

It was dark in the hull of the ship. The stairs creaked and groaned as she descended, candle-flame dancing in her hand. The shadows encroached softly around her, swirling in forms reminiscent of the depths over which their grand ship travelled yet. Monsters lurked in those depths, they said, in hushed tales told over gin in the seaside pubs: of great tentacled things hungry for the secrets of a surface world from which they had been so infinitely removed, of trickster-beasts which masqueraded as whales, waiting for the harpoon to come only to snatch away the hunters' souls, of the lonely ghosts of drowned sailors seeking more for their ranks. Stories only ever spoken while on land, of course. It was bad luck to harbour such ideas at sea—speak of the devil and he shalt appear, after all.

Maria selected the crate she was looking for and popped the lid with a *thunk* before returning the crowbar to its hook on the wall. As she lifted a bottle from the crate she couldn't help but imagine the sweet smell of the wine, sharp and pungent, filling the air. She probably couldn't have any—the captain asked for the bottle to be brought up to her quarters to share with her guest, a foreign diplomat who was travelling with them—but it was tempting to imagine the taste of it on her tongue.

As she did, memory flicked through her mind, of warm sun filtering through the autumn leaves, dappled light oozing onto a picnic blanket, and the two bodies sprawled in tender repose upon it...*mierda*. It's not like she hadn't felt this before—every journey was the same. But still she missed her. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind of it, but it wouldn't work. Still those tender lips clung to hers, that phantom hand clutched her own, those bright eyes twinkled with stories...she couldn't move on. It was so hard to be out here, at sea, miles and miles away from the woman she loved, but work was work, and they needed the coin. After this trip, her contract would be over, and she would finally have saved up enough to buy her own ship, and they would be married upon it, and sail away to their future together... She couldn't stay on land, of course—the sea was her first love, but to captain her own vessel, with her beloved by her side! That was the dream. A dream soon to be reality, if all went right. The captain would have to find another first officer, of course, but she was supportive of the endeavour. She had even generously offered Maria a small loan toward her ship, but Maria had refused—she was already indebted to the captain for all the years she had cared for her and offered her work. This was something she wanted to do of her own accord.

She set the bottle down, closed the crate once more, then paused. A steady *scritch-scratch* noise sounded from somewhere in the dark. Strange noises, bumps and creaks and whispers, were far from absent on a ship at sea, but she knew this ship like her childhood hometown, every board and nail—and this was a *new* noise. Her mind circled the possibilities like an eagle its prey: A stowaway? A trapped animal? Something broken in the cargo? In any case, she didn't have time to go searching now. The hold was big, and she didn't want to keep the

captain and her guest waiting. Best search in the morning. Whatever it was, they would take care of it.

The sky was shimmering and starry as she entered the upper decks. There were still a few sailors on duty on the night shift, but the seas were good, the weather clear, so most were getting their rest in preparation for the undoubtedly difficult journey to come. The captain's office and officers' quarters were a roomy affair located at the stern, and a golden light shone from the windows, glowing into the blue night. The door swung open smoothly in front of her as she entered.

"Ah, Maria. Did you bring the wine? Good vintage, I promise?"

"You know it is, Miss. That's why we're shipping it."

The captain just chuckled, in her formidable, sultry, voice. "Mr. Azlo here was telling me the most splendid tale about his days spent as court zookeeper for the King of Parla—why don't you join us? I can have the cook bring up another plate for you."

"I appreciate that, Miss, but I've already eaten, and I really should get some rest," she lied. "I'll leave you and your guest alone." She took a little bow toward the two of them.

A nod. "Alright. Sleep well then."

"Oh, and—" She leaned in so the diplomat wouldn't overhear. "—incidentally, we may have a stowaway. I'll get a few of the sailors to check it out in the morning, but I heard some noises while I was down in the hold."

Another nod. "Well noted, Maria. Please do."

She retreated from the light of the cabin. It's not that she didn't want to dine with them—in fact, most nights she would have, but there was something on her mind. She wandered up to the bow of the ship, eliciting a few nods of acknowledgement from the sailors as she passed. These sailors...they were like family to her, really. And this was to be her last journey with them all. They knew it, of course—word had spread of her plans. It was no secret that it had long been her aspiration to have her own ship, and that was largely why she had worked so hard up the chain of command here. It was a shame she would have to find her own crew when she jumped ship. She would miss many of them, of course, and the bonds formed between them, but it was also exhilarating to be on the precipice of something new.

She leaned against a gunwale and watched the black water as the ship cut through it. Their figurehead, a statue of Loa, goddess of fair winds and patron of sailors, billowed forth from the bow, heralding them forth. The winds stirred Maria's hair, as if the goddess herself had reached down and ruffled it like a proud mother watching over her. Maria brought out her necklace—a little pendant of green seaglass on a brass chain. Adela had given it to her many years ago now, to remember her by on these long, lonely, journeys. When she held it just right, to catch the moonlight, it seemed to glow with its own rippling iridescence, like looking up at the

sun from underwater. She always loved that; it reminded her of Adela's eyes, curious and bright. It was beautiful.

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"Come on, slowpoke!" Adela cried out as she hurried down the gravel path to the beach. Adela's white dress billowed in the wind as she ran, and Maria smiled. As much as she would love to, Maria did *not* have the capacity to 'come on', as she was the one carrying the umbrella *and* picnic basket *and* blanket.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Maria replied, with a chuckle.

It was one of her rare free weeks ashore, in a lull between work, and they were making the most of it in a little rented cottage just outside the city limits. They set up their blanket in the lee of a bare cliff, jutting out into the sea. The grey sky rendered the umbrella fully unnecessary, so it was left discarded to one side. They sat there a time, feet bare in the sand, held in each others's arms, sharing warmth. Maria looked out over the horizon. It was a cool day—unpleasant enough that they were the only beachgoers—but they had to carve out these moments when they could. It was better than nothing.

