

## Down to the Mermaid

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The grey streak in her hair had grown to more than a finger's width. Ignoring it wasn't working anymore. She was starting to show her age, and she couldn't help but resent the old man for it.

The purple circles under her eyes didn't help her mood. She hadn't slept again last night, too full of shadowy thoughts and a gnawing restlessness. All night the wind itself had seemed to murmur promises, whispering across her skin of someplace more than this. She ran the brush through her hair once more, hiding the traitorous silver under glossy brown, and tossed the brush onto the vanity with more force than necessary. The clatter startled something from under the bed, and she spun, hissing half a gasp.

It took her eyes a moment to find the source; the gecko had already scuttled beneath the breeze-rippled curtains and had frozen in place, a ghost of itself beneath the filmy fabric.

She rose and crossed into the mid-afternoon sun striping the hardwood floor. Pausing, she knelt slowly – *ha, I'd like to see you do this, old man* – squinting against the brightness as warmth flooded her skin. The sun was the best thing about this place. Well, the sun and sometimes, like today when the wind was right, the sea air. The geckoes she could've lived without.

This little intruder, perhaps thinking it was safe beneath the curtains, diaphanous though they were, didn't flee as her hand neared. Its eyes were the only moving things: they roved fitfully, lighting only a second on her, the wall, the floor, and the escape promised by the doorway ahead. Her hand darted once, and caught the slender body just as it tensed to move.

She'd caught them before, but was surprised again at how light these creatures were, as if made of folded slick paper. Claws were tiny pinpricks as this one grasped at her finger, trying to gain a wriggling purchase. Its eyes jiggled in panic, and a small, neat tongue darted out to test the air. All of a sudden it stopped struggling and just waited, those crystal eyes seeming to catalogue every feature of her face: forehead, eyes, nose, lips...

It reminded her of the old man. Her fingers spasmed, stopping just short of crushing the poor thing in her fist. She stepped forward and threw the gecko out the patio door. It curled and twisted wildly in the air as it flew. For a moment she envied its freedom. Then it dropped out of sight beyond the deck. She drew the door closed, scraping it over the grit of sand in the runners – the stuff got everywhere, no matter how often she scrubbed under her nails, no matter how often Martina

swept – and pulled the sheers across. The sunlight dimmed a little, softening the edges of the big room.

It was too bright to take a nap. She was too restless to eat. She'd read every book in the library seventeen times. They'd had to get rid of the piano because of the damned sand everywhere.

*I could go to Amsterdam. I could go to Rome.*

She was tempted to throw herself on the clean white linen of the bedclothes and sulk like a teenager. What else was there to do?

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This was another room, on the other side of the house, far darker than her own. He couldn't stand much light at all anymore, sun or otherwise. A softly-shaded sconce lit his headboard so he could read, and that's all he did these days. He put down the newspapers as she entered. Until now, it had never occurred to her that he was a captive audience whenever she visited. She didn't visit much anymore.

"I'm going out," she announced.

The welcoming half-smile on his lips froze and faded. "I see." His gaze returned to the newspapers on his lap, trembling fingers smoothing a corner. His hands were thinner than she had ever seen. The skin looked bleached, taut enough to tear. She looked away. "Where will you go?" he asked politely.

"Oh, for God's sake," she sighed. "I don't know. Somewhere in the village. Not a lot of choice." She prowled the shadowed edges of the room, avoiding the furniture by long habit and his gaze by design. She couldn't allow her simmering hostility to meet his eyes. She knew he wasn't looking at her, either. They each directed their comments to the warm, shadowed air.

"Is... is it daytime?" he asked. "Is the market still open?"

"Too crowded."

"Too crowded. Not the beach, then, for the same reason." When she didn't bother to respond, he brightened. "Ah. Your friend, Analise. Well, then. Please give her my regards."

Furious, she wrapped her hand around the bedpost and swallowed a scream. "She's dead. Six months now. You know that." Finally she looked at him. He was blinking vaguely, brow furrowed in confusion. His thin white hair shook as he sighed.

