

The Merman, My Man by Black Velvet

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An iron gate blocked by steel bars was in my way. Though I could see through the gaps into the darkness inside, I saw several turns heading towards the left side, but there was no way of telling where it connected to. I also saw wall sculptures over the walls on both sides—the aqueduct may have been a tourist spot before, though it was now closed down for some reason.

I saw the gap between the iron gates then and tried to push myself inside, standing on my sides so that I could squeeze my way in. Despite being skinny, however, I realized that I just wouldn't make it through.

If I couldn't make it through when I was this slim, then someone as burly as Dicken would certainly not get through, not to mention that there was a long, thick tail hidden beneath his wide trench coat. Even if he had some method to turn himself human, he would never get through that narrow entrance.

But how did he disappear from here? Could he be underwater like I was?

I promptly jumped back into the nearby canal, but it was only as deep as an adult person's height and very narrow. Could he really hide underwater with his huge figure? Where?

I couldn't help doubting what I had seen, and worried that I was imagining it. Looking around, I found that the bars around me were brightly lit, whereas the depths of that aqueduct was still pitch-black, and hence leapt atop the gondola, sitting on it as I reached out my hand and touched the coarse wooden planks—it reminded me of Dicken's thick, powerful tail, as if his scales were brushing over my palm.

The downpour persisted, and I finally felt cold as the icy chill of the rain continued to assault me, as if I would freeze into an icicle myself.

I knew I should leave for my own health, but my heart was bellowing at me, 'Don't leave! He is here, he is watching you, and it took you so much to chase him here!'

I closed myself and inhaled forcefully, attempting to taste the various scents in the air. Even so, there was nothing to be found, let alone that intoxicating scent of his.

I know that I was lying to myself because of my reluctance to give up on that fragment of hope. But if Dicken really had returned from the merfolk's realm, why didn't he come to find me? And he promised to find me wherever I was...

He probably didn't. In fact, he might have long since given up on me, a human, and naturally would not return to the embrace of humankind who had virtually wiped out his entire race.

That reasoning was most logical—after all, how resistant had I been towards the idea of going with him to the merfolk's home, after all? I even chose to leave him on multiple occasions because I did not want to become a mermaid.

Was that why our connection had long since been severed? Perhaps all trace of it was gone even if his blood flowed within my veins.

'Isn't it funny, Lina? You're now relentlessly chasing after the one whom you wanted to get away from, and reluctant to give up even if that hope might merely have been your imagination.'

Hell, I was falling apart.

"Are you here, Dicken? Do you see me? What do I have to do to make you see me? Come out, Dicken... I beg you! "

I wiped away the rainwater over my face and clenched my fist as I punched the gondola, even as I screamed like a beast. However, I did not get any response.

In despair, I lay down on the book and stared blankly into the skies, watching as raindrops poured endlessly from above. My eyelids were getting heavy, but just as I couldn't fight the exhaustion and was about to close my eyes, I glimpsed a shadow that appeared in a flash in the water, and the entire gondola shook.

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I promptly sat up in reflex and jumped into the water, searching around crazily. Even so, all I found was the vague illumination of the lights from both sides of the canal, and no glimpse of a fishtail.

Realizing that the glimpse I had a moment ago could be an illusion, I was crumbling inside and started to flail my arms wildly against the water like a child

throwing a tantrum, but I just couldn't care about the weird looks pedestrians nearby were throwing at me.

"Dicken! Get out here, you bastard!" I yelled maniacally. "I know it's you! It has to be! Are you punishing me? Did you want me to see me lose my mind thinking about you? Or did you just want to see how much I yearn for you? Well, let me tell you this—you've totally won! I've been searching for you for over a year... A whole year! If I can't see you again... F*ck, I've really gone crazy..."

I lowered my head in despair and buried my face in the water, feeling as if something was stuck in my chest as despair overcame me.

But suddenly, a crazy thought occurred to me as if I was given guidance.

I had no idea if I was really crazy, but I climbed back on the gondola and rowed it as close to the iron gate as possible, so that pedestrians wouldn't see the craziness I was up to.

After all, it was actually a little crazy, and anyone who saw me would definitely think that I was a woman with a disgusting, obscene fetish.

Having hid the gondola in the darkness, I lay on my back and undid the buttons of my thoroughly soaked shirt, one by one.

My movement was very slow as if I was performing some sort of ritual sacrifice, and I continued to take off layers of my own clothes until I was completely n*ked.

