

Currents

The bruise still hasn't faded. The deep black dimmed to a faint purple, but it's still stark against my left eyelid, an ever-present reminder of the brutality. I lower the hat as far down my face as I can, a futile attempt to cover up the scars from last night. But I know they'll never really disappear. Sure, the physical pain might lessen over time, but the emotional blow would remain embedded inside of me, and that would never go away. It was just another strike to add to the collection of whips constantly attacking my heart. I should be used to this, to the punches and the kicks, the belittlement and the disparagement, but every time the pain is fresh. I can practically feel the hole of self-doubt inside of me, thriving on the cowardice and weakness I'm feeling right now. No matter how much I resist, I can almost see my resolve weakening every day. It threatens to retreat back into that pit of loneliness and pull me into the currents as well. But what scares me most are those dark corners of my mind where I submit simply for the pain to cease; to leave me and never return.

"Adelaide!" Marie's voice pulls me out of my dark thoughts and back into reality, though that's not really a better alternative. I feel like every day I'm being pulled deeper and deep into a whirlwind, stuck with no way out. "Get your sister out of this house right this moment unless you want me to give her a matching eye!" The steel in her tone tells me she's not kidding, but the shakiness of her overall voice warns me that she might hurt her anyway, just to spite me. I can smell the bitter tang of brandy in the air, the instability that always accompanies inebriation. *Sadist*, I think, as I trudge out of the cramped room, stepping over piles of homework and assignments that never seem to get turned in. I make my way down the rickety stairs, preparing myself for whatever mess that she's left me to clean up before taking Aria to school.

And then I hear them.

The screams.

Aria's screams. The wailing shriek of a five-year-old girl, a child who's just as trapped in this life as I am. I throw open the door, fear gripping my stomach and enveloping my every thought. Aria's on the ground, her Hello Kitty backpack thrown open and its contents scattered across the floor. There's a broken vase on the floor, shards of glass dangerously close to her frail body. I rush to Aria, the only thought on my mind to get as close to her as possible before the fragments hurt her. The tears on her face are flowing, every droplet another stab to my soul. I swallow down my revulsion when I see Marie, after wondering why she hasn't noticed. She's passed out on the couch, an empty liquor bottle on the floor beside her, oblivious to the state of her living room and her children. Or, I should say, her paychecks from the foster system. That's all we are, anyways; the money that provides funding for her nights out, rather than the welfare of her two adoptees. What few notes that are left are the food in our fridge—that is—if it even makes it into the cash box before nightfall. After that, it's cold cereal for dinner if we're lucky.

“Aria, honey, what happened?” My voice is frantic, the fear clear in the sound that comes out. I'm scanning her front for any marks, any signs of pain inflicted. There's a red mark on her cheek with the imprint of Marie's hand, her nails clearly embossed on Aria's delicate features. I cup her face as I whisper nothings in her ear, attempting to calm her down and think straight.

“Marie hit me, Laide.” She cries out in tears, the only words I can decipher from her incoherent wails. “She hurt me, and then the glass-” I cut her off as I turn her around, studying her back. For a few seconds, I just gape at the wound, disbelieving. Then she says it.

“Laide, help.” The words are a plea for a solution, a turn to hope in me. In her rock. In the one person who’s always given her answers and been there for her. But I don’t know what to do, have no idea where to go. I need to do *something*. But I’m frozen in place; the waves thrashing inside me, repeatedly attacking me with a flood of desperation and anguish.

The marred skin on her flesh is tearing apart as the glass digs in further. It’s deep, deeper than any wound I’ve ever seen. There’s one large piece buried inside her upper back, smaller shreds strewn across the rest of the expanse of her skin. “I can’t help you,” I whisper, each word stabbing me in a million different places.

Marie’s never done something this bad. Sure, we’ve each been slapped a few times—I’ve been punched, even, hence the woeful state of my eye. But the glass sinking into her flesh is something a little Ibuprofen and some band-aids won’t fix. I need to get her to a professional. To help in any way I can—the *only* way I can right now.

And so I do the one thing that I’ve never allowed myself to do. I slowly rise, then reach for the phone on the table. My hands are shaking as I push the buttons with my trembling fingers. The number feels strange to dial, a foreign concept that only ever enters my subconscious as my thumb hovers over the “Call” button. Last time I dared enter it was years ago, and Marie’s been worse ever since the social worker came. She’s hated me even more, for the money wasted on therapy and the visits to my school and her workplace. If they don’t take her away this time, I’m done for. I’ll be out of this house faster than the time it takes my foster mother to down a bottle of cheap beer. But this is Aria—*my* Aria—so I throw caution to wind, and press, before I can rethink my already wavering decision.

“Nine-one-one operator. What is your emergency?” The speaker is female, calm and clear-headed; but I can tell she’s firm in her statement. The coherency in her words is a relief, the drop of water to my parched mouth, and it gets me speaking.

“I—My name is Adelaide. I need help. My sister is hurt and I think she’s almost unconscious. She’s only five years old. Please…” My voice wobbles, and I innately pause before I continue. Lying about abuse is almost second nature to me at this point, ingrained in my head after fifteen years of practice smothering the swells of pain. Somehow, she understands.

“What is your address, young lady? Are you in any imminent danger?” I can hear dials and buttons in the background, sounds of a police dispatch being sent. I give her our street and then tell her the truth, for possibly the very first time in my life. The words are soft and cracking, my mouth dry at the prospect of continuing this call for help. But they come out, and right now that’s all that matters.

“My mother is passed out on the couch, but I think she might wake up. If she finds out that I’m doing this she’ll hurt us…just please come quick.”

“It’s all right, Adelaide. I’ve sent some officers to your house, but I need you to focus. Now, I need you to check on your sister. Is she still breathing?”

My fingers rush to her neck, checking for a pulse. For any sign of life. I know that an injury this bad can be permanently damaging if not checked, especially to such a young child. But I can feel the faint flutter of a heartbeat, and the word that comes out of me is breathless in anticipation for the waves to wash away and take the pain with them. “Yes.”

Then the knocking ensues. It’s a police officer, pounding on the door and asking for someone to open it before he knocks it down. I race to the barrier between my sea and the land

beyond, opening it with a fling of my wrist on the broken knob. I don't say anything, and they run inside, quickly scanning the room for potential threats. Paramedics come rushing as well, picking up Aria and placing her on a stretcher before I know what's happening. The officer is asking questions—so many questions. He's hauling Marie up from her alcohol-induced slumber, putting her wrists in handcuffs. I know that I should be happy, ecstatic even. They'll take her away for doing this to her, get her out of my life for good.

But all I can feel is dread. For Aria. For myself. For the small shred of a life, I've managed to create for us. Because, at that very moment, I've ruined the safety net I've ever so carefully built; around me, and around Aria. Now that they know, they'll take her. It's selfish but I need her. I need my beacon. I need that light to guide me to land, away from the depths that threaten to pull me down.

A nurse puts her hand on my arm, seeing my pale face that's drawn back in worry. I look up at her, the question clear in my watery eyes. She smiles at me and nods, "She'll be all right." and I exhale, giving a silent prayer of thanks. But as the nurse extends her hand and helps me up, her voice reaches somewhere deep inside of me, "And so will you."

Somehow, the words give me hope. They fill me with a strength and purpose I never had before, or maybe it was just hidden under layers of thrashings I've received. The tides of pain are replaced with waves of hope. I don't know what will happen, but I'll do what all I can to be strong and happy. To find the good things in life and cherish them. To love like I never have, and to protect with every inch of my heart. But not for Aria.

This time, the currents will move for me.