

Tidelings

Spring- Present

Dear Liam,

As I watch you hop from rock to stone to sand, along the tidepools on these New England shores, I remember a time not so long ago (and yet it feels so distant) that I was doing the very same thing. I see you crouch and ever so carefully pluck the periwinkle shells from the water and curiously turn them, peering in to see if a snail still resides. The water in the shallows swirling to mirror the calcareous exoskeleton you hold, I call out to suggest you bring anything still living within home for dinner and laugh as you crinkle your nose.

Son, I wish these Elysian days could last forever. I'm certain my father felt the same and his before him...Perhaps, in a way, these moments are eternal from one generation to the next. In having a son of your own day, this perfect memory shall be preserved; But now as the dusk is creeping inland and I sit here writing this, I feel the sun is setting not only on our day together here but on this period of our lives. Come the Fall before the years end you and all your other Tidelings will join the Shoal and with that, certain responsibilities will fall on your young shoulders. Responsibilities I know you shall be able to carry as I did and your ancestors before you; But damn it all, do you seem so young skip-hopping along the shoreline, to be receiving these burdens.

With this in mind, I have decided to give you my old journals, recently retrieved from some dusty attic corner, in hopes that perhaps seeing the path I have walked before you, you will understand. You will understand this milestone and its importance, and know that you are not alone. When a community shoulders its burdens together, the load is light and the laughter plenty, I love you son.

Dutifully,

Your Father

Jericho Olmstead

###

Summer- Some Not Too Distant Past

Trymaster Cooper took his duties as a Tideling leader seriously; and he was seriously concerned about Jericho Olmstead and Harper Smith. Harper, being the older of the boys and should've been ranked up to Sounder by now at that, he ought to have more respect for the institution, the traditions than he was currently displaying. Jericho, ah well, one could simply hope that once he was brought into the Shoal the ceremony itself would be awe-inspiring enough to motivate the young boy to start getting his act together.

Such were the thoughts spinning in the Trymaster's mind as he approached the Olmstead home near the heart of the town center that afternoon. He knew the rest of the country was competing for the

attention of America's youth over the ambient noise that pop culture and gadgetry seemed to be flooding the ether with; the constant klaxon and pinging and dinging that seemed to be everpresent in the larger cities both confused and to be blatantly honest- angered the Trymaster whenever he went to visit his daughters at the University. He had hoped that their sleepy little New England town would be sheltered from it, but it seemed like for every house that embraced the desktop computer, one less child came to their weekly Tidelings meetings and Trymaster Cooper shuddered to think what would become of Innsmouth once the last household succumbed to the 'Net.

He clutched tighter under his arm, the deep purple tome-like journal he had gotten from Old Winslow's Bookshop. He took a deep breath and inhaled the brine-scented mist that still lingered on the late morning air. "It's an unusually cool one today," he thought, trying to ground himself in the present moment. He had been lamenting his concerns to Old Winslow himself amidst the wobbling towers of codices and haphazard piles of omnibi littering the interior of the shop. Cluttered, cramped, and cozy- Cooper and indeed the entire town assumed the decades old store was just a front to cover up the bibliophile's addiction to the written word. Old Winslow seemed to accumulate more than he ever sold, but still he was known to part with a piece of literature every now and again to keep the lights on. "Ah, now I believe I may have just the thing," Winslow told him holding up a single arthritic finger and wagging it as he maneuvered around stacks of magazines from editorials that were long- since out of publication and made his way towards the back of his shop. He returned with the journal Cooper was now carrying for Jericho. "Tell the boy," Winslow had said, "tell the boy every good Captain keeps a log of the course he is charting. By keeping track of where he's been, he'll know better where he's going. A little reflection now and then, it does us all some good."

Cooper couldn't agree more. A sudden gust of salt-air brought him back to himself as he approached the front door of the Olmstead home. The gentle blue-grey paint was chipping, being so near the shore and subject to the same salty gusts day in and day out that Cooper had just endured. Still, the flowerboxes beneath the neat and tidy white trimmed windows averted the eyes from these imperfections. The house, rather than appearing weary and worn, came across as well-loved and well-lived in, in the bright mid-morning light. Cooper knocked.

Jericho's Log- July 11th

Mr. Cooper and Pop came in today and made me turn off the TV to give me this journal. Mr. Cooper had told Pop about all the Tidelings meetings I've been missing and Pop didn't say anything in front of Mr. Cooper but I could tell he was mad. He's always mad these days though, so what does it matter? I was trying to tell them that I am way too old for Tidelings and it kind of cuts into my personal time. Like, it was fine when I was younger but I never actually asked to join and I was getting too old for it anyway. I told Pops if it was about him and Ma always telling me I spent too much time inside, I'd rather get a BMX bike or something but I guess that was the exactly wrong thing to say cause Pop's eyes got REAL big and his face went kind of red but Mr. Cooper stopped him and kind of laughed.

Apparently at the end of the year if I stick with it, I get my very own Low-Tide Party. Like the one Mom and Pop get to go to sometimes and don't ever let me ask about. Nick's parents, and everybody's parents really, go to them but kids aren't allowed. Well, I guess I wouldn't be a kid anymore if I got one, huh? Or at least, I feel like that's what Pop and Mr. Cooper were implying- no more 9:30 bedtime, no more weird weekend curfews even though the sun is still pretty much up, I'd get to come and go as I'd want. At least, eventually anyway.

So, I told Mr. Cooper I'd start writing and talk about what I write with him before the Tideling meetings and he'd help me get ready for my ceremony, and I promised Pop that Mr. Cooper wouldn't need to come by again.

###

The late afternoon sun would've been broiling if the cool predictable Atlantic breeze wasn't blowing inland; the saline and wet-stone smell providing a comfortable contrast to an otherwise cloudless day. Jericho tramped through the sand bar, occasionally stopping to crouch and mindlessly pick at the lichen and coastal grasses that stuck fast in the soil, deeply rooted. Having been kicked out of the house for the afternoon because his mother "got the girls ovah", nature would have to feel his fury. Displaced and despondent, forcibly removed from his Nintendo, he felt the need to pull at a great tuft of beachgrass but it held fast. Finally, giving up, he threw himself backwards and stared at the endless blue sky and contemplated all the ways in which the adults in his life had been doing him wrong lately.

For a while, there was only the rippling of the water on the coast, the ebb and flow of the tide listlessly drifting in and out all around him. Then, a "pip", an insistent "pip pip" nearly swallowed by the surf, but it was there. He sat up, drawn by the peculiar peeping sound, he urgently felt he must find the source. Scanning the horizon, he saw what looked like a dark lump against the pale sand. He stumbled down the sand bank toward it and then realizing whatever it was must already be startled and not wishing to cause it more stress he slowed himself less than gracefully and awkwardly tried to approach it from a sideways and what he thought was a casual way.

As he approached the dark lump revealed itself to be an Eider duckling. Though not at all as cute as he'd been led to believe they were. Its feathers appeared more like wet driftwood and the fluff didn't stand evenly at all anymore, its juvenile feathers beginning to push through. "What's the matter, little guy?" Jericho asked in what he hoped was a soothing tone, "Your Ma kicked you out too?" Its head seemed too large for its thin neck and the glossy, bead-like eyes in its large head gave it a look of perpetual startled uncertainty that resonated with Jericho more than he'd like to admit. "Stay here, bud, I'll uh- I'll find... something.." Jericho didn't know exactly what he was supposed to do in this situation but he supposed he'd figure it out as he went. He'd never seen a duckling alone before and all the stories and stuff he'd heard in class always talked about ducklings, PLURAL, so he knew something had to be wrong. He didn't know what ducklings ate but he knew everything had predators, so the first order of business would be to make sure the thing was safe. He went home to grab a shoebox. He returned shortly, feeling like a triumphant hero to bring his new friend home.

Jericho's Log — August 23

Gulliver cried almost all night and he won't really eat. I mashed up some eggs like the internet said. He pecks at it but doesn't swallow much. I tried lettuce too. Nothing. Ma always says when I don't wanna eat dinner that I'll eat when I'm hungry so I'm hoping maybe he just isn't hungry yet.

I thought once I brought him in and made him comfortable, he'd get quiet or at least start to sleep after he wore himself out from crying, but he's got a lot of energy for someone that hasn't eaten anything yet or slept really.

Every once in a while he'll stop crying and get really still and I think he's done, but then he just starts up again a minute or two later. I feel so bad for him. I wish he could tell me what he needs. I'll just have to keep doing research.

Jericho's Log — August 24

He hasn't quit peeping but it's louder now, raspier and hurts my ears. Pop asked what that noise was at breakfast and I told him he must've heard my Gameboy.