"Sometimes I think you love the sea more than me," Adela said, ostensibly teasing, but with an undertone of wistfulness.

Maria turned back to her. "Well, yes. I can't help that." She brushed Adela's hair behind her ears and held her face gently in both hands, gazing deep into her eyes. "But I don't fear you."

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The next morning Maria gathered two of the sailors to help her search the hold for their stowaway. It would take some time to root out every possible hideaway among the cargo, so she was glad for the aid. They hung a couple lanterns to illuminate as much of the hold at once as possible, and split up, each sweeping over a different area. They had dealt with stowaways before, so it was clear what they were looking for: any sign of movement, anything else out of the ordinary that might signal the presence of an intruder. And Maria soon noted just the thing: a crate with the lid knocked loose, buried in behind a few others which had been savagely pushed away like something burrowed out from between them. The lidless crate was about an arm-span across, and half her height. Had someone been hiding inside? Usually a stowaway would try to stay hidden as long as possible—why had they pushed out so soon in the journey? Furthermore, they must have been terribly strong to displace the other crates like that; it usually took two able-bodied sailors to carry just one. Nonetheless, that crate would certainly be big enough to hold a person. She clambered over the displaced cargo to take a closer look.

The crate contained a heap of scrap metal, mostly rods, but thick—at least an inch in diameter, and heavily welded at the joints. Had this been a cage? It was in tatters now; many of the bars were twisted and even torn in violent fashion. She didn't remember anything like this

on the cargo manifest—it looked almost like the sort of cage an exotic animal might be kept in. How did it end up on board? Any hazardous cargo should have gone through her. Who could have—her train of thought was interrupted by one of the sailors, crying out in surprise.

“¡Joder!” The young man’s name was Rami, and he had just joined them just a few months prior.

“What is it? Did you find something?” Maria turned, but the far corner of the hold, and whatever it was the sailor could see, was hidden from view by his body.

Rami was still for a moment, face pale in the dim light, then spoke shakily, “M—Miss, I think you’d better see this.”

She clambered back over the crates and approached, placing a hand on the man’s shoulder to maneuver past him. And then she saw it too, and froze. “Heridas de la Diosa...”

Stuffed away into the corner was what must have once been a body. Where the gore was thin enough to see beneath, the boards of the hull were filled with deep gouges, violent marks of some inhuman claws. There was no chance at recognizing the person now, her face mutilated as it was, but surely her absence from the crew would be noted soon enough. *It must have happened just before I came down here. That noise... Maybe I could have done something last night. If only I had—I could have saved her.* Maria ran a hand through her hair, pushing it away from her face, trying to calm her manic expression.

“What *did this*?” Maria asked, to herself, to the universe, to an uncaring sea.

The sailor covered his mouth with a hand. “Do you think it’s still aboard?”

“We should certainly act as though it is.”

The other woman had joined them now, a more experienced sailor and a good friend of Maria’s by the name of Sónia, a tall and strong woman with sepia-dark skin. She too stood rapt in horror.

Maria addressed her, “It struck at night last time, but that’s no guarantee it’ll do the same again. Don’t tell anyone about this yet, but warn the crew not to let anyone go off on their own right now. I’ll inform the captain. Keep an eye on Rami, okay?”

Sónia nodded slowly, seeming to barely register her words with her gaze locked on the carnage, but Maria knew she understood. Maria tore her eyes away from the scene, and marched above decks. The captain was standing by her wheel at the stern, speaking with their navigator, Neris, and gazing off into the sea.

“Captain.” Maria tried to get her attention.

“Ah, Maria. Just a moment.”

“No, Miss. This is important.”

“Oh?” The captain turned, seeming surprised.

Maria's gaze was stone and fear, her tone serious. "It's not a stowaway—it's a monster. And it's killed one of the crew already."

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The captain had decided to be candid with her crew about the threat; it doesn't pay to keep too many secrets from your sailors. They get restless. Better to know the danger, and let them direct their worry toward the enemy than ferment distrust toward their captain. Every member of the crew gathered on the main deck, within shouting distance. The captain stood upon a crate before her crew, cutting a heroic figure, and made her announcement:

"Sailors! I'll cut to the chase. We have a beast aboard. I've seen the carnage it's caused myself, one already dead at its claws. Furthermore, as Navigator Neris informs me, we are soon to be travelling through Alcans' Rift, and will have to contend with its fury. We will reach its borders by nightfall tomorrow."

A nervous murmur passed through the crowd.

"But we shall prevail! Remember yourselves: we have braved the Rift before, and shall do so again! We have hunted whales and kraken, made combat with pirates, fought mighty storms! What are we?"

A rousing cheer: "Sailors! Children of Loa!"

"We are sailors, and we will not back down! We shall root out the creature and take vengeance upon it—I will not allow another of our siblings to die so ruthlessly! There are only so many places such a creature could hide on this ship; I will pick some of you to search it out. As for the rest—if you see anything out of the ordinary, raise the alarm, and we shall defeat this terror. And when we reach the Rift, we'll dispatch the creature overboard and let Alcans' fury destroy it. May Loa's swift winds guide us!"

Another cheer, now determined: "Swift winds!"

They gathered ten of their strongest, all hardened sailors with lifetimes of experience—past the point of naive youth, but before age started to make them weak. Sónia was among them, as well as a bushy-bearded man by the name of Montserrat.

Montserrat spoke, "What exactly are we looking for?"

"You'll know when you see it. This beast is nothing small," Sónia replied.

With that, they led the group into the lower decks to begin the search, all armed with oil lanterns, knives, pistols, rope. Maria had ordered them to split into twos to cover the most area—if they were lucky, they could discover and subdue the creature before the storm hit.

