
Foam
by Dave Smeds

Dark Fantasy

A DF Books NERDs Release
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Coral swam slowly, with trepidation, into the reception hall of her father, the Sea King. The lord of the ocean, clad in the visage of a giant turtle, rested on the sands, quiet save for the pensive shifting of a flipper.

Gone were the dolphins who had swum and sung across the vaulted chamber. Gone were the crabs who danced on the tables of rock, leaving behind their gifts of shells and jade. Gone were Coral's brothers and sisters, come to congratulate her on the anniversary of her birth.

There was only the Sea King, dimming the sanctuary with cold green melancholy.

"Father?" she asked, setting her fluke timidly upon the sand beside his beak, wishing she could cure his mood.

"Today you are fifteen years old," he said. "Today you venture into the world for the first time."

Her brows drew together. Hours earlier, he had celebrated this same fact.

"I feel her," he said. "She is waiting for you."

The current streaming off his shell carried the sting of an Arctic floe. Coral shuddered in the chill. "The Sea Witch?" she asked.

"She has always thwarted me. I am Life. She is Death. I tell the amoeba to divide, I make fertile the eggs of the marlin, I anchor the roots of the kelp. She brings to them age, rot, and dissipation. She and I may never share the same place and moment, but I feel her presence. I know her desires."

The Sea King turned his turtle eyes toward his offspring. Massive and opaque, the pupils dwarfed her, capturing her reflection like an insect in amber. Her long red tresses flowed rich and full around her human half, down to the dorsal fin on her long, whalelike fluke.

"She hates you most of all," the king said. "You are beautiful, you brim with young life, and because you are made from my essence, you will not succumb to the decay she has loosed upon the rest of my world. To kill you, she must actively break the magic which formed you, with your consent."

Coral lay a hand gently on her sire's beak. "Why would I give her my consent?"

The turtle closed his eyes, as if in pain, shutting out the reflected vision of her. "I cannot protect you, once you leave these walls. You must dare Death alone, if you are to overcome her. If you are my true child, and if you make the right choices, you will prevail. If not..."

One of his fins moved, spawning a surge of water that sent Coral back, into the central portion of the grotto. The quivering of his great eyelids betrayed that he would rather have cupped her form beneath

him, and guarded her forever.

“Go, my daughter. Show the world your beauty. Be all that you can.”

The currents lifted her up, gently buoying her through the long passageway to the open ocean. Her father's grief followed her, as he wept for older children who had never returned to his side.

* * *

Twilight silvered the ocean as Coral emerged from the depths. Vestiges of the day blessed the clouds with hues of rose and gold, and up in the pale pink sky the evening star held court. A large three-masted ship idled in the calm sea, sails hoisted as offerings to a fickle tradewind. Sailors hung like monkeys from the rigging and from the yards. They sang, made music, and lit hundreds of lanterns that, with their different colors, looked as if the flags of all nations had been borrowed for display.

Coral floated just beyond the range of the lantern light, drawn by the jubilation frothing in the hearts of the crew. They were near the end of a long voyage; the coast of their country had come in sight as the sun had set. Holds full of trade goods, they anticipated the wealth and welcome awaiting them in the morning.

All this the mermaid gleaned from their minds, but the facts meant little to her compared to the feelings associated with them. Such fire, such a cacophony of hope, schemes, and relief.

Her father had often told her of humanity, of how the Earth Mother had sent him the ape, and how he had stripped the creature's hair from its skin and aligned its pelvis with its spine until, streamlined, it could swim and dive with ease. He had heightened its sense of hearing, prompting its first use of vocal language. He taught it to use tools, with which it battered open shellfish to eat.

But the Earth Mother, seeing what he had fashioned, called her gift back. The new species took its language, tools, and erect posture back to the land, forsaking the Sea King.

At last, Coral understood why her father spoke of man with such wistfulness, and why he had shaped her upper body like them. Never had she encountered so many consciousnesses, gathered so closely together, burbling with such keenly felt desires. Their passions tugged her like spawning beds drew the salmon.

One human stood out. Dark-haired and tall, he seemed quite young, and yet every other man on the ship deferred to him. Was he a prince? Yes. A prince of merchants. Within his awareness flashed images of lively negotiations, careful intimidation, and a paternal concern for his crew. She saw why they looked to him with loyalty and respect.

