

A short story by Nigel Coates

Vivaldi de Bellamee

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Through the fury of the storm he could hear the humans pleading for their lives. Their ship was soon to be washed onto the rocks, rendered helpless by the disabled mast. Arnicas knew they would surely perish in such an unforgiving sea. A human could never swim from the outcropped island back to the big land mass where they dwelled. Their cries of panic were muffled by the crashing noise of the ship's hull onto the rocks. As it started to crumble to pieces, Arnicas looked on in horror. The flickering lightning only gave glimpses of the sailors' demise. The sounds of cracking timber and human screams fell beneath the continual might and fury of the storm as it became even more ferocious. Arnicas knew even the strong would survive only a few minutes.

He ducked his head, and with just a few hastened strokes of his tail, was dodging submerged timber and cargo that was falling to the depths. The darkness of night was not kind. The thrashing seas had him grabbing at shadows. He felt helpless – which brought back into his focus the fear of his nightmare ... losing his own family.

Arnicas breached the surface near a section of the wreckage just as lightning lit the night sky. He was staring into the eyes of a frightened young woman – her slipping grip preparing her for a watery demise. Over her panic she knew immediately Arnicas was not of her vessel.

"A strange man in a strange place," she thought ... but she could not question it further. She knew her time was near.

"Take my boy!" she yelled over the storm. "Save him!"

Wrapped to her back with a blanket was a boy, stricken silent and numb by fear. Though her face was beaten by rain, it was obvious to Arnicas that tears of love and sorrow ran down her cheeks. He felt for the woman. She hugged the boy tightly and confessed her love by whispering in his ear.

"Save my boy! Give him life!" she shouted pleadingly to Arnicas as she stretched out her arms. Her shifting weight made her footing slip on the sodden timber, and she and the boy were quickly swallowed by the sea. Arnicas dove into the darkness and searched for the two as more pieces of the ship fell around him. Arnicas was fighting panic of his own, concerned for his own safety and haunted by his nightmare. Luckily, he managed to surface with the boy securely in his arms. He was rushed from immediate danger.

That boy was to be the only survivor from the wreckage that ill-fated night.

He stared to them unable to restrain his anguish, his choked breathing and tears in control. Questions, questions ... He did not know. He felt a thin rope around his neck and looked down to see a flat rock hanging at his chest. It was round and had markings carved into it. He didn't know from where it had come. He was confused and again stricken by fear. He shook his head and curled to a ball. The Señora moved the onlookers from the room, the boy sobbing for hours before falling asleep.

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The boy walked the streets and stared at his feet, daring not to make eye contact. He held the amulet that hung from his neck. It was his only connection to what he did not know, and knew it would be the link to the answers he sought. He did not know his name, where he was, who the people were, or ... what had happened to his mother.

The boy walked to the limits of town in three directions – not game to enter the forests alone. He walked the cobblestone alleys, through the market square, around the cantina and the length of the wharf. From there he spied rocks that lay in the ocean at the far end of the harbor. He broke a trail and found himself alone, away from prying eyes and unspoken assumptions. He sat on the rocks and stared into the water as the waves washed just below his feet.

His adopted caregiver had convinced the townsfolk to refrain from asking the questions they held, on the premise the boy needed time to settle into his new surrounds. He walked the streets as a ghost.

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He smiled to the Señora who placed dinner before him – his appetite fully returned. She did not pressure him for answers, knowing he was not yet ready to speak. The boy knew she had a kind heart, and was thankful for all she was doing.

The boy now had will enough for adventure. As he walked just a few dwellings down along an alley that ran to the water's edge, he heard a pleasing sound. Music flowed from an open window – music like he had never before heard. He stared at the open arch and let the music consume him with its flow. Once engulfed, he felt a release. He flew on the melody and escaped his surrounds, his feet lifting from the ground. With beauty filling his thoughts, he was free.

A man's face appeared at the window and broke his blissful trance.

"My boy, my boy, how do you go there? ... The music? You like the music?"

He disappeared just a moment before the front door opened wide. The louder sound emanating drew the boy inside.

"Do you like the music?" the man asked again. The boy merely smiled. He was sat on a couch so big his feet could not nearly touch the ground. He was faced to a statue thing he had never before seen.

"This is my new machine," the man said proudly. "This is a phonograph! The first in the whole region! You are listening to Alfonzo Vivaldi as he played in Venice!" He threw his fist into the air in triumph. The boy did not care for the "who" or "how," he just liked the sound. It gave him the comfort of a friend ... or a mother. The smile grew on his face.

After some time, Señora Simante appeared at the open door.

"Maestro, I have been looking for him!"

