

Skye's Lure

ANGEL LEYA

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PROLOGUE: LEGEND

“The Mer didn’t always exist—at least not as we’re known now. We used to live as people of the sea, living in the water nearly as much as on land. We turned to the depths for our food, trade, and more. It was a simple but wonderful life, as some tell it. Our people kept to themselves, preferring the briny waters and marine life to outside tribes, and the sea returned our love. We fished with the dolphins, swam with the sharks, and oysters willingly gave us their pearls. Then everything changed.”

I paused, looking at the young Mer gathered around me. Their eyes were wide, reflecting the glow of the jellyfish that danced by in the cool waters of the deep. The flow of hair in the gentle current made them look like the coral reefs. It wasn’t so long ago when I sat in the audience, mesmerized by the animated retelling of our people’s history.

“As legend tells it, our tribe carefully protected the secrets we learned from our love. In order to do so, our elders passed a law that no one should find love or marriage outside of our tribe. It worked for many years, but as our trade business grew, some of the youths among us began to fall in love with the young and exotic traders that came in. There were only a few at first, but soon a large group of our tribe had fallen in love with outsiders.”

An appreciative “ooh” resounded from the small crowd, and a couple of the little mermaids giggled, webbed fingers covering mouths. A smile brushed my lips.

“The group, which called themselves the Tierramor, banded together. They fought for their right to pursue love, but the elders fought back. Though imprisoned and publicly flogged, the rebels persisted, and the uprising continued, growing in strength and

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number. Many sympathized with the Tierramor, much to the displeasure of the elders, and eventually the imprisoned escaped, fleeing to the outside tribes for refuge with their lovers.”

A few onlookers gasped. I pulled a rod I had crafted into a makeshift spear from the seabed and turned on the children, garnering some nervous gulps. The giant shark’s tooth I had on the end of my spear glowed blue in the light of the jellyfish.

My voice rose as I continued the story. “Fueled by anger and fear, the elders ordered the rest of the tribe to pursue the Tierramor. Those who resisted would be forced to watch their families suffer, so all participated, including the sympathizers.” I poked the stick in the direction of some of the Mer, who squealed and shied away, tail flukes flailing. A wicked smile crossed my face.

“After a few days, all of the Tierramor were rounded up, along with many of their lovers. The elders forced the mutineers and their lovers into the sea, blocking their return to land.

“Their deaths were slow. The outsiders drowned first, not having the skills that our tribe had learned from birth. The rest succumbed to the sea one by one.”

I looked from each child to the next. One visibly shuddered, and some whimpered from the back.

“As the last woman began to drown, a dolphin swam by. It saw her distress and tried to save her. The dolphin’s actions angered the elders, and they threw spears at it to scare it away. One of the spears pierced the dolphin’s tail.” I threw my spear into the sand in front of the crowd, causing one of the little mermaids to scream. “It cried out in pain,” I shouted over the growing ruckus, “but it continued to try to help the drowning woman. Enraged, the elders threw more spears. One struck the dolphin’s side, while another plunged straight into the woman’s heart.”

I grabbed my chest and let my body sink to the ocean floor. I lay there until all were silent. The only sound was the swishing of the passing jellyfish. I rose slowly, my voice soft and low.

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“Seeing the woman speared to death, the dolphin screeched. As legend tells it, it sounded just like a human. Having nothing left to live for, the dolphin died, joining the dead bodies that floated along the shore. The elders forbade the people of the tribe to bury the bodies, including that of the dolphin. They said that the rebel’s punishment wasn’t full until the sea had swallowed them whole.”

I paused.

“The creatures of the sea surrounded the floating bodies, preventing them from floating away. For days, they sang to the tribespeople. Their song had no words, but the meaning was clear: bury your dead and mourn for their loss. No one listened.”

One of the children sobbed, and I had to choke back a catch in my own throat. Despite the many times I heard the story over my lifetime, the calloused actions of my ancestors always got to me.

“On the third day, the singing ceased, and the creatures parted. A man rode through their wake, carried by a shark and a dolphin. Kelp covered his body, and starfish clung to his wet hair, which shone as green and brown as the seaweed. Although none had ever laid eyes on the man, all understood that this was the King of the Sea, and fear spread through their midst.

