

mermaids monthly

Issue #1 - January 2021



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Nilah Magruder - Brett Massé - Niv Sekar
Patty Templeton - Brigit Truex

will '21

mermaids monthly

a magazine about mermaid stuff. that's it - that's the shell.

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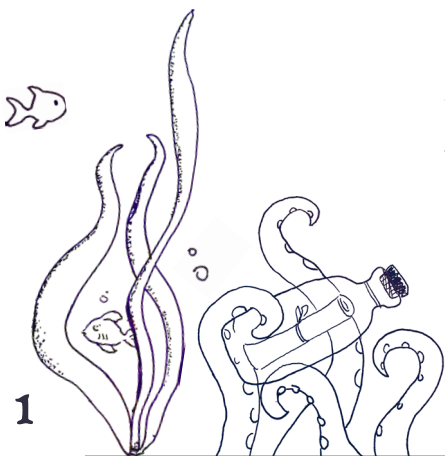
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Mermaids Monthly is a magazine all about mermaids. Happy mermaids, murderous mermaids; mermaids, merdudes, mermxs – maybe even a few highly confused manatees. Any cool aquatic chimeras that you could ever possibly think of with any and every fin color and combination. To subscribe, visit mermaidsmoonthly.com.



Don't miss the **Message in a Bubble** section on Page 18! Several sweet notes washed up on the shores of our inbox and gosh its nice to share. Want to send a note of your own?

Send us \$5 and a tweet sized text and we'll share it in the next issue! Kickstarter backers are entitled to one free message! Email us with any questions at [mermaidsmoonthly @ gmail](mailto:mermaidsmoonthly@gmail.com)



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“Moonmaid” by Niv Sekar

Belkie

by Brigit Truex

Lying in your arms, after,
I see the moon change shape
letting her light spill over the lip,

brushing the hills, round
as belly or breast,
with a milky sheen that no
amount of rubbing, no slow
tongue can remove.

You tell me that I am silvered too,
with a fine sweat that tastes of salt,
you say, of seawater. That my hair is
dark as wet kelp, and heavy to lift.
It has the weight of the sea,
you say. You hear the thrum of tides
when you listen, close, to my heart.

I watch your head on my breast,
the ceaseless rise and fall
of heart and sea, at once the same,
without volition, unstoppable.
I cannot speak. I cannot tell you

how I am called back, again and again,
to these arms, this embrace which
welcomes me wetly, pulls me down,
caressing my hair, my face, my open
mouth as I gasp, delighted, gazing back
at the moon as she changes shape
once more, tilting toward the surface
and flooding me with silver.

I dive deep, sleek in my rich brown skin.
Wait for me on the shingle.
Watch for me in the dark.

Pep and Luna's

by Patty Templeton

Content note: This story contains details of a violent fight between a mermaid and a dog.

You ain't gonna find a better dive than Pep and Luna's on Rural Route 2. It's past the second cornfield to the right and straight on till midnight. Get to the quarry and you've gone too far. Sun-up and the same directions stand, but keep an ear out for the bee-tree. A murmuring oak flags the final furlong.

Luna'd chitter a creek-curse at me for calling it a dive. Pep'd straighten her yellow neckerchief, dignified-like, and call it a road house. It's a tin-roofed wooden box with a neon sign and gravel lot. We got thirteen barstools and three round tables. Only time we're full is the first Friday of the month when there's live music behind chicken wire in the left corner. Hooch, water, and coffee on hand. Get hungry, and we got a two-buck baked potato. I'd call the place heaven if I didn't already call it work. Someone's gotta finagle the dayshift for those two.

Maybe I'm old enough that more midnights have hurt me than mid-afternoons, but I find solace in a sunlit saloon. It's a trashy kinda romantic, what with dust motes roping sunbeams and water shadows waltzing the room.

Day or night, only three kinds stumble in here: regulars, rubbernecks, and wrong-turns.

First door creak of the day and there's a lookie-loo wide-eye about them. I get it, I do. I was once where they're at. Mayhap they bummed a hitcher a smoke and the debt was settled with a story. More likely, they read about us while truck stop shitter-sittin'; ain't it a roadside rule that a stall's walls have peculiar pronouncements? I, myself, learned of Pep and Luna's not from a biker but the blind parrot on her shoulder.

"Go on and gawk," I says to 'em and look around myself. "It ain't ordinary. You heard this here's a mermaid bar, and you heard right."

Only bar out there with moonshine pouring from a spigotted, chicken-footed, backbar bathtub connected to clear pipes impersonating crown molding the joint over.

"Saw your ad in *Gutter Grub*."

“Heck, that rag’s been dead ten-plus years. Pull up a barstool, and quit looking over your shoulder. Shift change ain’t till four. Pep’ll pop in the backdoor and Luna will plop into that jar. There, by the coffeemaker. She’ll slide down from the bathtub. No, I don’t know if she’s sleeping there now or if she’s in the back, and no, I won’t check. She’s a light sleeper, and it’s rude. Furthermore, I ain’t effin’ up her process. I don’t know if it’s in the sleeping or the swimming, but something Luna does turns water into white lightning. I refill that tub myself and know for verified fact that water goes in. Then that miniature mermaid, in all her pudgy, bolo tie-wearing, bald wonder, turns it into hooch. So, mind your manners. She gets upset and it tastes like coffin varnish.”

