

The Truth About Oliver (Man to Fantasy Creature TFTG)

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A Commission for 1a010012

When Ben meets Oliver, the two young men become fast friends, unnaturally fast in fact. Both feel as if they know each other, but things get even stranger when their fathers try to keep them apart, and Oliver starts being confused for a girl around town. With a strange convention of 'hunters' arriving, both men have to unravel the secrets of their past and find out who - or what - Oliver is, and how to keep him - or her - safe.

The Truth About Oliver

They met down at the beach. Ben was speeding along on his bike down the trail just up the bank. His frizzy black hair was free to the wind, and his darker skin was soaking up the summer sun's rays. He let out a laugh, enjoying the freedom of it all, when suddenly a strange sight caught his eye: a young man standing with his feet in the water with a collection of seashells by his side. Ben knew most people that lived in Pearlwater, but this guy didn't register to him. He was a pretty boy type: pale blonde hair that fell to just below his ear, soft features, and a bright red hoodie that was just a little bit loud. He also had a bike next to him, and *that* was intriguing to Ben.

"Hey! Are you new here?" he yelled.

The figure turned, startled. He cupped his ear to indicate that he couldn't hear Ben from the bank, so Ben ditched his bike and came over, feet squelching into the sand. He liked peddling his bike bare feet, even though his father told him not to often, sometimes flying into a rage over it.

"I said, are you new here?"

The other man shrugged. He couldn't have been any older than Ben, who had just turned twenty. "I've been here all my life."

"Weird! I'd never seen you around here before. Or maybe I have, you seem kind of familiar."

The other man nodded. "Yeah, same for you actually. We've definitely chatted before. At least I think we have. My name is Oliver."

He extended a pale hand, and Ben took it in his much darker one. "Ben," he said readily. "Yeah, we've definitely met before or something, because that name rings a bell. I can't think of why though. What are you doing here?"

"Just collecting shells. I know it sounds lame but my mom was big into that stuff and she passed away years ago, so I like to come here."

“Oh, jeez, sorry. Didn’t mean to disturb you. I’ll go.”

But Oliver just chuckled and threw some of the shells into a bag before putting it over his shoulder. “Don’t be, man. I was just finishing up.”

Ben considered something. The man’s bike did look pretty cool, much like his own.

“You live nearby?”

“About twenty minutes out.”

“Fancy a bike ride? It’s been a while since I met someone else in this sleepy town that enjoys a bit of BMXing, instead of just boring old cycling.”

“Well, I can’t promise my moves are too good, but yeah, I’d be up for that.”

Ben grinned. “Trust me, my moves *are* great.”

Ben returned home to the sweet smell of pork coming from the oven. His father was clearly in a good mood to be making dinner, which also meant that he wasn’t in one of his angry moods. Not that he’d ever hit Ben or anything, but he could get pretty foul.

“Hey Dad!” he called. “Dinner smells amazing!”

“Well, if it isn’t my wayward boy, finally come home like the prodigal son.”

Hank emerged, looking like the spitting image of his son only older and slightly balding, small creases in his dark skin. “Sorry Dad, I was with someone new. A friend, I think.”

“You think?”

“Well, I only just met him. Funny though, because I get the feeling that I’ve known him before. Eh, it’s just small town *deja vu* or whatever.”

Hank chuckled, boiling the pot for some late coffee - he loved late coffee, for who knows what reason. “Well, just shoot me a message next time. Doesn’t take much to brake your bike for a moment so your old man won’t worry. Still, it’s not like my cooking ever runs on time; you’ve come back at the perfect moment. This’ll be the last meal I’ll be properly cooking for a while; I’ve got that convention at the end of the week and need to be ready.”

Ben frowned. “Yeah, about that, what’s this mysterious convention even about?”

“That is for me to know, and you to not find out until you’re twenty five, son. Them’s the rules and I ain’t breaking them.”

“Ugh, it’s masonic, isn’t it? Lodge shit.”

“Language! But sure, if that makes you feel better. Now, would you like a coffee?”

“So long as it doesn’t have a poisonous amount of sugar like you always do.”

Hank shrugged. “Hey, you’ve got to enjoy life while you have it. You never know when the monsters will take it all away.”

It was an old refrain of his, one that went way back to Ben's childhood. His mom had always found it annoying, among many, *many* other things that caused her to split from Hank. But still he said it, even seriously when he got overly frustrated and depressed. Thankfully, that was not the case now.

"Sure thing, Dad," he said.

"Your friend have a name? Perhaps I know him."

"He's a guy called Oliver, and he-"

Hank stood, his expression suddenly changing. "No," he said simply. "Trust me, that kid is bad news. I just know it."

"What? Do you know him?"

"I know enough about him. He's bad news and you should stay the hell away from him."

"But Dad-"

"And that's *final, Benjamin!*"

He shouted that last part, his anger flaring into a brief rage. Ben felt sufficiently cowed. The silence that followed was awkward, saved only by the ding of the oven.

"I'll go check that," Hank said. "Just remember what I told you. That kid is bad news."

Oliver scoffed, confused at what he was hearing.

"What do you mean I can't see him again? Jesus. Dad, it's not like we're fucking each other or something. He's literally just a guy I met who seemed friendly. You know, like a *friend*. Remember *friends*, Dad?"

But Jay just sat in the corner of their little ocean cottage and frowned, cold and distant as always.

"I told you before, Oliver, you can't just trust everyone you meet. There is danger in this town. Think about your mother and what happened to her."

"I would if you ever told me the whole truth! I know you're keeping some of it back. She couldn't have just been mugged; where's the news record? This may be a sleepy town but it would have been written down by someone! Instead, it's like she's a ghost."

Jay scoffed. "She's not a ghost. Alera was far more than that, Oliver, and you know I won't hear a bad word about her."

"Then how come you never talk about her?"

Jay fell silent.

"Fine, don't tell me. But I'm still catching up with Ben."

"Just stay clear of his father, okay? He's a hard man."

Oliver rolled his eyes. “Sure, and you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

He brushed past his father and headed for his room. God, he couldn’t wait to get out of this town, even if he loves its coastal views. He felt tethered to it in a way, but at twenty years old it was time to leave the nest anyhow. He’d stayed with his overprotective father too long. Jay was a good man who cared for his son, Oliver knew that. But the distance, the coldness, the way he tried to shield him from the world like anything could kill him . . . it was infuriating. He barely even let him use a knife in the kitchen. No wonder he still hadn’t moved out at twenty with his father so hell-bent on everything being ‘safe.’