Yet overriding his satisfaction at a job well done, he brimmed with another urge. He gazed toward the night-shrouded coast. A woman waited for him there. Body aching, he dreamed of their reunion.

Coral surged up, until she rose waist high in a wreath of foam. Eyes closed, she drank in the prince's hunger. Her skin, exposed to the air, rose with fine prickles.

Her eyes came open. She had wandered into the lantern light. At the gunwale, the prince stared. He lifted his flagon, as if to accuse its contents of addling his senses, but he never looked away from her.

His dream woman transformed. Her plain brown hair became Coral's luxuriant scarlet tresses. Her breasts rode higher, her waist shrank, and the bones of her clavicle grew more distinct. Like Coral.

Her exclamation rode across the water. The prince blinked. He called to his companions.

Coral submerged. The other sailors glimpsed her white skin so briefly that, moments later, they joked at being so foolish as to mistake sea foam for a mermaid. The prince scowled, laughing only to give them less to tease him about. Agitated, he scanned the waves.

Coral remained below. But not from fright. She could not banish the image she had seen in the prince's mind, an instant before her cry shattered it. It was she, reenvisioned by the prince's fervor.

Her face, her arms—and below that, her legs.

When Coral finally nudged above the surface, she was far from the lantern light. She could still distinguish the silhouettes of the men—and of the prince—but a gulf yawned between her and the ship, as awesome as the deepest trench of her father's domain.

She floated listlessly, drifting away from the ship. The scales of her lower extremity flashed in the moonlight, and the glare hurt her eyes as it had never done before.

The moonlight faded. Swells deepened and the wind rose. Coral scarcely noticed. Storms were no threat to her. But at some point she realized that the sounds of revelry had died out, replaced by harsh, barked orders to furl the sails and secure the ship.

Weather's fury arrived in a wall of turbulence and hard rain. Waves loomed black and mountainous. The ship dived like a swan into the troughs of the swells and rode up again on their towering crests, masts creaking. The young mermaid might have enjoyed the spectacle, but she was still attuned to the humans, and felt their fear.

The vessel groaned, the stout planks yielding to the heavy pounding. A spur of reef suddenly appeared in the trough ahead. As sailors screamed, the craft struck.

The mainmast snapped. The ship gave a lurch to one side. Water gushed through the ruptured hull.

Coral plunged forward. Wreckage threatened to slam into her at the whim of the gale. She sought and found the familiar essence of the prince. He was underwater, caught in a morass of rigging, losing consciousness.

She dived, reaching the man as his lungs gave out. The ropes and tackle clutched him like a lover. She yanked and bit at the hemp. No good. Deprived of quicker choices, she worked a knot free and fed the line through the pulley that held it. Success. She rushed the prince to the surface.

As her father had taught her, the mermaid created an islet of calm within the tempest. Floating on her back, she cradled the prince on her belly. She squeezed his midsection. Salt water bubbled from his mouth. He coughed, heaved, and collapsed against her. His breath returned, ragged but continuous.

The depths took three, five, then seven of the prince's sailors. Coral resolved that he would not join them. She kept the storm's violence at bay, ferrying him gently to the shore.

She swam so carefully that, by the time sand brushed against her back, the worst of the gale had passed. Though awkward on land, she dragged herself and her charge high above the reach of the breakers, into the lee of a grassy dune.

He shivered. She removed and wrung out his drenched garments, curled around him, and draped them both with the fabric. He stopped shaking, though he still twisted restlessly.

The sensation of his body against her brought a puzzling weakness to her muscles. Pleased and curious, she huddled closer.

He moaned. She wiped beads of feverish sudor from his forehead and the bridge of his nose. He rolled over, facing her. His eyes opened.

Even with thick clouds and rain shrouding the moon, he recognized her. He caressed her cheek. Coral read his confusion. He believed himself delirious. He trembled to find warm, tangible flesh beneath his fingers.

In answer to his unspoken question, Coral leaned in and placed her mouth against his. He pressed up, into her kiss.

She played with the hairs on his chest. His lips teased the lobes of her ears. She wallowed in the sensations like a fish suddenly given the gift of breathing air. His hand found one of her breasts, cupped it, treasured it.

Coral writhed, tingles crawling over her skin. Was it this way for humans all the time? No, it couldn't be. A human woman could not look within the prince's mind and see how much he cared that his touch give her pleasure. He gave himself to her, totally.

