

THE MERMAN

TRANSFORMATION

1



X. ARATARE

A RAYTHE REIGN PUBLICATION

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The Merman - Book 1: Transformation

Gabriel Braven is destined for a great love, but he does not believe it.

His parents had a storybook romance ... until a freak ocean storm robbed them of their lives and left him alone to be raised by his grandmother. With their deaths, Gabriel's adoration for the sea turned to fear, and his belief in happy-ever-afters turned to dust. Gabriel vowed to never set foot in the ocean again and to never believe in love.

Gabriel kept that promise until after his junior year of college, when he and his best friend Corey return to the ocean-side town where he lost his parents in order to help his grandmother. Gabriel's bitter fear of the water has only grown, along with his belief that it is his destiny to be forever alone.

Corey is determined to prove Gabriel wrong. It is his mission that summer for Gabriel to find love on the beach ... and maybe do some swimming, too. Gabriel will settle for simply not reliving his parents' deaths every time he hears the rush and shush of the waves.

Both may get their wish as Gabriel discovers the hidden past of the Bravens and the sea sends *someone amazing* to his aid.

THE MERMAN

BOOK 1: TRANSFORMATION
A RAYTHE REIGN NOVEL

Based on the novel The Sea by X. Aratare

Story by X. Aratare

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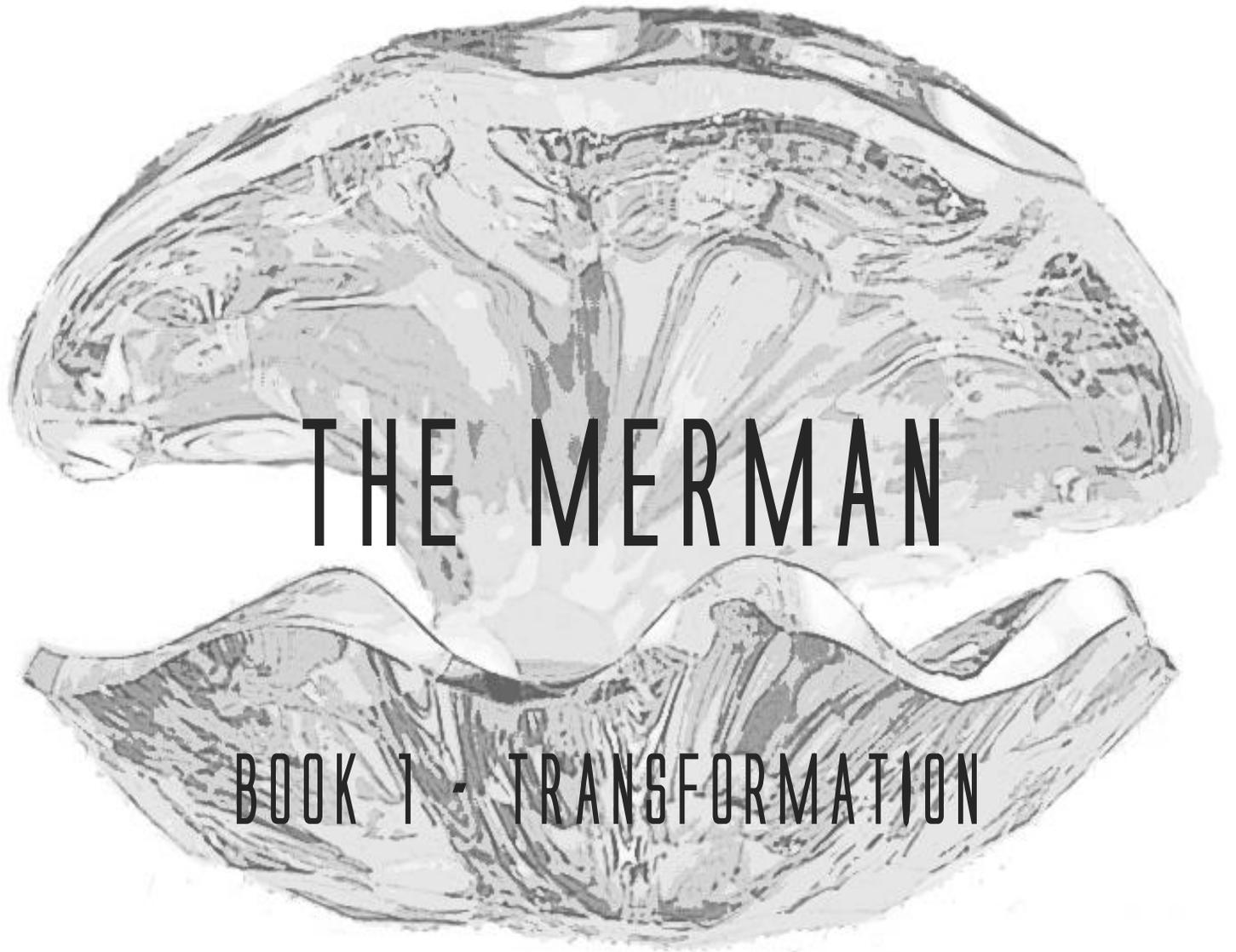
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THE MERMAN