“As the man emerged from the water, the sky darkened, and the creatures began to cry in anguish.”

I lowered my voice as I continued, attempting to sound like I imagined the Sea King would. “‘How dare you punish the sea for your own sins,’ the Sea King roared. ‘This was not a matter for the sea to settle, but by forcing your will on the waters, you have punished the depths as well. Even as she begged you to stop, you continued to ignore her pleas. Now you will pay for your sins. You will no longer live on the land, but you will live in the briny waters that you have taken for granted. Your lives will be dedicated to repaying the ocean, and her secrets will never be yours to tell, for you will be hunted and feared by your once fellow humans. They will force you to live in seclusion, for if they find you, they will

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annihilate you or trap you and rip you apart.”

“When he was finished, the Sea King jumped into the water, riding his creatures back into the sea. The sky remained dark, and the waves began rolling in with the ferocity of a great storm.

“As soon as the King disappeared from view, swallowed by the waves, the people of the tribe began falling to the ground. Tails like that of dolphins grew from their feet as their legs fused together.” I flipped my smooth tail, sending a small wave through the crowd. “A great wail arose as the people felt the weight of their punishment, but it was too late for repentance. The sound turned into an unearthly chorus, taking on a brassy, unnatural tone. The eerie howling reached the ears of the surrounding tribes.”

As if on cue, the children began to moan and wail.

I raised my voice again to combat the lamentations. “The outsiders, eager for revenge after losing so many of their own, rushed into the midst of our tribe expecting war. Upon seeing our number writhing on the ground, half-fish and half-human, they were frightened. ‘What abomination is this?’ they cried.

“Filled with anger and horror, they began attacking. Many of our people died that day, but many escaped into the waters.

“As further punishment, we found that the sea no longer loved us, and we had to learn how to survive in this now hostile environment.”

All was quiet. I grabbed a clam from the seabed and held it up in front of the children. I tapped on the shell, and it opened, releasing bubbles. Inside was a pearl. I removed it, careful not to trigger the shell to clamp back down.

“The sea is our home now, and though it’s still full of danger, we have made our peace. This pearl is a testament to our legacy, and it must always remind us to stay hidden. Fear the humans and keep the law of the elders. This is the only way we can survive.”

I punched the pearl above my head, holding it between two fingers. The crowd erupted into applause. Beaming faces and a

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flurry of bubbles filled my view, but I lacked that depth of feeling. The little Mer began to disperse, some called away by their parents, some ready to chase their next big adventure.

The legend has been told since our creation, and though I put everything into my retellings, I always felt a little hollow afterwards. The story was meant to teach the children the importance of following the rules. Speaking to a human is not only dangerous—it is punishable by death. Most of the Mer heed the rules and are content with our life in the water.

I, however, am not like most of the Mer.

My name is Skye, and I fear that my growing curiosity will one day drive me to a fate worse than that of my ancestors.

CHAPTER 1: SIGHTED

Surfacing when the fishing boats came around was intoxicating. The sights, the sounds, the danger; all of it heightened the thrill of the hunt. We followed them because of all the marine life they attracted, but we had to be extremely careful not to get caught in their nets or come close enough to the surface to get spotted.

This boat was different, though. Thousands of tiny lights lined the decks, and colors burst from its belly. It glowed like a jellyfish from the deep, but sparkled like the starry night sky. I had never seen such a boat, and I could hardly bring myself to look away.

I glanced at the Mer in my pod. They were all asleep, one eye open and the other closed. We learned the technique from the dolphins long ago. As mammals, we lacked the gills needed to convert water into oxygen, so falling fully asleep would result in drowning.

Tonight, though, I couldn't sleep. I always had trouble sleeping after a retelling. The story just didn't seem right to me. Of course, if I had been asleep, I would've missed the boat.

I glanced around the pod one more time before deciding to surface. My eyes rose above the water a safe distance away, hair clinging to my head. The boat was full. Humans moved like a school of fish, nearly in sync with their thumping and thrashing. No one bothered to look at the water.

