

Matchmakers of Dolphin Grotto

The morning *Porpoise Throwback* show finishes at ten-thirty. As the crowd scatters along the winding walkways of *FantaSEA*, the click-clicking of Jumpin' Dolphin coaster reaches head trainer Taika. The sound races around the stadium concrete and gives an illusion of plurality: six, seven, eight coasters ratcheting into the sky.

Still standing under the giant show screen, Taika calls Pixie back over. She rolls slowly, until one dark eye settles on the trainer dressed in an all-black wetsuit. With a pointed finger, Taika directs her to the circular medical pool in the backstage area.

Mel comes out of the fish house with a line of silver buckets clanging on her arms, sunscreen slathered messily across her rose-pink face. She drops three buckets in front of her superior.

Taika pulls back his left neoprene sleeve to show the whisper of dots, arranged in parallel formation. Mel looks at the old bite wound, knowing that it was Pixie's jaws—stubbier incisors near the mouth tip—but she turns away.

"Put that away. Every safety briefing you flash your frickin' arm," she says.

On the switchbox, the head trainer activates the gate pistons that close the med pool with Pixie inside. The locking bolt falls into place with a *click-thunk*.

At the picnic tables sits a man with a camera, his face pressed into the viewfinder. The muzzle of his massive lens points right at the med pool, dropping a puddle of sunlight on the fish house behind them. For the past few minutes, Taika has heard the chattering of the shutter as the man squeezes bursts of pictures. Something about that long lens puts Taika off, but he can't say anything. Nowhere in *FantaSEA* are cameras prohibited.

The door clomps shut as Mel emerges from the locker room again. Her suit is a custom design, splotted with regions of navy blue, like lakes viewed from an airplane. Not many people wear colorful suits at Grotto. It was just Mel and Peanut, who wore a suit with the brightest turquoise at the sleeves. That's how they caught him in the video.

When Taika drops into the chilled water, Pixie makes her way over, sculling with her pecs. He pulls the animal closer as he makes a claw with his left hand and runs it slowly up and down her flank. Pixie clicks lazily and leans into his scratching hand.

As Taika tries to pull her tighter, the dolphin wriggles out of his grasp and sprays him with a clap of her jaw.

"You see this?" says Taika to Mel, who sits on the opposite pool side. "She alone decides."

The junior trainer breaststrokes towards the pair, until she's on the other side of the animal. Up close, Pixie's terrain is visible, her healed scratches and the cluster of freckles behind her left eye as it wobbles around, looking between her longtime trainer and the new, patchy-blue figure stirring up currents behind.

"Try to touch her where she can see you," says Taika.

Mel reaches out a hand with two fingers stuck out like a probe. She gently sets upon the base of her dorsal, but as soon as she makes contact, the dolphin takes off with a powerful kick and swims to the furthest end of the circular pool.

"Come on, stop being such a bitch," says Taika as he looks at the small snout poking out of the water.

Mel pulls out a handful of capelin from a bucket and holds it out for Pixie to see.

"That's just a bribe." Taika pulls the fish out of her grasp and back into the bucket. "You just have to let her come to you."

At the picnic table, the cameraman has taken his fill on the two trainers working with Pixie. Now, he moves the lens in rapid darts around backstage, from the six dolphins rustling about in the main pool, to the other trainers—Nick, Elena, Liz, Hannah—as they shuffle out of the fish house. The unwashed buckets propping open the office door are a sanitary violation, but hopefully, the man doesn't know. Hopefully, the man also overlooks the rusty railings that almost gave Nick lockjaw, the sun-cracked insulation on the show screen cables that give "the tingles" if you grab them with a salty hand. Hopefully, the man sees nothing important in the dry-erase smear where Peanut's *PNT* once marked his sessions with Pixie and Rambo, because out there in media-land, they called him Filip the dolphin puncher.

In the video, a trainer kneels in front of a dolphin, his blue sleeves glowing in the afternoon sun. He pushes the gray body slowly, but when it doesn't move, he strikes the animal with the back of his hand, sending spray into the air and the dolphin into a quick dive. The clip ends there and plays in loop on Facebook, where it has been viewed twelve million times and shared in twenty-two thousand posts. Taika could see the trail of freckles around Pixie's eye right before she gives a surprised chuff and slips below the surface.

