

[SFX: *Open with the ambience of gentle ocean waves lapping at the shore, followed by a loud splash as the LISTENER is plunged into the water; shift to a subtle underwater effect paired with the sound of the LISTENER sinking deeper into the water; after a moment, the MERMAN swims closer*]

“...Well, hello there. Bit of an entrance!”

“Did you... fall off a human boat just now? How did you even end up on a boat in the first place? Were you caught in a net or something?”

“...”

“If I’m not mistaken, you’re not from around this reef - I think I’d have noticed fins like those passing through. So... where’s home, then? Do you usually swim with a pod? I might be able to point you in the right direction. You seem... a little lost.”

“...Not much of a talker, are you? Right. Duly noted. But, uh... (*carefully*) is everything all right? You’re not injured, are you? I don’t see any blood in the water - thank the tides. Let me take a look at you - ”

[SFX: *LISTENER thrashing around in the water*]

“Woah, easy, easy now, - stop thrashing! You’ll draw the attention of every shark within a mile of here! That’s not the sort of company you want to keep, is it?”

“...wait. Look at me a moment - what are you... (*genuinely bewildered*) ...why are you puffing your cheeks out like a pufferfish? Are you... holding your breath??”

“Stop, stop - you’re turning blue! Breathe!”

[SFX: *Water displacing as the MERMAN draws in the closer*]

“...There, good - you nearly - “

“(baffled) Drown? What in the seven seas are you talking about - drown? Why would you drown??”

“...huh? My tentacles? Er... why yes, thank you for noticing, but what about them?”

[SFX: *Tentacle shifting in the water*]

“...”

"I don't follow. Is that not - is that unusual, in whatever part of the ocean where you're from? Because - believe it or not - here, they're pretty unremarkable. Far from the strangest thing about me. I'm a perfectly normal mer, same as you - or... well (*awkward laugh*) ...I suppose 'normal' is a bit... relative - in your case. You're... clearly having a bit of a moment. (*quickly*) No judgment, truly - I'm sure I'd be having a moment too, in your situation... whatever your situation actually is."

"...what? Human?"

"...um... did you hit your head when you fell off that human boat?"

"(*scoffs, repeating back incredulously*) What do I mean? Well - have you looked at yourself at all lately? You're obviously not a human - not unless humans started growing scales and gills when I wasn't looking. See?"

[*SFX: Tentacles shifting in water; a moment later, more thrashing and water displacing as the MERMAN swims back*]

"Right, yes - understood! I won't touch you with the tentacles. Forgive me, I'm not, uh... terribly familiar with your... 'human' etiquette, I suppose. (*scoffs*)"

"...no, I'm not - I'm not mocking you. I just... well..."

"If you WERE human, do you... know what happened? Can you explain why you're a mer now?"

"..."

"...No. That's the trouble, isn't it? You can't think of a possible explanation, and neither can I. Surely you can imagine how all this sounds to me?"

"Listen, I'm sorry - I want to believe you. I do. I don't mean to imply that you're lying, necessarily - I... for what it's worth, I believe that YOU believe what you're saying, but... well... I've never heard of anything like that happening before. I'm afraid I'm a bit out of my depth here, and... well, you're not giving me much to work with. Are you sure you're not just confused?"

"..."

"...Right. I... I'll humor you."

"The only being I can think of who might actually have an answer for you would be the Good Witch of the Abyss. She keeps to the deep trench, further out than most mer care to swim, down where the water gets dark and cold. As the name suggests, she knows magic - and is, well... good. In her own way - helpful. She's not what the stories make her out to be. I know more

than a few mer who have gone to her with their own predicaments and come back better for it. Granted, they weren't exactly predicaments like yours. Yours is... certainly unique in that regard."

"..."

"It - (*quickly corrects*) *she* - is fascinated by humans, or so I've been told. She collects stories about them and artifacts that sink down from the surface, so if you tell her that you're a human, I'm sure she'd be willing to help you in exchange for very little. If anyone can make sense of what's happened to you, it would be her. I can't think of another creature who would even know where to begin."

"It's a decent journey from here, granted, and not an easy one to make alone. The currents alone give most mer trouble, let alone a human who only just happened to sprout fins. Buuut... (*dramatic pause*) ...as it so happens, I was already swimming in that direction myself. I've got some business to attend to in that part of the ocean, and you're welcome to tag along, if you'd like. It would feel... irresponsible to leave you here on your own in this state, regardless. Confused, human, mer - whatever you actually are, I wouldn't sleep right knowing I'd swum off and left you stranded on your own."

