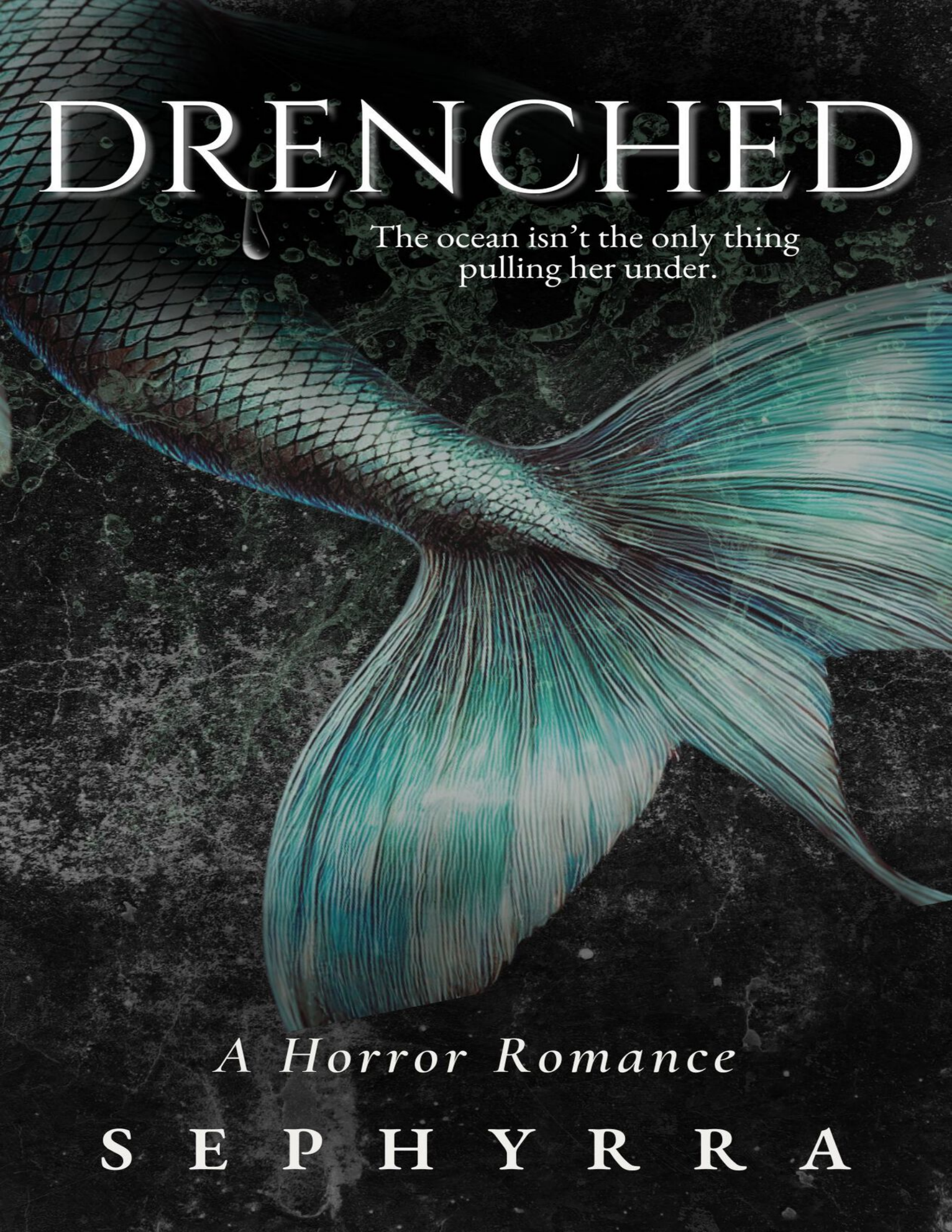

DRENCHED
The ocean isn't the only thing pulling her under.
A Horror Romance
SEPHYRRA

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Drenched: A Horror Romance (The Primal Sins Collection Book 2)
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Dedication

For all the curvy queens, the plus-size babes, and the unapologetically gorgeous girlies who saw *King Triton* and thought, *“Yes, Daddy.”* For those who watched *The Shape of Water* and secretly rooted for the fish guy. For the ones who dream of strong arms, sharp claws, and tails that glimmer in the deep.

This is for you.

May your fantasies swim wild, your oceans be endless, and your *Aquatic Crushes* always know how to treat you right. Keep loving your curves, and the creatures who’d worship every inch of them

Content Advisory

Before you dive in, please take a moment to read this important note. This is a dark monster romance, and with it comes intense, provocative, and deeply emotional themes. Your media consumption is your own responsibility, and it's essential to know what you're stepping into.

This story includes:

- Non-consensual and dubious-consent dynamics (monsters don't ask for permission)
- Explicit sexual content with primal, otherworldly behaviors
- Emotional struggles, including depression and self-harm
- Childhood trauma and its lasting effects
- Graphic violence, human sacrifice, and supernatural horror

These themes are integral to the narrative and are not watered down. If you choose to proceed, please do so with care and self-awareness. This story isn't for everyone, and that's okay.

By reading further, you acknowledge that you're engaging with this content voluntarily. Reader discretion is strongly advised.

Take care of yourself, and if you're ready, dive into the Abyss.

Author’s Note

Drenched is **Book 2** in *The Primal Sins Collection*, but don’t worry, it can be read on its own. ***Insatiable: A Plus Size Horror Romance Novella*** introduced a world of dark and irresistible monsters, and this story continues to explore those themes with a fresh twist.

Here, you’ll meet Pearl, a curvy heroine in her late 30s and experience her unforgettable romance with a sea monster who might just worship every inch of her.

If you love stories with heart, heat, and a touch of the otherworldly, this one’s for you. Thank you for giving it a chance, and I hope it sweeps you away.

Chapter One

The boat lurched. My gloved hands slipped on the wet railing as I scrambled to stay upright. The cold wasn't your normal kind of cold, this shit crept in and gnawed straight through to the bone. My boots kept sliding on the deck while fog swallowed everything except the slam of waves and the groan of steel.

Sarkivik emerged reluctantly, half-hidden by the fog. The cliffs shot up from the water like broken teeth over the churning ocean. Waves hammered the rocks below, clawing their way toward land. The air reeked of salt and rotting fish, making my stomach roll.

My anxiety had been mounting ever since we left the tiny village of Ittoqqortoormiit, where the ferry dropped us off days ago. The people there hadn’t been much help. They were tight-lipped about Sarkivik but offered one piece of advice: respect the customs and be wary of the locals.

As if that explained anything.

But something in the wind scraped at me, a chill that whispered of trouble ahead.

It’s just in your head, Pearl, I told myself and focused on the task at hand- we needed to secure the boat and get ashore.

“Trevor, tie us off!” I shouted over the howling wind.

Trevor, our logistics guy, was always first to tackle the grunt work. He climbed over the side, boots landing on the slick dock with a thud. Bracing against the wind, he looped the rope around a bollard, his movements quick and practiced. He gave the line a firm tug to check the knot before turning back.

“All set,” he muttered, shaking off his hands and wiping them on his jacket.

I stepped off next, and my boot sank straight into wet sand. Icy water crept in, stabbing at my toes like tiny needles. Perfect. Just what I needed.

Jaime landed behind me with a thud. “You good?” he murmured, quiet enough for only me to hear.

I nodded quickly. “Fine,” I lied, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

“Bullshit,” he quipped, stepping closer.

It was hard to ignore Jaime, not just because he stood six feet tall, all broad shoulders and solid muscle. It was those blue eyes, sharp, always watching, like they could see right through the walls I put up. His red hair, curling damply under his hood from the mist, giving him a boyish charm. He was our dive specialist. The one who was supposed to keep us alive out in the freezing unpredictable waters we came here to study.

He was also my biggest mistake. One I had to face on this trip.

Back when Jaime was my student in my marine biology class at Westmount University during his master’s program, we crossed a line we shouldn’t have. For a year, I told myself it meant nothing, just a distraction for both of us. Then he said he loved me and asked me to move in. That’s when simple things got complicated. I ended it because I had to. Jaime deserved better than someone carrying the kind of emotional wreckage I couldn’t unload. He deserved someone like Kim.

She groaned, looping her arm through mine, trying to rub warmth back into her fingers. “Can you blame me? This place is trying to turn us into popsicles.” Her braid snapped in the wind as she grinned. “But you know what? I’m gonna make this work.”

Kim was good like that. Tall and lean, she had a grounded calm that made you believe things wouldn’t fall apart. She always found the silver lining when I couldn’t. She handled the data, the samples, and, like me, she was a professor at Westmount University. She knew about Jaime too. Never judged me. Never brought it up. Just smiled once and said, You trained him for me.

We both stared ahead at the village, the wind cutting through every layer. She leaned in, her voice low. “Ready?”

“Hell no,” I muttered.

She gave my arm a quick squeeze and let go. “We’ve got this,” she said, like she actually believed it.

I wished I could borrow some of that confidence, just for a second.

My fingers brushed over Mom’s locket, the last piece of her I still held. It was part of a set, a locket for me, a ring for her. Every time I touched the locket, it felt like she was still with me, like some part of her was just a heartbeat away.

Jonathan came off the boat last, his shoulders squared like he was ready to claim the whole island, snapping me out of my thoughts. At fifty, he still had that ex-Marine build: square jaw, piercing eyes, the kind of authority he didn't need to work for. As our security lead, he was here to handle permits and keep us breathing if things went sideways.

“Try not to wander off, Pearl,” Jonathan called, his smirk smug and biting. His gaze slid over me, sticking like oil. “Wouldn’t want you getting lost out here.”

Before I could answer, Trevor snorted. “She’s hard to lose,” he muttered, his grin curling up mean. “Takes up plenty of space.”

The insult landed like it always did. Familiar. Tiring. At 5'2“ and 200 pounds, I'd heard it all before. I straightened my back, lifted my chin, and let the words bounce off me.

“Cut that shit out,” Jaime growled, stepping between us.

Jonathan raised his hands, still smirking. “Relax, man. Just having fun.”

Kim brushed her hand against mine as we started walking. “Don't let them get to you,” she whispered.

I nodded, swallowing hard. “Like it matters,” I muttered, but it always did.

We trudged up the narrow path toward the village, sand clinging to our boots. The houses looked ancient, their dark wood twisted from years of salt and wind. Smoke curled from crooked chimneys, vanishing into the gray mist. The whole place felt untouched and cold, like it had existed long before us and wouldn't give a damn when we were gone.

The villagers stood waiting at the edge, wrapped in furs that blended seamlessly with the gray cliffs behind them. They watched us with unblinking eyes, their silence heavy and oppressive. At their center stood a woman, frost dusting her fur-lined cloak. She pulled back her hood, revealing silver-

streaked hair and a face carved by years of hardship. Something cruel lingered in those features.

“Welcome to Sarkivik,” she said, authority clear in every word. Her sharp gaze swept over us, pausing on me for a heartbeat longer. “I am Tanya Illiak, guardian of this land.”

Jonathan let out a short laugh. “Guardian? What does that even mean? You’re in charge here?”

Her expression remained blank. “I protect this village and its people. We have rules. Follow them, and you’ll be fine.”

Jaime stepped up beside Jonathan, his tone calm. “We’re not here to cause trouble.”

Tanya’s eyes hardened. “Good. But the Abyss rules these waters. They are not yours to enter.”

A chill settled in my gut. That was exactly why we were here.

Jonathan’s lips curled, his irritation barely held back. “Look, we have government approval.” He waved the permits in front of her. “We’re here to dive and study the algae. That’s non-negotiable.”

Tanya didn’t budge. “You can study our preserved samples,” she spoke with a calm resolve that tightened something in my chest. “That’s all you get. The Abyss’s gift isn’t yours to take.”

Jonathan’s jaw tightened. “We didn’t come all this way for leftovers.”

I stepped in before things could spiral. “Tanya, we respect that this is your home. And as Lead Researcher of this team, if preserved samples are the only option, we’ll start there.” My eyes flicked from Tanya to Jonathan.

His glare burned into me. “This isn’t what we agreed to.”

I held his stare. “We agreed to study the algae. If following their rules gets us that, then that’s what we do.”

He muttered something under his breath but backed down.

Tanya’s eyes moved between us, sharp and unreadable. After a pause, she gave a thin, tight smile. “Thank you for understanding... Miss?”

“Dr. Pearl Hart,” I said, trying my best to sound confident.

Her head tilted slightly. “Hart...” she murmured. “We’ve had Harts here before.”

My chest clenched. I knew exactly who she meant. My parents. They’d come here years ago. They never came back.

“Yes,” I managed, my throat tight.

She studied me a moment longer, then nodded like she’d figured something out. Her tone shifted to all business. “Your cabins are ready.” She gestured to a young man behind her. “Sebastian.”

Sebastian stepped forward. Tall, with watchful dark eyes, someone who’d learned early to listen more than talk.

“My son,” Tanya said. “He’ll show you to your cabins.”

Sebastian nodded, motioning us to follow.

Jonathan moved closer and whispered, “This is bullshit. We need to push back.”

I kept walking. “We’re guests. Follow their rules, and maybe we get more access later. Don’t fuck this up before we even start.”

Jonathan’s jaw twitched. He turned sharply. “Trevor!” he snapped. “Start unloading the gear.”

Trevor shot him a look, irritation evident in his expression. He muttered something and trudged back to the boat, his movements jerky. Clearly didn't like being the errand boy, especially in front of everyone.

As I walked, Sebastian fell in beside me, reaching for my bag. “You don't have to, “ I started.

“I insist,” he replied with a kind smile, taking the bag from me and hanging it over his shoulder. “Lead researchers shouldn't carry their bags.”

“Well... thanks,” I mumbled, feeling a tad bit awkward.

“Not every day we get visitors like you,” he said. “Ones who actually listen? Even rarer.” There was something genuine in his voice that made me look at him closely.

“Listening seemed smart,” I said, giving him a smile.

He chuckled. “Smart, maybe. But most people don't bother.”

The way he said it, like being ignored was normal. I nodded, unsure what to say. Sebastian couldn't be more than twenty-three or twenty-four, but he carried this quiet confidence. Not cocky, just steady.

“You're different from the others,” he said, glancing sideways.

“Different, how?”

His smile was faint but genuine. “You actually seem to care.”

The compliment caught me off guard. My cheeks warmed. “Just don’t want to get kicked out before we start.”

He laughed. “Good plan. Sarkivik doesn’t do second chances.”

We trudged across the sand until we stopped in front of a weathered building. The sign above the door swayed in the wind, its paint chipped and faded. Sarkivik Inn. The place was two stories, with narrow windows glowing faintly in the dark. The wooden walls looked solid enough, but years of storms had left their mark.

Sebastian pushed the door open, and the scent of old wood and sea salt greeted us. Inside, the lobby was small and dim, with a worn rug and a desk cluttered with papers.

He grabbed a set of keys from behind the counter and turned to us. “Your rooms are down that hall.” He handed me a key marked 1A. “This one’s yours. They’re not fancy, but the heaters work.”

Kim and Jaime shuffled in behind me, their boots thudding on the creaky floorboards.

Jaime eyed the hallway. “Well,” he said, trying for optimism, “at least it’s dry.”

Kim snorted. “Barely.”

I smirked, but exhaustion tugged at me. “Dry’s good enough.”

Jonathan’s voice came from behind me, dripping with sarcasm. “Great. Now we’re staying in a haunted shack.”

I clenched the key in my hand, ignoring him. “Let’s just get some sleep.”

Sebastian smirked but stayed quiet. He handed back my bag, his fingers brushing mine. “This one’s yours,” he murmured, nodding to the nearest cabin. “Not fancy, but you’ll stay warm.”

“Thanks.” The word felt heavier than it should have.

His dark eyes lingered on mine for a beat too long before he stepped back. “See you around, Pearl.” The way he said my name made something twist in my gut.

Jonathan noticed, his gaze darting between us. “You know,” he muttered, his tone dripping with implication, “Kim and Jaime are definitely fucking tonight. Maybe you want company too.”

Disgust curled through me. “Pass.” I turned on my heel and headed for the cabin.

He trailed after me, too close, trying to coax me. “C’mon, Pearl. Don’t be uptight. I can rock your world. Make this boring research trip exciting.”

I didn't answer. I Just went inside, slammed the door, and clicked the lock. Leaning against it, I let out a shaky breath.

His voice carried through the thin walls. “You'll come around, Pearl. You'll see. I know how to make this fun.”

“Not in this lifetime,” I muttered.

I scanned the room. Small. Cramped. It stank of mold and old peat. The walls were damp, paint peeling off in sad, curling strips. The bed looked ready to give up. When I tossed my bag onto it, the springs let out a tortured groan.

The air was sour and stale, like no one had bothered to open a window in years. I took a slow breath through my nose. Just temporary. Just part of the

deal.

I grabbed some clean clothes and headed for the bathroom. The tiles were cracked and freezing beneath my feet and when I splashed water on my face, it hit me like a slap.

I looked in the mirror. Pale skin, dark hair hanging limp and dull. My eyes were shadowed with dark circles, the exhaustion carved deep. The cold hadn’t been kind to me. Traveling through it had stripped away whatever energy I had left.

Nothing strong stared back. Just someone worn out. Just someone scared.

I changed as fast as I could and sat on the edge of the bed. My eyes landed on the old gas heater tucked in the corner. Maybe some heat would help. I shuffled over, knees stiff from the cold. The metal casing was dented and streaked with rust. I turned the knob and clicked the ignition switch.

Nothing.

I tried again. The igniter sparked, but no flame. Just a hollow click-click-click I leaned down, peering into the empty chamber. No hiss of gas. No faint smell of propane. The tank was dry.
The cold wrapped itself tighter around me, sinking into my bones. I rubbed my hands together, but it was useless against the chill. The heater wasn’t going to save me. Not tonight.

To distract myself, I took out my phone, and, bingo,there was no signal. Of course, we had been informed that radio was the only means of communication in this remote village.

I sank back onto the bed, staring at the wall. My thoughts circled like vultures, picking apart every scrap of doubt.

Why am I here?

Five months ago, Dr. Henderson,the dean at the university where I taught ,called me. He'd been buzzing about the algae like it'd cure cancer or something. He even managed to secure government funding for this trip to study its properties.. But for me? This wasn't about research.

I was here because my parents were.

I was just fourteen when they vanished. Everyone said drowning, but it never made sense. They were careful, experienced, and always had a plan. Them.. drowning. It just didn’t make sense.

I remember our empty house afterward. The quiet hurt worse than any noise. Nothing felt real anymore.

I thought living with my aunt would help. That it’d make me feel safe again.

My uncle made sure that didn't happen.

It started like the usual, he would call me *“little Pearl*.” Would mess up my hair. Would sit on my bed when I couldn't sleep, saying soft things. But then his hand stayed too long on my shoulder. His words turned wrong, made my skin crawl. Every touch left me feeling dirty, like I'd never be clean again.

Every night I prayed he'd stay away. He didn't. His presence became a weight that just crushed me, inside out. His touch was something I couldn't wash off. I scrubbed my skin raw in scalding showers but it didn't help. It never helped. I felt trapped in my own body.

That's when I found the razor.

The first cut was just a test, a quick sting, a flash of red, and everything else blurred out. The chaos quieted, narrowing to that thin line of crimson. For those few seconds, something was finally mine to control.

After that, it became a ritual. Each mark, my choice. My pain. Not his. The cuts got deeper, more frequent. At night, I’d trace the raised lines with my fingertips, counting them like prayer beads. One, two, three... until the panic eased. Some nights it took more than others.

But one night.. one night it became too much. Way too much. It's all still hazy. There was blood, so much blood, and then my aunt came running. She cradled me in her arms.

“It’s not your fault,” she whispered, holding me tight. I couldn’t stop shaking. Couldn’t stop sobbing.

She didn’t ask. Didn’t hesitate. Her eyes burned with a quiet rage I’d never seen before. She packed our bags, took my hand, and we left.

“You’re safe now,” she said, her knuckles white on the wheel. “I’ll handle everything.”

I never asked what “everything“ meant, and she never told me.

New York became home, sort of. Far from that house. Far from him. But distance doesn’t erase shadows. Some nights, I’d wake up with the taste of copper on my tongue, like blood lingering in my mouth. My fingers would trace the scars running up my arms. Each mark was a reminder: sometimes pain was better than feeling nothing.

Therapy helped me move forward, but the past still slipped through the cracks Like that night. Him stumbling into my room, drunk, for the last time. Me, not frozen, not again. Then the spray of red. His face twisted in shock. My aunt in the doorway, then pulling me into her arms, holding me together when I was ready to shatter.

I buried those memories deep, sealed them away with everything else.

But then the dreams started.

Not about him, those I could handle. These were different. Icy water. Endless black. Skeleton hands dragging me down. No faces, just pulling, wrists, ankles, deeper into nothing. Always that pale light far off. Pulsing. Watching. Waiting. Like something knew what I'd done. What we'd done.

I'd wake up gasping, choking on air, skin cold and chest tight, but the fear didn’t leave. It clung to me like a second skin, always there. The scars ached on those nights. I never knew why. I could never understand.

The memories blurred and bled into the present. I lay back on the bed, clutching my mother’s locket in my hand and then without realizing it, I started humming. The melody rose softly, a fragment of a lullaby my mother used to sing when I was little.

“Hush now, the ocean sighs,

Deep below where silence lies.

Waves will cradle, shadows keep,

In the abyss, all things sleep.”

Her voice used to be warm and low, a sound that made the world feel smaller, safer. I held on to that memory, letting the tune fill the hollow spaces in my chest.

“Stars may fade, the tide may rise,

But you are safe where love abides.

Drenched in peace, let darkness creep,

In the abyss, all things sleep.”

The song wavered as my voice cracked, but I kept going, the words wrapping around me like armor. I closed my eyes, letting the melody carry me, pushing back the painful memories clawing at the edges of my mind.

I didn’t think I’d fall asleep, but I did. And as I drifted, the song followed, its gentle rhythm like waves lapping softly against a shore.

Chapter Two

I woke up with a sore back, all thanks to the stone-hard mattress I slept on. I knew this wasn't some five-star hotel, but they could've at least tried with the beds. Yesterday's travel had drained me, and even after a night's sleep, I didn't feel fully refreshed.

As I swung my legs off the bed, Jonathan's stare flashed in my mind. That man was shameless. I needed to keep my distance.

My wool socks slid on the smooth wood floor, betraying me. My ankle twisted, and I stumbled forward, fingers scraping the doorframe to catch myself. That's when I saw them.

The prints stretched across the floor, too wide for human feet, with curves like claws or fins. Each one glistened with an oily sheen in the weak light.

"Get it together." My voice trembled. I forced three deep breaths, just like my therapist taught me. "You're here for science, not ghost stories."

I grabbed a cloth from under the sink and wiped my glasses, my fingers shaking slightly. They were just sea spray, I told myself. Just salt and water, nothing more.

I yanked on my armor for the day, my favorite worn t-shirt, a chunky sweater that still smelled faintly of home, and jeans that had seen better days. Wrestling my curls into something that passed for order. I pulled on a woolen cap feeling the thick knit hug my head, the scratchy warmth a small comfort. My glasses slid down my nose, same as always. I pushed them up and forced a smile into the mirror. It didn't quite reach my eyes. But it would have to do.

I wandered through the inn, floorboards creaking under my feet. The bitter smell of coffee pulled me towards a door. I pushed it open, and the kitchen greeted me with warmth. Sebastian was already at the counter, slicing some vegetables. The sound of his knife tapping against the board filled the quiet. He looked up as I walked in.

“Morning,” I croaked.

He paused, the knife hovering just above the board. “Morning.” His tone was casual, but his gaze felt sharp, like he noticed more than he let on.

“You want coffee?” he asked.

“God, yes,” I muttered, wrapping my arms around myself against the chill. “Thanks.”

He handed me a mug, the ceramic warm against my frozen fingers. The first sip seared its way down my throat, spreading heat through my chest. It didn’t fix everything, but it woke me up, chased away the worst of the chill.

“Is there a heater or something?” I asked, trying not to sound as pathetic as I felt. “The one in my room’s dead.”

Sebastian’s knife paused mid-chop. He glanced up, eyebrows raised. “Out of fuel, probably.”

He grabbed a rag, wiped his hands, then crossed to a cabinet. With zero effort, he hauled out a gas cylinder and set it down with a loud clunk. “We use these. Propane. If yours ran dry, it happens.”

I eyed the tank like it might bite me. “Does that happen often?”

He shrugged, already turning back to his chopping. “Out here? Constantly.”

I nodded, swallowing the urge to complain because I knew this wasn’t some cozy getaway. Comfort wasn’t part of the deal.

“These inn, “ I spoke too loud. I cleared my throat. “It’s yours? You and your mom’s?”

His shoulders tensed. “Inherited. From her father. And his before that.” The knife slowed, his voice became a bit quieter now. “It’s all we have.” His eyes shifted to the window, to the gray ocean stretching out forever.

“Your dad?” The question slipped out before I could stop it.

The knife stopped. His knuckles turned white. “Died at sea.” He swallowed hard, like the words scraped his throat. “Happens a lot here.”

Silence settled over us. Grief hung there too and I knew that look in his eyes. I’d seen it in my own mirror. Some things you don’t talk about.

I turned and left the kitchen. His quiet stayed with me, like a weight I couldn’t shake off.

By the time I reached the lab, Trevor was waiting. He leaned against one of the tables, arms crossed, smirking like he’d been rehearsing it all morning.

“Finally joining us?” He traded looks with Jonathan, who undressed me with his eyes from the corner. “Nice of you to let us set up while you got your beauty rest.”

I kept my face blank, heading for Kim's station. She shot me a look of understanding, organizing vials with steady hands.

Jamie was bent over the centrifuge, muttering as he twisted knobs and checked the calibration. His brow was furrowed so deeply it looked like it might stay that way. “These settings are all over the place,” he grumbled. The machine hummed faintly, but his tension filled the air more than the sound.

Jonathan leaned against the far counter, his arms crossed. He didn't say anything, just watched with an unrelenting stare. His silence felt louder than anything else in the room - not encouraging, but expectant, like he was waiting for someone to fail.

“So, how's it coming along?” I asked, pulling on my gloves as I took a seat next to Kim.

“Almost set,” she said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “The slides are prepped. We just need the algae.”

Jamie straightened, rubbing the back of his neck. “We can test setups all day, but without the algae, there's only so much we can do.”

“Exactly,” Jonathan cut in, his voice sharp as he stepped forward and uncrossed his arms. “We're wasting time. We need to dive and collect what we need.”

“No,” I said firmly, turning to face him. “Tanya will bring the algae.”

His jaw tightened, his eyes not leaving mine. “Tanya's not in charge here. We've got permits. We've got the gear. We need to do our jobs.”

“Diving isn't an option,” I raised my voice a bit. “Not until Tanya gives the go-ahead.”

Jonathan didn’t argue, but he turned away with a muttered curse. I knew he hated taking orders from women, but I wasn’t about to let his ego get us kicked out before we even saw the algae. Even if it was just old samples.

I walked over to the cages lined up near the wall. Inside, our three test mice scurried restlessly, their tiny noses twitching at the faint smell of food. Crouching by the brown mouse with the white stripe, I grabbed the container of pellets and held one out. “Come on, buddy,” I murmured. Willy had become a quick favorite. His curious nature made him stand out. He hesitated for a moment before darting forward to snatch the pellet, then retreating to his corner to nibble.

Kim glanced over and smirked. “Still spoiling him?”

“Just keeping morale up,” I said, shutting the cage door. “He's the only one around here who doesn't complain.”

Trevor snorted from the floor. “Give it time. He'll start squeaking about algae soon enough.”

The door creaked open, and all eyes turned as Tanya stepped inside. Her silver braid caught the light, sleek and bright. She didn’t bother with greetings, just strode to the counter with a kind of quiet authority that filled the room.

Opening the bag slung over her shoulder, she pulled out three jars. The algae inside glowed faintly, the light pulsing like a heartbeat. She placed them on the counter with deliberate care.

“These are what the Abyss has allowed us to take,” she told us, the warning clear in her voice. “Use them wisely. They will not last long.”

Kim stepped closer, fingers brushing the glass. “Thank you,” she murmured, her gaze fixed on the jars.

Tanya looked at her, then at the rest of us, pausing on Jonathan just a little longer. “The Abyss isn’t just water. It’s alive. It’s ancient. It doesn’t forget. It

doesn’t forgive. Treat this as a gift, or you’ll regret it.”

Her focus lingered on Jonathan one last time before she turned and walked out.

The door closed with a soft thud, leaving silence behind. No one moved until Jaime finally spoke.

“She’s serious,” he said quietly. “She really believes this Abyss thing is alive.”

Jonathan scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “Belief doesn't matter. What matters is whether these samples are good enough to get results.”

Kim frowned. “It does matter. They've survived for centuries by following these rules. Maybe we should listen.”

I didn't respond, my attention was entirely fixed on the jars. The algae's glow was mesmerizing, but there was something unsettling about it too. Reaching out, I brushed my fingers against the glass. A sharp, lingering chill spread through my hand, and I quickly pulled back, flexing my fingers.

“Let's get started,” I said, slipping on my gloves. “Jamie, run the centrifuge. Kim, take a sample and get it under the microscope.”

The lab shifted into motion, the quiet breaking as machines hummed and pens scraped against paper. Kim and Jaime moved quickly, their focus locked on the algae. Its glow faded as we studied it, dimming like a candle burning low.

Kim’s voice broke through the noise, tight with frustration. “It’s degrading too fast. The regenerative properties barely register.”

Jaime leaned over her shoulder, his jaw set. “These samples won’t last. We need fresh ones.”

I stared at the data streaming across my screen, the numbers mocking me. He wasn’t wrong. But what choice did we have? I pulled off my glasses and rubbed the bridge of my nose, the ache building behind my eyes.

“We work with what we’ve got,” I said, more to myself than anyone else.

Fresh samples. I knew we needed them. But I also knew where they were. Out there. In the dark waters where my parents had vanished twenty five years

ago. Now it was my turn to face the same darkness , and I wasn’t sure I’d come back.

Chapter Three

The night had swallowed the island by the time I left the lab. My head throbbed. My shoulders ached from hours hunched over data. Stepping outside the inn, the cold air bit into me.

I just wanted to clear my head. Maybe breathe for a minute. Then I saw her.

A young girl stood near a gnarled bush in the faint garden light. She couldn’t have been more than eleven or twelve. Her long hair hung limp, hiding most of her small frame.

What stopped me was how still she was. Not shivering. Not moving. Just waiting. Or maybe watching.

Slowing my pace, I felt my pulse quicken without any clear reason. Though her back was turned to me, I somehow knew she was aware of my presence. “Hey,” I called out, keeping my voice soft. “Are you okay?”

The girl's head tilted, not in response to me, but as if she were listening for some other sound. When she finally turned to face me, the light caught her eyes - wide and unblinking, locking onto me with an unsettling intensity.

“Do you live here?” I asked, my breath clouding the air while hers remained still and silent. Before she could answer, or before I could dwell too much on her lack of response, the sound of footsteps made me spin around.

Sebastian was approaching, looking tired but not particularly concerned. “There you are,” he said, addressing the girl. Glancing at me, he gave a quick, lopsided smile. “Sorry if she's bothering you. Pearl, this is my sister, Amanda.”

I wanted to laugh at the idea of this girl “bothering“ me, but Amanda's unblinking stare made the chuckle catch in my throat. Turning back to her, I tried to shake the strange weight that had settled in my chest. “Hi, Amanda. Nice to meet you.”

She didn't speak, just kept staring, her eyes now darker, as if the weak light had been swallowed whole. Forcing a smile, I attempted to fill the uncomfortable silence. “You're adorable, you know that?”

Amanda’s head tilted, her mouth pulling into a slight frown, like I’d said something wrong. No, not wrong, dangerous. Her gaze flicked to Sebastian, who looked just as lost as I felt.

“She’s not big on compliments,” Sebastian said, forcing a smile. He shrugged like this was normal. “Kids, right?”

Amanda’s head snapped toward him, her glare sharp enough to cut. If looks could kill, Sebastian would be six feet under. He let out a weak chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck. “See what I mean?” he muttered, trying to play i off.

I shifted, the awkwardness pressing down on all of us. “Well, good night,” I said. It was more for Sebastian than Amanda, who still hadn’t taken her eyes off me.

“Night,” Sebastian replied.

Amanda said nothing.

I turned and started walking, that strange feeling sticking to me like a cold sweat. When I glanced back, she was still there. Still watching. Her head tilted again, like she knew something I didn’t.

By the time I made it to my room, my skin was covered in goosebumps. Maybe Sebastian was right, kids could be weird. But Amanda wasn’t just weird. She was off. Like a note played too sharp or a shadow where there shouldn’t be one. I couldn’t shake it. Her stare felt like something I couldn’t scrape off, no matter how hard I tried.

OBJ

That night, the dream stuck to me like a wet sheet. I was sinking, the water closing in, as it was heavy and alive, squeezing the air from my chest. My

lungs burned, ready to give out. The deeper I fell, the darker it got. Shapes moved in the blackness, voices swirling like smoke, whispering my name.

Then I saw them, eyes. Huge, unblinking, impossibly dark. They hovered, watching me. Staring straight through me. My body screamed to fight, to swim back, but I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe.

I tried to scream, but the water shoved its way into my throat. The pressure crushed my ribs, ready to split me open. All I could do was fall deeper, those eyes following me down.

I jerked awake, gasping. My heart pounded, tangled sheets clinging to my damp skin. The room was still dark, but faint light crept around the edges of the curtains, morning wasn't far off. I sat frozen, listening, my breath coming in short bursts.

That's when I heard it.

A shift. Barely a sound, like the soft creak of wood or a foot brushing against the floor. My skin prickled, and the air felt different, too close, too still. I wasn't alone.

"Who's there?" I rasped, my voice cracking in the silence.

Nothing.

I swallowed hard, my pulse thudding in my ears. "Who's there?" I said again, louder this time. My words felt small in the dark, swallowed up by the quiet.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, my feet hitting the floor. My hands shook as I stood, fumbling to turn on the flashlight on my phone. The beam cut through the dark, sweeping across the room.

And I froze.

In the corner, a figure sat curled up, knees pulled to her chest. A little girl. Amanda.

"Amanda?" My voice cracked. "How, how did you get in here?"

She didn't answer right away. She just tilted her head, staring at me like she was studying something I couldn't see. Her stillness made my skin crawl.

Then, without warning, she started crawling toward me. Not walking. Crawling. The way her limbs jerked and moved made my stomach knot.

“I sneaked in,” she said flatly, as if it cost her nothing to say it. “You have to listen to me.”

I couldn’t move. My fingers gripped the phone like it might protect me. “Listen to you? Amanda, what are you doing in my room?”

“You have to find a cure,” she said, completely ignoring my question. “You need to test the algae. Understand it. The villagers, my mother... they don’t know the truth. They think it’s a miracle from the Abyss, but it’s not. It’s a curse.”

I stared at her, trying to make sense of what she was saying. “What do you mean... a curse? What’s wrong with the algae?”

“They don’t know everything,” Amanda said, her voice calm in a way that made my skin crawl. She glanced toward the curtain, her dark eyes darting like she expected something, or someone. “But you can figure it out. You’re different.”