When Taika dropped off Peanut's belongings after his dismissal, he stopped short of ringing the doorbell and instead put the box under the garage door awning. He didn't mean to look into that garage at first, but a flash of red caught his curiosity and he peered into a dusty pane. The old F150 was hard to avoid, its body pocked with rust but still very cherry red. More decals clung to its side now, twirls of purple and little cyan fish that Jennie had cut herself.

Taika had only been in the F150 once, and he was at the wheel. They were rumbling down I-4 with ICON park thrusting into the sky like a neon flame. Peanut and Jennie Meyer were splayed across the back, on top of each other, giggling at something given in a low whisper.

"Eagleboy ain't flyin, he drivin," said Taika. The stench of fruity margaritas made him crack open the window.

"Taika?" said Jennie, her voice slurred. "Taik, eagleboy. I love you."

"Yes, Jennie," said Taika with an exasperated sigh as he looked through the rearview at his eagle-lover draped over another man. "This eagle loves you long time."

"Taik, I love you too." Peanut laughs. "You're such a bro for doing this."

"Eagle...eagleboy" said Jennie, and that was the last thing she said that night.

It's been fifteen years since Taika picked up the new trainer couple, hammered from the bar. He still remembers keeping Peanut's keys for a few hours more and driving aimlessly around downtown. He wanted to see the lights, those neons and incandescents playing over the lakes. They looked so similar to the lights that shone on Jennie and Taika in the evening shows at Grotto. It would illuminate their brown bird suits as she hooked her arms around his chest, his shoulders, before the harness grew taught and lifted them into the sky.

At the sound of footsteps, Taika and Mel turn away from the sulking dolphin. A young woman has jumped the chain that blocks off the back pool area from the picnic tables. Standing in a #*TheyLiveInTheSea* crop-top, she brandishes a phone camera.

"Hey!" says Mel. They pull themselves out of the water and start running towards her. Behind the bushes, Taika sees the lens panning slowly, following their wet footprints on the deck.

"Put that phone down," says Taika, putting a hand over the iPhone camera. She slowly pockets it but doesn't stop looking around at everything.

"Where's the dolphin with the broken jaw?"

Mel grabs her on the shoulder. "What broken jaw?"

"The one that Filip punched," she says.

Mel points back at the med pool with the small snout sticking out. "Does that look like a broken jaw to you?"

"Where did you hear this?" asks Taika.

"Instagram. Facebook. It's everywhere."

"Enough," says Mel. "Get the fuck out." She pushes the girl back to the chains and watches as she disappears into the winding paths of FantaSEA.

Everything is dolphin-themed near the Grotto. A life-sized trainer statue props open the door at the Dog n' Strips eatery, bird shit splattered across his resin-polished shoulders. Their soda cups have collectible animal names on them, including Pixie.

"That's the third activist in six days," says Mel, looking at that Dog n' Strips and the trainer smiling a laquered smile.

"They'll stop soon enough," says Taika.

"Good."

"I didn't say that things were going to return to normal."

Mel turns and looks at him. She's got cinnamon-brown hair and puppy-playful eyes, the type of girl that some men found appealing in a wetsuit. They'd sit in the splash zone, ignore the dolphins, and give her *the look*.

"That's how it goes here, Mel," he says. "Shit happens, and a good trainer knows how to adapt."

They keep trying for a few minutes every day in the med pool, but Pixie always finds the spot furthest away from Mel. One day, though, things are different. Taika decides to keep Pixie in the show pool after *Porpoise Throwback* and run a training session with Mel. He beckons the Junior to join him on the trainer's platform.

"You're gonna lead," says Taika, "Ask her to come to control."

Mel slaps the water with an open palm and the sound echoes around the empty stadium. Pixie stops swimming along the glass walls and comes up to the Junior trainer, not in the direct flippers-to-the-wall sort of way, but slowly, head tilted, gazing at Mel. If she'd been a human, Taika would have pinned her as sticky with sarcasm.

With a hand thrown over her shoulder, Mel signals for a spin-breach. Pixie darts away from the trainer's platform, tail pumping as she dives to the bottom. Moments later, the water explodes in white as she flies up, slinging droplets from her twirling body. She whacks a training target hanging over the main pool and sends the red buoy dancing on its cable.

