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“Whoever’s out there, they need help.”
Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
Chapter 1

I've been getting fanart commissioned from different artists at the anime conventions I attend, so look for the links to the fanarts at the end of each chapter.

“We’re so lost!”

“We’re not lost.”

“I’m telling you, Google Maps will tell us where to go, just let me- “

“We don’t need Google Maps.”

“Oh, come on, Lukas! In this brilliant era of technology there’s no reason to be driving through the country blind! Stop acting like an old man!”

The argument was made more chaotic as a lash of rain pelted against the SUV, harder than the others and giving the windshield wipers a run for their money. The sound of the assaulting spring weather had been a constant but it was getting steadily worse the longer they drove, causing tensions in the car to run a bit high. There were four of them crammed together, after all, and even considering the large space of the vehicle, they had been on the road for a long time and were wearing on each other’s nerves.

The driver, Lukas, stayed calm through it all, however, even as he reprimanded the worrying man in the passenger seat beside him. Even his tone was quiet, in contrast to his biting words.

“If I’m an old man then you’re a stupid kid.” He said, to the man who was a head taller than him and quite a bit broader. His hair was a darker shade of blond than Lukas’, and spiked in the front. “I know where I’m going because I paid attention last time we were here. You were probably too busy staring at your screen the whole trip, like Emil back there.”

“Don’t lump me in with him!” Piped a fresh-faced youth from the back seat, without looking up from his laptop. “I’m finishing an article, not melting my brains on Candy Crush.”

“Hey, that game is badass!” Cried the front seat passenger, whipping his golden head around to glare at the teen. “Have you ever tried playing against the Jelly Queen?! She’s harsh, man!”

“What’s another word for ‘anomaly’?” Emil asked, pausing in his typing and acting like the other hadn’t spoken at all.

“Try ‘irregularity’.” Lukas suggested.

“Try ‘annoying’!”
“Irregularity…” Emil brushed his white-blond bangs out of his eyes, scratching his head as he considered. “I haven’t used that one yet…ok, I-R-R-.”

“Urrrrg! It’s bad enough we’re lost, do we have to suffer through your writing too?”

“Shut up Mathias, you’re whining again.” Emil cut in. “If I don’t write, we don’t get paid. Besides, if I want to relax at all this week I need to type up our last case and post it on the blog before tomorrow morning.”

“How can you even waste your time on such a boring one?” Mathias droned, turning to face forward in his seat again. “It was just a lingering spirit; no poltergeist, no ill will, no injuries, no screaming babies, nothing to write about. Why don’t you write up the Wailing Witch case?”

“Posted it already.”

“But that was less than a week ago!”

“I write quickly,” Emil shrugged, “I’m cool that way.”

“Well, while you’re at it maybe you could write us some directions…”

“We’re not lost.” Lukas insisted wearily. “This road takes us straight to the cabin site. It’s not that difficult to remember. We got off the highway and now we’re on this road for another hour.”

“But you’ve been saying that for twenty minutes and we’re still in the middle of nowhere!”

“It’s not nowhere,” Emil rebuffed, “it’s just too dark for you to see the coast. We’d have a great view from up here if it was daytime.”

“He’s right.” Said Lukas.

Mathias opened his mouth to continue their abrasive back and forth, but their other, previously silent, passenger intervened. A huge hand slid onto Mathias’s shoulder from the man in the seat behind him, and a deep voice accompanied the action,

“He’s going the right way. Don’t distract him in this rain.”

Mathias shot a glare into the stern face of the huge blond man, but backed off under the stare of his green-blue eyes, illuminated even behind his square glasses. He sunk down into his seat, mumbling under his breath.

“Nice, Berwald, you caged the beast.” Emil said with a little grin, offering his hand palm-up to the man beside him. “Slip some skin.”

Berwald slid his large hand and fingers smoothly along the teen’s in the affirming gesture.

“That’s so twenty years ago…” Mathias grumbled, plucking at a thread on his sleeve and frowning back at them.

“It’s still cool,” Emil insisted, “Right, Ber?”

Berwald made a deep hum of agreement, and held up a huge closed fist to Emil. The teen cracked a smile and rapped his knuckles against the bigger man’s, sending a cocky smirk Mathias’ way.

“At least he used a social gesture from this decade!” Mathias quipped at him. “A fist bump is way more hip than ‘slipping some skin’!”
“Who cares what’s hip?” Lukas questioned, his dark blue eyes still fixed on the road.

“Mathias obviously.” Emil fake whispered, while his fingers returned to flying over his keyboard. Berwald gave a tiny grunt that may have been a chuckle. “That’s why he plays-”


“This guy gets it.”

Mathias growled and once more turned away from his two companions, whipping out his phone to resume said King game.

“You’re too soft for your size, Berwald.” He whined. “Always taking the brat’s side.”

“What do you mean?” Emil asked, his tone one of exaggerated confusion. “He’s never on your side.”

“Oh, ha-ha!” Mathias said with a forced smile, ignoring them in favor of his game.

For a few more minutes their voices were replaced with just the click of Emil’s typing over the roaring wind and rain. Berwald kept reading on his tablet, and Mathias played on his phone. Three passengers with faces lit up by their entertainment devices, without which murders would probably ensue. Lukas usually popped in his earbuds and listened to his audiobooks when the car went quiet, but right now he needed to focus in this weather.

Somewhere during the long silence, Lukas drew in a sharp breath, just audible over the rain.

“You ok, babe?” Mathias asked absentmindedly, still playing his game.

Lukas bit his lip softly and didn’t answer. That got the other man to look up at him.

“You look a little…” Mathias waggled his hand in the air in an indecisive motion. Lukas shook his head.

“I’m alright…just thought I heard something strange.”

“Sure it’s not just the memory of the Wailing Witch?” Emil asked from the back, giving a mock wail low in his throat. Mathias made a disgusted sound.

“No…” Lukas said slowly, as though concentrating. “It’s…not like that.”

“Want me to drive?” Berwald asked.

“No, you already drove your part. The last half of the trip’s my turn.” Lukas reassured. “It’s nothing.”

“Plus, we’d all like to get there some time this year. I’m surprised we didn’t all check into the geriatrics ward while waiting for you two to swap out.”

Emil actually laughed at Mathias’ words.

“You do drive slowly, Ber.” He agreed.

“Look who’s giving you a fist bump now!” Mathias cheered, reaching around to present Emil with his knuckles. The teen bumped his fist back with a grin. “Boom!”
“I just drive safely.” Berwald stated simply, unaffected by their teasing.

“Oh, it’s safe enough to put us all—”

Suddenly Lukas slammed on the breaks. Everyone in the car lurched as it jolted, tilted, and finally stumbled to a stop off the side of the road. Panting breaths filled the air as adrenaline shot through their veins.

“What the hell, Lukas?!” Emil and Mathias said at nearly the same time, while Berwald simply grunted and rubbed at his head, which had been bumped on the back of Mathias’ seat. He was the tallest out of all of them and partially the reason they bought the SUV in favor of a general sized car.

“Didn’t you see that?” Lukas asked urgently, staring wide-eyed in the rearview mirror. The other three men exchanged worried glances.

“See what?” Mathias asked. “Are you completely insane, trying to give us all whiplash?”

Lukas shook his head emphatically, his breathing erratic now.

“There’s something on the side of the road right back there. It…it looked like a person.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t just a mirage? Lights and shadows and all that?” Emil asked, “You’re freaking me out.”

“Should I get the camera?” Mathias asked eagerly. Instead of answering immediately Lukas roughly maneuvered the car into a U-turn and settled it so that the headlights were shining back the way they had come. He put the SUV in park and snatched up his rain slicker from the space between his seat and Mathias’s, pulling it on.

“Whoever’s out there, they need help.”

They knew by his tone that this was no joke. Lukas didn’t get flustered very often and if ever he did, it meant that something serious was about to follow. Without another word, he climbed out of the car and started walking through the rain back down the side of the road.

“He’s crazy!” Mathias cried, rubbing at the bridge of his nose.

Berwald shook his head as he watched Lukas, slender body being pelted by rain in the glare of the headlights, searching the side of the road.

“You know he’s not. If he saw or even sensed something we take it seriously. C’mon.”

Following Lukas’s example, Berwald slipped into his own coat. Emil and Mathias followed suit.

“But no cameras?!” Mathias questioned. “Why not?! Low visibility, lots of rain, headlights in the dark against a murky forest; it’s the perfect setting for spooky footage! If we have to be dragged out into that mess why not get something out of it?”

“He’s got a point.” Emil said, closing his laptop and sliding it beneath his seat. “We can always use more shots for the intro and outro of the videos.”

Berwald frowned deeper, hesitating, before reaching back behind his seat and hauling out a camera case.

“Atta boy!” Mathias cheered, reaching out for the device. “Gimme!”
A few seconds later Mathias leapt fearlessly from the SUV, camera in hand, Berwald and Emil making a less dramatic exit. With a quick turn, Mathias had the camera fixed on himself and he began speaking to it as rain poured over his hood.

“The love of my life just about killed all of us, pulling over unexpectedly on this lonely road along the coast of Finland.” He told the camera, looking victimized but still sounding intrigued. “He heard something a few minutes ago that the rest of us couldn’t, and then he pulled over suddenly because he says he saw something on the side of the road. He’s making us go look for it now, says something about someone being in danger. Even for Lukas this is strange!”

As he explained the situation he turned the camera to glance at Berwald and Emil in turn, as all three of them shuffled along in the blinding rain, casting eerie shadows in the beams of light from the car. Lukas had paused to wait for them a hundred yards or so away, and upon seeing the camera called out loudly above the rain,

“This is an emergency! Someone needs our help here, I can feel it, can you just put that thing away?!”

“If there really is someone out here,” Mathias answered, “They’ll have the three of you to help, and the one of me to make them the star of our next case.”

“That’s a bit insensitive.” Emil said, his words battling to be heard in the heavy rain.

“Uck! We’re getting so wet out here! This is nuts.” Mathias said, ignoring Emil completely and catching up to a very miffed-looking Lukas.

“Mathias, I’m serious, turn that thing off.”

“Calm down and show me where you saw this…what did it look like?”

Lukas gave an exasperated sigh and continued blazing the trail down the road.

“I thought I saw a pair of arms coming up out of the ditch on this side of the road. But before that…I felt an overwhelming sense of despair…and pain…like someone was crying out for help but couldn’t voice their plea.”

Whether he knew it or not, Lukas was slipping into ‘drama speech mode’ without even realizing it. He was entirely sincere but after doing what they had for so long, speaking so dramatically was commonplace, especially in front of a camera.

“That’s freaky, man.” Mathias commented. Where Lukas and sometimes Emil would wax eloquent during filming, Mathias would digress to simple statements spoken with raw emotion. Berwald usually just looked stoic and on the rare occasions that he would speak, he never said more than a few words. It was a good mix for the online audience that supported their lifestyle.

“I can’t say how far down it might have been from here.” Lukas said. “The light from the car only goes so far, and the camera light isn’t much better. Try shining it further that way.”

The second the faint beam of light added to the car’s gleam on the hump of ditch down the road a few hundred yards, something pale and humanoid caught the light, lying on the soaking grass. They all recoiled a few steps out of sheer reflex, and Mathias said a word that Lukas would scold him for saying in front of Emil. When he could focus the camera again, they edged forward, at a quicker pace now that the thing had been spotted.

“Dude…it’s not moving.” Mathias said in a low and shaking tone as they closed in. “I think it’s a
The figure they approached was lying face down with its two pale arms stretched over the ridge of the ditch, as though it had been trying to pull itself up and onto the road. The rest of the figure was obscured by a long curtain of sopping hair that looked gold in the harsh light. Despite the mane covering most of its body, however, it was obvious that it was naked.

“Hello!” Lukas called out bravely. “Are you alright? I heard you cry out for help, didn’t I?”

As he spoke the figure lifted its head slowly, and through the long hair two big, violet-blue eyes blinked at them. As they watched, one hand lifted toward them, and a pained groan escaped the figure.

“Don’t just stand there, we need to help!” Lukas said. “It’s not a spirit, come on!”

He moved boldly to kneel beside the figure and took hold of its arms.

“Help me, Berwald!”

“I don’t know, man…it looks pretty pale and weird…” Mathias commented in a fearful tone as the larger man joined Lukas, standing over the figure.

“Lift around the waist.” Lukas instructed, and Berwald latched his massive hands onto a small waist and lifted.

An inhuman wail escaped the figure, and its hands clenched on Lukas’s arms. Mathias cursed again and Berwald nearly dropped it the sound was so unexpected and so loud, but he was a pro, and managed to haul the mystery being up to rest on the side of the road, directly in the beam of the headlights. Mathias had bolted back quite a few paces when the sound rang out, but he inched closer now, zooming the camera in and out to take in the entire scene and the details.

Once upright it was more obvious that the figure was male, despite the ridiculously long golden hair, which hung down over his shoulders and pooled in his lap. He was completely naked but for a curious bracelet around his wrist that looked to be made of large beads. He wasn’t much bigger than Emil, but was slightly smaller than Lukas, and his skin was very white. He was whimpering and clutching at Berwald and Lukas as they kept him propped up into a sitting position. Once they looked down at the rest of his body, it became apparent why he was in such distress.

“Oh…what…what the hell is that?” Mathias asked, speaking for all of them as they stared at the figure’s legs. From his thighs to his mid shins he looked perfectly fine, but his ankles…were fused together. That was the best way to describe it. Where there should have been two individual feet, there was instead a long mass of what looked like gelatinous flesh, but covered in faint…

“Scales?” Emil asked breathlessly. “Are those scales?”

“Get him to the car!” Lukas said sharply. “Now! We need to dry him off right now! Berwald, help me carry him. Emil, dig out some towels from our bags, go!”

There was a note of urgency and command in Lukas’ voice that they responded to out of instinct, like soldiers. A mad scramble ensued in response as Emil ran back to the car, and Berwald lifted the stranger with Lukas. He screamed again, a terrible high-pitched sound that rang clearly through the trees as they carried him in the beam of light back to the car. Meanwhile Mathias was filming it all as he walked backwards in front of them. The longer they walked the more erratic the cries became. Sometimes they faded into low moans, other times they swelled into loud wailing. But for all his noise, and for all that he twisted in their arms, the stranger was not actually fighting them.
“Mathias put that camera down and help!” Emil called over his shoulder.

“I can open the door, I can open the door!” Mathias barked back, proving his usefulness by flinging open the side door. Over the back seat they could see Emil rummaging through their bags, tugging out clothes and toiletries in pursuit of towels.

“Put him on the back seat.” Lukas instructed. “Careful of his legs.”

They laid the stranger across the seat, trying to be cautious of the raw-looking lump at the end of his legs. His cries died down but he still let out pained whines or grunts every other second.

“He’s um…he’s got to be hurting, I mean just look at that…” Mathias sputtered, getting a better look at the alien-looking mass with the camera. “Dude, what happened to you?”

The stranger seemed too preoccupied with his pain to hear the question, let alone respond. He lay there, shaking, with his arms curled around himself, and didn’t attempt to get up.

“Towel!” Emil announced frantically, tossing the first one he found over the back seat, where Lukas caught it. He instantly began rubbing it over the stranger’s knees and thighs.

“We have to get him as dry as possible.” Lukas’ tone was urgent. “Berwald, prop him up. We need to get to his upper body.”

Berwald went around the other side of the SUV, startling the stranger when he opened the door by his sopping golden head. Violet-blue eyes looked startled as Berwald lifted him to sit upright, then leaned him back against his chest.

“Incoming!” Emil cried again, this time tossing the next towel he found to Berwald. He continued to search for more towels, but none of them had packed more than one. Together with the two towels they currently had, Lukas and Berwald began drying him off. The stranger didn’t fight them, but he couldn’t do much to help as he was shaking so badly and his hands couldn’t quite hold anything.

It was his hair that was the greatest task; it fell past his knees, and was completely drenched. Every time they thought they had his chest or arms sufficiently dried off, rivulets of rainwater would cascade down from his head.

“Emil, I don’t care if you use one of our shirts, but get up here and wrap his hair in something.”

Scrambling, the teen dug out one last towel to his luck, and crawled over the mountain of bags to the back of the seat. From there he carefully pulled the wet curtain of hair away from the stranger’s face and draped it over the seat, letting it hang back into the trunk. He bound the golden length with their last towel and held it tight to drain.

Once all that hair was out of the way they could see that the stranger had a very youthful-looking face; pretty and round with a small nose and big eyes fringed with dark lashes. However, his beauty was marred by constant grimacing and agonized expressions.

“There’s no way we have enough towels with us to completely dry him.” Mathias butted in, from his prime filming position in the front passenger seat, camera resting on the seat back.

“The cabin has plenty.” Lukas pointed out, rubbing at the stranger’s torso and chest as clinically as possible. “We’ll take him with us.”

“Not like we have a choice.” Emil interjected. “There’s nothing else around here.”
“Hospital?” Berwald grunted, using the end of his own sleeve to gently dry the stranger’s face. He only blinked a little when a sleeve-clad thumb wiped around his big eyes.

“Too far away,” Lukas answered, “it wouldn’t help anyway.”

At that they all found themselves staring down at the abnormality before them, their guts twisting with the sight. It wasn’t as though the flesh was bloody or mangled, but it was discolored, looking much darker than the rest of his pale skin and glistening wet. There were mottled reds and pinks dotted within the pale whiteness of the flesh, and as Emil had instantly pointed out there was a dark scale pattern underneath the layer of translucent film on the outside of the lump.

While patting him down Lukas left that area alone, seeing enough to know that it would greatly hurt if he touched it. Once Lukas declared the stranger dry enough to satisfy him they wrapped him in the ‘car quilt’, a huge homemade thing that Lukas and Emil’s mother had sewn for them two years ago. They had found that there was always a need for a blanket while on cases, and she had crafted them one specifically for the purpose, big enough to even wrap around Berwald or Mathias when necessary. After bundling the stranger carefully so that his ‘feet’ were untouched by the quilt, Lukas had Berwald sit behind him bobsled style against the car door, and keeping him upright. This proved to be easy as the stranger leaned against him at once, eagerly accepting his support.

“Alright, everyone, pile in, we’re getting back on the road.” Lukas announced, even though they were all already inside the car.

Mathias buckled himself back in, Lukas resumed his place in the driver’s seat, and Emil had to close the trunk from the inside and squeeze himself into the back with all their luggage. The teen was not complaining as he could stretch out over the bags. He still managed to pull his laptop from beneath the back seat and open it over his legs, beginning to type frantically.

The scent of rain-soaked skin and hair filled the space now that the doors were closed, but it was too cold for it to be repulsive. And perhaps it was their imagination, but there seemed to be a noticeable scent of salt wafting through the air as well.

“We have to hurry.” Lukas said as he pulled back on the road, driving much faster than before. “He needs to dry off.”

“He’s cold.” Berwald said, brushing a thumb down the stranger’s cheek. His head was flopped back onto Berwald’s broad shoulder, and the pale forehead was nudging his jaw. “Shaking really bad.”

He pulled the blanket tighter around the stranger, holding him closer against his body to try and keep him warm. In response, a slender hand reached up and grasped Berwald’s sleeve with trembling fingers.

“Keep him as still and calm as you can.” Lukas told him.

“That’s easier said than done when you’re driving like a madman!” Mathias pointed out loudly, holding on as they rounded a curve. The stranger seemed to agree, as he gasped and his eyes flew open with a flash of violet in response to the movement. He clutched frantically at Berwald, whimpering.

“Stop yelling, Mathias.” Lukas reprimanded in a quiet tone. “We don’t need to frighten him any more than we probably already have.”
“But what is he, Lukas? What’s up with his feet?” Mathias turned the camera and focused it on the swollen gelatinous tissue holding the base of his legs together on the seat. “Well, if you could call them feet…they’re not really feet, are they? What do you think happened to them?”

“Mathias.”

The camera jerked a bit as Mathias looked up at Berwald, who was glaring at him sternly.

“But…Lukas…he feels real…”

“I said he wasn’t entirely human,” Lukas clarified, “not that he was intangible.”

A small whimper left the stranger’s mouth and Berwald made a small expression as though he were the one feeling pain. He gently rubbed at the man’s shoulder. Very quietly he addressed him,

“Can you tell us what happened to you?”

“I wouldn’t bother, Berwald.” Said Lukas. “If he is what I think he is he won’t be talking any time soon. Maybe not at all.”

“What do you think he is?” Mathias asked, turning the camera onto Lukas, capturing the intense look of concentration on his face. There was a silence in the car as they all waited for Lukas’s answer, the only sounds that of the rain as it continued to assault their vehicle, and the stranger gasping.

“I think he must be a merman.”

Another silence, but this one only stretched the space of an instant. All sets of blue eyes were looking toward Lukas, incredulous.

“WHAT?! NO WAY!!” Mathias instantly jerked the camera back to the stranger.

“But he’s got legs!” Emil pointed out incredulously from his perch on their luggage.

“Sort of…” Mathias mumbled, zooming in to focus on the obvious pattern of scales over the ugly mottled flesh. “but you can see scales…I guess they’re scales…but they look kinda like they’re…dissolving…don’t they? They’re faded out…and what the hell is with that?”

Lukas heaved a small sigh, navigating them through another sharp curve up the mountainous road.
“Even to you it should be obvious that he’s in the middle of a change. He’s somehow been stranded so far inland that he’s having to rapidly adapt to survive. But this rain isn’t helping. The theory is that they must be completely dried out for the change to begin. In response to the lack of water they excrete a gelatinous substance to protect their tail. When they can’t afford to sap the fluid resources in their own body to keep up the secretion they start to metamorphize otherwise they will die. My guess is that it was dry out when he started to change, but then it began to rain and that slowed down the process. It will probably speed up if we get him dry enough.”

“And just where did you get all that?” Mathias nearly sing-songed in response to this typical Lukas-information-dump.


“Not a *printed* book.” Lukas said firmly, obviously not liking the skepticism. “Journals kept by Norse fisherman in the eighteenth century. They wrote of countless encounters with merpeople in the Baltic Sea. They would steal fish from the nets once they figured out where the fishermen were going to be day after day. It didn’t bother some of them too much since they never took enough to damage their livelihood. They assumed they just wanted an easy snack. According to one man he’d once saved a mer child who had been stranded by the low tide. He never found out how or why, just stumbled across a crying humanoid child with fused legs and a scale pattern on the flesh. He had to think fast and decided the best course of action was to put it back into the water. He rowed it out in his boat and helped it to hold onto the sides. Over time the child reverted back and swam away.”

“Wow.” Mathias said, shaking his head. “Even for your research that’s a little far-fetched.”

“Well,” Emil said slowly, “we *are* on the coast of the Baltic Sea…”

“In Finland, not Norway!” Mathias argued. “If the fisherman was Norse then he’d be clear on the other coast. Then again, I guess you can’t really argue with *this*.”

He turned in his seat again and got yet another shot of the stranger’s legs.

“Mathias.” Berwald said again in a warning voice, actually pulling the stranger close with one huge hand holding his face, as though sheltering him from the paparazzi.

“What?! If he is a merman and he’s changing into a freaking human I want to document it all! This might be the very first ever video record of something like this!”

Berwald opened his mouth to snarl again, but Lukas cut him off.

“I hate to agree with him, but I think he’s right, Berwald. If nothing else, I’d be interested to keep the footage for further study.”

“In your face!” Mathias cheered, pumping his free fist in the air, balancing the camera in his other.

Berwald looked like he was planning on skinning the other man alive, but at that moment the merman groaned loudly, clenching his hands painfully against Berwald and drawing his attention.

“That’s gotta be painful…” Emil muttered. “His tail had to have split into legs. Ouch…”

“And I’m assuming that’s what’s still happening now; his feet are separating and forming.”

Even Mathias stayed quiet after Lukas said that, all of them horrified at what pain the merman had to be in. Berwald held him a little tighter.
It was a stressful half-hour drive before they arrived at the cabin. It was difficult to see in the dark, but there were a few outer lights that came on as they pulled up, showing the front of the sprawling log building.

Lukas parked the car and went immediately to the back, opening it up and tossing his keys at Emil.

“Go unlock the door and turn on the lights. Get the fire going too, please.”

Emil nodded, and after crawling off from his mountain of bags, hurried to do as he was told.

“Berwald, can you manage to carry him on your own? I need to help Emil bring in the bags and this moron’s too busy filming.” Lukas hooked a thumb at Mathias, who was opening the door on the merman’s side and continuing to hold the camera. “Plus,” he added, “I sense that he doesn’t want to be away from you.”

Lukas proved to have the right of it. When Berwald moved just to get out of the car, the merman gave a little sad chirping noise, holding onto his shirt.

“It’s ok, just give me a minute.” Berwald muttered to the stranger, before carefully lifting him into his arms, quilt and all.

They all braced themselves for more wailing, but instead the merman just moaned loudly into Berwald’s shoulder. He was holding onto the big man’s neck like it was his lifeline. It was impossible with his legs draped over Berwald’s arm to keep the fused limbs from jostling a little, so he was gasping and letting out little whimpers the entire way into the cabin.

“Our own damsel in distress.” Mathias whispered to the camera, not wanting the others to overhear him. “Well, he’s not a damsel, but with all that hair can you blame me for thinking so?”

Emil had done his job, and as they crossed the threshold into the foyer they were bathed in the warm, atmospheric lighting that made up just a part of the cabin’s appeal. They called it a cabin but really it was more like their own personal lodge. A fireplace sat in the corner of the huge great room under a vaulted ceiling, and Emil was going an extra step to load it with the prepared wood that was left for the guests. Berwald set the merman down onto one of the deep sofas that sat in a cozy radius around the magnificent stone hearth.

“You’ll warm up more when the fire gets going.” Berwald told him, kneeling down to be sure he was still sufficiently wrapped up. The merman had his eyes squeezed shut, and was still shaking all over.

Berwald looked up from his position and saw Lukas struggling to pull several of their bags through the doorway. He immediately stood up, intent on going to help. He had barely gone two steps before the merman let out a mournful whine and reached out to try and grab hold of him. He couldn’t quite reach and he leaned dangerously, making Berwald catch him before he fell over. The merman latched onto him like a leech.

Mathias plopped down into the plush chair opposite the sofa, making a contented sound and zooming in on the pair. Berwald glanced at him over his shoulder before casting Lukas a helpless look.

“Mat, if you have to keep that thing rolling you can set it up on the tripod or the arm of the chair, but I need your help with the bags. Berwald’s helping our guest and could use a few more towels I think.”

“But his feet look a little more like feet now!” Mathias said pleadingly, kneeling next to Berwald
with the camera trained on the mass resting carefully on the floor where the merman’s feet should have been. The mass had shrunk down a great deal in size, and now ankles were clearly formed, the vague shape of heels just beginning to peek out from the swollen mass. “The scales are almost gone!”

“Lukas said he would change faster once he was dry.” Berwald said, maneuvering in the merman’s hold to sit next to him on the sofa. “Now go help him. And get me towels.”

“Aw come on-.”

“Now, Mathias, please?” Lukas called, feigning as though he was falling over from the weight of the bags.

Grumbling and unable to resist his better half in need of him, Mathias placed the camera carefully on the chair, checked that it was filming at a wide enough angle, then went to help Lukas.

Fifteen minutes later all the bags were piled in their respective rooms, the fire was blazing, and they were all gathered before it, five shades of blond hair and blue eyes glinting in its light. Emil was standing behind the sofa, using a towel to try and squeeze as much water out of the merman’s exceedingly long mane of hair as he could. Lukas was doing the same with the crown of his head. Berwald had wrapped him in a new blanket, the quilt from the car being too damp to be comfortable anymore, and was serving as the merman’s leaning post. Those shaking hands were clinging to his arm, and every few minutes he would grimace, his body twisting in pain as it continued to change.

“It’s got to be like having your limb melted and then forged brand new.” Lukas said quietly, rubbing at the merman’s head gently. “That’s the only way I can imagine that it works.”

The merman squirmed with a cry and pulled helplessly at Berwald’s shirt. There were quite a few wrinkles in it at this point from where it had been clutched, tugged, and dug into. The big man placed his arm around the trembling shoulders.

“Poor thing.” He mumbled.

“You can freaking see him changing now.” Mathias said in wonder. He was stretched out on his stomach a polite distance away from the sofa, his camera watching at a close angle as the gelatinous mass very slowly seemed to melt away and solidify into a natural shape. The substance was not falling away, it was reforming.

“Lukas.” Berwald said quietly as they watched. “He’s been shaking nonstop since we found him. He must be exhausted from it. He’s not even cold anymore, but he won’t stop shaking.”

Lukas shook his head.

“I’m sorry Berwald, I honestly don’t know what else to do for him. I’d suggest trying to give him some pain meds, but we don’t know right now if his physiology is completely human or still something else. We’ve done all that we know to do. Now we just need to wait.”

“He’s probably shaking because he’s so stressed out and hurting.” Emil offered. “I know when I’m anxious I’ll shake a little.”

“Hopefully that’s true.” Lukas said. “It will wear him out but really won’t do any harm.”

Emil and Lukas did their best and got the long mess of hair as dry as they could. When they were done, they spread the damp towels alongside the car quilt on the hearth.
“I’m going to change into dry clothes and unpack my things.” Lukas announced. “We have all the food to put away on top of everything else. Emil, you should help me. Mathias, I’d tell you to help and leave our guest and Berwald alone, but don’t suppose you’re going to, are you?”

“No way dude!” Mathias called, never looking out from the camera’s viewfinder. “I gotta capture this from start to finish, unfiltered.”

“Well then, look after him. Emil, let’s go put our things in order and warm up the extra room for our guest. Berwald, I’d suggest that you try and do the same but--.”

The merman gave a short cry and buried his face into Berwald’s shoulder. The man patted his arm gently, and gave Lukas a determined look.

“Alright then, we’ll be back.”

The entire cabin—well, lodge—was so open that they could see right into the kitchen, entranceway, and dining room. From any room there was at least a spot where every other area of the first floor was visible. So their eyes flicked up every now and again as the two brothers unpacked their coolers, stocking up their huge refrigerator, and put the dry goods in the pantry. They always had to bring a weeks’ worth of food with them, only going to the little store at the base of the mountain for snacks once or twice in the trip. This amount of food, for four men, took a long time to put away.

Once Lukas and Emil had finished their tasks and changed their clothes nearly twenty minutes later, the merman seemed to be much calmer. He was quiet and slumped against Berwald with his eyes closed. After grimacing in pain for so long he seemed to be exhausted and slack now.

“How is he doing?” Emil asked, sitting down cross-legged by Berwald’s feet.

“Much better,” Mathias said, “He even perked up a bit a while ago and was just staring at the fire.”

“He’s probably never seen it before.” Lukas supplied, dropping down into a nearby chair.

“Probably never seen anything on land before.”

“Yea, and look at his feet!” Mathias urged. “They’re just being held together by the big toes, a tiny bit of that flesh still hanging on. It’ll snap any second now!”

“Ja…” Emil said, leaning closer.

“Careful, don’t block the shot!” Mathias warned. “I’ve been waiting for this.”

He was still stretched out on his stomach and was quite sore but wasn’t about to give up his perfect vantage point.

They all fell silent as they waited, watching with bated breath. Before their eyes over the next minute, the fleshy bit holding the two toes together shrunk away, and with a final snap, the feet separated.

The merman jolted a little at this, giving a tiny whine. The rest of them felt their jaws drop in awe. The gelatinous mound had formed into perfectly normal feet, and not even an ounce of dampness was to be seen on them. They were perfectly dry.

As if sensing their eyes on him, the merman opened his own violet-blue ones and stared at them, then slowly lifted his head, and leaned over to look down at his two new feet.
“Wow.” Mathias supplied scholarly. He panned the camera from the newly-formed feet up to the merman’s face as he observed them for the first time. His violet-blue eyes were tired, but still filled with wonder as he studied his new appendages. For all his awe, he then looked a little lost, his expression falling into something like fear.

“Emil,” Lukas said quietly. “Can you run and get a glass of water for him? I’m sure he’s needing it right about now.”

“How come?” Emil asked, as he got up to obey his brother. “I thought water was the issue before.”

“It was when it was pouring down on him constantly.” Lukas said. “That’s why I didn’t want to give him any to drink until his change was complete.”

The teen got up to leave the fireside, fetching a large tumbler of water from the kitchen. When he brought it back he stood awkwardly beside the rest.

“Um… will he even know how to drink? Not just from a cup, but period?” He asked nervously. “Fish don’t really swallow water, do they?”

“Hmmm…” Lukas thought about it for a moment, and stood up to take the tumbler from Emil. He brought it over to the merman, who had been entranced by looking at his feet this entire time, and squatted down to his eye level. Since this blocked Mathias’s perfect angle, he finally pulled himself up onto his knees and filmed from the side of the sofa.

Once Lukas was sure the merman was looking at him, he took a short sip from the cup, being sure to make an audible slurping sound to make it unmistakable what he was doing. Then he held the cup slowly up to his lips for him. The merman opened his mouth cautiously and, as Lukas tipped it up and let the water run into his mouth, he took a slow swallow.

After that first mouthful the merman’s eyes opened in discovery, and he seized the sides of the cup with shaking hands, tipping it further back as he gulped frantically. The blanket that had been wrapped around him dropped from his shoulders and pooled around his trim waist. His bracelet jangled a bit as he moved.

“Slowly now!” Lukas chastised gently, pulling the cup away. “Don’t make yourself sick.”

The merman ignored him and yanked the cup from Lukas’s hands, quickly holding it to his lips again.

“Look at him go!” Mathias said with a chuckle. “He’s like a little baby calf!”

No one watching would deny that, as the merman drained the tumbler quickly. Once he finished the water he gasped and held out the empty cup to Emil, tapping the side rapidly with his finger.

“More?” Emil asked, his eyebrows raising. The merman continued to hold it out, his lips parting and his eyes widening, begging.

“Listen to the puppy-dog eyes, Emil.” Mathias teased.

The teen shrugged and took the cup, going to the kitchen to refill it. While waiting, the merman startled fiddling with the bracelet around his wrist, as though it was a common nervous habit.

“That’s pretty.” Mathias said, pointing to the bit of jewelry. “Where do you think he got it?”

Lukas carefully took a closer look, and then his eyes widened a bit in understanding.
“It’s sea glass.” He declared.

“How?” Mathias asked.

“It’s been all the rage for a while now; human trash like glass beer bottles are broken and worn down by the water into these smooth and beautiful pieces. Sea glass jewelry is quite pricey, actually. Looks like mer people get theirs for free.”

At that moment Emil came back, and he’d barely stepped close enough to reach the merman when he snatched it, and poured it so quickly into his mouth that he spilled a great deal of it. He didn’t seem too concerned about it, as he kept gulping. To everyone’s shock, the sides of the merman’s neck opened and water shot out onto his shoulders.

“What the hell?!” Mathias cried, the camera whirring as he zoomed in. “Dude…”

Lukas stood up from his seat and stepped closer to the sofa to observe, his mouth dropping open like the rest of them. Emil knelt up on his knees to get a closer look as well. Berwald lifted a hand to brush at the gush of water that had splashed on his own shirt. The merman seemed to be alerted to their intense interest, and he stared back at them, lowering the water.

“Do that again!” Mathias urged, making a definitive drinking motion with his free hand. The merman watched the gestures, and then slowly lifted the water again, looking confused. As he drank, once more the sides of his neck opened; three fine slits on each side that let the water flow right out of them.

“They’re gills.” Lukas affirmed.

“Why does he still have them?” Emil asked, reaching out as though to touch the sides of the merman’s slender neck. The gills flattened instantly, virtually disappearing as the merman recoiled from Emil’s hand, hissing almost like a cat.

“Leave him alone, Emil.” Lukas warned. “I’m not sure why he still has his gills, but they’re not there for you to touch.”

The merman relaxed when Emil sat back down onto the floor. He even held out the now empty tumbler to him once more.

“Another?” Emil asked, incredulous. The merman nodded vigorously.

“He probably needs to rehydrate,” Lukas speculated, “a lot of the fluids in his body must have gone to create that gelatinous substance.”

Emil sighed, jumping up lightly to his feet, and going yet again to refill the tumbler. When he next had the water in his hands, the merman drank more carefully. When he looked up and saw all their eyes on his again, he seemed to give the tiniest of grins, and flapped his gills open on his last gulp, another spurt of water escaping them.

“Sweet!” Mathias whispered, having been waiting for it with the camera. “That is wicked sweet!”

“Well, it is fascinating, but he spilled water all over himself.” Lukas chided. Berwald wordlessly picked up an extra towel from the short stack they had brought out earlier, and patted the water from the merman’s shoulders and arms. His every move was scrutinized by big, violet-blue eyes.

“We should try to put him in some clothes.” Emil commented. “To keep him warm.”
“I don’t know how a merman will react to clothes.” Lukas pondered. “Emil, go get a pair of your boxers.”

“What?!” Emil exclaimed, blushing furiously.

“He’s the closest to you in size. Everyone else’s clothes will be too big on him.”

“He’s about your size!” Emil argued, crossing arms over his chest. “Why don’t you get him a pair of *your* boxers?”

“He’s skinnier than me.” Lukas pointed out. “His waist is too small for anything of mine to stay up on him.”

Emil stared Lukas down for a few seconds of defiance, then gave in and hurried away to the stairs, Mathias following his retreat, zooming as best he could on his face.

“Look how red you made his ears, Luk!” He laughed, earning him a middle finger from Emil, who heard him when he was at the top of the stairs.

“Naughty boy!” Mathias complained, turning the camera on Lukas. “You need to rear your little bro in!”

“You deserved that.” Lukas deadpanned at the camera’s lens.

“But you’re the one who mentioned underwear to a teenager.” Mathias shot back. “What did you expect?”

“He’s of university age. Underwear shouldn’t phase him.”

Their little spat was interrupted as the empty tumbler clattered to the ground from the merman’s limp hands, his body slumping against Berwald as it had before. His eyes were now blinking tiredly.

“He’s worn out.” Berwald said quietly.

“Changing species would do that to anyone.” Lukas pointed out. “Speaking of which…did you notice, he seems to be able to understand us?”

Mathias scooted on his knees to the other side of the exhausted merman.

“I’m pretty sure anyone would know how to mime wanting more water, without understanding a language.”

The well-pointed camera captured Lukas’s thoughtful look, then his frown.

“He’s obviously tired, but maybe we should try asking him, now that his mind isn’t clouded with pain.”

Lukas then looked pointedly at Berwald, who gave him a deer-in-the-headlights look in response. He quickly schooled the expression and then cleared his throat, patting the merman’s shoulder to get his attention. Half-lidded eyes rose to meet his own, mildly curious.

“Um…can you understand what we’re saying?” Berwald asked quietly.

The merman didn’t respond right away, but seemed to be thinking as his eyes drifted down to his lap for a minute. Then he raised his head and gave a deliberate nod.
“Oh, good!” Mathias sighed. “That will make things a lot easier.”

“Maybe not,” Lukas chimed in, “he may be able to understand our language but that doesn’t mean he can understand everything.” He jerked his chin at Mathias. “Like ‘camera’, for instance.”

At this point Emil came back down the stairs, a pile of clothes in his arms. Berwald’s eyes narrowed suspiciously as the teen came closer.

“That’s my sweater.”

“In case he doesn’t want the boxers.” Emil supplied. “They’re brand new to him, and he may not like wearing them at all. He’s not even used to having legs, how can wearing anything on them be comfortable at first?”

“But why my sweater?” Berwald asked possessively.

“You’re the biggest,” Emil shrugged, “and I figured if he doesn’t want boxers, he’ll need a shirt that is long enough to cover…everything…”

Berwald sighed resignedly, nodding his approval.

“So…” Mathias said awkwardly. “Who’s going to…you know…dress him?”

All eyes went at once to Berwald expectantly. The man nodded in agreement.

“He does seem to like Ber the best!” Mathias all but giggled.

“I’m still going to need some help.” Berwald said. “Don’t think he’s ready to stand up yet…”

Lukas rose from his perch on the sofa’s armrest, and helped Berwald to sit the merman up. He stirred a little when he felt himself being moved, and blinked up at the two men.

“The sweater, Emil.”

Emil shook out the garment, an old comfortable thing worn soft by years of wear. It was nearly all white, but for the wide bands of pattern around the collar and sleeves that were made up of many shades of blue. It always brought out Berwald’s eyes.

When they slid the merman’s arms into the sleeves he gave a soft sound of confusion. When Lukas helped Berwald put it over his head a frightened chirp erupted from the sweater, and they had to quickly put the more-than-large-enough collar over the merman’s head to quiet him. He was breathing a bit faster but seemed content, once he could see again, that they were not hurting him. Berwald smoothed the sweater down over his chest and shoulders, while Lukas began hauling the long length of his golden hair out of the fabric and draping it down his back.

“There, that was fairly painless, hmm?” Lukas encouraged, rubbing the merman’s shoulder. The merman ran his fingers over the soft material and gave a small smile and nod.

“How are we going to…” Berwald gestured to the boxers in Emil’s hand. They were white and blue gingham with a graphic of a cartoon puffin across one side, the other side sporting the words ‘stud puffin’ in huge navy letters.

Mathias sniggered when he captured the graphic with the camera.

“I knew you would keep them!” He declared triumphantly, then whispered conspiratorially for the camera, “I got those for him last Christmas.”
“I think,” Lukas cut in, coming to Emil’s rescue and taking the boxers from him, “that you should just pick him up, and I’ll get these on him.”

Berwald nodded. He knelt and began pushing away the ends of the quilt, then slowly slid one arm under the merman’s knees, and the other around his back, carefully lifting him off the sofa. In response, pale arms went around Berwald’s neck like he’d been doing it forever.

“Awww, look at him…” Mathias said to the camera in his favorite whisper-voice, as the merman dropped his head onto Berwald’s shoulder.

Lukas cautiously slid the boxers over the brand-new feet and pushed them up the shins.

“One at a time now.” He said reassuringly, lifting one pale knee and pushing the fabric over it. The merman lifted his head from its resting place and let out the faintest chirp, his gills flapping open once.

“What a cute little sound.” Mathias chuckled.

“It’s alright.” Berwald murmured. “Calm down.”

The merman quieted down at this, and Lukas was able to work the garment up his thighs and over his rump, then finally left them in place around his waist.

“Again, painless, you see?” The merman reached one hand down and touched the boxers. His mouth twisted and one gold eyebrow rose in distaste. Lukas actually smiled at the look; it was the first ounce of expression he’d given that hadn’t been pain or confusion. “You’ll get used to them.”

The merman smiled back at him, before his mouth opened around a massive yawn.

“You’ve been through a hard time, haven’t you?” Lukas said gently. “Don’t worry; Berwald will put you to bed and you can rest. Try to get some sleep.”

The merman nodded, blowing out a breath before yawning again. He once more rested his head on Berwald’s broad shoulder, closing his eyes entirely.

“I don’t think he could have said ‘that’s a great idea’ any more clearly.” Mathias said, keeping his tone respectfully quiet for once. “Now off you go, Berwald, and tuck our little merman into bed!”

Berwald glared at him, but began carrying the tired merman toward the stairs. Once they were out of sight Lukas dropped onto the sofa and sighed loudly, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“What’s wrong?” Emil asked, plopping down beside his brother. “Don’t you think this is exciting?”

“Of course it is,” Lukas answered, “but I don’t really know how to handle this.”

“What do you mean?” Mathias asked, sitting in the chair opposite them. “Dealing with the paranormal is kind of what we do. We can figure this out no problem.”

“Dismantling curses, helping lingering spirits wrap up their earthly regrets, exorcising evil presences…” Lukas rambled off wearily. “That’s not the same as having to house and care for a mythological creature.”

“It’s not like we haven’t sort of had to before.” Emil said, fighting off a smile. “Like that gnome in Norway.”
“That wasn’t the same.” Lukas insisted. “We were only living in that house temporarily while we figured out what was going on. We didn’t have to take the creature in and figure out everything about it in order to…figure out where it should go next…”

“Don’t you think he’ll tell us where he plans on going? If he has any idea?” Mathias asked. “I mean, he didn’t seem to have any problems understanding us. Don’t you think he can speak too?”

“Have you ever tried to speak underwater?” Emil pointed out. “I don’t think his kind could possibly communicate verbally the same way we do.”

They all took a second to think that concept over, before Mathias asked,

“Then how did he learn our language to begin with?”

Lukas shook his head, putting out his hands in a helpless gesture of defeat.

“While we’re playing guessing games,” Emil said wearily, “do you think we could make some dinner?”

Nodding, Lukas pulled himself from the sofa.

“Something quick for tonight.” He said tiredly. “I’ll reheat the Lapskaus. Mathias, you can turn that thing off now.”

“Yea, I guess all the interesting stuff is pretty much over…hm…just one quick thing first!”

Mathias took the camera and crept up the stairs and out of sight. Lukas and Emil shared a knowing, weary look before heading into the kitchen. There Lukas tasked Emil with putting the pot on the stove and turning on the heat, while he dug out the huge Tupperware box containing the stew from the refrigerator. For a few minutes they worked in companionable silence, Emil turning over the pot to Lukas once he poured in the cold stew, and going to wash up the dishes. Since this was a guesthouse the dishes, while clean already, had been sitting in the cupboard for a long time and were a little dusty.

The Lapskaus was still cold in the pot when Mathias came tiptoeing down the stairs. He was grinning ear-to-ear and his feet barely hit the last stair before he was bolting toward them, whispering excitedly.

“The door was cracked open and they didn’t see me; the merman is all tucked up in the guestroom bed, and Berwald is sitting on the floor next to it because blondie won’t let go of his hand. Whenever Berwald tries to get up and leave the merman lets out those chirping sounds one after another until he sits down again. They’re just in there, looking at each other while the merman nods off. So freakin’ adorable! Our Ber-Ber looks so awkward but so intrigued at the same time. You can’t ask for better footage than that!”

“How about the footage of you finally shutting that camera off and helping us set the table?” Lukas deadpanned, stirring the pot a bit more fervently.

“After that perfect send-off? Sure, sure I can do that.” Mathias finally turned the camera off and placed it carefully on its tripod in the great room. He started to sit down on the sofa when Lukas stopped him.

“Help Emil dry the dishes, will you?”

“What?!” He protested. “But I haven’t had a second to just chillax!”
“You’ve just been filming all evening.” Emil said, placing another dripping bowl on the drying rack.

“Filming in the rain and cold!” Mathias complained, but he went over toward the kitchen anyway.

“No one asked you to.” Lukas mumbled. Mathias plucked a towel from the drawer and picked up the first wet bowl.

“You’ll thank me when this makes us rich.”

“I doubt that.”

Emil hummed at Lukas’ comment, and said,

“But you have to admit that the footage will at least get a lot of attention.”

Lukas said nothing for a moment, before shaking his head and sighing.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way I can convince either of you two not to post it?”

“Why would we not?” Mathias asked. “It’s not like the merman will object.”

“He didn’t exactly give his consent.” Lukas said sternly. “May I remind you that he was nude through most the rescue? Even if he did know what the camera was for, I don’t think he’d be thrilled to know you want to share images of his bare body with the entire world.”

Emil was turning redder the longer Lukas continued to talk, but Mathias just rolled his eyes.

“He was wrapped up in blankets most of the time.” He argued, to which Emil shyly reminded,

“Oh come on! We’ll blur out his fun bits with pixels, no big deal.”

Emil positively had steam pouring out his ears now, his face was so flushed. It wasn’t like they hadn’t had to do something similar before; occasionally for one reason or another someone or something might be captured on camera in the nude for a case, and they’d have to alter the footage for modesty. But still, Emil usually left that task up to Mathias.

“If you can promise me that nothing inappropriate will be visible, then I suppose I can’t see a reason to object.” Lukas assented. “Just be sure you look through every inch of that footage to be sure his dignity is preserved.”

“Aw sweet!” Mathias declared, placing the now dry bowl on the counter and reaching for another wet one. “I need to do that anyway because I’m going to post the entire video. No cuts. Beginning to end. That’s the only way anyone will take it seriously.”

“That’ll take a long time to upload, won’t it?” Lukas asked.

“Not as long if we compress the file.” Emil suggested, scrubbing a few spoons in the soapy water. “That’ll decrease the quality a bit but not to the point where it’ll look grainy and fake.”

“My man.” Mathias said, nudging Emil’s shoulder playfully.

It only took a few more minutes to finish the dishes and then arrange them on the table. It was a long, sturdy thing made of oak, all the nicks and grooves of use glossed over by a beautiful polish.
They had stayed here so often over the years that it was like a family table to them. Once a year it would host their meals for a week or more before they went back home, and a few of the dents in the strong wood were as familiar to them as if it had been sitting in one of their own houses for years.

“You think we should check on Berwald?” Emil asked, placing spoons around the bowls Mathias had put down.

“Nah, he’s fine sitting with the cutie.”

As if on cue, Berwald’s heavy footsteps could be heard walking down the upstairs hallway. When he appeared, coming down the stairs, he looked less tense than he had the rest of the evening, and he had changed out of his damp clothes at last like the rest of them had been able to do much earlier.

“Hello stranger,” Mathias called, “we had nearly forgotten about you.”

Lukas looked up from where he was spooning out stew into the serving dish by the stove.

“Is he asleep?” He asked. Berwald nodded, leaning against the counter.

“Wouldn’t let me leave.”

Mathias laughed, going over and sitting next to him, crossing his arms and looking smug.

“You’re his favorite all right.”

“Am not.” Berwald muttered.

“He was clinging to you from the moment we found him.” Emil said from the dining room. “I’m pretty sure he likes you the best.”

Lukas carried the Lapskaus out in a huge taurine, placing it carefully on the table.

“Leave Berwald alone.” He scolded quietly. “If the merman likes him the best, so what? We can debate that later if it really means that much to you two. For now, we all need to eat.”

The four blond men sat down and began eating together, letting the soothing act of filling their bellies wash calm over them all. Even though dinner with the four of them was always pretty noisy, tonight they were surreally quiet. When everyone had taken at least a few bites, Berwald voiced the question that was on everyone’s mind;

“What are we going to do with him?”

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FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER:

Tino and Berwald in car

Stud Puffin
Chapter 2

A silence followed the question and eventually everyone looked to Lukas. He wasn’t the oldest of them all, but he was undoubtedly the leader. He had the sensitivity to the paranormal that brought them all jobs. While Mathias had the filming and editing skills, and Emil the writing and blogging skills, Berwald had the muscle, and could secure shields of strong positive energy. But Lukas had brought them all together, what with his ability to sense and communicate with the paranormal, and exorcise them when needed. He was the boss, and he made the decisions.

Lukas wiped his mouth on a napkin, took a deep breath, and said,

“I don’t know.”

They continued to stare at him for a second, before he followed up his admission with,

“We’ve never had to take something mythical home with us before.”

“That’s not for Emil’s lack of trying of course. ‘Just one cute, harmless spirit to keep as a pet, please?’” Mathias teased. Emil frowned at him.

“A pet is one thing. This is a person.” Berwald said seriously.

“He’s right.” Lukas agreed, “We can’t assume to ‘keep’ him, but we can’t just let him go either; he doesn’t know anything about this world.”

“How would we even do that anyway?” Emil asked, stirring his stew absently. “Put him back in the sea?”

“Maybe he’ll want to wander off on his own,” said Mathias, “maybe that’s what his plan was in the first place.”

Lukas twisted his mouth a bit, as he did whenever he was deep in thought, trying to solve a particularly challenging mystery.

“The fact is, we don’t know why he was so far inland. I can’t think of any way that a merman could get marooned that far up in the hills, nearly into the mountains. Even if he could have come this far on his own, why? What reason would he have to flee his home?”

“Maybe he was in danger?” Berwald tried. “Being chased by his own people?”

“I have read a hypothesis about the judicial system of underwater folk, if they exist.” Lukas supplied thoughtfully. “It was theorized that stranding a mer person on land would be a form of punishment. Possible banishment for crimes serious enough to warrant severe punishment, but not so severe as a death sentence.”

More than one eyebrow lifted around the table. They were all used to Lukas and his ability to remember nearly everything he read, and he did read a mountain of research to reinforce his knowledge of all realms of oddity. Still, that didn’t mean that at times some of the more obscure texts contained theories bordering on insane ramblings.

“How can we know anything about the justice system of a mythological community?” Mathias asked blandly.
“We can’t, but like I said it was just a theory.”

“And even if was true,” protested Emil, “that sweet-faced boy doesn’t seem like a criminal!”

“Criminals on the run rarely do.” Lukas said very softly. “But this is all conjecture, so we’re not going to start treating him like a murderer, relax.”

“Could he have been captured?” Berwald suggested, “Perhaps he managed to escape and ended up where he was.”

“What, like, he was on a truck or something and just flopped out?” Mathias asked around a mouthful of bread.

“But if he was captured,” Lukas thought aloud, “don’t you think he’d be more afraid of us?”

“Well, we were helping him, not treating him like an object or an animal.” Emil tried.

“We won’t know until we ask him.”

“If he can actually tell us.” Mathias brought up again. “Like I said, we don’t know if he can actually speak. Even if he can’t right now, he can pick it up. You can’t know a language but not be able to speak it, right?”

“We’ll just have to wait and find out.”

“You’re right.” Lukas agreed with his brother. “I think we’ll just have to sit tight for now. We’ll keep him here and see what happens next.”

“Our views and donations are going to go through the roof!” Mathias said excitedly. “Not only do we have the rescue of a real-life merman on camera, we can also document everything else that happens from here on out! Maybe do a live stream or two, oh this is a goldmine!”

Lukas sighed, Berwald seemed to start zoning out, but Emil immediately began to show interest. However often they went back and forth busting each other’s chops, Emil and Mathias always worked well together when it came to running the website.

“If we’re going to commit to an ongoing story like this, we’ll need to think of the story title pretty quickly.”

“No problem!” Mathias said at once. “This story just about writes itself: Merman Rescue SOS, or A Merman’s Tale…something like that.”

Emil rolled his eyes.

“Too trite. It needs to be more simple and compelling.”

“Angel of the Sea, Stranded on Land?”

Emil shot him a ‘really?’ look.

“Way too long!”

“Well didn’t you think he looked like a fallen angel at first glance?” Mathias argued. “On the ground, covered by all that golden hair?”
“Yes.”

They all turned in surprise to look at Berwald, who had spoken. He maintained his neutral face but could not conceal the slight pink tinge to his cheeks. Emil tried to move the conversation forward again,

“Anyway…”

“No, no, no, no, no…” Mathias cut off his effort to evade, a devious grin on his face. He leaned mischievously closer to the man beside him, grinning from ear to ear.

“Ber, do you like our little fish boy?”

“Just answering your question.” Berwald shot back. “He did look like an angel. I thought he was a girl at first.”

“To be fair, I think we all did.” Lukas commented. “Though I don’t know how well we’re going to manage hair that long.”

“It is going to be a pain to brush out in the morning.” Emil agreed.

“It’ll be great footage though.” Mathias said with his mouth full. “I’m telling you this could make our careers!”

“Was supposed to be a vacation…” Berwald mumbled.

“Screw that, this is an opportunity of a lifetime!”

“He’s right.” Emil said. “Posting this as an ongoing video journal will at least get us more attention, even though some people will cry fraud like they always do. Those who do think it’s fake will still be impressed because they’ll think we’re doing improv the entire time and it’ll still be amazing.”

“That’s why we can’t turn the camera off if we can help it.” Mathias said, fairly trembling with excitement. “We’ll have to use the charger with the extra-long cord so we can keep the battery up when it starts getting low, and use the tripod when we’re all in one place, anything we can do to show that we’re not staging anything. Every time we cut, it gives more credibility to the fraud suspicion.”

Lukas swirled his water in his glass as though it was wine, listening to the conversation for a while before chiming in,

“Just be sure you don’t overwhelm him.”

“I think the very nature of his rescue was enough to overwhelm him, don’t you?” Emil asked, “After that, something like having Mathias in your face with his camera isn’t that traumatizing.”

“He’ll be ok.” Berwald intoned. “He’ll just chirp if he doesn’t like something.”

“And you would know, wouldn’t you, Berwald?” Mathias jeered, “After hearing him do it so many times? How could you break his heart that way and try to leave him alone in a strange bed and strange house?”

Berwald didn’t answer, he just scraped the bottom of his bowl with his spoon, chasing the last remnants of his stew.
“Didn’t I tell you to leave Berwald alone?” Lukas reprimanded. “The merman likes him. That’s a good thing for us; at least he’s not terrified of us all. That would make this impossibly harder...”

Emil ran his fingers through his hair and leaned his head back on his chair.

“As if this isn’t going to be hard already.”

None of them could argue with that, not even Mathias’ overwhelming optimism felt tempted to object.

After dinner Mathias planted himself in the chair nearest to the fireplace in the great room and plugged the camera into his laptop. For over an hour the sounds of his editing would cut into the otherwise tranquil silence of the lodge as he stopped and paused the footage to add pixilation and adjust lighting and sound.

Similarly Emil joined him a little while later with his own laptop, curling up at one end of the big sofa. He had abandoned his previous article and was instead working on the one they would post along with the video. His fingers flew over the keys as he typed, trying to capture with words every mood, every emotion, every facet of that evening’s great surprise.

Every now and then the two would bounce ideas and suggestions off each other as they worked on their own projects. Their working relationship was always good, even if their personal one was a bit touchy. It was unofficially in the book that a brother had to frown upon anyone stealing their sibling away with romance, even if it did make them happy. The same worked in the opposite direction of course. But if nothing else both Emil and Mathias loved telling their stories in their own creative way, and creative people always got along on some level, if only for a short time. Under the surface though, they both knew that they were linked together as family and would never truly hate one another.

Meanwhile Berwald and Lukas sat around in different chairs in the great room, reading their books. Lukas had his earbuds in, listening to some soothing music on his iPod as he read. But Berwald seemed unable to even focus on reading, let alone the idea of listening to music at the same time. He kept blinking and having to refocus on the page. While Emil and Mathias were discussing something across the room, Lukas sighed and put down his book, pulling out his earbuds.

“What’s the matter?” He asked Berwald, quietly enough so that the younger ones across the room wouldn’t overhear. “You keep turning that page back and forth. It’s distracting. What’s on your mind?”

Berwald grunted and lowered his book to lay in his lap.

“What if he wakes up in the night and gets scared?”

Lukas shrugged.

“He’ll remember where he is after a bit.”

Berwald’s frown softened as he looked concerned.

“He could fall out of bed and get hurt if it’s dark.”

“You left the light on in the hallway, is his door cracked open?” Berwald nodded. “Then he’ll have plenty of light to see by if he does wake up. Why are you so worried?”

Bright blue-green eyes avoided Lukas’s inquisitive stare, flitting to the side before dropping his
book on his lap.

“Don’t want him to be scared.”

Lukas said nothing at first, studying Berwald. He now knew all too well part of what was troubling his friend. Still, there was something else…

“You really do like him, don’t you?” Lukas asked simply. Berwald said nothing. “Well, just don’t get too attached. You know how it usually goes with wild things. They have to go back, and then break your heart.”

Berwald set his jaw, still staying silent. Lukas rubbed at his chin and tried again,

“You’re not going to frighten him. Do you think he would have been clinging to you the entire evening if he was terrified of you? Do you think he would have demanded you stay by his side while he was falling asleep? You should know by now that good-intentioned inhuman beings are receptive to you. Why should a merman be any different?”

The big man’s finger played with the page of his book for a moment, thinking over Lukas’ words. He finally sighed and closed his eyes.

“Guess there’s no way to know until morning.”

Despite a few more encouragements, Lukas could see that Berwald’s old insecurity was rearing its ugly head. It had been a year or two since he had seen the man like this. They had functioned so well as a family unit, accepting Berwald effortlessly into their ranks, that he hadn’t really needed to worry about other people’s opinions for a while. And the internet had clearly showed it’s love for him as part of their group. Now, it seemed, with the sudden intrusion of a cute mythological being, Berwald was questioning his likability again. He was correct though; all they could do was wait.

They all stayed up extremely late, as they always did during this vacation week. Mathias and Emil managed to finish up their editing and writing after about two hours, and together posted the story to their website along with the video. They left Mathias’ laptop open and on when they went to bed, simply because it would most likely take forever to upload the full video.

A quick check on the merman before bed showed him to be in the same position Berwald had left him, sleeping soundly. Even with this assurance, hardly any of them slept without waking up a few times and wondering if he was alright. Once during the night Emil and Berwald nearly collided in the hallway, as they had both decided to get up and see if their guest was alright. After recovering from their heart attacks they peeked in, and sure enough, the merman was still sleeping like a log.

By the time morning rolled around everyone had at least managed to get a few solid hours of exhausted sleep, enough to be somewhat human when they began to filter down to the great room. In the pale light of morning their view was gorgeous; the huge windows in the great room showed the thick forest surrounding them, and the birds that were flocking to the bird feeder planted by one of the main windows. Heavy mist hung over the ground and through the tops of the trees, obscuring their view of the distant hilltops they’d all come to know so well. The morning light was dimmed by heavy clouds, but it was no longer raining at least.

“Morning.” Lukas called when he saw Berwald coming down the stairs. “Coffee?”

Berwald nodded grimly, rubbing at his face. Lukas continued preparing the coffee as Berwald restarted the fire that had died down in the night.

“Did you check on him last night?” Lukas asked.
“Ja.”

“Thought so. I did too...more than once.”

Berwald gave Lukas the closest expression to a smirk that he could manage so early in the morning, and Lukas even grinned back a bit.

“Couldn’t help it; I was worried for him too.” Lukas admitted. “Just wanted to make sure he was ok.”

“He didn’t really move much, did he?” Berwald asked. “Was in the same place all night.”

“Exhaustion can immobilize you even in sleep.” Lukas pointed out, then paused in concern before saying, “Though...we should probably look in on him again, just to be sure.”

Berwald caught on to the worry in Lukas’ voice, and his mouth opened slightly as his eyes widened. Without another word the two of them turned and hurried up the stairs. Neither of them said it, but they knew why the other was flustered. Usually everyone moved at least a little in their sleep.

When they poked their heads around the door the merman still looked like he hadn’t moved. He was still lying on his stomach in the bed, covered to his neck with the blanket, one hand on the pillow by his cheek where Berwald had tucked it last night when he left. They both cautiously stepped into the room, unknowingly holding their breath. Lukas knelt beside the bed and watched the merman’s face intently. A tense second later he relaxed.

“He’s breathing.” He declared softly. Berwald let out a sigh of relief as well, having to shake himself a bit.

Lukas reached out and placed the back of his hand against the merman’s forehead, testing his temperature.

“Nice and warm, but no fever.”

At the touch of his hand and the sound of his soft voice, the merman’s eyes fluttered a bit. His steady breathing faltered and then started up again, more quickly. Then those lovely violet-blue eyes blinked open. They opened and closed a few times then before focusing on the two of them standing over him. He only looked briefly confused before he relaxed.

“Good morning. Did you sleep well?” Lukas asked.

The merman nodded groggily, rubbing at his eyes with a hand. He then winced as he rolled over onto his back. A small popping sound was heard as he arched a bit.

“You didn’t move at all last night.” Lukas chuckled. “Sore, huh?”

A huge yawn answered Lukas’s inquiry, and then the merman carefully stretched his arms out above him. He held them there for a second, then let them drop heavily onto the mattress. He looked a bit irritated, and tried the motion again, stretching deliberately far. He lowered his arms with more control this time, but still let them bounce at they hit the covers. When he tried to sit up, however, one of his arms went out from under him and he fell back again, resulting in a short yelp. The merman looked startled.

“Careful now.” Lukas said, sitting on the side of the bed in case he was needed. “You’re not really used to gravity yet, are you?”
A voice from behind them answered.

“He doesn’t even know what gravity is.”

They all looked toward the new voice and saw Mathias standing there in the open doorway, camera in his hand. Lukas rolled his eyes.

“I thought you were still asleep.”

“Yea that’s why you snuck in here to wake up the mythological being without telling me.”

Berwald and Lukas both looked annoyed.

“I was hoping to give him some privacy.”

“He’s fine, look at him!”

Mathias gestured to the merman, who was gazing at the camera, apparently unconcerned, rubbing his cheek with the back of one hand. The sleeve of Berwald’s sweater came down over his fingers and he seemed to enjoy rubbing the soft fabric against his skin.

“We should check out his legs.” Mathias suggested, taking another step closer. Lukas nodded.

“I suppose you’re right. Is that ok?” He asked the merman, who nodded. Cautiously, he moved to sit up, successfully staying upright this time. He rolled his head on his shoulders a few times, wincing and rubbing at the back of his neck, sore from sleeping all night on his stomach.

Lukas helped him pull the covers down to expose his legs and feet. They were delicate, white, but looked perfectly healthy. The merman reached out with both hands and stroked over his shins, wide-eyed with wonder. He flexed his feet a little and broke out into a smile. It lit up his already sweet face and made him look even more beautiful.

“Are you still hurting at all?” Lukas asked. The merman shook his head, still smiling.

“That’s good.” Berwald said. Mathias swiveled the camera to focus on the big man’s face, then back to Lukas and the merman on the bed.

“Look at that!” He exclaimed, drawing right up to the bed. “Your feet look fine now!”

The merman nodded emphatically and shifted his hips a little, pulling himself over to the edge of the mattress. He then very slowly swung his legs over the side. Lukas reached out as though to steady him if he fell, since he did sway a bit back and forth, reminiscent of how something underwater would move to propel itself forward.

“Think he wants to stand up.” Berwald said.

“Any reason he shouldn’t, Lukas?” Mathias asked. The other man shook his head.

“Not that I can think of. He appears to be fully changed and adapted. Might as well give it a try sooner rather than later.”

“Then help him, Berwald.”

Doing as Mathias said, without noticing the glint in his bright blue eyes, Berwald leaned down toward the merman, offering his hands.
“Easy does it.” He said, and the merman looked excited, but nervous. He nodded at Berwald, laying his hands to hold tight on his strong forearms. “Alright: three, two, one.”

Berwald pulled, hefting the little blond to his feet. With a great gasp the merman held on and balanced shakily, bent over a bit at the waist, his eyes wide with unease. His long hair dropped around his back and hips in curtains of gold, hanging down to his knees.

“First time standing on your new legs!” Mathias declared, to which the merman smiled and nodded.

“Want to take a step?” Berwald asked softly. The merman looked up at him (which took some doing considering their height difference) and bit his full bottom lip in contemplation. His slender legs were already beginning to shake.

“You can sit right back down anytime you want.” Lukas assured him. “But if you want to try walking don’t worry; Berwald won’t let you fall.”

The merman glanced at each of their faces in turn before cautiously shifting his weight and sliding a foot forward. Leaning heavily on Berwald for support, he took a single step, legs trembling the whole time.

“Well done, merman!” Mathias said happily. “Try it again!”

Smiling and encouraged by Mathias’s enthusiasm, the merman took a few more slow, trembling steps with Berwald’s help, before he blew a breath out of his cheeks and stood still again. His smile had not faded but he now looked a little lost.

“That should be a good starting point for now.” Lukas said. “Sit him back down.”

Berwald wordlessly picked the merman up by his waist, receiving one of those startled chirrups in response, and sat him on the edge of the bed in two strides.

“Wow, that sound is so cool.” Mathias said. “Can you do it again?”

The merman ducked his head shyly, before lifting it again to give another chirp.

“So cool.”

“Did I miss something?” Emil’s voice came from the doorway. He was still in his pajamas, rubbing at his face and yawning. There were faint circles beneath his stormy blue eyes; he had stayed up later than all of them to work on the website.

“Aw, dude, you missed the merman’s first step!”

Emil’s mouth opened in surprise, and he looked at all of them as though they had purposefully conspired to leave him out. For a second he seemed genuinely upset to have missed such a significant moment, but then he shrugged it off.

“That’s good news. Are we going to have breakfast?”

Mathias got playfully close to Emil’s face with the camera, making him cringe and step back a bit.

“Do you even have a heart?!” He demanded of the ruffled teen. “This ancient mythological creature of the deep just took his first steps on land and all you can think about is breakfast?!”

Lukas and Berwald sighed in unison as Emil grunted out,
“It’s only natural that he’d walk at some point now that he has feet, you moron! Besides, he’s got to be hungrier than any of us after everything he’s been through.”

As the two were bickering, the merman reached out and tugged on Lukas’s sleeve.

“Yes, what is it?” He asked.

The merman looked toward Emil, then back at Lukas. He made an exaggerated biting motion with his mouth, then rubbed his belly.

“You are hungry, of course. Alright, I’ll go get breakfast on the stove. You two,” he pointed at Mathias and Emil, “out, let the poor boy have some space first thing in the morning.”

He crossed the room, reached for something that was folded on the floor right outside in the hallway, and picked it up. Then he held the item out to Berwald.

“Berwald, you see if he’ll consent to wearing these. I thought of it earlier and put them out here for that purpose.”

“Are those my track pants?” Emil asked in disbelief and annoyance.

Berwald opened his mouth to protest, but Lukas was shuffling Emil and a protesting Mathias out into the hallway, and a second later had closed the door on him.

Berwald looked at the merman, who looked back at him with wide, pretty eyes.

It wasn’t that Berwald was a shy person really, or even very sensitive, but he was more than aware of his tendency to make people nervous by his mere stern presence, and didn’t know how the stranger would react to him without the buffer of the others. Or the buffer of being in terrible pain and just needing a strong support to cling to. He cleared his throat and unfolded the soft black pants Lukas had handed him. He recognized them as a pair that Emil wore whenever he was lounging around.

“Want to try these on?” He asked. The merman cocked his head to the side, studying the garment closely. His eyes then flicked over Berwald’s own legs, clad in jeans, and the man could hear the blonde’s brain putting the pieces together. When he figured it out he gave a small frown and shook his head.

“Why not?”

The merman shrugged and rubbed at his bare knees, swinging his legs and smiling at him.

“I suppose…you want to look at your legs now that you have them?”

The merman nodded, holding his feet up off the ground and wiggling his toes, delighting in the action.

“Ok, the boxers should be enough I suppose. But if you get cold let me know.”

The blond merman shook his head again, and without blinking an eye, began tugging the sweater off.

“Wait, why are you doing that?”

The merman shed the sweater, pulling out the length of his hair from the neck, and sighed pleasantly, running his hands lightly over his bare chest and arms.
“Just more comfortable this way?” A contented nod. “Oh.”

They stared at each other again until the merman held out his arms and made a small crooning sound from his throat.

“Want to walk again?” Berwald tried.

A negative head shake.

“Want me to carry you?”

A happy nod.

“Alright, but hold on to that sweater in case you get cold.”

He easily scooped the merman up into his arms, who kept the sweater balled up in his lap. Berwald carried him down the hallway, those slender legs swinging gently over his strong arm, and the merman looking around at everything. Now that he was alert and no longer half-asleep he was engaged in observing all that was around him. Berwald could practically feel him vibrating with excitement, a small purring sound rumbling in his chest. He’d have to ask Lukas whether he thought those sounds could be a residual from his mer form, like his gills. Not that it particularly mattered. He rather liked them.

Mathias spotted them as soon as they were at the top of the stairs overlooking the great room. He and Emil were hovering over one of their laptops on a coffee table, chatting about the website when he looked up and saw them. He scrambled to grab his ever-present camera and turn it up at them as Berwald carried the merman down the stairs.

“Look at that, our little water prince being carried down to breakfast!” He said with a chuckle. “What happened to your sweater, Berwald?”

“T ook it off.” Berwald supplied. “Guess he’s more comfortable without it.”

“Makes sense; he’s never worn clothes before.” Emil said.

“Just don’t want him getting cold.” Mathias pointed out as Berwald passed by him on the way to the dining room.

“That’s what I said.” He muttered, sitting the merman carefully in one of the dining chairs. The table was already set for breakfast, and the merman ran his fingers over the plate in front of him, studying it with round eyes.

“Well if I had a body of solid muscle like that I wouldn’t want to cover it up either.” Mathias said. The merman cocked his head, then looked down at himself, running a hand over his firm midsection, and then looked up questioningly. “That was a compliment, bro! You’re way toned!”

“Well, he’s been swimming his entire life just to get around.” Emil commented, leaning against the back of a dining chair across from the merman. “Have you seen swimmer’s bodies?”

The merman seemed more confused, and slowly lifted the sweater in his lap to cover his chest and belly, as though to hide.

“It’s fine.” Emil told him. “There’s nothing wrong with you. We’re just used to everyone wearing clothes when it’s cold outside.”
The merman looked unconvinced, still holding the garment over himself.

“Great,” Emil chided, “he’s barely awake and you already gave him a body complex.”

“I did not!” Mathias insisted. “He doesn’t get what I was saying. He has a great body! You understand me, merman? You have a really great body!”

A blush broke out across the merman’s white cheeks, and he couldn’t hide the smile that rose on his lips. There could have been no better way to tell Mathias that he understood what was being said to him.

“See?! He knows.”

“How’s his hair?” Emil asked, coming to stand beside the merman. He slowly held out his hand. “Can I?”

The merman nodded at him, and Emil threaded his fingers through the long mane, checking for tangles.

“Hmm…It’s not as bad as I thought, but we really do need to comb it out.”

The merman’s eyes went wide and he jumped, literally grabbing onto the length of his hair and yanking it from Emil’s hands, holding onto it tightly and shaking his head.

“Brush it out.” Emil rephrased, holding his hands up innocently. “It means to get out all the knots and tangles. I didn’t mean pull it out.”

The merman relaxed, letting out an audible breath and releasing his hair. It fell along his back, undisturbed once more.

“This will be hard.” Berwald intoned, in response to the little misunderstanding. He took the seat beside the merman.

“Maybe,” Called Lukas’s voice from the kitchen, “things would go more smoothly if we knew his name.”

The merman nodded at these words immediately, making a small affirmative sound.

“Let’s get one thing straight first,” Mathias said, leaning across the table with his upper body but still getting really close to the merman’s face with the camera, “can you talk?”

When the merman looked muddled, he tried again,

“You know? Talk? With your mouth and your lips?” He enunciated clearly and made over exaggerated movements with his lips, while pointing to them.

The merman touched his fingertips to his own lips, and mimicked speaking as he thought to himself. A second later his eyes lit up and he nodded, then seemed to think better of it, and shook his head instead.

“Either you can or you can’t.” Mathias said, a bit pushy. “Which is it?”

“Mathias,” Lukas warned from the kitchen, “remember, don’t overwhelm him.”

The merman looked worried and then began to make gestures that no one could interpret; pointing over and over to his head, then his lips, and making little sounds while he did.
“Alright, alright.” Emil said, after a few minutes of gaping at him, “You obviously have a voice; you’ve made enough noise since last night for us to be sure of that. So why won’t you talk to us when it’s obvious you can understand what we’re saying?”

Stilling, the merman took a deep breath, closing his eyes in concentration. He breathed again, and opened his mouth.

“N-not…u-used…to…ta-lking…l-l-li-ke…y-you…do…”

A clatter came from the kitchen, and Lukas’s face appeared from around the hanging cabinets that cut off his view of the dining room. Mathias turned the camera to catch his wide-eyed expression.

“Did he just talk?!”

“Um…ja…ja he did.” Mathias said in soft amazement.

“Steikje, I’ve got omelets and oatmeal on the stove. But find out his name!” He then disappeared around the cabinets again.

“Yeah, what is your name?” Mathias probed, turning the camera back to the merman, zooming in on his face.

“Tino.”

This word came at once with no stuttering or effort, the sweet, high octave voice speaking it with familiarity.

“Tino, that’s such a cute name!” Mathias said, “It fits you just right! And I’ll bet you want to know our names too, huh?!”

“We’ve shouted them at each other enough since we found him he probably already knows.” Emil muttered.

“Oh come on, that’s not true!”

Tino nodded his head vigorously, and pointed his finger at Mathias.

“M-Ma-thi-as.” The young man nearly dropped the camera in surprise. But he managed to keep it focused on Tino as he pointed to Emil next.

“E-mil.”

He then turned a sunny smile on the big man beside him.

“Ber…Ber…wald…”

“You can just call him ‘Ber’ for short like I do if you want.” Mathias offered, and Tino seemed to like that idea, nodding decisively.

“He’s been paying attention alright.” Lukas called from the kitchen. Tino sat up straighter and pointed toward the sound of his voice.

“L-Luk-as.”

“Right!” Mathias cheered. “Wow, do we really say each other’s names that much?”
Tino nodded, smiling.

“Don’t just nod,” Emil said, “try to speak as much as you can so you can practice, alright?”

“Al-right.” Tino said, a bit more confidently.

“How come you falter in your words like that?” Emil asked. Tino concentrated as he explained,

“M-y Pe-ople…t-talk…i-n our minds. Can’t…s-peak un-der…water.”

“Hold that thought!” Mathias said suddenly, and placed the camera down onto the table, facing toward Tino. He dashed over to the sofa in the great room where the tripod was set up, and snatched it. With a swiftness borne of great practice he placed the camera on it at an angle wide enough to capture the entire table and the comings and goings around it. Then he sat himself down on the other side of Berwald, at the end of the table.

“Ok.” He said excitedly, “this is amazing. Are you telling me that you communicate at the speed of thought? Through your freaking minds?!”

“Yes. W-e h-ear each oth-er i-n ou-r mi-nds. S-so it’s…ha-rd to sp-eak.”

“Wicked freaking sweet!”

“Incredible.” Came Lukas’s voice from the kitchen, his head once more peeking out from around the cabinets.

Tino looked down a little shyly as they all gazed at him in wonder.

“Can you do it to us?” Emil asked, a little excitement in his voice. “Can you speak to us through your head?”

Tino shook his head. Then, seeing Emil encourage him to speak the answer, said,

“No. Tr-ied…a l-lot. Last…night.”

“We must be too dimwitted for such a miracle as telepathy.” Lukas commented, his voice moving to and fro as though he was stirring something.

“But wait, could that be how you heard him in the first place?” Mathias demanded. “You said that you heard someone crying out for help while you were driving.”

Tino looked in Lukas’s direction brightly, smiling.

“D-did you…h-hear me?”

Lukas didn’t answer right away. When he did he sounded cautious.

“To be honest it happened so quickly that it’s hard for me to remember. I can’t say whether it was really a voice that I heard so much as this overwhelming feeling that someone was calling out for help. It blindsided me with how powerful it was. I can’t really describe it now though…”

Tino chirped happily, nodding his head.

“So, what about when your people go to the surface?” Emil asked. “Do you talk to each other out loud then?”
“T-too m-much tr-ou-ble.” Tino stammered slowly. “And w-we don’t of-ten.”

Berwald shifted in his seat and cleared his throat as he said,

“Well, you’re doing very well for your first time speaking.”

The blond merman inclined his head to look at Berwald with a smile.

“It’s n-not…e-eas-y. T-takes…for-ever.”

“Practice makes perfect.” Mathias encouraged.

“But don’t push yourself too hard if it’s stressful or exhausting.” Lukas called.

“Ja, just take your time.” Emil agreed. “We want to listen to you and hear everything you have to say.”

“That’s why the camera’s been rolling almost since we found you.” Mathias said, grinning. “You’re already an internet star.”

A look of utter confusion knit Tino’s brows together, and he looked at Mathias with his lips parted as though to ask a question, but didn’t know where to start. The tall, hyper man never did need much of an invitation to begin rambling about what he did. This was no exception.

“Ok, so we put the video of your rescue last night on the internet and it’s already gotten about fifty-thousand views! The comment section is blowing up and already people are clamoring for more of you!”

“Lay off the tech talk for now, Mathias.” Berwald suggested, gesturing toward the tripod. “He doesn’t even know what the camera is doing.”

Tino glanced from Berwald, to Mathias, then to the camera that was set up a few yards away. He pointed to it, and asked slowly,

“Y-your…p-pet?”

Mathias broke out laughing and Emil joined him. From the kitchen, they heard a small chuckle.

“No, Tino,” Emil said, his voice strained with the need to laugh. “We’ll explain later. For now, let’s just say it’s keeping track of everything that we’re doing and saying. Don’t ask how, it’ll be too much to explain.”

Nodding and sending a suspicious glance at the camera, Tino said,

“Ummm…”

He swallowed and lifted his hands before him, forming a cup with them and bowing his head toward it. The gesture seemed oddly ritualistic, and he remained with his head bowed as he struggled through his next sentence.

“Th-thank…y-you…I w-as l-ost. An-d you f-found me. I am i-n your d-de-bt, m-my g-guard-ians.”

“You’re welcome.” Came Lukas’s voice, as the man stepped around the corner. “We’re glad to be helping you. Now, I could use some help carrying all this out. Emil?”

The teen sighed, slumping in his chair.
“Why is it always me?” He complained.

“Because he’s your big brother.” Mathias answered. “You have to do what he tells you.”

Emil snorted and went to help Lukas in the kitchen. The sounds of clinking came as they began to gather up the breakfast items. It took them a few trips, as there was a lot for so many of them. Emil brought out the few breads they had, along with butter, jams, and cheeses. Lukas set out the plate of cold cut meat and vegetables, along with a tube of roe that Berwald insisted upon. Emil was also careful to place potholders strategically along spots on the table for Lukas to rest the two hot dishes.

“You’re…a family?” Tino asked, watching them come and go. Mathias jumped on the question with glee.

“Lukas and Emil are brothers, Berwald is a bit of an add-on.”

“Add…on?”

“Yea, kind of like an adopted brother. He’s the big muscle around here, but we like the guy even if he’s not related to us.”

“Ah…th-en…y-you?”

“Well I’m Lukas’s true love of course!” Mathias caught Lukas’s waist as he was walking by, and hugged him close, rubbing his cheek on the man's side.

“I’m carrying oatmeal here, Mathias.” Lukas said, sounding completely disinterested. He held a huge, steaming pot of oatmeal and had to nudge Mathias with his hip until the man let go, pouting.

“You’re no fun, babe…”

“Do you want me to spill piping hot porridge on you?” Lukas asked, placing the pot on the table. Mathias gave a wicked smile.

“Only if you eat it off me afterward.”

Emil let out a groan and slapped a hand over his face.

“I did not need that image.” He said in a long-suffering tone.

“Yes, please, Mathias, not in front of my teenage sibling.” Lukas said firmly, giving Mathias a smack to the back of his head as he headed toward the kitchen again.

“It’s nothing I haven’t endured hearing before.” Emil mumbled, fiddling with his silverware.

Tino was watching the entire scene intently, and suddenly made a humming sound. Looking toward Mathias he said,

“So…you’re his…wife!”

Another clatter came from the kitchen, this time very loud like Lukas had dropped the lid to a pan. Following it was a sound suspiciously like a snort of laughter.

Mathias’s jaw dropped open as he sat there speechless for once. Berwald gave a coughing sound reminiscent of a chortle, and Emil flat out giggled, covering his mouth to try and muffle the sound. Little squeaks came out regardless.
Tino’s face fell as he saw the various reactions.

“No?” He inquired slowly. Mathias opened and closed his mouth a few times before Lukas came to his rescue, carrying out a large pan filled to the brim with salmon omelets.

“Tino, I know where and why you came up with that word, but ‘lover’ would be a more accurate term.”

“Oh.” Tino said, nodding in understanding. “I’m…sorry.”

“Yea…b-besides!” Mathias blurted. “We take turns!”

Lukas dropped the pan onto the potholders on the table, then turned and outright banged Mathias over the head with a heavy wooden serving spoon.

“Owwwwwww!!!” Mathias cried, rubbing his head. Emil’s hands flew back up to his mouth once again as more laughter overtook him.

“Shut up, Emil!” Mathias lashed out.

“Leave Emil alone, it’s not his fault that you have no tact.” Berwald said, covering up a small smile himself. Tino looked frightened, and had instinctively grabbed on to Berwald’s sleeve.

“Don’t worry, Tino.” Lukas assured, placing the spoon back onto the table and taking his own seat beside Mathias. “I’m not a violent person, but sometimes Mathias needs keeping in line.”

The merman swallowed and inched as close to Berwald as he could manage, resting his forehead on his arm.

“It’s alright, Tino.” Berwald said softly to him, gently patting the slender fingers on his sleeve. “No one’s going to hurt you.”

Tino looked skeptical. In fact, he looked so scared that even Mathias chipped in, trying to put him at ease.

“Don’t worry about it, Tino. Really, Lukas doesn’t go around hitting people. Just me. And only when I’ve said something really stupid.”

Lukas raised his eyebrows and looked at Mathias.

“That might be the most mature statement I’ve ever heard you make.” Then he turned and smiled at the merman. “You’re a good influence, Tino.”

Tino gave a hesitant smile back, and relaxed into his seat, letting go of Berwald.

“In….my home…male c-couples…s-still…have…a ‘wife’…” He explained, hesitantly.

“Mer people allow male couples?” Emil asked. “Woah…so cool.”

Tino looked curious by this question.

“W-why wouldn’t…we?”

“So the one considered the ‘wife’ in a male couple isn’t defined by size then?” Lukas asked, interested and glancing with a smirk at Mathias. “Otherwise you might have thought I was the wife instead.”
Before Tino could answer, Mathias cut him off,

“Let’s dig into this breakfast, huh?”

The grumbling man reached for the nearest dish. Knowing that this was a purposeful distraction from the subject at hand didn’t really bother them. They all began to make their sandwiches with the cold cuts, cheese, and vegetables, passing the items around as they needed them. Berwald squeezed his beloved roe paste over his sandwiches, but the others avoided it.

Lukas began serving their omelets and porridge, each man passing his plate and bowl to him in turn. After seeing how it was done, Tino eagerly handed over his own plate for Lukas, and when he received it back he lifted it to his face and look a long inhale of the omelet’s steam. He jerked back, surprised.

“It’s…hot.”

“Of course it is.” Mathias said. “That’s how you serve them.”

Tino looked at him blankly.

“I guess you don’t cook under The Baltic Sea, do you?” Lukas questioned, spooning a little oatmeal into his brother’s bowl.

“C-cook?” Tino asked, sounding out the word carefully.

“Thought not.” Lukas responded. “Don’t worry about it, let’s finish our meal then we’ll start explaining what we can. I hope you like the food.”

Tino watched them all for a while instead of eating right away. He studied how they held their forks and spoons for the hot food, and how they were eating their sandwiches, made up of so many different pieces. Berwald was not oblivious to the fact that Tino ended up focusing intently on him in the end, so he moved slowly, spearing his omelet with his fork deliberately before raising the morsel to his mouth. He did the same with the spoon and his oatmeal, after dropping a handful of berries into it. Tino finally followed suit, clumsily cutting at his omelet and taking his first bite of human food.

He chewed for a moment, and then his eyes went wide and he chewed more quickly, and swallowed. Instantly he scooped up more with his fork, and began eating like he was under a time limit.

“Woah, woah, slow down there.” Mathias said, around his own mouthful. “It’s not going to expire, you know.”

Tino ignored him, wolfing down the food like he couldn’t get enough.

“He must like your cooking, Lukas.” Berwald commented.

“I’m flattered, but he’s probably so hungry because he hasn’t eaten in so long. At least since yesterday.”

“I’m curious if he’s ever had anything besides fish.” Emil wondered, as he fastidiously cut up his own omelet.

As eager as he was, Tino was dropping a lot of food from his fork and seemed to be getting frustrated.
“If you want to just use your hands to eat,” Lukas told him finally, “that’s alright with us, we don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

Tino put down his fork at once and picked up a piece of bread from the plate nearby with his hands, tearing into it with his teeth. As he chewed vigorously he pointed eagerly to the rest of the food on the table.

“Try anything you want.” Lukas said encouragingly. “I like fish myself, but I imagine it gets old after a while.”

Tino shrugged and reached for the cold cuts. Each new bit of food he tried seemed to make his eyes widen more than the last. He enjoyed the meat, cheeses, and breads the most, but still seemed to like the vegetables and porridge. The roe, however, sent his eyes watering and his lips twisting up at the utter saltiness of the flavor. Berwald had to remind him he had a cup of water if he needed it. Tino drained it quickly, washing the saltiness away. Emil commented on how he thought being in salty water his entire life would have braced him for the taste. Lukas had to remind him that the Baltic Sea was nowhere near as salty as roe paste.

Somewhere in the midst of his food discoveries Tino seemed to notice the mugs of coffee beside the other men’s plates. He pointed at Berwald’s and cocked his head.

“I don’t know if you’ll like coffee,” Lukas said quickly, “It’s pretty bitter, especially how Berwald drinks it.”

Tino looked disappointed.

“But I can make it with milk and a lot of sugar like Emil’s; that makes it sweet.”

Tino nodded excitedly, taking another bite.

“I think he’s going to want to try everything that he can regardless.” Emil said with a small chuckle. Lukas agreed and got up to make Tino his doctored coffee.

“So did you only eat fish, or did you like slay dolphins and stuff?” Mathias asked Tino. The merman didn’t answer at once, too busy sampling the cucumbers. A moment later however he swallowed and said,

“F-ish, sea-grass, s-starfish…” he paused and concentrated before apparently giving up. “There is…much food… in the sea, but nothing…that tastes like this!”

“Well you don’t have wheat or sugar.” Emil pointed out. “Those are just some of what makes our food taste so good.”

“Yea, wait until you taste cake!” Mathias said excitedly, “And chicken, pork, rice, cookies….aw man, you’re in for a treat! There’s so much food from all over the world for you to try!”

Tino all but bounced in his seat at that prospect, smiling around a huge mouthful that swelled his cheeks. When he swallowed, he asked,

“The world?”

“Oh dear.” Lukas said, coming back with Tino’s coffee and hearing that question.

“I didn’t think of that.” Mathias worried. “He has no idea what the Earth even is.”
“I do!” Tino protested. “Earth is…the surface. Where you grow your trees and…crops…”

“Technically you’re right,” Emil said, “but it’s more than that…”

“It’s…the…p-plan-et!” Tino garbled out, looking proud of himself. They looked at him in astonishment for a second.

“How’d you know that?” Emil asked for all of them.

“L-long story.” Tino answered. “b-but…I’ve never…seen…the planet. C-can you sh-show me?”

“Let’s save the education for after the meal.” Lukas said, placing the coffee before Tino. “For now you’re having enough just eating breakfast. Here, give it a try.”

Excitedly, Tino took the mug and cautiously sniffed at the scent wafting up from the coffee. He hummed in delight and sipped slowly. He looked unsure at first, but then took a few more sips and then smiled, nodding his head in approval.

“Emil, you have a new sugary coffee buddy!” Mathias laughed, as Tino began to slurp at the coffee.

“Don’t let any of that out of your gills.” Emil warned.

“Oh yea, your gills!” Mathias chimed in at once. “Why the hell do you still have gills if you’re a human now?”

Tino ran his fingers down the side of his slender neck.

“When I…return…to the sea…I have to be…completely under the waves…at some point…to change back. Have…to breathe…somehow.”

“I see.” Lukas said, intrigued. “So you retained some of your mer features even though you look completely human…”

“Was wondering about that.” Berwald said. “You make those sounds that we can’t.”

Tino nodded and, just for emphasis, gave a long trilling sound from his throat. His lips barely moved at all yet the sound rang out clear and beautiful.

“F-for…when I need…them to fetch me…”

Lukas, Mathias, Berwald, and Emil, all stared at their surprise houseguest in awe after hearing such an unearthly sound. They had all seen otherworldly things before, but that didn’t stop them from marveling over each new one they witnessed.

“Totes amazing…” Mathias said a second later. Tino smiled widely at him.

“Th-thank you, Mathias. W-what…is ‘totes’?”

“It’s slang. You know? A shorter way of saying a longer word? So I said ‘totes’ instead of ‘totally’.”

“Totes…totes…” Tino tried a few times, then seemed to be trying to remember something. “Totes…freaking…sweet?”

Not a single one of them could keep from chuckling or smiling at this.
“Oh my god, this kid!” Mathias declared, laughing. “This kid is the best!”

Tino tilted his head, puppy-like and waited for the all-round laughter to die down before asking,

“Kid means…child? Am I a child to you? How…old…are you all?”

“It might be better to ask you that first.” Lukas suggested. “That way we have an idea of whether you’d be a kid to us. How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven summers.”

Mathias’ jaw dropped and he pointed at Tino with his spoon.

“No fair at all! He’s got a baby face!” He exclaimed, sounding a little upset. When Tino looked concerned at this outburst Emil explained,

“You’re a year older than him but you look like you’re my age.”

“A-and…how…old..?”

“I’m nineteen.”

Tino smiled sweetly at him and pursed his lips a bit.

“You’re…the child.”

Emil’s face dropped into a very long-suffering expression at the words, but Mathias grinned deviously.

“Even the merman who’s barely been on land for a whole day knows where you stand, Emil!” He chided, waving his spoon tauntingly in the air.

A sudden hiss startled them all. The sound was raw and ferocious, and Tino’s pretty face turned ugly when he drew back his lips to make it. The unsettling sight only lasted a split second before Tino was merely frowning again.

“Children…kids…are…important!” He insisted, his voice louder than they had heard before. That is if they didn’t count the screaming from the previous night.

Emil and Lukas’ eyebrows lifted at this, seeing how stern Tino looked. Mathias certainly wasn’t laughing anymore, and Berwald seemed a bit concerned under his neutral face. The merman shot Mathias a look that didn’t seem upset so much as disappointed. He then leaned toward Emil across the table and seized his hand, shaking it as though to rally the youth, who looked like he wanted to draw back.

“Without children…we have…no future! They’re precious…and inval---inval---” Tino huffed a bit angrily as he struggled to form the word. They all respectfully waited until he blurted, “Invaluable!”

There was an awkward pause before Tino seemed to realize that he had raised his voice, and he withdrew his arm back again, ducking his head as if in silent apology.

“Better listen to him, Mathias.” Berwald said, breaking the silence, a slight tease in his voice. “Or I won’t be the only one hitting you for picking on Emil.”

For once, Mathias didn’t say anything. He just pouted, stuffing another bite into his mouth to avoid
having to talk. There was another few seconds of uncomfortable silence before Tino muttered,

“Sorry…for…my outburst. Chil—uh…kids…are special…to me.”

“Don’t sweat it.” Emil said, holding his head a little higher. “I’m going to like having you around.”

“Seconded.” Lukas said quietly, hiding a small smile.

“‘Seconded’…” Mathias mocked in the tiniest of whines. Lukas gave him a little kick under the table.

Tino smiled at the interaction, then looked up at Berwald curiously.

“You’re…you’re…um…how old?” He inquired, being cautious as though afraid to insult him as he might have done to Emil.

“I’m thirty. I’m the oldest.”

His face brightening, Tino seemed happy to have guessed right. He then glanced at Lukas.

“Twenty-eight.” The man said at once, while Tino was opening his mouth to ask. “I have to say you do look a lot younger than twenty-seven.”

Tino smiled politely.

“Thank you…um…can I..?”

Sheepishly, the merman presented Lukas with his empty plate. Wordlessly, Lukas served him another helping of everything. This prompted all of them to get their second servings as well. They were all glad to be able to focus on their food to help gloss over the awkward interaction about children.

Tino, apparently satisfied with the discussion of their ages, went right back to eating as much as he could with his hands, only using his fork and spoon for the messier foods. He continued to slurp his coffee happily, and enjoyed his water just as much. No one commented on Tino’s bad table manners. It wouldn’t benefit anything at this point. Instead they just enjoyed watching him revel in the new tastes. When they all seemed to come to a stopping point, Tino gave a big sigh, and rubbed at his slightly bulging belly.

“Full.” He declared happily.

“That’s good.” Berwald agreed from beside him, handing him a napkin. Tino looked at it blankly. “For your face.”

Tino didn’t say anything in response, just looked confused. His tongue slipped out and swiped at what it could reach, as if to ask what else could possibly be needed. Berwald took the direct approach then, reaching out to tip Tino’s chin up, holding it in place as he wiped at the mess on it and around the merman’s mouth. At first Tino had tensed up, but quickly relaxed once he realized what Berwald was doing.

“Ber-Ber the mother hen strikes again.” Mathias said, whimsy returning to his voice. Berwald didn’t apologize for his behavior, just finished up and nodded his approval at Tino’s now clean face.

“What’s…a hen?” Tino asked.
“It just means he’s protective and caring.” Lukas provided. “Berwald does tend to baby us when he feels we need it.”

