

Echoes Of The Abyss: Tides of Destiny

by Ryssa Elyse

Embark on a riveting journey of family secrets and royal intrigue in this captivating tale of triplets separated at birth. When two siblings discover the existence of their long-lost brother, who is now the heir to an underwater kingdom, a compelling question arises: should the throne be shared amongst the triplets or is there a true rightful heir waiting to claim their destiny? Who will claim the throne, and who will be left adrift in the depths of a forgotten realm?

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Episode 1: Sweet Nothings

The Murphy family had been planning their vacation for months! There was no scenario that existed, in which Ben Murphy, was allowing a few crabs to run him and his family off from this beach.

“Shoo! Get on somewhere! We’ll give it back in a few hou-” cutting Ben off, a crab clamped down on his toe. “OWE! Oh shit, oh shit! Hurry, Liv! Help me out over here!”

Using all of her self control to stifle a hearty laugh, Olivia Murphy sat the babies down in the chair to her right. Using the umbrella they’d pack for shade, she lined the end of it up with the crab’s center. Reeling back and letting go, Olivia knocked the crab back into the waters. Dusting her shoulders off for dramatics, she planted and opened the umbrella, providing shade for the little ones.

“Maybe don’t try kicking a crab while you’re wearing flip flops, love. I mean seriously, I told you not to wear those things here anyway, but no. Now look at you-Big Toe Ben!” Finally tossing her self control out the window, Olivia couldn’t help but toss her head back while releasing her build up laughter at her husband.

“I book this thing, fund this thing, and even clear the way-literally! And this is how you show the appreciation, huh? Well, how about next time, you clear the crabs, *lov-*”. Being cut off once again, Ben can’t help but startle from the sudden flash of a camera.

“No you didn’t. Olivia! This is supposed to be a family vacation! *Our* family vacation! Seriously? You brought your phone down to the beach with us?”

“Sure did! And I’m glad, too! Wouldn’t want to miss such precious moments like these, would we?”

Ben sets the last baby down with the others and continues to rub his toe, muttering under his breath.

“Now what should I caption our first memorable vacay moment? Hmm....’Big Toe Ben, what an attraction!’”

“Come here!”

Taking off with a mischievous grin on his face, Ben chases Olivia in the hopes of getting to her before she can actually post anything to the internet, or worse- their group chat! Just last week, Ben had pulled a prank on Olivia in which he had managed to fit his rather muscular body into their outdoor trashcan and wait. Once Olivia had opened the lid to dump the bag she carried in, he'd leapt out and scared the living daylights out of her! The picture he'd posted to their friend group chat had everyone laughing for several days. Big Toe Ben would probably turn into a damn meme if he didn't catch her in time.

Stumbling into her, Ben makes the two of them tumble down into the sand. Dusting what he can off of his face, he opens his eyes.

“Are you okay? What the heck was that ‘Liv? Why the sudden stop? Hey, do you hear me? What happened?” Jostling around, Ben shuffles his hands through the nearby sand. “Was it another crab-“

“Where are the kids?”

Following her line of sight, Ben freezes.

“WHERE ARE THE KIDS, BEN?!” Trembling, grasping her head, and frantically searching around, she notices there's no other people on the beach. How long have they been alone out here? Now that she thinks of it, she doesn't recall them passing anyone on the way down either. Shuffling through the sand for her phone, she finds it, but then struggles to unlock the screen. And once she does, she just struggles even more to get her shaking hands to hit the three simple buttons needed to signal help.

“Liv...do you hear that?” Ben asks while lightly grabbing her arm, trying to catch her attention.

“Hear what?” Olivia replies.

“911, what's your emergency?”

“Is it the kids?”

"Hello? 911, what's your emergen--"

Ben moves his hand out further and grasps her phone, quickly chucking it into the water.

"What the fuck, Ben! Have you lost your damn mind?! All three of our children are missing, no one is around, and you hang up on emergency services by throwing my phone in the fucking ocean! Do you *want* to die?"

"I already have." Ben whispers, still looking out, continuously scanning the area with a distant look in his eyes.

Stunned and confused, Olivia can do nothing but stare at her husband; wondering if there are any species of crabs that may be venomous or cause hallucinations.

"Dammit Benjamin! We do *not* have time for this shit right now!" Making Olivia jump with fear, thunder rumbles the sky.

Seriously, how long have we been out here? It was just sunny as hell a minute ago. When did these clouds roll in and how did we miss them? Hell, how'd we miss the triplets disappearing?!

"We don't. There's something you need to know Olivia."

"The only thing I need to know right now Benjamin, is where the fuck our kids went!"

Pulling her around to face him, he cups her face in his hands, their noses just inches apart. Lightning flashes through the clouds and Olivia audibly gasps.

"Ben, your eyes. They're--"

Thunder shakes the air around them once again. Followed by lightning soon after, Olivia pushes herself away, lost for words at the sight in front of her and the strange, rough wet texture enveloping her face.

"I know it's a lot to take in, but if nothing else resisters for you, let it be this: there can only be one heir. Do not be fooled. Do not let them choose."

"Ben, you're scaring m--"

"Go!" Extending his hand out, now fully covered in a rich brown layer of scales with webbing between the fingers, Ben's eyes glow like the sun in the dim area. Suddenly the tide rolls in, causing Olivia to turn in an attempt to outrun it. The last thing she hears being so soft, it's like a whisper she's almost unsure she really heard before her head collides with a rock.

"Kuwalinda."

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A familiar sound awakes Olivia. A heart-warming sound. Something so gentle and pure, it seems misplaced in this cruel world. The not so gentle tap of a small hand smacking her cheek brings her out of her sleep as she gets a grasp on her surroundings. Sitting up and rubbing the side of her head, she's greeted with the chubby cheeks of her first born son, Cadence, and the dried trail of tears once running down his face. After inspecting that he was not crying because he was harmed, she picks him up, cradles him in her lap, kisses his forehead, and cleans his face while responding to all his gibberish he uses to catch her up on things.

One down, two to go!

Looking around, she sees no sight of Ben, not that she would recognize him now anyway; but suddenly she realizes she hasn't learned where the heart-warming sound is coming from. Picking Cadence up, and setting him on her hip, she trails along, following the light, airy, melody that brings joy to her heart. Standing in front of a nearby cave, she questions entering its dark inside. Once the melody starts back up though, she hesitantly steps through, her sight adjusting to the dim interior lit solely by the sun beaming through in cracks. Cadence squirms and grips her shirt tighter, unsure of what to make of the new place.

“We got this, Cadence! Don’t you want to see Lon-Lon again? She’s close, you know? Don’t you hear her singing?” Pinching Cadence’s cheek, he gives a toothless grin and hides his face in her side, giggling.

Rounding the corner, Liv exhales a sigh of relief at the sight of her youngest triplet, London, in her diaper crouched down smacking a puddle of water while singing to herself.

“London?...Lon-Lon?”

Turning, London looks at her mother with the biggest grin, still splashing the water around, her hair a wet mess.

“Whatcha doing love bug? Is your other brother with you?” Stepping closer, Olivia picks up London and places her on her unoccupied hip, while scanning the area. “A pond, huh? Leave it to the only girl, to find the craziest things in the craziest places! Haha! Come on you two, we got one more to find!”

Hitching the two crumb snatchers higher up on her hips, she turns and exits the cave. Keeping her eyes peeled for the third musketeer, Liv is completely oblivious to the form in the water Cadence mean mugs and London waves goodbye to while singing.

End Episode 1

Episode 2: The Songman

You know what's crazy? How fast babies grow up! How strong they are when they don't mean to be. And how fast they move-especially when you're not looking.

While Olivia and Ben were caught up in their love for pranking one another, one of the triplets was caught up in trying to figure out what they were hearing. London, being the curious little thing she was at only 12 months old, wiggled herself down from the chair and wobbled towards the low gentle sounds that enthralled her. Following her lead, her brothers wobbled and stumbled along behind her, thinking she was making the noise. After all, what babies don't like games that have noises, right?

Reaching the entrance to a nearby cave, the triplets came to a standstill, unsure of what to do next. London, with her toothless grin, clapped her little hands together while venturing forward, proud she'd finally found the sound but curious as to what it actually was. Treading carefully along the cave's interior, their hands reached out in front of them and along the walls for stability, the crew began to slow down, adjusting to the dim lighting around them.

