

# SIRENS

By Laura Pugno

## CHAPTER 1

Samuel climbed onto the deck overlooking the tanks, and opened one of the lockers. He took off his overalls with their *Yakuza Western Standard* logo—a stylized *Y* inside a Zen circle that seemed traced in blood—and put on a neoprene wetsuit.

The tank edge was deserted; no one else was at the station. The pandemic had brought layoffs. The only staff left were the vet techs, the slaughterhouse workers, and the two guards, Samuel and Kennosuke, who traded shifts. Their plant had been one of the first, and was one of the smallest. Other parts of the Yakuza marine reservation had larger, more modern facilities.

The mounting of the sirens was about to start. When it was over, Samuel would activate the water exchange from the drainage system's control panel. It was a task he enjoyed. With a suck and a gurgle, the ocean water would enter, and the grill filter would adjust, permitting a gentle, controlled osmosis between internal and external seas. But if Samuel made a mistake, if he didn't perfectly fit the grill into its hinged frame, the water's fury would sweep everything away.

In the same way, the ocean battered the outer decks of the farms on the Yakuza reservation, in Underwater City, off the coast of New Baja California, where no one would find them. Least of all the Territory authorities, who didn't care to monitor what the Yakuza did on their property. Not with the outbreak of skin cancer (black cancer, black sun) that was consuming the population.

If Samuel had wanted to destroy it all he could.

The thought gave him great comfort.

Sadako had died, at seventeen, the year before, in the middle of summer when the black cancer was at its worst. They called it cancer. But it was more than just a haywire proliferation of cells. To the Mermaid Liberation Front, at least, it was God's punishment for what humans had done to mermaids.

Samuel had worn long, blonde dreadlocks his whole life. But he'd shaved them off the day he'd assisted in Sadako's euthanasia. Sadako wouldn't have wanted that kind of tribute. A shaved skull almost always meant black cancer, starting from the head. Especially in someone who was phototype 1.

But Sadako was dead.

In the pools below him, the males were covering the females.

They mounted frontally. The females were pinned against the tank rims by the weight of the males, who were much larger.

Ordinarily gentle as cows, the females turned uncharacteristically violent when the mount ended. Soon after the estrus that kept them calm, subdued, and at the mercy of the males wore off, the females would kill and partially ingest them. It was the only instance when the species consumed meat, or so scientists believed.

Then the water would darken with blood, and it would be time to release the carcasses into the ocean and empty the tanks. The males' meat was toxic for humans. Their only function was to impregnate the females.

The sirens didn't sing for human ears. Notoriously voracious, now quelled and tamed, they sometimes released a strident cry, like a gull, or a seal. But their real song was an ultrasonic call that drove dogs mad. And maybe, for all its imperceptibility, men too.

Ever since the introduction of mechanized slaughter in place of manual throat cutting, mermaid meat (the "flesh-of-the-sea") had rapidly flooded the market. Statistics had shown that slaughterhouse workers presented a slight tendency toward suicide. For this reason, the death tanks in the newly-constructed facilities were soundproofed. But the one where Samuel worked was one of the oldest.

It was only the females who emitted a call. The males were entirely mute.

*Like drones*, Samuel thought.

One scientist had maintained that the males and females did not constitute a single species, but rather two distinct ones, mysteriously hybridized into a third. The originators were the females, while the so-called males were a commensal species.

*Ugly death for a commensal species*, thought Samuel, zipping up his wetsuit.

The dimorphism between the sexes was extensive. The males were like small manatees, with no human features. The females were livestock bred for milk and meat but also women—devoid of words, devoid of legs, their tails' single muscle able to break a man's back in half, their smooth vaginas devoid of hair, protected from the abrasive seawater by a pearly secretion.

They looked at you with empty, spent eyes, sea-green or ultramarine, their eyelids' nictitating membranes like bits of dirty plastic, their faces little more than snouts—*like cows*, thought Samuel. But complicating their bodies was that long hair (if one could call it hair), a single, elastic, living, blue or blue-green mass that fell along their backs, undulating in the water like a teen beauty's braid. And their pale-green arms, with their webbed hands. And their breasts, large and heavy, with hard, dark green nipples from which came a sweetish milk when the females were in heat. Samuel had drunk it more than once, when he'd managed to steal it from the plant.

