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The Eternal Waters

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The Eternal Waters

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY


Heather Meeks

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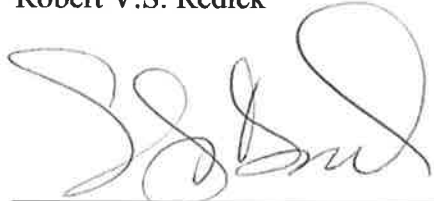
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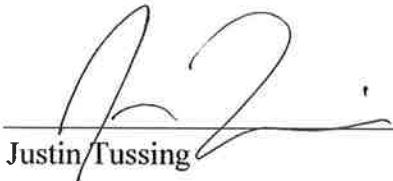
We hereby recommend that the thesis of Heather Meeks entitled *The Eternal Waters* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.



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Abstract

This creative thesis is from the first book of a planned trilogy. It is the beginning third of a young adult, dark fantasy novel about a secondary, drowning world. Merfolk and humans have been at conflict for centuries over territory and resources. When an angry ocean goddess wakes after a thousand years of slumber, both societies are threatened. The races are forced to work together to solve their environmental and fantastical perils.

We see the island and water worlds through an alternating point of view. The two male point of view characters, one human and the other merfolk, become attracted to each other as they try to find and build a new home.

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Preface

The idea for *The Eternal Waters* began in one of my undergraduate writing classes. I grew up reading fantasy—Philip Pullman, J.K. Rowling, Robert Jordan—but this class was taught by a literary writer who wanted us to write “literary” pieces. So, with a little rebellion, I sat in a corner of the room picking different fantastical creatures I wanted to recreate for the next assignment. I still have the list. It reads: fungus zombies, insect fairies/changelings, kirins, humans with phoenix souls, contracted demons, and merfolk.

I turned in a story about an American family vacationing in Thailand. They catch a mutated strain of fungus that turns humans and closely related animals into zombies. The children are sent home carrying the fungus, which begins an apocalypse in the Americas. My professor wasn’t thrilled with the story, but I was. I continued to refer to and expand on my list of creatures. When I got to graduate school I decided to focus on a story about merfolk.

My original intent for *The Eternal Waters* was for it to be a short story about a woman finding and helping an injured merman, a sort of reversal of *The Little Mermaid*, which was a favorite childhood movie of mine. I even used to watch the television series. I fell in love with Ariel and her underwater world and wanted to be a mermaid myself. When I was a kid, I used to put on flippers and pretend I was one. I suppose *The Eternal Waters* has been in the back of my head for a very long time.

I have a complex relationship with water. On the one hand I adore it and on the other I despise it. As a child I loved swimming, kept prized seashells and sand dollars I had found on the beach, and was enthralled by Discovery Channel specials on ocean animals.

But my love for the water deteriorated after my parents put me in swimming classes for eight years. Swimming became exercise rather than play. I avoided water for a long time after that until I became a lifeguard and swim teacher at a local pool. Then water became a job, even worse than exercise. One of my responsibilities was cleaning the pool, which made me realize how disgusting pools are. It's only recently, in the last few years or so, that my interest in the ocean has resurfaced. One reason for this is that saltwater is natural and—despite all the litter that might be on the beach—often cleaner than pool and lake water, so I don't feel dirty as soon as I dip a toe in. The main reason is that I'm still fascinated by ocean creatures. Mantis shrimp, cuttlefish, and dolphins remain some of my favorite sea animals.

When I began writing *The Eternal Waters*, it quickly outgrew the short form because I started to question why the merman was injured, how he ended up in human territory, what kind of setting the woman lived in, and whether it should be a heterosexual relationship or not. I knew from the beginning that I did not want to adhere to the mermaid and human male stereotype. Heterosexual relationships already dominate our culture, and I wanted to represent other kinds of people. The gender and sexual orientation of my two main characters fluctuated a lot. At one point they were both lesbians, at another they were both male but not romantically involved, and at another one was male and the other female but not attracted to the merman. Eventually I settled on them both being male, one gay and the other bisexual. The story percolated in the back of my mind for a couple of years before I wrote anything down. I bounced ideas off family and friends before writing the first chapter in the first semester of my graduate degree.

In the first iteration, the story was told entirely from the human character's point of view. This became an issue because he didn't have access to all of the things transpiring underwater, namely the magical things. So, I decided to make the merman a point of view character and alternate between the two. I also wanted their chapters to reflect their proximity to each other. When the characters are physically separate their chapters are separate. When they're sharing the same space their chapters are shared. I tried to make the sentence structure reflect the characters as well. The merman's sentences are longer and more flowing while the human has shorter sentences. Their story arcs mimic each other to a certain degree as well. For instance, right after the merman returns home, the human's father returns home. Soon after the merman escapes the island, the human flees his home. This mimicry is something I intend to continue throughout the story.

I struggled with the opening scene. I decided to make the merman my opening character because he immediately gets us into the overarching conflict and the magical underwater world. But the problem with beginning a story with a nonhuman character is that it's hard to ground the reader. In previous versions, readers were unsure if the characters were human or nonhuman, what they looked like, if they were on a boat or in the water. I have lost track of how many times I've rewritten the beginning. I decided to use a more cinematic opening that starts with a bird's-eye view before gradually zooming into close third-person with the merman. Starting with a removed point of view allows me to explain the setting and the characters so the reader is grounded when they enter the character's viewpoint.

I made the merfolk half seal for a few reasons. First, I wanted them to be dependent on air which would force them to surface and come in contact with humans; second, I

wanted something different from the overused half-fish person (even though half-seal people harken back to the selkie tradition); and third, fish scales are sharp, which I felt didn't lend itself well to a budding romantic relationship. I decided to base their anatomy on true seals rather than fur seals. Fur seals can rotate their hind flippers forward so they can walk on all fours. True seals, however, move across land with an undulating motion. I wanted my merfolk to be at a severe disadvantage on land, so I went the true seal route. I based their breathing system on baleen whales so they would be able to recycle air and speak a complex language underwater. I came up with merfolk words by listening for syllables in baleen whale songs and then I put those syllables together in different combinations.

For the merfolk naming scheme, I originally chose names that reflected parts of nature like Sea Blossom and Sand Dove. This style was reminiscent of Native American culture and made sense to me because the merfolk culture is strongly connected to the ocean. I also wanted names that would translate so humans could easily refer to their merfolk companions. But too many names were flagged by readers because they were too silly or strange. I decided to rename most of the merfolk with Native American names. The merfolk and humans don't have the right physiology to speak each other's languages, so when they do communicate they use Hand Language, which I based on American Sign Language. Because the merfolk names no longer translated and the humans can't accurately reproduce merfolk sounds, I gave the merfolk sign names so humans could still easily refer to individuals. I looked at deaf culture when coming up with sign names.

Because the merfolk are half seal and I wanted to emphasize their connection to nature, I decided they should be more animalistic in the way that they eat. They don't use

utensils and often eat things that are raw or still alive. I looked at Pacific island recipes when inventing their diet. I actually typed up a menu so I could easily plug in a meal whenever a merperson ate something. I also based their timekeeping system on the tides. They have four tide cycles in a day which they divide into half and quarter cycles.

The underwater world was difficult to create because there are no real-life examples I could draw on, besides submerged cave systems. The merfolk need air and land to rest on, but most of the land has been claimed by humans. The most common place my merfolk live are in partially submerged cave systems within rocky outcrops that either already existed or were carved out. But then I needed a group of merfolk in a certain area that didn't have little islands they could live on. I had to come up with a way for them to create a home at a depth of six hundred feet. So, I looked at sci-fi examples to come up with a solution. The merfolk homes in the south pole, which aren't featured in this excerpt, were easy to create because they can be built out of snow and ice.

When I was creating the human islands, I did a lot of research on Venice, and to a lesser degree on sinking Pacific islands. I have never been to Venice so learning about what it's like there and the amount of work that goes into keeping it above water helped me make decisions about my own world. Things I considered included how the wells must be made to avoid saltwater contamination, what kinds of food would grow in such a salty environment, how people dispose of their waste, how the breakwaters are built, how the streets and roads are maintained, how rare and valuable wood must be, etc. But then I had to make my islands not Venice because my islands are on the peak of a sinking mountaintop, not in a lagoon.

Venice wasn't isolated; the people were able to import and steal resources. My humans can import a little, but for the most part they have to be self-sufficient. Their land resources, and therefore their farming ability, are limited. I looked at real-life solutions like hydroponics, floating farms, rainwater collectors, and solar-desalination to make the islands self-sufficient. I read some environmental sci-fi to come up with different ideas and designs. The resources the humans do have easy access to are from the sea. Many household items in our world are made from wood and metal, but I couldn't do that in my drowning world. I had to come up with alternatives. Instead of paper made from trees, I used paper made from bleached seaweed. Instead of silverware, I used bone ware made from sperm whales. Instead of wooden floorboards, I used hemp.

I gave the island dwelling humans traditional Italian names, some of which I changed a little for aesthetic purposes. For their food, I researched what could grow in their type of environment. I looked at common Mediterranean foods, especially peasant foods. I had to remember that some foods, like bread, wouldn't be available to most people; and that other foods, like potatoes, could be grown in brackish water, which would change their taste.

I tried to achieve a dark fantasy atmosphere with this story. I used dark cultural elements like the human culture falling apart as their land disappears and the merfolk worshipping a ruthless goddess. One of my main character's mental health gradually deteriorates as events unfold. I tried to make the setting beautiful but also dangerous and terrifying. Some people have told me this story is just fantasy and maybe they're right. Dark fantasy as a genre is hard to define and often gets lumped in with horror, but I think there's too much darkness in my tale for it to only be called fantasy.

I was inspired by a wide range of media when writing this narrative. Kai Meyer's *Dark Reflections* trilogy was a primary inspiration, particularly its setting, atmosphere, and creatures. In fact, the first time this story was critiqued my professor told me I was channeling too much Kai Meyer. My merfolk originally had shark-like mouths that stretched all the way to their ears, very reminiscent of Meyer's fish-based mermaids. Not to mention that Meyer's story took place in a magical version of Venice. I had to distance myself from Meyer. I got rid of the shark mouths, not only because of the similarities but also because, like fish scales, shark mouths aren't great for romance. And then I made the islands and their culture more my own.

Drowned Worlds, which is an environmental sci-fi anthology put together by Jonathan Strahan, was another influence. It gave me so many ideas for how humans could survive in a drowned world. There was one story in particular that inspired my coral goddesses, who will appear much later in the narrative.

I read selkie myths and watched some selkie movies as well, such as *The Secret of Roan Inish*. You can't create a species of half-seal people without looking at the stories seal people originated from. My narrative doesn't draw on any parts of the selkie myths except for the creatures, as far as I know, but it was still important to me that I research them. I'm captivated by selkies and looked at a lot of selkie art when I created my merfolk. There are some very body positive images of seal maids and seal men out there.

Guillermo del Toro's award-winning film *The Shape of Water* was another inspiration. In this movie a mute woman falls in love with and rescues a merman from a government facility. The basic plot isn't that far off from my original idea for *The Eternal Waters*. I love del Toro's creature designs. They're gritty and realistic but also beautiful. I

always try to create creatures in a similar style. Del Toro is wonderful at building dark captivating settings. I have a background in art and art history, and in my own settings I also aim for a balance between darkness and beauty. I use a lot of color and sensory details to achieve this.

At first, I was upset when *The Shape of Water* came out because the woman and merman communicate with sign language, just like my main characters do. I felt like del Toro had beaten me to my own idea! But there have been other recent works that utilize sign language as well, such as *A Quiet Place* and *The Magicians*. Ultimately, del Toro's movie reaffirmed that my idea is worthwhile and reassured me that there is an audience for this type of work.

Kevin Reynold's film *Waterworld*, even though it's a B movie, was another influence. It's a post-apocalyptic sci-fi film where there's no land left because the icecaps have melted. Humanity is forced to live on boats and other floating structures where they fight over resources. The humans in my story haven't quite gotten to this point, but that's where they're headed. I looked at the structure designs in this film when I was figuring out how the floating colony would function and where and how pirates live in my world.

Sunless Seas, which is a video game by Failbetter Games, also hung around the back of my mind as I was writing. It's a narrative based game where you captain a ship in an underground ocean as your character slowly goes insane. Failbetter Games cites H.P. Lovecraft as one of their inspirations, but I think they've surpassed him. They have created such a creepy, interesting world with people and islands that are deadly beautiful. My ideas for the floating colony and the Iron State (a group of humans outside of the eternal waters) were inspired by this game.

David Anthony Durham and Robert V.S. Redick were both strong influences on this story. I worked with each of them for a semester on it, Durham during the beginning drafts and Redick during the final drafts. Other professors who worked on this narrative with me include, in no particular order, Elizabeth Searle, Elizabeth Hand, James Patrick Kelly, Nancy Holder, and Theodora Goss. Many of my peers gave me their opinions as well. Everyone's feedback was invaluable in shaping this narrative and I am eternally grateful.

This story will be much longer than its current state. This excerpt should be the first third of the first novel. I plan on finishing this novel when my characters arrive at the floating colony, but they will still have a long way to go before they find their new home. They will have to travel across the world and will encounter other cultures, creatures, types of magic, and gods and goddesses along the way. The story keeps growing and growing, but I believe I'll be able to finish my tale within three books. I'm planning on naming the books after the locations the characters are currently living in, so the second book will be *The Floating Colony* and the third will be *The Fallen Continent*. But titles often change, so I'm sure that a month from now my working titles will be different.

This narrative, even though it takes place in a secondary world, is still salient to today's issues. It deals with race and prejudice, not just between the humans and merfolk but also within their races; sexual orientation and discovery during the teen years; and global environmental change and finding solutions to those problems. These are things that we deal with every day and often ignore. I believe fiction is a great way to talk about, explore, and maybe even solve current issues.

I, as a writer, have changed a lot since embarking on this watery journey. There were so many little craft things like avoiding adverbs and passive voice that I didn't know about before joining the Stonecoast program, even though I had taken writing classes before. One of the biggest changes to my writing style was moving away from a cinematic approach to a closer third-person point of view, to better develop the interior worlds of my characters. Free indirect discourse became my best friend, but I still struggle to achieve the closeness I want.

Another change was a shift towards gradual world building rather than info dumps. I still occasionally succumb to the urge to overexplain. I have to remind myself that the information on the page needs to be closely related to what a character is doing or thinking about. I have also gotten better at character motivation. For example, in *The Eternal Waters* my human needs a good reason to go against society and help a potentially dangerous merperson. His original motivation was altruism, which wasn't strong enough, so I changed his motivation to a desire for magic and all of its benefits. I usually know what actions I want my characters to take, but I have learned to ensure that their motivations support those actions.

I used defamiliarization a lot in *The Eternal Waters*. My characters experience new cultures and technologies, so I had to ask myself questions like, how would a person who has never seen a book before perceive such an object? What would shingles look like to someone who has only lived inside caves? Sensory detail was something I really had to focus on too, especially for the underwater world. The more unfamiliar a place is the more detail you need to make it believable. I described things like what the water would feel like

at different depths, what types of rocks and formations were around, everyday objects the merfolk used and what they were made of.

Point of view switches and when they should occur were another thing I worked on. When does a scene come to a natural end and which scenes should be told from which characters' perspective? There are a handful of scenes in *The Eternal Waters* that were originally written in the other character's viewpoint. I decided who should take us through each scene based on who had the most to say. For instance, there's a scene where the human tends to the merman's injuries and it was originally told from the human's viewpoint. I decided to change it to the merman's viewpoint because his experience is more intense and vulnerable.

Dialogue was another major consideration. There are two different accents on the islands. At first, I overdid the accents which was a distraction to readers, so I toned them down a lot. The humans from the Salt Isles say "zee" instead of "sea" while other Islanders say "an" instead of "and." I also used sentence structure and word choice to delineate between characters who are educated and those who are not. When my human character communicates with the merman, I really had to fragment and mess with his sentence structure to show his inexperience with the language.

I look more at the structure of my narratives now, from the overarching plot down to sentence level and word choice, to find better ways to tell my stories and characterize. I decided to stick to a linear timeline for *The Eternal Waters*. I personally dislike jumping around in time but also, because I plan on this story being very long and there being many characters, I think a less complicated timeline will work better.

I have become a much better writer over the course of my graduate degree, but I know I still have a long way to go and many more struggles to overcome, and I look forward to them.

The Eternal Waters

Chapter 1

A flat, gray-blue expanse of water stretched out forever against a pink sky. There were no birds or fish or land masses. Nothing but the cold sea and crisp air. People said that someday the whole world would look this way.

Four figures floated on the ocean's surface. They looked human at first, until one noticed their streamlined bottom halves. Fur began around their navels and went all the way down their thick tails to their hind flippers. Off their hips hung a second set of flippers. They were Shiwa—seal people—and they had come to this desolate location to perform an annual ritual for their goddess.

Three of the Shiwa were clustered together treading water, while the fourth had drifted away a little. Tahmel, a young acolyte, was in the group of three. His body swayed with the gentle waves. He sculled the flippers on his hips back and forth to keep his nose just above water. The pale patches of skin across his stomach, which mimicked the white spots on the underside of his tail, had turned red and painful from the sun. Salt had crusted inside his nostrils. He wanted to pick it out but was too embarrassed to do so in front of his companions.

The two figures beside him, also young acolytes, were Catori and Mingan. Their bodies were bathed in a warm, orange glow from the sunfish lanterns they held. Inside the lanterns darted little luminescent cave fish behind glass and green copper frames.

Catori flapped her hip flippers, almost like a bird, to lift her mouth above water. The bone hoop piercings dangling between the digits of her flippers clinked together. Her long black braid curled in the current behind her. “I see one,” she said, her voice coming out soft and strained. She pointed to the cloudy horizon, the webbing between her index finger and thumb stretching.

“Where?” Mingan’s eyes narrowed, flitting back and forth. Male acolytes tied their braids into high buns, though Mingan’s was beginning to come loose. Tahmel’s own was tight against his scalp and giving him a headache. He was tired; he wanted to go home.

“There, that gray dot.”

“That tiny thing?” Mingan said. “It’s so far away. Stop torturing yourself; they’ll never see us.” He swished his tail to stretch onto his back, fanning out the dark blue flippers on his hips and at the end of his tail.

Tahmel could just make out a tiny speck in the distance, the size of a gnat. Too far away to be of concern. He understood her anxiety, though; he had also been nervous on his first trip to the Hallow. “They shouldn’t be traveling this way,” he said.

She flashed him a glance, her black irises standing out against the white of her eyes, before she continued to scan the waters.

The humans always stayed on their southeasterly trade route, sailing back and forth between the islands and a giant metal wall that rose out of the sea. Tahmel had never seen this wall, but knew it lay some distance to the east.

Their group was trespassing, even though the ancient waters had belonged to them not fifty years ago. The humans had displaced them to the south in a war of harpoons, black

powder, and cutting song. Every time Tahmel entered these waters, defying the Islanders, it felt like he was reclaiming a little bit of his people's lost home.

Even if the ship came near, Tahmel and his mentor Dohasan were both water-touched and could get everyone out fast.

He glanced back; he should probably pull Dohasan closer to the group again. The leader of their church was asleep, floating on his back, slowly drifting away with every undulation of the sea. He held his breath as he slept, nostrils closed. Every several minutes, he would inhale with a loud snore before his nostrils re-sealed. Tahmel kicked once to glide over to him.

Dohasan had been old when Tahmel first met him ten years ago. Now his body was gaunt, his hair a white wisp that couldn't be braided anymore, and the religious patterns covering his liver-spotted skin sagged with wrinkles. Tahmel worried about him, worried about what life would be like when he finally left this world.

Dohasan was one of the few people he could relate to. They had both inherited the Goddess' magic through their bloodline. Dohasan understood what it was like to have people stare at you with awe and fear, to have people whisper about you behind your back, to be different.

With a soft hand so he wouldn't wake, Tahmel grabbed the manatee hide belt around Dohasan's waist and kicked them closer to the others. Besides a seashell and pearl necklace, the belt was the only thing his mentor wore, the only thing any of them wore. The belt's straps looped around their hip flippers so they would stay in place. Leather bags containing live mollusks hung from them. In Tamel's bag sat an impressive conch amongst

common clams and sea snails. Some of the offerings had been dropped off by neighboring tribes, but most they had collected themselves.

A low trill ending in five clicks came from below, Ethete calling for assistance. They had been waiting for the two warrior acolytes since high noon. The warriors had surfaced countless times for air, their heads popping up in random locations around the main group, empty-handed every time. That call meant they had finally found a worthy sacrifice.

“Thank the Goddess,” Mingan said, “let’s go.” He kicked and pushed the water with his hands to flip backwards under the surface with a splash. Catori dove a moment after him, nervousness still on her face.

Tahmel shook awake his mentor, who sputtering, inhaled water and entered a coughing fit; his face turned bright red. Tahmel grabbed his arm to help him keep his head above water and began to apologize.

Dohasan waved him off. “I’m fine, dear boy. It’s just a little water.”

“They’ve returned.”

“Well, it’s about time.”

Once Dohasan had recovered, they inhaled deep and dove, churning the water with their tails. Liquid flooded Tahmel’s ears. The setting sun made the ocean dark, but he could still see a shadowed mass rising from the depths. The form solidified as they got closer. Ethete and Bodaway had caught a huge bowoshi in their seaweed net.

“It’s magnificent; she’ll be pleased,” Dohasan said with a smile. His sharp teeth glinted in the sunfish’s pale light. He spoke with his mouth closed, passing air through the

voice box between his lungs and air sac. Words sounded different underwater, louder and smoother.

The bowoshi had black and gold scales and was at least forty hands long, the largest Tahmel had ever seen. Sharp finlets protruded along its spine and belly. Fleshy bits of loggerhead bait hung between its jagged teeth. Its prehensile trunk, longer and thicker than Tahmel's arm, reached around trying to grab Ethete. She leaned back, just out of its reach. Her expression was calm even though the trunk was strong enough to break bone.

The warriors were struggling to tow the thrashing creature upward, even with honed bodies that rivaled the fish's length. Catori and Mingan had grabbed hold of the net as well, their lanterns now hanging from the crooks of their arms.