Mel glances at the thick concrete pillars that hold the buoy cable. They're cracked

and rusted and built too heavily for just a training buoy.

"They had stage lights on those things once, right?" she asks. Near the tops are the nutless ends of anchor bolts, sticking out like porcupine quills.

Taika looks at the buoy, dangling limp in the wind. "Ten years ago, we would be standing under a whole scaffold," he says. "Cable harnesses around your waist. Pull a little purple lever in the control house and you can fly."

Pixie comes around again, but hearing no control command, disappears somewhere below stadium ground-level to play with a collection of waterlogged toys rattling on the filter grate.

"You ever fly?" asks Mel.

"Sure. I was the eagle with a broken wing," says Taika.

"How did you fly if you had a broken wing?"

"The other eagle fixes it," says Taika, staring off into the sky, thick with summer humidity. "The dolphins help me too."

Taika slaps the water, and as Pixie pops up, he signals a behavior that they haven't done for years and years. Pixie doesn't move, her glassy eye giving something of confusion. Taika repeats the gesture very slowly. The dolphin floats, and then pokes her tongue out.

Mel laughs. "What a helpful dolphin that is."

"She doesn't seem to remember right now," says Taika. He gives the signal again, and something changes. The glassy eye sparkles, Pixie snaps rigid, holding her flippers out like handles.

Taika jumps in the water and grabs the animal's flippers where it curves like a boomerang. Pixie begins turning while pushing forward, belly to belly with Taika. It brings something back to Taika, to feel the muscles of Pixie's old body coursing in unison. The girl had been in her twenties and Taika two weeks a Junior when they first met. Pixie had been a much easier dolphin back then.

After making a loop around the pool, Taika dismounts and clings to the edge.

"She would bring me like that from the edge to the center, where the girl-eagle waited," he says.

"How would she heal you?"

"The power of imagination," says Taika. Mel laughs and looks out at the empty seats. From behind these stadium bleachers comes the click-clicking of Jumpin' Dolphin again, where everyone in over-the-shoulder restraints, too, could corkscrew to the roar of oiled metal.

"What are the chances you dance with her?" asks Taika.

Mel shrugs. "About the same as riding a bull."

Still, Mel slips into the water next to Pixie. She asks her to lay sideways, and to Taika's surprise, Pixie listens. Mel takes a flipper in each hand and goes off into the show pool.

Taika watches as the pair twists through the water, and somewhere, he sees a sunset sky and a metal arch gleaming with stage lights. He sees Jennie in her feather suit, dangling over the water as her mate spins with a girl-dolphin named after the trail of freckles around her eyes. The more he tried to explain this old show to the Juniors, the less it made sense to him. If the female eagle could fly, why couldn't she come to him? Every choreographed movement seemed arbitrary, but they repeated it over and over

until it felt like an absolute truth.

Mel and Pixie make a full circle around the perimeter. They stop at the trainer's platform, right next to Taika's boots. He pulls Mel from the pool, who looks at the dolphin, her eyes still following the two trainers. "I don't get it," she says.

Taika kneels and strokes Pixie, down from her tapered tip and across her side, where the gray fades to the rose of her belly.

"I don't get it either," he says. "But you're not the first."

"So she still hates me?"

Taika smiles a little. Pixie's skin is cool and slippery to the touch, criss-crossed with hundreds of tiny healed scratches, the records of nearly four decades of life. And somewhere in that tapered head, the spin of dolphin thoughts, a mystery.

Peanut used to teach interns how to throw fish into a dolphin's mouth. He'd cup his right hand and ask them to throw capelin from twenty feet. It's a skill that requires the coordination of a baseball pitcher, and even baseballs don't wobble in the air as much as a thawed herring. A bad toss, as it happened often with an intern Taika remembers as Raymond-the-slippery-hand, would leave a splattering of fish guts across Peanut's face. Why he kept his hand so close to his face, Taika could never understand.

"You're moving your hand," said Taika once. They were all Juniors then—he, Peanut, and Jennie.