"Oh, yes... yes, of course. My apologies for mentioning it." He lowered his eyes to the newspapers again and his body seemed to collapse into itself, silk robe falling into loose folds as if empty. She found herself staring at it, thinking how wrong it looked, how frail he was. For the first time in a long time, regret warred with frustration and gained ground.

*I could go to Amsterdam. I could go to Rome.*

*But what about him?*

When she finally trusted herself to speak again, her voice sounded raw and remote. "I'll find something along the boardwalk. I just need to get *out*."

He flinched at the final word and remained silent until she was almost at the door. "Why not take Martina with you?"

"I don't want to."

"Georgio, then. Or Luka. They'd enjoy an evening off." *Because I can't protect you like this* he didn't say. His voice was an odd mixture of plea and apology, and she hated the way her heart seemed to shrivel in response – only for an instant, though, then it pounded back to angry, stubborn life.

"No. I want to go by myself."

"I see," he said again, more softly.

She yanked the bedroom door open. "The customary parting words here are *Have fun*."

"Be careful," was his whispered reply as she stalked into the hallway and slammed the door behind her.

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Five minutes later, sandals on, shawl thrown over her shoulders, she stepped outside, filling her lungs with warm air and the riot of scent from the jewel-coloured contents of the flower pots hanging along the verandah. The tangled blooms nodded in the breeze, smelling of sunshine and earth and their own exotic selves – nothing at all like the wilting death of the cut flowers in the murky rooms inside. It was awfully bright out here; she discovered she was glad for a few more moments of shade here at the threshold. She slipped on a pair of sunglasses against the glare ahead and was down the wide stairs in an instant, resisting the urge to run for the gate.

The sounds of the village rose as she approached the street. A canary-coloured Moped whined past, its helmeted rider intent on the road, the odour of exhaust in its wake. Music from the boardwalk reached her ears, a discordant stew of tourist-trap traditional and newest nightclub,

blaring through open doors and windows. Traffic, laughter, the sounds of the market – and if she held her breath to listen, behind everything was the steady, watery heartbeat of the ocean against the sand.

*I could go to Amsterdam. I could go to Rome. But he...*

Letting out an impatient breath, she soaked in the day, trying to ignore the feeling of the house at her back. Down the hill, the village was scattered like a child's colourful blocks, embraced on one side by rolling green mountains. Across the bay, pale rock reached beyond its cloak of trees, curling a bare arm around the blue-green waters. Pocked with cave mouths and scored with strata, the cliffs didn't so much descend into the water as suddenly disappear into it, as if an enormous unseen hand were straining to hold it beneath the waves. She thought of the old man again and shook her head to banish him.

She reached the gate. Its wrought iron bars warm beneath her hand, she waited for a strolling couple to pass by, nodding a silent greeting. They moved on, and she closed her eyes, inhaling the swirling scents of sweat on skin, the woman's spiced perfume, the man's desire, the lingering wisps of Moped exhaust and verandah flowers. Behind it all was the salt tang of the sea. The restless wind was saturated with it, the same wind that had been whispering to her last night, sleepless, promising. The locals, too tied to maps and weather patterns, called it an African wind. But in her more fanciful moments it seemed it had crossed the Mediterranean carrying pharaoh dust and Nile mud, teeming with death and life together, just for her.

Maybe she'd walk to the cliffs. Climb higher than the tourists and wander in the cool silence of the caves.

She pushed the gate open, earning a complaint from the hinges. The couple who'd passed turned briefly at the noise, and she saw their attention shift from her to the sprawling, silent house she'd left. The man murmured something, and the woman giggled in response as they walked on. She frowned at their retreating backs, the edges of the wrought iron biting into her fingers as they tensed.

What did people say, in the village, about the house on the hill? Did they wonder who lived there? Tell stories about its flowered, vacant verandahs and spotless, blind windows, meticulously maintained by servants who moved through the landscape like ghosts, with a master never seen and never mentioned? She felt suddenly indignant that the villagers would gossip about them. Martina and her sons were a vital part of their lives here. Despite the oddities of the job, they cared for the old man – and her, by extension – with a quiet, pleasant deference. As had Martina's parents and

grandparents before them. With a start, she realized that Martina's sons had been born here. They'd never known anywhere else. Did they melt into the local population on their nights off? Eat *dolmades* and drink *ouzo* in sticky, smoky bars beneath lazy ceiling fans? Did they have friends in town? Did they talk, laugh, love? Surely they did. She found she just couldn't imagine it. It had been too long for her. Panic and regret rose in her, a fast-crested wave.

