

Windswept

By Nora Wilson Fry

The fourth incarnation of the *Sea Siren* blew in to the island chain like flotsam riding the last wisps of the maelstrom. Tattered sails gave little heed to the shrieking birds or flirting breezes that swirled through growing holes. Staggering through the waves she heaved herself onto the rocky shore.

Glancing across the deck towards her glaring Captain on the forecastle the navigator sobbed against the wheel. Brushing tears from her eyes, she walked to the stern rail, swung her legs over and flung herself overboard in a flood of tears. Fins flashed as soon as she struck the water.

Captain Marina Asherah reached down and patted the blindfolded octopus tangled around the ship's figurehead. "Well, that puts the final bow on a catastrophe of a trip. Now we're going to have to drag up another dead ship from the depths, and we are nowhere near home. It's all right Octavia, you can come up now. We're nearly done crashing."

The cephalopod shifted from the grey-brown of the ship to a sickly-green version of her usual cream as she clambered up from the prow. Her legs wrapped tightly around Marina's torso as she attempted to squeeze most of her quivering body under the Captain's coat.

Marina slid the octopus' blindfold up, replacing it with a pair of wide-set goggles. "I'm sorry it didn't help the seasickness, love. Go check and see if there's any way to salvage our *Siren*." Legs flying Octavia scrambled up, and over the rails, after the fish snack Marina had tossed overboard.

First mate Alana bumped her hip as Marina sighed. “Oh, don’t throw her overboard, Mari. It wasn’t the octopus’ fault you put an inexperienced mer-girl in charge of navigation just before a giant storm popped up out of nowhere. Next time you might want to think about a certain wind godling whom you might have annoyed recently before putting someone else at the wheel.”

Marina’s eyes grew wide. “Whom I’ve annoyed, Alana? I haven’t annoyed anyone recently. Besides you.”

Alana’s pale blue eyes flashed a green as deep as her scales. “Oh, really? I think you need to wash that lie off with a little seawater.” Alana tossed her shrieking Captain overboard. Mid-fall Marina’s pants burst apart. Scales swept down pale legs as they fused into a formidable tail. Marina dove deep, trailing bubbles, and leapt back on board, smoothly transitioning from gills to lungs and fins to legs in time to land on the deck.

“Alana! Those were my favorite pants!” Marina leaned over the rail to check on her happily splashing octopus. “Son of a sea hag, what could possibly have gone worse on this trip? Not even a trickle of wind for days. Then three straight days of storms. Octavia spent nearly the whole trip green! It should be impossible for a cephalopod to be simultaneously sunburned and seasick.”

“That loony octopus is always turning colors!” Alana grumbled. “Especially when I want her to do something. Tries to disappear on me every time. Like I can’t tell it’s Octavia when a pile of rope scutters itself across the deck!”

Marina sighed, absently re-braiding her hair as she gazed towards the foreboding shoreline. “I’m not sure what we’re going to do this time. Or where we’re at, for that matter. If we can’t raise another ship it’s going to be ‘mer overboard,’ and we’ll be swimming our way back home.”

Alana leaned against the rail, crossed her ankles, and watched Marina attempting to scan the shoreline casually. Her eyes flickered green with amusement. “Getting a bit breezy again, don’t you think? Looking for something? Or, perhaps, someone?”

Marina glared and turned away. “The sea folk already think of us as misfit mermaids. Father assumes sailing around the world in human form is just an amusing rebellion that I’ll grow out of. Mother and he have a bet on when I’ll come back Under. Nothing travels faster in the water than gossip or is more amusing than failure.”

Alana gazed down, wiggled pink-tipped toes, and smiled. “Having feet never gets old. So adorably impractical.”

Sighing Alana interrupted Marina’s wailing. “Oh, failure is amusing I suppose for some. I’m more entertained by romance.” Just for a heartbeat over Marina’s shoulder, Alana saw a handsome, translucent, and deeply amused man’s face. “And you know, the other amusements of life just chasing the breeze on the open seas.” Alana returned the translucent man’s wink.

Marina shot her a look, “We’re not chasing any breezes. We’re seeing if surface life is survivable! And building a legacy as the first Mer to successfully live in the Above. Even if it’s as vicious human pirates.”