"So what?" said Peanut. "Dolphins won't just let fish fly into their mouths. They'll chase it. I'm moving my hand. I don't see a problem."

The two men started in Grotto in the same summer season of 2001, where they had night shows Thursdays through Sundays and every Grotto trainer called themselves a Dreamer.

They never talked about it directly (it seemed too childish), but the Seniors played matchmakers among the Juniors. For each dolphin, men and women were put together by the divine hands of Seniors, huddled in a conference room by the fish house, writing names and taking votes on a whiteboard. Of course, a trainer worked with multiple animals and had different partners, but they say—or at least what Taika heard when he became a Senior—that many trainer couples had been made that way.

So it was, then, that Taika stood shoulder to shoulder with Jennie during the morning fish prep. From the restaurant supplier truck, they'd tug a stack of white fish boxes and put them in water to defrost the diets for the day. Jennie studied animals and their trainers as part of her thesis in psychology, but for the fish house mornings and the night shows, she was just another Junior. They passed handfuls of herring from sink to scale to labeled buckets.

When it came to animals, the Seniors put Taika and Jennie with Pixie. Pixie was a good dolphin, self-determined of course, or "sassy." Pixie's records have shown similar confusing incidents back in the Dreamer era. Once, the dolphin had been in one of her moods and was sulking in a back pool corner. When they approached for a training session, Pixie sank headfirst, slowly, until all they saw was her tail.

"Okay resident behavior expert," said Taika. "What do we do now?"

An event logger putted away at their feet, drawing sixteen lines of ink onto receipt paper. A blip in a line would represent a behavior of significance from either the animal or trainer.

Jennie slapped the water for a recall, and instantly, Pixie turned right-side up. Taika made a sign for a belly-roll, and the dolphin snapped to attention, stretched alongside the pool, and started rotating like a log. But as soon as Taika gave the whistle and a handful of fish, Pixie flicked her flukes and went tail-up.

“The fuck is this?” asked Taika to Jennie, but she was deep in her field notebook, the pages crinkled from saltwater.

“So, what *behaviors of significance* did we see here?” asked Taika again, picking up the logger with its motorized hum. Jennie laughed and slipped his fingers from the keypad. Leaning on Taika’s shoulder, the scientist pressed four buttons, and a couple blips in the ink rolled through the paper, spun around the receiving ream, and was gone.

When Taika thinks of this old event recorder, he imagines Jennie back in her apartment, rolling the reams around her room like ancient scrolls. She read those blips of ink, like heartbeats, and magically, she would come back the next day knowing more about Pixie than anyone else.

Jennie was beautiful. She was beautiful even when she had a line of bird shit down her arm, beautiful even when the salt dried and her hair became a hopeless tangle. At least that’s what Taika thought. Nearly two decades later, the Dreamers has long dispersed into prissier marine parks. Nobody at Grotto remembers Jennie outside of the postcards, and by the turn of events, it seems that Taika will keep it that way. Nobody wants to hear about an old crush, especially when her husband was a fellow trainer, dismissed from a viral video.

Back in his office, Taika pulls out the old postcards. Some of them are frayed around the edges, their ink faded to muted greens and blues. They came from Finn’s Fins, a little boutique right next to the Dog n’ Strips eatery. Shuffling through them card by card, like he would do sometimes on the night shifts by the pool, he sees himself and Jennie over and over. They rode dolphins like skis, kissed them on their bony rostrums, and played two-on-two water polo with Pixie and Rambo. That’s all the corporate photographers were interested in, the dolphin trainers playing the male and female eagle in the night shows. *Pretend to like each other*, they would say with fingers on flashbulb triggers, and the whole bunch of Seniors would burst out in hoots and hollers.

Taika did like Jennie. In those fish house mornings, after the buckets were stashed away, they’d share a coffee and sit on the old plastic barrels they gave to their walruses as toys. These ninety minutes every Monday and Wednesday were the times they had alone. Work didn’t start until the other trainers punched in, so they had nothing to do but scoot their barrels together and watch the sun rise over central Florida.

At the same time, Taika knows that these postcards were the biggest lie that ever came out of Grotto. In the eagle suits, they grabbed each other like the photographers asked, fingers feeling the terrain of their tight bodies. Taika laughed as men in pit-stained tee-shirts pushed Jennie into his arms, poked and prodded and then held still. Without them, they were were a man and a woman sitting on scuffed barrels, doing nothing more than sharing a cup of coffee, black, as Jennie liked it.

