

SHE'S A
SIREN HUNTER
HE'S HER PREY.

HUNTING SIRENS

MARY MECHAM

CHAPTER 3



A toast, signed Sterling, to your great accomplishments. May sirens the world over fear your name.

I grinned and raised my mug in victory. We drained our ale simultaneously, both racing to see who would finish first. Sterling won, though narrowly.

Are you sure you aren't a sailor? You drink like one!

Sterling signaled the tavern keeper for refills. *Says the girl who can outdrink most any sailor or soldier.*

I smirked. *Maybe they should be less of ninnies about holding their alcohol then, if a girl can best them. This is weak, anyway.*

A barmaid took our mugs over to the keg in the corner, and I drummed my fingers idly on the wooden table. The lit candles illuminated Sterling's face in a ghostly light. He had a handsome face, smooth and clean, just like the other bookkeepers he worked with. His pale skin and blond hair were a stark contrast to my tanned complexion and dark brown hair, and we were nearly

identical in height. It wasn't that Sterling was short by any means; I was just an unusually tall girl, something I had always been proud of. My height and strength proved invaluable in my line of work, and I loved when men seemed intimidated by my height and confidence, which only bolstered my somewhat inflated self-assurance.

My mind drifted to which ships I would prioritize arming next. Korth paid generously for my time. Though we were cousins, he would never take advantage of our family relationship to pay me less than my workmanship was worth. Because of the higher prices, all my other projects had been pushed back months so I could focus on outfitting the fleet.

Sterling's hands jumped into motion and I was pulled from my thoughts. *Do you think they will catch sirens?*

With my weapons on board? Absolutely! The sea will bleed red tomorrow.

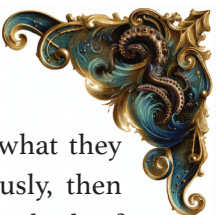
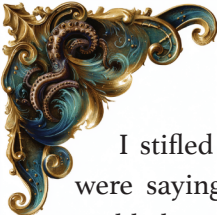
Sterling's pale face grew slightly green. *You have a gruesome sadistic streak. You know that, right?*

I pretended to blush and fanned myself dramatically. *You flatter me.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a couple of older women giggling and looking in our direction. I felt the vibrations in my chest from the pub's raucous laughter and music from the jongleur, so these women likely believed that they couldn't be overheard. I watched their lips move.

"Aren't those two adorable? I am surprised they aren't married already. They are so cute together!"

"Oh, I know. There aren't many Deaf people in Haven Harbor, but those two found each other." The woman pressed a hand to her heart. "So romantic."




I stifled a snigger and relayed to Sterling what they were saying about us. He grinned mischievously, then nodded at two people sitting at a nearby table, both of whom had crossed their arms and were glaring away from each other. The air was thick with icy tension around them.

Sterling pulled his face into an exaggerated dreamy look. *I think those two should get married. Want to know why?*

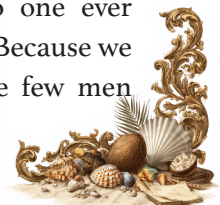
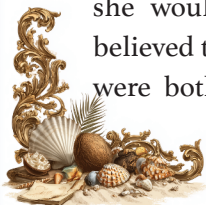
Why?

They are both hearing! Isn't it romantic? They're perfect for each other!

I let out an unheard laugh, feeling the air in my lungs compress as it was forced out of my chest. It was so typical of everyone to assume Sterling and I were madly in love since we both signed and spent time together. Coupled with the fact that few people could understand what we were saying to each other, it led all the townsfolk to assume we were in some sort of relationship and doing the equivalent of whispering sweet nothings to each other when we signed. This didn't bother me too much outside of being annoyed at people for making assumptions. It served to ward off any young men who otherwise may have expressed interest in me, but as Sterling so frequently pointed out, my standoffish attitude did that already.



Sterling was the one I felt sorry for. He had harbored a crush on a sweet girl at his bookkeeping office for months but felt too shy to say anything and worried that she would think he was already taken. No one ever believed that Sterling and I were only friends. Because we were both Deaf and Sterling was one of the few men



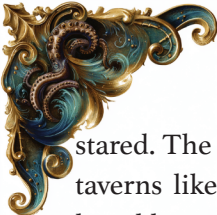
taller than I was, everyone assumed we would end up together.

As we wiled away the evening drinking, people would occasionally approach us and introduce themselves, fingerspelling their names and asking to practice signing with us. Sterling was far more receptive to them than I was. He would smile and urge them to continue learning, practicing for a few minutes before they went along their way. His thought was that we should encourage anyone who wanted to learn sign to broaden our circle of friends, and being the eternal optimist that he was, he was very welcoming to their efforts.

I, on the other hand, had a different, more pessimistic outlook. Hearing people who learned sign language often sought out validation from the few Deaf individuals they knew, expecting praise from both the hearing and Deaf communities for their mediocre efforts at slaughtering my native language, and I had no intention of giving it. It often felt like they viewed me as a pity project and were learning sign language out of the goodness of their hearts.

