

A Coral Pillow
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When Carl paused in his long and dangerous descent to wave, he almost lost his footing on the crumbled shale slope. A scatter of stones clattered and drew his eyes to the sharp rocks below where the wild waves chewed the shoreline with foaming teeth. Risking another scare, he cocked his head from side to side, peering through a tangle of sea wrack for another glimpse of her. He'd seen her swimming just before.

Yes, there on the salted sea breeze, he saw a golden coil of hair. It danced in the air and beckoned, but he could see nothing more. She had moved behind a wayward boulder that had crashed down the slope in a reckless bid for the deep—years or even centuries past.

Urgently, he resumed his climb, weathered boots scuffing at the loose rocks for purchase and more small avalanches rattled. He hugged his pack tight to his chest so the iron tins of ham bit into his flesh. His free hand clutched at the air for balance.

A cave worn by water and wind gaped before him. Reflected light sent spangled ghosts into its depths. The waves rolled in along a stony trench and to either side ran a shelf of rock where the footing grew more sure. Echoes of daylight and breakers filled the cave's mouth. Carl searched for signs of her.

"Carl?"

His name floated up from the shallows of the sea cave, the syllable buoyed by emotion. Carl stepped a few more yards beneath the arch of frowning stone. Beside him the waves were slowing. The trough of lime green water showed visions of colored fish and coral.

"Lhasa?" he whispered. The name sparked on the dancing water before trailing off to burbling echoes.

"Here." Her voice again, this time followed by a lighthearted giggle and playful splash.

"Lhasa," Carl breathed, face widening around a grin as he rushed forward.

The cave broadened out at the end where the trough spilled its contents in a pond. To either side the rock swept up and cradled a beach of fine, dark sand. Time had cut holes in the vaulted ceiling so beams of amber pierced the briny air.

Lhasa sat on the sand, her smile dancing. She raised her smooth, strong hands and beckoned—long fingers flickered anxious.

Carl hurried and then paused a moment over her, breathing deeply, always disbelieving. It was magic.

Her pale irises held the color of driftwood shot through with pupils darker than the deepest shadow of the wave worn cave. Her skin shone with the tan of endless summer, and jeweled her shoulders and arms with gilded bands. Golden hair fell in ringlets by her shoulders, hid her breasts in playful tangles.

"Carl, my love." She stretched her arms toward him.

He dropped his pack, fell to his knees and swept her into his arms. Her face he covered in kisses.

"I have missed you so!" Carl gasped, tears growing hot in his eyes. His voice was heavy.

"It is more difficult to meet you, love," Lhasa sang, her accented tones an enchantment. "My family grows suspicious."

"Damn them!" Carl blurted boldly, then softening, kissed her closed eyelids. "We must be together, we must. The hours in the lighthouse grow long and as each passes, the memory of your face grows stronger. It grows, my love, until I feel you with me. We must find a way."

Lhasa's eyes dropped and her full lips formed a frown.

"I fear there is no way. My family will not approve," she sighed, her strong hands kneading his shoulders. "Already they seek a suitor."

"We must find a way!" A pang of envy made his voice so sharp she flinched. "I am paid well for my lighthouse work; my carpentry earns me money from the shipwrights on the shore. We can have a life together..."

"But, we differ so..."

"No." He grasped her hands and brought them down between their chests. "In here we are alike. The same God set these hearts to beating." He rubbed the knot of fingers on their breasts. "We are one, my love. We have seen the round moon many times and watched the stars whirl in the inky black. Lhasa, we know each other's heart."

"Just that you do." Lhasa smiled, pulled his hands up and kissed his heavy knuckles. "For this will sit unwell with your people too."

"Damn them! They are fools and cannot know!" He glared out toward the sea cave door. "They do not love each other!"

"Outcasts would we be."

"Two stars in our own night," he said without hesitation. "King and Queen of heaven."

"But..." she whispered, glanced at the pond, then back to him.

"Enough." Carl set a finger to her lips. "Remember the night we met."

Lhasa nodded and smiled.

