Your Love is Gonna Drown

by sonnie

Summary

“I’ve seen *The Shape of Water*, Arthur. What if he tries to eat one of my cats?”

“Based on my mother’s first meal in Dad’s house, I’d be more concerned if you have any goldfish.”

In which unwanted house guests are acquired, all cats are marked safe, and the way to a man’s heart might be through attention to detail but definitely his stomach.
Plans Get Complex

For the life of her, Fin can’t remember the song she wants to add to her student’s playlist. It’s just a bunch of piano pop songs, but there are so many piano pop songs that she’s honestly drawing a blank. Fin knows it’s somewhere on her fossil of an iPod, but it doesn’t have any charge left after sitting unused in her desk for years and it would be so much effort just for one lousy—

*Vienna Teng. It’s a Vienna Teng song!*

While it’s far from her best, shiniest moment of adulting, Fin congratulates herself for recalling the name of an artist she kind of forgot about for the past five years. She scrolls through all of her albums before she finds *The Tower* and adds it to her playlist.

Padding into the kitchen to collect her half-forgotten tea, Fin sighs at how bitter an extra five minutes of seeping has made it. She carries it back towards her room when sudden pounding on her front door nearly causes her to drop her mug. The ceramic vessel tips over in her hand, dangling from her finger and spilling hot tea across the top of her foot before she rights it, swearing and hobbling to her door. She’s about to stand on her tiptoes to look through the peephole when she hears a familiar voice.

“Fin, it’s me.”

*Me* is Arthur Curry, and he doesn’t exactly call much anymore. They were really good friends all through school (outcasts stick together in Amnesty Bay), but it’s been a decade since he’s had to sleep off a wild night of binge drinking on her couch because he didn’t want to wake up his dad by stumbling back to the lighthouse. Fin sees him as frequently as one can see a real-life superhero, but has only managed to snag a handful of conversations with him since he was publicly outed as Aquaman.

Puzzled by his sudden reappearance in her life, Fin unlocks her door and straightens when she sees that Arthur is not alone. He and a stunning red-haired woman are supporting the weight of a nearly-unconscious looking man whose blond head is lolling against Arthur’s shoulder.

“I hate to do this to you, Fin, but it’s been stated that my mother’s homeland isn’t a forgiving place,” Arthur intones dryly, making eye contact with his red-haired companion. There must be some kind of inside joke going on there but he doesn’t explain it before gesturing to the man slung across his shoulder. “This is my half-brother, Orm. Atlantis isn’t working out for him at the moment. He needs a place to stay.”

There’s a pause. She may not be as close with Arthur anymore but she talks to Tom frequently and sees him at least once a week. He told her what really happened and who was responsible with some earnest prodding. “…Are you referring to Orm, Ocean Master, the guy that killed thousands of people by flooding every beach on the Atlantic Seaboard with millions of tons of trash?”

“When you put it like that, this sounds like the dumbest idea of all time,” Arthur blinks. “Mera, I told you it was a long shot.”

Mera, Fin guesses, blinks and looks as if she’s not backing down from whatever this is. She merely crosses her arms and makes it a point to look into Fin’s house over her shoulder. Before one of her cats can bolt outside, Fin shuts the door gently before turning back to Arthur and crossing her arms. It’s hard to look opposing when he’s a foot taller, but she’s still going to try.
"So why am I on the shortlist for this dubious honor? Why can’t he stay in Atlantis?"

“There’s been a lot of political unrest since I became king. Orm is a very high-profile prisoner. He’s been the target of two attempted break-outs and a hostage attempt. A lot of people want to exploit him for personal gain, which isn’t really good for his rehabilitation.”

“Does he deserve rehabilitation?” Fin asks loftily, tossing her dark hair over her shoulder and crossing her arms. Yes, her fellow Amnesty Bay residents practically think she’s a witch because of her cats, greenhouse, and voting record. She feels compassion for any outcast, truly. But even though this one looks like he’d tip over in a strong breeze, she’s not fooled for a minute. Arthur might not view his half-brother as a mass-murderer, but family is his soft spot and he’d be the first to say so.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Arthur says, his shrug displacing Orm’s head so that it flops against his chest.

“Arthur, it’s not like I can offer him protection if people are after him like you say. He can’t go to Belle Reve?”

“Orm wanted to wage war to protect our oceans,” Arthur explains cagily. He knows it’s a flimsy argument, but he’s persistent. “He didn’t do it for any other reason. He doesn’t belong in there with a bunch of criminal sociopaths. He’s not evil.”

“He won’t harm you, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Mera intercedes.

Fin snorts. “I’m more worried about a bunch of pissed off Atlanteans crashing my house and shooting up the place! I mean, Tom told me how they found Atlanna all those years ago. I’m pretty sure they can find Orm.”

Mera relaxes incrementally. “A group of soldiers loyal to Atlanna will be stationed by the shore. They won’t let anyone near your home.”

“That sounds like a lot of special treatment for a prisoner of war.”

“He’s still my brother.” Arthur looks more serious than Fin has ever seen him. “I can’t ask Dad to help me with this, not after everything King Orvax has cost him. But I still want Orm with someone I can trust.”

“Your Justice League friends can’t help you?”

“Diana has a day job, hard pass on Victor, I wouldn’t trust Barry looking after a packet of Sea Monkeys, and Batman can kind of be a giant tool. The last thing I need is Batman trying to convince Orm to join up.”

Of course, Arthur has an answer for everything, Fin thinks, staring him down only for Arthur to wiggle his eyebrows at her. He knows Fin’s going to say yes, and she hates herself a little for it. She’s a pushover for anyone in need. It’s why the townspeople leave kittens outside her door, it’s why she gives free music lessons when she really needs the money, it’s why she cans fruit and vegetables as “gifts” for local fishwives that are too proud to accept charity outright.

(It’s why her brother comes to her expecting help and never leaves empty-handed, even when he’s blown chance after chance. And while he may not have ever done anything on the scale that Orm did, she can’t really fault anyone for believing in family when she’s practically an enabler herself.)

“Why should I say yes?” Fin asks after a moment, sounding much weaker than she wants to.
“Because you hate saying no,” Arthur says quietly. As if on cue, one of her rescue cats scratches at the front door. Fin sighs.

“You’re not the first person to exploit that particular tendency, you know.”

Arthur frowns. “I know that we aren’t best friends or anything, not anymore, and that I don’t have the right to asking something like this from you. I’ve spent so long distancing myself from other people and not relying on them for anything. But I’ve always been able to rely on you when I needed help, except you don’t have to chase off bullies for me this time.”

“I just have to babysit a tyrannical despot,” Fin deadpans, pointing to where Orm’s not even capable of standing on his own two feet. “Is he okay? Do I have to take him to a hospital?”

“He exhausted himself trying to fight his way out of Atlantis with us,” Mera explains. “But he will make a full recovery.”

Waving a hand in front of Orm’s unresponsive face, Fin frowns. “He seems really out of it. What if he’s not cooperative when he wakes up? I can’t see him going along with this plan.”

“He doesn’t have a choice,” Mera says tightly. Fin wonders what kind of history these three all have together, because there’s a mix of compassion and tension that she doesn’t comprehend.

“What should I do if he gives me any problems?”

Mera hands her a small device. “This is a direct line to Atlanna. She’s been splitting her time in Atlantis and Amnesty Bay.”

“Wait, you’re literally telling me that if this guy is being an asshole, I’m supposed to call his mom on him?”

Arthur considers this with a wide grin, “Pretty much, yeah.”

Fin twists her hands together. “I’ve seen The Shape of Water. What if he tries to eat one of my cats?”

“Based on my mother’s first meal in Dad’s house, I’d be more concerned if you have any goldfish.”

“Arthur!”

“He’ll likely just be interested in eating fish,” Mera soothes. “I don’t think he’s ever eaten anything that lives on land.”

“Will I have to keep him in my bathtub?”

Arthur blinks, and Fin can see him mentally run through the movie. She had recommended it to him as a joke but he must actually have some familiarity with it. “He’ll need to drink a lot of water but he doesn’t have to stay submerged.”

"Is there anything else I need to know?"

"Uh, if you're going off The Shape of Water as your template, you probably shouldn't have sex with him in your bathtub."

The last sentence makes Mera’s head whip around in confusion. “What?”

“It’s from a movie,” Arthur explains.
“Like *Pinocchio*?”

“Decidedly not like *Pinocchio.*”

“This whole thing is a terrible idea,” Fin interrupts, opening the front door because this conversation is too goddamn weird for her porch. She shoos away one of her cats, who sits back on his haunches to watch Arthur and Mera shuffle the stranger inside.

“Where do you want him?” Arthur asks.

“Back in Atlantis,” Fin counters, shutting the door behind them.

“Ha ha, Fin,” Arthur grumbles, carrying Orm from room to room. “Where’d the guest bed go?”

“I sold it so I can use the spare room for other things. It’s not like I have lots of overnight visitors.”

Arthur lifts an eyebrow at that and Fin rolls her eyes. Mera watches all this with interest.

“Dry spell, Fin?”

“Men in Amnesty Bay don’t find me to their tastes but the feeling is mutual,” Fin elaborates, following them into her room because it’s the only one with a bed and Orm is definitely too tall for her new couch. “Although you already knew that.”

“You’re worth fifty of ‘em,” Arthur says confidently, setting Orm down on top of her covers.

“You’re just saying that because I’m letting you stash a merman at my house.”

“He’s not a merman, Fin. He doesn’t have gills or scales. He has legs and he presumably has a dick.”

“Jesus,” Fin grumbles as she pinches the bridge of her nose, watching Mera fire a dangerous look at Arthur at his offhand comment over the top of her glasses.

“Fin, do you have any of your brother’s clothes handy?”

After a little rummaging, Fin produces a canvas bag from the back of her closet with floral-scented garments. Wrinkling his nose, Arthur plucks the rose sachet off the top.

“That’s gross.”

“It’s an improvement over what he left here, trust me. It was hard to get rid of the smoke smell.”

Tossing the offending item over his shoulder onto the ground (like it’s his damn house or something), Arthur moves back to the bed. He and Mera get to work unceremoniously stripping off Orm’s boots and wetsuit. He’s wearing some kind of skin-tight undergarment underneath but that’s not what concerns Fin at all. His arms and torso are littered in bruises.

“What the hell happened to him? I thought he was just tired!”

“He’s having a really bad time in prison,” Mera admits quietly. “He’s had time to think about all the Atlantean lives that were lost in the process of what he’s done. I think he’s depressed.”

Fin feels pity predictably swell in her heart and has to remind herself that while this man didn’t kill anyone she knew very well, the refuse he threw back up on shore wrecked her reclaimed water system and cost her an entire season of produce by flooding her greenhouse. It also dropped a boat on her car, although the worst damage happened to the house she parked next to. Her insurance wasn’t too eager to pay up for what they consider a hobby and what she considers a primary source
“I’ll do my best, but the first sign of trouble and I’m kicking him out,” Fin says. She gazes at his expression, so stern even in sleep. “And if he eats one of my cats I will spray paint a middle finger on your dad’s lighthouse. Deal?”

Arthur’s shoulders sag with relief. “Deal. Thanks, Fin. I owe you one.”

"That’s for damn sure." With very little fanfare, Fin sends Arthur and Mera on their way. They look exhausted; they’ll probably stay with Tom Curry tonight. When Fin locks up behind them, she glances over where one of her cats, Morris, is eyeing the closed door to her bedroom. She shakes her head.

“Shape. Of. Water.” Fin intones gravely, realizing she is completely insane for talking to a cat like he can understand her. She walks over to the kitchen and pours out the remainder of her ice-cold tea. Filling a mason jar with water and carrying it to the living room where she intends to sleep, it occurs to her that maybe she should get some for Orm when he wakes up. She places a glass on the bedside table before scooping up his crumpled wetsuit and throwing it in her washing machine.

Wishing she could simply crawl into her own bed but accepting that she can’t, Fin throws herself dramatically back into the sofa cushions. She’s already dressed for bed in a tank top and shorts, and she has about ten blankets stashed in her living room. She sets her alarm in an attempt to rise before her unwanted house guest does because if she wakes up to him looming over her, she might have a heart attack.

“Sweet dreams, Merman,” Fin mutters drolly before closing her eyes. She feels the familiar sensation of one of her cats curling up against her side before she drops off to sleep.
Awareness happens gradually. Orm has never had the luxury of many deep sleeps, not since he threw himself into training as a child and his father was still alive to run the country while he recovered. But the first thing he’s aware of, he knows before he opens his eyes. There is so much sunlight. It’s warm on his face in the way that all the bioluminescence of his home world cannot duplicate.

He’s never woken up on dry land before, and Orm wonders if that realization is what severed his final tether to sleep. For all the studying he’s done over the years to understand his enemies better, he could never bear to part with the ocean long enough. The lack of water encasing his body causes a spike of panic. Processing sensation through the air is so different than through water; the latter is a good conductor of sound but not heat. He’s so hypersensitive that he feels his body hair stand on end.

After Orm's eyes adjust and he risks opening all the way, he studies his surroundings. He’s not in another prison of some kind; he surely wouldn’t have such large windows or soft blankets. From his lessons, it appears to be a surface dweller domicile and he can detect enough humidity to deduce proximity to the ocean. His last memories before losing consciousness involve Arthur and Mera and a terrible thought occurs to him.

Is this the house of Arthur’s father?

Dread forms a leaden ball in his gut. If he had any food in his stomach, it would threaten to reappear, but Orm can’t remember the last time he was fed. He spies the water near his bed. There mere act of reaching for it leeches his strength away; there’s no water resistance or buoyancy, so he moves easy through the air but feels the pull of gravity in a totally unfamiliar way. He drains it in seconds, careful not to spill a drop. It feels wonderful but he’s still too weak to move otherwise. His bare arm falls against the mattress and the sheets feel soft and warm beneath his skin.

The last few months have been a monotonous blur. Orm's request to be imprisoned with the general population (because suddenly the idea of being trapped in the palace with Mera and Arthur is unbearable) forced him to interact with the worst people society had to offer. His sheltered upbringing only led to contact with royalty, nobility, and military leadership. His fellow inmates were not so prestigious. Some of the prisoners admired him, praised him for taking action when no other king had dared. Others held him accountable for their dead brothers and sons and fathers who rode off for his war and never came back—men who died fighting other kingdoms of Atlantis and never reached the surface.

When they fought him, the fire in his belly that propelled Orm through life at breakneck speed suddenly left him. Because where was the lie in that accusation? Orm had caused a lot of death and it was all for naught. His goal, for all the treachery and machinations, is still unrealized. He's still not sure whether that's a wholly bad or good thing that he never made it to the surface. He only knows that all of his conviction is gone.

With startling clarity, Orm recalls Arthur’s genuine and completely undesirable offer to talk when he was ready. It’s more than he deserves, but Orm doesn’t want to talk, not yet and maybe not ever. Hatred for Arthur and the surface taking his mother away made him incredibly strong and driven. But honoring Atlanna's memory could have stayed his hand. She would have never wanted him to attack the surface or his brother. His passionate rebuke to Mera that his behavior didn't matter because Atlanna was dead reminds him that had he succeeded in either, his mother's love and forgiveness would have been lost to him.
Atlanna's word, *misguided*, still echoes across his consciousness when his weary mind wanders.

There’s a very gentle knock on the door and Orm quickly feigns sleep. Even with his eyes closed, his senses are powerful. He can hear light footsteps over the strangely covered floor. There’s a humming sound, definitely a female voice. He can practically feel her looming over him, but if she’s a human as he suspects, she poses no real threat. A few mere hours of rest and healing and he will be at full strength.

A myriad of completely alien smells assault him. There must be something on her hands with a pungent, astringent odor. He feels her smear it against the bruises on his ribs. It doesn’t cause any pain, merely tingling where applied. Perhaps she is a healer of some kind? He detects another scent closer to his face, more muted than the other. He can’t identify it either, but it’s pleasant and subconsciously familiar. Everything smells so different on the surface world, undiluted by currents carrying scents to and away from him. He can tell from the volume of her humming when she turns her back on him momentarily, and he peers at her through his lashes.

Young, short stature, small build, inferior physiology, Orm finds himself ticking off her traits in case he needs to make a run for it, but even in his weakened state this woman would not be able to stop him if he truly wanted to leave. He might collapse the second he set foot outside her house, though, and that thought is enough to stop him.

The absolutely foreign sensation of someone touching him while he’s so vulnerable starts to make him uncomfortable. His servants had strict orders to leave him alone if he was not feeling well. It doesn’t help that the woman’s hands are very unusually cold. He fights the urge to grab her wrist and overpower her (he’s here because of Arthur’s doing, and hurting the caretaker Arthur left in charge of him will undoubtedly cause complications) and through sheer willpower, forces himself to relax.

“Did you want some more water?” The question is sudden, as if she’s just noticed his empty glass. She obviously knows he’s awake.

Orm keeps his eyes closed as he shakes his head, shifting a little in bed. His abs clench minutely beneath her hands, causing her nails to rake against his skin. He shivers at the intimate sensation but she luckily mistakes it for pain.

“I’m sorry, are you still hurting that badly? Arnica is good for bruises as long as the skin isn’t broken.”

“Is that what I smell?” Orm asks.

The woman hums. “Probably? Although I don’t know what you’re smelling, exactly.”

She delicately lifts her pale fingers to his face; Orm sniffs minutely and nods. “That’s it.”

“If it bothers you, I can stop,” the woman offers. She wipes her hands on a thin looking cloth and shoves it in her back pocket. “I was getting a little concerned. Arthur told me that you were basically fine, but you’ve been asleep for at least thirty six hours.”

At the mention of Arthur’s name, Orm tries to rise a little too suddenly. It makes his head spin and he permits the woman to gently maneuver him onto his back. He hasn’t been this helpless since he was a small child and his mother was caring for him. Two days of gravity pulling him down to earth explains the weariness, though.

“I think you should regain some strength before you go traipsing off after Arthur and Mera,” the woman suggests sensibly. Her dark eyes flash a hint of warning, and Orm can hardly argue against
that logic. The woman turns briefly before retrieving a plate from the bedside table. “I’m not sure what kind of food you find appealing. Arthur says you’d eat goldfish, but I wasn’t sure how serious he was. Mera suggested fish. I wasn’t sure when you would wake up but luckily I went to the market and picked something up less than an hour ago.”

Orm eyes her suspiciously. “How accommodating of you.”

“Indeed.” The woman shoots him a breezy smile and Orm is fairly certain she’s mocking him. She pours him a refill and despite the fact he initially declined, he finds he’s already thirsty and accepts it gratefully.

“I have three different types of raw fish,” the woman explains, pointing to various piles of neatly sliced meat on the plate. She scoots closer to his bedside and it occurs to Orm that none of his subjects ever dared to venture so close. “Tuna, salmon, and whitefish seemed pretty mild. Arthur messaged me early this morning and told me that you liked extra spicy food, but I think he’s lying to me. If they taste too bland, I can find a sauce or something to add.”

By his own admission, Orm doesn’t really pay much attention to his sense of taste, preferring only that whatever he ingests be nutritious. It’s not something he’s ever paid attention to before. Not even prison food made an impression on him either way.

Orm takes the fork from her hand and gingerly impales a slice of pink fish. It’s not as fresh as he’d like, but at least it isn’t cooked. The other kinds taste equally acceptable but he’d prefer fish straight from the ocean.

“How is everything?” The woman asks this needlessly, as Orm goes to work quickly devouring his food. He suspects it’s sarcasm but has so little experience with it because his people simply wouldn’t dare speak to him that way.

“Everything is adequate,” Orm concedes distantly, mostly with the intent of seeing how she reacts to his lukewarm assessment.

Hiding a smile behind her hand, the woman rises and takes his plate when he’s finished. “Good to know that fifty dollars worth of sushi grade fish is just okay.”

Whatever fifty dollars is, the food it purchased is going to build up his strength and that’s his primary concern. But it occurs to him that still has no idea what to do, though. He’s no longer imprisoned in Atlantis. Is he free to leave? Where would he even go, if not back to the place Arthur and Mera took him from?

“I can see the gears of your brain turning. I’ll let Arthur know you’re awake and he will tell you everything you need to know.”

Refilling his empty glass another time, she departs and takes the plate with her. She shuts the door and it occurs to Orm that he never asked who she was and knows nothing about her. He’s never inquired about the help before but also knows that land dwellers have a completely different social structure than he’s accustomed to. She looks too young to be a physician.

The bedroom door swings back open and when the woman said she’d inform Arthur he was awake, Orm didn’t realize she was able to do it in person. His half-brother swaggers inside, smelling of fresh air, sweat, and the ocean. He must have been outside doing some kind of manual labor.

“Hey, brother,” Arthur greets, a mix of relief and wariness.

Orm inclines his head incrementally but does not reply. He has no reason to be happy to see him, but
he can tell from Arthur’s intense expression that it’s not unexpected. It’s both distressing and gratifying to interact with someone that emotes so openly. It’s not the Atlantean way.

Arthur doesn’t waste any time. “Mera and I figured we’d stash you here until all the treaties get hammered out. A few of the other kingdoms are having a hard time coming to an agreement with Atlantis in regards to you.”

“I suppose killing the Fisherman King and attacking the Kingdom of the Brine might be factoring in.”

“We will find a solution eventually, and I promise I’ll keep you alive and safe,” Arthur swears. “But until your fate is official law, it’s open season on you, buddy.”

Yes, better to arrange an accident whilst in custody before it can trigger another war. Orm understands, really. He is ruthless enough to operate in a similar manner. “And I will be safe here?”

“Citizens of the Brine and Fisherman kingdoms don’t venture onto land.” Arthur states a common fact.

“There are plenty of Atlanteans able to do so,” Orm reminds him.

“Maybe a few outliers, but nothing organized,” Arthur concedes. “Some of your paratroopers are stationed nearby, a group loyal to you and Mom. Fin did not want a military presence in her home so they’re camped on the seafloor.”

“That’s her name? Fin, like a shark fin?”

“More like Fin, short for Finduilas, but as the fellow recipient of a nerdy literary name, I can only empathize. Wait, she came in and fed you and you didn’t even ask for her name?”

“I am not accustomed to inquiring after my servant’s personal information.”

“Please don’t ever refer to her as a servant. I don’t need to hear about it for the next rest of my life.”

“She’s not one, I presume?”

“Hell no, she’s got a lot of side hustles going on so I’m not sure what she’d consider her main occupation nowadays. But she definitely doesn’t work for me or serve anyone. She took you in out of the kindness of her heart.”

“Really?”

“I also kind of begged her and paid her, but I can’t just leave you with anyone.”

“Oh?”

“I saw the shape you were in when we got you out of that prison. I don’t see why you just couldn’t stay in the palace under guard.”

Orm hates the weakness he exudes, but artifice means so little to Arthur. “I don’t want anyone there seeing me as I am now. They served me as king for ten years, and now they do not.”

“You can’t avoid us forever. Mom—”

“Arthur, I’m not ready for that,” Orm interrupts him suddenly. “I know she wants to see me. But she doesn’t like what I’ve done. It didn’t matter when I thought she was dead, but she isn’t anymore. I
have you to thank for that, and I resent that too.”

Despite the grim confession, Arthur relaxes a little bit and sits down on the chair that Fin had used when tending to Orm. “Once the treaties are finished, you’ll be back in Atlantis. I know it’s the last place you want to be, but it’s all you know. I would never banish you.”

*Or sacrifice you to the Trench,* is all Orm hears, remembering how his mother fought her sentence because she didn’t want to leave him. “I don’t know what I’m going to do when I go back. I’m no longer king. Nothing is the way it used to be.”

“But you’re a prince,” Arthur points out. “And you’re still politically savvy and a very talented military commander. I’m not trying to take any of that away from you. But only when you’re ready.”

“This is turning into that talk you ominously promised,” Orm points out, sounding more petulant than stern.

“Not even close,” Arthur promises. “You have some time to think about what you want to do. You’re like, thirty and technically a millennial. You can go travel the world and find yourself and shit. There are just a couple of ground rules for this house that Fin wanted me to go over. She’d tell you herself but I think one of her kids is having a lesson.”

“She has children old enough for lessons? She looks barely twenty.”

“She teaches music lessons to kids that live here in the Bay. And she’s three months older than me, which means she’s at least four years older than you. She doesn’t have kids or a husband, although if you met some of the guys our age that live in the Bay, you’d understand.”

“Please inform me of the spinster’s rules for his house.”

Arthur whips an actual *list* out of his pocket but doesn’t look at it right away. “Rule one, she hates the patriarchy, so probably don’t refer to her as a spinster. That’s not even on here, but that’s rule one, believe me. If you try to use ‘but I’m a prince and you’re a peasant’ bullshit on her, she will absolutely not have it and then she’ll bitch to me about it, so just don’t.”

Orm crosses his arms. “What’s rule two?”

A small quadruped with black fur runs by the room and Arthur snatches it up in his arms and practically brandishes it at Orm. “This is a cat.”

“I know what it is.”

“Well, this is one of Fin’s cats, uh,” Arthur fiddles with the collar. “Morris. He’s Morris and I think he’s her favorite one. You don’t eat cats, do you?”

Orm scrubs his forehead with his hand. “Why would I do such a thing?”

With relief, Arthur gently drops the creature back on the ground, where it meows indignantly and quickly scurries out of the room. “Rule two is don’t eat the cats. It’s tied with rule one but doesn’t seem like a problem.” Arthur scans the list silently until Orm grows impatient.

“How many rules are there?”

“Just the normal houseguest rules apply. I guess you might actually need them written down since I doubt you ever had a roommate. Don’t do rude, stupid shit like ruin her plumbing or leave your shit lying around or throw wild parties when she’s out of town.”
Arthur sighs when Orm doesn’t even crack a grin. “Jesus, just use common sense and some consideration. Don’t steal or damage her property. Don’t hurt her or her pets. Don’t use all the hot water. Surface dwellers heat it up in small metal tanks.”

"That's barbaric."

Arthur shrugs. "They can't help it, but back to the lesson at hand..." Arthur trails off and places the list on the bedside table. "You still have the subcutaneous tracking device they shot between your shoulder blades at the prison. Since we have your location, you’re free to go wherever you want in the Bay. If you hurt anyone, you’re going back to the royal palace and I will send out invitations to the entire kingdom. Considering how much you hate the idea of people there seeing you as you are now, whatever that means, you might want to consider giving this arrangement a chance until we get everything sorted."

"Is Fin going to put me to work as she obviously has with you?"

“You should consider it since she cleaned your dirty laundry, treated your injuries, and gave you a sponge bath because you were starting to smell.”

Orm feels the color draining out of his face until Arthur claps him on the shoulder. “I'm kidding about that last part, dude, although I think she used some dry shampoo in your hair. You smell like coconut.”

Shifting in bed and trying not to exude relief, Orm manages to reach for and drain his water glass while Arthur studies him. It’s not as uncomfortable as Orm thought it might be, spending time with his half-brother when they’re not swinging tridents at each other.

“Once you’re feeling stronger I can show you around Amnesty Bay.”

“Must you?”

Arthur rolls his eyes. “You’re such a brat, but I guess losing absolute power would do that to a man.”

“I just don’t see how you have the time to be my tour guide, considering it was my absolute power that you took.”

“You know it was never about that,” Arthur snaps, and Orm finds satisfaction in finally getting Arthur to show some anger. But it’s not what he wants right now, so when there’s no follow up, Arthur breathes deeply and looks out the window. He fishes a small device out of his pocket and his mouth flattens into a thin line when he studies it. “Fine, Atlanna, Fin, or my father can show you around if you’d prefer.”

“By default I choose the woman.”

“She’ll be so flattered,” Arthur deadpans, pocketing the device and heading towards the door. “Anyway, rest up and I’ll check in later this week. Good talk.”

Orm has enough energy to roll his eyes but Arthur merely smiles as he pushes the door shut, leaving him alone with his thoughts.
With very little fanfare, Fin sees Arthur off on official Atlantean diplomatic business with the promise of a check-in later that week. She's excited: he's been weirdly tight-lipped about the redhead he initially arrived with and Fin knows a bottle of whisky will get him talking. She casually arranges to meet him at Terry’s Sunken Galleon. In addition to booze, he’d definitely prefer the change in scenery.

Arthur always slinks around her house like it’s full of ghosts. Sometimes he hesitates, mid-step, like he’s remembering something that happened in that exact same spot when he was a kid. Fin isn’t big on taking or displaying photos, but her parents were. They were great friends of Tom Curry before they passed away. There are pictures of Tom, Arthur, and even a few of Atlanna in the house they left to her, either in photo albums or on display throughout the house. It’s probably a little weird for him, honestly.

Fin feels happy for Arthur that he found his family again, even if one of them is a bit of a problem child. Orm isn’t what she initially expected. He is certainly not quite the insufferable prick that Arthur described. Orm is processing a lot, both physically and emotionally, she can tell. And maybe he’s just biding his time, but maybe he’s also the weakest and most defeated he’s ever been and doesn’t know how to handle it.

In her heart, Fin can tell her defenses are crumbling. She really is too soft for her own good, no matter how hard she fights sometimes. She recalls checking on Orm the previous afternoon noting the condition of his hair. She applied some dried shampoo and the strands felt baby-fine between her fingers. She chastised herself for enjoying it a little too much but the tender gesture somehow endeared him to her.

*This is why I have so many goddamn cats,* Fin thought, followed immediately by *Orm is not a cat, Fin. He is an intelligent and dignified person. I appreciate that he’s not immediately laying into me with macho patriarchal bullshit, but he was just sizing me up at that first time. He knows I’m not a soldier of any kind, that I pose no physical threat, although he could probably tell because of my clothing.*

Fin wears sundresses all summer long over bicycle shorts. It’s pretty much the cutest and least-threatening outfit she could possibly don to nurse a violent military genius back to health, but she wanted to look nice for her student. From how out of it he was only the day before, Fin thought it very likely he’d still be asleep. It’s not like she can make a new first impression, but she highly doubts Orm paid any attention to her clothes.

*Speaking of which…*

Not trusting her dryer with Orm’s wetsuit, Fin checks to make sure the garment is still lying flat to dry (and that one of her asshole cats hasn’t destroyed it, used it as a bed, or knocked it onto the ground.) The garment seems determined to retain moisture, which makes sense because Atlanteans need to stay hydrated, but she’s also worried it might start to smell. Fin has glimpsed Atlanna’s beautiful white suit in person, but Orm’s is gray and rather plain. The octagonal scales aren’t varied in color or finish. Arthur did mention to her later that Orm chose to be with the general population. Perhaps it’s standard prison garb.

A ding from her phone reminds her to email some sheet music to her previous student, Gabby. Keeping students motivated to practice is always challenging but Fin takes pride in finding enough good music to keep them going. Gabby loved the playlist—she really doesn’t like classics at all but
enjoys playing modern music. Fin knows most kids stop playing instruments before high school and doesn’t want Gabby to be another statistic.

*I wonder when Arthur last picked up a guitar? And I wonder what he'd say if he knew his dad was learning how to play again...*

Following up on the chores she assigned Arthur, Fin heads out to her father’s old tool shed. Her dad had three of them lined up against the back wall, which gave her lots of counter space but took away from what could fit on the floor. She had Arthur move one of them into the garage to free everything up. It was a job she could never do herself, but she has no issue with asking for that kind of help when she needs it.

*I have to take help when I can get it.*

The grim reflection reminds Fin that she’s left Orm alone long enough for him to get some more rest. She wonders if he’s awake or hungry. She has some homemade soup but it is cream based and she’s not sure if he can handle dairy. (The Asian half of her is never sure if she can handle dairy, but that’s what Lactaid is for!) She knows Arthur drinks and eats a reckless variety of things, but his physiology might be different than Orm’s. She doesn’t want to make him sick.

*Maybe he would eat vegetables?* Fin wonders, wracking her brain. She has an endless supply of tomatoes, but would they be too acidic? One of her exes couldn’t have eggs, dairy, onions, garlic, tomatoes, strawberries, oranges, soy, or gluten, so she can definitely handle dietary accommodation, even though six months without Italian or Mexican food nearly caused a nervous breakdown.

Before she gets started, Fin calls up Spotify on her iPad and finds the playlist Gabby made for her. A lot of the songs are acoustic covers from girls that got their start on YouTube, a secret guilty pleasure of hers. But it’s not really what she’s in the mood for, so she picks something a little more nostalgic, a musician that Gabby has likely never even heard of. Once she’s got it all queued up, she turns up the volume loud enough to fill the kitchen. Her bedroom is on the other end of the house and she has very little chance of waking Orm up if he's still asleep. Fin is not a great dancer, but it’s her goddamn house and she’s alone, so she sashays around the room to *Moondance* and grabs up some bowls and plates. She sings along with Van Morrison as she pulls two glasses down from the cupboard and sets them on the counter.

Fin yanks open the refrigerator door and pulls out a transparent glass carafe. When she shuts the it, she realizes Orm is right beside her. She screams and the water pitcher flies out of her hand. Instead of landing on her ass with a soaking wet sundress, Orm has caught the carafe in one hand and managed to right her with the other. His eyes are incrementally wider and it’s the most expression she’s seen from him yet.

“Are you always this jumpy?”

“Yes,” Fin replies. “Please don’t sneak up on me.”

Orm doesn’t reply, which means he’s not agreeing not to, and Fin gingerly takes the carafe from him before he starts drinks from the top. She pours him another glass of water (his fourth?) and puts it back in the fridge after pouring herself one.

“What’s that sound?”

Fin blinks and realizes he’s glancing over to where her cheap little Bluetooth speaker is. Music must sound very different when it’s not playing through water. “Oh, it’s an album from the seventies my parents used to make me listen to. The artist’s name is Van Morrison. I named Morris after him.”
Fin turns the music down so that the lyrics are almost indistinguishable in order to hear his next question. “You named the cat after a musician?”

“How did you know who Morris is?” Fin wonders aloud before realizing Arthur must have said something or Orm must have come across him on his way to the kitchen.

“Arthur showed Morris to me earlier. I had to promise not to eat him,” Orm informs her solemnly, and he’s so earnest that Fin laughs aloud.

“Thank you, I’m very reassured,” Fin beams at him but he doesn’t smile back and his expression doesn’t soften. After a moment, she gives him an appraising look. “Well, I was just wondering if you were hungry, but then I was at a loss as to what to feed you. I think fish would get boring after awhile. Tom told me that Atlanna could eat pretty much anything she wanted but I wasn’t sure if you had any sensitivity to certain foods. I don’t want to accidentally poison you or something.”

Orm hums, studying an ancient picture on the refrigerator her parents took while chaperoning a tenth-grade field trip. It’s a large group picture, but she and Arthur are not hard to pick out—Fin, because she’s the only woman in the picture that doesn’t look like a bonny Irish lass, and Arthur, because he’s a head taller than everyone else.

Straightening up, Orm glances away from it and makes startling direct eye contact with her. His eyes are unbelievably blue. “I’ve never eaten a meal on the surface before.”

He doesn’t use a lot of expressive tones when he speaks, but Orm clearly indicates that Fin’s offerings will disappoint him.

*Challenge accepted, asshole.*

But because it’s not her way to throw herself full-tilt into bitch mode, she merely smiles. “I’m not sure what you like, and you’re not sure what you like, so why don’t I have you smell a few things and you can tell me if the idea of eating them repels you or not?”

Fin doesn’t want to spend all afternoon preparing food he doesn’t like but she is a damned resourceful cook and she will find a way to please him.

Orm pulls open the refrigerator door and examines its contents. Fin has *no idea why* because he doesn’t have a fucking clue what anything is, but who is she to judge? She’d likely do the same thing. But he spends an inordinate amount of time staring into the abyss. Fin spares him by quickly pulling out the container of soup and some fruit. She doesn’t usually have bread, but Gabby brought over a fresh loaf earlier before her lesson so she places it on the table along with the items she retrieved from the fridge.

“This is potato soup,” Fin says, opening the lid. “Not that any of this means anything to you, but it has sausage, bacon, potatoes, and kale in it. I used my great-grandmother’s recipe.”

Orm delicately sniffs. “That should suffice.”

Nodding, Fin spoons the soup into a kettle and starts to reheat it. She normally adds red pepper to it but isn’t sure if Orm can handle anything spicy, despite Arthur’s reassurances. After placing the lid on top, she turns back to Orm, who is rolling an orange back and forth across the table.

“This is an orange,” Fin informs him, plucking it from his loose grasp. “It’s a fruit that grows in warmer climates but it’s very popular. It’s very acidic and tangy, but also extremely sweet. Do you like sweet food?” She pauses. “Do you even have any sweet food?”
Clearly perturbed at her line of questioning, Orm takes back the orange. He goes to bite into it but she stops him. Her fingers brush his but he doesn’t react to the contact, probably too pissed she had the gall to take something from him.

“Let me peel it first. You’re not supposed to eat it that way.”

Feeling inordinately self-conscious by his scrutiny, Fin grabs a cutting board and slices the orange. She pulls the rind off and sets it aside for compost, silently congratulating herself for not slicing open her finger. She pushes the plate of peeled fruit in front of Orm. He picks up a piece and smells it.

“Don’t bite down to hard. I think I got most of them, but oranges have seeds that you can’t eat. You can spit them out.”

Orm chews experimentally, his expression suspicious. The slice he chose is either seed-free or his teeth are stronger than rocks, Fin decides. He quickly finishes and then immediately devours the rest of them.

“Adequate?” Fin teases, recalling his earlier meal.

“It’s very good,” Orm says softly.

“I have a whole crate of Clementines. They’re even sweeter and you can peel them with your hands.”

“I didn't require your assistance,” Orm informs her. "I'm stronger than you by a very significant amount."

“Yes, but then you’d smell like oranges all day, even if you washed your hands,” Fin tells him, ignoring the dig about her strength. “We aren’t surrounded by water that rinses over our skin constantly. So sometimes people can tell what we had to eat earlier just by how they smell. Scents linger.”

“That sounds revolting,” Orm grumbles.

“Sometimes it is, but sometimes it can smell amazing too. My mom used to make waffle cones for me and my brother when we were younger in the summer time for our ice cream. She smelled so good we would just hug her so we could sniff her clothes. The ice cream would make me sick sometimes but everything tasted so good I’d take that chance.”

“You said used to.”

Fin meets his eyes and understanding passes between them. “I did. She and Dad passed away right after I graduated from college. They left this house behind, which is the only reason I can afford to live in one, honestly. I’ve been fixing it up for the past ten years.”

“Alone.”

Fin narrows her eyes. “Yes.”

“My brother says you are unmarried.”

“That’s true.”

“Why be alone? Your face is symmetrical enough to attract a mate.”

“…Thanks?” Fin laughs. It’s not really a compliment, she can tell, more like he’s stating a fact. “But
I don’t really want or need to get married. I really feel like you shouldn’t settle. I’ve never met anyone remotely compatible until I moved away for college. When those relationships didn’t work, I moved back and I haven’t encountered anyone compatible since. All the men do around here for fun is drink, which is fine in moderation but literally none of them actually drink in moderation. It’s expensive and tiresome.

“Don’t they have to attend daily training?”

“We may overspend on our military but it’s hardly a presence in everyone’s life, especially in a small seaside town. Conscription isn’t mandatory…I think only ten guys I went to high school with ended up enlisting.”

Orm looks appalled. “No wonder surface dwellers are so weak.”

Fin rolls her eyes. “I’d agree that some are lazy, but definitely not all of us.”

“Why do you make Arthur perform manual labor for you?”

Knowing bait when she sees it, Fin merely takes a deep and centering breath. “Why wouldn’t I take advantage of his superior physical strength? That would be stupid. He only moved a table for me. I didn’t ask him to humiliate him. I asked him because it’s literally easier for him to move something than I am.”

Fin feels Orm’s eyes on her back when she turns off the burner and fishes in her drawer for a spoon. She takes her time scraping the soup into two bowls. She slices some bread for them and puts it in front of her guest. It’s flaky, warm, and still fragrant; she can see Orm inhale deeply. It occurs to her that he has probably never eaten soup, so she digs in right away as soon as she sits down.

Orm glances at Fin for a moment and then copies her. He’s a talented mimic. When he sees her dip the bread in the soup, he does the same and his expression of pleasure as he chews is very satisfying.

“Gabby’s mom made it for me,” Fin tells him. She can see he’s resisting the urge to openly toy with his bread and pull it apart even further. All land food must be incredibly perplexing and stimulating after a bland diet of fish.

“It’s soft.”

“It’s bread. There are countless types of it. I like the fluffy kind that doesn’t hurt my teeth.”

“They make a hard version?”

“Oh yes, some of them are really dense and chewy. You have to practically tear them apart with your jaws. But I’m partial to softer rolls like Brioche.”

“What’s in this soup? I don’t know what any of the ingredients are that you mentioned.”

Fin scoots closer to Orm and pulls out her battered cell phone. She instructs Siri to Google various images for him. He doesn’t seem squeamish about eating land animals, which she appreciates because it will be easier to keep him fed.

“I grow the potatoes and kale myself,” Fin informs him, pointing out the window to her garden. “The greenhouse is good for my herb garden but most of my vegetables grow right outside.”

“What are those shiny slabs beside it?”
“They’re solar panels that my parents put them in. They’re outdated, but they’re too expensive to replace. The closest tech to service them lives over three hours away and refuses to come out here, so a month ago I hired an engineering undergrad to help me with them.”

“From the name I guess they derive energy from the sun?”

Fin nods. “My parents were ahead of their time. Folks in Amnesty Bay tolerated their ways because they were such likeable people, but I haven’t gotten the same treatment.”

“Are they cruel?” Orm asks.

“Not really, they just don’t understand me,” Fin admits. “They think I’m a snob because I like different things than they do and I keep to myself. I’m not shy, but I like my privacy.”

“Having me here must be awful for you,” Orm deadpans. He doesn’t sound sorry in the slightest. It’s a taunt, and how fucking dare he?

Fin shrugs, tucking a piece of hair behind her ears, forcing the careful modulation of her voice. “I don’t mind, really. You’re the only person in this whole town that feels more out of place here than I do. And you know so little about our culture that you can’t possibly judge me for how I choose to live. You hate all humans so I don’t take it personally.”

Orm frowns despite her light tone, but Fin is not going to walk on eggshells around someone who was perfectly willing to wipe out all surface life a few months ago. He may not be holding a trident to her throat, but she’s going to show him she’s not afraid to confront him for what he’s done. Orm's expression is calm but her soup spoon is literally getting crushed in his grasp.

That escalated quickly. Me and my big, fucking mouth.

“Surface dwellers are destroying the ocean,” Orm hisses. He throws the spoon down on the table and presses his hands flat against the wood as if he’s a second away from standing and storming out.

"You're not wrong, but the people that can enact the most change aren’t the ones you’re hurting when you send tsunamis onto our beaches filled with garbage.”

“It’s for the greater good.”

"Your greater good, maybe." 

"There is always collateral when wars are fought.”

"They are your victims, not a sacrifice to some bullshit greater good. No one is expendable, our people or yours!”

Fin can tell she's hit a sore spot, because Orm's face contorts with rage. “Even though they didn't make it to the surface, my men were willing to lay down their lives for the cause. The message I sent was long overdue!"

“The only thing that provoking the surface world does is convince countries that you’re dangerous. Do you really want nuclear weapons being fired into the ocean? Because until the Justice League formally intervened with world leaders, that was a very real possibility! And even if your military overpowered ours—which it could have, I’m not debating that—what would you have done next? Without surface dwellers to maintain things like power plants, nuclear weapons sites, and large commercial factories and farms, they would eventually break down and cause environmental catastrophes.”
Unable to take her eyes off Orm’s clenched fists, Fin continues. “If you don’t have an open mind about what you’re going to be doing here for the foreseeable future, I’ll ask Arthur to find someone else to house you. You have the opportunity to learn more about surface dwellers than you can ever find out by reading books or reports on our activities.”

Unmoved, Orm stares her down. "Aren't you afraid I'll use that against you one day?"

"At least you'll be able to do it knowing that the evil surface dwellers treated the wounds your own people left on you, fed you and housed you when you were in need, and honestly wanted to help you cope with all the terrible things you've done. But if you ever decide again that you want to kill all humans, promise me that you'll come for me personally and look me in the eye when you do it. You're right in pointing out my physical disadvantage. There wouldn't be anything stopping you."

Somehow this is what seems to coerce Orm into some semblance of compliance. Fin collects Orm’s empty bowl and refills his glass. “I have to walk across town for my next lesson. You can help yourself to my library or to any more food that you need.” She doesn’t need to leave for another half hour, but at least she’s not telling him a lie.

Orm doesn’t respond, only fixes her with that same, impenetrable stare as if he’s still seeing her for the first time.

“Please stay inside until I get back? I'll only be a few hours. I don't think you should go wandering around outside if you don't know where you're going.”

“I'll stay on the property.”

“Great. I didn’t get a chance to tell you earlier or show you where stuff was or how anything worked. Do you think you can figure out the bathroom appliances?”

“I'll manage.” Orm is actively trying not to be a dick, which Fin appreciates, because she doesn’t know if her last question was stupid or not. She barely remembers to grab her acoustic guitar, which is thankfully all packed up and waiting by the door.

“I hope everything goes okay,” Fin bids him, also actively trying not to be a dick. She makes sure he’s standing back far enough so that he won’t perceive her as slamming the door in his face. Checking her watch, she realizes she's given herself a whopping hour and fifteen minutes to walk the two miles to the Curry's lighthouse.

Well, at least I'll have a better answer when Tom asks me, 'What's new, Kiddo'?
When My Mirror Speaks, It Never Minces Words

Orm is finally alone in Fin’s house. He feels a puzzling combination of relief and agitation as his residual anger starts to ebb. Looking out the window at her retreating figure, he can see the ocean behind her pale green dress, and he realizes now how very close he was to wiping her house off the face of the earth when he attacked with his tidal wave. What if he would have destroyed the entire town? Arthur’s father would have died and Atlanna would have no one to go back to.

The idea makes him uneasy. Orm cannot face his mother, but he doesn’t want her to be sad. If reuniting with the man whose love caused her so much misery somehow brings her joy, a small, underdeveloped part of him is pleased for her. But in a tiny frame on the mantle, there is photographic proof in this very house that their union was a happy one. He’s never seen his mother with such a smile on her face, and it’s not at the splendorous side of Atlantis’s king, it’s sitting next to a humble, ordinary surface dweller.

Due to his high position, Orm is unaccustomed to visiting other people’s homes—they would come to him. And on the rare occasion he did have to venture out for diplomatic reasons, their estates were certainly not as unassuming or rustic as this one. There are personal touches everywhere that he finds lacking in palaces and mansions, but it occurs to him that he never sets foot in personal spaces there. Guest rooms are by nature generic, the exact opposite of where he finds himself now.

(A quick investigation before he’d gone into the kitchen revealed to Orm that he must have taken up residence in Fin’s bedroom. It doesn’t sit right with him, upsetting her from her own room, but he discovers that there is no other furniture in the house that could accommodate him.)

The nest of messy blankets in the living room confirms his theory—he hadn’t noticed before she left. He now sees a total of five hairy creatures huddled together in a giant sleeping mass. Morris is present, although Orm can only tell by the color of his collar. They appear nearly identical otherwise: black fur, triangular faces, and delicately pointed ears.

One of the animals wakes up at his approach; Orm is unsure how it detects him, as he is capable of moving stealthily even on land. The cat’s eyes are comically wide, the pupils nearly swallowing its yellow irises as it makes unrelenting eye contact. Its blue collar jingles when it moves its head, and then suddenly all five cats are awake and staring at him. It’s actually quite disconcerting. He may not be able to communicate with them, but he can read their apprehensive body language clearly.

_These animals are even more harmless than their owner_, Orm muses as one of them breaks the standoff by yawning and stretching. It jumps down off the couch and approaches him tentatively. About three feet away, just out of reach, it sits down in front of him and meows. It flops over on its belly and twists around for a moment.

_She clearly doesn’t raise you for eating_, Orm deduces, studying the cat when it stands back up and trots towards him. It bashes the front of its face against his shin, which would indicate aggression in most animals but the rest of the animal’s body language is relaxed. Recalling that its name might be listed on its collar (as Arthur clumsily demonstrated before), Orm takes a chance and scoops the creature up in his arms. It’s not as if it can hurt him.

Immediately the animal emits a rumbling sound. Once again, a typically aggressive noise, but this cat seems content otherwise. He realizes after a moment that it’s actually pleasant. It’s an unbelievably soft, warm, and squishy bundle to try and maneuver, and after some fumbling, Orm reads the name _Olive_ before gently placing the animal back on the ground. It rubs its face and the length of its body against his hand before he can stand back up, and he’s struck by its gentle nature.
Like its mistress…

A music teacher is a strange choice for a jailer. But Fin shares an acquaintance with Arthur that, according to photographs, must date far back into their childhood. Orm intentionally startled his host in the kitchen—her surprise and subsequent response was embarrassing but genuine. She has no hidden special training or ulterior motive that he can detect. He’s not accustomed to anyone displaying thoughtfulness. It’s not a quality that is appreciated in Atlantis so he didn’t recognize it for genuine consideration.

In retrospect, Orm realizes he pushed Fin too far in his efforts to discern this but he had to be sure. As a prisoner, others attempted to bring him over to their causes or coerce him into betraying his brother. As a king, he battled attempted coups and power grabs just as Arthur is likely battling now. A new king doesn’t make people less ambitious, it only makes the target more enticing to topple. Arthur may be honorable and straightforward, but Orm was taught to be manipulative and underhanded in getting what he wanted when brute force would not secure his goals.

There’s no reason why those same tactics won’t be useful here. Orvax had carefully excised every bit of Atlanna from Orm that he could. He was punished for showing signs of compassion, kindness, and mercy until one day Orm found that he stopped searching his heart for them. He is ashamed for letting it happen, but he was not at liberty to lift a hand to protect himself against the King of Atlantis, even when that king was his own father.

My brother has a father very much like my mother, and he ended up stronger than any of us.

It’s difficult to accept that the traits that served him well as king disqualify him from regaining his mother’s acceptance. Orm doesn’t want to avoid her forever, but the knowledge that Atlanna might only be a few miles away is unbearable. He’s perfectly content to pad through a stranger’s house and invade the privacy she treasures so much in an effort to distract himself from this.

Orm starts in Fin’s bedroom, where he woke up less than two hours ago. She has a lot of clothing, bright colors that contrast with her pale skin and dark hair. They’re not functional garments, with thin material lacking insulation. He could easily tear them apart in his hands; they would be no match against a weapon. After opening and quickly shutting one of her dresser drawers upon discovering what he assumes to be underclothes, Orm admits that he’s going too far and abandons that particular course of action.

There’s plenty more in plain sight he can analyze.

The jewelry Orm finds is made of cheap metal and glass, some of it even crafted from disgusting plastic. Even the most modest Atlantean owns elegant pearls and coral cabochons. It occurs to him that some or most of this might not even be hers, but her mother’s. He recalls taking one of Atlanna’s bracelets to his science team to have it modified to track Mera. Nothing present is half as elegant or refined.

There is a neatly-folded stack of garments sitting on a chair by the unmade bed. They must be intended for Orm, since they’re clearly too big for Fin. The colors are muted, which relieves him given her taste for outlandish prints and color combinations. Fin may look perfectly fine in colors that resemble candy, but he doesn’t share that desire. The plain garment he woke up in still feel and smells clean, but if he’s going to be stuck on dry land for awhile, he does need to bathe.

Fin’s en suite bathroom is too full of bottles, jars, and tubes. He’s afraid he’ll knock something over and break it, so he walks the length of the house to use the other bathroom. The toilet is self-explanatory once he pushes the handle and it flushes. There’s a sink—a totally unnecessary thing in Atlantis—but he’s familiar with them from studying Roman architecture. They may not have had
running water back then, but they still stood in front of basins to bathe and dress their hair.

An assortment of completely foreign items is sitting on the counter for him but in quantities he can handle this time. Orm discovers that the directions explain the use more than what their labels do—the words have no context or meaning for him. He flips open one of the caps and is pleased to discover it doesn’t have an overpowering scent. He grabs a few bottles and steps into the shower, managing to start it after a moment of fiddling with the levers.

Nearly scalding water comes pouring out and absolute bliss fills him.

Orm may have tolerance to cold temperatures and crushing pressure, but he does have preferences. Hot water pelting his face, neck, and shoulders feels amazing. There are natural hot springs in the ocean as well as vents and lava, but this shower stall is easier to regulate. It’s safer. And he can savor it without guards stationed a few feet away or anyone getting impatient that he’s not doing a hundred other things instead of what he’s doing right now. He can enjoy it without anyone else knowing—without it feeling like some kind of weakness.

Leisure time in a prison cell is utter boredom. Leisure time in a relatively open environment full of new and interesting things is a completely foreign concept to him. Since childhood, he’s used to his days being booked months in advance with training, lessons, and meetings. He’s done nothing for his own pleasure. It’s not fair that he’s finding it thousands of miles away from where he belongs, but at this point, he’ll take it.

Staying hygienic while submerged underwater is very different than for a surface dweller, but it still involves scented cleansing products so the ritual isn’t too unfamiliar. Pouring some shampoo into his hands, Orm lathers it up and runs it through his hair. It doesn’t smell anything like what Arthur remarked Fin had put on him, but it’s pleasant. He scrubs his body down with a loofah, one of the items she’d left out for him that he was already familiar with. The cleanser provided contains unfamiliar scents but overall gives the impression of freshness when he inhales. Steam diffuses the fragrance all around him.

Head tipped under the shower head until the spray goes ice-cold, Orm recalls what Arthur said about using up all the hot water. He quickly shuts it off and feels gravity pull every single rivulet down over the muscles of his back, chest, and thighs. He has never let his hair and skin dry out completely on the surface and never without the protective layer of his wetsuit. With great reluctance, he leaves the humid stall and stands in the bathroom in a daze as the water evaporates off his skin.

There’s a mirror above the sink that shows his blurry outline from the waist up. He smears away the condensation, slowly revealing his reflection after months of not having access to a mirror. His muscle mass is thankfully still intact, but that’s not what draws his eye. The bruises covering his ribs are old but they are fading with stubborn slowness. They don’t really hurt anymore, but he’s not sure if that’s his healing factor or the strange plant concoction Fin applied to him. His stomach clenches when he recalls how her hands traced over him this morning. The sensation that arises isn’t quite arousal, but fascination, maybe interest? He doesn’t have a lot of experience on the subject.

After learning about Arthur’s existence, Orm decided that any dalliances would risk the line of succession to the throne and that was more than enough to halt his curiosity. After his betrothal was official, there could only be Mera in his future, until there wasn't. But for all her dazzling beauty, Mera never stirred physical desire in him. Too much mutual distrust made them start to actively dislike each other towards the end of their engagement; it was impossible to think of her romantically. His intention to marry her was born solely from the desire to perform his royal duty with the most eligible candidate chosen by Atlanna. When their wedding date loomed closer, Orm had hopes that Mera’s strength, intellect, and bravery would overshadow her willfulness, defiance
and treachery.

That Mera would betray him for Arthur was more a blow to his pride than his feelings; he never loved her. Orm just thought he knew Mera better, thought her sense of duty to Atlantis would bind her more tightly to his cause than Arthur’s. Orm knows that Mera is in love with Arthur and that suits him just fine. No two people can be more relieved to have a dissolved betrothal than they are.

Orm wonders if, as similarly long-acquainted friends, Arthur and Fin had ever dabbled in romance. She speaks of him casually and with irreverence, which tells Orm absolutely nothing because Arthur doesn’t stand on formality and apparently neither does she. Arthur’s joke that Fin had disrobed and bathed Orm is unsettling, if only because he had no recollection of such an intimate event occurring. Arthur’s comment that Fin had cleaned his hair while he was asleep is intriguing.

At the thought of her fingernails caressing along his scalp, he rakes his own hand through his hair in an approximation of what he’d been imagining. Orm realizes it’s starting to get quite long. The strands gleam almost silvery-white in the sunlight streaming in from the window. Without his hair clip—confiscated as a potential weapon—the locks hang in his face. He turns on the tap and sluices some more water through his hair to keep it slicked back.

Eventually Orm reaches for a towel, suspecting that Fin doesn’t want him tracking water all over her house. But he merely drags the edge against the water running down his neck. He leaves his hair smooth the way he remembers seeing it.

Fist clenching in the unexpected texture of the terrycloth, Orm’s reminded that everything is so soft here. The sensation feels alien against his skin. Just existing without crushing air pressure or bitterly cold temperatures is changing him, somehow.

He glances up and sees his frown in the mirror. At least that still looks the same.

Orm considers himself a very quick study, and upon brief examination he is easily able to figure out how to get into the boxer briefs and jeans Fin left for him even though he’s never used a button or zipper before. Neither of them is a perfect fit, but they’re snugger than the clothes he woke up in. He decides not to put on his shirt until after his hair is drier, or he’ll just soak the hemline of it in water where it will make his neck itch.

Trying to duplicate the appearance of the towel when he first saw it, Orm refolds it awkwardly and hangs it back up. It was another rule, to clean up after himself. Arthur made it clear Fin is not his maid, and having argued with her less than an hour ago, he’s yet to be struck by her nonexistent subservience. He reasons that it is her house, and while it wasn’t exactly a threat to kick him out, she did promise to do so if he didn’t stop acting out.

Orm’s stroll through the living room is interrupted by a cat running across his path, nearly tripping him. Swearing, he manages not to fall on his face, but it’s a near miss. The animal doesn’t look contrite at all; if Orm didn’t know any better, he’d say it was intentional given the body language of the little beast. He attempts to scoop it up like Olive to discern its identity, but the cat is too agile. He’s simultaneously annoyed and impressed. The collar is blue, and that’s as good a designation as any.

After righting himself, Orm resumes his exploration of the house. One of the bedrooms is full of strange items he doesn’t recognize save for a recorder. It bears a striking resemblance to a flute that he’s heard Mera play—he doesn’t normally pay any attention to music. He determines this room must be dedicated to that pursuit and quickly loses interest.

The other converted bedroom beside it is covered, floor to ceiling, with bookshelves. There are
ancient stone tablets in Atlantis, as well as electronic devices similar to the iPad Orm saw in the kitchen, but for obvious reasons, no paper books. He systematically starts in the upper left hand corner and works his way across in an attempt to find acceptable reading material.

There is a rudimentary system of organization, Orm determines after a solid half hour of investigation. All of the authors and the majority of the book titles mean nothing to him, so he has to randomly select them based on words running down the spines that he does recognize, page through them to understand what they’re about, and then carefully replace them (out of respect, of course).

There’s a large swathe of cheap-looking, brightly-colored books with scandalous covers involving half dressed men and women. Orm correctly surmises their contents and mentally expunges them from the list of available material. He is still left with hundreds of books he deems to be works of fiction. From the wear, he can tell that some are much more heavily read than others. Maybe those would be a good place to start.

Before he sits, Orm folds his shirt over the back of the chair so it doesn’t get wet from his damp hair. It turns out to be a sinfully comfortable chair that reclines automatically once he starts to lean into it. He proceeds to tear into his hefty pile of books. It takes him only a few minutes to start eliminating a few of his selections right off the bat. He has no context to enjoy most of them, since they all derive surface dwelling elements because all of the characters are, well, surface dwellers. Disappointment creeps in and he’s about to give up when he spots a worn volume titled The Fellowship of the Ring.

He doesn’t get very far when a knock on the front door interrupts him. He carefully places his finger between the pages and walks to the living room, book in hand, damp shirt lying forgotten across the back of his chair. Before the infernal pounding can continue, Orm unlocks it and flings it open to reveal a pair of young strangers.

“You’re not Miss Fin,” the red-haired girl says needlessly.

The teenage boy next to her rolls his dark eyes. “That’s pretty obvious, Kelsey.”

“Shut up, Derek,” Kelsey hisses. “Sorry, Mister…?”

Orm doesn’t answer her question, only crossing his arms at them forbiddingly. “What are you doing here?”

“I wasn’t sure if Miss Fin was back from Mister Curry’s house yet, but she said that I could borrow her melodica.”

Orm inhales sharply. “Why was she going to Mister Curry’s house?”

Kelsey manages to tear her eyes away from Orm’s bare chest. “Oh, they’re practicing for something, but it’s a secret.”

“Jeez, Kelsey, not anymore it’s not.”

“Anyway,” Kelsey presses on, ignoring Derek’s comment. “My church is having a talent show and Miss Fin said I could borrow her melodica, but I wasn’t sure if she got my text or not because reception is really bad out here. If it’s alright with you, I can just come in and get it. I know exactly where it is.”

Weighing the pros and cons of allowing her to do so, Orm can barely protest when Kelsey mistakes his silence for acquiescence. She darts into the house but Orm’s not really sure if he should stop her or not.
“Sorry, Kelsey’s kind of the worst sometimes,” Derek commiserates. "She would have made us wait here for Miss Fin, so I appreciate you letting her in."

Orm nods in agreement with Derek’s assessment and crosses his arms. The book is still clenched in his hand. The spine is clearly visible and recognition flashes in the boy’s eyes.

“Oh hey, that’s one of my dad’s favorite series. The Parks were really obsessed with it too; that’s why they named their kids after the characters. Fin is named after Denethor’s wife and Sam is named after the gardener.”

“I just started this five minutes ago, so I wouldn’t know."

“Well, Samwise is a main character but Finduilas only gets mentioned for like, two paragraphs. Tolkein didn’t really have an even male-to-female ratio when it comes to characters in those books.”

Orm has no idea how to respond when he hears a loud crash come from one of the rooms.

“I’m fine, everything’s fine!” Kelsey calls out, and Derek merely shakes his head, the action tossing his spirally hair in every direction. The dark strands are so tightly curled they look fluffy.

“Everything is probably not fine,” Derek mutters. “She’s just excited that Miss Fin has a boyfriend. She’s probably already posted it on Twitter.”

“Boyfriend?” The colloquialism is unfamiliar but he’s able to infer its meaning. “I’m not Fin’s boyfriend.”

“Oh, then are you one of Sam’s friends? I didn’t know they let him out of jail.”

Head spinning, because Fin never mentioned a brother, let alone one that was incarcerated, Orm attempts a shrug, even though he’s unaccustomed to doing so. Kings decidedly do not shrug.

“I’m not here because I know Sam, I’m here because I know Arthur Curry,” Orm blurts out, because he can’t bring himself to say, I’m friends with Arthur Curry or Arthur Curry is my brother.

Derek’s reply is stopped by Kelsey breezing past Orm, holding what he assumes is a melodica in her hand.

“Thanks so much for letting me get this,” Kelsey says shyly, bouncing on her heels.

Derek sighs. “This dude is a friend of Aquaman’s, but he’s not dating Miss Fin.”

Kelsey’s eyes get huge and she launches into a rapid-fire speech about how cool Aquaman is. Orm halts her mid-sentence with a raised hand. He knows he can’t threaten a pair of teenagers and get away with it, so he tries a different tactic.

Carefully modulating his voice and assuming what passes for a smile, Orm leans in a little closer. “Fin told me that it’s hard to keep a low profile in a town this size. I don’t want my presence to cause any trouble for her or for people to get the wrong idea like you just did. So for her sake, please don’t go around telling everyone you saw me here.”

“Oh my God, are you on a mission with Aquaman?” Kelsey is practically squealing.

“Kels, calm down, seriously,” Derek hisses. He smiles apologetically. “Sure thing, sir.”

Orm doesn’t return the weird little salute Kelsey shoots him but can’t help but feel relief when they’re finally gone. He wonders if they should be in school, before it occurs to him he doesn’t know
when surface dwelling children even attend school. With incredible speed, Orm manages to shut the
door before one of the cats can make a run for it. He wonders how far along he'll have to read before
he gets to the paragraphs about Finduilas, and what kind of a character she must be to name a child
after her, even if the description is only two paragraphs.

Heading back to the library, Orm sinks back into the chair and continues reading.

(If Orm wonders why Fin was visiting the Curry household, he carefully pushes it to the back of his
mind. He doesn't know Tom Curry and doesn't want to and none of this is any of his business.)

Aided by his extraordinary ability to compartmentalize, Orm succeeds in not giving it another
thought by the time Bilbo Baggins' birthday party rolls around.
Too Important to Stay the Way It's Been

With an affectionate pat on her shoulder, Atlanna presses a steaming mug into Fin’s hands. It’s the first Tuesday in June but Fin can drink hot tea and eat hearty soup any day of the year. Even though it’s hot, most people run their air conditioning high enough that her Reynaud’s Syndrome acts up. She includes Tom with this group, figuring that Atlanteans apparently function best in the cold because his thermostat is set to freezing.

Guitar lesson officially over, the couple always invites her to stay for a drink. It’s usually a glass of cheap merlot (Tom is not above day drinking and neither, apparently, is Atlanna) but today Fin wants to stay sharp. She needs a clear head because the residents of Amnesty Bay drive like they just robbed a bank and it’s a two mile walk.

Too young to remember Altanna from her infancy, Fin’s been getting slowly reacquainted with her over the past six weeks. She was originally called over to help Tom restring his aging acoustic guitar. It turns out that back in the day he would play for Atlanna, but after she left it made him too emotional so he had to stop. Re-teaching him how to play is fun, especially because Atlanna is only a chair away offering helpful pointers at Tom’s expense.

Fin enjoys seeing Tom laugh and smile wholeheartedly. He’s spent almost her entire life staring longingly into the bay with haunted eyes. Fin’s only been at the lighthouse once when Arthur dropped by, but it was so wonderful, seeing them all together as a family. Ever since Arthur was a teenager and told her what happened to Atlanna, she never thought he could be so happy. There’s a whole different side to his joy that's brand new, tempered by maturity and responsibility.

It makes Fin a little wistful, with the ten-year anniversary of her parents’ deaths approaching next month. To her surprise, Atlanna had remembered the kooky Park family, even thirty years after she left. The conversation inevitably went downhill (which happens when you ask about people you didn’t know were dead or in jail) but it didn’t turn into an ugly or awkward moment. Atlanna also remembers Sam, but empathizes with his plight.

For all intents and purposes, Fin doesn’t really have any family. Sam’s incarcerated in a state prison—which is where he belongs—and she feels safe knowing he can’t get to her. The fact that Orm led his country into civil war and yet is roaming around her house unsupervised is a lot to unpack, but somehow she just knows he will be fine. Fin's aware she’s definitely not a genius or anything, but she’s an excellent judge of character. People may disappoint her, but they don’t surprise her. She can often predict what they’ll do, and while Orm remains mostly a mystery to her, he did live up to her expectations. He was quiet at first—gathering information on her. He was a little standoffish to test her and then flat out confrontational to push her. He had to know who he was dealing with, and she understands that. She just hopes it’s all out of his system by the time she gets back.

Fin blows on her tea and still burns her tongue anyway. Leaving angry wasn’t the wisest course of action, but she doesn’t want to make Orm any angrier. When she’s upset, the last thing she needs is someone getting in her face and antagonizing her. A part of her wonders what would happen if she really pushed him. Would he snap and go on a surface dweller murder spree and wipe out all human life? Fin doesn’t want to be an accessory to Armageddon, thank you.

Amnesty Bay has worked so hard to reclaim its sense of peace. There are still buildings that need to be mended and roads that need to be fixed, but all the bodies were identified and buried within the first two weeks. The death toll was seventeen, a thankfully low number given all the fires that broke out when debris from the tidal waves severed residential gas mains and severed power cables. Arthur works to rebuild his childhood home when he’s not in Atlantis, lifting impossible burdens and
completing tasks that require equipment that Amnesty Bay has in short supply. Between that and his royal duties, Fin wonders how he has any time for himself.

*Maybe he doesn’t anymore,* Fin muses. It’s a sad thought, because for all of Arthur’s bluster about being tough and taking care of himself, he’s always looked after others weaker than himself. He fed hungry fishing villages when their ports would freeze. He rescued naval vessels from pirates. He saved the world from Steppenwolf and saved the surface from Orm. She hopes that Arthur has time to actually enjoy the life he’s earned for himself.

“How is your tea, Fin?” Atlanna asks. Her gentle voice stirs Fin from her rumination.

“It’s really good, thank you.” Glancing over she sees her hosts looking at her expectantly, and knows something’s up. “Um…what’s going on?”

“So, Atlanna and I were thinking about having a barbecue for Independence Day and we’d like you to come.”

Fin manages not to pour tea all over her lap. “You’re having a barbecue here?”

“Yeah, just a few people,” Tom says carefully, “mostly family.”

“But, I’m not related to you,” Fin says dumbly.

“No, but Arthur and I have known you since you were born. It would be nice to have you over.”

“I don’t have family anymore, so why not, right?” It’s said with a remarkable lack of bitterness; she knows Tom’s coming from a kindhearted place. Being considered someone’s honorary family again is so incredibly alluring, but she’s afraid that if things go south with Orm, she’ll be held responsible. Tom’s pretty much the only family friend that actually tried to look after her all these years and if he cut her off, she would genuinely mourn the loss.

“We really appreciate what you’re trying to do for my son,” Atlanna tells her. “If he comes around in the next few weeks, we’d like you to come together. But if he’s not ready, we’d still like you to come anyway. Orm was truly suffering where he was. I know you don’t really think he deserves a second chance, but I thank you for giving him one.”

“It’s not my decision whether or not he’s deserving,” Fin says truthfully. “And I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“Yeah, you actually did have a choice and you know it,” Tom counters gently.

“Not when I’m so terrible at saying no.”

“I’ve seen you get asked out six times on karaoke night at Terry’s. You say no plenty of times.”

Fin waves a dismissive hand. “That’s different. Orm’s not trying to get into my pants. He just genuinely needs help in pretty much every other way. I’ll do my best but honestly, I’m not sure if I’m the right person for the job. I really made him mad before I left. I wasn’t trying to fight with him, but he wound me up pretty good. There’s a tyrannical fascist in my house right now and I somehow trust him not to fuck up all my shit after I blew up at him.”

Atlanna looks sorrowful. “Orm likes to test boundaries; he always has. Did he upset you horribly?”

“I mean, I kind of got shitty with him too. I refuse to tiptoe around his whole ‘destroy all humans’ bit that washed away half the bay and set fire to the other half of it. I confronted him about error of his
ways. It escalated. We just shouted a lot but he didn’t do anything violent or scary. I think my soup spoon is ruined, though.”

“You’re okay?” Tom asks.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I don’t think he’ll hurt me or he would have done it as soon as he woke up. Arthur warned me that he’s calculating but when the power levels between us are so imbalanced, there’s no reason why he would need to wait. I don’t have anything he wants.”

Fin’s next sip of tea is marred by her burnt tongue, but she persists. Atlanna and Tom study her out of their peripheral; Fin’s been on the receiving end of so many of these types of looks she’s onto them in an instant. At least they’re polite enough to not stare outright. She wishes the rest of the Bay was on the same page.

“I need to order more clothes for him. Sam’s stuff will fit him weird.”

“Arthur gave you enough money, right?”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t bring myself to keep it. I’ll manage with what I have. Just don’t tell Arthur I donated it all to the Benson’s. Nobody’s insurance wanted to pay out, citing an act of God, so I know money’s been especially tight for them. Gabby doesn’t talk about it much but I know she misses the bakery.”

Tom sighs. “And her dad, too, I bet.”

“I feel bad I never managed to meet Curtis, but his hours were always weird,” Fin admits with a frown. “Now I guess I never will. You know, I was thinking about showing Orm around town in a day or two.”

“Don’t you think he feels bad enough?” Tom ventures hesitantly.

“No.” Fin’s answer is emphatic. “I think he feels sorry for himself and bad for Atlanteans that died, but he doesn’t give a shit about us surface dwellers. He feels no remorse for what he’s done. That’s just the price of war and business as usual. I have a problem with that and I don’t think I’m the only one.”

Calmly sipping her tea, Fin meets Atlanna’s eyes, but the former queen does not lower her gaze. “Orm is not an unfeeling man. The entire reason he wanted to start the war was because of the suffering of Atlanteans. He needs to learn that surface dwellers are people too, as silly as that sounds. I think in order for him to get past this, he needs to see the extent first-hand.”

“Once he’s back at peak strength he’s going to help fix up the Bay. I already told Arthur this plan and he didn’t object. After everything that Orm did to this town, he doesn’t get to say no to this. He already dodged a prison sentence.”

Polishing off her tea, Fin sits back and admires the view of the ocean. She hears one of them approach her and finds the former queen gazing down at her, her hand resting on the edge of the chair.

“Has Orm mentioned if he wants to see me yet?” Atlanna asks quietly.

“He might have told Arthur. He definitely wouldn’t share that with me.”

Nodding tightly, Atlanna finds her hand covered comfortingly by Tom’s as he comes up behind her. Their shared smile is so sweet that Fin has to look away.
“Let us know if there’s anything you need,” Tom says sincerely.

“A really big shovel and some alibis,” Fin mutters.

“Anything but that,” Atlanna says, but she’s smiling faintly.

“I feel like I’m forgetting something, hold on a second…” Fin reaches in her bag but realizes she forgot to bring the produce with her. Her tomato plant reproduces at a frightful rate, especially given that she lives alone and simply can’t eat that many of them. Tom likes to cook, so it was a good solution in theory.

“What’s wrong? You’re making that face.” Tom points to the skin between his eyebrows that Fin notoriously creases when she’s thinking intensely about something.

“Oh, I was going to bring you some vegetables. I’ll get them to you by the end of the week.”

“There’s no hurry.”

Fin waves her hand. “There will be plenty of tomatoes for you, I promise. You should make some of your famous marinara for me.” Glancing down at her phone, she realizes she’s been gone for over four hours. Tom and Atlanna are never in a hurry to get rid of her and she always loses track of time since they’re her last Tuesday lesson of the day. “I didn’t realize it was so late. I have to get back.”

“Did you want a lift?” Tom offers. “I know it’s not too far for you, but a two minute drive beats a two mile walk in my book.”

Fin considers this and nods. “Sure.”

Waving goodbye to Atlanna, Fin heads over to Tom’s truck. For obvious reasons he had to replace his old ’83 Chevy but his “new” one is still pushing twenty years old. It’s a charming eyesore that she’s happy to hitch a ride in, relieved that she won’t arrive home disheveled and sweaty. She’s not a girl that glistens—she flat-out wilts in the sun. Even unconscious, Orm looks magnificent. Fin is definitely not that blessed.

“Atlanna is really worried about him, you know,” Tom informs her he pulls into her driveway. The whole ride over had been comfortably silent.

"I'm worried about him too," Fin admits, keeping her gaze straight ahead.

“But I’m more worried about you, though. Please be careful.”

Smiling, Fin nods, glancing over at him. “Thanks for caring.”

“Of course, Kiddo,” Tom assures her, lifting a hand jokingly and pretending he’s going to mess up her hair. That’s one of his strongest Dad moves right there. Fin ducks away and out of the car as he laughs.

“Have a good night, Fin.”

“Thanks for the ride!”

“Any time!” They wave and Tom drives away, a black silhouette against the beautiful, sparkling water of the Bay. He’s no doubt in a hurry to reunite with Atlanna. After being parted for thirty years, Fin wouldn’t expect most couples to still be close. But just being in their presence makes her believe in true love, at least for some people. Arthur has fondly referred to them as two ships in the
open sea that found each other, and it’s remarkable how romantic everyone in that entire family somehow is, with one glaring exception.

*My Prince Not-So-Charming awaits.*

Fin’s not really sure where she’ll find Orm, or what he’ll be doing when she does. She wants so badly to help him reconnect with Atlanna, but doesn’t feel like it’s her place even though Arthur put her up to everything in the first place.

The music room looks like a tornado went through it, but Orm strikes Fin as someone who doesn’t leave that kind of carelessness in his wake. When her melodica turns up missing, she quickly surmises the real culprit and sighs, picking up after her errant student. When she exits, she glances over into the next room and finds Orm paging through a book. His hair isn’t wet anymore, but she can tell he’s showered in her absence. His shirt is slung over the back of his neck and the scent of his body wash fills the small room.

“Hi,” Fin offers. Orm would have heard her come in the front door, and while she wasn’t expecting a welcome wagon, a part of her hoped he would greet her. When he doesn’t respond, she realizes it’s not out of rudeness. He’s probably not used to exchanging pleasantries.

“What are you reading?”

That question seems to get Orm’s attention. He glances up at her. *“It’s called The Fellowship of the Ring. Two of your students came by earlier and one of the informed me that this is the book your parents took your name from.”*

Fin scratches her head. *“It’s from the same series, yes, but I don’t think Finduilas is mentioned until the third book.”*

Orm moves his head incrementally. *“I was puzzled by this volume’s apparent lack of a climax. I’m at the end but things don’t seem close to wrapping up.”*

*“The author had to release it in separa—wait, you’re almost done? He’s not easy reading. Tolkein has a ton of different names and aliases for a lot of his characters. Honestly it’s too confusing for me to get through.”*

*“He’s very verbose but overall I like it.”*

*“How are you almost done reading? I wasn’t gone long enough for that to happen.”*

*“I read very quickly.”*

*“Apparently.”*

*“I’m a genius.”*

*Dick.*

“I will concede only that you’re a fast reader.”

*But not the genius part* is implied, and Orm looks up at her sharply. *“Did you have a nice time with Tom Curry? Did you see my mother?”*

Fin takes a deep breath. *“I had a wonderful time at the lighthouse, as always. And yes, I saw Atlanna today. I’ve seen her there every Tuesday for the past six weeks. She told me her original plan was to*
split time between both nations, but decided to stay on land so Arthur doesn’t feel like she’s stepping on his toes.”

Orm turns a page and without looking up at her, continuing their conversation. “Arthur will need Mother’s help if he’s to maintain his throne. Atlantis is cutthroat and his merciful ways might cost him his life.”

“Atlanna said that a man named Vulko was helping him adjust.”

The side of Orm’s mouth turns down into an ugly sneer. “The only person more treacherous than my betrothed was my vizier, Vulko.”

It’s perhaps the wrong thing to zero in on, but now Fin’s interest is piqued. “You were engaged?”

“Her name is Princess Y’Mera Xebella Challa. She brought me here with Arthur.”

“She’s very beautiful.”

“Her betrayal overshadows any other positive qualities.”

“I barely know her.”

“She doesn’t like surface dwellers. She just didn’t want Atlantis to go to war and she didn’t want to marry me.”

“Did you want to marry her?” Fin counters.

“No, but I would have performed my duty for Altantis. She should have been willing to do the same thing.”

“Didn’t you ever dream of falling in love?”

“No.”

“That’s too bad.”

Orm closes his book and levels a glare at her. “Why is that bad? Love brought ruin down on my mother.”

“She doesn’t look like she regrets it. You’ll see how happy she looks when you’re ready to go to her. She asked about you.”

“And what did you say? That I’m a murderer you regret taking in? That within two hours of me waking up we fought?”

“Yes, I basically said all that, although I don’t actually regret saying yes to letting you stay here. I just don’t know if I can help you in any way.”

“Help has to come from within, Vulko told me,” Orm sneers. “He said I have to want to change.”

“Do you?” Fin asks bluntly, which seems to take him aback.

“I don’t know how.”

Positioning herself beside his chair, Fin crouches down so she doesn’t tower over him. “There’s no guide that will tell you how to proceed. You just have to live your life day by day, decision by
decision, until you arrive at who you’re meant to be. It takes time. But here, I can save you some.”

Fin pulls out the two remaining volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* and shows him the cover of *The Return of the King* before flipping it over in her hands. She knows the page number by heart, having read and reread it countless times growing up. “She was a lady of great beauty and gentle heart, but before twelve years had passed she died. Denethor loved her, in his fashion, more dearly than any other, unless it were the elder of the sons that she bore him. But it seemed to men that she withered in the guarded city, as a flower of the seaward vales set upon a barren rock. The shadow in the east filled her with horror, and she turned her eyes ever south to the sea that she missed.”

“That’s what was written about you?”

“That’s what was written about her,” Fin corrects. “They named me after a woman whose arranged marriage took her far away from the sea that she loved. She grew homesick and died after only twelve years with him.”

“Why name you for such a woman?”

“Because my mother wanted me to find an extraordinary man and change how he saw the world. She said she did it for my father and that I deserved that kind of romance too. And maybe also because naming your child Galadriel might be considered some form of child abuse. At least ‘Fin’ is on my birth certificate, so I didn’t get made fun of too much in school.”

“Speaking of which, your two students today should have been in class, correct?”

“They’re out for the summer. I’d say ‘teenagers everywhere,’ except Amnesty Bay isn’t quite that big.”

“They are free from lessons for the entire summer?”

“Yes.”

“No wonder surface dwellers are so unintelligent.”

“Yet you seem to be enjoying what you’ve read or you definitely wouldn’t have made it that far. J.R.R. Tolkien was definitely not from Atlantis.”

“I was told that your namesake was inside and I was curious.”

“You must have been disappointed to learn, over 170,000 words later, that it was not even in that particular volume.”

“I guess I can stop reading now that you’ve spoiled the whole thing for me.”

“So you don’t want to know if Frodo makes it the Mount Doom?”

“Maybe I don’t.”

“In that case…” Fin slides the book from Orm’s grasp and replaces it, along with its companions, back on the shelf. His look of disbelief is priceless. “I’m going to insist that you take a break and help me make dinner. This is only the tip of the iceberg—where your real work begins. I can’t imagine you like being idle.”

*That* definitely gets stuck in his craw and he rises instantly. Orm obediently follows her when she motions for him to, which is all Fin can really ask amidst the glaring.
As she walks towards her kitchen, Fin finally gets Kelsey’s text about the melodica—she’s convinced it’s one of the few areas of the Bay that gets cell service. She pockets the cell (most of her dresses have pockets because damn it, dresses should) and starts pulling ingredients out of various drawers and cabinets while Orm stands awkwardly in the doorway. He always watches her: the order in which she completes her tasks, where she pulls out cups versus silverware, the economy of her movement entirely. It’s definitely not out of appreciation. It's almost like she's being studied.

“Are you still hot?” Fin asks casually. She tries and fails to look away from the smooth, broad expanse of Orm’s bare chest. It didn’t feel right, studying him when he was asleep, but she can look her fill now. He’s very classically handsome, like a Roman general carved from marble. It always makes his face appear very stern, even when she suspects his expression is neutral.

“I’m accustomed to far cooler temperatures.”

“Do you want me to change the thermostat for you?” Fin shivers unconsciously.

Orm’s eyes study the faint tremor that runs down her arms, even though she’s wearing a dress with three-quarter length sleeves. “Yes.”

Rolling her eyes, Fin obliges, silently resigning herself to wearing leggings for the foreseeable future. But Orm intuits why she asked and puts the shirt on. It might be his very first time slipping such a garment on over his head, but he somehow manages gracefully and Fin wonders how easily some of this surface dweller stuff comes to him—if their positions were reversed, she would surely struggle more than he appears to.

“I’m going to pick some basil from the garden. Please accompany me.”

