

THE DEEP

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“IT WAS LIKE DREAMING,” SAID YETU, THROAT RAW. She’d been weeping for days, lost in a remembering of one of the first wajinru.

“Then wake up,” Amaba said, “and wake up now. What kind of dream makes someone lurk in shark-dense waters, leaking blood like a fool? If I had not come for you, if I had not found you in time . . .” Amaba shook her head, black water sloshing over her face. “Do you wish for death? Is that why you do this? You are grown now. Have *been* grown. You must put those childish whims behind you.” Amaba waved her front fins forcefully as she lectured her daughter, the movements troubling the otherwise placid water.

“I do not wish for death,” said Yetu, resolute despite the quiet of her worn voice.

“Then what? What else would make you do something so foolish?” Amaba asked, her fins a bevy of movement.

Yetu strained to feel Amaba’s words over the chorus of ripples, her skin drawn away from the delicate waves of speech and toward the short, powerful pulses brought on by her amaba’s gesticulations.

“Answer me!” Amaba said, her tone desperate and screeching.

Most of the time, Yetu kept her senses dulled. As a child, she’d learned to shut out what she could of the world, lest it overwhelm her into fits. But now she had to open herself back up, to make her body a wound again so Amaba’s words would ring against her skin more clearly.

Yetu closed her eyes and honed in on the vibrations of the deep, purposefully resensitizing her scaled skin to the onslaught of the circus that is the sea. It was a matter of reconnecting her brain to her body and lowering the shields she’d put in place in her mind to protect herself. As she focused, the world came in. The water grew colder, the pressure more intense, the salt denser. She could parse each granule. Individual crystals of the flaky white mineral scraped against her.

Even though Yetu always kept herself tense against the ocean’s intrusions, they found their way in; but with her senses freshly unreined, the rush of feeling was dizzying. This was nothing like the faraway throbbing she’d grown used to when she threw all her energy into repelling the world outside. The push and pull of nearby currents upended her. The flutter of a school of fangfish

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reverberated deep in her chest. How did other wajinru manage this all the time?

“Where did you go just now? Are you dreaming yet again?” asked Amaba, sounding more defeated than angry. Her voice cracked into splintered waves, rough against Yetu’s skin.

“I am here, Amaba. I promise,” said Yetu quietly, exhaustedly, though she wasn’t sure that was true. Adrift in a memory that wasn’t hers, she hadn’t been present when she’d brought herself to the sharks to be feasted upon. How could she be sure she was here now?

Yetu needed to recover her composure. She’d never done something that dangerous before. She had lost more control of her abilities than she’d realized. The rememberings were always drawing her backward into the ancestors’ memories—that was what they were supposed to do—but not at the expense of her life.

“Come to me,” said Amaba, several paces away. Too weak to argue, Yetu offered no protest. She resigned herself for now to do her amaba’s biddings. “You need medicine, child. And food. When did you last eat?”

Yetu didn’t remember, but as she took a moment to zero in on the emptiness in her stomach, she was surprised to find the pain of it was a vortex she could easily get lost in. She moved her body, examined its contours. She’d been withering away, and now there was little left of her but the base amounts of outer fat she needed to keep warm in the ocean’s deepest waters.

As evidenced by her encounter with the sharks, Yetu’s

condition was worsening. With each passing year, she was less and less able to distinguish rememberings from the present.

“Eat these. They will help your throat heal,” said Amaba, drawing her daughter into her embrace. Yetu floated in the dense, black brine, her amaba’s fins a lasso about her torso. “Come, now. I said eat.” Amaba pressed venom leaves into Yetu’s mouth, humming a made-up lullaby as she did. Water waves from her voice stroked Yetu’s scales, and though Yetu usually avoided such stimulation, she was pleased to have a tether to the waking world as her connection to it grew more and more precarious. She needed frequent reminders she was more than a vessel for the ancestors’ memories. She wouldn’t let herself disappear. “Keep chewing. That’s good. Very good. Now swallow.”

Spurred by the promise of pain relief as much as by her amaba’s prodding, Yetu gagged the medicine down. Venom leaves slithered like slime down her throat and into her belly, and with every swallow she coughed.

“See? Isn’t that nice? Can you feel it working in you yet?”

Cradled in her amaba’s front fins, Yetu looked but a pup. It was fitting. In this moment, she was as reliant on Amaba’s care as she had been in infancy. She’d grown from colicky pup into mercurial adolescent into tempestuous adult, still sometimes in need of her amaba’s deep nurturing.

