

CHAPTER ONE  
**THE MERMAID AND THE AMNESIAC**

"So, is it true?"

He turned his head to his right, facing a woman looking at him with feigned wide-wide innocence

"Is what true?" He knew what she was asking but wanted her to say it.

"Is it true that you all are eunuchs?" the woman asked with a soft drawl.

"Susan!" her father exclaimed in clear reprimand.

"Daddy, you said we should ask anything we wanted to know," she replied without looking at the older man, completely focused on the tall man in the tuxedo. "So, is that true? Because that would be such a waste," the woman asked, walking her fingers up the sleeve of his tuxedo.

He shifted away from the spoiled debutante; he didn't like to be touched. "Yes," he replied curtly.

"Ohh, such a waste," Susan repeated. She gave him another head-to-toe assessment, shook her head, and drifted away, curiosity satisfied if nothing else.

"I must apologize for my daughter. Susan knows better than to ask that kind of question," he said, looking at his daughter's retreating back. "She's quite impetuous, and sometimes, her curiosity can make her seem rude."

"I understand," he said, not really understanding. He knew many of the people in the glittering ballroom didn't believe that the Others deserved the consideration awarded to 'true' humans.

He'd been volunteered to be one of the dancing monkeys at this circus. He knew that it was necessary to show the world that the Others could move amongst people without endangering the masses but, as far as he was concerned, it was just another form of slow torture. His boss had decided that he needed to come out of the shadows and learn to interact with people. He argued that he didn't need to 'interact' to do his job. He'd been overruled. So here he was, 'interacting' with Miami society. He stood with his back to a wall and didn't allow any of the gathering to get behind him: polite society or not, he wasn't letting down his guard. He'd been trained as an assassin and wasn't at ease in a crowd, especially under scrutiny. Right now, he worked for a department that rescued people from dangerous situations. There weren't that many jobs for people with his skill set.

Susan had been the first but not the last woman to ask the question about his sexuality. He really didn't understand it. The men who came to speak with him tended to ask questions regarding his training. They asked him the same inane questions as the politicians in Washington had asked his brethren. He hadn't been there, but he'd reviewed the footage before coming here. Couldn't they come up with anything original?

After two hours of submitting to the polite, and frequently not so polite interrogation, he'd had enough. He excused himself to go to the bar to get some water. He only drank water in public and only from a sealed bottle. In his estimation, there was no such thing as being too cautious. He quickly drained the bottle and reached for another. His fingers had a fine tremor. He fisted his hand and blinked hard. He felt nauseated, and his muscles started to tremble. Clearly, there'd been something in the water.

"Hey man, you okay?" Two men were reaching for him. "Let's get you to the bathroom. You wouldn't want to upchuck in front of all these fine folks." That wasn't going to happen. He tried to move away, but there had to have been a paralytic in the water. His knees buckled, and he would've fallen to the floor except for the hands that held him firmly. He was pulled and half carried towards the exit. The two men kept up encouraging chatter until they cleared the ballroom doors. After that, they were all business. They dragged him to the elevators. They kept a firm grip on him and didn't say a word. Down on the garage level, an SUV pulled up as soon as the elevator doors opened. They loaded him into the back, and the vehicle drove off.

He was fully conscious, but he couldn't move. At least he was able to negate the nausea by the time they reached the warehouse district down by the waterfront. He recognized the smell: that salty, rotten fish smell. The driver pulled up to a dilapidated building right next to the water. They were obviously expected. Four men came out, pulled him out of the cargo compartment, and dragged his unresponsive body across the broken concrete into the seemingly abandoned building.

They stripped him down to his skin and chained him up to a hook in the ceiling. They took turns working him over using their fists and baseball bats. He still couldn't move, so he stared, promising retribution. Whatever was going on, these men were pros, and they did their job without emotional involvement.

The orchestrator of his kidnapping and beating arrived after midnight. He recognized the man: Senator Calhoun. He'd been introduced earlier at the fundraiser. He was a very vocal opponent of Others' rights: in his estimation, they weren't human and should either be caged or used as lab rats.

The senator stood in front of him, examining him from head to toe. "Not a scar on you, and I know for a fact that you've been shot a few times. I know, *I know*, some of you are over fifty, and you all still look as though you were in your twenties. I want to know the secret of your regenerative abilities, and you're going to tell me." His demand was met with a blank stare. The prisoner hung limply from the chains, his body already black and blue from the vicious beating he'd ordered to 'soften' up the Other. He back-handed the bleeding man across the face. The wet sound reverberated in the empty room. The blow split the captive's lip, but he didn't make a sound.