When they merely gave me the afterthought courtesy of including me only when it was convenient so they could boost their already inflated egos, I was more than happy to shut them out. If they wouldn't make an active effort to include me in their lives, I had no reason at all to include them in mine. I didn't want to be someone's extra-credit, feel-good project, and I was perfectly content with my life as it was—I had a job that I enjoyed, friends and family who supported me...I had no need for superficial friends who only knew how to fingerspell *cat*.

Over Sterling's head, I saw Korth enter the pub. I



stared. The crown prince never deigned to come to shady taverns like this; what was he doing here? I rapped my knuckles on the table to attract Sterling's attention and jerked my head toward my older cousin. Just as Sterling looked around, Korth caught my eye and made a beeline for me. As usual, the customers parted the moment they saw him coming. I saw that everyone had stopped talking, too engrossed in Korth's approach.

Uninvited, he pulled up a stool, whipped out his handkerchief to brush the seat free of the crumbs scattered from the last occupant, and sat down. I appraised him with interest. Korth never came to me unless he wanted something. He seemed more cheerful than I had ever seen him before but still maintained his air of dignity and station.

Choppily, Korth signed, *How are you?*

Good, I answered, eyebrows raised. He knew a few simple signs, but nothing else, and I knew what was coming.

After a brief pause, Korth began to slowly and meticulously fingerspell *I-L-I-K-E-D-W-H-A-T-Y-O-U-M-A-D-E*, but I held up a hand to forestall him halfway through and shoved the slate and writing stylus I always carried at him.

He seemed relieved and quickly wrote,

I liked the weapons you made.

I wiped the slate clean of his obnoxiously perfect handwriting and scrawled back,


What do you want?



To have a drink with my cousin.

He smiled, flashing his white teeth in a way that would make most girls swoon.

His charm was wasted on me. I raised an eyebrow suspiciously then shoved a mug across to him and raised my own, challenging his honesty. Korth took the offered ale and sniffed it. He wrinkled his nose and gingerly took the smallest sip I had ever seen. He would've looked more at home sitting down at a little girl's tea party rather than surrounded by brawny men at a seedy tavern like this one. Sterling raised his hand to cover his smile, his eyes crinkling up as he did so. I drained my own mug in a matter of seconds, then slammed the empty container down.



Korth considered me, then smiled ruefully and shook his head as he admitted defeat. He took up the slate again and wrote,

I need your help.

The truth comes out, I signed to Sterling, then wiped the slate clear.

What sort of help?

He didn't answer right away. He swirled his foaming tankard around several times without taking another drink before responding.



HUNTING SIRENS



Come with us on the hunt tomorrow.

I cocked an eyebrow after I was done reading. It wasn't that the offer wasn't tempting. To the contrary, I was very eager to know that my inventions avenged some of the deaths our town had suffered over the years. But like I had already told Da, I wasn't a soldier or sailor; I was a weapons designer. My part in this story ended once the weapons were handed off to the military. I picked at one of my nails, which had grown long enough to be inconvenient at work lately, and deliberated.

Korth made to hand the slate back to me, but Sterling snatched it out of my hands.

She'll do it



You can't make decisions for me, you big lummo!

Sterling smirked. *Like you don't want to see payoff for your hard work. Besides, I want to watch too. I'm inviting myself.*

I glowered, but I knew he was right. I wanted to see my creations in action. I nodded my consent.





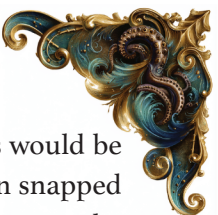
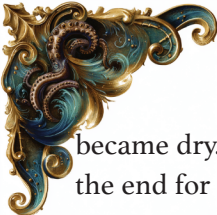
TEASER FROM CHAPTER 9



What in the name of Davy Jones's deepest locker was *that*?! Massive tentacles, thick as a battering ram, rose from the depths of the ocean, undulating back and forth as the waves grew increasingly choppy and foam lapped onto the deck. My heart raced. The boat I was on suddenly felt tiny and utterly worthless as a defense against the monstrous creature circling the vessel. Even the Lacerator, as devastating as it was when facing sirens, seemed like a child's slingshot in comparison. If I fired, it would only serve to annoy the beast.

The tiller vibrated, as if it could sense the impending doom that lay in wait for it, just as I could. The surge of the deck beneath my feet felt like I was speeding toward my death. I heaved on the ropes and turned to tack the ship away from the creature, but resistance shuddered through the hull, wind spilling from the sails. Instead of veering away from danger, the bow fell and lost momentum entirely.

Sweat broke out on my forehead and my mouth.



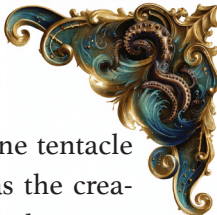

became dry. I was done for, simple as that. This would be the end for me. I offered up a quick prayer, then snapped my eyes open, fire blazing from within. If this was to be the end, I would make it an end to remember—an end fit for the best Siren Hunter who ever lived.

