



Swim
A Short Story by Heather Westropp

Under the water, everything was quiet, blue, and soft. The water flowed over Allana's face like a silky smooth blanket as she propelled herself along the sandy ocean floor. A distant hum pulsed through her ear drums, and it was the only noise she could hear besides the loud silence that surrounded her. This far underwater, the world was tinted a dim blue and it expanded emptily around her for what seemed like forever. To some, it would have been lonely, but to Allana it was just peaceful. Peaceful and perfect.

She spent several long moments just floating there, her face inches above the sand-covered ground. Her eyes were open and she took in the details there; the sand made up of tiny grains of tan, brown, white, and black specks, scattered with the occasional seashell or rock. It fascinated her, seeing everyday things up this close— it gave her a whole new perspective. From this distance, she could almost imagine what it would be like to be a creature much smaller than herself, whose whole world might be contained within a few square miles of this speckled ground.

Finally, she spun around slowly until she was facing the sky. Her eyes squinted at the sun, diluted as it was through the glimmering water. She spread her arms wide and let them float in the subtle, rhythmic tide. Her hair spread around her face like smoke, black and billowing. Against her pale white face, it was a shocking contrast, both haunting and beautiful at the same time. It didn't matter though, because there was nobody else around to see it. She lay there for one more peaceful moment before pulling her arms in and giving her tail a flick, reluctantly making her way back towards home.

After swimming for a few minutes at a leisurely pace, she heard a faint sound echo through the water towards her. Three clicks, a squeal, and then two more clicks, muted and distant but still distinguishable. A second later, the sequence repeated. Allana knew that the noise came all the way from the City, but it was designed to be heard for miles around. She rolled her eyes but then quickened her pace, gliding through the water like a seal. It wasn't the fastest that she could travel, but Marlow would just have to have some patience. She wasn't going to rush herself *too* much for him.

She swam through the tranquil water for ten minutes before making her way over a hill, and on the other side she could finally see gleaming white buildings appear on the horizon. The Pearl City loomed in the distance, and as she drew closer, she could hear the buzz of civilization growing louder.

Within twenty minutes of leaving her peaceful plot of sand, she was back at the front gate of the city. The guards, burly mermen armed with harpoon guns, watched her closely as she approached. Her hand reached for the purple shell that hung on the thin rope around her neck, and she flashed it at the guards. The guard floating nearest to her, a young man with curling blonde hair, nodded curtly and she thought she saw the hint of a smile. But before she could tell for sure, the gates were opening and she was expected to swim inside quickly. The less time the gates were open the better. That was the philosophy of the Pearl City's guards, at least.

Inside the city, the world looked different. Although the city officials tried to make it look nice, there was only so much you could do to dress up what was essentially a giant cage. The

buildings were beautiful, but that was not the concern. All of them were adorned with sheets of pearlescent material like the inside of an oyster. It covered buildings in patterns and shapes that were intricately designed, along with pearls of all colors and sizes.

Looking at the city all around her, she couldn't help but appreciate the beauty. And yet, all it took was a quick glance up towards the sky to ruin the mood. About 20 feet up, metal bars marked the ceiling of her city. They connected to the metal fence that surrounded the perimeter of the Pearl City, enclosing it in a cage that was meant to keep danger and intruders out.

Even though the outside of the cage was decorated here and there by coral reefs and tangles of sea weed, there was enough of the surface that had been kept clear for the citizens to receive ample sunlight. The guards who were stationed about every 25 feet on the roof of the cage paced back and forth, casting shadows on the ground far below. All of the citizens could rest in peace knowing that they were being protected from all sides. Except for Allana.

Allana hated how closely guarded she always was, mostly because of the extreme irony of it all. She was protected from "outsiders and intruders," sure, but nobody seemed to care about protecting her from the real threats that she dealt with every day. Her father, for one; then, there was Marlow.

She saw him now, peeking through the curtains as she slid her key into the lock on the front door and eased it open. As soon as she was completely inside, he stepped forward to shut the door with a click.

"I have been waiting for you all morning," he said, with a frown. "Where have you been?"