I opened my mouth to ask more, but the room felt so dark, so suffocating. I needed light. I turned toward the curtain, my hands reaching to pull it open, to let in anything that could make this make sense.

Amanda moved suddenly, her body jerking forward in sharp, unnatural motions. Her hand darted forward, gripping my wrist.

“Don't open the curtains,” she said sharply, her dark eyes boring into mine. I noticed how shallow her breathing was, as if she was holding something back.

“Why not?” I asked, confused but also scared of the answer.

“Because I can’t tolerate the sun,” she murmured. “If sunlight touches me, I’ll die.”

I stared at her, my mind rejecting what I was hearing. “That’s not possible.”

“It is,” she shot back, her grip on my wrist tightening. Her nails pressed into my skin. “The algae healed me, but it left this behind. It’s a side effect.”

Her words just confused me even more. “You’re saying the algae did this to you?”

Before she could answer, a sudden, loud banging on the door made me jump.

“Amanda!” Sebastian’s voice rang through the wood, urgent and sharp. “We know you’re in there! Open up!”

Amanda’s eyes widened, her breath coming in short, panicked bursts. Her hand on my wrist trembled but didn’t let go. “It’s my mom and Sebastian,” she whispered harshly. “Don’t let them take me. Please.”

The banging grew louder, the doorknob rattling violently. I stumbled back as Amanda darted behind me, my heart thundering in my chest. “What the hell is going on?” I whispered, trying to make sense of the situation.

Suddenly, the lock clicked. The door flew open with a crash. Tanya stormed in, followed by Sebastian. They both looked tensed.

Before I could react, Tanya snatched a bedsheet and threw it over Amanda, wrapping her up in one smooth motion. Amanda’s muffled scream tore through the air. She thrashed wildly under the fabric. “Let me go! I’m not going back to that room! Just kill me if you have to! I’m sick of this! I’m sick of you!”

Sebastian lunged to grab her. “Stop it!” he hissed. Amanda twisted free, her small hands clawing at him. Her nails caught his skin, and blood welled up instantly.

“Damn it, Amanda!” he shouted, pulling his hand back.

Through the chaos, Tanya stayed calm in a way that felt colder than anything else. She pulled a syringe from her pocket and approached Amanda. “Enough,” she said. Then she plunged the needle into Amanda’s neck.

Amanda’s scream cut off. Her body sagged, going limp in seconds.

I stood there, stunned, my mind barely able to process what just happened.

“What the hell is going on?” Jaime’s voice called from the hallway. I glanced over and saw the rest of the team gathered at the door, eyes wide, faces pale.

Tanya didn’t look at any of us. “She’s having an episode,” she said flatly.

Sebastian lifted Amanda into her arms like it was nothing. “We’ll take care of her.”

“She’s not well. Go back to bed.” Tanya said with a fake smile.

The others hesitated. Their eyes darted between each other, uncertainty written all over their faces. One by one, they turned away, retreating to their rooms.

I didn’t move. My legs felt like lead, my heart slamming against my ribs.

Tanya and Sebastian carried Amanda down the hall. Her last words rang in my ears.

“If sunlight touches me, I’ll die.”

The door to their lodge slammed shut. The hallway fell into an eerie quiet.

I closed my door with shaking hands and leaned back against it, trying to breathe. My mind raced.

Whatever was happening to Amanda, whatever the algae had done to her, it wasn’t some “episode.” It was something darker, something worse. And I was going to find out the truth.

But for that, I needed fresh samples.

Chapter Four

As I stood in the lab, sorting equipment, my thoughts spun in circles. The morning light felt too bright, too sharp. Sleep had barely touched me. After they dragged Amanda from my room, her face wouldn't leave me. I couldn't close my eyes without seeing her. And when I did, questions gnawed at me. What was she going through? What did she mean about the sunlight and the algae?

The creak of the lab door opening pulled me from my thoughts, and I looked up to see Tanya entering. Just like yesterday, she was the picture of calm composure. But her face was hard, her eyes assessing me with an intensity tha made my skin crawl.

"Pearl," she said in a steady tone. "I need a word. Outside."

I hesitated, sensing that this was no mere request. Pulling off my gloves, I followed her into the crisp morning air. The village was quiet, the stillness broken only by the distant crash of waves.

"What happened last night," she began, as we walked past the inn. "I want to clarify. Amanda has... episodes. She's unwell. Mentally unstable. She has, what do you call it.. Ahh.. schizophrenia."

I frowned at how easily she declared Amanda's whole episode as 'schizophrenia'. "That didn't look like schizophrenia. That looked like something else entirely."

Tanya stopped walking and turned to face me. Suddenly her eyes narrowed and her jaw tightened, clearly she didn't like what I just said. "I'm telling you what you need to know. Amanda is sick. She's been this way for years. She isn't dangerous. She just needs care."

I stared at her, I knew in my gut that there was more to this story. Something about the way her gaze pressed on me and the tightness in her mouth - it all

felt wrong. Before I could press her further, she nodded toward the path ahead "I want to show you something."

We walked in silence, side by side. The path wound past the village and toward the cliffs, where the ground was rocky and uneven. At the top of a small rise, Tanya stopped. Ahead of us was a graveyard, tucked into the hillside - a simple collection of weathered stones, some marked with carvings, others bare.

Tanya walked forward, her boots crunching on the frost-covered grass, and stopped at two side-by-side graves. My breath caught in my throat as I saw the names etched into the stones.

DIANA HART and PETER HART.

"What is this?" I whispered, more to myself than her.

Tanya turned to me, her face softened by something I couldn't quite place - perhaps sympathy, or maybe regret. "You look like your mother," she said. "I recognized you the moment you told me your name."

I blinked, my throat tightening. "My parents?"

She nodded. "They came here years ago. For the algae, just like you." She gestured to the graves. "But they couldn't survive the waters. It took weeks for their bodies to come ashore."

It was too much. I thought they were never found. That's what we were told. If their bodies were found, why weren't they sent to us? I could've seen them one last time. I wanted to ask Tanya, but I didn't have the courage. Something inside me was breaking, like I was finally getting closure.

Tears stung my eyes as I knelt by the graves, my trembling hands tracing the grooves of my mother's name. "I'm sorry," I muttered, not sure who the apology was for, them, myself, or the impossible weight of the choices ahead.

Tanya stood a few steps away and when I looked back at her, her eyes softened, but only slightly.

"I've shown you their resting place," she spoke as she turned to leave. "Now find it in your heart to let us rest. Take your team and leave, Pearl."

She left me there, alone between two stones that now felt heavier than I could bear.

The walk back from the graveyard was colder than I remembered, or perhaps it was just me, feeling the kind of chill that doesn't come from the weather. My parents. Here. Buried in a place I barely knew, their names carved into stones older than my memories of them.

By the time I reached the inn, my throat felt tight, and my chest ached like it was carrying too much. Instead of going to my room, I found myself standing outside Kim's door, staring at the light seeping out from under it. I needed someone to talk to, so I knocked softly.

The door opened a crack, and Kim's face appeared, framed by loose strands of hair that had slipped from her ponytail. Her inquisitive eyes softened as she saw me. “Pearl? What's wrong?”

I stepped inside without a word. The warmth of her room hit me immediately, the faint scent of eucalyptus tea lingering in the air. For a moment, I just stood there, trying to figure out how to say it.

“I found their graves,” I finally blurted out. My voice wavered, and the words felt like jagged glass in my throat.

Kim's brow furrowed as she stepped closer. “Whose graves?”

“My parents,” I whispered. “Tanya showed me... she said they came here for the algae too. And that the ocean... the ocean took them.” The words tumbled out faster now, as if saying it quickly would hurt less. It didn't.

Kim's mouth opened slightly, but no words came out. Her expression shifted from confusion to shock, then to something softer. Her arms wrapped around me, pulling me into a tight hug before I could fall apart completely.

“Oh, Pearl,” she murmured into my hair. “I'm so sorry.”

The warmth of her embrace broke something loose in me, and a choked sob escaped my throat. “I didn't even know what to say,” I admitted, clutching the fabric of her shirt. “I didn't know how to feel. They died here, Kim. They died because of this place, and now I'm here, doing the same thing they were.”

Kim pulled back just enough to look at me, her hands gripping my shoulders. Her eyes were glassy now, her lips pressed into a thin line. “You're not doing the same thing,” she said firmly. “You're not. You're here to figure this out. To make sense of all of it.”

I wanted to believe her, but the ache in my chest wouldn’t let me. “But what if I’m making the same mistake?”

Kim didn't answer right away. Instead, she guided me to the bed and sat down beside me, her hand still gripping mine. “Do you know what your parents would say if they saw you right now?”

I shook my head, my throat too tight to speak.

“They’d say they’re proud of you,” she smiled. “Because you're here, doing something important. Something brave. Just like them. They wanted to study the algae so it could cure sicknesses, diseases for which there was no cure. You’re here for the same reason. And yeah, maybe it’s terrifying as hell, but you're not alone. You have me. You have Jamie. Even Trevor, though he's mostly good for complaining. And you’ve got Jonathan, who seems to take a fancy to you.” She smiled faintly, trying to lighten the mood.

“Ugh...” I muttered, my voice laced with disgust.

She raised an eyebrow but kept going. “And honestly? You’re the toughest person I know.”

Her words hit me harder than I expected, a lump forming in my throat. It wasn’t just grief this time. It was gratitude. I squeezed her hand, a tear slipping down my cheek. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Bullshit,” she replied immediately, her tone teasing but warm. “You'd do the same for me. You have done the same for me, a million times.”

She stood and moved to the small cabinet near the bed. After rummaging for a moment, she pulled out a bottle of vodka and two mismatched glasses.

“I know this isn't exactly grief counseling,” she said, pouring generously, “but it's what I've got.”

I let out a watery laugh, taking the glass she offered. “It's perfect.”

We clinked our glasses together in a mock toast before downing the vodka in one go. It burned on the way down, but it steadied me somehow.

Kim poured another round, and we sat there, leaning against the headboard, the silence between us comfortable now. She started telling me about her first disastrous field assignment, how she'd fallen into a tide pool while trying to impress her professor. I laughed, the sound surprising me with how normal it felt.

“See?” she said, smiling. “You're already feeling better.”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't help smiling back. “You're a terrible therapist.”

“Yeah, but I'm a great friend,” she said, nudging my shoulder.

For a while, we just sat there, trading stories and sipping vodka until the bottle was nearly empty. Kim's presence, her easy humor and steady warmth, made the grief a little easier to bear.

The door opened suddenly, and Jamie stepped in, his gaze moving between us and the half-empty bottle on the floor. “What's going on here?” he asked, looking clearly amused.

“Girls' night,” Kim replied smoothly, raising her glass.

I stood quickly, brushing off my pants. “We were just... talking,” I said. The air felt tighter now, like Jamie's presence had shifted something unspoken in the room. “I need some air,” I added, grabbing my coat.

“Pearl-“ Kim started, but I waved her off.

“I'm fine. Really. I'll be back soon.”

It hurt to see Jamie there. I didn't have feelings for him anymore - but still. It was a hollow kind of ache, one I didn't want to examine too closely. Seeing him standing there, so casual, so unbothered, made the room feel too small, too stifling.

I needed to get out of there.

The door closed behind me, muffling the low murmur of their voices. I exhaled slowly, letting the ice cold air fill my lungs. It was bracing, sharp against my flushed cheeks. My steps carried me toward the beach without

thinking, the path familiar even in the dark. My thoughts kept going back to the graves , my parents, buried in a place I barely knew, surrounded by strangers. Tanya's words echoed in my mind, her calm voice hiding something I couldn't put my finger on.

“Let us rest. Take your team and leave.”

I hugged myself, trying to shake off the heavy feeling. But the harder I tried, the more my mind drifted to Amanda. Tanya had said she was sick, unstable, but the way Amanda had grabbed my wrist, her voice low and desperate - it didn't seem like madness. It felt real.

I let out a sharp breath, the sound disappearing into the waves. Tanya was lying - I was sure of it. Her smooth explanations couldn't cover the truth. And Amanda... Amanda was proof of that.

Tanya had lied. I was sure of it now. There was more to this place, to my parents' deaths, to Amanda, and Tanya was hiding it all behind a veil of half-truths and warnings.

I was so lost in thought I almost didn't notice him.

Sebastian stood at the water's edge. His silhouette was dark against the ocean. He didn't move. His shoulders slouched like he was carrying something too heavy to bear.

I hesitated for a moment, but the way he stood pulled me forward.

“Sebastian,” I called softly.

He turned slowly. His face was pale in the moonlight. I could see dried streaks of tears on his cheeks. His eyes, red and tired, met mine.

“She wasn't always like this,” he said, shaking his head.

I knew this wasn't going to be a simple conversation. I stayed quiet, letting him find his words. The waves crashed in a steady rhythm, and salt spray clung to my skin, sharp and cold.

“She's my older sister,” he said after a pause. His voice barely rose above the sound of the ocean. He kicked a piece of driftwood, his boots sinking into the wet sand. “When she was young, she got sick. Cancer.” He looked down, his

hands shaking as he pulled them from his pockets. He started tracing circles in the sand with his fingers. “My dad... he couldn't accept it. He was desperate to save her.”

The wind picked up, stinging my face as it whipped my hair into my eyes. A seagull screeched, circling overhead before diving into the water.

Sebastian stared at the waves. “My dad made sacrifices. He went deeper into the ocean than anyone dared. He did things no one should have to do. He risked everything. All to get the algae. All to save Amanda.”

He stopped talking, his face tightening like the memory hurt too much to share. I watched him, my chest heavy with something I couldn't name. I didn't know his father, but I could picture him - a man pushing past every limit, desperate to save his daughter.

I hugged myself, the cold seeming to seep right into my chest. “So... the algae healed her?” My voice came out small.

“It did,” Sebastian said. His face twisted, his jaw clenching. “The cancer was gone in weeks. But it took something else from her. A part of her.” He paused, shaking his head. “I don't know if it was her soul or something else, but it's like it ate her bit by bit.” He kicked a shell, sending it tumbling down the sand. “Now she can't go out in the light. She can't be in the sun. She's been like this for twenty-five years. Trapped in a darkness she can't escape.”

His words hit me hard. My chest tightened as I tried to take it all in. “Twenty-five years?” I asked quietly. “But she looks...”

“Young?” His laugh was harsh and bitter. “She hasn't aged since she was a kid. Since after she took the algae. She's frozen. Stuck. And it's driving her mad.”

He stared at the water, his breath visible in the chilly air. “When I was born, Amanda was twelve. She raised me. Loved me. But I grew up, and she didn’t. Everything changed. Suddenly, I was the one looking after her.” He swallowed hard. “She hates me for it. She hates needing me.”

The wind whipped past us, carrying the salty, rotting tang of seaweed. The waves crashed relentlessly, loud in the quiet night. A fog was rolling in. I

reached out and rested my hand on his arm. His jacket was damp, and his muscles were tense beneath it.

“You're doing the best you can,” I said gently. “You're trying to help her.”

Sebastian turned to me, tears clinging to his lashes, his face wet with salt spray and grief. His eyes looked stormy now, the blue clouded with something darker. “At what cost, Pearl?” his voice cracked as he let out those words. “She's trapped. During the daytime, I hear her scratching at the walls of her room. Crying. Begging me to let her die.”

I couldn't speak. His words settled over me like a heavy weight.

Sebastian wiped his face with his sleeve, his breath shaky as he straightened. “There's something else,” he said, his hand brushing mine. His calloused fingers were warm. “I need to show you something.”

He led me along the beach, the path narrowing as the fog thickened. I kept my eyes on the uneven ground, careful not to trip. The sky was starting to lighten, a dull gray glow hanging over the cliffs. The fog was thicker here, wrapping around us like it had weight.

Sebastian stopped in front of a cave, half-hidden behind moss and thick vines. The entrance was dark and uninviting.

“Here,” he said and his voice echoing faintly in the stillness. “This is where it all began.”

The cave loomed before us, its dark entrance like an open mouth waiting to swallow us whole. Sebastian stepped inside first, his flashlight cutting through the gloom. I hesitated at the threshold, the air colder here, damp and heavy. It smelled of wet stone and something faintly metallic, like old blood.

“Come on,” Sebastian urged. “You gotta see this.”

I swallowed hard and followed, flicking on my phone’s flashlight. Our beams cut through the shadows, lighting up the slick walls. Water dripped somewhere, each drop landing with a sharp, steady tap. The deeper we went, the tighter the air seemed to squeeze in.

Sebastian stopped, his light catching strange markings on the wall. The script curled and twisted, the edges softened by time.

I leaned closer. “What language is this?”

He traced the letters, brow furrowed. “Proto-Norse. My grandfather taught me a little. It’s older than Icelandic, almost forgotten. Only a few of us still know how to read it.”

His words landed hard, pressing into my chest. These weren’t just carvings; they were warnings left for anyone who dared follow.

Sebastian’s light shifted downward, landing on a long, coiled shape etched into the stone. The details made my skin crawl, each scale, each hollow eye socket.

“That’s the Vurrax. It wraps around you and squeezes. You won’t see it coming in the dark.”

We moved further in. His beam swept across another figure, sleek, overlapping scales that seemed to shimmer when we moved.

“The Silvershrike,” he went on, voice low. “Reflects light. Messes with your head. Makes you see things that aren’t there.”

A faint noise echoed from deeper in the cave. I jerked my light around, heart hammering. Nothing but shadows.

Sebastian’s jaw tightened. His light found another carving, thin, stretched limbs, almost human but wrong.

“The Drowner’s Hand. It hides in algae beds. Looks like someone reaching fo help... until it grabs you.”

I clenched my jaw, my stomach twisting. My light caught the last carving, and a cold dread settled in my bones. A skeletal figure stared back, mouth frozen in a silent scream.

Sebastian’s fingers curled around the flashlight. “The Sirenshade. It calls to you, sounds like someone you love. The more fear it senses, the stronger it gets.”

He didn’t say anything more. He didn’t need to. The cave felt like it was holding its breath, and suddenly, so was I.

“Why are these here?” My voice echoed slightly in the stillness, louder than I intended. “Who made them?”

Sebastian didn't look at me. His flashlight stayed fixed on the carvings, moving slowly over each deliberate mark. “No one knows for sure,” he said after a moment. “Some villagers believe ancient people lived here long before Sarkivik. They worshipped the ocean - the Abyss - and everything in it. My people think these carvings were left behind to warn anyone who came after them.”

“Worshipped the ocean?” I asked, my voice tinged with disbelief. The idea sounded almost ridiculous. “You're saying they believed in some kind of... Sea God?”

“That's exactly what I'm saying,” Sebastian replied. His beam lingered on a particularly jagged carving. “To them, the Abyss wasn't just water. It was alive. Something they couldn't control. Something they feared.”

I turned my light back to the wall, studying the sharp lines and unsettling shapes carved into the stone. The detail was too intricate, too purposeful to feel random. Whoever had made these had seen something - or believed they had.

“How does anyone know these aren't just myths?” I asked as doubt crept into my tone. “You're talking like this is fact.”

Sebastian moved his light to the next carvings. “Because the Abyss doesn't leave room for myths. People here still feel it. They see things no one can explain. Look at Amanda. My sister hasn't aged in twenty-five years. How do you explain that?”

I stayed silent, my grip tightening on the flashlight.

“This ocean holds secrets, Pearl,” he continued. “The algae might be one of them, but it's not the only one. Far more dangerous things hide out there. Sailors have disappeared into these waters for centuries. Entire ships.”

His words felt too big, too impossible. I couldn't look away from the carvings, their silent warnings carved deep into the walls.

At the farthest edge of the wall, I noticed something else. Sebastian hadn't pointed it out, but my light found it on its own. This carving wasn't like the

others. It wasn't a creature. It didn't have a body. It was a shifting cloud, jagged and uneven, its edges blurring into the stone. The only clear part was the eyes, pitch black, deep and endless.

The eyes stared back at me, carved with such detail that they almost felt alive. My breath hitched. My chest tightened. Those eyes. I'd seen them before.

In my dreams.

My knees went weak. Recognition hit me all at once, crashing down like a wave.

Sebastian's voice cut through my panic. "That's the Abyss," he murmured, his voice lower now, almost reverent. "The master of the oceans and the master of those creatures."

I couldn't move. I couldn't look away. The eyes, they were the same. Dark, endless, staring back at me. The ones that had pulled me down into the abyss, swallowed me whole.

Suddenly, Sebastian grabbed my arm. "We need to go." His flashlight flickered in the dark. "The tide's coming in. This place floods."

I didn't fight him. We rushed, our footsteps splashing through shallow puddles on the cave floor. The air grew heavier with every step, like the walls were closing in on me.

When we finally stepped outside, the sun had risen, the light chasing away the shadows. But those eyes , dark, endless, and alive , stayed with me. And I knew they weren't done watching.

Chapter Five

I was still shaken from the cave. All I wanted was to get to my room, shut the door, and breathe. But as I headed down the hallway, the muffled hum of voices from the lab stopped me cold. My fingers brushed the door to my room but Jonathan’s voice rang out from inside the lab, pulling me in the other direction.

“It's happening tomorrow, before sunrise. We're getting the samples from the source.”

The mention of diving made my stomach twist. Tanya’s warnings and what Sebastian had shown me in the cave crashed through my thoughts. I took a deep breath, pushed the door open, and stepped in.

The room went quiet. Everyone turned to look at me.

“A dive tomorrow?” I asked. My voice stayed calm even though my heart slammed in my chest. “That’s the plan?”

Jonathan leaned against the table, not bothering to look up from his notes. “It's our only choice,” he said, his voice calm but final. “The algae Tanya gave us is degrading. Already degraded! We need the real thing from the source to continue our research.”

I frowned, moving further into the room. “And you think risking your lives is the answer? The currents here are deadly, and the water temperature alone could, “

“We know the risks,” Jamie interrupted, leaning against the counter with his arms crossed. His expression was serious, but there was a hint of confidence in his tone. “We've done this kind of thing before, Pearl. Worse than this, even.”

My frustration bubbled over. “It's not just about the physical conditions! There's something off about this place, something that Tanya clearly wanted to

warn us about. How can you be so sure it's safe down there?”

Jonathan finally looked up, his expression unreadable. “You're letting the villagers' superstitions get to you.”

“It's not superstition!” I couldn't help raising my voice. “We don't know what's down there, Jonathan. How can you be so confident that it's safe to just dive in?”

He didn't flinch, his tone growing colder. “If you're too scared to join us, Pearl, that's your choice. But I'm not backing down from this.”

I didn't rise to the bait, instead sinking into a chair and rubbing my temples. Everything about this place - Sebastian's unsettling warnings, Amanda's desperate pleas, Tanya's eerie calm - it all gnawed at me. Nothing seemed to fit together, and yet it all screamed danger.

Kim's calm, curious voice broke the silence. “Even if we do dive, how are we supposed to find what we're looking for? The ocean is massive. What are we supposed to actually look for?”

Her question pulled me from my thoughts. My eyes drifted to the algae sample sitting on the counter, its faint glow barely visible but there. Suddenly, an idea started to form.

“We use the algae,” I said, sitting up straighter.

Jonathan turned to me, his brow furrowing. “What do you mean?”

I leaned forward, trying to piece my thoughts together. “In nature, we often find that animals and other organisms have developed fascinating ways of responding to their environment - ways that we don't always fully understand.”

I paused, glancing around the room to make sure I had everyone's attention. “Take fireflies, for example. Their bioluminescence causes them to glow brighter when they're near others of their kind. Or sharks - they can sense electromagnetic fields from miles away, allowing them to detect prey and navigate the vast ocean.”

Kim tilted her head, her expression intrigued. “So you think the algae could do something similar?”

“Exactly,” I replied. “We've seen how the algae reacts and glows under certain conditions. What if it has some kind of innate ability to respond more strongly as it gets closer to its source - to where it originally came from?” I gestured to the glowing sample. “It's a bit of a stretch, I know, but it's better than just aimlessly diving and hoping for the best.”

Jonathan raised a skeptical eyebrow. “So we're pinning this whole plan on a 'maybe'?”

I held his gaze, trying to convey the importance of my idea. “The ocean is massive, Jonathan. Are you really planning to just swim around and hope you stumble across what we need? At least if we use the algae as a guide, it gives us a chance to narrow things down and not waste precious time or risk our lives unnecessarily.”

Kim nodded slowly, her gaze fixed on the glowing sample. “She has a point. The algae does seem to respond to its environment in unique ways. And if it doesn't work, we're no worse off than we are now.” She turned to the others. “It's worth a try, don't you think?”

Jamie ran a hand over his jaw, his expression thoughtful. “It's risky, but I have to admit, it's not a bad idea. Beats just swimming around aimlessly.”

Jonathan's jaw tightened, but I could see him considering the proposal. After a moment, he let out a frustrated sigh. “Fine,” he said. “We'll take the sample and see if it reacts as we get closer to the source. But if it doesn't lead us anywhere, we keep diving until we find what we need.”

His tone left no room for argument, but I held his gaze, refusing to back down “We stick to the plan, then. No unnecessary risks, no splitting up. If things start to go wrong, we come back immediately. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Jamie said with a nod.

Jonathan then grabbed the sample container, holding it up to the light as if examining a precious treasure. His eyes locked onto the faintly glowing algae, and for a moment, it was like the rest of us didn't even exist. The look on his face made my stomach churn - it was pure determination, yes, but also a raw, almost greedy hunger that I couldn't quite place.

Kim adjusted her jacket, shooting me a quick, encouraging smile, probably trying to keep the mood light. Jamie leaned against the wall, his expression unreadable as he tapped his foot.

But the whole cabin felt tense, like we were balancing on the edge of something we couldn't quite see.

“This'll guide us,” Jonathan said, setting the container down on the table with a little too much force. His tone didn't leave room for argument, not that anyone seemed inclined to push back at the moment.

Kim and Jamie gave half-hearted nods, but I just couldn't shake the heavy feeling in my chest. My eyes kept drifting back to the algae jars on the table. Their faint green glow pulsed almost rhythmically, as if they were alive and waiting for something.

I swallowed hard, trying to steady my nerves because I knew it deep in my heart that the ocean held secrets we couldn’t imagine. And tomorrow, we were going to dive straight into its jaws.

Chapter Six

The sky was still dark when we reached the boat, and the stars were barely visible. As the first hints of dawn blurred the horizon, my breath came in clouds, the cold slicing through every layer.

Our dive gear sat waiting near the edge of the boat, and I couldn't stop staring at it. I wasn’t sure what came next, but a pit of dread settled in my stomach. I had to push past the fear. Logic and science had to come before superstition.

Jonathan held the algae jar tight in his hand. The deeper we went, the more the algae started to glow. What looked dead on land came alive down here, brighter and brighter.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. Kim peeled off her jacket in the center of the boat, moving without a care in the world. She put on her wetsuit with such grace she made it look like a ball gown. She was perfect.

I wasn’t.

I sighed, resigning myself to the task at hand. It was my turn now. Unzipping my jacket and yanking it off, followed by my thermal shirt and leggings, I shivered as I grabbed my wetsuit. The neoprene felt stiff and uncooperative, like I was wrestling a stubborn animal to get it on.

That's when I felt it, their eyes on me. Not just quick glances now, but full-on stares. Jonathan didn’t bother pretending. Jaime’s awkward attempt to look casual only made it worse.

“Looking good, Professor,” Jaime hesitated and looked away quickly.

I froze, the wetsuit zipper halfway up. My face burned, and not just from the cold. “Are you serious right now?” I snapped, glaring at him. “You're gonna be that guy?”

Kim looked up, stifling a laugh, and walked over to smack Jaime on the back of the head. “Seriously, grow up.”

“What?” Jaime mumbled, rubbing the spot like she'd actually hurt him. “I was just complimenting her.”

“And you,” I snapped, turning to Jonathan. “If you're gonna stare, at least try not to make it so obvious. It’s embarrassing, for you.”

His smirk didn’t waver. “What can I say? I’m a hot-blooded man. And I like what I see.”

My stomach twisted, disgust coiling tight. The man didn’t know the meaning of subtlety, or decency.

Across the deck, Trevor’s jaw clenched, his eyes burning with quiet fury. His hands gripped the wheel tighter than necessary. He looked ready to snap Jonathan in half, but he stayed glued to the helm, the boat’s steady drift keeping him anchored.

I met his gaze, one brow lifting in silent challenge. Control your man.

He swallowed hard, his jaw working, but didn’t say a word.

Kim rolled her eyes and stepped closer. Her voice dropped, meant only for me “Don’t let them crawl under your skin. Boys are idiots. It’s in their DNA.”

“Clearly,” I muttered, tugging the wetsuit’s zipper up and yanking the gear into place.

Once all four of us were ready, Jonathan gave the signal to dive. He went first, stepping off the edge and disappearing into the water with a practiced, effortless motion. Kim followed.

Jaime lingered for a moment, giving me another one of his infuriating half-smiles before he stepped off the boat and vanished into the depths.

I stood at the edge, staring down at the black water below. It looked endless, like it could swallow me whole. My pulse roared in my ears. I forced the dread down. There was no turning back now.

“Just do it,” Trevor yelled from behind me.

I took a deep breath and jumped.

The ice cold water stabbed through me. It took a second to get my bearings. It was freaking cold. My chest felt tight, and the hiss of my regulator cut through my ears, sharp and metallic. I tried to get my breathing steady, but every inhale felt too quick, too shallow.

It wasn’t just the cold. Something about this place pressed in on me. Like the water itself was alive, coiling around me, trying to sink into my skin. Turning on the flashlight attached to my mask, a narrow beam cut through the inky darkness, illuminating the swirling particles drifting with the current. Ahead, I could make out the faint bobbing of the others' lights.

Kicking hard, I pushed myself to catch up. The heavy tank on my back pressed into my shoulders with every stroke. As I descended, a beautiful glow started to appear. It looked otherworldly. Like stars glowing on the bottom of the ocean. That was algae! The deeper I went, the stronger the glow became.

“Do you see that?” Jaime's voice crackled through the radio, his tone just as awestruck as I felt.

“It's incredible,” Kim replied, her light sweeping over the glowing algae. She moved closer, reaching out carefully with her gloved hand. When her fingers brushed against the pulsing organisms, the glow seemed to respond, brightening as if recognizing her touch.

Once I caught up with the others, I carefully brushed my fingers against one o the glowing patches. The glow intensified, pulsing brighter for a moment before settling back down. It was almost as if the algae was reacting to my touch, as if it could sense my presence.

“It's responding,” I said into the radio. “The algae, it's reacting when I touch it.”

Kim's voice crackled back, her tone filled with intrigue. “Incredible. It's almost like the algae can sense us, or our proximity to it. I wonder what that could mean.”

The idea that the algae might be aware of us was hard to wrap my head around. If they could sense and react to our presence, even in a basic way, it meant they were more complex than we thought. They weren’t just lifeless plants. There was something else going on, maybe even a kind of intelligence, that didn’t fit with what we usually understood about marine life.

I brushed my fingers over the glowing patches, watching the light flare and fade. The rhythm felt like a heartbeat, almost hypnotic. Just as I started to lose myself in it, a sharp voice snapped me back to reality.

“Stop admiring it and focus,” Jonathan snapped, his beam of light cut through the water like a blade. “We need more samples. Keep moving.”

Right, grab the samples and get out. That was the plan. But Jonathan’s brush-off of the algae’s strange glow bugged me. Couldn’t he see something unusual was happening here?

I kept going, following the trail of glowing algae. The deeper we went, the glow thickened, brighter and more intense. Then, out of nowhere, it hit me, a wave of dread. The water felt tighter, pressing in like a vice. My chest clenched, and a chill prickled along my spine.

Something was wrong.

I tore my eyes away from the algae and looked around. Darkness. Nothing moved.

Then I heard it. A faint sound, almost lost in the hiss of my breath. A whisper, just beyond reach.

My heart pounded. I wasn’t losing it, Kim had heard it too.

“I heard it,” Jaime said, his voice edged with tension.

Jonathan’s voice cut in, sharp and impatient. “It’s nothing. Focus. Keep moving.”

Easy for him to say. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that something more sinister was at play. The sound wasn’t coming through the radio anymore, it was in my head, pressing against my thoughts, sending a chill racing through me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of movement and swung my flashlight toward it. Nothing. Just more swirling particles drifting in the current. My chest tightened, my mind filling the empty spaces with shapes tha may or may not have been real.

“Stay close,” Kim's voice cut in, firm but laced with worry. “Don’t lose sight of each other.”

I tried to focus on Kim’s words, to stay grounded. But my flashlight caught it, a massive shape shifting just beyond the beam. It twisted, bending the light in ways that made my stomach knot.

Teeth. Rows of thin, needle-sharp points glinted faintly in the algae’s glow.

“Vurrax,” I whispered, the name escaping before I knew it.

Jonathan’s forced laugh crackled through the radio. “Vurrax? What’s that, Pearl?”

Kim’s voice came strained. “It’s the pressure. The depth can make you see things that aren’t there.”

I wanted to believe her. My hands shook too hard to pretend I wasn’t scared.

And just like that, it happened. Darkness exploded around us. A cloud of black ink swallowed Jonathan’s light in an instant. His scream tore through the radio, raw and guttural.

“Jonathan!” Jaime’s flashlight swept wildly through the water.

Bubbles surged. Shadows twisted. Jonathan thrashed, a flash of his dive knife slashing at nothing. The scene spun out of focus, a whirl of ink and confusion.

“Something’s grabbed me!” Jonathan’s voice crackled through the radio, sharp with panic. “I can’t see it, but I’m not going down without a fight!”

“What the hell is happening?!” Kim screamed over the radio.

As the ink cleared, I braced myself for... I didn’t even know what. But Jonathan was just there, floating, his breathing ragged. His leg showed no marks, no blood, he seemed physically unharmed. Yet the look in his eyes unsettled me to the core. I’d never seen Jonathan rattled before. But now? He looked spooked, like something had reached inside him and shaken the foundation of who he was.

“We need to leave,” I said, my voice cracking with urgency. “This isn’t safe. We’ve got a sample, let’s go.”

But Jonathan shook his head, his expression hardening. “Not yet,” he snapped “We’re not leaving with just one sample. That was nothing, just an octopus or something.”

I wanted to believe him. God, I really did. But my gut knew better. Still, we needed more algae samples. We couldn’t leave empty-handed.

“I’ll grab another sample,” I muttered, more to myself than anyone else. Kicking hard, I pushed away from the group, heading toward the glowing algae bed.

The algae pulsed, its glow hypnotic as I reached out. My own breathing filled my ears, loud and uneven. The water around me shifted, alive with something unseen. My pulse raced, hands trembling as I reached for the algae.

Suddenly I saw a familiar face.

My mother.

Her face floated in the distance, pale and distorted. Dark streams of water leaked from her hollow eyes. Her lips moved, but the voice that came through sounded wet and broken.

“Pearl… darling… come to me.”

My chest seized. My breath stuttered. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. But the longer I stared, the more doubt clawed at me. Her face swam into focus, too familiar, too close. Behind her, more figures emerged, my father’s lifeless eyes. And then… him.

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head. My lungs felt tight, panic gnawing at the edges of my mind. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

Her hand lifted, fingers outstretched. “Come, Pearl… it’s safe here.”

My pulse pounded, each beat loud and frantic. My father’s eyes locked onto me, empty, accusing. The algae’s glow smeared their faces in sickly green. They looked wrong, like shadows wearing familiar skin.

