

“Fathom”

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7 *BBY*

Panicked pliffer fish swarmed for cover within the nearby multicolored ridge of terpfen coral as the three Mon Calamari children twisted through the water in their direction. One of the three, Bissl, laughed with delight when she spotted them and tried to give chase, but the fish were already gone. She spun and joined back up with her two friends, her detour all but forgotten.

Bissl gazed around her in wonder. The world was so big. The deep, shifting blues of Dac’s oceans stretched as far as she could see in every direction, and it was teeming with so much life and so many creatures that she doubted she’d ever get to see them all. She wondered if her parents had seen them all. They must have.

The water around the three children was gradually growing lighter as they steadily swam upward. Yesterday Bissl’s friend Petrin had told her and her other friend Lesz that he and his family had gone up to some islands on the surface. Bissl had been fascinated by the story, so much so that Petrin had promised to take her and Lesz up to the surface today.

What would the surface be like? The four-year-old Mon Cal couldn’t quite wrangle such a concept into her imagination, even with as large as that imagination was. All she’d ever known was the depths of the ocean. How could the ocean possibly end? How could she go somewhere that wasn’t ocean? The ocean was everything and everywhere. It couldn’t not be somewhere. It made absolutely no sense.

Bissl couldn’t wait to find out, though at the same time she was nervous at venturing away from home without her parents. They never allowed her to swim far without one of them with her. But they often let her go to Petrin’s house or Lesz’s house nearby, and she was with both of her friends now, so everything would be okay.

“Almost there,” Petrin said as the water continued to brighten. Bissl eagerly swam faster to keep pace with Petrin and Lesz.

“Bissl!”

The frightened call came from below. Bissl paused in mid-stroke and twisted to look down. Her parents were swimming up toward her as fast as they could.

“Mother? Father?” Bissl said. Petrin and Lesz had also stopped and watched her parents’ frantic approach.

Her parents reached her in a cascade of chaotic bubbles. “Bissl, what are you doing way up here?” her mother demanded.

Bissl was confused at the fear she heard in her mother’s voice. “I told you I was going with Petrin and Lesz. We’re going to the surface.”

“What?” her father said. He also sounded afraid. Then he shook his head and said, “Bissl, the surface is no place for you or your friends. The Imperial slavers will see you up there!”

“The slavers?” Unconsciously, Bissl moved downward a stroke or two. Her parents’ vigilance and their remote home in the deep waters had kept their family safe from the slavery and subjugation so far, but Bissl hadn’t realized that protection could be shattered so easily if she wandered. The anxious feeling from earlier grew more pronounced. “They’re up there?”

“Yes. You’re not safe on the surface, Bissie,” her mother said, placing one reddish webbed hand protectively on Bissl’s mottled orange arm. “They’d be able to see you from far away up there. You’re much safer down here where we can continue to hide. All of you are.” Her right eye swivelled to encompass Petrin and Lesz as well.

“But me and my parents went to the surface yesterday,” Petrin protested. “We even went to some islands. We were fine.”

“Then you were lucky,” Bissl’s father snapped. His barbels twitched. “I won’t let my daughter take such a risk. All it takes is one passing Imperial to spot her and take her away forever.”

“Forever?” Bissl’s voice was small, and she quickly huddled next to her mother for safety. Her mother wrapped both arms around her and held her. The danger of the slavers had never felt real to Bissl until now. Before, they were a scary story told over and over again by her parents, and some part of her had always kept them compartmentalized as just a story. Now, she realized her actions had almost made them into a reality with horrible consequences.

“We’re taking Bissl home,” her father said to her friends. “You two should head home as well before something terrible happens.” With that, he spun in a flash of salmon pink, churning up more frenzied bubbles, and headed down toward their home hidden far below in some rock crevices. Bissl’s mother also turned, still holding Bissl, and the pair followed.

Bissl huddled into her mother’s embrace for protection. As they swam, she looked around with wide eyes. The world was so big. Too big. It was teeming with threats and hiding places for predators and slavers. Every shadow could contain something that wanted to snatch her away from her parents forever. How had she never noticed that?

She’d never been glad for the confines of the small house before.

64 *ABY*

Deep in Dac’s ocean, Bissl swam slowly, trying to glide through the water more than propel herself. Her achy joints didn’t move very fast or powerfully anymore. They hadn’t for a long time.

