

THE MERMAN

# CALLER

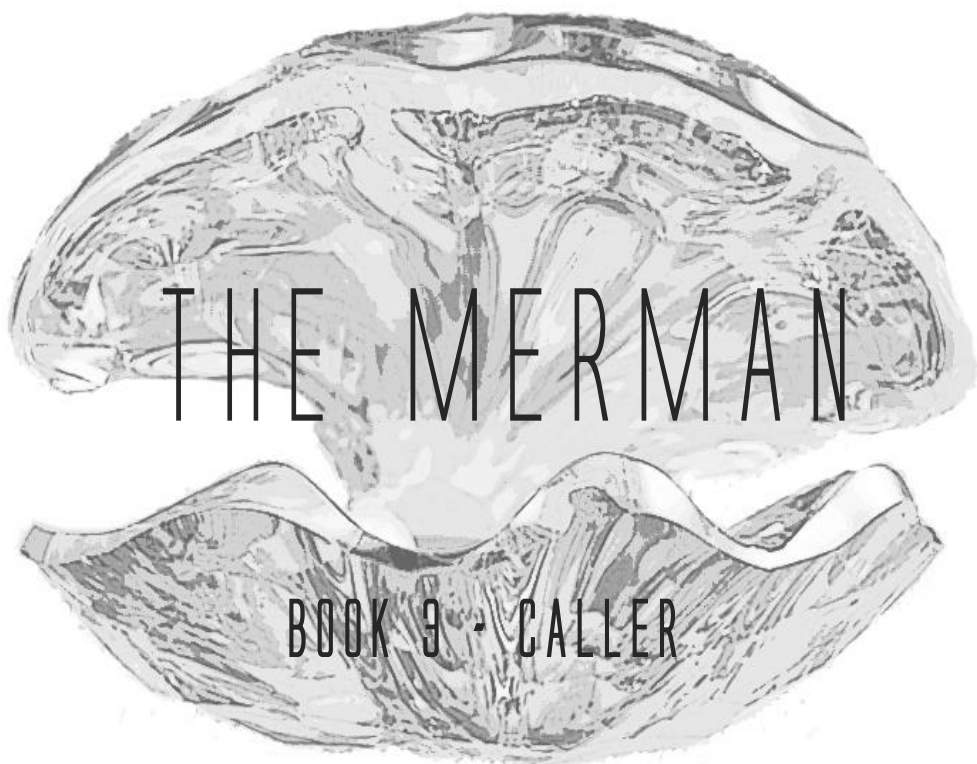
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X. ARATARE

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*Michael Ross*



# THE MERMAN

BOOK 9 - CALLER

X. ARATARE

STORY

MATHIA ARKONIEL

COVER ART

# Chapter 1



## FOOTSTEPS IN THE SAND



abriel Braven met Johnson Tims' gray gaze and wondered if the older man had seen the Mer Prince Casillus Nerion dive beneath the ocean's surface. Because if Johnson had, things were about to get very interesting.

"Johnson! I—I didn't hear you come—come out," Gabriel said lamely, gesturing to the porch where the man stood. "How long have you been standing there?"

*Watching me? Watching Casillus? Spying on us?*

Johnson Tims was a former military man-turned-professor at the mysterious and secretive Miskatonic University and, evidently, also Gabriel's grandmother's boyfriend. After all, why would the man be in a robe at 6:00 a.m. on Grace's porch unless he had spent the night? But standing there in the morning light, Johnson didn't look like a man blinded by love. Instead, his bright, inquisitive gaze was completely clear. Too clear.

*What am I thinking? That he spent the night with my grandmother to be near me? That he's seducing her so that he can find out if Mer blood still runs strong in Braven veins? That's crazy.*

Then again, Gabriel had thought believing mermen were real was crazy, too. However, not only were mermen real, he was transforming into one of them.

Johnson walked down the steps and onto the beach that spread out from the back of his grandmother's cottage in a fan of gold. The black robe he wore strained over the bulging muscles in his arms. The end of it hung to just above his knees. Gabriel guessed it wasn't Johnson's own robe by how tight it was and how little it covered. It didn't look like one of his grandmother's either, so that left it being his grandfather's, a man whom Gabriel had never met as he had died before Gabriel was born.

