

Fish Out Of Water

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/3392948) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/3392948>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/F
Fandom:	Person of Interest (TV)
Relationship:	Root/Sameen Shaw
Characters:	Root (Person of Interest) , Sameen Shaw
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2015-02-19 Completed: 2015-02-24 Words: 15,509 Chapters: 3/3

Fish Out Of Water

by [donteatmyfingerprints](#)

Summary

Completely AU.

A mermaid. There is a mermaid in front of her.

Notes

My brain. Made me do this. I'm so sorry.

The Beach

When she woke up this morning, Sameen Shaw was not prepared for her life to change so drastically. That was the point of throwing away her job, her dangerous life in the city, to come to this part of the world, wasn't it? She was absolutely not, capital N, O, T, looking for adventure of any kind. That's the *whole* bloody point.

It started out innocently enough, as all things do. Shaw got up like clockwork before dawn, checked on the chickens at the back of her hut, and then rose to haul her nets into her small boat. The other fishermen prefer catching squid at the witching hour, but Shaw came here to be alone, and she isn't interested in small talk. They learn quickly, and leave her alone. She does her fishing after they have retired, but before the sun rises. Squid don't like the sun.

There's three boats still missing from the beach, but Shaw didn't really pay it much mind.

But when she paddles out to sea, her old military training kicks in, and she notices quite a ruckus. The waves are choppy, this close to monsoon, but that is to be expected. What is unexpected, is the shouting she can hear in the far distance. In the quiet of the village and sea, every sound travels for miles. She frowns and heads toward it.

The sounds are getting louder when she feels her boat rock to one side harshly, and something bumps into the bottom of the left side. This is it, Shaw thinks: ex-military, the once feared shadow assassin of the United States Government, and she's about to be eaten by a shark.

But then Shaw hears a very human gasp, and she scrambles to the side of the boat, peering into the water. She is wholly unprepared for the sight that greets her. A woman, struggling against a large net, is thrashing wildly against her boat, fingernails trying to grasp at the wood.

Instinct drives her, and she clambers to pull the woman free from the net. She almost topples over- Okay, yup, she's toppling over.

The choppy water hits her and noise drowns out, the eerie loudness of the sea swallowing her. She flails for a moment, fighting to find her bearings. When she manages to next open her eyes, Shaw thinks she might have already drowned, and is in the afterlife.

A mermaid. There is a mermaid in front of her.

Shimmering green, blue, red, pink scales cover a magnificent tail twice the length of the mermaid's torso. It- she, definitely a she, Shaw thinks hazily- was completely tangled up in a large net.

The mermaid thrashes more, the net trapping her in place, and there's blood in the water. Shaw swims with great difficulty toward the mermaid, the waves knocking them both about, and fumbles blindly under her boot. Her fingers close around the handle of the back up switchback she keeps, and she flicks it open.

The glint of the smooth blade catches the light, and the mermaid suddenly starts hissing and slapping her tail harder against the net. Shaw's clothes feel heavy, but she kicks harder in the water, closing her other hand onto the net. The mermaid tries to shake Shaw off violently, and Shaw kicks her in retaliation.

Then, when she has the chance, Shaw reaches up with the knife, even as the mermaid bites down onto her other hand. Pain burns through her as she cuts through the rope, but she doesn't stop. She nicks one square of the lattice of the net, and then another, until the hole Shaw made is big enough for the mermaid to swat her to one side and forcefully swim out.

Shaw feels lightheaded, and her vision drowsy. She kicks to try to get to the surface, but her clothes are so heavy, and the rough waves knock her back twice. Her thoughts blur together, the sea dark and compressing.

Well, Shaw thinks, at least it wasn't a shark. But even as she starts to black out, she catches sight of glittering scales, of a woman's elegant bare torso.

The last things she sees are light, hazel brown eyes.

Shaw chokes into life in the scorching sun, spluttering and spitting out water. She heaves, coughing. Her body aches, and it takes a while to gain her bearings. The smell of salt is heavy in the air. There's a slight rocking motion. Boat. She's on her boat. She coughs again, and spits. And then she startles and rush backward.

There is a naked woman on her boat, back facing her, lying on her side. Shaw fumbles as she tries to remember. There was shouting. There was a mermaid.

There is no doubt, that said mermaid, is currently lying on her boat, naked, without a tail. Shaw opens and closes her mouth. She was so *sure* that it was a mermaid. She's gone mad with the heat, she thinks. What a cliché, for her to being a fisherman, and have fisherman dreams. Mermaid, indeed. She scolds herself, and takes a breath. She scans the boat.

Thankfully, both oars were locked to their handles. Shaw didn't have friends here who would be worried if she went missing, so she'd made the effort to rope the oars around their handles. In the event that she dropped them, she'd be able to reel them back in.

She stares at the woman for a while, wondering if she should wake her.

The woman is injured. There is blood on the boat.

Perhaps she was a friend of the fishermen she heard shouting last night, and they had been trying to find her. She'll sort that out later, Shaw tells herself. She'd best be getting back to shore first.

It's past mid-afternoon when Shaw gets back to the village, and the village is mostly empty. The fishermen who fish at night would be asleep, and those that prefer the day catching are

out at sea, so Shaw carries the woman back to her hut first. She takes great care in trying to preserve the woman's modesty, in case someone does see them.

Only when Shaw's placed the mermaid on the floor, does she examine her injuries. Her right foot is twisted at an angle, and there is a deep gash on her right thigh and smaller abrasions on the calf connected to it. Shaw inspects the gash. Harpoon, most likely. Ripped through quite a fair bit of muscle too. She gets a blanket, and drapes it over the woman without thinking much into it.

Shaw digs through her drawers, and finds some old antibiotics, and bandages. She might have come to a village, but it doesn't mean she can't have a first aid kit. People here die from flus, you know.

Shaw had placed the woman to lie on her left side, so that her wounds face upwards, easier for Shaw to do her work. It's when she presses a rag dipped in disinfectant that the woman jolts awake, an elbow catching Shaw in the chest. She grunts, and the woman kicks and struggles to get up, and falls down as she makes a high pitched noise in pain. They both stare at her ankle, red and twisted.

"Stop that, I'm trying to help," Shaw says, attempting to calm the kicking and snarling woman. The woman looks defiantly at her then, and Shaw sees recognition slowly creep into her eyes.

The woman stops fighting, but doesn't relax. Her body is taut with tension and poised to spring and run any moment, but she watches Shaw intently as Shaw bandages her thigh, and construct a makeshift cast for her ankle.

She makes hissing noises when Shaw uses disinfectant, and Shaw has to assure her that she isn't trying to maim her. She also refuses to take the antibiotics. Well, that was a long-shot anyway, Shaw thinks, considering how menacing she looks with a needle in her hand.

"Fine, let your wound rot," Shaw huffs after the fourth attempt, the woman finally knocking the syringe out of her hand. They stare angrily into each other's eyes for a long time.

The woman is very, very handsome. She's got sharp eyes, a well-defined nose, and lips just the right shade of pink. Even as she's wounded, her face does not betray the state of her injuries. She has long brown hair, long dried since they've emerged from the sea, and her skin is alabaster white, almost like she's never been in the sun. Her limbs are long and elegant, her figure pneumatic. It's only when Shaw realizes that she is staring at the woman's body, and the woman is watching very closely, that Shaw jumps up, putting her things away.

When she turns back from her drawers, she is greeted with an odd sight.

The woman has, very carefully placed the blanket Shaw gave her over her legs, completely covering them, leaving her torso bare.

When Shaw goes into the heart of the village later, she contemplates asking if anyone's lost a friend. But there is something off about the atmosphere, and the fishermen are all talking in hushed voices.

Shaw thinks of the woman's odd actions to cover her legs, and her absence of modesty toward her breasts. She thinks if she were a friend of a fisherman, she wouldn't be naked at sea, unless their intentions toward her were *not* quite so friendly.

So she exchanges coin for herbs at the village healer, and gets fodder for chicken feed, and doesn't speak a word else to anyone.

Shaw's starting to think the mermaid wasn't a dream after all.

When Shaw enters her hut much later, it is a mess. The woman has unfurled her bandages, thrown it haphazardly around her room, and is trying to push her foot back in place. She is not so successful at stifling her whimpers of pain. Alarmed, Shaw makes to move closer, then switches direction halfway and reaches for a large oversized shirt that she considers pyjamas.

Shaw flings it at the woman.

“Look, I am going to help you, but first put on the shirt. This is,” Shaw pauses, looking for the right word. “Inappropriate.”

The woman glares at her stubbornly, and Shaw crosses the distance in three steps, grabbing the shirt herself and trying to put it on the woman. She snatches it out of Shaw’s hands, then, and they have another staring match before Shaw sighs exasperatedly.

“Fine, then put it on yourself.” The woman continues to glare, but eventually puts it on, but keeps the blanket over the legs. The shirt reaches down to mid-thigh, and Shaw is relieved. Shaw lets the woman continue her campaign of glaring, and moves to clean up the mess. She picks up the bandages, grumbling to no one.

“Do you know how hard it is to get gauze out here? You’ve cost me a lot of money.” She rolls up the bandages, wondering if there are any clean parts to be salvaged.

“Not that it matters, since I’m not going back to the city,” Shaw mutters.

“And you’ve destroyed the splint for your ankle, and now where are we going to find something to cast your foot?” Shaw makes another aggravated noise. “You don’t even speak English, do you? I am going to kill something-”

That was rather careless of her, because the woman growls and makes to get up again and Shaw has to calm her down, shouting, “not you! I’m not trying to hurt you!”