“Hen…” Tino repeated, to himself. Then he smiled at Berwald. “Hen?”

Emil was stifling a giggle as Berwald’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Um…ja…” He answered Tino.

Tino gave a slight shiver, and tugged Berwald’s sweater on again, sinking into its softness.

“Let’s clear the table, and then we need to have a talk.” Lukas announced.

They piled all the dishes in the sink, knowing that they could wait to wash them until after more important matters were taken care of. Tino insisted on walking again, and Berwald helped him inch by inch into the great room and to the sofa before the fire. Tino sighed when he sank into the deep cushions, resting his legs. Emil brought a comb and a brush and situated himself behind Tino on the sofa, carefully explaining to him what he was going to do so that Tino wouldn’t be frightened. Slowly, the teen began at the ends of that long mane, and started brushing out the tangles.

Mathias set up the camera on the tripod while Emil started on Tino’s hair, being sure it captured all of them in its view. Once the rest of them were seated Lukas sat in the chair nearest the sofa, and took the lead.

“Now, Tino, take your time if you need to. You don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to, but can you tell us why you were on the side of the road in the rain last night?”

“Yea, how did you end up there?” Mathias asked, sitting on the armrest of Lukas’ chair.

Tino’s large eyes narrowed ever so slightly as he looked each of them in the face, even turning his head to look at Emil over his shoulder. He seemed to come to a decision after a time, and let out a deep breath.

“I was sent…by my people, to learn about… human-kind. I was chosen because my…memory is very good.”

Lukas didn’t let his face betray what he was thinking. Doing what they did, he often had to lead people in telling their stories even if it was difficult or uncomfortable for them. Tino didn’t seem like he was reluctant by any means, but he did portray a level of hesitancy that Lukas wanted to respect.

“Sent?”

“Yes. It is never…enough to try and…learn about humans from…our place in the sea. That’s why…I had to come ashore…and let the change…come over me.”

Lukas leaned forward a bit in his chair, eyes turning wide as he looked at Tino.

“You mean to tell me that you crawled up on land, all the way up into these hills, of your own free will? Knowing the pain it would cause you to change forms?”

Tino looked grave, setting his jaw and nodding.

“Bro…that’s hardcore.” Mathias said in awe.
“What was it like?” Emil asked, to which Tino shuddered and pulled the large folds of Berwald’s sweater closer around his body.

“It was…terrible. I didn’t really know…I thought I did…thought I could bear it. But once it started…”

He stopped for a second to take a few breaths.

“They told me to crawl as far inland as I could. To keep going…even if I was completely exhausted. Because if I was anywhere close to the sea I would be tempted to throw myself back in when the change began. They were right…it was…agony…”

Berwald shifted next to Tino, and his hand dropped onto the sofa cushions close to his thigh, as though he wanted to touch him.

“So you went through all that, just to learn about us?” Emil questioned, running his fingers through the silky hair he’d brushed flawless. He still had a ways to go to get to Tino’s scalp, though. Tino nodded.

“Your people send…researchers…into our waters, don’t they? We’ve been doing the same just as long as you.”

“Say what?!” Mathias asked. “Then why haven’t we heard about them?”

“You have.” Tino insisted. “We never try to…hide… what we are or what we’re doing. We are so rarely believed, so our presence is not well known. But there is one from every clan who spends time on land each generation. Sometimes…. more than one. I had to study under the previous explorer from my clan. So I tried to understand all that he had learned when he had been here. But, like he warned me…much has changed. He was ashore nearly twenty years ago, and no one believed him either. I’m shocked you knew what I was when you first found me, and didn’t even question it.”

“Well, we have a little more experience believing things most people don’t.” Lukas said. When Tino looked curious, he went on, “we’ll explain a little later. So, you already know something of our world?”

“I know what he told me, but that doesn’t mean I really understand.”

“Do you have a set amount of time to do your research before you have to return?”

“I can be away for a year at the longest. After that they will assume something has…happened…to keep me from returning.”

“Who’s ‘they’?” Mathias asked.

“The group of Elders who chose me from the volunteers. They have always decided things like that.”

“They chose you because of your memory, you said?”

“That was the main reason, yes. But also they said I…” Tino blushed slightly and fidgeted before continuing, “They said I appeared the most vulnerable because of my face and size. Apparently, you humans are kinder to smaller, more vulnerable creatures. At least…decent humans are.”

“I can’t argue with that.” Lukas said. “What’s more vulnerable than a wide-eyed person who can’t
“walk and can barely talk?”

“That makes him sound like a child.” Berwald pointed out a bit defensively. Tino gave him a huge grin, and as if to prove his point, leaned his head back into Emil’s brushing hands, which had made their way to the crown of his head.

“And we all have a natural urge to protect children, don’t we?” Emil said. “I heard something about this on a show; anything with big eyes and a round face evokes the same nurturing instincts in our brains.”

“That’s cool!” Mathias declared.

“Human slang for ‘amazing’?” Tino asked.

“Right!”

“That was something I remember from my studies,” the merman said proudly, “I tried to learn a lot of slang. There was something that I couldn’t really understand though…um…can you…tell me about the planet? The…earth?”

“Sure thing, hold on!” Mathias shot up and went darting out of the room toward the study off the great room. Tino watched with wide eyes.

“He’s fast.” He commented. “I wish I could move that fast out of the water.”

“Well,” Emil suggested, “you could always give it a try, right?”

Tino’s eyes opened with enthusiasm as he nodded, and fairly bounced up onto his feet in one move. It was impressive how he’d shot upward with hardly anything propelling him but his upper body. A startled chirp escaped him when two large hands grasped his waist, catching him before he fell and steadying him on his feet. Berwald had kept him from falling right over.

“Thanks, but I want to walk!” Tino said spiritedly, wriggling in his grasp, stepping in place vigorously to show that he could. He was apparently becoming more and more used to balancing on land.

“They look like an old timey cartoon right now.” Emil chuckled.

“You kind of do.” Lukas commented, grinning.

Tino didn’t look like he had any idea what a cartoon was, but he frowned back at Berwald impatiently.

“Let me walk!” He repeated, pulling away harshly from the bigger man.


Tino lurched forward as those strong hands eased away from him. He held out his hands and balanced on his legs. He stumbled about for a few steps before steadying and standing there a bit awkwardly. Mathias returned at that moment, with a globe in his hands. He instantly took in the sight of the merman half bent over as he shuffled around the room. He wasted no time trying to help.

“Hey you know what? If you want to make it easier, you could always start off balancing on your knees!” He said, putting the globe aside. “Like this!”
Mathias got onto his hands and knees and began crawling around, then popped up onto his knees to demonstrate. Tino cocked his head as he watched, but didn’t seem eager to join in.

“You realize you look like an idiotic moron right now.” Emil deadpanned. "But this will make hilarious footage for our online audience."

Mathias flopped over onto his back, frowning upside down at him.

"Lay off; it's helping him."

“That looks doubtful.”

Tino was grinning right along with Emil at how silly Mathias looked, and continued to wobble around on his legs. After a few minutes, he was a bit steadier at least, and moving with more confidence.

“There’s more need for balance on land than I’d thought.” Tino admitted. “I feel…bad now. I once...well, I made fun of you humans scurrying about on your funny legs.”

“They’re not so funny when you don’t know how to use them,” Emil said kindly, “like I’m sure all of us would be helpless if you slapped a tail onto us instead of legs, and dumped us in the sea!”

Seemingly amused with that image, Tino eased himself back onto the sofa beside Emil and Berwald. He sighed heavily and rubbed his hands down his calves.

“I’m almost sore from doing just that much…”

“My guess is you need to build up the muscles in your legs.” Lukas said. “Then you can try walking faster and then running. But not until later. You have to master walking first.”

Nodding, Tino shifted his legs on the sofa. He huffed out a breath, looking up at the ceiling longingly. His head swayed back and forth oddly, making him look as though he was trying to hypnotize something.

“You ok, Tino?” Emil asked, after an awkward pause in which they just watched his strange movement. “I’m pretty much brushing your hair just to brush it now; all the tangles are out, but it’s hard with you moving around like that.”

Tino dropped his eyes back to their level and sighed, saying,

“I’m just trying to shake off the idea that you can only move one way here.”

“What do you mean?”

Tino bit his lip as he considered how to answer, then pointed toward the ceiling.

“You can’t move up. You can’t move down. You can only move across. I’m used to using my entire body to get around…here you only use your legs.”

“In the sea, there are no limits to how you can move, I suppose.” Emil wondered, smiling at the thought. “It must be frustrating for you now.”

“A little.”

“This should help keep your mind off that.” Mathias declared, retrieving the globe from where he’d tossed it, and setting it down on the coffee table before Tino with a little flourish. Tino’s eyes
“Earth?” He asked, skeptically.

“Right.” Mathias answered. He pointed to a spot on the globe with his finger. “This is Finland, where we are now. Then right next to it is the Baltic Sea, where you’re from.”

Tino scooted closer and his eyes widened a bit, taking in the bit of blue next to Mathias’ fingers.

“Baltic Sea…sounds odd.”

“That’s not what you call it?”

“We don’t call it anything. It’s just Our Water. So this,” He placed his finger beside Mathias’ over Finland, “is where you live?”

“No,” Lukas answered, “we’re just visiting for the week. We’re all from different areas around the Baltic Sea.”

He got up and leaned over the globe as well, pointing to each country as he mentioned it,

“Emil and I are from Norway. Mathias is from Denmark. And Berwald is from Sweden, where we all live now.”

Tino slowly traced the path of Lukas’ finger with his own, mouthing the names of the strange countries. Finally he looked up at them.

“You were all far apart. How come you’re all together now?”

“Mathias contacted us after he became a fan of my blog.” Emil said.

Tino raised an eyebrow in confusion.

“Oh, right, um…a blog…is…like a record that some people keep, kind of like a journal but it’s out there for everyone to read.”

“How do you share with ‘everyone’?” Tino asked, intrigued.

“It’s online.”

“It’s on a line?”

“No…uh…Mathias, get my laptop will you? I can’t explain it, so let’s just show it to him.”

“On it!” Mathias said, jumping up again and snatching the closed laptop that rested on an end table across the room. Lukas took this opportunity to sit back in his chair again, making more room around the coffee table. Tino watched closely as Emil took the laptop from Mathias, laid it on the table beside the globe, and opened the lid. It blinked quickly to life, showing the home screen; a beautiful photograph of a group of puffins on rocks.

“I don’t know how to explain what a computer is.” Emil said apologetically, kneeling before the laptop, at Tino’s feet, and pulling up the internet window.

Tino’s eyes went wide, as they had so many times today, as he watched the movements of the graphics and Emil’s fingers over the mouse pad. He wriggled excitedly from his space on the sofa, not even seeming to care that he dropped onto his knees on the floor beside Emil. He put his face
right up next to the screen.

“This…” He said with wonder. “This is like how you make your lights…”

He ran his fingers over the back of the laptop.

“Something like that.” Lukas confirmed. “It runs on electricity, the same force that powers most of our world.”

“The big ships have these!” Tino said excitedly, tapping his fingers on the screen itself. “They can show life moving around like magic.”

“Exactly. We can capture images and sound, then watch them later on a screen like this one. Nearly everyone in a civilized area of the world has one and they can all connect to each other through the internet.”

“A net?” Tino asked.

For the next few minutes Emil and Mathias explained in very basic terms what the internet was and how it worked. While he didn’t seem to understand all of it Tino didn’t looked as confused anymore. Emil then showed him their website.

“This is where I post my blog, the record I keep of our lives and work. We started out with a tiny, cheap little website, where I would just write about the encounters Lukas and I had with the paranormal.”

“It was good stuff!” Mathias praised. “So good that I wanted to see video proof of what they were doing.”

“Um…” Tino began slowly, “I’m sorry…what exactly do you do?”

They all shared a special look before Lukas began,

“Do you know what the paranormal is, Tino? Ghosts, spirits, demons, trolls, those kinds of things?”

The merman nodded triumphantly.

“Good, that should make this a little easier I guess.” Lukas said, taking a bit of a breath. “All kinds of paranormal events cause trouble for us humans, and it takes special kinds of people to deal with them. I’m one of those people who investigate the issues caused by nonhuman entities and find solutions to the problems if I can. I get paid to do it; we all do.”

Tino looked fascinated, so Lukas kept going.

“I’m the one who does most of the research, the exorcising, the summoning, you name it. It’s a talent of mine that used to feel like a burden before I found a way to use it in a productive manner and not just to keep the spirits away from me. Emil is like that too, a bit.”

“Not nearly to the same extent.” Emil cut in. “I can see a lot of the same things he does and I can cast a spell here and there but I can’t remember everything I read. I can remember more than the average person, but Lukas here remembers all of it. Every word he reads.”

Violet-blue eyes widened incredibly as they stared at Lukas.

“It’s a good skill to have in our line of work.” Lukas admitted with a touch of pride. “I wouldn’t
have known what you were if I hadn’t had the journal of a Norse fisherman and a few other accounts from hundreds of years ago rattling around in the library in my head.”

“Lib…rary?”

“A collection of writings and information.”

“Oh. So…What do you do then?” Tino asked, nodding at Mathias.

“I’m the one who records every encounter with the paranormal that we have, on my beautiful camera!”

They had explained enough when they first opened the laptop for Tino to understand what the camera did now.

“So you…bring the v-vid-eos…to the…b-blog?”

“Yea! I do my best to keep the camera rolling, no matter how freaking scary some of our cases get! There was this one time when we were in this old farmhouse, where the owners had reported hearing wailing from inside the walls whenever they went to sleep. And once we got in there all the lights went out and we had to use flashlights, and in the short time that it took between the lights going out and getting the flashlights on, it suddenly looked like blood was oozing from the walls and dripping down-.”

Lukas mercifully cut him off, as Tino was looking a bit unnerved and was inching closer to Berwald with every ominous word out of Mathias’ big mouth.

“We’re never in any real danger so long as we do our research.” He stated calmly, trying to put the nervous merman at ease. “The scarier cases are always the most popular ones on our website, so having the visuals to accompany Emil’s writing has proven to be very effective and…dare I say…profitable.”

Mathias gave a smug chuckle.

“And who was it who said they didn’t need anything so stupid? Who was it who declared ‘I’ll never make a living from turning me and my brother’s gifts into some weekly online drama’?”

A very faint blush broke out over Lukas’ cheeks.

“So…when did you say that?” Tino asked carefully. Mathias looked thrilled at this question, and he poked Lukas in the cheek with his fingertip.

“Yes, Luk-Luk, when, oh when did you say such awful things to poor little old me?”

Lukas gave a deliberate frown at that, so Emil, covering his chuckle, took over the question.

“That was when Mathias first found us like I told you before. He saw my blog and wouldn’t stop messaging me about the possibilities of what film could add to what I had.”

“Film was in my blood from the start.” Mathias said proudly.

“Yes, Mathias was in university at that time, and…”

Emil stopped when he saw Tino’s lack of comprehension. They had all realized very quickly that there would be much pausing and detours during conversation to explain things to him. So Emil made it quick.
“Ok, university is a place where people study and learn about things that they want to do for their living. So Mathias was in film school, learning the ins and outs of working a camera and capturing video in a creative way. He needed to complete an internship (it’s where someone works in the job they want on a trial basis) before he could graduate...er...finish up his time there. So he began harassing me and my brother, begging for us to take him on as a cameraman.”

Mathias laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back on the arm of Lukas’ chair, looking very proud of himself.

“He claimed that if his involvement filming for us and helping us create a decent website with our stories, and videos to go along with them, didn’t earn us all enough to live on that he would quit university without graduating.” Lukas said, somewhat fondly. “The idiot just wouldn’t leave us alone. He even found out my number and began calling me.”

“What number did he call?” Tino asked, cocking his head.

Another detour ensued as they explained briefly how phones worked, to which Tino looked absolutely spellbound.

“I moved to Norway a month after I started calling them.” Mathias declared, tipping his head back and laughing. “It was so neat to start filming real spiritual events, and sharing a place with this hottie?!”

Mathias leaned down to rub his cheek against Lukas’.

“That was a bonus!”

“For the record,” Lukas sighed, “he wasn’t supposed to live with us. When I agreed to take him on as an intern we were only doing the paranormal investigating part-time, and I made it clear to him that he’d have to find another job while he was there. Somehow he interpreted that as ‘I’ll put you up in my home, don’t worry I’m not even there half the time so you won’t bother me’.”

“He showed up on our doorstep with all three bags he owned.” Emil said. “Even without liking him I had to admit that was reckless and kind of....”

Emil stopped, seeming to catch what he was about to say. Mathias didn’t let it go unnoticed.

“Reckless and...what, Emil?” He teased. Emil grimaced and admitted,

“It was...kind of cool.”

Lukas shot a surprised look at his little brother, and then shook his head.

“Emil was even younger back then, you understand, Tino. So was I, but I was not impressed with this fresh-faced university senior worming his way onto my couch! I was barely able to live on my own and that little apartment was perfectly suited to one!”

Tino looked confused, and asked.

“Emil...wasn’t living with you?”

“No, I was still at home with our folks.” Emil clarified. “Technically I still am, but I make my living with Lukas so I travel with him everywhere. When Mathias showed up I was there because we did know he was coming over to talk over the arrangements of his internship and Lukas thought I should be there since I was the reason he found us.”
“Oh you should have seen the hatred in his eyes,” Mathias said happily, “when I dragged my three bags inside and stacked them next to his big brother’s couch!”

“Couch?”

Berwald took the lead this time by simply pointing at the sofa he was sitting on. No detours. The story went on.

“Matt ended up convincing me to let him stay for at least a few nights while he found other accommodations, but a few days somehow turned into two weeks, by which time he had found a job at a local shop, and was shooting some pretty impressive film for us on a big case. In the end I just let him stay.”

Mathias gave a small sound that was part squeal, part victorious grunt, and slid his arm around Lukas’ shoulder, leaning his head down onto the other man’s.

“Yea, it didn’t take too long for you to fall for me!”

Lukas reached up and patted Mathias’ head patiently, but Tino detected the slight smile that showed at the corners of his lips.

“He’s not wrong.” Emil sighed. “I don’t care how much my big brother protests, he did fall hard for Mathias, and pretty quick too.”

“Why would he fall?” Tino questioned. “Do you fall over on land to prove your love?”

Mathias broke out into an obnoxiously boisterous laugh, his entire frame shaking with mirth. Lukas gave him a little shove with one hand and Mathias fell off the arm of the chair to the floor, where he lay clutching his stomach and laughing some more.

“You made him fall for you too!” Tino declared, pointing at them both.

“Um…no, no, that’s just a figure of speech, Tino.” Emil said, giggling himself.

“’Fall in love’.” Berwald clarified, and Tino frowned at him for a second before his face brightened and he giggled as well.

“Oh, I see! That’s so beautiful!”

“Sure is!” Mathias said happily, pulling himself up beside the arm of Lukas’ chair again and, quick as a flash, stole a kiss from the man. Lukas’ eyes widened in surprise for a second, but then they closed and he indulged in the short peck. He even slipped a hand behind Mathias’ neck. When Mathias leaned back into a sitting position Lukas left his hand resting there.

Tino watched the display with interest, and tilted his head to the side. Then he looked at Berwald beside him, and his eyes flicked over to Emil.

“So are you two mates as well?” He asked bluntly.

Both the teenager and the big man blushed furiously, and Tino’s face fell.

Mathias broke out into more hysterical laughter. This time Lukas didn’t indulge him, but took his hand away from Mathias’ neck and slapped his arm, hard.

“No, Tino.” He answered calmly. “Berwald is like part of the family but not like that.”
“Yea, poor kid can never get a date because his big bro scares all the suitors away!”

Emil frowned, and on top of his blushing skin it looked quite adorable on him. Tino was still sitting right beside him, and he took the boy’s face in his hands, rubbing his thumbs over his red cheeks.

“You’ll find someone to ‘fall for’!” He declared happily, and pulled the teen’s head to lay on his shoulder, rubbing his back and nuzzling into his neck. A crooning sound rolled out from his throat.

They all froze and watched, surprised. Tino pulled back and patted Emil on the head. When he noticed the way the rest were all staring at him he raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“What?” He asked, looking perplexed.

“You’re pretty affectionate, huh?” Mathias asked, smirking a bit. “You’ve been all over Berwald too.”

“Is that bad?” Tino asked, inching away from Emil as though he felt guilty.

“Not at all, bro!” Mathias said, throwing his own arms around Lukas’ neck. “It’ll be nice to have another affectionate, huggy guy around these three stiffs!”

Tino still didn’t seem to understand.

“The younger ones always need affection the most.” He said defensively, reaching out and petting Emil’s head. “Especially when they’re still without a mate.”

Mathias choked on a stifled laugh as Lukas shifted his legs uncomfortably in his seat.

“That’s one way to look at it.” Berwald said, and he reached out to give Emil two deliberate pats on his head, mimicking Tino’s own show of affection. The merman’s eyes fairly glowed and he smiled widely.

Emil’s face was fully clothed in scarlet, but there was a small smile on his lips.

Lukas cleared his throat.

“Be as affectionate as you’d like, Tino. We won’t really mind. Now, you’ve heard how Mathias joined us. Would you like to hear about Berwald?”

“Yes, yes!” Tino chirped happily, wriggling back onto the sofa. Now beside the large man again, he looked up at him with adoration and eagerness.

“He’s a shield-maker!” Matthias declared, waving his hands around dramatically.

“Oh, come on!” Emil exclaimed, taking Matthias’ side. “What you do is totally cool!”

“Yea! He throws his arms up in a cross and this sick burst of green light shoots up and—.”

“One thing at a time.” Lukas interrupted. “Let Berwald explain it to Tino.”

The merman looked eagerly at the big man, having bounced his attention between the other two when they were trying to explain, and now focusing in on him.

“How did you join the ‘family’?” He asked brightly. Berwald blinked for a second before
answering.

“Found them through their website. I had questions.”

When Berwald stopped talking Tino cocked his head, waiting for more. Berwald was a man of few words. Not that he couldn’t speak at length when it was necessary, but for the most part he stayed silent, thinking. Just since finding Tino last night he had been speaking more than usual, and he was not exactly uncomfortable with it, just unused to it. But Tino’s pretty eyes were just so big and endearing and pleading. So he had to clear his throat and keep going.

“Emil had posted an entire catalogue of information about paranormal creatures, powers, spells. I went looking to find a description of what I can do. Since I was a child, whenever I was scared I could form a barrier around myself and block out anything that frightened me. On the website I found out that I was a shield weaver; someone who can manipulate the energy of the elements to create protective structures.”

Tino’s lips parted in awe as he watched Berwald, obviously hanging on his every word. But the poor man looked a little tired out from saying so much, and Lukas helped him out.

“Luckily Emil had posted in several areas of the website, including the page about the shield weaver, that we were in the market to hire one. This was a while after Mathias joined and we began the business full-time. We were taking on bigger and more dangerous cases, so the need for a ‘spiritual bodyguard’ was growing.”

“The big guy contacted us and the rest is history!” Mathias added. Tino tilted his head to consider Berwald seriously, his eyes narrowing with understanding.

“So you are a guardian.” He stated. Berwald opened his mouth slightly, then closed it, not knowing what to say to that.

Emil and Lukas both took a second to really let Tino’s words soak in. He was an observant little thing, that much was becoming obvious.

“That’s true! He’s saved our asses more than once with his wicked skills, let me tell you!”

“Saved your…what?” Tino asked, tearing his eyes away from Berwald to look at Mathias.

“Asses? You know? Our behinds? Our butts?”

Tino gave him a little shake of his head. Mathias jutted his hip out from his seat and slapped his own rump. The merman got it, and giggled a little.

“So yea, he’s saved us a bunch.” Emil picked up the thread of Mathias’ thought. “He didn’t really need Lukas to teach him a whole lot, he already knew what to do. He just didn’t understand exactly what it was he was doing, and how.”

“Can you do it now?” Tino asked, looking excitedly up at Berwald again. “Please?”

“You wouldn’t see anything.” Berwald said, as if bracing himself for Tino’s disappointment.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s…not something most people can see.” Emil said slowly.

“Then again,” Mathias chimed in, “Tino isn’t ‘most people’, is he?”
They contemplated that for a second before Berwald nodded.

“Alright then. I’ll make a little shield and you tell me if you can see anything.”

Nodding excitedly, Tino shifted back on the sofa to give Berwald a little room. One big hand waved vaguely in the air, and wide violet-blue eyes watched closely. A gasp followed the motion and Tino scooted back even farther.

“So beautiful…” He whispered.

“You can see it?” Emil and Berwald asked at the same time. Tino nodded, smiling wider.

“It’s like shimmering water.” He said, reaching out a hand to the shield that surrounded the width of Berwald’s palm. His fingers went right through it and he looked curious.

“Only spiritual or paranormal entities are stopped by that shield.” Lukas explained. “It takes a lot out of a man, even one Berwald’s size, to create barriers against the physical world.”

Despite Lukas’ words, Tino repeatedly pressed his palm forward against Berwald’s, then pulled it back, then plunged it through the barrier again. Finally, he accepted the fact that it wasn’t a physical barrier, and he stopped trying.

“We haven’t really needed Berwald to create physical walls of energy that many times before,” said Emil, “all the threats coming at us are of a paranormal nature. Not to say it’s never happened.”

Berwald let the little shield fade out, and Tino pouted…just a little. He kept his hand clinging to the bigger man’s, however, and Matthias huffed little laughs out as he watched Berwald trying to think his way out of the grasp.

“When have you had to make a physical one?” Tino asked quietly, his fingers rubbing at the back of Berwald’s hand as though it was injured.

“Troll was chucking boulders at us on the side of a mountain.” Matthias said casually, and Tino’s face turned afraid.

“So dangerous…” He said. “Why was the troll doing that? Was he trying to kill you?”

“It’s a long story,” Lukas sighed, “but let’s just say that the people who hired us didn’t realize they had been making the troll on their land very aggressive. So we ended up trying to dodge huge mounds of rock being hurled around at us. Berwald had to use his physical barriers for the first time.”

“It was pretty exhausting.” Berwald said quietly. “Had to deflect the boulders with my own energy, and they were pretty heavy.”

“The poor guy collapsed on us the second we took the troll down.” Said Emil. “He was in bed for about three days after that. The doctor thought he had ‘chronic fatigue syndrome’ he was so wiped out.”

After Tino spent some time lamenting Berwald’s past troubles (hugging on his arm all the while), they explained to him what a doctor was. And chronic fatigue syndrome. And a hospital. And medication. The conversation went on for a while, with Tino answering a few questions for them about ‘medical care’ in the sea. That led to a long discussion on currency, law, social hierarchy, and family groups.
After nearly two hours of pure information exchange, their talking reached a point of awkward silence, and for a few long seconds they were all sitting there, staring at one another.

“So…” Emil asked, clearing his throat. “Um…where do we go from here?”

All eyes turned to Lukas, who seemed momentarily caught off-guard by the question. He looked intensely thoughtful for a while, and Tino watched him like a man watching his executioner prepare the drop floor. When he did speak, it was with a quiet, even tone, as though not wanting to startle the merman.

“Tino, do you mind if we continue to film your time with us and share it online? A lot of people will see it and it may enlighten a handful of skeptics if we’re lucky.”

Nodding enthusiastically, Tino still didn’t smile, but continued to watch him carefully.

“You do realize that this is not our home. We’re only here for a short time, and we’ll be going back to Sweden in just five days. It’s far from here, and it would be a long trip back. We can only afford to come here once a year, Tino.”

The merman looked extremely uncomfortable at the notion of being so far from his home, and for so long. He took a deep breath and exhaled it quickly, biting at his bottom lip.

“Not to sound douchey,” Mathias said flippantly, “but ehm…who’s he going to stay with if he comes back with us? Do we even have the room?”

Tino looked as though they had just threatened to abandon him on the side of the road again. His eyebrows drew up in a sorrowful bow, his lips parted on a whimper, and curled in on himself slightly where he sat.

“Mathias!” Emil chided.

“What?!” The older man asked, holding up his hands as though blameless. “I’m sorry, but it’s a legitimate question! If we’re going to take him in for an entire year we’re going to need to sort stuff like that out! I mean come on, are you going to have your parents put him up in Lukas’ old bedroom? I thought they were using it as a storage closet now. You couldn’t fit a bed in there now if you tried with all the stuff they have crammed in there. Even if they could put him up Emil would have to run him and forth all the time, which I guess would be fine, but a hassle. And Lukas and I can’t really help unless he wants to live on a couch in our apartment for a year and listen to Lukas’ begging through the wall at night when I’m--.”

Mathias actually stopped his ramble before Lukas could hit him, because he had spotted the tears pooling in Tino’s eyes.

“…oh hell…” He swore, rubbing the back of his neck.

Berwald noticed too, promptly curled an arm around Tino, and glared so coldly at Mathias that frost could have formed on his glasses.

“You made him cry.” Berwald growled. Mathias grimaced apologetically, but Berwald just repeated,

“You made him cry.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, Tino, ok? I didn’t mean to…eh…to…what, frighten…? Um…hurt your feelings…?”
Berwald just narrowed his glare and Mathias stopped trying. The big man squared his shoulders impressively and stated clearly,

“He’ll stay with me.”

Big, watery eyes looked up at him hopefully.

“R-really?” Tino choked out. “Y-you…have the room?”

Berwald ran a rough thumb gently beneath Tino’s eyes to catch the pooling tears. He softened his expression as he spoke to the merman,

“I have an extra guest room in my house. Two, in fact. You can have the one upstairs, next to mine.”

A gulp followed Berwald’s assurances, and Tino leaned his head on Berwald’s shoulder.

“Thank you.... thank you so much…humans…really are kind.”

“Well, some of them.” Emil snapped, frowning pointedly at Mathias. “Others are just douches.”

“Hey, hey!”


“You really don’t need to know what that means.” Lukas declared, looking amused for all his words were serious. “But in any case, it seems that settles it. You’ll be staying with us and we’ll let you soak up the knowledge.”

“We can do better than that.” Berwald said, a slight smirk at the corner of his mouth. “We have the internet.”

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Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart: https://www.deviantart.com/teadrop56/gallery/68057510/Hook-Line-and-Sinker-Commissions
Chapter 3

The rest of the morning passed quickly for Tino as his newfound pod answered question after question for him, showing him so much on the ‘computer’ that he thought he’d have to grow a new brain.

He was finding the quick intake of all the new information a nice distraction for how odd it felt being out of the water. His body felt too light and restless without the pressure of the sea all around him, holding him in place while letting him float.

When he had first pulled himself out of the sea, his limbs had felt so heavy he thought he’d never be able to adjust to life on land. After a while had passed and he’d become used to it, he didn’t feel heavy anymore, at least, not in the same way. The pull of the earth was so strong, yet the movements of his limbs were so much easier without the resistance of the water. Almost too easy. He threw himself off balance constantly because he used more force than was necessary to move himself, used to working against the water pressure.

Tino wasn’t used to being still, always having to move in the sea. Even when he let the water carry him, his tail would unconsciously wave back and forth to keep him balanced out, so he was never entirely still except when he was asleep. Even then, the waves would gently shift his body back and forth. So as they explained to him about cities, pets, clothes, cars, houses, and a hundred other things that somehow all tied together, he found himself rocking back and forth or side-to-side. More than a few times he caught one or more of them overtly staring at his odd movements, but he couldn’t stop for more than a minute at a time without the stillness of his body urging him to pick up the rhythm again. It didn’t have to be a dramatic amount of movement, but he had to sway at least subtly, something to keep the utter stillness at bay. It was borderline uncomfortable.

After about another hour of questions and answers, his brain was buzzing happily with all the new knowledge, a lot of which he had yet to fully grasp. He sensed that behind the clouds the sun was high, and that explained the creep of weariness along his nerves. It didn’t matter how much sleep he’d gotten the night before, he had still been through a lot and after staring at that ‘screen’ for so long and talking so much...he was exhausted again.

The beta male, Berwald, seemed to notice it before any of the rest of them.

“We tiring you out?” He asked, leaning down to observe Tino closely. The merman felt grateful for such a caring beta in this pod.

“I, um...just...” He responded dumbly, not able to explain to himself why Berwald’s blue-eyed scrutiny made his heart beat faster. “Do you ever...sleep in the middle of the day?”

Tino, like nearly all his people, usually took midday naps to refresh himself after hunting most of the morning. He knew from other mer researchers that he would not need to hunt here on land, but apart from being very tired at the moment, he simply hoped to hold on to the deeply-ingrained habit.

Matthias looked at him askew.

“Not a lot. Naps are for siss-...”

Lukas elbowed Matthias in his side, cutting off whatever it was he was going to say. Tino still didn’t know enough human slang words to determine what ‘siss’ meant. He winced at the slight
violence, though. So far it had only been Matthias that Lukas hit, but he still felt a bit uneasy about the calm man. He would snap like that with only Matthias’ stupidity as a warning and Tino wondered what he might do to earn that wrath.

“If you’d like to take a rest, Tino, feel free to lie down in your room for a while. We’re all here to rest and relax anyway. It’s not like we have anywhere to be or go, so you can do what you’d like.”

Tino gave him a smile, hoping to show his gratitude.

“I think I’ll do that, then.”

“Want some help climbing the stairs?” Berwald asked him, to which Tino nodded. He took the larger hand offered to him and clung to it for balance as they shuffled up the ‘stairs’. Berwald walked him all the way to his bed before letting go and telling him to enjoy his nap. Tino smiled at the man even as he turned his back and closed the door for him. A split second later the door opened again and Berwald’s head poked in.

“Um, do you want me to leave the door cracked?”

Tilting his head, the merman asked, “Why damage it?”

“No, I meant, do you want me to leave it open a bit?”

“Oh! Uh…no, thanks…you can leave it closed. If that’s alright.”

“Sure.”

Then Berwald closed the door again, and Tino listened to the footsteps of his big frame as he retreated with a grin. For as huge and intimidating as he seemed, Berwald was kind of an adorable lug.

Tino sighed, just sitting there for a moment and drinking in the solitude. He hadn’t had a second alone to think since he’d made the change, and as much as he liked his newfound pod members, he needed breathing space.

He at once flopped back on the bed and began examining his new limbs. He hadn’t wanted to appear too strange by doing this in front of everyone, but he’d been wanting to since last night. He ran his hands over the junction of his hips and thighs, learning how they connected to the familiar part of his body. Then he made a series of careful, experimental moves with his new limbs, finding out how he could fold them up or link them together without hurting himself. He especially liked sitting with his feet crossed beneath his knees, the way he’d seem Emil and Mathias sit several times since last night. It took him a few minutes and a few frustrated grunts to accomplish this position, and his long hair was getting in the way of everything. It was much more of a nuisance without the water to keep it flowing around him. It just hung from his head and got tangled easily.

After he’d come to grips with how exactly his legs worked, he began to closely examine his feet. They were just so strange but so important…he spent several long moments just sitting there watching his toes wiggle and flex in delight. His toes were such weird little things that looked like stubby fingers. But though they moved similarly they didn’t work the same way at all. He was unsure whether he could actually pick anything up with his toes. He’d have to ask at some point. But there were so many questions in his head that he had to prioritize. Still, they were his favorite part of this new body. Well, half-new body. His upper half was the same.
The only aspect about his new form that truly disconcerted him was his…

Tino pulled the stretchy waistband of the ‘boxers’ away to stare down between his legs. He glanced up to watch the door, as if afraid someone might burst in, before carefully pulling the boxers down his legs to get a better look. He tilted his head this way and that, trying to decide what to make of it. The shape was the same, but…. he’d have to ask about it later.

He pulled the boxers up and then collapsed back onto the soft bed, letting gravity take him. He rolled one way and then the other, enjoying how comfortable it was. He hadn’t really thought that sleeping on land could be this enjoyable, but, wow, did these humans know how to make a bed. In his home a ‘bed’ was usually a patch of long seagrass wound around him to keep him from floating off in his sleep, or wedging into a crevice for the same reason, usually with a family member, friend, or lover curled up with him for safety and comfort.

This was certainly nicer than he’d thought. So nice that he barely had time to think over what all he had learned and what all he still wanted to know, before sleep took him.

“’We’ve got to make a shorter cut of it.”

“But the more we cut, the more people will cry fraud!”

“It worked last night because that was only a few hours, and the entire experience was showing his change. You were right; cutting away from the sequence would have been suspicious. We should still make a shorter cut of that too, though, for the people who don’t have two hours free to check out our claim. For the rest of his activities we can cut all we want.”

“Look, I’ve seen websites with cut up shots and scenes and they’re almost always fakes because they can’t produce the full version!”

“We can still put the full version online, you idiot! But no person in their right mind is going to watch eight or more hours of us just going about day-to-day.”

“They will since there’s, hell, a MERMAN with us!”

“Quiet you two!” Lukas interjected into the argument, silencing his brother and lover. “Tino’s trying to get some rest upstairs and I doubt hearing you two shouting at each other will help.”

“We aren’t shouting!” Mathias protested, but in a calmer voice that belied his tone.

“First of all,” Lukas said, “something neither of you has mentioned yet, is how much we actually need to film. The most important part is already out there, isn’t it? The change is the main evidence we have, the rest is just us going about our day, like Emil said. So, we don’t have to film every single hour of our day, just here and there as you think the conversations or situations might please the crowd.”

“That’s what I’m saying.” Emil agreed.

“But I want to capture every second I can.” Mathias grumbled. Lukas patted his knee, having sat beside him when Berwald and Tino left.

“Use your discretion, but if you film too much you’re just going to bore people, even if they do think they’re watching a merman in human form, it’s just a merman in human form…what, eating food and talking? Still not that exciting if you don’t choose your moments.”
Mathias turned and pouted at Lukas.

“Which of us here graduated from film school?”

Lukas grinned at him and gave him a small peck on the cheek before standing up.

“Film school didn’t prepare you for the supernatural element of videography. Now you two play nice, I’m going to read in the study, see what books I missed the last time I was here.”

Berwald had already left them to do a bit of woodcarving on the back patio, so now Emil and Mathias were left to hash out the details of the website.

“Alright, let’s start with editing down the full version of last night’s footage to just a half-hour or so if we can.” Emil suggested.

“Fine.” Mathias sighed, retrieving his own computer from the nearby shelf where he’d placed it that morning. “But can you start in on the blog entry for today while I do that? I’m going to upload and start cutting together the footage we’ve already shot this morning since you’re both so gung ho about it. I’ll add more to it after tonight.”

“Sure,” answered the teen, who was already opening a blank document on his own laptop, “I just need to think of a good title for this ongoing story. I got off easy last night because I posted the article with the video so it just read ‘merman rescued last night in Finland’, to get more hits. But since this will be a continuing narrative now…pitching the ideas we had last night, what are some other titles?”

“Would ‘fish out of water’ be too corny?”

“Yep.”

“’Merman on land’?”

“Too basic.”

Mathias sat down in one of his comfy leather chairs, plugging his camera into the computer and began downloading footage. He brought up his video editing software as well and began clicking away.

“’Finding our Feet’?” Emil tried this time.

“Wouldn’t it technically be his feet? And doesn’t he technically already have them?”

“True…’Life on Land’?”

“That’s not bad. Has a nice ring to it. Short, sweet, but gets across the mood.”

Emil typed it up in the list of potential titles, then paused to think again, chewing the inside of his cheek.

“How about simple and expositional; ‘Tino the merman’?”

Mathias made a rude sound.

“That just sounds boring and silly at the same time.”

“Well I do think more and more that we should include the fact that he’s a merman into the main
title somehow. It’ll get more hits and leave no room for interpretation.”

“Yea, but it’s an overall journey that we’re going to be recording. Shouldn’t we think more about that? You can name the individual articles anything you want, but the main thread of the story needs to be about his mission here on land, right?”

They both sat in silence for a moment, pondering Mathias’ rare moment of insight.

“So…something about him coming on land to research us instead of the other way around…”

“Script flip by a flip flop!” Mathias declared sarcastically. “Oh yea! Imagine the remixes they could make out of that one!”

Emil rolled his eyes.

“This isn’t a rap song title or anything. Ug…this shouldn’t be so hard, but you’re right; this is the biggest story we’ve ever had, and it’ll be ongoing and it has to have the right title.”

They spent a good several minutes just tossing different title ideas back and forth, most of them ridiculous, out of place, or just grasping at straws.

“Washed ashore?

“Tino’s Progress?”

“Land Locked Merman?”

“How about just ‘Land Locked’?”

“Landlubber Merman?”

This went on far longer than it usually did for Emil, as he was very creative with titles, but this one was so important to them that it was driving him crazy. He ended up lying face down in the carpet as he kicked his foot back against the sofa.

“Tino Ashore?”

Emil’s ears perked up, and he paused his kicking as he considered. Then slowly, he raised his face from the floor and squinted at his word document. He quickly typed up the two words to see them in print. He stared at them and mouthed them a few times before tilting his head.

“You know what…it’s not the most descriptive, but…it’s simple and…it sounds nice.”

Mathias grinned without looking up from his own screen where he’d been editing this entire time.

“Are you telling me I just came up with the title for our greatest story ever?”

Emil sighed as he began to type.

“Maybe… yea…”

“Woohoo!” Mathias stage-screamed, not wanting to wake up Tino. “I’m getting the credit on that from here onward!”

The teen simply shook his head and started his first draft of that days’ article.
Waking up, Tino found, felt like he’d sunk to the bottom of the sea floor and had the weight of the water crushing down on him. His entire body felt so heavy from the inactivity that it was like moving through tar. In the water, there was always a stiffness in his body after sleeping that needed to be worked out but there wasn’t the pull of gravity like there was here. Groaning a bit, he stretched out carefully as he had done this morning, and glanced at the clock on the wall, trying to remember how it worked and how much time had passed. He couldn’t make sense of the two rods and the numbers, but he glanced around some more and noticed a digital clock on the bedside table. The number 1 had been in the first place when he went to bed (he couldn’t remember what number had come after it), and now it read 2:35. He supposed that was a good amount of time, but he didn’t really know.

Yawning and feeling an intense need to relieve himself, he stumbled to his feet, determined to walk. He fell into the motion much better than before, and rubbed his eyes when he reached the top of the stairs. Looking down into the great room, he saw Emil stretched out on the floor looking at his computer, and Mathias sitting in a chair next to him with his own. Tino couldn’t see their faces as their backs were to the stairs, so he edged down with the help of the railing.

“Tino’s awake now.” He said in a soft, sleepy voice. Neither of the two men said anything back to him. He frowned and wondered if he needed to speak louder.

“I’m awake.” He said, more loudly, stepping up closer to them, having to place a few fingers on the back of Mathias’ shoulder, feeling unnerved in the silence. He saw that he was ‘editing footage’, at least that’s how he’d put it earlier. That’s when Tino saw the tendrils. They were streaming out of the computer and up into the two men’s ears. Horrified, Tino recoiled in shock at the unsettling image. That, plus the fact that they couldn’t seem to hear him led him to one terrible conclusion.

“Rest well?”

Tino jumped as Berwald came toward him from the hallway on his left, holding a mug of coffee in his hand. He must have been in one of the other rooms. The frightened merman wasted no time, but pointed frantically at Emil and Mathias’ backs.

“They’ve lost their hearing!” He said in a panicked tone. “Those things! Those things in their ears have taken their hearing!”

The huge man didn’t say anything to that, his expression didn’t even change as he followed Tino’s finger with his eyes to see what he was talking about. As Tino stood there, wide eyes fearful and lost, Berwald stepped up casually behind Mathias and tugged one of the tendrils right out of his ear.

“What the hell, man?!” Mathias blurted, as Berwald knelt straight down to Emil and did the same.

“Hey!” Emil protested.

Tino looked aghast, fearing that Berwald had just injured both of them, though had he been less afraid he would have realized they sounded annoyed, not hurt. Berwald nodded toward Tino, and the other two turned to see the merman standing there.

“Oh, hey, fish boy!” Mathias greeted with a happy smile.

“Have a good nap, Tino?” Emil asked. “What’s wrong?”
“Those things…in your ears…” Tino began, rubbing the tip of his finger against his own ear.

“They’re just earbuds.” Berwald explained, gesturing him forward to get a better look.

“Oh yea, dude, nothing to be afraid of.” Mathias said, showing Tino how they fit into his ears and then came out. He let Tino touch the tendril, and it felt odd and smooth in his fingers. He relaxed with a nervous chuckle.

“I thought…I thought you’d lost your hearing to those things.”

“No, they’re just for when we don’t want our music or video sounds to bother anyone else. We can hear what’s on the computer through them, but no one else can.”

This idea intrigued Tino. It seemed like one more form of magic.

“You can…hear…through those?” He asked.

“Yea, check this out!” Mathias pulled something up on his computer screen, a video, and let it play. As Tino watched he yanked the end of the tendril from the computer, and suddenly there was a sound emanating from it. Tino took a step back the sound was so utterly different. A second later Mathias put the tendril back.

“Come here, try it out!” He encouraged, holding out an earbud to Tino.

Gulping, Tino took the proffered ‘earbud’ with trepidation, and slid it with much care into his ear. Instantly the sound was there, ringing through his ear, as though it were inside his mind. It was incredible.

“This…” He said after staring at the odd compilation of images flashing on the screen and listening, “is…music?”

“A music video, but yea.” Mathias answered. “Pretty cool, right?”

Tino wasn’t afraid of the earbud anymore, and he pulled it out of his ear, then out of the computer so he could hear that lovely sound without them. The song rang out into the great room, and Tino was captivated. He had heard music from the ‘cruise ships’ before, and he’d always wanted to hear more. This didn’t sound the same though; it was slower, with an undertone of drums but not fast like all the music on the ships had been. The melody was absolutely enchanting, and he closed his eyes, tilting his head back as he took it in.

Very slowly, he sunk to the floor and sat on his knees, just listening. Nothing else mattered at this moment; this music, this song, was so beautiful…he’d never heard anything so lovely in his life. The voice of the singer was so sweet but haunting, uplifting and tortured…there were layers upon layers of meaning in that sound. Tears formed behind his closed eyelids, and slowly slipped down his cheeks over the long moments that he sat there.

“Woah…uh…dude?” He heard Matthias say, the music cutting off. “You ok?”

Opening his eyes slowly, Tino nodded. He saw that they were all looking at him with varied measures of concern. Berwald looked at him like Tino was dying there was so much worry in the set of his mouth.

“It’s…it’s so…” Tino wiped his eyes and gave a small sob. “Incredible…”

“It’s Evanescence.” Emil offered, the words not meaning anything to Tino.
“Same thing.” Mathias countered.

“Did I just hear Amy Lee in here?” Asked Lukas’ voice from down the hall, as he walked toward them. He held an open book at his side, as though they had pulled him from in the middle of reading it. “Tino, you’re awake.”

“How…how can that sound be possible?” Tino asked, his voice quiet and awestruck, not even answering Lukas’ question. “How does a voice even produce something like that?”

There was a pause for a moment, and Tino sensed that they were all thinking very hard on how to explain such a concept to him.

“Don’t creatures underwater have their own songs?” Lukas asked after the long introspective silence.

“Yes,” Tino admitted, “but…not with words…not with…music. The researcher I studied under tried to explain it to me once, brought me up to hear the music from the cruise ships, but…I still can’t understand how in-instru-ments work.”

“Did your tutor tell you about instruments as well then?” Lukas asked.

Pulling himself back onto his feet, with Berwald grabbing his arm to help, Tino nodded and leaned against the armrest of Mathias’ chair like he’d seen Lukas do earlier.

“He tried, but like a lot of things I couldn’t really understand. Like um….well…”

Tino suddenly looked very nervous as something came back to him, something he had suppressed out of his fear over the ‘earbud’ incident. He shifted uncomfortably, pressing his legs closer together self-consciously.

“I need to use the…um…bath…room?”

“I assume that was one of the first things you learned?” Lukas said, unable to help the small smile on his face. Tino made an affirmative, amused sound. Emil piped up then.

“Alright, well, there’s one right there by the front door if you want to use it. Do you need any… help?” Emil blushed very red as he realized how that sounded. Tino didn’t seem to pick up on what was making him so embarrassed and he said,

“Um…maybe just to show me how the um…t-toi-let works? I don’t know how to…flush…”

Mathias made a little fizzing sound like a kettle about to start singing, but Lukas’ warning glare kept him under control, though his smile was wide enough to nearly split his face.

“Here, I’ll show you.” Emil said, hopping up from the floor and stretching out his back while he was at it.

After a quick and awkward demonstration of how to utilize the contraption, Emil closed the door on him and Tino gratefully did what he so desperately needed to do. The loud sound of the toilet flushing did make him uneasy, but it wasn’t as though he hadn’t seen whirlpools in the sea before. He then followed the instructions that Emil had given him, washing his hands in the ‘sink’, when he suddenly noticed what was hanging above the sink.

He screamed.
Tino’s shriek startled them all. They took a split second to stare in silent fear of what might have happened to the merman while on his own. It may have sounded like a funny fact, but it was true that most household accidents happened in the bathroom (or kitchen), and they all knew this. For a sea creature who’d never used a bathroom before…

Berwald was the first to lead the charge, but Mathias quickly grabbed his camera and overtook the big man as they ran for the bathroom. Tino hadn’t known how to lock the door, so when they tried the handle it opened for them. Tino was pressed up against the opposite wall from the sink, staring.

“What’s that?!” He demanded the second he saw them, pointing at the mirror. Mathias panned the camera from Tino’s reflection in the mirror, to the merman’s frightened face.

“It’s just your reflection, bro.” He enlightened.

“Are you hurt?” Berwald demanded of Tino, over Mathias’ shoulder.

“Did you fall or something?” Emil asked, standing on his tiptoes to see around the two larger men. Lukas said nothing but managed to find another spot around the camera man to squeeze his head and see what was going on.

Tino slowly shook his head, but his eyes never left the mirror.

“No… I’m… just… I was startled.” He answered haltingly. “Is… that a mirror?”

“Yea, dude. Haven’t you ever…” Mathias trailed off, realization hitting him as it did them all.

“You’ve never seen your own reflection clearly before.” Lukas said, a statement, not a question.

“Woah…” Mathias added, astutely. Tino shoved off the wall and stepped up to the counter. He leaned in close and stared into his own eyes. For a long moment, he watched the mirror mimic his movements. He checked his teeth, his neck, his long hair. Finally he gave a big smile, turned to them, and declared,

“I’m… freaking… cute!”

They all, even Mathias, felt their jaws drop in surprise at Tino’s honesty, before they all burst out laughing, and Tino loudest of all. The idea that he had never seen his own image before a few minutes ago was astounding to the other four, who had grown up with mirrors, school photos, and now, social media. It was refreshing to hear such innocence.

Berwald recovered first, naturally, and wormed his way into the small bathroom around Mathias. Without saying anything he helped Tino dry his hands, which were still dripping. During this little interaction, Lukas picked up on the subtle way that Tino sometimes dipped his head when Berwald looked directly at him. A lot of people avoided Berwald’s eyes because he could come off as too intimidating, so Lukas knew what that looked like. But Tino wasn’t doing that; he would meet Berwald’s eyes for long stretches of time, only to duck his head eventually. This… this looked almost… bashful, and… submissive. Theories began to swirl in Lukas’ mind as a few ancient texts on social interactions floated up from the endless libraries in his head, but he kept them to himself, along with a wry smile.
He had only seen vague shadows of his own appearance in the side of sunken ships, or on the surface of the water if ever he went up. But he’d never seen his own face before, in such stark, realistic detail. Tino was pleased with what he saw, having always been told that he was cute, but never really knowing it until now.

Tino offered his wet hands willingly to the folds of the soft towel when Berwald held it out to him. Those large hands engulfed his own with the towel as he began to dry them. ‘Mother Hen’ indeed. Tino’s heart fluttered.

“Mathias, do you really think that filming Tino drying his hands is necessary footage?” Lukas asked from the doorway, where he, Mathias, and Emil were still crowded, watching them.

“It’s not like he’s going to gawk at the towel.” Emil agreed.

“You never know what’ll happen!” Mathias snapped. “We’ll just cut it later since you’re making me do that now, alright?”

Tino smiled in the direction of the others’ bickering as he considered the little group. He could read all of these humans pretty easily: Lukas was levelheaded and a bit stern because he had the responsibility of his family unit to uphold, but he just wanted them all to be happy. Mathias was boisterous, cheerful, and begged for attention, but only because he worried that others wouldn’t like him. Emil was sweet and smart, but he didn’t want to be looked down on for his age and wanted emotional support. Berwald…

Berwald didn’t say much, but Tino liked his strong, silent presence. There was more than one way to be an alpha. While Lukas clearly was the leader of their pod, Berwald was also an alpha in the making. However, he fit the role of Beta male very nicely in their current dynamic. Tino sensed that he was content to be led about so long as he could support his companions. Tino desperately liked Berwald already for his good heart; he had seen it the moment he’d been calm enough to start observing last night. Behind that frown and quiet demeanor Berwald was a big softie with a heart of gold, but would fight to the death to defend those he cared for. Tino could practically taste the kindness wafting off him like a rich and delightful scent. It didn’t matter if his face looked like it was permanently set into a frown or blank expression, his emotions were loud and clear to Tino.

Berwald also reminded Tino of the ancient warriors of his people, the descendants of whom still bore a likeness to them in body and heart. Tino himself was on the small size by the standards of his kind, not that it truly mattered in their society; all sizes of mer people were essential to their society flourishing, and Tino had never felt unhappy with himself, but he always admired his larger counterparts.

There was still one thing about Berwald, though, that he absolutely could not decode. So he decided to go for the direct approach like he did in everything else.

"Um, Berwald..." He said, and the man stopped folding the damp towel to look down at Tino. He was so tall that Tino didn’t feel like reaching up to his face. "Could you lean down a bit closer?"

Berwald’s eyes showed a flicker of surprise and apprehension, but he did as Tino asked. The merman carefully reached up to the bigger man’s face and ran his fingers down the weird structure over his eyes. He had wanted to ask about them before, but there had been so many other things to ask about he’d never found the right moment. Berwald seemed to get what he was doing, and reached up to help, slipping the objects off his face entirely and handing them to Tino.

"Is this...armor?” Tino asked, tapping at the glass. He heard Mathias chortle, and was aware that the two brothers were watching intently as well.
"They're my glasses," Berwald explained, ignoring their audience at the doorway, "they help me see clearly. My eyesight's pretty bad without them."

"I have glass!" Tino exclaimed, lifting his left wrist and jangling his bracelet. The blue, brown, and white pieces of seaglass tinkled.

"Yea, where did you get that anyway?" Lukas asked.

"Made it, with fisherman’s twine." Tino answered. "There is a lot of human glass by the coast, but it makes pretty adornments when it’s been crafted by the water."

"It’s pretty, Tino, but Berwald’s glasses aren’t just for decoration."

Tino turned the 'glasses' over in his hands a few times, holding them up to study them. Then he cautiously lifted them to slide onto his own nose, sliding the longer pieces over his ears like Berwald had worn them. Everything looked so distressed and distorted that it made the space between Tino's eyes ache. He grimaced and pulled the glasses from his face.

"These are horrible!" He said with dismay, wondering why on earth Berwald would torture himself so much by wearing them.

"Not for me." Berwald assured him. "It makes things look weird for you because your eyesight’s normal. For me, it corrects the blurriness of my vision and makes everything sharp and clear."

"I'm older than you. You're the kid here. You and Emil."

Emil and Lukas both suddenly looked like they were about to burst, and Berwald even let out a very small huff of air that might have been a chuckle.

"Well, this little escapade in the bathroom has been lovely." Mathias said bitterly. "But I think we should change location. Do something more productive."

"I don't know what the rest of you were planning on doing," Emil declared as they filtered from the bathroom to the entranceway, "but I've got to take a walk, now that it's stopped raining. Tino, would you like to go into the forest with us?"

Just like every other second it seemed, Tino felt excitement fill him.

"Yes! I'd love that!"

Eager to get outside now that the idea was planted in his head, Tino rocked excitedly on his feet and wiggled through his midsection as though he still had his tail. He darted forward to follow Emil toward the door, where all their shoes were piled. A strong arm reached out and hooked him around the waist, pulling him back. Tino had almost been expecting it, and huffed, resignedly leaning back into Berwald’s arm and waiting to hear his excuse for stopping him this time.
"What's the hold up, Ber?" Mathias laughed, pointing the camera down to focus on where Tino was squirming in the bigger man's one-armed grasp.

"No shoes." Berwald said simply.

They suddenly all stared at Tino's feet, and he calmed down enough to ask,

"Do I really need shoes?"

"If you don't want to tear up those tender new feet of yours, yes." Said Lukas.

"We um...don't have any extra do we?" Emil asked, now looking guilty for having suggested the walk. Tino's heart dropped and he could feel the sad expression drawing on all his features. He let himself go limp in Berwald's arm.

"No worries. We'll go down to the Bend." Seeing his confused expression, Lukas went on, "It's full name is The Bend in the Road; it's a little shop about a half hour from here down the mountainside. It's the only place around for miles if you want food or anything."

Tino didn't want his human guardians to weary of this cycle; him hearing something they said and then asking them to explain it, but there was so much he didn't understand. It truly was what he was here to do, after all. But this was something he had an idea about, at least. We'll head down there and buy you a pair or two. You're going to need them in any case."

Lukas' matter-of-fact tone brought all the happiness zinging back into Tino's heart. The change was so sudden Berwald wasn't expecting him to suddenly wriggle out of his grasp. But he did, and flung himself at Lukas, hugging him tightly.

"Thank you so much!" He chimed happily. Lukas didn't even flinch, but patted him on the head and made a small humming sound. With Mathias as his lover Tino assumed that he must be used to sudden, overwhelming bursts of affection.

"Don't think you can go stealing my sweetie away with hugs, now!" Mathias chided. "He's immune."

Tino didn't understand that last part, but he was too excited to care; he was going to see a human place of trade.

It was obvious as they trooped out to the SUV that Tino was a little worried about getting in the car again. The night before he had been too busy trying to block out the intense pain of his change to absorb exactly what the car was like, but he had been aware enough to be frightened. He was careful as he stepped up into the vehicle, a little unsure in the odd, oversized slippers that Mathias had lent him. He had barely gotten used to his own new feet, now putting something else on top of them was not helping. But all the others there around him, and they did what they could to help.

They had also insisted that he put Berwald's sweater on again, and managed to convince him to wear the track pants they'd offered him that morning. He hadn't liked that much, but they weren't uncomfortable at all, just foreign to him. Once he felt the slight bite of chill in the air outside, however, he was glad to be wearing them.

Once seated in the car, sandwiched between Berwald and Emil (and having to deal with where to put his hair without sitting on it), Tino relaxed a bit. This was how they traveled, they did this all the time, there was no reason to be nervous. Berwald showed him how to put the seatbelt around
himself, which they told him was for safety. When Lukas put the key in and turn on the growling, grumbling of the engine, Tino didn’t think, he just jumped at the sound and grabbed onto Emil. They had to explain to him that everything was alright, and it took a while for him to adjust to the movement of the car once they got moving, but then he focused on watching the scenery as it flew by the windows. They were in deep forests mostly, and Tino had never seen trees so close. The amazing view of the mountains and the little glimpses of the coast were enough to preoccupy him for the nearly 30-min drive to the little store.

The Bend was named so because it was nestled beside a sharp bend along the road that wound up and down the mountainside. It was not a large shop, but it was the only resource for the vacationers and tourists staying in the various cabins, lodges, and resorts nearby. It was also decent for the variety of necessities it offered as well as tourist items. It was an all-around cozy little place that they enjoyed visiting every year.

Tino was fairly vibrating with excitement when they pulled up to the building and stepped out of the car.

A little chime hung above the door inside, and the sweet tinkling of it made Tino jump as they pushed the door open, but he quickly relaxed when he realized it was nothing that would hurt him. Sounds here were so much clearer than in the water and he was still adjusting. Berwald, Mathias, Emil, and Lukas alike took great delight in watching Tino examine everything he saw as though he had discovered a roomful of treasure. They had to explain to him the tags and signs that showed the price, as Tino’s sense of currency came from bartering rather than any kind of money unit. Tino was apparently familiar with numbers, but was unused to seeing them arranged with decimals and such.

The aged clerk behind the counter looked bored when they first walked in, but the more they spoke together the more he seemed to take an interest in them. Their companion with hair down to his knees might have had something to do with that. That, and the tall spikey-haired man following him around with a digital camera. When Lukas went up to the counter and asked if there were any shoes in the store, the clerk nodded blankly and pointed to a back corner. Lukas thanked him and made for the area. There obviously wasn’t much selection beyond house slippers and flip flops, but there were also some cheap rubber boots.

“These should work for now.” Lukas told Tino, who was eying the shoes with interest. After determining his size, they then had to gather a package of socks, a few t-shirts, sweatshirts, and pants (many with tourist texts over them).

While Lukas and Emil were having a disagreement about whether they should buy hair ties or hair clips for Tino’s unmanageably long hair, the merman wandered to the opposite corner of the store, where there was a tall stand filled with stuffed animals. He froze when he saw them, and after a second of silent observation, cocked his head.

“Why aren’t they moving?” He asked cautiously.

“They’re just toys.” Mathias said, snatching a fluffy white one from the stand and tossing it to him. Tino caught it with a tiny squeak, and his eyes narrowed as he held it up.

“They’re…toys? But they look real.”

Mathias gave a laugh and shook his head.

“How many real animals do you know that look like that?”
“I assumed…it was a land animal I haven’t heard of yet.”

“Nah, here on land we also have a fascination with creating non-real animals that don’t exist. They usually make people a lot of money, especially if they’re from a movie or a TV show; that’s a Moomin you’re holding, for one.”

Tino stared into the tiny black bead eyes, and finally grinned.

“It’s…enchanting.” He said softly, carefully pulling it into a little squeeze against his cheek. “And soft! How do you make them so wonderful?”

Matthias shrugged.

“Toy companies know what the public want.”

“Seems that way.” Tino agreed, even though he didn’t really know what Mathias meant.

“You want it?” Berwald asked, from where he stood to one side, watching. Tino’s eyes narrowed in concern.

“Do you have enough to trade for it?”

Berwald gave a single, short nod. Tino didn’t seem cheered by this. He lowered his eyes to the floor and murmured,

“But…I have nothing to repay you…”

“It’ll be a gift.” Berwald stated simply. “Because you like it.”

Tino’s face exploded into a smile, his entire countenance changing to one of pure joy, and he grabbed Berwald’s arm and hugged it tight, squishing the promised toy between his chest and the strong arm. He followed up the gesture by brushing his forehead against Berwald’s arm like a cat fawning over its master.

“Thank you for this gift! I’ll always treasure it!”

Berwald’s cheeks colored slightly at the display, and he grunted a pleased sound.

The poor clerk was looking more and more suspiciously at them after seeing this exchange, his thick grey eyebrows rising higher and higher on his forehead.

When they had picked out all the clothes and toiletries that Tino would need, they started picking out snacks. Tino had no basis for what the flavors might be, so they guessed for him and filled the small counter before the clerk. Usually they waited to get snacks until a few days into their stay, but any trip to The Bend had to count so they went ahead and got what they wanted.

Tino watched intently as Lukas and Berwald paid for their purchases.

“Your paper and metal must be very valuable!” Tino blurted as he saw how much they had bought with just the few pieces of the currency.

“It is but it isn’t.” Lukas said as he received his change. “It’s a long story.”

They could feel the clerk’s stare on their backs as they left the store, and were glad he hadn’t asked any questions. Though with a wide-eyed beauty with hair to his knees reacting to a Moomin plushie like a child in his store, and the possibly creepy cameraman tracking his every move while the
three others ignored it, he would have had every right to question them. Had he done so, they would have told him the plain truth. Not that they would have expected him to believe them.

They were always open and honest about what they did, and were immune to the jeers, disgust, and utter disbelief people showed them in response. After all these years they had learned to live with every reaction possible. Right now, though, they didn’t feel like putting Tino through that if they could help it.

The whole drive back Tino was admiring and hugging his plush Moomin and thanking Berwald repeatedly for it. The big man never seemed to get tired of saying ‘you’re welcome’ in a soft tone every time.

“You said that you don’t really have anything to do while you’re here?” Tino asked midway through the trip back. “So what do you do then?”

“Anything that’s fun, really.” Emil said vaguely. “We’re here to get away from work for a week, so we really just do what we want.”

“Yea, we have all kinds of fun stuff to do though!” Matthias interjected, as he checked the battery on the camera. He’d stopped filming after the tenth time Tino had thanked Berwald for his Moomin. Even he had thought that the cuteness factor wore off after a while. “We play games, and have movie marathons, and sit in the sauna, and swim in the pool, and-”

“You swim?” Tino cut him off excitedly. “There’s a pool?!”

Lukas glanced at him in the rear-view mirror, a smile on his face.

“We probably should have told you sooner,” He commented, “but I guess we didn’t think about it. There’s a pool room off the house; it has a hot tub and a sauna too.”

The long golden hair draped further into Tino’s lap as he tilted his head to the side. He didn’t even need to ask.

“A sauna is a little wooden room that heats up and makes you sweat.”

“It’s really good for your skin.” Emil added.

“And it makes jumping back into the pool a real rush afterward! You get really hot in the sauna, which is awesome, but then you dive back into the pool and it feels like it’s negative billion degrees!”

“That sounds sweet!” Tino exclaimed, the narrow tilt to his eyes showing how proud he was to be using human slang.

“It’s a nice way to relax.” Berwald said.

“I wonder if you’d be able to breathe in the pool with your gills.” Emil pondered. “I mean, it’s saltwater but…I think there’s still some chlorine in it. That’s a pretty harsh chemical.”

Lifting a hand to his neck, Tino ran his fingers over the invisible lines of his gills.

“I don’t know…there are some areas of my home with pretty bad chemicals from…” His lips puckered slightly in concentration as he tried to pull up the word. “Poll—poll…poll-something…”

“Pollution.” Berwald supplied.
“That’s it! Pollution! And let me tell you that makes breathing at home really hard if we go too close to the shore in certain places. But we manage and adapt. So...maybe I could at least try breathing in the pool?”

“I don’t want any health concerns on my hands,” Lukas said firmly. “You can swim in the pool if you’d like, I’d never deny you that, but if you try to use your gills and then end up sick...we don’t exactly have a mer doctor to take you to.”

Deflating a bit under Lukas’ no-nonsense tone, Tino nodded. Lukas didn’t miss how he ducked his head the same way he did to Berwald. Definitely a sign of submission, he thought.

“Aw, come on, babe! At least let him try? Just one little breath underwater, and if it hurts him or he can’t do it he’ll stop! Come on, it’ll be great footage if he can manage to swim around underwater without coming up for air!”

“Mathias, I’m not endangering Tino just for the blog. That’s idiotic and irresponsible.”

“But...” Mathias trailed off, trying to come up with some good reason why he could get his shot, but then Berwald spoke up.

“He’s not hurting himself for something so stupid.”

Tino glanced up at the man beside him, surprised by the fervor in his tone. Even Lukas looked a bit taken aback. Mathias didn’t turn in his seat to look at Berwald, he simply remained where he was, muttering ‘fine then, freaking mother hen.’

Not liking how tense the mood had just become, Tino swallowed and asked,

“Um...so...how big is this pool?”

“Pretty big.” Emil answered quickly, wanting to soothe over the awkward just as much as the merman did. “It takes up a big chunk of the pool room, but there’s enough room for the hot tub in the corner. That’s a smaller pool with really, really hot water that bubbles.”

“That sounds amazing!” Tino chirped. “We migrate to a place every year with really hot water shooting out from the bottom of the sea! I love going there because we don’t have to worry about keeping warm. It’s a lot deeper than we usually swim, but the extra pressure is worth it to stay warm for so long.”

“Wait,” Lukas said, suddenly very interested, “does this hot water...I mean...does it come from tall, pointed vents?”

“Yes!”

“Loki’s Castle, maybe...?” Lukas said softly to himself. “That would be incredible.”

“I don’t know what you call the area,” Tino said, “but we call it The Warm Place.”

“Then you’ll love the hot tub!” Said Mathias, returning from his silent sulk. “And the sauna too! But that’s a dry heat.”

“Can I try it when we get back?” Tino asked, literally bouncing in his seat like a toddler in anticipation.

“If you’d like, but we should really clean up the dishes from breakfast first.” Lukas said. “We have
a policy about keeping the kitchen clean before playing around.”

“Do you use one of those….dishwashers?” Tino asked. “I was wondering if those were still around.”

“They existed 20 years ago too, Tino, but they have been greatly improved upon. So yes, we have one.”

“After we load up the dishwasher, though, are we going to make our cookies?” Emil asked, then turned to Tino and said, “I always make up a ton of cookies on our first day here, so we can eat on them throughout the trip.”

“What are cookies?”

“They’re a sweet baked good.”

Tino licked his lips.

“I want to know more about your food. I was told about how amazing it can be, and I don’t really understand how you make it the way that you do. But I loved the food we ate for breakfast!”

“I know you don’t really know which flavors you exactly like yet,” Emil said, “but there are a lot of different kinds of cookies that we can make, if we have the right ingredients. When we get back, we’ll go through the cookbook and pick out one or two recipes.”

Tino didn’t admit that he had no idea what ‘recipe’ meant, but smiled and said,

“I’m sure no matter what kind they are they’ll be delicious! All of your food is delicious!”

“That’s not entirely true,” said Lukas, “there will definitely be some foods out there that you won’t like. Some are bitter, overly spicy to the point of making you tear up…it just depends on what you like. Don’t decide that you like everything, because you didn’t like the fishy paste at breakfast, did you?”

Tino pouted.

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Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
Chapter 4

When they did get back and discussed it (after Emil let Tino gawk at the recipe book, never questioning how the merman could read) they decided to go with lemon shortbread cookies and regular shortbread cookies with Nutella. They had let Tino sample a tiny bit of the chocolate hazelnut paste and he was in heaven. Mathias hovered around with the camera, hoping to catch Tino’s very expressive reactions. He was not disappointed.

“Eggs are always soft and jelly!” Tino protested when he held one up in his hand. “This is too hard to be an egg!”

“That’s just the shell.” Emil explained. “It’s not like a fish egg; it needs a harder protective casing on land, but it’s still fragile. Watch.”

He cracked the egg open and poured it into the bowl. Tino’s brows lifted, and he followed Emil’s lead, cracking his own open. Shell flew everywhere and Emil had to help him pick bits of it out of the batter, and Tino’s long hair while Mathias chortled and fought to hold he camera still on the startled merman. Tino studied the two halves of the shell intently. He got it after a while.

Tino was in awe watching Emil put the ingredients together. He had to ask where each of them came from; flour from grain, vanilla from a plant, sugar from a stalk, etc.

He was so fascinated by everything they told him that it made them all feel like scholars. They continued to answer question after question as they mixed the dough, dropped it neatly on cookie sheets, and placed them in the oven. Tino let Emil do that, as he was still startled by the wave of intense heat that flared up from the oven door. While they had done their best to fill out the corners of Tino’s broad knowledge on how their technology worked, he was still easily spooked or surprised by it. He had screeched like a banshee when Emil pressed the timer button on the stove and a series of loud beeps chimed out, and had nearly fallen and hit his head on the counter.

Thankfully, Lukas was on hand loading the dishwasher, and had managed to catch him in time, even though all three of the others had lunged to do the same. After that they had shooed Tino out of the kitchen, putting Berwald in charge of him for his own safety. A firm glare from the big man convinced Mathias to put away the camera after capturing the almost-injury, and leave their charge alone for a while.

“That noise was much too loud.” Tino muttered when Berwald led him out to the back patio. He was clinging to Berwald’s arm even though he no longer had need of it to walk properly. “I’m not used to hearing anything like that. I’m sorry though…I’ve made trouble for you all.”

Berwald shook his head in an emphatic negative, and pulled out a comfy deck chair for Tino. The merman gladly sat down, releasing Berwald’s arm and rubbing his legs after he’d done so.

“It’s calm and quiet out here.” Berwald reassured him. “Really relaxing. This is my favorite spot; this and in front of the fireplace.”

Tino looked out on the view of thick trees, tall hills rolling up into mountains beyond their canopies. It was a very soothing view even if the leaves weren’t out yet this early in the year. Finding Berwald was right, Tino let himself listen to the quiet for a moment, just gazing over the image of nature on land. He was distracted when Berwald pulled his own chair a bit closer, the legs scraping a little on the paved brick floor. Scattered around his chair were piles of wood shavings, and the merman cocked his head in curiosity when he spotted them.
“From my carving.” Berwald explained, seeing the look. He opened a set of carving tools that had been rolled up on the deck table, and then held up a small figure for Tino to see. Large violet-blue eyes squinted at the odd creature, trying to figure out what it was he was seeing. It just fit in Berwald’s huge hand, and looked rough on one side and more fleshed out on another. The rich grains of the wood shone beautifully where it was smoothed out.

“It’s a moose.” Berwald explained. “We have a lot of them around here.”

“Moose...” Tino repeated, reaching out to run his fingers along the rough outline of big antlers. He held Berwald’s hand with one of his own while his free one inspected the carving, and Berwald grinned just a bit.

“It’s not finished yet, not even halfway done.”

“But…it’s incredible...how you made this…” Tino said in wonder.

Berwald broke into a rare little smile at the merman’s gushing.

“Thanks. It’s how I was trained. I’m a carpenter, which means I can do virtually anything out of wood. That's why I bought a house that I needed to fix up.”

“That’s right!” Tino said, impressed. “You built your own house!”

“Renovated an existing house, but yes, basically. It’s pretty old so I got it at a low price, but it’s sizable, with a big piece of property and a shed. I’ve been working on it for years, and it’s barely been finished for a year now.”

Tino smiled at the notion of Berwald having a large home basically built with his own two hands. A few seconds later though, his smile faded into a more neutral expression.

“Why such a big house if it’s just you? Planning on taking a mate and raising children soon?”

Blinking in surprise at the bluntness of the question, Berwald looked briefly uncomfortable. Tino instantly sensed this and pulled back from the man entirely, waving his hands.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to ask something I shouldn’t have! That’s none of my business but I’m just so curious about everything and-.”

“It’s alright.” Berwald cut off his rambling apology. Tino relaxed a little, but curled up in his chair, a tight little ball with his arms around his drawn-up knees. “To answer your question, yes I’d like to get married so I wanted a big house. A big house for kids; I love kids. I’ve always wanted one or two of my own. I’ll need to adopt a few.”

Tino bit his lip as the urge to question why rose to the forefront of his mind, but he restrained himself, and Berwald could see that. The man couldn’t help but draw out the seconds just to see the little merman squirm with his curiosity.

“Why do you need to adopt?” He finally blurted out. Berwald laughed internally before answering, “I’m not planning on marrying a woman.”

When Berwald said this it was in a frank tone, not ashamed or secretive, but Tino still reacted with surprise. Perhaps too much surprise for all of it to be genuine.

“Ohhhh!” He exclaimed. “You would take a male mate? Like Lukas and Mathias?”
“Just like that. I don’t know if or when I’ll find someone…I tend to frighten a lot of people away. But if I do find the right person, it’ll be a man, so we’ll have to adopt.”

Cocking his head slightly to the side like he did when he was especially unsure of something, Tino asked.

“Why not have your own children with the mate you choose?”

“Like I said, I’d marry another man. So we couldn’t have our own.”

Tino made a face as though he were being teased.

“Can your males not conceive when in pairs?”

Berwald’s eyes flew open and his jaw dropped in probably the biggest expression Tino had seen him make.

“What?” Berwald asked, sounding choked. “No, of course not.”

Tino’s face fell slowly, as though the reality of Berwald’s words was slowly dawning on him. He leaned forward deliberately, his big eyes searched Berwald’s for some hint, some smallest indication that his words had simply been a jest. When all he saw there was confused sincerity, Tino looked so crestfallen that Berwald felt guilty revealing to him what, for anyone else, was a common fact of life.

“Men here…can’t…? So…Lukas…cannot bear Mathias’ children? But…why?”

Not knowing exactly how to go about explaining something so obvious that it would sound insulting, Berwald cleared his throat and took a deep breath before giving it a try.

“No, that is why there are male and female genders to begin with; the females have the organs to bear the children, the males have the organs to impregnate. That never changes, at least for us.”

No response to that. Tino sat back in his chair, curling in even tighter on himself. The merman’s eyes filled a bit, a glassy sheen coating them, threatening to pool and trickle down his face. His lips contorted as he closed his eyes and fought the urge to weep. Berwald didn’t press him, just let him come to terms with this apparently overwhelming information. When he’d gotten himself under control Tino spoke again, his voice fragile and quiet.

“That is…very sad.”

Berwald gave Tino another moment before responding with his own burning question.

“Can your males bear children like the females?”

“Oh yes,” Tino answered at once, “if two males pair together our bodies adapt to carry young and continue repopulating. The same happens to females who pair; they adapt to produce sperm. We’ve always been a scarce species, and we need every advantage to ensure we survive. That includes any one of us being able to carry offspring. That is why children are so important.”

Berwald couldn’t hide the surprise and wonder at hearing such an incredible truth about Tino’s people.

“That’s amazing.” He said softly. “I…that’s amazing. Granted there are so many of us that it’s not an issue that men can’t become pregnant, but we’ve only just started to accept the fact that gender
doesn’t matter when it comes to couples, to say nothing for changing genders. In order to do what you say your people do naturally, we have to undergo expensive and painful surgery. The outcome is permanent too.”

“Really?” Tino looked startled. “You can’t change back?!”

“Not once you’ve undergone the modification.”

Tino shuddered.

“You have it hard on land.”

“I won’t deny that.” Berwald agreed. “But there are always kids without parents who need loving homes, and that’s where adoption comes in.”

This notion cheered Tino up and the tears began to fade. He gave a special little smile, one that spoke of a long-ingrained conviction.

“Children are wonderful.” He said happily. “They…they are so special and so innocent and they carry our future. So yea, I can see how great it would be to take in a little baby with no parents and raise it up with love and hugs and kisses! I…I’ve always wanted…to bear a child.”

Still in awe that this was a possibility for the adorable little male creature sitting beside him, this phrase made Berwald’s heart absolutely throb. Berwald studied his face, seeing the shy look and the way Tino avoided eye contact. He had the distinct feeling that Tino was somehow vulnerable about this revelation.

“Why haven’t you?”

Tino came back from whatever happy fantasy he’d been lost in, and his eyes grew sharp. His brows lowered, his mouth thinned, and he set his jaw.

“I…I wasn’t wanted…by the one I wished to court.”

The air seemed to grow tense at these words, and neither of them seemed to want to move lest they break it. Tino finally did with a huff of air and a nervous laugh.

“Then I was eagerly pursued by someone I didn’t want to court…but I just couldn’t justify having a child with someone I didn’t love regardless of how much I wanted one. Let’s just say…it was part of the reason I volunteered to come ashore about three months ago. I needed to get away.”

Tino sighed, looking more bitter than Berwald had thought capable for his cute face. Then he seemed to realize the bigger man was just staring at him. That smile inched its way onto his face and he waved a single hand.

“I’m sorry…none of that is your problem and the last thing you want to hear from a merman is the drama that brought him ashore.”

“No, it’s alright. I had no idea.” Berwald assured him. When Tino wouldn’t look at him or respond, Berwald leaned forward and wrapped a big hand around the back of Tino’s head, giving it a comforting stroke.

“Trust me, I know how much rejection hurts. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

As if feeding directly off the attention, Tino seemed to brighten, and he made a small purring
sound. He turned his head and rubbed his cheek, catlike, along Berwald’s palm. A split second later he seemed to realize what he was doing and stopped.

“Sorry…you probably thought that was weird.” He said sheepishly.

“A little, but it’s alright.” Berwald said, sitting back. There was a flush on his cheeks.

“We’re really physical, affectionate folk.” Tino explained. “I was told by my mentor not to go overboard since you humans are more…reserved.”

“It depends on who you meet.” Berwald said. “There are some touchy-feely humans, and some who would rather die than even shake hands.”

“Oh! I know how to shake hands!” Tino said proudly. He stuck out his slender hand for Berwald to take, which he did, then made the definitive motion. “See? My mentor showed me that. Wow, you have rough spots on your hands…is that from all your hard work? And carving?”

“Yea, you get a few calluses when you work with your hands as much as I do.”

“Can you show me how you’re carving that…mo-ose?”

“Sure.”

Berwald let Tino watch him as he began to use his tools. Each one had a specific purpose, and could create a different texture or help him carve out tiny details, depending on what he wanted. Berwald switched off between a few of them as time rolled on, and the merman continued to watch him in fascination as the figure was fleshed out more and more, bit by bit before his eyes. Both of them listening to the silence and the faint, rough sound of tools on wood. After their unintentional heart-to-heart, they needed some quiet.

A twig or two snapped in the forest long moments later, shattering the silence. The merman looked up swiftly, instantly rigid and alert. He looked questioningly at Berwald.

“Deer.” Berwald said, pointing to a spot nearby. “Look closely. They hide well.”

Tino did so, and his eyes turned to saucers when a few does came carefully edging out of the trees to the patch of sprouting grass a hundred yards from the porch. They started to graze there, lifting their heads and flicking their huge ears as they went.

“So weird.” Tino whispered, straining his neck to get a better look when they wandered a bit around the corner of the house. “But pretty.”

“Those are the females.” Berwald explained. “The males have big antlers to fight each other off over them, so they look more intimidating.”

Tino shuddered.

“I guess mating rights are alive and well in every animal group.”

Berwald hummed in agreement, turning back to his carving.

Tino turned in his seat to get a better view of the retreating deer, and loudly shrieked at the sight of Mathias, camera in hand, kneeling right behind his chair.

The deer scattered at the inhuman wail, and Berwald nearly had a heart attack. Mathias didn’t look unaffected either, as he almost fell over from his crouched position. Tino apologized frantically,
but Mathias just laughed it off while Berwald rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Everybody alive out here?” Lukas asked, appearing in the doorway. “What on earth happened?”

“Mathias scared me!” Tino accused, pointing childishly at the man. “And he scared the deer too!”

Lukas raised an amused eyebrow at this, and looked expectantly at his partner.

“You scared the deer, Mathias?” Emil called sarcastically from all the way in the kitchen, having heard the entire incident.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to!” Mathias defended. “They were just sitting there so peaceful, and I had to film it.”

The other man’s dark blue eyes narrowed suspiciously, but Lukas let it go, shrugging it off and changing the subject.

“Cookies are done.”

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After Tino’s life changing discovery of baked goods, the rest of the afternoon flew by. They showed the merman how to use the washer and dryer by putting in all the clothes they had bought for him at The Bend, showed him how to use the toiletries they’d got for him, and then finally a short lesson on shoes ensued. It wasn’t too difficult considering there were no laces to tie on the flip flops, slippers, and boots, but they still showed him the basics of the tennis shoe knot on Emil’s shoes to give him some practice.

Neither Berwald nor Tino said anything more about their conversation about the birds and bees, but they would catch each other’s eyes sometimes and there would be an odd feeling of connection. Perhaps it was their common desire for a child. Perhaps it was the fact that they both hinted at rejection from someone they cared for. Either way they knew each other better now, and they didn’t seem inclined to share this with the others.

There was plenty to distract from that topic, too. The tour of the pool room excited Tino greatly. The smaller building was connected to the main house by a little breezeway, the door of which opened into the pool. The lights were adjustable, but Lukas explained how they liked to keep them low and relaxing. The pool itself was a fairly large size, especially for a private lodge, and its pale blue surface was smooth as glass.

“You want to jump in right this second, don’t you?” Emil asked when Tino walked right up to the side and gazed down at his reflection in the water. The longing in his eyes was tangible.

“Kind of…” He admitted, chewing on his bottom lip. “Yea, I really do…but show me the rest first. Is that the hot tub?”

“Sure is.” Mathias led him over to the generous tub, and showed him the basics of turning on the bubbles. Tino giggled when the clear surface began to froth and bubble.

“That’s so amazing!” He exclaimed. “I can feel the heat from here!”
“Trust me, it’s incredible after a long day.” Mathias said, turning puppy-dog eyes on Lukas. “It would sure be nice to get one of our own.”

Lukas’ mouth thinned into a hard line.

“We don’t have the money, idiot, or the room!”

“Could always start a donation line for it.” Mathias muttered.

“The site isn’t there to support your selfish wants.” Lukas said, almost mechanically like he’d said it many times before. “We should be thankful it supports us for our current living.”

“Is that the sauna?” Tino asked, wanting to divert the conversation away from the tense subject. He pointed to a wooden doorway with a few instructional and caution signs around it.

“Yea, but we really shouldn’t go in there until we’re dressed for it.”

“Could we go get dressed for it?” Tino asked, trying to keep the pleading out of his voice.

“Well, we do have some time before dinner, so, why not?” Said Lukas.

They all flocked back into the house and broke off to their separate rooms to put on their swimming attire. Thankfully Lukas had been farsighted enough to buy Tino swim trunks, and with a bit of help from Emil on how to tie the drawstring, Tino was proudly wearing them. He was thrilled, and kept tracing the large print of leaves and flowers with his fingertip.

The merman was nearly wriggling out of his skin while waiting for the rest of them to finish changing, but he went still when he saw them coming down with bare chests and swim trunks. He openly scrutinized their exposed upper bodies, having not seen them before.

“What are these?” He asked, stepping close to Mathias and running his fingers over a patch of freckles on his chest.

“Woa, space invasion there!” The man said, but didn’t really mind. “Those are my freckles.”

“Fr-eckles…” Tino repeated, squinting at the sprinkles of darker pigment on Mathias’ pale skin. “Like markings…they’re pretty!”

“Hear that, Lukas?” Mathias winked at his partner.

“Yea, yea, doesn’t take a genius to see how charming freckles are.” brushed off Lukas with a roll of his eyes. Mathias grinned.

“Damn, you’re sweet to me.”

Tino then turned his attention to the others, scanning their bare chests eagerly, searching for more markings. Emil, like his brother, was completely pale without any freckles at all, though there was a mole or two dotted on their backs. Berwald, though, like Mathias, had a few faint freckles over his skin. Tino grinned and made a little “aha!” sound when he spotted them over his shoulders, tapping at them triumphantly with his fingers as though he’d found the prize in a treasure hunt.

“Don’t get much sun,” Berwald told him, “but when I do they get a lot darker.”

Tino began looking down at his own milk white skin and pursing his lips.

“I don’t have any markings.” He said slowly, sounding surprisingly sad about it.
“Is that a bad thing?” Lukas questioned. Tino didn’t answer, but seemed to be lost in thought as he stared at his arms.

“Well, hey, swimming time!” Mathias reminded him, lifting the suddenly glum mood that had descended onto the merman. His face lit up with that smile they all had memorized at this point, and nodded vigorously.

Mathias was the first one into the pool, after setting up the camera on its tripod in the far corner of the room of course, shattering the smooth surface of the water with a massive cannonball. Tino chirped happily and loudly at the very sound of splashing water. Emil followed Mathias in a more reserved manner, walking down on the shallow steps into the pool, encouraging Tino to follow. The merman did, white teeth showing in a smile as he carefully eased down the first step. His toes touched the water for the first time and he giggled, stepping in further, running his hands lovingly through it.

“I don’t really know how to swim as a human.” He admitted nervously as he got out to waist level. “I’ve spied on humans swimming before, so I think I have an idea, but…”

“Don’t worry,” Emil said, trotting behind him in the water, “we won’t let you drown or anything.”

“That would make our fail levels go up to critical.” Mathias laughed. “Imagine if we managed to drown a merman!”

“Tino, do you even know how to hold your breath?” Lukas asked, not getting into the pool but heading to turn on the sauna and then the hot tub.

“Um…I don’t know.” Tino said, looking suddenly worried. “I’ve never had to before. I could…try it…I guess.”

“You’ll have to if you want to go under the water. Do what I do.”

Emil took a large, audible inhale, and then deliberately held it in. Tino imitated him, but only lasted a handful of seconds before looking frightened and letting out the breath with a chorus of panting.

“That’s…kind of awful…” He grimly declared. “That’s what you have to do to go under?”

“Only if you want to.” Emil said. “You can swim around with your head above water just fine.”

Tino dipped himself lower so that his shoulders were submerged, and Mathias whistled.

“Look at his hair!”

The golden curtain was now floating behind Tino and around him like an ethereal veil. The merman chuckled and twisted in the water to twine long lengths of it around his arms.

“It’s not as much of a bother in the water.” He explained, running his arms and hands through it familiarly.

“You know,” Lukas said, stepping down into the hot tub, “I hate to be the one to say this, Tino, but we’re probably going to have to cut your hair at some point if we plan on taking you back home.”

Nodding in understanding, Tino gave his mane a long caress before flipping it back over his shoulders.

“I assumed that. There’s no way I can keep managing it on land.”
“But how did you manage it in the sea?” Emil asked, taking the liberty of mirroring Tino’s earlier movements and wrapping a long portion of hair around his arm. “Didn’t it get tangled by the smallest thing?”

Shaking his head, Tino yanked it to one side, and the length of hair that was wrapped around and around Emil’s wrist and arm suddenly slipped away.

“It’s too silky to tangle.” Tino explained. “It can’t catch on anything; it just slips right around any obstacles.”

“Wicked sweet!” Mathias declared, swimming closer and clawing his fingers at the ends of Tino’s hair. Just like he’d said, the strands were so soft that his clenching fingers were left empty as the silky hair slipped out of his grasp. “Bro…that is sick…”

“I’m sick?!” Tino asked, horrified.

A short detour into more human slang words ensued, and Tino ended up laughing off his misunderstanding as he did all of them. He then tried out swimming with his new legs in the shallow end, while Mathias and Emil splashed around him and helped where they could, showing him how to tread water and kick his legs. Tino tended to try and kick both together in a crude echo of his tail movements, but found very quickly that scissoring his legs in the water worked much better.

All the while Berwald and Lukas looked on from their spot in the hot tub a few feet away from the edge of the pool. Berwald was frowning more than usual because he had to take off his glasses due to the heat of the hot tub fogging them up, and couldn’t really see what was going on. But he could hear the hauntingly beautiful sound that rang out under the water when Tino decided to try singing a single note. He couldn’t hold his breath enough to do more.

“If only we could get the camera down here!” Mathias bemoaned. “We need to invest in a waterproof one anyway.”

“You need to stop lusting after superfluous things.” Lukas told him, though it was impossible for him to sound angry or stern while resting in the soothing embrace of the frothing hot tub.

“Just think of the water spirit we might have been able to catch on camera last year if we’d been able to go into the lake after it!” Mathias reminded him.

“Would’ve eaten you.” Berwald pointed out, rubbing a hand down his damp face. “I wasn’t there for that one.”

“Oh yea.” Mathias recalled, before shaking his head like a dog and sending water droplets flying in every direction. The other two were struck in the face, and they snuck up on him to deliver a joint attack, sending a tidal wave crashing up into Mathias’ head. He went down to avoid them, and came up sputtering.

“No fair, you two!” He wailed. “There are rules you know!”

“Unless you’re the one playing.” Emil chided with a smile.

“There aren’t any rules in the sea,” Tino teased, “when it comes to play!”

With that he began to dart about and seize their legs at random, tickle their sides, spit water at their faces, anything he could to get them riled up and chasing after him. In the midst of the commotion Lukas and Berwald shared a few words.
“So, you going to build a pool in your backyard now?” Lukas asked, seeing Berwald trying to keep his glasses clear of fog. He’d put them back on when the playing in the pool had begun, and was struggling to keep watching them all.

Berwald didn’t answer the teasing question, opting to stay silent like usual. Lukas went on.

“He looks really happy in there, doesn’t he? It must feel nice to be in the water again. I can’t imagine what it would be like to be forced to live in a different environment like this without any idea how hard it would really be. The gravity must be killer.”

“Can’t imagine.” Berwald echoed, shaking his head in empathy.

“Do you think…we should try to take him to a marine biologist, like Kiku, maybe? Just for insight?”

Berwald frowned deeper.

“So they can lock him up in some tank as a specimen?”

“Kiku wouldn’t do that. I don’t think any scientist would; this is a person, who can think and communicate on a human level. There’s no way they could get away with it, especially now with all the media exposure and conservationists.”

“Still think they would want to try.” Berwald said quietly.

“Well, running a few tests wouldn’t be harmful to him, and there is quite a lot we can discover just through discussion with him. I’d love to find out how those gills work, and his vocal abilities in and out of water, and that telepathic bond that his folk share…There’s so much that I’d want to study if I were a scientist, but not at the cost of his humanity. They run plenty of tests on humans for study that don’t do any harm, you know. Even when they test animals they do it humanely now; it’s the 21st century and there are standards for how science is to treat living things.”

Looking a bit more persuaded, Berwald nodded.

“Guess I would like to know about his voice. That chirping and all. It’s nice.”

Lukas gave his friend a sidelong glance, studying his face. He wasn’t sure if it was the heat of the tub or something else that caused the big man’s cheeks to look redder than normal.

“It sure is a treat when he chirps like that, isn’t it?” Lukas asked. “It’s like a little water-bird.”

“Mm-hm.” Berwald hummed in agreement, then seemed to realize that Lukas was looking at him, and raised an eyebrow. “What?”

Smiling secretly, Lukas just shook his head and looked out to the pool again. The frolicking had quieted down a bit, and Tino was showing Mathias and Emil how easy it was for him to float on his back. He was just bobbing gently in the water, arms and legs outspread and head tipped back as he relaxed. The younger two respected his space and didn’t try to tip him over or pull him under. They weren’t sure how he’d be able to handle that, after all.

“He’s going to have to be able to swim when we take him home.” Lukas said, watching the happy contentment on Tino’s face as he closed his eyes. “Do we even have a local pool?”

“Maybe I will have one put in.” Berwald muttered, having just cleared his glasses, and was staring at Tino just as Lukas was.
The other man said nothing, but smiled.

Eventually Tino made his way into the deeper end (with Mathias and Emil beside him just in case), which really wasn’t as deep or deadly as some pools, but to a merman with no real experience swimming with human legs, it was still threatening to an extent. He was still at home in the water despite the new swimming style, however, and once he caught on he started to almost literally swim circles around the younger two. Even with no experience swimming with legs, his upper body was built for this, and the strength he retained was a huge advantage.

He still hated holding his breath, though, and that meant that submersion was quick and never more than a second or two. Tino didn’t say anything, but this did bother him. He wanted to go under, wanted to feel the weight and pressure of the water holding him again, but he couldn’t. Well, he supposed he could…but he had no idea what the outcome would be if he tried…this water did smell different than his home water, but what harm could really come of trying to filter it through his gills? Just a little? Having the opportunity so tauntingly close was starting to eat at him.

Finally, his self-control broke, and he decided to test it out.

Tino glanced over at the hot tub, meaning to watch Lukas carefully and wait until he looked away to go under. Unfortunately, at the same moment he turned to look at Lukas, Lukas turned to look at him. The man was sharp, had to be after all the years he spent doing what he had, and he spied the mischievous glint in Tino’s violet-blue eyes. Lukas’ expression became startled, putting the pieces together, and he nearly lunged out of the hot tub as his mouth opened to shout a protest.

Tino never heard what he said. He dived.

On pure instinct, without any conscious effort, his gills opened. Water flooded through and over them, and Tino found that he could breathe. The water was somehow heavier, with a funny smell, but it didn’t hurt him. Thrilled, Tino shot down to the bottom, rolling over to smile up at the surface. He could hear the frantic rush of activity, could see Emil and Mathias coming after him. They couldn’t keep their eyes open and so they were swimming blind. A split second later he was startled when both Berwald and Lukas dove in with a mighty splash to join the search.

Feeling guilty that they were all apparently so worried for him, Tino pushed off the concrete floor of the pool and shot upwards, nearly colliding with all of them. A bubble of confusion and noise, and they were all at the surface, closing in on Tino with worried faces, all speaking at once.

“Yes, you insane?!” Lukas was demanding of him.

“Did you do it? Did you breathe?!” Mathias was excitedly asking.


Berwald didn’t say anything, instead opting to reach out and take Tino’s head into his big hands. He just held him there, carefully but insistently as he studied Tino’s face with anxious eyes.

“I’m fine!” Tino chirped a second later, laughing loudly. Being crowded in by loud and animated people reminded him of home. “I can breathe in this water! I can do it!”

