

Fragile Depths

Hazel taps the glass, staring out into inky blackness.

“Hey, don’t do that.” The security officer warns.

She slips her hands behind her back. “Sorry.”

She’s been chastised by the same officer more times than she can count for this exact infraction. It’s hardly her fault; her hands get fidgety while waiting for her always-tardy partner to show up. There are only so many things you can do standing around down here. The signal in the hallways is pretty spotty so she can’t even use her phone, with everything needing internet these days.

She brought her mom’s vintage iPod when she moved, and used to listen to that in the mornings while waiting. That was until her coworker Beck snuck up behind her one time while she had her earbuds in, resulting in Hazel screaming bloody murder. She hasn’t used it since.

Hazel switches to tapping her foot and checking her watch.

It’s been several months with this same routine, yet Beck still could not find herself showing up on time.

It’s not long before she gets bored spacing out and Hazel finds her gaze back to the window.

At first glance, the window doesn’t really look like a window. It functions like a window, yes, but it gives an incredibly boring view of just pure darkness. If you’d expect the ocean to look blue while you’re 15,000 feet below in it, you’d be severely wrong. So yes, it’s showing what’s on the other side, but you’d probably be more entertained watching grass grow.

She loves it though. There’s a calmness and simpleness to it. Like stepping outside and breathing fresh air on a nice spring day. Something that Hazel could not do at the moment. Unless she wanted to immediately drown.

All the windows here, like some in the newer buildings above ground, are set up to double as a screen, so if a pitch black rectangle in your room isn’t your idea of a view, you can switch it to something brighter. The aquarium display is the most popular down here, giving something that you might expect to see while you’re living in the ocean.

The fishes on the window TV are also significantly less ugly than the ones down here in reality. She feels like that's something the brochures should have warned people about: how hideous deep sea creatures were when you're well, in the deep sea.

One of the things the brochures *do* tell you is to NOT mess with the glass. Everything down here has been meticulously constructed with physics of all the water around them in mind, and while mild tapping should be within the realm of non-destructive activity, it's generally better to be safe than sorry when one thing breaking can lead to every person here dying.

Hazel wanted to be an astronaut when she was younger. She begged her mom to let her buy every book about stars and planets at her elementary school book fairs. Weird to think how instead of going up into the sky, she's gone in the opposite direction.

The previous company she was at got bought out, which led to her team downsizing from twelve to five. Then from what she heard, those five secured other jobs pretty quickly and left. Hazel was pretty much applying to every actuarial posting on LinkedIn as soon as she got the news she was let go.

Well, first she took a couple shots of tequila, and then she went online to look for positions. It wasn't the greatest idea, but it allowed her to knock out a bunch of applications quickly.

The next morning, she couldn't remember any specific place she applied to. She deleted all the "thank you for applying" automatic emails without looking at the senders, wanting to spare herself the mortification if it turned out she sent in her resume to a place she really wanted to work at.

She told herself she'd give herself two weeks, and get back on the job application horse. She wanted a break.

However, at the start of her second week of unemployment, she got an email on the status of one of her applications, stating that they'd be interested in setting up an initial phone screen. Then another week and multiple interviews later, she was hired.

And thus the preparation began.

There's a period of training that you have to go through so that your body doesn't collapse upon itself and force you to pass out upon descending fifteen thousand feet. When opportunities for

regular people first started opening up to live underwater, the training took up to a year, fairly close in intensity to U.S. Navy seamen training to live in submarines.

Over the years, the period of time has been parsed down to just a couple of months, due to some extra help from various technologies developed to help the body acclimate better.

Almost as long as the training was the process of gathering medical information. She spent hours going through tests and questionnaires and more tests. Both above and below ground. She's sure her health record is now the size of War and Peace.

And even now, they have regular health check ups to monitor how their body is dealing with living down here. She's been prescribed more vitamins, supplements, injections and breathing exercises than she's ever even heard of before.

But it's all free, so she doesn't mind. And as far as she can tell, none of it has been negatively affecting her.

So, in her mind, no harm done.

Approaching steps pull her out of her thoughts.

"Hiii sorry. Alarm didn't go off this morning."