"Then you know the fate we share." He smiled. "Out of the darkness came the light—from the end a beginning. You know what we are."

Lhasa leaned forward and kissed his smile. "Then we must leave." Her breath brushed his whiskers. "We will go from these shores to another, and start this new life together."

Carl's hands slipped to her strong hips and pulled her close. The salt air filled his nostrils.

"Tomorrow night," he whispered, and kissed the soft skin on her cheeks.

They made love in the sand while the warm sea lapped at their bodies.

Outside, the rocks that made their cave with lines of shadow formed a grimace. The sea was black, as it grew cold.

Forty years had passed but Carl's broad shoulders held the years well. Many kegs of oil had he hauled up the turning steps to the lanterns atop the lighthouse.

Then all that changed.

A heavy limp in his left leg spoke for that part of the tale. Twenty years before, falling down those steps had shattered his thigh, and two weeks awaiting help near killed him with poison and pain. When he had returned from his mainland sickbed, his replacement relieved, he found noisy engines powering electric lights.

Still, his broad shoulders held the years well.

He stood atop the slope he traveled every day, and like each day before he held the same debate.

She won't be here.

A cloud of darkness filled his mind but through it came a voice to the surface wafting like some cruel angel of the deep.

She promised.

He limped down the slope, face set and grim. His mind did the things it did at this time always. Pain and acceptance struggled to dominate. Like a widow hugging the tattered nightshirt of a cruel husband for warmth, Carl held the memory of Lhasa.

His thoughts straggled back to their meeting.

He remembered the first time he saw the bleak black island: bare two miles long, all of dark rock and sparsely grown. The lighthouse jutted from a rise at one end, a mast of the same material looming over him like a gravestone. Youthful passion and remorse had driven him there: sick of life, sick of people, and sick of love.

Not four months passed before he drank himself numb and foolish in a lonely fit. Driven by pretty ghosts to a momentary need for company, he set out for *town* in a twelve-foot launch. *Town* was a village on the mainland shore ten miles across a cold and choppy channel.

The rough sea sank his boat.

He hit the water and great blackness pressed him round. Like death it kissed his fingers and numb spirit with frozen lips. A gasp of air and he dropped beneath the waves without a sound.

He had no strength to fight the dark current dragging him down.

Why live to another lonely day?

Then, the hands. Glowing, they fluttered toward him like ivory doves in a sky of shadow. They flapped from the dark to perch upon his arms and breast and squeeze the heavy muscle there. Warmth brought life to his heart, and power to his legs. Something in their touch made him fight.

Carl shook off the numbing ache of death as he was lifted upward, carried, towed and dragged to land, where he fell unconscious before laying eyes on his redeemer.

He kicked to the surface awake. Waves beat nearby. Gulls and plovers wheeled in an orange dawn. Morning gave him Lhasa's eyes, their black centers showed the arch of beach that swept around. They echoed the night before, the night that should have made the sea his lonely tomb.

He tried to raise himself.

"No, fellow, you must rest."

"But the sea," he mumbled against a dragging weight in his limbs.

"There we met." She smiled. "When you called my name."

"But I do not know it," he said as sea mist fell upon them.

"You spoke and my spirit heard, for I, too, looked for death." She turned to the shore. "The storm could not take me when you called me back."

Unable to understand, Carl fell asleep and dreamt of a sea with warm hands.

But that was a whole life ago.

Now Carl reached their little beach. It was not so easy to clamber down that slope, but there he was deep within the cave, his old lungs dragging in the sharp sea air. His leg throbbed painfully from overwork but he barely felt it.

The echoing cavern was as empty as it was that night of promise so many years before.

He sighed, and then winced as he lowered himself upon the sand they so long ago had shared. He lit his pipe. The gray smoke drifted up and disappeared like the past.

Two years later they removed Carl from the island. He was too old, the company said: too old to climb the many steps, too old to keep the channel safe for ships and weary crews. The company built a new lighthouse of silver steel on a hump of rock fifty feet from the old. Carl's lighthouse stood empty in the wind, a forlorn spit of stone.