“So your dad sucks too, huh?” Ben asked, lining up his cue.

“Nah, he doesn’t suck,” Oliver said. “Oh man, you’re really good at this. How on earth did you sink two in one shot?”

Ben winked. “Skill. Angled. Mathematics and shit. And a bit of luck.”

He passed the cue to Oliver. “But he *is* weirdly overprotective, right?”

“Yeah. Probably why you haven’t seen me around much prior to this. I sort of started coming out of my shell.”

“Might explain how you’re so white while living in a coastal town.”

Oliver chuckled enough that his shot went way off. Still, he managed to sink one ball by accident, which made Ben gasp. The movement had been strangely . . . elegant. Oliver’s blonde hair had swished with the motion, and when he looked up and smiled at Ben there was almost a hint of a memory, of something warm and fuzzy, that lingered with him. He couldn’t figure out what it was.

“You okay?”

Ben shook his head. “Yeah, just distracted. Dad told me not to hang out with you. He’s normally cool, even if he gets eccentric with his weird masonic hall stuff or whatever, but then sometimes he gets angry. Likely why my Mom divorced him.”

“Yeah, my Dad was never the same after my Mom died. He won’t even show me a picture of her. I’ve just got a lock of her hair and that’s it. I don’t even know her natural colour because its dyed green and hasn’t faded.”

Ben winced. “I’m sorry man. That’s . . . well, that’s shit.”

“Yeah. Hey, at least I’m kicking your ass at pool, right?”

“Oh yeah? Watch this shot!”

The two were at a local bar called *The Seaspray*. It had all sorts of cool memorabilia along the walls - anchors and crab shells and the like - and Oliver quite liked the aesthetic. Ben thought it was a bit tacky, but the place had a pool table and would occasionally serve a

drink to him and Oliver, even if it was all hush-hush, what with them still being a year under age and all. Perks of being in a relatively small town. It had been several weeks since their first meeting and their initial friendship had only grown exponentially since. Not only did they both like nature and the wild, but they had similar problems with their fathers, loved exploring weird places, and both were hesitant about what was in their future. For now, neither of them knew if they wanted to stay in Pearlwater, but weren't sure what prospects there were elsewhere. Ben was thinking about becoming a fisherman, but didn't talk of that often: Oliver was a vegetarian; he just couldn't stand the idea of eating even fish, for whatever reason.

Their friendship was almost intimate, in fact. There was no other way to really explain it. Ben could listen to Oliver talk about his love of the beach and the sea endlessly, while Oliver found Ben's stronger presence deeply comforting. They weren't physically attracted to one another - that would be ridiculous! - but there was a sense of connection that couldn't be explained. It beat them both exactly why this was the case, but from the first it was as if they had known each other much longer than they truly had.

"Hey Olive, been a while since we've seen you around."

They were pulled from their silent moment of reverie after the pool game by a man coming into the room. He was a local named David, roughly thirty five odd years or so, and he could often be seen down by the docs. Oliver turned and cocked his head quizzically.

"Sorry, do I know you?"

"Sure you do, Olive. You used to come round all the time to check out my catches. Tried to convince me to give up fishing when you were a wee girl."

Ben frowned. What the hell was going on? He looked at Oliver, who just shrugged to his friend in turn.

"What are you talking about?" Oliver said. "First of all, I've never met you before. Second of all, I'm clearly not a girl, am I? I mean, I know people call me a bit of a pretty boy behind my back, but you *can* tell I'm a guy, right?"

David blushed a deep red along his slightly chubby cheeks. "Oh, um . . . shit. You are. Sorry, I was . . . I guess I was just confused there, for a moment. I thought you were someone else. But that doesn't make sense . . . who would I have thought you were?"

He turned and hobbled out of the room, scratching his head all the while, leaving Ben and Oliver to their shared confusion.

"That was weird, right?" Ben asked. "Tell me that was weird."

"It was indeed freakin' weird," Oliver replied, but then he went silent, almost pensive. "But he wasn't the first guy to think I was a girl lately either. Or the first to call me Olive."

The case of mistaken identity continued several more times, in fact. Ben hadn't believed his friend at first, but when they caught up by the beach someone shouted out, asking why 'Olive' wasn't "wearing your usual bikini?" They were pretty embarrassed when Oliver turned around, but the continual occurrences were starting to make him concerned, and Ben as well.

"I don't understand it," he said to Ben. "Like, I know I've got this weird, hazy memory at times, but surely I didn't have a twin sister or something? That'd be crazy, right?"

Ben frowned, thinking. The sound of the waves in the distance was soothing. "It would be. But it's funny that you mention a hazy memory, because I feel like I've always had one too. I can't quite explain it, it's like I can remember a bunch of things that happened . . ."

"But they're all quite ill-defined, right? Fuzzy and unclear, and jumbled up like they're not in the right order?"

"Exactly! Like, I have a fuzzy image of me laughing with a friend on this very beach years ago, but I couldn't tell you who that friend was, or their name, or even what they looked like."

Oliver paused. "Weird. Same for me. We'd swim out to beyond the coral reef and-"

"Dive down to see the schools of fish swim by," Ben finished.

The two looked at each other, both pairs of eyes wide.

"No way," Oliver said, tousling his longer blonde hair. "That can't be. You and me?"

Ben was putting things together. He'd always been pretty clever - cunning too - but now lots of little odd things that hadn't added up before were starting to connect.

"I don't know," he said. "Lots of people do it. Well, some do. But for us both to have that kind of memory . . . I need to talk to my Dad. He'll know."

Oliver nodded. "And I'll talk to mine. I think he owes me an explanation."

He reached his hand out for Ben to pull him up off of the beach, and Ben did so. Both men were shirtless, but as he grasped the other man's arm and lifted him - easily, given that Oliver was more lithe - there was a flourish of connection once more. Both young men stared into each other's eyes, and Ben didn't pull away. Neither did Oliver. An intimate . . . *something*, passed between them, and it left Oliver biting his lip sheepishly while Ben felt a warmth settle in his belly. He finally pulled his hand back.

"Oh, um, sorry."

"Yeah, I don't know what that was about."

"Let's meet up after we've tried to puzzle this out, okay?"

Oliver nodded, blushing red on his pale cheeks. It was a cute look, and again Ben had a flash of recognition back to his past, of a blurry figure doing the same. But the blurry figure couldn't be Oliver . . . the shape was all wrong. It didn't even look fully human.

