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Fear and Conquering

The wide, coal-grey river taunted her as she stood shivering miserably on the barren, rocky shore, the cool waves lapping at her bare toes. Indeed, it was a brisk day, but she was not shivering just from the biting cold. Hugging herself against the chill breeze and for comfort, she closed her eyes, drawing a deep breath. “You *can* do this, Opal,” she told herself, steadying herself for the inevitable. Her eyes then went past all that water to a hazy green blot on the horizon and she sighed heavily. She wanted to go there. She *needed* to go there. “Today must be the day,” she whispered with urgency.

Bracing herself, she took a large, stiff step forward... then another... and another... until it was too terribly agonizing to continue further, her body shuddering like thin blade of grass in the wind. It was too much, yet again. She floundered back onto the shore and panted in frustration as her clenched hands began to grow pale. “How are you supposed to overcome this if you can’t even get in past yer belly?” she reprimanded herself, teeth chattering. “*You have* to do it for *him!*”

The few, tall trees towering behind her were much too large for use, and she was too weak to even dream of building a raft with them, even if she had help. And it wouldn’t matter anyway. Water was water no matter how you were in it, but precious time was running out.

Dripping wet and defeated again, Opal began the trek back to her father where he had lain stricken with a mysterious illness in their hut for the past few months. Mentally she kicked herself for being so cowardly, but she was much too tired to care more than a little.

She felt utterly disheartened as she completed the journey home. The ramshackle hut was depressingly dark inside and smelled of musty sickness, its melancholy no more relieved when her eyes adjusted and she could focus on the emaciated figure in the bed on the floor: her father. She knelt at the side of his mattress and brushed the hair away from his clammy face, her palm resting on her cheek as she looked down upon him. He hardly stirred, and she began to weep quietly for him.

“I’m sorry, Da...” she whispered. “I’ve tried...”

Opal had done all that she could for the best existence possible, but it was just that—her best. She could hunt, clean, and protect herself, but still she was helpless. In the isolated area where they lived, there were no other people for miles save for one old medicine woman—practically good for nothing—and her father was too sick to move or be left behind while she went for help. Once, she had considered seeking out the village where they had lived when she was very young. It had been her home before the death of her mother, who was the only reason why her father had stayed around people for so long. Since the night she had died, they had packed up and never looked back. They found land by the river for themselves and were happy. Her father never told Opal why he found other people irritating; it was just something she had known for most of her life and was fine with. They didn’t need anyone but each other. It was just unfortunate that her father’s seemingly irrational disdain for other people besides his daughter was to be their downfall.

When her father had grown only worse with time, Opal had begged for the old woman to help her ailing father. She had said that the only cure was a plant located across the river on an island. In her younger years, the old, nearly blind woman would have been able to retrieve it herself. Now, it was up to Opal, who was younger and much stronger in body.

But her lanky body could be as strong as a man’s and she still wouldn’t be able to do it. As many times as Opal had tried, she felt herself a failure because she was held back by her powerful fear of the river that flowed between life and death for her father, promising to wash them both away if she couldn’t learn to swim bravely again like she used to.

She sat there for hours next to her father, staring into nothing as she reflected upon her dilemma, unbothered by the tears that rolled down her cheeks. Why was she so cowardly? Why was this fear so brutal? How could she let her father die like this, a shell of the strong, independent man he had once been? It was startling then when an insistent epiphany popped into her head.

I can’t give up on him because I was just too scared! If he’s dying, couldn’t I be stronger than my fear? she thought as she stood up.

Quickly spinning around, she left the hut and her father behind, tore down the length of the darkening beach, and took a running leap into the water. Instantly, she knew it was a mistake and shuddered as the shockingly cold water rolled over her head, but she couldn’t give her fear an inch as she took a gulp of air, and the faster she moved the sooner it would be over. If she were to stop paddling for even a second, she knew she would sink to the bottom again, just like she had all those summers ago, only this time nobody could save her from her stupid curiosity that had willed her to seek out the same island, stupidly underestimating the energy she would have needed to complete the swim. But she was bigger now and her mind focused solely on the motions. Her muscles were out of form for a short time until they recognized the familiar pattern and her speed increased. She would not succumb to exhaustion this time.