"Oh, yes, Señora, please come in. We are listening to Alfonzo Vivaldi ..."

She looked on with pleasure.

"I have never seen him so happy ... Who did you say? Vivaldi?"

"Yes, Alfonzo Vivaldi." The boy turned to the bemused pair and laughed just a little.

"Vivaldi," repeated the Señora, "That is for him. We shall call him Vivaldi!"

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With the passing days the town returned to normal. All of the storm damage had been repaired. The baker and the farmer walked the streets each morning offering their bread and milk. The fishermen had returned to the sea. The stalls opened at lunch, offering vegetables, meat, lamp oils, wood, and all sorts of things the citizens of Bellamee needed.

"Well, what are your intentions?" asked the Mayor of Bellamee of the Señora.

"If returned to his family, I would wish him well, but to turn him away now – I could not dream of it! He is no burden ... just a scared child, as all can see. Something happened inside him that night of the storm, and only a fool would guess how long his quiet behaviour will remain. And his amulet? Who knows?! He is a special one I am sure, one whom I shall not see harm befall."

"Then be it so – the boy is yours. Ah, Mayor, I shall care for him, yes, but let it be known he is a 'Boy of Bellamee' ... A gift from the sea!"

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By the next full moon, the strange boy was no longer that strange. Vivaldi was no trouble, spending most of his time on the rocks at the end of the harbor, or sitting on the wall just watching the markets below. He had done as much as he could to keep to himself. Even though he had not said a word, he was always polite. The townsfolk were just accepting him as a mystery of the sea.

An elderly lady was making her way, arms laden with goods, when a loose cobblestone nearly brought her to the ground. Several apples jumped from her bag and rolled around her feet. Knowing it would be difficult for her to pick them up; Vivaldi hopped from his perch and quickly had the stray apples in his care. He stood cautiously before the woman and offered them forth. The woman opened her bag for Vivaldi to place them in. They exchanged smiles, her gratitude prompting an offering of an apple as reward. Vivaldi was greatly pleased, hopping back up on his perch to eat it. It was the sweetest apple he had ever eaten. The woman continued on her way.

That afternoon as he sat alone on the wharf, the fishermen returned from a rough day at sea. The winds were not favourable, the harbor choppy enough to make berthing quite difficult. The captain tried to steady the craft, as a deckhand tried twice to throw a rope over the mooring. Vivaldi could see the difficulty and ran promptly to the edge of the wharf. His outstretched hands caught the rope on the first try, and he quickly looped the rope's end secure. A small cheer erupted from the crewmen on deck.

As the ship was fastened the captain handed Vivaldi a worthy fish. It was heavy for him to hold! The crew gave thanks as he ran home with a sumptuous dinner for himself and the Señora.



P a r t T w o

Vivaldi sat on his moonlit rock, playing his drum in time with the sea. As a gift to the world, he let his beats roll onto the breeze. He looked back to Bellamee, his beloved home. He felt lucky indeed to have been adopted by the town and to be loved by all. Giving them service was just a little he could do to repay their kindness.

If it were a festival day he would spend the morning with the baker. Always at harvest he would help the farmer in the fields. Vivaldi was always on the wharf to give welcome to each ship's return.

This night was darker than most. It was pleasantly warm and still – but the moon was just a sliver. If Vivaldi had not walked the path to his rock so many times, he would have had difficulty placing his feet.

He found his perch and began to play his drum slowly. As he relaxed his breathing, he could feel the ocean and earth, and the energy in the air around him.

Not long from when he started, something happened to change his life. From the water's edge came a sound.

"Is it a horn, or a flute, or ... What is it?" Vivaldi couldn't quite pick the instrument as he could not recall hearing a similar sound before – but he quickly realized the bigger concern was *who* was playing the instrument.

He had been startled as the horn joined rhythm and stopped playing immediately. So did the horn. He laid his drum by his side, squinting into the darkness of the water's edge from where the sound came. This stretch of coastline had spears of rock extending into the ocean; like fingers from the hand of the mountain behind him, resting on the water's edge. It was difficult for Vivaldi to see. All was quiet.

Vivaldi waited a moment for someone to present himself, but nothing ... no one ... He was confused. He questioned himself as to whether there had been any sound at all. With a minute passing, Vivaldi again began to play. Only a few beats in, the horn joined him again. Vivaldi stopped. The horn stopped. He started again and so did the horn. This time Vivaldi played on.

The horn player was good. The drum and the horn together sounded great. Vivaldi was inspired – this drumming session more invigorating than any other. He was full of the energy and enthusiasm of mystery. "Who could it be?" he wondered.