“She only ever swim in?”

“You ain’t guaranteed to see a mermaid or know you seen one. How you know I don’t have a tail? How I know you don’t have one? Don’t be the boner who asks Luna to transform from mer-gal to gams aplenty when she gets here. Ain’t no one’s business what other folks’ bottom half can or can’t do.”

“Too early for a drink?”

“Never.” I slide ‘em a tin mug. “Sip slow. It’s schnockerin’ stuff.”

“Pep brought a slew of those mugs back

from Big Rock Candy Mountain. If you’re wondering how in the corn-high-hell a human and a mermaid become best friends and open a dive down the road from the edge of nothing, it’s because of Big Rock Candy Mountain. You probably heard Burl Ives sing about it; Johnny Cash even covered that old song, but it’s a real-life land of milk and honey where you don’t need any money. Or was.”

“See, Pep’s an adventurer. Settled these days. But before the bar there was the road and Pep’s brown boots tread more miles than you can fling a fan dancing elephant at. She rode the rails, was a riverboat gambler, sewed sequined suits for country stars, worked as a pinsetter in a bowling alley ran by the mob, and that’s not the half of it. Big Rock Candy Mountain was supposed to be her retirement. But nothing goes according to plan and if it’s Pep’s plan, you can double dunk that donut.”

“Ask her, and Pep won’t say how her bad knees made it to Big Rock Candy Mountain. She’ll declare it took forty days and forty nights on foot. She’ll point at the walking stick nailed above the door. But she won’t jaw on it much. She wanted hobo heaven and found a ruin. Bluebird carcasses in busted crystal fountains. A surface mined mountain. Cigarette trees cut to stumps. Costly lofts where life used to be free. Bad coffee.”

“Ask Luna, and she’ll sing on the sweet ol’ days. The gin lake, big sky, and fireflies. Might mention winning her bolo-tie playing gin rummy with a rodeo clown or the time Whitman and his barbaric yawp came around.”

“Pep’ll pipe up and interrupt. Say Luna gleamed in a moonbeam first time she saw her. Say the world’s smallest mermaid bareknuckle boxed the world’s filthiest mutt in a near-dry river bed.”

“Luna ain’t one to be outdone. She’ll nod at her hometown mural behind the stage—white lightning at a white water gallop clambering Candy Mountain—and remind Pep that the only puddle she had left, in what used to be that corn liquor river, was from the frothing mouth of that mongrel. Then she’ll shout an ode to Pep’s purple flannel, crow-footed squint, and ample fundament.”

“If Pep’s in her cups, she’ll roll up a patched denim pant leg and flash the gash that dog bestowed. She tried to send it packing, instead it got snacking. And tiny don’t mean unmighty because Luna’s the tough cookie of those two. She tail-smacked that mutt’s eye to tatters before it let go and git.”

“Still, they’ll say they saved each other.”

“Pep offered a mason jar and Luna climbed in. Liked the shine but said she made better. She ate Pep’s potato chips while

Pep bandaged the bite. Got to chatting. Both wanted more than they had and found increase in each other. I ain’t sure on details, but they got plastered and lit candles in the river bed. A friendship made over shadow and flame with a cloud-covered moon as witness.”

“They got walking, albeit crooked, hanging on a lamppost here and cornstalks there. Luna shimmering, graceful and green, in a jar in the chest pocket of Pep’s overalls. Pep lanky and sweating because Pep’s always sweating. They didn’t stop for forty days and forty nights, lord save their livers. Wouldn’t have halted either but for the both of ‘em spotting a jackalope’s ghost engrossed in the harvest moon. It was a good enough omen to quit roaming.”

“But, like I said, Pep and Luna come in at four. You can ask ‘em yourself about all the hindsights and goodnights they got together. Meantime, you want another drink?”

Pep & Luna illustration
by Brett Massé

HOT COFFEE • BOOZE • POTATOES



Mermaid Alignment Chart

Mood	Body Type	Half/Half	Must be Human	Any Water Dweller
Murderous		Ursula	Rusalka	Coconut Crabs
Kind		Mermaid Pusheen	La Sirena	Free Willy
Look, merfolk are complex, okay?		Nagas	Swamp Thing	Patty Templeton's "So Alive"

From Witch to Queen and God

by L. D. Lewis

Content note: This story contains slavery, mentions of torture, and depictions of graphic violence and executions.

Twilight and the islands are on fire.

The witch walks out of the sea on two legs alongside her men, armed to the teeth with fury meant to carry them through Eros's liberation. She's forgotten the weight of locs drenched in seawater and what it is to have knees, the flex of heel and toe and the very concept of footing as she moves out of the surf across pebbled sand and silt. Stammered steps are unbecoming of a sea queen but no one who should fear her notices.

Her men are warriors, the damned redeemed with her power to back them. Many of them still bear the mark of their past lives' crimes, cut or branded into their necks. Debtors, absconders, escaped slaves in all their forms, all sentenced to death, all choosing instead the service of the witch, The Obe Ursla. She has lent them her power to free the families they left behind.

