

Miss Underwood and the Mermaid  
Sarah Zettel

*As told by Captain Latimer of Her Majesty's privateer Nancy's Pride for the general edification of all Their Majesties' subjects by land or sea.*

First, let me say, she was not the kind of woman one normally saw in the Debauched Sloth. No mother who produced that straight spine and those squared shoulders should have permitted her daughter to know that dim, smoky, dockside tavern where unmarried men with open shirts and braided hair mingled freely with women of the Queen's navy, and the Queen's privateers.

For all that, the young lady in exquisite, but wholly modest, green silk walked a straight and determined line. She seemed wholly undeterred by the silence that fell like leaden weight around her. Without pause she approached the table where I sat with, it must be confessed, Jimmy Harte, an amiable, ample and generous lad employed by the Sloth's mistress-and occasionally by her customers. The stranger looked right at Jimmy and I swear before Goddess, her eyes flashed with a cold blue light. Jimmy stumbled to his feet, splashing beer and mumbling excuses, and retreated.

Neither event warmed me to this person.

She turned those eyes to me, and I saw they were huge, ice blue and judgmental in her fair-skinned, rich woman's face. After the barest instant, I found I had to drop my own gaze to my beer. This also did not encourage my favor toward her.

The young lady cleared her throat. "You are, I believe, Captain Latimer, of the Queen's privateer, *Nancy's Pride*?"

I raised my gaze and straightened my own shoulders. "I am, and you, Miss, are interrupting my personal business."

I saw it then, the light shining beneath the blue. Without a doubt there was power here. *A witch, then? With those manners and that Dress? Whoever heard of a prudish witch?*

"Then I must apologize for my actions, which without my knowledge or intent have been rude and an affront; but I must say, I believe that when you hear me out, you will both forgive and understand the reasons for those actions, as I am on an errand of both delicacy and urgency."

"And you, Miss, were obviously traumatized by a grammar book in your youth."

The quip failed to put her out. Uninvited, she sat, and her spine did not bend an inch with the act. As there was no immediate prospect of a brawl, or a shooting, the noise around us gradually returned to its normal levels.

The young lady raised her voice. "I wish to hire your ship, your crew and yourself."

I looked again at her clothing in all its silken splendor, and the diamond and sapphire necklace around her throat. "My ship has a letter of marque and reprisal," I said, a touch reluctantly. "My commission is to capture, burn, sink, or destroy all of Their Majesties' enemies by sea. I can take no other work until the war is over."

That took her back for all of one heartbeat. "What would you say of a personage who accosts

one of Their Majesties' ships? Abducts one of Their Majesties' officers? Would you say this personage could indeed be considered an enemy to the peace and security of Their Majesties' kingdom, territories, and possessions?"

I did not like the turn this was taking. "I would be hard pressed not to."

I would not have believed it possible, but she actually sat up straighter. "Then, Captain Latimer, it is my duty to tell you of the work of one of Their Majesties' greatest enemies by sea, a cunning, ruthless and destructive enemy, one who terrorizes at will, and who is also magnificently rich."

All at once, you could have heard a pin drop in the tavern. All my sailors looked at me, as wolves might look upon hearing the words "wounded deer nearby." My own monetary hunger rolled hard through my privateer's blood. Glowing eyes and prudish Miss or no, this woman had word of a prize.

I wiped at my mouth before I could start drooling, something this woman would surely consider uncouth, and tried to reassert my powers of reason. "What enemy would this be, Miss . . . ?"

"Cecilia Underwood," she answered primly. "As to the enemy, you have perhaps heard of the King's ship *Magnificent*?"

I choked on my own breath. The *Magnificent* had set out early in the year five to cruise the northern waters and protect Their Majesties' shipping. As a King's ship, the frigate was crewed by men and captained by one Jack Tremor, a young fellow but a prime seaman by all accounts.

Six months later, the *Magnificent* returned to the Kingdom, a broken hulk. The ship foundered off Whitefish Point, and only one sad wretch was pulled from the water. No matter what the doctors and wizards attempted, all he could say was, "Go and tell her he will marry the mermaid. Go and tell her he will marry the mermaid."

"Captain Jack Tremor is my fiancé," said Miss Underwood. "Your enemy is the mermaid."

