

HANDS OF THE SEA

PART 1

Never enter the ocean at night. The seas can be an angry place, Eferee. We may hunt the water in the daylight, but the nighttime is when the seas belong to the hunters whose home we borrow. Never enter that world. It belongs to the gods of the seas, and men must not go there. —My father always said.

Winters by the sea, my sea, get very cold, but aren't too hard to weather. My village is on the west shore out of Thedes and a little north where the weather is gentle and warm winds blow most of the year. I remember getting sick over one of those winters. My chest ached badly. I could hardly breathe and when I coughed I rattled. The doctor said breathing through my nose would help but it didn't because it felt like a hand was pressed over my face, as if something much bigger than me was sure I should die, and they thought I would but I didn't. Since then there are things I'm not allowed to do, like running and swimming. When you can't run, everywhere takes longer to get to and living by the sea isn't as fun when you can't go into it.

Spending time with boys is generally discouraged by my father, because as he says, boys play too rough and I'm not supposed to be rough. Not that I played with boys before I got sick. Who wants to spend time with the boring little girl from the nice house up the hill?

The only time I go out is when my parents make me go out with them. Even though I'm only supposed to sit and watch them, still they say it's good to get out of the house; which is funny because they're the ones keeping me there in the first place. I guess they think it's good for me to go out just so long as they can keep an eye on me, not that they are tonight. They're busy dancing while I sit in my favorite spot where I can see through the open windows of the town hall, where I can hear the music and where I can be generally undisturbed. I like being undisturbed. Sometimes though, a pack of kids my age find me, always the same pack and they always act surprised. They never have any idea what to say to me so they lower their voices and then hurry past as if they

don't want to disturb whatever I was doing. So I sit here, not much to do. My parents won't let me bring my books. I love my books, but they want me to talk instead. Talking isn't as effortless as they think.

Tonight, there was this boy came up to me, staring straight at me, looking happy and calm, which I thought was an unusual way for a boy to look when he walks up to a girl. Then these three girls my sister's age, his age, tiptoed nearby, whispering and giggling like idiots something about the boy and me. When they heard him actually ask me to dance they scattered, and all of a sudden the boy and I were alone. He was still calm and I liked that he was calm, but then I was probably too little girly to frighten him. I'd seen the boy around and liked him fine, but I think I might have accidentally been staring at him so he was maybe thinking that I wanted to dance with him and that's why he came over and is now standing here expectantly while I'm not saying anything and he's thinking that I'm coy, and I despise coy. My sister plays coy with boys. I've seen it and don't buy it. I don't like boys who buy it either. But still, I thought, staring coyly back at him. I didn't know how to talk to boys. What was I supposed to do? I'm not allowed to dance, but I like this one. I'd like him to talk to me.

He offered his hand and I immediately turned a little away from him, just like Em would have done, and frustrated with myself I accidentally ran a hand through my hair and tucked it behind my ear before I could stop myself. I was falling right into that silly boy/girl game. It's the only way I'd ever seen boys and girls talk and it was like I couldn't even help myself. Warm anger flushed my cheeks. Perfect! Now I look like I'm blushing. Might as well toss my handkerchief on the ground.

I've watched Em do this so many times and I thought it was so silly, but I guess there are just things you can't help but do when you're nervous. Like how I was fidgeting with a seashell, and of course, just as I realized I was doing it, dropped the stupid thing on the ground.

Time slowed for a moment as his knees bent and his proffered hand lowered towards the ground, and in that same slow moment, determined to end my helpless, girly, simpering act, I sprang off my seat and tackled the seashell with both hands. I looked like a kitten in doing so, and I know he noticed, but at least I got it and hadn't fallen into his arms or swooned like some girls are wont to do. It wasn't my fault (I think) that when I stood up my shoulder connected with his

jaw. He shouldn't have been standing over me like that. I retreated to my seat, determined not to offer sympathy for hitting him in the face. I mustn't fawn or simper or be disgusting like Em. God, I was confused!

"You okay?" he asked, rubbing his jaw and still smiling at me.

"No", I thought angrily. "My collarbone is bruised, you idiot." I should have said it. Instead I bit my lip and nodded. Of course I did.

He gave a small shrug and extended his hand, silently asking me to dance a second time. I wasn't allowed to dance, but even my parents wanted me to talk. This time, well in control of myself, I turned deliberately away from him towards the sea and let the first words that came to mind come tumbling out. I was hoping for something brilliant.