“Come back, Pearl. It’s warm here…”

Cold dread spread through me. My throat closed, the taste of metal flooding my mouth. I gasped into the regulator, each breath thin and shaky.

Then he appeared.

The man from every nightmare.

“My little Pearl,” he cooed, his voice a singsong mockery.

Terror clawed up my spine. I nearly lost it.

“No! You’re not real. None of you are real!” The scream tore out of me, desperate and raw.

But they kept drifting closer. The water thickened, darkness closing in like invisible hands squeezing my throat.

My mother’s lips moved again. Her hollow eyes pleaded. *“We miss you, darling. We’re waiting.”*

Panic snapped. I kicked back, but my legs felt heavy, tangled in the water. I couldn’t get away.

Jaime’s voice crackled through the radio. “Pearl, get it together!”

Reality slammed back into me. The figures vanished.

I needed to get out. My flashlight shook, the beam flickering wildly as I pushed toward the surface.

And I finally found her!

Kim’s body hung ahead, limp, suspended in a creature’s grasp.

My stomach clenched with realization. The Drowner’s Hand. Its long, jointed fingers wrapped around her arms and torso. Webbed membranes stretched between its fingers, glowing faintly with that same eerie blue light. Its mottled, dark skin rippled as if it was breathing. The way it held her sent cold dread through me.

Kim’s eyes snapped to mine, wide and frantic. She jerked, her body fighting even as the creature’s grip tightened. It wanted her to struggle.

“Kim!” I lunged forward, water dragging at me. Panic surged. I had to reach her.

The creature turned. Not a face, just two dark hollows where eyes should be. The algae in my bag pulsed brighter, painting it in sickly green light.

No time to think. I yanked out my dive knife. The blade glinted, then plunged into its wrist joint. The knife slipped against its rubbery skin. Dark ooze leaked out, curling like smoke.

Kim sagged. Her oxygen was running out.

No. Not now.

I tightened my grip, drove the blade deeper, and twisted hard. The creature jolted. Its fingers loosened just enough for Kim to drop free. I caught her wais and kicked upward, my lungs burning, muscles shaking. The creature stayed below, watching.

The surface felt miles away. My legs screamed, but I didn't stop. Kim's tank dragged at us, but I clung to the faint shimmer of light.

We broke through. I tore the regulator out and gasped, air slicing into my lungs. Kim's head lolled against my shoulder, her body limp and unresponsive.

"Trevor!" My voice cracked. "Help!"

He was already there. Strong hands yanked Kim out of the water while I hauled myself onto the deck, my fingers trembling too hard to pull her mask off. Trevor did it, his face twisted with fear. Kim coughed, a thin, broken sound.

"She's breathing," he murmured, like he needed to believe it.

Relief flared, then sputtered out. My mind couldn't shake the image of those fingers, slick with dark ooze. The way she went limp.

Jonathan hunched by the rail, his eyes fixed on the water. His shoulders curled inward, like he was trying to disappear.

The wetsuit clung to me, suffocating. I yanked the zipper down to my waist, cold air biting through my bikini top. I didn't care. At least I wasn't in the water anymore.

Just as my heart started to slow, Kim stirred. Her eyes darted around, wild with panic. “Where’s Jaime?”

The words punched the air from my lungs. My gut twisted. I turned to the water. Endless black stretched out.

“He’s still down there,” I rasped.

The words barely left my throat before I was moving. I ran to the edge of the boat.

“Pearl, no!” Trevor’s hand clamped around my arm. “You can’t, “

I ripped my arm free. “I’m not leaving him.”

I didn’t wait. I dove.

The water hit like ice, stabbing where my wetsuit hung loose. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but finding Jaime.

My heart pounded as I kicked deeper. The beam of my flashlight sliced through the dark, searching. A faint glimmer caught my eye.

Jaime.

He was tangled in dark tendrils, curling like smoke. They weren’t solid, but they clung to him, wrapping tight around his limbs and torso. My stomach knotted. They weren’t suffocating him, they were keeping him. Holding him in place.

A cloud of red spread through the water. My eyes darted to his leg. Blood spiraled in thin ribbons from a gash. My lungs seized at the sight.

I reached for him, my fingers trembling. He was only inches away. Before I could touch him, the tendrils unraveled, slipping away like shadows in the current. Jaime’s body floated upward, free.

Relief surged, then evaporated.

The water thickened around me. A sense of dread curled tight. I felt it before I saw it, the creature’s attention shifting, zeroing in on me.

A shimmer of silver caught my eye. The tail emerged first, massive, sleek, slicing through the water with slow, deadly grace. Then his chest came into

view, broad and sculpted, bioluminescent skin rippling like living metal. Clawed, webbed hands glided through the water as he swam toward me.

Then I met his eyes.

Pitch black. Bottomless.

They locked onto me, swallowing everything. The world faded, leaving only the pull of his gaze. I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. He wasn't just looking at me, he was inside me, prying into my thoughts, holding me in place, unraveling me piece by piece.

His claws slid over my exposed waist, cold seeping through my skin. His other hand cupped my face, the touch firm but careful, like he was deciding whether to break me or hold me together.

My lungs burned, the need for air turning desperate. His eyes never let go. He leaned in, his cool lips brushing against my neck. Not a kiss. A claim. Then his teeth sank in.

Pain flared white-hot, a shock that jolted through my body. Heat chased it, spreading like fire through my veins. My back arched into him, the scream in my mind swallowed by the way my body gave in, wanting more.

My vision blurred. My limbs trembled. I started to slip away. Then his mouth found mine. His lips sealed over me, and he breathed into me. Salt and something raw filled my lungs, electric and alive. My chest expanded, the rush of it rewiring something deep and primal.

His claws traced my sides, glided to the back of my neck. He tangled his fingers in my hair, tilting my head. His lips brushed the other side of my throat. The second bite went deeper, pain blurring into something sharper, almost unbearable. The water thrummed around us, vibrating with whatever he was doing.

I gasped weakly. His mouth crashed onto mine again, the breath he gave searing through me. My hands pressed against his chest, useless, trembling. He didn't let go. He held me there, his grip unrelenting.

When he finally pulled back, his eyes met mine. Dark. Possessive. Endless.

Shadows moved behind him, something massive shifting just out of reach. He loosened his hold, letting me float away. Not because I escaped, but because he allowed it.

I broke the surface, gasping. Hands grabbed me, Trevor, Kim, hauling me onto the deck. Their voices blurred, far away and muffled. My fingers found the marks on my neck, warm with my own blood.

But the pain wasn’t what stayed with me.

It was his eyes. Those black, endless eyes. Eyes I knew too well. Eyes that had haunted my dreams. My nightmares.

Chapter Seven

We walked back to the inn in silence. My fingers wouldn't stop touching my neck, tracing the marks he'd left. They tingled, a constant reminder of how close he'd been. Jaime limped beside me, jaw tight, pretending he wasn't struggling. Kim kept glancing around nervously, her hands twisting together, but she didn't say anything. Even Jonathan, who always had something to say, stayed quiet.

Blood dripped steadily onto the floor as I rolled up Jaime's pant leg. The gash was deep, jagged, and ugly, the kind of wound that would leave a scar. Jaime's knuckles were white as he gripped the edge of the chair, his face pale.

"Pearl," he started, his voice uneven, "what we saw down there… that thing… it had me. I couldn't, "

"Don't." I cut him off, forcing myself to focus on the first-aid kit. "Let's just fix this and move on."

Jaime nodded stiffly but didn't say anything else. The words hung between us, heavy and unsaid.

Kim perched on the edge of the table, arms wrapped tightly around herself. Her shoulders hunched like she was trying to disappear. "Its eyes," she murmured, barely audible. "Like staring into nothing."

"Shut it!" Jonathan barked, pacing by the window. His boots dragged over the worn floorboards, each step erratic.

"Then what the hell did this?" Jaime snapped, his voice cracking as he motioned to his leg. "And what about the marks on Pearl's neck? If it wasn't real, Jonathan, then explain that."

Jonathan's mouth opened, then shut. For once, he didn't have an answer.

Trevor sat hunched in the corner, a cigarette burning low between his fingers. His hand trembled as he exhaled smoke. "We can't stay here," he muttered,

his tone sharp. “Not after what we’ve seen.”

Jonathan spun around, his eyes darting wildly. “He’s right. We’ve got to go. We’re not safe here.”

Jaime flinched as I tightened the bandage around his leg. “I’ve got the samples,” he said through gritted teeth. “Two of them.”

Kim spoke up, hesitant. “I grabbed one.”

Jonathan froze mid-step. His eyes darted between us, calculating. “Then we have what we need.” His voice steadied, a note of triumph creeping in. “We can leave. We’re done here.”

A faint spark of hope flared in my chest, fragile and fleeting. The thought of leaving, of stepping off this cursed island and never looking back, made me want to believe him. For the first time, it felt possible.

But the spark snuffed out as the door slammed open.

Tanya stood in the doorway, her coat soaked through, water dripping onto the floorboards. Her silver hair clung to her face, her eyes sharp as they swept over us. She stepped inside, the wood creaking under her boots.

“You’re not going anywhere,” she said flatly. Her gaze lingered on me, dropping to my neck. Her lips pressed into a hard line. “I warned you. I told you to stay out of the water.”

“We have the samples,” Jonathan blurted, his voice rising like volume alone could overpower her. “We’re leaving. You can’t stop us.”

Tanya let out a low, bitter laugh, more exhaustion than humor. “You think it’s that simple?” She shook her head. “You don’t understand what you’ve done. You trespassed into His territory. Now only He decides the verdict.”

Her eyes darkened. “The storm is just the beginning.”

Jonathan’s fists clenched, his body rigid. “This is ridiculous, “

“Ridiculous?” Tanya snapped, cutting him off. Her voice sharpened like a blade. “It’s more than ridiculous. It’s dangerous. Do you even see what’s happening?” She motioned toward the window, where the sky churned a

sickly gray. “That rain out there, it’s only the beginning. There’s a storm coming, and it’s not like anything you’ve seen before.”

Kim frowned, her arms still clutched tightly around herself. “A storm? It’s just rain.”

Tanya’s expression darkened. “It hasn’t stormed here in decades, not since the last time someone disturbed the water. You think this is just rain? It’s a warning.”

Jonathan scoffed, shaking his head. “This is insane.”

“Is it?” Tanya’s frustration bled through. “You don’t hear the waves getting louder? The way the wind’s shifting? The Abyss doesn’t just let people go. He doesn’t forgive.”

Her words hit like a punch to the gut. The marks on my neck burned, and my stomach churned. I wanted to argue, to fight back, but fear held me silent.

Kim’s voice cracked. “What does he want?”

Tanya’s expression softened. “That’s not for me to say. You’ll know when it’s time.”

The silence that followed was suffocating. No one moved. No one spoke. Even Jonathan didn’t argue. Tanya turned and walked back outside, her boots leaving wet prints on the floorboards. Through the open door, I saw them.

The villagers.

They stood in the fog, motionless. Their faces were blank. The fishermen were at the front, yellow overalls stained and wet, ropes draped over their shoulders like they were waiting for orders. Spears hung loosely in their hands, tips dark with rust. The fog curled around their boots, clinging to them like it had been summoned.

Tanya stopped on the porch, her boots sinking into the damp wood. She looked back at us, her face devoid of any emotion. “Stay here. Don’t make it worse.” Her voice dropped, like she didn’t want us to hear the next part. “The Abyss always gets what he wants.”

Jonathan’s voice cracked as he stepped forward. “We’re leaving. And there’s nothing you or your fishing crew can do about it.”

Her gaze didn’t waver. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Jonathan scoffed. “Watch me.”

He brushed past her, his shoulder bumping hers hard. Tanya didn’t react. She didn’t need to. From the mist came the sound of footsteps, slow, heavy, deliberate.

The villagers stepped into view, one by one. Sebastian stood at the front now, shoulders tense, hands shoved into the pockets of his wet flannel. Water dripped from their boots, leaving dark patches on the wood.

Jonathan froze for half a second. Hesitation flickered in his eyes before he laughed, sharp and brittle. “This is your big plan? A couple of guys with spears and some ropes?”

No one answered.

Sebastian stepped forward, movements deliberate. He stopped in front of Jonathan, close enough to make him flinch. “You don’t leave until he lets you.”

Jonathan laughed louder, panic threading through it. “Your boogeyman sea god doesn’t scare me. Move, or I’ll, “

Sebastian’s fist slammed into Jonathan’s jaw. The crack was too loud. Jonathan stumbled, cursing, clutching his face. Two fishermen grabbed him, their hands rough and unyielding.

“Get off me!” he shouted, twisting and kicking. It was useless. They dragged him back inside like he weighed nothing.

“Stop!” Kim cried, her voice breaking. “You’re hurting him!”

I grabbed her arm before she got closer. “Don’t,” I said, my voice low and shaking. “You’ll make it worse.”

The villagers didn’t say anything. They just moved, deliberate and methodical One knocked over the table, glass and metal clattering to the floor. A microscope shattered, pieces scattering everywhere.

Sebastian tipped a shelf, spilling samples onto the floor. The algae glowed faintly where it pooled, staining the wood with ghostly light.

“This isn’t about your samples,” Sebastian said quietly. “This is about him. You don’t take from the Abyss. He takes from you.”

And just like that, it was over. The villagers left, their boots thudding softly. Sebastian disappeared into the mist.

Our makeshift lab lay in ruins. Shards of glass. Glowing puddles. Broken equipment. Jonathan slumped against the wall, blood streaking his face. He was breathing hard, eyes unfocused.

I stared at the mess.

“What now?” I asked, my voice thin. “We can’t call for help. There’s no signal.”

No one answered. Kim leaned against the window, trembling. Jaime sat in the chair, head tipped back. Trevor lit another cigarette, hands unsteady.

“We’re stuck,” Kim said flatly.

And she wasn’t wrong. We weren’t going anywhere. Not until the Abyss decided.

Chapter Eight

By the time the storm hit its peak, it was noon, but it felt like we'd been stuck there for days. The rain hammered the windows, loud enough to drown out my thoughts. Wind whistled through the cracks in the lodge, making everything feel colder. We'd been sitting in the lab for hours, surrounded by broken glass, spilled samples, and overturned tables. No one spoke. No one moved. I think we were all waiting for someone else to break the silence.

Jamie stood up. He winced as he straightened, one hand gripping the chair for support, his injured leg dragging behind him. His hands shook as he gathered the scattered papers and stacked them neatly on the table.

Kim got up next. She didn't say a word. She grabbed the broom and started sweeping up the glass. The scraping sound filled the room, louder than I expected.

Trevor snuffed out his cigarette, muttering something I didn't catch. He picked up the knocked-over chairs. Even Jonathan, who always had a smug comment for every situation, quietly gathered what was left of the equipment. Cleaning gave everyone something to focus on besides the fear. It was easier than thinking about what we'd seen.

I stayed where I was, brushing my hands against my neck again. The marks burned faintly, like a warning I couldn't understand. The others moved around the room slowly, their faces blank and haunted.

When the lab was as clean as it was going to get, they drifted out one by one. Trevor left first, his boots heavy on the floorboards. Kim followed him with the broom in her hand. Jamie was the last to leave, limping and leaning against the wall for support. Even Jonathan, who usually made a show of being the last to leave, walked out like he couldn't get away fast enough.

I didn't move right away. The room felt empty now, despite the faint glow of the algae jars in the corner. My eyes wandered to the cages where three mice

huddled. They barely twitched, their tiny bodies pressed together like they were too scared or too tired to move.

Willy was off by himself in a smaller cage. His patchy fur and the way he curled up made it seem like he didn't want to be seen. I walked over to him, trying to keep my movements steady.

I set the other two mice on a table that hadn't been smashed. Willy's food dish was empty, so I grabbed the pellets from the shelf and filled it. At first, he didn't move. He stayed huddled in the corner. Then his nose twitched, and he started nibbling.

"Good boy," I murmured. It sounded stupid, but it made me feel better. Talking to him was easier than dealing with the silence.

For a while, I just watched him eat. His tiny paws moved quickly. His breathing was uneven but steady. Watching something alive, surviving, felt like it mattered.

I turned off the overhead light before I left. The algae jars glowed faintly in the dark. The door creaked as I pulled it shut behind me, the sound blending with the endless rain outside.

Once in my room, I shut the door and let out a shaky breath. My hand went to my neck, brushing over the marks. They felt warm, like they had a pulse of their own. His mouth, his teeth, I couldn't stop thinking about it. The way he'd held me, so possessively, like I wasn't a person, just something to claim. It wasn't just a memory. It felt like he'd left a piece of himself behind.

I sat on the bed, my fingers tracing the marks. They throbbed, as if they wanted me to remember. After a minute, I stood and went to the mirror, tilting my head to look.

Three dark crescents stared back. They didn't look like regular bruises; they looked carved in. My stomach twisted. I wanted to hate them, hate him for putting them there. But a tiny part of me didn't. A tiny part of me liked them. And I hated myself for that.

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to shake off the feeling. Maybe it was fear. Or something worse, curiosity, longing. I felt sick, but I couldn't

deny it. He was still there, in the shadows, just out of sight. Watching. Waiting.

And that kiss, if you could call it that. It wasn't gentle. It wasn't kind. He didn't ask; he took. Like it was his right. He filled my lungs with himself. A claim that settled in my chest and wouldn't let go. I could still feel it, that thread tying me to him, pulling me back no matter how hard I tried to forget.

I sank onto the bed, my eyes drifting to the window as I clutched my mom's necklace. The storm raged outside, wind and rain battering the glass. I don't know when I fell asleep. One moment I was staring into the dark, the next, I was sinking into water, black as ink, endless in every direction.

The algae's glow flickered weakly, a thin thread of light struggling to survive. It barely pushed back the darkness, just enough to show how vast it was. Then his eyes appeared. Two black pits, opening slowly, pulling me in like a rip current. Resistance felt pointless, a formality my body couldn't maintain.

I tried to move. Nothing happened. The water coiled around me, clinging to every inch of skin, keeping me still. He drew closer, and my chest tightened, a need to gasp swelling inside me even though I didn't need to breathe.

When he finally emerged from the shadows, my mind stalled. He was beautiful in a way that didn't belong here. His pale, almost glowing skin rippled with sharp ridges along his neck and shoulders, like the sea had shaped him with a cruel, careful hand. Fins spread along his back and arms, the delicate webs shifting as though alive.

His hands hovered near my waist, claws poised, promising ruin. A tremor rolled through me, heat pooling low in my stomach. His fingers grazed my hips, the cold bite making me shudder. It wasn't pain I knew how to name. It was something raw, a whisper of danger my body shouldn't crave.

He leaned in, his face inches from mine. The cold of his breath brushed my lips, sharp and biting. He didn't hesitate. His mouth crashed onto mine, taking claiming, devouring. There was no gentleness. No permission. Just possession

My lips gave way to him, caught in the pull of his demand. His tongue explored my mouth with a possessiveness that made my pulse quicken. A molten heat pooled inside me, driving me closer, though my mind clawed at the edges, desperate to stop.

He broke away just enough to speak and his voice came as a low growl against my lips. “Mine.”

The word sent fire through me. He trailed his mouth down my neck, his teeth scraping sensitive skin. My breath caught, each inhale shallow and shaky. When his teeth sank in, pain flared, sharp, electric, then melted into something hotter, deeper. A gasp tore from me, part shock, part desperate want.

Heat flooded every nerve, my body arching against him. His tongue traced the marks, slow and deliberate, each stroke setting me alight. My fingers dug into his arms, caught between pulling him closer and pushing him away.

He didn’t stop. His teeth held me there, his grip unyielding, like he was savoring every tremor that wracked my body. Thought dissolved. All that was left was his mouth, his hands, and the ache spreading through me.

Finally, he pulled back, his eyes meeting mine. Dark. Endless. Claiming me completely.

And I let him.

Chapter Nine

The lab felt like the only place left, even if being there didn't help much. The storm hadn't let up, just like Tanya said it wouldn't. And the villagers were still out there, waiting, patient as ever.

I adjusted my glasses, wiping a smudge off the lens with my sweater. The scarf scratched against my neck, but I couldn't take it off. Not after this morning. The marks had changed, darker, hotter, like they were sinking deeper into my skin. Every time I touched them, they pulsed, slow and deliberate, with a heartbeat of their own.

Kim's voice pulled me back. "It's going." She gripped the counter, eyes fixed on the algae jars. "The glow's going away."

She was right. The algae wasn't glowing like yesterday. A dull greenish tint swirled sluggishly in the liquid. It looked sick, barely alive.

"We need to test it," Kim said, grabbing her notebook. Her hands moved with urgency. "Now. Before we lose it completely."

I wanted to argue. Testing the algae wasn't our biggest problem right now, but the words stuck. I nodded. "Fine. Let's do it."

The mice were the first hurdle. They weren't sick yet, and feeding them the algae raw wouldn't prove anything. We had to make them sick first, see if the algae could heal them.

Jaime helped Kim prep the syringes while I set up the cages. Willy was first. He was old, his fur patchy, his movements slow. I cradled him in my hands, feeling the tremor of his tiny body.

"Sorry, buddy," I whispered.

Kim slid the needle into the loose skin at the back of his neck. Willy squeaked a sharp, weak sound, but he didn't struggle.

The next mouse fought harder, scratching my thumb and leaving a thin red line. Jaime held it down, his jaw clenched. “Little fighter.”

When we finished, all three mice had been injected with a mild bacterial infection. Strong enough to weaken them, not strong enough to kill.

We waited.

At first, they seemed fine, wandering their cages, sniffing the food dishes. But after an hour, it started. Willy curled up in a corner, his breathing shallow. The other two followed, their tiny bodies trembling, their fur losing its shine.

Kim’s eyes darted between the cages and her notes. “It’s working.”

She was right. The mice were getting sicker. Their movements slowed. The curiosity faded from their eyes. It was horrible, but necessary.

When they were weak enough, we moved on to the algae.

The process of making the serum dragged. The algae stuck to everything. We had to filter it, dilute it, then run it through the centrifuge to isolate the active compounds. Kim worked in silence, her shoulders tight. I watched her measure the doses, the pale green liquid shimmering faintly in the syringe.

“Five percent,” she muttered. “Anything more could kill them.”

We started with Willy again. He barely moved, his small chest rising in uneven, labored spurts. I lifted him gently, keeping him steady as Kim injected the serum. He flinched but didn’t make a sound.

The other mice squirmed weakly, but they were too sick to fight. When we finished, all three curled up, looking more like clumps of fur than living creatures.

We waited again.

The storm hammered the windows, and the fluorescent lights buzzed above. I sat on a stool, eyes locked on Willy’s cage, silently willing him to move. The others were quiet too, breath shallow, bodies tense.

Then it happened.

Willy’s leg twitched. Just a small jerk, but enough to make me sit up.

“Did you see that?” My voice came out hoarse.

Kim leaned closer. “Look at his fur.”

It thickened, healthier than before. His breathing steadied. He stretched, tiny paws pressing against the cage floor.

The second mouse lifted its head, sniffing the air. Its eyes cleared, movements quickening. The third mouse stirred, its fur gleaming under the harsh lights.

“It’s a miracle,” Kim whispered, eyes wide with disbelief.

Jonathan, of course, couldn’t hold it in.

“This is it.” He stepped closer, eyes bright with excitement. “Do you know what this means? We could, “

“Jonathan.” My voice cut through, sharp. “This means nothing if we can’t get out of here.”

He blinked, as if the idea hadn’t crossed his mind. “We’ll escape. We have to. This is too important.”

I didn’t argue, but something felt wrong. Willy’s movements were too quick, too sharp. My thoughts drifted to Amanda, her pale skin, her whispered warnings about the light.

“Test them in sunlight,” I said.

Kim hesitated, then nodded. We moved the cages to the window and pulled back the blinds.

The first mouse screamed. A high-pitched, piercing sound. Its fur crumbled. Skin split. The body twisted, withered. Dead in seconds.

The second mouse shriveled to a husk.

I yanked Willy’s cage into the shade. He writhed, paws clawing at the air as his fur fell away. I reached in, trying to help, but it was useless. His death was slower. More painful.

Tears blurred my eyes as I set the cage down.

“They’re dead,” Kim whispered, her voice shaking.

I wiped my face with my sleeve. “Every single one.”

Jaime crossed his arms, staring at the wall. “That’s it. We’re at a dead end.”

Jonathan’s eyes flared. “No. We’re not done. We need more time. More tests.”

I snapped. “Jonathan, you saw what happened. This isn’t something we can figure out. It’s beyond us.”

“That’s fear talking,” he growled. “This is the discovery of a lifetime.”

“No. This is a curse.”

Jaime stepped in, calm but firm. “Pearl’s right. We’re dealing with things we don’t understand. After what we saw in the water, it’s not worth it.”

Kim nodded, voice unsteady. “We shouldn’t have taken it.”

Trevor leaned against the wall, cigarette in hand. “Great. So what’s the plan? Wait for the villagers to kill us?”

He took a drag, smoke curling around him. “For what it’s worth, I hid the boat in a cove. If they haven’t found it, it’s still there.”

Kim’s eyes lit up. “We could make it?”

“Maybe. If we’re fast.”

Jaime’s face hardened. “No more diving. We stick to the surface, get to the boat, and leave.”

Jonathan grabbed the algae jar. “We’re not leaving without this.”

The greed in his eyes made my skin crawl.

Jaime ignored him. “We need a distraction. I’ll do it.”

No one argued. No one had to.

Later, as I headed to my room, the storm pounded harder, rain hammering the roof like it wanted to break through. I shut the door behind me and dropped my bag on the floor. The scarf around my neck scratched at my skin, but I didn’t dare take it off. The marks underneath burned, hotter now, almost alive.

I sank onto the bed, hands trembling as I unzipped my bag. The algae jar lay hidden beneath my clothes. I'd grabbed it when no one was looking, its cold weight pressing against my palms. I didn't trust Jonathan with it. Didn't trust anyone. If we made it off this island, the algae was coming with me.

Storms stirred up memories. Watching the rain lash the window, I thought of my parents. They loved storms. Dad would say the ocean roared louder during them, like it was alive, like it was singing for us. Mom, always the optimist, called storms a fresh start, something that washed everything clean.

But this storm wasn't cleansing. It felt furious, like it had waited years to let loose. Like it had been waiting for us to screw up.

The room felt wrong, like the storm had crept inside with me. Papers lay scattered, notes scribbled with words like mutation and parasitic. They stared back like accusations. But notes weren't enough. They couldn't explain what this algae was. What it wanted. And I knew it wanted something. I could feel it, watching, waiting for us to mess up even more.

I glanced at the jar on the bed, its glow faint through the shadows. It wasn't the same vivid green as before. Now it looked sickly, like it was trying to die, to get back to where it belonged.

A floorboard creaked outside my door. Slow, deliberate footsteps. Not Kim or Jaime. They moved carefully. This was someone else. Someone angry.

My stomach knotted. I grabbed the jar, shoving it under the bed. My heartbeat thundered so loud, I swore the whole room could hear it.

The door burst open. Papers flew like startled birds. Jonathan stood in the doorway, dripping wet, eyes wild. He looked like the storm had spat him out.

"Where is it?" His voice cut through the air.

I stepped between him and the bed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play dumb." His gaze landed on the faint green glow under the bed. His mouth twisted into a cruel smile. "There it is."

Panic surged. "You can't have it," I said, arms spread wide. My hands shook, and I didn't try to hide it.

Desperation twisted his face. “Do you know what this is worth? Millions, Pearl. You think I’m walking away from that?”

“You sold us out?” My voice cracked. “Behind our backs?”

“This isn’t just science. It’s survival. It’s power. And you’re in my way.”

“Jonathan, listen to yourself!” The words tumbled out. “This isn’t medicine. It’s alive. You’ve seen what it does.”

He grinned, manic. “Exactly! That’s why we can’t let it go. This could change everything, medicine, warfare, humanity!”

“Change? It’ll destroy us!”

He let out an empty laugh. “You’re pathetic. A scientist afraid of discovery.”

He lunged, shoving me aside. His hand shot under the bed, fingers curling around the jar.

“Let go!” he yelled, yanking hard.

“No!” I shouted, lunging forward as his grip tightened on the jar. My hands found it too, wrestling against his hold. Panic roared in my ears, every breath coming short and sharp. Desperation surged through me. I kicked him hard, aiming low. He let out a strangled sound and staggered back, his grip loosening just enough. I fell to the floor, the jar in my hands now. My fingers worked instinctively, twisting the lid open. Before I even realized it, I tipped the jar to my lips.

The algae hit my tongue, cold fire spreading through me. Bitter, salty, wrong. choked as it burned down my throat, ice and heat flooding every vein. My body convulsed. The jar slipped from my hands.

Jonathan grabbed my shoulders, shaking me. “What did you do?”

I couldn’t answer. My muscles locked, cold searing through me. Darkness fringed my vision. Jonathan’s face blurred, rage twisting his features.

“You ruined everything!” His fingers bruised my arms.

I stumbled back, hitting the bed. “Jonathan, stop!” My voice broke.

He didn’t stop. He shoved me down, his weight crushing me. His hands tore at my clothes, frantic.

“You think you can take this from me?” His breath was hot, sour. Fabric ripped. I scratched at his face, his arms, but he didn’t flinch.

“Get off me!” I screamed, kicking, thrashing. His knee pinned my leg. His hands clawed at my collar.

“You don’t get to ruin me.”

Tears blurred my vision. My heart pounded, wild and erratic.

Then the temperature dropped. A sudden, brutal cold filled the room. The sound of shattering glass cracked through the air. I gasped as the storm burst in, icy wind clawing at my skin.

Jonathan’s grip loosened. His face went pale, his eyes flicking to the broken window. He took a shaky step back.

That’s when I saw it or him.

A figure stood in the frame. Water and shadow coiled together, shifting and fluid. The storm bent around him, as if the wind and rain obeyed his presence. His form glistened with a sheen that made my stomach twist. But those eyes, deep, endless voids, caught me. They pulled at something raw and instinctive, a silent demand I couldn’t fight.

Jonathan’s voice broke, a thin whisper. “What… is that?”

The figure glided forward, each movement deliberate. His attention didn’t waver. His gaze stayed locked on me. Tendrils of water curled toward Jonathan, wrapping around his arms and shoulders. He thrashed, but his strikes passed through like smoke.

“No… no! Let me go!”

The figure didn’t care. His focus was mine alone.

The tendrils tightened, water swirling into a suffocating bubble around Jonathan’s head. He choked, his body shuddering. The bubble vanished just long enough for a desperate gasp, then water surged into his mouth, forcing its

way inside. His eyes bulged, veins straining beneath his skin. His body swelled.

A wet pop, and Jonathan exploded, flesh, blood, and bone splattered across the room. The warmth splashed against my skin, sticky and vile.

I couldn’t move. My chest heaved, each breath ragged. My vision blurred, tears mixing with the blood on my face.

The creature stepped toward me. The air grew colder, but heat pooled low in my stomach. My body stayed frozen, trapped between fear and something I didn’t want to name.

He crouched in front of me, his eyes never leaving mine. The storm outside faded to a distant roar. It was just us now.

He reached out, his fingers, fluid and solid all at once, brushed my cheek. The touch was cold, but it burned through me. His fingers slid lower, following the line of my jaw, lingering at my throat where the marks throbbed. A shiver rippled through me, not from the cold, but from him.

His gaze softened, curiosity flickering in the depths. His thumb traced the edge of my lip, slow and deliberate. My breath caught. I wanted to pull away. I wanted to lean in. I stayed locked in place, heart pounding so hard it hurt.

He leaned closer, his face near enough that I could see the faint shimmer of light across his skin. He tilted his head, eyes narrowing as if studying me, as if claiming me.

When he spoke, his voice wasn’t sound. It was a vibration inside me, low and resonant.

“You are mine.”

The words slid through me, dark and possessive. My body responded before my mind could catch up. Heat spread through my veins, overwhelming, dizzying. His fingers traced down my throat, brushing the edge of my collarbone. My skin prickled, every nerve on edge.

He leaned in further, his face just inches away. The storm’s cold breath slipped between us, but his presence filled the space, drowning out everything else. I felt his power, ancient and inescapable, curling around me like an unseen net.

His lips almost touched mine, so close that I could feel the chill radiating from him. My own lips parted, a tremor shaking through me. He didn't close the distance. He held me there, suspended in the unbearable space between want and fear.

His eyes flickered, something unreadable passing through them. His fingers tightened against my throat, not enough to hurt, but enough to make my pulse quicken. The marks under my skin burned hotter, as if answering his touch.

Then, just as slowly, he drew back. His fingers trailed away, leaving my skin aching for contact. His gaze lingered on me, dark and possessive.

And then he melted away, his form dissolving into mist and storm. The chill faded with him, but the sensation of his touch stayed, seared into me.

I collapsed forward, my palms hitting the floor, blood sticky beneath my fingers. My body trembled, heart still racing with a mix of terror and something dangerously close to desire.

Once I steadied myself, I looked down. Blood soaked my hands, my clothes. The horror slammed into me. A scream tore free, raw and jagged. It echoed off the walls, twisting into something unrecognizable, something that didn't sound like me anymore.

The room shook suddenly. A loud boom rattled the floor. I turned my head. Flames flickered under the door, casting orange light that twisted with the shadows. Jaime's signal. The distraction we planned if everything went to hell

My heart pounded. I forced myself up while the world spun around me. Smoke curled under the door. The heat pushed at my back. There wasn't much time.

I grabbed my backpack from the corner. I didn't care what I left behind. I just needed to get out. I stumbled to the door and yanked it open. Smoke rushed in stinging my eyes, choking my lungs.

Downstairs, I saw them. Trevor, Jaime, and Kim. They stood at the bottom of the staircase, half-lit by the fire. Their eyes widened when they saw me. Blood-covered. Wild-eyed. A walking nightmare.

Trevor's voice came out low, sharp. "Where's Jonathan?" His eyes scanned me, taking in the stains and chunks of meat on my clothes.

“He’s… he’s gone.” The words slipped out, barely louder than a whisper. My mind spun, trying to process what happened. Trevor’s face twisted in horror, snapping me back to reality.

He grabbed my collar and yanked me close. “Gone? What did you do?”

“It wasn’t me!” My voice cracked. “Something else… in the room. It killed him.”

Jaime pulled Trevor back. His eyes darted to the blood on my face, then to the flames creeping closer. “We need to go. Now.”

Kim nodded while her voice shook. “If the villagers find us, “

“We’re dead,” she finished. Her eyes darted to the fire, to the growing smoke. “We have to move.”

Outside, voices shouted through the storm. I saw them through the cracked window. Tanya, Sebastian, and the villagers. They ran toward the inn.

Jaime pointed to the back. “The lab window. It’s our way out.”

We squeezed through the window, one by one. Mud sucked at my feet when I landed. Jaime’s hand grabbed my arm, steadying me.

“We’re close. Keep moving.”

We ran as the rain poured down on us and finally the boat appeared ahead, hidden between rocks. Hope flared in my chest. Just a little farther.

Chapter Ten

“There they are!” Sebastian’s voice cut through the rain. Villagers closed in, grabbing us. Their hands clamped tight, like iron shackles. I kicked and struggled, but their grips wouldn’t budge.

“Let us go!” Kim’s scream cracked. A villager yanked her hair, pulling her off balance. Her arms flailed, fingers scraping at nothing. Her cries hit me like a blade, sharp and helpless. I couldn’t help her. I couldn’t help myself.