Allana busied herself with sorting the mail, which was stacked neatly on a table by the door. She flipped through the plastic envelopes, reading the printing on the front carefully, as if she wasn't sure whose names she would find there. Finally, she felt the silence heavy around her as Marlow waited for her answer, and she felt compelled to speak.

"Nowhere," she said breezily. "I just felt like going for a swim." She brushed past him, swimming into the kitchen. He followed her like a tail.

"You know I don't like it when you do that. Just disappear without saying anything. I got worried and sent out a call," he said, holding up a smooth, blue electronic device—a pager, it was called. His forehead was creased with genuine concern.

Allana was now rummaging through the cupboards, looking for some food to prepare for dinner. All the while, Marlow stayed very still, watching her from a few feet away.

"Yes, I know you did," she finally said. "I heard it. I was already on my way back when you sent it, so there was no need to worry." She heard her voice spike defensively and mentally scolded herself. No need to have a bad attitude, especially in front of him.

He was silent for a few moments, and when she glanced over at him she saw a slightly hurt look on his face. But he quickly rearranged his expression into one of indifference.

“Well, right, of course. My apologies. Perhaps next time you could just leave me a note? Let me know where you’re going and how long you plan to be gone?” He asked business-like.

She could tell that inside, he was wishing he could ask a different question. *Maybe I can come with you next time?* He had asked it a few times before, but the last time was ten months ago. Each time, Allana had met it with excuses, deflections, and flat-out refusals, but the last time that he’d asked, she had been a bit brusque with him.

“I just don’t understand why you always have to go off on your *own*,” he had said. “Why can’t I come with you? I want to know this part of you, whatever it is.”

“No. You see, that’s the thing, Marlow. I just want to keep this part of me to myself. You don’t need to be involved in every single thing I do, okay? Let me have a life of my own, please.” She’d seen the usual hurt look flash across his face, and that time he hadn’t tried to hide it.

“But…” he’d said, “I thought that we were supposed to be having our lives *together*. You know, as *one*.” He’d looked so much like a sad puppy then that she’d had to turn her back and choke down the guilt that was threatening to change her mind.

“I’m sorry Marlow, but no. You can’t come with me. Please stop asking.” And with that, she’d swam out of the house, closing the door behind her with a quiet click that still somehow managed to echo inside her head for several hours afterward.

Now, floating in the kitchen next to him, she felt that same small pang of guilt in her chest. She did not enjoy hurting him, but what other option was there? She couldn’t let him into her most sacred ritual, the quiet time that she spent in the open sea, just floating and thinking about life. Especially when the truth was that she spent many of those quiet hours thinking about him, and all of the things that they could have been. No, that time was for her and she could not let Marlow become a part of it.

“Sure,” she said, answering his previous questions. “I’ll try to let you know next time.” She knew that it sounded weak, that she was offering so little in return for everything that he gave to her. She could hear it in her own ears. But it was the only way that she could push on each day. It was her way of protecting herself from the constant threat of heartbreak that loomed over her. That threat was the reason that she never felt completely safe in her own home. She could never let her guard down completely, not with Marlow around.

Later that day, she left the house alone once again. It was evening, and the second Tuesday of the month, which meant that it was time to meet with her father. She despised these meetings with him, but it wasn’t as if she had any choice. It was either do what he said, or lose everything.

That was the power that all men, particularly fathers and husbands, had over women in her city. It was the only way to protect the precious balance of life, or so they said. Being that her city was the last civilized population of merpeople in the ocean, there was little anybody could do to argue against that philosophy. Why change something that had worked just fine for centuries, especially when there was so much to lose? In a situation as fragile as this, the risk just wasn't worth the possibility of improvement. At least not to most of the people who lived there.

And so, Allana swam reluctantly through the city towards her father's house, the house that she'd lived in for the first 15 years of her life. From another person's point of view, it was just like any other house in the Pearl City. Small, cozy, and decorated with a unique design of pearly white material, gleaming in the sunlight. But for Allana, this house held memories of her childhood that she could never forget, no matter how badly she wanted to.

Even now, just approaching the house gave her a bitter taste in the back of her throat. She pushed through it and swam up to the door, knocking quietly. A few moments later, it swung open and her smiling father appeared in the doorway.

"Welcome, daughter!" he exclaimed jovially. Allana felt slightly ill. Still, she swam inside with a polite smile plastered on her face.

