

"Shipwrecked"
by Wilayna Putterman

Long ago Poseidon's daughter, whose laughing voice filled the ocean, fell in love with a shipwrecked sailor. She brought him to her palace beneath the waves, and for a time they were happy. But then he yearned to feel the breeze on his cheeks and smell the salty air again; he was, after all, a sailor.

The daughter was filled with jealousy. She plied him with gifts, then she plied him with threats. But one night he stole away from the palace and set sail upon the nearest ship. Distraught, the daughter poured forth her grief, until her tears transformed to rain, and then to a storm. Poseidon saw her sorrow. Stirred to fury, he cursed the sea with unrelenting storms, dousing the guiding lights. All who dared sail upon it were lost.

This is how it has always been and always will be, for Poseidon the Earthshaker, he whose wrath makes the ocean shudder, decreed it so.

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The waves lash the rocks, spraying laurel foam against them as the water rumbles. Silhouetted against the rocks are the hulking forms of ships, gutted and rotting in the rain. A few ragged birds huddle on the rocks. Time and the elements have carved the stones, until they've taken on the semblance of a pockmarked bird. The sky swirls gray, the birds are gray and even the water appears gray.

This is an illusion.

Despite the lack of sunlight the water beneath the heaving surface is warm, and a rich blue like fine silk. It is teeming with colorful fish and algae, seaweed that chokes the water and reefs brimming with life. The ocean floor is dotted with colorful urchin and

mussels, clams and seahorses and stingrays. And among all this a red form flickers. It is a scaly creature, rippling with red and orange scales. It turns, revealing webbed feet. It pushes the water with broad strokes of its hands, also webbed. Its head is covered in a halo of red hair that floats around it when it jerks its head. The bulbous yellow eyes train on something in the distance, greed stirring in their depths.

It paddles away from the conglomeration of sea life, heading toward a towering wreck that juts out of the sand like a massive splinter.

It is a nereid, a sea nymph, and her name is Autonoe.

Autonoe approaches the shipwreck haltingly; if a shark has laid claim to it, not even a nereid dares challenge. She swims around it, feeling the wood, which is still firm and unblemished by algae. She doesn't see the bloated forms drifting with the current.

Inside, fruit and grain roll from split bags. Dark shapes lie huddled around the bow. Autonoe reaches for an apple, sniffs it and pulls away in disgust. She tosses it over her shoulder. She is about to move on to the next bag when she hears something, a low moaning that sends a shiver through her gills.

There is a small pocket of air in the ship where the water can't reach. The gasping comes from a tattered figure, struggling to keep its head above the water. When Autonoe drifts toward it, its eyes widen, and it almost sinks under. When it pops up again the eyes flash a challenge.

She runs her tongue over sharp teeth. She is hungry, and her school is hungry. A land-creature would sate their appetites for many cycles. She reaches toward it, her fingers brushing its face, and suddenly pain bursts along her hand. It spits green blood, grinning at her defiantly.

She cradles her hand with a scowl, but she can't help admiring its courage, foolish though it may be. She makes toward it again, and again it bears its teeth. Instead she drifts down onto a crate. If it won't let her drown it, then she'll wait. She tips her head to the side, studying it; something in the shape of its head and jaw reminds her of the sea-centaurs. The creature is male. He stares at her, motionless, while she considers him. Her scales glitter red- blue in the murkiness.

One...two...three...

The land-creature clings to the hull with white fingertips as time passes, bobbing listlessly in the water. But he clings tight. Whenever Autonoe comes close he snarls feebly, laughably. Yet she stays her hand. He is weak and near death; to her though, there is something fascinating about him. Maybe it's the way the damp hair spikes, so unlike her own, or the demeaning lack of scales. Or maybe those eyes, filled with a kind of fearless terror.

...Sixty five...sixty six...sixty seven...

By now his face has gone blank with exhaustion, and his hands tremble.

...One hundred forty nine...one hundred fifty...

