

# Cressida



By  
Rami Ungar

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Mark Honig drove the rental car towards his uncle's beach home. On the driver's side was a great cliff face dappled with green moss, while on the other side the ocean lapped against the cliff face dappled with barnacles and mollusks. For anyone else on the road that day, it was probably a beautiful sight worthy of a postcard. Indeed, Mark spotted quite a few people pulled over on the shoulder to take selfies with the ocean as a backdrop.

He wished he could share in their enthusiasm. However, the ocean only filled Mark with unease and bad memories.

*How many years has it been since I was last out here?* he wondered. *Must be at least eight years, not since before Aunt Delilah's funeral.*

He felt guilty about being away so long. He had always meant to come out and visit his Uncle Jacob as much as possible. After all, they were each other's only living relatives now. But the fact that his uncle had sold his home in the city and moved into his beach home full-time had kept Mark away. Why his uncle had decided to move there, he couldn't say. After all, Jacob had the same bad memories associated with the place. Whatever the reason, it was enough of a reason for Mark that he always found an excuse not to come out and visit. And if things had gone as planned, that pattern would have continued until one or both of them were dead.

So why was he now driving out to see Jacob Olshaker at the family beach house? Because Jacob had sent him a text last week. Not unusual, they normally called each other once a month and texted each other one or two times a week. However, it was what was in the text that had Mark concerned.

*You should come out here and visit, Mark. Me and Cressida would love to see you. We miss you terribly.*

Cressida. Jacob's daughter and Mark's cousin. The same cousin who had died the summer of Mark's tenth year. And up until that text, he had been sure his uncle was not only aware that his daughter was dead but had reconciled with her passing and moved on. So, he had been concerned to see his uncle mention her in a text message in the present tense. As if she were not only alive but living with his uncle in the beach house.

Obviously, Mark had called Jacob up almost as soon as he'd read the text. Jacob had answered and he had seemed as jovial and as well as he always did during their usual calls. But when Mark had brought up the subject of Cressida, his uncle had become evasive.

"I can't say anything over the phone, bucko," he had said. "It's a bit of a sensitive subject and if I told you the truth, you'd probably lock me up in the funny farm. But listen, you have some vacation time saved up, right? Come out and see me. I'll explain everything then."

And that was all Jacob would say, no matter how much Mark pushed and prodded for more information. So, despite how reluctant he was, Mark had requested some time off work and booked tickets out to see his uncle.



Sighing, Mark glanced out the window at the ocean. He decided he wanted to pull over as well, though not to take a photo. No, he just wanted time to think before he arrived at the beach house.

Or was he just stalling?

Shrugging to himself, Mark signaled and drove onto the shoulder. Slowing down and parking, he turned off the rental's engine, stepped out, and leaned against the guardrail. Down below him, the waves crashed against the cliff face, reminding Mark of a rumbling stomach as it slowly ate away at the stone rising out of it. Between the sunbeams reflecting off the blue waves, there were dark spots that had an ominous gleam of their own.

It all exacerbated Mark's worries. Was his uncle going senile in his old age? Did he have a break with reality after so many years alone? Or, like out of a bad horror novel, had the beach house and the ocean worked together to drive his uncle mad, haunting him with the memory of his dead daughter?

Mark sighed. *I guess I'll find out soon enough*, he thought, gazing out at the waves. The very waves, he reminded himself, that had swallowed up his cousin Cressida all those years ago.

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It was the sound of the sliding glass door that woke him up. Ten-year-old Mark Honig opened his eyes and sat up, at once both curious and worried. Because his uncle's beach house kind of scared him at night with all its unfamiliar noises, something which at ten years old he felt ashamed of but couldn't fix or get rid of, he had memorized the sounds the house made at night. The sliding door was never heard after all the grownups went to bed. Thus, its presence had woken Mark.

Getting out of bed, Mark cautiously approached the window in his briefs. From the window, he would have a decent vantage point of both the beach and the glass doors. He hoped he would see his Uncle Jacob and Aunt Delilah, or even his own parents, outside for a late-night stroll. If he didn't see them and he saw signs that the glass sliding door had been recently disturbed, he might have to raise the alarm. Or, to be more literal, he would have to scream his head off that they might have a burglar in the house.

Mark pushed the curtain aside and pressed his face against the window screen. Glancing down, he saw the glass doors were open and a trail of footsteps in the sand were leading away from the house. Well, at least he knew that a burglar or even a depraved sex maniac like in the movies his parents didn't know he watched had gotten inside. Instead, someone had stepped outside. But who?

Mark scanned the beach and immediately zeroed in on a familiar form walking towards the ocean. He raised an eyebrow. What was his cousin Cressida doing out so late?

He watched as she came to a stop at the edge of where the tide reached, where the sand was damp and packed and hadn't turned to mud yet. A breeze stirred her dress, a pretty thing Mark hadn't known his cousin owned. She always preferred sporty clothes and hated anything remotely girly. The full moon in the sky illuminated Cressida's lithe form through the dress, causing Mark's stomach to stir uncomfortably.

He watched her for another minute or so before deciding to go out and ask her herself what she was doing out so late. Grabbing a T-shirt and a pair of shorts from his dresser, he dressed as he stole quietly down the stairs and to the back door, dressing as he went. When he stepped down onto the sand, he was fully dressed and Cressida was still standing by the ocean, as

still as a statue. He took a few steps towards her, then stopped. For some reason, he was scared to approach his cousin right now.

Deciding to wait and watch, Mark sat in the sand, which had cooled from its time baking in the sun. The moment he did, however, Cressida turned to face him. Mark's heart leapt into his throat. He felt like he'd been caught doing something very bad, the kind of thing his parents would smack his butt and then ground him for.

