

Life in the basin followed a rigid but calm schedule, seemingly divided into fourteen parts. Seven light parts, and seven dark parts.

Swerve always woke up just as the light part started, and the first sounds started to penetrate the water. The thunk-thunk-thunk of the humans walking around, the clatter of objects against walls and floors, and the early-morning chirps of the dolphins kept in the basin next to him.

Swerve shook the last remnants of sleep from his head, and swam up, eagerly breaking the surface of the water with a shrill cry. Today, it was time for people to visit again.

For reasons Swerve could never ask after, there was always a four-part gap in between visits. Nobody ever visited during the dark-parts, but every five light-parts, there would be two lightparts where there were no visitors.

The human in charge of bringing food was not paying attention to Swerve, instead tossing fish to the dolphins in the next basin, having them do small tricks for each bite of fish. Swerve cried out again, and slapped his tail against the water.

The human made the human happy-sound, and tossed the rest of the fish to the dolphins before walking over to Swerve's basin. He kneeled, and Swerve pushed his head into the hand that stroked over his skin. The human said something, but as always, it was meaningless blabber to Swerve's ears.

The human made motions to stand up, and Swerve tried to follow the source of the strokes. "Stay?" He chirped, but the human just made sounds, and reached into the bucket that held Swerve's food.

Swerve didn't have to do tricks for his food, and there was nobody in his tank to steal it, so the human just let it slide into the water and left.

Swerve was still aching for more of the headstrokes, but he sank underwater and started eating the fish and kelp. It wouldn't be long before the visitors started coming in, and then he would be getting all the strokes he wanted.

The food was gone quickly, and it settled like a heavy weight in his belly, making him drift to the bottom and watch the surface of the water become still and calm.

He sent out a call for company, and it echoed off the walls of his enclosure. He couldn't hear the calls from the other mer, but he knew they were nearby. In different tanks maybe. Swerve called again, and traced the claw-marks on his flank and lower tail. They still ached, and the new skin felt tender.

Swerve waited at the bottom of his tank, and wondered if he would get to see familiar faces. It was hard to tell the humans apart when they looked so much alike, but there were a few repeating visitors that he remembered.

There was a completely white human, very small and with red eyes. Swerve always wanted to take him down underwater, but he knew that that wasn't allowed. The white human also had a very large and very frightening other human with him – a human with a large purple mark on his

neck and angry eyes. Swerve was scared of him, but the white human had been so very nice. He hoped that they would visit again.

There was also a kid with only one eye that liked to pull on his head-fins. Swerve didn't like him much, but sometimes the pain in his fins was better than being all alone in his tank.

For the rest, most humans were just indistinguishable aliens, new ones every day, and every single one leaving him alone in his tank at the end of the day. Even the ones that gave food – the only ones that visited during those four parts when nobody visited – always left when the sun disappeared.

Swerve swam over to where his tank bordered on the dolphins, and called for some company as loudly as he could. A few happy clicks and chirps answered him through the glass, before the dolphins continued with whatever they had been doing before.

Swerve turned and swam restlessly, and finally lingered near the door that would allow him into the larger pool with the other mer and dolphins. It would still be some time before it opened, but he felt starved. He wished there was more fish, even though he already felt full and his belly was round.

Finally, finally, the door opened, and Swerve squirmed through the gate as soon as it was open far enough to let him through. The dolphins were let out as well, but Swerve did not see the other mer.

He trilled an inquiry through the water, but there came no answer. The claw-marks on his belly ached, and Swerve thought that maybe it was better if they weren't in the same basin as him. The humans probably knew best.

Swerve swam towards the shallow water, where a platform descended just below the surface and where he could see bare human feet standing in the water. He breached the surface from a fair distance away, as he had been taught, and then swam over to the humans as quickly as he dared.

The white human was not there, nor was the one-eyed one. This time there were just humans he hadn't seen before- or just hadn't memorised if he had. Swerve's belly felt the slope, and he quickly clambered forward, using his arms and claws to lift him above the rough surface of the slope.

One of the feeder-humans crouched down, and Swerve melted into the warm touches of the human as he petted expertly over his head and fins. Blab-blub-blub went the human, and as always, Swerve hoped that the explanation would last extra long.

A third, tentative hand was introduced, and Swerve made an encouraging sound to the human-youngling that was carefully petting his head. The human wouldn't meet his eyes, but Swerve was used to that. The feeder human stopped petting, and instead gave silent instructions to the youngling, directing his small hands to the Swerve's fin.