What was it like for them, for Georgio and Luka, who had only ever known this village, had only ever known her with a silver stripe in her hair, and him with bloodless, parchment skin? What questions had they asked Martina, growing up? Was there somewhere they went on their days off that felt more like a *home* than a mausoleum? Filled with more life than death?

The sun bore down, stealing her breath away. The laughter on the wind seemed to blame her.

Moments later, she burst into the old man's dusky room. The newspapers soared like startled birds as she crawled sobbing onto the bed, gathering him close in a fierce embrace.

"Now then, it's all right," he said, his fingers fumbling in her hair. His voice was gentle and breathless, but not surprised. "It's all right, my heart."

"I hate them – *hate* them – how they look at us, without seeing us, without respect. The whispers and the stares. I hate them. This isn't my home. I want to go home."

"I know."

"But we can't, can we? Never again."

"Not 'never', my heart. Just not so soon."

"Soon," she sniffled. "It's already been so long."

"Not long enough," he corrected her gently. "You'd be recognized, and you're too young."

"I only *look* young," she corrected him in turn. "I'm not really. And I'm getting older."

"As do we all." There was a long, silent moment as tears slid down her cheeks. Finally he sighed. "And I... am so sorry, my heart. To have brought you here, to have made you so unhappy. I should've let you go." There was an answering catch in his own breath that may have been a sob of his own. "I should let you go. You could go anywhere you like. Amsterdam... Rome..."

Despite the dim warmth of the room she felt suddenly chilled to the marrow. The thought of losing him raised gooseflesh on her arms, and all her petulant peevishness dissolved in the panic. He was frail against her, weighing less than nothing, as if all she held were hollow, jagged bones in a bag of skin. She loosened her grip, afraid she was hurting him. His hand waved weakly at her in protest.

"It's all right," he repeated. The note of helplessness in his voice left her stricken again.

"There's a rift between us, I know, but I'm still here. I can still take care of you."

"We can take care of each other," she replied, wiping her tears away. "And I've been unfairly selfish. Forgive me for being so stubborn." Resting her head carefully on his collarbone, she pulled her hair back over her shoulder. "I owe you my life. Share it with me."

She felt him inhale. They both stilled, and after a long moment his trembling fingertips touched the side of her throat. She shivered and turned her face against his neck, feeling the artery there stutter beneath his skin.

"Are you certain? It's been so long. I'm not what I once was..." He trailed off. The regretful longing in his voice made her tears well again. She pulled back enough to look into his eyes. Their colour had faded to almost nothing, and their hesitant hope almost made her weep in earnest - but there, like a half-smothered fire, was a gleam she recognized.

She kissed him carefully, then smiled against his mouth as she felt his canines stir. "Come. Let's get you strong enough to go out tonight, and I'll buy you a bottle of wine."

After a startled moment of silence, he burst into soft, wheezing laughter. "When you know I don't drink it?" His gaze was drifting down her jawline to her neck. "I believe you're trying to corrupt me," he murmured, sliding his fingers into new positions under her skull. His head sank toward her throat.

Smiling, she settled into his embrace. "These days, they say payback is a -" she began, then gasped as his teeth found her.

*It's all right, she thought as her heart lurched, and her blood rushed, and the old familiar whirling delight took her, I'm still here. I'm here.*

*As am I, he thought in reply, and his triumph matched her own.*

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When she woke, she saw he'd thrown the shutters open to the last of the sunset and was sitting in the casement, watching the day die. Against the fiery sky he was nothing but silhouette, darkness personified. The African wind still brought its faint echoes of the Nile, but the scent of him sang louder, of fine clothes and French cologne and watchful, coiled power.

