

Beneath the Waves

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She had been stowed away for more than a week now, living off the scraps she had brought along with her in the tattered rucksack at her side. Hunger gnawed at her belly and the smell of ocean water and gunpowder was beginning to addle her brain. Her entire body was sore and achy after too long spent sitting in the same position, unable to stretch her legs or even her back. She rarely dared to even raise her head to peek over the crates she was tucked behind, afraid someone might see her.

Every now and again she snuck from her little corner just long enough to relieve herself and stop her limbs from going numb, then returned to the nook she'd been tucked away in and continued to wait. As much as she was ached and worn, she felt a certain hope in her heart that kept her warm during the long nights at sea. Soon enough they would make port and she could disembark with her lover, to make a life with him wherever they landed.

That was of course the plan, the entire reason she was even here at this very moment, wearing dirty clothes that smelled of brine, dark hair unkempt and bags forming under tired eyes. Women were not allowed on board shipping vessels, for surely they would bring bad fortune to the crew. But her lovely Jack could not do without her and so he had snuck her on board in hopes that they could run away into a new life together.

Yet, as with the best laid plans of all men, something was bound to go awry eventually and it did. On the tenth day, or perhaps it was the twelfth she really could not be sure, she was discovered. Two burly sailors chased her down and caught her before she could hide herself away again, though the moment they had seen her she had known it to be hopeless. Now that they knew she was there they would have searched the whole vessel for her, and found her eventually.

Each arm held in one man's iron grasp, she was hauled through the halls and up the stairs, her small feet barely touching the ground as they dragged her. The sunlight burned her eyes and she had to lower her head so as not to

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blind herself, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. The sound of the waves lapping at the sides of the ship and the gulls cawing overhead was overwhelming after so long being kept in the secluded darkness.

By the time she looked up the crew was already beginning to gather, having taken notice of the girl held aloft by their crewmates. From the bridge came the captain, taking the steps two at a time and striding purposefully across the deck towards them, his face a mix of fury and confusion. He did not look like a man to be trifled with in the slightest and she felt as though her heart dropped into the pit of her stomach at the sight of him.

She held firm despite this, trying her best to draw herself up to her full height even though she was being forced to stand on her toes. She was not a very intimidating sight at the best of times, but weary and dirtied as she was she looked more like an angered street dog than any sort of imposing force. It was an effort though, one that seemed to do nothing but further anger the approaching captain.

“Gregory, McMullen!” the captain barked, his voice a weathered snarl from years amongst the salty waves. “What the devil’s the meaning of this?!”

Gregory, or perhaps it was McMullen she wasn’t sure, jerked on her arm, forcing her to stumble to the side and nearly lose her balance.

“We found ‘er below deck, Cap’n!” he replied in his own gruff tone. “Hidin’ in the stores!”

“I told ya I heard summat down below.”

“Stuff it Gregory.”

“Well ah did!”

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“Quiet!”

Both men silenced themselves when their captain roared. Fear was beginning to set in and she could feel her heartbeat quickening. Men were gathering around and her clear blue eyes darted from face to face, searching desperately for the only ally she had on this ship. Where was Jack? Where was her love?

The captain took a step forward and had she been in control of her own body, she would have taken a step back. Alas, Gregory and McMullen kept a firm grip on her arms, leaving her no choice but to instead look up into the steely gray eyes of the weathered man. He looked as harsh as the sea in a storm and twice as unforgiving.

“I do not tolerate stowaways on my ship.” he said, his voice lowered to a dangerous rasp. “Especially not *dames*.”

There were murmurs of assent from the crew, all of whom had by now gathered around in a semi-circle, blocking her in.

“N-no you don’t understand,” she said, somehow managing to find her voice again despite her fear. “I was brought aboard!”

The captain’s brows rose and all around her there was further muttering as the crew all looked to one another.

Who had dared to bring a woman aboard? Which of them had disobeyed the sacred rule that all sailors followed?

“Brought aboard...?” he repeated slowly. “Are you sayin’ one of *my* sailors brought ye on this ship?”

“Y-yes sir.” she stammered, nodding her head along with her words.

“Who?”

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"Jack, sir. Jack Sinclair."