*Wearing a dead man's clothes? That's sort of creepy. But it's certainly better than seeing him naked.*

"I'm surprised to see you up and looking so ... *refreshed*, Gabriel," Johnson said as he stopped alongside him. "You seemed so ill at dinner last night."

*And I thought you went home after that dinner, but evidently not. We're both full of surprises.*

He had spent the night in the bathtub in Casillus' arms with water surrounding them both. That had relieved some of the weakness that now plagued Gabriel as his body transformed from human to merman. He resisted the urge to touch his sides and assure himself that his gills, which appeared when he got wet, had disappeared. If faint traces of them still remained it would only draw Johnson's attention to them, so he kept his hands down.

In some ways, the fact that Gabriel was becoming a merman was the most ridiculous thing that could have ever happened to him. He had been afraid of the sea since he was a child. His fear had started after his parents had drowned in a terrible storm on the ocean. Seemingly miraculously, Gabriel had survived the sinking of their boat by two rogue waves, but his love of the ocean had died that day along with his

parents. After their deaths, Gabriel had feared and loathed the water as much as he had formerly loved it. And then, just yesterday, Gabriel had nearly drowned *again*. This time, he had been rescued by Casillus Nerion, a prince of the Mers. Casillus had told Gabriel the truth about why he had survived drowning twice. Gabriel was a Mer, too.

Casillus explained that Gabriel's ancestors on both sides must have had Mer blood, and once combined in him, there was enough merman DNA that he was transitioning into a Mer. The change normally took place much earlier in life, but Gabriel's avoidance of the sea had delayed the transition.

Gabriel hadn't believed Casillus at first. After all, mermen did *not* exist. Like unicorns and Santa Claus, they weren't real. But Gabriel had ultimately had to accept the truth as his breathing became more and more labored out of the water and gills started appearing on his sides whenever he got wet. The physical transformation had pretty much sealed the deal as far as proof went. He was not human. Then Casillus had told him one more thing. Mers lived forever, but Gabriel would die unless he entered the water. He only had three days left on land before he had to go into the sea and transition fully into a Mer. Three days to say goodbye to all he loved and go into the ocean he still feared.

The existence of Mers and his transition into one of them had to be kept secret from humans. Only his grandmother and his best friend Corey Rudman could ever know. Gabriel hadn't had a chance to tell them yet, but Johnson, with his cold eyes and military mindset, seemed to have guessed something. At least, he *suspected* something.

*What does he suspect? What does he know?*

"Yeah, well, a good night's sleep helped," Gabriel said finally.

Johnson's slate gray gaze, which had been sweeping the water looking for something—or *someone*—turned towards him. "I wouldn't have thought sleeping in a bathtub would be that restful."

"How did you know I slept there?" Gabriel tensed. "I mean, yeah, I did—did take a bath last night and I fell asleep in the tub, but how do you know that?"

"I thought I heard the bath running last night. It woke me up,

and then I heard your voice. You must have been talking to yourself.” Johnson’s gaze was opaque.

*Talking to myself? Oh, shit, that was when I was INSISTING to Casillus that it was too intimate to speak through our bond. Why was I so stupid?*

“Yeah, I do that sometimes. Talk to myself out loud about ... about things,” Gabriel said.

Gabriel immediately shut down his mental bond with Casillus. This bond allowed them to speak to one another telepathically. He felt as though shutting it down would keep the Mer safer from Johnson somehow.

“You had a lot to talk out, then,” Johnson said.

“And you, ah, listened?” Gabriel’s mouth went dry. What had he said out loud? How much of it could Johnson make out?

Johnson dug his toes into the soft, warm sand. “You mustn’t worry. I didn’t clearly hear what you said. Just the cadence of your voice rising and falling.”

“Oh, I—I see.”

*And he heard all of this from my grandmother’s bed? For a moment, Gabriel envisioned Johnson and Grace’s bodies entwined. Gah! I have to put that image out of my mind. Then again, I was doing things with Casillus that would curl their hair and we were in the tub just down the hall, so I guess we’re even.*

Johnson continued on, “By the *length* of your conversation, I could tell that you were quite concerned about something. Is it something I could help you with?”