His eyes roll back into his head and he's sinking, submerged in the water. A warm glow of triumph spreads through Autonoe; the land-creature will drown now, and they will feast.

His hair ripples, his eyes shut fast and his mouth opens. Suddenly, he seems very small, as helpless as a newborn seal. Then Autonoe's arms are wrapped around him, dragging him - up.

She shivers as cold air pierces her gills. Poseidon's anger lashes her, pelting her with rain. She gasps an uneven breath and tows her burden toward the rocks, her webbed feet kicking against the current. A small boulder is shielded from the rain by a larger boulder, and she lays him there. She huddles beside him, hugging her knees, a bright red-gold smudge in a world of gray. The briny salt smell, the rain thundering, and the jagged rock scraping her scales are all dizzying. Her eyes grow heavy. Soon she's asleep beside him. He is the first to survive the sea in over a hundred years.

Autonoe's rest is fitful, and by the time she awakes it is dawn and the land-creature crouches on the rock. He is pale but well enough to take interest in some splintered boards washed up beside him. Autonoe watches him uncoil a strand of rope from around his waist, using it to lash the boards together. As his fingers do their work he looks out at the sea, which roils and bucks before him. For an instant his eyes go dark; then their fire returns, dimmer but still strong.

Her heart skips a beat. Something new has awakened in her, something she can't face yet. She dives from the rock down to the wreck, ransacking the ship, rummaging through the crates and sacks until she finds what she's looking for.

She comes up with a paddle, which is shorn but hopefully still functional. The land-creature, focused on his work, doesn't even look at her when she hands it to him. He grasps it and places it beside his raft. Suddenly his eyes widen. He whirls on her, bemusement and shock warring on his face. He pinches himself, wincing.

Autonoe lifts her chin. Her posture tenses, daring him to lash out. He doesn't. He pushes his raft toward the water, then stops with it suspended over the rock. He turns to her.

“What are you? What’s your name?”

She responds with a smile that shows her pointed teeth, but he doesn’t recoil. He pushes the raft again and is gone, sailing through the gray morning.

Autonoe watches his craft shrink into a small storm-tossed dot. Good bye, she wants to say. She takes another ragged breath and slips beneath the waves, sighing as the water, now cool, sweeps over her. She is readying herself to return to the school, preparing for what she will tell them. A jellyfish flashes green as she passes, its soft glow imprinting a flare behind her eyes. She freezes. Then she grabs it, and the next she sees, and the next. The land-creature will drown without guidance. She isn’t ready to desert him yet.

As a hunter she’s explored the length of the sea, and there are no crevices she hasn’t discovered. The rocks where she left him aren’t far from the shore.

With an armful of jellyfish, she scans the surface for the raft. Once she spies its form, she bobs up beside it, placing a glowing jellyfish in front of it. Then another and another. The land-creature only starts steering toward the jellyfish when she pads in front of the raft, jabbing a finger at them. Realization dawns in him and he digs the paddle into the water, turning his raft toward the green lights. It tosses in the wind, stricken by the rain and the blustering waves. Autonoe swims beside him. Somehow the soft jellyfish shine like beacons.

The storm is strong, but the land-creature fights it with all the strength left in his limbs. When his eyes grow heavy, and the paddle falls from his fingers, Autonoe slips beneath the raft. She guides it by the light of her own jellyfish. After an age, her back

throbbing, it bumps against the shore. The land-creature drops from the raft and collapses on the sand, his body shivering as he coughs a stream of water.

Autonoe pulls herself up beside him, lowering her face toward his pale one. His eyes are shut. There's a thump, and a fisherman hurries out toward them. She shrinks back into the water.

For an instant the storm shrieks. Then a ray of light falls on her, setting her scales on fire. She raises her head, craning her neck toward the shore. The fisherman kneels beside her land-creature. He's draping a blanket over the trembling form.

Meanwhile Autonoe shines in the sunlight, so bright the land-creature raises his eyes to her, blinking. He is looking at her in a way she's never seen before. Her heart swells, and she whispers: "I am Autonoe."