

Fire in the Sea

Jacob lay upon the rocky outcropping peering into the shallows where the water's crystal blue gave window to the tiny Temprusian rays that glided along the white sandy floor. The rays looked like elongated, flattened stars with the two longest points projecting as dorsal fins that moved in concert with the much smaller pectoral fins to allow the creatures to skate above the ocean floor. Finished with the day's lessons and chores, Jacob had scrambled to the secluded cove where he often came to meet with his friend, Kik. Kik was Kreeghah, one of two sentient races that had existed on Temprus when the human colony was formed nearly five hundred years before. The humans called them Merpeople.

A half a mile beyond the inlet, the docks of Harborton would soon be bustling with the returning fishermen and he would be called to help his father clean and prepare the catch for the evening market. Kik was late - already in the distance Jacob could hear the sounds of the merchants as they passed high above him on the road that led to the quay.

"Hey," he cried out as the rays scattered. He searched the shoals leading to the sandy cliff that dropped off into the depths and he caught a glimpse of her shadow.

She surfaced, calling out "Ca," her pet name for him. Jacob pulled himself to his knees and smiled at Kik, whose upper body resembled a very pretty human girl with large eyes that were the same blue-green as the warm waters of Harborton Bay.

"Where have you been?" he demanded. "We hardly have any time left."

Kik did a series of dives, indicating that she had been playing with the young ones.

"I thought you did that while I was in school."

"Not today. This morning, I worked with the adults on the harvest," she said beaming with pride. "They said that I did so well that soon I would have my own bed to farm."

"Then you'll be just like them," Jacob said, thrusting his head back to indicate the clatter of the merchants far above and behind him on the road that led to town. "You'll have no time for me," he said with a frown.

"Nonsense. We'll always be friends."

The late afternoon bell clanged and he scowled. "See? I told you we wouldn't have time today." Jacob gave one last fleeting look before rising to his feet and hurrying down the road where he joined others en route.

"There you are, son," his father said as Jacob arrived breathless to their slip where his brothers already worked to haul the catch upon the dock.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled as he quickly went to work.

"Jacob Hadding, are you paying attention?" the school master demanded. The young boy blinked and focused on the frowning face of the old man. "I asked you - what is the square root of one hundred and twenty-one?"

"Eleven," he replied with relief, happy that it had been an easy question.

“Correct,” the old man said and then added, “I’m watching you today, boy. Your mind is not on your work.”

Indeed it was not. His thoughts were on Kik and the fact that even though she was a year younger than him, she was going to start working. *It isn't fair*, he thought. Jacob looked around the small classroom of fifteen children. Only he and the Biddle twins were in the sixth year and *they* kept to themselves. Kik was his only real friend. The rest of the children in school were either too young or too old and the older kids got annoyed when he tried to tag along - especially his brother, Oliver.

Jacob knew that beneath her shoulders, Kik was not human at all. She had strange slits on her ribcage that his teacher said were gills. Her arms and hands looked almost human, if he ignored the webbing between her fingers, but Kik did not have legs. Instead, her lower limbs looked more like the rays he often watched.

None of this mattered to Jacob. She was his friend and she taught him so much about the sea - things that his teacher hadn't.

“Jacob Hadding,” the school master shouted and the young boy jumped up in his seat.

Jacob raced from the house as soon as he finished his chores and sped down the road to the inlet. The sun hovered over the peaks of the mountains that lined the road to his right as he scanned the dense brush on his left searching for the narrow path that led down the secluded cove. Spotting the opening, he scurried down, mechanically stepping over the familiar roots and stones that marred the trail.

“Kik,” he called out in greeting as he stepped upon the rocky outcropping and crept along to the edge.

Kik began talking excitedly in her native tongue, a strange mixture of clicks, whistles and squeals accompanied by frantic movements, which Jacob did not understand. Seeing his confused expression, she grimaced and said, “The currents have changed.”