"Yeah, I'll see you later," he said.

He moved up the bank faster than was necessary and got on his bike.

Hank was hiding something. Ben tried to broach the subject of his hazy memories, of Oliver's strange familiarity, several times. At each turn Hank changed the conversation; first to football, then to local town events, then to Ben's future. It was all done under the guise of family friendliness, and once more he invited Ben to a hunting opportunity with him.

"Better than fishing, I tell ya," he said. "Plus, it's always good to get your self-defence skills up and prepped. Archery, shooting, netting, it's all an important set of skills for a man in a place like this."

Ben just groaned. "Dad, what is this all about? I'm asking you about Oliver and why we both have weird memories, and you keep changing the subject! Is there something you're not telling me?"

Hank just shrugged his large shoulders. He had always been a big, muscular man as long as Ben had known him. "I guess I just don't have much to say on the matter. I think this man is just influencing you badly. That's why I didn't want you with him; he's some kind of pretty boy type, right?"

"Yeah, he's really pretty, but - I mean, he's a pretty boy, is what I mean to say. Look, I don't know what's going on, but you're keeping secrets. I thought we were close. Is this something to do with why Mom left?"

Hank's expression changed suddenly. He stood to his impressive six-foot-two height and loomed over Ben, his eccentric charm all replaced by an angry snarl.

"Don't you ever talk about why your mother left," he said. "She couldn't understand the good I was doing. One day you *will*. Maybe it's high time you joined me at the convention."

"Dad, I don't care about Masonic bullsh-"

"Mind your tongue! And it's not Masonic. That's what I've been letting you believe. It's so much more than that. And if you're looking for answers, you'll get them there. But *only* if you stop seeing your friend and agree never to talk to him again."

Ben stood from the table, took his plate, and went to his room.

"Don't you walk away from me, son!"

But he already had. The price he had asked was too high. That connection with Oliver was already so strong, how could he possibly agree to sever it?

Jay was silent in the face of Oliver's questions. He didn't meet his son's eye, but when Oliver demanded to know why people were calling him 'Olive' and if he ever had a sister, the man with the cold expression finally lifted his head.

"We were never blessed with a second child," he said somberly. "I wish we had been. No, you don't have a sister, Olive. Oliver."

"See! You just called me that! What's this about? Please Dad. I feel . . . I feel so confused lately, about myself most of all. Ben is so wonderful, and it feels right to be his friend. But I can sense there's something more. What aren't you telling me?"

Jay looked at his son. Oliver was about to snap when he realised what his father was doing, something he'd *never* seen him do: he was *crying*.

"Dad . . ."

"I just want you to be safe, son," Jay said. "If I tell you the truth, you won't be. You need to be safe. You're . . . you're all I have . . ."

Oliver was overcome with emotion. He'd been feeling more of it lately, like a rush of hormones sweeping through him, a powerful empathy. He stepped away from his father to give him his peace, but stopped at the door frame.

"Dad, whatever you're going through, I'm really sorry. I just wish you'd let me in so I could help you. I just wish you'd let me know about my mother."

Jay nodded, but otherwise said nothing. Oliver retreated to his room. A plan was already forming in his mind.

In the darkness of night, both young men followed the same course of action.

'Dad is hiding something,' Ben texted. 'Going to snoop and find out what. Sick of being told nothing. Sick of him changing the topic. We have a shed he never lets me look at. I'm going to take a look at, lol.'

Oliver texted a quick reply. *'Funny, I had a similar feeling. Dad broke down in tears over my questions but won't tell me anything. So frustrating! I got all emotional and everything. I know he puts things up in the attic sometimes and locks them up there. I'm going to find the key and check it out.'*

'Sounds like a plan, Oliver. You be safe, okay?'

'You too. Please take care of yourself.'

Their fathers were hiding something, and it was high time to find out what. They were both being told not to associate with one another, and yet the reasons were often vague and never expanded upon. Ben gritted his teeth as he left his bed and tip-toed down the stairs.

His father was a heavy snorer but could wake easily, so he was extra careful when opening the backdoor, even applying extra WD40 upon it so it wouldn't squeak. The shed was locked, but he grabbed all of the keys from the shelf in the kitchen in the hopes one would open it.

Unfortunately, he wasn't in luck. Not one of them opened the door, and he could find no good way in. Thinking, he decided to try to be canny about it. A length of wire was easy to remove from the fencing nearby after giving it a few bends back and forth, and he placed that against the lock instead. His dad could be a real survivalist nutjob sometimes, so ironically he was using a skill his own father had taught him to discover his dad's secrets. Still, it took nearly ten minutes of wrangling before he got it finally open.

In the meantime, Oliver was having a close encounter with his own father. He wasn't a big snorer, but he was at least a deep sleeper. It was a good thing too, because Oliver had to retrieve the key to the attic from the bedside table right next to his father's sleeping form. Thankfully, Oliver had always been strangely elegant and quiet in his movements. Some even said he moved like a dancer - some recently obviously thought he moved like a woman, much to his annoyance. He managed to get the key, but at the moment of retrieving it, his father opened his eyes.

Oliver paused. His father didn't move. Slowly, his eyes closed again.

"*Shit*," he mouthed silently to himself. He made his way to where the pulldown attic was, mindful that the small building would make it hard to disguise the noise. He was as silent as he could be, and for once was thankful that he wasn't a brutish strongman type, though he did rather like Ben's bigger physique.

"Woah, weird thought," he mumbled to himself.

He unlocked the attic access and shifted up, trying to be as quiet as possible.

Both men had reached the sanctums of their respective father's secrets, and both began to search for what they could. For Ben, most of what was in the shed was clearly stuff for his father's strange club; his 'convention.' There were carpenter's tools, vices, a series of chisels and ropes and the like, along with numerous other gadgets. It was curious to see just how much weaponry was present though; not just a few hunting rifles but several pistols, racks of ammunition, a shotgun, and other more specialised weapons. This included a compound bow, a series of knives (including throwing knives), and a taser. There were nets, bear traps, and other traps clearly made by Hank personally. Strangest of all was in a cupboard that Ben unlocked with his trusty wire: an actual, real life set of homemade armour, thick padding and helmet and all.

"Holy shit," he said. "What the fuck is all this, Dad?"

A chill ran down his spine as he inspected further. He unlocked and opened a case on the wall, the tension rising. It was like some bizarre trophy display within, only with no

kind of trophies Ben had ever seen. There were bones, but not human ones; the shapes were all wrong. A large fiery-coloured feather was propped up on display, as well as a jar of shimmering green scales. A bloody horn that looked like it could have been on a dinosaur, or a dragon, sat in the centre of the display, several talons beside it.

