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SEANAN MCGUIRE

WE BOTH GO DOWN TOGETHER

An InCryptid Story
We Both Go Down Together

by

Seanan McGuire
“No,” said Jonathan. “Absolutely not. There is no way, and I truly wish that you would drop the matter.”

“Mmm-hmm,” said Fran, folding another shirt before stuffing it into her valise in a way that left it guaranteed to wrinkle. “What’s the weather like in Maine this time of year? Hot, muggy, and horrible, or just hot and muggy? Because I gotta say, if you leave off the ‘horrible,’ it’ll be a huge improvement on Michigan. I don’t know why you always talk about the temperatures where I come from like they’re out of line. At least back in Arizona, what we get’s basically a dry heat. This is a sauna full of mosquitoes.”

“Fran, you’re not coming with me.”

“I’m not?” Fran turned to face him, folding her arms across the swell of her bosom, which, while always a favorite sight of his, had grown to truly impressive proportions over the last few months. “You’re taking a trip to the coast, where the ocean lives and the hummingbird-sized skeeters aren’t, and you think I’m going to stay here because...?”

“Because you’re pregnant!” He waved his hands, trying to encompass the swell of her belly. “I don’t take women who are eight months pregnant to Maine to meet with potentially dangerous fish people!”

Fran beamed. “See, that’s where you’re in luck, city boy. I may be pregnant, but I’m not just a pregnant woman. I’m your pregnant wife. So if you enjoy sleeping without the fear that I’m going to murder you sometime in the night, you’re taking me to the beach with you. End of story.”

Jonathan stared at her, unsure of what he could possibly say to make her understand the magnitude of her error. A trip to Gentling wasn’t a seaside holiday; at best, it was a delicate incursion into another culture. At worst, it was incredibly dangerous, while still being a delicate incursion into another culture—not a combination Jonathan enjoyed navigating at the best of times, and certainly not when he had his incredibly stubborn, extremely pregnant wife along.

Fran had come a long way since he’d first met her in Arizona. Ten years of experience and training had transformed a woman who’d never seen a monster in her life into someone who was fully capable of negotiating treaties and sharing land with non-humans. But she hadn’t been born to it, and the people in Gentling...

Well, the people in Gentling were hard to handle even after a lifetime of preparing for situations just like this one.

“Johnny!” The snap of Fran’s fingers brought him crashing back into the present. He blinked at her. She was standing with her hands on her hips and her eyes narrowed in the way that meant someone was about to meet the wrong end of a throwing knife. “Remember when we had that little talk about how you don’t try to reason me out of things I want to do, and I don’t smother you with a pillow in your sleep?”

“Yes,” he said uncertainly.

“Good. That means we don’t need to have it again. Now go tell your father we’re going to need another train ticket, and I’ll finish packing before the mice completely infest the suitcase.”

Jonathan sighed and stood. “Yes, dear,” he said. Much as he hated to admit it, it was starting to look like taking her to Gentling would be the easier option. God help them all.
Naturally, there was no direct service from Ann Arbor, Michigan—the nearest city to Buckley to have a major train station—to Gentling, Maine. There wasn’t actually direct service from much of anywhere to Gentling. It was the sort of town that had fallen off the map almost as soon as it had appeared there, fading into rumor, hearsay, and the occasional urban legend. Jonathan and Fran boarded their first train in Ann Arbor, where Fran’s condition earned them a concerned look from the porter, and rode from there to New York, a journey that took almost twenty hours. They disembarked at Grand Central Station, where Jonathan found Fran a seat at one of the terminal’s many small eateries before heading to the ticketing booth to arrange the next stage of their journey.

She was drinking a celery soda when he returned, and morosely watching the families walking by. “None of them look half as miserable as I feel,” she announced, apparently sensing Jonathan’s return. “You think it’d be wrong of me to start throwing things?”

“It certainly wouldn’t be social,” he said carefully, taking the seat next to her. “It’s not too late to get you a ticket home. I can take care of this on my own.”

“Suggest that again and I’ll punch you in the kidney,” she said. She took a sip of her soda, and added, “Besides, the mice’d be sad.”

Jonathan froze. “The mice?”

“The ones who stowed away in my suitcase.” Fran turned a sunny smile on him. “I couldn’t sleep on the train. All that rocking made me need to pee something awful. So I asked the bags if there was anybody inside. It’s sort of neat how they don’t lie when you ask them a direct question, isn’t it? Not very stealthy, but neat.”

“You...oh, God.” He gave her suitcase a sidelong look, like he expected it to break into song at any moment. “Did you get a rough count, by any chance? How many mice are we hosting on this little outing?”

“No more’n ten,” she said. From her tone, it was intended to be reassuring. Jonathan stared at her. Fran laughed. “Oh, come on, city boy. It’s not like they haven’t hitched along before. Remember? We met because of a mouse.”

“I remember,” said Jonathan grimly. He’d been following a trail of murders that had led him straight to the traveling circus where Fran worked as a trick rider. She’d been preparing to put a throwing knife in his throat when one of the family’s colony of talking pantheistic mice made itself known, hailing Fran as the Priestess of Unexpected Violence in the process. Really, it shouldn’t have been a surprise when he eventually married her: the mice virtually had a sixth sense about who was and was not going to wind up a member of the family.

“Besides, this way if I decide to stay in the hotel instead of going out on business with you, I’ll have something to keep me occupied, instead of wandering off and somehow offending the locals.” Fran took a demure sip of her soda. “You’ve got to admit that the idea of me having a chaperone appeals to you. Don’t lie to me now, I know you better’n that.”

“It goes both ways,” he said. “You know that I only want to keep you out of dangerous situations until the baby’s here. I worry.”

“I know, honey, and I love you for it.” Fran sobered briefly. The loss of their first child, Daniel, had scarred them both. But it wasn’t a raw wound for her the way it still seemed to be for Jonathan, and she worried sometimes about how that wound didn’t seem to be healing. “Ain’t nothing going to happen to me or to this
baby. That’s a promise. You’re going to be a daddy soon, and I intend to enjoy watching you cope with that. I’m just not willing to give up on having adventures until he’s here, all right? Give me this month. It won’t be long before it’s my turn to worry about every little thing in the world, and I want to enjoy myself.”

“Just promise me that you’ll be careful.” Jonathan leaned across the table to touch her arm. “I know it goes against your nature, but right now, you’re not just taking risks for yourself. You’re taking them for all three of us.”

Fran managed a smile, although the concern didn’t leave her eyes. “I’ll be careful, as much as I know how to. Now where do we go from here?”

“The train to Boston leaves in an hour,” said Jonathan, and the mice in Fran’s suitcase—the ones that weren’t supposed to be there—cheered.

The ride from New York to Boston was only eight hours long—a relief after the grind of the first leg of their trip. Their car was a private sleeper, and Fran even dozed off after Jonathan let the mice out of her suitcase and encouraged them to hold their evening devotionals on her pillow. Nothing put her to sleep like Aeslin hymns, the occasional impassioned cheer notwithstanding.

When the singing was done and Fran was sleeping soundly, Jonathan sat down on the bed and leaned forward to address the novice in charge of the small colony grouping. “Have you the permission of the high priest to be here?” he asked. “Don’t lie to me. I’ll ask as soon as we get home, so it’s in your best interests to be truthful.”

The novice ducked her head and lowered her ears, sure signs of shame, and said, “We have permission, but were asked not to tell you unless you brought forth the question. I am sorry we have defied you.”

Jonathan frowned. Aeslin mice worshipped the men of his family as gods, while being far more inclined to actually listen to the women, who the mice viewed as priestesses and hence far more sensible than their divine counterparts. They still usually followed direct instructions from their gods, such as “do not follow us to Maine.” Disobedience on this scale implied some nuance that he was missing. “Why did you defy me?” he asked, gently.

“We were present at your Birth,” squeaked the mouse, finally lifting her head to meet his eyes. “Not this piece of the congregation, but our mothers, our fathers, our keepers of record. We saw you enter the World, and we rejoiced, for the line of your divinity was unbroken.”

“I’ve heard the recitation,” said Jonathan. “It’s very, ah, detailed.”

“Also saw we the Birth of your mother, the Patient Priestess, and her father, the God of Hard Work and Sunshine, and the birth of his mother, all the way back to Caroline, who first raised us from the Dust and brought us to the shining Light of our Faith.” The mouse twitched her whiskers, begging him to understand what she was saying. “We do not like to disobey—it is a sin, and it burns us to our bones—but we cannot miss the birth. That would be a mortal sin, and the whole colony would be darker for bearing its stain.”

Jonathan blinked, sitting up a bit straighter. Out of all the complications he had considered for this trip, this one hadn’t even made the list. Of course the mice would feel the need to come along. If there was even the slightest chance that the baby would make its appearance before they got back to Michigan—and he had to admit that there was a chance, no matter how much Fran denied it; she was a stubborn woman, and he
would bet on her over almost any monster he had ever met, but he wouldn’t bet on her against Mother Nature herself—then the mice would want to be there. They would want to witness the event, and preserve it in the colony’s collective memory. It was the way that they were made.

He would have felt odder about that notion, if it hadn’t been for Daniel. Daniel, who had died too soon, and had never been given a chance to become the man he could have been. Daniel, who was eternally preserved in the memory of the colony. Every laugh, every tear, every delighted encounter with the world, it was all there, waiting to be triggered by a simple request from a grieving parent. After Daniel, how could he deny the colony the right to be present at the birth of his second child?

“I wish you had told me this was why you wanted to come with us to Boston,” he said gently, making the novice lift her ears away from her head, looking awed by his tone. “I would have packed a proper habitat for you, instead of making you stow away in Fran’s linens.”

“Truly, you are the best of all possible Gods,” said the mouse solemnly. Then, an uncharacteristic choir of one, she squeaked, “Hail,” and turned to vanish into the crack in the cot that the other mice had already slipped away through.

Jonathan remained where he was, dropping his face into his hands and allowing his shoulders to slump. He barely noticed Fran stirring beside him until she placed her hand on the back of his neck, cool fingers threading through his hair.

“That was a good thing you just did,” she murmured, lips close to his ear. “They need this as much as we do.”

“Fran.” He lowered his hands and turned to face her, guilt writ large across his face. “I’m sorry, darling. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t,” she said. “Baby did. Apparently, I’m not supposed to be still.” She left her hand on his neck, putting the other hand on the pronounced swell of her belly. “I’m being kicked like a rodeo clown, and I can’t get out of the ring until this little fellow’s done with me. It’s sort of a miracle the human race continues, when you think about it. Pregnancy’s not the most fun ever.”