Coral absorbed his love, and was claimed.

His hand drifted lower, brushing past her skin and onto the scales of her lower body.

He jerked. He stared down with wide, disbelieving eyes, willing the night's gloom to vanish and show him that she was not half-fish after all.

She reached for him. He retreated. She cast back the passion he had sent into her, hoping that he could sense it.

He shook his head, as if in pain. But as she stroked his shoulder, and massaged the firm muscles of his belly, he sighed, tears welling, and sagged back on the sand.

At last she could read through the tangle of his thoughts. Her mermaid features were proof to him that he was dreaming. He cried because he did not want her to be a dream.

He draped his arms around her. "Stay with me," he murmured.

She answered him as best she could. She snuggled close and held him tightly.

But he, believing himself asleep, gave into the fever and exhaustion, and sank into true slumber.

* * *

She left him in the morning, lingering in the shallows as search parties from the town arrived on the debris-ridden beach. The prince babbled feverish sentences as they placed him on the litter.

Coral swam away with the listlessness of a minnow who has met with the nettles of a jellyfish.

She wished she possessed the human ability to sleep. She wanted desperately to purge the stream of thought and emotion from her consciousness. Below, life on the sea bottom continued as ever—anemones captured their diminutive prey, a hermit crab hunted for a new shell, a manta ray patrolled its territory—but not one aspect of that drama mattered. She knew the cycle too well; none of it could surprise her.

What she had felt when the merchant prince had touched her was new. It was outside the knowledge passed down to her as a daughter of the Sea King. Suddenly this food she had never tasted before had

become the only thing she could eat.

Coral wandered. For three days, she fluttered through the currents. She was not aware of choosing a direction, but in the end she arrived at the harbor of the port where the young merchant lived.

She could sense him. The connection remained. She wriggled along the shallows of the coast until she reached a small beach past the edge of the town. A cottage rose atop the dunes. He was there.

She glided back into deep water. The few yards of sand that separated her from him might as well have been an entire continent.

As Coral drifted out to sea, the water turned brown and murky. Dead fish hung before her eyes. Strange polyps wriggled on the sea floor, feeding on the sewage carried from the port by the river.

Coral turned to avoid the zone of putrescence, only to be stopped by a voice.

Why are you sad?

In front of Coral loomed a horrific creature. A crab carapace supported a humanlike head. Its legs writhed like those of an octopus, suckers withered and discolored, the extremities tipped with pincers. Its hair was made of thin eels whose jaws snapped incessantly.

Who are you? asked the little mermaid.

I am the Sea Witch, said the apparition.

Coral darted backward. *Be gone,* she demanded. *You will not have me.*

I can give the prince to you.

The water suddenly chilled her. *No one can do that,* Coral responded. *We belong to different worlds.* She stopped short of asking how the goddess knew of him.

I can.

Coral swam in a slow, tight circuit, eyebrows drawn together. She knew she should leave, but she could not keep from listening further.

How? Coral demanded.

I cannot bring him to the sea, but I can send you to the land. I can give you legs.

Coral touched her scaled hips, on the very spot the prince had touched. *Many of my brothers and sisters have died at your hand. Why should I trust you?*

I am the embodiment of Death, said the Sea Witch. *I have no need to lie—I always win, given time. I will help you because it will serve my ends.* She raised a pincer toward her heart, as if to say, here I am, my nature undisguised. Coral knew that the witch could have worn the beauty of a siren had she chosen it.

How?

I can create nothing. My tools are death and decay. If I change you from an immortal mermaid into a mortal human, I will have moved you in the direction of death. The act is its own reward.

Coral tensed her fluke, trying to imagine what it would be like to have two limbs there instead of one. Vividly she recalled the soft, tapered legs of the woman in the young merchant's vision, and his pleasure at the consideration of them.

It cannot be so simple, Coral stated. There must be other prices to be paid. Tell me, and leave nothing out.

The Sea Witch laughed. *Indeed there are. And I am happy to tell you, for they please me.* Her tentacles stroked the sea floor, stirring up decayed polyps and fermenting sediment.

First, it will be painful, as if I had cut your fluke down the middle with my claws. This suffering will fade as the legs dry, but then, whenever you walk, your feet will feel as if you are treading on knives or pricking gimlets. Given time, this too will ease, but time is the thing you may not have.

Why not?