I dared to swim closer. The smell of salt water mixed with sweet and sour notes that tickled my nose. I could practically feel the heat emanating from the moving crowd, which pulsed to a deep, hypnotic rhythm. My heart thumped to the same beat. I wished I had feet so that I could join the humans in their celebration.

A brown bottle came hurtling towards me, and I dove to avoid

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it. My nose wrinkled as I let out a huff. Humans often threw things into the ocean. Why didn't the Sea King change all humans into Mer, if he was so intent on teaching lessons? At least my people had respected the waters—until the end of our existence as humans, that is.

The bottle sank, and I considered retrieving it. What would the humans on board do if I threw it back on the deck? How would they feel if I littered on their boat? I couldn't risk exposure, though, so I did nothing, watching as the bottle disappeared into the depths.

A commotion arose from the deck above, and I looked up just as one of the men fell backwards over the rail. He hit the water a short distance from where I floated. The impact pushed a small wave over my head. My eyes wide, I considered fleeing. It's what a normal Mer would do, but I didn't.

I had never been this close to a human.

I sank beneath the water to get a better view. The man's clothes floated like a blooming coral. He clawed at the water, his legs twitching and jerking, but they couldn't bring him back to the surface. Eyes bulged, cheeks inflating like a frightened puffer fish. His sandy hair swayed like a surreal halo.

Why couldn't he surface?

The man went still, eyes focused on me. His mouth opened, a large bubble escaping. The calm didn't last. Eyes went wild, hands grasping at his throat. He looked at me, pleading.

I hesitated. The retellings said that I should loath and fear this human, but he didn't look so bad. No more splashes came from the boat. Would no one rescue him? In the glimmering light of the boat I could see the man's eyes rolling back into his head, body going limp.

I darted to his side. Throwing my arms around his waist, I swam towards the surface. He was heavier than I expected, his body like an anchor trying to drag me down, but I fought back.

Our heads broke the surface, and I scanned the waters. A

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circular object floated nearby. It was bright orange, and a rope connected it to the boat. Peering up, I saw people running around, shouting at each other. I had to hurry if I didn't want to be seen.

I heaved the man's body onto the floating object, but he slid off. Grabbing him, I pulled the floating object over his head, but there was nothing to keep him there, and he began sinking again. I tried once more, pulling his arms through the object, and this time it stayed, hugging his chest.

The man slumped over, his lips blue, chest unmoving. Was I too late? After a tense moment, he sputtered, water gushing from his mouth. He was breathing. I breathed as well, as if by doing so I could help him recover.

Now that he was safe, I took in his face again. There was nothing comical about it now. A chiseled chin and squared jaw framed full lips that seemed curved in a perpetual smirk. The blue of his skin was fading, returning his tone to warm beige colors.

He raised his head, wiping the trickling water off his face. Once again, his green eyes focused on me, thick brows furrowing. Slowly, those brown brows crept up into his hairline.

My hand stretched out, as if it had a mind of its own. The elders would kill me if they found out, but in this moment, I didn't care. Maybe the humans weren't so bad. Maybe it was time to challenge everything I knew.

As my webbed fingers approached his face, the man thrust his hand towards mine, fingers outstretched. He lost his grip on the orange object around him, and he brought his hand back down to balance himself.

Shying back, I stared. He grinned sheepishly, and my lips curved upwards in response.

The commotion from the deck grew louder, and I looked up as shouting voices approached.

Words floated above the din. "We're coming! Hang on."

I raced for the safety of the depths. Sure I couldn't be seen, I

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stopped and hovered below the boat. The man's feet disappeared as he was hoisted from the water.

I waited there a long time, staring at the golden bottom of the boat. How was the man doing? Had the party continued or were they done for the night? Lights continued to pulse and twinkle as the boat sailed away.

When I returned to the pod, I found my pod still sleeping. I swam beside them as I waited for rest to come, but I could not stop replaying what had just happened. The man's eyes burned into my imagination. What would it have been like to touch him? What would his voice have sounded like? Would I ever see him again?

I was bursting to tell someone what happened, but that was impossible. It's not like I had a death wish. It was foolish of me to go near that boat, but I had to admit, I wasn't sorry.

To tell the truth, it left me wanting more.

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