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A Song Only Dead Men Know

Cassidy Foust

Macalester College, cfoust1@macalester.edu

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A Song Only Dead Men Know

Cassidy Foust

One

In old maps, the sea drips off at the edge of the parchment in what is supposed to be the end of the world. Mapmakers would draw monsters here: great sea beasts and serpents with mouths tall as a ship's mast; winged harpies, their talons raised; beautiful sirens, selkies, and mermaids, their soft lips parted in deadly song.

These were always Marin's favorites, these wicked women, these horrible temptresses. Her grandfather, a grizzled old man who had once served as a mapmaker to the King of England himself, would set her down on his knee and unfurl long parchments of map, teaching her the names of all the waterways as her fingers traced the faded ink.

"That's the Irish Sea," he would say, "It swirls down towards Europe right past the Salinges."

"Have you ever seen a selkie, Granddad?" Marin would ask, thumbing over the creature's hair as if she could draw it into life.

"I might have," he replied solemnly.

"You could walk right past them and never know - human or seal, they look same as all the rest. The only way to really tell the difference is to catch one changing, and you need to be mighty tricky to do that."

"Oh," Marin had sighed.

"Mermaids, though... now those I've seen."

Marin sat up straighter. "You've seen a mermaid?"

"I have."

“A real mermaid...” Marin’s mouth dropped open and her tiny fingernail crept up to scratch at the ink-and-paper mermaid’s tail. “What was she like?”

“She was the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen,” her granddad said. He too stared at the mermaid smiling coyly on the map, but it seemed to Marin that even though they were looking at the same thing, they were seeing something entirely different.

“Prettier than Mum?” Marin asked. Marin’s mum was the most beautiful woman in the world. Marin’s mum had long brown hair that made every woman in town go pale with envy, and cheekbones so high that Marin’s dad teased they were reaching up to God. Marin couldn’t imagine anything being more perfect than that, but then her granddad replied,

“Prettier than your Mum.” He paused, and added, “But also more dangerous.”

Marin nodded sagely, then scrunched up her face. “What d’you mean?”

“Her eyes were wide, so wide, and violet, impossibly violet. They were beautiful and deep, and they made you want to trust her. If she asked you to join her in the deep, you would follow without hesitation. Her neck was slender and fair, but just below the water you could see that she had gills bright as blood. And her smile...” Marin’s granddad took a long, shuddering breath. “Her smile was all white fang. It caught the sunlight and glittered and you could not look away. You knew those teeth would rip through your skin as easily as splitting silk, and you also knew that you would let them.

“She was the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen, yes. But mermaids are *things*, make no mistake. There is nothing human left in them to find.”

Marin gulped.

“What are you scaring her with now, Dad?” Marin’s mum bustled into the room, bouncing the baby on her hip.

“Mapmaking,” Marin’s granddad replied with a stone face, at the same time that Marin chirped, “Mermaids!”

Marin’s mum sighed. “And now she’ll be having night terrors about drowning, I expect.”

“Rawr!” Marin growled in response, trying to smile and bare her teeth just like a mermaid would.

“Very frightening,” Marin’s mum assured her. “Now come on, supper’s on the table.”

It had never occurred to Marin to doubt her granddad’s account. She learned, as she got older, that the earth was round and nothing ever trickled off the edge, and rarely ever did anyone disappear to a sea monster. But sure as she was living, she knew her granddad had seen a mermaid and lived to tell the tale.

Sometimes, she found herself murmuring the story of the violet-eyed siren. She would wake up dreaming of fins and flashes of white fang smiles, and she would swear that in her dreams she could hear their song.

Now, she bares her teeth at her reflection in the glass window. She grips a knife in one hand and her thick dark braid in the other and imagines what it is to be less human more creature. The knife seems to snarl as she saws it through the braid, hacking off the length of her hair. It drops to the floor with a heavier thud than Marin expects.

She blinks at her face in the makeshift mirror and raises the knife to her head once again. This time, her strokes are smaller, more deliberate. The knife is not a razor; it is meant for coring

apples and peeling potatoes, but it serves its new purpose as good as anything else. Soon, Marin is surrounded by a pile of her shearings.

She looks in the not-quite-mirror again and is left with a feeling of dissatisfaction. The girl who stares back is still undeniably her. Her hair is ragged short and sticks up in every direction, but there is no radical transformation shining in the window. At its most extreme, Marin could pass for a relative, or a sibling, removed from herself but still there in resemblance. She scowls and the not-quite-new Marin scowls back.

In one manner, however, has her project been successful. The cut-away hair accentuates the squareness of her jaw, draws attention away from the softness of her lips. It makes her nose look more angular and reveals the natural broadness of her shoulders.

In short, Marin looks like a boy.