Communicating through babbles and sounds, Teylu, the second born triplet, grabbed London by her arm, pulling her back behind him. Confused as to what was happening, London moved around her older brother, hoping to see what was the problem. Still adjusting to the light, she squint her eyes and slowly scanned the area in front of them. Poking her lip out in fear of how quiet it was now that the melody they'd been chasing had stopped, she grabbed Cadence's hand. Pulling her close for a hug, he gently pat her back with his chubby little hands the way mom did for them all whenever they were scared or needed comfort, and followed in line behind Teylu.

Where Cadence was the first born and cautious, Teylu was the second born and bold. They may have only been 1, but there wasn't much that scared Teylu yet so far in his life, other than the green stuff Mom put on their plates to eat sometimes. So the fact that Teylu was being careful, had the other two uncomfortable for sure! Sticking his arm out to stop the train of siblings behind him, Teylu paused, just staring ahead. After finally adjusting to their new lighting, Cadence and London finally seen it too. Floating, right at the edge of the extremely still water directly in front of them, was a man's head.

Above the surface, the head's golden eyes and curly wet hair were visible. Running across the pale skin tone of his forehead was a deeply inflicted scar that creased as he looked across the triplets faces. Taking in their features one by one, the man seen the similarities but struggled to find the differences.

Lost in thought, the man mindlessly flicked his tale, splashing some water behind him. Thunder boomed then, echoing off of the walls of the cave and startling the lot of little ones. The man in the water rose a bit more from the surface. His neck and shoulders now visible and layered in green scales, he began to sing his song again. No need for the trio to be scared and tense, he didn't like his meat tough.

Recognizing the man as the source of the sound that lead them all here, London began to smile again, letting go of Cadence's hand who took a step back, unsure what the tight feeling was in his chest. Stepping forward next to Teylu, London sang the same melody back to the man in the water. Taken by surprise, the man's eyebrows caused his scar to crease again, confusion written all over his face.

How does this landwalker sing the song of death so effortlessly? It takes many moons for my people to perfect it. Who in the depths do they have me here for?

Unsure of when the miniature land walker, or wobbler in this case, had gotten so close, the man's eyes widen. London, having no fear of the man, sits on the water's edge, splashing and laughing away, humming the same tune. Teylu, grabbing at London's arm, tried to pull her back, away from the man in the water.

Sinking back down to only half his face being exposed above the surface the man thinks. He got them here, but he didn't think there'd be 3. He was only told 2. This could be a problem. *What's the smoothest way to do the job and make the least amount of noise?*

Rolling his eyes in frustration, the man locks onto a sea shell and an idea comes to his mind. Grabbing it, the man extends his hand out to the closest boy. Unsure of the man, Teylu simply shakes his head and nervously looks back at Cadence who, undoubtedly, needs a change. The man closes his hand around the shell, his lips pressed in a fine line. He holds the shell up to his ear and pretends to be very intrigued with what he hears. This causes London to stare with her mouth hung open in awe. Even Cadence, several feet behind his younger siblings, has tuned in to what the man has now.

Putting his hand out again with the sea shell, he offers it to Teylu again. Nervously, Teylu steps forward bit by bit, building the courage to take it from the man. Upon second thought, Teylu takes a step back and quickly shakes his head no while wringing his hands in uncertainty.

Lightning strikes then, and so does the man's impatience knowing what it means. Hissing in frustration, the man lurches from the water with dripping wet webbed fingers covered in scales and in the same fluid motion, arched to his left, grabbing Teylu by the shirt and in the blink of an eye, drags him underwater with him. Cadence and London both gasp and begin to cry at the top of their lungs, their

cries barely heard over the sound of the storm. Cadence, through his tears, backs away closer to the entrance they came through, mumbling his best version of “Mama”, leaving London to cry alone while she smacks the water.

It’s uncertain how long London was left alone in the cave, or how long it was before the bubbles came up, or even when she got hold of the sea shell. But, when their mom came to get her and she was still singing the same melody, now stuck in her head, Cadence knew two things: he wasn’t a fan of his sister’s singing, and he’d have to be brave from now on. For the both of them.

End Episode 2

Episode 3: The Last Day

"Hey, have you seen my hair pick lately, Lon?!" Cadence asked, stopped in the doorway of London's bedroom.

"Um...last time I seen it, you had it on the table downstairs in the living room the other day." London replied as she faced her mirror oiling her scalp.

"Fuck...Okay, thanks." Cadence said as he adjusted the short sleeves of his black shirt. Catching a glimpse of himself in London's mirror, he wondered when he'd gotten this big. With his toned chest pushing through the fabric of his shirt and the short sleeves clinging to his broad shoulders and toned deep brown biceps, it was no wonder most people moved out of his way when he walked by- his size could be rather intimidating to those smaller than him. Brushing his beard down, he noticed the oil London was using.

"I'll give you a ride to school this morning if you oil my scalp real quick sis." Plastering on his signature dimpled, pearly white smile, he waited for her response as he brushed the other side of his beard.

Rolling her eyes and letting a soft chuckle out, she moved from her seat at the vanity. "Bet. But we're stopping for an iced coffee though! A large, too! I'm almost done with my book and I'm going to need something to keep me up this morning in Mr. Hamlet's class if I want to finish it. Lord knows that man just goes-"

"On, and on, and on. Trust me, I know. I hated having him for Mythology, too." Being taller, Cadence did his best to hunch over for his sister a bit as he sat down, so she could reach his head. Stepping up on her toes, she began to gently section his hair, oiling his scalp as she went along.

"This is really it, huh? The last day."

Looking to the right in the mirror, the twins notice their mom now standing in the doorway, her bonnet and moo-moo on and her arms crossed.

"Aw, ma. Don't be so sad. We'll still be around, you know?" London says.

"True! Plus, you can always call or text us too if you want to check in. Just because we're graduating, doesn't mean we're abandoning you." Cadence said with his head bent down at a surely uncomfortable angle.

"I'm just so proud of you two! With the cards you two were dealt...I'm just happy that you guys took school serious and I'm able to see my babies walk across that stage! You know I'm acting a fool when they call your names, right?" Olivia said with a playful evil grin on her lips.

"Now that? That would probably make me abandon you-" the sound of a heavy handed slap to the back of his head cutting him off. Playfully side eyeing his sister in the mirror, he throws his mom a small smile.

"You should mom. You've done a lot for us growing up to help us get to the point we're at. The least you should be allowed is celebration of that. Right Cade?" London says, as she, not so gently, sections another part of his hair again to oil." Wincing, he agrees.

Entering the room, Olivia steps to the twins, placing a kiss on each of their temples, she smiles at them in the mirror. "I didn't come in here to be all emotional. I'm not going to do that to you two on your last day as seniors." she says as she chuckles. "I just came to tell you that breakfast is done and in to-go boxes this morning because you guys are running late."

Simultaneously looking at the clock on the wall, the twins make eye contact in the mirror before rushing their separate ways. "Thanks mom." Cadence replies, kissing Olivia's forehead and quickly hugging her as he rushes past her to head downstairs for his plate and his pick.

After shaking her locs out, London throws her book, water bottle, and lotion in her bag before doing the same, hugging Olivia a little bit longer. "Thanks mama."

"You're welcome baby."

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Making it to her seat as the bell rings, London slides into the chair, sits her coffee down on the desk, and begins to unload her bag. Finding the page she was on in her book, she picks up reading where she left off while sipping her coffee. Interrupted by the sliding of a desk next to hers, she pulls her eyes away from the page to look at her best friend.

"It's the last day of senior year, you were late getting here, and we may never see each other again after this, except for FaceTime!" Nina wines while reaching for London's book. Pulling away, London pouts at her. "Come on, it's the last few chapters! This class is an hour long; I could totally have this done in like 20 minutes!"

"No ma'am!"

"Okay, one more chapter? Just one!" London begs her.

"What the hell are they putting in the books you read, that make you sound like such a feign?" Craning her neck to look behind herself, only to roll her eyes, London realizes the judgment is coming from none other than Arlo.

Ignoring London's annoyance, Arlo pulls up a chair to sit with the duo. "Romance. Something you would actually know something about if you decided to pick up a book too, or hell, do anything really, other than what you're doing now." London started.