“Huh?”

“It’s serious.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Kik.”

“The water’s churning, Ca. I can feel it even all the way over here.”

“A storm?” he asked in disbelief as he looked up at a clear blue sky and pointed.

“You must hurry,” she urged and as Jacob’s expression changed to show his concern, Kik, satisfied that he had at last understood, dove underwater and headed for the safety of her nest.

“Mother,” Jacob cried out in alarm as he reached his house. “There’s a storm brewing.” He didn’t wait for a reply and instead began to shutter the windows tightly.

“What are you doing?” his mother asked with a frown as she came into the room.

“Kik told me - there’s a storm coming. You need to ring the bell, Mother.”

The ringing of the bell would recall the fishing fleet and his mother, who rushed to one of the unshuttered windows to peer out, said, “Nonsense. The sky is calm. And just who is Kik?”

“A merperson,” he said impatiently as he continued to bolt the shutters. “Ring the bell,” he shouted in alarm. “Where are Zachary and Oliver?” he asked after his brothers.

“Yong man,” his mother said sternly. “Stop right now and settle yourself down. There is not one single cloud in the sky and if we recall the fishermen, your father and all of the other men will contemplate murder should they arrive to find nothing amiss but a young boy with a vivid imagination.”

Jacob’s shoulders slumped and his eyes welled with tears of frustration.

“If you have nothing better to do, then go and sweep the walk,” she said and then turning on her heels, she went back to finish with her mending. “And open those shutters,” she hollered from the other room.

Jacob thrust himself into a chair - his one act of defiance was to leave the windows shuttered - and he waited, staring at the curved exterior wall of the parlor. Harborton was a relatively new town built seventy-five years ago on the distant outskirts of Anchor, the site of the first settlement on Temprus. The round houses had been constructed of stone to withstand the force of the frequently devastating monsoons that typically hit in the later months.

Yes, it is true that it is too early in the season, Jacob thought bitterly, but Kik was terrified and he just *knew* that she was right.

He was unaware of how long he had sat there brooding when he heard the bells ring out the warning. Jacob launched himself from the chair and sped out to the pier noting the darkening sky that was moving in ominously from the east over the water. The wind was picking up dramatically and the trees began to sway alarmingly. He braced himself against the wind and scanning the horizon he located the fleet as it sped at half-mast toward the port with the storm brewing dangerously behind it.

The villagers gathered slowly around him and soon he was joined by Zachary, Oliver and his mother, who refused to look his way or even acknowledge their earlier conversation. The sky grew even darker as the cloud cover rolled in carrying the force of increased winds and Jacob watched as the ships doused the sails leaving only the mainsail at half-mast, and still the fleet raced toward him.

“They’re coming in too fast,” Zachary cried out above the howling of the wind and, as if in response, one by one they doused their mainsail, but it was too late. The waters churned beneath them and the ships lurched forward carried upon the froth of an angry sea.

His father lay in bed; his breath coming in ragged gasps as they stood around him helplessly. His shoulder was dislocated, his arm broken in three places and four of his ribs were broken. The doctor had said those were not serious - his internal injuries were, and Jacob’s mother had listened tight-lipped and ashen as the doctor had said that his father would not live out the night.

“Avenge me,” he whispered and Jacob’s older brother went pale.

“Avenge you against whom?” Zachary asked quietly.

“The damned sea devils. Why didn’t they warn us?”

Jacob’s eyes sought his mother’s, but she looked only at father, whose eyes closed slowly with pain and fatigue. “Leave us,” she said quietly and Jacob and his brothers filed from the room.

“Zachary,” Jacob said when they were in the parlor.

“Not now. Let me be for now,” the older boy said and walked away toward his room.

“Oliver?”

“I don’t feel like talking either,” Oliver said and he went to his room as well leaving Jacob alone in the parlor listening as the winds howled and battered the shutters.