The internet said ducklings need their mothers' warmth so I held him under my sweatshirt so he could feel my body heat. That worked for a minute. But when I put him back down he started up again even louder. I tried to look up where all the other Eiders are. A lot of them move up toward Massachusetts Bay this time of year. It said they travel in broods and stick together. It didn't say what happens if one gets left; or why one would get left behind.

It made me think of that one summer where it seemed like everyone had somewhere to go but me. Most of the time there's always a few families that stay behind to help out with tourist season, but this time a lot of the town was closed for renovations. Suddenly everyone of my friends parent's decided to take that "dream vacation" they always wanted too and just my luck, my parents said they couldn't "dream of any place better than here" and so here we stayed.

I spent a couple nights crying.

Gulliver can sleep tucked into my sweatshirt tonight if he wants too.

Jericho's Log — August 25

I finally had to tell them but I think they already kind of knew. Gulliver's been peeping louder than ever. Almost like screeching. Pop called Mr. Cooper. He figured a Trymaster would know about coastal creatures and stuff since they spend so much time down at the shore. They looked Gulliver over and Mr. Cooper said it was strange for an eider duckling to be here this late in the summer. He said most of them have already moved up toward the Bay by now. I told him that was what the internet said and he said if I'd been paying attention last year I wouldn't have needed the internet for that.

I thought that was kind of a jerk thing to bring up with Gulliver so upset and half starved. Shouldn't we have been focused on him? Pop asked where I found him and I told him a couple of days ago at the sandbar. Pop and Mr. Cooper said something about brood birds needing their own kind and they stay in groups to learn together and grow together. That Gulliver was peeping so bad because if they aren't within a "vocal distance" of their family, they're terrified. Those moments he had been still, he was listening for his family to call back to him.

Mr. Cooper said sometimes trying to help can make it worse if the animal can't belong where it is. Like, there was definitely no way his family was going to hear him from inside the house, but that probably didn't matter anyway. Chances are, Gulliver had been left behind for a reason, maybe he was sick or weak and sometimes if something is sick it can make the whole family sick and if it's weak it can make the whole family vulnerable to predators by slowing them down; but I told them to stop. They both kept saying that the best thing would be to take him back down to the water and if his family was still in the area they'd find him. I thought about asking what would happen if they didn't but something felt like I shouldn't.

Mr. Cooper told me to stay and write about it instead of coming, I couldn't find it in me to argue for once.

###

Jericho's Log September 8th

Pop and Mr. Cooper have said I need to memorize Tideling's Oath and Creed before the next meeting. Here they are.

Tideling's Oath

Whether the tide is high or low,
By land or by sea
I will obey the currents that guide me
I will serve the Shoal before myself
Stand rigid as the mast
And keep safe the harbor of my community

The Tidelings Creed

A Tideling is true and does not drift from his pledge. He is bound to his Harbor, his Shoal, and the Deep that cradles them all. A Tideling knows how to chart a Course, reads the Tide, and treads lightly in the Undertow. He leads the lost to the Shore and guides them as they go. A Tideling gives proper respect and steals no valor. A Tideling is brave in submergence, he does not fear the dark below the surface. Above all else he is Obedient to The Tide, he follows the Signal, the Lantern, and the Call.

As if memorizing this stuff isn't enough, I have to start on my final project soon.

###

Jericho's Log- September 12th

I had the weirdest dream last night. Gulliver was in the sea, just kind of floating on the waves and suddenly this big wave rose up behind him and I was crying trying to call to him but I couldn't get my voice to work and just as the wave crashed down and brought everything to shore, there was this weird toad left behind when the water receded. But it wasn't a toad exactly because it wasn't the right color but my tears were so hot and salty and burning I couldn't see right, so I rubbed my fists over my eyes and when I looked again there was this super hot red-haired lady. Like, I knew she was older than me but she didn't look as old as my mom but also she seemed older than my mom just not by looks. It was weird, but she was looking really nice in this red dress and barefoot and just walking along the shore and humming. She had one of those plastic buckets you build sandcastles with and she wanted me to look in it and I think there was a goldfish in there but just before I could really get a good look at it Pops woke me up and said we were going to take the boat out today. I was going to tell him I didn't want to go but, I dunno. Pop's been like, less annoyed and less annoying ever since Gulliver and it's been nice. Like, he isn't giving me a bunch of chores to do or just yelling orders at me and if I have to work on something, we've been working on it together. He explained to me a little more about Gulliver too, like why we couldn't just take him to the vet and it kind of made sense. Everything has some place to be and some purpose to serve and if we try to force things to be how we want them to be we can end up hurting things more. I feel super guilty now that I may have stressed Gulliver out even more by trying to take him into my house and making a pet out of him. I might've even accidentally killed him if Pops and Mr. Cooper hadn't taken him back to the sea like they did. I just can't stop thinking about how raspy his cries got that last day.

###

Fall

Harper was moved up in the Tidelings to Sounder, a fact he seemed to care less about except when he could pull rank on Jericho. "Trymaster wants this place neat," Harper suddenly snapped at Jericho. "We're representing the Shoal."

Jericho nodded and picked up the broom, and began the Sisyphean task of trying to sweep the sand outside the entryway of the Gillman Hotel. Mr. Cooper had assigned Harper to be Jericho's Sounder, a sort of mentorship program that taught the Tidelings to be of service to each other and the community at large. It also, Harper had noted somewhat bitterly earlier in the day, got the struggling local business a lot of free child labor.

A couple from Connecticut dragged their wheeled luggage up the front steps, sand grinding beneath the plastic wheels and spreading it unevenly back onto Jericho's freshly swept floors.

Harper smirked as Jericho picked up the broom again.

Later, when they were wiping down the dining tables inside the hotel's restaurant, Harper ran his finger through the thin film of salt that gathered on every surface this close to the sea.

"Have you ever thought about leaving?" Harper asked suddenly.

Jericho blinked. "Leaving where?"

"Oh, anywhere. Wherever the tourists come from. I wonder what it feels like to be a tourist."

Jericho stopped wiping.

“We’re supposed to keep the Shoal strong,” Jericho said carefully. “That’s what Trymaster says. Tourists wander...wander away from their communities.”

Harper sucked his teeth and smacked the table leaving prints for Jericho to wipe again.

“You really buy into all that stuff, huh?”

Jericho felt his cheeks burn. “I mean, but everyone’s entitled to a vacation now and again though, right? Seems like everyone took one a few years ago when the town got that grant to fix up all our historic buildings.”

“I mean,” Harper added, shrugging, “What’s that British guy say, ‘Not all who wander are lost?’ But I guess Trymaster says there’s nothing worse than being lost, eh?”

Harper sounded like he was being sarcastic but Jericho knew better.

Jericho’s Log — September 26

I don’t know why Harper gets to be my Sounder. He hasn’t even done his Project yet which means he hasn’t even had his Low-Tide Ceremony yet but he still acts soooo superior. He says it doesn’t bother him but he punches me whenever I bring it up so I think it probably actually does.

He says being my Sounder is enough of a project and that he’s gonna have his ceremony before me but I doubt it. Mr. Cooper takes this stuff pretty seriously and he hates shortcuts.

Harper’s a asshole and he thinks he’s so edgy when he says stuff about wandering around, being a “tourist” but I’ve seen what happens when you don’t know where you belong. When you lose your group. I mean, it’d be nice to see other places but I’d only wanna do it on a boat like Pop’s. One that always knows how to find its way home.

I was pretty skeptical at the beginning of the summer but it has been nice taking Tideling stuff a little more seriously and it has been nice learning more about the history of Innsmouth and how we’ve been able to get through all the hard times and how we’ve survived the changing of the industries and tides. Not everyone can say that. Not everyone can say that they have family and friends and a community that’ll keep them from getting lost, that’ll keep them surviving.

###

They were sweeping the front steps again.—swish swish-

The Connecticut couple had just dragged their sand back up onto the porch —swish sw-

Harper suddenly stopped mid-sweep and tilted his chin slightly toward the far end of the porch.

“Well, would you look at that,” he muttered.

The man sat in one of the wicker chairs, elbows on his knees, staring out past the dunes. Jericho had never seen a grown man sit like that, with his head in his hands. The gray morning sky and slightly chilled wind painted a picture, but of what Jericho wasn't quite sure.

“Now there's someone,” Harper said, “who looks like he wandered away from the group.”

Jericho frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Just look at him,” Harper said without explaining. It was like he couldn't quite find the words either.

Jericho watched more carefully. The man shifted in his chair, stood up, sat down again, checked his watch. His gaze flicked toward the hotel door every time it opened.

“He's probably waiting for someone,” Jericho said.

“Exactly.” Harper leaned the broom against the railing. “He doesn't know where he's supposed to be right now. He can't move on till he has someone to move on with.”

Jericho swallowed.