Gently plucking London's book from her hands, skimming the page she was on, and giving her a small smile without breaking eye contact, Arli replies, "And what am I doing right now, beautiful?"

Though Arlo was known for being a huge flirt with the ladies, he was rarely ever turned down; and when he was, he wasn't the type to persistently keep trying- unless it was London. Somehow, none of this took away from the fact that this man was fine. With long locs, a strong jawline, and a body built from hours practicing football, it was no wonder London was unable to look away from the way his perfect teeth chewed on his toothpick, or the way his chestnut brown eyes never left hers. Still, she stood on what she said.

"Maybe if you spent as much time studying as you do messing around, you wouldn't have got your shit rocked yesterday!" London said as she snatched her book back from his hands.

"Daaayyummm! You didn't have to come for him like that Lon, sheesh!" Nina says, crossing her legs and adjusting her skirt.

"One, I didn't get my shit rocked. They were in a mutually open relationship and dude just didn't like that his woman was more open. Two, I have been studying. The only answer I can't seem to find, is if you're going to the Senior bonfire tonight on the beach or not." Arlo says, fiddling with his hoodie string as he awaits her reply.

"Bonfire?" London says in confusing, looking between the two.

"Yeah, apparently it's tradition. Every year, on the last day of school, all the seniors meet up at the beach for a bonfire as one last get together. Say goodbyes, make last chance connections, maybe smoke a little..." Nina contributes, while putting her two fingers to her lips to imitate smoking. Smiling to keep from laughing too loudly, London crosses her arms in thought.

"I wasn't aware, but I don't think I've got anything major to do tonight. I could definitely go. What time we talking?"

"Everyone's been saying around 7 or 8." Nina says, reaching for London's iced coffee, taking the lid off, and taking a sip before replacing it and returning it to its spot.

"Bet, I'm down!" London replied excitedly.

"Then so am I." Arlo says, with a wink to London, before swiveling his chair back under the nearby desk and disappearing into the group of other sports players in the corner of the class.

"Like you had a choice, Lon!" Nina jokes. "You were going, even if I had to drag your ass down there!" Nina says, while getting up to move her desk back. "And you, and you, and you, you're gonna love meee!" Nina theatrically sings to London before returning to her normal seat, making the dynamic duo laugh.

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Sliding into the seat next to Soraya, Cadence kisses her cheek and sets her coffee down in front of her, before resting his arm on the back of her chair and sticking his pick in his hair. "Mornin', love!"

Sipping her coffee and smiling so hard that her dimples show, she returns his energy. "Good morning, handsome!" Leaning into his chest, she adjusts her uniform shirt, pulls her phone out and starts to show him the funny videos she'd found online while waiting for him this morning. Right on cue, as usual every morning, August comes up to talk about the most recent game.

"You seen that weak ass pass 37 made the other night, man!" August asks while he plops down at the table.

"Yeah, man. Told you not to bet on him. 13 is where it's at! Look at his stats! Yeah, he recently got over that injury, but look how hard he came back during game time! He's not to be messed with man. I tried to tell you!" Cadence says while mindlessly flinging one of Soraya's natural curls.

"Bud time, got it. Y'all know when y'all get to talking sports, it's like a whole other language to me, babe." Soraya says with a laugh while pulling her earbuds out and her playlist up.

"My bad, Sora. I promise I won't be long today. I just need some pointers for the next game from ya boy over here!" August jokes as he pats Cadence's shoulder.

"Sora, I promise, you have my undivided attention once this fool is gone." Cadence says with a kick to August's leg. Crossing his heart and raising his hands in surrender, August agrees.

"You guys are fine. I've got some art I've got to finish anyway. A little music won't hurt my inspiration. We're good, I promise." Sora says extending her arm out to August for a fist bump.

"See man, why can't you just be cool, like her?" August says with a laugh. Getting a stern look from Cadence, he fixes his face soon after.

"Anyway, screw the game right now, are y'all going to the bonfire?" August asks, leaning forward with his arms crossed on the table top.

Looking at Soraya, who has paused while putting in her second earbud, Cadence and her make eye contact.

"Bonfire?" the two ask at the same time.

"Yeah, it's supposed to be some senior tradition type shit in the beach. Everybody meets up for one last kick back before we all inevitably start the damn rat race. Supposed to be lit, from what I've heard." August says, pulling out a pack of sunflower seeds to snack on from his bag.

"Hmm...interesting. Never heard of it. What do you think babe, you want to go?" Cadence asks.

"Sure! I don't have any plans or anything later and my sketches aren't due until next week. Sounds fun, to me!" Sora says, lighting up from the excitement of the new plans.

"We'll be there then, bro. What time is this thing anyway?" Cadence asks as he slides the pack of sunflower seeds closer and pours some in his hands before returning the bag.

"I've heard it starts around 7:30pm, but it's also a Friday and we're all seniors so I'm assuming it could start anywhere from 7 or later to be honest bro." August says, as he offers the pack to Soraya before packing them away after receiving her head shake for an answer.

"Cool. I can pick Sora up at 6:30, then swing by and grab you by 7 if you want a lift." Cadence offers before he pops a few seeds in his mouth.

"That's cool with me bro. Sounds like a plan." August says as he reaches his hand across the table to dab Cadence up.

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End episode 3

Episode 4: Cheese !

Pulling his shirt from his body to allow a breeze to kiss his skin underneath, Cadence ascended the steps to the house, two at a time, before knocking on the door at 6:25pm. Finding himself listening to the buzzing of the insects this late in the evening, he was startled at the abrupt opening of the front door. "The Murphy boy!"

Turning to see Soraya's father in the doorway with his arms held open in a welcoming stance, Cadence laughed, giving the man his best smile. "How ya doing this evening, Mr. Talle?" Cadence asked, extending his arm out to shake the man's hand. "Nonsense, son! Bring it in! You're dating my daughter, dammit! I've got to hug the young man who's keeping my princess out of my pockets, come on now! Come here!", Mr. Talle joked while waking Cade over.

Stepping closer to Sora's dad, the two men dabbed and hugged, heavily patting each other's backs while laughing. Releasing the embrace, Mr. Talle gripped Cade's shoulders while really taking him in. "Congratulations on graduating, young man! And with a full ride football scholarship too?" Whistling, he lets Cadence's shoulders go, placing his hands on his hips. "Now that's impressive!"

"Thanks Mr. Talle. It wasn't easy, I can tell you that much for sure." Cade replies, crossing his hands at his front.

"Babe! You're early!" Sora yells in excitement. Skipping down the stairs in her yellow swimsuit and orange cover up, she locks her arms around Cade's neck and kisses his cheek.

"Hey beautiful." Cadence replies while hugging Sora. "I know, right? Getting both Lon and myself out the door and here on time? I need to buy a scratch off or something!" Laughing along with the guys, Sora reaches over to hug her father. "We won't be long, dad. I should be back no later than 10, I know the rules." Hugging his daughter back, he kisses her forehead before letting her go. "I'm sure if you're going to be with this line backer of a gentleman and his tempered twin, you'll be just fine. But remem-"

"No later than ten, don't consume anything I didn't see rolled or poured or that I left unattended, and if needed, remember that hands are rated E for everyone. I know, I know. You've raised me right, I've got this! The rock giant behind me is just my personal body guard, Dad."

Laughing, Sora looks to Cadence with pride.

"I'll see you two youngsters later; enjoy yourselves, now! And again, congratulations young man. Keep up that hard work!"

"Oh yeah! Hey Dad, can I borrow \$20?" Playfully side eyeing Sora, Mr. Talle pulls his wallet out while turning away from the two, only to look back at them hesitantly. Playfully, he slaps some cash into her hands and locks eyes with Cadence.

"Seriously, son. Keep up the hard work. Please, brother, please!" Wiping his forehead of the imaginary sweat the ordeal has caused him, he retracts into his home after waving the couple off for the night.

"I told you my dad likes you, Cade!" Sora says with a smile, while nudging his side.

"I know. It doesn't mean I don't get nervous sometimes though. I've got big shoes to fill, wanting to love you right, you know!" He says, wrapping his arm over her shoulder as they head back to the car.

"Yeah? How so?"