She grins at her reflection and grabs a broom to sweep away the evidence. She opens the door and watches the shorter strands of hair skate off on a breeze into the dark. The braid she kicks into the bushes. She doubts that anyone would connect the pieces, even if they noticed, and they probably wouldn't be able to stop her, but she figures it is much better to be safe than sorry.

Back inside, Marin peels off her nightdress. The fabric flutters to the floor and Marin has the fleeting image of her soul leaving her body.

Don't be silly, she tells herself. It's only a nightdress.

She takes the cloth strips she had torn earlier from an old muslin skirt and wraps them tightly around her bare chest. The rough fabric itches and bites her skin, but she ignores it, yanking the strips tight and securing them with the best knot she can muster. Her breasts are not entirely flattened, but they will likely pass as such.

Marin looks down at the rest of her body, shadowed except for the light of a single candle. She has never been dainty and feminine like her mother, nor soft and plump like memories of her grandmother are. Instead, she has always been too much muscle and too much angle. Now, Marin thinks that maybe she was born to play through this boyish masquerade.

In the next room, her little sister coughs. Marin freezes, naked in the candlelight.

Go back to sleep, she thinks. Go back to sleep, go back to sleep -

Cora hacks and hacks and hacks. Marin closes her eyes, tries not to imagine the way her sister's rail-thin body trembles under the threadbare blanket of the bed they share, tries not to think of the spots of blood that come up with every painful cough. More than anything, she wants to run to her, hold the body that is so so so much smaller - so much more breakable - than her own until its shivering subsides. But she has already cut her hair and cut her ties and -

No. She has to do this.

Marin closes her eyes and breathes a silent prayer for Cora to rest again. Slowly, the coughing turns from panicked to faltering, and then, after a hundred painful heartbeats, from faltering to absence. Marin swallows and continues with her task.

She hurriedly slips into the loose shift and trousers which she stole from her father's room. She feels a momentary twinge of guilt - it's not as if her father has the money to spare for another pair of trousers - but she shakes it off. She is doing this for him, and her mother, and her sister, and soon enough she will be able to pay them back for much more than the trousers are worth.

Before she steps out into the night, she does a mental inventory: hair cut; chest bound; trousers and shirt on; and, around her neck, a thin braided leather cord onto which Cora had

strung a series of seashells. She raises the necklace to her lips and brushes a kiss over the shells. As she does, she lets herself imagine waking her sister up again, pressing her to her chest and telling her not to worry, that this was for the best and she would be back soon. Then the fantasy shifts and Cora starts sobbing and Marin is rooted to the spot and her father and mother come rushing in and -

No, Marin reminds herself, it is better this way. A clean break, with no space to lose resolve. It would have been nice to leave a note, but Marin does not know how to read or write. Very few of the peasant boys in her village do, and none of the girls; it simply isn't practical. Here, hands are meant for callous and hard work. Reading and writing are a luxury they do not know they have to need. In any case, Marin doubts any explanation she could offer would be sufficient.

She does not let herself glance back at her family's small house as she makes her way down the gravel path and towards the town. She is afraid that she will be stricken with some sort of paralyzing nostalgia for the weathered door and cracking roof - or, worse, that by some panicked hallucination she will smell her mother's stew and run back with a rumbling stomach and yearning arms - or, worse still, that she will look back and see Cora's pale face staring out the window, her bloodshot eyes wide with confusion - or -

Marin shakes her head and resolutely puts one foot in front of the other.

She isn't wearing shoes. Her father's wouldn't fit her, and her own are too feminine. Besides, she figures, a few callouses will do her good for the coming months.

Harwich is not a large town. There is not much distance between the small cottages on the outskirts where Marin lives and the cluster of shops that make up the town center. From

there, it is an even shorter walk to the true heart of the village: the docks. At its core, Harwich is a port, its small population constantly being supplemented by swarms of sailors who come in quite literally as the wind blows. Tonight - today, rather, as the sun starts to shiver its way over the horizon - there are no less than half a dozen ships tied up along the docks. There are a handful of sloops and a corvette that Marin thinks might belong to the Royal Navy... and there, on the end, sails slack but proud in the dim dawn, is Marin's destination.

It is a merchant brigantine ship. It's bigger than most of the others that Marin has seen come and go, and though it is not fancy or well-adorned, it is sturdy and strong. Up close on the hull, Marin knows it reads *The Harbinger* in weathered gold letters. She can't make out the words for herself, but the crewmen have been cavorting around the town for the past week, and there was hardly a person in town who hadn't heard their raucous songs and booming laughter spilling out of the tavern.

Their enthusiasm had drawn Marin like a moth to the flame. She was entranced by the men, their rowdiness, the way they inhabited space so unabashedly; they did not shrink in a room, but rather filled it, as if it was a personal challenge. *Look*, their body language seemed to say, *I am not afraid to have you stare*.

And stare Marin did.