The sound of the horn was beautiful. It was enchanting. Its player matched his skill, sharing such similar rhythm and expression. Vivaldi was amazed!

When he could drum no more he rested and sat with a wide smile. He waited for the horn player to present himself, but nothing ... no one stepped forward. Vivaldi rose and cautiously made his way to the water's edge. He looked on the rocks, and behind the rocks, and even in the shallow water – but there was no one to be found.

Vivaldi was truly confused and now a little scared. He had never heard a similar instrument – and there was no one around to play it! He thought maybe he was going mad!

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Vivaldi woke later than normal, sleeping restlessly as he had wondered so. He made his way to the market for breakfast. Not far from his door the blacksmith grabbed his ear.

“Vivaldi, Vivaldi, I must thank you for your music last night.” Vivaldi took note. “My wife thought it beautiful, and she laid me flat by the open window to massage my aching muscles as she used to do when we courted! Thank you, thank you!” The blacksmith shook Vivaldi’s hand enthusiastically and walked off with a spring in his step.

Vivaldi now knew surely that the music had not been only in his mind ... ‘But why the thanks?’ He had played each night for so many years the townsfolk had rightly tired of thanking him each morning. It was not of particular concern, for he played firstly for himself, but he had not continued a block before the builder caught his eye.

“Vivaldi, a good day to you!” he said with an exaggerated wink and cheeky grin.

Vivaldi was truly confused.

As he chose his breakfast many of the townsfolk discreetly made a point of presenting their praises. He returned to Señora Simante for the reason but stood bemused in the open doorway. She was waltzing around the sitting room – dusting! Her light feet twinkled this way and that as she hummed a merry tune. This dusting was no chore!

“Ah, Vivaldi my boy, what a glorious day!” Vivaldi looked over his shoulder at the passing clouds and knew she was not talking of the weather.

“I heard you start and stop, trying to play both of your instruments together, and when you did ... it was so magical! You are such a talent, I am so proud, I am so happy!”

Without words in his possession, it was hard for Vivaldi to explain the previous night.

He let it be.

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Vivaldi returned to his rock at sunset. He looked all over the headland before he began. No one. He beat his drum loudly, thinking only of *who* could have been playing the horn. By the time it was fully dark his hands were already sore, and his rhythms were jumbled - not nearly speaking the clear intentions of his heart as they had. He retired without knowing more.

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As hard as it was for him to pass the next day without trying to figure out his confusion, Vivaldi managed to wait till long after dark before walking the path to his rock. With eyes half closed he took a moment to feel his surrounds. The gentle waves rolled consistently to his feet. The breeze brought him the fresh ocean air. In the distance he could hear the ships moored to the wharf, creaking as they rolled in their sleep. He took the time to focus on his breath. He was centred.

Vivaldi began softly and slowly. With just a little time he arrived at his heartfelt beat. The sounds from his drum skipped over the surface of the ocean and filtered into the forest trees behind him. It wrapped Bellamee in a blanket of wonder. Vivaldi thought of his happiness.

Softly at first, the horn joined his song. Vivaldi stuttered a beat – but continued on. The horn and the drum soon became interwoven. They soon played as one. The sound was an energy that felt alive on his skin, filling his ears and mind with wonder and love. The thought of dropping his drum and running the twenty steps to where he could hear the sound emanate from the water’s edge was tempting, but he dared not. It was more than enough to again converse with his drum.

For hours they played – swapping the lead, faster and slower, softer and louder, increasing the wonder and increasing the passion! Vivaldi looked to the glowing moon and made a wish for love of his own. As he finished his playing, he turned toward Bellamee and walked from the rocks without casting a backward glance.

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The townsfolk the following day were again stricken crazy.

“Did they not realize how far from normal they acted?” Vivaldi thought.

Grown men whistled merry tunes as they carried out their duties. For no reason, elderly women baked cakes for their neighbours. Reserved couples held hands as they walked the streets.

The everyday market had drawn a festival crowd. There was an excitement in the air which seemed to electrify them all. They chatted enthusiastically with each other – all animated and pleased beyond the norm. Vivaldi took vigil from the wall and watched the proceedings unfold.

One of the farmers sliced each of his apples into four pieces and offered them free. Señorita Margarita, who arranged flowers for weddings and funerals and husbands regretting the neglect of their wives, skipped merrily around the square blessing random ladies with a single red rose. Children scurried under the feet of the elderly and were praised for their youthfulness and not reprimanded for their reckless action. Teenagers walked coupled in front of their parents – stealing kisses without fear of being scolded.

Vivaldi could not understand. Had they all been infected with goodwill? Kindness? Love?

