



Pearl's Ocean Magic



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For Becky Shapiro,
who started the magic



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First Day of School

“DO YOU THINK THE OTHER DOLPHINS AT school will like me?” Pearl asked.

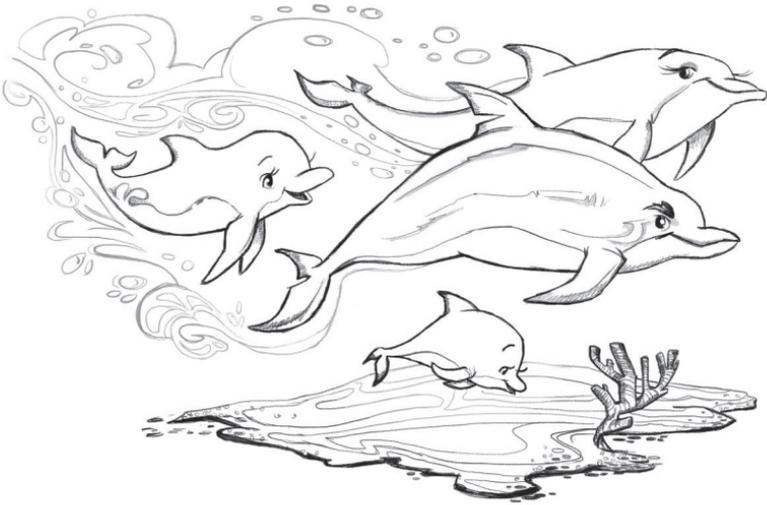
She was swimming through the blue waters of the Salty Sea with her pod. A pod is a dolphin family. Pearl’s pod was made up of herself, her parents, and her little sister, Squeak.

“Of course they’ll like you!” Pearl’s father told her.

Pearl’s mother slowed down to let a school

of fish swim by. The sun made the silvery little fish sparkle in the clear water. The sea was shallow here among the beautiful coral reefs that grew all over the area.

“Just be yourself, Pearl,” Pearl’s mother said. “You’ll make lots of friends.”



Pearl hoped her parents were right. Her pod was much smaller than most and lived in a quiet lagoon far away from other pods.

That meant Pearl hardly ever saw other young dolphins. Well, except for Squeak, of course. But she was too young to count.

“I’m sure you’ll love school, Pearl,” her father said. “You want to learn how to use your magic, right?”

“That’s true.” Pearl blew a stream of bubbles out of her blowhole as she thought about that. Dolphins were the protectors of the ocean. They helped other sea creatures whenever they could. The reason Pearl and her pod lived in their lagoon was because sea turtles laid their eggs on the beach nearby. Pearl’s pod helped the baby turtles swim safely out to sea after they hatched.

Most of the time that was an easy job. All the dolphins had to do was steer the tiny creatures into deeper waters or show them where to find

food. Pearl's parents used a special magical skill called *guiding* to do that. It made the turtles want to do whatever the dolphins were thinking. Magical guiding could also help the hatchlings swim faster to escape from hungry crabs and fish.

But that wasn't the only type of dolphin magic Pearl's parents used. For instance, the dolphins could sing magical songs, or create sparkly light displays in the water to distract the gulls that liked to swoop down and snatch the baby turtles out of the shallows.

Pearl wanted to be able to do all of those things someday, just like her parents. She was already good at using mental magic to communicate with the baby turtles and other sea creatures. Dolphins were the only ones who could send mental messages to one

another using words and ideas, though all fish and animals understood the simple pictures and emotions that the dolphins sent. Pearl and Squeak practiced that kind of mental magic all the time. They could use their skills to talk an octopus into playing with them, or to convince a pair of cranky crabs to stop fighting. The dolphin sisters were pretty good at sending more complicated messages to each other, too, even when they were half a lagoon apart. And now, finally, Pearl was old enough to go to school and learn the rest of her dolphin skills.

“I can’t wait until I’m old enough to go to school!” Squeak flapped her fins. “What classes will you take, Pearlie?”

“Magic class, of course,” Pearl told her sister. “I can’t wait to start that one! I’ll also be

taking Music, Ocean Lore, and Jumping and Swimming.”

“I’m going to be great at Jumping and Swimming!” Squeak demonstrated by zipping to the surface and leaping into the air. Then she swam back down, dodging around a prickly bit of fire coral. “Wait, but what’s Ocean Lore?” she asked.

