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Before She Surfaced

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BEFORE SHE SURFACED

A Vaelith Short Story

I had the outer shelf that morning, which was not, on most days, a duty that asked much of anyone beyond patience.

The boundary line between the reef's territory and the human outpost's is not a wall or even a visible thing — nothing you could point to under the water, no marker Vosk would concede exists at all, some evenings, when he wanted to make a point about how casually we'd let the humans define the edges of our own home simply by arriving in it. It is closer to a listening line. You move along it slowly, feeling for anything in the current that reads as unfamiliar or unaccounted for, and you carry that feeling back to Sael or Corrah, and mostly, on most days, you carry back nothing at all worth mentioning.

Fourteen months since she'd first arrived had at least given the reef a new vocabulary of sound to sort through while I worked. The low mechanical hum of her instruments, which I had come to find almost soothing in its predictability, arriving always at the same hours, in the same patches of shallow water. The particular clumsy rhythm of her footsteps on the shelf — unaware, as she always seemed to be, that water carries a body's intentions long before it carries a voice, so that I generally knew when she was frightened, or bored, or excited, several seconds before any sound reached me that a human ear would have registered as meaningful. Mireet found this endlessly funny, the first time I tried to explain it to her. *So you already know what she feels before she does*, she said, delighted, the way children are delighted by anything that sounds like a secret power. I told her it was not a power so much as an inconvenience, most days, knowing a thing before you'd been offered the courtesy of being told it. She did not find that answer nearly as satisfying.

I had grown, without entirely deciding to, familiar with the particular rhythm of her footsteps.

She surveyed the same stretch most days, methodical in a way that made her easy to track even at a distance — the same unhurried crouch over the tide pools, the same long stillness before she wrote anything down, as though she needed to be certain a thing was true before she'd commit it to a page. I had watched her do this more mornings than I could easily count, across those fourteen months, always from a professional remove, always telling myself the interest was the ordinary kind you'd extend to any new and unfamiliar creature moving through territory you knew intimately and she did not. I did not think of it as anything beyond that. Vosk would have said I was refusing to name the shape of the interest honestly, and Vosk would likely have been correct, but I had not yet done him the courtesy of admitting it, even privately, even to the water, which tends to know these things before the one it concerns has worked up the nerve to know them.

I felt her before I saw her that morning — the pressure-sense that runs along my forearms picking up something in the current that read wrong, a static under the ordinary rhythm of the tide, sharp and small and getting sharper. Fear has its own texture in the water, distinct from the reef's usual traffic of small distress — a fish startled, a shell dislodged — and I had learned, across those fourteen months of half-attention I told myself was only diligence, to recognize hers specifically. This was not her ordinary caution, the low steady wariness she carried most days the way the reef itself seemed to hum low and careful before a weather system it had not yet seen. This was something closer to alarm, arriving in short, uneven pulses that did not resolve the way they should have within a few seconds, the way fear usually resolves when a body catches itself and steadies.

It did not steady.

Protocol was clear enough on the matter of the boundary line. We were permitted to observe. We were permitted, under narrow and specific circumstances, to signal them if something appeared genuinely wrong. We were not permitted to cross into human territory uninvited, and we were certainly not permitted to interact directly with one of them

without authorization from Sael or, in her absence, from Corrah — a rule that existed, I understood even then, for good reasons that had nothing to do with me personally and everything to do with a species still deciding, cautiously, what kind of neighbors we intended to be to a people who had only just arrived among us.

I did not think about the rule for longer than it takes to state it. I was already moving.

The distance between the outer shelf and her position was not far by the reef's measure, though I imagine it would have looked considerable to anyone standing on dry land, watching a human figure alone at the edge of deep water in the pale, climbing light of early morning. I covered it the way I covered any distance that mattered, which is to say without any real awareness of the covering at all — only the current under me, and the fear ahead of me, sharpening with every length I closed.

There is a particular quality to swimming toward someone else's panic that I have never found adequate words for, not in my own language and certainly not in hers. It is not the same as urgency toward a task. It has weight to it, a kind of gravity that pulls the whole body forward faster than caution would normally allow, and underneath the weight, unhelpfully, absurdly, some small clear thread of thought that had nothing to do with the emergency at all — only her. Only the specific, unbearable wrongness of that particular fear-signature being the one sharpening ahead of me, rather than any other. I did not examine that thread as I swam. I did not have the room in me to examine anything. But I remember it being there, distinct from the urgency, riding just beneath it the entire way.

I did not know the shape of it yet, only that the water ahead of me had changed key — a new disturbance layered over her fear, sharper and more physical than fright alone. The reef held what had happened the way it holds the shape of anything that disturbs it, and I read it off the current as I closed the last length between us, piece by piece, the way you read a story that is already ending by the time you arrive at its first

page: a cold tongue of water sliding up from the deeper shelf without warning, dragging the visible world sideways; a body that had found nothing to brace against; a kit swept one way and her swept another; and threaded through all of it, unmistakable before I was anywhere close enough to see her, the taste of blood spreading into the wider current — her head, I understood only as I finally reached her, having met the shelf edge hard enough to open her skin to the water.