My powers have their limits. I can only make you human for three days. In order to complete the spell, and achieve a normal human lifespan, your prince must lie with you. Only his love, given in passion, will finish the transformation.

Only three days. The little mermaid knew she should be frightened, but the prince's desire had been unmistakable. Were she to don legs, and come to him in the light of day, would it truly be so difficult to consummate their attraction?

If you do not succeed, continued the death goddess, you will wither to dust. And there is no turning back. Should you enter the sea during the three days, you will dissolve into foam. Only if your man proves his love will you have the years a human normally has. You will also regain the ability to visit the ocean, but you will swim only as people do. The water will tire you out as it does them. You can never be a mermaid again. Even if I should wish it, my power cannot restore a being to immortality.

My prince will want me, Coral asserted. I have seen his soul's longing. Yet you wear the smile of one who owns the better side of a wager. What have you not told me? Why would this man not help me, should I ask it of him?

The Sea Witch laughed until her crustacean belly disintegrated into a spongy, gelatinous mass. A foul, inky substance extruded from her pores.

How will you tell him? Unless you can learn human speech in three days, you will be mute among them. But 'tis true, you have your pretty form, your graceful movements, your desire. Perhaps these will be enough. But I think you will fail, and that gives me great joy.

The little mermaid refused to let so foul a creature taunt her. What she had seen in the prince's mind was a pure and true emotion, and she knew her own heart. To reach the fulfillment of that bond, she would risk anything.

Very well, said Coral. If you speak the truth, my fluke will split. If you lie, the magic of my blood will know it, and preserve me.

I speak the truth, stated the witch. She raked the front of her bilious form, opening a gash. Black, viscous blood spumed out and snaked languorously toward Coral like strands of molten tar. Drink of my essence. One draught, no more. Then flee to the shore, for soon your father's realm will spurn you.

Coral grimaced, drawing her hands and body away from the fluid. Arching her neck, she sucked in a

mouthful. It tasted as evil as it looked. She swallowed, if only to drive it away from her teeth and tongue. It seared her throat and tore at her stomach as if she had swallowed a harpoon.

Coral surged up, broke into the air, and raced along the surface, barely within the water. Even the laughter of the Sea Witch could not keep up with her. The beach reached for her. She struck it at a frightening velocity and skidded up the embankment onto dry sand.

The impact grated skin off her arms and breasts, but she hardly noticed. That discomfort was lost within the agony welling up from her lower body. Phantom pincers closed, snipping her fluke down the center.

She cried out. Salt tears streamed from her eyes. She grasped handfuls of sand and tightened her fists until the knuckles threatened to explode. Far too slowly, skin closed in around the exposed tissue. Knees, ankles, and toes took vague shape.

She endured until she could sense the bones hardening and joints meshing, then mercifully, consciousness failed her.

* * *

Coral felt eyes upon her as she woke.

She lay on the sand beside a jumble of driftwood. A gull perched there, gazing at her intently. Its dark eyes sparkled with intelligence. It opened its pure white wings and hissed softly, as if to tell her something. Groggy, Coral could only shake her head.

Abruptly the gull took flight. Coral turned to see what had startled it.

Two boys stood a few steps away. If she had been a giant kraken, they could not have stared with more awe.

She tried to move. Her body squirmed strangely, and abruptly, she was gazing at herself with as much astonishment as the children. Two shapely legs, as fine as the pair in the prince's dream, extended from her equally human pelvis.

She rolled over. The boys, startled, pranced backward. Suddenly they burst into a run, straight toward the cottage on the dune. She ignored them, mesmerized by the sensation of knees bending and toes wriggling.

When she looked up, the boys were leading two men down from the cottage.

One of the men carried a blanket. She recognized him instantly as her merchant prince. Her eyes locked upon his, and did not shift until he leaned over her. She reached up, not quite believing it as her fingers brushed the firm, warm flesh of his neck.

He spoke to her. In his mind, she read the meaning of his words, but when she tried to reply, only a meaningless squeak emerged from her throat.

"It's her, Tane," he told the other adult. "I told you there was a girl on the beach with me the night of the gale."

"She's real enough," Tane replied. "But if you think a little thing like her could have pulled you from the waves, your fever must have returned. She's nothing but a cast-off waif herself. Cover her, Adan, before she withers away."

