

Maverick

Maverick

By Emily Cooper

Even with the strength of the Gods, Maverick was not able to save his family. He held his wife's body as the current ruffled her beautiful blue and purple fins. They were now gray without the bio-luminance glow of her life essence. The only color he could see was her blood clouding the water around them.

No, no, no, not my love. Not my love. Maverick sobbed into her braided hair. It seemed to wrap around him as if it was his wife's final embrace.

He knew who had done this. He knew who he needed to kill. But he couldn't let go of her. Couldn't lose this last bit of connection to his old life. He hadn't dared to look into the cradle. He knew with every part of himself that his son was dead. Didn't need to see the cloud of blood that hovered over the lip of the large shell. Maverick had hand carved the shell as a gift to his newly pregnant wife. It told the story of how they first met. How he had won her affections at the mating games. Even the spear he had taken right before killing his opponent.

I'll kill them all my love. I swear it. I won't rest until I breathe in their blood-soaked water. Maverick just needed to let her go. But his hands wouldn't work. They just clenched harder around her.

I'm so sorry I wasn't fast enough. I should have known. I should have done something. I-

His thoughts trailed off as his grief overwhelmed him again. Each beat of his heart took him further away from the time he shared with his wife. Maverick's tears melted into the sea water around him, blending with the blood of his family.

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Soon, his grief ran out. Then replaced by rage. All consuming. All powerful rage. Maverick inhaled deeply through his gills. The water was cold within his lungs. But it did nothing to dim the fire that burned within him. The ferocious flames that mimicked his own fiery colored scales. Orange, yellow, and red fins framed his thick body ending in his powerful tail. He looked down at his hands, they were stained red with his wife's blood, he could barely see the bio-luminescent glow of his stripes that ran the length of his hands and arms. They traced a pattern across his entire body highlighting the dips and hollows of his face and body. He hadn't seen his own reflection, but he had seen his father. He had known his aunts and uncles. But he had lost those relatives. One by one the king's men killed them all, ending with his wife and son.

A vibration came from the door of his den making Maverick spin around, the body of his wife still clutched in his clawed hands. There was a merman floating in the doorway, his webbed hands clutching a spear. The sight flamed the burning rage in his gut. *He* killed Maverick's wife and son. *He* had desecrated their home. And *he* was going to die for that.

"There you are." The man motioned with the sign language of the merfolk. His glowing stripes accentuating his movements into a dance. His lips widened into a triumphant grin, his teeth reflecting his blue and yellow stripes.

Maverick's resolve hardened as he placed one last kiss to his wife's forehead, then he gently placed his wife on the floor, his eyes never leaving the merman.

"Easy journeys, my love." Maverick gestured over her body. With his hand still outstretched from his words, he reached just a bit farther toward his harpoon. It was one of his prized possessions. At one end it was razor sharp, curved. Deadly. The other end had some kind

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of stretchy material the humans made. It helped shoot the weapon through the water with a lethal precision.

“Stop!” It was one of the few verbal words they had in their language. The merman held out his spear preparing to strike. He wanted to stop Maverick from grabbing his weapon, but he was too slow. Or Maverick was just faster.

With a furious snarl, Maverick stretched the band in his grip and turned it toward the invader. The merman didn’t have a chance as the harpoon shot through the water, cutting the water just as efficiently as the blade pierced the intruders’ chest.

He didn’t have time to scream as all the water was sucked out of his lungs. The spear drifted slowly to the floor as his hands clamped around the harpoon. Then with a savage yank, Maverick pulled it out of the merman’s chest, shredding it. The dying man blinked once, his mouth opened in shock before the cloud of blood obscured Maverick’s view of his face. He couldn’t see the life fade from his eyes and the glow from his stripes, but he wished he could.

“May hell have a special place for you.” Maverick gestured. His killing spree had begun and he wasn’t about to stop now.

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“Stop.” Maverick’s long-time friend, Nautilus, snapped, the vibration of his words sent a shiver down Maverick’s spine. He stopped but couldn’t look at his friend. So, his friend came to him. A hand on Maverick’s shoulder spun him around to face Nautilus. “I am coming with you.” His motions were strict. They brook no argument.