She crawled onto the foreign shore, her body pleading with her to stop, but she couldn't spare the time. Although the old woman had been little help overall, when Opal had first started her attempts at helping herself, she had given to the girl the description of the plant, and had told her where on the island it had usually grown in the past. Recalling this easily, it did not take her long despite the quickly fading light to find the scrubby little plant, grabbing it up and clutching it in her fist when she fell upon it. Wheezing, Opal ran back to the shore of the island and didn't stop to let the fatal, dangerous thoughts creep into her mind, the river water sloshing and splashing around her knees, hips, and then her chest and neck as she plunged forth, her gaze only seeing the mainland shore on the other side.

Her arms stretched out with each easy stroke, her legs kicking rhythmically just beneath the choppy waves, but after a while she began to grow unbearably tired. She knew what to do this time, and paused to float on her back like her father taught her to when he was trying to rehabilitate her. It hadn't worked much back then, but she still had learned the trick. Floating there, good memories began to come back to her; she could recall the happy days she had spent before the accident paddling about without a trace of fear with her father nearby on the beach. She had loved it, and loved hearing her father's praise as he watched her swim very well. She had no way of explaining the feelings she had felt, and was beginning to feel again. She had done what she hadn't been able to accomplish so long ago by swimming all the way to the island and then back, and now she was going to save her father, too.

The dark waters of the river gave way to something that brushed against her leg, and at first she hardly noticed. It was a fish, medium or large, it didn't matter. It was just a fish, and the second time it passed by—thinking it was just playing some little fishy game—Opal noticed. Fear rose up in her adrenaline-filled heart, and she panicked. She envisioned the worst and she flailed about, forgetting everything she had ever learned in the blindness of her terror. The shore was so close that she thought she could see through blurred sight a figure standing on the shore but she was still too tired to go that far. She thought it could only be the old woman as she cried for help in vain with the bed of the river out of reach of her toes.

“Why don't you help me!” Opal cried even though the possibility of rescue was so very slim as everything grew fuzzier and blurrier until she could see no more.

That dark, dreary afternoon, Opal, dry as a sun-bleached bone, bewildered for a moment before she realized what had happened, her eyes clearing and focusing on some dark shape floating limply in the waves, something she couldn't bring herself to think about further, and so she turned her gaze away from it. She was standing next to the old woman now, and together the pair looked out to the water, one with unearthly eyes, as the old woman in her mind recalled from earlier in the day toiling over her journals, bent so close to the pages just to see it had given her a headache. The old woman remembered standing both briefly and painfully to draw back the covering on the makeshift window. A cooling breeze had filled the room, turning the pages of the shabby journal her attention had been on. Frustration had filled her, but when she'd looked down, she had found what she had been looking for.

By the dream-like haziness of it, Opal could easily see that the old woman's memory had weakened over the years, losing its young vividness, but printed in her own scrawled script the

old woman had found the words that gave back a bit of her memory to her. The plant that she had described to Opal was a plant she hadn't needed for decades, but before her sight and body in general had gone bad, she had stumbled upon a plentiful source located on the mainland. The island would be unnecessary now.

Silently, Opal watched the memory through the old woman's nearly useless eyes as she had retraced her steps dictated by the journal. She had easily rediscovered the plant, and thereafter had made her way down to the shore where she knew the silly, distressed girl would be, as she had been for months, to deliver the good news... good news that after all that had come too late for Opal.

"Mayhap there is a chance still for your father, girl," the old woman said aloud, naturally believing that her words were for her old ears only. "You will rest in a watery grave for your brave attempt, but now I wonder if your father can make it through the sickness of heartbreak without joining you."

Opal, as she despairingly took in the woman's words, stood on the earthly shore with her for the last time. She was glad the old woman could not see her sad face or her tears as she murmured to herself, her soft, sad voice catching on the breeze, "I hope so, too..."

The End