He was doing the same as he had from when he was a boy, assisting the townsfolk where needed and playing his drum at night. But they all thought it was he alone that had twice enchanted their ears. But now things were different. Vivaldi knew it true.

The horn player and he combined created music not just for the ear ... They created a magic for the heart.

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For several nights, the drum and the horn sang together in praise. As soon as they finished, Vivaldi would walk from the rocks, believing the best intent was not to pry. But his curiosity was growing.

On a night not far from the full moon, when it was easier for him to see into the shadows, Vivaldi rose on completion of his efforts but did not walk away. He faced the rocks from where the horn played.

A minute passed without change. He took one small step forward.

“Do not come closer!” came a woman’s voice. It was not a voice he knew. It was not a woman from town. He stood still another moment, before taking another short step.

“If you must come closer, I shall disappear.”

After one more short step, there was no reply. Vivaldi walked the rest of the way cautiously, but she had gone before his arrival.

Vivaldi could not understand ... The girl had disappeared into the sea.

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Bellamee quickly developed a reputation from those who travelled in their trade. Word was passed of the quiet seaside town whose charm would consume you. Travellers started to make

Most in town had probably forgotten about the amulet, Vivaldi always keeping it hidden under his shirt. He would only take it off to bathe and to swim in the sea. Swimming bare-chested, he would wrap it in his shirt and leave it by the water's edge to not draw attention.

It was still his only connection to a forgotten past.

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Vivaldi returned to his rock the following night not long after dark. He was determined to know more. He took the time to centre, but with driven intent soon played a rhythm to light the night sky. As the horn joined him, he increased tempo further. The horn took a moment to adjust but managed just to keep up. Vivaldi drummed like never before. He drew even deeper into his passion. Tonight's rhythm was a mission of determined love.

Near exhaustion he brought his beats to rest. He stood to face the rocks. He took one small step forward.

"Do not come closer..."

Vivaldi's lip trembled. Determination crossed his brow. He cleared his throat ...

For the first time in Bellamee, Vivaldi spoke a word.

"Granted." As the word passed his lips a weight lifted from his shoulders. He surprised himself. He could not believe he could speak!

"Oh, okay, I ... I shan't come closer," he continued. Vivaldi's smile grew from amazement. Not only was he speaking – it was to the woman who played the horn! It was to the woman who held his heart! But with all of his excitement, he could not think of another thing to say. A good moment passed in silence.

"What is your name?" asked the mysterious woman.

"Vivaldi de Bellamee," he announced proudly. "Vivaldi de Bellamee."

He looked over his shoulder to his beloved town, now sleeping quietly in the night.

"And what do they call you?"

"Angelece."

Hidden from each other's sight, they spoke of their love of music and nature ... but stopped short of discussing love.

Vivaldi wondered, but did not ask about, her departure into the sea. He knew some things would come with time. He thanked Angelece for her months of music – and she thanked Vivaldi for his years. Vivaldi could not wipe his smile off his face if he tried. This night it was his turn to be the happiest man in Bellamee.



Bellamee continued to prosper as a town driven by love. The festival was every day! The fruit grew sweeter, the fish caught larger, the laughter louder ... no one happier than Vivaldi. He too was carried by the craze of love.

This love was new to Vivaldi. He had easily picked it out in others, but the love of a woman had never been welcomed by his heart.

As he grew from a boy he was friend to all ... but still, always different. He was the boy from the sea, the boy without parents, the boy who did not speak ... There was not a girl of Bellamee who would have held his hand to walk across the square. There was not a female teen to share a first kiss. There was no young woman to lie beside him at night.

Till now it had been of little concern to Vivaldi. He had not felt left out, he had not been wanting, he had not sought love ... till now. Now he wanted to make up for all he had missed. Wonder filled his mind! Passion filled his heart! "A woman of the sea..."

He wondered of destiny and true love, knowing they were big things for a woman who had not yet filled his gaze.



As Vivaldi's drum and Angelece's horn again kissed Bellamee goodnight, the evening's gentle breeze came to rest. The birds nestled in the forest's care were silent. The distant ships tied to the wharf rocked neither this way nor that. Only to be heard was the comfortable and ever-present caress of the earth and the sea.

"I fear the fool whose heart beats so, for the passion never caught by his sight.

"But Vivaldi who shares these enchanted eves, what if *to wonder* brings greater delight?

"Then what of the brave – who strive for their dreams?

"And what of the nightmare – that wakes you with screams?

"I promise you not, if only allowed to show...

"I wish to believe your love, but fear the things you don't know..."