Their tails were covered in green or blue scales that turned purple with age. But in the slaughterhouses, the mermaids never reached old-age. Their meat became grainy. The demand for quality meat was high, and the most sought-after, tender variety was veal.

Siren brothels were illegal, because the species was endangered. Nevertheless, sirens were the new sex sport, the new Beluga caviar. The factory farms were illegal too. For this reason, the Yakuza maintained their establishments in the city of Underwater, and in other secure places along the coast—the *New New Baja California*, or *NuBaCa*, of the suboceanic resorts.

Any movements for the liberation of the mermaids and sister species—the Mermaid Liberation Front, primarily—had been destroyed by the epidemic.

Samuel had been trained as a middle manager, and then let go. The Yakuza had kept him on as a guard at the plant, and in time he had paid for Sadako's medical treatment. She had lived maybe three more months. And she'd died in a hospital, not in the street like scum.

Sadako was dead. And Samuel would never return to the suboceanic resorts, not even to one of their Killer asylums. Like two-thirds of NuBaCa's inhabitants, the residents of Underwater, and the rest of the world, he was condemned to dry land, to the sun that ate you alive.

Still, no sane resident of New Baja California would likely have done what he was about to do—enter a tank of stock sirens in heat, blend with the males, plant his seed in one of those great bodies lightly covered by some slimy substance, then try to save his skin. Even the brothels were careful not to offer their clients specimens in heat. There were stories of lusty Yakuza who'd had their heads mauled off, before the development of estrosimulators. For some, sirens became a perversion. And some Yakuza could no longer be with women—not even a slight Japanese girl, with hairless, fish-like skin.

*Sadako was Japanese.* Samuel dismissed the thought.

The male who would take his place in the siren's teeth was ready. He was a particularly docile specimen, more like a steer than a mounting bull.

*What I'm about to do makes no sense.*

He dismissed that thought too.

He had little time—once the mounting was over, the sirens would emerge from the haze induced by their estrum narcosis and begin to ravage the males, each sinking a first fatal bite into her mate's neck. After reproduction, he and Kennosuke would transport them to the slaughterhouse.

The sterile specimens were sent to the Yakuza brothels. Any sirens with abnormalities that ruled out sex work entered the death tanks sooner than the others in their pod. Because of their impoverished DNA (a result of inbreeding) sterility was a common defect among stock sirens. Only sterile animals were sent to the underwater brothels. No pregnant siren escaped Yakuza profit, even if there *were* clients who liked to suck milk from their dark green nipples. The milk was a prohibited delicacy—nutrient-rich, capable of reviving the dead. *Fools*, thought Samuel, though in his mouth he could almost taste the flavor of that fatty sustenance not unlike human milk.

He had chosen the most woman-like siren—a smaller specimen, with a face almost human, who had entered heat for the first time only a few days prior. She was a half-albino—what they called those with white, silver-streaked skin, and eyes, tail, and palms more blue than green.

Pure albino mermaids, with their red, rabbit-like eyes, had poor meat, and were killed at birth in the plants. But for half-albinos the thinking was different. In reality, the concern surrounding albinism

was misguided. Their silver coloring simply became part of the breed standard, even if half-albinos were usually sterile.

In the tank's hot water, the siren with white-silver skin seemed to smile at him with her tiny, pointed teeth. She was in a narcotic state. The muscular mass of her hair and tail, her heavy breast, undulated in the water. A bit of milk escaped from her nipple.

She was ready.

Samuel lifted his eyes to where the control-post windows overlooked the tanks. Sometimes, the Yakuza bosses stopped by to enjoy the spectacle of the mount and the killing of the males. None had informed him of a visit, but the higher-ups loved to maintain a climate of surprise. He and Kennosuke knew this.

He had weighed the risks. He dropped into the water.