BOOK 1 - TRANSFORMATION

X. ARATARE

STORY

MATHIA ARKONIEL

COVER ART

Chapter 1



LIGHTS IN THE DEEP

Twelve years ago ...

“We’re going sailing today, right?” Nine-year-old Gabriel Braven couldn’t quite keep the slightest plea from his voice as he spoke to his parents. The need to get out on the water when they went to his grandmother’s cottage was always strong, but on this visit it was almost overwhelming.

Something is going to happen. Something amazing. Those two thoughts chased each other through his head like rambunctious squirrels. There was no concrete reason for feeling this way. He just felt it, like he felt the warmth of the sun shining through the kitchen windows in his grandmother’s cottage.

His mother and father exchanged smiles over the tops of their coffee cups. His father John Braven reached over and ruffled Gabriel’s black hair. He was handsome and strong with deeply tanned limbs even though summer had just begun.

“Eager to get out on the water, Gabriel?” he asked.

“Totally!” Gabriel replied and nodded, a smile stretching from ear to ear. He could hear the surf through the open back door that led out onto his grandmother’s porch. The ocean was just fifty feet away. It called to him like a siren song.

His family came to Ocean Side every summer to stay with his grandmother and sail the boat

that his father kept there. Her cottage sat on an isolated point, surrounded on three sides by the sea. Every moment Gabriel could, he spent out on the water or in it. The sea was in his blood.

"I don't know, Gabriel. We had a long drive yesterday. Maybe we should just stay on land for now and rest. Will my water baby wither away if we don't sail?" His mother Kathleen's green eyes sparkled as she teased him.

"Not a *baby*, Mom." He scrapped his fork through his scrambled eggs. They were as yellow and bright as the sunny kitchen. He gazed out the back door, almost as if he were considering making a run for it. He just had to get out on the boat today. Going in the water near the beach was good, but he knew he had to feel deep water beneath him. He wouldn't feel *right* without it.

"Don't tease him any more, you two. He's been practically quivering to get on the boat since you got here yesterday," his grandmother Grace said from her spot in front of the sink. She was already cleaning the dishes even though breakfast had just ended. Gabriel knew that she hated being idle and was always cleaning, cooking or working on something. She was running for councilwoman of Ocean Side, and he was sure she would win and then clean up the town, too.

"He's nine. He quivers at lots of things." John winked at his son.

"You're forty-two and you're just the same," Grace said with a smile. "What's your excuse?"

His father flushed and lowered his head with a rueful smile on his lips. "You're right, Mom. I'm dying to get out there myself. Let's go."

A rush of relief went through Gabriel. *Something is going to happen. Something amazing.*

"I already packed a cooler with sandwiches and drinks. All we have to do is grab it off the back porch," Kathleen said. "C'mon, kiddo."

"You mean you were planning on us going out all along?" Gabriel let out a shocked laugh.

His mother tipped back her head and laughed. "And have you and your father sulking all day if we didn't? I think not."

"You're the best, Mom!"

"I try." Her chair scraped across the floor as she stood up.

"Have fun. I'll be sure to have a big dinner ready for my sailors when you come back," Grace called.

Gabriel launched himself to his feet and ran out onto the back porch. The scent of salt and the sound of gulls calling to one another as they wheeled overhead enveloped him. The breeze off the ocean was cool, which was a relief from the superheated air. Even though it was only 10 a.m., he already knew the day was going to be blisteringly hot.

"Not a cloud in the sky," his father said as he stepped out onto the porch beside Gabriel. "Perfect sailing weather."