I continued to lay there quietly, using myself as bait and waiting. I even started to run my fingers all over my own body as Dicken had done so many times, repeatedly groping my sensitive spots, rearing myself as if offering myself.

Even if I was feeling utterly embarrassed, my heart was racing and I felt that I must have gone crazy, but that is exactly what I wanted to do—it was my wager, because I know how much Dicken the pervert liked my body!

I waited quietly, my hands never once stopping, even as I wondered how long that pervert would

resist. It had been over a year since he had touched my body, and would he be even more thirsty now, or had he lost interest?

At the same time, my eyes were wide open like a hunter, combing through every corner where someone might be looking, but there was nothing unusual going on around me.

Only the darkness and the sounds of raindrops played in tune with my motions, as if to mock me for how ridiculous and foolish I was being.

Unable to persevere any longer, I closed my eyes dejectedly as despondence crept all over me. Still, naked, I sat up and hugged my legs, resting my head on my knees as I watched my legs go red from the cold.

That was when a particular scent wafted out of the aqueduct. Not only was it starkly different from the dank air that was supposed to be in there, but it was a sweet aroma I was very familiar with! I looked up in an instant like an addict who had caught a whiff of drugs, my mind blowing up right then. That was when I saw a silhouette appear from the corner of the aqueduct, behind the iron gate. It was just like the first time I had seen it at the deep sea research room—he slowly poked his head out of the water, locks of his black hair spread over the surface.

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Dicken wasn't baring his upper body like he used to. His black trench coat was soaked and sticking to his body, while his collar was opened and exposed his chest that was as hard as stone. At the same time, his skin was as pale as an ancient, noble vampire.

He was staring at me from behind a black mask that covered the upper half of his face. I couldn't see his eyes, but I could feel the fire from his magical eyes, even as he admired my naked body with burgeoning lust in his gaze without constraint.

Fuck! I had finally forced this pervert out of hiding!

Complex emotions filled my heart as myriad feelings erupted like a typhoon in my chest, and a surging stream of heat rushed up my head.

My eyes turned red in a split second, but I pretended to lie down again and looked smugly at him as if I was the victor—despite being naked and looking as if I was trying to seduce him.

"Dicken, you bastard!" I cursed quietly, my tears welling even as my eyes couldn't resist the urge to look at his body, wandering over his muscular figure. Somehow, I couldn't help gulping while my breaths turned rushed.

I was not tormented by my libido in the days when Dicken was gone, and my mutations seemed to fade with his absence as well... but when I presumed that my yearning for his body would disappear as well, I realized that I was very far off the mark.

After all, there were countless nights where I had dreamt the same thing: being one with Dicken in savage union, and I always woke up with a puddle between my legs.

My body missed him and yearned for him so much— hopeful that he would defile me! F*ck!

And what about Dicken? Did he yearn for me like I did?

I watched his expression, and I could see his Adam's apple bobbing restlessly while his breaths turned ragged. For some reason, he wasn't moving towards me at all even though his libido was bursting, and merely watched me yearningly and showing no inclination to move.

B*stard!

"Come here... or I'll leave!" I couldn't help swimming up to him, so I grabbed the iron bars of the gate, shaking it firmly even as I stared tightly at him, and worked hard to calm myself. "Why aren't you talking, Dicken? And what's with that getup?"

Dicken merely watched me from afar but still said nothing. I was immensely confused then, though I relaxed my hold on the iron bars as my maniacal emotion seemed to be eased just then. Now, I merely lean my head on the iron gate as I watch him quietly.

After a moment, he moved —swimming towards me while my heart pounded, threatening to jump out of my body. Then, when he came near the iron gate, I stiffened and suddenly couldn't move, and could only watch as his hands reached out between the bars, past my

head and around my neck. He held the back of my head, pressing me so that I met his cold, tender lips, before he kissed me wildly and devoured my lips.

My whole body shuddered —that kiss had come too sudden for me to react, and my tears rolled without control over our locked lips.

I only recovered some of my senses after he had kissed me for a long while. My aggression overcame me just then, and I stretched my hands through the iron bars as I pulled his hair and devoured his lips wildly and clumsily. I savored the taste of saltwater on his mouth, and even as he bit my lip, his tongue was thrashing around in my mouth. There was no doubt that we were two lustful beasts, tangled and hard to part.

My chest was plastered squarely over his, and the iron bars of the gate could well be flattened by our bodies. Even if it stood firm between us and my chest hurt even as I pushed against it, I paid it no heed in the least—all I cared about was Dicken, and at that very moment, the world seemed to have turned still.

