

## The Mermaid in the Bathtub

Luna, who was seven years old, woke herself up early. She made sure to drink two big glasses of water before bed so that she'd *have* to get up before the crack of dawn. That was the only way she had, really—the big round alarm clock on her Mom's bed stand was full of gears and knobs which proved too complex for her little sausage fingers to operate.

The heavy rain from the night before faded to a light drizzle. The kitchen window looked out over milky grey lake, dressed with clouds of fog drifting about like ballerinas on a great glass mirror. It was perfect weather for frog-finding.

Luna put on her favorite pink rain boots and poncho (the one with butterflies on it), picked up her ice cream bucket, and trekked out into the mist.

Luna and her Mom were engaged in a private war about the frogs. It was Luna's position that frogs should be kept in the house, and given names, fed cheese crackers, and educated. Mom had a lot of irrational problems with this very simple request, so Luna had to go about her mission secretly.

She hopped down the wooden stairs to the lake shore. The sun had just barely peeked out from behind the pines—it hid behind a veil of mist, but its light reached the water's edge and showed Luna her path to the very best frog spot in the reeds. You had to hop to get there, of course, or risk getting your knees wet. The lake was always chilly after a storm.

Luna gasped with delight when she saw five glittery jade frogs perched on the deadhead log. She struggled to contain her excitement—frogs are easily spooked, and would run from her, even though she only meant to be their new mother. Carefully, she crept across the stones, bucket ready.

She crouched by the log. She'd read in a book called *How To Be A Spy* that if you stay still enough, everyone will forget that you're there. So, though the frogs seemed initially troubled at her approach, after a few moments their awareness drifted from her.

This deadhead had been rotting in the lake ever since the beginning of time. Its bark had gone black and green, the papery remnants of ancient birch uncurling into the mud. A whole ecosystem had sprung up around it. Lake grass and tall cattails became homes for whirligig

beetles, water striders, dragonflies, and little fishes. Luna had found many wonderful things here — crayfish, on multiple occasions, and painted turtles sunning themselves on the rocks, and one time a snake.

She held her breath as she raised the bucket. The frogs pulsed like little green hearts, beating against the misty air. So deep was her fixation on the five frogs that she didn't even see the big, dark eyes staring out over the other side of the log.

Before she could bring the bucket down, a little brown hand sprung out of the reeds and snatched a frog right off the log. Luna screamed and fell backwards into the water, and the other four frogs scattered— she heard a big splash, like the one she'd made, and as she sat up (her pajamas were soaking wet) she saw a huge black shape slither into the mud. Its tail was slippery and fast, like the snake she'd seen, wriggling into the mud and knocking reeds every which way.

“Wait!” Luna called after the creature, righting herself and splashing after it.

Eventually, Luna Dawning grew up to become a very intelligent— though occasionally stupid— young woman. I wish I could say that this moment was not a testament to her good sense, but I have to be completely honest with you: it was, and when she got older, she would have done exactly the same thing.

She suspected that the creature might be an alligator. Luna had seen many small reptiles in the lake, but never an alligator. She'd been assured that the climate here was too cold for alligators, but Luna challenged this argument by drawing an alligator wearing a sweater and hat.

Mom couldn't say no to an alligator— and really, a pet alligator was worlds better than a pet frog. And so, Luna trudged through the mud and reeds after the strange creature. She followed the shore all the way to The Point, the big rocky hill that jutted out into the water behind her house. Mom forbade her from ever going out there by herself. Too dangerous, she said. But those thoughts were far from Luna's mind right now, as she climbed the dark rock and slid over to the other side, her heart racing with excitement, her mind swirling with curiosity.

Waiting for her there was not, as she'd hoped for, an alligator. A little girl sat against the rock, on a little ledge in the water which allowed her to keep her black fish tail submerged in the lake. She had pretty black hair in three braids down her back, a big hooked nose with a ring in it, and olive-brown skin that shimmered like her inky tail. She was the first and only mermaid Luna

had ever seen in real life, and she had Luna's frog halfway in her mouth. The quiet morning was cut suddenly by the sick crunch of frog bones.

"Hey!" Luna screamed. "Stop!"

The mermaid began to cry. She spat out the remaining half of a frog into the water.

"You killed him!" Luna yelled.

"I'm sorry," sobbed the mermaid. "Don't tell."

"I'm telling my mommy," said Luna.

"No!" The mermaid cried. "I'll get in trouble! I just wanna go home. I want my mommy and daddy." She rubbed at her left arm with her right, and Luna finally noticed that she seemed to be tangled up in something. It looked like a fishing net, but crueler, set with sharp barbs that scratched and cut the girl's skin. It was wrapped around her torso and her arm, pinning it to her side. It looked tight, knotted, and painful.

Luna softened.

"Does that hurt?" She asked.

The mermaid nodded. "Yeah, it really, really hurts."

"I'll help you. My name's Luna, and I can be your friend. And you can be my friend."

"I can't be your friend," said the mermaid. "I can't be friends with humans."

Luna's eyebrows knit tightly for a moment as she pondered this problem.

"Okay, then I'll just be your friend. And you don't have to be my friend."

The mermaid thought about this.

"Well, that sounds okay, I guess. My name's Kore," she said.

"Wait here," Luna instructed, and ran up to her house.

Luna's Mom took some effort to wake. Luna had to resort to climbing on top of her sleeping mother and prying her eyes open with force. Mom groaned and shoved Luna off to the side.

