

The island was hiding, just out of sight in the darkness. Evie stared out into the night, straining for a glimpse. They'd dropped anchor as the sun was setting, but Evie had been inside, enjoying the gourmet meal set in front of the passengers for dinner. But as soon as she'd swallowed her last bite, restlessness had pushed her out to the deck and the solitude it promised. The itch that propelled her outdoors settled between her shoulders, tingling.

Raucous laughter forced its way past the glass doors and assaulted the quiet night, jolting Evie from her study of the darkness. She'd been a last-minute addition to the passengers, an oddity amongst the rich and thrill-seeking who were calling the *Agua Fantasma* home for the year. Part of her was still in amazed disbelief that she was here at all – and part of her grieved for the same reason. It was supposed to be a father–daughter trip; they'd been planning an around-the-world sailing trip for years. Gavin gave up his love of sailing to look after Evie when her mother walked out on them. He'd promised her so many times that on this trip they would revisit his favorite places ... but then the cancer had invaded, carrying her father away with her dreams. But when the package arrived after the funeral, she discovered that Gavin had made all the arrangements for Evie to undertake the trip after all.

Well Papa, it may not be the way we planned it – but I'm here nonetheless.

The laughter dropped off, and she saw Miguel, the heir to a top venture capital firm, waving for her to come back in. He was undeniably attractive, but a little too used to getting whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted it. She shook her head, instead turning her attention back to the island. The tingling feeling between her shoulder blades intensified. Evie knew she was being watched, but there was no one else in sight; the other passengers preferring the intoxicating revelry in the lounge. Could it be someone on the island itself? They wouldn't be

able to make her out at this distance, surely, but the boat would be clearly visible, lit from stem to stern against the night. *You're letting your imagination run away with you*, she chided herself. *Nothing out there except monkeys and parrots*. But as she went back inside, she wondered if that were true.

The morning sun shone on turquoise water and sent steam rising from the captain's tender on its way to a small cove with a dock. It hadn't been hard to convince Evie to come along; Miguel had simply plied her with flattery and mimosas until she agreed. He acted like his charms were finally wearing her down, but the truth was, she loved to swim, and the guide promised rainbows of fish and bright coral. There was a pain there – her father had taken her snorkeling for the first time years before – but she couldn't avoid it forever. This trip was to honor his memory, and what better way to do so than to pay homage at the ocean's altar?

The day passed in a blur of fins and brightly colored scales. On the beach, the sun dried the ocean away, leaving salt crusting her hair and skin. For the first time since her father's diagnosis had shattered their lives, Evie felt almost whole. In the warmth of the late afternoon, she fell asleep.

When her eyes opened again, the sun was dipping towards the ocean, the first colors of sunset just hints in the blueness. She yawned and stretched, turning her gaze to where the staff were busy spreading a blanket and arranging food for dinner. Her fellow passengers had discovered the temporary bar while she napped and were clearly well into the stores.

One last swim, before the sun goes down and it gets too cold. She dropped her sarong to the sand and strode towards the water. As she was about to step in, a hand grabbed her arm, gently but firmly pulling her back. The deckhand Aaron's face was grim as he shook his head.

"We do not go in the water past dark."

"It's hardly dark. The sun is still well above the horizon." Evie tried to pull her arm away, but his grip was unrelenting.

"Not here. Not in any wave that touches this island after the sun peaks." He lowered his voice. "The ocean is hungry; here it hunts." He held her gaze for a moment longer, looking for something in her face, before releasing his grip, and hurrying back to help the others.

Evie shivered despite the lingering warmth of the day. She felt eyes on her back, but when she turned there was only the ocean behind her.

As night descended, it covered the beach with an absolute darkness but for the lanterns on the launch. Evie sat huddled along the starboard rail, arms wrapped tightly around her slight frame as if to ward off a chill. The motor broke through the chorus of voices, the sharp lurch into motion setting off renewed peals of laughter as Miguel lost his footing; he lurched against the side of the boat, eyes glazed from the steady stream of alcohol. The others, managing to stay on their feet, sank into their seats as a deckhand-turned-waiter offered champagne. When the tray was proffered to her, Evie shook her head.

"Oh come on. Have a drink with us." Miguel's voice was hypnotic and compelling, even as he slurred the words.

"I think you've indulged enough for both of us."

“For the love of all that’s holy – don’t you ever let yourself have any fun?” The glint in his eyes was cruel, and his laughter was harsh, cutting her into pieces.

“Don’t you ever stop?” Evie kept the tears out of her voice, if only just, and turned her back, setting her eyes out over the dark water. The moon reflected against the waves, breaking the black with shimmering white light.

The launch ceased its forward motion as it pulled alongside the yacht. Evie climbed the ladder, gratefully taking the offered hand at the top to help her over the rail.

“Did you enjoy the day?”

“Oh yes, the snorkeling was incredible. And the moon is so beautiful on the water tonight!”

Aaron gave her a funny look. “I’m sorry, Miss Evie, but there is no moon tonight.”

“But I saw it reflected just over ...” Her words trailed off as she raised a hand to point at – nothing. He was right: no moon graced the sky.

What had made the white light on the water?

By some instinct she couldn’t understand, Evie stayed as the others disembarked. She absently counted heads as they passed over the rail. She mentally reviewed all who had come ashore, then did it again. She turned to the Aaron, who was hauling the last of the supplies they’d brought with them from the launch.