Without knowing it, our mouths were filled with the taste of blood, but his arms remained tightly wrapped around my body, holding me even tighter as his lips

shifted beneath to my chin. He then started to lick and slurp without constraint and lustfully. I shuddered even as I reached out with my arms, intent on pulling him closer to me and touched the clenching

skin beneath his trench coat, but he caught my hands and kept them on his back, preventing me from moving around.

With the iron door keeping my body in place, I could only look up as he defiled me. Amid the pouring rain, my mind was going blank from the waves of stimulations. In fact, I wondered if I was just having a dream I could wake from at any movement.

Hence, amid Dicken's assault, a flustered murmur escaped my lips. "Open up the gate, Dicken. I want to see you..."

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Dicken did not answer me, but his arms tightened over my waist while his lips slid down to my neck. He nestled my neck from behind the mask, inhaling my scent deeply. He then put a webbed claw over my head, petting me like one would a child, before tucking the hair that was covering my forehead behind my ear.

"Dicken..."

I looked longingly into his enrapturing gaze, and reached out to touch his cheek when a woman shrieked, "Hey, what are you doing?!"

I flinched in surprise and turned to find a girl, holding a bucket of laundry on the shore. She had probably come down for a wash, but was startled by Dicken and me.

I was left stammering awkwardly, unsure of how to explain what was going on right then, just as I heard a loud splash behind me —Dicken had dived into the water, and was gone without a trace before I could catch him.

"Where are you going?!" I was more angry than surprised, and slammed at the iron gate furiously, but my response was the banging and the splashing in the night.

Why was Dicken hiding from me? What was he doing? Was he hiding some sort of secret?

I frowned in irritation, finding the scene at once awkward yet laughable. After all, Dicken used to do everything he could to woo me and ogle me, but it was the complete opposite now—I was now both the stalker and a voyeur! And it was frustrating that I had no idea where he had gone!

Fuck! How did this happen?! Extremely discontent, I began to scour every inch of the iron gate, even diving in the water to check the bottom —there had to be some sort of mechanism that allowed someone to pass through, and I must not have noticed it the first time around because it was relatively well concealed.

Soon, I managed to reach a particular iron bar that was loose. Gritting my teeth, I grabbed it and shook it firmly a few times, and ended up prying it off directly.

Shit! To think I didn't notice that at all just now!

With that done, I promptly swam back to my gondola, put on my clothes, and crawled through the bottom of the iron gate.

"Dicken! " I yelled his name even as I swam deep into the aqueduct, and was left facing several pitch-black holes after turning a corner. I had no idea where it connected —it could be the sewers of Venice, and it would be an underground maze.

I rejoiced that I now had night-vision right then. How else would I notice the path beneath the water?

That being said, I had no idea what Dicken could be thinking. He was a king of the sea and he had his freedom, so why would he crawl under the filth of the sewers?

What could he be up to? Honestly his intentions were becoming less obvious to me now.

Meanwhile, I did all I could to push aside various rubbish ranging from cigarette butts to beer bottles that were floating beside me, and breathe in all the senses down here as much as I could. Even if it stinked, I was hoping to pick up Dicken's whereabouts since all I could do was track his faint scent along the sewers.

I had felt like a rat before, but now felt that the more precise description here was a cat—like one that hadn't eaten for days, I was tracking Dicken's fishy scent!

Even as my thoughts were left in disarray, I heard more sounds aside from the sound of flowing water in the quiet sewers... those were voices in conversation combined with music.

Could there be some bustling spot over my head? Where was I, for that matter?

I advanced along the voice, and saw faint light shining from above, and patted my head. Then, with a firm shove, I opened the manhole and carefully poked my head out of the gap to find that it was a casino!

Smoke was swirling across the room, and the light was rather dim. Still, I could see a group of people gathered beside a table laden with stacks of betting chips—money and desires were the constant vices of this place.

It appears that everyone's attention was on the table, and no one cared that I had climbed out of the manhole.

I sniffed, and was positive that Dicken's scent was right here.

After climbing out from beneath the floor, I carefully looked around, and noticed that the building had been remodeled from an abbey—wall sculptures filled the roof and the pillars, and there were various murals on the wall.

It was simply bizarre. What would Dicken be doing here? Did he get bored of talking to fishes in the sea, and decide to come onshore for a few rounds of poker, experiencing the amusement humans have?