It is a long time before the woman relaxes, and she watches Shaw clean the room with gauging eyes.

“I know your tongue.”

It is the way the woman speaks these words, her voice sounding so alien wrapping around the syllables, as though she was trying it out for the first time, that makes Shaw finally sigh. The woman is trying to look at her own mouth now, and is moving her tongue and teeth in testing motions.

“You’re really a mermaid, aren’t you? I didn’t- this isn’t just some weird dream, is it?”

The woman stares back impassively, and then jerks her head in what appears to be an attempt at a nod.

“I was a doctor,” When the mermaid blinks blankly at her, Shaw tries again, “Physician, healer.” Shaw gestures, waving her hands, not knowing how to explain. “I fix wounds.”

The mermaid quirks up a lip and relieve her of her trouble.

“I understand.”

This time, when Shaw re-bandages her thigh, and uses what remains of the wood as a splint for her foot, the mermaid does not resist.

Shaw has had a rather trying day, by all accounts, so it’s only when night falls that she has time to care about her own wound. Her hut is not very spacious, and she has nowhere else to put the mermaid, so she makes the mermaid rest in her bed. It’s better anyway, than letting the mermaid lie on the floor in the middle of her hut, blocking her way.

Shaw rests on the wall near the mermaid’s feet, so that she can monitor her and react if need be, the entrance to the hut on the left. It’s an old military habit, to be aware of position. Only then, does she inspect her own knuckles, the ones that the mermaid had clamped on the night before. She stretches and shakes her fingers. She doesn’t think anything is broken.

The mermaid is watching her.

Shaw makes exaggerated movements to disinfect, clean and bandage her knuckles, and then injecting the antibiotics into her arm, to demonstrate that it is normal.

She tries to administer a shot to the mermaid again, but the mermaid is stubborn. Shaw's getting really irritated. It's good medicine. But she doesn't force the issue.

Two days later, Shaw takes a bicycle and cycles to the supply store, to buy medicinal herbs-the organic stuff. She figures that the mermaid will be less unwilling if the medicine is made of plants.

She catches the mermaid looking through her things when she comes back, and snatches a bunch of letters out of the mermaid's grasp.

The mermaid points to the repeated scribble of the addressee and looks at Shaw.

“What?”

The mermaid jabs the repeated words harder.

“That's my name. Sameen. Shaw.”

“Shaw,” she says, testing it out on her lips, and sounds almost incredulous, “you inscribe your name on these flimsy things?”

It occurs to Shaw, that the mermaid has never seen paper. Shaw ignores her. She takes out the herbs and arranges it neatly in front of her, in between them.

She grinds them to a nice, juicy pulp with a small mortar and pestle, in front of the mermaid, letting her see. Then she approaches the mermaid, and moves to apply the paste to her calf, to the multitude of scratches that didn't warrant a bandage. The mermaid jerks her leg away.

"Your wound will fester," Shaw barks testily, "if you do not accept the medicine." The mermaid scoffs.

"You will die," Shaw warns, frustrated with the lack of cooperation.

"Then it is my fate, human."

"You really want death so much? Then I should have let the other fishermen take you."

"At least then I would have died with *dignity*," the mermaid snaps, angered, her hair crackling with static. Before Shaw can respond, the mermaid carries on her tirade, seeming to release her pent up anger all at once. "Instead of here, reduced to *this*. I have lost my tail, being trapped in your lair for three days and three nights. I-, Mighty Poseidon save me, I have *legs!*"

The mermaid wails this last part with absolute lament and revulsion, gesturing wildly with her palms. Shaw blinks and automatically glances down at the mermaid's long thin legs peeking out from the oversized shirt. Then Shaw tears her gaze immediately back upwards from pale alabaster skin, hairless and elegantly shaped, embarrassed by her ungainly staring. The mermaid does not notice, too embroiled was she in her own fury.

"Are you quite done?" Shaw says gruffly, and the mermaid puffs out her chest and stubbornly, deliberately turns away. Shaw purses her lips, and wedges herself closer to the bed, dragging her mortar with her on the floor. It makes croaking noises as it scrapes the rocky surface of the ground.

“When you’re well,” Shaw deadpans, scooping up a generous amount of the grinded paste with her fingers, “you can smite all the humans with Poseidon’s trident all you want.”

The mermaid flinches at the flippant way Shaw speaks, and widens her eyes at her, indignant.

“Tis no laughing matter!” The mermaid exclaims, but Shaw smirks and barely manages not to laugh.

When Shaw takes the medicine and applies it on the mermaid’s calf, the mermaid hisses and twitches whenever it stings, but that is the last time she refuses Shaw’s help.

She even allows Shaw to remove her bandages, apply the herbs onto her thigh, and then rewrap them. Shaw thinks they are making progress.

“You look like me,” Shaw starts to say, and then regrets it instantly. The mermaid had been staring at her working hands intently, observing her pounding of the medicinal herbs, as has been their routine, for several nights now, but now snaps upward to look at her. Cringing, Shaw tries to salvage it, aware of how offensive that sounds.

“I don’t mean you look like me- I mean- I don’t-” Shaw fumbles- this was not coming out not the way she intended it to be.

“I know what you meant, human,” the mermaid says easily, cutting through Shaw’s blabber, clearly amused, before tilting her head in question. “Why should I not?”

“I don’t know. I thought, I don’t know, I thought maybe you’d-”

“-Look like a monster? Giant fangs, webbed fingers, claws for nails?” The mermaid supplies helpfully. Shaw starts to scowl, but it strikes her suddenly that the mermaid was *teasing* her,

the nerve. Shaw resists the urge to stick out her tongue at the mermaid.

“Maybe bright green hair? Who knows what a seaweed diet does to your system,” Shaw grumbles instead.

The mermaid’s eyes widen for a fraction, possibly surprised, and then bursts out laughing. It is a twinkling sound, like wind chimes, high-pitched inflections that are lilting and light. It resonates tangibly inside of Shaw’s chest, as though it physically reached deep inside her, and Shaw is filled with the sudden absurdity that it did.

“Oh no, we only eat humans,” the mermaid says, eyes full of mirth, “and we only like them small, short and grumpy. Bonus points if they’re tanned and like fishing.”

Disconcerted with the mermaid’s playful tone, Shaw doesn’t find the appropriate response. Instead she refocuses her efforts with the mortar and pestle, and grinds her herbs harder, until the paste becomes a little too watery and limp.

The mermaid says nothing else, thankfully, and allows Shaw to apply the medicine onto her thigh again.

“You didn’t tell the others.” Shaw says nothing.

“About me,” the mermaid clarifies, “You didn’t inform your brethren.” Shaw snorts.

“They would have killed you.”

The mermaid is indiscernible for a long time. Shaw makes her way outside, and a travelling medicine-man stops by the village. Shaw barter one of her chickens away from more medicine. The mermaid is in the same exact position when she returns. Shaw frowns at her.

“You have saved my life,” the mermaid says, uncertainly, “and I owe you a great debt.” The mermaid switches from hesitation to an outright seductive tone. “Would you like treasure? There have been many ships led by your species, sunk to the bottom of the sea...”

Shaw frowns more, and one of the mermaid’s eyebrow twitches in amusement.

“Do not you, desire gold?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Shaw huffs, “I’m a fisherman in a village seven miles from the nearest supply store. Currency holds no weight here. What am I going to do with your gold?”

The mermaid’s eyes sparkle at her, seemingly taking enjoyment in Shaw’s brusqueness, and her dismissal of shipwreck treasure.

“Name me your price then, Shaw,” the mermaid says, now clearly grinning. It irritates Shaw.

“I live a quiet life at the beach. I fish and I sleep. Keep your... reward. I don't want anything.”

This seems to interest the mermaid, and she angles her head at Shaw contemplatively, her eyes trailing down Shaw’s lithe form and back up again several times. The scrutiny stretches for minutes, the mermaid’s cross-examination unhurried. Finally, Shaw crosses her arms in front of her defensively, huffing and looking away from the mermaid’s intensely twinkling eyes. Only then does the mermaid address her again.

“You have been kind toward me, Sameen Shaw, a concept I have not encountered in your kind in quite some time. It is troubling, that you will not request your fee. But I must repay this life-debt, so I will give you the most precious gift I can.”

Shaw makes to protest with a bothered wave of her hand, but the mermaid silences her with A Grave Look, before she closes her eyes and turn solemn.

“What do you know, Sameen Shaw, of *true* names?” The mermaid asks, but she doesn’t seem to be expecting a reply.

“I have been called many names over the years... Naiad, Melusine... *Anahita*- a personal favourite,” she purrs, the syllables curling around her tongue smoothly and teasingly, as though the words *enjoyed* being spoken as much as she did, speaking them. Shaw could feel magic in the air, as though the words were not quite so simple words, but that they held power, meaning pulled from the dips and curves of those choruses.

“I have been named Nerin, Siren, *Devil Fish*,” She says the last one with great scorn. Though her lips quirk up in a smirk, her eyes twitch, clearly annoyed with the injustice of having that associated with her. The air ripples with tension as her teeth click together. Her hair seemed to rise with static when she becomes agitated, and deflates when she calms.

“I have been shunned as one of the Dark creatures that were not granted passage onto Noah’s Ark,” she says, and her expression shifts into something softer then, as she soothes her hair down, looking out to the sea.

“And you call me, *Mermaid*,” she says quietly, inhaling effortlessly. Her eyes turn forgiving, filled with melancholy and longing the longer she gazes out to the beach.

