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Sand and Ruin and Gold

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Once upon a time . . . that's how the old stories always begin.

Once upon a time there was a king of a fallen kingdom. He was just and he was beloved. Or so the numbers said. One day, he gathered together the greatest, wisest minds in all the land—not sorcerers, but scientists—and he bade them fashion him a son. A prince. A perfect prince to embody his father's legacy.

The scientists each brought the prince a gift: beauty, strength, ambition, intellect, pride. But they must have forgotten *something* because when he saw the mermaids dance at the Cirque de la Mer, he ran away to join them.

For a year, he trained them, performed with them, thought he was happy. For a year he thought he was free. But then Nerites came: A merman who refused to be tamed. A captive from another kingdom. A beast in a glass cage.

The old stories always end with happy ever after. But this isn't one of the old stories. This is a story of princes and monsters.



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I must have been very young when I saw the mermaids at the Cirque de la Mer because it was my nurse who took me, and her place in my life was soon surrendered to tutors. I don't think my father ever found out. He would not have approved.

The day is little more than a sensory haze of pastel children, the laughter of strangers, and the burn of salt and chemicals at the back of my throat.

The mermaids, though. They are as vivid as stained glass, even now.

There were three I saw perform—Neaera, Arethusa, Ianessa—though it was for Neaera that the crowd went wild. She was the number one attraction, her image on every poster, shining, beautiful, and perfectly iconic: copper skin, burnished golden scales, the untamed waves of her dark-green hair. I didn't know, then, that she was the cirque's seventh Neaera.

It is that particular combination of hair and skin and scales, at least according to market research, that best meets our ideal image of a mermaid.

And it's right.

She was sun and sky and flame that day.

And I thought I had never seen anything so beautiful, or so free.

I was young. I didn't know any better.

When I turned eighteen, I ran away from home to join the cirque.



I had tried at fourteen, and sixteen, but they always brought me back. I never told anyone where I was going or why. I never told them about the mermaids.

My father was bewildered. He had hired the best geneticians in the country to create me. I was supposed to be flawless, and when he returned me to the lab, once, twice, three times, they assured him I was.

I was. I am.

Everything he coded into me is there. Everything that should have made me just like him.

But something got into my heart that day at the cirque. A piece of grit, love, or beauty, or hope. Words we didn't use so much anymore.

I thought you would need special knowledge or advanced training, perhaps some kind of background in marine biology, to be allowed to work with the Mer. But, no, all you need is the desire and—I would learn later—the ability to look good in a wetsuit, and I possessed all those things. My father was vain enough to make me an ideal in ways beyond the merely intellectual.

I didn't know if the years had changed the Cirque de la Mer, or if they had changed me, but it was strange at first to see beyond the veil of enchantment to dingy pools and peeling paint, grey concrete beneath a grey sky, in the empty times after closing when there was no laughter left. But, in some ways, that was when I liked it best, when it was ours again—we who waited when everyone else went home.

You have to understand, we did it all for love. We offered these glimpses of glorious things, too dazzled ourselves to see the truth of what we did. And the crowds flocked.

I worked without particular affiliation at first, going wherever I was needed, doing whatever I was told—scrubbing buckets, cleaning tanks and filters, injecting the necessary vitamins and antibiotics into the frozen fish that were delivered daily in huge crates. But whenever I could, I watched the mermaids, learned their names, their ways. Neaera who would sometimes lie with her head in her trainer's lap, letting her comb the tangles from her mane. Tempestuous Arethusa who had skin of lapis lazuli and hair the colour of moonlight. Ianessa, slighter and shyer than the others, whose blushes were as pale as cherry blossom. And then there was Taras, Neaera's son, who was her shining, golden shadow. Everyone loved to see them perform, mother and child together, breaking the blue-green water into diamonds as they leapt for the sun.

Those were good seasons, before Taras grew too restless and had to be taken away.

We never forgot the Mer were wild creatures. Predators. But they were our whole lives. We greeted them in the mornings, said our farewells at night, worked with them all day, talked to them, thought of them, dreamed of them. We taught them tricks that would please the crowds. We called them friends.

In those days, when I had no other chores, I liked to sit by the viewing windows of the back pool. Underwater, they were different, silent and sinuous, all the ways they were not human—their stark black eyes, the webbing between their clawed fingers—more apparent.

I was assigned to the dolphins for a while, where I scrubbed more buckets, picked up the rudiments of training and performance before—at last—they transferred me to the mermaids.

I'd become a fixture, like the sullen shark who floated in his glass tube or the sea lions scrambling on their artificial floes. And a marketable one. Nineteen years old, glazed by sun and salt and physical labour, unrecognisable. It pleased me to think perhaps even my own father wouldn't have known me. I saw him often enough—or his image, at least. He had secured another term in office. A place for everyone, and everyone in their place. A certain man for an uncertain time.

Sometimes I stared into the pixels that were his eyes, looking for the loss of me.

I never found it.



The head trainer told me there was only one way to learn to swim with the Mer and that was to swim with the Mer. Either they would take to you, or they wouldn't. "Waterwork" it was called, when you were interacting with the animals directly. The routines were demanding, a complex combination of underwater acrobatics and aerial ballet, requiring strength, grace, and above all, trust. It was reserved only for the most experienced trainers who had bonded effectively with the Mer. The rest of us waited in the shallows, restricted to whistles and hand signals and buckets of fish.

I learned a lot in those early days about training animals. Lost in behaviour shaping, stimulus discrimination, auditory queuing, and lexigram reinforcement, I never noticed how little I learned about the Mer themselves.

I never thought to be afraid.

When I ventured fully into the turquoise waters of the mermaid pool, Ianessa was the first to come to me. It felt like the moment I had been waiting for my whole life. As if I had always been holding my breath.

At a distance, or behind a pane of glass, mermaids look delicate, the trailing tendrils of their dorsal fins drifting upon the slightest eddies.