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I slipped my hands into my trouser pockets as if it was natural, and hunched my back to pretend to be a gambling addict even as I looked around for Dicken. However, I was going up the second floor when I saw a crewmate from the Seeker. It was Luna—a Russian girl with whom I was quite close to, and she appeared to be in panic even as she tried to hide from someone, and was hurrying down the stairs.

I realized immediately that this was the casino where David had come to make his deal, and a foreboding sensation grew in my head when I saw how flustered Luna was. I rushed up to her and grabbed her by her wrist, and clasped my hand over her mouth before she could scream, all while dragging her to the dark corner behind the stairs.

"Calm down, Luna—it's me. What happened?" I asked with a hushed voice.

"T-The mafia..." Luna's shoulders were shaking and her breaths were ragged even as she cried, "They cut off one of David's hands!"

"What?!" I was dumbfounded.

Luna's tears began to roll down her cheeks—she was clearly traumatized. "I don't know the specific reason, but it seems that there are problems with the stuff we

were trying to trade. Some of them were saying that the gem David brought was a fake, and the rules dictate that he will have one hand hacked off, but we'll still have to trade in something else to make up for it!"

"Calm down, Luna. Take me there to see what is actually going on." I took a deep breath to calm myself. After experiencing so much in the last few years of my life, I was much more composed in managing crises.

Moreover, David had saved my life, and his refuge was what afforded me a place to call my own over the last year. Even if what Luna had said was something I did not want to see at all, I still had to try to come up with something and help.

I clapped Luna's shoulder then, and my words were as much a reassurance to her as myself. "The mafia would probably have their own rules, and they've already had David pay with one hand—they wouldn't kill him if we manage to make amends in time."

Luna calmed down following our exchange, too. She was an agile burglar who had strong mental fortitude, and she composed herself soon enough.

She led me to the second floor but we did not enter any of the rooms, and headed into a washroom instead. There was a platform outside the window, and we carefully climbed over to reach the window of another room.

I couldn't help gasping once I peered through the curtains and into the room.

Several gun-wielding mafia members were surrounding David beside the gambling table in the room, who was pressing a stump that used to be his hand. His palm was gone from the wrist-down, and I admired the strength of his will that he did not pass out. While blood seemed drained out of his face, he still clenched his teeth as he faced the burly man standing opposite him—a member of the Mora family, if my guess was right.

David was very calm despite his injury, too. I shifted my body just then so that I could peer inside the room from another angle, and I found something sparkling on the table just as I had expected. It looked like a gem, but it had been sliced in half by a sharp dagger, and a luminous blue fluid was flowing out from within.

My eyelid twitched in reflex, and my eyes soon widened at the object on the table, immediately understanding why Dicken had showed up here.

I recognized the blue fluid that was leaking out, because it was the crystal that was detached from Dicken's chest! It belonged to that merman, just like the one which was inserted into my own body!

It seems that David had managed to scoop it out of the sea by chance, but was under the impression that it was a gem, and tried to give it to the mafia without having anyone appraise it!

Oh my god!

“Tell me, David—what the hell is this? There’s water flowing in there, or could it be your tears? Don’t tell me you don’t know that trust goes both ways in making deals, so how could you sell us a fake gem like that?”

A voice could be heard from within the room, and I could see the burly man from the Mora family pressing his hand on the blue fluid over the table with a frightening glower. “You swindled me off a huge chunk of cash last time, David, and you came back before I went looking for you? Either way, you’ve brought this upon yourself, so pay the price for your greed now. Either have your people bring the real gem, or I’ll keep your other hand.”

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“You have to trust me, Mr. Mora—I would never dare to cross you. I honestly believe that it’s a gemstone, and just look at how mystical it is: it would definitely fetch millions even if it wasn’t a gem,” David explained through grinding teeth. “I salvaged it from a German shipwreck that was marked with the Nazis’ emblem, and you should know the treasures they have. Moreover, it was locked in a safe—why would it be protected so well if it’s worth nothing? Mr. Mora, I swear that something valuable must be inside.”

“Oh, my poor David —I’m just not interested in your explorer’s crap. All I care about is whether this thing could get me more weed and heroin, but now I’m starting to think you and your paltry tricks are costing us too much.”

Mora slammed his hand furiously on the table then, and a man beside them immediately seized David by the stump that was once his wrist, prompting a scream from David. I felt my body turn numb and couldn’t help turning away, even as I told myself that this wasn’t good.

We had no idea that the items we salvaged off the Arctic Ocean did not please the Moras, since I had no idea what compensation they were demanding.

