

Woman vs Leviathan

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On a clear day, in the middle of the sea, seven warships surrounded one small boat. The warships had seven sails each, while the boat relied on oars. The warships had cannons poking out of their hulls along multiple rows, while the boat's firepower was limited by how heavy the stones its crew could throw. But on this day, the cannon's were unloaded and the anchors were down, for the fate of everything and everyone rested on the one small boat in the middle.

Each of the warships had a crow's nest high in the air. And each nest held three sailors equipped with their own spyglass telescope. Each sailor looked out across the ocean, never dropping their spyglass from their left eye, and speaking no words. They were all waiting for something, and they knew from where it would come. They did not glance from left to right, nor were they scanning around the horizon. Instead, they all patiently looked in the same direction, the East.

Then, far across the waters in that very direction, something disturbed the surface. Froth formed over an area larger than that taken up by the whole fleet of warships. Bubbles burst up from underneath, bubbles large enough to hold a person each.

The sailors on the crow's nests screamed down towards the decks. Then they reached into their breast pockets and removed a coarse powder, rubbed it together in their hands and threw it into the air. Coloured sparks flew into the air above the warships, a signal for the tiny boat below.

The crew of the warships rushed to the rails and peered down onto the boat. Captains screamed orders but no one listened, the crew all pushed and scrambled to get a better view.

"It's beneath us, it's right beneath us," said one crewmember. He was gripping the railing with such force his hands were turning purple. "Gods, give us your protection."

"It's not us the gods need to worry about," said a man next to him. He pointed down to the small boat below. "It's her."

Gull stood tall in the centre of the small boat. She was tall and thin, and had short silver hair. She wore a black, full body suit which extended around her hands and feet, giving them a duck-like webbing. She stared straight forward, unaware and uncaring about what she was looking at. Her eyebrows were furrowed and her jaw was clenched, nothing on her face so much as twitched. But the muscles on her wrists strained every few seconds as she squeezed her clenched fist. And unseen by anyone, her heart beat faster than a bird's.

Standing next to her was an old man. He was white haired, bearded and short, he wore all black clothes and rested on a cane that moved with the rocking floor like a leg accustomed to the sea. Two soldier's clad in silver walked past the two of them, heaving a large, stone anchor. They

stopped at the edge of the deck and turned to Gull, waiting.

Gull held her hands out to the old man, who pulled two pouches from his robes. From the first pouch, he squeezed a cold blue jelly into her hands. She went to raise it to her mouth before the old man grabbed her by the wrist.

“Remember,” he said in a gravelly voice. “If it wears off and you’re still too deep, the weight of the water will crush you before you even have the chance to run out of air.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, and she placed the substance in her mouth and swallowed it. “I’m not coming back until after I succeed. And if I don’t succeed then what does it matter if I die there, there will be nothing to come back to.”

The old man nodded. Then, from the second pouch, he poured a fine salt into her hand. Gull closed her fingers tightly over the compound. Then the man stepped to the side and allowed Gull to approach the edge of the boat.

She stepped right up to the edge and looked down at the water. Despite the hundreds of people looking down on her from the ships, she only focused on the ripples. She saw nothing inside the water, it just went deeper and deeper until she could see nothing but black. She turned so that her back faced the water and closed her eyes.

She held out her arms and felt the anchor drop into her hands. Handed to her by the soldiers.

“I’m ready,” she said.

“Then go,” said the old man. “There’s nothing more anyone can do to prepare you.”

Holding the anchor to her chest, the woman stepped backwards and dropped straight down into the depths.

She felt the water rush past every part of her body, but it was strongest on her ears, to the point it was painful. The temperature was chilling, but she had trained herself for that.

She kept a tight hold of the anchor and sunk deeper and deeper. The world darkened. She didn’t look up but she knew if she did then the bowels of the boat and ships would already be gone from sight.

She sank deeper.

And deeper.

And deeper.

There was a sound. A reverberation so deep and powerful that Gull felt it as much as she heard it. The sound was alien to her, like nothing she had heard before. And yet she knew exactly what had caused it.

It was what she had come down for.

It was who she had come down for.

It was the Leviathan.

The humans had always known of the Leviathan, it had existed much longer than they. They had plenty of stories and legends of its creation or its purpose but these stories all contradicted each other some way or another.

Some revered it as a god, but very few. For if it was a god, it was an uncaring one. It was aware of the ships and people it came across, much in the same way that a person is aware of a bug landing on their arm, or a bird singing in the distance.

Fundamentally, to the leviathan, that's what they were. Primitive animals. It was a more advanced being. Not just bigger, but more intelligent and more wise. It was of a size inconceivable to humans, and of power indescribable. It created tidal waves when it moved and redirected currents when it turned. It carved trenches into the seafloor in its wake. And when it met the shore, it moved on unperturbed, bringing the sea along and ploughing out a channel to the other side. And for the past few days it had been heading straight towards the island of Gull's people.

