

Seirenes

by Nicole Wallace

She has had several names throughout her long life. The one she uses now: Ligeia. It was always the one she thought prettiest, so she has always saved it for the times when her wings are arms, when her feathers are smooth skin. The times when she has left the ocean behind, left her sisters, left their cruel task. The times when she is in love.

The ocean calls to her, reaches inside and tugs on her heart. It calls to her, as dangerous as she used to be when she called sailors to their deaths. It has been seven years since she left her sisters, following a man who had somehow escaped their charms, their voices. A man who turned out to have a wife and a child. A man for whom remaining faithful was not a test of willpower, but simply something he *was*. She had given up trying to tempt him as soon as she had seen the soft smile on his face as he gazed at his wife, held his child in his arms. She could not live with being the one to ruin that family.

Seven years since she had left the ocean's cool embrace, and while it was not a simple life at first, it quickly became one. She was the youngest of her sisters, wasn't as intertwined with the waves as they were. The longing to return faded after a year. She made a life for herself, a small cottage off the beach. She sold shells that she gathered and painted. She gathered sand that she would then imbue with what remained of her magic, sold it as love potions. After the first year had passed, she lived another five after that in a quiet state of comfort. She no longer missed luring men, no longer missed her sisters, or being rocked to sleep by the currents. She does not even miss the beautiful harmony of their voices, though that is truly what she had loved the most. After so long of never being more than a few feet from her sisters, her solitariness is blissful.

With the start of the sixth year, comes a subtle pull inside of her. She has become more melancholy with each passing day and she finds herself walking towards the edge of the shore more and more often, after years of only going as far as the beach. What began as a soft tug has become a full-bodied *wrench*, as though someone has stuck their hand into her chest and is pulling her towards the waves. As the sixth year comes to a close, she cannot stray far from the shoreline, oftentimes wading in up to her waist before she comes to her senses and returns to the shore, where she sleeps, curled into a tight ball, knees pulled up in an attempt to cover her heart.

She has fought as hard as she can, but the pull is too strong now, and she no longer has the will to fight. Casting one last glance at the land she's leaving behind, she walks into the water until she runs out of ocean floor to stand on, and then she swims until she can no longer see the shore. Her arms become feathered, her face changes shape. She releases any last hope she had of resisting, and lets the water pull her under.

She has had a few names throughout her long life. The one she uses now: Peisinoe. She hates it, doesn't think it's pretty at all, but she has always been the least spectacular looking of her sisters, and none of her names are particularly nice. It's the best of what she has to work with. It's the name she uses when she's in the form she likes best, when she has her feathers,

when she can feel the ocean lapping against her as she lets her bird-like arms drop off her rock into the water.

The ocean calls to her, but it is not painful. It is a comfort because she does not ever leave the ocean. She stays where she belongs and does what she loves to do. Not that she loves luring men to their deaths, but she does love the singing. She may not be the prettiest sister, but she has the best voice, a delicate soprano that drifts across the waves, calling to wayward sailors like a specter. And she is the only sister left, the only one that has accepted her role. Her younger sister has gone off in pursuit of a man that had escaped them. Her older was unable to get past her first love, a woman who had never loved her and never would. She had left to follow that woman into the very depths of the earth, a place where she could not possibly be comfortable, physically or emotionally. But Peisinoe, she stays. She has been here for countless thousand years, and she will stay here for countless thousand more. She has never been in love, never desired to be in love. All she needs is right here in the waves. When her sisters inevitably return to the sea, she will be there.

Times have changed so much since she came to this place. Sailors used to come this way so often, drawn by the harmony of her and her sisters voices. Now it is rare that someone comes near them. Ships are no longer the primary mode of travel, or so she hears. She does not care much for the changes of the world. She only cares for her little section of the ocean, her island, the sound of her own voice, the feel of her own feathers against her smooth skin. It does not bother her that men seldom come here anymore. Bringing death to men is not why she stays, though she does not mind it as much as her sisters did. She stays because this is her home, has been her home for centuries, and will be her home for centuries to come.

She has had one name throughout her long life, though it is sometimes spelled different. She lost her love long ago and had always wanted her name to be the same, so if they found each other again, her love would know who she was. Thelxinoe. That is the name she had when she lost her love, and it was name she had when she finally found her again, though her love had gained a new name.

She does not miss the sea or her sisters. She had only ever missed her love, her Kore. She found her some time ago, a century or three, but that does not mean that she has stopped missing her.

She and her sisters had been Kore's handmaidens, once upon a time, so long ago. Kore had not known that Thelxinoe loved her, though she may have suspected. The four girls had gone everywhere together. Kore's mother trusted the sisters to look after her daughter when she could not. And they did, though they did not think of it as looking after.

But Kore was adventurous and one day she slipped off by herself. Thelxinoe and her sisters spent the day looking for her, fearing what may have happened, fearing the wrath of Kore's mother when she found out they had lost her precious daughter. They had no luck, and eventually day became night. They returned home without Kore and Demeter's wrath was as great as they had feared, for it was not wrath born of anger, but of terror and was all the more

powerful for it. She went out to search for Kore herself, leaving Thelxinoe and her sisters to wallow in their guilt at having lost their charge.

When Kore's mother returned the next morning, she was alone and forlorn, having begun to hear rumors that her daughter had been abducted. This was worse than anyone could have imagined. Demeter was desperate to find her beloved daughter, and she charged the three sisters with searching for her, day and night. To help them in the search, she gave them all the wings of birds, so they might fly to cover more ground, and so they could see from high up. She sent the sisters off to search, begging them not to return until they had found her daughter.

They searched for days, weeks, months. The entire time, Thelxinoe's heart felt like it would leap out of her mouth, plummet to the earth. She missed her Kore, felt guilty at having let her slip away, felt hurt that she had not been invited on the adventure. Eventually, after having searched for so long they could not remember when they had started, the sisters discovered an island, beautiful and covered in flowers. They stopped to take a break from their search there. Thelxinoe wanted to keep looking, but her sisters had decided that they were done with that. They had searched for so long, and now they were giving up. Thelxinoe was welcome to continue looking by herself, but they were staying here, where they would be able to rest and sing and swim.

Thelxinoe missed Kore deeply, and still loved, but she was also hurt at being left behind. So, she stayed on the island with her sisters.

Centuries had passed when Thelxinoe decided that she could take no more. She had never stopped missing her love, and her heart was so full of sorrow it may burst. She bade her sisters farewell and went off to continue her search.

It did not take her long to find Kore. Thelxinoe had decided to start her search from the beginning and had returned to her old home. It was there that she found Kore, talking in a meadow with her mother. Thelxinoe could not believe it; her love had returned home and all the while Thelxinoe had been living off on an island

Because her life on the island was so isolated, Thelxinoe had missed a lot. She and her sisters did not hear anything of the outside world on their home. No one came to visit them except wayward sailors that were drawn to their voices and death. Thus, Thelxinoe had never heard that Kore had gone to live with the god of the underworld, that she had gone willingly, that she loved him and now split her year between his home and her mother's. She had never heard that Kore was not her love's name anymore, but Persephone, a proper name for a queen of the underworld.

None of this mattered to Thelxinoe. All that mattered was that she was reunited with her great love. It did not even matter that Kore – Persephone – had found someone else she loved. Thelxinoe would do anything to remain by her love's side. So when it was time for Persephone to return to her husband and her kingdom, Thelxinoe went with her, vowing to always stay by her side, handmaiden once again.