Hazel just starts walking, already used to hearing this excuse, or something similar, most days. Beck follows easily, also accustomed to this morning routine of theirs.

Their job responsibilities are quite vague. Officially, they were brought on board as actuaries to help develop a new mortality table specifically for people living below ground. (She never understood why people called it "below ground" when they were technically below water, but whatever.) It's basically all uncharted territory, so it's a lot of figuring stuff out as they go, and a lot of random research.

Normally, the actuaries are pretty hands off with this type of thing, but apparently the people that hired them wanted them to be very involved. Not so say that they're the ones gathering the data (they're not, there are actual researches here that are much more competent), but more that they're living the same special conditions that they're looking into.

Sub-40, they want to call the new mortality table, a play on the old Pub-10 tables. Who knows if it'll be done by 2040 though. At this pace, and limited staff and subjects on this project, it's looking more like Sub-50 or 60.

Because the process is so unclear, they're pretty much given free rein on how to go about their research.

However, the one mandatory thing they have to do is a "patrol" of the building every morning. Their boss says that it's to "help them know the place and people", which will "lead to better insights". Hazel can't complain. She loves a calm stroll to ease her mind into the day.

The thing is, the walk is never calm with Beck around.

Today, like most days, Beck immediately launches into what she did last night. Since arriving here, Beck has been knee deep researching anything and everything about the ocean and its creatures. And by association and proximity, Hazel learns all about it as well.

Somehow, despite being the one that shows up late, Beck's always the one more awake, chatting incessantly throughout their entire walk. One day, Hazel had woken up later than usual, and so forged her usual cup of morning coffee. By the end of their walk, Hazel was ready to strangle the other girl.

Yet, everybody loves Beck.

As they pass groups of people, most of them say hi to them, but Hazel knows it's because of the other girl. Beck is the talkative and social one. Oftentimes, their patrol time will be lengthened due to stopping by a group because someone wanted to tell Beck the latest gossip.

At the beginning of their time together, all the socializing annoyed Hazel, who wanted quiet mornings. And she never had the talent for conversation like Beck did. One of the best parts of her old job was that she could put in her headphones, hunker down at her desk and just work on her computer for the entire day. She loved her coworkers, but also loved uninterrupted working.

She has learned to appreciate the socialization here though, finding out about other people's lives, the things they find important, whimsical, sad.

This morning, like most mornings for the past week, they stop by Julia's desk in the IT area. Her sister recently gave birth, so everyday, there are new pictures of her new nephew to be shown.

Some people are like Hazel, reluctant to make conversation so early in the morning, but for the most part, people are pretty open and kind. It's nice to feel a part of a community again, something she hasn't quite felt since she graduated college.

They finish walking through the sections filled with people and move on to the more quiet parts, where it's more people in lab coats focused on their samples, c-suite having meetings behind closed doors, etc.

Their route takes them past a section that is blocked off to them. Section S, or Sec S as people like to shorten it to. As far as she knows, only a select group of people are allowed behind there. She's tried to catch a glimpse a few times as the door was closing behind someone, and it looked like any other section.

"Do you ever wonder what's behind there?" Hazel asks.

"Sometimes. What do you think it has?"

"Either the most important things known to man or something really innocuous. No in-between. If it's the latter, I'd say office supplies. Or maybe real meat."

Beck groans. "I'd be so mad if they had just a stash of meat back there they've hidden from us. You know, the first thing I'm going to do when I'm back above ground is order a steak. And salad. I've never been one for vegetables, but the greens they import make the ones I left in my fridge for three weeks look freshly picked."

"Drama queen."

"You know it's true. I've never seen you eat anything leafy."

"Not because of the quality."

"No wonder you're so crabby all the time. Need your vitamins."

Hazel grunts, not entertaining the comment with a verbal response. She tries to walk faster to leave the other girl behind but Beck steps in front of her and matches her pace walking backwards.

“Someone’s testy.”

“Yes, you were late again today, and I haven’t seen the sun in 5 months so sue me.”

She raises her hands in surrender. “My bad.”

Hazel rubs at her eyes and sighs. “Sorry, just...tired.”