*Help me?* Gabriel’s gaze slid to the sea. It was beautiful and terrifying, and he had no idea how he was ever going to live in it for eternity. He wished he could talk to Casillus at that moment, but the silence was better. He was protecting the Mer.

Johnson touched Gabriel’s shoulder. “I can tell you’re troubled. You don’t have to bear this burden alone.”

For one wild moment, Gabriel considered telling him. Without Casillus there to take away his doubts and fears he suddenly felt like he

would explode. Johnson's expression was almost gentle and definitely concerned. The urge to confess was so strong that Gabriel actually opened his mouth to speak, but then he saw the coldness lurking behind Johnson's eyes. His mouth snapped shut. Revealing any of this to Johnson would be crazy. His confession would be to Corey and his grandmother, not to this ex-military man.

*The only reason I even considered telling him is because I've cut myself off from Casillus, Gabriel realized with a start. I'm alone again and I'm not thinking straight.*

Shaking himself, Gabriel said, "No, it's nothing you can help me with. It's something that I've got to deal with on my own."

*On my own ... no, I'm not on my own. Casillus is with me. He's out there. Watching. Waiting. Caring for me. And Corey and my grandmother are here for me as well. I'm not alone.* Repeating that to himself helped calm down his frantic thoughts.

"But on your own, you fell asleep in a tub full of water," Johnson pointed out.

"I—"

"You need to be more careful, Gabriel. You could *drown* doing something like that," Johnson said too casually.

Gabriel found himself stepping back. He hadn't meant to react to Johnson's words, but he couldn't help it. "Y—yeah, but I'm fine. Clearly, I didn't—I didn't *drown*."

Terror had him thinking, *He knows!*

But what did, or could, Johnson know? That Mers existed?

His mind offered, *He saw Casillus dive into the sea!*

But then his mind then offered, *He can't know Mers are real even if he did see Casillus. Casillus looks just like a normal man. Albeit, an extremely beautiful, nearly naked man who disappeared under the waves and never surfaced for air ...*

Gabriel mentally shook himself. *He can't know! He knows nothing!*

"You didn't drown *this time*," Johnson corrected quietly, but then he gave Gabriel a stern look. "And not the time with your parents

either. One would almost say that the water loves you. That or you're exceptionally lucky."

"The sea took my parents! That's not *love!*" Gabriel snapped.

"Forgive me, Gabriel," he responded. "I shouldn't have said it the way I did."

"You shouldn't have said it at all!" Gabriel shouted. His throat felt raw.

"It's just so *strange* how you survived that day when your parents did not. When *no one* should have. You were *miles* away from land. The storm was the most powerful in a *century*. I can't even imagine what the ocean must have been like. Waves as tall as buildings bearing down on you. Rain like knives hitting your skin. Yet you managed to *swim* to shore although you were just a little boy," Johnson said, and as he spoke, Gabriel remembered.

But Gabriel didn't remember the waves or rain. He remembered looking up and seeing the storm raging far, far, far above him. He was safe. The lightning that streaked the sky illuminated the water around him ... the water ... he was underwater ... being carried by tentacles like he was the most precious of treasures ...

Gabriel blinked and the memory disappeared. His gaze jerked to the sea. He expected to see the sky turning black and the waves rising and rising and rising. But the sky was clear and the sea was almost flat. It was a calm day. A beautiful day. Sweat coated his forehead and upper lip.

*That wasn't real. That couldn't be real. Casillus, I need you.* But he did not reach for the Mer. He had to keep it together and keep Casillus safe.

"Do you ever wonder about why you survived?" Johnson asked. It was more than asking, it was probing.

Gabriel's back straightened. The urge to flee flowed over him. *But where would I go? And what would he think? If he has suspicions about me, running would clearly confirm them. I have to keep calm.*

Gabriel took in a deep breath and turned back to Johnson before he said, "I've been thinking about it a lot since I've been back here." He



crossed his arms over his chest and looked out at the water once more. Casillus was out there. The sea was not as frightening as it had been now that he knew the Mer was right there. Nearly touchable. Casillus would let nothing happen to him. “Coming back here is bringing up a lot of memories. Not all of them are good.”

“The day of the storm being one of those bad memories, I’m sure,” Johnson said.

