

THE SIREN OF AVONMORA

By Abigail Miller

The gales hung still beneath a grey haze of leftover storm cloud. They sat heavy with a scent not quite as pungent as persimmon or rose hips, yet just as crisp and sweet as the silver swells of the Avonmora Sea clashed with the scarred hull of The Tethys. They beat upon her sculpted bow - the rhythmic slaps of water upon wood reminiscent of the hum of childhood lullabies.

Captain Galin stepped from his quarters, glancing about the weathered deck and taking in the damage to his schooner. He watched as his tired and beleaguered crew fought to keep the ship afloat. At the far end of the deck, he spied a group of his men working frantically to secure the forestay sail. Its lines, severed in the previous night's squall, dangled from their masts frayed and lifeless. To the Captain's left another three men with torn breeches and ripped sleeves prepared a sack of tools to fix the broken bowsprit as on the lower deck a younger boy, the lookout Arne, rubbed his bloodshot eyes. The boy prodded at the bruises about his hands and arms as he leaned against the main mast, catching his breath. Loud bangs and thuds from below deck signaled the Captain's crew was hard at work attempting to repair the damaged artillery and re-anchor the cannons. Without cannons, they were whale blubber – a fat deposit of riches for any other pirate crew to harvest.

Setting forth to walk amongst his bruised and battered men, Captain Galin was relieved to see how many had survived their nighttime ordeal. Together, the crew of the Tethys had borne witness to many horrific storms; in fact, they seemed chased by them. But this had been one of the worst Captain Galin had weathered in all his years at sea.

Kicking away a shard of splintered wood and stepping around the fractured floorboards, Captain Galin wove through the chaos of the upper deck, offering a slap on the back and a motivating yet stoic nod to those he passed, taking inventory of the men he saw.

Fletcher. Turner. Smith. Wright. Rocque. Bainard.

Unlike most in his “profession”, Captain Galin cared for each of the men that served him, selecting only those he trusted to join his crew. It made the pirate’s life difficult; many, far too many, never made it back to shore. Yet his crew became his family. That sort of devotion was rare for such rogues, and the Captain’s reputation had spread across the Eleven Seas. The fierce and unyielding loyalty of his subjects made The Tethys a dangerous adversary. Very few dared challenge them in port, and even fewer attempted at sea.

“Captain!”

Galín turned to find his Boatswain - a doughty and balding middle-aged man whose grey whiskers and barking voice reminded all who knew him of the seals that eagerly awaited their arrival in the port cities. This, combined with his slight limp, had earned him the nickname Fin-Foot, although the crew simply referred to him as Fin.

“Fin, my friend,” sighed Galín, placing a strong hand on Fin’s broad shoulder. “How fares the rigging? When will we be able to set sail?”

“She’s wounded Captain, but stubborn,” Fin replied, his sea-salted voice gruff and coarse. “We’ll give her back to the waves of Avonmora by midday. Although we’d move faster if I could find my First Rigger. Have you laid eyes on Sten?”

Galín’s eyes darkened, and his brow furrowed recalling the night before. During the worst of it he had taken position on the upper quarter deck beside Emil, the Sailing Master. It had taken their collective strength to keep the ship steady enough for the crew to hold onto the jibs and

cannons. But from his place at the helm, the top deck bathed in weak, rigged lantern light, Galin had been forced to watch as Avonmora herself pulled several of his crew to her depths. He was powerless to save his family as they were dragged to a watery grave. The piercing rains and sharp winds had nearly blinded him, making it impossible to tell who he had lost at the time. But if Sten was nowhere to be found, then he was likely one of the souls fed to the squall.

“You may need to make do without him, Fin,” said Galin, heavy sorrow in his voice. “We lost good men last night.”

Letting out a weary sigh, Fin placed his hand atop the Captain’s, giving a curt and mournful nod before returning to his men on the top deck and barking orders that skipped across the wet floor boards and ricocheted from the masts.

“Emil!” shouted Captain Galin, scanning the top deck.

