

Prologue

I'm waiting for someone to release me. I've been waiting on this for what seems like days at times and others, years. Alone, time has lost all meaning.

When they put me in the containment chamber 'for my safety', so long ago, they'd insisted my incarceration would last an hour at most, but it didn't. Hours passed before an alarm clanged outside. The head researcher came to assure me that all was well, the alarm just a drill, while her colleagues filed out of the room behind her. She followed them, leaving me in the dark.

Since then, I've waited, clinging to the hope that they haven't abandoned me. I refuse to call for help, not when my voice is what landed me here in the first place. I'm determined to only sit, pace, or pound the walls until someone comes for me.

Eventually, my patience pays off. A light that isn't mine illuminates the room outside of the containment chamber. Its tinge is so reminiscent of sunlight that I drift toward it.

The chamber's single window lies in its locked hatch. I've tried to break down that heavy door so many times, and it hasn't once budged. After the head researcher left me here, I vainly watched for rescue through that window, only rewarded with a view of pitch black. It's been so long since I abandoned that post, but now, hope lifts its head, peering through glass at me.

Two men are hovering parallel to the floor over the equipment outside. A plasma-like bubble has been wrapped, skin-tight, around each of them, emerging from the dense orbs of light floating beside their heads. While I try to understand these oddities, the light orbs near the men deepen in hue from a bright yellow to the orange of a forest fire.

They gesture at one another with their signs flashing to quickly for me to follow. I only catch two words: brother and wealth. Even with the little of it I can read, most of what their hands say is foreign to me.

I gather enough to understand that the two are treasure hunters of some sort, which makes me reluctant to draw their attention. It prompts too many questions.

Did the alarm that stole my helpers come before an actual disaster? If so, are these treasure hunters the type to hurt or help survivors? Most importantly, how much time has passed since the alarm?

That last question decides me. Kera needs me. She can't survive for long without my help. The service I paid to watch her is covered until the end of the month, but after that, she'll be on her own, which once more returns me to that most important of questions.

How long have I been here?

I pound on the hatch, which jerks the treasure hunters toward the containment chamber. Their light orbs flash orange with that movement. The smallest of them drifts my way. He sees me behind the window, and I see the white of his eyes as they widen.

He gestures for his brother, and once they're together, the signs between them blur once more, leaving me lost. I knock again, gaining their attention, before trying some signs of my own. I only use the most basic of them, hoping they won't judge how slow I've gotten with them. It's been a while since I last had to sign.

'Help me,' I say.

This prompts a furious storm of hand waving and finger manipulation between the treasure hunters. As I catch the signs for 'danger' and 'unwise' among the rest, I start worrying that once more, I'll be left here, alone.

Fortunately, one of the brothers seems more amenable toward helping me than the other. His light orb deepens to a bright gold while he puffs up like a threatened cat. He unleashes a flurry of signs, which prompts his brother's orb to change to a sickly green color. As that man hangs his head, I know I've won the argument.

The one who comes to my aid motions me aside, and I'm more than happy to comply with the request. Backing to the chamber's far side, I climb its handholds to get off of the floor. I don't know how the outside world might have changed in the time I've been trapped here.

The hatch creaks as the treasure hunters turn its wheel, but eventually, it bursts open. I'm free!

Or maybe not. A deluge of water floods the chamber, filling it a quarter of the way in seconds. So long ago, the people who promised to help me, putting me in here before abandoning me, said that I shouldn't touch water, that it would be bad for both me and anyone nearby.

They needn't have bothered with the warning. I'm deathly afraid of that awful stuff.

I scramble up handholds while the water level rises, leaving me hanging from the containment chamber's ceiling, and still, it comes. When it touches my dangling toes, something drags bits of me into the water, something that won't be denied. It leaves the surface glittering. Still, I cling to my perch until the water reaches over my head.

I can't breathe! Panicked, I thrash against metal, certain I'll drown, while sips of me disappear into the depths. It takes me several seconds to remember that I don't need oxygen anymore, one of the slight advantages I've gained in this new state. Even that knowledge, however, fails to soothe the building roar in my head. The distraction of it lets a memory slip free from the box containing it.

I'm on a sailboat with Sharon, Kera, and Robert when a storm appears on the horizon. Kera whimpers that she wants to go home, and I tell her not to worry. The harbor isn't far from here, and the storm is hours away.

How wrong I am about that.

As choppy water and wind threaten to tip our boat, I struggle to keep it upright. When I see the shore ahead, I cheer, sharing a grin with my wife. Sharon shakes her head, signing that I need to stay alert.

She and I work the lines while Kera huddles in the middle of the deck with Robert. We'll make it to shore. I know we will. We've sailed through worse than this.

Next time I check on the kids, though, Robert's missing. I know Sharon can handle the lines by herself for a little while, so I rush to Kera, asking about her brother. She only wails louder, pointing toward stern. I follow her finger, and my heart stops upon seeing the boy leaning over the water, clapping with a giggle.

For an instant, my attention slips off of monitoring Sharon's handling of the lines, zoomed onto my son instead. I run to him, scooping him into my arms, and see his beaming grin. We're fine. Everything will be ok.

Then, the sail hits me.

We fly overboard, I lose my grip on Robert, and water closes over my head.

Once the memory has returned to where it belongs, I shoot out of the containment chamber, but even the freedom I've long sought has become another prison. Water is everywhere. *It's everywhere!*

Nearby, the treasure hunters are listlessly floating with their light orbs dimmed and bubbles gone. I won't find any help there. In fact, they look like they could use some help. As soon as I find a patch of solid ground, I'll send someone for them, but for now, I need to *get out!*

I take the stairs two at a time. My new form slips through the water however I please, which feels... strange, and even through my panic, it takes more effort than I'd like to ignore the slow leak of me into the liquid all around. I soon reach the building's lobby, and on seeing the darkened view through its broken glass door, everything in my vicinity starts glittering more brightly than before.

The water never ends. It *never ends!* I'm screaming in my head because even this, my worst nightmare, isn't enough to force me to use my voice, but it... it's TOO MUCH!

A rational part of my brain eventually saves me.

"Kera," it whispers. "What's happened to Kera?"

As I continue looking into the black void, my fear blubbers protestations and objections, but I refuse to listen to it. I can't fail my daughter again.

Jittery steps take me away from Laryngeal Special Studies and into the ocean's depths.

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