"For starters, I'm going to have to start carrying cash apparently. And the side of town I'm from babe- we don't do that." Letting his eyes drift to his right in thought, he continues, "Not unless we're on the way to get a dime bag, anyway."

Playfully slapping his shoulder as they arrive to the Toyota Corolla, Sora slides into the car, nodding her thanks to Cadence as he holds her door open for her.

"Waddup, sis!" London says, greeting Sora from the backseat. "Hey Lon! Oh my God, your swimsuit is so cute! Where'd you get it?" Sora questions, adjusting in her seat to get a better view of the piece.

"Ross, girl! \$30! I ain't above it!" London says as she moves, posing in different positions to show off her swimsuit. With Cadence the more popular twin, people tended to notice him more, growing up. Between the two, London was the one who'd changed the most through high school though. With

puberty taking her chubby shape and replacing it with her now leaned out pear shape, it also gave her more confidence in herself. Like when she decided to take her natural curls and loc them, so that'd she'd have more time to sleep in, in the mornings. Sitting in the backseat of the car, she was very confident in how she looked in her maroon and orange swimsuit, especially knowing that she'd be out with Sora and Nina tonight, too.

Sora, with her gymnastics built physique, was toned. Very toned-like 90's low-maintenance-but-somehow-still-look-good-and-have-a-flat-tummy-kind-of-toned...yeah, like that! Seeing her in her yellow bikini made her think of Victoria Monét's shape.

Nina, on the other hand, always talking about how she needed to go on a diet, but also always talking about the latest soul food dish she'd made for dinner, was different. Sure, she had a few more pounds than she would have liked, but Nina had problems most girls their age wished they had. Where adolescence gave London hips, it gave Nina everything most of them hoped to grow into. Thinking of Nina reminded London to keep them on schedule.

"Hurry up, Cade, Damn! We've still got to pick up Nina and August." Digging through her purse, she fished for her lipgloss, applying it with the use of her phone's front camera.

"I know you're not talking, Miss 'turn around, I forgot my vape pen' looking ass", Cadence replied, while starting the car and backing out of the driveway causing Sora to hide her laughter while looking out of her passenger seat window.

"In the event this shit sucks, it's nice to know I've got something to help take the edge off." London says, taking a hit of her vape. Releasing the smoke from her mouth while scrolling through her contacts in her phone, she continues with a mutter. "Especially since Arlo's gonna be there."

Braking a little harder than he probably meant to at the stop sign, Cade makes eye contact with London in the backseat. Before he can start his speech though, London's screen lights up- her call finally being answered. "Nina! We're like 7 minutes from your place, you ready?" London asks, thankful for her friend's impeccable timing. "Just about! You and Sora already together? What y'all got on? Switch to FaceTime so I can make sure I'm not making a fool of myself real quick!" Nina says through her nervous laugh. Taking another hit from her vape, London obliges, extending her arm out to show Nina her swimsuit, and then passing the phone to Sora to showcase hers.

"Damn, y'all really pulled out all the stops tonight, huh?" Nina says through the phone in awe.

Using Nina's own words against her, London reaches for the phone back and said, "We may never see each other again after this, except for FaceTime." Eyeing London with a salty ass look on her face, Nina nods in defeat. "You're right. I'm gonna change, and by the time y'all pull up, I'll be outside."

"Go hard, or stay home! See you in a bit." London says, disconnecting. Connecting her phone to the car, the group decides on turning up to "Church" by T-Pain.

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"Aye! Waddup bro!" August says as he approaches the car in a black tee and some black swim trunks, dabbing Cade up through the window before hopping in the seat behind him. Opening the door, he sees Sora, London, and Nina already piled inside. "Ladies", he says while climbing in with the crew. Staring a little longer than he may have meant to, he can't help but notice how good Nina looks in her choice of swimwear- the black one piece hugging her hourglass frame snugly, while the mesh material of her one shoulder strap, deep neckline, and midsection left just enough to the imagination that she didn't feel too exposed.

"Hey Gus, want a hit?" London offered, passing her vape across Nina to him.

"Nah, I'm good. You know we officially start playing college football soon, I can't have that shit in my system sis. Thanks for the offer though, for sure!" August declined.

"Right fucking answer!" Cadence says from the front seat, smiling at his friend in the rearview. "We busted our asses to get where we're at man. Don't let me fuck around and show up to practice and your ass don got cut. I'm not dealing with Coach Frey by my damn self. I'll make the 2 hour drive all the way back here, just to beat your ass real personal like. Hell no, he don't want that shit, Lon!" Putting her hands up in the air in defeat, London simply replied, "Okay, I get it. Not everyone smokes. Not too much on me though big bro."

"I keep telling you, you need to stop that stuff while there's still time, sis." Cade says, taking a left onto the main road that's a straight shot down to the beach. "That shit is gonna catch up to you someday, I swear!"

"Black don't crack, Cade." London replied smartly.

"Yeah, but we still need to apply sunscreen guys. Skin isn't going to take care of itself." Sora says from the front seat, silence encompassing the car after.

"Sora, I know you're the light-skin one of the group, so I'm going to hold your hand when I tell you this, okay, babe?" Nina says, reaching her hand out to grasp Sorayah's, causing London and Gus to shake their heads.

"Here we go.." Cadence says with a smile.

"What? Just because we're Black doesn't mean we can't use protection from the damage sun rays can cause." Sora says, with her arms crossed.

"That's exactly what that means. It's like our one super power across the entire damn diaspora." August says through a hearty laugh.

Having to laugh herself, Sora simply replies, "Mm-hm. Yeah, you'll be the first of us with dark spots when we're all pushing 30, mark my words."

"Damn!" Cade says from the driver seat, causing everyone to look to what has his attention. Looking through the windshield at the parking lot at the turnout of people, it's no surprise why Cade had the reaction that he did. The entire beach is packed with seniors from end to end. Coasting trying to find a parking spot, the group takes in the scene. One side of the beach has two groups playing a pretty competitive game of volleyball, while the middle section seems to be for those interested in food, music, and the warmth of the bonfire itself. The other end of the beach, has groups sporadically placed out laughing while they smoke together.

Finally finding a spot to pull into, Cade throws the wheels in park, the group hopping out and stretching soon after.

“Let’s take a picture, guys! Our last day as seniors, our last real get together for who knows how long-let’s take a picture to remember it by. I’m not going to lie, I’m going to miss us. I’m going to miss this.” Nina says while looking around the five of them, really taking each one of them into her memory.

Throwing his arm over Nina’s shoulders, August reaches for London with his free one. “Bring it in guys. Late night get-togethers like these are definitely going to be missed. That I can agree with you on.”

“Awe! Gus-Gus!” Sora says, cupping August’s face and squishing his cheeks while laughing before tucking her arm under his and reaching for Cadence.

Smiling and huddled close together, the group poses for the timed camera-the flash capturing the last photo the group of five would ever take together.

End episode 4

Episode 5: The Calm

Looking from just below the surface of the still water, the two Mer count a total of three land walkers on the boat. Straining his ears to hear better, his ear fins twitch, causing a small trail of air bubbles to float away.

“You’re right. This won’t be nearly enough.” He confirms, his green and blue tail flicking in frustration, as he thought of an alternative. “We’ll just keep swimming, until we find another. It is the night they tend to enjoy gathering in their wrong minds, and wandering our waters like fools. We’re bound to catch more. You may take this group to yourself if you like. I can wait.” He says as he turns his head, looking at the Mer floating beside him.

“Your Majesty, I cannot.” she says, the small pink fleshy fins on the back of her tail flaring slightly in anxious alarm to his offer. “Royals feed first, that is the way. Always has been.”

“‘The way’ is what the royals make it, Niyala. And I’ve said that if you are hungry and cannot wait, that you may feed from these three first. Though I am certain that we will, I cannot guarantee how long it will be before we find a larger supply.” Awaiting her further dispute, he holds her eye contact. This wouldn’t be the first time he’s allowed his mermaids to eat before him on nights like these; but it is this particular Mer’s first time hunting with him, so he could understand her hesitancy of his kindness. It wasn’t exactly a feature their people tended to show often. “And I’ve also told you that when it is just us, that you may call me by my name, not my status.”

