

“Hey. I brought you this.”

I press the wrinkled picture up against the aquarium glass, smoothing it so that she can see the constellations in it, unbroken- almost as if it's real, like a little window to the Milky Way. The minute I let go, it wrinkles up again, drifting to the floor between the railing and the side of the tank. I peer down- it has landed so that, if she lay on her stomach, she could still see the stars through the glass.

“Whatever. You can keep it,” I say.

She catches my eyes, and presses her hand against the tank like it could melt through. Her fingertips are candle-wax, luminous and webbed with skin. I don't understand what she's trying to say, but I move to match my palm to hers, hesitating and curling my fingers before resting on the surface. I do not press. Of course, these aquariums hold thousands of liters of water on a daily basis, and the mermaid's tank is particularly reinforced- I wouldn't be able to crack it if I tried. But maybe the reason I'm hesitating is because I'm scared that I might. Try to break it, I mean. As if maybe I could.

But I wouldn't risk her like that. There is a plaque on the wall that details how very delicate she is: how easily her bones could snap, how oil sticks to and stains her, and how she looks like she's always swimming under ultraviolet light- not by an accident of pigment- but because her skin is so fly-wing fragile that the blue of her veins shows through it. It is a map to her weak hinges, a chart detailing how very possible it is to unravel her. She wouldn't survive five minutes out of water. But sometimes, even knowing that- even knowing that I know better-

I imagine the great, thunderbolt crack of the glass. I imagine the jagged shards buckling, the water in a shuddering rush, her tail, limp on the soggy crimson carpet, her eyes blinking in the pale light. I imagine that she doesn't choke on the air, that her tail isn't shredded as her scales scrape off- that she doesn't mind it, the way the air slips and clings to her skin.

In my best daydreams, I pretend that I am strong enough to crack the glass-

I pretend that the flood of aquarium-water could carry her right out to the clean sea, and a beach where I could go visit her on weekends. In my best daydreams, we grow old that way- I spend my Saturdays talking to her, asking questions, and reading her answers in the tilt of her shoulders and curl of her tail as she peers up from the water. Sometimes she gives me shells, in those dreams- great, Corinthian things, with curling spines and skeletal patterns, or she presses a piece of water-softened sea-glass into my palm, and we talk in this way, her through objects and me through sound. I tell her how I quit being a secretary: she tells me fish-bones, like splinters of sun under my fingertips. I tell her I'm happy, and she tells me a handful of sand. Like I said, these are dreams.

What would actually happen is this: her delicate gills would clog with pollutants in her first sluggish gasp of breath, and she would choke on dust and particulates long before a rescue crew could even begin to think about arriving. I try to stop imagining it there, but my brain continues without me, following the scene to its inevitable conclusion, the choking and the coughing and the pale, bloated face of her. Before I know what's happening, my eyes have been tear-blurred and my face is flushed with the sadness of something that hasn't even happened. I keep my hand gentle on the glass, brush the shadow of hers, and hope she understands it isn't because I don't care.

Sometimes, I catch her staring at the painted fish on the back of her tank, tracing them with her hands, looking lost and confused and a little bit frustrated. She has scratched away the paint around several of them, leaving their fins and bodies intact, as if she's trying to excavate them from the wall. As if they're trapped, too, and she's trying to scoop them from the cement and set them free- but it doesn't matter what she does. They don't move. They just sit there.

They keep staring.

The Aquarium wouldn't hear of setting her free, of course. They say she's too delicate. They say she's an ancient creature, maybe the last of her kind, and that she doesn't have the survival skills to cope with the rapidly changing oceans.

After all, they say, she doesn't make tools, she shows no capacity for reason or understanding, and she doesn't even seem to have a concept of language. As if, that's that, then- if she doesn't have a language, after all, she's hardly *real*, is she? She can't be intelligent, not if she doesn't do things the way we do. It's an argument that never fails to hurt, each time in new and unexpected ways.