“Um, hi Cressida.”

For a moment, Cressida only regarded him unemotionally, like she'd noticed a piece of seaweed lying at her feet. Then she said, in her throaty voice, “Hey Mark.”

An uncomfortable silence fell between them. As Mark struggled to think of something to say, he took her in like he never had before. Eleven years older than him, she was tall and athletic, with an oval face and long brown hair pulled into a practical ponytail that fell down her back. And, to Mark's surprise, her bright-green eyes were full of sadness.

He'd known Cressida since he was a baby, but during this summer, he had found himself paying more attention to his cousin than usual for some reason. And he had never seen her look sad. She usually had a gentle smile on her face, or occasionally an annoyed frown. But sadness? He didn't think he'd ever seen that on her face and the sight of it made his sense of unease worse.

Finally, unable to take the silence anymore, he coughed and said, “What are you doing up?”

“Oh, you know,” Cressida replied, turning back to the ocean. “Enjoying the view. There’s no view like it, after all. Go back to bed, okay? You don’t want to be crabby tomorrow.”

Something in her voice told him that she wasn’t really out here to enjoy the view. “Is everything alright?”

She turned back to him and he was horrified to see that, while she was smiling, there were tears in her eyes. “Just go to bed, okay?” she said, a sob in her throat. “I-I’m just going to go for a late-night swim. I’ll be back soon.”

And without waiting to see what he would do, she turned back towards the ocean and stepped in. Mark watched, confused, as she continued to walk into the water, even though she was still wearing that pretty dress, the skirt of which billowed around her as it became soaked. Still she walked further in, up to her waist, then to her chest and to her shoulders. Another step, and only Cressida’s head and ponytail remained above the surface. Then her head disappeared beneath the surface, and her ponytail followed a moment later.

Mark crossed to the edge of the beach, waiting for her to reemerge with a splash and a deep breath, like she did when they had played together earlier today. She would jump out from the water, suck in a deep breath, and then flash him a smile. That was how she’d done it that day and all throughout vacation. She would then laugh, give him some anecdote about being on her school’s swim team, and then play a game with him or show him how to swim like the professionals did. Mark had no doubt that, whatever Cressida was doing right now, she would emerge and do just that.

But she didn’t emerge. The only thing to arrive from the dark depths of the ocean were a small stream of bubbles about twenty feet out, the moonlight bouncing off them before they



popped so that even Mark could spot them. And the moment he saw those bubbles, he grasped what had happened, what Cressida was really doing in the ocean. And he screamed loud enough to wake his parents and his aunt and uncle and let them know what was wrong.

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Mark pulled up to the beach house, his uncle's car in the driveway. He turned off the engine of his own vehicle, but he did not get out. Instead, he stayed in his seat and took in the old house, noting how it looked slightly run down. Mark wondered about this. Considering his uncle had decided to keep the place rather than sell it and had then retired to this house once Aunt Delilah passed, one would think he would maintain it better.

"I know it seems silly," he had confided in Mark after he had moved in. "But I feel closer to Cressida here. After all, she's not buried in that cemetery where her headstone is. That's an empty grave. If I'm going to live anywhere, it's going to be where I at least feel her spirit."

Her spirit. Perhaps that had something to do with the state of the house. Cressida didn't leave behind a suicide note, so why she drowned herself was still a mystery. However, if it had something to do with the house or something that happened there, perhaps Cressida's ghost was haunting the place, and her father by extension. And it would go a long way to explain that weird phone call.

Mark shivered. Such morbid thoughts were unusual for him. Besides, he didn't believe in ghosts.

*I'm sure there's a logical explanation for all this,* he thought, stepping out of the car and grabbing his suitcase from the trunk. *I just need to get inside and figure out what that is.*

Taking out his key—Jacob had given him one with the reminder that Mark was always welcome at the beach house—Mark unlocked the front door and stepped inside. He glanced around the living room, kitchen-dinette, and dining room, and noticed nothing out of sorts. Unlike the outside, the rooms were well maintained, though Mark thought the furniture and photos on the walls were the same ones that had been here when he was ten.

Also, there was no sign of his uncle. Mark called out for him but received no response. Placing his suitcase on the floor, he first checked the sliding doors in the back. As far as he could tell, his uncle wasn't out enjoying the beach. There was a long, wooden dock out there that hadn't been there the last time Mark had been down, as well as a small, sporty yacht that was tied to a mooring. Those were new additions Jacob had forgotten to mention. Mark would have to bring that up.

Of course, he would have to find his uncle first. Deciding to leave searching the yacht for last, Mark turned back and headed to the second floor. The master bedroom and attached bathroom was empty, as was the guest bathroom, the guest room Mark's parents used to sleep in, the guest room he used to sleep in, and Cressida's room. He didn't stay long in this last room. It had been perfectly preserved as it had been on the day Cressida had walked into the ocean, and just breathing the air within made Mark uncomfortable.

He made his way downstairs again. On the second-to-last step, the wood underneath the carpet creaked. A figure stepped from around the corner, brandishing a large, blunt weapon.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" he roared.

Mark threw his arms up defensively. "Uncle Jacob, chill! It's me, Mark!"

Jacob Olshaker lowered the rolling pin he'd been holding as a weapon and stared at Mark as if he were seeing him for the first time. "Mark? Is that you?"

"Do I look like Eleanor Roosevelt?" The words were out before Mark could even think of what he was saying. The two men, who hadn't been face-to-face with each other without a computer or phone screen between them in years, stared at each other for a moment before they burst out laughing and hugged each other.