Moreover, that was supposed to be half a year’s worth of income—even if I didn’t mind giving up my share to help David, it was uncertain for others,

because we were all desperate fugitives whose only lifeline was money.

At the same time, Luna had begun to panic again. Covering her ears, she murmured feebly, “It’s over, it’s over... We somehow got on the wrong side of the mafia, we’re so dead...”

“Luna, go back to the boat and tell the others to bring as much valuables as they can, alright? I’m staying here—I’ll keep an eye on the situation to act accordingly, “ I whispered into Luna’s ear, and she nodded.

Still, just as she was about to leave, I heard a commotion from the direction of the gambling tables on the first floor, converging towards this room. Soon, a door knock could be heard.

“Mr. Mora? The godmother has arrived.” “F*ck! Why would that bitch come here?!”

Mora’s expression turned from ferocity to fluster, and even before he could receive his visitor, the door was brusquely shoved open, and in came a blonde woman of stunning, noble looks. She was the godmother known as Miya, dressed in a black coat embroidered with golden threads that played up her imposing presence, and the sound of her heels clicking against the floor sent chills up the spine of anyone who heard it. Reaching Mora in a few steps, she promptly whipped up a dagger and held it against Mora’s head.

“Mora, darling—who afforded you the bravery to cut deals behind my back?” Her icy voice shows no emotion even as she spoke. “That thing over there is much more valuable than the gemstones you crave, and a company from Germany has already reserved it from me and I can’t wait to buy it off that gentleman. You, on the other hand, decided that it was better to hack his hand off and destroy it.”

Even before she finished, her hands moved viciously and stabbed the silver dagger over the back of Mora’s hand. For a split second, Mora screamed even more horrifically than David, but even before I could breathe a sigh of relief from the turn of events, I was taken aback by the sight of another figure slowly entering the room.

The figure wore a black mask that covered his bewitching gaze, and his long black hair was tied behind his tail. He was taller than everyone else present, and I judged him to be almost two meters tall from how his head almost reached the top of the doorframe. The burly mafia members around him were dwarfed by his presence, and everyone around him couldn’t help staring at him as his presence screamed danger.

As for me, I couldn’t resist staring at his lower body, as if to find out from his black trench coat if it was a pair of legs or a fishtail there. If those weren’t legs, would he really be able to hide his giant tail?

I had no idea how Dicken had altered himself to look like a human, but I knew that he had come for the crystals which contained his bloodline—those were his children, after all.

Aside from the one which was broken, the others must be in that woman’s possession. That must be why he had assumed another identity to get close to that woman, and I finally had an explanation for his weird behavior and why he had shown up here.

That being said, retrieving the crystals won't be easy—I could tell that the German company which the woman spoke of was the same organization which consisted of Laura and Gary. Whether they had sea back then, the Nazis would never abandon their grand plan over the fate of two comrades, and must have been keeping a close, discreet eye on how things developed.

Suddenly, Luna exclaimed in shock, "Isn't that huge man the elite assassin serving Miya? He's said to have albinism, and I think his name is Loyal."

What? Assassin?!

Was that the identity Dicken had assumed after integrating into human society? It was indeed a fitting identity which made hiding his whereabouts easy, since assassins were as mysterious as they were unfathomable. "I heard that he's Miya's lover too? Now that I see him, I guess he really could pin her down," Luna added just then.

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"Oh... Lover, huh?" I mumbled hoarsely, feeling as if something was suddenly stuck in my throat.

Luna noticed that I was behaving weirdly, and asked, "What's wrong, Linda?"

"N-Nothing. It seems David will be fine for a while— we've gotten lucky this time." I rubbed my nose

even as I changed the subject.

In the room, Miya's people entered and picked up the shattered crystal on the table, while Dicken stood coldly and dutifully behind Miya as her bodyguard. The dim light hid his facial expression from everyone else, but I could feel him staring closely at the shattered crystal in despair and misery.

His bloodline was extremely vital for what few surviving merfolk right now, and as their leader, he had a duty to make his race flourish. I was convinced that, given his character, he would kill every person in the room if he wanted to.

And yet, he was maintaining an eerie calmness, standing upright in a corner like a sculpture—that is, until Miya approached him, leaned in, and said something into

his ear. That was when his lips parted slightly, and he was somehow smiling as he responded in Italian.

I must admit that Dicken looked just like a mysterious, noble knight, and it was a damn

enchanting mesmerizing sight.

At the same time, I instantly felt an indescribable yet uncomfortable sensation gnawing my heart, as if I were an upset young wife spotting my husband having an affair. Still, I felt even more upset at the sight of the shattered crystal.

