How to Poison a Mermaid

By Mariah Moon

She popped her head out of the water. Thick, dense fog surrounded the skies above. The sun could hardly penetrate it, much less the light she so desperately needed to see above the water. Ducking back under the water, she found her way along the river.

Laelia watched the water rush past her face as she swam, pushing her sapphire tail up and down. Propelling quickly through the water, she failed to notice her fate quickly looming. She simply smiled, enjoying the feeling of rushing through the water – free. Untied from all responsibilities. Away from her family and her friends for a few precious hours.

Her neck whipped forward. Her arms flew back. Hair began to drift on the currant as she came to a jerking halt. Then her body fell back as it was caught by a net. She smelled blood, but was too disoriented to tell where it came from. The water rushed past her body, going down.

As forceful as it was, she was used to swimming up to the surface quickly. It didn’t bother her as much as a sudden pain in her fins did. Managing to orient her thoughts again, she noticed a small, steady stream of blood in the water. Her eyes trailed it to her fins. Then she had to hold in a gasp.

A fishing hook had gotten stuck in her fins. She could just barely see the reflection of the light off the fishing line. Then again, there was hardly any light to begin with. Before she could attempt to unhook her fins, fish piled into the net. The surface was only a few inches away.

Then they rose above the surface. She gasped for air, using her lungs and not her gills. Her gills flapped twice as they realized that they need not work. Though she was used to using her lungs on a daily basis, the first breath on the surface was always the hardest.

A round of gasps followed hers. Her eyes gradually adjusted to the dim, foggy light. Artificial light flooded the area in a sudden burst. She quickly blinked. Raising a hand to her face, she tried to get her eyes to adjust. It took longer than she would’ve liked, and by now the net was on a hard, wooden surface. Her hair caught on something, and a man came to help.

Hands grasped at her fins, unhooking the line from them. Cloth pressed against them to stop the bleeding. She flipped her tail, but they held her down.

The lack of water began to take its toll quickly. Stories of other mermaids – and the unlucky mermen who often went to save them – who had gotten stuck on land filled her head. Her own parents had died this way, and she remembered watching them on the beach.

They flopped. They flipped. They scratched. Whatever they did, if a mermaid or merman was beached, they could not get into the ocean again by themselves. The wood underneath her was more forgiving.

She managed to grab something solid and pulled herself to it. Foreign words came to her ears, sounding like gibberish. Something grabbed her wrist, and then she realized it was another hand. It looked like that of her best friend – with hair and five fingers and a wrist.

Her eyes looked up the hand to find an arm. Muscles bulged as the grip on her wrist tightened. She squeezed her eyes shut and bite her lip before opening her eyes again. She picked up on where she left off. A shoulder came next. Then she saw the head. Two bright seaweed green eyes stared back at her. The nose on the face showed a delicate balance between years of work and a playful sense of personality. His lips parted.

More gibberish came out. However, he wasn’t speaking to her. She followed his gaze to find that he was addressing the other person. A sweet bucket of cold water was dumped over her head, and one followed quickly over her tail.

Before he could take hold of her other hand, she smacked him hard with her tail and caused herself to flip over on herself. Now her hands were away from where she wanted to be. She felt her fins were not on a solid surface, and began to attempt to back herself up and off whatever it was she was on.

The man kept a firm hold on her wrist and kept her from going anywhere. Suddenly he made a move, and she was against his chest as he lifted her off the surface. Her tail followed her upper body, and the other man had to hold her tail so her fins did not drag on the surface.

The two men – Seaweed, for the color of his eyes, and Coral, for the color of his cheeks – took her into a dark room. Her trips to lower areas of the sea had only ever been this dark. Seaweed created light from a waxen stick.

The light did not spread far. She could see her fins in Coral’s arms, but beyond that was dark. Ahead of her, she saw a piece of furniture.

The furniture was unlike anything she had seen before. It was quite wide, and seemed to be white. The dim lighting made it look yellowish – like a flounder whose color was dim. It had claws shaped like oyster shells at the bottom, and only two on the very edge from what she could see.

As they got closer, the familiar reflection of light off of water hit her eyes. The thing seemed to be a water transport device – like a bucket. A really, really big bucket. The concept made her curious, but she knew they would not be able to understand her.

The water was cold. She realized Coral had put her tail in the water, and Seaweed was following with her torso. The bucket was hardly large enough for her entire body to be submerged, but she did not need to be fully submerged.

Seaweed left the waxen stick of light nearby. Gingerly, Laelia reached out to touch it. The base of the stick was wax, as she had expected. What she did not expect was the warm wax dripping onto her hand. It hurt.

She pulled her hand away quickly. The water felt cool on the hot area. She let the wound soak for a long while as she looked around. The dim light did not afford her much to see, but she could see a small hole on the wall. It looked to be a circular window.

The fog rolled past. Though she couldn’t see it, she could hear the water rolling beneath them. Resigning herself to death by drying – or worse – she settled into the bucket and fell fast asleep.

She woke to an undeniable pain in her abdomen. They must not have been moving for long. It felt as if she had been swimming for three or four days nonstop. Food was left on top of something for her. She could smell fish, and wrinkled her nose.

Looking at what else there was, she found a hard, round thing. It didn’t have much of a flavor, but it was better than fish.

Something must have been in the water, she now realized. Her scales were beginning to shed, just as her hair was. Seaweed sat a few feet away from her, holding his stomach in pain. Coral was not in the room.

Ignoring her abdominal pain, she managed to fall asleep again. Fitfully, she tossed and turned to try and completely ignore her pain. However, the tossing caused her to wake up. The water had been spilt from the bucket, and not even up to her waist was covered.

At this, she realized that there were hairs floating in the water. Weakly, slowly, she reached a hand up to her head. A fistful of hair came back down with it.

In a start, her hand fell to the side of the bucket. Her fist uncurled, allowing the hair to fall out of her palm. Her head fell back, hitting the wall of the bucket hard.

Her breath left her mouth. Her chest stilled. Her fins stopped lapping lazily upon the water’s surface. Though blood leaked from her skull, she had been dead before she hit the bucket.

All the while, Coral stood just out of sight with a large, maniacal grin upon his face as Laelia fell victim to the thallium.