As soon as she was inside and the door was shut tightly, her father's demeanor transformed. Gone was the smiling face and the cheerfulness, and in its place was a disdainful scowl. Allana wasn't surprised one bit; this was just the way it was. Her father always made sure that his family appeared picture-perfect from the outside, despite the reality that it was quite the opposite behind closed doors.

Now, he was staring at her reproachfully while they floated silently in the hallway. She leveled an even gaze back at him, waiting for him to speak. Instead, he covered the distance between them in two flicks of his tail and raised his hand, slapping her hard across the face.

She flinched and felt the skin on her cheek stinging wildly, but stayed where she was. No use running from the storm, she'd always said. It was going to follow you anyway, so you may as well face it head-on.

"Marlow told me that you took off again. He came by here to look for you." His face was close to hers and he spoke quietly and furiously.

Allana laughed bitterly in her head. As if she would ever come to *this* place of her own volition. That just went to show how out of touch Marlow was with who she really was.

"Went for a peaceful swim by yourself, did you? And just left your husband worrying at home, wondering where you were?" Her father's voice was clipped. "He told me that he had to send out a call for you yet again," he paused, letting a deadly moment of silence hang in the air. "How do you think that looks to other people, Allana?"

She knew better than to delay her responses when talking to her father, and she quickly answered.

“It probably looks bad,” she said evenly.

“Probably? You think that it... *probably*... looks bad? Allana, let’s not play games here. I’ll ask you again,” he said, then continued slowly, clipping out each word. “How do you think your childish behavior and complete lack of respect for your husband looks to other people?”

“Bad,” Allana replied instantly. “It looks bad.”

“Very good,” her father said mockingly, a cruel smile spreading across his lips. “Now, what are we going to do to rectify this situation?”

“I don’t know, father. What would you like to do?”

At this, her father released a hard bark-like laugh, completely devoid of humor. “Oh, how I wish that you *cared* what I would like, Allana. But alas, I have been cursed with a mutinous, ungrateful, and useless daughter.” He spit the words at her like bullets. She knew not to speak unless directed to or asked a question, and thus she remained silent, trying to let the words roll right off. But no matter what she tried to convince herself of, she still knew deep down that they were leaving wounds, like a thousand tiny paper cuts.

“This is going to be the last time that I warn you, girl. The next time that I see even the slightest questionable act from you, I will report you to the officials. Rude and inappropriate behavior towards both your husband and your father will not look good on your record,” he sneered.

Allana tried to breathe deeply and swallow the panicked feelings that were rising up in her chest. He had threatened to report her before, after all. But for some reason, this time he seemed more serious. And she knew that despite his sarcastic comment, the punishment for unwomanly behavior was much worse than a mark on the perpetrator’s record. Women who stepped out of line could end up in prison for life, and that was Allana’s worst nightmare.

“Am I understood?” he asked sternly.

“Yes, sir,” she responded instantly, forcing herself to meet his eyes.

He continued gazing at her for a few moments, as if he could see her true thoughts just by waiting patiently. Then he turned and swam swiftly out of the hallway, towards his bedroom.

“Put some ice on that before you go,” he called over his shoulder before disappearing around the corner.

As soon as he was gone, she sank to the floor. A single tear slid down her burning cheek and she let out a silent sob. Mermaid tears had magical qualities—that was why she was even able to cry underwater in the first place—and one of their uses was as a healing agent. It soothed the red

mark on her face as it slid down. After a few deep breaths, she rose back up to her full height and swam into the kitchen to get some ice.

After erasing the evidence of her father's abuse, she silently let herself out and headed back home. It was always a bit of a relief, going back to Marlow after her visits with her father, and that was really saying something. She knew that it wouldn't take long for the relief to wear off and be replaced with the usual misery.

As she swam, she replayed their story in her mind. She thought of how her father had arranged the marriage when she was 15 years old, the legal marrying age in the Pearl City, and had informed her the night before she was to be married (which was, incidentally, her birthday).

