The Monster Was My Heart

By Ana Towns

I moved as quietly as I could to the edge of the drifting boat. The sky and the sea were almost black—still and silent.

I looked down at a wooden chest at my feet. There, inside a jar, was the monster that nearly killed me. Even with the sound of the waves, I could hear its hollow breathing. It was still unclear who had won. I had taken it out of my body before it could kill me, but it had taken away my memories. And my heart.

I was a sailor, and somewhere along my travels the monster made me its host. The sorcerer who helped me had only two pieces of advice for me: I couldn't kill the monster; it was my heart. The only solution was to find magical pearls, made from rain, found only in the desert in the Solar Empire.

The sorcerer couldn't figure out how I was still living.

I came from the cities of the sea, and my people were all sailors. Yet now, without memory, I was a stranger in my own home. I couldn't remember the seas and oceans. The stars that used to guide me no longer did.

The monster was a deep current, the kind that shifts a ship's course without warning, so I gave up my ship and my crew to take this small boat I could sail alone. As long as the monster was alive, I wouldn't endanger anyone but myself.

Without my memory, I let the boat decide my course.

I went to sleep.

I dreamt of the monster. It was dark grey, a mouth full of sharp teeth. When the monster was about to eat my heart, I woke up.

It was then that I felt the morning cold. Fog surrounded my boat. I pulled the woolen blanket around my shoulders tighter and saw, through the mist, a coast I had written of in my diaries. It was the kingdom of Aberlin, and I had almost sailed past it.

I wanted to cry, but without a heart it was impossible.

I needed provisions, so even if a few days in Aberlin would delay my journey, I had to stay.

I read about Aberlin in my diary, which felt like reading a stranger's life. According to my own handwriting, I liked to eat at the Sleeping Tide, another place I could not remember. It would be my first stop.

I arrived at the port and hid the chest in my satchel. I was afraid someone would think it was treasure and take it.

The monster woke up.

Aberlin was beautiful in its own ghostly way. I tried to remember the landscapes I knew I had walked before, but I couldn't.

I entered the Sleeping Tide and noticed the man as soon as he came into view. He looked like a bear, but his eyes were like a doe's. He had a lute. He sat next to me. I felt like I knew him. Was he another erased memory?

An old woman brought us food and beer. We talked for so long, I didn't notice the moon replace the sun. I asked the man if he would sing but he refused.

The old woman told us we could share a room upstairs. I climbed the stairs first, and he followed me. I tripped and the chest fell from my satchel, and he took it.

"What is it?" he asked. "It is heavy."

"Spices," I lied.

He smiled and helped me stand up. As soon as we entered the room, I let myself fall on the bed. He sat next to me and played his lute. I fell asleep.

Suddenly, I woke up. My chest ached as if it were on fire. I looked around, and the wooden chest was nowhere. Neither was the man. I left the room. I needed to find him before it was too late.

I walked with no destination. He could be anywhere. I reached the end of the city. The ache was unbearable. I fell. I knew I was dying.

The pain forced me to close my eyes. It was then that I heard him. His voice sounded like a secret shared in the dark. It kept coming closer. Slowly, the ache became bearable. As he sang, his voice went from a whisper to a cry, and back to a whisper again. I kept my eyes closed. Fragments of my old life came back.

The song finished. I opened my eyes. The man was sitting in front of me. I knew him. The monster in its jar was between us. He swept away a tear from my eye. He showed it to me. It was a pearl. I looked at my lap and saw it was filled with my tears, turned into pearls.

I took one pearl and gave it to the monster. It turned into ash.

The man—my North star, the one I could not read—put his hand on my chest. My heart was home again.