This is not altruism. This is an exchange.

Their motley fleet of pilfered ships are allowed to run aground as bombs shake the world around them. The brick and

stone buildings of Governor Island loom dark against the sky, flickering against the hellfire sunrise lit by battles in the streets below them. They fight merchants and the comfortable private militias of slavers. Victory is imminent.

The witch follows her personal guard across cobblestones to the Governor's palace. They are four mountainous men with battle axes and mad eyes. They clear her path with violence. The streets are alive with war cries and clashing metal, the scraping of golden baubles against brick walls as aristocrats slump gurgling to where they will finally die. She is of little help with the sword in her fist but she carries it anyway. She is not a god, not yet. Her power is not infinite. It takes all of it to keep her army breathing and upright as they invade eleven islands, to keep the storm roiling in the east and the foreigners at bay. By now she is masterful at masking the strain.

Akil, the youngest of her legion sticks close to her as her shield. He is wiry and quick with his sickled sword. He is branded "V" for vandal just below his right ear. The symbol marks the end of a

crude line across his throat where the chain meant to strangle him to death succeeded only in permanently damaging his vocal cords. He is grown now, but he was eight when the Governor condemned him.

The Governor's Palace is on the east end of a brick courtyard and spans half a city block. The witch watches a silhouette disappear from a high balcony as they approach. Akil presses her back into a shadowed doorway until the way is clear. Her men are zealous in their revenge and waste no time engaging the pitiable group of soldiers mustered in the square.

Black lances and battle axes swing in whistling spirals cut by the sounds of protest and splattering flesh and the violent crashing of the Governor's great oak door. Akil nods for her to follow him inside and they quickly overstep the scattered bodies to enter the Governor's foyer. It is a needlessly opulent hall lined with ugly, valuable, fragile things on pedestals. Her men move quickly through every door, fishing for cowering enemies but find only the help staring wide-eyed and confused as they are ushered kindly to the foyer.

"Where is the Governor?" the witch asks.

The cook, the bootblack, the maid all do some version of pointing upward, waiting, it seemed, for a sentence of their own. All are elders. All have been through some version of this before. New lords came to

Eros almost with the seasons.

"Do you know who I am?" the witch asks.

One of her guard, a man named Omar with a bald head and a D for "debtor" carved into his neck steps forward. "By the grace of the Roaming Queen, the Obe Ursla, who abides in the waters, you are freed."

It is sort of a foolish, needlessly dramatic thing, something a herald might say that wouldn't mortify her nearly as much if she wasn't standing right there. She is shorter than most queens, she imagines. Her hips are wider, her face rounder. There are by far more curves than lines to her altogether. Her boots are dirty. The workers look unconvinced. She doesn't blame them.

"Wait here for now. The soldiers will kill you out there if they think you are with us," she tells them and starts up the stairs.

"... I do know you..." she hears, and turns back. The cook — decided by her dirty apron and cooking oil scent — has grabbed Omar by the wrist and stares him long in the face.

"Your mother is Della isn't she? Omar?"

"Titia?" Omar squints. The woman who is apparently Titia gasps and steps backward onto the toes of the bootblack.

“By the... you died! You died, boy! They dropped you...”

Sentiment.

“We don’t have time for this,” the witch declares. Her heart flutters as if it knows it is on unsteady ground. They have to be back in the water soon.

Omar nods and squeezes Titia’s hands one good time before joining the others on the staircase. Titia watches, the confusion on her face mingled by a clear disdain for the Roaming Queen’s insistence.

There are few guards in the upstairs hallway and the carpet is nice. Akil does not have to break stride to cut them down; they are light work for the others to handle. He does, however, kick in a dark door at the end of the hall. The soldiers’ positioning gave away its importance.

It is a bedroom. A thin man, relatively young and with sand-colored hair yelps inside. The witch watches him take in the fact that they wear no uniforms. This is not a foreign invasion. This is an uprising.

“Who are you?” He stammers, trying to find a place for his tone somewhere between authoritative and amicable. He thinks they are slaves to be reasoned with at least until rescue arrives, but he isn’t sure. Something about the way the

warriors look at him, the way the witch looks at him, suggests this will end badly.

The witch steps from behind Akil, prepared to do her own work this one time. “Are you the Governor of Eros?” she asks.

“I... yes. Why?” he backs away.

“On your knees,” she commands.

“I’m sorry?” he scoffs.

The witch smiles and points to the lovely carpet with her sword. “On your knees.” He doesn’t seem to take her seriously until he takes stock of the eyes on him in this room. He is half the size of any man and even less armed. He goes to the floor on his knees.

“Your settlement here is theft,” the witch continues. “It was not given to you by the people of Eros and so it has been reclaimed. Your services are no longer required.”

“I don’t unders—”

The words catch where the blood pools in his throat. The witch has cut it suddenly. His brow furrows in confusion before his eyes go vacant and he topples the rest of the way over.

The witch flexes her hand, put off by the feel of someone else’s blood. She had only

killed a man by her own hand once before and hadn't developed a taste for it in the decade or so since. The skin of her fingers crackles and begins to split at the knuckles; her neck scratches off in pieces on the collar of her shirt as she begins to dry out. The sensation makes her grind her teeth. She cannot be this far from the ocean for too long, not with her power spread so thin. She wipes her blade clean and discards it with a clatter on a stately, round drawing table in the middle of the room before turning back to her guards.