The man rubbed his hands together and kept checking his pockets but they continued to turn up empty.

“Untethered,” Harper said with a bit of a smug look, like he had something very wise.

Jericho didn't ask what he meant.

That night, the man ate alone and yet kept glancing at the doorway. Not hopeful. Just looking. Looking at all the other people who were coming in with someone, or meeting someone. His eyes seemed distant.

When Jericho passed by with napkins he made sure to smile at him, the man gave him a small, hesitant smile and then as if as an after-thought, a little nod for flourish. As if to imply he wasn't as alone as it may seem.

Jericho turned around and almost ran into Harper. Harper wasn't smiling.

Later, while they stacked chairs, Harper's tone shifted.

“Don't get ideas,” he said. “I still outrank you.”

“I don't have ideas,” Jericho replied defensively.

“Let's keep it that way.”

Jericho's Log — September 27

There's a new man at the Gillman. He's always fidgeting and rubbing his hands together like Helena from class who's always complaining about what a freeze-baby she is. I swear he was putting them in and out of his pockets every 5 seconds for a half hour straight. He was pacing a lot on the porch today. It reminded me of Gulliver in the shoebox.

I'm not really supposed to talk to strangers but I feel like, he's not a stranger, he's a guest right? And I'm supposed to be of service and not drift from my pledge... and maybe this guy needs extra service?

Harper noticed me noticing him and was acting really weird even though he was the one who pointed him out to me in the first place. Like, what does he care what I do or don't do with the guests?

Like, yeah technically he's my Sounder but that just means he's supposed to guide me and give me helpful advice and so far he hasn't even done that. He's not the king of me. He's not my boss. He's just someone who shoves all his chores off onto me. I don't know what he thinks is going to happen if I'm just a little bit nicer to this guest. Make him look bad to Trymaster?

###

Jericho heard Harper's snicker over the psalm-like hum of the dryer in the hotel's laundry room. "Jericho-look at this guy. Now, I don't know where he's meant to be, but it sure as shit ain't here."

Jericho finished folding the towel and placing it carefully on its designated shelf before peering out the bay window with Harper. As much as he wanted to leave the poor man alone, he was also deeply curious. "What? Looks like he's just trying to have a day at the beach."

"But look at his jeans, man!" Harper's intensity seemed at odds with the lovely linen scent that permeated the air around them. "First of all, he's in jeans, he's got one cuff up to this knee and the other barely rolled up above his ankles, and he's carrying his sneakers in his hands like... Dude, who comes to Innsmouth and doesn't bring flip-flops and shorts, AT LEAST?"

Harper was right, unsympathetic maybe, but right. This man seemed wholly unprepared for a beach vacation. "So what? Like you think he just got in his car and drove and drove as far east as he could drive and took the first ferry here?" Jericho snorted.

Harper shrugged. "S'not impossible." He turned away from the window and stretched, knocking half a stack of Jericho's towels on the floor. "Whoops! Look, I've got some other business to attend too. Why don't you finish up here and then, I dunno, grab two sodas and meet me in the dining hall before the lunch rush, k?" He left without waiting for an answer.

###

"Oh," The man said, turning after a pebble had nearly missed his shoulder and landed in the vast sea before him. "Hotel kid."

Jericho shrugged. He hadn't wanted to sneak up on the man but wasn't sure how to make the best introduction. The pebble seemed to him the least invasive option.

"I'm not a kid-kid," he said. "I work here."

The man smiled a little more at that.

"Right. Sorry."

Jericho looked down at the man's feet. Bare. Pale. Strangely well manicured. A little pink from the cold water.

"You'll freeze like that," he said before he could stop himself.

"I guess I might."

Jericho hitched the sack on his shoulder.

"The water stays cold even when it's warm out; and we're at the end of summer looking at Fall."

"It's quieter down here," the man said finally.

"From where?" Jericho asked.

"Well, from most places. That's why I came, I think." The man said more to himself than Jericho.

Jericho didn't know what to say but he wanted to seem insightful and like he understood whatever the man was talking about so he nodded and said, "Hmmm" and stared off into the horizon like he had seen his dad do sometimes.

Jericho nodded again and then gasped, suddenly remembering the bag he was carrying with him. “Oh! I brought you these.” and pulled out a pair of swim trunks. “Water is probably too cold for swimmin’ now but in case you didn’t wanna ruin your pants, or wanted to brave it anyway.”

The man accepted them and looked at the size as Jericho continued, “You don’t have to thank me or pay me or anything. They were in the lost and found for months.”

The man chuckled, “Good to know, but uh- in case they don’t fit, know of any good shops in town I might be able to pick some up?”

Jericho stood up a little straighter, suddenly feeling like an ambassador or something, “Mr. Ritchie’s got swim trunks in town if you need some. He overcharges a little though. Ms. Hannah runs the This N’ That and sometimes has some on clearance this late in the year but no guarantees what she has in stock.” And then he added, “There’s changing rooms by the dunes if you wanted to actually go in.

The man bent and picked up a flat stone from the shore and turned it over in his hand before tossing it himself in the direction Jericho’s had fallen earlier.

“Back home,” The Man said, “there’s always noise. Cars, phones, people wanting things. So many people...and yet, no real community I think. Here, it’s much quieter, and less people... but more community Go figure.”

Jericho tried to think about that but then decided to pretend to think about it instead.

“If you’re still here in few weeks, you should try to go to a bonfire,” he said.

The man looked up.

“A what?”

Jericho immediately felt stupid because maybe he wasn’t sure he was supposed to be inviting tourists to things, let alone things he wasn’t allowed to go too, but now he’d already said it.

“Just... people get together. Sometimes. Not all the time. It’s nice.”

The man half-smiled now and tossed another pebble into the sea.

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be here but, yeah. Maybe. I haven’t been to a bonfire in ages”

Jericho shifted his weight. “I think almost all the adults in town go. They call it Low-Tide.”

The man opened his mouth, then closed it.

“That must be nice.”

Jericho didn’t know if it was nice exactly. It was just how things were.

When he got back up to the hotel, Harper met him on the porch, before he got to the kitchen.

“You talked to him. You didn’t get the sodas and you talked to him. Again” Harper said strangely aggressively.

Jericho paused for a moment and then, shifted his shoulders back slightly, tilted his chin forward. “And?”

Harper put his hand in his pockets and stepped down off the porch.

“I told you not to get ideas.”

“I wasn’t getting ideas.”

“What did you tell him?”

Jericho crossed his arms.

“Nothing.”

Harper just stared.

After a second Jericho muttered, “I told him about Low-Tide and bonfire nights.”

Harper’s whole face changed. “Are you stupid?”

Jericho stepped back. “What?”

“That’s not your job, yet. It’s not your turn.”

“I was being nice.”

“You’re not here to be nice. You’re here to learn from me, your superior officer.”

Jericho bit his lower lip and felt a sick sort of tightness in his gut. “I’m here to be of service.”

Harper actually tossed his head back and guffawed, like a cartoon character.

“Yeah,” he said. “And I’m your Sounder, so listen to me for once and stop acting like every lost thing you see is yours to drag home.”

Jericho stared at him. Harper looked away first, out toward the dunes and the strip of gray sea beyond them. Then his voice flattened and Jericho thought he sounded more like Mr. Cooper’s. “Yeah,” he said.

“The Trymaster told me...but there’s an order to these things and I’m next.”

Jericho didn’t answer.

Harper sighed, “Just, just get ready for the lunch rush.”

For the rest of the afternoon, they didn’t say another word to each other. That night Jericho dreamed of the red-haired woman again.

He was on his bike, pedaling hard along the coastal road, an oppressive sky weighing down on him with greys and green. The sea had come too close to shore and the rain felt like an extension of the waves, crashing against his body, stinging his face.

The waves themselves writhed and breached like bodies. The lightning crashing casting shadows that made them look like something serpentine lurked among them, wriggling back and forth between the crest and troughs of the waves. The sea was alive.

And there she was. Riding the storm.

She leapt from crest to crest, barefoot, her red dress billowing behind her like wildfire despite the rain.

For a second she was clear and human, laughing, arms outstretched like she was playing some game only she understood.

Then the wave rose up over here and crashed down, swallowing her whole and left in her place, something slick and dark surging upward. It was a great toadlike-shape with wide glassy eyes that lolled toward Jericho as it passed.

He pedaled harder.

The road curved and dipped and the storm seemed to gather around him tighter, the winds coveting the air in his lungs, trying to steal his breath for itself, to feed the storm. The water seemed to be keeping pace with him now, rising and falling just off the edge of the land.

The waves gave birth to her again.

Closer this time.

Running along the wave like it was solid ground, her bare feet never slipping. Her hair streamed behind her, entwining with the gossamer material of her dress, dancing in the wind.