"I was four the first time I wasn't allowed in the ocean." I resisted the impulse to kick myself and continued. "My older sister swam out farther than the rest of them and I meant to follow, but Dad took my arm and made me stay ashore and watch. I wasn't allowed in the sea, Dad said, I'd surely drown. He'd seen it before, kids like me whose lungs weren't strong like others'. So I played with the sand and got very good at playing with sand. I could build a bridge out of sand and fill the underneath with water and paddle my fingers through it and that was all the swimming I knew until I was nine. I went to the lake with friends and since my parents weren't there to say no, decided I would learn how. It's harder to swim in lakes than it is to swim in the sea, but at the time I didn't know that, and before long I was swimming. I felt strong for the first time and I was nine."

He looked thoughtful. "I've seen you here with your family, but wasn't sure why you sit out here all night watching. I guess that makes sense that you won't dance with me. That is why you won't dance with me, right?" He continued without waiting for a reply, "No running or swimming; that's rough. What do you do then; read a lot of books, huh?"

I sucked the corner of my lip in irritation. I was almost sure that every person I ever spoke to had posed that same rhetoric at some point or another. It was starting to sound like an insult.

I didn't nod. I was thinking back to the dance thing. I wasn't sure what I was doing. If I wasn't here to dance with the first good-looking older boy who asked me to, even if only to irritate my father, then I should certainly wonder why I was here.

“How old are you?” he asked. He was just full of questions.

I hesitated in preparation to lie. I knew he was almost my sister’s age, at least two years older than me, and if he knew that, he would think me too young to talk with. I talk older than I actually am, my mother says. She thinks it’s because I’m just like her, but I think it’s because I’m smarter than the other children; plus, they get to go outside and run around while I have to stay inside where I can breathe, so I read and learn more than they do.

“Won’t tell me?” he asked. “You’re Emeree’s little sister, right?”

I nodded, staring at my toes, blank-faced, trying hard not to reveal my disappointment in that fact.

“Eferee,” he said, almost certainly. A smile cut itself into the side of my face but I continued to stare at my shoes. He sat beside me facing the bright windows of the hall where music played and spinning partners danced. “So you were nine when you learned to swim,” he said, gently elbowing me to continue my story.

I stifled a yell of triumph, which was easy because I was still nervous for some reason. I felt like I’d won a contest I hadn’t meant to participate in. It was a victory over my sister who was older than me, and pretty, and had real red hair that was vibrant and alluring, not like my dry-clayish kind of dead bird sort of red. On top of all that she also looked much more like a girl than I ever would. Boys would sit with her so long, even when she didn’t speak. Her being liked was so effortless.

“I was twelve the first time a boy wanted to talk to me,” I said, almost aloud. I actually think I mumbled it, because he frowned and leaned a little closer towards me.

“I said,” louder this time, “I was nine the first time I wasn’t allowed to dance.”

“Because of your lungs?” he asked, and I nodded.

“If I get winded, my lungs close. It’s like when you’re out of breath, but then you can’t draw another one as hard as you try. Similar to dying, but you only go about half-way.”

“But you can swim?” the boy said, appearing thoughtful.

“Well, I can float.”

“Do you go out on boats?”

“No.”

“You want to?”

“I don’t really know how to sail. It would be fun, but we don’t have a boat so I might not ever get to.”

He looked invigorated, animated, and excited quite suddenly. The change happened only on his face and he seemed to forget himself for a moment as he stared off towards the sea. “I can take you,” he said, “Lets go out right now.”

“Now? It’s night.”

“Boats can float at night.”

I hesitated, regarding the dark, distant water with a fearful curiosity, and regarded the boy’s changing energy with the same uncertain interest.

He saw this when his attention returned. “Would you believe me if I told you there’s something out there better than your books?”

“How much do you know about books?” I asked.

He smiled at me for a moment before saying, “You know, our fishermen here never sail at night, but I do, and I found something. Something no one knows about, ‘cept me, and I’ll bet you’ve never seen it in your books. I’ll show you if you like.” His smile turned roguish and his excitement captured my imagination.

My parents were holding hands while laughing and spinning together and they didn’t notice me leave. I followed the boy out of the light and away down the long, shallow stairs towards the sand and pier where all the fishing boats were lashed. He stopped us on the way to gather a bunch of large stones he said we needed to bring, though for what purpose I was apparently not allowed to know. As I filled my pockets, I asked what they were for. He remained mute and smiling and answered with only an infuriating wink.