"Oh, it's good to see you, boy." Jacob led Mark into the kitchen and replaced the rolling pin in a cabinet. "I forgot you were coming and was down in the basement when you arrived. When I heard someone walking about above me, I got concerned."

Mark had forgotten about the basement, which he'd barely been in when he was younger. As far as he could remember, it had been spacious but only contained a washer and dryer. Jacob had talked of turning it into a rec room when Cressida was alive, but that talk had never turned into action.

"Anyway," Jacob continued, "I'm glad you came like you said. I've missed you, buddy. And I'm sure Cressida will be delighted to see you too."

"Um, yeah," Mark replied. "Uncle Jacob, about that. When you said Cressida wanted to see me—?"

"It's better if I show you," Jacob interrupted, heading to the basement door. "You'll soon see."

Mark followed, confused and a little afraid. He didn't see any sign of madness or senility in his uncle, but you never could tell. Plenty of people went mad without showing it to their friends or family.

"Uncle, you do remember that Cressida died? She drowned." What he didn't say was, *She committed suicide, and I know she committed suicide because she walked into the ocean and then opened her mouth to drown herself. I watched her do it. Plus, she was wearing a nice dress, which is something suicides do. They dress their best when they take their own lives.*

"She didn't die." Jacob opened the door to the basement and walked down the stairs. A salty smell floated up towards them, filling their nostrils. Mark followed, wary but curious. "She just went into the water. After all, they never found her body."

"Well, they never found her body, but the Coast Guard said that was because the currents—"

"She didn't die!" Jacob spun around and glared at his nephew. "Cressida is alive. She just went into the water and left for a while. But she's here now. She's come home."

"Come home?" Mark repeated, perturbed. He was starting to wonder if his uncle was keeping some girl trapped down here. If he was, how should Mark, as his nephew, react?

"Yes, come home. And with a bit of time, she'll remember how good she had it here. Look and see."

They had reached the bottom of the stairs. Jacob gestured for Mark to look. He looked. His eyes widened and his mouth gaped.

On the one hand, it wasn't a girl chained to the wall, or a bunch of creepy mannequins, or something else out of a horror novel. On the other hand, Mark had no idea of what to make of it. The entire basement had been taken up by what appeared to be a huge aquarium tank. It was rectangular in shape, the sides made with thick glass and the top covered with metal plating. A ladder beside one corner led to a hatch on top, while some sort of motorized machine with pipes feeding into the tank growled quietly on the aquarium wall opposite the ladder.

Inside the tank, a thick layer of blue gravel covered the floor, with fake rocks and reefs rising out of the floor like in a child's fish tank. An artificial cave with a large overhang took up an entire corner of the tank, its shadow obscuring whatever was inside. There was movement in that cave, and Mark zeroed in as something emerged from it. As his eyes focused on what had swum out of the cave, he thought his mind would break right in that moment.

Behind him, Jacob laughed and said, "Yeah, that's what you think it is. Or I guess I should say, *who* you think it is."

The bottom half was long, sleek and dark red, with a horizontal flipper at the end of the tail and fins on the side and back. The top, except for gills on either side of the torso, was humanoid. Feminine. And it looked a lot like—

"Cressida," he whispered, stepping past his uncle and to the glass tank.

It was impossible. There was no way this could be happening. His mind was telling him this had to be some sort of trick or illusion. But there was no getting past what his eyes were seeing. There was a mermaid in the giant fish tank in his Uncle Jacob's basement and the mermaid's upper half looked almost entirely like his cousin Cressida had before she died.

In fact, it was insane how much she looked like his cousin: same oval face, same bright green eyes, even the same long hair kept in an athletic ponytail with some sort of sea plant as a tie. If he took a photograph of his cousin from right before she died and compared it to the mermaid, he would be hard-pressed to find any differences.

“H-How—how did you...?” He couldn’t form the words.

Thankfully, his uncle understood exactly what he was asking. “After your aunt died and I moved here, I bought my yacht and started taking it out. You know, just to get me out of the house and get me some fresh air. Can’t spend all day indoors communing with my daughter’s spirit, can I?”

“I suppose not,” Mark replied, still hypnotized by the mermaid.

“Anyway, one day last year I was out on the ocean, and that’s when I first saw her,” Jacob continued. “Just a glimpse, enough to make me think I imagined it. But then I saw her resurface just a few yards from where I’d first seen her. And when she resurfaced a third time, I had my camera ready. Once I had zoomed in enough and taken enough shots to prove to myself I wasn’t crazy, I started to think. Because not only had I just seen a mermaid, but one that looked exactly like Cressida had when she disappeared all those years ago.

“And that’s when I realized: my daughter’s spirit was never in the beach house. How could it be? It turned out she never died. I don’t know how, but she turned into a mermaid the night you saw her walk into the ocean. That’s why the Coast Guard never found her body: because there was never a body to find!”

“I-I guess that’s an explanation,” said Mark, though he still had trouble believing it.

“Anyway, once I realized that, I knew I had to bring her back. I wanted my daughter back with me. So, I came home, and started figuring out how to put this tank together. I could see in the photos, which I’ll show you later, that she had gills, so I didn’t think she would be able to survive long outside water. And it took me several months and more of my retirement account than I would like to admit, but I got this tank put together, complete with an environmental control system to keep her environment similar to the ocean.” He pointed a thumb at the machine hooked up to the tank.

“And after that, it was just a matter of finding her again. Took about a year or so of searching on the yacht, but I finally managed to find her, net her, and, when she started resisting, tranquilize her. After that, it was just a matter of getting her home and in the tank before she woke up. And now my Cressida is home, as she should be.”

Mark listened with dumb amazement, his mind adding the story and attempting to compute it with all the other information he had just taken in. Truthfully, he wasn’t sure he could compute it. His cousin had become a mermaid? And his uncle had brought her back here to be with her family? Could that even be possible?