“That’s where you’ll learn all about our world here in the Salty Sea,” Pearl’s father explained, wiggling his flukes—his tail fins—to move forward. “You’ll also learn more about the other creatures who live here with us, like fish and lobsters and jellyfish and—”

“Oh!” Pearl’s mother broke in suddenly. “Someone is in trouble!”

Pearl had seen it, too. An image had just popped into her mind. It was shadowy and

dark and filled with fear.

“Here!” Pearl’s father led the way past another coral formation.

A spotted eel was thrashing around near the reef. His long, slender body was all tangled up in something white and crinkly. He shook and jerked his whole body trying to get loose from it. He was so frantic that he kept slamming into the spiky coral.

“Stop!” Pearl’s father cried. “Hold still, friend. We want to help you.”

Pearl could feel magic energy flowing out toward the eel from both her parents. But the eel only thrashed harder.

“He’s panicking,” Pearl’s father said. “He doesn’t even hear us.”

“Come,” Pearl’s mother told her children. “Join in. We need to get through to him before

he hurts himself.”

Pearl and Squeak swam forward. Pearl focused her mind on the eel and sent a mental message. *Peace, friend, she thought. Be still so we can help you.*

She knew the eel wouldn't understand the words of her message. But she hoped he would feel that the dolphins were trying to help.

“It's still not working,” Pearl's father said after a moment.

Pearl's mother swam forward, letting the eel's body slam against her sleek gray side instead of the sharp coral. Once again, Pearl felt strong magic flowing out from her mother.

“Is she guiding the eel?” Squeak whispered.

“I think so,” Pearl replied. “She might even be pushing him.”

Pushing was a stronger form of magical

guiding. Usually dolphins tried not to use it, since it forced other creatures to do what the dolphins wanted rather than allowing them a choice. But sometimes, in an emergency, pushing was necessary. Pearl kept focusing on the eel, adding her tiny bit of magic to the stronger magic coming from her parents.

This time, it worked. The eel's frantic motions slowed, and then stopped. He hung in the water, still and dull-eyed.

"Hurry," Pearl's mother said. "I can't push him to stay still for long. Get him untangled."

Pearl zipped forward to help her father and sister. They pulled at the white substance with their snouts.

"Yuck," Squeak said, spitting out a piece that had come loose in her mouth. "What is this junk, anyway?"

“It must be something the Land Leggers dropped in the water,” her father replied.

Land Leggers were a species of two-legged creature that lived on the islands and shore above the surface of the Salty Sea. Pearl had never seen one, since there were none on the turtles’ island. But she’d seen lots of things that had washed into the sea from the Land Leggers’ world.

“There—I think the eel is loose,” her father said. “Back away in case he panics when your mother releases him.”

Pearl and her family backed off. Her mother stopped her flow of magic energy. The eel hung there in the water for a moment. Then, with a single flip of his whiplike body, he disappeared into a hole in the coral. A grateful feeling floated into Pearl’s mind, and she

smiled in the direction of the eel.

“How far are we from dolphin school?” Squeak wondered.

Her father nodded his sleek gray head toward a coral wall nearby. “We’re here.”

Pearl realized he was right. Coral Cove Dolphin School was located in a shallow lagoon protected by a colorful ring of coral reef.

“Thanks for swimming me to school,” she told her parents and sister when they reached the entrance.

“You’re welcome,” her mother said. “Will you be okay swimming home by yourself after school?”

“I think so.” Pearl wiggled her fins nervously.

“Just remember to stay away from Bigsky Basin,” Pearl’s father said. “The water is very deep there.”

“Yeah,” Squeak said. “There could be sharks!”

Pearl shivered as she glanced up at her father’s dorsal fin. There was a scar there. Long ago, a shark had bitten him while his pod was rescuing an octopus from becoming the shark’s dinner. Pearl had heard the story many times. But it seemed even scarier here, so close to Bigsky Basin.

“Maybe your new school friends will swim you home,” Squeak told Pearl.

“Maybe.” Pearl forgot about sharks as she looked into the school lagoon. Inside, she could see lots of dolphins of all ages swimming around. “But what if nobody likes me? What if they think I’m weird?”

“Don’t worry, little one.” Her father rubbed his fin against hers. “If you want to have friends, you just have to act like a friend.”



“How do I do that?” Pearl wondered.

“Always choose kindness,” her father replied.

Squeak laughed and did a flip in the water. “You always say that, Daddy!” she exclaimed.

Her father smiled. “That’s because it’s always true.”

Pearl's mother rubbed her fin against Pearl's, too. Then she gave her a gentle shove toward the entrance. "You'd better go in, Pearl," she said. "It's almost time for school to start."