Maria had a few other sailors help her gather the remains of the creature's cage, and to rearrange the cargo to be tightly packed and secure once more. Now, she sat in the corner of the hold, considering how it could have ended up aboard. She was personally in charge of overseeing loading—she should have known immediately if something like this was put on. Was

there anything out of the ordinary this trip? Come to think of it, she was sure that ‘diplomat’, Azlo, had loaded some personal effects... Had the crate with the beast been a part of those? She looked at the cargo manifest. There it was, three crates had been loaded on his behalf. All three had supposedly contained clothing and ‘gifts’—the captain had forbid her from checking their contents, for fear of angering the man. He had power, she had said. She would never disobey the captain, but still she cursed herself for not checking them. Beside the label on the manifest was his personal stamp, in purple ink. She picked up a fragment of the shattered crate. And there, upon the wood, was the same purple stamp. She knew it.

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Azlo was in the officers’ quarters, sitting upon the cot he had been so generously lent for the journey, and preening himself in front of a hand-mirror. He did not look up as she approached.

“You’ve heard the news about the beast, then?” Maria asked coldly.

“Oh, yes. Terrifying, isn’t it? I’m sure you’ll be dealing with it?” He still did not look up, completely focussed on adjusting a stray strand of hair in the mirror.

She knocked the mirror out of his hand, and it shattered on the floor. “Don’t play coy with me. I know what you’ve done.”

He finally looked up, with wide eyes, and spoke back shakily. “You cannot treat me like this! I am—”

Her voice rose as she spoke. “No me jodas. I don’t care if you’re a diplomat, or a prince, or even a king. None of that means a damn thing at sea—that crate was part of your personal effects. I know you put the beast aboard, and nobody endangers my crew like that! Nobody.” She grabbed the arrogant man by his shirt, and pushed him up against the wall.

He raised his hands. “Fine, fine! I’m sorry! Look, I didn’t lie on the manifest, okay? It *was* supposed to be a gift, for the Queen of Makva.”

Maria shook her head angrily. “Your apologies change nothing, pendejo. It’s already aboard with us. Do you have no idea what you’ve caused?” She gritted her teeth. “Do you know anything of what that beast can do? Where it might be hiding?”

The man cowered. “I don’t know. I wasn’t even the one who captured it, it was a hunter that gifted it to me a month ago.”

She pressed him.

“I don’t, I swear!”

“Ugh. Fine. Just stay out of our way, then, while we solve this mess *you* made.” With no more patience for the man, she shoved him, roughly, and turned to leave. They had a lot of work to do before the storm hit.

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The storm clouds congealed to blot out the horizon, seething and roiling like the flesh on a burning corpse, bringing a stench in the air and curses on its tongue. The sea before them was consumed by its shadow, the once gentle waves becoming slicing fins in its wake.

Alcans' Rift—a narrow strait where the continent had split in two, leaving as its scar a preternaturally deep trench, walled in by steep cliffs and rocky spires. It was also, unfortunately, the only known passage to the Liranese Ocean. In the mythology, Alcans was the scorned younger brother of Loa, and his fury, manifest in the ceaseless storm which guarded the Rift, had been the bane of sailors for eternity. Churning air, brimming with lightning and violent winds, crashing waves ready to tear any ship limb from mast—and their whirlpool-kin, lying in wait to devour the remains; these had for many a century been too much for most any to traverse. But with the invention of the stormcompass a decade prior, it had finally become navigable, and trade with the west was most lucrative. The captain prided herself on them being one of the few ships equipped with a stormcompass, and with a crew skilled enough to use it effectively.

Its bulk sat at the stern, at the very back of the quarterdeck from which the captain commanded. The whirring and clicking machinery was attended to by their navigator. Maria wasn't skilled enough in such mechanical applications to really understand it, but the navigator had been kind enough to give her a tour of the stormcompass when they installed it a few years prior. Neris said that it was powered much like a watch, with a wound spring that moved the rest of the machinery, except that the spring itself was automatically wound by a series of oscillating weights which moved with the heave and sway of the ship when in motion. The apparatus then spun a collection of magnets which supposedly worked to detect fluctuations in the charge of the atmosphere, signalling where and when lightning was gathering, and therefore where the most active parts of the storm were. Or something like that. Maria wasn't clear on exactly *what* it did, but by the navigator's readings of the dials on the front of the machine, supplemented by visual readings of the sea conditions from the lookouts stationed in the crow's nest, a path through the weaker parts of the storm could be found.

In theory, at least. It had worked for them before—they had braved the Rift more than once in the past few years, at least running enough cargo to pay off the installation of the stormcompass. But it was hard to say how much it really did for them; how much was skilled passage versus blind luck, attributable to the sense of confidence having the machinery gave them? Maria had never known how to feel about this new technology. Neris and the captain were certainly awed by it, but she couldn't feel the same way, especially without having a clear understanding of the technical functioning. Could it really be trusted?

Besides, even with the stormcompass it was never an easy passage. The actual, intensive, labour of controlling the ship still lay on the sailors, to whom Maria was in charge of relaying commands during storm-passages.

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She shouted over the already-rising winds as the front approached, “Batten down the hatches! Reef the mainsails! Prepare the storm jibs!” Then Maria cast a dire glance around the main deck, considering every step in their practiced storm preparation regimen. The cargo was already secured, the cook’s fires doused, there was just one piece missing—

Sónia’s voice cried out from the lower decks, “The beast was hiding in the ballast tanks! Tenemos el cabrón!”