It’s an easy task that Fin doesn’t actually require assistance for, but she eventually intends for Orm to do it, since she’s not going to be waiting on him hand and foot. She grows the herbs in the greenhouse because they’re delicate and she likes access to them even when there’s snow on the ground. She notices how Orm glances upwards when he’s inside, once again taking everything in.

“I’m ninety nine percent sure my parents used this for pot when they were in their twenties, but after a few close calls with the sole police office that lives in the Bay, they switched over to actual herbs,” Fin admits sheepishly. “They don’t mean anything to you, but all the herbs in here have names. Originally they were labeled for me so that I could learn the differences when I was a kid. Even though I don’t need them anymore, I couldn’t bring myself to get rid of them, but I guess that makes it easier for you.”

Orm leans forward and studies the faded handwriting. It’s very warm and toasty in the greenhouse, and Fin can feel herself relaxing.

“Cilantro, parsley, and mint are over there,” Fin points at the far end of the greenhouse that receives less sunlight before pointing to the other side. “Basil, rosemary, thyme, dill, and oregano are over there. I used to grow a lot more herbs for tinctures and creams, but everyone’s afraid to buy them for me. Half the town probably thinks I’m a witch.”

“Why?”

“I live alone, I don’t have a typical occupation, I don’t go to church, and I have five black cats. I also used to sing for a living when I was in college, which would have put me first in line for the stake back in the day. But lately I’ve been getting a lot of grief because for whatever reason, my house received the least amount of damage when your tidal wave struck the bay. I had to fish some trash out of my reclaimed water system and my Saturn was crushed, but my house itself was fine.”
“Your Saturn?”

“My car,” Fin elaborates. “They don’t even make them anymore. It used to belong to my mom and it was ancient, but it got me around until half a fishing boat landed on it. I’d left it down by the dock near Gabby’s house for a lesson. I used to go over to her house for them when they still had one.”

_Better not go into too much detail until tomorrow_, Fin reminds herself. Producing a pair of shears, she walks over to the closest plant and snips a stalk. “This is basil. It’s savory and fragrant. Herbs make out food taste complex and delicious.”

Twirling it in her hand, Fin brings it to Orm’s nose with a sly smile. He inhales, long and slow, and she suspects his sense of smell lay mostly dormant underwater in comparison to what it must be going through now. If he’s going to ever destroy the surface dwellers, he’s got to understand what he’s taking away: countless cultures with diverse food, music, and histories.

Fin doesn’t think life is all about grand milestone achievements—it’s about what she eats for dinner and the playlists that get her through breakups and the same ridiculous stories her father told her about all the mishaps he had when he and her mom built their house. She desperately doesn’t want to lose those things—things that would be gone forever if Orm stopped cutting up all her basil and decided the world needed one less surface dweller.

“Hey now, easy does it,” Fin swoops in and gently grips his wrists to pull the shears back. “If you cut it all, I won’t have any for next time. It takes awhile to grow back. Would you help me take this inside?”

Orm seems to consider her request for a moment and then suddenly hands her back the shears. He gathers the _ridiculous_ amount of basil that he harvested and heads back to the house without another word. Fin promised a bunch of fresh basil to Kelsey’s mom, but now she’s not so sure she can fulfill that order. She wonders briefly if there’s anything that can be done. Maybe she’ll take cilantro instead?

Mind racing, Fin takes one last look at her previously beautiful herb garden. Before following Orm inside, she snips off a few sprigs of mint. She’s got a plan for all that basil.
As soon as he reenters the kitchen, Orm drops a handful of basil on the counter. He glances behind him and Fin is still in the greenhouse, so he takes the opportunity to study what she’s put on the countertop. There’s a large wooden cylinder, a large bowl with a damp towel over it, and a cold jar full of something red. He removes the lid from the latter, inhaling deeply. Surface dweller food has such exciting, multifaceted smells and in the privacy of this moment, he can admit that to himself.

“It’s technically marinara sauce, but I like it on pizza, too.” Fin’s voice announces her return, but Orm’s not ashamed to be caught investigating. Curiosity is a necessity in a fresh environment.

“It seems agreeable,” Orm admits.

“The oregano you smell came from my greenhouse. So did the tomatoes, garlic, and onions.”

“Surface dweller food seems needlessly complicated.”

Fin smiles. “In some cultures, there are dishes and meals that require days of preparation. Some alcohol ages for a decade or more. We emphasize a lot of rituals involving food. Most social and religious events are either about eating or fasting.”

“That sounds tiresome.”

“Well, I’m sure it is to some people, but if you want to eat well while you’re here, complain upon pain of my wrath.”

It’s a joke, but as Orm watches her from the doorway, a strange feeling of indebtedness creeps in. This woman was never one of his subjects; it’s his first time interacting with someone, aside from Arthur, that never deferred to him as a king or addressed him as such. He gets the impression that attempting to command her would only result in mockery.

Orm marches past this line of thought very decidedly. “What else did you pick up before you came back in? I thought you were right behind me.”

“Oh, that was some mint for later,” Fin says vaguely. She motions to the unshapely lump she’s finished forming on the countertop. “This is dough I made yesterday. I’m all out of yeast to make it fresh for you. I’d normally apologize for that but you have no idea what I’m talking about.”

It’s all nonsensical to him, so Orm says nothing. Fin sprinkles something powdery and white on top. He can tell from her practiced movements that this must be something she commonly makes. She appears to be spreading it thin with the rolling apparatus.

“Do you have everything memorized?”

“Not always. After my parents died I ate a lot of stuff that wasn’t good for me. I was depressed and I discovered that spending time to plan and make nutritious meals really helped me work through some things. I was able to take pride in something again and I felt better when I ate better. It was a small way to achieve control after I felt like I had none.”

Orm has known Fin for less than a day but can’t imagine her in any way lesser. For a weak surface dweller, she’s a better person than he was led to believe that surface dwellers could be. Her explanations provide context he doesn’t even know he needs—a gesture that’s definitely not a requirement of boarding him. Not since childhood has he felt so lost; he feels a strange emptiness
when he realizes that Vulko was always his mentor after Atlanna was sacrificed to the Trench. He hasn’t needed a teacher since.

But Vulko turned his back on Orm to face Arthur, just as Mera and his mother had. Fin has no way of knowing the emotional isolation he feels sitting in her brightly-lit little house. But she’s taking time to engage with him and educate him so he doesn’t feel ignorant. After leaving his terrible childhood in his wake, Orm never thought he’d need to feel grateful for that again. He thought he’d previously banished insecurity and loneliness but the surface world has brought them roaring back.

“Hey, are you still with me?”

Orm doesn’t know how long he’s been standing in the doorway staring past her. His mind never used to wander when he was in the company of others and he hopes this isn’t going to be a frequent occurrence. “What is yeast?”

“It’s an ingredient that causes dough to rise. A lot of food, especially baking, requires chemical reactions to change it along the way to achieve different textures or to make it more stable. Some things you can kind of wing it and make up as you go, because creativity can really improve a dish. But baking is stricter. You can’t really change too much or you could ruin the whole thing.”

Pulling a large knife out of the drawer, Fin sets it on the countertop before turning to Orm. “Can you start pulling off the basil leaves with me? If you come across any with brown spots or if you see any flower buds, put them to the side so I can throw them outside.”

Relying on his mimicry from earlier, Orm observes her for a moment before doing as she asks. He notes her efficiency when tasking; she leads by good example. After a moment, he’s completed his rather large pile. He’s absolutely mesmerized when she picks the knife back up and starts cutting up the leaves; he hasn’t been near a weapon in months. The action is smooth, almost a rocking motion, as she delicately saws through the basil. She has admirable control.

“A lot of people use whole basil leaves like the ones you and I just pulled off, but I prefer the long, skinny pieces for my pizza because they’re more flavorful and easier to eat,” Fin admits. She motions to the cutting board. “Will you try?”

Orm pauses. “Are you trying to coerce me into servitude like you did my brother?”

“That’s it. You can’t. You’ll either do it or you won’t.”

This surface dweller continues to surprise him. As if to accept Fin’s challenge, Orm steps forward to assume her former position at the cutting board. He’s wielded dozens of knives, albeit never ones meant for preparing food. It’s hardly a blade befitting his station, but Orm can do anything he wants. He’s not afraid.

“Um, now that I think about it, please slice gently. That cutting board is kind of an heirloom.”

Having been deliberately holding back all day, it’s still good advice to keep in mind. One of the rules is respecting property, after all. Orm’s used do doing everything thousands of feet below sea level under immense water pressure and extreme cold. It should be effortless, but the task laid out before him is more symbolic than anything: it’s taking one more step further away from everything he’s ever known. It’s adapting to a different, albeit temporary role and accepting burdens he’s never had to before. What could be more humble than preparing your own food?

There is the briefest moment of hesitation before Orm picks up the knife. What Fin said is correct: he has to make the decisions themselves. Change can’t be forced on him. Everything is somehow easier...
here, away from everyone’s prying eyes save hers. He’s going to show her how effortless this one tiny thing can be.

In an admirable approximation of Fin’s movements, Orm gingerly draws the knife over a batch of basil leaves. He replicates her motions perfectly—motions he’s only observed this one time. He rocks the blade back and forth over them expertly until his pile resembles hers.

“You’re a natural.”

Orm hums in agreement. Would Fin be bothered, knowing that she stands next to a murderer? He considers himself a warrior even more than he considered himself a king; every achievement in Atlantis is a battle. His attitude towards killing is casual at best. A kitchen knife is beneath him, but a weapon of any kind in his hands will bend to his will and do exactly what he wants it to. As least he doesn’t have to worry about any opponents in this house. All of its occupants are soft, gentle creatures.

His host is truthfully the most harmless being Orm’s ever met. She moves differently than an Atlantean, with seemingly no capacity for lethal intent. But, enthralled by her tasks, it doesn’t make her less interesting to watch. With a leisurely swirl of a spoon, Fin spreads the aromatic red sauce all over the dough she rolled out. There’s a strange white sphere she slices into thin pieces before laying down several red discs on the top of everything else. He doesn’t know what anything is up here. It’s never occurred to him before now that if he had to fend for himself—cook his own food and wash his own clothes and look after his own dwelling—he wouldn’t know how. All of those things were previously done for him.

Orm is naturally observant and curious, and here, without the overbearing weight of ruling a kingdom, he can sit in this modest home and look his fill as Fin completes domestic tasks completely foreign to him. It’s almost relaxing.

“I like to put pepperoni on a margherita pizza. But that’s not how you’re supposed to enjoy it, so I’ll just put them on half. Otherwise you might find it too salty.”

“I will risk your concoction.”

“I’m so gratified by your boundless excitement,” Fin shoots him a dazzling smile that he suspects is completely fake. Only Vulko ever treated him to sarcasm; it’s strange coming from someone else. Orm watches as she sprinkles the basil leaves over the entire thing, the scent filling the entire kitchen.

A blast of hot air hits him when Fin opens a clear drawer in one of her cabinets. The name of the appliance escapes him, but he’s familiar with the concept. Orm supposes it’s how she cooks her food, since surface dwellers have such an aversion to raw things. She presses a few buttons and a countdown appears.

Fin sidles up to where he’s still standing in the doorway. “So, do Atlanteans drink alcohol? Arthur says he was labeled a drunk on his first visit to Atlantis. How do you even know what a drunk is if you don’t do something similar?”

Orm wonders exactly how detailed Arthur was when imparting that tale. Does Fin know he was about to fight in an arena? Does she know it was supposed to be a fight to the death? Does she know how close Orm was to committing fratricide?

Does she know how badly he wanted to?

“Atlanteans are more disciplined than stumbling drunkards,” is the response Orm finally settles on.
“I wasn’t talking about getting shitfaced, I was just wondering if you had any kind of equivalent. No civilization is above recreational drugs.”

“Certain animals carry toxins that can be refined for a similar effect, but I banned the practice seven years ago.”

“Protecting the wildlife?”

“I was cracking down on unruly behavior.”

“You know, your mom and your brother are pretty big fans of booze,” Fin informs him slyly. “If you want, I could let you see what all the fuss is about. My parents used to entertain a lot so I have all the equipment I need. I really can’t think of a more fun way to use all that basil you cut.”

“You want me to drink it?” Orm stares at the extra basil she chose not to cut up. The leaves sit there innocuously but he can’t imagine them in a beverage.

“Well, only some of it. We’re definitely eating pesto tomorrow, but for tonight, I had something else in mind.”

Magically producing two small green orbs, Fin drops one into his hand so he can test its weight—much like he did earlier with the orange—before reclaiming it and then rolling them over the cutting board Orm was just using. “These little cuties are called limes. They’re a tropical fruit and very tart—almost sour. They grow in a similar climate to those oranges you seem to like so much, except they’re not sweet.”

Fin cuts off the ends before slicing them into uniform wedges. Pulling out a thick glass, she drops half of one lime inside and selects what looks like a long, silver pestle. “Muddling releases flavors. Fruit requires more force; I’m trying to release juice from the lime and oil from the skin.”

Once the limes are crushed, Fin places the basil in a separate glass along with a translucent liquid and the mint. “Herbs are delicate and can taste bitter when you muddle them too hard, so a light touch will do. The mint and basil should be lightly bruised, not shredded. The liquid I used is simple syrup. It’s just sugar and water but I like the sweetness.”

The three little twists with a wooden stick are almost anticlimactic after she went hard at the limes. There’s a large clear bottle with what Orm assumes is the alcoholic component to the beverage and Fin pours some of that into the larger glass along with the other ingredients. She also adds ice before placing a large silver cup on top. Grasping the two cups in her hands, she shakes them together near eye level. The action makes her sleeves bunch at the elbows. It’s a practiced, almost stilted movement and something occurs to him.

“You’re showing off.”

“When I was in college, before they let me sing, I had to bartend at an upscale club in Gotham. It was a terrible city and I’ll be happy to never go back, but I did learn a lot about showmanship. Are you not entertained?”

Fin is unreadable to him. She’s smiling, but she might also be insecure about the situation Arthur foisted on her. Despite his taunt earlier, Orm really does consider it a huge imposition upon her. She’s going through a lot of trouble and he hasn’t been a good guest. He’s used to being served and waited on; he was king once. He’s still highborn, still a prince, still more important than she’ll ever be, but he can tell that titles mean nothing to her, but his good manners might.

Orm doesn’t understand why Fin wants to help, but a part of her must want to, because she’s made it
clear that their arrangement can end if she says the word. Help from a stranger is best; he can’t stand anyone familiar. His life is full of traitors and usurpers. The only thing Orm knows is that he doesn’t want to continue on as he has been. He caused a civil war and lost his crown in addition to his vizier’s confidence, his betrothed’s loyalty, and his mother’s respect.

“Am I supposed to be entertained? Is that why you hold it so high to shake it?”

“It’s supposed to look better,” Fin says with a shrug, pouring the mixture into two glasses. “Bartenders are trained that way. The point is to appear happy that you’re mixing someone’s drink for them, or at least look attractive while doing it. When you hold your arms up like this, it draws attention to your assets.

Orm can’t say he hasn’t noticed. “This kind of showing off is required for such a job?”

Fin smiles with what he guesses would be amusement. “Yes. Most bartenders make a very small hourly wage and rely on your customers to leave extra money called tips. I’m not sure what kind of bar culture you have in Atlantis, or if you even have bars, but that’s how surface dwellers do it. Men tend to leave better tips when you put on a good show.”

“And you just…let them look at you?”

“Hey, not so judgy,” Fin scolds. She places a cardboard straw in each glass. “Most customers aren’t creepy about it. I genuinely liked tending bar for the most part. The hours were terrible, though.”

“You don’t do that here, in Amnesty Bay?”

“Nah, I’d be waiting on the same twenty customers every day of the off-season,” Fin says. “It’d be boring. The people here don’t have lots of money to throw around. And I grew up with most of them, so it would also be kind of weird.” She pushes the drink in front of him.

With intense skepticism, Orm picks the glass up and smells it.

“Rum is made from sugarcane and then aged in barrels,” Fin informs him. “This is a good drink for sipping, but drink slowly so the alcohol doesn’t go right to your head. You’re not used to how that feels.”

It must occur to Fin that Orm has never used a drinking straw, so she patiently demonstrates the act for him. Awkwardly, he closes his lips around his, feeling the resistance of his breath drawing the liquid up until it paints his tongue. He chokes—he can’t ever remember that happening before—and amidst the sputtering Fin moves to assist him.

Orm waves off her concern. “I’m fine, it’s just…“ He takes another sip and finds the sensations haven’t dulled one bit. Bright, tart, sweet, and tangy flavors assault him.

“Good?” Fin asks, hopeful.

Orm nods. The beverage is very refreshing. His eyes want to water from the acidity but he likes it. “This is what my brother drinks?”

“I’d pay serious money to watch Arthur drink a mojito,” Fin informs him with a cackle. “I prefer to drink for pleasure. He drinks to get drunk. I don’t think I can impress upon you how bad some of his tastes are. You’ll just have to go drinking with him one night and find out. He and I don’t have a lot of common ground when it comes to the booze we like.”

There’s a shrill beeping and Fin hops up and fetches the pizza. She uses some kind of thick covers
for her hands, presumably to avoid burns. It might be too hot for her to eat, but it’s not too hot for him. As soon as it’s plated in front of him, Orm takes a bite and chews thoughtfully. The soup he had for lunch was good, but this? This is better. It’s sensory overload that makes him feel like he’s eating for the very first time.

A minute in, Fin once again looks at him expectantly, probably because he still hasn’t taken another bite. She doesn’t even need to ask this time.

“This food is incredible,” Orm admits quietly. “It’s hard to describe everything that I taste. I always thought such things were a waste of time.”

Fin looks a little puzzled. “Oh?”

“I didn’t realize things could taste so good. I’m unsettled by it.”

“Eating should be pleasurable if you’re doing it right,” Fin says. “Smell and taste can transport you to another time and place. I guess in your case, you’ll remember this moment later on if you ever decide to eat pizza again.”

Orm can’t remember the last time he enjoyed something just for its own sake in Atlantis. He fought for survival and he thrived, but as he grew he slowly shed every little distraction that could have held him back. But he’s discovering a whole facet of his personality—that he might actually have preferences and like things—and she’s managed to nurture it in the span of twelve hours. It’s a little disconcerting. He never had someone take the time to show him things he might enjoy. All of his lessons were meant to make him a better king.

Desires...are perplexing. Orm has spent his life ignoring them, not realizing that some are rather harmless, like craving certain foods.

“Are all surface dwellers as sensual as you?” Orm asks after a moment. "You seem to hold physical pleasure in high esteem."

It could be because she’s suffused with heat from her food, but Fin looks especially warm. “I mean, I’m not a total hedonist or anything, but why not enjoy things if you can?”

Motioning to her pizza slices with meat, she swaps one out on his plate. He takes in the crispy texture and the salty taste of the pepperoni. “It’s good, but I prefer the original one.”

“Would you have said that if I’d have given you one of these first?”

Orm honestly can’t say. He finishes the rest of the slice she gave him; it’s still excellent. When his beverage is gone he gladly accepts the water she provides.

“This meal is rather informal.”

"Did you have a big royal dinner every night?"

"Not if I could help it. But I would still be served in accordance with my station. It was always the very best food that Atlantis had to offer."

Fin smirks. "I guess you're really slumming it with me. I hope my food is adequate."

"It's excellent," Orm admits. He can give recognition when it's due. "Do you prefer to eat by yourself?"
“Sometimes my students’ families invite me to dinner,” Fin says after a moment. “It’s probably out of pity and it’s not fancy—the Bay is never fancy. I used to eat a lot with my old band mates, but they got married to each other and moved to Seattle. There’s a whole continent separating us so now I usually eat by myself, although I have anywhere from one to five cats trying to crawl all over me and steal my food. They’re still wary of you, which will probably last for less than twenty four hours. Don’t ever feed them or they will never leave you alone.”

Orm finishes his water and before he can ask for another, Fin refills his glass.

“Why do you have so many?”

Fin’s smile is crooked. “People have been dropping off kittens at this house since before I was born. My parents would take care of them and find them homes, but once they died I discovered that the cats didn’t stop coming. I found homes for the ones that I could, but there’re only a finite number of people living here during the off season. I couldn’t find a home for all of them and the closest animal shelter is over an hour away.”

“Why do you care about them so much?”

“They provide company and unconditional love even though all cats are kind of terrible sometimes. It would be lonely without them. But mostly because they needed me and I couldn’t say no.”

“And that’s how you ended up with me?”

It’s not quite a smirk, but Fin kind of half smiles. “You’re definitely somewhat of a stray at the moment, but at least you have somewhere to go back to. I don’t think this is your forever home.”

Orm doesn’t say anything for the rest of the meal, his mind periodically repeating her last words to him. Fin doesn’t seem particularly bothered by the silence, but she’s probably used to the quiet while she eats. After dinner, he helps her clear the table and listens to her instructions on how to clean the various implements used to prepare and serve the food.

Fin’s bossy, but since he knows less than she does about the surface world, he doesn’t mind on principle the way he thought he might. Orm certainly has no other way to repay her, and finds the menial tasks simple because they don’t require a lot of thought. He’s able to think about other things, such as how a few short months ago, he would have never had unstructured time like this—he was too busy plotting to destroy the surface world. Her neighbors may resent her, but he’s content with the knowledge that her house was mostly spared by his tidal wave.

“So, it’s still early, but I’m not sure what you normally do before bedtime,” Fin admits.

“I practice Xebel-Fu and meditate,” Orm replies. “Xebel Fu requires submersion in water so that is out of the question.”

“Did you need anything special for the latter?” Fin asks. She snorts. “I almost asked if you used candles.”

“I feel like all I’ve done today is ruminate,” Orm admits. “My thoughts are too chaotic to attempt meditation. It would be a waste of time.”

“Maybe you’ll feel better tomorrow,” Fin offers. “I was planning to show you around and put you to work.”

“So you finally admit that was why you took me in? Slave labor?” Orm doesn’t believe this is her actual purpose, but she doesn’t seem adverse to his help.
“Not exactly, but we can talk about it more then,” Fin says furtively. “I was going to suggest watching a movie tonight before bed, but you’re probably itching to find out what happens to Frodo.”

“It’s the first time since childhood that I’ve been able to read something that wasn’t some form of legal document or treaty.”

Fin looks aghast. “That’s awful. But if you finish the entire trilogy, you’ll be up all night, genius or not, and I need you to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed tomorrow.”

Orm blinks at the colloquialism but figures she means for him to be alert in the morning. “A movie should be acceptable. We have similar entertainment in Atlantis.”

“I’m going to go change for bed before you start getting too sleepy, so why don’t you pick whichever one you want? I can tell if you if they’re actually good or not. I have questionable taste in film, I’ve been told.” Fin gestures to a rather large shelf stocked with slim blue or black cases before she takes off in the direction of her room.

Making his way over, Orm finds he has to rely on the same system he used in her library. He pulls out a few volumes with interesting-sounding titles but finds the covers off-putting. Every single case is made of plastic; he imagines them mass produced in millions of houses and the case in his hand starts to creak in protest. There are reminders everywhere of surface dweller carelessness.

Delicately placing the volume back on the shelf, Orm finds he’s suddenly in no mood to socialize, even if he doesn’t have to say anything. As he walks back to his room, he crosses paths with his puzzled host. She’s changed into dark loose pants and a light-colored long-sleeve shirt and does indeed look more informal than he can recall ever seeing any of his former subjects. When she sees his face, her relaxed body language melts away. He’s clearly agitated but she has no way of knowing why.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Orm offers simply, and she seems to accept that line of reasoning. Before he lost his crown, it was not an excuse he could give to anyone else and have it deemed acceptable.

Fin's surprise is evident, but she handles it gracefully. “Okay, then, I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Orm nods in acknowledgment, brushing past her. He’s not in the mood for reading and knows he’ll likely spend a few hours lying in bed under the crushing weight of his own thoughts. The last time he suffered from this kind of emotional distress was after he thought his mother died; it’s unfair that finding her again makes it all come roaring back.

During his childhood, Atlanna served as his conscience and heart. Her loss had honed his conviction that the surface world needed to end—they were at fault for what happened to her. For twenty years she hadn’t been there to temper that fire until it grew into a raging inferno. The anger that served Orm so well as king is nothing but a burden to a prince.

Flopping back onto the bed, he detects faint traces of the strange concoction his brother mentioned. Nothing Fin has brought to his attention so far has smelled similar. Admittedly curious about whatever work she has in store for him tomorrow, Orm doesn’t think it could be anything awful. Outright torment doesn’t seem to be in her nature, although she’s more confrontational than any Atlantean would ever dare.

His enhanced sense of hearing detects her moving around in the kitchen. She’s likely prepping something for tomorrow. Orm knows he should be thankful; he’s comfortable and well-fed without any of the pomp and circumstance of royalty. The lack of pretense just makes sure his undivided
attention never strays from his crushing self-doubt and uncertainty. Twenty years of solid conviction isn’t so easily broken apart.

Orm knows that logically, all surface dwellers can’t be bad.

Decent ones must exist because statistically it’s impossible for an entire sentient race to consist of willfully evil people. But Orm never expected patience or kindness from a surface dweller, especially one that knows his role in destroying her town. And maybe if she’d suffered heavier losses her attitude would be different towards him, Orm realizes, but all things considered Fin is nicer than he deserves.

As a prince, and later a king, Orm never had to trouble himself with worthiness. He got the things he wanted, either through privilege or manipulation. Integrity was never part of the equation. But he doesn’t want to see Atlanna before he’s ready. Shame has everything to do with that. For whatever reason, he is in no rush to feel better about himself.

Pride is not a useful thing, but when Orm was sad and motherless, it projected the strength he required to withstand his father’s temper. As an adult, it prevents him from whining when he’s frustrated, crying when he’s hurt, and breaking down completely because of how overwhelmed he is. It’s pride that keeps him from asking for help, but for the first time since he can remember, there are people in his life who want to and without Orvax standing in their way, they might actually be able to make a difference.

Utterly drained, Orm silently acknowledges that while change must come from within, tonight he’s had enough.
I'm the War of Head Versus Heart

Despite the fact she hasn’t been able to sleep in her own bed for the past three nights, Fin wakes up feeling better than she thought she might. She can’t sleep in the fetal position more than one night in a row, so she’s been using the floor to stretch out. The obvious downside is that she’s sleeping on the goddamn ground, but at least all five cats can snuggle with her this way.

Before she’d gone to sleep, Fin placed an online order for Orm’s new clothes, the measurements having been provided and translated by Arthur. It consists of boring guy stuff—jeans, henleys, work boots, and t-shirts in boring guy colors—gray, black, and blue—but they’ll fit and he’ll hopefully feel more comfortable. Even with express shipping, won’t arrive for two more days but that simply can’t be helped.

With a slight amount of trepidation, Fin goes to check on her guest. The bedroom door is open and Orm is perched on the edge of the bed, The Two Towers in his hand. He’s already dressed for the day, and Sam’s black t-shirt is stretched perilously thin across his chest and shoulders. She’s pretty sure shirts don’t just rip and fall off like they would in a cartoon, but he might split a seam or two once he’s working on the house.

“Want some breakfast?”

Orm nods, following her into the kitchen. To her chagrin, Fin screams when one of her cats runs between her ankles and trips her. Orm catches her wrist and prevents her from a face plant, but her dignity is in tatters. She straightens up but finds that Orm isn’t remotely derisive.

“Do they always do that?”

Fin sighs. “Just one does; I guess he thinks it’s funny. You met Morris, his collar is red. Olive is a sweetheart and her collar is green. Norah has a purple collar and Lester has a yellow one, but they’re shyer. The blue collar cat was already dropped off with a name on his, and he definitely lives up to it. I spent a whole summer trying to get him into my house because he was such a menace living off the land. He left me dead birds and dead mice and a dead snake—there aren’t even supposed to be snakes in Maine—before I finally lured him inside. He’s a giant dick but my other cats love him.”

“What’s his name?”

Fin sighs. “His name is Killer.”

“Oh, Lester, Norah, Morris, and…Killer,” Orm recites.

“Yeah…that’s his name and he doesn’t answer to anything else,” Fin has to admit it’s a little weird, but nothing about her living situation is typical. She has five cats. She resumes her course through the house and once she’s bathed in the kitchen sunlight, she risks another glance at her guest, who appears marginally more sociable than the night before. His sudden about face surprised her before bedtime, but figures he’s moody.

“What are you preparing this morning?”

Orm probably doesn’t realize that his statement smacks of entitlement. A part of Fin wonders if she’ll ever be able to convince him to prepare their meals before finding the very idea ludicrous. She turns away from him so he doesn’t see her smile. He seems sensitive about being laughed at.

“There are a lot of different options but I was going to just make some sandwiches with eggs, cheese,
toast, roasted tomatoes, spinach, and pesto. Pesto is atypical for breakfast but I think you’ll like it because it’s made out of basil. I also need to make a few other things for this afternoon.”

Fin pulls out her ingredients and gets to work, aware of Orm’s gaze on her again. She figures it’s because she’s the most interesting thing in the room. He seems to learn from example, so maybe he’s figuring out how everything works, just for the sake of knowledge? She’s not sure there’s anything in her house that would stimulate the mind of a military genius and former king.

“You seem fine with dairy, so I figured some more cheese wouldn’t hurt you,” Fin explains. She pops two Lactaid caplets in her mouth. “However I can’t always digest dairy all that well, so I need a little help. Surface dweller food is very funny like that.”

“Why would you eat food that makes you sick?” Orm asks.

“Because it tastes so good,” Fin admits a little helplessly, because yeah, it sounds really stupid. “Lots of people have allergies or intolerances to food.”

“Are you sure you’re not just getting poisoned?” At Orm’s uncomprehending look, Fin wonders if maybe Atlanteans don’t have such conditions.

“An allergy occurs when the body mistakenly identifies a typically harmless substance as harmful and the resulting hypersensitivity causes terrible symptoms, sometimes death. About six percent of the population has them and the onset is instant. Food intolerances are more delayed and tend to be less deadly, but they can make people very sick.”

Even your food tries to kill you. Surface dwellers are very—”

“Pathetic, contradictory, the worst, etc. yes, I know,” Fin finishes dismissively. “Although in my case, just feed me some ice cream late at night and I will beg for death, I promise.”

“It surely can’t be that easy.”

“After being stuck in this house, you’ll learn all my weaknesses soon enough,” Fin muses.

“You did make me promise to kill you personally.”

Surely it must be a joke, so Fin smiles. “Yes, I guess I would be first in line by default if you don’t get all of those pesky genocidal urges out of your system.”

Fin reasons that there’s nothing she can do if Orm decides to resume his campaign and turns away to resume cooking. Antagonizing him is definitely not helping, but keeping him nourished is. At any rate it seems to distract him. It’s not like she can save the human race with food, but maybe she can help stave off its destruction until he’s gone through the contents of her pantry.

Fin senses that Orm’s inability to articulate the flavors and textures he’s experiencing is causing frustration so she still takes time to explain what she’s doing. He seems especially perplexed by the raw eggs.

“Lots of marine life lays eggs.”

“The only ones worth eating are those of small fish.”

“I hear caviar’s good with sour cream. It’s considered a luxury food up here.”

Fin slices the sandwiches in half before serving them. Orm must secretly be a fastidious eater because
he doesn’t make a mess at all, but some pesto from her sandwich runs onto her finger and without thinking, she licks it off. The look he gives her is unfavorable and Fin is reminded she’s eating in the presence of actual royalty.

“I’m sorry, that’s probably poor manners.”

“Is that green sauce what you were making last night? I heard you in the kitchen.”

“Yes. I didn’t keep you up, did I?” Unless Orm went to sleep before nine, there’s no way Fin could have, but she’s not sure what kind of sleep schedule he has.

“No, I was unaffected.”

“Oh, I also made this too!” Fin remembers suddenly and after hooking a foot around a table leg, tips her chair back so she can open the fridge. Yeah, it’s a lazy move that backfired a lot in her childhood, but old habits die hard and her legs are longer now. She fumbles with one hand and miraculously grabs a pitcher of orange juice before shutting the door. With the utmost care, she shifts her weight and manages to slide herself upright, pitcher balanced in her hand. Orm is staring at her like she has three heads, but Fin assumes in Atlantis they don’t have to worry about falling down and cracking open their skull like a melon. Gravity is such a bitch.

“I remembered that you liked oranges, so I squeezed some juice for us.”

Orm already knows what oranges smell like but he inhales before he drinks. He seems a little put off by the pulp at first, but she can spot the actual second he adjusts. Realizing she’s staring at his throat when he swallows, she turns her attention back to her own food.

Fin still finds it remarkable how similar Atlanteans and humans look. She recalls Arthur’s comment about how Orm had a dick, and while she didn’t take a look at that particular part of him, she’s seen almost everything else. He physically passes for human in her book. Atlanteans can eat their food, procreate with surface dwellers, and in some cases, breathe the air. If Arthur hadn’t told her any details, Fin would have assumed he was just a regular Joe.

As she thinks on it, Fin notices Orm helping himself to the last portion of orange juice, which is fine with her. He seems to have a healthy appetite. He’s going to need all that strength at the Benson’s house, helping with drywall installation for the next two days. She managed to reschedule all her lessons to help out this week because it’s something she has experience with doing.

Fin knows she’s not very involved with the community, but this is something she genuinely cares about. Mindy Benson is one of the few people in the Bay that doesn’t resent Fin for still having a standing house and she’s one of only a handful of folks that Fin can say was her friend first and not a hand-me-down from her mom and dad.

“So how are you doing today?” Fin ventures when she’s cleared away the food. Orm’s still nursing the dregs of his juice, relishing the last half the way she always likes to because it’s practically all pulp. Fin’s surprised by how much Orm’s condition has improved. He slept solidly during the entire first day: through her cleaning her bedroom, a spirited conversation with Arthur involving no small amount of raised voices, vacuuming her house, and accidentally dropping an amplifier on her foot across the hall and her resulting litany of swearing. When he woke up he was too weak to stand. Less than two hours later he was walking around her house and at dinner, he showed absolutely no signs of infirmity.

With reluctance, Orm takes his last sip. “I feel stronger.”
“Strong enough to work, I hope?” Fin teases.

Orm pushes his chair back from the table and stands suddenly. He’s not exceptionally tall the way Arthur is, but Fin is short so he does tower over her. If he’s trying to intimidate her, it kind of works, but it also pisses her off and she is not a passive woman. She has to look up at him to talk which only increases her aggravation.

“I don’t know what your problem is, Orm. A lot of houses in the Bay are still being rebuilt. That is your fault and you’re going to help me. But this work isn’t designed to embarrass or demean you. We’re just going to be helping people today and I won’t tell anyone that you’re responsible. What are you afraid of?”

“My father made my mother swim the gateway bridge out of Atlantis in front of all their subjects before she was sacrificed to The Trench. She was given no weapons or armor.”

“God, he sounds like the worst,” Fin tells him, but it doesn’t get the reaction that she expects.

“King Orvax acted out of jealousy because of his love for my mother.”

*God, toxic masculinity isn’t just for surface dwellers, got it.*

“You don’t kill or humiliate the people you love, no matter what they’ve done to you,” Fin stresses, trying to keep her voice controlled because two fights in less than twenty-four hours doesn’t bode well. Breakfast had been going so well.

“Her indiscretion is how I lost my throne in the first place!”

“Well that *indiscretion* is why you’re still alive and not in the stomach of a shark or rotting in a prison cell right now!” Fin snaps. “Be glad you’re up here instead of down there. Just because you’re used to Atlantean ways doesn’t mean they are better. People fuck up—killing them isn’t always the best answer. Your suffering will not bring anybody back that died. But you’re still alive and you’re still able-bodied and you’re going to fucking help me today because it’s the *least you can do after almost wiping this place off the map.*”

Praising her wonderful and nonexistent ability to keep calm, Fin exhales deeply and walks past Orm to double check all the bags she packed up waiting by the front door. She’s got canned food for Mindy, bagged lunches for the friends and family of the Bensons that are coming to help out for the next two days, and the tomatoes she forgot yesterday on the off-chance Tom Curry will drop by to lend a hand.

“Are we going to walk wherever we’re going today?” It’s a thoughtful question in response to what she’s told him, so she tries to shelve her anger.

“Gabby’s mom is picking us up because I don’t have a car. She’s the one who made the bread you ate yesterday for lunch.”

It’s a simple reminder that hopefully suggests *don’t be a dick* without overtly telling him so. Fin has no idea what’s going through Orm’s head as she rushes back into her room to change. She yanks her pajamas off and quickly throws on boots, jeans, and a loose t-shirt over a tank top. Her hair is a tangled mess but she claws her fingers through it and pulls it into a ponytail. When she rushes back into the living room, she realizes Orm’s going to have similar problems.

“Do you need something for your hair?” Fin asks, previous argument forgotten. He’s calm, and that’s all she needs from him at this exact moment. In response, Orm rakes a finger through his blond locks tentatively. The fringe lands over his eyes, too short for a bun. Knowing they’ll be bothersome
today if she doesn’t fix them, Fin racks her brain.

Fun fact: hairclips come in about forty thousand different shapes. Fin retreats to her bathroom and digs through a drawer. She comes back with five large ones, all of which are shot down by him without a word. Sighing, she sadly brandishes some silver bobby pins. “Will these be suitable, Your Majesty?”

“Arthur is technically Your Majesty. My title would be Your Highness.”

“For fuck’s sake, I wasn’t being especially serious,” Fin grumbles. She motions for Orm to kneel down so he’s not so tall, which he steadfastly refuses to do, but he does bow his head a little. Standing on her coffee table, she sections off half of his hair with her finger, the nail scoring his scalp. He audibly sucks in a breath, and Fin files this little bit of information away for later while she secures his hair. It’s out of his face and the pins aren’t too obvious.

Fin’s about to ask him what she thinks but the doorbell rings and interrupts her train of thought. Mindy’s just about the only person that uses it; everyone else bangs on the side of her house like they’re trying to beat down the doors to a medieval castle. All the cats go scattering, with the exception of Killer, who remains unmoved from his position on the couch. Knowing she looks a mess but also knowing there’s no time to fix it, Fin flings open the door anyway.

“Mindy!”

“Hi honey!”

Within two seconds Fin is engulfed in Mindy Benson’s arms freckled arms. She’s always been a hugger, but ever since Curtis died her hugs are extra long and tinged with a little longing. Fin’s not much of a crier on her own, but as soon as she’s in the vicinity of an emotional person, her eyes become faucets. She doesn’t really think her day is going to be off to a good start if she ugly cries before noon.

Luckily getting released before she can get too sentimental, Fin steps back and opens the door for the older woman. Mindy instantly zeroes in the only thing that’s different from the last few times she’s picked her up on Wednesdays: Orm.

“Honey, I didn’t know you had company.” It’s a stage whisper that Orm can clearly hear, and Fin cringes.

“Um, it’s a recent arrangement.”

“Gabby didn’t mention seeing anyone new yesterday, but now that I think about it, she said a friend of yours was asleep and that’s why you practiced downstairs. But I didn’t think it was a man friend!”

“This is Orm. He’s…uh, from…overseas…somewhere.”

*Jesus Christ.* If Fin didn’t know Orm any better, she’d say he was enjoying her awkwardness. He glances at her mockingly while Mindy is distracted by Killer, who has the audacity to purr and pretend like he doesn’t attack anything that moves with his claws out.

“Honey, you really lucked out with this lover boy right here,” Mindy coos, scratching Killer behind the ears.

“Thanks,” Fin smiles weakly. She’s got his claw marks on her ankle from a week ago that haven’t completely healed, but that’s fine. She gives her undying love to them, but yes, her cats are traitorous whores.
Fin stoops to pick up some bags by the door and load up Mindy’s car. To her surprise, Orm does the same, except he’s able to pick up three in each hand, a gesture which flexes his biceps. Mindy flashes a thumbs up and wink that Fin tries to block out as they make their way to the station wagon. After everything’s packed up, Fin crawls in the backseat behind the driver’s side so Orm has more leg room up front. He observes her and Mindy buckling their seatbelts and copies them, which absolutely floors her that he catches on so fast.

“So where are you from, Mr. Orm?”

Mindy hasn’t even waited until the car is out of park. She’s Kelsey’s aunt, and while they’re both nice people, their curiosity is insatiable. But Orm handles her with more cordiality that Fin would have anticipated.

“It’s actually Orm Marius. My family name is originally Roman, named for the god of war, Mars.”

Mindy looks impressed, and that doesn’t bode well for Fin at all. “Ooh, that’s so neat. How did you meet little Finny?”

Only by clamping her hand over her mouth does Fin prevent any sound from escaping.

“Finny?” Orm mouths, gaze sliding towards where Fin is cowering in the backseat and refusing to meet his eyes. “We met through Arthur Curry.”

“Oh, I’ve only really gotten to know Finny since my Gabby started going to lessons with her last year, but I would see her run around town with Arthur Curry when they were kids. Tom and I always thought they’d be so cute together. I think he’s still got a picture of your junior prom in the living room somewhere, honey.”

If Fin ever had an existential crisis, she would find God’s existence confirmed because the only excuse for the level of discomfort she currently feels has be her soul trying to shed its mortal coil.

Orm’s voice is remarkably unmoved. “Arthur never mentioned that to me.”

Of course not! You don’t even know what prom is!

Mindy chuckles. “Aw, well Arthur’s always been a big free spirit. Finny deserves someone a little more grounded. I haven’t seen her date anyone in what, ten years? Twelve years?”

“Sure, Mindy,” Fin manages, wishing that the Benson’s house was a little closer. She shrinks into herself in the backseat while Mindy talks Orm’s ear off about how talented Fin is and how beautiful. She’s a great wingman, but that’s definitely not why Orm’s here, so it’s embarrassing more than complimentary. She manages to block out the conversation until she realizes that Mindy’s repeating a question at her.

“Honey, I asked if you played for him,” Mindy restates primly, not pleased to catch Fin spacing out on her.

“Oh no, I haven’t,” Fin says hurriedly. Tyranny aside, Orm is still royalty. He’s so much worldlier and more intelligent than she is; she would not put herself out there like that in front of him. Their society is far more advanced; there’s no way that as king, he wouldn’t have had the absolute best entertainment on the planet at his disposal. Compared to that, Fin feels like… nothing, really.

“I think he considers music a waste of time.”

Mindy’s eyes meet hers in the mirror but Fin looks away. The questions oddly come to a halt and the
remaining few minutes stay blissfully silent. When they pull in the driveway, the view of the Bay is
spectacular, but the exposed wooden frame visible through the windows is not. Orm’s face is
unreadable.

“Honey, my nephews have been here since sunup. Can you grab some of your sandwiches for them?
They should be in the basement.”

Fin tries not to groan. Kelsey’s older brothers are here, which she’d been trying to avoid by coming
on Wednesday because they’re usually at work. Jake’s okay by himself, but he’s always around his
twin brother and Nate’s a piece of work that never minds his business or shuts his mouth. They were
two years behind her in school; they talked about her behind her back a lot without ever actually
talking to her. That practice hasn’t changed much.

“Yeah, I’ll feed and water the boys,” Fin assures her. Taking a deep breath, she rummages through
the canvas sacks and pulls out two brown bags. She distantly registers Mindy say something to Orm,
but she’s already out of the car, determined to make this as quick as possible. The ground is uneven
beneath her boots; the pavement had been so badly cracked by the boat, but her homeowner’s
insurance won’t pay to get it fixed. She manages not to fall as she lets herself into the house.

Fin can hear twelve year old rock music coming from the stairs and figures the twins must be close.
They’re hardly diabolical, but they make a lot of rude and vulgar remarks, especially when they’ve
been drinking. If they’ve been nursing a six pack each of shitty lite beer all morning, she’ll probably
be in for a real treat. By the time she descends the stairwell, they appear to have just finished
strapping the ceiling. The drywall they want to install is under the upstairs living room and needs
extra support.

“Hey, Hello Kitty!”

Trying not to face palm, Fin gives them each a polite nod. She’s not even Japanese, not that it matters
to them. Her dad was half Korean and her mother was a quarter Chinese and a quarter Korean.
There are also half a dozen different ethnicities thrown in on both sides (Irish, Senegalese, and
French, to name a few components of her genetic sock drawer), but Fin looks Asian first and
foremost. But Hello Kitty is hardly the worst thing that’s been said to her so she just bites her tongue
and extends the sandwich bags to Jake and Nate.

“Our Aunt Mindy said you guys might be hungry,” Fin says neutrally. As if to accentuate her point,
she shakes her wrist. When neither of them take their lunches, she sets them down by a ladder. As
she tries to back out of the room she discovers the older twin has circled around behind her, blocking
the exit.

“What if what I want isn’t in that brown bag?” Nate asks slyly.

He’s just joking around, but she just doesn’t need this right now. Fin wrestles with the age-old
dilemma of how mean she’s allowed to be before she has to be taught a lesson or some other macho
bullshit. The twins are part of the same group of guys that taunted her in high school and were forced
to change tactics between her junior and senior year because she finally grew out of her awkward
stage.

After awhile it became more about how she never gave them the time of day instead of how pretty
she actually was. Fragile male egos are something she has no time for. Fin’s not a snob; she just
wants to be left alone. Sometimes the banter is harmless, sometimes they actually get kind of shitty
with each other, but she doesn’t like to chance it. To her relief, she hears footsteps behind Nate and
hopes that Mindy’s coming to her rescue.
“I thought you were coming right back to the car. We moved everything inside without you.”

Orm stands on the stairs, arms crossed in such a way that makes his arms and chest look menacing. It’s clearly a power move, but it seems to have the desired effect without things devolving into a dick measuring contest. Orm has a great deal of charisma and quiet authority, which he used to impress Mindy on the way over and now uses it to intimidate strangers. Nate backs away from the exit and Fin beats a hasty retreat. Her fists are balled up the whole way up the stairs and she can feel Orm’s gaze between her shoulder blades. When she’s out of their view and earshot, she turns to him.

“Thanks for checking on me.”

Orm nods, sparing a distasteful glance down the stairs.

“They don’t really mean any actual harm. They just make me really uncomfortable when they go too far. I wish there was a way I could get them to leave me alone for good, but it’s not like I can go around beating people up because they do things I don’t like. Although I can’t beat people up anyway because I’m so weak that even my own food tries to kill me, so I’m told.”

Fin gives Orm a little smile, but he doesn’t seem remotely amused. Sighing, she pats his arm (Jesus, he feels like he’s made out of granite) and heads into the kitchen to check on the sandwiches that she knows were brought inside. Fin queues up a Spotify playlist while Mindy assures her that everything is fine and sets her up with a bucket to mix drywall mud.

“Honey, have you ever done this before?” Mindy asks Orm, who is standing far enough back that it’s clear he’s not participating in the process.

“No, but he’s a quick learner,” Fin assures her. She’s definitely not a contracting mastermind herself, but her dad regularly sicced her on home repairs and she did redo her basement pretty much all by herself over the past two years. Sure, she uses it for studio recording and practicing only, but still, it counts, even if it’s not impressive.

Over the mournful yet soothing sounds of Keaten Henson, Orm listens to her explanation of using drywall mud to cover seams and then covering everything with tape. He watches her smear a thin coat on initially, smooth tape over it, and then press out the air bubbles with a putty knife. It’s awkward standing above him on the ladder, but it’s the only way he’ll learn how to do the ceiling.

“We have to do this whole room and then let it dry for twenty four hours. Then we get to do it all over again. If the guys downstairs get the ceiling drywall measured and hung, we can do this down there too, but that might be something for tomorrow.”

Examining her seams one last time, Fin smiles at her handiwork and starts to descend. A meter off the ground, her foot catches on a rung and she starts to tip backwards, but the side of Orm’s foot prevents the ladder from sliding away while his hands snatch her out of the air and set her down. She wouldn’t have hurt herself very badly, but it would have been painful and embarrassing if she’d fallen.

“Are you capable of doing anything without injuring yourself?”

“YES.” Fin can feel her cheeks grow red but knows bait when she sees it. She gets the impression that if Orm really didn’t actually respect her, he would have just allowed her to fall. “Thank you, by the way.”

“I feel like Arthur would hold me responsible if you get injured.”

“He might, he might not,” Fin concedes.
“Arthur’s seen her bump into the fire extinguisher in Tom’s kitchen no less than seven times. It’s right by the door and she always manages to hit it. That rusty menace is literally the reason her parents made her get a tetanus shot in seventh grade.”

“Arthur is well acquainted with your clumsiness?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“Maybe he placed me in your custody so I could protect you. I’ve already done so three times.”

At the number three, Fin actually has to stop and think. She’s about to correct him but recalls the previous afternoon how she almost dropped water in the kitchen. Nodding slowly, she turns to him gravely.

“Thank you, Your Highness.” Fin shoots him solemn look and curtsies, a gesture which must surely be lost on him. She giggles at his bemused expression. “Come on and help me, this will go way faster if you do.”

Despite never having done construction in his life, Orm is not unskilled. There’s only the slightest hesitation as he repeats the steps he observed. When he works on the ceiling, his shirt bunches up around his shoulders but it’s the fact it exposes the bottom half of his stomach that’s problematic. Fin can objectively appreciate how handsome he is, but she can’t forget how close he came to killing her and her friends that night. She refuses to forget, because he hasn’t exactly disavowed his actions yet.

“The Murphy brothers are coming tomorrow, but your sandwiches will keep until then,” Mindy calls out from the kitchen where she’s baking something. It’s on the side of the house that’s still intact, along with Gabby’s bedroom and the bathroom. Fin tears her eyes away from Orm before she gets caught staring. She hasn’t actually denied that Orm is her boyfriend, because she knows it will do zero good if Mindy’s got her mind set on it.

“I thought that Conner worked at the shop on Thursdays.”

“His dad has been letting him off so he can come here and help.”

“That’ll be a big help,” Fin says, privately remembering how she’d make sure Conner was working before she took her Saturn in for emissions inspections, since she has the good fortune to live in the only county in Maine where testing is enforced. Mindy peers around the corner and sees Orm absorbed in his task, so she motions for Fin to follow her into the kitchen.

“Conner asked about you again,” Mindy whispers, although Fin’s certain that Orm can hear every word she says.

“Conner’s a sweetheart.”

He’s also gay, which Fin has known since high school, but she plays along because Mindy likely doesn’t know that.

“You know, you should consider giving one of those guys a real chance.”

“I’ve met every man the Bay has to offer, Mindy. Hard pass.”

“But you’ve been by yourself for almost ten years, love.”

“Relationships don’t really last for me,” Fin admits. “I’m not eager to set myself back up for more heartache. And I’d rather be alone than settle.”
Mindy tilts her head to the side. It’s a gaze not unlike Orm’s: perceptive and almost calculating, devoid of warmth. “No one in the Bay deserves you, honey, so you’ve got a lonely road ahead of you.”

Fin’s made as much peace with that as she can. “Then it’s a good thing I have all those cats.”

With a quick drum on the countertop, Fin slips out of the kitchen and back into the living room. She can hear the twins having a heated discussion below her and Mindy races downstairs.

“They said something about not having a lift, whatever that means,” Orm informs her upon seeing her expression, confirming that his sense of hearing is far superior to a normal person’s.

“Oh, I bet they’re all booked through the rest of the summer,” Fin says after that sinks in, crossing her arms. “The problem with rebuilding after the wave is the shortage of materials and machinery more so than any shortage of labor. There’s only a finite amount of things like bulldozers and wrecking balls and drywall lifts. The guys are trying to install the ceiling drywall without one. It’s doable, but the stuff they managed to get their hands on is the heavy stuff and the ceiling is really high. The might be able to rig something to help them but a lift would be so much easier.”

“How do you know how to do this?” Orm asks her frankly. It’s a fair question, although in his case it’s probably being posed because he continues to underestimate her.

“Um, I did this to my basement a few years ago. I cut my ceiling drywall into smaller pieces so I could fit them down the steps and I bribed Conner Murphy to help me mount it by offering free music lessons. We spent a week doing drywall together and now he comes by on Friday mornings so I can teach him how to use all the guitar pedals he keeps buying.”

“Guitar pedals?”

It’s hard to capture the nuances of Orm’s voice and expression when he’s standing on a ladder, but music’s not really his wheelhouse.

“You use them when you play songs sometimes. I originally fixed up the basement and did some soundproofing so I could record music down there. I mostly did it for my friends that moved away because they were working on an album. They never really got to use it much.”

It used to be somewhat of a sore spot, but Fin uses the space to record her lessons with her students now and they love it. It’s definitely not a fancy setup but it does the job. Her students all share videos and watch each other and it’s a level of camaraderie that was largely missing from Fin’s childhood experience with being into music. She and Arthur were in a band for like two weeks in ninth grade but that was about it until she was in college.

Fin’s mind is all over the place. She volunteered for this, yeah, but she doesn’t want to be here all day with nostalgia creeping up on her. The state of her hometown is her biggest sore spot.

“Do you think you can help the guys downstairs?” Fin wonders aloud. Realizing how rude it came off, she adds, “I can go with you if you want.”

It’s a risky move asking that of him, but Orm silently finishes his seam and descends the ladder. He clearly declines her offer to accompany him because he heads downstairs alone. She’s not sure if he’s in a bad mood or not; navigating his disposition isn’t her strong suit. She doesn’t try to be deliberately awful, but he takes offense to a variety of things and she tends to set him off without meaning to. It’s not premeditated or anything, she’s just used to being direct.

Fin doesn’t expect him to be pleased about being put to work, but at least he hasn’t complained at all.
She’s pretty sure that whatever they need help with down there, they’ll tell Orm exactly what to do. *Romantic Works* wraps up and her playlist starts running through some movie scores. Over the next few hours, she hears Jake shuffle upstairs at some point, probably to pee, and Mindy grabs something out of the kitchen and heads back down. Fin starts to forget that Orm is even in the same building by the time she moves onto the next row of ceiling panels.

There’s no air conditioning in the house and it’s starting to get pretty hot. Fin feels her hair stick to the back of her neck and lifts up her shirt to dab at her sweaty face. She hears a wolf whistle behind her and groans into the fabric.

“Nate, I don't get why you're like this. You don't even like me. It doesn't make any goddamn sense.”

It’s not the smartest thing to say to a dude that’s twice her size, but Fin’s so over his bullshit. It’s not like he’ll fight her in his aunt’s house and she didn’t embarrass him in front of anyone else.

“Jesus, it’s no wonder your boyfriend is in such a shitty mood,” Nate grumbles. “You’re such a bitch sometimes.”

“Was Orm actually able to help you?” Fin asks genuinely, ignoring the grousing because he didn’t really seem to mean it this time.

“Yeah, he’s strong as an ox. He held the sheetrock over his head while Jake and I screwed it in, like a body builder or something. He’s not very friendly, though.”

“Not especially,” Fin concedes, pausing before she continues. “Were the sandwiches okay?”

“Yeah, they’re fine. Seriously though, where’d you find that guy? He didn’t crack a smile or anything since we started.”

Fin shrugs. Nate seems a little intimidated, but she has no problem with that personally. “He’s a serious man.”

“He’s about to mix up some mud for the ceiling until Aunt Mindy mentioned food,” Nate reveals. “She also said he’s new to all this but he could have fooled me.”

After Nate shuffles off to the bathroom, Fin finishes the ceiling and grabs two of the brown bags out of the fridge. She heads downstairs to feed Orm but finds he’s already eating—that must have been what Mindy grabbed. Orm makes eye contact with her while she’s on the way down and clearly sees she’s got a bag for him. He holds her gaze for a beat before looking away, turning his head when Jake asks him a question.

Fin feels a pang of hurt, and it’s *so dumb* because it’s not like they need to eat together or anything. One of the twins’ shitty beers is sitting next to him, half empty. Orm’s not exactly making friends and eating to be sociable, but it stings that he didn’t feel the need to wait for her. Temporarily frozen on the stairs, Fin feels loneliness burn a hole in her chest.

*You haven’t exactly given Orm any reason to desire your company today.*

Slipping back upstairs and shoving the second bag back in the fridge, Fin decides to sit on the front porch and eat by herself. Ham and Swiss on a pretzel roll is hardly on par with the rest of the food she’s been feeding Orm, but it’s still good. She hopes he likes it—wants him to be able to finally describe the flavors he tastes—wishes she was there to tell him how good pineapple is with ham and how next time she’ll put some on his sandwich.

That thought brings her to a screeching halt: the last thing Fin needs is some kind of twisted
codependency with her new housemate. Maybe she enjoys coaxing little victories from him more than she should. Validation from other people is not what she’s about and she has to remember that. She’s resigned herself to a lonely life and she can’t go making more of this than what it is. It’s a temporary arrangement that she doesn’t even want.

But another part of her wants to make the most of this; regardless of his past, Orm is easily one of the most remarkable people she’s ever met. She has the opportunity to learn first-hand about a culture she’s only heard of in legends. A part of her thinks it might be worth it to try and get to know him, if he’ll let her. This whole situation is what they both make it.

Twenty minutes in the sun and she can feel her face starting to get tender. Fin burns terribly before eventually tanning—somehow she’s got just enough Irish in her for that but not enough to blend in better—and wonders if Orm will need sunscreen or if he’s impervious.

Asshole could probably walk on the surface of the sun from the way he talks.

Tired of feeling sorry for herself, Fin gathers up her things and heads back inside before her face starts to turn pink. She doesn’t want to add peeling sunburn onto the list of things Orm undoubtedly finds repulsive about surface dwellers. Given the shitty Natural Light that the twins gave him, he’s probably adding beer to the list as well.

I’d better find him before he decides that humanity has nothing else to offer.
Watching Fin slink back upstairs is a retreat, if Orm’s ever seen one. Ever since he woke up yesterday, he’s seen a myriad of emotions from her. They’re all as plain as day because she’s so used to being alone and not having to disguise them from others. He figures that’s why she sent him downstairs, so she could be by herself. If that’s the case, there’s no reason to follow her. Orm hears the front door upstairs open to let her out and a few minutes later there’s a beeping sound and Mindy goes running upstairs after it.

The second she’s gone, Nate starts swearing.

“Man, Fin’s being a fucking bitch today,” Nate mutters, before catching Orm’s eye and looking away.

Orm says nothing, merely leveling a look at Nate while he holds a sheet of drywall over his head like it’s a piece of cardboard.

Nate mistakes his silence for anger. “Sorry, man, but you know how she is. She hates all men.”

“She’s been friends with Arthur and Conner for a long time,” Jake points out.

“But she fucked Conner when they were seniors and we were in tenth grade.”

“That was like, fifteen years ago.”

“He still popped her cherry, though. I don’t see what makes him so special.”

Orm can’t say he’s offended on Fin’s behalf, but if this is how the majority of the Bay’s residents talk about her, he has to say that he understands why she prefers to keep to herself. Some of the colloquialisms are lost on him, but he has enough intuition to know they’re discussing things that are none of their business. Fin’s of no political importance here, so it shouldn’t matter who pops her cherry or when. Orm had some detractors in Atlantis, but his position afforded him protection from their disparaging views. Fin must be forced to interact with these people frequently; it must grow tiresome to have small minds weighing in on her life.

“Do you always discuss someone’s previous alleged sexual history in front of the person you suspect she’s currently involved with?”

“No,” Nate admits. “We’re just really surprised she’s got a man around, that’s all. Kelsey told me she saw you yesterday but I didn’t believe her. My sister’s so obsessed with Fin it’s not even funny. She calls it a woman crush.”

Jake snorts. “Fin’s really hot, not that you can tell her that without getting your balls ripped off.”

“Fucking feminist can’t take a compliment,” Nate grunts. As if remembering that Orm is there, he offers him a grin. “But good job, dude. She’s a dime.”

He’s not really sure what a feminist is—or a cherry or a dime—but he can ask Fin later and no doubt receive a colorful response. She, like Arthur, is very animated and expressive. When he thinks about it further, his mother is, too, although he doesn’t know if this is a trait she picked up on the surface or if she was always just a little bit different. Fleeing to the surface wouldn’t have occurred to just anyone in Atlantis as a viable option.
Blocking out Nate’s lascivious grin, Orm deduces that their preoccupation with Fin seems largely rooted in her appearance, although Orm supposes she would be of little interest to men if she were unattractive. Every single male diplomat he encountered as King of Atlantis congratulated him for his engagement based on Mera’s beauty alone—none had ever complimented her superior skills in hydrokinesis or her fighting abilities. In his opinion, those traits made her the worthiest prospective bride for him over her sisters and cousins but the fixation was always on Mera’s appearance.

The surface world does not seem so different in this respect. Fin is, objectively speaking, pleasant to look at. Her complexion is radiant and her hair is healthy and when he commented on her symmetrical facial features, he was being honest. He does not feel the need to bestow meaningless observations about a woman’s appearance because in his limited experience, beauty doesn’t make him desire a woman more strongly. A part of him is naturally inquisitive but he was never overrun by desire like many other Atlanteans.

When it comes down to it he reasons that Fin’s mystique is also heightened by her rejection of the local men. It seems to be a sore point for some of them, obviously. To Orm, her culinary skill is a much more valuable trait than her looks, but figures that most other people have not had the privilege of experiencing it firsthand—a thought that makes him oddly pleased. He’s no longer a king, but just the idea of being set apart stokes his ego, although there’s literally no competition for her attention; Arthur’s comment about her lack of prospects is startlingly true.

(Orm wonders if Jake and Nate are the best that the bay has to offer before thinking that it’s no great wonder Fin seems resigned to dying alone.)

The grown women he’s met here so far are vastly superior to the men. The amount of talking that Mindy does is mildly annoying, but she’s harmless and kind-hearted. Orm understands why Fin wants to help her—he can see that they’re friends. Orm hasn’t had one since his childhood with Mera; it’s a weakness he discarded long ago. But Fin, living by herself with none of his advantages, probably benefits from having a few.

Fin’s embarrassment on the ride over didn’t surprise him, but her reaction to Mindy’s question did. She’s correct in surmising that Orm doesn’t have a high regard for music. He doesn’t like or dislike it either way. Whatever the twins are playing now is pretty unremarkable and he wonders if it’s to her tastes. Music plays a huge role in Fin’s occupation but Orm has no personal use for it. Perhaps her assessment of waste of time was too harsh, but it’s certainly of no consequence to him.

He’s not sure if it injured Fin’s feelings somehow when he didn’t correct her assumption. She didn’t lash out; she just kind of closed up. But he knows she’s capable of feeling pride—she appears gratified when he enjoys her cooking and makes an effort to please him. She need not worry on that front, but Orm wonders if perhaps she set up unrealistic expectations that all surface dweller food is delicious or maybe she just has superior tastes. The alcoholic beverage he nurses in between panels is atrocious.

Orm glances at it from across the room and notes how condensation is making the label peel off on the corner. He continues to sip the beer out of curiosity (because even the bad tastes here have some kind of enticing quality) but it’s not enjoyable and he will turn one down if it’s ever offered to him again. The sandwich is nice but the ingredients aren’t fresh. He finds himself wishing Fin were present because the flavors are interesting. She could elevate it, through either explanation or time; she makes things better somehow. He figures it’s because she’s the most familiar thing on the surface—a touchstone of her odd and overwhelming culture.

This place will never be his home, but in less than thirty six hours Fin’s made an indelible mark. He will never be able to rise to the surface again without thinking of her—how she moves her hands
when she speaks, how she sometimes looks away when she smiles so he doesn’t see, and how she elaborates on matters in an effort for him to appreciate them. Fin lacks his former mentor’s patience and temperance, but if she also lacks Vulko’s treachery, he will be satisfied.

Once Orm realizes that the point of today’s excursion is supposed to be philanthropy, not humiliation, he feels his resistance slipping away. Due to his intervention, it doesn’t take as long to hang the sheetrock as the twins initially feared, and soon enough they’ve already progressed to the next step. Applying the mud and taping it is almost as mindless as washing dishes. He’s very quick and efficient, brushing off compliments from his observers because why wouldn’t he excel at something so simple?

The ease of his performance assures Orm’s that his physical strength has come back fully, although if he returned to the ocean he’d be even stronger there. For some reason the idea doesn’t have the appeal he thought it would. He loves his home, but all he felt there the past few months was emptiness. The oppressive weight of every single mistake he’s ever made felt like a chain to the ocean floor that kept him from rising. Like the ruins on Atlantis’s outskirts, he could feel decay start to seep in.

That feels impossible here. The sun, despite being overly bright and hot, starts to cleave the darkness away inside him. It’s baking him alive, but for the first time in months his chest doesn’t feel hollowed out. Even in ninety degree heat, in a stranger’s dwelling, Orm can still see the sea and feel it in the air. For now, it’s enough. The distance provides him with some perspective. Atlantis, for all of its flaws and splendor, will still be waiting for him when he’s ready.

He’s safe from the Fishermen and The Brine on land; they cannot leave the water. Orm finds himself missing the cold temperature, though; he’s hardly exerting himself but the hot air is making him sweaty. He knows it’s a biological function for surface dwellers but had no idea he could experience it himself. It’s highly unpleasant but working in any capacity is an improvement over inactivity.

“Honey, I brought you a little something,” Mindy’s cloyingly sweet voice interrupts his thoughts. “You’ve been at it for hours. I thought a break might be nice. The boys are certainly ready for one.”

Nate and Jake are nursing more beers and eating some strange concoction. He has no base of reference for what he smells, only that it’s enjoyable.

“What is it?”

Mindy looks at him a little funny. “It’s peach pie and whipped cream.” There’s no description of what’s inside or how it’s made, which Orm figures is pretty typical since her puzzled reaction tells him he should know what it is she’s giving him. She hovers as he eats his first bite, and it occurs to him that she too requires feedback from him as to whether or not he likes it.

The warm crusty bottom flakes in his mouth, a strange sensation that should be unpleasant but isn’t. There’s a sticky sauce that’s very messy but what Orm suspects are the peaches really have the best flavor. They have a little bit of crunch when he bites into them. The white fluffy accompaniment cuts the sweetness perfectly and its texture is like a cloud when he closes his lips around the fork.

“It’s very good,” Orm manages, trying hard not to devour the pie in three bites. Surface dweller food is a revelation. He recalls how he mocked them for being lazy and fat, but he is starting to understand how easy it could be to become so. Nearly everything tastes good, as if that is its primary purpose instead of nourishment. It’s so mystifying to him how everything is made to feel and taste pleasurable. It’s self-indulgent and distracting.

“Cherry pie is Fin’s favorite, but I like to wait until July when the cherries are better.”
Orm nods to cover up the fact he has no idea what she’s talking about. She’s about to ask a question when they both hear a knock on the front door upstairs. It must be Fin that opens it, because she calls down to them a moment later.

“Mindy, where did you put the tomatoes I brought for Tom?” Fin asks. “He’s here to drop something off.”

Orm’s heart freezes in his chest for a moment knowing Tom Curry is upstairs.

He’s not afraid of the man who convinced his mother to stay on land when she washed ashore. But Orm almost wasn’t born because of Tom Curry and he feels very strongly about that. Atlanna has tried to impress upon him that what happened to her was because of Orvax, not Tom, but the foundation for blaming the latter has been laid down since his childhood.

(Orm’s never run from an opponent before, but he finds himself mentally calculating how quickly he can jump out the back window. He’s pretty sure the glass won’t even scratch him and he can run to the ocean before anyone can catch him.)

“I’ll get the tomatoes!” Gently securing her pie dish, Mindy walks back upstairs to help.

“Hey Tom, want a beer?” Jake calls up the stairs.

There’s a muted conversation that even Orm can’t hear before Fin answers. “Tom says keep your shitty Natural Ice to yourself. Liam’s taking him to Terry’s where he can get a real beer!”

Nate and Jake just laugh, although Orm privately agrees with Tom’s assessment.

“We’re almost done here, we’ll meet you there in thirty,” Nate yells.

Hopefully that means that Tom Curry will stay upstairs, but Orm reasons that since Fin is with him, she probably warned him to stay away. Even at her most hostile, Fin does not seem cruel enough to initiate their introduction so carelessly. There’s no possibility of a chance encounter, so Orm carefully exhales and inhales until he feels more in control. The abundance of oxygen in the air makes him heady.

“Are you almost done with that seam?”

Mindy’s voice beside Orm almost startles him; he was so absorbed in his apprehension he missed her coming back down. He can feel the tiniest ocean current against his skin announcing someone’s approach from a mile away without any conscious effort but the air contains so much ambient interference it’s hard to focus when his mind is elsewhere.

Orm doesn’t know how to respond, but Fin chooses that second to reappear. She’s sweaty and looks as miserable as he feels in the heat, but is missing the somewhat troubled look she wore the last time he saw her. She’s pulling out her hairstyle and attempting to redress it, but she fails miserably and just yanks it up in a bun.

“Hey Mindy, I’m sorry to run out on you, but I promised Arthur I’d do something for him today. I’ll be back again tomorrow.”

“Oh, I was just about to kick you both out,” Mindy explains. “I was going to go pick up Gabby and I’ll drop off those herbs for Brenda. You’re bringing your helper with you again, right?”

Fin smiles serenely as she heads upstairs. “Of course.”
It takes a second, but Orm recognizes that he’s being released from his obligations for the day. He finds that he doesn’t truly mind the nature of the work he’s done. It’s far more stimulating than trading agreements and executive law but he does miss the harsh discipline of Atlantis. His schedule was merciless, ironic since the word used by Vulko to describe the surface is forgiving, but Orm’s not sure if Nate, Jake, or Mindy would ever speak to him if they knew the truth about his identity. Perhaps Fin is the best choice to house him due to her relative luck during his attack? She knows exactly what he’s done.

Orm doesn’t view forgiveness as a positive trait, but it’s been doing him lots of favors lately. He’s so glad to be free of the Atlantean prison he chose, though he will never admit it. The physical activity feels good and it’s nice to be away from Fin’s house. He’s apprehensive about what a promise to Arthur might entail, but if it were especially serious Arthur would have told him.

“Are we walking home?” Orm asks as Fin opens the front door.

“No, this is what Tom Curry was dropping off. He kind of surprised me, actually.”

With a flourish befitting the finest Atlantean warship, Fin gestures grandly to a rusty heap that Orm’s brain tells him is supposed to be a vehicle of some kind. He doesn’t need any familiarity with surface dweller technology to know that this thing is a monstrosity.

“Why does it look like that?” Orm would definitely not consider that sentence very polite or eloquent, but it conveys his disgust, because his companion frowns and crosses her arms.

“Well, not everyone is made out of money,” Fin chastises. “Tom’s truck was totaled during the tsunami and this is the best thing available. There’s a shortage on more than just hardware equipment.”

Orm opens the door gingerly, knowing he could casually pull it right off the truck with little effort. He’s not sure if that’s an inherent design flaw or if it’s just a symptom of age. Before he climbs inside he notices there’s a strange red tag dangling from a mirror inside.

Fin smiles. “It’s an air freshener. It’s supposed to smell like cinnamon apple. And I’m sorry it’s so hot in here. The air conditioner is broken.”

Truthfully, Orm is used to much more uncomfortable temperatures. He didn’t realize that something so antiquated was theoretically capable of temperature regulation. He fastens the safety harness he observed earlier in Mindy’s car and Fin does the same. After she inserts a key into a small depression on the side of the steering column and turns it, she stares and frowns at the floor for a solid two minutes. When she sees his glance, she smiles embarrassedly.

“Umm…disclaimer, I haven’t driven a manual transmission since high school. This might take a minute…I kind of suck at this.”

The truck lurches forward and Orm’s relieved to have buckled his seatbelt. Fin exhales sharply as she’s jerked against hers and then maneuvers the stick in the console between them. Once they’re out of Mindy’s driveway and on the main road, she visible relaxes. With the windows down, the wind picks up the pieces of hair around her face. They float behind her, not unlike an Atlantean’s hair in the water.

“Orm, I wanted to say thank you for coming today.”

“Did I have a choice?”

Fin sort of half smiles but hides it beneath her hand. “You always have a choice.” Her voice is wry,
“Like she’s enjoying some type of joke, but her expression is solemn. “I’m sorry Mindy talked your ear off, but I’m sure she couldn’t resist the idea of a mysterious stranger. Your mom was probably the last one around these parts. Mindy adored her too.”

“When you didn’t come back to the car right away, Mindy told me to go to you. She said she forgot that she should have brought them the food herself.”

That admission actually makes Fin look away from the road for a moment and scan his face. “I never told her that they like to harass me. It felt like gossip.”

“I heard what they said to your face and what they said behind your back. I’d wager they gossip more about you than the opposite.”

Fin snorts. “People will always talk. Sometimes it bothers me, sometimes it doesn’t.”

She doesn’t ask what they said; perhaps she’s already heard it all. Nate and Jake don’t appear to have an endless supply of wit. The more distance she puts between them, the better, as far as he’s concerned. The roads around the bay wind dangerously around sporadic trees and rock formations. Fin drives a little more cautiously than Mindy, and without the constant bombardment of questions, Orm can take in more of the view. There are thick clouds in the distance, but the sun shines brilliantly above the horizon. The ocean glitters and winks deep blue across the length of the Bay.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Fin says wistfully.

Orm has to concede that it is. His eyes find the purple shutters of Fin’s house high on the hill; she really must enjoy a great view. Without meaning to, his eyes also seek out the other familiar landmark, although he’s never seen it in person. The Curry lighthouse stands proud at the coast. According to Arthur, their mother is probably there this very minute.

“We can go sometime, if you want,” Fin ventures hesitantly, no doubt following his gaze. “Just tell me when you’re ready.”

“Arthur thinks I’m hiding from her,” Orm admits. The sentiment comes out unbidden, but the guilt has been weighing on him since he woke up.

“No one wants to disappoint their parents,” Fin says quietly. “Growing up, Arthur fucked up plenty of times. He’s just lucky enough to have a dad that loves him unconditionally.”

“I don’t want to meet him.”

Fin’s eyebrows climb about half an inch and Orm just knows she’s very patiently tolerating his outburst. It makes him feel childish but also relieved that she’s not outright laughing at him. His aversion to Tom Curry is understandable, but since he’s a grown man, it also comes across as petty. At some point, meeting him will be inevitable and he’ll be expected to behave. And he will. Just not anytime soon.

“I’ve always looked up to Tom,” Fin tells him. “He was a lot like me, once. He inherited his cute little house full of books and guitars and pictures. He had a comfortable existence that he was content with and was prepared to live out his life in peace and relative solitude.”

“And then my mother washed ashore.”

Fin hums in agreement. “And then Atlanna washed ashore.”

After another few minutes of driving, Fin pulls off the road and parks the truck in a secluded area
surrounded by trees. She grabs a small backpack and motions for him to get out and follow her. They’re heading in the opposite direction of town, up a rocky incline that looks slightly unsafe. It resembles a mountainside, although mountains are technically taller.

“Be careful, Orm. I know you won’t get seriously hurt, but you’ll have to climb back up if you fall.”

Orm truthfully has very little experience climbing; his entire habitat growing up was water and he could just swim or float wherever he wanted. He never felt gravity’s eternal pull on his movements until the past few days. As he climbs, he can feel the air thinning. He’s truthfully not that high up but his body can still detect the difference in oxygen levels. He can easily withstand far more than any surface dweller, but his body keeps bombarding him with new stimuli on a near constant basis. He’s never been this far above sea level.

They climb for twenty minutes. Orm finds the physical activity pleasurable, even though he’s not exerting himself much. Fin, for all of her clumsiness, seems a competent climber and doesn’t falter. He figures her experience allows her to pick the best path up the hill and leads her to the best rocks to hold onto. The trees around them begin to thin out and when Orm looks up at Fin, she’s standing at the top of the ridge.

“So every local knows this spot but it’s kind of a pain to get to,” she says. He notices her breathing a little hard but she seems peaceful. She pulls out a wooden bottle from her bag and takes a drink before offering it to him.

“I thought you were going to show me around, at least that’s what Arthur insinuated yesterday,” Orm states, accepting the canteen and drinking slowly. The water is warm but better than nothing.

“I plan to, but I thought you might like a view of the ocean first. It probably means more to you than anything in the Bay. There are a dozen great places to see the town. This is just nature up here.”

Orm is struck by her insight. She’s not wrong, after all. He’s been in Amnesty Bay for a handful of days. The businesses and houses are just surface dweller eyesores that the bay would look much better without. But the ocean…? It may not want him right now and he may not want it back, but it’s all he’s ever known. Looking at it makes him feel better.

The sunlight is almost blinding until Fin presses something in his hand. It’s plastic, and Orm draws his lips back in a sneer until she gently grasps his wrists and turns them over. She unfolds the little apparatus and places them across the bridge of his nose. They look like the contraption that she wears on her face, except the lenses are dark where hers are clear.

“Arthur took me up here when we were teenagers. We had a bottle of rum I stole from my dad and I think we nearly went blind because neither of us realized how bright it would be. He told me that his was where he learned to swim. He would tell me all about Atlantis at first, for years and years and then when we were fifteen, Arthur stopped talking to me for almost half a year. When he finally started again, he told me that his mother had been killed. He said it was his fault.”

This is not news to Orm. “I thought it was his fault too.”

Fin’s dark eyes are unreadable as she reaches inside one of her small paper bags. “That’s a lot of negativity to carry inside.”

“I didn’t keep it inside,” Orm mutters. “I targeted every single faceless surface dweller. It was exploited by my father; he taught me how vital it was to manipulate the emotions of your allies. King Orvax was one of the first to be affected by the pollution. He knew he would never be strong enough to mount a war against the surface.”
"But he knew you would be."

"I’m not a fool. I knew what Orvax was doing, honing my hatred of the surface world, but I thought that I wanted it too so I went along with it. Every account of surface dwellers he gave me was condemning. There were no redeeming qualities to be found."

"Confirmation bias," Fin says quietly and Orm nods.

"Mother says I was misled. Maybe to some extent I was. Not every surface dweller is bad; I never considered that before I came here—I never thought of them as individuals. I didn’t really know any of them. But Orvax didn’t lie about the suffering your pollution has caused; I wasn’t manipulated into believing that. The damage has to end."

"Do you think another tidal wave will stop it?" It’s a serious question, or maybe it isn’t; Orm is accustomed to being the one issuing all the challenges. Despite her flippant delivery, the expression on Fin’s face is uncharacteristically hard.

"Why do you ask?"

"I just have to know if we’re all safe. Staying here isn’t supposed to be a punishment, though God knows you deserve one. If you have the capacity for feeling guilt, it won’t be productive for you. Guilt is what scared Arthur away from responsibility all his life because he grew up thinking he got his mother killed. He didn’t want anyone dying because he made the wrong choices and now he’s responsible for an entire nation."

"One of the consequences of leadership is leading. Those people are his priority now."

"A lot of those people were on the front lines for your war. You can’t preach self-righteousness and then conspire with pirates to sabotage your own war meetings to further your agenda. You have no great claim to integrity after sacrificing your own people."

"Why are you saying all this to me?" Orm demands tiredly. He’s angry, but mostly angry because she’s right. He spent countless hours in prison berating himself for these very same things. They were easy to overlook in the heat of the moment because his goal was within reach. Having someone who’s only known him a short time cleverly locate and attack his single largest misgiving finally convinces him that despite her physical limitations, Fin is not weak.

"I don’t want to think you deserve to be executed, but there’s no redemption for you unless you feel some shred of remorse for what you’ve done. If you don’t, what consequences are there for you besides your own sad circumstances? You have a second chance after doing unforgivable things. But you’re not where you need to be yet. I want you to promise that you won’t try to kill us all again."

"I can’t make that promise right now. Atlantis’s well-being is still of the utmost importance to me," Orm says firmly.

"Well, not dying at the hands of a genocidal maniac is of the utmost importance to me," Fin tells him seriously. She glances out across the water and finally withdraws her arm from the paper bag to hand him an orange.

Unbelievably tense, Orm blinks and says the first thing that occurs to him. "Is this a bribe?"

Fin balks in disbelief, clearly not expecting that. She clamps a hand over her mouth for a second, making eye contact with Orm before laughing until she gasps for air. Part of it must be from nerves; he sees tension leave her as she shakes on the ground. He’s gratified that some of her fear has abated but she’s right in still maintaining some baseline apprehension. It takes a long time for her shoulders
to stop shaking, and for a few minutes they sit together in not uncomfortable silence while she regains her breath, sprawled in the grass a foot away from him.

“‘A bribe?’ Fin is still smiling, and now Orm just feels incredibly stupid for misunderstanding. ‘Is my life worth an orange, your Highness? Or must I rely on a variety of foods?’

“Surely there are limits to your craft,” Orm surmises, catching on. He inadvertently changed the tone of their conversation and he will do his best to maintain it. “Mindy gave me something today she called peach pie. It’s far superior to oranges and you’ll have to do better now if you want to impress me.”

Eyes wide in mock outrage, Fin crosses her arms and glares up at him. “How dare you. I am terrible at making pies and she is a professional baker. But I do have a cake recipe that far surpasses anything you’ve ever had. I can’t even begin to explain to you how amazing chocolate is.”

“Chocolate?”

“Yes,” Fin cocks her head, somehow looking regal despite the fact she’s sitting down beside him. “It’s perhaps the best food on the planet.”

“Why haven’t you given it to me?” Orm asks, and as soon as the words leave his mouth, he feels like a cosseted brat. He was never a spoiled child.

“Maybe you haven’t earned it yet,” Fin intones gravely, her eventual smirk ruining the effect.

Not even Mera ever dared to tease him. She contradicted him, scolded him, and betrayed him—but she never teased him. But Orm’s not even sure if Fin’s joking. He believes her entirely capable of withholding things from him and taunting him for it, all while smiling serenely. She lacks the mean spirit he employs when he torments his opponents, but it's also what prevents him from taking true offense to her laughing at him.

“I don’t have any chocolate that’s high enough quality at the moment. It’s only worth eating if it’s good. Some food is fine, even if it’s bad—like pizza or hot dogs or cheeseburgers. But some things, like chocolate or beer or—”

“No more beer.”

“Oh no, see, the twins don’t have any sense of taste,” Fin wails. “The only cheap alcohol that tastes good is wine. But I can get you good beer…just maybe not tonight.”

“Why not?”

“Because my arms feel like they’re made of lead and I was dumb enough to climb up here, which means I’ve got to climb back down. And then I have to drive home and make us dinner.”

“…Are you trying to get me to carry you?”

“It would fall outside the confines of traditional penitence, so no,” Fin admits, standing reluctantly. “I’ll walk down myself.”

True to what Orm perceives is her nature, Fin does nearly fall down at least once, but the descent is otherwise unremarkable. If he were to spend several hours climbing he would actually find it to be a satisfactory workout. When they reach the bottom, Fin is sweaty and miserable looking. She has some kind of thin layer on under her shirt, and when she peels off the latter to wipe her brow she exposes a myriad of markings on her upper arms and shoulders.
“Do all surface dwellers defile their skin in such a way?” Orm blurts it out, because he didn’t realize that tattoos were so common. He saw one on Jake’s arm, one on Mindy’s ankle, and two on Nate’s hand. Arthur’s entire chest and torso are covered in them and now he realizes that his host has at least half a dozen that had remained hidden until this very moment.