"Okay, I guess we're going to be doing this the hard way." Calhoun backed away and signaled one of his men. "I know it has to do with blood, so let's make you bleed, shall we." He seemed to take great pleasure in watching the whipping, smiling when the lash made the prisoner's body arch.

The Other tried feigning weakness once again, screaming every time the lash hit. The pain was bad, but it wasn't anything he hadn't experienced before. After the fifth hit, the questions began. When he couldn't, or rather wouldn't answer, they'd punished him with another hit or another taste of the lash.

His people had great stamina and endurance. This was usually a gift. In this situation, it was a nightmare. Calhoun finally gave up.

"If you don't want to talk, I'll just have to run my own experiments." One of the men brought over a small bag and propped it on a discarded table. He opened the latches to reveal an assortment of medical instruments, including some scalpels.

Calhoun picked up one of the blades, walked the few steps over to the Other, and ran the flat of the blade against his chest. "Don't worry, I won't be using this on you. Yet. I don't want to waste any blood. Yet. Remember, the operative word is yet."

The Other mentally rolled his eyes. He knew he was in a dire predicament but did Calhoun really have to sound like a villain in a very bad movie? He watched one of Calhoun's men open a phlebotomy kit. Apparently, they were going to be civilized about taking his blood.

The man looked him over while donning gloves. His left arm was swabbed, and a needle was inserted into his forearm. Calhoun paced in front of him, obviously impatient.

It took about fifteen minutes to fill the one-pint bag. He'd been drugged and had already lost blood to the beating and lashing; the blood loss was problematic.

"I've tried a transfusion before, and it didn't work. Maybe drinking it is the way to go. I'm willing to try until you run out of blood," he said before drinking his blood, hot and fresh.

He was grateful that Calhoun didn't try to drink from his wounds. The secret was in body fluids but drinking his blood wouldn't get Calhoun the longevity he was obviously seeking. The Senator was in his sixties, overweight and florid. He was seeking the fountain of youth where it didn't exist.

"Nothing is happening," Calhoun said, looking at his hands. "I need more. Take a couple pints from him."

"Ah, boss, maybe you should wait."

Calhoun turned away from the prisoner and stared at his underling. "Why should I?" asked softly, dangerously. The man had better have a good reason for questioning his order.

"Any drug takes at least a few hours to take effect. I mean, the results could be inside before they're outside."

"What's your point?"

"It took planning to get this guy. If we kill him before we know anything, getting another one will take a while. That's all."

Calhoun considered this. "You have a point. I'll wait a few hours. If you're right, I'll see something before morning. Put him in the boat. We're going on a sea cruise."

The senator was wrong, and the man in chains wasn't about to educate him. The respite would give him some time to recover. All he needed was some rest, food and water. His people had extraordinary recuperative abilities, and they'd be looking for him. But it was not to be. He was dumped in a small damp hold. No food, no water, and certainly no rest. Sometime during the night, they came and rolled him in a tarp. He was carried outside and thrown onto a hard metal surface. By the sound and vibration, he deduced that it was a seaplane. He drifted in and out of consciousness for hours. The landing jarred his already battered body. He was lifted and dragged elsewhere and pushed down some stairs.

Twenty-four hours later, he was in bad shape. If he didn't get away from these people soon, they might actually stumble upon the great secret by process of elimination. There were many myths about his people, all of them false and most of them promulgated by his people themselves. Unfortunately, Calhoun was going to try something else. They dragged him up on deck, letting them carry most of his weight. He needed to conserve every ounce of energy.

Once they had him on the aft deck, they used a second set of handcuffs, threading it to the chain on his ankles. Then they forced them to his knees. He had a very bad feeling as to where this was going.

"He might not be willing to talk, but we can still try to see if the rumors are true," Calhoun said. The senator bent over, grabbed the prisoner's hair, and yanked up his head.

"Last chance," he offered menacingly. "If you thought that you were fucked before, well..." The prisoner stared glassy-eyed at his tormentor and slowly shook his head.

Calhoun dropped the head, "if that's the way you want to play it, don't say you weren't warned." He walked behind the prisoner and stroked his back, savoring the anticipation. The senator opened his pants and placed his hands on the prisoner's ass. The latter had stopped struggling. Calhoun was disappointed: it was more fun when they fought.