“You’re the one who chose to be pregnant on a train,” Jonathan noted.

Fran smiled. “No, honey. I’m the one who chose to be pregnant on an adventure. There’s a pretty big difference. I think the baby’d agree, if we were in a position to ask him.”

“Why’s that?” asked Jonathan.

“Easy enough,” said Fran, and leaned in to kiss him before she pulled back, smiled, and said, “He’s ours.”

The ride from Boston to Portland was two hours, which seemed like nothing after everything else they’d been through. Jonathan led a half-asleep Fran out of the station and down the street to the hotel where they’d be spending the rest of the night. Her eyes were closed by the time he finished paying for their room and signing the guest book, and he tugged her up the stairs to the second floor one step at a time, coaxing and cajoling until they reached their room. Once inside, he let go of her and turned to free the mice from her suitcase. By the time he turned around, she was already flat on her back on the bed, limbs splayed, snoring gently.
Jonathan smiled. It was impossible not to. Fran had always been prone to falling asleep fast—and waking up just as fast, something she’d learned to do during her time with the circus—but pregnancy seemed to make her descents into unconsciousness all the swifter, possibly because she was sleeping for two. He pressed a kiss against her temple, removed her shoes, and unbuttoned her jacket. Fran didn’t stir. That was for the best; she’d never been to Gentling before, and it could be a little unnerving for the uninitiated. Better that she get her rest now, while she could sleep easy.

The mice scurried from her suitcase and lined up on the edge of the dresser, all of them watching Jonathan. He turned back to them and said, very softly, “You may go looking for dinner, if you like; this hotel has no cat. Do not let yourselves be seen. We’re not here to endanger anyone’s livelihood. We’ll be leaving at sunrise. Do you understand?”

“Hail,” piped the mice in a reedy whisper. Even they had learned the wisdom of not being too loud around a sleeping Fran. Then they turned, vanishing behind the dresser with surprising speed.

Jonathan smiled again and began unbuttoning his shirt. It was time to get to bed.

Exhaustion being what it was, Jonathan had barely closed his eyes before he followed Fran down into slumber. It felt like he’d been asleep for less than five minutes when the mattress bounced, and he opened his eyes to find Fran, fully dressed, kneeling next to him and beaming. The room smelled of bacon, toast, and freshly fried egg. There were worse ways to wake up.

“Thought you were dead, city boy, so I brought you up some breakfast from the dining room. Also brought you some harsh words from the cook, who didn’t like seeing a pregnant lady carrying her own dishes up the stairs. Shame on you, and all that.”

“What time is it?” Jonathan pushed himself upright, blinking in an effort to clear the sleep from his eyes. The sky outside their room’s narrow window was still black and bruised.

“‘bout four-thirty in the morning. I couldn’t sleep, and they cater to enough railmen here that they start serving breakfast at four. The mice told me you’d wanted to be on the road by sunrise, so I figured waking you up wouldn’t go over poorly.”

“Not a bit,” said Jonathan. He leaned over to kiss her, and then slid out of the bed, beginning to gather his clothes. “I need to run down the street to get our car for the ride to Gentling. As soon as that’s done, we can be on the road.”

“I figured you’d say something like that,” said Fran. She twisted awkwardly, picking up a plate from the nightstand, and thrust it at him. “That’s why your breakfast is in sandwich form. Don’t you worry about us here. I’ll get the mice to help me pack anything that still needs to get back into a suitcase, and we’ll be ready to go when you get back.”

Jonathan grabbed the sandwich and paused, looking at her with admiration. “You really are the best wife in the history of matrimony. You’re aware of that, aren’t you?”

“Sure am.” Fran waved a hand at the door. “Go on now, get the car. I need to pee every twenty minutes right now, so I’d love it if we could start the torture chamber that is travel by private car.”

Jonathan laughed and let himself out of the room.
The car rental that he had arranged in Portland was less of a formal service and more a matter of knowing someone who knew someone who had a grudge against the Covenant and hence subscribed to a basic “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” philosophy. Jonathan was able to secure a reasonably well-maintained 1935 Ford. The paint had been weathered by the sea air, but the engine and body were in excellent shape, and he didn’t feel the need to worry about using it to drive his pregnant wife along eighty miles of the Maine coast. He paid for the rental with fifty dollars cash, a vial of bloodworm extract, and three jars of his mother’s best strawberry jam. He never saw the face of the man who rented him the car. Judging by the squishing sounds that accompanied every movement his unknown benefactor made, that was probably for the best.

When he pulled up in front of the hotel, Fran was already standing on the curb with their suitcases. Jonathan stopped the car, opened his door, and stood, staring at her. She grinned, clearly understanding the source of his distress.

“I didn’t lift a finger, so don’t you look at me like that,” she said. “I just went back to the dining room and told them all the nice railmen that we were in a hurry to get to my momma before the baby came, and they fell all over themselves getting our things down the stairs. Cook gave me a bag of biscuits for the ride, too. Says pregnant ladies get carsick sometimes, so I should have something to throw up.”

“You didn’t tell them where we were going, did you?” Jonathan’s tone was suddenly tight, like he was afraid of her answer.

Fran shook her head. “I figure it’s better if they didn’t know.”

“Yes. It is, at that.” He came around the car, collecting their bags and loading them into the trunk before opening the passenger side door for her. Fran got in, looking at him anxiously. Jonathan closed the door, walked back around the car, and got into the driver’s seat. The smell of biscuits filled the cab.

Fran held her silence until they were out of Portland and on the road, heading up the coast toward Canada. Then, finally, she asked, “What’s the big deal about this Gentling place, anyway? I figured you’d get around to telling me eventually, but I’m getting a little tired of waiting, and we’re getting a little close to our destination.”

Jonathan glanced at her, startled. “You mean I still haven’t explained?”

“Nope,” she said, amiably enough. “You usually do the whole ‘blah blah science and ecology and protecting the unnatural world’ thing on the train, but this time, between the peeing and the puking and the yelling at you for suggesting that I catch the next train back to Michigan, I guess I never got around to asking, and you never got around to telling me what the heck was going on.”

“I’m so sorry.” Jonathan returned his attention to the road. The sun was starting to rise, and the Maine coastline was coming to life around them. The growing light revealed wildflowers clinging to the rocky shoulder to their right, while pines and ash trees climbed the mountains to their left, turning the whole world green and glorious. “Gentling was founded sometime in the 1700s, by a man named Howard Gentling. He wanted his daughters to grow up—as much as they could—without facing the judgment and prejudice he’d seen his wife endure while they were living in the city of Portland. He wasn’t the only one. The settlement grew relatively quickly, and by the early 1800s, they even had people moving there who were unaware of the town’s...unique...origins.”

“What kind of prejudice?” Fran asked. “There’s a whole laundry list of things can get somebody looked at funny, especially back then. Did he marry a harpy or something?”

“Close,” said Jonathan. “He married a mermaid.”
Fran blinked. Fran removed a biscuit from her bag, taking a thoughtful bite and chewing slowly before she swallowed. And finally, Fran asked the question that Jonathan had been waiting for ever since she said that she was going to accompany him to Gentling, Maine: “How’n the hell do you fuck a mermaid? Fish ain’t got vaginas, last time I checked.”

“There are quite a few types of mermaid, as it turns out,” said Jonathan. “At least a dozen different species have been recorded worldwide.”

“Not answering the question,” said Fran.

“Getting there,” said Jonathan. “Mr. Gentling’s wife was from a species of merfolk called ‘the finfolk.’ Our earliest recorded sightings have them originating in the waters near Scotland, which explains why they’ve done so well here in Maine—they like cold oceans, and rough seas. They’re metamorphs, going through three distinct life cycles. Mammalian when young, amphibian in middle age, and fully aquatic in their final years. Mrs. Gentling probably looked as human as you or I when she was younger. The scales and the gills would have come later, after they’d been married for several years.”

“Well, that seems a little deceitful,” said Fran dubiously. “You expect gray hair and wrinkles, not ‘honey, I don’t know how to tell you this, but we’re gonna need a bigger bathtub.’ And what kind of name is ‘finfolk’? That’s like calling a bird a ‘flap-thing.’”

“Aren’t you the one who named the frickens?” asked Jonathan, sounding amused.

“Details.” Fran flapped a hand dismissively. “Not answering the question again. Is this going to be a habit with you now? Not answering my questions? Because I have no compunctions about being a self-made widow if you annoy me enough.”

“What’s worst is that my parents would probably forgive you,” said Jonathan. “Yes, calling a race of sea-going hominids ‘finfolk’ is exactly like calling a bird a ‘flap-thing,’ but that doesn’t make it any less their name. And how is it worse than ‘mermaid,’ exactly? It just sounds worse because you’re not used to hearing it yet. You will be soon.”

“Why? Are Mr. Gentling’s descendants still living in town?”

“You remember I said that he wasn’t the only one whose children had a finfolk parent?” Jonathan waited for Fran’s nod before he continued: “Those children had children, and their children had children, and while the entire town of Gentling is not finfolk, I would say that one in three are. It’s their largest settlement, and it’s possible only because they have the numbers that they do.”

Fran frowned, eating another biscuit while she puzzled through the implications of this statement. Jonathan held his tongue, letting her come to her conclusion in her own time. They’d been together long enough that he understood the way her mind worked: if she thought things through before she spoke, she’d have an easier time understanding how they fit together.

“They have real short lifespans?” she asked finally.

“In a sense, yes,” he said. “The more aquatic the finfolk become, the less they remember their lives on land. By the time they return fully to the sea, they aren’t really thinking creatures anymore. Ancient finfolk look like enormous predatory fish, and are about as intelligent.”

Fran shuddered. “What a horrible thing to have happen to you. To know that was coming, and to not be able to stop it.”
“The younger finfolk try to stave off the change for as long as they possibly can, but it’s inevitable for them: they all eventually return to the sea.” Jonathan traced the line of the road ahead with his eyes, marking off the curves and bends that would take them into Gentling. “Most will begin to change in their late teens. Some postpone it until well into their twenties. Most marry young, of course. They prefer to have their children on land when possible.”

“Why? I’d think the water’d make it easier, what with being mostly weightless and all.”

“A variety of reasons. The infants can’t breathe water, which can be a problem if the mother is too aquatic to remember that air is important. Having children while still land-bound means that they can see them settled with a good family, if necessary, before their minds become too clouded. And there are the elder finfolk to be considered.”