The mermaid had finally noticed him and swam to the tank wall, floating right before him. Mark looked her up and down in amazement, lingered on her bare breasts perhaps a moment too long, and then focused on her face. It was exactly like Cressida’s. And yet, could this actually be his cousin? Had she actually turned into a mermaid that night on the beach? Or could the creature right before him just bear an uncanny resemblance?

The mermaid pounded on the glass with her fists and bared teeth that were long, red, and sharp, startling him. He jumped back as she let out a muffled roar and pounded on the glass with



her fists again. It reminded Mark of a mandrill he'd seen at the zoo once when he was a kid. It had pounded its fists at the visitors who had come to see it, warning them what it could do if only that pesky glass wasn't standing between them.

"Yeah, she hasn't been very friendly since she came home," Jacob said in an almost too-nonchalant tone. "I think her time in the ocean made her forget about us and how to be a human. She's gone a bit feral because of that. I can't even use the upper hatch to feed her. Tries to either bite or pull me in and drown me."

Motioning for Mark to follow, he led Mark to the far end of the room and pulled a large fish filet out of a mini refrigerator. He then guided his nephew to the environmental control system and pointed out one of the pipes that led into the tank. There was a small hatch on top of the pipe.

"I always knew Cressida might resist coming back home. She spent so much time away from us, after all. That's why I had to tranquilize her. But when I realized how aggressive she was, I worried about how I was going to feed her. Luckily, the maintenance hatches for these pipes provided a solution to that problem." He pulled on the hatch's handle and opened the pipe up. Leaning in, Mark watched as water flowed rapidly past the rectangular opening and into the tank.

"You feed her this way," he said, glancing at his uncle.

Jacob nodded. "She gets her three-square meals, and I get to keep all my fingers."

He dropped the filet into the pipe, shut the hatch, and turned the handle into the locked position. A second later, the filet appeared in the tank, floating serenely through the water. The

mermaid saw the filet and rushed towards it, grabbing it in her hands and tearing it violently with her teeth. The way she fed seemed to Mark both savage and strangely beautiful.

In fact, *she* was beautiful. There was no getting around it. This mermaid who resembled Cressida so closely was beautiful. Heavenly, even.

A thousand mixed and conflicting feelings stirred to life inside him. Shaking his head to clear his mind, Mark glanced at Jacob and asked the question at the forefront of his mind. “What are you going to do now?”

They both turned to the mermaid, who had finished her meal and had swum back to the cave. Apparently, that was her refuge from prying eyes.

“Well, like I said, I think she’s forgotten how to be a human and live in a house,” Jacob reminded him. “But I think, with enough time and exposure, Cressida will start to remember how to be human again. Then maybe she can tell us how she became a mermaid. If we can do that, then perhaps we can reverse it and I can have my little girl back again.”

He turned to Mark. “That’s why I’m glad you’re here, kid. Cressida was always fond of you. I’m sure if we both spend enough time with her down here, she’ll come to her senses soon enough. We can take turns, if you like, or we can work together.”

“Together?” Mark repeated.

Jacob nodded. “For now, though, how about you two get reacquainted? I’ll go upstairs and get your room ready. I suppose you’ll want your parents’ old room. After all, you’re too big for the kid bed you used to sleep in.”

He moved past Mark, around the tank and to the stairs. As his footsteps softened and then sounded overhead, Mark regarded the giant tank again, his eyes narrowing on the cave.

*This is crazy, he thought. A mermaid that looks like Cressida! And Uncle Jacob is certain she's the same girl I saw kill herself all those years ago!*

But what did he believe? Mark wasn't sure. On the one hand, the resemblance to his cousin was so uncanny, it couldn't be a coincidence. On the other hand, could that really be Cressida in mermaid form? If that were possible, could she really have forgotten them?

Or was the creature in the tank simply that, a creature? A wild animal, with no concept of human language and no understanding of who they were or why they were keeping her in a giant tank in a basement? All she knew was that enemies had her and that required her to be as aggressive as possible against her captors if she wanted to survive and escape.

As he pondered this, the mermaid swam out from the cave and towards him. This time when she floated before him, she did not pound on the glass, gnash her teeth or otherwise rage at him. Instead, she coolly surveyed him. Mark surveyed her in turn, doing his best to avoid her chest area and focusing on her unique anatomy. His eyes kept coming back, however, to her face. That face so similar to the one he had burned into his memories so many years ago.

Mark came to a decision then. He didn't know if this mermaid was Cressida, but he had to find out one way or another. So, while he hadn't intended to stay longer than a few days, he would stay as long as was needed.

And with that decision made, Mark began talking to the mermaid. He told her about his cousin Cressida, about how one night she had committed suicide by drowning in front of him,

and what he had been up to in his life since then. And the mermaid simply floated in front of him, as if listening, but gave him no indication that she understood.

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Mark's phone alarm went off, pulling him out of sleep and from what he'd been sure was a really good dream. With a yawn, he dragged himself to the bathroom, then dragged himself back to his room to dress. When he got downstairs, he found his Uncle Jacob grabbing his car keys and about to head out.

"Going somewhere?" Mark asked, checking his watch. It was just past eight.

Jacob nodded. "I thought I had an appointment at the VA at nine-thirty, but it's actually eight-thirty. I guess I'm getting old if I'm mixing up my appointments. Anyway, I'll run some errands while I'm in town. Probably be back around two or three. You need me to grab anything?" When Mark responded he didn't, his uncle shrugged and said, "Make sure to feed Cressida and spend some time with her. I think we're making real progress with her."