Lukas looked skeptical, then angry.

“Tino, that is still very dangerous. What if you don’t feel the effects right now, but they come back
to make you sick later?”

“I don’t think that will happen.” Tino tried to assure him. “This water doesn’t feel like the poll- polluted water I’ve had to swim through before. If I can handle that, I can handle this.”

When none of them looked convinced, Tino ducked his head and let out a sad chirp.

“Please..?” He muttered.

They weren’t made of stone, but they still all looked to Lukas, Berwald drawing his hands away from Tino’s head as the merman started wriggling with nerves. Lukas stared at Tino, head ducked, eyes watching him keenly from beneath his lashes. He finally sighed and gave a shrug.

“You know your own body, Tino. If you believe you’ll be alright, then go ahead.”

Without even so much as a ‘thank you’, Tino instantly let himself drop down into the water again, and swam back to the bottom. The rest of them watched the watery image of the merman as he settled on the floor beneath them, stretching out and rolling about like a happy seal.

“Camera.” Mathias said at once, and splashed gracelessly toward the stairs, nearly killing himself trying to get out and towel off enough to dash for it. He held it out over the pool, following Tino’s blurry movements.

“He’s really doing it.” He informed the camera’s unseen audience. “Look at him down there, he’s so happy!”

The rest of them spread out around the edges of the pool to watch as well, and could clearly see Tino crawling along the bottom and rolling about.

“Disney got it so right!” Mathias laughed, when the slender body stretched out on its back along the concrete, arms sifting through his own golden hair. It was clear how content he was, and how happy.

So happy, that Tino started to sing.

Mathias didn’t need an expensive underwater camera to catch that beautiful sound. They all froze, and listened. The sound was clear, bright, and so beautiful that over the several minutes that they heard it, tears formed in all their eyes.

“It’s…like a boys’ choir…isn’t it?” Emil asked softly.

“Yea…” Mathias answered vaguely. “Wow…”

Tino turned his head up during the end of his song to see how his human friends were liking it. He couldn’t make out much, so he slowly let himself float up to the surface. He finished the song’s last note while he was an inch below the water, and then let his head slip out into the air. He was startled to see the looks on all their faces.

“What’s the matter?” Tino asked, worriedly. “Why are you all so sad?”

Throats were cleared, eyes were wiped, and sniffling was heard as the four men pulled themselves together. Oddly enough it was Berwald who spoke first.

“Enchanting.”

That was all Tino needed to understand why they looked the way they did. His heart swelled with
happiness.

“I’d heard before that our songs could cause powerful emotions in humans, but I didn’t think much of it.” He said, grinning.

The next second, however, all their dazed and teary expressions morphed into wide-eyed disbelief, and they stared at him with newfound interest.

“What?” He asked, as Mathias suddenly thrust out as far over the water toward him with the camera as he could.

“Dude, you’re glowing!”


Tino looked down at his body, and was met with a brilliant surprise. It took them all a second to adjust to what they were seeing. All along the sides of Tino’s face there were spots of blue and white light glowing in the dimness of the pool room. Long, elegant lines of spotted and speckled lights created ethereal patterns along the merman’s body.

“My markings are back!” Tino declared, sounding ecstatic. “I thought they would be gone when I was a human!”

“Oh my god, come into the shallow end, let me get a better look!” Mathias cried excitedly, nearly bouncing as he went over to the steps. Tino swam over and pulled himself up onto the step just above the water, cringing at how heavy he felt.

With his body out of the water they could now see the extent of the beautiful markings. They started as sand-fine scatterings at his brow line in the middle of his forehead, then grew larger as they trickled down past his temples and the sides of his neck. From there, their lines curved out over the caps of his shoulders and down his arms, tracing the sleek shape of his muscle structure. Apart from the patterns on his arms that flowed in single form from his face, there was a strip of them in the center of his chest, tracing the natural line of his body all the way down past his navel.

“Sit up for me.” Mathias instructed, as Tino had been a bit bent over his knees. Tino obeyed and turned, revealing another band of dotted pattern connected to the lines at his shoulder, outlining the bows of his shoulder blades and then cascading down his spine past the small of his back.

“Oh, they’re on your legs too!” Emil pointed out, swimming up beside Tino. Berwald and Lukas were right behind him. Tino stared in amazement at his own appendages. Sure enough, another band of spots ran down the sides of his legs to curl around his ankles and sprinkle out on the tops of his feet.

Matthias did the best he could at getting a full pan of Tino’s body with the camera, looking him up and down. The markings all had a similar pattern; larger, brighter spots of light in the center, then the spots flared out from there in graduating size, the outside of the bands being nothing more than pinprick speckles. They were truly breathtaking.

“Bioluminescence.” Lukas supplied in an awestruck whisper.

“I didn’t want to say anything,” Tino said, looking at his hands happily (the lights went all the way down to the tips of his pointer finger and thumb), “but I was missing them a lot, especially when I saw your freckles. We’re all born with our own unique markings. No two are the same. So I was
sad when I realized they’d gone with my change.”

“Woah.” Emil said, shaking his head in wonder. He did what they all wanted to do, and ran a hand
down Tino’s arm, watching as his fingers briefly blocked out the glow from the pattern.

“They’re like freckles,” Mathias commented, “except they glow in the dark.”

“You do have some on your cheeks!” Emil agreed, running a fingertip over the very fine trail of
light-freckles that ran from cheek to cheek over the bridge of Tino’s small nose. They reflected like
little stars in his violet-blue eyes. “So pretty…”

“Thank you. My clan, my family, determined my colors, and so my markings are white and blue.
Other clans closer to the…” Tino thought for a moment to pull up what he’d learned. “Atlantic
Ocean, have markings of green and blue, and further out in the depths there are clans of red.”

“Wow.” Mathias said, having planted himself at a side angle to see most of Tino’s markings.

“Did you have lights down your tail too?”

“Oh yes, they are much bigger! My tail is lavender close to my waist, but then the color darkens
into a purple-blue midway and my fins are really dark. I didn’t think my markings would show up
on my legs if they did come back!” Tino said, sounding flustered with how happy he was.

“Your legs formed from the same makeup as your tail.” Lukas pondered. “So it makes sense.”

“But how come they just now came back? Where were they before?” Emil asked.

“Our lights only go out when we go through something traumatic enough to put us into shock.”
Tino explained softly. “When I was little I saw a clan member being cared for after most of his
hand was bitten off by a shark. His lights had gone out even though he was still alive. But he’d lost
a lot of blood. I guess… I was in a state of shock because…the change was brutal on me. But
you’ve fed me up and made me feel safe, so my body has recovered. And being back in the water
again…made me feel like I was home…and I guess that was enough for my mind to recover.”

Mathias eyed him closely from around the camera’s lens.

“So, do you glow like that in the sunlight too?”

“Yes, but they’re harder to see in brighter light than in the dark.”

“I thought only creatures who live in the deep, deep ocean needed bioluminescence…” Lukas
pondered, studying Tino in fascination. “You weren’t down so deep where there was no sunlight,
right?”

“Oh no, we can’t go that deep. Even for us the pressure is too much.”

“Curious.” Was Lukas’ only other comment before shrugging it off.

“We can see each other across greater distances because of our markings.” Tino said. “It makes
hunting easier to coordinate.”

“Can you change them just by thinking about it? Like Cuttlefish or Squid?” Emil asked. Tino
shook his head.

“The brightness is constant regardless of the surrounding light.”
“This,” Mathias said, “is incredible.”

They all let that statement hang in the air for a moment as they admired Tino’s bespeckled skin, while he looked too happy to be self-conscious. But the hypnotizing stasis couldn’t last for long, as Mathias quickly recovered and demanded,

“What back in the pool, I want to record you swimming around with your lights! We’ll be able to see you so much better through the water now!”

Tino giggled, and obliged.

Getting out of the pool was awful for Tino. He had just been reacquainted with the wonderful sensation of being weightless, and then he had to try and haul himself up onto the shallow stairs again. But as much as he loved swimming again, the hot tub was calling and he had to persevere. Lukas and Berwald both helped him, grabbing him by the arms to steady him and take some of his weight, but he still hated the immense heaviness that assaulted him. Sinking down into the hot tub helped ease the frustration, however, and Tino let out a very strange, very animalistic moan that vibrated in his throat.

They were all crammed together in the tub, as it was large but not enormous, and all eyes went to him as he let out the sound.

“Feel anything like the deep sea vents?” Lukas asked, interestedly.

“Yea, a lot like.” Tino groaned out.

They all made idle chit-chat (Except for Berwald, who just sat quietly and let out deep breaths from the heat every now and again) for a few moments as they enjoyed the hot water burning the cares and aches of the day from their bodies. Tino leaned his head back along the edge as he’d observed Emil doing, and let out a contented chirp, letting his arms drift through the seething foam. It felt so incredibly good, so like the deep vents but also different, having his head out of the water and just his body submerged.

That gave him a thought.

His eyes closed and he sunk down completely until even his head was under the nearly-burning water. He could hear the startled voices above him, but it didn’t matter because being immersed in such wonderful heat made him feel like he was wintering in the Warm Place. His heart flooded with happiness and contentment.

When he broke the surface he began panting heavily, having held his breath longer than before.

“You’re not supposed to go under in water this hot.” Lukas warned, as Tino caught his breath and leaned back along the side of the tub.

“Oh come on, like you’ve never done it at least for a second?” Mathias chided, slipping an arm around Lukas’ shoulders. Lukas allowed this, settling in closer to the bigger man’s body.

“My point is, it’s frowned upon.”

“Why exactly?” Emil asked, splashing handfuls of the hot water up on his own face. “Who even makes those statements?”
“Hot water’s good for the skin.” Berwald added.

“But submerging in it can be harmful.”

“Oh forget it!” Mathias whined, kissing Lukas’ wet cheek. “Just enjoy it.”

Lukas didn’t answer, but sighed and closed his eyes, letting his head lean against Mathias’. Tino was watching this closely, a knowing smile on his face. These two were wildly in love, even if they pretended to bicker, or really did bicker, it didn’t matter. They loved each other.

Tino couldn’t keep his eyes from wandering to Berwald as he sat there beside him, almost looking bored, glasses fogging up every other minute. During the times when he had to take them off and wipe them on a towel Tino observed his body discreetly. He couldn’t help it; the man was broad and strong, his build screaming of safety, refuge, and comfort to someone as small and affectionate as Tino. He was also aware that he was still healing from the pain of rejection and so it might be all too easy to fall for the first strong, unattached human he saw. Still, that didn’t change the fact that Berwald was a specimen of a man. So he inched a bit closer. He couldn’t help it; his was a flirtatious folk.

“Berwald?” He asked after a few moments of sidling up to the larger man. Blue eyes looked down at him through a mild haze of glass. “Um…do you mind if I ask you…when is the day of your birth?”

Berwald’s eyebrows rose slightly as he considered the question. Tino prattled on ahead before he could answer.

“I hope that’s not a difficult question, I mean I don’t even know if you have the same unit of measuring days and years that we have in the sea, but either way I’d like to know because knowing another person’s day of birth is important and special!”

Mathias was huffing with silent laughter across the tub, and the two brothers were looking more interested than amused at Tino’s ramble. The corner of Berwald’s mouth twitched in a small grin, before schooling itself back into calm thoughtfulness.

“I was born in the summer. June 6th. Does that help?”

Tino smiled and nodded, but then his face morphed into a confused one and he shook his head.

“June…June…so June is summer?”

A short conversation took place trying to explain the 12-month calendar to the merman. It went over surprisingly well, with Tino explaining that it was very close to the system they used in the sea, but it was slightly different because of the amount of light and their ability to gauge based on how much of it filtered down into the water.

“Isn’t it at all difficult to see under there?” Mathias asked, rubbing at his own eye subconsciously.

“No, we can see through the water just fine. Better than Berwald probably can right now, out of the water!”

The merman was about to reach up and smear the fog on Berwald’s glasses for fun, but then he caught sight of his hand. He let out a tiny gasp of horror as he saw the wrinkles forming on his fingers and down his palms. The light of his markings was a little distorted in the tiny folds of skin.

“What’s happening to me?” He asked, presenting his hands for them to inspect.
“What do you mean?” Emil asked, not getting it yet. Tino sputtered, so worried he couldn’t form proper words, and simply shook his hands wildly out in front of him.

“It’s ok, Tino.” Berwald assured him, catching his flailing hands and holding onto them. “Look.”

One huge, wet paw was presented to him. Sure enough, Tino saw the same wrinkles on it. The rest of them held out their hands as well to show him, and he breathed a bit easier.

“It’s just a sign you’ve been in water too long.” Lukas explained. “I don’t know what your skin might have been like in the sea, but as a human you can’t really stay submerged that long without your skin wrinkling up. We’re not meant to stay in water. We should probably get out anyway. The sauna’s heated up by now.”

Looking uncertain and still a bit disturbed by the odd change to his body, Tino followed them when they started getting out. Berwald helped steady him as he hauled himself out of the hot water and instantly began shivering. Thankfully when they stepped into the wooden room, a wave of intense heat chased the chill away. It was so hot that Tino had to breathe deeply for a moment or two before getting used to it. The air was heavy with the heat, but not in an uncomfortable way.

The sauna was a completely wooden room with two stacked rows on either side of the small floor space. A heating unit stood in the back center, covered in large rocks. Emil was the first to go to it and poured water over the rocks, using the ladle and bucket of water on the floor. Steam erupted from the rocks, and filled the room with a much-needed dose of moisture. Tino watched in fascination.

“Too bad we can’t bring the camera in here.” Mathias lamented. “But then again, I can take a few minutes off, can’t I?”

He climbed the steeply stacked wooden rows to the second level, where he plopped himself and then patted the spot next to him with a wet slap of his hand, looking at Lukas. The smaller man wordlessly climbed up to sit beside him.

“You’re supposed to be off this entire trip, you know.” He reminded Mathias, relaxing back against the wooden wall. “No one’s making you film all the time. Try to breathe for a second, ok?”

With little squelching sounds, they all settled themselves around the sauna on different levels. Tino stayed on the bottom one, not trusting himself to climb since he still felt heavy after leaving the water again. Emil sat on the level just above him, on the other side of the sauna, and Berwald was on the same level just far enough from him to give him personal space.

“So, we just sit here?” Tino asked after a few silent moments.

“Pretty much.” Emil answered. “It’s supposed to help sweat out the impurities in your body and cleanse you. Traditionally though….um…well…”

Tino waited patiently for the youth to finish his thought, but Lukas rescued him.

“Traditionally you’re supposed to be naked in a sauna.” He explained. “Or at least only have a towel for minimal modesty. You reap the most benefit that way.”

“Yea, then you dash outside into the freezing cold.” Mathias chipped in. “It’s awesome rolling around naked in the snow!”

Emil covered his face with his hands, the redness obvious from around his fingers.
“Don’t remind me of that image.”

“Hey, you had fun!” Mathias protested. “You see, Tino, on one of our first trips here to Finland we went the traditional route at a different location and were told how it was done, so we all participated. Our little Emil is still shy in the nude.”

“Who wouldn’t be!?” Emil blurted, rubbing at his arms. “I’ll admit it was nice, though, even if the sight of your bare ass in the snow will haunt me until I die.”

Tino let out a repressed giggle at Emil’s words, which swelled into a resounding laugh. Just the very idea of these four very different men naked together and trying to come to terms with it was enough to make him split his sides with laughter.

“I forgot that you can’t hide yourselves without your clothes!” Tino blurted between laughs. “That explains a lot!”

“What do you mean?” Berwald asked him.

“Well, I meant to ask you all about this anyway,” Tino admitted, calming down, “but from what I could see of my own body, your sexual organs are always exposed, aren’t they?”

The silence following his question was deafening, and then Mathias roared with laughter. Emil looked utterly shocked and covered his face again, while Lukas looked genuinely stunned. Even Berwald’s mouth dropped open.

“Oh my god! Why, oh why, couldn’t I have the camera in here for this!?” Mathias bellowed, his entire body shaking, his belly rippling with the force of his mirth. “Oh god, our little fish boy is comic gold!”

Tino frowned at the mixed reactions, but he was becoming used to them by now.

“I take it,” he said blandly, “that you don’t usually talk about your own bodies so openly? Especially if you don’t like being naked in the first place?”

“Not really.” Berwald clarified for him, clearing his throat.

“Though, we are Scandinavian so it’s not like we are shy about it.” Lukas followed up calmly, factually. “Our people embrace nudity more than others (Emil being an exception), but there are many cultures where not wearing clothes isn’t just uncomfortable, it’s an offense that can land you in trouble with the law.”

Tino huffed at all that.

“As sensitive a person as I am, being one of the mer folk, you humans have a different set of insecurities and sensitivities that are pretty odd!”

“I don’t think it’s odd.” Emil muttered.

“Tino, I’m assuming your kind don’t need clothes,” Mathias said, overcoming his laughter, “but are you telling me that your…um…you’re not exposed at all?”

The merman shook his head, taking a deep breath and rubbing at the water on his skin that was beading up and drying in the heat. It was a fascinatingly enjoyable sensation.

“No, our genitals are cradled in a protective flap that lies seamless against our tails. We only
expose them when we need to relieve ourselves. Or…”

It was Tino’s turn to look uncomfortable now, and he shifted a bit before Lukas finished for him.

“Mate?”

“Mm-hm.” Tino responded, rubbing his drying feet together to help the process along.

“That’s gotta be convenient.” Mathias said bluntly. “At least you don’t have to worry about anyone kicking you in the balls like we do!”

Tino looked scandalized.

“What? Is that something that happens?”

An awkward conversation followed about the undignified and lowest form of physical revenge or confrontation to be bestowed upon a human male during a fight. Tino’s hair fairly pricked with discomfort.

“I think we’re due for a subject change.” Emil piped in a moment later, through the red haze glowing around his face. Berwald saved him this time, pointing casually at the long ends of Tino’s hair.

“Haircut.” He said simply. Tino nodded, trailing a few ropes of his damp hair around to fiddle with.

“I do feel like it should be done soon.” He said sadly.

“Seems a shame to just throw all that beautiful hair away.” Lukas admitted. “There are plenty of donation centers that would die for hair that long and perfect.”

Another short conversation ensued to explain wig making and such to the clueless merman. He became very excited with the idea.

“My hair’s so long it could make a lot of wigs!” He said cheerfully. “It could help a lot of people!”

“We’d have to find an organization that would accept hair cut at home, though.” Lukas pointed out. “Otherwise you’d have to go to a salon and fill out an application. It’s not like you have a home address or social security number or anything. But if that’s what you want to do, I think it’s a great idea. Emil, how are your braiding skills?”

Emil looked up at his big brother, indifferent.

“How often have you seen me braid hair?”

“Just asking. I can’t braid, and they always need it braided or in a tie. We don’t have any hair ties on us.”

Lukas glanced at Mathias, who rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“I know how.”

They all looked at Berwald, surprised.

“How the hell?” Mathias asked.
“My cousins are all girls.” Berwald answered. “Grew up watching them do it and they made me learn. Never thought it’d do any good.”

Tino lit up with excitement.

“Show me! Show me!”

He wriggled over on the bench until he was right next to Berwald, and held out a thick section of his hair to the man. Big, confident hands took the damp golden hair gently, complying with the eager merman’s demands. As if watching magic, they were all quiet as Berwald’s strong fingers easily separated the section into three strands and began expertly weaving them together at Tino’s scalp. It took him a good seven minutes to get down to the very end, and then he handed the braid back to Tino. The merman ran his fingers over the braid reverently.

“Wow.”

“Still finding out new stuff about you, muscle-man.” Mathias commented cheekily.

“Can you do more?!?” Tino asked, seeming eager but his words edged with panting a bit with the heat and his excitement. “Please? Can you put lots of braids in my hair? Before I have to cut it off? Please?”

Emil and Mathias both chuckled at the notion, and even Lukas cracked a smile at how Berwald was struggling to respond to the request. Though they all knew he couldn’t resist those big, pleading eyes.

“Okay.”

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Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
Hey everybody! I’ve recently had a few cute fanarts commissioned for this chapter, so if you’d like to see them, go the very end of the chapter and click the link I’ll have there ^.^.

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An hour and a half later they all sat before the TV in the den, their bellies full from dinner, smelling of various shampoos and faint chemicals from the pool that clung to their skin despite their best efforts. The den was the only room with a TV, and even though it was large there was limited furniture. Because of the fireplace in the great room it made more sense for the TV to be in a room that could be completely darkened, there was only a sofa and a single plush arm chair. Because of this, Emil opted to stretch out on his stomach on the floor between the two pieces of furniture. Mathias and Lukas took the sofa thanks to Mathias’ insistence. Tino was cross-legged in the chair, spots glowing, watching the screen intensely as Berwald stood behind him, big fingers twisting his long golden hair into a beautiful and complicated French Braid along the right side of this head.

Twice he had to start over, because Tino was so enthralled with the TV (They had picked a classic black & white film to cut his teeth on) that he would react physically to what he saw. He would point and laugh like a child, or jump back in fear. He apologized when the actions ruined Berwald’s progress, but after a little while he became too engrossed in the film to care. In polar opposition, Lukas just sat there, calmly watching the movie while his partner fiddled around with his hair as well. Mathias had decided that he wanted to join in with what he described as “slumber party activities”, but Lukas’ hair was relatively short, the longest ends barely reaching to his chin. But that didn’t deter Mathias. He had filched a handful of hairpins from the packet they had bought earlier that day for Tino, and was taking great delight in pulling sections of Lukas’ hair and pinning them into place, creating bumps and odd formations. He’d curse whenever the soft, short strands slipped out of the pins’ grip and he had to start over again. All the while the camera was in the corner, capturing it all.

“Damn your silky hair!” Mathias huffed after ten full minutes of futile effort. He was unable to keep a single cute twist in place because of his inexperience paired with Lukas’ fine hair.

“It’s short, you can’t do much with it.” Lukas said, tossing some popcorn into his mouth.

“But if Mr. Manly Muscles over there can fix hair, then so can I!”

“You’re an idiot.” Lukas said fondly, nudging him with his drawn-up knee.

“And you’re hot as hell.” Mathias replied, giving Lukas an impromptu hug and a big smooch on his cheek. Lukas took it in stride as he always did, and then Mathias returned to work. It was unclear what exactly his goal was in doing so, but whatever his intention, it wasn’t quite working. By the middle of the film he had wrestled the hair along just the left side of Lukas’ head into a lopsided roll style, held in place by far more pins than would ever be considered aesthetic.

“Boom!” He declared proudly, faking like he was dropped a mic.

“Wow.” Tino said, leaning carefully forward to see Mathias’ work without disrupting Berwald’s
own (He was just putting a million tiny braids into Tino’s hair to amuse him). “That um…that looks pretty good for short hair!”

It was obvious that Tino was just being polite, but Mathias didn’t seem to care as he gave an extravagant bow.

“Berwald wins.” Emil said dryly without even looking away from the screen to compare the two.

“Oh, come on!” Mathias complained. “Berwald has much more to work with!”

“Are you saying I’m not enough?” Lukas asked, adding a hurt edge to his voice and ducking his head slightly into his arm as though wounded. Mathias was on him in an instant.

“That’s not what I meant, baby!” He dragged Lukas into his arms, half into his lap. “You’re more than enough, I don’t care about your hair!”

“Then get these bloody things off me.” Lukas said, still calm and composed even though he was being squished like a kid’s favorite toy. Mathias complied then, pulling the pins out carefully, as his love wanted. When he was done, he pulled Lukas’ head to rest on his shoulder and began to run his fingers gently through his hair.

“Hmm…” Lukas let the sound slip out, closing his eyes.

“That’s better, huh?” Mathias asked tenderly, scratching softly at his scalp.


Complying, Mathias kept stroking the fine hair that had given him so much contrived grief, and smiled lovingly while doing so.

Tino hadn’t missed the interaction, even though he wanted to see where the film was headed. He couldn’t help it; those two were just too adorable in his opinion. He smiled secretively to himself at this thought. They probably didn’t even know how sweet they looked together. His smile faltered as he thought of Eduard, the Beta who had rejected him. It had not been nearly as harsh as that sounded in Tino’s mind; there had been nothing unkind about how Eduard turned him down. He had very gently told Tino that he had his sights on another, and that he hoped Tino would find happiness with someone else.

Tino’s smile drained away as fresh hurt threatened to choke him. He had almost wished Eduard would have been harsher, rather than looking…sorry for him. And then the Alpha, Ivan, had practically thrown himself at Tino’s tailfins. Being upset and feeling lonely, Tino hadn’t really been thinking, and had let Ivan…

“All done.”

Berwald’s voice brought Tino out of the memories.

His hair was a waterfall of mini braids that probably wouldn’t last long considering Berwald didn’t have any ties to put into the ends, but still looked impressive. Tino carefully hopped up to go to the bathroom in the foyer and take a look in the mirror. Mathias didn’t follow him with the camera, being too engrossed in cuddling with Lukas, but the camera did catch Tino coming back into the room and giving Berwald a huge hug.

“Thank you, thank you! It looks amazing!” He all but squealed, and Berwald stiffened like a board before relaxing and patting the merman’s back.
“No problem. It was fun to do.”

Tino let him go and dropped down to sit next to Emil on the floor, subtly offering up the chair to Berwald for all his hard work. Berwald took it, and Tino proceeded to hug onto Emil too when he told him how good the braids looked.

“No, really mean it?” Tino asked the boy again, reaching up to very carefully fondle a particularly delicate braid that hung down from the right side of his head.

“Yeah, it looks really good. Really…” Emil paused for a moment before finishing almost hesitantly, “pretty.”

“Feeling left out, short stack?” Mathias asked over Lukas’ head. “I’m sure Berwald could find some way to work with your hair the same way if you really wanted the attention.”

“No!” Emil cried defensively. “That’s not what I meant at all, you idiot!”

“It’s no trouble.” Berwald said seriously. “If you want me to.”

Emil let his face plant into the thick carpet at the sincere offer.

“No thanks, I’m good.” The response came very muffled and embarrassed.

Tino patted him on the back with a little laugh. He secretly felt a bit sorry for Emil; his older brother had a very attentive, if hyperactive, lover who would in no way hide how very much he cared. He fawned over Lukas every chance he got, and while Tino thought it was utterly sweet, he sensed that it wore on Emil. Seeing something like that so often had to be rough on an unattached youngster, and he had to be aching for attention and love. He was just too busy trying to establish himself in the ranks of other dominant males to show it.

The merman mulled all this over for a short while before placing his hand down on Emil’s back. The teen didn’t react beyond slightly shifting as though to lift his face, and Tino began to rub warm circles into the center of Emil’s back, stopping to pat him every now and again. Tino wasn’t sure where the boundaries really were with these humans, he only knew what he’d do to comfort one of his own kind. So, he eventually made his way up to Emil’s head, where he began to pet him one-handed in long strokes from the top of his head down to the back of his neck. No one questioned it, but Emil eventually lifted his head and continued watching the film, slightly leaning into the touch after a few minutes. Tino smiled to himself. He adored taking care of youngsters.

They finished the first film, and were considering popping in a second one, but by that time Tino was too tired, and they all agreed he should probably go to sleep. After wishing them all a goodnight, the merman went up to his room and fell into bed with a thankful groan, barely having time to pull the covers over himself before he was asleep. Berwald was the next to say goodnight, followed closely by Lukas. For Emil and Mathias, as always, the work continued into the night. Mathias editing, Emil continuing to write, and both eventually posting to the website within twenty minutes of each other, linking the two mediums up perfectly.

“Hey, what was with fish boy pawing at you earlier?” Mathias asked at one point late in their collaboration. He sounded too tired to be trying to pick a fight, and too genuine to just be teasing, so Emil answered him.

“I think he took your comment to heart about me feeling left out. I got the sense that he wanted to make me feel better by giving me some attention.”
There was a pause following Emil’s slightly weary words. He braced for any kind of snarky response, but when Mathias did speak it was quiet.

“Did it work?”

Emil didn’t pause in his typing, but he was tempted to grin; from Mathias that was almost an apology.

“Yeah…it reminded me of mom actually.”

Another short pause went by.

“Good.”

With that the two retired, exhausted, to their beds, and their first full day at the cabin came to a close. Only four more to go.

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The following days at the cabin were undoubtedly the most interesting that any of them had experienced. Tino was ravenous for knowledge, nearly to the point of exhausting them with his inquiries. They took him on hikes into the woods and showed him how to cook and bake, and use electronics, and just about anything else that they could possibly show him. Tino soaked it all up like a sponge. Emil and Lukas continued to help instruct him, Mathias kept recording and praising him for his mere existence, and Berwald continued pampering him like he was a new puppy. As much as they were all becoming attached to Tino, they were running out of breath day by day with the amount of questions that he had.

On Wednesday, they sat him down in his room and gave him full access to Emil’s laptop…and Google. This turned out to be a good arrangement for all involved, as Tino was getting practice typing and using the computer and the rest of them were given a much-needed break.

The first essential lesson Tino learned was how to open multiple tabs as he was searching. Time and again he would read a description and have to look up a word or event within that description. This happened so often that when Emil checked in on him later that afternoon he found at least twenty tabs open all at once, and Tino darting back and forth between them. Tino loved it; baffled and pleased with the instant access to knowledge of any kind, and from all over the globe.

They ended up having to force him to leave his room because he had spent six hours straight researching.

“You need to get out from behind that screen and get some exercise.” Mathias insisted, dragging him down the stairs as evening set in. “So we’re all going to play catch!”

Lukas and Emil looked at Mathias skeptically, while Berwald presented the medium sized rubber ball he’d been instructed to hold for effect.

“You do know that catch is boring, right?” Emil deadpanned.

“Not with five people it’s not!” Mathias countered. “And nothing’s boring to Tino.”

The merman was just as enthusiastic about the idea as he had been everything else. They piled onto the stretch of lawn between the trees and the house and explained the simple game to Tino.

“So, there are no real rules to catch, you just throw the ball to each other for fun. Easy enough.”
“Let’s start off easy for him.” Lukas told Mathias, plucking the ball from his hand. “Ready, Tino? I’m going to toss it slow for you, ok?”

The merman readied himself, imitating the stance that Berwald had taken, with his knees apart and slightly bent, with his hands held up at his sides. Lukas tossed the ball gently, and Tino grabbed and caught it.

“Now throw it back, carefully.” Tino tossed it overhand toward Lukas.

“Good throw, Tino!” Mathias cheered. “We’ll see how you hold out when Berwald gets going. He packs one hell of a punch.”

“I won’t hurt him.” Berwald said defensively. Lukas chuckled the ball at the big man.

“Prove it.” He said as he did. Berwald was across from Tino, and the merman opened his hands for the ball, smiling. Berwald tossed it underhand, but it was too gentle and fell short. Tino lunged, but didn’t manage to catch it. He frowned up at Berwald.

“Mother hen.” He pouted. They all laughed at that; Tino had revealed himself to be playfully snarky over the last few days, picking up little nicknames and harmless taunts. Mostly from Mathias.

“Wish the camera had caught that.” Mathias complained. He had whined a lot about the times when the camera wasn’t on, thanks to Lukas’ insistence that not every moment needed to be filmed. “Speaking of which, I’ve been meaning to ask you all about something…” Emil caught the overhand toss from Tino and threw the ball to his brother.

“Talk to us about what?”

“How would you feel about doing a live stream on Friday? As our last night in the cabin we ought to do something special anyway.”

“Live?” Tino asked, as Lukas hucked the ball with force at Mathias, who caught it with a grunt before it smashed into his shoulder.

“Yea, we can stream on YouTube, link it up through the website, and leave the chat open for viewers to ask questions, and it’ll be a great boost for us with all the attention we’ve been getting lately!” He aimed at Tino, and Berwald shifted as though readying to tackle Mathias or the ball should either of them try to hurt Tino. But it was tossed at medium speed and Tino caught it with no fuss.

“You think that lots of people will watch if we go live?” Tino asked, putting his arm behind his next throw, which was to Berwald. The tall man surprisingly had to stretch to catch it.

“Sure they will; you’ve seen the numbers on the blog.” Emil answered, taking a few steps back when Berwald aimed at him.

“A live stream would be the next logical step.” Berwald intoned.

“Does that mean that we can’t filter out the crazies?” Lukas asked, concern in his voice.

“We can ignore the comments and questions that are inappropriate or uncomfortable, but obviously, we can’t keep them from popping up in chat.”

“Right.” Mathias agreed with Emil. “It’s just a chat box, not a video call. We’ll just be
broadcasting our video, not seeing the faces of all the fans tuning in.”

Tino gestured eagerly for Emil to throw to him, which he did.

“I do know how live streams work.” Lukas said dryly. “But we’ve never done one when we’re not out on a case. What do we even do?”

Mathias caught Tino’s throw and tossed the ball back and forth in his hands as he spoke.

“We sit there and talk, we answer questions. We smile, and be charming and get more views and ratings.”

Lukas made a thoughtful sound and caught the ball his partner pitched to him.

“And what do you expect will actually happen? How long will the stream go?” Berwald asked.

“Tino?” Mathias asked. “How long do you think you could stand talking to strangers on the computer before getting bored?”

Tino cocked his head and the ball paused as they all let him think.

“Um…I don’t really know…”

“Why don’t we say an hour to be safe?” Suggested Lukas. “If you feel too tired or uncomfortable, you can just say so if you want to end earlier.”

“Oh.” Tino said simply. “I like the idea of talking to a lot of people at once. It might kind of be like being back in a pod.”

“Ok, so the Main Man is onboard.” Mathias cheered. “How about the rest of you?”

“It’s a great idea, let’s do it.” Emil said at once.

“Sure.” Berwald said with a nod.

Lukas thought a little longer than the other three, before saying,

“We’ll need some kind of structure, even if it is a spur-of-the-moment kind of event. Maybe we should offer some incentive for people to tune in…”

“Like what?” Emil asked. The ball resumed bouncing between them all.

“If the idea is for the fans to ask questions, as well as just support us by viewing and possibly donating, we should offer some kind of special. Perhaps we should ask people to prepare questions ahead of time, maybe submit them to the website, and then we’ll answer our top picks first, before opening up for a free-for-all.”

“Wow, Lukas.” Emil said to his brother, smiling. “That’s actually a really enterprising idea.”

“I do occasionally make myself useful for something besides reading books.” Lukas said a bit smugly.

“I think we know what we’re going to be doing tonight and tomorrow!” Mathias said cheerfully. “We’ll have to post the information, then wait for the submissions, and then go through them. How many questions should we choose?”
“Ten’s a good number.” Berwald suggested. “Don’t want to take up too much time that could be used for the live viewers.”

“True,” Emil agreed, “the stream is primarily for them.”

“But Lukas is right; there will be a ton of wild people with wild questions or comments. You better prepare for that, Tino. You’ll get a taste of it, I’m sure, when we look through the submission questions.”

Tino cocked his head.

“What do you mean ‘wild’?” He asked.

“A lot of people will ask you about uncomfortable subjects.” Lukas answered. “Like how mer people mate, and what mer people look like naked, or if you masturb-.”

“Lukas!” Emil and Berwald shouted at the same time, cutting him off. He looked genuinely surprised.

“What? He deserves to know what’s in store. You know those things will come up in conversation.”

“Yea, but don’t spoil his innocent little ears!” Mathias said, roaming over to Tino and patting his head. The merman looked sheepish, his cheeks flushing.

“Um… I mean… I have mated before…” He admitted quietly. “I don’t mind saying it.”

All of their jaws dropped at once, and even Mathias looked shocked. An awkward moment passed before Lukas recovered first and cleared his throat.

“Well, Tino is 27 years old, it’s foolish of us to assume he hasn’t had some interaction of that nature with others in his lifetime.”

“I suppose.” Mathias said, bouncing back quickly. “You do have such an adorable face I can see how you’d be irresistible. Sly dog, you!”

“Mathias, come on, weren’t you just warning him about comments like that?!” Emil chided. Mathias shrugged it off, and Tino smiled, getting over his shyness.

“It’s not like I’m ashamed or anything.” He said evenly. “I am quite sly.”

“Dude, your awesome factor just shot up a ton!” Mathias laughed, slinging and arm around Tino’s shoulders.

“Tino, even if you don’t mind being free with that kind of information, it is not a good idea to pursue those questions and comments; it can spiral down fast.”

“I understand.” Tino said. “I’m not shy about it, but I don’t really feel it’s anyone’s business.”

“Exactly.” Emil backed him up. “Just keep that to yourself.”

Tino nodded, agreeing.

The game of catch was more interesting with them all discussing what they needed to do in preparation for the live stream. They decided to film a scripted video with all of them encouraging people to submit their questions and then tune in for their live stream, which they agreed made
more sense to do on Thursday night instead, so that there was no added pressure to their last night
in the cabin on Friday, so they could relax. They began working on the video explaining their
plans to their public as soon as they’d worked out what else they’d need to do. Once that was
filmed, Mathias began editing out the flubs and missed lines, while Emil set up the submission
form on the website. Mathias posted the video from his laptop at the same time Emil let the form
go live from his own. Once done they gave each other conspiratorial smirks.

“All done.” Mathias announced.

“And now we wait.” Emil followed up.

Tino had been fiddling around with a set of magnetic connector toys that sat on the side table in the
great room, but upon hearing this he looked up and smiled.

“Can we go swimming while we wait?”

“How could we ever say no to a merman?”

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When they checked the website the next morning and Emil closed the form, there were a
considerable amount of submissions.

“Put the coffee on,” Emil announced when he saw the total number of questions, “we’re definitely
in for a long haul, especially if we want to keep on schedule for tonight.”

Lukas weakly saluted his younger brother and went to start the coffee. Tino grabbed onto
Berwald’s sleeve and began asking with puppy-dog eyes if he could try to make eggs again for
breakfast. He had attempted it the day before but had added too much salt. Tino had not been able
to hide how disappointed he had been in his failure. When all their faces scrunched up a bit at the
salty flavor, including Tino’s, his violet-blue eyes had gone so sad that the rest looked at each other
and toughed it out, cleaning their plates. Tino knew they were sparing his feelings, and he loved
them all just a bit for it.

So it was with hesitation that Berwald glanced up at Lukas in response to Tino’s question. The
other man shrugged and said,

“I don’t see a problem with that, but be sure to keep the counters clean if you can help it.”

Lukas was fastidious in the kitchen, and Tino had found quickly that he didn’t like messes sitting
around. With Berwald and Lukas’ help, Tino managed to make a decent skillet full of scrambles.
They showed him carefully this time how little of the salt to add. They also helped him throw in
some cheese, garlic, onion, and spinach into the eggs as well. The delicious scent brought Mathias
down from his hibernation in his and Lukas’ room.

“Fooooo…” He groaned, rubbing his bleary eyes and making a beeline for the coffee. It was just a
cup below being finished, and he whined, turning toward Lukas and opening his mouth.

“No,” Lukas deadpanned before Mathias could ask, “you’ll have to wait. It’ll drip all over the
burner if you take the kettle from the coffee maker now.”

With another groan Mathias slumped against Lukas’ back, flopping his cheek down against his
shoulder and loosely holding his hips.

“But I’m half dead here, honey-baby…” The words were muffled and slurred, but Lukas didn’t
turn around, just kept watching Tino’s progress with the eggs at the stove. He did reach one hand up to rub at Mathias’ bedhead.

“You can wait for a minute or two, you big infant.”

“Uuuuuuggggggnnnn…” Was Mathias’ response.

Tino giggled and flicked his eyes up at Berwald, who gave him a tiny grin back.

“I think he sounds more like a cave man than an infant.” Said Emil from the dining table. When Mathias raised his head to glare at Emil and shoot back a retort, the teen cut him off. “So we have an enormous amount of questions to sift through today, I recommend we start now.”

“Over breakfast?” Berwald asked.

“Yea,” Mathias said, leaning back on the counter and watching the dripping of the coffee maker intently. “What if some of the questions are gross?”

“I think we all agree to skip the gross ones on principle.” Lukas stated. “Right Emil? Since it’s your insistence that we do this even through our meal then you can be responsible for filtering those out.”

“Fair enough.” Responded Emil, “I’ll just read out the ones that are somewhat viable.”

“I don’t mind answering funny ones too.” Piped Tino. “It’s good to inform, but it’s also good to entertain, right?”

“Good thinking!” Mathias agreed, sounding much more cheerful as he observed the coffee dripping was slowing down. “There’s nothing wrong with pandering a little bit so long as it’s not harmful or offensive.”

“Or asking about his pants size…” Emil muttered from the other room. They all looked up at him and he blushed, shaking his head. “Sorry…was supposed to be the filter, wasn’t I?”

Tino chirped out a happy laugh, and that prompted the rest of them to chuckle as well.

The breakfast turned out much better than the day before, with the ingredients being balanced better and the addition of toast, butter, and jam. And coffee, to Mathias’ near orgasmic moan of delight when he finally took his first sip. Beyond that it was the beginning of a long few hours of discussion. Before they were halfway done eating they had each grabbed paper and pens to jot down the questions that they thought were interesting enough to make the ‘maybe’ pile. That alone was a long process, but it was two hours later before they returned to all of the ‘maybes’ to wheedle out which ones to pick for sure. They had one or two already that they knew were good enough to pick, but from there it became harder and harder to narrow down.

Ultimately they chose ten solid questions that balanced a variety of subjects and still ended up with a huge pile of descent questions leftover.

“We could always do a follow-up video of Tino just answering the ones that are still really good.” Emil said, rubbing at his eyes. By this time it was nearly midday.

“I’d be up for it.” Volunteered Tino. “Whatever helps people understand better. This is so exciting. My predecessor was never able to reach out to so many humans at once!”

He was nearly bouncing out of his skin with his eagerness, which usually meant he’d need to take a
swim to let out his energy. The rest of them were similarly excited, but not quite like Tino was. They’d all done live streams before, had experience with the instant connection to the rest of the globe. That was all new to Tino.

“Alright, let’s take a break.” Lukas suggested. “We can talk about the live stream later on. For now, I have a bit of reading up to do on house trolls.”

As he rose to go, Mathias jumped to his feet as well, drawing all their attention.

“I’ll um…I’ll go too!” He said weakly to explain his eagerness. “I’ve got to catch up on reading too. Reading…books.”

Berwald raised an eyebrow, Tino’s eyes got wide with curiosity, and Emil worked his jaw. Lukas, on the other hand, only rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Alright, come on then.”

Mathias smiled and followed Lukas like a puppy into the study.

“He’s an idiot, but he loves my brother enough to hate being away from him.” Emil huffed out. “Even if he’s forced to read something.”

“It’s really sweet isn’t it?” Tino asked, grinning.

“Very.” Berwald answered. “But you know he’s just going to end up laying all over Lukas while he tries to read.”

“Yea, but my brother has adapted.” Emil said simply. “Mathias makes an excellent bookrest.”

Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
Chapter 6

Tino had found himself alone in the pool more frequently as the week had worn on. He went swimming at least once a day if not more, and the others were doing their own relaxing, so they couldn’t always keep him company. So after Mathias left them to cuddle Lukas in the library, Tino announced he was going swimming, without asking either Emil or Berwald to join him. He had stopped asking since yesterday. More and more they were saying no. He understood, of course, but couldn’t help his need for companionship.

So it thrilled him when he began sinking down into the water, only to hear the pool room door open and find Berwald standing there in his swimming trunks.

“Ber!” Tino called happily. “You decided to swim with me?”

The tall man nodded, closed the door, and made his way to the steps.

“Ja, was getting bored of watching Emil type, and I don’t feel like carving.”

Tino didn’t get into the pool any further, but scooched over on the steps to make room for Berwald.

“Your moose is almost done though, ja?” He asked brightly. He’d spent more than a few hours in Berwald’s company over the last few days watching him work on the little wooden animal.

Berwald sunk into the water up to his shoulders at once, even though they were in the shallow end and it meant his long legs folded up laughably beneath him.

“Just a little more work and it’ll be ready for sale.” He confirmed, swishing through the water with his arms.

“Oh! You forgot to take off your glasses again!” Tino noticed, and smoothly reached out for them. Berwald let him remove them, and Tino placed them carefully on the side of the pool, folding up the ear pieces.

“That’s the third time in the last two days! You have a head full of bubbles!” Tino giggled.

“What does that mean?” Berwald asked, as they both glided out in the deeper end.

“Bubbles in your head? You know? You get distracted and forget stuff. It’s something we say; when there are a lot of bubbles in the water it can be difficult to see through them, kind of like when you’re thinking a lot and so you forget something.”

Berwald made an affirmative sound, and squinted a bit. Tino knew it was hard for him to see without his glasses, so he stuck close enough to his side to ensure he’d be seen clearly.

“Are you nervous about the live stream tonight?” Berwald asked. Tino made a thoughtful sound before replying.

“The nervousness comes and goes. But really, I have no idea what to expect. It’s all so strange to me. The more I learn…the more I feel like my own people are…um…”

Tino bit his lip, trying to pull up the right word.

“How did Lukas describe it a while back…um…pri-prim-tive?”
“Primitive?” Berwald asked.

“Ja! That’s the word! It means that we’re kind of…backward. And compared to you humans on land, we really are…so something like the internet and YouTube…it’s still very hard to comprehend even though I’ve spent so much time studying them now.”

“Only a few days.” Berwald pointed out, treading water while Tino dogpaddled around him.

“Still, it’s made me realize just how limited our options are in the sea. Because of your electricity you have advanced so rapidly…and now you can talk with the entire world! I can’t really…I can’t comprehend that…”

Berwald looked thoughtful for a moment, then said,

“You don’t have to. Most of us can’t when we think about it too much; even I don’t know exactly how everything, like the internet, works. Don’t feel like you have to.”

“But I do!” Tino replied, popping up to float on his back and sighing. “I’ll have to give as detailed an account as possible. I don’t think a researcher of ours has ever had to remember so much…”

Seeing that Tino was troubled, Berwald cleared his throat and changed the subject,

“You’re really good at that.”

“Floating?” Tino asked, lifting his head to look at the bigger man.

“Ja. I can’t do it. But you make it look easy.”

“You can’t float?” Tino asked incredulously, flipping over in the water to swim toward him. “I don’t believe you, show me!”

Sighing, Berwald carefully rolled onto his back, but he began to sink at once. Tino let out a startled chirp and without thinking, reached to hold the broad back in his arms.

“Stretch out your limbs at least!” He chided, and Berwald did. When Tino let go of him he still sank like a rock. Tino huffed. “You’re too heavy I think…”

“I’m a big guy.” Berwald said simply, returning to treading water.

“That shouldn’t matter now that I think about it…watch me!” Tino demonstrated his skills again, and Berwald again tried to copy him. No luck. A half dozen tries later, with Tino pushing, prodding, and pulling at Berwald like he was a mannequin, he at least stayed in one position in the water, but couldn’t hold it for very long.

They both ended up leaving the pool to soak in the hot tub, as the entire exercise had worn them out a bit. Tino was still building up the endurance in his legs but it wasn’t incredible yet, and treading water was tiring even for someone as fit as Berwald. So they relaxed in the hot tub while the steam danced and swirled like golden mist in the afternoon sunlight that filtered in from the window. It was peaceful, and Tino closed his eyes for a few minutes, before the silence was broken by Berwald’s rumbling voice.

“Tino, can I ask you a question?”

Violet-blue eyes opened at once to look at the man sitting across from him.

“Of course!” He said happily, glad to be the one answering a question for once.
“You don’t have to if this is too personal,” Berwald prefaced, “but you mentioned it the other day and…just in case anyone else asks this tonight during the live stream…I wanted to know first. Only if you want to tell me.”

“Ok…” Tino said, a little wary. “What is it?”

“Why did you volunteer to come ashore?”

Tino’s smile fell and he blinked a little, as if not expecting the question. Berwald took advantage of his pause, and explained,

“Like I said, you don’t have to tell me. But you’re always very vague about it, and when you do talk about it you say you were chosen from a group of volunteers. So you always mention how you were chosen, not why you were in the running to begin with.”

Tino looked hesitant, but then a glimmer of a smile appeared and he giggled.

“Heh-heh…’running’.” He muttered, and Berwald’s lips twitched. Then Tino sighed and said, very slowly. “I’m surprised none of you have actually asked me that yet, to be honest. I tried my best to skirt the topic directly. But I guess you’re right; there are going to be people asking me that tonight for sure. I should at least tell one of you first…”

Shifting on his seat in the tub, Tino drew his knees up close to his chest. It was a position he had come to love; curling into himself as tight as possible. He took a deep breath.

“About a year ago by your measurement, my people held a celebration for the turning of the seasons. The warming of the waters signals the beginning of better times ahead, more abundance. This particular celebration, along with one other at the very end of the harvest, is specifically a time for unattached mer like myself to show our interest in someone. If our interest is returned by the one we pursue, we gather at the end of the day and dance together. Older couples and unattached mer who didn’t wish to participate or are too young dance as well, but they are on opposite sides of the seabed we use. It’s a right of passage, to go from one side of the seabed to the other, and then back again. But once the dancing has begun, all the new pairings will sing together, and…it’s the most beautiful sound in the sea. A chorus of voices in harmony while new pairs swim together, with all our lights making the seafloor glow…”

The merman looked dreamily at nothing, his eyes going unfocused as he described the lovely image. Berwald tilted his head as he tried to imagine such a sight.

“So, were you pursued?” He asked carefully a second later. Tino gave himself a little shake and answered,

“Um…actually, I was the one pursuing. I’d grown up with another male, Eduard. He was a good hunting partner and friend to me. And…I grew to love him…a lot. Neither of us had ever participated in the Pairing Dance before, but this year, I wanted to bare my feelings to him and stop hiding.”

Tino swallowed. He pulled his knees impossibly closer to his body.

“How did that go?” Berwald asked gently. The merman shook his head.

“No badly. But…Eduard told me he didn’t return my feelings. In fact, he had his sights set on someone else that night. So…ja…it was…”

“Painful.”
It was a statement, not a question, and Tino nodded, looking up at Berwald for the first time since his story began.

“Eduard was so kind. He was not harsh toward me, but…that almost hurt even more. Because…he felt sorry for me. There was nothing else he could have said to make me feel better, but still….”

“So did you have to go to the rest of the celebration at all?” Asked Berwald, curious. “Or were you obligated to?”

Tino avoided his eyes and there was a long pause before he answered.

“I was going to go straight home and skip the rest of the celebration, but…it turned out that someone else was interested in me.”

Berwald’s eyes narrowed without him realizing it, but he didn’t press any further. Tino had to want to tell him.

“There was a big alpha, Ivan, who taught a few of us how to hunt when we were younger. He wasn’t much older than us but he was exceptional as a hunter, so he was tasked to teach us some basics. So like Eduard, I kind of grew up with him, was friends with him, but I’d never call us ‘close’. Anyway, shortly after Eduard rejected me, I was off by myself around an outcropping of rock. I was crying a little, I won’t lie. Mer folk do cry like humans do, but our tears float off instead of collect on our cheeks like yours do. So I was crying, and Ivan found me.”

Again there was a pause, and Berwald could sense Tino struggling.

“Like I said…” He began.

“No, No…I… I need to tell you… just…it’s still a little hard for me, confusing I guess. I was so upset, and Ivan… he was nice to me. He hugged me and let me cry and told me that Eduard was an idiot to say no to me. He um… he called me all kinds of sweet things and held me for a long time. I had never felt like I needed someone as much as I did at that moment. It was… very kind. When I was done crying he cleaned me up a bit, and then carefully asked if I would consider pairing with him instead.”

Tino glanced up to see Berwald’s reaction to that. The man’s face was as impassive as ever, but he could sense the hint of unease beneath the stare. He looked away again.

“I said yes.”

The words hung in the air for a moment or two, before Tino cleared his throat and began babbling,

“I was just hurting so much, and he was such a kind, handsome alpha. He was there for me, and he’d felt so warm. I’d seen how strong he was, and knew he’d be a good provider, there was no reason for me to say no. I wanted to be in the Pairing Dance so badly, and even if it didn’t work out I just wanted to so desperately…”

“You paired with him.” Berwald stated simply. There was no trace of judgement in his tone, just simple fact. Tino’s cheeks burned red, and he hid his face in his knees. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, we’ve all been in rebound relationships.”

Tino peeked up at him.

“Rebound?”
“Where you either get rejected, or break up with your partner, and to soothe the hurt and make yourself feel better you have a fling with the next person who shows you any attention.”

Tino perked up, his legs sliding down and away from him.

“Exactly! That’s it exactly!”

Berwald tilted his head back a little, sinking deeper to let the water get up to his neck.

“Literally every one of us have been through something similar, Tino. Well, except for Emil.”

“Poor dear.” Tino giggled. “He’ll find his love one day.”

Berwald joined him in a small chuckle, then his brow furrowed even deeper.

“I’m sorry, Tino, but what does this have to do with why you volunteered to come ashore?”

The smile once more melted from the merman’s lovely face, and he covered it up by rubbing his wet hands over his face, spreading the hot water.

“I’m getting to that, I promise. You see, even if you do pair with someone, it doesn’t always end in a life commitment. To find out for sure, couples share living space after they choose each other. Most of us are young when we do pair for the first time and we find out we’re not as compatible as we thought after living together for a time.”

“It’s the same for us.”

“Right, well, Ivan and I…we were pretty compatible. He was affectionate, and I kind of live off affection, and he always hunted plenty of meat, and he…” Tino swallowed and bit his lip, a very small wicked smile curling his lips. “Um…he was…well…he kept me…satisfied…you understand?”

Berwald nodded, shifting a bit where he sat. Tino could sense just how uncomfortable that had made him so he brushed past the subject. He held up his wrist, where the sea glass bracelet always hung snugly.

“I was lying a bit when I said that I made this. I had collected it for years, and I had all the pieces piled in a stone box. They were so beautiful, blue, green, brown, and opaque white…I’d told Ivan that I wished I had the skills to do something useful with them so I could admire them as more than trinkets. So…one day he surprised me by presenting me with this bracelet. He’d make it for me out of my collection. He really was a good alpha to me.”

“That’s a lovely gesture.” Berwald commented, looking at the bracelet with new respect for this Ivan character.

“That’s a lovely gesture.” Berwald commented, looking at the bracelet with new respect for this Ivan character.

“It was.” Tino agreed, letting his wrist sink back beneath the water. “We lived together for nearly four months before I started to feel unsure.”

The merman closed his eyes, looking very sad, and his voice sunk to a quiet murmur.

“You see…Ivan and I…both of us really wanted-.”

“CANNONBALL!!!!!”

Tino and Berwald both nearly jumped out of their skin as Mathias flung the door open as he yelled, and bounded to the side of the pool, cannonballing in with a mighty splash. An extremely loud trill
had left Tino’s startled mouth, and rang off the pool room walls.

“Mathias, you scared Tino to death!” Came Lukas’ chiding voice as he appeared in the doorway as well, holding his towel and dressed in his swim trunks. Mathias whooped and tried to splash Lukas, but the smaller man evaded it easily, walking toward the hot tub.

“Are you alright, Tino?” He asked.

“Ja, I’m alright.” Tino said breathlessly, “My heart is in my throat, but I’m alright.”

“I’m sorry. I assume you just wanted a nice relaxing span of time away from him, but…he got bored using me as a lounging post while I was reading, and dragged me in here.”

“Reading so much on vacation has to be bad for you!” Mathias called from the pool, swimming over to the steps. “It’s for your own good to take a break!”

“He’s right.” Berwald agreed. Lukas shot him a frustrated look.

“You’re really siding with Mat on this?” He asked dryly. Berwald nodded.

“You read enough when you’re not working. This is vacation.”

Tino giggled and sidled up closer to Berwald to stare up at Lukas with mock reproof.

“It is vacation.” He echoed.

Lukas opened his mouth to say something, but Mathias had climbed out of the pool and come up behind him, wrapping his dripping arms around Lukas’ chest and waist.

“Cool it, babe, just have some fun!” He jeered, pulling him backward toward the pool. Lukas struggled as he realized what Mathias was going to do, but Mathias was bigger than him, and housed more muscle in his frame.

“No, no, no! Mat, I told you I only wanted to use the sauna! let go of me, let-.”

Mathias tipped back, Lukas in his arms, and plunged them both into the pool together, towel and all. Tino laughed out loud at the sight of Lukas’ pale limbs flailing every which way as they fell, as though in midair somehow he could reverse the fall. When the two rose to the surface Lukas sputtered and snarled like an animal.

“You bastard! I told you I didn’t want to get wet!”

Mathias laughed, still holding Lukas tight while the older man tried to pry his grip away, splashing and carrying on like mad.

“That’s what you said last night too, but I changed your mind anyway.”

“Dammit, Mathias!”

“Oh just relax, lemme hold you.”

“You just held me for ages in the library!”

“But not all romantic-like in the water!”

Lukas let out a few more curses, but they trailed off into the muttering nothings as he calmed down
and resigned himself to going limp and letting Mathias keep them both afloat. In the end, he leaned his head back against the other’s broad shoulder and let out a harsh sigh, cradling the arms that held his waist.

“Why the hell do I put up with you?” He asked. “Pain in the ass.”

Mathias smiled cheerfully and nuzzled Lukas’ wet hair.

“Because you loooooove me!” He declared, smacking a wet kiss to Lukas’ temple. The smaller man gave a loud, fed up sigh.

“Sometimes more than others. Right now I’m questioning whether I even like you or not.”

“Aw, come on Lukas, that’s not fair; I like AND love you ALL the time!”

Lukas gave another sigh, this one quieter, more secret.

“Me too.”

Mathias made a small affectionate sound, before Lukas broke the silence by suddenly splashing water up into Mathias’ face. The bigger man loosened his hold enough for Lukas to get away, and as Mathias sputtered and tried to reach for him, he made it to the safety of the steps and quickly climbed out. He ignored his lover’s bemoaning of his loss as he went back over to the hot tub, where he’d been before the watery detour.

Tino took one look at him, dripping head to toe, holding his equally dripping towel, and began laughing. It wouldn’t be funny out of context considering Lukas was in his trunks, but it was just the refined way he carried himself, as though he were wearing an expensive outfit that had been ruined but he was clinging to his dignity regardless. Lukas regarded the laughing merman as though he’d betrayed him.

Without a word, he haughtily slung his useless towel over his shoulders, and marched into the sauna. Tino burst into more laughter when he realized that it wasn’t turned it on.

A few hours, and a dinner consisting of leftovers due to how long they had been there, later, found them all filtering into the great room. They’d discussed at length how the first part of the stream would go over dinner, going over and over the questions and Tino’s answers, before hastily doing the dishes and going to ready themselves for their viewers.

“How does my hair look?” Mathias asked Lukas, as he poked at the sides of his head, afraid to touch the top where he’d spiked it as usual.

“Juvenile, as always,” Lukas said, patting Mathias’ cheek teasingly, “but it looks just fine, dear.”

Tino was adjusting his shirt; a short-sleeved scoop neck of pale blue. They’d chosen it to compliment his spots, despite Mathias hinting that he should go bare-chested to show off the patch of glowing markings in the center of his chest.

“How about me?” He asked, turning to Berwald. “Do I look ok? I did my best to keep your braids in, but…”
The big man looked down at him, and reached out to tuck a single, long lock of golden hair behind his ear.

“Don’t worry about it. You look perfect.”

Violet-blue eyes lit up with happiness, and Tino gave a happy chirrup in response. He then reached up on tiptoes to smooth down the cloth over Berwald’s shoulders.

“You look good too! Real camera...uh...camera ready!” Tino declared proudly, remembering the term that Emil had used before they’d all gone to change clothes for the stream.

Berwald gave a hum of thanks.

“Oh yea, a hoodie of the Swedish flag, just in case anyone forgot where he was from...” Emil teased, hurrying down the stairs. He’d taken longer than the rest of them to get ready.

“What about you?” Mathias laughed, seeing the teen’s outfit. He was wearing a black t-shirt with a puffin on the front, overlaid with a white vest, and skinny jeans with his sneakers. To top it all off, he wore a black, fedora-style hat cocked on his white-blond head.

“You going to be posing for a teen life magazine or something?”

Emil frowned and shoved Mathias’ shoulder with his own as he headed toward the coffee table.

“Mathias!” Tino scolded, his face turning angry. “I don’t even know what a mag-zine is, but that wasn’t very nice!”

The merman snagged Emil’s arm as he passed him, and pulled him into a hug, rubbing his back and glaring at Mathias.

“He looks adorable! And...fash...fashionable! You could learn more about how humans dress than I could from Emil.”

Lukas’s eyes widened and he let out an uncharacteristic bark of laughter at the statement, and the pout that rose on Mathias’ face.

“Schooled.” Berwald declared evenly.

Emil startled chuckling against Tino’s shoulder when he heard this, and pulled out of Tino’s hug to offer a fist-bump to the tall man. Berwald returned it. Tino cocked his head at the gesture, still keeping hold of Emil’s arm.

“Seriously,” he said, “I think you look so cute. Your clothes are darling.”

“I believe you, Tino.” Emil assured, patting him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. Come on, I’ve got to set up the computers.”

Tino released his arm, but followed him closely, casting another disapproving frown at Mathias as he did. Lukas chuckled one more time, and gave his partner a kiss on the cheek.

“You’ll have to learn to keep in line, Mat.” He said teasingly. “Beware Tino’s wrath when it comes to Emil. He’s worse than Berwald.”

“Heaven forbid.” Mathias mumbled, still pouting a little.

“Heaven sent.” Berwald rebutted.
Lukas shook his head, a smile on his face as he patted Berwald’s shoulder and headed toward the coffee table where Emil was setting up the laptops. Mathias glanced at Berwald, who raised a single smug eyebrow at him.

“Oh shut up.” He scoffed, and they both went to join the rest of them.

Emil tinkered with the computers for a few minutes, until one showing them all on the full screen from the webcam, and the other showing their youtube page.

“Alright, everybody get into position.” Emil instructed, and there was a small amount of scrambling until they were all settled in. Tino was sitting in the center of the shot on the sofa, Berwald leaned on the back of the sofa behind him, Emil and Lukas took opposite sides of the merman, and Mathias perched on the armrest of the sofa. With them all framed correctly and comfortably, they waited, watching the clock and adjusting their clothes and hair a bit as they watched their own images in the screen.

They had left the lighting low enough that Tino’s markings were bright and clear, but not so low that they couldn’t all be seen. The fire was lit, as always, and cast warm light over them, making the blue spots contrast even more starkly.

Finally, the clock read 7:00 pm.

“Oh, so everybody ready?” Emil asked.

They all nodded, and with a deep breath Emil hit the live stream button. They waited a beat, then Emil asked,

“Is it on? I’m pretty sure it’s-.” At that moment their images appeared in the window on YouTube, and Mathias cut off Emil’s words with a cheery, almost announcer-like bellow, throwing an arm around Lukas’ shoulders.

“Hi there everybody! This is Mathias and his smoking hot boyfriend Lukas! As well as his kid brother, Emil, our powerhouse Berwald, and last but most interestingly, Tino, our little merman turned semi-human.”

They all murmured ‘hey’ and ‘hello’ after the introduction and then Tino leaned forward to look at the screen.

“So everyone out there can see us now?” He asked, looking into his own wide eyes on the screen, slightly delayed playback and faint audio. They’d turned it down so that they could be sure it was working, but it was too low for it to interfere with their voices.

“Everyone who’s tuned in to watch.” Emil confirmed.

“To all our viewers out there, we thank you so much for all your support, and we wanted to let you know once more how this is going to work,” Lukas stated, taking up the instructional role in their group as usual, “firstly, we’ve selected ten questions from our many submissions on the forum, and thanks to those who submitted, we had a very difficult time narrowing all your questions down to ten. Tino will be answering those first hand. After that we will open up our chat box and allow all the rest of you to interact as you’d like. We’ll talk more about that when we get to it.”

“Let’s get this started then!” Mathias said happily. “You ready, Tino?”

“I hope so.” Said a smiling Tino, eyes gleaming with intrigue.
“Ok, first question,” Emil read out from the paper he held, “submitted by LinkTgether_39: ‘Do mermaids lay eggs or do they carry their young to term?’”

Giving a little chuckle, Tino leaned forward, knees on his elbows.

“A lot of people seemed to be asking about how we reproduce when we looked on the forum.” Tino explained. “So I hope I can answer most of them by answering this one, which is why I chose it. The answer is that we do carry our young, but it’s not just the females that can give birth. Males like me can adapt to be impregnated, and females can develop the ability to produce sperm. Lukas and I have talked about this a lot in preparing for this answer.”

Tino glanced over at the other man, who jumped in. Lukas focused on the tiny camera lens in the laptop as he began,

“We already know that there are many aquatic or amphibian species that can change gender entirely for the sake of survival and reproduction, but in the case of mer people, it seems to be determined only partially by that need. We can’t know for sure how this happens in beings like Tino who are motivated by emotion as well as basic survival instinct. Tino, you said that you have to desire to change, and even then, only a partial area of your bodies actually do?”

“Ja,” answered the merman, blushing a little, “when we chose same gender mates…I can’t really describe it well, but we have a bit of clas…classif…”

Tino looked to Lukas for help again, trying to remember the word that they had used when they were prepping for this question.

“Classification.” The man offered gently.

“Classification, where some of us males are obviously better suited for child-bearing if in a pair, and same for the females. It’s just…something we know about each other, without having to think about it; it’s always obvious which role any of us will play in a pairing.”

“So, get to your freaky mutant powers to choose when you change downstairs!” Mathias said excitedly.

Grinning a bit, Tino continued to answer the question.

“Well, all that being said, we only change if it’s really our heart’s desire. There are some pairs who don’t want children yet, so neither of them have adapted to produce them. But that is really rare. We all love children!”

“One more aspect to the question and then we’ll move on to the next one.” Lukas said smoothly. “Now we talked about whether you’d be comfortable answering this and you said you were alright with it, so tell us; how long does it take to ‘adapt’ as you’ve been saying, and what does it entail?”

Tino took a little breath and he rubbed his arm a bit, showing signs of nervousness.

“To be honest I’ve never gone through it myself so I only know what I’ve been told by others; apparently it can take nearly a month for a female to grow a…um…well, I’m sure you can guess. But for us males it’s a longer process; we have to grow an entire nesting chamber…uh…uterus? Yes, uterus, and the channel that leads to it. That can take a little over two months, and it really disrupts the emotions because of the hormones. But from what my friends have told me, once everything balances out they feel completely normal again. Once a male gives birth he also has to feed the baby, so we lactate as well. That’s probably the biggest change; having a swollen chest when you’re a male. After the baby is weened, though, everything goes back to normal.”
“What, just like that, poof?” Mathias asked. “no more ‘nesting chamber’?”

“That depends on whether we want any more children after our first.” Tino explained. “Again, I don’t really know how to explain it, but it’s tied to our desires.”

“Heavy stuff.” Emil commented, and they all gave a small pause, just long enough for the weight of the topic to sink in, but not long enough to become uncomfortable.

“Alright, next question; furlyearling509 asked; ‘Can you explain more about how you communicate under water if you don’t talk?’” Any of you who have followed our vlog or caught up on it, you’ll know this was an issue when we first found Tino; he couldn’t really speak very well since he’d never had to before. It’s at a different pace, apparently.”

“Definitely.” Tino agreed with a smile, sounding more grounded with the starting point to work off of. “I’m still not entirely used to speaking verbally, which is why I chatter so quickly sometimes; I keep trying to match the speed of my thoughts. And again, I’m sorry, but this is a very hard concept to explain. My people share a collective consciousness, is how Lukas put it, where we can communicate through thoughts. Berwald thought that meant that we can read each other’s minds and that all our thoughts are out there free for the taking, but that’s not the case. We are always aware of each other’s presence when we’re within distance to each other, and if we want to speak we nudge at each other’s consciousness, and then are accepted in. Every exchange is mutual, and it’s…well…um…”

The merman faltered a bit, and fidgeted. They all watched him, cautious, waiting to support him if he needed it. When they’d been going over this answer earlier, Tino had let them know that it was a bit hard to talk about. Finally he blew out his cheeks a bit and continued,

“It’s a powerful experience. I didn’t even know that until I came onto land. When I met Lukas, Mathias, Emil, and Berwald, I was trying my hardest to reach out to them with my mind, but I couldn’t. I still can’t share and understand everything with them on an emotional and mental level, and it’s…it’s kind of hard to deal with still. When you’re used to being so aware of everyone’s presence in every sense of the word, suddenly not having that…it’s lonely.”

There was a very small tremor in Tino’s increasingly softening voice toward the end, and he gulped a little. But he kept going.

“I was warned about it; my predecessor told me that it was like being isolated in many ways. So, he made me spend days on my own to prepare for how it might feel being without that connection. It still didn’t do much to prepare me when I finally got here. Even when I was far away from my people I could feel their presence…like a reverb…um…reverber…”

“Reverberation, like a distant hum of a highway.” Lukas explained for him.

“I haven’t seen a human highway yet, but apparently that’s a good metaphor.” Tino said, giving a light smile.

“We can’t imagine anything like that.” Berwald said, speaking for the first time since the stream had begun.

“Um…I guess not.” Tino agreed. “Was…was there any more to that question?”

“That’s probably the best you’ll be able to explain it to us.” Said Emil, handing the paper to Lukas. “Your turn to read out.”

Lukas folded the paper down past the first two questions and looked at the third.
“Alright, something more lighthearted; FlutterBiNyte asked ‘do you have pets in the sea?’”

“Not in the way that you humans do. We can’t train fish or anything the way that you train dogs and cats. We have cultivation animals for eggs and meat, but they are not our pets.”

“No wonder you love that Moomin so much!” Emil pointed out.

“Ja! We don’t have anything fuzzy or cuddly in the sea, at least, nothing that’s not vegetation. That’s probably why we’re so affectionate with each other.”

“Oooh, you should go get your Moomin!” Mathias exclaimed. “We should have thought of that! Go get it!”

“No, he doesn’t have to-.”

“Sure, I’ll be right back!” Tino cut off Lukas’ comment, then shot from his seat and ran up the stairs. The rest of them all looked at Mathias.

“What?!” The man asked. “He’s freakin’ adorable with that thing! All of you watching, be sure to back me up on this when the chat box opens! If you’ve been following our story at all you know how much he loves it! And we have our muscle-man Berwald to thank for that, don’t we?”

Berwald nodded.

“You want to tell us why you bought it for him to begin with?” Mathias urged. The bigger man shrugged.

“He wanted it, and he didn’t have anything of his own at the time.”

“Uh-huh…I never thought about that.” Said Emil. “We bought him a bunch of stuff at The Bend, but the Moomin was the first thing he really wanted. So…Berwald, you bought him his first human possession.”

The blonde Swede gave a very small grin.

“Guess so.”

“I’ve got it!” Tino’s voice called, and a second later he was down the stairs and plopping back into his spot on the sofa, plush Moomin in his arms.

“Hold it up for them all.” Mathias encouraged, and Tino did, showing the plush to the webcam.

“I call him Moo-Moo! He’s very soft and I hug him all night while I sleep!”

“Moomin plushie producers are going to love you for that plug.” Emil chuckled, and Tino cocked his head. “Don’t worry about it, just keep loving your Moomin.”

“I will!”

“Now that we have the all-important Moomin in this stream, let’s move on to the next question: gl0wstix97654 asks, ‘how come mer people never make themselves known/why don’t you go to the surface more often?’”

Hugging the Moomin close to his chest and crossing his legs beneath him, Tino answered,

“We don’t really have reason to go to the surface. All we need is in the sea, and a trip to the surface
is less exciting than a human going to the beach; you at least can come in and swim, but it’s too uncomfortable and troubling to haul ourselves out of the water onto land. There’s no point to it. If we want to sun ourselves we’ll float on top of the water. That’s where most humans that do tend to spot us. We don’t really mind if we’re seen, but you humans seem to find any excuse to dismiss what we really are. A lot of you think we’re regular humans who are odd enough to wear fake tails and swim in the middle of the sea, or that we’re a hallucination, or…well, just about anything other than what we are. If there ever is a human who believes, they aren’t able to convince anyone else of the truth. So, we don’t really hide, and we don’t really avoid the surface.”

“The fact that your markings aren’t visible in the sunlight probably doesn’t help.” Lukas pointed out.

Nodding, Tino rubbed at the glowing markings over his arm.

“Even in sunlight you can see them, but you have to squint to tell.”

“As long as you’re looking for them, you can still see them unless the sun is glaring.” Mathias confirmed.

“Next question?” Tino asked, petting his Moomin’s head.

“Your turn.” Lukas said to Mathias, passing the questions to him. He straightened out the paper as dramatically as he could, then cleared his throat before reading out the next questions.

“OK, Tino, twin4life@las wants to know, “do you have a profession in the sea, and what is it?”

The merman bounced a little with excitement, smiling widely.

“We don’t really have jobs in the same way you humans do; our economy…is all trade-based. We all can hunt, it’s one of the first skills we learn and practice as children, but only some of us go on to hunt for a living. Those who hunt trade their catches for what we of a craft make. There are net-makers, snare-makers, healers, and I’m a tool-shaper. I make spear-heads, knife blades, and pretty much any other hunting tool. I repair them too, and all my work earns me my food. I learned the trade from the previous tool-shaper, and I left behind my own apprentice who’s learning from me. He knows enough to keep the trade going and support himself while I’m gone.”

“This was a huge surprise to us when we found this out.” Declared Emil. “I don’t think any of us really had any ideas what Tino did in the sea, but we certainly didn’t think he’d be our equivalent to a blacksmith or stone carver.”

“It’s not obvious.” Tino agreed, holding out his hands so that his palms were visible close to the webcam lens. “I do have callouses but they’re not easy to see.”

“When we get back home to Sweden we want to get Tino some similar tools to what he used in the sea, and let him make some things for us.”

“Want to show him a thing or two about carpentry too.” Berwald intoned.

“Yea, I really like that idea.” Tino said, craning his neck to look over his shoulder at Berwald. “I think the tools might be similar, and I might learn something to apply when I go home.”

“Moving on,” Mathias sing-songed, “Smithton19-94 asks, “is there a central leader of your people, or is there a governor?”

“We have a group of elders who we go to with disputes or for advice. But if there is an issue that
affects us all as a unit the elders will hold a meeting and let us speak our opinions. They try to choose the best route for us all while also using our input.”

“And how are the elders elected?” Lukas asked, angling himself more toward the merman.

“Oh, they aren’t elected; once they reach a certain age they are considered to have greater wisdom through experience and so anyone of elder age is expected to help with the decision-making. But like I said, they don’t rule over us, they just guide us with our input and their wisdom. They do things like draw borders between clans and negotiate hunting and such. We haven’t had a war between clans in decades now.”

“Ja, ja, boring, boring, next question!” Mathias said happily, but as he opened his mouth to read the next question Lukas snatched the paper back from him. “Hey!”

Mathias tried to snag the paper back, which resulted in Lukas quickly handing it to Berwald. The big man adjusted his glasses, then read out,

“One23four5… “Do mer people cook food?”

A mournful expression crossed Tino’s previously smiling face, and he let out a heavy sigh, deflating where he sat and dropping his head onto his Moomin.

“No, we can’t really do anything with our food like you do,” Tino lifted his head from the Moomin just to plop it on his hand sadly, “we have the vegetation from the sea and the fish, crabs… anything that lives in the sea, and we eat it as is. I’d never had cooked fish until Monday. I’ve always eaten it raw. We obviously eat some combinations like seaweed and fish, but we don’t have any of the flavors that you do. Now that I’ve tasted your food I’m realizing how bland ours is in comparison. That’s all I’ve got for that one. What’s the next question, Berwald?”

“AnnasBr0ther: “How old you live for?”

“Our lifespans are not that different from yours, from what I’ve gathered talking to all of you. but we do tend to reach a few years over 100 easier than your kind does.”

“Diet?” Emil suggested. “Exercise?”

“Maybe.” Tino said brightly. “But I don’t really know.”

“Alright, one more to go!” Mathias announced, grabbing the questions back from Berwald. “I got this one! BioDgradeFish wants you to tell us, “How do you defend yourself against sharks and other sea predators?”

“Last one, ok, um…well, we don’t really have that many in Our Water. Far out in the Ocean is more dangerous. We have to deal with stingrays more than sharks, and with them it’s more about giving them space and knowing where their territories are. Not to mention, we hunt them for their meat. The sharks that we do have aren’t that big, and while we were talking about it today we agreed that they weren’t any more threatening to us than wild dogs are to you; not an everyday threat, but still a plausible one.”

“So it’s not like you’re constantly defending yourselves or having to build safe structures just to survive?” Lukas asked.

“Not at all.”

There was a pause, all of them waiting to see if Tino had anything more to add to that answer.
When he just sat there smiling, Lukas cleared his throat.

“Alright, that does it for the ten questions. We ready to get to the main event?”

“Hell yea!” Mathias cheered, pumping his fist and reaching out to shake Tino’s shoulder. “You ready, fish boy?”

“Let’s do it!” The merman chuckled back at him.

“Alright, we’re going to open the chat option,” Lukas explained, “we’re asking one more time that you please keep your comments and questions clean, if you’re at all capable of that, we’d like to spare Tino his innocence if we can help it.”

Emil leaned forward once his brother was done instructing the viewers, and then clicked the button to allow the live chat. Instantly the chat box began filling with messages, popping up so fast that it was impossible to read them all in order.

“Whoa, just look at that!” Tino said, leaning in to view a stream of emojis that someone has posted in lieu of words. “These are all people sending these? Look at all the little pictures!”

“Some people don’t know how to write, so they express themselves with emojis instead.” Lukas said. Mathias laughed and placed his hands on Lukas’ shoulders.

“There’s the cold sense of humor that our audience loves.”

“They love being insulted?” Emil asked. Lukas rolled his eyes at his little brother.

“I don’t insult, I just don’t filter the truth.”

“That can still be insulting to some people.”

Emil answered back.

“Don’t feel insulted, folks; Lukas is just an honest soul!” Mathias laughed, smacking a kiss on Lukas’ head.

“Let’s see,” Emil said, eyes scanning the chat, “most of the questions seem to be for Tino. . . Um… lots of nonsense….encouragements….oh, “what was is like coming up on land for the first time?”

Tino sat forward on the sofa to address the computer. He grimaced a bit, and blew out his cheeks before answering,

“It was horrible. Imagine how you feel after just a few minutes in the pool, and then having to get out; you know how heavy you feel? Now imagine you’ve lived your entire life in the water and then have to literally drag yourself with just your arms up onto land, because you don’t have legs.”

“Lots of condolences…” Emil reported.

“Well, it was hard enough just getting out of the water, but then I had to get as far from it as I could, so… I had to drag myself with my arms over the beach, then through the grass and up into the woods. It hurt, lots of nasty stuff caught on my scales, but…I had to do it.”

“What’s that one say?” Mathias asked, getting off the armrest of the sofa to kneel down and get a good look at the chat. “PiXie94u2 says ‘Tino, your markings light up my world!’”

Lukas snorted, Tino blushed, and Emil and Mathias gave little jeers.
“Thanks, Pixi…Pixie.” Tino said, hiding his face in his Moomin a second later.

“Who is really in charge, Mat, or Luk?” Emil read out from another viewer.

“Oh, totally a tough question, dude.” Mathias said.

“Yea, Mathias handles the media,” Lukas told the screen, “but he still does what I tell him.”

“Lukas is the boss.” Berwald chimed in calmly.

“Definitely Lukas.” Emil added.

“Yea.” Tino agreed.

Mathias looked like he was about to protest harshly, but he didn’t have enough time as Lukas looked over Emil’s shoulder and read,

“You two are the cutest couple in the world and I just know you give each other oodles of kisses.”

Mathias flung himself closer to the screen to read the message for himself, before it disappeared under the flow of other comments. Then he whooped and gave Lukas a big kiss on the lips.

“See?! These are our people! They totally get us!”

Emil rolled his eyes, but then he focused on the screen again and surprise flooded his face, followed by a huge blush as Tino read out,

“I meant Emil and Tino.”

For once in perfect sync, Mathias and Lukas both at the same time cried,

“Woaaaahhh!”

Tino and Emil both looked beet red, and both were stammering over themselves for a while, as the chat continued to blow up with people laughing with them, arguing amongst themselves about who was really with who, and others who didn’t care about the current content and continued to post random phrase or emojis, until Lukas insisted they move on.

The rest of the stream passed that way, nearly two hour’s worth of ditsy comments, intelligent questions, and fun compliments. Everything from whether merfolk drowned sailors to whether they wore clothes, to how their vision worked, to whether there was merfolk prom was asked of Tino, and he did his best to explain as well as he could. Eventually, however, the others could tell that their star was tiring out. He even began yawning and rubbing his face, hugging his Moomin up to pillow his face. The viewers began commenting with tons of ‘awwws’ and ‘put the poor baby to sleep’ comments.

“Alright, everybody, we’re going to wrap this up.” Lukas announced when the conversation had come to a natural pause. “Thank you for tuning in and keep an eye on our website for the continuing updates we post. Have a good evening.”

The rest of them gave their own calls of ‘bye’, except Berwald, who just waved blandly with all of them. Emil turned off the live stream and closed out all the windows on both laptops. They all gave a collective sigh and looked at each other. Tino yawned again.

“Bed time.” Berwald declared, reaching over to pat Tino’s head. The merman made a purring sound.
“You bet.” Mathias said, taking Lukas’ hand and pulling him to his feet and stringing him along as he headed for the stairs. “See you all in the morning!”

“Good show everybody!” Emil called, pulling his laptop from the table and placing it in his lap. “I’m going to stay up and post the live stream video. Anyone who wasn’t able to catch it tonight can see it once I put it up on the website and our YouTube channel. You go on to sleep, Tino.”

“OK…” Tino yawned, stumbling to his feet. He slung around wearily and put his hands on Emil’s cheeks, tilting his head up and giving him a goodnight kiss on his forehead. “Sleep well.”

Emil looked up at Tino and smiled.

“Thanks…you too.”

Tino patted his face, then turned toward the stairs. Berwald stood there for a moment watching him go, then he looked at Emil, reached out, and teasingly patted his cheek as well. Emil pushed his hand away.

“Oh stop it…” He muttered, focusing in on his computer screen. “Why don’t you go make sure he gets to bed without tripping and falling asleep in the hallway?”

Berwald chuckled, and followed behind Tino. The merman had stopped at his bedroom doorway, and was watching him climb the stairs.

“Everything ok?” Berwald asked quietly, seeing that Tino was looking steadily at him through tired eyes.

“Ja, but…you have a minute? I want to talk to you.”

Berwald nodded, his eyes softening at this request, wondering what could be troubling the little merman.

“Alright, um…let me change? Can I come to your room?”

“Five minutes?” Berwald asked.

“Perfect. I’ll knock.”

They parted ways, each going into their rooms and changing into their pajamas. Just over five minutes later a soft knock came at Berwald’s door.

“Come in.”

Tino looked around the door, smiling lightly and coming into the room, closing the door behind him.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to act mysterious or anything.” Tino said, following Berwald’s gesture to sit on the bed beside him. “Cute pajamas!”

Berwald was in a pair of red sleep pants that were covered in white fish, and a white undershirt.

“Thanks. Mathias got them for me. Closest thing he could find to Swedish Fish.”

“What are Swedish Fish?”

“It’s a popular candy. They’re red and in the shape of little fish. It’s kind of a joke.”
“Oh. Still cute.” Tino pulled his knees up to his chest, his toes curling over the edge of the mattress. “So, um…I wanted to finish telling you the story that Mathias kind of…interrupted earlier.”

Berwald shifted on the mattress, pulling himself to sit back against the headboard and stretch out his legs behind where Tino sat. While the merman settled in, Berwald let his eyes cast over Tino’s bare feet, markings glowing brightly in the dim light as they peeked out under his too-long pajama pants.

“About you and Ivan,” He stated carefully, “I’ll tell you again that you don’t need to share this with me if you’d rather not.”

Tino’s face dropped into a dry expression.

“Do you think I’d specifically ask you to hear me out if I didn’t want to?”

Berwald shrugged his big shoulders and held out his hands helplessly.

Tino grinned, and flopped over onto his stomach, letting his face bury into the covers. He sighed deeply, and then popped up on hands and knees to crawl up the bed and stretch out beside Berwald, snatching one of his pillows and holding it to his body.

“You have a good heart, Berwald…” He said softly, looking up at the taller man with a soft smile. “Where did I leave off before?”

“You said something about feeling unsure about Ivan, I think.”

“Yes…well…like I’d said, we’d been together a little over four months, and it was really wonderful at first, but then…more and more time went by and…I…I hadn’t changed yet.”

Berwald frowned deeper, and tilted his head to look down into Tino’s face. Tino didn’t look back at him.

“You mean, you didn’t grow a uterus?” He asked carefully. The merman was silent for a moment, and then he swallowed a little and shook his head.

“You had to want it, and you didn’t.” Berwald said, in a glimpse of insight. “Because you weren’t really in love with Ivan, were you? You still loved Eduard.”

A huff of air left Tino.

“I’m not sure. I knew going in that Ivan wasn’t the one I loved, but it’s not as though I didn’t want to pair with him…but my love for Eduard was easing away, since his partner was already with child and I knew for certain I had no chance left. My confusion probably kept my body from changing. I’d heard that the body knows what the heart really wants and responds accordingly…it can be the cause of disagreements within pairs. Ivan and I…were no exception.”

There was a pause, and Tino clutched his pillow tighter.

“Ivan wanted babies, just like I did. But because my body hadn’t responded to my emotions, it was evident that I didn’t want to have them with him. I can’t blame him for becoming upset. The longer we were together without my body changing, the more tension built between us, until…until we finally had a terrible fight.”

With his finger, Tino traced a seam on the pillowcase, staring at it seriously, doing everything he
could to avoid Berwald’s eyes. The other didn’t speak, letting Tino set the pace. Inside, though, he was hurting for Tino’s situation.

“We both said things that I wish I could forget. I told him he wasn’t patient enough, he told me I didn’t want it as much as he did…it ended up with him shaking me by the arms and begging me to tell him why I didn’t want to have his children after all he’d done for me…and I just blurted out…that I didn’t love him enough.”

The last few words dropped to a whisper, and Tino closed his eyes completely rather than continuing to avoid Berwald’s gaze.

“I’ll never be able to forget the look on his face…he looked so devastated and hurt…and he just let me go, and swam away. I ended up gathering up my things and going back to my own territory that same day.”

Licking his lips, Tino curled around the pillow a little more, a small sniffling sound leaving him.

“That’s why I decided to volunteer to come ashore…”

Berwald couldn’t bear it any longer, and he slid his arms around the smaller body beside him, pulling Tino up against his chest. Slender arms released the pillow and clutched at Berwald instead, hiding his face in Berwald’s shoulder and letting out a few little shuddering breaths that weren’t quite sobs. A few long moments of Berwald stroking his long hair and saying nothing passed, until Tino finally said,

“I’m sorry…”

“No,” Berwald said, patting his back, “don’t you dare say you’re sorry. You’ve been hurt, and that pain doesn’t just go away. It’s alright. I’m very glad you trust me enough to tell me.”

Tino rubbed at his eyes with one hand, and then Berwald felt his entire body relax, and he just laid there. A few moments more passed, until Berwald took a deep breath that made Tino’s head rise and fall.

“When I was in high school, I was shot down by every boy I tried to ask out.”

Tino moved his head slightly, looking up at Berwald as he stared at nothing.

“Ber, you don’t have to…”

“Let me…please.”

The merman shut his mouth and laid his head back into Berwald’s shoulder, and listened.

“Sports teams loved me because I was bigger, and had a mean-looking expression, but off the field I intimidated everyone away. Including any crush that I had. When I got older, and was in the middle of my carpentry apprenticeship, I met my first boyfriend online. I think being able to talk to him without being in person helped him warm up to me. When we did meet, he was even ok with me not talking much and frowning all the time. He was the first person I…well…anything’d.”

Tino chuckled at Berwald’s unconventional word usage. He received a harmless poke to his upper arm in retaliation.

“Anyway…I was with him for over a year before things began to fall apart. I tried my best to give him all that I could, but I was also hiding my shield-weaving ability from him while trying to
figure out what it even was. He ended up telling me that he just couldn’t read me, that I was too secretive and quiet, didn’t share enough with him and that he couldn’t handle it. So he left me. I found Emil and Mathias’ website a few weeks after, and I think the only reason I made the decision to contact them and then move out to where they lived was because I was hurting so much. Turned out to be the best choice of my life.”

A silence followed Berwald’s story, heavy after the rumbling bass of Berwald’s narrative. Tino leaned back, untangling himself from the strong arms that were holding him, and asked,

“Really?”

Berwald nodded firmly, the set of his jaw sure and strong. The merman’s weepy eyes crinkled on a genuine smile. He picked up Berwald’s hand, studying it for a moment, at how it wrapped entirely around his own much smaller hand. Then he met Berwald’s eyes and spoke kindly,

“You’re brimming with emotion, Ber. All I have to do is look in your eyes and I see it. Anyone who can’t is blind.”

As if to confirm Tino’s words, Berwald’s expression briefly softened into an awed vulnerability, his lips parting and his brows rising. Still smiling, Tino tilted his head to study that look, then cupped Berwald’s cheek in his free hand.

“Hopefully my own story turns out like yours.”

The merman leaned forward and kissed Berwald’s forehead, just like he had Emil. Giving his hand one more firm squeeze, Tino whispered a ‘thank you’, and then slipped off the bed. He stopped at the door to look back at Berwald, still sitting, looking slightly stunned, on the bed.

“Gnight, Ber.”

The big Swede’s mouth slowly tugged into a soft smile.

“Sweet dreams, Tino.”

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Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
Ok, a few notes for you all. Firstly, thanks so much for all the wonderful supportive comments! Now, for the story-related stuff:

Yes, Stockholm. I’m literally going with the easiest and most recognizable Swedish city as their hometown. I’m a dumb American so sue me. I did actually look up how long it would take to drive from Stockholm to Helsinki (yes, the most recognizable Finnish city) where I’m assuming their cabin was, since there are camping locations outside of Helsinki. The time did round out to about 12 hours, so I though, eh they can drive 6 hours for two days with a stop in between. That’s where I got the info that I use in this chapter. And I have no idea if there would be anywhere rural-ish for Berwald to have his awesome country-ish house with property, etc. within 15-minutes of nice Stockholm apartments where Lukas and Mathias live, but by the magic of fanfiction it is so! Don’t question logic in this merman-comes-to-shore-and-becomes-human Hetalia story lol.

Also, in case you couldn’t tell by the obvious hints I drop in this chapter, Berwald is reading Storm Front, book one in the amazing series The Dresden Files. If you haven’t read it, you must. If you don’t like reading, check out the phenomenal (yes, you heard right, phenomenal) audiobooks read by James Marsters.

With that being said, read with a grain of salt and hope you enjoy.

They were all awakened the next day by an incredibly loud whooping sound coming from downstairs. Tino jolted awake, confused for a moment. He had been having a wonderful dream where he was swimming along the seabed, skimming the sand with his fingers. The water had been so comforting around his body, the familiar weight of it pressing against him, but not uncomfortably so. That peace was shattered by the high-pitched sound of elation ringing through the house, and the pounding of running feet from the other side of Tino’s door. It all came back to him in a rush, and he tumbled out of bed far too quickly before his sleep-numb legs were ready for it. A yelp escaped the merman as he bumped into the wall and nearly fell over. The next second he shook himself and flung his door open.

He almost collided with Lukas in the hallway outside.

“What’s going on?” Tino slurred, struggling to keep his eyes open, his entire body still heavy with sleep.

A flurry of tousled white-blonde hair, and Emil darted past them toward the top of the stairs. A door opened and Berwald stuck his groggy-looking face around his doorframe. He’d forgotten his
“Sounds like Mat…” Lukas muttered, hurrying them both forward to follow Emil. Berwald’s heavy steps caught up to them easily as they headed down to the great room.

The culprit of all the commotion, of course, was Mathias. He was still in his PJ’s down in the great room. His laptop was on the coffee table and he was jumping up and down, pumping his fists in the air in rapture as he continued to make loud, affirmative sounds.

“Mathias, what the hell?!” Emil asked, reaching the bottom of the stairs first.

The tall man whooped again when he saw him, took three big strides forward and seized Emil around the waist. He lifted Emil clear off the floor and spun him around like a child. The teen didn’t take kindly to this, especially considering he wasn’t fully awake yet.

“Put me down, you bastard!” He yelled, smacking Mathias’ shoulders. The man complied, but before letting him go completely he took Emil’s face in his hands and smacked an excited, brotherly kiss on his head.

“It’s amazing!” Was his only explanation before turning on Lukas, who was standing just as bleary-eyed with the other two at the bottom of the stairs. The slighter man was also picked up around the waist, but Mathis just levered him up and gave him an insistent kiss on the mouth rather than spinning him around. Lukas responded the same way his little brother had, beating at Mathias’ arms and shoulders, protests muffled by Mathias’ mouth.

“What’s going on?” Tino asked around a yawn. He snagged Berwald’s arm to keep himself steady as his sleep-weary legs stumbled a bit.

“Mat’s excited about something, I guess.” Berwald said, sounding disinterested and grumpy.

Mathias pulled out of the kiss he’d forced on his lover, and set Lukas back on his feet.

“You’re damned right I’m excited!” He exclaimed, taking an open-armed run at Berwald and hitting him chest-to-chest in an almost violent, manly embrace that didn’t even make the taller rock on his feet. He just looked more annoyed. “I just looked at the website, and you’ll never believe it!”

Berwald pushed Mathias away with a single huge hand. This didn’t deter him; he turned his gleeful, smiling face on Tino, who didn’t have time to recoil before Mathias grabbed for him. He snatched Tino up into his arms, rounding out the hugs for everyone, and laughed heartily.

“You’re a little miracle come into our lives, Tino! It’s all because of you!”

Tino didn’t know what was going on any more than anyone else did, but affection was infectious to him and he hugged back, a smile breaking out over his face.

“Thank you?” He called, and when Mathias plopped him down again and began showering his tousled golden head with kisses he started giggling profusely. “What’s going on?”

“Yea, what’s this all about, Mat?!” Emil demanded, while Lukas shook his head and ran fingers through his messy bedhead. “This is way too much hugging even from you.”

Mathias took a deep breath and turned to snatch the laptop off the coffee table. He held it up with the screen out for them all to see. The four of them all grouped around and took a close look. Four pairs of tired blue eyes widened in surprise.
“Is this for real?” Questioned Emil in a whisper. “We’ve never received this much…”

“You bet your ass it is.” Mathias said gleefully. “And that’s just one donation. They started to spike after the live stream, and then once it reached other time zones they started doubling! There are so many more…”

“That’s just one?” Lukas exclaimed. “Are you sure it’s not a mistake with the site, I mean...that’s…so much…”

“There’s no mistake, this is for real!” Mathias reaffirmed, his smile so wide that his eyes nearly disappeared. He reached out and lifted Lukas’ chin from where it was tilted down to look at the screen, and he looked into his eyes.

“Babe…we’re set for months.”

Lukas looked completely shocked, and he swallowed a few times as he looked back at Mathias. Finally he asked.

“Do you mean… for all of us?”

“All of us. For months.”

Emil gave out a shuddering laugh and seized Berwald’s arm, shaking it with his excitement. Lukas’ lips stretched into an unbelieving, joyous smile, laughing softly as well. When Mathias reached for him again, Lukas hugged back and let himself be swung around again as they all began laughing and cheering. Even Berwald exchanged hugs and cheers as they came to terms with the huge financial turn their life had just taken.

“I’m so happy for all of you!” Tino cried when things started to die down a bit. “You won’t have to worry about anything for a while, that’s such good news.”

“It really is because of you,” Emil said, reinforcing Mathias’ earlier declaration, “we’ve been doing just fine with our site so far, but without the footage of your rescue we never would have been able to take it to the next level.”

“Dude, we should totally celebrate this with a drink!” Announced Mathias.

“First thing in the morning?” Lukas asked, arching an eyebrow at the man currently hanging off his neck.

“Bad idea.” Berwald stated, pointing to Emil, who was standing beside him.

“Ohhhhh, yea…” Mathias jeered, letting go of Lukas and going to clap Emil on the back. “You’re our little drunkard, aren’t you? Wouldn’t want you causing a scene again…oh, who am I kidding, I’d LOVE to record that and share it with the world this time!”