“Y—yeah, the worst.” Gabriel blinked back sudden tears. The image of his mother and father being dragged down by the boat as it sank flashed through his mind. He had dreamt of the sinking just last night. The dream had been so vivid, so real, that his sadness at their deaths was now almost as fresh to him as if they had just happened.

“Your grandmother said that you *directed* where you and your parents sailed that day,” Johnson said.

Gabriel stiffened once more, and then his head snapped towards Johnson in surprise. “She *told* you that?”

“She didn’t mean to betray a confidence. She was just so nervous about how you would feel coming back here that she *had* to talk about it. She’s been so concerned about you, Gabriel, you have no idea,” Johnson said, and Gabriel felt a wash of guilt run through him.

“There’s nothing for her to worry about,” Gabriel said almost sharply. He tightened his hold on himself.

“She told me that you blamed yourself for your parents’ deaths,” Johnson said. “Because you had picked that spot to sail to, and that spot was where the rogue waves appeared that sank the boat.”

Gabriel *had* blamed himself for that choice. The “what ifs” had haunted him for years. What if he hadn’t insisted on going out on the boat that day? What if he had told his father to pick where they sailed? What if they had sailed closer to shore like his mother had wanted? His grandmother hadn’t understood his guilt. She had assured him over and over again that it was not his fault, that he could not have known where the storm would be or where the rogue waves would appear. No one could.

*But is that true? I’m a Mer with a connection to the sea. Was I*

*sensing something out there in the depths? Did some part of me know—and yearn for—the storm to come so I could ... could see it? So I could see something miles high with tentacles ...* That thought stopped Gabriel cold. That was madness. That “it” was not real.

“I—I did choose where we went that day,” Gabriel found himself saying. “My mother wanted to sail closer to shore. She had heard a weather report that a storm might be coming, but I convinced her that we had to go out farther than she wanted. So yes, I *am* responsible for us being there when the storm came.”

“What was it about that particular spot that called to you, Gabriel?” Johnson asked. He lowered his voice as if he wanted this to be a secret just between them. “Did you *hear* something coming from there? *Feel* something? *See* something?”

*The pull. It was like a silver thread connecting me to that part of the ocean. I had to go there. At the time, it felt like nothing could have stopped me from going there. How could Johnson know about that?* Again he mentally shook himself. *He doesn't know! He's guessing.*

“I don't know,” Gabriel answered, his lips numb.

He had long tried to convince himself that it was just a childish whim that had made him pick that terrible spot that day, but some part of him had never really believed that. Now that he knew about his Mer heritage, he really didn't believe it. What if he had been *compelled* in some way? He passed a shaky hand over his suddenly damp forehead.

“What did you think at the time? What did you *feel*?” Johnson asked.

Gabriel's mouth opened and he heard himself saying, “I just felt—felt that we had to go there, because ...”

“Because?” Johnson pressed, and Gabriel could have sworn the older man was holding his breath as he awaited Gabriel's answer.

*Because something amazing was going to happen. Something amazing was waiting there. Waiting for me. Something miles high with tentacles.*

Gabriel shuddered as he remembered the tentacles rising up from the glittering depths after the boat sank. Another wash of cold sweat

broke out on his forehead and upper lip. *That thing couldn't be real*, he told himself for what felt like the millionth time. It was a monster that his oxygen-starved mind had created based on his mother's story about the Mer's Guardian. He hadn't been drawn out to that spot in the ocean because that monstrous creature was there. That was just impossible!

"Gabriel, is everything all right?" Johnson again laid one of his massive hands on Gabriel's shoulder. His thick, dark eyebrows drew together in concern.

"I—I—everything's *fine*," Gabriel got out. He was shaking and felt so ill again.

"You look rather pale. Let me help you," Johnson said. His voice was gentle, but there was a hungry expression in his eyes.

"Help me? You're the last person who could *help* me! You're the one talking about my parents! I don't want to speak about it! Can't you understand that?" Gabriel's voice was shrill. He would never share his thoughts with Johnson. The more eager the older man was to hear them, the less Gabriel wanted to reveal. He stepped away from Johnson's touch. "Why do you want to drag it all up again? What business is it of yours?"

There was a flash of disappointment, and maybe even frustration, in Johnson's eyes. "You must think it very strange that I'm asking you these questions."