Fin blinks, unimpressed, as she rummages for the car keys. “I do what I want, Orm. I can’t speak for the rest of us.”

Orm realizes belatedly that he may have offended her but she doesn’t seem particularly bothered. Her body language is the picture of weariness more than affront. Her self-designation of music teacher doesn’t seem like it would prepare her for the manual labor she performed earlier in the day.

“Earlier when I was at Mindy’s house, Nate and Jake used a couple of phrases I was unfamiliar with,” Orm broaches when they’ve buckled their seatbelts. “Can you tell me what they mean?”

As if guessing what kinds of things about her Orm must have heard, Fin sighs but nods. “Sure.”

“What is a feminist?”

Fin cackles. “Feminists want equal rights for men and women. Some people erroneously assume that feminists think men are trash or that women are better, but all jokes aside, that’s not true.”

“What is a cherry?”

“It’s a fruit, like an orange or a peach is a fruit but they all taste very different.”

“So if you pop a cherry you’re crushing a fruit?”

Fin throws back her head and groans. “Wait, were they talking about me? Did they mention someone named Conner?”

“Nate said Conner popped your cherry.” It’s weird repeating such a vulgar phrase. Regardless of her sexual history, he’s seen nothing in Fin’s conduct that would call for practical strangers like Jake and Nate to be discussing it, especially with him.

“Back in like, 2004, he did, yeah,” Fin grumbles, “He’s so fixated on it because Conner’s not a typical alpha male type. I can’t stand men that think they’re sex gods when they’re incapable of holding a civilized conversation with a woman. Anyone that communicates that ineffectively probably thinks the clitoris is a chain of islands off the coast of India like the fucking Maldives, Jesus.”

Orm finds her assessment amusing; no one would have ever said such a thing in front of him in Atlantis. “He seems preoccupied by your continual rejection.”

“Nate doesn’t even like me as a person, it’s just macho bullshit,” Fin snaps. “But to answer your question, if someone *pops your cherry* it means you lost your virginity to them. Conner and I had sex one time in high school and then three months later he came out to me and told me he was gay. So now he bangs dudes, but low key, because this area is pretty conservative. I don’t think anyone else here knows his preferences, except maybe Tom, who literally couldn’t care less. Do you have any stigmas or laws against same-sex relationships or marriage?”

“It’s only frowned upon in higher classes where producing heirs is expected,” Orm informs her. “The consideration of feelings and attraction matter less when you’re royalty.”

“Those things are pretty important if you’re attempting to procreate with someone, just saying.”
Orm has no counter to that: he privately agrees. Atlantean laws and customs are outdated in that regard, meant to preserve and protect powerful families. It keeps the royal bloodline physically powerful with no accounting for anything else. He doesn't hold Mera in high regard but when he thinks about it, he was no less treacherous than when scheming to achieve his goals.

(In his own lifetime Orm’s has seen arranged marriages go horribly wrong, with both Atlanna and Mera. These women did not want to submit to society’s expectations and completely changed the political landscape in the process.)

“Did they talk about anything else you didn’t catch?” Fin glances at him briefly before fixing her eyes back on the road. They’re actually pretty close to her house by now.

“What is a dime?”

“Um, it’s money. But if you refer to someone as a dime or a dime piece, it’s supposed to be complimentary because a dime is a denomination of ten. It implies a person is a ten out of ten, if you feel like you should be rating people on their looks.”

When Fin pulls into the driveway, there’s still a great deal of sunlight left for the day. The ocean glitters in the distance and it occurs to Orm that she’s right; the view is gorgeous all over the Bay, but the spot she took him was probably the only place where he didn’t have to look at any houses or cars or people. The sunglasses have also helped, despite what they're made out of. It's such a simple, easy solution to a common problem; Atlanteans tend to go overboard when addressing issues. He can see why surface dwellers would use them, even if he hates what they're made out of.

Fin sees him examining the cheap frames but says nothing on that subject, merely glancing out over the water. “You worked really hard today for people you barely even knew. I appreciate that.”

Orm is unmoved. “You say I have a choice, but I’m not convinced I do.”

“A few months ago this whole Bay was either flooded or on fire. Today felt like a drop in the bucket as far as fixing things up, but every drop is important. Now, a hundred different things took place in between those two events, but they both happened because of you. Some people get to change by making one choice. You’re going to have to suffer through a lot of them to get wherever you’re going.”

“Finduilas,” Orm says, and that makes Fin stop in her tracks on her way to the door.

“Yeah?”

“I mean to do whatever it takes for protect Atlantis. I don’t regret what I’ve done and I may not ever. I’m not saying this to provoke you or upset you. I just can’t make any promises to you. I'm sorry if that's not good enough. But anything else would disingenuous and I don't want to lie.”

Orm expects to see fear or disappointment, but Fin only nods silently as she fiddles with a few keys to find the one that unlocks her front door.

"Like I said before, if you change your mind, I'll be the first to know."

She keeps mentioning this, and the indignity Orm feels finally makes him call her on it. "Do you really think I want to kill you?"

Fin shrugs. "Well, a few months ago, did you want to kill me then?"

"Not you personally, no."
"But all mankind, yes?" Fin asks, and Orm can't contradict her. "I'm a part of mankind, genius. I want to help you as much as I can, but I would also resent you terribly if you tried to obliterate the rest of humanity after I took you in, you know? The fact that I don't know if we're off the hook yet is a little stressful, like the weight of your salvation and the fate of the world rests on my shoulders. I'm your warden and your teacher and your caretaker and your conscience and Arthur probably didn't think about it like that, but I do. I have moments sometimes when I forget what you've done and then I remember all at once and I don't want to be awful on purpose, but I still struggle with that."

With a click, Fin finally locates her house key and opens the front door. Orm, utterly speechless, can only follow her inside.
Instead of guilt over all the truth bombs she just threw at her guest, Fin only experiences relief. She’s glad for an emotional respite, because physically she feels like she’s been hit by a bus and tomorrow will be even more painful. She especially should have known better than to go climbing up a fucking mountainside, but whatever, it’s going to build character. Fin doesn’t work out ever and she doesn’t really have the strength and stamina to do the manual labor she committed to this week. She would never back out, not in a million years, but she’ll definitely fantasize about sleeping in her bed and waking up without stiff and sore muscles.

“Hey, I’m going to get started on dinner awhile. You might want to grab a shower in the meantime.”

“You didn’t want one first? I might use all the hot water.”

It’s a nice gesture but Fin has to decline. “No, if I shower now I will fall asleep immediately.”

For Fin, bathing is preferably a relaxing nighttime ritual. She likes going to bed with clean skin and wet hair. It’s going to be slightly less awesome to curl up on the living room floor after she showers, but she did ultimately agree to take Orm in and can’t bring herself to make him sleep on the floor instead. It’s just how she was raised.

Orm complies with her suggestion, heading into her room and grabbing a change of casual clothes before crossing the length of her house again to the guest bathroom. When his hand closes around the bathroom doorknob, Olive chirps at him suddenly. He pauses mid-turn and examines the cat.

“What does she want?”

“We can’t really talk to them the way that you guys do with marine life.”

“Arthur talks to marine life. The rest of Atlanteans have domesticated animals in a similar way that surface dwellers have with dogs and horses; they obey but they can’t talk to us.”

Fin nods. “If I had to guess, Olive probably wants to go in to the bathroom with you.”

“What does she want to do in there?” Orm is genuinely puzzled, and Fin’s not sure if there’s a way to explain it without sounding weird—because there isn’t.

“Cats are just nosy and like to be in your business. They like to watch people do a variety of things for whatever reason. If you don’t let her in, that’s fine. She’ll just scratch at the door but you can ignore her.”

Orm considers this and manages to slip inside without the cat. Fin’s torn between amusement and embarrassment. Her five feline roommates are going to drive him insane. She has no explanation for their behavior, only knowledge of the strange things they tend to do.

Once she hears the shower starts running, Fin relaxes a little. She pulls out some gnocchi she froze last week and the pesto sauce she made last night. She thaws out the former and pours the latter into a saucepan with some heavy cream. It’s quick work to sauté a chicken breast in garlic and olive oil. She finds that it’s much different preparing food when Orm isn’t studying her. A part of her liked the company, another part got anxious. Considering how she just spoke with him, he might not want to even eat dinner with her.

But all in all, Fin’s glad she got everything off her chest. She deserves to say her piece and she
would do it all over again. She wants him to understand, and not just for her sake: he’s not going to get better unless he realizes that his way of thinking still poses a danger to her and everyone else in the Bay. He doesn’t see a huge problem with what he’s done and he doesn’t think that being racist is bad.

*Well, at least I learned that a crate of Clementines is a valuable bribe,* Fin thinks wryly, *and that I am worthy enough to at least of prepare his meals.*

Despite the absurd temperature that Orm seems to prefer her thermostat to be set at, it’s still hot in the kitchen when two of her burners are on. Fin slips her t-shirt over her head and slings it through the doorway where it lands on the couch. The ink bared by her tank top catches her eye and she smirks.

*Defiling myself? That’s a little extreme.*

It’s just a cultural difference, but Fin knows how important Arthur’s tattoos are to him and Tom. They’re not just for decoration. She hopes Orm doesn’t ever say anything unfavorable about them in Tom’s presence. Eventually they will meet and Fin’s pretty sure she’s going to rue that day.

*Atlanna said by July 4th, which is about a month away…maybe Orm will come around, maybe not. It’s a tossup at this point.*

Fin normally plays music in the house—but hasn’t for over twenty four hours—and decides that even though Orm doesn’t seem to like it, he hasn’t said he dislikes it, and until he does she’s going to put on a playlist. (It’s also very likely that even if he does, she still will.) The bathroom door squeaks and Fin knows she has to make a choice soon.

*If I was a disillusioned and pretentious millennial, what would I listen to?*

Orm walks into the kitchen song before the second song starts on *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea.* He pauses on his way to the table, about four steps from the doorway.

“…What is that noise?”

“I thought I’d play some Neutral Milk Hotel. They’re a band I listened to in college.” Fin smiles blandly before turning back to the food. With practiced movements, she carves the chicken breast into thin strips. She places two thirds of it over Orm’s portion and sprinkles some cheese on top. When she hands him his bowl, he stares at her oddly.

“Why did you give me more than you?”

“It’s chicken. It has a lot of protein in it. It’s good but I prefer more pasta and sauce than meat.”

“This is the same green sauce from this morning,” Orm states.

“Yes. It’s got some pine nuts, cheese, garlic, and olive oil along with the basil you helped me pick. The potato dumplings are called gnocchi.”

“Potatoes were also in the soup yesterday.” Orm’s voice is matter of fact before he takes a drink of water.

“How did you remember that?”

“I have a good memory.”

Fin nods. “Gnocchi has a mild flavor so you can eat it with a variety of sauces. Pesto is delicious but
has a short shelf life. You can only preserve it for a short time before it goes bad. I added some heavy cream to it. I would have preferred crème fraîche but it’s hard to get in the Bay. I’d have to drive over an hour away.”

Orm seems intrigued by his food if his expression is any indication. His wet hair makes him look somehow younger and less intimidating; it’s hard to imagine that he’s capable of killing her in the blink of an eye when he’s poking at his gnocchi experimentally like a little kid. When he finally eats his first bite, he looks thoughtful.

“I prefer the red sauce from yesterday.”

“I do too. Cream sauces are delicious but I like the taste of marinara. Oh wait, hold on!” Fin gets up and grabs a lemon from the fridge. She slices a lemon into wedges and squeezes one over his dish. “Acidity helps break up the fattiness. Try it now.”

Upon his first taste of lemon juice, Orm’s face contorts momentarily but he does swallow his food. It’s likely his first time tasting something sour, but how do you warn someone about a flavor they never tried? How do you explain sour to them when they have no frame of reference to understand it?

“It’s definitely different than before,” Orm states, “but I’m not sure if it’s better or worse.”

Fin smiles. “Well, I tried. We can switch if you want.”

Orm shakes his head, wincing when she sucks on the lemon wedge. “That’s not necessary.”

They eat in companionable silence, although when Two-Headed Boy comes on Orm seems a little freaked out by how weird it is.

“This is an unsettling song.”

“The lyrics are disturbing or the actual melody is bothering you?”

“Both?” Orm frowns in concentration. “I admit that I don’t know what he’s singing about exactly.”

“The musician that wrote this album—Jeff Mangum—was focused on a teenage girl that died during a war when she was half your age. She left behind a diary that’s been read by millions of people.”

“What war did she die in?”

“She died during World War II,” Fin answers. “So a little over seventy years ago. There were a lot of naval battles fought during that time, so that’s probably when we surface dwellers really started becoming a problem.”

Orm’s voice is unamused. “Did you pick this album because you’re trying to make a point?”

Fin shakes her head. “No. I didn’t even pick it because Anne Frank was a victim of genocide. I just like Jeff Mangum and I like this song and I like this album and I wasn’t trying to be passive aggressive. I’m a little more direct than that.”

When Fin finishes her meal, she puts her empty plate in the sink and rummages in her cupboard. She pulls out two fruits and sets them in front of Orm, who has just finished eating his gnocchi.

“This is what peaches normally look like,” Fin explains, indicating for Orm to hold out his hand. “They’ve got a skin that’s fuzzy but also edible. They have a completely different texture when
they’re baked into a pie and coated with sugar. But in my humble opinion, this is the best way to eat them.”

Orm turns the fruit over in his hand and when he goes to squeeze it experimentally, Fin stops him with a hand on his. “It’s not hardy like an orange. If you press on it, it bruises. It’s very fragrant when it’s ripe, which this one is.”

Lifting the peach to his nose, he inhales deeply. “It smells very good.”

Fin snatches the peach from him and rinses it in the sink. “You always have to wash them first to help smooth the skin.” Turning off the tap, Fin gently blots it dry on a towel and hands it back to him. “You can cut them in half, but I just like to bite into them. Just don’t eat the pit in the center.”

Demonstrating with her own peach, Fin sinks her teeth into the succulent fruit. She can feel juice run escape her mouth—but that’s one of the best parts, in her opinion. After her first bite she licks her lips and uses her fingers to catch the rivulets running down her chin. She’s not a dainty eater, but she’s okay with that.

After observing her, Orm tilts his head back at the perfect angle to avoid the juice dripping down his face. It occurs to Fin, and not for the first time, that the way his throat moves when he drinks is something that she can’t help but appreciate. He seems too distracted by food to notice her reluctant admiration, thankfully.

“They are very messy.”

“Says the man who doesn’t make a mess,” Fin points out.

“I can’t help it if I’m better at eating your food than you are.”

“Georgia peaches are supposed to be juicy and I’ll make a mess if I want to.”

Fin sucks juice off her fingers and playfully flicks him off, a gesture that he might not actually be familiar with but the implication is pretty clear. Orm shoots her a sort of weird smile but eventually looks away and says nothing. Fin somehow feels like she’s been spared some kind of dire consequences; it’s a little unnerving, honestly. He’s intimated that his strength is superior (and that he’s pretty much superior in every way), but she doesn’t feel physically threatened by him.

When he’s done, Fin motions for him to hand her the peach pit, which he does after sucking on it and running his tongue over the entire surface to lap up the juice. Fin isn’t a prude, but watching Orm is obscene because he doesn’t seem to realize what he’s done. She numbly accepts his offering and quickly places it in her bin for compost.

“Good?” Fin asks needlessly. Orm nods, and she looks away because she feels lecherous watching him suck on his fingers. He rises to wash his hands and without being asked, begins to scrub the dishes in the sink.

Fin stands up to switch her playlist to a Radiohead one when she trips over Morris. The cat looks up at her innocently and meows. “Honey, I don’t have any people food for you tonight. You can’t have pesto because of the garlic and the chicken was cooked in it too.”

Morris wails accusingly at her. He is a little hefty and still has the audacity to act like he’s starving.

“I thought you said you can’t understand them.” Orm’s voice is scornful, but Fin suspects it’s because he thinks she lied about it, not because she’s talking to an animal.
“I can’t understand them exactly but when these guys holler at me, it’s usually because they want food. Cats can’t eat everything that people can or they would get sick or die, so I have to be careful.” Fin scoops up Morris in her arms. She kisses his forehead and squeezes him, causing him to purr.

“You made that noise yesterday.”

“Purring can mean a lot of things but it usually indicates that a cat is content or happy. It’s a nice noise. They say it lowers blood pressure and when I have a migraine, I like to cuddle up with Morris here.”

“What is a migraine?” Orm asks, drying his hands on a towel.

“It’s a really bad headache that some people get. They can be debilitating. Sometimes I can barely move because the pain is so bad.”

“What would cause such an incident?”

“It’s different for every person. I got them a lot right after my parents died. I had a terrible diet and I was constantly upset and sick.”

“But you worked your way through it all,” Orm reasons, making it sound like it was the simplest thing in the world.

“Yes, I did eventually.”

“Alone?”

“Alone, for the most part,” Fin says after a moment. “Arthur was running around doing his loner thing and I didn’t even see him until three months after they died.” It was a sore point for the longest time, but the long conversation she had with him the day after he dropped off Orm really did kick start their friendship back up. The fact they have plans later in the week is practically a miracle.

“What about Sam?”

The mention of Sam's name is like being drenched in a bucket of cold water. Fin wishes the twins were standing in her kitchen so she could smack them with a frying pan. Perhaps sensing her growing anger, Orm holds up a hand as if dispel her rage.

“Your student, Derek, mentioned Sam to me. He initially assumed my presence at your house was due to Sam. I heard about your brother by accident, not gossip.”

Exhaling deeply, Fin crosses her arms. “Sam’s first stint in prison started when I was fourteen and he was seventeen. Our parents were out for the evening and a friend dropped him off back at home around ten or so. Sam was high on drugs and he started screaming at me about money. He thought I knew how to get into our parents’ safe, because he dragged me back there and tried to get me to open it at knifepoint. He took his eyes off me for half a second and I grabbed Dad’s Sig from his bedside drawer and I shot Sam in the leg.”

“A Sig?” Orm queries, and Fin pantomimes holding a gun before he nods in comprehension. “Why did you spare him?”

“I don’t think Sam would have killed me. He never laid a hand on me growing up, but I did wind up shooting him because I didn’t want to take any chances. My parents were furious with him but I didn’t want him to go to jail; he’s still my brother. But because he threatened me with a knife and I was forced to discharge a firearm, the state filed criminal charges. He was released after less than a
year but keeps going back to prison for repeat offenses. I still feel really guilty about what I did, shooting him like that, so when he comes by I wind up giving him money.”

“You still provide him with financial assistance?”

“Because of what Sam did, my parents took him out of their will. Their deaths were sudden so they didn’t have time to reconcile with him or change it. He didn’t get anything when they died and with his record, no place will hire him. I feel bad for him.”

Fin can tell Orm wants to say something harsh, but stops himself just in time. “Family is a complicated matter,” is what he settles on.

Fin knows from Arthur that Orm’s home life growing up was a nightmare, even if he doesn't quite agree. He doesn’t seem to resent his dad the way she feels he should, but also recognizes that such a thing is not up to her to decide. “At least your brother and your mother are still alive and they love you very much. Having known Arthur since childhood, I can tell you right now that family is the most important thing to him. He’d rewrite every law in Atlantis to keep you safe, complicated or not.”

“The laws of my people will prove formidable. They do no one any favors.”

“They somehow kept Arthur alive,” Fin says. “I always thought it was weird how no one else ever came to finish him off. My parents helped fix up Tom’s house back in the eighties and they really did a number on that place.”

“Even as a half-breed, Arthur is still first-born. Killing him would be an egregious sin. To purists like Vulko, Arthur was always the true heir. Even Mera’s father felt my brother’s claim was stronger than mine. The royal bloodline is through my mother, not my father. Even a half-breed bastard’s claim was stronger than mine.”

Shaking her head at that pretty terrible statement, Fin crosses her arms. “Then how was your father able to sacrifice Atlanna if she’s the real queen?”

“Orvax was a military commander that served her father. The king betrothed them with the understanding the arrangement would be consummated on his death. Atlanna was forced to marry to keep her power and once he was crowned king, Orvax’s authority superseded hers.”

“What kind of patriarchal bullshit is that?” Fin shrieks.

“Atlanteans have great respect for women, but they are not permitted to lead the kingdom,” Orm says simply. “That is just our way. We are conservative and have many rules, many of them passed down from ancient times. We hold the ancient gods in high esteem.”

“I guess surface dwellers are just a bunch of godless heathens, then, huh?”

“Amongst other things.”

Fin snorts. “So what kind of a king were you? Did you spend your entire budget on the military?”

“Of course I had to spend generously,” Orm huffs, “because investing in the future of Atlantis means keeping everyone safe. But I made sure to set aside funding towards medical research to combat the effects of your surface dweller pollution. Our children receive the finest educations in the world. Our infrastructure is very sound and there’s next to no pollution produced by our manufacturing district. My kingdom is very efficient in part because of many policies I implemented.”
Fin sees further glimpses of the ardent ruler Arthur had described. It makes sense that they only comes out when he’s discussing something he’s passionate about: Atlantis. “You mentioned a crackdown on recreational drugs.”

“With a brother like yours, I thought you might appreciate such things.”

“Watch it, Orm,” Fin warns. “Sam has made a lot of mistakes, but he’s never come anywhere close to what you’ve done.”

Orm’s tone is haughty. “It’s not a competition.”

“I figure no one else could keep up with a war criminal,” Fin counters breezily, and it’s a little alarming how ready she always is to go toe to toe with him.

“I devoted my life to Atlantis.”

“A home that doesn’t love you back doesn’t sound like a good home.”

“Says the local outcast,” Orm remarks slyly.

Fin takes a deep breath. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. You probably don’t believe me, but I don’t want to fight with you. Can I call an official attempt at a truce?”

“Attempt?”

“Well, I know you and you know me, so I think an attempt is probably more likely than an actual, successful truce.”

Orm chuckles, and it’s a weirdly warm, soothing sound—genuine, if she’s any judge. His blue eyes settle on her face before he accepts her offered hand and shakes it. His skin is warm and calloused against hers.

“Why are your hands so cold?” Orm asks, lifting the one in his palm closer to his face and studying how her fingertips are turning white.

“I have a circulatory disease that affects my blood vessels when I’m cold. I got hot while I was cooking but now I’m cold again because you set the thermostat so low. It’s not really a big deal. I’ll go grab a sweater.”

“I can just—” Orm walks over to the wall panel and taps it. Despite the fact she gave him no instructions, he reads the digital commands and intuits how to use them.

“How do you know how that works?”

“Our technology is superior by far,” Orm replies, eyes on the screen. “Your user interfaces are primitive.”

Fin doesn’t really have an answer for that. Arthur described giant space faring vessels and a beautiful underwater paradise. Fin’s house was built in the seventies and even though it’s well-kept, it’s certainly not state-of-the-art. Orm probably feels like he’s living in the dark ages without access to the advanced tech he’s used to.

Fin crosses her arms. “So did you want to watch a movie tonight?”

Because truce.
Orm blinks. “I would be amenable.”

“Arthur says you have similar media.”

“The majority of our films are educational. Atlanteans prefer live entertainment.”

“Like gladiator fights?”

Orm nods. “We also like music, despite what you may think. The most famous musician in Atlantis is Topo.”

“What does he or she play?”

“Topo is a male and he plays a variety of instruments, sometimes at the same time.”

“Like the harmonica and the guitar?” Fin ventures, thinking of videos she’s seen of The Beatles.

“He has eight arms, so he can play more than just two simultaneously.”

“Eight arms?”

“Topo is an octopus.”

Fin’s mouth is hanging open but she doesn’t care. “An octopus?”

“I just said that,” Orm chides. “He can also shoot a bow and arrow but no one’s really sure who taught him that.”

“That’s adorable,” Fin gushes.

“Is that why you have an octopus tattooed on your arm?” Orm gestures to her right shoulder. “Because you find them cute?” He spits the word like it’s a curse.

“Yes, but I also admire how cunning they are,” Fin sighs dreamily. She’s definitely made Conner read a ton of articles about them. “Octopi are remarkable animals.”

“Topo has fought all attempts at domestication. I think he plays drums because he wants to, for whatever reason. He’s also lived far longer than any other octopus on record.”

“I’d give anything to watch him perform,” Fin says as she perches on the arm of the loveseat and cackles. She motions for Orm to take a seat on the opposite end, which he does. Killer steadfastly refuses to move, but Lester and Norah run off.

“So, surface dweller films are very diverse because we like watching stuff according to our current mood. A lot of romantic movies are kind of dumb and I don’t need you thinking that every surface dweller is that stupid. You probably wouldn’t find any of our comedies funny, so I was thinking maybe a science fiction movie or a drama?”

“I’ll let you pick.”

Fin stands up and walks over to her DVD shelves. She likes having hard copies because the idea of her favorite movies getting yanked off Netflix with no warning is kind of a bummer and getting content to stream with her shitty internet connection is a headache. She makes her selection and pops it in the player. When she turns around, Olive is sitting in Orm’s lap, which seems to perturb him.

“If she’s bothering you, I can move her.”
“She has needles on the ends of her hands.”

“Is she hurting you?”

“No. You could empty that entire handgun you described into me and I would be completely uninjured.”

“Weird flex, but okay,” Fin mutters, grabbing a blanket from her pile.

“I can still feel the pain without it actually harming me,” Orm elaborates. “But it’s very mild.”

“You can pet her if you want,” Fin offers, demonstrating by running her palm over the cat from head to tail. “She’s soft and it’s a mindless, pleasant thing to do.”

“And you don’t eat them?”

Fin knows he’s joking, but hitting him in the face with a pillow might disturb Olive, so she looks away so he won’t see her smile. She turns on the television and changes the input. The DVD menu is animated and Orm gives her a questioning look.

“What are we watching?”

“Alien. It mostly takes place in one location but also in the future so you don’t need to have an advanced understanding of our society. It was made about ten years before you were born, so the special effects aren’t amazing but it holds up pretty well. My parents didn’t let me watch R-rated movies but Sam knew I wanted to see it and he got a friend to lend me a VHS when I was nine. All movies are evaluated for content so that children aren’t accidentally exposed to material their parents don’t want them to see. This was considered too scary for anyone under the age of seventeen.”

“We don’t shelter our children in such a way,” Orm comments. “We educate every young citizen on all kinds of subjects that parents might normally find uncomfortable. Ignorant children can cause a lot of damage.”

“And then they grow into ignorant adults that cause even more damage,” Fin mutters.

“Or ignorant men that can’t locate certain parts of female anatomy,” Orm says, voice grim.

Fin laughs as she spreads the blanket over her legs. Orm sounds so confident, but it’s difficult to imagine someone that uptight as a sexual person. She wonders if he was the type of ruler that had an endless procession of women into and out of his bedroom; men seem to get more of a pass than women in Atlantis, from what she gathers. It suddenly occurs to her that it’s been a very long time since she’s wondered such a thing about a man.

“This movie is about aliens?”

Orm’s voice pulls her back towards more appropriate thoughts and she almost sighs in relief.

“No, just one,” Fin replies, deciding not to tell him there’s a sequel. “The crew of the spaceship wakes up to a distress signal. Things go poorly.”

“Didn’t you just spoil the entire film?”

“I can promise you it’s a little more complicated than that,” Fin swears. She presses play and worries that Orm will be bored, but he obediently sits without a word until Ripley starts arguing with Dallas and Lambert about bringing Kane on board.
“She’s just trying to protect the ship. I don’t know why they want to breach protocol.”

“I know! Ripley’s doing what she’s supposed to.”

_I guess it wouldn’t be much of a movie if the xenomorph never makes it on board, but they’re also assholes, so it might have found a way to kill everyone anyway._

“Ash’s actions are very suspect.”

_You have no idea._

Fin’s seen the chestburster scene at least half a dozen times but it’s still gross. Orm doesn’t seem perturbed by the blood but he frowns as the alien runs away.

“No one pursues it?”

Fin shushes him although she secretly agrees. “Just watch.”

“This crew is inept.”

“They’re on a commercial space vessel. They’re not trained killers. Not everyone gets a decade or more of hardcore military training before being released into the world.”

“And it shows,” Orm adds. Fin wants to wag her finger at him before she reminds herself that she has the ability to deescalate things too. She makes the conscious decision to ignore his snarky comments and that’s when Morris jumps on her lap. She kisses the top of his head and tries her best to get him to settle, but he walks across her lap, across _Killer_, and then drapes himself over Orm and Olive. Fin clenches her fists at his _nerve_ before drawing her knees up under her chin.

_I can’t fucking believe this shit. My cats would rather sit with Orm than their own human._ Seething, Fin curls into a ball and relaxes until Ash’s final confrontation with Ripley.

“I knew he had ulterior motives.”

“He’s such a dick,” Fin grumbles, because she’s hated Ash ever since elementary school. He’s so condescending and rude and it drives her nuts every time she watches.

The look on Orm’s face indicates he has further thoughts on the matter but perhaps recalling how he was silenced earlier, he turns his attention back to the screen. Morris stretches out alongside Olive, and he absently resumes petting them both. He even spares a few strokes for Killer, who is surprisingly docile despite the fact that when Fin tries to pet him, he turns into a bear trap.

By the time the end of the movie rolls around, Fin is almost asleep. She vaguely registers the credit music and stirs before Orm gets too restless. Her bones crack as she awkwardly rises and stretches. She hobbles over to the DVD player and ejects it, feeling Orm’s eyes on her back the entire time. She turns in the hopes of catching something else besides a neutral expression, but is disappointed.

“So what did you think?”

“It’s unrealistic that the woman survived with her cat.”

“The director wanted her to die at the end but the producers wanted the alien to die instead. It might be more realistic, but less satisfying.”

Orm scoffs. “What is the point if it’s not believable?”
“What is the point of entertainment if you don’t get to suspend your disbelief or see something unexpected?” Fin asks, yawning. She turns back and looks at her houseguest, who currently has Olive and Morris in his lap with Killer by his hip. She wrinkles her nose.

“Why are you frowning?”

“My cat likes you more than he likes me.” Fin tries to keep resentment out of her voice. Morris and Olive love everyone, but Killer? That one kind of stings because he’s her problem child and the one that requires the most work; he has made her genuinely suffer before. “And he lives up to his name.”

“He’s harmless,” Orm beckons to her cat as if to taunt her.

Fin approaches Killer and pets him three times. On the fourth down stroke, he twists suddenly and swats at her. His claws across her arm feel like hot knives. She expects his violent reaction but still doesn’t move quickly enough. Three red stripes appear on her skin and Fin kind of regrets making her point so vividly.

With an unexpected gentleness, Orm displaces Morris and Olive by picking them up and placing them on the coffee table. Killer finally jumps off the couch and lumbers away as Orm shifts closer to inspect her arm.

“He is unusually aggressive towards you. Mindy and I don’t seem to have that problem.”

“Well spotted,” Fin mutters, watching the blood well up on her skin. She presses near the wound and the crimson drops bead up and drip down her arm. “He got me pretty good.”

There’s a first aid kit in the kitchen. Fin heads there and distantly registers Orm following her, probably out of morbid curiosity. She washes up in the sink and manages to find a half-used jar of ointment she made earlier in the spring.

“Sorry for the smell, but the marigolds I use in my candula ointment are very pungent,” Fin grunts, smearing it liberally over her wounds. She blots the excess with a paper towel and finds that her scratches have still not yet stopped bleeding. Three neat little red lines run through the white surface and start bleeding through the pattern of the quilted weave.

“You’re very fragile,” Orm remarks.

“Yes. I usually cover up my legs in the summer because I bruise even easier than those peaches we just ate.”

Fin recalls the faded marks she saw on Orm when he arrived, but given his healing rate, they were likely only days old instead of weeks old. Fin knows that even though they’re merely cuts, she’ll likely bear scars for the next few years. Her body is stubborn when it comes to healing.

“I definitely wouldn’t have made it to the end of that movie. I’m pretty sure the xenomorph would have killed me first,” Fin remarks, blotting at her arm one last time before throwing the paper towel in the bin. “Anyway, I need to get ready for bed. Do you mind reading in the library until I’m done?”

“That’s fine.”

It’s early, but Fin showers anyway knowing that as soon as the hot water hits her she’ll want to sleep. It does wonders for her sore muscles, though, and she loses track of time. The water grows cold fast, and she stands in the stall shivering before remembering that she can’t walk around naked in her house anymore. Wrapping her hair in a towel and throwing an oversized t-shirt over her head and some pants, Fin walks past the library and finds Orm absorbed in The Two Towers.
Smiling to herself on her way to the kitchen, Fin heats up some water for tea and carefully peruses her stash before she makes her selection. Sencha is fussy and grows astringent if it’s steeped for too long, so she sets a timer to keep on top of things. She adds a little sugar to both of them and heads back to where Orm is.

“I know some people think it’s too warm outside to drink hot beverages, but I wanted to introduce you to tea. It’s not scalding because the flavor gets stronger the hotter you make the water but you still should blow on it first.”

Fin demonstrates with a very theatrical puff of air. The steam dispels momentarily and Orm seems intrigued by it. He carefully repeats the action with his own mug of tea. She figures his system can handle a lot of temperature variances, but the closer he gets to experiencing the correct temperature tea should be enjoyed at, the better.

“It reminds me of seaweed.”

Nodding, Fin crouches down across from him. “It’s made from leaves. Some people think it tastes kind of grassy or earthy. All green tea is delicious but sencha is kind of fancy. Tom found it online for me and bought it for my birthday last year. I’m actually really flattered he got me such a thoughtful gift.”

“You two seem close.”

“Arthur would and still does disappear for months at a time and Tom’s never sure if he’ll see him for holidays or special occasions. He’s lonely, or at least he was before Atlanna came back. I think he just misses doing dad stuff like buying gifts. He worries about me living out here by myself.”

“You’re not alone at the moment,” Orm points out.

Smiling, Fin declines to tell him that that is the reason why Tom’s so concerned.

Orm is persistent. “Are you afraid that Atlanteans will come after you?”

“No, just one,” Fin says, smiling so Orm knows she’s kidding.

Sitting back in his chair, Orm tries hard not to look put out. “I can defend you against any Atlantean.”

“I’m more worried that my neighbors will find out that I’m harboring an eco terrorist and they’ll burn down my house,” Fin says truthfully, sipping her tea.

“I have no intention of telling anyone here what I’ve done. You don’t need that kind of burden.”

“No, I really don’t,” Fin snorts. “But sometimes I don’t really get to pick what I get burdened with.”

Rising—and wincing as her knees crack—Fin is almost out the door before Orm’s voice stops her.

“I appreciated seeing the ocean today.”

Fin is confused. “But you can see it from my house.”

“Yes, then you made sure to take me somewhere else so I had a better view.”

“That’s true,” Fin concedes with a weak shrug. It was a deliberately kind thing she did, because even though she’s adversarial she’s also really fucking nice. Those two sides of her are always battling for dominance around him; she wants to help but she doesn’t want to be taken advantage of. It’s hard to
know what to do.

“You said I had a choice today, but so did you.”

Blinking, Fin tries to determine if he’s complimenting her or not. She nods weakly and then shuffles out of the room. Even after she’s rinsed out her mug and settled into her pile of blankets on the living room floor, sleep eludes her. Despite her exhaustion, all she can think about is if she’s doing the right thing, both for herself and him, and if good choices for him and her are mutually exclusive.

_I guess I'll just have to wait and see._
Orm finds the blinding sunlight of the surface a little too disruptive to his circadian rhythms for comfort. He assumes that daylight is when he’s supposed to be active and nighttime is when he’s meant to sleep, but the presence or absence of the sun has no bearing on his activities and energy level. He stayed up to finish reading the rest of his book before going to bed; it still should have given him ample time to rest but he’s a little groggy when eight o’clock rolls around.

Extremely dehydrated, Orm walks to the kitchen and drinks two glasses of water. His mouth still doesn’t feel clean, so he heads to the bathroom to inspect all the items Fin left for him. He recalls that one of the items was meant for his teeth, and after some deductive reasoning figures out how to use a toothbrush. The experience altogether feels unnatural but when he’s finished he much prefers the clean state of his mouth. He mentally resists himself to what will inevitably be a frequent ritual.

After splashing his face and hair with some water, Orm heads back to Fin’s bedroom to change into the too-small clothes available to him. It’s only been a few months, but he recalls the custom fit of Atlantis’s finest materials against his skin. They didn’t feel pleasant, per se, but they helped craft the image of the king he was—the king he is no longer—so it’s almost a relief to be comfortable instead. His wetsuit is still lying in a small room in the house. He discovered it after Fin left for Tom Curry’s house the first day he was awake. He has no desire to wear it again so soon, preferring the surface dweller clothes for what Fin has planned for him today.

After tying his too-small boots, Orm finds his host lying on the living room floor in front of the couch in a deep sleep. All five cats are snuggled up against her but they are awake, seeming to have heard his approach. A small rectangular device is buzzing nearby but she doesn’t seem to register the noise. The sound is annoying, so he picks it up, reads the screen, and silences it when prompted.

A part of him wants to let her sleep. Fin clearly needs the rest. But if she’s not ready in time, Orm senses she will be disappointed in herself. He stands at her feet, looming over her, when all five cats make eye contact with him. Norah and Lester predictably bolt, but the other three remain behind. He’s not sure the best way to wake their mistress. Yelling is undignified and he doesn’t want to scare her.

Crouching down beside her and placing a hand on her shoulder, Orm applies gentle pressure and gives her a shake. It softens the stern expression on her face momentarily but she remains unconscious. He repeats the gesture, and her arm lashes out and slaps away his hand before she turns over onto her stomach and pulls the pillow over her head.

“Fin,” Orm intones, giving her another shake. “It’s time to get up. I assume that I deactivated an alarm on your phone.”

Fin’s head emerges from behind the pillow and her hair is a wild mess. She squints at him. “Can you find my glasses, please?”

Orm surmises what she’s looking for by her hand gestures and general impression of blindness (although he’s never heard the word glasses before) and finds them carelessly half-folded two feet away from her. He holds them in front of his face, wincing at how distorted everything looks when he gazes through them.

“I can’t see what expression you’re making, but I’m going to assume you’re judging me,” Fin says offhandedly, flopping onto her back and sighing.
“Your vision requires a great deal of correction.”

“You’re not wrong,” Fin remarks loftily. She puts on her glasses on when he deigns to hand them over and stares at him. “Are you seriously all ready to go?”

“I need you to do something about my hair,” Orm admits. “It’s getting in my eyes.”

“I can use pins again or I can cut it for you,” Fin offers, pressing her face into Morris’s back as he drapes himself over her chest and shoulder.

“Are you competent at cutting hair?”

Fin’s counter is swift. “Would you prefer a stranger to do it for you?”

“Good point,” Orm concedes. “Did you have time before we leave?”

“I have to make breakfast,” Fin says, yawning and trying to slide out from under Olive and Morris while giving Killer, who’s sitting beside her ankles, a wide berth. “I was going to drive Tom’s truck over to Mindy’s house so we can leave a little later if we need to.”

Fin looks wobbly when she stands, but manages to slink to the kitchen without tripping or falling. She pulls a strange looking appliance out with a flat tray and turns it on. She rummages through the fridge and pulls out eggs, a pitcher of something light-colored, and a bundle wrapped in paper. When she opens up the package, Morris runs into the kitchen making a strange trilling sound. He jumps into the chair across from Orm as if waiting to be served.

“This cat is obsessed with bacon. My dad would feed it to him all the time.”

“Your father?” Orm does a little mental math. “How long do cats live?”

“Oh, anywhere from eleven to fifteen years usually, but I had one in middle school that made it to her twenties. Morris is an old man, about thirteen years old. I found him one summer and I couldn’t take him to college with me, so my parents looked after him. They bitched about what a pain he was and then proceeded to spoil him. They even bought him a personalized Christmas stocking. When they died Morris would run around the house looking for them.”

“Arthur said he’s your favorite,” Orm relays carefully, studying the tender expression on her face.

Fin smiles, pouring the thick liquid from the pitcher onto the metal try. “He’s right. I love them all but Morris is my main man. Did you have any pets growing up?”

“My mount is a tylosaur. I named him when I was six after a famed surface dweller musician my mother told me about growing up.”

“What’s his name?”

“Keith.”

Fin nearly drops the egg in her hand as she erupts in a fit of giggles. “Keith? Are you serious?”

“She said his name was Keith Richards.”

Fin howls in laughter and clutches her sides in pain as she tries in vain to stop. “I mean, it makes sense to name a dinosaur after a dinosaur, Jesus.” At Orm’s confused expression, she elaborates. “Keith Richards is notorious for surviving a bunch of freak accidents and decades of reckless drug use. He looks rough.”
Orm is handed Fin’s phone, which apparently contains pictures she summoned during one of her search queries and he is aghast. “This is who I named him after? What kind of music did Tom Curry make my mother listen to?”

“He’s a legendary musician, considered by many to be one of the best of all time, but his extracurricular activities overshadow his music,” Fin mutters. “Hopefully your pet behaves better.”

“Keith is the best tylosaur,” Orm says proudly, "one of the few ocean creatures Arthur cannot bend to his will. Tylosaurs are bred exclusively for Atlantean royalty and Keith is loyal to me. I was too young to know that naming him had any kind of implications."

Fin smiles as she uses a strange plastic lever to flip the discs that are forming in her large rectangular pan. “That’s sweet. Of course your pet is a giant forty foot dinosaur that you ride into battle. Is he still alive?”

It’s discomforting when Orm realizes he spared no regard for Keith when he was imprisoned. “As far as I know, although I haven’t seen him since my fight with Arthur.”

The bacon that Fin makes smells amazing as it sizzles in its pan; the noise startles him from his thoughts. Morris places his little hands on the table expectantly, a strange gesture given that cats don’t seem to use their arms and legs the way humans do.

“So today I have for you a classic American breakfast of eggs, pancakes, and bacon,” Fin announces grandly, and her sudden affectations seem to reference something he’s unfamiliar with. “You seem to get wigged out by eggs so I’ll focus on the last two: pancakes are flat cakes heated in a pan—hence the creative name—and topped with butter and syrup. Bacon comes from cows, just like sausage, but the meat is cut into thin strips, cured, and then fried. It’s tasty but very unhealthy.”

“Your cat seems invested in this breakfast.”

“If I don’t give some bacon to this adorable little jerk he’ll be unbearable all day. This is for you, my love,” Fin coos, places a small saucer in front of Morris with a tiny piece of crumbled bacon about the size of his thumbnail. She drops a kiss on the top of his head and his eyes close briefly in contentment. Morris has to tilt his head to the side to eat it, his pink tongue whisking against the ceramic.

“And this is for you,” Fin informs Orm and places the plate in front of him. Three pancakes are neatly stacked on his plate and drenched in a brown sauce. It smells very sweet.

“I didn’t put any fancy fillings in, but sometimes classic is the way to go. The yellow stuff is butter, which makes everything taste awesome, and the liquid I poured over everything is called maple syrup. We make it from sap from trees.”

Orm watches Fin cut into her pancake stack with a knife, although the food itself seems very soft. He mimics her and slices a small wedge for himself. The gooey texture of the syrup reminds him of the pie filling he ate the day prior, but the fat from the butter cuts through the sweetness. The eggs are as unremarkable as they were the day before, but the bacon is outstanding. It practically dissolves in his mouth.

“I can see why the cat likes this.”

“It’s good, right? I prefer breakfast sausage but I’m out at the moment.”

It’s hard to imagine something that tastes better than what he’s experiencing now. His portions are much larger than Fin’s but he’s done before she is. She glances over at his empty plate.
contemplatively. “Do you want me to make more pancakes? I’m not sure if seconds are a thing in Atlantis, but they are here on the surface.”

“Seconds?”

“A second helping of food,” Fin elaborates. “My mom would deliberately plate small portions because Dad would always want seconds.”

“My meals were always served in multiple courses, but there were never repeats.”

“You couldn’t ask for more of something you liked?”

“I didn’t really care either way. I doubt that such a thing was ever done, though. What a strange custom; it doesn’t really move the meal forward if you continue eating the same thing until you’re full.”

Not having a response to that aside from a shrug, Fin stands by the griddle idly but Orm notices she hasn’t finished her food.

“I can wait until you’re done eating.”

Fin blinks, clearly still tired, but waves him off. She removes her plate from the table and eats standing up, flipping the pancakes after a few minutes. When she yawns, Orm studies the angry red marks that run up her forearm.

“Are you in a lot of pain?”

“They burn but I get scratched up all the time. He’s the only one that tries to hurt me on purpose. I just want him to love me.”

“You could put him back outside.”

“No, he’d be devastated and so would I. I’ll just take care of his heartless, freeloading ass forever. Plus he would decimate the local bird population if I put him out there again.”

With a flourish, Fin plates his second helping of pancakes and slathers them in butter and syrup. She pads out of the kitchen while he eats and by the time he’s done, returns wearing a pair of jeans and a red tank top. She attempts to braid her hair into some semblance of order but gives up and pulls it into a simple style secured at the nape of her neck.

“Let me know when you’re ready for your haircut. It’ll probably be easiest outside. I’m going to go find something to stand on since you refuse to kneel or sit.”

“I will sit,” Orm compromises. “We can do it now if you wish.”

“I haven’t had time to clean up my outdoor furniture, so I’ll just grab one of these.” Fin maneuvers one of the kitchen chairs out the same door she uses to access the greenhouse, which is further down the cliff side. She plops it in the middle of her garden facing the ocean and he takes a seat. She produces a sheet and unfolds it dramatically, the faded floral pattern almost sheer in the morning sunlight. She wraps it around him warily, noting his slightly apprehensive look.

With no warning, Fin pulls out a plastic comb from her back pocket and drags her fingers through Orm’s hair to study the length and texture. He inhales sharply through his nose and catches a whiff of that elusive fragrance he smelled not long after he woke up.
“What is that smell?”

Fin stops what she’s doing and her fingers trail through the ends of his hair one last time before she puts her hands on her hips. “I’m not sure what you smell.”

It reminds him of their first conversation. Orm isn’t really good at describing tastes and scents from the surface because his frame of reference is so small, but maybe he can help narrow it down. “I smelled it two days ago when I woke up. Arthur mentioned something called dry shampoo.”

“Oh, that must be coconut. It’s not my favorite, but I think it’s in my shampoo too.”

To satisfy his curiosity, Orm leans forward and smells the hair Fin has lifted up off her neck. “That’s it. Do people eat it?”

“It’s a very popular ingredient in many cultures. Fun fact: Keith Richards almost died falling out of a palm tree trying to gather coconuts. It was not his first brush with death.”

What Orm feels is not quite embarrassment, although he’d feel better if Fin was able to better contain her smile. She resumes combing through his hair, kindly ignoring his discomfort. “Do you just want a little cut off the ends?”

Orm considers this carefully. He relied on a clip and styling products he had back in Atlantis to keep it properly slicked back. After his helmet was knocked off in the arena and then during his fight with Arthur on the surface, he found that the dampness made the ends curl up as they dried. The length he favored when he was king would serve him best and be familiar. The current length feels wrong to him somehow.

“Shorter is fine. Maybe this much off,” Orm uses his fingers to approximate.

“So about an inch and a half?”

Orm is not familiar with surface dweller units of measurements but he nods. He has no one to impress if she somehow botches his haircut. The trimmers appear to use electricity and they buzz uncomfortably loud as she begins trailing the device near the base of his skull. The touch of her fingers brushing away stray hairs from his neck makes him squirm.

“Am I hurting you?”

Orm exhales sharply, the sound completely obscured. “No.”

“Good, then please stop moving or you’re getting a fade by accident.”

When Fin starts cutting the hair near the top of his head, she stands very close and Orm is acutely aware of how much shorter she is than any full-grown Atlantean. No wonder she’s relieved that he sat down for this. While she’s not as slim as Mera or his mother, she’s still rather slight, too. He’s not sure when she appears smaller, when she’s swimming in her nightclothes or when her attire accentuates her figure as it does now.

“You seem to have experience with cutting hair,” Orm comments.

“I never said I was new to it. My Dad made me go to the barbershop with him when I was a kid. I had to watch and learn so I could cut his hair and Sam’s hair for free when I was old enough. But Sam had to cut mine and mom’s hair; he said it was only fair. Dad made me learn a lot of things that are really important; I just hated it at the time. Car stuff, house stuff, gun stuff, you name it.”
It occurs to Orm that Orvax taught him many things too.

It’s hard to accept that part of him is intrinsically evil, that the damage is irreparable, whatever it is. Examining the components crafted by his father, Orm finds strength and cunning and resolve. Those are traits of an effective king and an admired leader; they’re not bad. And if they’ve cost him loyalty and companionship along the way, that's of little consequence. The love, compassion, and empathy his mother tried to impart have done him no favors. They may inspire strength in Arthur, but they’ve caused him nothing but grief.

From what Orm can gather about Tom, he seems weak in all the typical surface dweller ways. He’s soft. The son he raised is not a good fit for Atlantis—Arthur still does not and never will consider himself an Atlantean, or as he’s fond of stating, one of them. It remains to be seen what kind of king he will be. But Orm owes his continued existence to the teachings of the humble Tom Curry, because Atlanna had no part in raising him—Orvax saw to that.

“I’m going to have to make your hair wet to trim the front,” Fin advises him, producing a plastic bottle with a strange nozzle. She mists the air to demonstrate how it works. She leans forward and before her swinging ponytail can hit him in the face, Orm catches it. In midair his fingers inadvertently thread through the strands until he reaches the ends, catching her hair tie and pulling it out. He’s never touched anyone else’s hair, especially when it’s dry, and he’s tempted to repeat the gesture just for the unique sensory experience.

“My hair kind of has a life of its own,” Fin says sheepishly, trying to refasten her hair and flipping the ponytail over her shoulder. The tie once again starts sliding down to the ends. “It’s very slippery and resists all attempts to style it. Arthur and Conner tell me that my hair feels like plastic doll’s hair.”

“It doesn’t feel like plastic,” Orm insists, and for some reason he has the urge to touch it again.

“Your hair is baby fine and feels like silk,” Fin muses. “But I bet you’ve never even touched silk before. It’s not an environmentally sound material so you’d probably hate it. Worm larvae have to be fed very specific types of leaves that have a large carbon and water footprint, plus the larvae that create the silk fibers are boiled alive.”

“Atlanteans are less concerned with animal welfare and more concerned with sustainable sourcing,” Orm explains. “Why do you make silk if it’s bad for the environment? Why do you surface dwellers do anything that’s bad for the environment?”

“People have been making silk since ancient times, before they ever gave a thought to sustainability. People want what they want. Do you take everything into consideration before you make a decision? If you had the means to acquire what you desired, wouldn’t you just go get it? Because I feel like you have.”

Orm is compelled to contradict her—he’s not sure if it’s from force of habit or genuine disagreement. But he bites his tongue because she doesn’t pull any punches on the subject. He justifies this particular avoidance of conflict as self-preservation: he has no desire to antagonize her; she will rain hell down around them both. She’s not even an angry or hostile person, not really, but she meets every push with one of her own. Winning wouldn’t be a victory since it would be unworthy of him to provoke her—she simply doesn’t deserve it.

And that’s certainly a surprise; Orm does not often take other people into consideration. Life is not about fair. The answer to her question is obvious. He murdered the Fisherman King to secure a military alliance. That definitely wasn’t in their best interest, and they were arguably a race he was seeking to protect as fellow ocean dwellers. He utilized a false flag maneuver to achieve an understanding with King Nereus. Xebellan and Atlantean soldiers perished in the skirmish he
manufactured. And hundreds of Atlantean soldiers died during the confrontation with The Brine.

Orm had the means, took the action, and he is still Ocean Master; it’s not a title that belongs to Arthur in the way it did to him. The trident Orm used before he wielded his father’s still waits for him in Atlantis, along with his helm and his armor and his mount. He still has hydrokinesis and hand-to-hand fighting abilities. It’s mostly a sense of purpose that’s missing.

“The consequences you preach would not have affected me if I had succeeded; in fact, the destruction of the surface was exactly what I wanted. But surface dwellers are fools. They destroy the very planet they live on and pollute their own air and water. Even you are guilty of this: you don’t seem like a wasteful person, but there’s plastic in every room of your house. You use it every day and depend on it.”

“It’s been mass-produced for decades. Our parents never really gave it much thought, but my generation is trying. We like the idea of greener energy and biodegradable materials and sustainable sourcing, but it’s not necessarily what fuels a capitalist economy. Big corporations are the biggest culprits. But all of my toiletries are in plastic bottles and my food packaging is non-recyclable. There aren’t very many alternatives at all, but I know I can do better.”

“Much better,” Orm corrects. Her answer pleases him, though; she’s not shying away from her own culpability.

“There’s a quote I read online once: Being angry all the time is exhausting and corrosive. Not being angry feels morally irresponsible. Tim Grierson tweeted that.”

Letting the words roll around in his mind, Orm finds he’s in agreement with them. He’s tired and it has nothing to do with manual labor from yesterday. It has everything to do with all that’s happened since Orm tried to goad Arthur into giving him a warrior’s death: his mother’s tender kiss upon his hand and the sunset against his skin, a cold and dark jail cell where he was constantly tormented by his fellow inmates and his own thoughts, a narrow escape that nearly ended in his demise.

A surface dweller’s garden in the morning sunlight is the last place on Earth he should want to be. But even miles away from his home, Orm can’t ignore that his brother is now ruling his kingdom and that his mother is miraculously alive. The pain that defined him has been lifted away, and the role that shaped him is utterly lost to him. The disappointment in his mother’s eyes shames him, and her answer that yes, she was with Arthur, feels like an open wound.

Orm hasn’t felt guilt since he was a child. He didn’t hesitate to provoke King Ricou or strike down the Brine King. He doesn’t even feel bad about it now. But he somehow knows he should. After the last of his anger had burned away, Orm’s still feeling bereft, like a part of him is missing. He’s also disappointed in himself for not wanting the surface world to burn the way he used to. He still doesn’t like it, but now the idea of everything up here being razed to the ground doesn’t bring him any pleasure.

Path derailed, Orm’s not sure what will ever make him happy.

It’s not like Fin’s capable of understanding the magnitude of what’s gone wrong in his life anyway, so he gazes up at her unflinchingly. “Have you ever made a choice and then found out you are wrong? Did a mistake ever burn you up from the inside out?”

Fin’s shears finish their last snip across his bangs before she draws back. “Yes.”

Curiosity burns through him, because she doesn’t give any outward sign of distress but her tone is sure. “What did you do?”
“It’s too early for that tale,” Fin tells him firmly, dragging her fingers one final time through his damp fringe to brush away the stray hairs. “Do you need a shave?”

The change in subject doesn’t faze him, although he realizes that his window for hearing her story has closed for this particular morning. Catching Fin’s hand before she can touch the rough surface of his cheek, Orm carefully lowers it back to her side. “If you show me how to operate this device, I can manage it myself.”

“If you want to be clean shaven, I’ll just take off this part,” Fin snaps off the plastic guard and hands it to him. “You can use it dry but it might irritate your skin. I forgot to buy some shaving cream for you. You can use mine if you want, although they all smell like fruit or flowers if that bothers you.”

“Do you shave your face?” Orm is genuinely puzzled.

“No, women on the surface shave different parts of their bodies. Women are expected to be hairless from the eyebrows down.”

“That’s strange.”

Fin shrugs. “Yep.”

“Does it matter if the shaving products smell like fruit or flowers?”

“Atlanteans seem like they’re pretty on par with American men with toxic masculinity, so it might.”

Orm isn’t threatened by such trivialities. His appearance has no bearing on his intelligence and strength. Anyone that thinks less of him over something so inconsequential deserves the end of his trident through their chest. At any rate, his facial hair isn’t an immediate problem, so he figures he can address it when he gets back. He’d rather get his work out of the way first.

“I’ll wait until later this evening.”

“Yeah, we should probably get going.”

Fin throws together some bags to toss in the truck and after feeding the cats, they’re out the door. They buckle their seatbelts before she starts the car, but to Orm’s surprise they don’t depart immediately. Fin fiddles with a knob on the middle console, but after a few clicks nothing happens. She sighs and gives up whatever she’s trying to do.

“I wanted to play some music, but I guess Tom’s radio is broken too.”

Orm wisely says nothing. It’s a small miracle the rusty box they’re sitting in is capable of ferrying them across the land. The journey over is quiet this time, giving Orm the chance to observe how to operate the vehicle. It looks much less complex than his personal warship but he also knows that older technology can be harder to control. Fin seems to be doing okay despite her initial reluctance the day before. Before he knows it, they pull into Mindy’s driveway. There are several unfamiliar vehicles.

“Oh, I just remembered that Conner is going to be here today along with his brother, Simon Murphy. They’re both mechanics, although Conner is probably one of the best drummers in the state. He wanted to go to college for music like I did but his parents couldn’t afford it. They managed to scrape enough money together and sent his little sister for nursing. Gemma works at the doctor’s office in town.”

“I thought you said he uses guitar peddles.”
“Well, yes, but Conner can probably play eight or nine instruments and so can I. We used to be in a band with Arthur in high school but we only lasted for a few weeks. The past three years Conner and I have played with a few other random musicians in the Bay for extra money. We’re even doing a wedding on Saturday.”

“Eight or nine instruments?”

“Yeah. I’m not like, world class or anything, but I can still play them.”

Orm privately disagrees; that sounds like too many to be proficient at any of them, but bites his tongue. Fin grabs the bags, leaving him to exit the truck and walk inside. The living room still strongly smells of chemicals and there are two unfamiliar men standing on ladders. The closest one, a heavy-set man with short dark hair, merely gives them a cursory glance. The man on the far side of the room lights up when he sees them and climbs down, arms extended to wrap Fin in a hug.

“Hey, I’m finally off from the shop!”

Fin laughs. “Conner, you’re just leaving one job for another. You work all the time.”

“Why do you have to be so negative?”

If his host hadn’t informed him of their incompatibility, Orm would think Conner’s friendliness to have ulterior motives. His arm is still slung over Fin’s shoulder, tattoos running over his tan skin disappearing under each sleeve of his white t-shirt. Conner's dark hair is wavy, but not tightly coiled like Derek’s, and Fin runs her hand through it playfully when he finally releases her.

"Hey Fin, who is this?"

Rolling her eyes at Conner’s lilting tone, Fin merely crosses her arms and beckons Orm over. “This is Orm Marius. He’s staying with me for awhile.”

Conner gives him an appraising look. “I go three weeks without seeing you and you pick up a man. Nice work, Fin.”

“We’re roommates,” Fin states.

Leaning in close, Conner whispers something in Fin’s ear that makes her face turn bright red, before shooting Orm a breezy smile. Fin swats him on the arm and he yanks her ponytail out. He retreats up the ladder and shouts something unintelligible to her, possibly in another language. Simon briefly shoots him a glance before returning to work.

“What do I want to know what he said to you?” Orm asks.

Fin abruptly shakes her head. “It was in Italian, I think? Whatever he said, he’s just giving me a hard time. He and Arthur are always tormenting me. Sadly we’re all like children sometimes.”

Orm has yet to see Fin and Arthur interact but knows that his brother is incredibly frustrating. “Arthur brings that out in people.”

“I can definitely see that.”

A door opens down the hall and Mindy rushes out to greet them, followed by a young woman whose age Orm would estimate to be thirteen. Gabby, his mind supplies. She’s already taller than her mother but similarly covered in freckles. Her brown wavy hair falls to her waist and the look she gives Orm is oddly closed off. He’s used to the people here staring at him openly but Gabby has
more restraint than her elders.

“Gabby, this is Orm. He’s staying with Fin for the time being.”

Gray eyes meet blue. Gabby walks up to him and extends her hand. It’s not a custom of Atlanteans, but Orm has studied enough paintings to understand the concept of a handshake. Her hand is larger than Fin’s but with slimmer fingers. Her grip is firm and her eye contact is unwavering, and he has the distinct feeling he’s being sized up.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Gabby tells him. Her tone is genuine but she’s not full of her mother’s exuberance.

Orm nods and drops her hand, watching as her eyes fall from him and slide over to where Fin is showing something to Conner on her phone. She turns back to him and her expression is quizzical.

“It doesn’t bother you that she’s still close to her ex-boyfriend?” Gabby asks him bluntly after her mother retreats to the kitchen.

Taking a moment to figure out how to answer, he finally settles on a rather neutral statement. “Fin can do whatever she wants…I don’t think that telling her how to conduct herself would be a wise course of action especially when she’s not doing anything wrong.”

Unbidden, the memory of the tracking bracelet he gave Mera flashes through his mind. Fin would find such underhanded and possessive behavior abhorrent.

Gabby suddenly breaks into a smile. “You’re right about that.”

Orm feels a hint of pride. “Of course I am.”

At that comment, Gabby gives him an unreadable look. “Have you heard her play yet?”

“Your mother asked me the same thing.”

“Well considering how important music is to her, it’s kind of weird if you haven’t.”

“I suppose.”

“Are you guys doing more drywall today? I had some questions for her about some pieces she assigned to me, but I don’t want to bother her if she’s busy.”

“I believe she mentioned drywall again but I’m sure she wouldn’t mind a distraction or two. She seemed preoccupied yesterday.”

Gabby nods knowingly. “I guess being here must be kind of weird. She was here when the boat slammed into the house.”

Orm glances over at Fin, who’s trying to refasten her hair without success before Conner throws it into a quick braid for her. “She didn’t tell me that.”

“Fin and I were in the kitchen with Mom when it happened. It felt like the whole world was shaking. Mom was hysterical and didn’t want to leave at first, but Fin stayed calm and helped us get out. When the wave receded it took the boat further back out to sea but it was too close to the shore to be completely submerged. The Coast Guard just hauled it away last month. Our little dock is gone but the only person that used it was Dad.”

The knowledge that he’d almost inadvertently killed his host upsets Orm more than he’d like to
admit. But it occurs to him that Fin is incredibly open and hasn’t mentioned this near-death experience, so perhaps she doesn’t see it that way. She doesn’t hold him accountable for what could have happened to her, only what happened to her hometown and the surface in its entirety.

“Fin feels guilty because her house is mostly fine, but she was really lucky that nothing happened to her. Staying for dinner that night saved her life. If she would have been sitting in her car she’d have been completely pulverized. If she would have been driving home she’d have been swept off the road and into the Bay. It really sucks about her car, though. It was a hunk of junk but she can’t afford another one. I don’t know what she’s going to do in the winter time.”

“I didn’t know her finances were so dire.”

“She’s not destitute or anything, but after the wave, prices went sky high for everything. She’s way too stubborn to spend more money on something than it’s worth, even if it’s something she needs. She’s been using Lyft or bumming rides since early spring.”

“Gabby, honey, can you come here a second?”

Gabby gives him a little wave goodbye and wanders back into the kitchen with her mom. Equipped with brand new information about why Fin might be feeling emotional, Orm glances across the room to see that Fin is just fine, even though she’s kind of goofing off with Conner from the looks of it. He makes her laugh a lot, and not in the wry, half-embarrassed way Orm does.

Orm hasn’t seen many friendships in his lifetime that weren’t born from commiseration. From the sound of their conversation, Conner doesn’t see Fin very often, but they’re relaxed and friendly as if the distance of time hadn’t truly parted them. He wonders what a friendship with Mera would have been like unclouded by acrimony and the looming threat of a marriage that neither of them wanted. Would he have been able to make her laugh?

It’s truly remarkable how this house is still standing after hearing what it went through. Orm thinks of the thousands of people along the entire Atlantic Seaboard that must have gotten buried under debris or crushed beneath fishing vessels or trapped in their homes or dragged out to sea. He realizes that those very things nearly happened to Fin. She could have perished without him ever learning her name or tasting fresh basil or hearing the unfortunate tale about the origin of his tylosaur’s name. Orm might still be in jail or worse—at Tom Curry’s house, airing out his misery in full view of his mother and the man she loves.

That terrible thought is the final nail in the coffin of his good mood. As quietly as he can, Orm gathers his materials and heads downstairs.
“Hey, where did your friend run off to?” Conner calls down from atop the ladder casually to Fin, who’s mixing up another batch of drywall mud.

Fin guesses Orm went downstairs, although she has no idea why. She doesn’t want him to be alone unless he wants it too; intruding upon him downstairs might irritate him or he might really need her. She doesn’t know which—but there’s only one way to find out. Decision made, Fin finishes her mix and then heads downstairs. It makes sense to partner up with him, because he’s fast and efficient enough to make up for her slowness. It drives her kind of nuts how quickly he takes to stuff.

Grunting at the weight of the bucket (and the effort necessary to walk down a flight of stairs without spilling it or swinging it accidentally into the walls), Fin eventually makes it downstairs and finds Orm absorbed in his task. He undoubtedly heard her footsteps but doesn’t acknowledge her. Fin’s never sure if it’s because he’s ignoring her or because there’s really no need to greet her every time she makes a reappearance.

Fin wants to be supportive of whatever he’s going through but figures if she’s pushing him too hard, Orm has no problem telling her to leave. Setting up on the opposite side of the room, she fishes out her phone and speaker and plays one of those Spotify-generated playlists for The Rolling Stones. It’s not like he’ll make the connection anyway. She has to try her hardest not to sing along with the familiar lyrics, but the first time Orm hears the songs they should sound exactly the way the Stones intended.

Music makes the work go so much faster. Twenty songs go by before she even knows it. She has to take an air guitar break during the opening of *Paint It Black* but Orm misses it anyway, to her relief. He doesn’t seem to mind the music (how could any normal, sane person?) but given his apathy on the subject thus far, he’ll never really love it the way she does. Some people are just wired that way. She tries not to take it personally, because not everything is about her, but it’s a disappointment. It’s her favorite thing to share with people and she’s vainer about this perception of her than anything her looks can deliver.

“Hey Fin, lunch is ready!”

Gabby’s voice at the top of the stairs barely registers over *Happy*, but the girl absolutely refuses to set foot in the basement. Fin has no problem doing so, despite what happened that day, so she’s quick to shut off the music and run upstairs so Gabby doesn’t have to think she needs to make the trip. Orm is already finishing up, his hearing superior to hers.

Sprinting up the stairs to grab one of her bags, Fin pulls out some tomatoes and peppers for Simon, who’s only ever been lukewarm around her despite being acquainted with her since childhood. He only interacts with her now because of his wife’s borderline obsession with her produce. With a grunt, Simon hands her a twenty, which would have been exorbitant fee only a few months ago but is a bargain compared to what he’d pay at the grocery store for the organic products his son needs. Fresh food is ungodly expensive after the wave decimated countless acres of farms and orchards. He grabs one of the sandwiches Mindy offers and sits off by himself. He’s very much like his moody, taciturn Irish father, while Conner is a male replica of his outgoing, vivacious Italian mother.

“Aunt Brenda says thanks for the cilantro and that she read your note and can wait a few more weeks for the rest of the basil,” Gabby recites carefully. She hands Fin a five that she pockets.

“Look at Fin, dealing herbs,” Conner mutters, smirking when Fin throws him a look of disgust.
“You know Pops says your folks were huge potheads when they moved here.”

Oh, Fin’s *aware*.

From the fridge Conner pulls out a six pack of some hipster microbrew from Boston that Simon promptly turns down, not being into IPAs. Seeing an opportunity, Fin grabs the bottle opener and approaches Orm. He’s got a sandwich in his hand, still wrapped up in parchment paper.

“More beer?”

Orm’s mistrust is well-earned, but Fin is ready for it. “Yes, but it’s a good beer. Good enough that I’m drinking one too, if that means anything to you.”

Popping off the top and offering it to him, Orm sniffs it. “It’s not much different than the one from yesterday.”

“It will taste different, trust me.”

Orm blinks and takes a long pull from the bottle. Fin is not oblivious to how Conner’s eyes follow the line of his throat; Orm’s a good looking man. Classically handsome doesn’t really make an appearance throughout the Bay very often. It’s why Conner fucks off to Boston every weekend—better options.

“It’s a definite increase in quality.”

“Good. I’ll have Conner save you one.”

“That’s not necessary. I’d prefer a glass of water.”

Overhearing him, Mindy rushes to pour one for him. It’s mostly ice, but it will melt quickly enough in the heat. It’s still weirdly hot for early June. Fin walks over to take the glass from her and sees that Mindy’s mixing up some cake batter. It appears to be chocolate, her favorite, but an irrational part of her wants Orm’s first experience with chocolate to be prepared by her. It’s so *dumb*, because she barely knows him. She hates herself for this, but hesitantly approaches Mindy when Orm’s attention is caught by Gabby.

“Do you have any frozen cookie dough you can bake? I’m really craving some snicker doodles.”

It’s not a total lie and Fin tries not to feel too terrible. She doesn’t even know for sure if that cake was even for them or not. Her bakery was demolished so she makes everything from home now. It might be for an order, now that Fin thinks about it.

“Of course, Fin. I’ll pop them in while I refrigerate this cake batter. It’s so runny in this heat.”

“Thank you, Mindy.” Fin hands the water to Orm, who she notes moves off to the far corner of the room. She looks after him oddly, not sure why he’d rather be by himself. They shared a nice morning together and a peaceful car ride over. Maybe he was overwhelmed by meeting new people? Sure, the Bensons and Murphy families are probably all just mere peasants to a former king.

(She also has to entertain the idea that maybe he’s just sick of *her*. Spending all day and night with the same person is probably tiresome. She’s not a scorching hot princess with magical water bending powers, after all.)

Conner walks into the kitchen to rinse out his empty beer bottle from earlier that morning. “So I heard The Stones downstairs while you were with Orm. Is he into classic rock?”
“I don’t know what kind of music he likes. He’s not really a fan of anything.”

Acting like he’s just been knifed in the back, Conner stumbles forward clutching at his chest. “What?”

“Some people are just like that.”

“Yeah, but what do you two even talk about then?”

“I talk about more than just music,” Fin says defensively.

“I guess there’s always other stuff you can be doing instead of talking.” Conner’s dark eyebrows wiggle suggestively.

“Not everyone thinks about getting laid all the time,” Fin grumbles half-heartedly when Mindy’s out of earshot. She shuffles them away from the kitchen so they can talk more privately, although it occurs to her that Orm’s hearing is pretty good.

“You sound pretty high and mighty for someone who gleefully cleared out my Grindr queue a month ago.”

“You told me to!” Fin counters. “Besides, I just don’t think it’s safe to use GPS technology to fuck people.”

“Is meeting people in the Bay working for you? He’s the first fresh face in like, forever, and he looks too uptight to handle your big dick energy.”

“For the love of God, never say to him that I have big dick energy because he will not understand the reference.”

“You should consider looking elsewhere to get your groove back. Maybe try a guy that laughs or smiles…or likes music.”

Fin groans. “We’re not romantically involved. Arthur just showed up with him one day. I’m keeping him up as a favor.”

Conner looks thoughtful. “How is Arthur? I haven’t seen him in ages. He’s way more your type than this dude is. You tend to like men that come in darker shades than porcelain beige.”

Yeah, so Fin’s got a type, but she’s not blind to all Orm has to offer in the looks department. Neither, apparently, is Conner. “If you ever describe one of my exes as swarthy again I’m going to let all the air out of your tires.”

Ignoring her, Conner continues without pausing. “Don’t get me wrong, there are some positives I’m seeing. Orm’s got good bone structure and a great body. Those arms are works of art. The things he could do to you with all that upper body strength…”

Fin facepalms, because she has a healthy imagination too. “Conner, please shut the hell up.”

“It’s not like he can hear me,” Conner points out, and Fin immediately wants to contradict him before realizing that Gabby is talking Orm’s ear off on the other side of the living room. It’s weird, because Gabby is pretty quiet overall, but it’s the second time she’s seen them conversing.

You know, Gabby did tell me last month that everybody is too afraid to speak with her since Curtis died, kind of like they were with me. Orm doesn’t know what happened to her dad—either how he
died or that he died in the first place. And even if he did, would it matter to him? He’s not going to ever be intimidated by a thirteen-year-old girl.

To Fin’s amazement, Orm doesn’t appear to view Gabby’s attention as a burden. He might not be accustomed to interacting with children, but he does a better job than plenty of adults. It’s probably the most she’s seen him talk to anyone else, and he seems more relaxed than he was the day before when Mindy grilled him in the car.

“Oh! I was wondering how much it would cost to replace the air conditioner in Tom’s truck. It’s busted. The radio is also broken. Do you think you could take a look?”

“Pops hates when I take jobs off the books, so you’ll have to bring it by the shop,” Conner reminds her. “I forgot to mention it earlier, but Uncle Ian said if you wanted to trade for the car he’d still take you up on it.”

“It’s not off the table,” Fin tells him softly, heart aching. “But I’ll let him know in a few weeks.”

Conner gives her a consoling pat on the back. “Sorry, Fin. It’s the best deal you’re going to find.”

“I know,” Fin whispers, because the thought of trading her father's prized possession for a car makes her eyes tear up, but she still got off pretty light, all things considered.

“I wasn’t sure if Mindy was going to drive you two back, but I can, if you want.” Conner's voice is gentle.

“Arthur mentioned he was going to drive us home and pick up Tom’s truck, so you don’t have to worry. But can I grab my steel guitar out of your van?”

Fin leads them out the front door, and Conner gives her a sheepish look once they’re outside.

“It’s at my apartment, I swear. I’ll bring it by tomorrow morning when I record in your studio.”

Fin sighs. She really should have known better. “Fine.”

“I don’t have your steel guitar, but I have this for you,” Conner says, revealing her ukulele and its case wrapped in a blanket.

Fin feels her heart skip a beat. “I thought you said it got broken.”

“It did, but I know a guy. It cost a fortune to get repaired, but it was my fault anyway. It’s the first instrument that your parents ever bought you. I got it fixed just in time, too.”

“You mean for the tenth anniversary of their death? You still have a few more weeks.”

Conner pretends to look offended but Fin can tell he's proud of himself. “Just celebrate the fact that I got it done early, Jesus.”

Fin strums a few chords and beams at him. “You even tuned it for me! It’s like you’re a whole different person!”

Conner flips her off as they head back into the house. Orm is nowhere in sight, indicating to Fin that he’s downstairs already and not waiting up for her. She goes to walk down the stairs, but Mindy stops her.

“Honey, I sent Simon down with Orm. I thought you could work up here with Conner.”
Fin’s so confused, because Mindy has been trying to ‘set her up’ with Conner ever since Gabby started taking lessons last year. But conversely, Mindy also seemed excited by the prospect of Fin having a live-in boyfriend. Orm’s interrogation by her stopped just short of physical torture.

*Do I really need to get laid that badly? For fuck’s sake, people…*

At least she can play weirder music now with Orm downstairs, so she throws on some Deerhoof, which makes Mindy wince a little. It’s all for Conner’s benefit, since it’s more one of his favorite than hers, but she can be magnanimous. Her favorite song by the band, *Sexy But Sparkly*, isn’t even Spotify, much to her chagrin, but he’s made her listen to them enough that she’s familiar with the majority of their catalogue even if she doesn’t really like them as much.

*I wonder what kind of music I could get Orm into. He’s so different from other men his age. I could spend an entire day playing music that Arthur would like, but Orm’s upbringing has no cultural touchstones that relate to ours. He doesn’t understand why his mom loves Fleetwood Mac or why Tom digs Led Zeppelin. He doesn’t know he should like Radiohead or Arcade Fire or that he’s supposed to hate Creed and Nickelback. Music is how I talk to people. Maybe Conner is right. That’s all I am, basically.*

“Honey, you look like you’ve got a lot on your mind,” Mindy says to her quietly. Fin’s totally lost track of time and a quick glance at the kitchen clock tells her it’s well into the afternoon. Mindy bears a tray of cookies and Fin stuffs one in her mouth. She doesn’t have any Lactaid with her, so milk is out of the question unless she wants to die in Mindy’s bathroom, but she does help herself to another beer. It’s a questionable flavor combination, but the buzz helps dull her pain a little.

“I’m fine,” Fin says casually, waving off her concern. She knows he doesn’t look or feel fine, but Mindy knows that pushing her will make her close up. She grabs another cookie. “I don’t think Orm’s ever tried a snickerdoodle before. Because…Europe.”

Mindy blinks at her in disbelief before simply walking away. Fin realizes that she tuned out their conversation yesterday after it got too embarrassing for her. She doesn’t know what, if anything, Orm made up for her.

Fin decides to change the playlist mid-song, breaking a sacred rule she made with Conner when they were fifteen. She abruptly switches the artist to David Bowie, because only he can bring her out of her weird mood while simultaneously making it hurt even better. It’s a custom one she made a few years back; Fin curates her playlists so they’re in the perfect order. She doesn’t like to shuffle songs unless she’s at a party.

The shimmer of piano keys in the opening of *Lady Grinning Soul* suffuses her with warmth. She wishes she still had access to the piano at Gotham University—the Steinway concert grand still appears her dreams at night—but a new one would probably cost more than her house. But even when she sits in her basement with her battered old keyboard, she imagines she’s sitting in front of it. She wonders if Orm is haunted by the seductive call of his former power or if he finds any new meaning in a sparer, more modest existence. But she doesn’t like asking questions if she’s not sure she’ll like the answer.

After two hours, the music abruptly changes to Beck. Fin’s okay with it; she hears lots of Bowie influences in his work—he even did a Bowie cover—and it must be one of Conner’s public playlists, because it’s definitely got a bunch of his favorites. About an hour in, she’s really digging *Clap Hands* when she feels a tap on her shoulder. Fin screams and tips backwards off her ladder, only to land a lot sooner—and softer—than she thought.

*Arthur Curry is laughing at her, that asshole. Fin smacks him in the chest.*
“What’s wrong with you? I could have gotten hurt.”

“What have I ever let you get hurt in my presence?”

Oh, Fin is so ready for this question. “In third grade you scared me when I was in a tree and then I fell and dislocated my shoulder. In seventh grade you accidentally hit me in the face with a lacrosse stick and broke my nose. I had to shave off a portion of my hair in ninth grade when you—”

“Shit, you remember all that,” Arthur frowns thoughtfully.

“Yes, just because you’re indestructible doesn’t mean that I am. My dad tried for six months to stop me from seeing you after I needed the crutches. The greenhouse broke my fall, and my leg.”

“Maybe if you didn’t try to fight me constantly, you’d be healthier,” Arthur muses. He swings her around, Fin’s feet narrowly avoiding the ladder. “I never tried to seriously hurt you any of those times.”

“It’s a good thing your red-haired lady friend is more durable,” Fin grumbles.

The change in Arthur is immediate. While he told her everything about Orm, he told her next to nothing about Mera. Fin is dumped awkwardly but delicately on the ground while Arthur paces the length of the living room. Conner and Mindy must be downstairs, because they’re nowhere to be seen.

“Mera and I…well, it’s not that simple. Can we talk about it tomorrow night at Terry’s?”

“I trust you want to leave Orm at home?”

“He hasn’t been causing you problems or anything, has he?”

“He runs a little hot and cold, but he’s not the theatrical, monologuing diva you said he was.”

“Well, he doesn’t have an audience anymore. I get the impression he doesn’t like to embarrass himself.”

“It’s hard to have delusions of grandeur when you’re slumming it with a surface dweller. Dignity is one of the few things he has left. He’s doing remarkably well here all things considered.”

“Dad said you were putting him to work.”

“He’s better at this shit than I am.”

“I mean, he’s a genius. He’s probably better at almost everything than you are.”

The retort she’s about to hurl at him dies when Conner bounds up the stairs, going in for a hug when he spots the infamous Aquaman.

“Fish Boy!”

Conner gets a bear hug and winces, pleading for mercy when Arthur cracks his back.

“That’s Fish Man, Conner. What’s up, dude?”

“Fin and I are going to play at Claudia Hoffman’s wedding on Saturday. It’s at the fire hall; you should swing by. Your dad’s gonna be there.”
“Tipsy Tom Curry is an Amnesty Bay wedding staple,” Arthur says fondly, although he’s probably also a little embarrassed.

“Gabby describes him as inimitable,” Fin intones wryly.

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“Arthur!” Mindy squeals as she reaches the top of the stairs. Her tray is half empty, but Fin figures they’ll get polished off soon enough. She invites him to help himself and the rest of them disappear into Arthur’s giant hand.

“Mrs. Benson, you made my favorite.”

“You say all of them are your favorite,” Mindy reminds him coyly.

“Because they’re all made by you,” Arthur says with a shrug and a smile. Fin rolls her eyes at him, but the charm works on Mindy, who wags a finger at him but smiles nonetheless.

“Oh Arthur, have you met the man staying with Fin yet?”

“There’s another one?” Arthur asks dumbly before seeing Fin’s humorless expression and recovering. “Oh yeah, you’re talking about Orm. He’s my brother.”

Fin exhales sharply. She didn’t even tell Conner that, and she can feel his disapproving eyes between her shoulder blades. Of course Arthur has no problem telling people this brand new information, but Orm isn’t living with him. She paces while Arthur engages in pleasant small talk over the matter. It all ends when the half-brother in question finally makes an appearance.

“Orm, I didn’t know you were Arthur’s brother! You should have said something.”

For the first time in public, Orm looks as genuinely uncomfortable as he’s probably been feeling for the past few days.

“Orm’s a bit of a black sheep at the moment, but he’s coming around, right, Brother?” Orm doesn’t react to this in any way, but Arthur shrugs good-naturedly and powers on. “He’s been away for a long time in—” Arthur looks frantically at Orm, who kindly rescues him after the longest awkward pause of Fin’s life.

“I’ve been overseas.”

It’s not quite a lie, but watching Arthur’s face contort makes Fin laugh. She coughs to cover it, but she fools neither brother.

“Do you have any big plans while you’re visiting?” Mindy asks politely.

“He still hasn’t met Dad yet,” Arthur blurts out, but this has probably been a huge source of stress and excitement. He just wants one big happy family so bad.

Every Bay resident knows that Arthur Curry has some pretty unique abilities. They might or might not believe in Atlantis, but they know whatever it is that makes him special definitely didn’t come from one of their own. Tom is amazingly ordinary. Atlanna is the key to Arthur’s powers, and Orm must clearly be his mother’s son. Whether or not people will make the connection that he is a full-blooded Atlantean or what his powers entail is not a question Fin can answer. No one’s brave enough to ask Tom to spill the beans except for her.
“Oh honey, Tom’s a great guy and it will go great,” Mindy says sweetly to Orm, who looks like he might run through their new drywall like the Kool-Aid man in an effort to escape.

Arthur crosses his arms. “Anyway, it’s almost five. I was going to take them back to Fin’s house and crash a bit.”

“And I guess I’m cooking you dinner, then?” Fin asks archly.

“Thanks for offering, buddy. Can we have tacos?”

Fin rolls her eyes. “You’re the worst.”

“You’re the best!” Arthur shoots her a thumbs up and Fin rolls her eyes. All her life, she’s struggled with the effort not to wrestle Arthur to the ground and wipe his shit-eating grin off his face, and sometimes she loses that fight. She sighs, mentally switching her dinner menus for tonight and Sunday. She has everything she needs; she’ll just need to prepare more food.