"We're going to go out real far today, right, Dad?" Gabriel asked. Now that he was actually looking at the ocean, it felt like there was a string attached to the center of his chest and the other end was being held by an invisible hand in the depths of the ocean.

Something is going to happen. Something amazing.

"Real far. You pick the direction and we'll take off for it." His father squeezed his shoulder.

"I've already decided where we're going to go," Gabriel said softly.

"Really?" His father's brow furrowed.

Gabriel found himself lifting one hand up. The string seemed to move from his chest to the

tip of his pointer finger. His hand wavered in the air before it moved a few degrees off center. “There. That’s where we have to go.”

The place he was pointing to looked no different from where they were standing than anywhere else on the horizon, but Gabriel *knew* that was where they had to go. That’s where the *something* was. He nodded to himself.

“Okay, kiddo. We’ll go *there*. Wherever there is!” His father laughed.

Gabriel didn’t join in the laughter. He felt strangely calm now that it had been decided and there was nothing left to get in the way.

“Is there something you see out there, Gabriel?” His mother noticed his fixed stare at the special place.

“I don’t know. I just feel ...” He paused. “I feel like we’ll *find* something there. Something important.”

Something amazing.

His mother surveyed the sky. “The radio is reporting bad weather brewing, but it certainly doesn’t look like it. We should stay close to shore though, just in case.”

“No!” The word burst from Gabriel’s lips before he could help himself.

His mother’s green eyes widened. “Honey?”

“Sorry, Mom. Dad said I got to pick where we go. I already picked the place, and I really, really want to go there, and I know you’ll say it’s too far!”

“Son, if you talk to your mother that way we won’t be going out at all,” John warned.

Gabriel swallowed down the sudden panic that flooded him. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

She patted his arm. “I know, honey. If it really means that much to you we’ll go. What’s a little bad weather?”

John put an arm around her shoulders and kissed her cheek. “When has the weather service been right about anything, Kate? Have you ever seen a more beautiful blue sky?”

“I think Grace is correct that you’re just as eager to get on the water as Gabriel is. They could be forecasting a hurricane and you’d want to go out in the boat ‘just for a little while.’” She grinned and kissed him back.

“Don’t you feel the same?” John asked.

Her gaze swept over to the water. The luminous smile on her face faded slightly. “I love the sea. But I love you two more.”

John’s expression went serious. “If you’re really worried, Kathleen, then we won’t go out. We could swim here.”

Gabriel’s chest seized again. What would he do if they decided not to go? He had the wild idea to try and take the boat out himself or even swim the distance. He had to get out there!

“Can we go out for just a tiny bit? We don’t have to stay out that long. Just for an hour or so? And if it looks bad, if even one cloud comes out, we’ll go in. Please?” Gabriel wheedled.

His mother relented at his puppy-dog eyes and slight lip wobble. She smiled down at him. “All right, so long as we’re all agreed that at the first sign of trouble, we go in. I’m dying to sail as much as you are, Gabriel.”

“Thanks, Mom!”

“So easy to make him happy,” John said, but he brightened, too.

She kissed him tenderly. “You look pretty happy yourself.”

He grinned. “You’re the wind beneath my ... sails.”

She laughed and playfully hit his shoulder. “I’m glad I could make both the men in my life happy.”

Gabriel just smiled at his parents and shook his head. It didn’t matter if they were doing their lovey-dovey thing. He was going out onto the ocean!

“Get the cooler, Gabriel,” John said.

“Got it.” Gabriel picked it up with two hands. It was comfortingly heavy, indicating that it was full of sandwiches and sodas.

The three of them then walked down the steps that led from the porch onto the beach. The sailboat was anchored about one hundred feet from shore. They would take the dinghy that his father kept stored under a lean-to near the water to get over to it. His father pulled the dinghy out and flipped it over, then took the cooler from Gabriel and set it securely on the bottom of the boat.

“Get in, Gabriel. You too, Kathleen. I’ll push you both out.”

Gabriel and his mother scrambled into the dinghy. His father’s bronzed arms and calves flexed as he pushed the boat out into the water with ease. Gabriel let out a whoop as soon as he heard the slap of waves against the boat’s bottom. His father vaulted into the dinghy and took up the oars. His strokes were powerful and sure as he rowed out to the white-hulled, thirty-eight foot sailboat.