Very slowly, I set my tankard down. "Your enemy is the mermaid, perhaps, Miss Underwood, as it was your fiance who was stolen. My enemies are all mortals, and dry-skinned ones at that."

Miss Underwood did not bat an eye. "She is rich."

Damn the woman! My blood sang as I thought on all the treasure that went to the bottom of the sea: ingots, plate, fine jewels, not to mention the wealth in pearls that grew down there of their own accord. All for the taking. The Queen's ships were bound to assist the King's, as the King's were the Queen's. The *Magnificent* had been foully attacked, an officer dragged away, to all that wealth, chests of it, casks overflowing with it. . . .

I wiped my chin. Reason made a last, desperate bid for victory. "How could we find the mermaid, Miss Underwood? She is said to be a secretive creature."

Again, the light shone behind her eyes. "I will find her, and her treasure, for you."

Reason collapsed, beaten. I lifted my gaze to my sailors, standing still as statues around the tavern. "What say you, good women?"

The storm of cheers, defiance and approval threatened to raise the Sloth's roof. In the midst of it all, Miss Underwood sat and quietly smiled.

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A fortnight later, *Nancy's Pride* was ready to sail. Miss Underwood arrived at dawn on the appointed day. It took four of my crew to lift her sea chest and stow it for her. My first lieutenant, who hated passengers, was for once not put out that her cabin was commandeered. Miss Underwood could have had my cabin, if she'd desired it, as long as she took us to the mermaid, and the mermaid's riches.

So, with the breeze freshening from the southwest and an ebbing tide, I gave the order to weigh anchor and make sail. Wind caught the canvas, filling it proudly. Ropes and timbers creaked and *Nancy's Pride* slid forward from the bay toward the open sea. I turned to Miss Underwood, whom I allowed beside me on the windward side of the quarter deck, as a courtesy. I saw, with a start, that she smiled the same smile she had in the tavern when we had accepted her mission. Discomfort stirred in me, overriding my greed for a moment. I wondered, was this really the proper reaction for a woman whose love had been kidnapped by a mermaid? Then, I wondered why I had not thought of this before.

Miss Underwood turned to look at me, her eyes shining with gentle amusement. I feared that all I thought was plain in my face, then I feared her speaking those magic words "she is rich," and chasing my fears away.

"Would you care for a cup of coffee, Miss Underwood?" I blurted out. "It was an early start for you this morning."

She inclined her head politely. "Thank you, Captain, but no."

"Tea then, if you prefer? Or wine against the chill?"

Her smile both broadened and gentled. "Again I thank you, but I believe I shall retire."

An important point reached my conscious thought. "You have not yet told me what our destination is."

Miss Underwood looked forward and her eyes narrowed. "The course you are on will be satisfactory at present, Captain." Without in the least minding the pitch and roll of the ship, she walked down the quarterdeck ladder and disappeared through the hatch.

I blinked. In fact, I would swear I'd never even saw her sway the smallest bit, despite the strange, weaving course she walked across the deck. The strange course, as if avoiding something only she could see . . .

A captain must never collapse to her knees on the quarter deck, pounding the boards with her fist and cursing herself for ten times worse than a fool. It is bad for her authority.

I settled for bellowing. "First!"

"Captain?" Miss Sherman bounded up the ladder and saluted smartly.

"Pass the word for the ship's carpenter." I did not say why. I did not wish it generally known I wanted to find out how much cold iron we had on board.

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The next ten days passed without incident. Any incident. Even aboard a tight, happy privateer

there are cases of drunkenness, falls, minor disagreements that flare up into brawls. But not this time. Nothing happened to keep any hand from her work, and they worked cheerfully. Never a cross word or a mild curse. For the first time in twenty years of sailing, I heard sailors say "please" and "thank you" to those of their own rank. I'd finger the nail I'd taken to keeping in my pocket and consider issuing them generally, but I confess, I liked it. As unnatural as it was, it made for a remarkably pleasant change.

Miss Underwood herself kept to her cabin, only coming up once or twice a day to take a turn on deck and stare straight ahead of us. Each time, I would ask her what course to set and each time I would receive the same answer. "This one is most satisfactory, Captain." Then I would ask whether the normal precautions against mermaids should be instituted and she would say, "Not at present, Captain," and I would have to be content with that.