“What the actual fuck is all this, Dad?” he said. He took several steps back. Just what was this convention his father was attending?

Oliver was likewise being hit by revelations, and though not quite as blood-chilling as Ben's, they certainly stirred deep reserves of barely-kept emotion within him. There was all sorts of junk in the attic, and Oliver was surprised to see how much of it was fishing related. He knew his father had once been a fisherman, and that his mother had disapproved, leading to his father changing jobs. It was part of the reason Oliver was a vegetarian, that and the fact that eating animals felt all wrong for some reason. He sorted through the crappots, rods, tackleboxes and other menagerie of things, until he finally came to a chest near the back.

“It looks like an actual treasure chest,” he said, marvelling at it.

Indeed, it really did. It was big, wooden, and had metal bands keeping it securely together. It was also old; quite old, with evidence that it had once lingered underwater, what with the dried up coral and so forth stuck to the sides of it. He went to open it, but it was locked.

“C'mon,” he said, “there's got to be a way to open-”

And then suddenly, something very strange happened. He had placed his soft, dainty hand upon the lock and there was a brief, bright flare of green light. A connection of sorts. It only lasted a few seconds, but the light was almost . . . magical. When it faded, the lock clicked open. Oliver looked at his hand, confused.

“What am I?” he said. “What did I just do?”

He opened the chest lid, eager to find the answers to those questions. Within, he found all sorts of strange items, some of which had to have been incredibly valuable. There were pirate doubloons, gleaming gems, small golden items that looked like they'd been retrieved from the ocean floor. There was also a length of green hair pinned to a length of cardboard, preserved unnaturally. His mother's hair.

“Mom,” he said, tears forming in his eyes.

But the tears began to flow so much more freely when he reached in and found something else, something he'd been wanting to find for so, so long: a photo of his mother's face. She was resplendent, smiling to the camera, her lips full and her eyes magnificently large. The photo was slightly blurry, taken by an older camera, but still her looks shined through. She was in the water, her green hair wet and brilliant, her grin cheeky and excited. There was no doubting that she was looking at Jay, at Oliver's father, as he took the photo.

But holding it now, it seemed like she was looking across time to her son. He turned the photo over, and froze. There was a message on the back, written in a woman's hand.

To my Jay. Thank you for giving me our little Olive - Alera

"Olive," the young man whispered to himself. "She named me Olive? Or someone else? I don't understand."

He rifled through some more, but the evidence of something strange - perhaps even something *mystical* - continued to pile up. There was a tiny outfit for a newborn child, but clearly one for a girl. It was bright blue but made like a little dress, the bottom open. There were further mentions of this 'Olive', carved in that same gorgeous handwriting into shells and necklaces made from things from the ocean floor.

And there was also, near the bottom right of the chest, a small jar. In it were a set of bright, shimmering green scales. Oliver held them up, seeing how they twinkled unnaturally despite not even being in the light of his phone's torch. He turned the jar slowly, examining them, marvelling at them. A memory, something that was hazy and uncertain but undeniably, *impossibly* real shot out to him.

"These are her scales," he said. "They belonged to her. Were . . . were *on* her?"

He picked up the photo of Alera again, his mother.

"Mom, what *were* you?"

The pair met not the next day but two days later instead. Both needed time to absorb the strange revelations they'd confronted, and to figure out whether they even wanted to confront their respective fathers over them. They had biked to meet one another, neither owning a car nor wanting to use their parents' vehicles. The bushland behind the coastal town seemed like the perfect place to swap stories, and give them suitable privacy. They sat together on a log behind a disused bike trail, finding comfort in one another's presence.

"That's crazy," Oliver said. "I can't believe your father had all those - those weapons! It's just so . . . so horrible!"

Ben actually chuckled, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. It was nice and smooth, and he retracted his hand quickly so he didn't have to think about such things.

"Look at you, you little softie. I can see why you're vegetarian."

Oliver blushed and rubbed his arm. "I just don't like violence. I never have. I don't understand it, even to animals."

"Yeah, well, I guess I can respect that. Still, it happens. But all that strange stuff in Dad's shed was something else. It's got to be tied up with this convention of his; the strange club."

“Do you think it has anything to do with what I found in the attic?”

Oliver held up the photo of his mother and showed it to Ben again. Ben took the photo gingerly, treating it with the utmost care he knew it deserved. The woman stirred some feeling in him he couldn't understand. It wasn't quite an attraction, though she was indeed deeply beautiful. But it was adjacent to attraction in some way. He could see Oliver's green eyes in hers, his softness, his demureness and elegance. Ben had always been a pretty rugged man, but he found himself captured by the association between mother and son in the image.

“She looks otherworldly,” he said. “As if she's not truly . . .”

“Not truly human,” Oliver said. “The scales-”

“I found similar ones in Dad's shed.”

Oliver closed his eyes and took a few passive breaths. “What happened to Mom is tied up with your Dad. I just know it. We need to figure this out. Ben, I need to know what happened to her, and why my memories about it are so hazy.”

“Don't worry, Oliver, I've got your back,” Ben said. “I need to find answers too, and I won't let you down on finding yours as well.”

The two exchanged a smile, and once more both were hit by that attraction, that sense that they knew each other more intimately than either of their memories allowed them to know.

“Thanks, Ben. That means . . . it truly means a lot.”

Ben reached over and wiped some of the tears from Oliver's cheeks, only to pause, his thumb still tracing over his friend's cheeks.

“I've . . . I've done this before, haven't I?”

Oliver nodded. He felt the same stirring of an old memory as well. “I think so. Yes, I know so. Ben, we definitely knew each other before. I think we were . . . close.”

Ben shook his head. He'd never been attracted to men. He still wasn't. But there was something about Oliver that was different. His quiet, calm manner, his shyness, the way he moved so elegantly, like he was not entirely human.

“I'm going to find out more,” Ben said. “We both will. I promise you, we'll discover what's been happening to both of us.”

It was a week later before any investigation bore fruit. Oliver wasn't sure how to broach the subject with Jay, but when he tried, his father shut it down. Hard.

“What do you mean you snuck up into the attic? You shouldn't have done that! Goddamnit, Oliver, don't you trust me!?”

Oliver reeled in the fact of his father's anger, but it retreated as quickly as it had come. "I should have thrown the chest back into the sea."