"Go, help them," Dohasan said.

Tahmel kicked down and grabbed the net. The fish's rough scales grated against his knuckles and the rope jerked against his hands with each of the animal's frantic movements, scratching his palms and the webbing between his thumbs and forefingers. Last time his webbing had split in half. He hoped the scar tissue would hold together; he despised getting stiches.

Dohasan should have made the other two assistants stay to help, rather than approving their requests to visit their families. At least until the sacrifice was done. They still could have made it to their home tribes in time for the second half of the Winter Solstice Celebrations. But Tahmel rarely voiced his opinion when he disagreed with his mentor; now he wished he had said something.

“Keep it still,” Ethete said. Her black braid was wrapped up with a string of leather like a man’s. Her hands looked terrible, shredded, but nothing in her tone or posture revealed pain.

The bowoshi whipped its forked tail, throwing Catori off in a flurry of white bubbles. She floated there for a moment, mouth agape, staring at a long bloody cut across her small breasts. Then she flared her flippers and rushed back to Tahmel’s side to grab hold again.

“Sorry,” she said.

Ethete’s mouth lowered into a small frown. “We’ll be back in a moment.” She and Bodaway let go to surface for air.

Tahmel’s necklace floated in front of his face. It was tight around his neck with a dangling loop that carried holy shells and pearls that marked him as water-touched. He wanted to shove it aside but dare not let go. He grimaced at the little bits of skin and blood swirling around his hands.

He glanced at Catori, half of her hair had fallen out of her braid and floated around her head like black seagrass. She was fifteen, a year younger than him. She had dedicated herself to the Sect during the last moon cycle; the initiation marks on her right bicep were still swollen red.

“You’re doing well,” he said. “Once, a fish grabbed my arm and broke it. Dohasan made everyone wait so he could bring me home.”

She bared her teeth as the animal gave another powerful thrust. “Killing it would be easier,” she said.

“She only eats the living.” He disliked performing the sacrifices. It was different than killing unintelligent fish. Bowoshi were smart; they used tools and mimicked sounds. But Dohasan said they were necessary; their golden scales gave the Goddess glittering dreams.

If Tahmel’s parents hadn’t sent him to the church when he was a pup, he probably never would have joined. He had stayed so far because the Glistening Sect needed him; they were low on attendants, especially water-touched. He and Dohasan were the only water-touched in the Shoals, the only ones who could perform the dive into the trench.

But Tahmel would rather use his ability to protect tribes from storms. He wanted to leave the Shoals, get away from the Hallow. He had been putting off telling his mentor. Dohasan had spent years training him to take over the Northern Shoals Church in preparation for when he passed. Tahmel didn’t know how he would tell him, but the sacrifices made him sick and the trench haunted him. He had resolved to tell his mentor before the celebrations were over.

“Hurry, I want to get there while there’s still light,” Dohasan said, as the warriors returned.

Ethete and Bodaway swam to either side of the fish. Ivory spears were strapped to their backs and markings—prayers for the Glistening One’s protection—wove around their spines in intricate patterns. The Goddess’ cowry mark lay over their hearts. Tahmel would receive the same mark at the end of the celebrations, when he would become an adult. He was anxious over it. Did he really want to dedicate the rest of his life to the Sect?

Ethete held the fish’s dorsal fin still as Bodaway pulled out a thin bone dagger from his belt. He opened a small bag on his hip which contained blue swallow slugs. Their backs

were shades of silvery blue while their bellies were pure white. They had six delicate, wing-like appendages that branched off their sides. Bodaway carefully slid the dagger across the slugs' appendages before tying the bag shut. They only grew to the size of a fingernail, but their poison was strong enough to paralyze a person for half a day.

Bodaway placed a hand on the fish's back as he pushed the dagger into the flesh under its scales. The bowoshi twisted away from the blade, trying to swim down. After a while its movements became spasmodic, then slowed to a stop. Its trunk stiffened into a curl and its gills struggled to pull in water.

"Move it around, so it doesn't drown," Dohasan said.

Tahmel and the other acolytes began swimming in a wide circle.

"It's strong; she'll appreciate it," Bodaway said, as he moved to swim above them with one hand still on the net. His fur and hair were a burnt shade of brown.

"I'll channel the water path." Dohasan hummed in a low buzzing moan. It was a consistent, wordless sound that almost felt electric underwater. The water responded by swirling in front of them, a narrow rushing current formed. They were dragged into the thunderous water and propelled forward, as fast as a racing dolphin. The pressure made Tahmel's ears pop and forced the sunfish to the bottoms of the lanterns. Dohasan added a chitter of clicks to his tone to angle them north, towards the trench.

The black crack in the earth appeared within minutes. On its west side sat a giant mountain range whose northern quarter rose above sea level; Islanders made their home there. On the east side, hundreds of dormant seamounts loomed beneath them like spires, swarming with life. Coral forests covered their volcanic rock sides and organic particles

clouded the water. Massive schools of fish shimmered ahead and sperm whales clicked in the distance.

A cheepcree squid darted out of a reef, the triangular wings on its mantel flapping. The warriors eyed it as the group sped past its long, pale body. It wasn't often the squid attacked them, but they still conditioned themselves with small amounts of venom each moon cycle.

Dohasan guided them around a swarm of little jellyfish with golden bells and white frilly tentacles. He stopped humming when the abandoned church came into view. The water path slowed and then dispersed.

The church was carved into the cliffside far below them. Collapsed rock and red algae choked the enormous circular entrance. Low-relief sculptures circled the oculus, detailing the creation of the ocean and all its creatures. The eroded friezes were worn down past understanding, but Tahmel knew the images. All church entrances told the same story of the Glistening One's birth between the stars, the tears she shed to create the oceans, and the flesh she gave to create her children. This church had been built a thousand years ago—when the Glistening One first charged them with guarding her slumber.

They surfaced to breathe. Tahmel kept an eye out for ships as the others tied the offerings to the net. They would let the bags containing totems and shells sink to the trench's floor. The bowoshi and mollusks would be dropped into the Glistening One's open beak.

“Dive if a ship appears,” Dohasan said. “We'll be fast.”

Catori handed Tahmel her lantern. The sunfish floated belly-up, but their bodies would glow for another tide cycle.

“Swim with the Goddess,” she said.

Tahmel nodded, giving her a weak smile. He would have verbally thanked her but was afraid his voice would tremble. He hated this part.

He and Dohasan grabbed the net and dove. Dohasan sang to create a water path that pulled them down into the abyss. As the water pressure increased, Tahmel hummed a note to relieve the weight around them. The lower they went, the higher pitch his note had to be. His heart beat too fast, even though he had performed this descent many times before.

They rushed by drowned Islander ships, some wooden and others metal. Leftovers from the war; cracked open on the sloped walls. The wooden ships had decayed a long time ago leaving behind metal cannons, anchors, and chains. Green rusticles covered the iron ships, coral and swaying anemones had rooted on them, and fish swam between railings and in and out of broken hulls spotted with urchins.

Sometimes he thought he heard the water-muffled screams of dying Shiwa or drowning Islanders, but they had been dead for decades. Not even their bones remained. He told himself it was just the ships creaking.

As the walls narrowed, Dohasan clicked to steer them around crisscrossing masts. Misshapen creatures lived down here. Luminescent eels with clear fangs, transparent fish with visible intestines, octopuses with protruding eyes, gaping mouths, long spines, blind eyes. Things that—despite Tahmel having seen them repeatedly—still found their way into his dreams.

Dohasan stopped humming before they reached the bottom, letting the water path dissipate. “Is it strangely warm?” he asked.

Tahmel had to continue singing or else they would be crushed. He answered with a hand sign meaning “Yes.” It was too hot, but he was shivering. He wanted Dohasan to hurry. He wanted to leave and go back to the others. He wanted to go home.

“A fissure may have opened; be careful.” Before he could reopen the path, a white light glimmered beneath them. It curved out in all directions, pulsating like a heartbeat.

Dohasan’s eyes widened and his skin looked waxy in the light. “Is that…”

Tahmel could only stare, mesmerized. Then a giant, luminescent eye opened beneath them. There was no white in the eye, just a swirling purple iris and a lopsided bottomless pupil.

His mouth dropped and his hand fell from the net. A bizarre buzzing pressure wedged itself behind his eyes. His vision shifted sideways into—something, a vision? He saw a green mass of land shrouded in fog, suspended in the clouds above an ocean. Waterfalls fell from its rim, but instead of crashing into the sea, the water slowed until it floated around the base of the island. The ocean beneath arched upwards towards the floating land like a hill. Creatures the size of trees glided through the air. He felt intense anger and heat, as though he were lying too close to a fire—on top of a fire. His lungs burned; he couldn’t breathe.

A tug on his arm brought him back. Dohasan had grabbed him.

Look away; something’s wrong, Dohasan signed. He was singing to keep the pressure at bay and a water path was forming above their heads. Tahmel’s voice sounded faint when he added it to his mentor’s dauntless song.

The flesh beneath them flashed red and white. The eye closed and a scattering of other various sized eyes slid open. Bright blue rings appeared around them. The Goddess’

body shifted like a capsizing mountain. Then a thick tentacle with toothed suction cups shot upward.

It sped between them, pushing Tahmel sideways, away from Dohasan. He rushed to right himself and looked back, the song almost dying in his chest. The tentacle was wrapped around the fish and Dohasan. Something cracked and air bubbles rose from his mentor's nose and mouth. He stared at Tahmel, eyes wide. Tahmel wanted to swim to him and pull him back, but fear had frozen him. The tentacle retreated to the Goddess' black beak, leaving behind a cloudy trail of blood. A strangled cry rose in Tahmel's chest as the beak closed. His eyes burned. Dohasan couldn't be gone. Why was this happening?

More tentacles, with blue and yellow rings, climbed the walls. He started; he had to get away, but the water path was coming undone. He shifted the focus of his song to the path, darted into it, and raced upwards. He didn't know where his lantern had gone but the light from below was bright enough for him to steer around the shipwrecks. He hummed louder to quicken the water and ignored the painful pressure on his ears. He didn't slow until he shot out of the abyss.

Blood pounded against his skull. Where were the others? He had to tell them that—that Dohasan was dead. That the Goddess was awake. He wanted to scream out in rage and sorrow and fear, but he needed his air.

He stopped to scan the mountainside for the old church, but couldn't find it. He had come out in a different place. He pushed the water with his hands to spin around, trying to find something to orient himself. The ocean had become silent. The sperm whales no longer called to each other and the schools of fish had vanished. A wail that sounded like Mingan

came from his left. Then a second cry from the same direction, Ethete. He rushed towards the noise.

As he got closer, hundreds of flashing red and white lights glided through the water. He thought it was the Goddess—that she had somehow gotten out of the trench before him—but then he recognized the long, mantel-headed bodies. There were cheepcree squid everywhere. A group swarmed around a dark shape in a bloody cloud, pulling it deeper as they fed. The end of a flipper detached from the corpse.

His gut rolled. He began to retreat but stopped when he noticed a dim orange light below. One of the others. He hurried towards it.

He found Bodaway swimming towards the surface, spear in both hands, stabbing at squid as they darted at him. Blood trailed from gashes in his tail, arms, and chest. How many times had he been bitten? Could he even survive that?

The squid were only half Bodaway's size, but they were many. They weren't just attacking Bodaway either. They feasted on their dead and injured brethren in tight swarms. They hadn't noticed Tahmel yet.

He called to Bodaway who turned and began rising towards him, swimming in an erratic pattern to avoid the attacks. Tahmel trilled a note to sweep a handful of squid away from the warrior's tail.

"Make us a path!" Bodaway called, still making his way over. He thrust his spear through a squid's soft mantel. Its tentacles squirmed along the spear's shaft despite its fatal wound.

"Where are the others?"

“Ethete’s dead. Catori and Mingan can’t be alive.” He shook his weapon but the squid held on. “Make one now!”

Tahmel began to sing when a large squid collided with Bodaway’s torso. It wasn’t flashing; it had come out of the gloom in an instant. Bodaway screamed as tentacles wrapped around him.

Tahmel didn’t know what to do. Anything he sang would also hit Bodaway and if he got too close, he would be attacked. He watched as Bodaway stabbed awkwardly at the creature with his spear. The one already on the end of his weapon reached for his face. He bit off a mouthful of its tentacles but then a third one enveloped his head from behind. He shuddered once before a stream of bubbles slipped between the tentacles.

Something sharp pinched Tahmel hard on his side. Vice-like pressure made something snap inside his chest. He screamed, air leaving his lungs, and bright bubbles exploded around him. He thought he would drown but then the pressure released. He kicked into the water path, using what little air he had left to keep it going.

He clutched his side as the current whipped him away from the frenzy. His lungs burned and his head spun. He angled the path upwards and gasped when he breached the surface, but he didn’t stop. He kept the current moving. He had to get away, get to the Shoals, tell someone what had happened. What *had* happened? He didn’t know, he just needed to focus on getting home. Holy Goddess, he had almost died.

His braid had come loose and black hair clung to his face. Shredded lengths of tentacles hung from his torso, suction cup teeth caught in his skin. He wasn’t sure what he had done to that squid. He ripped the tentacles off with shaking hands as the path carried him away.

He realized he didn't know which direction he was traveling. He could no longer feel which way was north. All he felt was pain and blood pounding against his ears. The venom had never affected his sense of direction before, but there was probably more of it in his body than the small amounts he conditioned with. Perhaps more than the conditioning could counteract.

The sky was dark with clouds and the sun had disappeared below the horizon. He didn't know how to navigate without the sun. For a second, he considered diving in search of a landmark but immediately dismissed the idea. He didn't have the will to go back down there.

He thought back. When he had come out of the trench, the westerly mountains had been on his right. He had swum east to Bodaway and then fled...south? So, if he continued in the same direction, he should reach the Shoals in half a tide cycle.

He continued, floating on his back, trying to breathe around nauseating pain. He reached for his belt so he could tighten it around his wound, but it wasn't there. The squid must have ripped it off. He pressed a hand against the gash but pulled it back when a sharp pain resonated from his ribs. He settled on laying an arm across the wound.

Shallow breaths hurt less but made it impossible to hold a continuous note. The water path kept pausing and restarting between his breaths. After only a short time, he was tired and trembling, but he couldn't rest. He didn't know if the squid were following him or if his blood would attract sharks.

He kept seeing Dohasan's face. His surprise, his fear. Tahmel could have saved him. If he had acted faster maybe, somehow, he could have pulled him back. A choked sob caused a stabbing pain in his chest.

And Bodaway. He didn't know if Bodaway could have survived that much venom but Tahmel should have tried harder to fight off the swarm. He imagined himself swimming to him and ripping the squid away. It's what Ethete would have done, but he wasn't Ethete. He was afraid. It felt like a heavy rock had formed in his stomach, weighing him down.

Why had the Goddess attacked them? Had they done something wrong?

He traveled for a long time, but the Shoals never appeared. His water path must have curved or he had been facing the wrong way to begin with. The right side of his head ached as though a fish bone had been stabbed through his temple. He couldn't focus on his magic.

Little lights gleamed in the distance, but they weren't his people's. They shone too high above sea level and were brighter than the glow of sunfish. They were Islander lights.

Chapter 2

Marzio sat at the limestone dining table with his ma to help peel saltwater potatoes for their dinner. A multicolored kerchief held back Ma's long, sun-bleached box braids. She frowned as she rolled up the tattered sleeves of her shirt, revealing the bold lines of her tattoos. Saturated images of sea creatures, nautical stars, compasses, and waves—all detailing her accomplishments at sea—decorated her tan skin.

Marzio and his family lived next to a canal on the first floor of a narrow, yellow building. Moist air and periodic flooding had warped the hemp floorboards and chipped the red paint on the walls. A perpetual musty odor hung in the air caused by mildew growing in the cracks of the floor. Dried herbs dangled over the hearth amidst pots and pans made from red marine clay. Jars of pickled vegetables, dried fruits, and dry pasta sat on shelves next to utensils and plate ware made from sperm whale bone.

On the other side of the room, his paternal grandmother sat in her moth-eaten chair. She had two knitted blankets wrapped around her thin body. She often complained that it was too cold, but Ma preferred the cool damp sea air, so the window always remained propped open with a chunk of star coral.

His three siblings and two cousins crowded on the floor around their grandma as she told them a tale about a sea captain. There were a couple of years between each of them. Marzio, at fifteen, was five years older than his next sibling.

Right now, the apartment was a little less crowded because his pa, uncle, and aunt were out whaling. They had been gone for almost three months and would return next

week. This time around was Ma's turn to stay home and care for the family, and from her dour disposition, Marzio suspected she would rather be at sea.

Through the ceiling came muffled shouts as the Grecco family argued. Screams from the newborn on the fourth floor bounced off the tall surrounding buildings and echoed in through the window. Its mother sang a lullaby, her husky voice pleading for the child's silence. Four families lived above their floor. Four large, extended families all crammed into single floor apartments. Their island city was far too crowded.

"Did the seal maid give him her magic?" Zaira asked their grandma. She was five years old, the younger of Marzio's two cousins.

"You already know she didn't," said Ermes, Zaira's older brother. "We've heard this story before."

"Nu-uh." Zaira whacked her brother on his leg.

"Shush, shush. Meme will tell you," their grandma said. "Now, that seal maid spit in the captain's face an' said, 'Nay, land walker. Magic belongs to the sea.' An' the captain didn't like that. 'Then I'll take it from the sea,' he said."

The children hung on her words.

"The captain took his sword an' split the sea witch in half." Meme slashed her arm through the air like a sword. "Crack!" she said. "Then he stuck his hand inside her gooey mess—"

Marzio's little sister Alina squealed.

"—an' pulled out her magic."

"What did it look like?" Zaira asked.

“I’ll tell you,” Meme said. “It was the most beautiful thing you ever seen. A little black ball that sparkled like the stars, like holding the night sky in your hand.”

“Then what?” Alina asked.

“Then the captain swallowed up the magic,” Meme said.

“What did he do with it?” Renzo asked. Marzio’s youngest brother.

“He used that magic to stop his island from sinking an’ saved everyone.”

“I wanna be like Captain Conti!” Renzo stood and began swinging his arm around as if he held an invisible sword.

“Me too!” said Zaira.

The kids jumped up and started a mock battle, even Gian, the oldest of them. Meme smiled, caught Marzio’s gaze, and winked.

Ma swore as she rooted through the cupboard. Her exclamation made him flinch a little. “I forgot the codfish,” she said. She pulled out some coins from her back pocket and handed them to Marzio. “Run down to the market before they close.”

“Aye, Ma.”

The marketplace closed early during the short winter days. The ocean horizon had already swallowed most of the sun. Marzio put on his pa’s old waterproof jacket—it was too large for him, its ends trailing mid-thigh—and exited the apartment. The seashell wreath scraped against the door as he closed it.

The surrounding buildings sat flush against each other. They were painted in bright reds, greens, peaches, blues, and yellows. Underneath their crumbling stucco were brick walls made visible from centuries of water damage. Ceramic awnings covered in moss hooded every front door. Beneath windows hung planter boxes with shriveled flowers. In

the warmer months, they were crowded with vibrant plants: blood red poppies, blue irises, lavender, and ivy.

He stepped onto the narrow street bordering the canal. This part of the island only stood half a meter above sea level. Rows of boats tied to posts swayed on murky green water polluted with debris and dead fish. They creaked as they bumped against rope woven fenders. Farther down the canal, a man rowed a black canoe around the bend and out of sight.

Marzio stepped around scraps of rotten food, seaweed newspaper, and filthy discarded rags as he headed towards the center of the city. He gave the rats scampering in and out of cracks in the walls a wide berth. The click of his leather boots against the cobblestones echoed between the lofty buildings. Colorful tunics and trousers hung from drying poles off the roofs; they swayed in the breeze like flags. Smoke rose from pot-like chimneys and oil lamps flickered between the slits of closed shutters.

The farther inland he walked, the more putrid the air became, heavy with rot and human waste. He took shallow breaths through his mouth to lessen the impact on his nose.

He turned a corner and entered Market Square. The large canopy tents where peddlers set up their wares were almost empty; the few remaining vendors were preparing to go home. He jogged through the maze of tents until he spotted a fishmonger packing her goods into a cart.

“Wait,” he said, panting as he ran up to her. “I need a fish.”

The stocky woman looked up. She wore an apron over a striped dress and her hair was tied back with a beaded hairnet. “Of course,” she said. “I got the freshest fish in Sarita.”

She showed him her unpacked baskets, which held picked over salmon and tuna cuts. They were too expensive.

“Do you have cod?” he asked.

She frowned. “Aye, but I packed it up already.”

“Cod, please.”

The monger grumbled as she unpacked her cart to get to the fish at the bottom. She wrapped the cod in newspaper and held out her hand. “Five dulcatts,” she said.

His eyebrows rose. “It’s supposed to be three.”

She cursed him. “Buy from someone else then.”

“Wait.” He took out his ma’s money. Three dulcatts and a dirty silver duli. They were the same size, just different colors. Ma must have mistaken the duli for a dulcatt. He handed the woman the duli and took the codfish and his change. What a hag. He would never buy from her again.

He hoped Ma wouldn’t be too displeased when he got home. Her moods could be volatile and her anger struck fast like a snake.

He decided to walk back along the coastline, where the air was fresher. Only the cloud obscured moon and light from windows lit the streets now. He watched his step to avoid walking into a canal. He would never hear the end of it from the kids if he did that again.

He rounded a corner and almost tripped over a beggar woman. She was wrapped in gray rags to stave off the cool weather. She sat cross-legged against a dilapidated glass blower’s shop. A blue veil covered her hair and the lower half of her face. She bowed her

head so it hung barely above the ground and held out a tin cup. She muttered something he didn't catch.

He averted his gaze and walked around her hunched form. She was probably a refugee from Orbini or Carpa—one of the sunken cities. He'd seen beggars wallowing in the streets his whole life. They were so commonplace he had lost the urge to help them.

“You'll drown,” she said.

He stopped. “Excuse me?”