"Take him," she commands, nodding at the governor bleeding into the rug and donning a pair of damp leather gloves. "Find the Captain. Bring him to me here."

Most of them leave, carrying the governor's body between them. Akil lingers.

The sea witch sucks her teeth and waits for him to move. "You should go. You know better than they do who they're looking for."

"Forgive me, Mother," he signs. "Is this a mistake?"

"I don't make mistakes. You deserve your vengeance. The islands deserve their freedom. And I deserve worship for giving it to them."

He just watches her with those warm eyes of his, like some smug, simpering child

placating a mad, ancient mother. The skin of his face is dark and silk and handsome as Night himself once was. Irritated, she imagines his other fate as a bloated carcass, a drowned ghost pecked to dust by the sea's listless creatures. Perhaps she should not have saved him. Perhaps he'd have been more use to her that way.

"If you die here?" Akil signs.

She sighs and opens a tall, stained glass window overlooking the port and a wall of lightning on the horizon. "Then we all die here," she says plainly and signs her words in firm, staccato gestures for the drama in it. "So stop wasting time."

Akil nods once and leaves the door closed behind him. A needling sensation pierces between her ribs and she knows it's because one of her fighters has been killed. She braces herself against the high windowsill and allows herself a wince. War's ash and ember drift inside on the sea breeze to taint the heavy drapes and blood-soaked carpet. The fight is loud on the city streets beneath her. She closes her eyes and listens to the music of violence, of her rise from witch and queen to god, and breathes until the pain subsides. She was a child when the Old Gods departed for more entertaining corners of the cosmos and left Man to his hubris and the misery borne of it. The Obe were her parents and grandparents, elders forced to free themselves from Eros's foreign kings because worshipping the Old Gods had

done nothing to help. Obe magic was weaponized magic. It was survival magic. It was retribution magic if she used it right.

So, ever the opportunist, Ursula left her people in their exile and stepped into the sea where Men could not follow. She used her Obe magic to become its queen, making her legions from those condemned to drown by overwhelmed flesh traffickers and bitter kings.

She was at her loveliest when the damned descended to her depths—if only to seduce them to her rule. Her dark skin, almost blue and iridescent, ran smooth over ample, soft curves that gave way to black tentacles at her hips, dotted with pale lights and braided into a fishtail so as not to frighten them off. Locs white as bleached coral streamed from her head beneath a crown of sea glass.

She would stare into the faces of the damned with mirrored eyes, cradle their heads in her cold hands and whisper sweetly into their thoughts, “You do not have to die here. Not if you love me.”

Those who jerked away or gaped in horror until their lungs collapsed resigned themselves to death and the deep. She let them sink. The smart ones would nod; and she would smile something sinister in the dark and kiss them with full lips, breathing into them the magic they would need to live under the sea. Their new gills,

their pearlescent fishtails, were only the beginning of what it would mean to love her.

Their families, though, remained on the islands under the yoke of whatever wars or masters were seizing them at the time. Far be it from her to give a damn, but if she wanted to become more than a witch, more than the sea queen, she needed the reverence of Men. Becoming a deity was a question of politics. So she would see them freed and they would have her and no other god to thank for it.



The witch smokes his pipe — the dead governor’s. She found it half-packed on the nightstand beside a box of long fireplace matches and a crystal bowl of burnt-out leavings. It is an old vice from her days when she lived on land. Her lungs remember the feeling; she has only coughed once. The tobacco tastes like soured pumpkin. She’s had better.

A hard knock at the door. Her guest has arrived after an hour has passed. She takes her moments before ordering them in. *Best to be done with this quickly, she thinks. But not so quick as to seem rushed. Remember, a god has all the time in the world.*

The door opens with a creak and Akil strides in, his face stoic and revealing nothing of his doubts. He stands beside her. A battered man in a blood-stained

uniform is shoved into the room behind him and the door closes again. The new man is of average height with a remarkably round head. His face is creased, weather beaten, and dripping in sweat. He is panting. He's been fighting. He glares at her, at Akil, the whites of his narrowed eyes yellow with age. As ordered, the guards have not disarmed him. He will have a chance to choose not to abuse that courtesy.

"You are Captain Benta?" the witch asks.

"Where is the Governor?" He demands.

"You're standing in him." The witch nods at the captain's feet. He barely startles as he glances down at the glistening pool. He's seen blood before. His hand does fly reflexively to the sword on his hip, though, and Akil steps forward, drawing his own scimitar quick as a twitch.

The white caps of peaking waves outside the window rise to match the arc of the witch's grin. She takes a seat at the dead governor's drawing table.

"Please sit," she offers.

"I'll stand," the captain says, dropping his hands again warily at his sides. He squints in the dark, studying her face. She lets him.

"How do I know you?"

"The Drowned Mother, The Roaming Queen. But for our relationship, I would allow you to call me Ursla."

"The Obe? The Sea Witch?"

"Careful," her smile falters and the waters beyond the bay crackle to stony stillness.