His mother tossed her hair back in the breeze. It hung down to her shoulders and curled becomingly around her face like a bronze wave. His father’s gaze was fixed on her as he rowed. She smiled back at him. As much as watching them adore one another caused Gabriel to roll his eyes now, some part of him knew he would want someone to look at him exactly the same way one day in the future.

In the far future.

His father’s rowing slowed and then stopped as they reached the stern of the boat, where a steel ladder hung down. “Gabriel, go up and tie us off.”

Gabriel grabbed the end of the line that was attached to the front of the dinghy and leaped lightly up the ladder, not needing to catch his balance as the bobbing waves rocked the boat. On water, unlike on land, he was graceful and sure of himself. He tied the dinghy securely to the cleat at the top of the ladder. “All set.”

His mother went up next while his father remained below, watching to make sure that his wife safely got to the top.

“Hand me the cooler, John,” she said once she reached the last rung.

“It’s heavy. Be careful,” he warned.

She just smiled at his fussing. The muscles in her arms rippled as she easily took the cooler from him and put it on deck. John came up directly after her. He was grinning even wider than normal as he set foot on the boat. His father always tried to find the brightness in life, but he seemed to shed any concerns he had when he was on the water.

“Let’s get that anchor up, Gabriel, and take off,” John said.

None too soon, the anchor was stored in the forward compartment and the mainsail was fluttering in the wind. The colorful jib flew next, curling around the boat like an embracing arm.

The breeze filled it and the sailcloth billowed and rippled.

Gabriel raced to the bow of the boat. He had always loved riding up and down on the waves as the boat raced through the water, but this time he wanted to be on the bow so that he could feel exactly when they reached the special place. From there, he would be able to see everything. His father took his place behind the wheel while his mother finished putting their cooler down below in the cabin.

“Which direction again, Gabe?” his father called.

Gabriel faced forward. The sea seemed to stretch out before them endlessly. His right arm lifted and unerringly went to a spot that looked indistinguishable from the rest of the horizon. With his father’s laughter ringing in his ears at his certainty, the boat began to make its way to Gabriel’s chosen spot.

They had been sailing for about an hour when his mother joined Gabriel at the bow. She sat down behind him, spreading her legs to either side so he could snuggle between them and rest his head against her chest. He felt too old to be cuddled, but he loved the smell of her violet-scented perfume, plus they could both hold on to the railing that way, so he allowed it. She kissed his head above his right ear.

“I wish Corey could be here,” Gabriel said, meaning Corey Rudman, his best friend. The big curly-haired redhead was always laughing and forcing Gabriel out of his shell. Corey had taken the shy and uncertain Gabriel under his wing when they were just five, and they had been inseparable ever since.

“I know, but his parents already planned a trip for them out West this summer.”

“He didn’t want to go, though! He wanted to come with *us*,” Gabriel said sullenly.

She let out a soft laugh. “Corey wants to be wherever you are, Gabe, and vice versa. That’s what being best friends is all about.”

“Yeah, I guess. I just know he’d love Grandma and everything.”

“Next time we’ll bring him along.” They sat quietly for a moment before his mother asked, “Have I ever told you about the Mers and their Guardian that are supposed to haunt these waters?”

Gabriel’s forehead furrowed. “Mers?”

“*Mermen* and *mermaids*,” she whispered conspiratorially.

“Mermen - they’re not real!”

“Are you so sure?” she asked, and he could hear the impish smile in her voice.

“Okay, Mom. Tell me about them then,” Gabriel challenged.

“Well, anyone who has lived around here any length of time has seen strange things in the water at least once,” she said.

“I haven’t!”

“There’s still time for you yet,” she laughed. “But one of the very strangest things that are seen are the Mers. People swear to have glimpsed beautiful naked men and women swimming far out at sea. They only appear on the clearest of days or most moonless of nights,” she said.

“And how does the Guardian come into this?”

“They’re protected by the Guardian. For you see, if the Mers are ever attacked, the Guardian rises up from the deep to save them,” she explained.

“Who would want to hurt them?”

“Their beauty is supposed to drive people mad, to make them do terrible things that they otherwise wouldn’t do,” she said.

“And what does the Guardian look like?” Gabriel asked. “I’m guessing it’s not beautiful?”

She stroked his hair back from his forehead. “No, it’s not. Those who have seen it and survived can only speak of something miles high with tentacles.”

Gabriel felt a strange chill go down his spine. “Miles high with tentacles, huh?”

“Yes, that can grab the unwary like ... *this!*” She immediately began to tickle his ribs.