She found herself making up excuses to go into town. They needed more milk, she would say (though some had just been delivered yesterday). The roof was leaking and she needed to fetch someone to fix it (though the roof was always leaking, and her father was always fixing it). She needed to pass a message on to the tailor's boy (though the tailor's boy was a snott-nosed little pig who Marin never spent time with if she could avoid it). On the fourth day of this,

Marin's mother had made an offhand comment about finding a bed in town if she wanted to be there so badly. She was smiling, though, so Marin gave a short laugh in reply and went off again to search out the sailors.

There were nine of them, as far as she could tell. They rarely seemed to be in the same place at the same time, but if they were, it was impossible to count them; they were so loud, so big, so *much* that there always seemed to be more of them than there actually were. For the most part, Marin kept her distance from them. She had no idea how one would participate in such *muchness*. But still, she watched.

Then, on the sixth day, one of the men noticed her.

"D'you want something, lass?" he asked, as he and a companion emerged from the pub. The sailor's voice was low and rough but not unkind. His blonde hair was limp with oil.

Marin shook her head quickly. She had been attempting to stare through the thick glass windows and had not had time to look away when the door swung open.

"No, sir," she said. "I was just - I -"

She scrambled for an excuse and came up short.

Instead, what blurted out was, "You're the sailors from the *Harbinger!*"

The blonde sailor chuckled. His companion stayed silent but watched Marin intently. She caught his gaze for only a moment before she blushed and looked away. She was unsure what to do with such scrutiny, whether it was her place to shrink away or rise up.

"Aye, we are," the blonde sailor replied. "Why? Are you interested in adventure? Treasure? Want to join the luxurious life aboard a leaking, creaking merchant ship?"

Yes, a tiny voice in Marin's mind whispered.

“No,” she said aloud. She was aware that the second sailor’s stare was still fixed on her, and that his thick dark eyebrows narrowed slightly at her response, but she ignored him.

“Just as well. Bad luck to have a woman aboard a ship, we all know that. We’d all be drowned before the week was out if we took you in.” The sailor heaved a sigh and a giggle escaped Marin’s lips at his dramatic ways. At once, he raised a shaggy blonde eyebrow.

“Think I’m in jest, do you?” he barked at her.

“No - no, sir,” Marin backpedaled quickly.

“The *Lark*. The *Maidensbreath*. The *Penzalore*. All as sturdy and seaworthy a ship as you could find. All lost to uncharted rocks and sudden storms and roaring fires - and you know what they found in the wreckage?”

“A woman, sir?” Marin barely squeaked out.

“Aye,” the sailor said sagely. “A body of a woman. In each and every one. No other explanation. Your sex is a curse.”

The sailor sighed again. Marin wanted to tell him that she thought the “explanation” was that the sailors hit rocks and storms, but somehow she did not think he would listen. She kept her lips pressed tightly together.

“Shame, though,” the sailor said after a bit.

He stepped closer to Marin and leaned against the doorway.

“It would be nice to have some company as pretty as yourself.”

Marin swallowed. *Shrink or rise, shrink or rise*, she wondered. She didn’t move. The blonde sailor smiled at her. It wasn’t an altogether unfriendly smile, not even threatening, but Marin’s skin still prickled.

“Burgess.”

The second sailor didn't touch his companion, but the first still jerked back as if struck.

“We should be going,” the second sailor said. The blonde, Burgess, made only a single grunt in response, but he pushed himself off of the doorway and away from Marin.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Burgess muttered to Marin as he walked away. The second sailor nodded to her.

When he walked past, Marin would have sworn he whispered, “I'm sorry.”

From that day on, Marin had kept a larger distance between herself and the crewmen of the *Harbinger*. She still watched them, was still drawn to them, but she never ventured within earshot. But even as she did, Burgess's mocking suggestion rang in her ears.

Want to join the luxurious life aboard a leaking, creaking merchant ship?

Marin knew it was a jab, a mocking complaint that was about as far from a real offer as it could get. There was no luxury for a merchant sailor. But the men - the men -

Marin did not so much want them as she wanted to be them.

And back at home, the firewood was running out. The wind was whistling through the eaves louder and harder every night. Somedays, they had stew for dinner. Somedays, they had vaguely-vegetable-flavored water that Marin's mother labelled stew with a forced smile. And Cora coughed harder and harder, and Marin's father's face grew older and older, and then Cora started shivering even when she slept in front of the stove, and Marin's mother's smile was still not real, and -

There were no riches to be gleaned. Marin might not even come back with the little coin she managed to earn. But one less daughter to pay for, surely, one less hungry mouth left gaping too far open and unfilled - maybe, this way, with her out of the way, things could get better.

And so, at the break of day, Marin makes her way with determination towards the far end of the docks.