“You want to surprise me,” I thought, sounding sarcastic and cynical in my head, but if I was being honest with myself I was tense with excitement.

Now laden with stones we approached the pier, which swayed and clapped against the small waves beneath. I thought how stupid I was to load my pockets with rocks before stepping out onto floating wood, but before I could appraise my bravery the boy sprang past me onto the

shifting platforms, completely at ease, passing row upon row of boats until being swallowed by darkness.

The boats looked bigger up close. I had only ever seen them from up the hill where they looked small and boring. Up close I appreciated how many of them there were, like a small navy. Most of the families in my village owned fishing boats, as makes sense because my village is a fishing village, but my dad doesn't because we aren't fishermen, we're merchants. Someone has to sell the fish, he says. Other children grow up to be fishermen, but I'll grow up to be a merchant, because as he says, people with weak lungs have no business out at sea. What if I fall overboard? He thinks I can't swim, and he thinks me lucky that I am his daughter and can thus be afforded a life indoors. He thinks me lucky that I never have to go on a boat if I don't want to. He's proud to be a merchant, I guess.

I could hear the boy ahead of me in the dark. He had taken to humming something of a shanty, as seafarers cannot help but do when they smell saltwater. It occurred to me that the boy was very keen on sailing, and it also occurred to me that he was too young to own a boat. I wondered if he meant to steal one, until I saw him board the smallest, oldest boat around and my suspicions vanished.

"My Da's," he said before I could ask. "He doesn't mind us taking it out. Wants me to be a fisherman sooner than later."

I took his hand and leapt the small distance off the pier onto the tiny skiff, but since the thing was slick with moisture I lost my footing just as soon as I'd found it. He caught me, kind of, but we both ended up falling down into the boat. He found this extremely funny, more so when he saw how embarrassed I was. After scrambling off him I busied myself unloading the stones from my pockets and let them roll loose around the bottom of the little boat.

He untied us from the dock, still laughing. "Gotta get your sea-legs, Eferee. C'mon, grab a paddle and help me." I hurried so as to appear useful. I'd never used a paddle before and it was hard to keep pace at first, but he was aware of me and sensitive of my fatigue. I had but to breathe a little heavier and he would slow down to give me a rest. He was obviously the son of a fisherman, such a strong rower; while I on the other hand, was obviously a merchant's daughter.

"Do you want to be a fisherman?" I asked.

The boy's face tightened a little and after a moment he replied, "I dunno. My dad wants me to."

"What would you choose if it could be anything?"

He fell silent and minutes passed as we rowed ourselves farther from shore. Eventually he came back to me, sounding as if he'd been far away.

"You won't know, cause you've never seen one, probably, but I got to go up on a big boat once. A warship."

"How big?"

"Big," he said. "Bigger than a house, course they have to be cause you live on them."

"You live on them?" I asked, unsure why I asked because I already knew that. I was well read, and I was fairly certain I knew more about warships than he did. Was I pretending to be stupid?

"Of course you are!" I silently scolded.

"Ships that big go out to sea for weeks and months, so they live there. That's what I want," he fell to a whisper. "Fishermen come back to shore at the end of the day, they never go all that far out to sea. There's enough fish off our shores that they don't have to go far, but I want to see the deep waters."

"And be a soldier?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. There's stories, you know, about the kind of fish living in the deep oceans. Sometimes the dead ones wash up on shores like ours. An old sailor told me about the strong current that passes through the warm waters of the island seas. The sailors ride the current home after making long voyages in the deep oceans. The water is warm by the time it reaches us, but it starts out being very cold. It comes from the bottom of the earth, from the deepest, darkest waters beyond the islands, where all the water in the world comes from. Sometimes the current brings things with it from those waters. Monsters, they say, even bigger than warships."

I shuddered and lifted my oar out of the dark water. "Monsters?" I whispered, wondering if there was in fact, something the boy knew that I did not.

"Yeah," he said dreamily, and then grinned at me. "None around this close to land so don't worry."

I watched the black ocean lapping the side of our tiny boat. The sound set my skin to prickle, and the little hairs on my arms to rise. The water all at once seemed sinister as it lapped the skiff. I imagined that the ocean was licking its black lips looking back at me.