Up close, even little Ianessa was nothing but power. The beating of her fluke churned the surface of the pool to white froth, and the effortless rush of her moving was enough to push all the air from my lungs in a single, panicked exhalation. I came up, gasping and dizzy, and she surged up too, breaching with one flick of her tail, pulling me into the air with her in a torrent of streaming silver. Clawed hands at my waist, my mouth and nose seared by salt and bromide, the sky nothing but a distant ripple to my waterblurred eyes, I think I laughed. At the pinnacle of her leap, she tossed me into a swan dive, and for a moment, just that moment, I was unbound, earthless.

Free

Arethusa caught me on the way down. I clung to her on instinct alone as she whirled me through the water in a flurry of flashing scales.

We were flying, and I no longer cared about breath, the popping of my ears, or the burning in my lungs.

There was no space in me for anything but whatever it was I felt in the echo of Arethusa's heart as it pulsed against my own.

The tips of her hair had opened cuts on both my cheeks, but I didn't see the red ribbons in the water or notice the sting until later.

They said I was a natural.

It wasn't long before I was performing for the off-peak crowds and then the matinees. I had come here once, unknowingly in search of something lost, taken, or unspoken, and I had not only found it, but I was a part of it now. I never tired of the gasps, the cheers, the wide eyes, and the parted mouths. It felt a grand and magnanimous thing we did: to give the gift of wonder. Though there was something else, as well, something I could not have named or even admitted then. A sort of self-directed envy that fed on the thought that everyone else would turn in their dreams at the exit gate and return to lives more trammelled than the one I had dared to take for myself.



It was at about this time that Nerites came to us. I was so involved with the others by then, I barely remember the day he arrived. We were pleased, though—a full-grown male for the breeding programme (or cultivation, as it was called), which had fallen into abeyance since the death of Eryx, some years before I arrived. Cerebral haemorrhage, they said. It did not occur to me ask the cause. Taras's sire had been on loan from another park, and while there had been some success with artificial insemination, the cost of merman seed was prohibitive, even for the Cirque de la Mer, the biggest attraction of its kind in what remained of Europe.

Nerites came with a female, Melantheia, who was already pregnant. The stress and disorientation of travel must have been too much for her, and the child was born prematurely. We named her Ourea, but she lived only twenty-one days, a frail, twisted, listless creature her own mother several times attempted to drown before they were separated. We knew little of their origins—another cirque, we were told, which had recently closed. Melantheia was the colour of rain, grey skinned, grey scaled. Even her eyes were lighter, their iridescent surface clouded somehow.

The others were not particularly accepting of the newcomers, but this was normal. Even amongst the three who had lived together for years, rough play and dominance sparring was common, and we presumed it was the same in the wild. We knew the Mer were matriarchal, and Neaera would often rake and bite her tankmates, leaving deep lacerations in their flesh.

There were other destructive behaviours too: biting at gates, clawing at the concrete. When it was my job to clean the filters, I would often find teeth and chips of claw, and the Mer required almost constant dental irrigation—nearly all of Arethusa's lower teeth were gone—but because it was not unusual, we accepted it was normal.

Transporting Mer, especially over long distances, usually involved coating them in lanolin oil to prevent exsiccation, and it took a day or two for us to hose and peel it off the new arrivals. Of them both, at the beginning, I can recall only dirty grey ghosts pressed into ragged shapes.

And one incident, at the time its meaning unrecognised.

One of the other trainers in the shallows, who had been tossing handfuls of frozen fish to Nerites and Melantheia, was reaching down to accept Nerites's outstretched hand. This was typical relationship-classified behaviour. We all did it. We were encouraged to. The other behaviours were enrichment, training, performance, and cultivation. But when the senior

trainer saw him, she shouted for him to get out of the water, and there was a rush across the connecting bridges, a chorus of fast-moving feet rattling the metal and disturbing the Mer below. Neaera and Taras breached together, clicking to each other, water flying from them.

Panic was thick in the air. But it seemed without cause, without direction.

The trainer backed slowly out of the pool and up the landing shelf.

Nothing else was said or done. No explanations sought or given. Just a single moment, untethered in time.

I wouldn't think of it again until it was already too late. Perhaps I should have wondered what it was the senior trainer knew to fear, but my father had little regard for lost things, and I didn't think to ask about Nerites's history.

Where he had come from. What might have happened to him before he came to us. What he might have learned.

Or done to survive.

When the lanolin came off, they found he was covered in rake marks and lesions, some of which had become infected. We had intended to release him into the main pool, but it seemed preferable to keep him and his tankmate in relative isolation, at least initially. But in the end, they had to be separated even from each other, when the trainer responsible for the morning feed found the water thick with blood and ink and Nerites covered in fresh wounds, his fluke shredded raw.

I was called in to assist with the gating, as separating the Mer could be tricky when they were restive and disinclined to cooperate. We knew they'd been involved in performances at their previous cirque, but they had very little training with us.

Nevertheless, I gave a calling whistle, and Nerites came almost immediately. I rewarded him at once to reinforce the behaviour, throwing him frozen fish, which he ripped apart with his long, sharp teeth. As I ushered him through the gate, our eyes met for a moment.

It was . . . peculiar.

I felt, in some way, quite deeply seen.

I had not expected him to be obedient. I had not expected his trust.

Truthfully, I could imagine no reason for him to give it to me. It left me troubled by something I couldn't recognise then, although it became a

familiar sensation over the days that followed. A kind of agitated uncertainty I would later call shame.

He wasn't my charge, so once I had closed him into the back pool, I left him there and went about my day. Did my shows. Performed my appropriate behaviours with Neaera, Arethusa, and Ianessa as the duty roster required.

But when everything was done, I found myself standing before the viewing windows of Nerites's pool. He was floating almost motionless in the water, head bowed, the tendrils of his hair and fins swirling softly around him.

I realised then that I had never seen an adult merman before. It was bewildering, because I had thought the Mer were so familiar to me. He was larger than the others, and he moved—when he was moving—without their swift, savage grace.