“I’ll show up on time tomorrow, promise.”

“Pinky promise?”

Beck offers her pinky and Hazel links it with her own.

“Ugh. I’m going to regret this.”

“See you bright and early!”

Hazel sees Beck roll her eyes, but the tension between them has eased as they walk on.

Near the end of their patrol, Beck takes them left instead of going straight, which would go to the last stretch of their route.

“What are you doing?”

“Trust me.”

“I do not.” Hazel says, but begrudgingly follows.

They take a few turns and find their way back to Section S. Hazel’s notoriously bad with directions, and admittedly still does not have a good handle on the layout here, so it wasn’t until they were almost there that she recognized where Beck was leading them.

“Beck.” Hazel plants her feet.

“What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me. What are we doing here?” They’re currently peeking out behind a corner watching the door to Sec S. Well, Beck is watching while Hazel is glaring daggers at Beck.

Before the other girl has a chance to answer, the door opens and a couple people leave through it.

Quick as a flash, Beck disappears from her side and sticks her foot in the crack of the doorway before the door fully closes.

“What are you doing?” Hazel reiterates after joining her, furtively glancing around to check if anyone saw.

“Come on, weren’t you saying you wanted to know what was behind here?”

“Yeah, like legally!”

“Square.” She accused.

“I’m sorry if I don’t want to be fired or sued or arrested.” Hazel retorted.

“Well, make your decision quick, because I’m going with or without you.” Beck looks at her with a raised eyebrow, and slowly opens the door wider, giving a window to Hazel to make her choice.

Hazel curses under her breath, but follows anyway. She pretends not to see the triumphant look on Beck’s face as they slip into unfamiliar territory.

Whoever said actuaries were all risk averse was lying. This girl is going to be the death of her.

They duck behind the first corner they see.

Inside looks pretty much what Hazel was expecting: boring white walls and hallways for days. She does notice there are a fair amount of people with lab coats around. This must be another science wing.

Beck leads them left immediately and then a right. This hallway is a bit narrower than the main hallway. They take quick peeks into the rooms through the small windows in the doors.

They hear steps approaching their hallway from the back right.

Both of them desperately look around for some place to hide. The rooms they've looked in so far have been either locked or occupied. They push forward, Beck on the left and Hazel on the right, trying to check if rooms up here can serve as a temporary stowaway spot. Hazel finds one first.

"Over here."

They spare no time squeezing into the small broom closet and shutting the door. Honestly, calling it "small" is generous. With even just the two of them, they're pressed up against each other, face to face. Hazel can't tell whose body her arm's touching. She hopes to god it's her own.

The steps closing in echo in the hallway, and Beck shoves her hand over Hazel's mouth. Hazel immediately bats the hand away, glaring at the other girl. Hazel would have gone off on her if the mission wasn't to stay quiet. And Beck has the complete *audacity* to look confused and affronted.

Hazel hopes her annoyed look conveys what couldn't be said in the moment: *I'm going to deal with you later*. Beck dramatically rolls her eyes.

They both watch as the line of light under the door is repeatedly broken as people walk by it, chatting. Thankfully, there's no window on this door, so the group can't turn their heads and see the two women packed in like sardines.

The steps fade away, and it's again silent. Both of them let out the breath they'd been holding.

"Jerk," Hazel hisses, as soon as the coast is clear. "I'm done. You can continue your adventure but that's all I got in me."

“Fine, fine. I’ll come with, don’t worry. It’s no fun without you here anyways.”

They make their way back to the entrance thankfully without incident.

Now that patrol is finished, they go to their desks and do the other part of their job: the nitty gritty researching. It’s been slow progress. There’s some published research out there, but it’s extremely minimal, usually with small sample sizes and not the best controlled conditions. The researchers on site do the actual data collection, but Beck and Hazel get to do analysis as the data comes in. With of course, individual identifying factors removed.

They were instructed to also think of any other uses for the data, so on slow days, she plays around with different combinations of the data fields to see if she can find any other sort of interesting phenomenons. They’ve all led nowhere, which isn’t surprising given her limited data set and time frame.