“We'll all drown. The zee won't ever lower.” She scratched her broken nails against the cup. He placed her accent from the Salt Isles.

“The Queen will save us,” he said, but it sounded hollow.

She gave him a rasping laugh. “She's a fraud, boy.” Then she sang, “Under the zee we'll slip, our flesh the Mer will rip.”

The hairs rose on his arms; he hurried away. The Eternal Queen would save them from the ocean. She had to. Two islands had sunk over the last century. No one knew why the waters were rising, but as they did, their livable space dwindled. Carpa's streets rested six meters under and Orbini's two meters. Many people had returned to Orbini, though. They chose to live in its decrepit structures because they were less crowded than the other islands.

The royal scientists were working on a solution, though. They had made a floating colony called Astia. As they expanded it, more people abandoned the islands for the colony. One of Marzio's uncles had left three years ago to live there. How many years until Marzio's island sank? Until all the Eternal Islands disappeared? But still, he loved how the clean sea air blew away the city's stench.

He followed the sidewalk to a wide street that circled the edge of the island. Sarita was only separated from the ocean by a waist-high railing. Breakwaters built on top of sunken houses protected them from the worst of the waves. During high tide, water would splash over the cobblestones and settle in puddles. During storms, pedestrians had to wade through waist-high sewage.

In the distance, glowing lighthouses marked the other archipelago islands. A golden trident on top of a church reflected the moonlight. Half of its domed roof rose out of the water where the old part of the city used to be. It was a favorite racing destination for youths. Marzio had swum to it countless times. He could never see much under the water, just a fuzzy green facade. He had swum into it once, through a broken stained-glass window, and gouged his leg on something. He still had the jagged scar across his thigh.

He stepped onto an arched bridge to cross a canal but stopped mid-stride at the summit. On the edge of the street, someone was lying face-down on their stomach, half submerged in the water. The person's lower half was invisible beneath the water's dark surface and their bare upper body was splayed out across algae covered steps leading into the sea. A wild mass of black hair hung from the person's head, concealing their face.

A woman? Was she dead? Indecisive fear rushed through him. Then—realizing someone's life might depend on him—he ran across the bridge, dropped his bundle, and knelt by the woman's head.

“Ma'am?” he asked.

Her torso rose and fell but she was unresponsive when he shook her shoulder. Strange scar patterns circled her biceps. She must have been foreign. From the Iron State or one of its islands. She had probably been attacked for that reason.

Shallow scratches covered her olive skin and a bloody, circular chunk of flesh was missing from her side. Swelling and dark bruising surrounded the wound. He needed to pull her out of the water and find help.

He grabbed her wrists but stopped when he noticed thick webbing between her fingers. Curious dread filled his gut. He gathered her tangled tresses and moved them aside. He gazed, transfixed at her—no, *his* face.

He had strong cheekbones and a narrow chin. He was handsome, even with flushed skin and spittle hanging from the corner of his mouth. Shark teeth glinted between his lips. Marzio jerked his hand back. Why in hell's sea was a Mer in the city?

The Mer moaned low like a whale. His necklace of seashells and fish teeth jingled as he shifted. His eyes slid open and froze on Marzio, deep and dark like the midnight sea.

They stared at each other, Marzio holding his breath. He should run before the Mer dragged him under, only he didn't want to. He had never seen one alive. He wanted to touch him, to solidify in his mind that this being was real, living and breathing. He reached a hand out, but the Mer flinched away. He shoved himself into the ocean with a groan and disappeared beneath the rippling waves, leaving behind a puddle of watery blood on the steps.

Marzio blinked. He had just touched a Mer, and then tried to do it a second time! He scrambled away from the water's edge, his blood pounding. What was he thinking? He could've been killed!

He eyed the waves, half expecting the Mer to burst out of them in a spray of saltwater and drag him to his death, but nothing happened. Why hadn't he attacked Marzio? In sailor tales, a Mer never passed up an opportunity to drown and eat an Islander. Why

would they? Islanders killed them whenever they could. Maybe this Mer was different—he looked at the blood covering the steps—or he was too injured to attack.

He frowned as he picked up the codfish. He rubbed his thumb across his wet fingers. The Mer's skin wasn't slimy like people said.

His experience with the species extended to book drawings and the four-meter trophy skeletons captains hung from the bows of their ships. They looked so human on the inside, except for their elongated feet, their knees, and their pelvises. Their knees were fused together and off the sides of their hips hung a pair of sturdy little legs with long feet.

And then there was whatever part of them made them magical. He wondered how much magic this one had. He dreamed about having magic. About walking on water, and surfing the waves like the dolphins, and splitting giant sea swells in half.

Could he make a deal with this Mer for some of his magic? In stories, Islanders usually took the magic but sometimes a Mer would agree to an exchange. He wasn't sure what he could actually do with water magic, but he was certain he could find a lucrative use. Maybe he could learn how to quell storms and charge ships and residents for protection. He bet the Queen would be interested in keeping someone like that on her island. He could imagine himself there, dressed in finery, surrounded by creature comforts, eating some expensive meal he couldn't pronounce with his family.

Maybe the Mer would come back for food? Marzio unwrapped the codfish and tossed it into the water. He moved to the other side of the street, so he wasn't too close, and waited. The fish floated on the surface for a long while, so long that Marzio thought the Mer had left, but then a webbed hand snatched it under. He craned his neck, trying to

see anything through the inky waves, but the Mer didn't show himself. He found some pebbles between the cobblestones and tossed those in too. Still, nothing.

He cursed. Stupid fish couldn't even thank him. What a dumb idea. He would never be so lucky. Why was he always so impulsive?

Ma would be livid when he returned, but it was too late. He would have to come up with some excuse. A mugging perhaps? But he didn't have any bruises to prove it. Dropped it in the canal? Technically true, but she would ask why he hadn't jumped in after it.

He groaned, letting the newspaper flutter to the ground with the rest of the trash. It didn't matter what excuse he came up with. She would be angry regardless. He considered not returning home at all but that would only delay the consequences. It was better to just get it over with. He whistled a comforting shanty his grandpa used to sing as he headed home.

He opened the green front door to his building, his stomach twisting, and entered his family's apartment. The heavy, vegetable scent of his ma's stew mixed with the moldy air in an unappealing way. The children had started a new game. Renzo stood in the middle of the room, pretending to be an octopus, and tried to tag the other children as they dashed from one wall to the opposite one. He wiggled his arms like tentacles, causing the other four children to screech as they thundered across the room.

The gash on the Mer's body had been perfectly round. Marzio wondered if an octopus had bit him. Or a squid.

"Good, you're finally back," Ma said. She was sitting on a stool, her frame stooped over the brick hearth, her face red and sweaty. She stirred the contents of the pot with a

bone ladle. When she looked at him, a drop of sweat fell from the tip of her nose to darken her canvas pants.

“Where is it?” she asked. “Were the mongers packed up already?”

“No, I bought it,” he said. How was he going to explain this?

Her lips thinned. “So where is it, boy?”

He steeled himself. “I gave it to someone who was injured.”

“You what?” Her tone was so harsh the children stopped their game and wandered over to Meme.

“I said—”

“I heard!” She stood, clenching her hands; the storm swallows across the backs of her fists bulged—one for every hurricane she had sailed through. “You wasted our money, on who? Some worthless cur who’s gonna die anyway?”

“There are other people in worse condition than us. We have food.” He gestured at the full shelves of canned and dried food.

“I don’t give a damn about other people. You have no idea what condition we’re in.” She undid her belt and held it by its leather end.

The scars on his back seemed to tighten. “You’re overreacting.”

“I’m protecting us! We need every advantage we have.”

“Carina, calm down. He’s just a boy,” Meme said, but her voice wavered.

“He’s almost an adult. He knows better.” She advanced towards him. Ready to hit him with the buckle.

His bravery faltered. He could handle the leather, but not the buckle. Never again. He turned and fled. Metal smacked across his upper back as he sprinted out the door. He raced down the street while his ma screamed obscenities at him from the entryway.

He slowed to a walk after her voice and his terror had faded. He fingered his back; a welt was already forming. He hated her. He wished she would stay at sea. And Meme, she never actually defended him. She would try for a moment before her resolve caved. Then later she would sympathize with Marzio and complain about Ma behind her back, but Marzio knew she could do more. Her age made her untouchable. Ma would never strike her.

With nowhere to go, he wandered back to where the Mer had lain, hoping to spot him again. Green waves reflected the moonlight. There was something shiny on the street near the steps.

He bent over and picked up a violet snail shell. He had never seen a shell that color before. There was a hole drilled through its center so it could be hung on a necklace. He rubbed a thumb over the shell's smooth, pearlescent surface. The Mer must have left it for him. Excitement spiked in his chest.

He searched for any unusual ripples that might indicate the Mer's presence, but there were none. He was probably long gone, which was for the best. The sooner he got back to his people the better.

Marzio lay down near the steps. Maybe his grandma's stories were wrong. Maybe Mer kept their magic in shells. Or maybe some had rubbed off onto it. He popped the shell in his mouth and tucked it into the corner of his cheek. If it had any magic, he would suck

it out. When he was somewhere between consciousness and sleep, he wished the Mer would grab his feet and drag him under the waves.

The Goddess of light and dark joined the Goddess of cold and dreams in the blackness between stars. From their union they birthed Air, Earth, and Water. As the elements aged, they became intelligent and corporeal. They filled their domains with their creations—but they were covetous.

-Southern Glacial Sect. *The White Scripture*

The human left, whistling like a high-pitched whale as he did. Tahmel's racing heart slowed. He couldn't believe he had blacked out on the steps. He had only meant to close his eyes for a moment. He looked at the fish in his hand. An Islander had helped him. An *Islander*. Tahmel had expected to be attacked or an alarm sounded. He was grateful for a little bit of good luck after everything that had happened.

He looked more closely at the fish. It didn't look fresh; its eyes were glazed over and its skin had lost its mucus. He took a bite out of it anyway, its scales crunching between his teeth. It tasted old, not bloody enough, but it was edible.

He untied his necklace, removed the first shell—which represented his eighth year of service to the Sect—and left it near the steps as a token of his appreciation. He didn't know if shells held any value to Islanders, but he didn't have anything else.

His side throbbed, weeping blood. He needed to wrap it.

He munched on the fish as he swam away from the street. Every time he took a bite, foul water entered his mouth. Drowned houses rose beneath him, wave torn down to their basic structures. They were fuzzy with green algae and covered in sponges, coral, and kelp. Silver chir darted in and out of broken windows and doors. It was strange to think the houses used to be above water. That humans used to live and walk inside them. They were so different than Shiwa homes, built above ground rather than into it. He wondered if any Islander bones lay inside.

He finished eating the fish and let its skeleton drop. In the refracted moonlight, a field of seaweed swayed near a domed building whose top broke the surface. Red weed. He smiled; red weed had been used medicinally for centuries. Mingan ate it every day—used to. He used to eat it every day. That floating corpse popped back into Tahmel's mind. He clenched his jaw so it would stop trembling. He didn't want to think about it. He couldn't; he had to focus on his own survival.

He swam to the field and plucked off long strands of the slimy weeds. He needed a place to lie down and dress the wound, a place where random Islanders wouldn't walk into him. The waters were calm and empty as he searched, the weeds trailing behind him.

His stomach began to hurt. A subtle ache that quickly escalated. Then it clenched and he retched. He backed away from the floating vomit and surfaced to breath. He had thrown up too soon for it to be food poisoning. It had to be the venom. If he couldn't eat, how would he find the strength to swim home?

He spotted tall structures rising out of the water nearby. Maybe he could lie down there? He swam towards them. They were metal, floated atop the waves, and were anchored to the seafloor. He thought they were ships until he saw rows of plants covering their tops;

farms maybe? Off their edges jutted sloped, wing-like structures held up by diagonal poles. He had no idea what their purpose was.

The farms looked like they required much more upkeep than the fish or seaweed farms he was used to. It was amazing and terrifying what the Islanders could create. Dohasan told him the Shiwa ruled the seas until the Islanders invented harpoon cannons. His chest panged at the thought of his mentor.

He approached one of the structures. There was a metal dock attached to its side with steps leading up to the trees. The dock floated four or five hands above water. He put the red weed in his mouth and hauled his body onto it. His side protested as he dragged himself across the metal; his fingernails and flipper claws scratched against the surface. His body was so heavy out of the water, so much more weight on his crushed ribs.

He rolled onto his back to lessen the pain, letting his tail hang off the edge where the waves brushed it. He spit the seaweed out and waited for his breathing to calm. Then he chewed some of the red weed into a paste and packed it into his gash. The wound stabbed with pain every time he touched it. He wrapped the weeds around his chest to keep the mush in place, but had trouble knotting the strands together. His fingers wouldn't do what he wanted. He fumbled with the tendrils until he ended up with a large haphazard knot, which he deemed good enough.

His stomach ached; he was nauseous but starving. He ate a handful of the leftover red weed; its slime cooled his mouth and throat. Then he scooted off the edge of the dock and splashed, painfully, back into the ocean.

He returned to the domed building. A pattern of little rectangles wove around the top of its circumference and beneath that, a row of windows. A giant crack in its side

stretched all the way to its peak. It didn't look like a place people would frequent. He entered with an arm outstretched, trying to avoid swimming into anything in the dark. His fingers found something flat sloping out of the water. Part of the roof he thought.

He pulled himself onto it and fatigue washed over him. He shut his eyes.

The water warmed and pulsed with his heart as he woke. He climbed out of the blackness, wounds fully healed. Ravenous. Where were his guardians? Why hadn't they kept him fed? Had they forgotten him? He would make them remember. He searched their dwellings, but they lay abandoned.

Tahmel jerked awake. Early sunlight streamed in through the dome's crack and shattered windows. He lay on a broken balcony just below where the ceiling started to curve. Reflected light from the water danced across vibrant paintings on the ceiling. Most of them featured an Islander woman with a gold and white mask concealing her face. They were so much more detailed than Shiwa carvings.

He tried to sit but fell backwards when his side spiked with pain. It didn't feel any better and he was ravenous.

He slid into the water and dove. The bottom of the building opened into a cavernous space held up by metal columns. Unfamiliar furniture and objects lay scattered across the floor, many of them rotten or rusted. More paintings and carvings decorated the walls, algae encroaching on the images. A little school of yellow and white bawEEP swam near a collapsed pillar. Just seeing them made his mouth salivate.

He began to sing so they would be swept towards him, but his right temple exploded with sharp pain. He almost inhaled water in shock. He tried again, quieter this time, with the same result. The venom was affecting him far more than he had anticipated. How was he going to hunt if he couldn't use magic? His side hurt too badly to chase the fish down. He wished he had a spear, or even just a knife.

He settled on top of a large object with a bunch of tall, rusted pipes coming out of its top and waited. Every time a fish came near, he tried to grab it, but they were small and slipped through his fingers. After his tenth failure, he rose to breathe. This wasn't working. He searched the building for mollusks and crustaceans but there were none.

He swam to the crack and peered out. Small boats carrying Islanders drifted in the distance, but none were near his hideout. As long as no one saw him, he should be fine. He left the safety of the building, traveling close to the ocean floor. He grabbed a strand of red weed to eat but something about its texture was off-putting this time. It was too light. He wanted meat; he needed meat.

He found plenty of fish, but they were too fast for him. Small barnacles sat in clusters on rocks and house remnants but removing them would have required more effort than they were worth. He dismissed anything that was too colorful, knowing or fearful they were poisonous. He passed by purple urchins, orange spotted sea cucumbers, and slugs with red appendages on their backs.

Then he spotted a pale, unfamiliar crustacean laying on a sandy opening. It was two hands long with a thick abdomen and a black spot on its feather-like tail. From the shape of its thorax and head, he figured it was a type of shrimp. It moved slowly; easy prey.

He approached it and it reared up, showing a bunch of little legs on its underside and two tiny claws with club-like ends. Was that all it had to defend itself? Little club claws? He reached for it and a spark of bubbles exploded in front of the creature. He pulled his hand back. The bubbles looked like the ones he had somehow created to kill that squid. This little animal had magic.

Of course, there were other sea creatures blessed by the Glistening One. Palm-sized sprites danced on waves in the Shoals and seafoals played with water droplets in the south, but he had never seen or heard about them making water explode.

“How’d you do that?” he asked it.

The creature hopped towards him and more bubbles exploded near its thorax. Tahmel backed away to a safe distance. He didn’t want his hands to get shredded like that squid’s tentacles.

He found a piece of bent metal sticking out of the sand, grabbed it, and held it near the shrimp. Its claws punched out in a blur, hitting the stick and creating bright little bubbles. He kept poking it, trying to figure out how it made those bubbles.

Was it using the same kind of magic he had? Or was it something different? It wasn’t using sound to control it the way Shiwa did. Unless the sound was beyond his perception. He needed to breathe, but he was afraid he would lose track of the animal if he surfaced. He should just kill it and eat; he could figure out what it was later.

As he was getting ready to stab it with the pole, the shrimp jumped up and used its tail to flutter backwards. He chased after its darting form until it squeezed into a crevice in a wall. He cursed himself for wasting time. He would breathe then wait for it to come out.

A shadow passed overhead, the flat underside of a boat. His heart quickened. He realized he was back at the island, near one of the canals. He was an idiot. He glided into the canal and hid under a bridge, being careful not to kick up any of the silt. He didn't think he had been seen; the water was too dirty. He would take a quick breath then leave. He pressed himself against the wall and rose until his nose was out of the water. He opened his nostril slits to breathe.

Something on the boat made a strange barking noise, almost like a seal. He peeked around the corner of the canal. An Islander sat on the boat with a little furry animal. It didn't look like it could swim; his stomach groaned.

Chapter 3

Marzio woke when something thumped near him. A canoe bumped against the steps near where he lay. He was confused at first. Why was he outside? Oh, right. Ma had run him off. He hoped her anger would dissipate soon so he could return home. It usually did. He wished he could move out, even though he would miss the kids and Meme terribly. He didn't have enough money, though. It would be a relief when the rest of the family returned and Uncle Fausto took Ma's place as caretaker.

On the boat, a shaggy mutt with salt crusted fur stared at Marzio from the bow with its pink tongue lolling out. When he sat up, it let out a string of howling barks. He stretched out a hand and the dog's wet nose bumped against his fingers as it sniffed him. Once the mutt was satisfied, it settled down to lick the salt off its paws.

The boatman, dressed in white with a wide-brimmed hat, held the boat steady as two aged holy men lifted their scarlet robes to climb onto the steps. They wore black hats with golden tridents embroidered on them. Marzio shifted over to give them room to pass. They nodded at him.

One reached into his pocket and offered Marzio two dulcatts. "We're all struggling but the Queen is with us," he said.

Marzio almost burst out laughing. They thought he was homeless, although he kind of was at the moment. He accepted the change instead, making sure his expression remained serious. "Thank you an' may the Queen save you," he said.

They smiled before leaving, their robes sweeping the ground behind them. The boatman used his oar to push off from the street, a scowl on his face. Marzio wondered how much the holy men had paid him.

The orange sun was rising on the horizon as iron sail ships left port. Red glass buoys dotted the shallows. A handful of sleepy-eyed pedestrians walked the streets.

Water had splashed onto the road during the night so his back was soaked, and it ached from the cobblestones he had slept on. He should have chosen a different place to rest. The snail shell was still in his cheek. He spit it onto his palm. He didn't feel any different, just hungry and sore. He dropped the shell into his pocket next to Ma's money and rubbed the tender welt on his back. Yawning, he stood.

The dog put its paws on the edge of the boat as the man rowed them away from the street. They made it ten meters out before something hit the flat hull, pitching the boat to the side and sending the dog overboard. The man shouted in surprise and caught himself on the rim.

"Must've hit something," he said. He steadied the boat and whistled to the dog which was paddling back to its master. Then with a splash, the dog disappeared underwater. Marzio was certain he saw a flipper flick in the silty water.

"Paolo!" the man shouted. He jumped in after the dog but surfaced a second later. He rushed back to land and scrambled onto the street, water spilling everywhere, his eyes wide. "I saw something, in the water!" he shouted, at passersby.

Marzio's gaze shot back towards the waves. He didn't see anything now, but he had no doubt that had been the Mer. He must have been there the whole time. Might have

been within arm's reach of him as he slept. Had the Mer been looking for him? Did he intend to return Marzio's favor? Or make a deal for his help?

The Mer wouldn't be able to if this man kept shouting. He would cause a search. Some curious bystanders had wandered over. They scanned the waves, although nothing moved.

"It was huge! It took my dog!" the boatman said, grabbing a man by his arm.

Marzio approached the group. "I saw a fin. Looked like it might've been a sandbar shark." Sometimes sharks wandered into the canals, and a shark would put the fishermen on alert but not the authorities.

The boatman stared at him. "Maybe...it might've been a shark."

Someone patted the boatman on his shoulder. "Bad luck, friend. Let's find someone to get your boat back."

The boatman was led away. He kept glancing at the waves with a doubtful expression.

Marzio hoped nothing else would come of the incident. He needed to find the Mer again and come up with a way to speak with him. He knew there was a language Mer and Islanders used to use to communicate. Almost no one knew it anymore, although some captains still kept translators on their ships just in case. He would have to sneak into the university.

It was warmer today, so he took Pa's jacket off and carried it on his shoulder as he walked inland. A nearby church chimed the fourth hour. He stopped to drink at a stone well with lions carved into it. The water made his stomach feel a little less empty. Gutters

drained into this area and followed the sloped ground down towards the well. The cobblestones were widely spaced so water could sink into the earth.

Men were working on the canals. They had one dammed up and were waiting for it to drain so they could clean out the sludge and repair foundations. Scaffolding covered the facades of leaning, crumbling buildings. The city needed constant maintenance to prevent it from collapsing.

As he traveled higher above sea level, the canals became brick roads and the smell of waste thickened. Without the canals, people emptied their chamber pots on the streets.

Sarita's university sat in a large plaza near the center of the island. It was a giant, white building with a ridiculous number of windows, columns, arches, and friezes. From the roof, sculptures of robed maidens watched pedestrians bustle through the square. A small section of its library was open to the public. They held free classes there to help educate the masses.