The boy had no such fear, and instead was preoccupied doing something odd with his body. He was twisting this way and that, checking and rechecking the stationary landmarks visible on the coastline. It was apparent that he had a destination in mind. I wanted to ask him again what we were looking for but was afraid that distracting him might get us lost. I sat in silence, watching him, shyly curious as to why he was selecting the smallest stones from the pile at our feet and flicking them into the water. I wished he would stop teasing the ocean.

The boat lurched and I barely stifled a scream before realizing that the boy had merely risen to his feet. I clutched onto the edge of the skiff, and nearly lost my paddle in doing so. Instinctively, I lunged before it was lost in the black water, and hugged it against my chest. Somewhere in my mind I knew that paddles float, yet I hugged the thing as if I had nearly lost my way back to land forever. The shore was faint and tiny from where I sat, and the lights from homes and windows were only just visible. It was then I realized a layer of fog was rolling in on top of us, making the moonless night darker still.

“The sea isn’t so deep here,” he assured me. “Have you really never been out here before? If it were daylight you could see the bottom even this far out. That’s why our village is so great.”

“Is it?” I wanted to say, but instead said, “Why is that?” in a voice I hoped sounded elegant.

“Because of our water. It’s warmer and clearer than in Thedes. In Thedes the ocean is cold and dark and murky. Good fishing, but not like here. Here you can look down and actually see the schools you’re hunting ‘stead of just blindly casting out your nets. I love the ocean here. It’s more alive than other places; you look down into it and it feels like the ocean looks right back.”

He was young to be so traveled, I thought. He had been to places that fishermen don’t normally go. Thedes was a wealthy place that I, a merchant’s daughter, had an inherited right to visit, yet had only read about. And yet, none of the books had ever described the ocean in that way. The boy knew better than I did about one or two things, I admitted to myself, and since he had no fear of the water, I knew I shouldn’t either; but still, the little black waves licking the boat gave me chills.

A phrase sprang to my lips from the mouth of my favorite character in my favorite book. “Steady on, old girl,” I whispered to myself in such a small voice that the boy couldn’t hear. I then made sure he wasn’t looking, and I secretly dipped my fingers down into the water to let the black lips taste me, to settle once and for all whether or not the ocean would eat me. It was warmer than I expected, not lovingly warm, but warmer than I thought an evil ocean would be, and alive, just like he said. “Almost like its looking back at you,” I whispered, but again, he did not hear me.

“Up you get, c’mon,” he said, loud and excited and standing with a large stone in his hands. “We’re here, come see.”

I rose as instructed, shaking as the boat shook and stumbling as the craft shifted under my shifting weight. Despite my keen sense of effective reasoning, I kept a paranoid eye on the rock in his hands, unable to entirely shake the absurd idea that I had been lured into a murderous trap. He held the rock over the side of the skiff, nodding at me to come closer, to which I complied a little grudgingly since I was almost sure that if both of us stood on the same side we would tip the vessel.

“Watch,” he whispered and dropped the stone in the sea. “Wait for it.”

I obeyed, concentrating on the surface, unsettled by the dark mystery of the water and doing my best to ignore the images of what horror I expected to rise out of it. We waited and waited and very slowly something happened. The stone reached the ocean floor, and at that moment a phosphorescent glow emanated in a ripple outward, not in the water, but across the surface of the earth and coral below us. I heard myself gasp.

The color changed all at once from a small pulse of electric blue into myriad energies, bright and alive in whites and greens and blues and muted red. The boy let another stone fall into the water, and this time I could see it sink. The absolute darkness of the ocean night couldn’t even dispel the daylight growing below me, and as the second stone landed, the pulsing rhythmic glow redoubled. He threw more stones into the water, farther and farther away from the boat and with every stone the ocean daylight grew brighter and larger and spread beneath us. It was a coral reef, I knew, I had heard, but I had never known that it could be so brought to life by the gentle touch of stones.

“Magic,” I whispered, for at that moment it was the only thing that came to mind to explain how daylight could exist on its own without the sun.

The boy grinned excitedly and nodded. "Could be. You scared, or do you want to go closer?"

Now that all the stones were gone, he tossed the anchor overboard and pulled off his shirt. Before I could stop him he dove straight off the boat and slid gracefully into the crystal clear water. I pressed myself against the edge of the craft with my face hovering as close as I dared and watched his blurred feet kicking and propelling him straight down to the bottom. It took him only a few seconds to get there and then he twisted around and planted both feet on the ocean floor. I realized too late that he was rocketing up towards me and water covered me when he breached the surface. He flopped his arms over the side of the boat as I wiped the brine from my cheeks and glared at him, almost prepared to be angry before I saw what he was holding. It was a stone, or rather, a great big piece of coral that was glowing and rippling with electric light. He held it out towards me, and gingerly, breathlessly, I reached out to touch it. Just before my fingers met the luminous thing he, the boy, tossed it back over his head and smiled like a mischievous idiot.