“They don’t like babies?”

“Oh, they adore them,” said Jonathan grimly. “They think they’re quite delicious.”

Fran blanched and ate another biscuit. Finally, almost timidly, she said, “There’s something I don’t understand.”

“If there’s just one thing you don’t understand, you’re doing better than I did when I first heard about Gentling,” said Jonathan. “What is it?”

“If Mr. Gentling was a human man, how’d he have babies with a mermaid in the first place? Anything that turns into a fish when it grows all the way up ain’t human, and last I checked, you couldn’t get a pony pregnant without another pony.”

Jonathan chuckled. “As always, your way with words remains unparalleled in the natural world. The finfolk are distinctly not human, and we’re not entirely sure that they’re mammals at any stage of their life. Even the immature form, when they look like human beings, may be biologically very different. We’re not sure how they manage to reproduce with their human mates, but we know that the children of encounters between female finfolk and male humans are always entirely finfolk. None of them have ever managed to remain on land.”

“What about the other way around?” asked Fran.

“The offspring of male finfolk and human women may demonstrate traits from either parent. Most of them seem to stay human, although they are very likely to become senile in early middle age. It’s a pity. Most of the mayors of Gentling have been the sons of human women and finfolk men.”

“Just the sons?” asked Fran.

“Not only the sons, but mostly, yes. It is coastal Maine, darling,” said Jonathan. “They’re progressive enough to accept mermaids as neighbors. I think the folks in Gentling haven’t wanted to push it.”

Fran rolled her eyes and reached for another biscuit as Jonathan, laughing, drove on.

The town of Gentling, Maine appeared in front of them shortly before noon. There was nothing magical about the town’s sudden visibility: the road had curved the coastline in such a way that even the church spire was simply obscured by the landscape until suddenly, the car rounded the last curve and there it was,
waiting in all its New England splendor to receive them.

Like many of Maine’s small coastal towns, Gentling didn’t appear to have been planned so much as it had grown out of the soil, spreading out long tendrils of road and unspooling leafy avenues as it sought to cling to the land. The road deposited them on what must have served as the main street, a two-lane thoroughfare that was mostly deserted, save for a few parked cars and some anxious-looking pedestrians in clothing that was easily twenty years out of date. Fran twisted in her seat as much as her swollen stomach would allow, straining to see everything at once.

“Don’t stare at the locals dear, it tends to upset them, and I’d rather we not get run out of town on a rail before I find out why we’ve been called here.”

Fran twisted back around to blink at Jonathan. “What do you mean, ‘why we’ve been called here’? Don’t you know why we’re here?”

“Not as such,” he said, turning off onto a narrower street. “We receive a postcard from Gentling once every few months. Father files them all. If the postcard is blank, we assume all is well, and that no assistance is needed. The postcard he received three days before we left had writing on it.”

“Well, what did it say?”

“It said ‘wish you were here.’” Jonathan somehow made the standard postcard platitude sound ominous. “That’s their way of summoning us. I don’t know what they want, or whether whatever it is will be something that we can accomplish. But we promised the people of Gentling decades ago that if they ever called us, we would come. They called. Now here we are.”

Fran paused, studying the set of his jaw for a moment before she guessed, “This is one of those ‘we did bad things while we were with the Covenant of St. George’ promises, isn’t it?”

Jonathan sighed deeply, turning onto a still narrower street. This one was barely more than a glorified horse trail, and large-eyed children watched them from the shadows in front of the nearby houses as they went bumping past. “There was a settlement in Scotland, years ago. Almost as large as Gentling, and far more well-established. The finfolk had been there for centuries. I won’t say that they never interfered with human women who preferred to be left alone, but for the most part, they were excellent neighbors. They came on land to marry and have children, and in exchange, the village enjoyed excellent fishing. No one there ever went hungry.”

“But the Covenant found out,” Fran guessed.

“One of my ancestors, James Healy, led the mission against the town. They wiped out every man, woman, and child suspected of having finfolk heritage. They burned them. Alive. That was how the Covenant dealt with people who had congress with demons. They burned them.” His eyes were distant, and dark with a guilt that wasn’t his to bear. “Finfolk can be dangerous, but it’s almost always by accident; they forget that humans can’t breathe water. They generally don’t marry people who don’t know what they are, and they’re some of the sweetest, most generous souls you’ll ever know. It’s not their fault that they’re called to go back to the sea. They didn’t deserve what the Covenant did to them. What we did to them.”

“Johnny, it isn’t your fault. You weren’t there.”

Jonathan pulled the car to a stop in front of a sprawling monstrosity of a house, one that was large enough to have been considered the center of an estate if it hadn’t been surrounded so closely by other, smaller homes. It had at least three wings, all of slightly different architectural origin, and towered above the rest of the street, standing four stories high if it was a floor. The whole thing was painted a solid, unrelenting shade of
gray. Jonathan set the brake and twisted to face his wife, seizing one of her hands in both of his.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “It doesn’t matter, because family is everything. Fran—family is all that we have in this world, and that means that family’s sins are ours to carry, just as surely as family’s blessings are ours to enjoy. My family killed these people in cold blood for the crime of being different, and I will repay our debt to them before our son is born. He deserves a world with less blood on its hands.”

“All right, Johnny,” said Fran, reaching out with her free hand to stroke his cheek. “I’m sorry I didn’t understand.”

He shook his head. “It’s not your fault. I should have told you what you were marrying.” He dropped her hand and got out of the car before she could reply, slamming the door behind himself.

Fran stayed where she was, watching him walk around the car to get her door. She smiled a little, sadly. “That’s the thing, city boy,” she said, to no one in particular. “You did.”

A brass plate next to the door identified the house as the original residence of Howard and Abigail Gentling. Jonathan put down the suitcases—his and Fran’s, which he had insisted on carrying—and rang the doorbell, which produced a horrendous clanging noise. Fran winced.

“Sometimes it has to call people in from the beach, depending on where they are in their life cycle,” Jonathan explained. “This has always been the mayor’s house. The position is technically elected—they hold elections, anyway—but everyone knows it’s really hereditary. Gentling’s descendants have been the mayors here ever since the town was founded.”

“That’s nice,” said Fran noncommittally.

The sound of running footsteps became audible through the closed door, which wasrenched open to reveal a tall girl in a blue summer shift. She was barefoot, and the blue-gray scales that peppered her feet and ankles matched the color of her dress surprisingly well. A clip held her long blonde hair back from her face. She blinked at the pair of them, her gaze going from Jonathan to the vastly pregnant Fran and back again before she appeared to make up her mind. A bright, clearly artificial smile blossomed on her face like a flower.

“I’m terribly sorry, but Mayor Gentling is unwell, and not receiving visitors at this time,” she said. “If you were looking for the bed and breakfast, it closed down at the start of the year. There was a death in the family. If you head another ten miles or so up the road, you’ll come to West Cove. They have a really lovely inn there, absolutely top notch for families. Thanks so much for stopping by.” She started to swing the door closed.

“You know, I barely recognized you,” said Jonathan, with a sudden smile. “Hello, Lynn. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

The girl stopped mid-swing, smile fading as she looked more closely at Jonathan. Then her eyes widened, and she asked, “Johnny?”

“In the flesh,” he said, and spread his arms. “Come here, you.”

“Johnny!” It wasn’t a question this time: it was a joyous declaration, a confirmation that maybe, somehow, things were going to be all right after all. Lynn launched herself out of the house and into Jonathan’s arms,
Fran rolled her eyes. “First all the gorgon girls know him when we’re trying to have a perfectly normal honeymoon, then he takes me to meet dinosaurs, and now he’s gettin’ hugs from the fish-girls. No wonder he was single when we met. He didn’t know what a human girl even looked like before I came along.”

Still laughing, Jonathan pushed Lynn out to arm’s length and said, “No, darling, I was just waiting for you to come along. Lynn, may I introduce you to my wife, the lovely Frances Healy?”

“Howdy,” said Fran, smiling blithely at Lynn. “I know you were probably giving us your townie spiel before, and I respect that, but I gotta ask, you have a bathroom in this place? Preferably one that’s on the inside of the house?”

“We had indoor plumbing installed two years ago,” said Lynn. “We even have a plumber living in town now. It’s nice to meet you. We’ve all been wondering about the girl who got Johnny to settle down. When are you due?”

“A month,” said Fran. “Bathroom?”

“Follow me.” Lynn stepped back into the house with Fran close on her heels. Jonathan paused long enough to pick up the suitcases and followed them both into the plush, well-appointed foyer.

Abigail Gentling had been a woman of both taste and means, thanks to her marriage to Howard, and between the two of them, they had built a home that would be comfortable for themselves and their descendants in perpetuity. The floors were polished hardwood, sealed against the water that would inevitably be tracked in by finfolk who were far enough along in their change to spend most of their time submerged, and the walls were papered in blue damask, patterned with subtle loops and swirls that would obscure any creeping mold or water damage. All the bookshelves were glass-fronted, and all the visible metal was covered with a thin scrim of verdigris.

Fran goggled without reservation or attempt to hide it. Lynn smiled a little, although the worried cast never left her eyes. “If you’ll follow me, I can take you to the water closet. Johnny, we’ve got the main guest room set up for you. Is that all right?”

“That will be perfect,” he said. “Is your mother still the mayor?”

The worry in Lynn’s eyes deepened briefly into sadness. She shook her head. “My older brother. Mother has returned to the waves.”

“I see,” he said. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Lynn shrugged, lowering her eyes to the carpet.

Fran looked back and forth between the two of them before sighing and saying, “I get that this is a very emotionally significant moment and all, and I hate to interrupt, but I’m about to pee all over this really nice floor. Please can you take me to your bathroom?”

Lynn chuckled, raising her eyes. “Right this way. Johnny, I’ll see you in the kitchen?”

“All right,” he said, and turned to head off into the hall while the finfolk girl he hadn’t seen in almost twelve years led his wife away.

The hall off the foyer was slightly less decorative, with simpler paper on the walls and no bookshelves or
ornamentation of any kind. The air smelled of saltwater, even more than was normal in a seaside town. Jonathan knew that if he opened the first door, he would find a wooden tub full of water, and possibly one or more of the house’s residents. He left the door alone and walked onward until he came to the end of the hall, and the only door that had been left slightly ajar. Pushing it open, he stepped into the guest room that the Gentlings reserved for their human guests, rare as they were.