The free classes were separate from the school system, though they also held class at the university. The education system was competitive and focused on finding adaptive solutions to deal with their environment. The Queen had started the program after Carpa sunk. Marzio had been dropped from it when he was twelve for "unsatisfactory performance." Not that he minded, he would rather work.

So far, Uncle Neveo was the only person in Marzio's family to make it through all ten years of the program. Although, Gian had a shot at it.

Marzio approached a sign outside the public entrance. Some doctor was giving an anatomy lesson. He passed under the imposing entryway into an antechamber. At the end

of the chamber sat a middle-aged librarian at a desk. She was writing in a blank book made of bleached seaweed paper.

“I’m here for the lecture,” he said. He picked up a pencil and signed in with a fake name. The information he needed wouldn’t be in the public area.

“Better hurry,” she said, without looking up. “It’s already started.”

He entered a spacious room lit with candles. The paneled glass ceiling let in natural light that illuminated the religious frescos on the walls. Most of them featured the Queen. Tables had been pushed aside to make space for a standing audience—and an audience it was. Gore always attracted a crowd.

He joined the back of the group, but couldn’t see over the heads of the adults. Between the shoulders of a couple, he caught a glimpse of the doctor and a cadaver. She was showing the crowd the tendons in the corpse’s arm. Marzio edged to the side of the room and leaned against a narrow door that lead to the professors’ offices. There were university members in the crowd. He recognized some of them, having taken classes with them or seen them with Uncle Neveo. The rest were distinguishable by their better clothing.

He jittered with nervous excitement. When the crowd leaned forward to observe whatever the doctor was doing, he slid the door open and snuck inside. He followed a staircase to the second floor. He slinked passed empty offices, passed his uncle’s old office which now belonged to someone else, and entered the main library. Bookshelves stretched all the way to the ceiling and many of the tomes were chained down. It was quiet. He figured everyone was at the dissection.

He crept around until he found the language section. The spines faced away so the titles were written in a tiny font on the shelves’ edges. He skimmed them for at least a

quarter candle hour before he found a small manuscript titled “*De Luca's Merfolk Dactylology*.” He didn't know what “dactylology” meant but “Merfolk” seemed promising. He pulled the book out, its chain clinking, and opened mildewed pages so warped the tome couldn't close properly. Ink drawings of hand gestures, circular merfolk characters, and Islander translations filled the pages. That was good enough for him.

He didn't know where the keys were kept so he yanked on the book's rusty chain, but it was firmly attached to the shelf. The book's cover though, wasn't so sturdy. It was soft and rotten from the dank air. He grabbed the chain and pulled on it until it ripped off, taking a chunk of the cover with it. He put Pa's coat on, stuffed the book underneath it, and turned to leave.

As he approached the offices, he heard voices. He breathed a curse and darted behind a bookcase. The lecture must have finished already. He tiptoed down an aisle and hid at the end of the row. He peeked around the corner as two chatting faculty members entered the room. He waited for them to move on, but they had stopped and were discussing the “riveting” lecture. Why wouldn't they just go?

He needed to leave, now. But the way he had come was no longer an option. There were other doorways, but he couldn't remember where they led. It had been years since his uncle had brought him up here. He snuck three aisles over to the closest archway, praying the whole time for the floor to not creak, and entered a hallway. He slipped away as fast as he could.

Closed doors lined the left side of the corridor and glassless windows lined the right. The windows provided a view of an enclosed courtyard below with lattice walls

covered in ivy. He remembered the courtyard. It had a door that exited into the public area. If he remembered correctly, there was a staircase somewhere nearby.

He followed the hallway right and froze mid-step. There was someone else there, walking towards him. Panic crept into his chest. Should he run? Or pretend he was meant to be there? Then he recognized the husky figure of Professor Jilani. He had been a classmate of Uncle Neveo's and was still one of his uncle's close friends. He couldn't pretend, and he couldn't run.

"Marzio?" Professor Jilani asked. "What are you doing here?" The professor's hair and thin beard were grayer than he remembered.

Marzio put on his best smile and prayed the book's outline wasn't visible underneath his armpit. "I didn't see you at the lecture," he said. "I snuck up here to say hi."

Jilani gave a throaty chuckle. His belly stretched against his dress shirt and waistcoat. "Oh, those sorts of demonstrations make me a bit squeamish. How have you been?"

"Uh, good. Been looking for a new job." The butcher had let him go almost a month ago, claiming he wasn't profiting enough to keep Marzio around.

The professor nodded. "Hm-uhm. Are you old enough now to work the ships?"

"Almost, I'll probably head down there when I am."

"It's good work," Jilani said, but Marzio could tell from his overt cheer that he didn't think so. "How's your uncle doing? I haven't gotten a response to my last letter yet."

"We haven't heard from him in a while either. His last message said the colony was weathering storms well."

Jilani's eyes lit with excitement. "Good! I wish I were there. Did Neveo say if they got the solar desalination system working?"

"Uh—"

"Why don't we go to my office to talk? I'll pour us some brandy."

"I actually have to get going. I told my ma I'd help her with some errands after the lecture."

"I'll walk you out then." Jilani led him down the staircase. "How is your mother? It's been almost a year since I last saw her. You know, when she was a little girl, she used to follow me and Neveo everywhere. Wouldn't leave us alone."

Marzio couldn't imagine his ma tagging along after anyone. "Ma's fine," he said, his tone came out shorter than he had intended. His heart pounded against his chest. He worried his face was flushed with guilt.

"What has she been up to?"

Marzio wanted to say, "Who cares?" but instead he said, "She's home right now. She's been picking up work at the market an' is going out with the next whaling group."

They entered the courtyard which had a squat well in its center. Out of season bushes bordered the yard and grass poked up between gaps in the stone walkway.

"She still enjoys her work?"

"Uh, I think so."

"Ah, good. I've never had the stomach for that sort of thing." Jilani opened the door to the public area. A man mopped up blood where the cadaver had been. "You should visit again so we can catch up properly." He opened his arms wide and closed the distance between them.

Marzio didn't know how to tactfully evade him so he gave the professor a brief, one-armed hug. Was it his imagination or had Jilani's smile faltered for a second? Had he felt the book?

"Tell your mother I said hi."

"I will. Bye Professor." Marzio made his way to the antechamber on shaky legs. Did Jilani know? Would he report him?

He signed out at the librarian's desk, his sweaty palms making the pencil slick, and forced himself to exit calmly. He squinted against the blinding sun before disappearing into the throng of people in the plaza.

He cursed. Maybe Jilani would overlook the theft. He wasn't sure how much the book was worth. Hopefully, its value merited a fine and not a flogging. He would worry about it later.

His belly pressed up against his spine and his head swam with hunger. He approached a young girl with a bucket calling out, "Clams, oysters, and cockles!"

"Clams, please," he said, handing her three dulcatts.

She wore thick leather gloves to protect her hands as she cut open the clams with a shucking knife. They made a satisfying snapping noise when their muscles were cut. She put them in a green paper bag and handed them over.

He thanked her and left. As he walked, he picked the clams up one by one and bit their flesh from their shells. He dropped the empty shells back into the bag. He might be able to use them later to catch the Mer's attention.

He passed a towering statue of Her Eternal Majesty astride a winged lion. Her marble hair and robes billowed on nonexistent wind as she pointed a trident at the sky, her

mask in place. He had an unnerving sensation that her stone eyes watched him. That she knew he had stolen from one of her institutions. He shook the feeling off. She might be immortal but she wasn't all-seeing.

He decided to go to his usual haunt: a rocky inlet at the northern tip of the island. The abandoned remains of houses littered the area. They sat half submerged in crashing waves. The city council had given up repairing them, opting instead to salvage what was still useable. Only crumbling brick walls remained. He sat against one of these walls and opened the manuscript to the beginning.

In the year of our Eternal Queen 565,

In these pages is the culmination of my work attempting to foster communication between Her Eternal Majesty's court and the merfolk ambassadors. As both species lack the necessary physiology to speak each other's languages, I, in collaboration with my esteemed colleagues, have developed a language of hand gestures based on Dr. Simona Pampuri's work with the deaf. We have had success teaching Hand Language to the merfolk representatives...

Marzio didn't know all the words but understood the general idea. The book was dated almost fifty years ago, before official communication with the Mer ceased. He wondered if Mer still taught the language. He doubted his Mer knew the language but decided to learn a few phrases anyway. He figured he would start with "hello." The drawing showed a man pointing the index and middle fingers of his right hand to his right temple and then to his

companion. Pretty simple. Marzio mouthed the words as he practiced the gestures, trying to string sentences together.

Clouds moved in front of the sun and the breeze became crisp. He shrugged his pa's jacket closer to squeeze more warmth out of it. Gulls squawked as they searched for food on wet, slippery rocks exposed by the low tide.

He looked up when some pebbles scattered across the ground. Renzo hopped across rocks towards him, kicking loose pebbles as went. The buttons on his hand-me-down tunic were mismatched and he held a bundle in his arms.

"Mari, Ma wants you to come home," Renzo said. He blew messy, brown hair out of his eyes.

"I'm not going back," Marzio said, but he knew it was a lie. He would have to return. He couldn't survive on his own. He would end up like the beggars.

Renzo handed him the parcel, which was wrapped in newspaper. "Ma says she won't hit you."

He unfolded the bundle. It held a pile of sardines on a bed of dried tomatoes. A peace offering.

"Shouldn't you be at class or something?" Marzio said.

Renzo shrugged. "Shouldn't you be working?"

Marzio shrugged.

"Where'd you get that book?" Renzo asked.

"I borrowed it."

"From who?"

Marzio raised an eyebrow. "Why do you care?"

“I dunno. What’s it about?”

Marzio tapped his fingers against the book’s spine. “Nothing you’d be interested in,” he said. “Just tell Ma I’ll come back tonight.” He began reading again. He would use those sardines later.

—

Water gave her creations oceans to sleep in. Earth gave her creations land to dream on. Air could not provide a resting place for her creations. She stole land from Earth and made it float so her children could roost.

-Southern Glacial Sect. *The White Scripture*

Tahmel picked at the fur stuck between his teeth. The animal’s corpse lay on the broken balcony in a messy pile. His stomach could only handle small bits of its meat at a time. Maybe it wasn’t meant to be eaten, or it had to be prepared a certain way.

His wound itched. He knew he should collect more red weed and change his bandages, but he couldn’t bring himself to move. Despite having napped on and off all day, his body was heavy with exhaustion. He lay beside the crack in the domed building, watching the Islanders go about their day. They moved nonstop, flooding the streets and rowing little boats back and forth. Large ships came and went between the wave walls, smoke rose from tall columns before being swept away by the wind, and giant wheels turned with the tidal flow. Naked people jumped off piers to bathe and gracelessly swim within the confines of the walls. Tahmel had to dive when some of them came near his

hideout, but they only stayed long enough to touch the building before swimming back to the pier.

Even with all this activity, it was quieter than he had expected. Islander noises didn't carry through air the same way Shiwa sounds carried through water. The squawking gulls roosting on the dome were louder. The city's commotion slowed, then stopped at sunset. He figured poor night vision forced the Islanders inside after dusk.

He heard a faint whistle. He thought it was the wind until the sound manifested into a vaguely familiar tune. From the street, a figure tossed a small object into the ocean. Tahmel remembered the song. The Islander who fed him whistled the same thing when he left. Was it the same person? It was dangerous to go back there, but if it was the same human, maybe he would help Tahmel again.

He forced himself to crawl off his resting place, slide under the water, and swim to the street. A shell hit the waves and fluttered down in front of his face. Then a second and a third. A hand holding bochee broke the surface near a flight of steps that descended underwater. It had to be the same Islander. Tahmel moved back twenty hands and rose until his nose breached the water.

The Islander started, then smiled. He said something in a light tone, the words fast and airy, before making the hand gestures for "hello" and "food."

Tahmel's eyes widened. Did the Islander know Hand Language? He hesitated; it could be a trap, although, he didn't see anyone else and the human looked unarmed. He decided to take the risk. He dipped beneath the gentle waves and surfaced next to the Islander's hand, making him jump.

Thank you, Tahmel signed. The Islander tensed when Tahmel took the little fish from him. He kicked backwards to put some distance between them before he started eating. His gut twisted, he thought he would vomit, but then it settled down to an annoyed rumble.

Welcome. More food, the Islander signed. He pointed to an open bundle lying on the top corner of the steps, then moved to the far side of the stairs. He dried his hands on his legs. He wore strange garments that almost covered his entire body. They looked uncomfortable and difficult to move in.

Tahmel eyed the empty street; nothing but slivers of light from the buildings. Thin clouds obscured the waxing moon so even if someone looked at them, they probably wouldn't be able to discern what Tahmel was. Swimming there had drained what little energy he had. He needed to lie down.

He hauled himself up with a grimace. His lungs labored as he dragged his body to the pile of fish. It lay on something green, crinkly, and thin like a leaf. He swallowed the bochee one at a time, and rotated between scanning the street and eyeing the human.

He didn't know if the human was small by Islander standards, but he certainly was by Shiwa standards. He was probably eight hands shorter than Tahmel and two thirds his weight. It made him a little less intimidating.

It was so strange being in the company of a human, exciting and terrifying. He didn't know anyone who had gotten this close and lived. He couldn't deny how lucky he had been to run into this one.

Tell me name, the Islander signed.

Tahmel frowned at the rude wording, but spoke his name anyway.

The Islander's brow furrowed. He pushed wavy black hair out of his eyes before opening a rectangular object. He held the object close to his face with his eyes squinted. *Tell me sign name*, he signed.

Tahmel was curious about what was inside the rectangle. He wedged his hip flippers underneath himself and used his arms to lift his torso. The Islander turned the object so he could see it. He leaned forward, even though the human's proximity made him uncomfortable.

On rectangular leaves—similar to what the food rested on—was Shiwashi, its translation into Hand Language, and what must have been the Islander language. This must be how they record information, rather than using stone tablets. The leaves looked so fragile. They must lose information often.

He read some of the translations. They were awkward, like the way old Shiwa tried to sign, the ones who didn't keep up with the language as it changed. Hand Language was more popular with younger people. Its silence offered a privacy spoken words did not. Tahmel knew it well because it was necessary for water-touched to communicate while singing. The Islander probably didn't know he was being rude.

Ask like this. Tahmel signed each gesture slowly and deliberately so the Islander could look them up. *How are you named?*

The Islander repeated the question back to him.

I'm named Tahmel. For his sign name he pointed his pinky to the back of his jaw and slid it towards his chin. It was a unique sign his older sister had given him when he still lived with his family.

How are you named Islander? he asked. He had to pause and repeat gestures so the human could find the translations. He flipped through his strange tablet, then signed some letters from the Islander alphabet. They were meaningless to Tahmel.

What does it mean? he asked.

The Islander made a small noise as he searched through the tablet. *Great-grandfather name. You from where come?*

Tahmel caught himself before he laughed. After all, the Islander was trying. *South,* he signed.

The Islander nodded after he looked up the word. *Why you no kill I?*

It was a good question. Tahmel should have killed him to keep his presence secret. He still could. *I'm not much of a killer. Does anyone else know I'm here?*

The Islander's brow wrinkled again.

Tahmel repeated himself several times as the human found the translations.

No. I want make deal to you.

Tahmel stopped eating. He wanted to make a deal? Of course, he wanted something. Tahmel should have known he wasn't just being altruistic. Humans exploited everything, took and used everything they could. The Islander watched him with an intense, unblinking gaze. What could he possibly want from him?

What kind of deal? he asked.

Magic have you, yes?

Tahmel frowned. Did the Islander want him to perform some kind of magic for him? He wasn't sure how truthful he should be. *Yes, I have some.*

The human smiled and seemed excited as he turned the leaves in his tablet. *To me give magic and I help you.*

What? Did the Islander think magic was something that could be exchanged and divided up? You had to be born with it or the Goddess had to give it to you. If Tahmel told him the truth, would he turn on him? If the other humans found out about him, they would hunt him down. He couldn't escape their ships or harpoons.

He swallowed hard. *What do you need magic for?*

The Islander had to look up the question. He seemed to think for a moment, flipped through the tablet again, then signed, *Get money. Help family.*

What other option did Tahmel have? *Help me first, then I'll give you magic.* He doubted how well his ploy would work, but he couldn't risk the Islander revealing him.

After finding the translation, the Islander signed, *Proof magic.*

Tahmel shook his head. *I have to sing. It's too loud to do here. Too loud.*

He looked up what Tahmel had said before nodding. He set the tablet down and undressed until only a garment covered his waist. He was thinner than Tahmel realized, his clothing had made him look bigger. The human's lower ribs curved around his torso. He had a few scars scattered across his body and a red welt marred his shoulder blade.

You're hurt? Tahmel asked, pointing to the fresh mark on his back.

The Islander shook his head. He hid the tablet underneath his clothes then jumped into the water. He gasped when he came back up and growled something Tahmel suspected was a string of curse words. He gestured for Tahmel to follow before he began to swim.

Tahmel slid in after him. The human swam loudly, with his arms coming out of the water and splashing back down. It was a good thing he was slow, any faster and Tahmel's

weak kicks wouldn't have kept up. They followed the coastline to a small inlet. Destroyed structures listed in the water. They had no lights and looked abandoned.

The Islander swam into a building that was missing a corner and climbed onto a pile of rubble near a pockmarked wall. Tahmel followed him into the dark interior. The room was bare and there were holes in the ceiling. His arms trembled as he tried to drag himself up the rubble. His flippers scratched against the loose rocks and sand, unable to gain purchase. The human grabbed his elbow and pulled him up. Tahmel collapsed on his stomach, panting.

The Islander sat beside him, hunched over with his legs crossed. He shivered, covered in goosebumps, and crossed his arms. He waited, watching him.

Right, magic. Tahmel knew, or had heard at least, that humans didn't have any magic. He hoped a small demonstration would be enough. He focused on the waves lapping nearby. The water had to remain connected to its source or a solid surface. If it became disconnected in the air, he lost all control.

He started to hum, which caused his right temple to stab with pain. He gasped, cutting the sound off. The Islander cocked his head to the side. Tahmel started again; he could do this. He just needed to move the water. His whole body clenched against the pain as a thin water spout swirled up out of the waves.

The Islander leaned forward; his hand twitched.

Tahmel held the spout for an instant longer before letting it splash down with a whimper. A child could have created something more impressive.

The human's eyes narrowed. He seemed to agree.

I'm too sick to do more than that, Tahmel signed, but he didn't know if the Islander understood. Humans hoarded things for their creations, maybe a gift would do. He fumbled with the ends of his necklace, took off the pink pearl he had received for completing his first sacrifice at the trench, and held it out.

The Islander picked it up and examined it. He smiled with teeth that were too flat. Some fish had teeth like that, but the human's were neater, prettier. *Safe*, he signed, gesturing to their surroundings.

Tahmel nodded. *Thank you*.

The Islander put the pearl in his mouth. Then he waved, waded back into the ocean, and swam away. Tahmel closed his eyes, trying to calm his ragged breathing. It seemed the human was satisfied for now.

Chapter 4

Marzio wasn't sure he understood the Mer's name. The way he held out his pinky corresponded with the letter "t," but Marzio couldn't find the sweeping motion along the jaw in the manuscript. Maybe his name was just T? When he had spoken his name, Marzio could sort of hear syllables but they were very smooth and low in tone. He wasn't sure if he could accurately replicate the sounds.

T had been larger than he had expected, despite only being two and a half meters long. Drawings and skeletons didn't really convey the amount of mass a Mer's seal half had. His fur had been shiny black with white patches that dappled his underside like barnacles on a whale. He had also had pale spotting across the skin of his stomach that faded away just above his navel.

Marzio wasn't sure if T only had a little magic or if he was too injured and sick to make it work. He did look ill. He had had bags underneath his bloodshot eyes and pus had leaked from the cuts on his torso. Seeing that little bit of water lift into the air was amazing, though. Marzio prayed he would recover soon.

He stood naked on the street, wringing out his drenched underwear. His teeth chattered. Swimming with a Mer was absolutely worth freezing half to death. He bet no one in the Eternal Islands had ever had the chance.

He used his shirt as a towel, put his dry clothes on, grabbed the book and his wet garments, and started jogging home. Running put a little warmth back in his bones.

He took the pearl out of his mouth and dropped it in his pocket beside the snail shell. He had never seen a pink one before. He didn't know if its hue made it more or less

valuable. He had accepted it because T had looked scared. No one had ever looked at him with fear before. It made him feel guilty, even though he hadn't done anything wrong.

The thought had crossed his mind that turning T in might result in a reward. But after that encounter, there was no way he could do that. He couldn't bear to see T's corpse dragged through the streets. Crowds sometimes did that to condemned criminals. They would probably treat T the same way. He would have to ease his mind the next time he saw him.

When he arrived home, he hid the book underneath his jacket before sneaking in through the front door. His family seemed to be asleep. An oil lamp on the kitchen table illuminated Ma snoring on the couch, wrapped in a leaf-patterned blanket. He tried to sneak passed her but she jerked awake.

"Marzio?" she asked, sitting up.

He grimaced. "Aye, Ma?"

"Wait a moment. We need to talk." She wiped crust from her steely eyes. When she saw him she raised a fair eyebrow. "Why are you wet?"

"I went swimming."

She gave him a look. "At night, during winter?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Aye."

"Your lips are blue."

"I'm fine."

She shook her head. "Anyway, I wanted to say that what you did was a kind thing, but we can't afford to be kind. We need to look after ourselves. We need every scrap of food we have because we're sailing to Astia."

His breath caught. The floating colony. “We are?”

“Aye, we’re buying a little vessel an’ leaving when the current brings the colony closer. We haven’t told the little ones or Meme yet. Not sure how they’ll react.” She ran a hand through her braids. “Meme’s never left the island before. She’s sure to put up a fuss.”

Anxious excitement bloomed in his chest. Rumor had it that colony life was better than the islands, but was it really? “Will we live with Uncle Neveo?” he asked.

