

JACKIE AND THE MERMAID

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I woke up on a sandy shore as the sun was setting. I sat up and rubbed my eyes, trying to remember all that had happened. I had been on a boat, one of those three hour tour kinds of things. Then there was a storm, an unexpected storm. No one knew where it had come from. I barely remembered what happened after that, but based on my surroundings the boat must have crashed. But it was nowhere to be seen.

My backpack was lying out next to me, completely soaked through. Inside there was my bikini, a beach towel and a book of fairy tales, now a soggy mess. There were rocks all around me that looked like tiny mountains with flat tops. There was little vegetation and the sand was only enough to make a shore line. I found that I was exhausted, so I decided to find a small area to sleep until morning, figuring there wasn't much else I could do for the day. Up ahead there was a small cave that served as a small shelter. I used my backpack as a pillow and soon fell asleep.

The next morning I walked around the beach with my backpack, climbing up on the rock hills and looking out at the ocean. There was no sign of civilization anywhere. It seemed that I had found myself a deserted and unknown island. At least, that was my first impression. That soon changed when I heard the sweetest music fall over me. It sounded like the sound of the ocean inside a seashell and the wind blowing through a palm tree put to a beautiful melody. I was drawn to it and followed it up and over one of the rocky hills. On the other side of the hill I saw something I had only heard of in fairy tales. There sat a mermaid on a rock a few feet from the shore. She seemed to be brushing her hair with something that looked like a sea urchin. Her skin was tinted green and her long hair was dark brown. Her tail was a deep blue with orange spots, and it swished in and out of the water that lapped up onto her rock.

Her song was hypnotizing, causing me to believe the stories about the sailors being drawn to their deaths by a siren's call. I climbed down to her, seeing that she hadn't noticed me yet. I couldn't believe this. It felt like I was in a water logged dream. There was no way I was about to talk to a mermaid. It...it couldn't happen.

I approached her slowly, being careful not to startle her. But before I had come within ten feet of her, she looked up at me and smiled. Her teeth were slightly pointed, like a fish's, but they were pearly white. Her eyes were a bright orange. When she waved at me, I saw her hands had webbed fingers. Though very beautiful, she wasn't the stereotypical Little Mermaid that would have come to my mind before.

"You awaken!" she called out in a soft warble, like she was blowing bubbles with her voice. I stood there dumbfounded, unsure of how to react. Why wasn't she afraid of me? "How was your rest?" she asked.

"...Rest...?" I managed to say. "Fine."

"Come closer," she said, waving me over. My mind jumped to stories of people getting eaten by strange sea creatures, but I carefully came to her rock, not even noticing the water came up to my knees.

"How did I get here?" I asked, somehow knowing that she would have the answer.

"Your vessel crashed. I brought you here," the mermaid replied.

"What about the others?" I stammered, fearing the worst: all being drowned by other mermaids, or being eaten alive, or something just as horrible.

She shook her head sadly. "Only survivor," she said, pointing at me.

"Why?" I asked. It wasn't really a question of why I was the only survivor, but rather why she saved me instead of someone else.

She held up one finger. "Only survivor." That was all I could get out of her. She patted the rock, motioning for me to sit on it with her. I clambered up and sat about three feet away from her so I could see her properly, setting my backpack down beside me.

"What's your name?" I asked quietly.

"Elysian," she replied. A fitting name to be sure. She cocked her head and continued brushing her hair.

"I'm Jackie," I told her, pointing to myself. Elysian nodded and smiled. She then put her urchin brush down and reached over to pull on the edge of my shirt. I stopped myself from screaming in fear, but tensed up all the same. She had a puzzled look on her face.

"What is this?" she asked innocently, retracting her hand.

I held out the edge of my shirt, confused with her question. "A shirt?"

"Shirt..." she sounded out. Then she shrugged her shoulders as if to say that didn't mean anything to her.

"You know, clothing?" I offered. "Humans wear it as protection."

"Human protection," Elysian repeated, seemingly content with that answer. Then she motioned to me saying, "Human." She brought her hand to her chest and said, "Aquarian."

Pointing to her I asked, "Aquarian?" she nodded. "Huh, we always called you guys mermaids!"

She frowned and shook her head. "Aquarian." But then she seemed to understand what I had said and replied, "We call you Landers."

I smiled. "Awesome." I opened my backpack and took out my still somewhat soggy fairy tale book and carefully turned to the Little Mermaid story. "This is what we thought you were: a story or myth. I didn't know you were real." I showed her an illustration of a mermaid with a prince.

Elysian took the book and studied the words intently, though I don't think she could read them. "You are a...myth, too," she replied, returning the book to me.

My mind was blown just a bit. That would make sense, if mermaids and humans never officially met, then humans might be myths to mermaids, just like they were to us. "Is that why you saved me?" I asked. She cocked her

head and nodded. She was just as curious about me as I would be about her.

She wistfully touched my shirt again. "Human protection," she whispered. I thought of an idea and took my bikini top out of my backpack.

"You want some?" I asked, smiling excitedly, holding it out to her. I didn't really like the suit anyway.

Her eyes went wide. "For me?" she asked hopefully. I nodded. She took it gleefully and slowly put it on. I had to explain to her about where her arms went, but soon she had it on. I helped her tie it in the back with the thick straps so that it would fit her better. I was a lot thicker than she was, but after tightening the straps it ended up fitting her quite nicely. She looked down at it proudly and grinned up at me, carefully feeling the material. Then she jumped into the ocean and disappeared. Before I could become too devastated about her disappearance, she resurfaced and climbed back up on the rock. She held out a long string of black pearls for me to take.