A minute later, Mark saw Jacob's car pull out of the driveway and out of sight. Alone, he went to the kitchen and started making his breakfast. From the basement, there was a series of bangs. Cressida was pounding on the walls and the roof of her tank again.

While his uncle honestly believed they were making progress with their captive mermaid, Mark was more skeptical. He had been staying here for three weeks and no matter how many "conversations" they had with her or how many of her favorite things from his cousin's life they showed her, nothing had changed. If anything, as soon as the movie ended or she got bored listening to them as they showed off her favorite stuffed animal, she would rage against the walls of her tank before retreating to her cave.

The only thing that had progressed was that Mark had started calling her “Cressida” instead of “the mermaid.” Not because he thought she was his cousin. If anything, he was convinced she wasn’t his cousin and that her resemblance was just some crazy coincidence.

No, the reason he called her Cressida now was because Uncle Jacob kept referring to her as Cressida, and now Mark couldn’t help but think of her by that name.

*Well, whoever she is, I need to convince Uncle Jacob that this experiment isn’t working, he thought, sipping his coffee. Even if she used to be my cousin, she doesn’t want to be here. We should release her back into the ocean and hope she doesn’t belong to an underwater civilization who will make war on the surface as revenge for taking her.*

*Release her...*

At once, Mark remembered the dream he had last night. In the dream, he had been on his uncle’s yacht and was lowering Cressida into the ocean with a net. The lower the net got, the more intensely she stared at him. However, he didn’t think she was staring at him because she was angry. It was something else, something he couldn’t put his finger on. Finally, she was in the water, but instead of swimming off or disappearing into the depths, she stayed above the surface, watching him.

Then he was treading water in front of her, the yacht gone. For a while, they just gazed into each other’s eyes, neither one so much as breathing nor blinking. And then Cressida’s lips pulled back in a smile, revealing normal teeth. Her eyes were kind then, and she resembled his cousin more than she ever had in that moment. And Mark knew he didn’t want her to leave him again.

A scream from below him brought Mark crashing back to reality. Startled, he dropped his mug, which broke apart and sent hot coffee everywhere, including onto his shirt and pants. Hissing with pain, Mark jumped up and threw his shirt and pants off. Standing in the kitchen in just his boxers, breathing hard, he had only one question on his mind: *what the hell had that scream been?*

There was another scream, and Mark's blood ran cold. Cressida. Something was wrong with her.

He ran downstairs to the basement, only to skid to a stop as he spotted Cressida in the tank. Everything above her tail was a bright and painful shade of red. Mark watched as she swam laps around her tank, moving faster than he'd ever seen her swim before. On her third lap, she let out another ear-piercing scream, not even slowing down as she did. The tank walls and the metal ceiling vibrated with the force of the scream. Mark thought that even his skeleton was reacting to the scream, his bones vibrating like tuning forks.

*Something's wrong, Mark thought. She's in trouble, or sick, or in pain.*

The idea that Cressida might be in pain horrified Mark to the very core of his being. And in that moment, he knew what he had to do. It wasn't a conscious thought, more of an instinctual urge, but nevertheless he knew he had to do it. He had to get in the tank with Cressida and help her.

Mark ran to the tank and began ascending the ladder on the side. When he reached the roof, he opened the hatch, the same one Uncle Jacob had warned him never to open until they were sure Cressida remembered who she was and wouldn't attack them. The salty scent of seawater filled his nostrils and he glanced down just in time to see Cressida pass by and let out

another bone-vibrating scream. Glad he was already in his boxers, Mark took a deep breath and jumped into the water.

The cold water surrounded and shocked him, causing his reason to return to him again. What was he doing? This was the equivalent of jumping into a shark tank, except he didn't have any cage or protective gear to protect him from the predator swimming in here with him. Not only that, but unlike his cousin, Mark wasn't that great a swimmer, nor could he stay underwater for very long. He would need oxygen soon, and while there was a gap of about a foot between the surface of the water and the tank's roof, he knew it was dangerous to surface just for a breath.

After all, while he was busy filling his lungs, how would he watch out for Cressida and her teeth?

As he was considering this, Cressida made a turn and zoomed straight for him, hands outstretched. In that instant, Mark realized that if she wanted to kill him, she would. There was not enough time to pull himself out of the tank before she could grab him or latch her fangs into him. He had well and truly fucked himself and he knew it.

Even so, he closed his eyes and raised his arms over his face, ready to go down fighting if necessary.

A pair of arms encircled his midriff and a woman's soft chest pressed against his flat one. Confused and caught off guard, Mark opened his eyes. Cressida was embracing him and, while her skin was still bright red, she didn't look to be in pain. Rather, her expression was gentle. And kind of excited. Not excited like she was glad to see him, but a different sort of excitement, one that he wasn't used to seeing on a woman's face.



As Mark stared at her face, hypnotized, Cressida opened her mouth and sank her fangs into his bicep. He screamed, the air in his lungs escaping in a stream of bubbles. Within her mouth, something that distinctly felt unlike a tongue slithered around the meat of his arm and tasted his blood.

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Jacob parked his car in front of the house, switched off the ignition and lifted himself out of the car. God, he was getting old. Not because of this morning's memory lapse, but because of everything else. According to his GP, his cholesterol was way too high, and he needed to take another two medications to take care of it. This in addition to medication for acid reflux, arthritis, and a few other things.

*I don't know who designed the human body, but they really should have had their work looked over before it was approved, he thought. Once you get past a certain age, all there seems to be are problems.*

Not that he didn't deserve his fair share of health problems. He knew that he had done some things to deserve it. That business with Cressida all those years ago...well, that was in the past. The good news was, God had seen fit to forgive him and give him another chance with his daughter. He had revealed to Jacob where she had been all this time, not dead but a mermaid in the ocean, and had allowed him to bring her home.