Trevor lunged at a villager, his fist hitting with a dull crack. “Get off me!” he shouted. But they swarmed him, forcing his arms back. He groaned as they pushed him to his knees. Rope cut into his wrists, skin turning raw and red.

They shoved me down. My knees hit the wet ground. Pain flared, but fear swallowed it. Hands wrenched my arms back. Rope dug into my wrists, so tight my fingers went numb. Rain pounded down, blurring everything into gray.

We knelt together in the mud, shivering. The beach stretched ahead, endless and dark. Waves crashed against the shore, loud and angry. Tanya stepped forward, her boots sinking into the sand. Her face was hard, eyes cold.

“The storm isn’t just a storm,” she said. “It’s a sign. The Abyss demands its due. You must be sacrificed.”

“What are you talking about?” My voice broke. “Sacrifice? We came to help! To cure people! Like your daughter!”

Gasps rose from the villagers. Tanya’s eyes narrowed. I saw the rage flicker behind her calm mask. If she could, she’d tear me apart herself. Instead, she stepped closer, slow and measured.

“Your intentions don’t matter,” she said. “You disturbed the balance. That’s enough to throw you to Him.”

Sebastian’s lantern lit his face with jagged shadows. His eyes were empty, like the decision was already made. “You were warned,” he said. “You didn’t listen. Now it’s too late.”

I looked at Tanya, desperation twisting inside me. “Please,” I whispered. “We’ll leave everything. The algae. The research. Just let us go.”

Tanya shook her head. “The Abyss marked you.” Her fingers brushed the marks on my neck. Her touch was cold, almost tender. “These aren’t wounds. They’re a claim. Letting you go would doom us all.”

Her words crushed me. I gasped, my lungs tightening. Is this it? Is this where it ends?

A voice slithered through my mind. *Little Pearl... You’re going to be punished*

No. Not now. I clenched my teeth, trying to lock the memory away. But it pressed in, growing louder, scraping through me.

You’ll pay for this, little Pearl. No one will save you.

My body shook. My fists clenched in the mud. The storm faded. The villagers blurred. I was back in that room, shadows moving, the voice coiling around me.

I gasped for air, choking on the memory. I wanted to run, to fight. My body refused to move. My vision narrowed, and a broken sob escaped.

The storm roared. Villagers shouted. But it all slipped away. I twisted, pressing my shoulder into the ground, clawing at the earth with bound hands. Like I could hold on. Like I could stop the memories from drowning me.

“Hush now, the ocean sighs,
Deep below where silence lies…”

The lullaby slipped out. My voice shook, but the words came.

“Waves will cradle, shadows keep,
In the abyss, all things sleep…”

The song wrapped around me, thin but strong. The memories faded, their edges dulling. The storm and the voices felt far away.

“Stars may fade, the tide may rise,
But you are safe where love abides…”

Each word pulled me further from the shadows. The fear loosened its grip. The villagers still dragged us to the boat, but I barely felt them.

“Rest your eyes, let darkness creep,
In the abyss, all things sleep…”

I wasn’t on the beach anymore. The storm, the cold, the fear, all gone. The lullaby cradled me, blocking everything else. The world shrank to that fragile song.

OBJ

When I came back, we were on a boat. My hands were still tied, ropes biting my skin. My head throbbed. Rain lashed my face. Tanya and Sebastian stood at the front, staring at the horizon. Two villagers sat at the back, lanterns flickering.

The ocean pulled at the boat, dragging us away. My chest tightened with every wave. The water was too deep. Too dark. Something was waiting.

Trevor’s voice cut through the storm. “You can’t do this!” He thrashed. “You can’t just send us to die!”

Sebastian didn’t look at him. “You were dead the moment you entered its domain.”

A wave slammed into the boat. We tilted hard. My stomach flipped. Kim whimpered beside me. Her body shook so much I could feel it.

“We’re not going to survive,” she whispered.

The villagers moved. One grabbed Trevor. He screamed as they dragged him to the edge. His feet scraped the wood. “No! Don’t! Please!”

“Stop!” I screamed. “Please!”

They shoved him over. The storm swallowed his scream. I strained to see him. Nothing. The water took him.

Kim sobbed, clutching Jaime. “Please, don’t let them take me.”

They tore her away. Her nails scraped Jaime’s arm. Her screams ripped through me. They shoved her overboard. The water rippled. A crunch. Her scream stopped. I gagged, bile rising.

Jaime didn’t fight. He turned to me, eyes hollow. “I never stopped loving you.”

“No!” I sobbed. “Fight!”

They pushed him into the sea. He disappeared. I screamed his name. Nothing answered.

They grabbed me. I was too weak to resist. Sebastian leaned close. His breath was hot. “For the Abyss,” he hissed.

He kissed me, rough and bitter. I gagged. He shoved me back.

The water hit like ice. The ropes dragged me down. The ocean crushed in from all sides. My lungs burned. Light faded above. Darkness pulled me deeper.

Something brushed my leg.

I froze. My heart pounded so hard it hurt. The water shifted, slow and sure. It felt alive.

I wasn’t alone.

Chapter Eleven

My eyes fluttered open to a faint, bluish glow. For a moment, I couldn't tell if I was dead or dreaming. My body ached, my throat burned, but the cold stone beneath me made one thing clear, I was alive. Somehow. The villagers hadn't finished me off. Not yet.

I tried to move, every inch of me hurt. My hands throbbed, raw where the ropes had dug in. Though the bindings were gone, my skin was tender, and each pulse of pain reminded me how close I'd come to death. My drenched clothes clung to my body, the dampness seeping into my bones. Every movement felt slow, as if the weight of the ocean still pressed on me.

The cave around me shimmered with an otherworldly glow. Algae coated the walls, casting shifting patterns of blue and green across the wet stone. The light pulsed gently, almost like a heartbeat. It wasn't entirely dark, but the shadows crept in strange ways, curling into corners the light couldn't touch. Above me, jagged stalactites dripped steadily, glistening faintly in the glow.

I touched my face, searching for my glasses. They were gone. Yet somehow, I could see everything clearly. Every groove in the rock, every drop of water catching the faint light, it all stood out in perfect detail. My heart sank as the realization hit: The algae. It had changed me.

I forced myself to stand, my legs trembling. The air was damp and thick, clinging to my skin. My fingers brushed against the marks on my neck, the same ones left by the creature in the water. They pulsed faintly, an unwelcome reminder of its bite. I didn't need to see them to know they were worse now, darker, deeper.

My steps echoed lightly as I moved deeper into the cavern. The floor was uneven, slick with moisture. A blue hole waited in the cave's center, its surface perfectly still.. The glow from the algae reflected on its surface, making it look almost alive. I leaned over the edge, trying to see how deep it went, but the bottom was lost in darkness. Just looking at it made my stomach twist. It felt as though the water was watching me, waiting.

I backed away, my breath shaky. My foot struck something solid, and I turned to find myself face-to-face with the carvings.

They covered the walls, etched into the stone with a precision that felt impossible. The algae's glow highlighted every detail, every jagged line and curve. Figures marched in chains, their bodies bent and broken. Some reached out toward a monstrous shape at the center, their faces twisted in worship. Others clawed at the ground, their mouths frozen in silent screams as they were dragged forward. The creature in the carvings was unmistakable. Hollow eyes stared back at me, an abyss within an abyss. Its form was serpentine, with tendrils and fins that seemed to ripple as the light reflected on it.

My fingers trembled as I touched the stone, tracing the lines of one figure's outstretched hand. The rock was cold and damp, but the carvings seemed to radiate something darker, despair, hopelessness. This wasn't just a cave. It was a temple. A place where people were brought, not to worship, but to be offered. Sacrificed.

My stomach twisted with realization as I stepped back. This was where they'd wanted to send me. This wasn't just about the villagers' rituals or their fear of the Abyss. This place had existed long before them, carved into the earth by something ancient. Sebastian was right all along.

I was so focused on the carvings that I didn't notice it at first. The edges of the stone seemed to glow brighter. I blinked and looked up. There it was, an opening in the cave ceiling. A thin beam of sunlight streamed through, getting stronger. Sunrise.

If I could reach it, maybe I could escape.

Clinging to that thought, I moved to the wall, feeling for handholds. The rock was rough, uneven, but climbable. I grabbed the first ledge and started pulling myself up.

But just then, something yanked me back.

I hit the ground hard, the impact knocking the air out of my lungs. Panic shot through me as I scrambled to my feet and looked around wildly.

Before I could react, there he was.

I stumbled back, hitting the cold stone wall. I avoided his gaze. My heart pounded in my ears. I knew who he was. The creature from the dive, the one who left the marks on my neck. The one who attacked Jonathan in my room. I couldn't look into those black eyes, endless, empty, with no white.

Behind him, the blue hole stirred, the water swirling as if he'd just climbed out. The surface calmed, but it still felt alive, waiting.

I didn't want to see him, but I couldn't ignore what he was now. He stood on legs, strong, lean, covered in that same metallic sheen. Muscles shifted smoothly beneath his skin with each step. His feet and hands ended in webbed claws. My eyes dropped lower, and my face burned. He was naked, but nothing about him looked human. His body was smooth, and where a man's genitals would be, there was only a hidden slit, keeping everything tucked away. His whole form looked built for strength and speed, like a creature perfectly made for the water.

Then I looked at his face and when his obsidian black eyes, devoid of any white, met mine, it felt like drowning all over again. His features were sharp, too perfect. Thin fins flared along his head, pulsing gently. Gills on his neck opened and closed, drawing in the damp air.

I couldn't look away. Everything about him warned of danger. The algae's glow traced his body, marking him as part of this place. He stepped toward me like he already knew my fear.

"You shouldn't try to leave. The sun isn't for you anymore." The words weren't spoken aloud. They echoed in my mind, pressing down until my skull throbbed.

I flinched, my back pressing harder against the wall. "How did you do that? You can get inside my mind?"

He smirked. "I can enter your mind... and other places too." His tone held a hint of something else. Was he being suggestive? No. That couldn't be right.

"What... what are you?" My voice shook. I hated how weak it sounded.

He tilted his head, those black eyes narrowing. "I am Rynar. I guard these waters... for the Abyss."

He hesitated on that last word. A flicker of something I couldn’t place passed through his eyes. But that word, “Abyss“, rang in my mind. Since we stepped into this cursed village, it was all anyone spoke about.

“The Abyss,” I said. “What is it?”

The question made him bare his sharp teeth. “The Abyss is hunger. It’s the dark beneath the dark. The place where light dies and secrets decay. It’s everything the ocean swallows and hides, endless, vengeful, needy.” He paused, his voice lower. “It was born when the first shadows slipped beneath the waves, when life gasped for breath. It’s the pulse beneath the currents. The maw beneath the surface.”

His words hit me hard and instinctively my fingers dug into the stone wall,”Why does it need guarding?”

A cruel smile twisted his lips. “It doesn’t. The Abyss doesn’t need anything. It takes. It devours. It has no mercy. The ocean reflects it, carries its power and rage. The water is the line between your world and its hunger.”

He stepped closer, towering over me. “I guard that line. I stop your kind from taking what isn’t yours.” This time, he spoke the words aloud.

I knew he meant the algae.

“We didn’t steal anything. We were studying the algae, “ I need to explain but he cut me off with a low growl.

“You took. You always take. You strip the waters. You tear at secrets. You demand answers never meant for you.” A muscle in his jaw twitched.”The only reason your kind hasn’t drained the ocean’s last breath is the Abyss. It shrouds the deep in darkness. It buries your greed in fear.”

I tried to meet his gaze, but the pressure behind it made my knees weak. “We didn’t mean, “

“Mean to disturb the balance?” he interrupted. “But Pearl.. You did disturb the balance. And you consumed it… the algae.”

I froze, the blood draining from my face. “It was an accident,” I whispered.

He stepped closer still, crouching so that his face was level with mine. The motion was unnervingly smooth, his body moving with a predator's grace. His dark eyes seemed to pull at me, peeling away every layer of my defenses.

"Do you understand what it's done to you?" he asked with an impossibly calm voice.

I shook my head, tears welling in my eyes. "No," I choked out. "What do you mean?"

"The sunlight," he said, his voice softer now, almost gentle. "It will burn you. Your body isn't what it was. You're changing."

The words sank into me like stones, dragging my thoughts down with them. At once my mind went to Amanda, her pale skin, her dark eyes filled with terror for the sunlight. The way she had wanted to die instead of living in the darkness. I thought of the mice, specially Willy. How slow and tormenting his death was after being exposed to the sunlight.

"No," I whispered, shaking my head. "No, that's not… that can't…" My voice broke, and I pressed my palms to my face, trying to block out the memories.

"You saw it," Rynar's voice whispered in my mind, like a low tide pulling at my thoughts. "You knew what would happen. And still, you took it."

"I didn't have a choice!" I snapped, anger flaring through the fear. "Jonathan would've sold it to the highest bidder. I couldn't let him, "

"So you consumed it," he interrupted, his tone darkening. "You thought you could protect it by making it a part of you."

"I didn't know this would happen," I whispered as my voice broke.

He leaned in closer, locking his eyes onto mine. "Oh Pearl, you knew what you were doing. You definitely knew. And just because of what you did, you are alive. I saved you."

"And..what about the others?"

"The others are dead." His voice invaded my mind again and reality, the graveness of what happened, hit me.

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head. My knees buckled, and I slid down the wall. “No, you’re lying.”

“You know I’m not.” His tone didn’t change, as if the deaths of my friends meant nothing. He stepped closer, and I flinched. His webbed claws flexed at his sides, and the heat of his body pressed against the damp chill of the cave. “They were claimed by the ocean.”

“Then why didn’t you let me die?” My voice cracked, desperation bleeding into every word. “Why didn’t you let me go with them?”

He crouched in front of me, towering over me even at my level. “Because you belong to the ocean now. To the Abyss. And to me.”

A sick jolt shot through me. “I didn’t ask for this!” The words came out raw. “I didn’t want this! I don’t want to belong to anyone.. Or anything!”

My stomach twisted. “I don’t belong to you,” I hissed.

He tilted his head, that unsettling smile curling his lips and brought his webbed claw to my cheek. I flinched but he still touched me. “Not yet. But soon, you will be.”

His touch and his words made my skin crawl. “You disgust me,” I spat as my voice shook with anger.

His fingers slipped away, leaving a faint heat on my skin. He stood, towering over me. “Hate me if you want. It changes nothing.”

Before I could respond, he turned and stepped into the blue hole. The water rose around his legs as he lowered himself in. I followed him to the edge, anger bubbling inside me.

“You can’t just leave me here! I can’t stay here!” My voice shook.

He paused, looking back at me. “You can, and you will. The water chose you. You’ll understand soon enough.”

Then he sank deeper, his body disappearing into the water. Just before he vanished, his tail flicked upward, a flash of silver scales catching the algae’s glow. The water rippled, then stilled, leaving me alone.

Chapter Twelve

Caves like this took centuries to form. Water slowly carved the stone, shaping smooth walls and hidden pools over time. The scientist in me should have appreciated that. But right now, all I could think about was how the walls felt like they were closing in. My fingers trailed along the wall, finding it smooth, unbroken, no cracks, no weakness, no escape. The panic I'd been fighting rose higher, making it hard to breathe

I was trapped.

“Shit.” I slid down the wall, my wet clothes sticking to my skin. The cold seeped deeper, making me shake. I hugged my knees tight but it didn't help, This wasn't just physical cold, it was in the silence, in the cave itself, in the knowledge that I was a captive of a sea creature who seemed to have claimed me made it all the worse.

I ran shaking fingers through my hair, grimacing as cold droplets splashed against my face. My clothes weren't drying in this damp air, and the chill was getting dangerous. Something inside me, maybe that survival instinct they talk about, knew I had to get warm. But peeling off wet clothes meant being exposed, vulnerable. In this place, that thought terrified me more than the cold.

Minutes passed as I debated, each shiver making the decision more urgent. Finally, practicality won out. I'd freeze if I stayed in these clothes. With trembling hands, I pulled off my shirt and jeans, wringing out as much water as I could.

That's when I heard it, a splash.

I froze, every muscle locking as I turned toward the water. Ripples spread slowly, as though something beneath was stirring. My breath caught as the surface parted, and he emerged.

Rynar.

Water streamed down his body, tracing the hard lines of his chest, broad shoulders, and powerful arms.

His tail shifted as he rose, splitting smoothly into legs. The movement was unnaturally fluid. He took silent steps toward me, each one measured, deliberate. The next instant, I saw a basket. A dark reed basket dangling from his hand.

Did he bring food? I thought as my stomach growled.

But right then panic hit me as I realized I was exposed. My hands scrambled for anything to cover myself, my gaze darting to the pile of seaweed near the edge of the pool. I grabbed it, wrapping it hastily around my chest and tying it in place. The rough texture scratched against my skin, but I didn't care. I twisted another strand around my hips, securing it with shaking hands.

When I glanced up, Rynar was watching me with an amused expression on his face. unreadable.

"You don't need to hide yourself." His voice resonated through stone and bone, tinged with amusement. "There's no shame in your form."

Terror and anger churned in my chest. "Stay back," I managed, hating how my voice wavered.
His mouth curved into a faint smile. He set the basket down within reach but didn't move closer. "As you wish."
"What do you want?" My voice cracked. "Why... why are you keeping me here? Are you going to eat me?"
"You believe me a monster?" His laugh was low, revealing rows of needle-like teeth. My stomach turned cold. No human smiled like that.
"I'm not here to harm you," he said, his tone almost soothing as he gently placed the basket beside me.
He brought me food. But what kind? I tried to ignore the hunger clawing at my insides and turned away from the basket. Wrapping my arms tighter around myself, I tried to make my voice steady. "Right. Because kidnapping is so harmless."
His eyes narrowed slightly. "Hunger sharpens your tongue. Eat."
I scoffed, shaking my head. "I'm not hungry," I lied.

Rynar crouched, lowering himself to my level. His gaze moved over me, lingering too long.
“Such fire.” His hand drifted toward my face but stopped just short of touching my skin. “You should eat. That day, when you fought me in the water... I enjoyed the softness of your form. I'd hate to see you waste away.”
Softness. Was my body some kind of fetish for him? My stomach churned. Something snapped inside me. I swung my hand, scattering the basket’s contents across the stone. Fruit rolled into the shadows. Fish slid wetly away.
“Don't you dare talk about my body,” I spat, trembling with fury.

For a moment, Rynar’s expression flickered with surprise. Then it shifted, his amusement bleeding away to something darker, more focused.

“You test my patience, Pearl,” his voice was low, like the calm before a storm. “Defiance has its limits.”

“Then do it,” I spat, my chest heaving. “Kill me. I don’t care.”

His gaze lingered on me, unflinching. Then his lips curved into a slow, predatory smile. “Oh, Pearl, there are fates worse than death.” He murmured. “Allow me to give you a glimpse.”

At first, fear consumed me. My mind raced, imagining what he might do. But he didn’t move. He was just there, crouched infront of me, watching me.

And then it happened.

My breath caught as invisible touches brushed over my arms, skimming my shoulders and sliding down my back. The sensation was light but sent a shiver through me.

“What... what are you doing?” I managed, my voice trembling.

He didn’t respond. His dark eyes remained locked on mine. His gaze seemed like a force all its own, rooting me in place. It wasn’t like being touched, it was being claimed. The warmth of it wasn’t natural, not something my mind could rationalize. It was him, his presence surrounding me, invading me, binding me in a way that made my skin prickle and my breath hitch.

“Stop,” I gasped. My voice didn’t match the heat spreading through me, the way my body betrayed me, leaning into the sensation before I could stop myself.

“You say stop,” Rynar murmured, his voice curling through my mind like smoke, “but your body disagrees.”

I wanted to scream at him, to fight, but my muscles refused to obey. The touch trailed lower, ghosting over my collarbone and the hollow of my throat. It lingered there before dipping lower, tracing the gentle slope of my chest. A shiver ran through me as my back arched involuntarily, my skin burned under the phantom caress.

“Don't,” I whispered but there was no conviction in those words.

The pressure didn’t stop. It grew firmer, bolder, brushing over the swell of my breasts. My nipples hardened instantly, reacting to the warmth that wasn’t really there. The heat of my humiliation mixed with something darker, deeper, something I couldn’t name and didn’t want to acknowledge.

“You can’t hide from me, Pearl,” Rynar purred. “Not your thoughts. Not your desires. Not even this.”

His words burned in my ears, but it was the touch that consumed me. It circled one nipple sending sparks of sensation shooting through me. My chest rose and fell rapidly, my breath coming in shallow gasps as my body reacted, traitorous and hungry for more.

My hands shot up instinctively, trying to cover myself, to shield my body from the invisible force that seemed to know me too intimately. But the moment my palms met my chest, the touch shifted, pressing against my hands, pushing them away. My arms fell limp at my sides, as though he’d willed them to obey him instead of me.

“Don’t fight it,” he said, crouching closer. “Your body already knows who it belongs to.”

“I don’t belong to you,” I spat, my voice cracking as I forced the words out through clenched teeth.

He tilted his head, studying me with an intensity that made my skin prickle. “Your body disagrees.”

The invisible force swept lower, tracing the curve of my waist, the soft swell of my stomach. My thighs clenched together instinctively, a futile attempt to

shield myself from whatever came next. But the touch was merciless, pressing against my knees, coaxing them apart with maddening ease.

I moaned, my hands scrambling to grab the seaweed wrapped around me, trying to hold it in place as if it could protect me. Rynar's gaze flicked downward, amusement dancing in his shadowed eyes as he watched me struggle.

"Modesty," he murmured, his tone almost mocking. "How quaint."

"Go to hell," I snapped, the heat in my cheeks burning brighter as the touch grew more insistent.

But the pressure didn't falter. It skimmed up my inner thighs, featherlight and deliberate, teasing the sensitive skin until I was trembling. I bit my lip hard, trying to stifle the sound that threatened to escape, a soft, desperate whimper that would betray everything I was trying to deny.

"Such resistance." Rynar's tone softened, almost gentle. "And yet…"

The touch reached the apex of my thighs, brushing against the heat pooling there. The rough seaweed did nothing to block the sensation; it slipped through as if it wasn't even there, teasing the sensitive folds beneath. My head fell back against the wall, a strangled moan slipping past my lips before I could stop it.

"It's pointless to fight," he murmured, his tone slipping through me like a whisper. "Feel it. Let it guide you."

"No," I managed, but it was a lie. My hips jerked forward involuntarily, seeking the relief my mind refused to admit I wanted. The invisible force responded immediately, pressing harder, circling with maddening precision. My breath hitched, my thighs trembled as the pressure inside me built faster than I could keep up with.

"Do you feel it?" he asked, his tone dark, possessive. "The way your body craves what your mind denies?"

I hated him. I hated the way he read me so effortlessly, the way he unraveled me piece by piece. But most of all, I hated the way my body answered him,

responding to every calculated touch, every deliberate stroke, with a hunger I couldn’t control.

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, a raw mix of frustration, humiliation, and something deeper. “Stop,” I gasped, though the word was barely more than a broken whisper.

“But you don’t want me to stop,” he murmured, his tone laced with dark amusement. “Not really.”

The pressure grew firmer, sliding against my folds, teasing, tormenting. My head fell back, hips lifting off the cold stone floor as my body sought more, a rhythm I couldn’t stop. The phantom touch pushed inside me, filling me with a heat so intense it made me shudder. My walls clenched around it instinctively, pulling it deeper, my body betraying every ounce of resistance I had left.

It was too much. Every nerve in my body screamed for release, the tension coiling tighter and tighter until it was unbearable. My breaths came in shallow gasps, edged with soft, desperate sounds I couldn’t suppress. My thighs quivered, my toes curling as the pressure quickened, driving me higher, harder, closer to the edge.

“You’ll come for me,” Rynar growled and the timber of voice sent shivers racing down my spine. “Whether you admit it or not.”

“Fuck you,” I spat, the words weak and breathless, barely audible over the sharp cry that ripped from my throat as the climax crashed over me. Waves of ecstasy tore through me, leaving me trembling, broken, undone.

For a moment, there was nothing but the raw, overwhelming pleasure, my body writhing as the phantom touch milked every last shudder from me. And then it was gone, the heat, the pressure, the touch, all of it vanished, leaving me cold, shaking, and achingly empty.

I slumped against the wall, my chest heaving, my skin slick with sweat. My limbs felt heavy, my body weak, but my mind was alive with fury and humiliation.

Rynar crouched in front of me again. “You’ll beg for it next time,” his words curling through my thoughts like a promise.

“Never,” I spat, though the word was barely more than a whisper, my defiance fragile and hollow.

His lips curled into a slow, predatory smile. “Oh, Pearl,” he drawled, his tone rich with dark amusement. “We both know what’s real.”

Without another word, he stood and dived into the blue hole from where he had come from.

Chapter Thirteen

“You're going to die if you don’t figure this out,” I muttered, staring at the sunlight streaming in while I stayed in the shade.

But it wasn’t just dying that scared me. It was how it would happen. I already knew the sun would burn me alive if I stepped out there.

I started pacing the cave, frustration bubbling under my skin. It felt like I was stuck in a nightmare I couldn’t wake up from. I kicked a rock, hard, and immediately regretted it. Pain shot through my foot.

“Shit.”

I sat down, cradling my toe as blood trickled out. Tears burned at the back of my eyes. It wasn’t just the stupid rock. It was everything. I’d felt helpless before, plenty of times, but this was different. This wasn’t just being stuck. This was staring doom in the face and knowing it was waiting to swallow me whole.

Then my stomach let out a growl so loud it echoed. It sounded like some dying animal, and I pressed my hands against it, like that’d shut it up. When was the last time I ate? I couldn’t even remember.

My eyes wandered to the basket I’d thrown earlier. Its contents were scattered seagrass seeds, clusters of sea grapes, and some weird pods that glistened faintly in the algae’s glow. The smell hit me, all sharp and salty, and my stomach growled again, louder this time.

I tried to ignore it. Pride told me to look away. Hunger didn’t care.

My vision blurred at the edges, the hunger pushing everything else aside. I needed food.

Shame prickled under my skin as I crawled toward the scattered food. My fingers scraped against the stone, grabbing whatever they could find. The first

handful went into my mouth before I even thought about it.

Sand crunched between my teeth, and salt stung my tongue. I gagged but forced it down. My throat didn't want to cooperate, but I kept going. Sea grapes burst in my mouth, their juice sticky and tangy, dripping down my chin. The slimy pods had no taste at all, but I didn't care. Bite after bite, I shoved it down, desperate to quiet the ache in my stomach.

Tears spilled over as I ate, mixing with the salt on my face. It wasn't just the food. It was the humiliation of it all, crawling on the ground, shoving random scraps into my mouth like I was some kind of animal. I hated it. I hated him for putting me here.

But I didn't stop. Each bite pushed the hunger further away.

When there was nothing left, I leaned back against the wall, wiping my mouth with the back of my arm. Now that the hunger wasn't screaming at me, exhaustion hit. All I wanted to do was sleep. My eyes scanned the cave, and that's when I saw it, a bed of seaweed tucked into the corner. Stones arranged like a little table nearby.

This wasn't random.

My stomach knotted as the realization sank in. He'd prepared this place.

For me?

No. That couldn't be right. This had to be his home. I told myself that over and over, but the thought wouldn't leave me alone.

I stood up, pacing to shake off the unease. That's when I noticed something. My foot didn't hurt anymore. I looked down and froze. The cut from the rock was gone. Completely healed.

The algae.

It had to be.

I knew the algae had regenerative properties. It had healed Amanda's cancer. I healed the diseases we induced in the test mice. But the sunlight was its undoing.

I crouched near the wall, staring at the glowing algae spreading across its surface. “Okay, think,” I muttered. Why does sunlight destroy it?

Could it be photosensitization? Some substances, like psoralen in plants, react with UV light to cause burns. Maybe the algae worked the same way, it healed in darkness but became toxic when exposed to sunlight.

Amanda never tested sunlight exposure herself. She avoided it entirely, and she was alive. The mice weren’t so lucky. When exposed to sunlight after being injected with the algae serum, they suffered rapid cellular damage when exposed to sunlight. They died.

But for me things were different. I hadn’t just ingested it, I’d touched it, breathed it, absorbed it through my skin for hours. That saturation might make me different. It was already healing me. My foot, torn open just minutes ago, was completely repaired.

What if I could go in the sun and when it started to burn, I took more algae creating a cycle of tear and repair, until I reached cover. It was a desperate theory one that I’d have to test.

I turned toward the pool, my mind racing with possibilities. Could the algae work in a constant cycle of repair and damage? What if, instead of killing me instantly, the sunlight burned me while the algae healed me at the same time? Could the algae keep up with the damage? Not reverse it, but keep pace with i long enough for me to find shade?

It was a dangerous theory. But right now, it was all I had.

I needed to test the algae, but I wasn’t about to try it on myself. Not yet. My eyes landed on a piece of driftwood near the edge of the pool. Perfect.

I scraped a clump of algae off the wall, its faint glow pulsing against the shell in my hand. It felt alive, sticky and warm, and I hated how it clung to the tool like it didn’t want to let go. I pushed the thought aside and got to work.

Using the shell, I ground the algae into a paste and mixed it with a little seawater, creating a thick, slimy coating. Carefully, I smeared it over the driftwood, making sure the layer was even. It glowed faintly, fragile but steady. My heart raced as I set the wood into a patch of sunlight streaming through the hole above.

At first, the algae held. Its glow fought against the light, pulsing with quiet defiance. But then, the edges started to curl. The glow dimmed, turning to ash as the sunlight burned through it. The driftwood blackened, the algae reduced to nothing.

I yanked the wood back, my fingers trembling. “Okay,” I muttered. “Let’s see if you can fix this.”

I scraped another clump of algae, mixing it with a little crushed shell for added strength. My hands shook as I worked, spreading the paste over the blackened wood. This time, the coating was thicker, more deliberate. I placed it back into the sunlight, holding my breath.

The algae glowed brighter than before. It pulsed steadily, clinging to the charred surface like it was trying to fight back. For a moment, I thought it might work.

But then it failed.

The edges didn’t just blacken, they burst into violent sparks, the glow vanishing in an instant. The driftwood hissed and cracked, the damage spreading faster and deeper. The algae burned away completely, leaving the wood scorched and brittle.

I snatched it back, my chest tight with frustration. My fingers curled around the charred remains, the heat still radiating off the surface. It hadn’t worked. The algae couldn’t repair the damage fast enough. Worse, it seemed to make the burns even more violent the second time.

I threw the driftwood across the cave. It clattered against the stone, breaking into splinters. “Fuck!” The word ripped out of me, echoing off the damp walls My hands pressed to my face, sticky with algae and sweat. Tears stung my eyes, hot and humiliating.

The algae couldn’t keep up. It wasn’t enough to stop the sunlight. Every test had led to the same dead end. No matter how I tried to force it, to apply reason, the results were the same. The cycle of damage and repair wasn’t sustainable. The algae didn’t work the way I needed it to, not for this.

I slumped back against the rock, my body trembling from exhaustion and defeat. The glow of the algae around the cave mocked me, steady and

unchanging, as if it knew something I didn’t. As if it was laughing at my pathetic attempt to understand it.

And maybe it was.

My chest heaved, my breath shaky and uneven. I stared at the faint, rhythmic pulse of the algae. It felt alive. Too alive. Healing, killing, glowing, fading, it didn’t follow the rules. Not the rules I knew. This wasn’t science. It couldn’t be.

The realization hit me like a blow. This algae wasn’t just some natural phenomenon. It was ancient. Something beyond me, beyond us. It didn’t belong in a lab, didn’t fit in any of our neat, logical categories. This was designed, for what, I didn’t know. But it wasn’t just another organism. It was something bigger. Something incomprehensible.

Tears blurred my vision, but I didn’t bother wiping them away. What was the point? I was nothing against this. It wasn’t natural. It wasn’t mine to control. I belonged to the depths, to something older and far more powerful than I could grasp.

The algae pulsed again, lighting the walls like a silent heartbeat. It wasn’t mocking me, I realized. It didn’t care about me at all. I was just… here. Trying to make sense of something that didn’t care if I lived or died.

“There’s no way out,” I whispered, the words hollow and raw. Not like this. Not by trying to reason with something that was never meant to be understood.

Just then a ripple spread through the blue hole.

My stomach twisted. I didn’t need to look to know what it meant.

I wanted to close my eyes, to shut him out. But my gaze betrayed me. It followed the sharp lines of his chest, the hard set of his jaw. The water reached his hips, trembling like it feared him. My stomach twisted, a heat curling low that I didn’t want to name. My breath hitched, shallow and uneven.

Why was my body reacting like this? Why now, when everything was wrong? My mind screamed at me to feel nothing, but the heat only spread, wrapping

around me like a poison. It made me feel weak. Controlled. My hands clenched into fists, my nails pressing hard against my skin.

I hated myself for it. For the way my body betrayed me. For the way every part of me seemed to tense under his gaze. Fear and something darker tangled together, impossible to separate.

He stepped forward, his feet breaking the water's surface without a sound. His movements were precise, like each one was part of some ancient ritual. His webbed fingers flexed, claws glinting faintly. They curled as if testing their sharpness.

His lips curved into a slow, cruel smile. It wasn't human. His teeth, jagged and too many, peeked out, gleaming faintly. My chest tightened, and my pulse felt like it might shatter my ribs.

"You look rather lovely in seaweed." He drawled, the scorn in his words slicing through the air.

Shame and anger collided inside me. My arms crossed over my chest, trying to cover myself. The seaweed clung to my skin, wet and useless. "Go to hell."

His smirk deepened and though his tone was soft, it was laced with authority. "You still think you have a say."

Another step forward, and the cave seemed to shrink. His presence filled every corner, the air pressing against me like a living thing. My back pressed harder against the stone wall as he closed the distance. There was nowhere to run.

I tried to look away, but my gaze flicked back to him. His beauty was sharp and deliberate, like a weapon. Perfect in a way that felt cruel. Every flawless detail made my flaws feel more glaring.

"Why are you here?" My voice cracked. Tears burned at the corners of my eyes.

"You already know." His eyes moved over me slowly, as though taking in every shiver and every twitch. "You feel it, don't you? The pull. The inevitability."

A knot formed in my stomach, twisting tighter with each word. I clenched my jaw, trying to keep the panic down. “I’m just trying to survive… from you!” My words came out sharper than I intended.

His smile faded, and his gaze darkened. “You’re not my enemy, Pearl.” But his tone became softer.. Too soft. “You’re my purpose.”

The words wrapped around me, unshakable. My chest tightened, my pulse racing. I wanted to scream, to tell him he was wrong, but the words wouldn’t come.

He reached to his waist and pulled out a dagger. The blade gleamed faintly, its smooth hilt carved from dark stone and polished until it shone. Sea stones decorated it, their colors soft and otherworldly. It looked ancient and impossibly sharp.

Panic gripped me as he stepped closer. “Why are you giving me that?” My voice trembled. “What if I kill you with it?”

He tilted his head, a cruel smile pulling at his lips. “When the thought crosses your mind, I’ll know.”

His calmness chilled me. This wasn’t a trick. It was real. “Why?” I asked, my throat dry. “Why give me this?”

He gestured to the broken shells and splintered raft behind me. “For your experiments.”

He knew.