"Dad, I need to know; who was my mother?"

Jay sagged. "A very special woman. Too special for this world. And for you to know would threaten everything. Don't ask me again, Oliver."

"Dad, please, I deserve to know. What were the scales? Why did my hand glow when I touched the chest? Why did-"

"Enough! You want answers? Huh? You want to know why I'm so miserable, why your mother is dead? Then go ask the father of that so-called friend of yours, and you'll get your answer. Only you won't like it one bit, and it will be the last thing you do."

Oliver paused, standing in the middle of the living room, shocked. "You can't mean that Hank - that he -"

Jay's eyes were cold. "Hank is the reason your mother is dead. And if you aren't careful, you'll be dead too if you stay close to that Ben boy. Mark my words, Oliver, everything I've done is to protect you, to keep you safe. You can't know more than that. Please - please - don't look any further than this. It'll kill me to lose you too."

And with that he took his hat and went for a walk, leaving Oliver to slide down against a nearby wall and cry his heart out.

Ben, meanwhile, had gone to much further lengths to discover the truth. His father's 'convention' was only days away - the latest meeting - and he had to know where it was. Hank had a habit of slipping out when such meetings came, and Ben had no intention of going *with* him after the devil's bargain he had offered. So what he did do was purchase some electronic recording equipment and stash it around the house and especially in the shed, and listened in on the feeds when Hank thought he was alone. It took some time to get something important, but when he did, it was big.

Real big.

"Holy shit," he said to himself from his room as he heard his father's words. He made sure they were being properly recorded, then managed to slowly close his jaw from the shock. "It's true. It's actually true. What the fuck did you do, Dad?"

Unlike Oliver, he had no plans to confront Hank, not after this latest revelation. Instead, he took his things and made his way straight to Oliver's house and shot his friend a message. Oliver had to sneak out, but the pair united in a hug in the darkness before Ben pulled him further into the bushes.

"You have to listen to this," Ben said. "I recorded Dad. Listen."

Oliver took the headphones, and soon the words flowed.

'I knew I shouldn't have worked with that Jay. Knew I should have eliminated him. The girl too. But . . . they were innocent. It was the only way to get rid of the monsters and

their allies without . . . without failing the task. The other hunters can't know. If the boys ever find the crystal in the lodge - find it together - then the magic will bring their memories back. I can't let that happen. Ben will understand one day, but if he sees her as she truly is and remembers, I'll lose him forever. I won't be able to stop the other hunters this time."

Oliver put the headphones away as Ben signalled the important bit was over.

"Our Dads were in on it," he said.

"Sort of. Sounds like my Dad could have killed your Dad, and you too. He talks about monsters and hunting."

"Is that the convention he goes to?"

"No idea," Ben says. "But there's a magic crystal or some bullshit, and we're getting it. You and me, Oliver. And we're finding the truth about everything."

Oliver leapt into Ben's arms, breathing into the darker man's chest.

"Thank you," he said softly, so softly it may well have been uttered by a woman.

The plan was simple, and dangerous. Ben tracked his father to the convention. Hank had always slipped away in the dead of midnight, but Ben stayed up and made sure to follow the tracking app he'd secretly put on his father's phone. Oliver moved with him, having left his sleeping father alone. They slowly moved into the bushland beyond the coast, where the hills rose up to mountains. Torchlight was visible in the distance, and a number of figures moved; several dozen at most.

"This is creepy cult shit," Ben uttered.

Oliver clung to him for guidance, afraid, and Ben didn't push him away. He wanted to comfort Oliver. To keep him safe. So they trekked on, moving in silence and stealth until they came to a cave entrance that had been covered over by tree branches. The figure with the torches moved them aside, and a number of them entered. The procession continued, and only when it was clear did the pair move ahead as well, fear and horror in their hearts.

"Whatever happens," Ben whispered, "I'll keep you safe."

"And I'll be with you," Oliver said. "You're so strong."

"And you are so caring. We'll get that crystal."

Indeed, both of them could already feel a strange draw pulling them forth, a kind of impossible essence that was both part of them and not part of them. They weren't wearing clothes like those entering the caves, all of whom had that crude armour like his father, or some kind of brown robe. But what they did have was the element of surprise: a straggler who was running late to the meeting was easily ambushed by Ben. He couldn't believe he had leapt out of the bushes and grabbed the man, but he quickly had his neck in an armlock

and was cutting off the cultist's or hunter's or whatever he was's blood supply. The man wheezed and crumpled, and his leather mask came loose.

"I can't believe you did that!" gasped Oliver, for whom violence was anathema.

"I had to, for us to get in. Look, it's old man Wesker. He sells ice cream down on Calder Street! This is nuts."

"Shh. Another one is coming!"

That one proved to be Arnold Hayworth, a solicitor from town as well. Not a nice man, and well-connected, but they never could have imagined he'd be a cultist or something. They dragged the two men's unconscious bodies into the bushes and adopted their clothing. It was too tight on Ben and too loose on the lithe Oliver, but they made do. The pair held hands for a moment, Oliver giving Ben strength in his own quiet way, and then they entered into the darkness of the cave.

Where the chanting was coming from. Where the call of the crystal came. Their hearts pounded as they used their torches to guide them, but the only thing scarier than the darkness beyond was the bright chamber they eventually entered, one that was burning in the bowels of the rising mountain. A circle of cultists was gathered in a large chamber. The floor was elaborate stonework, and the walls also, with numerous ancient inscriptions upon it. In the centre was a firepit, and the men were gathered around it, making some sort of pledge. Above, strange trophies gazed down upon them, things that looked like the skin of demons, the hides of furry creatures, the limbs of frog-like beings. And horns. Many horns, and scales, and furs, none of which were fully animal.

'We pledge to protected humanity from the darkness. We swear to strike at the heart of the foul creatures that do not belong. We will uphold our vows until our dying breaths, and keep our kind safe from monsters and their ilk, and slay all who would offer them sanctuary. We will seek out the wielders of foul magic and tear them out, root and stem.'

Ben recognised his own father's voice in the mix, and it brought him low to hear it. Oliver tensed. The words about monsters and their ilk . . . it was about him. He just knew it. *He* was a monster, or a child of one, or a descendant. It didn't take a genius to realise that these men had killed his mother.

They had killed his mother.

They had killed his mother.

For the first time in his life, Oliver felt true rage. An anger swelled up inside him that even the more rugged, aggressive Ben could never hope to muster. The call of the crystal was there, and he could spot it now; a partially-glowing green rock that was shaped like a curved shell. It was on the other side of the firepit, and it wanted him to touch it. For them *both* to touch it.