"Nope," he said. "You gotta get your own."

He obviously anticipated my irritation, and before I could swipe him on the head he'd pushed himself out of reach to tread water on his back.

"I dunno how to dive," I whined like a child. I wanted so badly to hold the stone, to feel the light, I couldn't believe he would be so cruel.

"You said you can swim." He argued.

"I said I can float," I corrected.

He nodded sagely, "Well, diving is a lot like sinking, so if you know how to float you know how to sink no problem, c'mon Effee."

I stood and balled my fists just as he dove again, so I didn't have time to hate myself for falling prey to teasing before I undressed and rolled clumsily over the side and into the water. It might have been the pet name that gave me the courage to do it; that and his stupid grin.

For a moment I was afraid I had done something very foolish, and that my underclothes would weigh me down, but they didn't. On the contrary I discovered that sinking in salt water was a bit harder than in a lake. I felt buoyant like wood and it took some doing but I was determined to reach the bottom. The boy was farther down, watching me fall slowly towards him. He was giving me an exuberant thumbs-up that immediately made me self-conscious. I thought of my sister, and

wondered if there was any chance that she ever behaved like this. The thought was laughable. The beautiful Emeree diving for magic rocks in the night, bare-chested and disregarding Dad's concerns for safety? No, of course not; Em isn't reckless. And then, I wondered, am I?

The deeper I went, the colder the water became, though only a little. A chill started in my feet and ran up my body as my toes neared the ocean floor. There was fear in me that the light would hurt and when my toes touched it I nearly convinced myself that it burned me before I realized that it was only the small pain of sharp stones against my soft feet and nothing more. It wasn't hot either as I expected it to be, only bright, excited.

As I stood upon it, the pulse quickened, blurred and beat through the stones beneath me, around me, and I loved it. I wished that I wasn't nearly out of air. I even thought for a reckless moment that staying here might be worth drowning, but fear quickly replaced that fancy, even though it solved nothing. I had already let the air out so that I could sink, now how would I float?

"Just jump," I told myself. "You're standing upright, so jump." I pushed off the ocean floor, though with less force than I intended, which caused me to linger, struggling to remind my arms and legs how to work in water and solve the puzzle as to what motion would translate into 'up'.

The boy was a very good swimmer and I could visualize his movement. I knew what it looked like to swim well, but the subtlety of the motion was such that I, in all my education, could not replicate it.

Hands then fastened around my waist. Fear of drowning kept me from resisting, and even though the victory wasn't exactly my own, I couldn't help triumph washing over me when we breached the ocean surface. I immediately attached myself to the edge of the boat. My gasping for air reminded me that I would be in serious trouble if I continued to strain, but I was too happy to be afraid of anything. There was a little tightness in my chest, but I was sure it was only a normal pain of holding one's breath and not the cold hand of death I knew so well.

"Wow," he said, sputtering water out of his mouth. One of his hands was still on my waist. I don't think he realized it.

"What?" I asked without moving, holding the boat for comfort.

"You said you had weak lungs."

"So what?" I asked.

“You can hold your breath for a really long time.”

Could I?

“I mean,” he continued, “you were down as long as me.”

“Maybe you just got tiny lungs,” I teased. “Ever thought of that?”

He laughed and splashed me in the face, at which I forgot that I was holding onto the boat and let go. I sank again, but this time I was better prepared. “It’s easier to swim here,” I reminded myself.

“And safer,” a little voice in the back of my mind whispered. Curiously at the same moment, I became aware of the boy sinking beside me.

I was twelve the first time I made a real friend. Before that night, being forced to the dance every two weeks felt like we were going there ‘all the time’. But after the night in the sea I realized that two weeks is a very long time to wait for something. At each full and new moon a dance was held, and now, finally, the routine felt like my life beginning and not just my family’s life. Each moon I would sneak off in the night to the docks and meet the boy at his father’s fishing boat, and we would sail in darkness or in moonlight to the secret reef off the coast.

I was getting better at sinking.

To be continued...

We hope you have enjoyed

H a n d s o f t h e S e a

P a r t O n e

by Devon Michael

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