

The Creature

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The rubber floor of the life raft ripples beneath me. It wasn't the usual ripple I'd got used to over the last few weeks, caused by the waves, the one that undulates gently up and down as the raft is lifted, in turn, by each wave before being dropped again. This ripple is different: it's faster, more purposeful, as if something big has just swum beneath the raft. Almost as soon as I feel it, it's gone and the life raft goes back to conforming to the slow, laborious roll of the ocean waves. Maybe it was just my imagination; maybe I'm starting to hallucinate: after all, I haven't eaten in more than a week, and the single sip of water I now ration myself to each day is barely enough to keep me alive, let alone sane. Then I feel the ripple again. This time it's slower, more deliberate and I feel whatever it is pass under my legs as I sit with my back against the inflated rubber ring which forms the side of the life raft. I try to estimate its size by the time it takes to pass under me, but all I can tell is that it's big: eight feet, ten, maybe fifteen or even twenty, who knows, but something that big and this far from land could only be one of two things: a shark or a whale. I feel around and open the side of the orange tent which forms a roof over the life raft, protecting me from the intense tropical sun during the day, and the rain storms at night, but it's too dark to see anything. There must be clouds overhead, because I can't see the stars. In fact, and I know this because I try it, I can't even see my hand in front of my face. I listen, hoping to hear the tell-tale *whoosh* and *whup* of a whale breathing out and then back in again, but the only sound is that of the waves lapping gently against the side of the life raft. I zip the flap closed again, trying to shut out whatever it is that's outside, and stare down at the floor. It's as dark in here as it is outside so I know I can't see anything, but I stare nonetheless, my eyes searching the darkness in the vain hope of seeing something that will tell me what's underneath me.

I feel the ripple once more, and then I feel the floor of the life raft lift as if something is pushing it up from below. Whatever it is, it doesn't seem to be losing interest and if anything it's growing bolder. A few seconds later, something bumps against the side of the life raft, hard enough to make it shudder and throw me sideways onto the floor. I can feel the panic start to rise inside me, but I don't break out into a cold sweat. At first, I wonder why; then I realise I'm too dehydrated. My body is shutting down all non-essential reactions to save what little

water it has left, and that includes sweating, no matter how scared I am.

For a moment there's silence, then I hear something slap against the rubber. It's forceful and sends a shiver across the life raft, almost as if the raft itself is shaking with fear. I try to swallow, but I can't, again because of the dehydration and my body's response to it. I feel the floor of the life raft lift a second time as whatever it is pushes up from below once more. If it's doing that with its head, then the creature which is stalking me in the darkness is truly massive, because I can tell by the movement that its several feet across. I clutch to the side of the raft, not knowing if I should try to move out of the way, or remain as still as possible. Eventually, the floor flattens out again and the creature moves away. Only then do I realise I've been holding my breath and I let it out with an audible sigh. A second later, the creature hits the life raft again: this time it's not a gentle, exploratory push, it's a full on attack, as if the creature is trying to break through the rubber floor. Somehow it must be able to sense my presence within the life raft and it's determined to get me, but the rubber holds, thwarting its intent.

The seconds slowly tick by, and nothing more happens. They turn into minutes and still the creature hasn't returned. Maybe it's given up, maybe it's realised it's too difficult to get me and has gone off to seek easier prey. Maybe ... My thoughts are interrupted by something ramming the side of the life raft, pushing it through the water as if it were attached to a powerful engine. I cling on for dear life, worried I might be tipped into the water, but thankfully this doesn't happen. Instead, after what seems like an age, the life raft starts to slow, and then stop. My heart is pounding, but above the noise this is making in my ears, I can hear something else. It takes me a moment to realise that it's the sound of air leaking from the life raft. Desperately, I feel around in the dark, trying to find the hole, but I can't. All around me, I can feel the life raft getting softer and softer as it slowly deflates and sinks lower and lower into the water. Again, the creature pushes up from below, causing the rubber floor to bend and deform beneath me. It seems to be searching for me, trying to work out exactly where I am, and how it can get to me.

I cannot see it, but I sense intelligence in its actions. Not human intelligence, but something colder, more analytical and more predatory. This is a creature that's used to getting its own way. I feel the first wave slop over the side of the life raft; it won't be long before it sinks and I end up in the water. I unzip the flap in the roof again so that I won't be trapped inside as the raft continues to collapse around me, but I'm unwilling to abandon it quite yet. It might not offer me much protection, but it's better than nothing and outside in the inky blackness, it will be just me and the creature. Humans are used to being top dog, but out here, to it, I'm nothing more than prey. It bumps against the side of the life raft again, impatient to get at the tasty morsel it knows is inside. I try to think of something I can do, but my

brain has frozen. I know I'm going to die, and my brain can't cope with it. The creature rams the raft again, and I hear more air hissing out into the night. There's now so little of it left in the raft that it's not much more than a flaccid mass of rubber that's barely keeping itself above the waves. I can hear the creature circling me, splashing the water with its tail as it turns. While I can't see anything in the dark, it seems to have no trouble knowing exactly where I am. It's toying with me, and we both know it. All I can do is hope that when the end comes it's quick, but somehow I know that this isn't the end the creature has planned for me. Somehow, I know it wants to make me suffer. The very thought of what's going to happen makes me want to be sick, but I have nothing to bring up, so all I can do is dry heave. The longer the end is drawn out, the more I lose control of my body, the fear of what's to come is tearing me apart, ripping at my very soul.

I hear myself yelling at the creature, alternating between begging with it to leave me alone and urging it to hurry up and get it over with. Unsurprisingly, the creature doesn't respond, it just continues to circle. It's in total control, and I know it's the one who will decide when I die. All I can do is wait, cowering in the darkness, trembling with fear, until it decides that I am finished. I try to block out what's going to happen to me, but I can't. I can hear screaming, and even though I know it must be me, it seems like it's coming from somewhere other than my own body. I feel the life raft finally start to sink beneath me and I claw my way out just as it disappears into the depths. Instinctively, I find myself treading water, but I don't know why. The creature brushes against me, and I can feel the roughness of its skin tear at my flesh as it passes, but still I cannot see it. Death is coming for me and yet I'm blind to it. Somehow this makes it worse. If I could see it, I could prepare, but I can't. I don't know why, but suddenly a calmness settles over me and I lie back, floating on the surface, arms held out, almost as if I'm offering myself to the creature, giving myself to it as if I'm some sort of sacrifice to a god I don't believe in. At least this way, death will be on my terms and not its, and I will meet my fate face on, with open arms. I know I won't survive for long, but at least my death will be my own.