The first sailors she stumbles upon are the couple from before: the leering blonde, Burgess, and his unnamed dark-haired companion. They are stacking crates and tossing them aboard the ship. Marin watches their muscles tense and release under their blouses. The movement is strong, rhythmic, practiced. There is no room left for question. For too long a moment, Marin just stands and watches.

“D’you want something, lad?”

Marin looks over her shoulder for the boy Burgess is calling to. Too late, she realizes that it is her.

“I - er - I -“ Marin clears her throat. She tries to lower her voice until each word feels like scraping up gravel. “I wanted to join you. On your ship.”

Burgess laughs. His whole stomach quakes with it. He laughs until he has to set down the crate he is holding for fear of dropping it, and then he leans on the crate and laughs some more. His dark-haired companion elbows him in the side. He sets down his own crate and walks over to Marin.

“What’s your name?” the dark-haired one asks gently.

“Malachi,” Marin responds without hesitation. She had practiced this, out loud and in her mind, over and over and over until she was almost certain Malachi was her true name, that Marin was the mask.

“My name’s Eric. Maloney. You can call me either.” He looks Marin up and down, and she fights the urge to run. She forces herself not to flinch under his gaze; her guise, she knows, is not flawless, but it would convince even the keenest of eyes to look past her as “boy.” “Have you ever been on a ship before, Malachi?”

Marin nods. “A few times. M’dad was a sailor.”

It is only mostly a lie. Everyone in Harwich has been on a boat at one point or another in their lives. But ships... ships were different, bigger, meant for waters that did not always send you back, and Marin’s father was no sailor. The sheep he tended were a crew of a far more docile kind.

“Hmph,” Burgess snorts. He picks up a crate and tosses it aboard.

“We need more hands,” Eric says. “You know that, Dillon knows that. Doesn’t matter how skilled they are. It’s not like anyone’s been clamoring for the job.”

Me, Marin thinks. I am clamoring. Let me clamor.

“We can sail fine like this.”

“We can sail,” Eric counters. “I wouldn’t call it fine.”

“Please,” Marin jumps in. She is not sure where this courage comes from, but she does not pause to think about it, afraid that the moment she notices it, it will vanish. “I may not be skilled, but I can learn. I’m quick at learning things. And I’ll work, I’ll work hard, do anything you need - I’ll do the things none of you want to do.”

“And what d’you expect in return?” Burgess asks. He reaches for another crate, picks it up, toss. Reach, up, toss. Reach, up, toss. “Glory? Riches? All you’ll find here is rats and gut rot.”

“I know,” Marin says.

“Do you?” Reach, up, toss.

“At least let’s talk to Dillon about it,” Eric interrupts. “We could debate our teeth out and, at the end of the day, he’s the one who’ll have the final say.”

“Please,” Marin says again. She bites her lip - *stop it!* a voice in her head hisses, *That’s such like a girl!* - and then she plays her ace. “I don’t have anywhere else to go. My parents are dead. No other family. You know I’ll be a good worker, that I’ll learn and get strong and be useful to you, because I don’t have no other options. Harwich is a small town - no space for wanderers. It’s the ship or the streets, and I won’t even be safe there. Please.” Deep breath. *Take up space.* “You need me. You both know you do.”

Eric raises his eyebrows and gives Burgess a heavy look. They hold each others’ glare for two, three, four breaths, and then Burgess swears and looks away. The corner of Eric’s mouth twitches up in triumph.

“C’mon, I’ll take you to Dillon - he’s the captain, it’s his ship.” Eric strides up to the plank leaning between the ship and the dock. Marin tries to make her legs move slower, to make her steps longer rather than short and dainty. When Eric bounds up the plank without a second glance, Marin follows. She pushes aside all thoughts of how unsteady a small length of wood looks, how there is nothing tying it to the dock, mere inches keeping her from plunging down

into the water and breaking her neck. She doubts Eric and Burgess ever had these thoughts, so, she decides, Malachi will not either. Malachi has been on ships. Malachi has not been scared.

“Dillon’ll be below, in the captain’s cabin,” Eric explains as they make their way across the ship. The wood creaks under her weight, each step causing the tiniest of bobs deeper into the sea below. The motion sends a tiny thrill up Marin’s spine.

Belowdecks is darker than Marin imagined. Candles shudder and weave in lanterns on her side, but their light is a crude replica for the sun, and Marin finds herself squinting to make sense of the space.

“Not well lit down here, I know,” Eric says, noticing her discomfort. “The walls can feel like they’re closing in sometimes. When you’ve been in the middle of a storm for a week and you can’t remember what things look like up in the sun. Sure you can handle that?”

“I’m sure.”

“That’s easier to say when you still remember how solid land feels.” His words are still soft, the warning heavy but well-meant.

“Why aren’t you above helping load?”

A voice more croak than chorale calls to them from behind a wooden door that Marin hadn’t seen approach.