Carefully. That was it. He moved as if he was too aware of his own power.

And that was absurd. Perception was one thing, imagination another, speculation yet another. It did not do to confuse them, and I was concerned at my inability to recognise where the lines lay.

Nerites opened his eyes, and I was stricken by a shiver of awareness just as I had been that morning. His eyes were shiny black, full of reflections and the impression of depth.

There was something human in the faces of the mermaids—perhaps the delicacy of their bones, the soft curves of cheek, and lip, and jaw—but, in him, there was simply . . . not. The angles were too sharp, the planes too taut, and then there were the scales crowning his brow and curling along the edge of one eye, the sweeping filaments that followed the arch of each cheek. His gills were standing in a ruff, and the effect was unexpectedly regal.

I felt as I had that day in the stadium so many years ago. The same sense of self unfurling, but it was tinged by something else now, complicated in ways it hadn't been before, and all I wanted now was to escape it.

But then he moved. With a flick of his tail, he came towards me through the water. It was quite deliberate, and I searched instinctively for precursors of aggression. I don't know what I would have done had I spotted any. It was after hours, I was alone, and while there was a wall of glass between us, I was quite abruptly reminded how big he was, all his possible strength. And yet I did not move.

His skin was very white where it wasn't cut or seeping. Not human pale, but as stark as ice or marble, save where the ripples and the shadows in the water cast their magic-lantern theatre across his body. In sharp contrast, his scales were black, without sheen or lustre, coiling like strange tattoos down his arms and over his chest. And his hair the same, streaming behind him in the water, though as he drew closer, I saw that it was streaked here and there with white. I thought at first it must have been traces of lanolin, but I learned later it was natural. Or at least not the result of stains or dye. Perhaps variegation was common in mermen. Perhaps it was the result of some loss or trauma.

I never found out.

He stopped just before me, and I gazed up at him. His dorsal fins—spiny, and more pronounced than in the mermaids—curved downwards, as if dragged towards the bottom of the pool by some invisible force. I wondered if it was simply a consequence of their greater size and weight.

I came to suspect it was not.

He raised a hand and laid it gently over the glass. The webbing between his fingers was almost transparent, the vulnerability of that stretched and tender cartilage oddly shocking in its closeness to his curving, silver claws.

His eyes gleamed like sea-polished stones.

None of the others had ever behaved like this. As a species, the Mer are strong observational learners. Arethusa had briefly developed the habit of beckoning to visitors until they approached, and then she would bear her fangs and claws and beat her tail on the glass. The screams and starts must have amused her, and it amused us until the others started doing it too.

It was very much the wrong message. Our Mer were supposed to be magical, beautiful and serene, occasionally a little mischievous. They were supposed to be happy with us. It had taken several months of low-stimulus response conditioning to train them out of it, and we still discouraged visitors from coming too close.

The way Nerites was looking at me was . . . impossible. A trick of the light.

And then I understood. This was some relic of his previous training. What he was waiting for, looking for, was the reinforcer.

I was still possessed by an almost-overwhelming and entirely irrational need to flee from him, but instead, I steadied my breathing and did not

respond. For long moments, I offered the least reinforcing scenario, and at last, his hand dropped.

I was supposed to do something else now—give him an opportunity to remain calm and attentive and be rewarded. But he was swimming away from me, spiralling slowly towards the dark surface, his filaments trailing behind him like pieces of lace and shadow.

And then I . . . I fled. And I didn't know why.

I didn't know why I was so afraid. Or if it was even fear I felt.



Drywork only was the word from management regarding the new acquisitions, which was unusual but—by that point—a relief. Desensitisation was its own paradox: unless the Mer learned to accept humans in the water, interacting with them could be dangerous, but desensitisation involved being in the water. Melantheia in particular was inconsistent and given to displays of aggression, and—now she was kept with the others—she fought with Arethusa almost constantly.

We had to cancel shows on occasion because there was too much blood in the water.

Postpone. Shows were never cancelled.

Nerites was also inconsistent—or so the other trainers said; I did not work with him much myself—but biddable.

For the first time since I'd started at the cirque, I found myself, almost without understanding why, drawn to my fellow trainers. I had never been particularly inclined to mingle—my father had meant for me to be independent—but I knew how to fit when I needed to fit, how to charm when I needed to charm, and how to get what I wanted. I was liked, I believe, though that's difficult for me to fathom. Not because I am unlikeable—again, my father ensured I am not—but because the need for such things has always evaded me.

His doing also, I think. He wanted me to be unimpeded, as he is.

But the mermaids changed me. Taught me how to ache.

The trainers saw themselves as a kind of family, drawn together by everything they had rejected. And now I can't remember any of them. Not even the ones I passed nights with, on the rare occasions that I did.

I know they had their jokes about me, but they were not unkind. They liked to pretend I was a lost prince from the old world. A little strange in some ways, since I was very much a product of the new.

I soon realised I was spending time with them because I wanted to hear about Nerites.



I had nearly mistimed a rocket hop in front of a Saturday crowd because, in the swirl of white water, suddenly all I could see was a pale hand pressed to glass.

I never made mistakes. My father had not fashioned me to make mistakes.

They were frustrated with Nerites. He had lately stopped performing certain behaviours. At first they had ascribed it to poor training, then to a lack of focus, then to a lack of intelligence. They had tried to trace it to particular stimuli, but it was too erratic and, at the same time, too . . . Various words were bandied about before they agreed upon deliberate. And then laughed. How could it be deliberate?

While the methods we were taught centred on positive reinforcement through varied and variable rewards, it was sometimes necessary to enhance the value of those rewards, so they were feeding Nerites only in response to correctly performed behaviours.

It wasn't cruel.

They were intelligent animals, and it was simply a question of conditioning.



One night, someone invited me home. Put their hand on my hand, their lips on my lips. But instead, I stayed by the viewing windows.