“So vicious that you refuse to kill anyone and keep humans as far from us as possible with your blank check policy? Can you really blame the Mer for thinking it’s a seagirl game? Or Zeph for thinking you’re running away?”

Marina held up a hand, “Stop that or you’ll be swimming home under your own tail-power!”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n.”

Alana laughed at Marina’s outraged expression. “All right! I don’t really want to go back to reading humans’ messages in bottles for entertainment when I’m bored. Though they are quite amusing. I rather prefer swimming in warm seas collecting the spoils from sunken ships.”

It was possible to hire the *Sea Siren* to do impossible deeds; it just wasn’t probable. The Captain’s payment policy was legendary. The crew of the *Siren* could and would accomplish the impossible. Need someone to sail by the monster Charybdis unscathed to deliver a special package in time for your anniversary? The *Siren* was your ship. Need a long-lost treasure recovered from the dark depths of an abyss guarded by a particularly fierce shiny object loving Kraken? The *Siren* was your ship. Need your horse-mad son rescued from the wiles of a Kelpie? The *Siren* was your ship. If you could afford her.

The only payment the Captain required was a single sheet of paper. A blank cheque with your signature. She would fill in the blanks at the end of the venture. Octavia’s ink never bled. And if you couldn’t afford the cost. Well, you were sunk.

It had only taken a few staged murders of ‘clients’ to build up an appropriately terrifying reputation amongst the humans. Access to a large supply of people who wouldn’t actually die if

you threw them overboard or blew holes in their ships was useful. Especially people who possessed an extreme flair for the dramatic. As well as an unlimited supply of formerly sunken hulks and cannonballs.

Even if most of Marina's and the *Sea Sirens'* opponents saw it as a game, the sea battles were the stuff of legends. There were rumors the Mer wanted to make the Sinking Games an official biannual tradition. Including a hideously gaudy and absolutely worthless prize for the triumphant ship and crew. After all, a little dramatic rivalry goes a long way above and below the waves. Everyone loves to be able to tell a good fish story, even the fish.

Their killer reputation kept the *Sea Siren* nicely un-hired and unbothered by most humans. Exactly the way Marina wanted it. This allowed plenty of time for profitable diving excursions in the Caribbean and no need to hide their tails. "No one is better at treasure retrieval and deep-sea exploration than our tribe of merwomen!"

The crew spent two breezy days wandering the island they'd been flung upon. With their access to both land and sea being adrift on a deserted island posed relatively few major difficulties. Some crew members enjoyed the novelty of sleeping with legs while others took to the sea.

If they were hungry, they could search the land or take their natural finform and catch dinner. Consuming it raw or bringing it back to the beach and attempting fire, which led to many singed fingers and giggles. 'Sushi for dinner!'

The romance of pensively staring alone into the sunset as Octavia and the crew tumbled in the surf was wearing thin when an ancient man tottered out of the trees carrying an enormous pack. "Oh, thank the waves! People!"

Octavia launched herself out of the surf and swarmed into the startled man's arms, knocking him flat. "Is this a domesticated cephalopod? How incredible! I thought they were extinct!" A stray tentacle slapped his face, and a laugh burst out of him that sounded seventy years younger than his face.

"Traitor," Marina muttered as Octavia wrapped loving tentacles around the strange man. A part of Marina wished her stubborn pride would allow her to do the same.

Alana chuckled, "He does enjoy these little games, doesn't he? This time try not to let him goad you. Arguing with a god is so undignified."

Marina laughed softly, "What have I ever done that makes you think I care about dignity, Alana?"

"That's true, repeatedly running away from him lacks dignity. Diving into the ocean every night to hide your tears lacks dignity. And dropping love notes in bottles as we sail completely lacks any kind of dignity. It's frankly ridiculous. You've adored each other since you were a breeze and an egg. Just admit it already."

Marina snapped, "My family dynamics are complicated enough. Add sky-shaking magic, daunting political responsibilities, and things get downright dangerous. Not to mention the minor problem of losing his immortality!"

Alana sighed. "True, but if he arbitrarily made decisions for you the way you do for him or disappeared for weeks without a word the way you do, you'd be livid. You've dragged this entire crew across the sea in your attempt to run away from the wind."