“Someone is missing.”

“I beg your pardon, Miss Evie?”

“We went ashore with fifteen ... only fourteen came back.”

“Don’t you worry, Miss Evie – we counted very carefully. Everyone is where they should be.” Aaron’s gaze slid over her face, not quite meeting her eyes, and something about the way he said it raised the hairs on Evie’s neck.

She fled to the dubious safety of her cabin.

Something is wrong here. I never should have come.

Evie’s pen hovered above the page, her thoughts roiling. She couldn’t blame her father – he couldn’t have known what a disaster this trip had turned in to. Still, she wished for his presence and strength. She still thought of him as she had as a child: her invincible hero. *He* would get to the bottom of what was happening; he would have kept her safe.

As if her thoughts had summoned it, there was a loud knock – but not from her door. It came from the opposite wall, from *outside* of the boat. The ship rocked, and this time a knock from the boat’s other side echoed through her cabin.

Ice filled her veins. She whispered, “What in the hell was that?”

Another thud, rocking the boat even harder. Too afraid to look out the window, she lunged for the door and made for the reception area. True to form, the rest of the passengers were in various stages of drunkenness, a few passed out on the couches. Miguel, one arm around a well-endowed blonde, the other waving an empty glass, was hollering for another round, but there were no staff in sight. Evie frowned. When the ship had left port, there were uniforms everywhere; butlers, maids, bartenders, wait staff ... now all gone.

And something was attacking the ship.

Evie stumbled into the bridge, the rest of the ship as quiet as a tomb. The thought made her skin crawl – it was likely that that was exactly what this boat had become. No longer a pleasure cruise, but a place for them to die. They had been somehow abandoned by the staff, left to the mercy of whatever was out there. The bridge was the last place to check, and despite knowing what she would find, she couldn't keep her hope in check. It dashed against the floor with finality when she saw the space was empty.

Evie hurried to the control panel, and desperately checked for keys. She found them quickly – broken off in the ignition. Out of options, she resigned herself to giving the rest of the group the bad news. On leaving the room, she discovered a note fixed to the back of the door, with, of all things, her name written on it.

Miss Evie

You cannot imagine how sorry we are to leave you in this, but we had little choice. The time looms, and the ocean hunts. Without this offering, our families are in danger, being as bound to the curse as the doomed. The others on board deserve their fates; powerful people who have stepped on the weak, ignored the hungry, and built their fortunes on the ashes of other lives. Your misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time is our only regret. We tried to make an early sacrifice, hoping to keep the doomed satiated, but they were too close to waking. We could do nothing but follow our fated paths, scribed in blood for centuries.

Yours in sorrow,

The crew of the Agua Fantasma

Evie stood numbly at the rail, dread flowing through her body. Her attention was fixed on the sea around her, watching for what exactly she didn't know. The others took comfort in numbers, huddled together behind the glass. The occasional angry word rose up, a sharp counterpoint to the soft weeping that filled the air. The sky was clear and full of stars, yet somehow lightning flared against the darkness. From out of nowhere, waves rose to rock the boat, pouring water over the sides. The air crackled and a bolt of lightning fell, hitting the peak of the whitecaps, and sending shockwaves across the water.

Smaller forks landed, and for a moment the sea glowed. The white light – mistaken, Evie now saw, for the reflection of the moon - solidified, and rose from the water. The luminosity lifted from the waves, forming a vaguely human shapes; ethereal yet menacing.

One of the figures spoke, and the power in the voice that rumbled forth was staggering. Evie's knees threatened to buckle; she kept herself upright by will and a white-knuckled grip on the rail. "It is the dark of the apogee moon. We have come to claim our due. For too long we have slumbered in these waters, bound to our doom, but now the time has come, and the promise that was made to us will be fulfilled." She could feel the currents of the darkest parts of the oceans in that timbre, and found she could not keep her feet after all. The words sank into her, lodging themselves in her heart. She slid to the deck, cold and damp beneath her.

The second picked up its companion's thread, and continued with the chill and implacability of the arctic deeps. "We rise for each of the dark moons, but have yet to find the one that was promised. Sacrifices to slake our hunger, yes; but the one we have awaited was never there."

“Cursed we have been, to roam the waters.” A third’s voice rumbled like the ocean in a storm. “But now we have our vessel, and we will have the child who will walk the earth. Now we will have our Heir.”

Miguel has come up, unseen, beside her, and to his credit, he was no coward. “You say that one of us is ‘fated’ to you? I think you know where you can shove that.” A rude hand gesture illustrated his point.

By some unheard signal, the ghosts converged on the yacht. Evie shuddered as all but one flowed past her to the group beyond.

“You cannot save yourself manling. Your defiance but sweetens the meal.”

“But who among us fulfills your prophecy?” The sound of her own voice surprised Evie – she hadn’t thought there was any strength left to her.

The figure came to Evie, hovering right in front of her. “You know who we need sweetling.” She felt something ice cold stroke her hair. “There is only one who has stood near to death; only to you does the smell of the grave cling.” Her father’s face flashed in Evie’s mind as the voice crooned, “Yesssssss.” The apparition offered a hand to her, and said, “Come, and we will take your pain away.” Unable to resist, Evie took it, stepping over the rail. The water had just closed over her head when the screams began.

“Today’s top story: a woman from the luxury yacht, the *Agua Fantasma*, missing since last year, has been found miraculously alive, and nine months pregnant.”