She couldn't help but smile, stretching against the pillows, and he turned to smile at her in return. The movement pinched the skin around his eyes, drawing tiny lines in an otherwise flawless face glowing with health. His dark hair was graying only slightly, at the temples, in the way other men would envy. He moved with silent, fluid grace to sit next to her on the bed. The proximity made her almost dizzy.

"You look good," she told him, trailing her fingers across the back of his hand. "How do you feel?"

He sent her a sidelong gaze, and she exhaled a laugh. "I'll be a saggy old crone beside you," she said. "You'll sweep some pretty young thing off her feet and leave me behind."

"Never," he murmured, and leaned to kiss her forehead. "There's steak for you. Eat."

He fussed with napkins and a drink for her, and watched as she ate. Her wooziness faded as the meat's juices slid down her throat, but her anticipation was building. "So," she said, spearing a potato. "Where shall we go?"

"I haven't been out in an age," he reminded her gently, stroking her hair. His knuckle ghosted along her cheekbone. "Where do you suggest?"

"The tourists have taken over. Fat and loud and tasteless. But there are still a few worthwhile local places." She pushed the plate away, feeling better, sharper than she had for years, electrified by his touch. Even from here, she could hear the music from the boardwalk and the heartbeat of the tide. "And lately, I think, a new arrival. New, yet familiar. Someone from your side of the family, I think."

His eyes narrowed. "Indeed? Yet no one's come to call. How rude."

"I catch the scent of him sometimes, when the wind is right, when the moon is right. Only in certain areas. He stays on the fringes, I think, but hunts in the crowds. Maybe he's young, just doesn't have the manners or the sense." She looked up at him expectantly. "Or..."

"Or he decided the old man couldn't defend his territory, and he's poaching. That needs correcting."

"Oh, yes."

His eyebrow rose as he watched her face. "Well now. There's an old friend from years past," he murmured. "That smile has led us into trouble before."

"Let's go down to the Mermaid," she said. "It'll be fun."

"The last time I heard that..." He chuckled, then touched two fingers to her jawline and leaned in. "Such a *welcome* familiar friend," he murmured against her lips.

She kissed him back with a laugh of her own, before leaping out of the bed. "I'll have to change."

"I can wait."

She paused with her hand on the doorknob. Then she reached over and pulled an antique gentleman's cane, carved from ebony and tipped with silver, from its stand near the door. A deft

twist pulled the secret blade from its sheath, and she tested its edge before sliding it back into its hiding place. With a mischievous smile, she tossed it to him. "I hope you've had your fill for a while, old man, because I'm going to wear my silver."

His gaze went first to her throat and then, deliberately, traced the curves of her body. "I could never get my fill of you, my heart." As she blushed like an innocent in the gathering dark, he lifted the cane and continued, "Though I am beginning to wonder about this place you're taking me to."

"The Mermaid? It's on the edges. Good seafood, rickety tables. Rock and roll from a scratchy jukebox. Windows open to the shining Matalan sea. The usual."

"And its clientele?"

Her grin widened. "A few sodden locals, and the rest are only passing through. No tourists, no families. Mostly just... freaks and soldiers."

He shook his head indulgently. "You and your soldiers."

"It's the uniforms. Any lamb dressed as wolf deserves what he gets."

Smiling faintly, he pulled the blade from the cane again. "Poachers and freaks can be amusing, but soldiers will be missed."

"Oh, there's more danger on a weekend pass than on the front lines. Every soldier knows that." She re-crossed the room and took his head in both hands. "No more questions. There's plenty of fun to go around. We'll treat ourselves." She kissed him soundly enough to raise a growl in his throat, and felt herself purr in return. Then she ran her tongue along the points of his teeth, laughed in delight, and turned away again.

"Hurry." His snarl was breathless, its urgency restrained with effort.

"And ruin my fun? You're a mean old man," she teased from the doorway as the last of the sun's rays disappeared.

*And yet you love me for it, my heart.* His thought curled through her mind with amusement, edged with anticipation. *My own most savage heart...*

Shadows leapt forward, pulling him from sight – leaving only the rising hunger beneath her skin, the crimson fire of his eyes, and the dust of pharaohs on the breeze.