The Other had been waiting for this moment. He wasn't as stunned or as helpless as Calhoun had believed him to be. His earlier struggles had accomplished one thing: his back was to the sea. As soon as he felt the senator prepare to plunge into this body, he reared up and pushed back, throwing them both into the sea. They both sank several feet before Calhoun pushed himself away from his would-be victim and swam for the surface. The boat would turn around and pick him up.

Instinct had caused the Other to take a deep breath before hitting the water. What he hoped to accomplish, he didn't know. He sank to the sandy bottom. He was secured with heavy metal manacles, with his hands tied to his ankles. Even if he could swim, he'd only be placing himself back into the hands of his tormentors. Death was easier, and it would come soon.

He rolled onto his back and watched as Calhoun struggled to reach the surfaces. The boat had changed course and was turning around to pick up the senator.

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Tori had been exploring this part of the seabed when she heard the distinctive sound of a motorboat passing overhead. She looked up in time to see two bodies slam into the water. Idiots, she thought. She turned away and started swimming back to her sled: if there was another ship in the area, she needed to return to her own vessel. She was stopped by the three porpoises which were swimming with her. One of them positioned himself under her hand. It was an obvious attempt to take her somewhere. These were wild porpoises that swam with her by choice; if they wanted her to see something, she would go. She tightened her grip at the base of the porpoise's dorsal fin. He took off with the other two, pacing along. They swam directly to a man crouched on the seafloor. As she neared him, she was horrified by what she saw. He was shackled hand and foot, and small streamers of blood dissipated into the water behind him. When she looked into his eyes, she could see the acceptance of death. She wasn't going to let this man die. She unclipped her backup regulator, purged it, and then presented it. She wouldn't force him. This was his choice.

She was relieved when he accepted it. Okay, the first hurdle was taken care of: he had air. She needed to get those manacles off of him. She didn't have the tools on her or on her sled, and blood in the water would attract unwanted visitors. They needed to get out of here as quickly as possible. She reached into the utility pack hanging from her cummerbund. She pulled out a nine-foot safety line, threaded it under the man's arm, across his chest and back to her, and clipped herself off. They were now bound together, and she could safely inflate her BCD enough to take his weight as well as hers.

Tori wrapped her arm around his waist and lifted them off the bottom. She started to swim them back to her sled. They'd only covered half the distance when the sharks appeared out of the haze. She needed more time. She knew the porpoises could defend them, but a distraction would be best. She signaled to the porpoise swimming beside her and then pointed to the man still treading water on the surface. She didn't know if it would understand.

She was relieved when it took off like a bullet and quickly reached the thrashing swimmer. The porpoise opened his mouth and bit down hard. He did this several times and then swam back to Tori. There was now fresh blood in the water and a body flailing on the surface. The sharks headed to this vulnerable food source.

Tori hadn't waited but continued on to her sled. Once there, she deflated her BCD and unclipped herself from the safety line. The sled was equipped with a large air supply. She opened a compartment, took out a full face mask and showed it to the man. She mimed exchanging his regulator for the mask. He nodded his understanding, took one last deep breath, and then spit out the regulator. Tori was already purging the face mask as she placed it over his head. She continued until there was no water left. She then tightened the straps and looked into his eyes. She signaled okay and blinked once. She signaled trouble and blinked twice. She pointed at him and signaled okay. He blinked once. She signaled okay again, and he blinked once. Satisfied that he was breathing without trouble, she went about fastening him to the sled for the trip back.

He didn't understand where his savior had come from, but he wasn't questioning his good fortune. He'd stayed conscious through sheer willpower. Salt in his wounds was

excruciating, and the edges of his vision were blackening, beckoning him to oblivion. He needn't worry about the regulator falling from his mouth with a full face mask. She'd also protected him from the sharks. He was safe for a time. He allowed the blackness to take him.

Tori was aware of the moment the man passed out. Now that he was unconscious, she didn't have to worry about hurting him. She put him on the wing of the sled and used tie-downs to secure him into position. She made sure his face was towards her so that she could monitor his condition.

She started the motor and lifted off the bottom. She was surprised but grateful that the porpoises flanked the sled. Her ship was anchored in the cove around the point. It took twenty minutes at full speed to reach it.

It was only when she approached the ship that she realized she had a problem: how was she going to get him aboard? Judging by his musculature, her merman had to weigh close to two hundred and forty pounds. She wasn't going to be able to lift him.

She maneuvered the sled to the underside of her ship and up through the open moon pool doors. Once inside, she closed the bottom doors but did not pump out the water. She filled the buoyancy tanks and the sled rose to the surface. She swam to the ladder and keyed in the code to open the upper doors. She climbed out and took off her gear. She stared down at her catch. The man was lying face down, and the damage to his back was worse than she'd previously thought. The saltwater might have cleaned the wounds, but it had to hurt. She couldn't let him wake up to that kind of pain.