Given her sensitivity, no one should have been surprised

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that the rememberingings affected Yetu more deeply than previous historians, but then everything surprised wajinru. Their memories faded after weeks or months—if not through wajinru biological predisposition for forgetfulness, then through sheer force of will. Those cursed with more intact long-term recollection learned how to forget, how to throw themselves into the moment. Only the historian was allowed to remember.

After several moments, the venom leaves took effect, and the pain in Yetu's hoarse throat numbed. Other aches soothed too. The stiffness all but disappeared from her neck. Overworked muscles relaxed. Sedated, she could think more clearly now.

"Amaba," Yetu said. She was calmer and in a state to better explain what had happened that morning: why she'd gone to the sharks, why she'd put herself in such danger, why she'd threatened the wajinru legacy so selfishly.

If Yetu died doing something reckless and the wajinru were not able to recover her body, the next historian would not be able to harvest the ancestors' rememberingings from Yetu's mind. Bits of the History could be salvaged from the shark's body, assuming they found it, but it was an incredible risk, and no doubt whole sections would be lost.

Worse, the wajinru didn't know who was to succeed Yetu. They may not have had the memories to understand the importance of this fully, but they had an inkling. It had been plain to all for many years that Yetu was a creature on the precipice, and without a successor in place, they'd be lost. They'd have to improvise.

Previous historians had spent their days roaming the ocean to collect the memories of the living wajinru before they were forgotten. Such a task ensured that the historian understood who was best suited to take on the role after their own death came. In addition to reaching into the minds of wajinru to log the events of the era, historians learned whose minds were electro-sensitive enough to host the rememberings in the future, and shared that information often and repeatedly with other wajinru.

Yetu never did this. The ocean overwhelmed her even when she was in its most quiet portions, and that was before taking on the rememberings. Now that she was the historian, it was even worse, her mind unable to process it all. She couldn't fathom spending her days traveling across the sea only to burden herself with more memories at the end of each journey. Unfortunately for Yetu, when the previous historian had chosen her, he'd been so impressed by the sensitivity of her electroreceptors that he'd failed to notice her finicky temperament. Yetu loved Basha's memories, loved living inside of his bravery, his tumult. But if ever he'd made a mistake, it was choosing Yetu as historian. She couldn't fulfill her most basic of duties. How disappointed he would be in the girl he'd chosen. She'd grown up to be so fragile.

"I'm sorry," said Yetu. "There's so much to tell you, yet I never know where to begin. But I am ready now. I can speak. I can tell you why I did what I did, and it has nothing to do with wanting to die."

Yetu readied herself to reveal all, to go back to

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those painful moments and relive them yet again for her amaba's benefit.

"Shhh," said Amaba, using the sticky webbing at the end of her left front fin to cover Yetu's mouth. "It is in the past. It is already forgotten. What matters is that you are here now, and we can focus on the present. It is time for you to give the Remembrance."

The Remembrance—had it really been a year since the last? A year, then, since she'd seen her amaba? It was impossible to keep precise track of the passing of time in the dark of the deep, but she could ascertain the time of year based on currents, animal movement, and mating seasons. None of that mattered, however, if Yetu wasn't present enough to pay attention to them. The rememberings carried her mind away from the ocean to the past. These days, she was more there than here. This wasn't a new thought, but she'd never felt it this strongly before. Yetu was becoming an ancestor herself. Like them, she was dead, or very near it.

"I didn't know that we were already so close to the Remembrance," said Yetu, unsure she even had the strength to conduct the ceremony.

"Yetu, it is overdue by an entire mating cycle," said Amaba.

Was Yetu really three months late to the most important event in the wajinru's life? Had she failed her duty so tremendously? "Is everyone all right?" asked Yetu.

"Alive, yes, but not well, not well at all," said Amaba.

A historian's role was to carry the memories so other wajinru wouldn't have to. Then, when the time came, she'd share them freely until they got their fill of knowing.

Late as Yetu was, the wajinru must be starving for it, consumed with desire for the past that made and defined them. Living without detailed, long-term memories allowed for spontaneity and lack of regret, but after a certain amount of time had passed, they needed more. That was why once a year, Yetu gave them the remembering, even if only for a few days. It was enough that their bodies retained a sense memory of the past, which could sustain them through the year until the next Remembrance.