“MOM!” Gabriel cried out through his laughter. He squirmed around to face her and began to tickle her back. She collapsed helplessly when he got to her sides and arms. She was red-faced and gasping before he finally relented.

“Ah, enough, enough!” she pleaded.

“That’s what you get for telling me about a monster, Mom,” he said.

“I suppose so,” she said. Her expression went thoughtful. “People really do claim to have seen the Mers. I thought I saw one too, once. Staring at me right back.”

“Really? Where, Mom? Around here? What did you do?” Gabriel asked.

She opened her mouth to answer, but then her gaze fixed on something over his shoulder. That was when he heard the crack of lightning. He whipped around. The formerly cloudless horizon had filled with a welling line of black clouds. The slow, silky waves changed to choppy swells. His mother scrambled to her feet and helped him up.

“John!” she cried. Her face had gone chalk white.

“I see it!” he yelled back. His father was already white-knuckling the wheel. “We’ve got to turn around. Get back to shore *now!*”

“Where did the storm come from?” Gabriel crouch-walked back to the stern, holding on to the railing as tightly as he could. The boat had begun to buck up and down. “It was sunny!”

“The ocean can turn on a dime, Gabriel,” his mother said. Her expression was grim. She quickly joined his father behind the wheel.

That was when Gabriel felt it. They were at the spot. He wavered where he stood. Something was beneath them. Something far below.

This is where we were meant to come.

His mother’s voice, high and tight, broke him out of his reverie. “John, let’s get the motor on and the sails down. I’ll take over here.” She gestured towards the wheel.

His father nodded tightly. He stopped to cup Gabriel’s cheek, probably thinking the strange expression on his face was fear. “It’s going to be all right, Gabe. Don’t worry. We’re going to be fine. We’ll keep ahead of the storm. I’ll get the sails. Why don’t you turn the engine on?”

But the storm was already upon them. A line of darkness crossed over the boat. Gabriel watched as the sun was snuffed out. The wind nearly blew him over as he stumbled towards where the controls for the motor were. The line holding the dinghy snapped and the little boat floated several yards away before being swamped by a wave and disappearing below the surface. Lightning crackled above them. Thunder suddenly boomed, and Gabriel felt the vibration in his chest.

His father had untied the line and was winching the jib closed. The muscles in his arms and legs stood out as he used all of his strength against the power of the wind. Gabriel tried turning the key to get the engine to start, but nothing happened.

“Mom, Dad, it’s not turning over!”

His father turned to come help him, but his mother waved him off.

“John, get the mainsail down first! Then we can deal with the engine!” Kathleen cried.

The wind was making the mainsail snap violently, and there was now an ominous tilt to the boat. Gabriel had to hang on to one of the cleats to stop from tumbling into the sea.

“Damn!” John jumped up and headed towards the mast.

Gabriel was watching his father with anxious eyes when he glimpsed something huge and black rising up from the ocean in front of them. He heard his mother scream for his father. His father turned and saw the rogue wave. There was nothing they could do. They couldn’t get out of the way. His father didn’t even have time to get back to them. The massive wave blotted out Gabriel’s ability to think. And then his father, his mother, and the boat were all gone.

He was in the water.

It was amazingly quiet underneath the waves. The thunder was muted. The lightning that ripped across the sky wasn’t as bright. Everything was peaceful. Calm. Gabriel could see the boat floating above him, only it wasn’t quite right. The mast was snapped in the middle, hanging on by a few thin strands of fiberglass. It should have been pointing at the sky, but was now straining towards the bottom of the ocean. The boat had capsized. For one moment, he thought of just staying where he was. It felt so much safer under the water. But then his lungs began to ache. He had to surface. He had to face the storm.

He swam towards the lightning-streaked sky. Gasping as he broke the surface, Gabriel frantically looked around for his parents. His eyes stung from the salt water. He blinked them clear. Where were his mother and father? He grabbed hold of the boat’s barnacle-encrusted bottom. The sharp barnacles sliced through his palms, but his blood was quickly washed away by the sea. Lightning crackled across the sky. Another round of thunder reverberated in his chest.

“MOM! DAD!”

His head was again pushed beneath the ocean’s surface by another wave, not as big as the one that had capsized the boat, but powerful all the same. His eyes popped open underwater. He looked around him trying to see his parents’ bodies in the dimness. He thought he saw a flash of white, maybe an arm or a leg, about twenty feet away. And there was something else, something deep below him.