"First things first. Let's get you out of there."

Tori hurried over to her workshop. She had bolt cutters, which would at least get him out of that position. Next, she went to the infirmary and collected a wire basket stretcher. A few moments later, she was back in the dive chamber. She jumped into the moon pool and cut the chains linking her merman's wrists and ankles. Next, she cut the chains on the handcuffs and leg shackles. Now the man could be stretched out. She attached the basket stretcher to the hoist and lowered it all down to the sled. She climbed down again and rolled the man into the stretcher, tying him down. Tori removed the mask and checked his breathing. She lifted the stretcher out of the water enough so that he was completely out of the water.

"Okay. So far, so good."

Climbing out of the pool once more, Tori lifted the stretcher out of the pool and swung it over the edge. While it was still suspended a few feet above the deck, she gently rinsed the man with fresh water.

"Now what?" She needed to get him into a bed. She didn't have a gurney, and she lived alone. Humm, she did have an oversized office chair and it had wheels. She draped a few towels on the seat and back and tipped him into it with great care. Once she'd successfully accomplished this maneuver, she used a few bungee cords to hold him in place. She'd never been so grateful that the ship had an elevator. She rolled the chair into the confines of the small cab. She closed the door and ran up the companionway to meet him on the next level. She pushed him down the passageway to one of the VIP suites. Once there, she pushed down the armrest and tugged, pulled, and rolled the man onto the bed.

She laid him on his side, facing the doorway. She thought he might be somewhat disoriented when he woke up and, seeing only a wall, might panic.

She stopped and shook her head. "Nah, this guy would never panic. He'd kill you first." She pushed the chair back into the passageway and returned to the infirmary. Once there, she retrieved the heavy-duty emergency kit from the wall and grabbed a small suture kit from one of the drawers. She didn't yet know if she needed all the supplies, but she didn't want to make two trips.

She walked carefully into the room, but he was still non-responsive. She moved behind him onto the bed and pushed him flat onto his stomach. It would be easier to work on his back.

She opened the kit, found the topical anesthetic and sprayed it liberally on his back, arms, legs and buttocks. She worked on his right side, removing any remaining debris in the wounds, applying disinfectant, and closing some of the injuries with butterfly tapes. Once she was satisfied that she'd addressed all the wounds, she moved to his left side and repeated the process.

By the time she was finished, her back hurt and her fingers were twitchy and raw. She was used to meticulous work but not while applying a lot of pressure, the kind necessary to pull and hold skin together while removing the paper backer from the butterfly tapes.

Tori stood and stretched. She repacked the kit before checking her patient once again. He seemed to be breathing a bit easier. She pushed him back into the recovery position.

"Okay, kiddo. I have to get things settled in order to cast off. There's a storm due later tonight and I plan to be far away when it hits. I'll be back to check on you later," she promised the unconscious man.

Over the next three hours, Tori was very busy. The sled needed to be hoisted, cradled, cleaned and secured. The dive gear was also rinsed and stored.

She checked on her merman before grabbing a quick bite in the kitchen on her way to the bridge. Her ship, the *Minerva*, was a marvel of modern technology: a three-masted single-handle ninety-meter schooner. Tori could direct all the ship's functions from the bridge situated amidships. She sat down and studied the weather patterns on the console display. The storm was coming in from the northeast. If she headed southeast, she could avoid the worst of it as long as she left right now.

Tori rolled her chair over the command console and lifted the anchors. Next, she warmed up and engaged the engines. Slowly, the ship moved out of the cove. Once clear of the surf, Tori started to unfurl and raise the sails. The wind picked up, and her speed climbed to seventeen knots. The *Minerva* was flying. Tori decided to go outside and use the ship wheel to direct the ship. It was an exhilarating feeling and one of the reasons why she lived at sea.

With the powerful engines working in conjunction with the sails, the *Minerva* was soon in open water. It wasn't long before the island of Vieques was a speck behind her. Tori had initially thought that St-Croix would far be enough, but she decided to make for St-Kitts. The island was three hundred and three nautical miles away. Tori knew she was in for a hard night. She'd long ago perfected the art of night sailing: sleeping in twenty-

minute blocks: that was the length of time it took a ship to come over the horizon. Twenty miles out, she cut the engines. The *Minerva* was a fuel hog, but it was well worth it in an emergency, and rescuing her merman definitely constituted an emergency situation.