Maverick tried to object, but Nautilus pulled him into a tight hug, their foreheads pressing together for a long moment. They shared their grief over the death of Maverick’s family. Nautilus

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sometimes felt like the brother Maverick never had. The emotion of that thought clogged Maverick's throat. He couldn't stop the tears that dissolved into the water.

"You can't go alone."

They had served in the king's army in their youths, before Maverick was discharged for refusing to kill a mermaid. The same one that later became his wife. That one act of defiance was the start of the end for Maverick's whole bloodline. The king's guards tracked each one of his family down and slaughtered them.

"I can and I will." Maverick didn't look up at Nautilus as he geared up. He hadn't wanted to keep the bulk of his weapons in his den ever since his son was born, so Maverick had asked Nautilus to store them. The merman still lived alone yet was just as hunted as Maverick himself.

Maverick could never thank Nautilus enough for his friendship. Nautilus covered Mavericks and his wife's escape from the king's custody. That action sealed Nautilus' fate just as it did Maverick's. He didn't want to shorten Nautilus' life any more than he already had.

Finally, Maverick pulled away, now was not the time for tears. "Gear up, Squid. We have a king to kill."

"Nautilus. Not squid, Pearl."

Ah, yes, because I always irritate your ass. Thanks.

Maverick's lips twitched, good natured ribbing between friends. Only Nautilus could make him smile when Maverick's world had fallen apart. His eyes fell to Nautilus' silver and green hand as he gripped a nearby spear.

Time to go to war. Only this time Maverick didn't care if he came back alive.

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The king's castle towered above them, the multicolored glowing algae that clung to its walls created intricate murals. Snapshots of myths. Pictures of the sun above the water. Even the king's face adorned the coral castle.

During the main sleep period of the day, Maverick and Nautilus could see the specially trained merfolk that tended to the fragile ecosystem, as they swam around inspecting the beautiful pictures.

Maverick paused as they approached the next intersection of the city that expanded out beyond the castle. The nets that held more bioluminescent algae floated above the intersection, providing a low glow over the adjacent homes and businesses. It was time to cover their stripes. Maverick and Nautilus didn't want to be immediately seen when they invaded the castle so they had stopped by a local field of kelp to collect long strips of the deep green and brown leaves.

They didn't speak as they helped each other wrap the cold kelp around each other's arms and torsos, dimming their glow. They wouldn't do much for the stripes on their tails, but their fashioned shirts did wonders to hide their appearances. Only then did they approach the first grand staircase.

Carefully, they skirted around one side, so the floating guards didn't take note of them. Maverick let his body float up just a touch to peek over the railing and counted the guards quickly before pushing himself back down toward Nautilus.

"Four guards. Two on the ground floor and two on the top by the door." Maverick motioned to his friend. It was a standard formation for the form of the castle. But with only two of them against four, they had to be careful about it.

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“You take the top two, I’ll take the bottom two?”

Maverick chewed on his cheek for a second before nodding his agreement. He gripped his harpoon in his webbed hand, it felt familiar in his hand. Too familiar. He hated where his life had taken him. But now was not the time to lament about fate. Fate was like the tide. One goes where it takes them, if one fights, all one gets is way too fucking tired.

Time to stop fighting, by starting one last killing spree.

Maverick reached out with his free hand to stop Nautilus. His friend stopped and tilted his head in a silent question.

“Thank you, my friend. No matter what happens, I-”

Nautilus caught his hands before Maverick could continue his thoughts. “Stop. We are going to survive. We are going to avenge your wife’s death. Or we will go out in a blaze of fucking glory.”

Nautilus moved into position. It was time to begin. The blood would run thick today.

Maverick used his tail to rise up to the side of the top of the stairs. The stretchy band of his harpoon dug into his wrist as he pulled it back into position. He waited for a slight flash from Nautilus.

Then they struck.

With a powerful swish of his tail, Maverick swum up over the railing and before the guards recognized his presence his harpoon struck the first guard. Striking him in his neck between his gills. But Maverick didn’t leave it there, he yanked, pulling the guard into the second. The water immediately clouded with the first guard’s blood.

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Maverick gripped the harpoon and launched himself at the disorientated merman. The guard's staff had gone up to brace for Maverick's hit, but Maverick predicted it, so he swam in a quick wide circle to embed his harpoon into the second guard's neck, slicing it in two.