He whirled around, long coat billowing out behind him in a wave of worn leather. His eyes were fiery like the sun beating down on them from above, dangerous and angry beneath the shadow of the brim of his hat. Chapped lips pulled back in a snarl, revealing teeth darkened by coffee and tobacco.

"*Sinclair!*" he roared. "Jack Sinclair you get yer god forsaken self up here now or I'll have ya drawn for treason!"

There were a few moments of silence and her heart hammered, beating an unpleasant tattoo on her ribs as she waited anxiously for something to happen. At last, from the back the crew began to part, easing aside to allow her Jack to shoulder to the front. He looked more weary than the last time she'd seen him, but that of course had more to do with the days at sea than anything else.

His dark hair was tucked back beneath a cap, the few wisps that escaped hardened by sea salt, skin beginning to tan golden under the baking sun. Both his hands were blackened, likely from working with the gunpowder, double checking all the barrels were secure, and some had smudged his hollowed cheeks. As always he held himself tall, broad shoulders back and head held high, as if the world were his opponent.

The relief she felt at the sight of him made her want to fall to her knees, but she kept her wits about her as best she could. Oh she longed to run into his arms and kiss his cheeks and tell him how much she had missed him. It felt as though it had been so long since they had last held one another and laughed and she ached to do so again.

She strained to catch his eye, but he kept his firmly on the captain. She could understand she supposed, after all he was in the presence of authority. Best to let him straighten all this out before worrying about her.

"Jack, boy did you bring this lass aboard my ship? Knowin' as you know the rules and laws of the sea, that no maiden be brought into a ship without a captain's explicit say so, did ye? Tell me now boy."

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Those assembled all waited with baited breath for the man's reply. They could see the anger bubbling beneath the surface of the captain's calm composure, his mask of ease disguising rage to match a hurricane. It surely helped little that his hand had come to rest upon the hilt of his sword, offering no illusion as to where his mode of punishment for this discretion was likely to lie.

Desperately, she stared at her lover, waiting for his eyes to flick to her and reassure her that all would be well. His gaze never turned, jaw set and whole frame rigid. And after a moment, he spoke.

"No, Captain, I did not." he said. "I've never seen th' girl. On my life."

"Is that so? And how would it be that she'd come t' know your name, hm?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders languidly.

"I'm sure she just picked it up while she was hidin' away. S'not that hard to catch with us bellowin' and yellin' to each other all day, now is it?"

"Aye!" agreed one man from the back. "She mighta just as likely called on me!"

"Aye, same here!"

It felt as if her heart had stopped beating in her chest. At some point the cries and chortles of agreement from the crew had been drowned out by the deafening sound of disbelief. Her mind could not comprehend what she was hearing. Were these sordid words really falling from her Jack's lips? Was he really saying these things about her? No, it couldn't be true! He loved her!

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He had been the one to convince her to come with him when they left port. He had been the one to tuck her away and promise her that when they docked again they would run away. It was him who had kissed her one last time before disappearing above deck again, and it was by his hand that she had learned how to sneak about the ship. But now he was spewing these hateful lies, as if he had never seen her before in the entirety of his life. It had just been ten days, he could not have forgotten!

The captain nodded his head.

"I see... And ye wouldn't lie to me boy, now would ya?"

"Of course not Captain, never."

"Good, good."

These words snapped her out of her trance and soon she was struggling against the grip holding her, though to no avail.

"Jack!" she cried, the desperation evident in her voice. "Jack it's me! Please, why are you saying these things, you know me! Jack tell him!"

Still, he would not meet her eye. It felt as though a hand were clenching around her heart, closing into a tight fist and restricting its solitary beat. She sobbed aloud, eyes brimming with tears as the two men hoisted her up again despite her straining.

"*Jack! Jack please!*" she begged.

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But no one was listening. Gregory and McMullen were carrying her away and the crowd of the crew were following, like spectators watching a circus act. Tens of eyes followed the struggling girl as she kicked and screamed, still crying for her lover to answer her pleas. Every time she cried his name it tasted a little more bitter on her tongue, and the fear ate away at her a little more.