“Sometimes your logic is just irritating!” Marina gave up and stomped, how she loved the ability to stomp, fins just weren’t as effective for demonstrating irritation, across the sand. “Who are you supposed to be this time, Zeph?”

The elderly man blinked rheumy eyes. “Who is Zeph? My name is Vincent, but you can call me Doc. I’m a cartographer.”

“Are you, now, Doc? You’re not Zephyr, immortal godling of the wind?”

The man frowned, “No, I’m Vincent Savage, famous cartographer! I explore and map out what I see, though I haven’t seen too well the last few years. You might have heard of how I occasionally get to use my knowledge of cartography and map-making to solve territorial border disputes?”

“Uh huh. And the time before this you were what, a poor marooned sailor?”

Zephyr sighed, letting the glamour he was using to disguise himself fade. Marina much preferred his natural bronze skin, golden eyes, and bronze hair. “Yes, the poor castaway whom you left utterly alone on a deserted island filled with wild beasts! That was a little cruel of you, you know. I was quite sad to see you sail away as I was being used as a chew toy by a seven-headed Hydra. It almost made me think you didn’t care for me at all.”

“Zeph, this is getting ridiculous!” A helpless laugh escaped even as she pleaded. “You have responsibilities.” Eyes burning, she quashed traitorous tears. “You can’t keep pretending to be a physician, scientist, adventurer, inventor, explorer, researcher or some other kind of dashing and

daring human at every stop we make, you old windbag! And if that storm was your idea of a flirty message, I'll have you know you nearly drowned us. Poor Octavia was green!"

Zephyr gave Octavia a reassuring pat as she squeezed herself tighter around him. "First, I didn't send that storm! Second, you're merwomen and an adorable little octopus. You can't drown. So, since you can't simply sail away from me this time, there's something I need to say."

Marina quivered inside as she hardened her heart against the feelings of love he'd expressed so many times before. They didn't come. Instead, she heard, "I want to hire you."

Unexpectedly angry at his matter-of-fact and unloverlike tone she snapped, "You can't afford us."

"I will give you anything you want. I know your policy. Fill in the check with whatever number you like."

Marina looked away, unable to say what she needed to while looking in his eyes. "Unfortunately, you don't have anything I want."

"I think I do."

"Zephyr, the price is too high. We were children playing in the waves and wind. Children don't understand the cost of what they want. You. Will. Become. Mortal. You will die! Do you understand how much it would terrify me to have you living in constant danger of death?"

“Yes, as much as it terrifies me every time you set sail to some new port and won’t stay safely home. Always courting some new danger. Danger that happens despite my desire to keep you safe.”

“Just because I’m a woman!”

Zephyr interrupted before she could indulge in expelling her full head of steam, “No. Because you’re the woman I love.”

“Do not say that!”

“You cannot make me promise to never lie to you and then command me to lie. Marina. I’ve been everywhere. There is nothing the wind cannot touch, except apparently your heart.”

Marina winced, “I…”

Zephyr sighed, “I’m sorry. It’s just. As fun as it is and as willing as I am to follow you to the ends of the earth I need to know. I will not force you. If you truly do not love me. If you truly want me to leave-“

Eyes closed she shook her head. “No! I love you, but the danger. You can’t possibly want to give up immortality and the skies to live in the sea.”

“Where I want to be is with you. Whether it’s above the ocean or below! If you’re going to face danger, let me face it with you. Loving you is not an inconvenience! It’s a gift! And now that you can’t just sail away from me, again, I might finally have found a way to prove it. Come with me, please.”

Each walked on trembling legs, clinging to the other. Standing where sea, sand, and wind mingled, Zeph slid his arm around Marina's shoulders and whistled as only a wind-god can. Marina swayed a little closer, finally letting herself lean, and giggled when she got a face full of irritable octopus.

As the sun dipped into the sea a gorgeous clipper ship swept into the cove, Alana gleefully whooping at the helm. Marina couldn't help but laugh though tears streamed down her face when she saw the name on the prow.

Zeph had finally found a way to give her a *Blank Cheque*.