"Witch' is what you call the gods you intend to kill. You don't want me to take it as a threat. Not before I've made my offer."

"What offer am I going to accept from a demon?"

Ursla considers this a moment, wondering if diplomacy is even possible when the other party starts out discourse by insulting you twice. "Did my man here introduce... re-introduce himself to you on the way in?" she asks instead.

The captain grunts a no.

"About ten years ago a ship bound for Boorhia carrying forty-eight souls for trade arrived at its destination at Porto das Ilhas Loiras with only twelve. Among the missing was an eight-year-old boy. He told me you're the one to see about that math."

Akil glares and makes a tough show of craning his neck, cracking it this way and that to flex his scars.

"You'd be that boy I take it," says the

captain, unimpressed.

“You’ll be wanting to tell him why you wrapped chains around his neck and kicked him off the ship like a sack of bad meat,” says the witch.

“Now why would I do that? Nobody who died like they was supposed to got an explanation.”

“He’s not dead, though. Explain,” the witch demands. Her throat is tickling with dryness. She tries not to show it.

“If it was a special occasion or something I’d remember you but fact is I don’t,” says Benta, over-loud. “Boorhia stopped taking our unwanted years ago, but the transport ships kept taking commissions from the Eros lords. We collected for each head but only delivered what we knew we could unload. It wasn’t nothing personal, boy. But had you not done whatever you did to be on that ship in the first place, it wouldn’t have mattered.”

“Yes, he’d be a laborer,” says the witch.

“By the cut of him now I’d say they’d fight him in the pits. Now why don’t you tell me why you all are here so I can get to getting you out of my city?” Benta spits.

The witch slides a piece of paper across a table and the captain unfurls it. A contract.

“You prosper because I allow it. My waters feed you, they sustain your economy, they keep your executed and your dead, and it is by my grace that they do not consume this place entirely. I have never required anything from your people in exchange for these kindnesses,” she says.

“Until now.”

“Until now,” she grins. “If you look out that window, you’ll see a storm wall just before the horizon line. That’s mine. Beneath it are two dozen unfriendly warships bound for your territory and the wealth you’ve amassed here. My power is keeping them there until or unless we strike our agreement.” She raises her right hand and dances her fingers like marionette strings. The waves outside the open window mimic her movements.

“So what is it you want?”

“You’ve enslaved your own people to appease foreign masters and I want it undone. I want the allegiance of a freed Eros. Return the islands to the people and allow them to flourish under my protection.”

“I can’t make that decision; I don’t have the authority.” He laughs. It grates on her.

“Assume that you do have the authority,” she waves him off. “Assume that when you walk out of this room every

enforcer who would deny your command is now little more than rapidly cooling viscera decorating that lovely carpet you all have in the hallway.”

“You’ve been drinking too much sea water. Do you have any idea how unstable this place would become?”

“Which is why you will be allowed to live. The masters will be an example of my wrath and you, child-killer, will be an example of my mercy. You’ll restabilize the region as the first King of a united Eros under the last living god.”

Suddenly a sharp pain tears through the space between the witch’s eyes and she is forced to shut them tightly. Her balance swoons in the seat and she uses her hands on the table to stabilize herself.

Someone has died badly.

When she opens her eyes again, the captain is studying her and a wry grin creeps across his ancient face.

“I don’t think so,” he says coolly. “I don’t think you will last longer than this conversation. I think you need me to agree otherwise you would just take what you want. And I think you will spend every last remaining second of your life trying to convince me.”

“Then you will die in this room,” she said quietly.

“Not by your hand.”

“Doesn’t have to be mine.”

Akil smiles and again draws his weapon with a sharp sound. This time the old man matches his speed.

“You mean your pup here?” scoffs the Captain. “You’re on borrowed time, boy. What happens, hm, when the witch goes down? Do you melt? Shivel up like a worm on a dry deck? Or maybe you turn back into the fish she made you and I can gut you right here on this table. No matter. We’ll see.”

Akil is stone; disciplined. If he is suffering at all the witch cannot tell.

The witch sucks her breaths audibly now. What’s left of her body’s moisture emerges as cold sweat on the cracking surface of her skin. She can feel the fissure forming in a jagged line from her scalp down the left side of her face. The shallow flesh it exposes is too dry to even bleed and the Captain eyes her keenly. She will make a fine tavern story.

Diplomacy is useless.

“The hard way then,” the witch manages. Akil launches himself into the attack with a driving thrust that nearly finishes the fight before it begins and the witch shoves herself clear of the table. Her vision swims as she staggers backward toward

the open window. A crash behind her. They've upended the table. Between blinks the witch sees the sky and sea are one indiscernible darkness. There is no storm. The wall of lightning has collapsed.

She hears a grunt — has to be Benta's— and something strikes near her head. Before she can turn around, she too collapses.



Warbled cries like screaming underwater echo in her head and her eyes snap open.

She comes to with her face bouncing against Akil's back. She can make out little but the blur of cobblestones beneath his feet as he carries her sprinting through the city. Her thoughts are similarly indistinct, somewhere between where are we going and this is undignified. They mingle with the growing sensation of suffocating and the distant awareness that she is dying. She tightens her arms over his shoulders to prove that she can.

