

# Long Lost

By Maria Hilbich

*Long lost! Long lost!  
Swept out to sea are we  
Of the men once bound  
Are now long free  
Long live to the shining sea  
Long life to our Mother Sea!*

The ocean danced to the tune of my song as the sailors, young and filthy men, couldn't help but smile as they completed their tasks. I've never felt more alive as my long hair whipped in the wind and I smelled the salty air of freedom, singing my heart away. My voice carried in the breeze and among the sailor's banter with one another, some completely silent but to hum my tune, blissfully thinking of their loves back at home.

My first time at sea! I never thought I'd get the chance, for it is bad fortune to take a lady on board a voyage. Even now I can feel the weathered, old sailors who are terribly superstitious glare at me from the lower deck. Though I refuse to let them dull the journey; nothing in the world can hinder me from feeling this unspeakable joy!

The days continue monotonously; however, I feel tensions growing on the ship. The wind has picked up and the waves seem to become angrier, crashing against our vessel mercilessly and without fail for the past couple of weeks. I no longer am allowed to go on the deck. Many a night can I hear the men scream commands and the followed deafening crash of a colossal wave hitting the ship. And more often than not, there is one less man that stayed on ship to see another day. The rare times when I do venture out in the calmer hours, the men who used to give me tokens of bird's feathers or pretty seashells now scowl at me and do the Sign to ward off evil. Evil? They think I did this?

I guess I should expect them to. I hear them whisper about me. The old ways still run deep in the seafaring realm and I fear it may run too deep, for some say that my sea songs taught to me long ago by my father is a chant to the old pagan god Triton. The older seamen think I am a sea witch, bound to lure the men to their deaths, though the men keep silent to avoid punishment from the captain. However, most say that Mother Sea demands return of her daughters back to her cold bosom, for men have enslaved and corrupted us. Only the bravest ships dare put up a figurehead to represent their power over the Sea Mother and her daughters. Our figurehead is particularly gruesome. Before I boarded for the journey, I stopped to view it and held my hand to my face to block the morning sun. Before me was a beautiful woman carved out of rich wood, frozen in time and encrusted with sea salt. With long hair, smooth and pale white skin and a beautiful, flowing dress, the fair lady was chained the bow of the ship in a twisted, contorted position. As I looked closer, I was taken aback by her face; she started at me, twisted in agony and frozen in a dead scream. Her inhuman visage was terrifying, but no one else seemed to notice. I boarded the ship nervously but quickly forgot with my new-found freedom.

Now I have come to regret that fateful decision. The stormy days continued for another week before an eerily calm day-break crept upon our ship. I woke up that morning from the lack of noise I have gotten used to over the past month and came to see from my window that a dense fog has surrounded our vessel entirely. When I arrived on deck, smiling from ear to ear in celebration of the long-awaited peace, I quickly sensed something was wrong. No, very wrong. Aside from the daily duties assigned to the younger men, everyone else was gathered together and completely silent, some praying to their gods and some talking amongst themselves while sipping on whiskey. I slowly sat down among the edge to hear what was being discussed, and what I heard chilled my bones.

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Of what I could understand from their heavy accents and drunken slurs, I found that this peace will be short lived, and the Mother Sea only allows this calm before the storm for men to make right with their gods before they are taken under. The older men say it's because of me and that my songs call her to our deaths. I am used to their cruel words but what startles me is that the majority of the men nod in unison. Before I can be noticed from my position, I run back into my cabin and close the door behind me. After a few minutes, I hear the pounding of footsteps towards my door and suddenly, a group of men burst in before I could react. They dragged me down the hull of the ship as I numbly looked up at their faces. There were young men as old as I am with soft hairs just beginning to form on their chins. They looked at me with a mixture of horror, fear, anger, and confusion, obviously believing the older sailors' compelling superstitions. Middle aged men, who refused to look at me at all, silently kept their place in the crowd, perhaps thinking of their families back at home or perhaps I even reminded them wistfully of their daughter. However, the old and weathered sailors held my gaze with hatred. As I was being dragged across the ship, some spit at me and did the sign to ward off evil. They bound me with coarse rope from my ankles to my waist and sat me on the edge of the rail. As I prepared for my cold death, all went as silent as the waves. We turned to find the captain standing at the edge of the crowd, demanding I be released. Silence. No one dared untie me as the wind picked up and the men began to shuffle nervously as if they felt the storm finally descending upon them. Then one whisper broke out of the rising wind. It distinctly spoke: mutiny. It spoke again. Mutiny! Others joined in until it became one deafening roar that rain couldn't help but join in with the madness. This only motivated the sailors further to scream their rebellion. By now, all seemed to slow down for me as waves furiously attacked the ship, the calm morning long forgotten. Their words all blurring together, I detached from the insanity around me as I hummed my song for the last time as the captain desperately tried to take control of his ship, pleading with the angry roar for order. Before he could get his last word out, I got my final glimpse of the captain as the men swarmed him, pushing me off the rail to the sea below.

I fell as the wind drowned out my screams and the rope hindered my futile attempts to free my bound legs. I hit the ocean on my back as the cold water cut my exposed skin like a thousand shards of glass. I splayed my arms in an attempt to swim but waves crashed upon me, holding my head underwater. My vision blurred as I sank beneath the waves to the seafloor below, though somehow I did not pass out from the crushing pressure. I begged for it to end as water filled my lungs and I finally hit the sandy floor for what seemed like it took an eternity. I lay there staring up at the ship above me deteriorating into chaos as men fell from the ship like flies. I saw the anchor being finally let down, but it was too late. A massive, unearthly wave struck the ship and toppled it over before the anchor could reach the bottom.

Darkness descended upon me for what seemed like eternity as the ship, my oaken freedom, sunk to the floor. I laid there, neither dying nor living, neither breathing nor drowning in my watery grave for what felt like ages as I felt my legs slowly being melded together from the tight but decaying rope. My skin paled from the lack of light and roughened into scale-like calluses from the strong, cold current rubbing me with coarse sand. As I lay there in my watery grave, an ancient and powerful presence came upon me. She asked my name to which I replied in a whisper, my voice rough and my song dead upon my lips, "Merana". She then spoke of many things. Wonderful, terrible things! As she spoke, I felt the ocean breathe life into me and the decayed ropes fall from my legs. Legs? All that remained was what resembled a fish tail, with algae-green scales glistening from the little light that bled from the miles of darkness above.

The Sea spoke that I shall be her maid, and she shall me my Mother. "Merana-maid" she called me. She asked what I wanted most in the world in which I paused to only reply with a simple word. I demanded revenge. Suddenly, I was drowning all over again. As my lungs grasped for air, but was only given water, I felt as if the whole ocean was cramming itself into my throat. But an equally healing sensation came upon my ruined voice as I struggled against the pressure. The chords in my throat knit back together and repaired themselves and my song was once again on my lips. Mother Sea said that I shall be her first siren of death for all the sailors who dare cross her waters. With a final goodbye, she left me with these words.

"Go, child. My little Mermaid, go and sing."