Swerve carefully shuffled a little closer to the small human, and trilled a welcome.

Where the mers he'd met had swiped at him after a few trills, the human's face broke into a brittle smile, and tried to pull Swerve a little closer. Swerve happily obeyed, and settled himself into the awkward embrace.

As always, there was that treacherous wish to just grab them and drag them underwater so he could keep them forever, but he would never try that again. He hadn't been touched or petted for so many months after he had dragged a feeder-human down, he never wanted that to happen again!

Swerve looked at the youngling's face. "Stay?" He trilled, and the feeder human laughed and said something. Swerve had the feeling that they didn't understand what he'd been trying to convey.

A few more humans stopped by him, and Swerve enjoyed the attention as much as he could, knowing that it wouldn't last for long.

Anxiety grew, and before long, the humans were pulling away, walking out of the water over the dry land that always chafed his tail s badly. Swerve chirped out an invitation, and tried to crawl a little closer to the dry land. The feeder-human made the 'no' motion, and the humans distanced further and further.

"Come back?" Swerve chirped loudly. The humans always became deaf after leaving the water it seemed. "Come back? Stay?" He chirped more insistently, and he slapped his tail on the water.

The feeder human returned, and mentioned for him to go back into the water. Swerve didn't want to wait in the water, and he shrieked his displeasure. The feeder-human told him to go back into the water, and pulled out a large fish.

Swerve was not hungry. He called again, but even as the humans turned their heads to him, none of them came over to pet or play. The youngling that had been petting his head and fins was clamping his hands over his ears and groaning, slightly rocking back and forth.

Swerve ceased his call, and finally let himself sink down in the water. Failed again. The humans were not coming back, not until they felt like it.

Swerve felt a sting of anger and frustration, but it was quickly swept away by loneliness, and he stroked his own headfins. The fish that the feeder-human had promised in return for going underwater was tossed at him, and Swerve grabbed it before it fell prey to the dolphins. He felt full and heavy, but he still ate it, taking comfort from the sensation of food between his teeth.

The humans would come back whenever they felt like it. Maybe different ones, maybe the same ones. Swerve just wished that one of them would stay.

He finished his fish, and by lack for anything better to do, swam after the dolphins. They avoided him, and he was too slow to catch up. It was a game they played often. Swerve was still working on a way to catch them, and maybe get a few pets from them too. He kept an eye on the slope, watching for human feet or legs, and waited.

New feet entered the water, and Swerve sped over, almost scraping open his skin on the slope that led out of the water. The same pattern repeated, and Swerve almost threw himself against the feeder-human that was explaining things to the new humans.

Blab-blab-blab went the human mouth, and then there were more hands carefully petting him, and Swerve pushed himself into the arms of whomever was here this time. They petted, they cooed, they blabbed, and then they left again. The endless cycle, and no matter how many times he begged them to stay, or to come back, it always ended with him alone in the tank, a belly too full of fish and his skin aching for touch.

The day ended far too soon, and the sun started to disappear. Swerve had turned his thrills and cries to the sun quite a few times, hoping that if the light stayed, the humans would stay too, but that wish had gone unfulfilled as well.

The feeder-humans were the only ones left when it started to become dark, and Swerve tried to call them over to pet him, but he went ignored. One of the feeder-humans gave him a quick and rough petting over the top of his head, and then gestured for him to get back to his tank.

“Come with?” Swerve asked with a hopeful chirp, but the human did not come along when Swerve headed for his own small tank. The latch closed behind him, and he sat alone again. Swerve drifted uselessly in the water, at a loss for anything to do until the food for that dark-cycle would drift down from the surface. He called out for company again, and the trill went unanswered. He called louder, and swam in circles around the edge of his tank.

It took long, but finally he could hear the thunk-thunk-thunk of human feet approaching his tank, and he swam up, already calling out for attention as he breached the surface.

The feeder human was not one he'd seen before, and Swerve's heart leaped. They always ignored him after some time, but not while they were new, not when they had never met him before.

Swerve let out his happiest chirp, and threw himself against the just-too-high edge of his pool. The human made the human happy sound, and crouched down, hanging his hand in the tank and allowing Swerve to grab it and rub it over the top of his head in a desperate plea for affection.

The human cooed, and Swerve cooed back, flaring his fins in a way he hoped was pretty and nice. The human moved, and laid down on his stomach, reaching both his hands into the tank to pet him, and Swerve revelled in the touch, clasping his own hands around the human arms. The urge to pull the human in was so strong it was almost painful, but he forced himself to just be content with this, and chirped his joy extra clearly and loudly.