“Hey kiddo, we’re just heading out, but I’ll catch you later,” Arthur calls out to Gabby, who finally emerges from her room and gives him a skeptical look.

Gabby wrinkles her nose. “You sound like your dad when you say that.”

It’s a much chillier reception than Orm received. Fin notices a trace of smugness on his expression as Arthur tries unsuccessfully to contradict her. Mindy looks halfway between amused an apologetic as she issues her goodbye, and before Fin knows it, she’s standing on the front porch with Conner, Orm, and Arthur.

“Hey, I have to get going too. I’ll see you tomorrow, Fin. And Arthur, I’m sorry you missed Simon, but he left a half hour ago to take his son to an appointment.”

(Fin totally missed that, but such things tend to happen when she listens to music.)

“Tell him and Rachael I said hello!”

Conner and Arthur do that weird half hug handshake thing that men do. Conner and Orm nod at each other politely, which surprises Fin, but she has no idea what kinds of social cues Orm is picking up on or if there are similar ones in Atlantis.

“I hope you two enjoy eating Fin’s tacos!” Conner calls out cheerily before leaving, and Fin just really wants to die. Orm has no idea what he’s talking about, but Arthur cackles.

“I hope your next Grindr date thinks that the Earth is flat!” Fin shouts after him.

“That was one time, Fin!”

Fin shoots him two middle fingers as he drives away. Maturity isn’t really her strong suit sometimes. She’s better behaved around actual children.

“So, I’m driving,” Arthur announces suddenly, eyeing the truck speculatively.

“Like hell,” Fin snaps, racing towards it. She’s got a head start but Arthur’s legs are longer, and they both pull on the driver’s side door until Fin realizes she’s small enough to fit through the open window. She tries to crawl through, only for Arthur to grab her around the waist and haul her back out.

“It’s my dad’s truck!”
“I haven’t been able to drive in months!”

“Neither have I!”

“I don’t think either of you will get very far without these,” Orm’s cool voice cuts into their bickering; they both look over and see him holding the keys. They must have fallen out of Fin’s back pocket in the kerfluffle. She looks at him with pleading eyes, hoping he will give her the keys instead of Arthur. She feels ultimate betrayal when he drops them into Arthur’s palm.

“What the hell, Orm?”

“I want to see how my brother drives.”

“I could have told you he’s shitty at it,” Fin wails, because when Arthur isn’t chauffeuring his drunk dad around, he drives like he just robbed a bank. Sam was the same way, always tailgating drivers or running stop signs because he was an adrenaline junkie with no patience. She’s way too proud to admit it, but after her parents’ accident, driving too fast (or being in cars driven too fast) freaks her out. Having a panic attack is not on her to-do list today but she doesn’t exactly want to fess up to that particular weakness.

Arthur slides into the driver’s seat, which means as the smallest person (and the only female) Fin has to serve as the buffer between him and Orm. She feels like a sardine and finds that the middle seatbelt is broken. She trusts Arthur not to actually crash, but without a seatbelt she’s in for a bumpy ride.

They take off like a rocket. Somehow Arthur has coaxed hidden power out of the rust bucket his dad calls a truck. She alternatively smashes into Arthur’s shoulder and Orm’s shoulder as he takes his turns a little too sharp.

“This isn’t the motherfucking General Lee, Arthur!” Fin shouts as they catch air over a particularly bumpy patch of road.

Orm looks mildly alarmed but it’s his arm that keeps her from sailing through the windshield when Arthur’s forced to throw on the breaks for a raccoon. Orm’s warm palm reflexively flattens against her ribcage as the three of them watch the oblivious animal mosey across the road at a leisurely pace. When it’s finally safe, Orm and Fin make furious eye contact with Arthur, who smiles guiltily and resumes their journey at a much more reasonable speed.

The immediate danger is over, but Orm doesn’t release her until the house comes into view. She’s still clutching his arm but eventually sags against him in relief. The warmth of his hand is comforting against her racing heart. She glances up at him, his face mere inches from hers due to the tight cabin.

“If you ever pick him as a driver over me again, you’re sleeping in my greenhouse.”

“That’s fair.”

Fin’s legs feel like jelly when she climbs out of the truck. Thankfully everything in her bag is still okay. After Orm exits, she hauls her case to the edge of the seat and opens it, examining her precious ukulele and checking it for damage.

“Oh shit, I didn’t know that was in there or I never would have driven like that.”

Fin narrows her eyes at Arthur but says nothing. No actual damage was done, so it technically doesn’t matter. When she opens the front door to admit the three of them, her cats predictably scatter. She can see Arthur’s eyes slip back to her ukulele and knows what they’ll be listening to after dinner.
“Alright Arthur, make yourself at home, I guess. I’ll get started on food. I guess you two have a lot to talk about.”

To her surprise, Orm follows her into the kitchen, probably because a heart-to-heart with his big brother is the last thing he wants. With a shrug, Fin turns her back to him and searches Spotify for an instrumental playlist with some good Latin music. She’s got some chicken and steak that were thawed out earlier in the week and just need to be sautéed, but classic ground beef is her favorite and it’s still a solid block of ice.

“Arthur!” Fin yells out, and screams when he’s right behind her. She assumed he was still in the living room. It takes a second for her to dial back her heart rate.

“Yeah?”

“Can you defrost this for me?”

“Sure.” Arthur does actually know his way around the kitchen (because his dad refused to raise a helpless man, praises be) and can probably handle any task she assigns. He unwraps and plates it, tossing it in her barely-used microwave.

“Can you also shred some lettuce?”

“Yes.” The chef’s knife looks almost comically small in Arthur’s large hand as he saws through a head of fresh lettuce. “Hey, can you make elote dip too?”

Fin crosses her arms. “I don’t have any fresh corn. Any other requests, Your Majesty?”

“Can I have Mexican rice, fresh guacamole, and tequila?”

Fin’s heart is finally slowing down after the car ride, and the receding tension is leaving bone-weary exhaustion in its wake. “You can help me with all those things.”

Arthur shrugs. “Sure, like old times.”

“Hopefully without the fire extinguisher,” Fin grumbles. They found out the hard way how flammable bell peppers are when you just take your eyes off of them for a minute. She pulls out a bag of rice and a large pan. She has some carrots and peas set aside for this very purpose that she was going to use on Sunday, when she was going to make Mexican food then.

“That thing saved both our lives that day and you still hate it.”

Fin tosses her hair and just in time manages to stop Arthur from pouring a whole bag of rice into the pot. “Jesus, Arthur, I know you like to eat but there’s only three of us. Now toast the rice in this oil,” Fin pours some inside, “and don’t let it burn. When you’re done, slice me up some onions, garlic, and tomatoes for the guac.”

Arthur moves to obey without question, probably because he knows what’s good for him and because he wants to eat well. (And maybe Arthur has always responded better to female authority than male authority, but that’s something for a therapist to unpack.) For all his bluster, he’s not argumentative if she keeps her temper with him. She just has a hard time doing that, because he goes to town with all of his button pushing.

Fin removes some avocados from a bowl on the countertop. She shows one to Orm. “This is an avocado.” With a chef’s knife, she slices it in half and with a practiced flick of the wrist, impales the pit on the edge of the blade and twists it out. “It’s a fruit with a giant seed in the middle. It’s best
fresh but that window is very small.”

Carefully running the tip of the knife through the soft avocado, she digs out a slice for him to try. She hands it to him and after smelling it, he pops it in his mouth.

“It doesn’t have much of a taste and it’s not sweet like the other fruits,” Orm comments neutrally. Arthur is strangely quiet, watching this interaction avidly.

“Yes, it compliments other food well and has a creamy texture. I’m going to mix in some ingredients and you’ll see.”

It’s not easy to balance making so many different things at once (and it’s definitely more effort than she would exert for just herself), but it’s kind of fun preparing everything and hoping it all gets done at the right time. As soon as the guacamole is ready, though, Arthur mentally clocks out and starts digging into it, and Fin finishes making dinner by herself. He and Orm are eating in silence punctuated by the crunching of chips.

“How is it?” Fin asks, more for Orm’s benefit than Arthur’s. Atlantis’s new king is not picky with food.

Arthur preens. “It’s the vegetables I chopped that really make it good.”

Orm glances at Arthur but doesn’t really answer her question. He’s eating, which is a good sign, but Fin’s a little disappointed he doesn’t like it more. She kind of zones out for awhile while she finishes up the chicken, steak, and ground beef. When she’s got everything plated and separated, she finds exactly one third of the dip waiting for her along with a glass of water. Arthur’s ridiculous, but he’s not rude. He even pulls out her chair before she sits down, an act that Orm eyes suspiciously.

“Is this a common custom?”

Fin smiles. “It’s a little antiquated. But Arthur’s dad is not like other dads. He’s a weird mix of chivalrous and feminist, old-school and free spirit.”

“That’s a nice way of telling him that I know how to dance, sew, change a tire, and play hockey.”

“Tom’s always been a huge Bruins fan,” Fin comments off-handedly as she starts assembling a taco. She makes sure Orm is watching. “So, you can use a crunchy shell or a soft shell to wrap up whatever ingredients you want. There are a ton of different combinations and you’ll only find out what you like through trial and error. There’s lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, sour cream, taco sauce, and three different kinds of meat. The rice is more of a side dish but sometimes it’s my favorite part.”

Fin’s about to take a bite when she claps her hands together. “I forgot the booze.”

As if sensing her dismay, Arthur stands up and waves her off. “The tequila’s still in the same place, right?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t done a shot since 2010, so please don’t make me do more than two.” Arthur grins beatifically and Fin glances at Orm. “You don’t have to do shots if you don’t want to. Arthur won’t peer pressure you into anything, will he?”

“What’s a shot?”

Arthur looks like Christmas has come early and Fin claps a hand over Arthur’s mouth. “It’s just a round of drinks that are poured into tiny glasses and passed around to a group of people, usually to celebrate. You’re supposed to knock them back all at once, but it’s not easy if you don’t do it often.”
“We don’t have anything to celebrate,” Orm says quietly. It’s not uttered dramatically or with any inflection at all, really, but Fin sees the change immediately on her friend’s face.

It’s pretty clear that Orm doesn’t want Arthur around. He doesn’t have to be rude, outspoken, or histrionic to make this known, it’s just obvious. Fin feels for Arthur, who bravely smiles and digs into his tacos and acts like he didn’t just get his heart busted up again for the hundredth time. She grabs a glass and pours him a shot, along with one for herself. She doesn’t have a lime already cut or salt handy, and it’s going to be awful without them, but she nudges it over to him with a little half smile.

“A toast to old friends,” Fin finally settles on, picking up her glass and clinking it against his.

“Old friends,” Arthur repeats. He tips his head back and manages to swallow the whole thing, but Fin struggles a little and only gets down three quarters on her first try. She winces and gamely tries again, finally downing the whole thing while Arthur laughs.

“Not everyone has your alcohol tolerance,” Fin snaps, just grateful that she didn’t choke. She downs a few swigs of water to get the taste out of her mouth. She probably should have eaten a little first, because alcohol hits her pretty hard on an empty stomach.

“It’s literally one shot.”

“I don’t have tons of practice. Shots in college were kind of dangerous and that’s the only place I ever drank them. Losing your senses in Gotham is not recommended.”

“It hasn’t gotten any better since you left.” Arthur says vaguely.

Fin’s kind of curious about the Justice League—especially Batman—but Arthur doesn’t really talk about them much. The day after he brought Orm with him, Fin heard all about Atlantis but not very much about his sometimes-teammates. They don’t seem to keep in touch very often.

For the remainder of dinner, Fin leads the conversation away from anything charged or risky. She manages to keep Arthur’s mind off of Orm, who sits silently and occasionally observes them talking. When he’s finished, he places his dish and empty glass by the sink but doesn’t wash anything yet. He beats a hasty retreat out of the kitchen and when he’s gone, Fin practically sighs in relief. Arthur sags in his chair and looks ten years older.

“Man, I don’t know what to do about him sometimes,” Arthur mutters once they hear the bathroom door shut and the shower run.

“Orm was really good when I got up. He even woke me when I slept through my alarm. I cut his hair after breakfast and all was well until sometime after we got to Mindy’s house.”

“Do you think Gabby told him about her dad?”

“No, because Mindy says she doesn’t even talk about it with her. I don’t see her telling a stranger all those details. And Mindy, for all of her talk, wouldn’t mention it so casually either. I can't even see that having much of an effect on him. He barely knows them.”

“I wonder what happened,” Arthur wonders aloud. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad he’s off his homicidal high horse for the moment. That’s a minor miracle in itself. But at this rate he’s never going to see Mom. I think it’s making her a little crazy and Dad doesn’t like seeing her like that.”

“Tom knows this isn’t something that can be forced. He definitely knows a thing or two about patience.”
“Dad’s spent thirty years waiting for my mom, and now that she’s finally back, it’s like she’s only half here. She blames herself for not being able to come back to us both. I obviously made out okay because I still had one sane parent left, but the same can’t be said for my brother. Mom feels guilty about what Orm’s done, like she didn’t do enough to keep him on a better path. If Orvax wasn’t already dead, I’d kill him myself for what he did to them. He was everything that’s wrong with Atlantis but there are people in my kingdom that still admire him.”

“Orm wouldn’t have gotten as far as he did unless he enjoyed some serious support from his citizens,” Fin says carefully.

“Yeah, that’s an understatement. I don’t understand how such a technologically advanced race can be so ignorant. You and I grew up in this backwater small town and neither of us are bigoted, classist assholes.”

“That’s probably because we’re not super white looking or super rich. Our experiences growing up was a little atypical compared to our classmates. We got to build some character, at least.”

“Yeah, but even common Atlantetan citizens have **no idea** what surface dwellers are really like. It’s all propaganda. There’s literally nothing good about us being circulated in the media.”

“You really think when Orm rose to the surface to survey the damage that he was really looking for anything other than ways to condemn us?”

With a furious shake of his head, Arthur pours himself another shot and knocks it back. “There’s a place for all of us on this earth, but I’m not sure how we can coexist, even for a day. I mean, Mom and Dad want to get married—like have it officially recognized by Atlantean law. Vulko tells me that because my mom is a queen, every royal family in the seven kingdoms has to attend, including the newly crowned Fisherman Queen and the Brine King. Mom’s not going to get married without Orm present, either, so it would be great if he could actually bring himself to face her so we could get this show on the road. But once he’s at the wedding, he might get murdered by two people with very valid reasons for wanting him dead.”

“Can you change the law so that some of your more vengeful guests aren’t required to attend?”

“I never thought I’d say this, but it’s not that simple. I think Vulko’s starting to regret wanting me as king. Orm was a maniac but he’s apparently a genius politician. He knows all the laws and ran the place a lot smoother than I am now. Every day I have to reassert my dominance. I thought that my trident was good enough, and for some people, it is. But I’m getting way more push back than I thought I would.”

“Rightful heir or not, you still got your position through a coup. People don’t like change.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I’m sorry dinner was so rough tonight.”

“That’s not your fault. That’s not even Orm’s fault; he wasn’t trying to be shitty with me. I don’t think it’s personal, as weird as that sounds. He probably just needs to be alone and I just invited myself over.”

“Well, I’m happy to see you and it’s my house, not his.”

Arthur grins. “Thank you.”

“Hey, tell your dad thanks, too, because that truck was a lifesaver. It was nice not having to walk for
a change.”

“What are you going to do when I take it back? When I was moving that table two days ago, I didn’t see the bikes in there anymore.”

“I sold them. And bikes are fine for summer but once winter comes I’ve got a plan. Conner’s uncle wants Dad’s signed Stratocaster and he’s willing to trade me an actual, running car. It’s probably from the mid-nineties but it works. It’s half the price of the ones they’re selling further inland.”

“Fin, I didn’t want to shower the bay in Atlantean money, but if you need help, you just have to ask. Dad already told me that you donated the money I gave you, but I can give you more.”

“Tom said what?”

“In his defense, he was kind of tipsy at the time,” Arthur tries to soothe her, but Fin is annoyed. She knows Tom was venting his worry, but still, she didn’t need or want Arthur finding out.

“I don’t want money for any of this. I’m not poor, and the Saturn wouldn’t have lasted me much longer anyway. This was a foregone conclusion before the wave even happened, Arthur. Sure, losing thirteen students afterwards because they didn’t have the money to continue kind of hastened my timeline a little, but it was going to happen. If I let myself suffer needlessly over something as ridiculous as sentiment, Dad would be rolling in his grave. You can’t drive a guitar.”

“Your parents went through some lean times and he always refused to sell it. Can’t you just sell some of his guns instead?”

“Dad’s legendary gun collection is probably why no one’s come around here trying to cause trouble. If I dismantle it, word will get around and I’ll probably have vandalism within the week. Someone tried to break in right after they died but you’d be surprised how persuasive a warning shot with a Magnum is.”

Arthur leans back in his chair. “Why won’t you take the money?”

“It just feels wrong, like blood money,” Fin admits. “I don’t deserve to benefit in any way from this. That’s unwholesome.”

Shaking his head, Arthur stands up and Fin joins him. She packages up the leftovers while he washes dishes, hopefully not taking away too much hot water from Orm. A few minutes in, she hears the shower turn off but wisely doesn’t comment. He’s probably wondering the same thing.

“Do you think I should head out now, so we don’t have an awkward goodbye?”

“I think any interaction between you two will be awkward for a long time,” Fin admits. They stand in the kitchen and speak in hushed voices until Orm exits the bathroom and retreats back to her bedroom. She’s not sure whether or not he’s going to stay there, but she sees a chance for Arthur to leave. They sprint across the living room to the front door. Fin figures Orm won’t approach them so close to an exit.

“Fin, thanks again. I’m sorry if I made this summer even harder for you.”

“There’s never anything easy about my life, Arthur. I’m used to that.”

“Same,” Arthur agrees. He must cut a splendid figure as king, but Fin sees only the weight of responsibility yoked across his massive shoulders and weariness in his eyes.
“Wait, take this,” Fin says on a whim, grabbing her ukulele case. “We can play for your parents on the Fourth of July.”

“You’re coming?”

“Yes,” Fin says, and it’s the first she’s really admitted it to herself. “I know I just got it back today, but I want you to have it for awhile. Tom said your old one was in such bad shape he had to get rid of it.”

Arthur looks serious. “Are you sure you want me to borrow it?”

“Yes. But promise me we’ll play some old classics the next time you visit my house.”

Nodding, Arthur accepts the ukulele case in her hand and pats her shoulder on the way out. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight,” Fin calls after him.

It’s only about seven thirty, but Fin’s exhausted. She watches him drive away in Tom’s truck and only Norah’s face against her ankles reminds her she should go back inside. She scoops up the cat and locks up. She knows it’s not technically her responsibility to entertain her houseguest, but it’s kind of in her nature to look after everyone. To her mild surprise, when she turns around she finds Orm is watching her, likely waiting for Arthur to leave. There’s a moment of not-quite-unbearable silence before Fin breaks it.

“So…did you want to watch a movie tonight?”

Orm appears to think on it before he replies. “No, but I was hoping you could help me with something else.”

Fin frowns at how oblique he’s being. "Oh?"

"Gabby spoke very highly of you today."

Fin would normally be flattered but she’s sensing this commentary is framing some sort of scheme. Orm objectively states if he likes things, but he does not hand out compliments. He’s merely restating something inferred by another person, and if Fin wants his validation or recognition in any way, she senses that this is not the time for it.

“…And? Stop beating around the bush.”

“I was wondering if you could demonstrate for me why your skills are in such high demand.”

Tapping her hands against her thighs in 4/4 time, Fin gives him a half smile.

"No."
“No?” Orm’s quiet shock is almost palpable as he repeats her answer in disbelief.

“Is this like the chocolate? Another thing I don’t deserve—the gift of your performance?”

Fin levels a withering look at him and yes, Orm knows he deserves it for his contempt. “It actually has nothing to do with my perceived skill. I don’t have anything to prove to you and you certainly don’t validate what music means to me. I don’t want to play and sing anything for you because you’re being adversarial.”

“How do you know I’m not just curious?”

“I’ve seen you curious and you ask questions in the moment,” Fin points out. “You’re not coming from a sincere place.”

Orm crosses his arms. “Oh?”

Squaring her shoulders, Fin elaborates. “Remember when you gave me attitude the first day when I fed you soup? You were so determined to dislike whatever I served you, and even though it ended up being okay, think about how much different the experience would have been for you if your mind was open—how much better every meal has been since because you stopped resisting the idea of enjoying yourself. Simply put: you’re not ready to enjoy music yet.”

To some extent Orm understands what Fin’s saying, but it still feels like a rejection. He likes the gratification he receives whenever she educates him, because it’s a willing indulgence on her part. It is like a performance, in a way, and he wants to learn from her. Her refusal doesn’t sit well with him because he’s not used to people saying no.

“I only wish to understand why there is such heightened mystique surrounding your abilities.”

“Ha, that’s a good one,” Fin chuckles. “Your flattery is not convincing. We both know you’re too clever for your own good.”

Torn between being impressed and feeling thwarted, Orm is frustrated to realize that she has a point. He didn’t even do it intentionally. Manipulation just comes naturally to him. Fin’s not bending to his will tonight, so he might as well satiate some of his curiosity.

“If you won’t humor me in that regard, can you answer a few questions for me?” It’s uttered so casually that Fin nods in agreement, probably thinking she’ll get queries along the same lines as she did the day before.

“Gabby mentioned you had a close call at the house the night of the wave. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Orm can tell this subject change throws her off. Before she answers, Fin switches off the music before traipsing back to him. As she puts the small device in her pocket, she only shrugs, belying the gravity of the question.

“I’m not obligated to tell you anything like that. Besides, I’m fine. Nothing actually happened to me that night.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that it almost did?” Orm would very much like to know why it troubles him more than it seems to trouble her.
“Dwelling on things like that doesn’t help. I made it, alive and unharmed. It’s more than a lot of other people can say.”

It’s not said to make him feel bad, and it doesn’t. But all through dinner as Orm sat and watched Fin and Arthur nitpick with each other with a degree of familiarity and comfort he’s never actually seen in person, and he wonders if his brother would have been so generous as to free him from prison she had perished.

“And you aren’t upset that Arthur nearly got you killed with his driving?”

“Well I’m not dead and the raccoon is okay, so I’m good, I guess,” Fin shrugs with a mirthless laugh.

It takes Orm a second to get the connection, having never heard of a raccoon before. “It’s just an animal.”

“It’s a cute animal, with an adorable face and precious little hands!” Fin’s smile contains unbearable delight.

“I can see why you have five cats.”

“No crazy cat lady equivalents in Atlantis, I guess.”

“The habits of peasants are a little beneath my notice.”

Fin tosses her hair. “Maybe you were just out of touch with the common people.”


Fin’s expression is worrisome. “You were probably more popular than Arthur.”

Orm nods. “I’m sure. He is nothing like a typical Atlantean.”

“So following that line of reasoning, you’re the consummate one? What exactly does that entail?”

“The typical Atlantean citizen prizes intelligence, physical strength, military prowess, filial loyalty, and adherence to the law.”

“Yes, but my perception of the so-called typical Atlantean is calculating, authoritarian, vindictive, cold, and prejudiced.”

“Those also apply,” Orm admits, before wondering, “Is that how you see me?”

“Yes, all of them.”

These are all traits Orm would own up to without hesitation, but Fin seems less than pleased. “You don’t appear to be impressed.”

“You don’t find that being prejudiced is hard for me to accept?”

“Why would I when my race is the superior one?” Orm is genuinely confused.

Fin throws up her hands. “Because when you think of a group of people as lesser than yourselves, it makes it very easy to justify treating them poorly.”

“Does it matter when they’re inferior?”
“Why are we inferior?”

“Because you’re plagued by war and greed and wastefulness,” Orm explains calmly.

“And those are the words of someone who wanted the entire surface world to burn,” Fin counters. “I get the impression we surface dwellers are no more warlike than Atlanteans. And greed can hardly be exclusive to surface dwellers.”

“And wastefulness?”

“How many lives did you casually sacrifice for the chance to wipe us out, again?”

Orm presses his mouth into a thin line.

“I know you love Atlantis. It makes perfect sense to want to save it; I want to save it too. But that can’t come at the expense of billions of lives. I think a part of you knows that. Your path was forged by the same man who tried to kill your mother. Do you think she deserved to die? Was her sacrifice justified? If he can be wrong about that, then he can be wrong about many other things. There’s still time for you to be different than him.”

It takes every ounce of strength in Orm not to yell that he is different than his father. But Fin only knows what he's told her, and he has barely scratched the surface. There are things his father said to him that he never wants to tell anyone. There are marks of violence that his body still bears. But those burdens are his, not hers.

“I spent more of my life on my crusade against the surface than not. Once King Orvax died I was able to do as I pleased, but even in the years leading up to his death my power grew. Vulko was my confidant before Mother was sacrificed. And after awhile I just…stopped telling him much of anything personal. If he had a stronger connection to me, maybe he wouldn’t have sought out my brother so keenly. Perhaps he would not have viewed me so unfit if he had more insight into my intentions.”

“I think by the time your intentions were already solidified, Vulko knew he had to reach out to Arthur because he was afraid of what he saw. War might seem glorious at first, but since we surface dwellers have more experience with it, I can tell you that it’s not. I bet Vulko knows that too.”

Orm wonders what this sheltered woman knows of war, having no military training or experience, but her statement is absolutely serious. “A noble cause is always glorious.”

Instead of looking afraid, Fin appears thoughtful. “When did you know that’s what you wanted to do? Kill us all, I mean.”

“Probably before I Gabby’s age,” Orm answers.

“Arthur was told what happened to his mother around that time, but he wanted nothing to do with Atlantis when he found out.”

“I originally distanced myself from my vizier because Vulko held my mother’s teachings in such high regard. I should have known what he was up to when he stopped trying to correct my path. He already considered me a lost cause and knew I didn’t want to listen. Then he stood at my side and told me what I wanted to hear.”

“If he resisted you too much you would have discarded his services,” Fin reasons. “He would have lost the tactical advantage of knowing your every move.”
“An astute observation,” Orm praises, because she’s correct.

“And from an inferior mind inhabiting an inferior body, no less,” Fin intones drolly.

“It’s more a failure of your physiology in your case. You can’t really help the disadvantages you were born with, although your appalling education system did you no favors.”

“Public schools aren’t the best, but that doesn’t make me an idiot. And my college education was pretty top-notch.”

“Then why aren’t you teaching somewhere more prestigious than your basement?”

“That falls under the tragic back story category, trademarked by me, content currently unavailable,” Fin pantomimes sealing her lips shut.

“The mistake you don’t speak of,” Orm says dismissively.

“Whether I talk about it or not isn’t the point. You’re just not entitled to know what it is.”

The gall of this woman.

That Orm is unaccustomed to being forced into observing personal boundaries is an understatement.

“Depending on how long you stay here, I might eventually tell you, I might not. I’m sure you wouldn’t consider it much of one after everything you’ve been through, but it’s made a huge impact on me. But if humans are inferior, if their suffering is lesser, somehow, than any Atlanteans’ suffering by default because we somehow are capable of less, then it must not be worth knowing at all and I don’t ever have to tell you.”

Statement delivered matter-of-factly, without histrionics, Fin walks back into the kitchen and slices up a lime. She pours a small amount of the clear liquor she and Arthur consumed earlier into a small glass. To Orm’s confusion, she licks a small area on the back of her hand and sprinkles something white on it. She drinks the alcohol all at once, wincing, before lapping at the white substance and then biting into the lime.

“Ta da. That’s a proper tequila shot, by the way.” Appearing far from impressed, Fin merely shrugs and turns away from him to place her glass in the sink.

It strikes Orm as odd how she can really affect how he views various rituals and be equally impressed and indifferent in equal turn simply by her enthusiasm or lack thereof. He’d been transfixed two nights ago when she carefully took the time to explain how she made a cocktail. Squeezing the rest of the juice into her mouth, Fin discards the leftover rind in her compost bin. She runs the tap and fills a kettle with water and places it on the stove.

“I wasn’t kidding when I said people drink a lot around here. I wouldn’t expect you to have much, if any leisure time, but what do you actually enjoy doing?”

“Training,” are the first things that come to mind. Orm misses the vigorous physical activity that push him to his limits.

“I also enjoy reading philosophy and history.”

“You could read up on our history but it will probably make you think we deserve to be wiped out even more, if that’s possible. Ironically, surface dwellers don’t even know your civilization is real; they think it’s a myth. Even after the wave they deny your existence because it would mean a credible threat to us, just as people turn a blind eye to climate change and pollution. Convenience and cost are why we rely so much on wasteful materials. Life is hard for most of us and the idea that it
can get even worse is more than we can bear.”

“A myth nearly wiped out billions of your kind,” Orm states, because the treatment of Atlantis as a myth is offensive.

“Then thank God for Arthur Curry. I like being alive.”

Voice light, Fin walks back into the living room and flops onto her couch. She stares up at him with a smile on her face, utterly peaceful, and Orm finds himself feeling almost self-conscious due to her level of trust. Without knowing her name or her face or the fact she existed, he’d nearly killed her a few mere months ago. He can’t stop thinking about it. Her eyes track his movements as he walks around to the front of the couch next to her, but it’s not out of fear, and that’s actually a very remarkable thing.

Looming over her awkwardly, Orm doesn’t think he should sit down; his thigh would be nearly touching her if he did. “I’m not sure Arthur would have forgiven me if anything would have happened to you.”

Fin shrugs, her movement making the braid flip over the edge of the couch. Orm is struck by the sudden image of her pinned beneath some wreckage in the Benson house, gasping for breath as water pours in on top of her. He has the strangest idea to pick up the end of her hair and tuck it back over her shoulder—to reorder a little bit of the chaos his mind decided to conjure. The uncharacteristic urge unsettles him.

“Tom Curry drowned that night in his own truck, the one I told you got destroyed,” Fin reveals softly. “Mera’s powers saved him from dying. No one on Earth means as much to Arthur as his dad, and if he’s willing to overlook something as serious as his own father’s near-death experience, that’s pretty fucking phenomenal. I know seeing Arthur isn’t easy for you; he doesn’t know how to help you or connect with you. He’s going to make things worse between you before they get better, but he loves you. One day you might even deserve it.”

Orm has to consciously stop himself from wincing. “Arthur’s so open with his feelings. It’s no wonder he’s struggling in Atlantis.”

“Arthur never used to express much of anything. He was decently happy as a younger kid despite getting bullied but his teenage years were a blur of him closing up like a clam and not talking about feelings at all or lashing out in anger. Believe it or not he’s shown remarkable emotional maturity in the past few years.”

“When he’s not racing down the road at breakneck speed?”

“There’s probably not much on land that excites him anymore except fighting and racing.”

The kettle makes a strange, high-pitched noise and Fin rises to attend to it. She pours the hot water into two mugs containing a small mesh bag filled with what he assumes are dried plants. They release fragrant steam into the air.

“You said you’re seeing Arthur tomorrow, too? He’s spending an awful lot of time away.”

“That’s not really your problem at the moment,” Fin tells him. “You have to focus on you, whatever that means. Keep doing good deeds and such.”

“I don’t mind helping at the Benson house. Gabby’s intellect is superior to everyone else that I’ve met so far.”
“She’s probably the top in her class. Kelsey too, although she’s a few years older than her cousin.”

“Kelsey is annoying,” Orm mutters petulantly, and Fin laughs.

“That doesn’t make her stupid, Orm. She’s a talented musician and an amazing artist. Don’t you have art in Atlantis?”

“We have sculptors and what you might consider painters, although the technique is different underwater,” Orm says thoughtfully.

“Do you like art?” Fin asks.

“I don’t have a strong opinion about it. I admire engineering and consider it art. Our civil engineers make your tall metal buildings look insignificant by comparison.”

Fin sighs dreamily. “Arthur did tell me how beautiful Atlantis is. But it can be pretty amazing up here.”

“It is adequate.”

Mouth settling into a thin line, Fin gives him a searching look before holding out a mug to him. He inhales a variety of foreign smells but thinks he might be able to isolate a few familiar notes. She indicates for him to follow her, and she guides him out the side door and the same rickety stairs they took that morning to get to the garden. Her kitchen chair is still sitting there, surrounded by nameless flowers and large green plants, some of which he’s probably eaten since he arrived.

“Have a seat, Orm.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Just sit!” Fin urges, but her tone is playful. “We have the best view for the sunset up here. We’re pretty far north, it’ll still stay light out for awhile, but it’s starting right now. I’m going to grab another chair if you don’t mind company, but in the meantime, just sit there and do your best to meditate without the water. The sun is warm on your face and it’s the perfect temperature outside and my peppermint tea is the fucking bee’s knees.”

Before she leaves, Fin grabs the teabag from his mug and shakes the excess liquid onto the brick path. Doing his best to clear his mind, Orm finds himself unable to ignore his distracting surroundings. The sun doesn’t exactly feel bad, but it’s bright enough to practically singe his retinas even with his eyes closed. He hears birds in the distance, as well as a fishing vessel off the coast. The breeze plays with the newly-shorn edges of his hair and the tea nearly spills from the mug when he moves his hand too fast.

If Fin thinks he can relax under these conditions, she’s mistaken.

A few minutes later, his host finally sets a chair down a short distance away from his. Fin’s changed into more casual clothes, a looser sleeveless top with a strange design and some kind of small, snug garment that leaves her legs uncovered. Orm knows enough that she’s not in her underclothes, but it’s a more revealing outfit than he’s accustomed to seeing. Atlantean women do not typically bare their arms and never expose their legs.

The first thing Orm notices are Fin’s toes, which have black-lacquered nails. Never, in his life, has a woman been in his presence with bare feet. He doesn’t really know enough about the average citizen’s conversations and beliefs to know the prevailing opinions on things like sex and relationships, but there is a very strong cultural aversion to immodest dress. Her attire would
“What was that look you just gave me? The judgy one?”

“By Atlantean standards you are…inadequately dressed.”

“It doesn’t make you uncomfortable, does it? I don’t want you to feel like I’m sexual harassing you.”

“I have never heard that exact phrase before but I assure you that I don’t feel threatened.”

“Glad to hear it,” Fin laughs as she gazing out onto the water. The sky is a dizzying variety of brilliant orange, yellow, and red hues that paint her dark hair the same colors of the sunset. The clouds are lit up purple and pink by the sun and the water reflects the vivid colors. It’s remarkably beautiful; a sight that any surface dweller could appreciate, even with their terrible eyesight. There’s a faraway look in Fin’s eyes as they sit in companionable silence.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Fin’s phone buzzes uncontrollably and she apologizes. “I finally turned off do not disturb and walking through my kitchen kind of dumped a ton of notifications into my lap. I could miss a week’s worth if I didn’t go into that room. Communication isn’t really reliable out here. You don’t mind if I answer some of these, do you?”

Orm doesn’t care either way. He finally sips the tea she made; he’s not sure if bees actually have knees, but he figures it’s an expression that compliments the blend. If his presumption is correct, then so is hers. Hot water and dried plant matter shouldn’t taste this good, but it somehow does. Perhaps it contains some kind of drug? There can be no other reason for the relaxing effect.

Something twinkles out of the corner of Orm’s eye, but when he moves his head, he can’t find the source of the light. He thinks it might be Fin’s phone at first, but when he glances over it’s turned off and face down in her lap. When the flashing happens again, he realizes that it must be something blinking in mid-air. A large amount of twinkling insects fill the entire garden, something he wasn’t expecting.

“I didn’t know you had bioluminescent creatures up here.”

“Nothing quite so wondrous as in Atlantis, but they’re still beautiful,” Fin says quietly. “We call them lightning bugs or fireflies. They come every June.”

With gentleness, Orm plucks one out of the air and studies it as it crawls across his hand, blinking intermittently. It buzzes away and leaves him feeling bereft. It’s as whimsical as anything he saw during his childhood when Atlantis was still wondrous to him instead of dangerous. Glancing out over the Bay, Orm realizes he can see them everywhere. His enhanced vision can detect them several miles out. It disappoints him when he realizes that Fin can’t see them the way he can, but she seems just as appreciative. She absently plays with the end of the braid Conner made for her as she smiles at all the fireflies in her garden.

When Orm’s tea is finished, he places the mug on the ground between them.

“Was it good?”

“Yes.”

“Atlanna also makes very good tea.”

“She does?” Orm can’t believe it; it seems such a menial task for a queen to perform.
“Yes. She likes the sweet, fruity kinds and the really floral blends.”

“You can put flowers in tea?”

“Some of them, yes,” Fin informs him, “but others are poisonous. Lilies are beautiful but they’re deadly to cats, so I can’t bring them inside. But I grow them every spring because they sell well. If only people would buy the ointments and creams I make! They’re so good. I should know; I get injured constantly and have to use them all the time.”

“I overheard you talking to my Arthur. Did he really hurt you all those times?”

“Yes. And I’ve never managed to hurt him back. Although if I did I would just get upset; for all of my threats, I wouldn’t actually want to cause anyone harm. I cried for weeks after I shot Sam and I didn’t even hurt him all that badly.”

“He deserved it,” Orm insists.

“People that don’t want to fight should never be forced into that position. It changes them, and not for the better.”

For some reason Orm is reminded of the time he ridiculed King Ricou and then struck him down in front of his wife and young daughter. Scales is probably Gabby’s age. She’s far too young to have to be worrying about running a country and now that’s her responsibility. Orm did that. As his mother was taken from him, he in turn took someone’s father from her.

But Orm is resolute. “Conflict makes you stronger. It’s nothing to shy away from.”

“So avoiding your mother is a good thing? Got it.”

“That is a little more complicated than that.”

“Your family life is the definition of conflict, in all of its many various forms.”

“It will only get more complicated if Mother insists on marrying her surface dweller.”

Fin blinks. “By surface dweller, you mean Tom Curry, your brother’s father and your future stepdad.”

“He will never be my father!” It escapes him with more vehemence that he’s comfortable with. It’s nothing to lose his composure over, really, an inconsequential and ordinary man.

“Maybe thank God for that,” Fin mutters. Her tea must be growing cold, but she still sips it intermittently. “It’ll be a hell of a wedding, though. You’re going to need a whole platoon of body guards.”

“I can handle myself.”

Fin looks like she has an opinion on that, but she looks back at where the sun has all but disappeared. True to her prediction, there’s still a great deal of light in the sky. Even if there was no moon out he would still be able to see her.

“Are surface dweller weddings unbearably long, drawn-out affairs?”

“Not unless the people getting married want them to be. I’m not sure what kinds of rituals and traditions you have. Some couples get married at a courthouse to obtain a piece of paper. Others go all out to impress other people. I always thought that was kind of stupid, but I guess I’m just a simple
“Yeah, Claudia was one of the few people we went to school with that was always pretty nice to
Arthur. He used to have a crush on her, I think, back when we were about Gabby’s age. She and I
were really close in elementary school but we kind of drifted apart during middle and high school.
She was dating this huge douchebag at the time, though.”

“What’s a douchebag?”

“The literal definition will probably never come up in conversation, so all you need to know is that it
describes a person, almost always a man, who’s obnoxious and self-important.”

“How unfortunate.”

“She developed better taste over time, or at least since she was a dumb teenager.”

“Mother didn’t marry Father until her late twenties, and Mera and I were going to wait until I turned
thirty.”

“That’s a pretty long time to wait.”

“I was a very popular king. The only threat to my reign would have come from Arthur.”

“And then you forced his hand and lost your title anyway,” Fin says simply. She’s not trying to taunt
him, he can tell by her matter-of-fact delivery. But she is pointing out the irony of what happened.
Orm’s never thought about it quite like that before and it makes him uncomfortable that his
declaration of war cost him everything.

“I was never in a hurry to start a family. It would have distracted me from my goals.”

“I feel that for a lot of surface dwellers, starting a family is the goal. A lot of people my age wait until
they have financial stability and many are choosing not to have children at all.”

“My people are suffering from declining birth rates. There’s an almost desperation among young
people to maintain the population.”

“Surface dwellers are finally starting to see that we’ve drastically overpopulated. Many of us are
unable to afford to raise children. I don’t think I ever will.”

That causes Orm to regard her sternly. “But why not? You are patient and sensible. You would be
good at it, at least for a surface dweller.”

“Maybe, but I’d actually have to find someone I wanted to procreate with. I may have a symmetrical
face, but the standards for father of my children are a little higher than physical appearance, just as
I’m sure anyone would have higher standards for me if I was the mother of theirs.”

“I’ve never understood how peasants marry for love or why they begin courting so young. I say this
about both my people and yours.”

“I mean, I can’t speak for Atlanteans, but when teenagers ‘date,’ they usually don’t actually do much
of anything, just kinda hang out after school sometimes or see movies together. There was a really
shitty mall a few towns over that we’d go to and a local arcade here in The Bay, but it’s really pretty
boring regardless of your age.”
“How does anyone here enrich themselves? There’s nothing to do around here.”

“You’re not wrong,” Fin agrees. “You just hope you stumble across something that can become a hobby. That’s what I did with music. Conner had cable and we’d watch music videos together. I learned how to play the guitar just from observing people on television and convinced my parents to let me take lessons. Your parents never made you learn how to play an instrument? I feel like a lot of royal families on the surface do.”

“Mera plays the flute but I was not expected to indulge in such a pastime. Royalty is supposed to have an appreciation for music but playing an instrument is considered beneath me, as a king, anyway. Father pretended to like concerts and performances in front of his peers, mostly to appear cultured. I never bothered.”

“I guess you’re one of those people that’s all for cutting music and the arts in school?”

“They’re not essential but I don’t actively dislike them. My only exposure to music is a handful of concerts during my childhood. It’s not something enjoyed casually the way you do up here, at least not for people of my station.”

Fin seems to consider this. She shifts in her chair and tucks her legs underneath her, a position that strikes Orm as uncomfortable. The braid Conner made for her swings back over her shoulder and she plays with the end of it. She catches him watching it.

“Do all women wear their hair down like Princess Mera?”

“Commoners tend to wear braids or cut their hair short for convenience. Mera only wears hers in elaborate styles for formal occasions.”

“Ah, so my braid marks me as common,” Fin jokes, smiling at Orm’s impassive expression. He is not amused by her little remarks.

“Your friend does nice work.”

“He used to braid his sister’s hair when his mom got sick. Sophia’s had several rounds of chemo but she’s in remission now. But she would get very weak and could hardly do anything. Simon and their dad, Mark, are good providers but they’re not very emotionally nurturing. Conner did a lot of cooking and pretty raised Gemma himself. He’s a really good brother.”

Orm pointedly overlooks that comment because he can tell she didn’t mean anything against him. “Gabby thought I’d be jealous of Conner today since you two were inseparable. She was surprised when I wasn’t.”

Fin laughs. “You’d actually have to have some kind of regard for me to be jealous of him,” she remarks wryly. “A few of my former boyfriends felt threatened by him because of our history. But Conner’s my best friend. I love him. He’d make a terrible boyfriend and an even worse husband, so I’m glad I’m not in love with him anymore, but I would never give up the few friends I have to soothe some fragile man’s ego.”

“Is that why Mindy says you’ve gone on for so long without male attention? She was quite determined to find out my intentions.”

“I used to run off to Boston or Gotham every so often the way that Conner does and meet up with old flames or try to find someone new, but I haven’t done that in a few years. As flawed as this place is, it’s still my home. Every man I’ve met has tried to make me leave Amnesty Bay. And I’ve had some pretty remarkable opportunities presented to me over the years, but they’re not what I want to
do, and no one gets that.”

Orm is inquisitive. “What do you want to do?”

“I feel like I need to stay here and be the music teacher for these kids that I needed when I was their age. I grew up feeling so different from almost everyone else. There was no one I could talk to about feeling like that, either—I loved my parents and I still do, but they weren’t good for parsing emotions—and I can’t help but wonder how much heartache and teen angst I would have been spared if someone would have been there for me the way I needed it. I didn’t have an inspiring teacher or mentor—I created who I am today in my bedroom with an acoustic guitar and a beat up keyboard. I did it alone. By the time my parents let me take lessons I was way behind other people my age. I busted my ass to catch up.”

“I was always expected to be the best at everything.”

“I can’t see you disappointing in that area.”

“My father said I had too much of my mother in me. I bear a great physical resemblance to her that he could never stand, especially once she was sacrificed to the Trench. Sometimes the mere sight of me incurred rage.”

“That’s hardly any fault of yours!” Fin snaps. “You never should have had to grow up that way. I’m sorry.”

Her indignation on his behalf is so wholly unfamiliar; he never grew up with people openly expressing disdain for King Orvax. It would have been their death. But Orm, like his father, would have seen Fin wiped out with the rest of her race and would not have ever spared a thought about it.

“You speak of Arthur growing up with unconditional love. I suppose that I did have it, at least until my mother was taken. I never got to appreciate it for what it was.”

“Most ten year olds don’t have that kind of perspective,” Fin soothes. “I was over twice your age when it happened to me and I still don’t think I was grateful enough for everything they gave me. They were so hard on me but I love them so much. Living here breaks my heart sometimes, but I could never leave this place.”

“Then don’t listen to anyone that would make you want to leave,” Orm insists, “if your home means so much to you. It should be your choice.”

Glancing over at him, Fin smiles so kindly it makes Orm’s breath hitch momentarily. “Thank you, Orm.”

Feeling a strange mixture of embarrassment and gratification, Orm goes back to studying the strange glow of the fading sun. It’s definitely getting late, but the insects are still twinkling in the fading twilight and the stars are starting to show. He looks up and he just gasps.

“I’m not good with constellations, but I’m sure Atlanteans and surface dwellers still tell stories about those same mythical heroes. There’s shared history between us and it’s easy to forget.”

Orm nods, eyes tracing over every twinkling light in The Bay. When he was young, he would feel incredibly small and unimportant in the heart of the ocean, a tiny beating heart amongst billions in a sea of darkness. But here, he sees galaxies that are infinite lifetimes away. It’s almost freeing, how insignificant he feels in this moment. It’s as if none of his mistakes have any consequences; how could anything matter?
“A few decades ago surface dwellers reached the moon, correct?”

“That answer might depend on who you ask, but yes, we have.”

“And extraterrestrial beings have made their presence known.”

“Yes, one lives on earth in Metropolis. He works with Arthur sometimes. There’s also an Amazonian woman whose father was a Greek god. She’s immortal, apparently.”

“The thought of Arthur being forced to cooperate with a bunch of strangers is amusing. It’s not going to be any different as King of Atlantis.”

“He always says he doesn’t play well with others, but he needs all the help he can get.”

Orm agrees. His gaze lingers on horizon, on the stars lit up by the remnants of the sun. They shine the brightest and he’s reminded of a swarm of jellyfish leaving a gleaming trail in their wake. He supposes there are a few visual similarities, if he looks for them. The falling temperature has no affect on him, but it’s making Fin a little restless. She keeps moving around in her chair and Orm realizes she’s probably cold.

Fin stretches and her shoulders crack. “I wonder if I can bribe Conner into giving me a massage tomorrow morning.”

“What would you use to bribe him with? Several people have implied you have no money.”

“God damn it, I’m not broke off my ass or anything,” Fin grunts. “Conner and I have a bartering system. We don’t actually pay each other for anything. I’ll just make his favorite pasta for lunch or something. It won’t be as good as his mother’s, but the one thing he misses from living at home is Sophia’s cooking. I guess your mom never cooked, being a queen and all.”

“She did not.”

“Home-cooked meals from Mom are like, the stereotypical highlight of childhood, at least on the surface. I would drive over five hundred miles from Gotham University every fall semester just so I could have Thanksgiving Dinner. It was that good. I didn’t even care about the turkey; it was all the great side dishes she made that I liked best. Do Atlanteans have annual holidays that you got to celebrate with your mom?”

“Yes, but I was also forced to spend them with my father. He was very paranoid and possessive since my mother already ran away from him once. Her initial disappearance was explained away as some type of illness but I don’t think anyone believed that. He tried to display a united front regardless, at least until evidence was brought to him of Arthur’s existence. Everyone found out and he was forced to take swift action to maintain the appearance of control.”

“By casting her into the abyss,” Fin says quietly. “I hope that’s not how you remembered your mother, when you were young.”

“It was all he let me have. I was on the ship that took her out there. He made me watch the soldiers throw her in, completely defenseless, as she screamed for me to close my eyes. I had a very hard time remembering anything else about her for a long time, which I’m sure was his intention. From then on, any mention of her was accompanied by comments about how she defiled herself and committed treason.”

The touch of Fin’s fingertips on his causes a jolt to run up his arm in surprise. But Orm lets her hold his hand in his, a tiny gesture of comfort that he’s been denied for over twenty years. He recalls the
kiss Atlanna placed on his hand before he was led away. He’s steadfastly refused to see her since.

“When you’re ready, I’ll take you to her. I’ll take Tom out drinking or something and then you two can start making new memories, ones that your father can’t ruin. You have time now.”

The brief time Orm was able to spend with Atlanna was never about ostentatious gifts or grand acts—every special moment was quiet, and safe, and secret between the two of them. She never dared to tell him about Arthur or Tom, not with ears and eyes everywhere, but she would longingly gaze out the palace windows and tell him stories of the surface world. She would talk about all kinds of commonplace things, like dogs, rainfall, and musicians with strange names. But she never mentioned fireflies or hot tea or how twilight is one of the most objectively beautiful things in existence.

How could she not tell him?

Orm realizes that it would be to his detriment not to appreciate the small things that have the power to make his life better, even in almost undetectable ways. Every day is full of mind-numbing banalities and exquisite wonders. He doesn’t have to hate being on the surface, even though it’s just a temporary solution to a serious problem. This is the place his mother fled to, and would have stayed in, had she not been dragged back to the depths by his father’s vindictive memory. He spared Atlanna’s life so she could produce a legitimate heir and calm his naysayers, but once word of her treason spread he wasted no time discarding her.

The way Orvax treated his wife never sat well with him. Orm was too young and weak to stop the abuse. Atlanna had been forced to submit to the king until he was conceived and then, having performed her duty, did her best to avoid him. It’s something Orm has tried hard to avoid thinking about for a number of reasons, but even as a child he knew he never wanted a marriage like that with Mera. Orm knows that theoretically, better and happier unions have to exist.

*Tom Curry must be consoling my mother right now,* Orm reasons. *The man worth jeopardizing her future and the entire kingdom over made her so happy that instead of staying in Atlantis, she went back to dry land. He is by all accounts very ordinary and simple. What could he offer a queen?*

Fin’s grasp grows weak in his, and Orm realizes that she’s starting to doze off. He gives her hand a firm squeeze and she mutters something incoherent.

“Fin.”

“Hmm?” Fin’s voice is thick with sleep.

“You’re about to fall asleep. You should go inside. You can’t be comfortable sitting like that.”

Fin tries to stand up and immediately tips over. He catches her and manages to rearrange her back in her chair while he gives her a quizzical look.

“My legs fell asleep when I was sitting on them. Don’t Atlanteans ever get pins and needles from lying on their body parts too long?”

“We exist in a buoyant environment. Our weight doesn’t ever press down on our extremities.”

“That actually sounds pretty swell.” Fin tries massaging some feeling back into her limbs. She arches her back to stretch out her bare legs and toes. It’s an almost obscene display for an Atlantean, but Orm reminds himself that Fin is not one of them. She’s stretching because she’s tired and sore.

“Are you going to make it up the stairs?”
“If I fall, I’m going to relive the summer of 1996, so no thank you. I think I’ll manage. It’s really hard to perform in a cast and with crutches.”

With achingly deliberate steps, Fin shuffles back up the stairs and into the house. Orm picks up their forgotten tea mugs and follows her inside, maintaining a close distance in case she falls. She heads towards the living room, but he stops her.

“You should sleep in your bed. I was going to read tonight and it would be foolish to leave it unused.”

Fin blinks tiredly at him. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I still have to finish The Two Towers.”

This elicits a chuckle from Fin. “My dad refused to buy the second movie. He said it was too different from the book, so we had the first and third movie but no second one. I won’t let you watch them until you’re done reading the trilogy, but I’d like to see them with you.”

“I’m curious how such dense material is adapted to that format. It would require many hours of viewing.”

“I think Derek has the extended versions. He’s coming over for practice tomorrow morning. Actually, I have a few students coming over tomorrow. I totally forgot to tell you.”

“I will manage.”

Fin smiles, barely able to keep her eyes open. “Great. Have a good night.”

Surprisingly, Orm does. He finishes his book but decides against starting a new one, since he doesn’t want to become completely nocturnal. He feels a little better than he did this afternoon because Fin doesn’t hate him for nearly getting her killed. She rightfully holds him accountable for many things, but she doesn’t seem angry about that. It’s such a foreign concept to Orm; in Atlantis, there is no forgiveness—wrongs are righted through physical might. As a former king, Orm was above fighting duels for his honor, but many members of the nobility have done so. Fin continues to challenge him, but defeating her in such a manner would not make him feel like he was actually right.

Before he falls asleep in the recliner, Orm is haunted by the close call earlier in the truck. The idea of Fin smashing through the glass and onto the road is unbearable. Her broken, bleeding body would expire long before help could arrive to such a remote location. Death comes so easily to surface dwellers. Fin must be acutely aware.

Orm’s hand flexes unconsciously as he recalls warmth of Fin’s body through the thin material of her top, the way his fingers unconsciously slotted between the notches of her ribs, her rapid heartbeat pounding against the palm of his hand. Without his intervention, Arthur’s driving would have killed her. Fin’s relief as she melted into his arms was obvious, almost infectious. The memory still fills him with intermittent contentment several hours later.

He wonders when that feeling will finally go away.
Another Diet Fed by Crippling Defeat

Fin wakes when she feels someone lie down on the bed next to her. She hears kissy noises and cooing before realizing that it’s Conner, who loves any and all cats ever but whose landlord (Uncle Ian) refuses to budge on the subject. Fin feels her cats leave her, one by one, to be with him and groans.

“You steal my men and my cats and my instruments, you traitor,” Fin groans.

“I didn’t mean to steal that guy that time, but your cats and guitars are mine,” Conner whispers, returning Olive’s enthusiastic head bonk. She purrs and flops down on his chest, tucking her head under his chin.

“Why do they all hate me?”

“I found a bunch of them sleeping next to you, Fin. I don’t think they hate you. Although your boy Morris is chilling with Orm right now, so you might want to worry about that.”

“Ughhh,” Fin groans. It’s not fair that her favorite cat would rather sit with someone else, let alone someone who doesn’t seem to especially like him or, you know, the entire surface world. She goes to get up but her limbs feel like they’re full of lead. Her body is a complete wreck.

“Is there anything I can offer you that might persuade you to give me a massage?” Fin asks sweetly.

“The sign you’re making as a gift for Claudia’s wedding, tell her it’s from both of us instead of just you.”

Fin sighs in relief. “Done.”

“Great, because I totally didn’t buy anything for her or her future wife,” Conner laughs. He nudges her with his knee. “Hey, if you want the massage, you have to roll over on your stomach.”

All the cats flee as she attempts to do so. It’s nice being back in her own bed, but she can’t make Orm sleep on that awful loveseat in the living room. She’ll have to return there tonight, but the mere thought makes her groan.

“What is wrong with you?” Conner asks, straight up rolling Fin over like she’s a sleeping bag and swinging a leg over her hip so he can straddle her. She doesn’t think anything of their relaxed boundaries anymore; it’s kind of nice to not have to worry about anything getting misconstrued or complicated. They haven’t had any romantic feelings for each other since twelfth grade.

“I haven’t slept in my own bed since Saturday night.”

“And it’s Friday morning,” Conner informs her, “so your body’s all fucked up, huh?”

“Yes.”

“I know you hate sharing beds with people, but I’m sure Orm wouldn’t mind.”

“Orm and I are not having sex. I’m pretty sure he would never entertain the notion. He’s Atlantean royalty and I’m just a surface dweller peasant. He doesn’t like being up here and likes the people even less. I try to actively avoid fucking people that hate the human race, unless they’re somewhat ironic about it.”
She doesn’t like hiding the truth from him, but Conner’s brother-in-law died in the wave. Fin never met him and for some reason Conner seemed to loathe him, but his family still suffered a loss. Gemma took it hard and now she’s a single mom—with a four year old and a toddler—so Fin’s not sure how Conner will take it if he finds out that Orm’s responsible.

“You do always pick the weirdest dudes,” Conner mutters as he pushes her shirt up and gets to work. It’s almost scary how efficiently he finds all the knots but he sure as hell isn’t gentle when he’s releasing them. Fin actually shouts when he digs his thumb into a painful one on her lower back. To her mortification, the noise summons Orm, because she hears his footsteps enter her room. Because of how she’s lying, she can't see his face, but she can feel the weight of his gaze.

This probably looks weird as fuck to him.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Fin manages to wheeze, although the pain is breathtaking. She's probably not reassuring at all. “I have a ton of muscle knots.”

“And a shallow pain threshold,” Conner mutters judgmentally. His fingers press into her back again and she muffles a squeal into her pillow. It smells very much like the bougie bath products she bought for Orm, and she has to resist inhaling deeply because he’s standing about three feet away from her. The pain of having her muscle knots released by someone who cares more about efficiency than her comfort deprives her of any pleasure she might be getting otherwise.

Orm must still be standing there and watching the scene she’s making, because after a few minutes he has an opinion on her condition. “If you trained your body better, you could avoid such strain in the first place.”

“I hate exercising,” Fin informs him, whimpering when Conner runs the side of his thumb into her biggest knot yet. Her nails dig into the sheets and she tries not to make any more incriminating noises as she arches her back away from where he’s applying heavy pressure.

Shit fucking hurts.

“You better grab a hot shower when we’re done so you don’t cramp up even worse,” Conner advises.

“Yes, Mom,” Fin grumbles. Most of the pain has dulled into what she would classify as a low-grade ebb but he’ll still catch a spot that makes her squirm from time to time. When Conner is finally finished and takes off for the kitchen, Fin pulls her shirt down and rolls over. To her embarrassment, Orm is still observing her in all of her pained and awkward splendor. It’s a strange reversal of their first meeting.

“There are exercises to build muscle mass that I think even you can handle,” Orm intones.

“I am usually not this pathetic,” Fin offers, knowing her face is flushed from pain. “Between the living room floor and the drywall, I kind of overdid it. I’ll pop some ibuprofen for the next few days and be fine.”

Orm doesn’t look like he buys it, but leaves her statement lie. “What does the design on your shirt mean?”

Fin glances down at the logo for Gotham City University. “It’s where I went to college. We use our clothing to advertise all kinds of things. Navy and gold don’t really flatter me, but they’re the school colors. My mom bought this shirt when we visited for orientation. I donated a lot of things when they passed away, but I had to keep this since I never bought one for myself. Do you have a favorite
color?”

Orm blinks. “No one’s ever asked me that. I’m sure if I did, my mother would know.”

“That’s somehow a question you can’t answer?”

“Specific occasions call for specific colors. There’s no point in having a favorite when tradition always demands the same ones.”

Atlantis sounds like a drag but I suppose it’s all he knows. I guess that means he won’t hate the clothes I ordered for him. They should arrive today.

“I’m not sure what Conner is up to, but I’m going to grab a shower real quick and then I’ll feed you.” Fin slithers to the edge of the bed and manages to stand up. Orm watches this movement with a perplexed expression but physical grace isn’t something she excels at.

Once Orm departs, Fin digs around in her massive stash of shampoo and conditioner to find her favorites. They’re actually purple (when she went through her stereotypical colored hair phase, so sue her) but they smell amazing. She’s kind of curious if Orm will notice the difference. Yeah, that’s kind of weird but it’s not actually flirting, so there.

Hot water is the best fucking thing on earth as it pours over her back and shoulders. Her hair is in a shower cap (so it will be nice and wavy from Conner’s braid). She uses a sugar scrub she made at the end of May that smells like mango. It’s funny how a little self-care makes a huge difference in her mood and energy level. It makes her wonder if Orm would like any of her bath bombs. She probably made at least one or two without the glitter. Even though it’s biodegradable, she’s pretty sure Orm doesn’t want to sparkle.

Fin picks out a purple sundress that hits right above the knee and a pair of tan leather sandals. It’s one of three casual dresses she owns that doesn’t have pockets, so she shoves her phone down the front of it. She paws through her jewelry until she finds the necklace that Kelsey got her for Christmas. It makes sense, since she’s coming over today for a lesson and staying to practice. Ever since her former band mates moved away, Fin and Conner have been filling their old spots with her students.

Given the hour, Conner’s already gotten in all his recording. He’s an early riser because of his job and usually shows up around six in the morning. His dad lets him come in late at ten on Fridays since he works twelve-to-fourteen hour days the rest of the week. Conner usually hangs out with her during breakfast, but the past few weeks he’d been at the shop anyway. Most Bay residents suffered car problems, if not downright destruction of their vehicles.

It’s funny how a perceived act of God can be good for business, at least if you’re in the right one.

Fin laments her much lighter workload. Most of her students lost their means of transportation or their parents’ means of paying. Fin successfully negotiated temporary lower prices for some of them but others just bailed completely or ghosted her because they were too ashamed to explain they couldn’t afford lessons anymore. Some of them had been with her for years and she feels a little abandoned. She gets it, really, but it also hurts.

What else is new. At least it’s a better reason to leave me than death or boredom. Music saved me in my emotional times of need but not everyone has that luxury.

The smell of bacon hits Fin once she leaves her room. She figures Conner’s making breakfast (because he’s constantly hungry) and finds him in the kitchen. All of her chairs have been returned to the table, which she figures is Orm’s doing, but there’s no sign of him anywhere. Morris is sitting at
the table patiently.

“You know, when I got here, Orm was waiting by the door and looked like I’d just woke him up. He was really tense. Maybe he thought I was up to no good until he saw it was me.”

“I told him you were coming, he just probably didn’t expect you before dawn.”

“I don’t even know where he is right now.”

“He had _The Return of the King_ with him when he went outside.”

“All of my patio furniture is disgusting,” Fin recalls. “I hope he didn’t just sit down on one of those chairs. He’s going to ruin his clothes.”

“You live at one of the highest elevations on The Bay and it still flooded the greenhouse. I can’t believe how much garbage still made it into your garden.”

“It was early enough in the season that I could replant some of it. I probably spent too much money replacing some of them but I knew I needed the food. I bought a lot of stuff before they jacked up the prices too much. I knew that would happen once the shock wore off and boy, did it.”

“I wonder if Orm or Arthur knows who sent all that garbage back up here.”

“As long as they don’t do it again, does it matter?”

“But what if it _does_ happen again? We got hit with a metric fuckton of garbage, Fin; way too much for our tiny little seaside town to handle.”

“I thought the government is taking it away in a few weeks on a barge.”

“Every single place is full up, Fin. There’s a good chance it’ll just get dumped right back in the ocean.”

“No!” Fin shouts, and she wonders if Orm can hear her, even though her garden is further down the cliff side.

“The Bay isn’t even clean yet. It can’t all stay here. We literally have a giant trash pile beside our town. I don’t think anyone here wants this, but we have no say in what the government decides to do. They’re having this problem all along the Atlantic Seaboard. There’s no place to put it all, at least not all this fast. It’s a biohazard.”

Before her legs can give out, Fin tries to sit in the doorway. Conner gives her a look of sympathy but has to attend to breakfast. It looks like he has some browned potatoes and grilled tomatoes (Irish breakfasts are fucking weird) in addition to fried eggs.

“You didn’t have any sausage or coffee.”

“Coffee’s too hard on my stomach.”

“I brought some extra espresso for your students.”

“If you give them that much caffeine you might get arrested.”

“Maybe Orm would like some.”

“He’s never had coffee before.”
“Well no one bought the Europe story anyway, so you can finally stop telling it so badly.”

That’s actually a relief. Fin doesn’t consider herself a good liar and doesn’t like doing it.

“His civilization is so much different than ours,” Fin reveals quietly from the doorway. “It’s suffered greatly because of pollution. For generations they’ve hated us for what we’ve done to them. A lot of people, even on the surface, say we deserve it.”

Conner shrugs. “Humanity as a whole, maybe, but our little seaside town got a century’s worth of garbage that didn’t all come from us. You know the people here try and keep the Bay as clean as possible. It’s our home. But we got way more thrown at us than we ever threw in. It’s not fair that we have to deal with it when it’s not all our fault.”

“No, just like it’s not fair to have your children die off because of someone else’s pollution and carelessness. I get why Atlantis did it.”

“WayneTech is already green, has been before green was really a thing,” Conner reminds her. “We are trying.”

“But LexCorp will never do that, and they’re the second largest conglomerate in the world.”

“Don’t you look at the news on your phone? LexCorp is getting dissolved. Wayne Enterprises is buying up most of it. Bruce Wayne himself is also trying to work with the government to find solutions for all the trash.”

“That’s good,” Fin says quietly. *Bruce Wayne seems like a good man, despite the tabloid stories. It just might be too late to save some Atlanteans or change Orm’s mind about us.*

"No need for an existential crisis. The powers that be are finally paying attention."

“It won’t come quick enough to help us with the pickup, though.”

Conner purses his lips. “No, not really.”

Fin’s not sure what she’s going to tell Orm—he’ll probably find out about it eventually. And even though one barge of garbage is just a drop in the bucket, so to speak, it means a lot, even symbolically. The ocean has a fresh start—something no surface dweller could have given it. It’s so wrong to just ignore that—to spite it, even, by throwing even one piece back into it.

*We certainly don’t need to go making the same mistakes we’ve been making.*

“Fin, why don’t you go grab Orm and tell him breakfast is ready?”

“Yeah, okay,” Fin mumbles, getting to her feet and walking down the rickety stairs to her garden.

When she gets there, Fin sees that her chairs are still dirty and stacked against the side of her shed. Orm is a few feet away, standing by the fence with a book tucked under her arm. He’s studying the remnants of her rose bushes. They blended in with everything else the night before when it was dark, but the green stands out against the white fence in the morning sunlight. In the years prior she would grow and sell the roses, but since she can’t eat them, she budgeted against replacing them in favor of crops. Getting rid of that many thorny vines was never a priority, and they are admittedly an eyesore now, even after she spent a week picking trash out of her garden.

“They are dying.”
“Yeah, they mostly got, um, destroyed…” Fin trails off. “My favorite ones are all gone—yellow roses from a plant my grandmother gave my mom when I was born. I couldn’t salvage anything from that plant but the traditional red ones are still here.”

Fin can count on one hand the number of blooms. They don’t even look good, but maintaining this plant isn’t something she has time for. Maybe in a few years she’ll be able to afford to buy a whole row of new ones, but with prices sky high, it might be awhile.

“Is it my fault?”

Fin shrugs, not really in the mood for one of their intense discussions. “If you want to think of it that way, then yes.”

“I’ve made life hard on you, these past few months.”

The tone is a little patronizing, but Fin doesn’t get angry, just matter-of-fact. “Of course you did, but life was never easy here to begin with for anyone. We certainly didn’t need it to get any harder.”

“If you’re trying to get me to feel sorry for what I’ve done, it won’t work.” Orm turns towards her, arms crossed.

Fin smiles at that, and Orm seems a little taken aback. “You mentioned that your father set you on this path. But he’s been dead for over ten years. You were the one to finish it. This is your doing, regardless of what happened to you when you were a kid. I don’t expect remorse. I don’t expect an apology or an epiphany or a change of heart. The most I can ever hope for is that you won’t want to do it again.”

_Especially when you find out that humanity hasn’t learned its lesson._

Fin starts to walk back up to the house. “Come on, breakfast is ready. Conner is probably wondering where we are. He made some weird food, but it’ll taste good.”

Orm follows her up the stairs silently. It takes an eternity, somehow, to reach the top. Thankfully she doesn’t fall, but she does trip coming back into the house. Those ledges really sneak up on her.

“I was about to send out a search party. I did eat half of the bacon, though.”

“I don’t need any,” Fin declares; Conner doesn’t cook it crispy enough for her. She glances over at Morris, who’s sitting across from her and he’s got at least a tablespoon of bacon in front of him. “Are you trying to kill my cat, you asshole?”

“How can you say no to that face?”

“By reminding myself that I’ll be seeing it less and less the more junk food I give him.”

“Fine,” Conner mutters. He scoops the majority of the bacon off Morris’s plate and into his open mouth.

“You’re disgusting,” Fin says, wrinkling her nose, but she can’t help but chuckle.

“I’ve had worse things in my mouth, Fin.” Conner says with a wink. Fin has the sense of humor of a fourteen year old boy and can’t help but laugh even harder, but poor Orm is probably horrified.

“Orm is a prince, you know,” Fin explains. “We probably shouldn’t make dirty jokes like that in front of him.”
“Prince Orm, have I offended you?” Conner asks grandiosely. Thankfully his mouth isn’t full of food by this point (Sophia would have smacked him) but it’s overall a ridiculous picture.

Orm looks a little distressed but tries valiantly to appear untroubled. “It’s a little refreshing to enjoy an informal meal.”

“Great,” Conner beams. “So I can make all the terrible jokes I want to?”

“You can make more of them?” Orm wonders aloud.

“I grew up in a very repressed Catholic household. I aim to misbehave.”

Fin can’t help but giggle at the Firefly reference and because it’s true. Conner is sweet but he’s wild. She sees a half-empty bottle of vodka on the counter and knows that it’s supposed to be three-quarters full.

“Are you drinking a screwdriver, Conner?”

“It’s nine o’clock in the morning, Fin.”

“That’s not a no!”

“There’s your answer, then,” Conner replies. “Did you want one too?”

“I can’t drink before my students come over. That’s inappropriate.”

“Prince Orm, would you like a drink?”

Fin groans at his alluring tone. “Don’t you dare try to fucking peer pressure him into day drinking or make a pass at him.”

“I know better than to seriously come onto a straight guy, Fin. He’s like a negative four on the Kinsey scale. I can just tell.”

Fin covers her face with her hands. Orm may be ignorant of their slang but he’s very good at correctly inferring what people mean. He’s going to think they’re all cavemen before the week is out.

Far from seeming seriously offended, Orm appears fascinated. “Is that how one declares sexual interest on the surface, by giving them a drink? How strange.”

Fin’s flat out embarrassed, because she’s given Orm many drinks over the past few days and doesn’t want him getting the wrong idea. “Not if you’re just at someone’s house, but if you’re out at a bar, then yes.”

“So that’s a common way to meet romantic partners?”

“Conner likes casual meet ups that last only the duration of the evening.”

Conner nods in agreement. “I’m pretty much stuck in this hellhole all week long with no cell phone service while I work sixty plus hours a week in the shop. I also don’t like clingy men. One and done is the way to go.”

“So you embark with the specific intent to meet only temporary sexual partners?”

“Yes, always out of town. If I see someone I like, I buy them a drink and they sit with me while they drink it if they reciprocate interest,” Conner explains. “But I always make sure they’re interested in
the same thing—no strings attached.”

Despite physiological differences, Conner is an objectively attractive man. Perhaps Orm considers this, because he pauses for a moment before asking, “Does it work?”

“Um, it works for me, as a man picking up other men,” Conner says with a shrug. “It’s a little tougher for other people, I’m told. Fin’s only tried to pick up guys twice but they were both terrible in bed so she refuses to try again. It’s also kind of dangerous because you don’t really know what kind of people are out there. I’d hate to be on Forensic Files because I picked the wrong guy for a night.”

“What is Forensic Files?”

“It’s a television show that demonstrates how law enforcement uses science to solve criminal cases,” Fin explains.

Conner elaborates further. “I don’t even think they make new episodes anymore. Maybe I’d show up on a podcast in a few years and get my own episode.”

Jesus, Fin thinks, Orm probably thinks we’re insane.

“Is the surface really overrun with murderers that they create such programs?” Orm frowns.

“It’s more so that a lot of people are fascinated by violent criminals,” Fin tries to explain. “Google any serial killer and you’ll find a ton of results.”

“I get the impression that your online content varies greatly from ours. The material available is primarily educational and vetted for factual content. It would certainly never glorify anything immoral.”

Conner shrugs. “Our online content is pretty much memes and pornography. The former is dumb pictures with words that we use to tell inside jokes. The latter is just a staggering amount of videos of two people—or more—engaging in sexual activity. There are millions of videos on the internet depicting this.”

“And this is what you dedicate your online database to? It can’t have any benefit to your society.”

“It doesn’t, really,” Conner remarks, “it’s made all millennial men awful at sex, especially the straight ones. It’s all about the male’s pleasure, never the female’s. Gay porn is better. They usually know what they’re doing and have more fun. Lesbian porn is mostly made for men so it’s more hit or miss.”

Orm is unimpressed. “And this content runs rampant, available to anyone?”

“Yeah, it’s not very well-controlled or age restricted. Fin and I both managed to watch porn when we were teenagers because we were curious. I still watch it now from time to time, and so does she, it takes her awhile to find content she likes.”

Fin can’t bring herself to make eye contact with either of them, choosing instead to polish off the rest of her eggs.

“Surface dwellers are so vulgar.”

Conner shrugs. “Probably. Even if porn doesn’t exist in Atlantis—and I’m not convinced it doesn’t—I’m sure commoners talk about sex all the time. I bet you and your soldier boys had similar
discussions.”

“That kind of base conversation holds no appeal to me,” Orm says contemptuously. “My business is my own.”

Wow, and that makes Fin want to know everything. She gives him a reassuring smile, though, because it’s probably the answer that she needed to hear. “That’s really sweet, Orm. People don’t really appreciate being just another notch in the bedpost.”

“You notch your bedposts?”

“No, it’s just an expression or Conner would be putting his bed through a wood chipper,” Fin chuckles. Conner doesn’t even fake outrage as he finishes the rest of his drink.

“So do men buy you drinks when you go out?” Orm wonders aloud, but this question is clearly directed at Fin.

“They have, but I’m afraid that accepting might convince a man I want to take him to bed. In college it was kind of fun to drink for free all night and then go back to my dorm room alone, because my roommates would always make sure I didn’t go off with some strange guy. But both times I accepted drinks and let things escalate I wound up regretting it. I should have known based on the drinks they ordered me.”

“Did you ever pursue a man in such a way?”

Laughing Fin takes another sip of her drink. “I did try to buy a one for a man once, when I was twenty one, but it was the worst idea ever. He was like my boss’s boss’s boss or something like that—he actually owned the hotel that the club I worked in was in but I didn’t know it was him. He was so far out of my league that I’ll probably never try again. It was one of the most mortifying experiences of my life.”

“What made you pick him, Fin?” Conner asks curiously, eyes darting between Orm and his friend.

“He was pretty classically good looking, I guess,” Fin muses. “He was the typical tall, dark, and handsome type. He was older than me and very cultured, which I thought was exciting. He was very knowledgeable about books and music, especially classical composers. I served him drinks a few times before I tried to buy one on me. He let me down easy and said it was because I was too young for him. He did compliment me on the Scotch, though.”

“I bet he would have been good,” Conner adds slyly, and Fin’s forced to agree.

“Yeah, I bet he would have been,” Fin murmurs speculatively, finishing the rest of her juice. It’s been a ridiculously long time since she’s had sex, but Prince Orm doesn’t need to know all these details about her life. “I found out later he had quite the reputation for being a lady’s man and a party boy, but I never saw that side of him. I’m a little pickier these days about the drinks I’ll accept. Hopefully it will weed out all the bad ones.”

“Hear, hear,” Conner says cheerfully, clinking his empty glass with hers. They may have caused some permanent emotional scarring in Orm, but Fin’s never going to apologize for having fun with Conner. She could never talk about this with her old bandmates, Lee and Wendy, because they were dating each other and Fin really didn’t want to know. Fin and Conner didn’t go into lurid detail and she’s sure Orm’s heard worse. Besides, he was curious about surface dweller culture and he learned something new.

At least Fin’s mind has managed a few blissful minutes away from the bleak fate of the infamous
Bay garbage dump. She wonders if Orm will wipe them all out for real instead of throwing back
more garbage when he finds out. It’s a very real possibility. She’s not even sure how to break the
news but figures waiting until she finds a good way to tell him is better than just blurting it out now
and risking Conner getting caught in their inevitable argument.
“Thank you for making breakfast,” Orm says to Conner politely before leaving to presumably read in
the garden.
Fin has to wait a good long time until he’s out of earshot. “He’s never says thank you to me when I
cook!”
“Maybe you’re not doing it right,” Conner mutters as he soaps up the dishes.
“You know that’s not true,” Fin growls at his laughter.
“I mean, the guy’s spent his life eating fish and clams and stuff. Bacon and orange juice have to be
like crack.”
“I imagine there’s some sensory overload going on,” Fin ventures. "He was probably pretty
sheltered, too."
"Yeah, I get the impression he doesn't socialize for fun," Conner speculates. "He's not bad at it. Once
he gets used to us maybe he'll come around."
"Don't mention the garbage to Orm, it might make him mad. I'll find a way to tell him."
Conner shrugs. "What if he tells his Atlantean buddies and they come ashore and try to stop it?
Didn't they shoot up Tom's place back in the eighties?"
"I don't think Orm would do that," Fin says, but it's a total lie. She's really afraid he would lead the
charge if he found out.
"I guess you would know more than me," Conner concedes. He whistles while he finishes up with
the dishes.
Fin carefully puts the vodka bottle away so her students don't see it if they go into the kitchen. “By
the way, did you bring my steel guitar with you?”
“It’s in my van, I’ll grab it later,” Conner answers, a little too quickly for Fin’s liking.
“You’ve been saying that for months. Or you’ve been telling me it’s at the shop or it’s in your
apartment. Tom really needs it for something and I said he could use mine. I really need it back. He
wants to propose to Arthur’s mom and he was going to play her a few things. I think he specifically
mentioned Gold Dust Woman. They’re both a big fan of Rumours. It was her favorite album when
she first stayed with him.”
Conner pulls a face but he instantly grabs his keys and walks out the front door, soapy hands
spraying water all over the floor until he wipes them on his jeans. Fin wants to yell after him, but can
tell from his body language that something is wrong. She waits impatiently, pacing around her
kitchen.
I wonder if Tom knows he’s going to be hosting a ton of royals at his wedding when it sounds like he
wanted something really low key and relaxed, like within a few weeks of getting engaged because
they’ve already waited thirty years to be together. Maybe Arthur already told him about Atlantean
law, or maybe not. I don't even know how to tell Orm that they want to do his before the end of the


“Now promise to not freak out,” Conner says hesitantly when he reappears, but going by the look of the case itself, she knows it’s not going to be good.

“What the actual fuck, Conner?”

“I really should have told you, I know.”

Fin sighs. She’s had several dozen people bring her instruments in the past few months in similar condition. “Where was it?”

“It was in the trunk of Dad’s car. He let me borrow it that week while I was working on the transmission in my van.”

“When the wave hit, gotcha,” Fin says quietly, trailing her hand across the rusty frets.

“It was submerged for almost a week because that steel beam fell on the cabin. I tried everything I could. I scoured forums and called like a dozen different people all over the state, but it can’t be fixed. The water in the guitar was gone in a few days but it took all this time for the lining of the case to finally dry. I didn’t think a hair dryer or a fan would be good for the material, although I guess it’s ruined either way.”

“I’m sure you tried your best,” Fin says softly, trying to fight the sorrow and the rage that are duking it out. The seawater rusted out entire sections of the steel resonator guitar—her precious baby—and it looks like it’s been on the bottom of the ocean for years. Tears prick her eyes but she turns away resolutely.

Conner knows better than to try and console her. Accepting comfort is never easy, not when growing up it was so scarcely offered by her parents, and after they’re gone, it’s even harder to come by. Arthur and Conner are her friends, but they’d rather be off doing their own thing in their free time than hang out with her. She knows that living alone and not having a partner or children means she’ll never be anyone’s priority, but a part of her wishes she had someone who she could trust to help.

“I know you’ve got to go to work, and I’d like a little time alone. Kelsey will arrive in less than half an hour and I just have to get some things out of my system.”

“Sure thing,” Conner murmurs, giving her shoulder a squeeze. “I’ll grab the sign because it won’t fit in my van with all our equipment tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

Fin barely registers his footsteps as he tramples through her house. She’s lost in a haze of mourning and exasperation. She’s trying not to let resentment overtake her, but she’s lost a lot to Orm’s message and it’s draining. She’s pissed. She wants to help, but this shouldn’t be her responsibility, and every time she feels like she’s making progress, she’s reminded of another way the wave took something from her.

Without meaning to, her feet take her downstairs into her basement. It’s pitch black without the light on, but Fin knows where everything is by heart. When she first finished it a few years back, she barely left it, having finally completed something she’d dreamed about since high school. She really is a sentimental fool, sometimes, and that’s probably why she struggles with her feelings so much.

The thing is, is that every instrument that Fin owns has history. It means something; she doesn’t
purchase frivolously. She does research, she scouts different shops, and then she begins the journey of saving money for them. She gets them to celebrate milestones or for special occasions, or they’re gifts, but there’s always a ritual involved or a story behind each one.

Fin’s original electric guitar belonged to her father and he let her play it for the first time on her eighth birthday. Her original acoustic guitar belonged to her grandmother and was delivered in a fancy box with a handwritten letter when she died. Her first ukulele was a gift from her parents and her first keyboard was a hand-me-down from her former aunt (before she divorced Fin’s uncle, anyway). Sam got her a shitty harmonica for her birthday one year and she tormented her entire family for months before it mysteriously disappeared when she was at school. Even her parents’ pastor bought her a recorder to use at the Christmas concert.

But the beautiful steel resonator dobro is hers.

Or at least it was.

Fin spent two summers and the last half of her senior year slaving away a shitty restaurant job in the next town over so she could buy it—she had to miss her class trip and senior prom because they wouldn’t let her off work. Fin was obsessed with Lindsey Buckingham (and Fleetwood Mac) and had to have a dobro because nothing else she owned could produce that sound. She teases Conner endlessly, but he’s the same way. You can’t play Rage Against the Machine or Radiohead or Jack White and get the right sound with just anything. That’s why he buys so much damn equipment, and why she collects instruments like they’re going out of style.

Alone in her soundproofed basement, Fin can practically feel the weight of it an entire story above her. She imagines that at any second it will just fall through the floor and into her lap, as if the kitchen table didn’t exist. But seeing it in its current condition is too much for her. She can’t stand to be in the same room with it. The passage of time inevitably severs her ties to the past, one by one. That’s how life is: she gets that. But it always hurts. Every loss feels like a failure somehow.

*It’s so stupid. It’s just a guitar.*

Fin’s mind tries to rationalize it, but it fails miserably. It is just a guitar, but it’s a guitar that she’s had since 2004. She had it when she graduated high school and it went off to college with her. She had it through every single relationship (even Conner) and even had to steal it back from a bad ex when she was twenty. The purchase had been originally met by her parents with ridicule, but after he criticized her for blowing so much money in a reckless way, her father had still sat down and played it.

Even after my colossal fuck up, my dad still played that guitar when he could barely even talk to me, Fin recalls despondently. It was the last instrument of mine he ever played. He loved that thing. Dad’s the whole reason I got into Fleetwood Mac in the first place.