Vivaldi took a small step forward. He felt that love was nearly in his grasp. He held his breath – ready to face his dream. As he wondered of forever, the sound of a splash pained his heart. He

looked over the rock's edge to where Angelece had sat. A large sea shell was rocking in the waves where the water kissed the sand. Vivaldi picked it up and knew immediately it was Angelece's horn. He sat back on his rock and held it in his lap. He looked to the horizon, teased by the flicker of moonlight.

A single tear rolled down his cheek. The sea held all of his secrets ...

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Bellamee woke with its now usual buzz. Vivaldi lay in his bed and listened from his window to the passing whistlers and snippets of enthused conversations. The town had become the talk of the land – busier than it had ever been. The sad, the misfortunate, the lonely, lovers facing trouble ... they all came to the enchanted Bellamee, wanting to be washed anew by love.

Vivaldi wanted to meet with the maestro, to learn something of the unknown instrument. On his way he perched on his wall a moment, to look over the market in the square. There was barely room to move. He could hardly find a face to recognize.

"How things have changed ..."

"Just a *seashell* for sure, no crafting to see," said the maestro, and could offer nothing more. Vivaldi gave thanks and motioned to leave but was stopped in the doorway. He turned back to the maestro.

"If this shell is the instrument that sounds at night, now knowing how it is to be played, I offer it impossible for you to play both this and your drum alone."

Vivaldi remained expressionless and silent – his secret sprinkled by light. He left the maestro to wonder how it could be.

While Señora Simante sat before him, he retrieved paper and ink. This practice was seldom – the Señora knowing Vivaldi wanted to ask or explain something too difficult for gestures.

"What of a woman who lives in the sea?"

"Lives!" puzzled the Señora. She thought hard. "Dear Vivaldi, you speak of the tales of sailors ... the ones who spend too much time at sea. They tell stories to pass the cold hours of night. They speak of mermaids ... who are women, who live in the sea."

Vivaldi's expression turned to surprise. Of *mermaids* he had never known.

"Just stories, Vivaldi ... stories from the imaginations of sailors – that is all."

Vivaldi nodded thanks. He wanted to ask more of the captain, but knew his fishing ship was a day from return.

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Vivaldi had seldom ventured from Bellamee, but the busy town today pushed him afar. He walked the inland road that crossed the mountains. After several hours he neared the summit and sat on a patch of soft grass with the sea horn in his hands. From this spot he could see more of the sea than he had ever before. The blue that stretched to the horizon filled so much of his sight. He did not know the sea was so big!

He wondered of its many secrets. And he wondered of his love for Angelece ... the mermaid.

With a few minutes practice on the horn he could make a sound. After a few hours he could play a tune. He enjoyed sitting with greater perspective. It made him more certain of his love.

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Vivaldi returned to town a while past the setting sun. He made way straight to his rock. With his drum set by his side he started a tune on the sea horn. He played only minutes before hearing the voice for which he longed.

"Not so bad for a beginner!" Vivaldi knowing she had said this with a smile.

"Angelece! My love ... I wanted only to keep it safe."

Two albatrosses flew overhead, their majesty illuminated by the moon. They were returning to rest, having spent maybe days aloft.

"Would you *now* like it returned?" Vivaldi asked a little hesitantly. Angelece offered no immediate reply.

"I now know of mermaids!" he said excitedly to assure.

"And you did not before?"

"No, not a word..."

"And now that you do?"

"I am truly amazed! You are 'A Woman of the Sea!'"

Angelece laughed just a little, flattered by Vivaldi's blind love. She believed his intent ... she trusted his will.

It was indeed mermaid law to always fear the human. If her father had known of her evening adventures he would have surely been mad enough to boil the sea! But Angelece had listened to Vivaldi's heart, for she had swum close to Bellamee for many, many years to hear him play. And it was also her own exploration for love that inspired her to accompany him with the horn. Her heart had been warming to love as they had played ...

"Okay ... You may bring it here."

Vivaldi's heart raced, his eyes glowing bright. With the sea horn outstretched he shuffled forward slowly. He was soon to lay eyes on the woman of his dreams. He feared hearing a splash, but tonight, that was not to be.

Revealed, inch by inch, was a beauty that took his breath. Sand-coloured hair darkened by the damp, pale skin seldom kissed by the sun. Bright blue eyes seemingly holding an ocean of their own and full red lips that stirred his passion. Her face in full sight was truly that of an angel! Her long hair fell forward of her bare shoulders, the moonlight giving life to the droplets of sea that glistened on her skin. Her breasts covered just by hair, a stomach taut, and what he never thought could be ... A mermaid's tail! Green scales sparkled with gold, hugging her female figure right down to the fins. Vivaldi's jaw hung open as he now basked in her glory ...