"Strange?! Strange?!" Gabriel crossed his arms over his chest. "More than strange! Sadistic, actually!"

Johnson flinched. He held up one hand as if to placate Gabriel. "I assure you that the *last* thing I want to do is hurt you. I want to *help* you."

"You have a bizarre way of showing it!" Gabriel wanted to go inside. He didn't want to be there any longer, but there was something in Johnson's expression and voice that held him there despite his anger, pain and fear.

"There is a *reason* I'm asking you about all of this. A *good* reason." The older man put his hands on his hips and looked down at his feet. He was quiet for a moment, but then began to speak again.

“My last mission in the military took me to a remote jungle island.”

“I don’t care to hear a *story*—”

Johnson raised one hand again, which silenced Gabriel, and continued, “I swear you will understand my point after I’ve told you this.”

“I don’t see why I should stay a second longer with you!”

“Please,” Johnson begged. “*Please.*”

Gabriel stared for a long moment at the former military man. His temper wanted him to turn his back on Johnson, but his instincts told him to stay and listen. “All right. Fine. Tell me then.”

“Thank you,” Johnson said, letting out a relieved breath.

“Don’t thank me. Just say what you have to say,” Gabriel said sharply.

Johnson nodded. “All right. Fair enough.” He paused, apparently centering himself, and then began, “The military had a listening post on a remote Pacific island. A young man about your age, name of Kane, was stationed on the island two months before—before things went *wrong*.” Johnson’s gaze went distant as he clearly remembered his mission. “The listening post’s main purpose was to keep track of enemy vessels on the sea and intercept their messages, decode them and send them on to the mainland. And Kane was brilliant at it. He seemed to know just where our enemies’ ships were at all times, all over the globe. His colleagues joked that he had an *affinity* for water.”

Gabriel’s stomach fluttered uncertainly. A young man with an affinity for water? That sounded rather familiar. Could Kane have Mer blood, too? “Something happened to Kane?”

“Something happened to the people *around* him,” Johnson said. “I suppose something happened to him, too, but ... but I’ve always suspected that he survived somehow. I have no proof of it. Just a feeling in my gut.”

*Survived? Like how I survived drowning twice? Or something else?*

Gabriel’s back straightened. “What exactly do you think he

survived?”

“The first sign of something being wrong at the base came a month after he arrived.” Johnson crossed his arms at the wrists behind his back as if he were reporting. “Kane claimed that he was hearing signals, *music of the deep*, he later called it. No one else heard what he did. And this music, which he said he traced to the Mariana Trench ... well, it didn’t correspond to any human activity.”

“So he was tracking fish? Whales? Sharks?” Gabriel’s voice sounded high and fake to his own ears. He had a terrible feeling he knew what Kane had been hearing: the Mer. And he hadn’t been hearing them over the machines, but from inside his own head.

“No, Gabriel, other people would have heard it too if it was anything like that,” Johnson said, his expression stony. “Kane became obsessed with this music of the deep to the exclusion of all else.”

“So was he actually hearing something or just going crazy?” Gabriel asked.

Johnson did not answer his question. Instead, he said, “They found Kane destroying all of the listening equipment one night. He was smashing it to bits with a crowbar. He was *raving* that the music wasn’t ours to listen to, that we were violating *its* domain and that we must leave the sea to *it*.” Johnson swallowed. Kane’s words obviously still unsettled him to this day. “They locked him up, still screaming. He never stopped screaming. The last message from the base informed us of these developments and then ... it went *dark*.”

“You mean the base stopped reporting?” Gabriel asked. He was surprised that his voice sounded so even, because his heart was pounding in his chest even though he did not know exactly why.

*The sea is “its”? The Mers? But then wouldn’t “it” be plural? Them? They? Not “it”. And why would the Mers attack a military base anyways? Why not just contact Kane and take him into the water if he was transitioning?*

“I was sent in to find out what had happened to the base.” Johnson’s head lifted and his eyes were bleak. “The station was utterly destroyed. More than destroyed. It was simply *gone*.”

*That doesn't sound like the Mers. I can't believe Casillus or anyone related to him would order such a thing, or even be able to do such a thing.*

Gabriel blinked. "How could a whole station be gone?"