He turns his head slightly to acknowledge she is awake.

More cries, louder this time. Akil taps her leg urgently and points ahead of them with his sword. Four men, burly and bearing the king's colors stand between them and the flickering water of the bay and now Ursula understands: he is trying

to get her back to the sea. And he has no intention of slowing down.

"Grip me," he signs with his fists, and brings them to her hands where they drape over his chest.

The witch has her doubts but there is no time. The soldiers are rushing with their weapons drawn. Akil grunts as he hoists her higher on his hips. With what is left of her energy, she takes up her slack and locks her legs around his waist. She's underestimated his strength carrying her weight at this speed for this distance. A brief, mortal regret — not telling him often or ever how impressed she is with him — registers as she feels the muscles in his shoulders and back ripple and tense for a strike.

The air is a whirlwind of blades and flailing limbs. She feels the variable tension in Akil's muscles, the difference between a started and finished attack, between an inserted and extracted blade in the flesh. Here and there a body collapses, but never his. He keeps his back to the wall to keep her out of danger. A short sword sparks against the bricks near her face and she turns away. The sea is so close. She considers jumping off him and making a run for it. But as if he's read her mind, Akil pulls away from the fight with the last standing warrior and bolts for the edge of the docks. He doesn't stop until he falls.



Brackish water fills her lungs like fresh air. Her shriveled and split skin returns to its glorious luster and the stretching of her tentacles as she strips away her clothes feels like the first stretch of being liberated from a coffin.

Another blast and the water vibrates. Half a league beyond the drifting, burning debris, the invaders are arriving. They fire longshot cannons; and the balls sink into the bay just short of landfall.

So close, she fumes. How had she gotten this close and failed so grandly? Soon new invaders will take advantage of the subdued islands after havoc she's wreaked. What is left of her men will be at their mercy. It will take a lifetime to rebuild her people. She needed a Man on land to speak to Men of her greatness, her terrible mercy. To spread her fame and create the traditions for her worship.

A man.

Unless...

She turns to see Akil writhing nearby, wrestling a tangle of pants from around his sleek, black tail.

"Akil, beloved," she purred in his thoughts. "How would you like to be king?"

"What?"

"Come now, you deserve it!" she insists.

Her impatience is mounting, subdued rage emanating heat in the water around her. "You know what is at stake. Our people, our family, all dead or in bondage and for nothing. I can feel them. Their dying is like scorpions in my belly. There were many but so few now."

"So bring them home." He signs, his face reads deadpan.

"And then what? Their families remain in bondage or worse under the new invaders?"

"You do not have to play me." He frowns. "I know what you want. And 'king or death' is no choice."

"And yet you must choose. Quickly."

They stare beyond the surface of the water where the helms of incoming ships have not yet reached the flaming light of the city, but will any moment.

"Tell me first, where would you be without me? Tell me you are a god but I am your savior, and I will be the king you need."

The witch recoils with a scowl. He stares after her with mirrored eyes and she remembers the boy sinking in chains. She tries to remember the way fear looked on his young face, but all she sees is calm. Has she ever known him to be afraid?

What a little monster.

She adjusts her demeanor to mimic something regal. There is no time. She will play his game.

“Oh Akil...” she muses, wrapping her body and its stream of tentacles around him. “I don’t mind telling you you’ve come a long way from the forgotten, unloved baby vandal pissing in my water while you sank into the deep. You were valiant in defense of your Queen tonight, impressively so. And yes, you saved my life, and while I’m sure you can convince yourself it was a noble and extraordinary deed, you did it just as much to save yourself. You have been a fine warrior and will make quite the king, but because I raised you. Keep that in the worship you build for me and I will allow you to keep your position. Do we have a deal?” Neither trusts the other. The silent moments are tense, weighted with each one considering caveats to add or subtract from the arrangement. The witch never makes air-tight deals. It is mostly for her own benefit.

Akil nods once, distinctively, so there can be no uncertainty. The witch grins and kisses him on the lips, taking back the sea gifts she’s given him until his fins are legs again and he pushes her away for need of air before he drowns.

“Swim, my King.” She grins. Akil the Man, the naked King of Eros glares

back at her as he swims for the surface. Reinvigorated, the witch swims out to where the bay drops off into open ocean. There, she snatches the current and turns it on its side, blasting herself beyond the surface on an inverted waterspout.

Here she sits. She laughs loudly in a voice like thunder. It is fitting, for she is so close now to the clouds. Below and before her are the invaders in their ships, panicking to route themselves around her sudden throne. Behind her, Governor’s Island. King’s Island. It still burns, as do the islands around it. The people are still occupied, still recovering, but that is fine. The show hasn’t started yet.

The witch conjures tentacles in the form of two spouts nearly as high as she. The invaders panic as the water is sucked from beneath them. She watches them choose to swim instead of sail. Unfortunate she isn’t there to make them a deal when they drown.