When Carl refused to leave, three strong sailors broke him free of the island like he was made of the same hard rock or he had wound long roots among its many fissures.

He had no place else to go, but they only cared that he went.

He now lived in a small village in a small room. A company pension kept him fed and clothed, but Carl cared little for food and he did not go out enough to warrant more than a change of shirt. The village was small, but he found its rutted streets crowded; its people noisy for his ears.

He would sit by himself in his low attic room at the boarding house and gaze out its window at the sea. It shimmered there by the horizon, the waves flickering like forgotten ghosts. A blanket now, he needed for comfort, and three pairs of socks to wrap his gnarled feet against the chill.

Still the sea air could reach him through the small window, puffs of it and breezes tugged his baggy eyes awake, pulled his attention to the waves and whispered: *She promised.*

Often he would weep as he rocked in his rough old chair. Often he would fall asleep that way, mouth and jaw hung slack and open, rheumy eyes clotted with sleep and tears. Like barnacles, the wiry white whiskers dotted his old jaw in patches.

One morn as Carl slipped out of painful dreams; voices came to him from the yard below. Often the loud and churlish calls of boys were flung about like restless haunts. Sometimes the noise rattled the rafters above and heaved him from whatever blissful numb and quiet he could manage. He rarely had the passion to holler back anymore. Those days were done. Often had the children trespassed to steal apples from the tree beside the outhouse. Often had they answered his objections with taunts:

"Old grump! Old grump! Crooked stump!"

So what the use?

Sometimes like they missed him, they'd mark his absence with jeers.

But today he pulled himself forward in his chair, not to holler but to hear.

The children had been talking. Just chatter bordering the cruel, but a single spoken word hoisted Carl from his dreams. The word repeated, like magic leant strength to his old limbs and drew him forward to stand out of sight by the sill. The children could not see him listening.

"Go on!" came a braggart's voice.

"I tell you, I saw it," a young lad shouted.

"Nah!" another cried.

"He's dreaming!" said a boy.

"No," came the lad again, the voice insistent. "We saw it at the Wilford fair up the coast. Romanians run it, they do." The jeering laughter grew quiet. "My Da took me after shipping apples. There's a freak show."

"There's a freak!" The braggart laughed. "And there he stands."

"No. I swear it's true," said the lad again.

"Really?" a pair of younger voices begged in unison.

"As real as you and me," the lad affirmed.

"It's a trick," the braggart scoffed.

"If it's a trick," the lad who'd seen the freak show said, "then so's the blue sky!"

Carl looked up toward the sky, saw puffy clouds pass the eaves. Dizziness shifted behind his eyes in a wave, and he slapped at the bedpost for balance.

The boys heard the noise and they started: "Old stump. Old stump. Crooked grump!"

But Carl could barely hear, pulling on his heavy coat and boots and thinking of the quickest way to Wilford.

A monkey chattered shrilly where it rode the lacquered shoulder of a fiercely carved bear. Carl fell back with the brittle steps of age to catch his breath and gather courage before slowly limping past. He watched the creature until there were many paces put between. The monkey, tired of him, scolded others that wandered near.

All around the tents and wagons were painted with bold signs that promised delights of every kind. The smell of horses galloped in the air and drew Carl back to a lost enchanted time. The fair he walked in now sparkled in that very breeze and whispered the same magic. A long-absent grin cracked his cheeks, and Carl passed into the fairgrounds to mix with the country folk that crowded near. With a croaking laugh, he hoped to see himself a boy swing by his father's hand.

A banner hung overhead. Strange beasts from myth danced across red silk and around gold letters that marked the Freak Show. Carl's eyes searched among the mythic forms, but with sinking heart found none familiar.

He limped toward a broad aisle in the space between rows of wagons. Each hung a draped and painted stage before the gathering. People crowded here and there, fingers pointing, mouths agape. Children climbed higher for a frightened glimpse of a Lizard Man, his scaly skin slick in sunlight.

