

# The Shell That Surfed The Sea

Dominik Slusarczyk



**Brown Eyes**

# Prologue

It looks like the sun has been trapped in the lake. We know, deep inside, that this cannot be the case, for the sun is only ever high in the sky, but the orb is so bright and so intense that it confuses us, muddles our thoughts. I tentatively dip a finger into the water. It is far too warm. A frown appears on my face. The magic here is not natural.

Flashes of blue appear on the orb's surface, travelling over it like veins on a leaf. Each of these lightning strikes forces the whole cavern to glow blue with it. This is not how this place was designed. The wizards infected the lake with their magic. I can feel the decay in the water. I am filled with concern.

We should never have come to this place.

The lake is undisturbed by ripples or waves. This is a silent place, a calm place. The lake is not bothered by the wars fought in the outside world.

I notice the shadows.

Thousands of tiny shadows, visible as no more than dots, cross the surface of the light. They circle it in a tranquil fashion, caressing its soft glow. The light must not terrify them. It terrifies me. The light is too strong, too eternal. Light that doesn't go out is unnatural. Even the sun sets.

You gently take my hand and lead me into the lake. As my head goes underwater I feel the light seeping into my body and changing me as we knew it would.

A group of hooded figures enter the cavern through a fissure in the wall. The monstrous stalagmites that line the lake dwarf the figures. The figures wear robes made out of a rough material that is not pleasing to the touch. Thin pieces of rope encircle their waists, holding the robes in place. Their sandals clap on the floor, shattering the silence.

The figures walk slowly with their hands clasped in front of them. There is no unnecessary movement: they do not shiver, or sway, or scratch. Their movement is slow and purposeful, calm and confident. They will get to where they're going and they will get there when they want to get there. The figures are not scared of the light in the lake.

The leading figure crouches at the edge of the lake. The others form a semi-circle around this figure, watching with eyes hidden in the shadows under their hoods. The crouching figure removes their hood, revealing a wrinkled face and long grey hair. Her eyes glow the same bright blue as the lightning on the orb. Her eyes flicker and dance like a candle flame in a small breeze. There is a thin smile beneath her eyes.

She puts her hand in her robe and pulls out a thin wand. The wand is spindly, flimsy, so weak a child could snap it in two. At the base of this twig is a polished cylindrical handle. The handle gleams, reflecting both the white light of the orb and the blue light of the lightning. The woman pushes the tip of her wand into the lake. She starts muttering quietly. The wand vibrates gently. Her eyes glow even brighter. The shadows orbiting the light pause.

"This way," the old woman says. "Come towards my voice. Do not be afraid."

She moves her wand in slow circles within the lake. The wand encounters heavy resistance, as if the water here is thicker than it should be. Her movement forces ripples to form, creating an area of unrest on the otherwise glass like surface. A few of the shadows at the bottom of the lake start moving upwards, away from the light, towards the wand.

The shadows move towards the surface at a great pace, far faster than any fish can swim. The water is the shadow's home. It does not fight their movement like it does the wand's.

"That's right. This way. Come to my voice," the old woman continues as she twirls her wand in the water. Her muttering is constant, repetitive, a spell.

The group of shadows that initially responded to the woman's call was large but many of them lose interest during their journey to the surface. Shadow after shadow abandons the pack and returns to the light. The woman is undeterred. She continues to mutter and her wand continues to circle. As they approach the surface the shadows begin to take on recognisable forms.

"That's right, dear," the woman says. She places her wand on the floor beside her. She gently pushes her hands into the lake. When she pulls her hands back out she is holding a baby boy. He giggles and points at the woman. His eyes glow bright blue, just like hers do.

The woman pries his right eye open with her fingers. She gazes deeply into his eyes. The examination is thorough; she spends at least a minute inspecting the eye from all angles. When she is finished she repeats the examination on his left eye. Eventually she is satisfied. She smiles at the boy.

"The light is strong in this one," she says. She passes the baby to one of the figures behind her. The figure takes the baby, holding him gently under his arm pits. A different figure approaches and dries the baby with a soft towel. When the baby is dry they wrap him in the towel and the figure holding him exits the cavern with him.

The old woman watches this whole process carefully. When the figure and the baby are safely out of the cavern she puts her hands back in the lake. She pulls out another baby boy. He waves at the woman. The woman smiles at him. His eyes glow blue.

The woman examines his eyes like she did with the first one. She stares deep into his eyes, inspecting every part of them that she can see. When she is satisfied she announces:

"The light is strong in this one."

She passes the baby to one of the hooded figures. The baby gives the figure two thumbs up. The baby is dried, wrapped, and removed from the cavern like the first one was.

The woman's arms return to the water. She pulls out a third baby. It's a girl. She is crying. Her hands are fists and her eyes are shut tight. She wails at the old woman. Her screams fill the cavern. The old woman frowns.

There are tears on the baby's bright red, angry, cheeks. The woman gently opens one of the baby's eyes with her fingers. She immediately drops the baby to the floor. The baby lands with a thump. Her wailing worsens.

"She is called Brown Eyes," says the woman. "Take her to the orphanage."

A hooded figure picks up the baby. He holds her at arm's length as if she is contagious. The girl continues to scream her disapproval. The figure carries the baby out of the cavern. The wailing gradually gets fainter and fainter.

The woman stands and brushes the grey dust off her knees. Water drips from her sleeves onto the floor, adding a quiet tapping to the still discernable sounds of wailing.

"That is all for today," she says. She puts her hood up and leads the group out of the cavern. The ripples on the lake slowly die down and the cavern returns to its usual silence.

Thousands of shadows orbit the light at the bottom of the lake. There is one shadow that doesn't. This shadow is hiding, just out of sight, below where the woman was crouching. An hour after the figures have left this shadow starts moving. It does not move towards the light. It moves towards the surface.

A baby's hand thrusts out of the water. It gropes around on the floor, looking for purchase. This hand is different, unnatural. The nails are too long. The grasp is claw-like. The movement is aggressive. The hand finds a small crack and the baby pulls themselves out of the water. It's a boy.

He coughs and splutters as he lies at the edge of the lake. He coughs and he coughs and he coughs but eventually his coughing lessens. When he is breathing normally he pushes himself to his feet and opens his eyes. His eyes are as black as coal.