

Her name is Abri, and she came from the stars in a ship that I have no right to be on. Many travelers have visited us over the decades, from many different places. The first day I meet Abri, I ask her where she is from.

"Italy," she says. Seeing my blank gaze, she adds, "It's a country on Earth."

I nod. I have seen satellite photos of Earth. It is the planet most of the travelers have come from. Some travelers are born on other planets, but not many.

Some of them come to us after landing in neighboring oceans. Some of them marry into citizenship and settle with us, building floating houses to retreat to once their soft flesh wrinkles after hours in the water. Most commonly, they come to trade with us and establish treaties with our oceans. Groups of travelers have never come to live here, though--only individuals.

Abri dangles her brown feet in the shining water, smiling down at me. The angles of her face are sharper than most travelers'. Her entire body is one skinny slash in the air. She would cut like a knife through the water, I can tell.

Only her feet are bare. She sits on the edge of her barge, smiling at me, clad in a uniform that hangs oddly off her sharp frame. There are four pips in her collar. She must be a diplomat.

"How long are you here for?" I ask, resting my furred forearms on the sun-warmed wood of her barge.

"One month," Abri replies. "I am here on behalf of the Italian government--we are negotiating a potential permanent settlement in your ocean."

Even after a century of parlay and trade, it does not come naturally to travelers to refer to our divisions of power as "oceans" and "kinships." They call theirs "countries" and "cities." We find it equally mystifying, even after studying their history and culture. Their world is so landlocked, with barely any proper expanses of water. I sometimes wonder how a species like theirs could even exist on such a dry, cruel planet as their home.

"Thank you for coming," I say formally, and Abri laughs, her head tilted back, her locks of messy hair falling away from her face.

"*Su eos?*" she half-whistles, half-hisses. *You are named?* Her accent in my language is not as harsh as other travelers; hers is more lilting, more sing-song. She chose a less formal tone of address. I am pleased to note this; as a civilian, I do not expect familiarity from Earth diplomats, but Abri seems willing to be friendly with my curious little self.

"*Si eos Essa,*" I reply, clicking my tongue against the roof of my mouth in a friendly gesture. With a heave, I push away from the barge to float on my back, revealing the soft gray fur of my belly.

Abri leans down to rub my belly in circles with one of her small, brown hands. "It's lovely to meet you, Essa," she says, her dark eyes sparkling, and I whistle happily at her.

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I have always wanted to go onto a starship, but I have no right to do so.

I shake my pelt off, letting it fall in silver furred folds to the gritty gravelly sand. The sharp pinpricks are rough against my hands, but it doesn't bother me. To feel anything through just one layer of skin feels so intimate that I adore the feeling more than anything in the world.

Even as I am tucking my pelt into a pouch at my waist, I flush to remember Abri's skin,

stretched so tight over brittle bones.

(There is a recording we watch in school, from a century back, where one of us asked a traveler where their pelt was. The recording is supposed to teach us how making even the most basic of assumptions can be fatally flawed. Even though it is now common knowledge that travelers have no pelts, it always seems oddly indecent to see their skin--no matter how many layers of cloth they cover themselves with. We barely see anyone outside of our kinships without their fur.)

As I make my way over the island, my feet and legs are unsteady from being pressed together for so long, melded into a soft, fur-covered tail. I do not enjoy the unsteadiness that comes with finding my "land legs" again; I dislike the first few moments after I come back to land, when my legs feel as though they've been asleep and are only just waking up. If I could walk all the time, I sometimes think I would. But swimming is as natural as breathing, and I do not think I could live without the ocean.

Still, traveling to the caves where my littermates spend their landtime, I revel in the grit of sand and gravel against my calloused feet.

"She is probably here to parlay with the larger kinship out East," says Ses, by way of greeting. He is my littermate; he doesn't need me to tell him where I've been. He can see just by looking at me.

"Why?" I ask.

Ses shrugs, a fluid, rippling motion, and does not take his eyes off the screen in front of him. He spends almost all of his landtime on our kinship's screens, programming and chatting in equal measures. He is almost as fascinated with the travelers as I am, although his interest is distant, not intimate. He watches from a distance and gathers data. I dive into their oceans and clutch at their hands.

Finally, he says, "They control more of this ocean. They are larger, so a settlement would be more beneficial in their area, since they have more resources than us."

I examine Ses, his huge brown eyes, the layers of close-cropped fur on his head and torso. I think, not for the first time, about how easily one of us could pass for a traveler, without our pelts. An unusually tall traveler, certainly, with long, muscled legs, and abnormally large eyes, and a touch more hair on the torso than normal--but a traveler, nevertheless.

