

Discovering *Souls Below*:

Mythology, Lore, and Christian Feminism in Contemporary Fantasy

A Thesis Submitted to

Dr. Sarah Rice

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By

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my husband, who has championed this project since before it was put to paper, and to anyone who has decided to change her life path in adulthood. There are few things more beautiful than following your passion.

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Artist Statement

Background & Process

There are few things I love more than sitting on a warm, sunny beach with my toes in the sand. With a cool breeze rippling off the waves and the smell of salty ocean, it is easy to feel completely at peace. Yet last summer, as I sat limply in a beach chair experiencing all those sensations, I wondered, “What if this was my last day on earth, and I knew it?” More specifically, what if we *chose* such a serene day as our last? Of course, that reminded me there is only one way to truly choose our last day alive, and it is desperate, hopeless, and morbid. What would lead me to make that excruciating decision?

I asked the question to myself. Could I ever be so desperate to die? I pray that I never am, but the only scenario I could possibly fathom was if my husband, the one true love of my life, was taken from me. That would be hard to overcome, to say the least.

So, with my greatest fear in mind, I imagined a man whose world would be rocked just like mine would be if his spouse was taken from him. I envisioned him sitting on the same beach, running long fingers through the white sand, and waiting until the end of the day to walk into the Gulf’s endless waters, never to return. Or so he thought.

Instead, what if he doesn’t die? Thinking his worst nightmare was finally ending, he’s rather kept alive in a new, unknown world? A mermaid saves him! Why? I had no idea. But when he wakes up, he sees a mermaid who looks just like...his dead wife! Is it her?

Thus began the turning of wheels in my head that has developed much further than I even imagined sitting on that beach last June. My own questions – most of them – have been answered. The unnamed man turned into Sullivan Mavros, a handsome, once vibrant man who is in the throes of a deep depression. After losing his wife in a tragic boating accident, one decision

takes him deeper – literally – than he could have ever imagined. With this premise in mind, *Souls Below* began to take shape. It has since grown into a complex fantasy world rooted in Greek mythology and sea lore.

I had no idea the hold *Souls Below* would have on me once I conceptualized it. When I originally had the idea, I was in the middle of another fiction project for WRIT 650, but the idea of a miserable man trapped in a mermaid underworld-esque realm was so fast growing I had to abandon that other work. This story holds great potential for impact, both on my own educational journey and other readers' emotions.

One of my goals since beginning *Souls Below* has been to infuse it with lore and mythology. It is also important to me that the sea be depicted accurately and believably, even if this is a fantasy. Before I even began writing, I consulted the map to make sure I knew exactly how my land and sea settings worked together. I asked questions like, “What should my characters' names be?” and answered each methodically and intentionally. A broad search gave me wonderful foundational information about rare shells, common fish, and the colors of a coral reef.

Another priority of mine is to allow the characters to grow and shape the story in their own ways. Rather than follow a strict outline, I have chosen to plot out chapters at a time once I know what the one before it uncovers. This method does not change my intended outcome, nor do I feel it hinders the tension building aspects of the story. Rather, it allows me to focus on character development. This is a quality I greatly admire in some of my favorite authors and hope I can replicate to some extent.

Mythological Inspiration

Greek mythology, and stories based on it, have always been a part of the canon of my own literary foundation. I will never forget the night my father read the first chapter of *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* aloud to my sister and me. We could not believe so much action was jam packed into just a few pages, and we craved more. Later, we had all our *Percy Jackson* books signed by Rick Riordan himself.

Riordan, in both the *Percy Jackson* stories and his other series, handles mythology in a unique way. He rarely strays from the original versions of stories or attempts any sort of retelling. Instead, he elaborates on them as if they are true, realistic components of our mysterious world. He treats myths as reality, and in doing so he widens audience reception to them.

There is a great deal we can learn about storytelling from these Greco-Roman mythological themes that have been so well preserved for us. While the influence of mythology in my work will be less obvious than Riordan's, it is still present. When I began imagining the characters of Sullivan, Diana, and Eura, I thought of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the myth, Orpheus loses his wife to Hades and bravely ventures into the underworld to bring her back to earth. When he finds her, he is promised she will be returned to him after making the journey back through the underworld; but of course, there's a catch. If he turns around at any point to look at her, she will be lost to the underworld forever, and he must return to earth alone and spend the rest of his miserable life without her. Orpheus does the one thing he is charged not to at the very last moment of his journey, and his beloved Eurydice is lost to him forevermore. This story concept has shaped the way I write *Souls Below*. As an Orpheus-type, Sullivan will be forced to follow this mythological pattern whether he understands it or not. In his personal underworld, he will realize a way to bring his wife back to earth with him, even though it will

have challenges. What he learns on the journey will be the key to keeping her or losing her to her own sort of afterlife.

I want every name in *Souls Below* to be significant. As a primary example, I looked into the Greek meaning of the name Orpheus. According to Mike Campbell's "Behind the Name" article, it means "the darkness of the night" ("Behind the Name"). According to the same source, Sullivan is an English name that also means "dark." Mavros is a traditionally Greek surname; therefore, my protagonist, the Orpheus-type, is Sullivan Mavros. His physical features mimic his darkness. The balance to that darkness is Eura, a derivation of the name Eurydice. Her name means "justice," as does the English form Diana. If a reader does enough linguistic digging, she might catch on early that Eura is, in fact, Sullivan's allegedly dead wife, Diana, based on names alone.

While Sullivan and Eura/Diana's names are primarily derived from their Greek counterparts, the rest of the ocean is named for sea lore. Other examples of names based off mythology and lore are Naida, a form of the term "nayad;" Aorato, which means "the invisible one," as does the Greek "Hades;" Trigona, inspired by the Bermuda Triangle, where our final battle will take place; and the "anima" spell, a derivation of "animate" which allows humans to live and breathe underwater (This is the spell the mermaids place on Sullivan when they save his life, and Eura's unique power compounds and rejuvenates its effects.)

Another important aspect of sea lore in the novel is the uniting of the Seven Sisters, which each represents one of the seven seas of ancient maritime lore: for Gulf of Mexico, Eura; for the Arctic, Aurora; for the Atlantic, Marella ("shining sea," since the Atlantic is the second largest ocean); for the Indian, Samudra (Sanskrit "gathering together of waters"); for the Pacific, Wahine (pronounced "vah-HEE-nay;" the Hawaiian word for "queen"); for the Mediterranean, Acantha

(“thorn, sharp object”); and for the Caribbean, Calypso (inspired by the traditional Caribbean musical style).

Literary Context

While not specifically designated a young adult novel, this work has certainly been inspired by some of the young adult authors I read in years past. Kiera Cass, Erin Morgenstern, Stephanie Meyer, Ally Condie, Cassandra Clare, Veronica Roth, Maggie Stiefvater, and Suzanne Collins all have fingerprints on this particular work. However, authors like J. K. Rowling, C. S. Lewis, Jane Austen, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Walter Wangerin, Jr. have their fingerprints on *me*. Therefore, though this work is more of a commercial piece, my perspectives and styles are touched by others outside of the young adult fantasy genre. I plan on implementing aspects of style from both literary and commercial influences to aid the overall effectiveness of the work. For instance, it is important to me to incorporate deep symbolism, develop meaningful motifs, and utilize dynamic characterization, which are all so prevalent in literary works. It is just as important to include the action, tension, and well-moving plot points of a commercial work.

Something I hope will set this book apart from others in its genre is the deep-seeded driving force of it: fear. After all, it was my own greatest fear that inspired it. It is Sullivan living his greatest fear that sends him to the world of the Gulf mermaids. Yes, there will be an epic love story in the middle of it, like most great young adult fantasy novels, but I hope that it can resonate with more than that narrow audience to include more mature adults as well. I hope it shows the depths of desperation our fear can lead us to and that there is a resurfacing that must be done once we have faced that fear.

Vision

This story is one I can envision impacted many. Some will cling to its tense fantasy world and the intricacies of it. Others will relate more to the main characters' desires. Regardless of the reason, I want this story to mean something to people. Some of my favorite stories growing up were not the most intricate or well-written. They were simply the ones I could not stop thinking about. A good story should create a lot of questions along its way but tie each into a perfect, satisfying knot at the end.

I hinted that I see this more as a commercial work than a literary one. In many cases, and to a small amount of my own chagrin, that is true. However, I don't want that to limit what I am doing with the story. All the literary stories we love and praise must have had at least some commercial success for us to even know their titles. At the same time, would any best sellers make the top one hundred lists without some sort of literary excellence between their pages? There must be balance, and that balance lies with the writer herself. I must draw equally from Maggie Stiefvater and F. Scott Fitzgerald if I want to be successful with this project, using a balance of Stiefvater's captivating fantasy imagination and Fitzgerald's raw, uncut perspective about human emotions and behavior. Both nuances reside in me because of the books I've read, and I must channel all the audiences they draw.

I see this story ending on the same beach where it started, with Sullivan having a different perspective of his changed life. He will have a new understanding of himself and how he processes grief and loss. After being faced with tremendous responsibility and purpose for the first time in a long time, he will again have something to live for.

His understanding will be furthered by the fact that the prophecy all the mermaids believe to be about him is actually about Eura. That's the reason she was initially saved from drowning

just like Sullivan. Unlike Sullivan, she was transformed into a mermaid and had her memory erased by Isla and the Seven Sisters to keep Aorato from finding out about her own ability to fulfill the prophecy. All they are waiting for is the beacon, which Sullivan brings with his arrival. However, Eura herself does not know all this and will not understand it until that final fateful moment in Trigona. Sullivan will have to come to terms with the possibility of losing her all over again, but this time he will be more prepared.

Ultimately, this is a fantastical tale about fear, loss, grief, and purpose: human emotions. While none of us (to my knowledge) have ever been rescued from certain doom by mermaids, there will not be a person alive who will not be able to relate to some of the struggles Eura and Sullivan face. Who, like Sullivan, has never been overcome with grief and uncertainty about a future outside of what he pictured for himself? Many, too, will identify with the great responsibilities facing Eura which she did not ask for. Placed in an overwhelming position of authority, does she really know herself, or is she an imposter? Mermaids and magic are about the only fantasy aspects of the story; the rest is strictly human experience.

Significance as a Christian Scholar

One of my passions as a Christian writer is not to shy away from the hard things. One of my greatest qualms with some contemporary Christian artists is their resistance to showing the worst parts of the world. In my opinion, who better to talk about a sinful world than the Christian? The rest of the world will never avoid these things. They will touch on depression, abuse, suicide, hunger, evil, manipulation, and so tabeon without aligning those things with redemption. Why don't we show people that yes, there is evil in the world, but there is a Savior who has called us out of all of it?

This novel will by no means be graphic, but it will depict heavy thematic material. The opening chapter involves a man planning his own death and trying to drown himself, after all. There are also violent villains who will stop at nothing to get what they want. There is lots of magic and fantasy, but it isn't all good or lovely magic. Our world, though lacking that particular magic, has its fair share of good and bad. The lovely and the evil often live next door to each other.

There is also an element of baptism Sullivan experiences in this story. He walks into the sea one kind of man, is completely immersed by his sadness and desperation, and wakes up as something else entirely, something he never imagined. When he finally resurfaces, he will have experienced a transformation he could never have given himself. If anything, I pray this story shows there is a source of hope when life seems hopeless.

God will never be mentioned in this story, but I hope He will be seen in it. If there is one thing I have learned from earning this degree, it's that Christians have a great responsibility to make art for the rest of the world. We are the only ones who can point to what is truly good, beautiful, and true. We don't have to do that with flashy religious words and overt conversions. Instead, I think we can do it just by telling good stories.

A Critical Approach to *Souls Below*:

Instilling Distinctly Human Emotion in Uniquely Inhuman Characters

Introduction

Critically examining *Souls Below* demands orienting the story within its genre. Before the story is further developed, the undeniable question, “Where does a fantasy romance set under the sea belong on the bookstore shelf?” must be considered. The answer is more straightforward than might be expected. This story leans heavily on inspiration from the distinct categories of folklore and mythology and young adult fiction, and – by examining critical texts from each area – *Souls Below*’s unique identity takes shape.

Focusing on the development of the creative manuscript, it is important to explore different facets of each of these genres. Fantasy, while dependent much on the writer’s own imagination, can never stand on its own. No imagination is unfailingly unique or novel in and of itself. Therefore, it is important that the elements of this story – the mermaids, the undersea setting, the plot, and the characters’ traits – all root themselves in what already exists in literature. Exploration of these two particular genres and key examples from each prove such inspiration.

Greek Mythology and Sea Lore

The legend of the mermaid is one that has been passed down over centuries through storytellers around the world. In most cases, and like many of the urban legends of the world, these accounts have been changed gradually from one generation to the next because of the nature of oral tradition. Sims and Stephens, in *Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*, deem this “verbal folklore” (Sims 13). This type of verbal folklore was shared chiefly to entertain, and in some cases even inform listeners by uncovering the

mysteries of the world around them. They spoke of “seemingly true events,” but typically incorporated grandiose language and hyperbolic speech for the sake of the story’s entertainment value (13). Folklore, therefore, could and did change from one mouth to another as the style and preferences of the teller evolved.

Folklore and mythology affect us more than we often consciously recognize. For this reason, Richard Sartore argues that understanding our relationship to myth is key to a clear, beneficial education. He writes, “A broad understanding of mythology leads us toward a clearer consciousness of human life by addressing the unanswerable questions about life and death and by examining how previous civilizations over the millennia have tried to answer those questions” (35). This appropriate understanding of myth could bridge the gap between art and reality for many students of folklore. Sims and Stephens argue also that lore “touches on every dimension of human experience and artistic expression...and contains elements of psychology and sociology” (2-3). It can be understood, then, as a culture’s attempt to explain and understand the workings of their own lives and their place in a sometimes confusing and frightening universe.

Indeed, there is one area of our world that often harbors more confusion and fright than others: the ocean. Jerry Foster emphasizes this point’s importance for the life of the ancient sailor particularly. He writes, “The belief in supernatural lore...grew out of constant encounters with the unknown, abnormal, and fearsome in the uncharted seas filled with the Kraken and mer-people. The old tar lived in a world of which he had no control or understanding, so it is not strange that his imagination often provided him with an explanation” (260). Therefore, in recognizing the mermaid’s place in folklore, we must consider man’s relationship with the sea since the beginning of time. It is both terrifying and necessary for humans to be in proximity to the ocean and its offshoots. Civilizations have depended on it for trade, sustenance, travel, and

power for millennia. Though technology has improved, there are still hundreds of miles below the sea yet unexplored by man. This fear of the sea creates in some a fascination they cannot escape. And when the human brain sees something it does not understand, it fills in the gaps, no matter how fantastical those gaps may be. Therefore, it is only natural that people so dependent upon the sea create a being that correlates to their very limited understanding of it.

Sea Lore and Mermaids from Around the World

Mermaids are, perhaps, the most widely recognized icon of sea lore. Horace Beck attempts to explain the concept of mermaids in *Folklore and the Sea* through impeccably practical means. He claims that there are four likely explanations to their place in folklore. They might not and have never existed, and those who claim to have seen them are either lunatics or liars. Another explanation is that people claiming to see a mermaid have simply seen a manatee or poorly identified seal. Finally, he conjectures sightings of mermen were actually of the walrus (260). When considering a sea-sick seaman scanning the vast ocean horizon through a looking glass, it is easy to see any of these as plausible interpretations for his imagination's tricks.

Beck's explanations are reasonable and highly likely considering the intense physical and mental toll a life of sailing in long stretches can have on a person. On the other hand, the fact that one of the most globally noted and recognizable mythical creatures in history might merely have been a manatee or seal speaks at least to the profundity of the human imagination. Each ancient culture has its own variation of the mermaid, and the similarities among worldwide legends are striking.

Numerous cultures have included mermaids in their cannon of lore for centuries, whether or not their existence was coastal. Mary Pope Osborne's *Mermaid Tales from Around the World* recounts twelve collected stories of mermaids from Germany to Japan. Despite the stories'

nuances, Osborne was surprised by the similarities in the character of each culture's idea of a mermaid. "When I first began searching for tales about water maids," she writes, "I expected to find the typical legendary heroine – beautiful, kind, and in need of rescue. What I found instead startled me: a fiercely strong female character. Universally. Regardless of which country she came from, the water maid was a force to be reckoned with. Self-assured, independent and self-contained, she determined her own fate and could wreak havoc as well as bliss" (viii). For example, in the English tale "The Mermaid's Revenge," Osborne recounts the story of a young girl protected by mermaids her whole life. When she falls in love with a charismatic soldier who later grows bored of her and never speaks to her again, one mermaid decides to use her powers to lure him to his death (46). This is the picture of the mermaid most of us have, despite the Disney-fied version being most popular in our culture. These qualities of ferocity, power, and independence are heavy in the mermaids of *Souls Below*, particularly in the heroine Eura. This portrayal is demonstrative of the great power and leadership women are capable of having – whether in a corporate office or in their own homes. It is also aligned with many stories within the young adult genre, which will be examined in the next section.

A few of the stories in Osborne's collection highlight contrasting characteristics of mermaids. In the French story of Melusine, a count and his son, Raymond, go out late one night on a hunt. After accidentally killing his father, Raymond flees and stumbles upon a fountain, where Melusine and her sisters are relaxing. She has compassion on him and instructs him how he should protect himself from accusations of murder. Raymond follows her advice, and after he is made count comes back to marry Melusine. She falls in love with him as well and agrees to marry him on one condition: he is to buy the piece of land near the fountain, build her a private

residence, and let her go there alone every Saturday. If he ever intrudes on her privacy, the two will be separated forever.

The story continues that Raymond agrees to Melusine's wishes and the two are happily married. Melusine births him children over the years, each of which looks monstrous. For instance, one has a bright red eye and a bright green eye, and one has the tusk of a boar. Despite their abnormalities, they all grow up to be fine men.