“But from the goddess you call Atargatis herself, The Divine Beauty, she who gave birth to my mother, I was given the name *Root*,” she finishes, her long wavy hair seeming to curl and uncurl by itself, possessing its own will no matter the direction of the breeze. It seemed to shiver as her true name leaves her lips, excited and vibrating.

Her name invokes in Shaw a strange sense of heightenedness, of sudden grip over the mermaid in front of her. The colours of the mermaid’s hair twinkle brighter, her pale skin seeming to glow unearthly, ever so slightly. The skin on the mermaid’s legs suddenly shimmer when the sunlight falls on it in a specific angle, *like fish scales*, and all at once Shaw understood the gravity of the mermaid’s gift.

Shaw blinks, and the image is gone.

Surprised, and overcome with great humility, Shaw could only manage a stiff nod.

The mermaid- Root, she does not look back at Shaw, her attention now solely captivated by the steady coiling of the tide far out on the beach, and Shaw feels intrusive, as though she is witnessing something private. She gathers her small mortar of medicinal herbs, and leaves her mermaid to her musings.

She makes sure to pat down the straw at the hut's entrance to block wandering eyes peeping in, wondering why she cares that Root ought not be disturbed.

Shaw catches Root doing weird things sometimes, like opening and closing her legs repeatedly. Mostly she sits with her legs pressed together, as though she still thinks of them as a tail.

Shaw has been feeding Root with vegetation on land, because she hasn't had the time to go out to sea, and the summer monsoon season is dangerous to be venturing out anyway. Shaw's had some rice and vegetable saved up, bought from the supply hut, and she has managed to tide them both over for now.

But one day when the sky is bright and the waves look gentler than usual, Shaw decides that its time for some protein. So she takes her boat out while Root is playing with her Rubik's cube (Root is both delighted by Shaw's mastery over it, and violently furious that she herself cannot figure it out. She insists Shaw is using magic, 'a dastardly trick!'), and manages to bring back a net of small fishes. It is not the best catch, but hey, what's a poor fisherman, but subject to the wind and tide?

Shaw hadn't been one to give thought to uh, arbitrary details, so she's not expecting it when she first presents Root with a proper grilled dinner, and Root gives her an affronted look, proceeding to critic Shaw's cooking skills.

“What did you do Shaw, strike it with lightning?”

“No,” Shaw frowns, “I smoked it over a fire.” Root curls her mouth in disgust and orders her to get the stinking pile of burnt flesh away. Shaw shrugs her off and digs into her hard-won meal. Shaw briefly considers punishing Root by asking Root to get her own dinner, but then Root looks over longingly every time Shaw takes a bite and makes pathetic whimpering noises in her direction. Root’s stomach also growls, very often and very loudly.

After she is done with her meal, making sure to make satisfied noises, she pointedly smirks over at Root, who attempts to cast her a disdainful look, and goes back outside the tent to her storage trunk. Shaw has only the stomach for two fishes, but her net had caught a fair amount more. She had thought to store it and keep it for the next few days, but oh well, better to have them fresh anyway. She doesn’t think about why she cares if her guest has fresh fish.

She grabs the biggest two (she doesn’t know why that matters either) by the caudal and goes back to the hut, and almost drops them in laughter at Root’s indignant and hungry stare. Shaw makes to present them to Root very slowly, fussing about and telling Root, no, no, let me get a plate, please, I insist- and Root is narrowing her eyes and baring her teeth and Shaw absolutely loves it.

And then when Shaw is close enough, and she hadn’t been expecting it honestly, her houseguest lunges for the nearer fish and swipes it clean out of Shaw’s grip. And then Shaw watches with fascination and she’ll admit, a little horror, as Root happily attacks her meal.

“Mollusks,” Root says with a mouth full of blood, and grins.

Root eats fish like an animal, Shaw finds out. She grips the end of the head and tail with both hands, and tears into the meat with a strong jaw, and sharp teeth. She’s never noticed before, because when Root smiles it doesn’t seem like her teeth are all that different...

Of course Root has dug her teeth into Shaw’s knuckles that one time, but suddenly, Shaw has a strange urge then, to *touch* Root’s teeth, to graze her fingers under them, to feel that primordial sharpness press into her fingertips.

Root eats both fish, spitting out the bones and parts that she does not want onto a bowl Shaw had placed beside the bed. And then she looks up at Shaw hopefully, but refuses to bend her

pride to ask for more. She makes a show of cleaning and licking her fingers, preening and complimenting Shaw's catch with batted eyelashes and shy smiles, and letting her gaze dart repeatedly out the entrance. Shaw wonders if that trick works on Root's mermen suitors.

When it gets a little ludicrous, Shaw purses her lips and goes back out to fetch two more. Root has six before she decides that she is full.

"I have fed on day-old dead fish before," Root says at the end, after Shaw gives her a basin to wash her fingers and mouth. Shaw throws her a cloth and forces her to clean up all the residual blood.

Shaw scrunches up her nose. Her whole hut smells like raw fish and blood and fish guts now.

"What?"

"I have had worse," Root says simply, stretching indolently and yawning, and that's the worst compliment and thank-you Shaw has ever heard. She tries not to stare when Root's shirt moves upward at her blatant stretching, smooth white skin coming into view.

"Barnacles!" Root curses, gritting her teeth and clamping her fingernails down on Shaw's wrist. Shaw makes a pleased sound, a mocking scoff.

"Oh, don't be a child. It doesn't even look that bad anymore," Shaw scolds lightly.

"Is that why you've taken it upon yourself to jab it harder than you used to?" Root shoots back. It was only a split second, but Shaw's expression must have betrayed her because Root narrows her eyes at her shrewdly and her fingers tighten on Shaw when she tries to draw her hand back from Root's thigh.

“So you *have* noticed,” Root says. Shaw opens and closes her mouth, but her throat suddenly feels dry. She has very carefully, not allowed herself down this line of conversation.

“You’re doing it on purpose?” Root asks disbelievingly, releasing her grip. Root schools her expression, switching from offended to curious. Then very lightly, she trails her fingers up Shaw’s arm- the arm that is supposed to be applying medicine, the arm that has frozen in place.

“Why, I wonder?” Root murmurs, more to herself than Shaw. Shaw attempts at a grunt, but nothing comes out of her mouth.

“You are afraid,” Root concludes, a perplexed expression on her face as she scrutinizes Shaw. “But not of me.”

Shaw can feel every cell where Root’s fingers are touching her arm. Uncomfortable under Root’s intense gaze, Shaw drops her eyes downward to the fingers grazing just the surface of her skin, travelling up her forearm.

Root’s knuckles lift, and barely digging in, barely touching, her nails tickle Shaw’s arm as her fingers curl into a fist at the sensitive skin on the inside of her elbow. Shaw inhales, and notices for the first time that her breathing has gone quite shallow. She looks back at Root reflexively, to find Root staring at her with an unreadable expression on her face.

Embarrassed, and furious with herself and at Root, Shaw pulls away instantly. She lets the medicine thud rather unceremoniously on the floor, almost throwing it to hide the slight shaking of her hands.

“I trust you’re well enough to do it by yourself now,” Shaw snaps before making a hasty retreat. But when she returns later, Root simply offers her the small pot of medicine, and moves the sheets to prop up her thigh. When Shaw is done and makes to get up, Root touches her just once, on the arm, as an apology, and then turns away, pulling the covers up to her face.

Shaw stops trying to forcibly control her hands to be rigid. She lets them be gentle if they wish.

Shaw thought that Root would get bored, with the lack of activity available, but Root surprisingly handles immobility very well. She is content to stare out at the beach through the straw of her hut for long hours, and when Shaw gives her any new object, Root inspects it for an ungodly length of time.

It's only when Shaw gets irritated and makes to take it back that Root clings on tighter to it, bringing it away from Shaw's grasp. And then she makes a snooty sound of thanks, which only serves to irritate Shaw even more.

Shaw teaches Root how to play poker cards and Root misses the point entirely. She holds no concept of winning and losing. When Shaw finally realizes after the eighth round that Root is letting her win, Root stares at her blankly and says, "um, didn't you want to?"

It gets better when Shaw teaches her how to gamble, with fish. Winner take all, Shaw had said, and that definitely gets Root's attention. But when dinner came they split the fishes anyway (Shaw always considered herself to have a huge appetite, but clearly, with fish, Root wins).

"You're not like other fish hunting men," Root says very suddenly one day, after a game of poker and dinner. Shaw grunts, shifting to sit on the bed beside Root to check on her leg as she does every night.

"It's fish-er-men. And if you're speaking of the fact that I wear different clothes, it's because-"

"You're new to the sea. The sea doesn't sing in your blood. No," Root says, leaning forward, "you were born *far* away from here."

“I was. And hold still, I’m trying to get this right,” Shaw says, moving around Root’s ankle. It’s been a whole month now, since she and Root had settled into this strange domesticity. Shaw goes out for fish, or tends to the chickens, or run her errands. At night Shaw checks on her wounds, and sometimes they speak. Sometimes Shaw teaches Root things about the human world. It’s been a whole month, and Shaw thinks Root’s foot is healing. It is tender, but well on its way to recovery.

“You’ll be able to walk in another month,” Shaw says, satisfied, patting her foot and settling it down gently.

Her fingers trail up without conscious thought, touching the wounds on Root’s calf, and then further up to her thigh. She moves her fingers over the bandages lightly, and Shaw thinks she might have convinced herself she was still examining Root’s wounds.

Until she hears a tiny sound, a soft intake of breath, and Shaw looks up. Root is leaning back with her palms pressed to the bed, staring at her own leg, where Shaw’s fingers are still hovering above, and giving the strangest expression. Root looks like she wants to say something, but she doesn’t work it out of her mouth properly.