Then he paused, feeling for the vibrations of the water around them. No alarms. No verbal shouts. The water was still around him. Maverick turned his head toward the bottom of the stairs to see Nautilus also feeling out the water around them. Both of his guards floated in a cloud of their own blood.

Four down.

Maverick took in a deep breath trying to calm his wildly beating heart. This felt too easy. But it was only the beginning.

Reaching down Maverick took the arms of the dead guards in each hand and guided them over the railing and down into the deeper shadows beside the wall of the castle. He didn't have to wait for Nautilus to bring down his kills to set beside Maverick's. But before Maverick turned to swim back up to the front door, he paused and looked down at the shark scale armor the guards wore. An idea struck.

Working quickly, he began to unlace the armor. Nautilus watched him for a long moment before he followed suit. This armor would hide their stripes better than the kelp that was already beginning to unwind around their bodies. Plus, armor was rarely a bad idea when going into battle.

Maverick was silently grateful that these guards were similar in size to him, so their armor fit well. The warm comforting weight brought Maverick back to his time in the king's army. That first training session when they first got measured for their armor. It was something

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Maverick had always wanted to don the armor ever since he was a young fry. It wasn't until much later, Maverick saw the corruption in their ranks.

Maverick shook his head. This armor was no blessing. It was a curse. One that would undoubtedly get him killed.

"Ready?" Nautilus signed as he finished tightening the last strap of his armor. His eyes were bright with excitement, his jaw set tight and his webbed fingers gripping his harpoon.

Maverick just nodded and beat his thick tail until he swam up to the front door. The merfolk that tended the front door had elected to highlight it with bright yellow algae, so it shone bright like the sun above. It was intimidating. But Maverick pushed it open exposing the soft blues and greens of the internal lights.

In the king's armor, none of the guards looked at them for long before their bored eyes traveled passed as if they were invisible. It was better than Maverick had even hoped. Even Nautilus seemed a bit stunned as they swam down the large hallway.

"It hasn't changed much in here." Nautilus gestured somewhat inconspicuously as if he were whispering.

It really hadn't. Maverick remembered the same colored algae lighting the passages on his first day. The same position of the guards. The same living portrait of a waterfall on the right wall.

"Halt!"

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Maverick and Nautilus paused, their hands tightening on their harpoons as they turned toward the verbal command. Two mermen had their spears positioned to strike, their dark eyes narrowed.

A third swam up and began to gesture, "Name and rank."

Dumb and dumbass, rank expunged, ready for duty. Maverick could almost see the retort building on Nautilus' fingers. But that wouldn't end well.

Maverick smoothly slid his non regulation harpoon into the side of his armor before he replied, "We are new. Need to report to the king."

The two mermen inched closer, almost to the point of being in front of the guard who spoke. "Newbies need to report to the training arena, not the palace."

Maverick shrugged, feigning nonchalant, "King's orders. I am not in the rank to argue with the king. But if you think you are..." He let his motions trail off in a clear *are you going to be a dumbass and argue with the king?* But not in so many words.

The speaker hesitated, thinking. "Who told you this?"

Time to get ballsy. "General Tharros." He was one of the Generals that Maverick used to work under. Mentally Maverick crossed his fingers that he was still in charge.

The male's eyes narrowed before he gave a quick motion to the guard's flanking him. "Come with me." The cold smile on the guard's face made Maverick want to wince. He wasn't sure if he had said something incorrect, but they were taking them somewhere. It was better than attacking in the large open hallway with lots of witnesses.

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The speaker swam ahead allowing Maverick and Nautilus to follow behind and the two armed guards bringing up the rear. Maverick wanted to hold his breath and grip his harpoon, but he forced himself to keep his hands relaxed at his side. He had to act as if he had done nothing wrong.

Two left turns later, they had reached a door at the end of a hallway. Maverick was not about to go through that door. He knew it was not where the king would reside, or even where his throne room would be. This was definitely a trap.

The first guard pushed the door open and graciously waved them to continue, "You two first. The king will see you here."

Nope. That was not happening.

Maverick reached into his armor and gripped the harpoon. He swiveled and shot the sharpened point into the armed guard closest to him, it buried deep into the guard's chest. But it wasn't an immediate kill. The guard still had time to thrust his spear into Maverick's shoulder, piercing it through.