She was singing above the wind, it sounded like piping.

Then the words came through between the thunder.

There is a tempest in your chest

A swirling ache, t’will drown you yet

A yearning that you cannot name

An inner rot, a festering shame

Come away to me, come home

Come away to me, come home

Jericho pedaled harder.

She leapt again—

And a small, wet, toad-like thing came down to cling to the crest of the wave instead, its body and its eyes far too wide and glistening in the light as it looked at him.

Jericho swerved but didn't stop.

The wave broke— And she was there again, still smiling broadly at him, still singing.

Wave over wave, come away home

Willingly or drug by the undertow.

Her voice seemed to come from everywhere at once—the water, the wind, inside his own chest.

“You feel it, don't you?” she called over the storm.

Jericho didn't answer. He couldn't. He just kept riding, pedaling madly.

“You know what it is to ache,” she went on, softer now, though the storm hadn't lessened at all. “You feel that pull so strongly and yet so fragile. How quickly that which we wind can be unbound...”

“Longing,” she sang as if to make sure the word was carried on the wind. “Longing is the strongest current carried by the deepest tides...”

Her voice broke with the next wave.

“And the cruelest.”

The waves surged higher now, nearly level with the road. One of them rose beside him, towering, and for a moment he could see her inside it—not on it, but within it, her shape moving through the water like it was her true skin.

“Good sons remember this feeling,” she said.

Her eyes met his. Further apart, more wide, more still than they ought to be.

“Good sons learn what to do with it.”

The wind swelled again and he had to stop his bike and wipe his eyes.

When he opened them, she stood directly in front of him now.

“Home,” she hissed before leaning in to bite or kiss him, he didn't know which as a wave rose up behind them threatening to crash around them both and pull them into the sea.

Everything went dark.

Jericho woke all at once.

His room was quiet. No storm. No wind. Just the faint, steady sound of the ocean in the distance.

His chest hurt. He curled onto his side without really thinking about it, pulling his blanket tighter around himself. For just a second before sleep tried to take him again, he had the strongest need, just to be held.

Jericho's Log — September 28

I talked to the man on the beach today. He said it's quieter here and that's why he came. He said where he lives there's always noise and people wanting things from him.

I told him about Low-Tide and bonfire nights. I don't know if I was supposed to but it just felt mean not to. For all the talk about being around people too much, he just seemed really lonely. When Harper found out he was pissed. Like way madder than made sense and APPARENTLY, Trymaster seems to think it's just fine to share my business with everyone... I think Harper is just nervous that I'm going to get a Low-Tide ceremony before him and I'm gonna rank up before he does and then I can boss him around.

I think that'd be kind of neat now that I write it down and see it for myself. But can I tell you a secret? I don't even know exactly what the “special project” for the Low-Tide ceremony even is. Like, I know I'm something to do something for the community but I'm also super nervous we've gone over this in a

meeting I missed or wasn't pay attention too and Pop and Mr. Cooper have been so cool lately, I don't really want to ask them and ruin it... But that has to be what Harper is freaking out about, right?

###

The couple came trailing sand in again on Tuesday and immediately continued doing everything wrong. Jericho didn't really notice at first, not anymore so than usual. They were just another pair of guests with matching rolling suitcases and voices that carried a little too far down the hallways.

Harper noticed.

"Connecticut again," he said with slightly more edge than usual under his breath, without looking up from behind the front desk as the woman shook sand out of her shoes onto the welcome mat like she was improving the aesthetic.

"Okay, so like we've said that before about them but," Jericho asked, not looking himself, "Like how do you actually know, for sure?"

Harper kept his eyes on the guest log he was digitizing. "You can tell."

Jericho couldn't, but he nodded anyway.

The man laughed too loud at something the valet said. The woman interrupted him twice in the span of a minute. They both seemed to carry themselves with the confidence that their mere presence immediately added an extra star to whatever establishment they found themselves in.

Harper leaned closer. "Listen," he murmured.

The couple walked past them, trailing sand and the smell of sunscreen. The woman was saying something where each letter was enunciated and sounded as crisp as footsteps on fall leaves, "I liTerally cahn'T even—do people acTually live here year-round?"

"They don't look," Harper said. "That's another thing. They don't look where they're stepping, or at what or who they're stepping on... they literally move as if they expect doors to be held open for them all the time, and they do!"

Jericho glanced down at the floor. Grains of sand glittered against the polished wood. He looked up and sure enough without looking away from their conversation with each other, the hotel staff moved in orbit around them to get all the doors as they passed through the lower level of the hotel towards the elevator. Jericho realized this is not something he had seen his colleagues do for anyone else.

"So?" Jericho said. "They're a little messy and our staff takes pride in their work."

Harper's mouth twitched.

"It's not just messy," he said. "It's... it's like they've never had to ask nicely for anything. Like, they think we're just... like we're just appliances. Automatic like a coffee machine."

Everywhere they went they left little trails of debris. It followed them into the dining hall. Into the stairwell. It somehow even went into the laundry room where Jericho spent most of his afternoons folding towels into careful, even rectangles.

Jericho knew this because Harper was keeping track. "Three times," he said one day, counting on his fingers. "Three times I swept this hallway. Same day."

Jericho shrugged. "Dude, we work in a hotel... at the beach."

Harper looked at him like he'd said something stupid. "Yeah," he said slowly. "It is."

A few days later, Harper started quizzing Jericho, out of nowhere. They were on the back steps, taking their allotted ten minute soda break before the dinner rush.

"What's a community owe a tourist?" Harper asked suddenly.

Jericho blinked. “What?”

“Answer it, there’s gonna be a test soon enough.”

Jericho frowned. “I don’t know. Hospitality?”

Harper tilted his head. “Yeah,” he said. “Okay. I mean, that’s what we sell. But. okay, so what’s a tourist owe the community?”

Jericho thought about that longer. “...respect?” he said finally.

Harper nodded once but more like he liked the sound of it rather than that was the answer he had been looking for.

“Yeah,” Harper repeated it slowly. “Respect.”

He crushed the soda can in his hand and tossed it into the bin. “If they don’t have it already, maybe they could learn it.”

Harper started spending more time with Trymaster Cooper and even, once or twice a week, with Mr. Gillman after that. The couple from Connecticut kept being themselves.

Laughing too loud. Leaving doors open. Enunciating like they’d paid per letter and were getting their money’s worth.

“They take up room,” Harper said one evening, watching them from the porch.

Jericho leaned against the railing. “They paid for the room,” he said.

Harper sucked his teeth like Jericho was intentionally being an idiot. “Not like that.”

The first mention of Harper’s Low-Tide came the next day, indirectly at first. Mr. Gillman brought the Good Lanterns from the hotel’s basement storage and began polishing them. He’d be walking by doors slightly ajar and hear voices suddenly drop to a whisper. He saw his own family down at the docks decorating the rowboats with ribbons.

Jericho tried to ask Harper casually, “Something happening?”

Harper glowered for a moment, and then said flatly, “Yeah, and you’re not allowed.”

That’s when Jericho knew; Harper was ranking up.

Jericho’s Log — October 3

If Harper says one more thing about the couple from Connecticut I think I’m going to lose my mind; but now I’m definitely certain it has something to do with his special project for Low-Tide and I’m more confused than ever because he was definitely not acting like he was going to do anything special for them or the community.

Either way, it worked, but I’m super surprised cause normally Trymaster Cooper can see through things like that. Harper’s always been a asshole but tonight he’s a ceremonial Asshole.

I can see all the Lanterns and Boats on the shore from my window but the mist is getting pretty thick so I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to see much of anything. I haven’t even seen that man as much lately but Harper’s been on my case with all his questions and quizzing and extra chores, I haven’t really been looking for him.

###

The fog was still there in the morning. Thick, swirling tendrils stretching forth from the sea into the harbor and heading inland. It was as though Harper’s ceremony had stirred the ocean’s curiosity and it

was reaching forth from its depths, searching, and inviting Jericho to join it next, or so Jericho briefly thought as he shivered and zipped his hoodie up all the way to his neck that morning walking into work. Mr. Gillman was at the front desk, looking cheerful if not a bit groggy, holding a steaming mug of coffee. “Our man’s already upstairs.” He said with a wink. “Putting the last bits of his Project to bed. Won’t be long ’fore you’re doing it now, so why don’t you go and see if he needs a hand?” He took a long slurp that lingered on his mustache when he was done before gesturing to Jericho to head upstairs.

Jericho knew, even before turning the corner to their hallway, which room Harper would be in. Sure enough, the Connecticut couple’s door stood open.

“Mr. Gillman said, I oughta come see if you needed a hand. How was the ceremon-” Jericho started but Harper cut him off.

