

Frenchtown lay close to the water, right on Charlotte Amalie Harbor. Jackson could smell the sea, strong in the air, as he walked down the row of restaurants on his way to Sandy's. He passed Rum Shandy, hearing laughter from the people inside, and the swell of the music from the speakers. Pie Whole was quiet from the outside, but the smell of fresh dough greeted him.

Cars lined the street, packed tight together. Even on a quiet night, it was hard to find parking in Frenchtown. Jackson had gotten lucky and found a spot against the Griffith Ballpark fence. As he passed other cars, he looked inside the ballpark, where a group of expats were kicking around a soccer ball. A blond-haired guy with long legs shot the ball high into the air. A stout brunette girl with strong thighs and pronounced calf muscles whipped down the field in pursuit, spitting up dirt as she ran. On the bleachers, Jackson could see a few island boys sitting, lighting up, the smoke curling up from the ends of their blunts. The palm trees on the far side of the field swayed like dancers in the night breeze.

Sandy's was only a two-minute walk from Bella Blu, but Jackson took his sweet time getting there. He pushed open one of the double doors, and the sound of lively chatter greeted him. Sandy's was a dive compared to Bella Blu, but it had a homey feel that made it much more inviting. Clever sayings and old-timey photos of St. Thomas hung on the walls. "Warning," said a sign in big, bold letters. "The consumption of alcohol may cause pregnancy." "No trespassing," said another. "Violators will be shot. Survivors will be shot again." A crocodile skull dangled from the ceiling. Jackson had no idea of its authenticity. In the back were two pool tables, which almost always had people playing on them. Tonight was no exception.

The chairs that curved around the U-shaped bar were empty except for an older white man at one end, and a younger-looking woman at the other. The bartender was busy pouring drinks for a couple who stood near the door.

Jackson watched the woman on the far end of the bar. She had her dreadlocks pulled back into a ponytail of sorts, the thick knots falling behind her like the dormant limbs of some many-tentacled sea monster. She looked sullen but at ease, a Greenie in one hand. Even from where he sat, he could see those piercing light-brown eyes that seemed to glow faintly in the bar's low light. Her skin was dark like Jackson's, but it gleamed as if she were some goddess who had stepped into the world of men only the day before and had not yet begun to age. The softness of a child, the physique of a woman. Her black tank top exposed arms corded with muscles.

Seeing her powerful arms, Jackson finally considered the prospect of losing his head. He felt the skin of his neck go taut, could almost feel her hands on him, the flesh tearing as easily as bread. He knew that the Ynaa were powerful and not opposed to harming humans, and he recognized the same self-assuredness, the same discreet threat, in the woman across the bar. Just like other Ynaa he had glimpsed on island, she carried herself with the promise of violence. But no one mistook Mera for just any Ynaa. No other Ynaa fascinated and terrified the islanders the way she did.

At the moment, most of the people in Sandy's seemed at ease with the ambassador's presence, but Jackson knew better. He knew what hid under the smiles and conversation: the same quiet terror that was making his legs shake as he took his seat at the bar. He ordered a Greenie, and the bartender slid him a long-necked bottle of Heineken, cold and sweating with a little foam peeking from its lip.

Jackson let it settle and then took a swig while giving the ambassador quick glances. Soon, he gave up all his ambitions, measuring himself against the intimidating creature and finding that he was not up to the task. There would be no confrontation, no revelations this night. His sane mind had prevailed.

Sandy's had tables all around. Most, but not all, were empty. The couple at the bar had gone into the back room to watch a group of older men play pool, but a gang of young people were talking loudly at a corner booth. Every now and then, one of them looked in the ambassador's direction. Another couple ate their dinner quietly at the other end of the room, behind the ambassador's back. They, too, kept their eye on her, sneaking furtive glances.

The older white man smiled in Jackson's direction, and Jackson recognized the dirty-blond hair and missing teeth. He was a friend of the bar's owner. Jackson used to come into Sandy's a lot when he was teaching at Charlotte. The man was always here then, chatting up the owner, an older white woman with a loud voice and a warm smile, whose name actually was Sandy. She had lived on island most of her life.

The white man lifted his glass to Jackson. "Ain't see you in here in a while," he said in the island lilt.

Jackson smiled. The man was either a local Frenchie, which wouldn't be surprising here in Frenchtown, or an expat who had lived here long enough to pick up the talk. Jackson figured it was the latter, since he could detect a bit of awkwardness in the way the words rolled off the man's tongue.

"Yeah, it been a long while," Jackson said. "Been busier lately with all that been going on."

