

A Small Ray of Hope

-by Jenari Skye

Do you remember... well, no, of course you wouldn't. You weren't alive then... when the tide was silver with crests of gold, and the dawn was the color of a fire opal. Magic still existed then. Every day my people – the merpeople – would surface and sun our many-colored tails, to watch the dawn. We didn't often commingle with men, for they tended to envy us, so we swam our way to the beautiful beaches of deserted islands.

I shall begin my tale on one of these dawns. We took cheer from the dawn to help us through our day's work. This dawn, however, was evil, for it came with a sun that gave no warmth, little light, and, as you can imagine, no cheer. Usually when clouds covered the sun, we saw them as translucent. This time they were pure black – not the black of rain, but of evil. This had happened only once before: when the protection of the Trinity of our three Sachi – Temples – had been tampered with, and our ancestors had consequently fought the evil ghosts of Sartura.

We were afraid, so we gathered in our Sachinae – Temple of Hope – beneath the water's surface. We held a conference (for we had no king as some may think) that lasted a full week... we did not wish to see the dawn and the evil clouds again. We decided to stay in the Sachinae, and to post our soldiers around the gardens where we gathered food.

After another week of hoping, praying, and preparing for siege and battle, we began to hear whispers...

"Sachinae sahasrala adun." – "The Temple of Hope will fall."

The whispers continued for a night and a day, driving us mad with fear and frustration; we could do nothing. Their bodily forms were invisible until they fought or attacked. We tried using our combined magic to cast them out of the sea, or at least away from the Sachinae. However, this had been tried long ago, and as then, the spirits found a way to immobilize our magic... without which, we had few defenses.

On Tachna, the day our ancestors beat the spirits out of the oceans with conches blowing and cries of joy, the spirits attacked. The screams from the battle outside our Sachinae were heart wrenching. Those of us inside knew that our loved ones were out there fighting, and dying. If the spirits

breached the Sachinae, they would murder the children and us mermaids as well, but none of us could find it in our hearts to leave. I couldn't bear being helpless and staying in there any longer. I was, after all, a Mersha, capable of combat. I opened the Sachinae's door.

One of the spirits saw me open it and charged at me. He was flailing his ugly black and shadowed arms with gleaming weapons in hand, screaming like a banshee, to scare me off. After all, I was "just a mermaid." I quickly closed the Sachinae's door behind me and glanced around for a weapon.

"Erida!" I cried. "Father!"

*His body lay to my left. Forgetting the spirit, I rushed to his side on the chaotic battlefield. I bowed my head at his side, but a glint caught my eye. It was his diamond sword, its golden hilt inlaid with rubies, emeralds, and a single sapphire in representation of the ocean. The spirit's wale assaulted my ears from not far behind, and with a cry of rage I snatched the sword and whirled to face my enemy. Quickly, I dodged to the side. As he passed, I thrust *Titanis* – Spirit's Fear – into the shadow. The spirit, and all of his weapons, disappeared.*

*I looked around the field in anger, trying to see how I could help. I spotted *Euripidae*, my brother whose name meant Brave Soul, fighting against two of the spirits not far away. I swam to his aid, and torpedoed *Titanis* into another shadow. *Euripidae* killed the other shortly after as I righted myself, and he smiled up at me. He knew he couldn't get me back into the *Sachinae*. After all, I hadn't been named *Sophorus* – Stubborn – for nothing!*

*"Euripidae, *asa chu!*" I cried. "Euripidae, behind you!"*

*He whirled around raising *Sancha*, his sword, Defender, to block the spirit's onslaught. They quickly engaged in battle. I wanted to watch for an opening to help if I could, but knew that if I focused my attention on the pair, I would leave myself susceptible to another spirit.*

I looked about me, and, for the first time, truly saw the scene of the battle. My heart sank as I surveyed the bodies on the field. The spirits disappeared when they died – our mermen did not, and many lay across the field, wisps of red rising from them and clouding visibility. Of those still fighting, far fewer were mermen than spirits. More and more of my people fell as I watched.

Shaking with the misery of the scene, I turned my attention back to Euripidae. I found him fighting, but wounded severely.

I rushed to his aid and distracted the spirit assailing him. As I defended, Euripidae killed it. The phantom disappeared.

"Nalae!" "Yes!" I shouted in triumph, glad there was something to be glad about.

I turned to where Euripidae had been to see why he had not shouted with me, or even answered me, as he usually did, but he was no longer there... he was sinking! I swam to him, dropping Titanis, and slowly, gently, let him sink in my arms to the forest of shells and seaweed, so that his fall wouldn't further complicate his condition. I turned my head away from the red wisps that carried the scent of his blood.

"Marinada... ternate sacrea..." he said. "Leave... it is the only way..."

"Nulatell?" "What are you talking about?"

"Ser... nader... shon se... peal." "Just... trust me... and take... this." He reached to his necklace, a golden tablet, and slowly slipped it over his head to hand to me. His fin expanded and contracted with difficulty; he was having trouble breathing.

"Su-" "But-"

"Kan!" he breathed out with the last of his strength. "Go!" His body went limp.

"Marna!" I cried in utter agony. "No!"

I bowed my head and found the necklace in my hand. I put it around my neck, clinging to the thought of it as if it were my brother.

An eerie sound reached my ears, like something those spirits would emit. It sounded like twisted joy.

I gently pulled Sancha from my brother's grip, and reached behind me to snatch Titanis. Swiftly, I swam up from the forest floor, but stopped myself before emerging. I poked my head out, to see what was happening.

The Sachinae was surrounded by spirits, and all the mermen were dead. A flash of movement caught my eye. Not all. One was stealthily making a getaway. That angered me greatly... how could he leave all those mermaids and children to die? I wouldn't swim away, a coward, when I might be able to take a few more of those spirits with me.

It was then that I realized that I had to leave them... to escape. I was the only hope for the merpeople. Euripidae had seen it. That was why he had made a point of giving me the necklace. There was a prophecy engraved on its surface: "Sachi sahasrala adun. Su sansari sien sansi selk zalashabae."

"The Temples will fall. But one day the merpeople will rise again."

As I read the prophecy on his necklace, I realized what Euripidae had meant. One mermaid and one merman must escape for the prophecy to be fulfilled. I was the mermaid who had to escape to bring us back one day.

I drew a deep breath... and turned away from those that I loved. I swam as fast as I could to a beach that was populated by men. There I pulled myself ashore, and far from the spirits, used my magic to transform into a woman. My plain dress mimicked the hunter green color of my fin. A small ray of sun broke through the black clouds and shone brilliantly on the dress, glinted off the necklace, and reflected a dazzling array of colors off the swords that I still clutched. Perhaps somewhere else, another ray shone on the merman who had escaped. I lifted Titanis and it shone like a beacon. I decided that I would give him my father's sword – a sword rich in history to carry on hope for the future. I had a hundred years as a human to try to find the last of my kind before I would morph back into a mermaid the same age as I had been before I transformed; I didn't need to worry about him right this moment.

I finally allowed the shock to overcome me. It was then that I fell to my knees, and cried.