



Mermaid Top 20 Hits

RM Urquico

SOME TIME AROUND noon, Elena came upstairs to slap me awake. She had been watching her favorite variety show on the big television downstairs and got so excited about the upcoming guest star, that she'd run up the stairs to wake me.

"Tere!" She dragged me out of bed, and confused, sleepy, I followed her back down. "*Sirena daw!*" Elena hadn't been this excited about anything in months, much less anything that she would bother to tell me about.

I hated variety shows. I hated the gyrating dancers, stupid covers, inane status of celebrity, but she simply turned up to volume. Elena had probably been watching television all morning. She had her long hair twisted up into a bun, and there was still dried spittle at the side of her mouth. She hadn't even changed out of the nightdress she slept in.

"Baby," I said gently. "We're going out, right? You want to change into something nice for our *merienda cena* with Tita Bessie?"

"Later," she said, flicking her fingers at me in dismissal. It was a habit I used to find endearing when it wasn't directed at me.

Today's host was a well-loved comedian with a reputation as a ladies' man. "You all know where these mermaids came from." He said, as she made her entrance. The producers had rigged up a stylish elevator that emerged through the stage from



underneath the set; the elevator was complete with fake cartoon waves and bubble effects. “*Napaka-sexy na mga nilalang*. And we have a treat for you, our audience, today! Special guest star, *si Thalia, isang mahiwagang sirena!*”

It wasn't immediately apparent that she was a mermaid. For one thing, “Thalia” had legs. I later learned that mermaids' legs “appeared” whenever they got completely dry.

Everything about her looked undeniably alien. For one thing, the front of her body was chalk white and lightly striped with grey and blue, like a dolphin. It was obvious through the sheer shirt she was wearing that she didn't have nipples, even though she had generous breasts.

But it could all be makeup. Elena lit a cigarette with a disgusted huff of breath. “This is just a gimmick! Do they think we're stupid or something?”

Thalia didn't have pupils, only dark eyes with no whites. The camera zoomed in on the side of her neck, and showed off the gills below her ears.

Then she opened her mouth to sing, and that's how we knew she was real.

Nothing on earth could sing like that.

The mermaid sang, and the camera zoomed in on the audience. Everyone was in tears, it was so beautiful, and we didn't know yet what we were getting into.

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A mermaid aria was playing over the speakers when I went to the bay market early the next morning.

As I drove, I replayed yesterday's argument in my head, wondering how on earth we'd devolved to shouting and screaming.

“It's your auntie, and I don't care to go. They just judge me.”

“Baby, Bessie likes you. You know that's not true, and that's not fair to her either.”

“Well, I don't want to go.” Elena had ended up slamming the door and walking out. I'd ended up going to the merienda alone, lying that Elena wasn't feeling well. When I got home the bedroom door was locked, and I was wondering how on earth I was the one who ended up sleeping on the sofa. I owned the damn house.

To distract myself, I fiddled with the stations and tried to find a good old-fashioned pop hit. It turned out mermaid music was a worldwide hit and we were just getting into the trend. People walked around like zombies with mermaid voices in their ears. We couldn't help ourselves. It was like the *Ocean's Got Talent*, *punyeta*. But it took attention away from the fact that mermaid kind had essentially embargoed the ocean and its resources.

I felt it keenly. After all, I did own a sushi bar and restaurant. Well, at the rate I was going I used to own a sushi bar.



“A thousand a kilo? You must be kidding, Husto!”

“Take a look around, Tere. I would never give you bad prices if I didn’t have to, you know me.” Husto gestured at the giant piece of tuna he was carving, then at the surrounding stalls. The aquariums that normally lined the entrance of the walkway were empty. It smelled faintly of disinfectant, not of fresh fish. There were no lobsters tapping on the glass, no vats full of *ar-ar-u-sip* and *lato*. Some of the stalls and restaurants had been boarded up; the hawkers who sold fresh crab, scallops, and mussels were gone.

“*Wala na*,” Husto said. “They say the Mermaid Queen isn’t allowing boats to cross the China Sea or even the waters near Japan. Even our waters are hit.” To prove it, he turned around and switched on the radio that sat on a small shelf behind him and tuned it to a popular talk radio show.

“What are we going to do about it? For months, they’ve refused to let us fish in their grounds. This is the livelihood of thousands of fishermen that we’re talking about.”

“What’s happened?” I asked.

“*Parang* some mermaids found a way to get up to Laguna Lake to destroy fish pens, or something like that.” Husto shrugged. “Well, are you good for the fish? I can have it shipped.”

