

CICADA®

by Rene Sears

Your New  
Voice and  
YOU

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**You watch the mermaids swim.** Sometimes you think of joining them. They're like parrotfish, bright and pretty. If you joined them, they would scatter like a school of fish when a predator comes along. So you do nothing but watch from the shadows. From there sometimes you see ships, and shipwrecks, and sailors. Then you are less tempted to join.

They only come to you when they want something. Mermaids looking for feet, sailors looking for a knotted rope to capture wind, it's all the same. They fear what you are as much as long for what you can do. If they see you outside of your lair, when they haven't come to you, they flee, or stuff their ears with wax. You are not meant to approach, only be approached.

Sometimes children come to you on a dare. Tails flashing in the sunlight, they come to the edge of the shadows and toss things into your lair: conch shells, bits of coral. Dead fish, sometimes. Anything to make themselves feel brave at defying the sea witch. You have only to show yourself, black hair streaming like squid ink, dark coiling tail in the mouth of your cave, and they flee.

Only once did one linger. She was bright as the shallows, a slip of a thing, and she watched you with some emotion you could not name plain on her face. It wasn't fear, and that made her different. She reached a hand to you, and before you could stop yourself, you reached a hand back. Her sisters called her name from the sunlit water, and she fled like the rest of them. You don't know what you would have done if she had touched you anyway.

Mermaid or sea witch, siren or hag. Two sides of the same fin: the allure of the unknown sea, and the fear of its power. Sailors floating in a fragile wooden shell on the vast, inimical ocean tell stories to humanize their surroundings. Someone has to be cast in the role of villain.

You have little sympathy for sailors.



When you speak, you call storms. If you swim to the surface and sit on a rock and sing to feel the sun on your scales, ships veer into the reef and founder. Your words are strong. They matter. So you are parsimonious with your speech, whispering on those occasions when they come to you asking favors. They need not know how your mouth aches from holding that power in. You give no more thought to your solitude than fish give to the water they swim through. Only sometimes do you remember a hand extended to you from sunlight.

It's nearly a decade later when you see her again. (Decades mean little when you've been in the shadows for centuries.) You recognize her immediately, though she has grown up since you saw her; it's something about the brightness of her eyes. Her tail is pinched with shells of rank, and pearls hang heavy from her neck.

Of course she wants something. They always do.

There was a sailor, a prince of the land people. He would have drowned, but she saved him. She wants to give up the power of the sea for the faint hope of love—and it is such a faint hope: she's only looked at him, never spoken to him. *I know you can help me*, she says with perfect trust.

You are not kind. You don't know how. And if you simply gave her what she asked, she wouldn't trust it. They all know you always demand a price.

She doesn't hesitate when you name her voice. (You hoped it would dissuade her.) You make it worse, say each step will hurt, say she must win his love, but she thinks she can, even without speaking to him. She might be right; you hope she is. Unbearable heaviness weights your chest as she swims away, awkward with her legs, but still bright.



What might you do with your new voice? It's a rare commodity, tasting as it does of salt water and song and a loving family. You might sing to a

sailor without sinking a ship. (You are not actually fond of shipwrecks, all evidence aside.) You might breathe on the water without summoning a storm. You might say something kind. You might mean it.



You are not completely heartless, and you remember the hand reaching to you from sunny water, so when the girl's sisters come to you, you make them the knife.

*We are afraid, they say. We want our sister back. Help us bring her back to the ocean. Bring her home.*

*Give her the knife, you tell them. If she cannot win his love, let his dying blood wash over her. Her useless legs will become a tail once more, and you will have your sister back.*

Like their sister, like anyone who's ever come to you, there must be a price. Your hunger—for sailors, for death, for everything—is widely known. You take their hair, though you have no use for it. (Maybe you can make a net of it, or string pearls with it, or weave the world's winds into its knotted lengths.)

You hope they get the knife to her. You hope she has the strength to use it against the prince, who doesn't know her to love her. She's been walking on knives for him; surely he could walk into a knife for her.



You put on the voice like a gown and walk amongst the fishing villages. No one knows you to fear you. Your hair is as inky-black and tangled as ever, and your footprints still fill with water if you're not paying attention, but your whisper no longer swamps the beach. You ask questions, and people answer, and no one fears the price.

Your feet don't hurt. Transformation is part of your nature.

A family shares their dinner with you, whitefish that they caught

that morning cooked in broth over the smoking stove. Their knuckles are scarred from working the nets. In all your centuries, this is new: they feed you, because they want to, expecting nothing from you. For the first time you wonder if the prince might be a sailor like these, with small kindnesses for strangers.

It is not in your nature to question, to regret. And yet.



You hear of the prince's wedding.

No one says that the bride is mute. Far from it. She's well known as a wit in the kingdom of her birth, they say, and she's beautiful as well. Eyes as blue as the sea. (You know that the sea is more often green and gray and black, but you say nothing.)

The girl's sisters have given her the knife by now. You've done as much as you can. It's up to her now. There are villages all up and down the coast where no one knows you and no one fears you.

You don't owe her anything.



You find yourself in the capital city. The streets are swathed in white flowers, sweet with narcissus and hyacinth, and church bells fill your ears with tintinnabulation. People sing as they walk by, and your new voice swells in your throat, longing to join them, but you aren't ready to celebrate.

The sailor prince and his bride have taken a ship into the harbor where the captain will marry them. You make out a tiny figure on the outskirts of the deck, isolated from the festivities, staring at the sea. The sun glints off something in her hand. As you watch, she tosses it into the water. You don't have time to wonder whether it's regret for the girl or relief you feel, that the prince, who might be kind, will not die today.

The sea surrounds you like an embrace when you jump off the pier. Your powerful tail churns the water and you reach the ship while the opening remarks are still droning on.

It's a matter of moments to scale the side of the ship. Barnacles slice your hands and feet, but it's worth a little pain. This is what she's felt every time she's taken a step. Almost everyone is watching the ceremony. The only person to see you ascend like a spider can't speak or scream.

She doesn't try. When you reach her, her fear has turned to resignation, and that hurts more than your torn feet; even when she came to you before, she wasn't afraid. You hold out your hand, dripping with seawater, and she looks at you for a long moment before reaching out to take it.

With a wrench of loss for your anonymity, you take your voice—her voice—and give it back. The weight of who you are settles back on you, and your voice rises up in your throat.

You give her another gift, too, a piece of your heart, as cold as the kraken-depths where eyeless fish swim, a tiny stain of shadow on her brightness. There are no guarantees, but you hope it will make her own loss hurt less.

Before either of you can say anything, you drop to your knees and smear your bloody fingers over her bare feet—there is always a price, but it need not be her price—and take the pain from her footsteps before the memory of guilt can fade. Later, you can ask her if she wants her tail back, and her home in the sea.

She looks over her shoulder as the bride and groom kiss. "He never even knew me," she says.

"I'm sorry. For all of it." Your voice—your old voice—scrapes in your throat, but it's not the power of the ocean, only regret.

"It's all right." She lifts her eyes to meet yours. They're the green-gray of waves after a storm.

"I thought you might want to see the world beyond the sea," you say, knowing it's inadequate.

But she smiles. “I might, if someone came with me.”

You smile in return, and if it stretches your lips in unfamiliar ways, no one is watching to see it; all other eyes are on the happy couple.



You make your way along the coast, stopping to see all the sights.

She does the talking. 

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