

## **The Dragon in the Sea**

My father sinks beneath the waves.

They close over him in silence and he drifts down into the quiet dark. For a little while the sunlight manages to break through the water and reach his gleaming oxygen tank, but he continues to swim lithely away from its touch, and eventually he disappears into the shadows below. I am left alone above the surface, trapped in the cloying heat of the sun. The red flag of the dive buoy bobs cheerfully in the water, waving at me. I wave back.

It is our eleventh day at sea. When we had found this wreck the night before, I had seen that look in my father's eyes again, the one that burns so bright even the ocean cannot extinguish it. "This is the one," he had declared. "I can feel it. I can feel her."

I can't. But then, I was only four years old when she was swallowed by the sea. She was always gone, back on the water, while my father and I waited for her to come home. She told me and my father that she loved us, but even as a child, I always understood that she loved something else more. I remember a smile that glittered like the stars, a pair of eyes like moons above it, rough hands that cradled me like a boat upon the waves. But not a face. Not a body. Not a mother.

Now she lies somewhere beneath us, and my father will not rest until she comes home.

It's only an hour before he surfaces again. I hear him clamber back onto the deck and rush back up to ask him what he has found, but when I help him take off his tank and mask, his expression tells me all I need to know. I shiver with a sudden chill. My father has spent years combing up and down the coast where she disappeared, always fueled by a seemingly unquenchable flame. This is the first time I have seen the fire in his eyes begin to dim.

That night, over frozen meatloaf and mashed potatoes, I finally say what has spent the past few weeks eating at me. “I want to go down with you next time.” I say it as matter-of-factly as I can, but his head still snaps up and he swallows his bite in one angry gulp.

“Absolutely not,” he growls. “No.”

“But I can help,” I insist. I’ve spent the past days left up here by myself, and the days on shore between this trip and the last, carefully composing my argument. “I know the procedures and gear already because I’ve been helping you. I’m younger so I can swim better and faster than you can. And I’m smaller so I can navigate the wrecks more easily—”

“No,” he snarls, slamming his hand on the table so hard the cutlery jumps in fear. “Not now, not ever. It’s too dangerous.”

I scowl. “Of course I know it’s dangerous. I know my equipment might malfunction, or I could get decompression sickness, and obviously there’s a chance I would drown. But if you teach me to dive right then it won’t ever happen.”

He shakes his head again and sets his jaw. “It’s not happening. Don’t bring this up again.” He returns to his plate, violently shoveling spongy meat into his mouth, refusing to make eye contact with me.

My father does not like when I argue. So I grit my teeth and try to turn my focus back to my food, but I can’t. Not when I can hear the waves tapping on the hull, wondering where I have been and when I will join them like I should.

“Why not?” I retort, the words leaving my mouth before they pass through my brain. His eyes widen in shock, and for a moment he is speechless. The words keep coming, rising in vitriol like the tide. “Every day, I sit in the boat while you dive. Every day I watch you disappear into

the ocean from up here. And you know what? Sometimes I hold my breath and jump in myself to look, and when I do, I never want to leave. It's beautiful down there. I saw rainbow schools of fish dancing and plants swaying to some melody only they could hear, and coral mosaics spreading out over the ocean floor like someone had painted them there. Above the water it's hot and empty and dead and dry, but below I can look up and see the sun reaching through the surface with its brilliant fingers to grasp at the vastness below, because even it would rather be down there than up here." I lock onto his stunned gaze, and say without thinking, "You kept forcing her to come back up. Did you ever consider that maybe she doesn't want to come home?"

His chair flies back into the kitchen counter with a crash, and I flinch with surprise, snapping me out of my sudden bout of mania. The full understanding of what I have said floods my mind, and I watch with horror as he looms over me, his eyes cold and pale.

There is a moment of perfect stillness, and then he speaks. "Don't ever talk about your mother like that again," he demands quietly. "You never even knew her. Who the hell do you think you are to pretend to know what she wants?"

I don't know how to respond. In fact, I can't respond. Every muscle in my body has locked down. Only my heart stays immune to my temporary paralysis, beating wildly against the bars of my chest. I am helpless as he turns around and walks out of the kitchen. He stops only briefly in the doorway to say, without even turning to face me, "I'm taking you back to live with your grandmother tomorrow. Tonight is your last night on this boat."

And then he is gone.

Only when I hear the door to the cabin shut does my body let me free, and I slump down into the chair with sudden exhaustion. I stay there for a little while, choking back something that threatens to spill out, but then I burst out of my chair and scale the stairs to the deck, dragged up as the water in my body screams for the sea. The last rays of the sun reach out from below the horizon as I rise gasping from the depths of the boat. I crumple against the railing and watch as the droplets that fall splash out into little ripples, only to be absorbed by the larger waves lapping against the metal siding. By the time I've stopped crying, the moon is fully up and the sky twinkles with stars. Tonight is a supermoon, I know: a night when the moon is full and close enough to get a sense of its true size. As impressive as the moon is, the current time is much later than I'm used to still being awake, and I should go to bed. But this might be my last night at sea, and so I feel anchored to the deck. I watch as beneath me, the reflection of the full moon in the water distorts rhythmically with the surf.