“Probably not. He’s always doing those experiments, making the house smell strange. We’re going to hitch the boat to Astia’s side. Neveo said they need more sailors, so it should be easy for us to find work. We could buy a house. Or whatever passes for a house there.”

A house. He wouldn’t trip over the kids and their things every other step. Maybe he could have his own little room like his grandma. And he could see Uncle Neveo again. “What about the rest of the family?” he asked. They had extended relatives on some of the other islands. A large group from Ma’s side worked the salt beds in the isles.

She shrugged. “I’ll send them a letter. Let them know we’re leaving. I dunno if it’s something they’d be interested in doing. Don’t really care neither.”

The news was sudden, but good he thought. Sarita was dying, it was only a matter of time before it sank. “When are we leaving?”

Her expression softened. “One more whaling trip an’ we’ll have enough.”

He nodded. A few months then. That would be enough time for him to finish his deal with T.

“Don’t tell no one, you hear? We’re waiting for everyone to get home.”

“Aye, Ma.”

“And Marzio?” She held out a hand. “My change. I accidentally gave you a duli.”

He hesitated, then dug through his pocket for the remaining coins and dropped them onto her rope scarred palm.

She frowned, eyeing the money for a moment. “Off to bed, then,” she said. “An’ don’t swim at night again. You’ll catch your death.”

“I won’t.” He hurried into the boys' cramped bedroom, relieved the conversation hadn’t dissolved into a fight over the money.

His two brothers and cousin lay asleep in their bunk beds. Marzio changed into his sleepwear and stuffed the manuscript underneath his mattress. He lay on the bottom bunk, curled into a tight ball underneath the blankets, and breathed warm air onto his numb fingers. He slept with the pearl and snail shell underneath his pillow.

As soon as Marzio woke, he got dressed and grabbed the manuscript and one of his dirty shirts. He put the pearl and shell back in his pocket, he liked having them near. Then he crept to Renzo's bedside. The boys were still snoring. He poked Renzo on his shoulder. “Renzi, I need your help.”

Renzo groaned, pulling his wool blanket over his head.

Marzio shook his shoulder. “Renzi, wake up!”

“What? What is it?” Renzo rubbed his eyes.

“I need help stealing eggs from the Greccos.” He was pretty sure Mer ate raw food. He didn’t know if they could eat eggs, but at least it was something. He would find seafood later.

“Why? We got pickled ones.”

“I can't say but I'll buy you something if you help.”

Renzo sat up, wide awake. “I want one of those masks they wear at the capitol.”

Marzio frowned. Those were expensive but pawning the pearl might cover a cheap one. “Fine, but you can't tell no one.”

“I won't.”

“I'm serious Renzi.”

Renzo crossed two of his fingers as a promise. “I won't. I swear.”

They snuck out of the bedroom into the living area. The couch was empty. Ma must have moved into her room after he went to bed. He and Renzo ate a quick breakfast of almonds and raisins, then took the spiral staircase to the roof.

Planter boxes crowded the flat roof with dormant and late season plants. The olive and citrus trees lay barren, but the onion, beet, and fennel plants were still producing. When it was nice out, he often came up here to sleep between the herb boxes. It was more peaceful than a room with three snoring, farting boys.

The Grecco family had a wire chicken coop next to their planter boxes. Its bottom was filled with moist, rotten seaweed paper. A small part of the chicken wire was detached from the coop's frame. Marzio's hand no longer fit through the hole, but Renzo's did. He laid his extra shirt on the ground, stuck his fingers into the gap, and held it open so Renzo could stick his tiny hand inside.

“Grab as many as you can.”

Renzo shooed the squawking chickens off their nests and handed over four feces covered eggs. He laid them on the shirt, tied it all together, and carefully lifted the bundle.

“When do I get my mask?” Renzo asked.

“Later.” Marzio left his pouting brother behind. He probably shouldn’t have gotten Renzo involved, but he trusted him more than any of the other kids. He wanted to tell someone so badly about T, about magic. After the deal was done, he would tell everyone.

He went down to the canal to wash the eggs off, then walked to the northern inlet. He held the manuscript under his arm and the shirt between his teeth as he climbed down the rocks. Waves hissed against the shoreline and beached kelp stunk up the air.

There was a low, crumbled wall that went through the shallows and attached to the building he had left T in. He climbed up it and walked across without a problem. When he was younger, he used to pretend the wall was a tightrope. He entered the building through a crack and jumped down onto the rubble.

He didn’t see T, but the silt in the water swirled like it had just been kicked up. He should have given him a warning before entering. He whistled his grandpa’s tune and sure enough, the water in the corner of the room rippled as T lifted his head. He couldn’t have been more than a meter deep but Marzio hadn’t seen him at all in the cloudy water.

T approached, pulling himself halfway onto the rubble hill. He was shaking, fever flushed his cheeks, and his breathing was fast and shallow. He signed something Marzio had to look up.

I feel worse.

He knelt beside T and removed the seaweed bandages and packing covering his wound. T tensed and gagged, yellow bile spilling from his mouth. Marzio inhaled sharply. His entire side was enflamed. The wound had stopped bleeding but now it was ringed by

leathery black flesh. T stared at his injury with watery eyes. He started to pick at the black skin. Marzio slapped his hand away which earned him a glare.

He opened the manuscript and fumbled through it. *Stop. Sorry. Need you remedy. Bite type?*

T gestured for the book. His hands trembled as he turned the pages, his wet fingers dampening the paper. He pointed at the gesture for squid, then signed something Marzio couldn't follow. He took the book back and T repeated the gestures so he could look them up.

The specific name wasn't in the book. *Describe squid*, he signed.

He translated T's gestures to: *Long as you. It flashed red and white.*

Hopefully, that would be enough information for the apothecary. He left the manuscript and eggs on the ground within T's arm reach. Then he scrambled up the wall and hurried back to the street.

He raced to the bustling marketplace. People crowded the stalls. Vendors loudly hawked their goods and insulted the freshness of their neighbors' products. He pushed his way through the horde to the decaying building that housed the apothecary.

A bell jingled when he entered. Inside, a thousand remedies lined the walls. Dust motes floated in the morning light streaming in through the windows. Behind a counter, a balding medicine man dressed in black ground a brown powder with a mortar and pestle. His bird-like mask watched Marzio with glass eyes from the edge of the table.

"I need a remedy for someone bitten by a squid," he said.

“And what kind of squid was it, lad?” The man's gray beard rustled as he spoke. He raised a thick eyebrow after Marzio finished describing it. “That's a red devil. What were you doing at Shipwreck Trench?”

He almost faltered. Why had T been there? “Captain decides where we salvage, sir, not I.”

The apothecary hummed before he turned to a shelf and grabbed a clear vial and a syringe. He pointed to a line on the syringe. “Fill it to here with the antivenom and give them a dose in the leg, every day for seven days. Is there any necrosis?”

Marzio gave him a blank look. “Any what?”

“Dead tissue, lad.”

“Aye, it's black.”

The man hummed again. “It needs to be debrided. There's a doctor aboard, yes?”

Marzio had a feeling he was purposefully using words common folk wouldn't know. “There isn't.”

“Not an official salvage then,” the apothecary said, shaking his head. “Bring them here. I can do it.”

“Just tell me how to do it. The debriding thing.” The man was wasting time and asking far too many questions.

The apothecary tsked. “You cut off the dead tissue, but you shouldn't do it, lad. If it's done wrong, the person could bleed out or the wound could become infected.”

“It's already infected,” Marzio said. “There's pus.”

The apothecary turned back to the wall, grabbed an amber bottle, and set it on the counter. “Oregano oil. Rub this on the bite after it's debrided. Your crewmate needs a

professional touch, though. I can go to them if transportation is too difficult. I charge three duli per house call.”

Three duli? That was almost three months’ wages at the butcher’s. “I’ll just take the medicine,” he said.

“That’ll be seven duli.”

Hell’s sea. Marzio handed him the pearl. “How much is this worth?”

The man blinked before taking it. He held it against his yellowing front teeth and rubbed it back and forth. Then he put on a strange pair of glasses with magnifiers attached to the rim. He flipped the magnifiers down one at a time as he studied the pearl under the sunlight. “Aye, that’ll cover it.”

“I need bandages too.”

Without looking, the apothecary grabbed gauze from beneath the counter and handed it over. “Where did you get this?”

“It’s loot from the salvage.”

“Really? I didn’t think there was anything valuable still down there.” He flipped the magnifiers up and gave Marzio a suspicious look. “Best tell your ‘captain’ to keep a better stocked sick-bay if they plan on returning to that trench.”

“Aye, sir.” Marzio grabbed the supplies and hurried out, glad to escape the man’s scrutiny.

—

When Earth saw her stolen land, she gored Air with her tusks. Then chased her to the bottom of the world—where the ground was blue ice.

-Southern Glacial Sect. *The White Scripture*

Tahmel flinched when the Islander whistled his return. He jumped down from the ledge and sat beside him. From his garments, he took out a vial and a closed glass tube with a strange handle and a needle attached to its end. He put the needle into the vial and pulled the handle up, filling the tube. He showed Tahmel which line he filled it to, held it near his tail, and stuck it in.

Tahmel winced when it pierced his skin. The Islander pulled it out and now it was empty. That was a strange way to administer medicine. Why couldn't he just drink it? He asked the Islander this, who—after finding the translation—rapidly shook his head.

No, he signed. He mimicked the method, pointing at the line on the vial multiple times.

Tahmel nodded. He didn't understand why it had to be done that way, but it must have been important.

Then the Islander took out another bottle, a roll of white cloth, and a bone knife. His heart quickened when he saw the knife. The human rinsed it off in the water. Then he said something in a quavering voice as he pointed at Tahmel's wound. Holy Goddess, the Islander wouldn't let him pick at it but it was fine for him to cut it?

He twisted his hair into a rope, clenched it between his teeth, then nodded. *Ready*, he signed.

The Islander took a shaky breath and compressed his lips. He seemed more nervous than Tahmel did.

Ready, he signed again.

The human placed a hand on his side, cooling his hot skin. *Sorry*, he signed, just before he began to cut.

Tahmel squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself not to flinch away from the blade. It wasn't any different than receiving a mark. He had done it before, he could do it again. Tears mixed with his sweat and darkness encroached on his vision. When the knife finally left him, he sobbed with relief. He spit his hair out, breathing fast.

The Islander gently rubbed a clear liquid with a spicy, pungent scent on the bite and cuts covering his torso. Then he packed the wound with cloth. Tahmel lifted himself onto his elbows and hip flippers so he could wrap it around his chest. He collapsed once the last knot was tied.

Sorry, the Islander signed.

No, thank you. His side throbbed, but he felt clean now that the rotting flesh was removed.

The Islander untied his garment bundle. *Food*, he signed, pointing at a handful of bird eggs.

Tahmel inclined his head just enough so the Islander knew he saw. He couldn't eat anything right now, especially not eggs. He could barely stomach them on a normal day.

The Islander looked through his tablet. *I no tell you here*.

Tahmel eyed him, he looked earnest. The Islander had gone out of his way to help him, had probably saved his life, but he still didn't trust him. He nodded anyway. *I trust you, Sea Friend.*

The Islander smiled after looking up Tahmel's gestures. *Swim from you trench shipwreck?*

Trench shipwreck? He must be talking about the Hallow. He paused before signing, *Yes.* Clearly, he already knew.

For why?

He should keep his sentences simple. *For...religion.*

The Islander looked up the last word. His gaze raked him. He had interesting eyes, light brown like sand. *For why?* he asked.

Tahmel almost shrugged him off, almost told him he was too tired to talk, but the Islander seemed genuinely interested. *Our Goddess sleeps in the trench,* he signed. He wondered what she was doing. He prayed she had returned to her dark hole and fallen asleep again.

The human looked up the gestures then asked, *What goddess?*

The Glistening One. She made the sea and its creatures. Don't Islanders worship something? He had to repeat himself several times.

Queen religion, the Islander signed. A frown hung from his mouth. *Steal us holy waters. Sorry.*

It's not your fault. A sudden need to tell someone what had happened struck him. He didn't know if the Islander would care or even believe him, but he couldn't hold it

inside any longer. He signed slowly, *We swam into the trench to bring the Goddess offerings—*

The Islander held up a hand, consulted his tablet, then nodded for Tahmel to continue.

She woke and attacked us. Then squid attacked us. Everyone's dead. I'm the only survivor. Talking about it seemed to make it more real. Seemed to solidify the horror, the deaths. A light tremor shook his frame.

The Islander flipped through his tablet. He hesitated before signing, *Again, please.*

Tahmel repeated himself once, then twice, trying to conceal his frustration. With each explanation, the human's expression become more incredulous.

He worried a crack in his lip. *Giant animal?* he asked.

Tahmel growled. It was too complicated; the Islander didn't understand. *No, never mind.*

Sorry.

I need to get home.

The Islander nodded. He became still, staring off at nothing. Then he jumped to his feet. *Get food I,* he signed.

Tahmel rested his head on his arm. His eyelids drooped as he watched the Islander climb up the ledge. He heard him splashing nearby, combing the tide pools he thought. He returned a while later with a handful of mollusks.

Contrary to the previous day, Tahmel didn't have an appetite, but he grabbed one of the brown mussels anyway and crushed it between his teeth. He spit the shell pieces out, peeled the mussel off, and ate it.

Return I later, the Islander signed. He picked up his tablet and was about to grab the medicine.

Wait. Tahmel didn't want that medicine to leave his sight. He wanted control over it. *Leave it here. I understand how to do it*.

He looked up what Tahmel had gestured, then signed, *Each day, seven days*. He signed "fragile" as he pointed at the vials.

Tahmel nodded. *I understand*.

The human paused for a moment before he smiled and waved goodbye.

Chapter 5

Marzio wasn't sure he believed or even understood T's story. Something came out of the trench and attacked him, and that something—he was sure he misunderstood this part—was a goddess. It sounded pretty ridiculous. Then again, the Queen was supposed to be immortal, so maybe a deity did live at the bottom of the trench. More likely, something hadn't translated right and it was just some kind of sea creature.

His gaze had kept drifting to T's necklace. He had counted six pearls, all different colors. If they were worth as much as that pink one, then that was a small fortune hanging from his neck. Stealing them crossed his mind, but maybe he could convince T to part with them, especially if he couldn't give Marzio a lot of magic.

As he walked home, he passed a sheet of paper nailed to a post with the image of a ship flying the royal winged lion.

Her Eternal Majesty calls for able-bodied sailors to travel east in search of land.

Enlist now and find your new home. Castelli Port 4423

Another expedition. They had been searching for as long as he could remember. The ships only returned with rumors of land if they returned at all. He wondered what forests and mountains and rivers actually looked like. What they smelled and sounded like. The capital island had a forest the Queen farmed for wood, but he had only seen it from a distance and in paintings.

He arrived home and kicked off his boots near the door. His grandma rested in her chair. Her fluffy white hair curled around her head like a halo. With deft fingers, she mended a stained pair of pants for one of the kids. Her wrinkled face twisted into a smile when she saw him.

“Meme, why did we stop talking to the Mer?”

She set her needle and thread down. “Why do you ask?”

He shrugged. “Just wondering, I guess.”

“I don’t know much about it. Just that there was a dispute over territory. Her Majesty needs the waters over the trench for trade with the Iron State.”

“Why don't we just sail around it?”

She chuckled. “It's two-hundred leagues long an’ the seal people wanted the whole thing. They’re greedy.”

He frowned. “Still, that was fifty years ago an’ we stay out of their waters now. Why don’t we ever talk to them?”

“I dunno. I suppose neither side wants to.”

Renzo bounded in from the boys’ bedroom. “Do you have it?” he asked.

Marzio had forgotten about the mask. “Not yet. I'll get it later.”

“You said you'd have it when you came back.” He pouted.

“No, I didn't.”

“What were you going to get?” Meme asked.

“Nothing,” Marzio said.

“One of those masks they wear at the capitol,” Renzo said. Marzio glared at his brother. “What?” Renzo crossed his arms. “Everyone’s gonna know once you give it to me.”

“A carnival mask?” Meme raised an eyebrow. “How in hell's sea were you going to pay for that?”

“I’ve been running messages around town,” he said. His deception kept growing. How long could he keep it up?

“Oh, that’s wonderful.” Meme smiled. “I bet you’re glad to be working again.”

“Aye.” He flashed Renzo a glare before walking around him to enter the bedroom.

He shut the door and lay down on his bed. He took the manuscript out from under his arm, opened to a random page, and began studying. From T’s confused expressions, it seemed he wasn’t putting sentences together correctly. The language was more frustrating than he had anticipated. Verbs were used in strange orders and too many of the gestures had multiple meanings. As he practiced the hand gestures, the elegant Mer characters kept drawing his eye. They were circles and crescents with lines, loops, and hooks coming off them. He saw the symbol for “goddess,” a circle with three evenly spaced teardrops along its perimeter, and realized it was the same as “water.”

A game of ball started in the street. Shouts and laughter came in muffled through the door. It wasn’t long before his siblings and cousins were calling his name. Someone had kicked the canvas ball into the canal. Marzio spent the next few minutes fishing it out with a crooked laundry pole. He was annoyed, but he knew they couldn’t help it. Everywhere they could play was bordered by water.

He wondered if any children had ever been snatched underwater during such a moment. Were there good reasons why the Islanders hated the Mer? Or was it all just lies and fear?

He returned to his room, his feet now wet, and sat on his bed. He reopened the manuscript. As he read, clinking sounds came from the kitchen as Meme prepared dinner. The powerful scent of garlic wafted in under the door.

As the sun lowered, two sets of feet entered the apartment. The kids' feet pattered like rain, but these were heavy footfalls. He recognized his ma's clipped gait but the second one he didn't know. His throat tightened when Jilani's robust voice greeted Meme. Ma said something but her tone wasn't angry. In fact, she sounded excited. Jilani must not have told her about the stolen book, but why not?

Marzio got up slowly, quietly—unsure what to do. The only window in the bedroom overlooked a canal. He could climb through it and jump into the water, but fleeing was only a temporary solution. Plus, swimming in the same water they emptied their chamber pots into wasn't very appealing.

He opened the sock drawer at the bottom of the dresser and slid the book behind it. It would be a pain getting it back out, but no one would look there. The drawer stuck out a little when he shut it, but most of them did anyway because the wood was so warped. He went to the door and pressed an ear against it.

“...at the market,” Ma was saying.

Meme said something in a reserved tone about adding more pasta to the pot. Chair legs scraped across the floor. Then Ma and Jilani started talking about nothing important. The mild winter, old friends, work. They didn't even mention Marzio's name.

He jumped when Meme called him.

“Marzi, I need your help,” she said.

He cracked the door open and entered the living area. Jilani and Ma were facing each other at the table. The professor had trimmed his beard and wore a simple doublet that compressed his belly. A book lay on the table beside him. He leaned forward intently as Ma finished describing a raunchy exchange that had occurred at the market. A booming laugh erupted from Jilani’s throat.

Ma turned towards Marzio, her braids slithering across her shoulders. “You remember Mr. Jilani, don’t you?” she asked.

“It’s been a while hasn’t it?” Jilani said. He smiled like he didn’t have Marzio by his short hairs.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Ma flushed and her eyes narrowed. She opened her mouth but Jilani interjected before she could reprimand him. “I was struck by a sudden bout of nostalgia and decided to drop in on an old friend.”

Marzio clenched his jaw, anxiety eating at his stomach.

“Aye, and I invited him over for dinner,” Ma said. She gave him a warning look.

“Marzi, lift this for me, would you?” His grandma gestured to the pot over the hearth, her lips pressed thin. She removed her head scarf and used it to dab sweat off her ruddy cheeks.

Marzio covered his hands with a dish rag before lifting the pot. He helped Meme strain the pasta over the window, letting the water splash onto the street. She dumped the

noodles into a large bowl, set it down on the table, and added garlic and olive oil. Then she collapsed in the chair at the head of the table, fanning herself with a hand.

Ma went to the front door and yelled, “Dinner!” down the street. The kids rushed in, their clothes rumpled and dirty. Gian’s shoes squelched with water. They seemed oblivious to the tense atmosphere.

They only had enough seats for six people. Marzio sat in his usual chair, which happened to be across from Jilani, and got a whiff of the man’s woodsy cologne. Zaira and Alina both claimed seats at the table. Ermes tried to shove his little sister off her chair, claiming it was his turn to sit at the table.

Zaira grabbed the chair’s backing to steady herself. “It’s my turn too!”

Ma came over and cuffed Ermes upside his head. “It’s the girls’ turn. You sit on the floor.”

Zaira stuck her tongue out at her brother and repositioned her yellow skirts so they fanned out across her legs. Ma began doling out servings of pasta and steamed fennel. Marzio noticed she put a little extra on the professor’s plate. Gian took his food back to Meme’s chair while Renzo grabbed a plate for himself and Ermes, who was sulking in a corner of the room. They said a quick thank you to the Eternal Queen before they started eating.

Jilani took a bite of pasta and hummed. “This is the best capellini I’ve ever had.”

Meme grunted in response. The professor shifted in his chair and continued eating. Marzio didn’t know what was wrong with his grandma. She was usually a cheerful hostess. Maybe she didn’t appreciate the short notice?

Jilani's book caught his eye. It was thick with a green, tattered cover and a clasp that could be chained down. He cocked his head to read the upside-down title. *The Shiwashi Language*. He had never heard of it.

"How long were you at the capital?" Ma asked.

Meme's head perked up a little. She had always wanted to see the capital and the Queen.

"Almost eight months. It's wonderful there and I got so much research done," he said.

"What are you researching?" Ma asked.

"I'm studying the mangrove trees and trying to breed the same salt-tolerant qualities into our crops." Jilani entered a long-winded explanation that Marzio couldn't follow. Something about inheritance theories.

Ma spoke with a wrinkle across her brow, "You sound like my brother."

Alina turned to Zaira, her blonde curls bouncing. She was the only one with Ma's hair color. They whispered back and forth before Zaira asked, "How many trees are there?" Marzio assumed the question was actually Alina's.

"Why, only a million! The second you leave the street you're tripping over roots. And the bugs!" Jilani shook his head. "I didn't go anywhere without my net hat."