When the music started, Jennie would be floating over the stadium in the brown eagle suit. In her harness she would flap her wings (they glued feathers to Jennie’s sleeve), and the person at controls would jiggle that purple lever to the orchestral arrangement.

Taika started in the shadows made by the tank walls. In the same suit, he kept his right arm at an angle to signify that he couldn’t fly. Jennie and Taika, they took the eagle

job very seriously. They'd paint each other's faces with the bright white of medical sunscreen to look more like bald eagles. Once, sitting on those morning barrels, Jennie suggested some yellow lipstick for the beak, but Taika had looked at her with such indignation that they both started laughing and forgot the matter. Besides, who cared if the eagles had flesh-colored lips? The drowsy children? The grown-ups buzzed on cheap mimosas?

The head trainer at the time would clap Taika on the back after the show. *Eagleboy!* she would say. *Found your mate again, huh?* And Taika would nod. He'd pull the zippered tail of the wetsuit to step out of the feathered mess.

What he really wanted was back in those upturned barrels of morning. There, without a badgering photographer or choreographer, he wanted to slip an arm around Jennie and feel her lean into it. Never mind that they were a product of matchmaking, never mind that Taika later understood they put the asian guy with the scientist gal because they thought that smart people would hit it off, never mind all that. It was Jennie that Taika wanted. But they pulled off their Eagle suits, and they were humans again, stuffing dead fish with vitamins and watching twilight slip away to morning.

Since their start at Grotto, the two men had stuck together as friends of convenience. Trainers didn't have a nine-to-five. Maybe a six-to-two, or an eleven-to-eleven. So it seemed that all of Taika's friends were either dolphins or Dreamers. Back then, they had lived in cheap apartments a few streets apart, and on their days off, they would come together for "funny drinks" and whatever was on ESPN, as Peanut liked it.

So, when Peanut first put his head on Jennie's shoulders, Taika couldn't find anything to say. Outside of the eagle suits, Jennie wasn't really his girl, and Taika wasn't her guy. And developments came like the ratcheting of Jumpin' Dolphin, every click the sound of movement that could never be reversed.

In those fish house mornings, he listened as Jennie talked about Peanut. He too learned to love his steel-gray eyes, his two-day stubble, even the mooseknuckle that sometimes hung between his legs. None of that prevented him from imagining, though. When a very drunk Jennie gave him a call that night Taika drove the F150, he had seen himself once again in that eagle costume, running up to Jennie with his broken wing, and a cable pulling them up and away.

Jennie finished her Ph.D, got married to Peanut, and became a professor at Eckerd. But in the two years it took for that to happen, the show kept repeating itself Thursdays through Sundays, the same love story with the same ending.

After Jennie fixed Taika's wing, the eagle mates would wrap each other in a tight embrace as her harness lifted them in the air, twirling along the water surface. Taika could feel the tickle of clumpy hair on his neck and smell the tang of the metal harness, squeaking as they shifted their weights. But even as they swooped like nuptial birds, Taika knew that in every stroke and grab of the most exaggerated physicality, they were acting out a choreographed set. So perhaps the Eagle Show was the second-largest lie that came out of Grotto. The eagle with a broken wing would never find his mate, and every night he became further and further away.

Since that day in the main pool, Taika has shown the VHS taped Eagle Show to Mel. She had scrunched her eyebrows at the grainy picture. "Gosh," she said, "this made less sense than I originally thought."

Everything's different now. They don't make analog event recorders anymore, and the scaffolding is long stripped to scrap metal. But the days pass for Pixie and Mel, and

the dolphin does the same thing. Observe commands, follow them with gusto, and swim away, sometimes even refusing fish if Mel held them. Taika starts to think that the old dolphin hadn't changed much at all, even as the world turned digital.

Taika still hasn't found the images taken by the photographer at the picnic tables, but he trusts that they are out there somewhere. Every keystroke is a chase after gossip, but it is gossip that seems to matter. So every day, Taika keeps searching up FantaSEA for something new. The results are all Filip, Filip, Filip, the dolphin puncher. Somewhere in the past two weeks, the video has been sped up to look more violent.