I do wish I could talk to her, though. It would be easier than talking *at* her. That's what I do, really. I come to the aquarium, and I talk at the mermaid. I'm sure most of the security guards have long-since dismissed me as a harmless nutcase, as I sit there, breath fogging on the glass, whispering about the woman who made fun of me at work, or about how the aquariums must look at night, like separate universes boiling blue and cold through the cracks in our own. Sometimes I read poetry, or mutter through a chapter of a book, or whisper her an article about the sea. I don't even know if she listens, really, or if she just likes having a recognizable face sitting here day after day, or if she's as fascinated by me as I am by her. If she even understands why I care, or if I care, or what caring is. It's hard to be friends with someone who may have no concept of friendship.

Sometimes that's what gets me the most- the horrible *vagueness* of it all. Certainly, she likes my corner of the tank better than the other ones, but it could be mere coincidence. Certainly, her eyes follow me. She stares like chemicals burn. But that could be a vacant stare, for all I know- perhaps she always looks like that. Sometimes I read way too much into these things. In any case, I lean in, pressing my forehead against the glass, too, as if somehow that could let me connect to what she's thinking, like I could feel some connection if only I listened hard enough. As if I could tell her, "I'm on your side."

"Hey," I whisper.

"Ma'am."

I look up. It's Jared- one of the more polite security guards.

"Please don't touch the glass," he says.

"Right," I say, "Sorry." I take my hand away, slowly. The mermaid doesn't.

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She keeps reaching, her one palm pressed like a bruise to the side of the tank.

Her brow is faintly creased, with worry or annoyance or maybe with some mermaid-emotion I can't name or fathom- and I feel like maybe she understands. Her tail weaves slightly above her, ragged silk in a manufactured current, keeping her in place. If she presses any harder, I will see the bones of her hand through her skin.

It isn't the first time she's done this. God knows it won't be the last. I just- I wish I knew what she was trying to say.

She frowns, and concentrates, and starts moving her fingers deliberately, tilting her nails inward so they scrape against the glass. The sound is muted, but I still hear the faint sciiiiiiiiitch of it. Her hands are hieroglyphs- and stare as I might, I can't decipher them. Of course, this doesn't make any sense. Surely- if she has any reason at all- she knows, by now, that the glass is too thick to break through. Surely she sees-

And suddenly I feel like an idiot, because it's not her I'm thinking about, of course it's not. So I mute my thoughts, because it's not fair, it really isn't, to be blaming her for my own inability to stop *wishing*. And I just watch.

She continues her strange gestures, fingernails scraping glass. She isn't forming any letters or symbols that I can see- just meaningless sweeps, lines and curves. She isn't even denting the glass. I can tell that she knows it, too, because her face grows frustrated, and she tries to retrace her lines, over, and over, and over- and then just one line- and then just one part of the line- until it gets to the point where she's digging at a single point on the glass wall with all of her might, and then, suddenly- her fingernail snaps.

Well, not snaps, so much as *bends backward* on itself- there's only so much snapping things can do, in the water- but clearly it causes her pain, because she opens her mouth, as if gasping, and then clutches her hand to her chest. Her eyes cinch tight, as if she wants to cry but can't, and her body curls in on itself, buckling gently into fetal position. She drifts to the floor of her tank.

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Long after she has landed on the plastic-gravel base, her tail is still fluttering down, and the long tendril-like fins on either side of her curl lazily above her in

the water. Her hair blooms, then settles like a halo of blue silk, and all I can think is that if she's an angel, she's the most broken-looking one I've ever seen, and how could God not have pitied Lucifer, if he'd looked like this when he fell? Although, of course, in our own allegorical universe, I am so far from god- if anything, I'm a soul in limbo. My heart aches to reach out and help her, or to turn away so that I can't see, but I'm stuck. I don't move in either direction.

As she lies there, I can see the faint smudges of shed scales her fingers have left on the glass- tiny things, almost invisible, glittering and pale- and beyond them, the painted fish on the wall of her tank- and it starts to dawn on me, slowly, at first, and then in a great rush, that- well, it's exactly the same thing. The thought is unbelievable at first, but I explore it, and eventually, after prodding it around like a loose tooth, I am forced to conclude, it is- it is *exactly* the same thing.

She was doing to me what she has tried to do for the painted fish on the wall. She was trying to carve me out of the glass, and put me safely back in the water. She thinks I'm trapped, here, outside in the air.