The bed was large enough for three, piled high with pillows, blankets, and something that looked like a lace doily. Jonathan set their suitcases on the bed, unfastening Fran’s first, and said, “You can come out now.”

The mice swarmed from the bag with a flurry of cheers, gathering on the doily like it had been intended for that very purpose. “Hail!” cried the novice in charge. “Hail the release from the bag!”

“HAIL!” squeaked the rest of the mice.

“Yes, hail,” said Jonathan, with a faint smile. “We have arrived in Gentling. Do you know the protocols?”

“Do not trouble those who dwell here,” said the novice. “Do not enter sealed rooms. Do not drink any water which is not given to us directly. Do not show ourselves unless we must. Do not startle people.”

“Good,” said Jonathan. “I’ll get you something to eat in a little bit. For now, why don’t you find a place in the closet to serve as a temporary home? Fran and I will want some privacy when we sleep.”

“May we take the snowflake that does not melt?” asked the novice.

Jonathan blinked before realizing that the mouse meant the doily. “Yes, you may,” he said. “But don’t chew it up, I may have to give it back.”

The novice gave him a chastising look. “We would not,” she said. With that, the mice scampered for the headboard, vanishing down beneath the mattress. They took the doily with them.

“Mice,” muttered Jonathan fondly. He removed his hat, setting it atop his suitcase, and walked back out of the room to the hall.

The sound of voices coming from the kitchen told him that Lynn and Fran had taken care of whatever business needed handling. He stepped through the door to find Fran seated at the kitchen table, nibbling the last of her biscuits from the hotel, while Lynn bustled around the stove, setting up the kettle for tea. She looked around at the sound of his footsteps, and smiled.

“You know, there was a time when I was going to marry you,” she said, with no preamble or preparation. “You were going to take me away from Gentling, and we were going to live somewhere dry, where no one ever went back to the waves.”

“I know,” he said, moving to take the seat next to his wife. Fran reached under the table and took his hand, squeezing gently. “But you were seven at the time, so I didn’t think you meant it.”

“I did and I didn’t.” Lynn turned away from the stove. “It was Angus who sent the postcard. Half the town council didn’t want him to, and the other half pretty much followed him to the post office to be sure that he would.”

“What about Angus?” asked Fran.

“He didn’t want to,” said Lynn. “But the council talked him around, and him being mayor, it was part of his job. As for the rest, well...they’re scared. Scared people lash out. You may want to mind your step around
some of the elders.”

Jonathan nodded. “I appreciate the warning. I’d appreciate it even more if you could tell us why we were summoned here.”

Lynn’s eyes widened incrementally. “You mean you don’t know? I thought—Angus said he was calling you to fix the problem. I thought that meant you had to know what the problem was.”

“No, just that there was a problem in need of fixing,” said Jonathan. “What is it? What’s happening here?”

“Someone’s been harvesting the beaches,” said a male voice from the doorway. They all turned to see a tow-headed man perhaps five years Lynn’s senior, scaled patches on his bare arms and throat, standing there and looking forbiddingly at them. The family resemblance was undeniable. He even had Lynn’s dark, anxious eyes. “They’re taking our babies away.”

The tea was hot and bitter, no matter how much sugar Fran added to her cup. She took two sips and set it aside, murmuring about not wanting to excuse herself again. No one pressed the issue, and she was glad of that. If she’d tried to get the entire cup down, she would probably have vomited all over their nice, clean kitchen floor.

Angus was still standing, his own tea black and unadulterated as he sipped it from his steaming mug. “Our babies always look human. You know that.”

Jonathan nodded. “Camouflage, and protection from the elder finfolk. They can’t go out to sea to see Grandpa if they can’t swim yet.”

“Human babies get presents from their grandparents; our babies get eaten.” Angus shook his head. “We try to do our breeding while we’re on land, but we only manage about half the time. Once you go back to the waves, you’ve still got needs.”

“Angus!” said Lynn, looking scandalized.

Angus just looked tired. “You know it’s true, Lynnie, and this isn’t the time to play coy. The finfolk in the water, they play at mating, but they don’t have fidelity or morals or any of those silly things we burden ourselves with here. When the babies get born, they just leave them on the beach, figuring someone will come along and care for them.”

“That’s where we come in,” said Lynn. “We walk on the beach every morning at dawn, looking for babies who came in the night. Some of them drown before we can find them, but most are still alive. Our parents care. They’re just not very good at knowing what to do.”

“The children of Gentling are well cared for,” added Angus, focusing on Fran. “We’ve never needed an orphanage, and we’ve never sent a baby away to be raised by people who wouldn’t understand. Just because we’re different, that doesn’t mean our way of doing things is wrong.”

Fran blinked slowly. “I never said it was,” she said. “Sounds to me like y’all have a biological pickle, and you’ve been doing your best to choke it down without being untrue to your parents or forgetting how to be decent people. I don’t think anything you’re doing is wrong.”

“Well, someone does,” said Lynn. “It started about three months ago. We’d been walking the beach all
month, and no babies. That’s not unusual, especially when there’s been a storm in the area—the tides get high and pull the babies back out to sea, where the grandparents will eat them before they can be saved and put higher up on the shore. We were sad. It’s always sad to wonder whether there was no baby because there were none born, or whether you were just too late. But we all said ‘things will be different next month,’ and went home.” She looked down into her mug of tea, like she was searching for a secret. “Some of us were even a little relieved. Not to think that some of the babies might have been eaten—no one wanted to think that, no one ever wants to think that—but just because it would be a nice break, you know? No looking for someone with room in their house, no arguments about who nursed the last one. It was almost like a holiday. Until it happened again for the whole next month, and then into this one.”

“We finally sent two of the younger council members into the water to look for our parents, to ask them if they had stopped breeding,” said Angus grimly. “There’s something deeply shameful about needing to ask your mother, who barely remembers your name, whether she’s given birth recently.”

Jonathan nodded. “I don’t think I could do it, even if I needed to. You’ve shown great strength in protecting your town. What did they say?”

“They said the babies came as they always had, and asked if we had somehow misplaced them.” Angus’s frustration was plain. “One of my aunts was so pregnant that she made your lady wife look virginal. We watched the shores for weeks. Her baby never appeared.”

“Not that I don’t appreciate little digs at my virtue snuck into discussions of what is and isn’t on the beach, but don’t you think there might be a simpler answer?” asked Fran. “You’ve mentioned that your grandparents like the taste of baby. Who’s to say they haven’t just gotten better at following pregnant mer-ladies until they pop?”

Lynn shook her head. “The urge to give birth on land is instinctual, and so, so strong. I’ve seen mothers who were almost grandmothers drag themselves up the beach with arms that have transformed entirely into fins, just so they can have their babies where the air is. The grandparents can’t get to them there. They wouldn’t stop having their babies on the beach unless the beach was entirely walled off, which it’s not. It’s as open as it’s ever been.”

“What’s more, we’ve found signs that the mothers have been there,” said Angus. “Scraps in the sand. Scales. Even the occasional faint bloodstain. They’re coming up the beach to have their babies, the same as they’ve always done. Something is taking those babies away before we can get to them. That’s why I sent the postcard when Lynn asked me to. Our entire future is at risk. What can you do to help us?”

Jonathan stared at him, and didn’t say anything. In that moment, he had no idea what to say. Fran nudged him with her elbow. He turned to look at her, his eyes resting longest on the swell of her belly, before turning back to Angus.

“Everything,” he said.

The afternoon sun shone brightly down on Gentling’s rocky beaches, illuminating a scene out of a children’s book. Fran, who held tight to Jonathan’s arm to avoid a fall, couldn’t keep herself from goggling openly as they followed Angus and Lynn down the hard packed dirt trail that ran between the cliff side and the shore.

There were beachcombers about, naturally, and fishermen in rubber waders, standing up to their knees in the surf as they waited for something to bite. Children ran back and forth, shrieking—although Jonathan
noted that most of them were avoiding the water with an almost pathological degree of care, especially considering that they were growing up by the seashore. At their age, he would have already been up to his neck on a muggy summer day like this one, and the undertow and threat of prowling kraken be damned.

And then there were the finfolk who had already begun returning to the sea.

They draped across rocks and sat at the foaming edge of the sea like sea lions, clumsy on land but enjoying the chance to sun themselves safely. They were all of them naked as the day that they’d been born. The ones whose legs had already fused to the waist weren’t indecent, quite, hiding their genitalia under bands of thick blue and silver scales. Others had human thighs and groins rising above their conjoined knees, and Fran flushed red, averting their eyes.

“I wouldn’t have expected this to be the point at which you turned modest,” murmured Jonathan, sounding amused.

“I didn’t expect this to be the day you took me to look at a merman’s prick, so I guess we’re even,” countered Fran.

Jonathan chuckled but smothered the sound quickly, before it could offend their hosts. This was a serious matter, after all, and deserved to be treated as such.

Lynn and Angus stuck to the trail until they reached the place where the smooth beach dropped away, replaced by a series of large tide pools. There were more finfolk here, mostly women. Some had no real breasts left, just faintly mounded scales. Others had lost their hair, leaving the faintly alien domes of their skulls naked to the air. Even the ones who still looked mostly human were faintly wrong; something about the shape of the bones beneath their skin whispered of inhuman origins, of danger, and the sea.

Lynn stopped at the edge of the trail, pointing to the tide pools. “That’s where they usually leave their babies. We find a few on the beach, normally—not everyone makes it to the pools, or makes it to morning—but most of them come from right over there.” A wave crashed against the shore. She paled and took a step backward.

“My sister is at a dangerous stage,” said Angus. “Saltwater speeds the return.”

“I see no reason why she should need to accompany us to the water, although it would be better if you were able to do so,” said Jonathan. “I’m concerned that they may not understand that I’m trying to help.”

The sound Angus made was somewhere between a snort and a sigh. “You’re talking to the returned. You could tell them that you’re their son and they’d believe you. But I’ll come down to the water with you. Lynn, you wait here.”

“Gladly,” said Lynn. She glanced to Fran. “Will you wait with me?”

“It’s a tempting offer, given all those slippery rocks down there, but I think I’m going to have to pass,” said Fran amiably. “I want to talk to a real life mermaid. Never done that before.”

Angus looked amused. He kissed his sister on the cheek, and then beckoned for Fran and Jonathan to follow as he started down the beach.

The finfolk lounging around the tide pools barely stirred as the trio approached them. Angus stopped a few feet away, putting out a hand to signal the others to do the same, and called, “Honored mothers, may we approach?”
“Who are you?” asked one of the finfolk, rolling over so that her long blonde hair obscured half her face. There were bits of seaweed tangled in it, forming mats. She squinted at Angus. “You look familiar.”

