



THE MERMAN

BOOK 2 - ACCEPTANCE

X. ARATARE

STORY

MATHIA ARKONIEL

COVER ART

Chapter 1



DISBELIEF

Gabriel Braven stared at the spot where Casillus Nerion had disappeared beneath the waves. There was nothing to show that the beautiful man had ever been there, had showed Gabriel impossible things like gills and webbed fingers, had even rescued Gabriel from death in a watery cave in the first place. But the sea was like that. It didn't show anything at all when it had swallowed people up whole. Gabriel had known that all too well ever since his parents' deaths, when their boat had been capsized by a rogue wave when he was just a child. Gabriel had inexplicably survived the sinking. He had vague, dream-like memories of *something* miles high with tentacles taking him back to shore, but he didn't believe they were real memories.

Is Casillus even real or is he like that monster that I dreamed saved me? After all, Casillus said he's a Mer. A real, live merman! But he also claimed I am, too. That I am "transitioning" or whatever he called it.

Gabriel brought up his right hand before his face and spread his fingers wide. No webbing. He let out a relieved gust of air and dropped his hand back down to his side, but that movement had his wet shirt brushing against his skin, against his sides. Something moved just over his ribs. Something opened and closed, fluttered. Like gills.

No! Gabriel shook his head violently. *I'm not a Mer! I'm human! This is all crazy! Absolutely insane!* But he didn't lift up his shirt to check if there really was something there.

In a daze, Gabriel turned away from the sea and started walking back to his grandmother's house. He knew his grandmother Grace, his best friend Corey Rudman, and Professor Johnson Tims, a professor from Miskatonic University who was running a nearby archeological dig, were all waiting on him for dinner. He had no idea how he was going to be able to act normally around them after this. Because one of two things had happened to him. One possibility was that he had really been saved by a merman and might be a merman himself. Or there was the second possibility, which was that he was really and truly crazy.

Gabriel rubbed his mouth with one hand. The fluttering on his sides continued, but there was no way in Hell he was going to look to see if, like Casillus, he had four slit-like gills on either side of his ribcage. Seeing would be believing and he couldn't believe. He just couldn't.

They shouldn't even be there anatomically speaking! The ribs are like a hard suitcase around the organs. That is the last place gills should be. Wouldn't it make more logical sense if the gills were on my neck?

Gabriel clamped his hand over his mouth to stop hysterical laughter from erupting out of him. His wet shirt stuck to his right side at that moment, and the gills—*no, not gills!*—pushed against the clingy damp material. Gabriel glanced down for a brief second and saw the *rippling* they were causing. He jerked his head up, trying to convince himself that the movement had been caused by an unfelt breeze.

He told himself that the lack of oxygen to his brain from the near drowning had caused him to hallucinate the whole thing. He must have managed to get himself out of the cave somehow and imagined the rest. But Casillus had seemed so real! As real as Corey, his grandmother, or anyone else he had ever met. And Gabriel could still *feel* him out in the water, keeping pace with Gabriel on land. Watching. Waiting.

The dream I had felt real, too, and I know that was just a dream. Yet Casillus' touch was exactly like the man in the dream's.

He had dreamt two nights ago of a lover. A merman lover, if he was being completely honest with himself. He had dreamt of making love underwater to someone that *felt* just like Casillus.

If Corey heard even a sentence of these crazy thoughts he would be saying that this is what happens when someone closes themselves off from love: they go crazy!

As his feet pounded against the sand and his grandmother's cottage grew nearer, Gabriel felt the familiar breathlessness he had been experiencing over the past year return and increase.

It didn't use to be "normal." I used to be really fit. But now it's like I'm breathing in molasses. His increased difficulty breathing had to have come from the near drowning. His lungs were strained from that. It had nothing to do with ...

Gabriel, you cannot stay on land. The transition has begun. It will not stop.

... anything like that. Nothing at all. He was a Mer? His family had Mer blood? Ridiculous!

If you stay here, you will die.

And that was even crazier! It was always the *ocean* that had spelled death, not dry *land*. His lungs started to hurt as he made it up the dune that lead to the front of his grandmother's cottage. His sides were throbbing. Every time his wet shirt brushed against them they burned, as if something—*the gills, no, not gills!*—was being irritated by the constant shift of material over them. He slowed to a walk and then a crawl as he climbed up the stairs to the front porch.

He leaned on the porch's railing, bending over it as he took in deep breaths, but he still wasn't getting in enough air. His lungs felt like they were filled with sand. Hands shaking, he placed his palms over where the gills would be if such things were real. He felt something move beneath them. He jerked his hands away. His own body was alien to him all of the sudden. He

covered his face with his hands.

Am I crazy? Is it possible for crazy to feel this real?