Carl looked under a feathered hat brim and past a furry shoulder to watch a dwarf in purple dance atop a wooden stool. His feet beat out a rhythm, pacing a celebration missing from his face. The somber features told the tale. What could he be but a beggar?

Carl pushed on, and pushed he did, for the crowd grew thick about the strong man as Goliath held a couple on a bench high overhead.

Siamese twins joined at the chest drew a large group with their singing. One soprano, one tenor, they crooned a tearful country song. The happy crowd threw pennies but the girls looked sad in their own embrace.

Then through the din, a loud splash and spattering brace of cheers dappled over a crowd that clotted the end of the freak show lane. Such a crowd was in this place that Carl was slowed to wedge a shoulder away or gently press a leg aside with his cane. The gathering parted well enough, but there were so many and they did so slowly.

Another splash! But age had taken Carl's height away, replaced all with rounded shoulders, stoop and cane. He could just see atop the sign a word: "Nereid." In large colorful letters painted it baffled, yet in the air hints of its meaning still twinkled in water droplets and scent of sea.

Carl struggled frantic to push and jostle startled folk aside. *Crazy old man!* Some laughed and cursed as applause spattered like rain and the people turned to move past him. He fought with fury, breath catching, vision swimming, until he was swept to the stage.

A thick canvas curtain hung over stained floorboards. Carl stared up at the sign, searching for the word until he cursed. The picture painted there was proof enough, so he leaned to lever himself aboard the stage. Gasping, pulling he swung a knee up for purchase.

Then larger, stronger hands than his fell on his shoulders round, heaved him back and turned him, cane in his hands like a sword.

A big balding man with beard of gray stood smiling, his golden shirt stretched tight across a belly that hung over green pants and high boots.

"There, there old fellow," the Romanian said. "Show's over. Just once a day my friend."

"I must see..." Carl insisted.

"See tomorrow." The man grinned broadly. "One show a day."

"No!" Carl shouted. "I must see."

"She is old, my friend," said the bearded man. "And lacks the spirit for more."

"No!" Carl's face was dark. "I will see her today. TODAY!" He turned to mount the stage again.

"Stanislaus!" the big man bellowed. "Jerzy!"

Many hands gripped Carl's shoulders and pulled him down to face two men in scarlet coats. They grabbed him hard and shook him like a child.

That rankled Carl's pride, and he sputtered angry curses.

"Hold, Grandfather!" they laughed and carried him from the stage. "You've had your share to drink, no more."

Carl struggled, but his breath was gone. His heart hammered and his vision swam. He staggered as they pushed him down the road.

The men stood at the gate, then watched as Carl pressed the pain into his chest. He turned and walked in the end, as the men lit pipes and swore and laughed, and one stooped low for stones.

Carl's limp was worse than before, and his back ached as he walked some way down the road, to sit at last on a twisted root beneath a tree. A wind came from the beach but broke around the oak against his back. Tears dotted the lapels of his old coat as he tried to fill his pipe with shaking hands. His head spun, and he leaned back to fall asleep with pouch and pipe still strangers in his lap.

A small hand smoothed his cheek and Carl murmured quietly, unused to such a touch. So soft the hand against his face, and small, a child's.

"Thank you," he whispered, "young one."

"Come fellow," said a voice, high-pitched but rough with age and use. "The sun is setting and the cold is deep. You will not wake from sleep."

"Now child," Carl mumbled rolling forward to sit. "Get along, I've wisdom enough to know this thing." And Carl saw the fairy glow of a little pipe bowl burning. "You're no child!"

"Nor have I been in fifty springs!" the voice exploded. "You might have seen Bayok's dance this very day."

The dancing dwarf from the fair puffed on his pipe; its orange heat warmed small round features. The little face was impish in the eerie light.

"I've slept too long," Carl growled and crawled to his feet, his joints aflame with cold. The sky was red with sunset, and through the trees breakers boomed in amber bars. "I thank you, sir..."

"Bayok," said the dwarf.