The rest of the day passes like many others, her staring at data and research papers for hours on end hoping for something to finally click. No new revelations today.

At five p.m., her and Beck head together to dinner.

It’s a Tuesday, so of course, it’s Taco Tuesday.

Food here has been generally pretty good. The place functions like a college campus, with a single dining hall and lines for the multiple food options. There’s usually a couple stations that rotate food choices on a weekly schedule, and others that have the same selection every day, like the pizza and pasta stations. The usual food canteen stuff.

One thing definitely *not* common is their 3D printed food.

It supposedly allows for more options while minimizing the unique products that need to be imported. *There should be some sort of mortality table for people that only eat this their whole life*, Hazel thinks.

For the most part, the food taste is on par with non-3D printed meals. Texture is a whole nother story. Once you stop comparing stuff down here with what you’d expect above ground, then you can enjoy the food here for what it is: completely different specimens. 3D printed tortillas are not remotely equivalent to handmade tortillas.

Most people like to have dinner around this time, so it's pretty busy. Hazel and Beck sit with the other actuaries (who do more standard valuation jobs), which allows them a nice group to chat with and also discuss work related things that come up.

Hazel returns to her room after dinner. After the day she's had, she's not sure she's up for weekly "Crochet Corner" with Irene and the rest of the sales team. She generally enjoys their company, but they tend to talk three at a time, which Hazel can still barely comprehend on a sharp mental day.

Beck mentioned a catch up call with her friends, and Hazel's above ground friend Jackie is probably in bed already given her two kids and the time zone difference, so she's on her own for the night.

She goes to her standard issue bookshelf and flips through the cassettes lined up to find something to listen to. Growing up, she thought her mom was sooo lame for collecting physical media, when she could have all she wanted and more on her phone or computer. Cassettes, vinyls, CDs, DVDs - you named it and her mom had it. Hazel feels much more favorably towards them now, liking being able to have the weight of them in her hands.

Cassettes are her favorite. There's something so satisfying about manually rewinding one with her finger.

The shelf worth of them she brought were one of the few "personal effects" that came along in the move. Most of them are from her mom's classics collection, ones that she's heard playing in her house throughout her childhood that she took when she moved out for college.

She picks *Purple Rain* by Prince off the shelf and pops it into her cassette player. At least technology has improved since her mom's childhood that now her player can use bluetooth speakers.

She spends the night re-reading one of her favorite books. As each tape finishes, she replaces it with another one.

Near midnight, she ejects the final tape, and inserts her copy of *Good Riddance* by Gracie Abrams. It's her preferred bedtime routine album, the soft vocals and instrumentals lulling her to sleep. Another great thing about cassettes - they stop once they're done. No need to set a sleep timer.

She takes a quick shower in the in-room bathroom, brushes her teeth, and does her skincare routine. She eagerly settles under her covers and closes her eyes, excited for her favorite part of every day.

“Don’t freak out.”

Hazel yelps, forcibly yanked into wakefulness by a person shaking her. “What the..?”

Her brain and eyes are still catching up to what’s going on, as she finds someone straddling her in her bed.

“I told you to not freak out!”

“How am I supposed to not freak out!” Hazel half sits up, propping herself up on her elbows. She can’t get up much further with the person still on top of her. She groans. It’s Beck. Of course it’s Beck. As her eyes are adjusting to the dark of the room, she notices the other girl is fully dressed, a far cry from her own sleep shorts and worn out band tee combo. “And how the hell did you get into my room?”

“Key. You gave me a copy, remember?”

“And I distinctly remember saying that it was for *emergencies only*.”

“And this is an emergency.”

“Someone better be dying, then.”

“Not...exactly?”

Hazel squeezes her eyes shut and sends a prayer for patience. She reopens them.

“What, then?”

“So,” Beck starts. “What are your thoughts on going back to Sec S?”

“Absolutely not.” Hazel immediately answers.

“Think about it! Bare bones night shift. This is the best time to poke around.”

“Or...we could mind our own business, get a full night’s sleep, and show up to work on time. You know, do our job?” Hazel can’t help the irritation seeping into her voice. She’s barely agreeable at a normal time of day. This conversation happening at the witching hour after being rudely awakened is not helping her coworker’s case.