Mom— Jane Dawning— was a wiry, lithe woman with light tan skin and thick golden hair all about her head like a lion's mane. She had a small, hard mouth, and tired blue eyes. She was a wonderful storyteller and a terrible cook, and she raised Luna all by herself.

At first, Mom accused her of bringing more frogs into their home, and preemptively passed judgement that they could not stay. Frogs lived outside, not inside. When Luna could get a word in edgewise, she told her about the mermaid.

Mom frowned, and asked Luna if she was sure. Maybe Luna had just seen a very big catfish.

So Luna had to drag her mother down to The Point in her slippers, where Kore was waiting. Her dark eyes bugged when she saw Luna's mother, and she went very still.

"Don't be afraid! Mommy, this is my friend Kore!" Luna said. "I mean, I'm her friend. She isn't my friend."

Kore, who had stopped crying, started up again.

"Oh, dear," Mom said. "You're *very* lost, little girl."

"I'm sorry," Kore replied.

Mom had to crouch to climb down the point safely. Her slippers didn't have great traction on the wet rock.

"First, we have to get this trap off you. Stop moving around so much— you're making it worse when you do that."

Mom took off her slippers and waded into the water. She picked up Kore, careful not to put pressure on the barbs in the net. Luna followed behind curiously as Mom carried Kore up the shore, up the stairs, and into the house. Kore cried and cried the whole way there. Luna thought the mermaid was overreacting a bit.

Luna and her mother lived in a small, one-story house made of white wood. Jane decorated the place with things she found, and things she made— chimes with little metal fairies at the ends, old book pages with pictures of planets and stars and krakens and ogres were framed and hung on the walls like paintings. Colored glass orbs hung from the ceiling, casting rainbows about the room when the light hit them. Jane loved to collect things that looked like magic.

Luna's Mom carried Kore to the bathroom and placed her gently in the tub. She filled it to the brim with cold water as she went to find some pliers and scissors from the kitchen. Luna sat on the toilet seat, kicking her feet, asking Kore all kinds of questions about what it was like to have a fish tail and live underwater. She was appalled to hear that Kore didn't have TV at home.

Kore had never even *heard* of a TV. When Mom came back with the tools and began to clip away at the netting, Luna reiterated this shocking information to her.

“Of course not. TV doesn’t work in the water,” Mom calmly explained. “You need electricity to make TV work. Where Kore comes from, they don’t use electricity— they don’t have refrigerators, or ovens, or electric lights, either.”

“Where do you get food?” Luna was bewildered. “What about when it’s dark?”

“It’s always dark,” said Kore, who had started to get annoyed at this line of questioning. “We do too have lights. In Ashalo, we have lights all the time.”

Luna ran out of the room and returned with a bag of cheese crackers.

“Kore, you can have these,” she said, throwing the open bag into the bathtub.

“Luna!” Mom snapped. The little crackers spilled out of the bag. She quickly fished them out and dumped them in the trash can. Kore inspected one of the crackers that Mom had missed, and held it to the light in between her fingers. She crushed it to orange dust. She licked some of it off her forefinger.

“Its salt,” she said thoughtfully.

“She doesn’t want your cheese crackers,” said Mom. Mom finished clipping away the net. Kore had little cuts and big raw scrapes where the barbed ropes had rubbed her. She carefully inspected the wounds, checking each one for parasites, and cleaning them with a little rubbing alcohol before smothering them with bacitracin. Mom admitted that she didn’t know much about aquatic medicine, and told Kore to tell her if anything hurt or itched.

Luna and Kore talked for what felt like hours. At first, Kore seemed guarded, and offended at many of Luna’s ridiculous questions— did she ever sing sailors to their deaths? Did she keep catfish and dogfish as pets? Did she ever fight a shark? But Kore soon began to laugh at the questions instead, as she realized that Luna was not making fun of her at all, but truly knew nothing. Kore also laughed at Luna’s goofy games and silly voices, and the two of them splashed water back and forth at each other, soaking the tile floor. Luna brought all her toys into the bathroom and gave half of them to Kore. They played together with a pair of naked barbies and an army of rubber ducks, until Kore became gloomy again and drifted to the bottom of the tub to take a nap.

Luna was sad that Kore was sad, and so she went to her mother, crying. Jane sat on the green sofa, reading a magazine while brunch boiled on the stove.

“Kore is a long way from home today,” Mom explained, gently brushing Luna’s hair with her fingers as she lay on her mother’s lap. “She’s very scared, and misses her mommy and daddy a lot. Think about how you’d feel, if you got lost far away, and you couldn’t find me.”

Luna was horribly struck by this idea. She couldn’t even bear the thought.

“Even though she’s sad and scared, I think she’d be *more* sad and scared if she didn’t have you to play with her. You’re being a big help, Luna.”

“Where are her mommy and daddy?” Luna asked. Mom breathed a long breath.

“I don’t know,” she said. “We’ll keep her safe for when they come back.”

Kore slept for a long time. When she woke up, the three of them ate brunch in the bathroom— Mom had made boiled eggs and oatmeal, which she served with celery sticks and apple slices. Kore devoured everything, and asked for seconds.

Of course, they couldn’t keep Kore in the bathtub forever. It made things very awkward when they had to do their business, and the space was far too small for even a little mermaid. But Kore couldn’t live in the open lake, either— she was just a little girl, after all, and Mom said that it was like making a human girl sleep by herself in the woods. So after a few days, Mom drove into town and bought a large tent, an inflatable raft, and a snorkel, and got to work.