"Oh my gosh," I said, taking them gingerly. "Do you know how much these would sell for on land?" I asked her. She only cocked her head and smiled, not understanding my question. Maybe Aquarians didn't have a system of money. "Thank you," I said to her, placing the pearls in my backpack.

Then she waved her hands and held them out saying, "No, no, no, here!" I felt stupid, thinking that she hadn't meant to actually give them to me. Once they were back in her hands, she came behind me and began weaving them into my hair. I kept as still as possible as I felt her braiding and twisting my hair up into an intricate bun. I wished I had a mirror; sure that whatever she had done was beautiful.

When Elysian finished she came back around to face me and smiled brightly. "Thank you," I told her again and she nodded in reply.

Then she made a loud wheezing wail. "Thank you," then the wheeze again. Startled, but thinking I understood I asked, "Is that 'thank you' in Aquarian?"

She nodded, "Yes, Trophiclese."

"Ok, so Aquarians speak Trophiclese?" Elysian nodded again. "Then how did you learn English?"

But why? Especially if humans are only myths?"

Elysian shrugged her shoulders. "We also learn Italian, Dutch, and Mandarin."

I squinted my eyes at her, deep in thought. It didn't make sense that a group of people who believed another group of people to be a myth would learn their language. It was like going to college and learning Klingon: pointless.

"What do you know about humans?" I asked her. Her eyes grew wide as she told me.

"Humans carry long sharp sticks to kill us and they eat us. They travel in big hunting vessels and do not have feelings."

I blinked, stunned by the stream of words. "Wow. Ok." I thought a second. "Wait, so you know of us, but you just don't really know *about* us!" Elysian frowned. I tried to explain a little better. "Humans, or Landers are in your stories, but you know we exist, right? Like you knew I was real before you saw me."

She nodded slowly and seemed to understand. I continued speaking. "See, humans don't know you exist. We think you are really just a story and that's it." Her eyes grew wide.

"We are real."

"I know that, now! And it's awesome!" I grinned. "You're the answer to every little girl's fantasy! Did you know that?"

Elysian shook her head, but seemed amused with my emphatic demeanor. "Now you come down with me! You will see we are real."

I felt my skin grow cold. "What?"

She pointed at the water. "Come and see Trophicle."

"I can't," I said, trying to laugh it off. Surely she didn't mean to drown me, did she?

"Why?"

"I can't breathe under water!" I saw on the side of her neck that she had three gill splits. I reached out and pointed at them. "I don't have gills, see?" I asked, offering my neck for inspection.

She looked very upset. "If you don't come to Trophicle, you will kill us with sticks!"

"What?" I asked, disturbed. "No I won't."

"No?"

"Dude, why would I kill you?"

"Elysian," she corrected, motioning to herself.

I nodded, and waved the correction away. "Not all humans fish, and certainly not all humans fish with spears... sticks... whatever. You don't have to worry about me, at least."

"No?" she replied, seemingly relieved.

"No, not at all," I reassured her.

She still looked sad. "You do not want to see Trophicle?" she asked, still not understanding the concept of my drowning. I looked down at the water wistfully and found that I wanted to cry.

“I would love to see Trophicle.”

Elysian’s eyes lit up and she jumped into the water. Her head poked back up and as she looked at me with a playful glint in her eyes she splashed the water, motioning for me to come in. I shook my head, but before I realized what she was doing she grabbed my wrist and pulled me in. Water filled my vision and the salt burned my eyes. I couldn’t see a thing and was running out of oxygen. She continued to swim downward with me in tow. I struggled against her grasp and finally freed myself. I found the rock again and clung to it for dear life, pulling myself up to breathe the air again. After I climbed back up onto the rock she resurfaced with a very confused look on her face. I just shook my head and said, half choking, “I can’t breathe underwater.”

“Breathe?” she asked. I demonstrated, over-exaggerating my chest expanding and relaxing.

“Humans breathe to live. If I can’t breathe, I can’t live. I can’t breathe underwater,” I tried to explain.

“You can’t live underwater,” she deciphered. I nodded my head. Her eyes filled up with green goo. I think the goo was mermaid tears, but I still don’t know for sure to this day.

Up in the sky I heard a very loud spinning sound. Looking up I saw a helicopter headed my way. It was the rescue crew sent to retrieve any survivors from the shipwreck. I panicked and looked at Elysian.

“Leave!” I yelled at her. “Go away now! Go back to Trophicle!” She frowned and gawked at the helicopter. I knew if she didn’t get away now she would never see Trophicle again. “GO!!!”

Green goo spilling over her bottom eyelids, she plunged into the depths of the sea. I started waving my arms at the helicopter as I splashed back to the island shore, dragging my backpack in the water. They saw me and landed on the island. Several paramedics came out, moved me into the flying machine, and started running tests on me. I told them I was the only survivor and that I was unharmed. The helicopter took off and brought me back home to Arkansas, eventually safe and sound with my family again.

I never told anyone about Elysian until now. I guess I was always afraid they would go looking for Trophicle and make the mermaids’ nightmares about humans with sticks come true. I hope that someday we can befriend the mermaids, or rather the Aquarians, peacefully without any lab tests. But I doubt I’ll be alive to see it.