accidentally breaking the TSA's rules somehow. Any tips or tricks are appreciated.
Chapter Notes

Ahhh! We finally made it to this chapter! *grins*

Also, fyi, I'll be in Tuscon in less than a week! If I update late next week, it'll be because I got carried away with travel plans.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the three of them finished dinner and retired to their rooms, Silas was drifting off to sleep when Erick poked his head into Silas’ bed alcove.

“Silas?” he whispered. “Are you sleeping?”

Rubbing his eye, Silas answered, “I almost was. What is it?” He sat up on his elbow to face Erick.

Erick looked down and folded his arms over the edge of Silas’ alcove. “I can’t sleep.” His eyes darted over Silas’ tailfin and his sponge mattress, as if looking for something that wasn’t there. “I keep thinking about what I’ll have to say to try to convince the guards to side with us and what I should say to my crew and Ivan, but I can’t think of how to say anything right.”

Silas’ eyebrows knotted with a frown. Glancing at the wall towards where he knew his father would be asleep, he said, “Let’s go outside to talk.”

“No, I don’t want to keep you up,” Erick said, lifting his arms back off the edge of Silas’ alcove. “I’m sorry.”

“Erick.” Silas gave him a long-suffering look. “I’m going outside.” He swam out of his room.

Pausing at the door, he looked back at Erick before pointedly glancing at his father’s alcove. “You don’t have to come out with me, but open water might do you some good.”

Erick sighed, but his hands were still clenched. “Okay.” He followed Silas outside to a patch of sand behind the coral framing the kitchen window. The mermaids sat beside each other and looked up at the black abyss of the surface. The only light came from algae lamps attached to houses and columns throughout the shoal. Their turquoise glow washed out the seafloor, leaving both coral and sand a spectral green. Plankton and small fish swam around the lamps like dust motes and moths.

Silas turned his head to face Erick. “You don’t have to feel bad about getting me up, you know. I’d rather have you talk to me than stay up all night with your thoughts like this.”

Erick stared at his tail stretched out across the rocky sand. “But I don’t know what to say. My mind is going a mile a minute and I keep thinking everything really will go wrong like you think, and the more I think that, the more it all seems pointless.” He found himself gripping a chunk of pillar coral and fought the urge to break it from its base.
“Nothing is pointless.” Silas sat forward and rested his hands on his tail. “I’m worried about what’ll happen, but that doesn’t mean we have to give up.”

“But your dad told Kauí about the tattoos and the guild, and he’s going to tell more people about it. Even if we don’t say anything, they’re still going to ruin everything.”

“Then we just need to tell him what we’re trying to do,” Silas said. “My dad isn’t as unreasonable as you and Hal are trying to make him out to be. He gave you a chance, after all.”

“Why? It doesn’t make sense. I didn’t deserve it. Losing my legs, meeting you, losing my parents, getting caught up in all of this – magic is real for god’s sake, and there a bunch of other gods.” Erick threw up his hands. “There’s no rhyme or reason to anything. I’m not even making sense.” He crossed his arms over his chest, trying to remind himself to breathe.

“So? You’re just upset. Of course nothing makes sense. It doesn’t have to all the time.” Silas stared at Erick, searching for better words to say. “I never thought I would end up on your ship, but I did. And I’m glad about that. I really am, even if you don’t believe me.”

“I’m not. I just want to go home and be warm and dry again.” Erick dug his nails into his arms. “I want a beer so bad right now I feel like I’m going to be sick.”

“Well, you can be sick if you want to. I don’t know.” Silas shook his head, at a loss. He curled his fingers against his tail. “I would hug you right now, but I know you probably don’t want me to do that.”

“I do, but I don’t.” Erick buried his face in his hands, pressing his nails into his hairline now. “I just…” He choked on his words, unable to continue speaking. His voice was dangerously close to tears. His throat was the only thing holding back a sob. He trembled silently, hating every fiber of his skin and scales. His mind screamed curses that he was outside, in the dark underworld of the sea, sitting beside an amber-eyed merman that should have been asleep.

Silas went mute. His mouth parted slightly in horror at the pain Erick was fighting to swallow back down. He felt invisible threads ensnaring his arms and hands, holding him still and unable to reach out. Words Silas wanted to say floated in his mind, but the threads tied them to his tongue before they could get out. The longer he remained still, the tighter he felt the threads tangle in his chest, barbed ends hooking into his lungs.

“Erick… You can let yourself cry.” Before he could let the threads stop him again, Silas wrapped his arms around Erick’s waist. “Please.” He pushed his forehead against Erick’s shoulder. “Stop holding all of this in.” Tightening his hold and pressing his tail along the length of Erick’s, he said, “It hurts too much to see you like this.”

Erick stiffened at Silas’ touch and his eyes opened behind his palms. He parted his hands to see Silas’ slender arm across his chest. His crimson and gold tail curled around Erick’s cerulean scales. The end of his tailfin rested just above the end of Erick’s.

Barely breathing, Erick turned his head to look down at the top of Silas’ head. His soft breath and wavy hair ran hushed over his skin, but his heart thumped against him at the same speed as Erick’s own. Erick lifted his free arm away from Silas’ hands, but his other arm remained immobile because of Silas’ face pressed against it. The fiery merman had him trapped.

“I don’t want to let you go,” Silas said without lifting up his head, fighting and failing to stop himself from crying. “I just want to stay with you. Is… Is that okay?” His breath hitched with tears.
Erick stared at him. He took a shaky breath as he remembered to breathe in. He lowered his arm and put his hand on Silas’ back. Then he moved his other arm. He pulled Silas against his chest and pressed his lips against the top of his head. Breathing in the scent of his hair, feeling the warmth of Silas’ waist against his own, he clutched Silas with both arms. The merman made a sound of surprise, so Erick loosened his hold so not to suffocate him.

Silas stared wide-eyed at Erick’s chest, frozen stiff for a moment before he wrapped his arms around Erick again. Erick’s embrace knocked the water from his gills, less so from his grip but more so from the suddenness of it. He felt Erick’s heart beating against his forehead. Leaning into its racing pulse, he hoped his thoughts could cross the divide of their skin to quell its anxious beating.

Neither one knew how long they stayed entwined, but it felt like an impossibly long time. Even as Silas grew uncomfortable, feeling awkward as Erick continued to hold him, he didn’t let himself pull away. Erick’s stiff, desperate embrace eventually relaxed. He leaned back against the side of Silas’ house and let his arms lay loosely folded over Silas’ back. His fingers occasionally stroked Silas’ arms and shoulders, hesitant and questioning, as if touching him to make sure Silas was real and actually holding him back. Silas would give him a gentle squeeze back or rub his cheek against his chest each time to reassure him it was okay.

Erick held Silas, comforted even as guilt nettled him. Why was he letting himself do this? He tried to remind himself of his reasons to keep Silas at bay. Human guys couldn’t love other guys on land. He wasn’t any good for Silas. The amber-eyed merman was only pitying him. Yet each reason sounded empty, like ice bubbles melting where Silas rested on his chest. Every thought dissolved except for one: he still couldn’t be happy without his legs back. He couldn’t let Silas accept him as he was if he couldn’t be satisfied with himself first.

“I should let you get back to bed,” Erick murmured, sliding off his arms so only his hands remained on Silas’ back.

“Do you feel better now?” Silas asked, afraid to lift his head. He didn’t want to meet Erick’s eyes and see his gamble had failed.

“Better enough,” Erick answered, though he didn’t know if that was entirely true. He pushed Silas off his chest and sat up. Rubbing between his eyes, he said, “I’m sorry I’m such a mess.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Silas looked at Erick’s face. “It’s okay. We both just need to get some sleep.”

Erick nodded mutely. After a moment, he pushed himself up from the sand to return inside. “Let’s hope I actually can get to sleep tonight.”

The two of them returned to their bed alcoves. Before Erick went into his, he hesitated and faced Silas. “Goodnight,” he whispered.

Silas’ hand paused as he pushed up his curtain. He looked over at Erick and smiled. “Goodnight to you too.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter makes me feel so warm and fuzzy, and it reminds me that I’ve been collecting more songs from Erick's perspective. I'm low-key trying to put together a
playlist for each character, but Erick is the only one I've gotten songs for.

Here's my list so far:
"I won't say I'm in love" from Disney's Hercules
"I'll Be Good" by Jaymes Young
"Who I Am Hates Who I've Been" by Relient K

I'd love to get more suggestions for him or any of my other characters, so shoot me with any songs you like for them.
Early the next morning, Erick woke to the sound of Ronan getting ready for work. His armor clinked against itself as he pulled on his chest plate and pauldrons. He probably had breakfast already. He usually left before Silas or Erick even left their bed alcoves, sparing the young mermen from having to wake at the crack of dawn. The only evidence that it was even morning was the faint, bluish sunlight glowing behind Erick’s alcove curtain.

Erick was going to roll back over and continue sleeping until Silas bothered to get him up, but then he remembered that Merise said she would have his contraceptive medicine ready today. He would finally be able to stop worrying about whether or not he would end up pregnant. Even though he hadn’t felt any different besides the obvious loss of his legs, it would be a relief to stop being so hyperaware of the possibility of another change.

The door opened and closed as Ronan left. The house went silent again. Erick remained in bed for a few minutes, debating whether or not he should wake Silas to go to Merise’s house. Then he remembered last night and buried his face in his pillow. He wasn’t even drunk when he let Silas hug him.

“What the fuck was I thinking?” Erick muttered into his pillow. The small intimacy of holding each other wasn’t anywhere near as bad as realizing what they had done on his first night in the sea, but he couldn’t blame the gods for his thoughtlessness this time. He had no idea what Silas thought of his breakdown. The dumb fish was probably just more worried about him now, and Erick couldn’t blame him if he was.

“Damn panic attacks are getting worse.” Erick rolled back over onto his back and glowered at the ceiling. It was the only fitting explanation he could think of. He had made Silas cry again, so of course he had to comfort the merman. It couldn’t have had anything to do with how much he himself wanted to be held, Erick told himself. The stress of being stuck underwater was just wearing down his thick skin.

Sitting up, Erick wondered if Merise had medicine to fight his panic attacks. Alcohol used to be his go-to solution, but he knew getting drunk wouldn’t help him despite how much he wanted to ignore that fact. He hated his belligerent drunk self even more than himself as a merman.

Erick left his room and looked back at Silas’ bed alcove. Silas didn’t need to be with him to get either of the medicines he wanted, and Erick imagined it would only make him upset to have to watch him end the possibility of them having a child. The thought made Erick’s fingers touch his waist. On a morbid whim, he inhaled and puffed out his stomach. His distended muscles looked absolutely ridiculous. Shaking his head, he exhaled.

“What were you expecting?” Erick asked himself on the way to the door. “There’s nothing normal about a guy getting pregnant.” Mentally, he added that there wasn’t anything normal about liking guys either, but clearly his body didn’t care about either fact. “I shouldn’t even be thinking about
Outside Merise’s house, he hesitated to knock. It occurred to him that even if he had the right house, Gale was probably home too. Silas had visited him briefly after he had found Erick to let him know they were safe, but Gale hadn’t shown him any inclination then that he would apologize for making Erick upset. Erick told himself that Merise would keep Gale civil, but it was still an uncomfortable thought to discuss his panic attacks with Merise if Gale was home.

As Erick debated going back home or knocking anyway, the door opened.

“Erick?” Gale did a double-take, mirroring Erick’s surprise. Gale then scowled at him. “Why are you always hanging around my house?”

“I’m not hanging around,” Erick retorted. “I came to see Merise. It’s not my fault this is your house too.”

Gale let his annoyance simmer down. “My mom left for some emergency earlier. A kid swallowed something he shouldn’t have or something else stupid.” He nodded over his shoulder towards inside. “If you’re here for your medicine, she finished it yesterday.” He looked back at Erick. “Do you want me to grab it for you?”

“Oh, sure,” Erick answered.

“Come in then,” Gale said as he turned back inside. He swam over to Merise’s workbench and started moving around bottles and jars, looking for it. “You caught me as I was about to leave for work.”

Erick floated in the middle of the room, too uncomfortable to sit down. “You work as a gatherer, right?”

“Yeah, as long as stupid humans keep their trawling nets away from the reefs.”

Erick pursed his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’ll be out of a job if humans drag their nets through the reef fields. They’ve been tearing up the seabed nearby, so we’re all getting on edge about it.”

“Why? Bottom trawling can’t be that bad, can it?”

“No, it’s literally the worst thing humans have started doing to piss off merfolk,” Gale answered, pausing his search to give Erick a pointed look. “Bottom trawling nets destroy coral and kick up huge sand clouds, and the fishermen dump hundreds of dead fish back into the water after they pass through. Their nets are too big and dangerous to cut, and because it’s illegal now to enchant sailors, we can’t make them change course either.”

Erick considered that for a moment. “Well, their nets haven’t actually bothered any of the shoals yet, right? They just stay in the open ocean?”

Gale turned back to the desk. “For now, yeah, but most of us think just a matter of time until one of their nets goes through someone’s neighborhood.” He then made a frustrated sound, his search of the desk having failed, and opened a drawer out of the dozens lining the wall beside Merise’s workbench. He made a more dramatic groan. “Stupid woman never organizes this thing.” He dug around in the drawer for a moment before he closed it and opened another. “She made me watch how to make your medicine so I would know how to, but of course she had to put it away with everyone else’s medicine.”
Erick’s eyebrows rose and he found a renewed curiosity in the drawers by Merise’s workbench. “How many people does she treat?” he asked.

“I don’t know, over a hundred every year probably. We mostly just take care of the same two dozen some people over and over because they’re either old, accident-prone, or have dumb kids.” Gale shut another drawer. “I’m going to be late at this rate.”

“Sorry.” Erick looked down and rubbed the back of his neck. “I can come back later. I was wanting to ask Merise about some other stuff anyway.”

“Like what?” Gale didn’t turn around as he continued his search. “It’s not that big of a deal if I’m late. My friends will just be annoying about it.”

Reluctantly, Erick said, “I wanted to ask if she had anything for panic attacks.”

Gale faltered a moment to glance over at Erick. He frowned and turned back to the drawer. “We have a couple things that can help with that. Do you know what’s causing them?”

“Stress, I think.” Erick let himself take a seat at the table and folded his arm over the back of his chair. “I used to get them on land when I was getting depressed about my work and general life choices. I thought I got rid of them, but now I’m here, so…” He shrugged. “It’s just more proof I’m shit at fixing anything.”

Gale picked up a small packet made from a folded bit of fish leather. He stared at it a moment, absentminded. “Found your medicine.” He set the packet on Merise’s workbench and then swam up to open another drawer. He took out a green glass bottle and tilted it to check the contents. Bladderwrack capsules filled with brown liquid rolled around inside. It was the same medicine they wanted to give Erick after he hurt himself at the prison. He looked back at Erick before he closed the drawer and brought both the packet and the bottle to Erick.

Holding up the bottle first, Gale said, “This is a mild sedative. You can take one whenever you feel really anxious or have another attack. They will make you drowsy, but I don’t recommend taking them to help you get to sleep if that’s what you need instead.” Before Erick could take them, Gale pulled back the bottle. “Can you follow those directions?”

Erick frowned at Gale, but answered, “Yes.” It annoyed him that Gale could still act like he knew best despite being younger, but Erick knew that Gale probably did know exactly what was in the medicine he was offering.

“Good.” Gale let Erick take the bottle. He then picked up the packet and unfolded it. Two pills were individually wrapped and labeled. “This is a two-part medicine.” Pointing to the first one, he said, “You can take this one now if you’ve had breakfast. It’ll make your body stop providing nutrients to your womb, basically to stop the embryo from growing if there’s one there.” Gale then pointed to the second pill. “After twenty four hours, you’ll take this one to expel it. You’ll want to plan on staying home for a few days because it will make you sick.” As Gale folded back up the packet, he said, “You’re taking this early enough that your body will probably just reabsorb anything there, but don’t be surprised if you get some bleeding.”

Erick gaped at him, horrified, and made no move to take the packet Gale now held out. “I thought this was supposed to prevent pregnancy.”

“It will, by ending it.” Gale’s brow furrowed. “It’s been almost a month since your blood binding. If you were going to get pregnant, you already are. Honestly, you should probably wait until you have actual pregnancy symptoms before you take this. There’s no point making yourself sick if
you’re in the clear anyway.”

Erick didn’t answer. He stared at the floor, struggling to conceptualize that preventing pregnancy really meant ending an existing one. Logically, he already knew that, but hearing it stated so bluntly somehow made it more real.

“Hello?” Gale rolled his eyes, still holding out the packet. “Don’t tell me you’re having an attack right now.”

“I’m not!” Erick snapped, giving him a glare. “But thanks for caring. I can really see why Merise is trying to teach you this stuff.” He grabbed the packet and headed for the door.

“Shit, wait!” Gale followed him. “Don’t run off again. Silas really will never talk to me again if you go disappearing.”

“You think I care what he does?” Erick retorted.

“I mean, yeah?” Gale shrugged, wincing at Erick’s expression. “Look, I wasn’t trying to make you mad this time, I swear.” He pointed at the bottle in Erick’s hand. “I gave you that. I’m trying to help.”

“Do you have to treat me like I’m an idiot?” Erick gripped the bottle and the packet.

“No. I just don’t think before I talk.” Gale sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, okay? Everything about you just makes me worried about Silas, and he’s like a little brother to me. My mom took care of his maternal dad for a long time before he died, so I was all Silas had when Ronan was busy and his other dad was too sick to care for him. I can’t just let go of that.”

“Trying to justify your asshole behavior doesn’t make me feel better.”

“I’m not trying—”

“Yes you are,” Erick interrupted. “Apologies are about admitting you were wrong about something, but all I’m hearing is you wanting me to just give you a free pass.” Gesturing to himself, he said, “I know I have problems, but I’m at least still trying to come to terms with that fact. When you recognize yours, then you can come talk to me.”

Gale stared at Erick a moment before looking away. “Fine,” he said, shaking his head, “but where are you going then?”

“Back to Silas’ house. I’m not dumb enough to disappear again after just one day.”

“Okay then.” Gale waved to the door. “You can go and I can get to work. Will you at least tell Silas I tried to apologize?”

Erick rubbed between his eyes, tempted to tell Gale to just fuck off, but answered, “Yeah.” It occurred to him then that he probably wouldn’t see Gale again if he went to the Cradle. After they went out the door, Erick said, “For what it’s worth, Gale, I don’t think you’re completely awful.”

Gale scoffed. “Uh, thanks?”

“I mean you’re a good friend to Silas. Don’t mess it up just because of me.” Erick looked up at the surface. “I’m going to be able to see my crew again soon. I probably won’t stick around here much longer after that.”
Gale looked up as well. “Right. I’ll try to be less awful then, I guess.”

Chapter End Notes

Having written so far ahead, it's a little amazing to me how much my characters I've changed over the course of the story. Erick's grown a lot, but I like to think that Gale and Silas are both learning too.
Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

Forgive me for the late update this week! My trip to Tucson was a blast! I wish it could have lasted longer, but alas, homework is now catching up with me.

When Erick returned to Silas’ house, he sat at the kitchen table and looked at his new medicines. He didn’t feel anxious enough to warrant one of the seaweed pills, so he set the bottle aside and looked at the packet. He turned it over in his hands, not opening it. Gale’s words echoed in his mind: “If you were going to get pregnant, you already are.” He had talked himself into believing that this medicine wouldn’t hurt anything, but it would hurt whatever was inside him.

Of the little he knew about human pregnancies because of Dunley’s wife, morning sickness usually didn’t start until six weeks. Dunley’s wife was unlucky with her firstborn because she got morning sickness early at five weeks. If Erick was that unlucky too, he could start feeling sick any day now. Women typically knew before then because of their missed period, but Erick didn’t even know if merfolk had periods. If they did, he hadn’t been one long enough to have one himself. His face reddened as he remembered the other symptoms Dunley described. He touched his pecs, horrified at the thought of developing breasts to nurse a baby. Then he reminded himself that he had already seen a pregnant merman, and he didn’t have breasts. Erick breathed a small sigh of relief at that, though he did wonder how merbabies were supposed to be fed.

Looking again at the packet, Erick also considered its side effects. He couldn’t go see his crew or talk to the guards if he was stuck housebound. Not only would taking the medicine essentially make him a murderer if he was actually pregnant, it would further delay his plans to return to land. Erick put the packet on the table and rubbed his temples. Part of him insisted he should take the medicine anyway, that he basically had a fifty-fifty chance of doing anything wrong. If he waited for symptoms, it would be a hundred percent chance.

Erick looked at Silas’ bed alcove. He knew Silas would be happy to hear he was having second thoughts, but he also knew that no matter how much he hated the idea of killing anything, he couldn’t stand the idea of being pregnant. Just the thought of becoming a father was enough to make him drop his hand to the table and pick back up both medicines. Yet it wasn’t enough to make him swallow anything either.

In his bed alcove, Erick grabbed the belt Jeb gave him from a shelf and put the packet and the pill bottle inside the attached pouch. He had paid for his and Silas’ caviar medleys with the money Jeb gave him, so there were only a few shells left at the bottom of the pouch. He had already looped his worry beads around the belt as well, so it made sense to keep all of his possessions in one place. He would be able to keep everything on his person wherever he went, considering he also still never took off Silas’ locket.

Lying down, Erick folded his arm under his pillow and told himself he would take the packet’s medicine when he got back to land. He didn’t know what he would do if he got symptoms before then, but having the packet in his belt pouch was enough to reassure him that he had even a semblance of control over his life. Whatever he did with it was his choice now, not the gods’ or his uncle’s or Silas’. He could get back his legs and he could get back to land, and when he could have
both, he could figure out what to do about Silas.

Erick ended up falling asleep while waiting for Silas to wake up. Around midmorning, Silas pushed back Erick’s curtain.

“Good morning,” Silas said, hunching his shoulders a little, bashful. “Did you sleep okay?”

Erick opened one eye to look groggily at him. He left the other half of his face smothered in his pillow. “I had just fallen back asleep, but yeah.”

“Oh, sorry.” Silas smiled sheepishly. “What do you want for breakfast?”

Erick raised an eyebrow at Silas’ awkwardness, but then he remembered last night again. He turned to bury the other half of his face in his pillow too. Muffled by its sponge surface, Erick answered, “Pick whatever you want.”

Silas stuck out his lip, unsure what to make of Erick trying to suffocate himself, but said, “Okay. Are you going to come out or…?”

“I’m staying here. I’m one with the sponges.”

Silas laughed. “All right then. Do I need to bring food to the sponges?”

“Can sponges even eat?”

“I think they’re filter feeders,” Silas answered. “So kind of?”

Erick sighed and pushed himself up. Running a hand over his face, he said, “I don’t want to be a filter feeder.”

“Then come to the kitchen with me.” Silas turned to leave. “We’ve been sleeping in long enough today.”

“You’re the one who’s been sleeping in.” Erick left his bed alcove and joined Silas in the kitchen. “I went to Merise’s house earlier.”

“You did?” Silas’ hand paused as he reached into a shelf, but then he took out a jar and set it on the counter. His fingers gripped the lid. “So, you took the medicine then.”

“Yeah,” Erick lied. “Merise wasn’t home, so Gale had to get it for me.”

“Oh.” Silas said nothing for a moment. “Was he…?”

“He wasn’t a complete ass.” Erick sat down at the table. “He tried to apologize too, but I wasn’t in the mood to accept his excuses.” He rested his temple on his fist, staring at the table’s stone surface. “Still, it’s one less thing I have to worry about. You don’t have to keep shunning him for my sake.”

Silas didn’t answer. He took down plates from another shelf and served himself and Erick seaweed cakes and fish fillets. As Silas passed Erick his plate, he said, “Well, I guess we can do whatever we want now, now that that’s done.”

“Yeah.” Erick wasn’t sure what else to say. Despite Silas’ attempt to sound positive, they both knew it wasn’t fooling him. He lifted up his fork, but hesitated to start eating. “Was there anything we haven’t done yet that you still want to do?”
Silas cut a chunk of his seaweed cake into smaller and smaller pieces, turning it into a pulp. He bit his lip. Hesitantly, he said, “If we had more time, I would have liked to take you on a salvaging trip. I haven’t been able to introduce you to my salvage team yet because half of them aren’t here and we were avoiding the chasm.” He swirled his fork through the smashed bit of his seaweed cake. “There doesn’t really feel like a point to try now.”

“Maybe not, but we don’t have anything else to do today,” Erick answered. “This team is basically all your best friends, right?”

“Yeah.” Silas didn’t look up from his plate. “Monty and his guys are in Peleran now, so we could see them, but Doris and Iara are still on their way back from the northeast.”

“How many people are part of this team?” Erick asked, trying to imagine faces for their names.

“There’s just the four of us in the main group, plus Jeb even though he can’t go out with us, but Monty’s always picking up new guys,” Silas answered. “Not all of them stick around, either because salvaging isn’t their thing or because they find better teams. Monty usually plans a trip once a month for us, but last month he left with his old buddies for an anniversary get-together thing. If I hadn’t gotten captured, I’d probably be out in the open ocean right now with them.”

Erick considered that for a moment, the novel notion that Silas had a life before he fished him out of the sea. “Gale said your friends were all older than you,” he then said after a moment. “Is salvaging just a thing older people do?”

Silas shrugged. “Not really. There are plenty of young people that give it a try at least once. Even if you don’t find anything, it’s fun to go out and explore, see other shoals. It’s just expensive to keep going on trips if you can’t make any finds. Older mers usually have money saved up from other jobs, so they can afford a few sand holes between scores.

“Unlike most guys starting out, I got lucky,” Silas continued, sitting up as he reminisced. “First ship I found with Monty, I was the only one who could squeeze through some port windows and get inside.” He smiled somewhat. “It was so dark in there, I thought for sure a barracuda would jump out at me. My lamp barely lit an arm-span ahead of me. It was a fresh wreck, though, so there wasn’t a lot of coral yet inside. I carried out so much stuff through those windows – pewter pitchers, crystal glasses, real silverware. I even found the ship’s strongbox, but we couldn’t fit it through the window.” Silas laughed. “I had to prop it up against the frame while Monty filled off the lock. Gods, my arms were so sore after we finally got that thing open, and all it had were stupid papers.”

Erick smiled despite himself. “They were probably really important papers then.”

“Yeah, probably, but the water had already ruined them.” Silas tipped his head to the side, half-frowning. “The sea ruins a lot of stuff we find.”

“I see.” Erick found himself fiddling with his locket. Lifting it to show Silas, he said, “You know, I took this from the bag you had when I caught you. Were you ever going to ask for it back? It’s yours if you want it.”

“Huh?” Silas looked surprised, then looked down with a small blushing smile. “No, I want you to keep it. I didn’t say anything because I figured you liked it. I’ve never seen you take it off.”

“Isn’t it expensive though? You’re already having to provide me food, and I’m sure Merise would have made me pay for all of her help if I had been anyone else.”
“Yeah, but it’s okay,” Silas answered. “I have enough saved up, and my dad makes enough money that it’s no big deal. Jeb sells most of the things I find, so I still get money from his shop too.”

“Still. When I get back to land, I can get you whatever you want there. It wouldn’t be hard at all to drop some crates overboard for you.”

Silas’ expression fell. “I don’t want stuff.” He stabbed his fork into his seaweed cake, cutting off another piece. “I want to see a horse and know what it’s like to be wrapped in a blanket. I can’t get a pet goldfish in the ocean either. I thought... After last night, don’t you—”

“No.” Erick held his temples, hiding his eyes. “Last night I wasn’t in a good place. There was nothing romantic about how I was acting.” He sighed. “You are really important to me now, I’ll admit that. I care more about you than I thought I ever would. But I just... I have so many other things to worry about right now.”

Silas’ eyebrows knotted, unsure what to make of Erick’s admission. “So, does that mean I’ve been upgraded to good friend instead of just the weird guy you’re living with or what?”

Erick wiped his hand over his face, stifling a laugh. “Sure. You could say that.”

“Can I still hug you if you get upset again?” Silas then asked. “Because it was awkward, but I can’t honestly say I disliked it either. Like, you were really warm, so—”

“God, you don’t have to keep going on about it.” He dropped his forehead onto his palms with a groan.

“Sorry.” Silas inclined his head, rueful. “But I still want to know. I like giving hugs. It’s not necessarily meant to be romantic. My friends are all okay with it.” Pausing, he then added, “After the concert, you got so upset just because our shoulders touched. I want to make sure I don’t do anything wrong like that again.”

“It’s not that you did anything wrong that night,” Erick answered, letting his hands fall back to the table. “I was just caught up in thinking about something else. I don’t really hug my friends either. It’s like singing – it just seems more personal for me than you.”

“Why? You hug Ivan at least, right?”

Erick shook his head. “No, not really. He wasn’t ever that affectionate with me, and we’re both grown men now. I was too old after my parents died to want him to comfort me like that.”

Silas frowned. After a moment, he said, “That just sounds sad. How could you live without being able to hold anybody?”

Erick hesitated to answer. “I didn’t.” He took a breath and exhaled. “I wasn’t a virgin before we slept together. I used to get drunk and sleep around a lot. It was how I coped with everything for a long time. I don’t want to be like that anymore, but I was reminded of it at the concert. That’s why I freaked out. I’m afraid I’m just going to relapse into my old habits.”

Silas went quiet, considering this information. “So, when you said you wanted a beer last night—”

“Let’s just say it’s a good thing you don’t have alcohol at your house. I wouldn’t trust myself to drink responsibly when I’m upset.”

“Oh. I guess I’ll be sure to remember that then.” Silas decided against telling Erick that his dad actually did have a few bottles of caviar cocktails. He only took them out when he had company
over for game nights.

“Yeah.” Erick let himself start eating to fill the awkward silence. Admitting his past felt like it should have been a bigger deal, but Silas gave him no indication of being surprised. He supposed it probably shouldn’t have been surprising either. If the worse he could say about himself was that he slept around and beat up too many people, it wasn’t that bad at all in comparison to the merpirates’ activities. He repeated that to himself, the small comfort in the fact of their difference.
The rest of the morning passed quietly. They visited Jeb again to see if Hal had any news, but Jeb hadn’t seen the guard yet. After they returned home that evening and had dinner, Silas remained awake late into the night, wondering how his father’s game night was going. He fell asleep before his father returned.

The following day, Erick and Silas visited Jeb again before going to hang out at the squidball court. They alternated between playing catch and watching other people play.

As the pale blue of sunlight began fading to the bottle green glow of algae lamps, the mers who had been playing in the court below wrapped up their game and began exchanging goodbyes. Erick watched the mers disperse to their homes with his elbows on the seats behind him. Lifting up his head to look at the darkening surface, he said, “We should probably head back to your house now.”

Silas followed his gaze and nodded. “I still don’t know how we’re going to tell my dad about Hal and everything.”

“We could just stay quiet about it.”

“And make him more mad at us later? He needs to know what he and Kaui are dealing with. He doesn’t know that this guild’s boss is a mesmerist or that his own guards could be sabotaging his efforts to know more. It also might not be too late to stop the two guards Kaui sent to the Cradle.”

Erick looked sidelong at Silas, sitting forward to lean on the heels of his hands on either side of himself. “But what if he tries to do something instead of let me join them?”

“We’ll just try to talk him out of it,” Silas answered. “He’s going to find out one way or another. Wouldn’t you rather he know now so he can actually help us if something goes wrong?”

“I guess?”

“Then we’re going to tell him.” Silas got up from his seat. “C’mon. We’re out so late, he’s probably going to beat us home.”

“It’s barely sunset,” Erick protested, but got up as well. The ocean continued darkening as he followed Silas back to his house.

When they returned, they found Ronan waiting for them at the kitchen table. “Hey, you’re back,” he said, rising to greet them. “You two had me worrying you’d gone missing too.”

“Dad, you couldn’t have been waiting more than five minutes,” Silas said, heading to the kitchen to get out dinner.

Erick’s eyebrows furrowed. “Who else went missing?”
Ronan sat back down heavily in his chair. “Hal. He didn’t show up for dice last night or his shift at the prison today. I went to visit him to see why he flaked on us, but apparently no one’s seen him since his last shift the other day.”

Silas spun around. “Huh? But we—” he cut himself short, glancing at Erick. His concerned expression matched his own. Noticing his father’s furrowed brow, Silas faced the floor. “We’ve seen Hal since then.”

“You did?” Ronan asked. “Did he say anything about skipping game night or work today?”

“No,” Silas said, shaking his head. He bit his lip. “Okay, so promise you won’t be mad, but—”

“Silas.” Ronan’s voice took on a warning tone.

“It wasn’t my idea.” Speaking quickly, Silas said, “I wanted to tell you as soon as Erick told me, but—”

“Erick told you what?” Ronan sat up, looking to each of the mermen. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened! Well, not exactly. When Erick ran off—”

Erick cut off Silas’ disorganized explanation, stating, “Hal is a member of the Diving Peregrines, the merpirates’ guild.” Before Ronan could start yelling, Erick continued, “I found out first, and Silas and I talked to him the other day about their guild and why he was roped into it. Hal is on our side, but he didn’t want to tell you about his involvement with them because he knew you’d be mad and because you’re close to Kaui.”

“You’re serious?” Ronan slapped the table with both hands and shouted at both of them, “Why in the great seven seas did you not tell me this sooner?”

Silas shrunk back. Erick squared his shoulders and answered, “We didn’t want you to get involved yet. Hal said he’d help me join their guild so I can get their shifter tattoo. The only way it’ll work is if they don’t know I’m against them.”

“How are you so sure of that?” Ronan asked. “And how did you even find out Hal of all people is part of this group?”

“He has their tattoo,” Erick said.

Speaking up, Silas added, “It’s on his back. We’ve both seen it before. I didn’t realize it was the same as the merpirates’ tattoo until he showed it to me again yesterday.”

Ronan stared at him, dumbfounded, before lowering his gaze. “Gods,” he breathed. “He did have one, didn’t he?”

“Hal’s not the only one,” Erick added. “He says a lot of guards are with this guild. When we left him yesterday, he said he was going to talk to the other guards in on this to see if he could get some support to bust this thing after I get their tattoo. The only one who knows the awakening song is their boss, Adriel, and he’s apparently a good mesmerist.”

Silas added, “That’s why I’m worried about the people Kaui sent to the Cradle. We already know what they’re up against, but if we try to stop them, Kaui is going to find out about all this too.”

Ronan ran his hand over his thinning blond hair, falling back into his chair. “And why are you worried about that?”
Erick answered, summarizing his and Hal’s fears about all the different ways disbanding the merpirates could go wrong. Silas sat at the table, helping explain and back up Erick’s reasons for joining. Unsurprisingly, Ronan was furious when Silas admitted that he wanted to join as well, but he couldn’t deny Erick’s need to do so. As they continued talking, they had dinner.

When they finished telling Ronan everything, Silas said, “I don’t know why Hal’s missing, but I’m hoping it’s just because he’s busy trying to recruit people to our side.”

“If he isn’t,” Erick said, “I just hope they haven’t killed him.” He stared at his hands on the table. “If anything happens to Hal, it’ll be my fault for talking him into all of this.”

Silas frowned at Erick. “Don’t blame yourself. I wanted him to talk to the other guards too, and he’s the one that agreed to help us at all.”

“What ever his reasons are,” Ronan said, “I’m just disappointed he didn’t want to trust me. As soon as you two meet him again, get him to tell you who else is involved so I know not to trust them.” He sighed, glancing at the dark window. “Tomorrow morning, I’m going to need to relay all of this to Kauí. If this Adriel really is as deep in with the King as Hal says, then Kauí has to be familiar with him somehow already. He might know something about him that could help, but we won’t do anything until we can get more information. Is that fair?”

Silas nodded. “Yeah.”

“Good.” Ronan took on a firm tone. “Now next time, don’t wait to tell me these things.” He looked at each of the mermen, but they each avoided his eyes. “The guards are my responsibility. Withholding information like this not only inhibits my ability to lead them, it can put them and yourselves in more danger. I don’t care how grown-up either of you two think you are. You’re my son, Silas, and Erick, I’ve basically adopted you at this point. Please remember that when you think about why I get mad about these things.”

“Okay,” Silas said quietly. “I’m sorry, Dad.”

Ronan got up to give him a hug. “It’s all right.”

Erick looked at the two embracing and turned his gaze back down to his hands folded over each other on the table. His thumbnail pressed into his fingers. He was touched by Ronan calling him an adopted son, but it only emphasized the divide he felt between himself and Ivan. He doubted that their reunion tomorrow would be as kind.

“Now,” Ronan said, pulling away from Silas, “I don’t know about you two, but I need to get some sleep.”

Silas wished him goodnight and noticed Erick’s downcast expression. “Well, that worked out better than we thought, right?”

“Yeah.” Erick got up to head to his bed alcove. “We should try to get up early to meet Jeb tomorrow. Hal might have stopped by while we were at the squidball court.”

“Let’s hope so,” Silas said.
Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

I've been looking forward to uploading this chapter all week... lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as they finished breakfast, Erick and Silas made their way to the chasm. Now that he knew Hal was missing, Erick put more attention into his habit of monitoring his surroundings. Every mer felt like a potential threat until he could see their back. It didn’t matter how innocuous they appeared. His quiet paranoia wouldn’t silence itself, so all he could do was remain vigilant and keep his worries to himself. It wouldn’t help either of them if he made Silas worry unnecessarily too.

When they neared Jeb’s stall, Silas waved. Erick followed Silas’ gaze. Jeb was resting his elbows on his shop’s table, staring out into the chasm with a frown and a deeply furrowed brow. Erick’s expression matched Jeb’s. “Something looks wrong. He never frowns like that.”

“I guess Hal talked to him after all?” Silas said, shrugging. He called Jeb’s name as they continued swimming down.

The old merman’s head jerked up at the sound of Silas’ voice and he faced them, eyes widening. “Go home!” he shouted, waving them away before his hands abruptly fell back to the table. A mermaid with a tiger-striped jade tail darted out from beneath the awning over Jeb’s stall. On her hip hung a sheathed sword.

“Shit!” Erick hissed through his teeth. He threw his arm in front of Silas and pushed him back towards the shoal. “Get Ronan.”

“But you—”

Neither one had time to argue. Threads of a siren song ensnared their limbs, jamming their joints in place. The tiger-striped mermaid gave them a closed-lipped smile, waving at them as if she were greeting friends. Her voice wrapped around them, nearly blending in with the hum of the ocean. She curled her fingers and Erick and Silas’ tails moved at the same time, working against their wills to swim down to Jeb’s stall. Both of their voices were silenced by her song.

When Tiger-striipes pulled them into Jeb’s stall, they found another merman humming behind Jeb as he drummed his fingers against the handle of his sword. Bulky rings sat beneath each of his knuckles. After Tiger-striipes made Erick and Silas sit across from Jeb and Rings, she closed up Jeb’s stall by fastening the curtain over the table. She turned back around to face the mermen and stopped singing. The single lamp slowly brightened in the sudden darkness.

“So, you two are Silas and Erick,” Tiger-striipes said. She looked over each of them as they stared at her, Silas looking terrified and Erick glaring like he wanted to knock out her teeth. Letting her gaze fall onto Silas, she said, “It’s amazing how much can unravel just because of one little loose end.”

Erick sat forward. “Where’s Hal?” he asked, keeping Rings in the corner of his eye.
Her eyebrows rose. “That traitor? We’ve taken care of him.”

“You bitch!” Erick jumped up, but Tiger-stripes drew her sword and pointed it at Erick’s chest.

“He’s not dead,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Sit back down before I complete the other half of that X on your chest.”

Remembering too well the scars he got from the first time he fought merpirates, Erick lowered himself back to the floor.

“Good.” Tiger-stripes continued to point her sword at Erick as she glanced at Rings. “My friend and I are here to tie up the mess you two have made. We know what Hal has told you, but we need to know how far you’ve spread that information.”

Erick didn’t let his glare waver away from Tiger-stripes as his mind raced to remember everything he discussed with Hal. The guard knew everyone Erick knew, so there was no point hoping the merpirates wouldn’t target Merise or Gale if they didn’t get what they wanted from them. The way Rings sat behind Jeb implied that they weren’t above hurting him either to get them to talk. Yet Erick knew he had to be careful about what he would say so they could retain some leverage. He didn’t know whether it would be smart or not to hide the fact that they had told Ronan everything. Silas’ father had a lot of power in his position as captain of the guards, but Erick couldn’t ignore the possibility of them assassinating him or holding Silas ransom. But if they had waited for them at Jeb’s stall, they probably thought Ronan still didn’t know anything because Hal thought they would keep it secret. If Hal told them everything he knew, though, it was already too late for Erick to hide the fact that he was human.

Silas’ gaze flitted from Erick to Tiger-stripes. His breath stalled in his chest, watching their staring contest. Unable to stand the silence, he asked, “What are we supposed to tell you? Hal knows everyone we would have told.”

Erick mentally swore at Silas.

“He did give us a good list.” Counting with her free hand open at Silas, Tiger-stripes said, “We have the old merman here; the other half who started this problem, your friend Gale; his healer mother, Merise; and of course your father, the captain of the guards.” She lowered her hand. “We simply want to know what you’ve told them, and if you’ve told anyone else Hal neglected to mention.”

“And if we tell, what then?” Silas asked. “You kill us and them? We just want your tattoos.”

“We’re willing to work with you if you cooperate with us,” Tiger-stripes answered. “That’s why we’re here.”

Erick clenched his hands. “Then take me to Adriel if you’re serious,” he said. “You two are just middlemen, aren’t you? Why waste time talking here?”

Tiger-stripes raised an eyebrow. “Middlemen? I’m Adriel’s second-in-command here in Peleran. You are already wasting my precious time. Can you make it worth Adriel’s to bring you to him?”

“Did Hal tell you why I want your tattoo?”

“He said you claimed to be human, but I find it hard to believe an accidental blood binding is actually possible.”

“It’s the truth.” Switching to his native tongue, he asked, “Can either of you speak English?”
Tiger-stripes only frowned, confused, but Rings’ head leaned back with surprise. Answering back in English with a mertongue accent, he said, “You know human tongue?”

“Yes, and I can read and write in it too. I live in Anvil Point. Go to any bar from the docks to the west side – nearly every one can probably tell you who I am.”

Tiger-stripes shot a look at Rings. “What is he saying?”

Rings repeated what Erick told him, adding, “I’ve been there once.”

“If you take me to see Adriel,” Erick said, “I can introduce him to my uncle, Ivan Mikailov. He’s a rich and influential man on land. He can pay Adriel whatever he wants to bring me back home.”

Tiger-stripes gave Erick a calculating look. “Can you prove this uncle exists?” she asked. “It seems far too much like a very convenient excuse to me.”

Nodding to Rings, Erick answered, “Just send him to land to talk to my uncle. I can give you his address.”

“All right, but what do you expect us to do with you in the mean time?” Tiger-stripes asked. “We certainly can’t just let you go continue flapping your mouths to everyone. We’re running a tight business here, after all, and well…” She flourished her sword. “You two are making things difficult.”

“We’ll stay quiet,” Erick said. “Jeb is the only one we’ve told about our plans with Hal. Gale, Merise, Ronan – you don’t have to worry about them.”

“Oh really?” Tiger-stripes said. “Hal isn’t the only one close to Ronan, you know.” She caught the flash of horror in Erick’s eyes before he cleared his face again. Silas’ shoulders fell in dismay.

“Ronan was all too willing to tell our other informant during their little game night about your efforts to find out more about us. You may not have told him about Hal, but he’s already told Kaui too much. Clearly we can’t trust you on your own.”

Erick said nothing, silently cursing that he dragged so many people into this mess.

After a tense paused, Silas asked, “If you knew that, why interrogate us?”

“To check our facts and scope out our options, of course,” Tiger-stripes answered. “It’s too late to stick to our usual clean-up methods.” She waved her sword at Erick. “He’s already making our trip worth it.” She gave Silas a furtive smile. “What do you have to offer us?”

“Leave him out of this,” Erick snapped. “You’ll have no deal with me if you hurt him or anyone else we know.”

“Careful how much you’re asking for there,” Tiger-stripes said. “It’s cute how much you love the little merman, but our leniency will only stretch so far.”

Erick grit his teeth, biting back his retort that Silas was just a friend.

“Now, back to the question of what to do with all of you.” Tiger-stripes looked at each of them in turn. “I can’t simply keep all of you here while we confirm that this rich uncle exists, but I also can’t just let you go. I shudder to think of what other trouble you may try to stir up.”

“Just keep me then and let the others go,” Erick said. “You have to be keeping Hal somewhere too, aren’t you? If my uncle won’t help me or we do something you don’t like, go ahead and kill me.”
“Erick!” Silas faced him, horrified. “You can’t just bet yourself like that!”

Erick snapped at Silas, “Do you have any better alternatives?”

“No, but—”

Tiger-stripes swung her sword between them, cutting off Silas. “I’m willing to accept his proposal, except we’ll add Hal to your collateral. Should you challenge us again, we’ll kill the both of them.” She glanced at Jeb. “These terms apply to you too, and anyone else who makes trouble.”

Silas gaped at her, feeling like he was going to be sick. “What am I supposed to do until you let them go? What counts as making trouble?”

“For starters, stop telling people about shifting or our guild,” Tiger-stripes answered. “Get Ronan and Kauí to stop poking their noses into our business. Make sure everyone else who knows about us doesn’t keep talking.”

“Okay, but what am I supposed to tell my dad when Erick doesn’t come back home with me?”

“You can tell him he’s in our custody if that will keep him from doing anything stupid.” Tiger-stripes lowered her sword. “Is there anything else you’d like to tell me before we take Erick with us?”

Silas looked at Erick, trying to search his expression for any answers, but Erick had lowered his head. Silas looked back at Tiger-stripes. Uncertainly, he said, “Yeah.” He bit his lip. “We told my dad about our plans with Hal yesterday. He knows about Adriel now, and he’s probably told Kauí about him now already. If Adriel wants to work out something with them, he should talk to them sooner than later. I… I know I don’t really have anything to offer like Erick, but I want to be able to go back to land with him if you let him go home.”

“I see.” Tiger-stripes sheathed her sword. “That is good information to know, even if inconvenient. I’m glad you had the good sense to be open with us.” She looked to Erick. “Come on now.”

Erick pushed himself up. “Can I have a moment privately with Silas first?”

“No, but I’ll let you hug and kiss goodbye anyway if you don’t make it too sappy.”

Erick’s cheeks flushed. “Our relationship isn’t like that,” he muttered, turning to face Silas. His scowl faded into a contrite expression. “I’m sorry I have to go, but we both know this is basically what we had planned on anyway.”

“No it’s not!” Silas got up and held his hands in fists by his sides. “It wouldn’t have been my fault before if you get killed.”

“Silas—”

“Just promise me you will come back,” Silas pleaded. “Please. Don’t just leave me here when you go back home.”

“I’ll do what I can, okay?”

“Not okay!” Silas said, cutting the water in front of himself. “You have to promise me. I won’t let you go unless you do.”

Erick sighed, facing the ground. “You know you can’t stop me from going. You’re just making a
I don’t care! Look at me, Erick.” Silas grabbed his arms and tried to meet his eyes, but Erick leaned away. “Why can you still not promise me this? I thought you said you cared!”

“I do, but I’m not going to make promises I can’t keep!” Erick retorted, pushing Silas away. “If all goes well, we’ll both be okay, but I don’t know that for certain.” He then made himself meet Silas’ eyes. “I just need you to be strong. We were going to see my friends tonight, remember? I want you to make sure they don’t worry about me.”

“But I don’t…” Silas started to say, but then he remembered that Erick meant his crew. He wasn’t going to be able to meet them at the tide pool.

“I don’t know how long it’ll take Adriel to work out things with my uncle, so you’ll just have to hold on until we know.” He glanced back at Tiger-stripes. “I assume we’ll be able to update you on how it’s going as we work it out.”

Tiger-stripes said, “We can arrange something. Are you quite ready yet?”

“I am,” Erick answered.

“No,” Silas said at the same time. He grabbed Erick around the waist and pressed his face against his chest. His forehead brushed against his locket, resting at the middle of his collarbone.

Erick held his arms away from Silas for a moment, taken aback. Then he let his hands rest on Silas’ back. He didn’t speak.

“Even if you won’t promise me,” Silas whispered against his skin, “I won’t stop waiting for you. Please don’t make me wait too long.” He gave Erick one final squeeze before letting go.

“Are you done now?” Tiger-stripes asked, exasperated.

Silas nodded, unable to speak now without breaking into tears.

“All right then, let’s go.” Tiger-stripes removed the curtain covering the stall and led Erick and Rings out into the chasm. As they swam away, Silas fell into Jeb’s arms. Jeb rubbed his back as Silas began sobbing.

Chapter End Notes

#sorrynotsorry I put our merboys through hell. It's too much fun.
Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

So, I officially haven't worked on this story in over a month now. I'm pretty suck on chapter 76, and I'm beginning to worry that I may need to cut a large chunk and rewrite again... But if I do that, I'll have basically no buffer anymore. I don't want to post stuff that may have to be deleted, but I also don't have any motivation to really iron out whatever my problem is with the story right now. So... I guess updates will just continue as usual as I procrastinate figuring it out.

My hope is that I won't have to delete anything and that I'll finish this story completely by the end of summer. It feels like a fitting deadline, to finish after about a year. I still have vague intentions of writing some sort of fluffy after-story about our merboys, but I'm keeping finishing this story as my main goal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun was nearing its zenith over the sea when Silas finally stopped crying. Jeb reassured him as much as he could, but his encouragement sounded hollow to Silas. Erick didn't promise that he would return. In the face of their separation, the one thing Silas had been fearing most, Erick couldn’t grant him that single comfort. Its lack ached like a bitter hole in his chest.

“We should get some food in you now,” Jeb said, getting out his jar of goose barnacles. “Crying like that takes a lot out of you.”

“I’m not hungry.” Silas curled up against the wall, holding his tail against his chest.

“I know you aren’t, but you shouldn’t skip lunch.” Jeb opened up the jar and held it out towards Silas. “You’re skinny enough as-is, lad.”

Reluctantly, Silas took out a barnacle and broke the mussel out of its sheath. He halfheartedly nibbled on it.

“There we go.” Jeb set the jar down beside Silas and sat back down beside him. He put his arm over the young merman’s shoulders and rubbed his arm. “This old salvager’s got you, you hear?”

Silas nodded mutely as he continued eating.

“Now, you were going to meet Erick’s crew tonight, weren’t you?” Jeb asked. “Do you want me to come along?”

Silas glanced at the missing half of Jeb’s tailfin. “Isn’t going to land a long trip for you?”

“If you help me along, it won’t be bad,” Jeb answered. “I would make the trip for you even if you didn’t need me. I’d like to see for myself what a human looks like in person. Are their legs as gangly as they look in the pictures?”

Silas smiled somewhat at that. “A little. Their ears are weirder. They have little holes in the sides of their head.”
Jeb chuckled. “That so?”

“Yeah.” Looking back out towards the chasm, Silas said, “As much as I’d like you to see them, though, I’m worried about what the merpirates will think if you close up your shop for the day. They’re probably going to keep tabs on us, so you leaving is going to look weird since you hardly ever leave your shop.”

Jeb tugged on his beard, frowning at that thought. “I hadn’t considered that.”

“Exactly. And if I go see Erick’s uncle and his crew, wouldn’t that break their conditions?”

“I would assume so,” Jeb answered. “Do you think you can just stay home?”

Silas shook his head. “No, I promised Ivan I would return. Even if the merpirates can get Erick back to land, I want to make sure Ivan knows what kind of people he’ll be dealing with.”

“True, they don’t seem like they’d be above double-crossing him.”

Groaning, Silas leaned back against the wall. “No matter what I do could get Erick in more trouble. If I stay and do nothing, they might not hold up their end of the deal, but if I try to warn Ivan, they would have an excuse to kill Erick and Hal.” He faced his hands again and squeezed the goose barnacle casing, crushing it. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“I don’t know what to tell you either,” Jeb said. “If you think it would be better for me to stay here, I will, but I doubt these merpirates will think too much of it if you disappear for a day.”

“You think?”

“Yeah.” Jeb inclined his head. “Granted, though, I don’t want you to make that trip by yourself. If you’re meeting them at night, you’re going to have to wait until morning to come back.”

“I know.” Silas curled his tail around the jar he was sitting on, remembering the cave he found to spend the night with Erick. He had been planning on letting Erick sleep there again while he found somewhere else to anchor the camping gear he used on salvaging trips. The cave was safer than a tethered sleeping bag.

After a moment, Silas said, “Gale will probably go with me if I ask him. He’s not going to like it, especially since I haven’t told him anything about meeting Hal and the merpirates yet, but he knows he has a lot of making up to do before I forgive him for the things he’s said to Erick.”

“Yeah, he could do for a wee bit of flogging for that,” Jeb said. “Erick told me about his spat with Gale. Did my best to cheer him up, but still…”

“He’s Erick,” Silas agreed with a sigh. “Thank you for trying to help him at least.”

“You’re welcome, lad.” Jeb gave Silas a squeeze.

Silas leaned against the old merman, comforted by his steady presence. He continued eating the goose barnacles until Jeb was satisfied he had enough.

* * *

“You’ll be staying here,” Rings said to Erick as he gestured to a door at the end of a hallway. They had left the chasm and went to what Erick would describe as a particularly large pile of coral pretending to be a big house or a somewhat small apartment. Inside the coral building, Erick found it was some sort of storage center. Crates and pieces of ships were stacked up along the walls and
spilling out of open rooms while merpirates checked inventory or clustered in groups to chat. After Erick gave them his uncle’s address, Tiger-stripes left Erick with Rings so she could go report back to Adriel.

“Will I get to see Hal anytime soon?” Erick asked as Rings unlocked the door.

“Yeah, right about now.” Rings opened the door.


Rings slammed the door in Erick’s face. “We’ll fetch you when Adriel wants you, so just hang tight.”

“You bastards!” Erick banged on the door, but the lock had already clicked. “Bring back a doctor, dammit!”

“I’m not as bad as I look,” Hal said hoarsely.

Erick turned back around. “Not that bad? You’re covered with bruises!”

Hal stiffly sat up on the cot he was laying on and faced Erick. Blood scabbed over his broken nose and a cut on his cheek. Dark bruises circled his eyes and spread over his ribs and gills. There were red welts on his wrists, as if he had been tied up recently. With a rattling sigh, Hal said, “Bruises heal. I’m better than I was yesterday.”

“Jesus.” Erick sat on the floor across from Hal. Their room had a narrow strip of windows near the ceiling and a hole crudely punched through the wall, making Erick guess it was so they could relieve themselves. It was a storage closet converted into a jail cell. “Why did they do this to you?”