In the middle of the morning watch on the eleventh day, I sat in my cabin drinking my first pot of coffee and going over the charts. Miss Sherman knocked on my door.

"Beggin' your pardon, Captain," she said brightly. "But Miss Verity reports there is a sea serpent."

I did not spit out my coffee. I swallowed. "A sea serpent?"

"Yes, and a most prodigious big one, she says."

I squinted at my First. Miss Sherman's eyes were lively and full of her native intelligence. She simply did not see any reason to be alarmed. It was then I concluded things had perhaps gone too far.

"Very well, Miss Sherman. Beat to quarters and clear the decks for action fore and aft. Have the great guns and all the muskets loaded directly. I shall follow you up."

"Very good, Ma'am."

She vanished, and I got to my feet. With great effort, I blanked my face of all expression. I would not, I could not, appear before my crew wearing my fear. Only when I was certain I had succeeded did I leave my cabin.

On deck, I found my orders being carried out, merrily, as if for a target competition. The unoccupied crew leaned on the rails and grinned at the creature casting its shadow over our deck. Its dripping head reared higher than our mainmast, its fins spread out broader than our spritsails. It bellowed and sound and stench rolled over us. In the next instant, it bent its great, pale neck and swooped down on us.

"Raise weapons!"

Those of my crew who had armed themselves lifted their muskets. The creature must have been acquainted with guns, because it pulled back abruptly and had the nerve to look affronted.

I opened my mouth to give the command to fire, when the air stirred behind me.

"I would not recommend it, Captain," said Miss Underwood calmly. "Its hide is too tough for such projectiles. You will only succeed in angering it."

As if in answer, the creature shook the sky with a fresh bellow and dove straight down.

Something smashed against the hull, knocking us all ahoop and causing every hand to clap hold of ropes and rails. The crew's unnatural calm vanished. It takes more than a spell of bemusement to remove the fear of hull breach from a sailor.

Miss Underwood, of course, did not move an inch.

"Can you suggest a remedy, Miss Underwood?" I gasped, pulling myself upright.

Her blue eyes were thoughtful, but without light. "Have you anything you believe exceedingly hard I might throw, Captain?"

One third of my mind considered the phrasing of the question and the nature of the person in front of me. This was neither the third that was gibbering in terror, nor the third reminding it that captains did not gibber on deck. "Miss Sherman!" I barked. "Tell Miss Barton to jump down to the galley and have Cook roust out some of the month-old biscuit. Handsomely now!"

I turned my attention to ordering the hands to take up the canvas, to mind the wheel. The serpent erupted from the water. Its great, fanlike fins battered at the waves, rocking *Nancy's Pride* and almost swamping us. The thing opened its mouth in a grin I took to be idiot glee and reared back, ready to strike.

Miss Barton arrived and saluted. She handed me a rock-hard ship's biscuit which I handed to Miss Underwood, who thanked me. Like any sailor, I would happily show the chips in my teeth from such objects, and I firmly believed nothing could be harder.

Miss Underwood's eyes glowed intensely blue. she drew her arm back and hurled the biscuit at the sea serpent's head. It smacked the creature right between its eyes.

The serpent bellowed in gargantuan pain. Cheers arose from the crew. The monster slipped slowly beneath the waves.

"All sail!" I shouted. "All sail, now!"

Still laughing and cheering, the crew obeyed. *Nancy's Pride* leaned against the wind and sped forward.

I turned to my passenger. "Miss Underwood, a word with you, if you please."

Once in the great cabin, I turned to face her. I had to keep myself from clutching the nail in my pocket.

"Miss Underwood, were you aware we would meet this . . . creature?"

"I suspected something of the kind might happen, yes," she said coolly. "I thought perhaps Scylla and Charybdis, but I was mistaken."

"Can we expect any similar troubles?"

"I do not believe so. I think she will wait for a direct assault before she attacks again."

"I see," I nodded. "Miss Underwood, I fear I must be direct. Exactly who are you?"

For a moment those blue eyes glowed and I feared for my safety.

But the glow subsided. "So difficult to bespell someone in their own place of power," she shook her head. "I had hoped the lure of riches would be enough to lull you. I see that in this I was also mistaken." She met my gaze. "Obviously, I cannot give you my true name. Let us just say that I am a person of some importance in the Seelie court, and that the mermaid has stolen something of value to me, and destroyed one of your King's ships while doing so. I could not travel to reclaim him in my own form and under my own power, as the mermaid would sense that leagues away and strike me down at her leisure. Hence, my need for this disguise, and your services."