Luna and Kore helped set up the tent as best they could— though, once the raft was out on the water, they found it impossible to keep their attention on any particular task. Instead, it was fun to push one another off of the big yellow floatie and play Shark Tag, a game of their own invention where one girl would swim around the raft attempting to pull the other into the water.

Mom needed five anchors to keep the tent in place. One on each corner, and one in the middle, to keep the bottom flat. Luna was forbidden from going inside, for fear that she’d get stuck and be unable to breathe. Mom gave Kore lots of things to decorate her space with— a pretty silver mirror, a pair of pool lights, two big bags of seashells from the craft store, and some plastic jellyfish meant to decorate aquariums. Mom also gave her a big white woven rug and three wicker baskets with lids. Finally, Mom made sure Kore had things to do— she bought tools

for beadwork, including a bulk box of all kinds of assorted beads in every shape and size. Mer people loved beadwork, Mom explained, and Kore seconded this.

“Our books are made of beads,” Kore told Luna. “We don’t have letters. Just glyphs. I can’t read them all yet, but my teacher showed me how to make some of them. This one says ‘Luna,’” she said. Kore slid a little braid covered in pattered beads across the inflatable raft. It didn’t look like anything to Luna, but she loved it more than anything she’d ever received in her life. She tied it around her wrist like a bracelet, and didn’t take it off all summer.

Luna spent every day with Kore. There weren’t any other kids on the lake— nobody at all, really— it was just Luna and her Mom this far north, except for sometimes the groups of boy scouts who canoed through the area on camping trips. Kore simply hid under the raft whenever they came by. Luna had never had a real friend before. She’d be going into 1st grade in the autumn, and she thought she’d probably make loads of friends there, but she decided she couldn’t like any of them as much as Kore. Kore was the most fun of all.

They collected frogs together, and turtles. Mom made them release every animal they managed to get in the ice cream bucket, to their great chagrin. Kore was the one who named the frog spot at the deadhead the “frog kettle,” because frogs seemed to spawn from it magically. Kore kept Luna’s naked barbie in her tent at night, along with her own— just to keep her company.

Some nights, Kore sat at the edge of the dock crying until Mom picked her up and brought her to the bathtub. When Kore really missed her family, she slept in the house. Luna brought all her favorite books to Kore, and sat on the toilet seat— which she’d turned into a comfy lounge chair with the addition of a great big sofa pillow— and read them out loud. They went through her whole collection very quickly, including the book about the talking alligators. Luna didn’t always know the words, though, and so sometimes she had to make up her own endings. Kore liked these the most. She liked to chip in and add her own parts to the stories as well. Between the two of them, they sent Paddington Bear through all manner of hell, on increasingly frightening adventures. Paddington Bear slew the king of devils with his magic hat, and commanded all of his evil armies to jump off a cliff. Except, Kore emphasized, the evil army

guys who wanted to become good. Under Paddington's morally ambiguous (yet unarguably tyrannical) rule, the Kingdom of Devils flourished, and became the Kingdom of Best Friends.

Kore hardly liked any of the snacks Luna brought her. She scrunched up her beak-like nose at the taste of chocolate candies, and spat out the ice cream. Luna cried and cried that Kore didn't like her gifts, but Mom assured her that Mer people simply didn't like to eat the same things that little human girls ate.

Mom gave Kore boiled potatoes, wild rice, meat blanched grey, fish— both poached and raw— celery and lettuce, and frozen blue shrimp. Luna was not envious of this diet. She understood that Kore was a different sort of little girl, and maybe it was true that she didn't eat ice cream; however, Luna was also acutely aware that Mom's dinners for *human* girls were inedible. She had seven years of justification for her doubts that Mom knew what to feed a mer girl.

Luna asked Kore what she liked to eat one day, when they were playing a game by the shoreline called Throw The Rocks.

“Hmm, I like *lloralosh*.”

“What's *lloralosh*?”

“You take some soft kind of leaf, I don't know what it is, but it's really good, and you put in it some really really soft fish. And you can have anything you want. I always make my cook put crunchy seeds and blubber and red peppers in.”

Luna made a face.

“Blubber sounds gross.”

Kore picked up a really big rock and threw it all the way to the end of the dock. She was much stronger than Luna, probably because she had to swim all the time.

“No, it's good. It's sweet and chewy. And it's yummy with the peppers and seeds.”

Since Luna didn't have a cook, she took it upon herself to recreate this dish herself, using ingredients in the kitchen. They didn't have any blubber, as far as she knew, but they did have a lot of white bread. Luna stood on a chair in the kitchen and buttered three pieces of bread, stacked them on top of each other, and dumped a can of peanuts over it. She carefully layered on top of it all the sliced red peppers she'd picked out of one of Mom's pre-made salad kits. As a



finishing touch, she attempted to wrap the whole thing in lettuce leaves— but they proved too wily for her, and what she wound up with in the end was... well, a *Chopped* contestant might try to sell it as a rustic, open-faced peanut-pepper salad garnished lightly with crushed romaine.

“This isn’t even close,” Kore said when Luna gave her the sandwich. Luna nearly cried, but as Kore chewed thoughtfully, her face lit up. “This is way better than your mommy’s food.”