"Did you know about this before?" I ask. Without waiting for an answer, I settle into the chair beside him and peer over his shoulder at the screen.

Ses shrugs once more. It is his favorite motion to make. "It is the first potential permanent human settlement on our entire planet. If you occasionally watched the news broadcasts--"

I close my ears and tune him out.

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I wait for Abri at her barge the next day.

She comes swimming up, her skin shining in the water, all sharp shoulderblades and angles of limbs. Perfect geometry, triangles in biology-defying degrees. Her splashes spray shining droplets into the air that make me want to splash in return.

Her face lights up when she sees me. "Essa!"

I splash my tail in the water, whistling welcomingly.

She's wearing one of the odd human swim-clothes, which clings to her bare skin in a way that, to my eyes, seems disconcertingly intimate. But I know that style, a one-piece in dim colors, is modest for a traveler.

"You swim well," I tell her.

"You sound surprised," she replies, her voice light and teasing. Abri treads water, her sleek head bobbing up and down as she floats, and then she briefly submerges herself and does an underwater somersault--showing off, I think. Her feet briefly break the surface and splash me with glittering droplets; then it's over and her head's back above water, grinning at me mischievously.

"Better than most travelers," I amend, sheepishly.

Her lips part and she lets out another laugh. "I'm from Venice."

"I thought you were from Italy."

Abri's amusement seems bottomless. "Venice is a city in Italy," she explains, her eyes dreamy, an empty smile playing across her mouth, as if her body is here, but her mind is elsewhere. "It's floating city, where the streets are made of water. Ever since I was a child, I loved swimming... I'd sneak off to the canals during every lunch hour at school. My mother said I was born with river-water in my veins instead of blood."

My eyes are wide, my head tilted to one side in fascination. "Why would you ever leave?"

The traveler's face turns to gaze at me, her eyes finding mine and not leaving. I refuse to break eye contact. Looking into those huge brown eyes, not seeing anything else, she could almost be one of us. "Venice was my home," she says, carefully, "but a world made of water is somewhere worth making into a new home."

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"Essa."

Ses stares at me unblinkingly, like I am one of his screens and he is carefully taking in all my data. I don't like it.

"She won't stay," he says, firmly. "Travelers don't see us as people like they are. It's not their fault; we're too different."

I do not answer.

"If you fall for her, you'll pine, because she's going to leave," he continues. "And if you go with her, you'll be lost. You're not one of them any more than I am."

"I have always wanted to go to the stars," I tell him. It is not an answer.

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"America wants to colonize," Abri says in that lilting voice. "*Si owes.*" *I anger.*

"The UPN says colonies may only be established on uninhabited planets," I say quickly, parroting Ses's robotic, factual monotone. The United Planetary Nations has not failed us yet, not for over a century. They forbid the travelers from even stepping foot on our islands. Abri's diplomatic talks always take place in neutral waters.

My friend snorts. "America is not in the UPN anymore. They voted to leave."

I croon a small cry of shock. "But they won't--"

"I doubt it." Abri sighs and stretches her arms out above her head, her bones and joints rippling under the surface of her skin. "There is too much pressure from other countries. Nobody wants them to follow through on colonization of inhabited planets, especially an inconveniently oceanic one like yours. But it is making my negotiations more difficult. I don't think I will be able to convince this kinship to allow a permanent settlement, even though we're working with them, not colonizing."

"My kinship would agree to it," I say, impulsively.

She looks over at me and smiles gently. "I don't think Italy would find that partnership very... useful."

Ses was right, of course. There are no benefits towards establishing a settlement in tandem with a small, unimportant kinship like ours.

(Perhaps I had still been keeping a secret hope in my heart, that somehow, some way, Abri would be sent to live in our waters. That the other kinship would decline, and Abri would come to us as a last resort, and then she would never have to leave me, and I could take her to our beaches, show her our homes, rest with her on the wet sand... But my hopes and dreams are not what matters in this world of politics and diplomacy.)

"I whine too much," Abri says; I startle at her abrupt interjection. I hadn't realized how much I was lost in my own petulant thoughts. "Let's talk about something happier, Essa. Would you like to see photos of Venice? I think you would like it very much."

I nod eagerly. Abri pulls herself up out of the water, liquid slewing off her body, spilling back into the ocean and onto the barge deck. As she wanders below decks, I hesitantly follow suit, heaving myself clumsily out of the water and onto the deck. I shake my pelt off and spread it out on the deck to dry in the sunlight.