Thank god the cameras were rolling, wrote an activist on a Facebook post this morning, tagging the sped-up video. *Imagine how many times FantaSEA trainers have abused their dolphins and gotten away with it*. Twenty-two hundred likes, six hundred angry faces, and forty three shares.

Taika walks out of his office and towards Mel on the pool deck. He holds out his phone, open to the post.

"Can you believe they're still talking about it?"

Mel reads the post and watches the looping video before handing the phone back.

"That's just how the internet works," she says.

Pixie comes snuffling around and, seeing one of her old trainers, sticks her chin on the deck. He signals for a fluke slap, and the dolphin drops her tail down in a heavy splash before looking back up at Taika. Mel does a tactile signal by drawing a circle on Pixie's melon. Instantly, she pops up, waving her pectorals at the Junior. But at her whistle, the dolphin goes right back to Taika.

"You can't keep this up forever, Pixie," says Taika, pulling her head gently onto his lap.

"Why not?" Mel asks. "You've told me that she's been doing it for years."

"It hurts to do something and feel something else," says Taika. "Don't you think so?"

Still on his lap, Pixie opens her mouth. Taika rolls his eyes and reaches back for the bucket, but his fingers dip into nothing but ice water. "Sorry, gal," he says.

Suddenly, Mel turns around with the phone. It's the video by *#TheyLiveInTheSea* girl, uploaded earlier this morning. Most of it shows nothing but the inside of her sweatshirt, but he hears Mel shoving the girl from backstage, and he hears his own voice asking about Filip breaking the dolphin's jaw. For a few seconds, the two trainers of Grotto are visible in the frame, Taika reaching over to pull her camera away.

As Taika starts to look for another bucket for Pixie, Mel inhales sharply and the head trainer looks over. Her eyes are flitting left and right as she scrolls through the comments on that YouTube video.

"What's going on?" asks Taika. He reaches for his phone but Mel twists away and all he can see is a trail of text flowing up.

"Taik? Are you Chinese or Japanese?"

"I'm an American. Why does it matter if I'm Chinese or Japanese?"

"Your face doesn't tell you where you were born."

A memory comes to Taika, just for a second, but he's back in his New Jersey elementary school. He remembers the smell of boot-smashed earthworms on a wet blacktop. He's the jumper now, as they swing the long jump-rope back and forth. *What da ya wanna do this time?* Someone asks, and someone else responds. *How about*

Chinese-Japanese? And then they do the chant—*Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these*—as Taika leaps over the cord, swish-thwacking against the pavement glossy with rainwater. The cord keeps coming at him, and he keeps jumping.

Picking up the empty bucket, Taika walks back into the fish house. But as he passes by the men's room, he suddenly turns and pushes open the door. Here are the gleaming heads of showers and the lockers of thick plastic, one for every trainer. The radio is still playing from the morning, when Taika brought it into the kitchen to work the fish. Below the radio, he stops. Here is Peanut's locker, the name still written on the front. Inside, on its metal hook, hangs his wetsuit.

The suit is rough in his hands. There are places where the fibers have worn: on the knees and elbows, where Peanut bent over for so many years, teaching Pixie and Rambo how to fly. Twelve seconds earned his dismissal, another ratchet. Ratchets beget ratchets, comment after hateful comment, and they're all strapped into Jumpin' Dolphin, waiting for the plunge.

Taika pulls the ripcord on his own black suit and peels the hot material away. He stands there with nothing on but his Speedos, the radio cooing in the background. Slowly, he threads his hands through Peanut's blue sleeves until they come out the other end. Peanut's arms were thicker than his, thicker and shorter, he realizes for the first time. He sticks the rest of his body into that suit, first one leg, then the other. He closes the zipper, and suddenly he's standing in Peanut's wetsuit, his own suit laying crumpled on the dirty floor.

Outside is one of those summer skies with horizons that fade into brilliant white. Mel's still bent over Taika's phone, sitting criss-cross on the concrete. The water-light tickles Taika as he stands in the doorway, clad like Filip the dolphin puncher. He looks for Pixie in the med pool, but she is already gone.