Eventually, though Raymond loves his mysterious wife, he begins to doubt her identity and intentions. Following her to her private chambers one Saturday, he discovers she has the tail of a fish. He flees and tries to keep this revelation from her until their family begins to fall apart and she inevitably learns of his betrayal. Melusine flees in shock and reminds Raymond they will never be able to be together now that he knows her secret and believes her to be a monster. By not respecting his wife's independence, Raymond loses his beloved and the rest of his family.

Though the original date of this tale is unknown due to the nature of its oral history, it is worth noting that it is ancient enough that the very name of its mermaid character, "Melusine," has become synonymous with an entire category of European folk tradition. Almqvist writes, "...one might perhaps formulate the following definition of the Melusine legend: a story in which a supernatural woman before agreeing to take a human as her husband imposes certain injunctions on him which he later breaks, with the result that the wife leaves him and returns to her own world" (15). Thus, such sad tales involving the romantic relationships between mermaids and humans have had their fingerprints on an entire continent of folk tradition.

The story of Melusine is a forerunner for what *Souls Below* will do: give equal weight of responsibility to its male human character and its female mermaid character. Their decisions will mutually impact each other, and there will be many minor characters rooting against them, both

as a couple and individually. It will be up to Sullivan, the male protagonist, to trust that his mermaid counterpart is acting in everyone's best interest, even though he does not always understand what that entails.

This tragedy is not the happy ending many of us are accustomed to with fairy tales. Even Osborne's account of the Danish "Little Mermaid" has a much bleaker ending than the cartoon we know and love. Instead of simply losing her voice to the sea witch, the little mermaid's tongue is cut out. She forfeits her tail for legs, but each step is painful. The prince becomes her companion and tells her he would happily marry her, but he cannot because he is in love with the girl who saved him from drowning. The little mermaid is unable to tell him she was the one who pulled him from the ocean and sang him to life, for she has no tongue. The prince goes to a nearby island and falls for the princess there, thinking she is the one he saw when he woke from his near drowning. The little mermaid is devastated and knows that the morning after the prince's wedding, she will die. Her sisters come to the surface and offer her an alternative: cut out the prince's heart as he lies in bed with his new bride and return to the ocean to live with them forever. Despite her impending death, the little mermaid cannot do this to the prince and instead decides to give up her place as a human or mermaid. She turns into sea foam, and her spirit soars to the air (Osborne 71).

Osborne's curated story's ending draws from the traditions of Hans Christian Andersen, among others. More modern adaptations omit this bleak ending, choosing instead to cater to a younger audience. In Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, for example, the titular character emerges from the ocean at the end of the film in a sparkling blue dress, walking confidently on newly gifted human legs to her prince and happily ever after (Clements). With this movie's success, a

generation of children, chiefly in the United States, turned its attention to the romanticized version of sea lore.

It is here we can see the sharp delineation between old European “folklore” and its borrowed counterparts in the United States. (There is a difference here between the folklore of Native Americans and that of European implants into the new colonies. Native American folklore is extensive and contains its own version of the mermaid figure, but that will not be expounded upon here.) Richard Dorson claims this lack of unique folklore in the culture of the New World is due to both colonization and immigration. It is difficult to determine what stories were born here and which were merely adapted. He argues, “...within the boundaries of the United States, this field of folklore collection and research remains the most undeveloped” (168). In such a melting pot of a country, Americans have simply embraced legends from global cultures.

Drawing from the Story of Orpheus and Eurydice

While sea lore plays an obvious role in the story, there is underlying influence from Greek mythology as well. The two main characters of *Souls Below* are derivatives of the ancient Orpheus and Eurydice of Greek mythology. Sullivan Mavros, whose Greek name mimics the meaning of Orpheus’s, has unmistakable similarities to the hero of the Greek tragedy. For one, he is gifted at playing a stringed instrument. Orpheus performed “to such perfection that nothing could withstand the charm of his music” (Bulfinch 148). The strongest resemblance, though, is the loss of his beloved wife. Unbeknownst to Sullivan, the journey he takes through the sea will ultimately lead to either bringing his lost love back to the human world or waiting until his own death to join her. By the time he realizes his true mission in *Souls Below*, his doubt will be tested just like Orpheus’s.

Just like Eurydice, Eura is lost to an underworld apart from her husband. But unlike Eurydice, Eura has no memory of her former life as Diana Mavros. Instead, she has been changed into the self-sufficient mermaid of sea lore and is the leader of an entire civilization of mermaids. With such great purpose and responsibility, she may or may not choose to leave her new world for Sullivan. The inspiration for Eura's character from Eurydice is undeniable, but her role in the story will be drastically different than that in the Greek myth. While Orpheus is the hero in the original version, Eura is equal parts the hero in *Souls Below*. It is her leadership and guidance that awakens Sullivan's own sense of personal responsibility and capabilities. No longer a maiden in need of rescue, Eura's character embraces elements of both classical Greek mythology and folklore to produce a strangely modern female protagonist.

There is, in fact, a deep connection between Greek mythology and the sea. Perhaps no modern book demonstrates this better than Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. Riordan's protagonist, a troubled twelve-year-old boy named Percy, discovers an overwhelming responsibility in his own identity when it is revealed the Greek god of the sea, Poseidon, is his father. He must then go on an exceedingly dangerous quest to clear his father's name and discover his own unique powers as a demigod along the way. Throughout the story, Percy's interactions with water further demonstrate his father's rule over the sea.

Riordan chooses not to retell the ancient Greek myths but instead treat them as if they are reality. He uses the story's own narration – here Chiron, the legendary centaur trainer of Greek heroes, explaining the gods' workings to Percy – to explain how specifically he justifies his decision for realism in myth:

“Died? No. Did the West die? The gods simply moved, to Germany, to France, to Spain, for a while. Wherever the flame was brightest, the gods were there. They spent several

centuries in England. All you need to do is look at the architecture. People do not forget the gods. Every place they've ruled, for the last three thousand years, you can see them in paintings, in statues, on the most important buildings. And yes, Percy, of course they are now in your United States. Look at your symbol, the eagle of Zeus. Look at the statue of Prometheus in Rockefeller Center, the Greek facades of your government buildings in Washington. I defy you to find any American city where the Olympians are not prominently displayed in multiple places. Like it or not – and believe me, plenty of people weren't very fond of Rome, either – America is now the heart of the flame. It is the great power of the West. And so Olympus is here. And we are here.” (Riordan 72-73)

This excerpt not only shows Riordan's brilliant writing tactic of making a simple explanation for an unbelievable scenario for his modern character, but it also illustrates the impact of Greek mythology in the art of this country. By becoming familiarized with works like his – whether Greek mythology is employed in the same manner or not – a foundation of knowledge about this mythology can be established. For *Souls Below* in particular, Riordan's work demonstrates one side of a very large scale. His work is overtly inspired by Greek mythology; this passage deliberately shows his audience just how much he wants them to embrace it. For *Souls Below*, the influence is much more subtle. Readers should be able to see the influence of Orpheus and Eurydice only when they are familiar with stories of the Greek heroes. The creative manuscript will not include any passage as overt as Riordan's, though his is extremely effective for the purpose of his work.

Young Adult Fiction & Fantasy

Souls Below should not chiefly be categorized under the genre of young adult fiction. However, its content fits within the modern scope of the genre. Its combination of romance,

fantasy, and adventure make it a predominantly commercial title. Therefore, it is important to compare its premise to other young adult works to see how it can both fulfill audience expectations and stand out as a unique story.

The Siren

Kiera Cass, best known for the New York Times bestselling series, *The Selection*, published *The Siren* in 2016, a standalone fantasy novel about a young girl rescued from a shipwreck by the Sea itself. The Sea (capitalized here because of its characterization in the book) is a mother figure who calls a group of two to five girls at a time, transforming them into Sirens and committing them to one hundred years in service to her in exchange for their rescue. When Kahlen's family jumps overboard their cruise ship and drowns because of the Siren call, Kahlen begs for her life and is then turned into the mythical sea creature. Though not a mermaid, Kahlen is given the unique ability to breathe underwater and commune intimately with the Sea herself.

When not called to sing and sacrifice lives to the Sea, the Sirens are allowed to live close-to-normal lives on land. Their only parameter is that they must stay silent; any human who hears their voice will be lured to Sea to die. Kahlen and the Sea have a special bond, and Kahlen is loved by the Sea more than her other sisters, but she is still haunted by her role in the deaths of so many. Finally tired of the Sea's restraints, Kahlen falls in love with a human and becomes increasingly rebellious, eventually making the terrible mistake of speaking to him, which causes him to almost drown himself in the Sea. It also leads both of them to fall deathly ill with a mysterious sickness. Because of this, the Sea eventually relinquishes her grip on Kahlen, setting her free to live a human life with her true love.

Cass's story, while cliché in some moments, is captivating. Her handling of the Sea as a character opens new doors for underwater fantasies. While her protagonist is a siren, not a

mermaid, there are still similarities in their characteristics. Kahlen is compassionate but powerful, independent, and at times defiant and ferocious. The humanity in Cass's sirens allows for humanity among mermaids as well. She makes such a powerful, deadly character relatable.

There are not many plot similarities between *The Siren* and *Souls Below*, but there is much to learn from Cass's use of lore, the Sea as both character and setting, and the commercial romance elements she includes to make her story even harder to put down. It allows us to see one more example of a seemingly impossible relationship forming between two unlikely subjects.

The trope of a mythical creature falling in love with a human is one peppered throughout the young adult genre. In fact, it is the foundation of many of the category's most successful stories. Consider, for example, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*. Though Bella, the human protagonist in the story, is mild mannered, the female vampires in the Cullen family are just as strong and independent as their male counterparts, not unlike the mermaids of ancient sea lore.

Beyond YA: Other Transcending Female Characters

The success of works like Meyer's might be due, in part, to those strong-willed female characters that attract younger female audiences. For many, though, the young adult genre is too focused on female readers. Where is the balance in young adult literature between adventure and heart, loyalty and love, and equally strong male and female characters? That balance lies in arguably the greatest young adult series ever written, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books.

Rowling's work emphasizes something driving the creation of this creative manuscript: molding a story around equal parts magical fantasy and human emotion. For many readers – young boys, girls, and adults alike – the wizarding world is what draws them into Rowling's series. But it is not that world that keeps them there; no, instead it is the distinctly human, distinctly adolescent characters.

For many young girls, the characterization of Hermione Granger is life-altering. Through Rowling's skill, Hermione's bravery and determination blossomed through her own insecurities, which she was not magically without. The very evolution of her character demonstrated some of the challenges young girls face about body image, intellectual shame, and the pressure to bend to society's expectations. Instead of focusing on these things, Hermione remained a steadfast central character who, despite (and often because of) her gender, demonstrated a unique grasp of how maturity works. She dynamically changed, even over the course of one book, to model growth. "Me? Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery" (Rowling). Though some argue this quote downplays Hermione's intellectual brilliance, others believe it more clearly shows a growth in her character; though not casting aside her wit and hard work, she is demonstrating a changed mindset, understanding that she can exhibit more in her character than the box of intellect others put her in. Rowling's golden balance between adventure, romance, and magic has long appealed to an incredibly broad audience. Her tactics should influence *Souls Below* as it continues to develop into something many demographics can appreciate.

While Rowling and other pioneer young adult literature voices like J. D. Salinger relied on narration from the teenage voice, both of which, as Judith Hayn argues, demonstrate the "harsh and unforgiving reality of adolescent lives," young adult literature is not strictly limited to younger narrators or audiences. Some stories, like Maggie Stiefvater's *The Scorpio Races*, involve characters in their late teens or early twenties. Stiefvater's work also utilizes a unique element of sea lore: the *capaill uisce*, or water horse.

The water horse is a staple in both global sea lore and Greek mythology. Also called the kelpie, water horses were often man-eating (as in *The Scorpio Races*). In Greek mythology,

Poseidon, god of the sea, was ruler of all horses because they were born from the ocean. Celtic mythology also asserted that horses were from the sea, coming from “the mother of all horses...Epona” (Stiefvater 191). Stiefvater’s work demonstrates the marriage between mythological influence and writing for the young adult demographic. Her use of folklore creates a unique, tension-filled story world that will be of great importance to *Souls Below*.

Conclusion

Souls Below not only draws from but relies upon elements of both folklore and mythology and the young adult fiction genre. Like most stories, it cannot be put in a singular box. Instead, it could potentially belong on any number of shelves.

It is vital that I learn from authors like the astounding J. K. Rowling to strike an almost magical balance that appeals to more than just teenagers or young adults. How do I make a story that almost inherently fits within the young adult genre appeal to more mature audiences?

The answer, I believe, is in combining its romantic structure with classic elements of mythology and lore. It’s in weighing the fairy tale love with the spine-tingling adventure. For every moment that makes the heart swell, there must be one that puts a pit in the reader’s stomach. Just like in the stories of Greek heroes, there must be deadly risk for a spectacular reward. If I can create characters who have everything to gain or lose by their actions, I can build a story world that resonates with the deepest human emotions and fears.

“There is but a plank between a sailor and eternity” (Foster 260).

Disclaimer: The creative manuscript below is a work in progress. Like any good novel, the process for its creation is not linear. I hope to present the full story to you in a published format in the future.

Chapter One

Sullivan Mavros perched on white sand as the sun pinned itself atop the sapphire waters of the Gulf. A breeze prickled goosebumps on his bare chest and arms as a fishing boat floated on the waves in front of him. He picked a beautiful day to die.

He had woken up that morning after a dreadful sleep. Then again, he'd hardly had anything close to peaceful sleep in months. His thick, black curls prematurely grayed and thinned, and – as if in Nazarite fashion – no razor touched his face either. The brightness that once belonged in his chocolate eyes began to dull by the hour. He would go days without showering until finally he could stand it no longer. Then, he'd stay under the shower head's piping currents until the tap ran cold. He wondered what would happen if he just held his breath and let the running water fill his mouth, his nose, his lungs. Finally, after one of these showers at two o'clock that morning, he wanted to be done imagining.

But, as he stepped onto his balcony at the flecks of sunrise, he knew he could not let this day pass without living it. It was one of those rare, spotless mornings that reminded him why he bought this hurricane-proof house years ago. He could practically hear Diana's voice tremble with excitement, begging him to wake up so they could float the waves together. Oh, how he wished he could hear that voice again.

Sullivan took his chair, jacket, and ukelele to the shoreline well before any vacationers were even awake. When the sleepiness of dawn wore off, the beach became crowded with the activities of an early summer day. One by one, guests speckled the beach like freckles on the cheeks of sun-soaked children. Sullivan took them in: the honeymooners, the young families, the recent college graduates – all people he had never seen before and would never see again.

The only people he recognized were John and Tammy Stewart, the retired couple that had just purchased the stilted house next door. Tammy had promptly painted it a pale purple; Diana would have loved it, and her. The Stewarts waved to Sullivan as they pitched their cabana. Sullivan knew they'd go back to the house between eleven and two for lunch and then be on the beach again until dinner time. They'd never suspect a thing. He was not close to them, but they had always treated him kindly, neighborly. He supposed he was close to the same age as their own son, who brought their grandchildren to visit on school breaks. Tammy invited Sullivan over for Easter dinner a few weeks ago, but he quickly and politely declined. There were no holidays for him anymore, only one never-ending day of misery with hundreds of sunrises and sunsets.

He examined the waves. How far would he walk until the surface of the water swallowed him?

"Heads up!" A thick plastic disc landed at Sullivan's feet as a tanned, chiseled twenty-something with a mop of sun-bleached hair raced toward him. Sullivan gingerly picked up the frisbee and rotated it between his fingers.

"Man, I'm so sorry. My buddy Max over there is such a klutz." The stranger smiled as if he'd never felt pain at all.

Sullivan mustered the easy, relaxed mask he'd mastered in the last few months. "Don't worry about it," he said as he tossed the disc back.

The golden boy ran off, slapping the assumed Max on the shoulder as they dashed across the beach, gracefully tossing the disc again. Sullivan knew he had once been just like them, but he didn't remember it. He had gone to college on a lacrosse scholarship and played until he'd

gotten Diana pregnant junior year. Surely that easy athleticism still slept in him, hibernating for some other life that wasn't coming.

It's not coming, he reminded himself. There's no escape here.

As he allowed the hopeless thoughts to wash over him, the sun's warmth bathed him in its own unique peace. Exhausted, he fell asleep.

When he woke, the crowds had thinned. The sun hung directly overhead, and he knew most had gone to lunch, escaping this hottest hour of the day. He didn't mind it. His caramel skin soaked up the heat like a desert cactus.

Only a few groups remained, and one was a handful of beautiful girls thronged under a tent. They looked at him, giggling. He attempted a weak, acknowledging smile, hoping they understood his emotional eligibility was long expired. But the most beautiful of the group was nudged by her friend, and she nervously ducked under the tent and walked toward him. Sullivan braced himself.

"Hi," she said cheerfully as she approached him. "My friends and I were wondering; do you live around here?"

She had a sweet Southern accent pushed delicately from behind full pink lips. Soft copper tendrils, framed by sunny blonde strands, fell around her oval face. Sullivan couldn't deny she was beautiful, but he could do nothing with it.

"I do," he replied. Did he sound warm? How could he tell anymore?

She blushed, "We're in town for the long weekend and were wondering where we should go out tonight. Do you have any suggestions?"

Sullivan couldn't help but smirk. Once, the town's nightlife called him like a siren. He recalled all those nights as if they were dreams.

“Food or music?” he asked, hoping she would distract herself long enough for him to form a genuine answer.

The girl shrugged, twisting a lock of hair around her finger. “Both, I guess.”