“What’s the first rule of the Tideling’s OaTh?” he asked enunciating things like the couple had.

Jericho frowned, flopping on the already made bed. “...what?”

A silence hung for a moment when a tick-tick-ticking drew Jericho’s attention to the other side of the room.

On the dresser, the woman’s jewelry sat in a careful line, each piece placed as if someone had considered its position. Beside it, the man’s watch. The source of the sound. Jericho approached the dresser curiously. “Hey what’re we doing in here, anyway?” he asked. “They didn’t check out did they?” Harper picked up the watch and turned it once. “WhaT does the OaTh say abouT whaT belongs To the Tide?” he asked again in that crisp manner of speaking.

Jericho stared at him in annoyed disbelief. “...Harper.” Jericho grunted and sat on the bed crossing his arms. He really was going to be impossible to work with now that he had had his ceremony.

Harper offered no reply, he just kept the watch turning slowly between his fingers.

“Are you serious right now?” Jericho said. “Do you need my help or not?”

“What’s the difference beTween whaT is normal and whaT is necessary?” he asked.

Jericho blinked. “...what?”

Harper pointed toward the closet. “The bag,” he said. “Take it.”

Jericho hesitated. “...why?”

Harper finally looked at him and for the first time, in ever, Jericho realized he wasn’t sneering or snickering. He looked stern. “Even driftwood is a gift,” Harper stated, finally dropping the affected tone, “if used in gratitude. Nothing ‘washes’ ashore. It’s given and we’re grateful.”

Jericho exhaled hard. “You’re being kind of a jerk right now. Like, even more than usual.” Jericho braced himself, waiting for the shoulder punch he was sure was coming. It never did.

###

Mr. Gillman didn’t act surprised when he saw Jericho and Harper carrying two guests’ worth of vacation luggage down the stairs. In fact, he seemed delighted. “Good, good- tha’s real fine work, you two. Go on, take it to the back room. Lay it all out proper. That’s the way of it.”

They laid everything out in the back room. The fog pressed against the window panes, as if it was itself trying to get a good look at what was going on inside.

With the outside view obscured, Jericho realized he had never really spent a lot of time in Mr. Gillman’s backroom before, nor looked at the walls. Dozens of photographs adorned them; some black and white, others in sepia tones, seemingly going back to the early 19th century and spanning all the way through to

the present. His father was in a few, his grandfather was in others, Mr. Gillman was in many of them. Above the wall was a banner that said something like The Tideling Stewardship Society. Mr. Gillman came in and stood between the boys, resting a hand on either of their shoulders and stared at the pictures proudly. “Ah, yes. A lot of good work’s been done on this island and more will be done yet.” Then, looking towards Harper, “Your picture’ll be hanging there soon enough.” Then turning towards Jericho, “and you soon after. A lot to be proud of boys, a lot to be proud of.” “Jericho, now you run along and tend to your chores. Harper n’ I are gonna see about this yield.” Mr. Gillman said, ushering him out of the room. “WhaT do we do wiTh whaT the Tide gives us?” Harper whispered under his breath as Jericho passed in that affected voice again. Jericho ignored him. Harper asked, louder this time before the doors were shut. ““LasT quesTion””. Jericho turned. “...what?” “WhaT does the Tide ask in reTurn?” Harper asked, smiling strangely as Mr. Gillman shut the doors. Outside, the fog began to lift.

Jericho’s Log — October 6

The fog was super thick this morning. Like walking through soup. It made everything feel weird but also kind of cool. Harper’s already done with his Project and now he’s acting like he’s the king of everything... okay maybe not a king, but like, a Batman villain? Quizzing me has just turned into straight up Riddler-level stuff and I’m not in the mood to play games with him anymore. Like, again, he’s supposed to be guiding me and I haven’t learned anything from him, certainly not what I’m supposed to be doing about my Project. Mr. Gillman said it was good work, but I don’t even know what we did. Harper is definitely just showing off now and I’m like, more confused than ever and more worried than ever. Pops, Mr. Cooper, and even Mr. Gillman are going to expect me to do something amazing and if even Harper can pull it off, like what am I going to look like to them if I can’t?

###

The fog had lifted enough that Jericho’s dad had offered to take him out on the boat. Jericho leaned over the side, dipping his finger knuckle-deep beneath the top of the water and watched the ripples it created. “Careful,” Pops called from behind the helm, beer in hand. “Do you mean it, or do you just have to say that cause you’re a dad?” Jericho said but took his hand out of the water anyway. Pops took a swig from his can. “Can’t it be a little of both?” He chuckled and put the boat into autopilot and beckoned with his freehand for Jericho to come to the upper deck with him. “See how far from shore we are,” Pops started, “Ever notice how quiet it gets out here...? Yeah, you got the water slappin’ the hull, gulls carryin’ on—but it only makes it feel quieter, somehow.” He glanced over at Jericho. “You know what I mean, kid?” Jericho really thought about it this time. “Yeah, yeah, I really think I do Pops.” ““Course you do. You’re a good kid, Jericho.” Pops took another swig from his beer and put his arm around his son’s shoulders. “So, you gonna ask me or what?”

Jericho stiffened... “Ask you...?” Jericho quickly ran through the number of things he could possibly get in trouble for from the last month or so, and didn’t think anything was bad enough it warranted a conversation at sea in a boat to sort out.

“About... the Low-Tide Ceremony...” Pop led him to the answer and he felt Jericho’s shoulders soften. “I thought so. Look, I can’t tell you everything yet..” He was drawing this out. Almost as though he was savoring the moment, here, with his son. “But, I can tell you about my Special Project. My act of service...”

Pop crushed his can of beer and tossed it in the can on deck before sauntering over to the edge of the boat and leaning casually on the railing. He finally slapped the side a bit and said “This boat?”

Jericho listened intently.

“Wasn’t always mine... My Special Project.” Pop said, as if it were simple.

Jericho groaned and put his head in hands. “This is ridiculous! You’re being as weird as Harper was the other day. Why does everything have to be such a riddle in this town?”

Pops chuckled, “My act of service was to a good man but... he just... he didn’t have a place to put all the noise he carried.”

Jericho immediately thought of the man from the hotel, the beach. “You helped him?” He asked thoughtfully.

Pops looked wistful for a moment and then waved his hand out towards the water, “I’ve never taken you fishing proper, have I?” Jericho shook his head. “I don’t ‘spose you’re old enough to have gone out with the Tidelings yet either.” Pops sighed.

“Proper fishing, out on open water, is knowing what you’re gonna pull up even before you cast. You learn the water, what lives in it, what belongs where, what time of year, what should be there and what shouldn’t...”

Jericho sighed, “Pops you’re rambling...”

“My point is, there’s a balance to everything and if you get to know the rhythms and cycles of the water, you can know what you’re gonna catch before you even cast your line- but you also know when to throw back what you catch. To not take too much- to not overfish.” Pops looked at Jericho very seriously.

“Know what happens when you overfish, kid?”

Jericho shrugged.

“You ruin it. Plain and simple.” Pops spoke with authority now. “Take too many of one thing, it throws everything else off. Kill too much of one thing, other things start dying, other things start taking over. Next thing you know, the whole reef’s gone... then, every once in a while you get an invasive species that doesn’t belong anywhere and it tries to get in everywhere...” Pops took another long swig from his beer now.

He turned towards Jericho, wiping his mouth with his whole arm, “Now listen kid, this is important. Say you got a reef, a real one. Full system. Everything is balanced. Then something new gets in—something that doesn’t belong there. They don’t got predators, nothing keeping ’em in line. So they eat everything. Breed fast. Take space from things that’ve been there for generations...”

He paused again, took another long drink, and got a far away look in his eyes. “Water gets cloudy, coral starts dying. Fish starve... the whole thing collapses.”

There was a long pause before Pops smiled again. It seemed like he came back to himself. “So, we manage it boy. We manage our fishing. We manage our reef and it gives back to us. It’s a system, it’s the way of things.”

Jericho shook his head. “So, what does this have to do with your Special Project, the man you helped?” “Give me a minute kid, I’m getting to that.” Pops chuckled. “Innsmouth is like a reef. There’s a system to it.” He tapped the side of his boat. “We love the tourists, we love their money, their commerce. We love their stories, their energy... but...”

Jericho thought of peak tourist season and shuddered. “Too many and it’s a little overwhelming, they crowd us out, you have to wait two hours in line to get a scoop of ice cream.”

Pops laughed. “Something like that. So there’s a balance.” He patted Jericho on the shoulder.

“So, you brought balance. You helped that man find balance.” Jericho asked again.

Pops looked thoughtful. “I helped him find his place in the community. He was a special case.”

Jericho hesitated, “Pops? I think I have a special case.”