"Aye sir?" answered a small voice from somewhere down below.

“When we’re ready to sail, set a course heading East,” the Captain bellowed. “I trust the lodestone will show you the way.”

“Aye, Captain!” Emil shouted back from the anchor port.

Casting a final glance at this men spread across the deck, Galin retreated to his quarters to look once more upon the map that had sent them into the heart of the squall. Approaching the disorganized contents of the small desk beside his bunk, Galin aggressively pushed aside the various tomes and scrolls that littered the space – save for one. A single, bound piece of yellowed parchment tied with a strap of leather and well-worn from years of handling remained. Opening the parchment and laying it across his desk, Galin stared down at a detailed map of the Avonmora Sea. A litany of pen marks and notes marred its edges and details, the poor penmanship unreadable to all but their creator – Galin himself.

As the Captain stood over his most prized possession, he tried but failed to tear his eyes from the small black “X” the marked their current location.

She was supposed to be here. Why wasn't she here?

After years scouring the seas, searching for what very well could be a figment of his imagination, Galin felt his resolve falter as the failure of this voyage, and the grief of losing his men, weighed on his heart. Perhaps retiring to land would be in the best interest of this family.

Grabbing a green glass bottle from the floor, Galin gripped its cork between his teeth, yanking it out with vigor before taking several large gulps of the dark liquid within. Liquor tasting of spiced molasses rolled across his teeth and down his tongue. The Captain relished the burn it left behind.

No, he thought, the warmth from the rum spreading through his chest and biting into his lungs. *I've spent too many years trying to find her.*

“If it is a storm in which you hide,” grumbled Galin, pressing the smooth glass of the bottle against his lips as he spoke. “I’d give the lives of my own crew to find you.” With a sigh, he tossed the now empty green bottle out his open porthole. But the distant splash from below turned his stomach as he found himself immediately ashamed of his own words.

Turning back to his weathered map, Galin began plotting their next route, careful not to repeat any of the routes his crew had sailed before, lest they become suspicious. To the men on board, the Captain’s sailing routes were randomly plotted with no real destination in mind. The only motivation: riches and adventure. They were simply swashbuckling scallywags. A banded brood who plundered and journeyed far and wide, exploring the world and sampling its delicacies. Fin had been the only one to whom Galin confided his true motives. When Fin had one day chanced upon Galin’s maps and asked their purpose, he shared his secret with his oldest friend. The

Boatswain had remained silent as the Captain recounted his tale of having heard Avonmora speak to him countless times as a boy, begging him to come to her. He had explained that he was searching for her. Searching for the soul of the sea that had called to him as a child. But the Captain knew how this would sound to those of sound mind and had sworn Fin to secrecy. Fin agreed, understanding that such a delusion would be dangerous for Galin. It would be taken for a weakness - a sickness. And over the many years Galin had hunted the high seas Fin had dutifully maintained his silence, despite not believing in the magical and mythical nonsense of which the Captain spoke. All that mattered to Fin was the wellbeing of the ship, the strength of the Captain, and the fullness of his own belly.

Still fixated on his map, Galin felt an angry heat rising in his cheeks - anger at Avonmora for taking his men, vexed at the treasure of her spirit that still eluded him. The Captain pulled from his sheath a thin dagger, plunging it straight into the heart of the prominent black "X".

"I'll find you," he seethed through grit teeth.

Lifting his chin to stare into the cracked and dirty mirror hanging slightly askew on the schooner wall, Galin grimaced at the man gazing back. Dull, tired eyes rested on dark bags. A once strong and chiseled jaw was now mocked by the aged creases that had collected on his face over time. Galin could feel the pounding ache of exhaustion pulling at his temples, and his arms and shoulders throbbed from his overnight fight at the helm. Weary and aching, Captain Galin kicked off his boots and moved to his bunk, laying down to rest for the first time in nearly two days.