She was shocked when he told her; fathers were not obligated to arrange marriages for their daughters anymore, and many of her friends were allowed to choose their own husbands. Her own father had been threatening it for the past five years, though. Whenever she misbehaved, it was "you'd better not do that again, Allana, or I'll marry you off to some man you'll despise." It had always been somewhat funny to her though, because at the time she had thought that marrying any man would be better than living with her father. Little did she know that life with her future husband would be almost as torturous, but in a completely different way.

She'd met Marlow the day after she'd turned 15, which was the same day that they got married. Honestly, even though she had been shocked and had had very little time to acclimate to the idea of getting married, she had still been excited on her wedding day. She had thought that it was going to be the end of her old life and the start of a new one; particularly, a happier one where she might finally find freedom from her father.

When she'd first seen Marlow, she'd fallen in love with his sweet, boyish looks. From his messy red hair to his freckled nose and scrawny arms, she'd thought that he was nothing short of adorable. She'd been allowed to speak to him for a few minutes before the wedding, and it was during that short time with him that she'd fallen in love with his personality as well.

On her wedding night, though, everything had changed. After the ceremony and reception were over, she and Marlow had headed to their new home together, a gift from his parents, to celebrate. Naturally, she'd been nervous about being really alone with him for the first time. Plus, the expectations that she'd known he'd had for the night made her feel shy. But she liked him and they *were* married, so she'd had hopes that it would be a special night for her as well.

Unfortunately, that was where she'd met her first big disappointment.

They'd just been settling down for the night after enjoying a nice dinner and champagne together, when she'd noticed that something was off. She'd kept trying to broach the topic of whatever was coming next in a way that was natural and not awkward, but he'd seemed hell-bent on not discussing it. And when she'd asked him a few hours later if he was ready to "go to bed" he'd said "sure" and then went off to the bathroom to get ready, closing the door behind him. A few minutes later, he'd emerged. Instead of going into the bedroom, though, he'd headed for the

couch where he'd then curled up with a soft rubber pillow and blanket, reaching to turn the light off before calling goodnight to her.

She'd been baffled. Why did he not seem interested in going to bed with her? Did he not find her attractive? And why was he sleeping on the couch? She'd turned these questions over in her head while slowly getting ready for bed herself. Then, finally, she'd quietly swam back into the living room and cleared her throat.

Marlow had opened his eyes and looked up from the couch, clearly surprised to see her floating there. He'd reached over and turned the light back on.

"Hey, what's up?" he'd asked, casually.

"Umm..." she'd begun, slightly flustered. "I was just wondering... Why are you on the couch?" she'd asked quietly.

"Oh!" he'd said, surprised. "Well, I just thought it would be easier this way. You know, less awkward for you."

"Oh...Okay I guess I get that. But," she'd paused, searching for the right words, "I'm okay, really. You don't have to worry about me feeling uncomfortable. I am a little nervous, yeah, but I thought it would be best to just jump right in. You know, get to know each other as husband and wife right away," she'd finished with a blush.

"Ah..." he'd replied, slowly. "I think maybe you misunderstood me. Allana, I'm not expecting you to sleep with me. I don't blame you at all for the fact that we were forced to get married, so don't worry about that. But at the same time, I understand. I'm not one of those guys who expects his arranged marriage to be like a real one. I'm totally okay with us just being friends when we're at home. Nobody else has to know." He'd smiled as if this were the kindest thing he'd ever said.

Allana had been so surprised that she'd blurted the next thing out without thinking. "Is this because you don't think I'm pretty?" she'd asked, tears filling her eyes.

"What? No!" Marlow had shaken his head vigorously. "It's not that at all! You're fine-looking. I just don't expect you to act like we're really in love, that's all."

Fine-looking? Allana had thought. *He thinks I'm fine-looking?* Now several fat tears had slipped down her face.

"I don't understand," she'd choked out. "You don't want to love me?"

He'd sat up, clearly concerned now. "It's not that I don't *want* to love you, it's just that...well, we just met! We didn't get to fall in love and decide to get married like some people do. Your dad asked my parents, and they asked me what I thought. I said yes because it was my duty to

you and to our society. But that doesn't mean I want to be tortured in a fake marriage every day and night for the rest of my life," he'd explained carefully.

"You think our marriage is... fake? You didn't want to marry me?" Allana had asked sadly.