"I like bugs," Zaira said. "I squish them." She twirled a strand of pasta around her plate with her fork.

"That's because you're nasty," Alina said.

The girls began to argue over who was more disgusting. Marzio slipped his quartered fennel bulb into his pocket during the distraction. He wasn't sure if it was something T could eat, though.

"Girls! Shush," Ma said.

"I could have used you at the capital. You could've been my personal bug squisher," Jilani said.

Zaira beamed.

"Do they really wear masks all the time?" Meme asked.

Jilani flashed her a smile. "Most of them do. I worked with this one man for six months, never saw his face, just a gilded mask."

"How come they don't take them off?" Zaira asked.

Jilani shrugged. "I don't know."

"They're probably ugly underneath," Ma said.

"It's just a custom. They're pretty," said Meme. She pulled out her handkerchief and dabbed her mouth.

Ma frowned. A moment of silence passed in which Jilani wiped a trickle of sweat from his temple. Finally, after whispering to Alina, Zaira asked, "Did you see the Queen?"

He smiled. "I met her."

Meme's eyes widened with excitement. "What was she like? What did she say?"

"We crossed paths in the royal library. I'm afraid we didn't talk much." Jilani scratched his head. "Well actually, she didn't speak to me at all. She whispered to her attendant and then he asked me questions. She wanted to know who I was and what I was studying. I was too nervous to say much else."

Marzio thought it was strange that the Queen wouldn't directly speak to Jilani. Maybe it had to do with his social status.

"Was she beautiful?" Meme asked.

Jilani nodded. "Like a painting. She was wearing this extravagant blue and silver dress and a feathered hat with jewels on it. Everything there is beautiful. I love the architecture. Their library puts ours to shame and it's open to everyone on the island."

"Really?" Marzio asked, surprise breaking his silence.

"Yes. I brought the idea up with Sarita's dean, but he refused. He's afraid too many books will get stolen." He gave Marzio a pointed look. "It's a wonderful idea, though, isn't it?"

"I suppose," Ma said. "Most people don't need to know the kinds of things kept in books, though."

"If I remember correctly," Jilani said to him, "Neveo said you had an affinity for Kularic?"

"Aye." It had been a while since he had studied the Iron State's language. He thought it was interesting how their words conveyed different ideas about family and leadership. He had focused on it more than the sciences, which had no doubt contributed to his dismissal from the school.

"Fascinating people. I thought you might like to borrow this." Jilani pushed the book across the table.

Marzio ran his fingers over the depressed lettering. "Thank you," he said, even though he had no use for it. There were few Kularic speaking people in the islands.

The professor winked.

“Done!” Alina yelled. She jumped off her chair and ran outside. Zaira shoved the rest of her food into her mouth and followed, noodles dangling from her lips. Ma’s eye twitched the way it did when she was restraining herself. The boys deposited their dishes in a bucket soon after and followed the girls out.

Marzio and the adults continued eating. Ma and Jilani made most of the conversation. When they had finished, Ma asked him to collect the plates. He stood and piled the dirty dishes into a bucket.

“You’re welcome to stay,” Ma said. “We’ll be back in half a candle.”

“Nonsense.” Jilani took the bucket from Marzio. “I’ll help you wash them.”

“The well’s ten blocks away,” Ma said.

“I need the exercise.” Jilani was already out the door, walking in the wrong direction.

Ma followed him out with an amused expression on her face. “It’s this way, you oaf.”

Meme tsked, scowling at the closing door.

“What’s wrong?” Marzio asked.

“Oh, nothing. I suppose I should work more on Alina’s pants before going to bed.” She shuffled over to her chair.

Marzio returned to the table and flipped the book open. It wasn’t on Kularic, it was Hand Language. A different author than the one who wrote the manuscript and dated twenty years newer. Relief washed over him. Jilani didn’t have any ill intent towards him.

He took the book back to the bedroom, removed the manuscript from the drawer—pinching his fingers in the process—and compared the two. The translations were a little

different and the illustrations in the newer book were easier to understand. He would have to ask T if this book was better. He left with both books under Pa's jacket.

The sun hung heavy on the red horizon as he walked towards the inlet. At one point he thought he heard something scuffle behind him, but when he looked back there was nothing there.

He whistled as he climbed up the wall, crossed it, and jumped down from the ledge. T lay out of the water, sand and dirt plastered to his fur and skin. He looked healthier, not sweaty or flushed. He had eaten the mollusks, but the chicken eggs lay untouched.

Marzio opened the new book and showed it to him. *Gestures more good?* he asked.

T read some of the pages and handed it back. He signed something and pointed at the old manuscript. Marzio translated what he had said to: *Better than that one.*

How you feel? he asked.

Better.

He handed T the chunks of fennel. *Food*, he signed.

T sniffed them before taking a bite. He chewed slowly, his expression souring, then gestured.

Marzio consulted the new book.

He didn't like the taste but would still eat them. T kept scratching little bumps on his arms and around his bandages. Was the infection spreading? Marzio looked up the hand sign for infection and pointed at the bumps.

T shook his head and signed. One of the gestures was "sand" but the other wasn't in either book.

No understand.

T grabbed the book and looked through it. He sneered, apparently unable to find the right gesture. He signed “sand” again and pointed at the gesture for “bug.”

He was probably trying to say sand flea. Marzio nodded. He should clean T off to get rid of the parasites. He took the shirt he had transported the eggs in, soaked it in the waves, and knelt beside him. He wondered if T’s fur felt as soft as it looked and what the swirling vine-like scars on his biceps meant.

T watched him with a dubious expression. When Marzio tried to clean his arm, he growled sharply. Marzio jerked his hand back. He hadn’t expected that reaction. He was only trying to help. He dropped the cloth and backed up.

Sorry, he signed.

T looked at him for a moment with his eyebrows lowered. Then he relaxed and continued to eat. Once he had finished, he signed something which Marzio translated as: *How do you speak your name?*

Marzio sounded out the syllables of his name. T tried to repeat the sounds but his voice buzzed too much. The noise resonated from his chest more than his mouth. After a few minutes, he got it down to “Mar-shi-oo.”

Marzio smiled. *Almost*, he signed.

Something rustled behind them where the ledge was. Marzio jumped to his feet and spun around. Renzo’s head ducked away from the opening.

“Renzo? What are you doing here? Did you follow me?”

Renzo crawled forward, looking sheepish. “You’ve been acting strange. What is that?” he asked, pointing at T.

T said something in his language, a bunch of chirps and buzzing moans. He bared his teeth and pushed himself backward towards the water, his eyes locked on Renzo.

Wait, wait, Marzio signed. He flipped through the book. *Brother*.

T made a series of rapid gestures. Marzio searched for the translations. He was worried Renzo would reveal him.

He no tell, Marzio signed.

“Is it a Mer?” Renzo dropped down from the ledge and came up to Marzio’s side.

“He. His name is T.” Marzio bent down to Renzo’s eye level and held him by his shoulders. “Listen, you have to keep your mouth shut about this.”

Renzo stared at T. “I will. I swear.” He crossed two fingers.

Marzio shook him to gain his attention. “This isn’t just some silly promise,” he said. “It’s serious. Really serious. If anyone else finds out, they’ll kill him an’ Ma will kill us. Or we’ll go to jail.” He didn’t know what the legal repercussions were for helping a Mer, but Renzo didn’t know that.

His brother’s eyes widened. “Why don’t you just tell the guards?”

“No way. T’s going to give me magic. Besides, he’s not dangerous. He’s just hurt an’ lost. Now, do you promise, seriously?”

Renzo’s mouth dropped. “He’s going to give you magic?”

“Yes, now promise not to tell anyone.”

He met Marzio’s eyes. “I won’t tell.”

“Good.” He let his brother go and sat cross-legged.

T watched them with his hip flippers and arms bunched up underneath him. The tension in his back was obvious.

Renzo leaned over T with giant eyes. “Can he give me magic too?”

“I don’t think he has a lot to give, an’ why would he when he already has a deal with me? Sit down. You’re making him nervous.”

Renzo plopped down by Marzio’s side. He fidgeted quietly for a moment before the questions started again. “Can you give me magic once you have it?”

Marzio’s brow wrinkled. “Uh, I dunno.” He searched through the book for the right gestures. *I get magic, I can give to other people?* he asked.

T paused before signing, *No*.

Was the hesitation because of Marzio’s awkward wording or was it something else? “He says no.”

“That’s stupid,” Renzo said. “Will you do magic things for me, though?”

“Aye. I’ll change our lives.”

Renzo smiled. “This is gonna be so shimmer.” He reached forward and touched T’s tail. T tensed but didn’t growl like before.

Marzio slapped his hand away. “Don’t be rude.” *Sorry*, he signed.

It’s fine. T scratched his side where Renzo had touched him. Marzio’s gaze followed where the fur faded around his lower back.

“Come on, Renzi. It’s getting dark. Ma’s gonna wonder where you are.” *I return tomorrow*,” he signed.

T gave him a flickering smile. *Tomorrow*.

Chapter 6

Air grew weary of fleeing and turned to fight. She bit Earth, drawing blood that seeped through the ice to the frozen earth deep below, and awakened the seeds that became the Roaming Wood.

-Southern Glacial Sect. *The White Scripture*

Tahmel had to get out of there. Marzio might not reveal him but he wasn't going to put his life in the hands of a pup. He woke early; the moon still shined on the horizon, full and pale yellow. He almost felt normal. His side ached and he hadn't regained his sense of direction, but he didn't feel sick and didn't have a headache. He took the medicines out of the sand where he had hidden them and gave himself another dose. Then he grabbed the eggs, cracked them open in his mouth, and swallowed their slime. They were disgusting, but he would need their energy. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

He grabbed a small pointed rock and scratched an apology in Shiwashi on the wall. He laid his necklace beside it. Hopefully, it would compensate a little for his betrayal. Guilt gnawed at him but there was too much risk here.

He put the small medicine vial in his mouth where it clinked against his teeth, and held the larger one and the applicator in his hand. Then he dragged himself into the waves. He swam beyond the wave walls. He had paid attention to the sun the day before so he knew which way was south. As long as he found some part of the Shoals, he could navigate his way back to the church. He sung a water path into existence, his syllables slow and

groaning, and sped away from the island. He was relieved to be back in his element and to see the land disappear.

An empty expanse of black, choppy water spread out before him. The moon set and the sky became cloudy, causing the line between sea and sky to disappear. The ocean seemed endless, all consuming. After a quarter tide cycle, the horizon turned purple and then pink as the sun rose. He readjusted his path, which had strayed west. He dove every now and then in search of landmarks. The edge of the underwater mountain range shadowed the east but nothing lay beneath him. He was on track, moving across the deep dead zone that separated the Shoals from the mountains.

It surprised him how easily his magic came to him. With water paths he normally used a low steady tone, but for some reason he felt that a slightly higher undulating tone was more appropriate. The sea yielded to his creaking cries in a way it had never done before. Usually his head would ache after a quarter tide cycle. By the second quarter he would have to stop, but so far, he felt fine. He had expected the trip to take the entire day but at the rate he was going, he would arrive around midday.

After the third quarter, the ocean floor sloped upward. He spotted a familiar ridge of brittle coral. Fish swam between red, pink, and orange structures fanning off rocks. He followed the ridge east until he reached a tall rock totem rising above the coral. Algae covered wings with water worn carvings jutted off it. They pointed to the Shoal's church and the Greeba and Tickmo tribes. He clicked his water path towards the church.

The submarine canyon came into view around the fourth quarter cycle. It ran down a barren slope of rock that descended into the dead zone. A totem on its lip marked the

church's circular entrance. He breathed before diving and hummed a note to relieve the pressure on his broken ribs.

The church rested near the top of the canyon at a depth a healthy adult Shiwa could reach, but he still disliked diving this deep. He hated how thick the water was. The church's interior was at the same heavy pressure. He preferred swimming near the surface, where the water was thin and the sunlight bright.

He swam through the entryway, which was circled by crisp carving of the Glistening One, and entered a half-submerged cave system. The walls were grey sandstone with bands of black and tan rock. He followed a short tunnel before breaching the surface in the entrance hall. Small stalactites, which had to be knocked down every few years, dripped from the high ceiling. Above the water level, glass basins hung from the sides of walls and swirling columns with seashells embedded in them. They contained pools of sunfish which illuminated the oval room with orange light. The light bounced off the water and flickered across the cave's smooth walls.

A large statue of the Glistening One loomed in the air on a dais in the center of the room. She stood regally on ten delicate inner tentacles. Her outer, toothed tentacles swirled around her octopus-like head. Her center eye, her largest eye, was shut.

Tahmel knew from his first breath that the air wasn't right; it was too stale. The plankton had gone three days without care. He didn't know how many days it would take before the air became unbreathable.

He removed the vial from his mouth and submerged. "Hello!" he shouted. His voice carried through the water, bouncing off the walls. He called for Kele and Inteus—the two acolytes on leave—but of course, they weren't back yet.

He swam into the sanctuary through an archway and surfaced. The ground on the left and right sides of the room was raised so worshipers could lie down to listen to sermons. Religious carvings decorated the domed room. Out of the water, beneath a giant carving of a cowry shell, rose a crowded altar. It was filled with bone and rock totems engraved with words of prayer or carved into the shape of sea creatures. There were large shells that contained fragrant lumps of ambergris and candles they only lit on special occasions.

The sea otter was the only one present. She lay on the raised ground with the mauled remains of some little creature between her paws. Her head spun around when he entered. Then she squealed a greeting, scampered into the water, and swam to him. She slid around his body, pawing and nipping at his dressings.

He ran a hand along her matted fur. “Hi, Nettle. Are you the only one here?” She nuzzled her white face into his palm.

He had hoped someone would be here, but the Solstice Celebrations were in full swing. A handful of regulars from the Greeba and Tickmo tribes would come for the sermon on the last day of celebration, but they wouldn’t even depart for another three days. He would have to travel to one of the tribes for help. The Tickmo were the closest.

He rubbed behind Nettle’s ears. He would bring her with him, though he wasn’t sure how he would get her to the surface. You had to exhale the pressurized air as you rose or else the air would expand in your lungs and pop them. Maybe he could grab her while she was exhaling and whisk her away.

The plankton would die but they could be replaced, albeit with difficulty. Creating air pockets in underwater caves was a delicate and time-consuming process. He only knew of two other functioning locations.

He submerged and started swimming to his room to gather supplies when someone called out.

“Is someone here?”

Someone raced into the entrance hall. It took him a moment to recognize Catori, she was so disheveled. They froze staring at each other. Then she rushed forward to hug him. Her shoulder crashed into his chest, pushing him backwards and causing his ribs to grind.

“I thought you didn’t make it,” she said. Her frame shook.

He couldn’t believe she was alive. He barely knew her but elation still filled his chest. He ignored the pain and wrapped his arms around her, being careful not to prick her with the syringe. “Bodaway said you died.”

She pulled back with a scowl. “He abandoned us. Ethete held the squid back while Mingan and I escaped.”

“Mingan’s alive, too?”

She nodded, her chin quivering. “He got bit, though. I don’t—I don’t know if he’ll...” Her jaw clenched but the water made it impossible to tell if she was crying.

Dread crept into his throat. “Where is he?”

“I put him in the plankton room.”

He followed her through a corridor on the left; the otter trailed in their wake. Catori looked terrible. Bags hung beneath her eyes, her hair flowed behind her in a tangled mess, and long scabs marred her arms.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“Not really,” she said. “We got back a quarter cycle ago. It took two and a half days to swim here. I had to drag Mingan most of the way.”

Not for the first time, Tahmel recognized how convenient magic made his life.

They followed the gentle current through the curving tunnel, passing by circular rooms with flat bottoms that contained rows of seaweed, kelp, and netted fish cages. A different kind of light filled these rooms. Blue wipgro eels coiled lazily in basins on the walls. Their heads glowed white and created the light the plants and fish needed to live. Moss, fungus, and algae competed over every surface, making the rooms soft and green. Nettle darted into a line of kelp after something.

They entered the plankton farm at the end of the corridor. It dwarfed all other rooms in the cave system. The ground sloped up above water level to create a giant, round pool that contained the plankton. Large stone containers, half filled with sand, rose in the air around the pool’s edge. They had metal spouts that drained into the pool when opened. The current’s drag was strongest here. Water spilled over a dam in the back of the room where they dumped their trash. The waste floated down a tunnel that led back into the ocean.

They swam to Mingan, who lay on the moss-covered slope, and dragged themselves up to him. A pile of unused bandages and a bucket sat on the pool’s lip which was coated with a salty white crust. Mingan’s eyes were shut, he reeked of vomit, and his skin shined red and sweaty. Woven red weed covered his tail, abdomen, and arms. He mumbled something senseless between fast breaths.

“The other rooms are stuffy,” she said, her words sharpened in the air. “I thought he might do better in here.”

Tahmel looked over the lip of the pool. Black patches dotted the pool's tan surface and the water had taken on an unhealthy brownish-green hue. It was supposed to be pale green, but it wasn't as bad as he had feared. He had expected the water to be completely brown; this was salvageable at least.

"The farm's dying, but I think we can save it," he said.

She gave the pool a nervous glance. "It is? How much air do we have?"

He had forgotten she'd only been with them for a single moon cycle. Not long enough to recognize the subtle differences in the plankton's color.

"I'm not sure. Probably enough for a couple days," he said. "Mingan needs help first."

Her jaw worked before she blurted out, "I didn't know if I should swim to one of the tribes or wait for someone to show up. I'm not sure how far away they are and I was afraid Mingan would die if I left. If Kele and Inteus hadn't taken our dolphins, I could have strapped him to one of them and we could have swum there. But now, I don't know if he's going to make it. Maybe I should have left."

She'd spoken so fast he had barely kept up with her. She looked at him like she wanted something. Reassurance he thought.

"The Tickmo are the closest, and it would have taken you all day to swim there and all night to get back. Mingan doesn't even look like he could get water. I don't think he would have lasted that long on his own."

Some of the tension left her shoulders.

“Don’t worry. I have something that will help.” He unscrewed the medicine vial, inserted the applicator’s needle, and pulled the top to draw the clear liquid up to the third line. Then he gave Mingan a dose in his tail.

“What is that?” Catori asked. “And your bandages. They look strange.”

“I ended up at one of the human islands. An Islander helped me and gave me medicine.”

She gaped. “Really? And you’re all right?”

“I’m fine. Help me unwrap Mingan.”

They removed the bandages and Tahmel swore. Mingan had an uncountable number of scratches, a large bite on his tail, and another bite on his left arm. Black and yellow flesh surrounded both bites, far more than what Tahmel had had. His entire arm was swollen red; in some places his skin had split under the pressure and oozed pus. Tahmel didn’t know if the Islander medicine would be enough.

“We’ll have to cut all this dead tissue off,” he said.

“Here.” Catori took a bone knife from her belt and handed it over. The blade was chipped; he suspected it hadn’t been before the attack.

“Can you hold him down for me?”

She laid her weight across Mingan’s chest as he worked on removing the dead flesh. He dropped the rotting strips in the dirty bandage pile.

“Holy Goddess.” Catori turned her head away. “Did your Islander show you how to do that?”

“Yes, he did it to me.”

Mingan's skin burned beneath his hands. He was too incoherent to respond to the pain, though. Tahmel was both thankful and worried about that. Once he was finished, he cleaned the wounds with saltwater and rubbed the oil into them. Then he lifted Mingan's tail so Catori could replace the bandages. They threw the dirty dressings and dead flesh over the dam.

"How do we fix the farm?" she asked.

Tahmel dragged himself to the pool's edge. He cupped some of the water in his hands and sniffed it. It smelled sulfuric. "We filter it, clean the walls, and add cleansing film to the water."

"I've collected the film with Dohasan before. How much do we need?" she asked.

A lump wedged itself in his throat. He wished she hadn't reminded him. "All of it. Hopefully, it'll be enough to kill whatever's growing in there."

"I'll work on that," she said, before swimming off.

He rested on his elbows for a moment, swallowing around the tightness in his throat. Then he crooned so the pool water rose in curving spouts and fell into the sand filters. He filled them until they overflowed and only a few hands of liquid remained at the pool's bottom. Then he created a spinning stream of water, keeping it connected to the pool's surface. He spun it as fast as he could and ran it up and down the pool's side. The black buildup splattered off and dripped down the wall.

It took at least a quarter tide cycle to wash everything. He sang to lift the dirty water from the bottom of the pool, connected it with the dam's surface, then let it slide over the edge. With a hum he dragged some of the room's water into the pool. Then he opened the

spouts on each filter. The liquid that trickled out was more green than brown. Hopefully, the film could handle the rest.

He checked on Mingan, but his condition hadn't changed. He lifted Mingan's head; sweat from his hair ran down Tahmel's hands. He swung a small waterspout into the air and tried to drip the liquid down his throat. He got some of it down but had to stop when Mingan began to cough. He turned his head to the side, muttering nonsense. Tahmel let the water fall and lowered Mingan's head onto the moss.

He had never been that close to Mingan, even though he had known him for half a decade, but now his survival seemed imperative. He had failed Dohasan and Bodaway; he refused to let Mingan slip away too.

He slid into the water and swam to the kelp room. Catori, with her head sticking above the surface, was scraping a dull blade along weepmo kelp fronds to collect their sticky film. She lifted the long, ochre colored leaves out of the water as she worked. After each leaf, she tapped the film into a turtle shell bowl that sat on a shelf above water. She had already filled two other large bowls.

Nettle played in the kelp, getting in the way and making a nuisance of herself. Catori frowned and pushed her away. Nettle responded with a string of angry squeals before continuing to do whatever she pleased.

Tahmel took a dull blade from the shelf to help.

"She's a pest," Catori said.

"Agreed."

They worked silently for a while before she asked, "What happened back there? At the Hallow? I saw... something. Something big."

“It was the Goddess,” he said.

Her hands stilled for a moment. “I thought it might be, but why were we attacked?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Did you do something to make her angry?”