For the first time since the wave, Fin gives herself permission to be weak. Months of pent-up grief and rage and fear rise up in her and break the dam she’s been trying to build. Tears stream down her face and don’t stop; she can’t remember the last time she cried like this. She feels pure emotion carve away all rational thought until she’s left as nothing but a sobbing, gasping mess. She’s so glad the studio is soundproofed because the pain Orm overheard earlier is nothing compared to this.

Fin hates that her connection to people dead and gone almost ten years and to a childhood that was full of loneliness and alienation keeps her in a place where life is pretty fucking hard. She hates that it will be even harder to move away, both emotionally and financially. She hates that the work she does is important but that a job well done doesn’t pay her bills. And she hates that helping others is the only thing that fulfills her because sometimes it’s so strenuous and trying it makes her question
why she gives so much to other people and leaves nothing for herself.

The gentle bleating of her alarm on her phone jars her mid-sob. Realizing she’s got five minutes before Kelsey comes over, Fin attempts some deep breaths that after a minute are only intermittently interrupted by a periodic hitch. She blows her nose, dries her eyes, and counts to ten. She’s a source of strength for her students. It’s important that they never lose confidence in her. They need her.

*But not for five more minutes.*

Fin sets a timer and breathes in and out until the timer resets to zero. She shuts it off, stuffs it back down the front of her dress, and walks back up the stairs.
Once he’s outside, Orm finally has a chance to unpack the conversation he just had with Conner and Fin. He envisions the latter sitting at some dimly lit establishment, getting approached by all manner of men. He wonders what else, besides good looks and an air of refinement would make Fin accept such an offer. She had indicated that she favored men whose appearance was *tall, dark, and handsome*. She mentioned that the man she sought was older and seemed worldly and experienced; was that her preference?

Equally thought-provoking is the rampant consumption of illicit materials by surface dwellers. Orm doesn’t consider himself offended by sex or nudity on principle, but the idea of random people filming themselves during the act of copulation is distasteful. Conner says he believes the medium must somehow exist in Atlantis, but Orm has never heard of such a thing. He doesn’t discount certain individuals housing private collections, because nothing really shocks him anymore after spending a few months incarcerated with the absolute worst his society has to offer, but he’s confident it’s not freely available. Government censors would quickly remove any content like that.

*Live entertainment indeed.*

No Atlantean would be caught dead with such material, Orm is certain. And while the idea may put him off, it also successfully distracts him from his novel for a good long while. He has to actively clear his mind before he can concentrate again on reading. It’s not easy; the sun is nearing the brightest point of the day and the air is humid and uncomfortable. The sounds of birds is too frequent and there are even more fishing vessels dotting the coast than the previous night.

Through sheer force of will Orm prevails. He’s making nice progress until the hot morning air starts to uncomfortably dehydrate him. He walks back up to the house to pour himself a glass of water when he notices that there’s an unfamiliar object on the kitchen table. He knows only that it must be some type of musical instrument and that it appears to be in poor condition. Before he can inspect it further, he hears a loud knock on the front door. When it becomes obvious Fin is not going to answer, he cuts across the living room and opens it to reveal his least favorite acquaintance so far.

“Hi, Mr. Orm!”

Orm doesn’t respond at all, which doesn’t seem to deter her. Kelsey slips right past him again as if he’s not intimidating. She’s surprisingly agile considering the very large bag she’s carrying in one hand and the huge case she’s lugging in the other. Fin mentioned she’s older than her cousin by a few years but she’s considerably shorter than Gabby, closer to Fin’s height. Her red hair is secured in some elaborate braided style that keeps it away from her neck.

“I know I’m early, but I gave myself extra time today because I just got my driver’s license!”

It takes Orm a moment to parse that as she sets down her items by the door. “You are certified to operate a motor vehicle?”

“Yep, all by myself and I can drive wherever I want to now!”

A resolution to stay off the road forms in Orm’s mind. Kelsey walks over to the kitchen and grabs the glass that Orm had sat on the counter. She fills it up with water and while he knows it’s foolish to be irritated because she had no way of knowing he was going to use that particular glass, he finds himself annoyed regardless. He’s puzzled when she hands it to him.
“You kind of gave me a funny look, and then I realized I must have taken yours. Sorry.”

It’s not a connection Orm would have expected a teenager to make. He accepts the glass and takes a sip. They stand there for a moment drinking water until Kelsey begins to fidget. She’s halfway done before she glances over at the kitchen table and almost spits out her drink.

“Oh my God, what happened?”

Orm barely manages to prevent her glass from falling when she haphazardly places it on the edge of the counter. Kelsey walks over to the kitchen table and gingerly lifts the instrument out of the case.

“Did Fin see this?”

“I barely knew it was there until you got here.”

“My brothers work at the Murphy body shop. Conner mentioned to Jake that the damage was bad, but not this bad. Oh God, I hope she didn’t see it.”

“I assume it’s Fin’s?”

“Conner borrowed it. It’s another casualty of the wave, I guess.” Kelsey strums it and two rust-covered strings snap apart before she quickly replaces it. “Oh crap!”

“This damage was caused by the wave?”

“Yeah,” Kelsey replies bleakly. “I mean, compared to everything that’s happened, it’s not so bad, I guess, but that guitar really means a lot to her. Fin told me one of her ex-boyfriends stole it when they broke up, so she broke into his mom’s house when he was out of town and stole it back. She got chased by the family dog and somehow got mangled by a fence and needed stitches on her ankle, but it was worth it.”

That’s a much more complex tale than he was expecting. Orm’s gaze travels back to the broken instrument. “It’s just a guitar.”

Kelsey’s look of utter bewilderment takes him aback. “Jake’s right, you’re a really strange choice for her.”

“I didn’t know Jake had an opinion on the subject.”

Kelsey shrugs. “Derek yelled at me for telling my brothers that you know Arthur Curry, but I guess the cat’s out of the bag now. Arthur himself told Aunt Mindy, who told my mom, and then my mom told everyone. She’s kind of the worst sometimes. It’s a small town, so you better be prepared for lots of opinions and gossip.”

“I don’t want Fin to suffer any negative consequences. I was serious when I told you that.”

“You’re Aquaman’s brother! How could that lead to negative consequences for her? He’s a hero!”

That particular title in general stings even more than king. If Arthur is a hero, does that make him a villain? Orm is offended by the impertinence.

“What makes him a hero, exactly?”

“Well, he hangs out with the Justice League. They’re a group of superheroes from all over the world, even outer space. That means he knows Superman and Wonder Woman and Batman!”
“Who’s Batman?”

Kelsey actually squeals. “Hold on, let me make sure I’m on Fin’s wifi…” Kelsey fiddles with her phone for a moment before continuing, “…okay, let me see if I can find a video of him or something. He’s a superhero from Gotham.”

“That’s where Fin attended college.” With a perplexed expression, Orm watches a video of Batman that Kelsey pulls up on her phone. “Why is he dressed like an animal?”

“I don’t know, but he’s got all kinds of fancy gear. Don’t tell Arthur that Batman is Fin’s favorite superhero.”

The idea of an indignant Arthur is not unappealing. “Why is Batman her favorite?”

“He’s such a badass.”

“He’s a badass,” Orm repeats, trying to figure out what the word means with no luck.

“Um, a bad boy?” Kelsey tries again. “Like, he’s dashing and charismatic but also mysterious and tough. Batman saved Fin from a mugger after work. She used to tend bar and all of her tips were cash. So on a good night she’d go home with several hundred dollars and feel like she had a giant target on her back. Some guy tried to take her money when she was defenseless but Batman stopped him.”

“Fin has insinuated that she owns many weapons.”

“Fin was attending college at the time, and you can’t bear arms on campus. She told me she often headed straight to work right after class. Besides, you can’t just carry guns with you anywhere you want, especially to work. We don’t live in Texas.”

Orm’s never been in a situation where he couldn’t do basically whatever he wanted, at least until he reached the surface. But armed guards accompanied him everywhere. He’s actually enjoying his privacy and has never once felt unsafe. It never occurred to him how vulnerable any of these people are to personal threats from one another. He should have known that due to their lawlessness, they would be.

“So this Batman just happened to conveniently be nearby when Fin was in danger?”

“Yeah, he patrols the city at nighttime and fights bad guys. There aren’t even accurate reports on crime because the police department is so corrupt. And all the journalists that try to expose it are either murdered or they disappear. The bodies show up in the harbor from time to time. There are a lot of conspiracy theories about that place.”

“And yet there’s a great educational institution there?”

“Gotham has all kinds of wonderful museums, galleries, and parks and a lot of beautiful historic buildings. There’s also a monorail, which is a pretty impressive engineering feat. Fin said it was nice getting out of this small town but after living in Gotham she was dying to get back. One guy Fin dated even turned out to be involved with organized crime! There’s nobody that exciting here, except for maybe you.”

“Why would I be exciting?”

“You’re a prince.”
Orm can’t resist the draw of sarcasm. “Are all princes intrinsically interesting?”

Kelsey doesn’t rise to the bait. “Atlanna first came here long before my time and Tom Curry introduced her, with a straight face, as Queen of Altantis. My dad said she was beautiful but not much else. I never got to meet any royalty before besides Arthur, and he doesn’t really act like a prince. Atlantis has the oldest functional government in the world. I’d like a better idea of what politics there is really like.”

*If this girl read the first line of the Atlantean codex, she would know more than my brother about how to rule the country.*

“A lot of our laws have been in place since before Atlantis sank. They do not allow for many revisions.”

“How do you overturn laws once they become obsolete?” Kelsey asks. “Although we have that problem too, I guess, and our government’s a lot younger.”

“During my father’s reign, he codified the laws so they would be easier to understand,” Orm states. “Once a central record existed it only served to demonstrate how iron-clad most of them are. Our court system is merciless. Even royalty is subjected to law.”

It occurs to Orm, and not for the first time, that Orvax had begun this massive undertaking in order to justify Atlanna’s sacrifice to the Trench. He must have had suspicions even before Orm was born for the codex to have been completed before he was ten.

“You used past tense. Has your father passed away?”

“Yes,” Orm admits carefully, realizing he might reveal his culpability to this young girl if he’s not careful. The questions she’s asking aren’t those of the unassuming surface dweller he thought her to be. “Arthur is now king because he’s the first-born heir to the throne through our mother.”

“Arthur’s older than you?” Kelsey wonders aloud, muttering something Orm doesn’t understand about *city miles*.

“Yes, by a few months short of four years.”

“But if Atlantis is a monarchy, can’t Arthur just do whatever he wants because he’s king?”

“Anything but change prior laws,” Orm elaborates. “It would be chaotic otherwise. There would be no stability if the rules our people rely on could be instantly changed on the whim of a ruler. Arthur has to work around what’s already in place before he acts. Anything he wishes to change has to be backed up in court.”

“Is that the only check on royal powers?” Kelsey asks. “There’s no other governing body to stop a king from acting rashly in the heat of the moment? Nothing preventative, only punishment afterwards?”

“A king can’t have his hands tied by such restrictions.”

“Unless those restrictions come in the form of antiquated traditions,” Kelsey ventures. “It’s like peer pressure from dead relatives. No wonder your dad wanted to codify the laws. If he wanted something as big as an unprecedented war against the surface, he had to make sure a legal case couldn’t be made against it. Talk about tied hands.”

Orm levels a stern look at her. It’s a remarkably insightful thing Kelsey just said, and he considers
that maybe this girl might be more intelligent than he thought. Fin told him as much. Removing Atlanna ultimately cleared the path to declaring war, an almost innocuous first step in Orvax's plan. She would have openly opposed her husband's ambition and there could have been a massive civil war in the capital.

“War was not the only reason,” Orm insists. It's not that he even cares specifically about her opinion, but the idea of surface dwellers thinking of his father as a war-mongering despot doesn’t sit well with him. “He cared about keeping our people safe. It made it much easier for him to prosecute the citizens that caused a lot of trouble.”

At least the ones he didn’t downright assassinate. The prison I was kept at was full of his enemies and mine.

“So your legal code is written down somewhere?” Kelsey’s blue eyes are wide. “Can I read it?”

Orm recalls long hours memorizing large portions of the codex. He doesn’t remember it line-by-line, but he does have begrudging familiarity with some obscure facets of Atlantean criminal law. Though he has yet to receive a formal sentence, Orm used that knowledge to escape a house arrest in the palace walls during his trial.

“Why do you have an interest in such dry material? It’s not very stimulating.”

“I want to major in law when I go to college and I was hoping to get some insight into Atlantean politics, but Arthur would definitely not be helpful. This could help me get into Harvard. I’d love to be president someday.”

The thought is laughable, but even the effort of mocking her isn’t worth it. “The idea of elected officials is strange. Wouldn’t some of them be unfit?”

“Relying on someone’s family to continually churn out respectable leaders is equally weird.”

Orm is affronted. “Through my mother’s side, my family has been ruling Atlantis for over a thousand years. We’ve been prosperous and our technology has far surpassed yours.”

“Just because a culture has good tech doesn’t mean it’s making the best decisions,” Kelsey says sagely. “Just look at our country.”

“If a ruling family properly grooms their heirs to rule a kingdom, it’s better than just hoping someone worthy stumbles out from nowhere.”

“I’ll get you some textbooks and you can see how well monarchies went for Western Europe.”

Kelsey has a look of resolve and Orm realizes that reading history might be a good way to pass the time.

“Is there a device I can use to access the internet?” Orm asks. “I wouldn’t need you to trouble yourself with bringing me books.”

“You could use Fin’s laptop, but there’s a lot of misinformation out there online. Anyone can write stuff and put it out there. You have no way of knowing if it’s true. I mean, our textbooks aren’t always factual either, but they’re a little better than relying on stuff you find online.”

“No one cares if it’s true or not?”

“I mean, sort of, but we use information to confirm our beliefs as true, first and foremost. That can’t
just be a thing that we do here, on the surface.”

Orm relents. “You may bring me books if you’d like.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Kelsey says lightly. She has a great deal more reverence in her voice than Fin. “Fin’s got quite a library, but it’s mostly literature. My dad has some stuff you might like better.”

It might be a nice diversion after the fantasy novel he’s currently reading. It’s admittedly an indulgence, and after he completes the trilogy, Orm figures he’ll gravitate back towards more familiar subjects.

“Hey Kelsey, I’m ready for you.”

Fin is standing at the top of the stairs that Orm figures leads down to the basement. Her voice is scratchy but it’s her expression that strikes him first. Her eyes are red and her face is blotchy. He’s never seen anyone cry except himself, and it’s been some time, but he imagines it must be worse on the surface because there are no ocean currents to rinse away tears or muffle sobs. There can be no other excuse for her haggard appearance.

“Uh, okay, let me grab my stuff,” Kelsey mutters, scrambling to comply. She ducks down the stairs past Fin before shooting an unreadable look at Orm. Without a word or glance in his direction, Fin turns and follows her student.

It’s different, being on the receiving end of Fin’s apathy. He’s accustomed to her friendliness and even her rage, but her utter lack of reaction upon seeing him is strange. It strikes him as intentional, but he has no idea why. Perhaps it’s because of the instrument in the kitchen. But surely the loss of her car was more devastating, and she doesn’t seem particularly bothered by that.

There’s a small wooded board near the basement staircase that appears to be some kind of schedule. Orm surmises this after recognizing a handful of names on the chart and corroborating the days of the week with when he knows they have lessons. There are many names that are crossed out or erased. Is it possible to sustain herself on less than twenty students? He’s not sure how much she’s getting paid and it’s entirely possible that each child pays a different rate.

Another knock on the front door jars him from his thoughts and he answers it straightaway since Fin is occupied. A man in a very strange uniform hands him three cardboard boxes. He’s instructed to sign his name on a screen with a tiny plastic pen before the stranger departs, leaving Orm with several mysterious parcels. He knows he shouldn’t open them (they are addressed to Fin) but he does wonder what they might contain.

Lester, one of Fin’s more skittish pets, eyes the boxes from across the room. As soon as Orm places them on the ground, he zooms over and begins attacking one of them. It tips over and Lester makes a strange hissing noise, his fur growing stiff before he runs back the hallway. Orm doesn’t understand.

Maybe there’s something harmful in the boxes? These animals seem to possess a superior sense of smell. Perhaps he detects a threat.

It’s easy work to open the first box. He can simply pull the tape off and pry open the flaps. Many plastic-wrapped garments slide out onto his feet. They contain cloth tags sewn into the necklines—he assumes that large is not an applicable adjective for his host and that due to the size and weight and color, he deduces that they are for him.

The second parcel contains three smaller boxes. There’s a pair of boots in the first one similar to the ones the twins wore, tan and very heavy. The other pair of boots is black and seems similar to the
ones Arthur wore casually the day before. The last box contains some strange looking black shoes that have hard soles and mesh tops. The footwear he’s seen closest resembling these were worn by Derek. He can tell all three pairs are bigger than the too-small shoes he’s been wearing for the past few days and almost sighs audibly in relief.

The last box is smaller and lighter. What Orm guesses is a fragile object is heavily wrapped in some kind of special plastic with air-filled pockets. He sets it aside and figures Fin will want to open it. There’s another small leather box inside that contains some kind of contraption he’s seen intermittently on her wrist and those of her acquaintances. It has some kind of mechanism inside; he can hear it tick. It’s probably for telling time, but it also seems like some kind of fashion statement. He assumes it’s for him, but perhaps the presumption is incorrect. Fin has some male friends and acquaintances—it might even be for Tom or Arthur.

There’s a shuffling noise around his feet and to his consternation Orm realizes that Fin’s cats have taken up residence inside the boxes. Killer is situated in the largest one, Olive in the second to largest, and Lester is determined to fit in the smallest box that doesn’t seem up to holding his mass. Morris is rolling around on top of the plastic-wrapped garments that he still hasn’t picked up while Norah eyes her fellow cats with envy, although she’s likely still too afraid of Orm to approach.

*These creatures are so strange. There appears to be nothing harmful inside the boxes. They just wanted to play in them.*

Trying to clean up the mess he’s made, Orm drags all three cat boxes by the door, since the animals refuse to vacate them. There are various packing materials that he gathers up—mostly plastic—that he puts in a bin that he’s seen Fin use for similar items. The ambiguous items in the last box are laid gently on the coffee table in the living room—he doesn’t know where else to put them so that place is as good as any. He gingerly moves Morris aside and gathers up the clothes and shoes and takes them to her bedroom to try them on.

Orm finds more undergarments similar to the ones he’s wearing along with some plain black socks and some plain white socks. There are short-sleeved shirts in white and black and gray, along with long-sleeved shirts that have buttons near the neckline and a soft ribbed material. A pair of soft cotton pants, similar to the ones he’s been wearing around Fin’s house, seems long enough for him to feel like his ankles will stay covered if he bends his knees. The jeans mold a little more snugly through the thighs than Sam’s pants, but he’s accustomed to tight clothing. The shoes are the best part, because they are comfortable and they fit.

Changing into his new clothing has oddly improved his mood. Even garbed in peasant attire he cuts an intimidating figure. The colors are plain, almost boring compared to what he is accustomed to, but they befit his temporary station as a guest here. The Bay citizens are generally undeserving of Orm in his royal splendor and he doesn’t need more attention than he anticipates he’ll receive now that Arthur has revealed their connection.

Through the soles of his new shoes, Orm can detect movement downstairs. He can’t hear anything, per se, but whatever they’re doing is causing vibrations that run all the way up his legs. The noises are muffled and intermittent; whatever they’re doing, it seems to start and stop quite a bit. It’s overall a little too distracting for Orm to read (and too hot outdoors for him to feel comfortable), so he peruses her music room again.

*Perhaps she’s upset over the state of the instrument in the kitchen.*

Orm considers moving it somewhere more discreet so she won’t see it, but it’s obvious that she’s upset over something and that’s the only thing he can surmise. He’s not sure that moving it’s the right thing to do, and considers that it might be, but maybe he shouldn’t be the one doing it.
The sound of voices from the basement stairs catches Orm’s attention. He supposes an hour has gone by much quicker than he thought. Unstructured time moves so strangely; he finds himself losing track of the hours and hates the lack of discipline that’s slowly spreading throughout his life. Maybe one of the troops stationed nearby would be willing to spar with him. Would that break any rules?

“I’ll come by tomorrow morning and help you get ready. I can’t wait! It’s gonna be so much fun!”

“Yes, thanks again for stepping in for Wendy. I agreed to all these gigs before she and Lee moved west and I don’t know what I’d do without you guys.”

“I’m just so glad I get to play with you and Conner! You guys are so good. William and I are pumped!”

Fin smiles. “You’re such a sweetheart. I’ll see you tomorrow. Drive safe!”

“I will!”

(Orm isn’t convinced that someone who slips in and out of small spaces will make a safe driver, but someone, he assumes, approved of her driving enough to issue her a license.)

Once Kelsey leaves, Orm is able to appraise Fin’s appearance at his leisure. She seems subdued but her eyes aren’t so perilously red-rimmed. She walks over to the kitchen and grabs up her instrument, snapping the case shut and placing it in her music room. She pauses when she realizes he’s watching her from the doorway of her bedroom.

“Did you need something?”

“How many students do you have?”

Fin’s mouth twists up into a thoughtful expression. “Seventeen? Sixteen? Something like that.”

“That’s enough students to support you?”

A frown creasing her brow, Fin turns to him and gives him an odd look. “Is that really any of your business?”

Once again Orm’s first instinct is to be contrary. No one has ever pushed back like that at him before and he’s struck a little speechless. He’s not really sure how to backtrack after that, but Fin must take pity on him.

“I used to have more students, but after the wave, almost half of them could no longer afford lessons or no longer had means of transportation. Families with two cars went down to one and the breadwinner needs to drive to work and back home. It doesn’t leave a lot of flexibility for things deemed nonessential.”

Fin says the last part lightly, but he can tell she’s agitated.

“But it’s how you are making a living,” Orm states.

“I can’t make people pay me with money they don’t have,” Fin reasons. “Gabby’s family doesn’t even have money to give me. They pay me in food. Mindy was adamant that the lessons continue for Gabby’s sake—Lord knows the girl needs as much normalcy as she can get—but with Mindy practically out of work they can’t really afford it. There’s no help from insurance companies and the government because they’ve all been bombarded with requests for aid. Mindy’s sister is married to the richest man in town and it still took months to get the supplies necessary to fix up the house.”
“This is my fault, isn’t it?” Orm asks tonelessly.

“I mean, yes, but rubbing it in your face just now wasn’t my intention,” Fin says. “It is what it is and it’ll keep coming up, I promise. But it’s just a trying day, that’s all.”

“Are you referring to the instrument you just put away?” Orm inquires.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to talk about it right now,” Fin tells him. She walks away, leaving him standing in the hallway. It occurs to him that there are many things about her he has no right to know. She doesn’t owe him anything yet he owes her a great deal, not that she would hold such things against him.

This particular woman is as stubborn and prideful as any Atlantean. She’s vicious when he provokes her but kind and generous otherwise. The circumstances of his stay seem to be causing large amounts of stress in her but she hasn’t mentioned trying to end their arrangement.

“I opened up the packages that came in the mail,” Orm remembers suddenly. “One of your cats was scratching at it incessantly. I thought it might contain something harmful but it turns out he just wanted to sit inside it.”

Admitting this makes Fin smile. She walks over to the front door where her three most fortunate cats are sitting inside boxes. She picks up the box Lester is in and holds it out in front of him. Orm gives the cat a gentle pat, inwardly marveling at how soft he is. The texture of his fur is different than the others, which he wouldn’t expect since they all look the same.

“Cats are obsessed with boxes but I don’t know why,” Fin confesses. She gives Orm a once-over when she realizes that he’s completely changed his wardrobe from head to toe. “Do you like what I ordered? It looks nice.”

Orm nods. “Everything is adequate.”

“It’s not like you have favorite colors or anything, right?”

Recalling their discussion earlier, Orm concedes she’s correct. “I suppose not.”

“Oh, what did you do with the rest of the stuff? I ordered a mug and a watch.”

Orm points to the coffee table. Fin practically skips over and unwraps a black ceramic drinking vessel. There’s a yellow symbol on the side of it that makes Orm balk.

“Batman?”

“Yeah,” Fin answers, before demanding, “wait, how did you know that?”

“Kelsey informed me that you have a fondness for him.”

“I’m not sure I’d use that word, but I guess I’m a little biased.” Fin muses. “It’s heroic what he does, running around all night saving lives. He’s literally a superhero. Arthur’s actually met him! Did you know he saved me from getting robbed one night?”

“For a civilian, you have a lot of close calls,” Orm surmises uncomfortably.

“I guess I do, but not more than most people. A lot of surface dwellers die from disease or car accidents. That’s how my parents died. They were coming back from a party and they lost control of their car in the rain.”
Something in Fin’s distant expression hardens, and Orm knows there’s more to the story than that. To his surprise, she does eventually continue after a pause.

“Some people say they were drunk, but my parents wouldn’t touch alcohol for at least two hours before they drove and never had more than a couple of drinks when they were out. It’s awful, hearing from all kinds of people that they somehow deserved it. Some of these people were supposed to be their friends. They could have at least waited until after the funeral to tell me how irresponsible it was to drink and drive. Later on, the host of the party they were at told me later that they didn’t even drink that night. He tried to tell everyone that, but the drunk driving narrative was apparently more interesting.”

“People said terrible things about my mother after she was sacrificed. Some of my peers even dared to say it to my face, but my fists silenced them. Even as a child, I would abide their disrespect. I was not permitted to mourn her or talk about her. It was hard at first, until I realized I’d spent more of my life without her than with her. I questioned why I even bothered to let her influence me anymore, after awhile.”

Fin gives him a reassuring look. “Even in her very limited time with you, she tried her best. Arthur was only three when she left him, so he doesn’t even remember her. I’ve probably spent more time with her than he has, at this point.”

“And yet he resents me for avoiding her when he’s no better.”

“Orm, Arthur doesn’t know how to handle having his family together. Neither of you really have it figured out because none of you have been happy together yet. It’s terrifying and uncomfortable, but you’ve also been given a great opportunity that most people would kill for. You thought your brother and mom were lost to you and now they’re not.”

“Arthur saved our mother. If I’d only known she was still alive, I would have gone after her myself.”

“You had no way of knowing she made it, and you wouldn’t have been able to bring her back anyway. Just because you weren’t the one to save her doesn’t mean you somehow love her any less than Arthur or that you’re unworthy somehow. People make mistakes and assumptions and sometimes they just don’t know or do enough. Closure is a myth, by the way.”

The last sentence is spoken so quietly that if he didn’t have superior hearing, he would have missed it. Orm has been spending the past few days parsing all the differences between him and the people on the surface, but it’s admittedly a little foolish to assume that somehow the gravity of his emotions somehow surpasses Fin’s or anyone else’s up here.

“What makes you say that?” Orm only has passing familiarity with the concept. It’s not something emphasized in Atlantean culture.

“Do you think there’s anything that you could have said to your father or that he could have said to you that would somehow resolve all the things he put you through? What about Atlanna?”

Orm is silent, because that’s not something he wants to tell her, but he gets what she’s trying to say. As a boy, he would constantly dream about being ripped from his mother’s arms. Sometimes, only in his dreams, she would be able to comfort him one last time. In the whole scheme of things, it might not have made a difference.

Or maybe it would have been enough to tip the scales back towards compassion and empathy.

“Your mom can help you move on from everything you went through growing up. She went
through a lot of it too. Of course, you’ll do this only when you’re ready, but you’ve got people to support you in the meantime. Even Arthur wants to help you. I’m sure there are a few things he can do to make things easier for you.”

“He did promise to check in with me later this week when I woke up. I suppose he tried yesterday.”

“I can confirm that he did indeed,” Fin says, but she doesn’t seem to be angry with him. “You’re too busy avoiding Arthur to have a real discussion, but I can talk to him tonight if you want.”

Orm didn’t realize how much of a relief that was until she said it out loud.

“I want someone to train with. Perhaps one of the soldiers patrolling near the shore would do.”

“Do you really miss beating the shit out of someone every day?” Fin asks him curiously. She has her phone out and seems to be typing herself a little note.

“Yes.”

“Noted.”

“Vulko has been translating our codex into English for Arthur’s inevitable return. Stumbling onto his pet project is how I became aware of his treachery in the first place. Your student has requested a copy of our laws. I’m sure after nearly two decades it should be translated by now.”

“Kelsey wants to learn about Atlantean law?”

“She’s still annoying, but she asks intelligent questions. She is different from her brothers.”

“Her older brothers, Nate and Jake, have the same dad as Kelsey but his new wife is their stepmother.”

“Is that why there’s such a large gap between their ages?”

“Yeah, Stephen left his wife of twenty years to marry Brenda. She’s a lot younger than he is. It was a huge scandal. None of that’s Kelsey’s fault, but she’s a bit of an overachiever to compensate.”

“She’s no smarter than any Atlantean child her age. In fact, she’d probably have considerable gaps in her education by comparison.”

“Not everything about a person can be compared apples to apples,” Fin chastises. Seeing his puzzled expression, she smiles faintly. “It means that people are a little too complicated to pit against each other and come up with an objective winner in most cases. Everyone has different strengths and weaknesses. You can’t say that Kelsey isn’t as intelligent as a girl her age raised in Atlantis. Their circumstances are totally different. I’m sure I don’t really stack up to the typical Atlantean woman my age.”

“The only woman your age I ever spent time with was Mera.”

Fin appears thoughtful and then laughs. “I definitely can’t hold a candle to a beautiful magical genius warrior princess. She’s stronger, smarter, braver, and more beautiful than I am. I’m sure those are the only qualities that matter to an Atlantean. Well, that and loyalty, but she did what she did in service to her people, so I guess she ticks every box. She sounds perfect.”

The neat little smile Fin flashes at him indicates that she’s just fine with being far removed from his cultural ideal. “You take satisfaction in being deemed inferior in Atlantis?”
“Here on the surface, *where I’m from and where we are right now,* we celebrate people for all kinds of reasons. Some of our best and brightest minds don’t inhabit the strongest bodies. There’s so many different ways to contribute to society. We rely on other people to help show us the way.”

“What’s wrong with one way of thinking?”

“There’s so many different ways to see the world, Orm.”

Fin rushes over to the loveseat and rummages, pulling the laptop Kelsey was referring to. It perches on her thighs as she types rapidly. She quickly pulls up a picture of some ghastly, nearly indistinguishable picture drawn on a rocky surface.

“This is what people drew in caves thousands of years ago, at least what has survived. A society that struggled for its daily survival still took the time to do this because it was important to them. It’s just another version of history, but it’s more subjective than just recording facts. People make up stories and artwork and music in response to their political climate and emotional state. It's a testament to their struggles, one that can outlive them and inform generations. Artists, musicians, and filmmakers craft amazing works that can change lives and inspire others.”

“I suppose if I ask you to provide examples, you will just deny me again,” Orm states peevishly.

“You’re not a spoiled person, Orm, but you’re very entitled. When you make demands like that, I’ll never cave to them. You keep on insisting that I impress you but my job isn’t to cater to your every whim. Your mind is closed and there’s no point.”

“How am I supposed to learn the value of anything up here when you refuse to share things with me?”

“You’re already staying in my house and eating my food, Orm, so I don’t think *sharing* is the issue,” Fin reminds him flatly. “The change you think you’ll see in yourself while you’re here isn’t just about rebuilding and learning and experiencing new things, it’s about letting old things fall away and unlearning bad habits and wrong teachings. *You* get to decide if, deep down, you’re still the little boy that Atlanna helped raise or if you’re the man your father helped turn you into. The real you is in there somewhere, maybe a mix of both.”

For his entire adult life, up until this moment, both sides of him that his respective parents tried to nurture and encourage have been trying to assert dominance. Orm really doesn’t think he could pick one over the other, but trying to reconcile those two very different schools of thoughts gives him no comfort. His entire life has been built on brutal cultural conditioning, his own misunderstandings, and poor decisions that drew on the first two. He doesn’t think they’re compatible but doesn’t want to commit to either extreme point of view.

“You’re not just going to *find* yourself like you find a lost sock or your favorite pen if I play the right song for you or let you watch the right movie. You need to do things on your own that you like doing, like finding a hobby or getting a job.”

Orm decides to tell her something he’s been thinking about for the past two days. “Next week while you’re teaching, I should return to the Benson house. It will be a more productive use of my time.”

Fin practically beams at him. “Mindy would love the help. After the wave hit, they closed school early for the year. Everyone in the community was cleaning up the beaches and trying to get their lives sorted. Things won’t ever go back to normal for some of these people.”

“Gabby mentioned that Mindy’s bakery is gone.”
“She made desserts, like the pie and cookies you had at her house, for a living. She’s been trying to work from home to make some money but ingredients are expensive. She got a lot of money by selling off her extra truck. She didn’t get nearly what it was worth, but it was brand new and it didn’t have much damage. She’s using that money to get back on her feet.”

“Arthur said you gave her money. Don’t you need it more?”

“I don’t have a child to support, and I can grow a lot of my own food. If I need to, I can skip meat and cheese for awhile. Conner says I’m getting a little soft in the midsection anyway. He’s mostly kidding but he’s not wrong. I could probably lose a few pounds.”

“By starving yourself because you don’t have money?” Orm demands, recalling how pale she was only two days before. “That’s foolish of you. When winter comes you won’t be able to cope with the colder temperatures. You’re already weak as it is.”

“I’m not a sea lion, Orm. I can just bundle up and wear a sweater and turn on my fireplace. I know our bodies don’t protect us from the elements like Atlanteans’ bodies do, but I promise you my survival this winter does not depend on me achieving some kind of peak winter weight. Are you sure you don’t need to read up on our biology?”

Orm feels a little uncharacteristic embarrassment. She’s joking, of course. He doesn’t need to know anything at all about their bodies except that he can kill them without batting an eyelash. But Fin’s frailty is of concern. He circles the loveseat at her behest and takes a seat next to her. He accepts the laptop she offers, gently placing it on the tops of his thighs. He glances down at the machine skeptically.

“The setup of your keyboard is asinine.”

“Believe it or not, our primitive technology has come a long way. This keyboard layout was created over one hundred and fifty years ago. The inventor designed it that way because typewriters jammed a lot and he found this arrangement helped alleviate that to some degree. But it is pretty awkward.”

Fin gives him a quick tutorial, but like her thermostat, the interface is painfully easy to understand. It takes Orm only a few minutes to orient himself before he starts typing Atlantis into the search bar. He recognizes the website from seeing Fin’s phone. The first result seems to be for some kind of vacation resort, but the second seems promising.

“The hubris of nations? That’s rich coming from Plato. Conflict followed him his whole life.”

“You’re familiar with him?”

“Atlantis has been beneath the ocean for over five thousand years, but in that time we stationed spies and operatives all over the world to monitor surface dwellers. Highborn families volunteer their children for the honor of serving Atlantis; it’s very dangerous work. It took almost three thousand years of submersion before we were mentioned. Careful research led us to him.”

Orm quickly scans the article, his frown increasing the more he reads. “Kelsey is correct. This article is almost entirely false.”

“Well I doubt anyone that’s actually been here would be editing a Wikipedia article, Orm. I get the sense that you guys like your privacy.”

“Then who would presume to write something so erroneous?”

“Um, anyone can edit an article. It’s a website maintained by random, unpaid users. For the most part
people try to be factual but sometimes vandalism occurs. Usually dumb stuff, like someone saying so-and-so has a tiny penis or something. Some pages don’t even let people contribute to them anymore, like the moon landing page.”

“They really leave childish comments about other peoples’ anatomy?”

“All the time,” Fin reveals. “People are really childish on the internet due to the anonymity. They feel like there are no consequences because a computer screen separates them from interacting face to face.”

“That’s idiotic.”

“Well, yeah, but the internet is pretty dumb sometimes. It’s easy to get lost and waste hours on it. But since you’re new, you can look up anything you want. Just keep in mind I can check your browser history if I want to and see all the things you read about.”

Fin winks at him, and Orm shifts uncomfortably in his seat when he gets her implication. “I’m not you or Conner. I’m not going to watch illicit content. No one should be doing that.”

With a shrug, Fin stands and heads for the kitchen. “Millions of people can’t be wrong. If you ever want to see what all the fuss is about, I can show you some good scenes if you want. You can even think of it as educational if you want, like cultural enlightenment.”

Orm personally can’t see the appeal of appearing in a vulnerable state in front of someone else, especially a stranger. Any information such material would provide would currently be of no use, since he is no longer betrothed and given his status he is unlikely to get married. He certainly has no interest in using the internet to view some of the material that Conner informed him was available. Orm has never wondered about another person’s preferences before. By the time he was old enough to entertain such thoughts, he was already put off by Mera’s emotional distance that he never thought of her that way.

Surface dwellers are strangely open about some things; Orm could probably ask Fin questions on the subject and get answers, not that he would ever consider doing so. She showed only the slightest hesitation in sharing broad details from her escapades. Even if Orm would have relevant experiences to add, he would have never discussed his activities with others. He would imagine that his partner would want such relationship details to remain private.

(One of his commanders, a nephew of Vulko, was never shy about mentioning his many conquests, male and female. His stories were so outlandish that Orm had him transferred out of the palace rotation and sent him ashore to gather intelligence on surface dwellers.)

The idea of Fin watching such material is provocative. Orm wonders what she might find appealing in such things before wondering why he wonders that. That aspect of her life shouldn’t affect him in any way; Mindy indicated that Fin didn’t have any recent suitors so he doesn’t have to worry about men intruding upon the residence. So in lieu of male attention, Orm reasons that Fin’s attending to her own needs; the thought fills him with relief and endless questions.

*I don’t think Fin would appreciate this line of thought.*

Using his formidable mental discipline, Orm turns his attention back to the laptop. He stares at the search bar for a moment before the simplest suggestion comes to him. He's sure that due to surface dweller's casual preference for the truth, he'll surely find entertainment from his next query. As he types it in, he notices a small bar that supplies suggestions to him. He clicks on the first one, the search engine having successfully intuited what he wants to look for.
Orm is very curious about what the internet has to say about the *Aquaman*.
So I'm Proposing a Swift Orderly Change

Not wanting to disturb Orm’s quest to conquer the internet, Fin slips headphones into her phone jack (Conner teases her about her ancient iPhone, but it’s small enough to fit in one of her B cups) and tucks her phone back into the front of her dress. She picks some Daft Punk and rocks out, taking out ingredients for lasagna. She’s quickly depleting her stores of sauces and ingredients; she’ll have to spend a great deal of Sunday food shopping and prepping. She doesn’t normally cook so extravagantly for all her meals, but she’s enjoying introducing Orm to new things.

Lasagna is one of her favorites. Fin uses the last of her homemade béchamel sauce and meat sauce, unfortunately along with the last of her mozzarella cheese. Her grocery list is going to be ridiculous and she’ll have to travel to the Portland Farmer’s Market for some of her ingredients. She wonders if she can borrow Tom’s truck or Conner’s van. She also hopes her stores hold out that long. Next Wednesday is pretty far off.

The buzzing of her phone catches her attention. Fin pulls it out and reads a text message from Derek apologizing for forgetting to let her know he can’t come today due to a trip he forgot about. Fin could have really used the money, but he did mention in off-handedly a few weeks back, so it doesn’t totally take her by surprise. She tucks her phone back in the front of her dress and sprinkles on the last layer of cheese. Once her lasagna is prepped she covers it and pops it in the fridge for dinnertime.

Another glance over into the living room reassures her that he’s occupied and that he looks pretty damn good in dark joggers and blue cotton. Fin congratulates herself on picking out suitable clothes for Orm. It’s better than watching him run around in those revealing, light-colored sweatpants and Fin is definitely not a saint. Having impure thoughts about her homicidal house guest is not only inappropriate, but it is pretty unwise. Orm hates surface dwellers so much he declared war on them, comes from a patriarchal society that probably doesn’t know how to give straight women orgasms, and will only be staying for a finite amount of time. Fin’s pretty sure those three things alone are solid reasons to avoid thinking about him like that, but watching the muscles in his thighs flex while he shifts on the couch kind of makes her want to forget logic for a hot minute.

*At least the new joggers I got are black. Talk about meat vision. Grey sweatpants on men are like yoga pants for women.*

Fin decides that she can make salads for lunch. It’s unreasonably hot despite it only being June, and she wants something refreshing. She’s got some walnuts, dried cranberries and goat cheese and whips up some vinaigrette with oil and apple cider vinegar. She grills some chicken and heats up some leftover bacon in a sauté pan. She doesn’t hear Orm approach over the sizzling meat and almost screams when she realizes he’s right next to her holding her laptop at eye level with her. She whips out her phone and pauses the music while looking at his very concerned face.

“Make it stop.”

A quick glance at the screen makes Fin crack up. She doesn’t use an ad blocker because it interferes with some of her favorite websites, and poor Orm is the victim of some cam girl popup. The scantily-clad blonde luckily has all of her important bits covered, but the way she talks is filthy and the volume controls weren’t something she told him how to change.

"What's the matter, Orm? Don't you want this nice lady in your area to come over for a hot date?"

It’s funny, but Orm doesn’t see the humor in the situation.
“Is everything about sex with surface dwellers?” Orm demands tiredly as Fin closes out of the advertisement. She takes a little pity on him and gets serious.

“It’s not just because people are all desperate for sex, a lot of them are just lonely. It’s common to crave intimacy, and people live vicariously through viewing that kind of content. It’s easier than meeting someone new and putting yourself out there to get hurt.”

Orm makes a dismissive noise that Fin gracefully ignores. She manages to flip the chicken breast in the pan before it burns, but the bacon is a little crispy.

“Connecting with people is hard, Orm. A lot of people out there are unhappy and porn is just one way that they cope.”

“Why is there such an emphasis on personal happiness? It’s selfish and short-sighted.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It made my mother abandon her duty to my father.”

Fin purses her lips. “I don’t know many details about what went on between them, but your father also had a duty to your mother as well. I don’t think sacrificing her to the Trench was the act of a loving husband.”

“He only did it because mother betrayed him first. She fled on their wedding night.”

“And I’m sure your father wanted her back because she validated his right to the throne, not because he loved her.”

This is a line of thought that’s apparently occurred to Orm before, because he grows silent and cagey. “She still should not have left. It was a foolish risk that almost got her killed. I can’t ever recall hearing about an Atlantean ruler that’s found love in their arranged marriage. That’s not why people get married there.”

“But it’s primarily why people get married up here,” Fin reminds him. “We tend to create fantasies in our minds of what our lives will be like with another person, but they often can’t fulfill those expectations. Other people don’t exist to complete us, but they can show us our full potential. The idea of a partnership is very appealing. Who doesn’t like support?”

“That’s foolish.”

“Didn’t you derive some kind of pleasure from being King of Atlantis? Did you enjoy being a beloved leader? Did you enjoy being admired for your strength and your cunning? People naturally seek validation from others. We just have to be careful and make sure that we can also validate ourselves.”

“What do you mean?”

“I used to really go for emotionally unavailable men, guys that were self-centered narcissists. They were always too wrapped up in their own drama to pay much attention to me, so when they graciously made time for me, I was beyond flattered and felt special. I relied on them for self-confidence before realizing that’s something that should come from within. I think a part of it is because I grew up feeling so ostracized and isolated. I spent too many years chasing that feeling of being wanted and valued instead of focusing on the things about myself that I like. I could have used that time becoming a better person for me instead of someone else.”
“Romantic love is such a childish concept.”

“It’s in all our movies and books and songs.”

“In many of the older and revered works, it plays a prominent role. People romanticize these characters but they’re terrible role models.”

Fin smiles. “I’m sure our offerings are a lot different than yours, but will you watch one with me later, a romance? I promise I won’t pick a really bad one.”

Orm sits down at the table with the laptop, not really giving her a prompt answer by Fin suspects it’s not out of rudeness. He types a few more things before glancing up at her. “I’m going to look up anything you suggest and make sure it’s appropriate.”

“Does that mean no boobs?”

By leveling a severe blink at her, Fin has her answer. “I guess that’s a no to Titanic, then. That’s too bad, because you’re missing out. I made Arthur see it with me twice. It’s about an ocean liner that hit an iceberg over a hundred years ago.”

“Aren’t you telling me the whole plot?”

“It’s common knowledge up here what happened to it. But doomed love is a very popular subject matter. Come to think of it, most of the movies I find romantic are probably bittersweet at best. But I’ve never had love work out for me yet, so I guess that’s why. Derek is getting ready to leave on vacation so I don’t think he’s coming today. We might have time for a movie.”

“When is my brother coming?”

“He sort of implied we’d go out later tonight, but I honestly don’t have any idea when he’ll turn up. He kind of does what he wants, when he wants to do it.”

“I’m sure Vulko’s tracking his every move,” Orm surmises.

“Arthur’s a little flighty, but I hope he’s working on that.”

“He’s spending a lot of time on land.”

“That’s his prerogative right now,” Fin reminds him, although she privately agrees. “Surely the people in Atlantis that need to get in touch with him can, given your advanced technology.”

“Yes, but face-to-face contact is necessary to run a country.”

“What was your favorite part about being king?” Fin asks, slicing the chicken strips thin and laying them gently on top of the salad. “Besides the kill all humans part, I mean.”

“I liked the challenge of managing my country,” Orm replies. “Even in the throes of my campaign against you, I still made time to ensure that all of our budgets were sound, our science teams were making advancements, and our education system thrived. You think I don’t appreciate art or music, and while I may not as much as you, our culture is very rich and I recognize that such a distinction doesn’t come from solely from military might. Our archeologists and historians preserve the legacy of a culture that’s lasted longer than anything on your surface.”

“What about programs for young artists and musicians?”

“We already have an illustrious catalogue from classic composers and sculptors. They perform those
scores and imitate those works. Why must everything be new and different? Too much creativity would be a distraction, and the end results would be disastrous. There’s no need to stray beyond the confines of convention.”

“Doesn’t that get boring?”

“I’m sure the common people find some entertainment with the newer types of art and music available, but popular trends never lasts. It’s a waste of time to invest any attention into it.”

“Orm, a lot of people make great works that never get recognized, ever, or get recognized after their creator has passed away. Some of our most successful writers and musicians don’t gain fame in their lifetime. It’s sad. But then a whole new generation is influenced by them. Maybe your culture is full of hidden gems like that. What a nice thought.”

Fin smiles at him, and the gesture is not returned, which is unsurprising. Orm doesn’t really laugh or smile much (or ever). “If it’s not good enough to gain attention when it’s made, it sounds like a failure to me.”

“I guess by Atlantean standards it might be,” Fin admits. She slices up apples and places them on top of the salads before drizzling some apple cider vinaigrette over top. “This is a salad. I cut up some lettuce and put chicken, bacon, goat cheese, dried cranberries, and apples on it and made a sweet and tangy dressing. I thought it would be nice to eat on a hot day like this.”

“Apples to apples,” Orm repeats her phrase from earlier. “This is where the phrase came from?”

“Sort of? We have so many weird things we say that we don’t even know the origins of all of them. And so many get mangled and misheard that many people don’t even say them correctly anymore. They’re called malaphors.”

Fin hands an apple slice to Orm, who momentarily flinches at the wet residue it leaves on his fingers. He pops it in his mouth, not expecting the tartness or the crunch. He doesn’t spit it out, and proceeds to take a careful bite of lettuce dipped in salad dressing, avoiding the richer ingredients. He seems to let it sit in his mouth a moment, letting the acidic flavor of the apple cider vinegar settle. He chews thoughtfully; crunch lettuce might have been easy to overlook in tacos, but it’s the base of their lunch today. Finding the texture and taste acceptable, he neatly stacks some of every ingredient into his next bite.

“Is it okay?”

“There are a lot of flavors fighting for dominance,” Orm answers when he’s finished chewing. “I’m not sure how I feel about it. Some of the ingredients are hot, some are cold, some are soft, and some are sweet.”

“Variety in a dish keeps it interesting. Different textures make a huge difference and so do opposing flavor profiles. One of my favorite things to eat in the world, grilled cheese, is completely unappealing to me unless I have tomato soup with it. The acidity from the soup cuts through all that rich, fatty cheese and butter.”

“You haven’t made that for me?” Orm sounds almost indignant.

“No, I don’t have the right kind of cheese. I usually plan out all my meals and I’m running out of food. I usually go to the farmer’s market on Wednesday mornings in Portland. Would you like to come with me?”

“I trust you to pick out adequate food for us.”
Fin sighs. “I mean, it will be fun. You can see all kinds of food you never saw before.”

“Will it be crowded?”

“I mean, after the wave hit, a lot of crops definitely suffered, so there aren’t as many vendors as before, but the community is very supportive, so it’s a tossup. It’s not like you’ll run into anyone you know from Atlantis. There’s no reason not to go, basically, is what I’m trying to say. It will be a change of scenery and I recommend the experience.”

“I will consider it.”

“Excellent.” It’s the most that Fin can hope for with Orm. She pours a second glass of water for him and watches as he still types into her laptop. “You know, it’s considered rude to sit at the table and use the internet instead of interacting with other people.”

Orm is unconcerned with his perceived slight. “There is an overwhelming amount of information available. I would have never had time like this to waste back when I was king so I’ll take advantage of it.”

Fin has to concede this point. “I’m sure when you return you will eventually have a lot of responsibilities, but leisure time is a wonderful thing.”

“This is only my fourth morning awake, but it seems so much longer than that. Every day feels brand new.”

Fin chuckles. “Well, you’re living in the Bay, so you’ll be bored soon enough, but I’m glad you don’t hate it here.”

“If I would have tried to come here a few months ago, I would have.”

“Did you just need harsh reality to beat the fight out of you first?” Fin asks.

“In a sense, yes,” Orm admits. “Prison is admittedly unpleasant, but mostly due to the monotony. Being up here is a little too stimulating sometimes. But the way you use food is clever.”

“Great food is important to feeling like your best self. And the food we grow up with means a lot to us. My dad and mom were both part Korean, and they loved making Korean barbeque chicken wings when I was growing up. I’m not really good at making wings, but I do make the sauce from time to time.”

“You haven’t made it for me yet?”

“If you stayed here for a year I could serve you a different meal for breakfast, lunch, and dinner as long as I had access to recipes and ingredients. There are so many different ingredients and combinations that I would never run out of new ideas. There’s no way I can get to everything. But I was considering making them next month for an event I was invited to.”

“Can I try them then?”

“Sure, if you come along with me to Tom Curry’s house on July 4th. Americans celebrate their independence from Britain that day. There’s always a huge celebration in town that I go to because the food is amazing, but Tom will having something a little more quiet at his home later that night. It’s basically just an excuse to go eat and drink, but that’s every holiday. Tom will probably serve ribs and grill some steak.”
“I’m sure my presence would not be welcome.”

“The day you woke up Tom told me to invite you,” Fin corrects, trying not to beam with contrariness. He doesn’t know Tom at all.

“He’s soft, like Arthur.”

“That’s probably why your mom loves him so much.”

“She’s an Atlantean queen; she deserves better than a lighthouse keeper.”

“Atlanna was born into a role she never asked for and married off to someone that only valued her for her birthright. What has Atlantis ever done for her when she suffered through an awful marriage for it?”

“I’m only here because of that awful marriage,” Orm snaps, and Fin winces because she kind of walked right into that.

“Jesus, that’s not what I meant. I’m sorry, Orm.”

Fin bravely meets Orm’s stormy gaze, and she can tell he’s really struggling with what was just said. She honestly didn’t mean to strike a nerve or for it to sound the way it did. She certainly doesn’t think that Atlanna resents him in any way—she only speaks of him with longing in her voice.

“Everyone keeps trying to tell me how awful my father was, but at least he put Atlanteans before surface dwellers. That’s more than my brother is doing now. He’s just a half-breed bastard who favors his weaker side and thinks you surface dwellers should all get a pass for what you’ve done.”

Arthur doesn’t exactly have a glowing opinion of mankind, and Orm needs to be reminded of that. “I think you really resent the surface for taking Atlanna away, but now that she’s back, you don’t know what to do with all that misplaced hatred. Your mother certainly doesn’t hold us responsible for what happened to her—she blames your father, as she should.”

“She’s still responsible for breaking the law.”

“It’s a pretty strange law to have on the books for a race that doesn’t even come ashore,” Fin points out. “You declared war on us and you’d never been on dry land before. Yet somehow there’s a law sentencing royalty to death for having relations with a surface dweller?”

“I’m sure it must have happened in the past with some of the highborn spies we sent to your world. In their boredom they must have lowered themselves to procreate with surface dwellers. I suppose they needed the diversion, even if it’s disgraceful to fraternize with an inferior species.”

Fin closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. She’s not ashamed of any of her ethnicities, seemingly countless though they are, but hearing him talk like that is even worse than listening to him rail against the surface. It reminds her of growing up and not looking like everyone else. It’s easier, as an adult, knowing that some of it was just childish bullshit, but some people take ages to grow out of it and in Orm’s case, he might not ever.

Suddenly that thought is unbearable.

It’s such a disappointment.

“If you’re going to be racist in my kitchen, I’m going elsewhere,” Fin informs him. "I don't have to listen to this."
Her salad is half-eaten but she doesn’t care. Fin doesn’t have much of an appetite given how her day is going. She storms out the side exit and traipses down to her garden, uncaring that the midday sun is going to burn her to a crisp. She flies into her shed and yanks on a pair of ancient gardening gloves. She finally vows to wrestle her dead rose bushes into submission because all of these casual reminders of what she’s lost are finally starting to wear her down.

The shears help, but Fin still has to unwind what seems like a mile of dead vines from around the fence posts. She sets aside the few nice looking red blooms from the one plant but resolves to put it out of its misery along with its dead yellow companion. Thorns tear up her arms where the gloves stop, but she’s too proud to march back into her own home and deal with that self-righteous prick.

Fin is tolerant of the daddy issues, understands the mommy issues, but draws the line at his racism. Hearing half-breed fall so casually from Orm’s lips doesn’t sit well.

Physical labor continues to not be her forte. The work seems to take ages without music, but Fin’s speaker is in the kitchen. Songs usually help her measure time. She can feel herself getting a little burnt, which means it’s probably closer to an hour than not. She’s got one last vine to go when a voice suddenly interrupts her.

“Hey Fin, you’re not going to have any fence left if you keep hacking away like that.”

At the sound of Arthur’s voice, Fin turns around, shears in midair, only to find him accompanied by Mera. He’s dressed in normal clothing, but the latter is still wearing her green wetsuit. She looks more beautiful than anyone Fin’s ever seen in person before. Mera seems to catch her when she’s looking her worse, not that it matters, but the Atlantean woman probably thinks Fin’s insane at this point.

“You’re a lot earlier than I thought.” Fin checks her phone and he’s definitely beat her most conservative estimate by a solid seven hours.

“Well, I have someone keeping me on a tight schedule,” Arthur comments lightheartedly, although Mera definitely doesn’t seem amused.

“Are you ready to go now?” Fin’s skin is sweaty and blotchy and she looks exactly like she’s been slaving away in a garden for a solid fifty five minutes.

“I guess you can fix yourself up if you want, but you’ll still be the prettiest girl at Terry’s.”

Fin gives him an unconvincing fake laugh. “I’ll probably be the only girl at Terry’s.”

“Prettiest girl by default,” Arthur reasons, and Fin rolls her eyes at him.

“Gosh, Arthur, you’re such a charmer,” Fin grumbles, grasping at her hair tie to release her sweaty braid.

“Well, I’m a king now. It comes with the territory.”

“Does it?” Fin demands, not waiting for his answer. She marches back up the stairs, leaving Arthur and Mera with no choice but to follow her. Along the way she combs out the wavy strands until they pouf like a cloud around her face.

Fin pauses once they reach the kitchen, throwing the handful of salvageable red roses on the countertop. Orm is nowhere to be found. Her food is still untouched, but his dishes are clean. She splashes some water on her face and digs into her warm salad, famished after working outside. She’s almost done when she notices Mera standing awkwardly to the side. Arthur grabs a glass of water
and a sudden thought occurs to her.

“Did you need anything to wear? I’m sure that suit can’t be comfortable in this heat.”

Mera’s uncharacteristically unguarded expression betrays the fact that what Fin asked her was not what she was expecting to hear come out of her mouth. “I don’t want to impose.”

“Nonsense, I offered. Were you interested? I’m sure nothing I have is worthy of a princess, but you probably don’t want to walk around the Bay like that.”

Mouth quirking into a strange twist, Mera appears to be thinking over the offer. She follows Fin back to her bedroom (despite knowing the way from her first visit) and stands stiffly at the foot of her bed while Fin rummages through her clothes. She pulls out another dress for herself, a red one, and selects something a little too small for her that should fit Mera perfectly.

“How’s this?” Fin asks, holding up a pink and cream colored dress. It has a subdued abstract pattern that runs all over it, and delicate gold threads make it iridescent when it catches the light.

Mera runs her hands over the fabric almost reverently. “It’s beautiful.”

“I wore it for my high school graduation back in 2004 and I just couldn’t bring myself to get rid of it because it’s so pretty. If silk isn’t your style, I can try and find you something else.”

Mera shakes her head. “No, this should be fine.”

“You can try it on in there,” Fin points to her bathroom. “I’m going to change into something that’s not covered in dead roses.”

Mera obediently heads into the next room to change while Fin starts to unzip her purple dress. Her phone falls out of the front and hits her foot; she forgot it was stashed between her boobs. At least the red dress is stretchy and has pockets, and in less than a minute she’s all changed without having the worry about buttons or zippers. When Mera doesn’t emerge, she knocks on the door.

“Do you need help with anything?”

“Can you help me fasten it?”

Fin heads inside and fastens the hooks and eyes. It’s truly a pain to get in and out of and she’s not sure they have such fasteners in Atlantis. Mera steps forward and examines herself in the mirror.

“I once wore a beautiful dress made out of pearls and diamonds and adorned with glowing jellyfish, but I feel prettier in this.”

“Well, a pearl and diamond dress adorned with live, stinging animals doesn’t sound very comfortable, and it’s hard to feel pretty under those conditions, I would think,” Fin reasons, trying not to shudder at adorned with glowing jellyfish. “I’m sure your culture doesn’t adhere to my very irregular definition of femininity, but I just wear what I want when I want to feel pretty.”

“Is that why you’re not self-conscious about wearing such a dress?” Mera asks. “It’s made of very flimsy material and it’s revealing.”

“It is?” Fin’s arms aren’t any barer than Mera’s, but her dress hits about mid-thigh. It’s nothing scandalous and she would have been permitted to wear it to high school. But Orm did indicate that such a skirt length would be considered indecent. “Trust me, this is nothing compared to what some surface dwellers wear.”
Mera seems skeptical, but probably doesn’t want to disagree with someone who just lent her the
dress she’s wearing. Her knees are covered, and Fin wonders if that’s significant at all.

“Hey, where did Arthur go?”

“He’s speaking with Orm in another room. I can hear them talking.”

Fin shrugs. “Super senses, that’s right.” She walks past the library, where Orm and Arthur are
awkwardly trying to have a quiet conversation knowing full well that Mera can hear them from any
room in the house.

“Hey, nice dress,” Arthur tells Fin, almost as if it’s a peace offering. Maybe Orm just told him about
the thousandth time she managed to lose her temper with him.

“Thanks. Two members of Atlantean royalty have pointed out that my skirt is too short, but I’m not
changing again for the third time before noon so this is going to have to work.”

“What happened to your hair?” Orm asks, and Arthur shoots him a look for his curt tone.

“Um, it’s frizzy?” Fin shrugs. She ties it into a giant, wild half bun on the top of her head. “Better?”

Arthur says yes at the same time Mera says no, while Orm just looks perplexed by the volume her
hair achieved in the humidity.

“Let’s just get to Terry’s,” Fin mutters, turning away and heading towards the front door. She
glances over at Mera, wondering how they’re going to talk about her if she’s coming with them.

“Arthur, doesn’t Mera look pretty?”

“Is that your graduation dress?”

“Yes. I wear a size six now, Mera, so you can keep it if you want. There’s no way I can fit back into
that thing again. But you look nice in it so I’d love for you to have it.”

Mera and Arthur make eye contact and something unreadable passes between them. “Thank you,
Fin.”

“You’re welcome. Arthur, are we taking your dad’s truck again?”

“Nope. Mom said I can borrow hers. It’s got working AC and AM/FM radio and a tape deck.”

Fin and Arthur flash shaka signs at each other and giggle. They used to make shitty mixed cassette
tapes from songs off the radio. None of them have likely survived into the current century, but it’s
still a fond memory.

“What are tapes?” Mera asks, and Arthur tries explaining it to her while Fin shoots a glance back at
Orm, who’s practically standing in the kitchen as if to stay away from them both.

“Are you coming along, Princess?” Fin asks politely.

Mera crosses her arms. “I’m staying here and watching the prisoner.”

“I object.” Orm is vehement, even more so than he was during lunch.

“As king, I overrule your objection,” Arthur crows, and that surprisingly works. “I would have told
you about this last night, but you kind of fucked off right after dinner. Vulko doesn’t want you left
alone for more than a few hours.”
“You’re going *drinking*. How long can that take?”

“I can literally drink all day and night,” Arthur tells him seriously. “Not that Fin can hold her liquor or anything, but we’re not really in a rush, are we?”

Fin jolts under the force of Arthur’s companionable shoulder clap. “I guess? I can’t stay out too late because I have to play Claudia’s wedding tomorrow. I have to be back to make dinner for your brother, too. You guys are welcome to stay if you like.”

“That should give us plenty of time.”

“Um, I guess you can make yourself at home, Mera. I prepped some lasagna and it’s in the fridge. I’ll be back in time to make it, I promise. We’ll be two hours, tops.”

Nodding, Orm barely glances at her and instead stares down Arthur, who’s doing his best to shuffle Fin out the door. He actually shoos her out of the house with his hand on the small of her back. Once she’s outside and sitting in the truck, she turns to Arthur, who turns the key and speeds out of her driveway. Fin scrambles to put on her seatbelt. She’s about to scold him but sees uncharacteristic worry etched into the lines of his face.

“So what the actual fuck is going on?”

“I’m sorry I got weird. I have no privacy anymore and no one I can just be real with. I was just so impatient to be around someone not Atlantean and not my dad who will be honest with me. Vulko and Mera are different now that I’m king. They’re not secretive or anything, but I know they talk about me all the time when I’m not there. Mera especially has been really off since we dropped off Orm at your house on Sunday. She didn’t like the idea in the first place, and then she had to go and drag Vulko into it and now he wants to visit too and make sure things are going okay.”

“So I guess I’ll have another visitor shortly?”

“Yeah, but you’ll like him. He’s old and weird in a way you can appreciate, and he actually has social skills. It would only be to check in. You wouldn’t have to put him up or anything.”

Fin brushes off the *weird in a way you can appreciate* part because yeah, sometimes she’s drawn to strange people. It’s why she ended up becoming friends with Arthur.

“Yeah, okay, fine, I guess. As long as he’s not rude or anything, I can handle a short visit.”

“Good, hopefully that will put Mera at ease too. She’s very susceptible to his input. I get that she knows Orm better than I do, but I’d been keeping tabs on him for the past few months and I knew he wasn’t going to act out the way she feared if I brought him up here.”

“Maybe she’s upset that you didn’t listen to her opinion.”

“I did! He’s better off where he is now. But Atlanteans are not forgiving, and I meant that when I said it. I know Mera felt bad for betraying Orm, but she was beyond pissed when he sent those commandos after us in Sicily. She was ready to accept exile, but didn’t know murder was on the table. *That* was a surprise to her. I think they actually used to be friends, but it’s a huge sore point for her.”

“Same with Orm,” Fin tells him, watching Terry’s bar appear in the distance. The hardy little drinking establishment was somehow spared catastrophic damage. She’s not sure how it happened, but it was one of the first places up and running after the wave, probably because the citizens needed to unwind so badly.
“Mera spent almost her whole life in Atlantis, even though she’s from Xebel. My mother took her in during the war between the two nations, not as a hostage but as the best candidate for marriage to Orm. It pretty much ended the conflict. Mera practically idolizes Altanna and her teachings even though she’s still not much for surface dwellers. At least Mera doesn’t think they all need to die, which is a lot better than most of my citizens.”

“I imagine most of them hate us pretty badly.”

“Biggest understatement of the century,” Arthur mutters, pulling up to the bar. He hops out and opens her car door for her, a throwback to his childhood when his father instilled chivalry in him. It’s oddly sweet.

“I kind of made Orm mad again today,” Fin admits as she climbs out of the truck.

“He mentioned it. He didn’t go into detail, but he mentioned he made you angry as well. That’s probably why I met you today outside killing the shit out of those rose bushes.”

“They’re already dead or dying. I’ve been putting it off. There are so many chores that need to be done around that place but they’re all such a pain in the ass.”

Arthur plops down at the bar and she takes a seat next to him. Somehow Terry’s is never empty regardless of the time of day or day of the week, but it’s not crowded and she prefers it that way. Arthur orders a stout and she orders a Frangelico and Bailey’s. She used to share pitchers of beer with him until she realized he’d refill her glass every time she’d get up and pee. It definitely was a sneaky way to get her trashed without her catching on right away.

“Mindy’s always saying you should get married just to have someone to help you around the house.”

“Sometimes that’s the only reason I’d consider it,” Fin says with a laugh. “I wouldn’t mind getting laid, though.”

“Sorry, having my brother in your house has got to be the world’s biggest cock block.”

Fin steadfastly refuses to tell Arthur she finds his brother attractive, so she just nods in commiseration. “It’s not like there’s any options around here for me anyway.”

“The captain of Orm’s guard is a decent-looking dude, not that I’m any judge.”

“Hey, your brother said he wanted someone to beat up and train with.”

“I’ll send him over in that case. If you’re lucky he’ll have some cool tech to show you. He’s surprisingly open for an Atlantean; I’m told he’s very unusual in that respect. He’s a gun nut, even more than your dad.”

“Not possible.”

“Totally possible. The kid’s pretty handy in a fight.”

“Kid?”

“I mean, he’s like twenty five.”

“And being a king has aged you beyond thirty two? Those seven years make quite the difference.”

“Shut your face,” Arthur grumbles, swiping at her playfully and knocking her hair out of alignment.
“So what’s really up with you and Mera?” Fin asks, attempting in vain to fix her ponytail.

“I couldn’t tell you at the moment. I thought I could just annul her arranged marriage to Orm, easy peasy. Turns out I can’t just drop it. Despite starting a civil war and trying to enact genocide, Orm technically didn’t break any terms of the contract. Weird, right? I figured her father, King Nereus, would enjoy the advantage of his daughter marrying the new king, or something like that, but he hasn’t tried to renegotiate anything. He can’t possibly mean for Mera to still marry my brother. That would be an unmitigated disaster.”

“Maybe she’s worried about that too. Did you ask her?”

“I can’t spend any time alone with her in Atlantis. We have to be chaperoned, like little kids or something. I sure as hell am not asking her about us in front of strangers. She doesn’t like talking about her feelings when we’re alone, let alone when other Atlanteans are around.”

“It’s probably really weird to them that we’re just running off to drink without a chaperone.”

“I mean, I never thought about it like that, but I guess? I made it clear we’re just friends. I don’t think that’s the issue.”

“Maybe the fact you have more social freedom with a platonic friend than your future wannabe wife, who might still be forced to marry your brother?”

“Vulko’s working on that. I think her dad is just trying to make me sweat it out. He knows I want to marry her. He knows I’d give almost anything to make it happen and he’s probably just hoping to get the upper hand in some kind of treaty. He’s a clever old bastard. He was complicit with Orm but because he didn’t instigate anything, he’s getting off scot-free.”

Fin considers this a moment. “It does seem a little unfair that Mera’s father is getting away with everything and Orm isn’t; they were both in the wrong. Maybe Mera thought that with Orm out of the way, she wouldn’t be forced into an arranged marriage, period. I’m sure she really likes you and wants to marry you someday, but having it hang over her head can’t feel very good. I wish there was a way you could completely get rid of betrothals.”

“Their legal code is awful. I don’t know if I can.”

“Oh, Kelsey wants a copy of it to read, Orm mentioned.”

“Dane’s kid, the little girl?”

“That little girl will be old enough to vote in two years.”

“I know, I mean I last saw her when she was like, super tiny. What does she want with Atlantean legal code?”

“She wants to read it…recreationally.”

“Gross.”

“Yeah.” Legal documents are not Fin’s idea of a good time.

“I can get you the version that Vulko gave to me. It’ll be in electronic format, so she can read it on a tablet.”

“I’m sure she would love that,” Fin tells him, ordering another cocktail. “She wants to take over the
world someday. The twins are terrified of her.”

“I’m terrified of anyone that wants to read that death book for fun too.”

“I’m not sure how active women are in politics in Atlantis, but I think Orm finds Kelsey’s forceful personality a little abnormal.”

“Mera and my mom are pretty much the only independent women I’ve encountered there so far. There are no women in the military and no female judges or government officials.”

“Sounds like a sausage fest.”

“Atlantis is surprisingly backwards socially. Diana could run circles around some of these clowns and some days I’m tempted to let her visit.”

“Have you seen or heard from her lately?”

“She’s in Europe, still doing her thing. She juggles her day job and superhero stuff. Barry’s taking college courses—they’re out for the summer but I think he’s taking some classes online—and Victor is helping his dad at the lab. Superman has a girlfriend and a day job. Batman’s sulking in Gotham, I guess.”

“You don’t know what he’s up to?”

“He’s got a lot of stuff going on all the time but somehow still keeps a secret identity. I don’t know how he does it.”

“Maybe ask him for advice on how to balance out your life.”

“Fin, Batman literally has no personal life. His best and only friend is his family butler. He’s the worst; you have no idea.”

“I mean, I really don’t, because I don’t know who he is. Is Batman like a really famous guy or something?”

Arthur practically giggles into his beer before he orders another one. “Oh Jeez, this is too great.”

“It’s really not,” Fin whines. “You talk about Batman like the entire world knows his secret identity but me.”

With a shrug, Arthur pushes his empty glass to the edge of the bar for Terry to retrieve before sliding the fresh one closer. “Wouldn’t it be funnier that way?”

Fin sighs. “Fine, don’t tell me who he is. Asshole.”

Arthur looks a bit contrite, which isn’t like him at all. “I probably should be a little nicer.”

“What, to me personally or in general?”

“Both. I still owe you for taking care of Orm.”

“I’m not sure I’m doing a good job, but a decent enough job to know that leaving Mera with him was probably not a good thing.”

“You were the first person to say he might not deserve rehabilitation, at least on land. You might be the only person in the Bay that doesn’t want his head on a platter.”
“If you want to save him so bad, forcing him into uncomfortable confrontations with people he’s mad at is probably not the way I’d go, personally. Seriously, why did you leave him alone with his former betrothed? There's definitely no love lost there.”

“Mera wants to see how he’s doing. She’s very vocal about him being punished, but I still think she feels guilt. For better or worse, he’s her oldest friend, not that the label means much at the moment.”

“Orm is very angry with her and Vulko. He still doesn’t think what he did was wrong so he has no idea why they didn’t go along with his plans. He thinks it’s him versus the world right now and he feels abandoned and betrayed.”

“What’s so hard about not understanding why people don’t want a war?”

“Since he considered genocide in line with that, it stands to reason that any opposing viewpoints would be those of cowards or surface dwelling sympathizers and not true patriots.”

Arthur shakes his head. “Mera doesn’t like the surface much. She thinks parts of it are okay, but overall isn’t too impressed. I never got the chance to give her the grand tour of the world and impress her, you know? I’d give anything to have the time you have with Orm, believe it or not. I think I could change her mind. Sorry my brother’s kind of a lost cause with that or you’d probably enjoy yourself too.”

“At least he likes the food,” Fin offers, but doesn’t disagree with Arthur. Sharing is better when your audience has an open mind. “Orm’s not really coming around to the idea that Orvax was a bad father because he made him into the ideal Atlantean king. I think talking to Atlanna might really help him, but he’s not ready yet.”

“Vulko used to be stationed on the surface. They still send out highborn Atlanteans—because they pass for normal humans—and they gather intelligence on the surface world. It’s partially what motivated my mom to flee ashore. Vulko would talk about it with her and I guess it was inspirational. He said he was young, less than twenty when he first came up here.”

“God, depending on how old he is the music might have been terrible,” is Fin’s first thought, and Arthur just shakes his head.

“I can’t imagine him dancing to disco…or having long hair…or wearing bell-bottoms.”

“Eww, that’s a very real possibility.”

“At least our fashion sense has improved since then. You picked out some nice looking clothes for my brother.”

“If half of the Bay will assume he’s fucking me because he’s staying in my house, he’s not going to be dressed like a fool.”

Arthur cackles. “Are you going to teach him how to sing and play guitar?”

Fin tosses a peanut at Arthur, despite catching Terry’s eye as he shakes his head. She orders a glass of Scotch, her customary last drink, and leaves a generous tip.

“Orm doesn’t like music, Arthur. He hasn’t expressed anything for it but mild distaste. Apathy is even worse than hatred.”

“He’s living with a modern-day siren. What a waste.”
“Just because I sing well and play a few instruments doesn’t mean I have otherworldly powers. I’m certainly not seductive in any way.”

As someone that's never tried to get into her pants, he's never really been on the receiving end of one of her legendary take downs. “Verbal emasculation does tend to be penis kryptonite,” Arthur says with a grin.

Terry slides Fin a glass of Macallan on the rocks.

“I'll toast to that.” Fin clinks her Glencairn tumbler against Arthur’s mug of stout. She’s kind of glad she’s decided to call it a day with drinking—she’s on her third drink in less than an hour and even though the drinks were less than two ounces a piece, it’s still way more booze that she’s used to. Her first sip of Scotch goes right to her head. She shoots Arthur a smile that's meant to convey control and just ends up broadcasting that she's wasted.

“Mera’s gonna kill me if I bring you back like this. You definitely can’t handle anymore booze.”

“Um, I guess we can walk it off somewhere.”

Arthur pays for his drinks and helps her outside, where the sun beats down on her already red skin. She nearly turns around to go retrieve her little clutch before realizing that Arthur has it tucked under his arm. God bless him and his utter fearlessness when it comes to gender norms. Fin's dated men who wouldn't be caught dead doing something so nice.

They walk in silence for a good twenty minutes along the shoreline. The rising temperature has Fin contemplating dipping her feet in the water to cool off but staring at the ocean brings up a random snippet of conversation from the other day.

“Orm told me there’s a giant octopus in Atlantis that can play the drums. Was he making that up?”

“My brother’s not the yarn-spinning type. The octopus’s name is Topo. He’s enormous and I think he used to visit me when I was a kid.”

Fin lights up. “I remember you telling me about him. I didn't realize it was the same one! He must be older than any other octopus ever!”

Arthur seems to consider this. “I guess, because they usually only live for a few years.”

“Can I meet him?”

Arthur scratches his head. “I don’t see why not. He often follows me close to shore for whatever reason.”

Fin would jump up and down in excitement but figures the alcohol sloshing around in her stomach would not appreciate it. “Can you check?”

“Umm,” Arthur holds out his hand towards the ocean, and a few minutes later Fin sees a wake appear on the surface of the water as an utterly enormous sea creature pokes its head out.

“Holy shit!” Fin exclaims. She toes off her shoes and walks closer to the water for a closer look, the large rocks making it difficult.

Arthur continues to hold out his hand and a perplexed expression appears on his face.

“What are you telling him?” Fin wonders aloud.
“He’s not really a good listener, so not much of anything at the moment,” Arthur says vaguely, concentrating harder. “Don’t get any closer!”

“What? Why?” Fin asks, although she stops like he requests.

“He’s a little playful right now. He’s used to Atlantean physiology and I don’t think he realizes how badly he could hurt you.”

Disappointment hits her, but she's not stupid. Death by octopus would totally go on her tombstone in this town for sure. “Oh. Thanks for the heads up, dude.”

"No problem. I'm just trying to keep everything as uneventful as possible."

"Mr. Topo, it was very nice to meet you!” Fin waves at the octopus, and to her utter delight, it waves a tentacle back at her.

Fin giggles and turns around to head back to Arthur when she feels something fasten around her ankle and toss her backwards into the ocean. Her scream echoes across the Bay until she disappears under the waves.
The Distance Is Quite Simply Too Far for Me

The last time Orm spoke to Mera privately was beneath the Ring of Fire. It was the first time they were so openly hostile and mistrustful of one another. She passionately chastised him for abandoning his mother’s ideals and he clasped a tracking device around her wrist under the guise of a gift. Looking at her now, his acrimony has yet to fade and he can tell the feeling is mutual.

“You look like one of them now,” Mera comments flatly, giving his clothing an appraising glance.

“So do you,” Orm counters swiftly.

“I didn’t think it would be nice to turn down our host’s kind offer,” Mera replies as she gazes at the fabric she’s wearing with thinly-disguised enjoyment. She likes pretty things. “She said it’s made of silk, whatever that is.”

Orm recalls his conversation with Fin about the material, but there’s no way he’ll reveal his curiosity in front of Mera now. The garment is what he approximates a surface dwelling female might consider appealing and it suits Mera, but wearing their clothes doesn’t make either of them less Atlantean.

“Fin is full of kind offers.” Orm offers this observation neutrally, just to see how Mera replies.

Mera snorts. “I hope you’re not taking advantage of her as Arthur did. We both know you don’t belong here.”

“Are you upset I’m not in prison?” Orm taunts. “I know you think I deserve to be punished.”

“You should have stayed in the palace! Your presence amongst the general prison populace created a lot of ammunition for Arthur’s enemies. They say you stirred up sentiment against the new king.”

“I did no such thing.” Orm informs her, indignant. “I have no interest in politics at the moment. That’s why I didn’t want to be anywhere near the palace.”

“You don’t want to see your brother fail?”

“Not especially, because where would Atlantis be without a king?” Orm asks solemnly. “I worked tirelessly for its betterment. I was denied the death in battle I asked for but I suppose that was his choice. Half-breed bastard or not, Arthur does have a legal birthright and wields a legendary trident. Perhaps my brother is the king Atlantis needs, perhaps he isn’t, but I don’t want anything to do with it either way, at least at the moment. Be glad I don’t want to be involved.”

Mera’s intense expression doesn’t waver at this vague threat, but she almost jumps a foot in the air when Olive rubs against her leg. She’s visibly upset at having shown weakness in front of Orm, and scoops up the bothersome creature out of novelty. She’s not expecting her to be so soft, and he can spot the exact second when her feelings about the animal change.

“It’s a cat, Mera.”

“I know what it is!” Mera snaps. She almost drops Olive when she starts to purr. “What does that sound mean?”

“Contentment, usually,” Orm informs her. “That animal is especially friendly. She seems to like everyone but Arthur. I think the pitch or volume of his voice frightens her.”
Awkwardly holding Olive in the air, Mera flips her around so she can look at the cat’s face. Olive’s eyes are content little slivers as she peers at the puzzled Xebellan princess. “What is the point of such a pet?”

“I’ve surmised there is no real purpose. Fin enjoys their company and likes to touch their fur and listen to their sounds and watch their antics. She may use them for warmth when she sleeps. But they don’t provide a specific function the way our mounts do, nor do they provide food the way many captive surface dwelling animals do.”

“How odd,” Mera surmises.

“Indeed.”

Mera gently lowers the animal onto the ground, probably not realizing she could drop it midair and cause it no damage, or she would have likely gone that route. She’s never been especially fond of animals. Once Olive walks away, she leaves the two of them standing there, facing off against each other. Mera is still on her guard against him, as she should be. Orm doesn’t anticipate a physical altercation, but steadies himself for a fight nonetheless.

“I had a speech prepared when I came here,” Mera announces loftily. “I wanted to explain myself.”

“If you’re looking for me to clear you conscience, I’m not interested,” Orm replies. It reminds him of something Fin would say. The hurt that flashes across Mera’s face is satisfying and he can see her tactics change.

“The surface is everything Orvax told us it was, but it’s so much more than that too. Surely you must be seeing that.”

“Mera, you don’t even like the surface. Your angle is…disingenuous.”

Rearing back, Mera places her hands on her hips and stalks around the living room. “What about the woman Arthur selected to give you a home? Is she not a positive example of a surface dweller? She has shown you patience and forgiveness. Are you not enjoying her hospitality?”

Orm is silent on the subject.

“Orm, she would be dead if you had your way! Doesn’t that bother you?”

“What if that isn’t my way anymore. Is that what you want to hear?”

It’s a half-confession that Orm has yet to make to the woman who wants to hear it, but it doesn’t matter if he doesn’t say it, as long as he means it.

“Are you telling the truth?”

Orm doesn’t rightly know, and that’s why he hasn’t told Fin yet. He settles on a carefully worded, rather political answer. “Perhaps, if things continue in the way they have been. But that would be relying on surface dwellers to tread carefully and make no mistakes. The very next piece of trash I see thrown in the ocean would likely change my mind, even if it’s a bottle cap.”

Mera seems strangely moved. “So if someone dumps a trash bag out there you’ll just blast this house off the side of its cozy little cliff and let her drown?”

That’s a very graphic and specific scenario, but Orm powers through the distraction. “If surface dwellers don’t change their ways, she’ll hardly be the only one that’s dead. They’ll wipe out every living thing on the planet.”
A thoughtful expression appears on Mera’s face when something catches her eye. She leans forward and studies a picture on the mantle, one of Fin and Arthur and presumably Sam from their childhood. Though he and Mera often played together as children, Orm doubts any such proof exists.

“Do you like it here?”

Finally, a question without pretense; Orm pauses the tiniest bit before answering.

“Well, I’m able to sleep for more than four hours a night,” is the first thing that comes to mind. Orm rattles off a few random missives: “Fin has me eating strange food and listening to stranger music. I helped a local fix their dwelling. None of the children here attend school in the summer and seem to run about without supervision. The sun is absolutely terrible. There are tiny insects that glow in the dark that come out at night.”

It’s amusing to throw Mera off balance a little when she fancies herself his intellectual equal. She is plenty smart, but she’s not especially cunning due to her emotional transparency. Discovering her treachery was even easier than finding out about Vulko’s. He can actually see her mentally unpack and examine every statement he just threw at her.

“You didn’t answer my question, Orm.”

“I don’t really know how I feel up here.” Orm says this not to frustrate her, but because it’s true. She hasn’t earned the right to any knowledge deeper than that.

“Have you seen your mother yet?”

“That’s not any of your business.”

Fin’s words are a marvel indeed, producing Mera’s most agonized expression yet. She doesn’t even bother to voice her displeasure—her agitation is painfully obvious. No matter what they end up discussing, it always turns into a disagreement about each other’s choices. Mera is a nag, always telling him what he’s doing wrong and disapproving of his decisions.

"You can still tell me!" Mera huffs angrily at him, and Orm sighs, a gesture that he knows puts her on edge.

“I’m sure you already know the answer to your question, Mera. Redundancy is not your way.”

“I’m worried about your mother! I hate seeing her torn apart by your selfishness. I love her too, you know.”