Sullivan’s memory whip-lashed as he recalled a specific night – Diana dazzling in a yellow dress, crowned with a floppy sun hat. He was haunted by the sudden vibrancy of what used to be. But he could not share that moment with this girl, so he would not send her there.

“Try Smelly’s on West Beach Boulevard. Live band, great drinks, and a killer oyster bar.”

She smiled appreciatively and tossed a lock of salty curls behind her shoulder. “Sounds terrific. Will you be there?”

Sullivan flickered a glance at the ocean. “No,” he said. “I won’t be there.”

The girl lifted an eyebrow, puzzled by his cold shift. A panicked laugh crept from the corners of her mouth as she regained focus. “Well,” she chimed, “my friends and I will be there if you decide to make it out. That girl in the blue suit – Alexa – it’s her bachelorette trip.”

Sullivan looked back at the tent of bridesmaids, who were all still looking on in anticipation. He raised his can of Diet Coke to the one in blue. “Tell her *mazel tov*,” he said to the girl still lingering by him. His tone, though congratulatory, let her know he was not interested in further conversation. Weakly, she smiled finally and loped back to her friends with less vigor than when she’d come over to him earlier.

Sullivan did not want to hurt her. He had never been intentionally spiteful, and he knew his predicament had nothing to do with anyone around him. Still, this girl shook him. She poked at a part of his brain he’d tried to turn off almost a year ago. He had to get rid of her – whatever it took – for her own good.

Ignoring icy glares from the bridal party, Sullivan rose and stretched his legs for the first time that morning. His muscles were tight; they had been for a long time now. Every muscle was tense, every joint brittle, every bone on the brink of snap. He closed his eyes and inhaled as the gulls flew a sea breeze past him. He walked toward the water, only close enough to graze each incoming wave with his toes. He surveyed the sand beneath him, wondering how long his feet would be able to touch it later.

At the corner of his vision, something caught his attention. He blinked twice, knowing he could not have seen what he thought he saw. Suddenly alert, Sullivan took three long steps across the shore to a mound buried under the sand. He knelt, sand digging into his knees like glass, and shook his head in disbelief.

Trembling, he uncovered the shiny lump. A tear slid down his face. In his hand perched a Junonia shell the size of a baseball. Diana searched for one of these shells every day after they made this beach their home and never found one. Now, pure porcelain ivory dotted with oak brown spots, the shell had come to Sullivan, willingly and without a fight.

Sullivan clutched the fragile trophy and peered out over the ocean. Was this a sign? Did Diana want him to go on without her, even if it meant haunting the beach like a ghost?

Sullivan shook himself free from the conflict. *No*, he thought. If anything, the shell was a sign that he had made the right choice. If he held it up to his ear, he'd hear Diana, calling him away. He and the shell could trade places now, it finally above water and him forever below.

The shell was sleek as a diamond, and Sullivan carefully hid the treasure away in his pocket as he turned back for his chair. A kite flew as the bridesmaids packed up their cabana. The Stewarts turned in for the evening. As the sun set, most guests left, but a few new ones

came, lighting bonfires and eating pizza from cardboard boxes. They laughed and drank and danced in a way Sullivan accepted he never would again.

Yet he watched them all, and he loved and hated them at the same time. Behind each smile was a *joie de vie* he eerily remembered. The years had been kind to him, when they weren't cruel.

Ruefully, he plucked at the silky strings of the ukulele he carried with him to the sand every day. The instrument yielded a minor, meek melody under his will. It was humbly beautiful. No one around seemed to be listening, but they would have noticed if he stopped.

It did not end; Sullivan played until the last tipsy spring-breaker was carried off by her biceped friends. Finally alone, Sullivan set the instrument down and rose. He inhaled the perfect smell and temperature of the Gulf's air. The ocean was his last chance. One foot methodically in front of the other, he began walking.

"Sullivan!"

He jumped, turning like a child with his hand caught in the cookie jar. Mrs. Tammy Stewart stood behind him, wrapped in her robe. She was holding a gaudy porcelain plate piled high with cookies.

"Oh, sweetheart, I didn't mean to scare you! Bless your heart. John and I were just turning in when I saw you out here. I thought you might want a white chocolate macadamia nut cookie. Just baked this evening, so they should still be warm!" Tammy smiled with motherly affection. Her ignorance pained him.

Sullivan did not want his task to be interrupted, but Tammy's offer – and her kindness – were irresistible.

He smiled painfully and took one. "Thank you, Mrs. Tammy."

Tammy looked at him as if she expected him to eat it in front of her. Realizing he wouldn't, she continued talking. "Our grandkids are coming in tomorrow. These are their favorite treats, but I can make more if you want to take some home for the night! I'd be lying if I said I'd never had one for breakfast."

Sullivan shook his head, "Oh no, one is plenty. I'm not big on breakfast."

Tammy smiled and looked around the silent beach. "These cookies are kind of Hawaiian, aren't they?"

Sullivan shrugged.

"Well, John and I thought about retiring there, but we just didn't want to be so far from family. That's really the best thing about life, isn't it?"

Sullivan gulped, swallowing cold salt air. "Yes ma'am," he agreed. "It is."

Tammy nodded in satisfaction and patted him on the arm. "I'll leave you to enjoy this pretty night, then."

"Thank you again, Mrs. Tammy."

She waved gently as she trod off across the sand. Sullivan turned back to the ocean just as she called to him again.

"And Sullivan!"

His head swiveled on his shoulders.

"You're welcome in our home any time, sweetie. I know things have been...hard...for you lately. But John and I would do anything for you, you got it?"

He smiled at her more genuinely this time. "Thank you."

Sullivan watched her until she slipped through the door on her back deck. He was crying. Remembering the cookie in his hand, he took a bite. It was the first thing he'd eaten all day and

the best thing he'd eaten since his wife died. He was happy it'd be the last thing he would ever taste. As he finished the cookie, he stared at the purple house until the last light flickered off.

A gull cried, calling his attention back to the ocean. He slipped off the jacket he'd put on at sunset, folded it, and placed it on the seat of his beach chair. He set the ukulele on top. He looked at what he was leaving behind; he hoped someone would find them and use them. The only thing in his pocket was the Junonia. Despite his instinct to leave it for a lucky shell collector, he could not bear to part with it. He wrapped his cold fingers around it as he walked purposefully toward the black waves. *It will guide me to wherever I'm going*, he thought.

The water lapping at his ankles was colder than he expected. He slowed, inching himself deeper – to the shins, then the knees, then the hem of his shorts, then the waist – until the foam settled around his collarbone. He stood still and felt his body cool to match the ocean. Seconds or minutes or hours passed as he stared blankly across a watery grave. After one blink: complete darkness. Another: rippling, black waves, plunging Diana's research vessel beneath their currents. It was that moment – that memory, that vision, that nightmare – which brought him here, face to face with the only thing that could end it forever.

The water around him prickled less and less the longer he stood. Almost in a trance, he moved one leg forward in a long, reaching step. The water lapped at his lower lip, and he took a deep breath, realizing immediately that instinct could make his task more difficult soon. He was numb to what he was doing now, which solidified his decision. This apathy was as overwhelming as the ocean, and though it was not happiness, it was not the sadness he was used to, either. He took one more giant step forward, reaching for the sea floor with his bare feet. Water tickled the openings of his nostrils, as if begging to be let inside his airways.

Sullivan realized he'd chosen a slow, stubborn death. He understood now how his body would fight and how his mind would need to overrule its instincts. For the first time in a year, he said a prayer: *Let me surrender easily.*

Seaweed tickled his shins as he began stretching forward again. Purposefully, he did not take another breath as the water covered the rest of his face. *Let me surrender easily.*

He kept his eyes open underwater, but in the darkness the waves hid all the ocean's secrets. Reaching exhausted arms forward, he parted the currents and kicked his legs, swimming as far and as deep as he could while he still had oxygen. The tighter his lungs ached for air, the harder he pushed his body down and down and down.

Head fuzzy, his last conscious thoughts were if Diana had fought for her life in these same waters. *Please give her back to me. Please let me surrender easily.*

As his body began to release him into unconsciousness, he felt at peace with the end. He allowed his eyes to close and focused on the feeling of the water all around him. *Easily.*

And in his last conscious second, he assumed he imagined the hand that wrapped around his ankle.

Chapter Two

Beneath the waves, a precocious sunrise woke the creatures of the deep. The water's depths were far greater than the sun's light or warmth could touch, but its rays of power over the whole world influenced even the ocean's keepers. Eura felt its rising call as morning began. Her eyes flickered beneath amethyst lashes, deciphering the blurred forms around her.

Her fingers brushed the feathered fringes of the vibrant orange coral bed she was nestled in. As she stirred, a small school of bluemouth rockfish woke and whirled by her head. She smiled peacefully, allowing the morning to wake her in its own time. She closed her eyes again.

As soon as she began to drift back to sleep, a sharp panic overtook her. The jade scales along her tail prickled. Someone was here. She felt their presence slowly coming toward her.

Motionless as possible, Eura stealthily closed her fingers around the obsidian dagger hidden beneath the coral's tendrils.

Eura could feel the intruder hovering over her head now. She knew if this was an enemy, she had one opportunity to stay alive. Steadying herself, she swiftly sprung from the coral bed and plunged the stranger into the cave wall, dagger poised in hand.

"Eura! It's me! I did not want to wake you!"

Naida trembled as Eura released her grip and let out a sigh.

"I would have rather you woke me than die! Don't you know Aorato has men searching the seven corners of the deep for me?"

Naida bowed, clearly troubled, "Of course, my queen. But there's something urgent I must tell you."

Eura softened at Naida's formality. "Friend, there's no need to address me in such a way."

Naida shook her head, “My queen – Eura – by the depths, it does not matter! Eura, I bring news! We have found the beacon!”

Eura stared at Naida as if to discern whether this was the truth.

“The beacon? I thought it was a myth.”

Naida was nearly trembling again, “My lady, so did I. I never thought I’d lay eyes on it, but we are clearly in the Spirits’ favor.”

Eura’s tail flickered in disbelief. Its scales were tingling again. “Show it to me,” she said.

Naida’s disposition shifted immediately. “My lady, I am not sure...”

“Are you mad? One minute you call me your queen, yet now you will keep me from the one thing that could save us all?” Eura’s natural evenness cracked beneath her anticipation.

Naida stood firm, suddenly made bold by the weight of her message. “Eura, it was brought by a human.”

Eura, swimming furiously in circles, stopped cold. Her bare shoulders felt the temperature of the dark water more acutely than ever before.

“A human? Male or female?”

Naida spoke as if she too was in disbelief. “A male, my queen.”

The dagger clutched in Eura’s hand sank to the floor.

“The prophecy is true, then.” Her seafoam eyes began to see black stars as emotion overwhelmed her.

Naida stood silently in a crevice of the cave as Eura’s face warped from wonder to intense concentration. She began to swim in circles again.

“What are the next steps, my queen?” Naida asked.

Without interrupting her movement, Eura recited the plan she'd been making in her head for what seemed like a lifetime. "We must alert the rest of the Seven Sisters immediately. Have Beata gather messengers; I want them all traveling in pairs, with a dolphin or manatee. By the Spirits, we cannot let Aorato intercept a single one of them."

Naida whipped her tail, sending a current of ultrasonic waves to call Beata. "Of course, my queen. And the man?"

"He comes with me. He will need the utmost protection on the way to Trigona."

Naida furrowed her brow. "My lady, what if he will not go?"

"Will not go?" Eura repeated. "He must. The prophecy requires it."

"He is not exactly..." Naida struggled to find the words for Eura.

Eura raised a frustrated eyebrow, and Naida felt like shrinking beneath her gaze.

Finally, she spit out, "...conscious, my lady."

Eura became even more annoyed. "Did you wave Rosario's chum collection in his face and cause him to faint, Naida?"

"No, no, of course not! He was this way when we found him, but we cannot seem to wake him, madam."

Just as she spoke, the stone at the cave's entrance rolled away to admit Beata. Her silvery hair whipped in the water behind her, and her chest heaved above her red tail. "You called, my ladies?"

Eura spoke, "Beata, a male human has brought the beacon to us. We must notify the Seven Sisters so they can meet us at Trigona."

A fire lit behind Beata's eyes. "By the seas, the prophecy will be fulfilled after all! I'll gather messengers, Eura. I assume you want the maids sent in groups with extra protection. Would you like me to go to the Arctic or Mediterranean?"

"Neither, Beata," Eura said. "I need you and Naida with me. We must protect the man, and we have no warrior greater than you."

Beata bowed respectfully. "I will send out the messenger maids and meet you in the Sanctuary, my queen." Hurriedly, she was gone from the cave as quickly as she came.

Naida's eyes flashed in jealousy as she watched Eura's admiring gaze follow Beata. The two of them had always been closer than she and Eura, and nothing she could do seemed to put her at Beata's level. Clearing her throat, she regained Eura's attention. "The man is in the Sanctuary now, my queen. Isla and some other maids are tending to him."

Eura picked the obsidian dagger off the floor and folded it into the pouch hanging where her ivory waist met her tail. She waved her hand over a blocked cavern in the tunnel, and stones immediately rolled out of the way, sending sand in clouds through the water. "Take me to him."

Naida swam ahead of her through the cavernous tunnels, and Eura followed closely behind. She knew the way to the Sanctuary herself, but her shaking hands were not the first thing she wanted the maids tending to the man to see. No matter how terrified, she must always be the queen they made her.

As the tight tunnels began to widen, the Sanctuary came into Eura's view. Rock walls wrapped the room in a circle, sprouting into crystals at every crevice. Bioluminescent algae clung to the rock and bathed the room in a blue hue the ocean itself envied. Magnificent, ancient shells were set up in shrines to the Seven Seas. No matter how many times she entered, the Sanctuary always filled Eura with awe. It did the same for almost every mermaid in the Gulf, but

at this moment, dozens of them huddled crowdedly in the dead center, completely oblivious to the wonder around them.

The crowds parted slowly as Eura swam closer to the middle of the room. "Pardon me, my queen," was embarrassingly and humbly muttered in a low hum. Eura's path was finally clear enough for her to see the body of a human man sprawled limply on the floor, the beacon clutched loosely in his hand.

His face, relaxed beneath unconsciousness, was more handsome than Eura had imagined, though it was disguised in thick, black stubble and generous curls. His torso and feet were bare. Eura now understood why her maids had been paying more attention to this alien of a man than the Sanctuary's lights. Isla did not move from his side even as Eura approached.

"You found him, Isla?"

Isla jumped at the address, her concentration on the man finally breaking. "What? Oh, my queen, I beg your pardon. Yes, I found him sinking to the ocean floor. When I saw him, I...he was just so lovely. I couldn't bear to let him die."

Eura nodded in understanding. "You spoke the *anima* spell, then?"

Isla choked back a sob. "I felt sorry for him, my queen. I had no idea he held the beacon."

Eura's eyes flashed to the man's listless hand.

"Have any of you touched it?" Her question was underlined with threat.

A murmur arose from the crowd, but no answer came forward. Eura turned to face her citizens. As she surveyed them all, not an eye met her gaze.

"I need not repeat myself, ladies!"

The mermaids seemed to get impossibly closer to each other in the already conglomerated mass until one spoke.

“Of course we haven’t, Eura.”

A gasped uproar arose from the mermaids. “How dare you address her so casually, Cora!” one maid screeched. As soon as the words left her mouth, she erupted in sobs. Three maids near her wrapped their arms around her as her head fell to her hands.

Eura tightened her jaw. “I appreciate your concern for my honor, Rosario. As you were saying, Cora.”

Cora’s nostrils flared as her garnet eyes flickered with passion. “We have not, *my queen*.” The title dripped from her tongue like hot oil. “Isla threatened to sell us into the shark trade if we came close.”

A few stray chuckles bubbled from the group, but Eura’s voice soon drowned them. “She did well, for the prophecy condemns anyone who touches the beacon besides the human.”

The mention of the prophecy brought the room to dead silence again. Rosario’s crying stopped long enough for her to look at Eura with wide eyes. “My queen, what would have happened if one of us touched it?”

“The prophecy does not specifically say,” Eura replied grimly. “It only implies a deadly fate.”

Isla stayed crouched at the man’s side, eyes fixed on the beacon as if in a trance. Eura swam closer and bent down to her. She could see the viscous mermaid tear stains paved on her face like craggy roads.

Softly, she whispered to the maid, “You have done well, Isla. What happens to this man is my responsibility now.”

Isla wrinkled her nose in a snuffle. “You don’t understand, my queen. There are some things about the prophecy...” Gentle sobs began taking over.

Eura placed her hand gently on Isla's back. "Peace, my friend."

Isla heaved in a deep lungful of water and steadied herself. She met Eura's gaze with a steely glare and gravely said, "There are things about the prophecy you don't yet understand, my queen."

Eura felt a block of ice grow in her chest. She knew Isla was right, but she dared not let anyone in the Sanctuary know. "I am confident in my study of the prophecy, Isla. We will do what needs to be done to see it fulfilled."

Beata emerged from the crowd, seeing the human for the first time. If Eura had not known her so well, she might have missed Beata's mouth slightly opening in wonder before her face returned to its even expression. With her hands still on her back, Eura brought Isla upright. Beata quickly met the two and took the shaky Isla in her arms. Eura nodded to her, Beata's ability to understand her needs over the comfort.

As she drew closer to the human alone, Eura heard Cora's sharp voice rise from the crowd again. "Might I remind you, my queen, the prophecy requires the man to be conscious."

"Silence, Cora!" Beata snapped, her iron voice rippling through the crowd. She had not been present for Cora's first disrespect, but she would not allow it now. "The queen needs no reminder!" And Cora, being only afraid of Beata, took a step back into the crowd.

Eura reached a hesitant hand to the man's chest. His honey skin was smooth under her touch. She could feel her heart racing as she spread her fingers into a flat palm. Pressing down against his chest, she felt life energy leaving her.