“I broke the rules,” Hal answered shrugging, but then winced. “I tried not to tell them about you and Silas, but you saw the guy that brought you in. His rings aren’t just for show.”

Erick looked more closely at a diamond-shaped cut on Hal’s cheek and grit his teeth. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked you to get involved in all of this.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” Hal said. “Just tell me if Silas is okay. Did they take him somewhere else?”

“No, I left Silas with Jeb,” Erick answered. He summarized how the merpirates found them. “I’m just hoping that Adriel will be able to work out something with my uncle now.”

“Hm.” Hal nodded. “I can’t really imagine Adriel has much use for human money, but I hope your uncle can give him something to get you out of here.” Pausing, he added, “I was so stupid to get caught. I trusted the guys I was talking to about all this, but someone else overheard and told on us.”

“So that’s what happened.” Erick sighed, leaning his head back against the wall. “When do you think I’ll be able to talk to Adriel?”

“Sooner than later, probably. After that guard was done with me, Adriel interrogated me himself.”

“He did?” Erick asked, surprised. “Did he beat you up too?”

“No, but he did use mesmerism, and I’d take another beating over that any day.”
Erick frowned, knotting his brows together. “Is it really that bad?”

“Yes. When you meet him, don’t bother lying about anything. If he doubts anything you say, he’ll use his mesmerism on you too because you can’t lie in a tranced state.”

“Seriously?” Erick’s blood chilled at the thought.

“Yeah.” Hal faced his hands. “It isn’t a pleasant experience, losing control like that. It was like I got split into two people, but the side of me that knew what was going on couldn’t do anything to stop the side that was in control of my body. So, if you can avoid it, do so.”

Erick gaped at him, horrified. “Okay then,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “I’ll remember that.”

“Good.” After a moment, Hal said, “Not to be rude, but I’d like to continue resting now.” Gesturing to the bruises on his chest, he added, “All of this has made it hard for me to get any sleep.”

“Oh, yeah.” Erick waved for him to lay back down. “Don’t let me keep you up. As soon as I see Adriel, I’ll try to make sure he lets you go too.”

Hal chuckled, grimacing a bit. “Thanks, but I don’t think I’ll get to return home when all of this is said and done.” He turned and lay down on his side, his back facing Erick. “Adriel’s already cut me from the guild.”

Erick’s eyes widened. Between Hal’s shoulder blades where his tattoo was supposed to be was a lacerated mess of inflamed skin. The crisscrossed slashes had barely scabbed over.

Covering his mouth, Erick immediately turned away. Nausea overcame him as he tried not to imagine Adriel with a sword, hacking away at Hal’s back, or the blood that must have filled the water around him. He tried not to think of how Adriel wouldn’t have even cared, that he might have even smiled as his blade carved through Hal’s inked flesh. What was mutilating a traitor if he had no qualms against killing innocent humans?

Erick pushed himself to sit against the wall facing the door and avoided looking at Hal again. He tried to take deep breaths and reassure himself that the worst Adriel would do was just say no to giving him a tattoo, despite knowing that he really could do worse. He forgot the seaweed pills Gale gave him were still in his belt pouch, along with the abortion medicine he still hadn’t taken. His nausea didn’t go away.

Chapter End Notes

*raises eyebrows and snickers*
Forgive me for the late update! I got caught up with things this weekend and it completely got pushed to the wayside. Some good news, though: I'm back on track with writing this story again, so pending on my schedule, I should be able to continue progressing as usual.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” Gale asked as Silas once again surfaced to look at the coast for the tide pool where Ivan released him and Erick. They had been swimming near the shore for over an hour, getting themselves lost in the kelp forest that lay between land and the open ocean. The sun had fallen low over the ocean’s horizon.

“Yes, we have to be,” Silas answered shortly, but he doubted himself. They had easily found the stone pillars where Silas reunited with Gale, but Silas found it harder to pinpoint where he had come out of the kelp forest that divided the open ocean from land.

“It’s going to be dark before we find it,” Gale said. They dove back under to continue swimming. “We should just set up camp before we lose the rest of our daylight.”

“We can’t just give up. The whole point of coming out here was to find them. If I can’t talk to Ivan, then we’re risking Erick and Hal’s lives for nothing.”

Gale sighed. “We should have just stayed home,” he muttered. “I don’t know why I let you talk me into this. Your ideas always get us into trouble.”

Silas looked over his shoulder to scowl at Gale. “If you’re going to complain so much, I should have just gone with Jeb.”

“And get lost with a crippled merman?”

“Don’t call him crippled,” Silas retorted. “And I wouldn’t get lost with him either. Even if we did, it’d still be better than listening to you.” He turned his attention back to the water around them. “You could at least try to help me look.”

“I am looking, but I don’t know what that tide pool looks like,” Gale answered. “There are probably dozens of pools like it.”

“I’d be happy to just find even one at this point.” Each time Silas surfaced, they had only seen cliffs and jagged rocks along the coast. They were currently swimming to where the rocks seemed to level out.

As the sun began dipping below the horizon, they neared a corner in the cliffs. Swimming around it, Silas saw the corner curved around to a U shape, like a trowel scooping into the sea. They surfaced to get a better look. At the back of the curve were a half dozen humans sitting along a path to the water.

“There they are!” Silas dove back into the water to dart into the pool’s mouth. Sea stars curled away from him as he swam over the rocky bottom. He held his hands below himself to keep his
chest from hitting the ground as the waves surged in and out.

Silas surfaced again when he was only a few yards away from the cliff’s edge. “Ivan!” he called, looking up at the steep path where the humans were gathered.

Ivan jumped when he heard Silas call his name. He leaned forward to look down into the water and saw Silas. Then he saw a second merman with dark hair surface.

“It’s them!” Talia shouted, running to the water. Dunley got up after her. Flynn, Eustace, and Reena remained on the path, appearing too shocked to move or reluctant to enter the water.

Ivan was about to follow them, but then got a better look at the second merman’s face. “That’s not Erick.” His eyebrows lowered. He searched the water around the two mermen, but a third head did not surface.

Silas started to swim up to meet them, but Gale grabbed his arm before he could get too close. “Let them come to us,” Gale said, eyeing Erick’s crew warily. “I don’t care if you think it’s stupid; I don’t want to risk them pulling you out of the water again.”

“Do you really have to be paranoid right now?” Silas snapped, jerking away his arm. Still, he let Talia and Dunley wade waist-deep into the water. As soon as the two humans saw he was with Gale and not Erick, Silas sympathized with their fallen expressions.

“Where’s Erick?” Talia asked, abruptly coming to a stop.

Dunley frowned. “Is that the other merman we tried to catch?”

Silas barely understood the gist of what they had said, but it was based more on context than on the little English Erick had taught him. “I am sorry,” he said in English, thinking in mertongue before he translated each sentence. “My name is Silas. This is Gale. Erick is not…” He waved his hand, struggling to remember the word for ‘here.’ He shook his head. “I am sorry. English is hard.” Looking back up at Ivan, he called in mertongue, “I need you to translate. Erick isn’t here.”

“He’s not?” Ivan hurried into the water then. Ignoring the bewildered expressions of Erick’s crew, Ivan asked, “Why didn’t you bring Erick? You gave me your word that you would return him tonight.”

“I know, but we didn’t have a choice!” Silas answered. “He’s been taken hostage by merpirates. He wanted to be here, he really was planning on it, but they took him today and I couldn’t do anything to help him.”

“Whoa, slow down,” Ivan said, holding up his hands. “I can’t understand you if you talk that fast. Did you say merpirates?”

“Yes.” A particularly large wave rolled in, so Silas fanned out his hands to stay upright. He was bracing his tail against the rocks to hold his head above the water. “They sink ships by shifting, turning themselves human to attack sailors. Erick and I wanted to stop them and try to get the tattoo that lets them shift, but we messed up.”

Ivan paled, stumbling back as the waves surged against his legs. “Oh God…”

“What is he saying?” Talia asked. She gripped her hands into fists, trying to keep her arms above the water. “Ivan?” She glanced down at Silas’ distraught expression, fearing the worst. “Is he saying Erick’s dead?”
Ivan swallowed hard. “No, he’s alive, but I fear he won’t be for much longer.” To Silas, he asked, “What do we have to do to get Erick free?”

“I’m just supposed to stop talking about them,” Silas answered. Glancing at Gale, he added, “We told a lot of people about the fact they’re shifters, but they were trying to keep it secret.” Looking back up at Ivan, he said, “Erick let himself be taken so he could try to bargain with their leader. They’ll kill him if we do anything else they don’t like, but Erick is hoping that you can buy him a tattoo to go back home. They’re going to send someone to talk to you about that probably tomorrow. I came out here to warn you and explain everything in case they try to drop their end of the deal.”

Ivan held his temples, hiding his face. “The deal isn’t going to work. If their leader is who I think it is, Erick guaranteed his death the moment he said my name.”

Silas’ eyes widened in horror. “What do you mean? Who do you think their leader is?”

“Tell me his name,” Ivan said without looking at Silas.

“It’s Adriel. Do you actually know him?”

Ivan’s jaw clenched at the sound of his name. “Yes, I know him. It’s been sixteen years since the last time I heard from him. He’s the one who killed my sister and her husband – Erick’s parents.”
Chapter 67

Chapter Notes

This week’s update is a big chapter for a lot of new info. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the windows had grown dark, the door unlocked and startled Erick. “Time to meet the boss,” Rings said from the doorway, gesturing for Erick to come out.

Glancing back at Hal uncertainly, Erick got up from the floor and swam back out into the hallway. “Where am I meeting him?”

“You’ll see.” Rings pointed Erick where to go, staying behind him as if he expected Erick to try to make a break for it.

“Here he is,” Rings said, knocking on a door with the back of his hand before he swam inside a large office. Tiger-stripes floated beside a wide desk. Behind the desk sat a merman with electric blond hair and a sharp nose. He had wave-shaped tattoo armbands, but Erick’s eyes were drawn instead to the gold locket resting at his collarbone. It had a diamond in the center of an eight-pointed star, exactly like the locket his uncle had given his mother, the near-perfect twin of the locket Silas had found.

“Erick, right?” Adriel swam out from behind the desk. His tail had a bronze and black pattern like a python. Nodding to Tiger-stripes, he said, “She tells me your uncle’s name is Ivan Mikailov.” He leaned back against the desk and rested his hands on the edge. Looking Erick up and down with half-lidded eyes, he then smirked. “Boy, you sure are the spitting image of him. You really take after your mother’s side of the family, don’t you?”

Erick’s breath caught in his throat. “What?”

Adriel breathed a laugh, his lips pulling back in a grin to show his sharp teeth. He glanced at Rings and Tiger-stripes and waved them away. “Leave us.” He looked sidelong back at Erick. “It looks like we have plenty to talk about.”

As soon as the two mers left, Erick asked, “How do you know my uncle?” He clenched his hands by his sides, unsure whether he should be furious or terrified.

“Ivan? That bastard married my sister.” Seeing Erick’s bewildered expression, Adriel asked, “Did he not tell you about her?”

“No!” Erick answered, shaking his head. “My uncle hates merfolk. He would never…”

“Love one?” Adriel finished, raising an eyebrow. “He didn’t.” He dropped his debonair act and faced Erick with a cold expression. “He seduced her with lies to only benefit himself. My sister gave him absolutely everything she could, and he abandoned her as soon as she lost her usefulness to him.”

Erick gaped at him for a moment before he found his voice again. “Why?”
“My family traded with humans in the northeast,” Adriel said. “Your uncle was one of those humans. When he met my sister, he tricked her into thinking he cared about her so she would teach him mertongue and get him good trade deals. As soon as he outgrew trading with us, he tried doing a blood binding to turn her into a pathetic housewife. It failed because the gods knew better, of course, but he still managed to convince her to follow around his ship like one of those dumb dogs on land that let themselves get kicked over and over for just scraps. Your uncle only finally left her after he found out he couldn’t get viable spawn from her. Yet somehow, even after she saw how human doctors killed and dissected the monster he forced her to carry, she decided to find the secret of shifting to follow him back to land.”

Gesturing to himself, Adriel continued, “I of course had to help her, so find the secret we did! And what good did it do us?” He paused for Erick to take a guess, but Erick didn’t answer. “Exactly, nothing. She died because of some human disease, and Ivan didn’t give a damn when I finally found him to give him my sister’s last words.” He paused again, giving Erick almost a look of sympathy. “Whoever your uncle was to you, he was only my sister’s demise.”

Erick struggled to comprehend Adriel’s story. It contradicted what he thought he knew about his uncle’s past, yet it explained why he knew mertongue. Noticing the chair in front of the desk, Erick sunk into it. He rubbed his temples and glanced back up at Adriel. Then he saw his gold locket again. He froze. Slowly lowering his hand, Erick asked, “Did you know my parents too?”

Adriel looked away, but touched his locket. “I won’t ask for your forgiveness. Humans were all the same to me after I left Ivan that day. I had spent almost a decade living on land while my sister and I hunted down Ivan, and every day I watched humans tear each other apart over money, land, and even women. Doctors who could have saved my sister refused to help us just because we couldn’t pay them.”

Erick’s fingers gripped his armrest. His gills stilled as his breath grew shallow.

Adriel shrugged. “Hate me if you will, but surely you can understand. I couldn’t just kill Ivan. He had already done everything he could to ruin people’s lives. Nothing would change if I pulled him under the sea. But if I could make him feel the pain I went through…” He bit his lip against a breathy laugh. His fingers fell from the locket and he faced Erick. “Well, I thought it was worth a shot.”

Erick jumped up from his seat, but didn’t move farther. “You killed my parents!” he shouted, equal parts incredulous and furious. He envisioned his parents, his father defending his mother as Adriel and his followers replaced the monstrous merfolk of Ivan’s stories.

“I had a just cause,” Adriel retorted. “An eye for an eye. Clearly you’re better than him because the gods blessed you, so just accept that your uncle is the reason you ended up orphaned.”

“You didn’t have to kill them!” His nails dug into his palms as he barely restrained himself from attacking Adriel, but he didn’t know if it was fear or his conscience holding him back.

“How else was I supposed to make him understand what he did to my family?” Adriel answered. “My parents outlived their daughter. I had to watch her die!”

“You ruined my life! I became a sailor just so I could try to hunt you down. Now because of your damned gods, I have a fucking tail and am trying to explain to a psychopath that you can’t justify murder!”

“If you wanted to hunt merfolk so badly, you should understand.” Adriel took a breath and exhaled to regain his composure. Pointing his hand towards Erick, he said, “I am sorry you and your
parents had to suffer the consequences of the decades of manipulation my sister went through, but I have no quarrel with you."

“But I still do,” Erick said. “You not only fucked up my life, your people wanted to kill my friends. You mutilated Hal’s back just because he was trying to help me.”

“I don’t forgive people who betray me. Hal knew that.”

“So? You’re also wearing my mother’s necklace!”

“Yes, I am, because it’s a great memento to remember why I hate humans.” Holding out his hands, Adriel said, “Honestly, I don’t understand why you want to go back to land so badly. I’ve been told that the guy you bonded with was allowed to live because so many of my people like him, so it seems ridiculous to me that you would reject the gods’ blessing.”

“Maybe I could have appreciated it if I had been given a choice in the matter! I was fine on land. The only thing I’ve done since coming here is fuck up Silas’ life.” Erick fell back into his chair and hung his head. He pressed his hands over his eyes and pushed them up to cradle his forehead with his fingertips. “It was my fault he got dragged into this shit show you’re running. He wouldn’t have found out about shifting if he hadn’t gone to get me a language pearl, and he wouldn’t have had to worry about you wanting to kill him and all of his friends if I hadn’t tried to stop you.”

“So, what you’re saying is that you’re still just as bad as every other human?”

“Sure,” Erick spat, dropping his hands. “I wouldn’t blame it on the fact I was human, but I for sure as hell know I didn’t do anything to deserve Silas. Just because I realized I used to be an asshole doesn’t change the fact that I was.”

Adriel frowned at Erick, studying him like a dull knife on a sharpening block. “If you’re trying to win points with me, you sure have an odd way of doing it.”

“Hal told me there was no point lying to you because you can sing to stop me if I try. I don’t particularly want to know what it’s like being put in a trance, so I guess I’m playing the sympathy card to get my friends out of this mess, as stupid as that sounds. I’d like to go home, but I’m just as willing to let you kill me if it means you’ll leave Silas alone.”

Sitting back down on his desk, Adriel said, “You know saying that only makes me think even more that you should stay underwater, right?”

“Well, I don’t want to live here,” Erick answered. “For all of its faults, land is still my home. Silas wants to live there with me too, even though I doubt we can have the kind of life he probably wants. I’d still at least like to show him what it’s like up there, but I really don’t know how much I can even ask you for. You giving us tattoos should really be the least you can do to try to make up for all the shit you’ve done, but you’re not sorry about it at all.”

Adriel tipped his head to the side, acknowledging Erick’s words. “True, but I would be a lot more inclined to sympathy if you’d give the ocean another chance.”

“Well maybe I’d care more if I was actually able to choose,” Erick retorted. “Even if I did end up picking the ocean, I’d still need to sort out everything I’d be leaving behind on land.” He held out his arms. “What will it take for you to give me a tattoo? Do you even want anything from my uncle?”

“Yeah, plenty that he can’t give me, but I would still take his money. I have operations on land right now that could use some financial help. I just doubt he would actually pay me anything to
“He may have hated merfolk, but I know he cared about me at least,” Erick said, resting his elbows on the chair’s armrests. “I used to get into bar fights and stuff like that a lot, and he always paid my bail and covered damage expenses. Paying to get me out of this mess won’t be any different.” Pausing, he added, “But, if he doesn’t want to or can’t for whatever reason, I do have some savings too. Not nearly as much as my uncle, but my parents’ inheritance has kept me well-off.”

“I see.” Adriel looked down. “You’ve given me a lot to think over now.”

“Does that mean you will let me go home and leave my friends alone?”

Adriel glanced back over at Erick. “Whether I leave your friends alone depends entirely on their behavior. I’ve not yet decided what to do about you telling the captain of the guards and Lord Kaui about my activities.”

“Just leave them alone?” Erick suggested. “Or hell, if the secret’s out anyway, just start a business selling tattoos like how that other shoal sells language pearls. That has to be better than sinking ships and killing people all the time.”

“My business sinking ships is only a small part of the work I do around Cradle Basin,” Adriel answered. “It’s more of a side project to find like-minded mers like myself.”

“Then what is your end goal?” Erick asked.

“To get rid of humans, of course,” Adriel said, scoffing. “Or at least the ones exploiting the rest. Was that not obvious? With shifting, mers can eventually replace all the humans on land and clean up your filthy cities. There’s plenty to be had from your forests and mountains, but you’re all abusing those resources. You’re even destroying the ocean with your trawling nets now. This cruelty is why the gods abandoned humans. You stopped respecting the spirits and let your greed and apathy get the best of you.”

“You can’t condemn an entire race just because of that!”

“I can and will,” Adriel said. “Though it is a moot point if Adonis can’t even raise an army to take the shore back. It will take me at least another decade to really get the support for such an endeavor.”

“You don’t seriously think you can turn an entire army of mers into shifters, do you?”

“No, I know that I will have to share that song with my seconds-in-command eventually,” Adriel answered. “Right now I can still keep up with the pace of our recruitment.”

“What if you get killed?” Erick asked. “Are you really okay with shifting dying with you?”

Adriel smiled furtively at that. “If anyone managed to kill me, I would hope they were okay with that.”

Erick grit his teeth at Adriel’s grin, but it made him believe that Adriel actually did have the awakening song stored somewhere else besides just his own mind. If he didn’t keep a copy in Peleran or Cradle Basin, the original place where Adriel and his sister had discovered it still had to be in the seven seas somewhere.

Rising off the desk, Adriel said, “I believe it’s time for me to return you to your room. I will give
everything you’ve told me due consideration before I make your uncle beg for your safe return.”
He then opened the door and called for someone to take Erick.

“You’re not actually going to go to his house in person, are you?” Erick asked, surprised.

Adriel laughed. “Why not? It’s been sixteen years since the last time I saw him. I would love to see
just how much he hates me now.”

Rings arrived before Erick could think to ask anything else. As he led Erick back to his room,
Erick already began mentally replaying his conversation with Adriel. He had no idea if he had
made things better or worse. All he knew now was that Ivan had a lot more to answer for than
Erick thought.

Chapter End Notes

Now that I've finally revealed Adriel, what are you first impressions of him?

I've gone back and forth a lot on how I wanted to portray Adriel, so I'm curious to
know if you're reading him the way I'm envisioning his character.
Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

I loved all of your reactions last week to Adriel and his version of events with Ivan. I hope y'all enjoy Ivan's version of events now. :)

“What?” Silas recoiled. He would have fallen back, but another wave pushed him back up from the bottom of the tide pool. “Adriel is the one who killed Erick’s parents?”

“Yes,” Ivan answered. He faced the horizon with a stony expression. The sun had fallen beneath the water, leaving them in cobalt twilight. “It was revenge for what I had done to his sister.”

“What did you do?” Silas asked, fearing his answer.

Ivan turned away. “I rejected her when she needed me most.” He hesitated. “We were a disgustingly tragic romance, me and Lorelei. I loved her, but not enough for your gods to grant us a sign after our blood binding.”

“You almost became a merman for her?” Silas said, shocked.

“Our hope was that she would become human for me, actually,” Ivan said. “I had no wish to give up my life and fortune on land just to live with her. When our binding failed, I assumed the legends were wrong or that my selfishness made me unworthy of her affection. Your binding with Erick proves now that the gods have no such regard for reason.”

Silas didn’t answer, hesitating to believe that the gods would transform Erick without some purpose.

“Ivan, are you going to ignore us all night?” Talia snapped. “I don’t want to keep standing here if you’re not going to explain what he’s saying.”

Giving her a glare, Ivan said, “I’m still trying to understand everything that has happened. I’ll explain when I get the whole story.”

Dunley stepped between them. “We should get out of the water then if this is going to continue taking a while,” he said, trying to diffuse the tension. Gesturing to the steep path where the others waited, he added, “We can sit over there so we don’t ruin our boots more than they are already.” He glanced at the mermen. “Can you tell them that?”

“Fine,” Ivan said. As Talia and Dunley waded back to the cliff path, Ivan faced Silas again. “They want to get out of the water. Will it be deep enough over there for us to continue talking?”

Silas looked over at Talia and Dunley. The water only went up to their knees at the lowest point before they stepped out of the tide pool. “If we lay on our stomachs, we should be fine,” Silas answered.

“If you want us to get that close to shore, make the others go farther up the path,” Gale said.

Silas frowned. “Gale—”
“They helped Erick capture you,” Gale retorted. “I’m not saying they have to go away completely, but they should understand my reluctance to trust them.”

“They don’t have any reason to take me again.”

“They might if Erick really will be killed.”

Silas was about make another retort, but Ivan cut him off, stating, “I will tell them to keep their distance. If it will help you forgive us, I will do whatever I can to earn your trust, however undeserved it might be.”

Ivan then followed Talia and Dunley out of the water and had them move closer to the top of the cliff. While Ivan pulled off his sodden boots and dumped water out of them, Silas folded his arms on a rock that poked out of the tide pool between waves. The sea rushed over his shoulders and receded to the small of his back with each surge.

Wringing out the hems of his pants, Ivan said, “I’m not surprised Adriel is still sinking ships, but I was hoping that he would have given up the secret to shifting by now.” He then crossed his legs and leaned back against the cliff wall. “Lorelei is the reason he has it at all. After I left her, she used the rest of her life to discover it and try to find me again.”

“If she loved you that much, why did you leave her like that?” Silas asked. “Just because your blood binding failed doesn’t mean you had to give up.”

“It wasn’t the blood binding that made me leave her,” Ivan answered. “Believe me, I tried to make it work.” His eyes gained a faraway look as he stared at the last light of sunset. “She was too beautiful for me not to. Her laugh alone could make ice melt. We met about… Goodness, almost forty years ago. I was still just a sailor on another merchant’s ship. My captain had made connections with humans who traded with merfolk in the northeast, so he brought us to meet them and see if we could negotiate work with them. Lorelei was part of a hunter family who worked with the traders, but she was naïve then and liked taunting us with her immodesty while our superiors talked on shore. Naturally, I was spellbound.”

Silas listened, rapt, until he heard Gale flop back underwater and saw him roll his eyes. Giving him a sidelong glare, Silas returned his attention to Ivan. He didn’t care if Gale thought Ivan’s story was a waste of time. Every piece of information he could get about Adriel felt like it could help, even if it was just information about Adriel’s sister. “When were you able to actually talk to her?” Silas then asked.

“Well, eventually one day my friends pushed me off the deck when they caught me making silly faces at her, flirting,” Ivan answered. “They conveniently ‘forgot’ I didn’t know how to swim back then, so she helped me get back to the docks. She revealed that she knew English, and we arranged to meet again. We spent about seven or eight years doing that, meeting whenever my ship made port at her shoal. She taught me how to swim and speak mertongue and pulled favors to get the best trade deals for my captain. When I was set to be granted my own ship commission, I asked her to marry me.”

“But then the blood binding failed,” Silas said.

“Yes.” Ivan nodded, subdued. “Despite that, Lorelei still insisted that it didn’t invalidate our marriage. When I got my commission, she followed my ship to stay with me, even though it went against her family’s wishes. I had almost everything I could wish for – coin in the bank, the wind at my back, and my wife in my ship’s wake. Everything would have been perfect if she could have just been able to stand on deck with me.”
Silas pictured the moment, thinking it certainly a bittersweet image. As much as he enjoyed going on salvaging trips, he imaged it would be difficult to follow any ship for a long time. It only further proved her dedication to him. “So what made you leave her if you were so happy?”

Ivan folded his hands in his lap, quiet for a moment. “She became pregnant. She couldn’t keep up with my ship during her pregnancy, so she had to return home. In her last month, I took off work to stay near the shore with her, to see what our child would be. It was unheard of for a human and a mer to have children, but we had foolishly hoped our child would be able to live on both sides of the shore.” Ivan went silent again. Barely above a rough whisper, he said, “Lorelei gave birth a week early, in a tide pool just like this one in case our child wouldn’t be able to breathe water. But it was no use.

“Our child was born deformed, neither human nor mer,” Ivan continued. “Her legs were fused together like a tail with no scales and she had no gills.” He leaned back his head like he was trying to keep tears from falling. “Something was wrong inside her. We knew because she wouldn’t stop crying, but the doctors on land couldn’t save her. She died bleeding on the operating table. When I picked her back up and cradled her broken body, I believed that she was our punishment for trying to break the natural order of things.”

Silas stared at Ivan, horrified. Gale had even sat back up, looking shocked.

Ivan took a deep breath. “After I returned our daughter’s body to Lorelei, I boarded the first ship I could take back to my country. A year later I came to regret my foolishness and returned to Lorelei’s shoal, but she and her brother had already left and no one knew where they went. With no other way to get back in contact, I realized I had truly lost Lorelei then. I distracted myself with my work to move on, and my sister had Erick a year later. I utterly spoiled my nephew, and my sister agreed to never tell him about my time with Lorelei or his unfortunate cousin. I thought I had managed to put that chapter of my life behind me, but then Adriel found me.”

“How?” Silas asked, feeling guilty that he was learning all of this without Erick. It should have been him learning about his family’s history, not himself.

“He read the papers, I assume. I was a well-known man by that point,” Ivan answered. “I had just begun managing a shipping business rather than simply captaining merchant vessels, so I was a subject of interest for many investors. When Adriel arrived at my office, I hardly believed he was actually Lorelei’s brother. I had never met him before then, you see, because he had been so much younger than Lorelei. He was only a teenager when I left her.

“Adriel explained that after I left, Lorelei devoted everything to finding the secret of shifting,” Ivan continued, adjusting his position because his old joints were getting sore. “She wanted to find me, he said, but that she also wanted to make sure no other merfolk or humans would have to be separated like we were. Adriel joined her quest after his coming of age because he had proven himself to be a prodigy at enchanting, and I think he believed discovering a new song would solidify that reputation.

“When they were finally able to go to land, however, he said they were penniless and lost contact with most of the human traders they trusted.” Ivan shook his head. “It was when they began tracking me down on land that Adriel began to truly hate humans, I believe. Lorelei’s family had always distrusted humans, reasonably so due to traders’ penchant for underselling them, and merfolk generally consider humans inferior regardless because they can control us with their songs.”

“But merfolk aren’t allowed to control humans anymore,” Silas said. “That got outlawed when I was a little kid.”
Ivan’s eyebrows rose. “It did?”

“Yes,” Silas answered. “Things were getting better between humans and merfolk before our new King took the throne.”

“It heartens me to hear that,” Ivan said. “Even still, that was not the case when I met Adriel. He had a low opinion of us before coming to land, and his arrival only showed him how disgusting and cruel humans can be, especially to foreigners. He told me that Lorelei had contracted some disease, drinking bad water in slums somewhere. Doctors on land wouldn’t help her because she had no money, and the healers in the sea didn’t have medicine to treat a human illness. Her dying wish was for Adriel to tell me she didn’t blame me for our daughter’s death. He spat her words, saying that I wasn’t absolved from Lorelei’s death, however.”

Ivan held up his hands and let them fall back onto his knees. “I privately agreed with him, but I was a professional man and detained from showing how much his news grieved me. He took it as heartlessness, saying he understood then why our blood binding failed. I couldn’t bring myself to correct him, so he stormed out of my office swearing he would make me pay for his sister’s death. I didn’t realize then that he would target Erick’s mother. If I had known, I would have followed him, tried to make amends, anything, but instead I simply notified security and told my secretary to never schedule another appointment with him.” Ivan paused. “A few months later, after my sister and her husband’s ship sank, I received a letter from him claiming their deaths. He included a pencil rubbing of the locket I gave her, to prove he had taken it from her corpse and rub in the fact that I would never see it or her again.”

“That’s awful,” Silas said, leaning back in disgust. “Your sister didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know.” Ivan lowered his head. “But I am no better, making Erick believe all merfolk were as awful as Adriel. Lorelei was the only mer I ever loved, so I had no reason to care for any others after her death. But then Erick became a merman. I couldn’t even fathom how I would begin to explain all of this to him, so I gambled with the easy route and gave him to you. Now it seems I should have kept him on land.” Hesitating, Ivan then asked, “Did he ever forgive me for leaving him?”

Silas looked away. “I don’t know, but Erick isn’t dead yet. He can’t be.” He pulled his fingers into a fist. “Even if Adriel hates you, he can’t still hate you enough to kill Erick out of spite. One of the merpirates ended up being one of my dad’s friends, and he told me that Adriel is part of the reason our new King is in power now. He’s playing a game that’s a lot more than just getting revenge against you. If you can offer him something that can help with that, he shouldn’t have any reason to kill Erick.”

“If that is true, Erick’s life might not be worth whatever trouble Adriel is planning, as much as it pains me to say that,” Ivan answered.

“Then don’t,” Silas said. “I’m not going to give up on him. I love him, even if it’s stupid and he never feels the same. He at least thinks of me as a friend, so that has to mean something.”

Ivan went quiet for a moment, considering Silas’ words. Then he sighed. “You’re reminding me so much of Lorelei right now,” he said, pinching between his eyes. “I always told her she had a second heart where her brain was supposed to be, because she had too much love and not enough good sense.” He lowered his hand and faced Silas again. “I don’t want Erick to suffer anymore because of my mistakes. I would give up my fortune and my life if that is what it will take make things right again.”

“Hopefully it won’t take that much to get Erick free,” Silas answered.
“Hopefully indeed.” Ivan looked up at the rising full moon. Its abalone face bathed them in pearlescent light. Haltingly, he asked, “Would you tell me about what you and Erick did while you were in the ocean?”

Silas smiled lightly. “Sure. It might take the rest of the night, but I would be happy to.”

Ivan let himself give Silas a small smile in return. “Thank you.”
Here is the bonus chapter for reaching 375 kudos, but my excitement has been dampened a bit because of a comment I got today that I now can't seem to find. (When I try to reply to it through my email, it brings me to a 404 page, and I can't find even a notice of it being deleted somehow).

Basically the commenter pointed out that the explicit material in Chapter 12 should be categorized as rape/non-con rather than dubious consent, and having talked it over with my friends, I realized they were right. I've since updated my tags to reflect it, and I'm sorry that I hadn't done so in the first place. (If you're the commenter I'm talking about, please comment again so I can properly reply, and thank you for actually reading this far anyway.)

I want to rewrite Chapter 12 to make it better align with dubious consent rather than leave it rape/non-con, but I'm not sure what else I can do to make the situation better besides just make Silas unconscious through it all too, and have him put two and two together in the morning. If I do that, I would cut out the entire explicit scene and just put it with my other one-shot stories. Opinions on the matter are welcome.

When Silas finished his story, the moon had traveled over to the other side of the horizon. Gale was dozing in the water beside him, and most of Erick’s crew had gone up the rest of the path to wait in Dunley’s truck or Ivan’s car because Ivan ran out of patience trying to translate every word of Silas’ story. Only Dunley continued half-listening to their alien language, since Talia had fallen asleep while leaning against his shoulder.

Before Talia had gone up, she had given back Silas his bag and salvaging tools, sheepishly explaining that she had only kept his belongings because she was hoping she could use it to ransom Erick back. Silas assured her it was okay and thanked her all the same, and forgave her and the rest of Erick’s crew for capturing him. He even broke the bet between Flynn and Eustace had about his teeth, explaining that Flynn was right in guessing that merfolk could use magic. Eustace argued that he didn’t have to pay Flynn, however, because it was the merfolk’s gods and not Silas himself who enchanted Erick. Ivan knew that wasn’t exactly the case, but decided against explaining that blood bindings were done between lovers. He would leave that to Erick to explain if he actually had feelings for the merman.

Ivan stretched, grimacing as his spine crackled. “I really should have thought to bring a chair,” he muttered.

“Do you want to go home now?” Silas asked. His eyes and throat were a little sore from being out of water for so long, despite that he had ducked underwater frequently to stay hydrated.

“As much as I enjoy our conversation, I really ought to.” Ivan pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. He sighed and snapped it shut. “I hope Adriel’s men won’t knock on my door too early in the morning.”

“Don’t you have servants that can make them wait?”
“Yes, but I would rather not put off negotiations if I can help it.” Getting to his feet, Ivan added, “I don’t know if or when I will see you again, but if you see Erick before I do, please reiterate my apologies for causing all of this.”

“Of course.” Silas bid him goodbye, then shook Gale’s shoulder to wake him. Diving back under the waves, he said, “Ivan and the others are going home now. We should go anchor our sleeping bags before the tide runs out.”

“Right.” Gale stretched and glanced up at the dark sky. “Huh. And here I thought you really would keep talking until morning.”

Silas rolled his eyes, but smiled. “We both had to go to sleep at some point tonight.”

“I suppose so.” Gale readjusted the shoulder strap on the bag holding the camping gear he had borrowed from Jeb and swam out of the tide pool with Silas. “You really do like talking about Erick, don’t you?”

Silas blushed. “No I don’t! Ivan just wanted to know about everything, so I wanted to make sure I didn’t leave anything out.”

“Uh-huh.” Gale raised an eyebrow, then smirked at Silas’ blush. “You suck at lying.”

“Shut up!” They reached the bottom of the kelp forest, so Silas pulled out his sleeping bag. “It was just nice being able to talk about all this with someone else who knows him.” As he unrolled the sleeping bag and untangled the anchor cords, he added, “I feel like I understand a lot more about Erick now because he’s so much like Ivan.”

“If you say so.” Gale took out a hammer and stake and passed them over to Silas. While Silas started nailing down his sleeping bag’s anchor cords, Gale turned over another stake in his hands.

After a minute, Gale said, “I’ve been acting just like Adriel this whole time, haven’t I?”


Gale didn’t look up from the stake he continued turning it over. “Yeah, but I said a lot of stupid stuff to him. Stuff that probably really could have put him over the edge.”

Silas frowned at him. “Of course it does.”

“Sorry.” Silas half-smiled, shrugging. “I’m glad you get it now. It’s just annoying that you had to see yourself in a murderer first to understand.”

“No.” Gale glowered back at him a moment before facing his hands again. “I just didn’t really think it mattered that much. They’re just words, you know? But Adriel killed Erick’s parents just because Ivan didn’t tell him how he really felt. That has to prove something, doesn’t it?”

“Gale…” Silas gave a slightly exasperated sigh, shaking his head. “Of course it does.”

“You don’t have to make it sound so obvious.”

“Yeah…” Gale held the back of his neck. “It’s not just that, though. You never said before that you actually love Erick. When you were talking to Ivan, you said that, and I just kind of felt like shit realizing you meant it.”

Silas looked startled. “Oh,” he said in a small voice. He looked at the stake he had already nailed
in and then lowered his gaze to trace his finger along the hammer’s handle. “I guess I did say that, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Gale said with a nod. “Have you really felt like that this whole time?”

“No,” Silas answered without looking up. “It just started as a crush because the whole blood binding thing got my hopes up, but I tried to get over Erick when he said he didn’t feel the same way. But then we got to know each other, and it’s like, the harder I tried to deny liking him, the more I ended up wanting to be with him.”

“Okay?” Gale smiled, bemused. “I don’t really get how that works, but I’ll try to believe it.”

“I know it sounds dumb, but it’s true,” Silas said. “I just look at him, and I just… I feel something bigger than myself,” he said, looking down at his palms, “like it fills me up with bubbles and I can hardly breathe but it’s good, like I’m supposed to feel that puffed up even though I don’t know what to do about it.” He tossed down his hands and shook his head. “But I have no idea if Erick feels like that too or if he really just… doesn’t.” He sighed, pausing for a moment. “He still says he doesn’t, so that should be enough proof, but he does all these little things that make me think he actually does. So I just feel stupid because it’s probably just me seeing something that isn’t there.”

“I don’t know, honestly,” Gale said. “You’ve been stupid about a lot of stuff ever since you met him, but your intuition about stuff like this is usually pretty good.”

Silas groaned. “I know, and that’s why I hate this so much. I just want this whole merpirates mess to go away so I can figure out what in the abyss is up between me and him.”

“It would be nice for it to just go away period.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” Silas lifted back up the hammer and held out his hand to take Gale’s stake. “Let’s just try to get this night over with at least.”

“Sounds good to me,” Gale said, passing it over.

* * *

The two mermen returned to Peleran late that morning. Silas let Gale return home so he could hurry to get back to work, and Silas headed for the guard station to find his father. Since Silas had only left his father a brief note to tell him that Erick had been taken and that he would be gone with Gale to see Erick’s crew, he didn’t know what his father thought of everything yet. He knew that he should have talked to his father before he left, but in his rush to get to the tide pool before dark, he didn’t want to waste time explaining everything a second time. Just telling Gale everything about the merpirates had taken more time than he planned.

At the station, Silas asked the receptionist for his father. She told him he was in his office, so Silas thanked her and hurried down the hall. He stole furtive glances at the other guards in the office, wondering which ones were actually on his side or not. They often took off their helmets when they were inside, but all guards always wore at least their uniform breastplate and vambraces. When he was little, Silas used to think the guards’ armor was cool. Now he just wished their dress code wasn’t so strict.

As he knocked on the doorframe to his father’s office, Silas attempted a smile and said, “Hey, Dad.”

“Silas!” Ronan leapt up from his seat. “What were you thinking, running off like that?”
Silas closed the door. His shoulders hunched together. “I left you a note…”

“A note doesn’t explain why you thought it was necessary to visit the humans that attacked you on the very same day Erick was taken captive!” Ronan said. “You should have told me and filed a kidnapping report. I couldn’t do anything to help him since you didn’t tell me anything about who took him or why.”

“If we try to do anything, they will kill Erick,” Silas said. He summarized what the two merpirates told them before they took Erick. “I needed to see Ivan to warn him, and he was able to tell me a lot about Adriel.”

Ronan sat back down behind his desk and rubbed between his eyes. “Will any of his information be able to help us?”

“Maybe?” Silas shrugged, at a loss. “We know why Adriel knows about shifting.” After he told his father about Ivan’s story, he said, “Ivan should be able to take care of Erick, but I still don’t know what Adriel will do about you and Kauí knowing about him.”

“Adriel probably can’t outright attack us,” Ronan said. “Even if he has the manpower, we’re both too much in the public eye for that not to cause a scene. It’s much more likely that he will contact us privately with his demands.”

“What do you think he’ll ask for?” Silas asked.

“I don’t know, but if Ivan really can get Erick out of there, Adriel’s only bargaining chip left is Hal.” Ronan leaned back in his seat. “We don’t have conclusive proof that Hal is in his custody, but your word that they said they have him is enough to get warrants for their arrest.”

“But if a bunch of the guards are on Adriel’s side…”

“Then it’s high time I find out who has tattoos,” Ronan said. “I’m not going to keep pretending that there aren’t stingrays in our reefs.”

Silas’ eyebrows rose. “You want to out all of them?”

“Yes, and I’m going to make sure everyone in the shoal knows who they are too. Secrecy only gives Adriel more power.”

“But if we tell everyone about them—”

“They won’t kill Hal or Erick if they can’t hide behind their anonymity. Kidnapping and murder are serious crimes. I’m betting most of Adriel’s supporters wouldn’t want their friends or family knowing the kind of atrocities they commit.”

“What if they don’t care and kill them anyway?” Silas asked. “Can we really risk them like this?”

“If Adriel is responsible for the deaths of other missing mers, Hal’s death would fall within the expectations of his oath of service,” Ronan said. “Erick’s would be more unfortunate, but he voluntarily went with them knowing that risk.”

“But—”

“You left to see Ivan knowing that talking to him would put Erick in danger,” Ronan said. “What I’m proposing carries just as much risk, but we can end their guild if we do something now.”
Silas gripped his knuckles as he bit his lip, considering his father’s words. “How are you supposed to get all of the guards to reveal whether or not they’re part of the guild? Just get them all together and make them take off their armor?”

“I was thinking something like that,” Ronan answered. “I can order an emergency assembly, coordinate with Kauí to get the word out – my only concern then is making sure Adriel and his goons don’t catch tide of any of this.”

Silas nodded. “I wish Hal had told us who else we could trust. The only other person we know for certain is on Adriel’s side is one of your other game night friends, but they might not be like Hal and come back to our side.”

“True.” Ronan paused for a moment, looking absentmindedly at his desk. Then he got back up from his seat. “Come with me to see Kauí. I don’t want you on your own again and I’ll probably need you to fill in details anyway.” Before he opened the door for them to leave, Ronan pulled Silas into a hug. “I’ll take care of everything, all right? Just trust me. We’ll make sure Erick and Hal get back home safe and we’ll stop this madness.”

Silas tightly hugged back his father. “I hope so.”
Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

I've had a very productive writing week, despite the craziness that comes with finals week and prepping for summer. I've written through chapter 82, and I'm just over 145,000 words. I've also already planned out the next four or five chapters, so I'm looking forward to keeping this steam going through the summer.

Also, since the whole dubious consent/rape debacle, I've been wondering if I should add other content warnings to my other chapters. Things have been getting really dark for Erick in the past few chapters I've recently written especially, but it's hard to decide what actually warrants a content warning because it all doesn't faze me or any of my beta readers. Should any mention of self-harm or suicidal thoughts warrant a warning? Or should I just save it for when they're described in detail?

I will do more research on how content warnings work, but I'd still like to hear your thoughts. If you can think of any specific scenes that should have had a warning, please let me know. I don't want to catch any other readers off-guard again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“IT had to be fucking crab,” Erick said, grimacing at the crustaceans he and Hal were given for breakfast on the first morning of their confinement. Just like the last time Erick had been locked up, the guards at the merpirates’ secret base had mashed up the crabs’ innards and stuffed them back into their shells.

“What’s wrong with it?” Hal asked, opening up his crab bowl.

“Crab has to be cooked!” Jabbing his hand at the bowl he had put on the floor, Erick said, “This looks like literal shit, and it’s making me feel sick just looking at it.” He wasn’t exaggerating, but he had already begun feeling queasy since he woke up.

“Well, you don’t have to eat it, but I don’t think they will bring us anything else until lunch.”

Erick shoved the bowl away from himself and rolled over to face the wall. “Then it’s a good thing I’m not hungry anyway.” The merpirates had found Erick a bedroll for his first night, but it was hardly more comfortable than the floor. The lack of walls or a blanket to hide under made it difficult for him to sleep. Rings gave Erick more reason to be worried when he told him that Adriel had made contact with Ivan and was in the process of figuring out how and when Ivan would pay Adriel. Since they hated each other, Erick imagined it would be a complicated process.

Hal frowned in sympathy at Erick before scooping out another bite for himself. “You sure you don’t even want to try it?” he asked. “Shelling and mixing the meat like this takes some work, you know. They might have meant for this to be a little treat.”

“If they wanted to treat me, they should have just let us out!” Erick snapped.

“True, that would be nice. Frankly, though, I’m just happy they’re still letting me hang out with you,” Hal said as he continued eating. “They don’t have any reason to keep me around anymore,
unless they think for some reason that keeping me will make Ronan do what they want.”

“What do you mean?” Erick glanced over his shoulder back at him.

“I mean I’m probably expendable,” Hal answered. “Ronan is going to want to get Adriel behind bars because of everything he’s done, and I don’t want to get in the way of that.”

“Didn’t you say we couldn’t arrest Adriel though?”

“Yeah, not for sinking ships, but his people have kidnapped and assaulted me and are holding you hostage now too. If Ronan can figure out where we are, at least half of the people here could be facing prison time. And if we can get some convictions for what they’ve done to us, we can start digging to find all of the other illegal stuff they’re hiding.” Hal shrugged. “We might not be able to lock everyone up for as long as they probably should be, but it would certainly make things a lot more complicated for Adriel.”

Erick considered this information. “Do you think Ronan can really do any of that?”

“I trust our captain,” Hal said. “And besides, he probably has Silas helping him, and he’s a witness to all of this. His testimony will be necessary to help bring this down.”

“I hope you’re right.” Erick pressed his fingers into the hard sponges of his bedroll. It was reassuring to think of Silas and Ronan working together to do something about Adriel, but it worried him all the more that they could get into more trouble. Thinking of what could happen if Silas got caught made him clench his hand into a fist. His jaw muscles went taut as he fought back the urge to cry, and he silently cursed that he was letting himself get this upset so easily. Being locked up again was making his stress worse. His chest didn’t hurt like it did when he got his panic attacks, but he felt anxious enough to bother opening up his belt pouch.

Erick’s hands shook slightly as he took out the bottle and uncorked it to shake out a seaweed pill into his palm. He sat up to knock it back and grimaced as he almost gagged on the bitter taste. Pressing the cork back into the bottle, Erick took deep breaths and swallowed back the urge to throw up.

“What was that you just took?” Hal asked.

“A sedative.” Erick put the bottle back into his pouch. “It’s supposed to help with anxiety, but I have no idea if it’ll actually help or not yet.”

“Oh.” Hal looked somewhat surprised, but then nodded as if it explained a lot. “Do you want to talk about what’s making you anxious or…?”

“Just leave me alone until lunch.” Erick lay back down, hoping that the medicine would kick in sooner than later. He still felt nauseous because of the crab bowl, and he wished he could knock out the teeth of whoever thought it would be a good idea to give them that for breakfast.

As the windows brightened with the onset of noon, Erick fell fast asleep.

* * *

On the fourth morning of being captive, Rings opened the door and called, “Breakfast time!”

Erick groaned, rolling over, and shouted, “Fuck off you fucking asshole.”

Rings laughed. “Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the floor.”
Hal held out his hand to take their breakfasts. “Just leave him alone. Does Adriel have any news for us yet?”

Rings handed over two fish fillets wrapped in seaweed. “No, but he’ll be busy in the shoal today. Lord Kauí’s apparently calling everyone to Temple Park for an unscheduled state of the shoal address. He hasn’t said anything about what it’s supposed to be about, but a lot of people have seen him talking with the captain of the guards pretty frequently. So, for your sakes, you better hope it isn’t about us.”

“I see,” Hal said, as if this news knocked the water from his gills. “Thank you for telling us that.” After Rings left, Hal fell back upon his cot and set down the fish fillets. “So this was Ronan’s plan.”

“What are you talking about?” Erick grumbled.

“Kauí’s going to talk to the shoal about something,” Hal answered. “It’s probably going to be about the tattoo. Ronan probably couldn’t get any leads to track us down, so he’s going to ink out everyone in Adriel’s guild.”

“Good, they’ll finally get what’s coming to them.”

“Yeah, except we probably don’t have any time left. How do you think Adriel is going to react when literally everyone knows about shifting and him sinking ships?”

“He’ll be mad, I guess.” Erick sat up and rubbed his face to try to wake himself up.

“Mad enough to kill both of us?”

“He’s already started negotiating with my uncle. He can’t just back out on that deal now.” Erick reached over to grab his breakfast from Hal’s cot. “If he kills you as soon as everyone finds out about all this, that just proves he’s guilty.”

“True, but if he’s going to go down anyway, what’s to stop him from taking me with him?” Hal curled his fingers against his tail. “I don’t want to die.”

“You’re not going to die,” Erick said. “If any jerk comes back in here to kill you, I’ll fuck them up before they can do anything.” He unwrapped his fish fillet, but his stomach turned at the sight of its raw pink flesh. Regretting having gotten up at all, Erick set aside his breakfast and lay back down.

“Except you’re unarmed, and anybody that comes in here would be and would probably have backup too,” Hal said. “And I hate to break it to you, but it doesn’t look like you’ve been feeling very well recently either.”

“No shit, I’ve been locked up again,” Erick retorted. “The only reason I’m not pulling my scales out again right now is probably because you’re here to keep me sane.”

“That’s really not reassuring, you know.”

“I don’t know what else to tell you then!” Erick curled up his tail. As his hand reached for his belt pouch, he said, “Silas is the one who’s good at this stuff. I got pills to take care of worrying like that.”

Hal sighed. “I suppose that’s true.” After a minute, he picked back up his fish fillet, but still hesitated to eat. “If they do take me away, will you tell Ronan I’m sorry? Even though I didn’t tell him about all this, I still consider him a friend.” Pausing again, he then added, “I also want my
brother to know that whatever happens, I don’t blame him. He lives in Teleyan, and I know the
guild won’t tell him why I betrayed them. He’ll need you to get him out of this guild if I don’t
make it out of here.”

Erick took out his bottle of seaweed pills and shook out one. “Stop talking like you’re already dead.
You can tell them what you want to say as soon as we get out of here.”

Hal didn’t answer. He turned to face the door instead of Erick.

After Erick quickly knocked back his seaweed pill, he tried not to think too much about what
would happen at Kaui’s state of the shoal address. Whatever Silas and Ronan had planned, it was
out of his control. All he could do now was try to get more rest despite his hard bedroll and hope he
would have more of an appetite later.
Happy summer break! I am finally done with this semester, so I can spend all of my

time now goofing off and working on this story.

Silas sat beside his father, gripping his elbow so hard it hurt while he tried not to show how
nervous he was. Merfolk of all ages were already gathering along the floor of Temple Park, facing
the stage that had been set up for Lord Kaui to make his address. Silas and his father were seated
behind a podium along with two other guards. Normally at these kinds of events Silas would have
sat with the mers in the audience, but Ronan had refused to let Silas out of his sight. There was too
great of a chance for Silas to be taken like Erick, especially if Kaui’s address went as planned.

When the crowd of mers overflowed outside the pillars encircling Temple Park, Kaui arrived with
an entourage of four guards. The guards escorted the lord to the podium and then dispersed to
secure the space around the stage. Directly overhead, the sun shined through the stained glass
dome and reflected off the hundreds of mers below. The murmur of the crowd died down as Kaui
put his hands on either side of the podium.

“Merfolk of Peleran,” Kaui called, holding his head up high as a glyph in the podium amplified the
sound of his voice. His auburn hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. Around his neck he wore an
intricately woven gorget made of coral, pearl, and whalebone beads. “Thank you for gathering here
today. My news will be brief, but it is no less important that I share what I now know with you.”
He paused to survey the crowd, then continued, “It has come to my attention that you, my people,
are under threat by individuals we have yet to identify. These individuals have assaulted,
kidnapped, and possibly even murdered your fellow citizens for a cause we do not understand.
Ronan, your captain of the guards, will elaborate on the troubling findings he has discovered.”

Kau gestured to Ronan as he rose from his seat to take to the podium. After Kau took his seat by
the guards, Ronan faced the audience. “Merfolk of Peleran, I first do not want to cause undue
alarm. I do not believe that the majority of you are in any danger. However, that being said, recent
events have prompted me to urge caution and call for your help. If you will bear with me, let me
begin where I have been personally affected.”

Holding his hand out to Silas, Ronan said, “Three weeks ago, my son and one of his companions
were attacked by two mermen in the market chasm. My son was almost taken by these mermen, but
his companion was able to rescue him at the expense of his own wellbeing. Their attackers
escaped, and his companion had to be rushed to a healer for severe, knife-related injuries. Despite
our best efforts, we still have not been able to apprehend these mermen. The most significant point
of this encounter is the fact that these mermen both had a tattoo that identifies them as members of
a salvaging guild called the Diving Peregrines.

“As far as I understand,” Ronan continued, “the Diving Peregrines’ guild operates mainly in the
Cradle Basin area, but they run shops here in the market chasm. When I learned that my son’s
attackers were members of this guild, Lord Kaui sent two members of his personal guard to aid the
investigation. These two guards have since gone missing.” Ronan paused to let the fact sink in.

“Less than a week ago, my son and the same companion who protected him discovered one of our
close family friends is a member of the Diving Peregrines. Upon being asked about these unexplained events, our friend told my son and his companion that this guild is running a clandestine operation, the details of which he could not divulge.” Hitting his hand on the podium, Ronan said, “He did not want to tell them why they were attacked because he feared for his own life.” Ronan lowered his voice and repeated, “He feared for his life. And it was a fear justly held, for he has now gone missing too.”

Ronan paused again to survey the audience. “If this attack and missing persons were merely isolated incidents of the last month, I would not be standing here before you today. Yet these incidents prompted me to review old files, and I have found dozens of other suspicious incidents relating to members of the Diving Peregrines’ guild. These incidents range from simple assault to other missing persons cases.

“Now,” Ronan continued, “I do not want to insinuate that all members of this guild are criminals. My hope is that these incidents are merely being caused by a minority within this guild. However, if you are a member of the Diving Peregrines and have information about these incidents, I want to give you the benefit of doubt. I want to believe you may be in a situation similar to my friend’s, and that you had little choice in the matter. Help me understand what individuals associated with this guild are hiding. If you come forward, I will grant full pardons for any crimes committed. I am also offering a reward to anyone who can give me information about our missing persons.”