One of the other feeder-humans stopped by, and he blabbed to the new-feeder human. Swerve felt light panic setting in as the new feeder-human turned his attention away from Swerve, and he chirped louder, demanding that the attention would be turned back on him.

The new human listened to him, and the other feeder human made a weird snort-sound, before blabbing on. The new human answered him, but did not turn his attention away from Swerve. Swerve squeezed his eyes shut as the inexperienced hands petted his head, and he desperately tried to think of his plan to keep this one as his friend. He wouldn't drag him under water, he would offer food, he would play, he would never ever ignore him, he would do his best tricks-

He just hoped it'd be enough this time.

BREAK

"So, you're the new kid?" Ratchet asked gruffly. He could feel Aiden glaring at him for his demeanor, and he ignored the younger man.

"Yes, I'm Skids." Skids had a big, mellow smile on his face, and doe-brown eyes with flecks of yellow. He held out his hand, and Ratchet shook it briefly. "I've always wanted to work with marine animals, so it's great to be here! You guys really got the place running well!"

"Thanks." Ratchet said without enthusiasm. "Your job is to clean the tanks and feed the animals before they go to sleep."

Skids looked confused. "Shouldn't I learn a little more than that?"

Ratchet let out a huff of air. "You'll learn on the job kid, trust me. It's nothing more than throw fish in water and scrub tiles."

"Oh, well, okay then!" Skids smiled uneasily. "I'll just... gear up."

Ratchet sighed, and watched as the kid left for the locker room. "So, who's his therapist?"

"Rung's jurisdiction I think." Aiden answered. "Apparently the kid's super rich parents thought a job here would help him get his memory working again."

Ratchet stared, then sighed, and then rested his face in his hands. "I shouldn't be surprised. I should not be surprised. Fine then, we keep the kid here, make sure someone checks if he did his job, and that's it?"

"Free pass for him and his therapist, but that's it." Aiden shrugged. "From what I know, whatever he has is very specific and rare- he remembers everything up to a certain point, then has a

blurry patch of nothing, and every new memory fades into that blurry nothing patch after he sleeps. He still retains some form of understanding or memory, just... not consciously or something. Perfectly workable for stuff like cleaning and throwing fish into water."

Ratchet sighed. "First keeping an abused mer as a tourist attraction, then start to distribute 'dolphin therapy', and now we're letting amnesiacs toddle around for extra dough."

"Times change Ratchet." Aiden said from where he was digging into his lunch. "I like seeing those kids interact with the dolphins. No harm done, but more money to take care of the animals, and to get us a decent wage."

"Sure." Ratchet grumbled. "It's all very good for the wallet, but greed's prone to bring it all down on our heads, you just watch."

Aiden shrugged and took a bite from his sandwich. "If you think so." He said with his mouth full. "Without it, there wouldn't be a marine centre here anymore. What's worse? No centre, or a different centre?"

Ratchet didn't answer, and took a swig from the pocket-flask that always smelled just a little too strong to contain water. Aiden mentally rolled his eyes, and continued lunching.

BREAK

Swerve was restless. Anxiety and excitement were both making it impossible for him to sit still, and he swam quick little circles in his tank, waiting to be let out and hopefully get a long day full of head strokes and fish and cuddles.

He almost scraped himself with how quickly he wormed out of his tank, and he sped immediately to the slope, where two pair of human feet were waiting.

In his speed, his belly scraped painfully over the ground, but it went ignored as he chirped his joy at seeing the new feeder-human already crouched down to pet him.

The warm hand pet him over his head, neck and shoulders, and Swerve pressed closer, trying to get as much out of the contact as he could before it cooled off and became less. The human fell over, but before Swerve could even begin to get worried, the human was making his happy-sounds.

The new human was making continuous and loud happy-noises, and Swerve sought out his gaze, feeling warm just looking into the weirdly-shaped pools of brown and black.

The other feeder-human was tossing fish into the water for the dolphins, and the new human gave a fish to Swerve while they were still close.

Swerve barely chewed the fish as he ate it, both hungry and unwilling to let go of the new human that was still petting him. He burrowed closer, and carefully tried to pet back without

angering the human or chasing it away.

He always managed to mess it up. They always pulled away at some point, and it always seemed to happen quicker and quicker the longer he knew them.

The human brushed over the claw-marks on his belly, and Swerve quickly twisted so that his hand rested on something less ugly and incriminating. It was a fact that both mers and humans didn't like his company much, and the deep claw-marks on his abdomen told a very clear story to anyone that looked.