“I know, Aunt Marie. I’m your sister’s youngest son.”

The finfolk woman considered this for a moment before rolling the rest of the way over and lying flat atop her rock, curling her fins toward the sun. “Oh. Hello. What do you want?”

“Someone’s been taking the babies from the beach, Aunt Marie. Do you know who it is?”

“It’s the girls.” Aunt Marie flapped her webbed hands unconcernedly. “It’s always the girls. When I was a girl, I did it for the sake of the town. Got so wet, so many times, it sent me to the sea years before my husband. Should’ve made him do it. Should’ve stayed.”

Angus looked guilty, but pressed, “Do you know which girls?”

Aunt Marie turned her head back toward him, a flicker of irritation breaking through her self-absorbed serenity. “They’re all the same girl, nephew. We were all her once, and she’ll always turn into us. Don’t let yourself forget that.”

“Has there been anything strange about the girls who’ve come recently?” Jonathan took a half-step forward, pulling her attention onto him. “I know it’s difficult, with the sea so near and so enthralling, but can you remember anything at all about them? Anything that might help us find the babies?”

Aunt Marie blinked at him before smiling crookedly. “Alexander Healy, as I live and breathe. Always knew you’d come back to Gentling one day. Men like you, they always do. Nothing catches a man’s attention like a sweet piece of tail.” She began to laugh uproariously at her own joke. The other finfolk women joined in, and the ruckus they raised was like seagulls screaming, loud and cacophonous. Fran winced, turning her head away from the sound. Then she paused, squinting down the beach.

The children were still playing, still avoiding the water as best they could. The fishermen were still fishing. Lynn was still standing on the path, well out of reach of the water, and two more women had joined her, both wearing long skirts and blouses similar to hers, splitting their attention between talking to her and casting nervous glances at the sea. Their group had apparently contained a fourth woman until the finfolk started laughing; she was walking quickly away now, her hands over her ears.

“Huh,” said Fran. “I reckon that means something.” The baby was kicking her again, fiercely, like it was afraid of being forgotten. She folded her hands over her stomach, and turned back to watch the men questioning the mermaids.

The finfolk women either knew nothing or were too far gone to explain what they had seen: their thoughts were like schools of small fish, moving too fast and too unpredictably to catch. Jonathan and Angus finished asking their questions, and Jonathan offered his arm to Fran again, helping her back up the beach to where Lynn and her friends were waiting.

Fran was all smiles as they approached, and even raised her free hand in a cheery wave. “Howdy,” she said, playing up her native drawl as much as she could. She might be a decade removed from Arizona, but she still knew how to play the country bumpkin when she had to. “I’m Frances Healy. I’ve met Lynn, but who are y’all?”
“Chastity Gentling,” said one woman. “I’m Lynn’s cousin.”

“I’m Jane,” said the other woman. She didn’t give a last name.

Fran didn’t ask for it. She had more important questions to pursue. “Who was your other friend?” she asked. “I saw her heading out of here pretty quick, which was too bad. I was hoping I could say hello. I always like meeting new people, when there’s the opportunity.”

“That was Elaine,” said Lynn. She shook her head. “She doesn’t like it when the returned laugh. It hurts her ears.”

“Huh,” said Fran. “That’s funny. It didn’t seem to bother you none. Bothered me plenty, though. I know they’re your family, but I’ve never heard anybody laugh like that.”

“Elaine’s human,” said Jane. “She has more sensitive ears than we do.”

“Oh,” said Fran, casting a sidelong look at Jonathan. To her relief, there was a dawning comprehension in his expression. He knew what she was getting at. “Well, isn’t that interesting. I didn’t think y’all had any humans living here in Gentling.”

“There’s always been a small human population here,” said Angus. “We don’t discriminate. Anyone is welcome to live in Gentling, as long as they come in peace and don’t take offense at the ways of their neighbors.”

“But it helps if they’re good looking,” said Chastity, before hiding her giggles behind her hand. Jane and Lynn rolled their eyes. This was apparently a common declaration on the other woman’s part. “Elaine’s daddy brought her with him when he moved to town. She was just a wee thing, and he came from local. So he moved back after his first wife died. He remarried after he got here.”

“Who to?” asked Jonathan.

Lynn and Angus exchanged a glance, but it was Lynn who answered him: “Aunt Marie.”

Jonathan and Fran returned to the Gentling home with Lynn and Angus before begging off to pursue their investigations on their own. It wasn’t easy to convince the Gentlings to stay behind, but Jonathan finally managed to sway them by pointing out that if the babies were being stolen by one of their own, traveling with the mayor and the mayor’s sister wasn’t a good way to make any possible witnesses open up. “We don’t want to seem like we’re laying blame,” he said. “We just want to find out what’s really happening.”

In the end, the Gentling siblings allowed them to leave. What other option did they have?

There were few enough cars moving through the streets—and even fewer strangers in town—that every child in town emerged to watch Jonathan and Fran driving past. Fran watched through the windows as the children lined up to watch them sailing past. “They really do look completely human at this age,” she murmured.

“They do,” Jonathan agreed. “It’s actually unusual for a woman Lynn’s age to be so close to returning. She must have tried to help her mother for quite some time after it became clear that she was changing. That much exposure to the sea speeds up the process.”
Fran shuddered. “I can’t imagine needing to choose between my family and my sense of self. It’s amazing that they’re so calm and friendly, with everything their bodies make them go through.”

“It’s just how they’re made,” said Jonathan. “I suppose that sort of transition must seem only natural, when you’re raised expecting it to happen.”

“I suppose,” said Fran dolefully.

Jonathan pulled off onto a side street, driving toward the edge of town, where he had been told he would find Nathaniel and Elaine Lindsay. The numbers on the houses counted down, becoming a little shabbier and less well-kept with each step they took toward the sea. That made sense, too. The people who built closer to the water would return to it faster, and would have less time to care about things like the condition of their property.

At the end of the lane was a house which bucked the trend toward dissolution. Its walls were straight and strong, and it had been painted recently in shades of blue and white, making it look like it had been transplanted from another, more picturesque New England town. A weather vane shaped like a mermaid was mounted on the roof, spinning lazily in the breeze. Fran shielded her eyes with her hand as she got out of the car and squinted up at the fixture.

“I can’t tell if that’s charming or in extremely poor taste,” she said, finally.

“A bit of both, I’d wager,” said Jonathan. He walked around the car to offer her his arm. “There’s no rule against depictions of merfolk in Gentling, and I suppose some people would see it as a charming, if misguided, way to remember those that have gone.”

“Seems more ghoulish than gracious if you ask me.” The pair walked up the path to the porch steps, which were as well-maintained as everything else about the property. It was the sort of house that should have been located at the center of town, well away from the water.

Jonathan nodded. “I tend to agree. I assume their neighbors would say something if it bothered them.” He rang the doorbell, which made a deep chiming noise somewhere deep inside the house.

A few minutes inched by before the door was finally cracked open and the narrow, anxious face of a girl appeared, looking suspiciously out at them. “Can I help you?” she asked, her broad, Southern vowels marking her immediately as Elaine Lindsay. Not many outsiders chose to settle in Gentling, for a lot of reasons.

“Hello, Elaine,” said Jonathan. “My name’s Jonathan Healy, and this is my wife, Frances. We’re here because the mayor asked us to come to town to look into a problem he’s been having, and we wanted to get your perspective on the situation.”

“You’re here because of the missing babies, aren’t you?” Elaine pulled the door the rest of the way open, although she didn’t emerge from the house or invite them inside. The hallway that was visible behind her was unfurnished. The walls were bare. All the effort in keeping up the house had apparently gone into the exterior. “That’s the only reason I can think of that they’d call outsiders here.”

“Yes, we are,” said Jonathan, quickly covering his surprise. “You were aware of what’s been going on with the infants?”

“I work at the hospital,” Elaine replied. There was a note of weary resignation in her voice. “We’ve got a pretty good one, you know. We may be a little middle of nowhere town full of fish people, but that’s just meant we worked harder to have our own medical facilities. I went to nursing school and everything. Bet
Jonathan blinked. “No one said any such thing to us. We just wanted to find out whether you might have seen anything.”

“It’s not that we trust humans more’n we trust the finfolk, because that would be prejudiced and wrong and Johnny’d probably make me sleep on the couch for a week or more, which isn’t good when I’m this pregnant,” said Fran, hitting her accent harder than was strictly honest as she fell back into her long-practiced “sweet little country girl” routine. “We just thought maybe you could get closer to the water than they could, since you’re not worried about goin’ all scaly and weird, and maybe you’d seen something.”

The suspicion faded from Elaine’s eyes, replaced by frustration. “Not a thing,” she said, shaking her head. “I go down every morning, and I’ve never seen any signs of who’s stealing the babies. It’s not safe! Finfolk children are hardier than human babies, at least at first—they’d have to be to survive being born in the open ocean—but they lose that resiliency very quickly. It’s like nature set them up to make it to shore, and nothing more than that.”

“Sink or swim,” said Fran, with an understanding nod. “What about your mama? She seen anything?”

“No.” Elaine shook her head again, harder this time. “Marie was the nicest woman I’d ever met, you know? It didn’t matter to her that I wasn’t born her daughter. She wanted me, and she said that mattered even more, because a mother who gets to choose her children will always know that she chose to love them. She said she’d have her own babies after she’d returned, when she wouldn’t have to worry about sharing me with them.” She reached up and wiped her eye with her knuckles, sniffing. “She loved me. She stayed as long as she could. A lot of people around here go to the sea as soon as it starts calling them. They say it’s easier than staying here and forgetting themselves day by day. But not Marie. She stayed as long as she could, because she loved my father, and she loved me, and she knew we’d never come with her to the water.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” said Fran.

Elaine focused on her for what seemed like the first time. “No one really says that around here,” she said quietly. “For them, going to the water is just what happens when your land-life is finished. You go back where you came from, and that’s it, that’s done, you forget the people you had to leave behind. For me, it was a loss.”

“It’s hard,” said Fran. “People don’t always know what to say when they feel like you’ve lost something you should have been more careful with. I hate to ask—I know you’ve had a hard time of it—but can we see inside the house? It might be easier if, when other people ask whether we considered the outsider, we can say we genuinely did, and that we found nothing.”

Elaine hesitated for a moment before she nodded. “All right,” she said, stepping out of the doorway. “Come on in.”