“No. I mean, I don’t think so.” He didn’t understand why the ritual hadn’t worked, why she had betrayed them. He had done everything the way Dohasan had taught him. He didn’t know what they could have done wrong. Unless, she was just generally angry at all of them. “Maybe she’s upset because worship has slacked off since we lost the holy waters.”

She frowned. “Or maybe we’re wrong about her. Maybe she never loved us.”

That shocked him. If she had said that in front of any ranking member of the Sect, she could have been excommunicated. “I...don’t know. I don’t know how Goddesses think.”

She lowered her gaze. “Is-is Dohasan—”

“He’s dead,” he said, his voice curt. “Bodaway too.”

She nodded. “I can do this.” She gestured towards the plants. “You should tell the Tickmo what happened and bring back help for Mingan.”

“Are you sure?”

She raised her chin. “I just spent two days towing Mingan here. I can do it,” she said.

He winced a little at that. She had managed to save someone with just a dagger. He had magic and hadn’t saved anyone. “All right, but you should both stay in the plankton room. It’ll take a while for the filters to finish and the plankton need your breath.”

“We should change your bandages before you leave. Those Islander ones will raise questions.” She swam out.

He followed her back to the plankton room. They lay on the slope and she started replacing his white dressings with red weed. His bite looked much better. It had scabbed over and the pus and blackness were gone.

“How long did it take for the Islander medicine to start working?” she asked.

“One day, but I wasn’t as bad as Mingan. I’ll bring the Tickmo’s healer back with me.”

She looked at the applicator. “How much do I give him?”

He demonstrated how to use it and pointed to the third line. “Right here. The Islander said every day for seven days.”

“Will there be enough for both of you?”

“I don’t think so, but I feel better so just give it to Mingan. I’ll try to get back before nightfall.”

Her brow furrowed. “Can you make that swim? How much did you travel this morning?”

“A full tide cycle by water path. The Tickmo are half a cycle away.”

“Two tide cycles in one day? That’s the entire day. Dohasan couldn’t even do that,” she said.

“I think I can. I went for a continuous cycle this morning.”

Her eyes widened. “How?”

“I don’t know.” He suspected it might have something to do with gazing into the Goddess’ eye, but he didn’t know what that meant. He didn’t want anyone else to know about it until he better understood what was happening to him.

She finished tying the dressings. “This is crazy,” she said.

“I’m going to grab some things from my room before I leave.”

“I’ll pack you something to eat.” She left, tugging on the end of a tangled tress.

He swam to the other side of the cave where the living quarters were. The bedrooms slept four to a room, but they had so few members that all eight church workers had their own room. Now they had even fewer. Only five members, if Mingan survived that is.

Alcoves for beds and storage were carved into the walls just above water level. Strings of dried, orange starfish and mussel shells hung from the low ceiling in celebration of the solstice. He grabbed one of his belts from an alcove. It lay beside a bone hair comb and some tablets sent from his family. His parents wrote him a few times a year; he usually responded to half of them. He hadn’t looked at the most recent tablet yet.

He strapped the belt around his hip flippers and tied his hair into a messy bun with a strip of leather. A round obsidian mirror hung from the wall. His dark reflection looked worn, its eyes puffy. He left and met Catori in the entrance hall. She handed him two bags. One wriggled and the other clinked.

“You might need money,” she said.

He gave her a smile as he tied the bags to his belt.

“Swim with—I mean, good luck,” she said.

“You too.”

Chapter 7

Marzio knew something was wrong when he entered the ruined building. He didn't see Tahmel anywhere and his necklace lay beside vertical lines of characters carved into the wall. He had an inkling of what the message said before he translated it.

I lied to you, Sea Friend. Only a goddess can give you magic. It's not safe here. I'm sorry but I must leave.

He swore and kicked the brick wall until his big toe smarted. Magic had slipped through his fingers. Trusting a Mer was stupid. Of course, the opportunity had been too good to be true. He grabbed the necklace, fighting the urge to toss it into the sea; it was too valuable to throw away. He thrust it into his pocket instead.

He left, heading home. The sun shined low and bright against his back. When he arrived, he threw open the door to a great deal of cheer. The kids were putting on their shoes in a chatter of excitement. Meme had grabbed her walking cane and Ma waited by the door with a hand on her hip.

"We were just about to send one of the kids out looking for you," Meme said.

"What's going on?"

"They're back!" Renzo said. He was on the floor shoving his feet into his worn boots. That was some good news at least.

"I saw the *Red Orca* when I was watering the plants on the roof," Gian said.

Ma smiled. "They must've had a good haul to come back early."

Marzio dropped his books off in his room before following his family out. The boys raced off the instant they were out the door, darting around pedestrians. The walk to port was hard on Meme's knees. He stayed near her as she hobbled and huffed down the street. Ma walked a little further ahead with Alina and Zaira, who held hands as they skipped.

It took them a quarter of a candle hour to get to the harbor. The docks bustled with sailors loading and unloading supplies, supervised by officers dressed in smart dark blue uniforms. Waves slapped against creaking boats, gulls cried, and sailors shouted and cursed each other. Smaller boats lined the docks while larger ships anchored offshore.

The *Red Orca* floated offshore with her sails and anchor lowered. Her house flag—with its red killer whale emblem—hung motionless from her mainmast. She was a narrow white schooner with two masts and four-and-aft rigged sails. False gun ports darkened her sides to deter pirates and dark scratches marred her usually pristine portside. Three little whaleboats rowed from her towards the pier. The girls ran down the dock, swerving around other waiting families to join the boys who were jumping and waving at the skiffs.

Ermes squinted his eyes. "Where's Pa?" he asked.

In the second boat sat Marzio's pa and Aunt Leslia, but not Uncle Fausto. Pa gave them a small wave but Aunt Leslia didn't acknowledge them.

"Must still be on the boat," Meme said, though her voice sounded unsure.

The first boat docked carrying barrels of meat, oil, spermaceti, and baleen. The sailors climbed out, their sea legs unsteady on solid ground. They reeked of the tryworks, fetid smoke and oil. They wore ragged, ripped clothing that revealed taunt muscles, scars, and tattoos. The sun had darkened and burned them; flakes of dead skin peeled off their cheeks and noses and shoulders. Long hair and beards, now sun-bleached, hung in

dreadlocks caused by the wind and salty spray. Blood lines cracked the sailors' lips as they smiled and hugged their families.

The second boat docked and a man with a splinted leg was helped out. Pa and Aunt Leslia climbed out next. Pa looked exhausted, the crow's feet around his eyes more prominent. His curly graying beard concealed some of the gauntness in his cheeks, but nothing hid the hollowness in Aunt Leslia's face. Her cheekbones seemed too sharp and her eye sockets too deep. Her clothes hung loose from her shoulders and hips.

The kids ran up to greet them and Aunt Leslia started to cry. She fell to her knees as she pulled Zaira and Ermes into a desperate embrace. They looked at her bewildered.

"Ivo, what happened?" Ma asked.

"There was an accident," Pa said.

"No." Meme's voice was shrill. "What do you mean? What happened to my boy?"

Pa pulled her into a hug. "I'm sorry, Ma."

Her cane clattered to the floor and the cry that came from her throat wrenched at Marzio's gut. How could this have happened? Uncle Fausto was experienced. He had been whaling since he was Marzio's age.

"What happened?" Ma asked again.

Pa swallowed hard before saying, "The cannon misfired."

"Where is he?" Meme cried. "I want to see my boy!"

"It happened almost a month ago, Ma. We gave him a sea burial."

Meme collapsed, sobs racking her body. Pa lowered himself to the ground with her.

Ma was silent and stoic, but Marzio could see the dread in her eyes. She must be thinking about what that meant for their future. He couldn't think about that right now. He

went to Alina, who was standing in place wailing, and picked her up. He held her against his chest, as much for her as for himself, and fought back tears as hers dampened his shoulder.

The walk home was slow and arduous. He carried Alina the whole way back. Ma carried Zaira and Pa carried Ermes. Once inside, Ma set Zaira down on the floor and led Aunt Leslia into the bedroom. She had stopped crying and now stared dead-eyed at nothing. Marzio collapsed in a dining chair with Alina hugged against his chest. Pa helped Meme to her chair. She pressed a handkerchief against her mouth, her body shook, and tears streamed down her face.

Ma came out of the bedroom and clicked the door shut behind her. She gestured towards Meme's bedroom. "Ivo," she said.

Pa untangled Ermes, set him down on Meme's lap, then followed her into the room. Marzio stood to join them.

"Watch the kids," Ma said, as she closed the door.

Marzio clenched his jaw. This affected everyone, and he was old enough to handle it. He should be included in the discussion. He put Alina down and pressed an ear up against the door; their words were just audible over the sounds of tears.

"She's been like that since it happened," Pa said in a hushed voice.

"An' it was a month ago?"

"Aye, I don't know when she'll get back on her feet. Captain's docking her pay."

"That muckworm! What about the death compensation?"

"It's not much."

Ma swore. "Marzio has to start working the boats the day he turns sixteen."

“Aye, an’ we both have to go out with the next ships. He’ll have to take care of things here.”

Anger rose in his chest. He hated when they made decisions for him. The necklace shifted in his pocket as he straightened; he had a better idea. He secreted himself in the boys’ bedroom. The fish teeth on Tahmel’s necklace were too unusual. He took them off but left the shells and pearls where they hung. His parents were still talking in Meme’s room and everyone else was too morose to say anything as he left.

There were jewelers in the center of the island, in the rich part, highest above sea level. It took him the better part of the morning to walk there. The buildings stood straight with spotless walls, most of them painted in shades of beige. Their windows were barred and a family crest adorned each front door. The people wore silky dresses, embroidered suits, and flamboyant hats. A trio of elderly women rested in wicker chairs on a balcony; they eyed him over their lacey, folding fans. He hurried passed them, feeling out of place. They probably thought he was an errand boy.

The first jeweler he found had a storefront with large windows protected by iron bars. He went inside where it was brightly lit. Glittering valuables filled glass cabinets.

An elegant woman wearing a narrow, white dress argued with the saleswoman at the counter. In a corner of the room sat a brawny man in a black suit on a stool. The stool looked about to collapse under his weight. He read from a small book with his back leaned up against the wall. Hired muscle, Marzio figured.

The man looked up when he entered and scowled. “This isn’t the place for you,” he said.

“I’m selling some jewelry, for my grandma.”

“Let’s see it then.”

Marzio showed him the necklace.

The man’s eyebrows lowered before he jerked his chin towards the counter. He went back to reading his book.

Marzio stood behind the angry woman.

Her head of black ringlets bounced as she hissed her complaints. “The material must be impure for it to change color.”

A silver ring with a black gemstone in its center lay on the counter. He didn’t see anything wrong with it. It looked far nicer than any of the jewelry his meme had.

“I apologize again, but as I said before, all sales are final.” The clerk’s face was impassive. She was plump, middle-aged, and covered in dark freckles. She wore a black dress suit similar to what the man wore.

The woman snatched the ring back. “You’ll be hearing from my husband.” She turned on her heel to leave and grimaced when she saw Marzio. She stepped around him, her heels clicking as she exited.

The clerk started to smile at him but faltered. She glanced at the corner of the room where the man sat before saying, “How can I help you?”

Marzio laid the necklace on the counter. “My meme asked me to sell this for her.”

She leaned forward, arranging the necklace so it lay flat. Her brow wrinkled. “Oh, this is an unusual piece. Give me a moment to appraise it.”

She reached under the counter and pulled out a pair of glasses with magnifiers on them, just like the medicine man had done. She examined the pale green pearl first before moving on to the gold, bronze, and lavender ones.

“These are quite large and beautifully colored. Where did your grandmother get this?” She moved her glasses up so they rested atop her head.

“It’s a family heirloom.”

“I see. Let me check with the owner.” She took the necklace and disappeared into the backroom.

With the necklace out of sight, unease nestled in his stomach. He wished she had called the owner out rather than taking it to them. The man closed his book and watched him, which only added to his anxiety. Would they be able to tell it was Mer made?

It took a long while for the clerk to return. When she did, it was without the necklace and a bright smile. “The owner will be out in a few minutes. Feel free to look around.”

Something was wrong. He cursed himself for rushing into this decision. For not thinking to sell the pearls individually to different buyers; they were too strange all together. He needed to get the necklace back and leave.

“Actually, I wasn’t planning on the appraisal taking so long. I’ll have to bring it back tomorrow.”

The clerk’s smile widened. “She won’t be but a minute more.”

The man stood, set his book down on the stool, and moved near the exit.

“I must insist. I’m due at work soon and it’s a long walk from here.” His voice came out more strained than he had hoped.

“I understand. She’ll be out in a moment.”

Blood pounded against his ears. He’d been caught. Either they knew it was Mer made or they thought he had stolen it, and he couldn’t escape through the main entrance.

He dashed around the counter into the backroom, causing the woman to gasp. The room was small and dusty. There was a workbench with tools and colorful glass beads laid out across it. Heavy footfalls sounded behind him. He didn't have time to find T's necklace. He burst through another door and found himself outside. He sprinted down the street. He didn't need to look back to know the man was pursuing him, but Marzio was light and fast.

He took the most direct route back to familiar territory, darting around pedestrians and carts. Once there, he slipped in and out of twisting alleyways he knew better than the palm of his hand. He looked back, his hair whipping with the motion. The man still followed, but he was losing pace.

Marzio barreled into another alley to break line of sight and crouched behind a stoop. He held his breath as a moment later, the man ran passed gasping in air. More of a brawler than a runner. He disappeared down a side alley.

Marzio stood and jogged the other way. They didn't know his name, but they knew what he looked like. The guards would be able to find him.

Chapter 8

A storm of white ice rolled in as the sisters fought. Earth's feet froze to the ground and she was buried in an element not her own. Air breathed fire on her legs to keep warm. Then flew home victorious.

-Southern Glacial Sect. *The White Scripture*

When the sun was halfway through its descent, Tahmel heard the distant sounds of the Tickmo. Their seals, dolphins, and orcas chirped and sang and clicked. Voices murmured underneath the animal noises. He increased the speed of his water path, even though his right temple throbbed and his chest burned from singing so much.

He needed to talk to the Tickmo's leader, Pipwa Chayton. Tahmel wasn't sure how he would tell him about the change in the Goddess. He supposed a blunt approach would be simplest. He would tell him everything that had happened, minus his experience on the island, of course. That would only bring up questions about his loyalty. Tahmel had to convince the Pipwa to evacuate the tribe. They were too close to the trench.

Tahmel didn't slow down until he surfaced near the black sand beach. It was crescent shaped and rested on the back side of a tall, rocky outcrop. Groups of Shiwa sunbathed on the beach, their bodies plastered with dark sand. Children splashed in the shallows with pet fur seals and sea otters.

He dove and swam around a sandbar to the other side of the outcrop. An entrance shaped like a teardrop was carved into a sloping basalt wall. He entered, speeding past Shiwa who stared at him.

He followed the tunnel and breached in a large cavern. Unlike the church's smooth sandstone interior, these walls were rough, blocky, and colorful. They were tan with patches of dark red, purple, blue, ochre, and glassy obsidian. Sunlight drifted in through a crater in the lofty ceiling, which was held up by algae and lichen-covered stalactites and stalagmites that had met in the middle. The parts of the cavern that were above water were covered in moss, tufts of grass, ferns, and small hardy trees.

Celebratory strings of shells wound around the submerged portions of the stalagmites. Half-submerged archways with cloth curtains that brushed the gentle water lined the walls and led to homes, stores, farms, and stables. Wide tunnels branched off the cavern to other parts of the town.

People swam about their business, their conversations echoing through the water for all to hear. The Tickmo cropped their hair short to keep it out of the way. Many of the women wore vibrant, flowing fabric around their waists and bright shells around their throats and arms. The men wore bone piercings in their ears, lips, and hip flippers. Few had the marks of the devout. The tribe numbered around five hundred members. Tahmel visited the town a few times a year for supplies or leisure, more often than he visited his own tribe.

He liked the town, liked that it was on the surface and that there were more than just eight people living there. The inhabitants were carefree and different. He felt freer when he visited.

Tahmel submerged and took the large tunnel straight ahead, which led to the Pipwa's hall. No skylights lit this area so sunfish basins compensated for the lack of light. He entered an open lobby with archways that led to workspaces. Two men with ivory spears

strapped to their backs floated in front of the Pipwa's archway, blocking it. They conversed silently in hand language.

He approached them. "I need to speak with Pipwa Chayton."

They didn't move, but they did turn their attention to him. They eyed his dressings and religious marks. "What for?" one of them asked, not unkindly. Bone bars poked out of the shell of his ear like fish spines.

"I'm from the Northern Shoal's Church. We were attacked; my companion is injured."

The men shared a worried look. "By Islanders?" the other asked. A light beard shadowed his face, unusual this far north. He must have southern ancestors.

Tahmel didn't know how much he should tell them. He didn't want to cause a panic. "Please, it's urgent."

"What happened?" the pierced man asked.

"I have to discuss it with the Pipwa. Let me through."

The pierced man frowned and the bearded one shook his head. "He's busy. When he's free, I'll tell him a representative from the Sect is here."

Tahmel scowled. The Sect never asked for help; they should have understood the seriousness of such a request. He would have to explain the situation. "I'm here because the Goddess woke and attacked us. Three people have—"

The bearded guard interrupted him. "You can wait like everyone else," he said, his eyes narrow.

How dare he brush Tahmel aside. He was a member of the Sect. He was trying to warn them. He backed up, out of the range of their spears, his heart racing. “Move,” he said.

As they reached for their weapons, he sang a series of staccato notes that pushed them to either side of the doorway. He darted through the opening and followed a short corridor, swimming underneath three leather curtains that muffled sound, before surfacing in the Pipwa’s round room. The guards rushed in a second later and aimed their spears at his chest. He put his hands up above water and glared at them, a slight tremor running through his body.

Chayton was laying on a raised section of the ground covered with a thick, woven mat. He started at the intrusion but recovered his composure fast.

Tahmel had never spoken to a Pipwa before and was unsure of the proper etiquette, not that he hadn’t already broken etiquette by storming in. He bowed his head the same way he would for a high-ranking member of the church, his face dipping into the water, before addressing him, “I have urgent news from the Sect.”

“We’ll remove him immediately,” the bearded guard said, moving in closer.

The Pipwa raised a hand. “It must be important for you to break into my study,” he said, in a heavy baritone. He jerked his head at the guards. “Wait by the door.”

They hesitated a moment before backing up towards the exit. They didn’t sheath their weapons, though. Tahmel had no doubt they could be on top of him again in an instant. He lowered his hands with a relieved breath.

The Pipwa’s study was far nicer than any of the rooms back at the church. Sunfish light glinted off a coral reef mosaic made from shells on the ceiling. Stone tablets and

curiosities sat on shelves built into the walls. There were rare shells, crystals, animal skulls, and objects that looked distinctly Islander, probably salvaged from drowned ships. A golden circle with a clasp caught his eye.

Chayton observed him with a wide-set gaze. “You look like you’ve been through a lot.” The Pipwa’s body reminded him of a walrus’s, large and brown with a bald head. He wore nothing ornamental, just a heavy belt around his waist. “You have my attention, so say whatever you came to say.”

From his tone, Tahmel doubted he had much time. He told him about the Glistening One waking, the squid’s attack, and Mingan’s injury. He left out everything related to the Islander. He told Chayton instead that he had only been clipped by the squid’s beak, and that he had rested on a reef until his body had recovered from the venom. Except for a question here and there, the Pipwa listened quietly.

“That’s an improbable story,” Chayton said, after he had finished.

“It’s—”

Chayton raised a hand to cut him off. “You know, cheepcree venom can cause fever dreams.”

Tahmel frowned, thinking of the strange dream he had had. The Pipwa was going to be just as difficult as the guards. “It couldn’t have been a dream, I saw her before I was bitten. I think she’s still in the Shoals. You need to evacuate the town.”

He snorted. “That I don’t. If I evacuated every time someone saw something strange come out of that trench, we’d be permanent refugees.”

“This wasn’t some sea creature! It was her.”

“Deep sea squid are quite large and can change color the way you described.”

Was he serious? Fine, if he wanted to sit around while the Goddess lurked in the area, Tahmel wasn't going to stop him. "You have to send a messenger to the nearest church and my companion needs your healer."

"You're mistaken," the Pipwa said, with a scowl. "I don't have to do anything."

Were the Tickmo all this dense and stubborn? "Please, even if I'm wrong about it being the Goddess, a dangerous creature still came out of the trench and the squid still swarmed us. Three people have died; this area is dangerous."

Chayton was quite for a while. "I will send a swimmer to pass along your message, but my healer won't be any help to your friend."

"What? Why not?" Any amount of help was still help.

The Pipwa's gaze shifted back to his stone tablet. "I doubt she could do much for a single cheepcree bite, never mind two. A water-touched healer could, perhaps, save him—but she is not." He had lost interest, had already dismissed Mingan as dead.

Tahmel moved forward, trying to regain his attention. "The Grotto. Send your swimmer to the Grotto's church. Healer Sitala is water-touched."

"It's farther away, but very well," the Pipwa said, without looking up. "Escort him out," he told the guards, before he began chiseling again.

Had he just been dismissed? Tahmel wanted to yell at him. To drive the undeniable truth into his skull. A sound burned deep within his chest, unfamiliar and dangerous. He choked it off. He could find the healer on his own.

He inclined his head once more before following the guards out. They didn't just escort him from the room, but all the way out of the Pipwa's hall. One of them even loitered near the entrance, probably to make sure he didn't cause any more trouble.

He made his way to the tavern. The innkeeper would know where the healer was. He swam under a doorway and surfaced in an oblong room with a low ceiling. A handful of people dined on a raised section of the ground. They held their torsos up with their hip flippers as they drank from conch shell cups and ate from a bowl of live, declawed crabs. A little crab tried to escape over the bowl's rim but was plucked up by one of the men. He popped it into his mouth; its shell crunched between his teeth. They laughed and gossiped, their words slurred.

Built into the back wall were aquariums whose lids rose above the water level. They held starfish, urchins, seaweeds, and fish. The middle-aged innkeeper scrubbed the inside of one containing biffuh. He set his brush down and gave an impressed whistle as Tahmel approached.