True, she'd gone feral in the intervening years, but he thought she was coming around. He was certain that, with a few more weeks, his little girl would remember how to speak and act like a human. If that happened, they could turn her into a human again. And after that?

Well, it would be a hell of a time trying to explain where she'd gone and how she looked so young. And there would be the inevitable culture shock of seeing how different things were from when she'd gone under the water. But he would help her. He was her father, after all. And Mark would help as well. That boy was in love with Cressida, had been since he was a kid, even if he hadn't figured it out yet.

Perhaps they would marry someday. Jacob couldn't say he was against the idea. After all, who best to take care of her after he was gone, with all she'd gone through, then her favorite cousin?

Well, he could plan their wedding later. There were more important things to worry about in the meantime.

He pulled the supplies he'd bought in town from the trunk—groceries for him and Mark, and the biggest tuna and tilapia filets the fish market had on sale for Cressida—and made his way inside.

"I'm home!" he called, setting the bags down on the counter. He opened the fridge door, which swung wide, placed the milk and bacon inside, and closed the door. Mark stood right behind it, wearing a long-sleeved shirt that he hadn't worn this morning. His face appeared haunted.

Jacob jumped back, surprised. "Jesus!" He coughed, then said, "You scared me, kiddo. Everything okay?"

Mark shook his head. "Something's wrong with Cressida. You need to come down and see her."

Jacob blanched. “Cressida? What’s wrong with her?”

“You need to come down and see her,” he repeated, gesturing towards the basement. The haunted expression on his nephew’s face deepened, making him look positively shell-shocked.

Jacob did not bother asking any more questions. Instead, he pushed past Mark and headed down the stairs. It was then that he noticed how much stronger the smell of saltwater coming up the stairs was. He slowed, a bad feeling creeping up his spine. He turned around just in time to receive a frying pan straight to the head.

There was a flash of pain, followed by a warm feeling running down his face. Then Jacob was tumbling down the stairs, landing in a heap at the bottom.

From above, Jacob heard a metallic clatter, followed by feet on the stairs. Two fingers felt his pulse, and a moment later he was being dragged across the floor by the shoulders. Jacob’s head rolled backward, and he watched upside-down as Mark brought him close to the tank. The roof hatch was open and Cressida was swimming and splashing right underneath it, her skin bright red.

A wave of panic rolled through him, combining with the throbbing in his forehead to bring him back to full consciousness. He rolled his eyes back to Mark, who had a strange look on his face. There was some horror and disgust, but there was also happiness there. Ecstasy, even.

“Mark,” he croaked. “Something’s wrong with Cressida. We need to help her. *I* need to help her! She’s my little girl, after all.”

Mark dropped him underneath the tank ladder and, to Jacob’s confusion, took off his shirt. His confusion transformed into horror when he saw what was underneath: wrapped around

Mark's forearm was a dark grey creature with the body of a crab and five long, spiny arms. Mark gazed at it with both wonder and affection.

"Mark? What is that?" Jacob's eyes widened in their sockets.

"It's part of Cressida," he said, not looking away from the creature. "It lives inside her and comes out when she needs it. If you hadn't tranquilized her when you caught her, it would have kept you from dragging her here. At least, that's what I understand. I can talk to her through it, but there's a bit of a communication barrier."

"Y-You talk to her?" Jacob glanced at the strange creature, a current of envy in his shock and disgust. That, and a twinge of terror. "Through that thing? Has she said anything about why she became a mermaid?"

"Cressida's in her heat cycle," Mark announced, ignoring Jacob's question. "Giving birth to the next generation required a lot of energy, and salmon filets just won't cut it." He bent down, lifted Jacob off the floor, and then, to the latter's surprise, started carrying him up the ladder one-handed like he weighed nothing. "She'll need fresh meat. And lots of it."

On the roof of the tank, Mark threw Jacob next to the hatch. A hand splashed out of the tank and scratched at Jacob's shirt before slipping back down into the water.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Jacob," Mark said, pulling a kitchen knife out of the waistband of his pants. "But I love her. I don't care if she's not my cousin, I love her. And she let me fertilize her eggs. Those are my kids she's about to lay. She needs the energy, and then she needs me to help her get them to the ocean. You have to understand."

At that moment, Jacob sprang. He had been holding back until the very last second, making Mark think that the frying pan and the subsequent tumble down the stairs had dazed him worse than it had, but he couldn't hold back any longer. He grabbed his nephew's hands, trying to take the knife away from him. Mark was surprised for a moment, but then retightened his hold on the knife and began fighting back, pushing the knife closer and closer to Jacob's chest.

And Jacob knew his nephew would eventually stab him with the thing. He may not be weak, but the older man was in a bad position relative to Mark, and gravity was working against him.

Already, his combat training from his Coast Guard days kicked in and he knew what he had to do to stop his nephew and keep the knife from killing him. However, Jacob hesitated. Because once he countered, it would mean the end for his nephew, his only remaining family. Could he really live that?

There was a splash and a guttural shriek from the tank, reminding Jacob of just who was below them. Cressida, his Cressida. She was his family too, wasn't she? More than Mark, at any rate, and she needed him.

With that, Jacob decided and moved. He spun his body to the left while at the same time pushing Mark's hands forward. With a cry of surprise, Mark sailed past where his uncle had been, fell into the tank, and splashed into the water. Panting, Jacob leaned over to watch as Mark resurfaced and drew in oxygen, only to be pulled down again. Cressida had grabbed him and was tearing into him.