Nerites was floating just below the surface, barely moving. It was relatively common. A sign nearby explained that it was how they rested. His skin was healing slowly, a consequence of the superior care he was getting at the Cirque de la Mer.

I wondered . . . I found myself wondering . . . what it would be like to swim with him, to curl myself into the heat of his body against an endless, airless blue.

He didn't look at me.

I told myself it was because he didn't know I was there, but somehow I knew he did.

I went back the next night. The same.

And I resolved not to return.

My dreams were full of silken skin and rough scales, the roar of blood and air and darkness, breaches that broke the light.



Time slipped by, shaped only by the routine of the cirque. His trainers had a new word for Nerites: *intractable*.

His deviations from expected behaviours were never overt enough to cross the line into anything that could be directly corrected, but they were persistent, and soon nobody was laughing. Except some of his trainers grumbled that they thought *he* might be.

Not laughing precisely—the Mer didn't have the capability, even if they had the instinct—but they certainly had some sense of play. Performances were built around it, and visitors loved to see the animals enjoying what they did. On quiet nights, when nearly everyone was gone, I would sometimes see Neaera and Taras jumping together through the broken moonlight. There were coordination routines in the shows, involving two, or sometimes three, of the Mer. But this wasn't like that. Their bodies made different shapes.

The others never joined them. And I didn't like how I felt when I watched. As if I was taking something that didn't belong to me. That perhaps even what I'd found that day in the stadium was stolen.

I reminded myself that Nerites wasn't my concern. But I knew the Mer, I knew the way they moved, and I knew he wasn't playing. There was no joy in his anticlockwise twists, his mistimed jumps, his consistently graceless slides. No mischief or pleasure.

Some of his trainers said they didn't like the way he looked at them. It wasn't aggression. But it was something that unsettled people.

I remembered the way he had looked at me. Everything that couldn't have been in his eyes. Nothing but a desperate reflection of my own.



The death of Ourea had been yet another setback for the cultivation programme, and management was growing impatient. It wasn't difficult to see why. A child barely capable of life and a breeding pair we couldn't breed.

We had thought—hoped—that Melantheia's hostility to Nerites was a consequence of her pregnancy, or the close quarters in which they'd travelled, but it never abated. Perhaps the problem was the presence of the other mermaids, because if anything, her aggression intensified.

But what choice did we have?

I saw them together only once, silent in their underwater savagery, bright-red streamers unravelling all around them. I wondered why he didn't fight—fight more or fight harder. But his size was a disadvantage in the smaller tanks, and she was merciless, all malice and bloodied claws.

We had no more success with the others. Arethusa was just as aggressive as Melantheia, but we couldn't afford to take any risks with her because she was needed for shows. And Ianessa was simply terrified. As far as we observed, they never so much as brushed fins, but it was nearly impossible to coax her into a pool with Nerites.

Her trainer used to weep when he heard her screaming.

I still remember the promotional stills of them. Like a fantasy from another time or place, Ianessa, with her hair streaming down her back, rising from the water to embrace him, their smiling lips separated only by a flare of sunlight.

I think he went to management, but I'm not sure what happened. I only know he left a few days later.

They still sold the prints and postcards, though. It was strange to see them in the gift shops and pasted on the walls, those images of ghosts.



Ianessa had always been one of the easiest of the Mer to work with. That didn't change, but something had. She was still perfectly compliant, but she was difficult to engage, her eyes always sliding away to watch the crowds in the stadium or the visitors milling by the barriers.

As for Nerites, I remember him in monochrome, a listless shadow, fading a little with every day that passed.

But they won him over in the end. From a pool away, I saw him perform a perfect corkscrew, his body a twist of black and white, and silver water, shining for a moment in the still air.

He was so beautiful. It stole my breath like a fist to my throat.

His trainers clapped and cheered, and threw him fish, and stroked his hair.



I don't know why I went to him that night. I hadn't for such a long time. But some of his rake marks had festered and required a course of treatment, so I knew he'd be alone.

I found him at the bottom of his pool, folded into himself against one of the concrete walls, a lump of unshifting shadow.

My first thought was that he was ill.

But at my approach, he swiftly uncurled and began to swim in haphazard zigzags, back and forth across the pool. I'd never seen him move like that before, fast and frantic, twisting away from the corners of the tank only a second before he collided with them.

I didn't know what to do.

It almost seemed as though he was trying to get away from me, but the viewing windows were set into the whole length of the enclosure, and there was nowhere he could go.

Without really thinking about it, simply wanting to calm him, I put my palm against the glass.

He stilled the moment he saw me do it.

Seconds passed, enough of them to make me feel foolish standing there in the dark with my hand outstretched. And then he surged towards me—I was sufficiently unnerved to ascribe desperation to a movement born of simple agitation—and he covered my palm with his.

I don't know how long we stood there, hand-to-hand across a panel of touch-warmed glass.

I took the memory of his eyes with me when I left.



He was deemed ready to join the show. He became a sort of epilogue to it. We would clear the pool and open his gate, and he would perform a swift perimeter, a few splashes, jumps, and surfaces, before finally presenting on the rock at the forward-centre of the enclosure. There would be a moment of silence, then wild applause.

I couldn't watch. Even though he was glorious—crowd-pleasing, showstopping, a wild and magnificent animal—I couldn't watch.

The water cascaded down his skin like tears, and my palms stung, remembering glass.



Those were restless times, somehow. Working with the Mer was never without incident, but the incidents seemed to accumulate. Inconsistency, moodiness, biting, clawing, nothing that really mattered or meant anything, but most of us left the water bleeding. There was one occasion when Neaera body slammed a junior trainer into the wall of the tank, breaking his arm and leaving him with a mild concussion. Trainer error, management said.

Most people agreed. Of course, there was a degree of risk in entering the natural environment of a predatory animal, but the Mer were not prone to such behaviours unless you did something wrong.