“Looks like you were in some fight,” he said.

“I was. Where can I find the town's healer?” he asked.

“I've seen you before. From the church, right?” He smiled; a stud protruded from his lower lip just below a missing tooth.

“Where's the healer?”

The innkeeper's smile tightened. “She doesn't do any tending during the Solstice. Her assistant could see you, though.”

He didn't have time for this. “I need a fully trained healer.”

“You don't seem too injured. Len could surely help you.”

“My companion needs help, not me. He was bitten by cheepcree, twice,” he said, trying to keep his voice even.

“Oh, that’s quite serious.” The innkeeper scratched his nose. “Still, I don’t think she’ll see you.”

His eyes narrowed. He had just about had it with these people. “Why not?”

The innkeeper tensed. He glanced at the dining men, who had become silent and were watching them. “Now’s just not a good time. You should visit her tomorrow.”

“I don’t care if it’s inconvenient. I need to see her now.”

There was a strained moment of silence before one of the dining men spoke in a slight slur, “Her dwelling is near the dolphin stables. The door’s overgrown with ivy.”

The innkeeper started to say something else but Tahmel had stopped listening. He left the tavern and followed the sounds of dolphin chirps. A couple blacktips drifted passed the gated doorway of their enclosure. He found an overgrown entryway a few doors down. From the rock hung a tattered, salt-crusting cloth. He swam through and entered a messy room.

Objects lay under the water and floated on its surface. Stone tablets, broken ceramics, shells, jewelry, torn clothing, and bottles. Clutter rested on shelves carved into the walls. Dim light shone from a sunfish basin clouded with red slime.

“Hello?” he called.

A splash came from a room to his right. He swam around a half-eaten fish and surfaced in the other room. A woman lay sprawled on a blanket across the raised ground. Empty glass flasks lay beside her and the stench of urine hung in the air. She was younger than he had expected—late twenties. She had long, unkept hair and a nose with a faint hook. Deep scars crisscrossed her tail. She could have looked nice if she cleaned herself up.

“Are you the healer?”

She lifted her head. Red rimmed her eyes and a flush darkened her cheeks. “Yes, who are you?”

“I’m from the Northern Shoals Church. One of our members was injured and needs your help.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’m busy. Get out.”

He growled; he couldn’t believe this. “He was bitten by cheepcree. He’ll die if you don’t come!”

She swayed up onto her hands and hip flippers with her teeth bared. “You Sect scum are always going around giving people orders. All conceited and arrogant and self-righteous.” She spit at him but missed, hitting the water instead. “You don’t own us,” she said.

That sound rose in his throat again, burning. A screech tore from his lungs and the water around them boiled and sparkled. She gasped, jerking her tail away from the edge.

“Get out!” she screamed. She grabbed one of the bottles and threw it at him.

It connected with his brow. Dazed, he pressed a hand against his forehead and dove. More bottles and random objects hit the surface and sunk around him. He kicked out of the room and left the house.

She was unhinged, and now there was no way she would help. His anger deflated, leaving him shaken. It scared him that he had been willing to force her. Willing to scare her maybe even hurt her, to save Mingan, to get what he wanted. A sinking feeling formed in his chest and exhaustion weighed his limbs. There was no one else he could go to for help; he had failed.

He headed back to the inn, rubbing the bump that was forming on his head. A cheering crowd followed behind a group of manatees. They were being guided out of the cavern by ceremonial women dressed in brightly dyed fish leathers. The manatees were probably being brought to the beach to be sacrificed and eaten.

He entered the inn which was now empty, left some cowry coins near the aquariums, and picked a vacant room. On a raised area sat a rusty metal table, surely salvaged. It held a cluster of dried, painted urchin shells containing little succulent plants. He untied his bag of fish and let it sink, wriggling, to the floor. Then he tossed a cloth over the sunfish basin to dim the light. He dragged himself into the sleeping alcove and lay down on the thick mat.

Was he really the way the healer described him? He spent so little time outside the Sect he didn't know. Maybe he was arrogant. He took a shuttering breath.

He wondered what Marzio was doing. If he had found his note; if he understood why he had left. He felt so heavy and tired.

The current dragged against his body, saltwater cooling his gills. He saw them. In the rock and on the sand. His blood ran thin through their veins. They had become weak. They needed to be culled.

He blinked. He didn't have gills...had he fallen asleep for a second? Noises came from outside his room. It took him a moment to realize they were screams. He bolted upright, slid into the water, and swam outside.

Hysterical people rushed into the cavern, shoving and kicking each other aside. The air shimmered, hot and oppressive. A crumbling sound came from above. He craned his neck up. In the starlight, a blue and yellow ringed tentacle climbed over the edge of the skylight. Then a second and a third; they glowed as steam drifted off them.

Chapter 10

After Earth disappeared, Water went to Air's nest for answers. When Air told her she had killed Earth, Water raged—but Air's children defended her. They had drunk of their mother's spilt blood and had changed; they could bend air and fire.

-Southern Glacial Sect. *The White Scripture*

His breath left him. She had climbed onto the outcrop, onto land. How was she out of the sea?

Rocks fell from the ceiling and splashed into the water, hitting the crowd. The Tickmo didn't know which way to flee. Some swam to the corridors and dwellings while others—having seen the tentacles above—tried to exit the cavern.

He watched, paralyzed, as the Goddess' glowing body blocked the skylight, bathing everything in her hot light. The water's surface seemed to vibrate. The teeth on her suction cups scratched the rock as they squeezed through the opening. One of the columns cracked in half.

He needed to move. Why couldn't he move? The ceiling was going to collapse; he had to get out. If he froze this time, he was dead.

Someone crashed into his tail, knocking sense back into him. He dove and darted into the confused mob, intending to force his way through. Bodies collided with his, making his wounds spike with pain. He sang a note to shove the Tickmo aside. A tentacle slid in through the exit, wrapped around one of the screaming ceremonial women, and pulled her back down the passageway.

He wailed in desperation before turning back, singing again to clear a path through the crowd. There had to be another way out.

The Pipwa and his guards were escaping down a hallway near the stables. He raced after them. As soon as he entered, there was a grinding rattle strong enough to shake his bones and the cavern behind him collapsed. The resulting wave spun him upside-down and washed him down the passageway.

After the wave had passed, he righted himself. Sunfish had been washed out of their open topped basins and swam around him. The screams had stopped, but tremors still echoed off the walls. The way he had come was blocked by rock.

He hurried down the corridor, passing by openings that looked like storage rooms. He glimpsed riding and towing gear for dolphins and orcas.

A small group of people floated at the end of the hallway. Chayton, both of his guards with spears in hand, a young man, and two children who were holding hands and crying. They looked like sisters, with the same round faces and light eyebrows. The hallway ended abruptly with jagged rock. Someone's lower half stuck out from the cave-in. Blood clouded around them.

"We can still take the exit by the main hall," the bearded guard said.

"That way's blocked," Tahmel said.

They spun around to look at him. The guards' gazes became cold.

"It can't be," the bearded guard said.

"The whole cavern just collapsed."

The young man grimaced. "That's what that wave was." His black fur had a blue sheen.

“There could be a gap.” The pierced guard pushed passed Tahmel to swim down the corridor.

“Did the messenger make it out?” Tahmel asked Chayton.

Chayton replied without looking at him. “I told her to leave in the morning.”

Probably not then, but someone must have escaped and word would get out.

The guard returned a couple minutes later, solemn-eyed. He shook his head once.

The bearded guard cursed. “We can move the rocks.”

“We’re cut off from the orcas and we could never move that much weight. Besides, we could cause another cave-in,” the young man said.

There was silence for a moment, filled only with the children’s cries.

“What did you do?” the bearded guard asked Tahmel. “You were supposed to take care of her.”

Tahmel bristled. “How do you know she isn’t angry at you? I’ve never seen you at the sermons. Any of you.”

“Quiet,” the Pipwa said. “We need to come up with a way out of here.”

“There isn’t. We’re trapped,” the pierced guard said. He dropped his spear, his posture slumping.

“Won’t someone come for us?” Tahmel asked. When a cave-in happened at a church, the whole Sect came together for the rescue. From all across the oceans, even from different sects.

“If this was a regular disaster, the nearby tribes would come. But this...” the young man trailed off.

“We’re being punished,” the pierced guard said, staring at nothing.

“Honon, stop. We have no idea what’s going on,” Chayton said. “The eastern Islanders have flying ships now. This could be their doing.”

Tahmel wasn’t going to argue with denial. The Pipwa would realize, eventually, that this was the Glistening One.

“That was no Islander invention,” the young man said.

Chayton ignored him and looked at one of the doorways. “We can get out through the garbage pit.”

The bearded guard started to laugh but stifled it into a cough when Chayton glared at him. “It’s too deep, sir,” he said.

Chayton gestured at Tahmel. “He can get us down there.”

“I can relieve the water pressure,” Tahmel said, nodding.

The bearded guard frowned. “Even if he can get us down there, the thermal vents would kill us.”

The young man shook his head. “Not if we stay out of the smoke plumes. I’ve read that the surrounding water is relatively cool, but I don’t know how dangerous the mineral clouds are.”

“We’ll have to take the risk,” Chayton said.

“How far is it?” Tahmel asked.

“I’m unsure,” Chayton said, “but the surface has plenty of cracks. We should find a way out.”

“Should” was not a word Tahmel liked when it came to air.

“You can make ice bubbles and bring them with us,” the young man said.

“That’s a southern technique. I don’t know it, but I could try.” Southern tribes used ice bubbles when they hunted deep beneath thick ice floes. He had never needed to learn it. He had warmed water before, on cold winter days; it required a fast chattering noise. Maybe an opposing sound would freeze it. He tried slow clicks, but droplets just separated from the waves and bounced into the air. He tried varying the clicks, their speed, tone, and pattern. The water swirled, skipped across the surface, rose and fell, but didn’t freeze. It actually became warm rather than cold.

“I have no idea how to do this.”

“That poses a problem,” the young man said, looking at the children. Smaller lungs meant shorter dive times. The older one watched them in silence with cloudy eyes while the other still sobbed.

“So, we send the water-touched in first. To find a way out,” the bearded guard said.

That sounded far too dangerous. “I’m not going in there if we have no idea how far it is. I could get trapped in a dead end.”

“Follow the current,” Chayton said.

The bearded guard grabbed Tahmel’s forearm, making his heart skip.

“He could abandon us once he gets out,” the young man said.

The Pipwa nodded. “Len’s right. Ziven, go with him. Make sure he comes back.”

The bearded guard tensed. “Why not Honon?”

The other guard was still staring at nothing, his eyes dull. He didn’t even respond.

Ziven sneered. “Never mind.” He pulled Tahmel into an irregular room.

The floor in the middle dropped into a black pit. The darkness reminded him of the Goddess' trench, heavy and dark and hungry; his throat tightened. He pulled against Ziven's grip; a choked sound escaped between his teeth.

Ziven let go. "Relax," he said. "I don't plan on drowning today. We dive for ten minutes, then we come back. We do that until we find something promising."

Len handed Ziven a sunfish lantern that he must have gotten from one of the storage rooms.

"Please," Len said to Tahmel, "this is our only chance."

Tahmel looked at all of them, their faces full of hope, doubt, and fear. "You're the healer's assistant?"

Len nodded.

"My companion is hurt. If I get us out, will you help him?"

Len gave him a flickering smile. "If we get out."

Tahmel took a few calming breaths, then nodded at Ziven. They dove into the pit, Ziven leading the way with the lantern. The hole widened as they followed it down. A few ripped garbage bags, woven from seaweed and weighed down with rocks, hung from edges on the black walls.

Little yellow lights floated around them. He passed one and realized it was a centipede-like crustacean. See-through shrimp, smaller than his pinky nail, drifted in the weak current. Eyeless, finger long fish darted after them.

"We need to go faster," Ziven said, the water smoothing out his words.

Tahmel channeled a water path that sucked them down. The tunnel narrowed and curved to the side; cracks branched off it.

“Wait,” Ziven said, pointing at a crack that seemed to angle up.

He stopped singing. Ziven scratched a line near the crack with his spear before entering. Tahmel followed him in. The walls were covered with white tubeworm stalks and quickly became too narrow. They turned around and Ziven crossed out the line before they moved on. They tried two other crevices with similar results.

“We need to go back,” Tahmel said. He opened a water path that brought them back to the surface. They breached, gasping in air.

“Any luck?” Chayton asked.

“Not yet,” Ziven said. “We’ll breathe for a few minutes, then try again.”

They dove multiple times, going deeper each time. But every passageway they found either became too narrow, was a dead end, or looped back to the main tunnel. They were deep enough now that Tahmel had to hum to keep the water pressure at bay. The water was warm, cloudy white, and tasted sulfuric; it burned his eyes. The tunnel widened until its sides weren’t visible and its floor dropped out at a severe angle, disappearing into the mineral clouds. The ceiling leveled out and the current became stronger, causing the clouds to swirl beneath them.

We’re close to the vents, Tahmel signed.

But Ziven wasn’t looking at him. “This has to be the way out,” he said. “Open a path and follow the ceiling.” Ziven looked back at him when he didn’t do anything.

If we go any further, we won’t be able to make it back.

Ziven’s jaw worked. “I know. We’ve tried every other way. This is it.”

Tahmel gave a hesitant nod. He channeled a water path, keeping the pressure inside low, and steered it along the ceiling. The clouds became black and hot. His skin itched; he could barely keep his eyes open.

“Down!” Ziven shouted, from in front of him.

Tahmel’s voice hitched as he angled the water path down, narrowly avoiding a bulge in the ceiling. He hadn’t even seen it. He gave the ceiling a wider berth, so it was on the edge of his vision.

The ceiling continued to slope down, forcing them into the clouds. He could see Ziven and his light, but nothing else. He grabbed one of Ziven’s spotted flippers so they wouldn’t get separated. Ziven pointed his spear up and it scratched against rock. Tahmel lowered the water path’s angle. His lungs burned and he felt lightheaded. They weren’t going to make it.

Then the water began to clear and the ceiling disappeared.

“We’re out. Go up,” Ziven said, his voice weak.

Tahmel clicked so the path became vertical and increased its speed, but they were still so deep; everything was dark. The rushing water and his heart pounded against his ears. Then there was a glimmer of light above. He couldn’t hold his breath anymore; air began to leak out of his nose. Finally, they shot through the surface and into the sunlight. They flew into the air; relief filled Tahmel’s lungs. Then they splashed back into the ocean. They stayed at the surface, bobbing on the waves and breathing fast. They exchanged small smiles.

“I wasn’t sure we’d make it,” Ziven said.

“Me neither.”

The sun had risen just above the horizon, bathing the clouds in pinks and oranges. The Goddess was nowhere to be seen and the outcrop was destroyed, flattened under her weight.

She must be the cause of the dreams and visions he kept having. If he could see through her eyes, then surely, she could see through his. Was that how she found the Tickmo? Had he led her to them? He hoped not.

Ziven was staring at the ruins with a flat expression. He was silent for a moment before saying, “We need to go back and get the others.”

Finding their way back through the tunnel, backwards this time, wasn’t going to be easy. If Tahmel had been alone, he would have considered leaving them behind, but Mingan needed Len. And the children’s faces would have haunted him.

“The girls can’t make that swim,” Tahmel said, “but we might be able to make an air container.”

“The beach; everyone was drinking on the beach.”

They headed towards the shore, avoiding broken drifting bodies and sea foam dyed pink with blood. The smell was horrendous; if there had been anything in his stomach, he would have vomited. He held his breath as they glided onto the land. Sandy, indistinguishable masses littered the beach; he tried not to look at them. Ziven’s jaw clenched.

“I’m sorry,” Tahmel said, keeping his mouth closed as he spoke. His words sounded muffled when he spoke that way out of water.

Ziven didn’t respond. He set the lantern down, sheathed his spear, and dragged himself across the sand, searching. Tahmel began to look as well.

He grimaced when something sharp stabbed his underside. He rolled onto his hip and found a small shard of glass protruding from his tail. There was broken glass and ceramics everywhere. He pulled the shard out and tossed it aside. The white spots on his underside were dirty red. He thought it was his own blood until he saw that it was also on his arms and stomach. The sand was smeared with it.

His gut churned as he picked his way along the beach. He tried to ignore the sand and other people's blood rubbing into his cut. He found a half-empty flask of pale green liquid near some washed-up kelp. He unscrewed the glass stopper and dumped the alcohol out. He had to create a hole in its bottom.

Dohasan used to carve stone tablets with a water blade rather than a chisel and hammer. Tahmel had never been good at carving with water, the characters always came out jagged and chipped, but he could probably manage to drill a hole.

He dragged himself to the shallows. The waves hissed over him, washing him clean. He sang so a thin tendril of water rose from the waves, keeping it connected to its source. He spun the water in a circle; fast enough to make it hum. Then he adjusted it so it was more of a teardrop shape. He ground the pointed end against the bottom of the flask. It scratched the glass, slowly grinding through it. He pushed the water blade down a little bit harder, and the bottle shattered. He swore before dropping it.

"What are you doing?" Ziven asked. He held three bottles against his chest with one arm. He crawled forward awkwardly, using his other arm and hip flippers to drag himself.

"They need holes on their bottoms."

Ziven gave him a blank look.

“So water can replace the air when the children breathe from them.”

“Oh, I suppose that makes sense.”

Tahmel didn't say anything. He just took the bottles when Ziven offered them. He knew the tribes didn't have the same kind of educational resources the church did.

He tried drilling a hole again, this time with patience. Eventually, he scratched a jagged hole through the glass. He repeated the process for the other two bottles.

He eyed the containers; their bases were barely larger than his palms. “It's not a lot of air,” he said.

Ziven picked one of them up. “Too much and we'll have trouble diving. Besides, I couldn't find anything else,” he said, grabbing the lantern. “Let's go.”

Tahmel nodded and grabbed the other two bottles. They swam to the area Ziven thought they had come out of. They filled the bottles with air, placed their fingers over the holes, and dove. Tahmel opened a water path to bring them down; his head ached, but he had to keep going. Even though he was keeping the water pressure around them low, the bottles' suction on his fingertips was painful. And the edges were sharp; a drop of blood slid down the inside of one.

“Over there.” Ziven gestured with the lantern.

Tahmel angled the water path to the left. A wide overhang with multiple entrances came into view. Black clouds billowed out of it, like the deformed mouth of a giant fire breathing monster. His skin itched just looking at it.

He stopped the water path and waited for Ziven to look at him. *Which part did we come out of?*

Ziven shook his head. “I don't know. I'll mark the rock.”

Ziven stuck his arm through the lantern's handle and pulled out his spear. They swam through the clouds so he could scratch the lip of an overhang. Then they entered the tunnel, staying near the ceiling and moving cautiously through the cloudy darkness. Tahmel couldn't tell if they were making any progress, but Ziven seemed to have an idea of where to go. He kept tasting the water, studying the rocks, and used his innate sense of direction. Tahmel wished his sense of direction would return. He worried the cheepcree venom had damaged that part of him.

"Wait," Ziven said.

Tahmel switched to a high-pitched hum, letting the water path dissipate but keeping the pressure low. They floated there for a moment.

Ziven shook his head. "The current's too weak. Let's go back." He scratched the ceiling twice.

We should try using the bottles first. To make sure they work.

Ziven nodded before unscrewing the cap and putting his mouth over the opening. He took his finger off the hole, bubbles escaped from his nose, and water rose into the container. He grimaced. "It hurts, but I think it'll work," he said.

Exhale as we rise.

"Why?"

So your lungs don't burst. The air will expand.

Tahmel restarted the water path and brought them back to the surface. Ziven exhaled on the ascent.

"How are your lungs?"

His voice came out strained. “Sore, but all right,” he said. “You’ve done this before?”

“Yes, we have to do that when we leave the church.”

They breathed for a while before trying again. It took several attempts before they found the white clouds. They searched the ceiling for a single scratch that marked where the tunnel ascended.

“This way,” Ziven said, once they had found it. “Remember there’s a curve near the top. I don’t want to smash into the wall.”

Tahmel shot them upwards with the water path. They stopped partway, near one of Ziven’s scratches, to breathe from the bottles. The contained air felt sharp as it entered his lungs. It was an unpleasant process; he hoped the children could manage it. They exhaled gradually as they rose, breaching the surface in the garbage room. The air had become thin.

The others approached them with sallow faces. Chayton had a wide grin on his face and Honon had come out of his stupor.

“We worried you didn’t make it,” Len said, smiling.

“Did you see our parents out there?” one of the girls asked. She had short, curly blonde hair that matched her fur.

“I’m sorry, Olive,” Ziven said. “We didn’t see anyone.”

The girls’ faces fell. The smaller one’s chin started to tremble.

Len took her hand. “I’m sure they made it to one of the tribes,” he said. “We’ll find them.”

“It’s a long dive,” Tahmel said. “We made air containers for the children.”

Ziven showed the girls how to use the bottles and had them practice a few times near the surface.

“Let’s go,” Chayton said. He, Len, and Honon grabbed lanterns.

They dove, Tahmel using a water path to bring them down faster. He followed the single scratch marks as they rushed through the tunnel. He had to slow down when they entered the clouds. Ziven helped him navigate, and held his spear aloft again to make sure they didn’t get too close to the ceiling. Over the rushing water, he heard something going on between the others behind him.

Ziven looked back. “Keep going,” he said.

He glanced behind. Len was trying to help the youngest girl breath from a bottle; air escaped around her lips. Len looked worried.

He increased the water path’s speed. Ziven’s spear scratched the ceiling hard. He swore as his arm was wrenched back and the tip of the spear cracked off. He grabbed his shoulder with a grimace.

Tahmel lowered the water path’s angle, flying through the black clouds. When the water finally cleared, he shot them upwards. Someone shouted at the children to exhale.

He breathed when they reached the surface and looked at the others. The older girl, Olive, was coughing badly. So badly she began to vomit. Chayton was helping her keep her head above water. Len held the younger girl’s limp body; blood frothed around her mouth and nose. Len pinched her nose shut, put his mouth on hers, and started breathing for her. He did this for a while before giving up.

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