"You're confident in your *anima*, Isla?" She asked. Isla nodded surely.

Eura pressed down harder, a faint pink glow emanating from beneath her outstretched hand. Every speck of hope in her wavered the longer she touched him.

With a gasp, the man sat upright, sputtering with the new feeling of water in his lungs. Realizing he was not drowning, he opened his eyes to Eura in front of him. He furrowed his brow and blinked hard until a raspy voice sprang from his throat.

“Diana?”

Chapter Three

A strange twinge ran down Eura's spine, and she stared at the mysterious man with simultaneous intrigue and indignation. Her mouth twitched as she sputtered, "I beg your pardon?"

The man suddenly rose, his dark brow furrowing as he examined Eura's face. She held his gaze and watched his expression change from shock to adoration. He seemed almost familiar to her, like she had dreamt about eyes like his once years ago but could not recall the details. He dropped his face, surveying her torso and tail. When his eyes met hers again, they were glazed with confusion. Inching closer, he reached a hand to her face.

Beata jumped to action, putting herself between the man and Eura as the rest of the maids pressed in closer. An icy hiss of shock rolled from their tongues.

The man lowered his hand, his eyes still glowing with wonder. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to touch my wife."

Eura and the rest of the crowd prickled at his words. His voice was still slightly hoarse but was becoming deeper and richer as he adjusted to the water.

For once, words would not come to the queen. Finally, Beata spoke, "Sir, you are poorly mistaken. This is Eura, our leader. She is merfolk; you are human. She cannot be your wife."

The man seemed not to hear Beata. He craned his neck around her and stared squarely at Eura. "Diana, please. It's me, Sullivan." He stopped suddenly and then choked on his words. "Diana, you have no idea what it's been like without you. Don't you recognize me?"

The mermaids' eyes widened at the pleading pain in his voice. They, too, stared at Eura, waiting for her to answer the man. Even Beata turned toward her.

Eura blinked, shaking herself from stupor. Her voice's authority was restored. "Sir, I am not who you think I am. Isla, take this man to the alcove and prepare him for the journey." Without a second glance, she turned from the group and fled the Sanctuary, the man calling after her.

"Diana, wait! Please, it's me! You have to recognize me!" Beata restrained the now vehement man as Isla tried to soothe him through tears. "Sullivan, come now, let's go," she muttered.

The room was frenzied as the maids stared after Eura, speculating loudly.

"*Silence!*" Beata's voice reverberated off the illuminated walls, sending waves so strong most maids covered their ears. "Everyone, go about your business *now*. The queen will send for you if she has need." The room emptied as if the waves' currents had swept each maid away.

Sullivan still gazed at the spot Eura stood moments ago. "Diana, Diana," he almost whispered. Isla looked desperately at Beata for help.

Beata stayed silent, unsure how to respond to the man. Finally, Isla could take his torment no longer. "Sullivan. You will see Eura again soon. For now, you must come with me so I can prepare you for the journey, all right? These seas are not kind to humans, and you must be protected. Do you understand?"

Sullivan looked at Isla as if seeing her for the first time. "I'll see her again? You swear?"

Isla smiled, but Sullivan's urgency chilled Beata to the core. She had never seen someone so desperate, so in need of one thing. She feared the lengths he would go to for it. "We swear by the Seven Sisters," she said quietly.

Appeased, Sullivan allowed Isla to lead him out of the Sanctuary. Beata watched after them until they left. As she stood in the empty room, only seconds ago flooded with the very

mystery and expectation of the prophecy itself, she breathed out a cool sigh. Only one thought filled her head: *I must protect Eura*. But for the first time, she was unsure exactly what she must protect her from: the dangers of Aorato's ocean or this human man.

Off the main corridor leading to the Sanctuary sat a small, craggy room hidden by magic. Eura had discovered it what felt like ages ago, when a spat broke out between two maids. It was one of the first times Eura was required to mediate as queen, and though she had maintained her composure, things escalated and ended poorly. After the debacle, Eura wandered the corridor, seeking a place to be alone, when she noticed a divot in one of the rock walls. She pressed her hand to it, and the rock transformed, exposing a quiet nook laden with shimmering ocean crystals. Since then, Eura frequented it whenever she needed to escape from the depths of her responsibilities. She had only ever told one other person about it.

She floated in the room now, staring blankly at one of the opaque crystals on the wall. Her mind felt like a tsunami, thoughts rushing against each other until they all converged into one overpowering wave.

A flash of movement near the nook's hidden entrance made Eura's heart leap. As realization overtook her, she breathed out a low sigh of relief and grinned.

"You surprised me, my friend," she said as Beata entered the room.

Beata looked at her with nurturing eyes. "How are you feeling, Eura?"

Eura's eyebrows raised over wide eyes as she shook her head. "How should I be feeling?"

Beata paused before speaking. "How much do the maids know of the prophecy?"

“Little. Only Isla knows the full extent of it, since she was the one it came through.” Eura rested her eyes finally on Beata, relieved to share the truth with someone she loved. “I’m not even sure I know everything it means.”

Beata motioned to a cut out rock in the corner, urging Eura to rest. As the two sat, Beata pondered aloud. “Must it be this way?”

Eura tried to ignore her. “Beata, what the man was saying about me, I –” all at once, Eura seemed to be caught on her thought, overwhelmed with an emotion Beata couldn’t quite comprehend. She placed a hand firmly on her shoulder.

“Eura, tell me what you know of the prophecy that I don’t. If I don’t know the danger, I can’t protect you from it.”

Eura gulped. The salt water cooled her throat and settled her for just a moment. As she looked at Beata, a comfort overcame her long enough for her to feel secure.

“Who am I, Beata?”

Beata blinked, taken aback by Eura’s question. “You are our queen, Eura.”

“But who was I before then? I have no memories of my old life at all!”

Beata rose, disturbed and insistent. “Eura, you know that is what happens when one of our kind becomes queen! She’s chosen from a far-off sea, trained, and made to know only her new tribe. That’s how it always has been.”

Eura felt a hot rush of anger. “What sea did I come from, then?”

Beata continued to deny Eura’s sudden insistence. “My queen, I beg your pardon?”

With her voice sharp as cut crystal, Eura repeated her question. “What sea did I come from? Surely if the Sisters chose me for the Gulf, they must know where they found me. Did they not tell you when they placed me on the throne?”

Brow furrowed, Beata thought. Slowly, she replied, “No, Eura. I don’t suppose they did.”

“And you did not think to ask them? None of you had any desire to know about your new queen?”

A dark realization dawned across Beata’s face. She was utterly dumbfounded.

Eura noticed the panicked hurt in her friend’s eyes and cooled herself down. Now was her turn to comfort. “Beata, I don’t mean to ask such harsh things of you. I am simply trying to understand what the prophecy means and what the rest of the Seven Sisters require of me.”

Beata’s wheels still turned. “No. No, they didn’t tell us where you came from. They didn’t tell us *anything* about you, and we did not ask.” She looked up at Eura with a new pleading anguish. “But Eura, listen to me. There is no way you are who that man says you are. Isla’s *anima* spell must have confused him. You manifest the way of the sea better than anyone I have ever known. You *can* fulfill the prophecy, and you know you must.”

Eura felt the viscous mermaid tears push against her eyelids again. “I hope you’re right, Beata. But I’m so afraid you’re not.”

“Inhale.”

Sullivan could not focus on Isla in front of him. His eyes continually darted to the Sanctuary door where he swore he saw a ghost just moments ago, the ghost he’d been yearning to see for what felt like an eternity.

“Sullivan. Inhale!”

His attention snapped back to Isla. Her face was small and softly angled. Her eyes looked as if they’d been replaced with emeralds, and her honey-colored hair swayed with the currents.

“Do you feel your lungs adjusting to the water yet?”

Sullivan had not thought about his lungs. He realized he was miraculously breathing under water, yes, but all that paled in comparison to the possible miracle of Diana.

“Sullivan?”

He looked fervently into Isla’s eyes. “Where is she?”

Isla sighed. Her anxiety increased as the departure to Trigona loomed. “You will see her again when the time comes.”

“Listen, lady, you don’t understand.” Sullivan spoke urgently. “That mermaid, *your queen*, looks just like my dead wife.”

Isla blinked at him. “Your question is?”

Sullivan clenched his fists as the shock of his time underwater turned to rage. Teeth gritted and voice low, he said, “My question is: is she my wife?”

“She is our queen.”

“That’s pretty evident by now, but that doesn’t give me any answers.”

Isla sighed, backing away from Sullivan. “I can tell you nothing but the prophecy, and you clearly have no desire to hear it.”

“Fine.” Sullivan moved to a corner of the room and sat down on the rocky ground. “Tell me about this *prophecy*, then.” The word fell thickly from his tongue.

Isla’s eyes grew wide. She looked at him in disbelief, as if she had never expected him to want to listen to her. Sullivan saw the panic in her eyes, which then clouded with tears.

“Hey, wait a minute,” he said as he stood up and went toward her. His voice was gentler than it was a moment ago. “I’m sorry. I thought you wanted to tell me about it.”

Isla struggled with the tears and pursed her lips shut tightly.

“You’re the one who rescued me, right?”

She nodded, looking at the ground.

“I was trying to kill myself, you know. But you saved me. Unless I’m dead and this is just afterlife-dreaming right now, or something weird like that.”

Isla grinned faintly.

“Did you save me because of the prophecy?”

She tilted her head reflectively, then moved it up and down in a nod.

“Tell me more about it,” he said.

She sniffed, then motioned for him to sit down again. Her head tilted toward the ceiling as she composed herself. Sullivan could tell her mind was spinning. Finally, she took a deep gulp and spoke.

“Many years ago, the Seven Sisters ruled all the waters of the Earth peacefully—”

Sullivan held up a hand. “Wait. The what sisters?”

Isla looked at him intensely. “The Seven Sisters, one ruler for each of the Seven Seas. Gulf, Indian, Mediterranean, and so on.” She shuddered. “But please, Sullivan, there is *much* for me to say. You will understand later if you are patient with me.”

Sullivan bowed his head, willing her to continue.

“All the tribes of the Seven Seas lived together in harmony. Whenever a dispute arose, the Sisters held council amongst themselves and solved it cordially. In those days, the Gulf had a different ruler. Her name was Mira.”

“What happened to her?”

Isla opened her mouth, but no words came out. She pressed her hand to her face.

“Forgive me, Sullivan. These events are painful to recount.”

He sat silently, giving her time to speak again.

“Mira was a beautiful, brilliant queen, but her heart was deceived by Aorato.” Isla spit out the name like acid.

Sullivan couldn't keep himself from interrupting her. “I know you said things will make sense later, but who is Aorato?”

“...evil,” Isla muttered. Her eyes glazed over, fixing on something far off Sullivan could not see.

“Isla.” His voice saying her name brought her back to the moment. “Who is Aorato?”

Her voice was no longer trembling, but her words were hot as fire. “Aorato came to the Gulf from far away and tricked Mira into believing he was a human. When she first saw him, he seemed lovely – innocent, even. None of us had ever seen a human man, so we did not know he was deceiving us.”

Sullivan shook his head, grasping at the details of the story. “Time out. If this guy isn't a mermaid – er, *merman* – and he isn't a human, what is he?”

Isla suddenly spat ferociously at the ground. “He is a *monster*. Some say he's half human, half shark, the son of Hades, or some unholy combination. Whatever he is, he should have never been born!”

Sullivan nodded slowly. *Hades? Shark people? There's no way I'm not dead right now.*

“Shall I go on?” Isla had a new vigor in her voice, which surprised Sullivan.

“Absolutely.”

She inhaled and continued. “Aorato promised Mira that if she gave him her power of the Sisters, the two of them could bridge the divide between humans and merfolk and unite land and sea, ruling the whole world as one. The old ways of the Sisterhood would be abolished, and a new oceanic order would be established.”

Sullivan patted his folded legs with flat palms. “Clearly that never happened.”

“No,” Isla said gravely. “But Mira did give her powers to him, forfeiting her place in the Seven Sisters. She did not realize what she was doing...”

Isla closed her eyes tightly, clearly envisioning ugly memories. Sullivan kept quiet again.

“For a few weeks, Mira thought Aorato was keeping his promises, but the moment she realized what the rest of us already knew, his next movements were set in stone. She challenged him, in the very Sanctuary where we stood moments ago, and he slit her throat with an onyx blade.”

Sullivan felt his lower jaw go slack as his mouth opened. The ocean was so metal.

“He killed her. What – I mean how – where did he go? Why didn’t he kill all of you?”

As Isla looked at him, he could tell she was troubled, more so now than she had been even recounting her former queen’s murder. She closed her eyes, keeping them shut as she began speaking again.

“He would have. But then...” she winced as if the memory was more than she could bear.

Sullivan moved closer to her and placed a cool hand on her arm. At his touch, her eyes moved to where his fingers rested, and she stilled herself.

“Shortly before Mira died, I fell into a trance. I saw a vision – horrible things happening to our tribe at Aorato’s hands. I saw him in his true form, uncloaked by whatever shapeshifting magic he had been using to manipulate her. When it was over, I knew we all must hide. I summoned Beata, who evacuated everyone to our cavern tunnel system, while I looked for Mira.”

Here she paused again, flooded with the emotion of her loss.

“I found her, but it was too late. I opened the Sanctuary door just as Aorato held the knife to her neck.”

Sullivan lifted an eyebrow. “You saw it? And you survived?”

Isla nodded painfully. “He turned to look at me as Mira slumped to the floor. The water clouded with her blood, and I was petrified by the monstrosity before me. I’ll never forget those burning red eyes, thirsty for my blood, too.”

Sullivan blinked as he tried to process the intensity of her story. “Isla, how did you escape?”

Isla scoffed and nearly smirked. “That is the question that haunts me as I fall asleep each night and pulls me from my dreams the next morning.”

She turned away from him, now reeling with her recollection. “The prophecy saved me.”

“What do you mean the prophecy saved you? I know you all think it’s a big deal, but –”

Isla whipped back around to face him again, her eyes growing into lightbulb sized orbs.

“The prophecy saved me because I began to speak it into *existence*! Just like before, I was in another trance, but this time I could feel my body lifting high in the water, rising above Aorato toward the very ceiling of the Sanctuary’s rock walls! As I spoke, a light radiated from me I’ve never seen before, bluer than all the algae of our reef. The vision showed me years of Aorato’s harsh reign. Blood, sharks, betrayal: I saw it all!” Her voice rose into a high-pitched panic as she elaborated, but then she caught herself. She paused, and when she spoke again her voice was hushed.

“But then I saw him falling, deep down into some kind of pit bursting with orange and red beams.”

“Like fire?” Sullivan asked?

“Fire...” Isla trailed off. “Yes, I have heard of the fire of the human world. Perhaps like fire. But that pit was his destruction.”

Sullivan began to wonder where he fit into this. “Do you remember the words you were speaking, the actual prophecy?”

Isla smiled. “*The terror ends at human hands, the Beacon ever as the ocean’s last stand.*”

Sullivan gulped. “Was that all of it?”

Isla’s face fell. “By the seas, no. But there are certain things the Seven Sisters have forbidden me to share.”

He nodded, slowly becoming more aware of the reason Isla rescued him. “And when you finished speaking the prophecy, where was Aorato?”

Isla shrugged. “Gone.”

Sullivan furrowed his brow. “Wait, so how do we know this guy is even still alive?”

“Oh, believe me, Sullivan, whatever magic the seas used in my deliverance of the prophecy to make him disappear did not keep him down. With Mira’s death, the power of the Sisters was compromised. Even though some of it has now been given to Eura, he has twisted and warped the portion he stole. No one is safe outside of her colony. These are dark waters now.”

Sullivan’s hand instinctively moved to his pocket, and he remembered the Junonia shell. He wrapped his fingers around it and placed it on the sand in front of him, its ivory base glistening against the room’s crystal glow.

“This is it, huh? Me and a shell, the key to the survival of mermaid-kind...”

Isla smiled sadly, her brow knitting together as she gazed at the shell. “Eura can tell you about the importance of the beacon on your journey.”

She did not look at him as she spoke, and he noticed. For the first time since he met Isla, he felt she was not being completely truthful. “Isla, is there something else you need to tell me?”

“What?” She was once again snapped out of some apparent trance, a habit he was beginning to notice. “No. I – not for now.” She smiled weakly.

Before he could push her, the doors to the cove’s entrance swung wide open. Beata stood in the doorway, her strong red tail a sudden powerful presence. Her silver hair swayed behind her, as if it was frantically trying to keep up with the rest of her body.

“Is the man ready?” She asked tensely.

Isla glanced at Sullivan with hesitation. “He could use more time, but...”

Beata stopped her before she could elaborate. “We don’t have it. Calypso has arrived.”

Chapter Four

As the sun set over the coast of Sicily, the ocean's shadows quieted the activity of the Mediterranean mermaids. Each of them slowly drifted to their own caverns and clefts, while their leader, Acantha, waited anxiously in her chambers.

Her fingers, flecked with shimmering black scales, drummed intently upon the shells of her throne. She felt a shift in the sea's energy hours ago, and since then a rising uneasiness had been eating at her.

A swift, fluid movement caught her eye, and Acantha's neck snapped to attention. She felt herself deflate. Her pet ray had woken and swam toward her. She grazed the top of its silky back as she continued to wait.

Acantha huffed. She had sent searchers out well before nightfall, even giving some of them permission to walk among the humans of the coastal town. Surely someone – in the ocean or on land – had noticed the same change she had and was talking about it. Where were they all now?

Her answer came with a knock on her chamber door.

"Enter!" Acantha's voice was tense, shrill with anticipation. An amber-colored mermaid peeked around the door, her head low and eyes down like a worried animal.

"Speak!"

The maid's head bowed even lower. "The huntresses have captured a messenger, your majesty."