The teen frowned and shucked Mat’s hand from his shoulder.

“It was one time, and I didn’t see anybody trying to stop me.”

Tino cocked his head.

“What are you talking about?”

“The last time we all tried to drink together Emil went off the rails wild!” Explained Mathias with a laugh.
“I did not.” Emil muttered.

“You were shirtless and hugging the TV because there were puffins on the screen.” Lukas deadpanned.

“I think you said something about adopting one as your son, and calling it Tufton Fluff.” Reminded Berwald, “You were very serious about it too.”

“Shut up!” Emil snapped, wildly embarrassed. “Like all of you haven’t gotten drunk before!”

“Drunk?” Tino asked. “What does that mean?”

“If you drink too much alcohol it can completely take away your inhibitions.” Lukas explained. “Your judgement, balance, worries, all of it goes out the window.”

“And…you’ve all been that way before? Been ‘drunk’?”

“Hell yes!” Emil snapped, all too eager to turn on his teasers. “Mathias likes to find the nearest thing resembling a pole and start grinding on it and singing loudly off-key, Lukas gets super clingy and starts talking like a stoner about the meaning of life and how much everything is important to him, and Berwald…well…I guess he’s about the same drunk as he is sober, but his face gets red and he can’t walk very well…my point is, you’re all guilty of making jackasses of yourselves when you’ve had too much vodka! So it’s not just me!”

“Regardless, I do think a celebratory drink is in order.” Lukas declared, making Mathias squeal with delight. “But not now; let’s wait until dinner at least. Today we need to pack up and get ready for the trip home tomorrow.”

“This is why the last day really sucks…” A deflating Mathias muttered. “So much work…”

“Does it really take all day?” Tino asked, as they all started to head up to their rooms.

“Not really, Tino, but it’s important to go over this cabin with a fine tooth comb to be sure that we haven’t left anything behind. We need to check under the beds, behind the furniture, and so on.”

“Can’t we at least have breakfast first?” Whined Mathias. “I’ve been up and waiting for all of you for, like, ten whole minutes!”

“Let’s change our clothes first, then we’ll talk about breakfast; we have to make sure we have enough for this morning and tomorrow.”

They went with cold cereal for breakfast, deciding that the same would suffice for the next morning as well, even though Mathias complained about having to wash dishes right before they left for home. Tino had taken a liking to the task, however, and volunteered to wash up their bowls and spoons for both mornings. As he placed the first bowl in the dish drainer, Berwald walked up behind him, holding a towel.

“Ber! You’re going to help me?” Tino asked happily. Berwald nodded with a grunt, and began to dry the wet bowl. “Thanks! This will go much faster with the two of us.”

“You shouldn’t have to do this anyway,” Berwald said softly, “you’re still our guest you know.”

Tino rolled his eyes, and plunged the next dish into the hot water on one side of the sink.

“In my culture, you return kindness with favors.” He insisted. “I may still be considered a guest,
but that doesn’t mean I don’t pull my weight.”

“Besides,” Emil cut in, entering the kitchen and easing up to sit on the counter across from the other two, “Tino’s more like another bro than a guest after this week, right?”

Tino paused in his washing, and looked up to see Berwald’s reaction, smiling sweetly. The taller man returned his gaze, studying Tino’s hopeful face before there was a small softening around his mouth and he nodded. The merman bounced on the balls of his feet with a little giggle in response, as he did when he was excited.

“Emil, get down off the counter,” Lukas called from the other room, “how many times do I have to tell you?”

The teen glared in his brother’s direction.

“Really? What in the hell does it matter? I’m not breaking anything.”

“You’re breaking the camera with your grumpy face!” The bad joke came from Mathias, as he’d gotten around to turning on the camera for the day. He’d spent a lot of time at breakfast complaining about how he hadn’t switched it on before he opened the laptop that morning, therefore missing their jubilation over their donations. So he began filming right after they were finished eating. He’d been hovering at the corner of the kitchen, watching Tino’s interaction with Berwald.

Emil grumbled and jumped down from the counter, ignoring Mathias.

“Seriously, Lukas, I don’t understand why you don’t let me sit on the counter. Mom never has a problem with it, so it’s not something you picked up from her. Dad never cares either, so what gives?”

Lukas made a noncommittal sound and shrugged.

“Just don’t like the idea of someone’s ass in a place meant to prepare my food.”

Tino let out a loud laugh at that, dropping a spoon with a plop into the water. Emil turned a little red as Mathias laughed as well and said,

“Come on, Lukas, it’s not like he’s in the nude and rubbing his bare cheeks on the counter or anything!”

Another explosive laugh from Tino, and he covered his mouth with one hand, before remembering that it was soaking wet and soapy, leading to a spitting and hissing fit. Berwald quickly whipped the spare towel he had from over his shoulder and handed it to the merman, who snatched it and wiped his mouth.

“Thanks, Ber.” Tino said as soon as the suds were clear from his mouth. “I didn’t think that one over too much.”

“Soap doesn’t taste very good.” Berwald commented.

“Speaking of soap, how come no one asked you about soap in the sea last night?” Pondered Emil, now leaning his hip against the counter instead of sitting on it.

“What do you mean?” Tino asked, working on the last of the dishes.
“I mean, obviously you don’t have soap the same as we do, but you…bathe…right? Or…do you even have to?”

“Ohhhh,” said Tino with sudden realization, “I know what you mean now. Our issue is keeping algae from building up on our bodies. So, we have to scrub ourselves every other day or so, like you need to shower and take baths. Otherwise we get a layer of green all over us.”

Emil didn’t do a very good job keeping the horror from his face. Tino huffed and insisted,

“It’s the same as you humans getting dirt and sweat on you. I certainly don’t like how it feels to sweat; that wasn’t something I had to do in the sea.”

“Makes sense.” Called Lukas from the great room.

“Algae though, still kind of, ick…” Mathias added with a little disgusted sound. Tino turned bland eyes toward the camera-bearing man.

“I don’t want to hear it; you reek like rotting seaweed when you’ve been sweating heavily all day.”

Emil laughed at the merman’s words.

“Burn!” He cried, pointing at Mathias. Before the other man could respond, Lukas cut in.

“As riveting as this conversation is to listen to, we need to have a meeting about how tomorrow’s going to go.”

Mathias pouted, but apparently deemed that information too boring and turned the camera off. He turned to head toward Lukas in the great room, and Emil followed after him. Tino finished the washing and helped Berwald dry and put away the remaining bowls and spoons. Then they joined the other three.

“What more do we need to talk about?” Tino asked, as he sunk to the deep carpet in front of the fireplace, letting the warmth flow over his back.

“Just the basic plan,” said Lukas, “you’ve never made this trip before, so I just want to be sure you know what to expect.”

Tino crossed his legs and put his hands in his lap, eye focused on the other man. Seeing he was ready to listen, Lukas went ahead.

“So, we are going to get up very early tomorrow, around 5am, then we are on the road close to 6 hours before we stop for the night. Then we get up around the same time the next morning and drive for about another 6 hours before we are home.”

The merman’s eyes widened in obvious apprehension.

“Six hours…two days in a row?”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds.” Emil jumped in, trying to put Tino at ease. “We listen to audiobooks together when we’re not using our devices to entertain ourselves individually, plus we can always talk.”

“Besides,” added Mathias, “we stop for bathroom and food breaks all along the way so it’s not like we can’t get out of the car ever.”
Tino cast his eyes over Lukas, frowning.

“So…you drive all that way? Don’t you get bored?”

“Berwald and I break up the driving,” explained Lukas, “we each drive for three hours both days, and that ensures neither of us get too tired.”

“That’s smart.” Tino admitted.

“We try.” Added Berwald.

“Once we get back to Sweden, we drive over to Mat and I’s apartment, and from there Emil drives back to our folks’ and Berwald drives to his own house. So you’ll be going with Berwald. He lives about fifteen minutes away. Before we all break up we usually duck into our apartment for a short rest.”

Nodding, Tino shifted his position, pulling his knees up to his chest.

“So…then what? Berwald, do you have to go to work the next day, or…?”

“Not necessarily,” the big man replied, “I started a woodworking project before we left, all I have to do is finish it for my client, but there’s no real time pressure.”

“That’s the beauty of being a carpenter-for-hire.” Lukas agreed. “So, Tino, we all relax the day after we get home, before we even start to think about taking on new cases. Once we do, though, if you want to come with us you can.”

This notion excited the merman and he nodded eagerly.

“That would be wonderful! I might not entirely understand what is going on but at least I can observe!”

“Right!” Mathias butted in. “And plus, with you along I’d be filming for two reasons at once. It’s a win-win!”

Lukas, Berwald, and Emil gave a familiar-sounding heavy sigh, but Tino looked enthusiastic.

“From there, you can decide what you would like to do to occupy your time.” Lukas continued. “Berwald can maybe take you shopping and get you some more basic supplies or tools, and…we’ll just take it one day at a time, alright? And don’t forget; if there’s anything you don’t understand, or if you need anything, don’t keep it to yourself. I hope by now we’ve shown you that we stick by our own.”

A soft, endearing smile spread on Tino’s face and he said quietly,

“I never thought a human would call me one of their own…”

They all considered him for a moment before Emil broke the silence by clearing his throat.

“Well, I’m going to start packing; my stuff is all over the place.”

“Good idea.” Lukas agreed, getting up from the sofa. “Mathias, you’re going to crawl along every inch of our bedroom floor to be sure you haven’t dropped anything. The last thing I want is you whining about forgetting something.”

Mathias snorted at that as he hopped up to follow Lukas up the stairs.
“Oh please, you just want me on hands and knees so you can check out my ass.”

He emphasized the word ‘ass’ with a firm pinch to both of Lukas’ own cheeks, to which he received a little squeaking sound and then a smack across the chest. Nevertheless, Tino spotted the playful smile on Lukas’ normally reserved face.

The rest of the day was half bustling to and fro to finish up laundry and tidying rooms, checking every corner to be sure that they were leaving nothing behind. The other half was a slow, relaxing pace of everyone trying to soak up as much of their remaining time as they could. Tino took his last swim of the trip, Lukas insisting that he needed to wash and dry his trunks before that evening, and he stayed in the pool for far longer than usual. He ended up feeling a little chapped in his gills from breathing the pool water for so long, and flushed some fresh water from a cup through them before drying off.

By afternoon they had all packed as much as they could without bringing their bags down to the door, and all five of them were lounging in the great room. Mathias had draped himself in Lukas’ lap, playing games on his phone while the other man read a book, Emil was typing up a rough draft of a filler article for the blog, and Tino was playing checkers with Berwald. The merman didn’t care much for the chess game that they’d shown him over their stay, but he took to the checkers very well. Berwald had finally stopped letting him win, though whenever the merman did lose a game Tino would pout for a while before starting up a new one. For a few hours they all just rested like this together and enjoyed the peace and quiet.

The evening consisted of burgers, chips, and soda for dinner, since they needed to use the last of their meat. Tino still refused to make up his mind on whether he found soda repulsive or not. Once all the dishes from the meal were done, Lukas allowed Mathias to break out the one bottle of alcohol that they had brought. Apparently, Lukas had rationed it so that if any of them wanted it to last the week they’d have to drink it sparingly. Instead, they’d all ignored it until tonight.

“I’m going to warn you, Tino,” Lukas said carefully as he poured out the drinks for them all, “I have no idea how this will affect you. At best you’ll feel a pleasant buzz, at worst…you might get a hangover in the morning.”

Arching a golden eyebrow, Tino asked,

“Hanging over what?”

It had been a little while since they’d had a misunderstanding like that, so they all chuckled and explained it to him. After which Tino looked suspiciously at the liquor bottle and the small amount of its’ contents in his glass. No doubt he was also remembering the ‘drunk’ conversation from the morning.

“One glass shouldn’t hurt him, even if he’s never had it before.” Insisted Mathias. “Now down the hatch!”

“Not before we’ve had a proper toast!” Emil reminded him. “Even I know that much of etiquette.”

“Why should we have toast?” Asked Tino, looking past Berwald’s big frame to the toaster on the counter behind him.

“By ‘toast’ we mean a little speech; a salute, something to drink for.” Lukas explained. Tino’s eyes lit up.

“Oh! We do that with special hunts! The first bite of a group hunt requires a speech, but why do
you call it a ‘toast’ if you don’t eat toast with it?”

“That’s a very good question…for the internet.” Emil laughed.

“Moving on, let’s get to the drinking already!”

“Shut up for a moment and let me do the toast then.” Demanded Lukas. Mathias shut up, but watched him with a huge contained smile and wide eyes, like a toddler waiting for candy. Lukas sighed, then raised his glass. They all did the same. “To this life-changing week, and the future year ahead of us with Tino, our wonderful merman.”

“Here, here!” The other two mumbled, and Tino cried the words out late after he heard them, all their glasses clinking together. Tino took his first taste, sipping carefully, and then he frowned. A second later his eyes widened and his head snapped back.

“I’ve tasted this before!” He said, alarmed, looking at them with big, concerned eyes. They all stared back at him, intrigued. “It’s very bad! There were gallons of it floating around a huge crate that fell from a ship, and it made all of us very, very sick!”

Lukas cocked an eyebrow at that.

“A fallen alcohol crate? Must have been from a freighter…”

“I’m serious, this stuff is dangerous!” Tino insisted, his breathing starting to get a little panicky as his eyes darted between them all. “When we went to investigate we breathed it through our gills and the next thing we knew we were all disoriented and were bumping into each other and couldn’t speak right! Then we all had dreadful headaches and some of us vomited and—why are you drinking this horrible liquid!?”

“Booze, Tino, it’s called booze.” Mathias informed him, chugging his glass down. Tino chirped in dismay, his mouth dropping open.

“Stop it, Mat! You’re going to get sick!”

“Calm down,” Berwald told Tino, placing a huge hand on his shoulder, “it was probably different for your folk because it went through your gills and there was so much. It can only affect us like that when we drink too much of it. This amount won’t hurt any of us.”

Big, violet-blue eyes gazed up into Berwald’s, searching them for the truth. Finally, he relaxed and gave a soft exhalation of breath.

“Ok…if you say so. Just…be careful with it, alright? Don’t drink too much?”

“No promises!” Mathias laughed, but the others knew they didn’t have enough to make any of them drunk when split between them all.

“Sounds like you and your fellow mer folk had an overdose if there was a great amount of alcohol just floating in the water.” Lukas commented, taking a sip from his own glass. “Sounds like it went straight to your brains too.”

Tino gave the drink another suspicious try, but his face screwed up in displeasure.

“I um…I don’t really like how this tastes.” He admitted, placing his glass on the counter. “Please don’t be offended if I don’t want to finish it.”
“Don’t worry about it, it’s-.”

“More for me!” Mathias declared, reaching for the glass Tino had just abandoned. “It’s up for grabs, it’s mine now!”

Lukas sighed, watching with somewhat weary eyes as his better half began guzzling down the extra liquor.

“Just take it easy, alright?” He asked in a long-suffering tone. “I know that you won’t be the one driving the next two days, but we still have to put up with you and I don’t like how you whine when you’re hungover.”

Mathias rolled his eyes.

“I won’t get hungover from two glasses!”

“Like that would keep you from whining.” Muttered Emil into his own drink.

Berwald caught Tino’s eyes, and slightly rolled his own. The merman grinned in amusement. Mathias turned on Emil at once, invading his space and waggling his eyebrows.

“I may whine afterwards, but when I’ve got a few drinks in me I gain superpowers!”

The teen scoffed, pushing the older man away from him.

“Is one of those powers sounding like a complete lunatic?”

Mathias shook his head, took another gulp of the alcohol, and then whirled around toward his lover. Lukas seemed to bristle under the direct attention as Mathias began stalking toward him.

“Come on, Emil, as if you even have to ask what my superpower is!” In one movement, he had plucked the drink from Lukas’ hand, set it on the counter, and pulled Lukas easily against his body.

“Berwald, music!” Mathias demanded with a dramatic snap of his fingers. The bigger man pulled out his phone on cue and scrolled for a few seconds before plugging it into the port for the sound system in the kitchen. From all corners of the downstairs a jazzy tune belted out in brass instruments and a quick beat.

“Aw yeah, our man knows old timey dancing tunes!”

Lukas went with Mathias as he began swaying them back and forth in time with the music. Surprisingly it was true that the taller man was very adept at dancing, and Lukas had only to follow him. Emil let out a loud, frustrated sound and rubbed a hand over his eyes. Berwald didn’t say anything. Tino, on the other hand, was fascinated. He watched as the two men jazzed their way out into the open area of the great room, their feet rising and falling in rhythm, Mathias twirling Lukas out from him every now and again only to pull him back in, moving back and forth together in perfect sync. Lukas had the happiest expression that Tino had ever seen on him before; he was smiling faintly as they danced together, chuckling when Mathias grabbed him around the waist and held him up in a quick lift. It was nearly impossible to look away.

“Seriously, Berwald, why do you encourage them?” Emil complained. “I was hoping we could get through one night of drinking without the two of them breaking out into swing dance…”

Tino broke his eyes from the spectacle before him and looked at Emil.
“Swing dance?”

“Yea, they go to this meet-up a couple times a month.” The teen explained tiredly. “It’s one of the few things that they both really love to do together. Mathias dragged Lukas to the free class at a local rec center when they first started dating. My brother tried to act like he hated it at first but… I’ll admit once you learn a few moves it’s hard not to want to learn more. Lukas is just as good as Mathias, but he’s never the lead. Once he got so good it was fun to watch them together…the first five thousand times, but now it’s just kind of annoying.”

The merman stared back at the couple in the great room, and then he grabbed Emil’s free hand.

“Show me?! He begged. “I used to dance in the sea all the time but it was nothing like this! I didn’t even have legs! This looks amazing! Help me to do it, too, please?!”

The younger man looked taken aback. Tino shook his hand with pent up excitement as Emil struggled.

“Well, um…I don’t know that much, and-.”

“You know more than me, and that’s enough, right?”

“I guess, but-.”

“Please?” Tino’s wide violet-blue eyes made it difficult to refuse, and so Emil eventually grunted and put down his glass.

“OK, ok, but like I said, I don’t know a whole lot. This music is so old and boring too…”

Tino whooped with joy and tugged Emil out into the great room with him, Berwald trailing behind. He was the only one of them who still had his drink.

“Woah, Emil,” Mathias jeered, “you’re actually going to dance? We’re not even bribing you with Icelandic candy this time!”

Emil ignored Mathias, and positioned Tino in front of him.

“Now, you’re taller than me, but you don’t know what you’re doing, so I’ll lead and you follow. That means you put your right hand on my shoulder, and take my right hand in your left. Alright, now just try to mirror the movements of my feet with your own, ok?”

Nodding with enthusiasm, Tino looked down to watch Emil’s feet. They began to move, and Tino did his very best to follow. As expected from a sea creature who’d only had legs and feet for a few days, and had yet to even do more than a light jog with them, Tino wasn’t very graceful dancing for the first time. Emil managed to step on his foot a time or two, and Tino did in his turn. Try as they might, they didn’t fall into a good rhythm with each other for more than a few seconds at a time without one of them messing up. A good ten minutes and a song change later, and Tino looked about ready to cry.

“Aw, come on, Emil, you’re too short to lead him.” Mathias called finally, letting go of Lukas and heading over to the pair of them. “Let me try, why don’t you?”

For once Emil looked grateful to Mathias for something, sidestepping and falling onto the couch beside Berwald, who’d been watching them all.

“Emil, before you sit down why don’t you make yourself useful and set up the camera? Our
merman dancing for the first time; that’s gold that we need to film!”

Rolling his eyes, Emil popped up quickly and went to turn on the camera where it sat on its tripod. He checked the angle before stepping into the frame to sarcastically explain what was happening.

“My idiot not-quite-brother-in-law reeled us all into dancing because we had a drop of alcohol. Have fun with this nonsense, folks. But at least you’ll get to see Tino learning to dance for the first time.”

As Emil moved away from the camera Mathias laughed and took Tino’s hands in his own to ready them both. Emil sat back on the couch, and Lukas joined him and Berwald, breathing a bit heavily from the exertion of dancing. They all observed as Mathias tried to use his greater height to help the merman get into a better rhythm.

“Just relax and have fun!” Mathias told Tino, swinging him out like he had Lukas. “Now spin back to me!”

Tino did so cautiously, and Mathias met him halfway and pulled him in close before spinning him out the other way. The confidence in the taller man’s movements was in stark contrast to Emil’s stumbling instruction, and Tino picked up on it at once. He still had troubling moving his feet the right way, but Mathias made his every action look and feel better because of how skilled he was himself. Tino began to brighten as the moments wore on and he began to fall into sync with Mathias.

“He could make a rock look like a brilliant dancer.” Lukas said, vaguely dreamily. Emil blew a raspberry in response to that. Berwald grunted. Another song change later and Tino was already doing much better, going for longer stretches of time without stumbling. By this time, though, Lukas appeared to be squirming in his seat. Or as much as Lukas could.

“You look lonely over there, babe!” Mathias called, seeing how obviously Lukas wanted to be back with him. “I think Tino could use a break, but I’m wired! Come on over here again!”

Mathias managed to twirl Tino around and plop him down onto the recliner, then stand back up and hold his hand out to Lukas. The shorter man was there already to take it and go right into a routine with his partner. As they started up another long dance together, Tino caught his breath and clapped in time a little, before looking over at the other two men on the couch. Emil looked bored, but Berwald was tapping his foot with the music. That gave Tino an idea. He stood up from the recliner, and went over to stand in front of the couch.

“Sorry, Tino, I suck at dancing.” Emil said at once. “I can tell you want to keep it up, but I just don’t like it that much.”

“That’s ok.” Tino said, then looked at Berwald and turned instantly shy as he asked, “um…do you know how?”

Berwald responded barely before Tino had finished getting the words out, as though he’d been dying for Tino to ask him.

“I can try. I went with them to the class a few times, but never could find a partner for very long. So Lukas let me practice with him when we had time.”

“Great! Show me?”

Lighting up, Tino held out his hand like Mathias had done, giving Berwald his most eager smile. When Berwald stood up and pulled him carefully into position, Emil groaned.
“Oh god, I’m going to bed. You’re all too sappy and old for me. G’night everyone.”

He rose from the couch and started to head up the stairs.

“Bright and early tomorrow, Emil.” Lukas called to his little brother, as Mathias dipped him. Emil waved a hand with an affirmative sound, and then disappeared.

“Should we just jump in?” Tino asked Berwald, shifting in anticipation. Berwald’s eyebrows rose briefly and he gave a small breath.

“I hope so; I’ve practiced with Lukas enough when I couldn’t find anyone else. But he’s used to having Mathias as a partner, and he’s amazing.”

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine!” Piped Tino. “I’m the one who’s more likely to mess up. So let’s go!”

Berwald gave one more uncertain sound before blowing out a breath and setting his shoulders.

“Alright, I’ll do my best.”

With that Berwald lunged forward, taking Tino with him in a quick step sequence. The merman chirped in surprise. While not quite as confident as Mathias, Berwald was nearly as good knowing his footwork, making it easier for Tino to follow him. Berwald was also taller than Mathias by at least an inch and it was hard not to keep in time when he was such a large force.

“You’re good, Ber!” Tino laughed, clinging to the bigger man tighter as they fell into time together. “This is fun!”

Berwald didn’t answer, but led them over to Mathias and Lukas so that they could all sync up. It was incredible to Tino. Even with his errors and Berwald not quite knowing everything either, they were all having so much fun together and roughly doing the same moves at the same time. The atmosphere was so comfortable and vibrant that he couldn’t stop smiling.

“Hey, you’re not half bad there, fish boy!” Mathias called when Berwald spun Tino out and he gracefully spun back into his hold. Tino laughed and let himself be lead easily.

“It’s only because Berwald is so good!” He insisted, and that was all the speech he was capable of for a while. He had to pay attention even though he was having the time of his life. The last thing he wanted was to mess up and ruin the cheerful and happy mood. Little did Tino know that Berwald was thinking the exact same thing.

The bigger man drew on every bit of information he could remember from when he had led Lukas or the occasional instructor around in classes. It had seemed relatively easy for him, but he had never been given a lot of time to practice otherwise. That, and Tino was smaller than Lukas. The variance wasn’t by much, but it was enough for the movement to be different, especially since the merman had never danced before. So Berwald tried to compensate for him by being the strongest leader he could, with firm and decisive movements even if he wasn’t entirely sure he was doing them correctly. Tino was the fluttering flag to his firm pole, following his direction and clinging to him like a life support. All the while he was smiling and laughing and looking Berwald in the face. That meant more to Berwald than he could ever express; not many people outside his odd circle tried to look anywhere near his eyes in regular conversation. But those violet-blues continued to latch onto his own eyes and pour out trust and happiness in doses that Berwald was afraid would be lethal to him. Even on his happiest day Mathias was more annoying than he was infectious with his mood, and the two brothers were more laid back, while Berwald himself was the quietest and most withdrawn of them all. To suddenly have this ray of sparkling sunshine turned on him every other
second was a bit blinding, but filled him with such warmth and joy that he almost felt like a
different person. Holding Tino like this, dancing his little body around, was like hugging that
sunbeam; warm, light, and cheery.

Tino, on the other hand, was thinking just how sweet Berwald was being. He meant what he had
told the other man about being able to see the emotions inside of him. Even with his folk’s ability
to feel each other’s thoughts and emotions, much of their communication relied on expressions.
Just like humans, from what he had been able to tell, not all mer folk were as expressive as others.
Regardless, Tino had found that he had a knack for reading these humans in a way that they were
completely unaware of themselves. Berwald was no exception. While he tried to seem so calm and
in control right now, Tino could tell that he was putting on a very confident display despite being
unsure of himself. Classic behavior for any individual in a group of males, however…Tino had the
distinct impression that Berwald was more intent on impressing him specifically than he was
outdoing his fellows. This…was an interesting development. There was a slight hint of beta-
creeping-into-alpha-territory that made Tino feel just a bit excited.

Neither of the men let their thinking distract them too much from keeping up with Mathias and
Lukas, but after a long stretch of time the music ended with a final swell, and they all paused to
catch their breath.

“Damn, you two looked pretty good.” Lukas complimented. “We’ll have to take you to class
sometime, Tino.”

“Really? That would be so fun!” Tino exclaimed, swinging Berwald’s big hand in his. “We could
learn more together!”

It was hard to tell if it was the physical strain of such fast-paced dancing that turned Berwald’s
cheeks pink, or Tino’s words. Either way none of them missed it.

“Don’t you have any way to dance in the sea?” Mathias asked, still rocking Lukas back and forth in
his hold.

“We…aren’t as…um…quick and boisterous.” Admitted Tino with a downward glance. “When we
‘dance’ it’s more like we swim in tandem. We’re more about slow grace, so…I’ve never seen
anything like this before, let alone been able to do it. I mean, I’d sort of see humans bouncing
around on the big cruise ships, but I was never able to tell what they were doing.”

As he finished up his explanation the next song on Berwald’s playlist came on. It was a completely
different variation of the same style of jazzy music. But this song was slow, with soft piano and
saxophone crooning out a steady beat.

“Aw, yea…” Mathias almost moaned, pulling Lukas in close. “Slow dance, baby…”

Tino looked at them, observing the change in their body language. They were more relaxed,
melting into each other as they began stepping slowly from side to side.

“This one looks easier.” Tino said.

“Well, you don’t have to actually dance to this.” Lukas explained, his head resting against Mathias’
shoulder. “It’s more about enjoying the company of your partner.”

Tino blushed, looking back up at Berwald. The bigger man was still a bit red in the cheeks as well,
and the merman found that for once he didn’t have anything to say. It was obvious that this was
more for romantic partners rather than friends having fun together like they’d been doing before.
So...how was he to react?

“We can if you want.” Berwald finally said, his voice sounding even quieter than usual.

Tino’s heart leapt. The invitation was something much more meaningful in his own culture, at least when it came to dancing in this style. He knew that Berwald could not possibly know that, or maybe he did, considering what Tino had told him about the harvest dances and pairings...either way, he wanted to.

“Ok,” he said, trying to sound light and normal, “what should I do?”

“Just, um...” Berwald stammered, and glanced over at Mathias and Lukas. They were plastered together, hip to head, moving in a slow circle. “You don’t have to do that if...”

Tino scooted forward on his feet and boldly dropped his head to Berwald’s chest. He was just high enough to reach Berwald’s shoulder, but the tall man’s chest was broad enough that it seemed the best choice. That strong arm curled in close around his smaller waist, holding him against the larger frame. Almost at once, Tino relaxed. Now that he was here, it was very comfortable in Berwald’s arms. He felt it might be more awkward if he’d had to slow dance while looking up into Berwald’s eyes. He hadn’t minded the rest of the time, but even he felt that might be too uncomfortable given the context. This way was much nicer, and allowed him to just feel his way around Berwald instead of seeing it. He could feel Berwald’s heart thumping rapidly against his ribcage, but he couldn’t blame the man.

They began to rock back and forth, just as the other couple was, and Tino closed his eyes as they did. This was different from the dancing he was used to, but the atmosphere was the same. Something was shifting in his understanding of Berwald as well; the second he asked Tino to do this with him he had possibly exposed intentions other than friendship. Again, whether he was aware of it or not Tino didn’t know, but he chose not to worry over it. This possibility, fantasy or not, felt too nice to distract from it with worries.

Berwald was attempting to clear his mind as well, and just enjoy this time with Tino. It was an odd situation to begin with, and the confusion was expected. That’s what he told himself. He’d not forgotten how Tino might be in a vulnerable position emotionally, considering the story he had confided to him. The last time Tino had danced with someone this way, supposedly, it had ultimately ended in heartache. Berwald didn’t want Tino to think he was trying to romanticize him, even though he wasn’t sure that he wasn’t. Every one of their gang had become attached to Tino over the last week, but he couldn’t help but wonder if he’d attached a bit too much. After all, it had been a long time since anyone cute and friendly had shown him so much attention. Even his last serious boyfriend hadn’t been so constantly kind and uplifting. Berwald tried to tell himself not to read too much into it, especially when Tino was so affectionate with everyone. Though Lukas had to point out every now and again that he still thought Tino favored him.

So, now that he had the little darling in his arms, feeling so soft and pliant against him, willingly dancing a slow, romantic dance with him...it was hard to sort out his feelings. Berwald eventually decided that he could do that another time. They had at least a year ahead of them to get to know each other and that was plenty of time to figure things out. This conclusion enabled him to calm and just lead Tino around like he’d been doing it for years.

Berwald felt the merman’s fingers brush lovingly over his shoulder, probably enjoying the thin, soft material of his sweater. Tino had revealed himself to be a very tactile person; he’d touch everything he could to get a good understanding of how things felt. When he liked something he’d continue to pet it, almost like a child. Therefore, it was unsurprising that Tino also began rubbing his cheek against Berwald’s chest, making that little purring sound in delight.
“Soft…” Tino mumbled, probably without meaning to.

“It’s cashmere. Lukas and Emils’ mom bought it for me last Christmas.” Berwald explained, glad to have something to talk about. “Said the color would bring out my eyes, or something weird like that.”

Tino pulled back and narrowed his eyes as they flicked from Berwald’s to the sweater, and back. Then they opened fully as he smiled again.

“Wow! She was right!” Tino exclaimed, and lifted the hand resting on Berwald’s shoulder to poke at his glasses. “but these things really show…show…um…showca…”

Tino struggled, trying to pull up the word that he wanted.

“What are you trying to say?” Lukas’ voice filtered over from where he was still clinging to Mathias.

“Um…it’s like…they make you look toward his eyes more, and the word starts with ‘show’.” Tino explained.

“Showcase?” Lukas suggested.

“Yes!” Tino said with a chirp. “Showcase! His glasses really showcase his eyes already! So…I guess the sweater helps on top of that, so…yea. Your eyes are a pretty color!”

“Thanks.” Berwald said with a tiny grin at Tino’s little dilemma and resolution. The merman smiled victoriously before burrowing his head into Berwald’s shoulder again, pulling him tighter.

“You know, you two are pretty entertaining.” Mathias chuckled over Lukas’ head. “Wish we all lived in the same house like this year round. That would make for lots of antics.”

“I think we’ll have enough of those just seeing each other as often as we probably will.” Lukas pointed out. “Especially once we go back to work.”

“Hmmm…” Mathias answered, planting a few soft kisses to Lukas’ blond hair. “Can’t wait to see you back in action. I miss hearing you chant in Latin. It’s so freaking hot.”

As Mathias said this, the music slowly faded out and left them all with silence. Berwald stopped moving, and Tino pulled back from him.

“That was nice!” He said happily. “Thanks so much for letting me join in!”

Mathias and Lukas parted too.

“It’s no problem. I think the two of you make good dance partners.” Lukas declared. “You’re the right heights with each other.”

Tino giggled and reached up to ruffle Berwald’s hair.

“He’s so tall, he makes a good leader.” He declared.

“That’s what makes a good dancing pair.” Lukas emphasized his words by giving each of them a light thump on the shoulder with his fist. “We’ll definitely be dragging you both to class with us once we get home.”

Another loud and fast-beat song interrupted whatever Mathias was going to say, and it was raucous
and irritating after the soothing slow music.

“Berwald, would you mind? I think we’ve all had enough for tonight, plus we’re getting up early tomorrow.”

Berwald went to turn off the music and retrieve his phone. As he did that Mathias went to the camera and shut it off, content that it had captured the magic.

“Allright, to bed with everyone.” Lukas demanded. “Get as much sleep as you can, and remember, 5am tomorrow I expect you all to be out of bed. I don’t need you to be functional, but at least be on your feet and getting into your clothes at that time.”

Mathias groaned, but didn’t say anything else, heading up the stairs before any of them. Lukas shook his head with a small smile.

“We’ll have a hell of a time with him tomorrow, mark my words.” He said fondly, then put a hand on Tino’s back. “Come on, Tino, up to bed.”

The merman chirped and followed in Mathias’ path up the stairs.

“One of you will wake me up, right?” He asked, concerned.

“No worries, Tino, we won’t leave you behind.”

Tino grinned, then broke into a yawn.

“I think dancing is more tiring on feet…” He muttered.

“Probably more demanding out of the water.” Commented Berwald, bringing up the rear as they climbed the steps.

“I think that I like it better, though.” Tino admitted. “I like how much faster it is, and how much more fun! When we dance, it’s not boring by any means, but…it’s more about relaxation and communion, not fun.”

“Glad we could share it with you then.” Said Lukas, stifling his own yawn. “Alright, goodnight you two. Bright and early tomorrow!”

They all went toward their own doors, calling goodnight to each other before retiring behind them.

As tired as he was, it was hard for Tino to fall asleep. He couldn’t stop thinking about how good it felt to be in Berwald’s arms, how close they had been…but then, he knew that dancing could do that regardless of who the partner was. Still, he had been unhappy in romance long enough for him to feel starved, and even the hint of it from such a handsome and kind human…Tino ended up with a bit more keeping him awake than just warring emotions. Despite all the confusion, his body made it clear what it wanted. He would have felt ashamed that he locked his door and dealt with the issue swiftly, from the safety of his guest bed, but it had been such a long time that he felt it was justified. Plus, he hadn’t quite been brave enough to explore his new body that way yet, and he was relieved once he was lying, satisfied and panting, that everything worked the same as before.

With that, he stumbled to unlock his door, remembering that someone would be in to wake him up in the morning, and then collapsed back onto his bed.

As sleep came over him, he kept thinking about the deep blue of Berwald’s eyes…and how it reminded him of the sea.
Despite the haze of sleepiness hanging over them the next morning, there was an energy to it that made all their blood tingle. The necessity of wolfing down cold cereal and hot coffee, of packing everything into the car in the pale cold of the morning, and the anticipation of the journey before them made the air buzz with excitement. There was plenty of sleepy banter, a bit of yelling, and just a smidge of faint laughter. It was too early for the real wits of the group to try cracking jokes. Tino saw quickly why Lukas had insisted they all get up so early; by the time they were all bundled in the car and on the road more than an hour had passed since they’d all woken up. To keep to the driving schedule, Lukas must have planned an hour ahead.

They were a little cramped even in the big SUV because of all the luggage, and a small argument had ensued before they left because Emil wanted to sit in the trunk portion instead of crammed on the middle seat with Tino and Berwald. Lukas had finally given in on the condition that if they were in an accident and Emil was killed, he couldn’t be blamed for it. Because of this, they each had more space than they had thought they would, and all were using it to lounge and try to rest their still-weary selves. Tino unashamedly leaned his head on Berwald’s shoulder, wrapping his hands around the man’s arm to anchor himself. Berwald himself was leaning against the window to doze, so the position worked out well.

A half-hour later Tino was pulled from his half-sleeping state by the sound of cheerful music ringing out from somewhere. It was sweet and tinkling, with little whimsical sound effects. He opened his eyes and looked around, only to hear Lukas say,

“Mat, can you please mute the sound on that?”

“The music is half the appeal.” Mathias mumbled back, sounding far too asleep to fight about it. “The game is kinda boring without it.”

He did sound a bit pathetic, and it didn’t seem to be lost on Lukas, who made a small sound of understanding. When he spoke again, it sounded much more tender.

“I know, sweetheart, but it’s not helping me drive right now. Why don’t you put your earbuds in?”

“Kay babe…” Mathias nearly sighed, and Tino saw him do as he was told. This made him giggle just a little.

“What is it?” Berwald asked him softly. Tino looked up at him and whispered into his ear.

“Sometimes it seems like Mathias and Lukas are child and parent.”

Berwald’s mouth flinched in the ghost of a smile and he nodded.

“More than sometimes, but they’re good for each other.”

The merman sat up to stretch out his neck, and looked out of his window. It was still dark, too dark to make anything out, but he still focused on the trees and branches that he could see whizzing by in the headlights.

“We’ll be reaching the highway in a little while.” Lukas told Tino. “There will be a lot more cars on it, so don’t be startled, ok?”
The merman sat up straighter in his seat and strained his eyes to look at the road stretching ahead of them.

“Will they be going fast?” He asked, sounding uncertain.

“Depends on which lane we drive in.” Emil answered blearily from behind them. “Lukas stays in the middle lane, so we’ll be going medium speed. Now, when Berwald drives we’ll be all the way over in the slow lane and people will still be passing us because no one should drive that slow even in the slow lane.”

Berwald grunted.

“Just trying to keep you all safe. Better to go slow and get there alive.”

“I agree.” Tino added, his voice a little shaky. “It um…it sounds like your highways are dangerous…”

“They can be.” Lukas admitted. “But it’s just the way of life around here.”

No one said a word until the trees began thinning out and the lights from other cars became visible in the blackness. Tino leaned over Berwald slightly to look out of his window, having never seen a human highway before. As they grew closer and closer he drew gradually back from the window. When Lukas started to merge down the little road onto the paved highway, Tino chirped and shrunk farther back, his eyes going wide and his hand clenching on Berwald’s arm as the glare of other cars came closer and closer at high speed.

“Are you sure they won’t accidentally hit us?” He asked in a thin voice that was obviously trying to conceal just how frightened he was.

“Do schools of fish collide all the time when they swim by each other?” Emil asked, trying to parallel it to something Tino would be familiar with. Tino shook his head, watching intently as they joined the flow of other cars and Lukas established them in the center lane.

“It’s not the same. At all.”

Emil didn’t answer, defeated, and Tino continued watching the traffic with unease.

“They look frightening in the dark.” He mumbled.

“I’ve made this trip a lot, Tino,” Lukas told him softly, “we haven’t had an accident yet.”

Catching his eyes in the mirror, the merman gave him a thankful little smile, but it was still weak and faded as they passed a slower car. He flinched when he looked too closely at how little space there really was between the two vehicles.

“Hey, Tino,” Berwald’s voice came, quiet, as though not wanting to startle him, “Do you want to read with me?” He pulled out his tablet, and flipped it on to show Tino the text on the page. “It’s a story about a wizard in a big city in America called Chicago. He fights off a lot of the same problems we do.”

Violet-blue eyes lit up with interest and Tino leaned closer to read the first few lines.

“Ok…seems interesting…” He said, almost reluctantly as his eyes flicked to the window for a second.
“You have to keep reading to get the full gist of what he does.” Encouraged Berwald, inching closer to Tino. The merman eased into his shoulder, and focused on the tablet, beginning to read.

Having done his job of distracting Tino, Berwald continued to read with him, answering his questions as they came up; like what the Yellow Pages were, and taxis, and cops. No one else in the car commented on the fact that Berwald was at least halfway through the book already, but had started over again for Tino.

The merman required some consoling when they came to a scene in the book where two lovers were found with their hearts exploded out of their chests, but he quickly recovered when Berwald explained that in real life they never faced any kind of magic like that. The book kept Tino enthralled for nearly two hours or so, until his eyes began to give out from looking at the screen for so long.

“You need to take a break.” Berwald told him, when he was caught rubbing his eyes between blinks. “Your eyes are sore.”

Tino turned said eyes up at him pleadingly.

“But….he’s hurt!” The merman protested. “He’s hurt and sick and he only has so much time to find the culprits, I can’t stop reading now!”

Berwald shut the tablet off and shook his head, slipping it back into his bag.

“Berwald!” Tino begged, pawing at his arm.

“No. Rest now.” The big man told him. “We can read some more later.”

Tino crossed his arms and pouted. He couldn’t hold the pose for long, as the light had increased to where he could better see outside, and was soon distracted by watching the cars. Now that they weren’t glaring lights in the dark, they didn’t seem as frightening. He liked to try and spot the people inside, the drivers, and their passengers.

“Hey, Tino,” Mathias asked, sounding much more awake than when he last spoke, and apparently growing bored of his game, “want to play a car-watching game to pass the time?”

Tino tilted his head like a puppy.

“You can make a game out of that?”

“Sure! There’s a lot of them to help with long drives. Like, the first one to count five cars with a 6 in the license plate in five minutes wins.”

“What’s a lissence plate?”

“The plaques with numbers and letters on the front and back of cars.” Lukas supplied. “It’s to help register each car to its owner, in case it’s stolen or the owner does something illegal and need to be tracked down.”

“That’s a good idea!” Tino said happily.

“Which?” Mathias asked. “Playing the game or the idea of license plates?”

“Both!” The merman chirped. “Let’s play! What’s first?”

The license plate game lasted them longer than it usually did, mostly thanks to Tino’s enthusiasm.
At first they kept track of who won, but after a while they were all just blurting out which number, letter, or increasingly difficult combination of both that they saw with each passing car. The real fun came in when they argued about whether more than one of them could use the same license plate to count. To make it more interesting they decided that the first person to see a car with the right parameters could claim it, and no one else could count it as their own.

That could only take them so far before they all got bored and began to idly chat with each other. During this time Tino convinced Berwald to put braids in his hair again, despite the fact that the last ones came out barely a day after. Glad for something to do, Berwald complied. Idle chatting and watching Berwald’s braiding skills carried them for another hour or so before Tino began to bug Berwald to let him keep reading. Berwald never had a chance to answer.

“We’re almost to our lunch stop.” Lukas told them. “You can argue about reading later.”

Tino perked up at the mention of food, and he licked his lips eagerly.

“What kind of food?”

“Burgers mostly.” Mathias answered. “Burgers and fries with soda. Like last night.”

“We’ll have to explain about ordering fast food,” Mentioned Emil, “but I think you’ll get the swing of it.”

By the time they were pulling into the burger joint, Tino had already learned about the assembly line system in order to understand the concept of fast food, and he was excited to see how it was prepared. They explained to him that he couldn’t go into the kitchen but would have to get the best look that he could at the counter.

The bathroom was the first stop for all of them before they gathered at the counter to order. Tino’s eyes flew over the menu, reading the descriptions and his mouth began watering.

“Let’s all decide what we want first, and order together.” Lukas said.

As they stood deciding they received many stares from customers and employees alike. It wasn’t every day they saw a young man with a waterfall of a million braids down to his knees, let alone the flash of iridescent spots on his skin. He was bundled into one of the tourist hoodies that they’d bought him at The Bend, but his markings were still visible on his hands and down the sides of his face. Berwald had pulled all the hair on his left into a complicated braid along his scalp, so his skin was on full display, while the other side of his face and neck were hidden by braids that he’d left to hang.

Tino was quickly distracted from the menu by the people. Outside of this group he’d never seen any other humans in person. His eyes wandered excitedly to the young couple sitting by the window, the old man drinking coffee alone, and all the people hustling and bustling behind the counter. He was so busy staring he didn’t realize that he was also being stared at by a few of them.

“Love your hair!” The girl waiting for them at the register called to him. Tino grinned at her.

“Thanks! Berwald did it for me!” He took the big man’s arm and pulled it close to him.

“Aw, that’s sweet.” She said politely. “Are you shooting for a fashion blog or something?”

“What?” Tino asked. She pointed to Mathias.

“Your friend’s filming you.”
Tino turned to see Mathias holding out his phone discreetly to capture Tino’s reaction to the environment. He felt slightly annoyed.

“Mathias, can’t you wait until we’re sitting down?” Berwald scolded. “Put that thing away and order already.”

Mathias shrugged and stopped the recording, slipping his phone into his pocket.

“Will you be needing a few minutes?” The girl said in response. No doubt customers messing with their phones in line was old hat.

Lukas cast his eyes over the group questioningly. Tino ducked his head and admitted,

“I’m sorry, I…forgot to decide. Just…get something for me?”

“Sure thing, bro, we got you!” Mathias chuckled, thumping him on the back and sauntering up to the counter. He leaned on it like some greaser in a 50’s movie and ordered like one too. The girl’s lips were twitching like mad trying to contain a burst of laughter. Lukas immediately pulled Mathias away from the counter once he was finished, with a muttered ‘idiot’, and placed his own order. Emil was next, and then Berwald ordered double of the same meal for him and Tino. The merman watched in fascination at what was happening in the kitchen, at how fast everything was moving.

“It’s a little dizzying, isn’t it?” He asked, still clinging to Berwald’s arm. “How do they know what to do so quickly?”

“They’re trained.” Answered Lukas simply. “Like you are trained for any other job.”

Tino watched as the employees began piling food on the waiting trays for them, items at a time, until they had filled four of them. They picked a few tables in the center of the eating area that had been pushed together for larger groups. When they sat down to eat, Tino started to get excited. The food smelled amazing, and he’d never tried the drink Berwald ordered. He peeled away the wrappings around his burger with intensity, watching the others do the same, and catching Mathias filming him again. He ignored it, and instead took his first bite of his burger. He hadn’t realized how hungry he was until that bite, but suddenly he was starved. Tino had learned something about how to eat over the few days he’d observed the rest of them, and so he did his very best not to make a mess. For the most part he succeeded, though he found with this type of food it was impossible for things to not get a tad sloppy sometimes.

“What’s this drink, again?” Tino asked, as he took great delight in pushing his straw through the thin lid of his cup.

“Lemonade.” Berwald reminded him. “It’s made from a fruit called a lemon, and then they add water and sugar.”

Tino took a sip with his straw, gently, as he’d never used one before. As the liquid touched his tongue he flinched slightly, but then rolled it around in his mouth and smiled.

“This is really good!” He declared once he’d swallowed, and began guzzling it down. “Much better than soda.”

“You can get a refill or two if you finish it all before we leave.” Emil told him through a mouthful of fries.

“I wouldn’t recommend that.” Lukas reminded him. “We have a few hours left to go, and there’s
only a few stops along the way.”

Tino looked a little deflated when he heard that, and put his cup down, turning his attention to his fries.

“Don’t worry,” Berwald nudged him gently, “it’s not like we can’t get any lemonade at home.”

“We’ll have to take you to the grocery store and record your reaction!” Said Mathias excitedly. “I can’t wait to see what you think of everything!”

Chewing steadily, Tino smiled with his mouthful and gave Mathias and his phone a thumbs up. He’d learned the gesture recently, and loved it.

A few minutes later something caught Tino’s eye. A woman had just walked in and was standing at the counter ordering. Instantly Tino sat up straight, openly staring with his violet-blue eyes gone wide with happiness. The rest of them took note of his posture and turned to look as well. They knew instantly what was intriguing the merman so; with the woman were two children. The boy looked to be around seven, and the girl around five. They were chatting on and off with their mother, the girl jumping up and down excitedly about something most likely related to their order.

“They’re so cute…” Tino said, almost dreamily.

Lukas and Berwald shared a look, before Lukas spoke.

“Stop staring, Tino.”

The tone was firm, and the merman instantly snapped his head back around, looking at the other man. Lukas made sure to catch his eyes and hold them.

“Listen, Tino, we all know you love children, but you have to be careful what you say and how you act in a public place. Someone could take it the wrong way.”

“Yea, you might look like a creeper.” Agreed Emil. “We really don’t want that.”

Tino’s brows wrinkled in confusion.

“Cr-ee-per?”

They all went through outward signs of awkwardness and sadness as they realized Tino had no idea what they meant. Lukas looked like he was preparing himself mentally, Mathias looked more solemn and shook his head, while Emil rubbed at his temples and Berwald worked his jaw a bit.

“What’s the matter?” Tino asked, feeling slightly alarmed. “What did I do?”

“Nothing at all.” Assured Lukas. “You just don’t understand…there are…”

The man cleared his throat and lowered his voice, making Tino lean in closer to hear him.

“It’s revolting, and I don’t know if this is something that happens in the sea or not, but here…we have to be cautious of bad people who specifically hunt for children. The last thing we want is someone who doesn’t know you think that you’re one of them.”

A look of utter horror and disgust broke out over Tino’s face, and his jaw dropped open.

“W-what? Hunt? Like…to eat?”
Again, the unease and discomfort that rippled through his companions was enough to frighten Tino.

“No, Tino…” Emil muttered, trying to help his brother out. “There are other kinds of predators that take kids and…abuse them…in a very…erm…oh hell I can’t, this is…”

“Some sick people desire children like their mates.” Berwald stated, in a low voice that rumbled with anger and revulsion, while putting it into terms Tino would understand.

He did.

And the second understanding dawned on him, he reacted.

The merman’s eyes darkened to a deep violet-black, the irises expanding to nearly cover the whites of his eyes, the pupils suddenly constricting into a slit. His lips curled back and his canines rapidly lengthened an entire inch. His breathing grew heavy and animalistic and it was the humans’ turns to be alarmed, as they all jolted back a bit at the rather frightening sight. Matthias even uttered a little startled ‘woah!’ Their sweet little Tino looked like a bloodthirsty creature ready for war.

“Tino?” Berwald asked bravely a few seconds later.

The merman seemed to come back to himself, blinking suddenly. He closed his eyes, making an obvious effort to calm his breathing a bit. He let his lips relax, his fangs receding. When he opened his eyes again he looked completely normal, except for his blank expression. Then he spoke. His tone was dark, deep, sounding completely different than the light tone they all knew.

“In my waters, if folk like that are discovered we rip open their wrists, break their tail, and leave them for the sharks. They are an abomination that we do not tolerate. No one hurts a child like that and lives.”

The rest of them looked like they were struggling between being disturbed, and cheering the mer folk on for being so aggressive toward such vile offenders. Lukas cleared his throat again, and sounded a little shaky when he finally formed words.

“Now I think you understand why I told you to stop staring.”

Tino nodded.

“I’m sorry, it’s just…I do love children. So much. And…the fact that you had to tell me that…it shows me how much more prevalent that issue is in your world. It saddens me…”

They were all silent for a moment. Tino had fallen back into his more elaborate way of speaking, which he did at times when he was extremely serious.

“Well, you don’t need to worry,” Emil said, obviously trying to break the mood, “no one would ever think you could hurt a kid; you’re too sweet and caring.”

That statement seemed to perk the merman up, and he gave a small smile, but it was obvious that he was still upset. They ate in silence for a while, a rare occurrence for them. Even Mathias didn’t try to break it.

When someone did speak it was Lukas, asking quietly,

“I had no idea you could change your appearance like that.”
Tino looked up from his food in confusion.

“Huh?”

“You changed when you got angry just now. Didn’t you realize it?”

The merman blinked and shook his head.

“I did? What…what did I do?”

Mathias jumped on the question and described what had happened in detail while Tino listened. When he was done, Tino covered his eyes with a hand and groaned.

“I’m…so sorry, everyone…really…I didn’t mean to do that. I didn’t even know that I could in this form.”

“What is ‘it’?” Emil asked, sounding eager.

“Extract my fangs.” Tino explained. “In the sea we had to, depending on what we were eating and where we were hunting. But my eyes…I didn’t know that the pu-pupil was a different shape under the sea…I’d never seen my own face in the water before…So…I’m not sure about that.”

“Perhaps it was simply an emotional reaction, as though you were sensing and preparing for danger.” Suggested Lukas.


“What do you mean, Ber?”

They all turned to look at the usually silent man, and he sighed, but answered,

“It doesn’t matter who you are, everyone can react violently when emotions are high. It’s not so surprising that Tino can. It’s just easier to see.”

Lukas opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted.

“Excuse me.”

A timid voice called. They all looked up to see a young girl dressed in the restaurants’ uniform and holding a tray of food presumably for herself.

“I’m sorry to bug you, but I saw you all come in and…um…you’re the Bondevik brothers, right? And Mathias, Berwald, and Tino?”

Lukas nodded at her.

“That’s right. You’ve heard of us?”

She looked like she might drop her tray as her eyes darted to Tino.

“Um…I’ve been following you all…that is, I’ve been watching you! I mean, I’m always watching your videos and reading your blog. I really love you all! I mean I love what you do, not that I love love you, but--.”

“Oh, you’re a fan!?” Mathias asked at once, finding an instant vent. He didn’t sit in silence very often, but when he did he usually had to find some way to make up for it. So he stood up and
walked right to the girl, who nearly reeled back as he took hold of her tray. “Come sit with us! We’d love a chance to talk to one of our fans in person!”

She didn’t argue, but let him carry her tray to the one empty chair at their crowded table. She then sat and laughed awkwardly.

“I’m sorry, I’m not usually so forward, but I recognized you and thought that if I didn’t at least say hello that I’d regret it for the rest of my life.”

“Good thinking!” Declared Mathias. “We’re only in their area once a year, after all, and so you wouldn’t have a chance like this again! What’s your name?”

“Leena.” She replied, her eyes roving over them all as though she couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“That’s a pretty name.” Tino said sincerely, looking brighter now than he had been.

She grinned and stared back at him.

“Thanks so much…um…wow, I never thought I’d get to meet Tino the Merman in the flesh.”

“You have now.” Tino chirped happily. “So, you’re one of the people who watch on the computer?”

“Yes, I read every update that you post and watch all of your videos! I couldn’t believe it when the footage of your rescue went viral and the story started getting so much attention! I always said that you guys were amazing, but now the whole world knows it!”

Her excitement seemed to infect Tino, and he wriggled a bit in his seat.

“The whole world? Really?”

“Well that’s what the reports say; you’ve had views in every country and have been a headline for a while now.”

“Headline?” Tino asked, cocking his head. Leena covered her mouth briefly and said,

“Sorry, I’m sorry. Um, a headline; a big story? Front page news?”

“Oh…” Tino replied. “News. That’s right!”

Leena gave a little laugh at him, just keeping the hysterical edge out of it. Not that it would have mattered since Mathias joined her and his own laugh drowned hers out.

“Our little fish boy is still learning so much.” He declared, reaching over the table to tug at one of Tino’s braids. “But he’s a riot while doing it!”

Tino batted his hand away, but was smiling. Leena started in on her lunch, obviously under a time pressure but wanting to talk to them at the same time. She got in a few bites and swig of her soda before asking,

“So you’re all on your way back to Sweden now, right? Are you going to post a video of your homecoming?”

“Probably, since I’ve been filming on and off since we left this morning.” Mathias told her. “I’ll piece the shots together once we get home, but there’s no way to film Tino going to Berwald’s
house because I’m pretty sure Berwald wouldn’t let me. But I’m going to have us all at least wave to the camera once we’re sitting in our driveway because it’s the least we can do for our dedicated fans.”

Leena smiled wide around her mouthful of burger, and nodded in appreciation. They let her sit with them until she had finished her lunch, at which time she rose to go and asked,

“Um…would I be able to get a picture with all of you?”

“We can do better than that, you can take a picture and a video if you’d like! Share it with all your friends and spread the word!”

Leena looked very excited about Mathias’ suggestion, as did Tino. The rest of them were neutrally accepting of the situation. It wasn’t the first time they’d met fans, it had happened quite a lot and they knew how to react. They gathered in close, Tino squeezing in right next to Leena’s face, and let her snap a few photos before falling back. She then recorded a short video of them hailing the camera and showing her face. After all that all the other customers in the dining area were sending them curious glances and Leena looked ready to jump out of her skin with excitement.

“I have to get back to work, but thank you all so much! It was amazing getting to meet you all! And Tino, good luck, I’ll be following your story.”

“Thanks, Leena! I’m happy knowing you’ll be watching!”

Tino gave the girl a big hug with a little chirp, and when he let go she looked dazed. She almost wobbled over to the bin to stack her empty tray, and then she disappeared into the kitchen.

“Well, as far as first fan encounters, you took it like a pro, Tino.” Emil said, slapping Tino on the back. The merman’s chest swelled a little and he grinned.

“She was nice! I can’t believe she just knew who we were!”

“Get used to that.” Lukas said kindly. “From the sound of it, we’ve made more of a splash than even I thought we had.”

They began filing over to the trash with their trays, and Tino giggled at Lukas’ words.

“What?” Emil asked, as they headed out the doors and back to the car.

“‘Making a splash’, Tino explained, still giggling, “with a merman.”

A few soft chuckles acknowledged the irony of Lukas’ words, and then Mathias snapped his fingers.

“That’s gotta be the title of one of your articles, Emil! ‘Making a Splash with a Merman’, come on, it’s great! How did we never think of that?!’”

This sent the two into a discussion of how to use the phrase ‘making a splash’ regularly without altering their ‘Tino Ashore’ official title for the ongoing story. Berwald and Lukas switched off in the driver’s seat, and Tino kept reading the digital book on his own, after Lukas helped him open up Berwald’s tablet. They got back on the highway (slower than before now that Berwald was at the wheel) and Lukas popped in his earbuds to tune out the debate going on between his brother and lover from the front and back seats. When Emil and Mathias eventually came to an agreement, they too went to their individual forms of entertainment with computer and phone, and the car fell quiet.
Tino eventually became tired with holding himself upright to read, and without a word, leaned sideways against Lukas’ shoulder.

The man stiffened for a second, having been lost in his own audiobook, but then gave a very soft smile and relaxed. A few minutes later he felt Tino yawn, and saw that the tablet screen had gone black from lack of use. Sensing the merman was tired out, he reached down and slipped the tablet from his hands, placing it aside. He then put his arm around Tino and pulled him gently into his shoulder, brushing a hand through his hair. The merman didn’t even make a sound as he accepted the affection with a little nuzzle, and then fell asleep.

Everyone else was distracted with their own devices, and Lukas didn’t draw attention to it. However, he happened to glance up at that moment, and saw Berwald looking back at Tino’s sleeping face in the rear-view mirror. The second their eyes met, Berwald’s seemed to blink in surprise that Lukas was even there, which made the corner of his mouth tug into an unavoidable smirk.

Lukas winked at him.

Berwald looked quickly back to the road, his face as neutral as ever but a few shades pinker.

That evening was exciting for Tino, as he got to eat at a sit-down restaurant and check into a hotel for the first time.

The others were so patient with him when he didn’t understand something, or became frightened by something harmless, or became so happy or overwhelmed that he began bouncing in his seat or chirping. He didn’t mind that so many humans stared at him wherever they went. He stared right back at them, intrigued by the differences in every face and body and wardrobe. There were a few more instances of fans recognizing them in the restaurant, which more than hyped the merman up to the delight of all present with their phones.

Once they had checked in and were in their rooms, though, Tino felt the weariness of such exertion fall over him. After all their traveling they’d had to drag their bags up to the rooms, though the elevator scared him it had gotten them there faster than stairs would have, and Tino had nearly collapsed on the first bed he saw. He nearly missed the discussion the others had over who would be staying in each room, considering that they had originally booked for four and they now had five. It was decided that Emil would stay in one room with Lukas and Mathias, and Berwald would share with Tino. The merman was grateful for Lukas being his champion in this; stating that Tino needed a break from as many of them as he could get away from, and that Berwald was the quietest so it would be the most restful choice.

Berwald agreed, with very few words, and the decision was made. Their rooms were connected by a suite door, so for a while they left it open and just communicated back and forth as they would’ve in the cabin. Once they had all showered and changed into pj’s, though, they called all their goodnights and closed the door, leaving it unlocked.

The last hour had felt like a blur for Tino, like he was too tired to pay attention, or just couldn’t handle everything. So when he did curl up in the clean-smelling bed and let Berwald turn out the lights (except for the bathroom light for some reason) he was surprised when he didn’t fall asleep.
instantly. He lay there, waiting to fall into the abandon of sleep, but found he just couldn’t shut off his brain. So much had happened today, he had seen so many new things, and he was having a hard time calming down. Even the shower, which usually helped put him into a peaceful state of mind, had only temporarily helped.

Not only that, but as comfortable as the bed was, it wasn’t the one he’d gotten used to at the cabin. That calm, serene place in the middle of the forest had been the perfect location for him to adjust to being on land, and he’d become used to it and comfortable there. This place was…strange. It seemed so empty and there was the sound of traffic from the highway. Faint, but unsettling after the week of nights spent in the silence of the woods outside his cabin window. Tino wondered how he was ever supposed to sleep here.

Across the small space between their beds, Berwald was just on the verge of slipping into sleep. He was glad that he could get his driving out of the way first thing tomorrow morning and then let Lukas take the rest of the trip. He didn’t like driving more than two hours at a time. He was thinking these thoughts vaguely to himself, when he heard a small sigh, and realized that Tino was still stirring in his own bed.

Berwald looked over toward the other bed, and saw the multitude of brightly glowing markings outlining Tino in the semi-darkness, a bright blue light in contrast to the yellow crack of light from the bathroom door. Even as he watched, the blurry outline moved and Tino turned onto his back. Berwald frowned. Thinking about it, Tino hadn’t really remained still all that much since lying down. Every few minutes he had heard sheets rustling and the slight creak of the mattress.

For all Berwald knew this was how the merman fell asleep every night. Then again, he’d probably loved his room at the cabin. This was an unknown place. He felt like a heel for not considering whether Tino would even be able to sleep in a hotel room for the first time. This thought prompted him to investigate.

Berwald cleared his throat and spoke in the direction of the merman’s glow.

“Tino? Are you ok? You keep tossing and turning.”

A frustrated huff came from Tino’s bed.

“I’m sorry…am I keeping you awake? Are my markings too bright?”

Berwald had to give a small grin. As if he’d ever complain about those beautiful lights.

“No, it’s alright. I leave a light on while I sleep anyway. What’s the matter?”

There was a long silence in the dark and then Tino said, almost sheepishly.

“My mind’s going so fast. There’s so much to remember. So much to think about.”

Berwald made a small acknowledging sound, but didn’t say anything. There was a pause before Tino gave a small groan and a sigh before admitting,

“That’s normal actually. I always think myself to sleep. But tonight…I’m having trouble relaxing…I don’t know this place.”

Berwald could see the merman’s face vaguely in the faint glowing light from his spots. It was all fuzzy without his glasses, but he decided not to reach over and get them. For all he knew Tino didn’t really want to be stared at right now if he was feeling insecure.
“Hardly anyone sleeps well away from home,” Berwald assured, “let alone the first night in a hotel.”

“It’s worse because I’m actually tired!” The merman sounded absolutely dismal, and Berwald felt his heart grow heavy for him. “All I can think about is how badly I want to sleep, but that just keeps me awake more…”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

The beat of silence that followed the question told Berwald that something had to have entered Tino’s mind. His suspicion was confirmed with Tino’s soft, stumbling words,

“Um…well…actually…”

“What is it?”

He heard the deep breath that Tino took, while trying to keep it quiet enough that he wouldn’t hear. The little merman was too endearing.

“I didn’t tell you all before, since sometimes I come off as too clingy to you humans, but I did have trouble falling asleep sometimes at the cabin because…I’m not used to sleeping alone…we always sleep in pairs or groups for safety. It’s been strange to sleep on my own, and I’ve come close to knocking on one of your doors in the middle of the night before now, thinking that maybe…if…”

Berwald’s heart began to pick up speed at the thought of sleeping in the same bed as Tino. But it sounded like that was exactly what he wanted, and Berwald could never deny Tino anything. He left a silence of his own to hang in the air before asking gently,

“Would you like to sleep beside me?”

“To be honest, yes.” Tino said, almost at once, “I’m so used to curling up with someone and I’ve missed it so much, and…”

The merman stopped talking as he heard the other man move. Berwald shifted over in his bed, and then pulled the covers away from the mattress. The gesture was unmistakable. A creak came from Tino’s bed as he sat up, cocking his head in curiosity.

“Are you sure?” The hope in Tino’s voice was adorably sweet.

“Ja. Come over here.”

Tino scrambled out of his own bed, bringing two of his own pillows with him, and easily slid onto Berwald’s mattress, facing away from him. As Tino positioned his pillows, one for his head and one for between his knees, the bigger man pulled the covers up over the glowing, spotted body. They lay there, side by side for a handful of seconds, accustoming themselves to their closeness, before Tino shifted his body yet again.

“How snuggle up to you?” Tino asked eagerly. “Please? I mean, I won’t if it will make you uncomfortable…”

“It’s ok.” Berwald reached out to touch Tino’s shoulder. It was a bold move on his part, but he’d observed how easily Tino gave physical affection, and it was obvious that he needed some back. “I don’t mind.”

The merman wiggled closer, pressing his back to Berwald’s chest. Now having his blessing, Tino
casually took Berwald’s arm and pulled it around his waist like a second blanket, tucking it snug against his ribs. Berwald felt the slender body completely relax against him, and a soft sigh released from Tino’s lips. There was such meaning behind that simple sound, as though all of his cares and worries from a few minutes ago were being expelled through it and into the darkness, never to return.

“Thank you, Ber. This is nice.”

“Happy to help.” Berwald said softly, discreetly inhaling the scent of Tino’s long damp hair that had pooled on the pillow inches from his face. It smelled vaguely like Lukas’ shampoo that he’d been borrowing all week; mint and eucalyptus.

It had been a very long time since Berwald had shared a bed with someone, but he found that he had missed it. Feeling another body beside him, especially one as warm and slender as Tino’s, made him feel a surge of protectiveness and comfort that he hadn’t, in the same sense, for years. He felt slightly guilty, getting to hold Tino like this when he was unsure if he was just lonely, or was legitimately beginning to crush on the merman. For tonight, Berwald decided, it didn’t matter. Tino had wanted this, and he gladly gave it to him.

“Comfortable?” Berwald asked a few moments later, daring to tighten his arm around the slender waist.

“Hmmm…very…” The response was mumbled quietly, followed by a big yawn. A few moments later Tino’s breathing became deep and slow, signaling his surrender to sleep. Berwald smiled to himself, allowing himself to scoot his head a bit closer to Tino’s, enough to brush his nose against his hair. Then he, too, was soothed to sleep by the presence of the other.

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Tino woke up to soft whispering and giggling. It took him a second to even figure out he was awake, let alone remember where he was and who might be making the sounds. That was, until he felt his pillow moving up and down beneath his head. That’s when it struck him; his pillow was far too warm in addition to not being as giving as a pillow should. He blinked his eyes open, and many things struck him at once when he did.

Firstly, he was wrapped (arms and legs both) around a still-sleeping Berwald, who had rolled onto his back in the night, and was using his broad chest as a pillow. Secondly, Mathias (still in his boxers and wife beater) was hovering at the side of the bed with his camera, keeping one hand over his mouth to muffle his glee at finding and filming them in such a state. Thirdly, Emil was right behind Mathias, but instead of trying to stop him the teen’s face was just as filled with amusement. In fact, he was holding his cell phone, taking pictures.

“W…what…are you...?” Tino murmured, leaning up and rubbing at his eyes. Mathias began chuckling through his hand at the same time Berwald began to stir beneath the merman, awakened by the noise and Tino’s movements.

“You two are so cute all cuddling together!” Emil blurted, giggling loudly.

“When exactly did you start sleeping in the same bed together anyway?” Mathias demanded with a cheery voice.
“Last night.” Tino yawned, easing over onto his other side. “Now go away…”

The merman pulled his pillow over his head to hide his face, and he felt Berwald shift beside him.

“Cut it out Mathias.” He rumbled. “Why are you even in here?”

“Lukas sent me to make sure you two woke up on time.” Explained Emil, respecting Berwald’s grumpy face enough to put away his phone. Mathias, however, never knew when to stop despite Berwald’s intense glare. To be fair, the intimidation factor was lowered by the obvious blush on the big man’s cheeks.

“Good thing Lukas sent us too, otherwise you two would have snuggled yourselves into a coma!”

“He has a point.” Tino called, voice muffled and sleepy from within the pillow. He popped his head out a second later and blinked at the camera. “Haven’t slept as deeply as that since I came ashore…”

“We’re awake now, so go away and let us get up.” Berwald growled.

“Okay sunshines!” Mathias called happily, whispering to the camera as he and Emil went through the suite door, “that was so freaking cute.”

When the door closed again Berwald collapsed back on the mattress and let out a genuine groan.

“Mathias will never let this go.”

“Who cares?” Tino yawned, pushing himself up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “Mathias never lets anything go.”

He left Berwald lying there, commandeering the bathroom first. A splash of water and morning necessity and Tino was back into the room, letting Berwald take his turn while he changed his clothes.

They didn’t speak about how they’d spent the night, but it didn’t feel like they needed to.

Once Tino was dressed, he opened the suite door and slipped into the others’ room. Emil was lying on his stomach in his bed, typing on his laptop. Lukas was presumably in the bathroom, and Mathias was digging into the pile of food they’d gotten from the complimentary breakfast in the lobby.

“Hey, visiting us over here, huh?” Mathias asked, through a mouthful of pastry. “Want some food?”

Tino nodded, and headed toward him, grabbing at the first pastry he saw that had icing. He took a big bite, and was surprised by jelly in the middle. He closed his eyes in delight as he chewed languidly and swallowed.

“I. Love. Human. Food.” Tino said, punctuating each word and then taking another bite.

“Never would’ve guessed.” Laughed Emil, kicking his feet back and forth in the air. “Berwald needs to teach you how to cook and bake while you’re living with him.”

Tino nodded as he took another bite.

“Ber is a good cook,” Mathias agreed, taking his coffee and sitting down on the other bed, “he’s pretty decent at baking too.”
“Can he make pastries?” Tino asked eagerly, not even caring that he was getting icing all over his mouth in his eagerness to take another bite.

“Sure, he made doughnuts for us one morning after a night-long case last year.”

Tino was about to ask what kind of doughnuts, when the bathroom door opened and Lukas entered the room, half-dressed and drying his wet hair with a towel.

“Oh, good morning, Tino.” He said, going over to his suitcase and pulling out a shirt. “How did you sleep?”

Before Tino could finish his mouthful and answer, Emil and Mathias looked at each other and burst out laughing. Emil rolled onto his back and held his stomach, Mathias bent over and had to place his coffee on the end table. When Lukas looked to Tino for an explanation, he rolled his eyes.

“I couldn’t fall asleep last night, so I asked Berwald if I could sleep next to him.”

“Oh.” Lukas said neutrally. “And did it help?”

“Very much. I slept like a baby.”

“They weren’t just next to each other, Luk,” Mathias cut in, his laughter fading into a teasing tone, “they were like glued together!”

Even Lukas’ eye seemed to spark with interest at that, and he even turned a quizzical look on Tino.

“Really?”

Tino felt his face heat up, but before anyone could say anything else, Berwald walked in through the open suite door. It was obvious that he had heard their conversation when he fixed the room at large with a ‘just get over it’ expression, before heading toward the coffee and pastries for his own fill.

“Tino wanted to be close to someone so he could sleep.” Berwald said simply, selecting an apple fritter. “He was having trouble falling asleep alone. Of course I’d help him.”

When they all looked at Tino, he jumped at the sudden attention.

“We always sleep in pairs or groups.” He explained hastily. “We have to be near each other when we sleep to keep from floating away.”

“Huh, somehow we never knew that about your folk.” Emil noted.

“It’s…something that I thought you might make fun of.” Tino muttered, taking the last bite to finish off his pastry.

“We wouldn’t.” Lukas assured him. “If you’ve been having trouble sleeping you should have told us sooner. I’m sure Berwald would have been able to help you before now. I’m sure he doesn’t mind letting you sleep in his bed.”

Mathias sniggered, but Berwald shot him a glare than sobered him up at once.

“I really don’t.” Berwald agreed. “I want to help if I can. Nothing is worse than losing sleep.”

Tino smiled widely at him, and the big man swiped a napkin from the table and used it to clean the
excess icing from Tino’s mouth.

“Thanks, Ber!” The merman said cheerfully.

“Dawww!” Mathias exclaimed, cupping his hands under his chin and tilting his head. Emil chimed in with him a split second later, squirming over on his back to hang his head over the mattress and press his hands to his cheeks dramatically.

Lukas rolled his eyes and tossed his towel aside. Then he clapped his hands loudly.

“Alright! Finish up with breakfast and then pack up; we’re out of here in 15.”

That day passed much as the day before it, with a lot of arguing, laughing, stretches of silence, and car games. Berwald let Tino read without him while he drove the first half of the day, and when Lukas took over he joined the merman again. Thankfully Tino had caught up to where Berwald had been when he started over for him the day before, and today he let Tino read for as long as he wanted. They made it into the final act together before Tino began to feel sick of staring at the screen.

The last two hours were a challenge for them all, as being in such close quarters together for a second day in a row made them all feel the stress of each other’s presence. Even ignoring each other with their devices became boring after a while. For the first time Tino began desperately wishing for a little time to himself.

“We’re in the final stretch, everybody.” Lukas let them all know. “Stockholm 30 minutes ahead.”

“Thank god!” Mathias groaned, stretching and arching himself in his seat. “I never thought I could get sick of Candy Crush, but it’s stupid when it makes me wait to refill my lives!”

“And I can’t write any more filler for the blog,” Complained Emil, draping himself over the top of the back seat and twirling one of Tino’s braids around his finger, “I can only go on about Berwald braiding your hair, holding you in your sleep, fans in the restaurants, and traveling as one big family for soooo long!”

Berwald blushed slightly, and Mathias turned around to make a mock-pouting face at Emil.

“But that’s the sappy crap that everyone loves so much! You can’t write too much of that, it brings in too many fans.”

Emil let out a long sigh bordering on a moan, smooshing his face against his arm.

“I’ve been writing it all up for the past three hours…I’m done.”

Tino turned in his seat to look at the weary teen. When he saw Emil’s expression and his slumped position the merman reached out and took his face in his hands, pressing their foreheads together. He petted the white-blond hair with one hand soothingly and spoke in a sweet tone.

“You’re such a hard worker, and we all benefit from your talent. Take a break now and rest, precious.”
Emil sighed and leaned his head against the merman’s, smiling a little at the attention.

“Thanks, Tino.”

The merman pulled back and gave him a kiss on his brow, before turning back around. It felt good to dote on someone, despite Tino not feeling his best. His energy had been drained away from him by the stress of the journey and he wanted to try his best to stay positive, even though he was starting to feel a bit stir crazy. Berwald picked up on this even through Tino’s efforts to hide it.

“We’re almost there.” He mumbled quietly. The merman gifted Berwald with a tired smile, and then blew out his cheeks in a sigh.

“Want to play Candy Crush?” Mathias offered. He’d shown Tino how to play it at the cabin and the merman had become very fond of it. Now, however, he just shook his head with another placating smile. Mathias shrugged and went back to staring out the window again.

Fifteen minutes later Lukas pointed out the city in the distance. This made Tino perk up and he watched with excitement as the skyline drew closer, the light of late afternoon bathing the buildings in red-gold. When they finally entered the city Tino stared in awe at the towering buildings they passed, the shops, the people, the overwhelming sights all around them. He had a surge of curiosity and began questioning them about everything he saw, briefly invigorating the car with life and energy as the others pointed out about a million things to him. Even then his questions continued, his eyes widening to take in every detail that he could as they sped by.

After a time, the questions stopped and Tino sat back to simply take it all in silently.

“We’ll be at the apartment soon, Tino.” Lukas told him a while later, as they drove through a more suburban area away from downtown. “You can come in and rest for a while, of course. Emil will be driving back to our parents’ and Berwald will be driving both of you back to his house.”

“I wish I could film that.” Mathias pouted. “Berwald and Tino all by themselves; I’ll bet it would be adorable.”

“Let poor Tino have some quiet time for goodness’ sake.” Lukas sighed. “He needs a break from all of us and at least with Berwald he will get some peace and quiet.”

“He’ll have to stop asking questions if he really wants complete quiet.” Mathias pointed out.

He hadn’t meant it to sound unkind, but Tino looked a little hurt.

“It’s fine.” Berwald reassured him after glaring at the back of Mathias’ head. “You can always ask me anything. As many questions as you want.”

Tino turned to look at him, a worried expression gracing him. His voice was cautious when he asked,

“Are you sure it’s not annoying to you at all? I can ask questions until I’m out of breath, you’ve seen me do it.”

Berwald gave him a rare smile.

“It doesn’t annoy me, I promise.”

Ironically this answer caused Tino to remain silent as he treasured Berwald’s words.
“Did you just get shy on us, Tino?” Lukas asked coyly.

“Only when Berwald says something sweet.” Mathias sing-songed, and Lukas smacked his arm. Tino’s ears blushed fiercely.

“Stop embarrassing them, Mat.” Emil scolded. “We’re almost home, you can knock it off.”

“It’s because we’re almost home that I need to get in as many jabs as possible!”

Mathias shot back. They all let out sighs at the same time. Mathias glanced between them all.

“What?”

They collectively ignored him, and it was to their great relief when Lukas pulled the SUV into a parking spot along a line of apartment buildings. They poured out of the vehicle with much groaning, stretching, and sighing. They wasted no time but took as much of Lukas and Mathias’ luggage as they could carry and headed toward the buildings’ door.

“So you live here?” Tino asked, tilting his head back to take in the sight of the tall building with all its uniform windows and lights, and the others just like it lining the streets in all directions. “With all these other people?”

“It’s not that bad.” Lukas explained, unlocking the door. “Inside our apartment you would never believe that we were in surrounded by so many other people. It’s very private and sound-proof too so we can’t hear anything from the other tenants.”

“And they can’t hear us either,” Mathias said, nudging his lover’s shoulder, “and trust me, Lukas can be really loud when I’m blow-”

“-drying my hair for me!” Lukas nearly shouted, cutting Mathias’ words off and opening the door to the side hallway of the building. “No one can hear a thing.”

They all filed through the clean, white hallway and then piled into the shiny elevator with all their bags and suitcases. Tino didn’t say anything, but they knew he didn’t like the device, and did their best to keep up light chatter as they rose eight floors. They let him leave the elevator first, and then guided him down a few doors.

“Home sweet home.” Mathias declared, as Lukas unlocked and opened the door.

Tino studied every detail with interest as they entered and began dumping luggage on the floor. The walls were white just like the rest of the building, the floors were blonde hardwood, and all the accents were black and silver.

“Can I..?”

“Go ahead and explore, Tino. Be our guest.” Said Lukas kindly as he passed the merman, patting him on the back. Excited again, Tino followed him past the short hallway and into the living room. A comfortable-looking black couch sat before a coffee table and flat screen tv against one wall, and there were two deep chairs as well. Right off the living room was the kitchen, which was less than half of the size of the kitchen at the cabin. Still, it was very open and looked very clean and modern. The whole main area looked very airy and bright due to the white walls, pale floor, and big windows. The view from the windows looked out onto the street below and the other apartment buildings, but was still impressive.

Tino went through the kitchen and found the bedroom down the hallways beyond, and the
bathroom and spare bedroom as well, though the latter was very small and housed only a futon and miscellaneous items. All in all, it was a small place, but designed to be very open so that it felt bigger than it was. Tino saw very quickly how humans could live so close together when they built their housing like this. He really liked the calming feel of the place, and all the personal touches that the couple had added, like colorful rugs, curtains, and various posters.

“I love it!” Tino declared, coming back out into the living room. “It’s so bright and cheerful!”

“It’s simple, but it serves us just fine.” Lukas said with a grin. The shorter man slipped an arm around Mathias’ waist and pressed his head to his shoulder. Mathias grinned delightedly and leaned down to steal a kiss.

“My poor baby, driving so far.” He said, smooching the side of Lukas’ face. “You must be so tired. I’d better get you to bed soon.”

Ignoring Mathias’ suggestively arched eyebrow, Lukas broke out of his hold and headed toward the bedroom with his bags. The rest of them took turns shuffling luggage about, resting on the couch, and using the restroom. They didn’t talk much during this time, but it was a comfortably exhausted silence. It was hard for Tino to think about getting back into a car, but eventually it was time for them to part ways.

They went back to the SUV and sorted out the remaining luggage, Emil taking his to his own car which was parked higher up the street, and Berwald doing the same. When it was obvious that they were ready to leave, Tino gave each of them a hug and a farewell, following Berwald to his car. Tino hadn’t ridden in the front seat before, but couldn’t muster up any more excitement for the new experience. He was so disinterested and his brain was so worn out that he fell asleep on the 15-minute drive over to Berwald’s house.

When he woke, it was to Berwald gently shaking him.

“Tino, wake up, we’re here.”

The merman groaned and blinked awake with an effort. He saw they were parked before a beautiful house; it was small but had a second floor with a little balcony, and two chimneys. There was a stone pathway leading up to the small porch and front door. The huge stretch of grass around the house was bordered by evergreens and there was an old barn in the back painted the same rust-red as the house.

“Your house looks so nice.” Tino said, his yawn still not dampening his honesty.

“Thanks. I’ve finished most of it, but there’s still a few things on the inside that need to be done. I’m also working on the back porch.”

“I’m sure it’s beautiful.” Tino said groggily.

Berwald went around to the side to sling their bags over his shoulders. Tino slid out of the car and went to help. Berwald looked reluctant, but handed the small tote to the merman’s outstretched arms. Tino took it contentedly, and followed Berwald to the front door. Tino gratefully accepted the offer to walk in first. The interior walkway was very welcoming with rich wood floors and a matching staircase leading to the second level. There was a mat on which Tino wiped his feet, but then saw Berwald slipping his shoes off.

“Do I get to go barefoot?” Tino asked eagerly.

“Ja, I like to try and keep the floors clean if I can. They’re originals. I just polished them up a bit.”
“They’re beautiful, you did a wonderful job.”

The big man turned his head as he placed their shoes onto the designated mat, hiding his blush.

“Thanks. I’ll show you to your room.”

Berwald led him up the stairs firstly, and showed him to a room at the end of the hallway, all done up in cream and blue. The curtains, bedspread, and rugs all matched. Berwald set Tino’s bag down at the end of the mattress and flipped on the light on the end table.

“This is the guestroom. I had to finish it because the rest of the crew is over here a lot during big cases when we’re trying to figure things out. I have another one downstairs, but it still bare bones.”

Tino wasn’t shy about dropping his other bag on the floor and then flopping onto the bed with a sigh. He groaned into the bedspread.

“So comfy.” He murmured.

“Why don’t you rest for a while, maybe take a shower and relax? That’s what I’m going to do. Then you can come down and we’ll make some dinner.”

“Food…” Tino said, almost lustily. Berwald’s cheeks darkened a shade, but he smiled.

“I’ll let you unwind.”

“Thanks, Ber.”

Berwald eased the door closed behind him, leaving Tino alone.

Tino nearly fell asleep again as he lay there in the calming silence, still feeling that odd weariness clinging to him. Instead he roused himself in pursuit of a shower. There was a simple white bathroom attached to the bedroom, and Tino reveled in the hot water and generic but fragrant shampoo and soap that Berwald had stocked for his guests. The towels were also very soft and big, and Tino had a better time wrapping up his hair with these than the ones at the cabin. When he finally slipped into a long-sleeved shirt and long pants he felt like a new person. He was drowsy still but didn’t want to fall asleep yet, not with the promise of dinner waiting. So, he did his best to brush out his hair, twisting it into a rope over his shoulder to keep it contained, and headed downstairs.

Berwald wasn’t there, presumably still in his room, but Tino didn’t feel bad exploring. Right off the main entranceway was a dining area with a study table and chairs, and an ornate light fixture hanging over them. A big mirror was on the wall beside the table, making the area look even bigger. Tino ran his hand over the dark wood grain of the table, and it felt like water it was so smooth. Next down the hall was a little room with bookshelves and a desk filled with filing and stationary. A certificate hung on the wall and Tino felt he shouldn’t snoop much, as the room felt important. He closed the door and moved on. There was a big living room laid out like the cabin, with the kitchen open and visible through a counter and cabinet set.

The living room had a couch that looked deep and comfortable, and while Tino wanted to explore further, he just couldn’t resist the urge to sink into its depths. He followed that urge and relaxed into the soft leather. It was every bit as comfortable and embracing as he’d hoped it would be. He sighed and leaned his head back.

There was a decent-sized TV set up on the wall facing the couch, a small coffee table between the two. A deep recliner and a small love seat also face the TV, and rounding out the seating was a
lime green bean bag chair tossed against the far wall. It stood out because of its color, while the rest of the house was decorated in rich woods, sandy browns, and burnt reds and blues. Tino liked the colors in the house. He didn’t really have a good concept of human home aesthetics, but it felt cozy and welcoming. He sat up and plucked one of the cooking magazines from the coffee table and began to scan through the recipes. A few long moments later he heard Berwald’s footfalls on the stairs.

The tall man appeared a breath later, dressed in similar lounging clothes to Tino’s, his hair damp from his own shower, and smelling strongly of his spicy body wash.

“What do you feel like for dinner?”

Tino cocked his head, looking at the recipe he had been scanning.

“How about some kind of soup? Something ‘thick and creamy’?” He asked, quoting the line from the article. Berwald nodded.

“Baked potato soup. I’ve got some pumpernickel bread for you to try too.”

Tino dug himself out of the couch, and wobbled only slightly as he regained his footing.

“Can I help?”

Berwald studied him warily for a moment, before conceding with a nod. Excited, Tino followed him into the kitchen. It was just as tidy and welcoming as the rest of the house, warm gold, blue, and red with a huge counterspace and an island to work off.

“There are potatoes down in that cupboard.” Berwald told Tino, pointing it out and reaching into another. Tino got them out and under Berwald’s directions began to scrub them clean and then peel them. Berwald felt better about Tino’s safety with a peeler than he did with knives. He put a large pot of water onto the stove to boil before taking up the task of cutting up the other necessary ingredients. But when he was just starting to mince up the chives, he stopped and smacked his head with his palm.

“I have to get a rue started, I forgot.” He stated.

“I can cut the potatoes, Ber.” Tino offered carefully. “Really, we use knives of our own in the sea you know. I won’t hurt myself, I promise.”

Berwald looked skeptical at that, but he had to trust Tino to know his own abilities.

“Ok, just chop them into little chunks.”

While Berwald got out the butter and flour and water for the rue, Tino washed the newly-peeled potatoes and set them aside before going to the cutting board that Berwald had abandoned. Tino picked up the knives and began cutting up the potatoes. He proved to be as good as his word and when Berwald looked over to check on him Tino was already half finished. He moved on to mincing the chives on the other cutting board, and found that more difficult, but he was careful and managed alright with Berwald’s few guiding words. The tall man tipped the chopped potatoes into the nearly-boiling water and then turned back to the rue.

“Hey, Ber, can we make a dessert too? Something chocolate? Or is it too late for that…”
“Hmm… I think I do have some cocoa. We could make no-bake cookies.”

This statement intrigued Tino and he was sent about to gather different ingredients while Berwald pulled out yet another pot to put on the stove.

“We don’t have to bake them… but we still have to cook them… so… isn’t it more work?”

Berwald considered that as he melted the butter and cocoa with sugar in the pot.

“Guess you’re right, but then you don’t have to mix the dough, then bake them, then wait for them to cool. You’re mixing and cooking all at once and then just need them to cool.”

“Yes, but you’re still having to wait for them to cool, and you have to stand right by them while they cook…”

“They’re called ‘no-bake cookies’, not ‘faster-than-baked-cookies’.” Berwald pointed out.

Tino giggled at that not-even-joke and Berwald grinned.

“Well either way I’m sure they’re delicious.” The merman said, swiping at the sugary chocolate liquid in the pan and licking it off his finger.

“Hey…” Berwald protested weakly. Tino stuck out his tongue at Berwald.

“I can get away with it when it’s you and not Lukas.”

The frown on Berwald’s face softened and he nodded.

“I’ll let you get away with pretty much anything, so long as it makes you happy.”

Tino felt his heart speed up just a bit.

“Aw… Ber, that’s so sweet.” He said softly. “But… I mean, really, don’t let me do anything to inconvenience you. I don’t want to take advantage of your… kindness.”

Berwald stirred the rue and began adding salt.

“To be honest, I don’t mind. Like I said, as long as you’re happy.”

“But, you have to have some kinds of guidelines or rules, especially around your own house, right? Come on, you don’t need to patronize me. If there’s something I shouldn’t do, please tell me.”

Tino turned a serious expression on the bigger man.

“Like, can I sit on the counter?”

Berwald looked at his face, his lips quirking at the sight of those pretty violet-blue eyes narrowed into such scrutiny as Tino waited for his response.

“Sure.”

Tino’s face exploded into a happy smile and he hopped up to sit right beside Berwald.

“Ok, how about poking around the barn and stuff? I’m nosy, you know.”

“Look through anything you want. Just… don’t go into my workshop without me. I don’t want you to get hurt even if it’s just an accident.”
“What about your office?”

“It’s just records and taxes and stuff. Nothing I would mind you seeing.”

“Your room. You can’t like me poking around in there?”

Berwald shrugged his big shoulders.

“I’m not a very private person despite what I seem like.”

Tino studied Berwald’s face. He believed him; he always looked so serious that anyone who didn’t know him could think he was easily upset or secretive.

“Thank you, Berwald. I um…I think you have the best personality to handle me. The rest of the group together is…just so perfect…you were the best people to have found me. But you’re special…you’re my alpha.”

The last part was spoken so softly and sounded suspiciously like he hadn’t really meant for the words to slip out. Berwald paused in his stirring and looked confused.

“What do you mean?” He asked, “I thought Lukas was the alpha in our group.”

Tino went utterly still where he sat on the counter, and didn’t answer right away. When he did it was halting and somewhat unsure.

“Lukas is the alpha for the group…but, you…. you’re my alpha. It’s…hard to explain but you hold a position of respect for me personally. I guess you could call it mer slang.”

“I see.” Berwald said, even though he had no idea what Tino meant. Taking it as a cultural difference that he wouldn’t be able to understand, Berwald didn’t press him to explain.

“Grab a fork for me and test the potatoes. Just poke them and see how done they are.”

Tino did as he was told.

“They’re still a little too hard, I think.” Berwald looked into the pot as Tino tested the vegetable.

“Hmm…you’re right. They’re supposed to fall apart when you spear them, that’s how you know they’re done.”

Tino put the lid back on the pot.

“Smells delicious,” he declared, “I can’t wait.”

They were quiet for a while as they cooked and Tino was surprised how comfortable it felt. He had feared that without the buffer of the others it might be awkward, given how quiet Berwald was and how talkative he was. Surprisingly it was easy, like they’d been cooking together for years.

“Hey, Ber?” Tino asked, always being the first to break the silence. Berwald lifted his head and looked at him.

“Hm?”

“Do you have any music?”

“Yea, if you go push the power button on that console over there, then you can press play button.
Tino hopped down from the counter and padded over to the sound system mounted in one corner of the kitchen. He had learned enough to know how to operate the basics, but he still took some time before he touched anything, just to be sure he didn’t mess anything up. When he did turn it on and press play, a low, sultry tune began to play. Tino smiled.

“It’s nice and relaxing.”

“I like jazz music when I cook dinner. Jazz and big band.”

Tino took up his previous perch on the counter as the conversation turned again to instruments and how they worked. Although he’d already looked them up before, Tino used Berwald’s tablet to look up different brass instruments. As usual his curious nature meant that once he started researching something he didn’t stop until he was made to. Berwald had to pry the tablet from his hands and request, kindly but firmly, that he help finish out the dinner.

Ten minutes later they were set up on tv trays in the living room and watching the news, something that Tino had always wanted to do but had previously been forbidden from. They hadn’t wanted him to be instantly bombarded with information without context, let alone such depressing content. But Berwald explained that he liked to keep himself informed, and that they would only watch a little bit of it. Tino did his very best not to interrupt the reporters with questions every other sentence, plus it was hard to speak when his mouth was full of delicious food, but he managed to ply Berwald with questions throughout the first half of the program. By then, however, Tino was feeling a bit worn out himself. It had been a long day and he told himself that the knowledge wasn’t going to change in the next second, so he could relax and learn it later.

Berwald didn’t comment on Tino suddenly falling silent. He did pick up the remote and switch to a DVD that was in the player, however. It was a movie, and Tino had taken a great liking to them. The quickness with which Berwald had picked up on his shifting feelings moved Tino, and he wished…that Berwald hadn’t sat in one of the armchairs. If he had been on the couch beside him perhaps he could have inched closer and taken his arm like he had a habit of doing. He liked being close to Berwald, liked his strong body, his warmth, the rumbling of his chest when he did speak. He even liked how quiet Berwald usually was, letting him speak as much as he wanted, but knew when to cut him off or redirect the conversation. Berwald really was his alpha, even if he didn’t know what that meant to Tino.

After eating the delicious no-bake cookies, Berwald reluctantly let Tino help him load the dishwasher. It was obvious to the big man that the merman was very tired, but he knew he’d never hear the end of it if he didn’t accept the help.

“I think I’m going to go to bed.” Tino said, through a yawn and drooping eyes. “I’m sorry, I know it’s early, but…”

“You’re exhausted.” Berwald told him, as though trying to convince him. “Go to bed. Sleep as long as you want. I’ll make us breakfast when you wake up.”

Tino couldn’t even muster up a grin for him, which worried Berwald a little. He’d seen Tino tired before, but he’d never seen him so tired that he couldn’t smile at the mention of food. Concern nagged at him, but then the merman stood up on his tiptoes and gave him a goodnight kiss on the cheek. Then Tino stumbled up the stairs and into his room.

Berwald was left standing in the middle of the hallway, pressing fingers to his red cheek.
“Last night was incredible, wasn’t it?”

“Hmmm.”

“I’ve been waiting all week to do that to you again.”

“Ja.”

“You squirmed a lot more than usual. You were so impatient…”

“Foreplay’s too much after a week of abstinence, idiot.”

“Hmmm…you smell so good. C’mere.”

“I’m already in your lap.”

“Perfect.”

Soft sounds of lips meeting lips filtered through the air, followed by soft gasping.

“God, you’re a damn amazing kisser.”


“Ugn…Mat…”

A suckling sound rang louder through the semi-silence of the clean white apartment, accompanied by a high-pitched moan. Words, mumbled by soft flesh.

“You better not cover this one up with a turtleneck. I want people to know what I do to you.”

“I’m…already yours…why do you have to—ah—show off?!”

“That I bagged the hottest boy in Sweden? Why wouldn’t I?”

“N-Norwegian, bastard…”

“Hottest Norwegian boy in Sweden.”

“Damnit, Mat…ah…god…”

A sudden loud blast of brass instruments in a big band tune interrupted Mathias and Lukas’ late-morning ‘cuddle’ fest on the sofa, while watching terrible reality television. Or rather, letting it play in the background as they enjoyed being alone. Lukas jumped a bit on Mathias’ lap, pulling his lover’s head away from his neck, where a bright red mark was blooming over his pulse point.

“That’s Berwald.” Lukas stated breathlessly.

He stretched in Mathias’ octopus-like embrace to reach for his phone on the coffee table. Mathias sighed in disappointment, but compensated with a wisecrack.
“How much you wanna bet he’s proposed already and we’re looking at a sea-side wedding?” He asked, nuzzling into Lukas’ neck. His partner ignored him and answered the phone, leaning back into his arms and letting himself be squeezed in tight again.

“How’s it going?”

