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Mythopoeic Society's Online Midwinter Seminar 2024

17th–18th February 2024: Something Mighty Queer

Submission Deadline: November 30, 2023

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The Lord of All He Surveyed

The Lord of All He Surveyed

by JA Howe

Ian Katapoulis was out in his boat in the Mediterranean. He had a route that he generally followed, going around the islands. The water wasn't as clear as it might have been once, but he still found it lovely. A hazy sun shone down on his face, as greenish-gray waves rippled in the deep blue waters. A school of fish jumped playfully in the waters up ahead, near one of the reefs. He could hear the fishermen calling to one another as they sat in the water, and yelling at motorists and tourists who just wanted to fool around.

Every day, the merchant had left more and more of his work to his children. Ian, when asked what he did out on the Med, used to say he was keeping an eye on it for the gods -- actually he was making sure nobody stole any of the treasure that had sunk with boats during the Peloponnesian and Aegean wars, and the countless other battles and skirmishes that had happened in the country's history. At least, they couldn't -- Ian, being Greek, was of course entitled to the treasures of his land.

He swore loudly when something banged into the side of the boat. He whirled, fist raised, and stopped cold.

A pair of stingrays had jumped into his boat.

Ian didn't have a large craft. He liked to be close to the water -- but not this close!

The small rays -- for their kind they were small, anyway -- were flopping silently around on the deck of the twelve-foot boat. Their tails slashed against the mast and one of them hit a sail.

Thwop.

Tiny eyes stared at him.

Ian gave it no other thought: he jumped

into the water.

No life-vest; he had them but rarely wore them on good days.

He dove very far towards the bottom of the Mediterranean, trying to calm down. To jump from a ship in panic is one thing, to suffocate because of it is another. *Concentrate on the pretty water*, he said to himself. *Look at the fish!*

He was right near one of the prettiest islands, one known well to tourists. He saw a diver some ways off, taking pictures.

Swimming on, his heartbeat slowed a bit now, Ian was startled again when he turned. Something glinted in the water.

Swimming closer, he found a golden anchor. He wasn't sure whether he was hallucinating or not.

He made note of the spot, which was near the edge of a rock face, and a school of brightly-colored fish swam there. The two rays were thankfully not on his boat when he returned to it. He watched the sun set brilliant pink and gold, and headed in as the other fishermen brought in the day's catch.

"It's a sign from Athena, you shouldn't touch it," said one of his friends.

"I think it's a sign from Poseidon," said another, "and definitely you shouldn't touch it. The rays were obviously guardians."

"Be very wary of that god," said the first friend, who was a fisherman himself.

"Remember that storm that came up off the coast of Sicily without warning. . . ?"

He went to the temple of Poseidon. Offered the god a bit of dried fish hide he'd made into a vest, which was his hobby.

The god appeared. "I see you have found

an anchor,” he boomed. “You are a fisherman, a sailor by trade, and I do not know where it comes from. You may take it.” He waved a barrel-thick arm carelessly.

Fickle as the wind is Poseidon Earthmaker, Ian thought but did not say so. He bowed. “Thank you, Great Poseidon,” he said.

That night when he went to sleep an owl appeared to him. “I am the Owl of Athena,” it said. “She asked me to send her greetings and her wisdom: those who take something from the sea always must give something back. Be careful what you take.”

He woke up thinking about the stingrays again, and went to the temple of Athena, made an offering. This time, he gave her a bowl of fine olives he’d picked that morning.

She appeared to him.

“You had a dream last night about me, didn’t you?” she said. “Think on what that could possibly mean.” And with that she disappeared.

He sighed, and left. *As cryptic as a raven*, he thought.

That day, he went out again.

One of the stingrays jumped into his boat again.

Ian had to think fast; if the ray came near him he’d die. Even if it didn’t intend to do so, the barb on the tail would kill him. On the other hand –

“O Poseidon,” he said to the waters around him, “if I am meant to have this golden thing, let the rays leave me alone.”

There was silence. The stingray in his boat stared impassively at him.

It isn’t bothering me, he thought.

Ian decided to go down. Then he remembered the other message. “O Athena, I promise to give something back!” he cried as he dove. *That should help*.

The waters were dark this time, few of the pretty fish out. He caught sight of some of the golden ones swimming nearby, but he was on the wrong side. *There must be sharks out*

today, he thought, un-worried; the sharks of this area were small and relatively harmless.

His goal was still there, the anchor. It gleamed as if beckoning to him in the waters nearby. He could almost taste the riches it would bring him. He had brought up things before, but not like this.

Who uses a golden anchor, he wondered? Surely it would be too soft a metal -- which probably meant it had simply been decorative.

Silently, he thanked Poseidon for this great opportunity. The anchor came out easily, sliding from a place where it had seemed wedged, like a square of butter.

It truly is a gift of the gods, then, he thought.

He began to bring up the anchor when an eel came up behind him. It got his arm and he screamed underwater. Bubbles rose toward the surface -- not a good idea.

Ian swam off hurriedly, just a little ways-- still holding the chain of the golden anchor. It bit at his hands, but he’d not let this go!

The eel came at him again. He fought with it, and it got him again. The pain in his arm was dreadful.

He realized, as bubbles formed in his mouth and his head felt like it was being squeezed like a grapefruit, that he could have just stayed on the surface in his boat and died fast there, instead of this horror. So he let go the anchor and fought for his life, at least.

The chain had wrapped itself around one of his legs though. It had snapped off something, and the anchor didn’t weigh too much, but it was dragging at him.

No, I don’t want it -- keep your anchor! he cried silently to the gods, to the sea, to anything that might be listening.

The anchor remained attached to his leg, but it seemed to weigh less. He found himself rising, his vision maroon and black.

Just as he realized that was the bottom of his boat he was seeing, it was too late. He slammed right into it and gasping, swallowed water. He choked, the reflexive coughing

drowning him.

When he got to the Elysian Fields, the gods said to him, "why did you take the anchor?"

"Because I was a fool," he replied. "I was greedy. I thought my offerings would be enough. I thought, because the stingray stayed, I must be meant to have the anchor."

Poseidon, an eel on each side of him, laughed heartily. "The fickle delights of man! You did not even ask about it!"

You told me I could take it; you didn't say your guards were about it!

An owl flew down and cocked its head at him. Slowly it became the vision of the Goddess Athena.

She smiled sadly at him. "You did not think hard on my words. When taking something from the gods, there is always a price to pay. It is not up to you to name that price."

Ian simply nodded.

--END--

Acting Out Among The Ferae Naturae

by Colin James

I'm expecting a parcel.
It will contain
refurbished sandals,
hazelnuts from
Tolkien's garden
and some decent tea.
Neither vernacularisms
nor generic abstractions
can prevent my
beseeching me.