

She Wavers But She Does Not Weaken

by Marissa Lingen

They left me home when the others went out for the daily catch. My broken sense of balance was bad enough on land, but the bobbing of the fishing boats made it apocalyptically worse. Nor was I of much use processing the catch--one slip with the gutting knife was one too many, and I couldn't stoke the smoking fires lest I fall in like a toddler.

I hated feeling useless. No one ever chided me for it--no one outside my head, anyway--but I still had a running list of the things I *could* do to feel like I was earning my keep. I might be slow at carrying loads, but as long as I had my cane in one hand, I could take a large basket on the other hip. I was aces at packing the smoked fish in salted boxes to send off with the caravans. I could take charge of toddlers who were able to walk on their own, especially if they were tethered to me--we might roll on the grass more than their parents usually allowed, but the children didn't mind that and neither did I.

My favorite task, though, one I only allowed myself when I had exhausted the rest, was kelp drying and weaving. The variety of texture contrasted with the regularity of pattern in a way that I found soothing, satisfying, and no one in our village could make baskets with quite the range and skill I had. And they were *useful*, which was my foremost longing. My cousin Hitho had started to talk of selling them along with the catch, one or two to start with, to see how people from other villages liked them. He thought we should start with the small ones. I thought the large ones that went on a strong person's back and held the most would be the farthest from

what they were able to do for themselves, but I kept my mouth shut. Even being able to bring a little coin back to the village for the small baskets would be enough for me.

I was sitting on the end of the pier hooking kelp for my baskets when I saw a strange reflection on the waters. At first I thought it was a clump of red kelp, but then it moved and tossed in an unmistakable way: that was hair. The hair of a mermaid.

And she was coming straight for the pier.

We knew there were mermaids in the waters, of course, but seeing one was rare indeed. My previous memory of a mermaid, I was small enough to be carried in my auntie's arms, small enough that no one but me was sure I'd really seen it. And that mermaid had been swimming parallel to shore. This one kept making it clearer and clearer that she was there: round face, big dollop of a nose, any minute now I'd be able to see what color her eyes were. I held my breath, transfixed.

"Good morning," said the mermaid.

"Um...good morning."

"Do you want to come for a swim with me?"

"I--" I flushed. "I can't swim too far out, I get disoriented and can't find my way back."

"I see humans swimming all the time."

"It's not that humans can't. It's that *I* can't."

"Oh. Well, I could guide you. I'd hang on, I wouldn't let you drown," she said, a deep dimple in her cheek.

I believed her. There were stories of mermaids dragging sailors to their doom, but--I was no sailor, and why would she bother? Surely there was better prey at sea. "I'm Aline," I said, letting myself slip off the edge of the pier.

"Thena," she said.

I tried to think of something clever to say, something interesting that would make Thena happy she'd offered to guide me out into the water, but before too long I gave up on that. I was too lost in the sensation of Thena pulling me slowly through the water, the currents from her tail eddying against my legs. The swirling sensation would have been disorienting, but I had Thena's firm grip on my hands to orient me, and the line where the ocean met the sky further out. I just relaxed and let myself be where I never was: in the moment.

I didn't want to interrupt it, but I had to know. "Where are we going, Thena?"

The swish of her tail felt like a shrug. "Out."

I could have argued. I was used to arguing, used to needing to know where I was being taken and what might befall me there. In the water, Thena's hands encouragingly on mine, I relaxed and let it happen.

She swam quickly, and it had been years since I'd even tried to go out in a boat. I'd forgotten that there were rocky islands not too far from the shore, but Thena had me tumbling in the waves on their gravelly beaches before the sun was even close to overhead. I should have been working. I should have been doing something productive to justify my presence in the village. But the sun was sparkling on the waves, and though the dazzle made the world tilt and spin around me, I had to deal with that all the time; at least for the moment I was enjoying it. And we could talk a little, about what kinds of kelp grew around the islands, about what fish swam there, normal things, nice things.

Thena towed me back to the pier before I felt I had to ask her to, which was a relief. I was soaked to the skin, but the day was warm and the walk home to change into my other clothes was

not unpleasant. And I could take with me not only the memory of the water around us and Thena's grin, but also the fact that she had asked whether I came there often.

I did. At least, I could.

I think it was the third time Thena took me out in the water--maybe the fourth--that she said to me, "You know, I asked *whether* you'd be on the pier, but I didn't ask *why* you would."

So then I explained about the baskets, and then she wanted to take me back to shore right away so I could get some and show her. I demurred. We compromised that I would bring some of my work the next time we met up, and she could see it then. I thought she would forget, that we would leave the baskets on the pier, but she examined them minutely, quizzing me about technique in ways that no one ever had before.

"Do you weave too?" I asked.

She snorted, equally expressive to humans and mermaids. "We have nothing like this. Nothing."

"Oh."

"Could you...could you make me one?"

"You can have any of them you like. I can make more."

"But could you make *me* one."

"Oh. Yes, sure. What do you want to use it for?"

"Maybe...not a basket? Maybe a lobster pot? Have you ever woven a lobster pot?"