Acantha sat up straighter. "A messenger? From which sea?"

"The Gulf, majesty." The timid maid trained her eyes at a salt crystal on the ground.

"Chrysoberyl has her in the trench now."

As Acantha unfurled herself from her throne, the maid lingered at the door. “Did I ask you anything else? Go! Speak of this to no one!”

The maid backed out of the room at torpedo speed, a flash of faint orange trailing behind her as her tail whipped the waves.

Acantha turned to the mirror on the wall. Her inky eyes darkened as she ran a hand through black hair. She surveyed the onyx and sapphire scales that curled from her chest to her tail and smiled. She had not seen the Gulf’s new queen, but she had no doubt she was the most beautiful of all the Seven Sisters; she’d been told so by the ruler of the ocean himself.

The Mediterranean’s floor was stacked in flat, overlapping plates beneath her as she swam toward the trench. She moved deliberately, hyperaware of her maids resting for the night in their nooks. Their trust was of vital importance.

Acantha looked in every direction when she reached the trench. With no one in sight, she lowered herself between two rocky plates and immediately smelled the refreshing aroma of sea salt. Utter blackness overtook her. She closed her eyes, lifted her hands, and snapped. As her fingertips licked each other ferociously, tiny lights erupted through the trench’s narrow tunnel.

At the end of the rocky stretch, she could see Chrysoberyl. Her back was toward her, and her head was craned over something crouched on the floor beneath her.

Acantha swam up to her slowly. As she approached, she could see the limp figure of a pale blue mermaid. Her face was contorted in pain as Chrysoberyl’s eyes bore into her.

“Chrysoberyl.” Though she would have surely noticed Acantha’s presence when she lit the trench, Chrysoberyl startled, her eyes ungluing from the pitiful mermaid. She looked up at Acantha with cold, ochre eyes.

“Majesty,” she said with a chilling smile, “this one won’t talk.”

Even Acantha shivered as she knelt closer to the foreign maid. She could see thick tears tracking down the creature's face. In a low voice, she said, "Tell us what message you came to deliver."

The mermaid kept her eyes shut tightly and gingerly shook her head. Acantha looked up at Chrysoberyl.

"Had you played by the rules, she would have spoken freely, you fool! She would have trusted me, as one of the Seven Sisters. You have jeopardized us."

Chrysoberyl remained unflinching, her sadistic gaze still set on the Gulf maid.

"Very well," Acantha said. She stretched a hand toward the maid's face but stopped it just inches away. A bolt of shocking blue light emanated from her palm. The maid shook, struggling against Acantha's force.

"You're strong, for Gulf scum," she sneered as she worked, pulling everything she could from the maid's mind. The pale blue body shook fiercely as the muscles in Acantha's hand tightened and clenched. Finally, the maid went limp again, her blonde head slumping against the ocean floor.

Acantha sighed, and a smirk pulled at the corners of her tall cheek bones. "Is that so?" she chuckled.

Chrysoberyl drew an envious, sharp breath. "Majesty, what did you see? Are we ready to summon the Invisible One?"

Ignoring her maid, Acantha spun around and faced the empty trench. She breathed in the cool water around her, closing her eyes to feel all its power. As she lifted her palms, great swirls of water formed in front of her, gathering in an ominous gray cloud. Eyes still closed, she lifted

her chin in pleasure and anticipation as the storm raged in front of her. Chrysoberyl watched on eagerly but was careful to keep her distance.

With a rush, the water halted in place. The gray cloud stood still, and Acantha opened her eyes.

“My Lord?” she said breathlessly.

Two slitted red eyes glowed in front of her, and she heard Chrysoberyl release a shocked gasp. Turning around to scold her, Acantha realized she had already dropped to the ocean floor, prostrating herself in front of the eyes.

“My Lord!” Chrysoberyl exclaimed. “Is it truly you? We are ever in your service!”

The eyes narrowed as the outline of a sharply cut face began to appear behind them. Its gaze surveyed Chrysoberyl without emotion and turned back to Acantha.

“My darling,” the cloud hissed.

Acantha smiled but felt the chill of the eel-like voice nonetheless. The trench felt instantly colder as the scales on her arms prickled.

“My Lord and my love,” she bowed her head. “I have learned news from the Gulf.”

The face in the mist was not totally composed, but its chin jutted out just far enough for Acantha to see shark teeth gritting from a blood red mouth. “The Gulf,” the mouth said mockingly. “Is it news that will bring those scum to their ruin at last?”

Acantha smiled, knowing her words would please him. “I believe so, my Lord, what with your power and my huntresses.”

“Then continue,” the icy voice said stiffly.

Acantha masked her wavering boldness. “The beacon has been located.”

The clouded face stiffened, shadows dancing over its hidden features. Acantha thought she could see a wicked smile growing in the darkness. “At last!” the voice cried. “Was it found alone?”

Acantha cocked her head and fluttered her jet-black lashes. “A human man brought it.”

With a rush of red light, the mist lifted from the face. The Gulf maid, still cowering on the ground, screamed and fainted with terror. Chrysoberyl backed away, clumsily searching for a jutting rock. Acantha held her ground.

Aorato, the Invisible One, was now in full view. Though Acantha knew he was only there in image and not body, she still thought she could feel his chilling breath against her ear as he furiously whispered, “He. Must. Die.”

“Of course, my Lord,” she continued calmly. “But how, when –”

“No matter how!” Aorato shrieked. “By the power of the ocean itself, I will find a way!”

Acantha’s nostrils flared. “The rest of the Sisters will be on their way to meet Eura and her maids now. They will form a route for Trigona.”

“And you,” the dark one said, his eyes looking lustfully at her, “will tell me every move. The Seven Sisters must continue to trust you.”

Acantha nodded in understanding. “And my own maids, as well.”

“Yes, they all must still believe you are loyal to the Seven and its seas alone. But,” he glanced at Chrysoberyl, “it seems one of them already has knowledge that could betray you.”

Chrysoberyl’s eyes darkened, and she crouched behind a rock in equal parts fear and defense, ready at a moment for attack.

“Please, Lord –” Acantha regained his focus. “Chrysoberyl is my most deadly huntress. She will ensure my secrets stay safe and lead the others.”

“And that one?” His eyes shifted to the Gulf maid.

Acantha grinned. “I’ll take care of her.”

And with a swift stroke, she pulled an onyx blade from her waist and stabbed the shrieking mermaid.

Chapter Five

Eura tapped her fingers against her throne's arms. She had only met Calypso once, but she knew how vital her alliance was to their mission. Calypso's eyes were wrinkled but vibrant and inviting of trust. If anyone could make their journey to Trigona any easier, it was her.

The Sanctuary felt larger to Eura than it ever had in its emptiness. She had never liked being alone in it. Minutes felt like hours as she waited for the stone doors to open.

Finally, the currents in the water shifted. Eura felt an instant relaxation. It was distinct, warm, and tropical. It was Caribbean magic.

The doors swayed open, revealing a small group of mermaids with rich, dark skin and vibrant tails. Their braids and interwoven shells jangled merrily in the ripples of water. Though their presence was jovial, the steadiness of their eyes was intense. They were not to be tested.

The maids entered the room and formed a wall in front of their queen until the Sanctuary doors shut behind them. Then, parting as if cued, they shifted to create a path down the middle of them. Their queen swam between them toward Eura.

Calypso's ebony skin shined like the dark night sky. Her yellow tail looked like it received its light from the sun itself. Against her black curls and skin, her eyes were a shocking turquoise blue. She held a spear the length of her entire body, with a trident-pronged tip made of shell. Eura basked in her regality.

She smiled at Eura, flashing opulent white teeth. "So we meet again, Sister."

Eura tried to channel the queen's energy. She was – though she did not feel it – her equal in the sea's eyes. She spoke calmly. "What a pity it's under such circumstances, yes?"

Calypso let out a melodious chuckle. “Pity, eh? No such!” Her island accent lilted at every turn of her tongue. “It is well past time for Aorato’s defeat, and now it is finally at hand.” She closed her eyes and sucked in a chest full of water, tasting its nuances. “The ocean knows it, too.”

Eura marveled at her confidence. Surely, if Calypso believed in the prophecy, she should, too.

Beata’s head poked around the corner of the Sanctuary’s inner door. She cleared throat for the queens’ attention. “Pardon me, your highnesses. The man is here.”

Calypso turned intrigued eyes to Eura. “Bring him in, please, Beata,” Eura answered. If Beata could tell how nervous she was to see the man again, she did not show it.

Beata opened the door fully, guiding Sullivan into the blue-lit room. His eyes widened and locked on Eura, and she hoped no one noticed her blush.

Even Calypso’s statuesque maids turned their eyes to Sullivan as he walked toward the throne. Calypso, clearly intrigued, glanced back at Eura. “May we?”

Eura was dumbfounded; he was not her property, but somehow these Caribbean mermaids understood her authority was law until the prophecy was complete. She grappled internally with her new role, while her posture and face remained settled. “By all means.”

At her words, the Caribbean maids flocked to Sullivan, which scared him enough to tear his gaze off Eura for a moment. Suddenly, dozens of hands were on him at once – in his hair and on his legs, chest, and mouth. Calypso stood further from him than her maids but surveyed him intently. Finally she came close to him, and each of the other mermaids fell away.

Sullivan stood as still as he could as she circled him. He was still adjusting to standing at the bottom of the ocean, fighting ripples and current patterns that were foreign to him as a human. He was terrified of this beautiful mermaid; she exuded wisdom that felt ancient to him, like she had created the sea herself.

“What is your name, man?” He had not heard her voice before this, but something in her accent calmed him instantly.

“Sullivan Mavros,” he said without hesitation. It was as if her very presence had put a spell on him. He would tell her anything she asked.

She stopped in front of his face and smiled at him. The unexpected color of her eyes shocked Sullivan back to reality. “Are you prepared for what you must do, Sullivan Mavros?”

Sullivan shook his head in confusion. “What I must...um, I don’t know. I’m not sure what that is.”

Calypso’s eyes locked with his. Just like he knew he could never lie to her, he somehow also felt she would never lie to him, either. “Die, of course,” she said casually.

Beata and Eura looked on, expecting to see Sullivan panic from Calypso’s candor. Instead, he smiled back at her. It was the first time either of them had seen this expression on him, and it was lovely.

His eyes flickered to Eura, and she quickly averted her gaze. Still looking at her, he answered Calypso.

“I’ve been ready to die for a long time.”

“He’s either very brave or very stupid.” Eura rifled through the drawers in her room, going over Sullivan’s behavior with Calypso in her head over and over.

Beata circled the room, only half listening to her. Neither truly understood how they should be feeling at the moment.

“Do you think he really is human? He seems so...morbid.” Beata questioned aloud.

Eura scoffed. “He must be. No other creature on earth is so stubborn or so...so...” She faltered for a word.

Beata stopped swimming and came close to her. “What, Eura? What do you think of him?” Her eyes bore into Eura as if mining for the answer on her face.

Eura shifted uncomfortably. “What does it matter?”

Suddenly, Beata was urgent. “It determines how I treat him, Eura! How I treat both of you! I’m not sure whether to trust him or to be very afraid of him. The way he looks at you...it terrifies me. There’s a passion there I can’t quite fathom.”

Eura cast her a condescending look. “And you think I am going to reciprocate?”

Beata shook her head and flickered her hand as if brushing the notion away. “It’s not that.”

“Then why are you so frantic?”

“I am afraid he will make you doubt yourself.”

Eura smiled softly. “Beata, you don’t—”

“Don’t dispute it; he already has.”

Eura sighed. “Fine. I’ll tell you the truth. I am intrigued by him.”

“That’s all?” Beata asked.

Eura swallowed the lump in her throat. She never lied, especially not to Beata, but she knew she had to. What else could she say? *I feel an unexplainable connection to him and want to touch him every time I see him?* Certainly not.

Her eyes fluttered. “Of course, that’s all.”

Beata’s mouth pressed into a straight line. “All right. I trust you, my queen.” Eura felt the lump reforming in her throat, but Beata spoke again. “What else do you need for the journey?”

Eura turned back to the pouch open at her waist. Her dagger was there, along with some healing seaweed she’d jarred. There was not much else there was to need, considering her own powers. “Just some silver kelpie powder, I think.”

“I’m sure Rosario has some at the stables. I’ll be right back.”

Eura had always enjoyed solitude, but this day had changed that. A nagging terror lingered in the empty water around her. She knew word would spread through the ocean fast, and each moment until the prophecy was fulfilled made her more and more vulnerable to the Invisible One.

Trying to steady herself, she racked her brain for anything else she ought to bring with her to Trigona. She had very few personal items, but – aha! – she must bring the ring. *How could I forget?* She thought to herself.

On a flat rock in the corner of the room sat a hollow shell. In it, she kept the ring she’d found on her finger when she woke with the other Sisters for the first time. It had a large, ovular

amethyst stone at its center, as clear as the water itself. The stone was wrapped with filigree gold. It was obviously from the human world, and she'd always speculated how she got it. She decided it must have been in the wreckage of a sunken ship at one time; she might have easily found it in her underwater before she became queen. Each of the Seven Sisters was allowed one thing from her previous life. Eura was glad this was what she must have chosen. With a faint hope, she slipped the ring into her pouch.

Eura looked around her room, taking in its familiar crannies and crevices. She had found such solace here as queen. She tried not to think about the fact that she might never return to it.

Finally, she placed a hand on her coral bed. Its spongy, cool surface felt heavenly against her fingers. The group wouldn't leave for Trigona until morning, but Eura knew she had plenty to do overnight to prepare for the journey. *Maybe I could lie down for just a moment*, she thought. She curled up in the bed's tendrils and – busy as her mind had been all that day – drifted off quickly.

“Eura!”

Eura's eyes opened as soon as she heard Beata's desperate scream. She blinked hard to clear the sleep from her vision. “Beata? I'm sorry, I must have dozed off...”

The fierce terror on Beata's face let her know quickly that something was wrong. “We have to leave, now!” Her voice was firm and loud, but the panic in it was evident.

“For Trigona? Now?” Eura grappled to understand. She knew she was not ready, her travel party was still forming, and Sullivan...he certainly needed more time.

As Eura's senses awoke, she felt the thickness of the water growing around her. Being queen meant she had an acute sensation of her maids' emotions. Now, she could feel they were heavy with fear all around her.

"Eura, we must go! Aorato's sharks are here. Naida went to fetch Sullivan. Calypso and her party fled but insisted they would catch up with us near Trigona," Beata said.

A hard lump formed in Eura's throat. She had no idea how Aorato would have learned about Sullivan and the beacon this soon. Surely, they should have had more time to leave. Just as she was about to speak, the rocky ground trembled. It felt as if the earth around them would split open. Eura locked eyes with Beata.

"Are they all safe?" she asked.

Beata nodded quickly. "I believe so, my queen. We were able to initiate the tunnel system evacuation swiftly."

"You can assure me they're safe, then?" Eura could not bear to leave knowing any of her maids could be hurt or worse.

"Yes, Eura." Beata spoke firmly but with Eura's concern in mind. She was the kind of queen who always protected her people before herself. "But they won't stay that way unless their queen is alive. Come!"

Quickly checking the contents of the pouch on her hip, Eura pressed her palm flat against a cutout in the rock wall. When she did, a flat stone which had previously blended into the wall shifted, leaving a secret tunnel opening in its place. She and Beata swam through. Just as the door was closing behind them, a swirl of red burst into the room. Eura caught a glimpse of the

razor-sharp teeth and menacing fins before the stone slammed back into place. She shivered and hoped the horrible creature hadn't noticed them escaping.

Eura was frozen behind the rock wall's protection. Beata pulled at her arm. "We must go!" Still, Eura stared at the blank wall where she had been looking at her room mere seconds ago. Anger welled up inside her as she thought about the shark; it was probably tearing through the place she had called home right now. She lifted her palm steadily to the rock.

"Eura, what are you..." But Beata understood soon after she opened her mouth.

With all the strength she could summon, Eura spread her fingers taut until they began to curl over. She pictured exactly what she intended – the room imploding on itself, crushing the monstrous shark beneath its boulders. Her body began to shake as the image in her mind became clearer. Finally, the tunnels around them began to vibrate.

A mighty ripple pushed Eura back and reverberated through the tunnel. An avalanche of *thud, thud, thud* erupted as the room on the other side of the wall collapsed. Eura heard the shark's wail and closed her eyes, smiling.

She turned to look at Beata. "I want to make sure it's dead."

Beata's eyes widened. "I can't let you do that, my queen." Her voice was pleading. "I am confident your powers took care of it."

Remembering Sullivan and Naida hiding in wait for them, Eura did not argue.

The two navigated the dark tunnel carefully but swiftly. Beata led the way, brushing her fingers along small pockets of bioluminescent algae to provide some small light. The two had traveled these passages many times, during safety drills and days when they wanted to avoid

running into a disgruntled maid, but today they felt new and dangerous. Eura reminded herself at every twist that these pathways were secure, but every little scuttle of a sea snail or urchin made her skin prickle and scales tingle.

After what felt like an hour, Beata announced, “We’re here! I’ll make sure our cover is intact.” Carefully, she rolled away a narrow rock and swam through a hole just big enough for the widest part of her tail. Eura could not see her on the other side, but the small entrance began to glow shortly after Beata disappeared into it. She had created a magical shield – a barricade – to protect Eura in case something was wrong. Eura let out a sigh she hadn’t known she was holding in. Beata’s mind was wired to protect people in a way hers simply was not.

Eura could hear muted voices coming from the room on the other side but couldn’t make out what they were saying. She leaned in closer to the entrance. Beata’s voice was raised at someone. Was it Naida? Eura knew the two often clashed but had never heard them speak to each other like this.

“Leave it alone, Beata! I handled it!”

