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The Little Mermaid

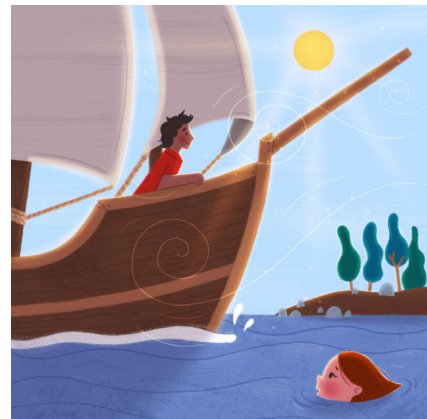
Hans Christian Andersen

At the bottom of the sparkling sea, where the sunlight filters down and dances on the coral reefs, lived the sea people. It was a beautiful world, and none more beautiful than the grand palace of the Sea King. He had been a kind and wise ruler for many years, raising his six lovely daughters with the help of his old mother, the sea queen.



The youngest of the princesses, the littlest mermaid, was a curious and gentle soul. While her older sisters loved playing in the deep gardens and chasing dolphins, the littlest mermaid dreamed of the world above the sea. Her grandmother would tell her enchanting tales about the world of humans, and the little mermaid could hardly wait to see it for herself.

When her fifteenth birthday finally arrived, it was her turn to visit the surface. Her heart raced with excitement as she rose above the waves and saw a magnificent ship sailing in the distance. Laughter and music filled the air, and as she swam closer, she spotted a handsome prince with black hair and bright eyes. The little mermaid couldn't look away; he was the most enchanting person she had ever seen.



But as the night fell, dark clouds gathered on the horizon. A fierce storm broke out, and the ship was tossed by towering waves. The little mermaid watched in horror as the ship split apart and sank into the depths. Knowing humans could not survive underwater, she dived down to rescue the prince. She swam with all her strength and kept his head above the water, guiding him to the safety of the shore.

There, on a sandy beach near a quiet monastery, she gently laid him down. She kissed his forehead, whispering a soft goodbye, and hid behind a large rock. Soon, some girls from the monastery found the prince and cared for him. The little mermaid watched from a distance, a little sad, but also happy that he was safe.



That night, she returned to her underwater home and told her sisters about the prince. One of her sisters had heard of the prince's palace and took her to see it the next night. From then on, the little mermaid returned every evening to catch a glimpse of him, her heart filling with quiet longing.

One day, feeling bold, the little mermaid visited the sea witch to ask for help. "I want to walk on land, to be with the prince," she said.

The sea witch cackled but agreed. "I can give you legs, but in return, you must give me your voice. It will be painful to walk, but you will be able to live among humans. If you get a true love's kiss within three days you can stay human and be with your prince. If you don't get a true love's kiss within three days you will become a mermaid again and forever be in my service."



The little mermaid hesitated, but her love for the prince gave her courage. "I accept," she said.

She swam to the shore and drank the potion the sea witch gave her. The transformation was painful, but when she awoke the next morning, the prince was there, looking down at her with concern. Though she could no longer speak, he helped her stand, offering her the finest clothes and a place in his castle. Every day, the prince grew fonder of the little mermaid, but he didn't yet know she was the one who had saved him.

The little mermaid and the prince spent much time together and even almost kissed, but the evil sea witch had her servants intervene.

One day, the prince told her about a girl who had saved him on the beach, and how he wanted to marry her. The little mermaid's heart sank, but she remained hopeful, believing that perhaps he would come to understand that she was that girl.



The sea witch was angry that the prince was falling in love with the little

mermaid and decided to disguise herself as the girl that the prince thought saved him on the beach.

Soon after, the prince's parents arranged for him to meet a girl from a neighboring kingdom, and the little mermaid accompanied him on the journey. When they arrived, the prince's heart lit up as he saw the girl, believing she was the one who had saved him. Not knowing that it was the wicked sea witch in disguise. The little mermaid felt her heart ache, knowing what this could mean for her. The prince fell for the sea witches' spell and forgot all about the little mermaid.

The little mermaid returned to sea heartbroken and the prince was to marry the sea witch.

The night before the prince's wedding, her sisters visited her at the shore. They brought a magical gift that they had secretly taken from the sea witch, a necklace that could restore her voice. "With this, you can tell the prince the truth, and he will know that you are the one he truly loves," they said.

Grateful for the chance, the little mermaid put on the necklace. As the prince stood on the deck of a ship, looking out over the water before his wedding, she found her voice again.

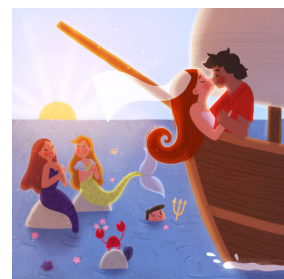
"Prince," she called softly.

He turned in surprise, recognizing the voice. "It's you!" he exclaimed. "You're the one who saved me! I can't believe I didn't realize it sooner." And with hearing her voice the spell the wicked sea witch casted over the prince disappeared.

With joy and relief, the little mermaid told him the full story of how she had rescued him from the storm. The prince, overjoyed, took her hands and said, "I have loved you all along. I was blind to it, but now I see clearly. Will you marry me, and we'll be together forever?"

The little mermaid nodded, tears of happiness filling her eyes. They sailed back to the kingdom, where they were married with great celebration. The sea king, the queen, and her sisters all came to the wedding, blessing their union.

And so, the little mermaid, no longer bound to the sea, lived happily ever after with her beloved prince. The two of them often returned to the shore, where she could visit her family in the ocean, and the sea and land lived in harmony ever after.



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