And then the reflection disappears.

For a moment, I freeze in perplexed terror. But it has to be a cloud or some other natural phenomenon, I quickly rationalize, so I glance hopefully back up at the sky. My stomach drops when I see the moon still beaming brightly. Reluctantly, I drag my eyes back down to where its reflection had been—only to watch it impossibly reappear before me, even as the sky stays perfectly still. First there is only a sliver of its diameter visible, then a thin ellipse, then the ellipse widens into a glowing circle and I realize that I have just watched a gargantuan eye, so brilliantly blue that it almost seems white, blink beneath the waves.

As I squint determinedly in the eye's direction, a leviathan head within the water gradually begins to take shape. I follow the head down to a massive, scaly neck, one that leads

down even deeper past where the light of the actual moon can reach. Its scales glitter beautifully, the surface of the water refracting the moonlight into millions of rays that bounce off its body in a dazzling array of colors. On the side of its head is a fan of scale-like feathers, each like a tapered fin, thin and translucent and edged with gold. Slowly, as if noticing my attention, the head begins to turn towards me, pushing a brief swell of water against the side of the boat and sending it drifting slightly. Soon enough there are twin moons staring up at me from underneath. The massive, impossibly pale irises feel utterly alien; yet, I feel no fear about its presence, only a warm, almost comforting familiarity as if we'd met one other before.

It occurs to me suddenly that although the eyes of the serpent seem far, its snout is actually within arms reach from the edge of the deck. Somehow, it seems to know the thought that next passes through my mind. It rises through the water until just the tip of its snout breaches the surface. It waits there, rivulets of seawater pouring through the crevices between its scales, watching me patiently.

I crouch down and reach out under the railing towards the creature. At some point, I have begun holding my breath, and I force it out in one big exhale before taking another. Carefully, I stretch out my arm, not even daring to look for fear that it might be gone if I do, until I feel something smooth press against my fingertips.

The dragon is surprisingly warm, heat radiating out in waves from its prismatic scales. When it doesn't react to my touch, I gently lay the rest of my hand against its snout. After a moment I notice that I can feel the gentle ebb and flow of its breath through the rise and fall of its skin. Its radiant eyes shine up at me with surprising sincerity, and I feel locked in their

glowing embrace. We stay there for a little while, sharing in the hypnotic calm of its rhythmic movement, rocking gently like the tide.

Then, all of a sudden, the creature snorts. It sends a rush of water splashing across the deck, dousing me in a chilly spray. “Hey!” I protest, automatically indignant, but when I open my mouth to say something in annoyance I find that I can easily sense its playful intentions. I look back towards its eyes, which blink once. Then its head tilts downwards and it begins to sink back into the depths.

An unexpected panic seizes me. “Wait!” I yell hopelessly, not expecting any response; I know that I must seem like dust to it, considering its sheer scale. To my surprise, the serpent actually stops, angling its head back up at me with surprising grace now that it is more fully submerged. I look into its eyes again and I understand: it wants me to join it. The pale orbs glow, luminescent beacons beckoning in the dark.

Without hesitation, I kick off my shoes and vault over the edge of the boat, slipping neatly into the sea. At this time of night, the ocean would normally be horribly cold, but it feels more than comfortable with the dragon’s heat warming the water. I take a deep breath, ready to dive under.

“What’s going on up here?” My father’s voice breaks the stillness, sounding unusually alert for the time. I look back up at the boat right as he turns and looks over the edge. For a long, frozen moment, I can watch as he struggles to take in what he sees before him—my shoes thrown on the deck, me treading water beneath him—and then I witness the exact instant he understands what is happening and his expression contorts with horror. “What are you—”

“Goodbye,” I interrupt, the words coming out more spiteful than I had intended. “Don’t do to me what you did to my mother. I don’t want to come home.” And then, without even waiting for his response, I turn and dive down to join the dragon.

I am a powerful swimmer when practicing in pools on land, but the ocean is different. I can feel the deceptively soft current trying to tug me in every direction, and it grows harder and harder to fight my buoyancy the deeper I go. As hard as I try to keep up, the creature keeps getting further and further away, moving with greater agility than ever. Normally, I can hold my breath for a good two minutes, maybe even three. But it doesn’t even feel like thirty seconds before my lungs and limbs all begin to burn with exhaustion. The serpent stops and turns again to face me, unconsciously creating a chaotic undertow that I have to work even harder to fight, and it cocks its head in apparent confusion. It does not appear to understand why I cannot move with the same ease that it does.