Angelece had often gazed a private eye on Vivaldi, but never like this. She had to challenge her instinct to flee, and to resist ignited a fire that charged her desire. She doubted whether a mermaid had ever lain before a human with passionate intent.

As Vivaldi bent down to pass the horn, his amulet fell from the neck of his shirt. It swung between them, grabbing the attention of both of them. Angelece was most intrigued. At once she recognized the markings. She reached for the amulet before the horn and as she grasped it firmly to stop its swing Vivaldi was struck by a bolt. Lightning flashed in his mind and electrified his soul. He was thrown backwards from his feet.

The storm continued ... more lightning, rain, wind ... and screams. He was ... on a sinking ship, that was being torn apart by rocks. His mother squeezed him tight.

"I will always love you my boy, always!" she whispered in his ear. He looked at her tender face, and in her loving eyes...

All at once he could recall his fifth birthday. It was just days before they were to sail across the sea to a new land. There were friends and family and presents and food, so much food! He could see himself standing bravely before them all, to thank everyone for coming. They laughed as he innocently gave special mention to those who brought the biggest gifts.

He could see his bedroom, and sitting room, and kitchen – his mother looking back at him with a smile.

By the wharf Vivaldi waited for the ship's return. He dangled his legs from the side and watched the sun's sparkle dance just below his feet. He removed his amulet to study it, as he had many times before. As he flipped it from hand to hand, a soaring hawk grabbed his attention and the amulet fell from his grasp. He watched without breath as it pierced the water's surface and was swallowed by the depths below. He had never been farther from it.

Without thought holding him another second, he tore off his shirt and dove below. He reached the bottom where it was dark and cold. His racing heart was keeping him far from comfortable, but the amulet's retrieval was of more concern than his safety. He dragged his fingers through the sandy silt with panic as he fevered for its return. Out of breath he returned to the surface. A few quick breaths and he was down again. His mind raced with confusion. What if the amulet were gone forever? His heart beat hard and his lungs burned for air.

With the disturbed seabed clouding the water he feared it lost ... but with luck, was flushed with relief as he again held the amulet firmly in his grasp. Vivaldi felt peace, but more than normal, more than it should have been. At once his heart slowed, his panic gone ... his vision became clear in the murky surrounds and he did not crave air. Relaxed, he looked at his underwater surrounds. He felt comfortable. He felt the same as he did in his vision, when he was five. He felt ... like he was home.

The disappearing sunlight shattered his thoughts as he was consumed by shadow. He looked up to see the hull of a ship coming aside the wharf.

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With the vessel secure and cargo stored Vivaldi found a moment alone with the captain. He had always been a man of the sea – surely wise to its secrets. As they left the wharf and walked together along the shore, Vivaldi wrote the word 'Mermaid' in the sand and looked to the captain for more.

"Arr, me boy, as real as you or I, but seldom, seldom seen."

Vivaldi pointed to the captain.

"Me? Have I seen one myself? ... Well I'd like to say yes, for sure, but, um ... I'd had just a few rums and can't be too certain, ya know?" Vivaldi nodded. He knew the captain liked a drink.

"But keep yar eyes peeled, Vivaldi, if yar lucky enough to catch one you'd be a rich man."

Vivaldi looked back with surprise.

"You'd be paid more for alive – for she could put on a show, but dead just the same for a crowd would still be drawn."

Vivaldi felt ill. It sickened him to learn of human intent. He was left in shock as the captain made his way to the cantina, rubbing his hands together in greed, muttering about mermaids and riches.

Now fearfully concerned for Angelece's wellbeing, Vivaldi made out early for his rock. He could not figure her meaning of "strolling in the moonlight" and feared the perilous intent of those like the captain.

With strength still in the sun, Vivaldi considered a quick siesta to revive himself from the previous night of sleepless wonder. With his drum for a pillow, he lay on the sand and closed his eyes.

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The town was filled with its usual buzz - locals and visitors preparing for their eve. Most wanted to be indoors with another, to listen to the sweet music that would cradle them with love. With just a few stragglers left at the wharf side cantina, rushing their farewells with the departure of the sun, it was a surprise indeed for one of them to see a woman's figure lying at the shore of the sea.

The guests lent favour to ensure her well-being, but commotion pursued them on seeing her nude! They called from the wharf and asked of her state, left staring without a reply. She once tried to stand but fell in a heap, the guests now rushing to her side to give aid. They covered her with a shawl and carried her to the cantina.

"Did you nearly drown?"

"Were you swimming?"

"Where are your clothes?"

"Who are you with?"

The questions were plentiful.