He let out a low chuckle, the sound vibrating through the air. My face burned, frustration and humiliation twisting together. I stared at the dagger, unsure if it was a gift or a trap. Its weight in my hand would feel like both.

“You’ll take it,” he murmured. “I know you need it. I know you want it.”

My anger flared. “Stay out of my head.”

His smirk widened. “But your mind is so inviting.”

I grabbed the blade from his hand. The cool hilt steadied me, even as the force of his presence seemed ready to overwhelm me. His eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

“You’ll need it,” he said, his tone softer now. He stepped back, brushing against me one last time before turning toward the pool.

The water greeted him like it knew him, rising to his hips as he stepped in. His legs shifted, merging into his tail with a fluid grace. He sank beneath the surface, only his eyes visible above the waterline, watching me like I still belonged to him.

“Rest,” he commanded. “You’ll need it.”

I sank to the floor, the dagger clutched tightly in my hand. My body trembled, every word and touch lingering on my skin.

You’re my purpose.

Chapter Fourteen

At first, I didn’t realize it was a dream. The sensations were too sharp, too vivid. I was lying on my back, the coolness of the stone beneath me grounding me in a way that felt unmistakably real, even as warmth spread across my skin. Hands slid over me, slow and deliberate, their touch firm yet reverent. They weren’t rushed or greedy, they were measured, as if they wanted to memorize every curve, every inch of me.

Fingers trailed over my arms, skimming my shoulders before moving lower. They brushed against my ribs, following the dip of my waist, lingering at the soft curve of my hips. A shiver ran through me as they moved upward again, savoring the texture of my skin. My breath hitched when warm lips followed, pressing soft, deliberate kisses against my collarbone in an unhurried, tender rhythm.

The mouth moved lower, trailing down to my breasts. The heat of it sent sparks racing across my nerves, sharp and insistent. When it wrapped around my nipple, my body arched instinctively. A flick of the tongue followed, teasing and precise, sending a shock straight to my core. My gasps escaped unbidden as the pressure of his mouth built, pulling me into sensations too intense to ignore.

The lips didn’t rush. They lingered, savoring every moment. My hands fisted at my sides, unsure of what to do, while his tongue continued to work me, slow and rhythmic, each pull igniting a new wave of heat. When his lips finally left my breast, a pang of loss hit me, but it was immediately replaced by the ache of anticipation.

The kisses trailed lower, down my stomach, his tongue mapping the contours of my body. Each motion felt purposeful, like it was meant to mark me, claim me in ways that words couldn’t. My thighs fell open without hesitation, my body responding instinctively. His hands slid between them, firm yet careful,

as if testing the boundaries of my willingness. His fingers spread me open, and then his mouth was there.

The first stroke of his tongue over my clit sent a jolt through me. It was sharp, undeniable, and my hips arched on their own, chasing the sensation before I could stop myself. He didn't stop. He circled my clit with deliberate precision, his tongue firm but soft in a way that made me tremble. My hands groped for something solid, desperate for an anchor, and I found the edge of the stone beneath me, gripping it tightly as if it could steady the storm within.

He moved with infuriating patience, sliding his tongue lower to tease my entrance before returning to my clit. Each flick, each motion, built a pressure in my stomach that coiled tighter with every second. When his lips closed around me, sucking gently, the heat spiked. My head tilted back, a broken moan escaping me as my hips rocked against his mouth.

"Mine," a voice murmured, deep and resonant, vibrating against me. "Every part of you."

The words should have terrified me, but they didn't. They sent another surge of heat rushing through me, leaving me trembling. My hands gripped the stone harder as his tongue pressed deeper, working me in ways that left me breathless. The pleasure built steadily, sharp and insistent, until it became too much to contain. My thighs quivered, my breath came in shallow bursts, and my body arched as the orgasm tore through me.

I cried out, my voice raw, my body convulsing as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me. His tongue didn't stop. It slowed, drawing out every pulse of sensation until I was gasping, trembling, unable to think of anything but him. Even when my thighs tried to close, oversensitive and overwhelmed, his hands held me open. He tasted me like he couldn't get enough, his tongue exploring me with unrelenting curiosity.

When I finally woke, my chest heaved, my skin felt slick with sweat. The remnants of the dream clung to me like a shadow, too vivid. My thighs trembled, and the ache between them was sharp, undeniable. My body felt too

alive, every nerve still buzzing. For a moment, I couldn't tell if it had been real.

And when I turned, I saw him.

Rynar sat at the edge of the pool, his silvery form gleaming faintly in the algae's glow. His black eyes were locked on me, unblinking, like he'd been watching for hours. His presence filled the cavern, oppressive and inescapable.

"What…" My throat tightened around the word. "What were you doing?"

His lips curved faintly, but his gaze stayed steady. "Watching you dream," he said simply.

The lingering heat in my body surged again, curling low in my stomach. "You were in my dream." My voice wobbled, barely holding together. "You were, "

"Tasting you," he breathed the words. Simple. Brutal. "Watching you fall apart."

My cheeks burned, the words cutting deeper than I wanted to admit. "You're disgusting," I snapped, though the tremor in my voice betrayed the anger I tried to muster.

"Am I?" he asked, tilting his head slightly. "Or are you lying to yourself? Your body knows the truth, even if you refuse to admit it."

I clenched my thighs together, desperate to ignore the throbbing heat. "You know nothing about me." I spat.

At first, I didn't even realize how close he was. He wasn't by the blue hole anymore, he was right next to me. He sat there, too still, too quiet, and it set my nerves on edge. His black eyes dropped to my hands, then to my wrists, tracing the faint scars like he was reading something written there. His fingers brushed over the lines so carefully, almost like they meant something to him. A shiver worked its way through me, leaving my whole body tense.

"Why do you do this?" His eyes stayed locked on mine. The stillness in his tone cut deeper than any sharp edge. "Why hurt yourself?"

I jerked my hand back, cradling it against my chest. “That’s none of your business,” I said sharply, though my voice cracked. The vulnerability clawed at me, raw and exposed.

“It is.” He didn’t move. Didn’t blink. “What you do to yourself concerns me.”

Anger flared in my chest, but it fizzled out as quickly as it came. The way he looked at me, unwavering, steady, made it impossible to hide. My throat tightened, shame twisting in my stomach. “It’s not about dying,” I said finally, my voice barely audible. “It’s about feeling like I have control. Like I can decide something when everything else is chaos.”

“Do you feel in control now?” The words slid under my skin, making my chest feel like it might shatter.

The question cut deep. “No,” I admitted, the word bitter. “Not anymore. But sometimes… sometimes it’s the only thing that silences the noise.”

He didn’t speak for a moment. Instead, his fingers brushed over my wrist again, his touch reverent. “You think these marks make you weak.” He said it like a fact, not a judgment. “They don’t. They show what you survived.”

“No one else would see it that way,” I muttered. “They’d see them and think I’m broken.”

“They are fools,” he said, his tone unwavering. “They do not see what I see.”

Before I could argue, his lips pressed against one of the scars on my wrist. The kiss was soft, deliberate, and it sent a shiver racing through me. I wanted to pull my hand away, but I couldn’t. His mouth moved slowly up my arm, tracing every line with care. “You are not broken,” he murmured. “You are whole.”

My breath hitched as Rynar’s lips moved higher, brushing over the faint scars on my forearm before pausing at the bend of my elbow. The way he kissed me, it wasn’t hunger or pity. It was reverence. Like he wasn’t just accepting these parts of me, but cherishing them. It sent a strange heat spiraling through me, leaving me unsteady.

“Stop,” I murmured, though the word came out weak and trembling. My body wasn’t pulling away, and I hated it.

His lips paused against my skin, but he didn’t let go. “Why?” he asked softly. “Why do you want me to stop?”

“Because…” I tried to find the words, but they stuck in my throat. My voice cracked as I finally managed, “Because no one’s supposed to touch them. No one’s supposed to see them.”

His gaze lifted, locking onto mine. “Why not?”

“Because they’re ugly,” I snapped, anger bubbling up to mask the shame. “Because they’re reminders of every time I wasn’t strong enough.”

His head tilted slightly, his expression calm but firm. “Do you think I see ugliness when I look at you?”

I opened my mouth to argue, but his hands moved, brushing my wrists again with a gentleness that made my chest ache. His touch lingered, warm and steady. “I see fire, Pearl,” he murmured. “I see strength. I see survival.”

Tears pricked at my eyes, unbidden, and I hated myself for it. I wasn’t supposed to cry. I wasn’t supposed to let anyone see me like this. But he didn’ look away. He stayed there, steady and unyielding, his black eyes holding mine with an intensity that left me breathless.

“You hate being vulnerable,” he said quietly. “You hate feeling out of control.'

“Yes,” I whispered, the admission clawing its way out of me. “I hate it. I hate it so much.”

“Then take control.” His hands hovered at my waist, just out of reach, but the force of his words struck deep. “Take what you need.”

The words sent a jolt through me, sharp and undeniable. My breath hitched as I stared at him, searching his face for any trace of mockery or malice. There was none. Only that same unshakable certainty, as if he’d been waiting for me to realize it all along.

“Take it,” he breathed. His tone was steady but pleading. “Take whatever you need from me.”

My stomach twisted, the memory of the dream crashing into me like a wave. I could still feel his mouth on me, the way his tongue worked me until I was trembling and undone. But it wasn’t just about the pleasure. It was about control. The image burned in my mind: me above him, taking what I needed, holding the power, for once.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said. The quiet broke with his words. “Do it. Please, Pearl.”

The word ‘*please’* shattered the last of my restraint. My knees trembled as I climbed onto him, straddling his chest. His hands steadied me, sliding up my thighs, his touch firm but reverent. I hovered there, every inch of me on fire, my breath coming in shallow, uneven bursts.

His mouth opened slightly, his tongue flicking out to taste me, and I couldn’t hold back. I lowered myself onto him, my thighs quivering as his tongue found my clit. The first stroke sent a jolt through me, sharp and overwhelming. A gasp tore from my lips as my hands clutched his shoulders, my hips bucking instinctively against him.

He worked me slowly at first, teasing my clit with soft, lazy circles that made me squirm. His hands gripped my thighs, holding me steady as his tongue moved lower, tasting me deeply before returning to my clit. The pleasure built steadily, each stroke pushing me closer to the edge.

My hips moved on their own, grinding against his mouth as my breath came in broken gasps. “Fuck,” I whispered, my voice shaky, as his tongue pressed harder, swirling around my clit with devastating precision. My thighs trembled uncontrollably, the pressure inside me building faster than I could keep up with. His tongue was unstoppable, sliding lower to dip into me, then back up to flick my clit in quick, teasing motions that made my hips jerk against him.

“Please,” I whimpered, the word escaping before I could stop it. My hands fisted against his shoulders, desperate for something to hold onto as he kept going, his tongue working me like he knew exactly how to unravel me.

He groaned against me, the sound vibrating through my core, and I moaned in response, louder this time. My body moved on instinct, grinding against his face while he held me steady, his hands spreading me wider as if he wanted to devour every inch of me. His tongue was hot, wet, and unstoppable, sliding over me with perfect pressure, coaxing every nerve in my body to life.

“You taste like a storm,” he murmured between strokes. “Like the ocean’s rage.”

I didn’t fully understand his words, but they sent a fresh surge of heat through me, sharp, consuming, overwhelming. My hips rocked harder, chasing the building pressure, the heat, the impossible pleasure that seemed to spiral higher with every flick of his tongue. His lips closed over my clit, sucking gently, and I cried out, my thighs shaking violently as the orgasm tore through me.

The release was blinding, ripping me apart from the inside out. My body convulsed as wave after wave of pleasure rolled over me, my hands gripping his shoulders so tightly my nails dug into his skin. He didn’t stop, his tongue continuing to move, drawing out every pulse of pleasure until I was trembling and gasping for air.

I tried to pull back, oversensitive, but his hands held me in place. His mouth softened against me, his tongue teasing me with slower, lighter strokes that made my legs quiver all over again. My body responded before I could think, the ache returning just as quickly as it had faded.

“Enough,” I gasped, my voice barely a whisper.

His hands loosened, but he didn’t let me go. “Not until you take everything,” he growled, his tone dragging low. “Let me give you more.”

My breath hitched, the raw hunger in his words sending a fresh wave of heat through me. I hated how my body reacted to him, how the shame I felt mixed so easily with the need. I hated that I wanted more, even now, when I should have been pulling away.

But instead of pulling away, I lowered myself again, fully surrendering this time. His mouth was waiting, his tongue sliding over me in long, deliberate strokes that sent shocks of pleasure straight to my core. I gasped as his lips

closed over my clit again, sucking gently, and I couldn't stop the way my hips rocked against his face, chasing every flick, every pull.

"Fuck," I whispered, my voice breaking as another orgasm built, sharp and fast, leaving me no time to think. My body tightened, the pressure overwhelming, and I cried out again as it crashed into me, my legs trembling violently.

His hands gripped me harder, holding me steady while my body bucked against him, my chest heaving as the pleasure pulsed through me. I couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything except ride the waves of it, letting him take me apart again and again.

When it finally stopped, I collapsed against him, my thighs still trembling as I struggled to catch my breath. His hands slid gently over my legs, his touch soft and reverent, as if I might shatter under his fingers. My chest heaved, skin damp with sweat, and I couldn't bring myself to move.

A low chuckle vibrated through his chest, dark and satisfied. His claws traced slow circles along my inner thigh, the points barely scraping my skin.

"Such a beautiful mess," he murmured. "The way you unravel for me… it's intoxicating." He leaned in, his lips grazing the shell of my ear. "Your body is perfect when it breaks like this."

His words should have sparked rage, should have made me shove him away. Instead, a shiver shot through me, sharp and humiliating. My thighs still tingled, the memory of his mouth scorching against my skin. I hated it. Hated how I'd pressed down on him, how his tongue had driven me beyond control, how I'd shattered above him, exposed and desperate.

I hated how his claws had gripped my hips, guiding me, holding me there until I came undone. How I'd let him. How my body had *wanted* him.

I clenched my fists, shame crawling through me. But under the shame was something darker, an insatiable craving I couldn't kill. A sick part of me that still *wanted* to be devoured but I wasn't going to admit it out loud. Even if he could get into my head and know the truth.

"I hate you," I whispered, though the words came out weak and hollow.

He chuckled, his hands sliding up to rest on my hips. “Hate me all you want,” he murmured. His voice dragged lower. “But you will crave me again.”

I wanted to deny it, to spit something back at him, but the words refused to come. Instead, I stayed where I was, trembling, furious, and aching all at once His hands didn’t move, steady and firm on my hips, holding me as if I was something precious.

It was infuriating. It was intoxicating.

My body was spent, my thighs still shaking from the intensity of everything. The stone beneath me was cold, but his skin was cool in a way that felt steady, grounding. My breathing slowed, my chest rising and falling in uneven bursts as the heat in my stomach ebbed into a dull, aching throb.

He shifted slightly, pulling me down against him until my legs rested on either side of his waist. I tensed, instinctively bracing for more, but he didn’t move to touch me again. He simply held me there, his hands firm but not demanding, his gaze quiet and watchful.

“You’re exhausted,” he murmured. “Rest.”

“I don’t, “ I started, my voice came out hoarse, but he cut me off.

“Rest,” he said again, firmer this time. “You have taken enough for now.”

I wanted to argue, to push away from him, to demand he let me go, but my body betrayed me. The adrenaline that had carried me this far had burned out, leaving only the crushing weight of exhaustion. My legs ached, my arms felt like lead, and my head swam with too many thoughts I couldn’t unravel.

Against my better judgment, I let my body slump against him, the tension draining from my muscles. His chest was solid beneath me, his silvery skin cool and smooth, and for a moment, I hated how comforting it felt. My cheek nestled against his shoulder, and his arms shifted slightly, one sliding around my back, the other cradling my hip.

“I should hate this,” I muttered, my voice barely a whisper.

“And yet you don’t,” he replied with certainty.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I was too tired to fight him, too tired to fight myself. My eyes fluttered shut, the darkness pressing in around me, and I felt his hand move slowly, lightly, brushing a stray curl from my face. The touch was so gentle it almost didn’t feel real.

Chapter Fifteen

I woke up and everything was dead quiet. Not the nice kind of quiet that helps you relax, but the creepy kind that twists your thoughts, making every breath feel wrong. My heart was racing as everything from last night came flooding back, how he'd touched me, how I'd just given in, how I'd completely lost sight of who I was supposed to be.

I could still feel him everywhere. His hands, his mouth, how his scales had wrapped around me like he owned me. Worse still was remembering how my body had reacted. I touched the scars on my neck, hoping they'd feel dead and cold, like any old scar. But no, they were warm and pulsing under my fingers, as if they were part of me now. A permanent reminder.

"Rynar." His name just slipped out, barely a whisper. The cave threw it back a me, like it was making fun of me. At least he wasn't here. Relief washed over me, but it was too late to get rid of the shame.

I got up on shaky legs. The Blue Hole was rippling a bit, black as anything, like someone had cut a hole in the cave floor. I had to look away. Whatever was down there, I didn't want to know.

I tried to keep busy, grinding algae with hands that wouldn't stop shaking. The repetitive motion helped dull my thoughts, but they wouldn't quiet completely Pictures from last night kept popping into my head whether I wanted them or not, his voice, his hands, how much I'd wanted him. I clenched my jaw so hard my teeth hurt. This wasn't me. It couldn't be.

But it was.

I caught myself smiling at the memory of his touch, then slammed the grinding tool into the rock so hard that the paste splattered everywhere. I stared at the mess, my chest getting tight. I wasn't just screwing myself over, I

was betraying my friends. The ones he'd killed. The ones I should have avenged. Instead here I was, letting him turn me into... whatever this was.

“I gotta get out of here,” I whispered, my voice shaky. “I can't stay.”

The scars started pulsing again, like they were laughing at me. I didn't belong in the sun anymore. Hell, I didn't belong anywhere.

But I had to try. If I stayed, I knew exactly what would happen. I'd let him touch me again. Let him claim me again. The worst part? Even now, my body wanted him. That scared the crap out of me.

I stared at the cave walls, searching for any sign of an escape. There had to be another way out. The carvings were ancient, made by humans. This place had once been above ground, before the ocean swallowed it up. There had to be other caves nearby, somewhere I could hide from him.

I waited until the cave got dark, well, its version of dark anyway. I gathered what little I could, some glowing fruits and the knife he'd given me, and shoved them all in a pouch I made from seaweed.

The rock wall stretched way up, all slimy with moss and sharp edges. My heart was pounding as I grabbed the first handhold, sharp and rough under my fingers. Blood seeped from the cuts, and I watched, freaked out, as the stone seemed to drink it in, the red just disappearing into rock that suddenly had holes.

“Keep moving,” I gasped, pushing myself higher. “Don't think. Just move.”

The higher I went, the more the wall seemed to fight back. The stone got slicker under my hands, almost oily, and the moss-covered edges felt unnervingly soft, like skin. My fingers slipped and I grabbed for another hold. It pulsed under my grip, like a heartbeat.

I didn't look down. No way in hell. The algae's glow was barely visible way below, all sickly looking, and I knew if I looked, I'd chicken out. Every move made my muscles scream, and I was soaked in sweat and something colder that definitely wasn't water. I gritted my teeth and kept climbing.

Then, just like that, the rock gave way.

The fall felt like it went on forever. Time got all weird while I dropped, the darkness swallowing me whole. I screamed but the cave just ate up the sound. When I hit the water, it wasn't like crashing, more like it was hugging me. Cold as hell, pulling me down.

I thrashed, kicking and twisting, desperate for air. The water wasn’t right, it moved weird, swirling and pulling like it was alive. Flickers of light caught my eye, shifting in the dark like they were dancing, taunting me. Then, out of nowhere, it appeared.

The Vurrax.

It looked like a long, glowing eel, its translucent body pulsing with veins that lit up in this eerie rhythm. It circled me slowly, like it was sizing me up. My breath stalled when it brushed against my leg. Its skin felt cold and slick, and its spines slid out just enough to scrape me, like a warning.

I stayed frozen, my whole body tense. It coiled tighter, looping around my leg now, not squeezing but close enough to make me feel trapped. Its veins pulsed brighter, casting rippling patterns on the water around us. I told myself to stay calm, not to do anything stupid.

And then I panicked.

My leg shot out, kicking it hard. The Vurrax reacted instantly. Its body tightened around me, and the spines dug into my skin. Pain hit first, sharp and searing, but the venom was worse. It spread fast, burning through my veins, making every nerve scream. It wasn’t just pain, though, it was like it was messing with my mind, tearing me apart from the inside out.

I started thrashing harder, bubbles bursting from my mouth as I screamed into the water. The Vurrax didn’t let go. If anything, it seemed to enjoy watching me struggle. It tightened, dragging me deeper, its glowing veins pulsing faster, like it was feeding off my fear.

Just when I thought it was over, it stopped. The pressure eased, and it slid away, unraveling in one smooth motion. I barely had time to process what was happening before it hovered in front of me for a moment, its glowing eyes locking onto mine.

And then it was gone. It disappeared into the dark like it had never been there, its faint glow fading until there was nothing left but the still water around me. My chest heaved, every muscle screaming, and the pain from the venom throbbed like fire in my blood.

I hung there, gasping, shaken, knowing I’d just barely made it out alive.

For a second, I thought I was okay.

Then I heard it.

“Pearl.”

Jaime's voice. Clear as day, warm and familiar. My heart jumped, hope surging through the pain and fear.

“Jaime?” I whispered, bubbles carrying his name into nothing. I turned toward the sound, shaking all over. “Is that really you?”

The water shifted, and out came the Sirenshade.

It had stolen Jaime's voice, but everything else was wrong. Its skeleton body was covered in rotting seaweed, algae stuck all over its bones. Empty eye sockets stared at me, scarier than any real eyes. It reached for me with these crazy long, skinny arms.

“Come here,” it said, sounding exactly like him. “You're safe now. I got you.”

My eyes filled up with tears. “You're not real,” I choked out, the words escaping despite my own disbelief.

The Sirenshade smiled, its skeleton grin splitting its face in two. “Don't be scared,” it whispered, the words wrapping around me like chains. “I'll take care of you.”

Its fingers touched my arm, cold, invasive, and I flinched violently. I grabbed the dagger from my side and struck out. The dagger cut through its arm, and the Sirenshade let out this skull-splitting shriek.

Its empty sockets blazed with rage. “You dare?” it hissed, its voice getting ugly, losing all that warmth. “You fight?”

It lunged, clawing at my throat. My vision went wonky as it squeezed. Then came the voices, whispers and screams flooding my mind like a torrent.

“You let us die,” it hissed, Jaime's voice turning sharp and mean. “You abandoned us.”

Kim's voice joined in. “You left me, Pearl. You let him kill me.”

Jonathan's laugh echoed, cruel as hell. “You think you're innocent? You think you're a victim?”

“No!” I screamed, fighting against its grip. “I didn't, “

The voices got louder, piling on top of each other until it was just noise, drowning me in guilt and shame. Images flashed in my head, Kim's body all bloody and broken. Jonathan's dead eyes. My reflection, looking like some kind of monster.

“Stop!” I begged, my voice wrecked. “Please, stop!”

The Sirenshade got right in my face. “You can't get away,” it whispered, all mocking and dark. “You belong to him. You belong to us.”

I tried swimming away, reaching for that faint glow of the Blue Hole up there. But its skeleton claws grabbed my leg dragging me back into the dark.

The pain of its claws stabbing into my skin made me cry out, but the water swallowed the sound. Blood swirled around us in little ribbons, and with it went my strength. My arms and legs got heavier by the second, exhaustion creeping in. My vision went blurry, and the glow from the cave walls turned into this hazy mess.

For a split second, I thought this was it. My chest got tight like I knew what was coming, and I wondered if giving up would be easier than fighting.

Then the water shifted. This violent current came out of nowhere, ripping the Sirenshade's claws out of my leg and throwing it back. I tumbled through the water, totally lost, until a familiar shape came out of the chaos.

Rynar.

His silver body cut through the water like a knife, moving fast and sure. The currents seemed to do whatever he wanted, swirling around him as he went after the Sirenshade. The skeleton thing hissed, its creepy voice turning into something that didn't sound human at all as it lunged at him.

Rynar caught it mid-attack, his clawed hands grabbing its skinny arms like it was nothing. The water pulsed with this crazy energy as he pulled the thing close, his black eyes burning with pure rage.

“You dared touch her,” he snarled and I could hear his voice in my thoughts. “You dared go against me.”

The Sirenshade let out this high-pitched scream, its seaweed-covered body twisting as it tried to break free. But Rynar wasn't letting go. His grip tightened and with one brutal move, he ripped the thing in half. Its body turned into this sick, glowing mist that the water just... ate up.

Then suddenly, the water went dead still, this unnatural calm that made my skin crawl. Rynar turned to me, his black eyes burning with something too raw to name. His tail wrapped around my body, not to trap me, but to protect me. His stare pinned me in place, making my chest hurt.

“You went against me,” the words thundered in my head like shards of ice slicing through the air. It wasn't just anger, it was something deeper, older, something that pressed down on me like the whole damn ocean. His claws flexed, and you could feel the tension rippling through the water between us.

Before I could say anything, he dragged me back to the cave. Every move he made was deliberate, each flip of his tail sending shockwaves through the water.

Once inside the cave, he let me go. His tail turned into legs without missing a beat. He started pacing, each step echoing in the cave. Every turn he made felt charged, like the air before a storm ready to break loose.

I stayed put, shaking and soaked, unable to take my eyes off him. Everything hurt, and that deep scratch from the Sirenshade on my leg was still bleeding a bit. But it wasn't the pain freaking me out, it was him.

Suddenly, Rynar stopped dead in his tracks, tilting his head like he heard something I couldn't. His black eyes cut to me, sharp and searching. I shivered as he stared, feeling like he was peeling my mind apart.

“You tried to escape,” he finally said. Each word seemed to vibrate in the air, like he was barely keeping his fury in check. “You risked everything. You know the sunlight will kill you.”

“What was I supposed to do?” I shot back, my voice all rough and shaky. My hands balled into fists. “Just sit here and rot? I can't live in this, this nightmare!”

His lips curled, exposing his sharp teeth. “Nightmare,” he repeated, the sound rippling through the air like a warning. “I’m trying to hold back, but you’re testing me.”

I let out this bitter laugh. “I didn't ask for this! I didn't ask for any of it!” My voice cracked as I pointed at the glowing marks on my neck, at the cave that seemed alive around us. “I didn't want this!”

His whole body stiffened. He stood tall, looming over me. “You shouldn't have come to the water that day.” The words landed hard, each one deliberate. “You shouldn't have stayed. I shouldn’t have given you air. I shouldn’t have...’ His claws tightened at his sides. “I shouldn’t have fallen for you.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. I couldn't breathe, and for a second the cave felt like it was closing in. He looked away, all tense, like saying it out loud cost him something.

“But now that I have,” he said, quieter but just as intense, “I can't let you go.”

I just stared at him, totally stunned. My mind was racing, trying to process what he'd just said, what it meant. This was way too much.

“I don't belong here,” I managed to get out, my voice shaking. “Look what happened. Those things, they could've killed me.”

He let out this snarl that echoed through the cave. “You think I'd let anything hurt you? Those creatures were there to guard you, keep others away. But you fought back. You resisted.”

“And look what happened!” I screamed, my voice breaking as tears ran down my face. “They attacked me! They almost killed me! How the hell is that protection?”

“They attacked,” his voice shook with anger, he was barely holding back, “because you went against how things work down here. The Sirenshade doesn't hurt what's mine. But you fought it, and it saw weakness. It saw your human side.”

My chest felt like it was gonna explode. “My human side?” I spat. “Is that what this is about? You don't give a damn about me. You just want control.”

I flinched as his hand shot out, his clawed fingers halting inches from my face His whole body trembled, his control unraveling in a way I hadn’t seen before “You think I don’t care?” His tone cracked, filled with emotions that clawed at the edges of his words. “I could’ve left you to drown. Let my monsters tear you apart when they threw you in. Let you become nothing. But I didn’t. I chose you.”

The cave seemed to hold its breath as his words settled in. My fists tightened, nails digging into my palms. “I didn't want this,” I said softly, voice shaking. “I didn't want to be your... choice.”

He knelt down slowly, his huge body lowering until he was looking right at me. His black eyes locked onto mine with this intensity that made my breath catch. “You're not just a choice, Pearl. You're my answer.”

His words tore through me, breaking down the wall I’d built to hold back my feelings. I fell apart under the flood of everything I’d been holding back.

The sob that ripped out of me was raw and ugly, the kind that comes from someone who's totally lost it. I curled up into myself, shaking, tears burning hot against my cold skin. All the fear, shame, and anger I'd buried came rushing out. It came out in these heaving breaths and broken cries, messy and uncontrollable.

Rynar just stayed there. He knelt, his massive form looming over me as I fell apart.. His black eyes, strange and unreadable, never left me, not pitying or

judging, but something weirdly close to getting it.

Then he moved. Slow, careful, his clawed hand reached out and landed on my shoulder. It wasn't the possessive grab I expected. It was light, almost hesitant, like he was testing how far he could go.

That tiny gesture broke whatever I had left. I threw myself at him, burying my face in his chest. My arms wrapped around his broad shoulders, holding on like someone grabbing the last piece of wood from a wrecked ship.

His arms came up around me in a hug that felt too solid, too warm, to belong to the monster I'd been trying so hard to hate. He didn't say anything, didn't try to feed me bullshit comfort words. He just held me, his claws making slow circles on my back.

The touch should've grossed me out, but it didn't. It wrecked me. I cried harder, the sound muffled against his chest. My fists hit weakly against his ribs, but it was pointless, more about being pissed at the world than actually trying to hurt him.

When the worst of the sobbing finally subsided, I pulled back a bit, my breath catching as I met his eyes. His black eyes burned with something I couldn't name, something that made my chest tight all over again.

“You are mine,” he growled.

And for the first time, I didn’t fight back. Didn’t argue. I let the truth of his words wash over me, pulling me under like the deep ocean.

Chapter Sixteen

It had been four days since Rynar saved me.

He hadn’t left my side. Always there, always watching. He brought offerings, food, tools, strange things pulled from the depths. Rare shells, their spirals smooth and gleaming, colors shifting like sunlight trapped in glass. Stones with veins that glimmered when touched. Coral fragments, so delicate they seemed carved by something beyond nature’s reach.

He placed them at the pool’s edge with deliberate care, like pieces of a puzzle I couldn’t solve.

I thought of my graduate research. Male puffers sculpting sand patterns to attract mates. Wrasses offering stones to potential partners. Damselfish tending algae gardens to impress. Was this the same?

No. It couldn’t be. He wasn’t human.

But the similarities made my skin crawl.

Each gift lay just within reach. His black eyes tracked me, unblinking, patient. Was I supposed to respond? The uncertainty twisted my stomach into knots.

I pushed the thought away. It was ridiculous.

And yet, I kept the gifts. A shard of coral that glinted like bone, hidden in the corner of my workstation. Out of sight, but never out of mind.

Today was different.

The pearls waited for me.

They were arranged with careful precision, shimmering softly in the algae’s glow. Perfect spheres, smooth and warm to the touch. Not ordinary pearls but black pearls. These seemed alive, humming with a faint energy.

I picked one up, cautious. It felt heavier than I expected. The glow spread over my fingers, cold and warm at once.

“You like them,” Rynar said.

I startled, clutching the pearl to my chest. He stood just beyond the pool, his black eyes locked onto mine.

“What is this?” My voice shook.

“A gift,” he said. “From the depths.”

His words felt like both an answer and a challenge. The pearl’s warmth seeped into my skin, its faint pulse matching something I couldn’t name.

“For what?” I asked, my fingers tightening around it.

He tilted his head slightly. “You work tirelessly. You endure. It is only right you are rewarded.”

The words struck deep, touching a place I’d rather ignore. My chest tightened.

“I didn’t ask for this,” I whispered.

“You don’t need to,” he purred. “The ocean sees what you cannot. It gives freely.”

I wanted to throw the pearls back. To tell him I needed nothing from him or his cursed ocean. But my fingers wouldn’t let go.

“Thank you,” I muttered.

A faint smile curved his lips, and for just a moment, the darkness in his eyes softened. Deep down, I hated how those three words made my chest feel tighter, how they made something inside me waver.

Carefully, I placed the pearls on the workstation and turned back to the algae, ignoring the way his presence loomed behind me like a shadow I couldn’t escape.

I couldn’t focus. No matter how hard I tried, my hands trembled too much. The algae paste kept slipping through my fingers like it had a mind of its own.

Rynar stood silently nearby, his black eyes fixed on me, tracking my every move. He was getting into my personal space, and it was too much. He was too much.

“Why are you like this?” I muttered, grinding the algae harder than I should have. My hands ached, raw from hours of work, but I didn’t stop. “Always watching. Always waiting.”

“You interest me,” he said. “I want to understand.”

“Understand?” I snapped, slamming the pestle into the bowl. “Dragging me into this nightmare is your idea of curiosity?”

He didn’t flinch. His black eyes stayed locked on mine, steady and unreadable. “The depths aren’t a nightmare, Pearl. You only see them that way because you’re afraid. But there’s beauty here, if you’re willing to see it.”

I laughed, bitter and sharp. “Beauty? I’m not here for beauty. I’m here to survive.”

“You could do both,” he replied, his tone almost gentle. “If you’d trust me.”

Trust. That word twisted something in my chest, but I shoved it down. “I don’t need your help,” I said, keeping my eyes on the algae paste. It was failing. I was failing. No matter how much I ground or mixed, it refused to cooperate. My fingers shook as I worked, but I kept going anyway, trying to ignore the pressure building in my head.

“You’re pushing too hard,” Rynar said softly. “You’ll, “

“Stop talking about me!” I snapped, slamming the pestle down harder. “Just stop.”

He didn’t reply, but I felt his gaze on me and it made my skin crawl, making me want to scream. Yet, in some infuriating way, it anchored me, like a tether I didn’t understand but couldn’t sever. And that pissed me off more than anything.

“What do you want from me?” I finally blurted, not caring how desperate I sounded. “Why do you care?”

“Because you are mine,” he said simply.

The words hit me harder than they should have. “I’m not yours,” I said, my voice trembling. “I don’t belong to anyone.”

His expression didn’t change, but something in his gaze shifted, something sharper, more determined. Before I could react, he moved.

His hands were on me before I even realized it, lifting me like I weighed nothing. A gasp ripped from my throat as the pestle clattered to the ground, forgotten. My fists pounded against his chest, but it was like hitting stone. He didn’t even flinch.

“What are you doing?” I shouted, my voice sharp with panic. “Rynar, put me down, “

“Trust me,” he said, his voice calm but firm.

“No!” I screamed, struggling harder as he carried me toward the pool. “Don’t you dare, “

The rest of my protest was swallowed by the rush of water as he plunged us both beneath the surface.

“Showing you,” he said, calm as ever.

“Showing me what?” I thrashed in his grip, trying to twist free, but it was pointless. His arms were like iron bands. “Put me down, Rynar! Now!”

He didn’t listen. He stepped into the pool, dragging me with him. The cold water hit me like a slap, stealing the breath from my lungs as it closed over us. My scream turned into bubbles, rising uselessly to the surface as he pulled me deeper.

I panicked. My legs kicked, my hands clawed at his arms, but it was useless. My chest burned as my lungs screamed for air. I twisted harder, my nails scraping his skin, but his grip stayed firm.