"We grow anxious and restless without you, my child. One can only go for so long without asking who am I? Where do I come from? What does all this mean? What is being? What came before me, and what might come after? Without answers, there is only a hole, a hole where a history should be that takes the shape of an endless longing. We are cavities. You don't know what it's like, blessed with the remembering as you are," said Amaba.

Yetu *did* know what it was like. After all, wasn't *cavity* just another word for *vessel*? Her own self had been scooped out when she was a child of fourteen years to make room for ancestors, leaving her empty and wandering and ravenous.

"I'll be taking you to the sacred waters soon. The people will want to offer their thanks and prayers to you. You should be happy, no? You like the Remembrance. It is good for you," Amaba said.

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Yetu disagreed. The Remembrance took more than it gave. It required she remember and relive the wajinru's entire history all at once. Not just that, she had to put order and meaning to the events, so that the others could understand. She had to help them open their minds so they could relive the past too.

It was a painful process. The reward at the end, that the remembering left Yetu briefly while the rest of the wajinru absorbed them, was small. If she could skip it, she would, but she couldn't. That was something her younger, more immature self would've done. She'd been appointed to this role according to her people's traditions, and she balked at the level of self-centeredness it would require to abandon six hundred years of wajinru culture and custom to accommodate her own desires.

"Are you strong enough to swim to the sacred waters without help?" Amaba asked Yetu.

She wasn't, but she'd make the journey unaided anyway. She didn't want her amaba carrying her any more than she already had. The memory of Amaba's fins squeezing around her tail fin, dragging her away from the sharks at nauseating speeds, lingered unpleasantly, the same way all memories did.

She understood why wajinru wanted nothing to do with them but for one time a year.



IT WAS NO LONGER SUNG.

For that morsel of mercy, Yetu gave thanks. She understood why all the historians before Basha performed the Remembrance to melody, that impulse to salvage a speck of beauty from tragedy with a dirge, but Yetu wanted people to remember how she remembered. With screams. She had no wish to transform trauma to performance, to parade what she'd come to think of as her own tragedies for entertainment.

Wajinru milled the sacred waters, a mass of bodies warming the deep. Yetu felt them embracing, swimming, sliding against one another in greeting, all of it sending a tide of ripples Yetu's way. The ocean pulsated. The water moved, animated. The meaning behind their name, *wajinru*, chorus of the deep, was clear.

Many wajinru lived far apart, alone or with friends

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or mates in dens of twenty or twenty-five people. The wajinru had settled the whole of the deep but were sparsely populated. While there was the occasional larger group who lived together, up to fifty or one hundred, there was nothing like the cities Yetu had seen in her rememberingings.

For a people with little memory, wajinru knew one another despite the year-long absence. They didn't remember in pictures nor did they recall exact events, but they knew things in their bodies, bits of the past absorbed into them and transformed into instincts. Wajinru knew the faces of lovers they'd once taken, the trajectory of their own lives. They knew that they were wajinru.

Because they tended to live so far apart, when they did gather en masse, it was an occasion of great celebration. Everyone shouted their greetings, swam in excited circles, joined together to dance a spiral. Soon, what had started as something intimate between two or three spread to twenty, then suddenly a hundred, five hundred, then all five thousand or six thousand of them. They moved spontaneously but in unison, a single entity.

It was this same energy Yetu would use to share the History with them.

"I'm relieved you're here," said Nnenyo, Yetu's caremaid during the Remembrance. When Yetu required everyone to hush, he would tell everyone to hush. When she needed stillness, he'd make everyone be still. If words didn't work, he'd compel them softly with his mind: a

little nudge that felt to most like a mild, compulsive urge. A cough. A sneeze.

Few had such power of suggestion, but he was getting on, almost a hundred and fifty years old. The average wajinru lifespan was closer to one hundred, and while it wasn't impossible to live for so long, Nnenyo was the oldest wajinru in a long time. He'd learned to harness the electrical energy present in all wajinru minds. That was why he'd been elected to oversee the historians. He was the one Yetu was to inform about the next historian when she discovered who might be capable of taking on the task, and he was the one who'd facilitate the harvesting of memories from Yetu to her successor when the time came. If he was unable, one of his many children would take on the task.

"I'm sorry for the delay. I—"

"Bygones. You are here now. That is what matters. I have a surprise for you," Nnenyo said.

"I don't like surprises," said Yetu. She found it difficult enough managing the quotidian and routine.