Ronan glanced back at Silas before facing the audience once again. “I want to leave you with one last unfortunate fact before I return the podium to Lord Kaui. Just four days ago, shortly after I opened this investigation on individuals associated with the Diving Peregrines, my son and the companion who protected him were visited again by two members of this guild. These two people threatened my son and took his companion hostage in an attempt to silence our efforts. I will not let such tactics stop us. Do not let them silence you either.”

Thanking the audience once more for their attention, Ronan reminded them where they can file a report before he sat back down. As Kaui thanked the audience and dismissed them, Silas asked his father quietly, “Do you think anyone will actually come forward?”

“Yes,” Ronan answered. “I have given them enough incentive and hidden the worst of their activities. Whoever comes forward now knows that we will protect them when we crack down on the rest of Adriel’s supporters.”

“But what if Adriel stops them?”

“Then hopefully we can round up enough guards we can trust before Adriel does anything to Erick or Hal.”

Silas frowned at that thought as he watched the audience disperse. Though this announcement was the biggest part of their plan, his father had spent most of the last four days compiling a record of guards who had Adriel’s tattoo. It had been a slow process. Since Ronan didn’t want to draw attention to the fact that he was cataloguing guards, he held armor checks. The guards normally had their armor inspected for cracks or other general wear and tear once a year, but Ronan made up the excuse that everyone had to be checked early because someone’s armor had failed unexpectedly. He wasn’t able to check everyone’s armor all at once because the force still had to do their jobs and had different schedules, so he entrusted a few different guards who he knew didn’t have a tattoo to inspect everyone’s back. They had finished inspecting almost everyone’s armor yesterday. Now Ronan just had to wait to see which guards with tattoos would come forward.
I'm barely a week into summer, and I'm already getting bored out of my mind. I'm one of those weird people that prefers being in school than on break. Anyone got suggestions for how to fill up my endless free time?

Also! I just posted a short story that is completely not related to merfolk, but I hope you all might be interested anyway. It's a retelling of "All Fur," one of the Brothers Grimm Fairy tales.

Late in the afternoon after Rings told them about Kaui’s state of the shoal address, the door to Erick and Hal’s room burst open. “You,” Adriel said, pointing to Hal. “Come out here.” His usual cool demeanor had cracked with seething fury. Rings floated behind Adriel, grinning as he twirled the keys.

Hal paled, but hesitantly rose from his cot.

Erick jumped up from his bedroll. Putting his arm in front of Hal, he asked, “Where are you taking him?”

Adriel’s sharp glare turned on Erick and he hummed a rapid set of notes. Erick’s body threw himself down to the floor. His face hit the floor as his arms shot out behind himself in an over-exaggerated bow of submission. Erick heard the first half of the siren song for sleeping, and then the room went dark.

Groaning, Erick rolled over and saw night had fallen outside the windows. He recoiled and darted back to the door. “Adriel!” he shouted, pounding on the door. “Hey! Anyone!” His hands tightened into fists against its metal surface. “Please… Don’t kill Hal!” His forehead fell onto the door and he slid back to the ground. “You can’t…” Erick couldn’t finish the thought. There would be no one outside now. His eyes burned as he succumbed to sobbing. He could barely breathe through his ragged cries, cursing Adriel, the gods, and himself. His stomach started hurting, making him feel sick.

Erick pushed himself away from the door when he felt the need to throw up. He dry-heaved at the hole in the wall, his body unable to decide if it actually wanted to vomit or not. The urge sat at the back of his throat. It refused to settle despite Erick’s attempts to take deep breaths, and coughing didn’t help to make it move forward. After several minutes, Erick fell back against Hal’s cot, whimpering. His hands shook before he pressed his fingers against the floor. It felt more solid than himself, and he tried focusing on the chill of the stone seeping into his palms.

It occurred to Erick then that he hadn’t eaten anything that day but seaweed pills. After he lost his appetite looking at the fish fillets, he had gone back to sleep and didn’t bother to eat lunch either. Both meals he had left untouched by his bedroll. By how dark it was outside, Erick assumed the merpirates also didn’t bother to bring him dinner. After Adriel used his siren voice to knock him out, Erick had no idea how long he had stayed unconscious.
“No wonder I’m sick,” Erick muttered. “I haven’t eaten anything.” He picked up his fish fillets and tried nibbling on the seaweed wrapped around them first, but he grimaced at the bitter taste and spat it out. He wondered what the merfolk equivalent of crackers and ginger ale was supposed to be. Since he had neither and doubted that the merpirates would bring him anything similar, Erick forced himself to eat at least part of his fish fillets.

When he had eaten as much as he could stomach, Erick took back out his bottle of seaweed pills. He stared at it for a moment, trying not to think of how he was alone now that Hal was gone. In the four days he had been locked up, he had already almost finished half the bottle. There weren’t many pills inside to begin with, but it was still a worrying thought that he would soon have to go without them again. It felt like a blessing, being able to make himself sleep whenever he wanted rather than deal with his situation. Erick then wondered if they were what was making him feel so sick. His nausea could have been just an unfortunate side effect. Or he was clearly taking too many of them. It was hard to tell given that he didn’t have a clock in his room.

Nevertheless, Erick swallowed another pill and lay back down. Even if the pills were making him sick, he wanted to pass out again more than try to actually feel better. It would be impossible to bother without Hal anymore.

* * *

“Get up,” Adriel ordered, waking up Erick two days later. “You’re going back to land today.”

Erick opened his eyes, disoriented for a moment before he jolted upright. “What?”

“I’ve finished my deal with Ivan,” Adriel said. “I have to deliver you to him today, but I will let you say goodbye to your bonded mate before I give you the shifter glyph.”

“He’s not my mate,” Erick retorted, getting up. “And I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what you did with Hal.”

“I didn’t do anything to him,” Adriel answered with an impassive expression. “You’ve been well cared for here, completely alone, while I kindly agreed to your deal.”

“Don’t fuck with me! If you killed him—”

Adriel closed the door to Erick’s room. “I did no such thing.” Before Erick could respond, Adriel began siren singing.

Erick’s limbs immediately felt heavy, as if Adriel’s voice had transformed into thick tar pouring over his shoulders. Erick sunk back down to the floor. His face blanked despite the terror screaming behind his eyes. Adriel’s mellifluous song flowed through Erick, mollifying his body and clouding his mind. Erick folded his tail beneath himself and rested his hands on either side of tail. He lifted his head to face Adriel, his neck and chest perfectly exposed for the knife sheathed on Adriel’s hip.

“I will not hurt you,” Adriel crooned. He somehow overlaid his speaking voice onto his siren voice, making his words resonate in Erick’s skull. “You are not afraid right now.”

Erick’s terror faded instantly, yet his dread lingered. He still knew logically that Adriel could hurt someone else.

“Tell me what you remember of your stay here.”

“I remember being shocked and angry to see Hal,” the controlled half of Erick answered. “I called
for a doctor, but the guard did not return. Hal told me that he was beaten for information and that you used mesmerism on him. You said you mutilated his back.”

Before Erick could continue, Adriel stated, “You never saw Hal in this room. Hal never spoke to you here. The mers who brought you to meet me had lied when they said they had Hal. No one mutilated Hal. Now, repeat what I just said.”

Against his own accord, Erick repeated his words in monotone.

“Good.” Adriel smiled. “This is the truth: you were alone here. Whatever you thought of Hal here was in your imagination. Repeat what I just said.”

Again, Erick repeated him. Erick tried to mentally deny Adriel’s words, but his memories of Hal were already feeling more like a vivid dream than reality.

“Very good. When I stop singing, you will remember what you have said and forget that I began singing. You were confused when you woke up. I am correcting you.”

Adriel stopped singing. Erick immediately tensed and blinked, feeling confused. He thought he had gotten up, but he was sitting on his bedroll again. Noticing the cot against the wall, he then wondered why he had been sleeping on the floor.

“Are you listening to me?” Adriel asked, catching Erick’s attention. “Stop dreaming and get up. Do you want me to give you a tattoo or not?”

Erick blinked again and rubbed between his eyes. He was starting to feel sick again. “No, I still want it.” He then pushed himself up off the floor. “Did you say I get to see Silas?”

“Yes, I have some things to discuss with his father.” Adriel opened the door again. “Now, come with me.”

Despite still feeling disoriented, Erick followed him.

Chapter End Notes

That last scene with Adriel is the main reason I have had so much trouble writing him. That he can be entirely rational and still be manipulative like this.

Being someone who has had to deal with gaslighting and emotional manipulation on a constant basis from one of my close family members, it is really difficult for me to get into the mindset of someone who engages in that kind of abuse. However, even though it's hard, it's a theme I still want to explore and try to understand, if only to try to help myself reconcile my history.
Chapter Notes

I've had such a productive writing week! I've finished six chapters and I'm still going strong.

This story has also officially crossed 160,000 words, so... updates are gonna end up lasting at least until August now, haha.

Silas sat across from his father in his office at the guard station, pinching and twisting his fingers as he waited for a knock at their door. Yesterday evening when Ronan returned home from work, they had found a note pinned outside their house. It read, “Ronan and Silas, be at the guard station tomorrow morning. I am bringing Erick and have matters to discuss.” Beside Adriel’s signature, the bottom of the note had a rough sketch of Diving Peregrines’ tattoo. Ronan doubted that Adriel would use this meeting to attack them, but he nevertheless he made sure to have guards in the station who weren’t with Adriel’s guild.

Their wait ended before midmorning when a guard knocked on the door and announced that Adriel and Erick had arrived. Ronan quickly got up to answer them. Silas rose from his seat, but hesitated to follow.

“Yes?” Ronan said, frowning at the blond merman in front of him. “You’re Adriel then?” Erick and the guard who brought them to his office floated behind him.

Adriel gave Ronan a tight-lipped smile and inclined his head to him. “That I am, but I unfortunately can’t say it is a pleasure to meet you after the slanderous accusations you have made against my guild.”

“Nothing I said was untrue.” Ronan looked over Adriel’s shoulder at Erick. Noticing the ill pallor on his unshaven face, he asked Adriel, “Where have you been keeping him?”

“At a safe house,” Adriel answered simply. “I want to talk to you privately to get your facts straight. Your son and his whatever-he-is-to-him can reunite out here before I take him back to see his uncle.”

“You’ve given him the tattoo then?” Ronan asked.

“Not yet, but I will before the day runs out.” When Ronan didn’t lessen his doubting frown, Adriel held out his hands. “I have come here purely in good faith. Your guards surround us, but I am alone. If you humor my complaints, I will answer your questions to the best of my ability. Is that not fair?”

Ronan studied Adriel’s nonchalant expression, judging the risk of meeting him alone. “Very well.” He glanced back at Silas. “Come talk to Erick while I hear out Adriel.” He dismissed the guard who escorted them, allowing him to return to the front desk.

Silas gave his father a worried look, but said, “Okay.” He swam outside and Adriel went in. As Ronan closed the door, Silas faced Erick in the hallway and asked, “Are you okay? What did
“Adriel do to you?”

“Nothing,” Erick answered, but he looked away and grimaced against his nausea making him feel faint. “I just got a stomach bug or something. I’ll be fine if we can sit down.”

“You don’t sound fine.” Silas sat down in the hallway beside the door to his father’s office.

“Don’t baby me,” Erick snapped. “It won’t take Adriel long to talk to Ronan, so all we have is now to talk before I have to go see Ivan again.”

“Right.” Silas bit his lip. Taking hold of his tail to hold it against his chest, Silas asked, “Did Adriel tell you he knows Ivan?”

“Yes.” Erick scowled at the wall. “He told me that Ivan fucked over his sister so he could get rich.”

“That isn’t what happened.” Silas turned his head towards Erick. “I went and talked to him and your crew like you wanted, and Ivan told me everything. When you go see him, he can explain it to you too.”

“If he was willing to tell you, why couldn’t he have just told me instead of dumping me here? He abandoned me just like Adriel’s sister.” Erick felt tears stinging his eyes, so he raised his hand to hold his temples and hide his face.

Taken aback by Erick’s sudden despondency, it took Silas a moment to answer. “Ivan didn’t know how to tell you. He is really sorry that he let me take you, and I know he wants to try to make it up to you.”

“So? I don’t know if I can forgive him.”

“Well, you don’t have to, I guess.” Silas paused. “Do you know when you think you’ll be able to come back? Adriel didn’t say he would give me a tattoo.”

“No, he didn’t,” Erick said, “and I don’t know. Adriel said I should stay underwater because that’s what the gods wanted, but I don’t give a shit about what they think. Just because humans suck doesn’t mean that the gods should have abandoned them.”

“Huh?” Silas’ eyebrows furrowed.

“It’s just stuff that’s been bothering me,” Erick said, shaking his head. “He wants merfolk to replace all the people on land because he hates humans so much. The stuff he’s doing with merpiracy is just to recruit other people who hate humans too.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yeah. He even wants to get a whole army of shifters to take control of coastal cities.”

“That’s insane!”

“Yeah, well, he’s a psychopath,” Erick said, shrugging. He then recalled seeing a mutilated back, but couldn’t remember why it felt relevant, only that it made him feel sick. Thinking about it made him feel worse, so he took deep breaths and decided to change the subject. “So what did you do while I was gone?”

“Well, we figured out which guards have tattoos,” Silas answered. “We also made a big
announcement about Adriel’s guild to try to get some more information about the crimes he and the rest of his guild are committing. We’re hoping that people close to Adriel will confess and testify against him, but so far the only people who have come forward have gone feral and either attacked the guards or stabbed themselves as soon as they came into the guard station. The guards were able to get two of them under control, but they also both managed kill themselves when they were left alone in a cell.”

Erick frowned at Silas. “That’s awful. And really weird.”

“I know.” Silas faced his fin. “My dad and I weren’t at the station when these attacks happened, but we’ve found a mesmerist who knows mind control songs. According to her, she says it sounds like the guards are somehow triggering a suicide command in the guild members who are trying to confess.”

“Holy shit. Hal was right then.”

“Right about what?” Silas asked. “Did you get to see him while you were gone?”

“No,” Erick said, but frowned as he thought he remembered talking to him. “I don’t think so? I think I went a little crazy being locked up again.”

Silas immediately looked concerned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I feel like I did talk to him, but I was probably just so bored that I imagined it or just dreamt it. I spent most of my time there just sleeping.”

“Okay,” Silas said uncertainly. “Then when would Hal have told you about a suicide trigger?”

“It was when I met him the first time, before you came with me to meet him,” Erick answered. “He mentioned being worried about telling me about Adriel because there were rumors that Adriel puts a suicide switch in everyone he gives tattoo to. He puts people to sleep before he gives them the tattoo so they can’t learn the awakening song, but Hal said that’s also when he could use mesmerism to make sure everyone who joins doesn’t turn against him.”

“If that’s really what Adriel does, why didn’t Hal try to kill himself?”

“I don’t know.” Erick considered it for a moment. “He said something about not believing he was actually revealing anything because I had already figured out the tattoo was a glyph, so maybe it has something to do with that.”

“Maybe.” Silas went quiet as he considered that as well. “I’ll have to talk to my dad and the mesmerist he’s consulting to see what they think. If Adriel really did put suicide switches in everybody, we have to figure out what the trigger is exactly so we don’t accidentally make any more informants kill themselves. As long as they keep dying, our mesmerist can’t do anything to help them or definitively prove they’re being controlled.” He then looked over at Erick. “You don’t think Adriel will do that to you, do you?”

“I don’t see why he would,” Erick said. “Ivan’s paying him to bring me back home. I imagine Ivan could pull back whatever money he’s giving him if he tried anything like that.”

“I hope you’re right.” Silas went quiet again, hiding the lower half of his face behind his tail.

Erick sighed. “I’ll be okay, all right? Tell me what your plan is here. It sounds like you and Ronan have everything under control with Adriel now.”
“I guess, but my dad is the one taking care of everything,” Silas said. “I’ve just been stuck following him around everywhere since you were taken.” He hugged his tail tighter, pressing his forehead against his scales. “I haven’t been able to do anything to help. Even Adriel is doing more for you than I could.”

“Silas…” Erick’s brow furrowed in guilt. He turned towards and lifted up his hand, but hesitated to touch him. He then pressed his lips into a thin line and pulled back his hand. Turning away again, he said, “Don’t say bullshit like that. You’ve helped me a lot.”

“How?” Silas asked. “All I can do is listen when you talk to me about stuff, but it just doesn’t feel like it’s enough.”

“It might not be, but talking has helped me a damn sight more than my old habits.” Erick shook his head. “You’ve cared about me even when I couldn’t give a shit about myself. Just knowing that has kept me going.”

Silas looked up then, trying to meet Erick’s eyes. “Do you really mean that?”

“Yeah. If…” Erick hesitated. “If, when Ronan gets done with all this business with the merpirates, but still can’t get Adriel to give you a tattoo, I can get a bigger tank commissioned for you. Ivan can make space for it at his estate. I know it wouldn’t be the same as getting legs, but…”

Silas smiled sadly at Erick and gave him a hug. “I would still love it.”

Erick stiffened at his touch, but let himself put his free arm over Silas’ back since Silas had pressed against his other arm. “Okay then.” He pulled back again. “I’m not sure how we’ll be able to contact each other again after I leave. Is siren singing really the only thing merfolk have to communicate long distance?”

“Yeah, except for letters.”

“But I can’t write in mertongue yet,” Erick said. “And I’ve barely taught you and Jeb the English alphabet.”

“True.” Silas frowned. “Maybe Ivan can write for you? But then I don’t know who would deliver it for you.” He paused. “I guess we could just agree to meet at the tide pool again. The new moon is a little less than a week from now. Would that be long enough to sort out everything on land?”

“I don’t know,” Erick answered. “It probably won’t be, but it’ll be enough time to at least have an update for you on how it all will be going.”

“Hm.” Silas faced his tail again. “Okay.” His fingers curled against his scales and he gave Erick another small smile. “I feel better now, knowing when we’ll see each other again.”

“Yeah.” Erick smiled back, catching himself before he said out loud that it would be a date. “And if something goes wrong, we can always plan for the full moon or the next new moon.”

“I hope it won’t come to that.” Neither one spoke for a moment. Silas then glanced behind himself up at the windows into his father’s office. “How long do you think they’re going to talk?”

Erick shrugged. “I don’t know.” Part of himself wanted Adriel to finish up talking to Ronan so he could get to land sooner, but he was reluctant to leave Silas after reuniting with him after so long. That, and he was still worried about how to face Ivan again. Even if there was more to Adriel’s story about his uncle, it would be difficult to hear him out without feeling bitter.
“I’m going to try to see what they’re doing,” Silas said, getting up to peek through the window.

“Silas!” Erick jerked upright to face him. “They’re going to see you,” he hissed.

“I just going to take a quick look,” Silas answered. “I want to make sure Adriel isn’t mesmerizing my dad.”

“And if he is?” Erick asked.

“I’ll get the guards.”

“But what if—?”

“It’ll be fine.” Silas looked through the window.
“So what do you have to discuss with me?” Ronan asked, going back behind his desk.

“Mainly your public announcement about my guild,” Adriel answered. “I don’t appreciate you insinuating that everyone in my guild is a criminal.”

“Is it really that far from the truth?” Ronan sat down. “Your guild is hunting down humans. Loophole or not, I still consider that murder.”

“Yet you are in no position to change the law, and nor will changing it affect the freedom of my guild members.” Adriel sat and folded his arm over the back of his chair. “Your records may show that some of them have been involved with illegal activity, but their irresponsible choices do not reflect me any more than they do for the rest of the guild. Every organization has bad clams in their ranks, after all.”

“You condone their actions by not expulsing them from your guild.” Ronan pressed his fist onto his desk.

“Actually, I am having the men who attacked your son turn themselves in.” Adriel tipped his head forward to give Ronan a smirk. “Awful rogues, they are. After your little announcement, I immediately had an assembly of my own to oust them from my ranks.” He held out his hand. “You see, they mistook your son for someone who owes them money. Clearly they choose the wrong course of action to get back what was owed them, but I can testify in court that to be the case.”

Ronan grit his teeth. “What of the missing men?”

“You have only circumstantial evidence that the men Kaui sent encountered any members of my guild,” Adriel answered. “As for your friend Hal, he was called away because of some emergency with his brother in Teleyan, and none of my men have heard from him since.”

“If that is the case, why didn’t he tell me?” Ronan demanded, not believing a word of his story.

“Perhaps it simply slipped his mind?” Adriel said, shrugging just his shoulders. “If he did send a message that didn’t reach you, I can see about tracking down the note he sent us if you need evidence.”

“I’ll need more than a note to believe you.” Ronan stared at Adriel with a stony expression. “Silas was told he was being held captive when more of your guild members took Erick.”

“Your son has an overactive imagination, and I wouldn’t be surprised if the old merman was going senile. Erick had simply expressed an interest in joining my guild, so they went to pick him up since Hal had to leave.”

“Do you really think anyone will believe that?”

“I would hope so, considering it’s the truth. I’ve already sent someone to bring Hal and his brother to testify in favor of these facts.”

Ronan narrowed his eyes. “What makes you so sure they will speak for you?”
“They know our guild’s reputation is on the line,” Adriel answered. “Whatever emergency called Hal away from Peleran should certainly be resolved by now, so they should be free to return here.”

“That isn’t what I meant and you know it,” Ronan retorted.

“No, I really haven’t the faintest idea of what you mean.” Adriel smiled. “Now,” he said, leaning forward to lace his fingers together and rest his chin on top. “I’m curious as to why you omitted the fact that you know what our tattoos do. Did you think that would win you any points with me? Or is it just that you have no way to prove it yet?”

“I’m not here to answer your questions,” Ronan answered. “The deal was that you answer mine and I listen to your complaints.”

Adriel’s smile dropped to a peeved expression. “Right. That it was.” He let his hands fall. Pushing himself up from his seat, he said, “I only ask for a public apology for your slanderous insinuations after I clear up the confusion you’ve caused.”

“I’ll go to the abyss before I do such a thing.” Ronan got up as well. “I will get proof of your misdeeds. No amount of lying and bribing is going to cover up all of the crimes you and your guild have committed.”

Adriel gave Ronan a cold glare. “Then you are inviting me to fight fire with fire, as the humans say.” He then noticed Silas looking through the window. “It seems your son likes eavesdropping as well as telling outlandish stories. You really ought to get him under control, else I fear what other trouble will befall him.”

“Don’t you dare threaten my son,” Ronan snapped. “If you so much as lay a finger on him—”

“I was only advising you to keep better care of him,” Adriel said with a laugh. “It’s amazing how irrational people can be after a death in the family, isn’t it?” He met Ronan’s glare with a serpentine grin. “It didn’t take much at all to ignore your son after your weak husband’s death. Perhaps that’s why—”

“Get out!” Ronan roared, slamming his hands on his desk. “You can’t talk about my family like you know anything!”

Laughing, Adriel held up his hands. “Touchy-touchy. I was just on my way out.” He swam outside and arched his eyebrow at Erick and Silas. “I’m done here. I hope you two have finished saying your goodbyes?”

Silas had sunk back down beside Erick, mouth parted slightly in fear at having seen Adriel break his father’s composure so easily.

Erick pushed himself up off the ground. “I’m ready to go,” he said, but he gave Silas a questioning look.

Silas took Erick’s hand and faced Adriel. “I want you to give me a tattoo too,” Silas said, trying to steel his voice like Erick, but failing to hide his desperation. “If you’re giving Erick one, why not me?”

Adriel looked down at Silas as if he were a fish bone he just found and spat out in the middle of his dinner. “You were born a merman. Don’t degrade yourself by wanting to live with humans.”

“I don’t care what you think of humans.” Silas held Erick’s hand more tightly. “It’s not fair to let Erick go to land and not me.”
Erick gave Silas a warning glare, whispering, “Silas…” He couldn’t hide the fear in his voice.

“Erick’s uncle is paying me handsomely for his return, and his return only,” Adriel answered. “Now if you would release him, please, I have a tight schedule today.”

Silas was about to continue arguing, but Erick pulled his hand out of Silas’ grip and wrapped his arms around him. “It’ll be okay, Silas,” he said against the top of his head, brushing Silas’ forehead with the stubble on his chin. “I’ll see you again soon.”

“Will you promise me?” Silas lifted up his face from Erick’s chest to meet his eyes.

Erick hesitated. He pulled Silas tighter against himself. “I promise,” he whispered. “I’m sorry I didn’t before.”

Silas made a choked sound, pressing his forehead against Erick. He bit back the urge to cry as he hugged him back as tightly as he could. When Erick relaxed his hold on him, Silas reluctantly let go.

After they said their goodbyes, Adriel stopped back at the front desk to inform them that Silas’ attackers would be arriving soon to turn themselves in, and that Erick was leaving with him again of his own free will. As the guards continued their investigation into his guild members, Adriel assured them that he would gladly cooperate with them to restore his guild’s reputation. It all seemed unnecessarily performative to Erick, knowing that there was no way he could continue tricking everyone once the secret of their tattoos got out, but he played along if only so he wouldn’t give Adriel any reason to rescind his promise to give Erick a tattoo.

Chapter End Notes

So, I've finally gotten into watching Voltron, and I've just started the third season. It's fricking awesome. And now I keep hearing Silas' voice as Pidge's and Erick as Shiro and Adriel as Prince Lotor, so... They have semi-official voices now? What voices do you all picture them having?
Chapter 75

Chapter Notes

Forgive me for the late update this week! I was busy this weekend since I went to my boyfriend's niece's baptism and had to clean my apartment today to show it off to a potential new roommate.

After Erick left the guard station with Adriel, the leader of the merpirates took him to the outskirts of the shoal where several other merpirates were gathered. Behind them, anchored out in the open sea was a giant, song-forged glass cage containing two dolphins.

“Why aren’t they saddled up yet?” Adriel barked. “I’m losing daylight here.”

Startled at their boss’ sudden arrival, the merpirates quickly hummed to bring out the dolphins and slide harnesses over their heads and flippers. Once secured, two of the merpirates each led a dolphin to Adriel and Erick.

Erick knotted his eyebrows in confusion at the two rope handles on either side of his dolphin’s dorsal fin. “How am I supposed to control this thing?”

“You don’t,” Adriel answered, taking one of the handles on his dolphin. “I’m leading both of them. Just hold on and let it do the swimming.”

“Okay,” Erick said uncertainly, taking hold of each of the handles. His dolphin stayed surprisingly still as it let him lay across its back, and he wasn’t sure if it was because they were trained or if the effect of the merpirates’ siren singing was keeping them docile.

Adriel glanced over at his grip. “Put your wrists through the ropes. You’re going to wear out your fingers if you try to hold on like that.” Once Erick did so, he added, “Also, try to keep your tail level above the dolphin’s fluke. It throws them off if you try to swim with them.”

“Oh.” Erick glanced down at his tail and lifted it up.

“It’ll take us a bit to get to land even with dolphins, but they’ll at least save us the effort of swimming there ourselves,” Adriel said. “I don’t plan on making any stops, so shout if you need anything. Otherwise just let me concentrate on singing. Got it?”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Good.” Adriel then looped his hands through his dolphin’s handles and began humming.

Their dolphins rocketed forward, making Erick yelp. He would have lost his grip if it weren’t for the ropes around his wrists. After his initial surprise, however, he fell into the dolphin’s rhythm and found himself enjoying the ride. Reefs teeming with schools of fish flew by beneath him and his hair rippled with the bubbles streaming behind his head and tail. Despite the unease he felt every time he looked at Adriel, the melody he hummed to control the dolphins had the odd effect of quelling the nausea that had been plaguing him all morning. Erick looked over his shoulder and watched as Peleran faded away in the blue haze of the ocean.
Before long, rock columns adorned with seagrass replaced the reefs, and then sand replaced the columns. The sheer magnitude of open water surrounding them nearly overwhelmed Erick. Despite having spent most of his life on the sea bordered only by blue horizons, he was used to the security of a ship and crew. Now he was clinging onto a dolphin controlled by a man who could very well abandon him in this endless open water. If he were to lose his grip and get left behind, he couldn’t even siren sing to get Adriel’s attention.

Having formed the thought, Erick could not banish that fear from his mind. It bred more worries, making him agonize over what could happen to Silas when he returned to the tide pool. Even though he knew logically Silas was perfectly capable of traveling across the ocean, considering he went on both salvaging trips and had made the trip to the tide pool once before already, he kept thinking of illogical ways something could go wrong. Silas could be attacked by sharks, his anxiety told him, or a storm could stir up a rogue current somehow and get him lost and starve to death. Worse still, the merpirates could do something before Silas even would have a chance to leave the shoal. If Silas couldn’t return to the tide pool, Erick knew he would never be able to swim back to the shoal on his own. He couldn’t even fathom attempting to make this trip without a dolphin.

When it finally registered in his mind that he was having another panic attack, he couldn’t even muster the bravery to unloop his hand to try to get his bottle of seaweed pills from his belt pouch. The terror of falling off had completely seized his muscles. He couldn’t think to ask Adriel to stop, to reveal his panic, give him a reason to kill the pathetic, cursed human. All Erick could do was cling onto the wild animal taking him away from the one person whose arms could dispel his fears.

It seemed like an eternity had passed before Adriel stopped the dolphins. “We’re here,” he said. “You can dismount now.”

Erick forced his hands to unclench from his dolphin’s saddle and looked up. They had arrived at rocky shallows. Scattered around them stood outcrops of stone. The surface was near enough for Erick to make out the rippling glimmer of the sun on the waves above them and the wavering impression of cumulus clouds in the sky.

Adriel sung a few notes of a signal song. A few moments later, another signal song answered. Adriel sung back again, then sent the dolphins towards the sound of the answering signal song. As the dolphins disappeared, Adriel faced Erick. “Normally I tattoo recruits on a special table so they can be comfortable during the process,” he said, turning his belt around to get into the bag that hung behind him. “Since I have to out here, you’ll just have to lay against one of those rocks.” He nodded towards one of the stone outcroppings jutting above the water.

“How am I supposed to stay up if you’re going to put me to sleep?” Erick asked.

Adriel took out a length of rope from his bag and held it up. With a smirk, he said, “This’ll do the trick.”

Erick cringed in disbelief, looking at the rope before he looked at Adriel again to make sure he was serious. “You want to tie me to a rock?”

“Do you want legs again or not?”

Sighing heavily, Erick rubbed between his eyes. “Okay. Fine.” He swam over to the rock Adriel nodded to and laid himself against it. The rough stone prickled against his bare skin and scales. Folding his arms in front of his face, he turned his head back towards Adriel. “Will this take long?”

“Yeah, but you’ll be passed out anyway.” Adriel passed the rope to Erick for him to run it under
his armpits. After Adriel finagled the rope to hold up Erick without covering the space between his shoulder blades, he got out a needle-tipped pen with a bladder full of ink. “Sweet dreams,” he said before he began singing.

Erick felt Adriel’s hands rest against his back and the first prick of his needle, then nothing.
Chapter 76

Chapter Notes

I don't have much to report on this week. I've been tinkering around with new story ideas, but haven't made much progress on anything yet. It's been a low-energy kind of spell so far.

After what seemed like moments, Erick he felt Adriel shake his shoulder as the rope slid out from under his arms.

"Time to get up," Adriel said as he rewound the rope and put it into his bag. "We got to get to the docks now."

"Right." Erick pushed himself away from the rock and tried to rub circulation back into his arms. They had gone numb while he was unconscious. As blood returned to his limbs, the sensation of pins and needles replaced his numbness. The space between his shoulder blades was sore. He tried to look over his shoulder to see his back, but he could only see the very edge of his new tattoo.

"Use a mirror when you get home," Adriel said, rolling his eyes. "I can assure you that I didn’t make any mistakes."

"I’m sure you didn’t," Erick answered. "I’m just still a little bit in disbelief that you actually made it at all."

"I follow through on my promises."

Erick quickly followed. Adriel led him to a private dock near a small beach. When they surfaced, Erick saw up the shore stood a beach house that was little more than a wooden shack. A car with rusted bumpers was parked beside it. Judging by the tree stumps dividing the house from the woods behind them, Erick guessed that merfolk had built the little settlement.

Adriel shouted up at the dock, "Cade! Get your lazy ass up and bring us clothes."

A man sleeping under a newspaper on the dock jerked upright. He folded the newspaper over his lap and looked down at the water. "Sorry, boss. I’m on it." He jogged to the house and disappeared inside for a minute before he returned.

The end of the dock had a ramp leading down into the water. Adriel swam to it and pulled himself up and out of the water. Cade passed him a towel to wrap around his waist as Adriel took deep breaths of air. When the water in his lungs had all been expelled through his gills, his tail shrunk and split into legs. The gills on his chest closed and took on the appearance of scars. The membranes of his ear fins condensed and became cartilage, but the shape of his ears retained their points. His transformation complete, Adriel stood up and tied the towel around his hips.

"What are you waiting for?" Adriel asked, sneering at Erick. His teeth were still pointed instead of flat like human teeth. "It doesn’t hurt to lose your tail."

Erick scowled at Adriel. "I was just waiting for you to get out of the way." He then pulled himself
onto the dock, struggling to make his tail cooperate with him. He slapped it repeatedly against the
dock’s wooden boards to inch his way up. Hearing Adriel laugh, he gritted his teeth.

When he was finally out of the water, Erick rolled over, panting, and Cade passed him a towel as
well. Erick laid it over his waist and tried not to cough at the feeling of air returning to his lungs. It
felt like he was slowly suffocating, drying out in the heat of the sun. It reminded him of the pain he
felt on his ship before he transformed, when his body was dying for water. Soon a tightening
sensation overcame his tail. His scales felt like they were shriveling up before they suddenly split
and returned the feeling of his bones beneath the flesh of his legs.

“Whoa.” Erick wiggled his toes, simultaneously baffled at how foreign his feet felt now that he
had spent over a month with a tail.

“We don’t have all day for you to stare at your toes,” Adriel said. “It’s a long drive to your uncle’s
estate.”

“Huh?” Erick turned his head and saw Adriel had already put on pants beneath his towel. “Oh,
right.” He gathered up his towel and started to stand, but froze when he felt something was off
between his legs. “What the fuck?” He looked under his towel and stared aghast at his altered
genitalia. “Why is there a cunt where my balls are supposed to be?”

Adriel looked baffled by his question for a moment before he burst out laughing. “Merfolk are
intersex, dumbass,” he said, trying to catch his breath between snickers. “Shifting doesn’t make
you human. It just gives you legs.”

“Seriously?” He mentally swore at this fact, certain that it had also made his dick smaller. Erick
tightened his towel around his waist and stood up. “Is there anything else I should know about
being a merman on land then?” His legs felt shaky and unbalanced, unused to standing on solid
ground. It was similar to losing his sea legs after a sailing a long time.

“You’ll get dehydrated a lot more easily than you used to, for starters, and you’ll need to have a lot
more salt in your diet to compensate for being out of the ocean,” Adriel answered as he pulled on a
loose, yellow shirt and a black jerkin. Now dressed, he took off his towel. As he rubbed his hair
dry, he continued, “Merfolk are also lactose intolerant, and regulating your body temperature can
be a pain in hot weather, too, because we’re used to being in cool water.” He paused. “Although,
since you grew up on land, some of that may not be a big deal for you.” Adriel gave his towel back
to Cade. “Also, if you haven’t noticed yet, we still got remnants of our auditory fins and gills.”

“That’s—ah!” Erick nearly fell over as he pulled on the baggy sailcloth pants Cade gave him.
“Jesus fuck, my legs hate me.” He managed to hitch up his pants and tugged on the drawstring to
keep them up. “When am I supposed to get my balance back?”

“I don’t know,” Adriel answered. “Usually mers shifting for the first time can’t even stand, so
you’re already doing better than them.”

“Great to know,” Erick muttered. He dried off the rest of himself before he pulled on a plain cotton
shirt. Noticing Adriel putting on a pair of boots, he asked, “Am I just supposed to go barefoot
now?”

“Just be thankful I had clothes for you at all.” Once Adriel finished lacing up his boots, he told
Cade that he would return later in the evening. He then led Erick to the rusted old car and got into
the driver’s seat.

“You know how to drive?” Erick asked, surprised as he got into the passenger seat. The leather
was cracked from sun exposure.

“Of course I do,” Adriel answered. “I lived on land just over ten years before I finally tracked
down your bastard uncle.” The car struggled to start for a minute before the engine finally got
going.

Erick marveled at that, that Adriel could spend ten years on land when he himself could barely
stand living underwater for a month. He then glanced back at the haphazardly built beach house in
the side view mirror. “So, was that your house back there?”

“One of them, yes.” Adriel focused on the gravel road as he began driving. “I’ve built others on the
islands where I train new recruits.”

“You actually built it yourself?” Erick asked, impressed despite himself.

Adriel bit the inside of his cheek, his stoic expression unreadable. “Yeah. It was the first one I
made after I decided to start my guild.”

“When was that?”

“Just about fifteen years ago.”

Erick considered that as he let his gaze fall to the road. The date meant Adriel had built that house
just after killing Erick’s parents, when his sister’s death was still recent. He wondered at the grief
that must have soaked into its timbers, knowing too well how his loss would have infused
everything and continued to linger. He turned his head to look through his window. Dense
evergreen trees passed by. Out Adriel’s window, the ocean’s horizon stretched out as far as his eye
could see. Soon Adriel turned into the woods, however, putting the ocean behind them to drive
over a disused road. Weeds grew between the tire tracks.

After Adriel got through the woods and pulled onto an actual highway, Erick found himself staring
at Adriel and the gold chain of his mother’s locket hidden beneath his shirt. He clenched his hand
against his leg, hating the fact that Adriel still wore what should rightfully have been his
inheritance. Erick wondered if Ivan even noticed that Adriel was wearing it. If he had, Adriel
clearly denied giving it back to him too.

Erick leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. He was exhausted from hanging onto a dolphin
and being tied to a rock all morning, and it occurred to him then that he hadn’t had breakfast or
lunch either yet. He hoped that Ivan would have something ready for him to eat when they finally
arrived. Yet even as he dreamed about having cooked food again, his stomach began disagreeing
with the long drive. Erick silently cursed the gods and hoped he wouldn’t have to throw up before
the end of their trip.
Ivan's back! And with his return, I want to bring up some things about his backstory with Adriel and Lorelei.

As this story currently stands, I simply had Lorelei die because of an unknown disease she picked up on land. Now that I've written so much farther into the story and have a better feel for how I want Erick's character arc to go, I think I want to change it so she dies because of an opium addiction, and that Ivan had been part of the opium trade before Adriel finally found him. It would explain why his business was so successful (since drugs always sell better than anything else), and it would give Adriel a lot stronger reasoning to hate both Ivan and humans (since the vague 'humans are corrupt and pollute everything' idea was always a weak reason). I only hesitate to make this change because (1) Lorelei seems too smart to actually fall into an addiction, even though I know it can happen to anyone, and (2) it would be a lot of rewriting.

Making Lorelei die because of substance abuse would also pair well thematically with Erick's alcoholism. Even though I haven't gone into too much detail about it (and honestly probably haven't handled it as well as I could have), Erick did and still does have a problem, and it's going to come into play more now that he's back on land and has ready access to bars again. It's why I've updated the tags.

If/when I get to revising this story, I plan to make addiction and recovery a stronger theme throughout. Erick's story has basically just been one about rehabilitation and how people deal with grief. Every character in this story has dealt with death in some form or another, and they've all worked through it differently.

With all this in mind, I'm still figuring out Silas' character arc. Most of his development has been about finding self-confidence and choosing his own path, but I feel like he's more or less done with that because he's already a salvager before he meets Erick. I like the idea of focusing on him as a healing influence, but that puts him back into a sub-servant position. So, I dunno. I want something to focus Silas' character like Erick with his rehab, but I can't think of anything.

TL;DR - I'm thinking of changing things with Ivan/Lorelei to make them thematically match Erick's character arc and make this story have a stronger focus on substance abuse and recovery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the iron and brick walls of Ivan’s estate came into view, Erick sat up and leaned toward the window. He hardly believed that he was actually seeing the koi pond and the fountain outside of the ivy-covered façade of his uncle’s house. As soon as Adriel parked in front of the tall steps up to the front door, Erick jumped out of the car. He took the steps two at a time, stumbling only once on his way up. Adriel came up behind him as Erick used the doorknocker.

Within minutes, the door opened and Erick found himself facing his uncle. “Ivan.” He faltered, tears welling in his eyes as he couldn’t decide whether he wanted to suffocate him with a hug or
knock out his teeth for abandoning him.

Ivan hesitated only a second before he pulled Erick into his arms. “Thank God, you’re back,” he whispered. He then held Erick at arm’s length. “I know my word must mean nothing to you now, but I swear on my life, I am so sorry for everything.” He glanced at Adriel before he faced Erick again. “I need to sign some paperwork with Adriel now, but I will answer all of your questions as soon as we’re done.”

Erick simply nodded and wiped his eyes on his sleeve, unable to stop himself from crying. He was too choked up to speak.

Ivan called over one of his servants. “Go with Erick to his room and get him whatever he may need. I will come up to see him shortly.” To Adriel, he said, “The notary is waiting in my office.”

“Perfect,” Adriel answered in English with a grin. “I may just make it back home before nightfall after all.”

Ivan glared back at him. “Don’t press you luck.”

“Or you’ll what? Kill me?” Adriel cocked an eyebrow. “If any of your men attacked me now, I wouldn’t hesitate to make them kill each other.”

“I am well aware of that fact,” Ivan answered, turning to go to his office. “Do you ever stop bragging about your skill with enchantments?”

“I’m not bragging. I’m simply warning you how outmatched you are.”

“Your warning is unwelcome and unnecessary.” Ivan opened the door to his office and gestured for Adriel to go in. “Now please, let us finish this business so I can be with my nephew.”

“Very well.” Adriel went inside and introduced himself to the notary. Ivan closed the door behind himself before he sat down at his desk.

* * *

“Erick?” Ivan knocked gently on Erick’s door. “Adriel has left. Do you want to join me for tea?”

“No,” Erick called, still trying to stop crying. “I don’t know.” It had taken Ivan less than an hour to finish his business with Adriel, but Erick had remained buried in his blankets since he had gone up to his room. It had been almost a year since the last time he had stayed at Ivan’s house, when he had spent Christmas with him. Even though Erick had moved out and had been living in his own apartment for nearly seven years, Ivan kept Erick’s room exactly as he had left it for his occasional visits.

Though Erick had taken most of his belongings to his apartment, he had left boxes of his old toys and outgrown clothes stacked in the closet. The covers on his bed were replaced with the same linens used in the guest rooms, but his headboard still held the impressions of fish and sailboats he had carved with a pocketknife when he was thirteen. When Ivan discovered that he had marred his furniture, he made him score a date and his initials beside his most detailed boat rather than punish him.

“If you need more time alone, I can leave you be,” Ivan said. “Do you have any requests for dinner?”

“Anything but fish.” Erick forced himself to sit up and sniffled, wiping his face on his sleeve. He
didn’t have a handkerchief to blow his nose. Reluctantly leaving his bed, Erick went to the bathroom to clean up his face.

“All right. Is there anything else I can do for you?” Ivan waited as he heard Erick run the sink.

“I don’t know,” Erick said as he pressed his face into a towel. He looked up at his reflection in the mirror. The cool water did little to lessen the redness around his eyes, and he had a stubbly beard because he hadn’t been able to shave at all while he was in Adriel’s custody. He traced a finger over one of his oddly fin-shaped ears, sardonically thinking that they at least felt more normal than auditory fins.

Noticing his teeth, Erick then pulled back his lips in a grimace at the mirror. He looked more like a demon than a merman now with such pointy features. With a sigh, he closed his mouth. All he could do now was fix his hair since it had dried flat, so he wet his fingers again to spike back up his bangs. He then noticed the collar of the loose shirt Adriel gave him dipped low over his chest, showing the locket he still wore and the edge of one of the scars he got from protecting Silas.

Shaking his head, Erick left the bathroom and called to Ivan, “I need to go back to my apartment to get some clothes and shoes.” He sat back down on the edge of his bed and folded his legs. “You can come in, if you want.”

Ivan opened the door. “Thank you.” He took the chair from Erick’s desk and sat down across from Erick. Unable to stop himself from staring at Erick’s ears, he said, “I never would have thought that my past could have continued to haunt me and you like this. I told Silas about my history with Adriel, and it’s high time I finally told you the truth as well.”

Erick couldn’t meet his uncle’s eyes. “Adriel told me that you married his sister to get rich.”

Ivan sighed, hanging his head. “Lorelei was never a means to an end. No matter what Adriel or the gods think, I did love her.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me you were married?” Erick asked. “He said she even had your child.”

“She did. But you must understand, the fate that befell your cousin broke me,” Ivan answered. “She was beautiful despite her deformity. I would have raised her with as much love as I gave you, but the gods took away the chance for me to even try. I couldn’t let myself stay with Lorelei after her death. After she trusted me to save our daughter, I failed. I thought I didn’t deserve Lorelei’s love. I only realized the foolishness of my choice after it was too late to see her again.”

Ivan shook his head and continued, “I couldn’t bear to tell you the truth because I was not ready to let go of the bitterness I felt. When I finally could, it was too late. I had already let my hate for merfolk consume you, and I knew any attempt to dissuade you with the truth would only break your trust.” He paused, facing the ground. “When the gods blessed your blood binding, I was terrified of what you would do when you woke up. I knew Adriel had the secret of shifting, but I had no way of knowing if you would be able to get that secret too. The last thing I wanted was for you to spend the rest of your life in a tank, so I did the only thing I could think to do, and that was give you to Silas.”

Erick didn’t answer. His uncle’s words rang true, but still hurt.

“Please forgive me,” Ivan said after a moment, looking up to try to meet Erick’s eyes. “I know I do not deserve it, but I must ask you all the same. Adriel would not have killed your parents if it wasn’t for my deplorable choices, and I cannot even imagine how you must have felt when you woke up underwater. If I could, I would take all the suffering you experienced in a heartbeat.”
Erick pressed his thumbnail into his hand, struggling to find words for his thoughts. “I don’t blame you for my parents’ deaths, but I don’t know what else I am supposed to say. In my first week underwater, I hated nearly every moment I was awake. It was a living nightmare, and I cursed your name more times than I can count. I thought you and my crew hated me for what I had become.”

Erick paused, glancing at his uncle. “But then I got to know Silas and his friends. I got used to having a tail and eating raw seafood. I even ended up thinking in mertongue more than English, and it still doesn’t seem real to me now that I have legs again.” He wrung his hands in his lap. “I actually did like a lot of things underwater. The shoal was terrifyingly alien in so many ways, but amazing too. And I know, even though I don’t want to admit it, that I needed to live there to understand merfolk, and to realize how narrow-minded I used to be. So even though I don’t want to forgive you, I am still thankful that it worked out this way.”

“That is the most I could hope for,” Ivan said. “When I spoke with Silas, he told me all about the wonders he had been able to show you. I only wish now that I could have seen it all myself.” Smiling gently, he then said, “And, I must say, Silas seems like a very nice boy. Do you love him in any way near how much he cares for you?”

Erick immediately reddened, but tried to keep his expression unreadable. “No, what do you mean?” He pulled up his legs and sat against his headboard, grabbing one of his pillows. “He’s a guy, and I’m not…”

Ivan restrained himself from laughing. “Erick, I know merfolk have no qualms against homosexual relations. Though I would not have expected it, given your colorful history with women, I can understand if it is true.”

Erick hesitantly looked at his uncle again. “You really don’t think it’s wrong?”

“No,” Ivan answered. “Strange, yes, but abstract art and enchaners have confused me more.”

Erick gripped his pillow and couldn’t speak. Having spent his the entirety of post-adolescent life ashamed of his sexual preferences, afraid of what his uncle and everyone else would think, it seemed unfair that it was all pointless.

“Erick?”

“I thought I was just a freak,” Erick said, unable to stop himself from crying again. “I did so much shit to piss you off, but I still thought…” He pressed his face into his pillow to stifle a sob.

“Thought what?” Ivan got up to sit beside Erick on his bed. “Erick, stop crying. Why are you so upset now?”

“I thought you would disown me. I knew others, but…” Erick struggled to breath between sentences. “Their families hated them.”


“I had asked you what you thought of gays, and you said they were no better than merfolk.”

“I said that?” Ivan said quietly, stunned and ashamed. “When?”

“I don’t know anymore,” Erick answered. “It was after I joined the fishing crews.”

“You held onto that all this time?”
“I was a teenager! What else would you expect?”

Ivan sighed. “I don’t know. I am sorry I said that, though I must admit I don’t remember it or why I did. I must have been mad about something that day. Time has made me realize my wrongdoings, but it appears that your transformation is making the extent of my mistakes all the more clear.”

Erick took a shaky breath. “We’re both just fucked up.” He lowered his pillow to rub his eyes. “Christ, I hate myself so much right now. I haven’t cried this much since I was a kid.”

“Well, you did go through quite a traumatic ordeal,” Ivan said. “I imagine it will take time to adjust.”

Nodding, Erick said, “Yeah, and none of this is over. Silas and his father are still trying to stop Adriel, and I need to see the Navy Admiral as soon as possible to tell them that the merfolk sinking ships are shifters. I don’t know what sailors can do against them, but I am proof that they have to address this and take me seriously now.”

“Are you sure?” Ivan asked. “If you tell them that you are a merman now, what if they try to treat you like some animal?”

“Ivan, if they tried anything that stupid, you could probably make all of their lives hell.”

“I don’t have as much power as you think I do,” Ivan said. “You must remember that I am retired now, and I just gave Adriel a small fortune to get you back home.”

Erick turned his head to look concerned at his uncle. “You didn’t give him all of your money, did you?”

“No, I just had to liquidate some of my assets,” Ivan said, waving away his concern. “I probably won’t be able to host as many parties anymore, but that was a price I was more than willing to pay.”

“Did Adriel say what he wanted all that money for?” Erick asked.

“Yes. He’s using it to buy land and build a village specifically for merfolk to live on the continent, to operate as a kind of military base as I understand it. Merfolk naturally don’t have much experience building houses, so he’ll be hiring a construction company with the funds I’ve given him.”

Erick pursed his eyebrows, intrigued. “I suppose your money could have gone to worse projects. If it wasn’t going to be used to kick out humans from our ports, it sounds like it would be a great place for Silas to live. If he had gotten a tattoo, anyway.” He sighed.

“Do you intend to return to the ocean?” Ivan asked.

“No,” Erick said, shaking his head. “But I am going to meet him at the tide pool on the new moon. I was actually wanting to ask you if you would be willing to set up a big tank for him here.”

“Of course. I’m sure I can convert the natatorium to be habitable for him. It’s already a saltwater pool, so you might even be able to swim in it with your tail now if you wished.”

“You think?” The thought seemed absurd to Erick, realizing he could transform back into a merman whenever he wanted. Or rather, return his legs to a tail. He still hadn’t quite gotten used to the thought that he was technically not human anymore despite being on land again.
“Yes, but I can’t imagine that you would be very keen on wearing your scales again so soon.”

“Yeah, no. I don’t even want to take a bath ever again.”

Ivan laughed. “Very well then.” He checked his pocket watch. “My, how about that? We’ve been talking for nearly an hour.” Standing up, he said, “I should inform the chef not to make any fish tonight before she begins preparing dinner. Are you sure you don’t have any other requests?”

Erick thought about it for a moment. “I guess I’d rather have something mild than spicy. Mashed potatoes sound ridiculously good to me right now.”

Ivan looked a bit bemused at the request, but said, “That can be arranged. Were you planning on staying here or did you want to return to your apartment after dinner? I can get my driver to take you home for whatever you choose, to get clothes or to stay there.”

“I think I’d like to stay here, at least until I get used to my legs again,” Erick answered, though his legs actually felt fine now. It was just his stomach still making him feel sick, and he couldn’t bear the thought of returning alone to his apartment. His annoying neighbors weren’t enough to fill the silence there.

“Perfect.” Ivan went to the door. Before he stepped out, he said, “Take all the time you need. I am certainly happy to have you as long as you wish to stay.”

“Thanks.” Erick hugged his pillow a little tighter and smiled briefly. “I’m glad.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay for fluffy chapter endings. I know I rambled a lot in my notes earlier, but I’d still like to hear your thoughts on what you think this story has been about so far and the main theme(s) for Erick and Silas. This story’s gotten so long, I’m curious what interpretations are out there.
Chapter 78

Chapter Notes

Content/Trigger warning: graphic depictions of self harm and suicidal thoughts.

Since we reached 400 kudos, I'm posting a bonus chapter! The next bonus will be released at 425 kudos.

I hope you all got enough fluff from the last chapter, because this chapter gets dark really fast.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Ivan’s chef began preparing dinner, Erick went by his apartment to pack his bag and change out of the baggy clothes Adriel gave him. When he took off the belt Jeb gave him, Erick started to put it in his bag when he remembered that he still hadn’t taken the abortion medicine yet. He opened up the pouch and took out both his bottle of seaweed pills and the folded packet. The bottle was still full of seawater, but the packet had dried out and became stiff. Erick worried then if the medicine would still be good, and if he could rehydrate them if they weren’t.

Since Erick didn’t want to try opening the dehydrated packet now while his driver was waiting on him, he put his medicines back into his belt pouch and tossed them into his bag along with the clothes Adriel gave him.

When Erick returned to Ivan’s estate, he let a servant take his bag up to his room so he could join Ivan in the dining room. As he walked down the long length of the table where Ivan sat at the end, Erick said, “It’s so much better being in my own clothes again. I get that merfolk have gills and all, but going around naked everywhere was so weird.”

Ivan chuckled. “I can only imagine.”

“Exactly,” Erick said, pulling out his seat. “Some of them wore stuff like nets or scarves and the guards wore armor, but they don’t care about actually covering themselves.” As he was about to sit down, his eye caught sight of a steak knife at his place setting. The sharp edge of the blade muted Ivan’s reply. Erick’s hand seemed to grasp the handle in slow motion.

His fingers wrapped around the smooth wood and lifted it up from the white linen napkin. The blade glinted, the shine on it darting to the pointed end. His wrist turned. Tendons, muscle, and bone tugged on each other, aimed the blade at his ribs, and hesitated a fraction of a moment. Confusion seeped through the haze in Erick’s mind. His hand and the blade looked like props in a play. The scene continued full speed. His elbow jerked. Steel cut through fabric, flesh, into the air of his left lung.

“Erick!” Ivan’s chair screeched against the floor.