But I was starting to see other things. I noticed how often they raked each other. How often they floated almost motionless in the water. How often the sun burned their shoulders and made the skin crack and peel.

It was not long after this that Taras left us. He had been troublesome for a long time, restive and restless, aggressive, disruptive. He had also taken to hassling Neaera during performances, so we had to close him into one of the smaller pools, but even then, they vocalised constantly, which was distracting. There was one show where his cries were particularly strident—

distressed, even, though there was nothing to distress him—which meant Neaera was unfocused and unresponsive.

I should probably have left the water. I don't know why I didn't.

I suppose I thought I could finish the show.

But as I got into position for a hydro, she caught my foot and instead of pushing me up, dragged me down into the depths.

I was stronger than most of the trainers. I could hold my breath for longer.

That was probably the only reason I didn't die that day.

Neaera pinned me to the concrete floor. In that moment, her drawn-back lips and her needlepoint fangs made her bestial. I put a hand to her face, trying to make her see, but her eyes were wild and black and empty.

If nothing else, I knew better than to struggle.

The surface was a pale and distant glow.

And suddenly, she was dragging me towards it. I was bruised, bloody, breathless, my own weakness perhaps the most shocking thing of all.

We breached, and I tried to pull away, but that only made her tighten her grip, claws shredding my skin like tissue paper.

One of the trainers was talking to the crowd about the Mer—their biology, their habits, how we trained them, the usual information that we dispensed without thought or effort—while the others attempted to bring Neaera back under control.

I just breathed. Breathed. Breathed.

And she took me down again.

To this day, I don't know what made her let me go. Perhaps the calls and signals finally reached her. Or I did. Or some still-more-frantic cry from Taras distracted her.

My world was a narrowing ribbon when she took me up a second time.

But I had just enough awareness left to realise I was—by miracle or accident—free. I swam for the shallows with limbs that felt almost too heavy to move. A net came up behind me, and hands pulled me to shore.

I thought I heard Neaera clicking. I didn't know what that meant, either.

I just bled and choked and gasped and hurt and felt, for the first time in my life, afraid.



I was back in the water as soon as I was fit again. I knew I had to or I wouldn't, but it was never the same again.

Though, in truth, it had not been the same for a long time.

Or had never been more than a picture on a poster.

Soon after, they took Taras away. Transferred him to another cirque. We had to corral him into the medical pool and lift him out in a sling.

As part of our cultivation programme, we ran a daily battery of tests on the Mer, monitoring their health and growth and general physical wellbeing. It helped us learn about them and care for them. They were strongly reinforced for this, so Taras was initially compliant.

But Neaera somehow seemed to . . . understand, and began to shriek.

High-pitched, raw, and terrible. I'd never heard any of them make a sound like it.

And it didn't stop. All day and all night, Neaera crouched in a corner of the tank and screamed.

Vocalised. We were meant to say she vocalised.

The others were silent. They would move towards her through the water sometimes, and then swim away again.

I didn't know what to call any of this.

Except . . .

Grief. It was grief.

Maybe time and routine dulled its edges, but by then I didn't know what she was capable of remembering, or forgetting, or feeling.



The summer that year was sunless, just grey heat rolling down from a heavy sky. Everything stagnated, sweltered, sweated itself to sepia.

For the first time, I thought about leaving. But where would I go, a man without dreams? Back to my father? Perhaps this had been in my blueprint all along.

It was just after closing on Reunification Day, the last of the stragglers gathered up and banished back to their world. A spiral of faded, plastic bunting from the celebrations had blown into one of the pools. I went to get a pole to hook it out but heard a splash and turned in time to see Nerites

leap from the water in a gleam of skin and scales. The wind whisked the ribbon from between his fingers, and he reached after it, his body twisting sinuously in the air before he crashed into the pool again.

I'd never seen him—or any of them—move like that before. The jumps and slides we taught them were supposed to mimic their natural behaviours, but they rarely performed them spontaneously. And this was something else again: a wild leap and an ungainly splash, more beautiful to me than the most perfect bow or spin because it seemed so absolutely heedless.

He surfaced again, almost vertical, spinning in the pale-grey spray, one hand catching for the bunting's tail. A tug, and it tumbled from the sky, nothing but a lifeless piece of string.

For a moment, he simply looked at it.

Was it just an animal's confusion? Or was it loss, or play, or something more complicated still? Something even I couldn't name.

He leaned back, opened his fingers, and let the wind reclaim his prize.

It swirled across the enclosure and landed at my feet.

There was another clumsy splash from Nerites, and he partially vanished beneath the water, leaving just his eyes watching me and his hair spreading like ink through the greyish blue. If I hadn't known better than to anthropomorphise, I could almost have believed he was embarrassed, as though I had inadvertently trespassed upon some private moment.

I bent and picked up the bunting. Let it unfurl from my hands, so that it trailed in the water not far from where Nerites waited.

His head turned almost imperceptibly.

The faded red-and-blue flags fluttered.

The whole world held its breath with me.

Almost as if he couldn't help himself, he sprang for the string like a great cat. I twitched it out of reach, and he plunged back into the water, emerging a second or two later to stare at me. Maybe it was just the tangled hair and the water slipping down his face, but he looked comically outraged.

He lunged forward and took another swipe at the ribbon. It tangled briefly in one of his claws, but I tugged it free, and the next thing I knew, I was running along the edge of the enclosure with a bit of bunting and Nerites in pursuit, skimming swift and effortless across the surface of the pool, his eyes shining.

It had seemed such a simple thing at first. A piece of an old, long-compromised pleasure.

But suddenly I was sick with sorrow. For this too-hot day and this too-small pool, and for Nerites, alone in the tank, jumping after a scrap of wizened fabric blown his way by chance.

A pathetic simulacrum of happiness he had impossibly chosen to share with me.

I stopped. It seemed too much of nothing. And I'd forgotten how vulnerable I was. That what I was doing was inherently dangerous.