"Bayok, then. It does grow cold with autumn night." Carl shook, and spied the purple sky. Stars peeped out and heavy clouds scudded under flocking gulls. Then, from sleepy thoughts a single word: *Promise*.

"Lhasa!" he blurted as a fist of pain struck his chest. Maddened by passion, he dropped to a knee and gripped the small round shoulder. "Do you know my Lhasa?"

"Who?" Bayok wriggled in the old man's grip.

"Lhasa, don't lie! I hear the knowing in your voice!" Carl's features were twisted by pain and anger.

"Stradovicho's wife?" The dwarf pointed his pipe at Carl's fury. "I've known her since she joined us."

"Lhasa?" Carl slumped against the tree. "Wife?"

"Never a greater friend." Bayok worked small fingertips under Carl's large thumb. "She understands the heart."

"Wife..." A hole opened in Carl's soul, and he drained out into darkness.

"How do *you* know her?" Bayok crouched atop an old root, his coat still fast in Carl's grip.

"To *me* was her hand promised!" Carl growled and punched his old wound. "She promised." He slapped his breast with hope his heart would burst. "Promised!" His vision swam and his maddened brain turned the dwarf into a thing from hell.

"How, little demon?" Carl bellowed and pulled the dwarf roughly. "Why did she marry Stradovicho?"

Bayok's face contorted as the old fingers slipped up around his throat.

"You're mad!" he wheezed and pulled.

"How?" Raged Carl, with a face of love and hate and loss.

"Five years past she married," Bayok hissed. "No work of mine!"

"How came she to this place, your group?" Carl snapped. "You were here when she came."

"Stradovicho brought her forty years ago. From fishermen he purchased her with gold." Then Bayok pulled against Carl's grip, his small voice growling, "Enough! To hell with you, madman. If you're to break my neck, then break it!"

Then Carl saw the pale face in dying sunlight with round eyes wide with terror. He loosed his grip and the dwarf jumped back, snatching up the cane as he went. He struck across the old knuckles, but the man offered no defense, did not even feel the blow.

"Purchased!" Carl wept. "He *bought* Lhasa?"

"Yes, you fool!" Bayok clubbed the air between. "I'll make a drum of your skull and dance."

"Forgive me," Carl breathed, slumping by the tree. "I am not myself." Tears ran down his cheeks. "My wife was she to be."

"*Your* wife?" the dwarf asked, eyebrows raised, cane lowering.

"We were to marry," Carl repeated.

"Then you are Carl." The dwarf tipped his head in greeting. "And I'm a fool."

"I am Carl," the old man said, shifting forward as another surge of madness caught him.

"The very one, then..." The dwarf dropped the cane, searched about a moment before picking up his pipe to light it. "She waited for you."

"Waited?" Carl crept forward on his knees.

"Calmly now." Bayok raised a warning hand and puffed until the bowl glowed red. "She hates old Stradovicho, and that's the truth. He did buy her from fishermen. Truth also. He bought her but not her freedom." He cleared his throat. "For that she hates him."

"Why marry?"

"Stradovicho abused her, wedding ring or not." Bayok blew a curling stream of smoke. "But it irked his pride that she would not accept his offer so he drugged her, and in that state he won her hand."

"Drugged her..."

"It was sad the day it happened," Bayok said, "and sad after."

"We must help." Carl struggled to stand but the dwarf pushed him back.

"Stradovicho's men today were kind and gentle, for many eyes were watching. They will be neither if they catch you there by night."

"I will save her." Carl fought back his tears. "And you must help."

The dwarf shook his head and turned.

"You told me even now, she was your friend. Is that truth also?" Carl implored the dwarf in shadow. "She understands the heart, you said. My friend, would she understand yours now?"

The dwarf dropped his gaze, and found his pipe was out.

"I'll help," he muttered, and stabbed his finger in the bowl.

Lamps and torches guttered in the dull red fairground air. Carl and Bayok hurried past the wagons, hidden well in the poor low light. They mounted the stage by the sign that read "Nereid," and stood side by side in the dark to sweat.

