

Meeting the world to the rhythm of death, Murdoch was mine from his very first breath. His father a sailor and mother soon dead, the pair took to my waters with a splintered cross and fistfuls of hope. Good fortune, they say, being born at sea. But it was winter. My tides were raging, and I don't answer to God.

'Watch the winds,' the woman muttered through sharp breaths and salt-crusted hair. The sailor furrowed his brow, eyes fixed on her swollen belly. 'We go where we must.'

So my breath blew westward, way out where the sky wept steel and my waves inspired myths dared only to be whispered in candlelight. I chewed up and spat out their ship like a bad taste, knees scraping deck and skin soaked to the twisting bone.

And yet they never turned back. Even when the first blood pooled at her feet, even when her screams melted from fear to determination to pain and back again, they remained childishly at mercy of my will.

Finally, he arrived. The sailor's hands, timid and raw, caught his son and held his wife in a juggle of life and death.

'Murdoch,' she choked, a breath possessed. And with that, she was gone.

The child's mouth opened. But unlike the cries of grown men I've grown so accustomed to, unlike the roar that erupted from his father, he sang no fear. No, what I heard was worse.

Murdoch spoke with the rage of one thousand men. Born to the hands that stole his mother and would soon lead his father to madness, Murdoch cursed me from his very first breath.

It was the kind of rage that cannot be tamed, the kind that would always lead him back to me. But you cannot wage war with the ocean.

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Murdoch grew, and I watched.

But I was not the only one.

Ocean-eyed and skin-bronzed by an affair with the sun, where there was Murdoch there was Marie. Raised by fishermen, rocked to sleep in the cradle of my waves, she saw me as few did not. Until Murdoch.

She lingered behind boats and frayed fishing nets, watching the other children cower from my waters while he stood like stone, counting each wave with hardened eyes.

Though intrigued, it was those eyes that kept her distant. They did not speak until after his father's funeral. It was five days past his ninth birthday.

Murdoch stood at my shores, foam fizzing in a mocking reminder of what had claimed both his parents – though his father, they say, was no accident. Whispers of a starless night, an empty bottle and an abandoned son spread like wildfire. For the town folk, it was evidence enough.

Left with nothing but his father's best knife, Murdoch sharpened the stones that flew from his hand, grazing my surface in small but cruel leaps. It was always their final jump – the one that sliced my skin – that made him smile.

Marie approached, a thousand questions burning like salt on her tongue. Why the sea? Why play with the thing that can bite?

Though wonder she might, she did not ask.

'Teach me.'

It was the first time a stranger had met him with anything but pity.

He hesitated, drinking in her clenched fists and knitted brow, daring him to refuse. She did not waver as I roared.

Murdoch lifted his hand, spread his fingers and offered her a stone as smooth as silk.

And so, as love often goes, that was that.

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Throwing stones soon became sailing ships and catching stolen kisses. While I marked the passing time through the darkening of Murdoch's salt-weathered skin, Marie marked it through his absence.

She knew what it meant to love him; you cannot replace what has already drowned a man's heart. But to love Murdoch was to love me and fear neither.

So she stayed.

The town spoke of the man who spoke to the sea, their whispers slipping through floorboards and rocking her to sleep. These whispers mocked Murdoch, too, but only worked to throw him further from my shores.

He spent the years learning the language of my waves. Testing a ship's limits. Toying with fate. Each time he returned, his eyes found it harder to meet Marie's. When they did, all that looked back was her own watery reflection.

Why stay? My waters begged to ask each time she watched him leave, standing at the shore like a rotting anchor.

But, as the passing of time was soon marked by something new, I understood.

If Murdoch belonged to me, then so would they all. She would create something born of salt and storm that he refused to run from.

So Murdoch sailed, we watched, and the slowly growing life inside her spoke that soon, we would not be the only ones.

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'I'm coming with you.'

Marie stood knee-deep next to Murdoch in my shallows, daring him to refuse. It was to be his longest voyage yet.

His eyes swallowed her swollen frame. The ship nodded impatiently. I tugged them deeper.

Marie winced, losing her footing and grabbing her cramping stomach.

'The child will be born at sea.' Murdoch stated. This, of course, she knew.

So they left.

The pair took to my waters with a splintered ship and fistfuls of might. They spoke not of fortunes or fables or murmurs to God. Murdoch was to face me with all the salt and spite that poisoned his blood, doing right what his parents did wrong. Marie was to bind Murdoch to her with blood and brine.

But while I don't answer to God, I laugh in the face of man – no matter fear or fury.

'Watch the winds.' Marie spat through wind-whipped hair. Murdoch did not flinch, hands fixed on the rigging. 'We go where I lead'.

So we danced. My breath spun them from wave to wave, their ship scraping claw-like peaks and tumbling into hell-kissing troughs. The sky darkened with my depths, bleeding together in an inky concoction that reeked of brine and terror and madness.

And yet neither knew no fear. As promised from his very first breath, Murdoch raged against my will.

He did not flinch at the copper stench of Marie's blood.

He did not falter as I pulled cries of forgiveness from her throat, cries that melted from rage to determination to pain and back again.

Even when her screams blended in an off-key harmony with another's, life in chorus with death, he did not turn.

The child was to Murdoch as stones are to my surface.

'Maren.' Marie choked, a breath possessed. And with that, she was gone.

But Murdoch did not cry. He did not curse me.  
No, what I heard was better.  
He laughed to the rhythm of death.