So he twisted it away, and covered the human's eyes with his hands as if playing a game. The distraction worked, as far as Swerve could tell, and the human responded by making human happy sounds and reaching out to cover Swerve's eyes in return.

The human tilted, and they both fell into the shallow water. Now the human had stopped making happy sounds, but the old feeder human was starting to make them now. Swerve just chirped uneasily, and hoped that it was the answer that would get both of them happy.

The new human stood up, dripping as wet as only humans with their weird flat fur could, and Swerve had to restrain himself lest he tackle the human back into the water. Instead, he settled for grabbing at the human's leg and trying to beg him to stay with his gaze.

"Stay?" He begged. "Stay?"

The old feeder human was saying something to the new human, and he took out a fish from the bucket – the consolation prize that Swerve got if he let go of a human.

"Come. Stay." He said, but he forced himself to let go. The last time he'd held on, he had drawn red and wet ribbons from the humans, and they had hurt him, and not touched him for so, so long....

He fully expected the human to retreat as soon as he let go of its leg, but instead, the human sat down in the water again, and opened his arms in a blatant invitation for a hug. Swerve dove into it, and made his happiest clicks for the new human.

The length of the hug bypassed the usual time, then it bypassed the time he got on his lucky days, and then it just passed the record for his longest-lasting contact ever.

He was still being held by the time more visitors arrived, and the hug slipped away to make room for the new arrivals. Swerve let the new feeder human leave, and instead rolled to see if a human he recognised had arrived. It was not, and the small human was loud and pulled too harshly on his headfins. Swerve wanted the new feeder human to hug him again, but he couldn't cling, never cling.

He turned all his attention on the human youngling pulling at his fins and returned the affection as he'd been taught they liked – making the weird noises the humans seemed to like so much, and petting the rough mop of fur on top of their heads.

Just so long as he wasn't alone, it was okay. The hope of a few more touches over his head and back was burning strong. Maybe this time he would work out the secret, and convince one of the humans to stay and become part of his pod.

Oh, he hoped. It would be amazing, that much knew. Humans didn't have claws sharp enough to hurt him like that. Swerve's scars tingled with a phantom of pain, and he focused on the squishy human fingers rubbing behind his headfins.

BREAK

Aiden was reading a file, slowly scanning the document through his glasses even as his colleague was looking through the metriplex (that stuff in front of windows) with a heavy frown on his face.

"Goddamnit Rodimus..." He growled under his breath, and Aiden suppressed a sigh as he put down his file.

"What did he do now?" He asked.

"He's letting the Amnesiac cuddle up with Swerve!" Ratchet exclaimed. "He's not even looking-!"

Ratchet pounded a fist on the glass, and Aiden watched as his senior colleague mimed his intentions to Rodimus, angrily pointing at the shallow pool where Skids was wrapped up in a mer-hug.

To any eye, the hug looked warm and genuine, like a puppy jumping up on your leg. Aiden had been there too, Swerve was such an attention-demanding little personality, and everyone had indulged in a few petting sessions with the mer, Rung most of all.

It'd been a rather shocking surprise when that night's janitor – a huge hulking man named Max – had found Swerve drowning Rung at the bottom of the pool.

Aiden hadn't touched the mer since. Chubby and unfit as the mer was, it was still a predator, and even with extra eyes looking out for if Swerve wanted to repeat the motion, Aiden didn't want to experience a near-death moment by drowning.

If it hadn't been for Rung's impossible ability to forgive a mer for almost drowning him, Swerve probably would have been terminated. The psychiatrist had decided not to press charges, and a few long and gruelling months of re-training Swerve had been enough for Ultra Magnus to approve the mer for duty once again, under a few strict rules.

Aiden frowned as he watched Swerve writhing against Skids, and he stood next to Ratchet. Skids was breaking a few of those rules already from what Aiden could see. Rodimus's attention had already lapsed, and the old-school dolphin-trainer was busy leading his pod of dolphins into flipping out of the water.

"Where are you going?" Aiden asked.

Ratchet was moving to the door of the office, grabbing a random coat from the rack and pulling it on. "I'm going to tell Rodimus that he is the biggest idiot I've seen in my life and that he should read his MEMOS every once in a while!"

"Hey, do you-?" The door swung closed, and Ratchet's footsteps marched down the hallway. Aiden sighed, and glanced at the work that Ratchet had left in his 'urgent' inbox. With a resigned sigh, Aiden grabbed a file from the top and started scanning through the contents. Next time he'd see it coming. Next time.