She's trying to set me free.

The mermaid is swimming back up to me, again, her face determined, as if the hurt she just felt was only a minor setback, and I feel so horribly guilty, and also, strangely, so horribly grateful, about the implications of what she's doing, that I just stare for a moment or two as she starts again, scratching around my outline, tracing me, like a corpse at a crime scene. In the end, it's only by rapping gently on the glass (earning myself a slight glare from Jared the Security Guard) that I can get her attention. I lean in, and say, as earnestly as I can, as if maybe if I sound like I mean it, she'll magically understand-

"Listen, hey, listen, that's not going to work. It doesn't work like that."

She tilts her head.

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"You can't get through that way. And anyway, I like it out here. Really, I'm okay. I'm fine. I'm free, look," I wave my arm, "Totally free."

She shakes her head, and presses both of her hands towards me, and I

remember the first time I saw her, drifting in lazy loops around the upper right-hand corner of the tank, hands limp at her sides. She was staring straight ahead as she looped, but I don't think she was seeing anything, really. She was just turning- and turning- and turning- like there was something she was looking for, but she'd forgotten what it was. Her hair fluttered wistfully behind her, all gossamer, trailing like fingertips. And she looked lonely, I remember that- she just looked so desperately lonely.

But now I feel like everything is flipped from the way it used to be, and I'm not sure when I started to be the one that needed saving, only, I think, maybe we have to reach some middle ground here, because we can't both be always trying to save each other. Can we?

"You're right, I guess," I say, leaning in towards the glass. Jared starts forward with a warning look, but I keep myself with just a paper-thin layer of air between me and the actual tank, and I let my hand hover over hers, not even touching, just- pretending to touch. But then, we've always been pretending, haven't we? Pretending that we understand each other, or know each other. And, in a way I don't think I could ever properly explain, this feels more real than anything else.

"There are a lot of things I can't do, not properly," I say, "I can't sing. I can't talk to people without wanting to scream. I can't break aquarium glass."

"Hey," I say, "Hey. Thank you. I don't know if I've ever said it." Around me, the crowd is starting to trundle and bump it's way back towards the doors.

"Ma'am," Jared says, in a way that suggests that his patience is going to be gone in a minute, "We're closing."

"Just a minute," I say, to him, and then I turn back to her, "I have to go."

She frowns.

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"I have to leave, it's time to leave," I say, and I take my hand away, trying to show her, with my expression, my eyes, the reluctance of my fingertips, that I do not *want* to leave, only, I don't really have much of a choice. I don't know how much she understands of it, but she lets her hands fall hopelessly to her sides.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say, and then, for good measure, just in case she *can* hear me, “You know, you should probably stop trying to scratch the fish out of your wall. They’re not real. I mean, not really real.”

She keeps staring at me.

At last, I shrug, “Hey, what do I know.”

“Ma’am,” Jared says, and he sounds a bit exasperated.

“I know,” I tell him, slinging my purse over my shoulder, and then fluttering my fingers goodbye back towards the mermaid. She flutters her fingers back, but I can tell that it’s only an imitation. She doesn’t know what it means. She only knows that I smile when she does it. (But then, maybe that’s all anyone knows, really- maybe that’s why we do anything.)

The aquarium halls are empty and cold and, in the abandoned rooms, my footsteps sound like a heartbeat. I feel like a trespasser when I’m alone, here, where I feel completely at home among the crowds. I’m not sure which feeling is true. I’m not sure either of them has to be.

Sometimes I feel like ‘truth’ is a concept we only use because we need to sleep at night. Sometimes I feel like even the stars are make-believe. Has anyone ever looked up and automatically said, “Oh, that’s a giant ball of reactive chemicals?” No. We melt the sky into metaphors. Stars become diamonds, and clouds become cotton tufts, and even with our tools and our language, really, it’s still all so tangled. It’s still such a mess. How do you dig the idea of what stars really are out of all of these make-believe images of what they should be? Sometimes, I don’t see how anyone does anything, with all this glass. But my hand still tingles where she didn’t touch it. So maybe we’re getting there.