It’s a very peculiar look Root is examining her own leg with, like she was surprised and confused and excited all at the same time. Shaw has a sinking suspicion it has something to do with the fact that Root has never had human legs, and is not accustomed to the, shall we say, *sensitivity*.

Root’s eyes follow Shaw’s fingers as she trails them back down to her calf, and Shaw watches as her breathing turns slightly louder. Root’s eyes flick upwards to meet Shaw’s then, her brows furrowed, eyes hooded, her lips parted. Root’s face is a little pink, and Shaw cannot look away.

It is only when Shaw’s fingers reach their original point of her ankle that Root darts her eyes back down, her expression turning morose.

“And when,” Root asks quietly, “will I be able to swim?”

The Ocean

Chapter Notes

So anyway you guys have said alot of nice things regarding this and Come Rain or Shine, and there's alot of pressure suddenly. I'm really starting to worry. So I hope this meets your expectations... cause this isnt some long story or anything, and I'll be wrapping it up in one more chapter.

Half a month later, the bandages come off Root's thigh, and Shaw has even more trouble averting her gaze as Root becomes less and less hindered in movement. Root is still opposed to pants (she considers it a net for her tail).

And like Shaw predicted, it takes one month for Root's ankle to resemble anything fit for walking. Shaw double-checks it anyway in the evening, before dinner, while Root bounces up and down impatiently.

"It's still tender, but we can try," Shaw concedes at last, satisfied after testing her ankle with a series of rotating exercises. She supports Root up with an arm around her waist, and Root gingerly places her foot onto the ground. When she applies pressure, however, she stumbles, making a noise of discomfort as her weight sags backward onto Shaw. They take a few tries; Root refuses to give up until she's able to make it to the door and back to the bed, with Shaw holding her up.

Root wants to walk around now, whenever Shaw is around to help hold her up. It is troublesome and disconcerting for Shaw, as she's caught between annoyed with Root and annoyed with herself for noticing certain things. Things like white skin. Things like the smell of Root's hair when her face is so close. Things like slender fingers that keep inspecting objects with care, meticulous in detail. Things like said slender fingers clutching her for support.

It is on one such occasion, where Shaw is helping Root lie back down on the bed, that Shaw realizes something. She is not the only one staring. And if she is, then Root is not an oblivious party. It only takes a moment to register this, and before Shaw can decide to get angry, Root has taken her own bottom lip into her mouth, and is staring quite determinedly at Shaw's lips. Before Shaw can process this to be the absurdity that it *most certainly* is (a

mermaid is thinking of kissing her, for god's sake), Root has pulled Shaw down onto the bed, above her.

Shaw holds her body up with palms on either side of Root's head, a leg over both of Root's and the other in a half-crouched position on the floor. She blinks dumbly down. Root blinks dumbly back.

"What are you doing?" Shaw blurts, slightly thrown. Root blinks some more, and then leans up to press her lips against Shaw's. After a long moment, when nothing else happens, Root pulls back, resting her head back on the bed.

"Huh," Root says thoughtfully.

"What?"

"I saw humans doing this once. It seemed a lot more... fun when they were doing it."

Shaw draws her eyebrows together and squints, suddenly feeling defensive, as though her kissing skills were called into question. She frowns, and then resolutely, leans down to Root's lips. Root doesn't move at all when Shaw languidly traces Root's lips with her own. Shaw nibbles lightly, and sucks on Root's bottom lip. When she looks back up, Root's eyes are turbulent.

"Well," Root says, a little breathily, "that's *much* more fun." Root leans back up, eagerly. It's when Shaw's hands are roving, palms sliding under Root's shirt, a hand coming up to cup a breast, that Root makes a small odd noise.

"That's, different," Root says vaguely, through a deep breath. She's stopped kissing Shaw now, preferring to observe, and Shaw moves down her neck, shifting her body up and against Root. Root's body is all soft angles and silk. When Shaw's hand slides around her torso, travelling downward to grip a hip, thumb tracing over a prominent hipbone, Root jerks.

“I, I-” Root licks her lips, and swallows uncertainly. Shaw tenses and moves back, moving to sit up beside Root. She runs a hand through her hair.

“Look, I don’t think you know what you’re doing. So let’s just-”

“Show me,” Root says then, and however tentative, Shaw can see the determination in her eyes. Shaw almost asks if Root is sure, but then Root is sitting up too, and closing in to kiss her again. This time, Shaw doesn’t move to touch Root anywhere lower than her stomach. Her hands slide over Root with ease, her flesh soft and willing. Shaw traces over her arms, her shoulders, her neck, and then down her sternum, her ribs, under her breasts.

Root is a fast learner, and doesn’t exactly hide her moans (this woman truly knows no proprietary). She tastes like fresh, spring water, even though she is from the sea. She tastes of salt too, not the murky overpowering saltiness of the sea, but clean and sharp, like tequila. It sends waves after waves of want in Shaw’s gut, and Shaw grips the bed sheet tight with the hand she’s using to hold herself up. Root’s small nipples are hard against Shaw’s other hand, and Root seems genuinely surprised at the sensation, but pleased at the same time.

“Do that again,” Root demands, her eyes half-lidded but shining, and Shaw does.

“That feels like the ocean,” Root says between kisses, and it occurs to Shaw that in the sea it is always cold.

Sex with a mermaid is a ridiculous business.

Root is a deeply sensual creature, Shaw finds out. She knows no concept of reservation, and isn’t shy. Curiosity and eagerness drives her more than anything else, and she lets Shaw teach her this human exercise.

She grows increasingly urgent as Shaw’s hands move over her, impatient to an end she doesn’t quite know about, making her writhe and writhe under Shaw, unable to express her

need. Shaw has no objections- she rather enjoys Root's incessant writhing.

When Root bites down on her neck or shoulder, Shaw gets first-hand experience of those sharp teeth that she so desperately wanted to touch before. It is much sharper than she imagined, and much more gratifying. There are angry marks on Shaw's shoulder, but Root draws no blood.

When Shaw touches Root's inner thighs for the first time, Root tenses up, and bites her lip. She trembles with a rare demonstration of modesty, afraid of being a lesser creature without her tail, and averts her eyes. Shaw can understand this, so she gently coaxes Root's thighs apart, murmuring encouragements.

When Shaw lets her fingers graze the wetness between Root's legs for the first time, Root opens her mouth in complete surprise, startled, and shakes at the pleasure. And when Shaw touches her clit lightly, just a brush of a fingertip, Root's hips jerk.

"*Oh*," Root says in revelation, as though she'd just realized the source of her tension. Shaw smirks at her through hooded eyes, and leans back up to kiss her.

"Oh, that's- that's-" Root falters, unable to explain, her eyes losing focus as Shaw draws circles over her clit.

"Good?" Shaw prompts, breathing heavily into Root's neck. Root nods vigorously, her body quivering. Her hair vibrates against Shaw's cheek. Shaw bites a little, and trails back up to Root's ear.

Root keeps her eyes open, even when Shaw slips a finger in her, hungry in cataloguing every detail. The feeling of being entered is completely new to her, and she says *oh* a lot, like she reaches a new understanding each time. But Root is a natural at this, and instinct pushes her to fulfill her desire. Root is glorious when she comes, uninhibited and keening, and Shaw is enraptured at the sight and sound of it.

"That's definitely different," Root says, after they have both caught their breaths.

And because the gods above like to make fun of Shaw, she is sure, after that first time, Root wants to have sex anytime, all the time. It doesn't matter how tired Shaw is from the day, or whether she is in the mood.

And then Root makes the habit of touching herself when Shaw is unwilling to. While normally Shaw wouldn't have any objections, Root is unabashed, and very *loud*. It is very unsettling.

Also, Shaw fears that Root might one day do this in a more public setting (she does plan to allow Root to leave the hut someday you know, when Root is ready and won't be stabbed to death by fishermen), so Shaw is forced to have a very uncomfortable, very intense, very lengthy discussion with Root about sex and *appropriateness*.

"When we put our mouths together, it is called a kiss-"

"There is no mating season, no, just-, no-, shut up-"

"What? No, the males do not carry roe- Do mermen carry- you know what, I don't want to know, *do not* tell me-"

"Do you now understand why you must wear pants-"

"Because it distracts me, when you're- touching- you're doing it *right beside* me!-"

"No, I do not do this with random strangers- this is a unique... bond, you can understand the sacredness of a bond, yes? No, you should not try it with other fishermen- do you *want* to be speared-"

"Yes, I know that dolphins do it in groups sometimes, but we are not dolphins-"

“Just wear the pants, Root!”

There are a lot of strangled, gurgling noises from Shaw during their discussion, and Shaw laments that she will end up throttling Root after all (which is a shame, because the sex is so good). Root still doesn't want to wear pants, but after much irritation on both their parts, concedes to a mutual understanding.

That battle is won when Shaw says very flippantly, “So, maybe I should do the same. I'll walk around without a shirt like you, when I leave you here to go out, I'll let all the other fishermen see me, and they'll think about kissing me, and touching me-”

Root kisses her hard then, bruising and angry. She doesn't quite understand why, because her people are not connected to another this way, and she does not understand the thudding of her heart in her chest (Root has never spent so much time in such close proximity in the company of a single creature before), but she is furious.

“*It is a sacred bond,*” Root hisses at Shaw, her gaze turning sharp and predatory, and she bares her teeth in an aggressive display of territorial claim (Shaw really shouldn't be turned on by her animalistic behaviour, but reluctantly she admits that she really, really is). Her fingers claw at Shaw as she moves her other hand lower, slipping between Shaw's legs. Her eyes glitter obsidian and stormy, but she makes no further comments about the shirt issue, instead becoming newly determined to reduce Shaw to a quivering pile of limp flesh in her arms.

