

## Moonlit Longing

Cyllene could taste the pirate on the wind.

Not the pirate's blood, or the salt of sweat on sun-kissed skin, but their longing—the deep, aching want that radiated from some place deep in their soul. It was so palpable Cyllene felt the yearning envelop her as she drew in a deep breath.

Out of the hundreds of seafarers Cyllene had coaxed to their deaths, she had never scented longing so encompassing, so desperate.

What was it they wanted?

Cyllene opened her eyes and stared out at the moonlit sea, and the silhouette of the sloop against the night sky. She stood with seven of her sisters on the island cliffs, ocean spray tossing up around them with each beat of a wave, showering them with droplets that shone on their skin like pearls. Nerissa was already humming an unearthly melody, coaxing in a different soul.

Sailor or pirate, it didn't matter—the sirens would catch any hint of desire on the air, pluck at its strings. Their songs wove illusions the seafarers couldn't resist. Gold. A homecoming. A mother. A son. They spun their desires out into desperation, until their ships came sailing in.

Other than the flash of luminous eyes and small steps to the edge of the cliff, none of Cyllene's sisters acknowledged the pirate's nearly tangible yearning. Two more joined Nerissa in song—none of them crafted for the pirate Cyllene tasted.

Cyllene scanned the deck of the approaching ship. Her eyes landed on a dark figure standing on the prow, hand wound in a rope as she leaned out over the sea, long, chestnut hair blowing across her face.

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Lorelei wanted.

She wanted to dance under full moons and tempt mer and swim with sea dragons to the far reaches of the land. She wanted to shed her skin like a selkie, to leave it on the shore and step into a new life, free from expectations that felt to her like shackles.

If only she heard how the crew spoke of her—of her deep, golden laugh, of the sly smile that curved her lips. Of her charm and uncanny wit, the luck they found when she sailed with them. Maybe then she would have felt the power to shape her own future.

But she didn't hear. And she wanted more.

She kept her yearning locked in a chest, sealing it even as it came spilling out the cracks. It was spilling now, too—that fierce, familiar ache seizing her heart as the haunting tunes carried across the waves. She shoved it back, shouting at the captain to turn to starboard, that the music was a bad omen—

The words died on her lips as she met starlit eyes.

A woman stood at the edge of a cliff in a soaked white dress, bare feet on the stone. Her hair cascaded to her elbows, shining like silver. Her skin glowed with ethereal radiance.

Their gazes locked. Lorelei's breath caught.

She knew in her bones what the woman was, and yet, and *yet*, she did nothing but stare, mesmerized, as her lips parted.

*Come, the siren sang. A new life awaits. Come to me, beautiful one, and be free.*

Lorelei's heart thrummed. The heady, desperate ache burst free, spilling out like innumerable grains of sand. She wanted, she wanted—

The ship smashed into the shoals.

The crew screamed, the prow shuddered under Lorelei's boots, the rope jerked in her hand. She swung out over the ocean, then plummeted to the icy waves.

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The woman struck the water like a stone, plunging into darkness.

The line of connection between them snapped, and Cyllene paused her song, catching her breath on the ache of the woman's want.

Shedding her skin for a new life. Becoming someone new. She'd felt that desire, too.

She hadn't felt it in years—but it bloomed now, a seedling, a whisper. Back so easily, after all that time.

Four more of the crew fell in after the woman, their cries echoing against the rocks. The ship groaned, the prow lurching high as it ran aground, holes tearing open along the hull.

Cyllene's sisters launched from the cliffs in perfect dives. Scales rippled down their skin when they hit the water. Pirates shouted, grabbing rocks, climbing the mast of their sinking ship—but the sirens navigated the shoals with ease. Fingers grasped, and pirates were yanked under the waves, one at a time, towed to the bottom of the ocean. Here and there a bloom of blood crested on the waves. The screams intensified. The woman surfaced, gasping, swimming for a piece of the hull.

Cyllene dove from the clifftop, salty air whipping by a moment before she sliced into the waves. Silver-blue scales appeared on her arms, her legs morphing into her powerful, steady tail. She wove toward the woman, reaching her just as she reached the flotsam. Cyllene burst from the water on the other side of the wood.

The woman gasped, but didn't let go. Up close she was even more striking. Her wide green eyes searched Cyllene's face. She didn't fight. She stared, dark hair sticking to her cheeks, trembling from the cold. They froze there, each holding onto one side of the flotsam, feet away from each other.

And Cyllene wanted just one more taste of her longing. She hummed the tune she'd crafted just for this woman and drew in a breath. The wanting more, the wanting out, the wanting...

The woman's longing shifted.

Cyllene's eyes widened. Her song trailed off.

She wanted...*her*.

Not just the empty promises Cyllene cooed, not some abstract woman she could weave an illusion of. Her. Cyllene, as she was.

A breath stretched between them. A pause.

A log line descended around Cyllene's neck.

The woman screamed as Cyllene was yanked backwards. She thrashed in the shallow water, sharp fingernails tearing at the cord, but it held fast, sliding across her skin, burning her, crushing her windpipe.

“You will never sing again,” a pirate snarled in her ear. He dragged her from the ocean, up onto the nearest rocks, and still the cord cut into her throat, sealing off her air. Her head swam. She was going to die.