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath in an attempt to collect her thoughts before speaking, she is startled by the feeling of his webbed hand firmly landing on her shoulder. “Niyala...” he says, trying to comfort her in what he knows she would like to do.

Looking up again through the water’s surface, her ear fins flexing while trying to provide better sound through the reverb of the waters, she gives him one last look. A tidal wave of gratitude in her eyes, he releases her shoulder as she smiles at him, showing her pearly white fangs. “Thank you, Teylu.”

Drifting back, allowing her the space needed to collect momentum as she swims towards the boat, her soft song trails behind her in echoes. Watching her deep magenta tail sway with anticipation, he smiles

soon after when the first body plunges below. The land walker, in his claimed mind, swims closer to Niyala in awe. Placing her hand on the back of his neck in an attempt to comfort him, she maintains eye contact with him as the second and third bodies jump into the water next. Still singing her song, she reaches her right arm out towards the men, inviting them closer with a gentle smile as they make their way over to her.

Hissing as her stomach growls, she extends her claws and digs them straight into the base of the first man's neck. Moving her fingers around until she finds it, she grips the man's spine and pulls down, peeling it from his body, a rush of red painting the water around them. In an attempt to swim away, the third man, not quite close enough to her yet, heads towards the surface. Letting the spine and its previous owner go, she swims upward, grabbing the leg of the second man and pulling it free from his body with her strength before letting it drift below her.

Continuing towards the surface to the third man trying to escape, she speeds up- her majenta colored tail waving through the water at high speed. Passing the man up entirely, she breaks the surface, her body completely free from the water. Arching her body to the right, she flips herself- her tail, and all of its weight and power, smacking the man several feet back below the surface. His body twirling through the water from the impact. Niyala is on the man before he can get his bearings, smacking him with her tail again in another direction. Gasping for a breath he'll never get again, his mouth releases red into the ocean- surely from some form of internal bleeding. His chest convulses severely times before going completely still.

Approaching the man whose leg she took, Niyala wraps her tail around his throat, squeezing tightly until a soft pop is heard. Taking the eyeball that popped from his head, she pulls- severing it from its connecting veins, and pops it in her mouth, being sure he watches her with the one he has left as she chews. Before putting the man out of his misery, she gives her gratitude again, looking over her scaled shoulder with a smile.

In response, Teylu simply nods his head in approval. The sound of the man's skull being crushed to pieces by her tail muffled underwater. The blood painting their waters red.

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"Yo, Gus! Toss me one too man!" Cadence yells to August as he jogs his way to the pile of coolers full of drinks.

"What all do they have in here, anyway?" asks London as she pulls the lids from a few coolers to see what's inside.

"Looks like waters, teas, and sports drinks." Gus says, rummaging through the layers of ice.

"Ohhh! Can one of you toss a tea please?" Nina asks the two.

"I'll take a water if you guys don't mind!" Sorayah says as she sets the beach towel out on the sand near some boulders for the group to lean and gather on.

Taking their seats, the group settles in, pulling out the abundance of snacks they'd brought. Soon, plates of thick sandwiches, chips, pretzels, and fruit snacks adorn the beach blanket they all cover.

"Now *that's* what I'm talking about, a woman who knows how to make a mean sandwich!" Grinning as he plops down next to Nina, Arlo tosses a towel over his shoulder and reaches across Nina for a small bag of pretzels and a sandwich. "Now who do I owe the thanks to-" cutting off his sentence as well as his access to a sandwich, August grips the man's wrist stopping him in his tracks.

"Maybe if you asked who made the food, you could also ask if they'd mind sharing it with you." Gus says through gritted teeth, his jaw flexing in anger as he tosses the man's wrist back away from the food.

"Come on bro. You know I don't mean no harm." Arlo starts with his palms up in surrender. Letting his eyes linger over London and her swimsuit, he continues, "Besides, I thought it wasn't no fun if the homie couldn't-" Quickly making his way over the display of food, Cadence grabs the man by the collar, pinning him up against a boulder. Tightening his grip, he pulls the man up before slamming him back into the boulder again.

"First, just because we're all on the same football team come Fall, does not mean we are bros. We will never be the same. Second, I am sick and-" slamming him even harder into the boulder, Arlo grunts in pain, his brows furrowed in anger and his hands on Cade's wrists trying to release his grip from his shirt.

“very fucking tired of you blatantly disrespecting the women in my life. That shit stops now. If you think you’re talking about them like that in front of me you’re a fucking fool.” Cade finishes, staring Arlo steady in his soul.

Eying August, who is right behind Cade at the ready, Arlo clicks his tongue. “If you got a problem, let me know, ‘cause we can solve it.” August says stepping closer.

Finally able to release Cade’s grip from his shirt, Arlo stands up, squaring up to both Cade and Gus. Jumping between the guys, Nina and Sora step in, doing their best to keep them all separated.

“Calm down guys. Fighting does none of you any good given you’re all professional players come Fall.” Sora says looking between Cade and Arlo.

“Seriously though! None of you need to risk an injury or drama right now.” Nina continues. “Right, London?” she continues, looking to Lon for backup.

Taking a long drag from her vape, London looks between the three guys before letting the smoke go and nodding her head. “Thank you guys, but honestly, he’s not worth it. It’s our last kickback- we can’t let him take this from us and ruin it.” she says.

Adjusting his shirt and stretched out collar, Arlo eyes August up and down before locking onto Cade. “Next time you think you’re bad enough to get that off, I’ll put your ass down.” he says as he starts away from the group.

Grabbing the back of Cade’s shirt and stepping in front of Gus, Sora and Nina keep the guys from surely causing Arlo a great deal of pain, as he winks at London as he departs.

Turning on his heels, Cade walks up to his twin. Taking another hit of her vape and trying to salvage a small bag of chips, she prepares herself for the interrogation to surely follow.

“What the hell happened between you two that that asshole is so confident approaching you that way?” Cade starts, his arms folded across his chest awaiting an answer.

"Excuse me?" London replied while chewing, letting smoke leave her nostrils.

"Absolutely not, babe. No. I get that Lon is your sister and all, but if you're asking what she did to deserve his behavior, you better be asking all three of us, because we were all just disrespected, not just her." Sora says, stepping next to him in challenge, matching his stance.

"Right bro. I get you're pissed and have questions. Believe me, I am too." August says as he glances to Nina. "But how you're coming off ain't it bro. I doubt any of them were *asking* for that piece of shit to come around the way that he does." August says stepping closer, looking between the twins in hesitancy.

Taking deep breaths as he continues to stare his twin down, Cade finally looks away- taking notice of the damage he caused to their food. Looking back up to London, he says, "I'm going to take a walk, but something is definitely going on and we're going to talk about it eventually." Grabbing his water, he starts to walk away.

Sorayah, starting to follow behind Cade, is stopped by Gus' hand gently grabbing her arm. "It's okay, I got him. You two make sure London's good." Looking back to the twin now eating out of anger, he can't help but feel second hand embarrassment. "She really didn't deserve that." He says as he jogs to catch up to his childhood best friend.

Settling back on the beach towel, the trio of ladies does their best to straighten the mess of food up, saving what little they can. Gathering what can't be salvaged into a bag, London lets her frustrations out.

"I love my brother, I really do. But how the hell is this my fault? I didn't invite Arlo. Actually, he's the one who told me about this stupid beach party in the first place! Talking about "why's he so comfortable?" - I don't know! Why didn't you ask him that when you had him pinned up on those damn rocks?" Squeezing a half open bag of chips, the sound of the chips crushing, she lets a small muffled scream out of her chest.

"Yeah, I appreciate he defended us, but I definitely didn't appreciate what he insinuated of you, Lon." Sora starts, stacking the used plates up in her hands. "You didn't deserve that-from either one of them."

Placing the smashed sandwiches in the bag London holds, Nina agrees. "Yeah girl. I'm sorry." Placing her hand on her back, Nina rubs London's back in reassurance. "But at least we've got guy friends we know will step in for us. I got to admit, it's comforting given most of our generation moves like Arlo."

"True. But still, he didn't have to come at me like that y'all." London says, folding her legs into her chest, the cool night air getting to her.

"You know what I think we need? To go for a swim! We came all the way down here, wore our cutest pieces" Soraya says as she stands and twirls dramatically to lighten up the mood. "and haven't even put them to work yet y'all! What's up with that?"