“I’ll take it now,” I said absently. “Two pieces, whatever you have left.”

While Husto packed the fresh tuna with ice and I chose dismal portions of fresh shrimp and squid, the radio host continued talking. “We also have to consider safety. Several fishermen off the coast of Palawan have disappeared and all suspicions point toward the merfolk.”

The guest was probably a mermaid advocate or something, and it seemed like she was trying to placate the host. “But we are destroying their homes. If this were a land-based country, act of war *na yan eh*. That was the reason we forced them out of hiding.”

I snorted. All these photos of whales washing up on shore with plastic in their bellies and it took one fucking photo of a mermaid baby with a plastic ring around its deformed arm for the outcry to start. At least for a while. It was easy to forget about mermaids if you didn’t pay attention. It was like watching rescuers pull people out from collapsed buildings during earthquakes. There was always a new sob story, and even an entirely different species of human didn’t stay in the headlines for long.





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“You can’t even fuck them, Tere. They just don’t have the—” Pedro gestured at his crotch. “*Alam mo yun?*” He draped his arm over the leather chair back and signalled a waiter to come refill his drink.

He said it with an aura of fake disgust, but he couldn’t stop watching my sole mermaid client as she swam lazily back and forth around the tank I had installed less than a year before. It was one of my favorite designs: the aquarium specialist had suggested tropical saltwater for extra warmth, low light corals, green star polyps, and angelfish.

This one was a charming variety of mermaid. Her tail was dappled orange and spotted white, and her hair was the same orange tone. Occasionally, she would surface to take a dainty sip from the Mai Tai I’d fixed for her.

“*Siyempre*, you tried.” I said, amused. Pedro was a handsome hulk of man and an unrepentant skirtchaser, but I knew for a fact that he was loyal to his wife of almost fifteen years.

“Of course I fucking tried. Have you *seen* them?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Some of them do.” This mermaid had a beautiful face. Some of them looked like anglerfish, all teeth and scary predator eyes. Others had shark faces, shark eyes, and shark teeth. Some of them looked like they stepped straight out a fairy tale, if you didn’t mind the outlandish color combinations of tail and hair and skin. They could never pass for human, but they were certainly gorgeous.

Pedro took a sip from his beer. “I thought you were crazy no, doing this! Aquarium bar right here on EDSA.”

I shrugged.

Elena and my investors said I was nuts. I told them to wait. It was Manila and the coastal waters here were foul. Mermaids seemed to like land, or maybe it was like any type of war, and there were mermaids who didn’t agree with the Queen’s commands and decided to “migrate.” Enough of them had left the ocean that there were border patrols set up on beaches. But you couldn’t patrol seven thousand fucking islands.

To be honest, I made some money from mermaids, but they rarely ate and often just drank. I made more money from people who came in to drink and watch them. Like Pedro, who was coming in everyday but didn’t notice.

I didn’t care. I decided to extend my happy hour, and since we had less and less fish, added more meat and vegetables to the menu.

The mermaid in the tank signalled me lazily. She was resting on the ledge at the top of the aquarium, tail gently swishing back and forth. “Another drink for me,





please?” she requested. Up close her face was guileless, large eyes and a pretty bow-shaped mouth.

I had never really come up close to a mermaid, and talking to her was like being inside a ringing bell. I walked away from her in a daze, and nearly forgot her order. While I made her drink, I got another business idea. It was stupid of me to think of it this late in the game.

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It was a rare night where Elena deigned to accompany me to work, but I was excited to show off the bar’s new look. Elena hadn’t come in in months. Instead, she liked to stay home, surf the Internet, read romance novels, and watch television.

I was just tired of her looking like she never took a bath, and asked her to go out with me. I’d never had to ask before, but she seemed happy enough. She looked fantastic, even with minimal effort: a shiny dress, new heels, and her hair in a messy bun.

“You look great,” I told her when she got out of the car and walked to the entrance of the bar.

“I don’t really want to stay out late,” she replied as she made her way to “our” table.

Mariana was singing in one of the tanks today. I know she preferred the stage, with a piano, real old-school style just like the movies. But she sang better in the tank, as though being in the water amplified her voice and her appeal. On stage, she sometimes came off as just a lounge singer, despite the gorgeous voice.

Every booth was packed, even if I was charging three *kiao* a table, or asking patrons to buy bottles for the privilege of staying. As long as Mariana was playing, I couldn’t lose. God, no one could resist mermaids.

Initially, I’d made the mistake of telling her to sing whatever she wanted. I guess the siren stories were true. People came into my bar, ordered one drink, sat down, and did nothing.

