

# The Arms of the Sea

*by* Cerrid Wynn

The water lapped against the sides of the small boat, their rhythm all that I could think of. Sweltering rays beat down, frying my flesh, the insipid salty breeze that occasionally stirred my only relief from it. Gulls circled overhead, like white ravens, their beady eyes scowling at me, waiting for the last of my fight... the rest of my life to fade away so they could have at my skeletal remains.

The thirst was overwhelming, so much I only dared taste a little of the briny liquid that was all to be had for leagues. There were tales of sailors giving in to drinking the sea, and losing their minds to it, engaging in something suicidal due to some hallucination. Perhaps death would be welcome. Perhaps the cool of the sea water would be a more comfortable alternative to succumbing to the sun and the greedy beaks of the gulls.

I didn't sleep at night. Horrifying images haunted me. Twisted faces among flames, and cannon fire eclipsing the sound of the lightning striking the water about us and our foes. The captain was supposed to go down with the ship. He was not supposed to be the sole survivor. As the small boat listed away from the two ships, I watched the vessel I'd married myself to sink beneath the waves. The mermaid at her bow watched me accusingly as I rose and sank over swells, as if promising she would come for me and make sure I'd suffer the same fate. The vessel attacking us had sustained too much damage to stay afloat, and minutes later it too slid below the choppy sea to its final resting place. The cabin boy had given himself to the waves a mere week after the firefight, driven crazy by the salt water.

A gull landed on the side of my small life vessel. I shoed it away weakly, trying to demonstrate I was not willing to give up the ghost yet. I leaned over the side. How long since I had a drink? How much could I drink before it began to play tricks with my mind. I cupped my hand and pulled out the villainous liquid that could both sustain and kill me, and I drank. The passage of time was so hard to

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measure. I could no longer remember how long ago my ship had gone down, nor how long before the cabin boy had jumped into the ocean, convinced Atlantis lay at the bottom. The only thing that lay at the bottom for him were the sharks that sent him to the after-life.

I was amazed, the water tasted sweet, not salty. Some warning in the back of my head tried to tell me that was a bad sign, but my thirst did not care. I began taking in as much of the sweet liquid as I could manage, and collapsed back onto the boat, satisfied for the moment. I knew the end was near. The journey had been so long. The sea would take my mind, and then it would take my life, and yet I no longer cared if I lost either. I closed my eyes, basking in the sun. I don't know how long I lay there before I was surprised by the sensation of a shadow passing over me. I opened my eyes and looked up to see another vessel near, men shouting and pointing.

"This is it," I thought to myself. "The sea is taking my mind, convincing me I'm to be rescued."

I laid back, so faint, so weary, and let the illusions come for me. I said nothing as I felt the jolt of the small boat being hooked and pulled in. I nearly chuckled as I felt hands begin to pick me up. I heard a curse as someones hand slipped, and I felt the sensation of falling. I let my mind play out it's desire and I went with it. My body hit the waves with a splash. I was too weak to swim, too weak to fight the ocean swimming about my mind, and the dangerous things it wanted me to believe. I looked up as I sank beneath the water, the shadow of the vessel my mind conjured sitting atop the waves. A man dove in, looking for me for rescue, and I wondered for a moment if the ship had been real after all.

But it was when I saw the mermaid that I smiled, and accepted it couldn't have been real at all. She was real. Her proud face welcomed me home to my ship and my crew at the bottom of the ocean. I closed my eyes again as I slipped beneath the surface of darkness and into the arms of the sea.