Despite the powerful chemicals Gull had ingested at the surface, she began to feel the weight of the water around her body. She flexed her hand, and found the water strongly resisted her movement. Her lungs felt odd as well, they tingled restlessly as the chemicals provided her with all the oxygen she needed.

The anchor reached its full length and jolted to a stop and ripped free from Gull's fingers. It pulled away as Gull's momentum carried her down a distance that could not have been far. All light had disappeared much further up, and now the distraction of the rushing water was gone too. Gull could no longer hear, see or feel anything at all.

She tried to swim back up, but soon realised how unsure she was where up was. After a few strokes, she assumed she was next to the anchor again but when she waved her arms around they felt nothing but water. Gull gripped the salts in her hand, she was meant to save them for later but she knew that every second she was drifting further and further away from the safety of the anchor, sinking into unknown depths.

Was she ready to sacrifice her only chance of returning to the surface and consequently her life, for the mission so early. Gull's heart began to thump in her chest, only then did she notice how constricted her body felt.

Something touched Gull's leg. It was only for a moment, but something smooth had glided

over her calf. Gull fluttered her legs and arms to rotate in the water and she reached out towards where her legs had been, hoping to find the rope holding the anchor. But in her mind, she knew that it had felt much smoother than the rough, hemp rope.

Then something touched her again, this time on the sole of her foot. Was it something different, or had the same suspicious thing circled around her. She clasped the hand holding the salts with her other hand, but stopped short of throwing them out. She could only use them once, what if it was just the rope after all. With such a lack of bearings, maybe she hadn't even properly rotated, and her legs hadn't moved at all.

She felt it on her back. This time, she instantly rubbed her hands together, the salts warmed in her hand and a glow emanated through her fingertips. She thrust her palms out and the salt puffed out in front of her. But it was too close to her eyes and too bright, and for a moment Gull was completely blinded. All she could see was a bright white in front of her.

For a second it seemed there was something else. A large white circle further beyond the salts. But after her eyes adjusted and the salts drifted further away, it was gone. She could see nothing around her at all.

She turned around, but there was no sign of what had touched her, nor was there any sign of the anchor and rope. She let out the tiniest of bubbles from her mouth, and to her surprise it travelled towards what she had originally thought was down. She looked back where she had thought she had seen the large circle. The light from the salts was dying down, they didn't last long and once they were gone she would have nothing.

Then, suddenly the ground appeared to open up beneath her. The blackness which she had been staring at, split open to reveal again an enormous white shape. It was perfectly clear to Gull now. It was perfectly round, and pearly white, and it had a black circle in the centre

Then, just as the light dimmed, from above, below and to the side of the shape, identical circles opened up. Thousands of them, all at once, stretching to the far edges of her vision in all directions, along a flat plane below her.

And just before all the light disappeared, the black dot in each one angled towards her. Each one, undeniably, looked at her.

Gull let out a gasp of breath, it was all that was left. She hadn't been using them, but her lungs felt squeezed. She couldn't see anything anymore, but she wasn't so sure that she wasn't still being seen.

Was that it?

Was that the Leviathan?

It had looked straight at her, with thousands of eyes, just for the briefest of moments. She paddled upwards, not wanting to float down and make contact with the first eye she saw right beneath her.

But then her training kicked in. She relaxed her limbs, floating in limbo. She cut off the voice in her head. She closed her eyes, not that it changed much. As her mind quieted down, she noticed a soft hum. Somehow, it was within her mind, but not produced there. She hadn't noticed it before, but she also hadn't noticed when it started either.

She tried to think as clearly as she could.

Can you hear me?

There was no response. She thought again, harder this time.

Can you hear me?

Another reverberation shot through Gull. She clasped her hands over her ears but it didn't affect the sound at all. Her very bones were shuddering at the vibrations.

Then, within Gull's own mind, something spoke to her.

Your words but irritate, like all your brethren's calls.

The voice matched the tone and pitch of the deep sound that had just passed through her. It did not come from her ears, but from within her own head. There was a break between the two phrases, more like a beat in poetry than a pause of contemplation.

You move closer and closer to our home every day, replied Gull to the voice. We worry you will destroy it.

There was silence for a moment. Gull paddled lightly to keep herself from sinking into the monster below her. Then the voice echoed in her mind again.

It matters not to me, If in my path it falls. Your first, he came with threats, his leverage was nought, The second came with spears, mere violence she sought.

Do you not care for others? Thought Gull.

The response came swiftly.

I see you humans all, the same you see your prey. Why give you any thought, when thousands die each day?

Gull had expected much fear, and perhaps anger to arise upon meeting the monster destined to destroy her world. She had not expected to be offended?

Fish do not have mouths to cry for help. Us humans are intelligent, does that not matter?