"And who is Jack Tremor?"

Her eyes did glow then, cold and dangerous. "Mine."

"I see." I felt curiously little fear now. Perhaps it was her acknowledgement that she did not have me in the palm of her fairy hand. "One thing I wish to make perfectly clear, Miss Underwood. If I determine you are unnecessarily endangering my ship and my crew, or forcing my people to act contrary to my direct orders, I will have you thrown in irons."

At that, I had the sweet satisfaction of seeing her blanch. "I understand you perfectly, Captain. Now, will you excuse me please? We are approaching the mermaid's demesne and I wish to be ready."

I bowed politely. "By all means, Miss Underwood."

Miss Underwood left me there. When she was gone I passed the word for the blacksmith, deciding I might do well to order up some additional precautions for this voyage.

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Back on deck, the normal order of things has reasserted itself, including the crew's fairy-wrought unflappability. Miss Verity steered a straight northeast course, both sea and sky were as clear as one could wish and from the feel of things, *Nancy's Pride* made a good seven knots. Still, I could no longer be easy. I paced the quarter deck, aware that my First watched me with amused patience.

"Miss Sherman, let us beat to quarters and crew the forward guns. I should not like the next serpent to catch us unawares."

"Aye, aye, Captain." She grinned at the prospect of good sport and turned to bellow out my orders to the appropriate crewmembers, who repeated them up and down the deck. The drum rolled to beat to quarters.

Even under the sound of running feet and the insistent drumbeat, I heard it. A rumble from deep below the ship, like thunder originating from the ocean rather than the sky. Miss Sherman's cheerfulness faltered and something like real concern showed on her face.

I opened my mouth, trying to think of something captain-worthy to say, when a great jet of water fountained from the waves to leeward. The sea split open. From the depths rose a great, grey whale, a living wall between us and the horizon, smelling powerfully of very old fish. It regarded us with one baleful eye.

On the whale's back perched the mermaid. The blue and green scales of her tail shimmered in

the sunlight. Sea weeds and sea flowers twinned in her green hair. Her, ah, feminine endowments were bare to the world. Beside her sat a man in a naval uniform much bedraggled from overexposure to salt water. Where the mermaid sat as calm as a cat or a queen, he seemed uncertain as to what to do, blinking and bobbing his head in all directions like a man being introduced to too many people at once.

*Fine-looking cove, though.*

I summoned all my lung capacity. "Ahoy the whale!"

The mermaid answered, her voice ringing clear as a bell over the sounds of wind, wave and whale. "What do you mean, Mortal, addressing us in that fashion?"

*Well.* "Madame, that is a King's officer next to you. As a servant of the Queen, I must demand his return."

The whale snorted. A gout of fishy-smelling water fell across the deck, and consequently across me.

"I think perhaps we have just been insulted," I said to Miss Sherman.

"I think so, ma'am. Shall we give her a gun?"

"No, I think . . ." My sentence trailed off. Miss Underwood had appeared on deck.

The prudish miss was gone. This was a warrior. A breastplate of bronze and silver encased her proud torso. A golden, plumed helmet covered her head. Her legs were bare, except for the greaves covering her, quite probably perfect, knees and shins. She carried a silver-tipped spear. I could not miss the fact that the fretwork encircling the helmet's brim looked remarkably like a crown.

*A person of some importance, indeed.*

"The man is mine!" Her eyes flashed and her voice rang and I wondered that I had ever had the nerve to raise my voice, to her, to this.

She also seemed no longer occupied with my crew. Smiling insensibility was fast being replaced by incredulity descending into wonderment and into fear. "Miss Sherman, ready all guns. Miss Chapwick!" I lifted my voice to the rigging. "Haul in the main top gallants. Handsomely now!" All hands sprang to their work, fear replaced by reflex. Quite suddenly no one seemed to mind the whale and the mermaid, or the warrior fairy.

The mermaid, however, was not so easily put off. "Jack Tremor is my lawful prize! You shall not steal him from me!"

"I will reclaim my own!" Miss Underwood hurled her spear with all the force she had used to hurl that biscuit.