"Speak for yourself, Sora! Some of us aren't loc'd up and strictly came to look cute!" Nina says with a laugh. "I have zero intention of my hair getting wet tonight."

Leaning over and hugging Nina, London laughs at the honesty of her friend. "I'm going to miss your honesty so much when we all go our separate ways. I swear. You're something else, Nina!"

Heading back towards the group, August jogs closer before stopping with his hands on his hips trying to catch his breath. "I forgot how long your brother's stride is. He's fast as hell when he's mad, man!" He says through pants. Sitting down next to Nina, August leans back and lays in the sand still winded.

Grabbing London's arm, Sora pulls her to get up. "Come on, Lon! It's our last day, don't leave me high and dry girl!" she wines. Groaning as she gets up, London gives in, dusting the sand from her body. "What about Nina?" London says, looking over to her friend.

"Nina never got to eat. Nina will be just fine, trust me!" Nina says as she piles chips onto the sandwich she managed to salvage from earlier.

Looking over at Sorayah and London, August says, "I don't know why she's talking in third person about herself, but I'll stay with her and make sure she's good." Placing his hand on his chest, still rising and falling rather quickly, he continues, "I'm not going anywhere soon." Laughing, Sora leads London away.

"Thanks, Gus!" They yell as they depart.

Walking along the beach, the two take in the view around them. The sound of the ocean waves softly crashing on the shore, the way the dark evening sky melts into the horizon of the water. Dragging her feet through the sand, Sora smiles, lost in her thoughts. Wrapping her arms around her torso, London hugs herself for warmth as she bites the bait.

"What?" London asks.

"Hmm?" Sora says as she turns to her friend.

"You're doing the thing." London says.

"What thing?" Sora asks in confusion.

"The thing you do when you're thinking something and you want to share it but you're hesitating." London says impatiently. "Spill it or I'm not swimming!"

Laughing, Sora looks away before speaking. "Have you noticed the thing between Gus and Nina lately, or am I tripping?" she asks.

Stopping in her tracks, London turns, gripping Sorayah's shoulders in shock. "Oh my god! You too? I thought it was just me for the longest! I mean, did you see how he couldn't take his eyes off of her in the car tonight?"

"Or how he was ready to be her knight in shining armor over the sandwiches she'd made for us tonight? Yeah. He definitely has a soft spot for Nina." Sora says with a smile.

Continuing their walk, London lets her thoughts drift. Were the signs only showing as of late? Gus and Nina had been around for the longest. They were both practically family as far as the twins were concerned. I mean, just last year, when Cadence had to get his appendix removed, Gus was the one who volunteered as their designated driver for the week- being sure to give London and Nina both rides to and from school. She'd never thought much of it, but Gus always having picked Nina up first probably meant more alone time for the two to get to know each other.

Then there was the whole mayhem with the mailbox, too! When they were first learning to drive, Gus had accidentally reversed into the Murphy's mailbox at the end of the driveway trying to avoid the ditch that was also there, while trying to meet up with the group for their weekly movie night. Knowing Olivia would be livid when she got home, Cadence had prepared himself to take the blame for his friend- only for Nina to jump in and take on the consequences alone at the last minute. Her parents had grounded her for two weeks after that.

"Who knows, Sora. Maybe one of them will finally confess something tonight. They're both strong willed, independent, and goofy!" London says with a soft laugh.

"Yeah, they would compliment each other pretty well, huh?" Sora agrees with a scrunch of her nose. "The real question is, when are you going to open up enough to invite someone in, sis?" She continues with a nudge to London's shoulder.

Completely avoiding the question, London stares out at the water before looking over at her friend. Getting a feel for London's uneasiness, Sora backs off of the topic. Taking her swimsuit cover off, she tosses it to the sand before grinning mischievously at London.

"This seems like a good enough spot. Race ya!" Sora says before taking off at full speed.

Letting her feet guide her, with a smile plastered on her face, London takes off right behind her friend- never missing a beat. Jumping over the soft waves, the water embraces them both. Stroking their arms through the water as it gets deeper, the two fully submerge themselves into its warmth. Kicking her legs for momentum, London tries to catch up to Sorayah.

Seeing her friend's form stop, she stops too, taking in their surroundings. Noticing Sora start to head towards the surface, London moves as well. Running her hands down her face in an attempt to see better, London looks around the surface for her friend- a task made difficult by the moving waters splashing her own face. Sinking back below, London tries to search for her silhouette again, which can't be too far given how close they just were.

With no success, London comes back up for air again, only to be met with a haunting high pitched scream. Frantically looking around, London panics not knowing her friend's location. Deciding where she believes the scream to have come from, she swims in that direction.

"London! LONDON!" Sora yells from somewhere close. A lot closer than what London heard before.

Continuing in the same direction, London exhales at the sight of her friend. Swimming faster, she reaches out towards Sorayah.

"Sora? It's me! I'm here! Are you okay? What happened?" London asks.

Turning towards London, her eyes wide as they could possibly be, she stared London in her soul. The waves adding an odd warmth to the chilly evening.

"Am I okay? London, are *you* okay? I thought you were dead!" She says over waves of water she spits out while reaching for London's arm under the surface.

"What? Dead? I just got a little lost, not too much on me." London says with a laugh.

Continuing to float while staring at London in disbelief and silence, Sora replies in a shaky tone, "London. This water is red."

End episode 5

Episode 6: The Storm

Taking notice of the water's odd color surrounding them, London's eyes widen too. Suddenly aware of the fact that this is the first time she hasn't been cold all night, her face scrunches and she grips Sora's arm back, the touch the only source of comfort for the two in the moment.

Turning in search of the shore, they realize they've drifted further away than they anticipated. The beach and students a distant mirage of hope.

"What the fuck...", London begins, barely able to give life to her fast moving thoughts.

Gently shaking London's arm, Sora tries her best to bring her friend back to reality, taking charge with a plan. "Lon! Stay with me, okay? We've got to figure out how to get back to shore. It's just water. We may be further away than we'd like, but the shore is still visible, so we're closer than we may actually feel, okay? There's no telling if what caused this is still around, and it's starting to get darker now. I *need* to know that I can trust you right now, sis. Our safety depends on each other right now. Are. You. With. Me?"

Starting to hyperventilate, London's eyes grow even larger. Vaguely aware of her own rapid heartbeat, she grabs her chest with one hand and pushes her weighed down locs from her face with the other.

Grabbing her friend's face between her hands before her anxiety can fully take over, Sorayah brings their foreheads together and tries to talk London down. "Lon. Give me three things. Right now, 3 things. Something you can hear, something you can see, and something you can feel."

Shaking her head in self doubt, London's breathing speeds up even more. "Sora, I.." Unable to finish her thought, her body starts to shake, a panic attack peeking around the corner.

"Three things, Lon! Now! What do you hear?"

"Water."

"And see?"

"You." London says, finally making eye contact with Sora, a sign she's coming back from the dark void trying to consume her.

"Good. One more. Give me something you can feel."

Closing her eyes and taking a shaky deep breath, London tries to think of something she can feel. Suddenly opening her eyes, her gaze locks onto Sora's hands- one holding each of London's elbows- before looking up and into Sora's eyes. Tilting her head down as though looking through the water, London opens her mouth to answer.

"My ank-"

Cut off before she can finish, London is dragged below the surface, completely snatched from Sorayah's grip. Eyes wide in disbelief, Sora now starts to hyperventilate as she stares at the empty space her friend once inhabited. Clutching her head in pure terror and panic, she screams as a hand reaches out and grips her shoulder. Turning, her fist flies in reaction, connecting with hard, wet, flesh.

"Hey, what the hell, shawty!" Gripping her wrist in one hand and rubbing his jaw with the other, Arlo looks Sorayah up and down in frustration."

"Arlo....London....she....something..." Sora stutters over the flow of the ocean.

Letting go of Sora, Arlo gestures for her to calm down with his hands.

"Deep breath. What happened?" He says, over the small waves moving between them.

Pointing at the water they float in, Sora shakes her head, unable to calm down. "Something took her. She was here, in my hands, and then something took her! What the fuck! Something took her, Arlo!"

Gently grabbing Sora's face, Arlo speaks to her slowly but stern. The bass from his voice a strange comfort in the moment.