“Pleaseeee.”

Hazel doesn’t need the lights on to know Beck is employing her best puppy eyes.

She weighs the pros and cons. The cons list is infinitely longer, but the pros list contains “hanging out with Beck” and “not disappointing Beck”, so it’s unfortunately not that difficult of a decision. Sometimes she wishes she had a bit more of a backbone.

Hazel lets out a heavy sigh and rubs at the sleep in her eyes. “Give me ten minutes.”

Beck squeals and squeezes Hazel’s shoulders. “This is going to be so much fun!”

Hazel grimaces at the loudness of just everything Beck. Audio, spatial, emotional.

“At the first hint of trouble, we’re turning tail, okay?”

“Yes yes, of course.”

“If we’re caught, you’re taking all the blame.”

“Cross my heart. I’ve got my speech all prepared.”

“You owe me.”

“Anything.”

They stare at each other. She thinks about if this was some other circumstance, Hazel might have pulled Beck down into the bed with her. Maybe if they get out of this scot free, she’ll consider it. Options are slim in a glorified underground bunker. Not that that would be the only reason. She might have to check the HR rules on that first, though.

Hazel looks back expectantly at the other girl, as Beck makes no move to, well, move.

“Okay well,” she says. “You have to get off of me first.”

Beck seemingly startles out of a trance. “Oh. Right.” She swings her leg over and steps off the bed.

Hazel changes into non-pajamas, but still comfortable clothes. It’s a pair of nice white linen pants and soft blue sweater. A good mix between casual and professional. Heist worthy, but still able to be passed off as on official business.

“You look nice.” Beck says as Hazel locks the door to her room behind them.

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Rebecca.”

Beck huffs. “I was trying to be nice. You didn’t have to bring out my government name.”

“And I was trying to sleep. Let’s get this over with so I can get back to that, please.”

They find their way back to the restricted area with minimal turnarounds. Given Hazel’s directionally challenged brain, she basically blindly followed Beck.

A security officer leaves the section just after maybe ten minutes of waiting, allowing them to slip in.

This time, they go down the main hallway as they enter.

The first couple rooms don’t have anything really interesting. Hazel sees through the door windows some plants under UV lights and what looks to be just a general sitting area.

“Done? Can we go now?”

“We’ve only been here a couple minutes.”

“And we’ve seen all the sights in this empty hallway. So unless you stole someone’s keycard, there’s really nothing left.”

Hazel meet’s Beck’s gaze, who for her credit, looks guilty.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I just borrowed it! I’ll give it back in the morning, he won’t even notice that it’s gone.”

“And we waited outside for that long because...?”

“I kind of forgot it opens the outer door too?”

The universe was really testing her today.

“You’re lucky I’m not a punch first ask questions later person.”

“My face thanks you.” Beck caresses it dramatically. “Can’t have harm come to the moneymaker.”

“You might want to look into a second stream of income.”

“Rude.”

Beck scans the keycard, taking them into their first room with notable content. Namely, thousands of medical vials in refrigerators. Beck goes to the nearest fridge and takes out a bottle. Hazel looks over Beck’s shoulder.

“Is it just me or does this remind you of the stuff we get injected with us every month?” Beck asks.

“You don’t get yours every week?”

“...No?”

Hazel flashes back to her regular health check ups, each one ending with a shot in her arm.

“Could be, this section is probably where they store all the medical stuff. Also could be literally any other thing.”

“I thought that would be in Section M, since that’s where the clinic and hospital are.” Beck turns the bottle. “And nope, the label is for the stuff we get. See?” She points to the name on the sticker.

“Looks like mumbo jumbo to me.”

“Didn’t you read the info pamphlet?”

“I mean, I skimmed it.”

“Well, this matches the name on there.” She pulls out her phone and shows a picture taken of the front of the pamphlet. “See?”

“Okay so it matches the sheet, doesn’t mean anything weird.”

“I didn’t say it was weird. You’re saying it’s weird. I’m just saying it’s interesting.”

“Okay great.”

“Fantastic.”

The next room is pretty empty besides a few computers.