As if by instinct, I began to wonder what I meant to Dicken—was I just a progeny carrying his blood? Did he protect me just because I was his blood?

I promptly stopped myself at that thought, refusing to think any further! Even so, the bitterness in my heart was unstoppable.

F*ck!

As if to throw those thoughts out of my head, I shook it as firmly as possible.

Meanwhile, Miya was ready to leave. I watched as Dicken saw her off and picked up the crystal on the table, carefully picking it up and holding it in his palm.

He was wearing a pair of leather gloves, and I recalled the scene just now when he embraced me. Even if he had turned human, there were many minute details that he did not successfully change—there must still be webs between his fingers, hence the need for gloves.

At that very moment, I watched his towering figure restraining a shudder. He must be holding back his extreme agony.

And that made my heart ache as well.

“Let’s go, Linda—David definitely needs us right

now,” Luna prompted beside my ear just then.

I also noticed that Dicken was heading for the door, and turned to Luna to gesture for her to leave first.

Then, I bounded across the room and leapt in through the window, intent on chasing down Dicken, but he had already disappeared outside the doorway.

I swore under my breath and dashed down the stairs, praying that he hadn’t gone far. Nonetheless, as I ran through the corridor, a door suddenly opened, a hand extending and grabbing me by the rear of my collar.

I was pulled into the darkness in a split second, and a pungent aroma struck my nose immediately, allowing me to realize who it was. I didn't struggle at all as Dicken picked me up and headed for the sewers, while I greedily leaned over his chest and took in his scent.

Once the manhole was covered, he held on to me tightly as he pressed me over the dank walls of the sewers. His body seemed to be shaking from agitation, and his breathing was rushed and rough, just before I heard the sound of fabric being torn apart.

I looked down towards the sound to find that the hem of Dicken's trench coat was bulging, as a firm and powerful object flailed, seemingly struggling as it tried to break out of Dicken's clothes.

I wanted to tear his clothes apart in reflex, but he tore it on his own instead, and I was left stunned by what I saw.

I'm not sure if I should call that thing a 'leg' because it didn't look like one at all. It was as if a fish's tail was sliced through the middle, and yet both were still covered in black, shining scales, with the tips being squeezed into a pair of black leather shoes. I could scarcely imagine what was inside—human feet? Or fins that were stuffed inside? Moreover, there was newly grown skin that was now connecting the fish tail once more. It was obvious that the 'legs' were doing all they could to return to each other, and recombine into that long, thick, and black fishtail.

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"It's very unstable, Linda. It's turning back into a tail again—I need a place to hide." Dicken watched me, even as he spoke quietly in Mermish that I could understand perfectly.

I did a double take as I watched him. Those were the first words I had heard from him after so many years. At once familiar and unknown, his voice left my whole body trembling.

Dicken patted my hand with his leather-gloved hand then, and it soon slithered down to my nose and then my lips as he spoke raspily, "Do you still fear me now?"

Nonetheless, I said nothing and simply grabbed his mask, firmly tearing off his face. It did not change despite his transfiguration: pale, handsome, and with

pronounced facial bones. However, the upper tip of his ears resembled plant shoots slowly

growing out of the ground, and while such an appearance could be a little frightening to other humans, I found it absolutely adorable, even funny.

I couldn't help giggling then, and tugged at his ears as if playing with a big dog. He wrapped his arms tightly around my waist as if in punishment, and pointedly bit me on the chin. Sensitive, I promptly shrunk my neck just as loud footsteps echoed above us—this was obviously not the place for a tryst, and I glanced at the complex sewers before asking, “ Dicken, do you know where we can go?”

Dicken did not respond, but he had to be familiar with the sewers of Venice.

After all, even as he kept his back to me, we were swiftly walking through the maze-like sewers. He did not hesitate to step through each turn and junction, as if he was born there.

And judging from that alone, he must have been moving around this place. In fact, this might well be his secret base that kept his unstable human form hidden.

I leaned on Dicken's body, watching as the tip of his ears turned sharp, reviving my long-faded curiosity as a biologist even as I couldn't help wondering how he had changed his appearance.

Was it his own ability that altered his physical structure? Or perhaps he had discovered some drug that he could use from the Nazis' sunken ship that facilitated it? Still, it was unbelievable for a biologist whether it was the former or the latter, but explainable if I categorized Dicken as an extraterrestrial lifeform. In other words, we could not apply human logic to our race.