Pops raised an eyebrow and Jericho continued. “There’s this guy, at the hotel. He said he likes it here, cause it’s quiet... that- that back home there’s people everywhere but no community. He’s not sure why he came...he didn’t even pack shorts, but he likes the quiet...”

“I see son...” Pops finished this can of beer too. “You really want to help this guy, or, you think he’s just gonna leave you a boat?”

Jericho laughed and Pops, for the first time in a long time, gave him a noogie.

Jericho’s Log — October 10

Pops really talked to me today, I think, for the first time really in... ever. Like, last summer we spent all morning setting up the chairs for his Fourth of July Barbecue and putting up all the decorations, and I helped him clean up the yard and the most he said to me was “ ‘atta boy” and he kind of ruffled my hair like I was a dog.

And the thing is, I don’t think I realized it then, but I actually really felt good, proud of that “ ‘atta boy” even. Cause, I don’t think Pops ever really said much good to me before that but he lets everyone know when something’s bad or not “to his satisfaction”. I didn’t need to redo anything that afternoon and I knew, I knew Pops meant that “ ‘atta boy”.

And today, he called me a “Good kid” and we really, we talked.

And the whole reef thing actually made sense. Like it’s not random—everything has its place, and if you mess with that, it all falls apart. So you just... keep it balanced.

I told him about the guy from the hotel. Said I think the community could help him.

Pop didn’t shut it down. He actually listened. So I think that means something.

He said noticing stuff like that is part of getting ready. I think I’m starting to get it. And I think I might already be kind of good at it. Better than Harper anyway. Like, actually trying to service people who need it, and keep making Pops proud of me.

###

Jericho had been thinking about it all morning, Special Projects, his Special Project. His first one, of many, it seemed. A life of noble service. Of balance.

He was beginning to feel very important and grown-up, but not in a way that came with the simple act of blowing out a candle, but in a way that was earned. True Adulthood.

This also came with a certain social savvy, Jericho thought to himself, maybe if he casually mentioned that his father had explained to him the origins of his boat, he might share more of the story. Mr. Gilman didn’t look surprised when Jericho asked.

He was behind the front desk, polishing the same glass he'd been polishing for the last ten minutes, humming something low and coastal, like something you'd hear drifting off a dock at dusk.

"Special Projects?" he repeated with a wry smile.

"Just heard people talking," he said in what he imagined was a nonchalant tone, leaning up against the front desk in a way he had never done at any point before this moment. "Pop mentioned his; said that's how he got his boat."

Mr. Gilman smiled. "Ah," he said. "Yes. Well, and I supposed you'll be wantin' a look at the photograph, eh?"

"Well, you've already been in there once," Mr. Gilman said lightly, opening it. "I don't think it'll hurt going in twice.."

The luggage and possessions he had laid out before were all gone, the room, in fact, looked neater than the last time he'd been in it.

"People we've helped," Mr. Gilman said gently, guiding his attention back to the dozens of framed photographs on the wall. "Everyone comes here carrying something," he said. "A burden, guilt, noise, or sometimes they simply reach our shores, lost. Drifting like a sailor in a life raft, hoping for a ship to pick them up out of the lonely waters..."

Mr. Gilman continued. "We relieve them of their burdens and give them a place, an anchor point, to find themselves again. Where they belong. Where they need to be."

Mr. Gilman approached an earlier section of the wall and began scanning it with his index finger before making a slight, "aha" noise and lifting one from the wall. "Here you go, lad."

Jericho took the frame and sure enough, it was his dad. Younger and thinner, for sure, standing on the dock beside Mr. Gilman and another man Jericho didn't recognize but knew must've been his Special Project.

His Pop's boat was behind them. The man was shaking his dad's hand and smiling. The smile was small, careful, but hopeful. Jericho felt a funny sort of dizzy feeling from his heart.

"Mr. Gilman, how old is my dad in this photo?" Jericho asked.

Mr. Gilman thought for a moment, "Oh, I can't imagine too much older than you. S'pose he didn't tell you but your ol' Pa was a what ya's might call a 'late bloomer.'" He said with a wink.

Jericho felt something lift in his chest. His dad, not much older than him, made such a difference in the life of this grown-up man, he left his boat to him. Not that that's what it was about of course. It just seemed.. Is this what people meant when they said awe-inspiring?

Jericho still had eyes fixed on the photo but secretly reflecting on how much time he had wasted at this point in his life playing Pokemon Snap, when he could've been out creating ripples in his community.

He lingered there a moment longer. That look on the man's face, that hope, like he'd almost found where he belonged.

Jericho finally handed the photo back to Mr. Gilman when another caught his eye, still laying on the table but recently framed and in color. It was Harper with the Connecticut Couple. The couple had drinks raised, faces flushed, and were laughing. The man had his arm slung too loosely around Harper's shoulders. The woman leaned in like she was trying to stretch her face to make it seem thinner. Harper didn't look drunk but he was smiling; smug, satisfied.

"How'd they need help?" Jericho asked, genuinely curious.

Mr. Gilman stepped up beside him. "That's a story for after your Low-Tide," he said.

Jericho accepted this as something that made sense. He already knew he was pushing it by asking Mr. Gilman about his dad.

As they headed towards the door Mr. Gillman pointed out things in glass cases on the shelves that lined the walls. “Personal effects,” Mr. Gilman said. “Left behind when someone no longer has need of them.” “Like... donations?” Jericho suggested.

Mr. Gilman smiled. “Something like that.”

“It’s important,” Mr. Gilman went on, voice warm and even, “to preserve these moments. This is a town that remembers its acts of service. Service. Preservation. Pride.” He emphasized each word.

“Without that,” he added, glancing toward the fogged window, “places drift. Lose their shape.”

“That’s what the Tidelings do,” Mr. Gilman said. “We keep the place from drifting.”

“Well,” he said. “Back to work.”

Jericho took one last look at the wall. At the names, years, at the things left behind. The legacy. It was cool.

Really cool.

Jericho’s Log — October 14

I finally know what the word “legacy” means... and I will be a part of one.

###

It happened three times before Jericho was sure of it.

Harper had been less weird the past couple of days, but he had been colder. Just giving small orders in an expressionless voice; largely not speaking though.

Jericho, despite himself, missed some of their banter, but with all the thoughts going through his head about his upcoming Low Tide Ceremony and making plans with Trymaster Cooper, he had plenty to occupy his thoughts as he worked.

So the first time Harper asked him to go all the way to the other side of the hotel to make sure the door was locked, rather than help with lunch, he shrugged it off. The second time, he was getting ready to bus the tables at dinner, and Harper said everything needed refolded in the North, East, and West linen closets. The third time, Jericho was on his way to greet the man and officially make him his Special Project, and Harper said Trymaster needed to see him now. Trymaster was just as confused as Jericho when Jericho showed up and said he hadn’t told Harper any such thing.

Harper was intentionally sabotaging him. He was sure of it.

And it kept happening, and kept escalating.

One night, just as the shift was ending, Jericho saw the man fidgeting with a paper cup by the fire pits, alone. Jericho was just crossing the threshold of the back patio and Harper literally cut him off, clipboard in hand.

“You missed two items on the closing checklist,” he said, flatly. “I’d like to redo the entire thing. Accuracy the first time is important. Let this be a lesson.”

Jericho stared at the page. Everything was already marked. “I didn’t miss anything.”

“Check again,” Harper said. “Figure out which you missed. Don’t cut corners. Trymaster hates it when we cut corners.” He insisted again in that same soulless monotone.

By the time Jericho finished pretending to check, the man had retired to his room for the evening. This was enough. If Jericho was going to be an adult, he was going to confront things head on, like an adult. Direct approach. That was all there was to it.

He found Harper in the Connecticut Couple's old room, still empty, sitting in the dark.

"What's your problem?" Jericho said switching on the light, hoping to catch Harper off guard.

Harper didn't jump up, he didn't even stand. "What problem, Jericho?"

Jericho entered the room, arms crossed, legs planted. "Don't pretend. You don't want to let me do my special project. You won't let me talk to him. You won't let me move on to my Low-Tide Ceremony."

"I'm simply assigning you tasks." Harper said, expressionless.

"Bull...bullshit." Jericho said, trying to find some bass in his otherwise cracking voice. "You're making things up."

Harper finally put his hand on his knees and slowly raised up. He wasn't much taller than Jericho, but it was enough. Jericho had to look up to him now, but he didn't stop. "You don't like that I'm about to rank up. That I'm about to be your equal."

A flash, however briefly, went across Harper's face. He flinched. Jericho went on more confidently, "You think I should be beneath you forever?"

Harper's jaw clenched and he turned and slowly moved toward the window, looking out toward the dark misty sea. "What's the first rule of Tideling's Oath?" Harper asked.