It only took two seconds of listening for Lukas to open his eyes wide in surprise and raise one eyebrow, his kiss-swollen lips parting.

“What is it?” Mathias whined after a second or two, clinging even closer. Lukas didn’t say anything, just hit the speakerphone button so that Mathias could hear for himself.

Berwald was frantic… at least as frantic as Berwald could ever get. His voice was a bit higher pitched and he was speaking in one long stream of words,

“He’s running a fever and says his throat’s sore, and his eyes even look a little bloodshot, and his limbs are aching and he says he feels hot then cold, and he can barely sit up in bed and I think I should take him to the hospital, but I don’t know what they’re going to do and-.”

“Whoa, Berwald, dude!” Mathias interrupted, speaking over Lukas’ shoulder. “Take a breath there!”

“Mathias, this isn’t a laughing matter.” Berwald growled over the phone. “Tino’s never been around humans before and none of us considered what our germs might do to him. We’re idiots, all of us, for overlooking it.”

“You do need to calm down.” Lukas agreed evenly. “Are you there with Tino, in the room?”

“No, I’m down in the kitchen, getting him some water.”

“Good. Then take a second to get a hold of yourself. You don’t want him to see you this upset, do you? It’ll only frighten him.”

There was a pause on the other end while Berwald apparently composed himself, then he said, in a calmer tone,

“Lukas…what should we do?”

There was a pause, Lukas’ stormy blue eyes going empty for a minute while he thought, then he spoke,

“Call me right back from Tino’s room, and make it a video call.”

He hung up on Berwald, and reached to mute the television.

“Wow…” Mathias muttered, as they waited. “He’s really worried…I mean…it’s just a little cold, right?”

“He has a point.” Lukas answered, and Mathias could see that he was just as worried. “Tino hasn’t been exposed to any human germs before, despite him being partially human even while living in the sea. He has no immunity against the everyday viruses that we don’t even notice.”

Mathias frowned, the worry starting to rub off on him now.

“But…antibiotics…am I right?”
Lukas’ reply was cut off when the phone chimed with Berwald’s incoming video call. Lukas answered it, and saw Berwald’s frowning face appear on the screen.

“Ok, Berwald, let me see Tino.” Lukas instructed. Berwald jostled the phone around so that it was facing Tino.

The merman was lying on his side in Berwald’s guest bed, his hands cradling the pillow against his cheek. He looked like he felt dreadful, his eyes were a bit puffy and his face was flushed. His golden hair was tossed carelessly up above his head on the other pillows, so that it wasn’t lying on his back, which was bare and flushed pink with fever.

“Morning, Tino.” Lukas said, trying to sound positive for him. “Not feeling so good?”

Tino moaned and shook his head a bit on the pillow.

“Feels like I’m dying.” He replied in a hoarse-sounding voice, but they could tell he was being sarcastic.

“What exactly are you feeling?” Lukas asked. Tino sighed, and Lukas suspected that Berwald had probably asked him this over and over.

“My throat hurts, my head hurts, my arms and legs hurt…and I just feel like sleeping. There’s this horrible gross stuff coming out of my nose and mouth too.”

“Ick, mucus.” Mathias chimed in. “Part of being sick, Tino, grossness like that.”

“Hi, Mat.” Tino droned, trying to muster up a smile.

“Tino, have you ever been sick before? In the sea?” Lukas asked.

“Sure,” Tino said wearily, “but I didn’t feel like this, exactly.”

“Different kinds of germs.” Lukas speculated. “Now, Tino, this is very important; when did you start feeling bad? Not just feeling sick, but really tired or off in any way?”

Tino closed his weary eyes to think about that, then admitted,

“I think yesterday morning. I thought I was just tired from all the travelling, but then I had trouble keeping my energy up the entire trip home yesterday. My throat felt a bit scratchy too, but I thought it would go away. Thought it was from talking too much.”

“Most viruses take about a week to gestate…” Lukas muttered. “But you weren’t with us for even that long. Then again, you don’t have immunity to what we carry around in our bodies, I’m not surprised it came on so fast.”

There was a pause as Lukas just gazed at Tino’s weary face, and they could tell he was thinking hard. Berwald couldn’t seem to handle the silence. He turned the phone to look at Lukas’ face, and both he and Mathias could see the concern etched in the corners of his eyes.

“Lukas, we need to get him some medicine, soon.” He urged.

“That’s just it, though…” Lukas said hesitantly. “I’m not sure…I don’t know how much marine DNA is present in him. We have no way of knowing without…tests and…”

Berwald didn’t say anything, but his lips hardened into a thin line and Lukas stopped talking as he struggled to make the important decision.
“What about Kiku?” Mathias suggested in the tense silence.

Lukas turned to look at him and Berwald seemed to brighten. “We were going to take Tino to him at some point, right? Or we were at least thinking about it. So why not ask his advice? Have him look Tino over and then he can decide whether human meds would be bad for him or not.”

“Kiku?” Tino’s voice came from offscreen.

“He’s a marine biologist.” Berwald said. “He studies sea creatures to understand and protect them better.”

“He’s a researcher…?” Tino asked, faint interest tinging his croaky voice. “I wouldn’t mind having him look me over. He won’t hurt me, right?”

“Never.” Lukas said. “Part of his profession is to help preserve marine life.”

“But can we just call him up on a Sunday and ask him to open up his lab for us?” Mathias questioned, to which Lukas bit his lip and shook his head. “And won’t he think we’re just bonkers, claiming we need him to look at a sick merman?!”

“It’s worth a chance. It’s better than waiting until tomorrow or just taking Tino to the hospital and gambling the outcome. Berwald, I’m going to let you go so I can call Emil. I’ll have him talk to Leon and see if his big brother wants to help us out.”

“Ok, call me back as soon as you know anything.” Berwald insisted.

“Will do, take care of Tino for us. You know the drill, mother hen.” Lukas teased, trying to get Berwald to show an ounce of optimism, for Tino’s sake if not his own.

Lukas hung up and they sat there on the sofa for a moment, before he gave a huge sigh and rubbed his eyes.

“God, this could be bad…”

Mathias reached up to brush a lock of satiny gold hair back and tuck it behind Luka’s ear, trying to ease him a bit.

“Why? I mean, it’s just a cold. Even if it’ll be worse for him it’s not like he’ll die or anything, right?”

Lukas shook his head.

“We can’t rule that out, Mat. Have you heard the story of disease genocide in an isolated culture when well-traveled people first discover it?”

Mathias was quiet for a second before asking softly, seriously,

“Which one?”

Lukas leaned into his lover’s stroking hand and gave another worried sigh.

“Exactly.”

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Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
Tino groaned weakly and rolled onto his back, bringing a hand up to rub at his aching temples. He felt like he’d never get out of bed again. The night before he had felt the signs that something was wrong, even though he hadn’t said anything, but now he felt a hundred times worse. He’d never felt like this before in his life. He’d had fevers in the sea from infections, but never had his head been clogged with the disgusting ‘mucus’, never had this throat felt so raw and sore.

Berwald’s concern for him was touching. After Lukas had hung up he instructed Tino to stay put, as though Tino had any choice or ability to do otherwise, and disappeared down the stairs. A while later Berwald reappeared, carrying a tray.

“I’ve got some hot lemon tea for you.” He told Tino when he set it down on the bed side table. “It’s not quite the same as lemonade, but it’s still made from lemons. There’s honey here too, so be sure to put a lot in; it’ll help your throat. I don’t know how hungry you are, but I brought you some porridge. You can put honey in it too if you want. Can’t have too much honey with a sore throat.”

“Thanks, Ber.” Tino said, forcing himself to sit up.

His head felt like a rock and his neck almost made a sound of protest it ached so much. He groaned and angrily pushed back his heavy hair as it fell around his shoulders and into his face.

“I’ll put your hair in a braid if you want.” Berwald offered, instantly reaching out and pulling the hair out of Tino’s face for him.

“I’d like that.” Tino said quietly. “Can you do it while I eat? That way I don’t have to sit up for longer than I have to.”

“OK, let me get a hair tie.”

Tino raised an eyebrow.

“Why do you have one of those?”

“I always keep a package around,” Berwald explained, “they can be useful for fixing things around the house.”

While Berwald dug around in the guest bathroom’s drawers, Tino added honey to his lemon tea with heavy fingers, then poured a good amount into his porridge as well. He started drinking the tea first, sighing as it did indeed soothe the soreness in his throat.

“How is it?” Berwald asked, coming out into the bedroom with a few different hair ties and a brush in his hand.

“Tea’s good.” Tino almost slurred, his lips still on the lip of the mug. “Thank you.”

“Alright, I’m just going to edge in behind you here.” Berwald prefaced as he scooted onto the bed. Tino shifted forward a bit so Berwald could sit behind him and start brushing out his hair.

“I never thought I’d say this.” Tino groaned. “But I’ll be glad to cut my hair. It’s nothing but a
nuisance here on land. Not that I don’t like you braiding it, because I do.”

“Might as well make the most of it while I can, then, hm?” Berwald asked, passing his hand through the wealth of gold he was brushing. For long silent moments Tino drank his tea and ate his breakfast while Berwald prepped his hair and then began a simple braid at the nape of his neck.

“Are you worried that I might die?” Tino asked quietly, breaking the stillness. Berwald’s hands stopped what they were doing and Tino could just imagine the look on his face as he tried to decide how to answer.

“It’s just a cold.” Berwald said, a second too late to be convincing. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. Just… we don’t want it to get worse.”

“I was only joking when I said that I felt like I was dying.” Tino sighed. “But you and Lukas seem pretty afraid for me. Could it really be that serious?”

Berwald’s hands faltered a little before resuming their hypnotic movements as he braided.

“Honestly, Tino…we don’t know. And…that’s a little more frightening, I won’t lie.”

Tino heaved another sigh as he scooped up a spoonful of porridge.

“You humans have great healing powers from what I’ve heard. I’m not concerned.”

Berwald didn’t answer with more than a grunt of acknowledgement, and Tino left him to his thoughts. He couldn’t deny that anything that frightened Berwald was enough to frighten him, but he also had every faith in his human pod to look after him. They had proved to him time and again that they truly cared, and this would just be a more strenuous test.

When Tino was finishing up his breakfast, Berwald’s phone rang again. Tino answered it, since Berwald had his hands full. It was another video call, but this time there were two images instead of one. Emil’s face appeared on one side of the screen and Lukas with Mathias appeared on the other.

“Conference call!” Mathias announced when Tino’s face popped up in the little square in the corner of the screen.

“Tino, how are you doing?” Emil asked, his tone filled with concern and his eyes just as worried as everyone else’s.

“Lemon tea helps.” Tino replied. “Berwald’s braiding my hair.”

Berwald leaned to the side just enough for them to see him for a brief second.

“Good, you’ll need it out of the way.” Lukas told him. “Kiku has agreed to look you over, though he doesn’t really understand the situation.”

“I kind of had to bribe him through my friend, Leon.” Emil explained. “He’s Kiku’s little brother so when he asks for something Kiku can’t really refuse.”

Berwald peeked over Tino’s shoulder to ask,

“Then, are we going to a lab somewhere?”

“Yea,” Emil answered, “we told him we don’t even know what kind of tests he’ll need to run, so as bad as Tino feels, a trip to a professional lap is the best idea.”
Tino groaned.

“I don’t even want to get out of bed.”

“That’s why you need to.” Lukas told him gently. “I’m sorry, Tino, but you’re not going to get any better until we know how to treat you.”

“I know.” Tino pouted. “Just feel wretched.”

“That’s a word you don’t hear every day.” Mathias chuckled.

“OK, give us a half hour. Emil can drive over here and then we’ll come to your place.” Instructed Lukas. “I think we should all go together. We have directions to the lab and it’s not as far away as we thought. Maybe a twenty-minute drive.”

“Got it.” Berwald agreed.

“Hang in there, Tino, it’s going to be alright.” Emil added, before ending his call. Lukas and Mathias signed off a split second later.

“At least we have a plan of action.” Berwald stated, freeing one hand from the braid to give Tino a confidant pat on his shoulder. The merman nodded and finished his porridge. As he started drinking the last of his tea, something occurred to Tino.

“Ber, what’s a lab?”

If the trip home the two days prior had gone better than they hoped, the drive to the lab was worse than they could have predicted. At least for Tino. Berwald wrapped him in the car quilt and brought along a portable coffee cup brimming with honey-rich lemon tea for the road, but even with that and all the others being so kind to him, Tino felt like death. He had never been so miserable in his life. He did his best not to complain, meaning he ended up keeping his mouth shut most of the trip. His head hurt too much for him to watch what was passing by, and without his constant stream of questions and discussions, the car seemed too quiet. None of them pushed him to speak for their own comfort, but the drive seemed much longer for how silent it was.

Mathias had insisted on filming this entire process, though he’d managed to stay professional for once and not joke about the situation while he documented it. He’d been tempted to cut when the atmosphere had become so heavy, but again, he wanted to preserve the accuracy of their story, which meant the fewer cuts the better.

When they were pulling into the parking lot of a very sleek-looking research building, Emil suddenly spoke up.

“I just realized; Tino’s never seen an Asian before.”

The merman managed to look curious at the statement.

“Kiku is Japanese, so he looks much different than us.” Lukas explained. “I don’t know if you came across information about Japan in your online research, but please don’t draw attention to it. We don’t want to offend him when he came to this country on a grant.”
“I read about Japan.” Tino supplied tiredly. “They have slanted eyes, and they love cute.”

Despite the gravity of their current situation, Mathias and Emil both shared a laugh and even Lukas and Berwald grinned a bit.

“Oh, hilarious, Tino,” Mathias chuckled, “but seriously don’t say that to his face unless you want to be kicked out.”

“Unlikely,” Emil said dryly, “He’d turn any insult into a compliment and somehow end up apologizing to us.”

“Cultural sensitivity is alive and well in this family.” Lukas muttered sarcastically.

Tino didn’t really understand what all that meant, but he understood enough to know tact was required. It wouldn’t make much difference; he didn’t plan on speaking if he could help it.

They parked, and then had a brief discussion on how to proceed before settling on just walking in together. Tino had to leave the car quilt behind, but he was wearing a warm hoodie that Berwald had lent him so he wasn’t too cold, and it was still comforting. Still, he held on to Berwald’s arm as they walked, feeling wobbly-legged and unsure of himself. He turned tired eyes toward the camera in Mathias’ hand, and gave a weak ‘rock on’ sign with his fingers, knowing that the audience that hadn’t seen this footage yet might appreciate the gesture. He was already beginning to think like Mathias and Emil.

The glass doors to the building were locked, but as they stood there they could see a young Japanese man hurrying down the hallway to let them in. Tino assumed it was this ‘Kiku’ they kept talking about. When the doors swung open he gestured them inside.

“Forgive me, I should have let you know the doors would be locked.” He said in a polite, measured voice. Tino decided he liked the sound of it; smooth and rich but soft and calming too. There was an accent to it that he hadn’t heard before, and as sick as he felt, his ears perked up to listen to the oddity.

“It’s not a problem.” Lukas assured him, and presented his hand, letting the shorter man shake it. “Good to see you again, Kiku.”

“And you.” Kiku’s eyes flitted to the video camera in Mathias’ hand, tastefully ignored it, and then to Tino as he hung from Berwald’s arm. “I don’t think I’ve met all of you yet.”

“This is Berwald,” Emil told him, “the other big brother I’ve talked about.”

“Oh yes.” Kiku said, shaking Berwald’s hand too. “I’ve heard about you from Emil and Leon. And how about you?”

He addressed Tino last, who did his best to stand up straight and shake hands.

“Tino.” He said simply. It was subtle, but Kiku did a double-take when he saw the markings on Tino’s hand, and his eyes then flit to the larger ones down his neck.

“He’s the reason we called you.” Emil explained. “Thank you for doing this for us, by the way.”

“No problem.” Kiku said, releasing Tino’s hand, and waving them further inside to the lobby. “I had to come in later today to work on some of my research, so really this just brought me in early. Now, what can I do to help you?”
They all shared glances for a long moment, before Emil blew out his cheeks and spoke.

“You know what we do for a living. You’ve heard me and Leon talk about it, right?”

Kiku schooled his expression into neutrality and slid his hands into the pockets of his white lab coat.

“Yes, I am aware.”

“I know you’ve had questions about it before, and haven’t really made it clear where you stand on it, but either way we need you to help us. You might be the first one to ever test and prove the myth of mer people. Because we’ve brought you one.”

Tino was impressed that Kiku’s stance and expression remained exactly the same. He had expected some kind of reaction. Instead the man just tilted his head and said, warily,

“What makes you think that?”

“Berwald,” Lukas advised, “sit Tino down. This might take a while.”

The tale didn’t take as long as Lukas had thought, but Kiku listened to him carefully, eyes glancing over to Tino often, who tried to look as wide-eyed and convincing as he could, given his current state. It was difficult when all he wanted was to close his eyes and curl up on the floor. After long minutes of explanation Kiku’s position was unclear, but they all knew one sure fire way to at least get him thinking. Tino was waiting for it, and when Lukas turned to him, he knew exactly what he would be asked to do.

“Tino, can you show him your gills? Or does it hurt?”

Shaking his head, Tino took a deep swallow, then opened his gills to flap them for greater effect. Kiku’s eyes widened in shock, and his lips parted for a second before he stepped closer. Tino did it again, and the man blinked rapidly, his breathing picking up a bit.

“This…you…I am not amused.” The words were not harsh, barely even sounding sincere; like it was something that he was required to say when faced with something so unbelievable.

“It’s not a prank.” Emil insisted. “Tino’s a merman, and he’s sick and we need your help to decide what to do.”

Kiku knelt before Tino and the sudden scrutiny almost made the merman uncomfortable. Those steady brown eyes had suddenly come alive with interest and deduction, studying him as though cataloguing every detail that he possibly could.

“Can you pop out your fangs?” Mathias asked, trying hard not to push but the eager tone in his voice was unmistakable.

“Um…I can try.” Tino said softly. He hadn’t done it on land apart from that incident at the restaurant.

Kiku watched attentively, and so did everyone else and Mathia’s camera. Despite the pressure of all the attention, Tino opened his mouth as wide as he could, and they waited. He couldn’t help being a touch dramatic, maybe all the screen time had gone to his head; in one split second he popped his fangs out to full length, making every one of them jump back in surprise. Mathias said a word that made Lukas reprimand him with a quick slap to his arm.
“Oh my…” Kiku said, taking a brave step forward and looking closely at the fangs. “Retractable?”

Tino answered by drawing the teeth back in until they looked normal length. Kiku stepped back, rubbing at his mouth and staring at Tino with great consideration.

“Can you come into the lab? I need to get a closer look at you.”

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The lab was pristine and clinical, with all the trimmings expected for scientific research. Tino would have been more intrigued if he was feeling better. They sat him on a cold steel chair and Kiku took another across from him. He began questioning him softly as he carefully examined his gills with a little flashlight, took his temperature, peered into his eyes, ears, and mouth, and took another look at his fangs. He then turned down the lights to look closely at Tino’s luminous markings.

“Not to rush you,” Emil said after Kiku had been studying the glowing spots with a magnifier for five whole minutes, “but we really need to know how to treat his sickness.”

“Of course.” Kiku said, pulling back and heading to turn the lights back up. “I apologize, I did get carried away. I’m just very intrigued. I’ve never seen anything like this in a human…humanoid…before…”

He cleared his throat and then went to dig around in a big, important-looking kit.

“May I please draw some blood? I can run a test and tell you what I find. That should determine whether human drugs would be helpful.”

Nervous violet-blue eyes flicked to the members of his human pod, who all reassured him. Lukas patted his shoulder.

“It’s not a big deal, a small prick with a little needle in your elbow.”

“OK.” Tino said timidly, rolling up his sleeve and watching as Kiku prepared a vial and needle.

He had a vague idea of how this worked, but still couldn’t help feeling nervous. Sensing his fear, the rest of them subtly inched closer to make him feel safer, and Emil gripped his shoulder when Kiku tied the rubber strap around his upper arm and felt for a vein.

“Deep breath for me.” Kiku said gently, and Tino obeyed. “A little pinch in three, two, one.”

Tino expelled a short breath as the needle punctured his skin, but he held still through the sting. His eyes widened as he watched his blood fill up the vial. His fascination with the process overcame his fear and the slight pain. The needle actually hurt more coming out than it had going in, and Kiku fixed a cotton ball over the small hole in his flesh with a band aid.

“Ok, give me a moment to see what I find at a basic look.” Kiku said. “It will take longer to test for more specifics, but as to the question of how he’d react to antibiotics, that I can answer soon.”

With a small nod, they let him go about his work and turned their attention back to the sick merman.

“You holding up ok?” Emil asked, rubbing Tino’s shoulder.

“I don’t think so…” Tino admitted, doing his best not to sound pathetic.
“Where do you hurt the most?” Asked Lukas from his other side.

“Head.” Tino sighed.

“Here, lean back against me,” Emil said, stepping up right behind Tino. “I’ll try to drain your sinuses for you.”

Tino had no idea what Emil meant, but he sounded so sure of himself that the merman did as he was told and leaned his head back on Emil’s chest. The teen’s slender fingers were a bit cold on his fevered skin, but they felt amazing as they began pressing against his forehead, dragging down to rub his temples. He worked in a specific pattern, always starting in the middle of his forehead or the bridge of his nose and sliding his fingers down his face. Tino felt like it should hurt for how much pressure Emil was using, but instead it seemed to relieve the pain the harder he pressed. He felt the need to swallow the longer he was worked on.

“Feel it draining down your throat?” Emil asked. “That’s what’s clogged in your head, and I’m pressing it out and down into your throat.”

“Wow…” Tino said dazedly. “That’s incredible.”

“And kinda gross.” Mathias said with a little gagging sound. Lukas rolled his eyes.

“It’s the best way to handle a sinus headache. I’ve used it on you enough times.”

“It’s still kinda gross.”

After what seemed like a long time Kiku turned from his work and walked briskly to where they were all standing around Tino’s chair. He looked like he was restraining his excitement in light of how serious he needed to be as he spoke.

“First off, and most important, take him to the hospital and get him antibiotics. Now. His system is extremely susceptible to infection and is unable to fight it off properly. He’ll be ok if he gets some meds in him though; he’ll need immune boosters, saline, and painkillers at the very least, I should think. Secondly…I can’t be sure but…” Kiku looked aside for a moment as though he couldn’t believe what he was about to say. “I’m not entirely convinced, but...there are marine traces in his blood…enough to make me believe that you are telling the truth. It’s beyond belief. But I can’t be sure unless I run more tests. Would you be willing to come back once you are well and let me study you?”

This last question he directed at Tino, who nodded groggily and flapped his gills for good measure.

“Anything to prove that we’re not lying.” He said in his increasingly croaking and thinning voice. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you so much for this, Kiku.” Lukas said, shaking the man’s hand.

“One last thing, doc.” Mathias asked as they were heading out of the lab. “Considering that you can’t make any kind of claim one way or another, do you want us to blur out your face and modify your voice in the video?”

Kiku looked surprised.

“I didn’t even think about that, but yes, please. I can’t risk my reputation at this point. I’ve just established myself here.”
“That’s why I asked. Thanks!”

Kiki showed them to the door and waved goodbye as they left.

“That was very diplomatic of you, Mathias.” Emil praised when they got back into the car. “I just assumed he’d want to be seen if he’s the first to prove that mer folk exist.”

Before Mathias could respond he became too distracted by Tino instantly pulling the car quilt around him and bending over at the waist in his seat, groaning.

“Aw…poor Tino…” He mumbled sincerely, lowering the still recording camera enough to stroke his head a few times. “Bad colds always feel like they’re killing you, but I promise you’ll be ok.”

Emil sat beside Tino and let the merman half-crawl into his lap. As they got back on the road and the teenager secured him in place with his arms, Tino felt a surge of gratefulness. None of the others needed to be doing any of this for him, but they were such kind humans, taking care of him when they could have just left him by the side of the road that night, or abandoned him to some institution. As horrible as he felt, Tino knew he needed to let them know how much it meant to him.

“Thank you all.” The words were quiet and strained, but they all heard them. “I’m sorry I’m causing so much trouble…but thank you for being such responsible and caring guardians.”

“You’re welcome, Tino,” Lukas said gently, “please don’t think you’re causing us any trouble; you’re one of us now, we’d do anything to help our own.”

“Also, don’t thank us just yet,” added Emil cautiously, “we have to get you to the hospital and pumped full of antibiotics before we can breathe easy.”

The merman barely took in the information they carefully fed him about what would most likely be done to him at the hospital. He’d researched hospitals, but still wasn’t quite sure what to expect. Adding to that how muddled his brain was becoming and he simply stopped thinking altogether.

The rest of the afternoon was an exhausting blur of confusion, fear, and absolute misery. Filling out the paperwork had apparently caused a big issue, as Tino had no citizenship or identification of any kind. Lukas had managed to smooth that over somehow, Tino had been too busy trying not to fall over in his chair at the time to catch how, and the hospital took him in.

From the first few moments it was uncomfortable. The sterile and unwelcoming atmosphere, the poking and prodding nurses, the IV shunt…he hated that the most. Unlike when Kiku had taken his blood, this needle stayed in his hand, allowing the healing liquid to flow into his veins from the IV bags hanging above his bed. It was still an unsettling if not disturbing concept, letting a substance be forced into his body. Tino knew the hospital staff were trying to help him, he’d been to healers in the sea before, but he’d never had the constant attention of so many people doing and saying things that he didn’t understand in relation to his own body. He wanted to take interest in what they were doing, but after being put into a hospital gown, examined again by a group of nurses and doctors with instruments he couldn’t place, asked a series of questions he didn’t have answers to (or answers they would accept), had his blood taken again, had the IV put in, and been told a mouthful he couldn’t understand about what they were doing to treat him…he was intimidated into silence.

In the middle of the last doctor’s speech about how antibiotics worked, Tino simply pulled the covers over his head and curled into a tight ball beneath them, cradling his IV-pierced hand to his chest and whimpering softly. He was vaguely aware that his companions were, and had been, doing
all they could to ease and support him through the frightening experience, but now he tuned them out. Tino could only handle so much, even with their comforting.

He completely shut down.

“Give him some space.” Lukas said softly after they had been standing around his bed for a few minutes, trying to coax him out. They all reluctantly backed off, gathering at the window across the little room.

“He’ll deal with the shock of it all in his own way. Once the meds kick in he’ll come around.”

“But…he’s never refused to speak before.” Worried Emil. “Will he really be ok? Emotionally, I mean.”

Berwald placed a hand on the teen’s shoulder and gave him as reassuring a look as he could.

“He’s just overwhelmed. He’ll recover.”

Lukas shook his head, rubbing at his cheek.

“I can’t imagine. It’s hard enough feeling sick in your own home, but to feel that terrible in a completely alien world…”

He trailed off, crossing his arms over his chest. Mathias was still filming all of this, of course, but asked in a serious tone,

“Do you think…that I made it worse for him because of the camera?”

They all turned to look at him, surprised by how guilty he sounded. It was nearly impossible for Mathias to feel remorse; it was refreshing to see that he did have a conscience. Lukas appeared to be moved by his partner’s concern, and he reached down to lace their fingers together.

“You’ve kept a fair distance all day, Mat. It’s not like you were the one in his space. The staff were just doing their jobs, but it was too much for Tino.”

Mathias turned the camera back to get a shot of the huddle of sheets in the bed.

“I’m going to cut here,” he said quietly, “for Tino’s sake.”

When he turned off the camera Lukas squeezed his hand and gave him a proud little grin.

“Wow, Mathias, you’re human.” Emil said, in a tone of mock awe.

“Bite me, shorty.”

“Lukas,” Berwald cut in softly, “I need to pick up a few things from home. Can I have your keys?”

Lukas nodded and handed them over without a second thought.

“We’ll hold down the fort here.”

With a grateful look, Berwald quickly left the room.

“Why did he leave?” Questioned Emil, looking confused.

“Tino’s going to be here overnight. Naturally, we can’t leave him here alone, so I’m assuming
Berwald has claimed the position of night guard.”

Emil shifted from foot to foot.

“I hope he won’t tire himself out doing that…”

“He’s learned how to pace himself over the years.” Lukas said, surety in his voice. “I’m sure there’s no reason to worry.”

Mathias rubbed his chin and made an uncertain humming sound.

“I don’t know; Ber’s never had to find a pace for taking care of a merman he’s crushing on. And that merman isn’t doing so well right now…worrying is all we can do.”

Neither of the brothers seemed able to come up with a response to that. Instead, they silently settled into the chairs beside the bed, to begin their vigil.

Thankfully along with the antibiotics that had been given to Tino, pain medication had also been administered.

He had no idea how much time had passed after he blocked out the world, but as the discomfort in his entire body ebbed away, Tino slowly began to uncoil in relief. Finally, he relaxed enough to hear the soft voices speaking beside him in a stillness that sounded so nice and calming after the chaos of their arrival. He tentatively pulled the covers down to peek out.

Emil, Lukas, and Mathias were all sitting in chairs around his bed, talking quietly and looking concerned. Their attention turned to him at once when they saw him moving.

“Hey there, fish boy.” Mathias said quietly. “Feeling a bit better?”

“Yea, actually.” Tino answered, carefully moving onto his back. He tilted his head from side to side and took a few deliberate swallows. “The pain isn’t completely gone, but it’s…it’s barely there…”

He still looked incredibly tired, but also amazed.

“Is this what your medicine can do?”

Lukas rose from his chair and went to stand closer to Tino’s bed. He tapped the IV bag with a finger and nodded.

“Yes, but remember, you’re not well yet; that’s just a mask to help you cope. The true medicine is going to take longer to heal you.”

“I see.” Tino said, and then seemed to realize something. “Where is Berwald?”

“He ran home to get a change of clothes and stuff,” Mathias supplied, “because they’re pretty sure they’re going to be keeping you overnight. He’s planning to stay here with you.”

“But…where is he going to sleep?”

“Probably in this chair.” Emil said, scooting around a little in the one roomy lounge chair that
wasn’t a standard stiff padded one. “It reclines I think…”

“But…” Tino tried protesting again.

“It’s fine, Tino.” Lukas told him. “As if anything any of us can say could stop him. I’d stay with you as well but there’s simply no room for another person in here.”

Tino studied the plain room more carefully now that absolute misery was not clouding his mind.

“What is it, Tino?”

“I…I don’t want…” The merman spoke very hesitantly, and then rubbed his head nervously. “I wish I could go back to Berwald’s house…”

Lukas’ face softened and he reached out to brush a strand of long hair back from Tino’s face.

“We’d all like that.” He said quietly. “No one likes staying in the hospital. But just think; one night and maybe another day and hopefully you’ll have improved enough for them to release you and send you back home with Berwald. Until then, just try and get some rest. It’s not forever.”

“Certainly feels like it’s going to be.” Tino sighed. He leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment, then suddenly they flew open and he gasped, “Lukas! This isn’t going to cost all of your money is it? I read that hospital stays are very expensive!”

He looked so upset that Lukas stood up, resting a hand on his forehead to press his head back down into the pillows.

“Don’t worry about that, Tino. We have a collective healthcare system in this country, so any medical bills are already covered. Even if we didn’t, your fans have donated in droves the last few days. Once we post the footage from today, and people get wind that you’re in the hospital, loads more will come pouring in. Believe me, whenever there’s an injury or illness, donations skyrocket. It happened when Berwald was bedded for two days after that troll case, and when Emil broke his hand and had to do all video-journal because he couldn’t type. Mathias and I have avoided getting any big injuries, but if and when we do, our supporters always flock around us. Trust me, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Tino’s slightly bloodshot eyes widened with amazement, and then tears pooled in them.

“That’s so generous.”

“Speaking of fans,” Interjected Mathias, doing his best to sound tactful while also holding in his eagerness, “I was thinking that at some point today we go live and let our audience know what’s going on. We can post the footage from today later, but this is like an emergency announcement and update all at once. I’m not asking for you to say anything, Tino, since your voice hurts you. It’ll be better if you don’t speak at all, actually. But we obviously won’t do it if the thought stresses you out.”

Lukas nibbled at his thumb nail as Mathias spoke, and then added,

“We’ve been discussing it. I think it’s a good idea, but we don’t want to force you to be part of it if you’d rather not.”

“We would need at least a shot or two of you in the bed,” Mathias said slowly, as if considering, “looking as sick as you are, but again, you wouldn’t have to say anything.”
Tino didn’t need long to make up his mind.

“I can talk a little if anyone has questions for me.” He offered. “Nothing hurts as badly as before, so I don’t think it will be a huge issue.”

“Still, the last thing we want is to make you feel worse.” Emil said.

“I’ll be perfectly fine.” Replied Tino, giving a small smile. “Anything for the fans, right?”

“A trooper all the way!” Mathias laughed. “Now we just have to wait for Berwald to come back with the car; my computer’s in there. I brought it just in case.”

Not surprisingly, Berwald was unhappy when he returned to the news that they would be doing a live stream. His frown was set deeper than Tino had seen it before when even Lukas told him it was a smart move.

“He should be resting.” Berwald kept insisting. “He’s sick.”

“But he won’t be getting up and doing anything. All he needs to do is show his face.” Was Mathias’ argument.

“It’s still stressful. It should be as calm in here as we can make it.”

“I think you’re the one making things more tense…” Muttered Emil.

Finally, after the argument had gone around a few times and reached a stalemate, Tino shook his head on the pillow and reached out a hand to the tall man. Berwald came over at once and wrapped his fingers around the smaller ones offered to him, while Tino smiled and told him,

“I am resting, Ber. The medicine is doing everything it can to cure me. While I’m lying here conscious I might as well let something productive come from it. So please, do not be so grieved…”

He’d slipped back into the more flowery vocabulary that he used when he was serious. This more than anything else, seemed to make Berwald realize that the merman had made up his mind. He sighed and nodded before hanging his head sheepishly.

“Sorry for stressing.” He said, to which Tino squeezed his hand and then released it.

“Alright, I’m going to get the computer! Emil, get on your phone and let everyone know we’ll be live in a bit with breaking emergency news!”

“I’m not going to say it like that.” Huffed the teen, pulling out his phone. “‘Critical update, going live soon’ has a more mysterious ring to it.”

“Do it.”

The live stream did not last for very long, and consisted mostly of them recapping what had happened that day and answering fan’s worried questions. The number of viewers they had was impressive considering it was an impromptu stream, and the response on their social media across the board was positive.

Tino did just lie in his bed and look as cheerful as he could, given the situation, while the rest of them did the talking and he nodded or shook his head in answer to questions. He only spoke a few
times. Most relevantly was to explain that his kind was afflicted more with infections in the skin, or injuries. He explained that he’d never felt like this before, technically never had a cold in his life, but had run fevers a few times when he’d had infections in his tail or his gills. The healers in the sea had few remedies beyond helping to soothe the irritation, and the body was left to repair on its own.

“I’ve never felt this helpless head to tail—I mean, toe, before.” He chuckled. “I’ve never had my entire body out of commission. It’s unsettling. But you have strong medicine, so I’m sure I’ll be alright.”

During the stream doctors and nurses would have to interrupt to check in on Tino, and the group had to repeatedly explain what they were doing when asked. They also had to constantly deal with the skepticism and obvious disapproval from most of the staff. They continued to point out Tino’s markings, to which no one really had much explanation.

Thankfully, somewhere between the comings and goings of the staff, and the long moments where Lukas was explaining something to the unseen audience of the live stream, Tino fell asleep. They ended the stream there, and Tino remained asleep for the rest of the afternoon and evening. With great reluctance, Lukas, Mathias, and Emil left the hospital when it grew dark, and Berwald set up his makeshift bed on the lounge chair.

Berwald read on his tablet for a while, but after an hour or two the screen began to get to his eyes. Even though the room was dark enough for his tablet screen to automatically go as dim as it could, his eyes became sore and he decided it was time to try and sleep. He used the bathroom to change into his simple pajama pants, socks, and t-shirt, then reclined in the chair with a blanket around him. He had to take his glasses off, but he kept glancing over to where Tino’s markings glowed in the darkness, his shape outlined by the faint light cast from the half-open doorway into the bright hospital hall outside.

Tino woke to someone touching his hand and arm. When he opened his eyes he could barely see, it was so dim, but a stranger stood over him. He chirped sharply, jerking away and trying to sit up. He bumped the plastic safety bar, which was the only reason he didn’t topple out of bed. As his mind raced to catch up, a pair of big hands took his shoulders and grounded him.

“Tino, it’s alright, calm down. You’re safe.”

Tino recognized Berwald’s voice, and looked up to see the man leaned over him on the other side of the bed, looking sleep-rumpled, but alert. The nurse had recoiled a foot or two back, but was standing and watching tensely. A few more seconds passed before Tino remembered where he was. It was his hospital room, but the lights were out so it was much darker than before, his spots glowing brilliantly in the low lighting from the open door. Tino relaxed. He looked over to the nurse, who held up some equipment in her hands.

“It’s ok,” she said softly, “I just need to record your vitals. We have to every four hours. Now, can you tell me your full name and birthday, please?”

“What…? Why?”

Tino was having trouble staying in the moment, with how hazy his brain was. His mind and body were heavy and slow to respond, but he must have looked calm enough for Berwald and the nurse to help lay him back down in bed. Tino adjusted his eyes to the dim light, widening his pupils without even thinking about it as he watched the nurse carefully.
“Overnight we have to ask this.” She explained, “It’s just procedure.”

With a small grunt, Tino answered, in a very slurred and weary voice,

“Tino of Clan Moinen…born on the third quarter-moon of winter.”

The nurse looked absolutely befuddled, and her jaw opened a bit. She glanced at Berwald as if looking for an answer. When he gave none, she asked,

“Well, um…Tino is the name I see on your chart, but…”

“We don’t know his exact birthday by our calendar.” Berwald said, though this only seemed to confuse the nurse more. “And he doesn’t have a proper last name, but you have the right patient. It’s alright.”

“Ok, well, then,” the nurse fumbled to set down the few items she’d brought with her to the room, “I’ll go ahead then.”

She slipped a loose clip onto Tino’s fingertip and pressed a round metal disc on a tube to his inner elbow. Tino turned his blackened eyes upon her every move, but she was concentrating, and didn’t notice the change in his eyes.

“She’s just testing how fast your heart is pumping.” Berwald told him quietly. Tino made a small little bird-like crooning sound, and turned his head away from her.

“Berwald…” He muttered, fixing his dilated eyes on his frowning face, “where are the others?”

“Home in bed.”

Tino gave a little frown and looked confused.

“But…you’re here…that’s right…you’re going to stay…”

“I wouldn’t leave you alone here. Never.”

Tino closed his eyes, offering the weakest of contented smiles.

“Thank you, alpha…”

The words were so soft, nearly a sigh, that Berwald barely heard them. He couldn’t help the smile that came to his lips in response, even if he didn’t quite understand their meaning. The nurse looked amused, but chose not to comment.

Berwald caught her staring at Tino’s markings, and didn’t miss the way she ran her thumb over a few sprinklings of lights on the back of his hand. An unexpected surge of possessiveness clutched at Berwald’s heart. As if in retaliation for the nurse daring to touch Tino, Berwald leaned down, swiped the hair from Tino’s forehead, and pressed a kiss to his temple. Tino made a soft groan of approval and leaned into it, prompting Berwald to give him another in the same spot.

“Al…pha…” Tino breathed again, making Berwald blush this time for how…enamored…that sounded.

The nurse ignored them after that, and quickly finished up her task. Tino had fallen asleep before she left, and Berwald managed to get in a few hours of sleep as well, until the nurse returned again to repeat the process. She didn’t have to wake either of them up to question them this time, but they both woke up, despite how quiet she tried to be. Tino didn’t attempt to speak this time, just kept his
eyes closed and his face turned away from her. She didn’t seem to hold it against him, no doubt seeing many patients who didn’t care for being disturbed in their sleep, and left them without a word.

Berwald had just turned over to try and get back to sleep, when he became aware of a sound in the quiet of the room. Being plagued by a nurturing personality, Berwald knew at once that it was the sound of sniffling. Specifically, the sniffling of someone trying to hold back their tears.

He fumbled for his glasses, and then carefully rose from the chair and went to the bed. When he looked, Tino was curled on his side, hiding his face in his drawn-up knees. He was trembling.

“Tino?” Berwald called softly, not wanting to startle him. “Tino, what’s the matter? Are you hurting? Should I get the nurse?”

The merman sniffled loudly and shook his head, giving a muffled sound of protest. Berwald rested a hand very softly on Tino’s bowed back, and stroked across his shoulder blades for a while, without pressing the issue. Finally, Tino let out a sob, as though he’d finally broken and couldn’t hold it in anymore. A few more trickled out of him, along with the scent of salt from his tears.

“I’m sorry,” Berwald told him, “you’re probably just overwhelmed, hm? It must be awful.”

Tino immediately nodded, letting out a few more ragged sobs that tore through the room with how vicious they were.

“I know I’m here for a reason,” He whispered through his sobs, “I want to be here, I do, I came on land for a purpose. But…right now, I…”

The merman faltered, and Berwald brushed the heavy tangle of his hair back from his neck, blowing gently to cool the heat that came off that spot.

“It’s ok, Tino. Whatever you’re feeling, it’s ok.”

With that reassurance, Tino uncovered his face and let Berwald see his weepy eyes. He didn’t look at the other man, but he admitted,

“I…I…want to go home.”

Berwald gave a deep sound in his throat. The words broke his heart just a bit. It was an acknowledging sound, but didn’t indicate his feelings either way. But his large hand came up to cup the back of Tino’s head, stroking softly through his hair.

“I’m sorry, but I do…I miss being in the water.” He blurted, deep sobs and shuddering breaths breaking some of his words up into uneven, messy sounds.

“I feel so lost here, there’s so much that scares me, even things I understand. The pace is different. The flow isn’t the same. I don’t know if I can ever fit into it in any sense. I miss my home. The feel of the water all around me. I still wake up sometimes and feel so alien in this body…and I feel guilty…because…you’ve all been so good to me. I shouldn’t…I shouldn’t complain…”

Berwald listened patiently, letting Tino pour out his worries. When he sputtered to a halt, the big man simply shook his head and spoke calmly,

“I can’t imagine what you’re going through, Tino; you’re scared and hurting and away from home. You should never feel guilty about being homesick. Missing your home is different than complaining. None of us would fault you for that. So, go ahead and cry. Cry all you want. I think
Tino stilled at those words, going silent in their wake, before the sobs began anew.

“C-can you…hold me?” He begged, turning over in bed and clutching at Berwald’s shirt. “P-please? I’m sorry if it’s weird, but…please?”

In response, Berwald used good foresight to snag a few tissues from the bedside tray, and climbed into the hospital bed beside Tino. With a little shifting and maneuvering with Tino’s IV tube, there was enough room for them both when they wedged together, which was exactly what Tino needed. He fit into Berwald’s arms like he was meant to be there, his head finding a perfect rest against a firm chest. Tino took the first tissue Berwald offered him, and pressed it to his face as he wept.

“You’ll be ok,” Berwald whispered to him, “I’ve got you.”

Neither of them spoke after that while Tino cried. There was no need.

When his tears were spent, and all five tissues were used and tossed onto the tray, Tino went limp against Berwald. It was a relief for them both, after Tino had been so tense as he cried. Now he was pliant, and Berwald took advantage of this to tilt his head back and wipe any stray tears with his thumb.

“Feel better?” He asked. Tino nodded tiredly at him, making a sad little chirruping sound which made his lips vibrate a bit. Berwald grinned a little at how cute that looked, like he was pursing his lips for a kiss…then he frowned, trying to get that thought out of his mind. He pulled Tino’s head back against his chest, wanting to distract himself from looking at Tino’s mouth. Even while sick, face ugly red from crying, Tino looked so sweet glowing with those ethereal blue markings that Berwald wouldn’t have minded kissing him.

“You’ll feel even better in the morning. Just sleep now.” He told the merman, rubbing his back.

“Will they make you move?” Tino slurred sleepily, tugging him closer as though daring anyone to try.

“I won’t.” Sighing at the reassurance, Tino nodded and relaxed deeper against Berwald’s body.

“Good…”

Despite not being the most comfortable of ways to sleep, cramped together in that one bed, both of them fell asleep moments later.

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The creaking of the mattress was loud in the silence of the bedroom, and it woke Mathias from his deep slumber. Instinctively he turned and reached out, but found the spot beside him empty of his lover. The bed was still warm where his body had been, and Mathias drowsily rubbed a hand against it before opening his eyes. In the small amount of light that filtered in from the street lamps below their windows, he saw Lukas’ figure sitting on the very edge of his side of the bed, fumbling through a drawer. He placed a glass of water down on the bedside table, using both hands to dig through its contents. That told Mathias all he needed to know.

He pulled himself upward, dragging himself up behind Lukas and slinging sleep-heavy arms around his chest.
“Can’t sleep?” Mathias asked.

Lukas sighed, abandoning his search for the moment and leaning back against Mathias.

“Looking for the melatonin. Did I wake you?” He asked, rubbing Mathias’ hands. The other man shook his head, wrapping his legs around Lukas’ waist so that he fully enveloped him.

“’s ok. What’s wrong?”

“I can’t stop worrying.” Lukas admitted, his voice sounding ragged. “It’s like having you, Berwald, or Emil in the hospital rather than someone who’s nearly a stranger.”

Mathias yawned widely against Lukas’ shoulder and then muttered,

“He might not’ve been with us for that long, but he’s not a stranger anymore.”

The huge breath and exhalation Lukas gave moved Mathias’ arms around his chest, and he could feel the waves of anxiety rolling off him. Even at his most distressed Lukas was quiet about it. Mathias would freak out whenever he felt like it, got it all off his chest and moved on. Lukas was different. Therefore, when he began to worry aloud, Mathias woke up a bit.

“Tino’s our responsibility.” He said, seriously. “I know what Kiku said, I know he’s the expert, but… what if he was somehow wrong? No one knows enough about Mer folk to make any solid determination. What if Tino has a reaction? Or the meds don’t affect him at all and he just gets worse. Or-.”

“Shhh, honey-baby,” Mathias whispered, kissing Lukas’ cheek, tightening his arms and legs around him, “worrying won’t do a damn thing to help Tino. If anything goes wrong, Ber will call. He hasn’t, so everything’s fine. We’d know by now if it wasn’t. Tino’s been pumped full of those drugs all day and nothing’s gone wrong. Come on, lie back down with me and relax.”

Lukas blew out a breath as he followed Mathias’ suggestion, letting his lover hold him back-to-chest, both of them lying over the covers with legs loosely tangled together. Mathias rubbed a few fingers over Lukas’ chest.

“Your heart’s racing so fast, baby…” He observed, feeling a surge of empathy. “You’re strung tight as a clothesline. Melatonin won’t help if it’s all in your head…”

Lukas gave another great sigh, tossing his head back onto Mathias’ shoulder. His body was indeed so tense that his muscles were trembling slightly.

“Aw, sweetheart…” Mathias said tenderly, no mocking in his tone, “you’re just like your little brother…”

Emil didn’t do as well as Lukas at hiding his worries. When anxiety struck the teen, anyone standing at all close to him would be able to feel how hard his body shook. Out on cases, during personal drama, arguments, anything that upset him, led to his body releasing its fight or flight response and left him shaking. Whether hereditary or not, Lukas experienced the same little spells of anxiety on occasion that were strong enough to affect him physically.

“Just can’t stop thinking about it.” Lukas admitted. “Trying not to think about it just makes it that much worse. I’m getting myself into a bad mental cycle…”

“Don’t think.” Mathias said simply. “Just focus on my hands. Nothing else.”
Mathias hummed into the flesh of Lukas’ neck and gave it a little kiss. He lifted one hand and laid two fingers to Lukas’ cheek. He stroked gentle circles into the soft flesh before trailing down his neck, marking invisible patterns just over Lukas’ collarbone.

“Deep breath for me.”

Lukas obeyed, his chest rising and falling under Mathias’ other hand.

“Follow my fingers with your mind. Don’t let it think about anything but how my touch feels.”

His hand began to roam over Lukas’ bare chest, over his shoulders, his arms, down his sides. He went slowly, making Lukas follow the path of his fingers with his concentration, which was enough to calm his mind a bit. They’d done this before; Mathias was lighthearted and usually bounced back quickly from anything that bothered him, but Lukas tended to be far more serious and contemplative. It was difficult for him to let go of some things, with as smart as he was and how much his brain worked, it was nearly impossible for him to turn it off at times.

So, they’d come up with a very basic, but generally effective technique. Mathias had jokingly called it ‘sexy meditation’, even though it wasn’t meant to be sexual (all the time, anyway) and it wasn’t quite meditation, as it hinged on touch for mental focus rather than sound. Mathias would trail his hands soothingly along Lukas’ body, one hand at a time, while Lukas tried to narrow all his mental focus to the touch of his lover’s fingertips. He’d clear all other thoughts and only concentrate on the sensation of skin on skin, until his entire body relaxed…or became excited. Either way it helped him completely escape his worries.

Only just over half of these ‘sessions’ ended in the two of them making love, and that was just as good an end as Lukas breathing easier and going on with his day, or falling asleep. The simple, patient touch of his lover was like magic. Considering how impatient and sometimes childish Mathias could be in his carefree lifestyle, it made it all the more precious to Lukas that he would take the time to do something like this for him. In general, Lukas was the one constantly taking the brunt of Mathias’ hyperactivity and telling him to calm down. The fact that Mathias had found a way to do that for Lukas too, dealing with his own hyperactive mind, was just one of the reasons Lukas could never stop loving him.

By the time Mathias worked his way down to Lukas’ hip bones, his breathing was calm and steady, his heart slower as well.

“I know you’re wide awake and I’m half-asleep…but…you want me to go lower?”

Lukas broke his mental concentration to chuckle into the darkness of the room. For all his ability to be serious and help Lukas like this, he was still Mathias.

“After teasing my nipples like that for ten minutes?” He asked, rolling his hips forward into the waiting cradle of Mathias’ hands. “Hell, yes…”

Mathias made a whimsical hum of happiness and sat up, rolling Lukas onto his back and sliding down his body.

“Don’t worry, honey-baby; I’m never too sleepy for this…I’ll suck all the worry right out of you.”

As Mathias made good on his word, Lukas chuckled again, silently thanking the heavens for him.
A Japanese pop tune startled Emil awake early the next morning.

He rolled over and slapped his hand down repeatedly on his nightstand, searching for his phone. Once he found it and picked it up he squinted at the screen. It looked insanely bright to Emil’s sleepy eyes, but he saw the name of the caller clearly. Not that he needed to look, the ringtone told him already. He begrudgingly hit the answer button and groaned into the phone,

“Hey, Leon.”

“Morning sunshine.” Called a steady voice, laced with an Asian accent. “I know you’re not awake yet, but I couldn’t wait any longer to call you.”

Emil rolled back over into his previous sleeping position and mock snored into the phone. Leon’s voice came through just as toneless again,

“Don’t get smart on me, Ice.”

The teen didn’t even roll his eyes at the nickname like he had when he first received it. Instead he quipped back,

“You know, I was having this great dream where I took all your spools of thread and tangled them together.” Hissed Emil into the phone. “But you woke me before I could pour ink on all your neatly folded fabric. I might just take inspiration from my dream if you keep calling me this early.”

“Then who would mend all your clothes?” Leon demanded, his neutral, even cadence turning slightly smugly. “You and your brother and The Giant, think of how many rips and tears would be left unpatched. Your job is hard on fabric, I’m sure it won’t take long for you all to look like paupers.”

“Who uses that word anymore?” Emil groaned.

“No one, unless you ruin my sewing room. Then you guys will bring it back into the mainstream.”

“What do you want?!” Demanded Emil, sounding playfully upset. He wasn’t happy about being woken up, but his best friend made him smile.

“I wanted to catch you early, because I figured you are all going over to the hospital, right?”

“Mm-Hm, I’m guessing so. I thought I’d drive myself today, though, so I had the option of coming and going when I wanted. I wouldn’t have bugged out yesterday at any time, but I did feel kinda trapped there.”

Leon sounded excited on the other line. Or as excited as he possibly could. His voice showed less emotion than his older brother.

“Oh good. I was hoping to ask if you could take me with you. I’d love to meet Tino in person. My brother came home all hyper yesterday, ranting about the scientific questions Tino’s very existence brings up, and what tests he needs to run, and what he can do to prove his theories correct, and….look, I just have to see with my own eyes what made Kiku act like a kid in a candy shop. I never see him like that anymore.”

Emil hesitated when Leon went quiet, and he finally said,
“I don’t think that would be a good idea until I find out how Tino’s doing today. He was pretty stressed out yesterday, and he hadn’t woken up when I left last night.”

“But if you’re taking your own car, can you at least check and see, and then if he’s ok with it, come and get me?” Leon begged. “Seriously, I’m intrigued with what it was about him that gave my brother such a spark. He’s been a bit bummed lately, you know.”

A sneaking suspicion came into Emil’s mind, and he woke up a bit as he frowned.

“Since when did you care about Kiku’s research interests?”

There was a brief pause before Leon answered.

“Since, God, I don’t know, you discovered a freaking merman that my brother might become world famous for studying?”

Unable to argue with that, Emil stretched a bit and tried to wake up his tired limbs.

“OK, fair enough, but still, he’s going to be with us for like a year. You’ll get to see him at some point.”

“I figured that, but…I want to see those markings! They’re so pretty and are so much more stunning when it’s dark, or…when he wears blue…”

“Aha!” Emil said loudly, sitting upright in bed and pointing at nothing. “That’s it! You just want to dress him up, don’t you?”

The reply came much too quickly, Leon’s voice gaining a vibrant energy.

“Whatsoever do you mean? I like scientific things too, you know! I’m not all consumed by fashion!”

“Fishnet pattern on blazer fabric is as close as you come to being scientific, Leon.” Emil deadpanned. “Admit it, you just want to take his measurements so you can start sewing for him.”

“It would be instant fame!” Leon cracked, sounding desperate. “If I could drape him in blues and greys like the waters of his homeland, just think of how gorgeous his spots would look against such tones! And the story would be huge! I could start my own brand with all the attention I’d get if I were attached to him. Oh, please, Emil, you know I’m not a selfish person, but this could be the big break I need! And you have the power to give it to me!”

Even as sleepy as he was, Emil couldn’t deny his friend’s thinking made sense. He actually agreed that it was a brilliant idea, but it was slightly irritating feeling like he was being used.

“Leon. He’s going to be with us for a year. You’ll have your chance, I promise. But he’s sick in a hospital bed. He already has people poking at him and examining him all through the day, he doesn’t need to hate you on top of them.”

Leon gave a quiet sigh, and after a beat, spoke in his usual calm and cool voice.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I was just being selfish.”

“It’s cool.” Assured Emil. “I’d love to help you out, man. Just wait a bit, ok? I’m sure Tino will be interested in how clothing is made, too. He started asking about it the first day we had him. None of us could really show him how it was done, so he looked at a few tutorials on YouTube, but he was looking at so much that he probably forgot about it.”
Emil though he just might have heard a tiny squeak of delight on the other end before Leon spoke again.

“It would be an amazing experience to show a real merman how to sew clothes. I hope he recovers soon for his own sake, but also so I can make this happen. Think of the footage and ratings. My first widespread exposure…”

“We’ll make it happen for you, bro.” Yawned Emil, stretching his back out. “But for now, just watch our site and I’ll keep you updated, like I’m doing for the rest of the world.”

“Easier said than done, but alright. I’ll put my life’s ambitions on the back burner. You’re the one controlling the stove.”

“I’m going to try and go back to sleep now.” Emil deadpanned.

“Keeping the stove off then? Cold, Ice, cold.”

Emil hung up on Leon and flung himself back onto the mattress. Hearing about ice and cold made him pull his covers up around him once more, burrowing into their warmth. Leon had given him the name ‘Ice’ shortly after he met Lukas and Mathias for the first time several years ago.

He and Emil had been friends for a few months at the time, meeting through first year university classes. Leon had met Lukas in passing before, but it wasn’t until he saw Mathias with Lukas that he made the declaration that Mathias was like fire, and Lukas was ice. This caused quite the friendly debate between them all over their dinner visit as to whether or not this was accurate. Leon ended up pointing out how much like alike Emil and Lukas really were. To which Emil had recoiled, stating that he wasn’t cold towards people, and if anything, Leon was cooler than him since he hardly put any emotion in his voice. Expertly navigating the conversation, Leon admitted that one of the reasons they got along so well as friends was because they were very similar. Somehow the debate was never truly settled, but from that day onward Leon called Emil ‘Ice’ as a joke. Over time, it just became routine for Emil to be called that by his friend. He didn’t even mind anymore.

His phone rang again a half hour later, right by his ear, since he’d just plopped his phone on his pillow.

“What?!” Emil answered crossly, rubbing at his eyes.

“Emil?” Came Lukas’ voice on the phone. “Didn’t mean to wake you. Mathias and I are heading to the hospital. Should we come and get you?”

“Driving myself today. I’ll be by later, once the chickens are actually up.” Grumped Emil.

“It’s only 8:00, Emil.” Lukas pointed out dryly. “The chickens are taking their midday naps.”

“Shut up…” Groaned the teen, uncurling his legs and wincing as his feet touched the cold end of the bed.

“Well, I’ll let you know if anything’s wrong, otherwise we’ll see you when we see you.”

“Cool. Bye.”

Emil hung up and purposefully tossed his phone in the vague direction of his nightstand. By some miracle it actually landed on it, clattering a bit next to his alarm clock. He groaned in frustration, knowing he’d only be able to doze for a while rather than fall back to sleep. If he tried that, he’d
sleep in far too late and then he’d feel bad for not checking in with the others. Not to mention his head began whirring with concern for Tino, and the more he thought about it the more he knew he needed to bite the bullet and just get up.

“Who am I, Mathias?” He told himself, fighting his way out of his bed and going to his closet. “I don’t have that much trouble waking up.”

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Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
Chapter 9

Tino woke to his stomach growling. His limbs were stiff from sleeping in the unfamiliar bed, so he stretched slowly, grunting and yawning as he opened his eyes.

“He’s waking up!”

“Shhh, you idiot…”

Tino rolled over to find Mathias and Lukas in his room, sitting in the two stiff padded chairs by the window. Berwald was still there too, and looked to be dozing in the lounge chair. He was covered in a rumpled hospital blanket up to his shoulders, but his long legs stretched out from beneath it.

The merman glanced around briefly but didn’t spot Emil. Sunlight was pouring in through the half-open curtains, making the room look yellow and cheerful in spite of its clinical nature.

“G’morning…” Tino slurred when he saw them. The two didn’t quite get up and run to his bedside, but as hard as they tried, they couldn’t keep the briskness out of their movements as they neared him.

“How are you feeling?” Lukas asked at once, trying to sound casual. But even in his half-asleep state Tino could tell the man was worried. Mathias, by contrast, was doing nothing to hide how concerned he was, with his eyes opened wide and questioning.

“’m hungry…” Tino said sincerely. “Can I eat something?”

Smiles broke out on both their faces.

“We’ll see what we can do.” Lukas told him. “They should be coming in to take your breakfast order soon. It’s still early, though.”

“And how are you feeling?” Mathias pressed. “If you’re hungry that means you’ve got to be feeling better, right? Do you still hurt?”

Tino rolled over again, onto his back this time, and flexed his hands and feet, rotating his joints. Then he swallowed a few times and gently moved his head from side to side. He finally sat up slowly, pulling his knees in to his chest.

“I still hurt a little, but…I feel a million times better than I did yesterday. The pain’s almost gone.”

“That’s awesome!” Mathias whooped, and Berwald jerked awake at the sound. He made a gruff sound that somehow seemed like something a bear would do when being forced out of its den.

“Sorry, Berwald,” Lukas apologized for his partner, “did you get any sleep at all?”

Berwald made another growling sound as he fumbled to find his glasses and then slipped them on his face. He looked rough, the skin around his eyes a bit puffy. He pulled the blanket up to his chin without realizing how childlike that was.

“Some.”

“And what about you, Tino? Did you get any sleep in here?”
“Slept through the whole day.” Tino reported. “But woke up a lot last night. The nurse kept coming in to check on my ‘vitals’. Then I got pretty sad and homesick, so Berwald let me cry for a while. I did fall asleep after that because he was so warm and comfy.”

Both Mathias and Lukas raised their eyebrows and turned their heads in eerie unison to look at the big man. He was rubbing at eyes under his glasses, and looked to be dragging the action out, possibly to hide his face.

“Ohhhhh, don’t tell me you slept in bed together again?” Mathias asked, mischievous drawl in his voice. “And I didn’t get here in time to capture it on film? Damnit! Next time you have a cuddle session I have to record it, damnit! Damnit!”

“Mathias, stop cursing.” Lukas told him. “You already have video of them cuddling at the hotel, that should be enough for now. It certainly got enough attention, like you wanted.”

“But not in a hospital bed!” Mathias whined. “That’s so much more gripping and dramatic!”

“And uncomfortable too, no doubt.” Lukas muttered. “You probably didn’t get any real sleep, did you, Berwald?”

Berwald finally showed his face and shrugged.

“Like I said, I got some. The nurse woke me up a while later and made me move back to the chair.”

Tino looked instantly downcast.

“Ber…did you force yourself to sleep next to me? Was it really that uncomfortable? I’m so sorry, I-.”

“I was fine, Tino, relax.” Berwald cut off his worried chatter. “I was comfortable enough next to you, the nurse just couldn’t get her readings with me there. That’s why I moved. Still got a few solid hours in the chair. Don’t fret about it.”

Tino still looked uncertain, and gave a little sad chirp as he sat up straighter in bed. His big eyes seemed to shrink when he was sad about something, and as he tilted his head in obvious worry to stare Berwald down with them, it only completed the puppy-dog look.

“Please don’t look at me like that.” Berwald sighed, rubbing at his short, disheveled hair. “It’s too early to argue my honesty. I promise I’m fine.”

“OK, I’m sorry.” Tino said, drawing back a bit. “If you say you slept enough, I believe you. I just feel bad…you have to stay here because of me.”


A gentle smile spread over Tino’s face, and he slowly nodded, showing his acceptance of the situation.

“Well, now that we got that out of the way,” Mathias blurted, bouncing on the balls of his feet, “Lukas and I want to do another live stream at some point today if you’re ok with it.”

Lukas rolled his eyes at his lover.

“You could’ve at least waited until the poor guy had breakfast to bring that up.”
“I might be filming him eating breakfast, so he should know.” Mathias countered. “Merman tastes hospital food for the first time! Watch live!”

Tino chuckled at Mathias’ enthusiasm, and he pressed the controller for his bed, easing it up so he could lean back and still be sitting upright.

“I’d be alright with another live stream. I feel so much better! So much better that I…I mean…can I leave? Go back to Berwald’s house?”

“We’ll have to speak with the doctor about that.” Lukas told him. “They’ll have to determine how your immune system is doing before they let you out of here, I’m guessing.”

As he shifted this way and that to get comfortable in the bed, and then frowned. Without a word, he began pulling at the ties of his gown, and trying to pull out of it.

“What are you doing, Tino?” Lukas asked.

“Trying to get out of this thing.” Tino muttered. “I want to feel the air.”

“Woah, dude,” Mathias laughed, “tell me you still have boxers on or something.”

Tino nodded.

“Berwald,” said Lukas, “can you check the cupboards in here? They should have extra gowns. Tino, in here it’s best to leave the gown on, but you can change into a fresh one if you’d like.”

The merman succeeded in freeing his upper body of the garment, and then it was just a matter of pulling it off from around his legs. Tino sighed, and rubbed his hands along his spotted shoulders and chest, as though just reveling in being bare again.

“I’m still not thrilled with clothes.” He admitted. “I mean, sometimes they’re soft, and they keep me warm, but…I’m not used to them, and I miss not having to worry about wearing them.”

Mathias whistled shortly and shook his head gleefully.

“I can’t lie; I’d loooove to run around in the nude if they’d let me.”

“I let you.” Said Lukas blandly. “At home. All the time.”

“That’s just because you can’t get enough of this sexy body!”

Mathias did a little dance where he stood, that involved a lot of swaying and thrusting of hips, and Tino burst into a fit of giggles. Lukas just rolled his eyes and fought off laughter himself as Mathias invaded his space, still waggling his hips.

“Get off me, you idiot!” Protested Lukas, pushing Mathias away. “Find one, Berwald?”

Berwald was just pulling down a folded gown from the cupboard above the sink. It was just as neutrally white as the one Tino discarded, but the vaguely calming geometric patterns on it were a slightly different shade of blue.

“Do you need any help getting into it, Tino?” Lukas asked, as the merman reached for it. Tino looked down at the cloth for a second, and then held it up, letting it unfold.

“Um…I think I should be fine. But, my hand aches…”
His right hand had been the chosen spot for the IV shunt, and after having it in for an entire night and day, it was bound to be sore.

Without a word, Berwald took the gown from Tino and carefully slipped it over his head for him.

“Thanks, Ber.” Tino said gratefully, as the big man helped him get his arms through the short sleeves, and then slid the gown down over his body. Next came the task of pulling Tino’s long hair out through the collar. When it finally lay over his shoulder, Tino picked up his long braid, still in fairly good condition despite all he’d been through.

“Um, do they cut hair at hospitals?” He asked uncertainly, “I think it’s time I say goodbye to it. I’ve already had enough trouble with it, and after I get out of here it’ll be hard to do much while carrying it around. I can’t ask Berwald to spend so long braiding it every day.”

“Wouldn’t mind.” Berwald muttered.

“But it’s not practical.” Tino argued. “I’m not thrilled about it, but I really need it to be cut. And I would like to send it to those wig people. Or at the least, sell it off and give them the money. That’s ch-charit…charit…”

“Charitable?” Lukas suggested. It had been a while since Tino had struggled with a human word.

“Yes! Charitable! So, do they do that here? At the hospital?”

Lukas rubbed at his chin, thinking. Before he could answer, Mathias jumped in.

“Hey, Leon cuts Emil’s hair for free, remember? Part of his fashion-stylist-whatever career. He’d probably be able to.”

“Leon already helped us by talking Kiku into examining Tino.” Lukas said, shaking his head. “I don’t know if we should impose further by asking him to do something like this.”

“Oh, come on! He’s always going on and on about starting his bran or whatever; cutting a merman’s hair on film will go a long way to getting his name out there!”

“Brand, Mathias, his brand.” Corrected Lukas. “His clothing line and stylist skills and… something…”

Mathias put one fist on his hip and titled his head back, looking as smug as he could as he gazed down his nose at Lukas.

“You don’t know any more about it than I do, huh, babe?”

The other man pursed his lips in irritation, trying to think up a comeback. Berwald saved Lukas by interjecting,

“Could always call and ask. Worst he could say is no.”

Sighing, Lukas took out his mobile phone and dialed Emil’s number.

“You sound much more pleasant than when I last called you.” Lukas stated, after Emil picked up. “Listen, is there any way Leon would want to come over and give Tino a haircut? He’s feeling much better today and has decided he wants it done soon.”

Lukas paused to listen to his brother’s words, and then his mouth ticked up at the corners.
“Providential! Then you go get him and bring him over when you come, alright? Good then. Bye.”

Lukas hung up the phone and turned back to them all.

“Apparently Leon was begging to come and see Tino anyway, but Emil didn’t think Tino would feel well enough. Emil thinks Leon would be delighted to help us out.”

“Score another for Mathias in the ‘awesome ideas’ department!” Mathias chanted, doing another manly little victory dance.

Tino giggled at him, and Lukas just rolled his eyes again.

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By the time Tino had ordered and received his breakfast, and Berwald had changed into day clothes, Emil and Leon were walking through the door. Tino was in the middle of a big bite of buttered toast and jam when the two entered.

“Morning, Tino!” Emil said. “Wow, you look so much better than yesterday!”

The merman smiled, biting off his mouthful and munching while nodding his head. He glanced at the other young man who had come in with Emil: he looked to be roughly the same age, perhaps a bit older, and resembled Kiku somewhat with his slanted eyes and tan skin. His dark brown hair was long enough for him to have tied back in a ponytail. There was a bag over his shoulder that looked important somehow; sleek and black, but heavy with a bulk of items.

“Leon, thank you so much for coming here to do this for us.” Lukas said, rising from his chair and going to shake the young man’s hand. Leon returned the handshake, but his eyes only flitted to Lukas’ for a moment before returning to Tino. He was not hiding his stare in the slightest as he traced the merman’s features and markings with his gaze.

“It’s no problem. I’m happy to do it.”

“Smile, Leon!” Mathias called from his perch on the lounge chair, camera resting on his shoulder. He’d been there since Tino ordered breakfast. Leon glanced over at him briefly and gave a wave to the camera, but did not smile.

“Hello Mathias, and Berwald.” Leon said, looking at each of them for a second before turning his attention back to Tino. “And, Tino. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Leon.”

Tino swallowed his mouthful of toast and held out his hand. Leon strode forward and took it with confidence.

“Hello, Leon! I’m so glad you’re going to cut my hair, it’s been getting in my way since I came ashore.”

Leon’s brown eyes grew a bit wider now that he was up closer to Tino, and the merman couldn’t help and think how much like his brother he was, eyes studying him without apology, but not in a way that made Tino uncomfortable.

“I understand, and I know it’s important that it be done. But it does seem a shame,” Leon commented, “may I?”

Tino nodded and Leon picked up the thick braid of golden hair that lay on the mattress beside Tino. He turned it over in his hands a few times, stroking it with his fingers. His eyes grew even
more intrigued, even if his mouth stayed set into a neutral line. His enraptured tone also gave away his interest.

“Wow…this…is like silk…”

“If you’re going to make a Rapunzel joke,” Emil said, going to the other side of Tino’s bed to watch his friend from there, “don’t; Mathias has already made a ton of them since Berwald started braiding Tino’s hair.”

“I know, I’ve heard.” Leon said, still focused on the braid in his hands.

“You’ve been watching us all?” Tino asked brightly. “On YouTube?”

“Every second.” Leon confirmed, swallowing a bit. “I’m really glad you’re letting me be the one to do this. It feels like an honor.”

The merman smiled at him and took another casual bite of the scrambled eggs that were on his plate. He may have been polite, but he was also hungry.

“Is there anything you need to set up?” Lukas asked, seeing that Tino needed time to finish his meal. Leon nodded and gestured to the bag he carried.

“Just a chair to drape the drop cloth around, and a surface for my tools.”

Emil helped Leon to set one of the chairs in the middle of the room, and then they unfolded the thin plastic drop cloth from Leon’s bag, laying it around the base of the chair. They took the extra rolling table from the room and put it to one side of the chair. Leon busied himself with laying out all the tools of his trade, scissors, combs, and a few other things that no one else in the room could name.

“Leon and I were talking on the way over here,” Emil said, as he helped as best he could arranging things on the tray, “we hope there won’t be a backlash from our fans because of this.”

“Why would there be?” Mathias asked, hovering around with the camera as they set up.

“Think about it,” said Emil, catching Mathias’ eye, “Tino’s hair is the second most beautiful and unique feature he has without changing his appearance. All you have to do is look at it and you know he’s something special. So, if we cut it off, some might argue we’re trying to ‘humanize’ him.”

Tino cocked his head at that, his mouth still full. He looked confused, but didn’t try to interrupt.

“We can’t please everyone, now, can we?” Mathias said, sarcastically bitter. “Tino’s hair may be beautiful and unique for it’s length, but he can’t do everyday stuff without it getting in the way. I call what we’re doing practical, and sure, there’ll always be some haters out there, but who cares? This was Tino’s call, not ours.”

“That’s a good point.” Commented Leon. “You said that he was the one who asked for his hair to be cut, so it has nothing to do with being ‘humanized’, it’s just something that needs to be done. All the same, there will be some people who won’t like it.”

“Should we maybe only cut half of it off?” Suggested Lukas. “That way it would still be really long, but not overly so?”

Tino shook his head, swallowing and saying,
“I want it short. Really short. I can always grow it back.”

“And there you have it, straight from the merman’s mouth!” Mathias declared triumphantly. “He wants it short, and we’re giving him what he wants.”

By the time Leon had everything set up a few moments later, Tino was sipping at his orange juice and watching on intensely, an empty plate before him.

“You ready, Tino?” Mathias asked, standing behind the camera on its tripod, which he’d put into place as Leon was prepping his area. “This is going to be a big moment for you! Let me know when you’re ready; we’re going live with this when you are!”

“Yea, and I’m finishing up posting the auction for your hair as we speak.” Emil added, from the lounge chair he’d commandeered from Mathias, laptop in front of him as he clicked furiously, putting the links and webpages in order. “Whoever bids the highest by tomorrow morning can vote on which wig charity we send the money to. There’s so many more out there than I thought…”

Tino’s eyes fairly glowed and it almost seemed like his markings brightened too as he pushed his tray away from him.

“I’m ready!” He pulled the blanket away and eased his legs over the side of the bed. He got stuck there as he fiddled with the IV tube. “Uh…”

“Here, I’ve got it.” Berwald told him, going over to carefully roll the IV unit around the bed so it could follow him to the chair.

“Thanks, Ber!” Tino chirped, and with his braid over his arm, he headed toward the chair. Mathias lifted the camera from the tripod so he could follow them and get closer angles.

“Going live, everybody.” He announced, and they froze briefly until he spoke again.

“You’re seeing it here now, folks,” Mathias told the audience, as he started streaming, “our little fish boy is going to get his hair cut short, and sell it to the highest bidder! All proceeds will go toward the wig charity of your choice!”

“You sound like a commercial.” Emil laughed.

“It’s what he’s best at.” Called Lukas from his chair by the window.

“Just getting the information out, no harm in making it sound interesting.” Retorted Mathias.

“As if a merman getting his hair cut for the first time isn’t interesting enough?” Leon questioned, as he helped arrange Tino’s IV tube and then draped a plastic smock over him. “I’m the one doing it and I can hardly believe it.”

“Tino, wave to the camera!” Mathias called, and Tino looked down at the smock covering his arms and shrugged.

“Can’t, really…but hi everybody!”

“Are you nervous, Tino?” Mathias pressed. “And how are you feeling today?”

“I’m feeling a lot better, but not quite back to normal. I’m a little nervous, yes. I’ve never been parted from my hair before.”

Leon patted him on the shoulder.
“I’ve cut hair for a few people who’ve had it very long for a while, and it’s always a little sad for them, so that’s normal. But I agree that in your case it needs to be done.”

As he spoke, Leon began the laborious process of tying up the start of the braid at Tino’s scalp.

“Having a little trouble there, Leon?” Mathias asked, as he filmed the Asian trying to feed the length of Tino’s braid through the stretchy hair tie over and over.

“I’m thinking that I’ll have to find another way to bind the top.” Leon replied, stopping to think for a moment.

“Have you ever dealt with hair even close to this long before?” Emil asked, snapping a few pictures, before standing by. He was going to post pictures of the process and the final product on the auction link when it was done. Leon’s mouth twisted a bit as he continued thinking about what to do.

“Not even close.” He answered. “Tino, do all mer folk have hair this long?”

“Generally,” Tino answered, wincing as Leon slightly jerked his head in the effort to tie up his hair, “but we do bind our hair back when we need to. I have to curl it around my wrist about ten times to tie it in a knot at my neck when I’m working on weapons. But I could never pick up the skill to braid it.”

Leon made an interested sound before huffing out a frustrated breath. Then he picked up a small set of scissors from his kit, opening and closing them with a little ‘schik-shak’.

“Let’s try this.”

He cut the hair tie off, then took the two ends and literally tied it around the braid at the start, wrapping it around and knotting it as many times as the flexible material would allow.

“Improvisation!” Mathias declared.

“Yea, there was no way I was going to get it as tight as I need it the traditional way. Not without it taking a really long time. Ok, that’s secure enough now. You ready, Tino? I’m going to start cutting the braid off, and then I’ll worry about styling what’s left.”

Tino closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. Berwald came over and knelt beside Tino’s chair, sliding his hand up beneath the smock to pull Tino’s out and hold onto it for support. The merman’s eyes opened at the touch, and smiled softly. Encouraged, Tino gave a nervous little chirp, and then nodded, shaking Berwald’s hand in his eagerly.

“Let’s just do it before I lose my nerve.”

“We have liftoff!” Mathias cheered, circling around to get a close up as Leon grasped the base of Tino’s braid in one hand and lifted razor-sharp scissors in the other. He’d moved to focus on the interaction between Berwald and Tino, but now needed to capture the most important moment.

“Ok, here we go.” Leon announced, opening the scissors over the corner of the braid.

They all went quiet as if in reverence as Leon’s razor edges sliced through the beautiful golden hair with several passes, and freed the braid from Tino’s head. The merman’s head rocked ever so slightly when Leon cut it away, and then Leon coiled the long braid over his arm and carefully held it up.
“There it is.”

Tino craned his neck to see, so Leon brought it around and showed it to him. Tino smiled, but it was hard to tell if it was happy or sad. Berwald squeezed his hand.

“Wow! There we have it! Way to go, Tino! You’re free!” Mathias exclaimed, as he moved around and got all angles of the braid, and Tino’s reaction to seeing it apart from his head.

“I do feel so much lighter.” Tino said, and reached up to touch his head. “So strange….”

“Emil, bring me the box, please.” Leon said, and Emil produced a mailer box that they’d picked up before they’d come over. Inside was a clear plastic bag, and between the two of them they coiled the braid up and lay it on top of the bag.

“I’ll take a few pictures of this, then add it to the auction, even though most of the bidders are probably watching this stream now.” Emil said, taking the box over to the window to get a few good shots in the sunlight.

“You doing ok, Tino?” Lukas asked, joining Berwald at his side. The merman nodded.

“I thought I’d be crying or something.” He admitted. “But I think it hasn’t really struck me yet. It just feels too odd to be real…”

“That’s better than instant regret.” Berwald assured, finally releasing his hand and standing up again.

Tino smiled at him sweetly, and then shook his head a few times, letting the short locks of hair fall over his face.

“Wow!” He lifted his hands and started playing with the short pieces. “This is so weird…”

Leon took up his previous place behind Tino, and picked up a comb from the table, beginning to comb through it.

“You’ll find it so much easier to care for now. I can give you all the tips that you’ll need, or Emil can. Now, how much shorter do you want it? You still want it at your shoulders, at least? Or shorter?”

Tino glanced at each of his companions in the room for a moment before deciding.

“I don’t want it as short as Berwald’s, or Mathias’s. So…make it like Lukas and Emil’s?”

“Excellent choice.” Leon praised. “I would have already suggested a similar style for your face shape.”

“What? My face shape?” Tino asked, confused.

“Styling hair weighs heavily on the shape of the person’s face.” Leon explained, testing out where to part Tino’s much shorter hair. “Your face is rounder, so a cut of hair all one length at your neck or shoulders would look unbalanced on you. If we cut some longer bangs that frame your face just above your chin, and trim it a bit shorter in the back, it will frame your face and complement its natural shape.”

Tino looked completely agog at this explanation. His brows drew down in confusion as he listened, his lips unconsciously pouting out as he concentrated.
“I know, dude,” Mathias laughed, upon seeing his expression, “beats me too, but Leon knows his stuff!”

“Yea, Tino,” Emil chimed in, “Leon cuts my hair, so if you like the way mine looks you’ll like what he’ll do to yours.”

Tino’s brows lifted and his eyes went wide with understanding.

“Oh! Alright! I see what he means now.”

“Leon, tell our viewing audience a bit more about what it is that you do!” Emil called from across the room. Mathias swerved the camera over to him for a moment before turning back to Leon. The man looked a little put on the spot, considering he was busy at work. But as he moved around Tino, looking at him from the front, adjusting his hair, and determining where to start, he answered,

“I’m in school to be a fashion designer. I blame it on learning to cut hair at home when I was growing up, to save money on going to the salon, and that somehow branched out into me loving everything that comes with styling. I sewed my first outfit when I was nine. It was horrible, but it was a start. My aim is to start up my own brand within the next three years at least. I’m almost out of school, but not quite.”

“I’m plugging his website right now!” Emil called again, making Mathias turn the camera on him as he rattled off the website address. “He’s got some great made-to-order designs that are awesome on there. He’s interested in sewing for Tino as well.”

“Really?” Tino asked, trying to turn around and look at the man, who turned his head to face forward again without a hitch, resuming his work.

“I’ve already got a few ideas I’m very excited about.” Leon said, that energy coming back into his voice even though his face remained relatively impassive. “If you’d be ok with it, I’d love to design some outfits for you. You’re a merman, so…the theme would be water.”

Tino fought to keep from tilting his head with curiosity. But as always, his eyes were alight with expression and interest.

“Clothes…can have a theme?”

“Oh yes,” Leon fairly glowed, “anything creative has a theme whether the creator intended it or not. With clothing lines, themes are a requirement.”

“Oh…”

Mathias laughed at the lost look on Tino’s face.

“That’s a subject for another one of your internet searches.” Said Lukas, getting up to head back to the chair he’d been sitting in before. While he didn’t say anything, he was still tired from the lack of sleep the night before. He was being quieter than usual.

“I don’t know much about clothes anyway.” Tino admitted. Before Mathias could take that statement and blow it up into a big hilarious deal, Leon started talking.

“You’ve never had a haircut before, so let me tell you this; stay still. You can’t jerk your head around suddenly or I’ll mess up, ok? The last thing I want is to accidentally give you a lopsided cut.”
“OK.”

Tino looked very serious about following Leon’s directions, and downright terrified when Leon cut his bangs in the front. They had to assure him that it wasn’t dangerous, and that Leon knew what he was doing, but he still ended up squeezing his eyes shut like a child when the scissors came to trim the other side. When all was said and done, Leon brushed the excess hair off Tino’s neck, and then lifted the smock from around him.

“You’re all done.”

“I am?”

“Yes sir, want to see?”

When Tino nodded, Leon passed him a round mirror, and then held up another behind him. After a bit of maneuvering, Tino was able to see the front and back of his new haircut.

“Wow!” He exclaimed, turning his head from side to side. “I…I like it a lot! I know it’s shorter, but…it’s like I can see more of my face!”

“Framing.” Leon said proudly, tapping one ling finger on the side of the mirror. “Makes all the difference, you see?”

“Alright, now back into bed, Tino, before the nurses come in and make you.” Matthias urged, moving aside and still filming while Leon helped Tino get up and then started gathering his things. By the time that Tino was settled back into his bed, and Leon had packed most of his things up, Tino’s doctor did come in.

The doctor was a middle-aged man of average height, with a striking head of red hair. Beyond that he wore glasses and a white lab coat. He did a quick double-take at the amount of people in the room, the computers, and the camera, but flashed a professional smile and pulled out Tino’s chart.

“Good morning, folks. Got a whole gang of visitors?”

“Yea, we’re streaming live right now, we got a ton of digital visitors, too.” Mathias informed him, settling in the chair Tino had vacated. Again, the doctor didn’t react much beyond a slight flick of his eyes to take in the details of the camera, and the other men hovering around.

“Well hi then, everybody out there.” He said, obviously trying his best to roll with it and sound cheerful. “Guess it’s alright to let them listen in on the report then, hm?”

“We’re all ears, doctor.” Mathias answered, “go for it.”

The doctor stepped up to Tino’s bed, and once again, had to look twice at him before the sight sunk in.

“You got a haircut since I saw you yesterday.”

Tino nodded, rubbing at his head.

“A big one. But I like it.”

“That’s good, it’s probably a lot easier to deal with. Now, Tino, I’m glad to see that you’re feeling better, your symptoms have been steadily decreasing, and the antibiotics are doing their work. The immune boosters are going to take a while longer, however. I’ve never quite seen someone react so
severely to such a common ailment, and so you’re a special case. That being said, as well as you’re responding to treatment, I’m recommending that you stay one more night for observation before I release you.”

Tino had been grinning, listening carefully and eagerly to what the doctor had been saying, but his hopeful expression slowly died away.

“You mean…I have to stay here?”

“Just for tonight,” the doctor explained, “I would sincerely hate to release you only to have you come right back again. A few more hours of treatment can make all the difference.”

Seeing that Tino looked close to devastated, the doctor carefully explained to him how the medications were working on his body, in a way that Tino hadn’t been able to let him explain the previous day when he’d first been brought in. This time, Tino listened, and understood to the best of his ability. The doctor made a good case for keeping him there that night, but it didn’t make Tino any happier. So he was not in the frame of mind to respond calmly when the doctor began examining him in place of the nurses. Tino had been hoping to leave, go back to Berwald’s lovely home or Lukas and Mathias’ apartment and just soak up what knowledge and ambience he could in peace. But now he was stuck here for another night of poking, questioning, and skepticism about what he even was.

Even as that thought crossed his mind, the doctor picked up his arm and stared openly at his markings.

“So, are those shining spots iridescent paint? Or…some new kind of tattoo?”

Tino just looked dumbfounded, not knowing what either of those things were. The doctor was checking his pulse as Tino stared at him.

“I…they’re my markings.” He said simply. “Like freckles. I was born with them.”

“Ok, we can uh…we can go with that.” The doctor said in a tone that was just shy of patronizing.

While the rest of the gang were used to the disbelief, and let it roll off their backs, Tino looked more and more hurt with each unintentional eye roll or twist of lips that the doctor gave him. Eventually the hurt in Tino’s expression shifted to a hardened anger.

The live stream was still going thanks to Mathias’ extremely focused attention, and caught the man deliberately rubbing Tino’s markings on his hand, as though trying to wear them off his skin.

“These things are on pretty good, aren’t they?” The doctor asked, again, trying to sound casual.

“They’re my natural markings.” Tino said, his voice even but with a heat of irritation behind the words.

“Hmmmm…I doubt that, son…”

The tension in the room shot up, and everyone’s nerves began to ring as they adjusted to it.

Tino’s didn’t. He snapped.

Even the merman’s kind and forgiving nature had had enough of humans thinking he was insane or lying. Between that and these people being the ones who were causing him physical and emotional discomfort, Tino simply couldn’t control himself this time.
In an instant his gills flared open like fans, his fangs sprouted like a snake’s as he hissed like one too. Tino’s pupils dilated to cover his entire eye in black. It took less than a second for all of this to happen simultaneously and transform Tino into the more creature-like being that he truly was.

The doctor must have jumped an entire foot as he shouted, and nearly fell over as he regained his footing from the fright. He stared with wide eyes at Tino, who let the unearthly features remain in place for a few long seconds, before returning them all to normal.

No one spoke for a beat, all of them left shaking from the sudden scare of it. Then Tino told the man in a very quiet, measured voice, that still trembled with emotion,

“Please don’t stress me. I’m supposed to be resting. Leave my markings alone.”

The doctor bolted from the room without another word. Tino frowned after him for a second, before realizing just how quiet it was in the room. He turned to look at the rest of them, only to find open mouths and wide eyes all around. Tino ducked his head in embarrassment and rubbed at his cheek.

“Um… I’m sorry everyone… I just… I was upset. Did I scare you?”

“In the best way possible, my man!” Mathias almost yelled, shattering the screaming tension of the room. “You totally owned that guy’s ass! Boom!”

“I shouldn’t have reacted like that, though.” Tino said worriedly. “I always get too emotional too fast…”

“The chat box is blowing up.” Emil reported. “Holy sh-.“

“Show me, show me!” Mathias cut him off, running over to fix the camera on the screen and streamed the image of the flooding messages running up the little window. Berwald and Lukas got up quickly to join him, and Leon inched his way into the huddle too.

“That’s incredible.” Leon commented, being the first to pull away and go to Tino’s side. “They’re all rooting for you.”

“Really?” Tino asked, hopeful.

“They sure are, Tino.” Lukas told him, lifting his head to give him an encouraging nod.

“For anyone else out there who still thinks this is a hoax,” Mathias said, turning the camera on his own face, “do you think we manage to paint glowing spots on Tino’s skin in the exact same pattern every day or something? Some of those spots are so tiny you can barely see them! We’ll have an expert take a look at a later time, but for now, really consider how insane that idea is.”

Tino cocked his head and looked down at the little sprinkles of lights around the larger spots.

“Hey, um, what are tattoos anyway?”

This question caused all of them to break out into laughter.

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The hospital staff was very wary of Tino the rest of the day and into that night. A fact that Tino was very proud of, as it meant they did their jobs quickly and then left him alone. Word of his little outburst must have spread, because they were finding a few staff ducking in just to speak with them, fascinated by their most interesting patient. These people Tino catered to gladly, as they were wanting to believe him in the first place, or they wouldn’t have come to see him.

Leon stayed around for the first half of the day, and Tino was given a basic lesson on fashion and hairstyling while he visited. Tino also let Leon take his body measurements with a measuring tape, all the while listening to him describe the types of clothes he would start making for Tino. The merman enjoyed Leon’s company, despite how little expression his face showed most of the time. Like his brother, Leon’s eyes and tone would reveal his true feelings, and it didn’t take long for Tino to pick up on it. He could see that Leon was very passionate about what he did, and was over the moon to be designing for him. Tino, for his part, was excited to see what Leon would come up with.

All day the bidding war was raging over Tino’s braid online. The longer it went on, the higher Emil’s eyebrows rose with the bids, as though trying to crawl off his forehead. The auction wouldn’t close until the next morning anyway, which meant that whichever wig charity the winning bidder selected was going to be very happy.

Between all these things, the day went by much easier than the one before it. The only drawback was that Tino was feeling better and better with each passing minute, meaning that it became tedious sitting around in the room. Mathias let him borrow his laptop on and off to research things that came up in conversation, and that also helped. At one point Tino, Lukas, Emil, and Berwald were all on their individual laptops at once, while Mathias was on his phone and Leon was drawing rough designs in his sketchbook. They all managed to pass the time like this together between conversations until Emil took Leon home. Eventually Lukas and Mathias left for dinner and home as well. Berwald stayed.

“If you really wanted to go home,” Tino told him as they both ate their hospital fare for dinner, “I think I’d be alright alone now. I’m not in any immediate danger anymore, and I’m comfortable enough here that I won’t get too frightened or upset.”

Berwald finished his mouthful of potatoes and wiped his mouth before fixing Tino with a stare. The merman gazed into it with wide eyes before they narrowed and rolled.

“Have it your way.” Tino said, a smile in his voice. “Just try to get more sleep tonight, ok?”

Berwald grunted.

That night it was easier to sleep as well, since Tino didn’t feel so horrible and he was able to watch Berwald reading his book as he fell asleep. There was something hypnotic about watching the man turning the pages and holding the cover and spine. There were no books in the sea. Tino felt like he’d barely drifted off before he was being awakened by voices around him. They were quiet, as always, but enough in the silence of his room to shake him out of his slumber.

He blinked his eyes open to see the redheaded doctor from yesterday standing at a distance from his bed, speaking with Berwald. The big man looked a little sleep-wrecked, but had made an attempt to smooth down his hair. Short as it was, one side stuck up in a little cowlick. Tino couldn’t help it, and giggled softly. The doctor turned his head sharply toward the sound, and a look came into his eyes that was not quite fear, but was something stronger than uncertainty. After the terrifying way Tino had transformed the day before, it was no wonder. He quickly finished up whatever he was saying to Berwald, and then turned and left the room without even taking a step closer to the bed.
I really scared him off." Tino yawned, rolling over in bed. Berwald settled back into his upright chair at once, pulling his quilt over him and leaning his head back on his pillow.

"I think you nearly gave him a heart attack yesterday." Berwald said, his voice rough with sleep. The doctor must have woken him up by coming into the room.

"He deserved it." Tino said darkly. "I knew he didn’t believe me but he didn’t have to be so rude about it. I thought that human healers were supposed to have a sense of tact."

"They are." Berwald said, pausing to yawn. "But that doesn’t mean they do."

"So what was he talking to you about?" Tino asked, pulling himself into a sitting position to stretch his back out. "Trying to disprove my species existence even further?"

"He says you can be discharged today." Berwald answered, and Tino shot straight up in bed.

"What?! Really?! I can leave?!"

The suddenness and volume of Tino’s happy outburst made Berwald jump a bit, his eyes flying open almost comically. The merman shrunk back and muttered,

"Sorry, I’m sorry…"

"It’s alright, you’re excited." Berwald said. "I’m going to give the others a call in maybe another half-hour. Right now I doubt any of them are out of their pajamas."

Tino yawned again and nodded.

"I’d love be in pajamas." Tino pouted a little. "I really don’t like wearing clothes that much, but I do like those sweaters and the soft pants."

"Flannel."

"Right! They’re so cozy and just make me want to curl up and watch a fire!" The merman sighed. "I couldn’t believe it when I saw your fire that first night at the lodge. I’d never seen anything like it before in my life. As far as I’m concerned, it’s still like magic."

Tino stretched then, pushing the bedcovers aside and sitting up to hang his legs over the side of the bed. He leaned over at the waist to look at his feet, waggling his toes and waving them in the air.

"Feet are so cute." He muttered, distracted. "I still like staring at them. Still can’t believe I have a pair, sometimes."

"Not all feet are cute like yours." Berwald said, and when Tino looked up at him questioningly, the big man flushed and bumbled, "Some feet are really hairy and others have bad toenails, b-but yours are smooth and pale, so…they’re cuter than most."

A gigantic smile lit up Tino’s face and he giggled a little.

"Thanks, Berwald!"

The merman stepped out of bed, carefully dragging the IV hanger unit behind him, trotted up to Berwald, and gave him a big kiss on his slightly rough, unshaven cheek.

"Good morning, by the way!"
“Morning.” Berwald said quietly, a very small smile curling his lips. Tino stepped even closer, and gave Berwald a hug, hiding his face in the side of Berwald’s neck.

“Before all the others get here and things get chaotic again,” Tino mumbled, “I just…wanted to tell you…what you’ve done for me is beyond anything I could’ve asked for from any human when I came ashore. You especially have been so kind to me, and…just…I wanted to thank you one more time while it was just the two of us.”

Berwald pulled his arms out from beneath the blankets, and slid them around Tino gently, holding him there and humming shortly.

“You’re welcome, Tino. You’re worth it all.”

The merman smiled so widely that Berwald could feel it against his neck.

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Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart: https://www.deviantart.com/teadrop56/gallery/68057510/Hook-Line-and-Sinker-Commissions
Sorry for the delay, everybody! I've been ridiculously busy, to the point where this update is almost literally a miracle. I don't know how I did it lol. I hope you enjoy it!

Discharging Tino from the hospital was a quick and easy affair, though many nurses seemed to be hanging around purposefully to get one last look at him before he left. The merman was dressed in the sweatpants and hoodie that they’d bought him at The Bend, with his cheap snow boots, so most of his spots were covered up, except the ones on his face and hands, but people still stared. Tino was in a much better mood now that he knew he was leaving, so he didn’t get upset about it, but he didn’t respond either. He was very quiet, caution written in his body language; the way he held himself and looked around, as though worried that someone would come running up to him any moment to tell him that they made a mistake and he’d have to spend yet another night in that place.

All the way out to the car the others were watching him, slightly worried about how solemn he seemed, asking him if he was alright. Tino just nodded, but didn’t even smile. It caused a tension to spread through them all as they buckled up and started the car. Tino’s eyes stayed fixed on the big white building as they drove away from it, turning in his seat to keep it in his vision. When they turned a corner and it disappeared from sight, his demeanor changed like the crack of a whip.

Tino’s face lit up, all his front teeth showing, his eyes near sparkling with happiness. He turned in his seat, and threw his arms up in the air with a loud cheer of pure delight.

“Woohoo!!!!”

The others all startled at the sudden sound from the previously silent merman. The SUV even rocked a little as Lukas’ body jerked in reaction. Mathias swore, and nearly dropped his camera.

“Don’t do that!” Emil scolded, but Tino didn’t pay attention. He was too happy.

Tino bounced all over his seat, chirping in a louder, longer trill than any of them had heard him make before. Beside him, Berwald’s big body was jostled by Tino’s enthusiasm.

“I’m free! I’m free!”

Tino was giggling with joy, and grabbed Berwald’s arm to shake it, as though trying to spread his cheer around. He was doing that regardless, as his infectious smile caused every single one of them to grin, smile, or laugh with him.

“You sound like you were just released from prison!” Mathias laughed, the camera shaking in his hand as he tried to steady it against the mirth rattling out of him. He was turned in his front seat spot like usual, and had watched closely when Tino from the time they signed out at the front desk. He hadn’t been sure at the time where Tino’s standoffish mood would lead, but he’d been discreet about filming it. As a result, he now had captured Tino’s rapturous mood swing for all to see.