"Agghh, Allana! No, you're taking this all wrong. Look, I just think it would be better if we could act like friends, okay? I'm not interested in a romantic relationship, that's all. It's nothing personal, it's just me." He'd looked at her beseechingly.

She'd wiped her tears away quickly, swallowing and taking a few deep breaths, before finally nodding her head. "Okay. That's fine. You're right, we shouldn't feel forced to pretend." He'd looked relieved. She'd forced a smile and then started to swim away, towards the bedroom. "Goodnight Marlow," she'd called quietly.

And that was that. Every day since then, Allana had determined that she would not fall in love with her husband. Doing so would be not only pointless, but painful, because she knew that he could not or would not ever reciprocate. He wasn't interested in love, or romance, or passion. And so, she pretended that she wasn't either.

The hardest part of all of that was the fact that he still wanted to be friends. Not just friends, but *close* friends. He essentially wanted to be her husband but without the romantic stuff. For her, though, that was impossible. She could not just give him part of her heart; it was either all or nothing for her, and since he clearly did not want all of it, she had settled on giving him nothing.

She thought sadly about these things as she made her way back home. Then she let herself consider the present situation.

She was to be under tight supervision now, she knew. She had to take her father's threat seriously, just to be safe. And that meant that somehow, she was going to have to force herself to act like Marlow's wife, a job which she had honestly not given much effort to for the last year that they'd been married. Marlow had been ironically upset by this, but she hadn't been very concerned about his feelings. It was his fault anyway, she'd thought. He couldn't expect her to act like his loving wife in public and then turn it right off in private (although apparently, he could and *did* expect just that).

She was trying to work through this puzzle in her mind, planning how she was going to pull off just the necessary amount of wifely behavior without truly investing any part of herself in the relationship, when it happened.

It was almost unnoticeable at first, just a small ripple in the water that she barely felt pass over her skin. But a moment later, she felt something less easy to ignore. The water started to push against her and the plants that decorated the landscape began to bend in the current. She looked around, confused, and was pushed into the side of a building by a sudden surge in the water.

Suddenly, darkness fell over everything around her. It was as if something had come between her city and the sun. When she looked up to the sky, she realized that that was exactly what had happened.

A huge, smooth, gray object was floating just above the cage that surrounded the Pearl City. The guards that normally swam around up there were scattered, swimming away from the unfamiliar object. A few of them floated around the perimeter, taking aim at the thing with their harpoon guns. Some even fired shots at it, but they all watched in confusion as the miniature spears bounced right off of the surface with a *clink*.

The people who were outside started to panic. Some started to swim quickly away, but to where, Allana could only guess. Some of the women screamed and clutched on to their husbands or children. Others just stared up in horror at the large gray object that was looming above them. Soon, people started to come out of buildings and homes to join the confusion on the streets.

Finally, an alarm began to blare throughout the city, which only added to the panic. Everybody looked around, unsure of what to do. Normally in an emergency, they were taught to go inside and hide until whatever it was had gone away. But in this case, the threat seemed too big for the comparatively fragile walls of their homes to protect them from. After so many years of relying on the safety of the city's protective barriers, it suddenly felt as if being inside of them was more dangerous than being on the outside.

Everybody seemed to come to this conclusion at around the same moment, and then they were all rushing toward the front gates in a flurry of bodies and fins. Allana started to follow them, but then the guards started barking directives. They spoke into special megaphones that allowed their already naturally loud voices to carry even further through the water.

“Everybody please remain calm and return to your homes at once. If you are with your family, stay together. If you are unable to locate all of the members of your family, return to your home and wait for them,” yelled the guard nearest to her. Slowly, people started to turn around and swim reluctantly toward their homes, eyeing the sky nervously.

For a few moments Allana stayed where she was, glued to the side of a building. In the chaos, nobody seemed to notice that she was not swimming home. Eventually, she peeled herself off of the building and started swimming low to the ground in the opposite direction. People swam over her obliviously, focused on getting themselves to safety.

As she drew closer to the gates of the city, her heart sank. The guards were all gathering around them in an impenetrable semicircle. She could not sneak past them, no matter how distracted they might be. She cursed under her breath and was about to turn around to head back when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

Spinning around guiltily, she quickly made up an excuse in her mind and was about to blurt it out when she saw who it was. The guard that she'd noticed earlier that morning, the young man with curling blonde hair, was floating in front of her, holding a finger up to his lips in the universal “be quiet” signal. He grabbed her arm and pulled her behind the nearest building.