Adan wrapped her carefully, yet his hands betrayed a certain reluctance to hide her beauty. “It’s her, I tell you. I couldn’t forget a face like this.”

Coral smiled.

“Then where’s she been the past three days?” Tane argued. “Where was she when we salvaged the wreck and scoured the coast for the dead? You’ve never seen this man before, have you, girl?”

As Tane spoke, doubt took root in Adan’s mind. He remembered the touch of fish scales against his hips.

Coral shook her head, willing him to believe his instincts, but to her dismay, both men took her gesture as a reply to Tane’s question.

“There’s your answer, Adan. Here, let’s help this poor lass inside and send the boys to fetch Lara. You know, it’s just as well your new ship will have that bridal cabin. You’re too young a trader to ply this strait without a wife aboard. It leaves your imagination without an anchor.”

Coral struggled to think of a way to communicate. The more Adan analyzed his memories, the more he attributed the night on the beach to delirium. Tane was his mother’s brother, his mentor and financier. Adan had obeyed the man’s advice all his life.

While the men lifted her upright, Coral started to gesture—anything to get their attention. But as weight settled onto her feet, pain blotted out her attempt. She doubled over, gasping.

“She’s ill, Adan, or hurt. Perhaps we’d better take her to the healer.”

Thinking quickly, Coral shook her head again. She wouldn’t let herself be shut up some place away from her prince, now that she’d found him. She steadied herself, and stepped forward.

Her innate grace maintained her for the first two paces. By then, she was reading in the minds of Adan, Tane, and the boys how she should walk. She forced her legs to obey that mental model, though each grain of sand beneath her soles seemed to penetrate to the bone.

The men shrugged and followed her, dispatching the boys to a nearby cluster of houses.

* * *

“Lara will see to you,” Adan said as he helped Coral into a chair. “Perhaps some of her younger sister’s clothing would fit you.”

He hovered near her. Coral gazed at him longingly, resentful of Tane’s presence.

“Don’t you speak at all?” Adan asked.

She touched her lips, and shook her head. Then she pulled his hand within the blanket to the center of her chest, and let her heart beat against it. She nodded.

Once again, the connection was made. She could tell he was reliving the vision that had first drawn her near his ship. But to her frustration, the recollection only made him recall the ridicule of his crew, and he retreated from it.

Tane cleared his throat. Adan pulled his hand back.

“Mute as a fish,” Tane said.

“She's obviously had a terrible experience,” Adan replied. “Do not be so harsh.”

Coral beamed at his defense of her. He smiled back. Just then, the door opened.

A young woman entered, with the boys. She looked at Coral and smiled. The Sea King's daughter read concern and empathy in the newcomer's mind, but she ignored it. What she saw in Adan's mind consumed her full attention.

Betrothed. This woman was his intended mate. And he was devoted to her.

This could not be, Coral insisted to herself. Lara's prettiness was quiet, unimposing—and yet the affection in the prince's heart could not be denied. Coral began to shake, caught in a wave of betrayal mitigated only by her sudden fear for her existence.

A sudden, warm wetness drenched the blanket beneath her. She glanced down, startled. The liquid spread darkly across the cloth, heading for the floor.

“Oh, you poor dear,” Lara said, hurrying forward. “Out, all of you. She needs privacy.”

Coral had only to glance in the mind of anyone present to understand why she was suddenly being treated like an invalid. In the sea, she'd never had to be concerned about when her bladder emptied. She watched forlornly as her prince exited with the others, leaving her with a nurse she could not have resented more.

“Let me take this,” Lara murmured soothingly as she tugged at the blanket. “Some broth will warm you up. Do you have a fever, child?”

Coral resisted the urge to fling Lara's hand from her brow. She wanted to rise, to follow her prince. But as she placed a foot on the floor, the knife-sharp twinges stunned her back into place.

By the time Lara had returned with a fresh blanket and a washcloth, Coral's anger at the woman had faded. Her body prickled with so many strange needs. Lara seemed to understand what she required, though she herself did not. Broth, what was that? She looked in Lara's mind, and all at once understood the meaning of the pangs in her abdomen.

Mer did not eat. They drank only salt water. The Sea King had made his children so that they would not need to take life in order to preserve their own. But Coral's new body had no such magic. She had much to learn.

Coral had already lost half the first day lying unconscious on the beach. She would not waste the rest of it. As Lara mothered her, the former mermaid gleaned the information necessary to behave as a human being.