“Thank you,” said Jonathan, and escorted Fran inside.

The Lindsay house yielded nothing but sparsely furnished rooms and the faint but inescapable smell of dusting polish. The windows were all sealed up tight, like the smell of the sea air had been banned. By the time Jonathan and Fran left to return to their room at the Gentling house, they both felt as if they had been
intruding on a private sorrow where they had no place or business.

The sun was hanging low in the sky when they parked the car by the side of the house. Lynn had set a simple meal of bread rolls and fish stew on the table. Angus joined them, and the small foursome ate without conversation beyond what was absolutely necessary. It seemed like there was nothing to be said.

Finally, Jonathan stood. “I’ll be getting up before dawn to walk the beach and see if I can find who’s been taking your children,” he said. “I have an alarm, and I’ll do my best not to wake you.”

“I’ll see you there,” said Lynn.

“We both will,” said Angus.

“Goodnight,” said Fran, and rose, following Jonathan back down the hall to their room. She carried a bread roll in either hand, which might have seemed odd had Jonathan not been holding a full bowl of stew.

The reason for their food-hoarding presented itself as soon as they opened the guest room door. The mice, who had arranged themselves in an elaborate star-shape on the bed, turned and cheered, making more noise than seemed possible for such a small assemblage of rodents. Then again, it was best not to make assumptions where the Aeslin were concerned.

“Simmer down, you ruffians,” scolded Fran, holding up her rolls. “If you want supper, you need to earn it. What’d y’all learn today?”

“That this domicile is four stories in height,” squeaked a mouse. “The attic is a land of many things.”

“Including mousetraps, I’d reckon,” said Fran. Behind her, Jonathan closed the door and looked on with amusement. “Anybody get killed?”

“No, Priestess,” said the novice responsible for the colony. She puffed out her chest a bit and added, “I kept my charges well clear of the snapping metal bars.”

“That was right good of you,” said Fran. “How many people live here?”

“Three,” said a mouse. “The two in the kitchen, and the man in the tub behind the closed door.” The other mice murmured agreement with this statement.

Fran glanced at Jonathan, raising an eyebrow. “Johnny?”

“Sometimes someone has entered the early stages of the return, but is not yet ready to go, and is still mentally acute enough to refuse,” he said. “The door down the hall that smells of saltwater leads to a room used for just such individuals. The Gentlings wouldn’t mention their housemate unless it seemed relevant. It’s...shameful, to a degree, to flout someone’s helplessness like that.”

“Huh,” said Fran. She turned back to the mice. “You see any babies? Fish babies or human babies, it doesn’t much matter. We’re looking for any we can find.”

“No, Priestess,” said the novice.

Fran sighed. “Guess that was too much to hope. All y’all, get off the bed. Johnny, if you would do the honors?” She handed the rolls to her husband as the mice scattered, spurred on by the promise of food.

“Eat in the closet, please,” said Jonathan, bending to set the rolls and bowl of stew on the bedroom floor. “The Priestess and I have things to discuss, and it will be easier if your celebrations are not distracting us.”
“HAIL!” agreed the mice. The food was promptly hoisted on tiny backs and shoulders, and swept away on a furry tide, vanishing through the half-open closet door.

Jonathan straightened as he watched them go. When the last of the mice was inside the closet and the sound of celebration had begun in earnest, he walked across the room and nudged the door gently closed. Turning back to Fran he said, “It never ceases to amaze me how good you are with them.”

“They’re probably my favorite things,” said Fran. Then she winced and pressed a hand to her stomach. “Yes, sweet pea, except for you. You’re definitely my favorite thing.”

“I’ll count myself lucky to come in third,” said Jonathan. “Do you need help with your shoes? We should get a few hours of sleep—I’m assuming you’ll want to come down to the beach with me. Please feel free to tell me that you’d rather stay in bed, like a normal pregnant woman, and avoid the risk of catching a chill.”

“Only thing I’ve done normal during this pregnancy is get knocked up,” said Fran. She sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. “If you get my shoes off, I can handle the rest. Lord above, I can’t wait to be formally reintroduced to my own feet.”

“I’m sure they miss you as much as you miss them,” said Jonathan. He dropped to one knee, beginning to unbutton Fran’s shoes with rapid ease. “What are your impressions of the town?”

“Peaceful, mostly. I suppose you’d have to be, when you grew up knowing that you didn’t have any place else that you could go. But folks seem happy enough. It’s good that they can stay near their kin.” She waggled her toes as he pulled off the first shoe. “Not sure how long they can go on like this. People are bound to figure out that there’s something strange about this place sooner or later.”

“Yes,” Jonathan agreed. He removed her second shoe before straightening and beginning to undo his tie. “The trouble is explaining things to those who have returned. They’d keep coming back to this beach even if the Covenant were here and setting things on fire in front of them. They’re not good at remembering when a situation changes. So the people here try to adapt as best they can, and they make strangers feel as unwelcome as possible, to keep them from settling and noticing what’s going on. They’ll get caught eventually, and whatever happens then...well, whatever happens then, we’ll do our best to help them.”

“Is it possible that one of the returned ladies is trying to keep the babies, and they’re drowning?” Fran began unbuttoning her own blouse, remaining seated as she did. She frowned. “No, that doesn’t work. They’d be findin’ dead babies on the beach, not no babies at all. Forget I asked.”

“I won’t forget, because it was a good question, but you’re right—we’d be finding some sign if this were just a matter of a mermaid trying to keep what she thinks of as hers.”

“Could it be Elaine?” Fran bit her lip, looking briefly worried before she pushed on, saying, “She seemed awfully sad. Sad people can do some pretty strange things.”

“It could be,” Jonathan allowed. “But what would she be doing with them? She doesn’t have a room in her house full of stolen infants. We’d have noticed. And why? What would be her motive for doing such a despicable thing?”

“I don’t know.” Fran shook her head. “Not much of this seems to want to make sense. I’m flummoxed.”

“That makes two of us.” Jonathan shrugged his coat off. “Maybe the morning will help us to clear things up. If we can find the baby-snatcher in the act, we’ll be able to stop them, and hopefully force them to take us to where they’re keeping the infants.”
A shadow flickered across Fran’s eyes, dulling her expression and seeming to age her ten years in under a second. “Do you really think those babies are still alive?” Her hand went to her stomach, cupping it protectively.

Jonathan didn’t hesitate. He nodded, saying firmly, “They have to be. No one could be that inhumane.”

“I wish I could believe you.”

“Try.” He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “Everything is going to be all right. We’re going to save the day.”

Fran smiled at him fondly. “We always do,” she said, before grabbing the front of his shirt and pulling him in for a more satisfying kiss. Jonathan went willingly, and before long, they slept, gathering strength for the day ahead of them. It was bound to be a difficult one. How difficult, however, they had no idea.

Jonathan was dead to the world and dreaming of teaching his son—a little boy with Fran’s golden hair and his serious demeanor—how to track jackalope migrations when a hand grasped his shoulder and shook him firmly. He made a small grunting noise. The hand shook him again, even harder this time.

“Dammit, Johnny, wake up,” hissed Fran. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What?” Jonathan fumbled on the bedside table for his glasses before opening his eyes and rolling over to face his wife. She was sitting up in the bed, barely illuminated by the moonlight coming in through the window. She was also clutching her stomach, a dismayed expression contorting her features. Jonathan pushed himself onto one elbow, fear lancing through him. “Fran?”

“I think the baby’s coming, Johnny. We need to get me to a hospital.” Daniel had been delivered at home, with Enid serving as the midwife, but home was a long way away.

“What? No, that can’t be right. It’s too soon.”

“Appreciate your adherence to the schedule, city boy, but I’m telling you, this baby is showing up here, right now, tonight. Now if you don’t want your son born in a bed in Fishville, you’ll go get the car!” Fran’s voice hit an unusually high note at the end of her command, illustrating just how much pain she was in.

Jonathan fell out of the bed in his eagerness to get moving. Grabbing his discarded trousers from the floor, he hopped on first one leg and then the other in order to pull them on. He was still wearing an undershirt, and so didn’t bother with his jacket before running out of the room.

Fran levered herself out of the bed, looking with dismay at the large wet patch she left behind on the previously immaculate sheets. “Well I never,” she mumbled, and bent as well as she could to retrieve her coat. Nothing else seemed worth dealing with at the moment, and if she couldn’t go out in public in her nightdress when she was in the process of giving birth, when could she? Never, that was when.

Another contraction hit, sending a wave of pain through Fran’s entire body. She gasped, clutching her stomach, before glaring down at the proximate location of the problem. “Now why don’t you just learn a little patience, huh? Your daddy’s on his way to get me to the hospital, and then you can be born in a nice clean bed, instead of on a stranger’s floor.”

The baby, who was having none of this “logic,” kicked her hard in the kidneys. Fran sucked a breath
through her teeth and began half walking, half waddling toward the door, trying to focus on putting one foot in front of the other, rather than on the increasing sensation of being torn in two.

She opened the bedroom door to find Jonathan waiting there, his hand outstretched to grasp the doorknob. “About time you came back,” she said, pushing past him. “Where’s the car?”

“Right out front, and the hospital is only two blocks from here. Are you all right? Is the baby all right?” The white edges of panic still showed all the way around Jonathan’s eyes. “What can I do?”

“You can help me to the car,” said Fran, who would normally never have passed up an opportunity to tease Jonathan about his endless questions, but was currently distracted by the effort of keeping a tiny human from escaping her body before they got to a place with clean sheets.

“Of course.” Jonathan took her arm. Together, they were able to make their way down the hall much more quickly than Fran could possibly have managed on her own. She leaned on him heavily the whole way, letting him support the bulk of her weight. Her free hand clutched her stomach the whole way, like only that small point of pressure was doing anything to keep the baby inside of her.

Angus was waiting for them at the front door, holding it open. His eyes fell on Fran’s hand, clutching her stomach, and he asked anxiously, “Is she all right?”

“Don’t mind me, just havin’ a baby,” Fran gasped. “Johnny, help me down the stairs.”

“Yes, dear. Angus, we’ll be back later. I will do my very best to make it to the beach at dawn,” said Jonathan. Fran’s arm tightened until the pressure became painful. He winced, but didn’t say anything. A little pain was the least he could endure, given what she was currently going through.

Helping Fran into the car was difficult. By the time he was done, she was swearing steadily and he was starting to wonder if their child would be born already enlisted in the navy. Finally, she was in, and he shut her door before running around the car to slide into the driver’s seat. He glanced up. Angus was still standing on the porch, watching them wistfully.