“Handled it? You nearly had him killed!”

Him? Sullivan! Eura knew he was her ultimate responsibility, wherever he was or whatever he was doing. She spoke, loudly and firmly, through Beata’s glowing barricade. “Let me in the room, *now*. That is an order.”

The two maids went silent on the other side. After a moment, she heard the *swoosh* of a strong tail coming toward her in the water. She felt a small current of water on her face as Beata’s shield disintegrated. Holding her arms against her sides, she swam into the room headfirst.

It took a few long seconds for her mind to register the contents of the room. Beata and Naida faced each other, Naida glaring at Beata, whose eyes were fixed on the queen. The room was clouded red; as soon as Eura settled, she could taste the water's metallic tinge. In the middle of the room, a large carcass had sunk to the floor. Eura drew closer to make out what it was – or had been.

Up close, she could see its sickly gray flesh and jagged teeth. Its mouth was flecked with blood, but its throat was drenched in it. An obsidian blade was still lodged in the side of its neck. The shark's black eyes were open and fixed, forever, in a glossy trance.

Sullivan was in the corner. His eyes were down, but Eura felt them shift up to her as she turned to face him. He was clutching his arm close to his body. She was more afraid to go to him than the dead monster in the room, but she knew she must.

“What happened to him, Naida?” She knew her voice was harsh, but it was hard for her to control her anger and fear.

Naida gritted her teeth. She had become so much more comfortable around Eura in the last few months, but her regal presence still frightened her occasionally. She envied Eura's easy command. “I thought we had made it safely here.” She answered. “The man was behind me one minute, and the next I heard him scream.”

“So he was attacked under your protection?”

Naida's jaw tightened even more as she gave her hesitant reply. “Yes, my queen.”

Eura glanced back to the bloodied shark's body. “But you killed it?”

Naida closed her eyes and nodded.

Eura looked up at Beata, who was still focused on her, waiting for her response. There was something in the way she held her brow that worried Eura. It was a questioning, doubtful look. There was something going on Beata didn't quite trust, and Eura could tell by her subtleties that even Beata didn't know exactly what that was.

Instead of speaking, Eura turned again to Sullivan. She felt her stomach lurch as she slowly swam toward him. The closer she got, the further Sullivan's head lifted. She avoided his eye contact.

"May I?" she gestured to the arm he was still holding close to his abdomen. Under the water, his wound didn't look so bad; most of the blood had mixed with the water around him. But up close, Eura could see the deep teeth marks penetrating his muscles and ligaments.

Sullivan meekly held his arm out to her. His shoulder shook at it tried to hold up the limp weight of forearm muscles that were no longer intact enough to function properly.

Eura shuddered. She'd healed so many wounds for her maids during her reign as queen, some just as bad as this. There was just something about this one belonging to *him* that unsettled her. She swallowed the pit in her throat and the thoughts about Sullivan it was bringing with it.

Instinctively, she reached into her pouch and pulled out a small glass jar of seaweed. "You'll want this." Sullivan looked intently at her as she placed it to his lips.

"You should know, I don't like eating my vegetables," he said wryly.

The joke was lost on Eura, but she wouldn't have responded to it even if it wasn't. She was focused on the difficult thing she was about to do.

Sullivan chewed thoughtfully. "Why am I eating this?" he asked with his mouth still full.

“It will help numb the pain – hopefully.” Eura replied.

Sullivan shrugged. “I’m kind of getting used to it now.”

Eura winced. She pulled out a few more strips of dark seaweed from her pouch and dipped her fingers into another petite jar. Methodically, she began coating the strips with a black, tar-like salve. “The pain of the magic.”

She placed the seaweed wrappings gingerly across Sullivan’s legs ointment side up and reached for his hurt arm. Before her fingers touched his skin, she stopped. She was terrified of what he might feel.

He looked at her with reassurance, though. There was a steely confidence and trust in his dark eyes that settled her. It was like he spoke directly to the unspoken worry in her mind when he nodded.

She placed both hands on his arm and nearly jumped out of her skin. Something like an electric current had run through her. Sullivan blinked quickly, but if he’d felt it too, he didn’t react as strongly as she did. Though the pulse rocked her, it left her feeling warm down to her fingertips.

Eura looked at his face now, and his eyes were there to meet hers. They looked cloudy, like he might have been crying underwater. She couldn’t tell because he was human. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Sullivan began to reply, “For wh—” but released a sharp cry instead as, beneath Eura’s hands, there was a loud *crack* and a flash of light. He leaned his head against the wall, and his chest heaved with the aftershock of Eura’s power.

“For that.” Her voice was low as she answered.

Though he smiled at her, she was more afraid of him than she had been before.

Chapter Six

Sullivan was finding it hard not to feel like he was drowning. Somehow, his body was receiving adequate oxygen from the water he was continually swallowing, but he still involuntarily found himself panicking at the weight of the water in his chest.

He was also finding it hard not to believe he was dreaming.

The time spent learning more about the prophecy with Isla was distracting. He had tried to comprehend as much of it as he could, though he knew he was still in the dark on many things and couldn't get over the idea that Isla might be keeping something from him – something important and terrifying. Now, though, fleeing through the blood-soaked sea with a gang of fearsome mermaids, there was only one thing he could think about. Despite the fact that he felt acutely the threat of imminent danger, there was Eura.

Or was she Diana? This was another question that lulled his mind into thinking he was dreaming or half-living in some world not his own. There were many things about Eura that were different than his beloved Diana.

For one thing, and most obviously, she had a tail. It was massive and powerful but graceful with its every swishing move. Her arms were covered in scales that looked like they could slice through leather. Her hair was a darker, deeper color – then again, that might just be the water. She seemed to have no memory of a life with Sullivan, which did give him pause. Surely, he could only inhale so much salt water before he started hallucinating.

But, despite every difference, there were many similarities. Sullivan had always thought Diana's eyes were the color of the sea and shifted to match its hues. When she first woke in the morning, they were a pale green blue that darkened as the sun set. It was clear that Eura's not

only matched the ocean but held all its mysteries with their color. They were a dark, seafoam tinted gray, exactly like Diana's had been on the latest nights out by the shore.

Eura also held her mouth just like Diana. She hesitated the same amount before answering a question. She was, as a whole, everything Diana had been – now one with the very sea Diana had loved so desperately. Looking at her made Sullivan want to weep and shout for joy all in the same moment.

She was paying him no attention as she and Beata led the group out of the Sanctuary through a series of dark, woven tunnels. Sullivan had tried swimming with them but simply could not keep up. He was not made for the water as the other three were. Nor were his eyes adjusted to the algae glow and dark water. Eventually, Naida grabbed his arm and pulled him alongside her. “We will fix this later,” she said. Sullivan was terrified by what that might mean.

Their weaving seemed endless. Sullivan's mind filled with questions every time he glanced at Eura. Finally, he could take it no more, and chose instead to focus on Naida's slick hand on his wrist and Beata's sterling hair cutting through the water like metal. He measured the sharp angle of her jaw and high cheek bones as they swam. Each of the mermaids was stunningly beautiful, Sullivan knew. On earth, as women instead of fish creatures, any of them could be considered the most gorgeous woman anyone had ever seen. He understood this, yet none of them tugged at the pit in his chest like Eura.

Sullivan narrowed his eyes as he concentrated on the maids' contrasting colors. Beata's scales, from chest to arms to tail, were all ruby red. They glistened like jewels themselves, but Sullivan could not bring himself to even consider how they would feel under his touch. Despite

her fierce beauty, she looked like she could be on fire. Flames glittered along her tail and continued into her eyes. He had the feeling she could cause anyone to combust if she so desired.

Naida, though also pretty, did not have the feminine regality most of the other maids did. Her colors seemed muted and dull, especially compared to the two forces next to her in Eura and Beata. Her tail was a fleshy pink color, like a salmon that had been drying out and losing its luster under the hot sun. Her hair was light; sometimes it looked like dried straw, but at other moments it caught and absorbed a green tint from the water around her. Sullivan could tell she was – or had been, at some point – more than this. Her importance to Eura was evident, but her devotion to her seemed nowhere as fervent as Beata's.

Suddenly, Sullivan startled. He was so focused on distracting himself from Eura with the other two that he nearly swam into them, for they had finally stopped. The cavernous trail they had been following met a dead end.

It took Sullivan a moment to realize they weren't just waiting there hopelessly. Eura's eyes were closed intently. Beata kept her eyes keenly on the queen, while Naida's flickered back and forth between the two. Eura's eyes abruptly snapped open.

"Is the way forward safe, my queen?" Naida asked, breaking the tense silence.

Eura nodded, but soon began shaking it instead. Her eyes furrowed into deep, questioning lines. "It's not that. I was searching through the ocean to make sure all our maids were safe and realized something."

Beata's eyes went cold, and she steadied her gaze on Eura.

Naida jumped in once more. "Aorato himself was not there, was he?"

Eura shook her head again. “No, but he sent Berus to lead the sharks.”

Sullivan cleared his throat quietly. “Berus?”

“Aorato’s right hand,” Beata replied. She did not look at Sullivan as she spoke, but he saw the gears of her mind turning as she formed the words. “That means our shield...”

“Exactly,” Eura finished her friend’s thought. The two looked at each other and shared the same expression. Sullivan couldn’t exactly determine what emotion it held.

After a moment, Naida spoke what the other two wouldn’t. “Someone let them in.”

A bubble of water caught in Sullivan’s throat, and he sputtered. “Would any of you like to explain that to me?”

Eura’s tongue pushed at her top lip. Sullivan noticed.

“The three of us, along with some of the other highly gifted maids, placed a shield spell on our colony soon after I was appointed queen. It is absolutely impenetrable,” she said, not looking at Sullivan. “Unless...”

The maids’ worry finally clicked in Sullivan’s mind. “Unless one of you allowed someone through it.”

Neither of the three acknowledged he was right, which solidified that he was.

Sullivan sighed. It felt different in his throat than it did on land. “How many more beside the three of you were part of placing the spell?”

Beata’s eyes were far off as she answered, “Four. Isla, Fay, Cora, and Chelsea.”

Sullivan knew he shouldn’t have an opinion, but his face gave him away.

“What was that?” Eura asked.

He pursed his lips and tried to neutralize his expression. “What was what?”

“That look,” she said, leaving her lips slightly opened in a flat oval.

Sullivan examined her lips and then met her eyes again as he stiffly shook his head. “I didn’t make a look.”

Eura lowered her eyes. “Come here,” she said.

Sullivan did not move until he could not disobey her ocean eyes any longer. Hesitantly, he moved toward her.

“Close your eyes,” she said. Her tone made it clear he needn’t argue.

Slowly, he let his top lids flutter shut. He tried not to jump as he felt both her hands come to the sides of his face. Her thumb rested on each corner of his jaw, and she spread her fingers out so that her middle finger rested on his temple. The others fell across his face in various places, and felt all ten with a feverish, prickling heat.

He also felt a strange tug at his temples, like Eura was drawing a faint string taut from the very center of his brain.

Sullivan knew to open his eyes then, but he didn’t know how. Eura dropped her hands but held his gaze. “You’re wrong,” she said with a scoff.

“Listen, I know you’re her queen and everything, but I got a weird feeling!”

Beata and Naida looked at each other. “What is he talking about, your highness?” Beata asked.

Eura grimaced. “He suspects Isla.”

Beata’s mouth dropped open, and she threw her head back in disbelief. “That cannot be.”

Sullivan steadied himself. “Believe what you want. I’m just telling you there was something off when she was telling me about the prophecy. She was hiding something; I could feel it.”

“Isla is the oldest mermaid in our entire colony. She was on the council that restored the Seven Sisters. She helped place Mira on the throne, and the queen before her, and the queen before her. She knows the ways of the sea better than any of us, and she would die before she betrayed it,” Beata argued.

Sullivan blinked, “Are you sure?”

Beata did not answer.

“She is the one who received the prophecy,” Naida inserted quietly. “Maybe she kept something about it from us? From the Seven Sisters?”

Beata and Naida both looked to Eura for an answer.

“She would have kept nothing from the Sisters,” she finally replied.

“But from you?” Naida asked.

Eura spoke flatly. “I trust her.”

At that, Beata and Eura exchanged a knowing glance. Sullivan was unsurprised that he was not involved in whatever secret they shared, but he saw Naida’s face turn stony as she realized she wasn’t, either.

“It is of no import to us right now,” Eura stated with finality. “Berus and some of the shapeshifting sharks have taken over the Sanctuary, but there were none of our maids held captive with them, thank the seas.”

Sullivan’s heart did a somersault at her mention of shapeshifting sharks.

“So we must press on,” Beata said. “Can we get a message to the other maids?”

Eura looked around the rocky corridor. “Did either of you bring a shell?”

Beata and Naida rifled through their wait pouches. “I was sure I did,” Beata said worriedly. Naida shot her a narrow glance.

With a questioning smirk, Sullivan reached into the pocket of his shorts. “Would this work?” He held out the Junonia.

The other three stared at it, mystified. It seemed to have this effect on them, and it was beginning to annoy Sullivan. Sure, it was rare, but he had a hard time believing it was as special as they made it out to be.

“Well?”

The mermaids looked at each other.

“We can’t touch it!” said Naida.

“But we may still be able to – “

“If you use your magic on it, Eura!”

Sullivan shrugged and held it out to them.

“Keep it in your hand.” Eura said. He dared not disobey her, and the more she spoke to him, the less Sullivan wanted to.

Eura’s fingers hovered over the shell in a dome shape. The shell began to glow a faint blue, and she smiled. “It will work,” she said.

“Sullivan.” His name on her lips made him shiver against the cold ocean, but he looked at her obediently. “You’re holding the shell, which means your voice must pass on the message. When the shell’s aura changes color, repeat after me.”

“They’ll know you’re safe?” He asked her, for somehow he knew that as important as she could potentially be to him, there were others who needed her.

She smiled confidently and nodded. “I am their leader; they will know my voice through yours.”

The blue light grew until suddenly it burst into bright cold, filling every crevice of rocks around them. Eura’s face remained steady and sure.

“Tell them Trigona bows to no man.”

Considering everything he knew about the prophecy so far, this message confused him, but he repeated it anyway. As he spoke, he could somehow see the words leaving his mouth and entering the shell. Behind Eura, Beata smiled.

As the last of his words fell into the Junonia, the gold light evaporated and rippled like a soundwave through the water.

“It worked,” Beata assured them.

“How do we know?” Sullivan asked.

Beata shrugged as if it were simple. "I hear it."

Chapter Seven

“Come!”

Acantha’s sharp voice bellowed through the stony cavern as she called out. Too anxious to leave her post and risk waking the rest of her colony above, she hunkered there for the night, creating for herself a makeshift throne with her own magic. A nest of eels had been lurking in one of the cavern’s crevices; their skin made a lovely, sleek exterior for her new throne.

Chrysoberyl’s dark figure grew closer. She moved so quietly that Acantha would have been startled had she not known she was coming. “What is the news, then?” she asked.

Chrysoberyl’s muddy yellow eyes flickered back in annoyed response. “Escaped,” she hissed.

Acantha tensed in her glassy, black throne. “All of them? Including the queen?”

The lack of response from Chrysoberyl answered Acantha’s question. She swore under her breath.

“The Invisible One will not be pleased with this.”

Chrysoberyl’s expression grew colder, but there was no surprise in it. “Had the Huntresses been sent out with me leading them, as was my suggestion –”

“Enough!” Glowing, deep purple ribbons swam from Acantha’s fingers and wrapped around Chrysoberyl’s arms and throat. “Insolent servant! How dare you speak against the Sea Lord!”

Chrysoberyl sputtered as the ropes burned around her neck. The gills on her torso fought to bring in more water as her body fought Acantha’s power.

“Please, Majesty!” She choked. “You know – I would never – I serve the great Invisible One! Please!”

Acantha flicked her scaled wrist, and the ropes dropped away from the maid. Chrysoberyl stumbled but did not let herself sink all the way to the rocky floor. Instead, she bore her nasty eyes deeply into her queen. Acantha couldn't tell if her gaze was any colder than usual. Chrysoberyl always had death in her eyes, even on a good day.

Acantha smirked at her. “Don't overestimate your worth, Chrysoberyl. You have trained many more who might soon be able to take your place.”

Chrysoberyl grit her teeth and flashed her forked tongue. Acantha remembered the night she had found her splitting it in half. The original mutilation took months to heal, and every time Chrysoberyl had spoken blood lap at the corners of her lips. The image still unsettled Acantha, though she did well at hiding her fear.

Suddenly, Acantha felt a hot, burning flash searing through her forehead. She slammed her eyes shut and threw her head back, trying to keep her focus through the pain. The brief thought crossed her mind, *Is Chrysoberyl doing this?* But no, there was no way her powers had grown so much so quickly. She soon put the idea out of her head as a deep, rattling voice shook through the pain.

I am coming, Acantha.

She forced her eyes open and widened them to indicate to Chrysoberyl the voice she was hearing. Chrysoberyl's own eyes responded with a fast fear.

Now!

Acantha felt thrown back, though her body was still firmly seated on her new throne.

“Now!” she gulped.

The two could do nothing but cower as the ground beneath them shook and black smoke thick as a blanket formed in the cavern’s water. Before anything else could happen, Acantha slipped the black shell from her side and sent a quick message to her maids. “Trouble on land. Nothing to fear here underwater. Go back to sleep, family.” She hoped it would kill any curiosity.

As the glowing red eyes and sinewy gray muscles emerged from the smoke, Acantha plastered a sick smile across her face. Chrysoberyl still clung to the ground and kept her head bowed low.

He came toward Acantha with terrifying purpose. She lowered her chin in a slight bow, but his hand snapped to grab it before she could raise it up again. His thumb, long and gray and cold, pressed firmly beneath her lip. His grip was so tight she thought he might twist his wrist and break her jaw, just for the fun of it. Instead, he stared at her, his glassy, blood colored eyes reflecting the fear on her face back to her.