Erick’s hand fell from the knife and he slumped into his chair. He stared at the knife in his chest as blood blossomed over his shirt.

“Call the doctor!” Ivan shouted, bending over his nephew. He held out his hand over the blade,
wanting to do something, but he knew not to remove it. He turned back to the kitchen and shouted again, “Erick’s hurt!”

Erick coughed, the shock still not registering as he continued staring at the knife.

“Erick! Erick, look at me!” Ivan knelt in front of his nephew and cupped his chin to lift his face. “Come back now. I’m right here, don’t you dare leave me now.”

Erick’s glazed over eyes widened in recognition. “Iv—” he started to say, but began coughing again. He grabbed Ivan’s arm as he finally registered the pain in his chest.

“Don’t look at the knife,” Ivan said, clutching Erick’s back as he guided Erick’s face away from his chest again.

“Why…?” Erick’s voice was hardly more than a wheeze.

“Don’t speak, we’re going to take you to the hospital. Just hold on.”

“I can’t… breathe…”

“The knife is only in one side of your chest,” Ivan said, trying to hold his voice steady. “Your other lung should be okay.”

“No…” Erick tightened his grip on his uncle’s arm. “I need… water… gills.”

“Shit.” Ivan swore through his teeth. “You’re not transforming back, are you?”

Erick shook his head and fought back the urge to cough. It hurt his chest too much. He didn’t know whether it was the blood filling his lung, the hole between his ribs, or his glyph failing somehow, but his body was screaming to dive back into the cool shelter of water.

“Okay then. You’ll be okay. I’ll get you in water as soon as I can, just hold on.”

Erick gritted his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut. “I’m sorry, Ivan…”

“Hush, this isn’t your fault,” Ivan said. “I don’t understand why this happened, but I know Adriel is behind it. You would never have done this to yourself otherwise.”

Erick couldn’t answer as he began crying. He wanted to tell Ivan he was wrong, that he had been wishing he could die before he returned to land. He had watched his hand and done nothing as it plunged the blade into his chest. The sight captivated and sickened him, that he had stared without caring, at ease even. Picturing the knife now began to numb his mind again, making him glad Silas wasn’t here to see him. Yet remembering Silas made him more terrified of letting himself go numb. He clung onto the memory of his smile, his laugh, of the children’s song he tried to teach him. Erick began mentally repeating the signal notes, “I’m lost, help me” to distract himself from the pain and focus on Silas’ voice.

Ivan’s servants had come back into the dining room to figure out what had happened and take Erick to the car. Ivan tried to explain as best he could, knowing that hypnosis was hard to believe for anyone who had not heard a mer’s siren singing.

The ride to the hospital passed in a blur. Every hard turn and bump in the road jostled Erick, making his wound hurt worse. Ivan kept trying to talk to Erick on the way over, but his voice faded into the noise of the car’s engine. Erick barely paid attention as nurses helped him into a wheelchair, letting his uncle do all the talking. The doctor looked mildly surprised after they cut
off Erick’s shirt to see Erick’s other scars and closed gills. After the doctor finished patching up Erick, he left him to rest with an IV and oxygen therapy.

The following morning, Erick woke up sore. When the nurse brought him oatmeal for breakfast, the smell of it made him feel queasy. He tried to eat what he could and hoped that what Adriel said about merfolk being lactose intolerant wouldn’t apply to him. After he finished, he leaned back against his propped up bed to continue resting. Nurses checked on him through the window of his door every fifteen minutes. On their third visit, Erick realized he was on suicide watch. Then on their fourth, a nurse knocked on his door and came inside.

“Good morning,” he said, holding a clipboard. “How are you feeling?”

“Sick and my chest still hurts.” Erick gave him a tired scowl as he continued laying against his propped up bed. They had taken him off of oxygen therapy, but he still had an IV in his arm.

The nurse pulled over a chair to sit beside Erick’s bed. “Well, a little aching should be expected after a big injury like that. Since we had to work so fast last night to get you stabilized, we weren’t able to get your medical history.” He uncapped his pen. “Can I have you confirm your name and date of birth first?”

Erick sighed, in no mood to answer his questions, but answered anyway.

After the nurse asked him several other basic questions, he then said, “Now, this may sound strange, but your uncle told us that you are a merman. Can you elaborate on why he would think that?”

Bristling at the nurse insinuating that his uncle was going senile, Erick said, “I was born human, but I became a merman last month when I had exchanged blood with another merman in the process of capturing him. He bit me, and his blood got into my mouth while we struggled to restrain him.”

The nurse tapped his pen against his clipboard. “So, you mean to say being a merman means having some kind of disease?” He looked pointedly at his ears and teeth.

“No,” Erick answered, pinching between his eyes. “It means having a goddamn fish tail and gills. The merfolk say it’s a blessing from their gods.”

“If that is true, why do you not have a fish tail right now?”

“The merfolk can use magic. The tattoo on my back allows me to be on land again.” Seeing the nurse’s still skeptical expression, Erick said, “I know I sound insane, but I don’t care if you believe me or not. Go ahead and note it with my panic attacks.” He turned his head to look at a green lawn outside his window. “I don’t know why my uncle bothered telling you at all. He should’ve have.”

“I see.” The nurse wrote it down. “As I understand it, he told us in order to explain your injury. He claimed that you were ‘enchanted’ by another merman, and that were not in control of actions when you stabbed yourself. Do you believe this is true?”

A muscle tightened in Erick’s jaw. “If I ‘believe’ it?” he asked, keeping his tone carefully neutral. “I’m not suicidal, if that’s what you’re trying to ask. I’ll admit that have been before, but I’m not anymore. I have no reason to be now that I’m on land again.”

“That is good, but we’re still going to need to keep an eye on you for a while. You understand we just want to help you, right?”
Erick glanced sidelong at the nurse before he resumed staring out the window. “I know. Did my uncle say anything else?”

“Yes, actually,” the nurse said. “He was also concerned that your injury would make you ‘lose your legs,’ and that remaining out of water would complicate your healing process. However, you ought to know that submerging your stitches is probably the worst thing you can do right now. You’ll need to keep them dry for at least the next twenty-four hours, and after that you should still avoid getting them too wet until your wound closes.”

“And when will that be?”

“In about one to two weeks, depending on how quickly you heal, but full recovery may take anywhere from six to eight weeks.”

Erick frowned, annoyed since he was certain Merise’s enchanted salves could have halved that estimate. “So when can I go home then? Ignoring the suicide watch, will I be okay to leave within the next week?”

“Well, that is our plan.”

“Okay.” Erick sighed, glad for that small reassurance. “Did you have any other questions?”

“Yes, just a few more,” the nurse answered. “When your uncle gave us an overview of your medical history, he also mentioned that merfolk are intersex. Does that mean you have ambiguous genitalia, or do you have both functioning testis and ovaries? This affects the other questions I have to ask now.”

Erick opened his mouth to answer, but realized he didn’t actually know. He pursed his lips and faced his lap, wondering if becoming a breeder instead of a stud meant he had more female parts than male. It was an unsettling thought, the physical loss of his manhood. It didn’t change how he felt about his gender, but it did make him feel less human.

“I understand if my question makes you uncomfortable,” the nurse said, “but it is in your best interest to have a complete record of your health.”

“I know.” Erick gripped his blankets. “I just don’t know if I have both working or not. I’m assuming yes, but I’m still trying to understand how that part of being a merman works.”

“Do you want us to give you a physical examination to try to determine that answer for you?”

“No,” Erick answered, quickly shaking his head. “I don’t want to do that. Just write that I have both.”

“Very well.” The nurse marked it on his clipboard. “Now, have you been sexually active within the past six months?”

“Uh…” Erick thought it over, then remembered the last time was with Silas. His cheeks flushed. “Yes.”

“How often would you say you engage in sexual intercourse?”

Erick blew air through his lips and ran his hand through his hair. “Uh, well, I haven’t been that active anymore recently. I used to be, but I think it was just the one time since then.”

“I see. Are experiencing any pain or seeing unusual discharge when you urinate? These symptoms
“No, I’m clean down there. I haven’t had issues with STDs for like three years now.”

“I see.” The nurse then asked, “When was the last time you engaged in intercourse?”

“What’s today’s date?” After the nurse answered, Erick mentally counted up the weeks. “It was a little over five weeks ago, I think. Why do you need to know that?”

“Well, if you have functioning ovaries, I have to ask in case there is a chance you are pregnant,” the nurse said.

The question made Erick cringe, reminding him that his abortion medicine was in his bag at Ivan’s house. “I think I could be,” Erick answered, unable to face the nurse. “I was going to take medicine to make sure I don’t, but I haven’t yet.”

“I would assume it’s too late now then. Do you have regular menstrual cycles?”

“No, I’ve never had one before,” Erick said, reminding himself to take deep breaths. “I didn’t have a cunt until last month.”

“Oh, well, have you noticed any symptoms?” the nurse asked. “I doubt that you would have, but common signs include cramping or bloating, some blood spotting, mood swings, nausea, frequent need to urinate, and unusual fatigue. Does any of that sound applicable?”

“I don’t know!” Erick answered, but he was already thinking of the nausea that had plagued him for the entire past week. “Oh God, I can’t be.” His queasiness always got worse whenever he tried to eat anything. Then it occurred to him that his panic attacks had been bothering him more frequently, and he had cried more in the last month than he had in over a year. He put his hand over his mouth, staring wide-eyed at his blankets. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Oh boy.” The nurse jumped up and grabbed him a sickness bag.

Erick grabbed it just before he ended up throwing up. After he emptied his breakfast, he couldn’t stop himself from crying. He couldn’t hide from the truth with excuses or a fifty-fifty probability anymore. The facts were too clear to him now. There was a tiny person growing inside him, and he did not know what to do.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I rushed the end of this chapter a bit, but I'm too lazy to revise it. Poor Erick is gonna need a lot of cuddles now.
Chapter 79

Chapter Notes

This week's a bit lighter than the bonus chapter, but Erick still has to have some hard conversations before we get to the end of this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Following Erick’s breakdown, Erick made the nurse leave so he could try to continue resting. He eventually fell back asleep for a while before they woke him up again for lunch, but he could barely make himself eat any of it. Just the knowledge that he should be eating for two now had made his nausea worse. It didn’t help his conscience either that the only reason he was in the hospital was because he tried to kill himself, even if it was Adriel’s fault. The nurse gave him medicine to try to alleviate his nausea, but they could do nothing to quell his guilt and disgust with himself. After the nurse left, Erick attempted to sleep again. He had begun dozing when a knock on his door late that afternoon woke him back up.

“Erick?” the nurse said. “Your uncle is here to see you.”

Erick rubbed his face, groggy. “Let him in,” he groaned. His eyes already began misting over again as he remembered his epiphany that morning, and he clenched his jaw to stop himself from crying. He didn’t look up at his uncle as he sat down beside his bed.

Ivan gripped his knees at the sight of his nephew. “I suppose I don’t need to ask how you’re feeling right now,” he said. “The nurse told me that you believe you could be pregnant.” He hung his head, carefully choosing his words. “I assumed there was more between you and Silas than you were admitting, but this…” He lifted his hands and dropped them back on his knees.

“I wasn’t in control of myself,” Erick said quietly. “The night you gave me to Silas was the same night we got our ‘sign’ from the gods. I was barely conscious when it happened.”

Ivan paled. “You’re serious?”

Erick nodded slightly. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about Silas. I care about him a lot, but I didn’t want this,” he said, gesturing to his stomach. “I told him I didn’t want it, but he didn’t…” He swallowed hard, fighting back his tears. Ivan remained silent.

“When he finally let me, I got the medicine, but I didn’t take it,” Erick continued. “I made excuses. I want to now, I should, but if I do…” His voice broke as his tears won. “I don’t want to be a murderer, Ivan. What am I supposed to do?” He buried his face in his hands. His sobs aggravated the stitches on his chest, making his wound hurt again.

Ivan stared, at a loss for words. He had expected Erick to eventually end up with a child he hadn’t planned on, but he never thought Erick would be the one carrying it. That he was a merman only compounded his fear for him. Even though Erick and Silas were both mermen, Ivan could only think of the fate that befell his own daughter.

“I don’t know,” Ivan eventually said. “This is a conversation you need to have with Silas.”
“But he wanted it,” Erick cried. “I don’t.”

“Well…” Ivan didn’t know what else to say. “I will get you whatever care you need. If you decide to keep it or not, I will still love you either way.”

Erick continued crying for some time. Ivan rubbed his back, assuring it would be okay. When Erick was able to take deep breaths without sobbing, he wiped his eyes on his blankets. Haltingly, he asked, “What would you do if you were in my place?”

Sighing, Ivan faced his hands. “I’m not sure. I wished for a very long time that my daughter hadn’t been born, that she could have been spared from her painful existence and stopped me from leaving Lorelei. But if I didn’t have her, Lorelei wouldn’t have found the secret of shifting. That fact has caused us nearly more grief than I can bear, but I believe now that it has to mean something. It could be a truly wonderful world if humans and merfolk were allowed to freely cross the shore.”

Ivan faced Erick again. “I know that doesn’t really answer your question, but I suppose I mean to say that I would keep it. Perhaps I’m underestimating the work it would require, or rather almost certainly underestimating it, but it is my answer all the same.”

Erick pressed his thumbnail into his finger, considering his uncle’s answer. “What am I supposed to tell everyone if I keep it?” he then asked. “This is worse than being bisexual. Men can’t be pregnant.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t have to tell anyone, if you really wanted to keep it secret,” Ivan answered.

“How?” Erick said in disbelief. “My stomach would get huge. It’d be impossible to hide that.”

“Yes, but plenty of men your age eventually lose their figure. It would be reasonable for anyone who saw you to simply assume you had a penchant for sweets.”

Erick face-palmed. “I don’t want to look fat either.” Facing Ivan again, he demanded, “And how the hell would I explain why I have a kid after it’s born? Silas can’t pretend to be the mother.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have to explain anything if you just let Silas raise it,” Ivan said.

“I can’t just let him raise it by himself, it would be my kid too!” Erick retorted. “And I wouldn’t trust Gale to help keep care of it either because he’s a dick. Ronan and everybody else would be okay, I guess, but they’re too busy all the time.” Noticing Ivan’s bemused expression, Erick realized he was already getting protective about a baby he still didn’t want to exist. “God dammit!” he said, dropping his head in his hands. “Fucking hell, fuck this and fuck the gods.”

The furrow in Ivan’s brow deepened. “What is it?”

Erick pressed his nails into his scalp with a groan. “Nothing. All of this is fucking with my head and I don’t want to keep talking about it.” He let his hands fall on his lap. “Distract me with something else. How is my crew? I didn’t get the chance to ask Silas about them.”

“I haven’t spoken with any of them personally since we met Silas,” Ivan answered. “However, most of them have found new employers. Dunley joined the dockworkers, Flynn and Eustace joined a fishing trawler’s crew, and Reena is a waitress at one of the taverns in town. Talia detained from telling me what job she found because she was still cross with me for sending her home, but I assume she has found work with her loathsome friends in the West End, pickpocketing or something.”

Erick scowled at his uncle. “She hasn’t been a thief since we were kids. She probably just hasn’t
found work yet and didn’t want to say so, since she knew you would think that anyway.” Ivan had no response. Erick faced his hands again. “What about The Gentian? Is it still in port?”

“Yes, I saved her for you,” Ivan answered. “A ship her size isn’t good for much besides pleasure sailing, and I saw no reason to continue funding your chase against pirates if you weren’t at the helm.”

Erick considered that for a moment. “You never really expected me to find any pirates, did you?”

Ivan gave him a small smile. “No, I did not. Yet you were so motivated to find them, I couldn’t say no. It was the first reason you ever had to get sober.”

“You were funding my wild goose chase just to stop me from going to bars all the time?” Erick laughed despite himself.

“Yes, and I would have funded a hundred more,” Ivan said. “I never did stop spoiling you.”

“No kidding.” Erick shook his head with a smile. “You let me get away with everything.”

“This is true. I should have disciplined you more, I know,” Ivan said, looking at the floor, “but it was just so difficult.”

“It’s okay. You were supposed to be my fun uncle, not my dad.”

“That, and I still blamed myself for your parents’ deaths. I couldn’t bear to take any more of your happiness, even when it was warranted.”

“I guess that’s true.” Erick wondered then what kind of parent he would be. He didn’t want to give everything a free pass like his uncle, but he had no idea how he would enforce any kind of authority. It was just yet another thing to worry about if he continued his pregnancy.

After a moment, Erick said, “I’m going to have to stay here for a few more days, to make sure my lung doesn’t collapse or anything. If they won’t let me leave before the new moon, do you think you can go meet Silas for me again?”

“Of course,” Ivan answered. “I also still have the tank you used to capture him. I don’t know how feasible it would be to bring him here, but we could potentially arrange for you to be able to meet him at my estate. It is a long drive to the tide pool, and it would be better not to overexert yourself until your wound finishes healing.”

The thought of transporting Silas anywhere but to Ivan’s estate worried Erick, but he couldn’t deny how much he wanted to see him. Even though he had spent nearly every day of the total five plus weeks he had been underwater with the amber-eyed merman, the distance between them ached like the hole in his chest.

“If you can prepare the pool for him in time, I guess we can let Silas decide if he wants to come or not,” Erick said eventually. “He’ll need a bed alcove or a sponge mattress at least, and there’ll have to be some way to filter out waste. Merfolk use glyphs that create vacuums to flush everything from their houses, but I guess the pool pump can work.”

“I’ll sort out all of the details,” Ivan said with a smile. “I am no stranger to the basic needs of merfolk.”

“Okay.” Erick frowned, wondering what else he might need. “Oh! Can you get a goldfish?”
Puzzled, Ivan said, “Yes? That shouldn’t be a problem, but why a goldfish?”

“Silas wants one as a pet,” Erick answered. “We could keep it in a tank by the pool, can’t we?”

Ivan laughed. “I don’t see why not. I will put that on my to-do list.”

Chapter End Notes

If Ivan got you a goldfish, what would you name it?

Fun facts about me: My first pet was a was completely white goldfish, so I named it Angel. My sister got an orange one with black spots on its tail that were shaped like Mickey Mouse head, so she named it Mickey. Though we no longer have any fish, I still enjoy watching aquariums.
“Why did I have to say we should meet on the new moon?” Silas groaned, swimming alongside Gale as he plucked sea anemones and starfish from the reef fields outside of Peleran. “I should have said today.”

Gale rolled his eyes as he tossed another anemone into his collection bag. “It’s been barely two days since Erick went back to land. You can survive five more days.”

“But five days is going to take forever.” Silas swam up around Gale to float in front of him upside down. “What am I supposed to do while he’s gone?”

Gale lowered his eyebrows at Silas, pursing his lips in annoyance. “Apparently bother me incessantly while I’m at work.” He swam past Silas to look for more harvestable creatures. Out in the open ocean, a distant sand cloud from a bottom trawling net billowed across the seafloor.

Silas twisted around to continue following him. “You can still fill your bag while I hang out with you, though.”

“Yeah, but you could also pester Jeb or your salvaging crew. I’m sure you still have plenty to catch up on with Doris and Iara.”

“I guess, but I spent all day with them yesterday.”

The two mermaids had returned from their trip to the northeast just the day before, so Silas and Monty caught up on what happened with each other while they were separated. Doris and Iara were both relieved to find that Silas was okay, but the humans they found to track down Silas were apparently already involved with several other missing merfolk cases. The captive mers they had been able to rescue were usually being kept as part of traveling freak shows, but at least one victim had been killed and preserved for a cryptozoologist’s private collection. All of the missing mers were either kidnapped while basking on rocks near the shore or caught in fishermen’s nets. Since the small team of humans willing to help them had limited resources to track down missing mers and organize rescue missions, Doris and Iara had returned to Peleran with little hope that they would actually be able to find Silas. Their news about the rescue team had both heartened and dismayed Silas because it simultaneously proved the extent of human kindness and their cruelty, and made him wish even more fiercely that he could see Erick again to tell him about this group. Silas imagined that he and Ivan in particular could help them a lot.

“So?” Gale asked. “What’s wrong with hanging out with them again today?”

“They were going to see their other friends today,” Silas answered, sticking his finger into a tube of coral. It scared a small fish and made it dart down and out of another tube. “I don’t see why you’re complaining. You’re always asking me to come hang out with you at work.”
“Yeah, but that was before you became obsessed with Erick. You’ve been talking about him all morning.”

Silas blushed. “No I haven’t.”

“You definitely have, liar,” Gale said half-teasingly, tossing a spiral seashell at him. He clasped his hands in front of his chest and looked starry-eyed at the surface. “Oh Gale, what do you think Erick is doing right now? Do you think he’s talking to his crew, or is he already going to see the Navy Admiral?”

Silas batted away the seashell. “I don’t sound like that!”

Gale laughed. “Yeah, you do, so give it a rest already.”

Pouting, Silas looked down at the reefs. The seashell Gale threw landed and a hermit crab inside slowly began poking out its head. “It’s not like you have anything more interesting to talk about.”

“Sure I do,” Gale said. “We could talk about your dad’s investigation on Adriel instead.”

Silas groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“What, is it going that bad?”

“Basically. After those first guys killed themselves, everybody else stopped coming forward,” Silas answered. “We got some anonymous tips about where Adriel was keeping Hal and Erick, but the guards we sent to investigate didn’t find anything but the stuff from their shipwrecking, which they claimed was just from legitimate salvaging. The only other thing we’ve found about Hal was the note he supposedly sent before he went to Teleyan, but it was one of the guards with a tattoo who supposedly found it in a pile of other notices. It’s in Hal’s handwriting, but it’s so short, it’s hard to tell if the words are actually his. We won’t actually get to know Hal is okay until the guards my dad sent to his brother’s house in Teleyan come back. They’re supposed to return today, but I’m half-expecting them to go missing too.”

“If Adriel is trying to pretend he’s done nothing wrong, I don’t think he’d try to make more people disappear.” Gale looked over at the open ocean when he noticed the faint rumble coming from the trawler’s sand cloud. Glaring at it and then up at the indistinct shadow of a ship on the surface, he said, “Those stupid humans keep dragging their nets closer to the reefs every day.”

“Is that what that is?” Silas tilted his head at the cloud. “Why are their nets scraping the bottom like that?”

“They get more fish that way, I think.” Gale rolled his eyes and sighed. As he continued swimming along the reef, he added, “It’s when humans do stuff like this that make me think Adriel actually has a point about them sometimes.”

Silas’ head jerked to face him. “You can’t be serious.”

Gale shrugged, looking awkward. “I know, it sounds bad, but look at the mess they’re making.” He pointed to the long trail of turbid water behind the net. “They should really just stick to their land animals and leave the fish for us. Clearly they don’t need it since they’re always throwing back at least half of everything they catch.”

“Maybe.” Silas frowned, thoughtful. “I’ll have to ask Erick about it and see if he can do anything to make fishermen stop it. They might not know their nets are causing that much damage.”
“If they don’t know, then they’re either choosing to be ignorant or they’re not the ones emptying those nets,” Gale said. “I doubt Erick can do much about them. One not-entirely-shitty guy can’t stop all the other shitty humans from acting like sharks.”

Silas gave Gale a sidelong glare. “I thought you were done hating on Erick.”

“I am, lay your barbs.” Gale held up his hands. Mockingly serious, he said, “Admitting he isn’t entirely shitty is a big step for me.”

“Can’t you say something actually nice about him?”

“Maybe when he comes back here. After all, I can’t waste those kindness points when he’s not here.”

Silas groaned. “I’m going to hold your word to that, you know.”

“Cool with me.” Gale turned back to the corals and pushed aside a sea fan to continue looking for more edible creatures. “You said he wasn’t planning on returning to the shoal, so that means I won’t have to say anything.”

Silas fell behind Gale. Quietly, he asked, “You really had to go there?”

“Huh?” Gale looked back. His shoulders fell. “Silas, you know I’m just kidding. I’m sure Erick didn’t mean it either.”

“Yeah, but it still hurts.” Silas held his elbows. “I can’t be on land without a tank or tattoo, but I can’t get a tattoo unless Adriel changes his mind. The only way I can really live with Erick now is if he comes back to the shoal.”

“I guess that’s true.” Gale picked up a starfish and turned it around in his hands. “You’ll figure something out that works for both of you eventually. You have to remember you’ve only known each other for like a month. You’re still just in the honeymoon phase.”

“Pretty much literally and figuratively,” Silas conceded. “But still.” He dramatically threw out his hands. “A fish tank can’t be my only solution if Erick won’t live here.”

“It might be a very nice tank though, with fancy tubes and coral——”

“You’re not helping.” Silas let himself slip backwards and drift down. He swished his hands to scatter a group of fish.

“At least I’m trying.” Gale filled up the rest of his bag. As they swam back to the collection drop-off, the trawler’s sand cloud turned slightly and began drifting to the reefs.

Chapter End Notes

I’m still trying to figure out Silas’ character arc. If he was a girl, he’s basically failed the Bechdel test because I haven’t really shown him being interested in anything besides Erick. So, while this is a romantic story, I’d like to give more depth to Silas than just the guy swooning over a pirate hunter.
I don’t have much to say this week since I’m not really feeling it right now.

I’ve fallen back into the rut of feeling like I’m giving more than I receive in my personal life, and I don’t know how to balance those scales. It’s like I keep trying to give more, somehow expecting that I’ll eventually get something back, but it’s never enough or what I actually wanted... I dunno. If any of you have advice, I’m all ears. All I can think is to give less, but that just makes me feel worse because it severs connections I’m trying to maintain.

Gale was close to filling up the rest of his second bag when Silas said, “That trawler is going to turn away from the reefs soon, right?” Over the past hour, the trawler’s sand cloud had been steadily heading towards them. The distant haze it created was growing into a more defined mass of seabed debris behind a net as wide as a whale, nose to fluke.

“It better,” Gale answered, frowning at the ship. “They usually double-back before they reel in their catch, but they might pull up their net before they turn again.”

“What if they don’t?”

Gale looked down at the brightly colored corals beneath them. “Then we get out of the way, I guess. That’s what my supervisor told us if they do come through here.”

Silas’ eyes widened. “We can’t stop them at all?”

“No, hunters have gotten hurt trying to cut their nets,” Gale said. “They don’t move very fast, but people have gotten pushed into the net by all the fish falling into it.”

“Why don’t they just cut the ropes towing the nets?”

“Because they’re usually chains now, not ropes. Song-forged knifes break before they can do anything.” Gale adjusted the strap on his collection bag. “A lot of the gatherers are saying we should get the hunters to enchant the sailors to keep them away, but of course enchanting them in any way is illegal now.”

Silas nodded, subdued. He watched Gale continue working in silence. The trawler reeled in its net soon later, and he watched as dozens upon dozens of fish began being thrown back overboard as the humans emptied the giant net. Before long, the net plunged back into the water.

“Come on, turn around now,” Silas whispered, watching the weighted half of the net hit the ground. The ship began moving again. “No! What’re you doing?” The net resumed its course towards the reef fields. “Gale, they’re not turning around!”

Gale looked up and swore. “Let’s go back. My bag’s almost full, and my supervisor can tell us if I should keep working or not.”

They swam back to the collection drop-off and found Gale’s supervisor had a grim expression as
she watched the approaching trawler. Her fingers drummed against one of the collection baskets as her chartreuse tail swayed anxiously. Many of the other gatherers were also returning.

“Jodie, what do you want us to do?” Gale asked.

One of the other gatherers asked, “Should we go home and warn everybody?”

“It’s not going to run into the shoal, is it?” another one asked.

“That’s impossible!”

“The humans wouldn’t really tear up the reefs, would they?”

“They’re sailing blind, of course they would!”

Jodie held up her hands. “Quiet everyone!” She pointed to one of the gatherers. “You, go tell the guards one of the trawlers is in a collision course with the reefs. If it comes down to it, they’re better equipped to cut the net.”

As the gatherer she had pointed to sped off to the nearest guard tower, an older gatherer with tail striped like a lionfish said, “Why bother cutting the nets if the hunters can just make them turn around? We don’t need to put anyone in danger!”

“We’re not enchanting anyone unless the guards can promise us pardons for breaking the law,” Jodie answered. “And even if we did enchant them, would any of the hunters even know how to make them turn their ship around?”

“The only way to find out is to let them try,” the old gatherer retorted. “If we send someone to the chasm to get them now, we might just have enough time.”

Silas gripped his fingers as the gatherers argued, biting his lip. “What if…” He cleared his throat and spoke louder. “What if we just ask the fishermen to change course?”

Jodie gave him a look like an octopus replaced his face. “Excuse me, you’re suggesting what? The humans don’t understand us.”

“I know a little of their language,” Silas answered. “If we all surface and wave our hands to show them that they shouldn’t come over here, they’ll have to listen.”

The old gatherer shook his head. “You’re insane! The humans don’t care about the ocean. Why should they care about us?”

“Furthermore, who’s to say they wouldn’t try to catch us?” Jodie added. “I’d rather lose the reefs than any of you.”

“But you’re still willing to put the guards in danger,” Silas said.

“Yes, because defending the shoal is their job.”

“Except cutting the nets isn’t going to help.” Silas held out his hands. “If we cut the nets today, nothing will stop them from just coming back with new ones. We have to make them understand why they shouldn’t come back.”

“And showing ourselves is supposed to dissuade them?” the old gatherer asked. “We’re likely more valuable to them than all the fish in their nets!”
“Then I’ll just try to talk to them by myself!” Silas answered. “I’m not just going to sit out here and watch them destroy everything.”

“Silas, you can’t,” Gale started to say, but Silas had turned around and darted off towards the ship’s shadow on the surface. Swearing, Gale threw off his collection bag and swam after him. “Silas, wait!”

The shadow of the boat continued creeping closer to the reefs, and the trawling net lumbered behind it. They had mere minutes before the maw of the net would crunch through the corals and leave a fog of sand over anything that survived.

“Hey, down here!” Silas shouted above the surface, waving his hands. The boat was about the same size as Erick’s ship, but smokestacks and booms holding the net stood on the deck rather than sails. The rumble of its coal-fired engine drowned out Silas’ voice.

Gale grabbed Silas around the waist and pulled him back under. “For the gods’ sakes, stop throwing yourself at humans!”

Silas tried to push off Gale’s arms. “Get off! I’m trying to save the reefs!”

“You’re trying to get yourself caught again is what you’re doing!” Gale gripped Silas tighter even as Silas shoved his hand against his face and flailed his tail more madly.

“No I’m not!” Silas then remembered his guard training to disarm attackers. He grabbed Gale’s wrist like he had practiced and elbowed his chest to knock the water from his gills. Gale’s grip faltered. Silas whipped his tail to slip out. He shot back out of the water and shouted for the fishermen’s attention again. Splashing down, Silas spun back around and resurfaced. One of the men aboard noticed him and went slack-jawed. Silas hadn’t learned the word for stop, so he instead waved his arms and shouted, “No! No! Please!”

Holding his bruised chest, Gale surfaced beside Silas. He looked fearfully at the deck as other sailors rushed to the railing to point at Silas and shout at each other in bewilderment.

Seeing that the sailors weren’t understanding why he was making such a commotion, Silas darted to the chains towing the net. He breached over the water like a dolphin, hoping that showing his tail would help the fishermen understand. Silas faced them again when he grabbed hold of starboard chain. Trying to pull on it in the opposite direction away from the reefs, he shouted, “Please! I do not understand very English.”

The fishermen were slow to react, bewildered as they were, but then a skinny one jumped with recognition. He shook the arm of a black man beside him, shouting, “Eustace, that’s Silas!”

“The fuck?” Eustace’s mouth dropped, matching Silas’ shock at recognizing Erick’s former deckhands.

Flynn said something Silas didn’t understand as he shoved aside two other fishermen and ran below deck. A second man with a red scarf followed him. Eustace pointed at Silas, shouting over the sound of the engine.

Silas had no idea if they understood him as he watched Eustace try to explain why he and Flynn knew a merman. He continued tugging on the net’s tow chain, hoping that the fishermen would get that they needed to stop or turn around. Gale stayed close to Silas, baffled by the coincidence but still cautious.

The man with the red scarf returned. Silas froze at the sight of a speargun in his hands. Most of the
other fishermen looked outraged or shocked that he had gotten it. As Red-scarf took aim with the speargun, Eustace tried to grab it. The spear fired. It splashed the water beside Silas. He turned his head and heard Gale cry out before he saw the spear embedded in his stomach.

Silas screamed, “Gale!”

Many of the fisherman onboard shouted, and Silas recognized their swear words because Erick often used them. Eustace got the speargun out of Red-scarf’s hands, but another man punched his face and knocked him flat onto the deck. Another fight ensued between the men as one man tried to pull on the braided cord connecting the spear to the gun.

“Shit!” Gale swore, instinctively clutching the spear to stop the barbed end from tearing itself back out. It hadn’t gone all the way through. Blood quickly began darkening the water around his waist even as the smoke began fading from the smokestacks. The noise of the engine had died down. The fishermen’s yelling sounded louder in its absence.

Since he had no weapon, Silas grabbed the cord and yanked it away from the deck as hard as he could. It slipped out of the hands of the men fighting over it and clattered against the deck, but got stuck on the railing. Gale swore through his teeth again because Silas’ elbow had knocked into the spear shaft.

“Oh gods, sorry!” Silas tried to pull on the cord again without hitting the spear shaft, but the gun had neatly secured itself like a grappling hook between the ship’s railings. He continued trying desperately to free it, shouting over and over again in English, “Please, no!”

Flynn returned to the deck after he shut off the engine and swore. He shoved his way through the brawl and pulled out a knife. Seizing the cord, he cut Gale free and faced the mermen with an expression wrought with fear and shame. His eyes then widened as he looked past Silas and Gale.

Silas turned his head and saw half a dozen guards had surfaced. Two rushed to their aid as the other four surrounded the slowing boat. Their discordant siren voices soon filled the air, each melody clashing out of time with each other. Flynn suddenly went rigid. Raising his knife, he turned and stabbed the man beside him. Half of the other men froze while the other half began moving mechanically to reel in the trawl net.

As the guards grabbed Silas and Gale to pull them back under, Silas fought off his hands and shouted, “No, stop! What are you doing? Don’t kill them!”

The four guards’ siren singing continued. Flynn repeatedly stabbed and slit the throats of his immobilized friends one by one. He cried for forgiveness, unable to stop his hand even as blood splattered across his sleeve. His friends could only watch or continue reeling in the net.

“Stop! Stop it!” Silas cried. “Please, they don’t deserve this!”

The guard taking Silas managed to seize his wrists and pull him back under. Two dozen more guards were cutting the net at its base to free the captured fish as it rose and help it rise more quickly. Below, a wide swath of the reefs had already been demolished. The fog of sand following the net billowed over the surviving reefs. Silas turned his head and saw the other guard was rushing Gale to the shoal. The braided cord from the spear impaled in Gale’s waist trailed behind them.

Succumbing to sobbing, Silas could do nothing as the guard led him back to Jodie and the other gatherers. The guard tried to reassure him that they had no other choice, that the reefs were being destroyed too quickly, but Silas swatted away his hand. He sat and clutched his arms, rocking
himself. The other gatherers gave him space as they silently watched the fish escaping from the trawler’s net. Many gaped in horror at the sand cloud drifting over the reef fields. No one spoke when the four enchanters’ song ended.
I'm feeling better this week. Not sure where I'm going with this story again. I know I definitely won't be finishing it by the end of summer anymore. My new goal is the end of this year.

When the guards cutting the net finished and realized what happened above the surface, shouting broke out. The four enchanters defended their actions, saying the reefs would have been destroyed entirely if they hadn’t attacked the humans. Several of the guards agreed with them, many others argued that they should be charged with contempt of the law and stripped of their rank, and the rest didn’t know what to think. Some surfaced to see if they could save any of the fishermen, but the bodies they could see from the water were still. Blood dripped over the edge of the deck.

Then the guards noticed that the boat’s engine had stopped. The four enchanters couldn’t have made any of them men go below deck to turn it off. Their puppeteering song could only control people within the enchanter’s line of sight. Believing that at least one of the humans could have survived, the guards now had to worry about a possible survivor amid a boat full of dead bodies. None of them wanted to try to climb aboard and investigate, but they all knew one of them would have to volunteer. Though the boat floated idly on the sea now, the current was slowly pulling it away from the shoal.

When the guard who had pulled Silas away from the boat returned to the others and told them how Silas’ friend was stabbed and rushed to a healer, the most senior-ranking guard finally took control of the situation. She ordered that all four of the enchanters be bound and brought to the guard station. As they were taken away, the senior guard assigned others to hold the perimeter around the fishing boat and alert her if the engine started again. Since no one volunteered to go onto the ship to count the bodies and look for anyone they could still save, she pointed to one guard randomly and ordered them to find a way onto the deck. She got several other guards to help her collect witness statements from the gatherers, and then sent the rest back to their stations around the shoal.

Silas hadn’t been paying attention to the guards as he cried. He kept mentally seeing the spear in Gale’s waist and Flynn’s horrified expression as he cut down his immobilized crewmates. It was his fault, Silas knew. He always messed up everything. Gale wouldn’t have been in range of the speargun if Silas had just did what he was told. He gripped his auditory fins, pressing each side of his head as he tried to block out the memory of Gale and Flynn’s screaming, and the wet, choked sounds of men with slit throats. He didn’t want to think of how Erick would react to his friends’ deaths. Would they have lived if Silas hadn’t given the enchanters a reason to attack?

“Hey, are you okay?” the senior guard asked Silas, folding her midnight blue tail to kneel in front of him. “My name is Althea. I was told your friend was hurt, but he’s getting help now.”

“No, they killed them,” Silas cried. “It’s my fault. They killed them.”

“Your friend isn’t dead, and they’re not going to die,” Althea said, trying to sound reassuring.

“Not him, the crew! The guards made them kill each other because I let Gale get hurt.”
Althea’s shoulders sunk with understanding. “It’s not your fault,” she said. “We’ve arrested the enchanters, and we’re trying to see if there are survivors now.”

Silas lifted up his head, quickly clinging onto that hope. “You think some of them survived?”

“Yes,” Althea answered. “The boat’s engine stopped, so someone must have gone below deck to turn it off. The enchanters wouldn’t have been able to reach them down there.”

“Oh.” Then Silas remembered that Flynn had gone under and stopped the engine, but he had come back on deck to cut Gale free. Unless Silas missed seeing anyone else go under, all of the fishermen had been on the deck when the enchanters began singing. Silas looked away again. He tightened his hands into fists against his arms. “I saw the man who turned off the engine. I knew him. He was trying to help us, but the enchanters…” Silas couldn’t continue the thought.

Althea leaned back in surprise. “You knew one of the humans?”

“Yeah, when I was caught by humans, he and one other man were part of the crew that caught me. I got back home because I turned their captain into a merman, and we had forgiven each other and everything, but Erick will never forgive me for letting his friends die.”

“Oh, hold on,” Althea said, bewildered. “That is a lot of stuff you’re going to have to explain more.”

“Then ask my dad!” Silas said, hiding his face behind his arms again. “He’s your boss, he knows everything.”

“My boss…?” Althea then recoiled. “Wait, you’re Ronan’s son?”

Before Silas could answer, the guards investigating the boat shouted, “Two men are still alive!”

Althea twisted around to face them. “How are they?”

“One’s scared but unharmed, it looked like,” the guard answered. “He was trying to staunch the bleeding of another man, but he jumped back when he saw me climbing the tow rope.”

“Well stay away from the deck and just keep watching in case he tries to leave.”

“And if he does?”

Althea looked at a loss for an answer. Then she faced Silas and asked, “If you knew two of those men, does that mean you can understand them?”

“Not fluently!” Silas said, panicking as he realized she would want him to translate. “I barely know any English.”

“That’s still more than any of us,” Althea said. “We need to find out what these men plan to do. Undoubtedly they will either want to get revenge or to never come back here again. If it’s the former, we’re going to have a problem if we just let them go like this.”

“What if they try to shoot me again?”

“I will go up there with you.” When Silas didn’t answer, Althea said. “If you can’t help us translate, we will have to leave those men to fend for themselves. We can’t help the injured man if needs more medical attention than what the other man can provide.”

“You can’t try to talk to them yourself?”
“I wouldn’t even know where to begin.” Althea glanced at the other guards before looking at the boat again. “Maybe someone else would have an idea, but I imagine these men won’t want to trust any of us after what just happened.” She paused, looking regretful.

Continuing to hide his face behind his arms, Silas asked, “You think they would trust me?”

“I believe you have a better chance than any of us,” Althea answered.

Silas bit his lip. He stared at the corals for a moment before he looked back up at the boat. It made him sick thinking about the dead men aboard, but the knowledge that he could help at least one man anchored him. He could fail and make things worse over and over, but he could still salvage this situation.

“Send someone to get Merise,” Silas said, getting up. “She’s a healer who lives near my house, and she’s the only one I want to trust right now.” He paused as another thought occurred to him. “Those enchanters were probably members of the Diving Peregrines.”

“The guild with people who tried to kidnap you?” Althea asked, confused. “What makes you think that?”

“They all hate humans. This is just the kind of thing they’d do to divert attention from themselves.” Silas clenched his hands by his sides, growing furious as he realized any mer with a tattoo could have climbed onto the deck and stopped the fishermen without killing them. Yet, because they were so concerned with keeping the power of their tattoos secret, they resorted to enchanting instead. “My dad needs to know about all of this as soon as possible.”

“All right.” Althea went with Silas back up to the guards around the boat. After she sent two of them to go find Merise and Ronan, she and Silas surfaced.

Silas couldn’t see much of the deck except the legs and arms of several men. He tried not to focus on the waves lapping up the blood tricking down the side of the boat. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he shouted in English, “Hello? My name is Silas. I am sorry. This… this is hurt. It is no good. I am sorry. You hurt?”

Silas dipped his nose back beneath the water to breathe as he waited for a response. The air was silent save for the sound of the water sloshing against the boat. Then he heard something moving and a stifled sob. A man retorted something, but Silas couldn’t understand him.

“I am sorry,” Silas called back, hurt by the man’s anguish. “I do not understand very English. Please, you hurt?”

“Fuck off, Silas!” the man shouted. “~~~ you ~~ ~~~~?”

“I do not understand! I help. This not…” Silas hit his fists against his forehead. “Please! I do medicine!”

Suddenly the man came to the railing, and Silas jerked back when he realized it was Eustace. When he had been punched trying to get the speargun away, he must not have been noticed laying on the deck when the enchanters began singing. His hands were slick with blood, and the white bandana he normally wore over his forehead was gone. “You can’t help!” Pointing behind himself, he shouted, “He ~~~! Flynn is ~~~! No medicine help ~~~~ you freaks fucking ~~~~!”

Silas’ eyes widened. “No!” It couldn’t have been too late already. “Not Flynn! I help, I medicine ___”
“~! He is ~!” Gesturing at all of the bodies around him, Eustace said, “~! No hurt, ~!”

“Dead?” Silas said, realizing then the meaning of the word Eustace kept repeating.

“Yes, dead!” Eustace gripped the railing again. “~? When Silas didn’t respond, he pointed at the cut nets and the dead bodies again. “~?”

It took Silas another moment to understand that he was asking why the enchanters killed everyone. “You hurt the reefs,” Silas answered, needing to use the mertongue word for reefs. He quickly turned to Althea and asked her to get him a piece of coral. Turning back to Eustace, he pointed at the net and said, “This hurt.”

Slowly, after a lot of pantomiming and struggling to define everything they could only point at, Silas managed to get Eustace to understand. Silas and the guards were just trying to protect the reefs, but four of the guards went too far. Neither Silas nor Eustace knew what they should do next. Eustace didn’t want to go back to land, and it took several more minutes for Silas to understand that it wasn’t because he couldn’t physically make the boat return. Eustace was afraid that the dockworkers would think he killed his own crewmates. Unless Silas went back with him, he wouldn’t have any witnesses to defend him.

Silas wanted to go back with him, but he feared for his own safety and knew that he would have to stand witness in the shoal’s courts to make sure the enchanters were imprisoned. If he couldn’t prove that murdering all those humans wasn’t necessary, Silas knew their trial would only fuel more hate against humans.

Since Silas couldn’t even hope to explain half of his worries about merfolk politics, he simply told Eustace that he would get Erick to help. While they waited, Eustace would have to weigh anchor and the guards would stay with him to make sure no other mers would hurt him or try to sink his boat. It wasn’t the best solution because it meant Eustace had to stay on a boat with his dead crewmates, but there was no way to care for him underwater.

Before Silas left Eustace in the guards’ care, Merise arrived and Silas helped her and the guards introduce themselves to Eustace. He certainly wouldn’t be able to hold a conversation with the little mertongue Silas had attempted to teach him, but it would help him pantomime anything he might need to ask about. Silas just hoped it would be enough.

Chapter End Notes

I wish I had written down what Eustace was actually saying here, because I’ve completely forgotten most of what the lines are standing for now. Did you all like the lines? Or would you have preferred you have understood both sides, like I did with Erick previously? I tried writing this way because I felt like it made the scene more suspenseful.

If I was J.R.R. Tolkien, I would have actually made a language system for mertongue. I want to put in so many funny bilingual things and cultural differences based on language, but it's kind of impossible to do what unless I just want to pretend French is the same as mertongue. And even then, it wouldn't be a very good fit.
Chapter 83

Chapter Notes

The update is a bit late this week because I've been helping a friend move into her new apartment all weekend. Moving boxes, unpacking, finding new furniture, cleaning, organizing... My shoulders are particularly sore right now and I'm bruised like a dalmatian all the way up and down my legs.

In this chapter, we get to see Erick again and a friend we haven't seen in a long time. :)

“Erick?” the nurse said. “You have a visitor.”

“Who?” Erick looked up from the newspaper he was reading. His breakfast sat half-finished on the rolling table beside him. The nausea medicine the doctors were giving him with his pain meds helped keep the worst of his queasiness at bay, but it was still hard to have much of an appetite when he still couldn’t look at bladed utensils of any kind without getting the urge to stab himself. He had to make do with only forks and spoons, and it was proving difficult to cut his food with only the side of his fork.

Talia poked her head around the door. Sheepish, she waved her hand. “Hey, Captain.”

Erick jumped forward. “Talia!” He then winced and put his hand over his stitches. Smiling at her despite the pain, he said, “Jesus, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?”

“And sore ribs apparently,” Talia said, coming inside. Over her shoulder, she had the bag Erick had packed to stay at Ivan’s.

“Oh, this?” Erick half-laughed, looking down. “Yeah, but I’m on the mend now.” He paused. “I assume Ivan explained what happened?”

“Yeah, but it’s still hard to believe.” Talia put down Erick’s bag at the foot of his bed. Pulling over the only chair in the room, she sat beside him. “The nurse was saying you’re lucky to be alive.”

Erick nodded. “I barely missed a major artery, I know.” He pointed at his bag, remembering that his abortion medicine was inside. “I see Ivan had you bring over my things.”

“He thought you’d want it sooner rather than later,” Talia said. “If I hadn’t come by, he was going to have a servant bring it.”

Frowning, Erick asked, “Why couldn’t he bring it himself?”

“He’s busy renovating the pool and trying to track down Adriel to make him answer for enchanting you, apparently,” she answered. “If he can’t get him to remove the enchantment on you, he said he’d kill him for hurting his family again.”

“Going after him isn’t going to help,” Erick said, pinching between his eyes. “Ivan should just let it go. I should have expected Adriel to pull this stunt. I knew there was a possibility, but I ignored it.”
“So? I don’t want to let this go either. If Ivan can find him, I want to meet this bastard so I can cut him a new pair of gills myself.”

“You can’t.” Erick thumbed a fold in his blankets, somber. “If you could have seen what Adriel’s voice can do, you would be glad you haven’t met him.” He tightened his hand around his blankets. “I let Adriel put me under for this tattoo, but he was able to knock me out with barely half a sleeping song once already. You’d have to mute him to have any chance in a fight.”

“So? We can’t just let him get away with this.” Talia held out her hand. “You’re going to go back to do something about him, right?”

“I don’t know,” Erick answered, looking away. “Silas and his father are already doing everything they can, and it’s not like I can go swimming any time soon with this.” He gestured to his chest. “If I went back, I don’t even know what else I can do. Right now the only thing I have planned is to talk to the Navy Admiral about all this. As soon as the doctors discharge me, I have to go show him what I am now to prove merpirates are a problem.”

“That can’t really be your only plan,” Talia said. “Silas looked worried sick about you the last time I saw him. Does he even know you’re on land now?”

“Yes, and Ivan’s going to meet him again at the tide pool in less than a week.” Erick glanced at his bag again, thinking of the abortion medicine. “I really wish I could go there myself, but I don’t think I’ll be well enough to make the trip there, or even just to Ivan’s estate if Ivan can bring Silas to land.”

“I guess he does still have that tank, doesn’t he?” Talia half-frowned. “Silas will probably need a bigger one if he wants to stay on land longer, though.”

“I know,” Erick said. “Ivan has a saltwater pool he’s going to make work for him.”

“Oh, that sounds nice.” Talia suddenly sat forward and grinned. “Hey, does this mean I can see your tail finally?”

“Huh? I mean, I guess it would be possible.” Erick rubbed the back of his neck, feeling awkward. The idea of her and the rest of his crew staring at his tail seemed too much like standing naked before them. Unlike his planned meeting with the Navy Admiral, it wouldn’t have a strictly impersonal context. “You didn’t get to see it already?”

“No, Ivan kicked me out of his house before I even knew what was going on,” Talia answered. “Dunley had to explain to me that you turned into a merman.”

“Right.” Erick frowned. “Silas mentioned that Ivan did that.” He continued staring at his blankets. Talia studied Erick for a moment, wondering at his downcast mood. She sensed there was something more than just his injury bothering him. “Did you and Silas talk about me a lot?”

Erick shrugged. “Only as much you’d expect. He liked hearing about everything on land.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He’s a little obsessed, to be honest.”

Perplexed, Talia asked, “Is that supposed to be a bad thing?”

“No.” Erick sighed. “Not exactly. It just makes it worse that he can’t walk on land.”
“I hadn’t thought of that.” Talia twisted a loose thread hanging off the end of her sleeve. “We’ve put the poor kid through a lot of crap. After Ivan let us actually talk to him, I felt bad realizing he really didn’t have any hard feelings.” She glanced back up at Erick. “It’s amazing to me that you seem to care so much about him now, after how much you used to hate merfolk.”

Erick nodded, quiet. “It amazes me too.” His expression softened. “He’s unlike anyone I’ve known on land.”

Talia smirked, raising her eyebrow. “You make it sound like you’ve got a crush on him.” When Erick immediately blushed, her mouth dropped. “Oh my God. You do?”

Erick grabbed his pillow and buried his face in its starched fabric.

“Holy shit, Erick. I thought he seemed like your type, but a fish boy? Is he even old enough for you?”

“Shut up!” Erick lifted his face away from the pillow, but continued hiding behind it. “He’s eighteen, but I don’t want to like him.”

“Why?” Talia scooted her chair closer. “Is he not gay too?”

“No, he likes me—”

“What?” Talia exclaimed. “Then what the hell is the problem?”

“He’s a merman!”

“Aren’t you one too now?”

“Yeah, but I care about him more than just somebody I’d pick up at a bar.” Erick lowered his pillow to hug it. “I don’t want to fuck up what I have with him now. None of my serious relationships have ever worked out. I don’t want to lose him.”

“It sounds like you’re more likely to lose him if you don’t tell him how you feel, especially if he already likes you back,” Talia said. “How do you even know he likes you?”

“It was the stupid blood binding,” Erick answered. “It’s only supposed to work for lovers.”

“Seriously?” Talia leaned back, surprised. “Ivan didn’t tell us that.”

“Then he had the tact to not make a big deal about it.”

“But it is!” Then her eyes widened. “Wait, so does that mean Ivan knows you’re bi now?” Reluctantly, Erick answered, “Yes. It turns out I was worried about nothing.”

“Shouldn’t you be glad about that?”

“I should, but it’s hard to get over how many years I hated myself because of it.”

“I guess.” Talia considered it. “Are you going to tell the others?”

“I don’t know. There’s no point unless I tell them about Silas, but I still don’t want to do that.”

“Why?”
“Because I don’t want to live underwater,” Erick said, becoming short with her. “And I don’t want to make him live in a fish tank just to be with me.” Mentally, he added that if he did tell Silas his feelings, he figured he really would have to go through with his pregnancy. He couldn’t claim to love him and not be willing to have the child he wanted.

“But if Silas wants to live in a tank, does it really matter?” Talia asked. “You shouldn’t give up just because you’re afraid of losing him.”

“Would you still have said that if you knew you’d lose Jonathan?” Erick retorted, referring to her late husband who was lost to the sea during a storm.

Talia’s expression grew icy. “Yes. And you’re a fool to compare his death to being rejected.” She turned away, moving her legs as if getting ready to leave.

Erick’s heart fell to the pit of his stomach. “Talia, wait! Don’t leave.” He put down his pillow, but gripped its edges. “Please. I’m just a wreck right now and I know it, but I don’t want to be alone again.”

Talia turned back, startled by his distress. “Okay, jeez.” She gave him a sympathetic look. “I’m not going anywhere. I just got here.”

“Oh.” Erick felt silly then for freaking out.

“Yeah. So… Do you want to tell me about what it was like being underwater?”

Erick smiled somewhat, glad for the change in subject. “Sure.”

Chapter End Notes

I love teasing Erick so much through Talia. She’s basically how I act towards my sister -- kind of mean, but mutually understood to be helpful.
Chapter 84

Chapter Notes

I got one week left before I start grad school, and let me tell ya, I am just a stack of cats in a blouse pretending I'm ready for it. My favorite coping mechanism is writing, though, which means I wrote stuff! But not more stuff for this story, technically.

So you remember way back when I said I was considering writing an alternate timeline of what would happen if Silas had become human instead of Erick turning into a merman? Yeah, I started that. I'm already five chapters into it and trying to decide if I wanna make a buffer for it before posting them or just post them as I come up with stuff. This alternate timeline will NOT wrap up nicely. If it doesn't end in tragedy, it probably won't actually end anywhere. (But then again, neither is Going Off the Deep End, so... :/ ) But regardless, I'm having fun with it and I'm sure you people would enjoy seeing Silas with legs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Here he is," an infirmary guard said to Silas as he brought him to Gale’s bed. “He’s been given the okay to go back home because his mother is a healer, but he’ll still need lots of bedrest. You both should also keep an eye on that wound to make sure it doesn’t get infected.”