And no cultist was standing in his way. No hunter.

Oliver stood, much to the confusion of Ben, and strode forth to the other side of the pit. Several curious eyes looked his way, sensing something was wrong.

“Arnold, is that you?”

Wesker, what are you doing?”

“The chant’s not over, you idiot!”

It was Hank that realised something was off. His eyes flicked to Oliver and then back to Ben, and even behind the mask Ben could see recognition flicker.

“Ben?” he said.

It was the cue for all hell to break loose. One of the hunters shifted, trying to ready a weapon. Oliver ran, shoving him aside and knocking him into another man. Ben roared, running forward. He expected to tackle his father, but his old man stepped aside even as he pushed two others to the ground and grabbed Oliver’s wrist.

“Come on! We’ve got to get out of here!”

“The crystal!” Oliver called. He grabbed it, wrenching it from its place. “It needs both of us!”

“NO!” Hank called, even as the others rallied.

But it was too late. Oliver grabbed the crystal shell and placed it in Ben’s hand, his own enfolding over it. Just as several crossbows and a rifle were raised the shell exploded with light, blinding everyone.

Except for Ben and Oliver.

Ben and Olive.

Both now could see, and they saw the truth in all its brilliance and sadness.

Before them was a beautiful mermaid, shifting through the ocean. She laughed freely, gesturing for daughter to join her. Olive stepped forward, uncertain. The sea was so vast, but her mother was so encouraging. She loved her green hair and green eyes, and the powerful green tail that appeared so beautiful. Her father encouraged her.

“You can do it,” Jay said. “Just go to Mom. You have the power.”

She walked forward on two unsteady legs, and then those same legs began to change. Scales grew down their sides, the same brilliant emerald as her mother’s. She giggled, entranced, and then with this excitement she began to *race* forward gleefully, laughing as more of her changed. Her legs collapsed as they merged together, and she ripped her skirt aside as she flopped to the sand. Her feet extended out brilliantly to become a fan-like fish fin, and with it she rocketed ahead to greet her mother. She was no longer a human girl. She was a mermaid!

Another flash, and suddenly both could see a new memory, this one belonging to both of them. Olive and Ben were spending time together. She was a young teenager and so was he. They were the best of friends, and perhaps about to become something more. Her father and mother had warned her not to tell anyone her secret, but Ben was kind. He was handsome. And he too felt like an outsider, though both his parents were human they were always arguing and keeping him off to the sidelines. She took him to the beach and made him promise not to say anything about what she was about to show him. And then she retreated back to the water.

“Trust me, you’re going to freak out, but it’s okay,” she said.

But Ben didn’t freak out, even as she turned into a mermaid, even as her hair became green and the fins on her forearms emerged. Instead, he looked at her with awe.

A third flash. The pair were making out. They loved making out in the warm shallows, she in mermaid form, him uncaring how wet he was. They were both seventeen, young and foolish, and she no longer felt afraid to be daring. She was proud to be a mermaid and shed her human form, and Ben always made her feel free. Her father hadn’t been supportive when he found out, but he was doing his best to keep them protected. He was such a worrywart for her and her mother, trying to keep them safe.

“You’re so beautiful,” Ben whispered in her ear.

She turned her attention back to her sweet boyfriend. She loved how rugged yet kind he was, how manly yet soft in all the right places. She leaned forward to kiss him, her tail wrapping around his side . . .

But then there was an interruption. A series of coarse shouts. It was night, but torchlight flickered over to near their position as numerous masked individuals raced over the banks. They had weapons. They had murderous intent. Olive screamed, and Ben urged for her to move.

But they weren’t heading for the pair. They were heading for her mother. For Alera, who was moving swiftly to try and retrieve her daughter.

“I see her! There’s the monster bitch! Slay the beast!”

More horrible yells, and soon guns were firing, and arrows too. Dogs barked, houses lit up, but the murderous crowd were intent on firing from the bank at the mermaid.

One shot hit. Olive was already racing to Alera, but instead she found the horrible sight of her mother bleeding, writhing in the water and gasping to breathe. She reached out, but another group was approaching in a boat. No, it was just one man, in a fishing boat. Olive screamed at him to help, but soon she was caught in a net alongside her mother. The man who pulled them in had dark skin. His expression was dark too.

“H-Hank,” Alera groaned. “P-please . . .”

“I should have known it was a monster with my son,” he said, brandishing a knife.

But there was hesitation in his eyes. Olive was crying, holding her mother. She pleaded with the father of her boyfriend to spare them, even though part of her knew her mother was already slipping away.

“I . . . I can’t let you live as you are,” Hank said. “But I won’t kill you either.”

The rest was darkness, as Olive fell into unconsciousness.

The last flash. This one was at the edge of their awareness, and it was Olive’s memory again. All she could remember was a glow, a strange ritual. Hank was with Jay, and both men hated each other, though Jay far more. He was seething, wanting to kill the other man.

“I didn’t hurt the monster, that was others. I saved your daughter. Be grateful.”

“I’ll kill you.”

“Not if you want your daughter - your son now - to live. This is the way. With the magic from her chest, the crystal from the cavern, and the knowledge we both possess, we can have this stalemate. You can raise your new son, and he can live. That’s as good as you’ll get.”

Jay turned cold, his warm hard frosting over.

“And you and your son will never come into contact with us ever again.”

“We won’t. The hunters all think they both died.”

The light faded, and they were still in the chamber. Olive - for she knew she was Olive now, not Oliver - gasped. The weight of so much confusion had lifted from her shoulders, the strange spell Hank and her father had worked together was now shattered, and fading fast. She knew that because even among the chaos of finding herself surrounded by astonished cultists, she could see that strands of hair were now falling even further into her vision than they had before.

And they were green.

“Holy shit,” Ben said. “Oliver, your hair is green! Like in our memories!”

“It’s Olive,” she said. “I was always Olive. Oh my God. By the sea. Ben, I’m a mermaid!”

“She’s a monster!” one of the hunters yelled. In the bright flash of the crystal he had dropped his weapon, but he moved to pick it up now. Ben was far quicker. He kicked the man in the head, grabbed Olive by the hand and yanked her out of the chamber. They swept past Hank.

“Son, what are you doing?”

“A damn better thing than you ever did! You’re the real monster!”