Clang! The bell tolled as the men filed down the dock in the waning light carrying remains wrapped in canvas to the waiting vessel. Clang! Jacob shuddered as he stood with his mother and brothers and the bell rang out five times twelve for each of the men being loaded onto the ship. On the grassy knoll behind them the onlookers held torches as the five families huddled before the pier.

“Marcus Hadding,” Old Master Davenport called out as the twelfth gong sounded and the men lowered father onto the ship and stood back. As the oldest man in Harborton, the duty to officiate fell to him.

Clang, the bell rang again for the next man as mother grabbed onto Zachary, her face a white mask. The air was still as if the entire world held its breath and listened to the death chimes.

“Stewart Reeves,” Davenport announced after the twelfth gong and Madame Reeves gasped beside Jacob.

“Avery Biddle,” he cried out as the last man was loaded. “From water born to water rest,” Davenport said as he set the boat afire and the men cast it out upon the waves.

Jacob heard the quiet sobs from the wives of the men who were being sent to rest, but not from mother, who stood tight-lipped and stoic as the ship was consumed by flames that lit the darkening sky.

Led by Old Master Davenport and the twelve sailors who had borne the bodies, the five families went to the town hall. As was customary they remained seated in the front row as the members of the community filed past them with condolences. Mother, who had not looked at Jacob once since yesterday, sat between Zachary and Oliver as Madame Smythe approached her and as Master Smythe limped past his wife to stand before Zachary.

“Sorry, son,” he said simply.

“No need to say sorry,” Master Carson said as he moved beside Master Smythe. “It’s the sea devils that will say they’re sorry as they hang from my hook.”

Jacob who had been sitting quietly shifted uncomfortably in his seat. *It’s not true*, he wanted to shout, but he held his tongue. *His mother hadn’t wanted to warn them either*. Jacob didn’t want anyone to know that.

“Now, now, Pete,” Master Smythe soothed.

Zachary stiffened. “Father said as much, Master Smythe,” he said and Oliver nodded in agreement.

“Long as I have been alive - and that is a very long time - the Merpeople have always helped the fisher-folk,” Master Smythe said.

“Not this time,” Carson said with a growl.

“Strange creatures,” Smythe continued unabated. “They may be different, but they have always been peaceful and they have traded knowledge and treasure from the depths in exchange for those things that can only be made on the land.”

“They killed my father,” Oliver said and Zachary echoed his words.

“No one killed your father,” Mother hissed. “It was a storm that came out of a clear sky.” Master Carson started to speak and mother glared at him. “There will be no more talk of revenge,” Mother said.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Carson said and he moved on to talk to the Reeves.

Zachary went to follow him, but mother called him back and as he turned, Jacob saw that his eyes seethed with anger.

“We’ll be going home now,” Master Smythe announced and he and his wife moved on.

Zachary took his seat and looked after the old couple as they walked to the back of the hall and out the door. His eyes still smoldered and Jacob could see that his muscles were taut as if they struggled to contain his fury.

Off in the kitchen, mother scampered around preparing the makings for supper, which would be heated once Zachary and Oscar returned and the day’s catch had been cleaned and sold off to the waiting merchants. Jacob, who had finished his chores, looked forlornly outside the window at the overcast sky and toward the docks where Master Pentan stood upon his crutches gazing out to sea as he had done every day for the past two weeks.

Tomorrow, Jacob thought. *Tomorrow, I will go and see Kik*, but the thought turned his stomach sour. What would he say to her? Would she even come to their meeting place? *Probably not*, he thought with despair.

The very first day that the fleet had set out following the storm, they harried the Merpeople and drove them away. Zachary had told them about it at dinner, once again calling them “Sea Devils,” and bragging how he nearly harpooned one. Mother had slammed the pot upon the table and told them, through clenched teeth, that there would be no more talk about Merpeople in this house. And that had been that. While Zachary seethed and Oliver sulked, no one dared disobey mother.