Jericho scoffed, "This again, really?"

Harper snapped his head back, "I'm serious, Jericho, answer it. The first rule. The oath. Tell me."

Jericho inhaled deeply and exhaled frustratedly, "Whether the tide is high or low, by land or by sea... we obey the currents that guide us..."

Harper responded with the Creed, "A Tideling is true... and does not drift from his pledge... he is bound to his Harbor... his Shoal..." and Harper shivered as he said this last one, "and the Deep..."

At this Harper turned away from the window and stared past Jericho, "You know, it's funny. Growing up, learning the words, we all picture ourselves as Sailors, charting our courses...like we're in charge, you know? But... but we never really think about, no one controls the tide. We don't... we don't control the Tide." He chuckled a little bit at this.

"Harper?"

"Dude, you wanna have your Low-Tide. Fine, whatever. Rank up. Join us. It'll be a hoot." And with that, Harper pushed past him and left.

Jericho's Log — October 15

Harper keeps getting in the way. Like not even subtle about it anymore. Every time I try to talk to my special project, there's suddenly something I have to do right then. Or something I did wrong that I didn't actually do. I don't know what his problem is.

I think he just doesn't want me to have a Project yet. Or maybe he thinks I'll mess it up. Or maybe he thinks I won't. I finally confronted him about it and he was all cryptic and weird again but I don't think he thought I'd stand up for myself.

I'm going to have my Low-Tide Ceremony. I am going to be of service.

###

Jericho didn't check in with Harper for his assigned duties the next day. He knew the routine and anyway, he said what he said, and Harper said what Harper said, and there was nothing more to say to each other, for now. He was on edge all morning, he felt like a cat ready to pounce, but the man never came. Was he sleeping late?

Had he gone home?

No, he would've had to turn his room over for the next guests.

Where was he?

By the time dinner rolled around he felt like he was crawling out of his skin, but suddenly, there he was. It took nearly knocking into a server and spilling a boiling hot seafood bake all over a guest to make him realize he was not in the right frame of mind to approach this man. He did a lap around the patio before coming back in, and breathing deeply, thinking calm thoughts.

The man had retired to the front lobby, by the fireplace, turning a paper cup over in his hands again, fiddling with his watch, and staring deeply into the flames.

He just walked over.

"Hey." He said, flipping his bangs up nonchalantly.

The man looked up, a little startled at first, and then his face softened in that same careful way Jericho had noticed before. "Oh—hey," he said. "You're... Jericho, right?"

"Yeah." Jericho hesitated for half a second, then added, "I realized I never got your name."

The man let out a small breath, almost like he was embarrassed. "Yeah," he said. "Sorry. I should've said it before. I'm Isaac."

Isaac.

Jericho held out his hand stiffly and formally, like Pops. "Nice to meet you."

"Yeah," Isaac said, smiling a little and accepting the handshake. "You too."

Jericho hovered for a second, then gestured toward the empty chair. "You mind? I'm on break"

Isaac shook his head. "No, go right ahead, by all means."

Jericho didn't sit so much as flopped but made himself comfortable nonetheless. "Okay, so, please don't think I'm rude but... what brings you here, dude? I mean, you don't seem like our normal vacationers and it's really late in the season to be here without your family and not on a business trip"

"I stick out that much, huh?" Isaac said glumly.

Jericho internally kicked himself, "No, I mean, not to the untrained eye I mean. I'm just a professional, is all."

Isaac sighed. "No, I'm glad you asked. I feel like maybe, maybe I've been waiting for someone to ask. So... I spent my whole life checking off lists. Get a successful job, at a successful company, keep a full schedule. Be dependable." He stretched and readjusted the way he was sitting. "I thought that was what it was supposed to be."

Jericho didn't interrupt but he had trouble understanding where the problem was. This sounded like all the things Jericho wanted to be. Maybe this guy did have too much noise in his head.

"I thought if I just kept checking those boxes," Isaac said, "I'd be alright. That things would just... eventually add up. The to-do list would be done and I'd look back and have a meaningful life."

He paused, coughed or choked, Jericho couldn't decide.

“But the checklist never stopped and one day I realized, it didn’t mean anything”

“So I left,” Isaac added, quieter. “And I don’t know what that means.”

“It means...” Jericho said. “Maybe you’re supposed to be here. Right here, right now.”

Isaac chuckled, “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Jericho said. “People here depend on each other. I mean, it’s not all one sided. I might depend on you today, and you might depend on me tomorrow, it’s like a cycle. A balance.”

“Jericho.” They heard a monotone voice call from behind them.

Harper. Jericho had to fix his face before he turned. He glanced over his shoulder.

Harper was standing near the entrance, back stiff, eyes cold. “I need you,” Harper said.

Jericho grit his teeth and inhaled through his nose before responding, “I’m on break.”

There was a pause.

“Now,” Harper said.

Jericho pushed down his knee jerk reaction and reminded himself of the bigger picture. If this was reported, Trymaster would understand. “I have five more minutes,” he said. “There are labor laws.”

Harper clicked his tongue, paused a moment, and then turned and walked away.

Jericho’s heart did a little flip flop in his chest. Did he... he win? Did he stand up to the bully and win?

That only happens in movies!

“You don’t have to get in trouble for me,” Isaac said.

Jericho shook his head, smiling. “I’m not,” he said. “Not at all. So, remember those bonfires I mentioned?”

Jericho’s Log — October 16

His name is Isaac and he is exactly what Pop talked about on the boat. About people getting stuck somewhere that isn’t really theirs and as Isaac was talking it just made sense. Isaac was stuck someplace that wasn’t his and he needs to go someplace that is. Like, I don’t know, something clicked and it felt right and then it felt right to stand up to Harper, and I don’t know. Things are just, starting to make more and more sense. I feel like I’m understanding things in a different way and there’s more of a flow to life that wasn’t there before.

I dreamt of her again last night. It wasn’t like the last one. I was just on the shore, looking at the waters, but I could see her out there, her eyes just above the water line and she was looking at me and even though I couldn’t see her mouth I knew she was smiling at me.

###

It was here. It was happening.

He felt like he was floating. All day long the town was murmuring, another and so soon after Harper’s, but nothing wrong with that! A season of double blessings for their community!

The Boats were being decorated, FOR HIM. The Lanterns were being lit FOR HIM! His day was otherwise pretty normal except for the internal chaos and excitement within him, the festivities would begin at sundown.

The fog had all but lifted, so he was able to see Isaac pretty clearly before he approached him. He was at the edge of the patio, in a nice cardigan with a button down underneath. Not dissimilar to what Jericho, himself, had on. Except his cardigan didn’t have a Squirtle on it.

Jericho made a mental note that FIRST THING tomorrow he was updating his wardrobe to something more mature. “You dressed up!” Jericho said as he approached.

“Well, I mean...yeah, so did you!” Isaac chuckled self-consciously. “I just, well it gets chilly on the beach at night right? And you never know who you’re gonna meet... the whole town?”

Jericho nodded, “Yeah, just about. It’s like my... It’s like a milestone for me.”

“Oh yeah, like the Pinewood Derby or getting the Order of the Arrow?” Isaac offered.

Jericho looked puzzled, “I’ve... I’ve never heard of those things.”

“Nevermind... You lead the way, kiddo.” Isaac said changing the subject.

The hanging lanterns and distantly lit bonfires made it easy to find their way despite the darkness and the light fog that still remained settled over the town, though it still seemed to be dissipating.

Jericho chattered nervously the entire way, explaining who would be there and about the Tidelings and how even though tonight was his special ceremony, these beach bonfires were pretty common occurrences regardless and only special tourists were ever invited to join the locals for them. Isaac listened intently and asked a few questions about the locals he’d be meeting here and there, and if there were any openings on the island in terms of employment. Jericho wasn’t sure.

Jericho also wasn’t sure why all the adults on the beach were wearing Red Cloaked hoods, obscuring their faces, and while he didn’t say this outloud, his facial expression said as much.

“I’m uh, I’m suddenly feeling underdressed.” Isaac joked.

A sudden burst of fog rolled in again with the tide. Thick. Surrounding them, encasing them. Swallowing the light of the lanterns, the bonfires, the people, until Jericho couldn’t tell where the beach ended and the water began.

Isaac’s nervous laughter sounded more distant now, blanketed. “It’s okay,” Jericho said, trying to sound reassuring. “This is pretty common on the coast.” He waited for one of the adults to say something, anything. Why were they all so silent?

Jericho, without knowing why, reached for Isaac’s hand. He felt a pull, a tug, a longing in his chest. As he and Isaac found each other, though his face was obscured by the fog, he knew Isaac felt this too.

Instinctively, they both walked in the direction of the shore and stopped just as the water began lapping up at the tips of their shoes.