A shout, and Cyllene looked through streaming eyes. The woman had climbed onto the flotsam. She slid a knife from her belt and threw it.

It hit the rock by Cyllene and skidded toward her. She flung out a hand and caught the handle, rasping for breath. She wedged the knife between her neck and the log line, feeling the sting as it sank into skin. She screamed as she sliced through the cord.

Blissful, cool air flooded her lungs.

Three of her sisters swarmed her, shrieking, lifting her, pulling her to safety. Another leapt from the waves and tackled the offending pirate into the ocean.

Cyllene and the woman met eyes one more time before her sisters towed her away.

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Cyllene wanted.

It was wild, confusing, like her soul was leaning out of her body, her focus narrowed to a woman with wide green eyes and scattered freckles.

She traced the ruby scar around her neck and sang in a new, damaged voice—a voice less sailors were drawn to, throaty and low, until she tasted her again, alone on the waves, and swam to meet her.

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Lorelei steered the jolly boat toward the jutting cliffs, toward the low, pining song. The moon was just a sliver, hanging among the stars. The lamplight in the boat danced off the pitching water—

And there—the same starlit eyes, watching her from just above the waterline. Silver hair swirled around her.

Lorelei's heart clenched, and she stopped rowing. The water lapped at her boat.

“Tell me your name,” she whispered.

The siren lifted her head from the water, scales shimmering lightly against her skin. A brutal red scar wrapped around her throat like a necklace. “Cyllene.”

“Lorelei.”

Cyllene floated closer. Lorelei didn't row away, but she clutched the oars, fingers turning white. This was foolish. And yet.

That longing, that curiosity, taut between them.

“Do you have to kill?” Lorelei whispered. “To survive?”

Cyllene stopped, a long tail pumping beneath the surface. “Yes.” Her teeth were sharp and triangular.

“Is... is there no way....” Lorelei cut the thoughtless, desperate words off.

“There is a way.”

Cyllene swam up to the side of the boat, pressing her forearms on the lip, water spilling down her back. “There is a pearl,” Cyllene murmured. “Born from the mouth of a clam nurtured by Corvina, harvested under the light of a full moon.”

“The sea witch's missing pearl.”

Cyllene nodded. "It can do many things."

It could stop her needing to kill, Lorelei thought. It could provide a way for them to exist together.

"Will you wait for me?" Lorelei's voice shook.

Cyllene caught her hand. Her fingernails were sharp, too. She lowered her lips to the inside of Lorelei's wrists. It would be so easy for her to draw blood, to drag her under. Lorelei brushed trembling fingertips over the scar on Cyllene's neck.

Cyllene dropped her wrist. "Yes."

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Her sisters were waiting for her upon her return.

"Who was that woman?" Aurelia asked, cocking her head.

Cyllene didn't answer.

But Nerissa watched with gleaming, knowing eyes. "Do not forget who you are," she hissed.

"I will not, sister."

The part of Cyllene that sensed Nerissa's watchfulness wished Lorelei would never find the pearl. The other part ached. She swam out from the rocks, singing her low tune, killing any unlucky souls drawn to her with Lorelei's knife. She was left empty, unsatisfied by each kill.

Eventually Cyllene's song called no one else in. She grew weak, surviving on the kills her sisters shared.

Her song was meant only for Lorelei.

There was no one else she wanted.

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On the night Lorelei returned, the cliffs were cold and silent.

Her hair was stiff with salt, face lined with sleepless nights and struggle. But around her neck hung a leather pouch, with an infinitely precious treasure inside.

“Cyllene,” she called. “I found it. I found it for you.”

For a long, fearful moment, Lorelei believed herself alone. Then a mournful, quiet hum surrounded her, and Cyllene surfaced.

There was a certain, new hollowness to her cheekbones. Her eyes still had that familiar longing, sharpened now to a hunger.

She gave Lorelei a long, slow look that made her cheeks and insides burn. “It is not for me,” she crooned. “It is for you.”

“For me?” Lorelei clutched the pouch to her chest. “But I thought—” Understanding dawned. “This will make me one of you. That’s how we can be together.”

Cyllene nodded. “Take it. Eat.”

Lorelei pulled the pearl from the pouch and rolled it in her palm. Somewhere behind that all-consuming yearning, a part of her balked. She looked at Cyllene, at her sharp teeth and scaled skin. At the scar around her neck. She thought of the throaty, irresistible voice her crew had begged her to ignore.

If only she could have seen herself the way the others saw her. If only she’d paused to truly look in the mirror, to consider how to wield her longing for her gain.



But she didn't. She thought it all, then let the thoughts float away on a tide of want. She knew Cyllene might be lying. But she *wanted* even more.

She raised the pearl to her lips, took it in her mouth. The bead was perfectly smooth and hard and slid easily down her throat.

An icy chill engulfed her. She gasped.

Cyllene propelled herself through the water, reaching up to catch Lorelei's face. She pulled her down into a searing, searching kiss, catching her lower lip with her sharp teeth. Lorelei's head spun. Cyllene hungered.

She pulled her under—and together, they disappeared into the depths of the sea.