She draws her arms wide as wings and the water tentacles follow. She brings her hands over her head and tentacles follow. And when she brings them down swift and hard — the descent of an executioner’s axe — the tentacles tear whistling through the air. They tear through the ships, they tear through the sea. They open it to its dry bottom, littered with rocks and long-dead carcasses of grand whales and old ships. The slice is a mile long, visible from the

shore by the moon and the odd lightning strike in the warm air. The invaders fall into it, their ships topple. A body or two spills first. And as quickly as it opened, the ocean closes again. Silence ensues but for the roar of waves until all is calm again.

When she turns to the islands, the people have gathered near the burning docks. Governors' soldiers who have managed to survive this long, the remnants of Ursla's warriors, their freed families. All agape.

All in awe.

Akil sits in found clothes on the rocks nearby. There is no dread on his face, only impatience for her theatrics to be over. He has always been hard to impress.

The witch smiles and conjures a voice like eleven voices — a way, she thinks a god might speak. And to all, but mainly her King, she gives her first divine decree:

“Bow.”



Cover Art by Nilah Magruder

Message In A Bubble

to **Jennifer**

we all love you and miss you and will be happy to see you when you come back!

- “the gang”

to **Audrey**

Audrey! I hope my no-longer-little Mermaid enjoys all the tales (and tails)! I bet mermaids would crush at Synchro except for pikes and other split-leg figures.

- **Ilove, Dadda**

to **Kim**

Hey, Kim. For you and your kung-fu mermaid. Happy New Year!

- **Carol**

to **Taryn**

Taryn, I hope that 2021 is off to a swimmingly good start! To get things started, please enjoy a year of mermaids and adventure.

- **Ilove, Kirsten**

The Little Sea Maid

by Annika Barranti Klein



Illustration by Gabriel Klein

Deep in the sea, Maris, youngest daughter of Amphitrite, dreamed of the surface.

Sometimes, when little rays of sun made their way down through the water, Maris imagined what it would be like in the shallows, where she would be able to feel the warmth of the light, to see with her eyes and not just her whiskers.

Maris's sisters did not want to go to the surface. Up there, they said, the sun would burn you and the wind scrape

against your skin. Up there, they said, there was no cold, thick sea to hold you and protect you. Up there, they said, people had no tails and no blubber and shaved off their whiskers.

Maris did not believe her sisters. How could all of those things be true? So she swam up to the surface to see for herself.

Maris's pale skin became hot and itchy, her blubber heavy; the bright sun hurt her eyes and her gills hurt in the thin air. She was shocked to see people walking on spiny legs. She wondered at their pale hair and dry skin. They had no blubber or whiskers to protect them and wrapped themselves in weeds instead. Maris did not like it on the surface.

Maris kissed her beautiful sea and dove deep, deep down, where she stayed and was happy for all of her days until one day she joyfully became sea foam again.

*This story originally appeared in
Enchanted Conversation*

Ships and How We're Handling Things

By Meg Frank

Hey folks, last year you helped us raise **\$27,553** to make this magazine happen. I told you we'd tell you how we spent the money we received and here I am to do that. **TL;dr we're operating within our budget but a little behind schedule.**

Kickstarter took a cut of the money we raised to the tune of \$2322 for the work of hosting our project online, streamlining the donations, and keeping track of your contact and shipping information. Honestly, it's a steal. We flip our fins especially in the direction of Oriana Leckert who provided specific and helpful feedback on our campaign concepts and some much needed encouragement.

That cut left us with **\$25,230**. We found another \$950 in our own pockets and altered our plans to fit a budget of **\$26,150** for 2021. The increase in operational budget covers more content - written and visual - for the magazine, legal incorporation costs, and a higher pay rate for our Logistics Wizard, Lis.

So far this year we've spent **\$4092**. A little over half of that, \$2582, has been spent on buying content for the magazine. \$1780 was spent on the content for this January Issue (we budgeted for \$1950)

with the rest covering content for the Bonus Issue and content for swiftly upcoming issues.

The other \$1510 we have spent this year has gone to incorporation fees (\$350), lots of postage stamps (\$520!), pins (\$610) and website stuff (\$30).

Production of some of our backing rewards is taking longer than we anticipated because our timeline didn't plan for living and trying to work through an armed insurrection. We decided to give ourselves and our contributors more time to work and we hope you understand - our work is better for it.

Ideally, future issues will be released to subscribers closer to the middle of the month. We **hope** all physical rewards will be delivered by the end of February and we will continue to update you here and in online spaces until everything is delivered.

So, there you have it: the cost and keeping of this magazine. Next time: charts and graphs!

Tall ships seem pretty cool. Got a favorite?

Our Contributors

Annika Barranti Klein lives and writes in Los Angeles with her partner and their two sons in a tiny apartment full of books. She is a collector of blank notebooks, pens, and animal bones. Her fiction has been or is forthcoming in *Craft Literary*, *Milk Candy Review*, and *Asimov's Science Fiction*, among others.

Gabriel Klein is a young writer who lives in Los Angeles. He is one of Annika's two sons and would describe himself as a 'gamer worm'. He loves music and digital art. He writes fan fiction, original stories, and comics in his spare time.