The two sailors who had been in the process of tying down the hatch were launched prone as Sónia and Montserrat wrestled the creature through the cargo hatchway. Sónia was covered in bloody gashes, gore dripping down her arms as she strained to control the creature squirming in her grip. Montserrat was leading it with a noose tied around what must have been its neck—the creature’s strangely human eyes sat in sunken sockets staring over his shoulder. Once its full size emerged from the hatchway, Maria gasped. Its body, which bulged and twisted with what must have been incredible strength, was easily as tall as a man. It had a long tapered fin, which exposed itself under Sónia’s arm, and four short legs, which looked like they’d be just as good at driving it over land as they would be paddling through water. Its tail dragged behind them on the hull stairs, thrashing back and forth wildly—where it struck, the wood splintered. When it opened its maw to release a tinny screech, it exposed rows upon rows of jagged saw-like teeth, which sliced hungrily at the sea air.

The sound of the waves lapping against the hull beat a fast and steady drum. Sailors scrambled out of their way as the two dragged the squirming beast past the centre mast and into a free space before the quarterdeck. The captain looked down on them in hatred and triumph, the setting sun limning her in savage red. She drew her rifle and aimed it squarely between the creature’s eyes. As finger tightened on the trigger, she spoke, with a voice of pure acid:

“Nobody, agent of man nor creature of sin, hurts my crew. Vile beast.”

And then the storm hit.

The ship rolled sideways in the sudden violent burst of wind. The heel unbalanced the captain, and her shot careened off into the air, striking one of the sailors in a bloody conflagration instead. She steadied herself and redoubled her efforts, her face contorting in fury, firing shot after shot into the creature. To any of the others, the woman must have seemed an embodiment of pure rage, but Maria saw that there was something else in her eyes—fear. She

had never seen the captain so afraid. She was the most steadfast person Maria had ever known, a paragon of focus and stoicism, in the face of *any* odds. What was it about this creature that inspired such terror in her?

In any case, it was too late. The shots bit into the creature, leaking green ichor across the deck, but somehow the beast had *changed*. In the howling of the storm, it was still, calm even, and didn't respond to what should have been fatal damage. Maria wondered for a moment if it *was* dead but was rapidly proven wrong as it, impossibly, began to *grow*.

"Throw it overboard! *Now!*" The captain roared.

Sónia and Montserrat, both having been hit in the crossfire of her reckless rain of bullets, staggered forward in response, and were weak under the bulk of the now-huge beast. All watched on in horror as its limbs multiplied, four to eight, then twelve, and its tail and back fins lengthened and sharpened. It was as if it was fed by the power of the storm. It shook off Sónia, leaving her winded and prone on the rain-slick deck, then it stood, on two limbs and balanced with its huge tail. The rope of the noose snapped as it flexed its neck, twisting savagely to place Montserrat's head and shoulders between its jaws.

As the sickening crunch sounded out, Maria snatched up her pistol in one hand, sword in the other, and leapt into action. Two of the braver sailors joined her, throwing looped ropes around its neck to hold it captive once more, though even their strength seemed to do little to halt the beast's motion. It turned towards Maria, a bloody grin painted across its face, hollowed eyes staring through her, and in turning, its fins sliced through the standing rigging supposed to support the central mast. The few riggers who had managed to hold on when the storm hit were still in the process of pulling in the main sails as Maria had ordered, and when their lines snapped they had no hope of holding on, being sent careening through the darkening air. A few screamed as the waves took them. Most didn't have time, or were silenced by the howling storm. When the next gust of wind came, the half-furled sails caught it, and the unsupported mast strained against the incredible leverage. And then it snapped.

It came crashing down, an avalanche of whipping cables smashing into the gunwales with an ear-shattering noise. It had splintered about a third of the way up, and the top now dragged in the water, causing the ship to list steeply portside. Immediately, the captain was alive, throwing down her empty gun and grabbing the wheel to wrench the ship back to as level a position as possible.

She cried out over the winds, "Get the axes! Cut the mast loose!"

The sailors obeyed immediately, arming themselves with the axes kept in the tool chest at the bow, and scrambling across the deck to hack at the remaining stays attaching the central mast. As they worked, it flapped in the winds, crashing against the side of the ship repeatedly with a thunderous crunching before finally coming free and sliding away into the waves. The

creature seemed agitated by the motion of their labour, and lunged its towering form forward to snatch up a couple more of the sailors in its jaws. Sónia, still prone behind the creature, drove her knife into its tail, but then released, her last energy spent, as it crushed her under its bulk.

With the dragging of the mast now gone, the ship overcorrected to starboard, sending Maria sliding across the deck, directly towards the beast's jaws. She leapt, kicking off to send herself soaring through the air, and aimed her pistol straight down to fire three shots into its mouth before she made contact, with her sturdy boots kicking directly into the monster's neck. It sounded another shrill screech as she did so, bringing one of its limbs up to slap at her and throw her off. But she wasn't going that easy. She wrapped her legs around its neck, holding fast between her thighs, and drove her sword viciously into the centre of its forehead. Then, she leaned into the tilting of the ship, trying to unbalance the monster.

It worked a little too well. The beast's now top-heavy mass fell, slipped across the slick boards, and tumbled toward the roiling waves. With Maria still very much attached. She let go, trying to extricate herself, but dropped her sword in the process. Reaching out for something to catch her fall, she managed to grab on one of the stays attached to the aft mast. She held on for dear life, swinging wildly as the ship righted itself, then crashed back down into the main deck. With the impact she heard a pop in her shoulder and a fiery pain shot through her upper body, but that was a worry for later. Her heart pumped like a dynamo, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She did it! The crew let out a triumphant cheer as they saw the battered creature go overboard. But their fight wasn't over yet. Even with the beast gone, they still had Alcans to contend with.

"The storm's intensifying ahead! Turn 30 degrees north!" Neris, still active at the control panel of the stormcompass called out, and the captain obeyed.

She turned the wheel while she shouted savagely, "Excellent, Maria!"

