

Eione

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YIAYIA THALIA would always tell Christina, ‘There’s magic in the water.’ But Christina never believed her until she was given Yiayia’s coin-pendant necklace at Gunnamatta Bay, and it happened.

Under the radiant sun at the tidal baths, Christina massaged her lips along the bumpy golden chain of the necklace. The metal scraping sound calmed her nerves as she lined up next to her older brother, Zach, and their big cousins on the rectangular concrete pier to jump into the water.

Zach had reminded her that morning that she was too slow, too little, and too annoying to hang with the big kids. But she was going to try!

‘Get ready!’ a cousin yelled. ‘Let’s make the biggest splash!’

Christina spat the golden chain out of her mouth and glanced at Zach for reassurance. Except he was stretching his neck and bouncing on the spot.

‘One!’

She clenched her fists, bending her knees like she was getting ready to sprint.

‘Two.’

She held her breath. Sweat creasing her brow.

‘Three!’

She screamed and jumped off the pier, feeling light and soaring out into the ocean like an eagle—wings strong and free.

And then

down

down

down

she went

screaming and squealing

with her high-pitched cry

into the ocean water.

As soon as she resurfaced she wiped her eyes clean from the saltwater. 'Zach!' she squealed, treading water. 'I did it!'

'Yeah, yeah,' he said. 'But did you do your dive-bomb?'

Oh. Whoops. Zach would have done his cherry-bomb. Their big cousins would have done their cannonball and hammerhead dive-bombs too. 'I forgot.'

'I could tell,' Zach said, swimming away to chat to their cousins. They were all whooping with laughter and guessing how big their cousin-team splash was.

Christina felt deflated.

Soon, one of the cousins suggested that they race to the pier's barnacled ladder to see who the fastest swimmer was. The challenge was eagerly accepted and soon they were off.

'Wait for me!' Christina shouted, dawdling behind.

'Hurry up!' Zach yelled impatiently, freestyling after them.

'I'm tryin—'

'Cool necklace.'

Christina stopped. Who said that?

She turned around and saw a dark-haired girl crowned with red coral branches. Why on earth was she wearing a crown in the water? But it reminded Christina of something ...

She touched the necklace that Yiayia had given her that morning. 'Thanks ...'

The girl was wearing a white tunic, double-clasped with golden shells at her shoulders. What kind of cossies were they?

Christina couldn't remember seeing the girl that morning as they set up for their community picnic.

'I have one too.' The girl untucked the coin-pendant under her tunic collar. Christina was shocked to notice that the girl's fingers were long and webbed.

The golden necklace was the same as Christina's. On the front-side of the coin-pendant was the side-profile of a woman's face—three dolphins circled her coral-crowned head. On the back was a big fish's tail—well, Christina assumed it was a fish. She could only see the tail; the rest of its body had faded away.

'You're one of us—a child of the brine!' The girl spoke in a gentle voice.

'Brine?' questioned Christina.

'A child of the sea!'

'Are you playing a trick on me?'

'No—you're a descendant of one.' The girl eyed Christina. 'But you don't have a tail.' Quite suddenly, the girl flipped her own tail out of the water.

Christina gasped! 'You're a mermaid?'

'No! I'm a nereid! My name's Eione.'

Christina had heard stories from her Yiayia and Papou and megali grandparents about the nereids—the legendary sea-nymphs who protected swimmers and fishermen back home on their island. Yiayia and Papou even had pottery plates and statues of the nereids riding on hippocamps—fish-tailed horses—in their living room.

Christina smiled with realisation. 'So where's *your* hippocamp?'

And then it happened.

A huge horse's head emerged from the water and nuzzled Eione's face. 'Oh, by Poseidon's beard,' she giggled, 'my dear pet!'

Christina was so startled she screamed.

Further away up on the pier, Zach and Christina's cousins screamed in fright!

'Dead horse!' shouted one cousin.

'No! It's a *Sea Monster!*' yelled another.

'Chrissy!' Zach yelled, desperation in his voice. '*Swim! Get to the ladder! Now!*'

But she didn't move. Her mouth was dry. Her ears were ringing. All she could do was suck in quick breaths and stare.

Everyone was alarmed. People were screaming and swimming away like manic monkeys. The sky broke out into a sunshower: drops of rain pranced and pitter-pattered on the water.