The pain was blinding. His grip loosening just a touch on his harpoon string, but not enough for him to lose contact. Maverick wanted to curse as he yanked with his injured arm, but the action finished off the offending guard, shredding his heart.

But Maverick didn't allow himself the time to recover his breath as he spun around and sent the harpoon into the speaker. The merman's claws were already a hairsbreadth away from Nautilus' back. Maverick would not allow his friend to be hurt.

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The harpoon, this time, hit true. Sinking through the guard's neck, then with another yank, his head detached from his body.

"Maverick." Nautilus touched Maverick's bicep of his injured arm. "We need to get this out."

Maverick looked down at the offending protrusion. Yep. It needed to come out. Not that he was looking forward to that. Maverick looked down and his eyes focused on a kelp purse that one of the guards had dropped in the attack. He reached down and wrapped his fingers around the hard material and stuck it between his teeth, biting down hard.

"Go ahead. Quickly." Maverick motioned as he pressed a hand to the cold coral wall.

Nautilus nodded, looking a little chagrin as he snapped the spear in two. Then, meeting his friend's gaze, Nautilus yanked the front part of the spear out of Maverick's skin.

Dot swam around Maverick's vision for a long minute as pain racked him. The kelp in his mouth muffling the pained yelped from vibrating through the water. Maverick's fist clenched as he slammed his fist into the wall.

Fuck that hurt.

"You good, Pearl?"

Maverick took in a deep gulp of water as he pushed the pain aside. "Yeah, squid." Maverick pulled out the now mashed pit of kelp from his mouth and stuffed it into the hole in his armor. It would be enough to stanch the blood flow. But he didn't exactly plan to live a long life after this mission, so he didn't feel like stopping for stitches.

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Nautilus watched him for a long while before he huffed, “Not a squid.” Then he turned and began to shove the bodies into the open door. It only took one glance to confirm the room was a jail cell. If they had gone in, they would have been locked away until the king saw fit, then they would probably have been executed. That was not in Maverick’s plan for the day.

When the hallway was clear, they swam back toward they came. They paused when they came to an intersection.

“Left or right?” Nautilus asked. They hadn’t been in this far into the castle before, so they were a bit lost. Thankfully there were no guards patrolling this area.

Maverick shrugged then made a motion. Kelp, ocean, or rock. Kelp beats rock because it covers rock, ocean loses since it moves around rock, and ocean wins against kelp since it moves kelp. “You win we go left; I win we go right.”

“It’s no fair. I always win.” Nautilus rolled his eyes but held up his fist to match Maverick.

“Kelp, ocean, rock.”

Maverick threw ocean with his hand flat and Nautilus presented his fist for rock. “Ha! Rock is stronger than ocean. I win.”

So, they went down the left hallway. It was clear, fairly quickly, that they had gone down the correct path. The algae became more and more elaborate. First showing the king as a young fry, then shifting to him growing up in the former king’s army. His many battles. His extensive studies and journeys.

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Maverick paused at the algae portrait of the Queen. She was stunning in her beauty, but nowhere near the quiet elegance of Maverick's wife. But what made him pause was the clean wipe through her body as if someone had taken their hand and removed a portion of the picture.

"I wonder what happened?" Nautilus gestured toward the broken image. It was unlike the royal family to degrade an image like that.

Maverick just shook his head. He had no words. It made him irate at the idea of the king would just wipe away an image of his living mate while Maverick's wife lay dead in their home.

A keening wail made the pair spin toward the vibration. It came from a mermaid, it was quickly followed by the slight cry of a fry. He knew that sound. It was the same sound he had woken to for the past couple months of his son's life. It knotted his belly. He would give anything to have his son in his arms again.

Maverick didn't know he had begun to move until his hand had touched the door where the vibration had originated. But Nautilus stopped him by grabbing his wrist.

"Don't." A simple warning. Maverick could see the pain in Nautilus' eyes that mirror his own. Nautilus knew what Maverick was thinking, or rather who he was thinking about.

He's hungry. Was at the tip of Maverick's fingers before he stopped himself. That cry wasn't his son. His son would never be hungry again. He was dead. Just like his mother. Dead. Their whole fucking family dead.

That idea solidified Maverick's resolve. He turned and swam past that door, and they continued down the hallway.