A shot rang out, followed by another. The hunters were regathering, the blinding effect of the crystal taking longer to wear off of them; they had seen no visions, just a momentary and magical flashbang effect that seared their senses.

“We need to get you out of here!” Ben said as they raced through the tunnel. His torch barely lit the way ahead, and Olive shrieked a little as rock crumbled from a stray shot. She stumbled, trying to run properly, but already the dissipating effect of the magic was having knock-on effects: her body was changing, and the changes weren’t slow either.

“Ben! I’m turning back! I’m becoming a girl again!”

“Good! Olive, I can’t believe I ever forgot! I love you!”

“I love you too! But - ohhhh! It’s making it hard to run!”

What little masculine strength that Oliver had possessed was fading as his limbs began to soften. Oliver groaned and grunted, even as they stumbled out of the exit of the cave and began running down the hill. His thighs thickened a little, and his hips cracked wider - much wider. For a few moments, he felt like a boy again, scrambling through bushes, but then the magic pulled back from his mind once again, and *she* was a girl. No, a *woman*. She held to Ben, feeling his strength. They ripped their costumes free so that they were just in t-shirts and shorts, but even they weren’t fitting so well now: Olive’s shirt began to loosen as she lost height, and her waist pulled inwards.

“Ohhhhhh, it f-feels so weird!”

“Are you okay? Are you in pain? Talk to me, Olive!”

She stopped for a moment at a tree and groaned, running increasingly soft hands down her sides, which flared outwards. Ben was momentarily stunned: Olive’s hips were divine. When she pulled at her shirt, he could see a flat midriff, athletic yet flat. Gorgeous. He remembered now how entrancing Olive had been, and now that it was three years on from the spell her body had only flowered into full womanhood. Especially in her . . .

“Mmhmm! OHhhhhh!”

She clutched him, pressing her chest against him. She was nearly a foot shorter now, and her hair was snaking down her back, becoming ethereally emerald in colour. It was

utterly freeing, but that wasn't the change occurring that caught both their attention. No, what was most alarming and strange and *wonderful* - for different reasons for the two of them - was the blossoming bustline that Olive was now developing. She moaned, voice getting higher and higher, more feminine by the second, as her nipples enlarged and her chest expanded, the flesh surging forth to become soft and bountiful. Just like her mother, she remembered, she was now quite the busty woman. She would have celebrated, feeling far more at home with this marvellous new body, were it not for a shot that ran out in the dark.

"Sh-shit!" she managed. "We n-need to go! Now!"

Sorry, I was distracted!"

She managed the briefest of giggles, particularly as her bust expanded yet again, making the shirt rise up and become tight around the chest. "I don't - ahh - blame you! But we need to go!"

The situation turned serious again, their brief flirtation ended by the very real knowledge that these men were coming to kill her. That they had killed her mother. Ben too was afraid, not just of his father but of what could happen to her. She struggled and groaned though, particularly as her womb formed, as her manhood began to slide up between her legs and be replaced by a far more feminine opening. Her hair was nearly down to her buttocks, and it caught several times on tree branches as it swayed.

"I'm s-sorry!" she cried, tears welling her eyes. Her legs ached, and her softening face betrayed fear for her life. "You have to go on!"

Ben grabbed her, pulled her against him, and kissed her deeply. Her lips softened against his, becoming larger - again, like her mother's - while her nose shrank down. When he pulled back, her face was one of otherworldly beauty.

"I'm not going anywhere without you, Olive," he said, and with that he raised her up in his strong arms, easily carrying the now-smaller woman, and began to run down into Pearlwater and through its streets.

The hunters were fanning out, he knew. She held to him. Cars were roaming the streets as they never did in the dead of night. She breathed heavily, breasts pushing against her lover. She wanted him so badly, to be safe and held by him where they needn't be afraid. To never have to worry about losing their memories again. More than that, there was a terrible itch. The last of her very impressive curves manifested, leaving her a deeply attractive and voluptuous woman just as she knew she was meant to be. But she wasn't *all* she was meant to be. The sea was calling her, and a further change with it. She longed to be her true form again. To be a mermaid.

But there were so many hunters, and their torchlights were scattering through the small town, cutting off exits.

“My father! We need to get to my father!” she cried. If things did truly go bad, she wanted to see him.

Ben looked into her emerald eyes for a moment, then nodded. She got to her feet as he lowered her, and this time she led the way, pausing behind trash dispensers and behind storefronts as hunters passed. They made their way to her house, knowing there was little time. Only Hank knew of her home, and she had to hope they could get there before him.

When they entered, Jay was already there, looking about in a panic.

“Oh my God! Olive! Oh, my beautiful pearl, my Olive! What have you done?”

Tears flowed from his once-cold eyes as he held her, wrapping his arms around her form as he hadn't in years. It took a moment for her to even respond, even as he pulled her into the house and shut the door. Ben stood back, not knowing what to say as father looked over daughter, joy and fear and frustration mingling together on his features.

“This was never meant to happen. You - you'll be discovered. The hunters are out - I saw them. I wanted to -”

“Keep me safe, I know Dad,” she said. She kissed him on the cheek and pulled back, taking Ben's hand. “But you had no right. Ben and I are in love.”

“They were going to kill you. This man's father, he killed-”

“He didn't kill your wife,” Ben said, though he then stared at the floor. “But he didn't save her, either. And he threatened Olive. He's a bad man. Please, sir, we need to get to the sea. I can take care of Olive. We'll run away together. I know it's not what you want, but I'll defend her, and see no harm comes to her. But she needs to be free.”

“I need to be a mermaid again,” she said. “It's who I'm meant to be, Dad. It is.”

Jay paused. For a moment, that coldness returned, but then he looked into Olive's eyes and clearly saw the resemblance to her mother. His face melted into a sad smile.

“Of course it's who you're meant to be,” he whispered. “You're just like your mother. I'm so sorry, Olive. I just wanted to keep you safe. I love you so much.”

“I love you too Dad,” she said, wiping her cheeks. “But we have to hurry, before-”

The front door slammed open, and Hank strode forth. He had a crossbow, and he wore no mask. His eyes were flickering like a mad man's, rage boiling beneath the surface.

“Jay! You broke our deal! This'll be on you! I never wanted blood. I told you that your daughter could live if she was no longer anything like-”

He didn't finish the sentence. Ben was in front of him, holding a sharp knife. He trembled, but he meant to use it.

“Don't. You. Fucking. Dare. Hurt. The. Woman. I. Love.”