“I was, Captain,” Eric answers. He does not open the door but instead adopts a formal stance only a few inches in front of it, his hands clasped behind his back. “But then we came across something interesting that I thought you’d like to know about. A boy, says he wants to join our crew.”

“What’s Burgess think?”

“Burgess,” Eric says, one eyebrow raised, “believes that we are capable of navigating the *Harbinger* with barely nine men on our crew.”

“Burgess,” the toad voice replies, “is first mate.”

“Yes, captain. I know, captain. But I still thought you might like to meet the lad, let him plead his own case.”

“Bring him in.”

The door swings open. It is not so much a door as a worn wooden plank hung in a space that vaguely resembles a doorway. Inside is smaller than the kitchen in Marin’s home - *my old home*, Marin reminds herself. There is a hammock hanging on one end. The ropes are limp and everything reeks of mold and Marin cannot quite pick out the source; it seems instead to permeate the entire ship. On another wall is a wooden table with a rickety stool, and on that stool sits a man. He looks not more than a head taller than Marin when standing. A thick gut juts over the table. His hair is dark and bristly, and though he is middle-aged, his face is scarred with spots and pimples.

“So you want to join the *Harbinger*.”

Marin swallows. She nods the smallest of nods. It was easier to catch her convictions fast in her fists when she had the firm docks below her and the sun above. Here, she wonders if the flickering candlelight catches on her blouse and shades her bound chest. Here, she wonders if her lips are too plump and soft. Here, she wonders if the darkness will not make her seen.

“Here we like to hear our responses, lad. I’ll ask again - *so you want to join the Harbinger?*”

Eric doesn’t touch her, but she can feel his gaze on her, prompting her.

“Yes. Sir. Captain. Sir.”

Dillon blinks at her, and she adds, “I do.”

Dillon stands up. His stool scrapes the floor with a grating noise. Standing, it seems to Marin that he almost fills the entire cabin with his girth. He walks over to Marin and circles her like a fisherman examining the catch of the day to determine whether it is worth keeping or worthy only of being tossed overboard.

“You don’t look strong.”

“I’m stronger than I seem.” Pause. “Sir.”

Dillon’s arm whips out with surprising speed and his thick fingers seize around Marin’s bicep. He squeezes once, twice, three times.

“Doesn’t feel like it.”

“I’ll get stronger on the ship, then. I’m not a twig. You can see that,” Marin says. She chokes the words out through breath held tight to keep her chest, her breasts, her *herself* from moving.

“And this way,” she adds, with sudden inspiration, “I’ll take up less space. Eat fewer rations. You’ll get another pair of hands to help out, but you won’t have to worry about stretching yourselves thin to keep me.”

“The last storm was nearly the death of us,” Eric chimes in. His voice is smooth as honey dripping across the cabin floor. “You remember that, Captain, I know you do. Even just one more man - one more boy - would have made the difference.”

Dillon scowls. His eyes do not leave Marin. “What’s your name?”

“Malachi,” she and Eric answer in tandem.

“And how old are you?”

“Just eighteen.”

This lie is smoother. It’s certainly not as far off as a new name or a new face - after all, Marin’s eighteenth birthday is only eight small months away.

Dillon does not reply immediately. He stares at Marin and blinks three slow, agonizing times, window shutters clattering open and closed. And then -

“Not worth it. We’ll manage.”

Dillon sits back down. The stool screams under his weight. He returns to the work at his table, a messy series of charts and maps and -

Maps.

“I can navigate,” Marin blurts. “Beg pardon, Captain. I can’t read words or letters but I’ve been staring at maps since I was a little g-“

She swallows hastily and covers with a cough. “Since I was a little boy. My granddad made maps for the king.”

Dillon does not motion for her to continue, but neither does he motion for her to stop, and so Marin inches closer to the table. She dares to drop a finger down on the closest chart. There are a series of dots and dashes trailing out from a dot that Marin knows must be labelled “Harwich.” She trails her index finger along the dots and dashes, and when she next breathes in, she imagines that the cabin smells a little less damp and a little more like the tobacco of her grandfather’s pipe.

“I know, Captain, that when the winds come in from the east and the sun sets red, you don’t want to be caught in this channel. I know where there are hidden rocks and shoals so thick

with sunken ships that they say the ghosts cry out in a chorus that will send you straight to hell. I know -“

“I have been sailing these waters for thirty-eight years,” Dillon interrupts. “You think I don’t know all this?”

Marin does not let herself step backward. She digs her finger into the map until her knuckle buckles. “No, Captain. I don’t doubt that for a moment. But think. With one more boy - no, one more *man* - aboard who knows the charts, who you can trust to navigate through the storms... I bet the ship will run smooth as silk when you have one less distraction?”

Dillon looks at the map, then back up to Marin, his eyes sliding down her body once more before landing back on the parchment.

