

Song Beneath The Tides



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SONG BENEATH THE TIDES
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One

It begins with a forest, and with Ally.

Light slants green through a high, leafy canopy. Hanging creepers sway and rustle. Everywhere, chirrups and cheeps and whistles and trills, and the flit of small, busy wings . . .

She spins round, braced to run.

No one there: the path empty. Sunlight dapples the scuffed sand so that it seems to move, but it's just a track, curling back to a dark outcrop of coral rock, then turning out of sight.

The hair on the back of her neck prickles. Something's about to appear. Between the curtains of leaves. Or the bushes. Or from behind that rock.

She watches. She shifts her gaze to a claw of roots from a tumbled tree. Arches of shadow like a vast skeleton, sheltering – *what?*

The forest stirs. Ripples of light speed towards her. She fights the urge to back away. A rush of sound. Birds whirl in fright.

Common sense says a ripe coconut has fallen.

It takes all her nerve to hold still, listen, then turn away, present her back to the path and resume her trek towards the sea. She should yell for her brothers – moments ago she'd seen them against the sheen of water beyond the trees ahead, Jack's tall silhouette beside Ben's stocky little shape.

She's reluctant to probe the forest with her voice.

She walks faster. And at once has the same unnerving sensation of *nearness*, of brushing the warm contours of something live, of eyes following her, of a soft breath exhaled.

This time she runs, breaking through the last trees into the blinding brilliance of the open bay. She clears the mounds of drying seaweed in a single bound, kicks off her shoes, grabs them and leaps down through the soft powdery sand towards the reef, putting distance as fast as she can between herself and that menace – that *terror* of the forest.

*

I dream . . . I dream . . .

I flee the festering walls of our prison.

I walk the paths of the forest.

I seek Hope, a flame of life in the dark.

In my dream I find Her. In my dream I speak to Her.

She gives no answer.

Is it the poison that dreams?

Is the sickness in me now?

*

'It's a leopard! It's stalking you!' Ben said. '*Pad, pad, pad*, just behind you! Bet it *is* – cos that rock's called Ras Chui an'

that means Leopard Rock.’ He waved a hand along the beach towards a coral promontory like a knobbly finger pointing to sea.

‘No, really!’ Ally protested. ‘It felt . . .’ She trailed off. *Spooky* sounded too ordinary.

‘Well, it’s a forest, so there’s animals all over.’ Jack shrugged off her alarm. ‘No *leopard*,’ he pretended to whack Ben over the head, ‘you can see people use this path a lot. Leopards’d keep clear.’

He said it with a tone of certainty that made Ally grind her teeth. Jack had taken on this all-seeing, all-knowing air since they’d stepped off the plane from London.

‘How can you see? You’ve only been here five minutes like me!’

Jack pulled a face, then grinned. ‘Yeah, well, sure. But you heard Carole say it’s a track used by people from that village along there. You know, she showed us on the map – *Shanza*, it’s called.’

‘Well don’t walk so fast,’ Ally finished lamely.

In this bright air, way out on the open reef where she’d caught up with them, with the tang of coral pools and warm salty seas carried on a light breeze, the menace of the forest walk was fading fast.

‘Didn’t mean to leave you behind, Ally,’ he waved a hand at the sweep of wide white sands, ‘but look – no one for miles— Hey, Benjy!’ He set off at a run towards their brother splashing gleefully across the coral towards the seaward edge of the reef. ‘Benjy! That’s deep sea out there!’

A tickle brushed Ally’s toes – a cavalcade of tiny crabs

scuttling to a rock pool. She crouched, tracking the pale shadows along the sandy bottom. Then she stood, looking round, only now taking in how far the tide had ebbed to expose the honeycomb landscape of miniature coral mountains and lakes, forested with seaweed, crusted with shells, popping and crackling in the warming sun.

A month ahead, a *whole month* here. Africa! Ever since that morning at home, her mother opening the email from their aunt, Carole, she'd felt this spiking thrill.

'Send Jack and Ally for as long as they can come. Benjy too, if you trust those two to keep track of him. And make him promise to OBEY them! I'm being posted to work in a hospital in Ulima on the coast for a while . . . so NOW'S THE TIME.'

Ally'd printed out the photos Carole sent, pinned them all over the walls in her room, debated every one with Zoe – Zoe wailing, 'I'm coming too! I wish my mum'd let me! Ally, you owe me an email every single day! Promise! Everything, everything, you got to tell me, yeah?'

Ally inhaled the salty, tangy air. How? *How can I make Zoe feel this?* Green forest, creamy sands, the rainbow reef glittering as if it moved, restless in the sunlight. A dream! She'd only ever seen this in adverts and films. Never, ever, did she believe she'd see it for real!

A ripple of shadow passed overhead. Just a wisp of cloud crossing the sun, the thread of its darkness travelling up the beach; she found herself watching till it merged with the forest.

That weird feeling in there! It flowed through her again, a thread of a sigh, a longing, like an emptiness deep in her centre.

She was oddly cold. She scanned the trees. They stared back – an impenetrable barricade along the summit of the sands, the path invisible.

'It is someone,' she whispered. 'It is!'

*

I have been to their deaths, and returned.

The fever brings this horror! Does my own death draw near?

I dream – I dream, that I have been to all their deaths. Before the monsoon breaks they will be lost.

I have been to their deaths, and beyond.

Even as I write these words am I dreaming, still?

It is the first hour of the first day of my sixteenth year, and I have a terrible dread. Vultures gather. Our ships rot on their moorings. Two more men have died, and three begin to fail. We dig more graves in the court below and soon there will be no square of ground to take more dead.

We should have burned the corpses, burned every man, woman and child who died. So my father said even as he died. But we have no firewood.

We have not eaten these seven days. Only the children had the scraps of food we had saved, and now there is nothing.

Where is Hope? In the secret paths of the forest, I fly to find Her.

Amid the green trees, I see Her.

Her face is fierce. Her hair flames like the rising sun.

The fever conjures Her to me, it is the poison in me!

I speak; I beg.

She turns from me.

Is there no hope left for any of us?

Leli paused on the spiny ridge of Ras Chui for his friend to catch up. He surveyed the reef below with satisfaction.

‘You are right, Huru,’ he announced. ‘These strangers are the expected ones. There, you see! Two cross the reef. These are the brothers. That one, alone, is the sister. She has the strange red hair, like the doctor auntie. Red hair, like a fire!’

‘Why do you speak to me in English?’ Huru demanded, in English, puffing from the short, steep climb up the rocks from the village. ‘This language sits like a stone on my head.’

‘We practise! So that they will know our words and hear that our greeting is good!’

Huru snorted. ‘You are mad, Leli. Very mad! These tourists will not want to be our friends. They will not want to hear our bad English. This red-hair girl—’

‘Afraid, always!’ retorted Leli, but with a grin. He was watching the third figure with interest, how she trailed the others, stopped to look at something at her feet, how she turned, how her hair caught the glow of the sun, how she looked back at the shore, and stood watching, as if she saw something.

‘How can we know if we will not try?’ Nudging his friend forward, together they scrambled down the rocks, still arguing, and veered in long, easy strides across the reef towards the three distant figures.