He captured the end of the bunting and tugged. I let go at once, but the string was snagged around my wrist and the ground was slick with fish guts and water. He didn't even have to pull hard; I didn't stand a chance. I was going to fall into his pool, and he was going to drown me, or rip me to pieces, or beat me to death against the walls.

Instead, he caught me.

And his arms were as strong as I'd once half dreamed they would be, and beneath my fingers, I felt the grooves of all his scars. On instinct, I curled my legs around his waist, as I might with have done with Neaera or Arethusa as we danced for the pleasure of the crowd.

The water was too warm, brackish and chemical-sour.

I saw myself, summer-flushed and golden, reflected in his eyes.

No glass between us now.

The steady beating of his tail bore us up. His skin was rough and smooth under my palms. He smelled of blood and salt. I wasn't used to this kind of stillness, this kind of closeness. I should have been terrified—I'm sure I was—but, in the confusion of it, all I felt was safe.

How could I ask him not to hurt me? I wasn't even sure I deserved to.

Ask. Or not be hurt.

Unthinking, I slid a hand up the column of his neck and into his wild, wild hair, wary of the barbs. I felt him shudder. It rippled through our bodies and into the water all around us.

The Mer were social. Tactile. It was how we related to them, rewarded them.

This was . . . that. Just that. It was how I would live. If I lived.

He leaned in and stroked the edge of his brow across my cheek. He was as cool as a shell.

We floated there awhile as the sky darkened. I wondered if this was loneliness. Whatever it was that made me yield to him instead of struggle. Whatever it was that made him hold me instead of kill me.

When it began to rain, we turned our faces together into the hot, treacleheavy drops. They clung to my skin and slid from his, leaving trails of fading silver. He tugged me down, his claws grazing my ribs through my wetsuit, and the water closed over us.

I didn't resist. His grip was firm, not cruel, but I couldn't have escaped. I wasn't sure I wanted to. In that submerged blue-grey world, Nerites was onyx and ivory and power itself, and I was his.

I had never truly been anyone's before.

The drumming of the rain above sounded like applause.

My lungs were beginning to burn, darkness gathering at the corners of my eyes.

But all I cared about was the body wrapped around mine, its shifting muscles and beating tail, the smoothness of skin and the roughness of scale, the unending black of his glistening, alien eyes. The tips of his hair had split the fabric of my wetsuit, so I felt sometimes the chill of him, the tenderness of his flesh.

Images from my life flickered at the edges of my consciousness. Archive footage, grainy and irrelevant. Faces I barely remembered. The spaces of my father's house. A world I had seen only through high windows.

Nothing was more real or more perfect to me than this moment. Dying in Nerites's arms to the beating of his heart and the rain.

His gills came up as he sealed his mouth over mine and gave me his breath. I tasted salt and blood and him. I took him into me, and it was life that joined us then, not death.

Eventually, he swam back with me to the shallows. When or why I didn't know. I only knew the rain had stopped, and I would have stayed.

When he pushed me out of the pool, perhaps I should have run, as I had that time from Neaera, but I didn't. He folded his elbows on the ledge and gazed up at me. Intent.

What was I supposed to do? Positively reinforce? Positively reinforce... what? The way he had . . . the way we had . . . I thought he might be waiting for something, but none of the behaviours made sense.

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And I \dots I was \dots what was I?
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A man who . . .

I scrambled onto dry land and over to one of the feeding buckets. It was mainly scraps and melted ice, but there were a few wilting fish at the bottom. I grabbed one and tossed it to Nerites.

He caught it just before it hit him in the face. Stared for a moment at me, and then at the fish in his hand, before he ripped it to pieces and flung the tatters in my direction.

Or at me. He threw them at me.

The amount of food we gave to the Mer was carefully controlled. We didn't starve them, but they had to be compliant, and the rewards we gave them had to be worth something.

Nerites couldn't have not been hungry.

He pushed away from the ledge and dived to the bottom of the pool, a ripple of fast-moving darkness.

Anger, betrayal, pride. These, I knew, belonged to human creatures.

For all his care—I did not dare call it anything else—Nerites's teeth had filled my mouth with small cuts. I traced them with my tongue, waking bright points of pain and the memory of his touch.



I don't know when, but it was not long after this that Melantheia died.

She and Arethusa were engaged in one of their usual dominance struggles. It was a few minutes before a performance, so we weren't paying much attention. But then came a crack of bone and a billow of red and a grey body thrashing and jerking in the water.

I think, at first, we were simply relieved it wasn't Arethusa. Before we realised it was serious.

We tried to coax Melantheia into the medical pool, but we couldn't reach her. In her agony, she could neither understand nor trust us. All we could do was corral the others and watch as she died. It lasted nearly two hours, and left the pool a sickly mire of blood, bile, and vomit it took us several days to drain and clean.

According to the necropsy, the cause of death was a severed artery. The result of a splintered jaw.

It turned out she was in the early stages of pregnancy.

Nobody had liked Melantheia. She had been unlovely and challenging to work with. But it was difficult somehow to go on without her. And Neaera had never been quite the same since Taras had left us.

Since Taras had been taken.

Management's main concern was the cultivation programme.

I had only questions, uncertainties, and shame. A kiss that was not a kiss from a man who was not a man.



One day, they took Nerites to the medical pool and strapped him down in order to extract his semen. It had been decided that artificial insemination was less risky and less likely to encourage aggression in the animals. I knew that what they did to him was a common technique and a well-rewarded behaviour, but he fought the whole time. And when he saw me, he screamed, and it reminded me of Neaera in some ways, and in others not at all. Everything about the way it sounded was different, but the pain was just the same.

In the confusion, one of the less experienced trainers stepped too close, and he tore her arm open to the bone.

It was the last thing I saw before I fled, but I'd already seen too much.

I had seen him made less than a beast. Mere object, commodity, a thing to be used. And I couldn't care anymore what I was, or what he was, or if we were different or the same.