"Señorita! Can you speak?"

The woman looked around at the expectant faces surrounding her. She looked around the room, and down to the wharf, and for some time bent her head to look at her legs ...

"Vivaldi," she managed to whisper, before collapsing, drained of strength.

"Who is this Vivaldi?" asked one of the visitors. The manager of the cantina answered his question.

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The town grew restless with the bustle in the streets with people running this way and that, and without the music yet conveying its charm. The word of a woman “washed up from the sea” quickly spread.

Señora Simante arrived at the cantina just in time to hear the verdict of the doctor. “Her legs are weak – I suggest some time at sea ...” and with that she made haste to Vivaldi’s rock at the far end of the harbor. She could not help but compare these strange happenings with Vivaldi’s enquiry from the previous day.

Vivaldi woke on the Señora’s approach - but on hearing the news did not run to town to offer the woman aid as she had expected. He walked calmly to the face of the mountain and placed both his hands flat on the rock. He closed his eyes and paused for a moment, seemingly in prayer. He next walked to the rock where he played his drum, but instead stood a few moments to stare at the moon. He then sat with his drum and took many deep breaths - without seeming to have a care in the world. The Señora moved back quietly to the forest’s edge and found a seat just hidden in shadow.

Vivaldi began a slow beat on his drum. It was determined. He was playing with a purpose. The beat pulsated and grew. This was not a song of love. Quite soon the sound drove to the bone, piercing far into the night sky and darkened sea. Vivaldi was playing with the might of the Earth. The light of the moon seemed to grow brighter. The Señora watched as Vivaldi started to glow white. He played also, with the power of Heaven.

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The doctor had locked Angelece in the storage room of the cantina for her own protection. The townsfolk and the many visitors all milled outside - rumours of a mermaid littering each conversation. The maestro had spoken of the horn and the captain of Vivaldi’s written word in the sand. They did not speak to cause harm ... merely searching for the truth. There was even fresh speculation on Vivaldi’s own arrival in Bellamee!

No one immediately wished the woman harm, but each wanted to be a direct witness to what most had thought a myth. The manager of the cantina and the doctor nervously guarded the cantina doors, unsure of what was to come. The visitors to town owed them no courtesy, and although they were urged to disperse, grew agitated and did not move on.

Vivaldi's late arrival caused uproar. It was supposed he knew truths, and they wondered where he had been. They had not heard his drumming over their own commotion. Vivaldi pushed through the crowd to the cantina's entrance. The nervous bouncers let him through, bringing jeers from the crowd.

Vivaldi found Angelece huddled in a corner behind crates of old wine.

"My love ..."

"I am a fool to trust a human!" she snapped. Angelece was in fear of death.

"My love, I am sorry, I did not dream ..." Vivaldi crouched by her side. He looked a moment to her bare legs and felt odd. It did not seem right.

"You would give up the sea for me?"

Tears ran down her cheeks.

"And look what has happened!"

Vivaldi felt guilty as charged. If he had only better known human intent. He now wished it any other way.

"I do love you, Angelece. Your happiness is my only desire, your safety my only concern."

They stared at each other a silent moment before locking into a secure embrace.

They both shed tears.

Vivaldi appeared at the cantina doors. He pointed to the maestro, the doctor and Señora Simante, who had just returned from the rocks. He waved for them to come inside – ignoring the crowd, who were now calling abuse and threatening action. He motioned for the cantina manager to stay on the doors; he reluctantly agreed. The four of them disappeared into the storeroom.

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With a few minutes passing it was Vivaldi alone to emerge. He held his hands up in the air to request silence. Things took a while to hush even a little. Many of the locals were still explaining to the visitors of Vivaldi's importance to the town, how he arrived, and the fact he doesn't speak. He again pushed through the crowd to the far end of the setting. He stood on a table as the whole crowd turned before him. He again raised his hands to completely settle the crowd. They eventually fell to silence.

He looked to all of the expectant faces, swaying gently to get a clear vantage. He could not help but imagine the sea. The sea had always been his nemesis of mystery, but this one, he was more than brave enough to face. He cleared his throat, which brought gasps of disbelief from the townsfolk and panicked glances from the visitors.

"S... S... Señores and Señoras..." The crowd was fixated. It was a night full of disbelieving behaviour! "For those that know me, I ask you to show me the love I have always felt for you. For those that don't, I ask for the benefit of your doubts.

"I stand before you now to tell you the tale of a boy ... I shall tell you *my* tale..."

Vigorous chatter erupted from the crowd. Each of the townsfolk had long accepted Vivaldi as "the boy from the sea," with the actual meaning and mystery of those words fading as they all befriended an honest, hardworking and sincere young man.