Maria shot the captain a grin. "We'll make it yet!" No time for her to rest, though. She got to her feet, not wanting to let the adrenaline fade, and cradling her dislocated arm as she did. She called out for the ship's medic immediately. The man arose from the lower decks in haste, hair up in a ponytail, medical kit in hand.

"Your arm, can I—"

"No, I'm fine for now. Get to her first," She ordered, pointing at Sónia with her good arm, and wincing through the pain as the injured one fell to her side. Sónia still lay bloodied and beaten from her combat with the beast, near the base of the now-shattered central mast, and at the sight of her unconscious body, the man obeyed.

"We're taking on water!" A voice called out.

Mierda. The mast must have punched a hole in the side, Maria thought. “Get more hands on the pumps!” She took a deep breath and steeled herself, ready to do whatever it took to keep pushing them to safety.

Thankfully, with the beast gone, the crew was able put their skills to good work. Maria watched, ordering here and there, offering what physical aid she could, until finally they found a stable path through the storm. It was a struggle as always, but they would make it—she was sure of that fact now.

As soon as there was a lull in activity, she was at Sónia’s side. The medic had pulled her into the officers’ quarters at the aft, out of the pouring rain and scurrying of sailors, and she was now at rest. She lay upon a cot in the corner, still unconscious, and when Maria looked over her dormant form she almost entirely forgot the heave and sway of the ship in the storm, the creaking of the boards, the shouts of the crew—the world held still for her. The vicious lacerations Sónia had taken upon her arms and the side of her torso had been taken care of: rubbed with ointment and wrapped securely with pure white bandages. Overall, she was bruised, battered, but alive. The medic informed Maria, while he set her shoulder, that Sónia had likely cracked a few ribs where the creature had crushed her, but she would have time to recuperate when they reached port. They would have to leave her in a hospital, and it would be months before she would be able to sail again. But she would heal. Taking a seat beside her, Maria clasped her hand in hers, and held it to her lips. This woman had been sister, friend, mentor, and more to her for years—she had been by her side ever since Maria began serving on the *Oath’s Defiance*. Sónia had taught her so much, saved her countless times, from the sea and from herself. The compassion and strength she held, the way she cared for and protected others dauntlessly—she was truly irreplaceable. *Gracias a Diosa que estas bien, amiga mía.*

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The docks were busy that day, towering ships glowing in the sun. The tall woman grabbed Maria by the hand and shook it. She radiated warmth like a lantern-wick, blinding and unwavering.

“The name’s Sónia, a senior crewmember here on the *Oath’s Defiance*. It’s a pleasure to welcome you aboard, Miss Torres.”

“Please, call me Maria. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sónia. I look forward to serving as best I can.” She couldn’t help but beam at the woman.

“You have previous experience under Captain Fisgard, yes?”

Maria nodded.

“Splendid man, I’m sure he taught you well. We manage things a little differently here than on his ship, and most ships for that matter—the captain can be a little unconventional—but I’m sure you’ll pick things up quickly.”

Three weeks later, Maria's maiden voyage upon the *Oath's Defiance* was complete, and the crew were carousing in a foreign port by the name of Halborn. They had brought a shipment of glass by commission for a local merchant, and having dropped it off and received their pay, were now set on squandering much of that pay in a pub by the docks identified only by a crude image of a squid holding a tankard of beer upon its wooden sign. The whole crew were gathered around a few round tables pushed together in one corner, celebrating another successful journey. The captain had bought everyone a round, then after a few accolades, had quietly left to be alone in the night air. Maria was feeling quite welcome, having already made a few close friends among the crew. She was sitting next to Sónia, and leaned in to speak to her.

"Of all the crew, you've known the captain longest, right?"

"That's right."

"Could you tell me a bit about her? I'm just curious. She doesn't seem to open up about her past much."

Sónia looked thoughtful for a moment, likely considering where to start. "Well, we served together in the royal navy before she took up mercantile sailing. That was for much of our youth...I believe she ran away from her family young, joined the navy so she would have a place to belong. I've always suspected that she lied about her age to get in—it doesn't seem it, but she's a year or two younger than me, you know. Anyway, back then we were quite different. I never had her ambition for leadership, had only ever joined because my father wanted 'glory for the family' and all that, and, honestly, partly just wanted rid of me." A sigh. She paused, then continued. "I used to hate it, to be honest, but I found things to love at sea, and you know what they say about sailing—"

Maria spoke in unison with her. "Once you get salt in your veins, the ocean never leaves you?"

"Yeah. Exactly." Sónia grinned. "Anyway, the captain and I we got along, mostly since we were kids at the time and both needed something to cling to. She rose through the ranks and eventually got placed as first officer on a frigate, sent to the front against Parla. Then I lost track of her—I was sent with a campaign across the Southern Reaches and we just couldn't keep in touch. News did get to me however, that her ship had been in the Battle of Lantin—"

"*She* was in the Battle of Lantin?" Maria cut her off with a disbelieving whisper. "How did she survive? They say not a single ship made it out from either side, and trickster-beasts devoured the scraps."

"I truly wish I could tell you. For a time I assumed she hadn't, and tried to come to terms with that. But then a couple years later there it was—a letter in my hand, inviting me to serve on the ship she had just bought. I had retired from the navy myself then, my mandatory service

after the academy being done, and was trying to settle down with a job on land. But ah, who was I kidding, when I got that letter I jumped at the chance to sail again. It was strange, though. She was never the same after those years between. She used to be so outgoing, warm even, but it's like something hardened in her. Something must have happened to her, but I don't know what. She's never talked to me about it and to be honest I've never asked—but I do see a certain darkness in her eyes sometimes.”

