

The Glass Window

By Jacquelynn Lyon

The first one they put in her cage was a girtablilu. He was a fiery youth with bright orange barbwire hair and a red scorpion torso ending in a nasty-looking stinger.

He looked like he would set fire to every tuft of grass and scrap of foliage in sight just to watch the visitors gape and to bask in his own flames, which he did. Paria watched him flash his hundred-watt smile her way and scorch the sand into a charred goo, almost glass and almost nothing. Paria wrinkled her nose at him and waited for the creature to tire himself out.

The satyr across the way, Foloi, snickered at her like he knew—he always knew something. She made a face at him and squared her shoulders. He just played a jaunty tune on his panpipes in return.

She didn't even bother to learn this girtablilu's name before summoning a familiar tingle in her fingertips, a surge of power that coursed through her. She raised the water level with a flick of her wrist and let him flounder. He tried to evaporate the waves before they hit him, but

Paria jerked her chin up and sent him capsizing. He began treading water helplessly, and Paria lounged on her sandy beach a little way off.

Her caretaker, Sydney, gave her a sharp look as the other Mythic thrashed around in the deep lagoon water. The zoo surely didn't like when their fantastical merchandise, the rare Mythics, were debased. No one wanted to think of the creatures dragged from humans' deepest imaginations as fallible too.

Sydney definitely wasn't amused.

Paria just flipped her long, dark hair over her shoulder. She wasn't going to share her enclosure, and she wasn't going to be mated or bonded or subjected to whatever it was they were planning.

Foloi played some garish cartoon theme song on his pipes across from her, and a young blond girl clapped along excitedly. Paria watched for a moment, the young girl's pink, tiny hands clumsily coming together again and again. Foloi smirked when he noticed her. Paria groaned at herself and rubbed her temples before diving to the bottom of her cage.

They fished out the girtablilu with a crane later that day, the young thing looking like a drowned shadow of himself afterward. He shot her a dejected look on the way out.

I'm not sorry, she said to herself. *I'm not going to balance a ball on my nose and clap my flippers together when they ask.* Especially when it came to being pair bonded, she wasn't a deer befriending a tiger for visitors' amusement.

They left her alone for another week.



Paria's enclosure was taller than it was wide, consisting of a sandy bank that fed into a little grassy area with several small bushes and a single peach tree. Her mom loved peaches, though she never made it to this enclosure.

The beach dropped off quickly into deep, salty water that was made to resemble the sparkling robin's-egg blue of her "natural" habitat. It was warm, and the back side of her cage was made to look like bumpy rocks. It faced a long length of glass that separated her from an indoor visitor hallway. Her other wall was simply dark and empty, a large expanse of wall with a length of glass at the bottom that separated her from the next cage.

The topside was surrounded by a red railing that visitors could lean on, cameras out, mouths hanging open, squeals of joy and surprise erupting as she breached. Phone cameras clicked, capturing the ideal mermaid: long, wavy brown hair with small braids threaded with gold. Long, slim wrists, prettily browned skin, and a round face and full lips—a Pacific Islander.

She was the pride of the zoo, or perhaps that's just what they told her. She did enough sneering at the cameras to break them, after all.



Paria didn't know why they kept bothering to put new Mythics in her cage. She managed to take out the naga and kinarra with a swish of her tale and a little creativity with water on the kinarra's feathers. The naga almost strangled her, but they struck a deal in the end: He wasn't interested in being paired for show either. They turned the tank upside down, tearing up grass, displacing sand, making a general mess. Sydney eventually intervened and signed with her hands to Paria that she might as well knock it off.

Paria had a feeling it was the zoo's idea to make an exhibit of two different Mythics pairing off, but she wasn't going to have Sydney or management walking all over her. It wasn't

their business if she stared out her tank window and blew depression bubbles to the top of the water.

I don't need any strange zoo transfer boys pushed on me, thinking they can woo me with a poem and a compliment to insert-body-part-of-the-day. I know I'm pretty; I don't need a second opinion. She scowled at nothing. And I don't need any interventions.

So Paria lingered at the bottom of her tank, blowing fine, crystalline bubbles to the surface one by one and getting lost in her own thoughts. The bubbles were a sign of discontent, though she knew the zoo couldn't figure out why. *Let them never know.*



The “issue” arose around two months earlier.