“Gabriel?” His grandmother’s voice came from inside through the screen door. A warm light shone down the hallway from the kitchen. “Is that you, sweetie?”

“Uh, yeah, Grandma.” Gabriel brought his hands down from his face even as sweat suddenly started peppering his upper lip and forehead. Panic fluttered in his chest. His grandmother couldn’t see him like this. He was wet. He was sandy. He might have gills! No, he couldn’t have gills. He couldn’t! But just being wet and sandy alone would raise questions about him getting into the water that he didn’t want to answer, that he simply *couldn’t* answer.

“Well, what are you doing out there? Come on in! Johnson will be here any moment,” she called out gaily.

He could smell steaks sizzling. The sound of his grandmother chopping something, maybe onions and tomatoes to be roasted, and the quieter shush of the waves washed over him.

“Yeah, Gabe, grab a brew and come sit down with us!” Corey called out as well.

“Y—yeah. In a minute. I’m all ... uh, sweaty. I’m just going to grab a quick shower and I’ll be right down.” Gabriel darted inside and then ran directly up the stairs to the bathroom.

He shut the door tightly behind him and sagged against the wall opposite the sink. The lights were off, but even in the windowless room he could see a bare outline of himself in the mirror from the light that streamed through the crack under the bottom of the door. His left hand slowly moved up to the light switch.

Just turn it on. I can’t keep standing here in the dark. What am I afraid of? A mirror? Myself? Gabriel swallowed. He could still feel the phantom press of whatever it was on his sides against his palms. He shook his head. *I don’t have to look at myself at all. Not that there will be anything to see. I’ll throw off my clothes and get in the shower. Wash off the salt. Then get dry. Everything will be fine.*

But he still hesitated to switch on the light. His breath came in harsh gasps.

I still don’t feel like I’m getting enough air.

A cry started to slip out of his mouth, but he immediately slammed a hand over his lips to hold it in.

Nothing’s wrong. Nothing at all. Just switch on the light. Don’t look in the mirror.

He flipped on the light, but he didn’t honor his promise not to look in the mirror. He couldn’t help himself. He couldn’t look away. He had to see. He wasn’t sure what he expected—or feared—to see. But when he saw his eyes looking back at him in the stark glass, all hopes that he would look no different after his experiences that day were lost. He stumbled over to the sink. His eyes looked *wrong*. His eyes looked like Casillus’ had: an iris larger than a human’s with a pupil that was far more dilated, leaving only a slender ring of color around the edge. He held his right eye open further and just stared.

Not normal. Not human.

“Oh, my God, what am I going to do?” Gabriel whispered.

There was a knock at the door. Gabriel jumped and clutched at the sink. His heart hammered in his chest and it took him a moment to catch his very shallow breath.

“Hey, Gabe, are you okay?” Corey asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” But Gabriel knew that he didn’t sound fine. Instead, his voice was high and brittle.

“Really?” Corey sounded about as convinced as Gabriel felt. “I can tell something is up with you. Seriously, open the door. You can’t hide from me in there.”

“I’m—I’m showering, Corey,” Gabriel said.

“Since when are you shy?” Corey asked.

He wasn’t. Living in tight quarters in the dorm room hadn’t allowed for real privacy, not that he was particularly modest in any event. But the changes to his eyes made seeing Corey at that moment impossible. If Corey saw him and noticed something wrong then this would all be real. And it simply could not be real. Gabriel would not allow it.

“It sounds like you’re actually curious to see me this time.” Gabriel gave out a shaky laugh.

“You’re cute, don’t get me wrong, but I like the curvier variety of human,” Corey retorted.

Gabriel closed his eyes. *Human? No, Corey, I’m not even that.*

“I just wanted to hand you this extra beer I picked up,” Corey said. “But if you don’t have any need for it, I’ll just drink it myself.”

Alcohol sounded perfect right then. “Give it here.”

Gabriel cracked open the door and Corey stuck one of his pudgy arms in. There was an ice cold Corona in his hand. Gabriel grabbed it and took a deep swallow. He let out a groan of pleasure. His throat suddenly wasn’t as tight as the alcohol flowed down. He rested the cold bottle against his hot forehead.

“So are you really okay?” Corey asked. “You sound a little ... *off.*”

“I’m—I’m good.” Gabriel laid his forehead against the door as he quietly shook.

“Did something happen on the beach? You didn’t try to go into the water again, did you? Save another drowning person?”

Gabriel stifled another inappropriate laugh. *Another drowning person? This time it was me.*

“I didn’t save anyone today,” Gabriel said faintly. *Casillus did.*

“I think there’s a rule that you can only save two people a week,” Corey chuckled. There was a slight pause before he said in a more serious tone, “If you’re suddenly ... ah, *not* good, I’m here, you know?”

