

Sea-stars – Chloe, Year 11, QLD

You never learn to fear the ocean.

It used to frighten you. You would jump away from the crashing waves, hesitate to swim over murky depths, frantically investigate whatever just brushed your ankle. It wasn't true *fear*, though.

How could it be, when you have your sister's hand in yours? When you've got a hand to hold as you navigate rockpools on shaky legs, a tug to go 'just a little further' across the channel, someone to laugh and point out the little minnow twining through your legs?

You don't think she ever learnt to be afraid either.

It's one of those days where the clouds fill the sky, crowding out the summer heat and freeing the sea breeze to whip the leafy trees into a frenzy. You love them, few as they are, weather just dark enough to be cool and yet light enough to ward off the rain, if only for the moment.

You take advantage of it, dragging your sister out the door and down the footpath to the old leaf-strewn track. At some point she pulls ahead, and you let her, content to dash along behind with a grin on your face and the wind in your hair.

She leads you by the hand down the rocky path you know by heart, over that one thorny weed you learnt the hard way not to step on, alongside the banksias that attract swirling clouds of butterflies come spring, under the sagging gum tree branch that you always forget to duck for.

Sometimes you wish they could see her like this, all the teachers and parents and uncles and aunts that call her a daydreamer, absent-minded, not quite there. You wish they could see the wild joy on her face, the surety in her step, her unwavering hand in yours.

Though they aren't quite wrong, you know. She tries to show you, tries to help you hear the songs she swears drift in on the ocean gales, the ones her teachers hate because she would choose music they can't hear over their droning voices any day.

You can never hear it either, no matter how hard you listen.

When you reach the bottom of the track, she swings you by the arms as you giggle, spinning round and round together in the cool breeze. She puts you down, eventually, leaving you breathless and giddy as your sister puts her hands on your shoulders and turns you again to face her.

"Come on," she says, her smile framed by the gray clouds above. "I have something to show you."

You go, scrabbling across sand and stones in the wake of your sister's sure footsteps to the place where the rocks meet the cliffs, and there, nestled into the seaside, there is a cave. You have never seen it before, and yet your sister leads you in as if she has known it all her life.

You tell yourself that the dark doesn't frighten you. Your sister is here, after all, and it clearly doesn't scare her at all.

You shiver, and blame it on the wind.

There is water in the cave, a miniature ocean, held still as the stone it sits upon. The pool spans the breadth of the cavern, the darkened edges almost seeming to fade into the stone walls.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" she exclaims. You would call it unforgettable.

And yet, you have no memory of this cave, even after a childhood spent scouring these shores.

Your sister doesn't seem to mind. She bounds over to the edge, crouching down to reach for her reflection in the smooth surface. You move closer and see her jerk back at its cold touch, sending ripples out across the pond. Reaching forwards again, she swirls a hand through the water.

You think you hear a whispering voice hidden somewhere in the ripples she stirs and the wind whistling through the cave. You think it almost sounds like a song.

As you walk up behind her, you wonder aloud what could be under the water. A reef? A shipwreck? A city? They're childish guesses, but something about the cavern seems to make them seem a little more plausible than they should be. She smiles, softly, at your reflection in the water beside her.

Your sister turns and holds her hand, still dripping, up to you.

"Why don't we find out?"

You look over, through the cave's gaping maw and across the rocky shore. The tide is low, as if the sea itself is holding its breath. Anticipating. You look away. You take her hand.

She jumps in first, and your breath catches in your throat as you follow her into the ice cold water. You hold it there, and fill your lungs with more besides. You look at your sister, catching a glimpse of a smile. She turns away. Your sister dives, and you don't let go of her hand.

You open your eyes to the murky sting of saltwater, with a familiar hazy figure swimming ahead. You know this dance well, years and years of paddling after her over reefs, under breaking waves, and through sandy creeks lending muscle memory to your dive. It doesn't feel as familiar as you remember.

You dive, and the wan light of the sun fades, blackness creeping up the edges of your vision, blurring everything into staticky darkness. Your sister's hand is warm, despite the water's chill, and it guides you through the emptiness.

There is a slow burning in your lungs, building with every breath un-taken. You dive anyway.

The world narrows, coalesces, until it is only the candle-warmth of your sister's hand and the ice of the water around you, the unyielding cave walls that seem to get closer no matter how much you fend them off with your other arm. You seem to be getting better at it the deeper you go, practically able to see the dark rock approaching. You dive, barely paddling anymore, propelled by your sister's steady strokes.

And then she stops.

And you can *see* her stop, down there in the inky blackness where light should not, *cannot*, penetrate. You can see her long hair like tendrils of seaweed, drifting in the water. You can see past it, past her, and you know why she stopped.

Because at the bottom of your world, with burning lungs and stinging eyes, you do not see an empty cave wall where you should.

You see *stars*.

There is a night sky at the bottom of a sea-cave, and it *sings* in a way that reverberates through the water itself, and nothing makes sense anymore. But making sense doesn't matter because you can see more clearly than you should this deep, the way the stars *move*, and the sky itself opens to reveal an eye, glowing and horrible and *looking right at you*.

You are frozen in its gaze, in the eye of something so much more than you have ever seen, your lungs are burning and yet you cannot look away.

And then its stare shifts, fixation landing on your sister instead. You are free, and you start to churn the waters with your frenzied kicking. She squeezes your hand, still hanging in the water like a discarded puppet. It feels like a goodbye.

The eye closes, after what feels like an eternity of desperately trying to pull your sister from its sight, and the stars blink out one by one as you make a desperate, crashing, escape. You don't look back. You drag her out with fire in your lungs, terror giving you strength you didn't know you possessed.

It doesn't help.

Your sister never comes home with you. She doesn't trudge up the muddy path, barely responding to your pulls and pleas to "just keep going, come on, *please*." (You don't remember the mud on the ground being there, before. You wonder how you didn't even notice the rain.)

Your sister doesn't knock on the front door with you, doesn't open the door to tearful faces and endless questions. She doesn't answer any of them, and neither do you, simply letting yourself melt into an embrace and stain your parents with soaked-through saltwater. Strong arms carry you through doorways and up stairwells, first to a shower and then to a room with two twin sized beds.

They close the door, but you make yourself get up and open the curtains. The sound of breaking waves almost makes you sick where it had once lulled you to sleep, but the dull light of the moon almost drowns out the nauseatingly star-like glow coming from the other mattress. It is familiar, and it fills your lungs with terror. You taste seawater on your tongue.

You make yourself lie down anyways, you try to masquerade your fear as exhaustion and blame the way you're shaking on that as well. You try, desperately, to feel anything other than *watched*.

Your sister never came home with you. Something else did.