Her daughter Lekba swam beside her at arm’s length. The awkward silence stretched between them like a physical barrier, and Lekba fidgeted. She’d been doing that ever since handing her young son to her husband and saying she would meet them back at their rented room at the nearby inn. As always, she’d declined the invitation for her family to stay at Bissl’s house.

Bissl sighed quietly. The circumstances were not what she’d wanted, but all the same, she’d held on to a glimmer of hope that this time spent together would help to mend the strained relationship between her and Lekba. Unfortunately, it hadn’t.

“Will you be all right, Mother?” Lekba asked at length, the words more perfunctory than warm.

Bissl nodded, though honestly she wasn’t sure. Her husband’s illness had been long, and

while they'd been prepared for his passing toward the end, the true fact of it still hadn't sunk in yet.

"Yes, I'll be fine," Bissl said, hoping it was the truth. "What about you, Lek? I know how you adored your father. He felt the same about you."

Lekba stiffened a bit, but she stated firmly, "I'll be okay. I have Ibshi and Aterak."

There was a long pause, during which Bissl wondered how to take the implication that she herself had no one now. It felt like another judgement, another unspoken barb from her daughter. This was the pattern Bissl and Lekba always fell into, though, and today, coming back from her husband's memorial service, Bissl tried hard not to give in to the habitual arguments. She wanted to mend the relationship with Lekba, not worsen it. Finally she decided to ignore the perceived barb and instead said sincerely, "You have a lovely family. They're very lucky to have you."

Lekba's response took a few moments to come, but when it did, it surprised Bissl. "I wish they could see more of you. I'd like Ibshi to know his grandmother."

"You're all always welcome to visit," Bissl said eagerly. The spark of hope inside glowed brighter.

It dimmed again almost immediately with Lekba's next words of frustration. "Mother, we've been over this. You know how hard it is for us to pack up the family and come all the way down here. Obviously this time we had to, and when Father was sick it was the same way, but even before that, aside from that, it's always been us who have to come to you. We can't keep doing that every single time like we have been. If you would just consider—" Lekba stopped herself, visibly took a deep breath, and let it out in a controlled but forceful stream of bubbles. "Never mind," she said, shaking her head and sounding resigned. "This same argument isn't going to get us anywhere. It never has before, and that won't change now."

They continued swimming in silence, and Bissl was grateful for it. She had no desire to retread that disagreement either. They both knew each other's stances: Bissl didn't want to venture far from home, and Lekba couldn't wait to get as far away as possible.

At last they reached Bissl's house. Lekba hesitated and pulled up short well outside of her childhood home, as if reluctant to ever enter it again. Not surprising, since she'd spent her entire youth trying to escape from it at every turn. Bissl stopped as well.

"Would you like to come inside?" Bissl asked despite already knowing the answer.

As expected, Lekba shook her head. "Thanks, but I'd better get back to Aterak and Ibshi. I just wanted to make sure you got home all right. We'll swing by in the morning on our way home to check on you."

And then it would surely be a long, long time before Bissl saw her daughter again. Maybe never. Maybe, without her father here as a motivation, Lekba would decide the hassle of traveling wasn't worth it just to see her disagreeable mother, and Bissl knew she herself couldn't make the trip to Lekba's home in the surface city.

The mere thought of the surface sent a bolt of panic through Bissl, just as it had always done. She wasn't even sure why she was so afraid of the world outside her little underwater town; the fear was just a part of her and had been for her entire life. It may as well have been an internal organ.

And yet, that completely natural and normal demeanor toward the world was something that Lekba utterly lacked. Talking to her about it was like trying to explain the role of a stomach or a rhyttok gland to someone who didn't have one. If they could somehow inexplicably function

and survive without it, they failed to see the purpose of it. It had always been maddening trying in vain to convince Lekba of why she should heed Bissl's perfectly legitimate concerns, and it had all come to a head when Lekba was finally old enough to move away.

Up to the surface. That action had crushed, confused, and horrified Bissl.

The fear and worry for her daughter had kept Bissl awake countless nights, and still did. Lekba was going to get killed or taken away up on the surface. Lekba was being an irresponsible, obstinate octowhale for insisting on living there and constantly being in danger. She was reckless. She was naive. She needed protection. And in the face of it all, Lekba was braver than Bissl herself could ever hope to be, and somehow Bissl was proud of her.