They would watch her with their mouths open, and their eyes glazed over. They wouldn’t even eat their *pulutan*; that is, if they even ordered.

“Mariana,” I said in the “green room”—which was really a storeroom I’d converted into a dressing room for her. She didn’t do makeup or even glance at herself in the mirror. She just liked to sit on the soft couch, and sometimes, nap. She’d asked to stay in the bar sometimes and slept in the aquariums at night. She slept sitting up with her eyes open but I asked her to stop after my janitor quit, saying he was too scared cause it always looked like she was dead. “I need you to sing something different.”





“Different?” She asked. It was like talking to a dozen different birds.

“I need them to buy things, not just look at you.” I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Next to Mariana I looked like a troll—short hair, my polo askew, the beer belly I’d been nursing for years even bigger than it used to be.

After that, Mariana changed something in her songs and the money started pouring in. I hired a new bouncer, and I installed a small tub in Mariana’s room so she could chill between sets. Good times.

Before Mariana opened her mouth, she looked around the crowd for me, and cast me a flirtatious smile. I knew I’d made a mistake. Elena’s eyes narrowed into slits. Her grip tightened around the mojito she was drinking, the green juice running through her fingers.

“Is this why you’re home late all the time?” Elena had conveniently forgotten that I’d been sleeping on the couch since the Tita Bessie fight a few weeks ago and that she normally didn’t see me until she emerged from our bedroom mid-morning.

“Well, no. Not really. She’s my entertainment, just like Paulo and the guys before.” Two years ago, I’d set up a big band to sing covers and stuff. They’d been picked up by a Taiwanese hotel, so it wasn’t like I never had entertainment in the bar.

“Ah,” Elena said. She had always been classy enough to stay and finish her drink, but I knew that look, and I knew by the defensive way her arms crossed over her chest that it would take a while before I could live this down.

#

I’d been in love with Elena for years. Since college, we were in the same *barkada*, taking the same business courses. She’d managed to date every boy in our circle before settling for me.

I knew I was her second choice. Maybe not even a second choice. Her third choice, after the boy of her dreams dumped her because he had to marry someone his family approved of.

Still, I tried not to judge her for it. She was a beautiful woman, who had been a beautiful girl. They’re told that this is how they are and this is the extent of their worth. If it wasn’t me, it would be some other sucker. I just happened to be a woman, too.

“Are you sleeping with her?” Elena asked, sullenly, on the drive home. She’d had a lot to drink.

“You can’t sleep with them,” I said. “They don’t have—”





It was the wrong thing to say; even she wasn't listening. She just went out. "If I had known you'd treat me just like a man would, diba, I would have never even tried this out."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I thought you couldn't hurt me as much as a man would, you know? That it would be different, that I'm safer with you. But it's like the same thing. You just don't have a dick."

"Baby, don't be jealous of her. She's a mermaid. This thing I'm doing, I'm doing for us. It's hard to keep the restaurant afloat, and I have to change with the times, or we'll be out on the streets. This is just one solution."

"I don't like it," she said. "I don't like you being with that mermaid all the time."

"Well, it's not like I'm not stopping you from being with me. You could come by the bar more. You could do other things, instead of staying at home waiting around for me all day."

"What else can I do?" She slammed her palm onto the glove compartment. "I cook and clean, and wait for you all day. You come home at midnight, sleep all day and you never spend any time with me anymore. It's always the business for you. Then I find out you have this, this—sirena in your bar! She's so *beautiful*."

"Who cares? She's a fish. You're beautiful! Instead of staying home all day and waiting, why don't you do something else? It's not like I asked you to be a housewife! You're the one who wanted to stay at home. I can pay for anything you want. You want to go back to school? You want to start your own business? Just say it! You're not my *katulong*; we can afford two! Three even! And it's not like you even clean anymore. All you do is sit around all day and watch telenovelas!"

"It would be different if we could have kids." And with that final word, Elena started crying.

I drove on for a little bit, but I could never resist her when she cried, and she knew this, which was how she ended up winning every fight we ever had. I parked the car along a small side street and unbuckled her seatbelt so I could drag her into my lap.

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"Is your name really Mariana?" I'd developed a bad habit of dropping by the green room to talk to her. Most time she just listened to me and never responded. It was a bad habit because sometimes I would tell her about Elena, and it was never good to tell about people about problems with your lover.

There was another mermaid in the bar tonight, but it was a male. Male mermaids tended to be extremely flashy. This one was dark-skinned and dark-





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haired, but made up for that with a neon pink and purple tail. I wondered if the guys sang, too.