“Really?” Luna gasped. Nobody had ever told her she was *better* than a grown-up at anything. Even though, truthfully, she had a sense the bar wasn’t high with this one.

Luna began to accompany Mom to the grocery store to help pick out foods for Kore. Kore told her what kinds of fish she liked best, and Luna tried very hard to pick out the ones that matched her descriptions the most. Often, Kore would describe things that Luna had never seen, like the Carpricorn, which was allegedly half-goat and half goldfish. They hunted in lakeweed forests for fat snails and worms. The meat was dark and stringy, and had to be cooked before consumption. Luna wondered how things were cooked underwater, and Kore’s answer only confused her more— heat from the earth, she said.

“Mommy, that one!” She pointed through the butcher case at a whole salmon. “That’s the one she said. With the beak.”

Mom smiled to the butcher and told him to wrap up a filet. The butcher, a big bearded man with a *Slipknot* tattoo, offered Luna a lollipop.

“Do you know what a Carpricorn is?” Luna asked the man.

“My wife’s a Capricorn,” he replied.

“*What?*” Luna shrieked. Then she broke into hysterical giggles. Mom and the butcher looked at her strangely, with amused little smiles. “My best friend Kore is a mermaid,” she explained further. “Did you know that mermaids eat Carpricorns?”

“I didn’t know that. I’ll tell my wife to watch out,” the butcher replied. Luna nodded. He winked at Mom, and she winked back.

As they drove back home in Mom’s green station wagon, down the winding dirt roads out of town and through the tall dark pines, Mom told Luna not to talk about Kore with anybody but her.

“Kore’s my best friend!” Luna argued.

“Yes, but you can’t tell everyone about her. If other people find out about Kore, she’ll get in trouble. And I’ll get in trouble, and you’ll get in trouble. You understand what a secret is, right?”

“*Duh*,” said Luna.

“We have to keep Kore a secret.”

“But *why*?”

Jane glanced at herself in the rearview mirror, and let out a sigh.

“Well, Kore’s not supposed to be here. It’s actually really bad that she’s here. We’re not supposed to be here either, actually— actually, we’re in more trouble than she is, if word gets out.”

“But *why*?” Luna asked again.

“Because. There’s bad people out there. They don’t like me, and they don’t like that I’m your mommy.”

“*But why*?”

“Because. A very long time ago, I did something bad. And I got in *big* trouble for it. You remember when you were really little, and you used to call me Auntie instead of Mommy?”

“No.”

“Well, you did. Actually, you said it like *ta-dee*. For a few years. Then Derrick— you remember Derrick, right?”

Luna kind of remembered Derrick. A flash of dark hair, a brown coat. He used to play dolls with her. She nodded.

“Derrick said it was mean of me to make you call me Auntie. You didn’t come from me. You came from my sister. But because I love you, and raised you, and will protect you forever, I should be called your Mommy. Because I *am* your Mommy. And you’re my little girl. So we stopped calling me Auntie Jane. Because you’d rather call me Mommy, right?”

“Yes,” Luna said.

“Well, there are really bad, really evil people out there, who want to come and hurt me. Because of the bad thing that I did. I made them really, really mad. And if they find us, they’ll take you away from me, and try to make you bad, too.”

“What did you do, Mommy?” Luna was starting to get scared.

“Hmm. Well, that’s a big question.” Jane started to smile. “I was a pirate, once. And a bandit queen. I travelled all over the continent, stealing things from people, and making all kinds of trouble. I did lots of good things, too, though. But when *bad* people are in charge, they make bad laws, and doing certain good deeds can get you arrested. Like, if a Duke burns down a village and takes their sacred drum, it’s not *bad* to sneak into his house and steal it back for them. But you’ll still get in trouble for it.”

“Okay,” Luna agreed. “It’s okay to steal from bad guys.”

“Well, one day I went a little too far. And I stole from a really *really* bad guy. The baddest guy you could ever imagine.”

“Gaston,” Luna offered.

“Badder.”

“Gaston is the baddest one.”

“The octopus woman?”

“Ursula!”

Mom turned off the main road, onto the unmarked driveway to their little cabin on Daurnile Lake. It was difficult to find if you’d never been there before.

“The bad guy will know where we are, if people find out about Kore. So you have to keep her a secret,” she said. “Do you understand? It’s very important.”

“Yeah, Mommy,” Luna replied, watching her favorite bird house pass her window. It was the one they had made together at Christmas. Luna had painted herself on the front of it, dressed like Sailor Moon.

“Repeat it back to me,” Mom urged.

“The bad guy will find us, blah blah blah, don’t tell people about Kore. Mommy, can we watch *The Little Mermaid*?”

Jane decided this was good enough for now. Luna ran inside to set up the VCR in the bathroom— it lived in there now, underneath the white table all the towels sat on. Kore wasn’t in there right now, but she’d surely jump at the idea of a mid-afternoon movie. Especially a mermaid movie. It was silly that they *hadn’t* watched it together yet.

Kore and Luna mostly watched movies together on the evenings when Kore was too lonely to sleep by herself in the tent, or when there were thunderstorms. Mom insisted on bringing Kore inside when there was thunder, even though Kore refused to admit any fear of storms. However, sometimes, it just felt like a movie day.

Kore liked the real-people movies more than the animations, to Luna's chagrin. They'd found common ground in the Muppets. Evidently, the Mer people had their own form of puppet-shows— one was even a talking frog, like Kermit. He was called Gorla-Gulo, and he amused the Mer children every day at the city's center by swallowing kelp melons whole and spitting out the seeds.

