

The Pearl Khalil Carries

"And that one," Sabine demanded happily.

Her pudgy hands grabbed for the next stone in the belt, unbothered with clutching a neighbouring sea rock that promised her safety. The water was shallow where they rested, especially at low tide. Still, without him beneath her, she would sink. Khalil flexed his tail instinctively, shifting to hold the full weight of her body. He supported her easily, bobbing in time to the ocean current. The sunlight bounced off his skin but Sabine simmered pink under the oppressive tropical heat. She laughed as though on an aquatic roller coaster, revelling in the foamy spray that tickled her toes, oblivious to her impending burn.

Lying on her stomach, resting on his turquoise scales gilded with gold, she watched schools of flashing fish swirling underneath the surface. Despite the midday glare, she caught the shimmering and shifting rainbow, just out of reach, and it filled her with awe.

For an even better view, she swatted her salt-stiff sandy hair away from her face, exposing the fading bruise on her shoulder. Her impatience dissolved into a giggle as her hand broke the glassy surface. The fish did not scatter. They swam towards her fingers curiously. Sucked at crumbs she had forgotten were there. She shot Khalil a glance through her salt-crusting lashes, shy wonder flickering across her face before her gaze returned to the fish. She never stopped marvelling at the surreal sight surrounding her. A place existed where she was never afraid; out here, the sea never raised its voice.

That giddy intermission ultimately did not distract from the rocks on his belt, slung low on his waist. The ribbon of gold boasted at least a few dozen glittering keepsakes, of varying colours and cuts. Khalil wore his dazzling collection proudly, and, of late, it had captivated the little French girl.

After a few chance meetings in Blue Moon Cave, her fascination had shifted from his tail to the ropes of jewellery cockily draped across his torso. His tail was shiny but merfolk anatomy was not a topic that inspired great interest in Sabine.

'You have a tail.'

'Yes.'

'I don't.'

'No, you don't.'

'I can't grow one?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'Okay.'

Yet, the jewels came up time and time again. In that moment, it was a pearl that rolled between her pointing finger and thumb, reflecting her wide, crooked smile. Like all the gems before it, it became her new favourite.

"Tell me the story. About this one," she urged, unaware of the drumming waves creeping up around them.

"I got this one on my eighth Moonset day." Khalil pretended to think, rubbing the hollow of his cheek as he paused and steered them closer to the shoreline. "It had rained all night. A great omen."