Still, he wasn't enough to distract me. I was still banished to the couch, and Elena had stopped speaking to me. It had been three weeks since the fight in the car.

"No," Mariana replied, surprising me. "You wouldn't be able to pronounce it."

I shrugged.

"You seem troubled," she said. She had her legs on today, and was wearing a shimmering green dress that set off her hair and eyes.

That's when I made the mistake. I think the rule should be something like: never tell beautiful predatory women that you think your girlfriend is leaving you. I ended up telling her the story. During the telling, her eyes glinted. Have you ever seen mother of pearl under moonlight? It was there, a flash of something bright, and then gone in an instant.

My heart contracted, but she turned back to the mirror and her hair, and started talking about the set list. She didn't attempt to soothe me. I figured it wasn't in her nature.

I made it a point to go home early that night. I took an Uber home because I'd had too much to drink.

I wasn't that surprised to see an unknown SUV parked in my driveway. What didn't make sense to me was that Elena hadn't been looking her best lately, but the woman escorting the man out of the house was dressed to kill. She grabbed the man's lapels and gave him a kiss.

I tipped the Uber driver another hundred to wait another thirty minutes. This way I couldn't catch her, or she couldn't catch me catching her.

This way I could cry a little, in the car, and not be alone, even if the guy I was with was paid to be there.

When I finally made my way inside she'd had enough time to change her clothes, and had artfully concealed any activity by changing the sheets, and airing out the room. She hugged me tight, and said. "I was thinking about our fight, and you know, I'm sorry, baby. I know you work so hard."

I nodded and let her lead me back to the room. Even though I felt like I'd been bombed, and that there was nothing left, I gave her all that I had.

Elena fell asleep first, and I stared up at our ceiling. For the first time since I was a teenager, I cried myself to sleep.

That night I dreamed that Mariana was singing only to me.





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Mariana made her offer a few weeks later.

I had closed up the bar, sending everyone else home. I was going home later and later every night, because I was putting things off and really going through the motions. Elena was looking even more beautiful, and I remembered what she was like when she was on the hunt, when she wanted something from someone.

I was taking measurements, because there wasn't enough fish to even pretend to serve sushi. I wanted to remove the clear glass front where I used to display plastic sushi, sashimi, and ramen bowls for my customers to choose from.

I heard the small splash as Mariana left her tank. Over the months she'd been singing here, the process of her legs appearing never failed to fascinate me, so I poured myself a drink to watch and sat down.

Mariana drew her tail out of the water and gave it a huge heave, whipping it out the way people shake laundry to get the last of the excess water out. The scales glistened as they caught the light from the aquarium and the bar, striations of orange that darkened near the fan of the tail and lightened near her hips. Her fins were the texture of tulle and were covered in fine white spots, like a clownfish. It was like watching a woman remove her gown.

I watched as her tail began to recede into her skin, as the scales vanished and turned into skin. I finished two more drinks before her legs fully appeared.

Her legs were perfectly shaped: thigh and calf and ankle, and dainty feet with long, pretty toes. But they went up to nothing. She had the same parts as a Barbie doll.

Transformation finished, she pulled on the robe we kept for her by the tank, and then walked up to me. I knew what she wanted from her expression and just sat there, waiting for her to make the first move.

She touched my face and said my name. I braced myself for the kiss she gave me, and it shocked me that her mouth was cold.

"I can fix it," she said. "What you are feeling." She smelled strongly of the sea today, and there was something vaguely hungry about her. "If you let me."

I nodded, and Mariana started to sing.

The song was so long and so mournful that I started to cry. It barely fazed me when she kissed me again, and barely fazed me when she placed her hand between my breasts. She slipped a nail in under my skin and opened my chest like a treasure box.

She drew something about from my chest, and I felt no pain. Instead, I felt a kind of euphoria, the way you feel when you fall off a great height. At first I thought it was





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my heart. It was a bright pulsing orb that throbbed as it left me. In her palm it looked small and shy, like it was hiding from her.

“I—” I said, surprised. “Mariana.”

She smiled at me, and her smile was fierce. Her song changed. I knew that what she was holding in her hand was my feeling for Elena, and I knew that somehow she was going to eat it.

I knew then why the mermaids sometimes took the time to leave the oceans, or why sometimes fishermen disappeared. I also knew that Mariana would never come see me again, and that this was why she came to my bar in the first place. She could sense all my love.

I don't remember the rest of the night.

Only that for the first time in a long while, Mariana left the bar, and I shut down the tanks.

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I drove by the bay market the next day, and it was closed. My menu was almost all meat now, and I was starting to forget the taste of fish.