Luna and Kore had conspired together to create something called the Land Boat. They'd taken Luna's wagon from the garage and filled it with water, and drawn all over it with glitter pens. The Land Boat's operation was simple— Kore would get in it, and Luna would drag her around on shore. It was hard to pull the wagon out of the water, though, so Mom's help was sometimes needed. Luna showed Kore all kinds of interesting and important Land Things this way, such as trees and birds and whatnot. Mostly, it was just fun to see how fast they could go. When it was time to watch a movie, Luna implemented the Land Boat.

"I found this for you," said Kore, when Luna hopped across the dock to meet her at its end. Kore passed Luna a small, rusty, pink anchor. "It's your favorite color!"

"Wow! Thank you so much! I love it," Luna said, taking the anchor and putting it in the fishing boat with all the other lake-bottom treasures Kore had found. "There's a movie I really wanna show you. It has a mermaid!" Kore scrunched up her face at the word 'mermaid.' Luna always forgot that Kore didn't like to be called that. Kore wasn't anyone's maid. "I mean, there's a Mer-girl."

"Is it a real people story, or just pictures?"

"... pictures, but it's really really good. I promise."

Kore thought about it.

"Did you get the orange fish?"

"Yeah!"

"Alright, I guess. We can have snacks while we watch!"

Luna managed to pull Kore's wagon up the shore almost by herself, though Kore helped by pushing the ground with her arms, and it took them about an hour to do so. It was always a fun game, trying to get Kore up the hill— especially when she rolled down again. Mom made them promise to take the long path through the thicket of trees, because it wasn't as steep, but occasionally this promise went unobserved.

The sun was low in the sky by the time they actually reached the front door of the cabin.

"Mommy!" Luna rapped against the screen door.

"Mommy!" Kore mimicked, and both of them laughed hysterically about this until Jane came to the door. The Land Boat was not allowed in the house (much like the frogs), so Mom picked up Kore and carried her to the bathtub. "Can we have snacks?" Kore asked.

"As long as you don't make a mess," Mom replied, setting Kore in the tub of cool water she'd started to run as soon as she saw them rolling around out the window.

They watched *The Little Mermaid* with the lights off. Luna sat on her toilet-chair with a fleece blanket and her favorite stuffed llama, and Kore in the tub with her big rubber duck. Luna ate a peanut-butter sandwich, and Kore ate cubes of raw salmon.

"Ashalo doesn't look like that," Kore commented when the mer-kingdom appeared.

"This is Atlantica," Luna argued.

"Mer people don't *look* like that," Kore laughed a few minutes later, gesturing at the screen. "What are they even wearing? It's like, shells on their..."

"Boobies," Luna offered, and they both snickered.

"You can't even talk underwater!" Said Kore, as the fishes all sang about how lovely life was under the sea.

"You can't?" This upset Luna greatly. "You can't even sing?"

"You can sing, but not like that. Mostly we just..." Kore moved her hands around. "Make words with our hands," she explained.

Luna had seen Kore gesticulate with her hands frequently, and in unusual ways. She hadn't realized that Kore was making words.

Kore went on to elaborate that her home looked more like Ursula's lair than any of the other mer-places in the movie. Luna had to pause the film so that Kore could finish talking about

it. Kore didn't usually talk during movies, but this one made her chatty. She thought it was silly that Ariel would sell her voice for legs.

"If you go to school and study and stuff, you can do that yourself," Kore said. "Maybe Ariel's just kinda dumb."

Luna could have slapped her, except she was intrigued.

"Can you do that?"

Kore shrugged.

"I probably could. It's kind of a thing grown-ups do. If I practice a lot and go to school, maybe I can. You gotta have a lot of focus like this— hmmm... ." Kore mimed meditating. Luna imitated her.

"Maybe I can learn to grow a tail," Luna suggested.

Kore beamed.

By the time they finished the movie, they were out of snacks, and Kore was out of criticisms. She only watched Prince Eric scoop Ariel out of the water, and twirl her around in her shimmering purple dress, with a dreamy look in her eye.

Kore was feeling restless after the movie, so Mom brought her back down to the lake. It was a dull, grey evening on Daurnile Lake. The wind had picked up, and big dark waves rocked the fishing boat until it crashed into the buoys that cushioned it from the dock. Mom sometimes worried about Kore's tent floating away in waves like these, but the water underneath was calmer than the water above. And warmer, too, Luna knew. The two of them swam together under a darkening sky. They pretended to be their own, made-up superheroes: Star Girl and Cloud Girl, a duo who lived in the sky and fought ghosts.

Luna sadly said goodbye to Kore when Mom said it was too dark to play in the water. It was time for quiet reading, and then bed. As Luna's water-wrinkled fingers turned the pages of her favorite *Paddington* book in her cozy bed, Mom sat down at the end of the dock with a lantern, and had her private talk with Kore. Mom called this 'checking in,' and Luna was not invited. It was important, she said, for Kore to have her own special time to talk to Mom about things you need a mom for.

Kore told Mom things that she didn't talk about much with Luna. She talked about the terrible accident that stole her away from her family, about how she missed her own mom and dad and sister, about things that made her happy and things that made her sad. Sometimes Luna heard them laughing together, and she wanted to run outside and ask what was so funny— but she wasn't allowed to, and so instead she just became grumpy.