The man nodded and glanced at the ambassador. Jackson nodded back, assuming that the glance was intentional. The man tilted his head and smiled big, revealing a mostly complete set of teeth. Then he returned to his drink. Jackson quietly finished his beer and ordered two more.

After the third Heineken, he switched back to a rum and Coke. Without meaning to, he continued his careful observation of the ambassador.

"Another drink?" the bartender asked the ambassador. He was white and definitely an expat but had been working at Sandy's for several years now. He had a laid-back disposition that Jackson liked. And he seemed completely at home with the ambassador, which impressed Jackson.

The ambassador looked up at the bartender, smiled, and said, "Yes, give me another one."

The bartender nodded.

Most other Ynaa could not pull off an act like this. Even in their human skin, they couldn't be mistaken for the real thing. They were too slow, too jerky in their movements. Not the ambassador. She could pass for an islander if only her face weren't so infamous.

The bartender gave Mera the Greenie, and she held it in her hand as if to drink, but then put down the bottle. Jackson watched her do this, looking for something that would give her away, reveal what she truly was. He didn't realize she had turned her eyes to him until it was too late.

He felt cold dread move through him before his body reacted, and then he quickly averted his eyes. He felt the seconds tick by as he fixed his attention on a painting above the heads of the dining couple behind Mera. He waited. After some time, when he couldn't take it anymore, he allowed himself a quick glance at her. She was still watching him, with no expression at all. Something in her

gaze caught him. He had stared into her eyes and turned to stone. Ants crawled up his back, and he was powerless to stop them. The world around him disappeared into those eyes.

Before he screamed, she pulled her attention away, releasing him. As if nothing had happened at all, she returned to her drink, staring into the middle distance between them, going back to whatever thoughts were occupying her mind.

Jackson felt hot behind the ears. He looked around, embarrassed. No one was looking at him, but the room was quiet.

He found a conspiracy in that silence. Perhaps he had drunk too much, but something broke in him then. His heart thumped with panicked rage, and the urge flooded back into him, filling all the spaces his terror had left. He wanted to run into traffic, to tip over a cliff, to slide the knife against flesh to watch it bleed. He heard Aubrey's voice in the back of his mind, begging him not to. And he found himself arguing with the voice, shouting back against it.

She had embarrassed him. And she knew she had done so. It was a very human thing to do—*too* human. How dare she! Who did she think she was? It was their Earth, not hers, not the Ynaa's. Who gave her the right to be here? Who gave her the right to deceive them all?

*And who are you to lecture me now that you've left me? I loved you and you left me.*

The words came out easily, a continuation of the argument in his head. "You been here a while, haven't you?" he asked, the question loud enough for everyone at the bar to hear.

Mera turned her eyes and head slowly this time to look at him. Not quite normal. Not quite human. It was a deception. He knew the truth.

"You been on Earth for centuries," he said, pressing on.

The bartender stopped polishing the glass in his hand. The older white man perked up, and the couple at the near table swung their attention Jackson's way. The background pop rock music seemed louder now since even the young people at the corner booth had stopped talking.

As if in answer, Mera got up and took a hundred-dollar bill out of her purse and put it on the bar, the movement so calm that Jackson shrank back in his seat, afraid of what would come. She smiled graciously at the bartender and moved slowly toward Jackson's side of the bar. His body tensed, his heart thumping hard and fast. He closed his eyes, listening to the soft footsteps approach. He could feel her closeness as she walked behind his chair. He waited in that tense silence for what felt like a long time.

But nothing happened.

When he opened his eyes, she was already headed toward the door, her back to him. Before he understood what he was doing, he got up from his chair. He rushed toward her, reaching out and grabbing her by the arm.

"Wait," he said.

She was careful when she turned. It was graceful. Slow. So human now. So painfully human. When she spoke, it was quiet, a secret for only the two of them.

"You can go back," she said, her eyes never leaving his. "You can take your hands off me and drink your beer. And I'll leave in peace. Nothing else will happen."

Jackson's eyes were wide. His body shook. Nothing about how she said this was odd at all. It was gentle. But he felt all the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. A chill slid all the way down to his legs. He let go.

"Good night," she said, and left.

The room sat in silence for a few seconds longer. Then murmuring crept back into the space. Soon, talking, though hushed, had resumed. Jackson had no difficulty guessing the subject of that talk. He returned to his chair and sat back down, staring forward, too afraid to leave.

Quietly he drank two more beers, his head low and shoulders high, sweat trickling down from his armpits. When the conversation in the bar felt as though it had returned to its normal tenor, he paid his bill and slipped out, the voices trailing behind him like a thunderstorm at sea.

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