The only theory I had was Dicken's journey over the last year or so: he had found out about the sinking of the Nazi's ship, but when David fished the crystals out of the sea by chance, he tracked the crystals here to Venice, and hid here in order to gather them.

It must have been easy to gain recognition in the mafia-controlled underbelly of Venice given his intelligence and ability. He infiltrated their organization by using the identity of Loyal, gaining trust as an assassin, before using the opportunity to sabotage the deals between the mafia and the Germans to seize the crystals.

In fact, I just had to consider it for a moment to decide that the rumor of an affair between Dicken and Miya was mere rumors. Given that Dicken's lower body was unstable, it was most likely hearsay, spread by bored gossipers among the mafia.

After all, who could hate the tale of a scandalous love affair between a young and beautiful godmother and an assassin?

F*ck! It's all bullshit! I'm not interested in that stuff anyway—hell, who cares?!

Even as I told that in my own head, I couldn't help remembering the way Miya looked at Dicken, and how she leaned towards him to whisper into his ear. Rolling my eyes, my hands that were wrapped around Dicken's long, firm neck that was covered under his thick black hair. Like a tame, oversized cat sprawled over a gigantic piece of sashimi.

The gigantic sashimi seemed to feel my dependence as well, and loosened his shoulders as he walked so that I could be more comfortable as I lay over his back, and thought to myself: this explains why Dicken didn't come looking for me for over eighteen months. He was carrying out his clandestine plans to ensure the future of the merfolk race, and as leader, he had to put aside his personal relationships—he did not have time to care where I was, which was why I couldn't find him.

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I sniffed, inhaling the strong sweet scent deep within my lungs even as the repressed sensation of disappointment swelled over my chest, and I felt bitter once again.

Still, I forced myself to smile despite my pain as another thought occupied my head: I was no more important than a descendant to Dicken, just like the crystals he had spread across various lands. Though he searched for me and protected me, he did all that to protect his blood which flows in my body—I am one of his few descendants, and the most disobedient at that.

That being said, I also wondered what reason there was for me to be dissatisfied, and I would have been long dead as a child if not for Dicken.

And as the merfolk's leader, his duty was to protect his people and to ensure the perpetuity of the next generation.

F*ck! Why would my thoughts keep drifting away? What had it to do with me...

"Linda."

Dicken suddenly called me, interrupting my thoughts. Turning his head so that his ear brushed against my cheek, he asked, "What's on your mind?"

"You, " I blurted out as if bewitched, almost choking when I realized how straightforward I was being and hence added, "I mean, how you've changed... and your identity. Uh, it really shocked me."

"You'll have all the time to find out." Dicken turned to flash a meaningful grin at me, his voice echoing in the darkness of the sewers.

Although I understood Merinish, I was still a little unaccustomed since the accent resembled some ancient mystical chant no matter how I tried to describe it. Moreover, Dicken's unique voice, which seemed to reverberate powerfully and carried weight, always left me spacing out.

All I could do was nod in reflex while I kept my hands tightly wrapped around his waist—he was now in his merman form once again, and sprinted through the waters like he did as he carried me through the ocean. Suddenly, the sewers seemed to turn vast and open, with the walls being distant from us as we dived deep beneath the canals.

The lights around us were a warm yellow. As Dicken carried me rapidly through the pillars of various bridges, we would swim past the hulls of various boats floating above us, though the rain tended to cover it soon enough. No one would see us as we darted forward beneath the waters, as if we existed in a different world—a private space that only belonged to Dicken and I.

I couldn't help holding on tighter to Dicken then.

Dicken started to swim towards the surface just then, and we soon arrived at the top of an underwater structure. Then, he extended his arm and firmly pushed, opening a steel plate under a building

with such proficient movement that one would think he was opening the door to his own house.

It was a classy tavern. Though it appeared that Dicken lived here, the front doors that faced a channel were locked with massive chains, virtually preventing entry. He clearly hadn't acquired it by legal means as it was quite old, with police tape pasted over various objects. While there was a signboard hanging over the wall that read 'Aquatic Organisms Research Lab,' it had clearly been abandoned for a long time without anyone entering.

That said, it was a place that suited Dicken, and I couldn't help feeling amused. "Aquatic Organisms Research Lab? Hahaha! You're an oversized fish and the leader of your race, and yet you just planted yourself here. I never knew you had a flair for comedy, Dicken... Perhaps you should stay at a fish market too?"