Mera’s statement wounds him more than he cares to admit. After his mother was banished, Mera did more to honor Atlanna’s memory than he did. Orm spent his life actively rebelling against her teachings of integration and coexistence and peace. It must have been lingering loyalty to those sentiments that made her seek out Arthur to save them. Odd, for someone who claims to love Atlantis so much turn her back on it in favor of a race of inferior beings.

But that’s ultimately what happened with his mother; she abandoned her duty to produce an heir with Atlan’s bloodline over something as silly as love. The spectacular revelation of her transgression—and resounding sentence--changed the trajectory of Orm’s life. He’s still angry that she was taken, but some of that fault lies with her and her choices, and Orm is desperate to hang onto that familiar feeling, even if it recedes a little every day. Forgiving Atlanna’s selfishness is hard, because she threw his life into complete disarray and left him alone and defenseless in the clutches of his father.

“Surely you can’t mean to pass these next few hours quarreling with me about my mother.”
At that, Mera’s shoulders sag. Her disappointment in him is a sadly familiar occurrence over the past few years, but it lacks the vitriol he expects. They’re both tired. Arguing with her is familiar, albeit draining, but the majority of his fighting spirit has been sapped. It’s not how he wants to spend time with her, if he must.

“Truthfully, I wanted to see how you were,” Mera admits. “I don’t actually hate you, you know. Seeing your face after the arena and knowing what I did to you…that wasn’t easy for me.”

Orm feels wrath slowly burn through his core. “And it was easy for me, watching proof of your betrayal with my brother? You chose him over me!”

“I didn’t go behind your back on a whim. I waited until I was absolutely sure you wouldn’t budge on this war. This was a totally avoidable conflict. I gave you years to do the right thing, to prove me wrong!”

“Then you waited a long time for the boy that Atlanna raised to show himself. I don’t think he exists anymore. I was punished severely for any mention of her, until only the physical resemblance remained. I could never get rid of that.”

“He still held that against you.”

Orm tries not to wince at the memory of his father dragging him closer to stare contemptuously into the face he swore was Atlanna’s from the grave, a visage that Orvax’s fists ruthlessly split open countless times for a resemblance that Orm barely remembered. He meets Mera’s eyes and says nothing until her gaze drops away.

Orvax was very careful not to behave so cruelly in front of the Xebellan princess, but she could see the marks and smell the blood. She still remembers.

“I don’t wish to talk about him.”

“You were very close to becoming him,” Mera says archly, and that’s the lowest blow she’s ever dared to level at him.

It surely had to have been Mera’s biggest concern in marrying him, but Orm is perplexed. “I would have never laid a hand on you if we were married.”

“You tried to kill me!”

“You betrayed me!”

“You think I wanted to?” Mera demands. “Atlantis is more my home than Xebel ever was. I never wanted to empty our great city to bring war to the surface. We lost hundreds of men fighting the Brine. We would have lost tens of thousands if you’d have had your way, despite our superior technology. I couldn’t let that happen. You forced my hand.”

The pained expression on Mera’s face as she piloted away from him with Arthur comes to mind. She was genuinely sad to have hurt him. Orm was genuinely sad when he thought they had perished; it wasn’t the ending he wanted either.

“I was taught to battle treason with execution,” Orm reasons. “Whether or not you or my mother deserved to die was not to issue; you both broke the law. You just didn’t like the consequences.”

“I was willing to accept exile,” Mera says quietly, fiddling with one of Fin’s roses on the countertop. “I guess I just never thought you’d hate me enough to want me dead.”

When the tracking bracelet showed that Mera was still alive and well, any goodwill remaining
towards her had vanished. He already knew of Vulko’s betrayal, despite not having confronted him yet, and it was surprisingly easy to give the order to have them killed. It meant one less treasonous Atlantean to worry about.

“I never thought you’d hate me enough to usurp me with my half-breed brother.”

“You may be the most popular king Atlantis has had in modern times, but the throne was never supposed to be yours.”

“Arthur was never meant to exist.”

“But he does, and it was only his disinterest that let you carry on for so long.”

“Not for lack of trying on Vulko’s part. Even before my father died, he was grooming Arthur for the throne.”

“It was his duty to do so,” Mera reminds him. “Succession was always supposed to fall to your brother. Your father knew that. Don’t you think it was strange Orvax chose to punish your mother so publicly? It weakened his reputation as a husband and a king, something we both know he hated. But Atlanna’s execution put off Arthur enough to ensure he wouldn’t challenge your reign and it turned the people against the idea of his rule.”

It certainly sounds like something Orvax would do. Orm’s father was very meticulous about his image, since he wasn’t directly descended from Atlan the way his wife was. The fact Orvax went to such great lengths to sully his wife’s reputation did strike Orm as strange, since it was also a reflection on him. A part of him has always thought this, but realizing that other people have too is uncomfortable. His father’s insecurity was always a source of embarrassment for him.

Despite his mother’s transgression, Orm is still full-blooded Atlantean and a direct descendant of Atlantis’s founder, so he never shared that awful trait. But Mera is correct in fearing that perhaps Orvax had rubbed off on Orm a little too much. He is serious when he states that he would not treat her so abusively, but he had no problem in countering her treason with the punishment he felt she deserved.

“Your stunt with the wave is what solidified Arthur’s determination to act against you. He wanted no part of the throne before that. Ironic, isn’t it?”

Mera decides that she’s studied the roses in her hands long enough and brings one to her mouth. To Orm’s horror, she uses her teeth to yank a petal off and begins to chew. He knows they’re only plants but they’re Fin’s plants and she might have a use for them. At the very least, they seem to hold some kind of sentimental value.

“What are you doing?” Orm is a little cross on Fin’s behalf.

Mera shoots him a weird look. “Fin said to make myself at home. Tom Curry says that phrase means I can help myself to whatever food is available, within reason.”

“I don’t think those are considered edible.”

“Arthur ate some with me before.”

“Your new king was likely trying to spare you embarrassment.”

A look of consternation overtakes Mera’s face. “I’m not sure if I believe you, but that would be like Arthur.”
“Those are not for eating; she might need them for something.”

With reluctance, Mera complies, and Orm spies a crate of what he assumes are the Clementines Fin mentioned earlier that week. He plucks one from the pile and hands it to her. He’s never eaten one before, but he recalls watching Fin prep his orange.

“Remove the outer layer before you begin to eat.”

With no small degree of mistrust, Mera accepts his offering and gingerly removes the peel. It comes off easily and she discards the pieces into a neat little pile before placing a slice of fruit on her tongue. Orm watches her face transform as she assimilates the foreign textures and flavors.

“It’s unusual.”

Orm tries a piece and discovers it’s sweeter and juicier than its similar-looking counterpart. The small size is unfortunate; he finds himself reaching for another at the same time Mera attempts the same thing.

“The food is rather varied up here,” Orm admits after yet another Clementine. “It was perhaps the only redeeming characteristic of my first day up here.”

“These are delicious,” Mera reluctantly agrees. “Good food is plentiful for some people while others starve.”

Recalling reports in regards to the very uneven distribution of resources on the surface, Orm is forced to agree. “Everything is complicated up here.”

Mera finishes a few more Clementines in silence and when they’re finished, Orm realizes belatedly that they completely decimated Fin’s supply. She did technically offer them all up to him, and he was courteous enough to share, even after everything that had happened between him and Mera.

“If you would have stayed gentle and inquisitive like the boy I met all those years ago when I arrived in Atlantis, I would have married you,” Mera says pensively, staring at their pile of fruit peels. “Our union would have been strong and we would have been content. We might not have ever been in love, but I would have never gone looking for Arthur to replace you because Atlantis would have already had a good king.”

“Was I really so bad?” Orm demands tiredly.

“You were easily the best king in the past few hundred years, except for that one, glaring obsession that I couldn’t overlook. The last thing anyone needs, anywhere, is another war. If you really want to planet to recover, billions of deaths won’t fix it.”

“You know as well as I do that they are only making it worse,” Orm counters.

“There are plenty of people up here who care and fight to improve things. Some of them try very hard. It isn’t right to kill them all.”

“They’re killing all of us.”

“So when Fin walks through that door, are you going to kill her?” Mera asks. “Does she deserve it, just for being one of them?”

“She is oddly obsessed with the same thing,” Orm mutters.
“If I were her, I’d be incredibly uncomfortable with the burden of looking after you and just hoping that I wouldn’t get murdered by someone who already tried to kill me. That’s how I feel right now, except you’re not exactly my problem anymore. You’re hers.”

“I don’t want her dead. I don’t see how she could think otherwise.”

“The two of you must have had some kind of disagreement before I arrived, judging by the state we found her in. You’re clearly still hostile and racist.”

Weary, Orm shoots her a venomous look. “Your father wanted this war as much as I did. Do you treat him with the same level of disdain?”

“He came around eventually.”

“Only when it suited him to do so,” Orm points out, and he knows this knowledge mustn’t sit well with Mera because she doesn’t meet his eyes. She *knows*, and it’s all over her face. “Do not think he would hold back if the opportunity came to him again. Your precious surface world will always have a target on its back regardless of who’s ruling Xebel.”

“It’s your mother’s precious surface world, too, Orm.”

“People are fond of reminding me.”

“You almost killed Tom, you know.”

“I do know.”

“And you don’t feel bad about that?”

“Why would I? I’ve never met Arthur’s father before.”

“Your mother has a chance to be happy with someone. Even if it’s not your father, you should let her. She deserves it after everything she went through. You can’t think she would be happy without you. She needs you too, Orm.”

That’s exactly what Orm has been trying not to think about. Why *would* Atlanna need him? She has her perfect first-born, lovingly conceived during the happiest time of her life. Arthur is a king, for Poseidon’s sake, and worthy of a legendary treasure that makes him the strongest ruler since their founder. Who could dare to compete with that?

As if sensing she will get no more out of him on the subject, Mera resumes her leisurely inspection of the kitchen while Orm places all of their fruit peels in Fin’s compost bin. She spends a long time staring into the refrigerator at ingredients she surely mustn’t recognize and Orm wonders if this is a universal thing, somehow, because he recalls doing something similar during his first day in the house.

When nothing else sparks her interest, Mera heads back through the living room, nearly tripping over Killer when he runs between her legs. She inhales sharply through her nose and stares at the cat balefully.

“That animal is very violent and aggressive,” Orm observes. “He injured Fin recently and drew blood.”

“He looks exactly like the other one, the friendly cat.”
“They all look very similar. I can only tell them apart by the collars she put on them. I suspect it helps her identify them as well.”

“Why does he do that?” Mera demands as she makes intense eye contact with Killer from across the room.

“Spite?” Orm offers. He genuinely doesn’t understand. “I just think he enjoys harming people. He’s incapable of hurting us though.”

“How have a pet that can hurt you if it serves no practical purpose?”

Truthfully, Orm doesn’t really know, but he brushes past Mera to return to the living room. Mera can explore all she wants, but her arrival interrupted his internet searches. There are literally pages for everything.

“What are you doing?”

“Fin left me her laptop and I’ve been doing research. You can type anything into this search engine and results appear that help you answer your questions or learn more about a particular subject. Not every answer is factual, but it provides a lot of insight into their culture. The amount of information is overwhelming.”

Orm types his latest impulsive query into the Google search bar and shows the results to Mera. He clicks on the first page and her eyes scan the words skeptically along with his. Their findings appall them both.

“That’s all that surface dwellers know about tylosaurs?”

“They have to learn from fossils. They know more about space than they do their own ocean. These people are truly savages.”

“Over ninety percent of the ocean is unmapped,” Mera recites blandly. “Unbelievable.”

“Indeed.”

Mera’s about to add something when she and Orm hear a vehicle pull into the driveway; it sounds distinctly different from the pickup truck that Arthur and Fin left in. They hear a knock on the door and freeze as the cats go running.

“Are you going to get that?” Mera hisses.

“I’ve learned that if I don’t, the knocking persists but increases in volume and frequency.”

Mera rolls her eyes. “Great.”

Orm opens the door and finds a woman about Fin’s age standing on the porch, but that’s where the similarities end. She’s as tall as he is with hair as gold and eyes as blue. She’s wearing a tiny denim skirt and a sleeveless top that ties at the bottom, exposing her tan stomach and an odd piercing at her navel. The low neckline displays some truly impressive assets but Orm is just taken aback by her sudden and overall appearance that he doesn’t really focus on anything in particular.

“Hey, my name is Claudia Jeffries. Is Fin here?”

The name means nothing to Orm, but considering his very small circle of acquaintances on land, that doesn’t mean anything either. “She is not.”
“Fin asked me to email her the last song of my setlist to her but the server’s down again and I’m not sure she’ll get it in time. My phone is really acting up, too. I was going to just tell her, but I can write it down for her if she’s not here.”

“She’s out with Arthur.”

The woman breaks into a smile. “It’s nice they’re finally getting together after all this time. Arthur’s such a sweetheart. He was one of the only boys in school who treated me like a gentleman.”

“They’re not out on a date,” Mera corrects, suddenly inhabiting the space by the door with as much charisma as she can muster, because this newcomer has a commanding physical presence.

(Mera might not have an equal in beauty in Atlantis, but this surface dweller is certainly striking. Even Orm has to admit she’s physically impressive.)

“That’s too bad, pickings are a little slim around here for straight women,” Claudia mutters. She draws elegant, loopy scrawl across a piece of paper that must somehow pass for words before passing the sheet to Orm. “Anyway, please give this to Fin and tell her that Steph and I picked the light purple dress for her to wear tomorrow for our wedding.”

“You’re the bride getting married tomorrow?”

“Well, Steph and I are both brides, technically.”

“You came out all this way just to tell her about a song?”

“It’s not just a song,” Claudia insists. “It’s the song I wanted to have played at my wedding since I was a little girl. I got married when I was twenty and my future ex-husband said it was a stupid choice and wouldn’t let anyone play it. That should have told me right then and there I shouldn’t have married him, but live and learn. Now I’m finally getting married to a wonderful woman and I hired a band with a member who can play a goddamn dulcimer.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“I heard you’re from Atlantis. I guess they don’t have dulcimers there?”

Orm shakes his head minutely. Mera shrugs almost apologetically.

“Steph and I already got married at the courthouse last week. This whole ceremony tomorrow is mostly for the benefit of our families and friends. Tell Arthur he’s still invited. Weddings are good for morale and all, especially after everything that happened. Y’all can come too if you want—the more the merrier! You can learn more about our culture!”

The idea of a stranger inviting them to something as intimate as a wedding takes Orm aback, followed by the realization that he is the one behind everything that happened.

“We’ll think about it,” Mera says with a smile that tells Orm that they actually won’t.

“Great!” Claudia turns to leave, but seems to remember something at the last minute. “Oh, I almost forgot!”

Claudia trots back to her vehicle, something large and sleek and expensive looking. The color is blistery white and practically sparkles in the sun. It looks like it was crafted on an entirely different planet from the pickup trucks that Tom and Atlanna own. Claudia pulls a large canvas bag from the rear passenger seat while Orm and Mera watch curiously.
“Steph and I think it’s absolutely precious that Arthur’s Atlantean brother is staying here. And I guess you’re him, since I’ve never seen you before. Steph picked up some stuff last night before she headed out of Gotham. My girl almost missed her own wedding because work is so crazy, but since she was actually stuck in an actual city instead of the boonies we wanted to get you a few things to welcome you to Amnesty Bay!”

With a huge smile, wink, and a wave, Claudia heads off, leaving a very bemused pair of Atlanteans behind. Mera starts sorting through the bag, earning a critical look from Orm.

“What?”

“That doesn’t belong to you. She said it’s mine.”

“You dare to lecture me on rudeness?”

She’s got him there.

Orm watches as Mera sifts through the bag, clearly not recognizing most of the contents. It feels kind of nice knowing there’s someone around who’s more ignorant of the surface than he is. There are several packages of what appear to be food or ingredients along with some clothing.

“Hey, Arthur told me about this place,” Mera announces, holding up a Gotham University t-shirt.

“Fin attended college there.” Orm realizes the garment is for him, and the idea of matching his shirt with Fin's is odd. The act of welcoming a member of royalty is certainly familiar, but it’s certainly not something he expected on the surface. The offerings are humble, but surprisingly more heartfelt. He feels the tiniest prick of misgiving at hiding the truth from these people; if they only knew what he did, he doubts they would be bringing him gifts.

Mera studies Orm quietly when he abruptly stops sifting through his bag. “So, Arthur mentioned Fin’s a talented musician. Atlanna and Tom tell me the same thing. How good is she?”

Uncharacteristic resentment rises in him at this particular instance; it’s admittedly a sore spot. He places the canvas bag by the door. “I have no interest in that particular area.”

Perhaps remembering his lukewarm reception to her flute playing, Mera accepts this answer at face value. A part of Orm wishes he could vent his frustration, another is glad he doesn’t have the opportunity to make the humiliating admission that Fin finds him unworthy. Her opinion shouldn’t matter, period, but she’s the first person that treats him how she thinks he should be treated, not based on status but on merit.

“I wonder what a dulcimer is,” Mera wonders aloud.

Orm resumes his spot on the loveseat and types the word into Google. He initially misspells the strange instrument but the search engine intuits what he’s looking for.

“What an unwieldy looking thing,” Mera muses.

Forced to agree, Orm clicks on a video of an older man playing the instrument, his frown growing progressively deeper. “Why would she be interested in playing such an instrument?”

Mera stalks with deliberation back the hall to poke around in Fin’s music room. Orm can’t find too much fault in that, because he did the same thing as soon as he was alone in her house. It’s a completely alien environment in both looks and function; Atlantean dwellings are not homey. They broadcast social class and accomplishments, not sentiment and hobbies.
Mera eyes what must be the case for the dulcimer with suspicion before picking it up and opening it. Apparently she doesn’t have it sitting on the correct side, because the instrument tumbles out and nearly falls on the floor. Orm flashes a furious look at her for her impulsivity and he’s reminded of their childhood. Mera was always taking risks without thinking.

“Please do not upset my host by breaking her possessions. I will have to deal with her when you leave.”

“What’s the matter? Can’t handle a puny surface dweller?”

“She is small and weak, but the force of her anger is impressive.”

Nodding, Mera glances away. “I’ve heard that from both Tom and Arthur.”

“Are they anything alike, my brother and his father?” Orm queries, the question escaping without enough thought.

Mera shrugs. “Tom is completely harmless physically but still confident without being arrogant. He’s very reliable and dependable and relatively easygoing. He loves listening to music and reading. He acts like a gentleman around me, opening doors and pulling out chairs.”

“The thought of my mother finding love with such a humble man is disappointing. Surely she deserves better.”

“You should probably meet him before you make that judgment. After everything Arthur’s done for you, please don’t say negative things to him about his father. That would be crossing the line with him.”

“He forgives me for trying to kill him multiple times and for trying to kill every surface dweller, but I can’t criticize Tom Curry?”

“Yes, it’s just his way.”

“Surface dwellers make no sense.”

“That’s an accurate statement,” Mera comments even as she shrugs to agree with his previous statement. She points to the stringed instrument that Orm has surmised is a guitar. It hangs suspended on the wall as if on display. "Arthur's dad plays one of these."

“Fin is teaching him.”

Mera smiles warmly. “He and Atlanna love music. They play records for me when I visit their home.”

“Records?”

“Musicians release their songs onto various media. Records are outdated but Tom and Atlanna seem to really like them. Tom says Fin’s record player is broken but since she mostly uses digital formats it doesn’t matter as much.”

“A lot of things in the Bay are broken.”

“And whose fault is that?” Mera asks mildly.

“I can’t take credit for breaking a record player.”
“How do you know it’s not somehow your fault?”

“You heap every problem in the world at my feet,” Orm accuses her. “So you can hardly blame me for defending myself against them. Surely I’m not responsible for every bad thing that’s happened here.”

The loud banging of the front door flying open cuts off any response Mera can make. They head out to the living room and find Arthur carrying Fin inside on his back. Her thin arms are wrapped around his neck while his hands are clasped behind her thighs to keep her held up. Her ankle is wrapped in what looks like the remnants of his shirt and her feet are bare. Fin’s wet hair hangs in her face and they’re both wearing completely different clothes than they were before they left.

“We’re inside, you can put me down now, Arthur.”

“The last time I put you down, you almost face-planted in my father’s kitchen. If you get banged up any more, he’s going to yell or worse, Mom is going to be disappointed in me. You just had to go and wave to the octopus.”

“All I did was wave! How was I supposed to know I was initiating some kind of game? He’s an octopus.”

“Yeah, and now your leg is numb because you wouldn’t let me just cut off his arm to rescue you sooner.”

“I’m not letting you hurt an octopus to save me.”

“Their arms grow back.”

“How is he supposed to play the drums if he's missing an arm? It probably takes a long time to grow back. Maybe he gets paid to perform and he's got a family to support. You don't know that, Arthur.”

Watching Arthur argue with someone he’s carrying on his back is kind of amusing, but Orm definitely has some questions. So, apparently, does Mera, who’s watching this scene unfold with no small deal of curiosity and skepticism. Her hands are on her hips, a stance Arthur must witness often because as soon as he sees her body language, he immediately goes on the defensive.

“Hi, Mera.”

“You’re back earlier than expected.”

“That’s probably true,” Arthur replies, releasing one of Fin’s legs long enough to swat her hand away from where she’s trying to disengage his grip.

Mera is unimpressed. “It looks like your afternoon was eventful.”

“Yeah, I wanted to make friends with an octopus,” Fin replies nonchalantly, and Orm can tell she’s trying to deescalate the situation for Arthur’s sake. “Topo is, uh, aggressively friendly, kind of like a puppy. I waved at him, he waved at me, I got thrown into the Bay, no big deal.”

“Is that why your shoes are missing?” Mera questions her.

“Yes, and I’ll probably never see them again, although we stopped off at Tom’s house and he very graciously lent me some clothes.”

“Why didn’t you borrow anything from Atlanna instead?” Mera is puzzled.
“She’s taller than he is, so his stuff fit me better,” Fin answers. “All of her loose-fitting pants dragged on the ground. These basketball shorts are the only thing that fit, although it’s probably been decades since Tom’s played any kind of sport.”

“Did Topo bite you?”

“God, no,” Fin assures him, “although his suckers hurt like a bitch. There also must be something lining them like some kind of venom or poison because my ankle and foot are totally numb. I can’t feel a thing.”

It explains why she was carried inside. Fin squirms in Arthur’s arms but if she has no feeling in her right leg, she’ll undoubtedly injure herself trying to get around. Orm is completely sure of this after observing her for the past few days. His host lacks physical grace.

“I’m going to find some of that fancy ointment and see if it helps,” Arthur announces.

He glances at Orm and must decide that he’s the best option for relieving him of his burden, because before he knows it, Fin has been deposited in his arms. “Hold this.”

Orm’s left carrying a pouting, squirming surface dweller. She winds her arms around his neck as he holds her out in front of him.

“You smell like alcohol and plants,” Orm informs Fin, his face perilously close to hers.

“Well, you knew about the booze, but the plant part is because Atlanna and Tom like the basil lemon shampoo I make. I showered at their house before I came back here.”

“You also still smell like the ocean.”

“I’m sorry.” Fin hurriedly runs her fingers through the damp strands as if to scrub away the scent; her hair brushes his face and he tucks a lock behind her ear.

“That’s nothing to be embarrassed about. You also smell like something else from earlier.”

Lips pursed, Fin appears to think it over. “Oh, I did use a mango scrub this morning. How can you smell that?”

“As an Atlantean, my senses are far superior to yours.”

Something changes on Fin’s face and she squirms so violently that Orm nearly does drop her. It must remind her of their disagreement earlier, and not wanting to distress her, he walks over to the loveseat and places her gently on the cushions. He walks into the bathroom and grabs one of the spare towels she left out for him, one he hasn’t used yet. He presses it into her hands but her frown hasn’t quite vanished, not even when she wraps up her hair.

“Hey, I think this stuff should work,” Arthur announces, tossing a glass jar at Fin. Despite being clumsy on her feet, she seems to possess sound hand-eye coordination. She deftly catches the ointment and starts unwrapping her ankle.

“I’m sorry about that, by the way,” Arthur tells her quietly. He’s hovering anxiously, his large figure looming in a way that would probably make Fin uncomfortable if they didn’t know each other so well.

“It wasn’t your fault. It’s not like you sicced him on me. You can’t control an animal.”
“Technically, he should be able to now,” Mera pipes up helpfully, and Arthur’s exasperated expression almost brings a smile to Orm’s face. It surprises him, how his older brother’s freely flowing emotions seem to make his life easier and harder in equal turn.

“I wish Topo could have played me a song or two,” Fin says wistfully, finally revealing her ankle. There are several large marks on her skin—angry, red circular wounds that will likely throb once the numbness wears off. She stares at her injury critically for a moment before looking up at Arthur. “Can you get my old crutches down from the attic? I’ll have to adjust them, but I might need them tomorrow.”

Arthur nods and disappears, with Mera running after him. Orm can vaguely make out what they’re discussing but that’s not his primary concern. Fin is still not looking at him as she deliberately treats her wounds with ointment. She also smooths some onto her arm over the scratches her cat left. She winces at the contact with her broken skin. Sealing up the jar, Fin moves to stand and nearly falls when she tries to put weight on her right leg.

“Numb, remember?” Orm reminds her mildly.

Fin’s steely gaze meets his and she does manage to rise. All of her weight is on her left leg, and Orm knows if he merely pressed against her shoulder he’d knock her over. She tests her strength again and hobbles. Perhaps realizing the futility, she waits patiently for Arthur to return, but her eyes never leave his. Perhaps she mistook his observation as a challenge.

“I can put that away,” Orm informs her.

Handing over the glass jar, Fin’s fingers brush his. The ointment still left on her fingers makes his skin tingle pleasantly as he walks through the kitchen. When he returns, his brother is brandishing large wooden implements in her general direction and nearly swings one into a light.

“We still have a long way to go until dinner. Wanna watch a movie?” Fin asks them.

Mera actually looks interested. “Arthur told me of one he watched in his youth. He said it was called Titanic. I wish to watch that one.”

His brother’s look of resignation pretty much seals the deal. Orm figures he can suffer through it if Arthur can. It’s a pyrrhic victory if there ever was one, but he wants to see why his brother is so uncomfortable. If it were truly inappropriate to watch, he feels that Fin or Arthur would have spoken up by now to spare Mera the indignity.

“Okay, I’ll put it in,” Fin says, once again trying to struggle to her feet.

Arthur sighs and wags a finger at her. “Stay put. And, um, elevate that.”

Fin crosses her arms but obeys him only out of self-preservation, obediently sitting her leg on the coffee table. Arthur rummages around for the movie, looking through hundreds of different titles before he finds it.

“I let Derek sort them by director one day and now I don’t know where anything is,” Fin admits sheepishly. “He knows more about movies than I do.”

Arthur pops the film disk into her player and looks around Fin’s living room as if realizing it can’t seat four people. Humming, he disappears down the hallway and reappears carrying the recliner as if it weighs nothing.

“Please put that back when you’re done with it. You always move my shit around and then leave.”
“Just have Orm do it if I forget. He’s just as strong as me.”

Fin gives him a speculative look. “Is that why he lost his fight against you?”

Arthur looks aghast. “That was really catty of you,” he remarks before Orm can retort.

“I heard him call you a half-breed,” Fin snaps. “That’s not an acceptable way to talk about someone, ever. I guess I was a little curious how a half-breed beat a pure blood, is all.”

The expression on Arthur’s face is torn. There must be something else to it, but Arthur shoots him a warning look to drop it and with reluctance, Orm suppresses the hurt that Fin’s comment brought to the surface. Of course Arthur won their fight. They weren’t underwater. Orm had been foolish to challenge him there, but his combination of overconfidence and desperation would never hold up against Atlan’s trident regardless.

“Let’s start the movie,” Mera suggests, taking in everyone’s sour mood without being affected, having already experienced emotional catharsis earlier. She perches on the arm of the recliner before Arthur motions for her to take her seat. They silently negotiate their seating arrangement until Arthur sits down and she settles on his lap. Such an intimate and familiar act would scandalize Atlantean nobility and threaten their marriage contract, if such a thing existed between them.

Orm isn’t sure how he feels. He never objectified Mera but a part of him did start to take her for granted and on principle, felt possessive because her hand in marriage was promised to him. Arthur never took her away from him, because she wasn’t his to take, but it was still a rejection nonetheless. He’s spent the majority of his life viewing her as his future wife, and seeing her with another man unsettles him.

“Arthur, leave some space for Jesus,” Fin remarks with a grin, earning a pillow being swung in her direction.

Orm deflects the projectile because it was thrown with a little too much force for a human to comfortably absorb. “I’m convinced you’re actually trying to kill this woman, Arthur.”

“I wouldn’t have to, if she’d watch her mouth,” Arthur counters, dragging his finger across his throat in a menacing manner towards Fin, who merely chuckles. She lifts the remote and starts the movie.

It’s immediately apparent that this film is much different from the one he watched earlier in the week. Orm is a little surprised by the opulence—someone spent money to recreate such elaborate scenes for the sake of entertainment? It seems a waste, although he is admittedly entertained, or at least his attention is diverted. The male lead is pretty unremarkable but he finds the female lead interesting. She is stuck in a betrothal against her will, and Orm is reminded of his mother.

Watching Rose run around unsupervised with someone of very low social standing makes Orm wonder if his mother felt the same way, unburdened and like she was seeing the world for the first time. Rose’s mother doesn’t take into account how her daughter actually feels and that’s certainly a feeling that Atlanna must be familiar with. He doesn’t want to root for Jack on principle, but her fiancée has so few redeeming qualities that he finds that he has an actual preference.

Similar to the first time he watched a movie, Orm finds Fin nodding off intermittently, even though it’s the middle of the afternoon. She completely drifts off before the scene she referenced earlier, and it’s not necessarily the scandalous drivel he expected. Orm may not have personal experience with it, but he knows that people are affected by physical chemistry with one another. Watching two people play out their mutual infatuation is somehow interesting.
Once the ship hits the iceberg, Fin is startled awake by the sheer volume of the film. She falls back asleep before the boat completely sinks and Orm watches the devastation of the ocean liner breaking apart while she dozes peacefully next to him, ankle still perilously elevated on the coffee table. She misses all the suspense and drama while Arthur and Mera are riveted. It's not surprising that they both cry when Jack dies while Orm is wondering how humans managed to live long enough to create the wheel when cold water is apparently dangerous enough to kill them.

(Watching Rose throw the necklace back into the ocean seems wasteful—and it’s technically polluting—but Orm must confess that sentiment often eludes him.)

Orm will admit only to himself that he’s moved by the very last scene. Watching Rose and Jack reunite after she lived a very full life without him is touching. He wonders if his mother feels that same joy with her surface dweller, flawed and unremarkable though he may be. Perhaps there’s something romantic about that, all that waiting he did, although such an attitude he personally doesn’t find appealing.

“Aw man, she missed the end,” Arthur says quietly to Mera, glancing over to where Fin’s about one twitch away from sliding off the loveseat.

“Why does she own such a sad movie?” Mera asks, wiping away tears.

“Sometimes we like to watch movies to make us cry,” Arthur says simply. “Sometimes we want to laugh, or get angry, or just escape. Movies help us do that. Some are bad, some are practically an art form, but there’s content that appeals to almost everyone. That’s what makes the surface world so great.”

“Why does anyone want to experience emotion on purpose?” Orm is genuinely puzzled by this. The movie only affected him towards the end, and not nearly to the degree that it did to Mera and Arthur.


“You let Mera pick the movie; it wasn't my decision. She seems to regret her choice.”

“I didn’t hate it,” Mera says sullenly, moving back to sit on the arm of the recliner. “But it would have been a better movie if they would have ended up safe together.”

“It wouldn’t have been as effective that way,” Arthur contradicts.

“Fin described it as ‘doomed love’ and I suppose that fits,” Orm states. He glances over at his unconscious host and manages to rearrange her before she falls. “Although we might not get any more on the subject for awhile.”

“Aw, let her sleep it off.”

“She’s going to be fine, right?” Mera demands.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m gonna wake her up in a few so I know how high to preheat the oven,” Arthur brushes off her concern as he stands up and stretches. He sees the bag that Claudia left for him and pulls out a piece of paper. "But first you can tell me why there's a S.T.A.R. Laboratories bag here."
Deep in the clutches of slumber, Fin reluctantly wakes up to someone nudging her arm. Blearily she opens her eyes and stares up into Arthur Curry’s face a few inches from hers and screams. Her panicked flailing nearly sends her off the edge of the loveseat. Someone grabs her wrist and maneuvers her upright again, and she realizes that it’s Orm, who’s sitting beside her, glaring at his brother.

“If I woke up to your face looming over mine, I’d react the same way. She’s clearly traumatized by you.”

“I’m not ugly or anything,” Arthur grumbles, rolling his eyes at his brother’s pettiness.

Fin smiles sleepily and leisurely begins to contemplate how badly she’ll fuck up her sleep schedule for tomorrow if she falls back asleep. A solid kick to the side of the loveseat jolts her back into awareness.

“Hey, Sleepyhead, what’s with the S.T.A.R. Laboratories bag?”

Fin has no idea what Arthur’s talking about until he brings it from the doorway and drops it in her lap. She squawks because it’s heavy, that asshole. At least she’s awake now. She looks at the strange item before glancing up at him questioningly.

“I’ve never seen this before, Arthur,” Fin says with a sigh.

“We didn’t have a chance to tell her it was here. Your arrival was rather abrupt,” Mera admits, crossing her arms.

“And how were we supposed to know the significance of the logo when you asked?” Orm chimes in, gesturing to him and Mera.

Staring at the logo on the canvas, Fin glances over at them. “Yeah, Arthur, how would they know what S.T.A.R. Labs is?”

“Are all three of you going to gang up on me?” Arthur asks, exasperated.

Fin glances at Orm, Orm glances at Mera, Mera glances at Fin, and they all three nod.

“Yes,” they all say in unison, and Arthur groans.

“Can we just get back to the bag?”

“A woman named Claudia dropped it off,” Mera tells him. “You didn’t give us a chance to explain before.

“Claudia was here?” Arthur’s voice cracks.

Fin beams at him; he had an epic crush on her in school, and it still brings a smile to her face when she thinks about all the times Arthur embarrassed himself in front of her trying to look cool.

“She was a tall, blonde, scantily-clad woman,” Mera elaborates.

“Mera, a person’s state of dress can easily change,” Orm contradicts. “I’m sure she’s not always scantily-clad.”
“Yeah, she is,” Fin and Arthur state simultaneously.

“So you know her, then,” Mera’s voice falls a little short of accusing and Arthur whips his head around defensively.

“Claudia’s a really nice woman we went to school with,” Fin says kindly, trying to take her attention off of Arthur. “She and Steph met through work, and if you actually had some listening comprehension, Arthur, you’d remember that Steph worked at S.T.A.R. Labs when they did that whole pesky long distance thing a few years back. S.T.A.R. Labs uses bags like this for their community outreach programs; it’s probably just something she had on hand. Steph volunteered all the time when she lived in Gotham.”

“Yeah, I mean, I just thought...maybe, since I haven’t heard from Victor in awhile…that it might be from him or something. It’s dumb.”

“Can’t you just text him or something?” It’s a question Fin herself has wondered when Arthur will ignore her for months at a time.

“I mean, sure,” Arthur reassures her. “He was checking into some things for me. I haven’t heard back in awhile. I guess I just assumed it was from him because I wanted it to be.”

“Steph works with him sometimes, but if he had anything for you there’s no reason why he’d leave it with me.” Fin says this to him, not unkindly. “If you want to know how someone’s doing, you generally have to ask them.”

A moment of tense, awkward silence descends upon the room, probably because Mera and Orm are making no small deal of staring at them with unabashed interest.

“Hey, what should I preheat the oven to?” Arthur asks suddenly, heading towards the kitchen, if only to get a bit of a breather. She’s not sure why he’s so upset about Victor, but if it’s a Justice League concern, it’s not really any of her business. The organization doesn’t seem like it’s a well-oiled machine or anything from Arthur’s pretty blasé attitude about it. Maybe that’s what’s stressing him out. He sucks at communicating.

“Three seventy five,” Fin calls out. “But you could have just had Orm Google it. I taught him how to look things up today.”

This last sentence Fin says with pride; he’s certainly taken to it much better than any other person she’s tried to explain it to—mostly older students that are retired and once, before he passed away, her uncle. Orm looks as content as Fin’s ever seen him and she wonders what he got into while she was away.

“Teaching my brother how to use the internet will probably end badly for you.” Fin blinks for a moment and narrows her eyes at Arthur when he reemerges from the kitchen.

“Why is that?”

“Atlantis definitely doesn’t have us beat in that area, for better or worse. A whole new world is at his fingertips. I bet he could hack into the Pentagon with your laptop. He is pretty smart, you know.”

“Yes, he’s informed me of this,” Fin comments drily, but Orm hasn’t lost his look of superiority. Jesus, you teach one guy how to use Google and he thinks he’s motherfucking Steve Jobs.

“I’m hardly interested in your meager online offerings,” Orm intones drolly. “After stumbling upon some unsavory content I’m convinced there’s very few, if any, redeeming qualities for the rest of
your recreational content. I'm sure the appeal of Google will wear off eventually.”

“Damn it Orm, you have to give things a chance, Jesus,” Fin groused, but knows the search engine is addictive as fuck and there's no way he'll ever stop using it. She stretches as if to get up, but it only makes things worse. She winds up yawning and Arthur smirks.

“Fin, you totally fell asleep and missed the movie.”

She hears the unspoken again and yeah, that certainly sounds like her. Fin blinks, trying to recall the last thing she was awake for. She can normally last at least an hour but upon reflection she’s pretty sure she only caught the first forty five minutes. “Oh shit.”

“If we replayed everything you missed we’d have to watch the majority of the movie over again,” Mera says gravely. Her eyes are a little red, and Fin wonders if she cried. She knows Arthur well enough to know that he did, even if he looks no worse for wear.

“Did you like it?” Fin asks tentatively to Mera and Orm.

“The ending is too sad,” Mera declares. “I was told the movie would be very emotional and dramatic but I wasn’t prepared for the impact.”

“I was led to believe the content would be more explicit but what was shown was still gratuitous,” Orm tells her.

“Boobs aren’t a huge deal in this culture. Well, maybe in America they are, because God forbid there are sex scenes when it’s okay to slit throats on network television, but overall I don’t find them to be too scandalous. I mean, I see boobs every day.”

Fin pats her chest and Orm gives her an unimpressed look at her little joke. She smiles and begins rifling through the contents of the bag on her lap curiously, the weight on her thighs finally reminding her of its presence.

“She said the items were to welcome me to the area, but I didn’t really know what anything was,” Orm admits quietly. He’s ignoring Arthur and Mera again, and it occurs to her that he doesn’t mean to do it out of rudeness. But by default Fin is the person with whom he has the less awkward baggage and issues, despite their earlier disagreement. Fin knows she’s been less than civil, and recognizes his statement for what it is; a request to explain things to him again. She pulls out the t-shirt first.

“Aww, there’s a Gotham City Uni shirt for you from Steph, I assume…Claudia’s fancy artisanal pickles, fuck yeah…Tom Curry’s infamous hot sauce with peppers from my garden…a few Pixar movies, because apparently those girls want us to ugly cry…Rachael Murphy’s pepper jelly, also made with peppers from my garden…a bottle of red wine from a Gotham vineyard, looks nice and sweet…Greta’s cherry pie filling, which I am flat out stealing from you…oh God, the Amnesty Bay almanac, I didn’t know they still made those…Jacob’s smoked deer jerky…and—”

Fin sits up when she sees the familiar wrapper for a Maison du Chocolat bar. Thankfully, this item is addressed to her. Fin told Claudia once, like four years ago, that she liked this extremely expensive brand of chocolate that she tried once and Claudia fucking remembered that shit. As the former valedictorian and homecoming queen, current Instagram and science world darling, and future Secretary of Agriculture and queen of the universe, Fin knows that Claudia pretty much has everything going for her, but that, to her, is Claudia’s best quality. She talks to you, listens to what you say, and remembers. Truly thoughtful people are so hard to come by and Claudia is the real deal. She and Steph met trying to figure out ways to making farming and raising livestock more
sustainable but in Fin’s mind, they met trying to literally save the world.

“Bless those sweet women,” Fin declares sincerely, closing her eyes and smelling the expensive chocolate through the wrapper. Just the act of holding it up to her nose and inhaling makes her feel happy. It doesn’t erase the pain she felt earlier, but it's definitely a turning point for what was really turning into an epic bad day.

Arthur knows she’s obsessed with chocolate, but Mera and Orm are confused. Mera frowns. “What are you doing?”

“Smell this,” Fin instructs, brandishing the candy bar at Mera. The princess walks over, takes it tentatively in her hand, and does as asked, handing it back after a moment.

"Yes...?"

“Isn’t it amazing?”

“It smells fine, I guess.”

Fin clasps a hand over her heart as if Mera has wounded her. She offers it to Orm, who is probably a lot more curious than he’s letting on. He tucks the corner of the bar against his nose and breathes in and out casually for a moment before inhaling slowly. He exhales hesitantly, almost as if he doesn’t want to scent to dissipate.

“It smells good.”

“I wish I had some more chocolate or I’d make brownies or something.”

“With crutches?”

“I can cook with my arm in a cast,” Fin sasses. “Crutches are nothing new.”

“When was your arm in a cast?”

“About six years ago I got into a fight with Kenny Hawes and he pushed me into a wall. I got a hairline fracture and the doctor insisted on a cast. They just let him out of jail in May—he was in for assault, ironically.”

“Fin, Kenny is a bad dude. He’d have no problem coming over here and wasting you after a night of drinking. Don’t you worry about that? That whole family is a giant trash fire.”

Fin crosses her arms. “Of course I worry about the Hawes. I worry about a bunch of people that live here. But I sleep easier with my dad’s Sig.”

“A .22 isn’t going to stop a dude as big as Kenny unless you shoot him in the head.”

“Well, I do have a reputation for actually having the balls to shoot someone if they’re a legitimate threat. Besides, when your boy comes over, have him bring me something that will scare off Kenny for good.”

“I mean, it might actually vaporize him, but not huge loss there,” Arthur smiles and crosses his arms. Kenny tormented him all through school until Arthur got bigger than him. Unfortunately it wasn’t until junior year, but it did finally end. That doesn’t stop the oldest Hawes brother from picking fights with half the town, but one of its resident’s finally outgrew the harassment and that’s a win in Fin’s book.
“What do you mean by your boy?” Orm asks.

“The captain of the guards I sent to watch out for you,” Arthur explains. “He’s going to swing by in a few days. Fin says you need a training partner.”

Orm doesn’t appear to have much of a reaction to this.

“Hey, I thought you might like to let off some steam,” Fin says, trying to get him to lighten up.

“It won’t be much of a fight without my trident.” It sounds a little more petulant than Orm probably realizes, and Fin tries not to smile.

Arthur crosses his arms.

“I’ll just have them bring your old stuff.”

Fin glances in Arthur’s direction but doesn’t want to meet his eyes. “Is that a good idea?”

*I’m not so sure genocide is off the table.*

“Arthur, please reconsider,” Mera urges. “He may seem unlikely to act against the surface world now, but that could change.”

Orm shoots Mera an unreadable look but says nothing. Fin has no idea what they discussed when she and Arthur left.

“He seems fine, Mera,” Arthur tells her. “Unless there’s something I should know about?”

Mera meets his eyes for a moment before looking away, and Fin wonders if she and Orm had a decent heart to heart while she and Arthur were gone. Clearly the subject was discussed, but neither Mera nor Orm is forthcoming. Arthur appears conflicted but he has no desire to ruin their fragile peace with an interrogation.

“Did Claudia tell you guys anything else when she came by?” Fin asks, because even though this conversation is important, they’re clearly at an impasse.

“She left you a note,” Orm informs her. “And she mentioned a purple dress.”

“Perfect, thanks,” Fin says, still eying her chocolate bar speculatively. Orm might enjoy it, so Fin thinks after Arthur and Mera leave she might share it with him because she feels a little bad about how she treated him today. Yeah, he wasn’t so great either, but she was kind of awful on purpose.

The timer goes off for the oven pre-heating, and Arthur disappears into the kitchen. His dad’s made lasagna for him enough that she trusts him not to mess it up; she’s already placed the foil on top but she sits up to call out, “Put it in for forty five minutes!”

Fin flops back into the cushions as she listens to Arthur’s footsteps in the kitchen. She doesn’t think anything of ordering Arthur around or asking him to do menial tasks for him; he does the same thing to her. Mera and Orm must find it strange because they’re oddly quiet at times, probably taken aback by their informality.

Sighing wistfully, Fin tucks the candy bar back in the bag and pulls out the pickle jar. It’s a little stereotypical, yeah, but Fin can’t open it. Wordlessly, Orm holds out his hand.

“Be gentle, please,” Fin urges. “I know you’re strong enough to break the glass without trying.”

Completely expressionless, Orm twists off the lid before handing it back to her. She fishes a pickle out of the jar and to Mera’s horror, drops the end gracelessly into her mouth. Fin can’t help it; pickles
aren’t a food you can eat with dignity. She bites down with a satisfying crunch. The tang and bite of the vinegar makes her mouth water; it hurts so good. Fin hates yellow mustard but Claudia uses some kind of honey mustard blend that makes them sweet.

“Pickles can be an acquired taste, but you can try one if you want,” Fin offers, brandishing the jar towards Orm and Mera. The latter recoils, but the Atlantean prince, having spent more time with her, is not put off. A small part of Fin hopes he trusts her good taste in food by now, but that sounds dangerously egotistical.

Orm bites down and flinches. He’s too dignified and proud to spit it out, but his face makes it clear he feels a little betrayed by Fin’s enthusiastic endorsement. The fact that Orm hates them makes Mera want to try one, naturally.

“I don’t know what your problem is, but I think they taste fine,” Mera tells him placidly after she tries one.

Arthur emerges from the kitchen and swipes the jar from her hand, helping himself to one. Apparently trolling someone who doesn’t like what you’re eating isn’t solely a surface dweller custom, as Mera takes an extra vigorous bite just to watch Orm wince.

“You’re all disgusting.”

Fin surges forward and swipes the uneaten portion out of his hand. “Don’t want that to go to waste.”

The blend of flavors and spices is just so good and Fin thanks God that Claudia took up such a weird hobby a few years back. She’s pretty high up in Dane Messersmith’s high-tech agricultural empire but still remembers her humble roots in her grandmother’s garden.

“Did you really make Arthur go see that movie multiple times in the movie theater?” Mera asks, licking pickle juice off her fingers just to watch Orm squirm. “It’s so sad.”

“We cried both times,” Fin says, “but sometimes that’s not a bad thing. Arthur cries a lot during movies but probably not as much as I do.”

“Why put yourself through that?”

“I guess it’s easier on your heart than crying over stuff in real life,” Fin says. “Sometimes it’s good to purge your emotions. Bottling them up is not good for you. If you repress them, eventually they’ll get so strong they’ll overtake you at a bad time. I’m speaking from experience, so now I try and watch a tearjerker every now and then and so I don’t cry in public over something dumb.”

*I’m kind of glad I fell asleep. I’m still emotionally drained after today. More crying would have been a bad idea.*

(Fin still needs to tell Tom about the resonator guitar—that she will *not* be lending it to him as it’s more fit for the garbage than it is to be played by human hands.)

“Just don’t make my brother watch anything too weird. No Wes Anderson or *It’s Always Sunny* or he’s going to think we’re all like that and start wearing pastel outfits and weird hats and asking about milk steak recipes.”

“I’m right here,” Orm reminds them mildly, but Arthur waves a dismissive hand at him.

“Arthur, once Orm has a better idea of what he likes, he can watch whatever he wants, assuming my tastes haven’t convinced him that we’re all a bunch of crazy weirdos up here on the surface.”
“I’m sure that ship has sailed,” Arthur counters. He looks at Orm. “You doing okay, buddy?”

“I don’t know how to answer that.”

“Awesome, that’s not a no.” Arthur is practically glowing. Fin hates to think how Orm must have been treating him over the past few months. “So what do you want to do until the lasagna is finished?”

Fin’s got a ready answer for that. “You can assemble some Caesar salads if you want or make some garlic bread. I’m not sure if I can trust this leg or not, if you don’t mind.”

Looking thoughtful, Arthur motions for Mera and she rises to join him in the kitchen. He makes a similar gesture at Orm, but he is unmoved. Far from being hurt, Arthur merely shrugs.

“Your brother’s not a bad cook,” Fin tells him.

“Cooking is beneath a king,” Orm intones coolly.

“But not a prince?” Fin jabs lightly, referencing all the times she’s made Orm help.

“But not a prince,” Orm repeats. “It’s more about his utter lack of propriety. A king is served by others. He does not serve them in the most literal sense. I get that he feels responsible for what happened to you, but he demeans himself by waiting on us like this and following every frivolous order you issue.”

Fin takes a deep breath through her nose, trying to parse through everything he just said. “One could argue a king’s duty is to serve all people, and that the ability to identify with his subjects on all levels would make him better equipped to fulfill his duties. I want my leaders to understand my problems and sympathize with them so I don’t feel like I’m fighting to survive on my own. Their decisions on issues like health care and taxes really impact my life. If someone in power makes choices to line his pocket as opposed to helping the people that rely on him, a lot of people could suffer or die. Even if sentiment against the surface is very unfavorable, a war would have very negative consequences for both sides. Good leaders have to take that into consideration.”

Instead of immediately taking offense, Orm looks thoughtful. It makes Fin wonder how hard he and Mera fought while she was gone. “I wasn’t a bad king, Fin.”

“No, maybe you were just short-sided and misguided.”

Maybe it’s her tone of voice or something she said, but Orm almost flinches. Fin doesn’t want to kill over half an hour with him in awkward silence, so she picks up the remote and turns the television back on. She navigates the special features from the DVD menu until she finds a little mini-documentary that could appeal to him.

“You know, poor and uncivilized surface dwelling mortals have to rely on submarines to reach the sea floor. It takes hours for us to adjust to the pressure.”

“I’m familiar with such seafaring devices. They’re very primitive.”

“They’re our only insight into the ocean, for the most part.”

“Why are there so few expeditions?”

“It’s expensive.”
“Doesn’t your military care about what’s on the sea floor? It’s not exactly harmless down there.”

“Well, until the wave hit we expected the biggest threats to come from other nations or from other planets. We looked up, not down. But your little stunt almost put Atlantis on the map. People are torn as to whether or not you’re real but I bet our armed forces care a whole lot.”

Fin moves to make another selection, but Orm’s hand covers hers and lowers the remote. “I’m not done watching it.”

“You sounded bored.”

“The vessels are primitive, but I’m not sure why this director would be willing to make so many uncomfortable journeys into the ocean for the sake of a film.”

“Some people really love the ocean, Orm.”

“Enough to get creatures inked onto their skin?”

There it is again, that shitty tone, and Fin rolls her eyes. “You must think we’re all careless and irresponsible, but a lot of people really love nature. I think the overall worse thing you can say about us up here is that we’re not living up to our potential. We can do better, but you could probably say that about a lot of Atlanteans, too. I mean, weren’t you staying in a prison for awhile? If all Atlanteans were good and moral and just, would you even need to put them in jail? Or is it just your physical attributes that makes you superior?”

Orm levels a searing glare at Fin but she doesn’t shrink away. She is not dropping this.

“I feel like our criteria for judgment is vastly different.” Orm says after a moment.

“I’m sure there’s some common ground,” Fin suggests, leaning forward and testing the integrity of her leg. She winces at the raw skin and the scars that Topo’s suckers will inevitably leave behind.

“When I was incarcerated, I encountered souls so degenerate and devoid of goodness, the likes of which I never realized existed. In a way, they too were lives I sought to elevate by destroying mankind, and many great Atlantean soldiers died for it. Good men perished in battle while bad ones languished in prison, safe from the war I started. I suppose that the worst we have to offer is certainly not better than your best.”

“If that was a compliment, it certainly needs some work,” Fin mutters. She goes to poke at her injuries again but Orm catches her hand.

“Stop that.”

“Why? It’s not like it’s hurting you.”

“You’re not going to make it any better that way.”

“It feels weird, like when you get Novocain at the dentist, which now that I think about it, isn’t something you can relate to. But it’s some weird compulsion. I can’t stop touching it.”

“Is it still completely numb?”

“It’s tingly, like pins and needles.”

“Be glad Topo didn’t bite you. He has no verified fatalities but he has bitten many people. Like you, they have expressed a similar interest in keeping him safe at their own expense.”
“Because he’s adorable,” Fin practically sings. She jumps when she hears something crash in the kitchen, and reflexively tries to stand to go investigate. She momentarily forgets about her condition and nearly falls, Orm steadies her and wordlessly makes her agree to stand still while he fetches her crutches. He gives her a wide berth (having not seen how they work, she can only guess as to how he thought they were used) and hobbles to the kitchen.

“Arthur, why is my cutting board on the ground?” Fin asks tiredly. “And how did it get broken in half?”

“I guess I don’t know my own strength?”

There’s a knife in Mera’s hand, so she’s clearly the culprit, but it’s sweet that Arthur tries to take the fall for her. He’s so unbelievably smitten that Fin smiles despite the broken heirloom. She shuffles forward to take care of the mess, but Arthur maneuvers her into the nearest chair. For emphasis, he squeezes her hands and places them on her lap before propping her crutches up against the table.

“It’s fine; I got it.”

Arthur leans down and picks up the wooden pieces. He sweeps up the splinters and the bread slices Mera must have been cutting. The two Atlantean royals watch his humble act as if entranced. Head bowed and shoulders hunched while he works, Arthur still cuts a striking figure.

“I’ve broken so much worse than a cutting board while I was here,” Arthur reflects as he bins the garbage.

“My dad’s motorcycle comes to mind, but since he’s not here and neither are any motorcycles, you’re probably safe from that level of catastrophe.”

Arthur’s mouth quirks up. “I mean, there is a truck out front. It’s almost like you’re daring me.”

“Please, no,” Fin urges, recalling half a dozen incidents in the house that resulted in them both getting yelled at by her dad. She kind of spaces out for awhile as Mera and Arthur scurry through the kitchen and finish making salads and garlic bread. The latter is a huge fan of carbs and Fin has no idea how he forgoes them when he’s in Atlantis. Between lack of bread and alcohol down there, she’s unsure how he’s actually surviving.

The oven beeps and Arthur is quick to retrieve the lasagna from the oven. He uses oven mitts, which Fin isn’t sure he actually needs, given his physiology, but perhaps it’s a habit he picked up during childhood from Tom. Growing up, Arthur never accidentally hurt his father in any serious way, but he was a little too much to handle sometimes.

“So today I have for you a fresh chopped Caesar salad, with shaved Parmesan cheese but without croutons, because I remembered that you hate them.”

Laughing, Fin picks up her pepper grinder and douses the Romaine lettuce. “Someone’s been watching Chopped lately.”

“My mom loves it, and I’ve caught it a few times with her,” Arthur gushes, pulling out Mera’s chair. She smiles up at him appreciatively when he gives her the salad. Fin winces at the face Orm pulls at their little display but figures he might be a little jealous.

He did spent over twenty years betrothed to this woman, so I guess that makes sense.

With a smile, Fin imagines Altanna and Tom tucked together on the couch watching Chopped judges critiquing food. “I think it’s adorable that she loves it.”
“What is that?” Orm asks.

“It’s a television show where contestants are given random ingredients, often incompatible, and forced to make an edible dish with them. Sometimes the combinations are just awful. They even have shows where the viewers select the ingredients and those are the worst! I think they just like to torment the chefs.”

“It’s a nice way to learn about different foods,” Arthur says with a shrug, sitting down beside her and digging into his salad. “There are lots of global ingredients I’ve never heard of.”

“I don’t have too many exotic offerings,” Fin admits. “Most of what I use is commonly available.”

“So everyone here eats the way you do?” Orm questions.

Arthur laughs. “Fin’s a great cook and puts a lot of thought into her meals. I promise that you’re eating better than almost anyone else in the Bay. But she makes a lot of rabbit food. Dad is a grilling master. If you want some good old fashioned meat and potatoes, he’s your guy.”

Fin has to agree. “His ribs are awesome.”

Orm likely has no idea what she’s talking about, but he eats his salad thoughtfully. He sniffs the pepper grinder and decides against using it, an action that Mera mimics although she does put the slightest amount on her food. She sneezes but doesn’t seem to find any fault in the taste.

“Hey Fin, can I crack open that bottle of wine?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

Arthur slips out of the kitchen and returns with the bottle, fishing out a corkscrew from one of her drawers. Orm and Mera watch him open the bottle with some interest.

“Mera has her own method of opening wine bottles, right?” Arthur winks at her, and she smiles fondly before glancing over at Orm and losing every ounce of her good nature.

“It’s called hydrokinesis,” Mera informs her. Her eyes turn a vibrant shade of blue and Fin watches in utter amazement as the wine flows out of the bottle and into the air as if encased in an invisible bubble. It hovers in the air and separates into four equal-sized orbs before each of them elegantly slips into separate wine glasses.

Fin clasps her hands together. “Bravo.”

“You’re so easily amused by such tricks?” Orm asks.

“Well, my inferior physiology doesn’t let me do such things,” Fin says evenly, leaning back in her chair. Arthur nudges her underneath the table and she lashes back, unfortunately with the wrong leg. She doesn’t really feel her numb foot hit his boot, but it makes her leg jolt and she nearly topples out of her chair.

“Are you okay?” Mera asks innocently as Fin manages to catch herself on the edge of the table.

“I’m super,” Fin reassures her and takes a dignified sip of wine. It’s nice and sweet, the way she likes, and she smiles at Arthur’s wince and Orm’s grimace.

“It’s like grape juice,” Arthur mutters, polishing off his glass in one swig. “Mom gave us some of that merlot she likes to give you, remember? I can go get that from the truck.”
“Orm might prefer it; it’s not as sweet.”

“If it’s a gift for you, I don’t want to take it.”

“Well, it was a gift to me, so it’s mine to do with as I please. Arthur, fetch me my wine.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Once Arthur exits the front door, Mera leans forward almost conspiratorially. “You feel comfortable just ordering him around like that?”

“Yes?” Fin confesses. “I mean, he’s not my king.”

Punctuating this with another healthy gulp of wine, Fin notes that Orm and Mera seem a little discomfited by her answer. Amnesty Bay isn’t a prim and proper place, her family and Arthur’s were never especially formal, and she and Arthur as people are more relaxed than royal. When Arthur returns, he refills every empty glass with merlot except for Fin’s; she places her hand over the brim.

“I’ll fall asleep again if I drink that so soon.”

“More for me, then,” Arthur reasons. He clears away the salad and plates the lasagna and the garlic bread. It’s work that Fin would normally do, but Arthur apparently doesn’t have the heart to watch her hobble around on her crutches.

“Thanks, Arthur.”

“No problem.”

The slice of lasagna Arthur cut for her is disturbingly large but she says nothing as she pushes her garlic bread to the edge of the plate so it’s not covered in sauce. Her fork slices through the lasagna with just the perfect amount of resistance; her first bite is always the best. She chews on it thoughtfully, watching Mera and Orm to see if they like it. Mera is a little more hesitant than Orm, who seems to have moved past the pickle incident.

“Is that clove?” Arthur asks after a moment, chewing thoughtfully.

“There’s also cinnamon,” Fin replies.

“No ricotta?”

Fin smiles. “You lose all those other delicate flavors from the Bolognese sauce because ricotta is too overpowering. Orm, it doesn’t matter how many recipes you Google for any given thing; chances are that the best one in existence is only in someone’s mind—that they’ve combined six or seven different ones together and experimented to find the perfect combination of ingredients.”

“Can’t things go wrong that way?”

“Sure, but sometimes they go oh so right. I added carrots because I like my Bolognese sauce to be sweeter. I substituted a cooking wine for water in my béchamel sauce because it sticks if I don’t. I hate fennel so I omit it completely in the sausage. And I use just a little bit of nutmeg. I’ve been perfecting this recipe for almost ten years.”

“I can’t imagine it getting any better,” Mera tells her kindly. “It’s probably the best thing I’ve eaten since I’ve come ashore.”

“It’s not hard to beat roses,” Orm mutters. “Fin, please tell Mera that they’re not supposed to be
“Arthur, please tell Orm that roses are indeed edible.”

Arthur’s face contorts but Fin places a comforting hand on his arm. “I mean, eating flowers straight up is unusual but not unheard of. And roses are often used in cooking. I love rose-flavored macarons. I’ll have to find some recipes and well…maybe get some more roses.”

“I can get you some to replace the ones you got rid of earlier,” Arthur offers kindly.

“Isn’t that like, some kind of abuse of power?” Fin wonders aloud.

“I mean, I don’t have much use for my American currency anymore. It’s not like I’m using our Atlantean taxpayer dollars on you.”

“Oh thank God.”

“So please don’t donate all my money away again.”

Fin rolls her eyes and continues eating, noting that her guests all seem to have heavy appetites. Orm especially eats a large amount, and Fin wonders if she’s been feeding him enough. He might not tell the truth in front of Arthur, and she doesn’t want to embarrass him. He’s also not above making demands, so she figures he’s feeling deprived enough he’ll simply inform her.

“So what’s for dessert?” Arthur asks, laughing at Fin’s look of surprise. “I’m just messing with you. I was thinking about taking us to the ice cream shop in town. I bet Orm’s never had ice cream before and I know Mera never has.”

“Your mom’s truck has all the seatbelts in it, so I’m down, but how are we all going to fit?”

“It’s a pickup truck, Fin. Orm can ride in the back.”

“That’s a little undignified for him, don’t you think, to put a prince in the back of a pickup truck like that?”

“Well the only person here that isn’t royalty is you, and if Dad finds out I ever made you ride in the back, he’d tell me off for not treating you like a gentleman. He’s still pissed about what happened to you earlier. I got the lecture again while you were in the shower.”

It was more along the lines of Fin sitting on the ground with a bum leg while water poured down over her, but it did effectively drown out the sounds around her. She had no idea that Tom was actually mad at Arthur.

“I wish I could drive the truck and all three of you could sit in the back,” Fin mutters, draining the last of her water glass.

“Too bad you’re all fucked up from Topo. I guess I’m driving again.”

“If we’re going out in public, let me put on something different than a Bruins shirt that’s older than we are,” Fin says, pushing her chair away from the table and hobbling back down the hall.

In her room, Fin rummages through her clothes and finds a tank top and some shorts that aren’t too scandalously short. She’s sad that Arthur accidentally knocked her shoes into the Bay trying to rescue her from Topo—they were her favorite flip flops.

“Sweet, Ingrid Michaelson,” Arthur comments when he sees her top. For all the Metallica, Nine Inch
Nails, and Slayer he listens to, he's a fucking goner for Ingrid.

Fin beams. “It’s your secret weakness—the charms of female singer-songwriters.”

“Just her, though. Don’t tell Vulko how easily I go down when you see him. He still thinks I’m some mythic hero.”

“It’s a good thing we know otherwise,” Mera deadpans.

“Why would Fin be telling Vulko anything?” Orm asks peevishly.

“He’s visiting next week,” Arthur informs Orm, “and it’s non-negotiable.”

“Won’t a report from the mouth of the king satisfy him?”

“I think it’s a little more personal than that, buddy.”

“Am I to receive every Atlantean who’s done me wrong so I can assuage their guilt?”

It’s a little dramatic, but Fin can totally see why Orm feels that way. Having Mera’s visit forced on him was definitely not his idea, but apparently he found it tolerable because her house is still in one piece. But Orm has nothing kind to say about his former vizier. She suspects that betrayal cut a lot deeper.

“Dude, Vulko just wants to make sure you’re doing alright. He likely wants to meet your gracious host and check out your accommodations. He’s a naturally curious guy.”

“You mean he’s meddlesome, treacherous, and invasive. I’d rather not deal with him.”

“Well, it’s Fin’s house, and she already said it was okay, as long as the visit was short.”

Orm shoots a look at Fin, and she practically dares him to speak up. She didn’t agree to receive Vulko in order to torment him. But she figures he can slink off somewhere while Vulko gets the nickel and dime tour, probably to critique her non-existent security measures and to make sure she’s not insane.

To her relief, Orm doesn’t object further, following them all outside silently as they figure out seating arrangements. Arthur opens the passenger side door and just grabs Fin and places her in the front seat. It’s a little mortifying but probably less-so than watching her struggle with crutches and a bum leg. Since Mera is wearing a dress, she gets to sit in the cabin while Orm studies the bed of the truck with disdain.

“C’mon, there’s free ice cream involved,” Arthur tells him.

“That doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“Get in!” Mera urges, although her tone isn’t terribly unkind.

Arthur groans. “Please?”

Fin turns around and opens the tiny back window. “The sooner you get in, the sooner we leave, the sooner we get ice cream, and the sooner you get to come back.”

That seems to do the trick. Arthur literally sighs in relief when Orm climbs into the bed of the truck.

“Is it legal to ride like this?” Orm inquires.
Arthur and Fin look at each other and shrug at the same time.

“I mean, Amnesty Bay is full of Maine hillbillies, so I don’t really think it’ll be a problem,” Fin says.

“And I’ll drive extra slow for you,” Arthur promises, although after their last experience with him, everyone knows it’s so Mera doesn’t think he’s an idiot. True to his word, his driving is impeccable and downtown Amnesty Bay comes into view without incident.

They pass the Murphy body shop and Fin knows Conner’s still slaving away.

(He never talks about his mom’s cancer, but every time it comes back he works sixty hour weeks to help cover the cost of her treatment and travel expenses. He heads off to Boston on either Friday or Saturday nights if they don’t have gigs, blows off some steam, and comes back ready to do it all over again. His grades were good enough for any college he could have wanted, but it would have been more money than their family could have parted with.)

It’s too bad that being a good person doesn’t make your way through life any easier.

When the truck pulls up to the dilapidated front of ice cream shop, Orm gives it a skeptic look. “I Scream on Main?”

“It’s a terrible pun,” Fin is forced to admit. “I can’t see Atlanteans bothering with such things.”

“They don’t,” Arthur stage whispers. “I tried a few times and all my jokes fell flat.”

“Maybe you’re just not funny.”

Mera hides a laugh behind her hand at Fin’s brutal delivery. She heads over to Orm, who probably slid around the bed of the truck like a sack of potatoes but is entirely unharmed. He’s glancing at the ice cream flavors in mild bewilderment but is able to pass off his cluelessness for being aloof.

“How am I supposed to know what I like?”

“Want some help?”

“If you’re offering,” Orm concedes, “I certainly don’t trust my brother.”

Arthur is wrapped up in explaining everything to Mera, completely oblivious of a few random people taking his picture. Fin averts her eyes when she realizes she’s getting a lot of looks too; apparently the whole Bay knows that Aquaman’s brother is in town. She knows that eventually the novelty will wear off, and she resolutely vows to ignore them.

“Most ice cream flavors are going to be sweet. Some are fruity and light, some are more savory and complex. Things like cheesecake, chocolate, and caramel are good ice cream flavors, but I think you should try the real things first. You seem to like fruit, so I’d suggest strawberry if you want to go that route. But vanilla is the most basic flavor and it’s still quite good. They make all their ice cream from scratch here.”

Fin orders herself a vanilla cone in solidarity. She’s not trying to overwhelm him with endless options, and judging from the sprinkle and fudge-covered treats that Arthur and Mera have, she chose wisely. She hands Orm his dessert and runs her tongue along the side of her ice cream cone, as non-suggestively as possible since Arthur is staring right at her with a huge grin.

“In all my years I haven’t ever seen you turn down chocolate ice cream.”
“Sometimes the classics are the best,” Fin reminds him, pointing at his Led Zeppelin shirt. “And sprinkles are disgusting.”

“We call them jimmies up here, and so did you before you went to Gotham. You fancy.”

Fin rolls her eyes but continues to eat up her ice cream before it melts. In retaliation for his sass, she tips his cone into his face, coating his mustache in sprinkles. Arthur totally lets it happen, and when Mera laughs, she knows why. Seeing Arthur this happy is a brand new thing for Fin, and she must say, it’s a good look for him.

“My brother is such a fool for her,” Orm tells her quietly when Fin rejoins his side to give them some privacy.

“Your brother didn’t have a very easy life growing up here,” Fin chides. “He got made fun of for not being white, for not having a mom, and for being really runty when he was younger. Amnesty Bay is home, but it’s backward, it’s conservative, and it’s racist. Let him enjoy his ridiculous ice cream with a girl he likes.”

“Why do people act like besotted fools when they think they’re in love?”

Fin shrugs. “You kind of get tunnel vision and can’t think of anything else.”

“You seem too practical to fall for such a trap.”

Laughing, Fin licks the ice cream off her lips. “I was in love with Conner, and his revelation totally busted up my heart. And I was in love with my college boyfriend, although I had no idea he was running around on me with two other girls. Man, I was so crazy for him that I make Arthur look like he friendzoned Mera.”

“You made a spectacle of yourself?”

“I’m sure I did on more than one occasion, but I’m a little more mature now, I think,” Fin reflects. “I don’t have anything to prove anymore. I’m not dating any more men that put me through the wringer for shits and giggles; I don’t care how good they are in bed. I mean, that’s probably why Niko was so talented—he was practicing with his side chicks every time I had my back turned.”

“Love doesn’t sound worth the effort, to be honest,” Orm says, making remarkable progress on his ice cream cone. The way he eats is very fastidious—he doesn’t ever make a mess. He probably doesn’t like anything messy, and love is admittedly the worst thing you can get into. “I will just avoid it.”

“I hate to break it to you, but you don’t get a say when you fall in love. You can’t do anything to hold out against it…it just happens. But hey, here on the surface, you’re not going to be running into any hot and royal Atlantean chicks so you have nothing to worry about. Thank God, right? There's no chance of it happening.”

Orm does seem relieved by her rather questionable pep talk. Fin has a point, though. He probably feels like he’s at his worst right now, and no one wants people to see them at their worst. It's not like he really cares about her opinion, so if she sees him whine or sulk or not know how to close a porn popup, it's no big deal. In the end, Orm will likely resolve all of his issues and go back to Atlantis with an emotional clean slate. Fin’s finances might be a little more worse for wear, but hopefully by then she’ll have extracted a promise from him not to destroy the world again.

Probably.
Maybe.

But it would be worth it. The fact that she still doesn't know if he'd do it again for sure drives her crazy.

“That truck over there belongs to Arthur’s father,” Orm says quietly, his eyes tracking the beat up Curry pickup from much farther away than Fin’s eyes can see. She can only spot a flicker of the sun reflect off of something metal, but trusts his eyesight more than hers. "He’s getting closer."

“They could be going to the body shop to fix up the truck or something. Lord knows that beater needs some love.”

“Or they could be heading here,” Orm contradicts, and sure enough, the truck bypasses the turn for Murphy’s Auto and creeps towards their current location.

“I’m sure this is all just an unfortunate coincidence. We can lie down in the bed of the pickup if you want and hide.”

“Hide?”

“You’ve never hidden from your parents before?”

“Hiding from my father incurred consequences that were never worth it.” He says this matter-of-factly and Fin has no idea how he can so casually insinuate that his father beat the shit out of him.

“I promise that Tom Curry is a very non-violent man and wouldn’t be upset if you wanted to wuss out this one time. I’ll even hide with you if you want.”

“I’m not a child.”

“Then you know what you’re going to love? Meeting Tom Curry in thirty seconds.”

They can both hear the doors slam to Tom and Atlanna’s pickup as they climb out and Orm turns to her.

“So you’re saying he won’t see us if we lie down in the bed of the truck?”

“I mean, he’ll probably know we’re there because Arthur’s would narc on us, but he wouldn’t push.”

“Narc?”

“Just get back in the truck!” Fin hisses, pushing him back towards the vehicle.

Orm gracefully ascends into the truck bed before Fin, standing with a crutch in each hand and the last bite of her ice cream cone shoved in her mouth, stares up it wondering how she can follow suit. His arm shoots out and hauls her up effortlessly, depositing her beside him lightly, flat on her back. The metal bed of the truck is frigid against her bare shoulders and she shivers. She realizes belatedly that she left the crutches on the ground, but she doesn’t exactly need them when she's prone.

“For only spending a few days on land, you’re a lot gentler with me than Arthur.”

“My older brother tends to get caught up in the moment and forget himself,” Orm mutters. The voices are too far away for Fin to hear clearly but only he can likely make out what they’re saying.

“What are they talking about?”
“You are correct in assuming their arrival coinciding with ours is unplanned. They are exchanging a
great deal of pleasantries with Arthur, despite seeing him only a few hours ago. I certainly didn’t get
out of seeing my father what Arthur appears to get out of seeing his.”

“Arthur doesn’t really see Tom a whole lot these days, actually,” Fin reveals. “Tom’s just happy he’s
putting down roots somewhere, even if it’s under the sea. He waited years for Arthur to stop
wandering the earth and use his powers for some real good. Thinking his existence is what got
Atlanna killed was a huge cloud over his head for a long time. The Arthur you’ve gotten to know
over the past few months isn’t anything like he used to be. He would be there one minute and then
gone the next. He was never…reliable, at least before.”

“Then I hope he’s changed as much as you say he has, or Atlantis has no future.”

“Orm, from what I’ve gathered, giving someone the benefit of the doubt is not your way, but the
help the Arthur needs isn’t just political. He grew up without you and Atlanna. He has her back, but
he still needs you in his life and he needs you to have some faith in him. I have a shitty older brother,
but you don’t! Arthur’s trying his best and that should mean something to you.”

A myriad of emotions overtakes Orm for a moment before the carefully erases any trace of emotion.
Lying down next to him, even in an uncomfortable truck bed, is still oddly intimate. His hands are
folded across his stomach and outwardly he seems peaceful enough, but he’s straining to listen to his
mother’s voice so Fin says quiet and watches the way the waning sunlight catches his eyelashes.

“They are talking about you,” Orm informs her after a few minutes.

Fin shrugs. “They probably know you can hear them, so I don’t think they’d talk about you.”

“Mother is concerned about your ankle.”

“She’s a very sweet woman.”

“Tom Curry is currently scolding Arthur for allowing you to come to harm.”

“We got into stuff all the time when we were kids. Dad would yell at me because I’m older and
should have known better, and Tom would yell at Arthur because he was bigger and stronger and
was supposed to look out for me.”

_I guess times haven’t changed much, except my parents are dead and his aren’t._

“This must be a continuation of an earlier argument. You did stop at their house before returning to
your home, correct?”

“Yeah, but I was in the shower while Arthur was getting dressed down. Tom probably thinks you
staying with me is the worst idea Arthur’s ever had.”

Orm tilts his head to the side. “That is the gist of this discussion, yes.”

“I’m sorry, this is a terrible first impression of Tom.”

“I’m not concerned about that at all. I saw him when he disembarked from his truck. He’s shorter
than my mother.”

“…Yeah?”

“That never happens in Atlantis. Mera is about as short as any Atlantean woman grows.”
“And she’s tall for a surface-dwelling woman, or at least above average. Heights vary greatly depending on what part of the world you’re in. You’re roughly average for America, maybe an inch or so above normal for a man. Arthur is just freakishly tall. Tell me Atlantean men don’t typically grow that large.”

“They do not.”

“But you’re hung up on a height difference?”

Orm’s lips thin out as if he’s unwilling to admit such a thing out loud.

There’s a tap on the side of the truck, and Fin reflexively sits up and finds her friend peering into the truck bed. “Arthur?”

“They’re gone now. Dad’s driving home with an ice cream cone in one hand, but the coast is clear. Mera went along with my parents, but I’ll give you two a lift back to your house.”

“You’re not going to the Hoffman wedding tomorrow?”

“You mean the Jeffries wedding?”

Fin blinks. “Claudia’s taking Steph’s last name, so in my mind, it’s been Claudia Hoffman for weeks, dude.”

“Better than Hawes, right? I still can’t believe she married Kenny’s brother. Shortest marriage ever, but she was being a good girl and waiting until marriage. It’s too bad she didn’t get a preview. It could have saved her a lot of disappointment.”

“Well, at least she got a huge upgrade,” Fin smirks.

“And someone who can last more than two minutes in bed,” Arthur chuckles, recalling one of Claudia’s biggest complaints. “I guess girls just keeping going until they get tired. Neat.”

Fin facepalms but laughs despite herself. “Atlanteans are going to assume all we think about is sex.”

“Well, if I had a dry spell like yours, I’d think of nothing else. But maybe you’ll hit it off with Orm’s captain.”

“Fraternization is frowned upon, I’m told,” Fin mutters drolly, feeling Orm’s eyes burn into the back of her skull.

“Only if the king finds it an offense worthy of punishment,” Arthur winks. "And I don't."

"Thanks for being a good king, dude," Fin chuckles at Orm’s very unamused expression.

Arthur gives her an appraising look. “Did you just wanna stay in the back of the truck while I drive back?”

With a frown, Fin peers down over the edge of the truck. Despite the fact Arthur’s strong enough to throw a car at her, he’ll probably end up botching her dismount somehow and she’ll end up even worse off. She bases this off of their terrible track record of personal injury, and perhaps Fin hesitates a little too long when she becomes distantly aware of some shuffling behind her.

Fin squeals when she feels a pair of strong hands haul her into a standing position. She feels Orm grip her waist and gently lower her over the side until her feet touch the ground. She wobbles a bit until Arthur hands her the crutches but she makes the descent in one piece, more than she was
originally expecting.

“She’ll get injured if she stays in here during the ride back,” Orm informs his brother brusquely. “That’s a terrible suggestion. Put her in the cabin where she’s safer.”

Fin bristles a little at being discussed as if she’s not present, but Orm has her best interests at heart. She settles next to Arthur and wonders if maybe he had some kind of disagreement or something with Mera but doesn’t exactly want to ask. The sun is beginning to set properly and paint the sky brilliant hues of pink and orange but the beauty doesn’t dispel any of the tension.

“I hope I didn’t get you into too much trouble with your dad.”

“It’s fine, just more of the same. I think he’s just deathly afraid of something happening to you. He still feels guilty, you know.”

“Over something that wasn’t his fault,” Fin mutters tiredly. “It wasn’t anyone’s fault. That’s why they call them accidents. I think about that night a lot around this time of year.”

“I wish I hadn’t been running around the world back then. I could have helped you.”

It’s a thought Fin’s had many times, but her dismissal is all-too ready. “Maybe, but non-stop crying and self-loathing are repetitive. If you’ve seen it once, you’ve seen it all.”

“That’s not true, Fin.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Arthur doesn’t even get out of the truck when they reach Fin’s house, a testament as to how antsy he must be about whatever’s going on between him and Mera. She waves to him and watches his car fade off into the distance until it’s just a metallic flicker racing towards the lighthouse.

“Oh, I forgot to ask,” Fin says suddenly as she opens the front door, “did you like the ice cream?”

“Yes.” Orm says this without any kind of attempt at aloofness.

“I’ll get you a more exciting flavor next time.”

“I was satisfied with the one you picked.”

“Oh, that reminds me, I was waiting until we were finally alone.” Fin retrieves the bag from the couch and pulls out the chocolate bar. “I didn’t want to share with Arthur.”

“How very uncharacteristic of you,” Orm muses.

“Chocolate is one of the most perfect foods. He doesn’t appreciate it the way I do, and I’m going to teach you how to eat it right. First you have to smell it. After that, you can’t just jam the entire thing in your mouth and chew it immediately. Let it sit on your tongue and melt a little bit. Then, and only then, can you chew it. You have to let all the flavors kind of slide around in your mouth. It’s a very decadent, rich food.”

Orm seems intrigued by the dark chocolate square Fin hands him. He follows her instructions and she can see him work the pip back and forth in his mouth a little, trying to coax out more flavor before he bites into it. When he finally goes for it, she has the pleasure of watching his face transform. It’s true appreciation, and Fin knows she was right to wait.

“I wanted to share this with you because it’s been a hard day for me, and I wasn’t really at my best. I
know that to a degree, you can’t really help it, but sometimes the way you talk about us surface dwellers is absolutely unacceptable and I need it to stop. I don’t think it’s something you’ll ever change your mind about, but assuming that and hearing you say it are two entirely different things.”

“Why does it bother you so much? We’re different.”

“But neither of us is better than the other, just on principle. Because as soon as one of us is somehow intrinsically better by virtue of some uncontrollable factor like race, it negates the value and credibility of the other person’s thoughts and feelings. You make judgments based on physiology but people up here make judgments based on ethnicity and appearance. Growing up and seeing the worst that humanity has to offer just because you look different makes you feel less than human. Hearing you talk sometimes reminds me of how fucking awful people are. You didn’t even grow up here and you embody some of the worst attitudes humanity has to offer.”

“Why do you give so much consideration to other people’s feelings?” Orm asks, and Fin’s not sure if he’s talking about her in particular or surface dwellers in general.

“Because caring for each other ensures our survival. Invalidating another person’s rights is the biggest obstacle to empathy. Our inability to see the big picture is why we treat our planet the way we do and why we go to war with each other and why we turn our backs on other people in need. The last thing we need is to hold all of our superficial differences against each other if we want to do better.”

Orm seems to consider her words. He may or may not agree with them, but Fin needs his compliance more than his respect at this point. Taking a deep breath, Fin feels weariness down to her very bones. It’s not very late and she already had a long nap in the middle of the afternoon, but she’s tired and knows tomorrow will be long and arduous, even though it’s a wedding she looks forward to playing. Claudia is the only woman Fin knows that wants Joni Mitchell songs played at her wedding and playing them will just remind her of her mother.

“I’m going to be gone for most of tomorrow, but you can keep yourself occupied, I hope. I’m sorry there’s not a lot of food around; I’ll have Mindy drop something off if you’d like.”

“I don’t want to trouble her.”

“Mindy would probably enjoy some company,” Fin says truthfully. Due to Curtis’s hours she spent a lot of time at the house by herself anyway, but the circumstances are a lot different now. Fin wonders if introducing them was the right thing to do, but it’s too late now. She still stands by the idea of Orm serving some kind of penance and Mindy is the person affected the most by the wave. If he can help her fix up her place, it’s the least he can do.

“Her daughter is very unlike her.”

Fin shrugs. “I’m not sure if I’m like either of my parents, to be honest. Don’t you ever wonder the same thing?”

Orm looks like he’s going to say something before thinking better of it.

Fin tests some weight on her leg before shaking her head and using her crutches to hobble to the kitchen. They polished off all the food earlier, but the plates are still sitting out in their hurry to get dessert. She puts them in the sink to soak—she can do them in the morning. Somehow the idea of washing dishes right now is utterly repulsive.

There’s still a little merlot left in the bottle that Fin pours into a glass. It will be enough to make her a
little sleepy, which is perfect. She sees Orm observe her movements carefully and wonders if he can manipulate water like Mera, but thinks better of asking him.

“When I’m a little less tired, I’ll tell you all about wine, or you can just Google it, assuming the novelty hasn’t worn off.”

