

## THE ISLAND

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Emelie Andersson, an investigative journalist from Sweden, started investigating into Eirene Island after several disconnected leads landed on her desk over the course of a year. People have gone missing. None of them were particularly relevant on their own. A missing influencer here, a masseuse girl there, a former guest who had apparently changed her entire appearance and vanished from public life. Most journalists would have dismissed it as gossip. Emelie had the uncomfortable feeling that there was something larger underneath.

So Emelie devised a plan. Over the previous two years she had gradually reshaped her public image. Her byline, once associated with political investigations and long-form reporting for British and American magazines, started appearing in fashion publications instead. She accepted assignments covering luxury events, celebrity culture and lifestyle trends. She attended fashion weeks in Milan, Paris and New York, cultivated relationships with models and designers, and quietly allowed people to assume she had become bored with politics.



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The transformation was entirely strategic. If Adrian Vale researched her background, he would not find a crusading investigative reporter looking for corruption. He would find a successful journalist who had apparently abandoned serious topics in favor of fashion and luxury culture.

Eventually the invitation arrived.

A private flight carried her from Miami to the remote archipelago where the island was located. During the journey she rehearsed the character she intended to play. She was no longer the skeptical Swedish reporter.

She was a successful professional woman in her early thirties who had spent years working too hard and now wanted to relax, have fun and stop taking the world so seriously.

To her surprise, the role became surprisingly easy to play.



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The island was beautiful. The staff were polite. The guests seemed relaxed.

Nothing immediately felt sinister.

As Adrian, who seemed to have taken a personal interest in her, personally showed her around the resort during her first afternoon, Emelie found herself struggling to identify anything suspicious.

"It's actually nice here," she admitted. "People seem genuinely friendly. I have a feeling this investigation is going to take some time."

"You have a lot of female friends here, Mr. Vale."

"Please, call me Adrian."

"Fair enough. Still, I've noticed that almost everybody you've introduced me to has been a woman."

Adrian seemed amused by the observation.



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"I've always bonded more easily with women. I suppose I have a fairly developed feminine side. Although, to be fair, many of the women you've seen aren't actually guests."

"No?"

"Employees."

Emelie raised an eyebrow.

"Huh. Don't you say. You're full of surprises, Adrian."

He smiled. "Hopefully not all of them unpleasant."

"How do you like your new dress, Dr. Andersson?"

Emelie glanced down at the metallic gold skirt hugging her hips and the black crop top Adrian's staff had somehow convinced her to wear.

"Hm. It's a bit tight, but it suits me, I suppose. Thanks for the gift."



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"See? You're already adapting to island life."

Over the following weeks Adrian seemed to take a particular interest in her wardrobe. Every new outfit was slightly more revealing than the last. Nothing outrageous on its own, at least not by the standards of the island, but enough that Emelie gradually realized she was being grouped with a very different category of women than she had intended.

The guests appeared to assume she belonged there. The staff certainly did, which could prove to be an advantage for her investigations, so she leaned in and seemed to appreciate the gifts. She was young, blonde, attractive, always seen near Adrian, and increasingly dressed according to his preferences. To an outsider, there was little separating her from the women who accompanied wealthy guests around the resort.

Only a close inspection revealed something different.



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There was still a sharpness in her expression, a habit of observing everything around her, that did not quite fit the role she appeared to be playing. Her searched had proven useless and she started planning to leave the island even though Adrian had full control over departures and seemed to enjoy her presence.

One afternoon she found a black costume laid out on her bed. It came with absurd rabbit ears, a bow tie and sheer tights. She put it on. Then she marched straight across the villa and found Adrian lounging by the pool. "Oh my God Adrian! This outfit is so humiliating." "Come on, Emelie. We're throwing a costume party today!" He smiled. "You look perfect in it! Didn't you tell me you wanted to have more fun?" "You're right, I guess!"

A few hours later, still wearing Adrian's ridiculous outfit, Emelie slipped away from the public areas of the resort and entered a restricted section of the island she had been trying to access for days.



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Nobody seemed to question her presence as she clearly seemed to be one of the many female employees freely roaming on the island. There were a few warning signs but nobody was around so she entered the building. Emelie knew she was doing something dangerous but that was the whole purpose of her stay on the island, and she had to take her chances.

The atmosphere changed immediately. The music disappeared. The scent of sunscreen and tropical flowers gave way to disinfectant and seawater. Glass doors replaced polished wooden hallways. Cameras watched every corridor. "This doesn't look like a wellness center..." she muttered. Even after everything she had seen, she was not prepared for this.

The room beyond the final door resembled a laboratory more than a medical facility. Stainless steel surfaces reflected the harsh white lights overhead. The air felt cold and damp.



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The creature lying on the wet metallic table looked as though someone had started with a woman and then slowly forgotten where the human body was supposed to end.

Her skin was dark, smooth and glossy. Her arms had flattened into broad fins. Below the waist there were no legs at all, only a muscular seal-like tail resting in a puddle of seawater. For a few seconds Emelie just stared at her. Then the creature's eyes locked onto hers. There was intelligence there.



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Something unmistakably human. A sparkle in her eyes showed how she had seen in Emelie a different presence than those usually around her.

"Ayúdame, por favor..." she gargled. The words emerged with difficulty. The hybrid twisted awkwardly on the table. The movement sent water splashing across the steel surface. Her tail struck the metal with a heavy slap.

Emelie, worried that the noise would attract people, told her to shut up and looked around.



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Other mermaid experiments had been more successful, like demonstrated by the photos of Ana hanging on the room's walls, now blonde and only with her lower half covered in scales resembling a costume, to the point that guests assumed it was just that.

Emelie recognized her, visitors photographed her constantly. Without noticing that she had lost her ability to speak and never managed to move more than a few meters away from the shoreline.

Her plea was cut short by the sound of a door opening somewhere behind them. Emelie turned. Two security guards were already entering the room. For a brief second she considered running. Then she remembered where she was.