Still finding my land legs, I make my way down the stairs to follow her. Abri's quarters are small, and she does not have much with her. I assume she left much of her personal effects in the quarters on her starship.

Abri glances over at me from her desk, where she's pulling up a screen, and her face flushes, deep red under brown.

"I'm sorry," I say quickly.

"No," she says, her words stumbling on their way to leave her mouth. "You look... different."

She's staring at my skin, so pale it's nearly translucent, the webworks of veins visible underneath it like it is nothing more than a frosted pane of glass. At the silver-gray puffs of fur on my scalp and stomach. At my strong cords of muscle, strongest in my thighs and legs. At the way my hands, without the webbing of pelt between my fingers, are visibly agile.

"Nudity isn't very casual in human culture," Abri says, finally, and turns back to the screen.

"It's not casual for us."

She knew that. She could not be a diplomat to my people and not understand my culture. Even in the open waters of the embassy, sealfolk still wear their pelts around outsiders.

The silence stretches out tighter than the taut skin over her wrists. Finally, she gestures to the screen, on which is a glowing, brilliant picture that I can't quite process right away. I lean

over her shoulder to get a better look, and whistle lowly in amazement.

There is a waterway surrounded by brilliant, glowing buildings, which create a stark neon contrast against the midnight-blue evening sky. The neon signs and streetlamps reflect in the dark ripples of the waterways, fragmented fractals of pure light.

Whoever had taken the photo was sitting on the opposite end of a boat from Abri, whose face glows on the screen, laughing and highlighted against the glowing lights in the background. Her hair is pulled back from her face in the photo, to show the buzzed sides of her head, and her cheekbones are painted with swaths of decorative glitter.

Beside me, the current Abri chuckles. "That was my birthday last year."

"Beautiful," I say.

It occurs to me, when I am kissing her a moment later, that I should have expected her to taste like sea salt and brine. But for some reason, her lips tasting like my home comes as a pleasant surprise to me.

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"She'll never take you with her."

"Shut up, Ses."

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We do not talk about what we are to one another. We do not even acknowledge what is forming, this odd new connection of *us*. I am afraid that if I bring it up, it will melt away, like sea foam in my hands. I do not want to upset this delicate balance.

"Philosophy," she says one night, as we sit on the barge deck, our feet in the cool dark water. "The study of thinking about thinking. How do we live our lives? What is ethically correct? Is anything?"

I laugh. "Sounds like a very human discipline."

"It is." Abri's eyes sparkle like the glittering moonlight on the black water all around us; like they do whenever she talks about something she is particularly passionate about. Or whenever she looks at me. "We made overthinking into a full scientific discipline--how human is that? But Essa, we have to think about these things. Is it ethical to colonize an uninhabited planet?"

I shrug and counter with "What makes an animal not civilized enough to count as an inhabitant?"

"Hmm?" Her face is puzzled, but open and trusting, eager for me to explain myself.

"You and I eat animals. We tear down plants in order to build things. We destroy the life in our home planets for our own good, so what makes the animal of another planet too civilized for us to do the same to them?"

"Communication?"

"Even you humans can't communicate with all the conscious, civilized beings on your planet," I shoot back. "Your species only started communicating with the dolphins a few decades ago--before that, you killed them just like every other animal. What makes you think species from whole other planets will always be easier than ones from your own home?"

Her eyes pass over me. "I don't know," she admits. "Maybe everything is an animal, and there are just different levels of animalism, the farther you get from humanity."

My voice catches. "What about the seafolk? How far are we from humanity?"

We both know what I am really asking.

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"When you go, take me with you."

I tremble as I say this, my long un-pelted fingers drumming anxiously against the bedclothes. My people do not get cold, not like travelers do, but I feel chilled, even under all the blankets that Abri piles on her bed.

She gazes at me, levelly. "Essa..."

"What?" My voice shakes. My heart feels like it is going to explode, bruising itself on the walls of my ribcage. "I am not an animal. I am not something to be ashamed of. I *want* to come to Venice."

She just sighs and lapses into silence.

Then:

"I..." Abri swallows. Wets her lips with the tip of her tongue. "You... You're different. From humans. You don't know--"

I gasp for air, my lungs shallow and shrunken. Perhaps I am drowning in thin air, perhaps I dove too deep and can't find my way back to the water's surface.

"I am a person." My voice breaks. "I am as much of a person as you are."

"But you're *different*," she says, her voice pushing desperately at my eardrums, but I don't have the heart to close my ears and tune her out. I am not looking at her. I tell myself that I do not even feel her hand on the thin, pale, hyper-sensitive skin of my forearm. "People on Earth might not see you like... like I do."