She was dragged to the port side rail, where McMullen, or maybe it was Gregory, grasped her other arm while the second turned to grab something from the ground. The captain turned to the assembled crew, sweeping his eyes over the men like a hawk overlooking ants.

“Now then,” he spoke, loud enough to be heard over the expanse of the entire ship. “Any man goin’ to take responsibility for this here lass, hm? Any of you? Or will she be dealt with as all women are on the high seas?”

There were cheers from the crew, deafening, drowning out the waves as they knocked the ship to and fro in the waters, froth splashing against the wooden hull. Sobs shook her body, quieter now as the man holding her jerked her around, allowing the other to lash her wrists in thick rope.

It was wound around several times, the rough material biting into her delicate skin and cutting off the circulation to her hands. Though she could not see the knot with which it was tied, she knew for certain it was much too tight for her to ever break free of now.

Her fate was sealed, but in a last fit of desperation, she turned her eyes up to the captain’s once more, tears spilling down her cheeks.

“Please.” she begged, voice cracked and soft. “Please, I beg you...”

The captain’s large hand patted her shoulder like one might a small child.

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“Beggin’ yer pardon, miss.” he said in a simpering tone meant to mock rather than reassure. “But this vessel’s got a long voyage ahead’a her, and we can’t be facin’ the repercussions of havin’ a dame like yourself aboard.”

He turned his head and nodded.

“Overboard with ‘er lads!”

She heard herself scream as she was lifted from the deck, and in one fluid motion, thrown over the side of the ship. The waves below came rushing up to meet her and before she could even take a breath she had crashed through the white foam, the darkness of the ocean depths pulling her down.

Her eyes stung and she squeezed them shut, closing her mouth too late and tasting bitter salt on her tongue. The icy cold of the open water clawed its way through her thin dress, eating its way through her skin and sinking into her bones. It was instinct to struggle for the surface, but every move she made only seemed to pull her further down below.

Despite knowing it would do her no good, she opened her eyes, as if to take one last look at the sun above the ocean surface. But this was not the sight that met her when her lids parted. Instead, she found herself gazing into a set of slit pupils set within golden irises gazing at her from several yards away (or so she guess).

At first, she thought herself to only be imagining it until she blinked and in a moment they were closer than before. Fear gripped her even more strongly than it had before as her eyes seemed to adjust and register the beginnings of a figure swaying towards her through the water. Long hair flowed behind it, dark like the ocean waves, and it had a human face, though its skin was of a pale blue like a corpse.

She had heard stories of the creatures as a girl growing up by the sea and it took her but a moment to fit it with a name.

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Mermaid.

And had she not been faced with one now, no more than a yard away and growing closer, she would have surely never believed it to be true. Mermaids, like ghosts and witches and goblins, were merely stories to scare children at night. To teach them not to swim alone and never to trust a stranger. They were not reality and never had been yet here one was now, before her.

Her lungs were beginning to burn, the lack of oxygen making her head pound, or perhaps that was the pressure as she sank deeper. She blinked again and the mermaid was before her, its glittering eyes staring deep into her own, pointed nose almost touching hers.

As fearsome as she was, as the mermaid was indeed a she, there almost seemed to be a hint of kindness in her gaze. Pity. Like a mother when she was privy to the sight of a child living on the unforgiving streets.

She raised a hand, and between her fingers was webbing like on the fin of a fish. Cold fingertips touched the bound girl's cheek, smoothing down over her skin, clammy even in comparison to the water. Those eerie eyes gazed deep into her own, searching for something that she could not discern. Her head grew lighter as the moments without breath ticked away.

All at once, the mermaid's full lips split into a smile, drawing over her cheeks and revealing rows and rows of thin, sharp teeth. The gills positioned beneath her jaw and down her slender neck flared, and she opened her mouth.

Somehow, though how she was not sure, the human girl was aware that the aquatic being was letting out a call.

Like a whale's song along the currents, drifting through the open waters.

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She began to circle the sinking girl, like a shark about its prey, faster and faster until the poor girl was sure she was seeing double. But, no, not double. No! There were *two* now! Three, four, six, ten- As she struggled to keep her consciousness and look about her more and more glittering eyes appeared out of the darkness. Golds and silvers and blues and all manner of other colors, like gems in a sunken ship.