"Go back to shore and get help. I'll find London." He says as she gently pushes her away in the direction of the shore.

"But how are you going-" she starts.

Turning back to her, his eyes darken as he cuts her train of thought off.

"Go. Get. Help."

Swallowing her words, Sora hesitates before nodding and taking off in strokes towards the shore.

Looking up towards the sky, Arlo takes a deep and steady breath before diving deep in the red below.

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"I don't know what's more overstimulating for me right now- how loud the crunch of these chips I'm eating are or your heavy breathing." Nina says as she side eyes August.

Still laying out on his back, August turns his head towards Nina, his hand on his chest in mock offense. "Well excuse the fuck out of me! Let me just-"

Continuing to stare at one another, the two freeze in a moment of awkwardness that stretches an uncomfortable amount of time before Nina gets his joke. Suddenly aware of his sarcasm, she rolls her eyes before eyeing her sandwich. "Why are you so out of breath anyway? I figured with you being an

athlete and all, you'd be in better condition than this. What gives?" she asks, placing her sandwich down on her plate.

Sitting up, August rests his arms on his knees as he's lost in thought. "If I tell you something, Nina, can I trust you to keep it between us?" Wiping her hands on a napkin, Nina turns a bit to show he has her attention.

"Gus, have I ever given you reason to think that you *can't* trust me?" she asks with a slight frown.

Letting a gentle smirk slip onto his face, Gus rests his hand on Nina's. "Never."

Scrunching her brows in confusion, Nina gives him the space and time to clarify with her silence.

Keeping his hand on her hand, he turns his gaze back to the sand. "You ever been in a situation where you were too far into looking or sounding stupid, so you had to stick with it?" Gus finally asks.

Completely caught off guard, Nina's face scrunches as she attempts to process his question. Looking back to her plate, she considers it carefully. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

Nodding his head in conformation that he heard her, Gus smiles again- so deeply that his dimples show this time. "That's why I'm out of breath." he finally says as he brings his gaze back to hers again.

Suddenly aware of the fact that he's been speaking with her just fine for the past few minutes, Nina's face heats. Thankful that her deep complexion won't betray her, she doesn't break eye contact when she says, "I...don't understand. What did you do that was stupid?"

Still holding her gaze, and wrapping her hand in his own, Gus gives it a gentle squeeze when he replies, "Waited."

Feeling the butterflies take over what space in her belly the food has not, she swallows her nerves as she builds the courage to seek the answer she needs. "For what?" She asks, eyes searching his own, anticipating what she'll find.

"Look, Nina", August starts, as he rubs the back of his neck with his free hand. "I know how I feel about you- how I've always felt about you- and I've never really acted on it before because I'm not going to lie- a man was nervous" he says through an awkward laugh, "but if we're all going our separate ways starting tomorrow, I at least need you to know-" Pressing her full lips to his, she cuts him off with a kiss, her held hand now cupping his jaw. Placing his hands on the back of her head, August kisses her back deeply before leaning back from the act and looking Nina in her eyes, his thumb stroking her cheek.

Smiling like a kid in a candy store, Nina leans into his touch and says, "Took you long en-"

"Nina! Gus!"

Breaking the embrace, the two turn to see Sora stumbling onto the shore, drenched, making her way to them....alone.

"Guys! It's London!"

Quickly getting up, Gus reaches his hand out and helps Nina to her feet as Sora approaches. "Something happened in the water!"

"What?!" The pair say simultaneously.

"Sora, where's London?" Nina asks.

Trying to catch her breath from the energy she spent swimming to shore, she answers between breaths. "There was blood..and then something...dragged her below. Arlo...searching for her now. Where's Cade?" she asks looking around.

Grabbing her cell from the items among the towel, Nina calls 911. Looking out at the last bit of the sunset kissing the surface of the water, August runs his hands through his hair in panic. "He hasn't come back, yet. When I spoke to him, he just said he wanted to walk on his own for a bit. So I came back here and that's when you two left to go swim."

"Shit! Okay, you guys wait here until help gets here and in case London comes back before then. Keep your eyes peeled for Arlo, too! I'm going to go find Cade!" Sorayah says as she sprints away through the sand, searching through the clusters of students spread out everywhere.

"Fuck.." August says as he runs his hand down his face searching the surface and listening to Nina give the operator all of the details.

"What?" Nina asks as she follows August's line of sight.

Just off in the distance, through the rolling waves and descending darkness, two silhouettes make their way through the water onto shore- one dragging the other.

"Shit..." Nina whispers with eyes wide as saucers.

"Sora! Sora! I think we got them!" Gus yells just before Sorayah could get out of earshot. Turning around, Sora sees August wave her back over as he trails behind Nina.

"Please be okay, please be okay, please be okay..." Nina prays as the three race to the scene- hearts pounding. Rounding a group of large boulders, Nina and August stop in their tracks, frozen from the sight in front of them. Quickly turning away, Gus's face morphs in confusion and disgust.

Finally catching up to the pair, Sora sprints up between them as Nina forces her phone into August's hands and ties her hair up away from her face very quickly.

Standing behind the boulders, wearing absolutely nothing but the drops of water on their skin, stands Cade and an exceptionally fit beautiful Black woman with magenta colored locs.

Eyes wide with shock and face full of rage, Sora raises her hand and points at the woman while flicking her gaze to look Cade in his eyes and, at the same time as Nina, asks, "Who the *fuck* is she?"

Episode 7

Slowly starting to turn around, Niyala's fangs show through her gritted teeth. Hearing his words, she stops before fully turning around, pissing Sorayah off even more.

"Careful, Niyala. She's woman..."

Hissing in her mind, she stays put, fighting against a rage that quickly invents new ways to end a life.

"Cade! I said who is she?" Sorayah yells as she steps closer. Reaching her hand out to grab his arm and turn him to face her, she comes up short. Looking down at her wrist, she trails the origin of the hand wrapped around it. Glaring at Niyala, Sorayah sees the quick change in her eyes, like she's seen a ghost-her facial features softening before quickly growing hard again.

Stepping forward with the same rage her friend surely feels, Nina grabs Niyala's wrist deadly tight while making eye contact with her. Through a tight lipped whisper, Nina speaks. "You keep your hands to yourself, and we'll keep ours to ourselves. Our problem's not with you." Looking the woman up and down slowly, Nina's eyes trail her exposed body. "And put some clothes on."

"Both of you! Where the hell are your clothes at anyway?" Sora agrees, still eyeing Cade lividly before glancing around the area for them.

"You dare approach him this way? Do you know who you're dealing with?" Niyala seethes, squeezing Sorayah's wrist even tighter with widened eyes.

"My fucking boyfriend!" Sora yells as she snatches her hand away, stepping closer to Niyala. "Do *you* know who the fuck *you're* dealing with?" She asks, brows pinched together.

Getting in her face, Niyala meets Sora's step forward, their faces inches apart. With the air thick with tension, Nina steps in, in an attempt to de-escalate again. Gently grabbing Sorayah's arms, she tries to get her to step away.

"Sora, your problem's not with her. *He* is who owes you loyalty. Not her." She says in a low voice as she looks over her shoulder at Niyala.

"Loyalty? He owes you *nothing*! Look how you speak to him, how you grab him however you think fit! You could never serve him the way he needs served." Niyala says with a judgmental look up and down of Sorayah. Her anger at an all time high, her thick accent shows when she says, "Jagoodadyu!"

Quickly turning around, he makes strong eye contact with Niyala, her defenses melting as she shrinks away from Sorayah.

Enough, Niyala!

Turning to gently grab her hand in his own, he looks Sorayah in her eyes and gives an empathetic smile. "I'm sorry, miss. But, I believe you have the wrong person."

"I know you're fucking lying." Nina says as she stares between him and Sora in utter shock.

"What the fuck, Cade." August says in disbelief, as he overhears the conversation, still faced away from the naked pair.

Jaw hanging open, Sora drops her hand from his, tears building up in her eyes. Looking to Niyala, she blinks them away before turning back to him and slapping him hard across his face. His head turning from the impact.

Moving quickly, Niyala steps forward again and grabs Sorayah by her neck as Sora reaches up and grabs Niyala's chin, pinching her cheeks together tightly in her hand as she glares into her eyes with a trying smile on her face. Following her lead, Nina quickly steps in and grabs Niyala by her locs, wrapping them around her hand as she cocks her other arm back to swing.