I did not have words ready. There was no time to assemble the kind of careful, considered speech Corrah might have used, the cadence she'd built for exactly this purpose across a lifetime of deliberate practice. I had only my own voice, and whatever of her language I could produce quickly enough to matter, and my hand, which found her wrist in the water and closed around it, and pulled — up and sideways in one motion, cutting across the current instead of fighting against it, the only read on that water I trusted myself to make quickly enough to matter.

She surfaced fighting me for one confused, precious second — the body's instinct not yet caught up to the fact that the thing holding her was help and not further danger — and then went still, gasping, the two of us breaking together into shallower light and breathable air.

Breathe, I told her, though she already was, badly, in ragged pulls.

I'm fine, she managed, or the shape of it, some flattened, clinical register I would come to recognize later as the sound she reached for whenever the honest alternative was closer to panic than she wanted to admit.

You are not fine. I said it plainly, because it was true, and because I have never found a way to make a true thing gentler by softening it. *You struck your head. You are bleeding into water I do not control the currents of. Look at me. Stay with my voice.*

Okay, she said, and the single word seemed to cost her more than it should have.

I am Isren. I gave her my name the way you would hand someone a rope over open water — something with weight, something that would hold if she gripped it. I did not, in that moment, examine why it felt so

urgent that she have exactly that word, my name specifically, rather than any other steadying thing I might have offered her. *Say it back to me, if you can.*

Isren, she repeated, and the effort of it seemed to matter more than the word itself, some thread of her holding on that I understood, even then, I intended to keep taut for as long as she needed it. Something in my chest answered it too, a feeling I would not have a name for until considerably after that night, once I had the luxury of examining it instead of simply acting inside it.

The outpost was the wrong direction. I understood this with the same clarity I understood the currents, an unambiguous fact underneath everything else happening — she needed warmth and reef-light and Corrah's steady hands, needed all of it faster than the walk back to her own outpost would allow. I turned toward the deep structure instead, toward home, and felt the current answer the decision the way it always does when you commit to it fully, cutting clean where a moment ago it had only been carrying us.

She went in and out after that, the way the injured do, fragments of awareness surfacing and submerging in a rhythm that had nothing to do with the tide. I kept my grip steady through all of it, kept my light — I would learn only later, from Corrah's gentle observation, that I had been glowing the entire swim, some helpless steady blue-green thread of worry I hadn't had the attention to notice myself producing. Vaelith cannot lie with our bodies. I had not yet fully understood, at that point in my life, how thoroughly that could apply even when no one but the water was watching.

Corrah met us at the outer chamber, already alert to something wrong before I had said a single word — the pod's own pressure-sense working the way mine had, carrying the shape of trouble ahead of any explanation. She took over with the calm, practiced competence of someone who had done this before, for others, in circumstances I did not ask about and she did not offer. I stayed back near the chamber's edge, out of the direct light, while Corrah worked. *She is waking*, Corrah

said eventually, not quite to me, though I understood the words were meant for me to hear, and then, turning to the small, laboring, half-conscious shape of the woman I had pulled from the current: *You are safe. You are among the pod. Do not try to stand yet.*

I stayed at the edge of the chamber longer than my presence was strictly required, which Corrah noted, I think, though she said nothing about it that night. There was cleaning to be done, and reporting — Sael would need to know, and the matter of the boundary, the broken protocol, would need to be accounted for in whatever fashion the pod accounted for such things, later, once there was room in the evening for anything other than the plain fact of her breathing steadily in a bed of woven reef fiber.

I watched her sleep for longer than I should have.

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Corrah found me still there in the morning, which I had not expected, having lost, at some point in the night, any clear sense of how long I'd meant to stay.

She did not ask why. She rarely asks the things she already knows the answer to, a habit I have always found either restful or infuriating depending on which side of it I happened to be standing.

"Your light never settled the whole night," she said instead, settling beside me with the unhurried certainty she brings to everything, even observations clearly meant to needle. "I noticed. I doubt you did — you were rather occupied at the time."

"I was watching for complications."

"Mm." Her crest did not move, but something in the set of her, ancient and entirely unbothered, told me she was amused regardless. "You watched very thoroughly, then. For complications."

"She nearly drowned under my watch, Corrah. I would think a certain amount of vigilance was warranted."

"I did not say it wasn't warranted. I said I noticed the shape of it." She let that sit for a moment, the way she lets most things sit, trusting

the silence to do work she isn't interested in doing herself. "You are young enough still to believe a feeling can be explained fully by the reason you give for having it. I remember being young enough for that too. It does not last."

I did not have a ready answer for that, which was, I was beginning to suspect, going to become a common state of affairs where this particular subject was concerned.

"She will wake soon," Corrah said, rising, letting the matter go with the same ease she'd raised it. "You should be here when she does. Not because I am telling you your duty. Only because I do not think you would forgive yourself the alternative."

She was right, of course. She usually is, about the things she doesn't bother arguing for.

I stayed.