

## Saltwater - Tameka, Year 8, QLD

There was something about the ocean that called to him. Something about its wild, endless grey, tossing and churning like the lungs of an ancient beast. Something that, according to the ladies of the orphanage, sent him tiptoeing out of his cot at night sending the entire house into an uproar trying to find the little boy, only for him to be found hours later at the end of the dock, reaching his tiny hands towards the water and humming softly.

Thomas smiled to himself and brushed his unkempt hazel hair out of his eyes. The summer sun reflected off the murky grey-blue water and shone into his sea green eyes. Here he was again, after all these years. Back at the same dock. He started abruptly as the ships' bell tolled once, twice, three times.

Well, not exactly. Thomas pushed himself upright with a soft sigh. He was a sailor, and never in one place for long.

*Of course, the one time I'm somewhere I want to be, Cameron's men actually do their job properly.* His bare feet thumped along the dock as he hurried back to the cargo ship. He couldn't help but envy the modern 'motor' cars of the nobility rattling along the pavement beside him. He eyed the ocean nervously. All it would take is one misstep, then—

The ocean gave an almighty heave and a large wave suddenly, violently threw itself against the underside of the dock. Saltwater flew up through the rotted wooden planks, splashing up and around the legs of the bustling crowd.

*Oh, no.* Thomas winced as the seawater covered his lower legs and feet. He watched as his light brown skin gave way to iridescent grey-green scales beneath the salt. He glanced around, tugging his red coat lower around his legs. He didn't have time to stop. Captain Cameron was infamous for leaving stragglers behind. A prickling sensation marched up his legs. Thomas glanced down and saw that his freckled skin had returned as his legs dried. He released a breath that he didn't know he was holding and leapt aboard the ship just in time.

Thomas clung to the mast, climbing nimbly from rope to rope like the tiny, red-furred monkeys he'd once seen skittering across the crumbling walls of an Indian village. He knew these ropes like the back of his hand and, being the smallest member on Cameron's crew, they were his. The Southerling had been at sea for over a week, and Thomas had managed to avoid any more...incidents. He looked out to sea.

The sunset tonight was brilliant; gold streaked with lines of shimmering pink and pale purple. He glanced down at the crew. There was Higgs, the old man with salt-and-pepper hair and knobbly knuckles gripping the ship's wheel. He was the navigator and the steerer and had ridden these seas for longer than anyone else. Then of course there was Cameron, the Captain of the ship -- a heavysset, intimidating man with a jagged scar slicing across his grizzled mouth.

That night Thomas lay restless. There was a storm incoming. He could feel it in the depths of his bones. It certainly did not help that his hammock was swaying more than usual tonight. He groaned and rolled over, burying his face into the damp, yellowed canvas of the hammock. The ship swayed again, and Thomas gave up on sleep.

He hauled himself out of the musty hammock and shrugged on a red coat over his white undershirt. He headed up stairs to see how things were faring up above. Not well, apparently.

The deck was slick with seawater. Rain pounded down and lightning split the sky. *Thank the Saints I'm only affected by seawater.* Men ran around him, tying down ropes and shouting to one another. Thomas grabbed a damp roll of rope and started towards a stack of crates. The crew around him felt blurred by the storm as they frantically tied down the cargo. Cameron stood on the starboard side, hollering orders.

The ocean gave a heave and Thomas flinched away from the rail. He could already feel scales forming on the underside of his feet, gripping the damp timber decks.

A man behind him gave a shout as a barrel came loose and rolled toward him. Thomas shoved him out of the way and together they watched in horror as the barrel rolled across the slick wet wood. Toward Higgs. Thomas launched himself upwards.

“Higgs! Look out, move—”

He was too late. Higgs looked up, but the poor man, half blinded by the storm, was too slow.

There was a sickening wet crunch, and he was gone. The storm seemed to go quiet, as if holding its breath. Then started up again, stronger and harder than ever. The ship started to tilt.

“Oh, for Saints’ sake,” Thomas muttered under his breath as he launched himself towards the wheel. His feet slid in Higgs’ blood.

Thomas refused to look down as he latched on to the wheel with both hands and leaned into it, cursing his thinness. He jerked it suddenly starboard, and the ship swung back upright. Cameron started towards him, then the grey ocean heaved, sending the ship careening towards the huge wave. Cameron stumbled as Thomas swung the wheel sharply in the opposite direction. The wave slammed into the deck.

For a moment, everything was gone. Thomas felt nothing but the sting of salt and the faint prickling of his scales. Then it was gone. “Oh, sh—”

Cameron reeled back, releasing a shout of horror. Thomas ignored him and turned to the storm.

“Enough! Please,” he spread his webbed hands out to the clouds. “Leave them. Please, father.”

Thomas set his jaw grimly as a collective gasp rose behind him.

The storm obeyed. The clouds, if not grudgingly, retreated.

Silence.

Cameron placed a large hand on his shoulder. “You boy, you have a lot of explaining to do.”

Cameron spun him around to face the crew. He felt laughter bubble up into his chest, then smiled, revealing sharp, pearl-white teeth. He held out his webbed hands, letting the firelight dance off the iridescent scales. “I know.”

Then he twisted free of Cameron’s grasp and hurled himself into the grey-blue waves.

*His waves.*