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Finally, the hallway opened up into a large chamber. Dozens of guards hovered in position, their chins up and hands gripping their spears, motionless.

“Halt!” Two guards snapped as they moved out of position and pointed their spears at Maverick and Nautilus. This time, neither spoke. The king sat nearby on his opulent throne, his dark beard rippling down his chest as he stroked his beard.

The king’s eyes weren’t on them. They were on a row of mermaids. Young ones by Maverick’s estimation. Each one had their breasts exposed, their heads bowed as the king slowly inspected each one. The sight made Maverick sick. He knew what was happening then. He knew why the portrait was destroyed.

The queen had died.

These were young mermaids that the king was inspecting for his new queen, or if their luck was bad, his new consort.

Maverick couldn’t move, even as spears pointed toward them, as the king reached forward and cupped a mermaid’s breast and tested it in his palm. Even from where Maverick hovered, he could see the disgusted shiver of the mermaid as she attempted to force herself to remain still.

“Too small.” The king waved her away. Her shoulders lowered in relief as she moved back a touch. But the king saw the movement and his hand shot out and gripped her neck, closing her gills. The angry snarl on the king’s face made the whole room freeze. “Don’t you dare be glad I didn’t choose you.” He motioned with one hand as he lifted the mermaid up, so she was forced to meet his gaze. “Guards,” He verbally barked, “Toss this one in the brothel.” He threw her down to the floor causing her head to smack with a loud thud.

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“No! Please!” The mermaid gasped a breath from her now free gills. “Not the brothel! I’ll do anything you want! Please, my king!” She swam up a little, her hands moving to the feathered fins that held the king’s manhood. “Please, I can please you. Please!”

But the king smacked her again, making her head whip to the side.

“Stop!” Maverick’s roar echoed around them. His anger was a living volcano in his chest, and it was ready to explode.

The king turned toward him with a disinterested grimace. “Who are you to challenge me?” He left the poor mermaid and swam toward Maverick and Nautilus.

The guards moved in closer and pressed their spears against Maverick’s throat, but Maverick didn’t look away from the king. Only when the king was close, did he wave away the guards from Maverick.

“I am Maverick. Former king’s guard. A widower. Father to a slain fry.” Maverick motioned slowly, methodically, as he moved closer to the king. “And your death.”

Maverick released his grip on the harpoon in his hand shooting it at the king, but he wasn’t king for nothing. He was fucking fast. He dodged Maverick’s blow and snatched a spear from a nearby guard.

“Bold of you to assume you could kill me that easily.” The king boasted. He moved the spear into a backhanded grip and stabbed at Maverick. It sliced a long line down his tail and sliced off part of his tail fin. But Maverick twisted and reaimed his harpoon and shot it toward the king.

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This time it sank into the king's back, poking out his front pec. It wasn't fatal. Just hurt like hell. Maverick yanked it out and spun, waiting for the king's next attack. But that's when he saw the several guards on Nautilus.

The spear.

Maverick tried to swim closer, his hand outstretched trying to prevent the strike. But just as the spear sank down into Nautilus' chest, another spear sank into Maverick's arm.

"No!" Maverick tried to bellow, but the pain of his own wound snatched the water from his lungs.

"Pathetic." The king mocked. "Your only back up dead so quickly."

Maverick panted with pain, both his physical wounds but his mental as he saw Nautilus freeze at the strike. He tried to struggle. But as the spear was yanked out it pulled with it his friend's life essence. It clouded the water around him with his blood.

"No." Maverick choked out. Tears leaked from his eyes again. Before the righteous rage overtook him. "No." This time it was harder. A command, not a plea.

"No? What are you going to do? Bleed on me?" The king waved him away as if to let the guards take him, but Maverick beat his tail, shooting forward. His rage giving him strength.

The king didn't expect the sudden spring, barely getting his arms up as Maverick drove his harpoon into the king's chest. The king blinked. Stunned. His mouth open as if seeking some words to explain what just happened. But the only thing the king found was pain. Pain and blood.

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Maverick twisted the harpoon. The king let out a strangled sound as his hands found Maverick's forearms. He blinked once more before a gloss fell over the life that once filled his black eyes.

