

Kept from the Sea

by Kendal Delaney

His shorts were wet with the salt water he had splashed out of the rock pools. A little unsteady, he straightened, turned and waved to his mother sitting on the beach behind him. Her skirt spread around her; the blue striking against the sand.

As he clambered over the next barnacle-covered rock, one sandaled foot slipped into the rock pool beneath, startling a shrimp who had been loitering in the shallower water.

He glared at the seaweed which had caused the trouble. Slimy and glistening, slug-like, it clung tenaciously to his calf, bandaging this latest scrape. Lip curled in disgust, he picked it off between forefinger and thumb and hurled it with determined effort at his sister, two rock pools behind.

Although it landed far short of her, he was satisfied by her squeal of surprise and disdain, his mouth tugging up at the corner in what his mother called his crooked smile.

He turned his attentions back to the pool; one foot still submerged. The shrimp had disappeared entirely but there was still much to look at: the rippling, undulating sea anemones; the cast-off shells of long-eaten creatures; tiny crabs with backs speckled like his marbling paper. The anemones were his favourite and he leaned in towards the largest. Its jellied flesh wonderful itself but the greatest joy came from hovering a finger above the flickering tentacles. Instantly pulling in its prey, the anemone grabbed the pad of the boy's finger. Wide-eyed, delighted, the boy pulled back his hand, ripping away from the many-fanged maw.

'Don't go too far' came his mother's voice from the sandy picnic dune. Startled, he stood and half-turned. Shielding his eyes, the boy twisted to find his sister. He spotted her at the edge of the cove: her long-legged form hoisting its way, crab-like onto the grass-strewn outcrop. They rarely played together. He acknowledged that she – three years older – was superior in both knowledge and experience and was, in consequence, sadly lacking in imagination.

The boy crouched once more by the pool. It was the biggest of the bay, broad and deep. A world entirely isolated, preserved and perfect between the tides. So much to see: the shimmering surface, puckered by the breeze and distorting what lay beneath. He remembered tales his grandfather had told him – ancient stories of selkies pining for the sea when hard-hearted humans had trapped them on land. He shuddered momentarily at the prospect of wicked men hiding away the pelts and their selkie wives weeping in horror and frustration.

Hoping to catch a glimpse of such a creature, he sunk a second foot to follow the first and bent double so his nose was mere inches from the water. The boy was initially transfixed by the mottled discoloration of his skin; the cold turning his feet purple and white. Like radishes he thought as he wiggled his toes. He laughed.

The seaweed which caught his attention was remarkable for two reasons: the astonishing shade of brown was hard to describe and it was flashing in the sunlight, its undulating sheen seemingly alive. It was, of course, at the far end of the rock pool and the boy sighed with an explorer's determination and steeled himself to get very wet indeed. He would inevitably be scolded but the women in his family simply could not fathom the unbridled joy of being the first boy to step on new ground. Like Christopher Columbus, he crossed the sea, admittedly slipping a little on the green slime which coated the floor of the rock pool.

At the far end of the pool, and by now waist deep in water, the boy stopped and stared down at his find. So that was why the colour had seemed so striking. It was not seaweed at all; it was her hair. She was not a selkie. From his books at home, he knew she must be a mermaid. She was beautiful, her long hair caressing her face as she looked back up at him, entirely unafraid. He knew that she would not speak but her eyes were wide and curious – she was just as surprised to see him as he was her.

Careful not to scare her away, the boy crept to the side of the pool and shuffled onto a dry ledge, never taking his eyes off her. She, it seemed, had lost interest in him; her gaze still turned upwards, out of confinement.

It must be horrible to be stuck in such a tiny pool he thought, as the wind blew sparse clouds over the sun. Used to the freedom of the sea, she must be so afraid. He knew that the high tide would free her. He would have to stay until she was safe.

Minutes passed as he vigilantly kept his post. He was her knight, determined to protect her from dragons and treasure hunters and his sister. The water darkened as larger clouds followed the wisps of before. It was suddenly cold, so far from the residual warmth of the beach. The boy's mother called and beckoned as he looked around. He could not hear her words but he was tempted to scramble back to where there were hugs and hot drinks and dry clothes. Absent-mindedly, the boy began to crawl from his rocky chair.

She would not be alone for long.

It took the boy several minutes to pick his way back over the rocks. His mother had watched his sliding progress and was waiting with a towel as he leapt from the last of the rocks into the coarse, silver sand. She bundled the boy into her arms, swinging and tipping him in one of their favourite games. His bright laugh rang out to where his sister stood motionless by his rock pool.

The young boy's laughter seemed to break some reserve of courage in the girl and her scream startled not only her family but many others in the vicinity.

He knew he should not have left her unguarded. His mother was by now too far ahead of him and he tried vainly to catch her to hold her back.

It was too late. The boy watched as his mother joined the other adults by the pool. She pulled his sister away. Shaking, crying, hands clasped, they scrambled back to him.

The boy struggled as his mother swung him onto her hip. He demanded to be put down but his mother did not hear him. He scowled at his sister who stalked, head bowed behind them. And then he cried for the mermaid who was being lifted from the water by grown men whose wives turned their faces away.

He wept because he knew the fate that awaited a mermaid kept from the sea.

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