Bissl's internal emotional war was a complicated one with no winners and no ceasefire in sight. And Lekba's intention to leave in the morning for what could be the very last time threw all the emotions' troops and generals into utter chaos.

Looking at her uncomfortable daughter who was so anxious to leave, only a single thought was clear for Bissl. Despite their constant friction over the years, Lekba was the one good thing remaining in Bissl's life, and the thought of permanently losing her too, of losing her to the surface where Bissl couldn't follow, was overwhelming. But the messy war raged on like it always did, and she was angry at Lekba for not understanding what a mistake Lekba was making in her intention to go back to the surface, for ignoring Bissl's very valid fears and guidance in trying to keep her safe, and going on with her life as if there was nothing to be concerned about.

As if Bissl and her worries didn't even exist.

Maybe she truly didn't exist anymore in Lekba's world. She'd never really been a part of it to begin with.

It was too much on a day like today.

"Lekba," Bissl blurted out before Lekba could swim away forever. Her voice was slightly choked.

"Yes?" Lekba asked.

Bissl reached out, and her wrinkled, mottled orange hands clasped Lekba's reddish brown one between them. Lekba looked a bit surprised at the gesture.

Bissl wasn't exactly sure what to say. They'd both said so much, too much, in all their arguments over the years, but she had to say something. As a reason, as an excuse, as some sort of explanation in a final attempt to bridge the gap in case this was the last time she was ever alone with her daughter again.

"I worry about you," Bissl said at last. The heartfelt words were soft.

Lekba sighed, though her response was gentle, not exasperated like it so often was in their conversations. "There's nothing to worry about. I'm fine. You know, Mother, the world out there..." She trailed off for a few moments, then seemed to make up her mind and kept going. "The world out there, the galaxy, it's not so bad. It's pretty amazing, actually. I just feel bad that you haven't ever really experienced that." She briefly squeezed Bissl's hands. "Get some rest. I'll see you in the morning." Lekba let go, turned, and swam away.

Bissl sadly watched her go, and then she slowly swam into her house. Alone.

It was empty now, and without her husband there to care for, she wasn't sure what to do. It was only early afternoon, and without any scheduled activities or even any ideas, the rest of the day stretching out before her seemed interminable. She drifted aimlessly between the too-familiar rooms, searching for anything even remotely engaging to occupy herself with.

She passed pictures on the corridor walls of old friends. Friends who had been a large part

of her life in her younger years. Friends who had moved on with their lives and ventured outward while she stayed put. Left behind.

Other pictures showed her family. There was her husband, who had always talked about traveling off-world for a vacation or getting a much better job in one of the surface cities but had constantly acquiesced to Bissl's strong desire to stay in their small town where it was safe. And there was her daughter, who had rebelled incessantly against Bissl's attempts to protect her and keep her close while Lekba was growing up.

Bissl made another restless lap around the small house. Was the rest of her life going to consist of nothing but this emptiness? Left behind by friends, no partner to care for, and an estranged daughter to never see again? Probably. What else was there? Despite living there her whole life, she didn't feel particularly close to anyone else in town. They spoke to her as if she was just part of the background, a minor detail taken for granted. A barely noticeable part of a world that was too small.

Her safe, tiny world was suddenly too lonely. Too constrictive.

Bissl headed out of her house. A swim around town might do her some good and help get her mind off the loss of her family.

Out amid the other residences and businesses, most of the Mon Calamari townsfolk she passed barely acknowledged her. All of them seemed to have somewhere pressing to be. This once sleepy town hidden in the depths of the sea had woken up at some point, though Bissl couldn't recall exactly when. It had grown in recent decades despite the wars and the friends moving away.

She swam a bit higher to avoid the residents' heightened activity. Bissl was pleasantly surprised to find it was more peaceful above the town. A school of pliffer fish whisked past, and she smiled as they darted out of sight. She followed in their wake for a short time.

Bissl found herself higher above the town than she'd been in recent memory. It was so quiet up here, and so beautiful with all the different fish. She saw a particularly pretty one that was a vibrant red and green, and she drifted lazily after the small creature.

She didn't expect the water up there to be a different shade of deep blue. Outside of the illuminated pathways around town and lit building interiors, the water was always so dark where she lived due to its depth. Bissl had forgotten water could be different hues.

Above her, it was even lighter. She began to swim upward in curiosity until one thought exploded across her mind:

Upward was toward the surface.