"I know," he said. "But I couldn't help it. I'm an old man. Allow me my whims."

Yetu let his words wash over her fully despite herself. The warmth of his tone settling even if the raw sensation of it stung.

Nnenyo was decent. Though he preferred a life in the moment, free of the past, like other wajinru, he recalled more than average. Were it not for his age, he would've been the historian to replace the previous historian, Basha. Yetu was the next best choice.

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“So? What is it, then? What’s my surprise?” she asked quietly. She needed to save her strength and didn’t want to waste energy projecting her voice.

Nnenyo had no trouble feeling Yetu’s words despite the surrounding bustle of conversation. Yetu was focusing every bit of her energy on picking his words out of the onslaught of information pressing against her skin. “Ajeji, Uyeba, Kata, Nneti, now,” he called with a sharp whistle that pierced through the water.

Yetu wanted to vomit the various food items Amaba had stuffed her with to strengthen her for the Remembrance. Her skin was an open sore, and Nnenyo’s call had salted it.

“I apologize,” said Nnenyo.

“Do not make such sharp sounds around her,” said Amaba, who’d been working quietly near Yetu, minimizing movement in order to lessen the disturbance to Yetu. “Can’t you see how it stings her?”

Amaba pampered Yetu now, but it hadn’t always been like that between them. Yetu’s early days as a historian were marked by endless discord with her amaba. It was only in adulthood that their relationship had settled. Thirty-four years old, Yetu’d matured enough to predict and therefore avoid most quarrels.

That didn’t mean there wasn’t still hurt. Unlike Amaba, Yetu remembered the past and remembered well. She had more than general impressions and faded pictures of pictures of pictures. Where Amaba recalled a vague “difficult relationship,” Yetu still felt the violent emotions

her amaba had provoked in her, knew the precise script of ill words exchanged between them.

“Such things don’t matter with all of this going on,” Yetu said, though it was a lie she told just so Nnenyo didn’t feel bad. He was close enough to her that the impact had bombarded her full force.

Amaba looked on the verge of arguing, then seemed to think better of it, returning to her work instead. She was wrapping sections of Yetu’s body with fish skins and seaweed to help block out sensation. It wasn’t a perfect solution, but it would make the Remembrance more bearable.

Nnenyo’s children arrived not long after. They’d been far away to conceal the surprise, so Yetu couldn’t discern the shape of it. Of course, the gift was wrapped, but that didn’t always matter. Sound traveled through everything, and though a second skin could dull things, it usually wasn’t enough to hide something completely.

Ajeji, the youngest of Nnenyo’s children at only fifteen, handed Yetu a corpse. Still reeling from the shock of Nnenyo’s whistle, she accepted it without pause, question, or upset.

“Don’t worry,” said Ajeji. “We did not kill it. It was already dead. We just thought it’d make a good skin for your gift.”

A vampire squid, strange and complex in form, did make a good disguise, though she hated holding it. She dealt with death every day during her rememberings, and more again when she was lucid enough to hunt for food. For once, she wanted to avoid confrontation with

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such things, reality though it may be. It never ceased to trouble her that peace depended on the violent seizing and squeezing out of other creatures.

It was perhaps dramatic to compare that to her own situation, but it was true. Her people's survival was reliant upon her suffering. It wasn't the intention. It was no one's wish. But it was her lot.

"Such a beautiful creature," Yetu said, front fins massaging the squid so she could memorize the shape of it. She had not yet determined what gift lay inside, too enamored by the textures of the externals. "I have never touched one or even been this close. Remarkable."

She wanted to cry for the dead thing draped in her front fins.

"You have always been such a tender thing," said Nnenyo as Yetu clutched the vampire squid. "Does it help to know that when we found it, there were no marks upon it? It did not die at the hand of another, as far as we can tell, but peacefully of age."

Yetu nodded. It did help. She didn't understand why everything couldn't be like that. Gentle and easy. No sacrifice. No pain.

Yetu handed the body back to Ajeji, unwilling to break inside the creature's flesh. "What's inside of it?" she asked.

One of Ajeji's siblings—Yetu guessed Kata by the precise, jagged movements—opened up the slit they'd cut in the flesh cut and removed a small, flat object, which she handed to Yetu.

“What is it?” she asked.

“We don’t know, but we know how much you like to have old things you can actually hold. It was found here near the sacred waters, lodged inside the skull of a two-legged surface dweller, which itself was inside the belly of Anyeteket,” Kata said.