“My Lord, my darling...” she fluttered her eyelashes at him best she could as he brought his lips closer to hers. He smelled of blood.

Centimeters from her lips, he stopped. She felt his icy breath as his metallic voice rumbled, “What do you know about the man?”

She held her mouth open in abject fear but forced a reply. “I know nothing, my Lord.”

He sneered. “And what of the prophecy?”

“I know as much about that as any of the other Sisters, my Lord.”

“There is nothing you have kept from me?” he demanded.

Acantha blinked. “Of course, my Lord! Why would I hide any of my knowledge from you?”

She thought she saw the faint line of panic enter his eyes, but it left so quickly she could have easily imagined it. Had he learned something she did not know?

He pulled back from her, and she took in his powerful form. His tail hardly moved against the water, but when it did it cast silvery black beams against the water. His skin was sickly gray, but his arms and torso were long and muscled tightly. It looked as if his skin was pulled so taut over his body, the slightest movement might cause it to rip and burst forth everything behind it.

His eyes were bright red. Because she knew what that meant, she shivered.

“My love, your eyes are fresh blood. That must mean some part of your raid was successful.”

His snakelike nostrils flared in anger. “Successful?” he fumed. “There was death, yes! One of *my* sharks!”

Chrysoberyl gasped from the cover of the slimy throne.

“*Your* sharks, Lord? Impossible.” Acantha replied.

His flaming eyes locked on her. “It was the man.”

Acantha held back a nervous laugh waiting to explode from her. How could a man have killed one of Aorato's sharks? Her brow furrowed as she tried to make sense of it. "How is that possible, Great One?"

He came close to her again, bringing a cold wave with him. "That," he snarled, "is what I need to know. For the last time, Acantha," with this, he grasped her by the throat with one hand and slammed her against the rock wall, "what else do you know about the prophecy?"

Her tail beat viciously against the water as she attempted to sputter an answer. "No— nothing, Lord. I know – noth—"

Aorato cut her off as he slung her to the ground. Taking a handful of her black hair in his massive fingers, he closed his eyes as he forced his way into her memory. Satisfied, he let go of her head, and it snapped as it hit the stony ground.

Pain scorched through Acantha's head as her skull reverberated off the floor. When she opened her eyes, he was hovering over her, looking at her with starving intention. He forced his lips on hers and caught her bottom lip with his sharklike teeth. When he pulled away, he smiled and licked his lips. "You know I always love the taste of your blood."

Acantha forced a smile on her face. She knew that soon this would be over, and she would finally be powerful enough at his side to make her wildest dreams come true.

His smile soon turned into a scowl. "Get up."

With composure, Acantha rose from the ocean floor and ran shaky fingers through her hair. Aorato took a seat on the throne she had made for herself.

She huffed. "I assume you already know your next steps, my Lord?"

Aorato sneered. “What am I, a guppie? Of course, I have another plan in action.” He smiled wickedly and made sure he met Acantha’s gaze as he said, “I have a maid in the Gulf. She is ensuring Eura and the man do *not* make it to Trigona alive.”

The way he said “maid” had exactly his desired effect on Acantha. She knew he meant that he had another lover, and it sent a bitter ripple of jealousy through her. She allowed the disdain to show on her face as arrogance. “And this maid?” she asked. “You’re sure she is capable of accomplishing this task?”

“Oh yes,” he replied breathlessly. “I find her very...*compliant.*” He practically salivated as the words dripped from his tongue.

Acantha’s jealousy flamed, but before she could respond, a small, hissing voice emerged from the shadows.

“My Lord?” Chrysoberyl picked her way delicately to the foot of the throne. “My Lord, if I may?” she began kissing the bottom of his tail humbly.

Aorato eyed her with keen interest. “What is it, creature?”

“My Lord, if I may, “Chrysoberyl began in her harrowing voice. “As Acantha’s lead huntress and main protector, I understand that the Gulf queen will be traveling with her own protection.”

“And?” Aorato snapped impatiently.

Chrysoberyl trembled but did not back down as her mind set. “Forgive me; of all the Sisters’ warriors, she is the only anywhere close to my equal.”

Aorato’s bloody eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, fish?”

Chrysoberyl's tongue flickered. "She is a sound warrior, Great One. I have seen her rip apart a hammerhead with only her hands and a simple spear."

Acantha glanced at Aorato to see if she could garner his reaction. He remained still, but she knew Chrysoberyl was telling the truth. She had heard rumors of Eura's unsuspecting but fierce warrior. Beata.

"There is also word," Chrysoberyl trudged on boldly, "that she and the queen are best friends."

"Which means what?" Aorato roared.

Acantha nodded with understanding as Chrysoberyl looked at her for help. "It means she would do anything for her. It makes her more dangerous. Unpredictable. There would be no stopping them – even with your insider."

Chrysoberyl nodded darkly in agreement.

Aorato licked his teeth. "What is your suggestion then, worm?" His insult glanced off the now determined Chrysoberyl.

She smiled demonically. "Send me after her."

Aorato looked to Acantha. "What do you make of this?"

"My Lord," she said, "I trust you have made proper arrangements to handle this as you see fit. *However...*"

A deep growl came from his throat. "However?"

Acantha steadied herself. “Beata is a factor we have not considered, especially if there is something about the prophecy we do not know. If there are other forces protecting the man and the Gulf queen, it is best to eliminate as many of the ones we already know exist.”

Aorato’s eyes ravaged Chrysoberyl from top to bottom. He sensed in her a kindred bloodthirst.

“And this is the one for the job?” he asked Acantha.

She nodded as a wide, wicked smile slashed Chrysoberyl’s face in half. “I will not fail you, Lord.” She bowed low to the ground, her head nearly touching the stony floor. “I will not fail you. I will bring the warrior’s head.”

Something about her chilling assurance made Aorato smile wildly. “Come here, my child.”

She drew herself to him confidently as a dagger materialized in his hand. Not taking his eyes from her, he slashed his wrist and held it above her forked tongue.

“Drink,” he insisted.

Acantha saw the fire gleam in Chrysoberyl’s red eyes as she lapped at the dark blood from Aorato’s wrist.

“Now you know you have my blessing,” he said as the water around them tinted pink.

“May she take others with her, my Lord?”

Aorato looked at Chrysoberyl instead of replying to Acantha. “Do you need them?” he asked.

“Not at all, Great One.”

He smiled. “Then you may choose two of your best to go with you. I’d rather them die than you. May the sea be with you.”

Chrysoberyl swam away with exceeding speed. Acantha watched her and tried not to worry about who would protect *her* while her best huntress was gone. She tried to tell herself Aorato would let nothing happen to her, but she knew in her heart he would give her up as soon as she was no longer useful to him. She would keep herself useful.

“Here, my Lord,” she perched herself on his lap and brought his sliced wrist to her lips with one hand. She let her magic work on his wound, and his gray skin pulled itself tightly again over bone and muscle. Though he was now healed, she kept his wrist to her lips, kissing it deeper. His eyes lapped her up exactly as she had intended them to. Suddenly, she was pinned against the ocean floor.

“My queen,” his cold voice said in her ears.

She closed her eyes.

Chapter Eight

“How do we know there aren’t more sharks waiting to eat us behind that door?”

Sullivan’s question took Eura’s focus from the Junonia shell in his hand to the skeptical look on his rugged face.

“There *is* no way to know for certain,” Beata replied. Until then, Eura’s eyes had been locked with Sullivan’s. She was grateful someone else’s answer took his intent attention off her.

“Well, that makes me feel all warm in fuzzy inside. Please, let’s leave this safe little tunnel and go see if we can find some more!” Sullivan’s sarcasm turned Beata’s expression sour. Naida chuckled at her frustration. Eura’s face remained stoic, but her heart did a funny lurch.

Beata closed in on Sullivan. “Leave the decision making to the queen and the question of our safety to me.”

“And you care about my safety?” he asked smartly.

Beata shot her eyes to Eura. “As long as you are in the queen’s company, you are safe.”

Something deadly serious in her tone let Sullivan know what she meant.

“Really, though.” The sarcasm left his voice, and a more genuine, smoother tone came from his lips. “How many more are there? Realistically?”

“One.” Eura replied.

The other three looked at her with an awed sort of confusion.

“We killed two. There will be another. Aorato would want to send three to form a triangle.”

“Ahh,” Beata and Naida murmured in unison.

“A triangle?” Sullivan asked warily. “Why a triangle?”

Naida looked at him as if he had just asked why fish have gills. “Trigona, of course.”

Sullivan’s raised eyebrows did not lower with her reply. “Now I know I’m new here,” he said, “but last I checked, Trigona is a place, not a shape.”

Eura smiled. “I love humans,” she said faintly. The other two recoiled as if she had cursed.

“Here, Sullivan,” the name felt heavy and hot coming from her mouth. “Let me show you.”

Next to him, against the rock wall of the tunnel, Eura slid her fingers across the stone. Inch by inch every piece of stone she touched glowed in orange and blue rivulets until a map appeared. Sullivan could make out the sharp jut of Florida and a smattering of islands to the southeast.

“We,” Eura said, circling her finger over a spot east of New Orleans on the map, “are here.”

Sullivan tightened his jaw and nodded. He thought about the town Diana loved, the town they chose to make home. “Have you been there?”

Eura blinked at him. “Have you been there? To Santa Rosa?”

She looked back at the map and shook her head in bewilderment. “Sullivan, I have no memories of before I became queen.”

With his hand, he held her fingers against the wall, right on the spot where she was pointing. “Yes, but have you been there?”

Eura could feel Beata’s worried eyes on her.

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “But,” she sucked in a watery breath, “Some part of me feels like I have.”

Sullivan’s earnest gaze on her did not change. She shifted her eyes slowly from him back to the map.

“I must have swum to shore for some reason in my past life,” she said and smiled weakly. She wanted to distract him from whatever thought – or accusation – he had in mind.

“This is where we are,” she reminded him. Leaving the index finger of her left hand on their sea location, she moved her right-hand further east. Gingerly, she touched three points on the map: Fort Lauderdale, Puerto Rico, and an empty circle of blue in the middle of the North Atlantic. As she touched each location, she looked at him expectantly. His eyes were blank.

“Do you know what these points form?”

Sullivan squinted at the map on the rock wall. The longer he stared, the brighter the lines connecting each point glowed.

“A triangle!” He finally shouted. “A wonky triangle, but it’s there.”

“It’s a rather important triangle,” Beata retorted behind them.

“Wait,” Sullivan examined the map closer. “Isn’t this...the Bermuda Triangle?”

“Exactly,” Eura replied. “Here, look closer.”

From the center of the triangle, a bright spot began to burn itself into the stone. What looked like a deep, fiery bit burrowed from the middle, and city walls grew up around it.

Sullivan's mouth fell open. "That's Trigona," he said. He felt his chest fill with dread faster than it had filled with water. "Is that a pit?"

The three mermaids looked at him grimly. It was all the answer he needed.

"Okay," he swallowed hard. "We're walking into the heart of the greatest nautical mystery known to man. And doing what there, exactly?"

No one answered him.

"Eura," he looked at her imploringly. "What are we doing there?"

Eura opened her mouth, but the words did not come immediately. "The prophecy implies – in order to set the ocean free and allow its inhabitants to live in peace – a human must deliver the beacon to the heart of Trigona."

"You mean the middle of a possibly supernatural wormhole?" He retorted.

"Sullivan," the sharp despair in Eura's voice caught him off guard. "You have no idea what it has been like to live in these waters under Aorato's reign. The death, the genocide..." Her eyes became glassy as she trailed off.

"Genocide?" Sullivan asked.

Eura was too verklempt to answer. Beata spoke up in her place. "The nymphs, the oceanids – any god or goddess of the sea, no matter how minor. Aorato horrifically killed them all."

Sullivan nodded gravely. "He slit their throats like your old queen."

"No," Beata shook her head, but she paused. The words wouldn't leave her mouth.

Behind her, Naida spoke: "He ate them."

Sullivan shivered and looked back to the map. Eura was still beside him.

"He considered them the only creatures with enough power to ever challenge him," she said. "But now, I fear there is more to come. We mermaids have always been modest creatures when it comes to our magic." She looked up at Sullivan, and her eyes were a deep, royal blue, pleading with him silently. "He is learning what we can do the more we have to defend ourselves from him. He will come for us next."

Somehow, looking at her, Sullivan could not bear the thought of Eura not existing. He steadied himself and returned his eyes to the map.

"What do I need to do?" he asked.

Sullivan, Beata, and Naida took slow, methodical bites of seaweed while Eura paced the tunnel's sealed exit.

Sullivan grimaced at his sinewy, slimy mouthful. "I could really use some sticky rice and yellowfin with this." Naida widened her eyes in terror. The other two ignored him.

"Beata, you and I have been planning this route for ages. We'll be able to travel in tunnels for much of the way, yes?"

“That is correct, my queen,” Beata’s voice was unwavering and focused. “But we will be forced to swim in open ocean four different times.”

Eura nodded. “Remind me where those locations are.”

Beata waved her hand across the wall like Eura had. A similar map appeared, but the blues of the ocean in it glowed deeper and richer.

“We will follow beneath the ridges of the West Florida Escarpment here.” As she motioned to the map, it zoomed in on itself, highlighting a partial underwater peninsula to the left of Florida’s landmass. “But we will come to the Dry Tortugas area just before Key West. We will have to swim a couple nautical miles further south until we can renegotiate the islands’ shallow waters.”

“Marella has agreed to wait for us there,” Eura spoke. “Hopefully, her powers and those of her traveling companions will be enough to form an invisibility shield around us.”

Naida leaned over and whispered in Sullivan’s ear. “*Marella*. Sister of the Atlantic.”

Sullivan tried to keep up with the plan Eura was presenting as best he could. “Wait. Why would your powers not work? You killed that other shark with them, right?”

“Eura’s power will be tracked by then,” Beata replied. “Each mermaid’s powers have different effects on the current. Aorato will have made sure to memorize hers now that he knows we are on the move.”

“Sheesh,” Sullivan huffed. “This guy’s thought of everything.”

“Maybe he hasn’t,” Eura replied. “But *we* must in case he has.”

Sullivan had not seen many demonstrations of Beata or Naida's powers. "You two will be able to protect us if we do run into trouble in these open water locations, right?"

Naida groaned beside him. Beata shot her an oppressive look and then set her eyes squarely on him. "Yes, human."

"And," Eura inserted, "Prophecy legend has it that the beacon provides its carrier some level of protection. I doubt it would protect you from Aorato's knife, but it might offer some extra layer of help."

Sullivan pulled the brown spotted shell from his pocket once more. "This?"

"Like I said, I am unaware of its exact abilities," Eura said. Though, she admitted to herself she felt a strange pull to the object. She longed to close her fingers around it as easily as the man did.

"Where are these other unprotected areas?" Sullivan asked.

Beata looked at him dubiously before motioning to three other locations on the map. "Here at the north tip of the Great Bahama Bank, north of Nassau, and again shortly after at the Bahama Ridge."

"Will Calypso be able to offer any protection there?" Naida asked. For someone so close to the queen, it seemed like she should be more in tune with the plan. Sullivan marked it as nerves.

"She has assured us her people will give guidance along the way. She herself has agreed to go on ahead of us to Trigona. She wants to see if she can persuade any of the locals to stand against Aorato when he inevitably follows us there."

Sullivan's eyes grew wide. "Locals? You mean people live there?"

"Misfit mermaids," Beata replied. "Runaways, exiles, and the like. Many of them aren't particularly brave, but some are rowdy. It is good Calypso will be the one to speak to them." Sullivan remembered the warm, almost magical effect her sing-song voice had on him when she first entered the Sanctuary.

Eura surveyed the ocean map still lingering beneath Beata's fingers on the stone wall. "We will need every ally we can find. If Aorato has convinced the people of Trigona to fight with him, our path into the city will be grim indeed."

"Do we have a backup plan for that?" Sullivan asked. The thought of disgraced, abandoned merfolk living in a veritable blackhole made his skin crawl.

"For what?" Beata replied.

"If these outcasts turn against us, how do we expect to get into the heart of the city?"

Beata looked darkly at Eura, who nodded in return and said, "At that point, it will not matter if Aorato knows where we are. He will either be there already or reaching for our tails behind us."

The frightening thought clicked in Sullivan's head. "Ah," he said, looking at Eura. "You'll use your powers then."

"We all will," Beata answered as she swam closer to Eura. "Believe us, Sullivan, we do not want to cause that kind of destruction, but if it is required for the peace of the ocean, it shall be done without hesitation."

Eura smiled at her assuredly.

“I do not anticipate the need for force,” she said confidently to Sullivan. “Calypso could convince anyone to follow her.”

Sullivan nodded and looked at the three mermaids around him. Between all they had said and not said, he now knew his role.

“Well, are we ready?” he asked.

Eura looked at the other two gravely. They each jerked nervous nods in reply.

“To Trigona,” she said.

“Right,” Beata piped up. “We have just a few feet to swim until the next tunnel entrance. I’ll lead the way.” She glanced nervously at Sullivan. “Stay close, human. Naida, help me with the door?”

The two mermaids stood at the rock tunnel’s dead end and began speaking in a language that sounded to Sullivan like convoluted Latin. They moved their hands thoughtfully along the rock as the thick words rolled off their tongue. Both became utterly engrossed in their work, and Sullivan knew he had only a moment before they were successful. Quietly, he grabbed Eura’s arm and pulled her around one of the tunnel’s nearest corners.

She gasped faintly, but she did not pull away.

“Listen to me,” he said softly, his mouth only inches from her face. “I’ve put two and two together. I know I’m being led to my death.”