Jacob stared in horrified amazement as his little girl ripped Mark's face and neck open, pulling away large chunks with her teeth. A cloud of red burst forth from his open jugular, hiding

him and Cressida as the latter continued to feed on her cousin. A moment later, pieces of Mark began floating to the surface. An eyeball, a finger. Even something that might have been part of Mark's penis and testicles.

The sight was too much for Jacob. He leaned over the edge of the tank and threw up. Dizzy, he reached for the ladder and climbed down, lest he fall again and this time really do some damage to his skull. When he was on the ground again, he glanced at the tank. The cloud of red was growing and thinning out, turning the water pink. Eventually, he began to make out Cressida and what was left of Mark. The former was holding the latter in her arms with the most human expression Jacob had ever seen on his daughter's face in many, many years. It was shock.

Then Cressida let go of Mark, raised her head, and screamed. Then she noticed him and screamed again before rushing at the tank. She pounded on the walls, wailing loud enough to wake the dead. There was rage in her face, but something else there, another human emotion Jacob had not seen in some years from his daughter.

At first, he thought it was grief. Grief that she had lost her beloved cousin that way. But then he realized that it wasn't grief, but severe disappointment. She had wanted to feast on her father, not on her cousin, the one she had been manipulating and communicating with.

It must have pained Cressida so badly to know that she had devoured the person who would have freed her if he had lived. And now she was stuck with him, her father, the person she likely hated the most in the world. And he knew he deserved her hate.

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Some time had passed since Cressida had devoured Mark. Jacob wasn't sure how long and was starting to wonder if that was due to a possible concussion. He'd patched himself as best

as he could, but he still had a throbbing headache where the frying pan had connected with his skull, and he still couldn't keep down anything heavier than water. Though that could just be because he'd been hit with a frying pan and had watched his own daughter devour her cousin.

That very same daughter was now lying on the floor of the tank, grunting and groaning as her body writhed and contorted. Jacob watched with both fascination and horror as some of the scales just below where her fish body began shifted to reveal a hole he hadn't known was there. The shape of the hole and the way the scales surrounded it clued him into its purpose, and he should have looked away for Cressida's sake. Instead, he watched as a long, ovular object was squeezed out from the hole.

An egg. Mark had mentioned before he died that Cressida was going through some sort of cycle and he had fertilized the eggs. The egg was the first of Mark's children, and Jacob's grandchildren.

*But she isn't Cressida,* said a voice—the ghost of Mark's voice—in the back of his mind. *She just looks like her. And that was good enough for me, I was in love with the real Cressida and traumatized way more than you by her death. So if a lookalike will let me fertilize her eggs, that's good with me!*

"Shut up!" Jacob muttered. The moment he started believing that was the moment he gave up not only that his daughter still being alive, but in the idea that there was any meaning in the universe and that he could be forgiven for his past. He couldn't allow himself to believe that. After all, he had discovered a mermaid with the exact same face as his daughter, who wore her hair in the exact same hairstyle, and who had been spotted swimming not just once, but twice, in



the oceans where she had supposedly committed suicide all those years ago! Surely this was his daughter, and surely this was a chance to make things right again!

In the tank, Cressida lay on the gravel, exhausted and no longer bright red. Beside her in a cluster were six off-white eggs, each the size of a pineapple. Wow. Six grandchildren, his grandchildren, were gestating within those eggs. He wondered what mermaid children looked like once they hatched. Would they look like miniatures of their mother, or would they resemble something more alien at first? Did Cressida even know the answer to that?

Jacob decided to find out. However, he wouldn't have a conversation with her through glass walls. Instead, he'd climb up and talk to her through the hatch on top of the tank. Now that she had just given birth, she wouldn't have the energy to attack him. Maybe she would be in the mood for a civilized conversation.

Ignoring his headache and dizziness, he climbed up the ladder to the roof. His head rose over the top and was confronted by a creature with dark-grey skin and five long arms.

The creature that had recently been wrapped around Mark's arm screeched and launched itself at Jacob. Jacob cried out and let go of the ladder just in time. The little monster sailed high over his head, landing on the wall. Ignoring the pain in his ass and spine, Jacob got up to confront the little monster before it could attack again. Instead, he watched in astonishment as it speed-crawled across the wall and to the stairs before disappearing up them.

Jacob gazed at the spot where it had disappeared for a moment before following it. He ran upstairs, searching for the creature. His ears caught the sound of wind before he spotted how it had gotten out: somehow, the little beast had made a hole in the back sliding doors. He opened

the back door and followed the little marks it had made in the sand to the beach. By the time he reached the water, however, he knew it was too late: the creature was too far away.

He stood at the water's edge for a minute, trying to puzzle out what the thing had been trying to do by escaping. Then it hit him and he laughed. He turned and headed back to the house, still guffawing loudly. By the time he had made it back to the basement, he was in tears and was having a little trouble breathing. Even so, he smiled at Cressida as she looked up from her eggs.

"Your little friend abandoned you," he said, wiping tears away. "Mark said it's supposed to help you out or something when you're in trouble, but I guess the little monster decided it's better off without you. You're too much trouble to help. Now it's off to find some other mermaid to live inside. And you're stuck with me."

Cressida didn't respond. Not even a growl or a hiss. She only watched him as he sat beside the tank and pressed his face to the glass.

"I bet you wanted that thing to attach itself to me and convince me to help you and your children back into the ocean," he continued. "Just like it did to Mark. But you don't get it, do you? This is the Lord's Will. We're supposed to make up and be happy again." He paused, considering his words. Then he said, "I know you probably still hate me. The men who invested in my business...if I had said no, they would have pulled their funding and there would have been nothing I could have done. It's not like things are now, where there's a chance a powerful man can be punished for being scummy with young girls. If I had stood up to them then, or if I had taken you to the police, it would have accomplished nothing except putting us in the streets.