“Anyeteket?” she asked. She hadn’t thought of that shark in some time. Anyeteket had only died last year but had lurked in these waters since the first wajinru six hundred years ago. Her age and infamy had earned her a name, which was not an honor bestowed on most sea creatures.

It wasn’t common for frilled sharks to be bound by such a limited area as she was, but she had two reasons to stay: One, she’d probably never forgotten the rain of bodies that descended here when two-legs had been cast into the sea so many centuries ago. Sharks didn’t usually feast on surface dwellers, but easy meat was easy meat. Two, being sickly, she couldn’t travel far to hunt. Wajinru supplemented her diet by bringing her grub.

Yetu was intrigued by the present being offered her. She guessed the two-legs skull inside of Anyeteket had been what had made her so ill all these years. There was a chance the head was one of the first mothers, the drownt, cast-off surface dwellers who gave birth to the early wajinru.

Yetu rubbed the flat object from the skull against the sensitive webbing of her fins to get a better sense of its precise shape. Sometimes, when she came across something

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she'd never seen before, she could reach her mind out to the History and find it: a tiny detail she'd missed in one of her rememberings.

At first feel, the object resembled a jaw, for there were tiny, tightly spaced teeth, dulled by time. Closer inspection revealed something purpose-made. It was too regular, its edges too smooth, for its origins to be animal. There were complex etchings in it. Teeth marks? Yetu enjoyed the feel of complex indentations against her skin.

“A tool of some kind?” Amaba asked, her voice tinged with desperation. She was anxious for knowledge, any sort of knowledge, keen to fill the various hollows she'd amassed over the past year. The Remembrance was late, and her lingering sense of who the wajinru were had started to wane.

Yetu closed her eyes as she felt a remembering tug her away from the present. Amaba, Nnenyo, and his children were reduced to a distant tingling, and the wajinru who were gathered in the sacred waters felt like a pleasing, beating thrum.

In the sacred waters, there was never color because there was never light. That was how Yetu knew the remembering had overcome her, because there was blurred color. Light from above the ocean's surface peeked through, painting the water a dark, grayish blue. It was bright enough to reveal a dead woman floating in front of her, with brown skin and two legs. There it was, something pressed into her short, coarse hair.

It was a comb, a tool used for styling hair. Yetu flowed

from remembering to remembering. She could only find three combs in her memory. The one in her fin didn't seem to be one of them, but its origin was clear. It had belonged to one of the foremothers.

Yetu stared at the face of the woman in her remembering, not yet bloated by death and sea, preserved by the iciness of the deep. She was heart-stilling and strange, her beauty magnetic. Yetu couldn't look away, not even when she felt someone shaking her.

“Yetu? Yetu!”

In the remembering, Yetu was not herself. She was possessed by an ancestor, living their story. Not-Yetu reached out for the comb in the sunken woman's hair and noted the smallness of her own fins, the webbing between the more stable cartilage finger limbs not yet developed. She was a young child. Old enough to be eating fish, shrimp, and so on premashed by someone bigger, but still young enough to need mostly whale milk to survive.

The little hand grabbed the comb, then Not-Yetu was jamming it into her mouth to stimulate and soothe her aching gums.

During such rememberings, Yetu's loneliness abated, overcome with the sanctity of being the vessel for another life—and in a moment like this, a child's life, a child who'd grown into an adult and then an elder, so many lifetimes ago. Yet here they were together, one.

“Yetu! Please!”

It ached to leave the foremother, the peacefulness of

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being the child, the comb, but she had her own comb now. Nnenyo had chosen his gift for her wisely.

“I’m here. I’m awake,” said Yetu, but her words came out a raspy, meaningless gurgle.

“The Remembrance isn’t long from now,” said Amaba. “You cannot be slipping away like that so often and for so long.”

Yetu was going to ask how long she’d been out, but as her senses resettled and acclimated to the ocean, she could smell that everyone was eating now. Hours had passed. It was the evening meal.

The rememberingings were most certainly increasing in intensity. Years of living with the memories of the dead had taken their toll, occupying as much of her mind and body as her own self did. Had she been alone, with no one prodding her to get back, she’d have stayed with the foremother and the child for days, perhaps weeks, lulled.