Silas nodded. “I understand.” The guards’ infirmary was Silas’ second stop that afternoon after he left Eustace. He had first gone to talk to his father in his office, but Ronan could do little to reassure Silas. The paperwork to process the four enchanters who had been arrested still needed to be processed and Kaui needed his help to come up with a public statement to address the disaster. All Silas could do now was make sure Gale was all right.

Shamefaced and gripping his fingers, Silas swam up beside his friend. “How are you feeling?”

“Awful, but that’s to be expected,” Gale answered, turning to get up. He avoided bending too much at the waist so not to aggravate his stitches. “They told me the enchanters are being detained when they questioned me about what happened.” He went quiet for a moment, debating whether or not to tell off Silas for yet again putting them in danger. He then decided against it with a sigh. Not looking up, he asked, “Have you been able to talk to your dad yet?”

Silas faced his hands. “Yeah, for a little bit, but he doesn’t really know what to do yet either. Eustace survived, so we have to worry about him and what to do with the enchanters now on top of everything else.”

“Well, it’s still a miracle at least.” Gale nodded soberly. “They’re probably going to use my testimony to defend those sharks. Even if Eustace and that other guy were willing to listen, one of those men did shoot me.”

“But if they bring you to court as a witness, you can tell them that killing all the crew like that wasn’t necessary. We can’t let them go free.”

“I know, but realistically I know that it’ll be hard to make any jury sympathetic to humans after what they did to the reef fields.” Gale gripped the side of his bed. “Killing the humans was
probably too much, but I can understand wanting to send them all to the abyss.”

“But they really didn’t know their nets were causing that much damage.”

“So? That they didn’t know is beside the point.” Gale shook his head. “I don’t want to fight about this, so can we just go home now?”

Sillas glanced over at Gale, noticing how he looked worn-out in a way that wasn’t just because he got harpooned. “Okay. I had Merise check on Eustace and see if she could do anything to help, but she might be back home already. I want to ask her what she thinks about all this.”

“She’ll just say it’s a tragedy or some shit,” Gale said, pushing himself off his bed. “After she sees all those dead people, she’s not going to want to talk about it.” He put his arm over Sillas’ shoulders to let him do the swimming for him. More quietly, Gale added, “All that blood is going to remind her of what happened to my dad.”

“Oh.” Sillas went quiet as he remembered, feeling guilty knowing that his death was no doubt weighing heavily on Gale’s mind too.

Gale’s father had died while hunting migrating stingrays. His hunting party had caught more stingrays than they could handle in one net, so his father ended up falling into the thrashing fever. Their venomous, barbed tails had cut him all across his body. As his hunting party rushed to get him back to the shoal for treatment, the hammerhead sharks that always follow the stingrays were drawn to his blood and attacked the party. Gale’s father died from the stingray venom before they made it back to the shoal. Another man died shortly after the party finally made it back home because of his injuries from the shark. Though hunting deaths like theirs were uncommon, accidents in the open ocean were inevitable. It was why merfolk always traveled in groups when they left the shoal. A mer traveling alone was an easy target for sharks.

When they returned to Gale’s house, they found that Merise wasn’t back home yet despite the late hour.

“She’s probably at Kazima’s shrine to pray for the dead,” Gale said as he swam into his bed alcove. He turned back around to fold his arms over the edge and faced Sillas in the living room. “Either that or she’s staying with Eustace to keep him company. I doubt she’s going to sleep at all tonight.”

“Do you want me to stay here until she comes back?” Sillas asked.

“If you have nothing else to do, sure. You can help me keep my mind off my stitches.” A bit ruefully, he added, “I don’t know how Erick was able to stand all the stitches he got. It was so freaky seeing my own stomach patched up like that.”

Sillas smiled lightly. “Really? But you’ve stitched up plenty of other people.”

“Yeah, but it’s different when it’s on yourself,” Gale said. “It’s easy to tell other people how to take care of themselves, but it’s hard being on the other end.”

Sillas hummed in acknowledgement, though he disagreed somewhat. If his experience with Erick had taught him anything so far, it was that Erick was the expert when it came to his own problems. All Sillas could do was listen and hope he could echo back whatever Erick needed to hear himself say.

***

“Oh, Gods…” The following day after he helped Gale back home, Sillas faltered as he swam over
the shoal. He had been on his way to check on Eustace, but a massive crowd had gathered outside of the guard station. The people’s angry shouting and raised fists agitated the water, making streams of bubbles surge up with their voices.

“Do something about the humans!” one strident voice called.

“Where were you?” others called.

“Why didn’t you stop them?”

“Kill the humans!”

“People, please!” Ronan shouted from the front of the station. He had taken off his helmet and held it under his arm. The crowd surrounded him and people swam above each other to be seen, creating a wall of screaming faces. “We are doing everything in our power—”

“Sink the monsters’ ship!”

“How can you want to protect them?”

“Someone could have been killed!”

Louder, Ronan continued, “To protect you, the people of Peleran. I know yesterday’s events are frightening, but—”

“What will happen to our homes?”

“Give up the sharks who wrecked our reefs!”

“I assure you,” Ronan said, holding out his hand, “we are not in any more immediate danger. Please return to your homes—”

“Let the enchanters free!”

“Finish what they started!”

“Whose side are you on?”

Another guard shoved his way through the crowd with a panicked expression and quickly spoke with his hand cupped around Ronan’s auditory fin. Ronan blanched. He sent the guard inside the station, then two other guards came back out with him. Without another word to the crowd as the two guards from the station tried to take over, Ronan and the messenger rushed away.

Silas darted after them. “Dad!” he called. “What is going on? Why is everyone so mad?”

“Dammit, Silas, go back home!” Ronan snapped, not stopping. “It’s because of the reefs. You were there!”

“Yeah, but—”

Ronan spun around. “I said go home! Nobody’s happy with me right now, and I don’t need anyone taking it out on you. I can’t talk right now because Kaui needs help addressing the mob outside his palace.”

“Those people were talking about killing Eustace!”
“I know, and I have all the guards I can spare trying to protect his ship, but I have to go.”

“Wait, people are attacking him right now?”

“Silas, you—Wait!” Ronan started after his son, but stopped himself and swore. “You can’t help him!”

Silas ignored his father as he sprinted to Eustace’s ship.

Turning to the guard beside him, Ronan said, “Go after him and make sure he doesn’t get hurt.”

He gave his son one last pained look before he continued to Kauí’s palace.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know in the comments how you want to see the alternate timeline get posted! I can post what I have now all at once, or I can post them with the weekly updates until I run out of content.
We reached 425 kudos! We get more of Silas this time, and Monday we’ll see how Erick's doing while all of this is going on. I hope with all of the jumping back and forth that you can still follow the plot, but I've specifically spaced everything out like this because these threads are happening concurrently.

Also, for those of you still interested in the alternate timeline, writing there is still going strong. My plan is to post the first three chapters as soon as I tidy up the first two chapters. They are the same for both timelines, but there is a lot I want to revise and I might as well start the alternate timeline with a fresh beginning rather than just where it diverges (chapter three). After the first three go up, I'll continue updating it on the same schedule as this story until I run out of material. Then it'll just be whenever I get finished with them.

When Eustace’s boat came into view, Silas faltered for a moment at the sight before speeding up again. At least three dozen mers had crowded around each side of Eustace’s boat, pushing on the hull and pulling on the tow chains back and forth. The deck pitched closer to the waves with every turn. The outnumbered guards tried to pull away and restrain the rebelling mers, but as they couldn’t draw their swords against civilians, their orders had no weight.

“Stop!” Silas shouted a short distance away. “Leave him alone!” The guard his father sent after him grabbed Silas’ arm, but the sight had already made Silas freeze.

The water continued rolling higher and higher each side of the boat. The rocking seemed to slow between each turn as it tipped farther. The crowd started calling heave ho, timing their assault. The boat tilted impossibly high, paused, rolled back down, and tilted up again. Mers lept out of the water to grab the railings on the lower side before it swung back. More moved from the other side to pull on their tails. The boat seemed to strain against their weight.

A tarp slid off the deck as the boat flipped over entirely. The crowd cheered. Buckets, ropes, and weights toppled down into the water and began sinking as spare floaters bobbed up to the surface beside the capsized boat. Mers grabbed the tarp to pull it aside, but then there was shouting, shocked cursing. Many balked and swam away.

Silas covered his mouth with both hands.

The bodies of Eustace’s crewmates had been covered by the tarp. Their death-frozen limbs hardly moved as the air trapped in their lungs brought their bodies back to the surface. They hung from the waves, tangled with ropes and floaters. Their bloodless faces and closed eyes stared at the mers who toppled them from their ship. Dark stains covered their shirts, but the skin around their slit throats had been carefully wiped clean.

The guards used the crowd’s horror to make them disperse. Who could hold their rage in the face of dead bodies and the rusted scent of blood? Even those willing to fight the guards wouldn’t stay for the inevitable arrival of sharks. They had accomplished what they came for.
Silas snapped out of his shock when he realized he didn’t see Eustace. He looked over the deck of the capsized boat. The grate to go below deck was fastened shut. Floaters crowded in front of the windows around the helm. Then Silas noticed legs kicking behind the windows as water filled the room.

“Eustace!” Silas darted to the boat, but the guard his father sent cut him off.

“You can’t go over there!”

“Yes I can,” Silas retorted. “I’m trying to help Eustace. He’s going to drown if we don’t get him out of there!”

The guard was about to continue arguing with him, but Althea saw their confrontation and shouted, “Let him through! That’s Silas.”

Before his father’s guard could stop him, Silas hurried ahead and silently thanked the gods that Althea had stayed with Eustace’s boat. As the other guards continued herding away the mers who had flipped the boat, Silas continued to the helm.

Other guards had already broken a window to try to get Eustace out of the helm room, but Eustace held onto the base of the wheel and kicked at the guards reaching to help him. His head stayed above in the small pocket of air left at the floor-turned-ceiling.

Althea came to the helm as Silas arrived. To her fellow guards, she called, “Get back! You’re just scaring him.”

“But he—”

“He doesn’t know you’re not trying to kill him too.” Althea pointed to Silas. “He trusts Silas, so let him through.”

Somewhat apprehensive for Silas’ safety, the guards moved aside and warned him of the broken glass still lodged in the window frame.

Silas cautiously swam through the opening. “Eustace?” He tried swimming a bit closer, but Eustace tightened his grip on the wheel’s base and kicked at Silas. He shouted something, but his words were muffled as his voice traveled from the trapped air into the water.

“He can’t recognize me,” Silas said to himself, suddenly realizing the water’s surface was obscuring his face as well as his words. He quickly swam up, keeping to the corner away from Eustace, and wiped his hair out of his eyes. There was hardly enough air for him to even lift his chin out of the water. “Eustace, it’s me, Silas.” He held out his hand. “I no hurt.”

Eustace’s eyes widened in recognition, but he turned away and shook his head. “I can’t,” he said, clutching the wheel. His shoulders were taut still with terror.

“Yes you can.” Silas swam closer. “I am sorry this hurt.” He pointed to Eustace and gestured diving down to get back out. “I help. Please?”

Eustace barely looked at Silas and stubbornly shook his head. “No.” His voice trembled. “I can’t, ~~~~ ~~~ ~~~.”

“Eustace…” Silas stared at him, wishing he had the words to help him.

Althea poked her head back into the helm room and called up to Silas, “Another boat is headed this
way.”

Silas dipped his head back under to face her. “You’re serious?” he asked, aghast at the thought of another trawling net going through the reefs.

“It’s not a fishing vessel,” Althea quickly answered, “but we think it saw this boat get flipped over.”

“So they’re coming to help?” Silas puzzled over that, wondering why humans would deviate from their course at the risk of getting their own boat flipped over.

“To help or at least investigate what happened,” Althea said. “It might be a rescue boat since Eustace’s boat didn’t return home yesterday. Either way, they can get Eustace back to shore. He can’t stay out here anymore.”

“But what about his crewmates?”

“I imagine they can take their bodies back as well, but we all should clear out before they arrive. I don’t want anyone else to get harpooned.”

Silas frowned at that possibility, glancing back at Eustace. He knew Eustace’s freedom would still be at risk if he couldn’t prove merfolk were to blame for his crewmates’ deaths. A flipped boat wouldn’t explain their knife wounds, unless Eustace could make them think they were being killed now. Yet Silas knew that was a slim possibility, and not a lie he wanted to spread among humans. Facing Althea again, he asked, “Can you get the crew’s bodies back out of the water?”

“I think so, but why?” Althea asked. “We would be seen.”

“I know. The humans on that boat need to know we’re real if they’re to believe Eustace is innocent, and if they see us caring for the dead, they will also know we’re not all monsters. When you get them all out, cover their bodies again so Eustace doesn’t have to see them.” Silas looked back at Eustace, noting how he was now staring anxiously at him and Althea. “We also need to get an enchanter here to prove that enchanting is possible. Do you think you can do all that? I’m going to stay with Eustace until the boat arrives.”

His answer gave Althea pause. “I think so, but are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Yes. I’m not about to just abandon him again. He’s been through enough already on his own.”

Althea seemed like she wanted to press the issue, but instead sighed. “Very well. We will try to be quick.”

“Thank you.” Silas surfaced again to face Eustace. The surviving human had seemed to have calmed down somewhat, but still very much seemed like he did not want to go back underwater. “It’ll be okay,” Silas said in mertongue, hoping his tone would convey his meaning better than his broken English. “The guards chased off those crazy people. We’ll get you back home soon.”

Althea returned to tell Silas that the crew’s bodies were all back on the boat’s hull. After she left again, Silas held out his hand to Eustace. “I help. Please?”

Eustace stared at Silas’ hand. For a moment Silas worried he wouldn’t accept his help, but then Eustace reluctantly let go of the wheel’s base to take his hand. He took a deep breath and ducked his head under the water. Silas pulled him down to lead him out through the broken window. Eustace simply held onto Silas’ hand as the merman’s strong tail pushed them back up to the surface.
Gasping, Eustace quickly grabbed onto the boat’s hull. His mouth remained open as he noticed the guards had pulled the tarp back over the bodies of his crewmates.

Silas pointed to the boat approaching behind Eustace. “This help?” he asked. They were near enough to just make out the surprised and concerned faces of the men gathered around the bow.

“How?” Eustace turned away from his crewmates. He jerked back in surprise. “~ ~~~~~~~~ ~~~~?” He turned back to the boat to try to climb up it, but the hull was too slick for him to get a good grip.

Silas dove back under to grab his feet and push him up. Eustace yelped at the sudden assistance and nearly kicked Silas in the face, but he managed to get on top of the hull and stand up. He waved his arms at the incoming boat, shouting to make sure they saw him. A wave rocked his boat, nearly making him fall over, but Eustace held his footing.

Silas smiled somewhat, glad for his rescue but worried about what the other humans would think of him. Would they understand that merfolk were neither inherently good or bad, just like themselves? Or would seeing a good merman make them not believe bad mermen attacked Eustace’s crew?

Despite his worries, Silas stayed on the hull and kept his gills wet with his tail, trying not to splash Eustace. When the rescue boat lowered down a life raft and began rowing to them, Silas slid down into the water to his shoulders. None of the men on the rescue boat seemed to be armed, but he wanted to be ready to run in case any of them tried to attack him.

The rescuers also looked wary of Silas as they neared Eustace’s boat. The humans introduced themselves, and Eustace gestured to Silas as he tried to explain what happened. Though Silas didn’t understand most of what they said, he spoke when Eustace asked him to try to back him up.

After a few minutes, Althea surfaced with another mermaid and introduced her to Silas, telling him that she knew hunting songs. Their appearance had unnerved Eustace and the other humans, but once Silas explained who they were, he had the enchanter make one of the men stand up against his will to demonstrate the power of siren singing. Naturally it had terrified all of the men, but after Silas managed to make them calm down again, he had the enchanter make the rest of the men do small things like lift up their arms or cover their face to prove to each of them how easy it was for merfolk to control humans.

Though the rescuers still didn’t seem to know what to think about the whole situation, they helped Eustace onto their life raft. Silas knew it would be a bad idea for them to come back to the shoal any time soon, so he told Eustace to get Erick’s help. There was nothing more Silas could do for him now.

Silas went back underwater after the rescue raft took Eustace back to their boat. Watching the surface, he waited until Eustace and the bodies of his crewmates were all safely aboard the rescue boat before he turned to swim back to the shoal.
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

Here's today's (late) update! I just started my grad school orientation, so I got sidetracked with all of the new info I'm needing to learn. I'll probably end up posting next week's chapter late as well, but I'll do my best to at least get it up before Monday rather than after.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Erick counted off his worry beads with his thumb, staring absentmindedly at a small crack above the door to his room. The nurses had let him put on pants underneath his hospital gown, but it was a negligible comfort considering how often he increasingly found himself needing to visit the restroom. It was yet another symptom that could have been remedied by the abortion medicine waiting not two feet from his bed. It was still tucked away in his belt pouch, pushed to the bottom of his bag. The nurses didn’t know he had it. Erick had been avoiding thinking about it. He wouldn’t even let himself look at his bag. Instead he focused on the polished surface of his worry beads and continued counting them as he took deep, even breaths to strengthen his healing lung.

He had spent most of yesterday resting, but Talia had visited him again and brought Dunley. Neither of them had heard anything from Eustace or Flynn for the past three days, and Dunley’s coworkers at the docks told him that their trawling boat hadn’t returned yet. No one knew where it went. There hadn’t been any storms, and there was no reason to suspect pirates. Erick tried to reassure them that the two bachelors were probably caught up with their usual antics, considering they had a penchant for gambling and dumb dares, but Erick knew this situation didn’t seem like the kind of trouble they usually got into. If he hadn’t been in the hospital, Erick would have gone out looking for them. Yet as it were, he had to continue staying in bed for at least one more day, according to the nurse who had checked on him earlier that morning.

When Erick heard a knock at his door, he assumed the nurse was bringing him lunch. Instead, the nurse stepped aside to reveal Ivan and two police officers.

“What’s this?” Erick asked, immediately sitting up straighter to face his uncle. “Ivan, why are you here with the police?”

“You’re not in any trouble,” Ivan assured him, though his expression was grave. “These gentlemen just want to ask you some questions about merfolk. Seeing as they came to my estate to find you, I thought it prudent for me to join this discussion.”

“Why?” Erick turned his attention to the two officers. “Did something happen?” With dread, he then recognized the officers because of his long history with public intoxication and assault. The stouter of the two policemen, Officer Perry, had frequently carted him off to Anvil Point’s jail.

“Yes indeed, something happened,” Officer Perry answered tersely, putting his thumbs through his belt loops. “Six men are dead and our prime suspect is trying to blame your favorite monster, mermaids. He told Officer Perkins and I that you would have answers, but I hardly think your obsession with ‘fish freaks’ should constitute any kind of expertise. Nevertheless, we would be
accused of neglecting our duty if we didn’t come question you.”

Bewildered and offended, Erick gaped at them for a moment before he recomposed himself. “Who is this prime suspect?”

“Eustace Moore,” Officer Perry said. “He told us he was one of your former deckhands, and that you supposedly had turned into a merman about a month ago. He claims that while he was out on sea three days ago, mermaids made his fishing crew kill each other with some kind of magical song. The coast guard picked him up yesterday after they claimed to have also seen mermaids flip over his boat and talked to a friendly one about it all.

“Had the coast guard not collaborated with Moore’s story about these mermaids being real, I would have simply written him off as a loony and left it at that,” Officer Perry continued. “However, I’ve never had reason to doubt their judgement before, so I’m willing to give you a chance to try to prove they’re not all going crazy. If you can’t give me any evidence that mermaids are real, I’m going to ask the judge to dismiss their witness statements.”

“God,” Erick muttered, holding his temples. “They’re not crazy, but I don’t understand why merfolk would attack humans like that. There are merpirates who sink ships, but they use shifting to have legs like me and attack them directly because merfolk aren’t allowed to enchant people.”

“Say what now?” Officer Perry said, moving aside as the nurse came back into Erick’s room with additional chairs. He took one of them and sat down beside Erick’s bed. The other officer remained standing. “What is shifting and how is that related to any of this?”

“It’s how merfolk can walk on land,” Erick said. “Like enchanting, it’s just another way they use magic.” As best he could, he explained how glyphs and siren singing worked, the basics of how he became a merman, and that he had made a deal with merpirates to get back home. He also told them about how he was in the hospital because of the enchantment on himself, and that the song used to control his actions was related to the ones used against Eustace’s crew. When he finished his story, he said, “Since it sounds like the mers who killed Eustace’s crew used siren singing, they have to be in some kind of trouble.”

“If they’re not in trouble with their own kind, they would certainly within our rights to arrest them for murder,” Officer Perry said. “But that’s only if we can identify these mermaids and actually bring them to land. As the situation still stands, your funny-shaped ears and teeth aren’t enough for me to believe you can actually breathe underwater now. What’s more, even if you can prove this shifting thing is possible, that doesn’t actually prove mermaids killed Moore’s crew. You would need to provide other witnesses of the attack to explain why all this happened.”

“Of course,” Erick muttered. He faced his blankets, feeling more and more overwhelmed. “Where is Eustace now then? In jail?”

“Yes,” Officer Perry said. “You are free to visit him if you want to question him yourself before his arraignment.”

“I’m going to have to.” Erick glanced over at Ivan. “Or you will, considering I can’t leave here yet. None of this is making a lot of sense to me right now.”

“I will go see him as soon as we’re done here today,” Ivan said. “By the sounds of things, he may need better legal counsel than what the court can provide him.”

“Right, I didn’t even think of that.” Erick frowned. “He’ll need a good lawyer even if Silas can help us find out who did this.” He looked back at Officer Perry. “Silas is a merman I trust, and his
father is basically the chief of police for their city. I’m sure you can coordinate something with him to get this all figured out.”

“If you can actually arrange such a meeting, we would be more than happy to try working with him,” Officer Perry said. “I imagine we’d be the first officers ever to collaborate with fish.”

“Well, technically you are already,” Erick said. “And there have probably been cases in the northeast already because humans and merfolk interact more up there.”

“Don’t give me lip,” Officer Perry said, pointing at Erick. “You don’t count until I see your fish tail.”

Erick couldn’t help but chuckle at that, but he tried to pass it off as a cough. As much as he disliked his interactions with Officer Perry, the ridiculousness of the situation had briefly outweighed his worry for Eustace. “All right then. I’ll be sure to invite you when I show it off to the Navy Admiral. I had planned to tell him first about merfolk so he could do something about merpirates, but I guess we’re letting the cat out of the bag now.”

“If you invite me, you might as well invite the rest of the force,” Officer Perry said. “If we’re to expect more business with mermaids, you ought to teach all of us about this drunkard tale.”

Though the prospect of speaking to so many people intimidated Erick, he agreed that it was probably a good idea. The officers didn’t have any other questions, so he and Ivan bid them good day. Ivan sat back down beside Erick’s bed.

“So, we are planning to make a freak show out of you after all?” Ivan asked, furrowing his brow in concern. “You do realize putting yourself on display for all of them is going to garner attention from the press as well, don’t you?”

“I know.” Erick faced his hands. “I don’t really see any way around it, though. With merpirates still killing sailors and now this, people need to know merfolk exist. They need to know so they can protect themselves, but if we can also get some positive communication between both sides, we’ll have a lot better chance of getting everyone tattoos and making that world you’re hoping for.”

“I suppose that is true.” After a moment, Ivan smiled sadly, bowing his head. “You’ve grown up so much. Hearing you talk this way now makes me regret all the more how much you could have done with your life before, had I not set you against merfolk.”

Taken aback, Erick looked up. “Ivan, don’t say stuff like that.” He tightened his fingers around his blankets. “I would have been a troublemaker even without hating merfolk, and it doesn’t matter that I wasted all that time. I’m making up for it now.”

“Yes, well I still feel like I have plenty to make up for too.” Ivan stood up. “I will go see what I can do for your friend now. I’m also still trying to track down Adriel for you. If Eustace is indeed innocent and we can pin the murders of his crewmates on enchanting, we will have legal precedent to charge Adriel for attempting to murder you.”

“Is there really a point to have police try to arrest him here if Ronan can do the same in Peleran?”

“There might not, but I want that man hanged,” Ivan said. “And if we have him tried in the courts here, can prove to the public that your stay in the hospital was not your fault.” He headed to the door. “You will have to start thinking more about your reputation if you’re going to let yourself become public figure. I may be retired now, but I haven’t forgotten how ruthless the press can be.”

Erick mentally cringed at the thought. He had always hated Ivan’s insistence on putting up
respectable appearances because he never had much reason to care before, but he knew Ivan was right to worry about that now. He couldn’t expect anyone to listen to him if everyone still only saw him as a belligerent drunk. He hoped his history wouldn’t get too much in the way of what he would have to say.

Chapter End Notes

As I continue working on the alternate timeline, what fluffy scenes would you like to see between Erick and Silas? I'm putting so many more cute things into this version of the story since the merpirates aren't really a thing anymore, so I figure I might as well go full-on slice of life/mushy rom-com if I can. Pretty much everything revolves around Silas being utterly baffled by things on land, and Erick consequently being bemused by his confusion. Their time period is around the early to mid 1900s, so no phones or TVs, but radios could be a thing. Send me all of your ideas.
Chapter 87

Chapter Notes

As expected, this chapter is a bit late because I just started grad school. I am also a GTA, so it's going to be interesting, to say the least, balancing my courses with teaching. Wish me luck on not perishing before the end of the semester. I have roughly four month's worth of buffer, so hopefully I won't burn through all of it before winter break. (There are chapters I need to revise before they go up, however, so we'll see if those go up on time or not).

Erick dropped his bag on his bed at Ivan’s estate and let his hands fall to his sides. The walk upstairs had left him winded since his lung was still healing, but he was thankful he had been able to walk on his own at all after spending five nights and four days at the hospital. He would only have to wait two more days before he would be able to see Silas again.

The driver who picked up Erick had told him Ivan was busy sorting out the situation with Eustace, so Erick had Ivan’s estate to himself until at least dinnertime. His servants were still at Erick’s disposal, but Erick had never liked bossing them around.

Since Erick didn’t want to spend any more time alone in his room with his bag, he made his way back downstairs and headed down to the natatorium. He wasn’t sure if Ivan had begun renovating the space yet, but dipping his feet in the water sounded like it would do him some good.

Erick breathed deeply in the salty, humid air of the natatorium. Two rows of skylights clouded over with condensation illuminated the long pool and lounge chairs that had been stacked and pushed aside to one side of the room. Normally dividers floated across the pool’s surface, but they were rolled away. Erick did a double-take when he looked into the water.

The previously pristine white floor of the pool had been covered with sand. Pillars of live rock stood in the center of the shallow side of pool and along its walls. At the deep end against one corner, a sheet of blue canvas was anchored between the pool’s edge and the bottom, creating a tent over a bed of sea sponges.

Shaking his head with a smile, Erick silently thanked his uncle. He had no idea how Ivan managed to redecorate the pool entirely in only four days, but he supposed getting rocks and sand couldn’t have been that hard. Ivan likely had plans to decorate it more lavishly, perhaps even to add live corals or sea anemones.

At the steps into the water, Erick leaned on the handrail to pull off his shoes and socks and roll up his pants. He stepped down to the second step and sighed in contentment. The water was noticeably warmer than the ocean, but it still felt like a salve on his skin. He sat down at the edge of the water, folding his elbow over the lower bar of the handrail. The water lapped at his shins. Erick dipped in his fingers and made little circles of waves. The urge to dive under tugged at him, calling like a siren song, but he swallowed back the instinct and reminded himself that he wasn’t supposed to swim with his stitches. The exercise wouldn’t be good for him, and his lung likely wasn’t strong enough yet to handle the pressure of diving.

Yet as Erick continued sitting, the call to go underwater nettled him more insistently. It fascinated
him in a morbid way, that his closed gills and hidden scales could have so much influence over
him. He wondered sardonically if part of it was due to his pregnancy hormones, and his musing on
urges reminded him of how dependent he used to be on alcohol, though he knew he still hadn’t
entirely broken out of it. He had only been completely sober for about two months now, and more
than half of that time was due to the fact that he hadn’t been given access to alcohol at all while
underwater. Had it not been for Silas’ insistence that he remain sober after he found out about
caviar cocktails, he would have already broken his record. He hadn’t gotten blackout drunk in over
five months, however, which struck him as surprising considering it had gotten to being nearly a
weekly occurrence before he had decided to hunt merfolk on The Gentian.

After several minutes musing over what was mer instincts or his own feelings, Erick supposed it
wouldn’t do any harm if he stripped down to his underwear and sat on the steps. He unbuttoned his
shirt and set it aside with his shoes, then stood up to shed his pants.

Erick walked down into the water. He let the little waves lap over his waist and he swept his arms
over the surface. He dug his toes into the sand, enjoying how it cushioned the balls of his feet. As
he sat back down on the steps, it occurred to him that if he stayed in the shallows, the pressure of
the water surely couldn’t be an issue. He experimentally slid down to sit on a lower step, letting the
water come up to his collarbone. His body felt weightless because of the air still in his chest and
the buoyancy of the saltwater. He continued taking deep, even breaths, carefully watching the
stitches on his chest to make sure he didn’t start bleeding. His stitches held, and the water soothed
his inflamed skin.

Erick wondered then how he was supposed to regain his tail. Was it as simple as submerging his
whole body? Or would he have to fill his lungs with saltwater to make his gills reopen? The
thought of intentionally breathing in water unnerved him. His human fear of drowning fought
against his merfolk instinct to return to his element. Logically, Erick figured the transformation
would be as simple as it was when he regained his legs. It would be an unpleasant sensation, but
probably last only briefly. The only other question he didn’t know was what would happen to his
underwear if he attempted to transform back while wearing them. Would they get pushed off, or
would they be caught under his scales? Erick shivered at the thought of them fusing into his tail.

Eventually, curiosity got the better of Erick. He slipped off his underwear and laid them flat at the
edge of the pool, then he leaned back to plunge his head underwater.

He held his breath, opening his eyes to look at the live rocks underwater and his legs floating in
front of him. The light from the skylights filtered through the water and rippled across the pool
door. It hardly looked anything at all like the shoal. The live rocks were devoid of coral and sea
creatures, and the bright sunlight was nearly blinding in comparison to the glow of algae lamps.
Yet still, the scene was enough to make him momentarily forget his human need for air. He
exhaled.

His breath bubbled in front of him, and Erick grabbed the handrail as he let himself breathe in. The
water burned his nose and he coughed. More air escaped his lungs as water rushed to fill the open
space. He was about to pull himself back out of the pool, but then he felt his gills unfurl from his
ribs and spasm with his coughing. His legs then went rigid as they pulled together like lodestones.
His bones bent and stretched like rubber, his muscles writhing as they reknit themselves. His scales
budded like goosebumps and smoothed out, coating his tail in brilliant cerulean.

Erick went limp after his transformation. He let himself sink down into shallows and leaned back
his head against the bottom step of the pool. Panting, trying to even out his breaths, he closed his
eyes. The water smelled aseptic, like concrete rather than seaweed. Erick supposed he should have
expected as much, though he hadn’t ever really noticed the scent of things underwater. As his
hearthrate came back down, he let his hands rest in the sand on either side of himself. He dumbly marveled at how much better his chest felt now that his gills were working again. The constant ache and the disconcerting pulling sensation of his lung moving against his stitches had faded nearly completely. Rather than hurt him, the weight of the water only helped make him feel safer.

After a minute, Erick opened his eyes again and sat up to swim around the pool. He barely needed to flick his tailfin to glide over the sand and inspect the live rock around the pool. Finding that the rocks were only anchored by their weight in the sand, Erick twisted and shifted many of the pillars, arranging them more to his liking. He wished he had other stones or coral to decorate the pool more. A little treasure chest filled with gold coins would have looked particularly nice nestled in the live rock arranged in the center of the pool’s shallow end, and Erick imagined that Silas would enjoy putting his salvaged trinkets in it.

When he swam down to the deep end of the pool to inspect the sponges under the blue canvas tent, Erick frowned. Though the tent offered some privacy since it blocked the view of onlookers from the surface, it hardly felt like a secure spot to sleep since one side was left completely open. There wasn’t much inside to make it very comfortable either, as there weren’t any pillows on the sponge bed or any kind of light source. Erick swam into the tent and ran his hand over the sponges, testing their softness. They were just bath sponges that had been stitched together, and they felt more porous than the ones at Silas’ house. Erick supposed that merfolk probably used magic to make their sponge beds one solid, dense piece. It occurred to him then that Ivan had made the bed of sponges wide enough for two mers to lay down side by side. Blushing furiously, Erick sat against the wall and pressed his palms over his eyes. He then sighed and pushed his fingers up through his hair.

“Dammit, Ivan,” Erick muttered. “You’re not seriously trying to play matchmaker, are you?” Erick turned away from the wall to let himself float down onto the sponges. It wasn’t quite long enough for the entire length of his tail, so his tailfin poked out at the end. “I guess old habits are hard to break.”

Erick stared up at the softly rippling canvas of the tent, reminiscing on all the dates Ivan had tried setting up for him with the daughters of his business partners. His uncle always had good intentions, even though the dinners he had set up almost always had been unbearably awkward. There were a few instances where the dates had led to heated activities in his apartment, but those were the women he least wanted to remember.

Turning onto his side, Erick folded his arm under his head and pushed his attention back to the pool. He wondered if Ivan would be able to build a proper bed alcove rather than just a tent. It would probably have to be sculpted out of plaster, but he imagined it couldn’t be too difficult. As for making the space more comfortable, Erick assumed that Silas would be able to get a better sponge mattress and pillows at the market chasm. Adding some algae lamps would certainly make it feel homier too.

The thought made Erick pause. The pool was supposed to be for Silas, and yet he was fretting around like he was the one going to move into it.

Erick groaned. It was getting to be harder and harder for him to understand what his body was doing to him. Between his merfolk biology and pregnancy symptoms, he had no idea how much of him was even still human anymore. Thinking of his attraction to both sexes, he wondered blandly if he was ever fully human to begin with, and if the blood binding just awakened some dormant scales under his skin. If his blood had been cursed all along, it could explain his issues with panic attacks. Yet even as he mused on these questions, Erick knew it was a ridiculous train of thought. He was just feeling confused because he wasn’t used to being back on land yet. As soon as he took
the abortion medicine, he would have one less entire set of issues to worry about.
Chapter 88

I miss having free time... I keep wanting to work on this story and the alternate timeline, but I keep not being able to find time to do so. I'm barely keeping up with my classes already. I basically used the entirety of this weekend to catch up on sleep. I know realistically a lot of my problems would be solved if I just stopped procrastinating so much, but it's really hard to break out of a habit I've had since basically high school.

The following day after Silas helped Eustace get to the rescue boat, Silas spent the morning and afternoon with Gale and Merise. Silas helped Gale keep his mind off his stitches again, and it gave Silas something to do besides worry about how his father had to deal with the fallout of the trawling incident and the mobs that had surrounded the palace and guard station. Though the mobs had all returned home, Silas knew their unrest stayed with them. Lord Kaui would need to better address his people’s concerns soon, and that meant his father needed to come up with a plan to make sure humans wouldn’t endanger the shoal again.

When Silas returned home that evening, he found his father sitting at the kitchen table. An opened caviar cocktail bottle sat in front of him with a half-filled glass.

“Dad?” Silas swam over to him, holding his thumbs apprehensively. His father never drank alone unless he had bad news. “What happened?”

Ronan sighed. Holding the rim of his glass, he said, “They found Hal.” A moment passed. “He’s dead.”

“What? No…” Silas shook his head. “No, it can’t be! How?”

“According to their official report, Hal was attacked in open water while traveling alone to their shoal. His brother was involved in some kind of salvaging accident with the Diving Peregrines, so in Hal’s haste to get to him, he left without back up.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Why would Hal do that?”

“Ronan picked up one of the caviar drops from his glass. “I think it’s a cover-up, but Teleyan’s captain of the guards is refusing to look deeper into the case.” He swallowed the caviar drop and held the rim of his glass again.

Silas sunk into the chair across from his father. “Why?”

“She says I don’t have enough evidence,” Ronan answered, resigned. “Your testimony against Adriel’s character isn’t enough to warrant a murder investigation. I said that was utter crap, and tried telling her that there were also discrepancies in the time line between Hal’s disappearance and his brother’s supposed ‘accident,’ but she wouldn’t listen.” Ronan paused a beat. “I’m almost
certain Adriel has done something to tie her hands, but without irrefutable evidence, I can’t do anything to help her out of this bind or prove corruption. Pressing the matter is only going to make me look worse than I do already.”

“I can’t believe this.” Silas rested his arms on the table and gripped his elbows. He knew that without Teleyan’s support, Peleran’s guards had no authority in Teleyan. His father wouldn’t be able to continue the investigation now about Hal’s murder.

“I couldn’t believe it either at first.” Ronan went silent for a moment again. “I know this is Adriel’s response to get back at us, but the fact that I have no way currently to prove it…” He shook his head. “It makes me wonder why I ever took this damn job.”

“Well, when Erick gets back…”

“He’ll be able to say what?” Ronan asked curtly. “You said Erick didn’t see Hal wherever they were keeping him, so he’ll hardly be able to tell us anything you couldn’t.”

“I know, but the way Erick was uncertain about it makes me wonder if it was actually true,” Silas said. “I don’t think Erick could have gone crazy enough to hallucinate Hal being there with him.”

Ronan frowned at Silas. “You’re suggesting Adriel did something to make him forget?”

“Maybe? If Adriel can enchant people to kill themselves if they reveal his secrets, I don’t see why he can’t do that too.”

Ronan faced the table again, considering that thought. “I hope you’re wrong. If Adriel can do that, we would be sunk to prove it.”

Silas put his chin on his folded arms. “I hate this so much. You don’t have any good news about anything?”

“No. My briefing with Kaui today didn’t go any better.” Ronan turned his head to look out the kitchen window to the dark corals outside. “He’s been talking to Adriel about our accusations, but he won’t admit to any of his other crimes. And despite my insistence that Adriel can’t be trusted, Kaui’s working with him now to help resolve the trawling situation because Adriel does actually have a long history of working with humans, for ill or naught.”

“Why can’t he just talk to Erick instead?” Silas asked.

“Because Erick isn’t here right now, and Adriel is backed by an entire guild of shifters,” Ronan answered. “Whether we like it or not, Adriel represents a large number of salvagers both here in Peleran and in several other shoals. He is not someone Kaui wants as an enemy, and so Kaui is turning a blind eye to the crimes we’re trying to prove.”

“But that’s wrong! He should care more about doing what’s right rather than what’s easy.”

“I agree, but that is easier said than done.”

Silas scowled. “This is why I hate politics.” He went quiet for a minute. “Did you talk about what to do with those four enchanters?”

“Yes.” Ronan sighed. “Kaui wants to pardon them to appease public opinion, as they were acting in defense of the shoal.”

“He can’t!” Silas jerked back upright. “If Kaui lets this go, he’ll just be inviting other mers to keep
“I know, but Kaui isn’t interested in protecting humans, seeing as he currently has nothing to gain from them.” Ronan’s fingers tightened around his glass. “We lost his sympathy the moment their nets hit our reefs.”

“But Erick—”

“Erick is just one man, Silas,” Ronan snapped. “He can’t fix all of our problems! He may have been human and his uncle might be rich, but he’ll be hard-pressed to refute all of the unpleasant stories Adriel has about humans. Even if I vouched for him, Erick would have very little influence over Kaui or the shoal, and I doubt he can do much on land either.”

“So?” Silas spread out his arms. “We can’t just do nothing!”

“What would you have me do?” Ronan asked, hitting his hand on the table. “I’m already doing everything I can just to keep my job. The mobs yesterday are just a taste of what will happen if I can’t restore the shoal’s confidence in their guards.”

“I don’t care. Letting those enchanter go free is not the answer.”

“If you want to argue that, you’re going to have to come up with alternative solution,” Ronan shouted. “My ideas have only led to my friend getting killed!”

Silas shrunk back, eyes widening as he saw the grief behind his father’s rage. “I—I’m sorry…”

The room went silent. Silas hardly breathed.

“Just go to bed, Silas,” Ronan said eventually, turning away and holding his head in his hand. His voice fell to barely above a whisper. “Please. I’ve had enough for today.”

Silas opened his mouth, wanting to say something that could help, but no words came. He silently rose from his seat and retreated into his bed alcove. As he tried to fall asleep, he put his hands over his auditory fins when he heard his father break into muffled sobbing.

* * *

Silas went to Jeb’s stall the next day while Ronan returned to the palace, hoping the old merman would be able to help console his heavy heart. Though Jeb had heard about the trawling incident, he hadn’t known Silas was there or that Silas knew the human who had survived two attempts on his life. As Silas told him everything he knew about the situation and updated him about Hal, Jeb told Silas what he knew from the rumor mill.

“Your father’s in a tough spot, that’s for certain,” Jeb said, tugging on his beard. “A lot of folks are saying he’s putting humans before mers, betraying the shoal.”

“I heard as much from the crowd outside the guard station.” Recalling everything that the mob had been shouting made Silas shudder. “I just don’t understand why everyone hates humans so much now just because of one accident. Nobody really cared one way or the other about them before.”

“Well, we never had much of a reason to think about them at all before, except for us salvagers.” Jeb picked up a boatswain’s whistle from the table in the front of his stall and absentmindedly rubbed at the patina tarnishing the brass mouthpiece. “Even we all seem to be split on the matter, though. Lot of folks are like us and want only natural forces to sink ships, but plenty aren’t against merpiracy either. Since Ronan’s announcement about the Diving Peregrines, a lot of speculation’s
been going around about all their shady business. A lot of it is just malarkey, but mers from the Cradle have been whispering about how they use shifting.”

“You’re serious?” Silas asked, sitting up.

“That I am, but most people aren’t believing it when they hear it,” Jeb said. “I’ve asked Monty and his network to find out who’s spreading it, but all the Peregrines they’ve talked to are denying anything to do with merpiracy. Interesting thing, though, Monty did talk to one lad who said he overheard a Peregrine explaining to another bloke that the Peregrines are broken into two factions. One uses shifting for merpiracy, and the other only uses it for trade with humans. All of them started out working for Adriel, but the ones sinking ships and making mers disappear are rogues outside of his control.”

“But that’s not true! Adriel himself admitted to my dad that his guild hunts ships. Why would they start telling people that they’re actually two different guilds?”

“You’re smart,” Jeb said, pointing at Silas with the boatswain’s whistle. “Surely you can figure out that answer.”

Silas pouted at Jeb, but lowered his gaze to think it over. “Well, if these rumors are getting out, Adriel must be intentionally letting it happen. Otherwise all these people talking about it would have killed themselves like the people who tried to tell the guards about what was going on. But why would it be better to spread the news as rumors rather than through the guards?” He pressed his lips against his fist, pondering the question.

“It takes control away from Ronan,” Jeb said. “It feeds Ronan conflicting reports while also generating interest in Adriel’s guild. The Peregrines weren’t that well-known before, but now everybody’s talking about them. And now that the humans have given mers a reason to attack their ships, merpiracy is starting to look very appealing to a lot of folks. Adriel’s guild is offering a way to make it a lucrative job.”

The thought chilled Silas. “So Adriel’s guild is getting bigger with every person who talks about it? But if people are joining because they want to help merpirates, how is that supposed to work if Adriel’s splitting up his guild?”

“I imagine he’s not actually splitting it up at all,” Jeb said. “This is just to distance himself from their crimes. He’ll probably throw some other people to the sharks just like how he made those men who attacked you turn themselves in.”

“Gods.” Silas pushed his fingers through his hair. “If this is all true, I don’t know how we’re supposed to fight back.”

“Maybe Erick will have some ideas. Didn’t you say you were planning on seeing him tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know how much he’ll be able to do either. One of his old crewmates just died, and now I’m going to have to tell him Hal is dead too.” Silas held out his hands. “He didn’t even want to come back to the ocean before, so this is just going to give him even more reason to hate it.”

“Well, you won’t know that for sure until you see him again,” Jeb said. “You just have to be patient and trust that we’ll figure this all out.”

Chapter End Notes
I debated a long time about Hal's fate. He was originally supposed to live and basically get turned into a puppet for Adriel, but it got too complicated and uncomfortable for me to write. I don't want to say things are better this way for him, since very few things are truly worse than death, but at least he won't have died in vain.
Thank you for your continued patience with my late updates. Grad school is still kicking my butt, but I'm trying to practice some more self-care and such to get back on track. I did manage to write a bit of this story over the weekend, so I have a bunch of ideas on how to keep it going. I'll just have to jot them down in a notebook or something until I can actually work on it again.

Ivan returned to his estate late in the afternoon. When he inquired of his butler where Erick was to be found, he professed that he hadn't seen Ivan’s nephew since he had gone up to his room earlier that morning. When Ivan went up to Erick’s room and found it empty, the maid told him that Erick had gone downstairs shortly after he had arrived, and assumed he was still downstairs.

Concerned, Ivan looked for Erick in the den, the library, the sunroom, the garden, and even the dining hall before he thought to check the natatorium. As soon as he stepped into the humid room, he spotted Erick’s clothes beside the pool and had a flash of panic as he realized Erick went against the doctor’s orders and went swimming.

“Erick!” Ivan walked up to the pool and looked into the water, half-expecting to see his nephew dead at the bottom. It took him a minute to notice Erick’s tailfin poking out from beneath the blue tent at the deep end of the pool. Ivan breathed a small sigh of relief before he went to get the pool net from the wall.

Dipping the net into the water, Ivan prodded Erick’s tail. It twitched at his touch and retreated under the tent. Ivan stuck the net into the tent, then nearly fell over when it yanked him forward and pushed back. He loosened his hold on the handle and scowled as he saw Erick swim out of the tent. The rippling surface of the water distorted his view of his nephew’s face, but he knew Erick was grinning at him like the little imp he was.

Erick surfaced and pushed back up his hair with one hand. “Hey,” he started to say before sputtering on the water coming out of his mouth. He breathed in a little air so he could talk above the surface. “That was a rude way to get my attention.”

Ivan fished the net back out of the water. “And that was a quick way to put more grey hairs on my head. What are you doing in the pool?”

“Uh, just hanging out?” Erick shrugged sheepishly. “The water’s making my chest feel better.”

“Mm-hmm,” Ivan hummed, raising an eyebrow. He set down the net like a foot soldier holding a pike. “I had wanted to be here when I let you see what I’ve done, but I should have expected you to find it without me. Are the changes to your liking?”

“Yeah, it’s impressive, but kind of plain in comparison to the shoal.” Pointing at Ivan, he added, “I know you made that bed too big for one person, but joke’s on you because it’s too short for me.”

Ivan feigned innocence, putting his hand to his chest. “I have no idea what you’re implying. I just
wanted Silas to have plenty of space.”

“Sure you did.” Erick rolled his eyes, but smiled despite himself. He hadn’t expected Ivan to approve of Silas as much as he did. It was going to take Erick a while to get used to the idea that his uncle not only accepted his bisexuality, but was actively encouraging it too.

Swimming up to the edge of the pool, Erick folded his arms over the ledge and asked, “Were you planning on adding anything else?”

“Eventually, yes,” Ivan answered. “I want to get Silas’ input on what aquatic flora would be best. Since I’ve essentially converted the pool into a giant aquarium, it will take time to gradually acclimate all the additions we’ll need to fill it out.”

“That makes sense,” Erick said with a nod, though he knew the wait would be annoying. “I was wondering if you could make something more secure than that tent. At Silas’ house, we all slept in these little, narrow caves with curtains at the opening.”

“That sounds like the same arrangement Lorelei had described to me.” Ivan gaze fell onto Erick’s tail as his expression grew wistful. “Will the tent be serviceable enough until more permanent arrangements can be made?”

“Yeah, but maybe we can add a flap at the front or something?” Erick pulled his tail against the wall of the pool, feeling uncomfortable with Ivan staring at it. He hadn’t had his tail around humans until now, and so his nakedness became impossible to ignore. “I was also thinking it could use some pillows.”

“Would they be just free-floating sponges?”

“Basically, but the sponges you found for the bed aren’t that soft. Do you think you can make a bedcover and pillowcases for them? Merfolk seem to use sailcloth for everything, so it’d probably work for this too.”

“I see.” Ivan nodded. “It shouldn’t be a problem to whip up something.”

“Cool. So…” Erick half-frowned, unsure what to say now that he was still in the pool with a ridiculous blue tail. He wanted to shift back to his legs, but he hadn’t thought to put a towel by the poolside. He couldn’t very well shift back without it while his uncle remained in the natatorium, unless of course he wanted to subject his uncle to the unpleasant sight between his legs. Its wrongness still bothered Erick every time he had to look down at it.

“So what now indeed,” Ivan said, appearing to share in Erick’s awkwardness. He turned away his head and sighed. “I have some bad news about Eustace’s case, and I am afraid it will greatly upset you. Would you rather hear it here or in the den?”

Erick pushed himself arms-length away from the ledge, knotting together his eyebrows. “How much worse can it get? He’s already being accused of murdering six people. I know he could get hanged for that.”

Ivan shook his head. “This isn’t about his sentencing. It is about the men who died.” He faced his nephew with a contrite expression. “Flynn was also on that boat.”

“What?” Erick let go of the ledge, drifting farther out into the water.

“I’m sorry, Erick.”
Erick gaped at the water’s surface. “Those enchanters killed him?” He pushed his hand through his hair, pulling on his scalp.

“So it seems,” Ivan said quietly. “Eustace explained that the enchanters attacked them because their net had gone through some reefs. Silas and Gale had tried to make his crew turn their boat turn around, but one of the men shot Gale with a harpoon. Eustace had been knocked flat onto the deck in the fight to stop him, but Flynn was still trying to help them when the enchanters surfaced. They must have mistook Flynn as one of the men trying to hurt Silas and Gale when they retaliated against the rest of the crew.”

“Christ.” Erick let his arms fall back into the water. He remained silent for another minute. “Does the rest of my crew know yet?”

“Yes, I assume Dunley has told them all by now. I had met with him to ask if he would be willing to stand as a witness in Eustace’s trial, seeing as he can both attest to Eustace’s character and recount how we discovered your transformation.” He went quiet for a moment. Erick didn’t speak.

With another heavy sigh, Ivan said, “Dunley is planning on rounding up your crew tomorrow to drink to Flynn’s memory. I assume they will also use the evening to discuss Eustace’s situation and our general problems with merfolk.” He paused, choosing his words carefully. “However, considering your current, uncertain health, I am not sure if it would be prudent for you to join.”

“I’m not an invalid,” Erick retorted. “I can survive a night out without ripping my stitches.”

“You can’t be sure about the stitches.”

“Then what—?” Erick started to ask, but then remembered his pregnancy. “Fuck.” He pressed his hand over his face. “You know I still don’t want it.”

“Have you taken the medicine then?”

“No, but I still have it.”

“Erick, you must decide sooner than later if you’re keeping this child,” Ivan said firmly yet gently. “If you are very certain that you are indeed pregnant, you have to either end it before your quickening or start keeping better care of yourself. Walking this middle route is not good for you or it.”

“I know, okay?” Erick snapped. “Do you have to lecture me about this right after you tell me one of my friends is dead?” Ivan lowered his head, admonished. “I already had to worry about merpirates and now Eustace’s trial, and the last thing I need to be thinking about is when I get rid of this thing in me.”

“You have me and Silas to help you with your other problems.” Ivan went to put the pool net back on the wall. “I’m just concerned about your wellbeing.”

“Well, you can take your concern and shove it on somebody else. I’m fine.”

Ivan gave Erick a pointed look. “That remains to be seen,” he said, turning to leave the natatorium. “Will you be dining with me tonight, or should I send your dinner up to your room?”

“Send it to my room.”

“Very well.” Ivan lingered for a moment longer. “I do apologize for upsetting you. Since you are able to shift back now, we can discuss tomorrow when to invite over the police and Eustace’s
attorney."

“We’re going to see Silas in two days, so we might as well just wait until we can talk to him.”

“True. I will be available regardless if you should want to see me.”

As Ivan left, Erick let himself sink back underwater, though his hands remained clenched. He fanned out his tailfin above him, studying briefly how the light from the skylights backlit the thin veins threaded through its translucent membrane. It still didn’t look like it was supposed to be attached to his body. His back landed softly at the deep end of the pool as his tail rested on the slope up to the shallow end. He scowled as his gaze moved to his stomach. His abs looked the same as they always did, despite that he was currently feeling a bit bloated. He imagined again what he would look like with a baby bump, but the image still repulsed him.

If he couldn’t even stand imagining himself carrying a child, how would he be able to survive other people ogling him? He could barely stand Ivan looking at his tail. There was no way he would be able to stomach both at the same time. Given his history, he was going to have a hard enough time making people take him seriously. A baby bump would make it impossible.

Yet the more he tried to come up with reasons, Erick kept hearing Ivan, Silas, and Merise all saying he should keep it. That it would all work out, that it was a living life, that he could actually want it. His terror and disgust warred with his conscience.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Erick yelled, pressing his palms over his eyes. “I can’t keep it! I can’t!”

But he remembered the pain in Silas’ quiet voice when he let him go to Merise’s house, how he hung his head as he knew he was giving up his child to save Erick.

“It’s not my fault. I didn’t want to be a damn breeder. I’m supposed to be a man!” He twisted away from the floor of the pool and swam back to the stair steps. He dragged himself out of the pool and held himself up on his elbows, choking back tears and on the air refilling his lungs. His chest began throbbing anew, and he wished for a second that his glyph wouldn’t save him, that his stitches would reopen and let him bleed out so he didn’t have to make a decision. If he let himself see another knife, he could let his hand finish what his mind couldn’t.

His tail split into legs again and his fluttering gills melted back into his ribs. Erick dug his nails into his palms. He remained like that, bent over at the edge of the pool, his bare skin chilling in the open air. Water dripped down from his hair and nose, and he told himself it was only from the pool.

Eventually he got up, pulled on his pants despite his wet skin, and hurried back to his room to properly dry off. He buried himself in his blankets and barely ate any of his dinner when it arrived. He was thinking now again of Flynn’s death and his crewmates. As he managed to drift off to sleep, he decided that if he couldn’t get drunk enough tomorrow night with them, he would raid Ivan’s wine cellar and take both parts of the abortion medicine before he went to bed. He wouldn’t be able to feel anything once the hangover set in, and if he could get blackout drunk, he wouldn’t have to remember taking the medicine either.