Eating, walking, bodily functions, customs of attire, roles of parent and child, male and female—all the mundane aspects of living that any resident of the kingdom took for granted were prey to Coral's thirst for knowledge. When at last Adan appeared out of the darkness of early evening, she was well-prepared for him.

She stood in front of him in a plain but well-fitting singlet. She had chosen a sash that emphasized the sea green of her eyes.

“Our little piece of driftwood has become a lady,” Lara said cordially.

“You work miracles,” Adan said. Coral would have resented the way he credited her transformation to

Lara, had she not been able to read behind the words. When his glance lingered on her hair, it was its natural sheen that captured his approval, not how well Lara had combed it. When he looked lower, the way she filled the weave mattered far more to him than the choice of garment.

He gave no sign to Lara, but Coral knew Adan regretted that his betrothed was not equally lovely.

Coral tried her best to keep his attention that evening, using the wiles she had stolen from Lara. She held her implements with dainty finesse, she smiled and made eye contact at carefully selected moments, and most of all, she hid her jealousy of Lara. The latter proved difficult, for she saw that Lara, as was often the custom in this realm between promised mates, intended to stay the night.

As the moon, in its waning quarter, slipped below the horizon, Lara set up a bed on a divan in the common room for Coral. As Lara allowed her privacy to disrobe, and Adan was busy outside splitting a few extra pieces of firewood, Coral sensed an opportunity. She hurried beneath the covers and feigned immediate sleep.

Lara soon checked on her and, believing the ruse, tiptoed back into Adan's bedroom. Moments later, Adan passed through on his way to join her. He paused to gaze in the direction of the divan.

Coral sat up, peeling the blankets off her naked body. She rose with a sinuous motion. Ignoring the agony in her feet, she crossed over to Adan and nudged against him before he could gather his wits.

Reluctantly, he pressed her back to arm's length. "Lord of the sea, what I wouldn't have done to have met you a year ago."

From the deep recesses of his being, she read the scroll of confession that he kept sealed to all but his view. He did not love Lara. Fondness, yes. Devotion, yes. But not love.

Coral tugged his wrist urgently.

He loosened her grip. "I cannot. My lady awaits."

He turned away from her silent protests, and vanished into the bedroom. Coral sank back on her pillow, stricken.

He wanted her. His heart said it, no matter that his spoken words declared. That promise alone gave her the strength of will to remain where she was.

She lay there, tossing, feeling death swimming nearer. What was she to do? Oh, how smug the Sea Witch's laugh seemed now.

* * *

Until the Sea Witch had split her legs, Coral had never known unconsciousness. She understood that humans slept, but she also knew that they often went without it for a night or more. She remained awake until the pre-dawn, and was caught unaware when her body asserted its needs. As a result, she then did not rouse until the sun broke through the fog late in the morning.

Crusts on her eyelashes, she stumbled to the window, disbelieving her senses. She willed the sunshine away, back to the previous night. Her three days were nearly half gone.

Wooden clogs scuffed the floor. Coral turned to see a matronly woman emerge from the pantry. Her memories of Adan's mind told her this was Lara's mother, Netta.

“Here, now, you can't run around the house naked,” the woman scolded. “Didn't my daughter provide you with night clothes?”

Coral let herself be led back to the divan, too distracted by the shooting pain in her feet to protest, and too amazed that she had not felt the pain until then. Netta introduced herself, adding, “Adan and my daughter went sailing in his ketch. They'll be back at dusk. Are you hungry?”

Coral blinked until tears came. There was no way she dared follow Adan. The sea was death to her. And to her annoyance, this human body of hers *was* hungry.

At least that was one need she could assuage.

While she ate, Coral tried to think of a plan—anything to keep the panic at bay. Netta was a resource, just as Lara had been. Among other things, in her youth, Netta had been a dancer.

To use legs so fully—it was so human an activity that Coral immediately claimed a section of porch, extracted the choreography from Netta's mind, and attempted the movements. Phantom slivers sprang up from the planks into her heels, but she did not stop.

The matron laughed with delight. Memories bubbled into her consciousness, where Coral could read them all the better, and use them to refine her cadence, posture, and tension.

“You've got the gift, child,” Netta declared. “Show it to Adan. He so loves dancing.”

