

Beyond the Reef

'Mermaids?' you may scoff. 'They're fantasy, like the Hans Christian Andersen's story, or sailors' rum-enhanced tales.'

I'm here to tell you that I am real and once a year I become human and emerge from the sea to observe what nonsense humans are up to. They can't breathe under water; have to gulp air each time they surface and they swim poorly. Have you seen those weird boards they try and stand up on to reach the beach? They have no idea that I am a Nereid and the goddess of sandy beaches.

When humans get into difficulties in the ocean they panic. There were many times I have gently bumped them into shallow water, and safety. Did they ever express gratitude? No, they screamed that I was a shark about to attack them. God, I am misunderstood! Here I am, trying to save their miserable lives, and these idiots boast about how they out-swam a shark.

It's really hard for me when the moon is full at midsummer and I lose my magnificent tail briefly and walk on two ugly legs. I have to conceal my gills too, breathe

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through my nose and make sure I have some sort of covering - not just seaweed and scales, but usually I can find someone's abandoned towel to wrap around myself, as I am first on the beach at sunup.

Admittedly, my fish-like odour is a bit strong, but these two-legged beings at the

seaside smell awful - shiny oil applied all over so they gleam. They put thin white sticks in their mouths and create smoke, looking like my distant dragon cousins. Their eating habits leave everything to be desired. I see them relishing my near relatives accompanied by yellow greasy sticks - their rank smell I have been told is something called vinegar.

What upsets me most is the mess that they leave behind. At the end of the day at the seaside they leave greasy papers, empty boxes and coloured metal cylinders. All this gets washed into my habitat when the tide comes in to clean the beach. They thoughtlessly never think about my environment, so it's time to teach them a lesson.

Bequeathed some powerful magic by my far-removed ancestor, Neptune, today I am going to get even in my brief spell as I assume human form.

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I watched a group of young men being obnoxious to some young girls who were trying to cook themselves on the sand. The men kept flicking sand until one of them protested. I intervened, and they all found themselves covered in thick sand that refused to come off even when they jumped into the waves.

Whispering, I rebuked them: 'The sand will remain there until sundown.' It put an end to their taunting, for the moment.

I saw a cluster of girls who were drinking something from metal cylinders. It seemed that the more they drank, the more argumentative they became. As well, some of them put these white sticks in their mouths and breathed smoke. Some of them seemed to be changing colour, becoming quite red. Then they decided to run into the water to cool off but two tripped in the sand and fell under a large wave. It took a lot of effort from me to get them back into the shallows again.

Managing to empty all their cylinders and bury those white sticks in the sand, I hid them. Somehow, my actions did the trick as the group collected their gear and

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retreated. Unfortunately, some men became very aggressive when they saw what I was doing.

'Hey, you, leave their belongings alone.'

I was pushed over by one of them, but a tall, strong, but gentle man came to my rescue and the group retreated.

'Thank you. I can't bear seeing my beach littered.'

'What do you mean, *your* beach?'

Suddenly, there was a cry from two people who pointed excitedly in the direction of their child who was being carried off to my home. Reluctantly, I sped into the water and lifted him up on my back, swimming back to shore and to his waiting parents. They were so pleased to see him that they spanked him for being so stupid. I'll never understand humans. When our mer-children are naughty, we gently explain what was wrong, but don't punish them.

My skin is beginning to dry and crack, I must get wet

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very soon. Making my way down to the edge of the waves, I listen as a passing seagull announces that she has seen a family of dolphins offshore. How splendid; I swim out to meet them, exchanging news and warning them to stay well clear of the seaside in case they are mistaken for a school of sharks. There is a great difference between shark and dolphin fins!

There are still a few hours until sundown. I have managed to exchange my towel for a long piece of fabric that I wind around my body to keep it from the sun. My hair is a fine silvery cloud and I have to pick seaweed and shells out from where they lodged in the sea before I emerged.

The sun sinks behind the dunes and I am grateful I can soon return home beneath the waves. The gentle man who came to my aid earlier approaches me, and asks:

'What's your name? Are you on holiday here?'

'My name is Psamathe, my home is far away, but I must leave soon.'

'I'm Peter. Must you go now?'

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Encouraged to have met one kind human today, I smile at him gently, and make my way towards the waves where I belong.

It's too late. My tail and gills reappear. The man stares at me aghast, not comprehending that I need the ocean to exist. I gasp frantically but like any fish out of water I do not survive this alien, hostile environment.