

## **Tears off the Starboard**

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When the village bells rang I was fast asleep. Mother rushed into my room, lifted me from my bed, and followed Father out of the house. I sank into my mother's arms as we ran through a series of alleys and down a stone stairway that led to the shoreline. Other families were running in the same direction as us. My father climbed into one of the many boats lined along the shore, then reached out for me and hauled me in. Then Mother climbed in and sat down and I fell asleep in her arms, only half noticing a fire burning in the village.

When I woke up we were out at sea, and I couldn't see our village or our land. The boat was crowded with children, parents and grandparents - all escaping the same fate. The adults were quiet, but we children, despite the terrible night, couldn't help but be a little excited. Usually only the men went out to sea, fishing for the village; we would wave goodbye as they left and call out to them when they returned. We could tell how many fish they had caught by their mood. They would either sing out loud and hug us or walk by silently. We peered over the edge of the boat looking for fish and a few of the boys cast lines and managed to catch some. But mostly we were quiet. We didn't want to disturb our elders. They looked troubled and spoke to each other in a serious manner.

By listening to the adults speak, I was able to discover what had happened to our village. A band of Spartans had attacked it and burnt it to the ground - the flames I saw on the night of our escape. Our village had always been vulnerable to attack from Sparta, as it sits on the western coast of Attica, far from our capital Athens. But we were prepared. Our look-outs warned us of the attack, allowing many of the villagers to escape. Someone said there were many more boats on the ocean besides this one; looking hard I could make out a couple of them far in the distance. The village lies in between the two cities, which have been at war with each other for many years. Our people are fine boat builders and sailors, and are valued by the Athenian navy. Many men from our village fight for this navy. Now the Spartans have sought their revenge and our village lies in ruins. The

adults speak of many more things, but I am unable to understand.

We have been at sea for three days now, and any excitement I had felt is gone. All day I sit with my head between my knees and hands around my ankles. I'm tired. I'm not allowed to move around because of the windy, stormy day - none of us are. I snuggle in nice and close to Mum and Dad. I hardly ever got to do that before we left, but now I'm with them all the time. They're like a warm coat against the strong wind. Everyone is sitting like this - crowded together. Some children are crying and want to know when we will go home. Occasionally, an adult breaks into prayer to the sea god Poseiden, asking for a safe passage across the ocean. I ask my parents where we are going. They hug me silently.

The storm is growing and the waves are becoming wilder. The boat lurches so high in the air that I am unable to see the ocean in front of me - just the stormy night sky. The men start moving anxiously about the boat, sharing control of the rudder and repositioning the sail. We children are frightened and the adults look worried. One of the older women, respected by all in our village, commands the children to look at her. We obey. She tells us to follow her into song. None of us feel like it at first, but slowly the passion in our voices grows, and eventually the adults begin to join in as well. The whole boat breaks into harmony, singing an ode powerful enough to compete with the heaving waves crashing against the boat. We sing of happy days when our stomachs were full and eagles circled in the sky. We sing of family and our ancestors. This is what keeps our people strong: we are not only boat builders and fishermen, we are also wonderful singers! For a moment the song takes us all to a happier place.

But the happiness does not last for long. The waves grow in intensity, throwing the boat around like one of the toy ships I played with in the shallow surf. Suddenly, my ears are filled with the sound of cracking timber as a towering wave slams into our boat. Our vessel breaks apart and capsizes, and we are hurled into the furious ocean. I am under the water and surrounded by darkness. My mouth fills with the ocean. I kick at the water and hear my muted voice screaming.

My ear drums throb. Where is the surface? It's dark, I can't see. The water is cold. I feel like I'm falling - there is nothing under my feet, and I kick and kick. Mercifully, my head pops above the surface. Immediately I am hit by a another wave, and my head is slammed under the water. I begin to panic and throw my arms and legs about aimlessly. But this time two hands grasp me, and I am pulled out of the water and onto a plank of wood. My mother holds me! I cough out the sea water inside my throat; it stings and I can't speak. I look at her. She looks as brave as Hera, the goddess of women! She pulls me under her bosom and presses down on me. Her arms and legs are spread outwards, clinging to the edges of a piece of wood from our broken ship, which soars above the ocean on the peaks of wild waves.

Eventually there is a lull in the storm; however, the sky and ocean still look menacing. We are both beginning to shiver and my fingers and toes are going numb. My mother's teeth chatter behind my head but she manages to speak into my ear. Her words fill me like a warm drink. 'My beautiful child, the Gods may be unhappy with our people, but *we* are still alive.'

'Where is Father?'

'He is gone Child.' I can feel her body tense up as she tells me. I sob. 'You must promise me,' she says, 'that no matter what happens you will hold onto this raft. No matter how scared you become or how terrible things seem, you must always grasp this piece of wood. Promise me.' I give her my promise. 'And,' she continues, 'remember to sing our songs, for that is the power of our people.' With these words the storm suddenly whips into a frenzy, as if Poseidon himself is angry at my mother's defying words. The raft is carried up the crest of a wave and flips over the top, dropping to the surface with a slap. The impact knocks the wind out of me, and when I recover I realise I am clinging to the raft alone. My mother is gone.

I have been grasping this raft for hours now, bobbing up and down in the storm. Thankfully the waters are now calm. The raft remained upright throughout the storm and I have managed to stay out of the water. I miss the comforting presence of my mother and have cried many tears for

her. Now the sky is beginning to break into colour and I beg the sun god Helios, for much needed warmth; I am freezing and my whole body shivers, though I do not will it. I am pressed downwards against the raft, and have locked my hands and feet into position just as my mother told me to, but I can't feel them anymore. I find it difficult to move. I roll my eyes and see that my fingers are a light blue colour. I don't feel like they belong to me. Where is everybody? I am alone in the endless ocean. Alone with dark, cold water sloshing endlessly over my body. There is no hope. I will die. With these words the sun rises. Helios has taken pity on me! Sunlight hits me. I feel its pleasure, but the cold owns my shaking body. The warm sun reminds me of my mother's words, *sing my child*. My throat has closed up but I can imagine the words, and I do. I roll them around in my head. I will die with these words, with the power of my people.

I imagine the words of a song about our fishing boats coming in to shore. It brings a faint smile to my numb lips. I imagine Father coming from the distance with a haul of fish and a smile on his face. It looks real. It comes right beside my raft and I roll my tired eyes upward to see the outline of a woman, surrounded by the light of the rising sun. Arms haul me into the boat. 'I am saved,' I whisper, and surrender to sleep in the comforting arms that hold me.

Some time later I awaken, my body wrapped in layers of sheepskin, closely surrounded by people from my village. My head lies in the lap of the woman I saw leaning over the edge of the boat - my auntie. I try to speak but can't, and instead smile at her blurry face. She smiles and cries, and strokes my hair. 'My brave child, you are alive, you are saved.' Guessing my thoughts she continues, 'Only you, only you.' I fall asleep. When I wake again, I feel stronger. My auntie is still holding me. 'All is well child, we will find land soon.' I believe her. She tells me it is time to lean over the edge of the boat and say goodbye to my parents. They have gone, she tells me, deep into the water where Poseidon will protect them. I lean over the starboard and cry into the water. I watch my tears splash into my parent's tomb, as I sob goodbye. A friendly gust of wind catches the sail and takes us far away.