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That same darkness flickered in the corner around where Sónia rested. A small dish sat by the side of the bed, holding the captain's bullets that had been extricated from her flesh by the medic's deft hands. The ship rocked in a gale, and they rattled against the ceramic. Two bullets removed, and another wound where the shot had gone right through her shoulder. What the hell had the captain been thinking, firing directly into her crew like that? *No*, Maria realized, *she wasn't thinking*, and then remembered the terror she had seen in her eyes. To do such a thing to her own crewmembers so blindly, she must have been consumed by it, totally lost to her fear. Why? There was something deeper here that Maria couldn't yet see, and she knew it. Did the captain have history with that creature? She waited there still holding Sónia's hand for a few moments, lost in thought. Then it struck her all at once. There was something the captain had said once:

“There was...a promise made to me, a lifetime ago. And me running this ship, every moment I spend on the sea, well, it lives in defiance of that promise. I don't know how long it'll last. But that's why I named it that, *Oath's Defiance*.”

Maria had heard in the stories of dark pacts with creatures of the depths, bargains made in moments of desperation, secret dealings that haunted those who made them for the rest of their borrowed lives. An oath the captain made...could that be it? She could see it now in her mind's eye: the captain drowning in the waves, her ship and crew lost in cannon-fire and teeth, the devouring maw of the Battle of Lantin from which not a single board or nail returned. And the creature, meeting her in the depths. An oath: new life in exchange for the promise of demise and a price paid in blood and soul. Could it be the very same creature, hunting her down to finally collect the toll? Or at least, did she think it was? That would certainly explain her terror. But they had dispatched it—either way the captain was free of it now, or *for* now. Maria knew you couldn't kill a myth for long. It would be back—if not on this journey, then another.

The door to the officers' quarters was flung open, and the rain swept in behind the sailor who stood there. Maria jumped up immediately, ready for action.

“We're sinking. Fast—something punched a hole in the hull.”

Fuck.

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By the time she arrived on deck, they were already readying the lifeboats, on the captain's orders. Maria would respect her command decision, but that made no sense—in such a storm, a smaller boat would never survive. The lifeboats had never been an option. Even if their hull was torn to shreds, they had to cling to this vessel to the bitter end! It was their only chance. Unless... Maria looked up at the captain.

She barked out orders, her hands tied to the wheel. Her face was white as sand, but resolute. If Maria's hunch was correct, and the captain had history with this creature... Was she planning to go down with the ship, and lure the beast away from the rest of them in the process? Give what she had promised, in a bet for her crew's safety? Maria caught the captain's gaze, for just a moment, and gave her a look of understanding. No words were needed between them.

A crunching noise sounded from below—the splintering of the belowdecks as their integrity failed, crushed under the twisting water. Twisting water, and something more, she saw, as Maria watched vast tentacles writhe up the sides of the ship, curling about the upper decks; she ducked and rolled as one fell toward her. No—not quite a tentacle. It behaved like one, but where an octopus or kraken's suckers would be, it was covered with razor-sharp claws, like the barbs on a cat's tongue. It must be the same creature as before, limbs elongated and grown to horrible proportion, back to destroy the ship for good. A few brave—or foolish—sailors brandished harpoons against them, but that endeavour was quickly abandoned as they were shredded beneath the beast's infinite claws.

Maria took one last glance at the captain, her magnificent figure silhouetted against the stormy sky, hair blowing in the wind, dedicated to the very end. Then she turned to the crew.

“Board the lifeboats! Grab whatever supplies you can salvage! GO!” She roared into the chaos. Maria didn't head toward the boats, though. She had one last thing to attend to.

She shook Sónia awake, hurriedly. She looked up with a weak expression, and smiled, that warm smile of hers.

“Maria. What—”

“We need to get you on a lifeboat. Come on.” Maria lifted the woman's arm over her good shoulder, raising her from the bed like an effigy raised before a festival procession. Sónia's legs were slack.

She just shook her head slightly. “No. You won't...make it in time. Leave me.”

“No, I'm not leaving you!” She gritted her teeth, and dragged Sónia's limp body toward the door. “I'm. Not. Leaving you.”

The two women stumbled through the doorway and Maria saw the not-tentacles strain; a massive *CRACK* sounded as the ship broke in half in the beast's grip. Maria lost hold of Sónia, and was thrown from her footing. And that was it.

All she could do was watch as her friend and sister, her crew, her captain, her ship, her *life*, tumbled beneath the waves of an uncaring ocean. She barely had time to breathe before the black water slammed against her skin, enveloping her.

No. NO. Not like this. Please, Diosa, Alcans, whatever's listening. Not this.

She plummeted like a shooting star, burning up in the atmosphere. It was eerily calm, beneath the waves. No light filtered through the surface, little trace of the commotion above, there in the inky dark. She could feel the ebb and flow of currents around her. She could hear a keening whale-like call of the beast in...triumph? Pain? She could see nothing but void surrounding her. And as the water forced its way down her throat, a memory flashed through her mind. A memory of a time long passed; a memory of a face that had never left her, even after all the time they spent apart. A memory of someone she missed so much.

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"Sorry miss, but I'll have to ask you to move shortly. We're loading these crates right now." Maria addressed the young woman who had been perched atop a crate by the side of the docks for the last hour or so. Her attire was pretty, but functional: leather boots, a long green skirt, a creamy-white blouse, tucked in, with bits of lace on the cuffs. Her brown hair was tied up in a neat bun, stuck through with a pair of long brass pins. She was watching the sailors as they worked, and making little marks on a pad of paper.

She looked up. "Oh, I'll get out of your way! Just a moment..." The woman squinted at Maria, seemingly trying to puzzle something out of her face. She made a few more marks on her paper, then spoke again under her breath, "Hmm... yeah, I think that's done."

"What are you doing?" Maria asked innocently.

The woman stuck her pencil behind her ear and stepped down from the crates. "Drawing! I'm an artist. I love to come down to the docks and see you sailors at work." A grin. "Would you like to see?"