Mom came back inside and set something down on the kitchen table. It was a strange object, long and black and sleek, with a cruel-looking ebony blade at the tip. When Luna asked what it was, Mom said it was an arrow. It had belonged to her, years ago. Kore had found it in the lake.

“She’s lucky to have a friend like you,” said Mom. “I’m very proud of you.”

“Why?”

“Oh, lots of reasons,” Mom smiled. “You’re good at cheering people up when they’re sad. You have a kind heart. It astounds me sometimes— how did *I* raise such a thoughtful, compassionate person?”

“Kore’s my friend,” Luna offered as explanation.

After Jane sent her daughter to bed, she boiled herself a pot of dark tea. She took it strong and black, and often oversteeped, as she looked over her work.

The kitchen table in her house was rarely used for dinner anymore. Not that it had ever been much of a dinner table— Jane preferred to eat on the green sofa, as fast as possible. Food was fuel, after all. You didn't have to make a ritual out of it. Her work, however, was critical.

Star charts and maps of planets and moons covered the table— distant nebulas, the Milky Way, Andromeda, Alpha Centauri, Proxima Centauri, the paths of comets and other celestial bodies, constellations named by countless cultures, the trajectory of Venus, the space between the planets, their projected crossings, their moons, the length of the sun's shadows on their backs as they whorled about it in a gravitational dervish. *Aries, Ursa Major, Lyra, Draco*— and there were other names, too, that you would never find on a reputable astronomer's map: *Wyvern, Galashyr, Wing-Of-Sady, Clove*. These names belonged to another sky, far away, but close, too— too close, sometimes.

You had to know a little about stars to be a good pirate. Still, this sort of math wasn't Jane's strong suit. And it was easy to get the two skies mixed up, especially when it was late at night, and you were low on tea.

She ran her finger along the edge of the arrow as she worked, fingering the blunt tip of it. The dark blade had dulled, but it was made of solid ebony, so it would never rust. The grain of the wood was tight. Perhaps, Jane thought, tight enough so that years of water damage hadn't penetrated too deeply. Maybe the arrow would still fly the same.

Jane's blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she wrapped a white knit blanket over her shoulders to warm her as she worked. It was chilly now, but she kept the window open. Call it a quirk. She drew paths from one constellation to another, across skies, between worlds, and worlds around worlds. She opened books about astrology and astronomy and cosmology and cartography, finding old bookmarks and making new ones, taking notes and marking them on the maps.

It was midnight when she spilled half a cup of cold tea across her workspace. She would have cursed, except that the reason she'd jerked her hand so suddenly was because of the revelation that a *something* was going to happen very soon, and not so very far away. The exact kind of *something* she'd been looking for.

She shivered in the chill of the night, and finally closed the window. The pool light in Kore's tent was still on. Its pale outline in the lake was like that of an immense jellyfish, the bioluminescent kind that haunted ocean currents when the season was right.

Luna woke up that morning to Kore standing over her.

"Look," Kore grinned.

Luna blinked. Something was wrong with this picture. She wasn't sure she was completely awake.

Kore stood on one leg and kicked the other. She shook her foot and wiggled her toes.

"How did you do that?" Luna gasped.

"I figured it out by myself!" Kore replied. She tried to switch to her other foot but fell down instead.



“Mom!” Luna yelled. “Kore got legs!” Kore giggled on the floor and tried four times to stand back up, falling each time.

Mom dug around her wardrobe to find Kore something small enough to fit her. Kore was a taller and more robust child than Luna, and her pants wouldn’t work. She eventually found a green scarf she’d received as a gift and never worn. She tied it around Kore’s waist like a wrap-around skirt— it clashed with the blue swim suit top she wore as a shirt, but something was better than nothing.

Kore’s new legs were not as Ariel’s had been. They were the same dark tan as the rest of her skin, at least initially, but ink-black swirls decorated them in dense, overlapping patterns. Her feet, where the tattoos were densest, were black as soot. They became more sparse around her hips, and trailed to mere wisps— sketches, really— just below her ribs, where her scales had once begun.

The patterns had a strange, biological quality to them, like the structure of chlorophyll or the mycelia of mushroom colonies, and also like spiderwebs and honeycombs— but there was also something eldritch about them as well, something artificial and arcane and ancient. The magic that Kore had tapped into here was innate to her, but unnatural. It was like a bastard language, or a bicycle a tree has grown through.

Luna was over the moon about it. Kore could come with her to the park, and to school when the autumn came— she could come to the grocery store and the ice cream store, she could play dry-on-the-land tag, she could sleep in a bed and stay up all night playing flashlight puppets in Luna’s room. She couldn’t wait to show Kore some cool land-walking things, like the hill over by the county road that had the best blueberry patch.

Kore was just having fun stumbling around like a newborn faun. Mom had to catch her plenty of times before she knocked something over in the living room.

“I’m so heavy,” she giggled. “Is this how it always is for you?”

For the first time ever, they got to see what Kore’s hair looked like when it was dried off. It was straight and thick, and shimmered with all kinds of hues in its blackness.

“Can you change back?” Mom asked.

“I dunno,” Kore shrugged. She kicked one of her legs high into the air and fell on her back.

“I think we should figure that out,” said Mom.

“No!” Luna said. “What if Kore can’t do it again?”

“Yeah! I wanna be like you guys,” Kore said. “I wanna be a human.”