The moon was a crack of light that night as I dived into Nerites's pool. I found him at the bottom of it, clawing and biting at the concrete edges, blood trickling from his claws and mouth.

Apart from Neaera and Taras, the Mer did not vocalise often, Nerites even less. But I could hear him now. Soft, almost incoherent sounds, that rippled through the water and echoed in the tank.

We had not been encouraged to pay much heed to their utterances. We had never looked for structure or for meaning, but now that I was underwater I was struck by the differences between Neaera and Taras,

Arethusa, Ianessa, Nerites, and Melantheia. Certainly they didn't look alike —which I had assumed was natural variation within species, much like the domestic cats that had once been common—but they didn't sound alike, either.

I didn't know what it meant.

I didn't know what anything meant.

And though he must have known I was there, Nerites wouldn't look at me. I reached out to touch his shoulder through the tangle of his hair, and he whirled on me, crimson-stained and monstrous, all claws and needle fangs.

His hands closed around my wrists, and he bore me to the floor, pinning me there with all his strength and hurt and fury. I lost the last of my air, the bubbles flurrying to nothing in the water. If he let me live this time, he would leave me with bruises, possibly scars, and the memory of his eyes, far too full of pain and shame and other far-too-human things.

My father had not thought I would ever need gentleness, care, or love.

I had never before felt the lack.

I brought my legs up to cradle him. Draw him close.

Shudders ripped through him, and his head found a place to press against the tender curve of my neck and shoulder, where my skin felt too thin and the blood too hot. Our bodies surely weren't designed to fit each other, but they found ways, softly falling together through the water.

The only fear was a physical instinct, and most of the pain was fading. His harshest touches adorned me like garlands, and I was light, nothing but light breaking into light.

He left me in the shallows. Tattered, breathless, almost unconscious.

My eyes were full of water, and my first breath hurt unimaginably more than my last.



He killed one of the other trainers the next day. He was still the finale of every performance, pure, breathtaking spectacle. He swam the perimeter as directed, while the crowd gasped and pursued him with their avaricious eyes, did his bows and jumps and slides, but rather than presenting on his rock to a crescendo of music and applause, he surged out of the water, grabbed his trainer, and yanked her under.

He was beautiful and terrible, and there was no pretending this was part of the routine.

Not when the trainer surfaced, screaming, and screaming, and screaming.

Nerites came up under her, tossed her into the air like a broken thing, and shredded her to bloody ribbons.

There wasn't even a body to retrieve. Just scraps of cloth and chunks of meat.

The visitors, of course, were taken away rapidly. But everyone had seen. Everyone knew.

The aftermath was silence. Nerites, strangely meek, with flesh still hanging from his teeth and blood slick on his claws, was gated into one of the back pools. He was too valuable to destroy and too dangerous to keep.

Nobody looked at him or any of them. Nobody knew what to do.

Except, by nightfall, I did.



I took one of the maintenance vehicles and drove it as close to the mermaid enclosure as I could get. There were security cameras all over the cirque, but I hoped by the time anyone realised what I was doing, it would be too late to stop me.

Something acrid burned at the back of my throat.

I thought perhaps I was desperate. And afraid. Neither were things my father had ever meant me to feel. But then, nor was whatever impelled me to do what I did. I had found the capacity for it the day my nurse had brought me here, but this was its only expression.

It was not a moral impulse. It was something entirely different. Something entirely personal.

The truth was, I barely thought of the others. I only thought of Nerites.

I had, at least, sufficient foresight to have brought lanolin oil, but he wouldn't approach me while I held it. I put the jar aside, and he came to me in the shallows. When I held out my hand, he took it with the same trust he had always shown me.

How had he known? How had he seen this wild, lost, hungry thing inside me? The only thing that was truly mine.

I lifted him into my arms. Out of the water, he was light for his size, a creature of shadows and moonlight. He nestled against my breast as a lover might.

But he was not my lover. Beautiful Nerites with his savage heart and his bloody kisses.

I bundled him into the truck and drove. Between the enclosures, past the brightly painted facades, the restaurants, and the gift shops, to the parts of the cirque no visitors were allowed to see, or even know were there. And finally, through the padlocked metal gates and into the city, leaving lights and sirens, raised voices, shock and fury, in our wake.

I'd made sure to fill the tank, so I probably had enough fuel for three hundred miles, perhaps a little more. But I had no idea of the world that lay beyond the safe confines of the city. I did not think there would be petrol.

I did not even know where the sea lay, if it was still a thing that was there when everything else had changed or died or broken. Or what I would do when I found it. Could Nerites survive in those cold, dark waters? Would he find others like him? If he did, would they accept him? Did he care? Maybe all I offered him was another kind of loneliness, a different death.

Freedom of a kind. The only kind we knew.

We were barely pursued, and we weren't stopped. Any citizen was free to leave the city; it was simply that nobody wanted to.

But when we crossed the barriers, I didn't look back.



The roads were empty, the darkness heavy around us, the silence as deep as it was underwater. The ruined moon wavered in its haze of cloud and stardust. Its shattered light made a pattern of fresh scars on Nerites's skin. His scales were already beginning to crack and flake.

What had I done?

I let the engine idle a moment or two. Rested my head against the steering wheel, watched the shadows drown in the dips and angles of his face.

He watched me in return, silent, his eyes lost without light. Then, he lifted his hand and pressed it against the space between us.

And, of course, I met him, palm to palm, seconds sliding past us as we touched.

We couldn't afford to linger. I broke away, chose the single bright star that remained, and drove.

Into the wild spaces of the world.

Where we were nothing but horizon.

I tracked time by the fading dark and Nerites's ragged breath.

I'd brought water, but it wasn't enough.

It rained a little. I stopped the car and carried him into it. Let it run over his face and his body, into his open hands. It caught on his claws and in his hair, made him fierce and glistening and more beautiful, more alien, than he had ever been.

It still wasn't enough.

His scales filled the footwell like fairy gold when the enchantment fades.