Shaw gets Root a proper oilskin the next day, long enough to reach below her knees this time, and they stop bickering about shirts and appropriateness.

Shaw now knows more about merpeople, fishes and their breeding habits more than she would ever want to know.

Sex with a mermaid is a ridiculous business.

“It’s strange,” Root says one day, examining her hands. She runs her fingers over each of her palms, a curious expression on her face. Shaw pays her no mind. Root likes to talk a lot, Shaw discovers, considering the haughty reticence she had at first to ‘consort with the likes of Man’.

But Root also likes an audience (oh yes, she definitely has a flair for the dramatic), and her ego demands she wait until she has Shaw’s undivided attention. Shaw likes to torture her by ignoring her as long as she can, and then finally, when she can feel Root’s hair threaten to strangle her (Shaw truly suspects it has a mind of its own), she’ll roll her eyes and prompt Root.

“What’s strange?” Shaw asks, exasperatedly.

“Here, on land... I *age*.” That surprises Shaw, and she looks up to find Root with an unreadable expression on her face. It suddenly occurs to her that Root is not exactly, strictly speaking, *human*. Shaw doesn’t even want to think about the fact that her sexual habits can be now classified as *bestiality*.

“How old are you exactly?” Shaw blurts out. Root considers this.

“In your terms: thirty eight decades - and still young,” Root smirks, “we do not count the lesser years.” Then Root turns gloomy and looks at her palms again, suddenly looking forlorn. Shaw doesn’t need half a brain to know that the possibility of Root slowly becoming mortal is very real, now with her legs and all. She doesn’t know how to fix it.

Shaw is not an expert on feelings, she has buried her soul with all the bodies back in New York, and she doesn’t quite have that mushy, lovey-dovey thing inside her anymore (doesn’t know if she ever had it). But seeing Root melancholy always fills her with an unexplainable urge to do something very silly and very impractical, like run to the far end of the beach to get her a blooming flower or something, just to wipe that look off of Root’s face. But there is no way Shaw is going to do that, no fucking way, so she settles for a little joke.

“Great,” Shaw grimaces, “I have an ancient worm living on my bed. And I’m having sex with her. I’m having sex with an old, wrinkly granny.”

When Root finally makes the effort for a half-smile, Shaw feels her chest flutter, just a tad.

“Sea slugs,” Root quips, “I’m right in my prime.”

Root’s favourite time of the day is late dusk, after dinner. Root likes to tell Shaw stories, and Shaw has never been much of talker anyway, so she listens. It’s an easy dynamic. She’s never sure if Root’s telling the truth, but she doesn’t mind.

“The last time I used my voice, was eleven decades ago,” Root says, waits a beat, and then, “is it an ugly sound?”

Shaw is used to being surprised so often by the things Root says, that she no longer lets it show on her face.

“No, it’s not.”

“We don’t speak you know, under.”

“Not even to other... merpeople?”

“I don’t- That’s absurd, what would we say- Don’t you know how loud it is down there? Voices do not work in the ocean.”

“Root? Do you have any friends?”

“I- We are not- That is not the way we-” Root gives up her pointless pretense and testily says, “No.”

Shaw stares at her expectantly, and Root finally averts her gaze, rubbing the inside of her elbow.

“I... I was not your average fishmaid. I was not like the rest. My people do not gather in colonies like yours, but yes, we do know of each other, and occasionally cross paths. But I was... different. I was always more... adventurous. My people thought me quite mad.” Her voice trails off at the end, as though remembering something long lost to her. Shaw clears her throat.

“Who taught you English?”

“My mother. I last spoke to her thirty-one decades ago.”

“Well, you have a very good memory then.”

Root looks up again at Shaw.

“Voices do not work in the ocean. We do not speak. We listen.”

Root says this with such severity that Shaw feels a need to break the intensity of the room before Root goes all mopey again.

“But Root,” Shaw says, sneering, “you talk *a lot*.”

Root lunges for her, but there’s a little grin on her face that she’s trying to hide, and Shaw laughs, letting Root tackle her to the ground. There’s much better use for both their mouths at the moment.

Root discovers that having Shaw scale the fishes first makes dinner much more enjoyable (she was amazed and Shaw felt slightly proud and who cares if she totally stole the credit for coming up with it).

Shaw's scaling their dinner (only four small sea bass) one evening, when she feels Root's intense gaze roving up and down her body. It's been a long hard day, and though the tide is promising, Shaw cannot go out in the day to fish, fearing for Root's safety should anyone find her. She hunts at night, where pickings are slimmer. Shaw's running out of non-perishables, and with an extra mouth (that won't shut up and can fit a lot of fish) to feed, Shaw becomes increasingly frustrated and worried.

Shaw's starting to get real bothered by Root's stare, her knife moving increasingly vicious, and she's about to snap and ask Root what her problem is, when Root finally speaks.

"Sweetie," Root coos, coming up behind her, wrapping slender fingers over her knife-welding hand. Shaw swats her hand away and grunts.

"What do you want?"

"For you to not... mutilate my meal, and then I want to go swimming." Shaw starts, and her knife stops over the fish. She turns her neck to look at Root.

"You want to go swimming?"

They wait until it is dead in the night, when there is no one else around, before Shaw motions for Root to follow her. They take a slight detour (Shaw relies heavily on military tactics when she is nervous) and end up at a strip of beach that is less widely frequented.

There's a very uneasy feeling in Shaw's throat, one she doesn't quite know if it's fear for being discovered, or fear of something else. She is quiet and attentive, while Root excitedly talks and talks her ear off, an irritating buzzing that Shaw tunes out.

Root takes off her oilskin, and Shaw has only a moment to stare at the back of Root, nude, at the edges where the white spume of the waves touch the sand. Other than her long, flowing brown locks, Shaw knows intimately that hair grows nowhere else on Root's body, and her skin is smooth like the marble tiles in her old apartment. Her skin has always been pale, after decades of living under the dark of the sea, but under the soft glow of the moonlight Root shines like a firefly, luminous and ethereal.

She watches as Root touches the water with her toes, tentatively at first, as her eyes slide close in pleasure. The moment is a sacrosanct one, and Shaw stays silent, an observer to a much higher magic, the gateway to a world she has no part in. Root slowly puts both feet into the wet sand, until the water reaches her ankles, and then seemingly gaining courage, she moves into the water with stronger purpose. When she is waist deep she takes a breath and glides into the water, letting the sea envelope her.

Her grace betrays her true nature, and Shaw watches and watches and does nothing, the uneasy pit in her stomach growing. Until the sounds at the beach become an easy rhythm of the waves rising and falling at Shaw's feet, before Shaw realizes the water has gone quite still. There is not a ripple in the smooth mirror-like surface of the horizon.

"Root?" Shaw calls, her feet already moving into the water automatically, worried. "Root? Are you okay?" She rushes into the water, clumsy splashing with her hands as she tries to find Root.

And there, not too far away, a glittering array of reflected lights reaches Shaw for the second time in her life, visible even in the murky darkness. Root's transformation was not yet complete. Scales form from Root's waist first, her skin at her thighs and calves hardening and smoothing over to become scales; a myriad of pale reflective colours, glinting where the moonlight catches. Root's legs mold together, the scales forming a solid cocoon around her as it closes up at her ankles and blossoms into two lithe tail fins. And in her breathtaking state, Root grins at her under the water, bubbles coming out from her mouth in a rush, and Root is suddenly a lot nearer than Shaw realized.

Root glides through the water, more fish than man, colliding into Shaw and pulling her upwards. When they break the surface Root kisses her hard, the smile on her face radiant and her face flushed. Shaw finds herself at a complete lost for words, swallowing and gasping for air, a turmoil of emotions she didn't know she possessed raging inside of her. But nothing ruins Root's elation, and she doesn't seem to realize Shaw's conflict, her hands roving and her lips insistent.

The feel of Root's diamond hard scales brushing her thighs and her toes brings Shaw back in the moment, and Shaw pushes her slightly further to a looser embrace, looking away. It becomes quiet as Root's smile falters, and the only things Shaw hears are the sea and the harshness of her own breathing.

"You were worried," Root says evenly, after a time. Shaw clenches her jaw, refusing to meet Root's eyes.

"But not for yourself. You were worried for me," Root says, a question in her gaze.

"I have misled you," Root says apologetically. "You thought I had lost my tail for good," Root goes on softly, and Shaw tries to push her off. Root's arms tighten around her, and her prowess in the water is sufficient for her to hold them both in place, her tail rolling to keep them suspended.

"You worried of how I would react in the water, of whether I would be distressed with feet for flippers." Shaw scowls, annoyed at her softness, and annoyed that it was for nothing. But when she looks at Root, Root has the warmest expression Shaw has ever seen in another being's eyes.

"You were worried for me," Root repeats, her eyes hooded, as she leans in again to kiss Shaw, a chaste press of her lips. Shaw exhales, in a bid to regain her composure, and pushes Root again. Root relents.

"Go take a swim, fishmaid," Shaw says, the affectionate term making Root grin, as the tension between them diffuses. Root bites her lip, and Shaw feels the rolling of her tail gain more force. She presses another chaste kiss to Shaw's cheek, and then dips her head back, the column of her neck exposed, and curls backward into the water. The momentum moves Shaw back, as Root swims away.

