

Pain Builds Character

Off the shore rested darkened clouds. Surely rain was on the horizon. For now, I was determined to stay under the hot sun. The breeze had indeed picked up, threatening to knock me over into the shallow water. The problem wasn't getting wet, but the pain that was to follow.

My feet hurt. It ran up my legs and hit my spine. Even my arms hurt for some reason. My bare feet stood on a slowly brown-turning-pink coral reef of the *lophelia pertusa*, which are the only coral in British waters. Down the beach, North Berwick turned into Mingulay, which held the deepest coral reefs in the Northern Hemisphere, and it was a breeding ground for sharks.

With the water receding after the tide of noon, the prickly reef rose from the sandy dunes. Waves rolled on, ebbing and flowing up and down; it was only five inches from the sand. Hard reef poked into my skin like knives. I held my ground, ignoring the sting. The pain built character. I learned that after years of injuries from sports and climbing on things I wasn't supposed to be on.

I probably wasn't supposed to be standing on the reef since corals are fragile and slow-growing. I just followed what everyone else was doing. Fathers held hands of their children as they stood on the reef only to jump off quickly after feeling torture. Standing on the reef, I watched the dark clouds move inch by inch toward us.

"Sophie," my friend called, who stood far back on the nice, soft sand. Cool water lapped her feet as well. Soft waves crashed into her ankles. "Don't your feet hurt?"

Yes was the short answer. "No."

"Liar!"

I laughed and moved on the reef, which managed to dig more into my feet, like I was stabbed repeatedly by tiny picks. I accepted it. Bending lower, I rocked onto my toes and balls of my feet. Immediately I wanted to scream in agony. My toes weren't equipped for the stabbing pain. Reaching my hand down, my fingers went over the sharp rocks. If there were small knives, I didn't feel it. It didn't compare to my feet.

The ragged rocks of brown with green algae wasted away above the water. Below, soft, pink tissue of flowers swayed in the waves. It was a million-billion little mountains belonging on the reef. It reached as high as erosion allowed. The crevices within the reef held tiny deposits of sea life. I didn't fathom the minuscule creatures that might live in there, just waiting for the tide to come in again.

A creative minds took a moment to look at the creatures, finding names and descriptions. But by this time, the hurt became unbearable and I escaped from the reef. Quickly I found a small patch of soft sand and stayed upon it, allowing my sore feet to relax.

Sand swirled around my feet with each passing stroke of wave. It wasn't even, but a quick, messed up chorus of small waves crashed into another. It was a fight to the death to the strong wave. With each of my movements, I became the strongest wave. I stood still. A school of children fish eventually grew confident enough to nibble at my toes. Somehow that was worse than the ache. I moved my foot, and they swam away in fear.

I laughed.

"Sophie, I know the reef hurts," Rachel called. "Just come back to shore."

"What?" I asked back, pretending as if I didn't hear her.

“Come back.”

“Nah.”

To prove a point, like I always did, I went back to the reef and stood on it again. Pain pricked my skin.

On the horizon, the clouds came closer and closer again, making the water grow darker and eerie. The breeze picked up. A chill hung in the air. I stared down at the reef, which humans would eventually destroy, and it was beautiful. Sunlight reflected off the water, making the reef glow with warmth. The small creatures took in all warmth before falling under the reef again.

I wanted to know their names but realized I didn't have the time or patience. If I lived by the ocean normally, perhaps I would go and learn. But I came from a landlocked state. These creatures off the shore of Scotland were different than my lake creatures of Minnesota. The creatures sulked away as the tide pushed off even more. Only three inches of water left before they were stuck. Redfish, ling, tusk and Pollack fish liked to hide in alive reef. Dead coral reef bellowed to wolf fish, which liked to mate within the tunnels.

Flowers of pink and orange swayed under the water and slowly curled up as the water disappeared. It was like everything slipped into sleep as the water dissipated. I wanted to be like the rest of the creatures who swam out. I wanted to swim with them. In the distance, a lone, red buoy waited for me. I stayed still on the reef, looking at the grooves.

If I was small enough, I would disappear into the small tunnel system and find my way through. What was in the tunnels? What hid? And I stood above them. I stood on them. I didn't move. I never moved. I watched with a careful eye. I looked for any sign of movement. All had disappeared.

Going out further, I emerged from the water to stand on reef covered in green algae, which wasn't any softer under my feet than the underwater reef. If anything, another layer of protection had been placed, as if they held William Wallace type of longswords or claymores. It was like I was the damn redcoats and the great Highlander William Wallace came to destroy me. Biting my tongue, I continued to walk on it. The algae squished underneath me. Water puffed out like pus, coming out of all edges. When no weapons were drawn, perhaps some of it was better, but at that time I was attacked like an invading army.

That didn't stop me from hopping up and down on it like a child, even though I was nineteen. Proper adults probably didn't do this, but I didn't feel people were proper adults until at least 40. By that time, hopefully things were figured out. Swooping down, I grabbed some of the algae, and it stabbed my hand. It drifted in the wind. The texture reminded me too much of a dead fish so I threw it out to sea, only for it to haunt me by floating back.

Done with my agonizing explorations, I headed back to dry land.

“How about the pain?” Rachel asked.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I responded.

“Your feet are bleeding.” She motioned down, and my blood oozed into the tan sand.

“Pain builds character.”

“You've lost so much blood in the ocean that it could attract a shark.”

I shrugged and pushed her into the ocean, which the waves splashed upon her. Her feet ran along the reef, and she jumped up.

“Sophie, you're an asshole.”

“Character is built.” I sang the *Jaws* theme song as I walked away in happiness.