Sometimes we saw clusters of lights nestled in the darkness, but I didn't know what they meant.

I kept driving.



In the grey haze before dawn, when the fuel tank was almost empty and Nerites was breathing so softly that I sometimes wondered if he was about to stop, I caught a shimmer in the distance.

I rolled down my window, and as the cold air swirled into the truck, Nerites's head came up.

Salt. I tasted salt.

And not long after, I saw the sea. At first, it was nothing but a silvery line between the land and the sky, and then it filled my eyes until they saw nothing but an endless, endlessly shifting landscape of grey and white and blue.

All around us lay like skeletons the relics of a forgotten time: a broken tower of steel and concrete flaking dull red paint, a pier half-shattered and lost to the waves, a rusted roller coaster, and a fairground wheel, its baskets creaking in the breeze. Houses too, standing empty, and grand hotels, their windows dark as blinded eyes.

The truck foundered on the beach, so I abandoned it. Staggered down the shingle to the perfect golden sand with Nerites in my arms, clinging to me with the last of his strength.

There were lost things here too. Bottle caps in red and white, metal discs, bronze and silver and gold, all tangled up together with the pebbles and the seaweed and the shells.

The sea was icy cold as I waded into the waves, and in the harsh spray, I felt Nerites revive. His heart quickened against my own, and for a moment, just a moment, his face was turned up to mine, shining in the last of the fragmented moonlight.

The sudden, ferocious thrashing of his fluke caught my knees, and I almost stumbled. As I steadied myself, he twisted out of my grasp, into the water and—

Was gone.

Like a stone skimmed from my hand.



I saw him surface—I think I saw him surface—far away, the wildness of his hair let loose upon the wind.

I made my way back to shore. Sat on the beach, colder and more exhausted than I had ever been, and watched the sea.

As it danced its unconquerable dance beneath the pallid fingers of our fading sun, I watched the sea.

Foam crowned, it swept slowly up the shingle.

Perhaps I should have been frightened, but as the sea took me, it seemed closer to belonging than loss.



I don't know how they found me, but a man and woman rowed out in a little boat. Dragged me from the brine, took me across the waves and into their home, where they gave me warmth and food and made me well again.

I suppose I should have been grateful, but my fever dreams were full of icy embraces and kisses that burned and bled, and recovery brought with it

only pain and weakness and the weathered, interchangeable faces of strangers.

It was a deeper loneliness than I had ever known. Or perhaps it was simply my clearest recognition of it.



My rescuers—Can I call them that?—brought me to a rough little island, rust-grassed and iron-hilled, edged by gleaming silver-gold plains where the land runs into the ever-rushing sea. Green in its deepest places, purple-capped in the highest. The wind whistles through the empty whiteness of what I think must have been a town, and on the headland, I find crumbling arches and spaces marked in once-tall stone.

There's a community of sorts, farmers and fisherman for the most part, dragging life from the dying world.

Their words are alien to me.

They've tried to teach me their language, their names, but I just let the sounds wash over me. I don't want to learn. I've lost the need for such things. Maybe I never had it.

But I still find ways to be valuable, earn my keep. My father had little use for kindness, but he gave me too much pride to countenance obligation, and there isn't much I can't do when I set my mind or my body to it. He saw to that, as well. I wonder what he would say if he knew. His son the circus performer, the fugitive, the farmer.

I won't fish, though.

It makes the others laugh. At first, they think I'm afraid. Then they realise I'm not. I think that's when they first start calling me *Graih ny marrey*. Or one of them said it as a joke, and it stays with me. They like to tell stories by their fires, stories, I like to imagine, that are older than the old world, stories about things that never change or fade away. The things we never lose.



When I'm able, I move into a place of my own. Not much more than a shack, but I don't find home among walls.

I only care that it's close to the beach, where I spend all the hours that are mine.

Still watching the sea.

Sometimes there's only me and the waves and the moonlight. But sometimes I see the arching, silver shining back of a whale breach the surface of the water, dolphins in the distance, quizzically whiskered seals, or shimmering shoals of fish.

Once I even think I see the Mer, just on the edge of the horizon—a flash of jewel-bright bodies.

Or perhaps I only dream it.

I wonder if Nerites is with them. If he remembers me or thinks of me. If he's still alone, like me.



One night he's there, leaping across the waves, between the wavering shafts of moonlight. The water glistens on his skin and his scars, the white streaks in his hair. He looks exactly like what he is: a creature of the wild sea, monstrous, capricious, and beautiful.

It's just a glimpse, and then he's gone, but I burn and ache, and I can't breathe. I'm shore bound and drowning in his arms all over again. I would weep, but my father never gave me the capability.

Nerites comes back after that—not every night, but he always comes back. Sometimes it's just for a handful of seconds, but sometimes he stays, riding the waves, as I wait by the tide line. Sometimes he performs circus tricks for me—jumps and slides and poses. He does them so perfectly, it can only be mockery. And reassurance, of a kind.

He never comes to shore, and I don't go out to him.

The boundaries of our belonging are too frayed, too uncertain, and our worlds meet only at the limits of my body. So we live—as we always have —together, in the only way we can, at the very edges of freedom.

And we wait.

For the day I walk into the sea and he takes me in his arms, covers my mouth with his, and gives me his breath, until there's only him and me and nothing else.



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Alexis Hall was born in the early 1980s and still thinks the twenty-first century is the future. To this day, he feels cheated that he lived through a fin de siècle but inexplicably failed to drink a single glass of absinthe, dance with a single courtesan, or stay in a single garret.

He did the Oxbridge thing sometime in the 2000s and failed to learn anything of substance. He has had many jobs, including ice cream maker, fortune-teller, lab technician, and professional gambler. He was fired from most of them.

He can neither cook nor sing, but he can handle a seventeenth-century smallsword, punts from the proper end, and knows how to hotwire a car.

He lives in southeast England, with no cats and no children, and fully intends to keep it that way.

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