But Root doesn't go very far, a pivot around Shaw as the fulcrum. Root's tail muscles are stronger than her thin human legs, and she is incredibly fast and agile in her natural element. She doesn't so much swim as she does glide, cutting through water with all the finesse of a figure-skater on ice. She makes large splashes as she darts around the water swiftly, circling Shaw like a compass, leaving Shaw to chase her twinkling laughter.

When Shaw's legs grow a little tired from threading water, Root comes to hold her up, her face flushed from excitement and delight, her ribs moving with the force of her inhaled and exhaled. Absently, Shaw touches the scales that her fingertips can reach, admiring the feel of them. They are hard and smooth like she thought they would be, each scale overlapping another in a matrix of diamonds. It feels like a million pearls under her hands, the scales moving under and over each other in time with the fluid rocking of Root's tail. She imagines that they would sound like the crackling of aluminum foil as she clicks her fingers onto them, if she could put her head underwater to hear.

Root's eyebrows furrow together, and her gaze goes fuzzy as Shaw languidly strokes her hips, the curve of her ass, following the cocoon of scales that funnel downward. Shaw watches her, amused. Root looks like a cat being stroked, eyes almost closed in pleasure, purring under her hands. She wonders if anyone has touched her this way before.

"Shaw, carry me to shore," Root says suddenly, her breathing haggard still from her swim. She nuzzles on Shaw's jaw, a tongue coming out to lick the salt on her neck.

"So soon? Don't you want to swim? The other men won't be here for another hour--"

Root kisses her way up to Shaw's ear and tugs on an earlobe. She very pointedly groans into Shaw's ear.

"Let me put it in terms that you can understand, Sameen. I'm going to need my legs right now. I am *wanting*."

Ten minutes out of the water, as she carries an impatient Root in her arms back to her hut, Shaw watches the scales thin and fall off one by one, leaving a trail of glittering gems in the sand. The shedding of scales reveal underneath, the now familiar alabaster skin of Root's

legs. She is a lot lighter without the thick layers of scales, and easier to carry. It is only Root's insistent mouth at Shaw's neck, and hands meandering on her body that hinders her movements, making her breathing strained.

"Does it hurt?" Shaw asks, out of curiosity.

"I will hurt *you* if you take that ill-advised deviation," Root growls belligerently (even though Shaw's the one having to carry her whole weight), as Shaw moves in a direction opposite to the hut. She digs five fingernails onto one of Shaw's breasts, dragging them over her nipple through her wet shirt.

Shaw laughs, and yields.

Root is demanding in Shaw's arms that day, fingers sure and assertive, a result of the rush of adrenaline after her swim. Shaw has never seen Root so alive, a burning candle in the small dim space of her home.

When she is buried two fingers deep in Root, and grinding desperately against Root's thigh, Root's name is pulled from Shaw's throat without thought. When she speaks it, it caresses Root like a zephyr, and Shaw watches with dilated irises, black like the bottom of the sea, as Root's body glows above her, and pulsates like the first time Root spoke her true name.

Root's hair vibrates, and her flesh shimmers with a mirage of scales for just a brief moment, like a trick of the light. Root's eyes flutter close and her eyebrows draw together in concentration as her muscles tense up. Like the release of an arrow from a bow Root snaps when she comes, jolting above Shaw, a helpless whimper torn from her throat. Her teeth sink into the place between Shaw's neck and shoulder, and her arms are tight around Shaw's neck, fingers tangled and pulling on raven hair as she quakes. This assault on Shaw's senses, Root's thigh pushing against her center, and the inarticulate mewing coming from Root, is enough to drag her own orgasm along.

She collapses onto Shaw as she catches her breath, body slowly relaxing as she lazily slides her tongue on Shaw's sweaty skin. She makes an approving sound.

“How did I live for thirty eight decades without this?” Root murmurs distractedly, kissing Shaw’s nipples, hands wandering aimlessly. She kisses Shaw’s neck, jaw, mouth, sluggishly, smiling through closed eyes.

It is a long time before Shaw answers, after their sweat has cooled and their bodies lay relaxed and spent.

“How will you live the next decades to come?” Hazy and indulgent, too engrossed in a spot under Shaw’s ear, it takes a while for Root to react. Then, her lazy tracing of Shaw’s hipbone stills.

“... What?”

“Your wounds are healed. You only need to touch the water to gain back your tail.” Root shifts to face Shaw dead in the eye, her gaze assessing.

“You’re afraid that I will leave.”

“I am not afraid-”

“I’m not going anywhere, Shaw. I can swim when I want to.”

“... Whatever,” Shaw grumbles, uncomfortable, but Root gives her a quick peck on the lips anyway.

“On those occasions,” Root asks, looking away and going pink, as though suddenly shy, “will you swim with me?”

This far out from the nearest city, the village isn't exactly bursting with modernity or the latest technologies, but Root is surprisingly inclined toward whatever gadgets Shaw has. She fiddles and takes apart Shaw's old phone and radio, and when Shaw looks surprised, she shrugs and says, "I always knew land was a magical place. Why else would I be near enough for fishermen to hunt me? I live a lot deeper, you know."

Shaw starts giving her toys to fiddle and play with, and although it occupies Root for a period, Root starts to feel trapped in the confined space. The walls are little more than nets to her, and Root gets easily irritated as the days pass.

And though Root assures Shaw that she will not, in fact, leave, suddenly the thoughts spoken out loud have made the notion real, and now Root finds herself growing restless.

The beach wind is breezy, but the lands and the hut is hot and stifling, and Root and Shaw is forced to sneak around even to go to the beach. With her wounds healed, she finds it harder to sit in Shaw's little hut all day doing nothing. There is so little space here, nothing like the vastness of the oceans, and Root finds it difficult to not think of her home.

"It's so noisy here," Root starts to say, a lot. It's the incessant crickets in the night, the constant shouting of the rowdy fishermen, the chirping of the seagulls, the loud roar of the waves. It's loud and oppressive in a completely opposite way from the way the pressure down under is loud.

Shaw pretends she doesn't know of Root slipping out of the hut at night by herself. She pretends she doesn't smell the salt of the sea, or the dampness of Root's hair when Root comes back in the morning.

And the tension between them builds and builds and builds until, like all pressurized gas tanks, it explodes.

"Stop being so reckless. What if someone saw you? You could be speared you stupid fish-"

"It's better than staying here and doing nothing. I'm bored out of my mind-"

“Then help out in the village or something. Care for the bloody chickens-”

“Like a *common* man?” Root says, indignant, “I am a *maid*-”

“Watch it, Root. I do those things. And it’s bad enough that I have to feed us both. Go back to the fucking ocean if you despise this so much!”

There is a pause as Root opens and closes her mouth, and her eyes are tight and a tad misty. She swallows twice, and purses her lips. And then, quietly, Root asks, “You want me to leave?”

“Don’t pin this on me, Root. *You* want to leave.”

Shaw knows that this is unfair, that Root is just frustrated, but then, so was she. She is tired of having to put up with Root’s constant griping. She came to the beach to escape the noise of the city, goddamnit, not to find and rescue mermaids, and certainly not to allow mermaids to complain everyday. Root has no idea what she’s talking about. The beach was quiet and lovely, and not at all noisy. It’s why she is here, and Root is making it far noisier than she liked.

“You resent, having to provide for me?”

And there it is, the upturn of a knife’s blade, where one dangles precariously on razor thin surface. One move and you tilt to either side. Root asks the question like she fears the answer, but Shaw knows better. Root *wants* her to agree. Root *wants* to be asked to leave, so that she doesn’t have to make the choice herself- so that she doesn’t have to abandon the person she is indebted to. Root needs this. Shaw knows, knows, knows this, so she clenches her jaw, and reins in her composure, before turning to Root with cold eyes.

“Yes.”

“You want me to leave?” Root repeats almost shakily, her voice cracking a little. Her eyes are tight at the corners.

“Yes.”

Shaw is reminded of poker cards, and of letting someone else win. Someone else who needs to win more.

They say nothing else, and Shaw angrily makes to leave the hut. There is wood in need of chopping, if they wanted to keep warm at night, or be able to cook. And her hands need something to do. And then, hesitantly, Root reaches out an unsteady hand, palm facing up.

“Come to bed.” Shaw takes a long time to turn around, but Root calls her softly. “Sameen, *come* to bed.”

And like every other damn thing, Shaw finds it impossible to deny Root.

That night Root moves slowly, and keeps her eyes open. She lets Shaw take her twice, but for the next few hours she pushes Shaw’s hands away and insists on taking instead. She devours Shaw like a starving man, but with all the tenderness of an old lover. She kisses long and deeply, her fingers deliberate and memorizing. She marks Shaw with harsh bites, a scattering of bruises that trek from Shaw’s neck down to her breasts, and then to her inner thighs. She takes Shaw from behind and marks her spine desperately. She coaxes moans from Shaw relentlessly, her fingers playing Shaw like a well-loved instrument. She watches with rapt attention each time, her expression closed and unreadable.

When Shaw is falling asleep, Root presses kisses from lips to her nose to her eyelids to her temple. She kisses and kisses and Shaw lets herself indulge, just this once, where she doesn’t have to control herself and protect Root and doesn’t have to constantly worry and worry and worry. She lets herself close her eyes and drift away.

And then, when Shaw wakes up in the morning, she doesn’t have to look around to know that she is alone for the first time in four months. There is an oilskin, neatly folded into a square, on the pillow.

She rises like she used to, before dawn, and goes to check on the chickens. And then she goes to fish. She doesn't do anything differently.

