

*Creatures of the Deep* by Abigail Hudson

Everyone knows sirens don't have emotions.

Sirens cannot feel. They are bloodthirsty predators, the killers of the sea who are more animal than their humanistic traits suggest. They lure their victims with false promises using honeyed words and saccharine voices that sing only the most captivating melodies. Once they have sunk a ship using their songs alone, they drag their quarry down to the depths, where they bide their time feasting on waterlogged flesh and each other before their hunger craves for more.

Mermaids, on the other hand, feel everything. They are vibrant and shimmering and exquisite, with scales every color one could ever imagine and more. They are kind and helpful and sweet, and it is a blessing to even glimpse one. It is a miracle if they look back at the one beholding them, because when they smile, all one can do is try not to fall instantly in love. Many ships sail through gem-colored reefs with sparkling waters in hopes that a coven will leap out of the waves and playfully dance around their vessel.

Before mastering what all crew hands must know, shipmates learn to identify these two types of creatures. If a sailor does not know the difference between a siren and a mermaid, he will not last on the open water. He will be a liability to the crew and endanger the entire ship. He will gawk at the siren and shoot the mermaid, and all the waters surrounding the once-safety of the ship will become red.

She was not a sailor. She was stolen in the dead of night by a band of pirates who took her in front of her father. Even though she screamed and reached out as one of the men hauled her over his shoulder like she was nothing but cargo, her father just stood there and watched amidst the terror and chaos. When she screamed again, pleading for him to come, to save her, she

could see in his eyes the flicker of relief. She was no longer *his*—his problem, his nightmare, his liability. It was the first time she had seen her father have any sort of light in his eyes.

She screamed the entire time it took to reach the ship, screamed until she was gagged and learned to save her voice, else her air be taken.

They did not keep her in the prison cells except for the three times she tried to escape—though there was nowhere to run, when there was only the salty abyss surrounding them, and she did not have a place to return to anymore. The crew looked at her with hungry eyes, making her skin crawl and the bile churning her stomach burn her throat, but they never once tried to touch her. For as much as they yearned, as much as she could feel it, they did not approach. They kept their distance, as though she were a ghost that would haunt them forevermore if they tainted her flesh.

She learned what her place was the following night, when the captain emerged from his cabin to curse the deck. It was strange, she thought, to go from the crew's lingering eyes but absent touches to the captain's hands tightly around her wrists with nothing but scorn in his gaze. There was the ghost of a sneer curling his lip that evening when he stalked over the creaking planks of wood and retaught her what it meant to feel someone else's touch, and she finally learned why it was that the crew were so distant from her. She was a ghost to them, but not the captain. He was a terrifying man that none could look in the eyes for more than the one glimpse needed to see his flaming gaze, the eyes that scared and burnt and scarred any who looked for longer.

The girl had not known the eyes could become even more ravenous until the following morning, when she reemerged from the captain's quarters. The crew touched her now, though they did not steal her away like that one hectic night which brought her onto this ship in the first

place. They jostled and startled her, pulled her by her arms and slung too-heavy hands on her waist. When the captain appeared, they would slink back to work, and she would hide in the shadow of the mast, clutching her tattered skirts and tangled hair and hoping she would not hear the telltale whine of wood coming closer.

Perhaps it was so as not to damn another to her fate. Perhaps it was because she did not want to be forsaken again, left in another place that would treat her unkindly. Perhaps it was because the ship was the one haven she had in the middle of the sea. She did not know why, but the following morning, she ate before the crew rose. She combed through her hair with her fingers as she hid in what shade she could find, choking back gasps and whines of pain when they caught unforgivingly on snarls and knots. When the sun became too much to handle, she snuck below deck, slinking through abducted trunks in search of clothes that would fit her.

When she returned to the deck, the girl was met with a shout of, “Mer off the starboard side!” Every last one of the crew swarmed over to the railing of the ship, straining their necks to catch a glimpse. She was easily able to make her way to the bow, behind the backs of each and every pirate, and find her own careful spot away from the rest of them.

She was not the only one to gasp when they caught the shimmer of a crimson tail, dazzling in the sunlight and diamond spray of the water twinkling around the place the mermaid had broken the surface. As she dove back down, two more leapt into the air, one with a tail of a rich emerald and the other, a merman, a silver the same shade as the stars. They were extraordinary. They were ethereal. “What I wouldn’t give to have one of them lasses up here with us,” one sailor sighed.