Luna and Kore held hands and spun around and around, singing *human, human, human!*

“Kore,” Jane said, “I’ve found a way for you to go home. To your own mommy and daddy.”

Kore stopped spinning. She didn’t fall, she just stood, eyes wide.

“I want Kore to stay,” Luna said. “You want to stay with us!” She grabbed her friend in a tight hug.

“My mommy and daddy?” Kore said, dumbstruck.

“And your big sister. I bet they really miss you.”

“I can go home? When?... How?”

“Tomorrow. There’s an eclipse... when the earth’s shadow crosses over the moon. That will open the stars on our side. Wing-Of-Sady will meet the Three Witches as they rise over Lake Ashalo. That will open the stars on your side. And a path will appear. It will take you straight to your home waters.”

Kore began to cry.

“Kore doesn’t want to go home,” said Luna, her little face scrunched ferociously at her Mom, her fists balled.

“I want to go home,” Kore replied.

“Luna,” Mom gently touched her daughter’s shoulder. Luna pulled away.

“Kore doesn’t want to go home!” Luna repeated. “You can’t go. You can’t! You just turned human! You can stay with us forever now!”

“Kore’s not human.” Mom pulled Kore into a big hug to calm her down. She picked her up, and sat her down on the couch.

“She *wants* to stay. She loves it here! She loves *me*. She’s going to come to my school. She can sleep on my bed! She *can’t* go. Look! She doesn’t even *want* to!”

“I *do* want to,” Kore sobbed. “I’m crying cause...”

“You’re crying because you’re happy,” Mom finished. Kore nodded, her face buried in Mom’s shoulder.

“*NO!*” Luna stomped her foot *hard*. Luna took a big, deep breath, and screamed as loud as she could, repeating, “*NO!*”

“Stop.” Mom shot her a hard look.

“*I won’t LET you!*” Luna screamed. Her face was red and ugly. Mom stood up.

“Come with me,” she said. She pulled Luna by the arm outside. They walked a little ways down the path to the driveway, past Luna’s other favorite birdhouse. Luna was bawling her eyes out. No birds sang.

They came to an old wooden swing that was there when Jane bought the cabin. It was grey and lichen grew off it like beards. She sat her daughter down.

“People aren’t pets,” she said.

“I don’t care,” Luna replied.

“When you say you won’t *let* Kore leave, you’re acting like... Gaston.”

“No I’m not.”

“He tries to control Belle’s life. He wants her to be his. Even though she doesn’t like it. Do you think that’s good, or bad?”

“Bad.”

“And...” Jane strained to think of the rest of the plot of the movie. “The Beast, he also tries to control Belle. He keeps her prisoner. And that’s bad, too. But then he realizes that it’s bad, and that because he loves her so much, he has to let her leave. Is that good, or bad?”

“Good.”

“Do you want to be like Gaston today, or like the Beast?”

Luna hung her head. She didn’t say anything.

“I don’t want Kore to be my prisoner,” she said in a tiny voice.

Mom gave her a tight hug.

“It’s actually a really happy thing,” Mom said. “I didn’t think Kore would get to see her mommy and daddy for years and years. But lucky for her, it turns out she can see them tomorrow. It’s kind of a miracle.”

“Doesn’t she like me anymore?” Luna whispered.

“Of course! She *loves* you. But just think— what if you got lost from me? Even if you got lost somewhere nice? Even if you made nice friends? I think you’d be really sad, if you thought you could never see me again. And I’d be sad, too. Especially if I didn’t know where you went. I’d be so sad and scared.”

“I’ll come find you, Mommy,” Luna clutched her mother’s fingers in her own.

“Do you see, though? That’s how Kore feels. That’s how Kore’s mommy feels.”

“Then Kore should go home,” Luna said.

“I need you to be a big help today,” Mom said. “You and I are going to have to work very hard to save Kore, and get her where she needs to be. You have an important job to do.”

“What’s my job?”

“In order to save Kore,” Mom said, “You and her need to get the car all ready for a road trip.”

It was an eight-hour drive from Daurnile to Devils Lake. Luna made sure her Mom brought the vhs player that plugged into the car battery, so that they could watch Muppets movies on the way. Luna brought car snacks— celery, carrots, and apple slices, which both girls liked, and cheese crackers for herself. She laid blankets and pillows all over the back seat of the car so that it was comfy.

Jane had packed Kore a backpack full of things to bring with her. She didn’t know where, exactly, Kore would end up on the other side— certainly in Lake Ashalo, somewhere, but pathways like these could be slippery. The lake was swarming with Mer people. And Kore would be immediately recognized. She just had to find someone... anyone, and they’d take her straight home. But just in case, Jane packed her some food— boiled eggs, some veggies, and a few apples. She doubted Kore would have a difficult time finding help, but it didn’t hurt to be cautious— the food would get her through a couple of days, if the need arose.

Even though Mom insisted that Kore travel light, Luna insisted on giving Kore one of her naked barbies “to remember her by.” Mom could not persuade Kore to dismiss this request, and so Kore stowed the barbie in the back pocket of her pack. Luna watched Mom go to the gaudy old cuckoo clock she kept in her bedroom— it had four clock faces, all off, and it was covered in ugly wooden birds with mischievous faces— and open it’s cuckoo compartment. The clock spat out a deluge of gold, silver, and black coins, which Mom collected in a cloth sack and gave to Kore.

“This is a lot of money. Don’t show it to *anyone*. You understand me?”

“Yes,” Kore said.