There would be time to worry about their host’s state of mind later. Jonathan slammed the door and hit the gas, sending them rocking down the narrow street that would bring them to the hospital. Fran made small pained sounds and breathed in and out through her teeth, both hands now clenching the swell of her belly.

“Almost there,” said Jonathan, forcing himself to keep his eyes on the road. “Just hold out a few more minutes, all right, sweetheart? We’re almost there.”

“It hurts, Johnny,” she said.

“I know.” Forcing a jovial note into his voice, he asked, “What are we going to name him? We should have decided by now, but in our defense, I thought we’d have more time.”

“I like ‘Alex,’” said Fran, before taking another whooping breath. “S’a good name, and he’s been a good father-in-law. Be nice to honor him a bit.”

“I like that too,” Jonathan said, and pulled up in front of the whitewashed two-story building that was the Gentling hospital. People in white coats and nurse’s uniforms were already spilling out into the parking lot by the time he killed the engine. Jonathan smiled in relief. “Angus called ahead.”

“Tell him I’ll pay for new sheets,” said Fran. One of the doctors opened her door and helped her out of the car before Jonathan could even get his key out of the ignition. He stood just in time to watch them help her
into a wheelchair and whisk her off to the hospital proper.

More slowly, he followed them. What happened next would be entirely on Fran, and he would have no place in it. That was a large part of why their first child had been born at home: men weren’t allowed in the delivery room, as a rule, but his mother had been more than happy to let him sit by Fran’s bed, wiping her forehead with a cloth and holding her hand while she screamed. This was a whole different world.

Jonathan Healy had spent very little time in human hospitals. Most of his own care had been received at home or at the hands of sympathetic veterinarians. It had been a gorgon doctor who had pulled buckshot out of his rear end when he’d offended a local farmer, and it had been the medic at Fran’s old circus who’d fixed his arm up after he’d been shot. Human hospitals were a mystery, too high-tech and clean to seem entirely safe. He understood the need for sterile surfaces and washing one’s hands, but pulling all of the dirt out of an environment struck him as a way of challenging God to find a way to give you an infection anyhow.

Fran had been whisked into one of the delivery rooms, leaving him to pace back and forth in the hallway outside and listen to her screams. She interspersed them with enthusiastic cursing, doubtless shocking the ears of one or more of the nurses. That thought brought a short-lived smile to his face, and then it was back to pacing, right up until the moment when a newborn baby’s lusty cry split the air. The infant sounded as angry as Fran had. Jonathan positioned himself outside the delivery room door, practically bouncing on his toes as he waited for someone to emerge and tell him the outcome of Fran’s efforts.

Minutes passed. The baby stopped crying. Finally, just as he was about to violate hospital rules and shove his way in there, a nurse emerged. “Mr. Healy?” she asked, eyes going directly to Jonathan.

“Yes,” he answered, squaring his shoulders and standing up a little straighter in automatic attention. “How is my wife?”

“She’s resting right now, but you should be able to see her soon.” The nurse’s face split in a broad smile. “Congratulations. You have a beautiful little baby girl.”

Jonathan blinked. They had both been so convinced that Fran was carrying a boy that he had never given much thought to the alternative. “Can I see her?”

“We’re taking her to the nursery to get her cleaned up and ready for you,” said the nurse, still smiling. “Mother and baby are both doing fine.”

Jonathan’s knees seemed suddenly, unaccountably weak. He put out an arm, catching himself against the wall before he could topple to the floor. “I…thank you very much for letting me know.”

“It’s our pleasure,” said the nurse.

From inside the room Fran bellowed, “Get your ass in here, city boy!”

The nurse laughed. “It sounds like that’s your cue. Are you ready to see your wife?”

“I’ve been ready since we got here,” said Jonathan, and walked past her, through the delivery room door.

The various doctors and nurses he’d seen rushing into the room were all gone now, having apparently exited through the door marked “staff” on the opposite wall. He noted this in passing, most of his attention going to the most important thing present: Fran. She was sitting up in bed, her hair matted down with sweat and lacking its customary curl. She had never been so beautiful.

“Hello, Fran,” he said.
She smiled. It did nothing to lessen her visible exhaustion. “Hello to you too, Johnny. You get to see the baby? It’s a little girl. Never thought that was gonna happen, did you?”

“I am overjoyed,” said Jonathan gravely, as he walked toward her bed. “I can’t imagine any greater future than one where you and I are raising our daughter together.”

“We didn’t come up with a name for her,” said Fran.

Jonathan sat down on the edge of the bed, taking her hand. “We could name her after Juniper, if you like. Or after my mother. Or after you.”

“But any of those.” Fran closed her eyes. “Enid is a good name, but not for a little girl in the here and the now. Juney’s still using her name, and I miss her something awful. Wouldn’t want to be reminded that she’s missing every time I called my baby girl in for dinner. As for naming her after me...it’d get confusing, don’t you think? We need something else for her. Something nobody’s using.”

“We don’t have to decide right now. You need your rest.”

“How do you feel about ‘Alice’?” Fran opened her eyes again, rolling her head toward Jonathan. “Sounds sort of like ‘Alex,’ so we’re still honoring your father, but it’s modern enough that nobody’s gonna make fun of her for it.”

“I like it,” said Jonathan. He reached out to brush a lock of sweat-matted hair away from her face. “Alice Healy.”

“Alice Enid Healy,” corrected Fran, reaching up to catch his hand. “Did they let you hold her?”

Jonathan paused. “What?”

“When they took her out of the room. The nurse said they were taking her out to see you.” Fran smiled. “She said you’d be tickled pink to meet your baby girl.”

Jonathan didn’t say anything. He just stared at her, trying in vain to collect his thoughts enough to settle on a course of action.

Bit by bit, Fran’s smile faded. “Johnny, what aren’t you saying? Is there something wrong with the baby?”

“I wouldn’t know,” he said, words slow and stiff. “I never saw her.”

Fran stared at him. Finally, in a horrified tone, she asked, “Where’s our baby?”

“I don’t know.”

Jonathan helped Fran out of the bed and back into her bloodstained coat. She was barefoot and unarmed—one of the few times he’d seen his wife without at least a dozen throwing knives somewhere on her person. She thrust her hand out at him and he placed a small revolver in it, watching with relief as her fingers curled in the proper position around the grip. She was focused enough to respect trigger safety. That was good.

Together, they walked through the staff-only door, Fran moving surprisingly fast for a woman who had just given birth. Then again, panic has been known to do incredible things, and there is nothing in this world as
panicked as a parent whose child has disappeared.

They had gone halfway down the white-painted hall on the other side of the door when a woman in a nurse’s uniform came around a corner and stopped dead, her eyes going wide with surprise. “You can’t be here,” she said. “This is a restricted area. Mrs. Healy, you shouldn’t even be out of bed yet.” She didn’t comment on the guns that they were both holding. Life in Gentling tended to instill a great survival instinct in people, living as they did between the threats from both sea and shore.

“Elaine, I don’t know whether you had any part in this, and I don’t particular care,” said Fran. Her voice was still rusty from screaming, but her grip on her borrowed revolver was true. “Where’s my baby?”

Elaine’s eyes went even wider, something neither of them would have believed possible if they hadn’t seen it with their own eyes. “What do you mean, where’s your baby? Newborns are taken to the nursery to be washed and weighed. It’s standard procedure.”

“Well, then, take us to the nursery so that we can see our daughter, and we’ll gladly apologize for trespassing,” said Jonathan. He sounded more reasonable than Fran did, but something in the precision of his tone warned that he was no less dangerous in this moment than she was.

“It’s right this way,” said Elaine, swallowing hard to keep her fear from rising up and overwhelming her. She beckoned for the pair to follow her as she turned and walked down the hall in the direction that they’d been heading before they met her. “I just came on duty, but I heard that you’d been brought in. It’s a very nice hospital. I don’t think I’d mind having babies in it, if I was intending to have any babies.”

“You’re not?” asked Jonathan, with automatic politeness. Too many lectures about making nice with the locals, especially the human locals; too many nights spent trying to weasel information out of people who would just as soon not give him the time of day.

The back of Elaine’s neck reddened as she realized what she’d just been asked, but she pressed on, possibly because both of the people walking behind her were armed. “Not many human men here in Gentling. I love the finfolk—I really do, they’re some of the sweetest people a girl could ever hope to know—but I don’t want my children returning. If I was going to have a baby, I’d want it to stay with me on the land forever, and that’s just not in the cards if I marry a Gentling boy.” She stopped at a plain white door, finally looking back at them. “I brought you here because I want you not to be worried for your little girl, but she’s not the only baby resting, so please, keep quiet?”

“We will,” said Jonathan. Fran didn’t say anything. She just nodded, lips pressed into a thin, hard line that meant trouble for anyone who dared to cross her.

Elaine opened the door, holding it to let them walk past her. Jonathan was first into the room. Then he froze and Fran, who followed close behind him, did the same, both of them staring at the bassinets that stretched in front of them. There must have been space for twenty infants, and all of them were empty.

“Where are the babies?” asked Elaine. She sounded more dismayed than anything, like panic hadn’t had time to set in yet. Jonathan almost envied her that. She didn’t understand what was happening. “There should be four infants in here. Where are they?”

“Whoever has our daughter has them,” said Jonathan. His voice was distant, assessing. “They couldn’t have carried them out through the front of the hospital. They didn’t carry them out past you. Is there another way to exit without going through the main lobby?”

“There’s the service entrance,” said Elaine. “We use it for grocery deliveries and new equipment...”
“Take us there.” Fran turned, baring her teeth at Elaine in an expression that was nothing at all like a smile.
“We’re going to find my little girl.”

Elaine gulped.

The service entrance led to a small, private parking area, where only a few cars were parked haphazardly wherever their owners had abandoned them. Fran scanned the empty gravel lot with cold eyes before snapping, “Johnny, go get the car. We’re going to need it if we’re going to follow the kidnappers.”

“Fran—”

“Go.”

There was no arguing with her tone. Jonathan turned and went back into the hospital, allowing the door to swing closed against behind him.

Fran waited for the small “click” of the latch engaging before she turned, almost lazily, and pressed the barrel of her revolver against Elaine’s forehead. Elaine made a small squeaking noise, her entire body going rigid with fear. Fran’s expression didn’t change.