The mermaid roared, as did her whale. The animal arched into the air like a sea bird. The spear shot under it. The whale hit the water with an enormous splash, sending salt water sheeting across our decks.

Miss Underwood also took to the air. I was not surprised to see a pair of gossamer blue wings

spread from her shoulders. She beat the air, flying swift and sure toward the mermaid and her resurfacing whale. I also saw that the spear was back in her hand.

The mermaid called out something harsh and incomprehensible. The waters roiled. A monstrous, slime-covered tentacle rose from the water and lashed out at Miss Underwood. Miss Underwood circled us and emitted a piercing shriek. All at once the air was alive with raptors; eagles, falcons, hawks. They poured down from the clouds, savaging the tentacle.

I was just wondering whether I should order a broadside, and if so, which target to make, when a new voice caught my attention.

"The ship ahoy!"

My gaze dropped to the water. Captain Tremor had obviously lost hold of the whale in the fracas and now bobbed in the waves on the leeward side of *Nancy's Pride*.

"Miss Verity, a rope for the captain, if you please."

The rope was dutifully lowered, and Captain Tremor was hauled, dripping, onto our deck. Out across the water, the tentacle had somehow become entangled, and Miss Underwood, a bolt of glowing gold and blue against the sky, let out a peal of savage laughter.

I turned my attention to the drenched man in front of me. "Captain Tremor, permit me to welcome you aboard the *Nancy's Pride*. I am Captain Latimer."

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Captain." Despite the dampness of his condition, Tremor gave me a smart salute and a most appealing smile.

I sent immediately for blankets, and brandy, and directed Miss Fletcher, my personal servant, to take Captain Tremor down to my cabin where there were some dry things that might do for him until his uniform could be cleaned. Miss Fletcher took Captain Tremor neatly in hand and I turned my attention back to the battle royale.

The mermaid seemed to have summoned a wealth of seabirds to assist her now, and the raptors screamed and clawed at gulls and albatrosses. Blood fell in a red rain onto the rolling sea. The whale had a bad gash in its side and Miss Underwood had blood on her bright spear.

"A little more sea room, Miss Verity, I think."

"I should think so," she muttered under her breath, and I knew the fairy veil had been truly stripped from my crew.

The mermaid raised her arms. A wave lifted out of the water and swung like a club at Miss Underwood who managed to back-paddle (back-wing?) just out of its reach.

"Captain Latimer?"

Captain Tremor stood at the foot of the quarterdeck ladder. He now wore the blue jacket, trousers and white shirt I keep in case . . . similar situations might arise.

"Do come up, Captain." As he did, I called for coffee. While we settled ourselves, a large,

damp chunk of unearthly flesh dropped onto the deck.

"A mop and bucket, Miss Verity."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"May I ask, Captain Tremor," I began, sipping hot coffee and wishing I smelt a little less of second-hand fish. "How you came to be embroiled in the affairs of these . . . persons?"

He smiled again, dropping his gaze to his coffee. "I am afraid, Captain Latimer, I am a victim of an old story. You see, my father became lost in the Great Forest and . . ."

I saw at once. "And was given shelter in a mysterious castle for the night. In return for the hospitality, he promised to give his host the first thing that greeted him upon reaching home?"

"Just so." Captain Tremor drank some coffee with evident relish. "What greeted him was myself of course, and I was informed of the bargain upon reaching my thirteenth birthday."

I nodded in sympathy. A hoarse cry of rage tumbled across the deck. Heavy waves slapped the hull. A shadow, which seemed to come from a leaping whale, fell momentarily across us.

"Well, my feelings had not been consulted in the matter," Captain Tremor went on, "and I took it rather hard. I've never been one of those clever fellows one reads about in the histories of such matters. I confess I ran away to sea, hoping to escape my fate. I seemed to have done so, until my twenty-third birthday and my first command. You are aware, perhaps, of the care one must take in waters frequented by the mermaid?"

I nodded. The wind carried screams and shrieks to us. I surmised Miss Underwood and the mermaid were hurling imprecations at each other in their native tongues. "I mostly cruised the far southern waters where such things are not as common, but I had heard. One must not use proper names on deck, that sort of thing."

