



Where Rock Meets Root

A reunion of sorts

By S.R. Laing © 2025

Mara loved singing to the sea.

No one had ever taught her; the melodies simply came, carried on the wind or pulled from the pulse of the tide.

This particular outcropping had been her favourite place since childhood, a scatter of black rocks just far enough from shore to feel secret.

Today, the air was heavy with salt and promise. Seals bobbed nearby, curious and playful, their eyes shining like wet coins. Mara sang to them in her made-up tongue, part hum, part chant, part lullaby.

The woman watching Mara had been searching for an unspoken treasure along the shoreline, where rock meets root. But now, her eyes were fixed on the girl chanting to the wind. It may have been a lifetime ago, but there was no doubt about what she was hearing. Recognition struck instantly. Shocked into stillness, a crescendo of homesickness crashed over her.

Catching her breath, she slowly approached the girl, who was swinging her legs from the black rocks, cooing to the seal-kin frolicking in the surf.

The woman picked her way along the sandbar just beneath the receding tide, noting the girl must have swum out before it turned.

She plunged into waist-deep water and dog-paddled the rest of the way to the rocks.

Mara was humming and chanting her nonsensical song to the waves, delighted by her friends, the brown seals, popping up around the rocky outcrop.

She let her mind wander, carried off by the gentle rhythm of the ocean slapping against stone, broken only by birdcalls or the clanking of moored boats around the bend.

Her voice faltered for a moment. A sound had caught her attention, soft at first, almost swallowed by the wind. But then she was sure: someone was echoing her tune in perfect harmony.

Suddenly, a woman's head popped up among the seal-kin, startling Mara. She rubbed her eyes, expecting a mirage, only to meet the smiling face of a middle-aged woman.

Mara blinked against the glare and saw, not a seal, but a woman. Rising from the water, her hair clung in heavy ropes to her shoulders; her eyes shone like storm-light under the surface. Her features were soft, somehow familiar.

"Don't stop," the woman said, still catching her breath. "It's been so long since I heard that song sung in our tongue."

Mara stared, sea spray stinging her eyes.

"It's just nonsense," she stammered.

The woman laughed softly, a sound like bubbles rising through water.

"Nonsense?" she said. "Oh no, child. That's an old song, older than land or tide. I'd know it anywhere."

And to prove it, she picked up the song again, her voice clear and rich.

As if in a dream, Mara joined in.

Her pulse thrummed. What had once been nonsense bubbling up from imagination was now transformed into a duet. The rhythm of wave against stone answered them, echoing their voices, slow and steady, until the whole cove seemed to breathe with their song.

The harmonies rushed through her for a few transcendent moments before she realized they had stopped singing.

For a long time, only the hush of waves remained between them.

The woman spoke first.

"You've a rare gift, niece," she said softly. "Most forget the words before they can walk."

Mara tilted her head, unsure she'd heard right. "Niece?"

"A word of kinship," the woman explained, smiling faintly. "Among those who share the sea in their veins."

Mara laughed, a little breathless. "You mean saltwater? Then half the world must be my cousin."

"Perhaps," the woman replied, her smile faltering just enough to let something ancient flicker through. "But not everyone hears the song. Fewer still answer it."

Mara felt heat rise to her cheeks. "I don't even know what I'm singing. I just... make it up as I go."

The woman looked away, scanning the open water as if searching for something just beneath the surface.

“Sometimes the song remembers before we do.”

Mara followed her gaze, sensing the conversation turning toward something she didn’t quite understand.

Her hand trembled slightly as she reached for a small pouch at her belt, touching it unconsciously, as if to reassure herself it was still there.

Understanding bloomed in her mind.

“What were you looking for?” Mara asked.

“Something that was taken from me,” the woman said, her tone suddenly clipped. “Something that belongs to the sea, but was stolen by the shore.”

Mara waited, but the woman didn’t elaborate. The air had shifted, charged, secretive.

At last, the woman straightened and shook the wet hair from her face.

“You should head back before the tide turns. The rocks can be cruel when they’ve had enough company.”

Mara hesitated, sensing dismissal but also something else, an invisible thread that bound them now.

“Will I see you again?”

The woman’s lips curved, not quite a smile, more like the memory of one.

“The sea decides,” she said, and stepped off the rock, slipping into the water with a motion too fluid to be entirely human.

For an instant, Mara thought she saw something shimmer beneath the surface, a glint like silver fur or light on a hidden skin, but then it was gone.

She sat there long after, the last note of their song still ringing inside her like a secret she wasn’t ready to understand.

What did she mean by “our” tongue?

Unbidden, the image of her grandmother’s face surfaced in her mind.

They said the sea stole her.

That’s what they told Granny about her own mother, my great-grandmother: she was taken by the waves, snatched from the shore like driftwood in a storm.

But Mara didn't believe it.

The stories always changed, depending on who told them. Some said she drowned; others, that she walked into the tide and never looked back.

Granny used to whisper her mother had salt in her blood, and that no land could hold her for long.

Maybe that's why their family had been adrift ever since:

Her Granny lost to grief, her Mother to wanderlust, and Mara... always half-turned toward the water.

Here she was, three generations later, ankle-deep in the same sea, pretending to be just another girl gazing at the horizon, having delightful chats with mysterious women in a secret, shared language she somehow knew but had never learned.

While denying the pull that threatened to take her under.

Granny's last note had said:

If you ever hear singing beneath the surf, don't be afraid. It's us.

She used to think Granny meant ghosts.

Now she wasn't so sure.

She didn't think her great-grandmother vanished.

She thought... she went home.

The tide was fully out, and moonlight pooled in rivulets carved into the seabed.

Mara disembarked from her rocky outpost, letting her toes sink into the wet sand as she made her way back to shore, humming something indistinct to the starfish and living seashells along her starlit path.