

I stared at the motionless surface of the lake. A cold gust of wind made my hair flutter and sent ripples across my reflection. I sighed, and tucked my hands in my sweatshirt's pockets.

It was spring break. All my friends were off vacationing on warm, sunny beaches. Not me. My family had decided to go *north*. To our *cabin*. So while my friends are off getting a tan on some tropical beach, I was in Michigan, living in a tiny log house. I would've rather stayed home all break. Even my brother's pesky friends always appearing out of nowhere would have been better than this.

I walked along the rocky shore, grateful that I was wearing shoes. I had no idea what to do. My brother was off riding his bike somewhere, but I wasn't really in the mood. Normally, I would go swimming, but if I was this cold *out* of the water- and I wasn't even wearing a swimsuit- I would get hypothermia within only moments of entering the water.

Ahead, the shore stretched on endlessly. The only change was that a little further up, the steep cliff of rock that lined the shore, a couple dozen yards away from the water's edge, came forward so that the water lapped at the base of it. I came to a halt in front of it. I didn't think I could go around it without getting my feet wet, and I had probably strayed too far from the cabin already. My parents would get worried if I went too far without telling them.

*Then again, I thought, If I go back and have nothing to do, they'll probably make me participate in some "fun" family activity.*

No way was I going back, but I was not going to plunge my feet into freezing cold water, either. I sighed. This was so boring. If I was at the beach with my friends, I could be tanning on the shore, building a sand castle, or collecting seashells-

Suddenly, I got an idea. There were certainly no shells here, but maybe I could collect some pretty rocks. I scanned the shore for a glint of something interesting, something that wasn't just boring old gray. My hope quickly faded, though. I picked up a round brown pebble with white stripes, but there really wasn't much else. I searched for a little while more. I found a handful more rocks, but none of them were too great. Searching for interesting pebbles on a lake shore just wasn't the same as looking for shells by the ocean.

I was just about to give up and go back when a shiny glint caught my eye. I walked over to the source and found a shiny, pale rose colored pebble. I crouched down and picked it up. It seemed so out of place here. I looked around the area, trying to see if there were any more.

*There!* An oval of amber was nestled between a bunch of smooth gray ones. It was only about a yard in front of me. I got on my knees and crawled over to it. As I looked closer, I realized the stone was in a hole in the rock wall. I wondered how the hole had been created.

Suddenly, a seagull screeched overhead, and in my surprise, I dropped the rock. I peered in the hole, but it was too dark to see anything. I took out my phone and turned the flashlight on. I gasped at what I saw.

The hole wasn't a hole.

It was a tunnel.

The tunnel went on for a while, longer than the beam of my flashlight could reach. I felt a sudden rush of excitement and adventure. Now *this* was the kind of thing I was looking for, not collecting some dumb rocks.

*Are you crazy?* I yelled at myself. *This could be dangerous! The tunnel could collapse, or you could get stuck, or lost, or maybe there's something living in there that wouldn't want you invading its home...*

I closed my eyes. I was being ridiculous. I was getting way too old to still be afraid of the dark. If there was a fork in the tunnel, I would go back. I would be *really* careful. I had been moaning about how bored I was, and now here was an exciting opportunity presenting itself. Still, I hesitated at the entrance. After about a minute of just sitting there, annoyance with myself overtook me, and I darted in.

After crawling for a little while, though, panic started to bubble up in my throat again. I couldn't see any sign of light on the other side, and it was eerily quiet, besides the muffled sound of the gentle lapping of the waves against the other side of this rock wall. Suddenly, my fear gave way to disappointment as my flashlight fell against a solid wall. Had I come all this way to reach a dead end? Then I noticed the light continued to the right. There was just a turn, not a dead end. As I went around the bend, I saw a glimmer of light not too far ahead. Excitement fizzled inside me and I sat up so fast that I banged my head against the ceiling. I winced, but was too excited to pay much attention to it.

As I crawled out of the tunnel, my eyes adjusted to the brightness and I couldn't believe what I was seeing. My jaw dropped into the sand beneath me.

It wasn't real. I was hallucinating. My eyes were still adjusting to the bright sun, that was all. In a second I would blink and this would all be gone.

*Wait a minute! Bright sun?* The sky had been gloomy and overcast when I went into the tunnel. I looked around trying to make sense of everything. I could *feel* the warm sun on my back, and the soft sand beneath my hands. I could *hear* the sound of the waves, not the gentle, lapping waves of the lake, but the big, crashing ones of the *ocean*. You couldn't hallucinate sounds and feelings, could you? I honestly had no idea. I stood up, basking in the warmth. Whether it was real or not, the sun sure felt magnificent on my arms and legs.