“You seemed nice before, and I’m usually a pretty good judge of character, so I’m willing to believe you didn’t have anything to do with this,” Fran said, without preamble. “If you’re smart, you won’t go changing my mind. Now who do you think has my baby girl? Don’t sass me, and don’t you lie.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” whispered Elaine.

“I already said I believed you. What you did or didn’t do is none of my concern, as long as you didn’t touch my daughter. Who do you think has her? I’ve asked you twice. You won’t like what happens if you make me ask you a third time.”

Elaine whimpered again. She had no doubt that the woman standing in front of her would pull the trigger if she felt the need. Maybe Fran would be sorry later for having killed an innocent woman, but Elaine wasn’t going to gamble her life on it.

“Angus Gentling,” she said. “He was running around with a girl—Lacey—but she returned early because she’d gathered too many babies from the shore. She’d gotten wet too many times. He hasn’t looked at anyone else in this town since, not like that.”

“What’s being unlucky in love got to do with my daughter?” For the first time since Jonathan left, there was a hint of emotion in Fran’s tone. It was anger. That didn’t make things any better.

“I heard him talking to one of the other nurses the other day down at the diner. Going on about how the Gentlings shouldn’t have settled here on the shoreline, because it means that the babies can’t stay dry,” said Elaine. “I mean, I guess they’d have baths and such no matter where they lived, but saltwater makes the return happen faster than freshwater does, so living by the sea means returning early. If the town was somewhere in the Midwest maybe, where there wasn’t any ocean, the babies could stay longer.”

Fran’s eyes went wide with understanding before they filled with a cold desperation. She lowered her gun, ignoring Elaine’s sigh of relief. Fran was somewhere well beyond relief in that moment, and her voice was barely more than a moan as she said, “He’s selling the babies.”
“What?”

“There’s always people who want to buy a healthy baby. Seems like it shouldn’t work that way, but it does, and finfolk babies look straight up human when they first come. Don’t they?”

“Yes,” said Elaine. “You can’t tell a human baby from a finfolk baby for anything.”

“So you sell them to adoptive parents far from the sea. They get more time. Do you understand now? He’s trying to help them. He’s selling them for time.” Fran shook her head, sweat-damp hair sticking to her cheeks. “He didn’t think Johnny would come this fast. He thought he would have more time.”

The snarl of tires driving too fast over gravel heralded Jonathan’s return. The car tore around the corner of the hospital, narrowly avoiding a collision with one of the vehicles already parked in the lot. It skidded to a halt barely a second before Jonathan shoved the driver’s side door open, shouting, “Come on!”

Fran didn’t need to be told twice. She grabbed Elaine by the wrist, hauling the startled nurse along with her as she walked as fast as her condition would allow to the waiting vehicle. “Get in,” she commanded Elaine, letting her go. “We need you to tell us where we’re going.”

“But I don’t—”

“You do,” Fran said, in a tone that left no room for argument. “You knew deep down that it was Angus Gentling; you just had to let yourself see. You know where he must have gone. Can’t be many places in a town this size. Now get.”

Elaine got.

The backseat was a snug fit, meant more for bags than for passengers. Jonathan hit the gas again as soon as Fran was in the car, and they tore back toward the street at an unsafe speed. “Where did he take our daughter?” he asked, without taking his eyes off the windshield.

“I don’t know,” said Elaine.

“Not the Gentling house,” said Jonathan. “Lynn didn’t know, and she’s close enough to returning that she wouldn’t have gone along with it. Not the hospital; there’s no way they could have hidden that many infants inside the building. But they’ll need space, and they’ll need to be on the road, if they’re transporting the babies out of town somehow.”

Elaine gasped.

Fran twisted in her seat, aiming her revolver squarely at the center of Elaine’s forehead. “Well?” she demanded. “Where are we going?”

“The grocer at the edge of town shut down last year,” said Elaine. “Big building. Only two doors. No one owns it anymore—it was given to the town.”

“Good,” said Jonathan. “Hold on.”

This time, when he hit the gas, the car moved faster than any of them would have believed it could.
The shuttered grocer’s stood right at the edge of town, near to the road and as far from the sea as it was possible to get without leaving the city limits. It was a free-standing building, separated from the structures to either side by narrow alleys that were nonetheless wide enough to allow a car to pass through. Jonathan drove slowly around to the back of the grocer’s, looking grimly at the ambulance that was parked there.

He parked in the shadow of the ambulance, reaching over to grab Fran’s arm before she could get out of the car. She shot him an angry, bewildered look.

“Let me go, Johnny.”

“We can’t go in with guns blazing,” he said. “There may be infants in there. Our daughter may be in there. We go quietly and we don’t shoot until we understand the situation. Are you with me?”

“I want to kill that bastard so bad that I can taste it, but yes, I’m with you,” said Fran, shaking off his hand. “Now let’s go bring our baby home.”

“Can I stay in the car?” asked Elaine.

“No,” Jonathan replied, and opened the door.

The three of them crossed the parking lot as quietly as they could, gravel crunching underfoot with every step. Jonathan and Fran kept their guns drawn and ready, while Elaine looked anxiously around with every step she took, like she was waiting for someone to come and order her away.

When they reached the back door, Jonathan motioned for the other two to be quiet and stepped forward, testing the handle. It turned easily. He pulled the door carefully open, holding it as Fran and Elaine slipped through the opening. Then he followed, moving from the natural darkness of the night into the more profound darkness of a disused building.

Voices were coming from somewhere up ahead. The trio moved toward them, finally emerging from the narrow hall connecting the stockroom to the rest of the store and into what had been the main room, once upon a time. Someone had taken the trouble to set out lines of old fruit crates, nestling a baby in each of them like the world’s strangest and most expensive fruit. Angus was on the far side of the room, arguing in a tight, low voice with a grizzled-looking man in a fisherman’s sweater. Elaine gasped. Both men stopped speaking and turned, their eyes going wide at the sight of the intruders.

“Daddy?” said Elaine.

“Where’s our baby?” demanded Fran. Her words were accompanied by her revolver swinging into position, and as such demanded the immediate attention of everyone in the room. For a moment, everything was silent.

Finally, Jonathan spoke. “You’re not armed, or you would already have gone for your weapon,” he said. “You don’t want to harm these babies. What are you doing, Angus?”

“They deserve better than a short life by the sea,” Angus said. “You, of all people, should appreciate that. They deserve the chance to grow up before they start to lose themselves.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” said Fran, voice ragged from the strain of not opening fire. “Where’s my baby?”

“I’m not answering because I don’t know the answer,” said Angus serenely. “She’s in one of the boxes. You’ll never figure out which one she is, and I couldn’t tell you if I wanted to. The men from the agency will
be here tonight, and they’ll know which one she is. They have their ways. It was just good luck that gave us an early labor. You can’t hurt me. Maybe I’m lying. Or maybe in a year you’ll get an envelope that tells you exactly where your daughter is, which family adopted her, and where you’ll have to go to bring her home. You can’t—"

Fran’s bullet caught him in the right shoulder. He yelped, staggering backward.

“Where’s my daughter?” she asked.

“I don’t know!” he shouted.

“This time I believe you,” she said, and raised her gun again.

“Daddy, why are you doing this?” Elaine didn’t appear to realize that she was about to witness an execution, or that half the babies had woken up and started to cry. “I thought you loved it here in Gentling.”

“I did, until we lost Marie,” he said. “We can’t afford to move. This would have let you start a new life somewhere else. Somewhere far away from the sea.”

Elaine turned her face away. She didn’t answer him.

“Well?” demanded Fran. “Next bullet goes in your head.”

“I don’t know!” wailed Angus. “I took the baby for security, but I don’t know which one she is!”

“Fran.” Jonathan put his hand on his wife’s shoulder, squeezing lightly. “Don’t shoot him just yet. We may have a solution.”

“Shooting sounds like a solution to me,” she said bleakly.

“I know, dear. Just breathe.” His next statement was directed to the pocket of her coat. “You can come out now.”

Two small, whiskered heads appeared as the Aeslin mice that had accompanied Fran to the hospital emerged. “Hail!” they greeted.

“Hail,” Jonathan echoed, with much more solemnity. “You stated your intent to attend the birth. Did you see your new Priestess?”

“We saw and witnessed,” squeaked a mouse.

“Good.” Jonathan took his hand from Fran’s shoulder, holding it out for the mice to climb onto. Then he knelt, allowing them to jump down to the floor. “Find her.”

The mice ran off into the maze of fruit crates and crying infants without another word. Jonathan raised his head to find Angus, Elaine, and Elaine’s father all staring at him in confusion. “That’s one problem solved,” he said. “Now the next arises.”

“Let me kill them,” said Fran.

“If only I could,” said Jonathan. “You will meet the men from the adoption agency. You will tell them there are no more babies to be had. Then you, Angus, will step down as Mayor. Go to the sea. Hurry your return. Forget that you ever dared to do such terrible things to your own people. As for you...” He focused on Elaine’s father. “You make me ashamed to be human. Leave tonight and never come back.”
“I won’t be going with him,” said Elaine. Ignoring her father’s cry of dismay, she continued, “The hospital needs me, and I like my home. I don’t ever want to see him again.”

“Elaine…”

“You heard the girl,” said Fran. “I could still start shootin’.”

The mice cheered. Fran lost all interest in threats. She lowered her revolver and ran across the room faster than Jonathan would have believed possible, dropping to her knees next to the fruit crate where the mice had stopped. Inside was a small, red, wrinkled infant wrapped in a white cloth. Its face was screwed up and angry, and it was crying, although not with nearly as much force as it had been a minute or so before.

“Is this her?” Fran demanded. “Is this our Alice?”

“Hail! Hail the arrival of the Remarkably Noisy Priestess!” rejoiced the mice.

Fran reached into the crate, tears running down her cheeks, and lifted her daughter, and held her close.

“Are you sure you won’t stay?” asked Lynn, standing on the porch of her family home and twisting her apron between her hands. “I don’t know how to be mayor yet. I need some time.”

“You’ll figure it out,” said Jonathan. “We want to get home. We’ve had enough of the seashore for now.”

“I suppose…” Lynn looked past him to the car. Fran was already in the front seat, Alice in her arms. “Are you sure? Are you really sure you have the right baby?”

“Yes,” said Jonathan. “I have to be, and the mice have never led us wrong.”

Lynn sighed. “I guess that’s that, then. I…I want to thank you for everything you’ve done for us. I’m sorry about what my brother tried to do to you.”

“All debts are paid,” said Jonathan, and picked up his suitcase before turning and walking down the porch steps toward the car, where his family and his future were waiting.