Tino was trying to settle down now, ceasing his bouncing but swaying back and forth where he sat. He did this when he was extremely happy; a holdover from the days when he would undulate through the water in a happy underwater dance.
“He might as well have been released from prison.” Piped Emil, leaning up from his seat in the very back to lean against the middle seats. “Once you start feeling better in a hospital and they make you stay, it feels like being locked up.”

Tino gave out another cheerful sound and sang in a rough approximation of human song,

“Well, I’m freeeeee noow!!!”

The sound was not grating, but sounded like what it was; someone singing who had never learned how. Tino liked how Mathias would randomly sing-song phrases or words, but had never quite understood the practice until now. He was so thrilled at the moment that it came naturally to him.

“Where are we going?” He asked eagerly. “Berwald’s house? Or your apartment?”

“Not quite,” Lukas told him, “we thought before we took you back anywhere we should stop and buy you a few things that we couldn’t get at The Bend. What we bought for you there was serviceable, but you deserve more than that now that we’re home.”

The merman quieted down as Lukas spoke, and it didn’t go unnoticed. Especially after being so boisterous just a second ago, the sudden silence and the happiness melting into concern on Tino’s face told them all what he was worrying about.

“Don’t worry about the cost,” Berwald told Tino softly, voicing what all the rest of them were thinking, “We’ll take care of you.”

Tino’s violet-blue eyes flicked up at Berwald guiltily, and he didn’t say anything.

“Seriously, Tino!” Mathias sighed. “How many times do we have to tell you that we’re flush with money for the first time in our professional careers? We can afford to provide you what you need for the human world, man.”

The merman worked his jaw, then licked his lips as his brow furrowed. He let their words sink in for a time, and he fiddled with his newly-shortened bangs, before his face eased a little into curiosity.

“So…I helped…earn some of it, right?” Tino asked, shyly. “At this point…I’m not taking too much of what is strictly yours, but what I helped to gain…d-does that sound fair?”

“Absolutely.” Lukas stated.

“Duh!” Mathias said at the same time. “Without you we wouldn’t be getting any extra pay at all! You’re the whole reason, so you’re definitely entitled to a share of it. You’ve got more smarts than you let on sometimes, you know that, fish boy?”

Tino straightened his back and lifted his little button nose into the air a bit.

“I do have a trade in my home waters,” he reminded them, “I know about bargaining and due payment.”

As was the pattern with Tino at times, a second after stating something he’d been confident about in the sea, he became unsure of whether his human companions thought it impressive or noteworthy. So, he shrunk back a little, the confidence fading from his face as he added,

“Though…it is different here. You don’t bargain anymore, since you have a curren—currency. So…maybe I don’t really understand.”
“Business is business no matter where you are.” Lukas assured him. “Bartering or paying with currency, it’s all wrapped up in roughly the same set of skills.”

Emil hummed next to Tino’s ear, where the teen was leaning his chin on his folded arms across the headrest of the seat.

“Tino’s got a point, though, Lukas.” He said, and plopped one hand on Tino’s head as he spoke. “He’s earning us all this income, and he deserves a direct piece of the profit.”

The merman turned his head to look at Emil, alarmed.

“Oh, I didn’t mean—I-I wasn’t--.”

“Emil’s right.” Berwald agreed. “Tino earns his own share.”

“Ber!” Tino protested, looking up incredulously at the much taller man.

“I’ve been meaning to bring that up anyway.” Lukas said. “I wanted to wait until Tino was settled in a little more, though. I’ll get down to the numbers and determine how much we owe Tino since we first posted the video of his rescue. We can add another account to our banking and get him an extra check card.”

Tino waved his hands frantically.

“You don’t have to do that! Really! I don’t even know how to use human currency!”

“Sounds like you don’t have a choice, then.” Said Berwald, a slight tease to his voice. Tino looked, wide-eyed, from one of them to the next, but found no backers. He slumped back into his seat, defeated.

“I’ve never seen someone look so miserable about making money before!” Mathias said. “Come on, man, just think of all the things you could get!”

“I’m not used to getting ‘things’ without working for them.” Muttered Tino. “Hours of painstaking work chiseling and carving.”

“Ug, you sound like dad.” Emil said with a massive sigh. “You millennials expect everything handed to you.”

“And as we’ve told him countless times,” Reminded Lukas, “we are working. Just differently than his generation. We’re entrepreneurs of internet fame.”

“Yea, and we work really hard! My baby goes through some tough emotional strain having to talk to all those ghosts and stuff, Emil puts in so many hours writing up the blogs, and I haul around this camera all the time and edit all the footage. Not to mention our muscle-man Berwald tagging along most of the time for absolutely no reason, just in case we need a shield! We all work hard! And Tino, you’re not working any less hard; you’re working the camera! That’s just as important as anything else. Without the camera we would be nothing.”

“Hey!” said Lukas, sounding hurt. “Emil and I were doing just fine before you and your camera showed up.”

“Yea, you were doing ‘fine’, but you didn’t have the celebrity status you do now, which is what ultimately brings in the money. You can’t deny that, Luk.”
Mathias took a moment to preen as Lukas heaved a heavy sigh that admitted his defeat. Then he turned back to Tino, who was looking more amused than upset now.

“Now, come on, Tino, there’s got to be something that you’ve seen in all your research that you’d like to buy and keep as your own? At least for the time you’re here?”

Tino thought it over a while, his face shifting into complacency. For a few minutes he stared down at one hand, and kept rubbing his head with the other, still adjusting to short hair. Then his eyes snapped back into focus, and he sat up, declaring,

“I’d like an iPod!”

They all broke out laughing, even Berwald giving a short sound of amusement. Tino had borrowed all of their iPods at some point since last week, and listened to their music, audiobooks, and even the ambience tracks that Lukas used to relax. He had taken a great liking to having all of that available instantly.

“That’s a place to start.” Emil chuckled. “We should be able to fix you up with that, no problem.”

“We’ll see about getting you an iPod if we have time, and if you’re not too tired.” Lukas told Tino. “For now, we’ll be shopping for jeans, a few sweaters and shirts, and most importantly, proper shoes. Those boots just won’t cut it. They were a short-term solution to begin with.”

Tino looked down at the boots he wore. They were certainly good at keeping his feet dry, but not warm. They’d overcompensated for this by layering his feet in wool socks, but his feet tended to still get cold whenever he was outside or in the car. The rest of the time he was barefoot.

“I’ll get shoes like the rest of you have?” Tino asked. “With laces and everything?”

“You betcha!” Mathias told him. “We’ll get you some sweet neon ones, too!”

“No.” Lukas followed up, with irritated finality. Mathias turned toward him and pleaded.

“No one of your dreams is about your shoelaces then I pity you, but I won’t let you walk around looking like a middle-schooler!”

A slightly uncomfortable silence followed, in which Mathias pouted down at the space between their two seats. Lukas looked over at his lover, saw his face, and sighed.

“I just want you to look like someone cares about you enough to dress you up nice. Not like some kid who doesn’t know any better. I love you too much for that.”

Lukas’ last words were soft, but Tino caught them, and all of them saw Mathias’ face brighten. The taller man reached out and gently pulled Lukas’ hand from the steering wheel, holding it hostage between his own fingers. Tino also didn’t miss how sneaky Lukas had been in diverting his attention. Then again, he didn’t miss the softening around Lukas’ stormy blue eyes at his lover’s touch, either.

Tino suddenly realized that Berwald was watching him as he watched the couple in the front. For some reason the scrutiny in Berwald’s expression made Tino instantly flustered.
“Um, so,” he babbled, “shoes! Where do you even get shoes?”

Shoe shopping with Tino was an interesting experience to say the least. They went to a very nice place, where the employees actually measured people’s feet and recommended the right shoes for each individual customer. Tino had been wary of the measuring device, and the young lady who was showing him how to use it politely ignored all of the strange behaviors they gave off as a group. Like when Tino leaned over so far to watch what she was doing that he got too close and blocked out all the light. Or when Mathias hovered over her with a camera to get a good shot at Tino’s foot measurement. To say nothing of how Tino kept crooning and chirruping while looking around the store with wide eyes like he’d never been outside before. She was a trooper. She got them a few pairs of shoes and then settled to the side as the rest of the group started in on Tino, giving him advice.

“Now, the key is to tie the laces this way…”

“Make sure you have enough room for your big toe at the end.”

“You really should walk around in them.”

“But wear both feet at once, if you just try on one you won’t get a good feel for them.”

“Are your ankles slipping out of those?”

“Need to tie them looser?”

“You can always try another size.”

After trying on a few pairs and probably creeping the poor woman out with a group of grown men treating another grown man like a child, they bought the shoes and went on to their next destination.

They took Tino to a resale shop, and as soon as he could, Tino climbed out of the car. As the rest of the team piled out, Tino began to sway where he stood, eagerness alight in his eyes. The shoe store had whet his pallet for more of the human world and its shops.

Berwald took up post beside Tino, and led him toward the door, temporarily leaving the other three behind. He could tell Tino was impatient and didn’t want to make him wait. You would’ve thought the resale shop was heaven the way Tino’s eyes widened upon walking in.

“Woah, slow your roll there!” Mathias called, catching up. “I want to get his first reactions on camera.”

“You still are.” Lukas said, trotting on Mathias’ heels with Emil trailing behind. “You already got his reaction to the shoe store.”

“Yea, but not to a thrift store! Every new thing is a treat for this guy!”

Tino glanced at the few shoppers dotted about and their carts. He then looked beside him at the collection of shopping carts lined up in a row. He grabbed the handlebars and tugged one out. As he rolled it across the floor, Tino chirped in pure excitement. A number of heads turned at the sound, but Tino was too distracted learning how to navigate his cart without hitting anything, and
the rest didn’t care about the stares of strangers. While Tino’s long hair was gone, his markings were still visible to anyone who gave a second glance. His haircut actually helped draw attention to the larger spots on his neck.

Thankfully, there weren’t a great many people in the thrift store, just like there hadn’t been many in the shoe store.

Emil helped Tino direct the cart over to the men’s section of clothing.

“This is amazing!” Tino said, watching as Emil showed him how to flip through the clothes on the hangers. “I knew that you humans wore clothes, but somehow I didn’t think that there would be so many in one place. Ridiculous, I know, but it’s just something I never really thought about before.”

Emil nodded.

“Same for us the other way around. That’s why so many people ask about whether merfolk wear clothes.”

Tino laughed and began digging through the rack of shirts.

“I don’t know how many more times I can say that we don’t!”

As he flipped through the shirts, making it halfway down the row when he suddenly stumbled across a tie-dyed long-sleeve t-shirt with a small yellow peace sign over one breast. The merman gasped and pulled it, hanger and all, from the rack to hold it up.

“Amazing! Look at this! Look at all the colors!”

Mathias stifled a guffaw and gave Tino a thumbs up.

“Groovy!” He said, in a slow, smoky tone. Tino looked puzzled at his word, and took another look at the shirt, running his hand over it.

“There’s no grooves in it…it’s quite soft…”

Emil patted Tino on the shoulder and took the shirt from him.

“Remind us to tell you about the 60’s some other time, Tino.”

The merman didn’t say anything, but when Emil put the shirt back on the rack, his face fell sadly.

“It’s so pretty…” He finally said, indicating how much he really wanted it. Emil gave him a nudge and got him moving again.

“Trust me, you don’t want that one. Pick literally anything else. You’re not even in your size, anyway; it’s going to be too big on you.”

As they moved down, Mathias questioned,

“What do you have against tie dye, Emil?”

The teen shot a look over his shoulder at Lukas, who gave him a completely innocent look.

“Ask my brother.”

Mathias’ eyebrows went up and he turned the camera on his lover. Lukas waved a hand
“When we were little mom and dad dressed us up as matching hippies for a costume party. I may or may not have carried Emil around like my own little twin doll instead of acknowledging him as my brother.”

Mathias’ mouth dropped open and he burst out laughing.

“Oh my god! How have I never heard this story?!”

Emil sent Mathias a death glare next.

“Because mom has pictures.” Lukas said simply, but with a little wicked smile. “And Emil had never wanted anyone to remember his humiliation. But we’re both adults now, right, little brother?”

The teen could not possibly look any meaner, so he turned on his heel and went after Tino, who had made his way into the women’s section without catching on.

It did not take long for Tino to fill the shopping cart with things to try on, or for the other shoppers to catch on that there was something different about the little blonde who kept making odd sounds and smiling at everything. When Tino was in the dressing room to try on the first round of clothes, a startled sound emerged, sharp and loud.

“Everything alright in there, Tino?” Lukas called, concerned.

“Yes.” Tino answered. “There was a…plastic tag I think…it scraped me on my neck when I pulled this shirt on.”

“Let’s see it!” Mathias called, holding up the camera in eager anticipation. Tino opened the door and stepped out, wearing his boxers and the t-shirt he’d just pulled on.

“Oh god, no, Tino!” Laughed Emil, pushing Tino back into the room and closing the door behind them. “Put some pants on too while you’re at it!”

The rest of them sat on a musty couch that sat in a section of furniture directly before the dressing rooms, waiting to see the results of their browsing. Emil got Tino modest, and opened the door for them to see his first outfit.

“That looks good.” Lukas said, nodding at the dark blue jeans and graphic tee.

“You think so?” Tino asked, turning around to look at himself in the mirror. He craned his neck to see the back of himself in the mirror, twisting his body awkwardly.

“No, no, no.” Mathias chided, handing his camera over to Emil and stepping up beside Tino.

“You’re doing it all wrong.”

“I am?” The merman asked, innocently.

“Yea, when you show off your clothes it’s like you’re on a catwalk! So, you gotta strut, man! Like this, watch me and do what I do!”

Lukas groaned loudly and shook his head.

“Mat, please not ag-.”
“Can’t stop me, baby, just doing what I always do!” Mathias cried, drowning out his lover’s plea as he struck a dramatic pose and paused for a beat.

“That’s what I mean, Mat, you do this every time-.”

“Can’t hear you, too busy being sexy!”

Then with a quick jerk of his head, Mathias began to strut along the empty space between the dressing rooms and the furniture, being sure to accentuate every move and swing his hips plenty. A woman nearby covered the eyes of her little daughter, while all the other customers tried to look like they were ignoring the display, while secretly trying to get a better look. Mathias was an embarrassment most of the time, and this was definitely the case now, but no one would deny that he knew how to strut.

He was six feet, broad-shouldered, with a tapered waist and long legs. That combined with his handsome face, blue eyes, and thick blond hair that he styled like a model…he could draw attention when he wanted to. Mathias ran a few fingers through his hair and licked his lips purposefully as he walked up to Lukas, who was facepalming, but still watching him through parted fingers. Mathias lifted two fingers to his lips, kissed them, then pulled Lukas’ hand away from his face and placed those same digits over the thin line of Lukas’ own lips.

“Oh god…” Emil groaned, while Mathias turned sharply and headed back to Tino, all the while keeping up the same walking cadence of a pompous model.

“Like this, Tino, you see?” He asked, swaggering. Tino was trying and failing to hold in a hugely amused grin, and when Mathias reached him again, he let out a single blast of a laugh.

“I don’t think I can even move like that!” Tino protested, continuing to grin as Mathias grabbed him around the waist and began pushing him forward.

“No, it’s easy, come on, do it with me.”

Mathias placed them side by side, and Tino tried to mimic what he did, but every single time he broke down into fits of giggles at how silly he felt trying.

“This is ridiculous!” He laughed. “You look ridiculous, what are you even doing?”

“That’s what we’d all like to know.” Emil said, trying to look like he didn’t know Mathias while still holding the camera on the scene unfolding before them.

“Along with the 60’s, remind us to show you some catwalk footage.” Said Lukas wearily. “It does seem silly, but that’s how a lot of models walk when they show off new clothes.”

Tino chuckled, and in an overly-exaggerated fashion, began galumphing down the makeshift ‘catwalk’ they’d claimed, teasingly trying out a few of Mathias’ ‘moves’, like blowing a kiss to them with one hip jutting out, sticking out his rear while saluting, and rocking his shoulders back and forth with the force of ‘gracefully’ swinging arms. He was committed to the mockery, and had them all laughing by the time he waggled his way back to the dressing room doors.

“Awesome, dude!” Mathias said, wiping the tears from his eyes. “You got a ways to go before you can strut like me, but keep it up and you’ll get there.”

“I’ll leave the nonsense to you, thanks.” Tino said with a raise of one eyebrow, and Emil and Lukas gave a unison ‘ohhhh’.
“Sick burn, bro, sick burn!” Mathias said, too impressed to be hurt. “Now go change into something else so you can practice your catwalk!”

“I’m just going to pop out and see what you think of each outfit.” Tino clarified. “I’m not going to do that ‘catswalk’ again.”

“Yes, please,” Lukas said, rubbing his temples, “and Tino, you don’t need to show us every single article of clothing. Just anything you’re unsure about. Everything else you can just slip on and look at in the mirror inside the dressing room, and determine for yourself whether you like it or not. Ok?”

Tino nodded, and darted back into the room.

“To be fair,” the merman called through the door as he changed, “we do have ways to try and show off in the sea, too. We curl our tails and bodies a certain way while we swim, adding an extra amount of effort to it, just to show that we can be more graceful or stronger depending on what we’re trying to convey.”

“Dude, I hope we get to see you do that in your real form sometime!” Mathias said, making a passing shopper eye him suspiciously before moving on.

“I don’t know how my return to the sea is going to work.” Tino admitted, sounding muffled behind another shirt he was trying on. “But if there was someway for you all to see me swimming under the water, that would be amazing! I’d love to show off for you all.”

“Kiku would be happy to see that, I’ll bet.” Emil said. “He can’t wait to start studying you, Tino. He’s got a whole plan he’s writing up, with which tests he’s going to run first and everything. It’s all he’s been talking about, according to Leon.”

“As long as he doesn’t hurt me.” Said the merman, sounding hesitant. “He didn’t seem like he would, but...I’m still unsure of what he’ll actually be doing to me.”

“I think you’ll find most of it more boring than scary or painful.” Assured Lukas. “Some tests will probably just be you answering questions or letting him collect swabs from your mouth or something. Nothing too harmful. He wants to study you, not dissect you.”

They heard a small shiver from the other side of the door.

“You’re going to get so much attention, Tino!” Said Emil, obviously trying to shift the mood a bit. “Kiku will be fascinated if you so much as sneeze, and Leon is going to be measuring you and designing clothes for you as well.”

“But, I’m getting clothes here,” Tino said, peeking out of the door, a comfy looking sweater half-covering him, “won’t that make Leon mad that I didn’t wait for his clothes?”

“No at all, Tino,” Lukas told him, “the clothes Leon wants to make for you will be once-in-a-while type of clothing. I’m sure he’ll make you a few practical things, but on the whole, it’ll be fashion clothing. You’ll only wear it on special occasions or when we chose to showcase it in order to promote him.”

Reassured, Tino went back to trying on the clothing he’d picked out.

By the time they left, Tino had tried on half the store and bought three packed bags of clothes. He was smiling contentedly while settling the bags into the back of the SUV.
“You’ll have to wash those clothes at Berwald’s before you wear any of them.” Lukas reminded him as they once more got on the road. “For now, we’re going to head back.”

“To Berwald’s?” Tino asked, having been anxious to return to the pleasant house since he’d been forced to leave it.

“No, actually,” Emil clarified. “Mom and dad are making us a late lunch at their place. It’s a little ‘glad you’re out of the hospital’ party…sort of…”

“The folks have been wanting to meet you for a while!” Said Mathias. “They usually watch our show when they can, but lately, like everyone else, they’ve been paying very close attention.”

Tino’s eyes lit up and he lifted his head, having been looking at a few of his purchases.

“What are they like?”

“They’re the best sort of people.” Berwald answered him at once, surprising everyone with the warmth of his tone. “They are kind, accepting, and firmly grounded in their beliefs.”

Tino studied Berwald’s face. Emil spoke before Tino had a chance to ask the question that had come to his mind.

“They weren’t quite sure about our career choices at first, but they both have a glimmer of supernatural talent, so they understand why we do what we do, and that it’s important.”

“It is important to have the approval of your elders.” Said Tino seriously. “With their blessing comes many more.”

“Is that a saying you have in the sea?” Asked Lukas, seeming interested.

“Yes.” Tino answered. “We take the word of our elders very seriously. Not that we always get along, but there is a respect that is owed them. So to have their support is invaluable.”

“Exactly.” Berwald agreed, once more surprising everyone with how enthusiastic he seemed. “They are the most supportive and caring people I’ve ever met.”

Once more, a question rose up in Tino’s mind, seeing the glint of sadness behind Berwald’s approximation of Lukas and Emil’s parents. But once again, he didn’t have time to ask it.

“They still give me crap to this day, though.” Mathias said cheerfully. “All in playful fun, but sometimes I wonder. They weren’t happy with me playing the exploitive cameraman and then stealing their son’s heart away. But they changed their tune right quick when they saw the kind of money-making potential filming brought to the business.”

Lukas made a grunt and shook his head, explaining,

“If my parents had any reservations about you, Mathias, I think it had less to do with what exactly you were doing, and was more like ‘this total stranger harassed our sons, then showed up out of the blue and inserted himself-’”

“Woah, baby, that wasn’t until months later-”

“-into our lives!” Lukas said loudly, cutting Mathias off sternly. “And then they just had to make peace with how much money his addition to the business was bringing us…and how…happy you made me.”
“Awww, Lukas!” Mathias drawled, tilting his head. “You couldn’t hide it even from your folks. Of course, I endeared myself to their mother through my love of film, and to their father through my wit and banter.”

“Dad still asks when I’ll snap on you and punch you in the mouth.” Lukas muttered.

“What?!” Tino exclaimed, looking shocked.

“Dad doesn’t quite know how to handle hyper people.” Explained Emil quickly. “So, he jokes a lot about how much alike he and Lukas are, and how he wonders how Lukas can stand Mathias’ hyperactivity. That includes jokes about Lukas inflicting bodily harm on Mathias.”

“You think he’d have had enough time to figure it out.” Mathias said, speculatively. “I’ve been around for a few years now.”

“We’re a pretty mellow family.” Lukas said, in a tone that suggested he’d said it many times before. “And then you come in and disrupt our tranquil circle with noise and spontaneity.”

“Your circle needed to be shaken up!” Mathias declared, proudly. “Example: who would’ve guessed that you not only liked to swing dance, but were also so damn good at it? You never would’ve given it a try if I hadn’t pushed you into it.”

“He’s right about that.” Emil teased, directing a smirk at his brother in the rear-view mirror. Lukas gave a grudging nod of his head.

“I can’t argue…”

Tino had been smiling through this exchange, soaking in the ease with which they all discussed each other. The love between them all and the parents he had yet to meet was palpable, and it made the merman feel secure.

As what they said about the Bondevik family being mellow hit home for Tino, though, his brain lined up a few details that caused his face to fall with concern. The others were busy talking, so they didn’t notice how he’d fallen silent. This was a sure sign that something was bothering him, and they all knew it by now, but only Berwald was focused enough to notice this time. He leaned in and whispered,

“What’s wrong, Tino?”

Big, violet-blue eyes turned toward Berwald, and white teeth worried at a full bottom lip. Berwald thought he could see those canines lengthening and shortening in rhythm, like some ethereal nervous habit. It took another second of careful glancing at the others and their conversation before Tino answered. He also spoke in a low voice.

“Does Mr. Bondevik really not like hyper people? Um, because, I know I’m shy and quiet when I first meet people, but I usually relax pretty soon after, and then I do get a bit excited. Will he not like me for that if he’s really quiet?”

Berwald shook his head firmly.

“Don’t worry about that at all. Lukas takes after his father, in his temperament and his compassion. They joke around about Mathias, but really the Bondeviks all love him. They don’t care how you act, they only care about what kind of person you are. And you are a very good person, Tino.”

The nervous chewing at his lip stopped, and Tino gave a close-mouthed grin that was so sweet and
understanding that Berwald felt the mad urge to kiss one of his cheekbones, pulled high with his smile and glittering with tiny points of glowing light.

“Thank you, Berwald.”

Pausing a moment, Tino scoped out how invested the other three men were in their own back-and-forth, and decided he could speak to Berwald without too much interference for a while. He looked the man in the eye and looped an arm through Berwald’s. The lithe body sidled closer to the burlier one, and Tino asked quietly,

“I meant to ask you earlier; Emil and Lukas’ parents, they’re very dear to you because they’ve done something for you, haven’t they? They’ve touched something inside of you that changed who you are. Can you tell me what it was?”

Berwald’s blue eyes widened a fraction. He should’ve been used to Tino’s keen insight into human emotions by now, but it didn’t seem like something that could be easily accepted considering how secretive most humans were with their inner feelings. Having someone point them out at a glance was somewhat unsettling for Berwald, whereas Tino had lived in a society where everyone felt everything collectively. No wonder he could quite literally sense emotions differently and more accurately.

Clearing his throat a little, Berwald nodded slowly, and patted Tino’s arm with his free hand to let him know he was alright with it being there against his own.

“I found in them…what I’d lacked. From everyone else in my life.”

Tino’s expression became neutrally interested, a clear sign that he wasn’t pushing for more information, but would accept it if Berwald chose to continue. As was the pattern in a group this size, however, their single interaction was interrupted by the others.

“C’mon, Tino, tell him!” Mathias said loudly, waving at Emil. “You didn’t even have legs for a week before you tried swing dancing and you got the hang of it alright! There’s no reason Emil can’t become just as good as us!”

Tino scrunched up his face as both Emil and Mathias looked at him, and he ended up saying apologetically,

“I don’t really know enough about it to say. But it is fun! Emil, you could always give it another try if you want to learn more.”

“But I don’t!” Emil protested, crossing his arms. “I don’t know why Mathias is so determined to drag me back to that class. I went under protest the last time, and I don’t really want to go back.”

“I thought that you said it was still fun once you got the hang of it.” Tino questioned. “You told me that when you helped me to dance the first time.”

“Tried to help you.” Emil muttered unhappily. “I’m just not good at it. I couldn’t teach you very well because I didn’t learn very well. Because it’s just not my thing…”

“It could be!” Mathias insisted, though his voice was teasing rather than persistent. “If you didn’t have two left feet!”

The merman cocked his head, his brows going down harshly in misunderstanding, and he turned instantly in his seat to star back and down at Emil’s feet. When he looked up, his mouth wide with surprise and his face glowing with confusion, both Emil and Lukas at the same time said,
“It’s just an expression, Tino.”

Emil picked up that thought and explained.

“It means I suck at dancing, as if I had a third foot that keeps getting in the way.”

“No, you’re really good once you get a foot sequence down.” Lukas said, agreeing with his lover. “And I think you have more fun than you admit. You really could be pretty amazing if you stuck with it.”

“I’ve tried.” Muttered Emil, leaning his head on the heel of his hand and staring out the window. “How many more times do I have to tell you guys it’s just not my thing?”

Glancing back and forth between Emil and the two in the front seat, Tino’s frown started dissolving. A saccharine slowly expression spread over Tino’s face, and he tilted his head as he looked at the teen once the car had fallen briefly silent.

“You three remind me of a story we tell in the sea.”

“Oh?!” Mathias said, leaning back to focus the camera on Tino. “A mer story? Do tell, please!”

“Oh, um, well…we tell this story to our little ones, when they’re just coming up. It lets them know they have many different paths than the ones that seem the most obvious.”

“Sounds like a good lesson.” Lukas said, sounding interested. “How does the story go?”

Giggling a little, Tino said,

“Well, imagine we’re all wrapped in giant seaweed and bobbing along with the current, ok? That’s how we tell our stories, to keep the little ones still and focused. Mathias, I think you should try it sometime.”

That earned him a few chuckles, and then he took a deep breath and began. His voice took on an even, familiar pattern, showing just how well he knew the tale.

“This story is about a large merman youth, whom everyone thought would be an alpha. He was broad and strong, with a powerful tail even as a child. When he grew into his training years, he tried very hard to be the best hunter he could, and put his strong body to good use. But as his training progressed, it became clear that he was not skilled at the hunt. Regardless of how many lessons he received, and how attentive he was, he could never spear his targets, or stalk without his scent being noticed, or end the day with a large catch. The longer he trained, the more and more sad he became. His fellows and elders kept advising him on how to hunt, because they all wanted to see him bloom into the alpha hunter they had all imagined he would be. But it never made a difference; he seemed fated to be a failure at the hunt. In his spare time, the merman would drift and think to himself, trying to determine what he was doing wrong. While he drifted along the sea floor, he’d pick up stems and roots from the sand and twist them together anxiously. He liked how it felt to tie and twist the pieces together, as though this was a problem he could solve. He’d twist so tightly and for so long that he’d end up with long strands of connected stems behind him. After so long worrying, he had a collection of twisted lines, and began to crisscross them to shorten them and give them a more pleasing pattern. The longer he did this, the more he came to enjoy it, and the less he worried. He left his project anchored by a rock next to a cave where he liked to go, so it would not drift away. When he came to the cave one day, he found a handful of fish caught in a wide loop of the crisscrossed lines. He realized that the tight weave of the stems and roots had made his creation a trap for the fish. Triumphant, he held the lines together and hauled them with
the caught fish back to his people, showing them that he’d discovered a new way to hunt. And that is how mer folk created the first nets. The merman began teaching others how to make the nets, and loved doing so his entire life. He never grew into the mighty hunter everyone had expected, but he gave his people a new skill and a different way to hunt, while being gentle and happy.”

There was a beat of quiet in the car after Tino finished his tale, before Berwald clapped politely. Then Emil picked it up and clapped as well. Mathias was holding the camera, so he couldn’t clap his hands, but he slapped his leg.

“Woah that was so freakin’ cool, dude!” He cheered.

“Very good moral lesson.” Lukas commented.

Tino ducked his head, cheeks growing pink.

“Well, thank you. I’ve loved that story from the time I was a little tadpole.”

“I can see why.” Said Berwald, nodding. “The merman was made to feel like he had to fulfill a specific role, but found a different path that still benefitted everyone and himself.”

“Exactly!” Tino affirmed. “We want our children to know that not every big, strong mer person grows into a hunter, and not every tiny, mild mer person has to be a gatherer. Look at me! I’m small by the standards of my people, and they always thought I’d be a gatherer or net maker, but I became a weapon crafter instead! And that’s why you three just now, talking about dancing, reminded me of that story.”

The merman turned in his seat to look at the teen in the back. He reached over the seat back and ruffled his straight, silver-blond hair.

“If you don’t want to dance, or you don’t take to it, it’s nothing to worry over. You have a completely different set of skills! You’re a writer, and you’re amazing at it! That’s what you do well! You wrote about the other night when we all danced together, and put it on the blog, and people loved it! You see? You can describe dancing with your words, and make people feel like they can see it in their heads, or are doing it themselves. That’s just as amazing as being able to dance better than anyone else in the world!”

Emil looked shy, with a little smile. The expression showed that he didn’t know how to take such blunt encouragement, but was soaking it up all the same.

“Nice parallel.” Lukas said, an appreciative grin on his face.

“Yea, um…thanks, Tino.” Emil said softly, scratching at the side of his head. The merman chirped happily. Then he leaned forward to jab Mathias’ arm.

“Ow!” Mathias wailed, like he’d been cut with a blade, but that didn’t deter Tino.

“You be nice to Emil about this!” He demanded, looking playful but still an underlying seriousness. “Teasing is ok, but he’s a young one, and he needs people to encourage what he’s good at, not point out things he’s not. Don’t you ever make him feel bad about something he doesn’t want to pursue, understand?”

Mathias saluted stiffly.

“Aye-aye, captain!”
Tino narrowed his eyes at the other blond man, and pursed his lips suspiciously. Emil caught the look in the rear-view mirror, and suddenly began laughing.

“Oh my god, Tino, you remind me of mom when she’d ask Lukas if he’d finished his vegetables, and he said yes, but really he’d slipped them to the dog!”

Lukas frowned while Mathias laughed along.

“We both did that, Emil.” He stated, as if that changed who the guilty party really was.

“I only learned it from you.” Rebuffed Emil. “And mom would look just like that; with her eyes going tiny and her mouth all scrunched up like that. So you’d better watch out, Mathias; that look means Tino’s on to your lies!”

“I’m not lying!” Mathias protested. “I won’t bug you about the dancing, really, if it bothers you! I just…didn’t know that it did.”

“It does.” Tino said firmly. “He just didn’t want to say it.”

“It’s ok, Tino.” Emil said, leaning forward and touching Tino’s shoulder. “You’ve gone to bat for me enough, calm down. I’m fine.”

Letting out a rough sigh, Tino leaned back on Berwald’s shoulder, still holding his arm.

“You’ve got wicked maternal instincts, you know that, fish boy?” Mathias asked, smiling. “You act like Emil is your own little brother or your own kid or something.”

A soft smile came to Tino’s lips, and he closed his eyes briefly as he adjusted his head on Berwald’s shoulder.

“I’ve been told that before. You know how much I adore children. My mother says they’re the most needy little things; like seeds that need pure affection and love to grow and blossom. Likewise, she says, folk like me exist, brimming with that love, constantly pouring it out on anyone who needs it.”

“Wow.” Mathias said in an entranced voice. “That’s…sweet…”

“Sounds accurate, too.” Said Lukas. “You’re a very giving person.”

Tino turned his head as though to hide in Berwald’s shirt, that blush still showing on his cheeks.

“I’m not really a child anymore.” Emil pointed out. “Sorry to be a downer, but Tino, I’m pretty much an adult in human terms, you know? I mean, not that I mind you being all nice to me, not at all, but I’m not a kid anymore.”

Tino didn’t lift his head, didn’t have to in order to picture the blustering bravado on Emil’s face and body language. He didn’t even open his eyes. He just smiled very knowingly and replied,

“Oh yes you are, Emil. And that’s ok.”

Mathias didn’t respond to that one, surprisingly reading the mood and staying quiet, though he was smiling. Lukas, Berwald, and Tino all shared the same knowing, slightly smirking grin of the older and somewhat wiser men. A few seconds later the odd stasis was broken.

“We’re just around the corner now. Mathias, it’s time to wrap it up; you know how mom hates being filmed.”
“Fine.” Mathias conceded, switching the camera off and lowering it with a grunt of effort. “I got a lot of good stuff for today anyway.”

Tino lifted his head and took a look around. They were pulling into the driveway of a house in a very nice, residential area. There were other houses close together with lawns and driveways out in front of each of them, on either side of the street.

“Look at all the mailboxes!” Tino said excitedly, pointing at the numerous mailboxes lined up neatly before each house. Tino had been fascinated by the concept of mail, and thought that mailboxes were cute.

They all climbed out of the SUV and Lukas waited until all the doors were closed to lock it up. As they headed toward the door, Tino felt shyness in face of the unknown come over him, and he purposefully hung back on the guise of admiring the houses. But something on his face or how he held himself must have given him away, because Berwald noticed. The taller man took a few steps backward to place himself at Tino’s side, and slightly in front of him. As he did so, he opened his hand invitingly. Tino clasped it at once, and began following him closely.

Emil still lived there with his parents, so they weren’t left to knock and wait at the door. Instead, Emil pulled out a key, unlocked the front door, and led them inside.

“Knock knock!” Emil called. “Mom, dad, we’re here!”

A cheery female voice called back from inside,

“Welcome home! I’m in the kitchen!”

They all bottlenecked in the entrance as they removed their shoes and coats and placed them in the designated coatracks and shelves by the door. Tino, still holding Berwald’s hand, followed the rest of them down a hallway that opened into a living room. It was decorated in whites and blues, and was very neat and orderly. But there were signs of life here and there that were not so orderly; a blanket tossed over the back of a chair, a used drinking glass sitting on a side table, and other tiny things that proved this place to be a home.

They found Mrs. Bondevik in the kitchen, with about three different pots and pans on the stovetop, and a dish of something baking in the oven beneath it. She was a tall woman, standing at least half a head above both of her sons, and was slightly plump with years. Her hair was a dirty blond underneath the frosting of grey and white her age had adorned it with, and was pulled back into an intricate bun at the base of her neck. Her face resembled Emil’s more than Lukas’s; round cheeks with a soft jawline and big blue eyes. Hers were crinkled with laugh lines around the corners, but it only made her look happy rather than old.

She was stirring something in a skillet when they came in and crowed around the outside of the bar countertop that divided the kitchen from the living room.

“Hello everyone!” She called, smiling at them and waving.

“Hi mom.” Lukas responded, going in to give her a small hug and kiss her cheek. “It’s been a while since I’ve visited, I’m sorry. Thanks for having us all over.”

Mrs. Bondevik patted her oldest son’s cheek, wiping away his guilty expression with a grin and a smacking kiss on his own cheek in response.

“Not a problem, you know how much I love cooking for you all.”
As she spoke, she cast her eyes over the little group standing on the outskirts of the kitchen, and her gaze lingered deliberately on Tino.

“Oh my, care to introduce me?” She asked, sounding eager and excited. She even bounced on her heels a tiny bit. That, if nothing else, made Tino like her instantly.

Emil put a hand on Tino’s shoulder.

“Mom, this is Tino, our resident merman. Tino, this is our mother.”

The merman startled them all by what he did in response. He stepped into the kitchen just enough for his entire body to be seen, then he made a peculiar but somehow beautiful gesture. Tino bowed his head to the older woman, and brushed the fingers of one hand down the center of his forehead to his brows, where he held them for a second. When he straightened up again he lowered his hand and said, quietly,

“Elder.”

They were all staring, and Tino seemed very aware of it, as he began fiddling with his fingers.

“Sorry…” He mumbled. “Um… ingrained rituals…”

That made them all realize that though Tino had been hospitalized for a few days and nights, and even been out on a shopping trip, they somehow hadn’t come across anyone of significant age face-to-face before. They’d had no idea there was some form of respect to be shown in Tino’s culture.

The woman recovered first, smiling sweetly at Tino, showing teeth that were too white to believe given her age.

“I’ve never been called ‘elder’ before! Let alone had anyone bow to me; it gave me chills. You can call me Mama Viki like everyone else does. Nice to meet you, dear. I must say, you’re much cuter in person!”

A furious blush broke out over Tino’s face, and made his spots glow all the brighter in contrast.

“Thank you, Eld-uh…Mama Viki.” Tino tried the name out on his tongue, a small grin creeping its way onto his face.

“I’m sorry I can’t shake your hand right now, by the way, but I’m a little tied up here.”

“That’s alright.” Tino said. “You look very busy! I’m surprised that you can do all that at once!”

Mama Viki beamed at him.

“Well, I’ve had a lot of practice, what with two boys and a husband to feed. Then this one comes along,” she hooked her thumb at Mathias, “and I have no choice but to up my cooking regiment. He eats like an ox, though where he puts it, I’ve no idea.”

Mathias pretended to look affronted.

“Mama Viki, I swear if it would ease your suffering I would gladly starve rather than make you slave away over a hot stove for one more meal!”

The woman just rolled her eyes at Mathias in a way that was laughably similar to how Lukas did it.

“You wouldn’t last one day without eating, let alone something that I make for you.”
Mathias popped into the kitchen, brushing past Tino, and threw his arms around Mama Viki’s plump waist from behind, dropping his head onto her shoulder. He adopted a sobbing child’s tone as he begged,

“You’re right, I’d never last! Please don’t stop feeding me!”

A pure laugh rang out from the woman, and she elbowed Mathias away with dexterity before slapping him on the chest.

“You’re such a rascal, Mathias! Now, the rest of you, go find your father and let him entertain you; I won’t be done in here for a while yet.”

“Will do!” Mathias said, turning and leading the exodus from the kitchen. But Tino lingered behind, looking torn and anxious.

“What’s the matter, Tino?” Berwald asked, hanging back with the merman.

“Um…I just…” Tino looked at Mama Viki’s vigorous stirring as she switched from pot to pan back to pot, then checked the oven through the glass window. “Can I stay and…watch her cook?”

Mama Viki overheard and gave him another beautiful smile.

“Oh, of course, Tino dear. If it’s just one of you, I can handle that just fine. It’s being crowded with a lot of people in my own kitchen that I can’t stand. Although, why don’t you make quick introductions to my husband first, and then come back, alright? I’ll find something for you to do to help in the meantime.”

Tino’s face brightened with a happy smile, and he giggled.

“Thank you, Mama Viki!”

“Go on, now, say hi to the old man.” She waved them away, and Tino followed Berwald back into the living room. There was another hallway that led to the bedrooms of the house, and they found the other three in a room that was obviously an office/hobby/storage room. An older man sat in a comfy office chair next to a computer desk, and was speaking quietly with Lukas. When Tino and Berwald entered, however, he stood up respectfully.

He was the same height as Lukas, though like his wife, he was carrying a scant bit of weight around his middle. His face remained thin, however, drawn with the lines of a serious disposition. His hair was silver-white, receding from his forehead but still relatively thick for an older man. His eyes were a steely grey under his unruly white eyebrows.

“Ah, Tino, I presume?” He said, in almost a completely deadpan voice. It reminded Tino of Lukas’, but even more flat. Not that the man seemed cold or distant, just more calculating.

“I’m happy to see you well again and out of the hospital. Congratulations, and welcome to our home.”

The merman made the same gesture that he’d used with Mama Viki, brushing his fingers over his forehead and holding them at his brows while bowing.

“Elder. Thank you, very much.”

When he looked up again the man was watching him with an expressionless face, but his grey eyes had widened a bit behind his wire-rimmed glasses.
“Didn’t think I looked that old.” He said, again in an emotionless tone, and held out his hand to Tino.

There was nothing in his voice that indicated that the man was seriously offended, or not. As the merman took his wiry hand and shook it, he was about to spout off apologies and explanations, but Emil stopped him.

“Don’t worry, Tino. We explained to him that you would probably do that. He’s just teasing you.”

“Oh, really?” Tino asked nervously. “Good, I um…that’s just how we respect our elders where I’m from.”

“I understand.” Their father said, outwardly staring at Tino’s markings and running his eyes over the merman curiously.

“S-so…” Asked Tino haltingly. “What would you have me call you?”

“Nikita is my name, but Nik is fine, lad. I don’t need people throwing around ‘Mr. Bondevik’, or ‘Mr. Nikita’. Just Nik.”

“Or Niki,” Mathias butted in, “that way I could call both of them ‘Niki and Viki’, but Nikita here doesn’t like his name sounding like a girl’s.”

“Nik is perfectly manly and sufficient.” Nik said, sounding confident and long-suffering. Obviously they’d had this discussion before.

“Forgive me,” Tino said, “you say to call you by your first name alone, but…it’s customary to add ‘Elder’ when addressing a male of such age and wisdom…would you…permit me to address you as ‘Elder Nik’? Or would that be offensive in your culture?”

White eyebrows rose half an inch in contemplation.

“Not offensive, just not necessary. If it makes you feel more at home, though, I don’t mind.”

Tino visibly relaxed, letting out a slight breath. He cocked his head, studying the man for a second. The way that Nik pronounced his words was distinctly different from the rest of those Tino had met on land so far, and Tino only hesitated a moment, flicking a questioning gaze toward Lukas before saying.

“Um, Elder Nik…may I ask…why you sound different than everyone else?”

Mathias slapped himself on the forehead and let out a frustrated sound. All eyes went to him as he explained,

“We forgot to tell you, Tino! Sorry! Nik here is Russian, so his accent stuck around when he did.”

Tino tilted his head to look at the older man, who’s mouth seemed to twitch a tiny bit when Mathias spoke, though he didn’t say anything in response.

“Russia is far away, right?” Tino asked, eyes gravitating toward the ceiling as he tried to pull up the world maps he’d poured over so many times.

“Quite far.” Nik answered. “Eydis, ‘Mama Viki’, is from Norway, but we met on a university trip to Sweden when we were young, fresh things. Thankfully our English enabled us to communicate just fine. It was a long, five-year courtship, but we both loved each other and this place so much
we finally left our homes and moved here.”

“How wonderful!” Chirped Tino, clapping his hands over his smiling cheeks. “What a love story!”

Nik looked only mildly startled from the happy little outburst. No doubt having Mathias around so much contributed to his tolerance for sudden loud sounds.

“It really was.” He answered calmly, something of a twinkle showing in his grey eyes.

“So, if I remember this right…” Said Tino, concentrating. “You’re from Russia, Mama Viki is from Nor-Norway…so Emil and Lukas are half-Russian, half-Norway…um…Norway…”

“Norwegian.” Supplied Lukas gently.

“Norwegian! And…then, Mathias, you’re from Denmark, so-.”

“I’m a Dane!” Mathias said proudly.

“Yes, I’ve heard you say that enough. So, you’re a Dane, but you moved here to live with Lukas. Then, Berwald, you’re Swede…Swedish. But you’re from a different place in Sweden. And you moved here as well.”

The merman made an exhausted sort of sigh and shook his head.

“You’re a collection of different cultures. It’s fascinating, but keeping track of it is tiring.”

They all chuckled a little, nodding an agreement.

“And now we have you with us, Tino.” Emil said, patting him on the shoulder. “You make a completely different culture to add to our diverse little group.”

“Mer folk culture sounds incredible.” Said Nik, a little light coming into his grey eyes. “I’ve watched and re-watched your first live stream, where you answered all those questions. Your answers were enthralling, but I confess, for me, it only spawned a whole new host of questions.”

Tino fairly beamed.

“I can answer any question you have, Elder Nik!”

“If that’s the case, why don’t we go into the living room; it beats standing around in here.” Emil suggested.

They once more herded down the narrow hallway, and into the living room. They were just finding their seats when Mama Viki called from the kitchen.

“If you’re ready, Tino dear, I could use your help now.”

The merman looked aghast at having forgotten about his promise, and popped up from the chair he’d just settled in. He cast an apologetic look at Nik, blustering,

“I’m sorry, I wanted to watch her cook, and she said I could help her out once I met you. I completely forgot!”

“No worries, go ahead.” Nik said calmly. “My questions can wait. You’re going to be around for a while, I’m sure.”
“Thank you.”

Tino made a beeline to the kitchen, almost skipping in his eagerness. They all watched him go, different levels of transparent fondness on their faces. Nik sighed and rocked his body slightly in his armchair, getting more comfortable.

“So,” he said, nodding in the direction of the kitchen, “he’s getting along well, then?”

“As well as could reasonably be expected.” Lukas answered his father. “There have been a few bumps in the road, but I think it’s going to smooth out now.”

“That’s an understatement.” Nik said lightly. “It’s a wonder that the boy survived. I’ve been going over the geography of where you all met up, and the odds of Tino finding anyone, let alone in a car during a rainstorm, are almost astronomical. I’m surprised that none of you bring that fact up more often. I’m convinced it was a miracle that led you to find him. Lukas, you said you heard someone calling out for help, or had the overwhelming sense that someone needed you. What else would you call that?”

Lukas raised his eyebrows and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before shaking his head.

“We haven’t really nailed that one down yet, dad. I’d love to believe that it was Tino’s telepathic abilities somehow bridging species because of my sensitivity to the paranormal…but if that were the case it would’ve continued to happen that entire night; Tino said during the whole rescue and the rest of the night he was trying to speak to us the way he did with his people, with no result. So, as to what happened to make me sense him in the first place? I’m still unsure.”

“A miracle, either way.” Nik declared. “That boy is a miracle, and I’m thrilled you all have the task of hosting him. He’s a very perceptive creature, isn’t he? I’ve watched all your uploads, it’s all your mother and I have been doing in the evenings, and Tino seems able to pick up on the smallest of nuances.”

“That’s true!” Mathias agreed. “He might not know what is going on around him, but when it comes to reading people, Tino’s wicked good! Even Berwald can’t hide anything from Tino’s big eyes.”

Berwald shifted uncomfortably beneath the scrutiny of Nik’s sudden gaze, before nodding.

“Wees right through me.” Berwald admitted softly.

“That must be at least a little refreshing.” Offered Nik. “Even amongst us sensitive ones, we can’t always tell what’s going on in your head.”

“It can be a bit startling, but if it’s Tino, then it’s ok.” The big man said.

“Oh?” Emil said, a high note of interest in his voice. “Why is that, Berwald?”

It took Berwald a moment to think about that carefully before putting it into words. When he did, they came out slow, soft.

“He’s too sweet to ever try and hurt me, even when he can see right inside of me and so easily could.”

Nik and Berwald met eyes for a brief moment, and an understanding passed between them. Then Mathias hummed.
“Hm…I think you’re right. That’s why he’s so great!”

“He can read situations and people really well, but he doesn’t take advantage of it for any malicious reasons.” Lukas followed up. “He just wants everyone to be happy and content. You don’t find many people truly living like that, but Tino does.”

“No wonder he’s a social media darling.” Nik chuckled. “I’ve seen some of the situations where he’s pinned all of you down with his emotional keenness. You especially, Emil.”

The teen rolled his eyes, but nodded sheepishly at his father.

“He really wants his own baby doesn’t he?” Nik asked, cracking a smile. “A young, pretty male with the instincts of a mother and the ability to conceive and give birth…”

“Like you said,” Mathias said with a wink, “media darling.”

Nik shook his head.

“Incredible. I’ve seen that your audience is just as fascinated with the idea as I am. Speaking of which, I know it’s very early to be talking about this, but how do you think your followers will react when Tino has to leave? Hell, how are you even going to manage that?”

An almost collective sigh left the group, as they all pondered the question. They hadn’t given a great deal of thought to that yet, but it had been a valid point looming over all their heads from the moment they decided to take Tino in.

“I’m thinking,” Lukas began, “that we can plan on returning to Finland a few weeks early next year, and try to find the area on the coast closest to where Tino emerged. From there, I’d assume, we just…well, we might need a boat, or we might not. It depends on how deep or far out Tino needs to be in the water and…we can’t really make plans without discussing it, but it seems too early to pester Tino about those kinds of details. I don’t want to make him think we’re already planning to send him home, you know?”

At that moment a high trilling sound rang out from the kitchen, along with sudden consoling words from Mama Viki. They were all instantly on alert.

“Everything ok in there, Eydis?!?” Nik called, raising his voice for the first time since they’d been there.

“Fine,” Mama Viki called back, “the timer dinged pretty loudly and scared him, but he’s alright!”

A short chirp followed Mama Viki’s reply. Smiles broke out over all their faces, and a few chuckles were huffed out as well.

“I’m surprised Tino’s nerves haven’t shattered him into a million pieces by now.” Nik commented. “You’d think he’d be so on edge about every little thing.”

“That’s how he was at first,” said Emil, “you saw it in the footage from the cabin, but he calmed down a lot after a while. You should have seen him out in the shops today! He was so much more confident and excited about taking it all in. There are still unexpected surprises that can frighten him, though. He’s not used to the sound frequency here, from what he’s said. All the sounds are much more muted in the sea, so I can only imagine how noisy he must think it is up here.”

“One of many hurdles he’ll have to jump.” Said Nik. “I feel for Tino, but at the same time I’m excited. To think that Tino’s the first merman to ever be so extensively filmed and acknowledged
by the public. All thanks to your willingness to believe him about what he is.”

“I don’t know how much of our story has been accepted by the public as truth, though,” Lukas pointed out, “there’s a lot of people who believe us, but the majority are still unconvinced. All we have to do is get Tino in a room with someone to make them doubt their own conclusions. It happened every day at the hospital, and before that Kiku became convinced after less than a half-hour with Tino that he wasn’t entirely human. Of course, he’s a marine biologist so he had more expertise than the average person, but my point is, even though Tino’s become a sensation, it doesn’t mean we’re proving anything to anyone.”

“Kiku should study Tino and publish his findings.” Nik suggested. “If he could get more than one of his fellows to confirm his study, that would add weight to the argument.”

“Like I said,” said Lukas, “we just need to get Tino in the same room with people who know what they’re doing, to scientifically prove that Tino is what he says he is.”

Berwald made a disapproving sound in his throat, and when they looked at him, he was frowning deeply.

“You don’t like that idea, Berwald?” Asked Nik, tilting his head toward the man curiously.

“I’m suspicious, that’s all.” Berwald stated evenly. “I don’t want scientists to become enamored by Tino, and then decide that it’s their right to lock him up in a lab somewhere to be their test subject.”

“You’re worried they’ll take away Tino’s rights in order to study him?” Mathias asked, lifting an eyebrow. “That’s crazy, though, right?”

Berwald straightened his shoulders.

“It wouldn’t surprise me. Tino’s not a citizen, and they might even argue he’s not even human. That might give them enough cause to try and keep him.”

“Who is this ‘them’, Berwald?” Emil asked, sounding surprised. “And where is this coming from? Kiku’s not the kind of person to do something like that!”

“He might not be,” Berwald said, “he helped Tino out when we needed him, but I didn’t know that we were planning on taking Tino back there. If Kiku does start studying Tino, and draws the attention of others in his field, they might try and take over his work. Take over Tino.”

“Dude, I think you’re paranoid.” Mathias laughed. “Even animals have rights now, man! The fact that Tino might be an ‘endangered’ or ‘new’ species should count for something too, right? There’s no way any biologist, or whatever, could go all evil-experiments-on-the-new-creature nowadays, especially with a subject who can walk, talk, think, and speak, like Tino!”

“I have to agree.” Lukas said, spreading his hands in surrender. “Berwald, I know you have been worried about that kind of scenario from the beginning, but I just don’t think it’s feasible anymore. We’re not in the dark ages, and even though in some shady labs somewhere, something like that might happen, the likelihood in this case is…negligible. Tino’s in our custody, whether or not that’s stated by some legal document. At worst people will just label it all a fake and brush us off. No one is going to take Tino away.”

The big man let out an impatient breath and argued,

“Why do we even need anyone to ‘prove’ what Tino is in the first place? We’ve never tried to prove anything about what we do. People either believe us or not. Why should this case be any
different?"

It had been a while since any of them had seen Berwald this visibly upset. His frown was genuine rather than his usual one, his hands were clenched where they rested on his knees, and his nostrils flared when he breathed.

“Berwald…” Nik said quietly. “I think you are being a touch unreasonable here.”

Blue eyes darted to the man, behind square glasses, and Berwald sighed harshly.

“Can you give me one good reason why we should set out to prove what Tino is?”

“The world needs to know that they’re sharing their water with freaking mermaids for one thing!” Mathias answered before anyone else. “Just think of what that’ll do to the environmental causes all over the world! Tino says there are more mer folk all over, and the idea that we are dumping our garbage on humanoid beings will, sadly or not, be greater incentive than fish or coral to make anyone to think twice about it.”

“That’s an ideal long-term benefit,” Lukas conceded, “unlike the spiritual or mythical beings we encounter, Tino is flesh and blood that we can show to people. Why wouldn’t we take the opportunity to settle whether we’re frauds, once and for all? I don’t think any of us need that satisfaction when it comes down to it, but admittedly, I think the world should know about the existence of something we can conclusively prove.”

“Sounds like you’re talking of getting the government involved.” Berwald said, terse and hard. “If they knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that there are human-like beings in the water within their territory, how do you think they’ll respond? How does government always respond? Regulation, regulation, regulation. How many times has that helped native cultures?”

There was a pause as the weight of Berwald’s words settled over them. None of them had considered that before, or at least not very deeply. The man went on.

“Think about it; the world might be excited for a while, mystified even, but then governments might try and use ‘protection laws’, for the sake of the mer people. Then, what do you think would happen? Slowly, the government might wonder why, since the mer folk are in their waters, they shouldn’t be citizens, like humans. That leads to a tangle of regulation; taxes, identification, legal procedures…the list of possible complications is never-ending. Not to mention the military, and how they might try and capitalize on underwater soldiers.”

“I have to agree with Mathias on this,” Emil said cautiously, “you do sound pretty paranoid. Almost like…crazy…”

“There is something to be said for the issue of government.” Nik rebuffed. “I’m not sure there would be any possible way to regulate a species in the sea as though they were on land, but it’s cause for some concern. That being said, I think Mathias hit the nail on the head to start with; mer folk are a new discovery and a unique species. I doubt that environmental laws could allow the government to touch them.”

“Laws can be changed.” Berwald muttered. “When it benefits the right people.”

“I don’t think that’s what’s bothering you.”

Tino’s voice came from the other side of the room, and they all looked up to see him standing there, a basket of rolls in his hands. How long he’d been listening, they had no idea. The debate they’d struck up had taken all their attention.
“Tino!” Berwald said, his eyes going wide. “How much did you-.”

“It’s alright,” Tino cut him off, a sad smile on his face, “I’m not an idiot. I understand what you were saying. Every word.”

The merman crossed over to the dining area, which was set to one side of the living room, and placed the basket on the table. Mama Viki must have instructed him to do so. He fiddled with the placement of the basket, turning it this way and that. Everyone waited in silence for his response, no one knowing what they could say to smooth over what Tino might have heard.

“You’re not really worried about some hostile government takeover of my people.” Tino stated evenly, his voice shaking a little as he finished stalling for time with the basket and turned to face the man.

“You’re not even that worried about people believing that I’m a merman. There’s something else that’s frightening you, isn’t there?”

Berwald lowered his eyes and swallowed, rubbing his hands together nervously. The rest of them had their eyes fixed on the pair, tense as they waited for the interaction to play out. Tino left the table, and walked right over to Berwald, sitting down next to him on the sofa. He reached out and took Berwald’s big paw in his own slender hand, and cradled it. He forced Berwald to turn his head and look at him simply by staring at him. When their eyes met, Tino studied them carefully. The scholarly, appraising look on his face lowered into a gentle, knowing smile.

“You’re frightened that I’ll get hurt, or taken away.”

Berwald sighed again, closing his eyes. When he gave a nod, Tino tightened his grip on Berwald’s hand.

“I’d hate to think of anything horrible happening to you because we exposed you to it.” He said. “When we could have protected you.”

“You are protecting me.” Tino insisted. “And do you think that I’d do anything that I wasn’t comfortable with? I may seem fragile, but my hands are very strong. If I really want to defend myself, I know how to break bones.”

That surprised everyone, and more than one set of eyebrows rose around the room.

“Even so,” Berwald worried, “I don’t want anyone taking advantage of you.”

“Then you’ll just have to make sure that doesn’t happen, because I think Kiku should study me.” Seeing the half-hearted protest in his face, Tino held up a hand to stop Berwald from talking.

“I want people to believe.”

“But, Tino…” Berwald said, being very careful not to sound upset. “If they don’t…”

“I can handle it.” Tino said, quirking an eyebrow up, trying out the phrase he’d heard Mathias and Emil use a number of times. “Trust me. I wouldn’t have made it this far if I couldn’t.”

“Sounds like you don’t have much of a choice, Berwald.” Nik said, a little teasingly.

The tension seemed to ease out of Berwald. He relaxed back into the sofa and nodded his head.

“Alright.”
Tino gave him a glowing smile, and put his arms around the man to pull him into a hug.

“It’ll be ok, Berwald, don’t worry! I’ll be just fine!”

“Not if you don’t eat something decent.” Came Mama Viki’s voice from the kitchen doorway. She was carrying out a big ceramic dish between two potholders.

“All you’ve had today is that horrid hospital food. Boys! Get over here and help me set the table, please. I can hear your stomachs growling from here.”

In unison, Lukas and Emil rose and went to the help their mother. Tino helped too, though with three people already carrying food out there was little for a fourth person to do. He was given the task of setting out the glasses. The hustle and bustle of readying to sit down and eat helped diffuse the tension that had gathered in the room, and by the time they were all seated the atmosphere felt calm and friendly again. The meal was delicious, and Tino had two helpings of everything before the end.

Tino was constantly thinking of how Lukas and Emil mirrored their parents in so many ways the more time he spent with them. Lukas was more of the domestic, like his mother, the way they cooked and served food, making sure everyone was fed, clean, and cared for. Yet Lukas had always carried out these tasks with more of his father’s demeanor; calm, efficient, and organized. Emil was definitely more like Mama Viki, more easily prone to laughing or joking, and speaking his mind. Tino also noticed how Berwald interacted with the Bondevik family as a whole, and immediately noticed how much he valued Nik’s approval, and Mama Viki’s attention. He didn’t speak much, which was typical, but he didn’t need to in this setting; Mama Viki and Nik seemed to know him so well that they didn’t need him to answer their questions with words. They knew when he wanted more potatoes, or when he didn’t like something in the conversation, or when something made him happy. Overall, this was a very tightknit group, and Tino felt blessed to be a part of it.

By the time they were finished eating, and more than enough people made quick work of the dishes, Tino had decided that he desperately liked Mama Viki and Nik. They were a good balance for each other, in a similar way that Mathias and Lukas were, though Mama Viki was not as high strung at all for her part as the louder spouse. Nik was not a very outwardly expressive man, but his voice and his words conveyed the wealth of opinion and emotion beneath his nearly-expressionless face. Compared to his father, Lukas was nearly as expressive as Tino was. That gave Tino some idea of why Berwald and Nik seemed to get along so well. They shared many glances and short sounds that constituted entire conversations and ideas in stone-faced-man-talk. It only made that question come back to the forefront of Tino’s brain, the one that had been patiently awaiting it’s answer in the back of his head since Berwald had first stated what he thought of the Bondeviks in the SUV. For now, Tino sensed the moment wasn’t right to ask it. Later. When they were alone at Berwald’s house.

Berwald and Lukas were the first to break away from the chaos of cleaning up, their tasks finished and all others currently claimed. They found themselves sitting in the living room, alone.

“I haven’t had a chance to say this to you since what happened earlier,” Lukas said to Berwald, “but I’m noticing a pattern with you, Ber. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

Berwald frowned a bit deeper and shook his head slightly. Lukas went on.

“I think I first noticed it at the cabin, but it’s been jumping out at me a lot since we got back. I know that we’re all protective of Tino, we have to be. But you’re becoming… reactively protective. It was fine when you didn’t want him to walk too soon, or tried to keep Mathias from lobbing a ball at his face, but now you’re freaking out about him dying from new germs, and being captured and
turned into a lab project for ‘evil scientists’, or even his entire race becoming another cog in the machine of world governments…do you see what I mean?”

Big shoulders shifted as Berwald sighed, looking a little sheepish but still defensive.

“None of us want Tino to get hurt, Ber.” Lukas said gently. “But to react with panic or anger because of what might happen, that could inadvertently hurt Tino in and of itself. He’s shown us that he’s stronger than we gave him credit for, but if you show so much uncertainty, how does that help him to feel safe?”

Berwald rubbed his hands together, and shook his head again.

“I know. I lose my composure sometimes when I think too hard about what might happen to him. He’s just…so sweet, and…”

“I know, Berwald.” Lukas said, nodding his agreement. “And I think he’s more than shown us, today, if at no other time, that he can set our own fears aside rather than letting them fuel his own. Still, I think that for once you need to internalize your feelings.”

A small grin bloomed across Berwald’s mouth.

“You’re right. I was already thinking that I didn’t want him to look so scared because of something I said again. You’d think that keeping quiet would be easy for me by now.”

Luks cocked his head at Berwald and mirrored his smile.

“I haven’t seen you feel so strongly about something that you can’t hold it inside since I’ve known you. Remember to protect yourself, too. Also, remember what Tino quoted from his mother? That he was ‘brimming with love and pouring it out on anyone who needs it’? I think in order to be that way, people like that need a steady stream of love and support themselves. What do you think? Are you up for that challenge?”

Berwald squared his shoulders and his eyes narrowed with determination.

“For Tino…yes, I am.”

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All seven of them managed to squeeze into the small living room after cleaning up, Emil and Tino sitting on the floor so that Mama Viki and Nik could have comfortable places to sit. Mathias had joined them for the sake of playing cards rather than freeing up for space for their elders, and that left Nik, Lukas, and Berwald on the sofa, and Mama Viki in the comfy chair. They could have used dining chairs, but Tino had made sitting on the floor look so much more appealing when he crossed his legs and smiled up at them.

While the three on the floor played a card game that they’d been teaching Tino over the previous week, Lukas was on his phone, checking his work email. He had vowed not to touch it until Tino was out of the hospital, and now there was a backlog of emails to slog through. His stormy blue eyes ran dismissively over one email after the next, discarding them left and right as his parents
and Berwald talked quietly, and Tino, Emil, and Mathias chatted playfully through their game.

Suddenly, Lukas’ eyes stopped roaming, and began to study. Then he put a hand up to his mouth, rubbing at it and letting out a deep, thoughtful hum. Emil looked up from the game, having heard the sound.

“What is it, Lukas?” Emil asked his brother, seeing the light that came into his eyes.

“Potential case.”

Excitement sprouted instantly, and grew through all of them as they stilled, waited for the details. Lukas gave them concisely.

“There’s a construction site, apparently in an area where building has been highly protested. The crew has all but quit, every one of them having sustained injury or frights while working there. Looks like they have nowhere else to turn.”

Mathias gave a triumphant sound, leaping to his feet and scattering cards from the deck on the floor.

“Sounds like they’ve got malevolent spirits on their hands.”

Lukas shook his head.

“No deaths.”

“Yeah, malevolent spirits would cause far more physical harm.” Emil pointed out. “And poltergeists are pranksters, so they don’t hurt people.”

Lukas chewed his lip, scrolling through the details.

“What are you thinking, babe?” Pressed Mathias.

“The grounds they’re building on were once a Viking village. They’re hoping to capitalize on that fact and build a tourist center. Just a single building to showcase information about the site and educate visitors. But some believe that the ghosts of the villagers want to be left alone and don’t want any new buildings on their land. I’m inclined to agree on a first glance, but we’ll just have to find out for ourselves.”

“It’s about time we get back out in the field!” Said Emil happily. Tino looked excited as well, but apprehensive.

“So these spirits, or ghosts…” He asked, nervously, “they’ve hurt people?”

“Only incidentally.” Lukas said, eyes still fixed on his phone screen. “All those injuries were caused by pieces of the construction falling apart, so no entity directly harmed any of the workers. To me, and to anyone else who even considers the supernatural a possibility, it appears that the building process is being unmade as soon as it’s being put up. The only times they have managed to put down any foundation or raise a wall, they come back the next day to find it destroyed.”

“That would be frustrating!” Mama Viki tutted. “Those poor men working so hard every day for nothing!”

“But think also of the villagers, if that’s whose spirits are behind this.” Nik pointed out with a shrug of his shoulders. “In their mind, they probably just want to rest in peace and not have their
land disturbed.”

“We’ll find out for ourselves.” Lukas announced, his tone turning concise and firm. “Checking out the site is a good starting point.”

Mathias’ eyes got wide, like a puppy’s. The tall man went still, anticipation screaming in his every muscle as he asked, eagerly,

“Does that mean..?”

Tino glanced back and forth between the two, comprehension dawning on him. Lukas slowly lifted his head to look from one to the other of them in a moment of silent communication. The he locked gazed with Mathias, smiled at how he’d wound him up with his silence, and declared,

“We’re taking the case.”

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Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
Chapter 11

Sorry this took so long, guys! This isn't a very long chapter, I'm sorry, but I really wanted it to be a kind of stand-alone chapter focusing just on Tino and Berwald. Hopefully you enjoy it in spite of it's shortness. lol and check out the new FANART that I had commissioned for this chapter at the very end!

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It had been a very long day, and Tino was thrilled to finally walk through Berwald’s front door again, both of them dropping the load of thrift-store bags as soon as the door was closed. Coming back here was all Tino had been thinking about since he’d had to leave several days ago. All that time in the hospital had only made him want to return even more, despite the fact that he’d only spent one night at the house. It was Berwald’s home, and that made it feel safe, warm, and special. Not to mention that before they left the Bondeviks’ the decision had been made to take up the latest case as soon as possible, and they didn’t know when they’d be up and leaving. Lukas was going to call the inquirer tomorrow, and there was a possibility of them needing to drive out to the location as soon as the next morning. With this in mind, Tino was determined to enjoy the time he had in Berwald’s house.

Tino moaned delightedly as he flung his coat and shoes aside and collapsed dramatically onto the wooden floor on the entranceway. His arms spread out and he stroked his palms along the smooth wood lovingly, pressing his cheek to it and sighing contentedly.

Berwald calmly stepped over him, asking, “Glad to be back?”

Tino only hummed a loud affirmative noise, not budging from his position on the floor. He was so tired, but it wasn’t an unpleasant sort of weariness. Still, it was enough to keep him pinned to that floor without being able to think of sitting up anytime soon. He listened to Berwald moving around for several minutes and tried to discern what he was doing by the noises. He wasn’t familiar enough with all the noises that could be made in a human house yet to be able to make any theories, and Berwald was actually very quiet as he moved around. A few minutes later, however, and he felt the floor vibrate with the big man’s footsteps. Then they paused over him, and Tino felt him leaning down over his sprawled body.

“Feeling sick again?”

Berwald didn’t sound all that concerned, for a change. Tino had expected him to become overly worried about him lying there, and fawn all over him. Instead, he’d ignored him for a little while and now he was sounding like he just wanted Tino to move out of the way. The merman knew he was probably just curious why Tino was staying put, but the lack of worrying attention prompted Tino to tease him a little.

“Yes…” He whined, flopping his arms and legs weakly before falling limp again. A pause followed his declaration, and Berwald didn’t so much as shift his weight. Finally, he asked,

“Feeling sick again?”
“No.”

“Is it the case? Is it scaring you?”

Tino hadn’t expected that speculation, and he answered honestly.

“No…”

“It’s ok, you can tell me if you’re worried about it. I can answer any questions you have.”

“No.”

Tino heard the rough sound of Berwald scratching his head in confusion.

“Um…I…are you upset with me?”

“No.”

His smart-alecky, single-word responses were suddenly met with silence. Tino waited it out, wanting to really make Berwald squirm. He didn’t exactly know where this evil impulse came from, but he wanted Berwald to make a fuss over him, like he always did.

“You’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

It seemed that Berwald had outsmarted him this time. Tino let out a little giggle and nodded as best as he could with his face plastered to the floor.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it; you’re such a worrier. It’s too easy.”

Berwald gave a little grunt of amusement.

“I’ve got enough to worry about.”

Tino popped onto his elbows, staring up at Berwald happily.

“I won’t make a habit of it. I’m sorry.”

Berwald shook his head.

“It’s alright. Just a bit of teasing is fine. I get it from the others, I can take it from you. Don’t you want to get off the floor now? Can’t be comfortable.”

Tino flopped down again, this time on his back, and gave one more determined,

"No!"

Once again, Berwald fought back with silence. At first. Then he simply leaned over and scooped Tino up in his arms, lifting him off the floor. The merman chirped in surprise as Berwald tossed him a little to position him better, then began marching into the living room.

“Berwald! What are you doing?!” Tino squealed, giggling and struggling at the same time. The man’s solid frame didn’t budge, his hands firm and strong under Tino’s back and legs. His voice was immovable too as he answered,

“Play your games any other time, but right now you’re tired and need to eat some dinner.”

“Mama Viki and Nik already fed us!” Tino protested, kicking his feet playfully.
“That was hours ago.” Berwald pointed out. “For lunch. Don’t want you waking up in the middle of the night with a growling stomach.”

Tino made a thoughtful sound and dropped his head back dramatically into open air over Berwald’s arm. He made an obnoxious imitation of a growling stomach with a loud,

“Grrrrrrrr!!”

Berwald reached the sofa in the living room and bent over to deposit the merman onto it. Tino landed with a small bounce, and he immediately curled up into the corner, pulling the blanket off the back and wrapping it around himself. The softness made him smile and hum.

“Hmm…. So much better than the floor.”

Berwald nodded, pulling his laptop off the corner table and sitting down on the other end of the sofa. As he flipped it open and let it boot up, he asked,

“Don’t feel like cooking. We’ll order dinner.”

Tino cocked his head, frowning a little.

“What do you mean? We’re not in a restaurant.”

“In all your research didn’t you ever come across pizza delivery services?” Tino frowned as he sorted through his ever-increasing mental file and ended up shaking his head. Berwald scooted closer to him, showing him the screen. “Pizza is the easiest alternative to cooking, and they deliver right to the door. See, you can order online.”

Tino watched him carefully, his eyes tracking the cursor as it clicked through the brightly colored pictures of the different pizzas.

“What looks good to you?” Berwald asked, being sure to scroll slowly through the options so Tino could see.

“We had this at the cabin one night!” Tino said, suddenly recognizing the food item. “I couldn’t remember what it was called, but I really liked it! We just got it out of the freeze and put it into the oven….but you’re saying that we don’t even have to leave the house? Someone just brings it to us?”

Berwald gave an inner chuckle that Tino was still calling the freezer ‘the freeze’, as he never seemed to get it right. Then he nodded at his question without correcting him for the adorable little mistake.

“Have to pay a little extra, but yes.”

“That’s amazing!” Tino nearly pushed Berwald over in his excitement to get a better look at the screen. He took over the mousepad too, fingers already nimble in how to work it as he clicked through the menu.

“These look different than the one we had…”

“We just had a plain cheese one. I like pizza with a lot of pepperoni, meat, and vegetables.”

Tino’s tongue swiped against his lips impatiently as his mouth began to water.

“That sounds delicious! Oh! Can we get one of those chocolate things too!”
Tino pointed to a picture of a chocolate chip cookie pan. Berwald hesitated.

“I still have those no-bake cookies leftover from the other night, before you went to the hospital.”

The merman’s eyes brightened with excitement for a second, before his face lowered into a slight pout.

“Well, perhaps, but…this way we’d have both…”

Berwald couldn’t resist that face, and in response, he clicked on the cookie tray to add it to the cart. Tino giggled and hugged his arm, thanking him without words.

Berwald took the opportunity, once dinner was ordered, to check his email and orders from his website. He’d actually fallen a little behind what with visiting Tino in the hospital. He’d have to make time with the case coming up, too. He had one kitchen table to finish that he’d been working on before their vacation, though his client was in no rush. The website clearly stated that any orders would be addressed in the order received, and that he was currently on hiatus for a while. The customers who had ordered knew they would have to wait a while for their product. Emil had been kind enough to help Berwald out with his website, and that little ‘on hiatus’ note had been his suggestion. Berwald was very grateful for it now. It took much of the pressure off.

“Are those things that you’ve made?” Tino asked, watching what he was doing. A few photos of furniture and animal carvings made up the background of the website. Berwald grunted an affirmative.

“Can you show me?”

Berwald clicked onto the gallery tab and slowly began scrolling through the images. Tino’s big lavender-blue eyes examined every one carefully, amazed. He didn’t say anything for a while as Berwald showed him example after example, which made him worry Tino might be bored, but then the merman gripped his wrist and let out a breath.

“Berwald, you are an exceptional craftsman. One of the finest I’ve ever seen.” Tino squirmed right after he said that and followed up with, “I mean, it’s not like I’ve seen many outside of the sea, but, this is incredible work!”

“Thanks, Tino.” Berwald said, convincing himself that he wasn’t blushing. “I learned right out of high school instead of going to university. I’ve had to learn a lot about business and finances through what I do, so I still came out on top.”

“On top of what?”

“Slang for saying that I succeeded.”

“Ah. It feels like I’ll never learn all of human slang…”

Tino hung his head, but then immediately perked up and sat back from Berwald on the sofa.

“Hey, we should get the dishes ready for when the food gets here, right?”

Berwald waved his head indecisively at the question.

“Not much to prepare for. Usually paper plates work fine.”

“Oh…” Tino actually looked crestfallen, and seemed to sink down further into the cushions as
though deflated by his disappointment.

“If you’d like to use real plates and napkins, though, that’d be nice.”

“Ok!” Tino leapt up, and darted into the kitchen.

Berwald let him, seeing that his energy seemed to have returned in full-force and deciding that it was time Tino learned his way around the kitchen anyway. He listened with a smile as cabinets were cautiously opened and closed in Tino’s search, followed by the clink of dishes and the padding of his bare feet on the hardwood floor. At one point he heard the faucet turn on and the telltale sign of a container being filled, though he couldn’t figure out why Tino would be doing that. Berwald responded to a few e-mails while he waited, and by the time he was done, Tino was calling to him from the other room.

“Berwald, come and see!”

The big man closed up his computer and followed that voice, wondering what Tino could be wanting him to look at. He found the merman in the dining room, arms crossed and chest puffed proudly. A ceramic plate sat before two of the places at the table, along with two folded napkins and two sets of silverware and glasses. A glass water pitcher also sat on the table, filled with ice water. That explained why he heard Tino getting the ice cubes out.

“You set the table.” Berwald stated the obvious with an ounce of gratefulness and approval. He couldn’t find it in his heart to tell Tino that he hardly ever used his dining table, and generally ate all his meals in the living room. Plus, it seemed a very sweet gesture that would make for a refreshing change in his bachelor ways. This would be the very first time he would be eating delivery pizza off real plates in his own dining room.

“I um…couldn’t find one of those pizza-cutting knives…the one that looks like a circle?”

“We won’t need one, it will come pre-sliced.”

“That’s wonderful!” Tino exclaimed. “One less thing we have to wash afterward! How long do you think it will be before it gets here?”

Berwald leaned to one side so he could catch sight of the clock hanging in the entranceway.

“About a half-hour.”

The merman’s face went a little tight, and he suddenly looked uncertain.

“Oh…I um…I probably shouldn’t have put the ice in the pitcher yet. I’m sorry.”

Wanting to wipe that defeated look off of Tino’s face, Berwald stepped forward and poured himself a glass of the ice water, taking a long draught before sighing.

“Hydration’s important.”

Tino smiled thankfully and poured water and ice into his own glass.

“Especially for a merman.” He said wryly, before downing more than half of his glass in one go.

They moved back into the living room, resting into the softness of the sofa for comfort. They spent a few companionable moments sipping their water, before Tino cleared his throat.

“Ber, can I ask you something?”
The other man nodded.

“I actually wanted to ask you this a few times today,” he said, sounding a bit hesitant, “you said that the Bondevik folks gave you something that no one else had. Can I ask what you meant by that?”

Berwald was silent for a moment, swirling his ice in his water glass as he thought. Tino could tell he was taking his time, preparing to impart something important, so he waited, quietly sipping his own water and trying to look casual. The other man finally spoke.

“You know the story I told you about my first serious relationship? I wasn’t lying about being shot down by the guys that I asked out in high school, but what I didn’t tell you was that one of them went and told someone who told my parents. They had had no idea that I liked other boys.”

It took Tino a second to register the implications. He was still getting used to the idea that it wasn’t the norm among humans to be with someone of the same gender.

“Oh! They weren’t supportive?” Tino asked, his face falling. Berwald set his jaw and shook his head.

“They wanted to send me to a reformative camp.”

Tino cocked his head, and Berwald sighed, having to fully explain the purpose of straight camps, to which the merman looked on the verge of tears.

“They didn’t actually send me, they just considered it.”

“But still,” Tino protested, “that’s a horrible, horrible prospect!”

His distress touched Berwald enough to make him smile.

“I had to go through three more years of high school with my father forbidding me to date a man. On top of that, every boy I did ask out whether out of rebellion or genuine affection, turned me down anyway.”

The merman had an anguished expression. Berwald had never seen someone look so genuinely affected by his own past circumstances.

“That’s awful,” Tino repeated, “but what does that have to do with the Bondeviks?”

“It’s important, I promise.” Berwald explained. “I had judgmental parents, who were constantly trying to ‘fix’ me. The rest of the family didn’t know how to act around me when they heard the news. My younger cousins used to be a big part of my life, but my aunt and uncle stopped bringing them over once they found out about me.”

Tino shook his head, looking beside himself. He couldn’t even speak in reaction to the sad picture being painted with Berwald’s oh-so-rare words. So the man continued to use up his reserve,

“My parents tried to force me to stay at home, in my room, or at least act ‘normal’ when I did go out. Even though I had to believe they loved me, really, it didn’t feel like it once they’d found out. It was like they decided to turn their backs on me until I changed. I felt sad and abandoned at the time. It felt like the world was closing in on me at every turn, and I couldn’t escape it. That’s how I found out how to seal myself in with a shield.”

The merman’s eyebrows shot down over his troubled eyes.
“You used a shield because you were so sad?” He asked, confused. “What could that possibly do to help?”

Berwald finished off his glass of water and then refilled it, needing to recoup after talking so much. Tino anxiously waited for him to take another swallow before he started speaking again.

“I couldn’t tell you if it actually did anything or it was just a psychological coping mechanism. But when I wove a shield around myself it was like the pain and distress melted away and the world went quiet and calm.”

Despite the heaviness of the subject matter, Tino sighed a little at that prospect.

“Hmmm…sounds like being underwater.”

Berwald tipped Tino his glass.

“It was, in a way. Lukas explained to me later, that there are various ways shield weavers operate. Sometimes it’s a manipulation of existing energy, other times it’s a pouring out of emotions. Whether it’s one or the other, or even both in many cases, a shield has to be fed with some kind of power source.”

“Like electricity!” Tino said, proud to use the metaphor now that he had a basic understanding of how it worked.

“Almost exactly.” Berwald confirmed, feeling a little spark in his heart at Tino’s excitement. “I didn’t understand back then, that by weaving a shield around myself when I felt upset, I was letting it feed on my negative emotions. In a sense, I literally burned them all away.”

Tino’s eyes widened.

“That’s awful that you had to resort to that.” He said quietly, biting his lips. “But…if you burned away all your sadness, did you feel nothing else but joy? Is that why you did it?”

It was easy to see how Tino had come to that conclusion, and Berwald felt guilty having to dash his speculation with the sad truth after hearing the pleading in his voice. But he’d never lie to the sweet little merman, so he answered honestly.

“No. Blocking out one emotion doesn’t mean you receive a surplus of another. It makes sense looking back on it; the stress and pain of my life didn’t leave room for any happiness or joy. When all I was left with was sadness and loneliness, and then I burned those away…I was left with nothing. If anything, I just felt hollow. According to Lukas, it was like abusing drugs or alcohol, using my abilities strictly to numb my feelings. Especially when I began doing it more and more often.

When my parents forced me to go to counseling, every time I heard another lecture, or when my aunt turned me away at the door because she didn’t want her daughters around someone like me… I’d just weave a shield and let it drain all the frustration and anger out of me. I was left with nothing. Not happiness, or sadness. It wasn’t a solution, but, at the time it seemed better than hurting.”

Tino looked aghast at this, his face alight with concern and troubles. But he swallowed hard and managed to ask,

“But…doesn’t something like that take its toll? It…it couldn’t have been good for you…”
“It wasn’t.” Berwald went on. “I wasn’t physically hurting myself, but I wasn’t learning to cope with things in a healthy way. When I did move out, and start my own life, I was met with consequences. Remember I told you I met a man online? Well, I fell for him so hard that I couldn’t imagine anything making me happier. He was my world for a long time, and I didn’t have any reason to use my shield. Until we would have a disagreement. It was generally over communication, because I was timid and also not used to even being in a relationship. I wouldn’t speak up, make any decisions, or be very active in growing us as a couple. I also couldn’t handle any friction between us because of how I’d been treated by everyone else in my life. So, instead of talking things through with my boyfriend, I would use my shield, go numb, and…ignore the issues. That’s no way to build a strong bond. At the same time, I began to search for answers about what my shield was, how it worked, and why I could even make it. I didn’t even have a proper name for it at the time, and sometimes I thought I was going insane, since no one else could ever see it like I could. I couldn’t tell my boyfriend, because I thought that he’d think I was mad, too. So, I just came off as insensitive and noncaring. In the end, I couldn’t bring myself to talk to him, he couldn’t cope, and he left me.”

Throughout the entire story, Tino had begun to show signs of empathy, with his big eyes going glassy, and his mouth slightly parted in disbelief. Now that Berwald paused, he didn’t seem capable of holding in his thoughts any longer. Full lips parted as Tino gave a little sound, his shoulders shaking. The next second he leapt up and flung his arms around Berwald’s shoulders. The man jerked a little, nearly spilling his water as the merman hugged his head close to his chest. His glasses were pressed uncomfortably into the side of his face, but he didn’t complain as Tino began to cry into his hair. He could smell the fabric softener on the sweater Tino wore, mixed with his own mildly sweet smell that he’d come to recognize.

“I’m so sorry!” Tino said brokenly, the sorrow in his display hitting Berwald in the gut. “That sounds so horrible and lonely! I wish I could’ve been there for you at that time! I would’ve kept you company, or made you feel better, or done my best to keep that from happening to you! How could parents do that to their own child?!”

At this last furious question, Tino broke down into little sobbing shudders for a moment, while Berwald collected himself and carefully laid his hands on Tino’s back and waist, patting him. Even he had never reacted this strongly to the emotional turmoil he’d endured. He didn’t say anything, but he felt bad now, considering how sensitive Tino was to emotional matters.

“It’s ok, Tino,” he said calmly, “it’s all in the past. You don’t have to cry. I’m alright now.”

When Tino didn’t answer, Berwald went with his first compulsion and tugged on Tino, urging him down into a hug. The merman instantly responded by climbing right into the bigger man’s lap, burying his face into the side of his neck. Berwald was a little startled, but easily recovered and began to gently rub Tino’s back. It might have been the lonely corner of his heart pointing it out to him, but it felt so good to hold a small, warm body against his own like this. Even if hot tears were smearing off onto his own skin. Gradually, Tino slid down, down, until he was sprawled over Berwald’s lap, hugging his waist and sniffing into his side, as though he didn’t have the will to hold himself upright under the weight of his sadness. Berwald let him, easing his way as best he could, still stroking his head.

“I don’t understand…” Tino garbled a moment later, sounding so sincerely hurt as he pulled back to wipe frustratedly at his eyes. “I don’t understand you humans…”

Berwald watched Tino trying to deal with his tears, still unused to how they rolled down his face like that, since in the sea they floated away without issue. He reached up to help, gently wiping at the path of a tear with his thumb over a light-speckled cheek, saying nothing.
“To act as though love between certain people was akin to love between two different species …”

Tino kept trying to blink away his tears, upset at their continuous flow while he tried to look at Berwald. His speech was reverting back to the more formal structure and words he used when he was very serious.

“It’s too intolerable. I know your kind cannot change to bear children as mine can, but…what does it matter when there are other children to be raised and wanted? What is the logic of denying love based on appearances? Families can be formed anywhere there is love, who would want to prevent that?!”

Berwald’s heart broke for Tino. He couldn’t even imagine the world that the merman came from, where gender was flexible and the collective goal was to love each other and raise children within that love regardless of anything else. He’d seen a small glimpse of his shock, that first time he’d had to break the news that it was exactly the opposite for humans. Perhaps being in the bubble of their little group, where Mathias and Lukas were openly in love and happy, and Berwald open about his own attraction to men, had blinded Tino. He hadn’t experienced anything other than acceptance and normality on the issue from all of them, like back home. They might have done him a disservice not wanting to admit how hostile many people were.

Right now, though, Berwald didn’t try to explain the issues of the world, didn’t try to rationalize one side or another to the crying merman in his lap. He simply let him cry for humanity.

After a long bout of sobbing into Berwald’s waist and irritatingly rubbing at his tears, Tino seemed to calm down a little, just breathing heavily as he slumped in Berwald’s arms.

“Your world…” he whispered finally, “your world is…a frightening place. Innovative, magical even…but at the same time, frightening.”

Berwald let one hand drift up Tino’s neck and into his short hair, stroking it for a minute before carefully pulling Tino back so he could see his face. The beautiful merman was just as ugly a crier as anyone, and his pale face was blotched, his pretty eyes red and swollen, lashes clumped together with tears. But Berwald didn’t comment, just reached for one of the napkins Tino had laid out, and began wiping his face clean.

“Nowhere is perfect.” Berwald said softly. “But there’s happiness. You haven’t heard the best part about the story yet.”

“Right,” Tino mumbled, “this all started with you trying to tell me something about the Bondeviks.”

Tino sniffled, and Berwald handed him a new napkin to blow his nose. This resulted in Tino having to sit up again, and this time he casually swung one leg over Berwald’s lap and made a seat there, comfortable enough to lean forward on Berwald’s shoulder. The man’s hand went down automatically to hold him there encouragingly.

Berwald tried not to think about how nice the curve of Tino’s waist felt beneath his free hand, as he focused on his story.

“When I found Lukas and Emil’s website, I wasn’t applying for a job. I was looking for help. When they hired me, Lukas taught me all about my gift and how to use it. The first time I created a shield to protect our group…it was the most wonderful feeling in the world, knowing I’d used my ability for something besides draining away my own misery. But…that wasn’t all I was learning. I saw how open Mathias and Lukas were with each other, and how Lukas’ parents didn’t care a bit
that they were both men. They were just so happy that their son was with someone who loved him. I’d never experienced a family like that. It taught me so much about honesty and trust. I would never have dreamed that I’d have come out to them barely six months after knowing them, but that was how comfortable they made me feel.”

Berwald paused to pick up his own glass and hand it to Tino, who was looking more recovered now. The merman took a refreshing sip and then gestured for Berwald to continue.

“It was Nik who convinced me to say the words out loud. It was just him and me in the study one day, while the others were working on editing our case in the living room with Mama Viki. It was as though he saw right through me. He called it a premonition. He very kindly asked me why I was struggling so hard to keep a secret that I clearly didn’t need to keep from them. I tried to play dumb at first, but he was patient, and eventually I told him about my past…and he didn’t judge me. He listened. I don’t remember everything he told me that evening, but he encouraged me to tell the others, and even, when I was ready, tell our online audience. He explained that there was more support out there to be found than in my own family, and I needed to see that.”

“Did you?” Tino asked, almost desperate for more happy points.

“It took another year, almost, but yes. I told the rest of them shortly after I talked with Nik, and they barely reacted at all beyond a few affirming words. It was wonderful. I still wasn’t brave enough to go on camera and explain about my past, the way I just told you, but Emil typed up an interview with me for the website, and I was more open about it in the following video journals if it ever came up. Over the last few years I’ve become so comfortable with who I am that I don’t have any intentions of hiding it again.”

The merman gave a little sigh at the conclusion of Berwald’s story.

“I’m so happy that you found a second family.” He stated. “But…what about your real one? Have they spoken to you in all these years?”

Berwald set his jaw and shook his head. Tino seemed to droop again.

“That’s so sad!” He declared, but then his face hardened into a determined expression. “Though if I ever saw your parents the first thing I’d do is give them an earful!”

The bigger man felt a grin tugging his lips at Tino’s defensiveness.

“That’s sweet, but I doubt it would do any good.”

The merman pouted, and tapped his fingers over Berwald’s shoulder. That’s when he suddenly seemed to realize that he was straddling Berwald’s lap, staring into his eyes. His face was already red from crying, but he blushed a little deeper.

“Um…sorry for just crawling on you like that.” He muttered. “I did it without thinking.”

“I don’t mind.” Berwald reassured him, then stated simply, “You needed a cuddle.”

Tino’s spots seemed to glow with an even brighter brilliance as Tino smiled at him. The merman leaned forward, slinging his arms around Berwald’s neck and pressing his cheek to the other man’s in a hug.

“Berwald, have I told you since I’ve come ashore that you seem to understand me the best?”

The man felt a swell of masculine pride at that, and gave a small shrug.
“It’s easy to see that you’re a physical person.”

A sweet giggle rolled out of Tino’s throat and he rocked a bit on Berwald’s lap for a second. Then something seemed to come to him, and pulled back, his face growing more serious.

“I wanted to ask you something else. I… hope this doesn’t sound foreword, this is your house after all, but…” Tino wasn’t looking at Berwald, his eyes focusing on the floor, but the sincerity in his voice was genuine. “C-can I…sleep beside you…like before?”

Berwald blinked. He had thought Tino’s question would be more serious considering what they’d been discussing. This was a pleasant surprise on all counts. He gave Tino’s waist a small squeeze, then a series of pats as he answered,

“Sure, if you want.”

Tino glanced at him shyly, as though expecting Berwald to be tricking him.

“You don’t mind? I mean, it was one thing while I was in a hotel or a hospital room, but this is your own space, and I don’t want to be invasive.”

Berwald didn’t even hesitate in his reassurance.

“You’re not invasive. I like sleeping beside you.”

The merman seemed to relax entirely, as though given permission to do so, and he began chattering,

“I like being next to you, too! You’re big and warm, and you don’t even snore! So I really want to, but…is it really ok? I mean…would it be just for tonight, or..?”

“If you wanted, it could be every night. I don’t mind.”

Tino’s face lit up and he hugged Berwald close again. The man was getting more hugs than he had in the previous handful of years combined, even with the last few hosting Mathias in his life. Though Tino’s voice was much sweeter than Mathias’ as it mumbled happily into his ear,

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! It means so much to me! I sleep so much better when I’m with someone, and you’re easy to relax around.”

“I enjoy you being there too, like I said. There’s a saying about having a warm body beside you.”

“Really? Well that makes sense, it’s more comforting than sleeping alone.”

The conversation was now treading a fine line between casual and awkwardly dangerous. But neither knew that the other was aware of it. Or at least, hoped they weren’t.

“If you decide that you need your own space,” Berwald said, “let me know.”

“Same. I’m already intruding on your home, so you can always kick me out of your room if you need some time alone.”

Berwald blushed a bit and hung his head, meaning it rested on Tino’s shoulder. It felt so soft and comforting, and he couldn’t bring himself to pull away if the merman wasn’t.

“I’ve had a lot of time alone, and…I don’t really like being by myself. Why do you think I spend so much time with the Bondeviks? They’re boisterous and fun and make me feel like family. Now
I have you… I like having you hear, listening to you, answering your questions. It’s a nice change of pace even if it does mean I’m talking more than usual.”

Tino hummed contentedly into Berwald’s ear.

“Tino, I’m glad that you talk to me. But you don’t have to if you don’t-.”

The sound of the doorbell ringing cut Tino off. It also made him jump so hard that Berwald’s teeth clacked together from his chin being on Tino’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry!” Tino blurted at once, as Berwald rubbed at his jaw.

“No problem. Pizza’s here early.”

Tino climbed off Berwald, and trailed behind him curiously as he went to the door. He watched with silent interest as Berwald tipped the woman who brought the pizza, and then took it from her. Once the door was closed and the big man turned around, Tino’s big smile resumed.

“They really did bring it right to the house! It smells amazing!”

Berwald placed the hot cardboard pizza boxes on the table, and they ate with their real dishes in the dining room. Tino tended to go quiet when enjoying food, and Berwald couldn’t deny that he savored the silence this once, for how comfortable it felt as they ate together. The same silence lingered even once they were done, and doing the washing up, with Tino saying very little due to his contentment.

“You can go shower and change into your pajamas.” Berwald told him once they had finished, and were clearly ready to wind down entirely for the night. “Then come on in to my room.”

Tino nodded at him, smiling, before going to obey. Showering reminded Tino of how short his hair was, without the huge, heavy mane to shampoo. It was a relief considering how much work it had been, but there was a dull ache for the loss that refused to completely go away as Tino put a tiny dab of shampoo on his palm. Drying off was also much easier, as was changing clothes. He enjoyed the oversized t-shirt and plaid pants that they’d bought for him at The Bend, even if he now had new ones to wear. The thrift store clothes had to be washed before he could wear any of them, and that was a task for the next day.

Refreshingly clean but no less tired, Tino plucked the two pillows from his own bed before leaving the room turning out the lights behind him and going next door. It was cracked open slightly, and the merman couldn’t resist the urge to peek in before he knocked. Berwald was sitting on the edge of his bed, facing away from Tino. He was shirtless, and drying off his wet hair with a towel. Tino swallowed, guiltily letting his eyes roam over the tight muscles in Berwald’s shoulders and back. He had seen Berwald without a shirt many times, but he’d never been able to openly stare before. It was hard not to, really. Berwald was a sight. The merman’s secret gawking didn’t last long, as Berwald stood up and slipped on a white t-shirt to sleep in. At which, Tino sighed to himself and knocked timidly at the door.

“Come in.” Berwald said, squinting at him since his glasses were on the bedside table. “Which side would you like?”

Tino cocked his head and studied the bed for a moment.

“I like the right side, if that’s ok.”

“Sure.”
They climbed into their respective sides, and Tino arranged his pillows to his liking; one between his knees and the other in his arms. He tended to curl over so he’d lay his head on the one he held instead of having it rest directly under his neck.

“You comfortable enough?” Berwald asked, shifting this way and that with his own pillows. Tino hummed an affirmative. “I’m going to shut the lights off, then.”