*Arms and legs?*

I looked down and screeched. I was wearing a blue and white striped swimsuit. The only swimsuit I owned was a two hour drive from here. Then I realized I was wearing goggles too. Just as I felt like I might faint, a little voice in my head whispered to me. *This is what you wanted, remember? So stop wasting your time freaking out about it, and go enjoy yourself.*

*No way*, I argued. *This is too creepy.* However, my body didn't obey, and I felt myself drifting towards the beach. *Just for a little while...*

I lay down in the sand, soothed by the sound of the ocean waves. I closed my eyes.

*I could lay here forever...*

*No!* I forced myself to my feet. *I mustn't fall asleep! My parents will get worried if I'm gone too long.* I couldn't make myself leave yet, however. No matter how unnerving it felt, I couldn't leave this beach for my gloomy, cold cabin on the other side of the tunnel.

Then, a pale white shape in the sand caught my eye. I looked closer and saw it was a sand dollar! It was perfectly round, with not even the smallest chip. I picked it up delicately. I couldn't believe my luck. I looked behind me and saw a plastic beach bucket.

*Where did that come from?* I shook my head. It didn't matter. It was probably just left behind by some little kid who visited the beach.

I put the sand dollar in the bucket. I scanned the beach for more shells, and gasped when I saw a perfect conch shell. I had only seen those in pictures. I walked over to it and reached out to grab it.

I wondered if my parents would be expecting me back yet. I glanced at my wrist, but nothing was there. My watch was gone. Then I remembered I was wearing a swimsuit. I had probably taken it off when I had changed into the swimsuit. For some odd reason though I didn't remember changing. My head started throbbing. It was probably just my headache causing me to forget it. Even now, the pain was subsiding. It was probably just the heat. I decided I wouldn't head back home for a little while. I was pretty sure I had only been here for a few minutes anyway, so I had plenty of time until I needed to head back.

I waded into the shallows, and the water felt pleasantly cool. When I was deep enough so the water was just under my shoulders, I pulled my goggles over my eyes and dove under an incoming wave. As I broke through the surface for air, I saw a dark shape a little ways in front of me. I realized it was a large, flat rock. Over the roar of the waves, I could hear a noise that seemed to be coming from the rock. It sounded almost like-

A voice! Surely I was imagining it?

I paddled over to the rock. The sound was louder now. It was *definitely* a voice, and it was singing. I cautiously climbed up onto the rock. Two young women were sitting there. One was pulling a strand of seaweed out of her flowing red hair. The other one, the one who was singing, was brushing her long blonde hair with a silver comb adorned with small shells. She paused when she caught sight of me. "Oh! Hello, I didn't see you there!"

"Um, hi." I replied cautiously. What were these women doing out here? Had they got there the same way I had? How had I not seen them this whole time?

The redhead's gaze flittered to my feet. "You're one of *them*?"

"One of *them*?" I glanced at my feet but didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

"You know, a human. Not a merfolk." As if almost on cue, the two women brought their legs out of the water onto the rock. Except, they weren't legs. They were *tails*.

I gaped at them in disbelief. The redhead had a pink tail with dashes of yellow and blue. The blonde's was green, and her fins were tinged with pink and blue.

"I'm Phoenix," said the redhead, "and this is Peacock."

Peacock held out her hand, and I took it.

"Ava."

Phoenix smiled. "That is an unusual name, at least for us merfolk, but pretty nonetheless."

I blushed slightly. "Thank you. What *is* usual for merpeople?"

"We're named after our tails, what they make our parents think of. So we mostly are named after plants, animals, or objects." Peacock explained.

"It's been a long time since we've seen another human. How are you enjoying your time here?" Phoenix stared into my eyes expectantly, her shoulders tensed. There was something a little unnatural about it.

"It's been..." I thought back to the glorious feeling of sun on my skin, the soft sand under my feet, the beautiful shells, and the refreshing swim in the ocean. "Wonderful."

Phoenix relaxed. "That makes me so happy. Look, we made something for our visitors." She dove into the water, and reemerged with a couple things in her hands. She handed one to Peacock. Peacock held a necklace with a seashell on the end. Phoenix held a decorative hair comb with tiny starfish and pearls.

I gasped. "They're beautiful! I can't take them!"

“Nonsense!” protested Peacock. “We made them just for you. Besides, we have plenty back at home.” They reached out and put them on me. I looked at my reflection in the water. It was beautiful.

“Oh, you’re so pretty!” gushed Phoenix.