When Coral heard this, her practice could not be stopped, especially when Netta's reminiscences shifted toward her long-held disappointment that her daughter had proven so uncoordinated in the art. The pain never left, but Coral endured it. She would take advantage of any avenue she could find into the prince's heart.

Finally, legs wobbling, she rested. She wanted to be steady when the time came to perform for Adan. As afternoon waned, she sequestered herself on a dune and worked on the greatest obstacle to her goal—her lack of human speech.

She could not glean the knowledge of how to speak from Netta or any other human. Use of their voices came so naturally to them that they gave the process no conscious thought. Trial and error was the only way Coral could teach her throat, tongue, and lips what they had to know.

Toward sunset, she could grunt and hum. “Nnnnnn,” she said as she observed the prince's ketch approach its dock. She could not even correctly transfer her excitement into the utterance.

She sighed. Given a few weeks, she might manage a sentence. But left with only two nights and a day, she would be fortunate to form a single word.

She brushed the sand off her skirts and hobbled toward the docks.

* * *

“You should see how she dances!” Netta chirped as soon as her prospective son-in-law appeared.

Adan glanced at Coral, intrigued. To her delight, it was arranged that, as soon as the evening meal ended, the Sea King's daughter would demonstrate what she had learned.

Adan's eyes gleamed as he watched. His mouth hung open, until Lara, annoyed, closed it for him.

Coral could not have danced better had she been born a human. She raised her arms above her head

and spun on the tips of her toes, she pranced, she swam through the air. She continued until the throb in her feet overwhelmed her. Her audience applauded as she swayed into a chair.

“Our little foundling seems to have completed her recovery,” Adan said.

“Perhaps tomorrow we can arrange a permanent home for her,” Lara suggested.

Adan pursed his lips. “Perhaps we can,” he said equably.

His annoyance at Lara was matched only by his approval of Coral. The former mermaid smiled into her cup. Dizzy and exhausted from the dancing, Coral bided her time for the rest of the evening, until at last, as Lara and her mother talked, she saw a chance to act. Grasping Adan, she tugged him out to the porch.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

Her lips came up to meet his. He kissed her back fiercely.

But he pulled away much too soon. “We must go back. Lara must not find us here.”

She pulled him toward the steps, toward the beach. When he anchored himself, she brushed her thigh along his.

“No,” he said.

His interest in her coursed through him like a rushing mountain stream, fueled by an unstoppable snow melt. But as she watched, he placed a dam across it.

“I’m promised, and that’s all there is to it,” he said. He turned toward the door.

She clutched at him, dragging him back. Just then, Lara called for Adan. Bitterly, he flung himself free. Coral, poised awkwardly on her tender, exhausted legs, nearly tumbled over. Adan disappeared without looking back.

Coral blinked through tears. She couldn’t go back in. She didn’t understand how any human could sequester his feelings as Adan had. He wanted Coral, more than any woman he’d ever seen, certainly more than the plain bride he’d settled for. But his determination was undeniable. He had come to his harbor, and would not weigh anchor.

A flutter of wings startled her out of her despair. A white gull perched on the porch rail beside her.

She knew instinctively that it was the same bird that had kept watch over her on the beach the previous day. It opened its wings and held them wide. Its sentient eyes gazed at her.

Impulsively she reached out to contact its mind. Blue fog retreated from her probe. The gull dwelled in the realm of the air, and its language rested just across the border of her understanding.

The bird flew off. Coral turned and stared forlornly at the door. Head down, she left the porch and vanished into the dunes.

* * *

The third day passed swiftly, as time does when a person wants it to linger. Coral wandered the heath and the dunes just outside of the town, avoiding passersby, sharing the thoughts of the populace during those rare times when she could block out the image of Adan. The richness of those thoughts told her she

would have liked living in that town, among its people, until she grew old.

As the lamplighters strolled down the streets on their rounds, Coral inevitably turned in the direction of the cottage.

The Sea Witch's magic seemed to be weakening already. Coral's bones creaked. Every joint in her new legs and hips gave her pain. She was stumbling by the time she arrived at Adan's dwelling.

Dark windows confronted her. He was not there.

She sank to her knees on the porch. She did not know why it should matter whether she saw him again or not. Best merely to stay and die, on the very spot where she had first acknowledged the Sea Witch's victory.

But there was little enough to do with what remained of her life. Finding Adan was a goal to stave off the bleakness of her reveries.