“You’re killing me!” I wanted to yell, but all that came out were more bubbles. My vision blurred as my chest tightened, the pressure crushing me. This was it. I was going to die.

His voice slid into my head. “Breathe, Pearl.”

I shook my head wildly, my panic sharp and instinctive. “I can’t,” I thought, the words jagged and desperate. “I’ll drown.”

His eyes softened, but his grip didn’t loosen. “Trust me,” he whispered into my mind.

I wanted to fight, to scream that I didn’t trust him, but my body betrayed me. My chest heaved, the last of my air escaping in a rush of bubbles, and I couldn’t hold it anymore. The water rushed in, filling my lungs.

But instead of the icy sting of drowning, there was… nothing. The burning stopped. The pressure eased. The water wasn’t suffocating me, it was flowing through me, cool and steady, like it belonged there. My hands stilled, my limbs going slack as my body adjusted to the impossible.

I touched my neck, my fingers brushing over the faintly glowing scars. They pulsed gently, warm against the cold water. Then it hit me—a sudden, undeniable realization. The scars weren’t just marks anymore. They were functioning, breathing for me. They had become gills.

“What… what’s happening?” My voice wavered, distorted by the water but still audible.

He steadied me, his black eyes holding mine with an intensity that made the world around us fade. “The algae,” he said simply. “It has fused with you. You’re no longer tied to the surface.”

I froze, my hands hovering over my neck as I tried to process his words. But it wasn’t just my neck. My eyes drifted downward, to the scars scattered across my body—on my wrists, my thighs, my stomach. All the places I’d once cut myself. They were glowing softly, and I could feel them working. The water passed through them, like they had become part of me. Like they had always been waiting for this moment.

Each breath felt different now—calm, steady, seamless. The water moved into my lungs, into my blood, like a second heartbeat I hadn’t known I needed. A strange, eerie harmony filled me, as though the scars that had once symbolized pain were now keeping me alive.

“You knew this would happen,” I whispered, but there was so much anger and pain in my voice. “You didn’t even warn me.”

“I told you to trust me,” he replied simply.

“You didn’t give me a choice!” I snapped, my voice rising in my head. “You just, “

“I gave you what you needed to survive,” he said, cutting me off. His voice was low, almost resigned. “You were already marked. The depths were always going to take you. The Abyss was always going to take you.”

My breath came out in short, shaky bursts. My mind spun, trying to piece together the fragments of his words. The cold air stung my lungs, but the chill inside me was worse.

“Why?” I whispered, barely more than a breath.. “Why me? What is the Abyss? What does it want from me?”

His eyes locked onto mine, endless and dark, and for a moment, I thought I saw something, something like guilt. His claws twitched, curling and uncurling at his sides. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, like he was wrestling with the words.

“The Abyss…” He paused, his jaw clenching. “It isn’t just water or darkness. It’s alive. It’s hunger, an insatiable hunger so deep it never ends. It’s the cold that crushes the light. The silence that smothers everything.” His voice dropped lower, like the words weighed him down. “It watches everything. And it chooses.”

My skin prickled, cold dread curling in my gut. “Chooses?” My voice was barely more than a whisper. “What does that mean?”

“It saw you,” he said, his black eyes locked onto mine. “It recognized something in you, strength, resilience, a will to survive.” His claws flexed, then stilled, as if he were trying to calm something restless inside him. “You’re worthy of it.”

The words hung between us, choking the air. My throat tightened, but I forced the question out, even though I was terrified of the answer. “Worthy of *what*?”

“To join it,” he murmured. “To become part of it. The Abyss doesn’t just take, it claims those who can endure it. Those who can survive its depths.”

I swallowed, the cold in my chest spreading through my veins. My heart pounded so loud I could barely think. “You’re saying the Abyss… *wants* me.”

He nodded, the glow of his skin dimming as though the truth itself was too much. “Yes.”

The reality of it pressed down on me, so heavy it was unbearable. “And you’re part of it. You knew this. You knew it wanted me.”

His gaze faltered for a moment, something raw flashing across his face. “I did,” he admitted, his voice low. “But it wasn’t just the Abyss that wanted you. I wanted you. From the moment I felt your presence in the water, I knew.”

I felt like I was falling, my world shattering piece by piece. The pain, the betrayal, it all surged to the surface. “So, what now?” I choked out. “You just hand me over? Let it claim me?”

“No.” The word was firm, almost desperate. His claws cupped my face gently, forcing me to look at him. “I won’t let it take you.”

I wanted to believe him, but the darkness between us was too vast, too deep. My voice trembled as I whispered, “Why?”

His eyes softened, and his thumb brushed over my lips. “Because you’re mine,” he said, the words quiet and possessive. “And I’m not ready to let you go.”

A shiver ran through me, fear and something else twisting together in a knot I couldn’t unravel. He leaned in closer, his presence overwhelming, his voice a low rumble.

“Come,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

I wanted to argue, but the air caught in my throat. Or maybe it was the water, I wasn’t sure anymore. My lungs didn’t burn, though they should have. The marks on my neck throbbed again, their glow steadying, and the water moved through me as though it had always belonged there.

I hated how easy it felt.

I was descending deeper than I ever thought possible. The pressure was immense, a weight that threatened to crush me from all sides. My lungs, or whatever passed for them now, tightened, panic gnawing at the edges of my mind.

Rynar's arms wrapped around me, his hold unwavering. His presence blocked out the suffocating force of the depths. His black eyes, endless and calm, anchored me. "Trust me," he said, his voice a low vibration that sank into my bones.

I clung to him, my fingers digging into his shoulders. "I don't know if I can do this," I whispered. The darkness below us stretched endlessly, a void that promised to consume me. But when I fell into it, the fear faded.

"You can," he murmured, his silver glow pulsing faintly. "You are stronger than you think."

The glowing marks on my neck, arms, and every place I had cut myself pulsed with his words. A strange certainty spread through me, his belief sinking into my veins. The fear didn't disappear, but it settled into something manageable, a quiet terror that no longer felt impossible to face.

As we sank deeper, it felt like the end of the world, like falling into an endless void.. My pulse hammered, my body stiff with fear. Then, faintly, a flicker of light appeared below us.

I blinked, unsure if it was real. The glimmer trembled, a soft, distant glow, like a star seen through heavy fog. As we descended further, more lights joined it. They shimmered and pulsed, their glow twisting into shapes that made my skin crawl. They weren't soft or welcoming. They were jagged, alien. Unnatural.

The ocean floor slowly revealed itself, not a city, but a chaotic, otherworldly dreamscape. Coral spires jutted up like twisted daggers, their edges gleaming with veins of bioluminescence. The light coursed through them like ghostly blood, casting eerie shadows over the sand.

The ground writhed with strange, translucent creatures, shimmering like liquid glass. They moved in eerie synchronization, their bodies catching the faint light as if they were part of the ocean itself.

A massive shadow slid past us, too many eyes blinking in unison before the creature melted back into the dark. My fingers dug into Rynar's shoulders. Smaller beings darted through the water, skittering away. They kept their distance from him, scattering at the edges of his presence.

"They're afraid of you," I breathed, my voice trembling.

"They know their place," he replied with a calm tone, but beneath it lay the cold certainty of power, the quiet menace of a predator. "As they will know yours."

A shiver rippled through me, part fear, part something I couldn't name. This world didn't pretend to be kind. Its beauty and brutality were exposed, raw and undeniable. It was everything the surface tried to hide. And a part of me, the dark, hidden part, was drawn to it.

We descended to a clearing where the sand glowed faintly, each grain lit from within. He set me down with careful grace. My feet sank into the soft surface, the glow beneath my toes pulsing with life. The water was cold, biting at my skin, but his presence kept the worst of it at bay.

His tail unfurled beside me. The scales shimmered like molten silver, smooth and flawless. The wide fin at the end drifted lazily, the delicate filaments swaying with a grace that seemed almost fragile. It was a contradiction, brutal strength and delicate beauty.

I couldn't stop myself. My hand reached out, fingers brushing against his tail. The texture sent a jolt through me, cool, sleek, impossibly smooth. Beneath the surface, muscles coiled and shifted, power barely contained. My fingertips traced the contours, following the play of light along his scales.

His tail twitched, a ripple of tension passing through it. His breath hitched, jus a fraction.

"Does it frighten you?" he asked, his voice a rough whisper.

“No,” I murmured, my fingers still gliding over the ridges of his tail. “It’s beautiful.”

His eyes softened. For a moment, the vast darkness of the ocean faded, leaving just the two of us suspended in a fragile bubble of light and silence.

He turned away, his tail sweeping gracefully through the sand. Spirals and lines took shape where it passed, patterns glowing with the same light as the marks on my neck. The designs weren’t random. They were deliberate, intricate. Each line seemed to pulse, alive.

“What are you doing?” My voice was unsteady, torn between curiosity and dread.

“A declaration,” he said, his gaze fixed on the glowing patterns. “To you. For you.”

My heart thudded painfully. “What does that mean?”

“It means I am bound to you.” His voice was low, unwavering. “Not because of the ocean. Not because of fate. But because I choose you, Pearl.”

His words pressed into me, too much to ignore. My throat tightened. “Why?” I whispered. “You don’t even know me.”

His lips curved into a faint smile, tinged with sadness. “I know enough. I know your strength. Your fear. Your pain. And I know that without you, I would lose what little of myself remains.”

My breath caught. The glowing patterns beneath us pulsed in rhythm with my heartbeat, a connection I couldn’t deny.

“You’re afraid,” he said softly. “It’s natural. But fear doesn’t make you weak. It makes you alive.”

I wanted to argue, to deny everything he said, but the words tangled in my throat. I was so tired. Tired of fighting him, tired of fighting myself, tired of the endless ache that never went away. Maybe the scariest part was that I didn’t want to fight anymore.

His hand cupped my cheek, his eyes searching mine. “You are more than you know, Pearl. Let me show you.”

He leaned in, his lips brushing mine. The kiss was hesitant, his touch feather-light, waiting for me to pull away. But I didn’t. My hands slid up to his shoulders, gripping him like he was the only thing holding me together.

His tail curled around us, anchoring me in place. His other hand traced down my spine, the glowing marks on my neck flaring with warmth. The water around us shimmered brighter, the sand beneath my feet pulsing like a heartbeat.

I melted into him. The fear, the anger, the resistance, everything drained away. All that was left was the raw need to feel something, anything, that wasn’t pain.

“You’re a monster,” I whispered against his lips.

His black eyes met mine, unflinching. “Yes. But I’m your monster.”

Chapter Seventeen

It wasn’t just the ocean floor. It was like a kingdom, one meant for sea creatures.

Structures towered from the seabed, coral and stone twisted together in impossible shapes. Arches rose like delicate spires, intricate and sweeping, as if carved by something beyond nature. Bioluminescent algae clung to every surface, casting everything in a soft, unearthly glow. Smaller forms dotted the landscape, organic and deliberate, like forgotten shrines left by ancient gods of the deep.

I stared, my mind struggling to process the sheer magnitude of it. This place wasn’t meant for humans. It wasn’t human. The city seemed alive, breathing, pulsing, as if every glowing surface carried a heartbeat I couldn’t quite hear.

“This is home,” Rynar said, his voice breaking through my awed silence.

“Home?” The word felt strange in my mouth. “For who?”

“For us.”

We drifted down to a clearing, the sand beneath us smooth and shimmering with a soft luminescence. Rynar’s grip loosened, letting me float freely while he descended. His silver tail curled gracefully, sweeping patterns into the sand with each controlled movement. His hands traced delicate lines, the glowing algae responding to his touch, illuminating the designs as they took shape. Spirals and curves unfurled, spreading like ripples, intricate and mesmerizing.

He moved with an ancient rhythm, a dance woven from the depths themselves Every sweep of his tail and flick of his fingers felt deliberate, meaningful, like he was speaking through the motion. The patterns expanded, glowing brighter as his movements quickened. The clearing seemed to hold its breath, watching, waiting.

“What is this?” My voice was barely a whisper, trembling with awe and confusion.

“A declaration,” he answered, his gaze fixed on me. His eyes held a quiet intensity that made my chest tighten. “For you.”

“For me?” The words slipped out, shaky and disbelieving. My hands hung at my sides, useless, my fingers twitching with the urge to reach out. The glow from the sand reflected on his face, softening the edges of his features. For a moment, he looked less like a predator, more like something… sacred.

“Yes.” He glided closer, his tail brushing against my legs in a gentle, lingering caress. “You are mine, Pearl. And tonight, you’ll understand what that means.’

My heart thundered in my chest, so loud I wondered if he could hear it. His hands found my arms, his fingers cool and steady. A shiver ran through me, unbidden, as my body leaned into his touch. I wanted to fight it, to hold onto the anger that had kept me safe. But my defenses crumbled, too brittle to withstand him.

“You didn’t ask,” I said, my voice thin and raw. “You just take.”

He tilted his head, his gaze steady and unwavering. “Some things aren’t asked They are known.” His fingers slid up my arms, featherlight but sure. “You are mine, and I am yours. The ocean knows this. The depths know this.”

“I don’t,” I whispered, but the words faltered on my tongue.

His lips curved into a faint smile, the kind that made heat bloom low in my belly. “You will.”

He cupped my face, his touch reverent, almost fragile. He leaned in slowly, his lips brushing mine in a whisper of a kiss. It wasn’t a demand. It was an offering, waiting to see if I would accept. My breath caught, my body poised between fight and surrender.

I didn’t pull away. His lips pressed more firmly, cool, and smooth, igniting something deep inside me. A soft sound escaped me, my hands lifting to clutch his shoulders. His tail coiled tighter, drawing me closer, his hands sliding down to trace the curve of my back.

“You are beautiful,” he murmured, his voice trembling with something raw. “Every scar, every breath, every thought... Beautiful.”

My throat tightened, a strange ache blooming in my chest. His words felt like a confession, a worship, and I didn’t know how to process it. All I knew was that my hands gripped him tighter, and when he kissed me again, I didn’t stop him.

The glowing patterns beneath us pulsed brighter as Rynar guided me lower, his tail coiling to cushion my descent. The sand beneath me was warm, soft, and alive with the same bioluminescence that illuminated the water around us. His hands never left my skin, trailing over my arms and shoulders with a touch that was both gentle and possessive.

I gasped as something brushed against my chest, an almost tickling sensation, delicate and unexpected. My gaze darted downward, and my breath caught at the sight of two glowing starfish. A wet brush against my chest made my breath catch. I looked down. Two glowing starfish latched onto my nipples, their bioluminescent arms curling, suction cups sealing tight. The first pull was sharp, a sting that sent heat racing through my veins. Their mouths clamped down tighter, teeth like tiny needles scraping the swollen peaks.

Pain flared, hot, and immediate. My body jolted, back arching instinctively. The suction deepened, pulsing in a rhythm that blurred pain and pleasure. My nipples throbbed, the raw ache building, twisting into something unbearable, and yet, perfect.

Rynar’s tail wound tighter around me. The smooth, scaled length coiled around my waist, snaked over my thighs, and wrapped around my wrists. The cold pressure pinned me, arms trapped at my sides. His grip made sure I couldn’t escape, not even if I wanted to.

He slid his claws up my neck, fingers spreading over the gills he’d carved into my skin. The touch was light, almost gentle. Then his hand closed, sealing the gills shut. Panic bloomed inside me. My lungs seized, my body convulsing as it fought for breath.

The starfish pulsed harder, their teeth biting down, tugging with maddening pressure. My nipples burned under their assault, pleasure spiking with each pull. My body shook, trapped between the pain on my chest and the

suffocating grip on my neck. My wrists flexed against the tail's coils, muscles straining, but there was no give. I was locked tight, every inch of me under his control.

The lack of air turned everything raw, every nerve exposed. My thighs trembled. The scars on my stomach and wrists, the gills he'd claimed, throbbed as his tail pressed them shut. Every breath, every escape, denied.

Black spots swirled at the edges of my vision. My body screamed for oxygen, panic clawing at the edges of my mind. The suction on my nipples grew sharper, the starfish tightening their mouths like they wanted to tear the peaks away. Pleasure and pain fused, the lines between them lost in the haze.

Rynar's lips brushed mine. His voice slipped into my mind, dark and soft. "Breathe through me."

His mouth sealed over mine, his cold breath flooding into me. Relief hit hard, dizzying, and brutal. The air rushed into my lungs, igniting the ache in my chest, sharpening the pleasure everywhere else. My nipples throbbed under the starfish's bite, every pulse a spark that shot straight between my legs.

The moment stretched, unbearable. His tail tightened, the scales pressing into the gills on my wrists and thighs. My body bucked, overwhelmed. The suction at my chest, the pressure on my neck, the cold coil around my limbs, it was too much. My muscles shook, heat coiling tight in my core, ready to snap.

Rynar's claws held steady, his mouth still feeding me air. His tongue flicked against mine, a cold tease that sent another jolt through me. The starfish pulled again, their teeth scraping, sending fresh waves of sensation crashing over me.

I shattered. My body convulsed, every nerve igniting, every inch of me caught in the storm. My scream was swallowed by his kiss, my lungs burning, my vision white-hot. The tail squeezed tighter, holding me in place as the pleasure tore through me, sharp and endless.

When it finally ebbed, I sagged in his coils, body trembling, chest heaving. Rynar loosened his grip, his claws sliding away from my neck. The starfish released their bite, their mouths leaving my nipples raw, swollen, aching.

He leaned close, his breath cool against my ear. “Mine,” he whispered, his voice reverent and possessive.

I slumped against him, shattered and drenched, the echoes of pleasure still rippling through me.

Just when I thought I couldn’t endure another moment, his tail loosened its grip and slid away. His hands moved down my sides, slow and deliberate.

“What… what are you doing?” I asked, confusion slipping into my voice.

He didn’t answer right away. Instead, he lowered himself between my thighs, his dark eyes locking onto mine. “Worshiping what’s mine,” he murmured.

The heat of his gaze seared through me, making me shiver. I was already drenched, my body aching, strung tight between anticipation and exhaustion.

His claws traced along my inner thighs, their faint scrape teasing the sensitive skin there. Sparks of sensation flared under his touch, my muscles trembling under the restraint. With careful, reverent hands, he spread me open, his breath cool as it ghosted over my swollen flesh. My hips lifted instinctively, offering more, desperate for relief.

“You’re beautiful like this,” he said, his voice a low growl, edged with hunger

His tongue flicked out, a slow, deliberate swipe that glided over my most sensitive spot. The texture was smooth, impossibly cool, and it sent a jolt of pleasure racing through me. My body quivered, the sensation building and tightening, leaving me breathless under his touch.

I gasped, my fingers gripping the sand and threw it all over the pressure of his mouth driving me to the edge of sanity. He licked again, slower this time, tasting me, savoring every drop. His lips closed around my clit, his tongue swirling in maddening circles. The cold slickness of his mouth contrasted with the heat building inside me, a sharp, unbearable pleasure that made me writhe beneath him.

“Rynar,” I moaned, the sound raw and desperate.

He responded with a low, pleased hum, the vibration of it shooting through me like lightning. His hands tightened on my thighs, holding me open, keeping

me still as his mouth continued its sacred worship. Each flick of his tongue, each gentle scrape of his teeth, sent me spiraling higher, until I was gasping, begging, lost.

Just when I thought I would shatter again, he pulled back. His lips glistened and somehow the darkness in his eyes deepened.

He moved closer, shifting his weight with deliberate care. A ripple coursed through his lower body, and I felt the change more than I saw it. His slit, smooth and seamless moments ago, parted against my skin. Warmth brushed me as his cock emerged, thick and ridged, the texture unmistakable as it pressed against my thigh. The sheer size sent a jolt through me, the ridges promising sensations I couldn't fully imagine.

"You're ready," he murmured. His voice wrapped around me, low, reverent, possessive.

I swallowed hard, my body trembling beneath him. "Please," I managed to whisper, barely recognizing my own voice.

He shifted again, angling his hips. I felt the ridges move against me, teasing, deliberate. The head of his cock pressed at my entrance, firm but unyielding. I couldn't see him from where I lay, but the sensation was enough. The texture, the heat—it was nothing human, nothing familiar, and yet it felt like it was made for me.

The weight of him, the way his body covered mine, left no doubt of his power His glow pulsed faintly, brushing against my skin like a caress, as he guided himself to the edge of me. Every nerve in my body braced for what was coming next.

"You're mine," he said and then, slowly, he pushed inside.

The stretch was exquisite, a sweet ache that bordered on pain. My body clenched around him, the ridges dragging along my walls, each bump sending fresh waves of sensation through me. He filled me inch by inch, his girth impossible, his length pushing deeper than I ever thought I could take.

I cried out, my hands flying to his shoulders, nails digging into his skin. He growled, a low, guttural sound that vibrated through both of us.

“Perfect,” he whispered. “You take me so perfectly.”

He slid deeper, his hips meeting mine as his cock buried to the hilt. The sensation was overwhelming, I was stretched, drenched, utterly claimed. He paused for a moment, letting me adjust, his breath ragged, his muscles trembling with restraint.

“Breathe,” he murmured. “Let me in.”

I exhaled shakily, my body relaxing just enough. He pulled back, the ridges dragging against my walls, then thrust forward again, slow and deep. My back arched, pleasure sparking in every nerve.

I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him closer, craving more. His tail coiled around my body, his grip sealing me completely. His hand slid up to my neck, his fingers pressing firmly against my gills, cutting off my breath. A wave of panic laced with pleasure, crashed through me. The lack of air heightened every sensation, making the heat coil tighter in my core.

My vision blurred, my body trembling. I slapped his cheek, my palm cracking against his skin. His eyes flared, his lips curling into a wicked grin. His hand tightened, the pressure on my neck sending a sharp thrill through me. I gripped his neck in return, my fingers squeezing, my need matching his.

He groaned, the sound dark and ragged. His hips snapped forward, the thrust brutal, perfect. My lungs burned, the world fading at the edges. He leaned in, his mouth capturing mine, his tongue sliding in as he exhaled into me, giving me his breath. The kiss was deep, consuming, his breath filling my lungs just as his body filled me.

I gasped into his mouth, the rush of oxygen making the pleasure explode. His pace grew wild, each thrust harder, deeper, the ridges dragging along my walls in a way that shattered me. The burn, the stretch, the sharp edge of pain, all blurred into ecstasy.

“You’re mine,” he growled, his voice trembling. “Every part of you.”

“Yes,” I gasped, my mind splintering, my body surrendering.

His tail tightened, his grip on my neck unyielding. The pressure built, sharp and consuming, until I was teetering on the edge.

“Let go,” he commanded, his voice rough with need.

And I did.

The orgasm ripped through me, my body clenching around him, waves of pleasure crashing over me, endless and raw. I was drenched in sensation, my limbs shaking, my mind blank. He followed me over the edge, his body shuddering, his groan reverberating through both of us.

We shattered together, lost in the dark, the abyss swallowing us whole.

Chapter Eighteen

Rynar’s hunger for me was endless.

It stretched beyond moments or days, blurring into something primal. He didn’t just *want* me; he *needed* me in ways that clawed at the edges of terrifying. And I was beginning to realize I needed him too, no matter how hard I tried to deny it.

It began on the ocean floor, the vast darkness enveloping us. He laid me down on a bed of bioluminescent coral, its soft glow dancing against his silver skin. His body, towering, powerful, otherworldly, moved with a precision that made every touch deliberate. He traced patterns across my stomach with his claws, teasing me until I shook, begging for more.

When he finally sank into me, it was like being swallowed by the abyss. His ridged cock stretched me, every thrust a shockwave that left me gasping. His tail coiled around my legs, holding me still as his claws skimmed my skin, pressing just enough to remind me of his strength.

But that was only the beginning.

Later, he took me to the surface. Stars stretched endlessly above us. He pinned me against the jagged hull of a sunken ship, rust biting into my palms as he bent me over. The cold air kissed my skin, sharp against the heat of his body. He was insatiable, his claws digging into my hips as he filled me. Each thrust crashed through me, leaving me trembling.

“You take me so well.” His words slid into my mind like a soft caress. “You were made for this.”

I wanted to deny it, to argue, but my body told a different story, arching into his touch, desperate for more.

And then came the starfishes.

He remembered how much I loved them. This time, he pressed them to my nipples with precise care, adjusting them until I was writhing beneath him. The gentle suction pulled and released, each jolt of sensation leaving me breathless.

“You like it,” he said, watching my reaction, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips.

“I hate you,” I whispered, my voice thin. My flushed skin told the truth he already knew.

His laugh rumbled low, vibrating through me. “Liar.”

He didn’t stop. His tongue, his claws, his teeth, all of him worked mercilessly to push me further. He grazed every sensitive spot, leaving marks that felt like signatures. He claimed me again and again until I felt branded.

In the water, he lifted me, his strength making me weightless. He pressed me to the curve of a reef, the algae glowing as we moved. His tail anchored me, his hands roamed, his mouth worshipped.

“You’re mine,” he murmured, his black eyes gleaming with possessive hunger I wanted to fight it, to push back, but soaked in his touch, his scent, his presence, I only wanted to give in.

Days blurred. Every moment was a tidal wave of need that pulled me under. He took me on the coral throne, the sunken ship, the glowing pools. He pinned me to the cave walls, his claws binding my wrists as his mouth explored my neck.

“You’re addictive,” he murmured, his tone thick. “Eons, Pearl. Eons, and I’ve never felt this.”

I wanted to ask what he meant, but his tail tightened, and his claws teased my thighs. Thought splintered, there was only him.

He drenched me with his hunger, his love, his seed. He marked me until I couldn’t tell where I ended, and he began. And I hated how much I craved it. Every time I tried to pull away, he dragged me back under. And I let him.

I leaned against his chest, my legs draped over his tail as he carried me toward the glowing pool. The cavern blurred around me, the aftershocks of our last encounter still buzzing through my body. His hands, his tongue, the unrelenting ridges of his cock, each sensation was branded into me, refusing to fade.

His body shimmered with a faint, otherworldly light. Silver skin caught the glow of the algae, each scale reflecting with subtle brilliance. Broad shoulders gave way to arms that could crush or cradle, power balanced by care. His eyes, deep, endless voids, held a darkness that should've terrified me. But instead, it pulled me in, made me crave the way they devoured me whole. I hated how exposed I felt, how seen I was. And yet, I ached for it.

"Exhausted?" His words curled into my mind, teasing and light.

"I should be," I murmured, resting my head against his chest. "But apparently, I've lost my limits."

His lips curved, sharp teeth glinting. "You're only beginning to understand what you're capable of."

I rolled my eyes, even as warmth coiled low in my stomach. "You're insatiable."

"And you love it." His tone was smug. He wasn't wrong.

I did love it. Loved the way he consumed me, made me feel like I was the only thing in his endless, empty world. Admitting that gnawed at me. There was something intoxicating about being the center of his attention. But a small, stubborn part of me wondered if I was losing pieces of myself. Letting the abyss swallow who I used to be.

I shoved the thought aside.

We reached the pool, its surface glowing steadily. He stepped in without hesitation, water swirling around us. When he lowered me into the pool, his hands held me with reverence, supporting my back as I floated.

"You've ruined me," I muttered, half-teasing, half-true.

His lips twitched into a smirk. “Ruined?” He dipped lower into the water beside me. “You mean perfected.”

I snorted, though heat pooled in my chest. “Perfected? My thighs feel like jelly. I can barely move.”

His smirk deepened. “Then I’ve done my job.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but his hands slid over my shoulders. The thought evaporated. His claws traced my skin, firm yet careful. The water cooled my body, but his touch stirred embers beneath the surface.

“Always so eager to worship me,” I said, my voice light, though my heart hammered in my chest.

“Always,” he answered, steady and sure. “You deserve nothing less.”

His hands traveled lower, skimming my arms. His black eyes watched me, catching every trace of emotion on my face. It should’ve made me feel vulnerable. Instead, I felt... cherished. His gaze wasn’t predatory this time. It was awe-filled, like he couldn’t quite believe I was real.

When his claws grazed my ribs, I sucked in a breath. The chill of the water tangled with the heat of his touch. He traced my waist, lingered at my hips, then turned me gently. His claws raked down my back, slow and deliberate.

“You’re hiding something,” he said, his words slipping into my mind, low and probing. “I can feel it.”

I tensed as his question pressed at the edges of my thoughts. I shoved it aside. “Not everything belongs to you.” My voice wavered.

He didn’t push. Instead, he guided me deeper into the water. His claws slid down to my thighs, brushing the scars etched there, reminders of old battles. His fingers lingered, tracing the raised lines with a care that made my throat tighten.

“You carry so much,” he murmured. “But you bear it well.”

I didn’t know how to respond. His hands moved up, claws grazing bruises he’d left earlier. Heat flared through me. His tail wrapped around my leg,

holding me still.

“You’re a savage,” I said, my voice trembling.

“And you wouldn’t want it any other way.” His smile was small but certain.

He was right. Even exhausted, I leaned into his touch. My body betrayed me, craving more. His claws teased my inner thighs, and my legs parted without thinking. I hated how much I wanted him again.

“Do you ever stop?” I whispered, breathless.

He tilted his head, smirk widening. “Why would I, when your body begs me to keep going?”

I meant to argue, but his mouth closed around my breast, and my mind shattered. His tongue flicked my nipple, heat and water mixing into something electric. When his teeth grazed the peak, I gasped, my back arching.

“Rynar...” My voice trembled.

He hummed, the vibration sinking deep, making my thighs clench. His mouth worked me, his tongue flicking over swollen nipples and occasionally biting it lightly with his sharp teeth, until I shook in his arms. My nails bit into his shoulders as I rode the wave.

He pulled back, his lips curling with satisfaction. “Perfect.”

I wanted to argue, but the words dissolved. His hands and mouth mapped me, worshipped me. The water lapped at my skin, cool and soothing, while his touch burned its way into my soul.

My body relaxed. My mind stayed restless.

I buried the doubts, the fear that I was slipping away, losing something vital. Instead, I clung to the way his eyes held mine: dark and reverent, like I was the only thing in his world.

Maybe, just for tonight, that was enough.

Rynar wrapped me in a soft fabric woven from algae, its cool smoothness clinging to my skin. His arms cradled me effortlessly, his strength a constant

reminder of how fragile I was in comparison. But his touch stayed careful, reverent, as if he feared I might shatter.

The glow of the cavern shifted around us as he carried me and laid me on the bed of glowing coral, his claws brushing my cheek with a gentleness that sent a shiver through me.

“Rest,” he murmured, the word settling in my mind like a blanket. “I’ll return soon.”

I nodded, watching as Rynar slipped beneath the water. The ripples shimmered before the pool stilled, leaving me alone.

I sat up slowly, the algae fabric slipping against my skin. My body ached in the best way, every bruise and mark a reminder of him. But my thoughts wouldn’t settle. They never really did anymore.

I stared at the faint sliver of light on the cavern wall. It moved so slowly, just like everything else down here. Like time was bending, dragging me further into something I didn’t understand.

This wasn’t me. Or at least, it hadn’t been. The fact was, I didn’t even know who I was anymore.

I pulled the algae fabric tighter around myself, as if it could protect me from my own thoughts. I wasn’t weak. I’d survived losing my parents. I’d survived that horror house. I’d survived sleepless nights in New York, choking on my own regrets. I’d survived all of it.

So why couldn’t I stop this?

Why couldn’t I stop *him*?

My chest tightened and I realized…I hated the way he made me feel. The way his touch lit something inside me I couldn’t control. The way his voice crept into my thoughts even when he wasn’t here, soft and mocking and impossible to ignore.

And worst of all, the way I wanted it.

My gaze fell to the glowing coral beneath me. It was beautiful. Everything down here was beautiful in that eerie, otherworldly way. Even Rynar.

Especially Rynar.

The thought made me sick.

He wasn’t human. He wasn’t even close. And yet, every time he looked at me, I felt something crack open inside me. Like he saw something I didn’t want anyone to see.

I let out a bitter laugh, the sound swallowed by the cavern. *How did it come to this?*

I thought about Kim. Jaime. Their faces blurred in my mind, like they were part of a dream I couldn’t quite remember. What would they think of me if they were alive?

I touched my wrist, tracing the faint scars that had been there for years. They were a reminder, a promise I’d made to myself a long time ago: keep going, no matter how much it hurt.

But this... this was different.

I wasn’t just surviving anymore. I was... changing.

My thoughts twisted back to Rynar. To the way he touched me, held me, looked at me like I was the center of his world. It wasn’t human. It was darker than that, deeper, more consuming.

And I was falling for it.

For *him*.

The realization hit me like ice water, sharp and shocking.

I couldn’t love him.

He wasn’t someone I could love. He was a monster. He served the Abyss.

But my heart didn’t care.

I buried my face in my hands, my breath shaking. I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t let myself feel this way.

I needed to leave.

I looked back at the sliver of light on the wall, watching how it shifted. Slowly, steadily, like it was trying to tell me something.

The winter solstice.

The memory clicked into place. Back during my bachelors, I had learned about the shortest day of the year. The longest night.

It was close, just days away. I had been observing it for some time now.

My pulse quickened. The solstice would give me time. Time to swim to shore, find shelter, and move under the cover of darkness.

My chest ached at the thought of leaving him, even though he was the reason I had to go.

I clenched my fists, forcing myself to focus. I couldn’t stay here. If I did, I’d lose everything. My freedom. My humanity.

Myself.

I stood on shaky legs, my body protesting every movement. The algae fabric slid to the ground, pooling at my feet. The light on the wall was faint, but it was enough. Enough to remind me of the surface. Of who I used to be.

I couldn’t let him own me.
Pacing the cavern, my mind raced. The solstice would be my chance. I’d have to play along, let him think I was his willing captive, but I couldn’t let myself believe it too.

Humming softly, I clung to the melody of my mother’s lullaby. It dulled the sharp edges of my fear, steadying my breath. My gaze fixed on the still blue hole where he’d disappeared.

This wasn’t just about escaping him. It was about escaping the part of me that wanted to stay.

I just had to survive a few more days.

Chapter Nineteen

The lullaby slipped from my lips, weaving through the damp air like a thread of warmth in the cold cavern.

“Drenched in peace, let darkness creep, In the abyss, all things sleep.”

The final note trembled, lingering briefly before fading into the silence. For a moment, the only sound was the faint ripple of water from the blue hole in the center of the cave. It was a fragile quiet, too delicate to last.

The water stirred. I froze.

Rynar emerged, his silver form cutting through the surface with effortless grace. His torso rose first, water clinging to his broad chest and shoulders, glinting faintly in the bioluminescence. The rest of him remained hidden beneath the surface, his movements slow and deliberate, as if he had all the time in the world. His black eyes locked onto mine, unreadable and consuming.

“That song,” he murmured, his voice like a ripple in my mind, soft but impossible to ignore. “It carries something more than melody.”

I tightened the algae fabric around me, the soft glow beneath it dimming under my fingers. “It’s just a lullaby,” I said, my voice firmer than I felt. “Something my mother used to sing when I couldn’t sleep.”

His gaze didn’t waver, his claws resting lightly on the edge of the pool. “It shields you,” he said, almost contemplatively. “When you sing, your thoughts slip beyond my reach.”

The revelation hit me like a jolt of static. “You can’t hear me?” The sharpness in my tone betrayed the mix of relief and unease coursing through me.

