

The Old Man and the Shark

by Tara King

An old man met a shark while swimming in the sea. He stopped swimming when he saw the dorsal fin, afraid of the teeth that could shake and tear his flesh, his blood a cloud in the wide blue waters. But the shark nuzzled the old man and said, "Hang on." The old man was startled, but grabbed the shark's dorsal fin before it swam away.

Vaslav tried to relax and let it pull his limp body through the warm water, feeling the lateral muscles contracting and stretching against him.

"What's your name?"

The shark's voice was dark, warm and scratchy, like dying embers.

"Vaslav. Yours?"

"Don't have one."

"You don't talk much," he said to the shark.

"I'm rusty. I get lonely with no one to talk to."

The shark laughed, the sound coming from deep underwater. Vaslav thought it sounded like a big dog barking.

The barking subsided. The shark said, "Are you feeling alright?"

Vaslav nodded and gasped, "Would you mind not swimming for a moment? I'm a bit dizzy."

"Can't. Not how we work, not even in our sleep."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"There are worse ways to go."

Vaslav nodded.

"Would you like to go back to the shore?"

The shark was dallying, swimming slowly in a tight zig-zag.

"No, I'm okay." Vaslav's heart beat very fast. He said, "When I was young, I could swim back from here."

"I saw a man try that once. He swam out farther than anyone I ever saw and didn't make it back."

Vaslav said nothing for a long time as the shark swam. He thought of Betty, in the resort casino, playing the same Cleopatra slot machine she played at home. He invited her to swim with him, but she turned him down without looking away or taking her hand off the button.

Vaslav asked the shark, "Do you know about Cleopatra?"

"No."

"She was a queen. She was the most beautiful woman who ever lived."

"Why do you ask?"

"My wife, Betty—she thinks she was Cleopatra in a past life. She's a very nice person. Maybe you'd like her."

Vaslav thought of Betty, her curly grey hair straightened and dyed into a black broom of thinning hair. Once, maybe ten years back, Betty didn't straighten it, and her dark curls reminded Vaslav of Sergei, whose naturally dark and curly hair bounced around his face while he conducted the orchestra. He loved to hear Sergei laugh during rehearsal. Vaslav told Betty he liked her hair better straight.

Vaslav looked in the nearest of the shark's wide-set eyes.

"Would you like a name?"

"Sure."

"How about Sergei?"

"Sergei. Okay. Why?"

Vaslav had memorized the lines of Sergei's neck, the beds of his nails. The day Vaslav overheard that Sergei was engaged, he took a very long time to pack away his violin, keeping his head down and breathing shallowly so the rush of sorrow and envy he felt would not be seen in his face.

"It means *helper*."

"Alright. Nice to meet you, Vaslav, my name is Sergei."

The old man laughed as they swam. He could no longer see the shore. The light blue waters of the resort hotels had darkened. The streaming water soothed his sunburn.

Vaslav remembered a letter from Sergei's wife. It smelled of wax and glue. She wrote that Sergei was found shot in the head in an alley. The letter was full of overwrought words and uneven handwriting. She claimed that Sergei was followed by men in dark coats and claimed it was all Vaslav's fault. He wondered if it was true.

"Vaslav, should I take you back?"

"No, Sergei. This is nice. Maybe I can come visit you again tomorrow."

Sergei swam on with Vaslav clinging to him.

"You know, I can't believe I'm doing this. I mean, this is a very unnatural situation. At any moment you could eat me, but I don't feel scared," Vaslav said.

"What?"

Vaslav hesitated.

"You're a shark. I'm a human. Sharks like meat."

"I don't know what you mean, actually. I thought we were friends." Sergei sounded upset. "I don't eat my friends."

Vaslav shifted his grip. "I'm sorry, I don't mean anything by it. I was just thinking out loud." He pulled himself in front of Sergei, looked down the shark's nose. "Can I look at your teeth?"

Sergei opened his mouth wide and Vaslav saw rows of teeth in uneven, jagged beds. Vaslav saw shreds of rotting flesh flutter as water rushed across Sergei's teeth. His arms were tired and he was very far from shore. His hands slipped from Sergei's nose and he floundered.

Sergei gently caught Vaslav between his jaws. Vaslav felt teeth pricking; some punctured his skin and he began to bleed. Sergei closed his mouth around Vaslav's belly, careful not to crush him, and headed towards the shore.

When Vaslav felt the teeth pricking on both sides of his torso, he became hysterical and tried to wrestle his way out of Sergei's mouth. Sergei tasted the blood running from Vaslav's back. He hurried as the taste of blood clouded his mind. He wanted to crush Vaslav, to tear his old soft flesh from his bones and to absorb the salt

and iron of his blood, but instead he thought of Vaslav's wife, Betty, and how she kept her hair like Cleopatra. Vaslav passed out.

As Sergei approached the beach, a man saw him and yelled. Soon everyone stood on the beach, watching the fin advance. They could see the figure of an old man lying prone in the shark's jaws; blood streaked behind them, billowing out in the clear water.

Sergei continued swimming until his belly stuck on the sand. He could not see anyone with straight dark hair to her shoulders, neither Betty nor Cleopatra. He wondered why they had not come, when there were so many people screaming.

He opened his mouth and hoped Vaslav would wake up. He heard children crying and he became very afraid. Vaslav groaned. Two men in red shorts ran up; one had a long pole. Sergei tried to move backwards to deeper water, but he could not. One man in red shorts pushed the pole against Sergei's upper jaw and held his mouth open. The other man rushed in, nearly tripped, grabbed Vaslav and placed him on the sand.

Sergei writhed, struggling to get into the water. A woman gathered her children and ran away from the bleeding old man and the shark. The men in red shorts held their arms out and told everyone to stay back. A small cart drove up and a man in khaki pants got out.

"This one's a killer," he announced, as if he were in a movie. The audience murmured. He pulled a shotgun from the back of the golf cart. When the tourists moved far enough back, he took aim at Sergei, who was tired from carrying Vaslav and was slowly suffocating. Vaslav sat up. He could not remember the English word so in Russian he screamed, "Stop! Stop!" The young man in red shorts hushed him and held him still. Vaslav strained toward the panting shark and moaned, "Sergei, Sergei, not again, Sergei, I'm sorry."