She probed randomly until she detected the pattern of Adan's consciousness. It came from the direction of the docks. She dragged herself toward the source.

* * *

Adan was on his ketch. Coral glimpsed him through a porthole, just before a forgotten candle guttered out in its holder. He and Lara were wrapped around each other, asleep in the bunk of the tiny master cabin.

Coral walked unsteadily out to the end of the pier. Deadly as the water might be, it was no more threatening now than the land.

She had not been there long when shapes appeared beneath her dangling legs.

Her sisters.

We have learned of your pact with the Sea Witch, announced the eldest. We have made a new pact. Your life may be saved.

How? asked Coral.

Our father has agreed that if you live out your proper mortal span, he will not fashion a new mermaid for a thousand years after your death.

But the Sea Witch said her power could only grant me three days and nights.

Not if you give her a death. She can give you a human lifetime if it is taken from another. The eldest threw a coral spike onto the end of the pier. Kill your prince's lover. Cast her body into the ocean. Her lifeless blood will fuel the magic.

Coral shrank away from the spike in horror. *I cannot do this!*

You must, or your own life is forfeit.

Her sisters submerged, leaving Coral to stare at the weapon they had left.

* * *

Entering the cabin proved surprisingly easy. Coral's natural grace served the cause of stealth well. A few long minutes after her sisters had departed, she held the spike over Lara's heart.

Coral dreamed that she was in the woman's place, there beside her sleeping Adan. In her vision, he did not wake during the murder. He and Coral met months later, when she had learned human speech, and he had overcome his grief. Unimpeded by a rival, Coral won his love.

At their marriage ceremony, he reached for her hand. He held it up and turned it over, ready to place a ring on her finger.

A pool of blood, lying in her palm, rolled out of her hand and splattered her wedding gown.

Coral lowered the weapon without striking.

She could not kill. However close to human she might be, however desperate, she was still the daughter of the Sea King, and the Sea King acted only in the interests of life.

She crept out as stealthily as she had entered. She stood at the gunwale and frowned down at the spike.

At once, a glamour lifted from her. She understood how she had been duped. Her sisters had never come to the pier. They had been an illusion. Greedy for one more death, the Sea Witch had tried to trick her. Spilling another's blood would not save her life; it would merely increase the witch's victory.

All that remained was for dawn to come and change her to dust. So be it.

With a subtle whisper of wings, the white gull landed on the deck beside her.

Impulsively, she reached out. It nodded three times. As her eyes widened in surprise, the bird launched off and skimmed the waves beside the boat, webbed feet grazing a strangely thick layer of sea foam.

Suddenly sure of herself, Coral leaped overboard, into the foam. Her body popped to the surface, boiling. She began to dissolve.

Yet, strangely, no sense of death overtook her, no lapse of consciousness. She heard the raucous screeching of the gull as it dived toward her. The bird caught a wisp of the froth that had been her heart and ascended.

And suddenly, Coral was high over the ketch. Adan and Lara, awakened by the loud splash, rushed on deck.

Coral looked beside her, and found herself in the midst of hundreds of ethereal creatures, winged and garbed in every shade of the rainbow, even in the starlight. The brightest and most beautiful of all sailed forward, forsaking the gull's shape, and smiled at her.

Who are you? asked Coral.

I am the Queen of the Air, said the entity. *I am to the sky what your father is to the sea and the Earth Mother is to the land. Welcome.*

How did I come here? I thought I would die.

You are the child of a god, replied the Queen of the Air. *You cannot die, unless you betray your nature. By remaining true, you have merely transformed yourself. Your father dared not reveal this ability to you earlier, for fear the Sea Witch would steal the knowledge from you. She does not realize the joke we play on her. She thinks me powerless, because no life is born of me. She does*

not realize her own magic is the catalyst that sends me offspring.

The goddess glided upward. *Come, daughter. Let us travel over the world and celebrate its life, and provide solace to the mortals in our care.*

Coral nodded eagerly, but spared one last glance below. In the ketch, her prince and his lady gazed out at the foam on the water with solemn faces, as if comprehending her sacrifice, and mourning her.

Coral descended. With her breathy, invisible form, she touched Lara on the cheek, and kissed Adan on the lips. They looked up, startled, and confused smiles brightened their faces.

And the merchant prince, until the end of his long life, was known as the captain who the wind treated with unusual kindness. Always, his sails were filled.