“Even if— *especially* if someone seems really nice and asks to see. This much money will make people crazy. Only use what you need, and keep the rest secret.”

“Okay,” Kore nodded.

“Repeat it back to me, please,” Mom said.

“Keep it secret, only use what I need.”

“What will you say, when you find someone?”

“My name is Korelo Bel’ Ashalo, daughter of King Arashashalano Bel’ Ashalo, and he’ll give you a King’s reward for my return.”

“Make sure you tell them about the reward,” Mom emphasized. “That’s the most important part.”

Mom also gave Kore her old bandit’s map of Ashalo— it was one of her most sentimental possessions, but it was also the only map she had that was waterproof, as it was burned into a piece of buckskin. Kore might need it, if worst came to worst.

They drove East through the forest until they hit Lake Superior, and followed the highway down until it was time to go West— to North Dakota, and Devil’s Lake. They ate a fast food dinner in Bemidji. Kore discovered far, far too late into her stay that she *immensely* enjoyed French fries.

The light disappeared, and the two girls soon fell asleep. Jane was glad for this, since it meant that they didn’t need to stop for more bathroom breaks.

The little green station wagon carried on through the night. At first, other headlights passed it by, but as the moon climbed higher and Jane's eyelids grew heavier, the other cars disappeared. They were alone in the world, in the vast grassy desert of crops, with only the stars above to pass them by.

It was the witching hour when Jane finally found Devils Lake. She found a motel and booked them a room, and led the sleepy little girls to their beds. She collapsed on the white motel mattress and kicked off her socks, slipping into sleep as easily as one slips into another world.

Devils Lake was a large and lovely body of water, cut into pieces by man-made highways and roads that criss-crossed it. Luna, Jane, and Kore ate a picnic brunch along of these roads, a little ways away from a group of fishermen. More fast food, more French fries for Kore.

"It'll be here," Jane said. "The path won't be open long."

"How much longer will we wait?" Kore asked.

Jane checked her watch, and looked up at the sky. It was clear and blue, and the moon was nowhere to be seen. And yet, it held the stars open for them.

"About thirty minutes."

Luna's heart panged in her chest.

"Kore," she said, "I don't want you to go. But I know you have to."

"I wish you could come with me," Kore said. "If you got a tail, maybe."

"I'll try. I'll concentrate hard. I'll visit you!"

Thirty minutes felt like forever, and no time at all, as Luna and Kore planned their visits to one another. Luna would learn to breathe water and come to Ashalo, and Kore would introduce her to all her friends and family— to Elenari, her big sister, and to her Grandma Esho, and to her friends at the palace. She'd show her Gorlo-Gulo the frog and teach her how to sign. She'd show her how mer people really sang.

"Next time, I'll show you everything I know," Kore promised. "And I'll keep you safe from the others."

"I think they won't be mad at me for being human if I bring some gifts," Luna said.

"Yeah!" Kore agreed. "It'll be so much fun."

Jane watched her girls as it happened— Venus rose on the horizon, and Mars set. And on the other side, she knew, Clove fell below the horizon just as Dream Spider rose. The doors of both skies were open, held on one end by the earth's shadow and on the other by a mythical wing in the stars, and the horizons were linked, and the pathway connected.

You wouldn't have thought much of it if you happened to wander by. The fishermen on the other side of the road certainly didn't. The only sign it had happened at all was a big, heavy sound in the air, like the noise of an airplane passing over, only deeper. And if you looked up, you'd never find a plane up there— just blue emptiness.

But Jane knew. A shudder rippled across her skin as she thought about how close she was.

"There it is," she said. "It's time to go, Kore."

Kore nodded. She gave Jane a hug.

"Me, too!" Luna cried, joining in.

"You know what to do. Just swim straight down until you find the surface. No matter how dark or cold it gets, keep going, and don't stop. Not until you find the sky again."

"I'll be brave," Kore said.

"You're *very* brave," Mom brushed her fingers through Kore's hair. "You're one of the bravest kids I've ever met. You'll be just fine. But, just in case—" Mom reached into her purse and pulled out two knives. One was big and sharp, and fit into a black leather holster. The other was small as a thumb and slid into itself. "You probably won't have to use these. The big one is for waving around at people, the little one is for hiding in your clothes if the big one gets taken away. Don't cut yourself, okay?"

"Got it," Kore replied. She stuffed the little knife down her swimsuit top and Mom tied the other one to her backpack. For easy access, in case.

They all stood around. There was nothing left to pack now, nothing left to prepare. There was just Kore and the path between horizons. Luna and Mom walked her to the water's edge. Luna held her hand the whole way.

It was time.

"Kore," said Luna. "Don't forget about me."

Kore took one long, last look at Luna, taking her in— her twinkly green eyes, her smattering of red freckles on ruddy tan skin, her button nose, and her lips, which were usually turned into a big, goofy smile, but which trembled now. Her best friend. Her best friend.

“I’ll remember you forever,” Kore promised. She gave Luna one last, tight hug. They hugged so long they started to laugh. And Mom had to make them split up.

Kore waded into the water. She came up to her knees, and looked down. Luna couldn’t see her face, but whatever she saw seemed to give her pause. Finally, Kore turned back.

“Bye,” she waved to them.

They waved back.

Kore dove. The legs she stood on disappeared beneath her and became her inky-black tail, which slapped the water behind her. She dove straight down. When her tail disappeared, she did not come back up.