They now recalled their intrigue from the morning after the storm many years previous. "A young boy wrapped in seaweed!" To now have those questions answered, out of the mouth of the boy who could not speak, was an event indeed! People busily made themselves comfortable for the story to come. They were all to hang onto his every word.

"The night was *indeed* dark and stormy ... as many of you know ..."

Vivaldi went on in detail to inform of his journey, of the shipwreck, and how he fell from his mother's arms.

"Only one man could swim in that ocean. There was only one to save me. And that man ... was a merman!" The captivated audience who had sat amazed now erupted as one. Each wanted to believe, but had to challenge his own beliefs. Vivaldi professed the existence and honest heart of the merman – but they were just words. The crowd would have rather seen proof with their own eyes. To actually see a merman or mermaid would be a better story to tell.

Vivaldi pleaded for mercy to be shown to the woman who offered them no harm. As he motioned with his arm to the cantina he immediately realized his mistake. Many of those before him shifted their gaze. A visitor close to the cantina doors noticed the storeroom door was now open. He pushed past the manager and rushed inside. Immediately returned a pain to Vivaldi's heart ...

"SHE IS GONE!"

The townsfolk again erupted. They jumped to their feet in panic, many of those on the outskirts of the crowd turning to scour the surrounds with their sight. Vivaldi shouted at the top of his voice. He had never before made such a sound.

When all of the visitors had left, on the night of the month's darkest moon, each member of town set adrift a floating candle from the wharf in his memory. It was on this night – but long after the townsfolk had all retired, in the hours of deepest sleep – when the sound of a drum could be heard, quietly playing a melancholy tune.

Vivaldi sat in the shadows between the rocks, hidden from sight. He stared to the ocean through eyes spilling tears ... He drummed for lost love.

The townsfolk all woke in reflection. They greeted each other with gratitude, thankful for what all the others did. Lovers took extra time to be thoughtful, cherishing all that they had.

Bellamee was unknowingly spellbound, but this time, with a different kind of love.

After the midnight hour, Vivaldi would drum. He would recall the time he spent with Angelece. He would recall her words and picture her face. He would try with all his will to relive the enchanted sound of her sea horn ... but could not do it justice. There was nothing like the real thing. Life could never be the same, now he had known Angelece.

As she slipped beneath the water out at sea, his *happiness* was taken from him. It made paddling for his life that much harder. It made the icy depths more inviting ... By the time a younger merman surfaced and dragged him to shore, he could not find a smile to celebrate life.

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Angelece had been taken far from Bellamee, recovering from the ordeal under the watchful eye of her father, who feared her misguided love would again threaten the safety of his family. But she hadn't strength to make any journey.

A mermaid can induce a cocoon to make herself human, and the same to turn herself back – but the magic is draining, to say the least. Occurrences of it happening were separated by generations, and for Angelece to do it twice in a matter of days was unheard of. She needed to draw on all the strength of her soul just to survive. They say if her heart hadn't been burning pure with love just beforehand, she may well have passed. And now, all Angelece could do was lay forlorn on the seabed day after day, contemplating Vivaldi's ways and their lost love.

Her initial pleas to be reunited drove her father to ban mention of Vivaldi, or humans, or Bellamee ... Angelece was lost, in her own world.

Vivaldi and Angelece played just a few short minutes - a passionate song to light the night sky. Vivaldi could resist no longer and ran full stretch down the rocks and dove as far as he could into the sea! Angelece laughed with happiness, joining her love in a reuniting embrace. They both shared tears of love, and kisses of passion. Vivaldi and Angelece... together...

Resting on the water's edge, they shared the sorrow of the regretful events. They confessed their new happiness and passionate love ...

"But how could we be together?" asked Vivaldi. "How could we be?"

"Could you ever give up the land?"

"As you gave up the sea for me? Indeed!"

Angelece held his hand and pulled him from the shore. They swam on the sparkles of the moon, Vivaldi again pleased he could feel its magic and power.

"As I can become human, you can become merman." Vivaldi smiled wider than he had ever before. He *could* be with his True Love! He dove down into the sea laughing... more than happy with his new home - more than happy with his True Love ...

They were both looking forward to forever...



C o n c l u s i o n

The townsfolk walked the street in the morning. They all swapped smiles and knowing grins. But not a word was mentioned of the midnight tune, knowing this was something new to begin.

And for the months and years to follow, only by the light of the slightest moon, Sweet music would blanket the town, making the lovers swoon.

And tales were told to the young, of a mermaid and a boy from the sea. But each was warned to watch their words, to keep safe - the secret of Bellamee.

The End