"Indeed, yes." His handsome face grew grave. "If one calls out a real name, such as 'James' the mermaid might rise from the water and say 'give us James,' and so you must, or your ship is lost. Consequently, one must call one's crew such things as 'lamp' or 'bucket,' 'old shoes,' and so on. Unfortunately, one of my men forgot this most sensible rule, and called me by my proper rank. The mermaid," he gestured toward leeward with his cup, "rose from the water and cried, give us Captain!"

"I attempted to explain to her there was a prior claim on my personage, but it was to no avail. I had to accompany her or the ship would be wrecked and my men lost." I looked at him with renewed respect. A captain who held his men's life above his own was not merely a pretty face. There was honor and a spine underneath. I felt absurdly pleased.

"Unfortunately, due to my crew's mistaken attempts to reclaim me . . ." He shook his head.

"Incoming!" cried Miss Verity, and we instinctively ducked our heads as a fairy spear shot across the deck, falling into the waves to windward.

When we straightened, I noted that the sky had darkened perceptibly, and I knew in my bones the glass was sinking fast. Miss Sherman bellowed the orders to take in the sails.

I drained my cup, briskly. "Well, sir, I must ask you, what are your particular wishes in this matter? The ladies," I decided to use the word in its loosest possible sense, "are likely to finish soon, and the winner will most certainly try to lay claim to you."

Captain Tremor sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid you are correct. I will tell you quite honestly, Captain Latimer, I have no wish to go with either of them." My heart warmed within me at this, but I hope I only managed to nod gravely. "But I do not see how it can be helped."

All blue sky was not hidden behind dark clouds. I regarded them with a pursed mouth as, in the distance, the mermaid laughed out loud.

"It would seem at the moment the mermaid has the advantage." I frowned. "I believe she and Miss Underwood, the one who flies there, are closely related."

"Indeed. They are both of the fair family."

"Mmm." I considered certain events, as well as the uncommonly beautiful man before me. "I believe we may safely say both are Their Majesties' enemies. The lower there kidnapped you and took a considerable number of lives. The higher-" The mermaid let out a piercing scream just then, cutting off my words. "The higher attempted to enslave you, which is clearly against the law." I tapped my chin. "I would be for making sail immediately and leaving them to each other, but my crew was brought out here with the promise of a crack at the mermaid's treasure. We are a privateer, you understand Captain, and while I have no wish at this time to assist Miss Underwood-" Lightning flashed overhead. "I must pay my crew."

"If it would be of any assistance," said Captain Tremor, "I know where the treasure is. There is a sea cave beneath an island not far from here. She took great delight in showing all its contents to me."

Now, I let myself smile. "It would be of great assistance, Captain. If you'll just give directions to Miss Sherman at the wheel, we can get under way at once."

He regarded me for a moment with a mix of emotion playing across his features. "With all due respect, Captain, do you not fear pursuit, from either the mermaid or your Miss Underwood? The mermaid easily subdued a ship of the line . . ."

He was, unfortunately, correct. I regarded the combatants out across the choppy, darkening sea. Miss Underwood glowed in the remains of the sunlight like a living bolt of lightning, surrounded by her birds of prey. The mermaid reared up on her battered leviathan, raising her hands to call up the waves and bring down the storm.

Whatever I did, it would have to be done quickly. If I gave my crew too much time to consider whom we were attacking, they would believe we could not win. Even when engaging mortal foes, belief in your abilities is critical.

Belief. Perhaps if the crew could be induced to believe differently about these ladies. Perhaps if they could be shown they were not all-powerful, but rather, were something quite different . . .

"Miss Sherman," I called. "Pass the word for the blacksmith, and tell her to bring the precautions we arranged." I faced Captain Tremor. "Captain, I must ask you to indulge me. I am going to attempt to disarm Miss Underwood, but to do so I will need to get her attention."

He bowed gracefully. "I place myself entirely in your hands, Captain Latimer."

As beguiling as that image was, I had no time to reply properly, for at that moment Miss Johnson, our blacksmith, along with the cook and her assistant, appeared. Between them they wrestled one of the galley's great, cast iron soup kettles up the ladder. It had been modified so that its lid was attached by means of a sturdy hinge. A lock for firm closure had also been provided.

Captain Tremor looked at me quizzically.

"When one has a fairy on board, one never knows what one is going to be obliged to store," I said. "Miss Johnson, place the kettle behind me and be ready to slam the lid." Then, I turned from him to the combatants.

