

Temple of the Mermaid
Excerpt from Chapter Five
"Cord"

Scissor kicking furiously, she scrambled away, untwining her hands. Once they came free, she grasped at handfuls of water and tossed them behind her. She looked down at her fingers then, experiencing a strange sensation. They'd gone webbed too. Her fingernails had also doubled in length and hardened. *And then there's that.*

She tried out a few different swim strokes for maximum speed. She ripped off fifty feet in no time. The weight of her sneakers and jeans caused her legs—her quads—to ache.

Pave exclaimed from behind, "Ick! There goes my cord!"

Joy passed several of the rolling jail cells. Incarcerated shadows of mermen yelled out, "Naiad runnin!" and "Ha! Constable Tarphy icked himself!" This last one caused a few hoots of approval.

Joy still had the cord wrapped around her waist, knotted, wrapped more, and knotted again. At least it kept her jacket from billowing. The metaphoric kite was frantically loose in the storm with its tail sidewinding behind her.

Fuck you, metaphor!

She switched to a breaststroke and dove under a tow cable. The rumble of the rolling pyramid was penetrative; she could feel it anywhere within her body if she focused on it. She risked a glance back to her right and saw Pave closing in on her. Refocusing ahead, she got within a few yards of the Temple's back golden-hued stone skirt. Each block in the masonry looked heavy, ancient, and weathered. From within the Temple's shadow she could see the rays of the sun ahead around the corner.

"Come on," Pave implored, "give us a break here." Joy spastically rounded the corner, followed by her eighteen-foot tummy leash.

The light this time was broken up by the shadow of the antler/branch structure high above. So far, her Temple-Symmetry theory held: There were two of the big things on this side as well. The building's stone apron ended, and Joy found herself hewing close to the hub of what moved like

a four-story steamroller. It crawled deliberately along in a one-mile per-hour forward progression.

Dead ahead hovered another merman with his back to Joy. He sported the same silver hat that the other constable wore. Unaware of her approach, he held a spear, wore gear similar to Taphy, but had a snazzier pattern to his tailfin. His hair poured out in a long blond ponytail. He was positioned astride the gap between the back roller and the next one ahead.

“Hey!” Pave shouted at the guard. But just as the constable rotated to see who’d called to him, Joy stayed in his blind spot, took a hard left, and slipped under the temple into the dark gap between the rollers.

Looking back, Joy gathered up two pulls of her cord and coasted.

Pave’s silhouette did a flip to stop his momentum. He worked his tailfin back, forward, and left to keep a few yards distance between himself and the turning circular wall.

“Aw, damn it, squirmin’ harpy is gonna get pulverized under there.”

“Who was that?” the guard asked sleepily.

Joy turned and swam deeper in, listening as she backed up slowly.

“A crazy naiad. Possibly from another temple.”

“Wow, really? How’s that?”

“We pulled her out of a sink hole next to an ilehos ring. I mean, shouldn’t you go in and get her?”

“Unless she’s Gam Gourami, she’s not my concern...”

The roller noise obscured all else, even the telepathy. *Ilehos? Gam Gourami? Sounded like some meat-spread you might order at a Greek deli.*

Joy struggled to remain copacetic within the swirling currents and countercurrents of the dark passageway. As she continued into the underside of the temple, an eddy grabbed her body and spun her around, rather rudely in her opinion. She cursed the thin, twisting pillar of water, then immediately smacked into another one. Getting her bearings and continuing forward, Joy felt with her hands while moving deeper inside the tunnel. A massive block of stone hung low between the forward roller

on her right and the rear roller to her left, giving her a claustrophobic-feeling six feet of clearance above her head and three feet above the seafloor as she swam. Barnacles and crusty, wavy critters adhered to the stone's underside, stretched their feelers toward her.

Looking down, the hard, flat, sea floor seemed to be moving constantly to her left, as though she was at cross-purposes with a conveyor belt. If this were a real-life highway steamroller moving slowly along, she would be a frog underneath, between the front and back rollers, trying to keep pace. If she were a frog, that is, wearing a purple jacket and sporting exploded sneakers above her webbed toes.