“No,” he admitted, tilting his head as if studying the phenomenon. “The melody forms a barrier. Delicate, but impenetrable.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to steady my breathing. “Good,” I muttered. “You shouldn’t be in my head anyway.”

He pushed himself higher from the water, his tail gliding forward before it began to change. Scales shimmered as his form shifted, the smooth flow of muscle and fin splitting into legs. The transformation was seamless, eerie in its quiet efficiency. By the time he stepped onto the stone floor, he stood tall on powerful legs, water streaming down his body in rivulets. He moved closer, each step measured, deliberate, until he loomed over me.

“Why?” I demanded, my voice trembling but determined. “Why save me and not them?”

Rynar’s gaze stayed steady. “Because you fight this place,” he said, his voice calm, but it hit me hard, like a tide I couldn’t push back. “You’re standing at the edge of the Abyss, and you won’t let yourself fall.”

His words sent a chill through me, but anger flared alongside it. “That’s not an answer,” I snapped. “You let them die. Kim. Jaime. Amanda. You could have saved them.”

His expression darkened, a flicker of something sharp crossing his face. “I did what was necessary.”

“Necessary?” The word tore from my throat, raw and jagged. “You decided they weren’t worth it. You chose me and left them to die.”

“Yes.” The admission was cold, unflinching. “I chose you.”

His honesty knocked the air from my lungs. My fists clenched, nails biting into my palms. “Why?” I whispered, my voice breaking. “Why me?”

He reached for me, his claws brushing against my cheek. The touch was light, almost reverent, but it sent a shiver down my spine. “Because you are more,” he said softly. “And because you are mine.”

“I’m not yours,” I hissed, stepping back. The words felt hollow, a fragile protest against the chain he’d wrapped around me.

His lips curved faintly, though the expression held no warmth. “You feel it too,” he murmured. “You may deny it with words, but your soul knows the truth.”

Before I could respond, he turned away, his movements fluid and unhurried. He stepped to the edge of the pool, his legs merging once more into his tail. The transformation rippled through him, seamless and unnatural. He slipped back into the water, his silver form glowing faintly beneath the surface.

“Come,” he called, his voice echoing in my mind. “There is something you must see.”

I hesitated, every instinct screaming at me to stay on solid ground. But the pul of his presence, the strange compulsion that tied me to him, dragged me forward. The water was cold as I stepped in, biting against my skin, but I didn’t stop. Rynar waited just beneath the surface, his bioluminescence casting soft ripples of light around him.

“What is it?” I asked, my voice trembling.

“You will see,” he said, offering no further explanation. His tail flicked, propelling him deeper into the pool.

I followed, my limbs sluggish against the cold resistance of the water. The glow of the cavern faded as we descended, shadows closing in like an endless curtain. My lungs tightened, the strange sensation of breathing underwater stil foreign despite Rynar’s influence. I clung to his form, his silvery glow the only thing keeping the darkness at bay.

As we sank deeper, a faint shimmer appeared below us. Threads of light twisted and pulsed, forming a barrier that stretched endlessly in all directions. The water around it felt heavier, thicker, as if we were brushing against the edge of another world.

“What is this?” I whispered.

“A threshold,” Rynar replied. “Few have crossed it.”

The light shimmered, writhing like living things. As we passed through, a sharp jolt crackled across my skin, electric and alien. I gasped, the sensation

rippling through me like a shockwave. The moment we breached the barrier, sound erupted around us.

Whispers.

They coiled and tangled, distorted and hollow, like voices trapped in glass. The noise pressed against my mind, a weight I couldn't shake. I clung tighter to Rynar, my nails digging into his shoulders.

"What is that?" My voice was barely more than a breath.

He didn't answer immediately, his gaze fixed on the darkness ahead. "The Abyss," he said at last. "Those are the voices of the ones he claims."

The words sent a chill through me. The whispers grew louder, wrapping around my thoughts like tendrils. They felt familiar, like memories I couldn't quite grasp. But before I could dwell on them, Rynar pulled me closer, his tail flicking powerfully as he guided us away from the voices.

The darkness began to thin, soft glimmers of light breaking through like the first hints of dawn. Shapes emerged, elegant structures rising from the ocean floor. Towers spiraled upward, their tips vanishing into the gloom above. Arches stretched between them, draped in shimmering strands of coral and algae. The entire structure glowed faintly, a cold, otherworldly beauty that left me breathless.

"What is this place?" I asked, my voice trembling.

Rynar's gaze softened as he turned to me. "A place I built for you."

The words knocked the air from my lungs. "For me?"

He nodded, his black eyes shimmering faintly. "From the moment I saw you, I knew you belonged here. With me."

His words pressed down on me, as heavy and suffocating as a storm. "Rynar, I... I don't understand."

"You will," he said simply. His claws brushed against my cheek, gentle and deliberate. "In time, you will see what I see."

I stared at him, my thoughts spinning. The whispers still echoed faintly in my mind, a reminder of the darkness that surrounded us. But Rynar’s gaze held steady, his presence grounding me in a way I didn’t want to admit.

“Let’s go back,” I said finally, as everything pressed down on me. “Please.”

He hesitated, his claws lingering on my arm. But he nodded, his tail flicking as he turned us back toward the surface. The glow of the castle faded into the shadows, but its presence lingered, a promise I couldn’t ignore.

Chapter Twenty

I sat at the edge of the glowing pool, my knees pulled to my chest, staring at the faint ripples that disturbed the surface. The bioluminescent light shimmered gently, but it did nothing to soothe the storm inside me.

A week had passed since Rynar had shown me his sanctuary. Since he had asked me to be part of his world. His black eyes, those endless voids, had looked at me like I was everything he desired. Like I was the only thing that mattered in his vast, unknowable dominion.

I hadn’t answered him. I didn’t know how.

The ocean, both beautiful and terrible, called to me. Its wonders, its secrets, they had shaped me since childhood. But beneath that beauty, there was always something darker. Something ancient. Something everlasting. My friends were proof of that. Kim’s determination, Jamie’s warmth, Trevor’s quiet strength, all gone. Taken by this place.

Taken by him.

Or were they?

Rynar’s denials circled through my mind, tangled with half-truths and unspoken admissions. He claimed the Abyss had taken them. That it was beyond his control. But the doubt gnawed at me. My fingers traced idle patterns in the water, my heart heavy with unanswered questions.

And yet, I stayed.

I hated myself for it. Hated the way his voice could calm the chaos in my mind. Hated the way his touch could anchor me. But the ocean’s pull was stronger. Vast. Endless. Irresistible.

I inhaled slowly, the salty air cold against my lungs.

I need to see more.

The thought solidified into a decision. If I was going to survive this, if I was going to understand what had happened to my friends, I needed to know the truth. All of it. Even the parts Rynar wanted to keep hidden.

My gaze drifted to the ocean's entrance, where shadows swam in the distance. I remembered the whispers I had heard, the one Rynar said were of the ones claimed by the Abyss. Those whispers were lingering in my mind like a splinter I couldn't remove.

I needed answers. If the Abyss was keeping souls. I needed to know if my friends were there too?

I stood, my knees weak, my resolve harder than steel. I tucked the blade, sharp and cold, into the folds of my seaweed-woven clothing. Its weight was reassuring against my thigh. A reminder that I wasn't helpless.

With a final glance at the cavern, I stepped into the water.

The cold welcomed me, familiar now. I sank beneath the surface, my body moving instinctively. The marks on my neck pulsed in rhythm with the currents, guiding me through the liquid dark. The glow of the pool faded behind me as I swam deeper, the world narrowing to the press of water and the sound of my own heartbeat.

The coral thinned, the seabed turning to jagged rock and stretches of barren sand. The water grew colder, the light dimmer. My breath quickened, unease rising within me like a tide. The cave lay ahead, its mouth a black wound in the ocean's skin.

But something else loomed between me and that darkness.

The barrier.

It shimmered faintly, a distortion in the water. A wall of force, invisible but tangible, like a pulse of energy locked in place. I swam closer, my fingers reaching out. The moment they touched the barrier, a shock rippled through me.

I gritted my teeth. *No.* I wasn't going to stop now.

I pushed harder. The barrier resisted, pressing back with a force that made my bones ache. My lungs strained. Panic clawed at the edges of my mind. But I dug in, every muscle in my body screaming.

Let me through.

I pulled back and surged forward again, my shoulder slamming against the barrier. Pain shot through me, but I didn't stop. I clenched my jaw, my vision blurring with frustration and determination.

Again.
Again.

My body shook with effort, my mind a razor-edged chant of defiance. And then, with one final push, the barrier gave way. I slipped through, the resistance vanishing like a popped bubble. The water on the other side was colder, thicker, as if grief itself had seeped into it.

The moment I crossed, the whispers began.

Faint at first, like echoes from a distant shore. Then louder, weaving around me, curling into my ears.

Pearl...
You let us die...
Free us...

The water carried their torment, their despair. My heart pounded, a frantic drumbeat in my chest. Each whisper scraped against my mind and suddenly I saw a glow. It was coming from a cave. I swam forward, the cave's mouth widening before me. Darkness spilled from it, an inkblot expanding, swallowing the ocean around me.

Suddenly, a hint of movement stopped me cold.

The Vurrax slipped from the shadows, its long, eel-like body almost invisible in the murky depths. A faint shimmer caught the edges of my vision, just enough to make me turn. My gut twisted. It was circling me.

Its translucent skin rippled, the spines along its back undulating like a series o needles poised to strike. It moved faster than it had any right to, smooth and

predatory. It was hunting me, and it knew I could see it now.

A surge of fear tried to lock up my limbs, but I clenched my teeth, forcing my grip to tighten around the hilt of my blade. I couldn’t let this thing get the upper hand. Not this time.

The Vurrax shot forward, its mouth gaping open to reveal rows of needle-like teeth. I twisted to the side, the water dragging at my movements. Its spines grazed past my arm, cold, sharp, leaving a line of pain into my flesh. A scream bubbled up, choked by the water.

Before I could recover, it coiled back, its body tensing. It came at me again, faster, more precise. I slashed out wildly, my dagger connecting with the side of its jaw. The creature hissed, a vibration I could feel more than hear, and backed off, a dark cloud of its blood swirling into the water.

It didn’t stay away long. The moment’s hesitation gave me just enough time to spin and kick toward the cave’s entrance. My lungs burned, every muscle screaming for oxygen, but I couldn’t stop. The Vurrax was on me again, darting forward like a silver needle, its spines flaring out to trap me.

One spine snagged my calf, slicing through my wetsuit, the pain a white-hot spike that shot up my leg. My vision blurred, the saltwater mixing with the raw ache. I turned, desperate, and drove my knife downward, straight into its side. The dagger sank in deep, meeting the soft tissue beneath its scales.

The Vurrax writhed, its body whipping violently, the force nearly yanking the knife from my hand. I twisted the dagger deeper, my fingers numb, my heart pounding in my ears. The creature’s body spasmed once, twice, then went slack. It died.

But I was alive.

And the cave waited.

I swam toward its entrance, my limbs heavy, my thoughts tangled with pain and dread. The water thickened with each stroke, clinging to me like a shroud. My breath came faster, shallow and tight in my chest.

The whispers clawed at my ears, curling through the water, slipping into the cracks of my mind.

Pearl…
You let us die…
Free us…

The water felt like grief, cold, continuous and smothering. The cave's mouth gaped before me, a jagged wound in the fabric of the ocean. Blackness seeped out, an ink-stain spreading, waiting to swallow me whole.

I hesitated, my heart a frantic drumbeat. But I couldn't turn back. Not now.

I crossed the threshold and swam deeper into the cave, and that's when I saw them.

Bones.

So many of them.

The sheer number of them was impossible to grasp. Hundreds. Thousands. It was like a labyrinth of the damned, every bone was like a monument to suffering.

I gagged, bile burning my throat. But there was no escape from the horror.

And then, I saw the faces.

They surged up from the depths, twisted and broken, barely holding their shape. Eyes rolled wildly, filled with terror that never ended. Their mouths opened and closed, trapped in silent screams, their agony echoing in the dark water.

Kim.

Her face floated up first, her eyes glassy with agony, her mouth contorted in a scream that shattered my heart. Her features rippled, dissolving at the edges like wet paper, then reforming into something worse.

Jamie.

His eyes met mine, wide with desperate recognition, his features melting, warping. His hand reached out, fingers splayed, but his arm disintegrated into wisps before he could grasp anything.

Trevor.

His form flickered, his jaw unhinged in an eternal scream. His arms flailed, reaching upward, his eyes filled with horror and betrayal.

They were trapped. Their souls shredded, splintered, yet still aware. Still suffering.

A sob tore from my throat, a garbled mess of grief and rage.

“No,” I choked, my voice strangled. “No… no…”

The pit convulsed. The molten glow flared violently, casting grotesque shadows across the walls. More faces surged up. More screams layered together until the sound became a physical force, a wave of torment crashing over me.

You let us die.
You knew.
You’re next.

The voices clanged inside my skull. My limbs trembled, my vision edged with black. My chest felt tight, suffocating. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. I screamed, the sound ripping through my throat. My arms flailed, my body convulsed with terror. The shadows surged closer, wrapping around my limbs, tightening.

And then…my fingers struck something hard.

A glint of metal on a skeletal finger.

I reached toward it, my hands trembling, and closed around it. A ring. Small. Delicate. Faintly gleaming in the hellish light.

I turned it over, and the engraving pierced me like a blade.

Diana Hart.

My mother’s name.

The world shattered.

A cold, hollow numbness spread through my chest. Rage ignited in its place, pure and searing. My grip tightened on the ring, the metal digging painfully into my palm.

The souls surged, their screams swelling into a desperate chorus.

Free us…
Don’t let him win…
He knew… He knew…

Rynar. He had known this whole time. His lies wrapped around me like chains, his whispers soft as poison. He had shown me tenderness, held me close, all while standing guard over this pit of torment.

My tears mixed with the water, salt on salt. The shadows clawed at me, dragging me back toward the pit.

But I fought.

I kicked, every movement a rebellion. The molten glow receded, the icy grip loosening. My muscles burned, my lungs screamed, but I pushed through.

I broke the surface of the barrier, collapsing into clean, cold water. The shadows retreated, hissing into the dark.

I floated there, gasping, my heart a wild, furious thing. The cavern’s soft glow felt sterile now, a mockery of peace. The screams echoed in my mind, etched into my bones.

I will free you.

Rage crystallized in my mind. I would tear this place apart. I would see Rynar’s lies crumble.

You knew, Rynar. You knew all along and now I will make you pay.

Chapter Twenty One

I sat in the cave, humming the lullaby under my breath, my fingers trembling as I unclasped my mother's necklace. Carefully, I slid her ring onto the chain. The ring settled against the pendant, familiar and comforting. I refastened the necklace around my neck.

It felt like she was with me, her strength close enough to touch. And right now I needed that strength more than ever.

The shift in the air was subtle at first, a crackling tension, a weight pressing down on the cave. I felt him before I saw him. His presence wrapped around me, a silent gravity pulling me closer to the abyss. My body tensed, every nerve on high alert, but I kept my head down, my song steady and clear. Even as dread twisted in my gut, even as my instincts screamed at me to look, to face the darkness that approached, I didn't waver. I couldn't.

"You're still singing." His voice slid through the space between us, low and magnetic, brushing against my defenses like an insistent tide. He knelt beside me, his silver glow spilling over the water. "Do you ever stop?"

I didn't dare falter. "I like the sound," I said lightly, my voice calm even as my chest tightened. "It keeps me focused."

He leaned closer, the faint bioluminescence of his body shimmering against my skin. His claws hovered just above my shoulder, and the heat of his proximity sent a shiver down my spine. "It does more than that," he murmured. "It draws me to you."

His words coiled around me like chains, heavy with meaning. I forced a smile my fingers continuing to trail through the water pretending I wasn't affected. "I didn't know you were so easily tempted."

He chuckled in a way that made the sides of his crinkle. “Temptation implies weakness. What I feel for you is…” He paused, his gaze locking onto me, raw and consuming. “inevitable.”

The heat of his gaze burned into me, daring me to look at him. I turned slowly my movements deliberate, and met his eyes. The darkness in them was endless, an abyss that promised to consume me whole. But I wouldn’t let him. Not tonight.

“You always watch me,” I said, my voice steady but low. “What are you waiting for?”

His lips parted, but no answer came. Instead, his hand rose, claws brushing lightly against my jaw. The touch was reverent, almost hesitant, and it made something in me twist. This was Rynar, the predator, the god who could rip me apart without a second thought. Yet here he was, poised as if I might shatter under his touch.

“You,” he said finally, the word heavy with a need that made my breath hitch. “I’m waiting for you.”

It wasn’t the answer I expected, and the honesty in his voice left me momentarily unmoored. But I didn’t let it show. Instead, I leaned closer, my song softening to a hum as I shifted onto my knees. I climbed into his space, straddling his tail where it coiled beneath him. His body went rigid, his claws digging into the stone floor with a sharp scrape.

“You don’t need to wait anymore,” I whispered.

His eyes widened slightly, the faintest crack in his composure. For once, he wasn’t the one in control. The realization sent a thrill through me, emboldening me as I let my hands rest on his chest. His skin was cool beneath my palms, the scales smooth and firm, shifting subtly with each breath he took.

“You don’t know what you’re inviting,” he said, his voice strained, though his hands rose to grip my hips. His claws hovered, as if unsure whether to hold me or push me away.

“Don’t I?” I challenged, leaning down until our faces were inches apart. His breath was cool against my lips, carrying a faint metallic tang that reminded me of the ocean. “Maybe I’m the one inviting you.”

His claws settled on my hips, firm and possessive, claiming me. His tail shifted beneath me, coiling tighter. The song on my lips faltered for the first time as his strength pressed against me, unrelenting. But I didn’t stop. I let my hands roam over his chest, exploring the ridges of muscle that moved beneath his scales. The faint glow of his body pulsed, responding to my touch in a way that made my pulse quicken.

When my hands drifted lower, over the curve of his stomach, his breath hitched. His cock rested against his abdomen, hard and thick, its ribbed surface catching the faint light. It was unlike anything I’d ever seen, alien and mesmerizing. My fingers hovered for a moment before I wrapped them around him.

The reaction was instant. His hips jerked, a low, guttural sound escaping him as his claws tightened on my hips. His eyes burned into mine as though he were trying to hold himself together. “Pearl,” he said, my name a rough exhale that sent shivers through me.

I began to move my hand slowly, deliberately, letting my palm slide over the ridges and curves of him. The texture was firm yet yielding, alive in a way that felt almost otherworldly. Each motion drew a new sound from him, a mix of growls, gasps and something rawer, something primal.

“You’re holding back,” I said, my voice low and teasing. “Don’t.”

His response was a growl, deep and resonant, as his claws flexed against my skin. But he didn’t take control. Not yet. His restraint was palpable, a tension that coiled around us like a storm on the verge of breaking. It was intoxicating knowing I was the one unraveling him.

I leaned down, letting my lips brush against the cool surface of his chest. The taste of salt and metal lingered on my tongue as I trailed kisses down his torso my movements slow and deliberate. His breathing grew heavier, each exhale a shuddering sound that filled the cavern.

When I reached his cock, I let my tongue trace the ridges, exploring the unfamiliar texture with careful precision. The response was immediate, his body tensed beneath me, and a sharp, inhuman sound tore from his throat. His tail coiled tighter around my leg, anchoring me in place as I took him deeper.

The taste of him was salt and sea, with an edge that was purely him. I moved slowly at first, letting my tongue map every ridge and curve, but as his growls grew louder, I quickened my pace. His claws scraped against the stone floor, his body trembling with the effort to contain himself.

“Enough,” he growled finally, his voice rough with need. His claws twitched against my hips, as though he wanted to pull me away, but the effort to resist was etched across his face. His composure was slipping, piece by piece, and I wasn’t about to let him take back control.

Instead of relenting, I tightened my grip on him, my hand stroking his cock deliberately as I took him deeper into my mouth. His sharp intake of breath was like a reward, his head falling back as his chest heaved. The ridges of his cock caught against my tongue, each one adding a new texture to explore, to conquer. His taste was intense, salty and sharp, a mix of the sea and something distinctly his.

“Pearl…” he rasped, my name breaking from his lips like a prayer, barely more than a breath. His claws scraped against the stone floor, the tension in his body coiling tighter with every flick of my tongue.

I didn’t stop. If anything, his helplessness spurred me on. I let my lips glide down to the base of him, my tongue tracing the grooves of his ridges before drawing back slowly, savoring the way he pulsed in my mouth. His cock twitched against my tongue, a desperate, involuntary motion that sent a thrill through me, heat pooling low in my stomach.

“You’re going to make me…” His voice broke, a deep growl resonating through his chest. His hips jerked, and his claws flexed as though he was trying to hold himself together.

“Do it,” I murmured, my voice low and commanding as I pulled back just enough to meet his eyes. “I want all of you.”

His gaze darkened, something raw and unrestrained flashing across his features. I didn’t give him time to respond before taking him deep again, my hand stroking him in time with the movements of my mouth. The pressure in his body was palpable, a storm threatening to break, and when it did, it was with a ferocity that left him trembling.

A low, guttural sound tore from his throat as he came, his release hot and sharp against my tongue. I swallowed greedily, my lips tightening around him as his cock pulsed in my mouth. His claws dug into the stone, his head thrown back in a way that made him look utterly undone. For a moment, he was silent, his chest rising and falling as though he couldn’t quite process what had just happened.

When I pulled away, his black eyes met mine, wide with something that looked like awe. “You…” he began, but his voice faltered. “You’re…”

“Not finished,” I interrupted, my voice calm and unwavering.

His breath hitched as I stood, straddling his chest. The smooth, cool surface of his scales pressed against my thighs as I shifted forward, positioning myself just above him. His claws hovered near my hips, hesitant, as though he couldn’t quite believe what was happening.

“My turn,” I said simply, my tone laced with authority.

His expression shifted, anticipation and hunger warring in his gaze as I lowered myself onto his face. The first stroke of his tongue sent a jolt through me, cool and electric as it traced over my clit. I gasped, my hands gripping his shoulders for balance as his claws settled on my thighs, holding me firmly in place.

His tongue was impossibly long, curling and flexing with precision that left me breathless. He moved slowly at first, exploring every inch of me with deliberate care. Each flick of his tongue sent shivers through my body, the ridges adding a sensation that bordered on overwhelming. When he focused on my clit, his tongue circling and stroking with maddening expertise, I couldn’t stop the moan that tore from my lips, louder than I intended, raw and unrestrained..

His claws tightened on my thighs, pulling me closer as his tongue delved deeper. The coolness of him contrasted sharply with the heat pooling in my core, the combination driving me to the brink. His hands slid upward, his claws grazing the soft skin of my hips before settling on my breasts.

When his fingers pinched my nipples, a sharp, pleasurable shock shot through me, adding another layer to the intensity of the moment. He rolled them between his claws, his movements perfectly timed with the rhythm of his tongue. My body arched against him, the sensations building to a crescendo that left me trembling.

“Don’t stop,” I gasped, my voice barely more than a whisper. My hips began to move instinctively, grinding against his mouth as his tongue worked me with unforgiving precision. The pleasure was blinding, a tidal wave that swept me under and left me breathless.

When I finally shattered, the release was earth-shattering. My cries echoed through the cavern, mingling with the low hums vibrating from his chest. He didn’t stop, his tongue continuing to stroke me through the aftershocks, drawing out every ounce of pleasure until I was trembling above him.

But I wasn’t done.

Sliding lower, I positioned myself above his cock, feeling the ridges press against me as I adjusted. His hands moved to my hips, his claws grazing my skin as he guided me down onto him. The stretch was exquisite, slow, deliberate, as I took him inch by inch. Each ridge added a new sensation, the pressure building in a way that left me gasping.

His growl rumbled through the cavern as I began to move, setting a steady rhythm that sent waves of pleasure crashing through both of us. His tail coiled around my legs, anchoring me in place as his claws gripped my hips, guiding me as I rode him. The ridges of his cock caught against me with every movement, amplifying the intensity until it bordered on unbearable.

His black eyes burned into mine as though I were the only thing holding him together. “Pearl,” he rasped, his voice raw and desperate. “You’re…”

“Mine,” I finished for him, leaning down to press my lips to his. The kiss was fierce, consuming, as our bodies moved together, each thrust pushing us closer

to the edge.

When his release came, it was overwhelming. His body trembled beneath me, his claws gripping my hips tightly as a low, guttural roar escaped his lips. The heat of him filled me, a sharp contrast to the coolness of his scales. I rode out the waves of his climax, feeling the tension in his body unravel as his tail loosened its hold on my legs. For a moment, he seemed utterly still, his breaths ragged and shallow.

He looked up at me, his black eyes softened by something I couldn't name. Reverence, perhaps. Or trust. It was almost too much to bear, the way he gazed at me as if I were the center of his universe.

"You're…" His voice cracked, low and unsteady. "You're everything, Pearl."

I smiled faintly, leaning forward as though to kiss him. My hands slid over his chest, feeling the rapid rise and fall of his breath beneath my palms. He was vulnerable now, utterly undone, and he didn't see it coming.

My fingers found the hilt of the dagger hidden behind the rock beside him, the one he'd gifted me in what he thought was an act of devotion. The metal was cold against my skin, its weight grounding me as I gripped it tightly.

His eyes fluttered shut, his head tilting back as he savored the moment, lost in the afterglow. That was when I struck.

The dagger sank deep.

His body went rigid beneath me, silver bioluminescence spilling from the wound like liquid moonlight. His chest heaved, a strangled sound caught in hi throat. For a moment, his black eyes went blank, the void within them stilling as if time itself had stopped.

Blue blood oozed from the gash, coating my hands. It should have felt like victory. But instead, a chill dread crawled up my spine.

Then his eyes snapped open.

The darkness within them surged, a swirling blackness that drank in the faint light. His lips curled back, exposing rows of jagged teeth that glistened like

wet glass. The glow in his wound dimmed, the blood pulling back as though retreating into his body.

A low, venomous laugh bubbled up from his throat.

“You thought you could kill me?”

His claws shot up, seizing my wrists with a crushing grip. My breath caught as his tail coiled around my legs, pinning me down, the cold scales biting into my skin. He sat up slowly, the dagger still buried in his chest, the handle slick with his blood. His gaze burned into mine, a void brimming with raw, unrelenting rage.

“You truly thought a weapon, such as the very dagger I gifted you, could end me?” His voice dripped with contempt, each word a drop of poison. “How naïve.”

I struggled, panic clawing at my throat, but his hold was unrelenting. The shadows in the cavern seemed to stretch toward him, pulled by an invisible force. The water around us vibrated, trembling with a low hum that resonated in my bones.

“Let me go,” I gasped, my voice breaking. “You’re bleeding, you’re dying.”

His laugh was hollow, a sound that scraped against my mind like a rusted blade.

“Bleeding? Dying?” He leaned closer, his face inches from mine. “You still don’t understand, do you?”

The air grew colder, the water around us darkening as if light itself was fleeing his presence. The glow in his wound pulsed, then dimmed completely. He reached down and wrapped his claws around the hilt of the blade.

I watched, horror freezing my veins, as he pulled it out, inch by inch, the metal slick with his shimmering blood. There was no pain in his eyes, no weakness. Just a cold, consuming fury.

When the dagger slid free, the wound closed instantly, silver scales knitting together as if nothing had happened. He held the dagger up, studying it with disdain before tossing it aside. It clattered to the stone floor, forgotten.

“You think you understand what I am,” he said, his voice a cold whisper that echoed through the cavern. “But you’ve barely glimpsed the truth.”

His claws traced my jawline, the touch almost gentle, but the cold in his eyes was unbearable. “I am not a god, Pearl. Gods are fragile, tethered to the worship of those beneath them. I am older than gods. I am *beyond* them.”

I shuddered as the shadows around us thickened, swirling like ink in water.

“I am the Abyss itself,” he whispered. “The endless dark that waits beneath the waves. The hunger that can never be sated. The cold that seeps into your bones and never leaves.”

His claws dug into my wrists, pinning me in place. The faint light of the cavern twinkled, the bioluminescent algae struggling against the suffocating darkness that bled from him. The intensity of his presence pressed down on me, like a gravity I couldn’t escape. My lungs felt tight, my breath coming in shallow, frantic gasps.

“You thought you could kill me?” His voice was a low, venomous whisper, curling around my thoughts like a vice. His black eyes burned into mine, endless voids swirling with something ancient and monstrous. “Did you really believe I was just another creature of the deep?”

I couldn’t speak. My throat closed, shock pounding through me. My heart pounded like it might tear free of my chest.

The blade lay forgotten on the stone, slick with his shimmering blood, useless The wound in his chest had already sealed itself, the silver scales smooth and unbroken. He was *whole*. Unstoppable.

He leaned in closer, his breath cool against my cheek. “I am not what you think I am, Pearl. Not a guardian. Not a protector.” His lips curled, revealing those jagged teeth. “I am the Abyss.”

The words slammed into me. My mind reeled, the enormity of it clawing at my sanity.

“The Abyss?” My voice was a strangled whisper. “You… you *are* the Abyss?”

He nodded slowly, his black eyes unblinking. “The endless dark beneath the waves. The predator lurking in every shadowed trench. The hunger that can never be sated.” His lips curled into a smile, cruel and triumphant. “I am the nightmare that waits at the bottom of the sea. And I have been waiting for a long time.”

My stomach twisted, nausea rising like bile. His claws sank deeper into my wrists, the chill of them seeping into my bones. I wanted to scream, to tear myself away, but I was frozen. The truth settled over me like a shroud.

“You lied to me,” I choked out. “You let me believe you were something else.’

A low, twisted laugh escaped him. “I never lied. I let you believe what you wanted to believe. Isn’t that what humans do? Cling to illusions because the truth is too unbearable?”

Tears burned my eyes, blurring his face. “But my friends… you said it wasn’t you.”

His eyes darkened, the swirling void within them deepening. “It was always me,” he said, his voice a cold whisper. “The Vurrax, the Sirenshade, the Drowner’s Hand, the Silvershrike, they are all my creations. Shattered souls, reshaped into weapons that enforce my will. That feeds my hunger.”

Their faces flashed before me, Kim, Jamie, Trevor, contorted into monstrous forms, twisted by torment beyond comprehension. Grief and fury tore through me, leaving me raw, hollow, shattered.

“Why?” I whispered, the word trembling on my lips. “Why do this?”

He tilted his head and gave me a calculating look filled with malice. “Because it sustains me. The souls offered to me grant me power, strength. I don’t take lives, I take what is given. In return for miracles, for protection, desperate fools offer up those they care for the least. The unwanted. The vulnerable.”

My breath caught, the horror of his words sinking in. The villagers, their rituals, their offerings, it had all been part of this endless cycle. A cycle of sacrifice and survival. My parents. My friends. Cast away like worthless tokens in exchange for salvation.

“You took them,” I whispered, my voice shaking. “My parents. My friends.”

He smiled, a joyless, cold twist of his lips. “Yes. They were given to me willingly. Offered by those who sought my favor. The souls of the desperate and the innocent fuel my power. They always have.”

My vision blurred with tears. “And me? What am I to you?”

His gaze hardened, something dangerous and possessive simmering beneath the surface. “You were also an offering. *Just an offering*“ he spat the words with loathe. “But I chose to keep you. To make you mine.”

His claws brushed along my jaw, the mockery of tenderness in his touch sending a shiver through me. “I wanted you by my side, Pearl. And yet, you betrayed me.”

The cavern’s walls seemed to close in, the shadows pressing tighter, suffocating me. My limbs trembled, the reality of his words were crushing me I was meant to be a sacrifice. The final piece of their twisted salvation. And still, he refused to take that from me.

“Then finish this. Kill me now!” I forced out the words.

He leaned closer, his eyes gleaming with ancient malice. “Oh no. I won’t do that.”

“Why?”

“Because your death would be too simple. Too merciful. You will suffer, Pearl You will feel the depths of my hunger, my wrath. You will understand what it means to betray the Abyss. To betray me.” He declared.

Chapter Twenty Two

Rynar’s claws locked around my wrists, pinning them above my head. Pain shot through my arms as his grip forced me down onto the rough, damp stone. I bit down hard on my lip, the tang of blood sharp in my mouth, refusing to let a sound escape. My pulse pounded in my ears, drowning out the faint lapping of water in the cavern.

The glow of his skin flickered, uneven and tense, throwing fractured shadows across the walls. His face was inches from mine, his dark eyes swallowing all light. Fury twisted his features, stripping away the strange beauty I’d once noticed. What was left was raw and unrelenting, a predator with nothing holding him back. His breath hit my face, carrying the staleness of salt and something bitter.

“You thought you could kill me?” The words lashed through my thoughts, each one striking harder than the last. His voice wasn’t loud—it didn’t need to be. It coiled through the air, sharp and relentless. “You, a mortal, dared to defy me?”

I twisted against him, my body fighting instinctively, though I knew it was useless. His weight kept me pinned. The stone beneath me bit into my back, its cold seeping into my skin. My wrists burned where his claws dug in, a wet warmth spreading from the shallow cuts.

“You’re a monster,” I forced out, my voice trembling but steady enough. “You destroyed everything I cared about. You ruined my life.”

The glow around him pulsed, a sudden burst of light that burned my eyes before plunging the cavern into shadow again. His claws pressed harder, making me gasp, but I bit back the scream. The taste of blood lingered on my tongue, coppery and bitter.

“You betrayed me,” he said. His tone shifted, quieter now but no less dangerous. His body tensed, his claws trembling where they held me. He leaned in closer, his lips brushing my ear, his breath seeping into my skin like poison.

“You want to see a monster?” His voice sank lower, heavier, curling around me like a trap. “I’ll show you one.”

Then he bit into my shoulder. Pain tore through me, hot and searing, exploding behind my eyes. A scream ripped from my throat before I could stop it. My back arched, my body trying to escape the agony as blood seeped from the wound, sticky and warm.

“Stop!” I screamed, my voice cracking. “Please, stop!” My legs kicked uselessly, my wrists twisting in his grip, but he didn’t let go. His claws dragged down to my jaw, sharp enough to leave trails of fire in their wake.

“I won’t kill you,” he growled, his teeth still bared. “But you’ll wish I had. You’ll remember this, Pearl. You’ll remember what happens when you betray me.”

The cavern shifted around me, the edges blurring until it wasn’t the same cold stone beneath me anymore. The air thickened, the scent of salt fading into something fouler. My chest seized as the memories came crashing in, dragging me under.

I was fourteen. The mattress sagged beneath me. The smell of sweat and alcohol burned in my nose. My uncle’s shadow loomed above, his breath hot and sour against my face.

“Shh... it’s our little secret, Pearl.”

His voice slithered through my thoughts, sick and suffocating. My body froze beneath his weight, the tears that welled in my eyes useless against the terror clawing through me.

Not again. Not again.

But this time, my fingers found the cold steel hidden beneath the pillow. The knife. My one chance. My only way out.

I gripped the blade tight and struck upward. His scream filled the room, high and jagged, as the knife sank into his eye. Blood sprayed, hot and slick, blinding him. He reeled back, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. The knife rose and fell, each strike releasing the rage and fear that had built for years.

Blood spattered my hands, my nightgown, the walls. His screams turned to gurgles, then silence. Still, I didn't stop until the stillness consumed everything.

The memory shattered, and the cavern rushed back. The cold stone beneath me. The sting of my wounds. My body shaking as I struggled to breathe.