Bissl immediately stopped in panic. What was she doing way up here? She was insane, going so far from town at her age. She was helpless to protect herself against danger.

She automatically turned to swim back down toward town, but something made her stop. What was waiting for her down in those dark depths? Nothing. Wasn't that why she'd gone out swimming in the first place? Wasn't that why she'd ended up here to begin with?

She treaded water, warring with herself uncertainly. As she did so, she noticed it was a bit easier to swim here. The crushing weight of the deeper water pressure had lessened, making Bissl feel almost buoyant for the first time in years.

She couldn't bring herself to go home again so soon, but she still was deeply afraid of ascending further. She looked up into the lighter-colored water above.

Lekba's world was up there. She'd said it was amazing.

This was the closest Bissl had ever gotten to Lekba's world and to understanding her. If

she didn't want to lose her daughter like she'd lost her husband, maybe it was time to go a little farther.

With trepidation, Bissl forced her elderly muscles to fight gravity and push her upward. At first one stroke was all she mustered the courage for. Then she managed another. Then another.

The water grew lighter both in color and in weight. Types of fish she'd never seen before surrounded her. Slowly she kept going, shaking from both effort and anxiety. It seemed like she was swimming forever.

Then there was a sort of localized sparkle in the water, and she paused. Everything looked incredibly strange right above her, an odd bright blue with unusual distortions, and she felt another stab of fear. This had to be the surface, a mere meter above her head. She'd never been this close to it before. She waited, trembling, but the surface did not smite her.

She stayed put for a considerable time, but nothing happened. Nothing continued to happen for so long that she began to feel both confused and a little embarrassed. Calmer now, Bissl kicked a half meter upward and paused again. She felt the pronounced effects of the waves around her.

Tentatively she raised a webbed hand and poked a couple fingers upward. They broke through the water to nothingness, encountering no resistance and only a sensation of coldness on her skin. Startled, she snatched her hand back down fully under the water and rubbed those fingers soothingly. They looked none the worse for their foray into the unknown.

She tried again, more prepared this time, and kept her whole hand above the surface for a longer period. It was odd, feeling nothing pressing against her hand except the cold. Water lightly lapped at her wrist as though scolding her for venturing beyond its protection. She pulled her hand back down.

The surface. It separated her from Lekba and her family. It had separated Bissl and her husband from his dreams. It separated her from so many others in her past and in her society. And now, thinking over what Lekba had said to her earlier, Bissl began to wonder if it had separated her from her own life.

Maybe today, facing her husband's death and struggling to keep her daughter, was the day she finally had to reclaim her life and try to start over before it was too late.

Force help her, she needed to be brave like Lekba. Just once. Just for a minute.

Before she could change her mind or allow sense back into it, Bissl took a deep breath and held it while she pushed upward with all her strength. Her head and shoulders broke the surface with a foamy splash. She instantly felt the cold sensation against her skin, and when her eyes adjusted to the blinding brightness, she nearly gasped at the sight.

She'd seen pictures of the surface, of the horizon, of clouds, of the sky, but the pictures had not prepared her for the sheer enormity of what lay all around her. Here she was, at the inconceivable edge of the ocean which had seemed so endless her entire life. She was existing partway out of the water, in a place where the ocean was not present. There was no resistance there, nothing pushing against her. And the sight... she hadn't known her eyes could see across such an incomprehensible distance. Visibility deep underwater was so limited, but here... she felt like she was seeing across the entire planet effortlessly. The horizon was so incredibly far away.

Bissl ducked down into the water momentarily to get a few more lungfuls of oxygen, then she held her breath again and popped back out into the airy nothingness. Off in the distance was what looked like one of the surface cities floating on the water, though she didn't know which

one. Above her, vehicles swam through the air, the sky was a shade of light blue she hadn't known existed, and the clouds were like nothing she'd ever seen. They just hung there, suspended like bubbles but without geometric precision in their shapes. The very bright light source had to be the sun, and as Bissl bobbed above the waves, her skin nearest the sun began to feel like she was near a thermal vent, eradicating the cold sensation.

She took another few excited breaths underwater and poked her head above the waves once more. Bissl looked all around in wide-eyed amazement at all the wonders she'd never experienced before.

She couldn't believe how big the world was. She wondered how much of it she'd be able to see.

The End

Revision A
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