Yetu might like to stay in a remembering forever, but she couldn’t. What would happen to her physical form, neglected in the deep? How long would it take her amaba to find her body? Would she ever? Without Yetu’s body, they couldn’t transfer the History, and without the History, the wajinru would perish.

“Yetu. Pay attention. Are you there?”

It took everything in that moment not to slip away again.

During the Remembrance, mind left body. Not long from now, the entirety of the wajinru people would be

entranced by the History. They would move, but according to instinct and random pulses in their brains, indecipherable from a seizure.

They would be in no position to fend for themselves in that state, so they built a giant mud sphere in defense, its walls thick and impenetrable. They called it *the womb*, and it protected the ocean as much as it protected them. Wajinru were deeply attuned to electrical forces, and when their energy was unbridled, they could stir up the sea into rageful storms. It had happened before.

Typically, Yetu was the last to enter the womb. There'd be a processional, and then she'd swim in, finally resting at the center of the sphere.

They were still building. When all of them worked together, it took three days, with no sleep or rest. The meal Yetu had awakened to them eating would be their last. They had to fast before the Remembrance so as not to vomit when the ceremony was taking place and to ensure their minds and bodies were weakened by starvation. That made them more receptive to bending. A historian needed her people's minds malleable to impart the History.

For her part, Yetu feasted, her only companions Amaba and Nnenyo, who alternated shifts every few hours. Nnenyo was off now to gather more food for Yetu and to check on the progress of the mud womb.

Amaba waited silently nearby as Yetu ate. She was still trying to build her resources. Get her fat up. If she slipped away into her mind during the Remembrance,

her people would suffer, experiencing the rememberings without her guidance or insight.

Worse, the Remembrance might subsume her. Reliving that much of the History at once—it might kill her in the state she was in. She couldn't shake the feeling that it already had, that it had been poisoning her for the two decades she'd been the historian.

"Stop fidgeting over there, Amaba. I can feel you," said Yetu. "Why are you so anxious?"

"There hasn't been a day without anxiousness since you took on the History," Amaba said.

"It is different now. More. Tell me, what troubles you? Is it me? Come closer so we might speak proper," Yetu said, surprised by her own request. Closer meant she'd feel the ripples of Amaba speaking more forcefully, but it had been so long since they'd properly talked. She wanted to know what was on Amaba's mind and tell her what was on her own. She wanted to be like other amaba-child pairs, with a relationship unstrained by the duty the rememberings brought. It was never to be, but they could share a moment, at least.

"You have enough troubles of your own. You have the troubles of our whole people. I won't bother you with it. Now quiet. Focus on food and rest. The womb will be ready before you know it, and when it's done, you need to be here. Here, Yetu. You hear me? Here."

Yetu focused on the comb still clutched in her fin. She would ask that it be sewn up inside her in death. It was one of the few tangible things she'd touched of the past, a

reminder that the History was not an imagining, not just stored electrical pulses. They were people who'd lived. Who'd breathed and wept and loved and lost.

"You are enamored with that thing," said Amaba, gesturing to the comb, her curiosity plain. Yetu hadn't let go of it since Nnenyo gifted it to her two days ago.

"It is special."

"Your remembering told you what it was, then?" Amaba asked.

Yetu stared out at the working wajinru ahead of her. They were a half mile away, and Yetu could just make out the rumblings of their actions pulsating through the water.

"Yetu? Are you here?" Amaba asked.

"I'm here."

The condemnatory shake of Amaba's head pressed familiarly across Yetu's scales, the burn dulled by its predictability.

"I don't like it when you suddenly stop answering. It scares me," said her amaba.

"You mean annoys you," Yetu said. "Not everything is about the rememberings, Amaba. I'm not a child. Sometimes it takes me a moment to gather my thoughts. Or sometimes I just have no desire to honor your questions with a response."

Yetu felt taken by the same indignation that had often overwhelmed her as a child, inflamed by the slightest of slights. Yetu appreciated Amaba's caring nature, but sometimes her gentle chiding turned into chafing,

and Yetu was reminded of all that was wrong between them. Yetu would never be the easy child, nor Amaba the mother to give space. What hopes Yetu had for a connection beyond caretaker and caretaken were squashed. Would she always be just the historian, over time supplanted by the voices of the past?

Yetu shook her head, calming herself down. Amaba was just worried. She had every right to be. It had only been two days since she'd rescued Yetu from sharks. The specificity of the memory may well already be fading for her, but the feel of it, the fear—that stayed.