Home Is Where You Make It

Some things needed no explanation. Some things you just know, instinctively. She remembers feeling in possession of Root, when she spoke it. It is old magic, she assumes. It is strong, old magic. Root had given her the gift of her true name, and she *could* use it. All she had to do, was call Root's name, and Root would come, no matter how far away. But she doesn't. She never will, she repeats to herself, every night. Root will never be happy on land- it is Shaw's home, not Root's.

Root will live for decades and decades more, and Shaw will have turned to dust by then. Shaw is deeply practical at the end of the day. She relies heavily on logic, on rationality. It is pointless, and so, irrelevant. Root had become a habit; that was all. Shaw just needed to break the habit, simple as that.

But Shaw finds herself doing things she doesn't want to explain. She stops going to the beach, and she stops fishing. Instead her tastes turn to the chickens in the back coop. She doesn't want to slaughter them all though (she likes having eggs to eat), so she goes behind the coop, walks down a rocky path until she reaches the swamp, and hunts there.

She catches rabbits, and some rodents that appear to be cousins of the mouse deer but Shaw isn't fully certain what they are. She tried Nutria meat but it is kind of tough and smells weird. Muskrats are alright, if a little tasteless. The birds are plentiful in the swampy wetlands, but hard to catch. Shaw ignores the crayfish even though they would no doubt, be a nice meal. She doesn't think of fishermen and spears and injured mermaids almost getting caught, and she definitely doesn't hunt in the water. Snakes are her favourite catch. They put up a good fight, the skinning process is therapeutic, and the meat is rewarding after.

Shaw has a lot of time alone now, to think. She thinks of New York. She thinks of her old life, murdering people for the government. She was the ISA's top assassin, and though her skills may be rusty, she has no doubt it will return with some practice. She thinks of her old sparse apartment, and the streets of New York that always has beer on every corner.

The beach and her hut has become too quiet, without the annoying chatter of her once houseguest. It seems lesser somehow; empty and lacking. The quiet that Shaw once craved became an itch in her ears, like when a fly flies in by accident, and the buzzing is more irritating than anything else. The noise that drove Shaw from New York suddenly seems appealing again. This has been a good vacation, but she's thinking of packing up and going

back to her real life. She wants to kill things again. It'll be noisy and loud and full of fighting and guns and it will be nothing like the beach.

Buzzing, incessant chatter, annoying houseguests, buzzing, seagulls cawing, waves splashing, fishermen laughing, buzzing, muted hut, steady beat of chopping wood, fire crackling, buzzing, ringing in her ears- It's driving her mad, the loud quiet-

Shaw wonders when noise became so complicated.

One day, her hands move without conscious thought, and she has already packed what meager belongings she owns into a trunk before she even realizes what she is doing. She doesn't have much here that counts as necessities. She can leave half the useless things behind.

She thinks about saying goodbye to the few familiar faces (there's a nice family three huts down that sometimes ask her to join them for dinner, even though she always politely declines), but doesn't in the end. She's just not the sort of person who does these things. She doesn't play nice with the neighbours, and she doesn't call a name. She's just not the sort of person who does these things. She sells the chickens.

She leaves the neatly folded oilskin on the pillow. She hasn't touched it since the day she found it there anyway.

Maybe she'll get a dog. Maybe she won't. But at least she'll have the choice.

Shaw has been in New York for at least a year when her boss hands her a black envelope, and temporarily relieves her of duty. He cannot look her in the eye when he tells her that she is his most efficient assassin.

"...But?" Shaw prompts. He sighs.

“But you are... I need a cold blooded killer, not a reckless one. You kill because you are angry. I will not ask you why- it is none of my business, and anyway I don’t give a shit. But you have been compromised. An emotional assassin is useless to me. I can’t have an *eager* assassin on missions, Shaw. It’s too much of a wild card. I am doing this to save both our skins. The alternative is for them to off you in your sleep, do you want that? You’ve been a good operative, Shaw. I’m trying to help you.”

Shaw stares back stonily. She feels nothing at the dismissal, the way she feels nothing about anyone.

“Look, I know this job isn’t easy. It takes its toll on people. Go and see a therapist. Or for God’s sakes Shaw, go and take a vacation.”

Shaw wanders around the streets for two weeks, aimlessly and restlessly. Her skills are very particular, and she doesn’t think she can get a regular job. She probably doesn’t need to (being an assassin pays very well).

She doesn’t know how she ended up on that same strip of beach again, but she does, with only a duffel bag slung over a shoulder. Her feet are guided by memory, even after a year, and she ends up in front of her old hut. She knocks on the door, but there is no answer. She nudges it open, just to peek a little.

The inside is rather messy, but there is no one there. There are two shirts thrown on the floor, and drawers aren’t closed fully. Books litter the floor, pens lying untidily. There’s a laptop on the bed. There are sandals and a pair of boots near the door. Shaw closes the door and leaves before the new owners return.

Well, she thinks to herself ruefully, it was a long shot to think no one would move into the hut. Fishermen don’t like wasting things, and it had been perfectly livable. The problem is, now she would have to find somewhere to spend the night before she decides where to go next.

She probably should go to the quadrangle of the village. Maybe someone will recognize her and offer her lodging for the night. She has some money, and can probably barter an exchange.

She's almost there when she hears hurried footsteps from a corner and someone collides into her from the side.

"Sorry, I didn't-" Shaw looks up into wide brown eyes. She doesn't register it at first, because Root looks so different. She looks like any other fisherman, a shirt and pants, *pants*, hair tied in a ponytail and clutching a book. They stare. And stare. And stare.

"Shaw?" Root croaks, an eyebrow twitching. Shaw is still staring, unable to comprehend. Shaw blinks.

"Shaw? I- Shaw, it's me," Root stutters. Shaw blinks again. Root swallows.

"Were you at home? Cause Daniel said, Daniel said someone went into the house, and he was worried that it was a thief, so he told me, and he said it was someone short and wearing all black and I, I thought it might have been you, and I ran here, and I-," Root stops rambling and breathes shakily, her eyes darting between Shaw's.

It takes some time to realize that Root's waiting on her for an answer, but all she manages is, "...Daniel?"

"One of the guys. Just some guy- He fixed the roof for me once when it was raining really heavily and- he's just, just a friend- and it was raining and all the books were getting wet-"

"Right." Shaw says rather fiercely, even though she didn't mean to, cutting through Root's nervous chatter. Root licks her lips and reaches one hand out but Shaw recoils on instinct, taking a step back. Root makes some weird twitching movements with her jaw, her expression unreadable, and her arm falls back to her side limply. Her other goes to touch her tied up hair anxiously.

“I came back, Shaw,” Root says abruptly, “I came back but you weren’t there and no one knew where you went and no one knew your number-”

“I have somewhere to be right now,” Shaw says firmly, even though she really has no idea what’s controlling her mouth. It’s certainly not her brain. She’s not very well equipped to handle anything of a personal nature, she thinks. People have said it to her for years, but Shaw thinks this is the moment she finally agrees with them. Root swallows again. Her eyes never leave Shaw’s.

“Stop by for coffee? You can run your errand first, and then you can come later, I can wait-”

“Coffee.” Shaw echoes hollowly. Coffee. Root frowns, and crosses her arms defensively.

“Yes, I can make coffee, it’s not that hard-” Root stops herself from blabbering, “Shaw, just come for coffee. One cup. Just- please.”

Root looks like she’s begging, and it pains Shaw in a way she cannot describe. Not enough feelings her ass; screw you, stupid therapist. There’s plenty of stupid feelings waging a war in her chest right now- she’s just not sure what they are. Root gnaws on her bottom lip and her eyes are wide and pleading as Shaw stares.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Shaw turns to go and Root’s hand darts out to grab her on the forearm. Root steps nearer.

“Please,” Root whispers softly, eyes boring hard into Shaw’s. Shaw looks down at where Root’s fingers are gripping her tightly. Their skin is touching.

Finally, Shaw manages a curt nod and then turns and walks away, ignoring the heavy stare at her back. She wanders pointlessly from shop to shop at the heart of the village, noticing small changes. It is livelier, though not by much. The blacksmith looks much busier. She doesn’t know what she’s doing really, because it’s not like she has anything to do here. She just needs some time to prepare, she guesses. And when there is nothing else to see, and when she is done walking past the same stalls and houses several times, she makes her way back to her old hut.

When Shaw stands outside she debates whether she should knock, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. It's weird, because it is her house, technically, but she is kind of a stranger to it at the same time. In the end, she decides not to knock and just swings the door open.

Root had been sitting very straight in the middle of the bed, and she jumps up when Shaw enters. Her hair is let down again and it looks more familiar. The room is neat, the mess Shaw saw earlier gone.

"I, I thought you weren't going to show." It is disconcerting, the way that Root speaks. It's so... *modern*. Shaw shrugs, and plods her duffel bag onto the floor by the door. Then she stands there awkwardly, not knowing where to sit.

After a long difficult moment, Shaw gruffly says, "So, coffee?"

Root startles, then almost *runs* to the drawers and starts fumbling, taking out two cups with shaky fingers. In any other circumstance, Shaw would probably smirk and make fun of her.

"You forgot the coffee?"

"Well, I- I-" Root splutters incoherently, rummaging for coffee powder, not looking up. She slams the drawers loudly and then cringes at the sound after she retrieves the large can of powder. She makes some feeble apology.

Shaw watches in silence as Root pours hot water from a kettle into the cups. Root holds out one cup to her, and Shaw ignores Root's unsteady hands when she takes it from her. The atmosphere is very uncomfortable.

“I learned to read,” Root blurts out, her voice strident, but Shaw doesn’t say anything in response. Root picks at her nails, her posture rigid as a board.