The lamp clicked, and darkness fell. Tino made sure to give Berwald plenty of space, not expecting the man to hold him like he did before. The merman sighed as the glow of his own iridescent markings in the blackness surrounded him familiarly. It had been a constant in his life up until he changed, and those first few nights at the cabin had been the most difficult because his surroundings had been too dark without it. As he was enjoying it, though, he remembered something that he’d worried about both other times he’d shared a bed with Berwald.

“Berwald?” He asked quietly. “If my lights keeps you awake, I’m sorry. I didn’t think about it that much when I asked to sleep with you.”

“It’s alright.” The other man answered, already sounding like he was fading. “Told you before, I always leave a light on anyway. With you here I don’t even have to.”

“But,” Tino protested lightly, “that was at the hotel room. It was a one-night situation. I assumed you might’ve just been saying that. Then at the hospital, well, I was in a bad state and you were obligated to be kind to me, weren’t you? So…I just want to be sure that-.”

“Tino.” Berwald cut him off, an edge of exasperation to his tone. It shut Tino up at once. “Take me at my word; it doesn’t bother me. If anything, it’s a comfort, and you don’t need to tangle yourself up with worries. Alright?”

The merman smiled at that, but still couldn’t relax. Berwald’s words had sounded sincere, but there was always the possibility with someone like him that he was putting others before himself. There was nothing for it either way, at this point. Tino curled tighter around his pillow and muttered into it,

“Alright. I believe you. I’m sorry…I don’t mean to sound like I doubt you, I just…can’t stop the worries sometimes…”

A pause followed, and then Tino heard a soft sigh come from the other man.

“Would it settle your worries if I cuddled you? I wouldn’t do that if the glow really bothered me.”

“Are you sure?” The eagerness in Tino’s voice wasn’t at all contained. “I’m not sick this time, or having trouble sleeping.”

“You sleep better when I’m holding you, regardless.” Berwald reminded him, and he shifted deliberately closer. “Come on.”

Tino didn’t answer, but scooted quickly backwards, and Berwald wrapped an arm around his chest, without Tino having to do it for him this time. The merman relaxed into the embrace, sighing gently and smiling. He’d been secretly hoping for this, wondering if there would be any way he could ask for this closeness again without a reasonable pretext. It seemed Berwald was always ready and willing to get close to him, and Tino reveled in that fact.

“Thank you.”

Tino breathed a moment or two later, when they’d both settled into the nearly-familiar position.
Berwald even nuzzled a bit into Tino’s hair as he answered,

“You’re welcome. Rest now, and don’t worry.”

“Ok…” Tino yawned out, closing his eyes and going limp around his pillow.

Berwald was beyond content to be in this position again, loving how small and warm Tino was against him, and how much the merman needed his presence. Berwald hadn’t felt needed by someone in so many capacities…ever. It filled a gaping hole that even his relationship with the Bondeviks couldn’t.

There would be time to consider that in all its implications later, but for now, Berwald just let himself enjoy holding the little body beside him. Unbeknownst to him, Tino was disregarding just as many implications and outcomes for the same reason. So they lay relaxed in each other’s presence while sleep descended on them both.

The future and all its questions and decisions would come soon enough, but for now, they found peace and rest together.

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Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
Chapter 12

Thank you all for your patience; I had a wedding to plan, a man to wed, and a new home to organize. So I've been busy lol. But now, I'm finally back with an update! I've been chipping away at this one, really wanting it to be good and not wanting to post just because a lot of you have been chomping at the bit for it lol. You deserve better. That being said, hope you enjoy the chapter!

))))(((((

The next few days passed in relative peace, with Tino soaking up the much-needed relaxation after his stint in the hospital and the overstimulation of traveling before that. There had been, and still was, so much to learn, that the merman needed the calm of Berwald’s cozy home in order to rest and renew his mind. It was the perfect environment for him to continue learning without being overwhelmed by the sheer surroundings of the greater human world.

The very first day, Berwald refreshed Tino’s threadbare knowledge on how to do laundry, washing the thrift store clothes so that he’d be able to start wearing them. The springboard into this exercise was Berwald retrieving a second thrift store bag from the car and handing it to Tino. It had been very light, and Tino had raised an eyebrow while smiling.

“What mischief is this?” He’d asked, then opened the bag to see a garment inside, sporting eye-catching color. With a small cry of delight, Tino had pulled out the tie-dyed t-shirt he’d loved so much when he’d found it at the store.

“Could tell you really liked it.” Berwald had said, trying not to look awkward as Tino beamed at him. “So I bought it when everyone else was following you around. Somehow, no one noticed.”

The merman had spun in a happy circle with the t-shirt pressed to his chest, then turned to step up on tip-toes and smack a kiss on Berwald’s cheek. Before the man could even sputter, Tino was off chattering about how much he loved the shirt and wanted to wear it immediately, dragging Berwald to the washer and begging him to show him how to work it again. The lesson that followed gave the big man the appearance of control and focus, even though his cheek was burning where Tino’s lips had touched.

There were a few more moments like that in the following days, with Tino’s bubbly emotions tending to pour out in physical ways that made Berwald feel warm and wanted. A grip of his hand here, a nuzzle into his shoulder there, and the occasional hugs and kisses that seemed so childish and yet so sincerely affectionate. Berwald tried to tell himself he shouldn’t enjoy the attention so much, but it was difficult when Tino was so eager to give at all times. Though, most of the time the merman was quizzing himself on human culture and information with Berwald’s laptop, which was never far from his reach. When the man was in the same room and had a moment, Tino would have Berwald drill him over facts, as though he was learning it for school. Although, truly, he had to remember for a much greater purpose.
"This information," Tino had said solemnly at one point, when Berwald suggested they take a break, "when taken back to my elders, and presented from my memory, could spell the merging of our two peoples. Knowledge is power, and I don’t believe one of my kind has ever had such instant access to so much of it before. This internet…it has made it possible for me to study quickly. And with the wealth of knowledge that it has helped me gain, my elders may decide that we now know enough to reveal ourselves officially. At least, for those of us in the Baltic Sea."

After that, Berwald understood more fully the gravity of what Tino needed to learn. He had to trust Tino to know his own limits when it came to study time, and even when the merman became frustrated at not remembering something, he wouldn’t push. When Tino was ready to call it quits, he’d always tell him. Tino had proven to have a good memory, but as time passed, Berwald was more than impressed with how much he was memorizing about human culture, science, government, and a miscellaneous scattering of information. He was not as startled by everyday things anymore, becoming familiar with them, and his vocabulary was growing. There was still the occasional surprise for him, as there was so much of the world that even humans never knew, but he was quickly picking up on day-to-day human routine.

In the meantime, Berwald took time to show Tino his garage, and his woodworking shop in the barn. He agreed to let Tino watch him work, which he did so happily for a while, marveling at the skill of Berwald’s hands just like he did when the other man carved. When the power tools came out, though, Tino became upset with the loud noises they produced. From then on, by mutual understanding and agreement, Tino left Berwald to himself when he had to work on his projects. During one of these times, Tino poked around the house again and found a few interesting things, like the linen closet, the basement, and the ‘bare bones’ in-progress spare room downstairs. When he wasn’t exploring or studying, Tino was resting. He’d come to love sprawling out on the bed in his guestroom during the day, taking his afternoon nap without fail. It was a quiet, peaceful place. Though, he still missed being underwater.

Occasionally over these few days Lukas called them up to report on his findings for their current case. When it wasn’t Lukas, it was Mathias or Emil, either calling or video-chatting. Even Leon got involved at one point while he was visiting Emil during one of their calls. The young man was as monotone as ever but described all the wonderful designs for a clothing line that he was working on, inspired by Tino’s story. The merman still had a lot to learn about the fashion industry not catering to general, everyday clothes. He was constantly confused by the idea that this line of clothes would only be worn by him at very specific times, for promotion, but the rest of the time, if it was successful, it would be worn by models. Even then he didn’t understand that only certain people in certain circles would likely purchase the designs. He repeatedly questioned them on what the purpose was in creating clothes that hardly anyone would ever wear, just to show them off. Leon finally managed to get through to him on some level by explaining how it was like art. Tino had found he enjoyed art, and it made more sense to him when described that way, though still not crystal clear. He had promised Leon that once the new case was closed, he’d start meeting with him for fittings and photoshoots and such. It had caused the reserved man to give a sigh of contentment at the thought.

Along with everything else the merman was learning, he had been picking up the basics of cooking and baking, since they did so for nearly every meal. They ended up eating the same meals several times while the merman repeated what he’d learned, under Berwald’s guidance. He loved all things carb, and would light up like a child when they baked breads, cookies, or pastries. When Berwald taught him how to make doughnuts for the first time, Tino nearly cried, the results were so delicious to him. Though the violent sizzling when the dough rings hit the hot oil frightened him. However, he was quickly overcoming his fear of the heat required to cook or bake things, as he’d thankfully not burned himself at any time, but was still cautious. He wore long oven mitts whether he was taking something out of the oven, or just putting it in for the first time.
When Mathias heard that Tino was beginning to cook more, he had suddenly appeared on the doorstep with his camera, whining about how it had been missing its’ star. Emil had tagged along, saying he’d observe and assist for the viewing audience.

“Sort of a follow-up to the first time he showed you how to bake cookies at the cabin.” Mathias had explained. “To see how far you’ve come.”

It had been close to dinnertime, and so they decided to make a meal for all of them. Tino had done well, only needing help with a few things. Berwald hadn’t commented on how this would be the third time in three days they’d had pasta and garlic bread, though it was still hard to sicken of such a delicious meal. Tino had enjoyed having the other two in the house for a while, and had soaked up all their attention gratefully, while playing it up for the camera like a pro.

He and Berwald had received a brief update on the case, with Emil saying that Lukas was having a hard time trying to solve this one and had been doing a massive amount of research in pursuit of answers. According to Mathias, any day now he could give the call for them to pack up and move out to investigate on-site.

“What are the current theories?” Berwald had asked, as they passed the giant pasta bowl and saucepan around the table.

“Lukas has been digging into the ancient history of that location.” Mathias had replied, while chewing on a mouthful of garlic bread.

“Like the inquirer said,” Emil had added, scooping out a helping of rotini, “the area used to be a Viking village, that was invaded and destroyed. The conquerors never rebuilt anything, just plundered, left it leveled, and moved on. It was apparently such a big deal that there are records of it, and the current landowner feels passionately about sharing the story of the event. That’s why he went through all the trouble of raising awareness and money enough to build a small museum on the site.”

“It’s way too small to be called a museum!” Mathias had corrected. “I think the phrase Lukas used was ‘informational tourist stop’, or something like that. Just a small building with plaques, artifacts, and a long rambling story about the place on the walls. If they’re lucky, they’re going to be able to display a skull or two from the original excavation.”

“But even that hasn’t been possible,” Emil had continued, “because every time they try and start construction, their progress is immediately sabotaged.”

Tino had jumped in with his own question, stirring creamy sauce onto his pasta delicately while he did,

“We knew that, didn’t we? So is Lukas any closer to finding out what kind of ent…uh…entities…are responsible?”

Mathias and Emil had shared an exasperated look, shaking their heads.

“He’s been lost in his research,” Emil had sighed, “trying to determine what kind of spirit or echo of such a by-gone age would behave this way. He says there’s some anomalies because of just how ancient the village was. Apparently that can change how different types of supernatural entities behave.”

“I say it’s pretty cut-and-dried.” Mathias had butted in. “Vikings are ticked that someone is trying to build on their land. They already had someone come in and destroy it, then dig up their graves,
they don’t want anyone else messing around.”

“If that was the case, given what kind of people they were, they could be much more violent and harmful,” Emil had pointed out, “that’s been the hang-up; no one has been threatened directly or injured. I mean, there have been injuries, but it’s mostly the result of materials falling or snapping. But that doesn’t rule out a lot of possibilities as to the entities’ motivation or hostility. A lot of them simply can’t physically affect flesh-and-blood humans, only their surroundings if they’re lucky.”

The four of them had tossed ideas back and forth all through the meal, but they only raised more questions than answers. Just like Lukas had.

“My baby’s really losing himself in this one.” Mathias had bemoaned while they all pitched in to do the dishes afterwards. “All he does is read all day, or make trips to the library, or spend hours on the phone with historians and academic types. He’s been scattering the floor in the little spare room with papers again!”

Berwald had grunted knowingly at that.

“Means he’s really stumped.” He had explained to Tino, who had looked sympathetic.

“Nothing kills his sex drive more than a mystery he can’t solve.” Mathias had griped.

To this, Emil had instantly covered his ears (even though he’d been wearing wet, sudsy rubber gloves) and began babbling loudly. The other man had simply shouted over the noise,

“How’s he hasn’t put out once this week!”

Tino hadn’t needed to awkwardly ask what that meant, he had spent enough time around Mathias to deduce it on his own. He had smacked Mathias lightly on the back of the head, considering it something he owed Lukas for his partner’s crassness. The action had surprised and amused them all, and Mathias played the abuse victim as always, making them laugh even more. They had to practically throw him out after that, Emil dragging him out the door despite his wailings that he needed his money shot of Berwald and Tino getting into bed together. The two men had chosen to ignore this comment in the booming silence left in Mathias’ wake, going about their normal nightly routine.

Berwald and Tino had become more and more comfortable sharing a bed regardless, even in such a short amount of time. It felt so oddly natural to simply curl up against each other and sleep that they never even talked about it again after that first night. They didn’t need to; it was just what they did. Berwald discovered that Tino would sometimes make sounds in his sleep. He wouldn’t snore, or grunt, but make small, thrumming sounds that almost sounded like a beautiful, guttural music. It was intriguing, even when it did wake him. The first time, he’d nearly jumped out of his skin because when Tino made the sound, his chest vibrated as well. It didn’t at all follow the pattern of his breath, and it didn’t take Berwald long to realize…the merman was literally purring.

In his own, ethereal way. The man suspected that the merman began to do it because he was sleeping so deeply and contentedly now that he had a stable place to call his home, even if it was temporary. This theory made Berwald feel such sweetness and warmth that he didn’t want to disappoint himself by asking Tino about it and finding out otherwise.

Tino, meanwhile, discovered that Berwald was much more of a morning person than he was. The merman constantly woke up alone in bed and would wander downstairs to find some breakfast left for him on the counter and sounds of woodworking coming faintly from the barn. When he would talk to Berwald, he’d find out the man had been awake for hours, and it boggled Tino’s mind. He had never been an early riser in the sea, either, but he hadn’t needed to be.
“If you ran your own stall in the Barter, didn’t you have to keep regular hours?” Berwald had asked him over lunch once, which was closer to brunch for Tino. The merman had nodded, tearing into a warm, buttery slice of home-baked bread. He had savored it as he chewed and swallowed, before answering.

“I always believed in ‘stay up late and wake up late.’” Tino had declared brightly. “As on land, this doesn’t work for everyone, but it does for me. I bartered, or ‘sold’, items mostly used by hunters, so I could count on their own schedule. Mornings are the best time to hunt, depending on what you’re stalking, and generally the hunters wouldn’t need to come to me earlier than midday. If they lost or broke something that I could provide, it was normally during that time. A few times I was woken up by someone who needed a spear-head right away, or their knife’s handle had broken, but other than that, I was more on an ‘afternoon shift’.”

This explained a lot, as Tino had never been bright-eyed and bushy-tailed during all the early mornings their group had shared together. Nor was he on the fourth morning, when they were woken by Berwald’s mobile phone ringing.

Tino felt Berwald’s warm bulk roll away from him and his back instantly felt cold. The merman made an unhappy sound and curled up in response, tugging the covers tighter over him. The bigger man flopped right back down and did the same as he answered the phone, his voice rough. Even mostly-asleep, Tino could recognize Lukas’ voice over the speaker, even and measured as always. He spoke for a while before Berwald grunted out a response, at which point Mathias’ voice chimed in so loud that Tino felt Berwald start. The words were clear.

“Bro, even I’m awake right now, how come you’re still in bed?!”

Berwald sighed and grated out,

“Tino and I stayed up too late.”

Which was absolutely true. They’d been marathoning through an animated show that began ending episodes with cliffhangers a few episodes in. The entire concept of animation had opened up to Tino shortly after he’d come to the cabin, when they first introduced him to movies. They’d shown him a few examples online, but he hadn’t sat down and actually watched an animated story yet. So, when Berwald showed him the options in the animation category on his streaming service, and Tino saw one that involved cute animals solving mysteries, the rest of their evening and night was quickly spent. The writing and storyline had been surprisingly good, and neither of them were bored or insulted despite the fact that they were watching personified animal detectives. They had both become so engrossed, and Berwald was unable to resist Tino’s puppy dog eyes when he wanted to keep watching, and as a result they hadn’t made it to bed until nearly two in the morning.

“Well, get your asses moving!” Mathias demanded. “We’re carpooling at the folks’ as soon as we can.”

Berwald didn’t bother responding, but simply hung up. Tino yawned and forced himself to open his eyes, blinking with the effort. The sun was just peeking over the tops of the tall pines on the far side of Berwald’s property, and a dim red-gold light bathed the walls of the room.

“We need to get up?” Tino asked, voice slurred with sleep.

“Mm-Hm.”

“Ug…I don’t want to.”
Berwald made a similar discontent sound, rolling his head on his shoulders to glance over at Tino, admiring the glowing lines of the markings on his face and neck in the early sunlight. A few more seconds passed, both of them hanging in the torturous void between sleep and the necessity of wakefulness. Berwald moved first, forcing himself to sit up and inch to hang his legs over his side of the bed. He stretched, arching his back and reaching his arms above his head. A tiny popping sound emitted from his frame, and he let out a gruff sigh.

“Come on, Tino, they’re all waiting for us.”

The merman made a quite unpleasant, whining squeal and rolled into the space left by Berwald’s large body on the mattress, curling up in the warmth it left behind. A big hand reached back to ruffle and stroke his short, blond hair.

“You’re making it worse, you know.” Berwald pointed out softly, reaching out with his free hand to retrieve his glasses from the nightstand and press them onto his face. “Don’t drag it out, just get up.”

When Berwald stood up and stretched again, then hovered by the bedside, Tino still hadn’t moved. But when one violet-blue eye peeked up at him, the merman sighed heavily and lazily lifted both of his arms toward Berwald. It mirrored the gesture Tino had made barely two weeks ago, that first morning when he still wasn’t talking and he had Berwald carry him out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

Desperately wanting to spoil him but knowing this situation required a bit of tough love, Berwald compromised by taking Tino’s outstretched hands and pulling him to sit upright. Tino rubbed at his eyes and moaned, then deliberately pouted. Obviously he had been hoping he could throw himself on Berwald’s kindness and strength to avoid having to move his own muscles for as long as possible. But Berwald’s own body was still in the process of waking up, so he used a different tactic to motivate his merman guest.

“Mama Viki is making us breakfast.”

Tino hummed in delight at that thought, his demeanor brightening. His pout dissipated into a small smile. He slumped forward and pushed his forehead into Berwald’s shoulder for a moment, for no other apparent reason than he wanted the closeness. Only for a second, then he pulled back and threw the covers off him.

“Food…”

With that single motivating word, Tino slid out of the bed. He weaved an unsteady path to the door, rocking tiredly back and forth on his legs as he walked.

“We need to pack for an overnight trip, too, just in case.” Berwald called after him, “we don’t know if we’re going to need to spend the night or not.”

“‘Kay.”

Tino called back, voice strained around a yawn. When he went into his guest room, he clumsily dug out the gym bag they’d bought him and began tossing clothes and toiletries inside it. He then went about his normal morning rituals as quickly as he could, though not even that seemed to be able to help him wake up. His violet-blue eyes felt sore and tired, and he continuously had trouble keeping them open. He couldn’t shake the heavy cling of weariness in his limbs and body and felt like he could fall right back to sleep at any second.
When they got into the car to leave, Tino leaned against the passenger window and dozed as Berwald turned on the radio and listened to the morning news. Despite feeling so tired, Tino had to ask a few questions on the drive, but the answers about the government only made him more tired, as he’d found they did. He understood the inner workings roughly enough at this point, but he still found the subject matter exhausting. Tino blocked it out as best he could, letting his eyes drift closed and his body relax into the passenger seat. He slipped into a soothing half-dream, imagining he was coasting through a lazy current that streamlined him through the dark, cool water.

It was another rude awakening when he heard Berwald’s car door shut, jolting him back to reality. They were at the Bondeviks’. The familiar SUV was parked in the driveway along with Emil’s car in front of the garage, showing that they were the last ones to arrive. When they carried their bags into the living room at the Bondevik home, it was already housing a handful of overnight bags, and the rest of the men sat about the semi-crowded room. The second Tino spotted Nik sitting there, he lifted his fingers to his forehead in his respectful salute to the older man, who nodded back at him.

Mathias took one look at the pair of them and whistled.

“Whoa, what in the hell did you two do last night?!”

Tino merely groaned in response to Mathias’ query, dropping his bag on the floor.

“Mystery Menagerie.” Berwald explained simply. “Were up late watching it.”

“That show with the Sherlock Holmes Otter?” Emil asked, from where he sat, curled up in the comfy recliner. “I hear it’s good enough for adults. A lot of girls like the Watson Hedgehog, too.”

“Tino liked him. Thought he was cute.”

“He was.” Tino confirmed. “I don’t know how they balanced out cute animals with murder and all, but it was so good I couldn’t stop watching. Now I feel half-dead…”

The merman sat down on the couch between Mathias and Lukas, letting himself fall over into the former’s lap, as Lukas was deeply engrossed in an old, bound book. Mathias chuckled and put a friendly arm around the merman.

“You need some coffee, my friend!” He declared, patting his shoulder firmly.

“With milk and sugar so you can stomach it.” Emil added. “Not that decaffeinated coffee you had at the cabin. The real stuff will help you wake up!”

Lukas made a disapproving sound, looking up from his reading.

“I don’t know if that’s the best idea. Tino, I know you’re tired, but you really haven’t had caffeine before. You didn’t like soda, so you never drank enough to know what it does to you.”

“It gives you a lot of energy, right?” Tino said, his voice so strained and quiet they could barely hear it. “Well, I could use some right now.”

Mathias shot a triumphant expression at his lover, who frowned back. Berwald leaned against Emil’s recliner and said nothing, apparently choosing to stay neutral in the discussion. He felt a bit bad that he hadn’t made Tino go to bed at a decent time, and that he was suffering the consequences. At the same time, the merman was an adult, and had to take responsibility for his own choices.

“Come now,” Nik said, shifting in his old padded rocker across the small room, “If Tino needs a
boost, Eydis has a fresh pot of coffee on, since we three finished off the last one. It doesn’t have to be a big dose, just enough to get him functional.”

Tino looked at Lukas with hope-filled eyes, lined with sleep. Lukas could only resist for a moment against that face and the word of his father. He sighed and waved a hand, nodding resignedly.

“Alright, go get mom to make it all sweet for you.”

The merman sluggishly pushed off of Mathias, rising to go to the kitchen. Mama Viki was there, making a pile of toast and using three large skillets to cook eggs and a huge hash. There was bacon in a large baking dish settled on a cooling rack, still sizzling slightly. She must have just taken it out of the oven. The merman watched in the doorway for a moment, impressed by her skill. He hadn’t managed more than two pots on the stovetop, and even then, he was always nervous about tending them both at the same time.

“Morning.” Tino said, stroking fingers down his forehead respectfully. “Mama Viki.”

The woman turned a cheerful smile on him, the expression showing her wrinkles in a way that seemed beautiful, showing how often she’d smiled in her life. It made him feel warm inside.

“Tino, dear, good morning!”

“Um…Lukas sent me in here for a cup of sweet coffee?”

She gestured toward a cabinet, then the coffee maker.

“Go ahead and grab a mug out of there, and fill it just over halfway. You look like you need it, alright.”

Tino carefully obeyed, then followed Mama Viki’s instructions to add cream and a few scoops of sugar. She had told him just one, but he’d found he really, really liked sugar. He stirred with his spoon and let the aroma waft up to him.

“Thank you,” Tino told the woman, “I’m glad I didn’t distract you from the cooking. It smells amazing!”

Mama Viki hummed a little, poking at the hash with her spatula.

“Thank you, I always like cooking breakfast more than any other meal.”

A little weary chuckle escaped the merman.

“You must like rising early, then?” She gave him a happy, affirmative sound, and he shook his head with a teasing groan. “Ber is the same way, but I’m definitely not. I’d rather stay up late into the night and wake up whenever I’ve had enough sleep.”

The older woman shrugged her shoulders, brushing a silvered-blond wisp of hair away from her brow with the back of her hand.

“Coffee exists just for night-owls like you. Go ahead and get a few sips of that down you.”

Tino lifted the mug and took a sip of the drink he’d prepared. A satisfied hum left him as he tasted it; Warm, earthy, but creamy and sweet. It seemed as though the taste alone was rejuvenating him, sending shivers of delight all through his body. The pleasant feelings each swallow left in its wake gave Tino a huge, happy smile. He let out a little moan, and Mama Viki turned to check on him at
“Good?” She asked, seeing his expression as he sipped again. His eyes were closed as he answered, “This…is incredible…”

“You should feel much more energized soon. Just give it a while to really kick in. Meanwhile, tell me how you’ve been. I saw Mat’s video last night of you and Emil making dinner. You’ve really come a long way, haven’t you?”

The merman shook his head, grinning. “I’m just trying to learn as much as I can. I really do like cooking and baking, though. I’ve never known such intricate preparations for food before. In the sea we just…”

He looked away, something akin to shame creeping onto his happy features, turning then worried and sheepish.


“I know,” Tino responded softly, “it’s just that…now, it almost seems…backward. Considering how you humans put so much care into your meals.”

“We’re blessed enough to have the options we do.” Eydis stated. “All the generations of people who came before us worked to give us this current consumer market. There was a time when most of us did hunt and gather, plenty of people all over the world still do, you know. Besides, in your case, what could you be expected to do? It’s not like there’s any way to cook, season, or really even prepare anything underwater. So don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not really worried…” Tino muttered. “Rather, I’m glad that I’m learning to prepare human food, but, it’s a shame I can’t bring the same customs home to my people.”

Eydis tilted her head to study him, flipping the eggs the next second. “Perhaps if all goes well, your people will have a chance to try our food just like you have. There might be commerce between them and us once you go back, for all we know.”

“I like that thought.” Tino said with a smile. “There’s so many possibilities I can see before me now, that I didn’t understand before, my mentor didn’t even foresee them. The knowledge is…a little daunting.”

The woman let the words rest for a moment, focusing on her cooking, then she cut a small corner off the giant hash with a fork. She turned to him, holding up the morsel.

“Taste this for me.”

He barely had time to open his mouth before she neatly fed it to him. Tino chewed, letting all the flavors roll over his tongue. Potatoes, cheese, onions, and seasonings that he still couldn’t name. All of which he liked.

“It’s delicious!” Tino said, with his mouth full. “I can’t wait to eat the rest of it!”

She smiled at him and patted his cheek, leaving her hand there as she looked into his eyes with motherly patience.
“Whatever you have to face after this year, Tino, our house is always open to you. And any of your people.”

It was such a simple, almost trite sentiment, but the honesty in her tone told Tino that Mama Viki was sincere. He leaned his head slightly into her touch, and nodded.

“Thank you, Elder Eydis.”

She gave him one more little grin and pat on his cheek, before turning away. Tino was about to offer to help her with anything, when Emil’s voice called from the next room.

“Meeting time, Tino! Come back in here!”

“Duty calls.” Tino said, secretly delighting in using that phrase. He’d heard it on Mystery Menagerie the night before.

“Go on, then, I know how this works, trust me.”

She waved him away, and he went to join the rest of them in the living room. Berwald sat on the sofa, which had emptied since Lukas was standing now, packing his book into his backpack, and Mathias had his camera rolling in the corner. Tino took a seat beside Berwald, leaning his head on his shoulder as he sipped from his mug.

“Alright, men,” Lukas said, turning to face them all and clapping his hands, “here’s the situation; I’ve spoken with the land owner, and the head of construction. They’ve agreed to let us see the area, even film where we want, and we’re meeting with them both on site. I have the sense that our official client, Oscar Meldow, is at least half-way to being a believer in what we do. He let me know in advance that the head of construction, Elias, is a skeptic who’s only agreeing to let us investigate because no one else has been able to give him conclusive answers. We’re dealing with a mixed bag, and I still don’t have more than speculations about what’s occurring there, so I don’t know what we’ll find. Regardless, we’ll be filming everything from the time we approach, since we have permission. Either on site or later at their offices, I’m hoping to get full interviews with both Elias and Oscar on film.”

“That’ll be my job!” Mathias interjected. “I like to see the skepticism on their faces when they first hear what we do, then the amazement at the end when they see the good we’ve done.”

“If they do,” Emil said, “but when they do, it is an interesting change.”

“Right.” Lukas continued. “Now we’ve got nearly a two-hour trip ahead of us, and I don’t know if we’ll need to be in the area overnight. I booked a hotel just in case. Best case scenario, we arrive on site and just being there will reveal enough for us to deal with the problem in short order and drive back home. Worse case, we stay overnight and hope it’s not for much longer than that. Mystery all around, even down to how long we’ll be gone, so let’s pack up the car, eat breakfast, and get going.”

In a mild rush of movement, they all grabbed their bags and trekked out to put them into the SUV. By the time they came back inside, Mama Viki was asking them to set the table. Despite being so tired still, Tino perked up, and eagerly insisted on being the one to put down the plates.

“I set the table at Berwald’s every single day.” He said proudly, holding the stack of plates expertly in the crook of his arm for easy access.

“That’s wonderful,” Mama Viki said, laying down trivets for the hot dishes to come, “a stable mealtime around a table is the number one way for a family to bond.”
Tino made a knowing sound, having to dance around Lukas as he went down the line setting out the silverware.

“At home in the sea, families share our catch by passing it around and cutting sections off to eat. It’s a way to show equality and love with our provision. When you humans pass your dishes around, it reminds me of that.”

Mathias trailed behind Tino, a stack of plastic cups in one arm as he awkwardly held the filming camera in the other while distributing them.

“You haven’t told us that before.” Mathias noted with interest. “Sounds like a cool custom. Lukas takes that whole ‘eating around a table tradition’ pretty seriously even at home with just the two of us. He makes us sit at the table in our little apartment kitchen to eat meals.”

Lukas made an exasperated sound as he finished laying out the silverware.

“We do eat off trays in front of the tv, too, nitwit.” He insisted, heading back toward the kitchen.

“Ja, like every other day!” Mathias retorted. “Even then, he grumbles about it.”

“Blame mom for that.” Emil laughed, appearing with the skillet of eggs, destined for one of the trivets Mama Viki had put down in the center of the table.

“Oh, I’ve gotten better about it,” Mama Viki insisted, “We eat from trays in front of the tv too, now.”

“Only for dessert.” Nik pointed out tonelessly, taking a seat at the head of the table. Viki slapped him lightly on the arm.

“Well, that’s why it’s a double treat.”

The merman smiled to himself at this interaction; the older couple really did remind him of Lukas and Mathias. Mama Viki didn’t have Mathias’ hyperactivity, but she was definitely the more lively of the two, while Nik was the calmer one.

Breakfast was as noisy an affair as it had been the afternoon Tino had been released from the hospital, and he enjoyed everything about it, including the good food. Berwald spread his roe paste over one of his toast slices, always finding a way to work it into his breakfast somehow. Tino had been reluctant to try it again, but the previous morning Berwald had convinced him to taste a small amount of it between two slices of cucumber. To the merman’s surprise, he liked the salty, fishy flavor when diluted by the crisp vegetable. It actually reminded him of his morsels from home, and he’d eaten several of the sandwich-like creations. This morning, however, there were no cucumbers to be found, and Tino wasn’t interested in trying it on anything else. The hash was delicious, however, and Tino shamelessly devoured it like he’d been without food for days.

“If I didn’t know better,” Lukas said in a light tone, watching the merman eat, “I’d say that Berwald was starving you over at his place.”

Tino glanced up, cheeks bulging and unable to speak. He just shook his head, chewing vigorously.

“He just loves food.” Berwald needlessly supplied. The merman grinned happily around his mouthful, bouncing a little. The message was clear; Tino would always be up for a meal.

After breakfast (and Mama Viki fighting them off from helping with the dishes) there came another burst of activity as they headed out. Eydis stopped Tino just before he left, pressing a
portable coffee keeper into his hands.

“I made this a little stronger for you,” she told him, “go ahead and nurse it over the trip, alright?”

The merman thanked her with a little hug, then ran to catch up with the rest. With a few shouted ‘goodbyes’ and waves to the Bondeviks, they loaded into their SUV and rolled out.

Tino settled next to Berwald again, Emil not even needing to fight to stretch out in the very back once more, and Mathias in the front passenger seat as always. The merman felt a little more awake now, with the coffee and good food resting comfortably in his belly. He took a renewed interest in the scenery, watching the people, admiring the buildings, billboards, and shop fronts. All the while he was taking sips from the coffee keeper, the taste just as sweet, but deeper and richer than the one small cup he’d had.

“What’s that?” Berwald asked, noticing it for the first time. The merman smiled and tapped his pretty nails along the plastic sides of the coffee keeper.

“Parting gift from Elder Eydis. It’s really good, do you want some?”

Berwald shook his head.

“You enjoy it.”

Tino didn’t have to be told twice.

Even though this trip was going to be relatively short compared to the last time they’d all driven somewhere, Tino at once asked Berwald if they could keep reading the book that they hadn’t looked at since being back home. The big man dug out his tablet and the two settled in to read. Unfortunately, it was more difficult to concentrate this time because Mathias and Emil were actively discussing back and forth about the best way to present their new case to their online audience. The teen was working on summarizing what they already knew for an article, since he’d waited to do so, and Mathias was trying to delay him until they knew more. Lukas jumped in a few times to support both of them in different areas of the argument. Yes, they knew a little, and it wouldn’t be a bad idea to write up what they could, but they also didn’t have any solid facts, meaning posting it right away might be foolish. They had to consider their client, too, who was allowing them to go about things in their own way, but probably wouldn’t want any of the information put online until after the case was solved.

Through all this talk back and forth, Tino gave up reading and had Berwald give him the tablet so he could play Candy Crush. He’d installed it over the last few days, wanting to play for himself rather than on Mathias’ borrowed phone. The game kept him distracted for a large portion of the trip, until he hit his first really hard level and used up all his lives. By that time the discussion had died to nothing, and Tino peeked around to see what everyone else was up to. Emil appeared to have given up working on the article, and was writing what looked to be an original story, though Tino only caught a glimpse of dialogue. Mathias was doodling in a notebook, taking a break from whatever he may have been doing on his phone. Lukas had his earbuds in, and the vacant expression on his face told Tino that he was probably listening to an audiobook. Berwald was… dozing off right beside to him. The merman smiled; the big man was slumped a bit, his head leaned straight back on the headrest since Tino had the window seat, and his mouth was partly open. One of his huge hands held the coffee that Tino had frustratedly shoved into it when he needed two hands for a timed level of his game. Guiltily, he slid the coffee keeper out of Berwald’s grip, and the man’s fingers curled up around nothing, relaxing.

With nothing else to do at the moment, Tino began drinking the coffee again. It was almost cold
now, but he found he still liked the flavor. He began to down it in greater gulps, now that the
temperature didn’t force him to drink slowly. As he did, the others began theorizing again, Emil
starting off the conversation.

“So, to sum up, we have no idea what spirits, if any, these are, or why they’re upset? If we go with
the theory that they’re the villagers, why didn’t they kick up a fuss when their bodies were
excavated? You’d think being dug up from their resting places would make them angrier or more
active than someone just building on top of the land long after their bodies were removed.”

There was a silence, in which they remembered that Lukas couldn’t hear them. Mathias got his
attention, making him take out his earbuds and Emil repeated his thoughts and questions.

Lukas sighed in response, wearily explaining,

“I’ve been over this every which way; digging up ancient remains doesn’t stir up the supernatural
every single time. It can’t be the villagers’ echoes, since it’s been too long, but perhaps their ghosts
have lingered, and are upset that the land is being disturbed again.”

“Echoes?” Tino asked, looking curious. Mathias looked from the merman to his lover, and said
cheerily,

“Crash course time for Tino, babe. Why don’t you give him some of that classic Lukas
Exposition?”

The smaller man frowned at his counterpart, but took a cleansing breath and began explaining,

“Sometimes, with bodies whose former owners were peaceful in death, an *echo* can be released
when the body is removed from its resting place. Not a ghost, which is a fragment of the
deceased’s soul lingering with the determination of haunting someone or something for a strong
reason. An echo is just an imprint left by the deceased, which drifts around, mindless, and not
really causing any harm or good. They just exist. We see far more echoes than ghosts in our line of
work. The conviction needed to leave behind a ghost, a piece of your soul, lingering on earth after
you die is so great that not many people are capable of leaving one. But we use the term ‘spirit’ to
refer to anything metaphysical. It’s a blanket term.”

“Echoes are everywhere,” Emil threw out, “even animals can leave behind echoes when they die,
but they’re distinct because they don’t last very long; after being released from the body, they
usually only last for a few days, and tend to linger right where they were buried. That’s where all
the sightings of ghostly figures by locations of death or burial come from. Some of them are
legitimate hauntings, but when there’s a regular sighting for a few days, only to disappear shortly
after, you know it’s an echo. Ghosts are constant until they finish their business.”

“If echoes are everywhere…” Tino said nervously. “Does that mean that…you can see them,
Lukas? Everywhere? All the time?”

Lukas gave a grim little smile.

“If I use my second sight, yes, I can always see them. But thankfully, the images don’t infect my
regular vision, since they’re so faint of an imprint. I always have to concentrate, so it’s not as
though I’m always seeing transparent dead people everywhere. Although it can be awkward to scan
a room and see the departed waiter eyeing you as you eat, or the drowned lifeguard still at her post,
etc.”

Tino was about to ask what second sight was, although he was fairly confident he knew the gist of
“You look so sexy when you use your second sight, honey-baby; your eyes get all far-away and your lids half-close…” Mathias made an appreciative grunting sound that made Tino laugh. “Reminds me of how you look when I’m on to--.”

Quick as lightning, Lukas threw out his fist sideways, and landed a solid blow to Mathias’ stomach. It wasn’t hard enough to actually injure him or make him gag, but it did cut off what he was about to say. He gasped and coughed dramatically as a result, rubbing the sore spot.

“Will you ever learn restraint when my kid brother is present?!” Lukas asked, sounding exasperated.

“Hey!” Emil protested. “I’m not a kid!”

“You are if it gets Mathias to keep his mouth shut about things no one else should hear.” Grumbled Lukas, rubbing the bridge of his nose as he drove.

“Sorry…” Mathias said roughly. “Just think you look so hot when your eyes look like that.”

Another sigh came from the smaller man, and he silently reached over a few moments later and patted Mathias on the thigh. Mathias latched onto his slender hand and held it without fanfare, but eagle-eyed Tino noticed the passion he exhibited even in such a simple action.

It was far from perfect, but those two were undeniably meant for each other.

As always, this thought filled Tino with mixed feelings. It warmed his heart to see such love on display, but it also made him feel incredibly lonely. He glanced at the dozing Berwald beside him, and felt an altogether different twinge in his heart. Hopeful and dreamy. It caused him to cozy up to the man until their shoulders were pressed together. He felt too awake now to try and lean his head on Berwald’s shoulder and nap, but like a balm to a burn, just being a little closer to the man soothed him. Once settled against him like that, Tino continued to drink his coffee, a happy little smile on contentment on his face. He didn’t notice both Mathias and Lukas looking at him in the mirror, then giving each other a secretive grin.

That marked the end of their discussions for the remainder of the miles; they all focused on their own entertainment devices, and the trip went smoothly. By the end, Tino had played another round or two of candy crush and finished off his coffee entirely. He was just taking his last sip when Lukas pulled out his earbuds and announced to the vehicle at large that they were approaching their destination. Tino had to shake Berwald awake, and they all perked up, generally stretching and readying themselves for whatever lay ahead.

They pulled off the highway and onto a parallel road that led them off the beaten track a few miles, into the country, but still within sight of all the traffic. It was easy to see where they were headed; a patch of gravel serving as a parking lot, and a torn-up piece of land surrounded by construction equipment. There was no sign of anyone else. A half-mile or so from the spot was a dense forest that wound up and down the rolling landscape in all directions, cut off only by the roads and highway. The open space almost looked unnaturally framed, sitting all by itself in clear sight of anyone driving by.

Lukas parked the SUV in the gravel near the entrance, and then gave them all a little pep talk as they all pulled on their coats in readiness to climb out.

“Alright, people, you know the drill.” He said, as Mathias began rolling the camera. “Behave
professionally at all times. They know we’re filming, but that’s no excuse to act out of control or silly.”

He fixed a long look at Mathias, who gave him a brilliant smile and a thumbs up from behind the camera. Shaking his head, Lukas then turned his attention to their merman, who was biting at his lower lip and looking nervous.

“Tino, just relax and stay close to one of us. Don’t worry.” Vigorous nodding was the response. “OK, let’s go.”

They left the car, the cold air both a shock and a surprising relief after being in the heated vehicle for so long. Though spring was on its’ way, it had still not yet arrived and there was a bitter chill to the air. Tino bunched up the huge length of knit scarf around his neck a few times. He’d borrowed it from Berwald, and the dark blue yarn was soft and smelled like spice. The rest of them were similarly bundled, gloves, hats, or scarves all around. As they stood in the cold, they silently gazed from one end of the construction site to the other, a very easy task as the area was not very large. The ground had been broken, dark earth laying in a rough sheet of nakedness, bordered by dead grass. Piles of materials lay about haphazardly, but that seemed to be as far as they had been able to get in the construction process. There was equipment sitting about, though the most obvious signs of something strange was a bulldozer lying neatly on its side, looking so blatantly wrong that it immediately put them on edge. Even Tino could tell that that wasn’t right.

“Where are our clients?” Emil asked, gesturing to the rest of the empty lot.

“We’re a little bit early.” Lukas said. “Just as well, too; I wanted to get an initial feel for the place without their theories to distract me. I’ve had enough of my own leading me down rabbit trails.”

Mathias walked a half-circle around Lukas as the shorter man scanned the area back and forth with his dark blue eyes. They seemed to grow empty and lost. A second later, his lover asked,

“Picking up on anything?”

Lukas didn’t answer as his eyes had stopped roaming and gone half-lidded, appearing as though he wasn’t even trying to focus on anything at all.

“What’s he doing?” Tino whispered to Emil.

“Using his second sight.” The teen explained. “He’s looking for traces of spiritual or paranormal presences.”

Tino nodded, having heard enough jargon about Lukas’ abilities at this point to have a basic understanding of the concept. A few seconds later, Lukas let out a short breath and blinked, his eyes coming back into focus as he shook his head.

“Well, their fingerprints are all over. Trace energy on everything. We’ve got a serious situation on our hands here, for sure.”

As he spoke, a sleek silver car pulled into the lot. It was immediately followed by a dark red one, tires crunching over the gravel as the two vehicles approached and parked nearby. An older man in business casual attire stepped out of the red car, and a much younger man in finer clothes left the silver one. The older looked almost cheery, a light smile on his face lifting his already impressively high cheeks. Whereas the younger man wore an attempt at a neutral expression that was a thin mask for his obvious irritation. The two men strode over to their group at once to make introductions.
“Good morning.” The shorter and older of the two men said, holding out his hand to Lukas. “Glad you could make it. I’m Oscar Meldow.”

Tino remembered Lukas referring to an ‘Oscar’ as the landowner, meaning that the other man had to be…

“And I’m Elias.” The taller and younger said, “the head of construction on this project.”

“Lukas Bondevik, and my crew.” Lukas answered. “I trust you’re still alright with the cameras, sir?”

“Yes,” Oscar said, “I understand that it’s part of your image, and no publicity is bad publicity as far as I’m concerned. This project is worth all the exposure it can get.”

Elias didn’t answer the question himself, but he glanced with obvious unease at Mathias and his camera.

“So, where do we begin?” Oscar asked, seemingly part enthused and part nervous.

“Why don’t you begin by briefing us once more, in person, on what you hired us to investigate?”

Lukas’ request was granted as Oscar began animatedly explaining the facts of the case. They had all heard them repeatedly thanks to Lukas, but it was required footage for their online audience.

While the two men took turns explaining their problem, and Lukas politely asked them questions, Tino became distracted by the increasing rate of his heartbeat. It had begun gradually right before they arrived on-site; a light pound of his pulse against his throat. He had dismissed it at first, thinking it was just his nerves, but now that pounding was strong and palpable. It almost felt like something was wrong. Like his heart wasn’t meant to ever speed so fast, send his blood rushing through his veins so quickly that it left a little ‘thump, thump’ at the base of his throat and against the walls of his ribcage. Despite his fear, he knew he couldn’t disrupt the story unfolding before them, couldn’t cause any scene in front of their clients. The very thought of embarrassing his human pod in such a way was nearly more worrisome than his racing heart.

With this in mind, Tino stepped up beside Emil and tugged on his sleeve. In response, the teen only placed a finger over his own lips to signal silence while the men talked. Emil’s focus was on the interaction, not on the merman or his worried face.

“Emil…” He whispered very quietly.

“What is it?” Emil whispered back, sparing him a short glance. “You have a question?”

Tino opened his mouth to tell the teen, but he looked toward Lukas and their clients as he did, and noticed that Elias was staring at him. The man seemed to catch himself as Tino’s wide, frightened eyes fell on him, but instead of looking away apologetically, he continued to stare.

“Um…never mind.” Tino muttered to Emil, having a mad notion that Elias’ intense scrutiny would interpret his conversation with the teen as being about him. The man seemed to catch himself as Tino’s wide, frightened eyes fell on him, but instead of looking away apologetically, he continued to stare.

“Um…never mind.” Tino muttered to Emil, having a mad notion that Elias’ intense scrutiny would interpret his conversation with the teen as being about him. With narrowed eyes, Elias turned away a second later, following the rest of them as they moved forward toward the construction zone. Tino felt he had no choice but to follow in silence. He was relieved when Elias had to divert his attention in order to explain more of the oddness that had been occurring.

“We’ve lain concrete three times.” Elias said, gesturing to a large pile of finely ground powder, with long rods sticking out of it like straws in a mound of whipping cream. “Each time it settled, we’d come back to find this.”
Lukas made a bit of a show of kneeling down and running his slender fingers through the powder, showing how thick it was.

“Curious.” He stated, then rose and fixed his gaze on the thick wooden beams that were halfway rooted into the earth. “What’s the story here?”

“Just what it looks like,” Oscar said, shrugging exasperatedly, “The support beams that were set into the concrete ended up there, looking like they’d been driven down into the ground.”

“Not looks like, they were.” Elias rebuffed, his tone brittle. “And I have no idea how something like this could be done without any signs of hammers, or the pounding of a blunt object to the end of the beam. But just look; the ends are completely clean, like they were just cut yesterday.”

“Someone could have come along and sawn the ends off after they’d hammered the beams in.” Oscar suggested, though he didn’t sound at all convinced.

“That would be a high level of dedication to an already outrageous prank.” Lukas pointed out, standing back up and brushing the concrete dust off on his pants. “The signs of human tampering seem to be nonexistent here; wouldn’t you agree? There are no indications that regular people could accomplish something this outlandish.”

The two men looked slightly uncomfortable, though they didn’t answer right away.

“Local law enforcement has come up with zilch.” Oscar admitted. “They even went so far as to arrange a stakeout to see if anyone snuck onto the site.”

“Was there activity of any sort during the stakeout?” Lukas asked, eyes searching the surrounding land.

Despite the large number of trees, there was a considerable amount of open ground between the tree line and the lot. It wouldn’t be easy for someone to access the site from any other point than the gravel drive without being seen, even at night. Especially at night if the pranksters needed flashlights to guide their way. It would be quite an undertaking.

“Indeed.” Elias said, pushing up his thin wire glasses. Then he pointed to the overturned bulldozer.

“That happened right in front of their eyes?!” Emil asked, unable to keep quiet at that.

“It did,” Oscar answered, “from what the two officers report, they saw it move on its own and turn right onto its’ side. When they gathered enough courage to investigate, they found no signs of anyone or anything that could’ve done it.”

“So with that, our help from law enforcement has been limited to none.” Elias almost grunted. “They offered to keep investigating, but there’s no evidence, no leads, no suspects. Absolutely nothing. After hearing all that, do you still think you’re up to the task?”

Lukas’ face hardened a fraction, and he simply nodded.

Tino tried to focus on the next few minutes of dialogue between the three men, but he was too worried about what was happening to his body. A shaking had now spread through his limbs, and his hands wavered when he held them out before him in the air. It was as though there was an unseen force racing through him, as if desperately seeking to escape. He wasn’t in pain, but it felt so strange, and unnerving that he was barely keeping himself from squeaking out a cry. It was becoming increasingly difficult to remain calm and composed in the presence of their clients, and Tino needed answers.
He decided to try Mathias, sidling up to him to get his attention. Mathias saw him approaching out of his periphery.

“What’s up, my man?” He breathed out of the corner of his mouth. Tino didn’t understand that it was a rhetorical question, and blurted quietly,

“Mathias, I’m scared, look…”

Mathias was focused through his camera, dedicated to capturing every word, but he did flick it around to get a shot of Tino’s expression. The merman was holding out his hands, displaying their slight tremor to the cameraman. His violet-blue eyes were wide and frightened. Mathias softened a bit, and patted Tino’s shoulder before turning the lens back onto the conversation before them.

“Look, Tino,” he said, still very softly so as to not speak over the men, “there’s nothing to be afraid of here. We have Berwald and Lukas if it’s anything dangerous. We’ve never been hurt with them on the job.”

“That’s not it,” the merman insisted, but before he could say anything else, Elias’s voice suddenly rose into a loud stream of frustrated words. Mathias tensed, and became laser-focused on his camerawork as the first bit of inevitable drama played out before them. Tino didn’t do well with confrontation, and he shrunk back as Mathias advanced with his camera.

“We haven’t even been able to lay the foundation because of whatever this is, and you’re trying to tell me you’re as clueless as we are?!”

Lukas was facing the man down with a perfectly calm expression, despite Elias being visibly agitated.

“That’s not what I said, sir.” Lukas answered evenly. “I merely stated that this could be any number of inhuman afflictions. It’s going to take extended observation to determine what is responsible. This is only a preliminary investigation, and in a case like this we rarely find definitive answers so quickly.”

“Calm down, Elias.” Oscar sighed at the younger man. “We all want answers and a resolution. You losing your patience isn’t going to help.”

Elias grumbled, running his fingers through his hair.

“Patience? I’m losing more than my patience over this project! Do you know how much it costs, with each delay, each night of sabotage? Try explaining something like this to any insurance company and tell me how far you get.”

“I’m the one funding this project,” Oscar reminded him, “I should be the one losing my cool over the financials.”

“It’s not just the money, it’s my reputation, as well as the reputation of my entire company!”

As the tense back-and-forth continued, Tino inched his way over to Berwald, who was standing apart from the rest, beside one of the mysteriously planted support beams. The merman leaned one hand against the wood when he reached it, lifting the other to press against his chest. Unlike the others, he didn’t have to try and get Berwald’s attention.

“What’s wrong?” Berwald asked quietly.

“I…I don’t know,” Tino said, keeping his voice at a whisper still, “my heart’s beating out of my
chest. Way too fast. I can’t stop shaking all over.”

Concerned, Berwald reached to touch Tino’s shoulder and say something, when Elias’ voice interrupted again. He pointed his finger accusingly at the two of them as he spoke.

“Don’t stand there trying to play it straight and professional when your team member is pretending to ‘sense the dead’ or something! You expect me to take you seriously when he’s back there doing that? I mean, just look at him!”

The others all turned to do so, seeing Tino slumped a bit over the beam, holding his chest, wide-eyed, spots glowing in the overcast light. Elias angled himself toward the merman and took a step.

“He’s really overdoing it; looking scared out of his mind! I’d believe him if he were only more subtle.”

Tino’s expression changed from frightened to confused, and Elias began to stalk deliberately toward him. Warily, the rest of them closed in with him, ready to defend Tino if required. Berwald stepped between Tino and Elias, just enough to block them from each other as the other man settled in a few feet from them. Now that he was so closer, he deliberately studied Tino’s spots.

“What is your gimmick, anyway, with those…those…things? What even are those?” He asked, waving a hand at Tino, presumably at his markings.

“Did you do any research on who we are before agreeing to hire us?” Emil asked blandly. The man looked rightfully embarrassed and more than a little annoyed.

Oscar rolled his eyes a bit at his counterpart’s ignorance, and explained to Elias,

“They claim this boy is a merman. They found him over their vacation and documented his transformation into a humanoid. Those spots are his bioluminescent markings, like cuttlefish and stingrays have. They’re an internet sensation, I’m surprised you haven’t come across them even by accident.”

Elias narrowed his eyes again, taking in every detail of Tino’s face.

“Come to mention it, I feel as though I have seen you somewhere online before, in pop-up articles and such. A merman, hm?” He didn’t sound snide, but he certainly didn’t look convinced. “So, Oscar, you’re telling me you hired internet sensationalists to handle this?”

“They are legitimate investigators,” Oscar defended, “and it’s obvious that this is no ordinary situation. I’ve told you this before. They’re experts.”

Before Elias could retort, Tino gave a sudden a high-pitched cry.

At the same time, Lukas gasped and jumped back in reaction to something no one else could see.

The merman jerked himself and Berwald away from the support beam, which snapped in half with an ear-splitting crack, and fell with a heavy thud on the ground where they’d both been standing. Thick splinters floated down through the air in a little shower of natural confetti.

“Where’d that come from?!” Tino demanded, clinging to Berwald.

“You saw it, too?” Lukas asked, sounding a little startled himself.

“Saw what?” Oscar demanded, rigid and fascinated.
“What just happened?!” Elias asked, looking as shaken as the rest of them.

“A spirit.” Lukas stated. “A very old one. He looked like a Viking, and he used his sword to cut the beam.”

“And Tino, you saw it?” Emil asked. “Usually only Lukas can-.”

At that second, the fallen part of the beam cracked in half again, and Tino suddenly went rigid, his fingers clamping down on Berwald’s so hard that the man actually flinched and tried to pull back. But he was anchored in place once he took one look at Tino’s face.

The merman’s eyes rolled back into his head, his breathing became so deep and heavy that it almost sounded like a growl. That got their attention. He didn’t look frightened anymore. He was scowling, deep lines appearing in his forehead and around his mouth that they’d never seen on his usually happy face. Berwald leaned down to get a better look at him, and tried asking,

“Tino, are you-.”

“Leave…leave now!”

It was Tino who had spoken, snarled out the words, but the voice that came out of his mouth was on a different spectrum; deep, gravelly, and tinged with a heavy accent from days long past.

As quickly as the spectacle had begun, Tino jerked again, with a mighty gasp. He blinked a few times, and grabbed his own throat in shock.

“I…I…” He gasped, his body shaking suddenly and tears welling up in his eyes. “I don’t…I don’t know what just…”

Lukas was by Tino’s side at once, taking both of his hands and studying his face.

“Look at me.” He said gently, and when Tino did, he looked deep into his eyes. “What did you feel, Tino? Take a few deep breaths and tell me.”

“I was…it was like I was pushed aside.” Tino mumbled out, voice quavering as he wiped at the tears he was trying to keep from falling. “I felt the rage and…it wasn’t mine…but I felt like it was…”

Elias and Oscar were looking stunned and uncomfortable with the suddenness of the events, but the rest of the men had enough experience with strange things that they were bearing up much better. Though, they were still all worried for their ward. Emil came closer to him, trying to assist his brother in comforting Tino.

“You’re fine, Tino, I saw the whole thing. Can you tell me what happened just before? Did you see anything?”

Tino nodded, then paused to consider, and shook his head.

“I didn’t…see it. I just felt it. Sensed it; an aura.”

“Oh, for heavens’ sake.” Elias muttered, but Oscar gave him a look that told him to hold his tongue. He did. Tino went on,

“It was red and angry, just like how I felt. It rose out of the ground and…went right through me. I sensed part of it swipe toward us and I pulled Berwald away.”
Lukas passed the upset merman off to Berwald and Emil, then turned to the others. He squared his shoulders and declared,

“Unlike Tino, I did see the true shape belonging to that aura. As I said, he was a Viking. Full armor and gear. Tino reacted before I did; auras can be sensed before the being attached to them approach, though by a slim margin. This is the first time we’ve brought Tino with us on a case, and we’re just as surprised as you are. He can’t see the full spectrum of the supernatural, but it’s just become obvious that Tino can sense auras. What’s more…”

Lukas fixed his eyes on the merman, currently wedged between his two companions and trying not to cry, Emil patting his back and making low shushing sounds.

“I think he’s a vessel. Someone who spirits can speak through.”

“That’s kind of like you, isn’t it, babe?” Mathias asked, zooming the camera away from the merman to capture his lover’s serious face.

“No,” Lukas answered, “I can see spirits and sense their thoughts and feelings to a degree, but I’ve never had their consciousness transfer to me directly. Never enough to affect me that strongly. Though, Tino’s kind communicate through a form of telepathy, so…perhaps I should’ve thought of this possibility before…”

“Looks like you have a gift, Tino.” Mathias declared, though for once he didn’t sound overly enthused about it, still as shaken up as they all were.

“So you’re telling me an ancient ghost is rising up and tearing down our work?” Elias ventured to ask. “Even if I believed that, and not that you’re playing us both for fools with your theatrics, what reason could there be for it? It’s not like this land hasn’t been disturbed before; it was excavated back in the 70’s, for crying out loud, they removed all the bodies!”

“That remains to be seen.” Lukas answered vaguely. “From here, I’ll need to stay on this site a while longer. We need to try and communicate with this entity, now that it’s shown itself.”

“Well, I for one, don’t believe your nonsense for a second! But Oscar hired you, so do whatever you feel necessary!” Elias grumbled, and turned toward his car, fiddling with his keys as he left. Without another word, he got into his car and drove out of the lot. Oscar looked no less frantic than his counterpart, but he seemed to be taking it a bit better. With no other recourse, he laughed awkwardly and shook his head.

“I apologize…but I can see his point.”

Lukas nodded at him, holding out his hands helplessly.

“So can I, but if we let ourselves be bothered by every single client who thought we weren’t on the up-and-up, we’d never get to the bottom of anything. If we’re to truly be of any use to you, we need to be allowed to do our jobs.”

“Of course,” Oscar said, glancing past Lukas to the now broken beam, “that…uh…occurrence is more than enough to convince me that you’re the right people for the job. Don’t let Elias get to you. I’m the one who’s paying him, and he won’t be able to just throw you out. What do you need right now?”

“Firstly,” Emil piped in, “I think Tino needs to go back to the car for a while.”

Oscar looked past Lukas to where Tino was starting to wipe at his face, tears having finally
escaped his eyes in spite of his efforts to hold them in. The man’s face softened.

“Ah, yes. Whatever you need. Do you want me to stay, or..?”

“Up to you.” Lukas told him. “I think we’ll poke around a little more, but the most significant observation has already been made. That spirit showing up, and the details of the encounter are more to go on than I could’ve hoped for. So please, feel free to go about your day if you want, we most likely won’t stay here much longer.”

Relief showed vaguely on Oscar’s face at this reply.

“Ah, I see. So are you coming back tonight? I know you do investigations at night sometimes.”

“Probably.” Lukas answered, gesturing at Emil and Berwald to take Tino away while he spoke. “But that will depend on how quickly Tino recovers from this incident, and whether I can decide on what this spirit wants. If you’d like to accompany us tonight, just let me know.”

While Lukas finished up conversation and small-talk with Oscar, Emil and Berwald followed his unspoken orders and led Tino to the SUV. They sat him down on the front seat with the door open, Mathias filming the entire time. The merman was actively trying to shake off the emotions that were clearly running through him. His tears were short-lived, but he still wiped at his face, not liking how they stuck to it.

“Are you alright, Tino?” Emil asked, handing him a bottle of water that he’d stashed away for the trip. Tino sipped at it and shrugged.

“I don’t know. I mean, I guess…I’m not really…hurt or anything. Just…it was frightening, having an entire mindset thrust upon me, overriding my natural feelings…”

Berwald hovered close, leaning on the door like he wanted to force himself into the same space as Tino and suck away all the worry that dripped off him. Mathias made sure to capture his subconsciously protective motions on film, staying silent.

“I mean, I’m ok, now!” Tino clarified, when he saw what Berwald was doing as well. “It was just very overwhelming. Like I didn’t have control over myself. One second I was worried about my heart beating so fast, and Elias snapping at me, the next I was pushing Berwald out of the way and felt so angry that I just wanted to attack someone. It felt so real…”

“Are you sure you’ll be ok?” Emil asked again, looking nervous for him. “That’s some intense stuff…”

Tino shook his head and blew out a breath.

“I’ll be alright, I’m only a bit shaken up. I don’t think I was really in any danger. It was frightening, but I didn’t get hurt at all. I’m still worried, though; can any of you tell me why I feel all shaky and my heart’s beating so fast? I’ve been feeling strange ever since we got here, even before the spirit showed up. I kept trying to get your attention to ask you about it.”

They all looked at each other with concern, except Berwald.

“You’ve just had too much coffee.” He stated. There was a pause while they all absorbed that. Then Tino gave a little burst of laughter.

“Really? I thought it was something serious. I’m trembling!”
“That’s what they call the ‘coffee shakes’. ” Mathias explained. “If you have too much caffeine, your adrenaline spikes and you’re left with so much energy your body has to find a way to burn it off. So you end up shaking a lot.”

“Fascinating.” Tino said, holding out a slender hand in the air and watching as it visibly trembled. “At least I’m awake now, I guess.”

They all gave small chuckles, relieved that at least one mystery was solved. The broader questions at hand kept Lukas out poking around a while longer, even after Oscar left them alone on the site. Mathias went out to film Lukas a bit more, but they both returned to the SUV after a few minutes. They’d closed it up and were fogging up the windows, having not bugged Lukas for the keys. As soon as he’d gotten into the car, Lukas started it and got the heat going. They all unconsciously leaned forward to bathe in the warmth shooting out from the vents.

Lukas turned in his seat to look at Tino, who was smiling pleasantly and holding Berwald’s arm.

“Are you feeling better, Tino?” He asked. “You have me worried.”

“I’m fine, now; turns out I’ve just got the coffee shakes!” His tone was bubbly and excited, making Lukas grin.

“Well, blame mom for that—she should’ve known better than to give you the amount that she did. Of course, one of us could’ve stopped you from drinking that whole other cup. No matter, you’ll be fine in a few hours.”

“Hopefully.” Emil added, “If he’s never had that much caffeine, he’ll probably have a pretty bad crash.”

Tino looked blissfully unconcerned and curious about that, and asked.

“What does that mean?”

“You’ll know it when it happens.” Mathias said, adding another layer of foreboding to his voice. That was enough to make Tino’s smile falter.

“Knock it off, Mat. He’ll be fine.” Lukas said dryly. “Besides, that’s not exactly what I was asking, Tino; I meant are you feeling any more residual effects from that spirit passing through you?”

The merman shook his head.

“I feel like myself, as far as I can tell.”

Lukas’ face went blank, as he started thinking. He stared at Tino for a while, his eyes going unfocused, empty. The merman twiddled his fingers a little.

“Um…are you looking me over with your…second sight?” He asked, timidly. Lukas took a second longer to answer than might have been necessary. His tone was flat and far-away.

“Yes…I don’t…see anything besides a slight residue from your auras brushing up against each other…”

His eyes cleared, and he blinked a few times.

“Sorry, I just had to be sure; I don’t think you could be endangered too much by what we do, especially since we have Berwald with us, but what happened out there was so fast and unexpected.
And you sensed what was coming before any of us.”

“You said I was…a ‘vessel’?” Tino asked, tugging his scarf down from his neck as the car warmed. “What exactly does that mean?”

“I’ll tell you on the way to the hotel; I think the best course of action is to take a break and come back once it’s dark.”

“Won’t that make everything more frightening?” Tino asked, looking nervous.

Everyone started buckling in and Lukas pulled the car out of the lot and onto the road toward the highway again.

“That’s part of the appeal,” Mathias explained, “our viewers love it when we have to solve cases out on location at night; it’s more spooky that way.”

Lukas rolled his eyes and gave Tino a reassuring look in the rear-view mirror.

“There’s a legitimate reason only we sometimes have to investigate at night; once the sun goes down the spiritual beings have freer reign of the earth. It is more difficult or impossible for them to move about or take physical form once the sun begins to rise. If we confront a problem at night we have a better shot at collecting answers by trying to observe the spirits.”

“But since you’re a vessel,” Mathias said excitedly, “we could communicate with the spirits directly, and find out exactly what this is all about!”

“You mean…spirits can speak through me?” Tino asked slowly.

“Essentially.” Lukas said in a quiet tone. “Regular people, even those like us who can sense or defend against the supernatural, cannot be taken over by spiritual beings. Possessions, good or evil, can only occur to those people who run on a certain wavelength, so to speak. Even amongst them, only a handful can allow a spirit to speak through them. We call these people ‘vessels’ for obvious reasons; they can let a spirit flow into them while also maintaining their own soul, like a vessel with both oil and water inside.”

Tino’s eyes alternated between opening with wide and narrowing to think over this information. It was quite a lot to take in. Lukas gave him a second or two to process, before speaking more conversationally rather than informatively.

“I don’t know if you’re a vessel because of your people’s innate ability to sense each other’s thoughts and emotions, or if you’re just a raw talent, but either way you have a useful gift.”

For a few minutes, the only sound was that of the other cars and the tires on the highway. Mathias occupied himself by turning the camera slowly from person to person, documenting them all thinking about the implications of such a revelation. Finally, Tino spoke.

“Do you want me to…let it happen again, tonight? So you can talk to the Viking?”

Lukas didn’t answer right away, and the rest of them knew better than to interject their two cents before he gave his thoughts on something like this. When he did speak, it was with a quiet seriousness.

“Tino, I don’t want to ask too much of you; you’re basically our ward, after all, we shouldn’t be taking advantage of you. However…I think you can help us greatly in this case.”
The merman looked torn between suspicion and interest. Emil picked up on his brother’s tone and mirrored it as best he could.

“If you would be willing to let the entity come over you again, perhaps for a longer enough time for us to try and speak to it, we could gain insight into its motivations. Maybe you could even persuade it to see our side of the predicament.”

“Could I be wounded by doing this?” Tino asked. “That spirit cut through a beam of wood…”

Lukas was quick to dispel Tino’s fears.

“Typically, spirits in general cannot harm those of flesh and blood directly; they can affect their environment if they’re powerful enough, but the accounts of people being clawed, strangled, pushed, etc., tend to be the work of something mystical taking physical form.”

“Like a goblin or a troll.” Mathias dropped into the conversation helpfully.

“Exactly,” Lukas agreed, “When spirits possess a vessel, they can’t move the vessel’s body in any way apart from speech. That’s why you froze when it entered you; your body reacts to the foreign spirit by stiffening up, and as the energy of the other being permeates you, you can start shaking.”

The merman’s face lightened with a brief moment of levity.

“That sounds like the coffee shakes I’m having.”

They all shared a glorious moment of light chuckling, breaking some of the tense mood that had fallen over them. Berwald placed a huge hand on Tino’s head and ruffled his gold hair fondly.

“No more coffee for you.” He stated, so deadpan that Tino’s smile faded into faux sadness.

“Wait…really?” He asked, so piteously that Berwald cracked a smile too and shook his head.

“Not that much, at least. You can’t handle much yet.”

“Oh, well good! Because I still like it!” Tino declared, and proceeded to hold up his hands and wave them around with his arms, in a circling motion that Mathias had taught him.

“Hey, you’re doing my victory dance!” Mathias cheered, joining him with his camera-free hand, waving it around like jazz hands.

“He’s polluting all the mermen.” Emil muttered, fighting to keep back his laughter.

“Just be careful to build up your coffee tolerance, Tino, ok?” Advised Lukas. “You really don’t want to wear yourself out day after day because of too much caffeine.”

“Why not?” Mathias asked, turning the camera to Lukas’ face. “That’s what most of the world does. It’s what we do; we couldn’t live without our coffee and tea maker!”

“We’re used to it, moron. Tino’s like a control group in some scientific experiment. He’s more susceptible.”

The merman chirped happily and rocked his body in an approximation of a dance.

“Susceptible control group, susceptible control group, that’s me!” He chanted, the way Mathias did when he tried to sound ‘cool and hip’.
“See what I mean?!” Emil cried. “Look what Mat’s done to Tino!”

“He’s just copying my signature style.” Mathias said proudly. The merman danced around a little more before settling down.

“I have my own style.” He said evenly. “In the water, I move like an elegant slip of satin. But it doesn’t translate well on dry land where there’s...gravity and all.”

“Hopefully,” Mathias said eagerly, “one day we’ll be able to film you underwater! I think we can afford a waterproof camera now, right Lukas?”

“Perhaps.” Lukas replied, sounding distracted. “But first we have to finish out this case; that might sway our fortunes a bit more. I think we should discuss our options once we get to the hotel.”

And with that, the unease trickled back into the group, dampening the levity that had briefly distracted them.

“I have to wonder about something.” Emil said, trying to keep his tone light. “How was that spirit able to possess Tino in broad daylight? I know we don’t have that many experiences with vessels, but the ones we have had were always at night, right?”

Lukas made a humming sound as he took an exit off the highway.

“I’ve been wondering about that; from what I understand, spirits of substantial will can manifest or possess a vessel in the daylight. Even as a stronger being, though, they can’t sustain their forms for long in the daytime, that’s why it all happened so fast. It must’ve been a real jolt to Tino’s already hyped system.”

Nodding, Tino rubbed at his neck and rolled his head on his shoulders.

“I think I’m a little sore from it, now that you mention it. My muscles all locked up, like you said. And that was only for a couple of seconds! If I let it happen again for the length of a conversation...will it be even worse?”

No one answered right away, trying to think of anything reassuring to tell him about the whole situation. Though, Lukas hadn’t tried to sugarcoat anything for him so far, and he didn’t now.

“It’s possible that you’ll be very sore after it’s all over; like I said, you won’t be injured per se, but you’ll feel the effects of your muscles clenching up like that.”

“Apart from the physical aspect, can having another entity inside me like that...do anything to my head? Like, does the spirit have the ability to change my thoughts or emotions permanently?”

“No, no,” Lukas said quickly, slightly distracted as he saw the sign for their hotel and followed it down a side road, “anything you feel emotionally while the spirit is possessing you will not stay with you. They don’t have power to manipulate you in any way other than using you to speak their message.”

“In that case, why do they call people like Tino ‘vessels’, instead of ‘messengers’, or ‘proxies’?” Emil asked curiously.

“I don’t make the terms.” Lukas said, pulling into the hotel parking lot. “But ‘vessel’ makes more sense for the reasons I already described. We’re here now, so let’s wind down and take a break. We can discuss our plan of action after we’re settled in.”
They didn’t talk much as they carried their overnight bags into the lobby and then took the elevator to the third floor. Tino still disliked elevators, and he pressed up against Berwald’s side to half-hide his face when it started rising. The big man said nothing, but placed a steadying hand on his shoulder.

They broke up the rooms differently than last time, putting Tino and Berwald in the same room as Emil, since they were now sleeping in the same bed. Mathias had complained at first, saying he’d rather share the room with them so he could film their cuddling for the audience, but all the others firmly denied him this opportunity. Somehow they skirted the awkward topic of what it meant that the two were now sleeping like that, in a semi-intimate manner. Instead, they focused on relaxing for a while.

Tino had filched Berwald’s earbuds and phone, leaving the other man to read on his tablet. The merman curled up on the bed and scrolled through the screen to find the soothing violin music he’d become familiar with lately. Berwald had made him a playlist, and he loved all the instrumental music that he’d picked out for him. The lead violin began the tune, and the merman eased down into the clean-smelling linens of the hotel bed to relax. As he listened, and the others planted themselves similarly around their rooms, Tino tried to calmly think through what they were asking him to do tonight.

It seemed like such a sudden revelation; that he had a significant supernatural gift. Although, he’d never been able to shake the feeling that he’d found this particular group of humans through something other than coincidence. Lukas had heard him all those weeks ago, while driving in the rain. He hadn’t spoken much about it, but Tino was convinced that he’d gotten through to Lukas somehow, by crying out with his thoughts. That could’ve been because Lukas was sensitive to the paranormal, and Tino had what could be classified as a paranormal ability to communicate with his own people telepathically. But Lukas was a human, and none of the rest of them had heard his pleas. Even Lukas hadn’t heard anything else he’d been trying to communicate the rest of that night. Tino remembered speaking to them all, within the confines of his mind. To his own perceptions he’d been pleading with them to tell him who they were, to explain what was happening to him, to ask what they were going to do with him. He’d had to consciously suppress his mental efforts in order to concentrate on their spoken language and how it translated from thought to speech. In the days following, Tino had discovered that he was still aware of their emotions on a much fainter scale than that of his own kind. That had made him happy, to feel he could understand them at least to a small extent. He’d still had trouble not being aware of them on the spectrum of thought and emotion that was common in his home; it had made him work harder to try and understand them by asking questions constantly and trying to observe their body language.

But this…being a vessel, that was different. It just seemed a bit far-fetched that he’d have such a gift in the human world, when he’d not been aware of any such power before coming ashore. Although, as Tino thought about it, more than anything the pieces seemed to fit together; being telepathic was apparently phenomenal to humans, and maybe that ability translated to being a vessel here on land. That seemed the most plausible.

In the end, there was only one way to find out . . .

There was still too much caffeine coursing through him to allow Tino to nap, and he briefly analyzed the slight throbbing of his pulse in his throat and the little twitches in his limbs. It wasn’t the most comfortable feeling, but at least he knew there was nothing incredibly harmful about it. He’d be sure to be sparse with his coffee consumption in the future, as he did still enjoy the taste. Perhaps he’d try the decaffeinated coffee again simply for the flavor aspect.
“Hey, Ber?” He asked in the midst of the calm silence hanging over the pair of rooms.

The other man looked up from his tablet, his blue eyes questioning behind his glasses.

“Do you have any decaffeinated coffee at your house?”

Berwald shook his head almost at once. Tino frowned, disappointed, and shrugged before flopping down on the mattress again.

“I like the taste, just not the energy rush.” The merman muttered. “Feels like I can’t catch my breath all the way. It’s unnerving.”

Emil was sitting on the bed beside Tino’s, and tore himself away from his laptop to glance over at him.

“Drink as much water as you can; it might help to flush the caffeine through your system better.”

Tino popped up at once to retrieve his water bottle, and downed the remaining contents quickly. Then he went back to Berwald’s phone and for about a half-hour they all existed in their own bubbles of peace and technology.

Ever the responsible one, Lukas burst his own bubble first, and began going around to burst the rest. Tino gave Berwald back his phone and earbuds, and Berwald put away his tablet. Emil put his laptop away as well, then had to drag Mathias away from his phone in the other room by telling him he could set up his camera like usual and record all of their discussion on how to proceed. Only bits and pieces of it had been captured in the car. Finally, they were all gathered in one room, and the camera was rolling.

“To start off,” Lukas said, taking up position in a chair opposite Berwald around the small round table in the room, “I think we all agree that we need to take care of this dilemma quickly; there’s a time factor here and more than one person’s finances directly tie into the outcome of this case.”

They tried not to act like they were all wanting to look at Tino, but the merman wasn’t ignorant. He took a little breath.

“Is it up to me?” Tino asked, his face and tone neutral.

“We’d never put such pressure on you, Tino.” Assured Emil. “But you could help us solve this case quickly.”

“We’ve done this plenty of times without you.” Berwald said. “If you don’t feel comfortable with the idea, you don’t have to do it.”

The merman jittered a bit where he sat, the caffeine still making him anxiously twitchy.

“Can I ask…have you ever had a case this hard before? And what did you do in the end? So, if I say no, what will you do?”

“He’s been thinking, no doubt about it.” Mathias said, with a shrewd lilt to his voice. “Let me tell you something, fish boy; when all else fails, we have one end-all solution.”

When he paused for dramatic effect, Emil stole his thunder by launching ahead into the explanation.

“Lukas performs a cleansing.”
“Little punk…” Mathias growled, crossing his arms with a little pout, wilting back against the headboard beside Emil. The teen almost glowed with victory, and continued,

“When we’re left without answers, even after extensive research and investigation, our only option is to purge the site of all spiritual traces. If the problem is a curse, lingering evasive spirits or demons, no matter what the mystery is we can eliminate the source entirely. We also call it a purge or an exorcism.”

Tino frowned, tilting his head questioningly.

“If you can do it that easily, why not always resolve things like that?”

“Because not all spiritual beings are harmful, and we wouldn’t want to eliminate anything benign. Of course, most issues required to call us in are due to somewhat troublesome spirits, so it’s a low margin.” Lukas answered. “Still, we don’t want to take the risk when we can help it; there’s cause and effect for all activity outside of the mortal realm. When we know the cause, we can control the effect in more peaceful ways than just dispersing it like a bomb, wiping away the problem. You see?”

Tino worried at his bottom lip as he considered that.

“If you can reason with something, it’s better than killing it.” Tino stated slowly. “Pacifism.”

“Exactly. No loss is inconsequential, even for those outside our perceptions.”

Mathias followed up that insight by saying,

“Plus, working out the mystery on film is much more intriguing for our audience! They love it watching Lukas do all his research and explain what he found. If we kept showing up and obliterating the problem with a cleansing, there’d be nothing on camera besides Lukas chanting up a storm, and that would get repetitive and drive people away after a while. The best cases are the ones we can showcase solving and then have a great visual ending!”

“You don’t have to make us sound like such sleaze-balls…” Emil said, irritated. “Even if filming and producing is your job…”

“What’s a sleaze-ball?” Tino asked. Mathias spoke before anyone could answer the merman.

“Don’t act like I’m not right; the more interesting our content is, the more viewers we get and then the more income we have.”

“I know that, but even with the basic cleansing cases, people still tune in and support us overall,” Emil shot back, “I don’t think exploiting Tino unnecessarily just to boost our views and support is right.”

“Break it up.” Berwald rumbled suddenly, his deep voice shushing the two young men.

“Will you two always find a reason to argue?” Lukas asked wearily. “Just drop it, I don’t think we need the drama right now.”

Mathias and Emil both grumbled but then stayed silent. Lukas gave them an extra second to make sure they’d stay quiet. Then he went on,

“The way I see it, if Tino decides to be our vessel, we can try and reason with the spirit behind all this. If that works, we’ll bind the spirit to a truce, and all will be resolved. But, Tino, if you decide
against it, we’d take the course of action that I was already suspecting we’d have to, and purge the site. It would satisfy our client, and leave the land pure. The entity there is obviously hostile, so we know we’d be doing them good.”

“Or,” Emil said, “It could be a misunderstanding. You know we’ve had those before. We don’t want to harm any innocents.”

“The humans are the victims in this case, I sense.” Lukas said firmly. “I feel we’ve ruled out the villagers being behind this, as their graves being excavated has never yielded any ghost sightings, and the entity there is clearly hostile. I feel no guilt in cleansing the area.”

“But then we won’t know for sure!” Protested Mathias. “I know you, Lukas; it’ll eat you up not knowing the truth after all the time you’ve poured into researching this case! Just help Tino do his thing! He won’t be hurt, you said so yourself, and then we’ll be able to get to the bottom of all this and have answers to boot.”

Berwald almost growled in response to this, his hands curling into fists. That alarmed Tino a bit.

“Just because your head is tough doesn’t mean that Tino’s is,” Emil jumped in, before Berwald or Lukas had a chance, “he might be a vessel, but he’s also so emotionally sensitive, what do you think would happen to him if we let some angry, unknown entity take him over?”

“It already happened earlier today and he was fine.” Mathias argued, his face set into a stubborn frown now, rather than his usual happy-go-lucky grin.

“For literally four seconds! How long do you think a full conversation would take?”

Tino tried to pipe in, not liking how the situation was devolving. But unfortunately, he didn’t speak quickly enough or loudly enough as the back and forth continued.

“Even then he’d be fine! Lukas said he’d just be a little sore, nothing to worry about! I think even Tino can agree that’s worth the price of wrapping this case up.”

“Technically that is true, but there would probably be some emotional recovery in order.” Lukas mentioned, looking as fed up with the arguing as everyone and trying to be the voice of reason.

“Is it really worth it to put him through that?” Asked Berwald, looking to Lukas to back him up.

“That’s what I’m saying,” agreed Emil, “it’s too much of a risk for him.”

“But he’s a willing sport, so why not let him?”

Tino let out a sharp trilling sound of frustration, his patience having run out, and he snapped,

“I’m right here, you know!”

His words and exasperated tone worked instantly; they all looked guilty, and lowered their eyes. Tino huffed out a breath and squared his shoulders, lifting his chin.

“You’ve told me the risks and the other option. At this point I’m the only one who can decide. And I have; let me be a vessel. I want to help solve this case. Not to mention end this pointless bickering.”

None of them rushed to talk him out of it, they knew better at this point, even Berwald. Though the man looked uncertain for him. Emil rubbed the back of his neck and said sheepishly,
“Sorry for all that, Tino. We probably sounded like a mess, huh?”

“A bit.” The merman answered, unimpressed with the apology. Emil turned his head and stared expectantly at Mathias. The man looked innocently back at him for a second before rocking his head in a shaky nod.

“OK, Sorry.”

Lukas gave them both an approving nod, then stood up and went to face the merman, place hands on his shoulders, and look him straight in the eyes. Tino gave a little chirrup at his touch, feeling the compassion, worry, and sense of responsibility weighing Lukas down.

“Are you absolutely sure?” Lukas asked, eveniy. “You do know we’re not forcing you to do this, right?”

Tino met his eyes, staring into their dark, stormy blue depths, and answered.

“This is something I want to do.”

Lukas let out a slow breath, then clapped at Tino’s shoulders. The merman was relieved to feel much of the man’s burden lift with the decision.

“That’s that, then.” He declared lightly. “We’ll go back to the site tonight, and try to use Tino as a vessel to try and communicate with the spirits. If communications go south, I’ll perform a cleansing.”

Mathias whooped, and pumped his fist in the air.

“Yeah, boy! That’s what I’m talking about! This is going to be amazing!”

“I’ll ask you not to sensationalize anything yet.” Lukas said dryly. “Though I can admit, I’m curious to see how this plays out as well.”

The merman gave a smile and licked his lips a bit nervously.

“Is there anything in particular that I need to do?” He asked. Lukas shook his head and took a seat next to Tino on the bed.

“Once we’re on site after sundown, and start calling out to them, the spirits or spirit will flock right to you like a magnet. They won’t have to cut up beams or push over bulldozers if they have a mouthpiece.”

“Oh.” Tino answered simply. “Um…so, I just…stand there?”

“Yes, basically; I’ll be right beside you, calling for the spirits to speak, and once they’re possessing you, if I think there’s anything wrong, I’ll cast them right out. Understand?”

“I think so, but will I have any way of talking to you? If the spirit is the one controlling my mouth?”

“You should be able to push it aside enough to speak on your own if you really need to, but like I said, they’re unable to do anything to you beyond giving you an adrenaline rush. But one word from you and I’ll know you need help, ok?”

“OK.” The merman took a deep breath and let it out, looking optimistic.
Berwald, on the other hand, looked less than thrilled, but after what Tino had said, he didn’t look ready to counter the decision.

“Plan of action: set!” Mathias said in a dramatic voice. “Now, let’s go get us some lunch.”

Tino’s foreshadowed caffeine crash came right after they’d eaten lunch at a little restaurant up the road. The current of energy had been slowing down gradually, until his belly was full and then he suddenly couldn’t keep his eyes open for the weariness that came over him. Thankfully it was still early enough in the afternoon that a recovery nap was in order, and they drove him back to the hotel and put him to bed. Lukas quietly murmured for him to rest up for the big night ahead before Tino blacked out.

By the time Tino woke up again, the light was very low and he was by himself in the room. The suite door was cracked open, and he heard the low sound of the tv from beyond it. With a little groan at how heavy and sluggish he felt, Tino sat upright, stretched, and rubbed at his eyes. His mouth felt tacky, and he snagged the half-empty water bottle someone had left on the nightstand to drink. He didn’t know whose is was, but it didn’t matter to him right now. After wetting his mouth and staggering to his feet, he doused his face from the sink. Feeling more refreshed but still weak with sleep, Tino opened the door to the other room.

Even in his fuzzy, half-awake state, Tino had to appreciate the scene before him.

Emil was curled up around his laptop on the bed, but his head was tipped to the side, propped on his outstretched arm. He was asleep, and a spare hotel blanket had been draped over him. Beside him, Berwald sat in the chair by the little round table, reading on his tablet again, one of his legs crossed comfortably over the other. On the other bed, Mathias sat up against the pillows lining the headboard, looking relaxed and happy as he played a game on his phone. Lukas was lying against him, stretched out on his side with his head in Mathias’ lap and his arm hugging the man’s waist. His eyes were closed and his face looked peaceful and content. They were both under the covers, and Mathias’ free hand stroked idly through Lukas’ hair.

The tv was on, but no one was watching it.

Tino smiled, and unsurprisingly Berwald was the one to notice him first. He glanced up at the merman, his eyes sparking for a second, then he lifted a finger to his lips, gesturing to Emil and Lukas. Tino walked softly over to the man, sitting down in the other chair at the table. Mathias gave him a brief wave, but said nothing, going right back to his phone.

“You all didn’t have to hole up in one room just for me.” Tino whispered, though he barely needed to since the tv was going.

“We wanted to give you every chance for deep sleep.” Berwald explained, turning off his tablet screen. “It was a good idea, anyway; Lukas hasn’t been getting a lot of sleep lately with all his research, and your decision took a lot of pressure off him.”

Tino looked confused for a second before his mind began to line things up, remembering how Lukas had felt earlier that day.

“You mean, because I said I’d be your vessel, he didn’t have to waste his time theorizing
anymore?"

Berwald nodded.

"Exactly, he’s been over there in Mathias’ lap for nearly three hours now. But he didn’t fall asleep until an hour ago."

"Oh good." Tino said happily. "That makes me feel better. But…um…the sun is setting, right? Don’t we have to start getting ready?"

"Good point," Admitted Berwald, "I do think it’s time to mobilize. Everyone should be rested by now."

The big man rose from his chair and stretched, and Tino couldn’t help glancing down at the strip of bare stomach that Berwald unintentionally exposed while doing so. He looked away quickly, and got up as well, deciding to wake Emil and leave Lukas to Mathias or Berwald. The merman sat down gently on the bed next to the sleeping teen, and as he reached out to shake his shoulder, Mathias whispered,

"Whack ‘im on the head, c’mon! It’ll be funny!"

Tino frowned indignantly at the other man, who was still taking measures not to disturb his lover, but obviously didn’t care how Emil was woken. Instead of taking Mathias’ advice, Tino chose to rub at Emil’s shoulder and talk to him in a low voice.

"Emil, hey, wake up. It’s time to start getting ready."

The silver-blond gave a little start, and his breathing stuttered as he came back to wakefulness. His eyes opened, and he let out a yawn before rolling over and staring up at Tino.

"Hello there, sleepyhead." Tino teased, pinching at Emil’s sleep-flushed cheek. The teen made a garbled, unhappy sound, and swatted at Tino’s hand.

"Speak for yourself." He mumbled a second later, blinking and forcing himself to sit up.

His brother was stirring as well, Berwald having patted his back a few times to wake him. Mathias was consoling him, kissing his head and petting him even while he sat up.

"I’m so sorry, I wanted to let you sleep forever, babe. You looked like an angel!"

Lukas, a little bleary-eyed, actually let Mathias kiss him on the face and mouth a few times before waking up enough to push him away.

"Get off me, idiot, we have work to do." He slurred, yawning and arching his back.

Now that the brothers were awake, they all began readying themselves to leave. Coats were donned, as were hats, gloves, and scarves. Shoulder bags were filled and gathered, and the mood grew increasingly serious and tense as they prepared to face the unknown. When Lukas checked his phone, he saw an unread message, responded to it, and then made the announcement that Oscar would be joining them on the site. That spurred them all to action, piling into the SUV and heading into the almost-black night.

Tino felt excitement and fear mingle within him as Lukas explained how they would proceed.

"When we’re within sight of the lot, Berwald, you’ll weave a shield around Tino. We don’t want
that entity even being able to sense Tino again until we’re out of the car and have space to work. Once Oscar’s arrived and we explain to him what we’re doing, we’ll move to a central spot on the site, and Berwald will drop the shield.”

“Then the entity will come right into me?” Tino asked, sounding as confident as he could manage.

“Almost; I’m assuming it would come to you regardless, considering it did earlier today, but I’d like to make it clear that’s what we want. It’s very important to establish who’s in control in situations like this. I’ll perform a summoning chant after Berwald lets his shield down, and then I doubt it will take much longer for the spirit to show up.”

The merman fidgeted and chirped quietly. His markings glowed brightly in the darkness of the car, and showed his determined, but slightly nervous face.

“I’ll be right there with you the entire time.” Lukas reassured him. “I’ll even hold your hand if you’d like.”

“Really?” Tino asked, hopefully. “That would make me feel a lot better.”

“No trouble at all; as soon as it’s time for Berwald to lower his shield, I’ll grab your hand and hold it until everything goes down.”

Tino smiled widely.

“Thanks so much, Lukas. I’d really like that.”

In the following silence, Berwald cleared his throat quietly and leaned close to tell Tino,

“I know it’s frightening, but none of us will let anything happen to you. We know what we’re doing, even if we don’t know exactly what we’re up against. This isn’t the first time we’ve gone in blind, and we’ll protect you.”

As was typical of the merman sometimes, he didn’t say anything in response, but chose to hold onto Berwald and hide his face in the broad man’s shoulder. Berwald stroked his blond hair gently, leaving his big hand over Tino’s head. They stayed that way only a handful of minutes, before Lukas spoke.

“Berwald, now’s a good time; we’re within sight.”

Nodding, Berwald swept his hands about within his limited space, and Tino saw a shimmering, glass-like aura materialize and surround him, tracing the shape of his body. The merman shifting about and watched as the shield followed him with every movement.

“That’s amazing.” Tino said, smiling at Berwald. The man nodded, keeping his concentration to hold the shield up.

“We’ll have to be careful with this.” Lukas said, the gravel of the lot crunching beneath their tires as he pulled in. “Oscar is here as another mortal witness, and we have to be sure that he stays close enough to see what’s going on to the best of his ability, but far enough away to where he’ll be out of danger in case we have to do anything drastic. Though I doubt anything will happen to endanger him.”

The man in question pulled in not even a half-minute later, and they hustled to get out of the SUV and accompany him. The light on the camera served as a good flashlight, though Emil still used his phone’s to see, as did Oscar when he saw the teen doing it.
“Hello, everyone.” Oscar said when they approached, as cheerfully as he could manage. It was pitch black, cold, and desolate, yet he still tried to keep a smile on his face. Though his eyes tracked at once to Tino, whose facial markings were lighting up a small radius around his head like little glow-sticks in the dark. The rest of them were covered under layers of warm clothing and gloves.

“Oh my, those are incredible, aren’t they?” He noted, trying not to stare too hard or make Tino too uncomfortable. The merman just grinned and nodded, running a hand subconsciously over his face.

Lukas greeted him and gave him a quick run-down on what they were doing, advising him to stay close but not too close. The man didn’t try to hide his nervousness, but his excitement put them all at ease; at least Elias wasn’t here to scoff at every word they said.

“I tried to invite him,” Oscar explained, trying not to stare as Lukas deliberately took hold of Tino’s hand and began leading him, surrounded by Berwald’s shield, into the open space of the site, “but he refused. Just said that if I wanted to be superstitious that was fine, but to leave him out of it this time. I’m only to report to him when the site is safe to work on again. Ironic, considering he claims not to believe in what you boys do.”

“Hopefully he’ll just take your report and go with it once we’re done.” Emil said, falling into step beside the man. “Nice scarf, by the way.”

Oscar reached up to stroke the bulky pink and purple scarf he wore. A glint of pride came into his eyes as he answered,

“My daughter just learned how to crochet. She’s pretty good for a nine-year-old, even if she does only use girly colors. It’s the warmest scarf in the house.”

Tino made a small ‘awww’ing sound upon overhearing that, straining to look over his shoulder at the vibrant scarf around Oscar’s neck.

Berwald stayed close on Tino and Lukas’ heels, one hand held out to keep the shield up. Between that, Lukas leading Tino by the hand, and Mathias tramping around to try and film as much as he could, they made an odd little group, trailing Emil and Oscar farther behind. They’d walked past the broken beam from earlier that day, and a few dozen yards beyond when Lukas halted, and everyone else in response.

“This is a good spot.” He explained. “Far enough from any objects that might be hurled toward us that Berwald has plenty of reaction time.”

“Wait,” Oscar said, uncertainly, “you’re saying that thing might throw something at us, like earlier today?”

“More likely since it’s after sundown.” Emil pointed out, and it was impossible to ignore the slight wickedness in his tone. He’d been with his brother and the other two men on many a dangerous trip like this, enough to sound casual about certain worries to those who hadn’t.

“Oh,” Oscar said, looking around into the blackness around them, “well, at least we’re away from the beams and machines…”

“That’s the idea.” Said Lukas, and he turned to face Tino. “OK, I’m going to start the summoning chant. The longer we wait the more likely the spirit will grow impatient with us and try to get our attention another way. Everyone, brace yourselves.”

A tangible tension seemed to spring up into the air, and they all stood a bit more stiffly.
“Berwald, release the shield now.”

The big man didn’t hesitate, obeying Lukas at once. The shimmering energy around Tino vanished like steam, and immediately, Lukas began a low chant in Latin. It started slow, but as he continued it grew louder, and even to the untrained ear the repetition of the few phrases became obvious. After a moment or two, Lukas’ voice rose to a louder pitch, though not quite yelling. Tino clung tighter to Lukas’ hand as the authority in his voice sent a tingle down his spine. It was so ritualistic and firm, the demanding nature of his tone somewhat unnerving.

Then, Tino felt it coming.

Lukas had barely finished the last word of his command, before Tino snapped upright, body going taught as wire, his head tilting up toward the night sky.

It was an eerily beautiful spectacle in the dark; Tino’s eyes flew back into his sockets, until only the whites were visible. His glowing facial markings shifted color abruptly from blue and white to a flaming, pulsing red. His arms were spread slightly at his sides, stiff and locked into place.

“Leave this place.” Tino’s mouth moved, and a gravely, deep voice escaped it. “This is our land, none may build upon it.”

Remaining calm, Lukas kept hold of Tino’s hand, and stared right into the whites of his eyes.

“Oh god…” Oscar breathed, taking a step forward. Emil politely put a hand on his arm.

“What do you see, Lukas?” Mathias prompted, taking a glance around the viewfinder of his camera.

“It’s the same spirit as before.” Lukas muttered back.

From his perspective, he saw the faint, ghostly form of the Viking, in full gear, superimposed over Tino’s rigid body. His eyes were flaming over Tino’s wide, unseeing ones.

“It has been generations since this land was yours.” Lukas told the specter. “Your time is passed; others have a claim here now.”

Mathias carefully circled the two men, staying as silent as possible and filming Tino’s red-glowing markings from as many angles as he could as the conversation played out.

“We claimed this land as ours!” The Viking snarled through Tino’s mouth, his lips curling back until his fanged teeth could be seen. “Forever ours! A legacy written in bloodshed and struggle!”

“And what better way to ensure your legacy is remembered than by letting these men do their work?” Lukas countered.

“The barren waste of this land is all the legacy we need.” The Viking shot back, and Tino’s shoulders twitched as though he wanted to lift his hand. His body settled into stillness immediately after.

Keeping a close watch on Tino’s limbs and face, Lukas tried again,

“Do you even know what they are trying to accomplish here in memory of your people? They wish to build a center where travelers can stop and learn about this location. Your customs, your culture, from which many of us here are descended. By opposing these efforts, you are doing more to ensure you will be forgotten rather than anything else.”
There was a low growling sound of contemplation from the Viking, then a pause. Tino’s eye-whites rolled from side to side, as though looking as far about him as he could without moving his head. To Lukas and Emil’s eyes, the Viking himself was watching Mathias, and glancing at Oscar, who stood petrified a few yards back.