“You’d be even prettier with a braid,” Peacock said, and she started braiding my hair. It felt soothing. I closed my eyes. I could get used to this...

Suddenly, a shrill screeching noise pierced the air. My eyes shot open. In the distance, I spotted another rock jutting out of the water. A small figure perched on top of it. I glanced at the mermaids. They were staring at the figure, their eyes narrowed in furious slits. “We’ll be back,” Peacock promised, and as one, the two slipped into the water. The distant figure did the same.

I sat there, a little stunned at what had just happened. What was that noise? Why had the kind, gentle mermaids looked so furious? I felt growing irritation under my skin. Whatever had made that noise had interrupted my peace.

Just then, someone popped up beside me. I opened my mouth to scream, but he quickly clamped his hand over my mouth. I swatted it away and glared at him. He was a young boy about my age. He wasted no time grabbing my arm and trying to pull me into the water. “Come on, quickly, before they get back!”

I yanked my arm away. “I’m not going with you!”

He looked at me in desperation. “Please, you have to trust me. I couldn’t save the others. I can’t let them take you too!”

“What are you talking about? What *others*?”

He glanced around quickly. “Look, there’s no time to explain, but don’t trust those mermaids! They’re tricking you! You’re under a spell!”

“Why would they trick me? They’ve been so nice to me! Besides, how do I know I can trust *you*?”

He looked into my eyes, and quietly he said “You don’t.”

Something deep down told me to trust him.

But before I could reply, my headache came back. I shut my eyes from the pain. *Don’t trust him*, my brain screamed.

What was happening? I could barely think straight. I could hear the boy talking, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying. I heard a splash and opened my eyes to see him dive under the water. I looked behind me and saw the mermaids approaching.

“Ava!” Phoenix cried as she climbed up onto the rock. “Are you ok? What did that awful boy do to you?”

“I don’t know, but he gave me a headache.”

“Oh, you poor thing.” Peacock murmured. She put her hands on my head, and I instantly started to feel better.

“I know what will make you feel better!” Phoenix brightened. “Would you like to see our homes?”

“Of course, but aren’t they underwater? I won’t be able to breathe!”

“Don’t worry about that.” Peacock reassured. “There are breathing spells.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me into the water. Despite Peacock’s assurance, I took a deep breath before we dove under.

We swam down towards some sort of shipwreck. It was kind of eerie, but at the same time entrancing. As we were about to enter, I felt a pressing sensation on my chest. Suddenly my sense of security popped like a bubble as I realized what was going on. There were no breathing spells. I was drowning!

I fought down my panic. No way could I outswim these mermaids. Thinking quickly, I knocked my comb out of my hair. It descended down a dark chasm. The mermaids stared in horror at their precious comb, then both darted after it.

I swam up to the surface quickly, gasping for air as I reached it. Relief flooded over me when a familiar voice sounded from atop the rock.

"You're- you're still human!" It was the boy from before.

I climbed onto the rock. "What?"

"They were trying to turn you into a merperson. That's what happens when you run out of air. But you escaped!"

I looked at him, stunned. "How do you know all this?"

He looked away. "It happened to me, many months ago. I can never go back now."

I put my hand on his arm, at loss for words. "What's your name?" I said finally.

"Rusty."

I remembered what Peacock had said about merfolk being named after their tails. Sure enough, his tail was blue, the edges rusted with gold.

"Come on, we have to get out of here before they come back." Rusty shot off into the water, and I struggled to keep up.

We had almost reached the shore when we heard a sound behind us. I glanced back, and my heart leaped in my throat. It was Peacock and Phoenix!

"Get back to the tunnel as fast as you can. Don't look back." Rusty turned away.

"Wait! Where are you going?"

"I need to distract the mermaids."

"No! I won't leave you here! Come with me."

"If I did that, we would both be captured. Besides, I can't go on the shore. It's too late for me now."

I looked at him sadly.

"I know I can find a place to escape. Don't worry about me." Then he was gone.

With nothing I could do, I swam to shore. Then I ran through the sand to the tunnel. Before I entered, I glanced back at the ocean. *Stay safe, Rusty.*

I emerged to gloomy skies, but for once I felt relieved by that. I was wearing my clothes again. Everything was the same as it had been when I left the cabin this morning. *Did that even happen? It felt like a dream.*

It had certainly been an adventure, like I had been hoping for. Maybe a little too *much* adventure.

Suddenly, a glint of gold in the water caught my eye. Hope filled my heart. It had probably just been a ray of sunlight peeking out between the clouds, but somehow I didn't think so. I felt certain that Rusty had escaped.

Where he would go now, I had no idea, but I had a feeling that things would all work out.