Beck shakes the mouse of one of them. “Ugh, it’s locked.”

“No way,” Hazel says sarcastically while taking in the rest of the room. “Computer has password. Sky is blue.”

“I’m in.”

“What?” Hazel glances back at the screen, and Beck is indeed logged in, already clicking on random file explorer paths. “How?”

“I guessed ‘password’, then ‘password1234’ and then I was in. No 2FA either. This must be an absolute relic.”

“Remind me to change my password later.”

Beck finds her way to a Research folder, and then clicks on the Memos folder. She opens up the most recent one, saved just a couple days ago, and pulls out her phone to take a few pictures of the contents.

“If we weren’t going to get in trouble before, we sure as hell are now.”

“Can you shelve your pessimism for just one hour, please?”

“Fine.” Hazel grumbles.

Beck backs out of the Memo folder and then clicks on Papers. She opens the pdf titled “FINAL FINAL Complete Paper v3”. Hazel scans the abstract. She’s not sure she’s understanding the words there right, so she rereads it. Either Beck is really taking her time reading, or she’s doing the same thing.

“Huh.” Beck breaks the silence.

“Huh, indeed.” Hazel agrees. This time, she’s the one that takes out her phone to get pictures of what’s on the screen, making sure to get a snap of every page.

Beck leads them out of this room and onto the next. For once, Hazel doesn’t complain. They don’t talk yet about what they saw. The next couple rooms are pretty boring, more desks and vials.

Then they enter a room filled with rows upon rows of floor to ceiling water tanks.

Beck breathes out. “La pièce de résistance.”

Each tank is filled with masses of jellyfish.

Beck has a look of recognition. “*Turritopsis dohrnii*,” she says as she touches the glass of a tank. “I read about them when I was looking up ocean stuff.” Hazel almost scoffs at how much Beck downplays her months of almost feverish oceanic research. “More commonly known as ‘immortal jellyfish’.”

Hazel watches Beck observe the creatures swimming inside with a sort of reverence.

Hazel then skims through the pictures of the research paper on her phone. She catches glimpses of *turritopsis dohrnii* in the text, along with the full complicated name of the drug they've been injected with. The one they found in the other room.

"This is what they're pumping us up with? Jellyfish?"

"Guess so." Beck takes a step back and sighs. "Why is it always immortality?"

"Mankind can't resist. It's like cats with a laser pointer."

"Does this mean no more mortality tables?"

"Oh thank god. One less assumption to update."

Beck laughs and Hazel follows suit. And suddenly, this situation feels so silly to Hazel.

She's hanging around with her coworker in a subterranean building, investigating alleged research on elongating human life. It's the plot of someone with a much more interesting life than hers.

She went to college, got a job right out of it, intent on remaining at a desk her whole life. She'd get married, have a couple of kids, and maybe even grandkids. A relatively uneventful stay on Earth.

The one time she takes a chance with something—someone—she uncovers that she's part of some sort of illicit science experiment with iffy ethical ramifications. To be fair, maybe it's not illegal, and she just didn't read the fine print of her contract.

"Well, I guess, end of the road here then, huh?" Beck takes a step back, and accidentally knocks into a slew of long metal pipes leaning up against a support beam. Beck sees what's happening and tries to catch them before they tip over, but she can't stop them all. A few fall against the nearest tank and smash the glass, splashing gallons of water and jellyfish alike onto the floor. The force of the water pushes Beck off her feet and onto the ground, soaking her through.

Alarms blare.

“Uh oh.”

Dread seizes Hazel. If for some reason they didn't look guilty before, this would be the last nail in the coffin, with them being surrounded by shattered glass and shriveling jellyfish.

“What do we do?” She asks, panicked.

“I don't know!”

“Well think maybe!” She yells over the alarms.

Water's still gushing out of the first tank, and another one apparently also got broken, likely with Beck letting go of the pipes she had in her arms as she fell.

“We gotta destroy the whole place. All of it. Inside and outside.”

“Are you joking? You want to make the worst ever situation even worse?”

“I'm not hearing a better idea!”

Hazel begins to pace, shoes crunching on broken glass.

“They wouldn't murder us, would they?”