“We sail out tomorrow at dawn,” he says finally. “You won’t see any compensation until we reach the next port. And when we reach the next port... I don’t want any trouble. You’re a man, you have needs - well, so do all the rest of us. Just make sure you take care of them discretely. Don’t fight with your crew members. You’re a skinny little rat, and they’ll knock you on your ass before you can take a breath, mark my words. You’ll find the sea’s an awful small place when you see it off a hull.”

Marin does not know if she should respond, so she stays quiet and makes a jerky half-nod.

“If there’s anything I said you can’t agree with, get off my ship. If not...” Dillon’s eyebrows narrow until they threaten to merge together. “We sail out tomorrow at dawn.”

“I can do that. I can do all of that. Thank you, sir - Captain. You won’t regret this.”

“I’m sure. Now get above decks and help your fellow crewmen.”

And without so much as a nod, Marin is dismissed.

Two

When everything is loaded onto the ship, and there is a burning in all of Marin's muscles such that she is surprised she still has limbs at all, Dillon gathers them at the stern and dismisses them for the night.

"Last eve on land, men," he tells them, glaring out from under his thick eyebrows. "Enjoy yourselves, but don't be fools about it. I don't want to set sail with half my crew retching over the rails because they wanted one more drink of ale and one more squeeze of woman."

The crewmen mutter and humph at Dillon, but they all nod in compliance. Marin swallows. She resists the urge to tug at her chest bindings.

There is nothing left for them to squeeze, she reminds herself.

"You coming?" Eric asks her, when the men start to tromp their way to the gangplank.

"No!" Marin says, a little too quickly. She clears her throat and tries again, "No... I don't think so. Want to get a good night's rest."

"You'll get a lot better rest passing out in an inn for a few hours than you will in those rot bunks," one of the sailors - Crot? Crowley? Crom, that was his name, Crom - interrupts. Marin gives him a shaky smile.

"Oh, I know, I just..."

Don't want to run into my parents, who think I'm a girl, who think I've run off into the night, who think I am stolen or dead or worse.

Don't want my sister to see me shorn and shabby and shaming.

Don't want to give myself the chance to run away and never see this ship again. Don't want to admit that I might take it.

“It’s been a long day. Might as well get used to the conditions, eh?” Marin pitches her voice hyper-low on the last note.

Crom narrows his eyes at her, but shrugs and seems to accept her explanation. Eric lingers back, one black boot on the plank and one still hesitating on ship.

“At least come get something to eat,” he wheedles. “A fortnight of hardtack and salt meat and you won’t be able to think of your last meal on land without your stomach moaning.”

Marin shakes her head. “No, I’m not that hungry.”

She clenches her stomach muscles to keep her belly from gurgling and betraying her. For once, it obeys. Eric watches her for a moment more, but finally he turns his back and heads down to the docks. As he goes she leans over the rail and watches the men scatter into town like ashes bursting away on the wind.

And then Marin is alone on the ship.

She becomes conscious of how much she can feel the deck swing beneath her. The waves, though small and unthreatening at a glance, chatter against the hull. The sails flop idly above her in the absence of wind. If this is the ship welcoming her home, it is far from comforting.

You have the ship to yourself! she chides herself. *This is it. This is yours now. You should be exploring, exciting!*

Marin takes one more breath looking out at Harwich and then

Exploring

Exciting

She sprints to the opposite end of the ship, the one that gazes not at cobblestone streets and ramshackle cottages but ocean ocean ocean as far as the eye can see. She knows she is probably imagining it, but this side seems more open, more free. Here, it seems to reek of salt and Marin imagines she can feel the rough crystals casting a net across her her face like a second skin. This is it. This is really, truly, entirely, fully it. One day in the future, one day soon, this will be the only view no matter which way she turns.

She makes her way across the deck again, this time to the trap. She clasps the heavy iron ring with both hands and jerks it open. Her muscles scream in protest. She peers down into the darkness. Against the sun, she can barely see the lamps that light the depths.

Here we go, she thinks, and carefully lowers herself down. The ladder seems more rickety this time around, as if it takes joy in taunting her with each gentle nudge of the waves. When she reaches the bottom and starts to weave through the underbelly of the ship, she takes her time and tries to memorize each nook and cranny. She reaches a hand out to the wall to trail her path with her fingers. Her skin meets wood that is crumbling and damp with rot, and she jerks away instantly. Welcome home, indeed.

At the end of this hall, she remembers, is Dillon's cabin. Two doorways branch out before then, and she turns into the first. Each step creaks and echoes.

In here, it is even darker than the hallway. No lanterns dot the walls. There are four hammocks strung on the walls. In one corner, there is a makeshift table fashioned out of an overturned crate. On it is an unlit candle almost buried in its own smear of wax. Marin walks over to the hammocks. They reek of mildew, but this is no surprise. Marin would be more

startled if they smelled fresh. She doubts if anything inside the ship ever truly dries. She tugs on one and it groans against the hooks that fasten it to the walls.