“So, I let them do those things to you. And I still hate myself for it, for not protecting you. I cut them off from the business and from you as soon as I was independent, but it wasn’t enough. I know that now. You went into the water and changed because of them and because of me. And I can’t blame you for that.

“But please. I miss you, and we’re each other’s only family now. Let me help you raise the kids. Let’s be father and daughter again, not enemies, okay?”

Cressida didn’t respond. Instead, she laid her head down on the gravel floor and closed her eyes. Her back rose and fell gently as she went into a doze.

Jacob thought a nap sounded like a good idea as well. Today had been a really exhausting day, and he was suddenly feeling very tired. He lay against the tank, closed his eyes, and began to snore.

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There was a great bang from above. Jacob woke with a start and jumped to his feet, looking around in confusion. He had been dreaming of people storming into his home and taking Cressida and her children away for scientific experimentation. For a moment, he was sure secret agents were outside for his daughter. Then he looked around and heard the familiar sounds of wind blowing and fingers tapping outside. Just a storm outside. The bang had probably been some thunder overhead. There was nothing to worry about.

He turned to check on Cressida. She was still laying in the tank next to her eggs, but now her head was pointed towards the roof of the tank. Jacob immediately knew what she was thinking and bent down beside the glass again. “Don’t worry, sweetie,” he said. “It’s just a

storm. We had plenty of those when you were growing up. This house lasted through them, and it'll last through this one. You'll see."

Cressida glanced at him. And then to his amazement, she smiled smugly at him. It was another human emotion, but one he had never thought he would ever see on his daughter's face. And seeing it now terrified him for some reason.

Before he could puzzle out its meaning though, the ceiling above them collapsed and something crashed into the roof of the tank.

Jacob fell on his back, staring up in shock at what had crashed through the ceiling. It looked like a seaworm, except it was a thousand times bigger than any seaworm he'd ever seen and it had a hundred hissing, slithering, snakelike creatures growing out of a ring around its mouth. The giant worm monster raised its head from the hole it had created, pieces of parquet floor and ceiling beams falling off it. Some of the debris landed on Jacob, but he barely noticed. He had just noticed the tiny creature that had been hiding in Cressida's mouth, the one he'd thought had fled and abandoned her. It was riding one of the snake heads like a surfer on a surfboard.

*It didn't abandon her, he thought with horrified realization. It just went to get help.*

He glanced at Cressida in the tank. She was swimming around her eggs excitedly, protecting them from harm while at the same time encouraging the giant beast to break the tank open.

"No!" Jacob screamed, pushing himself off the ground and trying to run through all the debris to the tank.

The worm monster slammed its head into the roof of the tank, punching a giant hole into the structure. Water swelled out of the tank and onto Jacob, pushing him off his feet again. He spluttered and resurfaced just in time to see the snakelike creatures growing out of the worm's mouth scooping up the eggs in their coils. One of them wrapped itself around Cressida, and in Jacob's addled state, he thought it looked like a lover's embrace as his daughter clung to it. Like a bad boy preying on an innocent teen, threatening to take her away and ruin her life while her father was helpless to stop it.

The worm monster lifted itself out of the tank and out of the house through a hole it had made in the ceiling before retreating away from the house.

*It's taking her back to the ocean.* Jacob splashed to his feet and ran as fast as he could through the debris-filled water to the stairs. He then ran through the ruin of his home and onto the beach, keeping his eyes on the giant worm as it left a huge, slimy trail in the sand. He only came to a stop when he was up to his shoulders in the ocean and the monster was way too far out for him to swim. He watched, horrified, as it sank with his daughter and his grandchildren into the water, and he thought he felt he now had some idea of how Mark felt all those years ago, watching his beloved cousin walk into the ocean and seemingly drown herself.

The worm dipped its head underneath the water, before arising again sans Cressida and the eggs. It then launched itself at Jacob's yacht, wrapped its body around the ship, and then pulled it away from the dock and out to sea before diving back down again. Even from far away, Jacob heard it break and explode.

The shifting waters calmed a little as the worm monster stayed submerged. Rain splashed around him and the chill seeped into his blood, but Jacob didn't notice. He had lost his little girl again. And this time, he was certain he would never see her again.

He had no idea how long he stood in that water. All he knew was that the storm had subsided and the moon had come out when he thought he should get out and call the police. Or maybe the insurance company. What would he say to them, though? That his mermaid daughter had been kidnapped by a giant worm monster and had destroyed the house along the way?

As he thought about what to say, something rose out of the ocean several yards in front of him. No, not something; someone. Cressida. Jacob's spirits soared. True, she was glaring at him with unmasked hatred and that tiny monster of hers was peaking out of her mouth, two of its arms hanging down her chin like rubbery vampire fangs. But she had returned to him. She had returned to him of her own accord. Somewhere, she still remembered and loved him.

"Cressida," Jacob whispered. He cleared his throat and tried again, this time louder than before. "Cressida! I'm sorry! I guess keeping you in the tank wasn't right after all. I was just trying to reestablish a relationship with you. Can you forgive me?"

Cressida didn't respond. Unperturbed, Jacob took a deep breath and continued shouting.

"Look, if you need to live in the ocean, that's fine by me. I'll join you there. There's nothing keeping me up here, and you turned into a mermaid, so why can't I turn into a merman? We'll be one big, happy family. You, me and the grandkids. You'll see. It'll be as if none of the bad stuff up here ever happened."

He didn't wait for Cressida's answer. Instead, he stepped deeper into the ocean, took a deep breath, and then submerged.