It suddenly dawned on the pirates that they had a woman on board with them. She could not even hope to compare to the beauty of the mermaids beyond when she wore tattered rags and

had sunken, terrified eyes. But they gasped again when their heads turned, to look at the creature with them instead of below the waves. Their eyes found her as elegant as the creatures beyond their ship. She had found a dress amidst their loot the same color as the sea surrounding them, that dipped and rippled and nearly seemed to enrobe her with the very waters around their vessel. She'd done what she could to restore the elegance she'd had before her life on the sea, trapped by bandits on the one spot of land for miles.

The eyes that had become bored whenever they saw her now instantly sharpened. "Seems we have our own mermaid," one of them mused, with a dripping voice and ravenous gaze that clawed and devoured. It was incredibly lucky for her to have appeared as beautiful as she could that day. If she hadn't, she was certain she would be in the waves with the ocean's maidens, drowning in place of their playing. Yet that evening, when she heard the creaking of wood come up behind her, her heart pounded as though she'd been shoved off the plank regardless as the captain dragged her back to his cabin.

Long ago, on the rare nights she was left alone, when the captain did not come for her and the crew did not play with her in his absence, the girl would weep for the life she never had, for the place in the world meant for her that did not exist. Now, she stayed at the edge of the ship, watching the waves crash and whisper beyond her reach. Perhaps the creatures would be kinder, she found herself thinking. Even though the sea would be cold and endless monsters lurked underneath their glimmering surface, the mermaids lived. For a place to be capable of creating something as beautiful as they, surely it had to have some speck of kindness. Perhaps not for her, though. She had always been told to avoid the water at a young age. Perhaps it was because she was not a mermaid, and she did not belong in yet another place.

More and more, the girl found herself looking at the waters. When the shadow of the mast and canvas stretched to the bow of the ship, she would curl up there, watching the white spray of the sea crash against the ship. She would gaze out at the emerald-blue horizon beyond when a crewmate's eyes beheld her, hoping, praying that perhaps another mermaid would appear and the pirates would look at it instead. When the whine of wood came closer, creaking step after step towards her to make the hair on the back of her neck raise and bristle, she would take one last look at the twinkling sea beyond, so beautifully black and reflecting the moon and stars onto their surface.

She was getting bolder on those nights and days when no one paid much attention to her. She would get closer to the railing, lean further over the planks meant to keep her safe and dry and above the water, watching the roil and ripple and crash and sway of the waves churning to make glittering white foam for the ship to pierce through. There was a day when she almost fell in, before the hand of the captain wrapped around her hip, her shoulder, and hoisted her back to the protection of the splintering deck that cast small daggers of wood into her skin. She'd never found another pair of shoes after the ones she'd kicked off and lost in her panic the day she'd been captured. No one had the thought of finding her any, not even herself. She was taken to the captain's quarters that night, and emerged with a swollen cheek bruised purple. She knew not to lean too far over the side anymore, or the crew would stare and jeer and tell the captain what she'd done.

As she stepped into the rowboat one night to clean it, something creaked. She had not paid attention, because the ship always groaned and whined on nights like this, when the full moon was a white pearl in the sea of the sky. She'd been foolish not to realize the ropes were not secure. She had sworn they were before she carefully swung herself into the smaller vessel. But a

few seconds later, she nearly screamed as she felt her stomach lurch to her throat as the waves that had been so far away sped up to meet her.

The rowboat hit the water with a splash, jolting the girl and making her fall harshly on her palms. She had never realized how high up the deck of the ship had been from the sea until now, after the hiss of pain dulled enough to let her look up without tears smartening her eyes. She was far away from the faint glow of the lantern now, plunged into darkness only the moon and stars illuminated.

She nearly screamed again when she saw two glowing eyes peering at her from the inky sea to her right. Her body tensed as they came closer, knowing she could not run away since she would tip the boat and was so far from the deck above. The eyes rose higher, and more of a face she could now see was humanlike emerged from the waters.