From the depths below came the most beautiful, terrifying beings she had ever seen. All manners of shapes and sizes and body types, some old as her mother, some mere children. Their hair was wild and skin varying shades of blues and greens and sometimes even white, mouths open to reveal pointed teeth as they swam round and round.

The mermaid who had first approached suddenly reappeared from the swarm, tail keeping her swaying just before the barely conscious girl. Again, she reached out with her cold hands and fear gripped the mortal like it never had before. She tried desperately to squirm away, but even if she had had any strength left to her she could never have escaped the circling creatures around her.

Her obvious fear did not seem to deter the mermaid in the least, reaching out until she could grasp both her cheeks. Had she been able to sob, she would have, and her lips parted in response to this thought, releasing the last bubble of air she had.

Consciousness began to slip away, her thoughts drifting with it. What would happen to her mother? Would she ever know what had happened to her? Why had Jack betrayed her, how could he do such a thing? Why was it her fate to die beneath the ocean waves, to no doubt become a meal for these creatures she'd thought only myth?

These thoughts petered on until she realized that they were, in fact, not stopping. In fact, nothing was stopping.

Cold had consumed her body and she had taken it as the sign her soul had left her, but it was with some surprise that she realized she was not *gone*. Life had not left her, though warmth had, and with some further confusion she

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found she did not entirely mind it. The cold felt comforting, like her mother's embrace or a warm fire in the heart of winter.

Her head was no longer pounding and her lungs no longer felt as if they were being crushed within her chest. She could not feel her heart beating within her chest any longer, either fast or slow, simply gone. Stopped.

Azure eyes blinked open in time to see the mermaid pulling back, relieving a chill from her lips she had not initially noticed. She had been kissed, she realized now, but this did not amend any of her confusion. It must have shown on her face because the mermaid laughed, resounding through the water like the chime of a bell.

It took her a moment to realize she had heard it. Before she had had a sense that the ocean dwellers were speaking when they opened their jagged maws but now she *heard* her as clear as day. All around her the mermaids began to croon and cheer, as if they too realized she could hear their voices now.

Hands still cupped her face, thumbs smoothing slowly against her cheekbones, soothing her into a state of calm. The changes came slowly, the voices of the maids filtering through her mind until they became perfectly clear, and then behind it their words. They did not speak as humans did, communing through the sound of the water and a connection between touch and their minds.

She did not hear them say it, yet somehow she understood that these women had never meant her harm, for they were the same as her. Women betrayed and forgotten, left at the mercy of the ocean by their fathers, uncles, lovers, husbands. Thrown overboard like empty crates without concern, their souls left to wash along the winds and froth.

Beneath these ocean waves, within the clutches of the unexplored depths, they had changed. Their hearts ceased to beat and their skin became water logged, bodies twisting and morphing to suit their new home. Rather than fall

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mercy to the wiles of men they had found strength in their betrayals, becoming more than mortal beings, more than men and their follies above the surface.

They roamed now, free, finding comfort in each other and safety in their unreachable fortresses beneath the sea. They who knew heartbreak better than all others sought to protect one another from the same pain, finding no interest in mortal men and their desires, but amusement in their suffering. Their songs could drift for miles across the waves, singing to the gales and calling the clouds to their whims, now masters of what had meant to be their graves.

Several women freed her hands, webbed fingers pulling at her dress, shredding it from her body. There was no need for modesty here, and she felt no shame as she looked down herself to watch as her skin grew cold. She looked at her hands, where between her fingers skin was beginning to grow. She touched her neck, feeling where skin was splitting and gills formed to allow her to breath in her new domain.

How long she had been beneath the waves she did not know, time was of little value to her any longer, but soon she looked to her waist and found a glittering tail the color of the oceans below. It was not beautiful in the way they had been drawn in children's books on land, but sharp and precise, meant for speed rather than appeal. But oh, she adored it.

Without saying, she knew when her transformation was at last complete and she cried aloud to the sea, her tail lashing, sending her spiraling away from her companions. She spun and circled, testing her new body and feeling a joy she had never known fill her as she did. The others flocked about her, tugging at her hair and laughing as they raced about.