Hank stared at his son. “Ben, step aside, you don't understand-”

"I understand everything, father. I saw Olive's memories. I saw that you left Alera to die. I saw that you pushed her father to help alter our memories. You tried to stop our love. Never again. I won't hesitate to kill you like the *monster you are*."

Hank swallowed. "She's the monster. She's not human—"

"And you are!? Look at you! What did she do to you!?"

"Her kind are—"

"Not here!" Ben roared. "But I am and I love her. And if there's anything left of the man that fell in love with Mom before you pushed her away, who loves *me*, then you'll step aside. Now."

Ben held the gaze of his father. Unlike with Jay, who had suppressed his sorrow until it had turned into a bitter rock within his soul, Hank had still shown warmth and liveliness when things were well. Ben knew that he was human, but he would revoke such consideration if he didn't back down and show he still had empathy.

Hank dropped the crossbow. He trembled. "Son, I didn't mean . . . I was raised among hunters. I've been trained to—"

"I don't give a shit. Olive's mom is dead. She might die soon. We're getting to the beach and then to safety."

Hank swallowed, seemed to come to a decision. "I'll take you there," he said. "Come. All of you."

Jay didn't move.

"Please, I swear on my life that I'm telling the truth."

Olive's father just walked past him. "If you lie, I'm getting my revenge. If you get my daughter and her boyfriend to safety, I still won't forgive you. But maybe you'll have enough to forgive yourself."

Olive took Ben's hand. She was trembling, and so was he.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He looked to her. She was so goddamn beautiful. How had he ever forgotten her, with her bright emerald hair and elven features and her curvaceous form. Far more than that, the hopeful kindness in her eyes, the desire for freedom and compassion that had drawn him in the first place.

"I'll never lose you again," he said.

She squeezed his hand, and they moved quickly to Hank's car.

Hank drove illegally onto the beach. It was a short drive, but they had to pass two hunter checks. The local organisation was pretending it was an escaped criminal and telling people

to stay indoors. Jay was in the front in a hunter costume, but Ben and Olive were in the trunk. It was only when it was opened and they were ushered out that the pair knew for certain that Hank had told the truth: the midnight waves were there. No, not midnight, not anymore: the first light of dawn was beginning to appear upon the horizon, the last patches of dusk beginning to ebb away.

“I can feel it,” Olive said, stepping forward. “The call to change. To be a mermaid again.”

She brushed more tears from her cheeks. It was like coming home as she stepped her toes into the water. It should have been cold, but instead the warmth was wonderful; protective. There was a slight shimmer, and she could see the scales slowly grow where the water contacted her skin. It elicited a gasp from her.

“My magic,” she breathed. “I didn’t lose it. Mother, I’m still me. I’m still a mermaid. I still have the gift!”

She also didn’t have much time. Hank looked around, paranoid.

“You need to get moving already. I won’t be able to hold the others back, though I’ll try.” He checked his crossbow. Jay had kept his distance, but he moved forward to Ben.

“You’re going with her, right?”

“Of course,” the young man said. “I’m not my father, sir. I won’t hurt her. Ever.”

“You protect her. You love her as I loved her mother. She was a magnificent woman. I think about her everyday. If I ever see you two again . . . please, just take care of my Olive.”

Ben extended a hand, and for the first time Jay took it.

“Thank you,” he said. “I was wrong to allow her to stay like this, and to keep you apart.”

“We both were,” Hank said, “though I played the far worse part of it. Now go, both of you. Find safety.”

“What will you do, Dad?” Ben asked. For all the hate he had for his father, he still felt love for him. The two feelings warred in his heart, but that same heart stopped beating for a moment when his father pulled a jerry can from the backseat of the car.

“I’m going to make one hell of a reason why you got away, and why you won’t be coming back,” he said. “As far as the hunters are concerned, you were both injured trying to get away.”

“But you’ll still be with them. A member.”

Hank shook his head. “I was thinking of being another casualty, but far better to finally push the group into the light. The world should know what we’ve been doing, and judge us for it. I’m sorry, Olive. For everything. To you too, Ben.”

Olive just nodded, thankful. Her heart was too pure as a mermaid, because she indeed forgave the man, even if the loss of her mother was a wound that would never fully heal. But she had Ben, and she had a future. She stirred in the water.

“Goodbye,” she said, before looking over to Ben's father. “I'll keep him safe.”

“And he'll keep you safe!” the other man yelled.

Ben joined her. They shared a brief look, and then waded into the water together. With each step, her body changed. She lost her clothing, freeing herself of the coverings that made little sense for a beauty of the sea. Her breasts bounced freely, her form gorgeous and curvaceous and otherworldly. The scales raced up her legs, and just like the memory of the past she collapsed forward as the water deepened, her legs joining together and becoming a single tail. It extended outwards, her feet flaring wonderfully into a full fin. Small fins extended from her forearms, and little scales appeared by her ears, which became more elf-like, elongated.

“OHhhhhhhh,” she moaned, feeling the rush of water through her lungs, the exhalation of it from her gills. Everything felt perfect, everything felt right. She shifted through the water, taking Ben by the hand and pulled him further out. Her powerful tail splashed, revealing to all that she was now a full mermaid. It rose out from the surface and caught the first glint of the sun's rays, flashing brilliantly.

“Wow, that's incredible,” Ben said. “I'm - I'm not even cold.”

“That's my doing,” she boasted, her magical touch keeping him warm. She pulled him further out. Just as he had held her from the cave, she now held him through the waters, even as the beach receded, becoming tiny in view, the two fathers watching their progeny join together, where they themselves had been in opposition. Something hard and tense finally left them, the sensation of truth and freedom now rippling just like the water around them. Olive was finally herself again, and Ben finally knew the truth. The two lovers continued out into deeper waters, only to stop with the beach at the very edge of their view. Holding her boyfriend - the love of her life - aloft, Olive pressed her naked form against him, letting him encircle her smooth waist in turn. She kissed him passionately, letting her tongue snake into his mouth and dance with his tongue. She wanted him, her needs flaring, but now was not the time. There would be plenty of time for that later, and for the rest of their lives. She would be his mermaid, and he her protector, and they would never see a hunter again; she just knew it. Whether they found an island or another town or lived on the move, they would be together, always.

Their lips parted, and the pair pressed their foreheads against one another.

“I love you, and I always will,” Ben said.

“I love you too,” she replied, kissing him again. “Now let's go. The sea is calling.”

And with it, their future. She held her lover and helped him cross through the ocean, on towards freedom. They were never to be parted again.

The End