“They're illegally experimenting on us, what do you think?”

“Maybe they'll let us sign an NDA in exchange for a million dollars.”

Beck looks thoughtful. “Maybe. I think I'd just whistleblow them as soon as I'm out though.”

“Well don't say that to them as they're granting us mercy!”

“I'm still not hearing an idea.”

“Feign innocence?”

“Like that'll work.”

“Who’s the pessimistic one now?” Hazel’s at the end of her rope. “We’ll I’m not going to lose everything over this one stupid night of listening to you. I’ll plead my case as some harmless exploration or whatever. I’m out.” She turns to leave.

Beck quickly grabs her wrist, stopping her. Her hand is cold and wet from the water.

“Don’t you want to do something that matters?” She challenges.

Hazel whips her body back around, staring Beck right in the eyes. “You think killing everyone here is doing something that matters?”

Uncertainty flickers in Beck’s expression but passes quickly. Leaving only an intense and piercing gaze. One encompassing practicality that’s paired with an unwavering belief in people. In Hazel. Despite how uncooperative Hazel always seems to be, Beck still believes in her to do the right thing. Which Hazel isn’t even sure is the right thing.

Beck’s touch and words burn into her skin.

Hazel takes a breath.

What was she doing here, really? Yes, she took this job because she needed it, but somewhere along the way she started to care about things. About the people. She started to want more out of life than to just sit in front of a computer all day. Like, she is living in the *ocean*.

The ocean.

It’s hard not to feel insignificant when you think about that. Unworthy.

But it also feels hopeful, like there is so much of the world to see, and do, and change.

When she was young, she never would have imagined a world were she could live thousands of feet below water. Maybe she can do something that’s unimaginable to her now. Give her life a meaning.

The fight leaves Hazel’s eyes and Beck drops the grip on her wrist.

“I’m with you.” Hazel says, softly. So softly that she’s not entirely sure that Beck hears her over the loudness of the alarms.

But Beck hears, and doesn't hide her relief. "Thank god. I'd be pretty screwed without you."

"That much is true," she replies, knowing very well Beck wouldn't need her for a single thing.

Beck gives Hazel a good-natured punch on the arm, with Hazel playing along and letting out a yelp, then rubbing the spot where she was struck.

It almost feels like 10 am, like they're just on morning patrol, bantering. She wishes they could rewind time and go back to that simplicity they had less than 24 hours ago.

"God, are we really doing this?" Beck's palm pushes at the wet hair plastered to her forehead.

"I'm in only if you are."

"You think this is going to work?" She goes to pick up one of the fallen pipes and stands closer to the window. It shows complete darkness, and is the only thing stopping an entire ocean of water surging into the room.

"Only one way to find out."

It's meant to be a light quip, but it weighs heavy. There's no turning back, just choosing their own destiny. *God that sounds dramatic*, Hazel thinks to herself. As if it wasn't dramatic their choices include being locked up for the rest of their life, mysteriously murdered, or destroying years of groundbreaking (albeit perhaps ethically gray) research that probably has cost trillions of dollars.

It's not like her. Everything in her body is telling her to just get caught. She deserves being captured, breaking the rules. Be the person that follows what's established. Throughout her life, she's always been the follower, not the leader. The feeling rushes up like bile, the surety that they're making an astronomical mistake.

"Come over here."

Hazel steps closer. "What's up?"

Beck takes hold of Hazel's right hand and carefully wraps her fingers around the pipe. Their glorified spear. Hazel watches as she does it. There's something grounding about the touch,

delicate and firm. The nausea recedes, replaced instead by a vibration in her body, like she's suddenly filled with bees.

"Ready?"

Hazel looks up at Beck's smirk, picking through the layers of that expression. Feigned confidence, fear, adrenaline. Hazel knows because that's what's running through her own veins right now.

So much adrenaline.

She thinks about Julia and Irene and every other person she's met down here, and hope they might forgive her in the next life. If this all goes according to their half-baked, passion driven, insanely conceived plan.

The storm of steps outside crescendo, leaving mere seconds before they barge down their door.
"Well, it's now or never."

They raise the pipe together, and strike.