Up this close, she could see that his eyes were an unusual shade of green, and for a moment she couldn't stop staring into them. She tore her gaze away, embarrassed, when he started to speak quietly to her. He didn't seem to notice.

"We can't go out that way. There's no way to get past them," he said quickly.

"Wait... what? Get out? What do you mean?" she asked, faking bewilderment.

He hesitated a moment, looking at her uncertainly. "You were trying to get out... weren't you?" he asked carefully.

"Ummm..." she said slowly. Could she trust this stranger with the truth? Especially when he was a city guard? She considered this a moment and then continued. "Well yeah... actually. I was."

"Okay, good. That's what I thought. Now, I can help you escape if you just follow my lead." He looked thoughtful as he said this, clearly organizing some sort of elaborate plan in his head.

"Oh... really? You would help me?" she asked, surprised. He nodded, smiling lightly. "Okay, but how? And why?" Allana asked, still confused.

"Let's just say that I know this city very well, and that includes several 'secret' exits. And I want to help you because two is better than one, and I want to get out of here too. This place is like a prison. I've been dying for the perfect opportunity to get out, and with all of the chaos going on I think this is it. They won't notice that we've left until it's too late and we're miles away." He was very animated when he spoke, she noticed.

"Really? You feel like that too?" She felt disbelief, and then hope rise up inside of her.

"Yes. And I'm ready to be free," he nodded confidently.

"Okay, but there's just one problem... where are we going to go? There's no other place to live out there. We'd be leaving civilization forever." She could hear the fear in her voice as she considered this aloud.

"What, you really believe that?" he asked incredulously. When she nodded slowly, he changed his expression to mildly surprised. "Well I don't," he continued. "There's something else out there that they don't want us to find." Allana just stared at him.

"Look, I know that sounds crazy, but you'll just have to trust me. And if you didn't think there was anything out there, then what were you planning on doing once you got out?" He poked her playfully in the shoulder, a curious expression on his face. The conversation felt strangely surreal to Allana. Who was this random stranger that she was talking to so casually about running away from home? And why did it feel like she'd known him for years? Shaking off the odd feeling, she continued.

“I don’t know. I guess I was just trying to survive... and I don’t think staying inside my house is the best way to do that.”

“Huh... so you were just going to leave the rest of us to die, then?” he grinned mischievously. She started to glare at him, but then he rolled his eyes and said, “I’m just kidding! Like you said, I’m sure you weren’t thinking that far ahead.” But even as he said this, he looked at her strangely, his eyes unreadable.

Allana felt a mini-wave of guilt wash over her. Had she purposely been leaving Marlow to die? She didn’t feel quite as badly about leaving her father, but surely Marlow deserved better than that. Suddenly, she felt like the man in front of her could read her thoughts with the way that he was looking at her, and she quickly pushed them aside.

“Yes, exactly. But what about you? Clearly, *you* have no problem leaving everybody else here to die, and you’ve obviously put some thought into it.” She said pointedly.

“Actually, you are right. I have thought about it. And the truth is, I’ve just never found anybody else here who I thought wanted to leave. So, yes, in a way I am abandoning them all to die if this thing,” he gestured towards the sky, “turns out to be as threatening as it looks. But in a way, I’m just giving them what they want— a life lived until the end behind bars.”

She thought about this for a moment. “Hmm. Well, I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“Yeah, me neither. But we don’t really have time to think about it if we want to get out of here in time,” he looked at her carefully. “So, are you ready to go?”

She only hesitated for one short moment before nodding her head and reaching her hand to meet his outstretched one.

“Oh by the way... what’s your name?” she asked.

“I’m Adare,” he said. “And you’re Allana, right?”

She nodded, surprised. “How did you—?” she began. “You know what? Never mind,” she smiled. She had a feeling that she’d be learning a lot of interesting things about him in the near future. For now, though, she was content with just knowing his name and the fact that he’d already known hers, probably long before she’d even noticed him that morning.

“Alright. Let’s go,” he said. Then she let him pull her through the city.