"(*subtly intense*) So, what do you say...?"

"(*pleased*) ...excellent! I promise the company improves the longer you stick with it!
(*good-natured laugh*)"

"For now, follow me. I've set up not too far from here. Here, I'll show you the way while you, uh... find your fins, so to speak. Here, let me just - "

[SFX: *Water shifting*]

" - ah, right. You don't want to touch the tentacles. Um... here - take my hand instead, then. Is that acceptable?"

"...all right."

[SFX: *Swimming*]

"..."

"Well, then... 'human' - why don't you tell me something about the, uh... human kingdom, then? Whatever it's called. Or... the surface in general. Wherever it is you say you came from."

"Anything, really - it doesn't have to be exciting. I imagine it'll be more interesting to me than it is to you, given I've never set fin on land in my life. Did you live on the beach near here?"

“ ... ”

“(listening) Mm-hmm.”

“ ... ”

“Wait - sorry, hold on. What’s an Airbnb, exactly?”

“...right. And a hotel is...?”

“...okay...”

“No, no, I follow. Well, I think I follow. Keep going. So, you were only visiting the beach then. Because humans like to... look at the ocean. From the land. For ‘vacation.’ Huh. So, then, you live somewhere else? You had - have - a different place to return to once - well, once you... sort everything out. And... other humans, who live with you there? Your family...?”

“ ... ”

“(subtly bitter) I see. Well, aren’t you lucky?”

“ ... ”

“Well... yes, of course I have family. I didn’t just spawn out of nowhere. I doubt it’s very much like what you’re imagining, though.”

“No. Hold that thought, why don’t you? We’re nearly there.”

[SFX: MERMAN swimming faster ahead, heavy door creaking open underwater]

“...yes? This was one of your kind’s boats - but I’d wager it’s been sitting down here longer than either of us have been alive. Sorry - this won’t be awkward for you, will it? I hadn’t thought of that. Don’t worry - you won’t find any waterlogged human corpses in there, I promise. I got rid of those earlier.”

“...I’m joking. Scavengers would have picked anything like that apart ages ago - obviously.”

“Just go inside, settle in wherever suits you. It’s not much - just somewhere to put my things. And it keeps most fish out. I didn’t plan to stay here for this long. I’m only passing through, so this is enough for my purposes. The bedding is there in the corner. (*spoken with pride*) I wove it myself, if you can believe it. Don’t look too closely at the edges, I’m not exactly a craftsman, but the tentacles do give me a bit of extra dexterity for that sort of thing. Comes in handy more often than you’d think.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“...Um...”

[SFX: *LISTENER* swimming inside, settling somewhere, the door closing]

“I admit, bit outside my element here - I don't travel with a pod, and I'm not used to hosting anyone, so bear with me. Do whatever you need to make yourself comfortable.”

“Um... let's see, are you hungry?”

[SFX: *Water displacing, retrieving fish and offering it to LISTENER*]

“Here - it's fresh. I caught it not long before I found you, actually - “

“ ... ”

“Fish. What did you expect?”

“...raw? Uh... yes? As opposed to...?”

“ ... ”

“How in the seven seas do you suggest I start a fire at the bottom of the ocean?”

“(genuinely bewildered) Do I look like I hatched yesterday? Are you playing some kind of joke on me? You expect me to believe humans actually won't eat anything unless they set it on FIRE first? Is that not... dangerous? And time-consuming? No - that's ridiculous! What if you've been swimming - or, walking, I guess - all day, and you're really hungry?”

“(scoffs) ...you know what? Never mind. Eat the fish, or don't.”

“ ... ”

“If you seriously can't stomach it, I'll show you where to gather some edible kelps in the morning. For tonight, though, fish - that's what's on offer. I need to sharpen my spear and get ready for tomorrow. Like I said, it's a decent journey. Best to get all the rest we can here where I know it's safe. You never know what we might find once we get out in deep water - or what might find us, for that matter.”

“ ... ”

[SFX: *The MERMAN swimming around the shelter, waterlogged wood creaking, something being retrieved*]

"I'll just be over here, if you need anything..."

"..."

"(*incredulously muttering to self under breath*) A human turned into a mer..."

"Sorry - what? ...no, I didn't say anything. Just talking to myself. Don't mind me. Go to sleep."