“Did you run your errands?” Root asks lamely, and Shaw rolls her eyes.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Root winces, and puts her cup down on the bedside table, wringing her hands together anxiously.

“Shaw, I- I came back, okay? I shouldn’t have left like that. I’m sorry. I didn’t know what-” Root’s voice cracks.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t care anymore.” Root swallows and her expression goes taut and hard in that second that Shaw looks away.

“Yes you do,” Root hisses, suddenly angry. “You care. That’s why you left. Because you fucking care.”

“I don’t-”

“Yes, you *do*,” Root snarls, raising her voice, taking a step forward aggressively. Root runs her hands through her hair, frustrated. Shaw watches impassively as Root clenches and unclenches her jaw, and sets her own cup down.

“I’m leaving,” Shaw announces decisively, and turns. And in three quick steps, Root is at her back and pulling her into an embrace, arms tight around her, breathing harsh on her neck.

“Sameen,” is all Root says, but her tense voice so close is jarring and uncomfortable. Shaw can hear every note of desperation in her voice. She feels Root take a shaky inhale.

“I came back,” Root says, straining with the effort not to cry, “and you weren’t here. I didn’t know where to look. I didn’t know where else to wait.”

Shaw sighs.

“What if I never came back?”

“I had to try,” Root breathes at her neck, the arm curving at her waist pressing into her ribs. She hesitates, and then presses her lips down on the curve of Shaw’s neck. “Why did you leave?”

Shaw considers all the possible ways to answer this question, and settles for honesty.

“It was too quiet.”

“You liked the quiet.”

“I know I did.” More silence. It itches at Shaw, under her skin. She doesn’t know how she ever liked the quiet.

“You never called me, not once,” Root says, her voice tiny and vulnerable, and Shaw wants to shake it out of her, until she cannot use that meek and helpless voice ever again. “I would have heard.”

“I know.”

“Did you,” Root swallows again, like she would never stop being nervous around Shaw, and Shaw hates it. Hates the way Root seemed so afraid. “Did you not think of me?”

“I wanted you to have the sea.” It takes nothing for Shaw to admit it. It’s true. Shaw may not know much about feelings, or any of that touchy-feely personal stuff, but this much she knows: she hated seeing Root miserable. Root’s arms tighten around her again, and another shuddering breath echoes on her spine where it is pressed up against Root.

“You can’t say things like that, Shaw,” Root says, her voice a little strangled, “and expect me to let you walk out that door.”

There had been a heaviness inside of Shaw for so long she didn’t know that it was there, and only now that it shifts and coils and churns inside of her, can she realize its presence.

“Why are you here, Root?”

“... The ocean was...” Root seems to be at a loss for words, so she ends up echoing Shaw’s earlier ones, “it was too quiet.”

“You liked the quiet,” Shaw replies, following suit, mirroring their earlier exchange. “You hated the noise here.”

“I know I did.”

A strange weight settles over them, as they digest and process their confessions that they’ve hidden under layers of meaningful words because the outright truth is always too strong a reality to bear.

“Your friend said I was *short*?”

Root regains her composure after a beat, and her arms relax marginally around Shaw. She buries her nose into Shaw’s neck and inhales deeply, sighing. “Don’t go.”

Shaw sighs too, and leans her head back, already knowing from a long time ago, that she could never refuse Root anything.

“What are you doing, Root?”

“Winning my fair maiden back,” Root says, her voice muffled, nuzzling into Shaw’s neck now, peppering light dry kisses. Her lips are soft on Shaw’s skin, tickling the tiny hairs.

“I don’t know who’s giving you those books, but they are *bad* for you.”

“Seems only fair. You courted me the previous time, so now it’s my-”

“Hang on a minute,” Shaw says defensively, almost choking. She cranes her neck around, giving Root an annoyed look, “I did not *court* you-”

“You invite me into your lair. You allow me to inspect your lair as I wish. You present me with fish, amongst other *offerings*. How is that *not* courting me?”

“A rubix cube is not an offering! And I did not invite you anywhere-” It may have dawned Shaw halfway through her sentence that Root was teasing her, but that’s not the reason why she stopped short. Root’s gaze was fixated on her lips, intently watching her rant. Root’s eyes held a smoky quality to it and it looked like she was barely listening. Her lashes flutter for a moment- have they always been that long?- and her gaze darts back up to Shaw’s eyes, as though caught with a hand in the proverbial cookie jar. Root inhales, her ribcage shuddering at Shaw’s back, and a muscle in her cheek twitches.

“Shaw?” Root says, a little tightly. She bites her lip when Shaw stares blankly back, and rasps, “I’m going to kiss you now.”

And Root leans forward, slowly, and runs a tongue over Shaw’s bottom lip before delving in and kissing her properly. Shaw does not melt. She definitely does not melt. Especially not

because of Root's tongue doing all sorts of pressing and rubbing and *oh-* (it's rather a good thing that Root's right behind, holding her up).

And then her hands are in Root's hair and there's some scratching on her scalp and someone is whimpering and she's tripping over long slender legs trying to get to the bed. There's some urgent tearing of clothes off each other, and frantic hands digging into skin, and there's no words except *yes*, or *oh god* between them for the next few hours (the rest of the incoherent noises probably don't count as words). Shaw has always preferred action to words anyway.

"It was strange, the first time I... cried," Root says suddenly, softly, as they lay in the aftermath of their fervent reunion. Root's chin is propped on the back of her hand, on top of Shaw's chest. Her other hand follows invisible vines across Shaw's neck. Shaw tenses up, uncomfortable with the line of conversation, but Root ploughs on.

"My eyes have never burned in the ocean before. It kept burning and burning and I thought the beach was angry with me- that it had cast the sun into my eyes, no matter how deep below I swam. I didn't know what it was until I came back here, six moons later."

Shaw sighs. "Root," she says warily, a hand resting on Root's hip, the other lightly rubbing Root's temple, her fingers in Root's hair. She's never been good at comforting people.

"Let me finish," Root says, but it's much less commanding than the words were meant to be. It sounded more like a plea. Shaw nods, keeping her thumb rubbing softly at the side of Root's head.

"Your beach followed me. It followed me under, where it was cold and beautiful and had been my lovely home for thirty-eight decades. But every time I dreamed it was in colours of sand and sun. In the quiet of the ocean all I could hear was the birds chirping in my head."

Somehow she felt like Root's words were vicariously studied, as though she'd said them a million times in her head, and never had a chance to say them out loud. Maybe it itched and itched and itched inside her throat the way Shaw feels them sometimes, except Shaw never knew how to let the words leave. So Shaw says nothing, letting Root say what she needed to.

“I had an idea, Sameen,” Root says, licking and then pulling a lip into her mouth nervously. She drums her fingers along the ridges of Shaw’s ribs, looking anywhere except directly at Shaw.

“I’ve lived for a very long time now, as a fishmaid. I,” Root swallows, and her fingers have stopped their light drumming. Shaw arches an eyebrow. “Your beach is enough for me to return, but not quite enough for me to remain.”

“Let’s go somewhere else.” Root says, her mouth set in a determined line, still looking away. When Shaw says nothing for long moments, Root falters. “Unless of course, you don’t want to. Come with me, I mean. Unless you don’t want to come with me, ” she adds hastily, stumbling over her words, her uncertainty less hidden than she would have liked.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Somewhere. Anywhere. Everywhere. I’ve been reading these books, and there’s so much in your world I want to see.” Root raises herself on one elbow now, but her gaze seems to be fixated on a spot near Shaw’s jaw. But she gains more confidence with every word, and she grows more animated the longer Shaw lets her ramble on.

“Let’s go see everything, Sam. Let’s go to China, and Rome, and Moscow, and that place you keep telling me about that has the best steaks. Let’s go skiing, and rock climbing, and parasailing. I’ve never flown before. Let’s go to the theatre and see that Shakespeare fellow’s plays.”

Shaw is unsure why, but for some reason, this amuses her. It fills her with a feeling so light she fears she might actually laugh with the irrationality of it all.

“You want to watch Shakespeare?” Shaw asks incredulously, half feeling like she’s about to snicker at the madness of this conversation. She’s ill-equipped to handle the strange bubbles in her chest. Root’s eyes snap up to finally meet Shaw’s.

“The internet said he was one of the greatest writers! How am I supposed to- It’s stupid too, that your kind calls it *The Web*. I’ve never heard of anything *less* like a web or a net. It’s the complete opposite. If anything, it’s wide and vast like the ocean.” Root says snootily, her annoyance growing at Shaw’s mocking expression. Shaw grins and reaches over to Root’s hand on her chest, and catches it even though Root swats her away repeatedly.

“You’ll miss it, you know. The ocean.”

“I’ve lived there long enough. But yes, I will probably still miss it.”

“You’ll live a mortal life.”

“Yes.”

“I’m in a bad mood all the time. I’m terrible at relationships.”

“You are,” Root says tenderly, not making any effort to disguise the fondness in her voice.

Shaw turns Root’s palm over, tracing the creases in her skin with her fingers.

“Okay. Let’s go watch Shakespeare.”

Root bites her lip hard, trying and failing to not let her grin look quite so radiant. She waits until Shaw looks at her exasperatedly (with her dramatic notions, *of course* she would gravitate toward Shakespeare) before she shifts and leans forward until she is pressed up fully from her thighs to her chest against Shaw.

“Okay,” Root says, and when she kisses her, Shaw thinks that there is something beating inside of her chest after all. It’s a year of aching and longing that she could never admit to herself, and it’s a relief so strong Shaw thinks that even if she would never know what *feelings* really are, she’s okay with this.

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