A number of her glowfish escorts spun and helixed about like dancing ribbons in the blackness, showing her what spots to avoid. They were her fairy lights, leading her deeper into the woods. The rollers *hissed* and *grumbled* in a constant basso-white noise tone like a thunderhead stretched infinitely: a stampeding buffalo herd reverberating upon itself.

The low block ended, and a high ceiling appeared above. The space around Joy expanded to reveal the near-entire three-story-plus height of the roller moving toward her as well as the roller moving away. Her eyes adjusted to the dark, seeing black shapes in gradations.

Three hundred yards in the distance was the small, blue, trapezoid-shaped exit at the far end of the temple's underside. One fish, two fish; red fish, blue fish—Joy's escorts, glowed like police lights and swam into the dark void ahead. Joy squinted as she sidestroked. The faraway tunnel light blinked. She focused on an object moving toward her, closing the distance. Joy braced for another merman—a constable from the other side sent to flush her out, maybe? Whatever it was, it was still more than a hundred yards away.

Screw this fucking cord. She knew what to do. Joy bunched all the remaining loops of cord to the center of her jacket, reached behind her neck, gripped the nape of her collar, clawed, stretched, and gathered the fabric, twisting like a straightjacketed escape artist. She pulled the whole mess over her head. She felt herself rise higher in the room between the rollers. Cool seawater caressed affectionately around her bare midriff, even as she struggled to pull the fabric over her chin.

Get it off. Get it off! Fuck this heavy-ass jacket. I quit! Sorry Laura, but

not sorry. The ghost of the company president and I unleashed destruction on the upstairs venditeria; I think I deserve some workman's comp. Either way, I'm probably fired. You'll have to work second shift alone. Argh!!

The whole mess released but not before painfully pulling her nose up. Her "Goddamnits" t-shirt remained bunched around her neck. She pulled the inside-out jacket off, balled it up in a wad, let it float in front of her, and reinserted her arms into her t-shirt. *There. That felt good. A hundred times lighter.* The only remaining bother: a last loop and one knot remained tied around her middle, just above her belly button. The cord fed out from under her shirt, drooped, and wound up in the mess of her jacket.

She looked down as she hovered in the water, thirty feet to the floor, and watched a shape move into the room below her; moving from within the deeper tunnel to her location.

Another constable? Seems too soon to get a...

Joy squinted.

A tiny, glowing fish illuminated the shadowy figure as it made a U-turn, showing the distinct profile of a—

Oh shit. Shark.

Her entire musculature snapped to it. Cold adrenalin shot from her brain to the tips of her fins. It wasn't one of the famous Great White sharks from the movies or TV; it was sleeker—

still big though; big as a two-person kayak.

Joy looked up at a square of yellow light that glowed above the water's surface, giving her a goal.

Swimming with as much strength as she could muster, she broke through the surface of the water. Her face was met, intriguingly, by a pair of flippered feet dangling down from above. They belonged to a blue-hued young woman sitting on a swing, suspended from the ceiling, and warmly silhouetted by the yellow light from a hatch above. Joy brought her hands up and pushed her wet hair back. A half dozen multi-colored glowfish poked around within the room, causing wavy lights to dance along the walls. The blue girl on the swing sat six feet above the water's surface.

Joy looked around and realized there was no easy way of "getting out

of the pool.” No edge on which to climb. To the left and right, smooth walls, slick with algae, rose up from below the water line and didn’t stop until they met the ceiling ten feet up. To the front, a massive stone roller rose out of the pool, curved, and disappeared into the wall. Behind her, an equally large roller emerged from within the wall and rotated down. Eddies and whirlpools roiled and churned between the two enormous moving structures.

Swimming frog, meet giant rolling logs.

“Hi!” Joy yelled up to the blue belle. “Would you help me out of here?”

The young woman had curly, almost kinky blonde hair tied back into two puff balls and an overbite with big front teeth. She cocked her head in indecision. *So young.* She had a teenager’s face and wore natural tan wraps around her bust and hips, while she cradled a long-handled fishing net in one arm and across her lap. She looked at Joy, her mouth agape.

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