The girl nearly gasped, though she had no air in her petrified lungs to breathe. It was a mermaid, she thought, as she saw the fins in place of ears peeking out from obsidian hair. Its body looked more animalistic up close now that she could see more of the creature beyond just the sparkle of its tail. It had markings on the side of its face, its neck, and a long scar that spanned from the corner of its jaw to the bridge of its nose.

“Are you alright?” the creature asked, and the girl nearly swooned as she heard its voice. It was melodic, enchanting, the combination of all the lullabies of the world wrapped in the most lovely sound to ever grace the world. It made her want to beg and plead to just hear one more word. The creature had to say the words again for the girl to hear beyond just the sound of its words, and she nodded. But that made the sea-maiden frown, making the girl’s heart drop with it. “Are you truly?” The girl caught a glimpse of its tail as the creature shifted, and even in the dim

light, she could see that it was not one that sparkled. It did not have iridescent scales, but a tail that was sleek and slippery and dark. “The messengers brought us here,” she told her softly.

*Us.* The girl noticed it then. The waters all around the ship had spots which glowed a beautiful blue-green. They flickered and darted throughout the sea, the push and pull of the waves bringing them closer to the wood, to each other. The only place they were not was next to her and the sea-maiden that did not glow. “They brought us to you,” she said, softly, quietly, and the girl turned back to look at her. It was beautiful, the girl found herself thinking again. “How long have you been at sea?”

She opened her mouth to speak. But no voice left her throat as she thought and thought but could not answer. The days and nights had blended together into an endless cycle of hungry eyes and clawing hands and creaking wood. And yet, the creature seemed to understand. “Were you trying to escape?” it whispered.

Here was a creature here so beautiful, so wonderfully deadly, yet listening to her so intently that the girl wondered if she was kind. “I am alone,” the girl admitted, in the softest of whispers. She had never said this, even though the entirety of her soul knew this to be true. “I have nowhere to go.”

The creature swam closer, putting clawed hands on the side of the ship. The girl was drawn to her. There was nothing but understanding in its eyes. There was no hunger, no yearning, no lust, which had become all the girl had known. There was not even pity. “What is your name?” the creature asked, so terribly kind.

No one had asked the girl that since she had gone to sea. She had almost forgotten it after so long without even so much as thinking it. When the girl told the sea-maiden her name, she did so in the quietest of voices, in the sigh of a whisper. And yet, the creature heard it. She spoke the

name in the same voice the girl had used, and the girl's heart quivered and nearly stopped beating when she heard it again. It was as though she was being reborn, awakening from a thousand-year slumber to blossom into life again.

"Would you like to go with me?" the sea-maiden asked, and the girl's heart did stop this time.

She wanted that more than anything. She wanted to have a place, and after the way the creature had spoken her name like a timeless incantation, she felt like that place was with *her*. But—"They will steal another," she told it, in a voice that quivered and told just how much she desired to say *yes*.

The creature smiled. Gently, so gently, her inky-black claws reached up. The girl did not tense when they touched a strand of her hair. It twirled between her fingers like silk. "They will not," the sea-maiden promised, and the girl believed her. "We'll make certain of that."

Wood whined and creaked. The girl could not hear it over the gentle lapping of the waves, the kindness of the sea-maiden, the thudding of her own heart. She had promised. The girl wanted to believe her. She *did* believe her. She wanted to go into the sea and be as beautiful as the creature, as free and as strong as the ocean maiden. "Come with me," it pleaded, offering the girl the one thing in the world she wanted. "Let us set you free."

She was sinking back into the water. The girl followed, forgetting the hands of the captain hauling her back over the railing of the ship that told her to pull back. She could not stay in the boat. The sea awaited. "I don't know how to swim," she admitted, nearly weeping as she did. She could be free, if only she would not drown.

And yet, the siren smiled again. "We will teach you," she answered. She cupped the girl's face, took the girl's hand, and her cool hands did not slice or tear or hurt. It was the first time that



the girl had been *touched*, not grabbed. It was gentle and sweet and kind. The girl cried now, dropping salty tears into the sea so close now, as she chased after her. They fell from eyes that were the same color as the ocean, watching as the markings on the siren in front of her began to glow, too.

The girl slipped into the waves, leaving only the abandoned boat and the rippling reflection of the full moon in her wake. And the singing began soon after, remorselessly luring the ship to a sea that would not embrace them.