Maria looked back at the crew. Dozens of strong men and women, sweating and straining in the sun, many shirtless... She supposed she could imagine the appeal, but this gal didn't seem the type for *that* sort of art. She looked back at the woman. Well, appearances could be deceiving.

"Sure," she replied, curious.

The woman handed her the sketchbook, open to the drawing she had just been working on, and Maria's mouth hung open in a most unflattering fashion. It was not what she expected—also, it was gorgeous, and she struggled to find words to express her awe.

"Wow."

The woman pressed closer to her. "Do you like it? You can have it if you want."

Maria looked up at the woman, who now wore a sly smile, and replied, “Can I really? I—this is amazing! Of course I...” She gaped at the drawing: a perfect rendering of herself standing triumphantly on the edge of the dock, with long black braid, sleeveless blue top, sturdy high-waisted pants—every detail immaculate, down to the mole on her temple, her pointed nose, the buttons and creases of her clothing. It was incredible. “I love it.”

“What’s your name?”

That caught her off guard. “Oh. It’s Maria. Maria Torres.”

“Splendid. That’s a lovely name.” The woman took back the notebook, and labelled the drawing with her name. Watching this woman write her name gave Maria the oddest flutter in her chest. She had very neat, ornate, handwriting, and let the T in her last name crown the rest of the letters with a flourish of the wrist. Then, she signed her own name at the bottom of the page, and carefully tore it out. Maria took the page again as it was offered to her.

“It was lovely to meet you, Maria. I do hope we’ll see each other again.” She smiled like the sun’s reflection on the waves, winked, and turned to leave.

As she walked off—without even a look back—Maria stuttered out, “You too! Thank you!” She felt a blush forming on her cheeks. One of the sailors was calling for her, but she continued to gaze at the drawing for a moment. What an incredible woman. Maria realized she never even got her name—she looked up, trying to find her again, but she was already lost in the crowd. Too late. *Oh, she signed it.* And just beneath the signature, an address. She shook her head with a grin. *What an incredible woman.*

There, in the corner of the page: *Adela de la Fuente*. She turned it over in her mind, feeling the syllables of that gorgeous name on her lips, as she went to attend to the crew. *Adela.*

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ADELA! The name became a cry, filling her drowning body. She tried to scream it out, choking as her last breath escaped with it, the brine replacing every ounce of life-giving air. *Adela...* She didn’t want to die here, not like this. She still had so much left to do, so much to see with her. She didn’t want to be just another casualty on the report: *Oath’s Defiance, mercantile vessel, sunk 32nd Locrian, all hands lost.* That horrid news so casually listed in the newspaper, as her final missive to her love? No letter of thanks, no last words, no final kiss, just a fucking statistic? She couldn’t, couldn’t let that happen, couldn’t ever do that to her, couldn’t *ever* leave her so empty and alone. They had of course known it was a danger—it’s something you accept when you work at sea—but she always swore to come home safe and alive and she intended to *keep* that promise.

The darkness started to encroach on her vision. Her muscles burned with her last strength turning to ash as she twisted, trying to find the light of the surface. She saw something emerge, a grey form reveal itself above her—sky? It curled around her, holding her close. It was

strong, yet gentle, and welcoming in its fold. Its bulk filled her vision, and its presence pushed into her mind, cold and slimy and alien, like reaching a hand into a bucket of fish-guts.

It did not have a language, at least not any that any other sentient creature would recognize. It spoke in symbols and signs only:

A bleeding heart,
A name called, a promise offered in return,
A tarot: the drowned man,
A coin, twirling in the air,
A curse on the tongue,
A dissolution,
A boon,
A beating heart.

She felt so empty as the water filled her lungs and the ice cold numbed her skin. She wanted to feel the warmth of love held tightly against her breast again, the gentle pressure of lips against hers, but all she had now was the impenetrable void of the sea around her. She heard her love calling her.

It dragged her down into its depths to do its work, and Maria felt its power course through her. Her bones cracked and shifted, her flesh rippling with the boon offered unto her. Her body felt wrong. Her lungs weren't built to breathe water, her skull too weak under the pressure here, her eyes not accustomed to the dark.

She breathed anyway.

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Adela stood alone on the end of a quiet pier, staring out at the fading horizon. In her hand, she clutched a scrap of newspaper. It was cold. She was sat, legs dangling off the edge, with the gentle sea-breeze stirring her loose and messy hair. She had come down here every single night since she heard the news. She didn't know why she still came—it had been weeks now. Maria was gone. She just had to accept that. These things happened at sea. She *knew* that, but ay, Diosa, why *her*? Why now? Of all the ships in all the seas, why did it have to be *her*?

Adela wrapped her arms around herself and fought back tears. She failed, and they came streaming down again, white-hot embers scorching her already dry and tired eyes. She couldn't keep doing this. *Tomorrow I go back to work, and never come to the docks again, never think of her again*, she told herself.

It was a lie, of course. Even if she avoided the docks, she would think of her again. Nary a day would go by that she wouldn't. Besides, she wasn't really dead, was she? Maria had set sail, and was just...still out there somewhere. Off at sea. Like she always had been. Maybe she'd never

come home, but if she believed *that*, maybe, at least...no. It didn't mean anything. What was the point of it all? How could she go on, without her?

The simple fact was that she missed her. There were no more words for it. She lay down, stared up at the stars. They swirled above her—the skies were clear that night, as clear and empty as her heart, a void lit with little points of light, ever dancing, but oh so far away.

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“See those three in a line, and the bright one in the middle above them?” Maria pointed up at the sky.

“Hmm...yeah! I think so.” Adela leaned in, her head against Maria's bicep to follow the angle of her guiding finger.