Eura’s eyes searched his face. “Sullivan, you don’t understand—”

“Shh!” he warned. “I don’t have much time to say this, but you need to know I will do it. Whatever you need me to do, I will. I’ll walk – er, swim – happily to my fiery grave.” He held

his hands up in surrender. “But only on the condition that you promise you will *try to remember.*”

Eura wanted to question what he was asking her to remember, but she already knew. Instead, she simply nodded. He smiled, and she felt a mysterious spark shoot through her chest.

Chapter Nine

As soon as the stone door had been magically rolled away, Beata stuck her head around the curve of the opening, looking off into the dark, open ocean ahead of them.

Her voice was low and measured. “On my signal.”

The three of them nodded in reply. Sullivan gulped; he had no idea how he was going to keep up with the three of them. Their tails were meant for swimming through dense sea water at high speeds. He knew his human body would be no match for them, but he didn’t feel like being dragged all the way by Naida again.

Sensing his hesitation, Eura looked him up and down. “Here,” she said, reaching a steady hand to his wrist. Fast whips of blue light flashed from her fingertips, and as they did he noticed an unnatural tingling in between his fingers and toes. Looking down at them, he noticed that his skin was almost sewing itself together. *No*, he thought. *Webbing!*

He looked at Eura in awe, and she smiled humbly. “I can’t give you a tail. Mermaid common law prohibits it, but this might help.”

Before he could thank her, Beata’s whisper erupted in a harsh burst: “*Now!*”

Ahead of Sullivan, the three mermaids were off with a flash before he could even register Beata’s signal. He suddenly realized he had no idea in what direction he should be going once he left the tunnel.

None of that mattered anymore. Knowing where to go would be useless if he lost track of the mermaids along the way. Bracing himself, he shot out of the tunnel as quickly as his body would let him.

He kicked with all his might, noticing the extra distance his webbed extremities were allowing him to cover. As he swam, he squinted through the maze of blurry salt water ahead of him. He felt hopelessly lost for a moment until – *there!* A fierce whip of Beata’s red tail caught his attention. Ferociously, he swam toward the flag of color against the water.

As he drew neared, he became confused. If Beata was still the same pace ahead of him, why was the red of her tail growing larger? Shouldn’t she still be the same distance away?

His question was answered too late, because finally it dawned on him that yes, the red spot was growing larger and brighter as he got closer, but it wasn’t Beata’s tail he had been following.

Lying on the ocean floor in front of him was a mermaid with a great slash across her throat. He screamed.

The moment the sound escaped his mouth, he looked up. Coming toward him, black blade in hand, was a monster.

“Sullivan!”

He distantly heard Eura shout his name, but his ears would not register what the sound meant as he struggled to take in the sight in front of him.

The creature holding the blade had hollow, black eyes and razor-sharp teeth; they reminded Sullivan of the shark he had come face to face with just a short time before. The monster was a merman, or at least – Sullivan thought – it *had* been a merman at one point. Its slimy black tail was split down the middle unnaturally, like someone had mutilated the creature by trying to give it legs.

It held a long blade and sat atop the largest horse Sullivan had ever seen. The horse was an eery green color, like rotten seaweed. Its eyes were bloodthirsty, and its nostrils were slit. Its face looked too long to be a normal horse. There was blood dripping from its mouth.

The horse and its armed rider were coming at him faster than he could comprehend.

“Eura, *no!*”

As quickly as Sullivan had realized the horse and its rider the two disintegrated in a banging flash of golden light.

Sullivan was pushed back by the ripples of the explosion. He bumped into something hard and tumbled to the floor.

Awestruck, he turned achingly to see what had broken his fall. It was Eura.

Her eyes looked empty, like she had seen a ghost and been left to figure out why it was visiting her.

Beata and Naida closed in on them.

“What is this? Eura, you *know* you are not to use your magic!” Beata fumed.

Sullivan watched her expression change from fury to shock as she saw the body of the mermaid lying on the floor.

Naida gasped as Beata pulled the hand away from her mouth. “Is that...Rosario?” she asked.

Eura was not looking at the body but some unseeable point far off into the distance of the black sea. She nodded with finality.

“And a son of the Telchines? Riding a kelpie?”

Eura nodded again. Beata swore.

Beata swam closer to the mermaid. She leaned close, toward her face, and gently closed Rosario’s gaping eyelids.

Throwing the limp maid’s body over her shoulder, Beata’s urgency returned. “Come on. Come *on!* There will be more of them if we do not hurry!”

Sullivan helped Eura from the ground, though he knew she probably didn’t need it. The blank look on her face lingered.

“By the seas, keep up this time, human!” Beata snapped at him.

As soon as the three maids lurched forward in the water, Sullivan fought against the currents to keep up with them. He trailed, but they remained in sight.

Sullivan could not determine if they had been swimming for seconds or hours when they reached a pile of large stones. Beata set Rosario’s body gently on the floor and immediately went to one of the biggest ones.

“Naida, help me,” she said coldly.

Naida’s body still shook as she and Beata began their rhythmic, melodious chanting once again. Sullivan looked to Eura. Her eyes were still wide and blank.

The chanting slowed, and the stone shifted slightly away from the floor. An opening just big enough to squeeze through opened in the ground, and Beata ushered them inside, checking the surrounding water frantically for danger.

When they were safe inside, Rosario's body was again carefully placed beside them. Beata and Naida continued the final piece of the spell, causing the stone above them to roll back into place. The now covered opening cast them into complete darkness.

Sullivan felt a tense fear ripple through his chest before a bioluminescent glow of orange and blue began to trail down the walls of the tunnel.

Eura leaned herself against the wall and sank to the ground. The others followed, longing for someone else in the group to break the tense, bitter silence.

Finally, Naida spoke. "I've never seen one in real life before."

Sullivan looked at her with confusion. "A what before?"

"A kelpie," she said mildly. "The water horse."

"Neither have I," said Beata. "We only fought against models during my training."

"I have," Eura said coldly. The other two looked at her in disbelief. "I don't know where or when or why, but I know in my gut I have."

Though her words were coarse in her grieving stupor, Eura was still poised and deliberate.

"I'm sorry I did what I did," she said resolutely, "but it had to be done. Sullivan would have died or worse. Aorato would have tortured him until he bent to his way. He could have turned the prophecy against us." She looked at the three of them sharply. "I would rather die than allow that to happen."

"We know, my queen," Beata reassured her. "What's done is done."

"Eura," Sullivan spoke hesitantly. "I – I'm sorry one of your mermaids died."

Next to him, Beata hissed in rebuke.

“Beata, please,” Eura said gently. “He means well by it.”

“I know you wanted to protect them all,” he said. “Whatever happened – however it happened – it wasn’t your fault.”

She shook her head. “It was my duty to protect her.”

Finally, Beata realized how Sullivan was attempting to reassure the queen and joined in. “He’s right, though,” she said. “Had you let Sullivan die or be captured, they would all be gone. None of them would survive Aorato’s wrath.”

“Rosario was brave,” Naida said.

“And she believed in the prophecy, Eura,” Beata said boldly. “She was ready to sacrifice for it!”

Eura looked at Rosario’s still, unmoving face on the ground.

“I will not lose any more of you,” she said firmly.

Beata nodded with her resolutely, while Naida did not meet Eura’s eyes.

Eura looked at Sullivan as if accidentally. She had been trying to avoid his face, but his intense gaze worked almost like a magnet for her. Somehow, though she meant to ignore him, his knowing look comforted her on a level she could barely comprehend.

“Is there time to rest?” Sullivan asked the group.

Beata contemplated this. “Just a little, perhaps,” she replied.

As if her own answer had brought her some peace, Beata leaned herself against the tunnel wall. Sullivan knew she was still alert, but he could tell she felt safe here. That eased his mind, too.

“Sullivan,” Naida said gently after they sat in blissful quiet for a few moments. “Would you tell us about the shore?”

The other two perked up just a bit at this question. To Sullivan’s surprise, they were intrigued.

“The shore?” he asked.

“Yes,” Naida replied. “What is it like living on land?”

Before speaking, Sullivan looked at Eura. There was a gentle curiosity in her eyes.

“We would all like to know,” she said.

So, Sullivan spoke to them about sunrises and sunsets. He told them how the dry sand stuck between toes, clung to bedsheets, and reappeared in unexpected places. He described the feeling of the warm sun on cool skin. They discussed dancing, music, and movies; all topics were regarded with fascinated disbelief.

“Do humans live in colonies like we do?” Naida asked.

“Not exactly,” Sullivan said. “We live in towns or cities, but we make families with people we love. I guess you could say they’re like our own little colonies.”

“People you love? You mean, you choose your colony?” Naida questioned.

Sullivan looked at Eura, who was listening attentively. His attention caught her off guard.

“Yes,” he replied, still gazing at Eura. “We definitely choose.”

He thought he saw Eura blush before she looked away, and it reminded him of the many times he had complimented Diana.

Beata tilted her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. “Tell us more, Sullivan,” she said.

Sullivan continued telling them about every detail he could imagine, and as he pictured them all he wondered if he would ever return to that life. Days or hours before – he couldn’t quite remember anymore – he had sought to leave all those things behind. His world became alive again as he shared it with these mermaids.

He had no idea how long he had been talking before he realized Beata and Naida had fallen asleep.

Eura was wide awake, her body relaxed but eyes bright with intent. “Go on,” she said softly to him.

“There are these things called cakes. They start out as a thick liquid, but once they’re baked in the oven they turn into a light, melt-in-your-mouth pillow of sweetness. You can make them chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, whatever flavor you want! They are layered with frosting…”

“Sullivan,” Eura said quietly, suppressing a giggle, “I don’t know what any of those words mean.”

He laughed as quietly as he could without waking the others. “Fine then,” he said playfully, “I’ll stop!”

“No, no!” she answered, reaching over to touch his arm. He jumped slightly as she did.

She looked at the place where her fingers had touched. “I don’t know what they mean, but I like the sound of them.”

He smiled wider than she had seen him smile yet. It made him look ten years younger and suddenly much more handsome. He was carefree alone with her.

“I know you,” she blurted out. It was a mistake, but as his eyes locked with hers she knew she did not want to take it back.

“I don’t know how,” she continued. “But there are lots of things about myself I don’t know now that I’m queen.”

He nodded as if he knew something she didn’t.

Her curiosity was sparked by his reaction. “Have you spent lots of time on the water? Did you ever see something strange peak out of the wave line or perch on a plank or stone? It might have been me!”

Sullivan shook his head as if he was sorry to tell her no. “I have spent a lot of time on the water, but I never saw a mermaid.”

She frowned. “What is it, then? How do you seem to understand this?”

Sullivan scoffed. “I don’t understand anything except who you are to me.”

Eura’s heart leaped in her chest, but she stayed still. She had a new, foreign urge: to lean across the tunnel’s small gap and kiss him.

“What am I, then?” she asked instead.

“I’ve told you this already, Eura. You’re my wife.”

She closed her eyes before she spoke. “That cannot be,” she said. “I am a mermaid!”

“And I’m a human!” he retorted. “But here I am breathing underwater. I told you I don’t understand any of this, but I can’t ignore what’s in front of me.”

Eura gulped. “Sullivan,” she said, trying to keep her voice low, “mermaid magic only works certain ways. It’s been examined and documented for thousands of years. We can help humans, yes, but we cannot transform them.”

“How do you know that?”

His question threw her. In her mind, the answer was obvious. “I just told you –”

“I know you said it’s been recorded,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean it’s never happened. How do you *know*?”

Eura was dumbfounded. “I...I believe what I’ve been taught.”

Sullivan nodded in disdainful disappointment. “Ah. Maybe you aren’t my wife after all.”

Eura felt a strange, sharp feeling catch in her throat. She was hurt by his comment, and she was mad about that. Good as she typically was at shielding her emotions, something in her eyes gave her away this time.

Sullivan swore. “Eura, I didn’t mean –” he reached for her hand, but she pulled away.

They stared at each other soberly.

“I don’t know what I mean,” he said finally, looking down at his empty palm.

“What did happen to your wife?” she asked after a moment of silence.

He knit his brow together in pain and continued to focus on his hand. “She drowned,” he said sadly. “She was a marine biologist. They took the research boat out one day, and...”

Sullivan wouldn’t say more. “I am so sorry,” Eura said.

“They never recovered her body,” Sullivan said angrily. “Eventually I decided the sea must have loved her so much it just took her.”

Eura frowned again. It looked to Sullivan like she was deep in thought.

“What is it?” he asked her.

She snapped out of her reverie and shook her head. “Nothing,” she said.

He softened to her as he watched her puzzle silently to herself. She was a perfect reflection of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Had Diana truly been taken by the sea and morphed into its eternal treasure, he thought, this would be exactly what she looked like.

Despite everything Eura held to be true and the ways in which she defended it, he still believed he knew exactly who this person – this mermaid – was.

“Should we sleep?” he asked.

“Oh,” Eura said with surprise. “Yes, I think we probably should.”

She closed her eyes, but her mind was still racing. A few minutes later, she opened them again. Sullivan’s chest was lifting and lowering heavily, as if his unconscious body was working harder to adjust to taking in the water. She could tell he was sleeping. Eura examined his serene face, tan and stubbled. His lashes stretched all the way to the top of his cheeks. In perfect symmetry, his slightly arched nose stood proud as a mountain. She knew that face; she adored that face.

How can I make any sense of this? She asked herself.

Sullivan had to be wrong. Surely, he had seen her once before while he was boating or fishing. She could not imagine any way around that scenario, anything else that could explain the grip he had on her.

Something about the idea – as reasonable as it was – did not sit well with her. No, she knew him deeper than just in passing. Had they spoken before? Had they had a connection? There were many tales of men and mermaids falling in love as two different creatures. It made more sense to her, but if that was the case, why would Sullivan not tell her?

She looked down at her tail and grazed her fingertips over the scales covering most of her body. Nothing about her form felt wrong to her. Eura had always been comfortable as a mermaid; she could not imagine a life away from the ocean. Even the tedious things mermaids had to learn – the tides, the currents, the patterns of the moon – all made perfect sense to her. There was no way she could have existed apart from being a mermaid!

There were so many things she could not understand, especially her blooming feelings for the man across from her.

Gingerly, she reached across the tunnel and placed her hand on Sullivan's bare leg. He did not budge. With her skin touching his, she felt a familiar warmth and closed her eyes again. Finally, sleep visited her.

Chapter Ten

Eura woke to the steady sound of her friend's voice.

"Your majesty," Beata said. When Eura opened her eyes, she realized her hand was still resting on Sullivan's warm skin and pulled it back quickly. There was no chance Beata had not noticed, but neither mermaid mentioned it to the other.

"We should be on our way," Beata continued. "I wanted to wake you before the others to ask you about our plans."

Eura furrowed her brow. "The plans have already been made, have they not?"

Beata nodded. "Yes, but after last night's – events – I was unsure if we should modify them or not."

"I had not considered that," Eura replied thoughtfully. "Aorato is on to us, yes, but thankfully we were still close to the colony when I used my magic."

"Exactly," Beata nodded. "Our original plan might still work if we can cover the route twice as fast."

Eura shot up. "We must go, then."

The two of them hastily woke the others, who were groggy and irritated by being interrupted.

"It's time to move," Beata said. "Now that Eura's magic has been used, we must increase our speed."

Naida nodded understandably, albeit not happily. Sullivan rubbed sleep from his eyes. Eura was thankful he'd been unconscious the entire time her hand sat on his leg.

“Sullivan,” Beata said briskly. “Keep up!”

His eyes grew wide as he scrambled to remember the feeling of his newly webbed fingers and toes against the water.

“I'll trail this time,” Beata said. “We cannot have another incident. Eura, are you comfortable leading?”

She nodded. Naida's eyes darted quickly between the other two maids, and again Sullivan got the sense there was something he was missing about their relationships.

To be continued.

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Appendix

Because of the nature of the story, names of people and places play a large role in understanding the underwater world the characters inhabit. Below are explanations of a few of the connections that might be helpful for a reader to make as she is introduced to this new world.

Sullivan – (“Dark one”/Orpheus) protagonist; human male; tries to drown himself in the ocean

Eura – (“Justice”/Eurydice) queen of the mermaids of the Gulf and one of the Seven Sister;
spirit of Diana

Naida – (nayad) Eura’s right-hand maid/assistant, but internally jealous

Aorato – (“The Invisible”/Hades) evil Spirit of the ocean who has taken power from the Seven Sisters; the prophecy’s fulfillment is the only hope of ending his reign of terror

Beata – warrior elite of the maids of the Gulf; Eura’s closest friend and most trusted ally

Isla – mermaid who finds and revives Sullivan

Rosario – a mermaid of the Gulf, soft and fully devoted to Eura

Cora – a mermaid of the Gulf; somewhat defiant although loyal to the prophecy

Trigona – (The Bermuda Triangle) ruins of a kingdom hidden by Bermuda Triangle where the prophecy must be fulfilled

Mira – former queen of the Gulf maids; seduced and murdered by Aorato before Eura’s reign

Anima spell – allows a human to breath underwater

Berus – Aorato’s right hand henchman and leader of his shark/Telchine army; derivation of the name Cerberus

Telchines – ancient Greek sea spirits who were killed by the gods when they turned to dark magic (In this story, a few escaped the gods’ wrath, and their offspring are used by Aorato.)

Mermaids involved with the shielding spell for the Gulf colony: Eura, Beata, Naida, Isla, Fay, Cora, and Chelsea

The Seven Sisters:

1. Gulf of Mexico – Eura
2. Arctic – Aurora
3. Atlantic – Marella (“shining sea;” second largest)
4. Indian – Samudra (“gathering together of waters” in Sanskrit)
5. Pacific – Wahine (vah-HEE-nay, Hawaiian for queen)
6. Mediterranean – Acantha (a thorn or sharp pointed object)
7. Caribbean – Calypso