Something splashed past the paint-covered curtain and quickened Carl's old heart.

Bayok pulled his coat.

"Wait!" he whispered, most worried. "Stradovicho chains Lhasa to her tank at night for fear she'll call to friends. And aye, he's heard of you too."

"What to do?"

"The key will in her master's wagon be." Bayok's eyes swung to the shadows as he spoke.

"I will help."

"You can't." Bayok smiled. "Wait here."

The dwarf leapt off the steps and into shadow. Carl watched the dark-shrouded space by the wagons and a rectangle of orange appeared. A tiny man passed before the amber.

Carl waited in the dark smelling sea salt and sand. Water trickled as the hand of a bather displaced it. There was a moan, a quiet half-spoken word. Soft it was as a calm sea swell; then came a sigh like a fine bow spray. Fear gripped Carl as he struggled in his heart. He longed to hold her in his arms, to crush Lhasa to his breast, but he was old now, so pale his vein-traced skin. The flesh beneath was flat and thin. Would she want him?

He tread closer listening, ear brushing the rough curtain's edge.

"Carl!" A whisper stabbed at his back. He whipped about to see Bayok there.

"The key!" the little man said, as he set it on Carl's palm. It was wet with darkness, and in the dim light Carl saw the oozing black came from the dwarf's small hands.

"What happened?" Carl set a palm on Bayok's arm. Tears lingered in the little man's eyes. "Are you well?"

"Yes." Bayok smiled.

"But what did you do?"

"Bought our freedom both." A fever of passion pulled the dwarf's face low.

"Let us go." Carl nodded, afraid to know. "Lhasa needs us."

"No." Bayok wiped his wet cheeks with a shirt cuff. "Lhasa is too great a burden to easily bear away; we will be caught by noise." He patted Carl's arm. "I will distract them while you take her. My time among these wagons is done. Bayok is old and he has danced in blood."

"But..." Carl was silenced by the dwarf's waving hands.

"Save her."

"I thank you." Carl caught the small fingers and squeezed them.

The dwarf melted into shadows.

Carl moved quickly now, hands searching for an open fold in the fabric. His fingers grasped a coarse seam, and he was inside. It was very dark, lit only by one wax-drowned candle and a faint glow that seeped through the curtain. There were just dim shapes and his cane felt the floor like a blind man's.

"Lhasa?" he whispered.

No answer came. He moved forward, clawing at the gloom for obstructions and his arm sank with a splash in cool water. Carl stumbled against a deep tub and there followed a clink and hollow ring of bottles on the floor. The smell of whiskey was heavy.

“Lhasa?”

Still no answer, but a rough drawn breath shifted the water. The edge of the tank was chest high and of oak boards bound with iron. Carl hung his cane there and felt along the lip until his fingers brushed wet hair.

He peered into the darkness, and his old eyes saw a pale shape in a tangle of dark curls.

“Lhasa!” He stabbed his hands into the water and pulled her silent form to him. Carl welcomed her crisp sea smell, and the warm ripe rise of her flesh. He kissed her brow, still tight with youth, and then whispered her name like a spell. “Lhasa. Lhasa. Lhasa.”

Still she did not respond. The liquor was heavy upon her. He felt her arms and on the left a circle of iron at the wrist. He fumbled with the key, cursing the rattle and noise—cursing his stiff old knuckles.

The chain fell away with a thump.

Success emboldened him, brought vitality to his form as he reached deep into the tank and heaved her out. His coat and clothing were soaked by the action and grew sodden and heavy; yet Carl’s shoulders held the years well. He limped from the cover of the curtain and down the steps of the stage, pausing only to glance at Lhasa’s face in the weird light.

Her features were drawn and pale, yet time had only brushed its lips across her face. With sinking heart he saw that though her hair had grown white strands, she was otherwise unchanged. Like a young woman careworn and tired, but she was just as he remembered.

He limped along as quickly as he could, his old heart laboring with the strain. Then, his shadow danced before him as the grounds behind were licked by violent flame. Turning, Carl saw wagons now demonic silhouettes leap against the fire from burning tents. Bayok had set a blaze to cover their escape.