L. D. Lewis is an award-winning SF/F writer and editor, and serves as a founding creator, Art Director, and Project Manager for *FIYAH Literary Magazine*. She also serves as Grant Administrator for the Speculative Literature Foundation, FIYAHCON Director, and a researcher for the LeVar Burton Reads podcast. She is the author of *A Ruin of Shadows* (Dancing Star Press, 2018) and her published short fiction includes appearances in *FIYAH*, *PodCastle*, *Strange Horizons*, *Anathema: Spec from the Margins*, and *Fireside Magazine*, among others. She lives in Georgia with her coffee habit and an impressive Funko Pop! collection. Visit her website ldlewiswrites.com, follow her on Twitter [@ellethevillain](https://twitter.com/ellethevillain).

Nilah Magruder is based in Western Maryland. She is the author of *M.F.K.*, a middle-grade graphic novel and winner of the Dwayne McDuffie Award for Diversity, and *How to Find a Fox*, a picture book. She has published short stories in *Fireside Magazine* and the anthology *All Out: The No-Longer-Secret Stories of Queer Teens throughout the Ages*. Nilah has also written for Marvel Comics, illustrated children's books for Disney-Hyperion, Scholastic, and Penguin, and worked as a writer and storyboard artist in television animation. When she is not working, Nilah is watching movies, growing herbs, and fighting her cat for control of her desk chair.

Brett Massé is a graphic designer excited about work centered around art, design, and games, with an emphasis on subcultures, DIY philosophies, and sociopolitical critiques of an instinct-driven society's impact on technology and culture, making particular note to its influence on the environment.

He lives with a cat. His name's Boombox.

Our Contributors

(Brett Massé continued) After earning a degree in graphic design, he went on to manage and direct marketing and branding at various businesses in Southwest Colorado, including the Durango Arts Center. Lately, he's been catching up on samurai movies and playing PC games in between designing books and zines. You can see his work at BrettMasseWorks.com.

Niv Sekar is someone who writes and draws, and does a lot of things inside the intersection of both (comics! animation! short stories!) She grew up in the south, making friends by magic and learning to drive in thunderstorms. Now she lives in New York, where she spends her winters trying not to slip on the sidewalks.

Patty Templeton is a writer, archivist, artist, and itinerant kitchen dancer. She has a MSLIS with an archival focus from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is a 2020 Library of Congress Junior Fellow, and is a provisional member of the Academy of Certified Archivists.

She is the author of the historical fantasy novel *There Is No Lovely End*, an 1880s ghost story following the life of rifle heiress Sarah Winchester. Currently, she's writing a novel in stories about a small city in perpetual autumn. Templeton enjoys hot coffee, loud rock shows, and reading while wrapped in rhinestones. You can find her on [Insta](#) and [Twitter](#).

After living in various parts of the country, **Brigit Truex** left California's Sierra Nevada mountains for the flatter, milder section of Kentucky's Blue Grass plateau. With a heritage of First Nations (Abenaki/Cree), French Canadian and Irish, it is no surprise that the natural world has greatly influenced her poetry. Her work has been included in various international journals and anthologies, including *About Place*, *apt*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, and others. She was finalist for both the Locked Horn Press prize and Hopper Journal Prize. Her latest collection, *Sierra Silk*, is available on Amazon. Her website is booksandsuchbybrigittruex.wordpress.com.

About Us

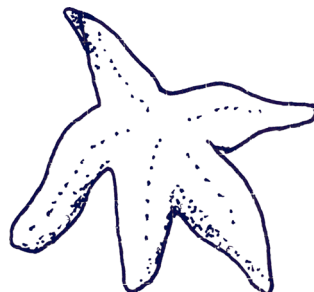
Julia Rios (they/them) is a queer, Latinx writer, editor, podcaster, and narrator whose fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have appeared in *Latin American Literature Today*, *Lightspeed*, and *Goblin Fruit*, among other places. Their editing work has won multiple awards including the Hugo Award. Julia is a co-host of *This is Why We're Like This*, a podcast about the movies we watch in childhood that shape our lives, for better or for worse. They've narrated stories for *Escape Pod*, *Podcastle*, *Pseudopod*, and *Cast of Wonders*. They're [@omgjulia](#) on Twitter.

Ashley Deng (she/her) is a Canadian-born Chinese-Jamaican writer with a love of fantasy and all things Gothic. She studied biochemistry with a particular interest in making accessible the often-cryptic world of science and medicine. When not writing, she spends her spare time overthinking society and culture and genre fiction. Her work has appeared at *Nightmare Magazine*, *Fireside Magazine*, and *Queen of Swords Press* and you can find her at [aedeng.wordpress.com](#) or on Twitter at [@ashesandmochi](#).

Meg Frank (they/them) is a Hugo-nominated artist based in New York. In the before times they traveled a lot and spent a lot of time looking up in museums. Currently they are keeping themselves busy with art school, two cats, knitting for their family, and this magazine. They're [@peripateticmeg](#) on Twitter.

Lis Hulin Wheeler (she/her) lives outside Boston with her spouse and child and spends her days chasing mail carriers and citing obscure postal regulations.

Find her on [Twitter](#) or [Goodreads](#) and her work at *Ninestar Press* and *The Future Fire*. She also serves as Fiction Editor and Logistics Manager for *Wizards in Space Literary Magazine* ([check them out!](#)) and slushreads for various genre publications.



- a little squished, still a star