The king was dead. His blood leaked into the seawater around them. A morbid stain to the opulence around them. Maverick still held the harpoon in the king's heart as his gills worked hard to gulp in water. It didn't matter that Maverick's hand was shaking as he gripped the murder weapon. It didn't matter that more and more eyes fell upon him. The only thing that mattered was the king that ordered his wife's and son's life was now dead. Just like they were.

Maverick hurt everywhere. Inside and out. Wounds. Gashes. Slices. The damned hole in his shoulder. They all adorned his scaled skin. He had fought hard. But those didn't hurt as much as his chest did. His heart felt so heavy. At what cost? Nautilus was dead. His family still all dead. Just one more life he crushed in his fist.

He yanked out the harpoon from the king's body, pulling with it a dark still beating heart. It quivered for a few more pumps, polluting the water around it with blood, before it relaxed. As if sighing with relief.

The king's body dropped, lifeless, from Maverick's hands. Falling almost neatly into his corrupt throne. One made of the bones of his enemies. Now the king fell to their same fate. Dead.

Maverick expected a spear to his back. He hadn't turned toward the awaiting eyes. But the longer he took, the heavier the eyes felt on his scales.

Finally, taking a deep gulp of water in, Maverick turned. His body ached from his fights. Part of his tail had been sliced off, but he managed. In front of him hovered, mermaids. So many mermaids. Not a merman among them. When his eyes fell to the front most mermaid, she was an

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elder. Her hair floated in white braids around her wrinkled face before she allowed her body to sink to the floor and practiced a low bow.

One by one, each mermaid followed the first's lead. Maverick was unsure what to do. He didn't expect anything other than a spear to his chest after killing the king, but this was odd. He didn't know how to react. But as his eyes fell to the lifeless body of his friend, tears welled and mixed with the blood-tinged water around him.

"My king," The elderly mermaid gestured as she rose up to her full height. She was slight of frame, but her energy gave her an almost powerful visage.

But Maverick shook his head. He was no king. He was a murderer. He was a widower. He had no son. No friends. He felt adrift in the ocean current. All he could think of to sign was, "I am no one."

The elder swam closer to him and placed a wrinkled hand on his uninjured hand on his shoulder. "You are more king than that," She gestured to the old king's body, "monster ever was."

That was why he needed to die. But did it make Maverick any better than the dead king? He looked down at his hands. The blood had already washed away. His sins were no longer visible. But they were still there. Still taunting him. He had killed the king out of vengeance. It was no better than the king himself. But if he could turn back time, would he choose something else? Maverick didn't think so. But then he heard the slight cries of the infant from earlier. It made him look up and noticed the small form that now clung to the elder mermaid's hair. The fry's tail swished from side to side highlighting his red and silver coloring, a stark contrast to the elder's white hair.

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The color of the fry was so similar to his own son it clogged his throat with grief. Maverick could almost feel his little hands gripping his hair during the day. It was an instinct for their young to cling to their keeper as to not be swept away by a strong current. Maverick missed him so much. Part of him wanted to reach out and touch the fry that seemed so similar.

“This fry is now orphaned.” The elder motioned, “and you are our new king. Whether you believe it or not. You will give our kingdom a new chance at life and dignity.”

Orphaned. Maverick winced at the word. He met those deep black eyes of the child. They were thoughtful. Almost as deep as the deepest of oceans.

“I can’t be your king.” Maverick couldn’t look away from the child. The way his head tilted at Maverick’s words.

“Then will you raise the next king?” The elder gently pulled the fry from her hair and held him out in her gnarled hands. “Teach him what it means to be a good merman? Teach him that mermaids are not something to be used. That blood is not to be spilled without cause?”

Maverick nodded before he could stop himself. A small part of himself, thought that adopting this child was a slap in the face of his own dead son. But the larger part, his heart, knew this fry needed a father. Just as Maverick needed his son.

A slight smile broke across the fry’s chubby face as he reached out and swam toward Maverick. His hands finding their purchase in Maverick’s hair and settling beside his ear. Safe.

“What is this fry’s name?” Maverick’s hands trembled slightly as he asked the elder mermaid.

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“He does not have one yet. His mother died soon after his birth and his father,” The mermaid gestured toward the body on the throne, “was busy.”

“Then I shall name you Atticus.”

From rocky beginnings, a true ruler was born. With his new father at his side Atticus will rule the seas with a kind and just hand. Their name went down in history as a turning point for the good of merfolk kind.