She could not remember a time she had felt such happiness, such contentment in herself. There was no fear or pain any longer, just the call of the wind and the storm, the cool touch of her sister's hands.

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This was bliss.

The maid who had first approached her crooned, bumping shoulders and rubbing their cheeks together. She cooed in return, feeling the scales of their silvery tails touch as they swam. Without meaning to, she felt their minds connect, and within her mind her story unfolded as it had who knew how long before. Outraged cries echoed from her sisters as Jack's betrayal replayed within her thoughts.

One of her sisters grasped her hand, amber eyes shining brightly and mouth pulled wide in a wicked grin. The grin was matched by several others and soon enough the entire group was sailing off, their tails carrying them through the water faster than any boat could match.

Above the surface, miles away, one hand pulled a cap from dark hair, so the other could swipe across his brow. Jack fitted his cap back atop his head, eyes turning up to the sky above them. He frowned, watching gray collect above their heads, billowing in from the north.

"Oi! Landon!" he hollered, turning to look at the poop deck high above. "Where's this weather comin' from?!"

"Don't know! It just showed up outta nowhere I tell ya! Better tell th' cap'n!"

Jack nodded, darting off to the captain's quarters to tell him of what they'd seen. Concern egged at the back of his mind, a sort of instinct tugging at him, telling him that something was not quite right. But he shook it off, passing it off merely as the jitters he'd had for the past week since the *incident*.

All too soon the storm was upon them, and what they'd thought would be a passing wave turned into something far, far worse. As if the gods themselves had cast down their wrath, rain hailed down on them in torrents, thunder crashing overhead. Lightning broke across the sky like cracks in the horizon, sometimes landing close enough to

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the ship to smell the burning saltwater. The clouds were almost black above them, the winds howling like some forgotten beast and the ship rocked, at the mercy of the darkened waves.

The crew rushed about their stations, desperately trying to defend from nature itself, but finding more and more that their efforts were in vain. Everything they did came undone, knots untying, tarps flying away, wood cracking and the wheel barely turning under the captain's command.

Jack could hear the men yelling, saying that this was an unnatural storm. It had come from nowhere at all, bearing down on them and them alone in the open waters. The ship was being swung about as if it were a child's toy in a tub, thrown hither and thither by some unknown force's will. He grit his teeth against all of this, desperate to find some logic in it all.

The captain was yelling orders and he scrambled to follow them, unable to do much more than concentrate. But then, all at once, a wave as tall as a mountain rose up above them, echoing for a moment in silence as all stopped to simply stare in awe. Jack was reminded, for a moment, of a great hand reaching up, curling as it made to bear down upon them.

And then it hit.

The boat almost toppled over onto its side. The mizzenmast cracked, men screamed, a canon went overboard, and then without warning, so did he. He did not even notice at first that he was no longer on the ship until he opened his eyes and saw around him only blackness.

Panic took hold, he tried to make his way towards the surface again, knowing he had only moments before rescue would be impossible and his life would be forfeit. Yet something stopped him, and for a moment he paused, staring into the blackness.

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Beneath the water all was calm, and through the endless depths he saw something, an impossible something. As he stared it came closer, closer, until he found himself staring into a face he'd seen only in his nightmares since that day.

He almost wanted to sob, but couldn't, petrified as he stared into the face of his lover. She was just as beautiful as the day they'd met, and his lips parted to mouth a thousand apologies he'd never had the chance to speak aloud. How, he wondered as he stared into her eyes, could he have ever done this to her? He had to get them back above the surface again, on board the ship, the captain be damned.

She reached out to him, hands grasping at his cheeks. He leaned into her touch, but a moment too late, wished he had not.

Her skin was colder than ice and as he stared into her eyes he realized with mounting fear that they shone like sapphires, dark pupils closing to mere pinpricks surrounded by endless blue. As he made to pull away her grip tightened, nails biting into his cheeks until they drew blood. All around him, the water shimmered as if alive and he realized to his horror that he was surrounded by glittering figures with glowing eyes.

He stared into her eyes, consumed by fear. As he watched, her lips pulled into that smile he'd fallen in love with, then wider, revealing jagged teeth.