Chapter End Notes
I just want to take a moment to say I don't condone Erick's plans (as getting drunk is rarely a good solution to anything), but I also understand that it is a realistic (and common) reaction. My main issue with it right now is how much thought he's putting into it. If I had more time, I would revise the following chapters to remove a lot of his premeditation. What it adds for suspense (whether or not he follows through with these plans) doesn't really mitigate how uncomfortable it all is to read now in hindsight. I might come back to these chapters eventually, perhaps over winter break, but they will have to remain as I've written them for now.
While Silas talked with Jeb, Ronan met Kauí in the drawing room of the palace. Kauí rose from his seat when Ronan arrived and swam over to a balcony overlooking the shoal.

“Ronan, it does not bring me joy to say this,” Kauí said, folding his arms over the railing, “but I can no longer support your vendetta against Adriel. Though you have made very many, valid claims against him and his guild, my advisors and I have decided that we have no choice but to work with him in an official capacity.”

Kauí’s words struck Ronan like a harpoon. “You can’t be serious.” Ronan joined Kauí by the balcony railing and searched his expression. “Adriel is an unchecked mesmerist. He spouts boldface lies and—”

“I know, but you have no proof.” Kauí turned his head away from the shoal to face Ronan. “He’s given you the men who hurt your son, and now that Teleyan’s saying Adriel had nothing to do with Hal’s death, you’ve run out of things to hold against him.”

“But Teleyan shouldn’t have closed the case!” Ronan retorted. “And I can’t prosecute those men until Erick returns to confirm they are actually the ones who attacked him and Silas. Adriel could have made anyone confess, not just the ones actually responsible. He doesn’t need mesmerism to blackmail them.”

“Even still, the fact that Erick is on land shows his good faith,” Kauí said. “Everyone in your office saw Erick willingly leave with him, and Adriel has provided me with multiple people who have all confirmed that Hal was helping him join his guild before his and his brother’s untimely accidents.”

“Accidents?” Ronan spat back. “Erick only left because Adriel was ransoming him to his uncle!” He exhaled through his nose, trying to reign back in his tone. “You must understand that my antipathy towards Adriel is not merely born of a grudge against his guild members. They are victims as much as the humans they hunt.”

“Adriel can’t be controlling literally every one of his members with mesmerism,” Kauí said. “I know you believe the mers who killed themselves had triggered some kind of suicide command, but you still haven’t identified the supposed trigger. Your mesmerist told both of us that triggers must be visual or verbal cues, but the guards at your station did nothing that could have served as a cue for all of those unfortunate people.”

“Yes, but Hal told Erick that the cue could be just the belief that they are revealing prohibited information.”

“Then you are suggesting that Adriel’s skill with mesmerism has surpassed its known limitations,” Kauí said, giving Ronan a look of disbelief before he shook his head. “I grant you that Adriel is skilled enchanter, but I highly doubt it is possible use a person’s very thoughts against themselves.”
“If Adriel has been allowed unrestricted practice on his guild members, he could have very well learned to do just that.”

“But such a feat would suggest he could fundamentally alter the mind of whoever he controlled. Can mesmerism be so powerful as to manipulate a person’s memories?”

“I don’t know, but my son believes it is possible. He thinks Adriel altered Erick’s memories so he wouldn’t remember being held captive with Hal. It would also explain the mixed reports I got about Hal’s disappearance and death.” Ronan looked over the shoal to the open ocean, recalling them. Before Teleyan had shut him out, his own guards had collected witness statements that contradicted both the time of his brother’s accident and number of shark sightings in the area. He had gotten two different dates for the accident, and only one mention of sharks in otherwise safe waters.

Kaui sighed, sympathizing with Ronan’s frustration and grief over his friend’s death. “I know this is a difficult time, but theorizing about broken limits to mesmerism does not change the fact that Adriel is the only one who can help us peaceably protect the shoal from humans’ trawling nets. His shifters know how their boats work, and he tells me that many of them know their language.”

“Adriel isn’t the only one,” Ronan said, pressing his fist against the handrail. “We can trust Erick.”

“To be honest, Ronan, I’m not entirely sure that is true. His record at the prison still has no mention of how he was formerly human, even though I now know you knew that when he was admitted. I know he showed signs of mental instability while he was there, tearing up his tail as he did, and Adriel told me about how desperate he was to get his shifting tattoo. The one redeeming thing I know about him is that he protected your son, but even that knowledge is muddled by the fact that his uncle apparently emotionally abused and manipulated Adriel’s sister for nearly a decade. If Erick—”

“Erick is not manipulating my son!” Ronan snapped. “I can’t believe you would suggest something so ridiculous.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised. I barely know anything about him. Would you have even told me Erick was human if your son hadn’t gotten tangled in Adriel’s business?”

“If it became relevant in another way, yes. You can’t take everything Adriel’s been telling you at face value. Erick needed to go back to land so he could help protect sailors from merpiracy, not just because he didn’t like it here, and Silas has talked to Erick’s uncle. He told him his side of the story. The only person manipulating people around here is Adriel himself.”

“Well at least Adriel still puts the interests of merfolk above humans. Your duty is to protect these people,” Kaui said, pointing to the shoal. “Until we can guarantee their safety, I don’t care whether humans’ ships sink or sail. And if Erick is too busy worrying about humans, then I simply can’t trust him.”

Kaui lowered his arms and softened his expression. “Adriel has the time and resources, and he’s told me a good number of his guild members are also already guards. All we need to do is make sure his guild members are part of the periphery patrols so they can intervene in the event of another incoming trawling net. They can climb onto their ships to negotiate things peaceably.”

“If you put them in charge of diverting trawling nets, who is to say they won’t escalate things instead and kill more fishermen?” Ronan asked. “We should be telling the fishermen not to come over here in the first place. I know you don’t want to deal with a new set of politics, but we need to open communication with the human leadership on land. Erick is already going to tell them about
merpiracy. If you pardon the enchanters who killed all those men, they will see us as no different.”

“What does it matter what they think of us?” Kaui asked. “Their nets are the only thing endangering our people, and that is only because we have allowed it to become a problem. I doubt talking to them would change anything. Adriel has told me at length about how human leaders can’t be trusted. Even if we can make any agreement with them, it doesn’t sound likely to be honored.”

“They still deserve the benefit of doubt.”

“I don’t have time to give them doubt,” Kaui retorted. “The people needed to know yesterday, before then even, how we are ensuring their safety. Adriel has given us a solution we can enact immediately. When Erick returns, I will humor him with an audience if he so wishes it, but I will not yield you more than that.”

Ronan went silent, debating whether or not to continue arguing. Then he sighed. “Fine, I will comply. But I still don’t agree with this decision.”

“Then you can stay home when I give my announcement,” Kaui said. “Just know that if you do, your lack of support won’t look good.”

“I know, but I cannot stand with you in good conscience.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Kaui shook his head. “I hope you will come to forgive me.”

Ronan didn’t know if he would, but it was no matter. He was banking everything on Erick’s return now. The fact that he was counting on him made Ronan marvel at how Erick and Silas had been able to completely flip his opinion on the former human, and he was thankful Silas didn’t rub it in.

As Ronan left the palace, he wondered how he would be able to break more bad news to his son.
Grad school is slowly killing me, but hey, here's this week's update. Thank you all for continuing to read and drop kudos. Even though I haven't been able to work on this story, it's nice knowing my readers are still around and patient.

“Erick, the car is ready,” Ivan called from the bottom of the stairs.

“I’ll be just a minute,” Erick answered, scowling at the mirror over his dresser as he quickly combed his hair. Now that he was faced with the fact that going out with Dunley meant actually showing his face in public again for the first time in over a month, he was fretting over the fact that he still hadn’t been able to shave. He hadn’t had the opportunity to while he was in Adriel’s custody, and he wasn’t allowed to at the hospital either. The nurses didn’t let him near any blades, and Ivan continued following their caution because he didn’t want to let Adriel’s enchantment have a second shot at killing him.

Erick put down his comb and ran his fingers over his thick stubble, trying to convince himself that it was full and even enough to look intentional and not sloppy. It didn’t help that he still felt sick too. He had slept terribly the previous night because he had napped all afternoon in the pool, and he had barely mustered the energy to get out of bed for lunch. Even though he had been hungry, he hadn’t been able to keep down most of his lunch because his morning sickness decided to come back with a vengeance and prove it couldn’t be restricted to mornings or by medicine. He was only just beginning to feel better again now. The only part of himself that seemed presentable was his clothes. The maid had ironed them for him that afternoon so they wouldn’t be rumpled from sitting in his bag for so long, but she had starched his shirt too much for his liking.

“Erick?” Ivan called again.

“I’m coming, just give me a minute!” Erick made himself turn away from the mirror and picked up his belt with the pouch containing his medicines. He took out the seaweed pills and dropped them into his wastebasket since he had decided they were the cause of him hallucinating Hal, but kept the packet with the dried up abortion medicine. He also left on the locket Silas let him keep, though he tucked it under his shirt. He had taken it off before he showered earlier, but quickly put it back on after he finished since he found its absence more anxiety-inducing than he had expected. Despite his mixed feelings about how it reminded him of his mother and Adriel, it was still the only thing he had from Silas.

As Erick came down the stairs, Ivan asked, “Are you sure you’re feeling well enough to go out tonight?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” Erick continued to the front door. Ivan had been trying to convince him to stay home all afternoon.

Ivan followed him. “What if you get ahold of another knife?”

“I won’t. Dunley and Talia already know about the enchantment,” Erick said. “They’ll make sure I can’t reach any.”
“I suppose, but—”

“Ivan, I can’t stay holed up in your house forever. Enchantment or not, I will have to leave eventually.” Softening his tone, Erick added, “What’s best for me now is to spend some time with my friends.”

Ivan said nothing for a moment before he exhaled through his nose. “Yes. Yes, you’re right.” He straightened his cuffs. “Just take care of yourself. If you’re going to drink, stick to ale or small beer please. Child or not, you should stay sober for your own health.”

“You’re worrying too much.” Erick picked up his jacket from the coat closet and pulled it on. “Whatever happened to letting me get away with everything?”

“I’ve nearly lost you twice in these past two months,” Ivan answered. “Humor an old man’s wisdom and appreciate the breath in your lungs.”

Sobered by that fact, Erick said, “Okay. I’ll likely be out late, so don’t wait up for me.”

“A kind offer, but I doubt I will be able to sleep regardless. Telephone the house if you need anything. The car will be at your disposal all evening.” Ivan opened the door for Erick and remained in the doorway as Erick went down the steps to the awaiting driver. Ivan waited until the car drove around the circle and disappeared past the wrought iron fence before he returned inside.

The driver took Erick to Dunley’s townhouse first to pick him up, as he and Talia also planned on using Ivan’s car. Reena couldn’t join them because she was busy with work, and she hadn’t been that close with Eustace or Flynn. Erick knocked on the door and put his hands into his jacket pockets.

“Hello?” A petite woman answered the door, who Erick knew was Dunley’s wife, Rachel. “Oh, Erick, you’re early. Dunley is still at the docks, but he should be back home soon.” She stepped aside to let him in, resting one hand at the small of her back to offset the weight of a baby bump. “Why don’t you come inside?”

“Oh, well, the driver…” Erick started to say before he noticed a toddler making a beeline for the door.

“Hey, Collin!” Rachel reached to catch him, but Erick had moved his leg first to block the little boy’s escape. “Sorry, he gets excited whenever someone’s at the door.”

“It’s okay,” Erick said, feeling awkward as Collin grasped his pant leg, apparently too unsteady to remain standing by himself yet. The little boy barely came up to Erick’s knee. “I think he’s trying to run away.”

“He just likes the cars.” Rachel smiled ruefully. Leaning over slightly with her hand still on the door handle, she said to her son, “Collin, do you remember Erick?” He faced her and made a giggling sound. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“He wasn’t walking the last time I saw him, right?” Erick asked, bending down to take Collin’s hand off his pants. The little boy’s pudgy fingers wrapped around Erick’s thumb, making him falter. Collin had a surprisingly strong grip despite his still baby soft skin.

“No, he got the hang of it while you were underwater.” Pointing to her ear as she looked at Erick’s, Rachel asked, “Is that, um…?”

“Huh?” Erick touched his own ear before remembering they were still shaped like fins. “Yeah,
that’s from the whole becoming a merman thing.” He frowned somewhat as he looked back at Collin, who grinned at him with four teeth. It was nauseatingly adorable.

“Amazing.” Rachel laughed a little. “Dunley told me, but I hadn’t really believed it before.” Glancing inside toward the living room, she put a hand over her stomach and said, “I really ought to sit back down now. Can you bring Collin inside for me?”

“Oh, sure.” Erick pulled his hand out of Collin’s grasp and looked back over at Rachel. “How should I pick him up?”

Rachel smiled as she sat down on the couch. “Just lift him up under his armpits. You won’t break him.”

“Okay,” Erick said uncertainly, regretting that he had arrived before Dunley returned from work. “Come here, Collin.” He picked up the little boy and held him against his hip so he could close the door. As he walked into the living room, Collin played with Erick’s stubble.

Erick turned his head to raise his eyebrow at the little boy. “Excuse you, that is my face.” Collin completely ignored him and reached for Erick’s ear. “Yes, I know my ears look weird, but that doesn’t mean you can play with them either.”

Rachel laughed. “He’s a very curious child.”

“I can tell.” Erick found himself smiling wryly at Collin as he tugged on Erick’s collar to better reach his ear, and he realized while moving his hand to set Collin down that he didn’t very much want to anymore. Instead he hitched him up higher on his hip and rubbed Collin’s back. “How old is he?” he asked, tipping his head to let Collin get a better look at his ear.

“Nineteen months,” Rachel answered proudly.

“Really? I would’ve thought he was older than that.”

“No, he’s just a big baby.” She folded her hands over her stomach as she watched Collin start pulling on Erick’s hair.

“Oh.” Erick tried not to stare at her stomach as he thought of his own. He slipped his finger into Collin’s hand to get it out of his hair and rubbed his thumb over the little boy’s fingers. “He’s just like his big brother then.” He let go of Collin’s hand to smooth out his wispy auburn hair. “Do you think his little sibling will be too?”

“I hope so.” Somewhat sheepishly, Rachel said, “The doctor was worried when he found out I had gotten pregnant again so soon after Collin, but my weight gain has been fairly normal so far. I’m praying things will continue going smoothly.”

“I hope it will be okay too.” Erick’s arm was beginning to tire, so he put Collin down. “Where is your other son?”

“He’s out with my mother, helping her get groceries,” Rachel answered. “She’s been a Godsend, having her here to help around the house. I don’t know what I would have done—” The door unlocking interrupted her. “Oh, that must be Dunley now.”

“Erick?” Dunley said, surprised to see him. “Sorry, did I keep you waiting?”

“No, I just arrived too early.” Erick glanced down at Collin. “Your wife and I were just talking about your kids.”
Dunley smiled. “Yeah, they’re growing like weeds.” Going over to his wife, he asked Erick, “Is the car outside for us?”

“Yeah. Ivan’s loaned us his driver for the whole night, not just to get us there.”

“Great.” Dunley gave his wife a kiss, promising that he would try to return home before too late. “Let’s get going then.”

They went back outside and climbed into the car. After Erick told the driver how to get to Talia’s apartment, he asked Dunley, “Where are we going tonight?”

“The Footsore Roebuck,” Dunley answered. “It was Flynn’s favorite place, even though I don’t think the owner ever liked him or Eustace that much.”

Erick gave him a sad, brief smile. “It was because they always spent more money on bets than on drinks.” He sighed.

In the intervening silence, he leaned back his head and looked at his reflection in the window, but his thoughts returned to Collin and the abortion medicine in his belt pouch. He still felt the ghost of the little boy’s fingers on his ear and the weight of him on his hip. It was a ridiculous feeling, one Erick didn’t even want to name, as he tried to ignore how the sound of his delighted babbling wouldn’t leave his mind.

Erick rubbed his temples. It wasn’t something he was supposed to be thinking about right now, he told himself. This night out was supposed to be about mourning Flynn and venting about Eustace and merpirates, not babies. He just needed to drink himself under the table to get rid of such absurd notions.
Chapter 92

Chapter Notes

*Trigger warning* -- panic attack, suicide idealization

Another week, another late update. Oh well. I had to revise the opening of this chapter because it was bothering me too much to leave it be. I still have to fix chapter 85 too, but that's a tomorrow problem.

This chapter is one of the darker points of Erick's arc, but don't worry. There will be lots of comfort and fluff soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Footsore Roebuck was much like the other bars Erick used to frequent. Sailors talked loudly, occasionally bursting into guffaws. Glasses clunked against tables and silverware scraped plates. Smoke hung in the air between oil lamps strung among the rafters. As a pair of men got up to leave at the end of the bar, Dunley walked ahead of them to secure their empty seats. One of the men stumbled as they walked past, and the other man laughed and joking shoved him, accidentally knocking him into Erick.

“Hey!” Erick caught the man’s shoulders and pushed him back away, but he had already got a whiff of the alcohol on his breath. The smell churned his stomach.

The stumbling man mumbled an offhand apology before smacking his friend upside the head. He laughed as they continued to the door.

Muttering “Assholes,” Erick shook his head and went to sit beside Dunley.

“You alright?” Dunley asked, noticing the sour look on Erick’s face. Talia only gave him a sidelong glance, unconcerned, before sitting down.

“You alright?” Dunley asked, noticing the sour look on Erick’s face. Talia only gave him a sidelong glance, unconcerned, before sitting down.

“Yeah, fine.” Erick looked at the spirits lined up along the shelves on the wall. “Just wishing we were here under better circumstances.” His stomach was still twisting at the thought of drinking now. The drunk men had been like mirrors of his past self, reminding him why he had tried to go sober in the first place. It had been almost two months since the last time he had even set foot in a bar, unless he counted the one where he met Hal.

Dunley hummed in understanding. “Things certainly could be better.” He went quiet, remembering the purpose of their night out.

Erick closed his hand into a fist, turning his gaze to the polished bar top.

Talia frowned at the two of them before sighing. “Okay guys, shit sucks, but can we at least get wasted before we wallow around like fucking slugs?”

“Right.” Dunley nodded and then waved over the bartender. “Can we get a round of shots and some beers please? This first one’s on me.”

“Thank you,” Talia said, leaning her elbows on the table and rubbing her eyes with her pointer and
middle fingers.

Erick frowned as the bartender filled their pints. Despite that he was having second thoughts about anything stronger than ale, he couldn’t bring himself say anything. What would he even say? Erick couldn’t tell them about the medicine in his belt pouch, and his friends certainly couldn’t expect him to stay sober now that their friends were dead or in jail.

The bartender brought foaming pints and filled their shot glasses. Talia and Dunley each picked up their shot glass. Holding up his, Dunley said, “To Flynn, the best bastard with the worst luck.”

“May his fortunes be better wherever he is now,” Talia added, clinking Dunley’s glass.

Unable to back out now, Erick tapped her and Dunley’s glasses and knocked back his shot. It burned the back of his throat, but it helped take the edge off his evening. He had given in. He didn’t feel any worse. There was even a small comfort in it, being back at a bar like nothing had changed. He could pretend nothing was different. That he wasn’t really any different from them anymore.

“Did you know I met Flynn because he lost a wager?” Dunley said as he put down his shot glass. “It was poker night at Skipper’s Boot, and he didn’t have cash to pay up. Poor sod was about to get his block knocked off over a couple coins, so I stepped in to help. Eustace had been there, but he hadn’t any money either.”

Talia chuckled at that. “Of course he didn’t.”

“Yeah, we got to talking after that,” Dunley continued. “He promised to pay me back, and he eventually did, amazingly enough. Bad as his luck was, he always somehow made it back. Too smart for his own good, I suppose.”

Erick listened to Dunley reminisce and nursed his beer without speaking much. They took turns recounting stories about Flynn, each trying to one up the other. Dunley knew the most, as he had known Flynn and Eustace longer than he had Erick, but the melancholy of the situation hurt all of them.

As the evening wore on, shot glasses and pints filled the bar in front of them. Erick had to excuse himself twice to use the bathroom. He tried not to think too hard about either fact. He let Dunley set the pace, accepting another shot whenever he ordered another round. It could have been just like old times, letting the buzz overtake his head. He told himself it was inevitable, relapsing. Dunley needed him drunk as much as much as he needed himself to be. How else were they supposed to talk about Flynn without falling to pieces? Erick never learned a better way to deal with death.

When the bartender cut them off, Dunley soon decided to call it a night. They called Ivan’s driver and sat on the bench outside to wait. The breeze carried the soft rumble of the ocean over the sound of passing cars and late-night revelers. Erick alternated between pressing his thumbnail into his fingers and trying to hold his shaking hands steady. It occurred to him in parts, like a hand insistently tapping his shoulder as he tried to ignore it, that he would soon be alone.

The realization quickened Erick’s breath. No more morning sickness or frequent bathroom runs. Hopefully no more panic attacks. His nails dug deeper into his skin. No more chance of holding tiny fingers. The sporadic stinging of his restless fingernails helped counter the growing ache in his chest, but it was not enough. Not enough. Not to stop the welling terror, the shrinking of his lungs, his thoughts—
“Erick?” Talia said. “The car’s here.” She had stood and started to leave, but noticed Erick was bent over his hands. “Heh, passing out already?” She burst into giggles. “So much for your alcohol tolerance.”

“Is he coming?” Dunley asked, also assuming Erick was merely worn out from the evening. He was already sitting in the car.

“I’ll get him up, just give us a minute,” Talia answered, kneeling down in front of Erick. “Hey, sleepy. It’s time to go home now.” She reached to shake his arm, but then noticed his taut brow and fidgeting fingers. Crescent imprints from his thumbs appeared and faded around his pale knuckles. “Shit,” she swore under her breath, sobering. “Erick, are you freaking out?”

“I don’t know what to do,” Erick whispered, shaking his head. “I can’t go home, I can’t.”

“Can’t why?” Talia asked. “Dunley’s waiting on us. We have to go.”

“No, don’t leave!” Erick’s hands gripped his forehead. “Please. If you go, then I…” His voice broke. He couldn’t keep speaking through his stuttering, shallow breaths.

“Oh, Jesus.” Talia quickly turned back to Dunley. “Go home without us and send the driver back here as soon as you’re home.”

“Huh?” Dunley got back out of the car. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Panic attack,” Talia answered curtly. “He used to get them a lot before you met him. Only way to bring him back down is to wait it out, so just go back home before Rachel starts worrying about you. Erick should be calm enough when the car gets back.”

“Are you sure?” Dunley looked at Erick with greater concern, but his former captain still had his head in his hands. “What if he’s dying or something again?”

“I know the signs, he’s not dying,” Talia answered.

“But—”

“Let me handle this,” she snapped, incensed by his lack of trust. “I didn’t get to help him last time he needed me, so fuck off.”

“That wasn’t my fault! Why can’t I wait here too?”

“Because more people isn’t going to help.” Pointing to Erick, Talia said, “Depending on what’s set him off, he may need to crash on my couch. That’s what he always used to do. So unless you wanna spend the night at my place too, you’re better off going home.”

Dunley frowned at Talia for a long, hard moment before he faced his former captain again. “Erick, will you be okay if I leave you with Talia?”

Erick almost didn’t hear Dunley over the negative feedback loop playing through his head. He wanted to go hide in his room or the pool, but he was too terrified to find out if he really would take the medicine as soon as he was alone, or if he would just go to the kitchen to find a knife again. Even if he did neither tonight, he felt certain drinking this much alcohol was still going to permanently affect the little life in him. The guilt of it was practically killing him already, if the pain in his chest was anything to go by.

But Erick couldn’t muster the words to say any of this to Talia or Dunley, to admit his new fucked
up biology extended past just a tail and gills. Instead he answered, “I don’t know. I just can’t…” He grit his teeth, exhaling forcefully through his nose.

Erick’s answer didn’t reassure Dunley, but nevertheless, he yielded to Talia’s experience.

While Talia waited for the car to return, she sat back down on the bench beside Erick. She pat his back and said, “I got ya, you big dumbass. Should’ve known these things weren’t gone for good, huh?”

Talia leaned back, wondering what could have caused Erick to have another panic attack. She knew through Ivan’s translation of Silas’s story that Erick had torn out his scales on his first night underwater, but Erick didn’t mention it at all when he told her about his experience there. He had acknowledged that he often felt depressed, but he mostly stuck to the facts of what he did and what he knew about the merpirates. So, though she realized he must have had an attack on his first night, she began to suspect it wasn’t the only one. The only question now was how many other attacks he had had since then.

When the car returned, Talia rubbed Erick’s shoulder. “Hey, car’s here again. You don’t have to go home, but we can’t stay here all night, okay?”

Reluctantly, Erick said, “Okay.” He pushed himself up off the bench despite his still racing heart. He staggered forward, nearly falling over before he caught himself on the bench’s handrail. His eyes widened, aghast. “Oh God, I really am drunk.” He held his hand over his mouth. “Christ, what have I done?”

“It’ll be okay,” Talia said, putting her arm under his shoulder. “I’ll walk you to the car.” Despite being a tall woman, she knew she would struggle with Erick’s weight if he actually needed to lean on her. She only stood two inches over his shoulder.

“It’s not okay,” Erick twisted away from her, falling against the outside wall of the bar. “I’ve fucked up. Oh God, I freaked up! This was supposed to make it easier.” His fists clenched against the brick.

“Erick—”

“Just give me your knife,” he cried, pressing his forehead against the wall. “I can’t do this.” Tears burned his eyes.

“No, Jesus,” Talia said, horrified. “I don’t have it. Just calm—”

“Bullshit! You never leave home without it.”

“I did tonight because you told us to keep you away from them!”

“God damn it! Why?” Erick slid down away from the wall and sat on the bench’s armrest. He continued crying into his hands.

“Because I care about your sorry ass!” Talia said. “And I am not letting you fucking kill yourself after you just got out of the goddamn hospital. You can cry ‘til you’re blue in the face, but you’re going to keep living whether you like it or not.”

“But I can’t…”

“Yes you can, you just don’t want to admit it.”
Erick pressed his nails into his hairline. “I hate you.”

Talia put her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes. “I know that’s a lie too. You wouldn’t have asked me to stay if you meant that.”

“Then stop being so stuck up about it!”

“Well I wouldn’t be if you’d just get in the fucking car and stop making the poor driver watch us fight about this.”

“Fine!” Erick made himself get up again while bracing himself against the wall and wiped his nose and eyes on his sleeve. “Just don’t fucking touch me.”

“Fine.” Talia stepped back, holding up her hands. “Let’s go then.” She followed him to the car, where the driver was waiting beside the open passenger door with a thoroughly anxious expression.

Erick sat down and crossed his arms, furiously avoiding looking at Talia or the driver. Talia climbed in on the other side and sighed heavily as she sat down. After the driver returned to his seat, he asked where they were going next.

“I don’t even know,” Talia said, turning to face Erick. “Do you still not want to go home? What’s wrong with Ivan’s house?”

“I don’t want him to see me like this.” Erick had hunched in his shoulders as he faced the window. He wiped his nose again on his sleeve.

“Okay then, my apartment it is.”

After they arrived at the cracked stoop to Talia’s apartment, Erick got out and waited at the end of the stairs on the side away from overfilled trashcans. Talia told the driver in a hushed voice to let Ivan know what was going on. She would try to get Erick calm enough to return home, but they shouldn’t expect him to come back until tomorrow morning.

After the driver left, Talia muttered, “This is going to be a long night.”

Chapter End Notes

Everyone needs a friend like Talia. Now that I’ve been able to develop her so much in these later chapters, I’m trying to highlight more of her importance in Erick's life earlier in the story as I revise. Most of these changes are only really going to be evident in the alternate timeline, however, since I'm avoiding making big changes to this story until I actually finish it.
Chapter Notes

I realized while going over the updates for the next few weeks that I forgot to post chapter 81! I had skipped it by accident, so 82 took its place and so on. I've since put it back in and fixed the chapter numbers (so they match my word document again), so you now get two chapters this week! I recommend reading this chapter before going back to 81, as 81 and next week's chapter goes back to things in the sea.

Talia put the kettle on her stove as soon as she and Erick came into her apartment. While Erick fell into the sagging couch in her living room, she picked up a mug for herself from the drying rack beside her sink and asked, “Want tea or something? I’m making coffee.”

“I don’t know.” Erick had stopped crying, but he had become too numb to care anymore. He sat with his elbows on his knees, staring blankly at the beer bottles and mail covering her coffee table.

“Alright, then you’re getting chamomile.” Talia picked up a second mug and put them on the counter by the stove. She then noticed her knife block and quickly stashed it in the cabinet after she took out her tea tin and a can of instant coffee powder. As she waited for the kettle to heat up, she went back into the living room to check for any other bladed objects she may have forgotten. Seeing none, she picked up her trash barrel and started picking up the beer bottles off her coffee table.

Neither she nor Erick spoke while Talia cleaned. She pulled out her spare blankets from the linen closet and dumped them onto the couch beside Erick. He partially unfolded and pulled the soft blankets over his lap, twisting them around his hands. When the kettle began whistling, Talia took it off the stove and filled the two mugs. She returned to the living room with both.

Holding out Erick’s mug, she said, “Take it, even if you don’t wanna drink it.”

Erick took it without looking up and wrapped his hands around the warm ceramic.

Talia sat down in a worn-out side chair across from him. She breathed deeply in the scent of her coffee before taking a sip. “We’re going to have God-awful hangovers,” she remarked, trying to break the silence. Erick didn’t answer. She lowered her mug. “You wanna try to talk me through what’s going on in your head?”

“No.” Erick didn’t look up from his mug.

“All right, well, I’m not going to bed until you fall asleep.” Talia sipped her coffee again. “You can brood all night for all I care.”

“You shouldn’t stay up for my sake.”

Talia snorted at that. “Are you being fucking serious?” she asked. “So what if you think I shouldn’t? You thought it was a good idea to ask for my knife.”

Erick tightened his hands around his mug, but didn’t speak.
Talia let the silence linger as she nursed her coffee. She finished her cup and went back to the kitchen to reheat the kettle. As she stood in front of the stove, staring at the blue flames dancing under the kettle, she crossed her arms and waited for it to whistle again.

When Talia walked back into the living room, Erick said haltingly, “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t how you wanted to spend the rest of your evening.”

“No shit.” Talia sat back down. “I know it isn’t how you wanted to spend yours either.”

“True.” Erick hesitated to speak again. “I don’t know.” His mug had grown cold, so he put it down without having drank from it at all. “I just don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“I don’t know either.” She leaned back in her chair and held up her mug. “Maybe it’s because of the whole dead parents thing, or that everybody called you crazy for believing in merfolk, or that you got turned into a merman, or that one of our friends got killed by them…” Talia shrugged. “Take your pick, really.”

Erick rubbed his temples with one hand. “It’s not actually any of those reasons this time.” He hesitated. “Well, it relates to one of them, I guess.”

“Which one?”

“Being a merman.”

“Hmm.” Talia stared at Erick as she sipped her coffee. “Wanna elaborate?”

“No, but…” Erick let his hands fall to the blankets again. “I don’t know what else I can do.” His thoughts drifted back to his last conversation with Silas before he returned to land. He remembered how he told Silas that talking had helped him more than his old habits, to reassure the worried merman that his constant compassion had helped him more than he realized. Erick sighed. For the umpteenth time that night, he cursed himself for thinking that going to the bar would solve anything. Ivan even tried to stop him, but he ignored his uncle’s caution.

“Well, then talk.” Talia held up her mug. “I’m already on my second cup. I don’t have any chance of going to sleep now.”

“I don’t know how.”

“You’re talking now, aren’t you?”

Erick glared at her. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, so? What about being a merman is so bad?” Talia asked. “You can breathe underwater. That sounds really fucking cool to me.”

“The gills aren’t the problem, it’s… a different physical part.”

Talia’s eyebrows knotted. “Huh? What the hell is that supposed to mean?” She pointed at his head. “Don’t tell me it’s your ears. I swear to God, if that’s really—”

“It isn’t!” Erick retorted. “Look,” he said, rubbing his hand over his face, “you know how merfolk just have a tail instead of legs? And it’s not really obvious how they, you know… What parts they have down there?”

“Yeah?” Talia said uncertainly, baffled. She put her coffee down on the table. “Where are you
“Well, they aren’t like humans. I know it sounds obvious, but like… Christ, I hate this.”

“Excuse me, what?” Talia leaned forward on her knees. “Are you trying to tell me turning into a merman fucked up your dick?”

Erick face-palmed. “Yes, basically!” He dragged his fingers over his eyes. “It fucked me up down there, and so now I both a cunt and a dick. All of them are goddamn hermaphrodites.”

“Holy shit. Does that mean you’re just PMSing?”

“No, fuck. I wish that was it.” Erick picked up the blanket to hide his face. “It just means mermen can get pregnant, and I…” He couldn’t bring himself to finish his sentence.

“Wait, what?” Talia fell back in her chair. “You… What the fuck? Are you saying…? Jesus Christ.” She stood up and turned away. Her hand went over her mouth as she stared at the floor. She abruptly turned back around. “Are you saying you got pregnant or that you knocked up somebody else? Or is it just that you got girl parts? Please tell me it’s just the girl parts.”

“No, it’s me.”

“You’re serious?” Erick didn’t answer. “No way. You have to be fucking joking. How would you even…?”

“It was the blood binding. It affected both me and Silas and made us… you know.”

“You got knocked up by Silas?” Talia asked. “That tiny kid?”

“Yes,” Erick answered before breaking down into tears again.

“Oh sweet Jesus fucking Christ.” Talia fell back into her chair. She let her head rest against the back before she jerked back upright. “Wait, you knew and you just let yourself get sloshed? God, Erick, why?”

“I don’t want it!”

“Just getting drunk isn’t going to get rid of it,” Talia said, incredulous. “You have to go to a doctor for that.”

“I did. I have the damn medicine.”

“You do? Then why…?” Talia’s shoulders fell with sudden understanding. “You don’t want to use it.”

“I do, but I can’t…” Erick gripped harder on the blankets pressed over his face.

Talia softened her voice. “Why?”

“Because, everybody says I shouldn’t,” Erick said, struggling to speak. “It’s supposed to be another living being. This stuff will kill it.”

“What other people think shouldn’t matter. This is your body, and it’s not living until its quickening. How far along are you even?”

“I don’t know. The binding happened the first night I was in the ocean.”
“Okay, well that wasn’t that long ago. It was what, six weeks?” Talia counted off the weeks with her fingers. “You should only be at about seven or eight weeks in then, since you’re supposed to start counting from the end of your last period.” She then frowned. “But you wouldn’t have had them before you transformed. How are you so certain you really are pregnant?”

“I have all the symptoms,” Erick answered. “I’ve had morning sickness for over a week and I’ve had more panic attacks and cried more in the past month than I have in the past two years. I even keep needing to use the goddamn restroom. What more proof do you need?”

“I don’t know! It just seems really crazy, okay? This is just really hard to believe considering I haven’t even seen your tail yet.”

“Yeah, but you’ve seen Silas and can see my ears and teeth right now! You know the fucking impossible is real.” Erick lowered the blanket to look at Talia with red-rimmed eyes. “Why do you still not believe me when I tell you these things?”

Talia looked away, guilty. “I don’t know. Because I’m a realist, I guess? I’m sorry.”

“Well I hate it, and I hate all of this. If I don’t take the medicine, then I’m stuck with this thing that I’ve probably fucked up now, and if I do, then everyone will still hate me. I can’t forgive myself either way.”

“Why? I don’t hate you. Nobody else should blame you for freaking out.” Tipping her head to the side, she added, “I mean, yeah, drinking was stupid, but it’s not the stupidest thing you’ve ever done. And Dunley and I probably shouldn’t have decided to go out in the first place, knowing that you had been trying to stay sober.”

“I don’t want you guys to blame yourselves.”

“Then stop being so hard on yourself too. Ignoring what everybody’s saying you should or shouldn’t do, what do you want to do about this?”

“I want to not be fucking pregnant.”

“Okay, then just take the medicine,” Talia said. “Where is it at, Ivan’s?”

“No, it’s in the pouch on my belt.”

“Can I see it?”

Erick hesitated to answer. “I guess.” He moved the blanket to open up the pouch. He avoided looking at the folded fish leather packet as he held it out to Talia. “It’s two parts. I’m supposed to take one half now and then the other tomorrow, but I was going to take both tonight.”

“Huh.” The packet’s material intrigued Talia, as it felt more like shed snake skin than paper or leather. The pills inside were wrinkled like raisins. “Did you get this from merfolk?”

“Yes.”

“I should’ve figured as much.” Talia held it back out towards Erick, but he didn’t reach to take it back. She put it back down on the coffee table instead. “So, why are you getting so hung up about this if you don’t want to be pregnant so badly? Is it mostly because of what everyone will think? Or because you think it’s killing something?”

“More the latter, if I had to choose,” Erick said quietly. “I don’t want to hurt it. If Silas could have carried it instead…” He lifted and dropped his hands. “I might’ve been able to be happy about it,
maybe. I don’t know. I just don’t know what to do.”

Talia sighed. “Erick, what you’ve just said right now should be enough of an answer. Whether or not you take this medicine shouldn’t be about whether or not you want to be pregnant. Nobody actually enjoys it. This should be about whether or not you want to have a kid. If you don’t want to be a parent, that’s okay. But it sounds like you do actually want this thing.”

Erick pulled the blankets back up over his face. He didn’t speak for several moments. Barely above a hoarse whisper, he then said, “What if it hates me, Talia? I’ve fucked up so bad. I’ve ruined its life.”

“Getting drunk once isn’t going to ruin its life,” Talia said. “Plenty of women get sloshed before they realize they’re pregnant, and their babies turn out fine.”

“But not all of them do. And it’s going to have to live underwater unless I can get tattoos for it and Silas. I don’t know if I can handle moving there permanently if I can’t.”

“Well, that’s something we’ll just have to figure out later. This is all too much to deal with in the middle of the night when we’re both drunk off our asses.” She pushed herself back up out of her seat and returned to the kitchen. After she filled a glass of water, she brought it back to Erick. “Here. If you’re not going to use it to knock back those pills, you should drink it anyway to try to help your hangover tomorrow.”

Erick reluctantly accepted the glass. “Okay.”

“Do you want me to keep staying here with you? Or do you want to try to go to sleep now?”

“I don’t know.” Erick forced himself to take a drink from his glass. The tap water practically tasted like sewage to him, and he regretted not drinking his tea while it was hot.

“Okay, I’ll just keep chilling out here then. Just give me a second.” Talia went into her room and returned with a dog-eared book. She put up her feet on the coffee table to begin reading.

Erick remained sitting up for a few minutes. He made himself finish his glass of water, then took off his shoes and belt. Turning to lay down with his back to Talia, Erick fluffed up one of her lumpy couch pillows and folded his arm underneath. He drifted off to sleep listening only to the sound of his breath and the hush of paper every few minutes as Talia turned the pages of her book.
Chapter 94

After Silas learned of Kaui’s plans to put Adriel’s guild members in the peripheral patrols, he struggled to sleep that night. Silas hadn’t even been able to fully articulate how furious he was with Kaui for ignoring his father and thinking so little of Erick, but he knew even if he had been, it was nothing his father needed to hear repeated. It was already a hard enough blow for his father when Silas told him about the rumors Adriel was spreading. So, Silas fumed silently in his bed alcove, spending much of the night trying to think of how he could fix the mess between humans and merfolk.

Most of his initial ideas just involved Erick talking to Kaui and the rest of the shoal. That would be the easy way, to have Erick do all of the talking, but Silas knew his father was right. Erick would have very little influence in the shoal. Consequently, as much as Silas disliked it, he tabled any other thoughts involving him and focused on what he could do specifically. There were very few feasible ways he could do anything, and they wouldn’t be easy either. But he knew that would have been inevitable.

Late the following morning, Silas went to Gale’s house to talk through his ideas, but only found Merise.

“He’s gone to the hunters’ lodge,” Merise said when Silas asked where he went. She was at her kitchen counter in the middle of pickling some fresh herring.

“Really?” Silas’ eyebrows knotted. “Why?” The lodge was where the hunters appraised fish for the market chasm, corralled dolphins between outings, and trained apprentices. Gale sometimes met friends there, but he typically avoided places that reminded him of his father.

Merise looked up from her work to give Silas a halfhearted smile. “He went to learn more about mesmerism songs, to see if the hunters there could teach him anything new about counteracting enchanters misusing them.”

“It’s possible to fight back?” Silas asked, surprised. He could only remember how helpless he felt the two times he heard their songs, when he had been controlled and when Eustace’s crew was killed.

“Yes, but it’s not typically a skill your average person needs to know,” Merise answered. “To resist a song being directed at you is mostly impossible unless you have an exceptionally strong will, but if you can sing a counter song, you can either cancel out its effect or overpower the enchanter.”

Silas tilted his head. “You can stop a mesmerist by using another mesmerism song against them?”
“You could, or you could use a sleeping song, or disrupt their singing with any number of different ways. Rather than fight back against the mesmerist directly, you could also instead redirect the spirits towards a different goal or to disperse them entirely. Enchanters better versed with mesmerism would know much more than me about how to do that.”

“But I can’t do any enchanting,” Silas said, frustrated. “Isn’t there any way that doesn’t need it?”

“Well, I imagine a silencing glyph could be effective if you could figure out a way to quickly place it on them, but otherwise you would just need numbers to overpower a mesmerist,” Merise answered. “They can only enchant up to two or three people at a time.”

“Figures.” Silas scowled at the ground. He knew the prison often used silencing glyphs on enchanters who abused their gift, but the glyph had to either be tattooed onto their chest or etched into a collar around their neck.

“Non-enchanters are certainly at a disadvantage,” Merise said. “The hunters might have better ideas, so you should ask them if you head over there.”

“I might as well.” Silas turned to leave again, but paused on his way to the door. “Oh, right.”

Looking despondent, he said, “I don’t know if you’ve heard about it yet already, but my dad finally got news about Hal the other day.”

“He did?” Merise turned away from the kitchen counter with a worried look.

Silas sighed, hating to be the bearer of bad news. “Yeah.” He told her what happened. Merise nodded, having few words. After a moment of silence, Silas added, “You should also know that Kauí decided what to do with those enchanters. He’s pardoning them. And he’s going to officially employ Adriel’s shifters in the peripheral patrol.” He bit his lip. “My dad isn’t going to be at the formal announcement, but there isn’t anything else he can do.”

Merise’s expression became more withdrawn. “I see,” she said quietly. “Thank you for letting me know.”

“I’m going to talk to Gale to see if there’s anything I can do, but I just… I don’t know.” Silas shook his head. “I feel like we’re the only people left who care about humans at all.”

“I’m sure there are others.” Merise turned back towards her kitchen counter. “It will just be a matter of seeking them out.”

“Maybe.” Silas wondered at that for a moment. “I hope so at least.” He bid Merise goodbye and left.

On Silas’ way to the hunter’s lodge, he saw most of Peleran convening at Temple Park for Kauí’s official announcement. It made his tailfin curl just thinking about how Adriel would be sitting behind Kauí, almost certainly where his father would have normally sat. All of Peleran would see a murderer instead of his father defending the shoal. Silas tried not to think about that fact as he continued swimming.

The hunter’s lodge stood at the very edge of Peleran, marking the divide between the shoal and the open ocean. It was built into a coral mountain overlooking the vast, blue water. Song-forged glass cages floated nearby, buoyed by enchantments and tethered by chains to the ocean floor, but they were rarely used to hold dolphins long-term. Hunters generally preferred to call dolphins in the wild and simply follow them to the best schools of fish, so the cages were only used to keep dolphins available for fast transportation to other shoals.
When Silas arrived, he found Gale talking to a handful of older hunters just outside the lodge. Silas waved as he swam down to greet him.

Gale waved back before he bid the older hunters goodbye. Swimming to meet Silas, he asked, “What’s up?” Bandages were still wrapped over his stitches like a belt, hiding the worst of his injury.

“A lot of bad news, mostly, and stuff I want to talk about,” Silas answered. “Your mom said you were talking to hunters so see if they can help us?”

“Yeah, they couldn’t really tell me anything about mesmerism I didn’t already know,” Gale said, rubbing the back of his head. “I did find out some stuff about the enchanters in Adriel’s guild, though.” He nodded towards the shoal. “We should go back home so I can tell you more.”

“If it’s stuff about Adriel, we should go to Jeb’s to make sure he knows too.”

“Good idea.” Gale gestured for Silas to lead the way, then held out his hand so Silas could pull him along and save him the effort of swimming. “You can tell me about your bad news on the way over.”

“Right.” Silas frowned, taking Gale’s hand. He explained it all again as he swam for both of them.

Unlike Merise, the news about Hal made Gale more angry than withdrawn. Yet after Silas told him about Kaui’s plans, Gale could only tip his head and raise his eyebrows, stating, “Well, he does have a point. Shifters could have stopped those fishermen without killing them.”

“Yeah, but trusting Adriel?”

“I know, it should be a bad idea, but what is the worse Adriel will do?” Gale asked.

Silas rolled his eyes with his whole head, answering, “I don’t know, kill more people? “Make my dad look more like the bad guy?” He looked over his shoulder to face Gale as they continued swimming down into the market chasm. The sound of their conversation flowed into the muted hum of slow business, as nearly all of the usual traffic had gone to Temple Park. “Even if Adriel doesn’t do anything wrong and his shifters do peaceably redirect fishermen, it’ll make it that much harder to prove everything else he’s doing.”

“So you’d rather Adriel hurt more people just to prove you’re right?”

“No.” Silas groaned. “You know what I mean. I just wish Kaui had given the humans a chance before he stuck with Adriel. He’s acting like they’re no better than sharks.”

“Well, currently those trawling boats are actually a lot worse, so…”

Silas narrowed his eyes at Gale. “You’re not helping.”

“I’m just saying that Kaui’s just trying to do what he can.” Gale shrugged. “He hasn’t seen the stuff we have. And honestly, even though you don’t stand with Adriel, to everybody else, Kaui is making a bold move wanting to use shifting instead of enchanting. Any of the hunters could have done what those four enchanters did, and the guys I talked to were all for employing them to protect the shoal. Using shifters says that he does want to meet humans on their own terms, literally on their boats.”

“Except he personally isn’t wanting to do that,” Silas said. “He’s making Adriel’s guild deal with humans for him.”
“Okay, but still. He personally doesn’t have a way to talk to them unless it’s through Erick, and you’ve already said Kaui would at least talk to him when he gets back. My point is that we can work with this. Kaui may have pardoned those enchanters, but he’s also not letting it happen again. See it as a compromise rather than a defeat.”

Frowning, Silas conceded, “Fine.” He lifted up his head as they neared Jeb’s stall and waved. Despite Jeb’s welcoming smile, Silas still couldn’t help but think of the mesmerists who attacked him and Erick every time he visited now. He pushed the memory to the back of his mind and smiled back.

“Morning, lads!” Jeb called as they swam up to his table. Facing Gale, he asked, “How’s that hole in your gut doing?”

“It’s healing fine,” Gale said, looking peeved by Jeb’s choice of words. “I just still have to take it easy for a while.”

Jeb laughed. “Try to enjoy the break. You lads are always running around so much, it’s good to have something slow you down for a bit.”

Silas pouted. “Yeah, but not when we have stuff we need to do.”

“Maybe not, but you never know. A break can always do you some good.” Jeb put his elbow on his table. “Anyway, how can I help you today?”

“Well,” Silas said, “Gale talked to some hunters today and found out some stuff about the enchanters in Adriel’s guild, and I wanted some help talking through what we can do.”

“Come on in then,” Jeb said, waving them into his stall. “What’d you learn?”

As Gale and Silas swam over the table, Gale said, “The main thing I found out is that Silas and I definitely weren’t the first to catch Adriel’s ship-sinkers at work. Most of the hunters had already heard stories about it, but none of them really cared because most of them miss the days merfolk could freely enchant humans. Now that everyone’s talking about Adriel’s guild, though, a lot of hunters are openly admitting to being part of its renegade faction. They’re apparently calling themselves Water Striders.”

Silas’ shoulders sunk in dismay. “They have a name now?”

Jeb tugged on his beard, thoughtful. “Was anyone able to tell you about how to join this faction or who’s leading it?”

“No one could tell me who’s behind the Striders, but they said they could introduce me to someone who can help me join.”

“Seriously?” Silas asked, surprised at their boldness. “Do you think they’d actually accept you?”

“I doubt it,” Gale said. “None of the guys I was talking to knew what we know about Adriel’s guild, but any Strider or Peregrine would probably figure out who I am if I tried playing secret agent.”

“To be expected,” Jeb said, nodding. “The risk wouldn’t be worth the payoff anyways. This all fits with what Monty’s been telling me from the rumor mill. Were you able to find out anything else?”

“Not really.” Gale shrugged. “All of the hunters are basically on Adriel’s side, whether they’re openly with the Striders or not. The gatherers are leaning that way now too because of the trawling
disaster. Even most of my friends aren’t opposed to sinking ships either after what humans did to me and Silas, since I still haven’t told any of them that Erick was human. The only story they keep hearing is the one Adriel is telling.”

“Then they need to hear ours,” Silas said, springing up from his seat. “If they only reason they’re listening to Adriel is because he’s the only voice, we have to speak up.”

“Okay, but how?” Gale asked. “Your dad’s drifting out of range really fast, and just the three of us can’t match all of the people already talking for Adriel.”

“I know, but it’s not just us three.” Gesturing outside, Silas said, “We have your mom and Monty and all of the people they both know. We could make like our own guild, a real one that’ll actually work with humans instead of just pretending, and they can tell everyone how humans are just like us.” Turning to Jeb, Silas asked, “We could do that, right? Monty basically already has a guild with all of the people he knows, so he could make it official really easily.”

Jeb bowed his head, pondering the question. After a minute, he said, “The idea makes sense, but Monty’s not in the trading business like me, and I wouldn’t know where to start if we started trading with humans.”

“We wouldn’t have to figure that out by ourselves,” Silas said. “Erick’s uncle could help. He used to organize all sorts of overseas shipping, and I’ve already been thinking about how a lot of humans would want to get back the things that they lose to the ocean. It would be easy to set up some kind of retrieval service if they wanted us to track down specific things for them.”

Gale raised his eyebrow. “You’re not actually trying to start a new business just to make merfolk like humans again, are you?”

“I—well…” Silas looked somewhat stupefied by the realization. “I guess? Is that really what it sounds like?”

Jeb laughed. “Sure does, lad. You’re thinking like an entrepreneur already.”

“Oh.” Silas half-frowned, looking at the ground. “Well, if that’s how I can get everyone to listen to me, I’m sure we can make it work. There must be plenty of people who are actually interested in what the Peregrines are claiming to be doing. When they all find out it’s not true, they can just join us.”

“Silas, you can’t be serious,” Gale said, facing him in disbelief. “If Monty or Jeb was going to run this, it’d be one thing, but you don’t know anything about running guilds or businesses.”

“Yeah, but I’ll have everyone’s help.”

“But you’ll still have to run it. You’ve never been in charge of anything before, and now you want to do this?”

“Yeah, why shouldn’t I try?” Silas asked, getting annoyed with Gale’s doubts. “The worst that happens is no one listens, and that’s what’s already happening.”

“It can’t really be that simple. You’re talking about recruiting people, lots of people, and if you can’t prove that this’ll be worth their time—”

“We will prove it. I don’t have to figure out everything right now. I just want to get something started now before it’s too late to do anything. Jeb can talk to Monty about my idea, and I can talk to Ivan, and we’ll decide what to do from there. Okay?”
Gale scowled. “Okay, but just be careful. You and your dad keep tackling orcas, and you keep getting bit in the tail for it. I don’t want to keep seeing that.”

“All right,” Silas said. “I’ll talk to him about this too, and I think I’ll see if I can get him to join us when we go talk to Erick tomorrow.” He looked at both Gale and Jeb. “You can both come, right?”

“I really shouldn’t,” Gale said, gesturing to his bandages. “I’m not even really supposed to be out of my house right now.”

“Oh.” Crestfallen, Silas faced Jeb.

The old merman ruefully shook his head. “I’ve plans with my grandson that night, but I can postpone them if you need a travel buddy.”

“Right, I forgot.” Silas waved away his offer. “You don’t have to that.” Jeb had mentioned it to Silas during one of their previous meetings, and Silas knew Jeb had been looking forward to seeing them since they lived halfway across the ocean. “If my dad can’t join me, he’ll just arrange another escort.”

“Sorry,” Gale said. “How long do you plan to be gone?”

“Just one night, probably,” Silas answered. “Camping over at the tide pool was pretty easy last time, and I’m not really worried about finding my way there and back again.”

“That’s good. And this time we shouldn’t have to worry as much about Adriel’s people attacking you again.”

Silas smiled. “Yeah, that’s true.” Then his smile faded. “I just have to worry now if Erick will actually be onboard with all of this.”

“Yeah…” Gale looked similarly concerned. “Good luck with that.”

Chapter End Notes

Most of my delay with this chapter stems from the fact that I didn't entirely know if I wanted Silas to pursue the idea of starting a guild/business or not. On one hand, it's really good to set up direct conflict/competition with Adriel, but on the other hand, it's probably going to set me up for some issues that'll be really hard to resolve later.

Ultimately I went with it because it signals a really big step in Silas' character arc -- he's not just doing what he likes; he's now actively having to lead other people. I want to keep exploring the idea of Silas as a strong leader as I simultaneously have Erick learn to rely on others more. Erick has always had an independent personality, while Silas was very dependent, so this reversal should help them reach more even ground with each other.
Chapter 95

Happy Monday! It's a dark and rainy day for me right now, so it's a fun coincidence that this chapter also begins with rain.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Erick woke the next morning to the sound of rain on the window and oil sizzling on a skillet. Cabinets opened and banged shut and plates clinked onto the counter. The spicy-greasy smell of sausages filled Talia’s apartment.

Rolling over, Erick groaned and wiped his hand over his face. The sun’s light was graciously muted by rain clouds and Talia’s curtains, but the smell of her cooking was overwhelming. He pulled his blanket over his head.

“You awake yet?” Talia asked, putting a mug of coffee and a glass of water on the coffee table beside Erick. She then rested her hands on the couch’s armrest to lean over Erick’s head. “Breakfast is almost ready, sleepyhead.”

Remaining under the blankets, Erick said, “It smells disgusting.”

“Gee, thanks.” Talia righted herself. “I still have a headache too, you know.” As she returned to the kitchen, she said, “Ivan came by earlier, freaking out about you. I made him go back home so you could continue sleeping. Did you actually stay asleep through all that or were you just pretending?”

“I don’t really remember.” Erick vaguely recalled hearing people talking earlier, but could have just as easily believed it was only a dream.

Talia rolled her eyes. “Stupid heavy sleeper. Drink your coffee, it’ll make you feel better.”

“But I don’t want to get up.”