Dicken narrowed his eyes as he studied me, as if wondering what I had meant by 'fish.' So, I explained by making a hook with a finger and pretending to bite it—I was aware that doing that most certainly challenged his dignity as the leader of the merfolk, but I couldn't help wanting to tease him in spite of the possibility of punishment.

And just as expected, he loomed over me in the next instant, pressing me over the underwater opening as he fixed his eyes.

Then, his lips brushed against the bridge of my nose. "Linda... You make me... "

He gulped, his eyes seemingly ablaze as his Adam's apple bobbed and he spoke hoarsely, "You really make me... "

He was still wearing his leather gloves, but it was already caressing my spine and heading slowly downwards to my tail bone. Then, he grasped my bottom as he pressed his lower body between my legs, and while we were both dressed in layers, I could feel him getting fully erect, his body burning hot even as he leaned on me.

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My heart was pounding as my breathing turned ragged, but I worked hard to calm myself. "Hey, Dicken—why don't we talk about it? I want to know what I mean to you... Am I just a container for your genes to propagate your bloodline?"

My heart clenched unwittingly even as I said those words, as if I was forcing myself to face a cruel truth. The smile was gone from Dicken's face too, and he took a long look at my eyes, as if seriously considering the question.

Dicken had been the king of the merfolk for a long time, and had lived through countless battles and slaughters in his long life. Still, I didn't think that such a simple question would stump him.

Sentiment, love, bonds —those were all emotions unique to humans, but would merfolk be able to feel the same as humans?

Even if I had been with him before, I cannot use the rationale of a biologist to decide on such cross- species relationships. Moreover, my EQ was not at all high and I used to be a nerd who only knew about her own research, having no experience in love and unable to make heads or tails of relationship matters.

I simply had no idea whether Dicken's desire for me was an instinct to continue his bloodline, or to put it in another way—would he find it acceptable if it wasn't me?

And did Dicken even understand my question? Or did he perhaps find that he was under no obligation to answer the question of a childish, insignificant progeny?

Naturally, I wished for an answer for him, and had been apprehensive—even insecure over it, and my heart felt as if I was walking a tightrope. Without knowing it, tears were welling in my eyes, and it took me so much effort to raise my gaze to stare fixedly at him, waiting nervously for his response.

I could see my own face in Dicken's eyes, and I looked just like a miserable, abandoned kitten. Unwilling to let him see how vulnerable I was, I straightened my bangs, blinked, and feigned nonchalance as I smiled, "It's nothing—it's just a stupid question. Just pretend you never heard it from me, and it's not like I really wanted to know anyway."

With those words, I shrank into myself so that I breached the surface, but he caught me in the next instant, holding my waist as he dragged me back into the water. Pressed against the door again, he pressed his hand over my shoulder and slowly stroked my skin, reaching up to my neck with his coarse leather glove.

Then, he rubbed the tip of his nose against my lips, and moved up to my forehead. Then, he raised my bangs, holding my head in place a little firmly to kiss my neck. There was weight in his lips, and I could feel a stream of warmth flowing across my entire body from where he kissed me, setting my body and soul ablaze and I was unable to help shuddering.

My body flinched in the water, and I opened my mouth to ask a question, but ultimately failed.

"Linda, I didn't know... " Moving away from my neck, Dicken lowered his gaze upon me. I could feel the depths of desire that seemed to be hidden behind his gaze, but I just couldn't understand or be certain of what he was feeling.

"I did consider you a progeny when you were younger, grooming and protecting you so that you slowly became dependent on me. I watched in delight as you changed, until the day of your grandfather's accident, and your parents took you away from my side."

His wet breath seemed to swirl around me, and he would lick my ear from time to time as he whispered, "It was too sudden, and I had to let go of you. I only began to search for you later at every sea that I could reach, but I failed even after over a decade, and could only reach you through dreams. As you grew, you would unwittingly yearn for me in your dreams, but lose all recollection of me once you wake up, which left me in pain, and I had even thought about changing into human form to find you, but I couldn't do it at the time. Even so, I didn't lose hope, because I knew that I was there—and that it would guide you towards me endlessly."

Dicken had put his hand over my chest, and it heaved as I breathed. I looked up then, meeting his entrancing gaze as if walking with him to his distant memories.

"But one day, I sensed you, and could tell that you were definitely looking for me. I couldn't wait and ran towards you, wanting to see what the tiny tot that belonged to me had become, only to find you constantly hanging out with that man named Gary... I could see the admiration in your eyes, and you were reliant on him as you were towards me in your childhood, although you don't remember me at all now."