I hadn't. It was a fun challenge--it had been ages since someone asked for something really new. I had to fit the time to make it in around seeing Thena and the work I did to keep up my end in the village, but I didn't mind a bit. It was a joy to think of her fingers tracing the twists and braids I'd incorporated into the weave--the lobsters wouldn't appreciate it, but Thena would.

When I actually gave it to her, it was even better; I hadn't dared to dream of how her eyes would shine.

At first I mistook love for buoyancy. Of course I felt light all over, held aloft--that's what the water did, if I relaxed into it. I felt safe, floating with Thena. I felt supported, free, able to be myself. It wasn't until the day I started without her that I realized that it was Thena making me feel that way, not the water.

Was I using good judgment, no, of course I wasn't. But I had gotten comfortable in the water. Secure. And I absolutely trusted that Thena would be there soon.

Any of my cousins, any of my childhood friends, would have known that there was a storm coming. They'd had to learn all the signs. I hadn't; even at my slow pace I could make it back to shelter without too much trouble if I left when the first drops of rain hit the pier.

The same was not true out in the water. Rain was going to be quite bad enough, but the wind hit first, and the wind that would have been annoying on land could kill me out in the water. The waves swamped me once, twice, and then I was under, kicking and choking, trying to find my way out to air in any way I could. I thrashed in the murk, but there was pressure all around me, and I couldn't see light anywhere. I didn't realize how much I relied on my eyes until they were useless, all sense of up and down obliterated in the churn of the water around me. I went limp in despair.

Of course--*of course*--that was the best thing I could have done. I'd have known that if I hadn't been so panicked. I swallowed some water on the way up, but I was definitely headed upward. My head broke the surface. I sputtered. And then another wave, and down again.

I don't know how many times I could have done that before it took me out for good. It felt like an eternity, but it was probably only a few minutes, because I wouldn't have survived

more. And at first when I felt my arm pulled, I thought it was a branch, kelp, any kind of flotsam that might drag me down to my doom. But the pull moved up, until I was firmly grasped and towed up.

There was air. There was shelter, against a rock in a tide pool. There was Thena.

There was Thena. I was already coughing and choking, and I started sobbing in relief.

"What were you *thinking*?" she shouted, over the noise of the water and the wind.

I couldn't manage an answer. She hugged me fiercely anyway. This was new--she'd towed me, buoyed me up, touched me in passing, but this was the first deliberate full contact, cool and slippery and somehow reassuring and solid all the same. I clung to her, shaking, teeth chattering. She waited in silence until I was steadier. Until the storm had abated, or maybe it was just the eye.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'm sorry, I was thinking I could do it. And I couldn't, I couldn't do it."

"You don't have to! I don't mind coming in and getting you from the pier!"

I flushed. "I know, but...you shouldn't always have to."

"Why not? I like being with you."

"I like being with you too--"

I was going to say something about how I should do my share. Pull my weight. But Thena's mouth was on mine, cool, firm, utterly centering.

"You make me better, Aline," she said. "Let's...let's find a way to be together. More often, I mean. I don't want you to be away from your people, and I don't want to be away from mine, but--they're both right here, we can figure it out."

"All the stories are about people who give up everything for love," I murmured in confusion.

"Not the stories my people tell." She kissed me again. "We tell stories of how love makes people stronger."

I wanted to keep kissing her. I wanted to keep talking. I would have to alternate the two. "But why me, then? I can't make you stronger."

Thena pushed away from me, switching her tail in a way that I had learned to recognize as the same as a human rolling their eyes. "You've decided that, have you?"

I flushed. "It seems obvious."

"To you, maybe."

"Well, I've always been a burden."

"Who told you that." Her voice was low and insistent. "Tell me who. I'll crack them like crabs."

"Nobody had to say it. It was just there. I can't do what other people can do."

"I can't do what your human friends can do either, does that make me a burden?"

My lungs, already burning from my sea adventure, refused to breathe for a moment. Of course she wasn't. Of course she couldn't be. I fumbled the words out, and she waited impatiently for how it didn't apply to me. "But I--but all I do is those baskets and--"

"They're beautiful, you utter flounder."

"And useful," I ventured.

"Of course useful, but--what makes them special is that they're useful *and beautiful*. And I bet you could find out some interesting things with them if you weren't so focused on justifying your existence."

This left me more breathless than the waves or her kisses, and not in the same way. "I-- you want me to make baskets for you?"

"If you want to. I want you to find out what you want to do with them. I think that'll be neat."

"And you, what do you want?" That was the part I'd never been sure of. She had splashed into my life and apparently decided that she wanted me for a friend, then for a lover. Why?

"At first it was just to mess with my parents, honestly. You don't like me hanging around with my friends? You don't like me wandering around looking at things instead of settling right down to spawn? I'll make a *human* friend, that'll make you *even angrier*." I recoiled, startled at how petty she was, but she kept talking. "And then I saw you. It was weeks before one of the humans even looked, but you really looked. You saw me too. And then I got to know you, I got to actually *be* your friend, and I like the way you look at things. I like the way you look at *me*. So...what I want is to have the room to figure out the next thing. And I want that for you too. Yours will probably be weaving. You've gotten farther along with that than I have. I don't know what mine will be. But I want to have the room to let it be good. And I want it to be with you."

I brushed a strand of her kelp-auburn hair out of her face. "I want that for you too. With you. For both of us."

THE END

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