The room next door is almost identical to the first. The only difference might be that the candle sits a little lower, and one of the hammocks sports a gaping tear in the netting. She wonders if she will be saddled with this as her sleeping spot, the new one, the green boy with the shaking muscles. Marin tentatively grasps the ropes of the hammock and eases herself up.

The ropes are harsher than she expected. The hooks strain and the knots grow taut and dig into her skin. The rip in the ropes instantly claims her elbow as victim, and no matter how she twists and turns, some part of her falls through the gap. She grits her teeth and lies back anyway. It is no better or worse than the moldy straw mattress she shared with Cora. It is simply different. She is simply different now, and so, Marin decides, this is something she can live with.

She closes her eyes and convinces herself that the rock of the ship is gentle. If she imagines that her hammock is a cradle, the swaying waves her mother's arms, it can almost be peaceful.

This is they find her, in a pose that could be sleep.

“Hey, boy. Malachi.”

Marin jerks upright - or, at least, she tries to, but the hammock does not condone sudden movement. It twists beneath her and almost bucks her out. She stifles a shriek.

“Yea?” she says, swallowing her breath into calmness. Her eyes adjust to the gloom and she sees Eric and another blonde sailor before her. The blonde sailor is in his late twenties, and his wavy hair falls to his chin. He grins a half-toothless smile and hands something to her.

“Gotchu a present,” he says.

Marin eyes it warily and does not grab it. The sailor chuckles and his grin widens.

“It’s harmless, I swear. You’ll like it.”

She flickers her eyes to Eric, who was nice to her, who she does not trust but feels that maybe, one day, she might. Marin reaches out and takes the handkerchief-wrapped object from the blonde sailor. She unpeels the fabric to find a large square of cornmeal bread. Her stomach snarls at the sight and Eric lets out a barking laugh.

“Told you he’d be hungry,” he says to the other sailor. Marin does not pause to pull the cornbread apart with her fingers but instead dives in with her teeth. The bread is moist and still warm to the touch. She gulps it down in huge, choking bites.

“Fank yoo,” she murmurs around mouthfuls. “If dewiff-uss.”

Eric laughs again. “I figured you’d like one last meal that isn’t swarming with maggots.”

Marin swallows her cornbread, staring at the crumbs left on the handkerchief. She suddenly wishes she had savored it more. She has a feeling that Eric is not joking.

“Oi!” the blonde interrupts. He swats Eric on the back of his head. “I do the best I can!”

“Ackley’s the cook,” Eric explains.

“Not that there’s much to *be* cooked here...” he jokes, earning him another slap. “Only kidding, only kidding... maybe...”

“The others’ll be back soon,” Ackley intervenes, before Eric can berate the ship’s nourishment any further. “We’ll probably all turn in for the night. Got a long morning ahead of us, that’s for sure.”

Ackley gestures at the hammock where Marin is precariously perched. “You found your bunk, I see. It might not seem like much, but yeh fit a lot better than the last one did, I can tell you that!”

Ackley's laugh is a wheeze to Eric's bellow. Marin forces out a smile and tries to pretend that she is not now thinking of the "last one" and whatever sorry fate he met.

Stop it, she tells herself. He probably married, or changed ships, or

Caught the plague

Drowned

Was stabbed in his -

STOP IT. Marin focuses on the crumbs left on the handkerchief and crumples it into a ball.

"D'you want this back?" she asks, too late. Ackley wheezes again and then shrugs.

"Nah, mate, it's yours now. Keep it under your pillow or sumfink." Wheeze wheeze groan.

"I'm gonna turn in," Eric interrupts. "See you in the morning."

"G'night Maloney," Ackley chimes, making his way across the room to his own hammock.

"Don' let the maggots bite. I hear they've got it out for you."

"Funny. Night, Ackley," Eric says, and then he turns to Marin with his open face and gentle eyes. "Night, Mal. Get some rest."

"G'night!" she calls, but he is already around the corner and out of view. She leans back into the hammock and closes her eyes. The only other sounds are the creak of the water under the ship and the gentle scuffling of Ackley settling in for the night.

"It's not that bad, lad," Ackley says softly, after so much time has passed in quiet that at first Marin thinks she must have imagined it.

"What?"

"On the ship. 'S not really that bad, as much as we joke. Course, 's not easy," he adds quickly, "by any means, 's not easy, and the pay... the pay is shite." Wheeze wheeze wheeze.

“But on *The Harbinger*... well, the men are good and there’s always rum, and one day you finally wake up and you realize you’re getting’ through it. More than that, you realize... what else are you gonna do?”

Ackley heaves a sigh that seems to fill the whole cabin.

“Seems as good a way as any to live yer life.”