“I didn’t want to get up either. Ivan woke me up way too goddamn early.” The stove clicked as Talia turned off the burners. She put eggs and sausages on two plates and put a piece of toast on each. “Here, breakfast,” she said, putting it down beside Erick’s coffee and water. “Eat up, you ungrateful git.”

Grudgingly, Erick made himself sit up. He winced at the change of position and rubbed his eyes. His head spun. Assaulted again with the too strong smell of sausage, Erick felt bile rise in his throat. He covered his mouth and nearly tripped over his blankets, running to the bathroom. He barely made it to the toilet before throwing up.

Talia sighed, lowering her fork before she even got a chance to take a bite. “Was it the hangover or morning sickness, I wonder?” she mused aloud as she picked back up Erick’s water glass. “Probably both.” She came into the bathroom just as Erick flushed. Setting the glass beside the bathroom sink, she opened up the medicine cabinet. “Need some painkillers?”

“Yes, please,” Erick said, panting over the toilet bowl and trying not to get sick again. “This is the third fucking time this week.”
Talia took out a bottle from the cabinet. “Least it’s not every day yet.” She shook out two pills and set them beside Erick’s glass.

“Oh God,” Erick groaned, “please no.”

Talia snickered wryly. “You’ll get over it.” Closing back up the medicine cabinet, she said, “I can reheat your breakfast whenever you finish here.”

“What’s the point? I’ll just barf it back up.”

“But you’ll still get a little energy out of it before you do.” Talia left the bathroom door mostly closed when she returned to the living room.

“Sure, more energy to keep being sick,” Erick muttered. After a long minute, he managed to stand back up and rinse out his mouth.

After he swished and spat, Erick faced himself in the bathroom mirror. His hair looked unkempt and he had dark eye circles. “God, I look like shit.” He leaned on the edge of the sink as he pushed his fingers through his hair. It was almost getting too long to stay spiked up in the front. “I need a shave and a haircut now.” He wondered for a moment what Silas would think of his growing beard, and then remembered with a jolt that today was the night of the new moon.

“Fuck!” Erick face-palmed.

“Something wrong?” Talia called.

“Nothing,” Erick answered. “I just remembered I’m supposed to meet Silas tonight. I really don’t want to go.”

“Ah.” Talia didn’t have more of a response. She knew Erick had too much to discuss with Silas for him to let Ivan go alone in his stead.

Cursing his luck, Erick knocked back the painkillers and relieved himself before he returned to the living room. He made himself eat as much of his breakfast as he could. Talia left while he ate to go down the hall and use the apartment’s phone to call Ivan’s driver. As they waited, Erick sat with his head resting in his hands. The painkillers had begun to lessen his headache, but he still felt like he would lose his breakfast sooner than later. He knew he would need to get ahold of the nausea medicine the hospital had been giving him if he was going to continue with his pregnancy.

The thought made him remember the abortion medicine still sitting on Talia’s coffee table. His discussion with her last night came back to him blearily, but he recalled enough to know what they said. Did his desperate need to not be pregnant actually outweigh his hesitantly growing wish to have a child of his own? That was really the choice he was making, he dumberly realized. There were plenty of practical and moral reasons to keep or not keep the little life in him, but none of them focused on what just he wanted. He shouldn’t have to keep it because anyone told him to, and he shouldn’t have to give it up either just to continue his life.

His musing reminded Erick of what Merise told him when she had given him the medicine: “You can have a baby and stop merpirates. It doesn’t have to be one or the other.” The advice had rung hollow to him then. Now, as he remembered holding Collin and the gentle, fuzzy feeling that had filled his chest, it became painfully obvious what his choice was always going to be. He had made excuse after excuse to avoid it, but he couldn’t deny it anymore.

Erick picked up the folded packet and returned to the bathroom. He opened it and hesitated a minute as he looked at the dried out capsules. He had been carrying them around for so long. Then,
taking a breath, Erick tipped the packet over the toilet. He exhaled as he flushed them down. A flash of regret crossed his mind as they disappeared, but it was only because it was a waste that they could have helped someone else. Yet he reminded himself that it wasn’t really true. It had helped him. He might never have accepted the little life in him if Merise hadn’t given him the choice.

Talia stared at Erick as he came back out of the bathroom. “Did you just…?”

“I flushed them.” Erick took a shaky breath. “I’m going to have a baby.” The magnitude of his decision then flooded him like a tidal wave. “Oh, God.” He managed to stumble back to the couch before his legs gave out. “Please tell me I’m not going to regret this.”

Talia gaped at him, speechless for a moment. “I mean… If this is what you really wanted, I don’t think you will.”

“Christ, I hope so.”

The driver arrived before long and held out an umbrella to walk Erick to the car. The damp, cool air helped rejuvenate Erick somewhat, and he had to fight the urge to walk out from underneath the umbrella’s protection. The rain continued during the drive back to his uncle’s estate. The butler told Erick that Ivan was waiting for him in the den, so Erick reluctantly went to see him.

Knocking on the doorframe, Erick said, “Hey.”

Ivan jumped upright as soon as he saw his nephew. “Erick.” He remained standing as Erick reluctantly walked into the den. “How are you feeling?”

Erick swallowed hard. “Still sick. Overwhelmed.” He sat down on the couch across from where Ivan had been sitting.

“I see.” Ivan sat back down as well. “Talia told me this morning about the cause of your trouble last night.” He paused. “I wish you had been honest with me about your plans for your evening yesterday.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Erick hid his face in his hand. “I decided to keep it.”

Ivan stiffened, surprised. Carefully, he asked, “You did?”

“Yeah.” Erick sighed, dropping his hands. “I don’t know how I’m going to tell Silas. He thinks I took the medicine weeks ago.”

“Well, it should be good news for him, shouldn’t it?” Ivan asked. “You said he wanted to keep it.”

“I know. It’s just…” Erick shook his head. “What if he doesn’t anymore?”

“I highly doubt that will be the case.”

“If you say so.” Erick didn’t speak for a minute. “Tonight’s the night we’re supposed to meet him again, isn’t it?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Yes. I was going to prepare the tank to transport Silas as soon as I got your approval,” Ivan said. “Do you still wish to bring him here?”

“Yeah. We need him as a witness in Eustace’s trial.” Then, after another moment of thought, Erick added, “I think I’ll also need to talk to him alone about all this. We won’t be able to at the tide
pool, at least for not as long as we’ll probably need.”

“I understand.” Ivan studied the pattern in the rug for a moment. “I will prepare for us to leave then. Please use the rest of the afternoon to rest.”

“Okay.” Erick returned to his room. Before he let himself crawl back into his blankets, he found himself opening his closet to take out his box of old toys. He set it on his desk to rifle through his popguns, wooden boats, tin cars, and a rubber ball. The wooden boats could float in the pool, Erick imagined, as well as the ball. He set them aside and then found his old stuffed goose, Puddles. It had a yellow raincoat and had been patched up several times over the course of his childhood. He had a habit of carrying it around by its neck to let its dangling legs drag across the ground. The poor goose used to have a matching rain hat, but Erick had long since lost it.

Feeling sentimental, Erick brought it with him into bed and wrapped his arms around its plush waist. Its long neck and head rested beside his face on the pillow as he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

My sister thinks I should have made Erick's special stuffed animal a duck or something with more mass like a teddy bear, but I just love the stupid image of his goose's head flopping all over the place, lol. Do you all like Puddles? Or do you also think it should have been a different animal?
Chapter 96

Chapter Notes

We reached 450 kudos! Thank you all for reading and showing your support. I would have abandoned this story a long time ago if it wasn't for your praise and comments, so I'm incredibly grateful that you've stuck with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rain had long since let up by the time Erick and Ivan parked at the cliff overlooking the tide pool, but the ground was still damp. The clouds had opened above the sea, letting the sun’s fiery light play across the ocean’s horizon.

“With any luck,” Ivan said, getting out of the driver’s seat, “Silas will already be waiting for us in the tide pool.” They had traded Ivan’s car for Dunley’s truck for the night, so Ivan went to the back to grab himself the folding chair he had stashed in the truck bed with the half-filled tank.

“Yeah.” Erick stared at the sunset, hesitant to go the cliff’s edge and look down into the tide pool. He still hadn’t decided how he would tell Silas about his little secret. Yet, being that it was the new moon, it would get very dark, very quickly. He already knew they would soon have to use the kerosene lamps Ivan packed.

“Watch your step as we go down,” Ivan said as he went ahead of him. “There aren’t any handrails on the path down to the water, so stay near the cliff wall.”

“Okay.” Erick took a deep breath to steady himself, though it tugged on his stitches and made him more anxious. Silas wasn’t going to be happy when he told him about that.

As they walked down, Erick saw Silas surface and call his name. Erick gave him a weak smile and waved, but then furrowed his brow when Ronan surfaced after him instead of Gale. He hadn’t thought Ronan was able to leave the shoal.

Silas swam right up to the path and pushed himself up as much as he could without taking his gills out of the shallow water. Marveling at Erick having legs and clothes and a surprisingly full beard now, Silas said, “I can’t believe it’s really you. You look so different now.”

Erick couldn’t help but laugh despite himself at that as he knelt down in front of Silas. “This is what I used to look like all the time.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t have a beard before.” Silas then tilted his head. “Why do your ears look weird now too? They’re not like Ivan’s anymore.”

Erick resisted the urge to self-consciously touch them. “It’s one of the side effects of being a merman on land. As for not shaving…” He sighed and glanced back over his shoulder at his uncle, who had already unfolded his chair. “Ivan won’t let me near any blades anymore.”

Silas’ expression dropped into concern. “Why?” Ronan also looked worried as he came up beside his son.

Reluctantly, Erick said, “Adriel put a suicide trigger on me after all.” Gesturing to his stitches
Despite his shirt covering them, he continued, “I stabbed myself with the first knife I saw, and I still feel compelled to do so every time I see one.”

“You almost died?” Silas’ eyes widened. “And you still might?”

“Yeah, but I’m okay now, more or less,” Erick said. “My lung’s still recovering, and I’ve been staying safe with Ivan.”

Ronan sat up and said, “This is still a very serious problem. The mesmerist I’ve been consulting can remove the trigger, but proving Adriel is behind it will be difficult.”

“I know,” Erick said. “With my history too, all the doctors here think I was in control of my hand. Setting the record straight isn’t high on my list of priorities right now, though.”

Ivan came up beside Erick. “It still is on mine.” Facing Ronan, he said, “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of meeting you yet. I am Ivan Mikailov, Erick’s uncle.” He extended his hand. “You are?”

“I’m Ronan, Silas’ father,” he answered under no pretense of pleasantries. “You’re the man who dumped Erick into my care.”

“Ah… Yes.” Ivan awkwardly withdrew his hand. “I’ve been wanting to thank you, and apologize for the trouble I’ve put you through. If you wish to be compensated in any way, I am forever in your debt.”

Ronan humphed. “Yes, of course. The only thing I need right now is for Erick to come back with us. He needs to confirm the identities of the two men who attacked him and Silas so I can actually continue processing them, and we need Erick to talk sense into our leader.”

Erick frowned. “Why do I need to talk to Kauí?”

“Human fishermen dragged their trawling net through one of Peleran’s reef fields and hurt Gale when he and Silas tried to stop them,” Ronan answered. “It’s made all of the shoal terrified that their nets will go through our houses next, and Adriel’s managed to convince Kauí that his guild is the only option to defend everyone. We’re hoping that they’ll handle things peacefully, but I won’t be surprised if they end up killing more people like all those fishermen. One of your crewmen, Eustace, was on that first boat, and I assume he’s made contact with you.”

Erick sat down, stunned. “He did, but I had no idea the shoal would react so badly. Is Gale okay?”

Silas answered, “Yeah, he just wanted to stay home to continue resting. Merise is keeping care of him now.”

Ivan’s expression became grim. “While this news is unfortunate, Erick can’t return to the shoal right now. He’s still recovering from his own injury, and Eustace is being charged with the murder of those men. We need Erick and Silas to prove his innocence. If he’s found guilty, he could be hanged.”

Silas’ shoulders sunk in dismay. “You need me to come to land?”

“Yes,” Ivan said. “You and preferably anyone else who witnessed the enchanters killing his crew. We’re also going to need an unbiased translator or another language pearl, as Erick and I are both too close to Eustace to translate for you.”

Ronan put his arm in front of Silas. “You’re not taking Silas onto land again. It’s not safe.”
“But Dad—”

“Silas, no matter how sturdy the tank they might have for you is, I can’t trust that it won’t break. If that happens, you will die,” Ronan said, facing his son. “You going onto land isn’t like humans crossing the ocean. If they fall overboard from their ships, they can still surface to breathe. How would you survive out of water on land?”

Silas lowered his head. Quietly, he said, “I don’t know.”

Erick gripped his hand against his leg. “Ronan, he wouldn’t stay in the tank we used to bring him to land the first time. My uncle converted his swimming pool into an aquarium. I’ve swam in it myself already. It’s set in the ground, so there aren’t any glass walls to break. I know the trip there and back has some risk, but Silas has made it before.”

“Can we not just testify from the ocean?” Ronan asked. “Ask your judges for special accommodations. If need be, I will fill out any paperwork they want to the best of my ability.”

“We can see what we can do, but there are other things I need to talk to Silas about.” Erick gave Silas an apprehensive look. “Things I’d really rather discuss in private.”

“Like what?” Ronan asked. “If it can’t wait, I can give you two space.”

Erick felt his face reddening, and he was suddenly thankful that he hadn’t been able to shave yet. He wouldn’t have been able to stand it if they could have seen him blushing too. “I don’t think we’ll have enough time tonight.”

Ivan stepped in then, saying, “Erick, you might as well try. I can talk to Silas’ father while you two figure out whether or not Silas even wants to come back home with us. Though it would be inconvenient if he doesn’t, we will make due.”

Erick swallowed hard. “Okay then.” He paused. “I think I’d rather talk to Silas underwater. Can you get the towel from the truck?”

“Certainly.” Ivan headed back up the path.

Silas watched him leave before looking at Erick again. “Should I be worried about whatever you want to talk to me about?”

Erick averted his eyes. “No. At least I hope not.” He began unbuttoning his shirt, feeling awkward despite the fact that he had spent more time around Silas naked than he had while dressed. He laid his shirt on Ivan’s chair and then sat down to pull off his boots while Ivan came back down with his towel and one of the kerosene lamps. Its warm glow flickered in the waning light of the sun. The dark ocean glimmered under the gold and vermillion sunset.

As Erick wrapped the towel around his waist so he could pull off his pants, Silas asked, “How does the glyph work?”

“Just like this.” Erick set aside his pants with his shirt and carefully stepped into the tide pool, wary of sharp rocks and sea creatures. Reluctantly, since the water was too shallow to simply sit down to submerge himself, Erick bent forward to go under. Like before, the water burned his nose and made him cough, but his tail quickly returned. He turned around to lay on his back and take a few deep breaths to get used to water going through his gills again.

“Wow, that was fast,” Silas said. “Did you get your legs that fast too?”
Erick sat back up and pushed back his hair. “Yeah.” He pulled off the towel and wrung it out before he handed it over to Ivan. “Shifting between the two really isn’t that pleasant, though.”

Ivan hung Erick’s towel on the corner of his chair. “Try not to be too long,” Ivan said, sitting down. In English, he then asked Erick, “Should I tell Silas’ father about your decision? It may help sway his opinion, since I assume that is what you want to talk to Silas about.”

Erick grimaced, and Silas looked between them in confusion. After a moment, Erick said, “Go ahead. I don’t want to have to explain twice, and I don’t really want to see his reaction if he’ll be mad.”

Ivan nodded. “Very well.” He switched back to mertongue. “I’ll be waiting here until you’re ready to return.”

“Okay.” Erick slipped back underwater. “Come on, let’s get out of the tide pool.”

Silas followed Erick as they swam out. “What did Ivan just ask you?”

“I’ll explain in a minute.” Erick blinked in the darkening water. “Did you and Ronan bring any lamps?”

“Yeah, they’re with our sleeping bags.” After they exited the tide pool, Silas swam down to his and his father’s already anchored sleeping bags. They hung from the wall like floating hammocks. The blue-green glow of their two glass ball lamps was all that illuminated the quickly darkening water. “We got here early because we knew it’d be dark tonight.” Silas sat down on his sleeping bag. “Are we far enough away here?” he asked, glancing at wall of kelp filling the ocean ahead of them.

Erick followed his gaze and then looked back up towards the tide pool. “I guess so.”

“All right then.” Silas patted the spot next to him for Erick to join him. “Tell me what’s up.”

Chapter End Notes

So, how do you all think Silas will react to Erick's news? ;)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 97

Chapter Notes

Since I'm very likely to forget to update on Monday, I'm posting next week's update early. Enjoy!

Erick pressed his hands over his eyes and then dragged his fingers down to press them together in front of his mouth. “God, I don’t know how to say this.” He remained floating in the water in front of Silas, unwilling to sit next to him on the sleeping bag anchored to the wall beneath the tide pool.

“Is it about us?” Silas’ heart beat more rapidly. The only reason he could possibly think Erick would have to talk to him alone would be if Erick was about to confess that he actually did like Silas back, but Silas couldn’t even dare to hope for something that amazing. It was far more likely that Erick had other bad news about Adriel, but Silas couldn’t fathom what news he wouldn’t want to say in front of Ronan.

“Yes, sort of.” Erick put his hand on the anchor stake holding Silas’ sleeping bag back to stop himself from sinking down to the sandy bottom of the kelp forest. He took a deep breath and exhaled. “I never actually ended up taking that abortion medicine. I flushed it.”


Erick turned away, still gripping the anchor stake, and looked down at his waist. Guiltily, he whispered, “Pregnant, yeah. I started getting sick right after Adriel took me. I didn’t realize why until after I went to the hospital.”

Silas gaped at him, wide-eyed. “Gods… And you’re not—you’re keeping it?” He sat forward. “You’re really okay with it now?”

Erick hunched in his shoulders. “I don’t know. But I couldn’t…” He shook his head. “I didn’t want to lose it.” He put his fingers over his stomach. “I decided I do actually want it. But I am still terrified about this. There’s so much that can go wrong, and I’ve already fucked up so much.” He tried to swallow back the lump in his throat as he felt himself getting close to tears again. “You’ve wanted it this whole time, but I didn’t…” He broke. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh boy.” Silas got up and hugged Erick. “It’s okay.” He felt about ready to cry himself, though he didn’t know if it was because he was happy, horrified, or simply overwhelmed by the news. Regardless, he pressed his face against Erick’s chest to hold back his tears. “I should be the one that’s sorry. It’s my fault. If I hadn’t given in that night, you wouldn’t have to be going through all of this.”

Erick hugged Silas back tightly. “I wish it could’ve been you instead.”


Erick leaned down to hide his face in Silas’ hair. “I’m sorry I’m such a wreck. I keep causing you
so much trouble.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Silas said, lifting up his head to face Erick. “I’m just glad you’re letting me help.” He gave him a soft smile.

Erick met his eyes and his breath caught in his throat. Silas’ amber eyes seemed to glimmer in the pale glow of his algae lamps. His golden hair floated around his round face, swaying slightly like the kelp surrounding the cliff wall. Threading his fingers through Silas’ hair, Erick pulled Silas under the crook of his neck and held him against his chest with his other arm. “Christ,” he whispered. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

Silas made a small sound of surprise, but smiled again against Erick’s skin. “Everyone deserves a little good luck every once in a while. Yours just took a little extra time.”

Erick continued holding Silas close for another minute before he finally let him go. With a shaky breath, he said, “We should go back now. Will your dad be okay going back to the shoal without you?”

“He should be fine,” Silas answered. “It’s not ideal for him to travel alone, but he came with me armed. I should get my camping gear packed back up first, though.”

“You do that then. Ivan’s probably told your dad about all this by now too. That’s what he was asking me before we left, if I wanted him to tell Ronan.”

“Oh.” Silas frowned somewhat as he considered that.

“Is your dad going to be okay with, well, this?” Erick asked, gesturing to his waist. “He never told me what he thought about it.”

“I mean, if we’re both onboard with it now, he’ll have to support us.” Silas handed Erick the algae lamp so he could begin removing the anchors holding his sleeping bag. “It will be his grandkid, after all.” Silas then faltered. “Gods, my dad is going to be a grandfather. He’s not old enough to have grandkids yet. I’m not old enough to have a kid yet.”

Erick burst out laughing, though it had a frantic edge. “You think I haven’t thought of that already?”

“Yeah, but like…” Silas held out his hands, as if he had tried and failed to catch a ball. “Holy crap, this is actually happening now. I was always the baby, but now you’re going to have the baby and I’m just…”

“Overwhelmed?” Erick said, sharing the feeling himself again. “Yeah. You’re just now only getting the half of it.”

“No kidding.” Silas let his hands fall. “Like, I’m happy. I really, really am. And I am definitely freaking out. But man, this… It’s going to take a while to get used to it for real this time.”

Erick rolled his eyes, getting irritated now that Silas was already coming undone. “Well, you better get used to it fast, because I don’t think I’m going to be able to handle all this if you can’t. I’m not going to be happy until it’s all over.”

Taken aback by Erick’s sudden frustration, Silas asked, “You’re not even a little excited?”

“No, I’m still too busy freaking out about whether or not this thing is going to survive another eight months. Do you realize how fucking close I got to ending it? How many times I almost took that
“I—Well, yeah,” Silas said, unsure how to respond. “I never said any of this would be easy, but—”

“Not easy? You’re getting all giddy while I’ve been barely keeping it together.”

Silas gaped at him, bewildered. “Am I supposed to be unhappy then?”

“No, but obviously this is going to be harder for me than you, so you don’t have to rub it in.”

“I’m not trying to rub in anything. Why are you getting mad at me?”

“Because!” Erick pressed his palms over his eyes. “I don’t know.” He shook his head. “It’s probably just the fucking pregnancy again, messing with my head. I wish this thing would just poof into existence so I wouldn’t have to keep dealing with this.”

“You’d rather keep care of a baby than cope with mood swings?” Silas asked, looking at him in disbelief.

“It’s the mood swings, crying, being sick, everything,” Erick answered. “At least with a baby I can give it to somebody else to get a break.”

“I guess that’s true, but still. I’m nowhere near ready for that yet.” Silas faced his sleeping bag again. “Look, how about I just finish getting my stuff together so we can keep talking about this on land? Is that okay?”

Erick sighed. “Yeah.”

Silas soon put his sleeping bag back away into his salvaging bag and they swam back up to the tide pool. Erick hung back behind Silas as they surfaced, still worried about what Ronan would think.

Ivan spotted them first, making Ronan turn around to face them. Silas’ father seemed to be in a state of shock as he looked at Erick.

“So, Dad…” Silas smiled sheepishly. “It’s okay for me to go to land now with Erick, right? Since Ivan told you?”

Ronan made a long-suffering sigh before he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, but we need to have a very specific, overdue kind of conversation first before you get any crazy ideas.”

Silas blushed, cringing. Erick very pointedly tried to pretend he wasn’t listening. “Dad, we’re not—it’s not like that between us.”

“Maybe not yet, but there are other things you’ll need to know about caring for Erick now that you’re expecting,” Ronan looked at Erick. “I should really be giving this talk to you too.”

“I know plenty already about safe sex, thank you,” Erick said, flustered. “Silas can tell me whatever you think we should know about anything else.”

“Eh?” Silas held out his hands. “But I don’t want to have this talk either!”

Ronan gave Silas a stern look. “Silas, if you’re serious about becoming a father, you need to be comfortable having these kinds of discussions. Letting me advise you is the least you can do to help put my mind at ease and show Erick that you will be able to provide for him.”

Silas shrunk back. “Okay,” he said, repentant.
Erick looked more uncomfortable rather than reassured, as Ronan’s wording made him feel like they were talking more about a feeble housewife rather than another man.

“While you two talk,” Ivan said, “Erick and I will prepare the tank for Silas. We left it half empty so we could fill it with fresh water here.”

“All right,” Ronan said. He gestured for Silas to join him as Erick swam back to Ivan.
Chapter 98

Chapter Notes

I'm in the midst of midterms and I've already had about two and a half breakdowns in as many days. Send me your good vibes so I can make it until Thanksgiving break.

“Silas, the tank’s ready,” Erick called as he walked back down the path, feeling winded. His chest ached again. He had to go back and forth for close to an hour, carrying buckets of seawater to Ivan as he stood on the truck bed to fill the tank. They had underestimated how long it would take, and Erick regretted not having filled it up completely before they left. They had reasoned that only filling the tank halfway would make emptying again easier if Silas didn’t come back with them, and if he did, filling half of it with ocean water would help Silas acclimate to the pool’s aseptic water. They didn’t know if it was actually necessary or not, especially since Erick had no problem shifting in it, but Ivan had been told by the man who sold him the live rock that it was important to pay attention to water changes when introducing fish into a new area.

“Oh.” Silas folded his arms at the bottom of the path. Waves swept over his shoulders and edged towards Erick’s boots. He found himself staring at Erick’s stitches. Though it wasn’t the first time Silas had seen his chest injured, it was still an unnerving sight. It yet was another line to match the long scar Erick got defending him. “If you’re that tired, you should ask Ivan to get me instead.”

Erick shook his head. “No, he’s getting too old to do any heavy lifting. He said he had trouble carrying you down here last time with Dunley, so I don’t want to make him carry you uphill. It’ll be hard enough for him to help you get into the tank when I get you to the truck.”

“Okay, if you’re certain…” Silas looked up the path as Ivan came down.

“Are you ready to go?” Ivan asked, looking at Silas and Ronan as he came over.

“Whenever Erick’s ready,” Silas said.

“When should I expect my son’s return?” Ronan asked.

Ivan looked to his nephew. Erick answered, “I’m not sure. Ivan and I planned to make my debut two days from now, but I’m not sure how things will go from there. It all depends on how everyone reacts to seeing merfolk.”

“I see,” Ronan said. “We need a way to keep in touch then. Ivan, can you read and write in mertongue?”

“Yes, though I only learned it to read ledgers.”
“That should be enough for short letters. If we made some sort of mailbox here, I can send guards to check it for me every few days. Would you be able to have someone do the same?”

“That certainly, but I don’t have waterproof writing materials anymore,” Ivan said. “Can you provide us some?”

“I can do that.” Ronan looked around the tide pool. “Only question then is where to put the box. This area is only accessible to us during high tide, but I don’t want to make you or your people have to swim out if we place it closer to the ocean.”

Ivan considered this dilemma for a minute. “It may be best to keep it near the path then, but another issue is this area is publicly accessible. I wouldn’t want tide poolers to come across any of our messages and think it’s for some kind of game.”

Silas frowned at both of them. “I guess we can just agree to meet again in a week and try to figure out something then. Would that be enough time? Or too long? We don’t have anything we can use as a mailbox right now anyway.”

“That is true,” Ivan said. “I’ve also gotten quite used to making the drive out here. Continuing to meet like this is hardly an inconvenience for me.”

“It is a much longer trip for us,” Ronan said. Facing his son, he asked, “If you get done within a week, will you and Erick be able to make the trip back on your own?”

“I’m bringing my salvaging stuff, so I don’t see why not,” Silas answered. “Erick, do you think you’d be able to swim back with me? If not, I’d have to wait until either my dad or Gale comes back here.”

Erick’s gut reaction was no because of how he panicked with Adriel on the way to land. Yet he shrugged and said, “I think so, but only because I’d be with you.”

Silas felt happy bubbles at that. “Oh.” He tried not to smile too much. Looking back at his father, he said, “Well, let’s plan on meeting here again in a week then, but if we get done here early, we’ll come back home so you don’t have to make the trip back out here. Is that good with you?”

“I suppose it is the best plan we have for now,” Ronan said.

As Erick got up, Ivan said, “I will be sure to keep good care of your son.” Ivan then took Erick’s shirt and the folding chair.

Erick knelt down in front of Silas. “Hook your arms around my neck. I’m going to have a hard time picking you up otherwise.”

“Okay.” Somewhat anxious now to be leaving, Silas looked at his father. “I’ll see you again soon.”

“Just be careful while you’re gone,” Ronan said, looking at Silas and then at Erick and Ivan. “Since Adriel’s already tried to kill Erick once, you should all stay on the lookout for another attempt. I’m going to update Kauai about all the developments here on land. He won’t be happy that we’re strong-arming him into opening talks with humans, but we knew it would have to happen sooner or later.”

“Thank you,” Erick said. “As soon as Eustace is in a better place with his trial, I’ll talk to Kauai. If you can get language pearls too, I can have my friends charge them with English so you, Silas and Kauai will be able to talk to people here on land without us.”
“Being that this is a matter of international diplomacy, Kauí should have no issue getting pearls,” Ronan said. “We will have people here charge some with mertongue so your officials on land can also speak with us.”

“Perfect,” Ivan said. “I will be sure to identify whoever will be most in need of these pearls before you reunite with Erick and Silas.”

“So, I guess it’s time for me to go now,” Silas said. After giving his father a final hug goodbye, Silas gave Ivan his salvaging bag and ducked back underwater to take a deep breath. He came back up and knit his fingers together behind Erick’s neck.

Erick put his hands underneath Silas’ back and tail and lifted him up with a grunt. “You’re heavier than I thought you’d be,” he said, turning to go up the path. Glancing down at Silas’ tail, which nearly touched the ground despite being folded over Erick’s arm, Erick added, “You’d be lighter with legs, I bet.”

Silas didn’t speak as he clung onto Erick. Water seeped out of his gills uncomfortably quickly, and Erick’s labored breathing made Silas worried and guilty to make him work so hard when he should be resting.

Soon Erick reached the truck and sat Silas down on the truck bed. Ivan helped him up into the tank as Erick caught his breath again. The second Silas slipped back down into the tank, he took grateful gulps of water and faced Erick through the glass. He waved at him with a smile.

Erick looked up and smiled back tiredly. “You look like an oversized goldfish,” he said with a chuckle.

Silas tilted his head. “What?” he asked, as he couldn’t understand Erick through the glass.

Erick gestured with two fingers for Silas to swim back up to the top of the tank. After he surfaced, Erick repeated himself.

“Oh,” Silas said with a laugh. “I can’t understand you at all when I’m underwater and you’re not.” He noticed Ivan picking up a tarp from the truck bed. Frowning, he asked, “Do you have to cover me up?”

“Yes,” Ivan answered. “I don’t want to attract any unwanted attention before we’re ready.”

Erick asked, “Can we leave a little bit uncovered so he can see us in the driver’s cab?”

Ivan looked like he would say no, but both Silas and Erick’s puppy dog expressions gave him pause. “Oh, very well then.”

“Yay!” Silas lifted his hands into the air and let himself sink back under. Ivan closed the grate on the top before he draped the tarp over it, leaving just enough of the tank exposed to be level with the truck’s back window.

After Erick got back into the passenger seat, he turned around and waved at Silas. Silas waved back and grinned.
Through the drive, Silas stared through the driver’s window, enthralled by seeing human city streets for the first time. Cars and buildings Erick had never looked twice at before appeared new and strange through Silas’ eyes. Rather than the organic, fluid structures of the shoal, Anvil Point was all sharp angles and straight roads.

As Ivan pulled into his estate, he drove past the koi pond and fountain to another road leading behind the house to a door closer to the natatorium and garden. While Ivan went to unlock the door and take in Silas’ salvaging bag, Erick pulled off the tarp from Silas’ tank.

Silas surfaced as soon as Erick moved the grate. “We’re here!” he said, holding the tank rim, about ready to leap out. “This place is amazing!”

Erick smiled at Silas’ enthusiasm as he took off his shirt again to keep it from getting wet. “Yeah, it’s home sweet home. Can you get out on your own?”

“Yeah, but you’re still going to need to carry me inside.” Silas took a deep breath underwater before he swung himself out of the tank and clung onto the edge. He reached out his other hand to put it around Erick’s neck again, and Erick helped set him down onto the truck bed. After Erick hopped off the truck, he picked back up Silas and hurried to get him inside.

Erick unceremoniously dumped Silas into the deep end of pool. He grinned as he watched Silas dart around the live rocks and check out the improved tent over the sponge bed, where Ivan had dropped his salvaging bag into the water. After a minute, Silas surfaced again with the biggest grin Erick had seen yet.

“You did all this for me?” Silas asked. “It’s amazing!”

Erick laughed. “It’s all thanks to Ivan, really,” he said, looking at his uncle as he headed back outside to get everything off the truck. “He set it up for both of us.”

“It’s perfect.” Silas cupped his hands around his mouth. “Thank you, Ivan!”

Ivan smiled with a humble nod to him. “It was my pleasure.” To Erick, he said, “I’m going to need your help in a bit to empty the tank.”

“All right,” Erick said, though he only had eyes for Silas.

“No, come swim with me!” Silas dove under to do a backflip back out of the water. “You’ll need to fill it again when we go back anyway.”

“But Dunley will need his truck back before then,” Erick said. With a sly grin, he added, “And I still haven’t shown you the best part here yet.” Silas tilted his head. “Come look.” Erick walked around to the shallow end of the pool and pointed to a table set up by the door into the house. Set
on top was a large glass bowl with blue gravel, a silk plant, and two goldfish inside. One was solid orange, and the other was dark orange and white.

Silas gasped. “Are those—?”

“Yeah, goldfish. Which one do you want to name Junior? Ivan got two so they wouldn’t get lonely.”

Silas was at a loss for words, overcome by the fact that Erick not only got him a goldfish, but also remembered what he would name it. That his uncle thought to get two was even more endearing.

Pointing to the solid orange one, Erick said, “I think this one looks more like you, so I’ve been thinking of naming the other Peaches, since it kind of looks like peaches and cream.” He translated what peaches were to explain the comparison.

Silas nodded vigorously. “I like it!” He swam up to the edge of the pool. “Can you bring their bowl over here so I can see them closer?”

“Sure.” Erick carefully picked up the bowl and set it down in front of Silas.

“They’re so pretty.” Silas nearly had his face pressed up against the glass. “Can they swim in the pool with me?”

“No, they’d die in saltwater,” Erick answered. “They’re just for looking at.”

“Aww…” Silas poked his finger into their bowl to try to pet them, but Junior and Peaches swam away. Silas laughed. “They don’t like me very much yet.”

“Well, you are a way bigger fish than them.” Erick stared at Silas with a soft smile as he watched the goldfish. “Even though I’m sure you’d like to keep them here, they’ll be safer if we keep them on the table.”

Silas pouted. “Are you sure? I can’t see them as well up there.”

“I mean…” Silas’ pout defeated Erick’s resolve. “I guess we can set up a little partition for them so nobody can accidentally knock them over.”

“Yes!” Silas threw his hands out of the water, splashing Erick.

“Hey!” Erick covered the top of the fish bowl, though none of the pool water got inside. “Watch where you’re splashing.”


Erick scowled at Silas. “You got me wet too.”

“Well I want to make you wet.” Silas crossed his arms and stuck out his tongue, pouting.

Erick blushed as his mind went to dirty thoughts, though he knew Silas only meant that he still wanted him to join him in the pool. “Well I can’t right now,” Erick stood back up. “I still have to go help Ivan with the tank. If there’s anything else you think you’ll need, let me know as soon as we’re done.”

“Okay.” Silas watched Erick leave, staring in fascination at his legs and butt. How Erick managed to stay balanced on two legs, he had no clue. He hadn’t been able to look much while he had his father’s special talk, and now he couldn’t help but wonder what Erick’s legs would look like
without pants. The thought made him blush, however, so he dove back underwater to hide before Erick could notice his embarrassing thoughts.

While Silas waited for Erick, he took out his algae lamp from his salvaging bag and hung it in the back of the tent. Though he was surprised to find that the sponge bed and pillows had been covered with sheets, he found it a welcome addition to his sleeping arrangements. The tent around him almost felt like an oversized sleeping bag, so he laid himself down quite comfortably.

By the time Erick finally finished helping Ivan get the tank off Dunley’s truck, Erick was thoroughly exhausted. He hadn’t even done any of the heavy lifting because Ivan had enlisted the help of his servants, but it had stressed him out supervising the ordeal now that he knew Silas would need the tank to get back to the ocean. If Erick had been smart, he would have just told Ivan to handle it all without him, but it had worried him too much to leave it in Ivan’s hands.

Ivan closed up the back of the truck. “Now we can finally get to bed,” he said, turning to go back inside. “I will trade this back for my car in the morning.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Erick walked with him back into the natatorium. “I’m going to see if Silas wants anything before I head up.”

“All right,” Ivan said. “Don’t stay up too late. You’ve overworked yourself too much tonight and had a rough morning, so you need to catch up on your rest.”

Erick rolled his eyes, but smiled. “Okay, I will.”

After Erick bid Ivan good night, he knelt down at the edge of the deep end of the pool. “Silas!” he called, facing the water. He didn’t see the fiery-tailed merman, so he knew Silas must have hidden in the tent. Erick understood then why his uncle used the pool net to wake him up. He knew he could do the same to get Silas out of the tent, but the impulse to be mischievous won out over his good sense. Erick hurried out of the natatorium to get a towel.

Chapter End Notes

Hehehe... Who else is as excited as Erick?
Chapter Notes

Rather than get my schoolwork done, I worked on writing again. However, it was for a different story I may or may not post here. It's about two apprentice wizards who decide to bang each other in the storeroom of an antique shop that belongs to one of their masters, and they accidentally release an incubus in the process. I'm hoping to keep it to under 10 chapters, but given how long-winded I am, who knows how long it’ll end up.

Should I post the first chapter now even though I have nothing else written? Or wait? This also goes for the alternate timeline of this merfolk story, since I've written several chapters of it now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Erick returned to the natatorium, he quickly stripped down until he was wearing nothing but a towel and Silas’ locket. Ever so slowly to avoid making a sound, Erick walked down into the pool and shifted back into his tail. He untied his towel and draped it over the stairs’ handrail before he glided down to the deep end.

Erick grinned as he reached for the curtains in front of the tent. Yanking them back, he shouted, “Boo!”

“Ah!” Silas jumped. “Erick!”

Erick laughed. “I thought you were getting too comfortable.”

“You jerk!” Silas lunged out at Erick to playfully hit his chest, trying very hard to look mad as a smile tugged at his lips.

Erick let him get one hit in before he caught him in his arms. “Gotcha!” He continued laughing as Silas tried to wriggle out of his clutches. “You’re still too easy to catch.”

“Not fair!” Silas twisted around to pout at Erick’s face. “I can’t fight back now that you’re having our baby.”

Erick reddened and let Silas go. “You don’t have to remind me.”

“Ha, I’m free!” Silas twirled away from Erick and fanned out his arms and tail to float above him. “I probably wouldn’t have been able to do much if I did fight back, though.” Silas let himself drift back down to sit in front of the tent. “My dad said you should only be about two months pregnant, so we won’t have to really worry about hurting the baby until you start showing.”

Erick settled down onto the sand in front of Silas. Turning to lay his back against the pool wall, he crossed his arms. Hesitantly, he then asked, “When will that be?”

“In about another month or so,” Silas answered. “Mermen tend to show later than mermaids because they have stronger stomach muscles, but when they do, it happens pretty quickly.”

“I only have a little more than a month left?” The thought made Erick feel faint.
“Yeah? It won’t be that big of a bump at first,” Silas said. “You’d still be able to swim around just fine until at least your last month.”

“But I’ll still be able to see it then. Other people will be able to see it.” Erick pushed his hand through his hair. “In two days I’m supposed to show off my tail to over a dozen people so they can take me seriously about merpiracy and Eustace’s case, and I know I’m going to have to keep parading myself around like that if I’m going to continue to get support. But if I’m going to get a bump in a month, how am I supposed to do any of that?”

“Well, it’s not like it’s going to obviously look like a baby bump,” Silas said, trying to sound reassuring. “Nobody will know what it is at first unless you tell them. And I can be with you when you show off your tail. Let me be all the proof you need to make people believe you.”

“Still.” Erick folded his arms again. “I don’t want to have to look in the mirror and see it.” He turned his head away. “I hate that it’s made my ears look so weird, and it freaks me out enough already whenever I look between my legs now. That bump is just going to be another reminder of how fucked up my body’s become.”

“What do you mean?” Silas asked, pursing his eyebrows together.

“I have parts for both guys and girls down there instead of just guy parts now,” Erick answered. “The whole reason I have to worry about having a baby is right there, practically mocking me every fucking time I have to use the bathroom or get undressed to shower or shift.”

Silas considered that for a moment, trying to understand. “I guess being reminded of that would be annoying, but you’ll probably get used to it.”

“But I don’t want to have to get used to it,” Erick said. “It doesn’t feel like it’s supposed to be there, just like how it doesn’t feel like I’m supposed to have this tail. It’s just so wrong. It makes me feel literally sick when I think too much about it, like I’ve been mutilated instead of just changed.”

Silas faced his hands, biting his lip. “Is that really how you still feel about your tail too?” Quieter, he added, “I thought you were okay with it now.”

“I don’t hate it as much as I used to since I can shift now, but I still wish I could keep my legs when I’m breathing underwater. Even if it is better for swimming, it’s weird not being able to move the way I normally would.”

“Oh.” Silas frowned. Folding his tail underneath himself, he asked, “Does it bother you when you look at other people’s tails?”

“No, not really anymore.” Erick glanced over at Silas. His eyes lingered on his fiery crimson and gold scales. “Yours suits you for whatever reason. It’s just looking at mine that always makes me feel off.” He paused, thoughtful. “It’s probably because you swim so much better than me. You’re always like a wind ribbon, but I still swim like a log.”

Silas blushed at the praise, smiling somewhat before looking downcast again. “You don’t swim that badly. You’ve gotten a lot better.”

“I suppose, but it’s still never going to feel completely natural to me,” Erick said.

“Hmm…” Silas leaned back on his hands. “Is there anything I can do to try to help you feel more normal about all this?”
“I don’t know.” Erick took a minute to think it over. “I guess just don’t ever act like I’m an invalid or anything. I want your help because it’ll be your kid too, but I don’t want to feel like I’ll be the mom in all this.”

Silas tilted his head. “Why? You are going to be maternal father, but aside from carrying the baby, it’s not any different from being the paternal father.”

“For merfolk, maybe, but on land, mothers are usually expected to just stay home and do nothing but keep care of their kids. It’s the fathers that go to work and make sure they all have a roof over their heads and food on the table.”

“That’s weird. Maternal parents usually end up spending the most time with their kids, but everybody they know will almost always try to pitch in and help keep care of them. I used to go back and forth between my house and Gale’s house especially when I was growing up since Merise was always taking care of my maternal dad, but I also spent a lot of time with my dad’s friends from work.”

Erick looked surprised. “It never bothered you being in so many different houses all the time?”

“Not really.” Silas shrugged, confused why Erick thought he would be. “I would’ve gotten bored being stuck in only one house, and it was through my dad’s friends that I ended up meeting Jeb. It’s important for merfolk kids to be socialized like that so they feel like a part of the shoal.”

Erick faced his stomach. “So you think we should trust our kid with everybody like that?”

“I don’t see why we wouldn’t. I know Jeb and Merise would definitely love to babysit again.”

“But what about my life here on land?” Erick asked. “If we can get tattoos for everybody, I’d like to continue living here, with you maybe, somehow…” He trailed off towards the end, realizing he was thinking of having Silas move in with him more like a partner rather than a roommate.

“Really?” Silas smiled as he considered the possibility. “That could be fun, but I don’t think I’d want to live here permanently even with legs. I’d miss everybody back home too much.”

“That’s understandable,” Erick said, becoming quiet. He remembered Talia chastising him for not telling Silas about his feelings, but he still couldn’t muster the courage to say anything. It had been easier to admit he was pregnant than admit he liked Silas. The fact that it was still somehow easier to talk about their future child and not their relationship greatly annoyed Erick.

Silas took Erick’s quietness for tiredness. “Are you starting to fall asleep already?”

“Huh?” Erick looked up at Silas, but averted his gaze again. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“You should go to sleep then,” Silas said. “The bed here is pretty comfy, so I’ll be okay.”

“All right.” Erick sat forward off the pool wall. “Do you want raw fish for breakfast, or would you like to try the kind of food I normally eat?”

“Definitely your food,” Silas answered. “I want to see and try everything here. If we can, I’d really like to go for another drive around town too.”

Erick chuckled at the thought. “I think your dad would kill Ivan if we did anything that reckless.”

“So?” Silas pouted. “Ivan seemed like a fine driver to me.”
“He might be, but not all the drivers on the road are. You’re not going to puppy-dog-eyes your way this time.”

Silas pouted more. “I don’t get what that means, but we’ll still see about that.”


Silas’ face lit up and he sat forward. “Can you get me one?”

“Silas, no.” Erick backed away. “Please. I can’t just keep getting you every kind of pet you want.”

“But counterpoint,” Silas said, pointing at Erick, “Ivan’s rich, so I can ask him.”

“No,” Erick said, exasperated. “I can see about borrowing somebody’s dog, but I’m not making Ivan adopt one just so you can look at it for like a week.”

“But you got fish for me.”

“Fish are easy to keep care of. Dogs are not.”

Silas crossed his arms petulantly. “It can’t be that hard,” he muttered.

Erick groaned, shaking his head. Smiling despite himself at Silas’ childishness, he said, “Just wait until you get legs. Then I just might actually make you keep care of one.”

“Then you better hurry up and kick Adriel’s butt.”

“Well, I will then.” Erick stuck up his chin at Silas and met his eyes in a brief staring contest before they both burst into laughter. Sighing, Erick then said, “God, I really hope I will.”

“Just have faith.” Silas shrugged, half-smiling. “The gods will make it all work out somehow.”

“Maybe, if they don’t kill me first.” Erick got up. “Goodnight then, I guess.”

Silas swam up to give Erick a hug. “Night.”

Erick blushed and awkwardly hugged him back. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Chapter End Notes

Erick's insecurities are such a cockblock, lol.

Let me know if you want to see my other bits of writing, either for the alternate timeline of this story or the random wizard story.
Chapter 101

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I'm happy to announce that I've just put up the first two chapters of the story about apprentice wizards I talked about last week. It's rated explicit since every chapter features sexual scenes, but I'm trying to weave in some semblance of a plot as well. My plan is to keep it under 10 chapters so I can actually have a completed work under my belt. (However, it's already about 9,000 words, and I'm getting quite attached to these new characters.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The following morning after Silas settled into Ivan’s pool, Erick and Ivan brought a table and chairs into the natatorium to have breakfast with him. Erick told Silas about everything that had happened on land, reluctantly admitting that he had gotten drunk before deciding to keep his pregnancy.

Silas sighed at this news, frowning, as he lay against the edge of his pool with his arms folded over the ledge. His tail had been lazily swaying back and forth behind him, but he let it sink and rest against the wall. On the floor nearby sat his breakfast plate.

“I know it was dumb,” Erick said, facing the table rather than look at Silas or his uncle. “But I really thought I wasn’t going to keep it. We had so many other things to worry about, and still do, and it just seemed like the best way to get it over with.” He then glanced at Silas, but shrunk when he saw the merman’s conflicted expression. Erick put his hand on the side of his face as if it could hide him from his shame. “I’m sorry. If there’s anything I can do to make it better, I’ll do it.” He curled in his fingers and pressed his knuckles against his temple. “I know I’m awful with so much stuff, but—”

“Erick, you’re not awful,” Silas said, rolling his eyes with a brief, forgiving smile. “Whatever happens, it’ll be okay. I understand.” He shrugged, looking back down at his arms. He rubbed the rough pool ledge with his finger, thinking back to their conversation last night. “All of this merfolk stuff is new for you, so it’s just going to take time to get used to it all.”

“I guess, but I don’t feel like we have any time,” Erick answered. “It all just keeps being one thing after another.”

Silas tipped his head to the side. “True. Things haven’t been going much better underwater, honestly.”

“You mean besides the trawling problem?” Erick asked.

“Yeah.” Somewhat reluctantly, Silas repeated all of the news he had telling everyone for the past week. When Silas quietly told Erick about Hal, their conversation abruptly went silent.

“He’s really dead?” Erick leaned back in his chair, staring at Silas in disbelief. “How?”

“The guards at Teleyan say it was a shark attack.” Silas squeezed his arm, pressing his thumb into his elbow. Avoiding looking at Erick too much, he explained what his father thought actually
happened, how Adriel must have killed Hal and drawn sharks to his body to hide the evidence.

“When was it?” Erick’s eyes searched the air over his hands on the table, his mind going back to how he hallucinated Adriel taking Hal away from their cell. His imagined memory of crying against the door afterwards felt viscerally recent, despite that he couldn’t remember in that moment exactly how many days he had actually spent alone in Adriel’s custody.

“They found his body five days ago.” Silas paused. “I think you were the last person to have seen him before Adriel took him.”

“But I didn’t…” Erick shook his head. “Hal wasn’t there with me. We were together the last time we saw him.”

“Are you really sure?” Silas looked at Erick uncertainly. “I think Adriel could have done more to your head than just plant that suicide trigger.”

Erick’s brow furrowed. “Is that possible?” He glanced over at Ivan, who looked greatly concerned and just as confused as he continued listening.

“When you said you thought you hallucinated Hal being with you there, what did you remember?” Silas asked.

“I… It was just mostly talking to him, I think. And seeing his back.” Erick swallowed hard as he thought back to his first day. “He said Adriel cut him from the guild. His back was all cut up and scabbed over. He had been beat up all over. Bruises on his face and chest. That guy with big rings interrogated him. He acted like it was nothing even though he was obviously hurting. He had been worried about you since I had been brought in.”

Erick turned away from the table and dropped his elbows to his knees. He held his head in his hand. “God, that couldn’t have all been actually real, could it?” he breathed. The amount of detail he recalled stunned him. “No. Christ, no.” Tears brimmed his eyes as he thought back to Hal’s last day. “He said he didn’t want to die. He didn’t, and I…” He covered his mouth with his other hand.

Silas unfolded his arms from the edge of the pool and sunk down into the water to his nose, horrified and guilty. What Hal had gone through left him aghast, but he was more hurt by Erick’s reaction to realizing the truth.

“Erick,” Ivan said cautiously, steeling his voice against his own worry for his nephew. “There was nothing you could do.”

“I said I would protect him!” Erick pressed his nails into his scalp. “He was supposed to see his brother again and apologize to Ronan, not me. How could I—?”

“Erick, stop thinking like that,” Ivan said more firmly. “Adriel is to blame for all of this. He killed Hal, not you.”

“But I let him make me forget,” Erick answered. “I should’ve told Ronan he was sorry. He tried so hard to protect us, but I let myself think it wasn’t real.”

“That wasn’t you, it was Adriel. His blasted enchantments are just hurting you again.”

Erick abruptly stood. “I don’t care! Hal trusted me, and he got killed because of it. Him and Flynn now – both dead. Gale’s hurt, I’m hurt, Eustace could be hanged – who’s going to die next? Him? Me?” Erick tossed up his hands. “I can’t fight all this,” he said, hurrying out of the natatorium.
“Erick, stop!” Ivan said, going after him. “Where are you going?”

“To my room!” Erick didn’t turn around.

“Wait!” Silas followed along the wall of the pool. “Erick, please don’t go. I’m sorry.” He pulled himself up the pool steps, halfway dragging his tail out of the water. “Let me help!”

Erick slammed the door after he left.

Silas remained on the concrete, gasping on air. He stared at the door. Then he hung his head. His hair dripped down his shoulders and in front of his face. A puddle spread beneath him as water ran off his skin and drained from his gills. His tail felt like a lead weight chaining him to the pool. He clenched his hands. His gills began hurting. For the first time, he hated being a merman.

Ivan walked to Silas. Quietly, he said, “You should go back into the pool before you dry out.”

“How did he have to run away?” Silas asked in a harsh whisper. “Even here, I couldn’t do anything.”

“I do not know.” Ivan sighed and folded his arms to hold his elbows. “I’ve never been very good at consoling him when he’s in grief.” He paused. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have tried this time.”

Silas didn’t know what to say to that. He pushed himself back into the pool, scraping his stomach and tail on the rough ground. He plunged back underwater to revive his gills and surfaced again only to his chin. Treading water with his arms in the shallow end of the pool, Silas eventually said, “Yeah. Maybe you shouldn’t have. But I don’t think I could have done any better.”

In his room, Erick pulled off his boots and collapsed onto his bed. He clutched Puddles against his chest. The old goose’s neck flopped over onto his blankets as Erick turned his face to cry into his pillows.

His own helplessness overwhelmed Erick. Adriel had taken control of him so easily. His voice alone nearly made him kill himself, and it had almost irrevocably altered his own memories. How could he stand against someone who could knock him out with a few short notes? He wasn’t nearly as wealthy as his uncle, didn’t command any guards like Ronan, and couldn’t even talk to the authorities on land without them looking at him like a drunk madman. All he had was reckless determination, but he couldn’t even risk his life anymore without endangering the little life he carried. Everything he wanted felt like it was falling leagues out of reach.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if you check out my new story! If it's not your thing, that's cool. I'll still continue working on this story too. It's just nice to have a change of pace.
Chapter 102

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: suicide ideation

Thank goodness for Thanksgiving break. I have about 5 more weeks left of updates, and my hope is to try to build up my buffer a bit before winter break. If I don't, then this story will probably end up with sporadic updates.

Some hours later, a knock at Erick’s door roused him from numb dozing. His hair was all mussed up, and his shirt had become rumpled. He felt nauseous again, and had already ran to his toilet earlier to dry heave at the bowl before giving up and moving his wastebasket beside his bed. His breakfast seemed determined to sit uncomfortably at the back of his throat.

Scooting deeper under his blankets with Puddles, Erick called, “What do you want?”

“I want you to get lunch,” Ivan answered, remaining behind the door. “It’s nearly one o’clock. I’ve been trying to give you space, but I am worried that letting you hide in your room like this isn’t helping. Silas is worried about you too.”

“I don’t care.” Erick tightened his hold on Puddles. “I’m not hungry, and I can’t say anything to make him feel better.”

“Even so, please let him try to console you. You need to be ready to talk to the Navy Admiral and chief of police tomorrow in addition to all the press we’ve invited. I’ve been preparing for their visit all morning, but if you want to call it all off, please tell me now so I can let them know.”

“We can’t call it off,” Erick said, though he didn’t feel like he would be able to handle it all at anymore. “Eustace needs us to prove merfolk exist so he can have a chance at his trial.”

“I know. But perhaps we can reschedule it at least?”

“It won’t help. You’ll just have to do all the talking.”

Ivan paused at that. “Are you sure?”

“I don’t know. We don’t have any other options. Just leave me alone.”

“You still need to have lunch, Erick.”

“I feel too sick to keep anything down.”