“You are our descendants?” The deep voice asked, sounding only mildly less affronted. “How can you trace yourselves back to such mighty warriors as we? You all look weak enough to kill with one finger.”

“Life has become easier,” Lukas said, “all settlers wish for a better life for their children and grandchildren, do they not? Here we are, generations later, with a life so much better that we do not have to scratch a living off the rocks anymore. We have the time to challenge our minds, learn, and explore the past for insight. That is what we’re trying to accomplish here, by keeping your history alive and in the public mind. Does that not please you to hear?”

Tino’s body gave a shudder, and a small breath escaped him. Berwald took a step forward, but Lukas shook his head at the man. Tino wasn’t calling for help.

“What is the merit of a life without discipline and strategy?” The Viking sneered. “Existing purely to exist and live in leisure is worse than being dead.”

“And being forgotten?” Demanded Lukas, his voice ever calm and confident. “Is that better or worse than leaving the living world when even your memory vanishes from it?”

For a moment, there was no reply. Tino’s limbs began to shake, his markings thrumming a million shades of angry red like a deep-sea monster. To Lukas and Emil’s eyes, it appeared as though steam was beginning to rise from him, and it prompted Lukas to go on,

“What is it you are trying to achieve by sabotaging these mortal builders? This land is only as sacred as the memory it leaves to the mass populous. As is, it is virtually meaningless without knowledge and education of its past.”

A harsh bark of laughter left Tino’s mouth, his lips curling into an unsettling smile. They all jumped a bit at the sudden outburst of sound, Mathias fighting to hold the camera still and deciding to circle around the two men to mask the shaking of his hands. Through the lens, Lukas was illuminated by the red glow from Tino’s markings, as well as the light cast by the camera, and it was chilling against the black backdrop of the night. Tino gave another huff of derisive laughter.

“I have guarded this land with my afterlife, it is the reason for my current existence! I care not about spreading history, only preserving the land; it is Conqueror’s Right! It is my purpose!”

Lukas’ brows pulled together briefly, confusion showing through the mask of surety he wore. He looked sideways toward Emil, who gave him a shrug, shaking his head.

“What’s he talking about? The villagers here weren’t warriors…”

The even look on Lukas’ face hardened as a suspicion crept over him. His eyes narrowed, and he observed what he could of the faint figure occupying the same space as Tino’s body, taking in the clothes, the armor, every clue and feature that he could. Then he set his features into a hard line. Lukas took a small breath and asked, evenly, with the cadence of three questions indicating a ritual demand for knowledge,

“Who are you to this land, how came you to be here, what is your purpose?”

At the questions, as though at the last word he had been touched by a live wire, Tino’s body gave a
little spasm, his sclera shifting rapidly from white to black as his natural form took him over in wake of the entities’ anger. The voice that rolled out of him this time was louder and more intimidating,

“I am one of the conquerors! We won this land in battle, slaughtered its people, pillaged their goods, and razed their houses to the earth! Nothing was left behind but their corpses, rotting where they fell. Even those strong enough to oppose us were done away with, only select women kept alive to continue our powerful bloodline! Through our might we lay waste and claim to this place, and in my death, I protect it!”

Lukas took a sharp breath, and looked like he wanted to step back, but his promise to keep hold of Tino’s hand kept him rooted on the spot. He compensated for the seconds’ hesitation by frowning and stating, in a grim tone,

“You are part of the barbarian hoard, who terrorized this area.”

Another sneering laugh, Tino’s fangs showing sharp and vicious.

“Mortal, who speaks of knowledge and legacy, did you think I was one of those pitiful villagers? Did your study not inform you enough to make the distinction between the victors and the defeated?”

Mathias dared to step closer, filming from just beyond and above Lukas’ shoulder, capturing the gaping smile on Tino’s face, and the violent shudders of his limbs as his lights strobed. Berwald moved with him, ever ready to protect them should he need to. There was a small cracking sound as he made fists with his hands.


“You wear their garb.” Lukas accused the specter. “You tried wiping out their culture while also appropriating it. Distinction is difficult when you reflect the very aesthetic of those who wish to stand apart from.”

“We wear the trophies of war!” The Barbarian barked, and spittle flew from Tino’s mouth. “It is the right of the powerful to take what they wish, be it goods, land, women, armor, or weaponry. If it were within my current power, I’d take this vessel you so willingly offered up to me, and crush his heart! Spill his blood at your feet!”

Berwald bolted forward, hands moving, the air shimmering around him as he began to weave a shield.

“Stop, Berwald!” Lukas cried, the first trace of panic in his voice. “Don’t touch him!”

Emil had rushed to Berwald’s side, and was holding him by the arm, trying to haul him back. He’d come within a few feet of Tino’s rigid, possessed body.

“Nothing’s going to happen to him!” Emil insisted, struggling as the big man tried to break his arm free and continue his shield. “That ghost can’t do anything but get us all riled up with empty threats!”

Tino let out a grating laugh, his markings suddenly glowing steady blood-red rather than pulsing through various shades. The voice was almost cocky when it spoke next.

“I may not be able to break this fragile vessel of flesh and blood, but I can break every mortal effort to build upon our land. No plank of wood, no instrument of building, nothing shall be erected upon
They heard a choking sound from Oscar behind them, but none of them spared the time to look at him as they watched Tino’s body begin to jerk and shake more harshly. Lukas’s face grew angry now, and he spoke in a frighteningly quiet, threatening tone,

“If you will not desist, then I will have no choice but to exorcise you from this realm and send you to the next.”

Tino’s black eyes narrowed and his face twisted into condescension, as it dripped from his words.

“I have passed through the death rites of a sacrificial guardian; I cannot be so easily dispelled.”

A small smile quirked Lukas’ lips, a spark of challenge in his stormy blue eyes. He shook his head gently, with a small chuckle. A beat of silence passed while Lukas drew in his breath before speaking quietly,

“I’m sorry, Tino, I have to let go. But trust me, everything will be alright.”

With this promise, Lukas released Tino’s hand, and quickly backstepped to plant his feet in a wide-legged stance.

“Berwald, encase him!”

As though he’d been holding back for an eternity, the big man flicked his hands through the air, sharp and precise. Emil and Mathias backed away from him at once, as he used the full length of his arms for several of the motions. Tino’s face contorted into an ugly frown, and his markings began nervously pulsing and striping with different shades of red once more. A split second later, the possessed merman’s body was surrounded by a dome of what looked like shimmering air to Lukas and Emil, though nothing showed up on the camera. However, the Barbarian reacted at once, laughing through Tino one more time before the sound cut off, and the red light left Tino’s markings. His eyes snapped back to normal, and he gave a small whimper, staggering where he stood.

All of this happened within the same two or three seconds, and an even shorter amount of time passed during what happened next; Lukas saw the Barbarian’s aura fly out of Tino and smash against Berwald’s shield like water in a glass. It bounced from one side to the other, almost comically, before rushing right back into Tino’s body before the merman had a chance to recover.

“Insolence!” Tino shrieked, his markings flaming and his fangs bared. “Release me! You cannot dispel me! I’ve paid for this rite with my death!”

Lukas answered by lifting his hands, linking his fingers together in an intricate shape, and immediately beginning to chant. Latin started flowing off his tongue as though speaking it was as easy as breathing, his voice commanding of the words and shaping them into a tangible power. His spell leant his voice an unearthly quality, echoing, booming through every syllable. Meanwhile Berwald stood by his side, arms steady, fists facing down as though holding a jar over a bug.

Mathias took up a prime filming position a few yards away, capturing it all. Oscar breathed a frightened curse, and Emil joined him at the sound.

“Don’t worry, they’ve got him now.” He reassured, with the air of a sports fan watching his favorite team corning their competition.
“This is unbelievable…” Oscar squeaked out, his hand going over his mouth and staying there as he watched.

It was a tense and beautiful scene; Lukas and Berwald working in tandem, as the Barbarian began wailing, cursing, and demanding to be released. All they could do was watch as Lukas’ spell took shape over a long count of seconds, and with a final chant, Lukas thrust his hands out, palms forward as though pushing a heavy door.

With a final shriek, the Barbarian’s aura vanished like so much mist, leaving Tino to jolt and rock on his feet.

Berwald dropped his shield at once and lurched forward to catch the stumbling merman. The slender body was limp in his arms, his breathing fast and desperate. The big man knelt down on the ground to more easily prop the merman up against his own broad chest, supporting his head.

“Lukas,” Berwald breathed, “his lights…”

Tino’s body had dimmed, the glowing markings having blinked out as the Barbarian left him.

“Oh god, his lights…” Emil echoed, darting up with Oscar trailing quickly behind him. Mathias closed in too, his camera work suffering for a moment as he too realized the seriousness of the situation. Lukas dropped to his knees, pressing two fingers to Tino’s neck. A tense half-second went by.

“His heart’s racing, no surprise.” Lukas said, his voice attempting to be calm, but it was shaky around the edges. “Tino, can you hear me?”

He lightly slapped the merman’s cheeks, and thankfully he reacted, flinching and drawing his brows down against the slight pain.

“Open your eyes, come on…”

Tino’s eyes remained closed.

“What happened to him?” Oscar asked, sounding panicked. “Should we call an ambulance?”

“He can’t have been physically hurt.” Lukas said, as though trying to assure himself as well as everyone else. “It was a hostile ghost, nothing that had the power to do anything more than speak through him. He probably just passed out from the stress.”

They waited, watching for agonizingly long moments. Eventually, Tino’s breathing calmed and his eyelids fluttered. Slowly, like the sun creeping over a hill, his markings began to glow faintly, growing gradually brighter and brighter.

“Oh, thank god…” Lukas breathed.

“Is…that a good sign?” Oscar asked, earnestly.

“The best we could hope for.” Emil answered, relief in his voice.

Tino’s eyes blinked open slowly, violet-blue eyes bright in the camera’s light. They squinted at it for a second, before adjusting and scanning the faces huddled over him for a while. Then the merman let out a little chuckle, and weakly lifted a hand, closing it into a triumphant fist.

“Case…closed…”
Tino’s voice came out tired, but filled with satisfaction.

A small eruption of chuckles, breaths of excitement, and a chorus of words left them all at once. Berwald hugged Tino as close as he dared, burying his face into his hair. Lukas started rubbing at Tino’s hands and arms, while Emil and Mathias started chattering away, congratulating themselves on the end of the case. Oscar was swept up in the jubilee as well, slapping each of them on the back and thanking them over and over.

Eventually, Tino sat up on his own, despite Berwald’s efforts to keep him supported.

“Are you feeling alright?” Lukas asked, fussing around his face and head. Tino nodded, rolling his head on his shoulders and flexing his fingers and toes.

“My muscles are just tired and sore, but I’m fine. Just a little shaken.”

“Can you walk?” Emil asked, Mathias jostling him for filming position just over the merman.

“I think so…”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to carry you to the car?” Berwald asked, keeping his arm around him.

Tino shook out his arms carefully, as if brushing off nerves.

“I’ll be fine, but maybe help me stand up.” Berwald stood and then carefully hauled the merman to his feet. He wavered a little, but then grounded his feet and wearily waved away the little crowd around him.

“Give him space if he wants it.” Lukas said, and they did, though Berwald stayed at his elbow just in case.

“I’m freezing.” Tino admitted, quietly. “And…hungry. Do we have to stay here any longer?”

“No,” Answered Lukas, “our job here is done.”

Stormy blue eyes turned to Oscar, who couldn’t seem to stop smiling like any of them.

“And a job well done it was!” Oscar agreed, holding out his hand to Lukas. The man took it, and shook. “It’s an admirable calling you all have, I’m so honored I was able to see you in action. You’ll be getting your paycheck as soon as I can get to my phone.”

“We appreciate prompt payment.” Lukas said. “Thank you. And if you’d like, feel free to keep tabs on our channel and website; we’ll be posting this story soon. Would you like me to blur out your face along with Elias?’?”

“I’d love to say no,” Oscar admitted sheepishly, “but I can’t. I don’t mind the case being linked up to the visitor’s center, it might bring in more customers, but I’d rather not let people know exactly who I am, let alone Elias and the construction company.”

“Fair enough.”

“Say,” Oscar said a little softly, “will your merman, uh, Tino be alright?”

“A good meal and full night’s sleep,” answered Lukas, winking at the man, “and yes, he’ll be just fine.”
With that, they bid farewell to their satisfied client, then packed into the SUV to warm up. Once they were seated, Berwald immediately bundled Tino into the car-quilt, making the merman giggle.

“Berwald, I’m alright!” He insisted, as Berwald tugged the quilt around him and then topped it off by pulling the seatbelt over him. “I’m cold, but I’ll overheat with this many layers…”

“Let him mother you, Tino.” Mathias teased. “It’ll make him feel better if not you.”

Tino rolled his eyes and made an irritated face, sitting there, wrapped up like a mummy and strapped into his seat. But then Berwald brushed the hair back from his face gently, observing him as though trying to find injuries, and that softened his features into a forgiving smile.

“So, Tino,” Mathias asked a few seconds later, having never taken the camera off his face, “what was it like, being a vessel?”

The merman looked thoughtful for a moment, and Lukas started the car.

“It was very odd,” He answered, once they started moving, “I could still see and hear and feel everything like normal, but it was like my control over my own body was pushed back. I couldn’t have moved if I’d tried, I was locked into place. Honestly…having the entity inside my head reminded me of how I communicate with my people; I sensed its presence and all it’s feelings. But I also knew that I could force it out if I really wanted to. I can’t describe it any better than that.”

“Wicked sweet!” Mathias declared, while Tino tried to worm his arms free of the blanket trap.

“Berwald, I need to move my arms…?” The merman complained, and the big man complied, helping him peel the blanket back. With his arms loose now, Tino adjusted the rest of the bulky blanket around his lap.

“Are you feeling emotionally scarred at all from this experience?” Mathias asked, to which Tino looked thoughtful.

“I can’t say it was the most pleasant of feelings.” The merman answered, shuddering with the memory. “That spirit was twisted up, all rage and bloodlust and greed. There was no fear or guilt in him at all. What did you call him, Lukas? A bar…barb…?”

“Barbarian.” Lukas provided softly. “Indeed, I wouldn’t expect his heart to reflect anything but evilness to you, Tino. Their ilk was brutal in those times.”

Tino frowned.

“I do feel…sad…he was just so far gone, and I’ve never felt the way he felt in my entire life.”

“I should hope not.” Intoned Lukas. “That kind of mindset was close to madness. Do you remember what he said about paying for his protective rites with his death? That was in reference to those particular barbarians’ customs; if one of their warriors was gravely injured in a victorious battle, they would offer him the right to pass through rituals that would (hypothetically) bind his soul to that spot for eternity, to defend it against any who dared trample on what they perceived to be their property.”

“So…those rituals…worked?” Emil asked, confusion in his voice.

“Not in such clear-cut terms.” His brother answered. “His soul moved on when he died, but his belief and conviction left a powerful ghost behind. It would be very unlikely that such a situation
wouldn’t produce a ghost, considering that the warrior would be killed by the hand of his own leader to seal the rite.”

“What?!” Emil and Tino blurted at the same time, their disgust so great that they didn’t even chuckle at their tandem question.

“Yes, their custom was to end the life of the wounded warrior after their rituals were performed; the thought was that this sacrifice affixed his soul to the land. Their method was flawed, as their rituals were nonsense, but it was the belief in their effect that created the lingering spirit.”

“Sick, man…” Mathias muttered. “No wonder he was so pissed off at us, after giving his life to try and ‘protect’ the land.”

“How horrible.” Tino said, looking so crestfallen that tears glimmered in his eyes by the glow of his markings. “I did sense a great loss from him, but I didn’t know the source…”

In the collective silence that followed, Berwald put an arm around Tino, and rubbed at his shoulder. The merman in turn, wiped at his eyes and sniffled, swallowing, trying to keep his feelings from gushing out like usual.

“You going to be alright, Tino?” Emil finally asked, patting his knee. Tino reached for his hand and grasped it, holding on with shaking, gloved fingers. He didn’t say anything, but he nodded.

“Just give him some time.” Lukas suggested. “Like I said, a good meal will help, as well as some rest. We can all relax now that this one’s over.”

“Yea, you did fantastic, Tino!” Mathias said, trying to lift the mood. “We couldn’t have closed this case without you! Even if we’d purged the area and gotten paid, how would we have the full story like that? It’s all thanks to you, fish boy!”

“I have to agree.” Said Lukas, his tone taking on a much lighter air. “I wish the backstory wasn’t so tragic, but I’m thrilled to have answers after all the hard work we’ve been going through to find them. We owe you a great deal of thanks, Tino.”

The merman gave an unintended chirrup of happiness, and a small smile broke through his sad expression. Berwald gave his shoulder a little squeeze.

“You were a trooper.” He said proudly, making Tino fairly glow.

“Ja, you looked like some kind of ancient seer or something the way your eyes and markings changed!” Emil chimed in. “So spooky but so cool!”

“Thanks, everybody.” Tino said shyly. “I’m glad that I could make a difference, and you all kept me safe like you said you would.”

“Safe and sound, always.” Mathias promised. “Now, I think that’s a wrap!”

He turned the camera off, and lowered it to its case between his seat and Lukas’. He sighed and rubbed at his shoulder when he did. A low popping sound was heard.

“Good grief.” Sighed Lukas. “You got all excited and held yourself stiff again, didn’t you?”

Mathias gave a leering grin.

“Oh, baby, you know I did.”
Lukas made a quiet, exasperated sound, and rephrased.

“You held the camera too tightly and made your arm sore again. I know it’s hard to relax in that kind of situation, but you have to give some effort to if you don’t want your muscles cramping up.”

“Ja, at least you had control over that.” Tino piped in. “I’m all sore too, but there was nothing I could do about it.”

“There is something you can do to help in the aftermath.” Lukas told him. “But we’ll talk about that later; for now, let’s go to that higher-end place up the highway for dinner. By now we should’ve received our payout from Oscar.”

“Oh yes,” Tino nearly moaned, “fooood…it feels like I haven’t eaten in years!”

“You’ve just put your body through a very stressful experience,” reminded Emil, “we’d better fortify it with some grub.”

And so they did, filming their mini-celebration-dinner to top off the footage for their viewers, Tino devouring all that was placed before him, and glowing happily in the comfort of the restaurant. Though he was dealing with the reality of how tightly his muscles had been locked up during the possession, and more and more his face gave away how some movements were painful.

Once they got back to the hotel, immediately changing into comfortable night clothes, Lukas sat Tino down in the middle of his bed and knelt behind him, placing hands on his shoulders. He then proceeded to introduce Tino to the concept of a massage. The merman was intensely grateful, and enjoyed the process to the point where Mathias poked fun at him for moaning so much, while Emil blushed and lightly suggested that Tino try and keep it down just to avoid snide comments online once they posted the footage. By the time Lukas had worked his way down Tino’s back, arms, and hands, the merman was having trouble keeping his eyes open.

“I’d work on your legs and feet too,” Lukas admitted, “but I think you’re about to fall asleep on me, so why don’t we call it a night?”

Tino nodded with a yawn, and they tucked him away, Berwald being sure to shoo them all out of the room before slipping in beside him. Mathias protested like he always did, declaring he needed to get another shot of the two of them in the same bed, but Lukas helped contain his whining by closing the suite door after him.

The dark room was so much quieter now, though Emil was still sitting up in bed, scrolling through nonsense on his laptop to lull him to sleep. He wore his earbuds, and was doing his best to ignore the two in the other bed, leaving them a measure of privacy. After sharing a room with his brother and Mathias so many times, he was very skilled at doing so.

Berwald held Tino’s smaller body close to him, and unlike all the other times he’d done it, this time he gently began patting him, as though wanting to be sure he was alright. His large hands traveled the length of Tino’s back, over his shoulders, and the base of his neck and head, searching.

“Ber…” Tino muttered sleepily. “I’m not hurt anywhere…I told you…stop worrying.”

“Can’t help it.” Berwald admitted softly. “Looked like you were hurting when you were all stiff like that.”

“It did, but not unbearably.” Tino clarified, nuzzling in closer to Berwald’s chest. “I don’t want to think about it anymore. I need to sleep.”
“Sorry, alskling…”

“’s ok…” Tino breathed, too far gone to acknowledge the endearment Berwald had just let slip.

The big man himself drew in a sharp breath, not having meant to call Tino that. The word had come so naturally to his lips that he hadn’t considered it’s implication. Tino was so warm and fragile and darling lying there so trusting in his arms that he couldn’t have thought of a more fitting way to address him…it was how he felt in his heart. As an afterthought, Berwald glanced up at Emil, and found the teen’s illuminated eyes looking right at him.

There was a disconcertingly Mathias-like, cheeky smile on his face. He must’ve muted his audio without taking out his earbuds, or his video or song must’ve ended. Either way, he’d heard what Berwald had said.

Berwald was sure that in the glowing light of Tino’s markings, or the faint light cast from Emil’s laptop, his blush still had to be obvious. But Emil said nothing, simply raised one teasing eyebrow, before slowly moving his gaze back to his screen. It took several long minutes for his smile to fade as he became distracted again. Berwald sighed gently, closing his eyes and breathing in Tino’s scent.

He wondered how long this could go on for, and more sadly, what they’d do when it was Tino’s time to leave them. That seemed like such a far-off point in time, and yet the truth was that something was developing between them.

Sooner or later…they would have to make some decisions.

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BONUS SCENE:

***I was originally going to have them go swimming once they reached the hotel, but the timing never worked out, then I thought of having them go swimming after finished the case, but the tone didn't work. But I enjoyed this little scene between Mathias and Lukas too much to just keep it to myself. It's a little more crass than what they've exhibited before, so hopefully you don't mind. Anyway, here it is! Lukas and Mathias are left in the pool room by themselves when the others take Tino back up to the room:

))((

“Well, well, we’re alone in the pool.” Mathias crooned to Lukas, waggling his eyebrows and slipping closer. Lukas glanced to one side, and cocked his head.

“Just us and the echo of a rat that drowned in here yesterday.”

Mathias looked instantly freaked, and whirled around to look behind him, even though he wouldn’t have been able to see it anyway. When he turned back, Lukas was right up against him, smiling, and surprised him with a searching kiss. Mathias’ frightened demeanor melted at once, and he slid his arms around his lover,

“That was mean,” He whined, “pulling that old trick on me!”

“You’re the one who keeps falling for it, even though you don’t have second sight, idiot.”
Lukas’ slender legs lifted to wrap around Mathias’ waist, his arms holding loosely around his broad shoulders.

“Keep me up.” Lukas muttered against his lips, keeping the kiss going as the other man complied, his long legs stretching to stand upright on the pool floor, his back leaning up against the pool edge. Mathias hummed a second later,

“Hmm…Sure, I’ll keep us both ‘up’, baby-doll.”

Lukas didn’t even retort the stupid joke, as they kissed long and hard and like they hadn’t since they’d taken the case. Mathias let out a little pleased sound as Lukas rubbed wet hands over his pecs.

“Damn…I wish we weren’t in a suite room with the others…”

“Emil is in with Berwald and Tino this time,” Lukas reminded him, “since they started sharing a bed.”

“That might help us tonight,” Mathias moaned, “but it doesn’t right now, does it? The connecting door is wide open.”

Lukas ran his slender fingers through Mathias’ wet hair and leaned their foreheads together. With a light moan, the smaller man pressed his hips forward in firm, undulating motions, causing them both to gasp.

“Forget the room. You can blow me in the shower stall.”

Mathias reacted, shuddering and whimpering, as though his lover’s words were physically rolling over him like his body was.

“Oh, honey-baby…the case is closed and you’re finally horny again…”

Lukas smashed their lips together, silencing any more observations, and taking advantage of their solitude in the pool room. It was midday, a time when most hotels were lacking in activity. They’d take advantage of this fact once they tore apart long enough to make it to the walled-off shower stalls.

For now, they stayed where they were, locked together. And making waves.

;)

Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

This chapter is a little shorter, but I wanted it to leave an impact. Hopefully you all enjoy!

The sea grew darker as the sun began sinking far above the surface and out of sight. Temperatures began to steadily lower. The various underwater creatures were either beginning to hide, or to go out on the hunt under the falling cover of night. Gentle currents of water swayed the sea grass and rippled the sandy seafloor in a hypnotic back and forth.

The water felt cold as always, but did not bother the merman who was built to withstand it, as he swam home, blue markings down his body and violet tail shedding light over a few retreating fish as he went. He wasn’t pursuing them, however; he slipped through the water slowly, tail waving languidly behind him, his slender arms flat at his sides. He was in no rush.

Tino had been intentionally returning home later and later over the last week, and tonight was the latest he had spent loitering in his own barter until there would be no excuse for why he was there. He sighed, bubbles spewing from his mouth as he did. This had proved to be much harder and more complicated than he’d ever bargained for. He never thought he’d be actively avoiding his own partner. Then again, he had agreed to this arrangement, he had made the choice. There was no one to blame but himself.

The shadowy outline of their den appeared on the sea floor, just beside a rocky gathering where it would be somewhat hidden. Tino swam straight down smoothly into the tunnel, which plunged several hundred yards beneath the surface of the seabed. There was no natural light here, but Tino’s eyes were equipped for even the thickest darkness, and his markings lit the way regardless. With a flick of his tail, he turned left with the curve of the tunnel, and emerged into the large cave-like space of their main living chamber. It was something to be proud of; large enough for ten merfolk to gather comfortably, if not swim freely, with nooks carved into the packed sand walls to serve as shelves. In the many spaces rested shells, sea glass, tools, and other things that they’d collected for everyday life or for decoration.

A small tethered net of freshly-caught fish bobbed near the far end of the chamber, ready to be torn open by sharp teeth and devoured. Tino’s stomach rumbled quietly when he saw them, and he was about to swim over and have a quick snack, when he noticed the glow of his partner’s markings. Like his own, they filled the dark space with ambient light.

He’d expected to see the blue glow of his partner at the entrance to their sleeping chamber, where he thought he’d be waiting for him. Instead, the much larger merman had been floating along the roof of the chamber above Tino, out of immediate sight. Tino had barely spotted his muscled body and taupe-scaled tail before the other merman dropped down on him with a mighty movement of water and bubbles. Strong arms coiled around him from behind in a fierce hug. Tino yelped a little, and thrashed his tail slightly on instinct at the initial surprise, the impact careening them sideways.

“Ivan!” His startled thoughts rang between their minds while his gills fluttered. “Do not frighten me like that!”
Silvery blond sheets of hair fell about them both, mingling with Tino’s as Ivan nuzzled into his shoulder. The other merman was big enough to tuck Tino against him with room to spare, and his muscled chest felt like a wall of stone against Tino’s slender back. His skin was still soft, however, and it felt nice to be hugged against it. Tino’s mind felt Ivan’s joy as he held him and rubbed his cheek affectionately against his shoulder and head.

“I have been longing for your return…”

Ivan cooed, his thoughts feeling warm and sincere to Tino’s awareness. In response, the smaller merman’s twinge of happiness at the sentiments brushed up along Ivan’s mind, causing him to take them both into a joyful twirl through the water.

“You lingered so long at your barter, I grew lonely.”

Tino fought to conceal his wariness of the subject, so Ivan wouldn’t sense it. Instead he let his genuine weariness feed his thoughts, and hopefully divert attention from his emotional reasons for staying away from home so long. He relaxed, letting Ivan sway them both about gracefully as he reveled in being close to his partner again.

“There was much to do today.” He replied. “You know the hunting has been especially good as of late and the other hunters have been needing more tools. How many have you needed mended as of late? Forgive me for leaving you alone so long. Though you did not have to wait for me; I assumed you would be asleep by now.”

Ivan pulled a curtain of blond hair away from Tino’s face so he could kiss his temple, crooning a soft note of music into his ear.

“I did not wish to fall asleep without you beside me one more night, my sweet. I am so very proud that you labor such as you do, but I cannot deny that I miss you dreadfully.”

Guilt wormed its way into Tino’s unshielded thoughts, and immediately Ivan’s reassurance and support reached out to respond. Unfortunately, this only caused more guilt to rise, as Tino knew he was undeserving of it. Ivan crooned more continuously, fussing around his smaller partner with hugs and touches and kisses to try and cheer him up. When it didn’t improve Tino’s mood, Ivan cupped his face in his large hands and studied his eyes, concerned. Tino felt the gentle touch of Ivan’s senses against his own, searching his feelings to try and pinpoint what was the matter. Thankfully, Tino had done a good job concealing the true problem plaguing his heart, and Ivan only found residual results.

Though, when all else failed, one tactic could always work to improve any mer’s mood.

“You are weary, Tino, and hungry. My catch was plentiful today, as you can see. Come.”

Taking his hand, Ivan led him over to the net of fish. It was woven from shaggy strands of sea grass, and Ivan had to release Tino’s hand to carefully open it and snag a medium sized fish without releasing the others. He held the wriggling fish in one hand while tying up the net again, showing great dexterity. Turning back to Tino, Ivan promptly brought the fish to his mouth and snapped the head off with his suddenly sharp fangs. He pushed the head into a separate net that hung open beside the first. It held several older heads, and many picked-clean skeletons from previous meals.

The scent of blood in the water stirred Tino’s hunger to greater heights, making him chirp out eagerly. And when Ivan held out the fish’s body to him, he latched fingers onto Ivan’s strong wrist, and fed on it; tearing off the scales and ripping into the flesh with his teeth. Pleasure filled his mind
at the relief of filling his empty stomach, and the joy of eating out of his partner’s hand. Ivan chirruped happily and rubbed his back as Tino devoured his provision, his own satisfaction mingling with Tino’s in the middle-ground where their consciousness was joined. More blood and detritus from the feeding flew out into the water, clouding it a bit as time went by.

Eventually, all that remained was a skeleton, and the other inedible parts of the fish, resting in Ivan’s hand. Tino ran his tongue along Ivan’s fingers, collecting anything he may have missed. When he was done, Ivan disposed of the remains as he had the head. Tino was full and content now, which made it easier to ignore the nagging uncertainty that had been growing in him for several weeks now. When Ivan demonstrated his role this way, provided for him or cared for him, it made things easier. The problem…lay elsewhere.

The larger merman swam idly around Tino, as he floated upwards and just enjoyed being well fed. Ivan could sense his contentment, and happily brushed their bodies together, nudging his face along Tino’s arms and sides. His hands trailed over Tino’s long tail, over the beautiful pattern of glowing markings over the violet scales at his waist, down toward the dark purple of his tail fins, where a sprinkling of lights diminished.

“You enjoy that?” Ivan purred through their minds, cupping Tino’s taught, muscled stomach in huge hands, running over it with satisfaction. “Full and happy?”

Tino cooed an affirmative back at him. Ivan then tugged playfully at the two long pelvic fins below Tino’s waist, making him trill and push Ivan away with a little smile. The water rippled over them both as they moved, flirted with their bodies and thoughts. It was so easy like this, to pretend that everything was alright. To be loving and playful together like young paired mer were, but there was an underlying tension neither of them could erase.

For several minutes Tino bobbed in the water while Ivan hovered around him, always maintaining touch with one part of his body or another while Tino reciprocated. There was nothing overtly different or new about the situation; any evening before could find them like this, but now what was supposed to be a relaxing atmosphere became more tense the longer it went on. Tino knew what Ivan wanted, knew why he’d waited up to greet him. His nerves rose to such a degree that he couldn’t hide it, and Ivan flicked his tail nervously as he sensed the anxiety from his partner. The bond of minds between mer folk did not give insight into the cause of all emotions, but the resulting emotional response was impossible to suppress.

“You…what is wrong? Why are you so worried?” Ivan asked, sliding his arms around Tino once again and holding him loosely. With slow movements of his tail fins, he sent them lazily rolling through the water, a normally placid and romantic gesture. Tino gulped water through his mouth and out his gills, trying for a lie.

“As I said, it is a busy time at the barter. I have more work than I am used to handling.”

Ivan’s thoughts indicated he didn’t entirely believe this excuse, but Tino sensed his hope that the real reason was one with a positive outcome. Following his trail of logic only made Tino feel more forlorn. He knew what Ivan was thinking, and it was the very reason they were having troubles to begin with. Ivan wound Tino’s long hair around his arm a few times, stroking through the length of it each time. He knew how much Tino enjoyed that, and the other mer could not help but close his eyes at the sensation, the way his own silky hair brushed over his body when moved by Ivan’s hand.

“You have been so hard at work these last few days. But you are here with me, now. Leave your work load at the barter. Or perhaps…you need a little help relaxing.”
A week or two back, just the very idea of what Ivan was suggesting would’ve caused Tino to flip over and cuddle up to his large partner, submissive and eager. But a week or two back…he should’ve been…

Ignoring Tino’s worries, Ivan slipped a hand into his long hair, gripping it lightly at the root and tilting Tino’s head upward to look at him. Tino gazed into Ivan’s eyes; violet-blue like his own, and filled with heart-breaking dedication and affection.

Once he was assured of Tino’s gaze, Ivan slowly began to make low growling and purring sounds in his throat, on such a deep frequency that Tino nearly melted it was so effective a seduction method. After a few slow rolling deliveries of the sounds, Ivan pumped his chest up and down a few times through the water, undulating his torso. He took Tino’s much smaller hands and pressed them to his chest, to his arms, purposefully flexing his muscles to impress his partner with his strength. It was working. Despite the turmoil in his heart, Tino’s base instincts reacted at once, enjoying his lover’s presentation. Tino began to croon sweetly back as hope filled him. Maybe this time would be better. Maybe…Ivan wouldn’t be disappointed.

Sensing Tino’s sudden willingness, Ivan pulled the smaller body roughly against his own, locking their mouths together in a hungry kiss. Tino shivered as big hands ran over his bare chest, back, and arms, caressing him lovingly as Ivan’s amorous desires flooded his mind. The eagerness, the need, was quite strong and nearly overwhelmed him. Ivan rolled them a few times, water and satiny hair winding around them. Their gills fluttered faster as they passed water through them to compensate for their quickening hearts. Slippery in the water, their lips met again and again, hands clinging to each other.

When they pulled apart, Ivan beat his tail and pelvic fins to drive them both down to the floor of their home, their buoyant bodies thumping lightly and stirring up puffs of sand. There Ivan rolled them a few more times, sending up more clouds of sand before he settled on his back, clamping Tino against his chest. The bigger merman arched his body so that Tino’s would do the same, and his large hands fit almost entirely over Tino’s chest, long fingers kneading down the bowed plains of his body.

Tino arched up further into Ivan’s hands, presenting himself eagerly to the lovely touches. His nipples grew taught and his groin flap grew tighter as his excitement rose. Lips nibbled on his neck, just behind his gills on one side, that spot that always aroused him greatly. Tino’s body twitched in Ivan’s arms, and he tilted his head encouragingly. He felt the tempered impatience and longing in his partner, which only served to entice him more to give him what they both wanted.

Though, unbidden, his worries rose again as Ivan began swimming them both toward their sleeping chamber. What would happen once they were there? Would it be wonderful and fulfilling like it used to be? Or would it end in disappointment and frustration, as it had so often the last few times they’d been together?

“You are thinking too hard on the matter.” Ivan told him, trying to soothe him with reassurance and warm feelings. “Your mind and heart are tied into knots. Do not think on it. For a time, simply be with me.”

That sounded perfect, almost like Ivan himself had put the issue behind him and simply wanted to enjoy him again. Tino brightened at this thought, and in a rush of affection for his partner, he wriggled against him and trilled happily. Once through the tunnel and into their sleeping chamber, they twined together, almost needing to in order to share the small space. It was a cozy little hollow, set higher in their home than the main chamber, so there was no chance of drifting out of the tunnel during sleep.
As they kissed and rolled slowly, sand misted through the water a bit as their bodies brushed the sediment of the walls, ceiling, and floor. Their markings filled the space with beautiful luminescent light, glowing through their pale hair and skin.

Ivan began mouthing at Tino’s skin, teasing his body into a more ready state with his hands, brushing their tails together. Tino’s gills pumped more quickly when Ivan began licking at his navel and waist, causing him to writhe and twist.

“You are so lovely,” Ivan encouraged, “have I told you recently?”

Tino chirped as a broad finger passed over the delicate transition from scales to skin on his torso.

“You have,” he replied, “but I never tire of the sentiment.”

Ivan’s hand lowered even further down the front of his lavender tail, and it was all Tino could do to hold in a loud chirrup. His body sang when Ivan gently flipped open the taught flap of his skin and scales that protected his groin. While Tino flinched upwards at the delicious freedom, Ivan wasted no time pleasing him, lavishing him with attention while he squirmed, arched, and crooned.

For several long moments, nothing existed except the joy and pleasure they were sharing, singing back and forth between their senses, feeding off each other and growing. Then, in the midst of it all, Ivan took a pause to study Tino’s maleness thoughtfully, as he palmed at it. Hope and desire radiated from him.

“It seems,” Ivan began hopefully, “that you are growing smaller. Do you not agree?”

Just like that, Tino’s happiness shattered into a thousand shards that cut him to the quick.

His earlier suspicion was confirmed, and the pain of it was so deep he had to stop tears from instantly forming in his eyes.

Ivan withdrew as Tino’s despair hit his senses hard, confusing him. Tino turned away from him as best he could in the small space, and thought bitterly,

“Ivan, I do not see any change. I am the same size I have always been.”

He didn’t know what he expected, but Ivan’s disappointment and frustration nudged into Tino’s consciousness, and he recoiled from it like a physical blow. He thrashed his tail and slipped away from Ivan, down the short tunnel to the main chamber. He angrily tucked himself back into his protective pouch as he went, scales easily hiding him away, his interest withered in the face of the negativity.

Ivan followed after him, his face and mind screaming concern and helplessness. He caught his smaller partner before he could leave their dwelling entirely, curling his large body around Tino and clinging tightly to his waist.

“Tino, why?” Ivan pleaded. “Why did you slip away from me? Why do you not wish to mate?”

Tino shivered, not fighting to escape, too busy keeping the walls in his mind strong enough to block his true thoughts from Ivan. When he didn’t answer, Ivan went on, his thoughts desperate now.

“You have become so distant and troubled, and you are hiding your mind from me, I can feel it. Please, just tell me why.”
Tino gave a small whimper, remaining stiff in Ivan’s hold. The other merman released him long enough to swim in front of him and take him by the shoulders, trying to meet his eyes. Tino squeezed them shut and turned his head away.

“Is it because you have not changed?”

Ivan pressed, slight frustration in his thoughts but overall empathy and hope flooded through. Tino’s thoughts turned down that path. Ivan was not wrong, but he had not guessed all of it. Sensing the uncertainty and unhappiness Tino felt about the subject, Ivan cooed softly, thinking he understood. He cupped Tino’s head and began stroking his hair, pressing their foreheads together to comfort his lover.

“Oh, Tino, it will happen in due time, I believe that. Do not trouble yourself with it so; perhaps your current emotions are due to hormonal change, have you thought of that? I have, and it is perfectly normal to feel as you are when your body adjusts and begins forming a nesting chamber. If anything, this is a good sign! Do not suffer alone, my dear, I am here to help you.”

The tears were flowing now, Tino’s face scrunching into agony the longer Ivan imparted his thoughts to him. He knew Ivan was trying to soothe him, but Tino had hidden too much about the topic for him to know he was only turning the knife in Tino’s heart.

“It is alright,” Ivan thought gently, “This will all be worth it when your malehood withdraws and a lovely chamber opens to me. Just think of how wonderful you will feel when our first child begins to grow within you. Will that not be incredible? I can already imagine you, swollen with new life and happiness. Just thinking on it makes me want to fertilize you right now.”

Cracks began to form in his walls, trickles of anger seeping out. Curiosity responded from Ivan’s mind.

“I want that.” Tino thought very softly, needing to tell Ivan some form of the truth. “More than anything…I want that. I am so eager to conceive that sometimes I can hardly bear it. I dream about it, all the time. But…it is clearly not happening.”

“We are a first pairing,” Ivan tried to remind him, grasping at any encouragement he could give, “it can take time, that is what they told us, right? We simply need to be patient, I am certain that-.”

“You are the farthest thing from patient with me!” Tino’s mind wailed, and he darted backward, wrenching free of Ivan’s grasp.

His own outburst shocked himself, but Tino could not take it back now. The thought that came after was unintentional, but he couldn’t stop it. The cracks in his walls began to widen, pouring more burning hot emotion. Clear and tormented, it rang between them,

“Do you even love me?!”

The question seemed to take Ivan aback, and Tino could feel how confused and lost he felt in response.

“Tino…my sweet, how can you even ask that of me?” Ivan demanded, looking lost and angry. The other merman frowned at him, twining his long hair around his arm nervously, all his fins flicking and shaking with his emotion.

“You should know why. You cannot be so blind.”

Ivan moved closer to him, but not so close as to make Tino feel trapped. His body language made it
clear that Ivan needed to keep his distance.

“I have given you everything, have I not? I provide for you, I love on you, I have never raised a hand against you. Why would you feel this way? Please, just tell me what I have done.”

So many times Tino had imagined this conversation, had thought of the things he would say. Now, given such a blunt opportunity, he found it was so much harder than he’d thought.

“You are a good alpha to me, Ivan.” He began, too kind and honest to let his anger entirely destroy his partner unwarranted. “I could not ask for someone better. In every way you keep me happy, you have given me so much and expected so little. That is…you expect only one thing of me…and I have not been able to give it to you.”

Ivan’s understanding somewhat comforted Tino, as his alpha put the pieces together. He tried once more to say what he thought might help his partner,

“I am certain that you will, even if you have given up hope.”

This was exactly the wrong sentiment to try and calm Tino down. His face twisted and he made a sudden growling sound as his anger rose again. That was the breaking point. Tino had hidden his true feelings for far too long, and it had only resulted in him stewing in misery. Now, with a choked sob, Tino let his walls collapse.

Ivan actually jerked as the tide of overwhelming emotion hit his consciousness. Tino looked up in time to see his eyes blink and leak tears of his own as the power of it overcame him. He could not deny that some part of him relished vengefully in seeing Ivan taste his pain.

“That is the problem here, Ivan! You behave as though you are merely waiting for me to change, and tolerating who I am in the meantime! Can you not enjoy me for who I am right now? As a male, who cannot currently conceive? The male that you selected and courted? Every other sentence you’ve ever spoken to me revolves around my change! Ever since we paired! Did you only court me because you thought I would be a good breeder!?”

Ivan’s eyes widened at this, and he managed to recover from the new course in the conversation enough to try and swim toward Tino. He stopped when he saw the other merman flinch away, baring his fangs. Instead, he pulled up short and just waved his hands through the water, sending little ripples through all of the floating hair between them.

“Of course I thought you’d be a good breeder, Tino, you have all the best qualities of a mother. But you cannot think that was the only reason I chose you!”

“Then answer me this,” Tino responded, direct, “if it turns out that I cannot or will not bear children…if I do not change…. will you stay with me?”

The question seemed to shock Ivan more than anything else Tino had felt or expressed during this exchange. His mouth dropped open, and he stared at Tino searchingly. It only took a split second of hesitancy for Tino to sense the truth. Ivan’s mind was sent into a spiral of disappointment, shame, and even anger. Ivan’s mind hardened, and he answered with a question of his own.

“The body…reflects the heart…does it not, Tino? Between the two of us, whose love is more questionable?”

As Tino realized the truth of what Ivan was saying, the other merman’s anguish came to him, the desperation, the true desire he held for Tino and their future. It was so strong that Ivan ignored Tino’s obvious deflective body language, and darted forward. He clamped huge hands onto Tino’s
upper arms and all but shook him as his own dam of restraint broke and he cried out between their minds,

“What more must I do to? Even if you did not love me when I courted you, I thought you would grow to over time. I provide everything a family could need, do I not?! So why?! Why do you not wish to bear my children?!”

Nothing Ivan said was false, Tino knew that. Yet the stress of the confrontation and the severity of being physically forced to give an answer broke him down, and he answered with the utter truth. The truth he’d been fearing to admit to himself, or to anyone else.

“Because I wanted Eduard!”

The thought made Ivan still, though his grip remained tight on Tino’s arms. The smaller merman trembled in his grasp, shuddering as hot tears returned. It was a shock that he’d actually admitted what he’d been fearing in the deepest parts of himself. He turned his face away from the utter hurt and rejection on Ivan’s face, knowing he’d put it there but unable to deny the truth any longer.

“I can never want you as I did him…never enough to bear your children…”

Ivan released him with a little puff from his gills, his strong chest quivering as he withdrew. Tino spared a timid glance at him, and saw the pain written in every aspect of his being, as well as being crushed by it in his mind. He looked away immediately, hugging himself and curling up tight against the rising slope of the chambers’ floor.

For several long, agonizing seconds there was no attempt to directly share thoughts or feelings, they both wallowed in the flood between them. Tino felt his heart racing as he contemplated what he had just done. It was very likely he had just put an end to their pairing.

“I am sorry.” Tino thought desperately, an eternity later. “I am...so sorry, Ivan…”

The other merman looked toward him, his face drawn down and pained. He worked his jaw a few times, and thought back,

“Do not be. You only told the truth.”

With that, and a flurry of movement, Ivan darted into the tunnel, disappearing on his way to the surface. Tino didn’t even think of going after him. There was no point. There was no salvaging this. He rocked on the wake Ivan’s strong tail had left in the water, tasting his partner’s tears on the little waves.

Tino’s own tears floated before him, washing away the second they left his eyes.

He had just lost his partner.

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Tino woke up crying.

The dream-memory had been so real that even as he realized where he was, he couldn’t stop the tears from flowing. The memory was fresh, the taste of it sharp on his senses, so real that it was hard to orient even though his eyes took in the sight of the hotel room ceiling and window. He drew in a loud breath, beginning to breathe heavily as he felt his heart racing in reaction to the
“Tino? What’s wrong?” Berwald’s voice came from beside him, and the man’s face appeared looking down at him in the faint morning light.

The merman didn’t answer; he looked tired and confused for all of three seconds before he shook his head helplessly, covering his face with his hands. He began to cry softly.

“What’s wrong?” Berwald asked. “Are your muscles hurting you? Are you in pain?”

He was panicking slightly. Tino had cried plenty of times since he’d been with them, but never after being possessed by an angry ghost as he had last night. With all the spasming his muscles had done, he’d been sore enough just before bed. Perhaps the effects were worse after a little passage of time, and he was suffering. Although, the quality of his weeping seemed different this time; Tino had been prone to outbursts and sobbing, but this…was quiet…and that somehow seemed more serious.

“Please, Tino, just tell me if you’re hurting.” The big man pleaded, sitting all the way up so that he could focus on every little twitch that Tino gave, every breath and movement, trying to spot signs of injury or pain. He laid a large hand on Tino’s back, feeling the tight muscles trembling as he gave near-silent sobs. The commotion made Emil stir from the other bed.

“What’s going on?” Emil asked in a rough voice, sitting up and looking over at them.

“He just woke up crying,” Berwald explained, “he was sleeping like a baby, and then he just jerked awake. I think he already had tears in his eyes.”

Tino tried to speak through his hands, but his words were lost in more tears. All that escaped him was a muffled sound of distress.

“All it your body, Tino? Are you in pain from last night?” Berwald tried again, mind already whirring through what measures they might have to take if that was the cause of Tino’s distress.

The merman managed to shake his head ‘no’ at that, drawing in a wet-sounding, shaky breath and sniffing. Berwald still couldn’t relax. He knew that Tino was a bundle of emotion, and prone to tearing up at the drop of a hat, but usually there was an understandable reason for it.

“Did he have a bad dream?” Emil grated out, clumsily getting out of bed, stumbling over, and sitting down by Tino’s head on the opposite side to Berwald. The other man shrugged helplessly at him.

But Tino nodded. Berwald relaxed at once, relieved that it wasn’t something more serious.

“Sucks, bro.” Emil yawned, absentmindedly patting Tino’s head. “But you’ll be fine.”

“Sorry…” Tino choked out softly. “It’s…nothing.”

Emil and Berwald exchanged interested, skeptical glances over the crying merman.

“You sure you’re not hurting?” Emil ventured. “From last night?”

Tino seemed to gain a little measure of control over himself, and nodded, now dropping his hands to wipe at his tears.

“I mean…I am…but it’s not that bad…”
Berwald rubbed his hand softly down Tino’s shoulder blades and back, trying his best to comfort him like always. There was something almost hypnotic about doing so; though he hated seeing Tino upset, he loved being able to literally hug him happy again.

Not many people were like that, but Tino seemed to be.

“You just need a minute?” Emil asked, and Tino nodded. “Alright. Take your time.”

The teen got back into his own bed, and immediately dozed off. It was still early enough to catch another hour or so of sleep before Lukas insisted that they all get up. Berwald, however, stayed hovering over Tino as he regained control of himself. It took several long moments of ardent, quiet weeping, but finally the merman seemed calm. He rolled over to pull a few tissues from the nightstand and clean up his face. Once he’d wiped away his tears and blown his nose, he lay back down and sighed. His breathing normalized after a while, evening out into a steady rise and fall.

“Are you going to be alright?” Berwald asked softly. The length of silent time that stretched between his question and Tino’s answer was concerning to him.

“Perhaps.”

Berwald also didn’t like Tino’s tone; it was flat, devoid of the emotion that seemed to ooze from every word he normally spoke. His eyes, red from crying, were lowered and staring at nothing. The set of his full mouth was not quite sad. Numb, perhaps, was a better description for how Berwald thought he looked. Something about the merman’s behavior worried the bigger man. A bad dream had upset him this much?

“Do you want to talk about-.”

“No.”

Tino cut off his gentle inquiry, and looked not the least bit apologetic for it. That surprised Berwald more than anything. Generally, Tino was overly conscious about treading on other’s feelings even by accident.

Tino turned away from Berwald suddenly and rose from bed, retreating into the bathroom. Once alone, Tino splashed cold water on his face to relieve it of the feverish heat of emotion. He looked up at his reflection and grimaced. He didn’t like the ease of seeing himself now that he looked so miserable. The merman hid away from the sight by drying his face. As he leaned over, face buried in the cloth, he suddenly stopped. It felt nice, burrowing into the fabric, however scratchy it was from overuse. All he wanted right now was to hole up somewhere and be alone. Like he had after that terrible fight...he’d gone back to his parent’s home and curled up in his old sleeping chambers for hours, day after day until he’d been able to push through the sadness that had weighed down his heart.

Right now, with a single dream, it all seemed to fall upon him again. He’d forgotten how heavy it was. With a small choking sob, he sunk to the floor, taking the towel with him. Tino leaned against the side of the tub and pulled his legs up to his chest, hiding his face in the towel and trying desperately not to make sound. Berwald was worried enough without hearing him sobbing in the bathroom.

As he sat there, one of his slender hands lowered to his stomach, where it ached with the pain of barrenness and memory. He wondered, in the midst of it all, how he’d managed to forget it over these last weeks. The newness of discovery and exploration had done exactly what he’d hoped for
by distracting him and keeping him engaged, but all of that was stripped away now. Tino struggled to maintain control, feeling a sudden need to defend his own emotions even from his kind human pod. They would be curious in any case now, and it would only make them more inquisitive if he let himself cry all day.

The moments ticked by, and he became more and more aware that the longer he stayed where he was the more and more suspicious Berwald would be. But it hurt too much to move just yet. In the quiet between Tino’s carefully released breaths, he whispered words that he'd never spoken aloud, never had to. But they rang through his mind so strongly that he had to get them out, if even so very quietly,

“Ivan…I’m so sorry…”

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Sorry for the sad tone, everyone, but Tino’s not a robot lol. Look for the next chapter hopefully soon!

Illustrations by commission are displayed here in my deviantart:
“Hey, Berwald,” Lukas asked, “what’s up with Tino? He seems off.”

They were all in the continental breakfast area of the hotel, piling their plates with food and filling Styrofoam cups with coffee. Their suitcases had already been packed into the car, and their various shoulder bags lay at the foot of a few tables within view. They decided it would be better to eat free breakfast here than going out somewhere along the way.

Berwald was waiting for his waffle to finish, while Mathias and Lukas waited to make their own. All three of them took up the majority of the space around the middle of the breakfast counter, but there weren’t many people about as it was. Even so, they spoke in quieter tones in case they might be overheard.

“Yeah,” Mathias added, “fish boy hasn’t smiled all morning, and he doesn’t look so good.”

Berwald cast a glance over to Tino. He could see the merman around the wall dividing the buffet area and the dining space; he sat looking out of the window, sipping his orange juice. The normally bright and curious lavender-blue eyes were heavy today, and the set of his mouth was sad. He hadn’t taken any food, nor had he made any attempt to hide that he was troubled about something. At least, if he had tried it hadn’t worked in the slightest. Emil sat across from Tino, but appeared to be so sleep-wrecked that he wasn’t paying attention to Tino’s own lack of emotiveness. If even Mathias picked up on his mood change, Tino was perhaps not able to conceal his worry. Then again, he had never seemed able to contain himself emotionally, whether good or bad.

“He woke up crying earlier.” Berwald explained quietly. “Says he had a bad dream, but…then he stayed in the bathroom for half an hour, and when he came out, he barely spoke to Emil or me.”

“You do something to tick him off?” Mathias joked, but Lukas shushed him with a frown.

“He wouldn’t talk about it?” Lukas asked, to which Berwald shook his head.

“I asked if he wanted to, but he was adamant that he didn’t. He…was a little short with me about it, actually…that was right before he locked himself in the bathroom. I didn’t try again after that.”

Lukas carefully looked over to where Tino sat, and with a quick check to be sure no one else was watching him, his eyes went empty as he fixed them upon the merman.

“Dude, you’re freaking ghost-scanning him again?” Mathias muttered. “You think he’s got some
bad mojo on him from last night or something, and you missed it?”

Lukas didn’t answer for a full five seconds, then his eyes cleared and he blinked a few times.

“Just making sure. We can’t be too careful. But I don’t see anything strange lingering around him.”

The first waffle dinged its’ completion, and Berwald hurried to scoop it out of the machine and free it up for Lukas.

“I haven’t seen him act like this before.” Berwald said, concerned. “Except maybe when he was in the hospital. But that was understandable, and it only lasted a few minutes. When he has been sad, he tends to bounce back quickly.”

“He’s been through a lot, all things considered,” Lukas pointed out as he prepared his own waffle and set the machine to cook, “I say we leave him alone. Whatever he’s dealing with, his demeanor makes it obvious that he doesn’t want us to pry.”

Berwald gave him a questioning look, and Lukas clarified,

“If and when he wants us to know, he’ll tell us. Or at least, he’ll tell you, won’t he?”

The other man looked a little surprised at that observation, and before he could ask, Mathias cut in,

“Ja, we’re always finding out about stuff he’s told you that the rest of us haven’t heard.”

“Well, he has been living with me for the last week,” Berwald grumbled, “without you lot around I am the only one he has to talk to.”

“True,” Lukas agreed, “although you have to admit, he seems to go straight to you first when it comes to more serious information.”

Berwald said nothing to that, his mind going immediately to the conversations they’d had at the cabin about Tino’s private life, his previous partner, Ivan, and why he really came to shore. Tino had never brought that up to any of the rest of them, so Berwald had been faithful in keeping his mouth shut about it too. He hadn’t really thought it was any of their business, but…Tino had shared it with him. He didn’t want to admit that Lukas had a point. That sparked a glimmer of hope in him all the same.

They finished making and doctoring their waffles with butter and syrup, and went to take their seats. They’d all been eating for a few bites before Lukas looked aside at Tino and asked casually,

“You’re not going to eat anything, Tino?”

The merman shook his head, attempting to meet Lukas’ eyes, but only ended up dancing around them and then looking down again.

“Alright, but be sure to at least have some lunch when you and Berwald get back to the house; don’t want you getting light-headed and fainting on us.”

Tino nodded in agreement, then went back to hiding in his orange juice.

“You’re not hungry?” Emil asked, sounding like he was still miles away from reaching wakefulness. “That’s not like you.”

The merman shrugged, and then escaped any more questioning by downing his juice and rising to get a refill. Once he was around the wall dividing the tables and chairs from the buffet, Mathias
swatted the back of Emil’s head, and the teen made a whining sound.

“Hey! What’s the big idea?!” He complained.

“Lay off the questions, will you?” Mathias told him, keeping his tone quiet, “Tino just needs to be sad right now, don’t ask him about it.”

Emil rubbed the back of his head where Mathias had struck him, and pursed his lips.

“Wait…why’s he sad?”

“We don’t know, dingus!” Mathias scolded childishly. Emil frowned and raised an eyebrow.

“He had that nightmare…is that what’s upset him?”

“Could be.” Lukas interjected. “We’ve decided not to draw attention to it.”

“None of my business.” Emil yawned, digging lazily into his oatmeal. “Besides, he’ll tell Berwald when he feels like it.”

Berwald’s mouth dropped open slightly, a bite of syrupy waffle halfway to his lips. Mathias and Lukas both deliberately turned to look at him, sly smiles and lifted eyebrows unnerving him for how in sync they were.

He stuffed the waffle bite in his mouth and chewed, chasing it with the strong coffee.

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The drive home was more quiet than they’d thought it would be considering they’d just closed a difficult case. There was the usual chattering at certain intervals, but overall, they kept to themselves. Tino didn’t even try to read Berwald’s book on the tablet like all the other trips. He spent the majority of the drive staring out of the window, or leaning back with his eyes closed. They did manage to wring a few words out of him when they did start reminiscing about the case, but he sounded uncharacteristically laid back. None of them addressed it, but the lack of Tino’s bubbly energy was palpable.

Tino felt bad on top of the other anxieties that had infected him; he knew they were all aware something was wrong and were being the best of friends by not pressing him to talk about it, but at the same time, he wanted to be happy like normal. He didn’t like feeling this way, like there was something cold wedged at the base of his throat and pressing on his chest, like he needed to cry continuously until he dislodged the pain and washed it away with his tears. So far, the things that had made him cry here on land had been sudden surprises, and he’d been able to cry it out and move on quickly, but this was different. He’d been dealing with this for a long time. Or rather, he had been ignoring it.

He didn’t want to think about it anymore, and it took far more work to ignore the issues than sort through them. The merman let out an unintentional sharp breath of frustration as he fought with all the concerns and memories spinning through his head.

The sound made Berwald draw to attention beside Tino, though he didn’t let on as he studied his expression. Tino’s brows were drawn together and the set of his jaw was angry, which was
somewhat of an improvement over the blank look he’d had all morning. Although, it had been almost two hours since he’d woken up in such distress, so perhaps it made sense that he couldn’t feel entirely numb for that long, even on purpose. Still, Berwald was aching inside just sensing the unknown pain he was going through. But as he was so practiced at doing, he kept it contained and remained silent. That was the least he could do for Tino at the moment.

When they arrived at the Bondevik’s, Lukas parked the SUV in the driveway and then stretched in his seat, a startlingly loud popping noise coming from his spine as he did. Mathias looked alarmed at the sound.

“Aw, babe, you need to let me work on you when we get home! You were so busy giving Tino a massage last night that you didn’t get one yourself!”

The merman seemed to stiffen at this, and Lukas stopped any worries he might have tried to voice.

“It’s ok, Tino, I wanted to do it for you. Don’t worry. A massage would be nice once we get home, though, Mat.”

The other man smiled and leaned in to nuzzle Lukas’ head, giving him a smacking kiss on his temple before he pulled back.

“Sure thing, I’ll work out all those knots in your back, no problem.”

“It’s mostly between my shoulders today.” Lukas mumbled. “But I’m sure you’ll fix me up.”

“How about you, Tino?” Mat asked, as they all began emerging from the vehicle and gathering their bags. “You’ve got to be sore from last night, too, right? You were all seizing up while that ghost guy was possessing you.”

Tino nodded, rolling one shoulder with a wince of discomfort. Berwald stepped up next to the merman, and looked down at him with a concerned face. A wicked light leapt up into Mathias’ eyes, and he suggested in an overly casual manner,

“Oh, well, maybe ask Berwald to take care of that for you. He’s got much bigger and stronger hands than Lukas, so he’ll probably be able to do you more good, if you let him.”

Berwald didn’t take the bait, and gave no visible reaction. Tino, however, turned bright red in his ears and cheeks, avoiding eye contact with the larger man beside him.

“Come on, tell me that you couldn’t work magic on his poor, aching muscles.” Mathias said to Berwald, who merely shrugged, and said,

“Only if he wanted me to.”

That had obviously not been the reaction either Mathias or Tino had been expecting, and they both gaped at him. Before the conversation could get any more awkward, Lukas cut in.

“Leave them alone, Mat, let’s go inside and say hi to mom and dad before we leave.”

Mathias winked at Tino before following his lover’s order and heading to the front door, Emil close behind him with his bag. The teen muttered something about wanting to invite Leon over later that day and needing to clean his room first. Lukas didn’t follow them right away, turning his attention to Tino, making sure Berwald heard him too as he dug out his and Tinos’ bags from the SUV.
“You’re probably best off resting as much as you can for a while.” Lukas advised. “I know you like to do as much research as you can in a day, but you’ve been through your first experience as a vessel, and you’ll be sore and tired for a few days, so take it easy, alright?”

The merman nodded, giving a little chirrup as Berwald handed him his overnight bag. Lukas looked like he wanted to say something else, but he just shook his head.

“You coming in to see the folks?” He asked instead.

Tino hesitated, looking reluctant and clutching his bag to his chest nervously for something to do. “It’s ok if you’d rather not.” Reassured Lukas. “Do you want to go straight back with Berwald?”

Looking slightly ashamed, the merman nodded, staring down at his boots.

“We can get going, then.” Berwald said, seeing that Tino didn’t want to linger. “Say hi for us, Lukas.”

Lukas nodded, and turned to follow the others into the house.

“See you later,” he called over his shoulder, “take care.”

Berwald unlocked his car, putting his bag in the back. The merman followed suit, and then fiddled with the door handle on the front passenger side. He looked toward the house as he stood there, his eyes strained. Berwald stopped on the other side of the car, looking at Tino from across the hood. When the merman turned to meet his eyes, the mans’ expression softened.

“Don’t feel guilty about it, Tino. They’re not bitter people, they can understand that you need space. Let’s go home, now.”

A small purring hum came from Tino’s chest at those words. He’d been using a lot of his mer sounds in place of words this morning, and oddly enough, Berwald found that he could actually understand the sentiment behind each response. It was the same as knowing when a dog was whining as opposed to barking, or cat purring instead of hissing; there was a universal tone to sounds like that, and Tino’s were no exception. So Berwald allowed himself a little pride as he heard that sound and knew that Tino was relieved to be going back home.

Tino slipped into the car and buckled his seat belt while Berwald did the same. He felt awful about snubbing the kind Bondeviks, but he honestly didn’t know if he could look Mama Viki in the face without crying. He had the feeling that her mothering nature had the capacity to coax his tears right out of him, and Tino didn’t need much help with that to begin with.

As Berwald started the car and they pulled out onto the street, Tino wondered to himself why exactly he was trying to keep his feelings in check this particular time. He’d already told Berwald all about Ivan, and their argument, had already wept on his shoulder about it. Perhaps that was it; he didn’t want to repeat the same grievances for fear of being a greater bother. Though, he still knew that the big man would claim not to mind, and Tino would believe him. Still, he felt an overwhelming urge to crawl into Berwald’s lap as soon as he could, and take the comfort and support that he knew the man would give him. The most vulnerable parts of Tino’s nature cried out for his new alpha to protect him from his own tragedy and make everything right again. But he remained stubbornly silent as he tried to weather this latest wave of emotion on his own.

When the entire group of them had been riding together, it was easier to pretend that Tino was just fine until he otherwise said, as they’d collectively agreed to do. Now, with just Tino and Berwald in the car alone, the lack of buffer from the others was noticeable to them both. Usually when they
were driving together, Berwald remained silent for the most part, and Tino would be chattering away about something. Without Tino’s normal peppiness and rambling, it seemed especially quiet inside the car.

For Tino’s part, he felt much more relaxed now that it was just the two of them. He cared for the others deeply, but even he had a threshold when it came to socializing, and combined with his sudden bad mood and being together for the last two days, he was ready to have his own space again. That wasn’t to say that he was wishing to be entirely alone, as Berwald himself was an inexplicably safe place for Tino, and he found he still wanted to be near him. During the long, drawn out minutes of driving in silence, Tino felt himself relaxing just being quiet with the man, as though his strong, silent presence was enough to soothe him.

After a handful of minutes, Tino cleared his throat and spoke for the first time since he’d startled from his dream that morning,

“Are you going to take a nap when we get back?”

Berwald thankfully didn’t give any indication that he was excited or shocked that Tino had broken his long silence, and only shrugged.

“Don’t think so. I slept well.”

Tino shifted in his seat, leaning his head on his hand as he gazed out of the window. The neighborhoods and mailboxes still caught his eye as they drove past them. His voice had a touch of desire in it as he asked,

“Think we could watch a movie or something then? And maybe…eat some snacks?”

A small glow of hope fringed Berwald’s heart at the suggestion, and he nodded.

“Sounds perfect.”

It could have been his imagination, but Berwald thought that he saw Tino grin slightly, out of the corner of his eye.

The rest of the day was spent lounging in the living room, eating a variety of snack foods, and watching a handful of movies. Berwald normally didn’t have a problem with taking a day off to just be lazy and recharge after a weekend like they’d had, and doing so with Tino was proving to be an interesting experience, but he did sense that they were doing it less out of the need for relaxation and more because Tino wanted to be distracted. That knowledge left him with an underlying bit of wariness toward the merman’s actions.

Most telling, Tino didn’t curl up right beside him like he normally liked to do. He’d taken up a spot in the plush recliner next to the sofa when he saw the other man sitting there. That spoke volumes to Berwald. Tino had never been shy about his need and love for physical contact, and he’d even hoped that the merman would cling to him like he had at other times when he’d been frightened or sad. It wasn’t as though he’d done anything to indicate that he minded. On the contrary, he’d repeatedly assured Tino that he was alright with it, and always willing to indulge him. Berwald could also tell that Tino didn’t truly want to keep his distance, but was making himself for some
reason. He nearly caught Tino’s gaze a few times when he glanced sideways at him, but the merman always turned away before he could confirm that Tino was peeking at him.

The movies, and eventually the streaming show, that they watched prompted reactions from Tino that told Berwald they were doing their job at distracting him. He’d chuckle or smile, or have a few questions, or jump in fear. It was at least a sign that he wasn’t entirely withdrawn into himself. Berwald had been afraid that the merman would have locked himself in his room when they returned to the house, and that he’d spend all day worrying about how he was doing. Little did he know was that this was Tino’s original wish, before changing his mind.

A lunch of leftover pasta came and went, and after marathoning through the show they’d settled on, they took a break to unpack their overnight bags and shower before dinner. Once fresh and clean, they came back downstairs to make a dinner of chicken and vegetables, which they ate on pop-up trays in the living room. By the time the sun had long since gone down and Tino began to yawn, they had amassed a scattering of snack packages, dishes, and cups from water, juice, and milk.

“I don’t remember the last time I’ve spent a day doing absolutely nothing.” Berwald said, when they reached the end of another episode and he sat up to stretch. “I didn’t even know I could eat that much in one day, either.”

Tino turned wide eyes to him and immediately said,

“Oh, I’m sorry…have you been uncomfortable or bored? Did you want to work on a project instead? You could’ve left me by myself if you really wanted to do something else! I just really needed down time, and-.”

“It’s ok, Tino,” Berwald cut him off, gently, “I know this was what was best for you. For both of us, actually. It’s been nice to have a day like this. Even nicer spending it with you. If I was by myself, then I might’ve been bored. Don’t worry.”

The merman looked for a moment like he didn’t believe Berwald, but then his skepticism faded away the longer he held Berwald’s honest gaze. Then his full lips pulled up into a small grin.

“It was nice, wasn’t it?” He asked, quietly. “Just resting, like Lukas said…”

Berwald nodded, then stood up and arched his back, groaning slightly. He suspected that Tino’s fast-acting insecurity would rear its ugly head at some point, and he’d been ready to shoot it down.

“So you enjoyed yourself today?” He asked lightly.

“Eventually, yes.” Answered Tino, and Berwald was pleased to see that the merman wasn’t trying to skirt his eyes anymore. “It became better as the day wore on.”

The taller man nodded, gathering a few of the cups from the day, and starting to stack the few real plates together to take them into the kitchen. Tino took a cue from him and began picking up the dishes around himself as well.

“I sensed that.” Berwald said, deciding not to shy away from the topic. “You seemed so far away and sad this morning, you needed something to help you escape your own thoughts for a while.”

The merman ducked his head, taking the lead on the way to the kitchen. Both of them had their hands full thanks to the two meals and a few desserts and snacks they’d had throughout the day. Berwald might have let them laze around and make a mess most of the day, but he was too tidy of a person to leave it all for tomorrow.
“It isn’t as though I did a good job hiding it.” Tino muttered, a little regretfully. “But I don’t think I could have been convincing if I’d tried.”

“You’re not the type to hide your emotions well, or even at all.”

Berwald affirmed, turning on the hot water as they took up their usual positions at the sink; Tino rinsed the dishes, while Berwald then loaded them into the dishwasher. They’d found this rhythm last week, after Berwald convinced Tino that not every dish needed to be hand-washed when they had a machine for the purpose. The merman still enjoyed the ritual of rinsing the dishes at least before putting them in, so they’d found a compromise that still helped the job go quicker.

“In general, my people are very open about their feelings.” Tino said. “It’s easier when you can sense them innately in your peers.”

“That idea still sounds very uncomfortable to me.” Admitted Berwald, taking dish after dish that Tino handed to him. The merman gave another small smile.

“Because you are the opposite; you are very good at hiding your feelings from other humans, even when you don’t mean to. You’re interesting like that, you know, even from my perspective.”

Berwald raised a golden eyebrow at Tino when their eyes met, and the merman gave a giggle at the questioning look on the other man’s face.

“Just think about it, Ber; you are uncannily good at appearing emotionless, even though you’ll share your thoughts or feelings with no qualms if someone asks you, even if it’s something most might find embarrassing. You’re not even trying to hide anything, but most people cannot tell that about you the way I can.”

“What’s your point?” Berwald asked, trying to suppress the little flutter in his heart from Tino’s wording.

The merman took a long time, several dishes worth, to answer. When he did, he sounded tired.

“That I’m jealous, I suppose…and confused as to why.”

“So, you wish that you could’ve hidden your distress from us all this morning?” Berwald tried to clarify, glad that they had a task to focus on while they began talking about this. It seemed to help Tino.

“Yes,” he answered immediately, “but I’m not sure why. You’ve all seen me in extreme emotional states before. At least, what you humans would call ‘extreme’. But…this time, I just didn’t want to involve anyone.”

“Do you even want to be telling me this?” Berwald asked softly. “If you’d rather not talk about it, we don’t have to.”

“I know,” Tino insisted, sounding frustrated, “that’s what you said the last time!”

When Berwald pushed his glasses farther up his nose and scratched the side of his head, Tino sighed, pausing briefly in his rinsing of the various silverware they’d used that day.

“I’m sorry. This is why I didn’t want to tell any of you; I’m…oddly upset about it. It’s not even anything new since I’ve already told you.”

Berwald had the sense that Tino wasn’t done voicing his entire complaint yet, so he stayed quiet,
loading the last few dishes Tino handed him while he thought.

“I shouldn’t even be this irritated anymore, anyway.” The merman finally muttered, as he shut off the water and began drying his hands. “I thought I’d moved passed this already.”

Instead of trying to make sense of what Tino was rambling about, Berwald started the dishwasher and dried his own hands. Then he gently nudged Tino aside so he could fill the electric kettle from the tap. He remained quiet while Tino climbed up to sit on the counter, and settled in, hugging his arms around himself. There was nothing to be said until Tino made it clear whether he truly wanted to speak about his troubles or not. Berwald was still not insisting that he do so, especially if the merman was unsure himself. So, he simply turned the kettle on, and began sifting through the drawer that contained his various packs of tea. He selected a citrus one for himself, and then turned to find Tino watching him with half-lidded eyes, that looked unfocused and weary.

His plan had been to wait, like he had been all day, to let Tino come to him. But that expression on Tino’s sweet face was too heart-breaking for him to ignore. Berwald let out an audible sigh through his nose, and walked deliberately over to stand in front of the merman, so close that Tino’s legs brushed up against his sides. One large hand reached out to cup Tino’s face, and those violet-blue eyes flared to life again, filling with anticipation and surprise. Berwald let his thumb pat Tino’s cheek a few times as he studied the lines of the merman’s face with gentle eyes. Remembering something that Tino had done more than once before, Berwald pulled his golden head forward a bit, and rested their foreheads together in a comforting gesture.

Tino drew in a very quiet breath, but remained still and unobjecting as the moment stretched. He could feel Berwald’s warm skin against his own, hear his soft breathing, the tender touch of his hand on his face and the other that came to pat his knee. True to form, Berwald didn’t say anything for a while, just let this simple expression of caring say everything for him. And Tino heard him loud and clear, in that silence between them. It made Tino all the more aware that this man, his human, was perfectly suitable to be his new alpha. Berwald had proven it enough times that, back home, Tino would be within his right to request a declaration of his intentions. To shift Berwald from alpha to Alpha. However, this was dry land. Much was different here and Tino felt he had already skirted the edge of what most humans might call proper in his relationship to Berwald. The other man had not seemed to care, though. He had known him for less than a month and yet Berwald seemed to understand Tino so completely, knew what he needed when he needed it, handled him in a doting and responsible way, even knew when to be firm with him. The merman was aware that the last thing on his mind should be a possible romance with the first human to show him such kindness, but there was only so much possibility that he could see right in front of him and not be tempted by.

When Berwald did finally speak, it almost made Tino jump, he’d been so wound up in his inner thoughts. For once, he was glad that Berwald couldn’t sense them.

“I’ll make you some peppermint tea.”

“Alright…” Tino answered softly, feeling so warm that he was mildly surprised he wasn’t glowing like an ember.

Berwald drew back, giving Tino one last pat on his knee before going back to his tea drawer. The sound of the kettles’ water growing hotter and hotter filled the quiet of the kitchen, as Tino watched Berwald prepare the two ceramic mugs with teabags. After pouring the boiled water in and beginning to steep the tea, Berwald handed one of the mugs to Tino, with a long-stemmed teaspoon already resting in it.

“Why don’t you take that on up to the bedroom?” Berwald suggested. “Get into comfy clothes
while it cools, and then we can just sit and drink together. Sound ok?"

Tino felt relieved just hearing that idea, and it must have flooded his face by the way Berwald lightly gripped his hand around the mug. The merman sniffed at the minty, refreshing scent wafting up in a tendril of steam, and pursed his lips a little.

“Do I get any sugar in this?”

Berwald’s compassionate expression hardened a little as he shook his head, stepping back from Tino.

“It’s getting late, and the idea is to help you relax. Sugar will only stimulate you.”

“Honey, then?” Pushed Tino.

“Honey still contains sugar.”

Tino frowned, mildly annoyed and yet amused at the same time.

“OK, what about that other stuff? Ag…uh…agave?”

He could almost see Berwald’s broad shoulders slump as he realized they might be here a while if he didn’t give in.

“Alright, I’ll give you a little bit of agave, but that’s all.”

Tino’s face blossomed into a bright smile, and he held out his currently-sugarless tea for Berwald to rectify. The man shook his head, fetching the bottle of agave and uncapping it to give two decent squirts into the mug. When he capped the bottle again, Tino looked unimpressed, stirring the hot liquid with his teaspoon.

“Just be happy I gave you that much.” Berwald chided gently. “Now go on, I’ll be up soon.”

Tino slipped down from the counter, and followed Berwald’s suggestion. He changed into his pajamas, then climbed into bed, taking his mug with him. He’d just taken his first sip of the still-hot, but cooling, tea, when Berwald came in, carrying his own.

“This tastes so nice, Berwald.” Tino told him, sounding happy and a little dreamy. “You’re right; it is relaxing.”

“I’m glad.” Berwald said, placing his tea on his nightstand. “It’s been a long couple of days for us, I think we need all the help we can get.”

Tino nodded, trying not to become distracted when Berwald began changing into his own pajamas. It had become a nightly struggle. Granted, Tino was used to most of the males in his life having toned bodies due to the abdominal strength required to swim with a mer tail, but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t appreciate a good-looking human body as well. Berwald had a set of weights in the bare-bones room downstairs, and he’d shown Tino once or twice how he used them to exercise, but it seemed like too much work to the merman. Plus, Berwald always smelled quite unpleasant after his bi-weekly routine, and Tino was still adjusting to sweat in everyday life.

Berwald made quick work of it, and then slid into bed beside Tino. Once he picked up his mug, they were a matched set, sitting up against the headboard, under the covers, with their tea. They rested like that for a little while, sipping together while the clock on the wall ticked later and later, the sound of the fan in the corner filling the rest of the room with soft white noise. Eventually,
Tino did what Berwald had known, and hoped that he would; scooted closer and leaned his head on the other man’s shoulder.

“Ber…” He said, softly. “I don’t want to go to sleep.”

Berwald hummed in response, lifting a hand to rest on Tino’s head. He unintentionally leaned his own down toward Tino’s, as though to rest them together once more.

“Is this because of the dream you had last night?” Berwald probed very carefully.

Tino nodded on Berwald’s shoulder, under his hand, and inched closer.

“It’s ridiculous.” The merman almost whispered. “I’m afraid that I’ll have another just like it tonight. I shouldn’t be this upset by the idea, not anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

Tino sighed, and took a little sip of tea while he leaned there, before asking,

“You remember at the cabin, when I told you about the fight I had with Ivan?”

Berwald gave an affirmative sound without saying anything, stroking his fingers on the crown of Tino’s head. The merman continued,

“Last night, or this morning, whichever…I dreamt about it, like I was reliving the entire argument over again. It was startlingly real…”

“That’s why you woke up crying.” Stated Berwald, lifting his own mug to his lips.

“It was very disorienting,” Tino said, “the emotions were so real, so close, because it felt like I’d just been ripped from that scene and woken up in the hotel room. Then…all I could do was remember how terrible it had been, and…I haven’t been able to shake it off.”

“Is it because you miss Ivan?”

The question seemed to knock Tino out of his sad, contemplative state for a moment, and he pulled back to look at Berwald.

“I…I don’t know, really.” He stuttered, tears forming a glossy sheen over his eyes. “It…feels like…a tangled mess, inside my heart. I can’t even sort through it all to decide what hurts the most.”

Berwald’s bright, blue-green eyes narrowed in sympathy at the painfully honest words. He could see Tino’s struggle, unfolding right before him, and he felt desperate to help. Tino wiped at his eyes with his free hand, the other holding his mug carefully in his lap.

“It’s been months now,” Tino went on, his voice wavering between frustration and defeat, “I’ve had other matters to focus on, my parents were kind and took me back without any ridicule…I shouldn’t still be so upset! It’s not like being a mother was the only goal I had for my life, I’m perfectly content as things are! But…I did…I did want…”

Without saying the words, Berwald knew exactly what Tino was thinking about. The merman had said plenty of times that he loved children, and wanted to bear his own someday. Although feeling out of his depth, not knowing how to relate to a male with the miraculous capacity to bear children, Berwald could still understand the sadness of being unable to conceive to a certain degree. It was
fascinatingly tragic that Tino had clearly wanted to conceive so badly, while some inexplicable
force had withheld his womb.

“Tino,” Berwald said quietly, “you were bonded to Ivan, right? Even though it ended badly, you
still had a close connection to him. That kind of intimacy leaves an impression on you, and it’s not
something you can erase overnight even if you want to.”

The merman looked up at him, his brows pulling in on themselves as he considered the words. He
swallowed, and rubbed his chin on his shoulder as a stray tear made it to the underside of his jaw.

“I didn’t even mean for Ivan to become so important.” Tino said. “I thought that I loved Eduard
more, and Ivan was just a comforting alternative. But…I was actually very happy with him. So
happy that I did let Eduard go, or thought I did. But then…when I didn’t grow a nesting chamber, I
began to doubt myself. If I’d developed true feelings for my partner, why didn’t my body open to
him? ‘The body reflects the heart’, that’s what we are always told.”

Berwald gave him an exceedingly apologetic shrug, and shook his head regretfully. The weight and
complexity of what Tino was imparting to him made his brain hurt a bit. Berwald was the last
person to discredit metaphysical influence on physical entities, but the idea that one’s own heart
determined who and when that person could conceive, was confounding.

“I can’t answer that for you.” He said honestly. “In my opinion, the heart can be fickle. Feelings do
change. There are subtleties to our emotions that can’t be analyzed, all we can do is make our best
guess as to why we’re feeling a certain way at a certain time, and then try to ride it out. That’s just
how life goes. So, I can’t really understand how your own desires and pregnancy work for your
people. I’m sorry. Though, from the sound of things, you were very confused through that entire
time.”

“I won’t deny that.” Admitted Tino, sounding a little sturdier now after hearing Berwald’s words.
“You’re right; sometimes we think we know what we want because of what we’re feeling, and we
end up being wrong. Whether that means the mind and heart are working separately, I don’t know.
But, confusion can be a major factor in keeping mer from nesting…to be honest, I think both me
and Ivan knew that, but didn’t want to admit it. Perhaps, if I had just said no to Ivan at the
celebration that night, and remained unattached until I adjusted to the idea of Eduard being with
someone else…then maybe…”

Berwald slid his fingers under Tino’s chin, and lifted his head. He made sure the merman was
looking into his eyes as he told him,

“It’s a bad idea to start asking ‘what if’ like that. It is very sad; you watched all the possibilities of
your future with Ivan fall apart, it’s natural to consider whether you would have been happy, or
what your children would have looked like, or how many you might have had. There’s nothing
wrong with having those thoughts, but you can’t dwell on them. You can never know what would
have happened, and you’ll torture yourself trying to.”

Tino leaned his head into Berwald’s touch. Those words seemed to have broken something in him.
His eyes closed slowly, two picture-perfect teardrops rolling down his cheeks. They were almost
beautiful in their symmetry. Tino’s bottom lip trembled, until he bit it gently, and his slender frame
heaved with a shuddering inhalation and sigh of breath. His lips parted then, his eyes opening again
to reveal those pools of lavender-blue, staring warily into Berwald’s own.

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

The question was enough to break Berwald’s heart for how hopeless it sounded. He had to fight to
keep from tearing up himself as the ghosts of his own past rose to haunt him. He calmly eased them back down. With a gentle stroke to Tino’s jaw, he said,

“Take it one day at a time, one hour at a time, if you have to. And move forward.”

Berwald wondered briefly if the words were too simple, not giving Tino enough encouragement or guidance to help him. For a terrifyingly uncertain moment, Tino didn’t react. Then, gradually, Berwald saw the merman relax bodily, felt the soft sigh that left his lips as he sunk back against the headboard beside Berwald. The man slid his arm behind Tino’s shoulders as he did this, supporting his slight weight and curling a hand around his shoulder, rubbing softly. The smaller man nuzzled his head against Berwald’s collarbone, his silky hair brushing his chin.

“Ja…I guess that’s all anyone can do.” Tino sighed. “It’s not easy, though.”

“Not all the time, no.” Berwald agreed, wishing he could do something more. “But it’s alright to feel sad if you need to. No one should try and force anyone else to act cheerful when they are not.”

Tino hummed, and made a thoughtful sound as he remembered something. When he spoke, his voice was very low, the cadence careful, as though not wanting to upset Berwald.

“You used to siphon all of your negative feelings into a shield. I guess if anyone has a right to tell me to work through emotions, and not stifle them, it’s you.”

“There’s a balance.” Berwald said, just as carefully. “If your sadness grows to the point where you can’t function, then measures definitely need to be taken for the sake of your emotional and mental health.”

The merman made a low, fluttery sound in his chest, almost like a mewl. It vibrated against Berwald’s arm and shoulder. Little things like that still got to the bigger man, reminding him of what a marvelous creature he actually had right in front of him. As charming as he found Tino, he could sometimes become so blinded by that charm that he’d forget the animal-like side the young man had, but didn’t require while on shore. When it did slip out, in his reactions, Berwald felt an urge to see Tino in his full, wild state in the sea. One day…perhaps.

“I don’t think I’m at that point.” Tino finally said. “I’m sad…and the dream brought back to me how much of a mess everything was with Ivan and my own desires, but…it’s never felt like I couldn’t move forward, like you said. It just hurts to think about.”

Berwald gave Tino’s shoulder a squeeze, and leaned down just enough to rest his chin on the top of Tino’s head.

“You’re so naturally joyful and happy that I’m sure those traits will pull you through.” Berwald assured. “If you weren’t able to handle it, I doubt you would have come to shore at all, let alone be so filled with life and energy despite everything you left behind.”

“That’s part of what I don’t understand.” Blurted Tino, in a livelier tone than he’d had all day. “I told you about all of this before, that first week at the cabin! You let me have a cry, and then I felt so much better, and I’ve confided parts of the story to the others and the fans in general…so why did this dream have to come along and blindside me like this? I thought that I had dealt with it!”

“There’s a difference between remembering something, then reliving it all over again.” Offered Berwald. “The brain is a wonderous mechanism, capable of making something like your dream so real that you’d be affected regardless of how long it had been. I don’t know why that happened to you, but I think it’s safe to say that the shock brought everything back.”
“I suppose.” Tino said, sounding more grumpy than upset now. Berwald was glad to hear a bit of spunk return to his voice. “To quote Emil, ‘it sucks, bro’.”

A smile spread on Berwald’s face until he couldn’t hold in the chuckling anymore, and he burst out with a rolling series of them. Tino joined him a second later, and it felt wonderfully refreshing to do so. As their chuckling quieted down, Tino set his tea aside, and wriggled his arm in behind Berwald’s back, wrapping his other around the broad chest to hug the man. Berwald wouldn’t have considered doing anything else but drawing Tino closer, hugging him back and holding him that way for a few minutes.

So good. Berwald’s mind whispered to him. This feels so good. He’s soft and warm and small.

He smelled good, too, Berwald noted as he inhaled the scent of his own shampoo on Tino’s hair. He’d always liked that shampoo. A stirring of something dangerous in his body alarmed the larger man, and he had to fight hard to distract himself from it. All he had to do was consider what the merman had just been talking about, and that gave him the motivation he needed to calm down. Tino had been confused and hurt enough without Berwald coming in with his own feelings and making things even worse. Right now, Tino needed strength and emotional stability.

Tino made a small sound of discomfort after a while, shifting his body, and Berwald instantly went on alert.

“Are you ok?” He asked, pulling back enough to look down at Tino’s expression.

“I’m sore.” Tino sighed, drawing away from Berwald as well. “I’ve been sore all day, just like Lukas said.”

Berwald said nothing at first, as his mind leapt at once to Mathias’ suggestion from that morning. He watched Tino arch his back, stretching, and rubbing at his neck. Berwald fought a brief war within himself; he’d just decided Tino needed emotional support, not physical attention. Then again, it was what Tino responded to best, and it couldn’t hurt anything to offer.

“I did say that I would massage anywhere that you were sore.” Berwald said, trying to mask any potential perversion to his voice. “Would you like me to?”

Tino cocked his head to the side, looking sideways at Berwald.

“You’d really do that for me?” He asked hopefully. “The way Lukas did?”

“Of course. Though, I’d probably do a few things differently. For one, I’d go all the way down your legs to your feet before you fall asleep this time. Your entire body was locked up tight, so aren’t they sore as well?”

“Ja, everything is to some degree.” Tino answered. “I’d really like that, Ber.”

Berwald nodded, calming himself so as not to sound bumbling or overly eager. This was a delicate situation to his mind. Last time, they had all been together and it was obviously nothing more than a kind gesture from one friend to another. This time, it was just the two of them, in bed together. The implications were enormous, and Berwald tried not to let on that he was aware of that. This tactic had paid off so far.

“Alright, then. Would you like me to start with your feet and work my way up? Or should I start with your shoulders?”

“Shoulders, please.” Tino said happily. “They’re the worst out of everything. Should I take off my
Tino didn’t need long to make up his mind, stripping his shirt off in a matter of seconds. Lukas had massaged Tino without his shirt, so Berwald decided that was the reason.

“I know that Lukas had you sitting up, but it might be a better idea to have you lay on your stomach; it’s easier for us both that way, and then you don’t have to worry about holding yourself up either.”

Tino nodded in agreement, stretching out toward the foot of the bed and crossing his ankles comfortably on the pillow next to Berwald. The other man was suddenly looking down on Tino’s slender back. The expanse of pale skin was adorned with two beautiful lines of glowing markings cresting Tino’s shoulder blades and meeting just beneath them, forming a larger column of spots that followed his spine all the way down. They were mesmerizing, glowing at the same brightness regardless of the lighting, but they looked so much more vibrant in low light like this.

“Ah…I can’t believe that after an entire day of doing nothing, it still feels amazing to lie down after it’s all over.” Tino sighed, running his hands over the bed’s comforter and nuzzling his face into the softness.

Berwald didn’t reply, happy enough to see Tino more content than a few minutes ago. Instead, he let his actions speak for him, laying his big hands over Tino’s shoulders and beginning to knead his tired muscles. The merman gave no reaction passed a cursory hum at first. After a minute, he said, almost timidly,

“You can dig in harder with your fingers, I won’t break.”

Berwald complied, leaning more of his weight into the movement of his hands and fingers. Almost instantly Tino began to give little sounds of encouragement.

“That’s better.” Tino crooned, a slow, rolling chirp of a sound escaping his throat as Berwald worked on a knot he’d discovered in the very center of his back. “Ahh… My, my…”

“Just tell me if I’m hurting you.” Berwald said softly, aware of how small and delicate Tino’s frame felt despite the corded muscle gained from his life at sea.

“You’re not.” The merman replied in a sighing breath. “That feels very good. You can go deeper, it’s alright…”

Taking him at his word, Berwald pressed harder and deeper, feeling little pops in Tino’s spine releasing their tension as he did.

“Ah!” Tino exclaimed in surprise, then chuckling. “That was a magnificent crack! It’s been a while…”

“You cracked your back in the sea, too?” Asked Berwald, as he rubbed out the spot and continued up and down the length of Tino’s spine, following his markings.

“Occasionally. After a long day of travel or work at the barter. Though, the cores of our bodies are much more accustomed to motion and support than you humans. I haven’t said anything, but…I feel like my body is beginning to grow weaker since coming ashore.”

A shameful thought came to Berwald; that Tino would naturally begin to soften and gain weight if
he kept eating unhealthy human food without exercise. Personally, he didn’t see a problem with that, but he wondered how it would impact the merman going forward. He made a mental note to try and fill Tino’s diet with more vegetables and less sugar and carbs. Though, he also wondered how he would ever deny him anything if he asked for it with that sweet face.

“Then best take care of yourself.” Was all he said aloud. “I can help with that. I’ll take care of you, too.”

Berwald didn’t realize the instinctive reaction his words had caused within Tino’s very being. By nature, Tino craved nurture and care with a passion only matched by his desire to reciprocate such qualities. There was little that made him feel safer, happier, and more content, than someone explicitly telling him for his own comfort that they would take care of him. His body shivered in response as it was filled with subtle warmth.

“Thanks, Ber…” Tino muttered into the sheets.

For long moments after this exchange, Berwald worked up and down Tino’s back, his shoulders, even his nape and up into his scalp. Every other movement was accompanied by more breathy sighs and little inhuman sounds of pleasure.

The merman’s skin was soft, and Berwald would be lying to himself not to admit that he was enjoying the feel of it. He found himself absently wondering how long it had been since he’d touched another person in such an intimate way, and realized it had been years. There was frequent companionable contact between his newfound surrogate family, The Bondeviks, but that didn’t compare. He wasn’t exactly caring for a sick or injured person, wasn’t meeting a familial need by nursing or comforting as he had with them. This was something different. Something tiptoeing over the edge of platonic and into…the erotic.

Perhaps both of them should have been more cautious, but in the end, neither of them felt the need to think on it more than a passing acknowledgement in their own minds.

That is, until Berwald felt tempted to venture just below Tino’s lower back, and had to stop his hands from gliding right down and over Tino’s taught backside. It seemed like such a natural progression to Berwald’s hands, but he had to remind them that was not the case this time, and he decided to call it quits with Tino’s upper half, and focus on his feet and legs like he’d promised.

“Can you turn around for me?” Berwald asked. “I can start on your feet now, if you still want me to.”

“Ja…” Tino answered, his voice slurred with relaxation. When he sat up and turned his body to lay back with his head on his pillows, Berwald could see how tired his eyes looked. They were mostly-closed, and something about the set of his mouth was sleepy as well.

Despite their close living arrangements, Berwald had never really taken time to study Tino’s feet beyond brief glimpses. Now, he was given all the permission he needed. They were small and pale like the rest of him, with neat nails and an almost skeletal slenderness to their shape. Tiny pinpricks of glowing light sprinkled over the tops of them, down to his toes like so much scattered glitter. When Berwald picked one up in his big hands, he was surprised at how cold it felt. Apparently Tino was as well.

“Your hands are warm.” Murmured the merman sleepily, eyes opening in a brief flutter of violet-blue.

“Why didn’t you tell me your feet were this cold?”
“Didn’t know.”

Berwald didn’t get much else out of Tino as he began to rub the ball of his foot with his thumbs, dragging them firmly down the center of the sole and into the heel. Mostly, the merman offered up awed groans and sighs as he experienced a foot massage for the first time. Berwald kept glancing up, unable to get enough of the blissful expression Tino wore, with his head cradled by the soft pillow. It gave him almost a bright glow between his pale skin, blond hair, and the white of the pillowcase. As Berwald moved from one foot to the other slowly, carefully, taking his time to let Tino every ounce of enjoyment he could from it, he chased away the cold and warmed Tino’s flesh with his own.

After several long minutes, Tino’s sounds began to die away, and eventually they dissolved into nothing more than deep breathing. When Berwald looked up to remark on how much warmer Tino’s feet had become, he saw in the merman’s face, that he was dead asleep. Relief washed over him. Tino had been stressed about sleeping, and so stressed in general today, that he’d wondered how the night would play out for him. There was a spot of pride in Berwald for feeling like he’d helped eased Tino to sleep as well.

Carefully, Berwald drew the covers out from under Tino’s calves, and draped them over his body. Tino shifted just a bit in response, and to Berwald’s surprise, slid a hand out from the blankets, and latched lazily onto his wrist. His heart twitched with how adorable this action was, and Berwald leaned down to bravely brush a kiss on Tino’s cheek. He was met by a very soft purring thrum. Fighting the impulse to whisper ‘sweet dreams’, Berwald very cautiously slid Tino’s hand away long enough for him to settle into his own spot under the covers, and switch off the lamp.

Once situated on his side, Berwald covered Tino’s hand with his own again, and the slender fingers curled gently into his hold. Time seemed to stretch as the man drank in the sight of the merman’s profile, dotted with glowing spots of light that he’d never tire of admiring. How had he come to have such a beautiful creature sleeping beside him every single night? He didn’t have the answer to that, and he wasn’t sure he really cared, but he could not keep himself from feeling the wonder.

Time began to flow again once Berwald’s eyes began drooping and his body relaxed into a pre-sleep slump. The world became foggier and started to drift away slowly. At some point, Tino gave a sharp little breath of wakefulness, and his hand flexed in Berwald’s. A sleepy squeeze of recognition came next from both of them, and then Tino was rolling over on his side to face the other man. A languid yawn escaped him, and he nuzzled deeper into his pillow before his hand went slack in Berwald’s a few seconds later.

“Alpha…”

The single word escaped, feather-soft and far-away, like Tino had breathed it rather than consciously decided to speak it aloud. Something about it touched Berwald’s heart in a way that it hadn’t before. Once or twice he’d heard Tino call him that, but he hadn’t thought much about it. This time…it was like the syllables brushed along his spine, up his neck, to settle in his mind the reassurance that Tino trusted him implicitly. How had he not felt so proud and possessive hearing that word before? In his own half-waking state, Berwald couldn’t decipher the complexity of what he felt at that moment.

For all the power in that one word, the draw of sleep was stronger, and drew him down into its’ depths with darkness, and the soothing sound of Tino’s purring.
TBC (:

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