Paria saw her the first time when the moon was a slim crescent smile up above and the adjacent hallway was nothing but an echoing ghost walk. She liked being awake during those times. The guest halls bore long shadows and a deep silence. She could be alone with her thoughts and so many other things.

Or, at least, she thought she was alone.

Paria always assumed there was something huge and sinister in the tank next to hers. The water there was dark and vast—an impenetrable black contrasting her perfect, soft blue—and the glass was cold and silent beside her. It was lower than hers, only a large plexiglass window separating the bottom of her tank with the top of theirs.

Perhaps a miniature kraken or electric squid lived there, but she didn't know. Paria always figured the deep-sea creatures would shine their fanged teeth at her at some point and she would have nightmares. She avoided that faceless, seven feet of glass on most nights, but maybe tonight she felt like having nightmares.

Paria swam back and forth along the bottom, running her hands over oysters and counting in her head how long another pearl would take to form in them. That was one of her enrichment programs: diving for pearls and collecting shells. She figured the zoo thought those were appropriate activities for her. Now all she needed to do was play the harp and listen to their money buckets fill. She wasn't going to play the harp.

The pearls themselves could be lovely, though. She wasn't completely opposed to the smooth, misshapen lumps in her hands and their off-colored ivory sheen. It made her want to start a hoard and pretend to be a dragon instead of a nascent mermaid. She could be a pearl dragon, ten feet—no, twenty feet—tall and sitting on her growing hoard until she kissed the sky and disappeared completely. It was a pleasant dream to pass the time.

Paria ran her hands along the spine of one of her oysters and her eyes unfocussed. This one would be ready soon. Perhaps she would weave it into the seams of her belt with the others.

Her vision was blurry and distant when she caught a flash of light in the corner of her eye, a bright burst that struck her across the face. She turned her head slowly, her skin prickling as she rotated in place. An electric surge flared in the cage next to her. She frowned.

She didn't know much about the adjacent enclosure. On some level, she never really wanted to know. She waited for a moment, pausing as she gazed into the inky waters of the deep-sea cage, dark and unknowable.

The water was still and calm, fathomless. Shivers ran from her tail to her fingertips as the same distant light sparked through the dark like a beacon. Paria raised her eyebrows. *I doubt that light can be anything good*, she said to herself.

Nonetheless, despite herself, Paria pushed off the cage floor and tentatively approached the edge. She furrowed her brow. *I've lived in the shadow of this place too long.* She was drawn to the side. She waited for another minute, body still and treading water.

Did I imagine it? she wondered, considering if she had really just seen a strip of lightning beside her. She hummed for a moment. *Maybe I should just go back up.*

Then a white light like a flash bomb illuminated a long, twisting figure. Paria hovered closer and craned her neck. *Something is in there, and close,* she thought with a slight tremble.

The murky outline of something curved took shape in front of her. She pressed herself up against the glass and tried to make out as much of it as she could.

It was long, with a mop of something swirling around its head, like kelp or a storm cloud. She couldn't make out the full form. She squinted. It wasn't huge like she had expected.

Paria waited, pursing her lips and flicking her tail anxiously back and forth. Finally, the next brilliant flash erupted, a blip of light seeping into the depths, a fading white sunset. It illuminated a single silhouette.

Paria's breath hitched. She could see it was humanoid. Humanoid with a long scaled tailed and a pair of gills on its neck. Paria's pulse sped up. It was like her, *like her.* The striking profile made her dizzy.

The other creature had wild, flowing red hair that swirled around her, almost as if it, too, were alive. Her skin was a similar brilliant red against flushed black stripes on her sides and arms. Her tail was a flashing dark maroon, and she had eyes like wide pools of milk. Paria's mouth was hanging open, her mind racing. It was another mermaid.

They didn't bother to cover her up with a shell bra like they did Paria. She hovered, naked and raw in the water, a lithe length of coiled muscles and bright white, fanged teeth. She was made of hard edges and jagged points, instead of the soft brushstrokes expected of Paria.

The mermaid had a series of spikes along her spine and a tail that whipped around the water like a razor. Her face was something sharp and almost alien. She had the same mouth as Paria and a lovely, round cherry nose under a pair of wide starry eyes.

It was ghoulish and breathtaking in one gasping vision. Paria's thoughts sparked and ran into each other. She couldn't help but feel her heart squeeze, almost painfully.

What is that?



She had a sense of it deep in her bones, but she couldn't put a name to it. There was another mermaid—another mermaid filled with pointed teeth and something electric.

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