Orm’s face is unreadable, but Fin knows he can play it cool all he wants, her browser history in the morning will tell her all she needs to know. She finishes her wine and places the glass in the sink.

“It’ll be really hectic here tomorrow morning. I’ll make us some breakfast but after that, Conner, Kelsey, and William are coming over. You haven’t met Will yet, but he’s a local guy that plays with us sometimes. He was one of my first students and even though he hasn’t been for years, he helps out from time to time. Ever since my band mates left the area it’s hard finding people that can play as many instruments as they could except for Conner. I make that poor man do everything.”

“I still don’t believe that you both play that many instruments,” Orm intones flatly.

“And it’s that kind of attitude that makes me not want to play for you,” Fin replies blithely missing a beat. “But one day I will, even though I will be sorely unappreciated.”

Fin throws Orm an exaggerated look of affront, tossing her hair over her shoulder theatrically. She heads back to her bedroom to change for the umpteenth time today. (At least it’s into her pajamas.) Tucked into bed, she can hear Orm pad through her house. It’s weird, knowing the man responsible for so many of her problems is only a few feet away, probably reading or typing. But his presence doesn’t change what’s already been done, and it happened well before she even met him.

_Holding a funeral service for my dobro would be a little melodramatic._

Not wanting to hold onto any more bitterness or grief than she’s already dealt with in her life, Fin resolves to tell Tom the next time she sees him about the guitar. She knows he’ll be disappointed, but he’s not the type to get all bent out of shape by something like that. If he can wait thirty years for the love of his life to return, then whether or not he can play a Fleetwood Mac song for her is of very little consequence.

Fin thinks of how utterly romantic Tom Curry is, and how Atlanna, growing up in such a dark and unforgiving place, might have found him to be a beacon of light and joy. Like her, Orm is on dry land because he has nowhere else to go, and Fin wonders what kind of man he’ll be when he inevitably returns home. Despite his stigma as a war criminal, surely some grandiose residence awaits him as a prince. Isn’t that how life usually worked? Rich people get off with a slap on the wrist.

A part of Fin fantasizes about that slap on the wrist coming in the form of her steel dobro smacking into Orm’s perfect face, but she knows she’s not the beacon of light and joy that Tom Curry is. No, Fin is nothing like her friend, but her guest needs a firmer hand than the town’s lighthouse keeper. Whether or not she’s up to it, Orm is her responsibility now, at least to a degree, and for the first time in a long time, she’ll have to rise to a whole new level of challenge.
Air Inside My Lungs Is Heavenly Starting Out

Chapter Notes

Note: A character has a panic attack at the end of the chapter.

In the wee morning hours, it occurs to Orm that he and Fin never discussed new sleeping arrangements, but he finds the recliner an acceptable alternative to her bed. It’s free from distracting scents of her soaps and shampoo. He moved the chair back to her library with ease while she slept, as she had originally wanted Arthur to do. To him, it weighs next to nothing but it’s probably a considerable burden for her on her own.

Fin’s snide comments from the day before about him losing to Arthur still bother him; she never struck him as a vindictive person until then, although he has to remind himself he barely knows her. Orm wouldn’t have imagined that the force of her resentment could rival his own—she is not weak in spirit, despite her physical fragility. He’s unaccustomed to being confronted so openly—death is a perfectly acceptable punishment for showing insolence to royalty, especially the king, but killing her wouldn’t make her less right, and therein lies the issue.

The opinions of others never mattered before. Orm was king and therefore he was *right*. He wanted what he wanted and did what he did and that was that. There were no emotional or moral conflicts to overcome, at least not since he was a young man. He knew his path and never wavered, not once, until Arthur’s trident cracked Orvax’s weapon in half while he held it in his hands.

*If the people up here have any strength, it certainly isn’t in their bodies.*

Fin certainly needs a space to sleep more comfortable and restorative than her living room floor given her injury. She seems prone to getting hurt—she’s tripped countless times, had a run-in with a giant sentient cephalopod, and gotten scratched open by her own pet cat in only a few days. It reminds Orm once again that he’s only been on land since Tuesday, and it’s now only Saturday morning. Time flies, he’s heard the saying go. He glances over at the small table beside him where he placed the last volume of the trilogy when he finished it an hour ago. He’s almost disappointed that it’s over.

Upon finishing the book, Orm looks up the author on Google. The information he finds surprises him. Tolkein was a religious man who had distaste for war. Odd, to write such a novel centered on the very thing he despised. What struck Orm upon finishing and what still sticks with him now, is that the book’s protagonist saved his home and his friends but was so damaged along the way that he simply couldn’t enjoy the peace he helped bring about.

Atlanteans revel in their glory—victories are celebrated and enjoyed. One does not simply slink back into the shadows after a job well done. But Frodo did exactly that. He *left*. He completed the mission but lost so much along the way that in the end that it wasn’t really much of a victory after all. His uncle is mad, his body is broken, and his heart is incapable of finding peace.

Orm didn’t achieve the victory he wanted, but he understands how drained Frodo must feel having suffered so much. He understands *leaving*. He understands not wanting to be in a place that’s familiar because it’s overwhelming. Atlantean stories and myths portray winning to be the pinnacle of achievement; their heroes are not in emotional ruins at the end of their stories.
They’re not sad.

And Orm is not a hero at the end of a glorious victory.

In his entire life, Orm’s not even sure if he knows what happiness or sadness is like. He remembers feeling intense emotion when his mother was sacrificed, but most of it was anxiety and loneliness until resentment and anger took over. Nothing else between that event and Arthur’s victory made him feel anything close to that. He felt the sting of Mera and Vulko betraying him but he brushed off the distractions because his goal was looming close. And losing Orvax was simply inevitable (acknowledging his relief is practically akin to treason) but it certainly wasn’t happiness Orm felt when his father was gone.

There was too much responsibility there for him to feel all that good. It meant his path was finally clear to pursue the path that had been laid out for him, for better or worse. Certainly the months following his defeat were mundane and Orm has to confront the fact he is lost and disheartened, but he doesn’t think that makes him sad.

Sad is pathetic, powerless, and weak, and even though there’s no one on the surface to take advantage of him in such a state, it doesn’t mean Orm wants to stay this way. And the opposite feeling—happiness—is almost a completely foreign concept entirely. He was waiting all of his life to win the battle he never even got to fight. Surely his happiness would follow in those moments that never were. What else could have possibly awaited him after such a victory?

Mera says my mother should be allowed to be happy. Is she happy up here, with the wretched sun beating down on her and without the comfort of water against her skin at every minute? Doesn’t she miss Atlantis in all of its finery and splendor? This place is so plain and boring by comparison. There are brief glimpses of beauty here, but they’re all fleeting.

Brushing his teeth the night before had chased away the last hints of lasagna and vanilla ice cream and dark chocolate. He never knew such things existed—such uncomplicated things that elicited comfort and pleasure but without guilt or effort—and can see how surface dwellers are so soft to have such ready conveniences. A part of him wonders exactly how much work goes into making something as unassuming as a chocolate bar. That simple act of enjoyment is a rather novel experience; something surface dwellers are so accustomed to it comes off as extravagance to him.

It’s no wonder they all seem so fat and lazy. Their lives must be a constant succession of hedonism. I didn’t know my mother was so susceptible to their wares. Such weakness appears to be handed down to me; I am enjoying the food here more than I ought. I should not be partaking of foreign libations and preferring them over the offerings of my own kind.

It occurs to Orm that he once had an entire kitchen staff to address his needs on this matter. To his knowledge he was never excessive or opulent unless there was some kind of formal celebration or feast, but then again, he has no idea what kind of demands were made upon them in accordance with his station. He was king, after all, and spared no mind to such things. Who knows to what lengths his people went to see him fed with the very best every day? His father had demanded every privilege the rank of king earned him and the quality had stayed consistent during Orm’s reign too.

Orm hears vehicles pull into the driveway, and rather than wait for the infernal door pounding he despises, he heads to the front door and opens it. Conner practically flies past him, muttering something about a sign that he forgot. Brandishing a key, he sprints out the back door with a brief greeting.

Kelsey arrives and has some stranger in tow, a slim brown-haired man who looks like he’s seconds from falling asleep. After putting down two very large bags, he
nods in Orm’s direction and makes a beeline for the living room floor where he unceremoniously plops himself. Kelsey throws a pink blanket over him and then stares right at Orm.

“Is Fin still asleep?”

“I thought it was still early by your standards.”

“Sort of, but we have to set up well before the wedding starts which means we have to be ready super early.”

With a fond sigh, Kelsey traipses back the hall to presumably wake Fin. Orm is a little indignant because she’s in his home, but it’s technically Fin’s and she’s known her a lot longer than he has. It makes sense that she walks through the building like she owns the place, despite how it makes him uncomfortable.

After a quiet exchange of words in Fin’s bedroom, Orm hears the sound of Fin’s shower running and assumes Kelsey has woken his host. The young woman practically charges down the hall into the kitchen, where Conner is dragging something large into the house from one of the structures outside.

“Something’s wrong with Fin’s leg,” Kelsey whispers to Conner. “It looks like she was attacked by a wild animal. She had crutches near the bed but she seems to be walking okay. She says she’s fine, but she always says that.”

Orm can hear conversations from any room in the house, with the exception of the basement. He listens to Conner and Kelsey exchange a few words of concern. Conner resumes his task and Kelsey is apparently placing herself in charge of making breakfast. She pulls a bunch of items from one of her bags (she always has bags) and gets to work. He doesn’t dare venture into the kitchen and observe.

“Hey Orm, can you grab that for me?” Conner calls over to him. He indicates for Orm to open the door for him, which he does. Orm watches him struggle to open the back of the van before wondering if he should offer to help and then figuring that Conner, as an adult, can ask for it if he needs it.

“What is this?”

“Fin painted this sign as a wedding gift for Steph and Claudia to hang in their barn, because yeah, they have a barn,” Conner mutters, pushing the sign in as far as it will go. “I’m glad Kelsey can drive now because we’ll have to put all of our equipment in her SUV. I forgot to take this with me yesterday.”

“That one is hers?” Orm asks, pointing to the white vehicle beside Conner’s. Like Claudia’s, it’s large and appears pristine compared to the Curry’s trucks and Conner’s van.

“Yep. Her dad is like one of the richest men in New England, so she’s got a brand spanking new Jeep while the rest of us peasants drive shitty cars older than her.”

“She does conduct herself with the confidence I’ve only ever seen in well-connected people.”

Conner smirks. “That’s for sure. Dane owns the biggest commercial farming empire in New England and his little girl doesn’t even eat meat. It blows my fucking mind and probably pisses him off; Kelsey was his last hope for an heir and she doesn’t want anything to do with his company. Lord knows Jake and Nate have no interest in running a corporation, let alone the ability.”

“They shouldn’t have a choice.”
“Every family is different. Those boys flocked to my dad’s shop right after high school and haven’t looked back. I think Dane was fine with it at first because he had Kelsey. Even though she was just a baby he was pretty optimistic, I guess. He had no idea she’d turn into an eco warrior-type.”

Orm still can’t get over this information. “I don’t understand. He has two sons.”

“So? It’s not like Dane can make them do it.”

“Why not?”

“Because you can’t just force someone to do something they don’t want to do. They’d probably run it into the ground because giving them some financial freedom in high school proved disastrous. They’re not business-minded—they can barely handle their credit cards. Now Dane’s scrambling around because he’s close to retirement age and none of his kids want anything to do with his business.”

“Kelsey is clearly the most intelligent by far. She could handle it.”

“She’s like Lisa Simpson and Elle Woods all rolled into one, and that’s the issue. She said she’d basically dismantle his company and find shelters and sanctuaries for all of the animals.”

The references are lost on him but Orm thinks about the Messersmith children for a moment, having met them all. Kelsey, for all of her talking and questions, is nothing like them and infinitely more suited for running the large empire that Conner alludes to her father having based on her intellectual curiosity alone. But to just not want to take on a responsibility like that is baffling in any capacity. Why else have children if they don’t carry out their familial duty?

“Why would a teenage girl want to dismantle her father’s legacy, especially when it’s so financially successful? She would dishonor him in such a way?”

“Kelsey really loves animals and doesn’t condone eating them. She doesn’t consider it humane. She doesn’t like dairy and egg farming either, and the only time she eats eggs or drinks milk is when it comes from Greta’s local farm.”

“What does she eat, then?” Orm asks.

“Whatever’s left?” Conner shrugs. “I grew up with an Italian mom, so I’m used to meat and dairy in every single meal. Kelsey’s vegetarian. Fruits, vegetables, grains, etc.”

“That sounds terrible.”

Conner shrugs. “I’m just mentally preparing you because whatever she’s going to make for breakfast will not include any ham or bacon or sausage, so just don’t ask her about it even though you’re probably used to it. It might hurt her feelings. I figured I’d say something because Arthur is practically a carnivore and I wasn’t sure if that was an Atlantean thing or not.”

“We eat plenty of vegetation in Atlantis but meat is a staple of our diet. Being vegetarian would not be feasible there for proper nutrition. It sounds like some kind of surface world moral indulgence.”

“Maybe, but eating meat is pretty bad for the environment. We know that and we still can’t give it up. And now that you know, will you be able to stop eating it?”

That’s not a question Orm ever thought would be posed to him, and he’s struck momentarily speechless. As a king, he never had to sacrifice anything. He never imposed laws on his people that he himself would not follow, but the grandeur of his former position naturally called for a larger
allocation of resources and for more personal consideration. He has no idea what their day-to-day lives are actually like.

"Society is quick to make fun of people like her, but we need more people like her."

With a turn of the key, Conner locks up the truck of his van and heads back inside. Orm assumes he’s meant to follow. When he reenters the house, a scene of pure chaos greets him. There’s smoke coming from the kitchen, a herd of cats is running back and forth through the house, Fin is shouting at the man who has apparently woken up and decided to start helping her dress her hair. Kelsey is standing in the doorway to the kitchen with a smoldering pan in her hand.

“I thought you said you knew what you were doing, Will!”

“She’s being a baby about the hair dryer.”

“Because it burns my head,” Fin snaps. “Can’t it go any lower?”

“Normal women use hairdryers without all of this drama,” Will intones flatly.

“Normal men don’t have two hundred dollar hairdryers,” Fin sasses. “And I know that’s not Kim’s!”

“What the hell is going on?” Conner asks, scooping up Olive when she runs to him.

“Can one of you help me, please?” Kelsey pleads from the kitchen.

“I got you, girl!” Will practically leaps over the loveseat in his eagerness to help, and Fin looks helplessly at Conner. He sighs and heads over, picking up the large piece of yellow plastic that Will had pointed at Fin’s hair. He flips a switch on the side and it roars to life.

“This is a fancy hair dryer,” Conner comments as he starts expertly drying Fin’s hair. Orm supposes that if he helped raise his sister, he is probably well-versed in such things.

“I know, right? I’ve literally seen him survive on ramen and crackers but he buys high-end skincare and salon shampoos,” Fin mutters. "His bathroom counter is full of them."

“Don’t judge me!” Will shouts from the kitchen. “Some of them are Kim’s.”

“Pay attention to the strawberries!” Kelsey scolds.

“Is it always like this when you get ready with your band?” Orm asks Fin, who appears to be painting her nails with some kind pearl-colored paint.

“Yeah, although the rotation changes a lot,” Fin informs him. “I have weddings booked for all summer. Some venues don’t allow people in them under twenty one years old so Kelsey and Derek aren’t able to help with those. Wendy and Lee played everything else Conner and I needed but now we have to rely on a ton of other people because no one else in the Bay is that well-rounded as they were. I really hope a harp player decides to move here.”

“I actually know what that is,” Orm says. “Topo plays one.”

A fond smile makes its way to her face. Fin surely can’t still be enamored by the beast. He could have killed her.

“I hope I can see him again soon. Do you think he could play an instrument for me?”

“I doubt Arthur would allow him near you after what happened.”
“But couldn’t I go with you? You could talk to Topo for me.”

Orm doesn’t miss the way Conner casually shifts to the side so he can see his face.

“I told you that Atlanteans can’t talk to sea creatures.”

“Arthur says the only animal besides Topo in the entire ocean that doesn’t listen to him is your tylosaur. You must be connecting with him on some level or his whole ‘talk to fish’ thing would have worked on him, too.”

“I raised Keith from a hatchling. He would never betray my trust.”

“Not even because of a magical trident?”

Orm is spared from responding when Conner pulls her head back and starts an elaborate series of braids. The majority of his citizens dress their fringe in such a manner. The length of her hair will ensure a good style.

“So you ride a dinosaur around?” Conner asks him conversationally, and Fin seems interested in hearing more about Keith too.

“Yes. He is twenty.”

“What’s with the name? It doesn’t sound very Atlantean, not that I would know.”

“I’m told I inadvertently named him after a musician named Keith Richards.”

“Oh shit, is that why you played The Stones that day while you and Orm were down in the basement?”

Fin shrugs. “Yeah, but I never told Orm that.”

Orm recalls the loud, raucous music from that morning. He didn’t realize her choices were so deliberate. “Why didn’t you tell me that was him?”

“You weren’t very talkative and I didn’t want to push. Besides, most of the singing is done by Mick Jagger. Keith is the guitar player.”

“Hey, are you going to come see us play?” Conner asks.

“I will not be doing so but I will consider it.”

The look that Fin and Conner both give him indicates they know he won’t, but they seem touched he’s not denying he’ll attend outright.

“Breakfast is ready!”

Orm files into the kitchen and finds an elaborate setup at each place. Despite the distinct lack of bacon or sausage, everything looks appealing and smells good.

“I usually only cook for me and mom,” Kelsey admits. “Dad’s always at work by the time I get up, even on school days.”

“It looks really good, Kels,” Fin tells her, and even though everything looks fine, Orm can tell it’s said more to soothe the nerves of a teenage girl.
“What are we eating?” Orm asks, eying all the various dishes.

“Well, I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I made a bunch of things. This is French toast, and it’s basically toast soaked in eggs and then baked. The second thing is a giant breakfast bowl of potatoes, scrambled eggs, and roasted vegetables. I also made a big fruit salad. I never cooked for royalty before, so I hope everything is okay.”

“Kelsey, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you do a bad job with anything, ever,” Conner admits. “But this was a lot more elaborate than I was expecting. We’ll be cutting it close on time.”

Kelsey smiles timidly. “I know. I just thought it would be a nice thing to do.”

Fin’s face lights up in a smile that pleases Orm but as he’s about to pick up his fork, her hand stops him. He glances up at her and Kelsey’s large eyes are fixed on him nervously.

“Can we say grace first?”

Orm is forced to concede that he doesn’t know what that is.

“Oh, when you thank the Lord for the meal you’re about to eat.”

“And this is traditional?”

“Yes, for many people,” Kelsey tells him. She holds out her hands on each side. With some prodding, Orm obediently takes her right hand in his left and feels Fin tuck her tiny hand into his right one. Everyone joins hands and it’s a strangely intimate tradition, in his opinion. He observes everyone else bow their head and lower their eyes.

“For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful. Amen.”

“Amen,” is the chorus around the table, and then the food distribution picks up. Fin ‘accidentally’ stabs Conner in the hand when he tries to take more than his fair share of French toast. Fin takes two pieces but loads up on the breakfast potatoes and the fresh fruit.

The French toast tastes heavenly; domestic competencies aren’t something Orm assumes a surface dwelling teenage girl would be good at. The breakfast potatoes are superior to the ones Conner made the previous day, although Kelsey had extra ingredients at her disposal that she brought along. The fruit is also delicious; there are new ones he’s never tried before. He separates them as best he can with a fork so he can enjoy their individual flavors.

“Do Atlanteans say grace before they eat?” Kelsey asks him avidly. She seems to have a fascination with his culture. Orm can’t blame her.

“During formal events, we speak words similar to those you used, although they do not join hands. We do no such thing when eating by ourselves.”

“Fin’s not religious at all, so I guess this is your first time doing it.”

“That’s correct. Aren’t most surface dwellers religious?”

“Um, that’s hard to quantify,” Kelsey mutters, looking uncharacteristically flustered.

“I’m an atheist,” Will pipes up as Kelsey’s face grows pink. “Fin’s practically agnostic, but Conner and Kelsey here are both Christian. Conner is Catholic and Kelsey’s non-denominational so it’s practically a whole different religion.”
“Will thinks Catholicism is a cult,” Conner mutters. “But I’m sure Atlanteans have their own religions too.”

“We just have one,” Orm tells him. “We know that the gods existed once, the ones you refer to from the Greek pantheon. We worship them.”

“Aren’t they all dead?”

“Will!” Fin hisses.

“What? I’m kind of curious.”

“They are, but their powers still have an influence over our world and yours.”

“Can you talk to fish?” Will asks. In his defense, he missed their conversation when he was in the kitchen, but his irreverent tone makes Conner nudge him under the table with his foot.

“Why does everyone think we talk to fish?”

“I dunno, it’s like a thing people mention when they talk about Aquaman,” Will mutters. “Hey Fin, did you see the new Justice League shirts I designed?”

“The Aquaman one already sold out online,” Fin pouts.

“I can print you one. I can even print one for Orm, too.”

“I’m not wearing an Aquaman shirt.”

“How about Wonder Woman or Batman?”

“Definitely not Batman,” Orm states firmly. “Wonder Woman is Amazonian, I believe? Our people were enemies, once.”

“I really wish I could smoke up right now; I’d have way better questions,” Will states.

Kelsey tries to hide her smirk around a mouthful of potatoes and Conner just rolls his eyes.

“Orm, you don’t have to entertain our questions if we’re bothering you,” Fin says quietly.

“You can ask us anything you want, dude,” Will offers encouragingly.

“I’m not that interested in the surface world, honestly.”

Will just kind of shrugs that off but Kelsey looks crestfallen. “You don’t want to know more about us?”

“I’ve seen the way you treat your planet and it’s made me realize you don’t have a lot to offer.”

Fin gives Kelsey a consolatory pat on the shoulder.

“You don’t think they’ll send another wave, do you?” Kelsey’s blue eyes bore into his with startling intensity.

“That isn’t exactly up to me,” Orm tells her placidly. At least not anymore. “But you’re in safe hands with Arthur.”

“How can he protect us if he’s all the way in Atlantis?” Kelsey asks.
“My brother seems to find many reasons to stay close to this bay. I’m sure he will be nearby in times of crisis.”

“So he’ll protect us from the people that might want to send another wave?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s one way of looking at it,” Orm says after a moment.

Kelsey seems satisfied with that response, but a glance at Fin’s face shows worried features. She eats in silence while Kelsey continues to pepper him with inquiries into every facet of life. He’s not sure what kind of questions a teenager would ask, but asking about manufacturing and infrastructure would probably not rank highly on the list. After a rapid fire round about crop sustainability Will groans.

“Kels, stop annoying the poor dude and let him eat.”

At the word annoying, Kelsey sits back in a huff, but obediently shuts her mouth. She probably does get told that a lot, and Orm is definitely one of the people who’s considered that less than gracious thought, but seeing her chastised isn’t as gratifying as he thought it’d be. Fin definitely kicks Will under the table at least twice but he allows it, looking pretty chastised himself. After Kelsey clears away her empty plate, she looks at her phone and hurriedly motions for Fin to join her in the living room. It’s unspoken that the men will clean up after breakfast, and the three of them stand there for a moment surveying the carnage.

“That girl made a shitload of fruit salad,” Will states as he glances at the giant bowl. He places a lid over it and places it in the refrigerator before putting all the dirty dishes in the sink.

Conner starts running the tap. “Kelsey made extra because she knows Fin likes it. We fucking demolished that French toast, though. The potatoes should heat up pretty well for you, Orm, when you’re hungry later.”

Nodding, Orm wonders how he would go about doing that. On the stove, presumably, but he’d have to maybe watch a video or two first. The internet is remarkably saturated with helpful tutorials. It’s kind of odd that the people that live in this world don’t know how things work, but in Orm’s opinion, there seems to be a great many different ways to do something for the same end result, and that’s just confusing.

“Kelsey is a talented cook,” Orm concedes. “Is that common up here?”

“Hell no, I can barely boil water,” Will says proudly. “Most people are pretty lazy and just do the bare minimum to feed themselves.”

“Not everyone suffers from Will’s appalling lack of standards,” Conner advises him. “But it’s not uncommon to half-ass a meal if you’re in a hurry or get some subpar food. There aren’t any fast food joints around here but they’re pretty much as low as you can go. I’m not saying I don’t love them sometimes, though.”

“Fast food?” Orm repeats.

“Don’t even eat that garbage, it’s unfit for human consumption!” Kelsey calls out from around the corner.

Curiously Orm peers around the corner and finds Kelsey in the process of applying some type of cosmetic to Fin’s face. His host possesses pleasant-looking features that seem to be subtly augmented by whatever Kelsey is doing. The biggest differences are the colors painted on her eyelids and lips.
“I watched a tutorial on Instagram for this look; I think it’s turning out pretty good.” Kelsey hums as she applies some type of powder with a large, fluffy brush. “You’re going to look like a little bluegrass princess, Miss Fin.”

“I’m going to stick out like a sore thumb no matter how you do my hair and makeup.”

“Well, you’re not white, so yeah,” Will says, rolling up beside Orm with a wet plate in his hand.

Fin cracks up and tosses a pillow at him playfully. It misses by a mile, and Will kicks it back into the living room.

“Are pillows a common weapon in households?”

“Unless you’re Fin, yeah, then you just use real guns on people that piss you off,” Will jokes.

Fin groans. “Will.”

“Sorry, sorry.”

With a head shake, Fin once again submits to Kelsey’s careful application of what looks like shimmering paint for Fin’s mouth. Layered over the other shade, it looks iridescent like fish scales. The finishing touch appears to be some kind of spray bottle mist, similar to what Fin used when she cut his hair. When she opens her eyes and catches his gaze, she smiles at him almost hesitantly. “Do I look okay?”

Orm studies the crisp edges of her eyebrows, the rosy hues that have been blended into her cheeks, and the fine hint of shimmer running across the tops of her cheekbones. Her hair looks soft and shiny and the light purple dress that Claudia and Steph picked for her suits her well. She looks more than okay, but something is bothering Orm about all the artifice. He’s accustomed to seeing Atlantean women decorated thusly, but on Fin it’s not his preference.

“I fail to see why you required any enhancement.”

Smiling, Fin looks almost shy. “It’s expected that women wear makeup to formal events. A wedding is pretty much as formal as you can get.”

When Conner and Will reemerge from the kitchen, the former disappears down the hall towards Fin’s bedroom while Will rummages through one of the bags he carried in.

“You didn’t hang up your suit?” Kelsey shrieks.

Will glances at the trousers in his hand a moment before he starts yanking off his t-shirt. Like Conner, he has several tattoos on his arms and shoulders. “The wrinkles will shake out before we get on stage.”

Fin rolls her eyes. “Before you start stripping down, remember that there’s a minor here and change in the bathroom instead.”

“Oh shit, sorry,” Will mutters, shuffling off to the bathroom.

“I really don’t mind, Miss Fin.”

“Yeah, but I do. My house is not a locker room and you’re still my student.”

“So was Will.”
“And now he’s a grown ass man and a grown ass mess.”

“I can hear you through this door, you know.”

“Good!”

Orm observes all of these informalities with interest. Of course he expects cultural differences, but it’s so jarring to watch the way all of these people act around each other. They’re so relaxed as if there’s no social structure in place at all. They seem deferential to Fin but maybe because it’s her house. It’s hard to tell who’s in charge due to the irreverence. Atlanteans do not casually disrobe in front of others.

“So Mindy is coming by later to drop off some tools I lent her. Gabby has therapy on Saturday mornings so they’ll swing by on the way back.”

Conner rushes by and taps Fin on the shoulder. He’s dressed in slim gray trousers and a long-sleeve white shirt. “We gotta get out of here. It’s almost nine.”

Kelsey looks at her phone and gasps. “Oh crap, he’s right. Will, are you almost done?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Will mutters as he rushes out of the bathroom. His gray trousers are indeed in awful shape and Fin wrinkles her nose.

“Jesus, Will.”

“God, stop judging me.”

“Mr. Orm, I brought you some of my father’s books. They’re in the bag by the door!” Kelsey shouts this to him on her way out.

Will merely nods at Orm as he leaves and Conner smiles and waves. Fin approaches him, looking nothing like she normally does, and hands him something.

“I forgot to give you this yesterday, but it’s a watch.”

“I saw it but I didn’t want to assume it was for me.”

“I mean, you technically don’t need it because you can get the time from a laptop or a cell phone nowadays, but they look nice and I wanted you to have one. It’s not fancy or expensive or anything, but it’s something people my age still like wearing.”

“It’s more for decoration?”

“Kind of,” Fin says with a shrug. “I know you had all of Atlantis’s finery at your disposal and that this is a sad consolation prize, but it’s your first proper gift up here on the surface that’s not clothes or food.”

His host does not likely know the significance of gift-giving in his homeland. What Orm did with Mera’s bracelet was a total affront to the spirit of the act; it’s why she likely continued to wear it even after she betrayed him—she would have never guessed he’d stoop so low. Presenting someone with a token when your intentions were anything less than sincere is offensive. He doubts Fin has such capabilities, even at her worst.

“Thank you.”

Fin’s nimble fingers fasten it around his wrist. Her hair swings around when she moves her arms,
and Orm can smell the mango scrub layered under about half a dozen other scents. She maneuvers his elbow so his arm is in what he assumes is the best position for reading the watch face. “I’m sure you tell time differently than we do.”

“Yes, but for the most part I’ve made the necessary adjustments,” Orm lies. He understands how days and nights work up here, but his body is not cooperative when it comes to resting when it’s expected to. He can function well enough on little sleep, but eventually it will start to take its toll. Now that his book is finished, he won’t be so tempted to stray from a normal sleep schedule.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine by yourself, but if you ever need anything, you can use the communicator that Arthur left. Between Tom and Atlanna, they can help you with whatever you need.”

Fin’s house could be on fire and disintegrating around him and he still wouldn’t call them for assistance, but Orm’s not going to tell her that. He merely nods at her when she waves at him. When he hears the vehicles pull out of the driveway, he quietly walks back and forth through the house to see if they left any trace of the chaos they brought. The only thing he finds is Will’s t-shirt crumpled up in the bathroom he uses. Orm gingerly picks it up and places it in the room where Fin must wash her clothes.

Now that his book is finished, Orm’s not really sure what to do with himself. He’s in no mood to watch a film. He’s certainly not hungry yet and he doesn’t trust himself to exercise without breaking something. He’s tired, but falling asleep in the middle of the morning is unfathomable to him. He is about to sit down in the living room with Fin’s laptop to Google watches when he hears something in the driveway, something large. He’s familiar with people needing him constantly but surely this person is here for Fin and he had no idea that peasants lived such fast-paced lives.

When Orm opens the door, there’s an absolutely massive vehicle sitting in Fin’s driveway with its engine still on. The noise is overpowering and the smell is terrible. Several men are milling about, and one of them rushes over to him with some kind of electronic tablet.

“Are you Arthur Curry or Fin Park?”

Perhaps the name Fin applies to men and women on the surface; Orm has no idea. “Arthur is my brother. My name is Orm.”

“Oh okay, your name is on here too. I thought that was some kind of typo… I’ve never seen that name before. Can you please sign for the delivery?”

“What am I signing for?”

“I have an overnight delivery of furniture.”

“I don’t recall Fin mentioning this.”

“It was ordered by Mr. Curry last evening—his name is on the invoice. I have a large sectional couch for you.”

Orm frowns at the man’s impatient body language but relents; if he makes this difficult, Arthur will surely give him a hard time about it. The new king of Atlantis needs as few distractions as possible, and Orm wonders if he goes looking for them. He’s not going to give his older brother any excuse to shirk his duties. He signs his name and some large, sweaty men head inside and move the loveseat onto Fin’s front porch.

Without Fin present, Orm has no idea where she would want it or what she wants done with it. She’s going to be furious that Arthur took such liberties without telling her but the size and visible quality
of the new item replacing the loveseat will probably bring her around. As soon as the sectional is
arranged in what they deem to be a satisfactory manner, the delivery men quickly depart and Orm is
left with a brand new piece of furniture.

Morris is the first to emerge and smell it. Eventually all the cats come out and inspect it; it’s
somewhat amusing to watch their wary body language as they explore. The couch looks large
enough to seat several people; Orm wonders if Arthur purchased it for more movie nights in the
future or as a better alternative to sleeping on the ground. It’s not something he would expect Arthur
to notice, but then again, Orm doesn’t know his brother all that well either. It’s easy to dismiss Arthur
as an idiot, and while he’s reckless and doesn’t always think, he seems to treat people with a great
deal more consideration than a king might.

Walking around to the front of it, Orm takes a seat and feels like he’s sinking into a cloud. The level
of indulgence is unreal—he feels almost ashamed for how comfortable he’s feeling. To his surprise,
the books Kelsey left for him are actually right beside the new couch. The delivery men must have
moved them because they were too close to the door. Orm pulls them out of the bag, one by one, and
tries to figure out his options.

The first book is clearly about architectural and engineering feats. That is definitely of interest. It’s
heavy and Orm would guess it’s expensive; the weight of the paper as he pages through it feels much
different than Fin’s books. There are lots of exotic buildings and bridges pictured and a short
description detailing their location and when they were built. He supposes he can supplement this
knowledge with Google if he’s so inclined.

The second book features animals. Like the first one it seems expensive and also has large pictures.
It’s pleasurable to just casually leaf through and look at everything. Orm’s education was vast, but it
didn’t include learning about every creature on the surface. Without having to contend with ocean
pressure and temperature extremes, many animals on land are wildly exotic and varied. The mild
surface environment leads to all kinds of weakness, apparently—some of these creatures are so
fragile he can’t imagine how they exist at all.

The third book appears to be some kind of collection of recipes. It’s not as expensive looking as the
first two, but the pictures are high quality. The food pictured looks appealing, and it takes a moment
for Orm to realize that none of the recipes include any meat or dairy. It’s a sneaky way to further
Kelsey’s strange agenda, but it’s done in a way he approves of. Some of the food looks like it might
taste good, and Orm supposes that’s the most important thing overall.

The last book is smaller and randomly opening up to a passage gives him no indication of its content.
He Googles the title and realizes it’s a religious book of some sort. He worships the Gods as all of his
people do, but Orm has no strong faith, choosing instead to credit himself for all he has achieved and
for all he has suffered. He’s never given much thought as to how devout his people are. It’s not a
subject that’s ever truly interested him before, but it appears to be of huge import to Kelsey and of
none to Fin and Will. Strange how a building block of his society has such variable meaning to the
people up here.

Everyone up here just chooses what to believe and how to act and which rules to follow. It’s no
wonder their world is so chaotic. They’re unstructured and wild people. And yet a teenage girl made
an elaborate breakfast for me this morning to impress me. She brought me books to entertain me
and she cares about the environment. She’s young and surely can’t be the only person like that. But
she’s unable to have any sort of impact yet.

Orm is admittedly old-fashioned in some of his schools of thought, having been raised by a very
conservative man. He knows he’s traditional, for better or worse, but hasn’t really given much
thought to what the other members of his generation are like. He’s always felt that rulers are the ones that direct the nation, not the citizens themselves. If there are millions of young people like Kelsey, it stands that eventually they will be able to make changes.

But change might not come in time if they have to wait.

The doorbell ringing sends the cats scurrying, and Orm realizes that from the sound of the car outside (and the fact they used the doorbell) that Mindy Benson must be here. He doesn’t mind answering the door for them. Mindy and Gabby are standing on the front porch and peering around him curiously, perhaps wondering why Fin’s loveseat was outside.

“Hi honey, I’m going to throw some of this food here in the fridge for you and then I’ll drop these tools off in the shed,” Mindy says to him. Orm steps aside for her, and unlike Conner and Kelsey, she waits for him to do so before making herself right at home.

“Whoa, Fin finally got something different for the living room?” Gabby asks skeptically.

“It’s my brother’s doing.”

Gabby nods sagely. “That makes more sense. She wouldn’t spend her money like that.”

“Was my brother’s gift expensive?”

Laughter bubbles from Gabby nervously. “Um, yeah. And Fin doesn’t really like extravagant gifts. They make her uncomfortable.”

Orm was always under the impression that both men and women enjoyed receiving expensive items as a show of status. “Why?”

“Well, she can’t really return the gesture, but it’s more of a personality thing. She keeps to herself, and most people like expensive things so they can show them off. But fawning all over the recognition that material stuff tends to get you isn’t something that interests her.”

That’s actually an astute observation. Orm never thought of it like that. He received many over-the-top gifts as a king—certainly more elaborate than a mere piece of furniture—but he never felt embarrassment over them. His favorite gift to receive was artwork that he could display in the palace. Despite not having an overdeveloped love for the medium, it spoke of sophistication and culture and said all kinds of things for him so that he didn’t have to.

“And what would interest her?” Orm inquires politely.

“That’s a good question. I’m not really sure. Now that her mom and dad are gone and Sam is out of the picture, there aren’t too many people that really know her well anymore. She’s the kind of person that would appreciate something from the heart, I guess.”

“From the heart,” Orm repeats the idiom flatly and Gabby laughs. Her ridicule would normally not sit well but she’s not making fun of him, really.

“Fin thinks out loud all the time without meaning to, so you wouldn’t be short on ideas. She always needs stuff for the house and she likes practical things. Conner’s not allowed to do anything to her car for free because his dad is a Nazi about that kind of stuff, but he fixed her sound bar last year and she seemed to really like that. Don’t Atlanteans give gifts?”

“We do, but they are all very well-thought-out and tend to be costly. They’re usually given to celebrate formal occasions and they’re presented with great import.”
Gabby shrugs. “We buy stuff for each other all the time, just casually. Sometimes it’s not thoughtful at all. Uncle Dane buys me expensive presents every Christmas but I don’t even like half the stuff I get. He just gives me things because I’m his niece. He doesn’t really know me that well and I see him like twice a year.”

“So gifts are perfunctory?”

Gabby blinks. “Not always, but often, I guess. Don’t over think them, at least not if they're from any of us. We're just being nice.”

With a small hum, Orm flips his wrist and shows Gabby his watch. “So she does not expect something in return for this?”

“I mean, Miss Fin does a lot of things for people without getting anything back,” Gabby says after a moment. “She’s a really generous person. Don't worry about it. I mean, you don’t have a job. You can’t just go out and buy her stuff without money.”

Orm wonders why he appreciates Gabby’s very blunt assessment of his situation because she is blatantly calling him out for free-loading. Normally he would be irate but she’s not saying it with any actual intent of humiliating him. The people up here treat him more gently than he’s accustomed to, even when being straightforward. He has to learn that not everyone on the surface is out to rub his face in his inferior circumstances.

“Oh, by the way, this was on the front porch.”

Orm doesn’t recall hearing a vehicle pull up; perhaps someone parked on the street and ran it to the door? He’s been trying to block out every little noise that he hears outside because the distractions of the surface are too overwhelming otherwise. The package he’s handed is awkward and heavier than it would appear, and after a moment Orm realizes it’s probably a wooden cutting board. Kelsey had been using one that looked like it was made of some kind of clear glass or plastic earlier since Arthur had broken the other one the night before.

"My brother was busy making many purchases last night."

"The internet is cool like that. You should ask him for a credit card."

"I don't think I will be doing that."

Gabby tries not to smile at the tension she surely picked up on. “So what are you going to do all day while Fin’s gone?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Gabby looks like she’s mulling something over for a moment before she carefully folds her hands on her lap. “So in the fall I’m going into eighth grade, and they let some of them on the junior varsity cross country team if they’re really good. I’m going to train all summer. Mom never lets me go by myself and no one really wants to go with me.”

“Couldn’t your cousin accompany you on days she’s not busy?”

Gabby laughs drily. “Kelsey is a great dancer but she thinks running is boring. I can’t ever get her to go and she’s pretty much always busy doing like eighty extracurricular activities or college prep or something for her Instagram followers. I used to go with—I mean, I used to have someone that would go with me but they can’t anymore.”
“Why doesn’t your mom let you go by yourself?”

“I mean, I think she’s afraid someone will snatch me up—she watches a lot of Forensic Files—but honestly the bigger problem would be getting hit by a car. People drive a little crazy out here. Even when I’m out walking I’ve almost been hit twice, and she was with me. If I have headphones in, I can’t hear the cars, and the music really helps me.”

“I’ve never gone running before. I suppose swimming for exercise would be the Atlantean equivalent.”

“Did you want to go? Mom needs a break from the house and she loves spending time with Fin’s cats.”

Orm contemplates this, but Gabby actually preempts his answer by waving her mom over through the window when she emerges from her trip to the shed. Gabby’s phone chimes and she briefly checks it before sticking it in her pocket. By the time Mindy makes her way inside, he’s feeling a fair amount of unease.

“Mom, can Orm come running with me? We can use the woods near Fin’s house.”

Mindy blinks in disbelief. “What, honey?”

“Orm’s never been running before. Can we go?”

"Does he want to go?"

Gabby shrugs and Orm stands as still as a statue, which apparently she considers as a win.

“Honey, we don’t know if he has the right clothes or shoes.”

“He doesn’t know if he does either, I bet. We could help him.”

Those words probably aren’t supposed to sound ominous, but Orm finds token resistance at the ready.

Orm finally decides to express his reservations. “I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

“I bet you need exercise.”

“Who says I’m not getting it?”

“Having sex with my teacher doesn’t count,” Gabby says flatly, and Mindy hides her face in her hands.

Orm has to consciously stop himself from having a visible reaction. “That wasn’t what I was implying.”

“I know. I just wanted to see how you reacted. See, Mom? They’re totally just friends.”

Mindy laughs nervously. “Gabby, honey, that wasn’t very nice.”

“But I found out the truth! You said you were curious and now you know.”

Utterly mortified, Mindy can’t bring herself to meet Orm’s eyes, which suits him just fine. Clearly seeing that Gabby's mind is made up, she heads over to the brand new sectional to sit down with the cats.
“So where are your clothes that you’re using while you’re here? Maybe Fin ordered you something you could use or maybe Sam still has some stuff. If you want to sit here alone and read Uncle Dane’s books, that’s fine, but I think you’ll like it. I get really anxious if I stay inside for too long.”

So does Orm, honestly. When he was king, he spent many hours training every day. He’s a very physical person and the lack of exercise has been slowly winding him up all week. After everything that’s happened so far he’s looking forward to a relatively uncomplicated outlet for some of his tension.

“So this is it?” Gabby asks when Orm shows her everything Fin purchased. “She bought you some really nice shoes. A lot nicer than anything she’d buy for herself. These will suit you just fine for running. You can use these shorts and any of those shirts,” Gabby points to various garments, “and I’ll see if I have some extra sunscreen. Fin never remembers to wear it. Kelsey just sent me a snap and she’s got sunburn on her shoulders since I’ve seen her last. She’s going to get cancer or something.”

“Gabby, honey, that’s not nice.” Mindy’s voice is uncharacteristically firm.

Gabby frowns but doesn’t apologize. Something unspoken passes between them but Gabby persists. “Anyway, my stuff is in the back of Mom’s car, so I’ll change in Fin’s room and then I’ll meet you back here in a few minutes. This is going to be so much fun!”

Orm wonders how he’s allowed a thirteen year-old girl to talk him into this, but also reasons that he’s not actively against the idea in theory. He changes into the unfamiliar clothes and studies his reflection in the mirror. There are no traces left of an Atlantean in his appearance; it’s disconcerting how a mere wardrobe change can affect that.

He’s accustomed to his tutors being more seasoned and older than he is, but Gabby gives him competent instruction. She shows him how to stretch and breathe; Orm instantly feels better physically than he has in ages. She fills up some water bottles for them and demonstrates how to put sunscreen on his face; his people don’t call it cancer (they use a different name) but it makes sense that a radioactive celestial body could cause severe tissue damage over time. He’s surprised that Fin, as sensible as she is, doesn’t remember to use it.

When they finally complete their stretches, Orm feels the hot sun land on his face and shoulders. As Gabby beckons him onward, he finds a similar feeling rise in him, like when he’s swimming openly through the ocean. He hasn’t had such freedom in decades, and despite how uncomfortable the sun makes him, the emotional response he’s discovering makes that easy to overlook. The crunch of pavement and the breeze against his bare arms and legs makes him hyper aware of how air seems to accentuate every sensation of touch. As Gabby pushes herself faster, he finds himself doing the same almost effortlessly. The movements unfamiliar, but that’s kind of nice after spending the last five days relatively still.

"Hey, you're doing great!" Gabby calls back to him.

For the first time in ages, Orm actually smiles. He could easily overtake her pace, but that's not the point of what they're doing. Once they reach the woods, Orm's feet travel on trails that were worn there by someone decades if not centuries prior. There's no such sensation in the ocean currents. He never feels like he's running out of oxygen there. He feels almost heady without the usual concentration he's accustomed to. Even with the thinner air that he prefers, Orm *likes* what he's doing and feeling and when he sees signs of weariness in Gabby, he's almost reluctant to return to Fin's house. Once they make it back, Gabby collapses on the loveseat on the front porch.

"Dude, you're really good at running. I need to push myself more. Can we run again sometime?"
You're faster than my coach, even."

Orm finds himself agreeing without necessarily meaning to, only to discover he doesn't actually mind. He doesn't want to tell her how much he was holding back, either.

"Do a lot of surface dwellers run?"

"More people should be doing it. It's good exercise but a lot of people hate it, including Fin. If you don't breathe properly, it can be very painful. A lot of people also drink too much water afterwards and throw up. I did that in second grade."

Doing some quick math, Orm estimates her age at that time. "You exercised like this when you were that young?"

"Maybe not quite so far, but yeah, I've always liked running. My therapist says I can't run away from my problems, but sometimes I feel like I can. It's the best feeling in the world, thinking you can outrun them."

Due to what Orm assumes is the heat, Gabby pours some of her water all over her head. Catching his disapproving look, shesquirts some water at him by squeezing her bottle. Without even thinking, Orm throws up his hand and catches the droplets in midair before slinging them back at her. He's not sure if it's the hydrokinesis or the silver hue his eyes take on when he uses that ability, but Gabby rears back and starts gasping. When she doesn't stop, Orm races into the house to get Mindy, who's blissfully asleep with Olive in her lap.

"You need to come outside immediately."

Mindy's eyes widen and she stumbles to her feet, dumping the cat off her lap unceremoniously. Her concerned gaze falls on her daughter, who adamantly waves her mother's advances away despite the fact she can barely breathe. Mindy's eyes well up with tears but she respects her daughter's wishes, keeping her distance as Gabby slowly regains control.

"She's having a panic attack," Mindy reveals, her voice weak. "Sometimes they get triggered by the most random things, like the dishwasher leaking all over her feet. Ever since the wave she's been...unpredictable."

"Because of what happened to the house?" Orm questions.

"More or less," Mindy says vaguely, and Orm automatically recognizes that this is definitely a case of more but doesn't feel comfortable asking her to elaborate.

"Mom, I'm fine," Gabby whispers, shoulders still quaking as she struggles to sit upright. With the back of her hand she wipes tears from her eyes. "Let's go home. It's time for me to practice anyway."

Flat out ignoring the awful thing that just happened is a routine Orm is familiar with since childhood, but it's unsettling to watch another person go through those same motions. It occurs to him that she may have suffered any variety of unknown traumas in her life. She's somehow adapted the same coping mechanisms as a man over twice her age whose circumstances and experiences are nothing like hers. It's strange to consider how similarly they handle moments of weakness, decades and lifetimes apart.

"Thanks for the run. We should try again sometime, if you wanted to."

_At least after what you just saw,_ is what Orm hears unspoken.
"I would be amenable to that."

"Great."

With a great deal of awkwardness, they bid him farewell and leave him alone, once again. Even after he's showered and used Google and the stove to reheat the potatoes, Orm can't help but think of what he witnessed. In the past hour, he watched Gabby go from elation to panic, but at the end of it, she calmed down and left of her own power, acting like it never happened. He wonders what occurred specifically in regards to the wave that gives her such anxiety; Mindy and Fin don't appear to have such repercussions.

Then again, how well do you know everyone here? Even Fin has secrets from you. She said so herself.

He is so sick of people hiding things from him. For the first time since he was a small boy, Orm lets weariness overtake him in private. He stretches back into the sectional couch and succumbs to the effects of five nights of awful sleep in addition to ridiculous amounts of stress and confusion. He pulls a blue blanket over him, and despite the overwhelming emotions roiling around inside him, the last thing he remembers before falling asleep is the sound of Morris purring against his face and faint smell of coconut from Fin's shampoo.
It seems like a whole new day by the time Fin finally gets dropped back off at home. She’s exhausted and more than a little tipsy from all the booze Claudia and Steph insisted she drink at their wedding, but that’s not why she almost takes a spill on her front porch. It’s pitch dark outside; Orm wouldn’t know to turn on the porch light and there’s no reason why she’d do so over twelve hours earlier in the middle of the morning. Taking out her cell phone and turning on the flashlight, she sees her loveseat sitting on the porch.

I am definitely not drunk enough to be imaging this.

Opening her front door and turning on the lights, Fin nearly drops her dulcimer case in shock. There is an entirely new piece of furniture in her living room. It’s dark gray and absolutely stunning; Fin just has no idea why it’s in her goddamn house. She drops her various instruments and bags and circles around and finds Orm passed out on the sectional. She’s suspected that he’s been having trouble sleeping but has no idea how long he’s been out for.

Fin takes a seat far enough away that she thinks she won’t disturb him, but when she glances over, his blue eyes meet hers. She manages not to jump, but it startles her. Taking a moment to smooth her skirt and study his overall demeanor, she smiles at him when she sees he’s still a bit sleepy. It’s the lowest his guard has been around her yet.

“How was your day, Orm?” Fin slips off her shoes and tucks her feet underneath her, wincing momentarily at the raw skin on her ankle rubbing against the fabric of her skirt.

Even in sleep, Orm’s hands must have been serenely folded below his sternum. He seems to give her question a great deal of consideration. “I don’t know how to answer you.”

“That’s okay.” Fin knows better than to expect him to return the courtesy and ask her how her day was. He’s probably not accustomed to asking anyone such inanities.

“I usually have such a way with words.”

“It doesn’t mean anything bad about you if you don’t know how to articulate how you feel up here, good or bad. Everything must be very different.”

“I’m not supposed to be enjoying myself at all.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Orm’s glare is decidedly less threatening when he looks weak enough to push off the couch with her pinkie, but it’s more impressive than anything she can muster. They sit in companionable silence for a moment before Orm sits up. “My brother ordered this piece of furniture for you.”

“He didn’t say anything about it at the wedding.”

“I overheard him mention that he wasn’t attending.”

“I think something must have changed his mind.”
“You mean someone.”

“Arthur did arrive with Mera,” Fin admits.

The Xebellan princess wore the pink dress Fin gave her yesterday (and somehow Claudia remembered that she wore it to their graduation fourteen years ago). Even amongst strangers, Mera had a great time. She learned how to slow dance and ate part of the bridesmaid’s bouquets and laughed at everyone’s speeches. She also loved the strawberry wedding cake.

“How is my brother ruling Atlantis if he’s never actually there?”

“Didn’t you ever go on vacation?”

“I never felt the need.”

Fin blinks. “Didn’t you ever just feel like you needed to go and blow off some steam?”

“Between practice and meditation, my moods were fairly stabilized.”

“Nothing ever happened that frustrated you or overwhelmed you?”

“I handled it.”

The tone is matter-of-fact, but Fin suspects Orm used some very unethical methods to achieve his goals. From what she gathers, they might not even be frowned upon. He was probably expected to be cold-blooded and ruthless.

“It must be hard up here for you, since you can’t use your position to get everything you want.”

“As I’m rather directionless at the moment, what I want is not really a priority.”

“Hopefully it’s not to still destroy all humans.”

“You’re fond of that phrase.”

Fin laughs. “It’s from a cartoon called Futurama. A man from the year 1999 accidentally gets frozen cryogenically for a thousand years. He wakes up in the future and has to navigate a completely unfamiliar world. It’s a comedy and it’s pretty stupid sometimes, but it’s also effectively deals with themes of loneliness and love and family. There’s a hard-drinking robot with a fondness for gambling and womanizing. He often talks about destroying all humans.”

Orm looks puzzled. “This sounds like a puzzling premise.”

“A lot of entertainment is pretty silly sometimes. But it’s a pleasant distraction.”

“What do surface dwellers need a distraction from? Everything here is so easy and soft.”

“I don’t know why you’re under the impression that none of us work hard. And hard work brings a lot of emotional stress and physical pain,” Fin says, brandishing her battered fingers. She played her dulcimer and electric guitar today without picks after Will accidentally misplaced them, and three of her fingers are bloody and tender.

“Is this a common occurrence for you?”

Fin hums. “Sometimes I bust through my calluses when I play for long periods of time. I haven’t had a chance to fix them up yet. You probably had a whole team of medics at your beck and call when
you were king.”

Orm looks thoughtful. “I was not spoiled, but I didn’t want for anything.”

“Is there a difference?”

“When I was a child I was never permitted to be excessive or immature. I only got my way if I could prove it would be beneficial to my father. I became very skilled in defending my case to him. It proved valuable as a ruler; if I only asked for practical things, why would they be denied? The courts always decided in my favor.”

_Yikes. No wonder he’s so calculating all the time. Goddamn Orvax._

“So I suppose you expect me to magically produce dinner for you because you had a fleet of personal chefs?” Fin asks playfully.

“I ate the breakfast potatoes earlier but I am hungry right now.”

“Were you asleep for a long time?” Fin asks curiously. His metabolism might be all out of whack due to the fact he doesn’t need to withstand the crushing depths of the deep or regulate his body temperature in frigid waters.

Orm checks his watch, which makes Fin smile. “Yes, for longer than I care to admit.”

“We can order some Chinese food. I’m too tired to make anything.”

“Is it good?”

“If I tried to feed you anything subpar, I can only imagine how I’d hear about it.” Fin is slightly disheartened that he doesn’t contradict her, but what does she expect? He’s so entitled it hurts to think about it. She whips out her phone and scans through some meal delivery apps. They’re usually riddled with expensive fees, but without a car, she’s used them recently because it was convenient when she was running out of ingredients.

The three main restaurants in town all use delivery services now. The deli and the coffee shop are closed, so her options are a pizzeria in town and a Chinese restaurant about twenty minutes away. She had pasta at the wedding, so she’s not in the mood for Italian, but Orm doesn’t have to know that subs or pizza are even an option right now.

(The Italian restaurant she used to work at as a teenager she still refuses to order from, even though it’s in the next town over and they still deliver for free. Nothing will scar you quite like a bad employer.)

“I’m going to order chicken curry, sweet and sour shrimp, and beef lo mein. It’ll be a nice intro to trashy but delicious Chinese food, which isn’t actually Chinese, and you can learn all about how important a good sauce is. Dad said they used to make everything super fresh there, so for Americanized Chinese food it’s better than most.”

With a few swipes and taps of her thumb, Fin places the order and flops back into the sectional.

“I kind of want to be mad at Arthur making such a presumption about my living arrangements but hot damn, this couch is amazing. That asshole bought me suede, bless his heart.”

“Gift giving in my culture has a great deal of significance.”
Fin’s laugh is dry. “This is a self-serving gift for Arthur, because now when he comes over to my house, he has a nice place to sit and he’ll expect a thank you every time I see him now. I’m only half serious about the last part—he’s not that much of an ass—but now I just feel kind of indebted.”

“Perhaps it is payment for harboring me.”

Fin winces. “You sound like a fugitive when you put it that way.”

“Technically I am. I’m supposed to be in an Atlantean jail.”

“I’m sure your people consider the surface worse than anything Atlantis has to offer, jail or otherwise. If you don’t hate it, well, that can just be our little secret.”

Orm nods before quietly admitting, “This is preferable.”

Despite the admission, Fin frowns. “You seem a little subdued. Are you alright?”

Orm tilts his head at her query and doesn’t meet her eyes. “I actually had a very good day until a few hours ago.”

Fin leans forward, concerned. “What happened?”

“Gabby came by and she talked me into going on a run. It wasn’t long, about an hour, but it’s the first decent exercise I’ve gotten since I arrived. When we got back, she squirted water at me from her bottle. It’s something Mera and I did a hundred times as children, so without thinking I just flung it right back at her face. She did not react well.”

The idea of Gabby having any more setbacks is a sobering thought. She refuses to discuss Curtis’s death with anyone—she refuses to do a lot of stuff anymore. That she invited Orm to go running is pretty remarkable in itself. To Fin, it seems like glorious progress, but progress doesn’t necessarily follow a linear timeline, especially when it comes to mourning.

“So you have the same powers that Mera does?”

“Yes, although my father always considered hydrokinesis unseemly. It’s not commonly utilized by men in combat; it’s often taught to female members of royalty and Mera is adept in its use. Its mastery is required for the technique with which Arthur beat me.”

“So you weren’t overpowered by brute physical strength, but by cunning.”

Orm seems to consider this. “The technique was taught to him by Vulko, who would think nothing of it. He’s never thought highly of brute strength. And it’s not as if my brother conforms to typical gender constructs. Mera has his ear even more than Vulko.”

Fin shrugs. “Tom didn’t raise a son that’s into all that alpha macho bullshit, thank God. Arthur told me how he convinced the Karathen to give him a chance, and it definitely wasn’t by physically overpowering her. He kind of laid his heart on the line and made himself vulnerable. I think that’s an admirable trait, to admit when you need help, even if I’m not good at it myself.”

“Arthur mentioned that you despise the patriarchy.”

“It’s the type of system that allows for things like Atlanna’s punishment to happen. She is Atlan’s heir, not Orvax. And I bet if your dad would have had an illegitimate kid, he wouldn’t have been punished.”
“He does and he wasn’t.”

Fin blinks. “What?”

“Orvax sired a natural child following my mother’s sentence to the Trench and he was not punished for it. Her name is Tula and she is twenty one. She is the only woman serving active military duty in Atlantis.”

Fin actually drops her phone.

“Wait, you have a sister? Does Arthur know?”

“Why would he want to know? Tula isn’t his sister.”

“Holy shit, Orm, you have an illegitimate half sister through your father and you get on Atlanna’s case about neglecting duty?”

“My father’s proclivities did not endanger the line of succession. Tula is younger than myself, female, and will never inherit the throne. She is not descended from Atlan. But she is highborn, a full-blooded Atlantean, and he did not commit treason by siring her. He never denied her existence and she grew up in relative comfort, enjoying enough special treatment that her unorthodox request to enlist in the military was granted. She captains one of Arthur’s black ops teams. I’m sure they’ve already met.”

This is delivered so casually that Fin can’t fucking take it.

“I need a drink,” Fin mumbles, climbing to her feet and stalking off to the kitchen.

*If she’s related to Orm, Arthur will consider her family. He’s going to shit a brick when he learns he has a step sister.*

It’s a little ass backwards, but Fin heads back to the living room with the giant bowl of fruit salad and a glass of rum. Even with real food on the way, she needs something sweet and boozy to deal with what she just heard.

“You really liked this stuff, huh,” Fin mutters, giving the near-empty bowl a critical glare.

“I did.”

“I was hoping for more than one helping,” Fin admits, trying not to be disappointed. She can totally make her own, but slicing fruit is a pain, and with her favorite cutting board broken, she’s definitely not in the mood. She also needs to go out and buy some more fruit.

“I woke up a few hours ago and looked up the fruits I didn’t recognize. There were strawberries, mangos, pineapples, blueberries, kiwi, and raspberries, and blackberries. I recognized the Clementines, although Google informs me that they are called Mandarin oranges when they’re that small.”

Despite her annoyance, Fin can’t help but find his studious nature endearing. “I watched you separate them in your dish so you could catalogue all the flavors.”

“The strawberries are the best,” Orm informs her solemnly, as if this is objective fact, and Fin smiles.

“Kelsey was so nervous to make all that food for you. She was afraid you wouldn’t like anything.”

“I’ve been informed that culinary skill amongst the young is unusual.”
“Kelsey cooks a lot for her mom, who tends to eat a lot of processed foods. Kelsey kind of took over so she’d eat healthier. It’s actually kind of sweet. Kelsey’s such an overachiever but I get the impression that Brenda isn’t like that. I think Kelsey’s a little embarrassed that her mom is so different from her.”

“Connor said she doesn’t want her father’s very lucrative business.”

“Half the country probably eats his products on any given day,” Fin says. “It’s more than just a lucrative business. Dane has more money than some countries. But Kelsey doesn’t want to go to boarding school or anything like that. She wants to grow up in her father’s hometown and stay as down to earth as possible.”

“Why live an ordinary life when you could live an extraordinary one?”

Fin shrugs. “You and Arthur lived extraordinary childhoods. Would you have given that up to have been raised by normal parents who didn’t despise one another? If commoners can marry for love but royalty has to marry for the good of their country, who’s the real winner?”

“Love is for fools.”

“You can’t tell me anything in your life is better than being in love.”

“You don’t really know anything about my life,” Orm points out. “How would you know?”

“You’ve never been in love before, so how would you know?” Fin stabs a sliver of pineapple with her fork and pops it into her mouth. She meets his stern look with a pointed smile.

“I doubt I ever will. If I’m ever released from my sentence, I will likely be married off to a highborn Atlantean family. Obviously, whatever offspring Arthur sires with Mera will be first in line for the throne, but my children will have pure blood. It’s important for Atlan’s bloodline to continue and I will still be highly-sought after by Atlantean purists.”

“Arthur would never force you to marry someone that you didn’t want to, not after what happened to his mother. You wouldn’t actually have to do that if you didn’t want to. And the bloodline will still be passed down through your brother.”

“But it’s not pure,” Orm insists.

Fin can practically feel the crease form beside her right eyebrow as she glares at him. “So you’re willing to marry some strange woman you might not even know?”

“You’re willing to have sex with strangers.”

“Having sex and getting married with the sole purpose of bearing children are two very different things. You can’t raise a child with someone you can’t stand. It doesn’t tend to work out well for anyone involved.”

Fin can practically see Orm weigh the pros and cons of contradicting her. His parents hated each other—from what she can gather—and it’s clear his childhood was not the greatest. He can argue all he wants how strong this made him, but watching your dad beat the shit out of you and your mom isn’t ideal, no matter how you spin it.

“It’s my duty.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s not officially written anywhere that you have to procreate. I’m sure that directive
has been ingrained in you since birth due to your status, but it sounds like you want heirs more than a family.”

“Is there a difference?”

Fin just smiles blandly and shrugs as she polishes off the rest of her fruit salad. “When you love your partner, raising a family can actually be enjoyable and not just a facet of duty. You make it sound decidedly un-fun.”

“It’s not supposed to be fun.”

“But if it could be, wouldn’t you want it to be? If that’s not important, I guess you can bring up your kids the same way you were raised and see if that’s any better.”

The corner of Orm’s lip curls up with distaste. It shows up only for an instant, but Fin knows she definitely planted a seed he’ll chew on later.

“I haven’t thought about it like that,” Orm says finally. “But children must be pushed to exceed their expectations.”

Fin doesn’t necessarily disagree with that, but their methods of pushing are likely very different. Figuring that she’s opposed him far enough for one night, she doesn’t press her luck. She takes the empty fruit salad bowl and places it in the sink along with her empty glass. She puts on a kettle to brew some tea and fills up two cups with cold water, leaving one by Orm’s side when she returns to the living room.

“Did you wanna watch a movie?” Fin asks, throwing him a tired glance.

“I don’t have energy for much else at the moment.”

“I’m not sure when the food will arrive, because delivery estimates are lies, but we can start playing a movie and then just pause it when the food gets here. Was there a specific type of movie you wanted to watch? I don’t think you’ll understand our comedies. Maybe more of an action movie would be okay?”

Orm wordlessly gestures to her giant wall of DVDs as if daring her to impress him.

“I’m too tired to over think this, so how about Aliens? It’s the sequel to Alien and features the same lead character. The rest of the cast is amazing too. This one has more action and less suspense.”

With a spring in her step, Fin hops up and runs to the kitchen to brew some sencha tea. She waits a few minutes until it’s done before popping back over with the teapot and putting in the movie. Despite blowing on the tea, it’s still way too hot to drink, but she glances over and sees that Orm doesn’t have any problems. Fin wonders what it’s like not being able to burn your own tongue—he’s just so much harder and stronger than her it blows her mind sometimes. He’s still got nothing on Ellen Ripley.

Sigourney Weaver is just the best, Michael Biehn is her eighties crush, and the whole team of space Marines is fucking rad. Fin’s not crazy about the first half hour or so, but luckily the food arrives before the movie really picks up. She pauses the movie so they can get situated. Scooting her coffee table closer, Fin arranges the cartons of food so Orm can dish out whatever interests him.

“So chicken curry is going to be a little spicy, and no, that’s not a dare,” Fin admonishes, “but it also has a lot of onions, which I love but some people really don’t. It’s got potatoes, carrots, peppers, and
snap peas. The sweet and sour shrimp is deep fried and crunchy but the dish tastes best when you smother it in sauce. There are green peppers, onions, carrots, and pineapples with it. The beef lo mein has a ton of veggies—they put mushrooms in everything, which is gross, but I wanted you to be able to try them if you wanted—but the noodles are delicious and the star of the show.”

Orm tilts each carton up to his nose to smell them individually. He recoils from the chicken curry but his sense of smell is much better than hers and the spices probably mess with his sinuses. He stares at the chopsticks in her hand, watching her use them to shovel out a helping of noodles.

“Did you want to try? It can be a little tricky at first. Arthur still can’t use them.”

At that, Orm holds out his hand for a pair and Fin smiles when she places them in his palm. He slides them out of the paper and stares at them momentarily. He grasps each one and snaps them apart, splitting them more evenly than Fin usually manages to. Glancing over at her hand, he arranges them as she has and after a few clumsy movements, opens and closes them with ease.

“You’re a natural.”

“These implements are primitive.”

“They’re still used in several countries to this day. Do you really think the Atlantean way to do everything is the best way?”

Fin punctuates this by awkwardly dropping a bunch of noodles in her mouth from high above, smiling around her food at Orm’s look of distaste. She pours him another cup of tea and refreshes hers a bit since it’s grown cold. She lets him load up his plate and get acclimated to the individual flavor profiles before she decides to start the movie back up.

He definitely perks up by the time the Marines land on the planet with Ripley and start exploring.

“Why does no one listen to her?” Orm demands. “Those creatures clearly pose a danger.”

“Because of the patriarchy and capitalism,” Fin offers, shrugging. “They want to study it and use it to make money. You should watch The Shape of Water. There are very slight parallels but all in all, scientists want to study something that’s not human. They give very little regard to how safe it is for them and how inhumane it might be for the creature. Although I’m convinced Xenomorphs are killing machines. They’re never portrayed with much sympathy.”

“So they are always viewed as the villain?” Orm asks solemnly as his eyes stay fixed on the screen in front of him.

Fin wonders if he’s inferring anything else, but can only answer with honesty. “Sometimes the ends justify the means. And sometimes they don’t. Xenomorphs aren’t particularly complex, but they’re fun to watch because they’re so powerful that the protagonists have to be resourceful to beat them. But the best villains are complex and always think they’re right.”

The Marines are stalking nervously through the power plant as Orm gives her an unreadable look.

“How do I a villain, then?”

Despite how anxious that question makes her, Fin takes a leisurely sip of tea before answering. “That’s not up for anyone to decide. Villains exist in stories and movies. Your actions don’t get excused because of how you were written; you’re not a character, you’re a person who made choices.”
Fin leans forward to take another helping of the chicken curry, noticing that despite his initial reluctance, Orm does seem to like the dish. She’s pointedly ignoring him, giving him some time to mull over her reply to his question. Fin knows she’s not one to mice words. She tries not to take people down unless they deserve it or unless it will help; Orm certainly deserves it but he also deserves a chance to be better. It shouldn’t be up to her, but Arthur inadvertently put her in charge.

Corporal Hicks unceremoniously gains command of the mission, and Fin watches the familiar scenes unfold. Her favorite part of the movie is when Ripley and the Marines are waiting in the compound for the Xenomorphs to attack. She likes all the interpersonal scenes that really develop the characters—for an action flick, she absolutely loves how well the movie was cast. Orm keeps inadvertently seeing James Cameron movies…she vows to show him something a little lighter next time.

By the time Ripley puts herself back in stasis and all the tension in the movie has wound down, they’ve pretty much demolished all the food and finished all the tea. The lack of leftovers kind of sucks, but it’s weirdly gratified to not feel like she’s wasting food. She glances over at Orm, who looks quite serious despite the somewhat-happy ending.

“Everything would have worked out so much better for them if they would have listened to her in the first place.”

Fin nods. “Yeah, and that’s kind of the point.”

“Doesn’t it frustrate you that things could have worked out in their favor but they didn’t? Why is this considered entertainment?”

“If everything was smooth sailing, how would that be interesting? Conflict drives the plot. It’s tough to watch the characters suffer, at least when they’re sympathetic or well-written, but the only way they develop is through failure. Sometimes a character’s mistakes can hurt the innocent, but that’s how people learn in real life, too.”

“I know you mentioned many different types of movies, but they all seem to heavily feature death.”

“You’re basing this on three movies, Orm. Once Derek gets back I’ll have him make a list for you of great films. I’m sure his taste is way better than mine. He’s obsessed with the history of film and theater and he takes dance lessons with Kelsey about an hour away and takes voice lessons with me. He wants to be the next Lin-Manuel Miranda, I think.”

(Fin smiles fondly when Orm doesn’t ask who that is; musical theater will likely just confound him. He seems wound a little too tight to enjoy singing and dancing, but then again, it’s hard to say. Mark Murphy seems allergic to enjoying himself but Connor swears up and down that his dad’s favorite movie is Singin’ in the Rain, and that’s the closest a movie’s ever come to making her feel joy.)

Standing to clear away the empty plastic containers, Fin gathers everything together to wash it. She uses them to store leftovers and perishable ingredients in her fridge before meal prep. Her ankle still feels funny after standing on it all day, but at least it’s not throbbing. She stumbles a bit on her way to the kitchen, but she’s not sure if it’s residual from Topo or if she’s just being her normal, clumsy self. Before she turns on the water, she looks down and realizes she’s still wearing her nice dress. She’s wearing a camisole and leggings underneath, so she strips it off and drapes it over a chair before washing the dishes.

Wishing Orm hadn’t depleted her entire supply of fruit, Fin wonders what she could offer him for dessert. The ice cream shop is closed and no one will be selling cherries or strawberries after ten o’clock at night.
“Oh shit, I forgot” Fin mutters, remembering that she’s got frozen blueberries in the back of her freezer.

“What did you forget?” Orm asks, a foot to her right.

Fin screams drops her mug, her wet hands spraying soap everywhere. Orm casually reaches out and catches it before it can shatter in the sink. He sits it down and calmly turns off the tap, and when he withdraws his hand Fin notices he’s not wet, not even a little. She’s got a few spots on her tank top, but it’s thankfully black.

“Please stop scaring me.”

“Is it my fault that you can’t hear me?”

“I keep forgetting there’s someone else in the house with me,” Fin admits. “I’ve lived alone for almost ten years, you know. And do Atlanteans not have personal space bubbles?”

“That sounds made up,” Orm intones skeptically.

“Everything is made up,” Fin counters sternly. She finishes drying her cup and then towels off her hands. Orm’s hip is leaning up against the kitchen counter and she has the sudden random thought that it must be odd for him to spend so much time standing. He’s probably used to floating all day.

“So, once Claudia and Steph get back from their honeymoon, Claudia offered to give you a tour of some of Messersmith’s farms, at least the ones in New England. She thought you might appreciate an education. Kelsey is pretty adamant that you not go, because to be honest, corporate farms are not a good thing, but I wanted to formally extend the invitation anyway.”

“Conner told me that eating meat is bad for the environment. I already knew that; I’m not sure if seeing it is something I need to do.”

“We can go vegetarian if you want,” Fin says sweetly. “Even a few days a week makes a difference.”

“That infernal girl gave me a vegetarian cookbook to read.”

Fin laughs. “That was a sneaky move but it works better than trying to directly preach at people. Kelsey learned that the hard way.”

“Oh?”

“I mentioned that Kenny Hawes broke my arm. It’s because he got in Kelsey’s face about some of her dad’s political donations. Now this was years ago—Kelsey wasn’t even a teenager yet. You can’t go around screaming at kids, especially when they’re not yours, and he was only brave enough to do it because he was wasted and Dane wasn’t present at the time. He called Brenda all kinds of names but when he started yelling at Kelsey I couldn’t stand it.”

“Why didn’t you mind your own business? I thought you preferred to stay out of things.”

“I mean, I really should have that time, because Arthur’s totally right when he says that Kenny is a bad guy. One of his old girlfriends from a few years back actually disappeared and we’re all about ninety percent sure he dumped her in the Bay, but they can’t prove it without a body. He’s also in and out of jail so often because he smacks around his wife and son. If he gets drunk enough he’ll drive by and throw rocks at my house just for shits and giggles, but I live pretty far away to be a convenient target. He doesn’t really hold back when he sees me in person, though. He makes the
things that Nate and Jake say to me sound absolutely angelic.”

“And you can’t do anything to stop him?”

“Unless he lays hands on me I don’t bother. I think there’s a holding cell or two in town that they use for as a drunk tank on the weekends, mostly, but no one wants to call the cops on him because he’s so retaliatory. He vandalizes property to get back at people and no one can exactly afford slashed tires or busted windows right now. Kenny’s family lost their pickup truck and he lost a boat to your wave. Once he finds out you’re here I’m in for a real treat.”

“You don’t seem too worried.”

“I have zero problem shooting some dumbass that rolls up to my house looking to start a fight. The law protects me if he gets too violent. I don’t want to kill him, because that would be a pain in the ass for me legally, but I’d totally shoot him in the leg for sure. Arthur says his new captain can get me some really cool guns, but I don’t want to vaporize him or anything. You don’t have anything that powerful, right?”

“You shouldn’t fire any Atlantean weapon near your house or it will be destroyed.”

Fin blinks. “Thanks for the heads up. Maybe I’ll ask for the Atlantean equivalent of a B.B. gun.”

“Are you experienced with firearms?”

Pursing her lips, Fin nods. “Yeah, my uncle was one of those crazy gun nuts. He’d visit every summer, always with fancy guns and enough ammunition to outfit a military base. He’d make Sam and I practice until our hands would blister because he insisted we be ready to defend our firearm cache when the government came to take away our guns.”

“Has that actually happened?”

“Of course not,” Fin says, rolling her eyes fondly at the memory of her uncle gesticulating wildly while trying to emphasize his theories. “He was just paranoid. He did a lot of fighting overseas in the early nineties and he was probably all messed up from that. He sure didn’t have a lot of faith in the government or people in general by the time I was old enough to remember him. What kind of weapon laws does Atlantis have?”

Fin reaches into the freezer and pulls out a Ziploc bag of blueberries with Orm figures out where he’s going to start when he answers her question. She slides open the bag and pops one into her mouth before offering some to him. He eats one with a much higher degree of dignity than she did before silently demanding more.

“With the exception of Tula, military service of any kind is reserved solely for males. Highborn families may elect to train their daughters in martial arts if they choose; some of these young women are sent to the surface to gather intelligence because they can pass for human. They don’t participate in any fighting but they can defend themselves if necessary. It’s the only time that women are permitted to carry a weapon unless they are royalty.”

“Does that include firearms?” Fin scoops more blueberries into her mouth but doesn’t break eye contact. She doesn’t want to miss his answer.

“Yes. Military service for men is mandatory, but they are not supposed to have them unless they are actively serving. Firearms training is something no typical Atlantean woman would ever receive. I’ve been informed that gun ownership is very unregulated on the surface.”
“God made all men. Sam Colt made them equal. That’s how the saying goes. There are so many guns out there in the world that the damage they could do is catastrophic. Sometimes it is. It’s very sad what we do to each other, but that doesn’t mean we’re all bad.”

You’re asking him to overlook a whole lot of bad, though.

“If wiping out humans to stop the pollution is the only way to save the planet, is that wrong?”

Wishing she could find fault in an idea that she’s honestly been thinking for years, Fin shrugs. “I can’t judge anyone as being right or wrong. I only act in the moment to protect myself and my friends. But that’s different than plotting out genocide. I can’t think that’s excusable under any circumstances.”

“You do it to each other all the time.”

And that? That’s true.

Sealing up the bag of blueberries so she has some for later, Fin sticks it back in the freezer. He seems a little miffed that she cut him off, but he easily ate more than his fair share. He’s the reason why meal prep tomorrow is going to be godawful, because he ate most of her food and she wonders if she’ll have to stop at an actual grocery store instead of waiting until the Wednesday market.

Orm will never stop holding all of humanity accountable for the crimes of a few, and Fin seems incapable of overlooking what he’s done, even if she’s not sure what he deserves for killing all of those people. If no one would have died, she would have totally been behind what he did one hundred percent. The ocean is not the place for garbage. But the fact remains that he did get a lot of people killed. And hundreds of thousands lost their homes and their livelihoods. Entire economies were wrecked and the consequences will last long after she’s gone.

Fin wants him to change for the better, but the burden is starting to wear on her. She feels a little used, honestly. Orm’s not deliberately taking advantage of her, but he definitely takes her for granted. That he doesn’t know any better makes it almost impossible for her to resent him in a satisfying way, and that’s frustrating as all get out.

“So I was thinking that you could help me with my gardening and meal prep tomorrow. And before you say that such things are beneath you, I’ll remind you that eating isn’t, and if I don’t take care of my horribly neglected garden, neither of us will be eating in the foreseeable future.”

“I wasn’t going to object.”

“Oh?”

“Peasant life is quaint. Your way of doing things isn't disagreeable.”

Fin honestly can’t tell if he’s being serious or if he’s trying to rile her up, placing her hands on her hips. “You’re the worst.”

Stalking back towards the living room, Fin grabs the instrument cases she left by the door and puts them away in her music room. She hangs up her dress and studies her hair before deciding to leave it braided so she can work easier tomorrow. She can wear a handkerchief over them and not have to worry about her hair sliding out of ponytails the way it always does.

“Arthur must have ordered this for you, too.”

Orm holds out a beautiful wooden cutting board, and a thought suddenly comes to her.
“You like to open my mail. That’s a federal offense, you know.”

“I promise you that I can resist any law enforcement the surface sends after me.”

“Well my house can’t withstand a S.W.A.T. team assault, so I’ll kindly ask that you behave yourself. Please stop opening my mail.”

“Or you’ll send police officers after me?”

“Or you’ll never eat meat in this house again.”

“Your threats are unorthodox.”

“I will never be able to physically oppose anything that you do. But reheating potatoes on a stove doesn’t mean you can cook, and you’ll starve to death in less than a week for sure when I run out of food.”

“You’ve given this some thought.”

“Not especially. I’m way overdue for a shopping trip. I was thinking that before you even got here. Tom lent me his truck to me on Wednesday, but he couldn’t get it to me in time for the farmer’s market. I really would like you to come with me. It’s much better than a grocery store. There’s less waste and it’s nice to support local business.”

“All food grown and consumed in Atlantis is highly-regulated and run by the government. There are no charming vendors that you allude to unless you’re traveling in the outskirts. I’m sure the rural, sparsely-populated areas indulge in such rituals.”

“What about things like clothes or jewelry?”

“Our clothing must adhere to strict guidelines so it adequately protects the wearer. I’m not that familiar with how civilians acquire jewelry. My father would repurpose royal heirlooms or commission items from someone working in the palace. Since that’s not an option for everyone I assume they are purchased from local shops or merchants.”

“I guess royalty doesn’t make their way into the market very often.”

“They do not.”

“You should see Aladdin.”

“Another movie?”

“It’s for kids, but a lot of adults like it too. It’s Arthur’s favorite, even more than The Little Mermaid.”

“I know what mermaids are. You make films about them?”

“Sometimes. There’s a local festival in the summer where people dress up like mythical creatures, like fairies and mermaids. You’d probably hate it except the food is excellent. Kelsey performs in it every year; Dane’s mother was Irish and they tend to feature a lot of Celtic music.”

“I’ve yet to find any music that I like.”

“And you’ve only heard a few different genres, so I’m not surprised. I usually like helping people find music they like, but once again, I’m not going to waste my time on something if you don’t have an open mind. It makes a world of difference.”
“Once, when I was young, I overheard Vulko mention to my mother that he missed the music of the surface world. I’m surprised he ever said such a thing in my proximity.”

“Would you have told your father?”

“No. There are listening devices all over the castle. To speak such things during my father’s reign would have been treason, although Vulko was clever enough to evade surveillance, obviously.”

“Are there still listening devices all over the castle?”

“I’m sure Arthur has been informed of their existence by now. He would be smart to take advantage of them.”

“I honestly can’t see him being down with such a complete lack of privacy.”

“He can spy on any room of the castle if he wishes.”

“Wow, I’m totally getting a Mirror, Mirror vibe right now. It’s from an old show, but a starship captain would creep on his crew and use a special device to kill them remotely.”

“I’m sure something like that could be arranged.”

“That’s not a submission for your very unwholesome palace suggestion box.”

Orm frowns as tries to figure out what she means—her slang and colloquialisms are probably hard to parse sometimes. “It would be useful.”

“I think Atlantis could benefit from more transparency.”

“It’s always been a civilization full of political intrigue.”

“Gross.”

“Indeed.”

“Sometimes it seems like you miss it.”

“I like politics and I like outmaneuvering my opponents. I don’t miss the assassination attempts, the corruption, the hypocrisy, and the general untrustworthiness of everyone I encountered while I was king. They all wanted something from me.”

“And now that you have nothing to give, you’ll find people will treat you a lot more honestly.”

“I suppose that’s one way of thinking about it.” Far from disturbed, Orm appears merely pensive. It appears to be his neutral expression, at least on land. Fin can feel her heart softening up yet again, and gives him a small smile.

“Get some sleep if you can, Orm. I’ll see you in the morning. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Fin nearly trips when he actually returns her kind sentiment, but wisely doesn’t comment or look back. It’s dumb to feel pleased over something as simple as a goodnight but she does. Overall it’s a pretty bland pleasantry, but maybe she can instill some manners in him through sheer repetition.

After washing off her makeup, changing into proper pajamas, and brushing her teeth, Fin curls up
into bed with Morris. She can hear Orm walking through her house long after she lied down. She wonders if he'll ever get his sleep schedule ironed out. Echoing her thoughts from nearly a week ago, she sighs.

*Sweet dreams, Merman.*

Chapter End Notes

I know there's lots of exposition, but pretty much everything out of Mera's mouth was exposition, and it's all important stuff for later, like his expectations for his future and such.

I'm sorry this chapter took so long. It's hard staying motivated and finding time to write. Your comments REALLY help - please leave them if you're enjoying yourself, the more detailed the better. Work will pick up again for me real soon so I appreciate your support and your reminders that I'm actually writing a story lol
Upon waking, Orm’s not immediately sure what time it is. His decision to sleep on the couch ended up with Olive curling up around his neck in the middle of the night. She is soft and her purr is soothing, but sharing a space with another living creature while trying to sleep is not an experience he’s familiar with. He doesn’t feel especially great but assumes part of it is also from gluttoning on sleep the day before. He wonders if he’ll ever feel well-rested up here on the surface.