"You could stay here," I whine. I hear the pathetic desperation in my voice, and yet I cannot stop myself. I am a child, despite being fully grown.

"I know."

We are quiet for a long time. We do not need to say out loud what we're both thinking-- that she's leaving in a week. That she will most likely not be back to this planet for a long time. That negotiations are not going well, that the kinship will not come to an agreement this trip, or for many trips afterwards, or possibly ever.

"Give me time to think," Abri says, finally. "A week."

I am dizzy, the world rushing around me in circles. My head is a tidal pool and it is filling up too quickly.

"Alright," I whisper.

She is leaving in a week.

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Or less?

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"Where are you?" My voice is a mournful whistle and click, a soft hiss of desperation. There is no-one to answer my call.

I saw a ship in the sky yesterday. Abri is not here. She has not been at her barge for several days--and she never told me she would be away. She never even came back after that night, when I asked to come home with her.

Why would she not even say goodbye?

The conclusion is obvious.

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"I told you so."

"Ses--"

"Oh. Essa. No, don't cry--"

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The seabirds seem to be calling my name. The ocean is still, nary a stray gust of wind to be felt. I am splayed open, naked, raw. My heart is pumping blood onto the barge deck as I wait for Abri. Above me, the sky is mockingly clear, a vibrant blue that throbs with sunshine. My pelt lies on the scorching boards of the deck, shimmering tantalizingly in the sunlight, mimicking the sparkling call of the sea.

There is no chance she is coming, but I will wait for her, day after day, until the end of my life. I will not disappear into the nameless, wordless, ageless beauty of the ocean, the sheer power and vitality of my pelt. It is not my home anymore--my home is the bleeding of my feet on a rocky beach, my shaking clumsiness as I stand upright, the feeling of individual fingers twined and grasped in the short fur of my head.

I heard a traveler say, once, "home is where the heart is." Perhaps my home is already on another planet, beating in someone else's hands as she smiles that cutting smile.

I will watch the skies until I find it again.

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She does not come from the sky, and so I nearly miss her as she swims up.

Her geometries are still as sharp and cutting as ever in the water. Her skin is still shining, her body still lean and neat. Water drips from her hair and skin as she pulls herself onto the deck.

"Essa," she says, quietly.

I swallow. Nod to her. My breath is quiet and shallow.

"I thought you left me," I say, stupidly, obviously.

Her eyes are soft. When she shakes her head, her hair drips onto the deck and a droplet of water splatters my foot. I shatter.

"I did," she says.

I'm so confused. She's shaking her head, she's *here*, but she left--

"I didn't want to say goodbye, I thought it would be too difficult." Her voice is shaking, so

light that she's barely catching her breath, and I want to give her the air out of my own lungs. "I didn't want to see your face when I left, but I was sitting in the ship... and it was so cold, so metallic, so distant... and I saw the ocean fading away, and my stomach hurt so much... and I realized, I wanted to come back and hear your voice again, even one more time." Abri's hands spasm by her sides, like she wants to reach out, but she doesn't. "So I did," she finishes lamely.

So that's it.

"Will you ever come back again?" I ask, my voice so quiet that I wonder if I am even speaking.

Her shaking, purple-knuckled hands come to rest on my shoulders. She's shaking so hard, and her hands are so cold. Perhaps she is dead, and I killed her with kindness. I would not be surprised.

"Please," her voice chokes out, strangled, the noose of the stars wrapping tighter around her throat. "Essa, I want you to--please--I need--" She's struggling. I stroke the knife of her cheekbone with one hand, and somehow, she rallies, her face and voice stronger. "There's another ship leaving in a few days that's taking a few dozen passengers offworld, and it only takes a few days to get immigration paperwork processed if you're a diplomat, and marriages are easily--well--oh, blast it, Essa, the point is, do you still want to come with me?"

Her eyes sparkle like the night-black ocean waters again, and her face is eager, tentative, raw, open. Her body is a study in sharp geometries, the science of her people, the cold metal of starships and cruel angles of skyscrapers in sprawling land-bound cities. She is a product of machinery, a sharpened switchblade, dangerous, cutting, liable to tear me apart if I give her the chance.

But that is my flaw--I am always willing to give her the chance. I would never have waited for her if I wouldn't forgive her in the end; if, deep down, I didn't truly believe in her steel-cut heart and tentative promises. Despite everything, I love her. Infinitely. Passionately. Stupidly.

Her name is Abri, and she came from the stars in a ship I have no right to be on. Except maybe, perhaps, now, I do.

"Yes."