"Miss Underwood!" I bellowed. The fae queen's attention turned abruptly toward me, the glow in her eyes hitting me like a solid blow. I staggered, but did not fall. "You cannot win! For if the mermaid does not prevent you from stealing away Jack Tremor, I most certainly shall!" At my side, Captain Tremor drew himself up straight, proud and unafraid.

"Upstart mortal!" cried Miss Underwood. "You have no power here!"

She hurled the spear toward me. I stayed stock still as long as my nerve held. Then, I slid sideways.

The spear fell into the iron kettle with a great, ringing clang. Miss Johnson slammed the lid over the top and shot home the bolt on the lock. Trapped, the spear banged madly about, seeking escape and causing the heavy kettle to shudder. Miss Johnson and Cook understandably backed away.

"No!" screamed the fairy. She dove toward the quarterdeck. Biting my lip, I reached for my pistol, but a new noise split the air, as I hoped it would—the rude, raucous laughter of the mermaid.

Miss Underwood screamed incoherently and turned in midair, descending on her damper cousin like all the wrath of Heaven. The fairy wrapped both her hands in those seaweeded, golden tresses and pulled hard. The mermaid screamed and slapped uselessly at the fairy's hands.

"Miss Sherman," I said. "Encourage the whale to leave."

"Aye, aye, ma'am!"

Miss Sherman gave the order and the great guns fired, filling the air with smoke and stench. The balls skipped across the water, bruising flukes, trimming tail and shuddering the great flanks. This iron attack convinced the poor, beleaguered beast that it had finally had enough. It arched its mighty back and vanished beneath the waves. Miss Underwood shot into the air a moment before the whale vanished, hauling the mermaid with her by the hair. The mermaid screamed again and clung to her rival's arms. They rolled over and over in the air, struggling with one another, slapping, biting, and letting out the most piercing of shrieks.

"Cat fight!" shouted one of my crew.

"Get 'er girl!" came the cry from one of the foremast hands.

"That's the way! Slap that pasty face!"

"I've a shilling says the one with wings can take her!"

"I'll take that bet, Chips!"

Someone chuckled, someone guffawed, someone howled, watching these two great queens of the fair folk rolling about like jealous serving boys fighting over some seawoman's affections. The crew's laughter rang across the waters, sliced through the wind and waves. It poured forth until even Jack Tremor joined in. I added my own mirth to the din with the greatest satisfaction.

The pair of them froze in midair, the mermaid's tail wrapped around the fairy's waist. The fairy's hand in the mermaid's hair and her free arm drawn back to deliver a ringing slap.

The merriment of my crew redoubled at this splendid tableau. Several of the women in the rigging had to clasp the ratlines and masts to keep themselves from falling as they shook with their laughter.

The air around the fabulous pair shimmered and I blinked. Instead of a winged warrior and a mer-queen, my streaming eyes made out a bone thin girl of about ten years suspended by a pair of limp, flower-petal wings hanging onto a thing that looked more like a boiled haddock woman than a seductive ruler of the sea.

They looked at us, they looked at each other, they looked down at themselves.

And, oh, Goddess, how they did scream.

The winged girl dropped the haddock woman and flew for the horizon. The haddock dove beneath the waves, and did not reappear. I laughed again at the sudden thought that the whale might be waiting for her in order to discuss its terms of employment.

"That was wonderful, Captain Latimer." Captain Tremor's eyes shone with mirth and delight. "Nothing short of wonderful. However did you think of it?"

I laid a hand on his firm, square, young shoulder. "Belief, Captain Tremor," I said, "I have learned, is all-important in matters of magic. We believed they looked ridiculous, and for that important moment, so did they." The clouds were clearing and the breeze freshening all around us. "Of course, I was praying the entire time that their vanity was as real as their beauty was false."

"You are a marvel, Captain Latimer," he said, with his admiration plain on his open face. "I hope you will tell me in more detail of your voyage. Perhaps when we have a moment to ourselves."

I let myself be warmed by the young man's earnestness. "First, Captain Tremor, you must guide us to that sea cave, or my crew will be more put out than either one of us would care to deal with." I smiled over my deck and my seawomen. "After than, I do believe you and I shall have all the time we need."