They speak as much without, you simply can not hear. The sharks they swim from me, an

equal show of fear. Like you are to the shark, beyond its understanding, my purposes outweigh the mercy you're demanding.

Do you never give mercy?

You have as much a chance, to play the soul more bright, as humans from before, to best me with their might. The sun prohibits me, from rising from the deep, but even in the depths, I see the fish you reap. I threaten just your land, you have the chance to flee, I give you mercy more, than that you give the sea. Return now to your land, and tell your men ashore, to find another home and beg no mercy more.

I do not beg, I call for what is fair. We show plenty of mercy. When we take our nets from the ocean, we only keep what we need to survive. We throw back the rest, and if there are smaller fish and other animals caught inside that we can't eat, we let them back into the ocean. Our land is but an island, surely you are capable of diverting your course around it.

Correct as though you are, that I could change my course, the benefits for me are not worth all the force. Already I await, the cursed tide to rise, I shall not wait but more to stop your home's demise.

But can you not show us mercy like we do the fish?

This word you use so much, you fail to truly know. You only free these fish once stomachs overflow. A mercy is much more than incidental act. You'll need much more to hold morality intact.

You don't think humans are gracious?

The thought is but audacious.

The rhyme irritated Gull. She felt as though the monster was trying to prove himself smarter each time.

What of the compassion we show one another.

Do you expect such care from me as from your brother?

Have you never known of a human to show care?

I've seen ten thousand men, twas never anywhere.

Do you think any living thing is gracious?

Everything I met was vicious and vexatious.

If I could prove to you that there was mercy in the world, would you spare my nation?

A foolish, hapless, and naive expectation.

Gull's lungs began to ache and her ears popped under increasing pressure. The old man's chemicals were wearing off. She didn't have much time.

What of the sun, and what of the tides?

For the first time, the response wasn't instantaneous. The pause only lasted a few seconds, but it was a jarring length compared to how the Leviathan seemed to be finishing Gull's own thoughts.

The sun insults me, and the other derides.

You need the tide to rise in order for you to plough through land. Is that not help from the tide? And the sun hides behind the horizon every night, is that not mercy?

The sun and tide alike, are forces with no life, deserving of no praise, and guilty of no strife.

And yet you cursed them as if they were. Why would forces with no life need reprimanding?

Twas but poetic speech, a figurative branding

Perhaps they're simply life beyond your understanding.

Gull had little chance to chuckle at her own final play of wit, for in that moment her last breath of air ran dry. The pain in her lungs turned to a wispy, sleepy sensation. The gentle sound of bubbles faded away, and soon after so did Gull's voice in her own head. The last thing she sensed was the tentacles of the leviathan wrapping around her heels and pulling her down. And the last thought was of the old man waiting for her on the surface.

I'm sorry for failing you father.

The old man remained fixated on the anchor's rope where it disappeared into the deck of the boat. It hadn't budged ever since it had reached its full length, and that had been too long ago. Even at his most optimistic estimates, the medicine he had concocted would have long run its course. His home and his people were doomed. But it was not even on his mind, for there was a thought, even more sorrow.

He had lost his daughter.

He had pushed her too hard. Pushed her to train too hard, pushed her to study too hard,

pushed her into a fanaticism so fierce she was willing to die for the chance to save her nation, and in the end do so. She had spent most of her life preparing for a singular purpose, and it had all been for nought. If only he had spent the time raising her with the love and care of a normal father.

Suddenly, people started shouting from the warships. The old man looked upwards and saw crewmen jumping up and down and pointing at the water. There was a flash, and coloured salts exploded in the sky near the crow's nests. The old man ran to the edge of the boat and looked at the water.

The whole surface was fizzing, white water surrounded the small boat on all sides. Shocked, the old man moved as fast as he could to where the rope dipped into the water, but it was still unmoving. He stared at the water, looking for a sign, and then one came.

With an enormous eruption of water, a long, black tentacle burst out of the water. It shot up into the sky with a rapid speed and within seconds was higher than the crow's nests. The crew of the warships ran away from the railings in fear, but the old man only stood in awe.

Outside of the shadows of the warship's sails, the tentacle began to burn red and sizzle where the sunlight struck its slimy skin. It retreated as fast as it had shot up in the air. But just as its tip was reaching the surface of the water it curled forward over the small boat and dropped something onto the deck before slipping back under the water. Save for the one thing left behind, the commotion of water and monster was gone like it had never even happened.

The old man rushed over to the bestowed thing and knelt by it. Moments later he draped his arm over it and cried.

Gull awoke under the arms and tears of her father. Her muscles burned in pain from her head to her feet. And her mind struggled to find gain focus, it felt like it was submerged in water. But her eyes managed to identify the shape of her father huddled over her. She smiled weakly. The leviathan had rescued her, but she didn't know why.

A familiar feeling washed over her brain, followed by a sound within that was so quiet it was like it coming from off in the horizon.

Then listened, did the third, and bested me with thought.