I loaded the Lacerator, drawing back the double barrel with a gargantuan effort. Difficult though it was, the adrenaline pumping through my body combined with my years of blacksmith work provided me the strength I needed. The pain from my stingray wound momentarily vanished as I poured all my attention into defending my ship. Though I limped slightly on my injured leg, I dashed about the deck as quickly as I could, preparing every weapon available to me while simultaneously keeping an eye on those tentacles, which had to be at the exact right spot for my plan to work.

The suction cups on the nearest tentacle began creeping up over the starboard side of the ship, slowly drawing the ship nearer to the slowly developing whirlpool. I knew something far worse than tentacles was coming and steeled myself. The beast's squid-like head emerged from the water, yawning its enormous, fanged mouth open wide as a cave. The creature's arm began oozing across the deck, leaving a thick green slime in its wake.


Three...two...one...

I struck. Using all my massive strength, I plunged my trident deep into the tentacle, pinning it to the wooden planks, then sprinted up to the bow, leaping over another of the monster's foul appendages as I went. The air vibrated as the creature's mouth opened wide, and I shivered from the intensity of it. I pivoted the Lacerator,



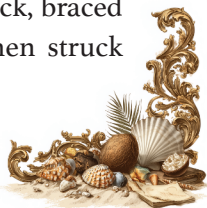
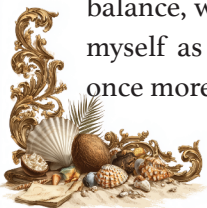
angling it just off the starboard side, where one tentacle was stretched tight, still pinned to the deck as the creature strained to get away. I would only have one shot.

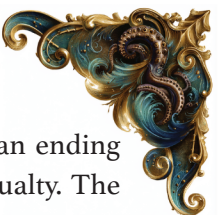
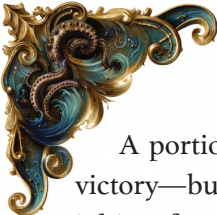
The few seconds it took me to take aim seemed like an eternity. I felt each frantic pump of my heart pound through my body, causing my vision to pulse from my increased blood pressure. I fired. The Lacerator's bolt split into twelve deadly spears, each shooting out with devastating force and accuracy. It was impossible to miss at so close a range.



The severed tentacle flopped onto the deck, still fastened by the trident's sharp tips, while several other bolts pierced the beast's body. Black blood spewed from the limb and the monstrous sea creature pulled away, thrashing about in a wild frenzy. A jarring force rocked the boat, sending me flying. My head smacked against the railing, where lights popped in front of my eyes. I tried to stagger to my feet, but another shuddering blow caused the ship to pitch to the side. Heavy barrels toppled and rolled past me, battering my legs and shoulders as I scrambled for any handhold that would prevent me from falling into the churning waves.


I felt the ship groan in protest as tentacles began wrapping themselves around the boat and the wood began to splinter. The foul suction cups that spotted the tentacles' slimy exterior opened and pinched shut like a fish's mouth when it was out of water. Despite the ship having only moments left, I couldn't resist the opportunity to get in one last blow. I struggled to regain my balance, wrenched an axe from the weapons rack, braced myself as the deck rolled under my boots, then struck once more.





A portion of a second tentacle fell away—an ending victory—but I was destined to be the final casualty. The jolting force ripping through the ship as the creature thrashed about in agony was the last thing I felt before I was finally thrown overboard and plunged deep into the inky-black water below.

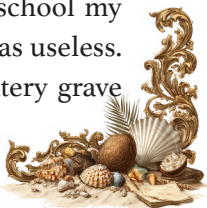
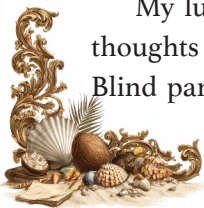
The darkness of the ocean disoriented me completely. I couldn't tell which way to swim, and the icy water pressed on me from all directions, causing my chest to constrict from the cold. My leg's forgotten pain from the stingray howled into remembrance and stiffened as swells from the raging waves shoved me repeatedly back, everything swirling and churning around me. The insides of my nostrils burned from the saltwater, my breath was all but gone, and the need for oxygen became desperate. I pumped my arms and legs furiously, frantic to reach the surface, but it was impossible to tell which way was up.



If only the sun were out, I would have been able to fight my way toward the light and fresh air. If only I could have seen my family one more time before I died. If only I could have done more to help the people of Haven Harbor.

I had known the fate that awaited me the moment I took up the mantle of Siren Hunter. If I had ever deluded myself into believing that I would walk away from this ordeal unscathed, it was a false hope. From the moment I accepted the responsibility, I had known it would end my life.

My lungs threatened to burst as I tried to school my thoughts and discover a way to survive, but it was useless. Blind panic forced me to think only of the watery grave





MARY MECHAM



that awaited me in the angry deep. A bubble of the last remnants of air in my body escaped as my eyes fluttered closed and I floated down, down, down.

The merciless sea had claimed its revenge on me at last.