Yet Christina's family and the Greek community up on the pier didn't scream in fear, they all whooped in roaring delight.

Sunshower droplets plinked onto Christina's face. She watched as the white-azure sea creature lifted Eione out of the water onto its back. She side-saddled it, her long turquoise tail twinkling. Eione leaned down and grabbed Christina's hand. 'His name is Pelagios—isn't he dazzling? Go on, pat him.'

Christina reached out a trembling hand, steadying her breath. The creature's skin felt scaly and wet under her fingertips. She rested her palm and cheek on its neck, hearing its thumping heartbeat. He was so breathtaking.

'He's magnificent!' Christina blurted.

Eione smiled. 'Do you wish to ride him?' In one brisk moment she yanked Christina onto Pelagios. Christina nearly choked when his wet mane slapped her in the face and saltwater hit the back of her throat. Gaining her balance, she swiftly wrapped her arms around his neck. Eione giggled.

'*Pame*, Pelagios!'

The creature rose its head up to the sky. Christina tightened her grip and hurriedly held her breath as the hippocamp dived deep into the depths of the ocean. Bubbles blew out of her mouth and nose as their bodies glided and sliced through the ocean like silky sea lions. Then the hippocamp pivoted up, its huge tail moving and pushing them through the water at a vigorous speed, up and up and up until they launched through the surface of the water, breaching so high that they jumped over the pier and headed for the wild ocean outside of Gunnamatta Bay.

Up this high, Christina soared like an eagle again, her hair billowing in the sunshower and wind. Her cousins and family waved at her from down below. In the distance she saw the bay in all its brilliance. The beach. The sandy hills. The park. The apple gumtrees. The picnic shed. The pavilion.

Was she dreaming?

As soon as the hippocamp SPLASHED back into the water, a whopping cold wave smacked her face—it even splattered onlookers further away at the pier.

She laughed and tasted the saltiness of the water and smelt the sunscreen lotion on her skin. No, she was definitely not dreaming.

'That was amazing,' she squealed. 'Let's go build some sandcastles!'

Eione laughed. The sunshower stopped. 'Another time. My family's calling me.'

Back at the pier, as Christina leapt off Pelagios, she exclaimed, 'It was lovely to meet you!' She now felt the concrete under her bare feet again. 'I hope I'll see you again!'

'Oh, by Poseidon, yes, that's a sacred oath ...'

Along the pier, bewildered people stared as Eione and Pelagios swam further out into the ocean. Christina wildly waved goodbye as her family surrounded her with hugs and kisses.

'Yiayia!' she beamed. 'You were right! There's magic in the water!'

Across the sky, a radiant rainbow appeared, and there they were, Eione's family. Out there in the distance, in the wild blue of the ocean, illuminated under rays of hues and light, a whole battalion of nereids on the backs of hippocamps and sea creatures, paddling the water and waiting; sea creatures like lions and bulls and leopards and goats with coiling and scaling serpentine-tails ...

Christina's skin tingled with goosebumps ...

People on the pier were quiet, their mouths agape in disbelief. Except for the Greek community and Christina's family.

'Yasas!' Yiayia greeted, waving her arm. 'It's the clan!' she cheered. 'Eione's back!' She climbed onto the pier's white-painted rail and yelled out to the nereids again, 'Sti zoi!'

Far away, Eione had rejoined her family. She blew a loving kiss and waved as the nereids disappeared, descending into the calm ocean waters. Scaly tails arose on the surface with twinkles and flashes and slaps ... and then they were gone.

Christina helped her Yiayia down from the rail. Zach grabbed Yiayia's arm too.

'I'm so glad Eione appeared,' Yiayia said, clasping her hands to her mouth. 'It's been a long time. Too long. I thought they had forgotten us ...' She looked so pensive. 'Maybe we forgot about them ... our heritage ... but this ...' She reached out and touched the coin-pendant around Christina's neck. '*This* is how we remember them.'

Christina hugged her Yiayia, and so did Zach. And the whole family swooped in and group-hugged Yiayia too.

Amongst the squished bodies, Zach caught Christina's eye and he half-smiled. 'Sorry about before, Chrissy.' He looked thoughtful.

She eyed him. 'I know, but how was *that* for a dive-bomb, *touvlo?*'

'Well,' Zach smirked, 'you kinda cheated.'

Christina laughed. 'Maybe—but it was still the biggest and most epic splash of today!'

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