Gabriel swallowed, realizing that his best friend thought his odd behavior came from being upset about his parents. “Y—yeah, I know. That means a lot, Corey.”

“Well, anything I can do, man. Seriously. I can only imagine how hard it is being back here and stuff. You’re being a real trooper.”

Gabriel just nodded even though Corey couldn’t see him. His throat had closed up. He felt sick for lying. *I can’t show Corey this. I can’t show anyone!*

“I’ll be downstairs in a second, Corey. Leave me some steak,” Gabriel said weakly.

“No problem!”

Gabriel's heart hurt as he listened to Corey pad away. He ripped off his clothes and turned on the shower. He was sticky with salt. He wanted to wash that off at least. Then he froze, half-in, half-out of the water.

Should I risk getting even wetter? The gills might stay longer. The gills ...

Gabriel threw himself into the shower, determined not to continue that thought and even more determined not to consider it further. His skin had been feeling increasingly tight and dry, but as soon as water poured over his body the tightness went away. He let out a sigh and allowed his head to tilt back into the spray. His eyelids slid closed. At first the normal darkness appeared behind his eyelids, but suddenly he thought he saw a flash of light. His forehead furrowed. He opened his eyes to see what it was and the cream tiled wall swam before his vision. The light from the wall sconces above the sink was a steady glow.

Must have been nothing.

He relished the warm stream of water running down his face, throat, chest, and stomach, trickling down the length of his cock. The pleasant heat relaxed his muscles and his lungs. But still he was careful not to let his arms brush his sides.

His eyes slid closed again, and this time instead of the normal black tinged with red he saw a murky blue, like moonlight streaming through water. His breath froze. He was definitely "seeing" something. There were motes drifting through patches of moonlight and down towards the sea floor far below him. He felt his head turn and saw a distant light from shore. How he knew that way was towards shore was a mystery to him, but he was sure it was.

Those are the lights from Grandma's house.

Gabriel? Casillus' warm voice asked. Are you with me?

Gabriel's eyelids flew open. He stumbled forward as the world seemed to spin and reform back into the bathroom shower. He caught himself from falling forward onto his face just in time by throwing out one hand towards the wall.

What the hell is happening to me?

He turned off the water and staggered out of the tub. He toweled off quickly, continuing to be careful not to let his palms touch the skin along his sides. But even so he felt a fluttering, felt the skin moving where it shouldn't. Panic rippled through him. He gathered up his clothes and raced across the hallway into his bedroom and quickly shut the door behind him. He could already hear voices and laughter from down below.

I just need to be with people. All of this—this weirdness—will stop if I'm not by myself.

He pulled on the first random clothes that he found in his suitcase as he hadn't unpacked yet. He had a feeling he was wearing all mismatched things, which would make him look more like Corey than like his more conservatively dressing self, but he didn't care. He just wanted everything to be covered. Especially his sides. He refused to look down at his chest at all. As soon as he had a shirt on, some of the tension bled out of his body. He sank down on his bed for a minute, trying to compose himself. He had to act normally once he made it downstairs.

Can I do that?

He let out a soft laugh and ran his fingers through his damp locks, arranging them. He felt the kalish shift against the hollow of his throat. His fingers skimmed over the top of it. The

shell was cool and smooth under his fingertips. He slipped the kalish beneath his T-shirt at the same time as his gaze fell on the jewelry box he had found in the basement. The box was on the floor tucked up against the wall opposite him. He stilled.

Samuel Braven called his wife's lover a "thing." A "creature." He also described him as naked, kind of like Casillus was. A scrap of cloth wrapped around his hips hardly qualifies as clothes.

Gabriel slid off the bed and onto his knees in front of the box. His right hand hesitated over the lid. The journal was inside. He could show it to his grandmother. Maybe it would jog her memory. She would be able to tell him that Tabatha's lover was a local fisherman or something. Not a Mer.

Gabriel, can you hear me? Casillus' voice ghosted through his mind again. It was faint. Are you all right? I sense such fear and confusion in you. There is no need for either. Come to me now and I can assist you.

Gabriel ignored the voice even though it was kind and warm and a part of him wanted to respond back to it. But he wouldn't! Because that voice would drag him over into insanity, or further into insanity. He wasn't sure anymore which it was. He would have to believe impossible things, and he just couldn't do it. For a moment, he thought of the unnamed protagonist of his own story, who had sacrificed his mind, and then his life, to love a Mer. Was he having some kind of bizarre break with reality like his character had had?

But the gills on my sides are real ... NO! There are no gills! There are no mermen! I refuse to believe!

Shaking, Gabriel decided the best way to block out this craziness was to join the others in the dining room. He yanked open the jewelry box and grabbed the journal. He would show it to his grandmother. Gabriel got off his knees and hustled downstairs, determined to forget everything that had happened that day in the sea.