They may have thought it a victory, but the fleet’s haul had become smaller and smaller with each passing day. Without the help of the Merpeople, their castings had often come up light and even empty. As if this was another affront, the men grumbled upon the docks how the “Sea Devils” had laid a curse upon the waters. Master Smythe had spoken out for the Merpeople, but even he fell silent after a few days. Only Master Pentan had remained apart - quiet and sullen now when before he had been an amiable man given to telling jokes and playing an occasional prank. Some of the men whispered that the storm that broke Pentan’s leg had also broken his spirit.

Jacob peered out again and looked at the man, who stood framed against the darkening sky. Every day as he walked home from the schoolhouse, Master Pentan would limp upon his crutches along the pier to position himself at the edge of the quay. Jacob wondered what he searched for as he gazed out over the sea.

As if in answer, Pentan shifted upon his crutches and, thrusting out his broken leg, he lowered himself upon the pier and began to speak to someone. *Someone? Something?*

Jacob launched himself from the room and sped out the front door along the walk and toward Pentan. When he reached the dock, his feet clomped along the wooden planks, startling the young man, who spun his head about in alarm. As Jacob neared him, he searched the waters, but all that remained of the visitor was the white froth left in the wake of a rapid departure.

“Who?” Jacob gasped out, trying to catch his breath.

“It doesn’t matter,” Pentan said quietly. “Nothing matters anymore.”

“Was it Kik? Kik,” he cried out over the water. “Kik!” There was no answer.

“Who were you speaking to, Master Pentan?”

“Eegkah came to visit me. He is a pod elder.” Pentan’s voice was flat and lifeless as he spoke.

“What did he want?”

“He asked why the men seethe like the spume and cry out for battle.”

“What did you tell him?” Jacob asked, suddenly very afraid.

“I told him about Master Reeves,” Pentan said and his voice broke. “Oh, Jacob,” he sobbed. “Reeves knew.”

“Knew?”

“Yes. They told him the storm was coming and he ignored them. I heard it - heard him tell them to go away with their silly tales - heard him tell them that we were busy and the catch was good.”

Pentan sobbed as Jacob looked on in astonishment. He shifted from foot to foot as he slowly absorbed what he had been told. “You have to come with me,” he cried as he tugged on the man’s arm. “Get up,” he hollered as if seized by sudden insight. Slowly the young man pushed up upon his crutches and with Jacob’s help rose to his feet.

“Mother!” Jacob called as he banged the front door open. “Come quickly.” His mother ran into the room, her eyes wide with fear. “Tell her.” Pentan looked down and Jacob said, “Tell her about Master Reeves. It’s important.”

“I am so sorry, Madame Hadding. It’s my fault that Master Hadding and the other good men died,” Pentan said in a choked sob.

“What are you talking about?”

As Pentan told her the story, her face went ashen and she slowly sank to the floor. Jacob knelt beside her in alarm as tears cascaded down her pale cheeks.

“Every day I walk to the edge of the dock and think - today is the day that I will hurl myself over and pay the price for my crime, but I am unable. I am a coward, Madam Hadding.”

No,” mother said finding her voice. “I knew, too. Young Jacob warned me and I didn’t listen.”

“It’s OK now, mother. See? Other people knew, too. It was a mistake.”

“Richard Vanboren knew as well, but as far as I know he hasn’t told a soul. He was beside me when Reeves spoke to the Merman,” Pentan said. “I am the more experienced - I should have done something.”

“You can do something now,” Jacob said quietly. “The Merpeople think that we’re at war with them.”

“Is that true?” his mother asked, rising from the floor as she dried her eyes. When Pentan nodded, mother said, “I should have put an end to this nonsense two weeks ago.” She reached out to take Jacobs hand and said, “Shall we go and ring the bell?”

“Yes, mother,” Jacob said with a broad smile. “Let’s go ring the bell.”