I come to a terrible realization then: I do not belong here. The pressure of the water squeezes at my skull, my chest is contracting wildly as it tries to scrabble for air that isn’t there, and every muscle fiber in my body burns trying to fight against the overwhelming power of the ocean. I try to burn through those obstacles through sheer force of will, scrambling to join the beautiful creature somersaulting below, but I can’t. My mother was like water, I think resentfully, so she could be at home in the sea. That part of me still feels the pull. But my father has always been like fire, and fire and water could never be happy together. If I stay any longer, the water will extinguish me too. I have to go.

I take one last longing look at the dragon weaving beneath me, hoping that it will understand my choice, then I reluctantly cast my eyes back up to the sky and kick.

But my legs move too weakly to propel me with any force. Already, I have no air left in my lungs, and I have had no choice but to let the water in instead. Even though my body wants to drift up, the ocean wants me to stay. I try fighting, I do, but it tugs insistently at me with every move I make. Perhaps I will stay, half of me thinks, while the other half flickers weakly in protest. I close my eyes and wonder whether I will belong if I let the sea claim me. I wonder whether I can be with my mother again.

I begin to sink.

And then something wrenches at my shoulder and yanks my body into its grasp, and I open my eyes to see my father. He looks at me and I see the barely contained panic in his eyes, but it is consumed by that burning focus I know so well. His strong arm wraps around my waist and, as I cling to his torso, he starts to swim back upwards with a determined confidence. The boat gets closer and closer until we erupt out of the water and he heaves me onto the deck. I land hard, roll onto my side, and immediately begin coughing out seawater, violently trying to empty my lungs. The first breath of air I can suck in after that tastes like ambrosia to my salt-coated tongue.

My father pulls himself out of the sea, clambering up the ladder and onto the deck. He stands on the edge briefly to catch his breath, then turns and leans against the railing to look back down into the water. For a long moment he stares down at where I know the creature to be. An unreadable expression passes over his face. By the time I stumble up and join him in looking down at the surface, the water is empty. The dragon is gone.

He exhales and sits down heavily on the deck, while I sit next to him a little more carefully. A puddle very quickly forms around us as we drip together in silence.



My father speaks first. “What were you thinking?” he growls, finally. “What the goddamn fuck was that?”

“Excuse me?” I splutter, slack-jawed with surprise. “What the goddamn fucking hell was you telling me to shut up about my mother, just because I told you something about her you didn’t want to hear?”

He whips around to face me, seething. Maybe once that would’ve been enough to quiet me, but not anymore. I meet his eyes with the controlled burn of my own.

“Language,” he grits out eventually.

“Hypocrite,” I retort back. I can tell that he’s scrambling for something to say. “You can’t expect me to not end up like you.”

“No,” he snaps, his volume rising, “I expected you to be better.”

“Better? How the hell am I supposed to become better?”

“You’re supposed to learn!”

“Then *teach me!*”

I yell and the sound echoes across the surface of the water, carried happily along by the shifting waves. Even as my skin crackles with fury, part of me notices the supermoon rising behind him like a silver halo. It shines so bright that I’m briefly distracted from my anger to gape at its sun-like radiance. It reminds me of my mother. Out of nowhere, I wonder if when he met her, my father saw the saltwater in her blood and knew that she would be the only one who could ever put out the fire in his soul, or if he was blinded by the moon in his eyes, too.

When I refocus on my father, he has slumped back down onto the deck, apparently lost in thought. “I’m sorry,” he says, finally. I glance at him in surprise. “I...” He stops to gather his

thoughts before he tries again. “I knew your mother for most of my life. So when she disappeared... I didn’t know what to do.” It occurs to me then that I’ve never actually heard him speak about my mother’s death. I hang onto every word. “At first I refused to believe that she was dead. I was convinced that she was maybe shipwrecked somewhere, waiting for me to come rescue her. That was stupid.” He takes a deep breath before continuing, as if the words he is about to say will be physically painful. “But I think you were right.” He stares out over the water, lingering on the moon’s reflection on its surface. “I think she’s already home.”

This is the most defeated I have ever seen my father. He doesn’t seem to want to fight anymore, and neither do I. “I think,” I say, offering an olive branch of my own, “if she’s home, then we should go home, too.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I agree.” He turns to face me again and frowns. I realize that the adrenaline has worn off, and I’ve begun shivering as the wind off the ocean has become more apparent. “Inside,” he says, his face brokering no disagreement, but this time I listen and get up with him. “It’s much easier for you to get cold and then get sick when you’ve been in the water.” He glances back at me, then adds with a forced nonchalance, “Keep that in mind when we go diving in the future.”

“Okay,” I respond with equally strained indifference. “Will do.”

He gives me a mildly reproachful look, but continues anyway. “You’ll have to be careful of pneumonia. If you ever have trouble breathing out of the water, that’s a big warning sign for any diver.” I know he’s trying desperately to fill the silence, but it still brings me enough warmth to fight the chill as I follow him back inside the boat.

Behind us, the great moon in the ocean blinks, then sinks contentedly back beneath the waves.