Sleep came quickly. It took but a moment for the Captain to fall into a deep fit of disturbed dreams, plagued by the sting of rain upon his face and Sten's disembodied voice calling out to him from dark waters. In his dreams, Galin stood not before the helm, but atop the bowsprit - one step away from falling into the black waves of Avonmora. His pulse raced as the wind howled in his

ears and the spit of the sea stung his eyes. When suddenly the waters stilled. The angry winds died and the needles that had been pricking his skin turned to gentle mist. In the distance, he spied a glowing, silver light. A beautiful voice called to him from within, singing gently. He recognized that voice...it was *her* voice. Reaching out his hand towards the glow on the horizon, Galin felt himself slip. A burst of adrenaline coursed through his body as he began to plummet towards Avonmora, whose cruel hands reached up to grab him as he fell. As his body hit the water, he awoke.

With haggard breath and a racing heart, Galin bolted from his bunk, glancing about his cabin. *A dream*, he realized, letting out a deep breath. Pulling himself upright, Galin cast a tired glance outside his porthole to find daylight had faded.

I had better check on my crew.

Running a hand through his tangled, oaken mane, Galin grabbed a crimson ribbon from the table and pulled his hair into his signature low-resting ponytail. Pulling on his boots, the Captain made his way above deck, breathing in Avonmora's brine. Glancing up at the sky, Galin smiled. It was a clear night - the first in many.

"All's well, Emil?" he called to the Sailing Master, still dutifully manning the helm, his back to the Captain. But Emil did not respond to Galin's call.

"Emil?"

With no response from his Sailing Master, Galin looked up once more at the constellations. "Unless my knowledge and experience fail me, Emil, we're heading South," questions the Captain. "Why are we not headed East?"

Emil's back remained turned to Galin. But the Captain could see his white knuckles gripping the helm, his silence melting into the unsettling quiet of the ship. Casting a glance over

the railing, Galin noticed that it was not only Emil that seemed frozen in time and place. The entire crew was standing, their backs turned to Galin, facing forward towards the bowsprit.

“Arne? You there, Turner!” Galin shouted desperately down at his crew, willing one of them to respond. But they all stood silent, rooted to the deck, facing out to where the water met the sky.

Slowly, Galin approached Emil, circling in front of the ship’s massive wheel. Upon seeing Emil’s face, Galin felt a surge of fear. Emil’s unblinking eyes were glazed over in lifelessness, and his jaw had fallen slack. Recoiling in alarm, Galin ran down the quarter deck stairs to inspect the faces of each of his crewmates. Each shared the same blank expression, simply staring out at the horizon.

“Captain.”

A weak voice from behind caught Galin’s attention. The captain turned to find that Fin, too, was frozen. Yet unlike the others there was a twitch in his brow, and his eyes were not quite so glazed.

“Fin?” questions the Captain, taking the Boatswain’s shoulders and shaking gently. “Fin, my friend, what has happened here?”

“Listen,” Fin moaned, slowly raising his arm, and pointing past the bowsprit.

“I hear nothing, old friend,” pleaded Galin. “For what am I listening?”

Fin’s growing shadow caught Galin’s attention. Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed a bright, silver light glowing in the distance. It felt familiar. Then, without warning, a beautiful, alluring voice sang out. It did not come from a single point; rather it filled the air from every angle, humming a beguiling, enchanting melody. Captain Galin felt the warm rush of nostalgia flow through his limbs. He remembers this voice.

It's her.

Running to the front of his ship, Galin stopped short of the bowsprit's slick rigging, and called out to the light shining from the middle of Avonmora.

"I have found you at last!" Galin laughed as his ship surged forward, the salty breeze in the sails propelling them faster towards the growing silver light in the distance. As they neared, Galin felt himself being pulled towards the soothing call that filled the air, growing louder with each passing wave.

Abruptly, Galin heard a loud splash from nearby. Looking back at his crew, he noticed that they had all started walking towards him. Another splash pulled his attention as one of the deckhands, Smith, walked straight off the edge of The Tethys, falling into the obsidian swells and disappearing below. Galin's eyes widened in horror as two more men followed behind, simply stepping off the edge and allowing themselves to be kissed by the waves, vanishing below the surface.