Lights? A submarine? No, it’s too big. Many colors, not just white. So deep below ...

The lights were red and blue and green and yellow and purple. They were distant, yet for some reason he felt the insane urge to try and swim down to them. But his lungs were already burning again. Strangely, so were his sides. They burned and itched. Gabriel raced to the surface for air. He gulped down oxygen greedily. The burning sensation in his lungs eased, but his sides still felt odd.

He turned to face where he had seen the flash of a limb. However, the slate gray sea showed nothing but foaming, storm-churned water.

“MOM! DAD! Where are you?” Gabriel’s voice was whipped back to him by the wind.

That was when he caught sight of his mother. She was on the opposite side of the boat. Her hair was plastered to her face like seaweed and her green eyes were so wide they swallowed everything else.

“Gabe! Oh, my God! Hold on to the boat! Don’t let go!” she cried.

Air trapped in the cabin must have been keeping the boat afloat. Pelting rain suddenly started coming down on them in torrents. The drops stung like acid on the backs of his hands as he stretched them over the bottom of the boat. Barnacles cut into the soft inner skin of his arms.

“Where’s Dad?” he shouted at her. He couldn’t see his strong, handsome father anywhere.

His mother’s head swiveled around. A look of panic flooded her features.

“John?” she cried out. “JOHN?”

But no one responded.

The waves lashed them from all sides. Gabriel’s grip on the boat was slipping, but he doggedly held on. A large wave lifted the boat, letting them see more clearly all around them. That was when he caught sight of his father.

“There! There he is, Mom!” Gabriel pointed towards his father. His father’s body was bobbing up and down on the waves. He didn’t appear to be moving on his own. “I’ll go get him!”

“No, Gabriel! Stay here!” she ordered. “I’m going to get your father. And then we’ll swim back to you. We’ll come back to you.”

“But—”

“NO!” She looked wild then. “Gabriel, stay with the boat. No matter what, you stay with the boat!”

She stared at him until he nodded his agreement. Every part of him was fighting against it.

“I love you, Gabriel.” She said the words as if she were trying to imprint them on him.

“I love you, too, Mom.” His voice sounded hollow.

She cast one last look at him and then she let go of the boat and swam out after his father. He watched as she swam with sure and steady strokes towards him even against the wildness of the sea. She would get to his father. She would swim them both back to the boat. Then they would all figure out a way to get back to shore. It would be all right. Everything would be all right.

Sea spray lifted off of the ocean’s surface and splashed into his eyes. He lost sight of his mother and father, but when his vision cleared he saw something else. It was another rogue wave. A wall of black water, ten times his height, was bearing down towards him. The wave was already breaking at the top. White foam frothed at the tip as the wave began to collapse.

His hands slid away from the boat’s slowly sinking bottom. The wave smashed down on top of him, sending him spiraling into the depths, far too deep to make it back to the surface before his lungs gave out. He barely was able to escape being snagged by the boat on its way down to the ocean’s distant floor.

He looked around for his parents, but there was nothing left but water and the lights. His parents were gone and he knew that they were dead. He felt it inside of him, and the grief was too huge to grasp. He looked up and couldn’t see the surface. He tried to take a few strokes upwards, but his lungs were already screaming for air and his arms and legs felt leaden. His sides were burning like a knife was being punched through his skin again and again.

I’m drowning, he thought, and was surprised at how numb he was to that fact.

Black spots began to dance before his eyes. In a moment his mouth was going to open, and he was going to try and draw in air that wasn’t there whether he wanted it to happen or not. Water was going to rush past his lips and flood his lungs. He would spasm and there would be pain and

panic. It had already happened to his parents. It would happen to him.

The lights below him dimmed slightly, as if something impossibly large had passed in front of them. In what he thought would be his last conscious moment, he looked down once more. He thought he saw something reaching up towards him. It was long and sinuous. He knew he must be hallucinating, because what caught ahold of him, what began to draw him to the surface and from there towards shore, appeared to be a gigantic tentacle. The tentacle was attached to something miles high swimming below him in the ocean's murky depths.

Much later, when he awoke alone on the beach next to the old Morse place, a mile and a half from his grandmother's cottage and somehow still alive, he would tell himself that monsters didn't exist. Like Mers and their Guardian, such things were not real. But part of him would know the truth even as he clung to the lie.