"Hey guys! I'm not about to turn around because I'm really not trying to see either of y'all naked, but I'm pretty sure I'm watching Arlo drag London to shore right now!" August yells.

Turning to see what August is referring to, Nina lets go of Niyala's hair, leaving her and Sorayah to a death stare match.

"Help! Somebody help! She's not breathing!" Arlo screams as he drags London further back from the tide, their drenched bodies making the task harder than necessary.

Kneeling next to London, Arlo leans down and adjusts his locs as he listens for her heartbeat. Leaning back up, he frantically looks around until he sees August and waves his long arms trying to get his attention. "Gus! Help me out, yo!"

Mumbling to himself, Gus moves in their direction. "It couldn't have been anyone else, huh?"

"Sora, worry about them later. We've got to help Lon." Nina says, turning back and pulling Sorayah in London's direction.

Still staring her down, Niyala slowly lowers her arm, letting go of Sorayah's throat. Accent still present, she speaks. "This isn't over. No one touches him and lives to share it. *You* will be dealt with."

"Fuck you and that ni-" Sora starts, glancing over at him rub the side of his face.

"Sora-London!" Nina says with a harder jerk of her arm, making Sora follow. Looking over her shoulder, she could have sworn she'd seen Niyala's eyes flash; but rage did strange things to a woman's vision.

Rushing over to London, Arlo, and Gus, Nina and Sora take in the scene before them. London laid out on her back, the only movement from her, forced from the chest compressions Arlo delivers at regular intervals. The adrenaline from everything that's happened tonight still pumping through her body, her friends' voices become barely audible as she stands there, mentally replaying the night's events. Cade and Gus hemming Arlo up, London being dragged below the surface of a blood red ocean, finding Cade naked with some strange woman on the beach. And now, her childhood best friend no longer breathing at her feet.

"Support her neck, but tilt her head upward." Arlo says to Gus as he adjusts his hands accordingly.

"On it." August replies.

Kneeling next to London, Nina takes her hand, tears streaming down her face. Shaking her head in disbelief and rocking herself in comfort, she speaks to her friend's still body. "Come on, Lon. Fight sis, fight! I know it's our last day, but we still gotta FaceTime, remember?" she says through a shaking, nervous voice. As a large crowd of students gather around, Sora comes back to her senses as she takes everything all in.

Looking at the faces surrounding them she notices there are students with volleyballs tucked under their arms, blunts tucked between their fingers, and cans stuffed in their hands. Classmates, neighbors, teammates, strangers. All of these concerned people, and no Cadence.

Leaning down to give London air, Arlo blows into her lungs. Waits. Repeats. Waits. Watches August adjust her neck again. When London doesn't respond, Arlo's face grows dim before he begins the compressions again, tears falling down Sorayah's face now.

"Nina called an ambulance earlier. They should be here any minute. Don't quit on her now, bro." August says. The two men making brief eye contact at the exchange.

Still kneeled next to London, Nina looks back at Sora and reaches out for her hand in comfort, tears still falling for their friend from them both. Their chests rising and falling as the weight of the world is gradually placed on their shoulders.

"Move! Move!" Jostling through the crowd, the command is heard over the gasps and murmurs of the other students. With people either making room or being pushed and pulled aside, a path is cleared for the owner of the command. "Move! That's my sister! Move!"

The approaching wail of a siren reawakening Sorayah's rage, she turns to look over her shoulder at Cade. Letting go of Nina's hand, she slowly makes her way over to the man. Glancing up at her body moving further away, Gus looks to Nina in fear.

"We don't have time, Sora!" August yells.

"Help the medics get through the crowd!" Arlo agrees, his breathing heavy with exertion from the continuous compressions.

Looking down at Sorayah as she approaches, Cade's teary-eyed face searches hers for comfort, for answers. "What happened to London, babe? What happened to my twin?"

Looking the man's face over, really taking in his features, Sorayah sees her partner of the past 3 years in a new light. A very dim one. Looking him in his eyes, she answers him, her voice void of emotion.

"Something pulled her underwater when we were swimming. Arlo came to help find her and when I got to shore to tell you-"

"Arlo?" Cade questions as he turns his attention towards the man attempting to breathe life into his twin's lungs, his expression growing dark.

"That son of a bit-" placing her hand on his chest, Sorayah stops him in his tracks. Stopping his advance, he looks to her in confusion.

"Clear the way! Medics coming through! You guys need to move back, give us some space! Back up guys! Move, move!" The emergency team says, working together to clear the surrounding area as they move closer to assess the situation around London.

"Wait....did you say 'when I got to shore'?" Cade asks, turning his attention back to Sorayah. His brows scrunched in confusion and anger.

Keeping her eyes on the medic team trying to help London, she crosses her arms over her chest and replies, "Yeah. Arlo dove to find her while I got to shore to get help and try to tell y-"

Grabbing her by her shoulders, he gently gives her a shake, his face full of pain and dread. "You left her out there? And with *him*? Why didn't you come get me? Why didn't you tell me what was going on-"

"I did, Cade, fuck! Or did your little friend already make you forget that?" Sorayah says, throwing her arms up in frustration.

Eyes widened, Cade's brows scrunch even more. "Friend? Sora, what the hell are you talking abo--"

"One, two, three!" The group of responders say as they brace and move London's body onto a stretcher, strapping her in for security. One of them places an oxygen mask to her face and begins to keep a steady rhythm as they squeeze. Hoisting her up, they begin their trek towards the ambulance. Arlo and Cadence rushing to either side of her, Nina and August stay back, comforting one another while Sorayah walks back to collect the group's things.

"Which hospital are y'all taking her to?" Arlo asks, effortlessly keeping up with the team's pace and looking over London's face.

"Davenport Memorial. We're going to try our best to get a heartbeat going on the route there. You guys are more than welcome to follow." One of the responders confirms as they connect her stretcher to their gurney.

"I'm her twin brother, I'm riding!" Cade says with a glance at Arlo as he takes hold of the doors' handles to lift himself inside.

"No can do, sir. We're going to need all of the room we can get inside to assist your sister. She's drenched and we're going to have to dry her pretty thoroughly before we can use the AED to help revive her." Another EMT says.

"Revive.." Clutching his head and looking around frantically, Arlo takes off to his car, the sand slowing him more than he'd like.

Running his hand down his face, Cade fights the shear amount of fear and stress running through his body. Looking behind him, he sees August, Nina, and Sorayah gathered a few feet away, waiting for him to inform them of the next steps. A soft hand gently pushing him aside, he turns back to see a woman with magenta colored locs and an oversized t-shirt holding London's hand as the responders hoist her into the vehicle. Dragging her line of sight from London's relaxed face, she faces Cadence.

"She will live. You need not worry." Niyala says as she gazes up at Cadence, taking all of his features in as though searching for something. Looking over his shoulder, her voice darkens. "But you will have to choose. You cannot have both."

Slowly turning his head to see what Niyala stares at, Cadence locks eyes with Sorayah as Nina rubs her back. Noticing even Gus turn his head away and fidget with the trash bags, Cade turns back to ask. "Who are yo-"

The sound of the departing siren silencing his thoughts, the ambulance pulls off, Niyala nowhere in sight. Frustrated and confused, he turns back to his friends, waving them over as he heads to his car.

"What's the plan, Cade?" August asks as he chucks the trash bags in the dumpster on their way, Nina and Sorayah close behind them. Climbing into the car, Cade starts the engine and hesitates before asking.

"Did I do something tonight? Something to make you all upset or act distant with me?" Cade asks as he looks among his friends. "I've seen the way you've all been looking at me. What am I missi-" the front passenger window cuts him off, suddenly rolling down, the sound made louder in the group's silence.

"Just worry about London." Sorayah says with her head leaned against the door, looking out of the window. "Someone's got to take accountability for something tonight and she was hurt while with me. So, just get us to the hospital, please, okay?" She says, never offering the man a glance.

Looking in the rearview at August and Nina for some sort of clarity, Nina glares at home while Gus simply shakes his head, hinting for him to leave things alone. Putting the car in drive, Cadence pulls out of the lot, speeding to catch up with the ambulance, Arlo following them close behind.