Ivan sighed. “I will send up crackers and something light to eat to your room then.” Turning to leave again, he said, “Please consider returning to the natatorium before dinner. I will have to continue keeping Silas company for you if you don’t.”

Erick didn’t answer. He wondered what his uncle and Silas would talk about without him, and it occurred to him that they must have talked about him a great deal already after he ran off. He
didn’t know if he should be mad or embarrassed or just resigned to the fact that he could be the
object of their conversation. It felt different than how strangers used to talk about him behind his
back. That he could ignore. But now he had more than a handful of people worrying about him,
and the realization struck him with a bizarre mix of appreciation and fear. He had more people
caring about him now, but it was also just more people he could hurt or disappoint.

After a servant dropped off a cup of soup and half a sandwich on a bed tray, Erick grudgingly sat
up to nibble on the crackers neatly arranged on the side of his plate. Gradually, as he made himself
eat the sandwich, he began to feel somewhat less ill. He still felt unsteady and numb from his
meltdown, but his guilt at leaving Silas alone started to outweigh wanting to stay holed up in his
room.

Erick moved aside his bed tray and got out of bed. He could do nothing to fix his rumpled shirt, but
he could at least comb his hair. As he straightened it out in front of the mirror in his bathroom, he
frowned at his beard. It was getting irritatingly itchy and had become a glaring reminder of
Adriel’s control over his life.

When Erick found himself contemplating pulling out each hair of his beard individually, he knew
that he couldn’t keep living like a cave man. He was about to go downstairs to make Ivan let him
get a shave before he remembered that he had a safety razor in the bag he brought to stay at Ivan’s.
He had forgotten about it because he normally let Ivan’s butler treat him to a straight razor shave
whenever he stayed with his uncle, but his safety razor was part of a basic set of toiletries he kept
in his bag.

It took Erick but a second to go back into his room. A razor looked different enough from a knife,
Erick figured, so it shouldn’t trigger the enchantment. They were completely different tools. Yet
even if it did, Erick doubted that he could properly stab himself with it, as he didn’t think the
enchantment would make him try anything else. That is what he told himself anyway as he opened
up the pocket in the side of his bag.

As Erick took the handle of his safety razor, he hesitated a moment before he pulled it out. Seeing
the empty chrome head didn’t bother him, but an unsettling feeling crept through him as he
imagined placing a new blade inside. It wasn’t a knife, he reminded himself.

Before Erick could let his good sense talk him out of it, he took out his shaving stick and brush and
lathered up his face. He took extra care in sudsing up his beard, as the last thing he wanted was to
nick himself. It would just give Ivan a reason to tell him he told him so.

The head on his safety razor easily twisted off. He opened up his box of replacement blades. They
were individually wrapped in tissue paper sleeves, seemingly harmless as letter stamps. He slid one
out and placed it onto his handle. The clear silence of his bathroom grew muffled as blood rushed
through his ears. It would be so easy to slit his thumb. Quicker than a papercut, it could slip from
his hand and slice his wrist. How long would it take to bleed out?

Erick faltered as he caught himself thinking those thoughts. The haze over his mind wasn’t as
dense as before, yet still left him with a distinctly out-of-body perspective. He curiously pondered
his situation. His hands remained still. Logically he knew he should be panicking, or at least
somewhat worried, but he felt only a cold fascination at the possibilities for injuring himself. It was
not fear holding back his hands. It was only the knowledge that he was not supposed to draw blood.
He wondered why the enchantment wasn’t fully taking effect. Was it just because his razor didn’t
taper off to a sharp point like a knife? Or was it because he was aware of it now, like a lucid
dreamer?

Whatever the reason, Erick supposed there was no point to remain standing there in front of his
sink with a lathered face if he wasn’t going to follow through with his original plan. He screwed
back on the head of his razor and set to work. As the blade scraped against each part of his chin,
cheeks, and lips with methodical precision, Erick couldn’t even muster any sort of joy in the fact
that he would be able to see all of his face again. A feeling of not quite disappointment seeped
through the haze, and he wondered if he would be able to be happy again after he finished. He then
wondered if it really mattered at all. Was the numbness better than feeling anything?
The strongest urge to hurt himself came as he shaved his neck. A single flick of his wrist could
split open his throat. Would he even feel it if he didn’t look away from his razor blade? It would be
no different than gutting a fish. Yet the thought of fish reminded him of Silas. The merman was
still waiting for him in Ivan’s pool.
The thought was enough to carry him through until he was done and could put his razor out of sight
under a towel. He stepped away from the sink and stepped back into his room, studying the space
like a stranger as the haze in his mind faded.

After a minute, Erick blinked and shook his head. It stuck him then how incredibly stupid it was to
shave without any sort of supervision. The thoughts he had considered so coolly just minutes
before now chilled him like a spear of ice. He staggered to his bed and sat down at the foot of it.
His fingers ran over his smooth cheeks, as if they couldn’t quite believe the change. Whatever
spirits Adriel’s enchantment had called were what had controlled his hands, and Erick had done
little more than watch. It scared him more that he was only unscathed because of Silas. How had he
let himself become so dependent on one person?
The realization made him feel short of breath. His hands gripped the edge of his bed. He still
hadn’t even told Silas that he liked him as more than a friend, and now he was inadvertently
depending on him to keep himself from taking his own life.

Erick dropped his head into his hand. “What am I doing?” he groaned. He let Silas become his
anchor, but he had gone overboard with him rather than keep his bearings. Now he couldn’t stop
sinking. Would it be better to cut him off and get back to the surface? Or was he supposed to let
himself go off the deep end?

It wasn’t a question he could answer in that moment. Everything was still going too fast. Erick
reached over to his pillows to grab Puddles and hug it. Its head flopped over his arm as Erick
squeezed it against his waist. He then remembered he hadn’t just endangered himself again. His
little stomach bug was depending on him to not be stupid, and he had failed, again. He may have
proved Adriel couldn’t control him, but it did show how little control he actually had over himself.
And that was somehow worse.

Erick remained sitting at the foot of his bed with Puddles for some time. He went over in his head
how to explain to Ivan and Silas why he had decided to shave, and why he had run off in the first
place, but his reasons all sounded petty now. He felt certain Ivan would berate him for acting so
childish. All he had done was throw a temper tantrum. And like a child, he was hugging a stuffed
goose instead of facing his problems like a grown man.

Sighing, Erick tossed Puddles back towards his pillows and stood up. He turned to leave his room,
but paused on his way out. On his desk was the two wooden toy boats and the rubber ball he had
set aside when he had taken Puddles out of storage. Remembering that he wanted to share the boats
and ball with Silas, he picked them up before he left. He had to do something to make up for
leaving Silas that morning, after all.
If you've been keeping up with this story, let me know in the comments! I'm curious to know when you started reading and what has kept you coming back each week. I get a steady number of kudos each week, but it's hard to tell how many people actually stick around.
There was an awful blizzard yesterday where I live, so morning classes were cancelled today and I cancelled the class I teach this afternoon because why not? علامة "بـ " ملهم من الحرف. My students may be annoyed at how slowly I get their papers back to them (I am the absolute worst at keeping up with grading), but at the very least, I try to make things easy for all of us.

This week’s chapter is mostly fluff and backstory, so enjoy!

Hesitating a minute before he opened the door, Erick quietly returned to the natatorium. Ivan was sitting at their breakfast table. A small stack of papers sat in front of him as he appeared to have been reviewing his finances or some other matter related to his and Silas’ debut tomorrow. Silas was basking on the tent over his bed with his forehead on his folded arms. Only the top of his head and tips of his auditory fins were above the water.

Erick tossed the rubber ball near Silas. As Silas jerked upright to see what landed near him, Erick called, “Hey.” He awkwardly waved. “Did I wake you?”

“No, I was just being lazy.” Silas dove back under to dart over to Erick’s side of the pool. Surfacing, he looked at Erick’s face and tilted his head. “You shaved?”

Erick rubbed his jawline, shrinking under Ivan’s disapproving stare across the pool. “Yeah. I didn’t want to deal with stubble anymore.”

Silas stuck out his lip, tilting his head to the other side. “So the enchantment…?”

“I’m not bleeding, am I?” Erick said, more curtly than he intended. “The enchantment’s still there, but my razor was different enough so that I got through it. Okay?”

“Okay,” Silas said uncertainly, looking him over to be sure he was unharmed. “Does that mean you’re feeling better now?” He glanced at the wooden boats in his arms.

Erick turned away and shrugged. “Sort of. I’m sorry I’ve been ignoring you all day.”

“Don’t worry about it. Ivan’s been interesting to talk to,” Silas said, looking over his shoulder at him. Ivan replaced his disapproving stare with a civil expression. “He was telling me funny stories about when he used to travel, and I was telling him about the salvaging trips I’ve been on and my idea to start my own guild.”


“Well, Gale pointed out that the only reason everybody is siding with Adriel and thinking badly about humans is because nobody’s really hearing that we shouldn’t,” Silas answered. “So, I figured I need to make everyone know about you and what humans are actually like, and the best way to do that is to get my own group of mers who can actually meet and work with humans and then tell other mers about it. You’ve mentioned that plenty of humans would probably love to get back stuff that gets lost at sea, so my guild could try to address that.”
“Oh.” Erick readjusted his hold on his wooden boats, somewhat dumbfounded by the idea. “I guess that makes sense, but am I really your best example? I made a pretty awful first impression.”

“Maybe, but I just think it’s a funny story now.” Silas shrugged. “I’m mostly just worried about how to actually get it started. Ivan said he can help me learn the business side of things and Jeb and Monty can find me people to join, but actually communicating with humans and getting them to work with mers will be the hard part. You and Ivan are the only people I know who can actually talk to people here.”

“Ronan said Kauia are going to get us some language pearls, though,” Erick said. “And if we’re successful in proving merpiracy is an issue, advertising your service shouldn’t be that much more work.”

“True.” Silas nodded. “My whole plan basically depends on us not messing up here first. If we end up showing everyone that merfolk are real, but make them think we’re all bad like Adriel, then I’m not going to be able to change anything in the shoal.”

“Right…” Erick pressed his lips into a thin line. “As if I wasn’t under enough pressure already.”

Silas laughed sheepishly. “Sorry. I’m sure it’ll be okay.”

“Of course,” Erick said sardonically, deadpanning. “Okay like a sinking ship.”

“Yep, and we can always salvage it later if it does go down.” Silas grinned as Erick narrowed his eyes at him. “What? It’s what I do.”

Erick shook his head, smiling despite himself. “I know, but you don’t have to be so stubbornly positive.”

“Maybe not, but at least one of us has to be optimistic. If it’s not going to be you, it might as well be me.”

“Of course.” Erick chuckled. “You’re such a silly fish.”

Silas beamed. “Proud of it.” Pointing then to Erick’s boats, he asked, “Are you going to tell me why you have those?”

“Oh, these?” Erick knelt down by the edge of the pool to place his boats on the water. “They’re some of my old toys.” One was made like a traditional sailing boat, and the other looked like a little tugboat. “I thought you might want to play with them.” Pointing at the tugboat, he said, “That one has a propeller attached to a rubber band, so if you wind it up, it’ll move forward a little bit. The other one you just have to use a fan to make it move.”

“Wow.” Silas picked up the tugboat to look at the propeller. Tugging on the rubber band, his eyes widened as he marveled at its elasticity. “These are amazing.” He then held it up and called, “Ivan, look! This thingy is stretchy!”

Ivan repressed a chuckle. “Yes, I know. I gave Erick that boat for his seventh birthday. His father made him that sailboat before he was born.”

“He did?” Silas turned to look back at the sailboat and picked it up. “It’s really well-made.” He turned towards Erick. “Did he make you other toys?”

“Yeah,” Erick said, somber as he remembered him. “Woodworking was one of his hobbies.” Erick’s memories of his parents had grown foggy after sixteen years, but he distinctly recalled
sitting in his father’s workshop many an afternoon as he pumped the lathe to carve cups and bowls. Wood shavings had always covered the floor and it always smelled like sawdust.

“I didn’t know that.” Silas set the sailboat back into the water and gave it a little push towards Ivan. “Do you have anything else from them?”

“Yeah, a lot of other stuff really,” Erick answered. “Ivan’s kept most of it for me.” Remembering his locket, he pulled it out from beneath his shirt and said, “This actually reminds me of my mom a lot. She had one just like it, but it had a diamond instead of an emerald.”

Surprised, Silas asked, “Is that why you wear it all the time? I just thought you liked it because it was pretty.”

“No, it was mostly just because it looked like hers.” Erick didn’t want to admit he mostly actually wore it now to remind himself of Silas.

“Where did you get that locket?” Ivan asked. “I saw you had it when you transformed, but I don’t recall you having it before then.”

“I found it,” Silas said, answering for Erick. “Right before Erick caught me, I had sifted it out of the sand. He stole it out of my salvaging bag and never gave it back.”

“Hey.” Erick scowled at Silas. “I did offer to let you have it back.”

Silas laughed. “It still took you like a month to bother.” When Erick continued to look peeved, Silas teased, “Just be happy I let you keep it. The stone on it matches your eyes too perfectly for me to take it back. They’d both lose some of their sparkle.”

Flustered by the compliment, Erick pushed his locket back behind his shirt. “They’re not that similar,” he muttered.

Ivan smiled at the two of them with a knowing expression.

Noticing Ivan’s stare, Silas blushed as he realized how brazenly he was flirting with Erick. He sunk to his nose in the pool and puffed a sigh, making bubbles. Picking back up the tugboat, he said, “Anyway…” He began winding the propeller. “I think that’s actually the first thing you’ve ever told me about your parents.”

“Is it?” Erick felt vaguely surprised at that, though he knew he shouldn’t have been. He rarely talked to anyone about them.

“Yeah. Can you tell me more?”

“I don’t know what there is to say,” Erick said, shrugging. “My dad met my mom because he got a job working for Ivan, and he always said it was a lucky break marrying into her and Ivan’s family because he had grown up poor. I was their only kid because they were too busy worrying about upholding their families’ expectations and building a legacy for me.”

“That’s kind of sad.” Silas half-frowned. He set the tugboat back on the water and watched it glide away. “If my maternal dad hadn’t gotten sick after I was born, I probably would have ended up with siblings. Gale would have had siblings too if Merise had been able. It’s weird to think you didn’t get any just because your parents were working too much.”

“I suppose, but it’s really common for wealthy families to only have one or two kids.”
Silas tilted his head. “Why?”

Ivan answered, “It allows the family inheritance to be less divided. It was rather unusual that my sister fell for a poor man at all, but Erick’s father had been a good man and a hard worker. It was only on my recommendation that our parents allowed their marriage at all.”

“They had to get your parents’ permission?” Silas asked, baffled. “The only permission merfolk need is from each other. It’s expected for their families to approve of it eventually, even if they don’t like each other.”

“I know,” Ivan said. “I was very aware of your marriage customs when I married Lorelei.”

Erick frowned as a thought occurred to him. “Did your parents know you married a mermaid?”

Ivan suddenly found his paperwork much more interesting. Reluctantly, he answered, “No. They thought she was human, as one of the requirements of trading with merfolk was to keep them and their shores secret from humans who hadn’t been vetted. It had been common once for humans to capture or kill merfolk near the shore, either as retaliation against being enchanted or to sell them off to freak shows, so very few humans were allowed to work with them.”

“At least I wasn’t the only one kept in the dark,” Erick said wryly.

“If the mers in the northeast were intentionally trying to stay secret,” Silas said worriedly, “they’re not going to be happy when we start talking to humans here tomorrow.”

“Yes, I imagine they will be very displeased,” Ivan said. “However, I always thought their rule was ridiculous. You ought not to fret about it.”

“If you say so,” Silas said, though it did lend credence to Adriel’s antipathy and Kaui’s reluctance to open talks with humans. “Do I need to do anything before we talk to them?”

“I don’t believe so,” Ivan said. “You may consider preparing responses to the questions we expect them to ask, but nothing should be beyond what would be common knowledge for you.”

“What kind of things would they ask me about? Where I live?”

“That, how your leadership and commerce works, what gods you worship, and quite likely even questions about your anatomy, such as the extent of your breathing capability on land.”

Silas looked daunted by the prospect. “That’s a lot of stuff to answer.”

“I will have to translate for you regardless, so rest assured that you will not have to answer all of those questions yourself. I’m sure Erick can translate what they are saying for you while I speak.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Erick said. “I’m just worried about having to transform in front of them. They’re going to see my stitches.”

“Yes, but we knew this when we decided on this date,” Ivan said. “It will merely be more evidence of what enchanters are capable of.”

“I guess.” Erick rubbed the back of his neck.

“Is there anything else I can do to help you feel more prepared for tomorrow?” Ivan asked.

Erick thought over the question for a minute. He considered going to get one of his suits from his apartment, but he knew that he would realistically end up spending most of the meeting in the pool
with Silas. There was no point being so formal if he had to be naked in front of them anyway.

After Erick told Ivan there was nothing else he needed, Ivan told them he would see them again at dinner before he left.

“So…” Silas said in the quiet lull, looking at the rubber ball that was still bobbing on the water. “Did you bring that for me to play with too?”

Erick followed his gaze. “Yeah. I was thinking we could play catch.”

“That sounds fun.” Silas dove under and flicked his tail above the water to swim over to the ball. Grabbing it, he said, “Are you going to join me in the pool?”

Erick shook his head but smiled. “No, I think I’d rather sit on the side for now.” He took off his shirt so it wouldn’t get wet and got up to put it on the table besides Ivan’s paperwork. On his way back to the shallow side, he brought over one of the chairs to make getting up and down easier to fetch the ball.

Once he sat back down, Erick held up his hands. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Okay!” Silas made an overhand throw that flew over Erick’s head. “Oops.” The ball rebounded against the wall and bounced back into the pool. “I got it.” He darted underwater to it.

Erick laughed. “It’s not like tossing a squidball, is it?”

“No, it goes way farther!” Silas grinned as he experimentally pushed it underwater, only to let it spring back to the surface. “It doesn’t like sinking at all.”

“Well, it is filled with air.” Silas’ utter fascination with the unfamiliar object amused Erick more than he expected, and he decided then that he would try to bring Silas as many odd things as he could just to see his reactions.

“How?” Silas turned the ball around in his hands before he noticed the tiny needle hole for the air pump. “Humans made this without magic?”

“Yeah. We get along just fine without it, really.”

“Wow.” Silas continued pushing it underwater to watch it bob back up. “I think this is my favorite toy now.”

Erick rolled with eyes with a smirk. “If you’re that easily pleased, I won’t ever have to worry about keeping you entertained.”

Silas playfully pouted. “It’s better to be easily entertained than to be easily sad.” He held up the ball again. “Catch!”

Erick lifted his hands, but the ball came at him too quickly and bounced out of his fingers. It rolled away towards the door. “So much for catch. We’re just playing fetch at this point.” He picked up the ball and lobbed it back towards Silas.

Silas pounced on it, but it slipped out of his arms and shot out of the water beside him. He surfaced and shook his hair like a dog. With its wet strands over his face, he laughed and said, “This is still fun too.”

Erick couldn’t help but agree as he looked at the silly merman, and he wanted nothing more than to
jump into the pool to brush Silas’ hair out of his face so he could better see his smile. Yet he contented himself by simply sitting down for Silas to try tossing him the ball again.
Chapter Notes

Dead week is kicking my ass because I have a ton of essays to write instead of tests to study for, hence why the update is late. I've been really appreciating the comments/kudos I'm getting as it's a nice little light spot to brighten my morning when I see the email notice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning of the day Ivan and Erick decided to invite Eustace’s attorney, Anvil Point’s chief of police, the Navy Admiral, and over a dozen newspaper reporters, Ivan’s estate saw more traffic than it had in several months. While Ivan’s chef was laying down trays of hors d’oeuvres beside a pitcher of fruit-infused water on a table in the foyer, Ivan’s servants finished setting up chairs in front of the pool. The skylights in the natatorium were opened to let in some fresh air and better lighting.

Erick watched the servants work while sitting at the breakfast table they had moved to the corner of the natatorium. His fingers rested on the rim of his glass of ginger ale beside a small plate of saltines. Erick had felt fine when he had gotten out of bed, but his nausea returned not long after breakfast while he was trying to help Ivan’s servants prepare for their guests’ arrival. Now he was focusing taking even breaths and trying to ignore the uncomfortable lump in his throat that was making him want to throw up.

As his nervousness exacerbated his morning sickness, Erick wished he could have had something stronger than ginger ale. It was becoming painfully obvious that he the worst of his nausea happened every time he was particularly stressed, but he had no idea how he would be able to relax without alcohol. Thinking of Silas and having his company only helped so much. He moved his hand from his glass to massage his temples with one hand.

“The first of our guests should be here shortly,” Ivan said, walking into the natatorium to check on Erick and Silas. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’m going to be sick.” Erick dragged his hand over his face and let it fall to the table. “I’m going to throw up in front of everyone, aren’t I?”

Ivan frowned in concern. Silas answered, “No you’re not. You’ll feel better as soon as you join me in the pool.”

“I better be right. I don’t know how I’d be able to live it down if I get sick.”

The door to the natatorium opened then and Ivan’s butler stepped in, leaving his hand on the door handle. “Sirs,” he said, “Eustace’s attorney has arrived. Shall I bring her in here?”

“Yes, send her in,” Ivan answered. As his butler left, he said to Silas, “I asked Mrs. Triplett to come early so she can have a chance to question you about the attack on Eustace’s crew. Your recollection of your side of the events will help her organize her case, but she will still need you and other eye witnesses to testify in court later.”
“How am I supposed to do that if I have to stay in water?” Silas asked.

“Most likely, we will have to bring you in Erick’s tank,” Ivan said. “How we will manage that will have to be organized after you can return to your father.”

Silas half-frowned. “Right.”

Ivan’s butler then ushered in Eustace’s attorney, a woman with bushy blonde curls, an olive green blazer, and a matching pencil skirt. Ivan stood up to greet her and introduce Erick and Silas.

Mrs. Triplett hitched up her foldover purse higher up on her shoulder to shake Erick’s hand. Clearly trying not to stare too much at Silas as she addressed both him and Erick, she said, “It is such a pleasure to meet both of you. I can’t believe I’m actually talking to real mermen.” She laughed lightly. “It’s just incredible. It’s like a real-life fairy tale.”

“Indeed,” Ivan said. “It’s one I hope will wrap up in a happy ending. So, how would you like to begin?” He pulled out a chair for her to take a seat at their breakfast table. “I can translate what you say for Silas, and Erick can translate for him.”

Mrs. Triplett sat down and opened up her purse. “Thanks, that’ll be perfect,” she said, taking out a legal pad and pen. Over the next hour, she asked Silas to tell her about what actually happened at the trawling incident and how his father and Kauí handled the case. When Silas told her that Kauí pardoned the enchanters, she bit the end of her pen.

“It’s a shame he did that,” Mrs. Triplett said, “but at the very least, it proves he’s recognizing that these enchanters were in fact responsible and not Eustace. If I can get an official statement from Kauí and Ronan to give to the judge at the preliminary hearing, that should be all I really need to stop this from even going to trial. The only issue then is whether or not the judge will recognize their authority.”

After Ivan translated her for Silas, Erick said, “Today will help with that. When the Navy Admiral and Anvil Point’s chief of police talk to us today, we’ll work out the details of making Peleran an officially recognized sovereign city-state.”

“When we make that official,” Ivan added, “it should also take care of both the issues with merpiracy and trawling boats. We would be able to reach a mutual agreement to not endanger or harm each other, and Silas’ guild could help reinforce peacable relations.”

“You think it can really be that simple?” Silas asked. “Just having Kauí and my dad talk to these people can solve everything?”

“Quite possibly so,” Ivan answered. “So long as both parties want to be reasonable and don’t demand anything extraordinary, we could settle these disputes within a few months.”

“That’s only if Adriel doesn’t somehow fuck it up, though,” Erick said.

“True.” Ivan’s expression soured at the mention of his name. “I am still working out that thorn in our side.” He pulled out his pocket watch and flipped it open. “Figuring out that problem will have to wait for now, however, as the rest of our guests should be here.” He put back away his watch and stood up. “Erick, would you like to greet everyone with me in the foyer, or would you rather wait here with Silas?”

“I’d rather stay here,” Erick answered. Then in mertongue so Mrs. Triplett wouldn’t understand, he added, “I still don’t feel very well, so the less I have to do, the better.”
“Very well.” Ivan nodded. “Use this time to rest. I will return once I am sure all of our guests are present.”

“Thanks.” Erick glanced over at Silas, who gave him a sympathetic smile.

After Ivan excused himself, Mrs. Triplett moved to one of the guest chairs facing the pool. Erick leaned his elbow on the breakfast table and rested his forehead on his knuckles. Quietly to Silas, he said, “As soon as we’re done here, I want to head back to bed.”

“You sure you won’t want to stay in the pool with me?” Silas asked. “You can sleep in my bed alcove if you want.”

Erick considered it for a moment. “That might be nice. I feel like if I do pass out there, though, I might end up just sleeping all day and through the night, and then you wouldn’t have anywhere to sleep.”

Silas laughed. “I wouldn’t mind.” He then blushed slightly. Poking his fingers together bashfully, he said, “If you really would like to sleep in here tonight, we could share… If you are okay with that, anyway.”

Erick stiffened and glanced at Mrs. Triplet, despite knowing that she could not understand them even if she had heard. Self-consciously readjusting himself in his seat, he said, “I don’t know if that would be a good idea.”

Silas sunk deeper into the pool. Trying to hide his disappointment under concern, he asked, “Why not? We wouldn’t have to do, well, you know.”

“I know that, but like…” Erick tried to grasp for words with his free hand as he pushed his other into his hair. “We’re not really like that and I just, I don’t know.”

Silas’ eyebrows knotted together. “But we’re having a baby now. I thought…” He pulled back his arms to grip the edge of the pool. “Do you mean you still don’t like me back the same way?”

Erick mentally swore and put his hand over his face. “No, I mean, not that. It’s different now, but…” He groaned. “We’ve barely known each other for like a month, and you’re a guy, and you’re so much younger, and it’s like everyone’s trying to force it to work… I just don’t know if anything I’m feeling is real or if it’s just pressure, so I’m trying to figure it out, but—” Erick cut himself off as he heard the door to the natatorium open.

Chapter End Notes

Lucky for you all, we hit the 475 kudo milestone! The bonus chapter is getting posted now so you don't have to wait a week with this cliffhanger.
We reached 475 kudos! It's hard for me to believe that this story is still being found and read by so many people. I'm especially thankful for the support here because of all of the shit that's going down over at Tumblr right now. Two of my drawings got flagged even though they're not NSFW, so I guess I'm part of the Tumblr flag game now. I don't really want to change sites for my fan art, but if I must, do you all have any recommendations? I might just start a new private Twitter just for us.

“Here we are, ladies and gentlemen,” Ivan said as he ushered their guests into the natatorium. “I would like to introduce you now to my nephew Erick and his friend Silas, the merman who allowed him to also gain a tail and gills. As you can see, Erick currently has his legs, but we will demonstrate soon how he can transform back to his other form.”

Both Silas and Erick jerked up, startled out of their conversation, as Ivan and his guests walked to their seats. Silas pulled himself against the wall and sunk in the water to his nose, suddenly timid. Erick dropped his hands and forced a cordial smile as he stood. The abrupt change of position made his head spin. He rested his hand on the table for a moment to swallow back bile. In the back of his mind, he was cursing his stomach and Ivan’s bad timing.

Once everyone was seated, Erick went to stand beside his uncle. The majority of their guests were reporters in fedoras or flat caps, but one of them was a woman with a particularly large, purple sunhat that obscured her face. In the front row, Erick recognized Officer Perry. He assumed the other uniformed man beside him was Anvil Point’s chief of police. Under better circumstances, Erick would have appreciated Officer Perry’s dumbfounded expression and the fact that he had proved the condescending officer wrong.

The Navy Admiral, John Baldwin sat in the front in the full uniform of his position. The gold embroidery on his jacket sleeves and badges beside his lapel highlighted his rank. His curled mustache emphasized the air of pompousness over his straight-backed posture, exactly as Erick remembered from the last time he had stood before him. He internally cringed at the memory, remembering how vehemently he had argued for the eradication of all merfolk. Admiral Baldwin hadn’t been very impressed with him back then, but he was plainly fascinated now by the sight of Silas and the wavering image of his fiery tail underwater.

Erick took a breath to steady himself before addressing his audience. “Thank you all for coming here today,” he said, holding out his hands. “I know you have busy schedules and probably didn’t want to be here, but I uh, hope we can make it worth your time.” He returned his hands to his sides and made himself keep his hands unclenched. His fake smile felt like a grimace. His thoughts were already running over how stupid he sounded, tripping over his words. He should have rehearsed more beforehand, shouldn’t have started talking to Silas about their relationship, shouldn’t have even been out of bed.

“To begin,” Ivan said, glancing at his nephew, “we would like to explain how Erick met Silas and why Erick was able to become a merman. Many of you may have heard or knew Erick was employed with the task of hunting merfolk. This is because sixteen years ago, his parents – my
sister and her husband – were murdered by merpirates.”

While Ivan continued to tell their story and Erick supplemented details, Erick was already jumping ahead in his mind to how they were supposed to explain blood binding. Even if they left out the part that it was meant to be something between lovers, the full truth of the matter was bound to become common knowledge if merfolk began commonly trading with humans. It would be impossible to keep his feelings secret, and then everyone would know that he, a man, was having a baby with another man who was barely old enough to be considered an adult. Would he be arrested for sodomy then? Or would his name only be plastered in the papers as some freak of nature?

A reporter raised his hand to interrupt with a question. “When you harpooned the merman and he bit you, did either of those injuries leave a scar to prove it happened?”

“Uh, no,” Erick answered. “I mean yeah, the bite mark I got healed when I got a tail, but I think Silas’ tail still has a mark.” He turned to Silas and repeated the question for him.

“Yeah, it does,” Silas said. “Why do they want to know?” Neither Ivan nor Erick had been translating what they were telling their guests, so he was lost on the context of their conversation.

“One of the reporters wants to see it,” Erick said. “Can you show them?”

“Sure, I guess?” Confused and feeling uncomfortable as so many strangers ogled at him, Silas swam over to their side of the pool and held onto the ledge to lift up his tail. He turned his tailfin to show his bumpy scar. His crimson, gold, and orange scales flared in the sunlight shining through the opened skylights.

The reporter’s eyes widened. “Amazing,” he breathed. Several others quickly lifted cameras and took pictures, startling Silas with their flashing. He yelped in fright and darted back underwater.

“Hey!” Erick snapped. “Warn us before you do that. He doesn’t know what a camera is.”

“It’s all right,” Ivan interjected with a polite smile, giving Erick a warning look to keep his composure. “It didn’t cause any harm and I’m sure none of them knew.” Ivan waved at Silas to resurface.

As Silas hesitantly came back up and curiously studied the reporters’ cameras now that they weren’t flashing at him, Admiral Baldwin asked Erick, “Was that an actual language you were speaking with him?”

“Yeah, mertongue,” Erick answered, not appreciating his insinuation that he was just speaking gibberish. “It’s what all merfolk speak. Silas taught me it by giving me a pearl that had been imbued with his language, using magic like the enchantment that allows me to walk on land.”

“How fascinating,” he said, sitting forward as he put his hands together. “Can you tell him to do something else? Perhaps he could swim in a circle for us?” His mustache curled up with delight. “Wait, a better thought! Can he jump out of the water like a dolphin?”

Before Ivan could respectfully deny such a request, Erick said, “He’s not a circus animal. He’s here to answer your questions, not to perform like some exotic dancer.”

“Surely he wouldn’t mind giving us a brief demonstration?” Gesturing to the rest of Erick’s audience, Admiral Baldwin said, “It’s what we all came here for, after all.”

“No, you—”
“You’re quite right,” Ivan interrupted. “Erick, why don’t you join Silas in the pool before we continue our story?” In mertongue, he added in an undertone, “You need to calm down.”

Erick stared down his uncle for a moment before he nodded tersely. “Right.” He took a breath and forcefully exhaled. With a false smile, he said, “My apologies. We did promise to show you how shifting works.” He turned to walk to the pool stairs, where they had set out towels on a table.

As Erick pulled off his shirt, he turned his back to their guests. “If you can see from your chairs,” Ivan said, “Erick has a tattoo on his back that resembles three stacked teardrops. This mark is what merfolk call a glyph. Without it, my nephew would not have been able to leave the ocean.”

Silas swam over to Erick and sat on the steps while Ivan addressed their audience. His tailfin nervously drew lines in the sandy bottom of the pool. He had noticed Erick getting upset and his growing pallor, so he was watching him closely in concern.

“Why doesn’t the other merman have one then?” Admiral Baldwin asked.

“That’s a keen observation,” Ivan said. “Silas doesn’t have a shifting glyph because only one merman has the power to make them. This merman is against peaceable relations with humans, and he is also the one responsible for the ships lost to merpiracy. Erick was only able to get a tattoo from him with great difficulty and financial expense on my part. Now,” he continued, seeing Erick had finished stripping down to just a towel, “we will show you how it works.” He gestured for Erick to enter the pool. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Erick walked down into the water and held down his towel to keep it from floating up. Trying to ignore everyone’s stares, he knelt down underwater and kicked out his legs as he breathed in. It burned his nose and chest as always, but it helped push back his nausea. He let go of his towel and kicked up his legs again. As they fell back down, his scales and tailfin swept across his skin. His towel slid off as he glided toward the deep end. He dove down, flicking up his cerulean tail and sending water droplets into the air, and remained underwater to take more deep breaths.

Silas followed, similarly showing off his tail before diving down to Erick. “You okay?”

“Just fine,” Erick said curtly. “Their dumb questions were just getting to me.”

As Erick resurfaced, Ivan said, “As you can see, it is a fairly instantaneous transformation. Are there any questions before I continue?”

A few hands raised. While Ivan took their questions, Silas said, “You got through the hard part at least. Is Ivan going to do the rest of the talking?”

“I think so,” Erick answered, half-listening to his uncle and their audience. He was trying not to look too much at them or Silas, as he was reminded again of their interrupted conversation. It had taken so little for him to get defensive about the merman.

“Do you think you’ll stay here in the pool then?”

“I don’t know, Silas,” Erick said, becoming exasperated. “I’m trying to listen to Ivan.”

“Oh.” Silas sunk a little deeper into the water. He remained quiet as the humans spoke in English. “Does that mean you’re not going to translate for me?”

Erick sighed. “No, I will.” Letting his tense shoulders relax somewhat, he began trying to translate word for word what everyone was saying. Soon he found it was better to summarize the conversation, however. Eventually they grew tired of treading water and moved to sit on the pool
steps. Erick wanted to pull Silas into his arms or at least hold his hand as they sat side by side, but refrained from doing either. He couldn’t risk such a public display when he was still so uncertain about his own feelings.
Chapter 106

Chapter Notes

We have a short chapter this week and some unfortunate news regarding updates.

This semester completely burnt me out. I only have about 5 chapters' worth of buffer left, and I'm not comfortable posting most of them yet because I haven't quite worked out all of the knots in the tangled storylines I'm working with. In order to rebuild my buffer and give me some time to recover from grad school over winter break, I'm going on a four-week hiatus. I will post one more update next week (December 16th), but then I won't post another update until January 13th.

I really wish I didn't have to do this, but I don't want to move to irregular updates. As I write new chapters, I constantly go back to the previous 2-5 to check continuity and fix typos. If I had to post my chapters as I complete them, as I know many writers do, I'd drive myself nuts having to constantly update previous chapters here on AO3. Plus, my writing flow tends to work in fits -- I'll get a ton done all at once, and then not write anything at all for long stretches of time. This semester just happened to exacerbate that problem. I'm really hoping I'll be able to get a lot written during the break.

In the mean time, since I know many of you will be sorry to not have this story during the holidays, I think I will begin posting the alternate timeline story. I was hoping to get more done with it before I started posting it, but now I know that probably won't happen. Even if it won't ever be finished, there is a lot of cute fluff that deserves to be appreciated anyway.

To get email updates on that story and any other work I post (such as my smutty wizard story), click the subscribe button if you have an AO3 account. (I didn't know this was a thing for a long time, so I'm saying this mostly for other silly people like me)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By noon, Ivan had finished answering everyone’s questions. Eustace’s attorney left early, followed by the woman with the large, purple sunhat. The other reporters with cameras had Erick and Silas sit on the edge of the pool so they could take pictures of them and their tails. It had been a tiring ordeal for Erick since he had to hold his breath for every photo outside of the water to prevent himself from shifting back. Before Admiral Baldwin and the police left, Ivan promised to keep in touch and told them more about their plans to get them language pearls. Admiral Baldwin clapped Ivan on the back with a wide smile at that, telling him he looked forward to learning more about their undersea neighbors.

By all appearances, Erick and Silas’ debut had gone well. The hiccups at the beginning of their presentation went easily ignored. The morning ended without a hitch. Yet Erick still dreaded what would end up in the papers and the work that still lay ahead of them. This day was just the start of a longer fight, and the continuation of an already difficult series of events.

Erick didn’t voice his concerns as Ivan cheerfully left to show out their remaining guests and to organize lunch. As soon as they all left, Erick dove back underwater and slipped down to the deep
end of the pool. He sat down at the bottom against the wall and sighed, leaning back his head.

“Well, that wasn’t so bad,” Silas said, sitting next to Erick. He leaned forward with his hands on his tail, turning his head to better see Erick’s face. “Are you still feeling crummy?”

“Not as bad as earlier.” Truthfully his stomach had all but completely settled down, but exhaustion had replaced his nausea. Fatigue seemed to plague him just as often as his morning sickness.

“That’s good. It’s better than not better at all.” Silas faced his tail. He curled and uncurled the end of his tailfin. Erick remained silent. “So…” he said uncertainly. “Earlier, before Ivan came in with everybody, when we were talking about us…”

Erick rubbed his eyes with his thumb and middle finger. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Silas. I have a lot of complicated feelings about pretty much everything, and I don’t really want to try to figure them out right now.” He let his hand fall. “I don’t want you to feel like I’m just stringing you along. I know it’s not fair. But I just kind of want to keep things between us the way they are.”

Silas pressed his lips into a small line, processing Erick’s words. “How do you see things right now then?” His hands gripped each other. “I’m clearly seeing it as something more than you are, but I can’t really tell how different it is.”

“I don’t know. Basically the same as it has been?” Erick said. “Like I’ve said before, I do care a lot about you. I just don’t want to go so fast with all of this that we end up ruining things between us. I’ve messed up too many relationships and friendships already.”

“Okay, but how would you ruin anything? I’ve already seen and know basically all of the worst stuff you’ve done, and I’ve forgiven you for all of it. I don’t know what else you could do at this point.”

“I don’t know either, but I’d probably find a way. It’s easy for you to be optimistic about it because you’ve never been in an actual relationship before.”

“An actual relationship?” he repeated, scowling at the fact that he would discount his relationships with his friends and family. “Just because I haven’t been romantically involved with anyone doesn’t mean I’m stupid. I know the way I feel too has a lot to do with the fact that I trust the gods’ judgement, but I also know that most of the things I like about you have nothing to do with them. Whether or not my feelings are ‘real’ doesn’t really matter to me – the fact that I am feeling them makes them valid.”

Erick had gone quiet again. Silas continued, “You can take all the time you want to sort through your feelings. I really don’t mind. Even if things somehow sink between us, we’re still having a kid. As long as we both want to be a part of their life, we can’t really get rid of each other.”

“I guess that’s true.” Erick glanced down at his stomach, wondering and fearing again about its future. The idea that he could actually have and raise a child still seemed like an unrealistic dream. He half expected that his little stomach bug would just turn out to be the flu after all, despite his certainty otherwise, or that it simply wouldn’t make it.

Both of them fell silent. Erick stared distractedly at a pillar of coral. Silas pinched his fingers. After a minute, Silas said, “Ivan will probably come back with lunch soon. You should probably go dry off and get dressed so you can eat and go take a nap if you still want to get more sleep.”

“Yeah,” Erick said, though he remained sitting. Guilt held him down. Silas was yet again being
more understanding and patient than he deserved, and Erick still couldn’t make himself reciprocate
Silas’ feelings. He wanted to fully like him back. He really wished it could be that simple, that they
could just be happy with each other and leave it at that. But his insecurities kept whispering their
doubts, repeating all the same worries that hadn’t left him ever since he learned how Silas felt. He
wanted Silas to explain what he saw in him that made him like him at all, but it felt too needy and
pathetic to ask for that kind of reassurance. Whatever he saw probably wasn’t true anyway. He
knew it was all too easy to view a first crush through rose colored lenses.

“Erick?” Silas frowned, trying to decipher Erick’s troubled expression. “If you don’t want to go,
you don’t have to.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Erick wiped his hand over his face. “I just got caught up with thinking, being tired
and all. I should go.” He pushed himself up into the water and straightened out his tail. “I think I’ll
just have my lunch in my room, but I’ll try to come back down before dinner.”

“Okay.” Silas watched Erick leave, wishing again he could follow him out of the water. The pool
felt too small.

Chapter End Notes

To recap my earlier note, I will post one more update next week, and then I will go on
a four-week hiatus until January 13th.
Chapter 107

Chapter Notes

It's a day late, but here is the last update of 2018! I finished off the end of this semester like Jack Sparrow coming into the docks on a sinking ship, but at least I made it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Erick didn’t talk much during dinner. He let Ivan tell Silas about how he thought the afternoon went, and they discussed when Silas and Erick should return to the shoal. Eustace’s preliminary hearing was in two days. Ronan would return to the tide pool in four. Even if Kauui had managed to get language pearls and immediately began charging them the day Ronan returned to the shoal, they wouldn’t be ready for another five days. It was much more likely to take longer. Silas and Erick could try to go to the shoal and return with the official notice Eustace’s attorney needed to show the judge, but they doubted it would be accepted without further direct communication between Kauui and Anvil Point’s leaders. The most they could do was bring Silas to the preliminary hearing, hope the judge would accept Erick and Ivan’s translation of his story, and then return to the shoal immediately afterwards.

Erick tried not to think about all of the things he would need to do as soon as he returned to the ocean. Not only would he need to meet with Ronan and Kauui, he would have to talk to Jeb and meet Silas’ salvaging crew to talk more about his guild idea as well as tell Merise, Gale, and everyone else that he was going through with his pregnancy. It was enough to make Erick want to run to his room and never leave the company of his blankets and Puddles again. All he could do instead was retreat into himself and try to let Silas and Ivan take care of everything.

The following day, Erick slept in late and joined Ivan and Silas for lunch. The extra sleep did wonders for his mood, so he spent much of the afternoon showing Silas an assortment of things found on land. He had Ivan bring in trinkets from his collection of souvenirs he had gathered while traveling the world, which included odd curios like bamboo flutes, carved ivory pipes, beaded moccsasins, and porcelain figurines. Silas gingerly touched the objects, spellbound at seeing such things without the ocean’s patina of coral. They brought in flowers from the garden outside and from the sunroom so Silas could smell their blooms and admire their colors. When Ivan’s curios and plants exhausted their interest, Erick began reading to Silas old picture books from Ivan’s library, to both show him their artwork and practice teaching him English. Silas listened with rapt attention, utterly fascinated by the differences between human stories and merfolk tales.

While Erick was in the middle of reading another story to Silas late that afternoon, Ivan’s butler announced that Talia and Dunley were at the door. Ivan had called Dunley earlier that morning so they could swap their cars in preparation of Eustace’s preliminary hearing and eventual return to the ocean, and they agreed it would also be good for them to visit Erick. Ivan meanwhile had other business to attend to, which included meeting with officials at Anvil Point’s city hall to discuss the validity of Peleran’s status as a neighboring city-state.

After Ivan left, Talia soon strode into the natatorium with a grin. Dunley followed behind her with a newspaper tucked under his arm. “Erick!” Talia called. “Good to see you’re still kicking.” She nodded to Silas. “Good to see you too, fish boy.”
Silas tilted his head at her. Erick laughed and translated for him before he turned back to Talia and Dunley. “It’s nice to see you both. How are you doing?”

“Oh, fine,” Talia answered with a shrug.

“We’re doing all right.” Dunley held up his newspaper. “We saw you and Silas in all of the papers this morning. You’re the only thing every single person at the dockyard is talking about.”

“Yeah, everyone who knows us kept asking if it was true,” Talia added. “It got really annoying, actually.”

“Really?” Erick stood to offer them seats at the breakfast table. “I didn’t think the reporters would publish their stories so quickly. Can I see?” He held out his hand to take the newspaper Dunley brought.

Passing over the newspaper, Dunley said, “That’s what happens when you get a bunch of important people all in one room. Far as I can tell, this paper wrote it best.” He sat down in one of the chairs, sinking gratefully to take his weight off his feet. Talia sat down across from him and draped her arm over the back of her chair.

“That so?” Erick found himself staring at his photo on the front page as he sat down between Talia and Dunley. The paper had picked the picture of him sitting with his tail partially in the pool while Silas was sitting in front of him with his tail folded beneath himself, turning its end to the other side. Erick had a stoic expression, but Silas had an earnest smile. Erick softly smiled at the two of them, tracing his finger beside Silas’ face. He glanced back over at Dunley. “Can I keep this?”

“Sure,” Dunley said, waving his hand to show him it was all his.

Talia smirked. “Are you gonna put it in a scrapbook or something?”

Erick reddened as he put the paper back on the table. “No, I’d just like to read it later.”

“Oh-huh,” she said, enjoying his flustered excuse. “So are you and Silas having fun here?”

“It’s been nice having his company, yeah.” He scratched his eyebrow to hide his face from Dunley and give Talia a death-stare. “I’ve been teaching him a lot about things on land.”

“Teaching him, huh?” She bounced her eyebrows.

Both Dunley and Silas looked confused, equally lost on the hidden meaning of their conversation, though for different reasons. “Am I missing something here?” Dunley asked.

“No!” Erick cleared his throat and repeated more calmly, “No, she’s just giving me shit about something dumb.”

“Erick, don’t leave me out,” Silas called with a pout, holding the pool ledge. “What’re you talking about?”

“Just the papers, Silas,” Erick answered, glad that he couldn’t understand Talia’s teasing. “We’re catching up.”

Silas sunk to his nose and blew petulant bubbles. “That doesn’t tell me very much,” he grumbled.

“Well, I can’t very easily translate and talk at the same time. We spent all day talking with each other. You can wait a bit for me to chat with my friends, can’t you?”
“Ivan can translate for me and talk just fine.”

“He’s better at multitasking than me.”

“So? You could practice.”

Erick sighed, rolling his eyes. Talia said, “It is so weird hearing you talk in mertongue. You have the accent and everything.”

“Huh?” Erick turned to Talia. “That’s just because I learned it with a language pearl instead of naturally like Ivan.”

“You’d think it wouldn’t make that big of a difference, though.”

“Erick,” Silas complained. “What are you saying now?”

“Talia was just saying I talk weird.”

“Why?”

“What is the fish boy griping about?”

Erick face-palmed with both hands. “Enough, both of you,” he repeated in English and then mertongue. “I can’t keep up with two conversations at once.”

“You should make Ivan come back then,” Silas said.

“I can’t. You know he’s probably busy working already. Just… give me a minute to recollect my thoughts, okay?” he asked, rubbing his temples. “Then I’ll try translating for you.”

Silas continued pouting, but said, “Fine.” He ducked back under the water.

“Is everything all right?” Dunley asked.

“Yes, fine,” Erick said, letting his hand fall back onto the table. “Silas just wants to be a part of the conversation, and it’s making me realize how annoying it’s going to be to keep having to be the in-between person for humans and merfolk.”

“You’re not going to be the only one, though, right?” Dunley asked. “The paper said you guys were going to have our leaders and theirs talk to each other.”

“Yeah, but I’m the only one that can physically be here and back in the shoal. Unless we can get Adriel to give up the secret of shifting, it’s going to stay just me and his merpirates.”

“I suppose I hadn’t thought of it like that,” Dunley said.

Talia held out her hand. “There can’t be anything stopping us from sailing out to their shoal. Just put Ivan or someone else with a language pearl on a boat if anybody wants to talk to them.”

Erick shook his head. “I’d be afraid that somebody might try to sink any ships that come near them again after what happened with the trawling net.”

“Then just don’t have a bloody net attached to the boat,” Talia said. “A ship just floating above them shouldn’t be an issue.”

“You’d think that, but Silas was telling me that merfolk really don’t have high opinions about
humans anymore because of it.”

Erick continued talking with Talia and Dunley, discussing the feasibility of establishing trade or just peaceable relations between humans and merfolk. When they got to Silas’ idea to start a guild, Erick brought Silas into the conversation and focused on translating so Silas could better explain merfolk perspectives.

Soon the afternoon wore on until evening, and they agreed it was time for Talia and Dunley to return home. Erick walked them to the front door. Outside, Ivan had already moved Dunley’s truck near the natatorium doors and left his car in the drive for Dunley to use.

“You start up the car,” Talia told Dunley. “I’ll follow in a minute.”

“All right.” Dunley left.

Erick raised his eyebrow at Talia. “Are you trying to squeeze in more teasing before you go?”

Talia laughed. “Maybe, but I just want to make sure everything really is okay with you and Silas. What’d he think of the news?”

Erick shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. “Uh, good, you know.” He resisted the urge to touch his stomach. “He was happy to hear it.”

Talia nodded. “That’s good. So are you two an item now or…?”

“No,” Erick said, shaking his head. “I’m still trying—”

“Erick!” Talia groaned, exasperated. “You’re both already acting like a couple. Will you just admit it and save the drama?”

“No, fuck off.” Erick reddened as he crossed his arms. “Just let me figure things out on my own, okay? Silas is okay with things as they are now, so you don’t have to butt in and play matchmaker.”

Talia rolled her eyes. “Fine then. Are you ever going to tell Dunley about this?” she asked, jabbing a finger at his waist.

“No, why?” Erick unconsciously stepped back, uncomfortable with her pointing at him. “It’s bad enough I told you.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Talia said, as if she was explaining the obvious. “Dunley has kids. Rachel’s having their third now. I know merfolk probably have their own way of raising kids, but they can give you advice and stuff about babies on land.”

“Okay, but we don’t even know if mine will make it or even be able to walk on land.” Erick turned his head towards the door. “I’d rather just wait until everything settles down.”

Talia sighed. “Okay. I won’t say anything then, but you better keep me updated. I don’t want to have to keep coming here to bug Ivan just to make sure you’re alive.”

“All right, I will.” Erick paused for a moment, reminded of how she stayed with him while he spent the night at her apartment. Silas wasn’t the only one stopping him from taking his own life. He sighed. “I’m sorry I make you worry so much.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Talia lightly punched his shoulder. “You should try saying thank you
sometime instead of apologizing so much. None of us mind helping you out. We just want to know it’s actually working.”

“It is.” Erick smiled slightly, sheepish. “I don’t know how I’d be able to do any of this without you all.”

Dunley called Talia’s name, asking her what was taking so long. Talia called back, “Just give me another minute.” Facing Erick again, she said, “You probably would’ve figured something out.” She took a step down the front stairs. “Anyway, keep care of yourself.” She bid him goodbye and then hurried off to Dunley.

Erick waved goodbye as they left, thanking whatever gods were watching him for putting such good friends in his life.

Chapter End Notes

As I announced last week, this story is going on a break until January 13th. Thank you all so much for sticking with me and this story for so long. I hope you all enjoy the holidays!

Next week I will begin posting the alternate timeline of this story, titled "The Other Side of the Water," and it'll feature rewritten chapters from the original before the timeline splits. We'll get to see a lot more of Erick's crew and Ivan's servants (yes, they have names!), and I can finally share the sweet fluff of Silas trying to figure out how legs work.

*UPDATE* I wasn't able to rebuild my buffer or get much writing done at all during winter break. I will continue posting chapters for the alternate timeline, so see my updates there or on whatever else I post to get info about my writing status.
Chapter 108

Chapter Summary

This is not a chapter - An update about my continued hiatus

Chapter Notes

This update is copy-pasted from my notes before/after on my most recent chapter for "The Other Side of the Water." I will delete this chapter and replace it with an actual update when I have it ready.

Hey everyone... I'm sorry I've been absent lately. I know I said I'd update this story, but I didn't want to put up an update that had a cliffhanger. Instead I've marked it as being on hiatus indefinitely. I still have a rough idea of how I want to get to the end of the story, which is basically the Christmas special I uploaded a few weeks ago, but I guess I've just burnt myself out with merfolk.

For a long story short, figuring out all the stuff with the merpirates just wasn't fun for me. Adriel served as something to push the romance plot, not be the main conflict. I started it because of the relationship I developed between Erick and Silas. Because their relationship is basically resolved all but officially, it's hard for me to motivate myself to find anything new to explore with them. The only conflict left is figuring out human-merfolk relations, which I see ending rather anticlimactically. There wouldn't be some epic fight between Erick and Adriel. Maybe they will go to war, but that's not the story I set out to write. It was about a guy dealing with the dysphoria of becoming a merman and accepting his bisexuality, along with problems from alcoholism and grief. Erick is still stuck in his anxiety, and always will be, and Silas can only there and supportive. I just feel like I'm beating a dead horse at this point.

I'm welcome to ideas if you have any to get over this roadblock. I still want to finish merfolk. I just feel like I've reached the point where I should be revising/rewriting old chapters, rather than continuing to plow forward.

Also, as for an update about my personal life, I met with a psychiatrist last Wednesday. It's looking like I have anxiety/depression, which *really* shouldn't have been as surprising to me as it was. I had figured depression was a possibility, but I hadn't considered anxiety at all because I have a few friends who have it way worse than me. However, I learned PTSD is a type of anxiety, and considering my history with my mom... It makes perfect sense that my anxiety is just C-PTSD. The things I thought were ADHD symptoms were just the combination of those things.

So, I suppose I have a decent excuse now for why my writing always comes in waves. Whenever I get writer's block, it's probably me just getting stuck in a depressive episode.

Thank you for sticking with me while I get through this. I hope you'll continue to read and support my other works here. I'm going to continue writing, but it probably won't be about merfolk for a
while.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed it, please drop a kudo or leave a comment.

Since I've run out of buffer, this story is on an indefinite hiatus until I can get it sorted out.

To see fan art and my own drawings of these characters, check out my tumblr at darkacey.tumblr.com. I'm also on Twitter @DarkAcey, so follow me there to get updates about my writing.

Works inspired by this: One Braid Swings with the Rhythm by DarkAcey, Chapter 39.5 from Go Off the Deep End by DarkAcey, A Little Fish and a Big Wreck by DarkAcey, The Other Side of the Water by DarkAcey, A Salty First Kiss by DarkMachi

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