His host must not be up yet, or she would have woken him already with her noise—Fin can’t stay quiet for long. Orm glances at the watch still on his wrist. It’s much later than when she got her start yesterday, although she doesn’t have a tight schedule today he assumes she doesn’t want to sleep away the day. He heads back the hall to see if she’s awake, and to his surprise Fin shuffles into the hallway, posture stiff. She’s wearing jeans and boots and one of those sleeveless shirts she’s fond of. Orm is a little taken aback by how acutely she projects misery, though. It’s something a little more serious that some sore muscles from last week.

“Well, you seem unwell,” Orm observes.

“An astute observation,” Fin intones dryly, clutching at her stomach.

“Are you ill?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Fin mutters. She walks forward two steps before clasping a hand over her mouth and rushing back into her room. Even through two closed doors, Orm can hear her vomiting in the bathroom. When she emerges a few minutes later, she smells like mint toothpaste and—

“Are you bleeding?”

Fin blinks. “What?”

“I smell blood.”

It takes Fin a moment to process what should be very straightforward information and she seems mortified rather than concerned. “You do?”

“Did you injure yourself since I saw you last?”

Wearily scrubbing her face with her palm, Fin sighs. “No, I promise. It’s just my period, and knowing that you can smell that makes me kind of want to die a little, mostly because that means that Arthur can too.”

“Your period?”

Narrowing her eyes, Fin gives him a serious look as if to determine how credible his ignorance is. Expelling all of the air in her lungs abruptly, she straightens up a bit (although she still rubs her lower abdomen) before taking a deep breath.

“Do you seriously not know what a menstrual cycle is?”

“I do not.”
“I suppose it would be dangerous for an Atlantean woman to bleed into the water every month for three to seven days,” Fin mutters nonsensically. “What, with sharks swimming around all over the place.”

Orm frowns at her. “What are you talking about?”

“Why don’t you Google it. I’ll go start some breakfast.”

It’s odd she’s unwilling to elaborate, but once Orm retrieves her laptop and follows her instructions, it makes a little sense. There are lots of scientific terms in regards to what must be happening to her right now, probably more than someone without a medical background would care to use in explaining a reproductive biological process. He follows her into the kitchen for additional information.

“So this happens to you every month?”

“Yes, and it’s really inconvenient. I always get very bad nausea the first day, along with headaches and horrible fatigue and killer cramps. I take birth control pills to control the worst of my symptoms but they never really go away.”

It takes Orm only a moment to make a connection to something with more familiar terminology.

“Are you talking about an oral contraceptive?”

“Yes, although they don’t really do what it says on the tin because I haven’t been sexually active in awhile. Arthur teases me about that constantly and promises he’ll send someone to take care of it. I’m pretty sure he’s joking but with Arthur, who can honestly say?”

Aghast, Orm frowns at his brother’s impropriety. “That seems highly inappropriate.”

Fin shrugs. “Well, we’re pretty inappropriate people.”

“And you just casually discuss your sexual encounters with him?”

“Um, not really in lurid detail or anything,” Fin informs him, “but sometimes having insight from the opposite sex really helps if you’re having a problem.”

“Like some sort of sexual dysfunction?” Orm nods gravely.

Fin cackles. “I was thinking more along the lines of like…relationship advice. Arthur’s never found a girl he cares about as much as Mera. It’s new ground for him. It’s kind of sweet how soft and tame she’s made him but he doesn’t really know what to do because there are so many rules and formalities standing between them.”

Orm can’t help but let his lip curl up in disgust a little before carefully smoothing out his expression. “He’s so besotted that it’s embarrassing to watch. They spend far more time together than a typical betrothed couple.”

Biting her lip, Fin looks thoughtful. “Maybe not as much as you think.”

That’s certainly an interesting thought. Perhaps Arthur is finally realizing he can’t just do whatever he wants, even though he’s king. It’s a lesson Orm struggled with in his early years, having his hands tied by ancient laws that were no longer relevant. His goal was a little more lofty than securing time alone with his betrothed, however.

“You mean my lawless, reckless brother hasn’t just declared her his queen? It’s a wonder he hasn’t
already married and put a child in her.”

“Well, I mean, they probably aren’t actually ever really left alone in Atlantis,” Fin says. “But who’s to say that they’re not getting up to that while they’re up here on the surface?”

It’s not an unintelligent conclusion for why Arthur has been spending so much time on land. It would be impossible to chaperone them in any meaningful way. No highborn would be stuck with the ignoble duty of supervising them, and evading a group of slow-moving Atlanteans in hydro suits would be child’s play for them, since they presumably wouldn’t be shooting at them. But Orm knows Mera too well.

“The princess would wait until they were married. I do not even think they’re even properly engaged yet. A child out of wedlock would render Mera ineligible to marry my brother, even if the child is his and Arthur acknowledges it.”

"Is that why your father never married Tula's mother?"

Orm frowns. "Her social status was far below my father's. A marriage would have never happened under any circumstances."

"So why is it acceptable to impregnate whomever you want but not marry them?"

"I can't answer that question," Orm says truthfully. "I only know that Mera would never endanger her future like that; even if she takes precautions nothing is foolproof."

"So is birth control easily accessible to women in Atlantis? Maybe she’ll find a way."

"I honestly don’t know how women go about gaining access to such things. It seems that royalty and nobles place a great deal of esteem in a woman’s ability to bear children so perhaps their use isn’t widespread. Additionally, no woman would ever discuss contraceptives in my presence. It just wouldn’t be done."

"Because you’re a man or because you were king?"

"I do not know what a husband and wife would typically discuss, but as king, my wife would never need them. She would be required to continue the line of Atlan and multiple heirs would be desirable."

"But say you were king and your wife wanted to stop popping out kids…would you let her?"

Orm doesn’t rightly know. He’s never had to give the matter any thought; any queen would perform her duty for the kingdom without question.

Except your mother and Mera, it would seem.

“The birth rates in Atlantis have continued to drop, so it would probably be a non-issue,” Orm finally declares. “It’s happening to families all over the realm, regardless of class. And illness has been spreading through our citizens at a younger age. Some are probably too sick to start families and others do not wish to start families out of fear of growing ill and leaving their children without parents. But for some, children would be a huge financial burden and the cost alone would be prohibitive.”

“Not everyone has unlimited resources to support a pregnancy,” Fin agrees. “I got a copper IUD a few years back, not that I’ve really needed it. I would still make guys suit up for safety reasons, but knowing it was virtually impossible for me to get pregnant made me enjoy sex a lot more. At least I
hope women in Atlantis can enjoy that, at least the ones that aren’t royalty or nobility.”

Orm has always been puzzled by the seemingly overwhelming obsession with sex, both on the surface and in Atlantis. “Procreation takes priority over pleasure.”

“But it can be both,” Fin whispers dramatically. “You need to expand your horizons.”

“Is the fear of bearing offspring really that off-putting?”

“It is when you don’t want to be a mom, yeah,” Fin mutters. “Who can afford babies anymore?”

Without having any idea how much things cost or how much money his host has at her disposal, it occurs to Orm that his grasp of how life is lived up here is really very thin. “Is the expense your main reason for not wanting children? You mentioned it before.”

“I’d love a family someday, but I’m nowhere near financially stable. Ideally I’d want a boyfriend or husband to raise my kids with. I’ve seen people do it alone, and while that’s not a bad thing, I’m sure it’s a thousand times better with a loving partner. And I’m sure my kid would want two parents. It sure hurt Arthur growing up without a mom.”

*It hurt me too*, is what immediately jumps into Orm’s mind, but he painstakingly smothers that sentiment into nothingness. There’s no point in reliving past hurts like that.

“What will you do if you don’t find a suitable partner?”

“I mean, I have no real urgency at the moment to have kids, although I get reminded that my biological clock is ticking by well-meaning people like Mindy all the time. A sperm bank seems pretty impersonal and I would literally be raising a stranger’s child. I’m not going to force myself to have them if it’s not in the cards. I guess I can just hope I meet someone. Conner suggested online dating.”

The phrase is unfamiliar, but Orm quickly surmises what she’s talking about. “Like the advertisement I saw two days ago?”

Fin laughs breezily. “No, that was fake. They just wanted your money. There are legitimate websites that people use to meet potential partners. Sometimes it’s the quickest way to find someone. Modern society doesn’t really give us lots of opportunities. Time is the biggest challenge.”

“You have a great deal of social and work obligations. Wouldn’t you benefit from something like that?”

“Not really. Most men online are just interested in me because they have yellow fever.” Fin winces as she pulls something out of the refrigerator in a plastic container.

“What does that mean?”

Placing the white tub on the counter, Fin crosses her arms for a moment. “*Asian* is technically not a race, because it just means someone from Asia, and it’s a huge fucking place. But that’s what I’m considered and based on my appearance, a lot of people, especially men, make assumptions about my personality and sexual proclivities based on how I look.”

“That’s incredibly stupid,” Orm observes, although his society suffers from plenty of comparable stereotypes. They’re not necessarily based on physical appearance, but on the similar assumptions that a person’s social status or birthplace predisposes them to certain behaviors.
“It’s so hard to find a man that doesn’t compartmentalize me that way. I’ve dated guys only to find out they were initially interested in me because I was an Asian chick and it had nothing to do with any meaningful aspect of me. It really sucks; I feel like they’re just ticking off a box.”

With a great deal of hostility, Fin scoops large amounts of the white material out of the plastic tub into bowls.

“I assume these assumptions are unflattering?”

“Yes, but it’s more insulting that they were made at all. When someone objectifies you it makes you feel like less of a human being. How I look is not my most definitive characteristic and I don’t like people thinking of me that way. I understand having a type and all, but I don’t want men wasting my time just because they think Asian girls are exotic and that’s all they see me as.”

“Is that the prevailing attitude here? I’ve yet to see another woman here that looks remotely like you,” Orm admits.

“This is not a very diverse place, so yeah, I guess I am exotic by default. I don’t see why it matters. Having sex with someone of a different race or ethnicity doesn’t feel any different, and I don’t exist just to fulfill the sexual desires of another person. I’ve had men turn on me at the drop of a hat because I wouldn’t have sex with them, and that’s such bullshit.”

With great fanfare, Fin places a bowl in front of him containing the strange white ingredient from the plastic tub, frozen blueberries from the night before, and some strange crispy-looking ingredient on top. There’s also a viscous liquid drizzled on top of everything. She serves it in a clear glass bowl.

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“She quickly ingests two of those caplets that allow her to digest milk products before she seats herself.

“I made yogurt parfaits for breakfast. It’s basically a giant lump of dairy, blueberries, honey, and granola. Mindy made the granola for me and the honey is local.”

The yogurt is kind of bland, but it helps to soften the sweetness of the honey and granola. The blueberries are still the best part, but overall it’s not a bad dish. It’s not terribly filling, but Orm can already feel some of the heat outside and he’s glad a rich, hot meal isn’t sitting in his stomach like a ball of lead.

“I’m sorry I’m all out of orange juice, but it wouldn’t have gone with this anyway.”

“Will you repurchase more?”

“The only reason I had Clementines and oranges in the first place was because Kelsey gets them for me. Her dad uses his resources to make sure the people in Amnesty Bay still have access to affordable produce and meat. Otherwise we’d be screwed. Half of the orange groves in Florida are flooded but I’m sure if you told Kelsey how much you liked them, there’d be a delivery on my front porch. Wouldn’t you feel a little disingenuous taking advantage of a young girl’s kindness?”

It feels like a trap, so Orm neatly sidesteps. Fin’s resorting to blatant emotional manipulation but calling her on it won’t change the facts. “Water suits me just fine right now.”

Fin shoots him a smile with lots of teeth before she finishes the rest of her parfait.

“I have a ton of vegetables and herbs I need to harvest so I can deliver them. Even with Dane’s help, it’s still more affordable than most commercialized options. I don’t even like cucumbers, but I grow them to sell. I have tomatoes, peppers, corn, carrots, squash, onions, and potatoes. Any later in the year, and your wave would have destroyed all my crops. The salt water decimated my roses,
though.”

Expression unreadable, Fin gazes out the window momentarily before shooting him a lopsided grin.

“At least all of my avocados are grown in California and are safe, unless there are humanoid underwater races living in the Pacific Ocean too.”

Orm scoffs. “That’s highly unlikely.”

“Is it any more unlikely than a race of magical beings living in the Atlantic Ocean?”

“Magic isn’t the correct word for it.”

“I mean, you can breathe on the land and under the sea, you’re incredibly strong and powerful, you can survive on land or thousands of feet below the ocean…kinda sounds a bit like magic. Your civilization survived because of a legendary object crafted by a Greek god, so doesn’t that make all of you a little bit magical?”

The clang of Fin’s metal spoon in her empty bowl echoes throughout the kitchen. She washes it and does the same for Orm’s when he suddenly materializes next to her and hands it to her at the sink.

“Magic is oversimplifying,” Orm says finally.

“How else do you describe an entire city and its people not dying when it sinks beneath the sea?”

“The power of the Gods,” Orm replies. “A blessing we received for being so much more advanced than our peers.”

“Ah, of course, more confirmation that Atlantis is better than everyone else.”

Walking away from the sink before Orm can reply, Fin grabs the key to her shed. Before she heads out the door, Orm makes eye contact with her and she stops, apparently riveted by the intensity of his expression.

“Where is your sunscreen?”

Fin blinks. “What?”

“Gabby says you will get cancer if you don’t remember to wear it.”

“It’s sweet of her to be concerned. I always forget.”

“Does it run in your family? I’ve often wondered why I never got sick but my father did. Perhaps it was where he was stationed; exposure to certain areas has proved detrimental.”

“My grandmother had skin cancer, but my parents didn’t live long enough for that one to catch up with them. They both got sick from the factory where they worked, though. They were actually in the process of getting a second opinion when they passed away.”

Grabbing the sunscreen and pointing outside to indicate where she was going to put it on, Fin marches down the stairs with Orm close behind her. Once they reach the garden out back, Orm glances at her expectantly. Fin’s eventually realizes he’s waiting for her to elaborate a little on what she said, given the serious nature of it.

“Losing them the way I did really sucked, but I’m glad I never had to watch them go through chemotherapy or radiation treatments. There was a factory in the next town over that manufactured
Looking out over the water, Fin’s expression grows openly mournful in the way it does when she forgets that Orm is there. What she said the previous day is true, that she’s so used to living alone that she’s accustomed to acting and emoting however she pleases without any repercussions or censure. The sun paints subtle red hues into her hair as the wind picks up a few strands that have come loose.

“Fin.”

Jolted by the sound of her name, Fin whips her head around to where Orm is gazing at her with an unreadable look on his face. He’s a little concerned; he can admit that privately.

“I’m sorry, I was just thinking about something.”

When she doesn't say anything else, Orm presses on. “What were you thinking about?”

“It’s been almost ten years since my parents's death. Ten is an arbitrary number, but sometimes we use multiples of five as milestones as if those numbers actually mean something. I know I was an adult when they died, but I never expected to lose them before I did anything with my life. Sometimes I still feel like I haven’t.”

Fin’s uncharacteristic self-pity doesn’t sit well with Orm. “You’ve kept up their home, you support yourself financially, and you have good friends and devoted students.”

“Yeah, but all the milestones they were supposed to see…they never did, except for me graduating college. And they weren’t very happy with me by the time I came home that summer. It was…really bad between us before they died. I never knew they could act like that towards me, and we never got to make it right.”

Orm follows Fin’s gaze out to the sparkling Bay waters again. He quickly surmises he’s not getting any more out of her on the subject but doesn’t push her. There are enough unpleasant memories at his disposal that he doesn’t have to needle her for hers.

“You’re already getting red and we’ve barely been outdoors.” Orm can’t help the condescension in his tone. She just told him it runs in her family.

Fin nods before turning to him. “I’m sure your skin is more sensitive than mine, since you’re not even used to seeing the sun. If you were going to take off your shirt, do you want me to put some sunscreen on your back?”

“I don’t understand the surface dwelling propensity to casually disrobe.”

“It gets hot up here! Maine is one of the coldest states and it still gets uncomfortable. It’s warmer than usual for some reason and the humidity is unreal. Also, it feels nice to be naked. I can’t walk around my own house like that anymore thanks to you. I’m pretty sure you would have some objections if I did.”

Orm looks at her as if Arthur made him stay with some kind of sexual predator, but Fin only shrugs. She’s already seen him without a stitch of clothing, if waking up in completely new garments last week is any indication, but she doesn’t seek to exploit or mock him over it.
Being naked honestly makes Orm feel vulnerable after decades of wearing a scaly hydro suit and full body armor. He’s free to examine his scars, proof of the weaknesses that are hidden from view. But they have no meaning to Fin, and the heat finally makes him peel of his t-shirt because it makes no sense to be uncomfortable when he can help it.

To his surprise, Fin is smiling at him. “Some of your injuries looked pretty old but all the bruises have healed.”

“They were less than a week old at most. I suppose it’s not fast for us, but we recover from injuries at a quicker rate than surface dwellers, I’ve been told.”

“Well I guess it came in handy for you,” Fin remarks kindly. “Do you want me to put sunscreen on your back?”

Orm is already aware of his few physical limitations, enough so that he doesn’t attempt the indignity of flapping his arms behind his back to test his flexibility. There’s no way he can reach where he needs to. He merely nods and Fin smiles, slipping beside him and dispensing sunscreen into the palm of her hand. He doesn’t quite tower over her the way that Arthur must, and he wonders if she feels threatened by his larger size.

The lotion is cool against his skin. Fin’s hands are small but they mold against the muscles of his back with strength and efficiency. Orm tries not to tense when he feels her fingertips skim the inch or so of skin at the top hem of his jeans. He realizes she’s trying to make sure she doesn’t miss a spot, but the contact feels weirdly sensual. No one’s ever touched him there before and he’s not accustomed to gentle treatment ever.

The intimate contact is unfamiliar, but it’s not uncomfortable now that Orm’s become better acquainted with her. He supposes that the implication that he trusts her is to be made, but his mind rationalizes it as Fin being too weak to harm him. It’s almost relaxing, the knowledge that she can’t hurt him. When she’s finished, Fin steps back and he resumes her task, smearing the awful stuff all over his chest and arms. It may be a putrid mess of chemicals and minerals, but it’s likely more effective than anything even his highly-evolved race has come up with. Since every surface dweller spends their life under the sun and only a relative few perish from skin cancer, surely this dreck must help.

“Did you require assistance?”

The words are out of Orm’s mouth before he can stop them when he sees Fin pick up the sunscreen bottle. Her arms are much more flexible than his, but she looks a little awkward. She seems to enjoy offers of reciprocation, even for small things such as wishing someone a good night. She seems surprised that he asked her but eventually acquiesces without a word, shuffling a bit so that her back faces him.

It’s remarkable how quickly the sun has heated Fin’s skin. They’ve only been outside for a handful of minutes and she feels unbelievably warm. Her sleeveless top leaves a portion of skin between her shoulder blades bare, and Orm discovers that his hands are capable of covering her much faster than hers did with him. He’s acutely aware of how small and fragile she is, although the muscles of her back and shoulders feel anything but delicate. The ink that swirls across her arms doesn’t feel much different than the surrounding skin except for a few areas where it’s slightly raised.

“Your marks feel uneven here.”

“Sometimes artists have heavy hands when they tattoo. Those are the ones I got first, and I didn’t really know who to go to when I was younger.”
“When was the last time you went?” Orm inquires. His fingers leave her arm but he traces the design lazily with this gaze. The marks are not as abhorrent as he originally thought. He supposes that he’s obviously concluded his sunscreen application, but she doesn’t seem to mind his self-indulgence.

“A few years ago,” Fin tells him. “It’s very expensive. I don’t think I have the funds to go ever again, to be honest. It’s funny how the wave changes everyone’s priorities; I’m sure tons of other people flocked to get all kinds of things commemorated in ink.”

“But you seem to enjoy it.”

“Just because I enjoy something, doesn’t mean I can afford it or I should do it. There’s nothing Conner would love more than driving a hotrod around, but they’re terrible for the environment, so he runs around in an ugly van with a converted engine that runs on electricity. And Kelsey actually enjoys the taste of meat but doesn’t eat it because once again, industry standards are bad for the environment and she feels compassion for animals.”

“So she deprives herself to make some type of political statement?”

“Yes, and she’s only a teenager. But most people in general aren’t that conscientious. Everything in Atlantis is probably highly regulated. It’s not up here, and we were never brought up to think about our resources that way. We’re trying to get better, but the people with all the power just care about money. It’s hard to find alternatives when they provide us with no other options. It’s not like we have the power to fight giant corporations or the government. I guess at one point you were the government.”

“Yes.”

“Environmentally sound and totalitarian,” Fin surmises.

“Correct.”

“There’s got to be a way to balance things out a little more. Free speech is pretty cool.”

“It threatens the stability of the monarchy.”

“If the monarchy can’t withstand some constructive criticism, is it really that stable in the first place?” Fin tips her head back so she can look him in the eye, and even though she’s got to look way up to do it, her challenge doesn’t waver.

Realizing that Fin is still incredibly close, Orm backs away very subtly so it’s not so obvious he’s retreating. Only when he stands like that facing her does he realize how much smaller she is than him; she certainly exudes a great deal of presence for such a small woman. He watches her gingerly apply sunscreen to her face, which is already getting a little pink. She also steps back even further from him to wrap her hair up in some kind of swath of fabric, careful to collect every strand off the back of her neck.

“I have to get my orders ready for tomorrow. You can help me pick tomatoes first, and then some carrots and potatoes. We also have to weed the garden and attend to my horribly neglected compost pile. I usually do some berry picking on Greta’s farm but she closed up for the weekend because Claudia got married. We can go later this week.”

“What kind of berries?”

“She’s got strawberries and blackberries. She usually lets me take some flowers, so I might leave them on the kitchen table to brighten things up a bit. I haven’t had a guest in like, well, ever.”
“How do you pick tomatoes?” Orm asks.

Fin can’t help but laugh, but Orm doesn’t feel ridiculed or humiliated. She smiles at him with only fondness as she leads him over to one of her tomato plants. She demonstrates how very easy it is and he understands now why she laughed in the first place.

“Please pick all the ripe ones. They’re red and firm. If you find overripe ones that feel really soft, you can just pull them off and put them to the side. I’ll compost them. I’ve been a very bad gardener since you arrived so you might find a lot. But they tend to provide an overabundance anyway.”

The task is simple enough, but Fin’s not exaggerating when she says how many productive these plants are. Every time he thinks he’s close to being done, he shifts a little more to his right and an entire new section of the plant magically appears.

“Is this normal?”

“Yes, pretty much everyone who grows tomatoes grows too many to know what to do with. I love them but even I can’t eat them all. They’re great in so many dishes the possibilities are endless. Sometimes I can them to save them for winter but I usually end up giving most of them away.”

“I was under the impression you didn’t necessarily have lots of resources,” Orm says carefully.

Fin shrugs. “I don’t, but there’s always someone that has less than you. Some people pay me because they can afford to, but others simply can’t. They’re too proud to admit they need help, but sometimes I suffer from that too.”

“Why don’t you just ask for help?”

“Help from whom?” Fin asks. Her gaze falls over his shoulder in the direction of town. “Arthur is never around when I need him. He brings me more problems than solutions, no offense. His dad is reliable but he doesn’t have lots of money. Conner slaves away at his dad’s shop to help afford his mother’s cancer treatments and every dime he makes past food and rent goes to Sophia. Mindy’s even more strapped for cash than I am.”

“What about Kelsey? She has money.”

“She is a teenage girl. Her father pays me very well for providing her with voice lessons and I’m not about to take advantage of their kindness. Her family’s done a lot for me already, well at least her and her dad. She’d give me anything I asked her for, but that doesn’t mean I should ask. Boundaries are important.”

"Everything used to be at my disposal in Atlantis," Orm tells her.

Slowly, Fin gives him a thoughtful look. "I can't exactly offer you the best in terms of everything the world has to offer, but I'm certainly not going to demand it of you in return. Enjoy a slower pace of life for once and do some things for yourself. You gave everything you had for them once. You don't have to anymore."

There's something about the way Fin phrases things or just simply thinks that continues to surprise him. Orm considers himself a philosopher but admittedly sees the world through a very narrow lens. Even if she's wrong, her point of view is likely shared by many other people. Understanding them will never be a priority of his, but surely it couldn't hurt his current situation to try and understand her a little better.

Glancing over, Orm sees Fin gingerly placing the tomatoes in canvas bags. She begins carting them
back up to the kitchen, the stairs a perilous obstacle given her propensity for falling. He quickly follows behind her, handling the items delicately when it becomes apparent how easily their flesh bruises if he’s not careful. She really does have more tomatoes than he ever thought possible from just a few plants.

“You went pretty hard at the basil, so I’m going to tell you right now, I don’t want to harvest all of my potatoes or carrots yet, just a few,” Fin informs him when they're back in the garden. She tosses something shiny to Orm, and he sees that it’s a fork. “I’ll show you how to use this to loosen up the soil around the carrots, otherwise you’re just going to yank on the top and pull off the leaves.”

Proving herself again to be a good teacher, Fin demonstrates how she wants her carrots harvested. Orm picks about twenty of them; they’re not very visually appealing the way the tomatoes are. He knows he’s eaten them before, but it’s hard to imagine how they started out their life growing in the dirt.

“So I decided to just turn the entire yard into a garden a few years ago when the mower stopped working. Lawns aren’t really that great for the environment anyway. The sprinkler system was still useful, although when I first got started I made so many mistakes and lost a lot of money and vegetables the first year or two. I had to figure out which ones to start in the greenhouse so they wouldn’t succumb to late spring frosts.”

“Would you consider yourself an expert?”

“I wish I could, but I still have a lot to learn,” Fin says wistfully. “I’m just happy I can feed myself and a few friends and acquaintances this way. It’s a nice feeling of accomplishment. I’m sure it can’t hold a candle to ruling the most technologically advanced country on the planet, but I’m pretty sure you can’t grow a tomato.”

Orm silently follows Fin over to where tall green stalks are growing off to the side. “I planted these way too early in my greenhouse so they’d be ready—you’re not supposed to start corn indoors and transfer it because the roots can get damaged—but sweet corn on the cob is one of my favorite things. I plant several different varieties just so I can enjoy corn all summer long. We’ll only pick a few, but I mostly need your help with my compost.”

Fin launches into an informative but pretty dry description of composting. She’s mentioned it several times over the past few days, and it’s pretty much exactly what he surmised. Turning the compost pile is unpleasant but he supposes it’s better than her throwing all of that organic material away in a plastic bag. If it helps her grow better vegetables it’s worth it, but it’s not particularly challenging work for him.

“Thankfully my garden is pretty inaccessible for squirrels or rabbits. I did find a raccoon once but I asked to dog sit Simon’s Rottweiler for a few days and he scared him off for good with zero raccoon deaths. He’s a very intimidating dog but he’s kind of dumb. If he didn’t scare my cats, I’d watch him more. Dog sitting is kind of fun.”

“Aren’t dogs supposed to be man’s best friend or something to that effect? I heard my mother utter that phrase once. Tom Curry used to own a dog and she did mention living with one before. Her adventure on the surface was something she would often discuss with me, but she was careful not to talk about Tom or Arthur.”

Giving him a reassuring look, Fin merely finishes turning the compost one last time with her shovel before standing back. “Most dogs are pretty good. They’re very loyal animals but they can be a pain because they’re super clingy. I used to have a dog named Domino and he would follow me and my brother around everywhere. We fed him table scraps and he slept at the foot of my parents’ bed.”
“We do not generally allow animals in our homes but we take good care of our mounts.”

“Maybe don’t tell Kelsey about that. She would hate the idea of riding an animal into battle where it could get hurt or killed. I know it’s a cultural difference, but I think it might distress her. She would consider it barbaric.”

“She asked for a book of our laws; if she thinks war mounts and beasts of burden are barbaric, she will not be able to handle how our codex sees fit to punish outlaws,” Orm intones dryly.

“I realize the world is a harsh place, but we could all stand to be a little nicer to each other. Kelsey gets bullied sometimes for being vegetarian. Some boys in her class send her pictures of dead animals and others share videos of how the livestock at her father’s farms are treated. They think it’s funny to torment her.”

“Children are cruel,” Orm says sagely. “I never went out of my way to treat my peers like that growing up, but I witnessed it many times. Maybe she needs a thicker skin to withstand their attacks.”

Fin yanks out a weed with more aggression than necessary. “Or maybe people shouldn’t be shitty to each other in the first place. I mean, there’s that.”

Thankfully identifying weeds and garden pests is simple, and the mindless work helps clear up some of his residual weariness. He doesn’t notice when his host slips off while he’s weeding the corn, and when Fin reappears with freshly-washed hands and a tray of refreshments, he’s feeling almost tangible relief.

“Go wash up in the kitchen. I’ve got some snacks for when you come back down.”

Orm immediately obeys, finding no issue in following such reasonable orders. He feels foolish for being eager, but it’s just so hot. His advanced physiology isn’t doing so much to help him against the power of the sun. When he returns to the garden, his gaze immediately falls on the pitcher of icy liquid, the pale yellow color only mildly disconcerting given his thirst. She presses a frigid glass into his palm.

“It’s going to be very sweet and tart,” she warns. Fin tips the entire contents of her glass down her throat in one hearty swig. She uses a pitcher to refill her glass, and drinks this one a bit more slowly.

The first sip makes Orm’s tongue tingle. He recoils a bit and recalls tasting that particular flavor before. It’s not bad, but nothing in the ocean tastes anything like it. He can also detect copious amounts of sweetener in the beverage. He knows on some level that they’re really bad for him, but they’re the only thing rendering the beverage drinkable.

“Fresh squeezed lemonade is the bee’s knees.”

“You’re fond of saying that.”

Fin shrugs. “It’s a cute phrase. And I know they don’t really go with the lemonade, but have some tomatoes. I just drizzled a little olive and balsamic vinegar on them and sprinkled on some salt and pepper. I’ll hold us over until I can make a proper meal. I’m sorry I don’t have more fruit but you and Mera cleaned me out.”

Taking a seat in the shade, Orm picks up a tomato slice only to find that the toppings slide right off. He watches Fin delicately sop them back up as best she can with her own slice and pop it in her mouth. She’s a messy eater, and when she’s done with her portion she licks her fingers clean.
“Are your tomatoes alright, Orm?”

“Yes, but you’re right; they don’t go with the lemonade.”

“I brought you some water too.”

“It’s a marvel you didn’t drop the tray on the way down.”

Fin smiles and playfully nudes his knee with the toe of her boot. “If you keep insulting me I will never run out of chores for you to help me with.”

“Is that how you treat all of your guests?”

“You’re my only long-term guest, and you’re setting a bad precedent,” Fin snaps in a light-hearted voice, wagging a finger at him. She leans back and stares up at the canopy of leaves above her head. “You know, my parents planted this when they built the house.”

“It’s an aesthetically pleasing tree,” Orm concedes. Fin smiles shyly, like he’s given her some kind of meaningful, personal compliment, and she tilts her face away from him as if she’s embarrassed.

“That’s one of the nicest things I’ve heard you say about my home,” Fin admits after a moment. “But anyway, this tree is even older than Sam. Right before the wave, I had an arborist come and look at it. It’s not very healthy and it’s a huge pain in my ass. It also makes growing a garden so much harder because it’s so goddamn greedy. If it gets any bigger it’ll start interfering with the underground pipes.”

“Are you going to keep it?”

“I don’t know. I realize that as I grow older, more and more of the things my parents built and made are going to break or go away, but it’s hard to sever the attachment. These aren’t even good trees for yards…my parents just liked the way they looked so they planted one. It’s so messy when the leaves drop. I don’t really want to get rid of it or keep it.”

“Are you asking my advice?” Orm asks after a moment.

Fin shrugs. “I suppose these kinds of trivialities are nothing compared to the glamorous problems of ruling Atlantis.”

“I would have gladly had your tree problem as opposed to some of my other ones.”

“Then what would you do, oh wise king?” Fin utters the words solemnly but her lips are curving into a badly-concealed smirk.

“Surface dwellers place a great importance on sentiment, I’ve noticed, but you’re also practical enough to recognize when something is more trouble than it’s worth. Your parents wouldn’t want you burdened by their mistakes.”

“Would yours?”

Fin’s question is soft but not timid. He doesn’t owe her an answer, but he’s never actually thought about his legacy in terms of inheriting mistakes.

“What do you mean?”

“You were placed on your path by a very angry and bitter man. Taking out all surface dwellers may have been the best thing for Atlantis or it might not have been, but I can’t see how it would be the
best thing for you. No good parent should want their child to lead genocide. I don’t really believe in heaven or hell, but let’s talk about real-world repercussions. What kind of a person would you be if you had actually pulled it off?”

“A hero or a monster, depending on how you look at it,” Orm muses.

“If your civilization only won at the expense of billions of other people, doesn’t that seem a little morally bankrupt to you?”

“Not if those billions of people were destroying the earth.”

“Governments and companies are causing the destruction, not your average citizen. And some are actively trying to be better; some have been trying decades before the wave. Wayne Enterprises has been environmentally conscientious since before I was born—well before most companies even gave it a thought. And plastic is used to make things accessible that wouldn’t normally be; if not for plastic, I wouldn’t have any dairy or meat in this house. If you want to go vegan, you got it.”

This seems like another trap, and Orm’s not sure if he wants to punish himself to prove a point. She’s already aware of humanities shortcomings and thankfully has been spared the worst of them, to his knowledge.

“How are you properly nourished without eating meat?”

“You can get iron from eating spinach.”

“That sounds decidedly less pleasant than eating a steak.”

“You’re right, there, but plenty of people make do without beef—it’s expensive. Kelsey takes multivitamins to make up for any deficiencies in her diet.”

“That sounds needlessly complicated and unappealing.”

“But she’s sticking to her beliefs. That kid has more integrity than most adults.”

“I never expected that when I met her.”

“You shouldn’t expect anything when you meet people. Open mind, remember? It takes awhile to get to know someone, truly.”

Fin taps her temple before leaving the luxurious shade to resume her work in the garden. Orm follows her lead and soon he’s learning how to pick peppers and cucumbers. When they finally haul the rest of the food upstairs to the kitchen, Fin stops him before he enters the living room. Making him walk with her around to another side of the house, they use an entrance that’s unfamiliar to him.

“This is where the washer and dryer are. I’m going to throw our clothes in here because they’re filthy and I don’t want dirt all over the house.”

Stripping off her boots, Fin quickly throws her socks in the washing machine along with her tank top. There’s another tank top on underneath, but when she strips off her jeans she’s only wearing undergarments underneath. She quickly grabs a pair of shorts from a stack of clothes sitting nearby and puts them on. Orm’s unsure if she meant to instruct him to look away, but when he glances at her again she’s not paying any attention to where his eyes are pointed. In all fairness to her, his soldiers treat disrobing the same way.

“Take off your jeans and socks. I’ll throw them in. I have something for you to change into when
you’re done. You can shower right now if you want to, but we still have a lot of work to do in the kitchen, so I figured you wanted to wait until it’s all done.”

“That would be sensible.”

Fin brushes by him and walks into the living room, leaving him alone to strip. Orm quickly changes into the clothes she provided, and when he’s finished, he joins her in the living room to investigate what she’s doing. She’s standing by a shelf of very slim cardboard boxes wrapped in plastic sleeves.

“My turntable is broken, but I’ll let you pick a few albums for us to listen to. I’ll just use Spotify to actually play them. You can pick based on the cover and it’s more fun to look at them in person that a tiny picture on a screen.”

Her game is a little childish, but it’s the happiest Orm’s seen Fin all day. As with the books, the names and art on the album have no context for him, so he really does just have to pick whatever he finds superficially appealing. It’s a little overwhelming, but he picks one at random, one based on the grayscale color palette, and one based on the title, Another Green World.

“Oh, this one has one of my favorite songs of all time on it so I’ll save it for last. Let’s put on the Green Day album you picked first.”

The opening song is just as dreadful as he fears, but Orm is quickly made to understand that listening to music is not the focus on their afternoon. He finds himself scrubbing potatoes and carrots and washing cucumbers and tomatoes. Some of the food gets packed up after being cleaned, presumably to be delivered. Others get sliced up and then pureed; it’s hard to keep track of what goes where. He picks up a hand-written sheet of paper and figures it’s a list of orders. It’s made of the same loopy script that Claudia uses.

As the albums Orm selected cycle through, it occurs to him he really did manage to select quite the variety simply by accident. He doesn’t really like loud music with the hard beats and shouting, but the album he selected with the minimalist white cover and a patchy gray circle is very pleasant.

“I like this one,” Orm states suddenly, probably around the third or fourth track. “I just don’t know what he’s singing about.”

“It’s actually a made up language called Hopelandic. Look it up on my laptop when you’re done, if you want. I think people can bring their own meanings to this album. Will says I’m pretentious for liking Sigur Rós, but he and his girlfriend like Nickelback, so I don’t give a flying fuck what he thinks about my taste in music. If anyone asks you if you like that band, just say no so you avoid getting made fun of.”

“Noted.”

Fin puts some corn aside, still wrapped in its husk. “This is going to be part of our dinner. You’re in for a treat.”

“You are making meat, right?”

“Yes, in spite of all that, I can see why you don’t want to give it up, although if meat were just made prohibitively expensive, it wouldn’t be a problem.”
“This, from someone who’s never gone to bed hungry because his parents were too poor,” Fin grumbles. “You do realize if meat were that expensive, you definitely wouldn’t have eaten any of it since you got here. Once again, Dane comes through for Amnesty Bay and makes sure it’s somewhat affordable. Plastic makes things accessible for everyone, and that’s important in a society too.”

“Why do things need to be enjoyed by everyone? Atlantis’s policies protect the wealth and power of its strongest families. Their service to Atlantis spans centuries in some cases. They deserve access more than anyone else.”

“So they’re entitled to the best and nutritionally sound food because they’re lucky enough to be born rich? That sounds like corruption to me.”

“No one in Atlantis starves. That’s far better than your surface world.”

“Arthur told me there are lots of poor districts—some of them are even overrun by pockets of trapped oxygen. If only highborn Atlanteans can breathe in that environment, isn’t it kind of awful that large areas of their homeland are completely unlivable? Do you help them reclaim viable spaces for them to live or do you just tell them to suck it up?”

“The outlying provinces were not my priority. They also have regional governors to worry about them. They’re not left entirely on their own.”

“Okay, so I get that maybe if the North Dakota equivalent of Atlantis or something decided to fuck off and secede from America it would suck but it wouldn’t be the hugest deal. But those rural people were still your responsibility. And you just admitted not caring about them because they probably aren’t able to contribute as much as wealthy provinces. They will never get the opportunity to prove themselves if they don’t receive any resources, though. A monarchy doesn’t give people the chance to move up.”

“People have their place.”

“In light of recent events, such as your brother’s dad being a lighthouse keeper, wouldn’t you say that particular sentiment is bullshit?”

“There will always be outliers,” Orm tells her firmly.

“And what is all this, then?” Fin’s gesture encompasses her kitchen but he gets the impression she’s kind of referring to his whole situation altogether. “Is it another outlier, or maybe just some weird genetic thing Atlanna passed onto you, needing the help of a surface dweller because Atlantis is full of assholes.”

“That’s not how genetics work, Fin,” Orm intones disdainfully.

“I know that, but you have to admit the coincidence is really, really weird. Or maybe not, given how awful Atlantis sounds to people that are a little different. For the most part, we’re so much nicer up here.”

“Perhaps that’s true occasionally,” Orm says noncommittally, although as soon as the words are out of his mouth, he has to consider his mother’s timeline on the surface. Given Arthur’s age and birthday, Atlanna must have copulated with the surface dweller and conceived their son no later seventeen weeks into her stay, assuming that her gestation period wasn’t altered in any way by the variations in his DNA.

That’s not…a whole lot of time. It’s not as if Tom Curry was capable of compelling her into any kind of sexual congress. Atlanna must have wanted to be with him and start a family. And who’s to
say that she wasn’t intimate with him sooner and didn’t get pregnant until four months into her stay? It’s a very real possibility that he’s never entertained.

“Are you okay? You look a little dazed. Why don’t you sit down in the living room and I’ll finish dinner?”

“I’m just thinking about something,” Orm replies, echoing her earlier words. He will *not* elaborate on the current source of his distress.

“No, seriously, go sit down. You look like you’ve seen a ghost or something.”

Frowning, Orm decides to be polite and listen to his insistent host. He walks into the living room but before he sits, he hears a strange noise outside. With the exception of Kelsey and Derek that first afternoon, Fin’s visitors use vehicles and Orm hasn’t heard any drive by in the past few hours, not even while they were outside in the garden. Listening closely for a moment, he doesn’t hear anything else out of the ordinary but his instincts tell him that they’re not alone on their little cliff-side dwelling.

Orm looks into the kitchen and sees that Fin is occupied before he decides to slip out and investigate.

Chapter End Notes

Orm does consider himself a philosopher, and what better way to flex that muscle than to have endless debates and discussions about various social issues :) See, they’re already getting a lot of relationship legwork out of the way and they don’t even know it.

Please leave me comments! This beast is a labor of love and I like knowing if people are enjoying it. I really appreciate all of you and your reviews motivate and reassure me. <3
An Eroding Beach Disappearing from Underneath

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So absorbed in her task of making dinner, Fin doesn’t realize she’s alone in her house at first. She glances over into the living room and doesn’t see Orm, which she finds odd because she expected to see the top of his blond head sticking up above her couch (he’s very into Google, and he has a spot for using it). As soon as the stuffed peppers are in the oven, she actually does a quick walk through to locate him. She completes an entire lap through her house and finds no sign of him.

Out of the corner of her eye, Fin sees her living room curtain flicker. Killer jumps into the front window, absolutely riveted by what’s outside. She goes over to pet him and drop a kiss on the top of his head. When she looks out the window she doesn’t exactly see the birds or squirrels she expects.

There’s a strange man outside with Orm dressed in what Fin guesses is Atlantean armor. Arthur mentioned that both the armor and skin of a typical Atlantean soldier is too thick for conventional bullets to penetrate, but that the faceplate doesn’t share the same invulnerability. If she can crack it open, the wearer will suffocate as long as he is not highborn. The glass is still stronger than what a typical handgun or rifle would damage, but Fin prays she’s got some super illegal bullets left over from her uncle’s heyday.

*Unfortunately, all of that ammo was outlawed around the year I was born, so is any of it going to still work?*

That’s a question to which Fin doesn’t rightly know the answer. Gunpowder loses its potency over time. But lots of ammo stays viable for longer than the ten years or so people recommend; some her uncle’s guns were antiques and fired bullets that were older than her parents. Uncle Jae had some pretty shady access to military-grade ammo and some of the shit he left her when he died she’d never even heard of. He may have even modified some of the bullets himself.

Knowing she doesn’t have any more time to waste, Fin finally selects a Ruger Redhawk Magnum from her collection. It’s a hand loader, but if she can’t take down an Atlantean soldier with six rounds, she’ll probably be dead anyway. He’ll be close enough to get off maybe three or four shots if she’s really fucking lucky. She closes up her gun safe and prays she made the right choice. Fin heads back to the living room and shoos at Killer to get down out of the window.

The man outside with Orm seems to be fighting him earnest and Fin takes a few deep breaths pressed against her front door before she flings it open. Both men turn around to stare at her when she bursts onto the front porch. She’s not very intimidating in a tank top and joggers, but for all it’s worth, she knows how to use a goddamn gun.

“Don’t move!” Fin commands, and her voice really carries when she needs it to. She can’t see into helmet of the soldier; water renders it nearly opaque. She’s not sure if he’s surprised to see her or not. Orm kind of backs off to the side, but he’s not exactly the one she’s talking to. The intruder walks towards her without hesitation.

*Fuck this motherfucker,* Fin thinks, and takes careful aim at his faceplate. The first shot lands successfully but no damage appears to be inflicted. Her hands are small so the Magnum isn’t easy for her to fire, but she’s still an excellent marksman. The second and third rounds hit their target but only by the fourth has a tiny crack appeared in the glass.
He’s also standing right in front of her by then. Even though Fin’s standing on the porch and he’s still on the ground almost eight inches beneath her, he’s so much taller that she still has to reach up so that the gun barrel rests against his helmet. The crack is so small that no water is pouring out, but Fin figures that she probably hit the same place in it at least twice to cause that much damage. She’s probably about to die an awful death (with Orm just standing there like a mannequin, for Christ’s sake) but at least she’ll go out after some best shooting of her life.

“Lower the weapon.”

Fin refuses to shudder at the awful mechanical sounding voice that filters through the armor. She squeezes the trigger one last time and even point blank, the bullet still doesn’t completely shatter the glass. The crack grows another half inch and Fin imagines that she can see his angry expression now. The soldier’s hand whips out almost faster than she can see and tears the gun from her hands, yanking on her index finger painfully.

“Lieutenant Roil, step away from her,” a voice next to Orm commands. It’s another Atlantean man, but he’s not dressed as a soldier would be. His wet suit is a brilliant navy blue, shining like the scales of an Atlantic blue tang. The part of Fin’s mind that isn’t waiting for an imminent death surmises that he must be highborn since he’s breathing the air. Thankfully the man he’s talking to eventually listens, but he doesn’t give her back her gun. He stands close enough that she can’t touch him, but she still feels his threatening presence and that’s completely intentional.

Massaging her finger gingerly, Fin glances over to where Orm and the other man are conversing quietly. She can hear them vaguely, but her gaze never wavers from Lieutenant Roil. He’s huge. She wonders if his suit was custom-made because there’s no way typical Atlanteans find that amount of muscle mass aerodynamic for swimming.

“Please return the woman’s firearm to her, Lieutenant.”

In a move so fast that stray strands of hair whip around her face, her own handgun is brandished at her head. It’s not Fin’s first time staring down the barrel of a gun in her own house, so she merely glares as best she can. Adrenaline causes fine tremors to run down her arms and she finally notices that her ears are ringing from firing the gun, but she’s oddly calm. Fin knows he can’t actually shoot her; his gloves make his fingers too thick to fit inside the trigger guard. He might pistol whip the shit out of her, but he can’t fire the weapon into her forehead like he pretends he can.

“Lieutenant Roil, you know that’s not what I meant,” the man says firmly.

“Captain Pontus, I am authorized to neutralize any threat to my safety.”

“While that’s true, this woman is only responding to the threat you pose to her. She’s also a friend of the king. Perhaps you’d like to offer King Arthur an explanation as to why you insist on intimidating her.”

Fin nearly collides with a support beam at the force with which Roil shoves her firearm at her. She keeps her footing but can feel the still-hot barrel against her skin. She gasps at the pain and manages to rearrange the weapon in her grasp so it doesn’t hurt, yanking up her tank top to cover the red mark she’s sure he left. She watches Roil stalk away from her, his footsteps heavy due to the bulk of his suit.


“Yes sir.”
“May we please continue this inside?” Pontus queries politely, and Fin blinks in surprise. She really just wants to get indoors and sit down, so she merely nods and points towards the door.

To her amazement, Pontus opens the door for her and ushers Fin inside; she can feel the heat of his hand at the small of her back. Once they’re indoors and the front door has been locked up, she whirls around and angrily faces Orm and her new guest.

“What is the deal with that guy out there?” Fin practically hisses.

“I apologize for his behavior, Lady Fin,” Pontus says grandly. “I’m his captain, Pontus Vulko.”

“You must be related to Arthur’s vizier,” Fin ventures. Pontus grins. It occurs to Fin that he’s got a nice smile. “Yes, my uncle Nuidis has served the crown for many years.”

“Well, I appreciate you saving me from your terrible lieutenant, Captain Vulko. It’s nice to meet you.”

Fin extends her arm for a handshake and finds the back of her hand gracefully lifted to Pontus’s mouth for a kiss.

“Please, call me Pontus.”

Orm looks very unimpressed. He and Pontus share a glance before the latter looks away.

“Do you two know each other?” Fin asks after a moment.

“A very astute observation,” Pontus flatters. “Yes, I served Prince Orm as a member of his personal guard when he was king. Due to his distaste for my personality, he sent me to the surface for what I assume was meant to be a punishment. I’ve actually been enjoying my stay and the intelligence I’ve provided has been crucial to the cause.”

Fin crosses her arms. “Are you referring to the cause of wiping humanity off the face of the earth?”

“Well, that’s not really my cause, but I live to serve. Atlantis follows the will of its king, after all, and Orm was once its ruler. I served Orm faithfully regardless, although King Arthur and I share a greater alignment of beliefs regarding the surface. Frustrating, but certainly not deserving of destruction.”

Fin leans against the back of the sofa as she feels her adrenaline drop. She glances between them with some small measure of amusement; Orm is extremely unhappy while Pontus seems very at ease.

“So why does Orm not like your personality?”

Pontus laughs at how frank she is. “Because I’m too charming, of course.”

It’s said with the perfect blend of showmanship and self-deprecation that Fin can’t help but laugh.

“You’re definitely not charming,” Orm contradicts.

“Oh, he’s not so bad, but I guess I’ll just have to see,” Fin concedes, because Pontus can at least put at ease. She appreciates it after what happened outside. It’s not like Orm is helping in any way possible. He didn’t deescalate the situation and just stood there while that giant stormed up to her to take her down.

“Do you mind showing me the ammunition you used to fire at Lieutenant Roil?” Pontus asks.
“Arthur wanted me to take a look at what you had and perhaps outfit you with some additional weapons. But I will only look at your collection with your permission, of course.”

It’s the last part that makes Fin finally concede, and she leads him back to her library with Orm following close behind. She pulls back the sliding closet door, revealing the gun safe. She types in the code and pulls open the door, revealing a very impressive cache of weapons. It’s definitely more than what Pontus is expecting, if his expression is any indication.

The collection is certainly a lot to take in. There are seven rifles, ten shotguns, and twenty nine handguns. Fin’s aware that puts her in percentile with a bunch of other people that don’t tend to see eye-to-eye with her on social or political issues. But in her defense, she didn’t buy any of the guns herself. She likes knowing she’s armed, but if Pontus can get her something that would take down an asshole like Roil, she’d feel even better.

“What kind of civilians stockpile this many guns?” Orm questions after a moment.

Fin shrugs. “Republicans?”

Orm doesn’t get the joke. “Is this typical?”

“God, no, my parents were just really into guns. And some of this stuff was my Uncle’s. He left me some weird shit when he died. Most of his stuff is super illegal but getting rid of it lawfully would draw a lot of attention to me so I just kind of kept it. Whoever executes my estate when I die is probably going to think I was psycho.”

“Can you fire all of these?” Pontus asks keenly. He’s eyeing the collection appreciatively but is keeping his hands to himself. He and Orm are the first people she’s ever shown, except for Conner. Her parents probably showed half the Bay during their lifetimes and that notoriety has keep most of them out of her business.

Long summers filled with training exercises and hunting trips instead of video games instantly come to mind. “Yes I can.”

Pontus turns to her suddenly. “Why did you select the Magnum?”

“How did you know it was a Magnum?”

“Surface dweller firearms are a hobby of mine, but it’s been pointed out to me that I have an overall appreciation for all kinds of weapons. I like all the subtleties of guns up here…there are so many options available and that really speaks to me. Atlantean firepower is so vulgar by comparison. The focus is solely on firepower and calls a lot of attention to itself.”

“Yes, Sicily is still trying to pick up the pieces,” Fin says drolly at Orm, although she’s not even sure if he knows where his troops ended up during their mission to kill his half-brother.

Pontus eyes Orm with a neutral expression. “Some favor brute strength, but I can see you deserve options with more elegance and class. It might take me some time to find an appropriate weapon for you.”

Fin laughs. “I’m just a small-town girl from Maine. I don’t need anything fancy.”

“Nonsense, this will be fun. Although I do need you to answer my original question: why pick the Redhawk?”

Sighing, Fin uncrosses her arms before removing the Redhawk from the loose waistband of her
pants. The gun was cleaned recently so she merely fishes out her box of ammo and finishes reloading it before putting it back. She completes the action almost mechanically and when she finishes, realizes that both men are watching her with avid interest. She smiles almost shyly.

“I prefer using handguns because that’s what Uncle Jae trained me on the most. I didn’t trust myself to shoot out a face shield with a shotgun. They’re heavy for me to operate comfortably and I only have buckshot for it, which wouldn’t do me any good because of the low penetration. And rifles aren’t really meant for close-range encounters. He was right on the edge of my property and I knew one shot wouldn’t take him down. Honestly, it’s not like I had time to run my decision through a committee…I just kind of went with my gut.”

“Can we go to the range sometime and fire some of these?” Pontus asks excitedly. “I never had much experience using them. Sidearms aren’t common in Atlantis…would you be able to provide instruction?”

“I can do that,” Fin supposes. “I could definitely teach you a thing or two.”

Pontus gives her a very flattering glance and winks. “I bet you could.”

Fin rolls her eyes at him as she shuts her gun safe. “Easy, Casanova, you’re laying it on a little too thick.”

Not that she cares what Orm thinks in particular, but she doesn’t want him to get the impression she’s super easy all the time, because anyone that’s gone as long as she has without sex is clearly not.

“I hope I haven’t made you uncomfortable. King Arthur merely indicated that you might be amenable to companionship.”

Three blinks later and Fin’s still digesting what he said. “Pray tell, what did good King Arthur say to you in that regard?” she asks sweetly.

“I’m paraphrasing here, but something along the lines of my friend might be down to get banged harder than a screen door but I don’t understand the reference. All the screen doors I’ve ever used slide open and closed.”

Fin groans and faceplams and kind of wishes she could swing a baseball bat at Arthur’s prized collection of mint Black Sabbath records. She almost doesn’t want to know the answer to her next question.

“Did he specifically send you over for that purpose?”

“No, I’m here about guns but I assured him I was completely agreeable to the other part happening too.”

Rubbing her temples, Fin is finally saved when her oven timer goes off. “Oh good, the peppers are ready.”

“That sounds like the perfect time for you to leave, Captain,” Orm says curtly. He follows her into the kitchen and Fin fights amusement at his very obvious distaste for Pontus; it sounds like it’s been ongoing for awhile.

“I think that’s up to the lady,” Pontus contradicts, leaning against the doorway to the kitchen as he watches her remove the pan of stuffed peppers from the oven. She cranks up the temperature and throws in the corn.

Fin frowns. “I hate to put you out, but I didn’t make enough food for you. Maybe you can come by
another time for dinner?”

“Could I bring my uncle with me?”

Seeing that Orm is on the verge of blowing up, Fin raises a conciliatory hand. “I’d prefer to meet your uncle under less formal terms. That way he can go about his business without being obligated to stay longer than he’d like. I know he had some questions for me and wanted to take a look at the property.”

“Very well, I believe he will visit either tomorrow or Tuesday. He did send me a copy of this, for some reason, although he didn’t tell me why.”

Pontus reaches into a bag and retrieves what appears to be a tablet. He hands it to Fin but is neatly intercepted by Orm. She would normally be annoyed at his presumption but he knows more about it than she does. She assumes it’s the codex that Kelsey wanted to read.

“Thank you,” Fin offers weakly as Orm ignores them both in favor of scanning the contents of the tablet as if to verify its authenticity.

“You’re welcome, Lady Fin.”

“Please don’t give me a title. I don’t have one and it’s a little too formal for me.”

“Okay, Fin,” he says, testing out her name without an honorific. “I’ll be accompanying my uncle when he visits. I have some things for Prince Orm that he might need during his stay. Due to the suddenness of his departure from Atlantis, certain items weren’t prepared for him as they are for the typical Atlantean spending time on the surface. We are provided with copies of government-issued IDs, credit cards, cell phones, and modes of transportation.”

Fin’s eyebrows climb. “That sounds very involved.”

“In order to gather any kind of substantial intelligence up here, we have to pass as natives, so to speak. Anyone that can’t drive, doesn’t have a cell phone, use a bank card, and lacks identifying papers can hardly access anything. I’ve made great modifications to our resettlement program so that we can pass for surface dwellers. I even use various apps to get them acquainted with slang, art, and music.”

“That's really fascinating,” Fin admits. “Do you have a specialty?”

“Hacking is my favorite aspect, but weapons research is my favorite.”

“You enjoy all that even though our computers and weapons aren’t as advanced as yours?” Fin asks skeptically, eyeing Orm and Pontus.

Pontus shoots Orm a glare. “Most Atlanteans aren’t capable of appreciating what the surface has to offer, but it’s really their loss. My time up here has taught me a great deal about myself. My mother and uncle were stationed up here together and she only had nice things to say about it from what I can remember.”

“And your uncle?”

“He doesn’t talk about it at all,” Pontus says with a shrug. This appears to strike some kind of hidden nerve, because he schools his expression into something more neutral and gives Fin a polite bow. “It was lovely to have met you. I will see you shortly. Is Sunday the best day for target practice?”
“Yes. Just see that Lieutenant Roil doesn’t come back.”

“Of course. I’ll send someone else in the future. Do early mornings work for Prince Orm?”

“I don’t have lessons before ten, so any time before then is fine,” Fin tells him. “Does eight-to-ten give you enough time?”

“I suppose it will suffice.” Orm’s answer is very unenthused given his expressed desire for a training partner.

“Then expect your first opponent tomorrow. I wanted to apologize, Fin, for Lieutenant Roil’s aggression today. I hope you aren’t injured.”

“Just keep him away from us.”

“Noted. He was rather eager to engage the prince today. He didn’t give him much of a chance to say no.”

Fin considers that silently. “Thank you for telling me that.”

“I wouldn’t want you to blame Prince Orm for what happened today. I should have put a stop to it sooner, but I wanted to assess your abilities.”

“So letting that asshole march up to me was a test?” Fin can feel her temper rising, and Pontus can his miscalculation.

“In a sense, but I never meant for him to actually engage you like that. Are you hurt? The gun barrel probably burned you when he returned it to you.”

“It wasn’t any worse than getting burned at the stove,” Fin remarks casually. She’s upset she almost completely dropped her guard; this Atlantean might want to be perceived as easygoing, but if he had less control of the situation Fin would be dead on her front porch just to satisfy his curiosity. “I’ll certainly be fine.”

“Well in that case, I shall see you soon,” Pontus says with a wave.

Fin merely nods, and perhaps Pontus can see that he’s lost her favor. She has no doubt he’ll be back with twice as determination to charm her, but she’s not falling for it again. She locks up her door again (not that it will keep an Atlantean out) and turns to face Orm.

“Did he hurt you?” Fin asks him solemnly.

“Did he hurt you?” Orm counters.

With trepidation, Fin tugs down the front of her tank top a little. A red mark runs across the slight swell of her left breast but it’ll likely be gone by morning. She’s more concerned about her index finger; Roil probably sprained it when he yanked the gun out of her hand. She heads to the kitchen and pulls an ancient bag of peas out of the freezer—something that Will brought over to her house at least five years ago for a reason she can’t even remember—and drapes them over her whole hand. She’s been using it as a cold compress ever since. She sags down to the kitchen floor in weariness.

“Do you know Roil from before? He seemed pretty hostile.”

“He served me very loyally. He is a typical Atlantean in many ways. Standing up to an Atlantean soldier as a civilian is practically unheard of. The fact that you’re a woman and a surface dweller
likely injured his pride.”

“I barely put a dent in him.”

“That’s still more resistance than he expected,” Orm says thoughtfully. “If you were armed with an Atlantean weapon, you would have killed him.”

“Well, I hope I’m never in that situation where I actually have to take a life.”

“You were fearless.”

“That’s absolutely not true!” Fin counters, pointing at him with her injured finger. “I was terrified. But I’ll be damned if I let some asshole know that. And I didn’t know you guys were just sparring or whatever. I thought he might be here to kill you.”

“I heard noises outside. I knew if I told you, you’d insist on coming with me. I was confident I could handle it myself. Lieutenant Roil jumped me outside, but it wasn’t to kill me. I was being tested too.”

“Well I hope you managed to get in a few good hits.”

“It’s difficult to injure an Atlantean wearing armor when you have no weapons. I could tell in mere moments his intentions towards me weren’t deadly, but he wasn’t about to let me leave. I doubt the order came from my brother to test my current fighting strength. Either Vulko or his nephew put Roil up to it. Do not trust Pontus.”

“I don’t,” Fin says. “He’s sneaky and he’s obviously a giant fuckboy.”

“A fuckboy,” Orm intones flatly, and it’s humorous because of his complete lack of comprehension as he repeats the colloquialism. Fin doesn’t think she’s ever heard him swear before.

“It’s a guy who likes to sleep around casually and never wants anything serious. He’s used to getting his way with people. They’re generally insufferable when you sort them out. Was his mom really stationed up here with Vulko?”

“Yes, they were betrothed at a young age but she was given in marriage to his brother instead. I’m not exactly sure why it changed; it was considered a minor scandal at the time. Perlina died before Pontus was a teenager. She got sick around the same time as my father but died much sooner.”

“Pontus said you sent up him up here as a punishment. Did you really want to remind him of how our pollution possibly killed his mom?”

“I didn’t over think it like that. Despite his seeming transparency, Pontus is every bit the conniving individual you suspect. He’s very talented at infiltration. He’s also good at breaching digital security. He collects a lot of military data, or at least that’s what I had him do for me. If Arthur is squandering his abilities as a glorified keeper for me, then he’s wasting his resources.”

“So when you get your fancy new credit card and cell phone, what are you going to do first?”

“You’ve already seen to my basic needs at your own expense. I do not think there is anything else I require.”

“I mean, I’m sure it’ll only be a fraction of what you used to be able to access, but you can buy anything you want. You could upgrade and buy a Rolex watch.”

“This watch suits me fine,” Orm says simply, and she’s not sure if he’s trying to make her feel better.
or not, but figures he’s not the type to bother.

“You could buy a Lambo!”

“What is that?”

“It’s a really obnoxious car that lets people know you have a giant wallet and probably a tiny penis.”

“How does a certain type of car convey such a thing?”

“Men tend to spend money on things to overcompensate for shortcomings.”

“If I have none of those shortcomings, I needn’t bother with such things.”

“They’re also fun to drive, from what I’m told.”

“I got the impression you didn’t really care for that.”

“I mean, when Arthur drove us around, I didn’t feel safe at all because he’s completely reckless. It’s not like he’ll die if we crashed. But I would, and not being able to control a car that’s flying around can be scary. Conner drives really fast but I always feel safe with him. Driving around in his mom’s convertible is actually a lot of fun!”

“I don’t even know how to drive, so there’s no point in buying a car.”

“Well Pontus is going to bring you a fake driver’s license in a few days. I’ll have to use Conner’s van or Tom’s truck, but if you want to learn, I’ll teach you.”

“I will consider it.”

The oven timer goes off and Fin rushes to shut it off. She doesn’t give the corn enough time to cool down; she winces as she tips two scalding hot ears onto each plate so she can slather them with butter. She scoops two stuffed peppers onto his plate along with one for herself onto hers. All in all a delicious meal for two—she’s glad she sent Pontus on his way, in more ways than one.

“I didn’t have any more mozzarella cheese, so I had to use cheddar for the peppers. It’s still pretty good but it’s not my first choice. There’s also rice and ground beef in there, and I prepared them in a tomato sauce. I put pepper and pink salt and butter on your corn.”

With a frown, Orm examines the tip of a plastic corn skewer with his finger before following her lead. The corn is too hot but it still tastes good even as it burns her tongue. It’s definitely not a dignified food to try and eat in the company of others, but it’s so delicious neither of them much cares. Orm still eats gracefully and doesn’t drip any extra butter onto his plate. Fin kind of feels like a wild animal by comparison.

“Is everything okay?” Fin asks.

Orm nods and continues eating in silence. They’ve both had a long day. She’s still pissed that asshole held a gun to her head, but her uncle did worse ‘training’ her and Sam for some imaginary dystopian nightmare that he thought was inevitable. She’s more upset that Pontus let it happen just for shits and giggles, basically. She doesn’t like tests; it’s the whole reasons he refuses to play music for Orm while his head’s up his ass.

“I think I saw some refrigerated cookie dough in there that Mindy left for us. I’ll make some if you wanted to grab a shower.”
Without a word, Orm gets up and heads to it. He’s awfully quiet for some reason but Fin knows better than to needle him about it. He’s probably not feeling very good about how everything happened earlier; it was a pretty uncomfortable situation overall and she can’t possibly understand the minutia of his emotional state; he’s a deposed king seeing two former subordinates for the first time since he lost power. One of them tried to beat the shit out of him while the other one made him do it.

“Hey, Orm!” Fin scrambles into the living room and intercepts him before he closes the bathroom door behind him. “I’ve got some things you might like if you wanted to take a soak in the tub. Let me go get them.”

Scurrying off to her bathroom, Fin retrieves a few homemade bath bombs. Orm lifts each one to his nose and seems partial to one with basil and lemon. She wonders if he remembers that his mother likes the scent as well; perhaps affinities for smells are hereditary? She has no idea. He disappears silently into the bathroom with her offering.

When her cookies are done, Fin puts them on a cooling rack and races back to her bathroom for a quick shower. The remnants of her sunscreen come off with a scrub; there’s something about the emollient texture of the stuff that drives her crazy and she’s more than happy to have clean skin again. She sprays down her hair with water but had forgotten about the braids. She tries to pluck the hair ties off with wet fingers but it’s pretty hopeless. She’ll have to yank them out when water isn’t pouring into her face.

By the time she traipses back into the kitchen, Orm is gently prying a cookie off the cooling rack with his bare fingers. He looks up at her approach, giving her hair a bit of a longer appraisal than strictly necessary. It’s a half-braided, half-undone mass of wet hair that probably resembles a bird’s nest.

“Chocolate chip is the best cookie flavor,” Fin advises as he takes his first bite. “I mean, snickerdoodles are great and all, but nothing beats these.”

“They’re good.”

“Mindy’s cookies are amazing.”

“I believe you mentioned a chocolate cake recipe? When will I be deemed worthy?” Orm’s tone is mocking, but his expression is serious.

“When you promise not to destroy all humans,” Fin says loftily, grabbing a cookie for herself. She doesn’t even bother with a plate; it’ll be gone in less than thirty seconds.

“And if I never swear such a thing?”

“No villains allowed, sorry,” Fin teases, and last week Orm would have gotten mad. He merely meets her gaze with a very unimpressed look and continues to eat his cookie. When Fin hands him a glass of milk, he eyes her with distrust.

“You can dunk your cookie for an even better experience,” Fin suggests, demonstrating it for him.

Orm’s brow creases when he follows her advice and some of the soft cookie breaks off into the glass. He quickly places the rest into his mouth before any more can crumble away. “It’s alright, but I prefer it the other way.”

Fin shrugs. “That’s your prerogative.” She grabs another cookie and even though she ate a lot at dinner, she’s always got room to eat at least three chocolate chip cookies, especially with milk.
“Did you take your medicine?”

“Upon further reflection, I did not,” Fin admits after a moment. “Sometimes I’m fine with dairy, sometimes I’m not. We’ll see, I guess.”

The look Orm levels at her is judgy as hell.

“So if we eat cookies for breakfast tomorrow, will you be seriously disappointed in me?” Fin wonders aloud. “I went through a lot of food in the past week and I didn’t have a chance to buy any more last Wednesday.”

“You can eat cookies for breakfast?”

“You can eat anything you want for breakfast.”

“I’m not sure they’re nutritionally sound.”

“They’re not. But they taste good and you won’t be hungry after you eat them. I guess we could always go into town and eat. I wish I still had my parents’ bikes—they were actually in great shape but I needed the money. I really should use one since it’s nice outside, but I’ve been run off the road countless times so I’d feel much safer in a car. Sam’s bike might still be out in the garage under a giant pile of old tools and junk, but it’s probably a pile of rust. What’s left of mine doesn’t even qualify as an actual bike.”

Orm takes a seat and uses Google to pull of pictures of bikes. The varied results that simple word pulls up clearly perplex him but he doesn’t ask for additional clarification.

“You’ve been quiet since Roil and Pontus showed up. Did you need to talk about anything?”

Tipping his head back a degree, Orm regards Fin for a moment before wordlessly shaking his head. He types away at Fin’s laptop, which is a dismissal if she’s ever seen one. It’s way too early for sleep, but Orm doesn’t seem up for conversation or even companionship. He’s probably a little sick of spending time with her, to be honest, so she merely shrugs it off and grabs her speaker and her phone.

She never did get around to her herb garden, and she shouldn’t get too dirty compared to the rest of her crops.

Plopping down the steps towards her greenhouse, Fin struggles to yank the elastics out of her hair. She shoves them in her pocket and combs her fingers through the wet, half-braided strands. By the time she opens the greenhouse door, she’s done all she can to salvage her hair. She really ought to take better care of it. When she opens the door and turns on the light, she can still make out the bay water through the brightly-lit glass.

This is the perfect night for some Chopin.

For all the joking her and Conner did a few years back about her being a rock star when she showed him how to work his new guitar pedals like Tom Morello, Fin’s heart has always been about the piano first and foremost. In their will, Fin’s parents left the family piano to the church that Kelsey still attends. That left her with a shitty keyboard that’s older than Gabby, but to be honest she can’t always handle even hearing one, let alone the thought of playing one.

Fin’s discussion with Orm earlier really brought up a lot of old memories, and not all of them are good.

After her graduation, Fin had originally planned to return to complete her master’s degree in piano pedagogy, at least before she went to that protest with her friend Mai. Protesters are usually
arraigned, but for some reason Lex Corp wanted to throw the book at her and her friend. They were charged with everything to trespassing to terroristic threats to felony rioting.

Most charges were eventually dropped and Fin never served any jail time, but the severity of her case still got her expelled from her master’s program. And they rescinded her degree less than two weeks after she got it, claiming her political actions rendered her ineligible from earning it. Fin spent eight full semesters in college and doesn’t have a degree to show for it; her deadline to appeal fell smack in the aftermath of her parents dying, and she just didn’t have the heart to fight it in the midst of crippling grief and trying to settle her parents’ estate.

Fin sure as hell can’t afford to go back to another school and try again. Gotham practically turned the credits she earned to ash; starting over has no appeal at her age. It’s her own fault, technically, and she has to accept that. She did something without thinking and it turned out to have unforeseen and unfair consequences. She ruined every aspect of her life because she was angry that a company’s irresponsible conduct was taking her parents away from her, and then she went and did it herself.

Given what happened with Sam, Fin’s parents were inconsolable since they’d saved up so much money to help her with school. They’d even spent all the money they’d originally saved up for Sam on her college career and Fin ended up being no less disappointing. She can’t remember any kind words in those last few weeks. When she thinks about their accident and how they flew off the road into the Bay when they lost control of their car, she wonders if their last thoughts were for her and if they died angry and resentful.

The way things ended was terrible, but it was easier to remember twenty two years of good times than six weeks of constant yelling, non-stop lecturing, and incessant crying. For her own sanity, Fin learned to stop beating herself up. It’s not like she’s totally over it, but she’s functional now and probably won’t be able to feel any better about the situation than she already does. She can wear Gotham University shirts and remember all the good times—not just how it ended.

It’s not really the college's fault that some soulless LexCorp lawyer forced them to kick her out.

The most important aspect of Fin’s recovery is that her eyes can look out over the horizon and not rush past the spot where she knows her parents’ car went under. A part of her wonders if Orm’s wave managed to push the rusty remnants back on shore somewhere. They recovered the bodies but the car was too heavy to pull from the water.

It doesn’t matter whether or not it’s still there; Fin still wonders.

> Even after all the heartbreak losing my parents caused me, I wouldn’t have given up my love for them if it would have made it hurt less. And at least I got to grow up with parents that loved me, even if they didn’t understand me too well.

Unconsciously, Fin turns her head up and gazes up at her house through the walls of her greenhouse. Orm’s in there doing God knows what, but for all of his privilege and power, he’s gone through his entire existence without what Fin considers to be some very basic commodities, like being treated with an ounce of empathy or affection.

> Jesus, I wonder what it’s like to grow up walking on eggshells, Fin wonders, thinking on the bits and pieces she’s gathered about Orm’s childhood. He learned the love is expressed through jealousy and possessiveness—that it can be manipulated and twisted into something you use to control others. It’s no wonder why he never dreamed of falling in love. It’s not really a positive emotion for him. It’s just a path to exploit people and hurt them.

Fin thinks on that sad thought until Chopin’s Ballade No. 1 in G Minor starts to play. The notes echo stark and somber in the otherwise empty greenhouse. She turns up the volume until her teeth hurt; it’s
one of her favorite compositions of all time and the ringing in her ears can be damned. She drops the shears on a bench and extends her arms as if she’s sitting in front of Gotham University’s Steinway concert grand. Its ivory keys always felt smooth, worn and translucent, and so utterly thrilling every time she touched them.

Fin feels a little morbid given what ivory is, but they just feel different. When she recalls playing a proper piano, that’s always what she remembers, how the keys felt beneath her fingertips. The chilling quality of the intro slowly melts into the rest of the piece, and she recalls playing this very ballade in front of her family, classmates, and professors as part of her undergrad recital. It was a different time; she was hopeful and everyone was proud. She’s not even sure if she could play it now, although she remembers every note.

Listening to the familiar piece brings back a whole lot of memories, and as it escalates towards the end she’s still surprised that she can feel same exhilaration it’s inspired in her since she was a little girl. She saw it by chance on some PBS show her mom was playing some random Sunday evening and it changed her life.

Hands shoved into her hair, Fin relishes those last euphoric measures before the final note fades abruptly. She grabs for her phone to turn down the volume, and nearly screams when she bumps into Orm. Staggering back, she clutches at her chest until her breathing returns to normal. She’s had way too much excitement today.

“I said your name several times but you didn’t hear me.”

Figuring Orm won’t call her out on her weird swaying if she doesn’t bring it up, she merely glances at him guilelessly. “Is anything wrong?”

“I am restless.”

Fin thinks to how he attempted to solve this problem before. “Did you, like, want to fight me or something?”

Orm’s mouth twists into a frown. She gets the impression he wants to sigh. “No, I don’t want to fight you.”

“I don’t understand why you’re telling me,” Fin admits before adding, “unless you just don’t really know what to do with yourself and are looking for suggestions.”

The look Orm gives her is the facial expression equivalent of a shrug. “Perhaps.”

“Did you want to watch a movie or play a game?”

“Play a game?”

“I have some board games and Sam’s old chessboard, but full disclosure: I suck at chess.”

“If you will not provide good sport, than I’d prefer to watch a movie.”

Fin laughs. “Oof, a movie it is.”

Packing up her clippings, Fin trudges back up the stairs and really begins to feel the physical toll of this day. She still takes the time to catalogue everything and separate her orders, but there aren’t too many and it takes less than ten minutes. Upon entering the living room, Fin is sad to see that her cats are still too scared from the commotion earlier to come out.
“They are hiding under your bed,” Orm informs her. “I assume you’re looking for your animals.”

“They’re little fraidy-cats,” Fin says sadly. “Morris and Olive are outgoing if things are quiet, but they’re scared of loud noises. Their hearing is very sensitive. I hope my tinnitus is gone in a few days but I fired that loud-ass gun five times and I’ve always been able to use ear protection until today.”

“What is tinnitus?”

“It’s when there’s a ringing in your ears. I know I made it worse listening to my music so loud out there, but I guess I wasn’t thinking.”

“There are many types of music up here, I’m learning.”

“Anything you hear can be turned into music. It just needs a beat.”

“I’ve seen people dance to it, but why do you stop moving and stand still when you listen to it?”

It occurs to her that Orm probably pays way closer attention to her than she realizes, and for him to notice this about her and to call her on it actually makes her a little self-conscious—more than him seeing her with bad hair or no makeup or all banged up due to her own clumsiness.

“Music makes me relive memories. It does that to a lot of people. I just kind of stop what I’m doing and close my eyes and remember. When you hear a song, you think of where you first heard it, or what you were doing or when you were doing it. Songs remind you of people, period. Music gets stuck in your head and you hear it over and over and over again.”

“I’ve never had that happen to me,” Orm says confidently.

“I mean, what I wouldn’t give to have never gotten Anaconda or Who Let the Dogs Out? stuck in my head, but sometimes it can be nice.”

“What fanciful surface dweller nonsense.”

Fin rolls her eyes. “Whatever you say, Your Highness. Speaking of fanciful surface dwellers...”

Strolling over to her DVD shelves, Fin pulls The Wizard of Oz off the shelf. She pops it in and flops down on the couch, grateful for its presence given the ridiculous day she’d had. As the black and white opening unfolds, Orm frowns.

“Why does it look like that?”

“You'll see; I promise.”

Orm makes a noncommittal noise and his hand makes a surreptitious grab for her laptop.

“Don’t you dare read spoilers!”

Properly chastised, Orm folds his hands on his lap and leans back into the soft cushions. This film is completely different than what he’s seen before; there are no aliens or shipwrecks. There are witches, however; Fin wonders if witches exist in Atlantis. Certainly what Mera can do with water would mark her as one up here on the surface. She wonders what one must do down there to qualify.

At the sound of Judy Garland’s soulful, lush voice pouring from the screen, Fin makes sure to observe Orm carefully to see if he’s paying attention. She can’t tell if he’s moved or not, but he’s watching obediently. She’s always wondering what he’s thinking but doesn’t dare interrupt. If he has a question, he has no problem asking, and she doesn’t want to risk taking him out of the experience.
It's been some time since Fin saw the movie. She wonders if he finds it childish or silly. It's a fantasy, so Orm might not even consider it a story worth telling due to how whimsical it all is. He did read *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy but there's a lot of warfare and fighting and the overall tone is completely different. *The Wizard of Oz* is a less epic story about a group of companions setting off on a journey and growing along the way.

“So she just taps her feet together and goes home?”

“Yes.”

“It’s just that easy?”

“In this movie it is,” Fin offers weakly. “In her defense, she only ran away from home with her dog.”

“She didn’t try to kill seven and a half billion people,” Orm continues drolly.

“She did not,” Fin agrees. She switches off the television. “So yeah, it was easy for her, ultimately, to go home.”

“She had people there that wanted her,” Orm points out.

“I’m sure plenty of your former subjects miss you.”

“Atlantis is not forgiving.”

“Atlantis is also more than one person that may or may not resent you for what you’ve done. I’m sure your people are a little more complex than that.”

“Ah, the reason why my brother struggles so,” Orm says after a moment.

“Loyalists of yours, perhaps?”

“Efforts were made to free me on multiple occasions but I had nothing to do with them. I’m sure that’s part of the reason why I’m even up here.”

“You can’t escape from prison if you’ve already escaped from prison?”

“More along the lines of where would I go up here?”

“You could literally go anywhere once Pontus hands over that credit card. I’m not sure how much money is in your account, but it’s likely a hefty sum. You’re still a prince, after all.”

“My mother is a queen and lives humbly in that little white shack by the ocean.”

“Why would your mom come back to that little white shack if Atlantis is truly the great place you say it is?”

Orm doesn’t seem to have an answer for that. Fin’s not trying to be shitty with him, but just because a place is beautiful and technologically advanced, it doesn’t mean that what it has to offer appeals to or benefits every person. Atlanna was treated horribly, to be quite frank, and Orm seems to overlook that a lot. It’s likely due to cultural conditioning, but still.

“You better rest up if you’re going to kick someone’s ass tomorrow morning,” Fin advises.

“I’m far from peak condition. I had a poor showing today.”
“I hope I didn’t embarrass you in your friends.”

“They’re not my friends,” Orm says firmly, “and you did not embarrass me.”

“You mean staying at the home of a gun-toting female surface dweller isn’t scandalous?”

“Very few people know that I’m here. I don’t think they have an opinion either way. They’re soldiers and do as they’re told.”

“You heard Pontus: just because you follow orders doesn’t absolve you of your opinion. You aren’t concerned about your reputation?”

“Rumors have persisted throughout my father’s entire reign about his fitness to rule for a variety of reasons, but due to my maternal grandfather’s lack of a male heir, there was no other choice. Despite her transgressions, my mother obviously enjoyed the loyalty of my vizier, who thought her long dead and still stood by her firstborn over me. My bloodline will always endear me to a large portion of the population regardless of Atlan’s trident. Arthur must simply accept this.”

“You know, if you two worked together, think about all you could accomplish. Wouldn’t publicly supporting him help?”

“Perhaps I will be reinstated in a military position someday, although that is in the distant future. Service to Atlantis is all I know.”

“Like I said, maybe look after yourself in a way Atlantis never will. Find some hobbies or something. There’s no way that every single activity up here is unbearable. You can find ways to be productive.”

“Does Mindy need any more help with her house?”

“I’m sure she does. I won’t be able to come with you because of my lessons, but I’m sure she’d be more than happy for the help.”

“Maybe less so if she knew that I was responsible,” Orm ventures.

Guilt creeps in a little; she certainly didn’t expect Mindy or Gabby to take to Orm. She feels bad keeping his involvement a secret but doesn’t think it’ll go well if they find out the truth.

“Well, that’s on you,” Fin says finally, and that’s the truth. “You can tell them if you want, but they might not want to have anything to do with you.”

“I have no intention of telling them; there’s no point unless I was going to apologize.”

“…And I take it you have no desire to apologize?”

“I don’t regret what I’ve done, Fin.”

“Right.”

Fin purses her lips and reminds herself that he’s told her this on multiple occasions—that he’s not sorry. But it’s jarring to hear, especially given the fact she’s been feeding and clothing him for going on a week and he’s still so much the same. They’ve exchanged countless words on many topics and she feels like it doesn’t even matter, even though having the conversations in the first place is progress.

The two of them share a very loaded gaze before looking away at the same time. It’s late enough that
Fin should go to bed. She’s tired, but hates leaving things like they are. Orm has been nothing but honest about his feelings on surface dwellers and what he feels they deserve. He watched his home decay and his citizens die and the reason for it all isn’t down under the ocean with them. She doesn’t want to lessen anything that's happened to his people.

“I’m going to bed. Have a good night.”

Orm merely nods, and Fin’s not sure if she considers that a lack of progress or not. Everything with him is so intentional, but withholding “good night” from her seems a little petty in her opinion. She walks back to her room and coaxes Morris out onto her bed. It's stupid, she knows, to get bent out of shape over two words, and that's a fact.

That doesn’t mean Fin doesn’t think about what it could mean as she lies in bed and tries to fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

I revealed Fin's deep, dark secret. I hope it doesn't disappoint - it was never going to be anything extremely awful, since she's the type of character that's got skeletons or baggage to the degree that Orm does, but it affected her family life and her career, and that's where it would hit her the hardest.

Please leave me some lovely, detailed comments. I adore reading them and I adore all of you. I want to thank everyone for taking the time to let me know you appreciate my story. Churning out these lengthy chapters isn't easy for me, haha. Your comments and support keep me motivated!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!