Then his weight was gone.

I blinked, disoriented, as I saw Rynar crouched across the cavern. His claws covered his face, his shoulders heaving. The glow around him had dimmed, leaving him a pale, trembling shadow. He wouldn't look at me.

I lay there, my chest heaving, every breath a struggle. Pain pulsed through my body, but it was muted now, drowned out by the fury rising in me. The echoes of my past burned in my mind, raw and unrelenting, bleeding into the present until I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

"You saw it, didn't you?" My voice rasped, rough and shaking.

He didn't answer. His claws twitched, digging into the stone floor, but he didn't lift his head. The weight of my words seemed to press down on him, his glow flickering weakly.

"You saw what I did," I said again, louder this time. My voice wavered, cracking under the strain. "You saw what I became."

Still, he didn't speak. His claws slipped from his face, but his head remained bowed. His silence clawed at me, made my fury burn hotter.

"I didn't know," he whispered, his voice barely audible. It was hollow, broken like he didn't even believe the words himself. "I didn't know how much it would cost you."

My laugh came sharp and bitter. "You didn't know?" The rage poured out of me, each word sharp as a blade. "You didn't care. You never cared about the

cost. You only cared about what you could take."

His head dipped, his glow dimming further until the cavern felt colder, emptier. His voice came softer this time, raw with something I couldn't place. "The villagers offered them to me," he said, his words cracking. "Your parents, your friends… they were sacrifices. I only took what was given."

"Don't you dare," I snarled. "Don't you dare shift all the blame onto them. Yes, they're responsible, but so are you. You could've stopped it. You didn't have to take them."

My voice broke. "You caused this!" I yelled, the words tearing through the air "If my parents hadn't been chasing your cursed Abyss, they'd still be alive! I wouldn't have ended up in that house. I wouldn't have been *his* victim. I wouldn't have had to kill *him*. I wouldn't be carrying this guilt, this endless weight that eats at me every single day. You set it all in motion. You did this to me!"

He flinched. His whole body jerked, as though my words had stabbed through him. The silver glow guttered, flickering like a dying flame in a storm.

"I'm sorry. I am really sorry, Pearl."

My laugh came out hollow—a sound without a trace of joy. "Sorry? Really?" My voice dripped with venom as I glared at him. "A few seconds ago, you were ready to show me just how much of a monster you are!" The rage surged through me, blazing hot and uncontrollable. "The truth is, you are a monster—the worst kind. You steal innocent lives, kill without remorse, and imprison their souls. Their blood is on your hands, Rynar!"

He stumbled forward, his claws reaching out as if to touch me, to anchor himself in the wreckage. I recoiled, every nerve screaming in rejection. The movement stopped him dead. His face crumpled, his glow sputtering out entirely for a moment. In the darkness, he looked fragile. Mortal. As shattered as the life he'd destroyed.

"I… I never meant to hurt you," he rasped and I could feel that every word was bleeding anguish. "Not you."

"But you *did*," I said as my voice shook. "You ruined everything."

He dropped to his knees, his claws scraping the stone floor, as if the ground was the only thing holding him together. His silver glow pulsed faintly, a pathetic echo of what he once was. “Pearl,” he murmured, his voice trembling “if I had known, “

“You didn’t *care* enough to know!” I screamed, the force of it ripping through my chest. “You didn’t care until it was too late. Until the damage was *done*.”

His hands flew to his face, his claws digging into his own flesh as he groaned, a low, broken sound. “I deserve your hatred,” he choked out, the words barely more than a breath. “I deserve every ounce of it.”

“You deserve *worse*! You deserve to suffer like I have. Like they did.”

He crawled toward me, his body low, his eyes hollow. When he reached me, he stopped, trembling hands reaching for the dagger lying on the floor. He lifted it, the blade catching the faintest glint of his dying glow.

“Then hurt me,” he whispered, his voice hollow and stripped of pride. “Punish me. Make me pay for what I’ve done.”

I stared at him, my breath ragged, my heart pounding painfully. The sight of him, this god, this monster, so utterly broken, so drenched in remorse, was almost more than I could bear. My fingers curled into fists, shaking with fury, grief, and something I couldn’t name.

“You think that’ll make it better?” I whispered. “You think your pain will undo what you’ve done?”

“No,” he admitted, his voice thin and unsteady. “But it’s all I have to give. I need you to punish me... so I can feel something—anything—besides this misery. Please forgive me, Pearl. Please.”

A scream clawed its way up my throat, and I lunged forward, my fists slamming into his chest. “You don’t get to make this about *you*!” I cried, each word a blow. “You don’t get to hurt me and then beg for my forgiveness!”

He didn’t resist. He took every hit of my fury. When the last of my strength bled away, I collapsed against him, my sobs muffled against his chest. His

arms wrapped around me, tentative and trembling, as if he feared I might shatter in his grasp.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his voice filled with despair. “For everything.”

I shoved him back, my hands shaking, my vision blurred with tears. “Sorry, don't bring them back,” I said, the words breaking inside me.

He nodded, his eyes shimmering with tears that finally fell, tracing pale streaks down his cheeks. “I know.”

I wiped my face, the anger and exhaustion crashing over me like a tidal wave. My voice dropped to a whisper. “I hate you.”

“And I love you,” he said, his voice soft, breaking. “That’s why I have to let you go.”

I froze. The words hung between us, fragile and devastating. “What?”

I watched Rynar move to my little workstation. It was strange, seeing him touch something so completely mine, just a mess of tools and scraps I’d thrown together to keep my hands busy. His eyes landed on the black pearls he’d gifted me.

He picked them up carefully, his claws shaking like he thought they might break. The pearls had a soft glow, faint and gentle, the kind of light that felt more alive than it should. I froze as he pulled a strand of seaweed from his sash and started threading the pearls together. Every movement was slow, focused, like it mattered more than anything else.

Then I saw the tears.

They slid down his face, quiet and steady. He didn’t even seem to notice. A few drops fell onto the pearls, smearing their glow. My chest tightened, the sight of it twisting something deep inside me. I didn’t want to feel this. I didn’ want to care.

But I couldn’t look away.

Why was he doing this? Why did he care? I wanted to ask, but the words stuck in my throat. His grief filled the room, wrapping around me like the cold wate

outside the cavern.

“The sun will burn you if you leave me,” he murmured. “But these will protec you. You’ll be free.”

My heart twisted, a pain so sharp it stole my breath. “You… you planned this.”

He nodded, his hands shaking as he fastened the necklace. “It was unfair not to give you a choice.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks as he slipped the pearls around my neck, settling them beside my mother’s necklace. His claws brushed my skin briefly before pulling away. He kept his eyes on the ground, his shoulders slumped under the impact of everything left unsaid.

I stared at him, confusion rising through the storm of my anger.

“The first night you were in the village,” he continued, his voice a haunted whisper. “I came to you. I heard your song, and I was drawn to you. Then, that day, I claimed you in the water, even before you knew me.” His claws tightened around the pearls. “When Jonathan attacked you, I finished him. Because he touched what was mine.”

A sob caught in my throat. The magnitude of his words crashed over me, drowning me.

“I always wanted so much of you,” he said, his voice breaking. “I wanted to devour you. To own you. And in doing so, I took everything. Your parents. Your freedom. Your life.”

He finally looked into my eyes, and the depths of his black gaze swallowed me whole. His voice cracked, barely a whisper. “I love you,” he said, each word soaked in anguish. “But what I did… I must be punished. And the worst punishment is letting you go.”

His claws trembled as he cupped my face, his touch was a whisper of what it had been, soft now, reverent, as though afraid I might crumble beneath his fingers. A tear slipped from his eye, disappearing into the silver glow of his skin. His lips parted as if he wanted to say more, but the words withered away

Without another word, he gathered me into his arms. The cold water closed around us as he carried me toward the shore. The sea itself seemed to bow to his will, the currents parting, bending, easing his path. I clung to his shoulders the remnants of my strength bleeding away, my body numb to the cold and the pain. It felt like a funeral procession, and I wasn't sure which of us was being mourned.

When we reached the shore, the wet sand sucked at my feet, grounding me in a reality I didn't want to face. Rynar didn't let go immediately. His hands lingered on my waist, his fingers etching the memory of my shape into his skin, branding it into himself.. When he finally stepped back, his eyes locked onto mine. There was a finality in them that cut deeper than any blade.

It was like he was looking at me for the last time.

My voice trembled. "What will you do?"

He turned to the water, the waves lapping at his ankles like they were desperate to reclaim him. His glow had faded to a faint shimmer, like a dying star. "I am the Abyss," he said, his voice hollow. "I will return to the darkness I am."

The surf crept higher, tugging at his legs like it couldn't wait to devour him. He took a step forward, the water swirling around his knees, his glow bleeding into the waves.

I wanted to scream, to grab him and drag him back. To make him stay. To make him suffer. To forgive him. The storm of emotions was too much, tearing through me, leaving nothing but raw, ragged edges.

He took another step. The water rose to his waist, his glow dimming further, a light swallowed by endless dark.

"Rynar," I choked out.

He didn't turn. The sea was already pulling him down. His final words drifted to me on a breath of wind: "I love you."

Then he was gone. The black water closed over his head, the last of his glow dimmed out like a snuffed candle.

The coldness in my veins turned to fire. Fury unfurled inside me, dark and consuming as I slowly turned toward the village. Vengeance seared through every nerve. These people knew all along. They always knew.

Tanya with her fake condolences, her fake graves, her fake sorrow, all of it meant to shut me up. To make me accept their lies. We were never safe. We were always the sacrifices, led to believe we weren't. My parents, my friends, they were fed to the Abyss, to Rynar.

But it was these people who handed them over.

They smiled while they did it. They hid their crimes beneath rituals and whispered prayers.

But now, there would be no hiding.

They would pay. I would make them pay.

Chapter Twenty Three

The village loomed ahead, shrouded in shadows and silence. The cold night air bit into my skin, but I barely felt it. Each step was deliberate, the wet sand whispering beneath my feet as I moved closer.

The inn stood in the distance, its half-burned frame a stark silhouette against the dark sky. The fire Jamie had started hadn't finished the job, leaving behind jagged walls and exposed beams that clawed at the night. Part of it still stood, defiant.

I stopped in front of it, my chest tightening. This was where we had trusted, laughed, and planned. Now, it was nothing but a husk. Memories threatened to pull me under, Jaime's quiet smile, Kim's sharp wit, Trevor's low grumbles. They were gone, and this place still stood.

My fists clenched. It wasn't right.

As I stepped inside, the broken doorway creaked under the weight of my push. Shadows swallowed me, the faint light of the moon struggling to follow. The smell of burnt wood clung to the air, mixing with the lingering tang of grease from the kitchen.

The gas cylinder sat near the stove, its metal surface faintly glinting in the dark. My feet moved toward it without hesitation. My fingers brushed the cold metal, and I twisted the valve.

The hiss of escaping gas filled the silence, sharp and insistent. It crawled into the room, invisible but suffocating. My hand stayed steady as I tipped the cylinder on its side. It hit the floor with a hollow clang, the sound echoing in the empty space.

Gas hissed out, swirling around my ankles and spreading across the floor. I pulled the cylinder to the doorway and left it lying on its side. The sound grew

louder, sharper, filling the silence with a steady urgency.

My eyes landed on a matchbox resting on the counter. I grabbed it, my fingers fumbling slightly as I held it tight.

Outside, the night air hit my face, sharp and biting. I looked down at the matchbox in my hand. It felt heavier than it should, like it knew what was coming. I slid it open and pulled out one match.

Striking it against the box, the flame flickered to life, small but strong. I stared at it for a second, watching it burn, before I let it drop.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the air ignited.

Flames roared through the kitchen, spilling out into the main room in a blinding rush of heat and light. The windows shattered, glass spraying outward in every direction. The force of the blast hit me like a blow, and I stumbled back, my feet slipping in the sand.

I hit the ground hard, pain jolting through my body as the impact rattled my bones. The night spun around me, blurred and chaotic. Heat washed over my face, the fire devouring everything in its path.

I sat up slowly, my chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath. The inn was engulfed, flames clawing at its remaining structure. Smoke curled into the air, blotting out the stars.

My hands trembled as I pushed myself to my feet, staggering a few steps back The heat pressed against me. The fire roared louder, the flames rising higher.

The wind shifted, carrying the acrid stench of burning wood and salt. My mind drifted to Jaime, Kim, and Trevor. I wondered if they could see this, wherever they were. If they knew I hadn’t let this place win.

I stared at the wreckage, the firelight flickering across the sand. My lungs burned with every breath, but I refused to move. This wasn’t just destruction, it was justice.

It was gone. All of it.

And it was beautiful.

A scream tore through the night.

“It’s burning! The inn is burning!”

Doors burst open. Villagers stumbled into the street, eyes wide, mouths gaping. Their confusion turned to horror as they saw the flames. More screams filled the air, tangled with the roar of the fire.

They turned, and they saw me.

I stood by the blaze, the firelight casting my shadow long and dark across the sand. My face was cold, my heart colder. I welcomed the heat licking at my skin, the chaos blooming before me. It felt right. It felt earned.

Tanya shoved her way through the crowd, her face pale and twisted with rage. Her eyes locked onto me, wild with accusation.

“What have you done, Pearl?” she screamed.

I smiled, a thin, brittle thing that cut through the smoke. “I set it all on fire.”

Her jaw clenched, her face contorting. “You’ve lost your mind.”

“No.” My voice was low, steady. “I’ve found it.”

More villagers gathered, their eyes flicking between me and the flames. They weren’t afraid of the fire. They were afraid of me.

“You’re worse than Rynar,” I said, the words scraping out of me like broken glass. “You sacrificed my parents. My friends. You fed them to the Abyss and pretended their graves were real. You smiled at me. You lied. You let me suffer.” My voice trembled with fury. “You let everything happen.”

Tanya’s eyes narrowed, her mouth a thin line. “I thought, if you’d see the graves, you’d feel some sense of closure and leave. But you didn’t. In the end we did what we had to do to survive.”

A laugh escaped me, hollow and bitter. “Survive? You call this survival? Sacrificing innocent lives, hiding behind your rituals and lies?” My fists trembled. “You’re worse than the monster you fear.”

Her face hardened. “You don’t understand the cost of keeping this village safe.”

“Don’t,” I hissed. “Don’t you dare talk to me about cost. I paid the cost. My parents. My friends. You threw us to the wolves and called it salvation.”

I took a step closer, my face inches from hers. “You’re the real monsters. And you’ll pay for what you’ve done.”

The rage inside me boiled over. I lunged at her.

We hit the ground, my fists flying, teeth bared. My knuckles struck her face, the impact jolting up my arm. She shrieked, her fingers clawing at my hair, yanking so hard my scalp burned. Blood smeared across her mouth as she screamed curses at me.

“You think you can judge us?” she spat, eyes wild. “You think you’re righteous?”

“I think you’re vile!” I snarled. My fist drove into her cheekbone, her skin splitting under my knuckles.

Hands wrenched me back, rough and punishing. My feet scraped against the dirt as I was hauled upright.

Sebastian.

His face twisted with disgust. “You’ve gone too far, Pearl.”

He punched me, the force snapping my head back. Pain exploded through me, sharp and blinding. My knees buckled, and I hit the ground hard. Blood filled my mouth, hot and metallic.

A scream ripped from my throat, raw and jagged. The waves surged, echoing my fury. But Sebastian didn’t stop. He dragged me up by my shoulder, his fingers digging into my flesh. He punched me again, harder.

My body crumpled under the blow, my ribs screaming as I hit the ground. His boot crashed into my gut. My breath whooshed out in a painful rush, bile and blood rising in my throat.

He leaned down, his breath hot against my ear. “You brought this on yourself.”

Through the haze, my fingers curled around the knife Rynar had given me. The handle was solid, cold.

As Sebastian’s hand closed around my throat, I struck. The dagger plunged into his foot, cutting through leather and flesh.

His scream was a wild, ragged sound. He stumbled back, clutching his foot.

I didn’t hesitate. I pulled the knife free and drove it into his chest. The blade slid between his ribs, hot blood spilling over my hand.

His eyes widened, his mouth opening in a strangled gasp. He crumpled to his knees, his body jerking. He tried to pull the knife out, but his strength faded. His eyes rolled back, and he fell.

Tanya’s scream shattered the night, raw and broken.

I met her eyes, my breath heaving. “Now you know,” I rasped, “how it feels to lose someone you love.”

Her face twisted in agony, her eyes blazing with fury. “Hold her!”

Villagers grabbed me, hands clawing, dragging me to the ground. My knees hit the dirt hard, sending shocks of pain through my battered body. I couldn’t fight them off, my limbs too weak, my vision swimming. They forced my arms behind me, the rough grip biting into my skin.

Tanya stumbled forward, tears streaking her face, her hands shaking with rage and grief. Her eyes were red, wild with the kind of fury that eats a person from the inside out. She snatched a rifle from one of the villagers, her fingers clenching around the barrel so tightly her knuckles turned white.

“You’ll die for this,” she hissed. Her voice was a raw whisper, barely holding itself together.

I lifted my head, blood dripping from my mouth, my vision narrowing to just her face and the cold glint of the rifle. My body felt like it was shutting down,

but my mind was clear. Sharp. I met her gaze, unblinking, my jaw clenched against the pain.

“No!” Amanda’s voice rang out, desperate and shrill. She shoved through the crowd, her eyes wide with horror. “Mom, stop!”

Amanda grabbed the rifle barrel, her hands trembling. They struggled, the weapon jerking wildly between them. The cold night air crackled with tension each second stretching out, unbearably long.

A shot cracked the silence.

Amanda’s body went rigid. Her eyes widened in shock, her mouth opening in a silent gasp. Blood bloomed across her chest like a dark, spreading flower. Her knees gave way, and she collapsed, her lifeless form crumpling to the ground.

Time froze. The world seemed to hold its breath.

Tanya’s scream ripped through the night, a sound so full of anguish it made my bones ache. She dropped to her knees beside Amanda, her hands shaking as they hovered over her daughter’s still form.

“No, no, no,” Tanya sobbed, her voice breaking apart. “Amanda! Please!”

Her grief poured out in wrenching wails, her body rocking as if the force of her sorrow might shatter her. The villagers stood frozen, their faces pale, eyes wide with terror and disbelief.

I barely felt the hands gripping me now. Everything blurred at the edges. The cold, the pain, the blood, all of it faded into the background. My gaze fixed on Tanya, her sobs mixing with the distant crash of waves.

She turned to me, her face twisted, eyes blazing with a madness born of grief. She grabbed a fistful of my hair, yanking my head back until my neck screamed with pain. Her breath came in ragged gasps, her face inches from mine.

“I’ll finish you myself,” she snarled. “I don’t know how you survived the Abyss, but if he didn’t kill you, I will.”

I spat in her face, the blood mixing with my defiance. “Do it.”

Her eyes narrowed, the rifle shaking in her hands. The barrel pressed against my forehead, the cold metal biting into my skin.

“Goodbye, Pearl,” she said, her voice trembling.

The gunshot cracked the night open.

Pain burst through me. A hot, searing flash that quickly dulled into cold. My body crumpled, the ground rising up to meet me. Darkness wrapped around the edges of my vision, pulling me under. My breaths came in shallow, wet gasps, the taste of blood heavy in my mouth. My fingers twitched, numb and useless.

“Rynar…” The word slipped out, barely a whisper. My voice was gone, my strength fading fast.

The ground trembled beneath me. A low, rumbling growl rolled through the earth, rising into a roar. The scent of salt and decay filled my lungs. The waves grew louder, their crash swelling, echoing with fury.

Tanya’s face twisted into a cruel smile. “The Abyss is here for you, to end you.”

I laughed, a thin, broken sound that hurt. Blood bubbled in my throat. “Oh, he’s here for me,” I rasped. “But you’ll see, Tanya. You’ll see how he avenges me.”

Chapter Twenty Four

The world blurred, smudged with smoke and salt. My eyelids fluttered, too heavy to keep open, but I forced myself to focus. The sharp scent of the ocean filled my nose, mixed with the acrid stink of fire and blood.

Then I saw him.

Rynar.

His silver glow sliced through the dark, a beacon of something ancient and deadly. His tail shimmered in the moonlight, the scales catching and reflecting every glimmer. The sight of him should have terrified me, but instead, something inside me uncoiled.

He was here. And he was furious.

The water lapped at his waist, but with each step, his tail shifted. The sleek, sinuous form shimmered, dissolving into powerful legs. The transition was seamless, otherworldly. When he stepped onto the sand, he stood tall and unyielding, the ocean dripping from his skin like it had no claim on him anymore.

The villagers shrank back, their faces pale with fear. Their eyes darted around like trapped animals, searching for an escape that didn’t exist. The fire behind them crackled and roared, casting shadows that danced.

I tried to push myself up, but my body refused. Pain held me captive, anchored to the cold sand., Each breath sharp and shallow. My vision swam, slipping in and out of focus. I could barely keep my eyes open, but I didn’t need to see clearly to know what was happening.

Their screams told me everything.

The villagers' cries rose into the night, raw and panicked. Footsteps pounded on the sand. Bodies shoved and tripped over each other, desperation turning them into animals. I heard the thud of someone falling, the wet slap of flesh hitting the ground.

Rynar's voice cut through the chaos, like a sharp blade. "You dared to hurt what is mine."

A wave of power rippled through the air. It pushed against my skin, the pressure building until it felt like my bones might crack. The villagers' screams grew sharper, edged with terror.

I drifted in and out of consciousness, my mind a haze of pain and fury. The world tilted, my cheek pressed against the cold, damp sand. Through the blur, I saw his silver feet step closer. The glow pulsed like a heartbeat.

His claws brushed my neck, light as a whisper. I felt the pearls lift away, the weight of them vanishing. His voice wrapped around me. "These pearls make you human. Without them, you are mine. The Abyss's."

Warmth flooded through me, a rush of heat and light that chased away the pain. My ribs knit together, the ache in my stomach fading. My vision sharpened, the world snapping into cruel, clear focus. I sucked in a deep breath, the air sharp and cold in my lungs.

I was alive.

Tanya's scream tore through the night, a sound so raw it almost made me pity her. Almost.

I pushed myself up, my limbs trembling but steady. Beside me, Amanda gasped, her eyes flying open as if startled back to life. She touched her chest, fingers brushing over the torn, blood-stained fabric. Confusion twisted her features, then relief. She was alive too.

Amanda's gaze darted to her mother, who had fallen to her knees. Tanya's eyes brimmed with disbelief, her face streaked with tears.

Rynar's dark eyes settled on the cowering villagers. His glow dimmed, replaced by a cold, deadly stillness. The air felt heavy, like the whole world

was holding its breath.

“You offered innocents to the Abyss,” he said, his voice calm and terrifying. “You masked your fear with rituals and lies. You let them suffer. You let them bleed. And now, you ask for mercy.”

Tanya’s body shook. She clutched the sand like it could hold her up. “Please,” she whispered, her voice cracked. “Please, have mercy.”

Rynar tilted his head, the movement slow and deliberate. “Mercy? You gave none to those you sacrificed.” His eyes narrowed, a storm brewing in their depths. “You thought you could kill my love. You thought you could destroy what belongs to me.”

Without warning, his claws closed around Tanya’s waist. She screamed, her hands scrabbling at his grip, her feet kicking wildly. Her eyes met mine, wide and pleading. But there was no saving her. Not this time.

Rynar’s grip tightened.

With one smooth motion, he ripped her apart.

The sound was a sickening crack, followed by a wet tear. Her body split in two, blood spraying across the sand. One half crumpled near the burning wreckage, the other flung farther, landing with a lifeless thud.

Amanda’s scream pierced the night, a sound so full of grief it made my chest ache. She collapsed to her knees, her shoulders shaking, tears streaming down her face.

“She was wicked,” Amanda choked out, her voice trembling, “but she was my mother.”

I crawled to her side, wrapping my arms around her. Her sobs soaked into my shoulder, her body trembling under the impact of everything she’d lost. I held her tight, my own tears slipping down my cheeks.

“I have nothing left,” she whispered. “Nothing to live for. Kill me, Abyss. Please.”

Her words sliced through me. I pulled back, cupping her face in my hands. Her eyes, hollow and red, searched mine for answers I didn't have.

"No," I said softly. "You still have a life to live."

I reached for the pearls in my palm, their glow faint but steady. I lifted Amanda's trembling hand and pressed the pearls into her palm. The warmth seeped between our fingers, a fragile promise.

"These will let you walk in the sun," I said. "You don't have to hide anymore."

Her eyes widened, fresh tears spilling over. "But… What about you?"

I tried to smile, but it felt hollow. "I don't know."

When we finally let go, I stood up, my legs weak but holding.

Rynar waited, standing at the water's edge. The wind tugged at his dark form, the waves licking at his feet like they were calling him home.

His eyes found mine, endless and filled with something that made my throat tighten, hope, fear, love. A love that burned deep, but not deep enough to erase the shadows between us.

My steps were slow, like trudging through ice. Each one dragged me further from the wreckage behind me and closer to the wreckage inside me. The part that wanted him. The part that hated him. The part that didn't know if I could ever forgive him or if I even wanted to try.

He stood there, still as stone. His claws trembled at his sides, his breath ragged, like he was bracing for a blow that would shatter him completely.

The wind howled between us, but neither of us moved. We were only feet apart, like an abyss stretched between us. An abyss too deep to cross. My chest ached, my ribs tight around a storm of grief, rage, and something else I couldn't name. Something sharp and fragile.

His voice broke the silence, low and raw. "I let them go."

My stomach twisted. "What?"

“The souls,” he rasped. “The ones I kept. The ones I trapped.” His eyes shimmered, silver tears welling up and spilling over, streaking his face like molten metal. “I released them before I came here.”

The words hung between us, brittle and cold. My heart pounded, each beat a hammer against my ribs. “Why?”

He swallowed hard, his throat working around the answer. “Because I was never meant to hold them. I thought their suffering made me stronger. I thought keeping them would fill the void inside me.” He shook his head, his voice cracking. “But it only made me hollow. A prison of my own making.”

His claws curled into his palms, his knuckles pale against his dark skin. “I was wrong. I was blind. And that blindness cost me everything. Cost *you* everything.”

I couldn’t breathe. The air stuck in my throat, burning like acid. My fists clenched at my sides, nails biting into my palms. “You kept them. You trapped them, just like you trapped me.”

“Yes,” he whispered. The word was a confession, a blade slipping between my ribs. “I did.”

The rage inside me flared, hot and blinding. “And now you want what? Redemption? Forgiveness?”

His head bowed, his shoulders shaking. “No. I want nothing. I deserve nothing. I deserve to be forgotten. To be left in the dark, alone.”

He fell to his knees, the wet sand swallowing him up to his shins. The great Devourer, brought low. But it didn’t feel like justice. It didn’t feel like enough

His claws dipped into the cold water, trembling. He lifted my foot, cradling it as though it might shatter. His breath came in short, broken gasps. “I don’t deserve to be worshipped,” he choked out, his voice ragged. “I deserve to rot. But *you*, you deserve worship. You deserve everything I thought I could take.”

He bowed his head lower, his lips brushing the top of my foot. The touch was barely there, a whisper of warmth against my frozen skin. “I want to be the one who kneels for you. Forever. If you let me.”

Tears burned down my cheeks. My chest cracked open, the pain too big to hold. “You think this makes it better?” My voice shook with fury, with the grief trying to claw its way out. “You think kneeling here, now, fixes what you did to me?”

“No.” He looked up, his abyssal eyes hollow and stripped bare. “Nothing can fix it. Nothing can erase it. But I will tear myself apart trying. I will kneel in the dark, in the cold, for eternity if that’s what it takes to give you back even a piece of what I stole.”

I sank to my knees, the cold water biting into my skin. I lifted his face, my fingers trembling against his jaw.

“I don’t know if I can forgive you,” I whispered, the words shattering inside me. “But I can’t keep carrying this hate. It’s killing me.”

A strangled sound escaped him, raw and broken, part sob, part breath. “Then let me carry it. Let me bear it for both of us.”

I closed my eyes, the tears slipping down. “I want to hate you. I want to hate you forever.”

His breath trembled. “I know.”

"I can't," I rasped. "Even after everything, there's still a part of me that... wants you. And it's wrong. It shouldn't feel this way."

He rested his forehead against mine. His claws brushed my cheeks, gently wiping my tears. Each touch hurt in a way I couldn’t explain. His voice was soft but firm. "I'll wait. As long as you need. I'll wait until it feels right for you."

The waves crashed and the wind howled around us, but between us, there was warmth. Small, fragile, but there. I looked at him, really looked at him. I loved him. Twisted and wrong as it was, but I did love him.

I let out a slow breath.

"Take me home," I said quietly.

He stared into my eyes, and for a moment, his face was unreadable. Then came the shock, clear and raw, followed by something softer—happiness. Without a word, he pulled me into his arms, holding me tightly. The waves surged around us, rising high and pulling us under. His light surrounded me unshaken by the chaos. The darkness beyond stretched endlessly, waiting.

But this time, I wasn’t falling alone. He was with me.

Epilogue

Time had lost its meaning. Days, hours, perhaps weeks, they slipped away as if swallowed by the deep. Only warmth, water, and silence remained. The abyss wrapped around me like a velvet cocoon, cradling my thoughts, my body, my very soul. Here, in the dark sanctuary Rynar had created, I felt suspended. Weightless. Drenched in a peace I had never known before.

Light pulsed from the bioluminescent corals along the cavern walls. Their soft glow painted everything in hues of silver and blue. Strange, delicate creatures swayed in the current, their tendrils brushing against me like whispers. I floated in the center of it all, my limbs relaxed, my mind drifting. The abyss had once been a prison, a place where fear gnawed at the edges of my sanity. Now, it was home.

Rynar's arms encircled me, his body solid and cool, anchoring me in this endless sea. His dark eyes never left mine. That piercing gaze had once terrified me, haunted me. Now, it held me together. His eyes spoke in ways his words couldn't, of love, regret, and devotion so deep it made my chest ache.

His hand slid over my hip, fingers brushing against my skin, lingering just long enough to leave trails of heat. He traced the curve of my belly, where new life grew. The gentle swell was unmistakable now. A tender secret cradled by the abyss. His claws trembled, his touch reverent, as though he feared he might shatter me.

I closed my eyes, savoring the sensation. His touch was careful, almost hesitant, as if he were still learning how to love without destroying. But beneath that restraint, I felt the desperation: the unrelenting need to prove himself worthy. To show me, again and again, that I was more than his obsession. I was his salvation.

"You're staring again," I whispered into his mind.

A small smile tugged at his lips. “I can’t help it.”

His voice rumbled through my mind, low and thick. It settled in my bones, wrapped around my heart. I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze. He leaned in, his lips brushing mine, a whisper of a kiss, hesitant and soft. The water held us, wrapped us in warmth as if it approved of this fragile intimacy.

I deepened the kiss, my fingers sliding into his dark hair. He groaned, the sound vibrating through me. His arms tightened around my waist, pulling me closer. The cool of his skin met the heat of mine, a contrast that sent shivers racing down my spine. The ache in my chest spread lower, turning into a slow burn that curled in my belly.

Effortlessly, he lifted me, his strength tempered with gentleness. The water parted around us, carrying us deeper into our sanctuary. The light dimmed, the corals fading into shadows. Here, in the quiet dark, nothing existed but us. The current stilled, thickening around us, holding us in a liquid embrace.

His claws trailed up my back, each touch leaving a line of fire that seared through my skin. My body arched into him, craving more. His mouth left mine, traveling down to my neck. His lips pressed against my pulse, lingering there, feeling my heartbeat. Slow. Steady. Alive.

“You are everything,” he whispered. “My light, my darkness, my salvation.”

The words sank into me. I tilted my head back, letting him taste the curve of my throat. Each kiss was a promise, a plea, a vow to worship me until the abyss itself ran dry. His hands explored my body, learning every dip, every curve, as though he were discovering me for the first time.

“Rynar,” I breathed, his name falling from my lips like a prayer.

He groaned in response, his grip tightening. He lifted me higher, my legs wrapping around his waist. The water pressed us together, the pressure building, winding tight. His claws grazed my thighs, teasing, deliberate, careful not to break the delicate surface. The reverence in his touch made my chest tighten. He wanted to claim me, all of me, but he feared his own strength. He feared losing me again.

“Let go,” I whispered. “I’m yours.”

The words broke something in him. His restraint melted away. His mouth crashed into mine, all hesitation gone. The kiss was rough, desperate, a collision of teeth and tongues. I drank him in, my fingers digging into his shoulders, anchoring myself to him. He moved us through the water, the current swirling around us like a storm.

He pressed me against a smooth, stone wall, the coral's glow casting faint shadows over our bodies. His hips pinned me there, his body a solid wall of heat and strength. His mouth devoured mine, each kiss stealing the breath from my lungs. I gasped, my chest heaving, the fire in my belly turning into an inferno.

His claws traced the line of my ribs, his touch possessive. He kissed down my throat, his lips worshiping every inch of exposed skin. My body trembled, the pleasure building in slow, relentless waves. He took his time, savoring me, showing me that I was his universe. His reason for existing.

His mouth moved lower, his tongue tracing patterns that made me shudder. The water rippled, charged with energy. His fingers explored every curve, every hollow, with a tenderness that left me aching. I clutched his head, holding him to me, needing more.

"Rynar, please," I gasped.

He growled, the sound low and primal. He lifted his head, his eyes burning with desire and something deeper, a need to show me just how much he loved me. Just how deeply he belonged to me.

With a deliberate motion, he slid inside me, slow and steady. My body opened to him, welcomed him, the ache giving way to a pleasure so intense it blurred the edges of my vision. He paused, his forehead resting against mine, his breath ragged.

"You're everything," he whispered. "Everything."

We moved together, our bodies finding a rhythm as old as the abyss itself. The water held us, cushioned us, as if it were a part of us now. Each thrust, each gasp, each kiss brought us closer to something infinite. The tension built, a wave rising higher, ready to crash.

I clung to him, my nails biting into his back. His hands held me firmly, grounding me as pleasure swept through me. The wave crested, then broke. I cried out, my body shattering and reforming in his arms. He followed, his grip tightening, his voice a low groan of surrender.

We drifted together, the world fading into silence. Our breaths slowed, our hearts finding the same steady rhythm. He didn't let me go. His arms stayed wrapped around me, his claws tracing idle patterns on my back.

I pressed my cheek to his chest, feeling the cool, steady thrum of his heartbeat My body felt warm, heavy, and sated. I let my hand slide down, resting on my belly.

Rynar's hand covered mine. His fingers spread over my swollen belly, his touch trembling, hesitant. He stared down at me, his eyes wide, stripped bare of the usual darkness. A tear slipped down his cheek, catching the faint glow that surrounded us.

"We found something beautiful in the wreckage," I whispered, the words trembling on my lips.

His voice broke, rough with something fragile. "*Drenched in peace, let darkness creep,*
In the abyss, all things sleep."

I cupped his face, my thumb wiping away the tear. "But some things don't," I murmured. "They endure."

His forehead touched mine. We weren't waiting anymore. We were here. Together.

Our hands stayed there, cradling the future growing inside me. The abyss stretched out around us, endless and dark. But here, in this quiet corner of the deep, there was light. There was hope.

No more waiting. No more emptiness.

This was home now.

I belonged to it. I belonged to him. And he belonged to me.

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With love,
Sephyrra