The fog was suddenly swept away in a sudden burst of salt-tinged wind that cut through their cardigans and seemed to slice at their cheeks. They covered their faces with their hands until it passed and in the clear light of the moon they saw her. There, standing above the water, her arms outstretched.

Jericho understood. He took a step back and gently pushed Isaac forward. “I knew as soon as I met you, I knew it was best to just take you back to the water.”

“Back to the water?” Isaac said breathlessly.

“She needs you. She needs you for the reef, the Tide, the Shoal, the Deep.” Jericho said softly from behind Isaac. “We depend on her, she depends on us, go to her...” Jericho took another step back. “Just one more night. Just be needed one more night, and then you can rest in her embrace...”

Isaac took one small step into the water towards her. “I am so tired...of being tired...”

She seemed to stretch out her arms further towards him, so much so they seemed to thin to a point; then further still. A mile to the shore from where she stood and then they split, divided, unraveled as her face bloomed forward, widening so her mouth became more a beak and her eyes stretched to the furthest points of her skull, luminous and glistening in the moonlight.

Her wide, amphibious maw opened to speak and it thundered, “Oh, there you are...” as her tendrils slithered towards Isaac and wrapped around him pulling him towards her. As she gathered him into her

embrace his breath left him one final time in a contented sigh, “Thank you...” Jericho thought he heard him gurgle as he was wrapped, folded, and embraced inward into Mother Hydra’s loving form before she sank below the waters and the sea was still again.

Jericho stood there for a small eternity before he realized his cheeks were wet. He had been crying this entire time. He had never felt so... so...

Right.

So proud. So jealous.

Isaac was chosen.

Isaac was needed. Was held.

Jericho felt movement behind him, a hand on his shoulder.

“Well done, son.” Jericho turned to see the cloaked figure pull down his hood. It was Pops.

One-by-one, his friends, family, and neighbors revealed themselves on the shoreline. They had seen what he had done, they knew that he was the one to have discovered Isaac, to have recognized what Mother Hydra wanted and needed from this Special Project.

And they were proud. He could see it in their smiles.

Trymaster Cooper pointed towards the shoreline, something red was drifting in with the tide. A robe.

Jericho stepped forward, no longer caring if his shoes were wet and picked it up.

They were his robes. Dry. Impossibly warm and dry, and as he lifted them up over his head and turned back to look at his community, he couldn’t help but marvel at how well they fit him. Like an embrace.

###

Jericho took a moment to himself before heading back up the path. The others, his community, had gone up ahead to get things started before he arrived.

He took a deep breath and got as much salt into his lungs as he could before exhaling.

Mother, I will return. He thought, not to himself, but projected it outward, outward and upward and downward. As he turned to start back up the path back to the hotel he swore he heard piping over the wind. A melody of longing.

The beachfacing exterior of the Gilman hotel had never looked so beautiful to him. Filled with the faces of adults in his life that used to look so tired, haggard, stern, or worn out had suddenly taken on new life to him, or perhaps he just had more appreciation for what lay behind each laugh line or crow’s-foot wrinkle. Maybe, they had been right to be stern with him when they were.

Jericho paused at the edge of the party, the cloak settling warm against his shoulders, and for a moment he just watched. This was for him and suddenly a hand was around his back and he was pulled into the thick of it.

Congratulations and hugs all around him. “Good eye!” Some said.

“That one was a young, strong one, Mother’ll be happy for months over him!”

“How’d you know?”

“I just— I just helped him,” he said, but even as he said it, he knew that wasn’t quite the whole of it.

“You recognized him,” someone corrected gently.

Jericho gave a bashful smile, “I just want to be of service...”

Yes. That felt right. That was right. A place for everything, and everything in its place, and he knew his. As he was doing the Cha-Cha slide with some older cousins, across the firelight, he caught sight of Harper. He stood just outside the circle, his hood down now, his face pale in the shifting glow of the

flames. Jericho tried to read his expression but realized the shadows must've been playing tricks on him; surely Harper couldn't look sad for him? Jealous maybe, angry, smug, but why should Harper look sad? Should he go to him? Their rivalry seemed so silly now that it was all over. Maybe he should make peace. Just as he was thinking of approaching him, he was pulled back into the line dance.

Soon, all was forgotten as other guests began pulling him aside for one-on-one conversations.

"There you are," Trymaster Cooper said, finding him first.

Jericho straightened instinctively. "Yes, sir."

Trymaster rested a firm hand on his shoulder, his expression warm but measured. "You've done your community a great service tonight."

"While I appreciate that, Trymaster, it was only right to serve my community and the Great Mother."

Jericho said, feeling somewhat smug about being "in" on things now.

Trymaster's smile deepened slightly. "Spoken like a true Tideling," he said.

He reached into his coat and pulled out a watch. Isaac's watch. Of course. For Gillman's backroom, if he saw fit.

"Every Project leaves something behind," Trymaster said, placing it into Jericho's hand. "A reminder. Of what was given—and what was received."

Jericho turned it over, the metal catching the firelight, still faintly warm.

"It's nice," he said.

Trymaster nodded. "Keep it, if you wish, I'm sure Isaac would want you too. Tomorrow, you'll return to the hotel and the rest of the catch will be appraised and passed along amongst the community based on need."

Jericho slipped it carefully into his pocket, he wasn't sure what he'd do with it yet, what felt most right.

"Come along, Jericho," Trymaster said heading towards the interior of the hotel. "There's something else."

"So, now you know why every Tideling completes a Project," Trymaster said as they walked to Gilman's backroom. "It's how we all come to understand Innsmouth's ways."

They stopped before a black space on the wall, with an empty frame waiting to be filled.

Trymaster handed a photograph to Jericho. It was of Isaac waiting for him in his cardigan earlier that night, sitting by the fire pit just outside the hotel. Smiling, that shy half-hearted smile

"Go on kiddo," he said quietly. "Frame it."

Jericho glanced at him, hesitantly and with somewhat shaky hands took the frame off the wall and slid the photograph in. Somehow, placing this picture on the wall was the most nervewracking part of this whole process. Somehow, it made it all real and there was no going back now.

"Some come in scattered," Trymaster went on, gesturing lightly toward the wall. "Hard to read. Hard to place. Others..." He nodded toward Isaac. "...they carry something with them. Weight. You can tell when they've lived enough to give something back."

Jericho looked at the photograph again. Isaac had.

Trymaster gave a small, satisfied nod. "Yours was a strong one," he added. "Not often we see that kind of readiness come through so clearly. There is...an unspoken way to appraise the Projects... not many are able to do so well their first time. You must be a natural, like your father."

Jericho held his head a little higher.

"Another one helped," Trymaster said, almost ceremonially, tapping the frame once. "Another success story for the gallery. Our Hall of Fame."

"Nothing is wasted," Trymaster continued. "It wouldn't be right. Not after what they give to us."

Jericho nodded immediately. “Of course.”

“It would be disrespectful,” Trymaster said quietly. “To them. To her.”

Jericho’s hand brushed unconsciously against his pocket.

“They come to us at the right time,” Trymaster went on. “And when they do, we make sure every part of that gift is honored. Used well. Remembered.”

That night, sitting on the edge of his bed, Jericho held the watch in his hands for a while before setting it carefully on the nightstand.

It ticked steadily. Reliably. He smiled.

Jericho’s Log — October 18

I can’t believe how nervous I was before...everything. Before meeting up with Isaac, before meeting Her. But now, I mean, I know this is what I was meant for. This is what I was born for, I’m right where I belong. I’m home, I’m really home.

Like, I just knew with the way Isaac was talking and pacing and sitting there waiting for something to fix everything for him. That’s not nothing, that’s what Pops meant about things starting to go wrong. He was drifting and when something is drifting, when someone is drifting you can’t just leave it like that. You can’t because then it spreads and it’s not even fair to them.

I don’t think I ever appreciated that before. Like, what if he just kept drifting like that? What would've happened to him? More feeling like he doesn’t belong anywhere? Like he didn’t have a life? At least now he’s part of something. Part of the reef. Part of her.

And he didn’t look scared, I swear he looked peaceful and relieved and I thought I heard him say “thank you”. I know what peace looks like and he finally found it. Like Pops was saying, you don’t let things fall apart and you don’t let something just sit there and take up space where it doesn’t belong. You fix it and it’s right and good for everything.

For the reef, for the town, for them... especially for them.

I dreamed about her again last night, singing again. And I just keep thinking about how lucky he is. He didn’t have to wait, he didn’t have to spend years not knowing. He got to go to her sooner than the rest of us.

I think that’s the part people wouldn’t understand if they weren’t from here and why I’m lucky I get to understand and be a part of it. A part of “the knowing” about right and wrong and where things belong. I’m so lucky I know.