Carl shrugged his burden higher, ignoring the deep ache in his back and leg.

He turned and made his way slowly past the pine trees, Lhasa growing heavier with each step. He stumbled blindly on from the fairgrounds and the road. Through the blackness he wended, his old ears searching fast for sounds of sea.

The rising sun brought him awake on his back in the dim orange light. The chill dew lay heavy on his face and clothes. Gulls wheeled and screeched overhead. A dull throb in his leg brought him back to his cares.

The sand caused him to tumble, Carl was sure of that. The waves were breaking in the darkness and echoed over the sloping dunes. One moment he had kicked his way through grass at the beach’s edge, and the next he was falling. The searing pain in his leg gave voice to the old damage there.

Carl turned his head to Lhasa’s face still unconscious or asleep at his side. The rising sun was warming her skin; coloring the pale features he’d seen the night before. The lines around her eyes were deeper than remembered, and a severe triangle now mapped her nose and lips. But such beauty did she have!

Pain lanced his chest, rose in strength and would not stop. He sank into the black.

Two pale brown eyes regarded him. He'd been stuck in nausea and nightmare before coming free.

"I was on my way, my love," Lhasa smiled weakly. "When fishermen caught me."

"Oh Lhasa!" Carl tried to pull her close but his arms would not respond. Pain flashed angry fire through his shoulders.

"Peace, my love," she cautioned, "you're not well,"

"Lhasa," he growled, teeth gritted against the pain. "I loved you always." Sorrow brought tears to his eyes. He suspected what the pain would mean. "I waited."

"Stradovicho bought me and took me far from the sea. For years I traveled with his show. I hoped you did not think ill of me," she said, lips quivering. "I thought of you always." She looked toward the waves. "I fear we're too late to enjoy that life we wished together."

"It matters not, I've seen you now," he sobbed. The pain in his chest drained his life away. "I am at peace. You must go to the sea. Can you go?"

"I could..." Lhasa's features trembled under tears. "But I will not lose you again."

"If the tales are true..." Pain wheezed through Carl's chest. "You will live forever."

"Not forever," she whispered as the new sun broke across the waves. "And the same long life awaits me there that I wished to leave for *you*."

"But honor me, Lhasa. I am old... and dying," he gasped. "Live a long life and love again."

"I didn't want it without you, Carl." She patted his chest.

He summoned up his strength to push her away, but she smiled as new tears flowed.

"Instead, I have a gift for you."

"No..." he insisted. "To the sea."

"It is a way we have my people, to gather up our years and use their power at once, in time of need." Her fingers probed the flesh over his heart.

"What do you say?"

"We can live a day together, as we would have lived our lives."

"No!" Carl tried to push her again.

"You have no say in how I use my magic," Lhasa laughed.

Her soft lips pressed his and fire flashed through his chest. It ran the length of his limbs and he bellowed.

The setting sun lit the water to red flame.

The pair laughed where they swam. Water streamed from their sleek bodies as they embraced again.

"Love me, Carl!"

"So I shall," he laughed, their lips meeting, arms entwining. Beneath the waves they dropped. The water closed out all sound but their beating hearts. The sea grew colder as they spiraled ever downward, yet their love heated the darkness around them and gave it light.

Above, the sun dipped lower in the sky to form a half-crescent against the sea.

Downward the lovers spun. Into the deep they went, a flickering spark that frightened away its darkest denizens. Their passion grew with each revolving fathom.

From the horizon, the sun sent long and fiery fingers forth to caress the darkening waves and slide burning tips against the distant coasts.

In the darkness, the lovers settled on a mattress of mud and gray. Arms about each other, cheek pressed to smiling cheek. The waters knit a warm cover of kelp to blanket their tangled limbs.

Coral formed a pillow for their heads.

Carl's heart beat its last.

Lhasa opened her eyes, and turned in his embrace. She studied his features, now slipping and shifting back to an old man's.

She kissed him once, and swam away.

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