

LEAVE ME ALONE

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Another boat full of fishermen had died.

Well, they used the word lost, but after the third boat disappeared everyone came to realise that lost was just a more positive way of saying dead. There's hope in the word lost. By repeating it you can hold on to the fact that they might return, might arrive at the dock, tie the boat up and empty their nets with hundreds of fish. The boy knew after the first boat hadn't returned that something was wrong. It was the indiscernible feeling in his belly, like a sixth sense. A week before the next ship was scheduled to leave, a man washed up on the shore by the dock. There was a stump where his arm was supposed to be and shreds of clothes hugged his wrinkled body.

"A mermaid!" The man screamed. "A murderous mermaid!"

So that's what the people went with - a mermaid with sharp nails and serrated teeth hid somewhere beneath the water with a craving for flesh. As information passed from mouth to mouth, the story began to evolve. The mermaid, wicked with bright red hair, had plucked the nails off the fishermen and watched them squirm before she swallowed them whole. The mermaid, with scales the colour of green moss, had held them underwater so long they tore the skin off their necks in desperation. The stories grew and grew, until no one stepped foot near the water, not even to fish.

Ribs were beginning to show. The land seemed to sense the cloud of death that hung above the village, the fruit and vegetables began to rot. A curse had settled over them, threading its fingers through everything good.

The boy wasn't scared of the mermaid. *It wasn't real*, he chanted to himself as he clutched a fishing rod tight in his hands. Mud splashed up to his knees, water trickled down his forehead, the bucket of bait strapped to his back kept swaying into his arm, but he was brave, he wouldn't turn around. Dirt had infected the water underneath the dock, making it hard to see any fish. After stabilising the fishing rod between his knees, he chucked some worms into the murky water. They floated on the surface then sank slowly, until the deep blue swallowed them up. No fish made a move for the bait. He chucked more worms into the water, into the bucket was almost empty, but nothing. Before he accepted defeat and left, he spied something moving slowly through the water. Grabbing his rod, he threw the line out

and waited for the fish to swim closer. Saliva flooded his mouth as he dreamed of how it would taste, how the heat would blossom in his mouth and the fish would fall apart on his tongue. He stood up to get a better hold on his rod, but as the fish finally got closer and closer, it became more obvious what it was. Floating towards him, bloated and purple in death, was a human leg.

A boat was in the water by dawn, packed with all the weapons he could find. He set sail just before everyone woke up, so he could slip away into the sea, the fog enveloping him like a hug. On his bed sat two letters, one for his sister and one for his mother, noting his absence and to not worry if he didn't come back. His sister's letter contained how to fish the best and milk the cows faster, and a stack of money was shoved in the envelope of his mother's. They were small gifts, but the boy hadn't lived very long and he had very little to show for himself.

Thick, heavy clouds weighed down the sky. As soon as the boy passed the narrow strait separating the village and the ocean, the air seemed to chill. Something like fear settled into his heart, thump-thump-thumping in his ribcage. It was far too quiet - there were no birds singing, the oppressive rain had let up, even the whistle of the wind was absent. Just the rhythm of waves pressing against the boat could be heard. The fog had gotten thicker as he rowed further, a wall of white in every direction. If he squinted hard enough, he could see a tall rock covered in moss in the distance. As he approached the rock, distressed planks of wood floated by, and when he peered down at the water a male body swept past. The boy jerked back and a shiver rolled down his spine. He knew then that he had found her.

The pain hit his ears before the boy could pinpoint where the screaming came from.

"I told you to stay away!" Her voice broke through the fog, shrill and terrifying. He continued to row, pressing through the fear.

"I'm not scared of you!" He screamed back, but his voice didn't carry the same power, and the words were lost in the sea. He rowed further and further until the boat scraped against gravel, and the fog cleared to reveal the opening of a cave. Without thinking further, the boy grabbed an axe and trudged into the mermaid's den

Light flowed in from outside the cave in small slivers only big enough to illuminate shapes, so the boy gripped the side of the cave as he walked. Slickness he hoped was mud clung to the soles of his shoes, squelching with every step he took.

“Leave!” The mermaid howled, stopping him in his tracks. “I’ll kill you!”

“What do you want?” He called out, marching forward again, trying to discard his fear once more. An orange glow pulsed from deeper in the cave, reflecting against the walls. He moved fast, almost sprinting towards the light while holding the axe high above his head.

“Go away! Go away! Go away!” Her voice echoed like the cave walls were screaming at him. The light got brighter and brighter, until the thin walls widened into a round room where the mermaid sat next to a fire. She was nothing like he expected, prettier than how the village described. She almost looked like a village girl with her brown hair and eyes, high cheekbones, and pale skin, but the green scaled tail that sat below her belly button suggested otherwise.

There were human things scattered throughout the cave: piles of mouldy clothes; books with yellowed, waterlogged pages; a shattered handheld mirror, its glass shards iced in a thick layer of mud. A putrid, rotten air that seemed unique to the cave wafted around him, sitting heavy in his lungs and clinging to every surface of the rock face. Death wafted through the cave also, it hung around like a heavy cloud and was almost palpable, a gritty feeling between the boy’s fingers. He only noticed where the smell was coming from when his eyes settled back on the mermaid.

There was a dead human girl.

Decay hadn’t left much of her. Flesh held onto her bones like a child with its teddy. She was darker than most people in the boy’s village, though it was hard to tell. She was a patchwork of skin and rotten flesh and bones. Her clothes had disintegrated leaving her bare, causing his cheeks to flush, but anything left of her that indicated her sex was covered in rot. He could only tell she was a girl in the softness of what was left, the roundness of her cheeks, the fullness of her lips.

“Stay back or I will eat you,” the mermaid screeched.

“What do you want from us?”

“Revenge.”

“Revenge? We never did anything to you!”

“You took her from me. She was mine and you took her!” The mermaid hissed and tears welled in her eyes.

“Took who?” He asked, exasperated.

“Her.”

The boy dropped his eyes back to the girl and he noticed the spear in her chest. He didn't see it before, maybe he didn't want to see it, because he recognised it. He recognized the colour of the wood because he watched men chop it down all day in the village. He recognized the dents in the metal head because he watched over his grandfather's shoulder while he worked and noticed how his mallet wasn't perfectly rounded.

“They thought I stole her, but she loved me, we loved each other. All I want is to be alone with her, finally. So leave, just leave - please leave me alone.” She cried and pressed her forehead on the girl's chest, curling her tail around her legs.

That was how the boy left them. He pushed his boat into the water and rowed it back to the village as fast as his arms could muster, never once looking behind him. The cries of the mermaid followed him, pushing him far away from the cave. He could still hear her screeching when it got quiet at night, but he never went back. No one went back. The mermaid was free to be with her lover. She curled around the bones of the girl until she died. Until their flesh rotted and melded together. Until they were finally alone.