Amaba whistled softly. Had she been feeling less sensitive to Yetu's needs, she'd have screeched. Such a thing might've killed Yetu. That was the truth. "Why wouldn't you want to answer my question? It is a simple one, no?" asked Amaba. "Do you know what the object Nnenyo and his children gave you is, or don't you?"

"I know what it is," Yetu said, her head beginning to tense and throb. She'd had more interaction in the last few days than she'd had in the past year. Her patience was waning. She could only be the good daughter, the compliant wajinru, and the dutiful historian in short bursts. After a time, the constant conversation and stimulation wore her patience down. She was becoming a sharp edge.

"Well? What is it, then?" asked Amaba, letting her voice get away from her. She spoke loudly enough that Yetu had to swim away several feet. "I'm sorry. Though this would be much less difficult if you answered when I spoke to you, like someone normal."

“Someone normal wouldn’t be able to tell you that the object is a comb. Someone normal wouldn’t be able to tell you that a comb was a tool the wajinru foremothers used in their hair,” said Yetu. “Someone normal would never know these things. Someone normal couldn’t fill your hole. You are someone normal, and you don’t know anything.”

For several seconds, Yetu’s amaba didn’t speak. She had the look of something wounded, her fins moving in an agitated fluster but her wide mouth puckered shut.

Yetu should’ve felt guilty, perhaps, for her harsh and bitter words, but instead she soaked up the silence, drunk it like the freshest whale milk.

She didn’t mean to be so cruel, but what else was she to do with the violence inside of her? Better to tear into Amaba than herself, when there was already so little left of her—and what *was* there was fractured.

“I’m sorry,” said Yetu.

“No need. It is already in the past.” Amaba swam closer, so the two were near enough to touch. “I demand too much. Ask too much of you. I don’t even understand why I care so much about that stupid, what did you call it? Comu?”

“Comb,” said Yetu.

In one of the rememberingings, there was still hair caught in a comb belonging to the foremother. Salt water had washed any hair strands from the tines of Yetu’s new comb, and now she could only imagine how the bonds of black keratin had once choked the carved ivory.

THE DEEP

Yetu didn't explain to her amaba further. She would not be mined for memories yet.

This one knowledge, this one piece of history, it was hers and no one else's.

Nnenyo came back not long later with more food for Yetu, but she'd finally had her fill. Her stomach was bloated and overstuffed, so even though she was hungry, she could not bear to eat another bite.

She had become so ragged, not just since the last Remembrance but over the course of her youth and young adulthood. It all had a cumulative effect, didn't it? She imagined a sunken ship, heavy with cargo, pieces peeling and rusting away year by year like dead scales. Yetu wasn't as hardy as those feats of two-legs innovation, though. She would die, and corpses were not eternal.

"We are almost ready for you to join us in the womb," said Nnenyo.

"Already? So fast?" asked Amaba.

"They are ready for the History. They're working faster than usual, like nothing I've ever seen before."

So much for three days. It had only been two. Yetu wasn't ready.

"It will be fine," her amaba said.

Her stomach twisted and coiled, and her heart raced. She tried to settle herself, to feel the lovely, cool water entering her gills, restoring oxygen to her blood. But she was suddenly short of breath.

"Don't worry, Nnenyo. Like always, she will pull herself together in time," said Amaba.

In the early years, in fact, Yetu had been much worse, unable to keep down food or do such basic things as hold her bowels for more than a few minutes.

“How are you feeling?” Nnenyo asked.

Yetu nodded her head. “I will do what is asked of me.”

“You are a blessing,” said Nnenyo.

“I am what is required,” she said, no warmth left in her even for Nnenyo. Everything tense, she just wanted this whole thing to be over. Fine. Let the Remembrance begin right here, right now, for all she cared, womb or no womb.

“Breathe,” said Amaba. “Breathe.”

“It hurts,” Yetu said, ashamed of the vulnerability. She wanted to flee and be in her discomfort alone, like she’d been this past year. In front of Amaba and Nnenyo, it wasn’t so bad, but the whole of the wajinru people would see her in this state. “I’d hoped to be stronger by this point,” she said. She wanted there to be more of her, to be steady on her feet, or else the Remembrance would steal what remained of her.

“They don’t care if you are strong. Only that you remember,” said Amaba. “Do you remember?”

A flurry of tiny bubbles left Yetu’s mouth as she sighed. “I do.”

“Good,” said Amaba. “That is all we ask.”