"No, stop!" Galin cried out, "Stop, you fools! What are you doing?!"

Running towards his crew, Captain Galin tried to pull back his men, one by one. Cursing and pleading for them to stop. But his cries were drowned out by the bewitching lullabies that filled the air. One by one, his men sunk like stones beneath the surface until only a handful were left. As Galin pulled Emil from the edge, tying a rope around his arm and securing him to the main mast, Galin watched as Arne and Fin were both only steps away from the edge. He would have to choose which he would save.

"No!" he, glancing once more at the painfully bright light, now only meters away, addressing it directly. "Please! Enough! Whatever you want, you can have. Just leave my men!"

Abruptly, the hypnotizing voice fell silent, and the silver light dimmed its glow. Fin, Emil, Arne, and the others who survived no longer pursued the edge of the ship, but returned to their slack-jawed, frozen positions. Frightened, Galin approached the bowsprit. Peering over the edge, he was astonished to find not only Avonmora's waters, but a woman floating effortlessly above the waves. Her long, silver hair set about a pale face.

“Please,” whispered Galin as her cold stare met his. “Let us go.”

“But you have searched for me,” she sang, her voice as light as mist. “And I have accepted your offer,” she sings. She pulled her hand from Avonmora, her flawless skin emitting a magnificent white glow. In her grasp she held an empty, green glass bottle. Recognizing the bottle, Galin’s tears fell like pearls from an oyster’s lips. Realizing his terrible mistake, Galin gazed at his friends - at his family.

“Aye, I have found you,” Galin nods, stifling a sob. “But if I stay with you, will you let them go and keep them safe on their journey?”

The siren thought for a moment before gracefully rising from the midnight tide. She smiled, handing the bottle back to Galin. For a moment his fingers hesitated, the tips lingering on the glass. But one glance back at the faces of his men gave him the courage he needed to tighten his grip around its neck and pull it gently from her grasp. Clutching the bottle in his hand, Galin threw it to the ground. As it shattered into a thousand small slivers, the siren disappeared beneath the waves. Gazing up once more to the clear night sky, Galin said his goodbye to the brightest speck in the constellation before climbing the bowsprit and inching his way carefully to the tip.

“Captain!” Galin couldn’t turn, but he knew it was Fin that called for him. “Captain, what are you doing?” cried out Fin, confused and disoriented. “W-where are the men? What’s going on?”

Galin's words caught in his chest as he glanced back to see his men released from the siren's spell. With a smile, Galin turned to face the horizon once more, taking another shaky step down the bowsprit as he spoke.

"I found her, Fin," he calls out, relief at knowing his crew was safe reliving the ache in his chest.

"You found her?" questions Fin. "Captain, please, come back into the ship!"

"I can't, Fin," shouted Galin. "I made a mistake."

A strange calmness was laced between his words as he stood at the end of the bowsprit, only a step from Avonmora. Peering into the depths of her ink, Galin spied a beautiful, white face smiling back from just below the surface - waiting for him.

"Besides," cried Galin with a grin. "It's a fair trade, old friend. The Tethys for the life of an old pirate."

"We can find another way," pleaded Fin. "This isn't right, Captain. The men are gone, and we've veered off course. Please, we need you!"

"No, you don't," Galin smiles, his voice floating above Avonmora's impatient roar. "Emil - follow the lodestone Northeast. You'll be safe once you're out of these waters."

"Safe?" cried out Emil, still tied to the mast. "Captain, we've been caught in squalls the entire voyage. The men have all but disappeared! We don't have the crew to make it through another storm!"

Galin raised his arms out to his sides as his gaze met the woman in the water, floating beneath the waves below him. She reached out her hand and beckoned him follow.

"You'll be guided," Galin says. "Trust the swells."

Letting out his final breath, Galin cast his body from the bowsprit, embracing the fall and greeting Avonmora as an old friend.