“That's Loa. The bright one is the diamond she wears upon her forehead, the three below it, the winds she blows forth. When at sea, we follow that diamond and she'll always lead us north. She watches over us all.” While Maria spoke, Adela turned to look at her. Her face was lit dimly, all pale reflections in the moon's light, like she was transparent. Like a ghost.

“She'll bring you home?”

“Always.”

Adela pressed her face into Maria's neck, kissing her. She wanted to be so close. She wanted to never leave her arms again.

Maria held her tightly. “Hey, hey...” She kissed her on the top of the head. “It's okay. Don't you worry, I'll be home soon, I promise. I love you.”

Adela closed her eyes, as if to capture the moment in a snapshot. “I love you too.”

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Adela tried to find Loa, the bright guide of sailors, but couldn't. The stars gave her no direction. She shook herself, got to her feet, threw down the scrap of newsprint. It flew away in a sudden shock of wind which pushed her back, but she fought it, stamping her feet against the boards of the pier.

Adela shouted into the gale, “Damn you! And damn your sea! How could you do this to me? You promised! Did your words mean nothing? How could you—!”

Her voice cracked.

“How could you leave me...”

She burst into tears, and fell once more. As she did, something in the water caught her eye. The black water danced before her, ever off into the distance, and—what was that?

She descended the ladder to the lower dock. Straining through her blurry tear-soaked vision, she looked out, trying to find it. There—a movement, stirring the currents unnaturally. It finished another turn, approached her, and rose above the surface. She wiped her eyes. It was some creature, with a smooth snout and two deep, sunken, eyes. It was a monster. It was some

slimy, toothed-and-clawed beast, crawling from the depths to meet her, hungry and searching. She knew monsters like these, had heard the tales of what lurked in the sea. She had always been fascinated by such stories. What would it mean to be a monster? To live in a way so removed from the human world? To be free of the shackles of expectations, allowed to be whatever fearsome thing one would be, and be given power and respect for it?

She stepped back, startled, as those sunken eyes met hers, and held her gaze. It was more than hungry, too—it was longing, lonely and hurt. There was something in those eyes. A spark of recognition, a ghost of a shy smile she knew all too well, a dull and desperate dread.

Something behind those eyes was screaming her name.

“Maria?”

The creature did not reply, just gazed back with infinite sorrow. But it heard her. She knew it heard her, it *must* have. It reached out one of its strange limbs, trying to pull itself up onto the pier, but faltered, and slipped back into the water. As it did, Adela caught a glimpse of something glinting around its neck. She knelt, hands shaking with indescribable emotion, and reached out a hand to touch the creature. It circled once more before coming back to her, unable to hold one position for long. Its lithe and elegant body cut through the water like a dancer, and when it came back around, it raised its head, and nuzzled against Adela’s outstretched hand. Its skin was soft and yielding, smooth like milk against her light fingers. This time, she caught a closer look at what was around its neck:

A little pendant of green seaglass, on a chain of brass now made the same colour by corrosion. A gift she had given, long ago. A token of remembrance.

“It is you, isn’t it? Diosa mía... ¿Que ha pasado a tí?”

The creature only stared back at her with its tortured gaze.

Adela dropped her purse, removed her sandals, and carefully lowered one foot into the water, then slid in silently. The ocean enveloped her, intoxicating and dreamlike. She took a deep breath, and dove to embrace her lover. Her new body was strange, but not unwelcoming. Even in this new form she could feel Maria’s touch, gentle yet strong, her inhuman limbs wrapping tightly around her. Adela laughed, and the taste of brine filled her mouth as the bubbles rose. Unfortunately, not long passed before she had to broach the surface, and breathe.

Treading water, with such a look of joy and relief on her face, she spoke, “Maria! I know you’re in there! You’re still so beautiful! I know you can hear me—and I know what we can do. Meet me at the beach by the cliffs, you know the one. I’ll wait for you there, I promise. We can still be together.”

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With the money they had saved to buy Maria’s ship, she instead bought the cottage, the same one they had stayed in together once. She tended a garden, and wrote, and painted. She

lived like that for many years. Every day she watched the sea, and every night when the tides came in, Adela would go down to the water and visit her love. They would swim together under the light of the moon, float beneath the stars, dance under the waves. Those nights were breathless, exhilarating. Adela felt so free, swaddled in the waves with her love.

But even in summer the water was cold.

The creature-that-was-Maria was strong and gorgeous and lovely—but she lacked so much, too. Her wit. Her voice—which had always been a little louder than it needed, a habit from years of shouting over the waves. Her appetite. What did she eat? Adela wished she could cook for her again; when they kissed it always tasted like fish. She wished they could walk together along the beach in the sun; she would grow tired of swimming, in time. The water was so cold.

As the years wore on, the night finally came when Maria stopped coming. In the months prior she had seemed distant, the human glint of recognition in those eyes ever fading. She was lost at last. The ocean had stolen her, her mind dissolved in the waves, and she had become a creature of salt and deep only. And Adela wept, her briny tears mixing into the sea, for finally she was alone, even that last ghost of her love’s presence gone at last.

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She still went into town, sometimes, and sold her paintings in a little stall in the market. It was a quiet, drizzly afternoon in autumn when an old man visited her stall. He was a retired sailor, she knew—he still had the calluses on his hands, still had the sea-breeze in his beard. He wore a long blue-grey overcoat. He looked over her work with a sense of melancholy grace, and one in particular caught his eye.

His voice was smooth and deep. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

“What?” Adela’s heart jumped slightly.

“The sea.” The man smiled.

“Oh. Yes.” She sighed.

The painting was a view of the sea by the cottage, dressed in sombre green and turquoise, the grass of the coast glowing in bronze. The waves were gentle, caressing the land, meeting it now and again with soft touches.

“You know, I see the same view from my lighthouse. I would love to see how you would paint it. You should visit sometime.”

Adela saw the kinship in the man’s eyes. “Perhaps I will.”