"The only clue about what had happened there was this bizarre *compaction*, an extreme *compression*, of the land." Johnson didn't even blink as he explained, "The compression started far offshore. We followed it from the seabed to the sandy beach and then up to the asphalted area around the base. The ground looked as if something impossibly heavy had *slid* up from the sea, crushed the station beneath its bulk, and then dragged the remains into the deep."

*Something miles high with tentacles.* Another shudder ran through Gabriel.

"Did you ever figure out what happened?" Gabriel asked faintly.

Johnson's gray eyes gleamed. "I know what caused it, yes. I found reports of it appearing throughout the ages written in esoteric books. Visions of it drawn on crumbling, ancient pages. Horrified whispers of its existence passed down through generations. But no one in the military would believe me!" Johnson's hands shook. He looked down at them as if surprised to find his hands clenched in front of him. He released his grip and took a deep breath. "But the people at Miskatonic *did*. They had come across this *thing* too, and others, many others, like it or worse. Studying things like this is the university's purpose."

Gabriel didn't ask what the *thing* was. His mouth wouldn't form the words. Instead, he asked, "Is that why you're a professor at Miskatonic now and not in the military any longer?"

"Yes, Gabriel." Johnson was standing at attention as if he were in military uniform still and not in a robe several sizes too small. "You see, I found that the *best* place I could be to protect this country—all of humanity, actually—was at Miskatonic, *not* in the military."

*Protect humanity? From the Mers? Or that thing ...*

"Why are you telling me this, Johnson?" Gabriel asked, remembering why Johnson had supposedly begun this story in the first

place, which was to explain his interest in Gabriel's parents' deaths.

"I told you this because I *know* that there are things in this world, *forces*, that few people would understand, let alone believe," Johnson said. His gaze was piercing.

"I still don't see what that has to do with me or how my parents died," Gabriel lied.

"Just that I would *believe* you, Gabriel, if you told me that you were *compelled* to go to that particular spot in the ocean that day," Johnson said, his voice almost pleading. "I wouldn't tell you that you were *mistaken* or ... *mad*, like so many others would, if you confessed that to me. I would understand. I would try to help you."

A chill ran through Gabriel. He felt so exposed, so vulnerable. "It seems like you've already made up your mind about what happened that day, Johnson."

"Perhaps I have. But I would like to hear it from you," Johnson paused as if he expected Gabriel to say something further, but Gabriel just stared silently back at him. "Since coming to Ocean Side has anything happened? Have you felt *compelled* like you did that day your parents died? Are there *any* strange things happening to you again?" Johnson was so still.

*Strange things? Oh, Johnson, you don't know the half of it.*

After three beats of silence where all Gabriel could hear was his own frantic heartbeat, he lied, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I think you do."

"I'm sorry about Kane and the people at the base, but that has nothing—"

"The thing that destroyed the base ... Miskatonic has been tracking it for decades," Johnson said.

"Tracking ..." Gabriel's voice dropped off. He found that he was hardly breathing as he waited for Johnson to say more.

"Yes, *tracking*. What drew me most to overseeing the settlement excavation, Gabriel, was that the tracking records showed that *it* had been here before. *It* had been exactly where your boat went down that

day. Exactly where your parents died,” Johnson said calmly. “*It was there that day.*”

Gabriel felt like he was going to throw up or fall to the ground and curl into a ball. He did not believe in monsters. He now believed in Mers, but not things miles high with tentacles.

“I—I’ve got to go,” Gabriel mumbled through numb lips.

“I’ll be here when you’re ready to talk,” Johnson said, obviously confident that Gabriel would be back. “And whatever you say, I will believe you.”

Gabriel turned on his heel and fled for the interior of the house. His heart was beating so hard that it felt like it wanted to escape from his chest. The bitter taste of fear coated the back of his throat. His feet slipped on the porch’s top step and he almost fell, but he caught himself at the last moment by grabbing the railing. His momentum though spun him halfway around, and he caught sight of Johnson behind him once more.

The older man wasn’t rushing after him. He wasn’t even looking at Gabriel. Instead, he was staring down at the beach. Specifically, he was gazing at the footsteps Casillus had left in the sand, the footsteps that led into the sea, but did not come back out of it.