Another sigh that dissolves into a series of slow, deep breaths.

“Hey, Ackley?” she whispers, before he falls asleep.

“Huh?”

“Thank you.”

“F’what?”

Marin doesn’t respond.

Three

“Mal! Hey, Mal! Mal, wake up!”

“Shhhhhuddup, Cor,” Marin murmurs through a mouthful of sleep, and then the rat-a-tat-tat of “Mal! Mal! Mal!” comes again and she jolts awake. Her fingers tangle in a handful of netting. Not mattress, then, but hammock; not Cora shaking her awake, but...

Wavy blonde hair, toothless grin. Ackley. His name is Ackley.

“Whaddisit?” she murmurs again, clearing her throat as she grips her vocal chords lower.

“Ackley?” she adds.

“Gotta get up. We’re casting off soon.” Ackley waits to make sure that Marin isn’t going to fall back asleep before he adds, “Figured it’d be nicer if I woke you up than to leave you for Burgess to find.”

“I appreciate it,” Marin says darkly. She pushes herself off the hammock and lands with a satisfying *thunk*.

“There’s some tack and meat in the galley. Grab some if you like, but then get on deck, before Dillon has a fit.”

Marin wonders if it would be appropriate for her to respond with *Aye, aye*. She holds it in and substitutes a quick nod before heading out of the cabin.

“Galley’s down the hall to your left,” Ackley shouts after her.

She makes her way to the galley, where a cluster of sailors is already gnawing on the stale crackers called hard tack. They nod to her in greeting, and she returns the gesture.

“Where -“ she starts, but one of the sailors - hair flecked with gray like salt and pepper seasoning, face knotted with scar - cuts off her question with a swift point. Marin follows his

gesture to a small crate stacked on a table in the corner. She nods her thanks and rifles her fingers through the barrel before extracting a handful of salt pork. She doesn't let herself look at it before shoving it into her mouth - *maggots can't hurt you*, she tells herself, *they're just tiny white chunks of wriggling meat. That's all they are and nothing more* - and attempting to rip off a bite. It takes three tries for her teeth to catch in the rock-hard strip and find enough purchase to saw through. She discards any idea of chewing it and instead swallows the chunk whole.

The hard tack is in a smaller crate next to the salt pork. Marin picks up a rectangular cracker, with hopes that this, at least, will be more chewable than the meat.

The second it lands on her tongue, it takes all of her willpower not to spit it back out again. It is a rude joke to call it any sort of cracker. It's a rude joke to call it food at all, but the ache in Marin's muscles and the empty pit that is her stomach force her to swallow down not one but three pieces. It settles heavy inside of her like her very own -

"Anchor," Dillon tells her when she gets up on deck. "You'll be hauling up the anchor. Barelli'll be nearby, supervisin', in case yeh fuck anything up too badly - but," Dillon adds, seeing Marin's eyes widen, "it's hard to do in this case. 'S why I'm givin' this task to you. Just pull up the anchor and coil the chain somewhere no one's gonna trip on it. Can you do that?"

Marin nods vigorously.

"Out loud, boy."

"Yes, sir," Marin amends.

"Good. Get to it."

Marin trots obediently over to the side of the ship where a thick chain spirals down into the water. She takes a deep breath and curls two fists around the chain. The metal is rough and rust

chips off beneath her grip; she grits her teeth, resists the urge to close her eyes in a prayer, and pulls.

The anchor does not budge.

“Come on, come on, come *on*,” Marin mutters under her breath. She plants one foot against the side of the ship for leverage and tugs, jerks, yanks at the chain. There is the slightest of stirrings in the water, but otherwise nothing.

You don't look strong, Dillon seems to hiss in her ear.

I am strong, she spits back in memory-Dillon's face. She imagines her saliva pounding out her lips like cannon fire and splatting right on his forehead.

Come on, she says to herself one more time. *Slow and steady. You can do this. You're stronger than you look.*

Marin readjusts her foot against the ship. She grinds her fists together so tightly her nails threaten to pierce her skin.

One

Two

Three

She leans back so her full weight is on the anchor and her body careens on the edge of balance. If the anchor jerks up suddenly, she will fall.

For a moment, one heart-stopping moment, nothing happens.

And then something quivers

Trembles

Just on the edge

The chain scrapes a fraction of an inch up against the rail. Marin almost drops her grip in surprise. She leans back again, places her left hand above her right, and another inch gives, and then another. Already her muscles are quaking.

“Alright there?” a sailor - Barelli, probably - calls to her. Marin spares him the slightest of nods as response. She senses rather than sees Dillon’s stern gaze upon her, and she is determined not to give him the satisfaction of watching her fail. If it takes her hours, until the sun has become a half-silver flickering on the depths of the horizon, she will get this anchor up on her own.

Of course, the crew would likely not be pleased with her regardless if they were unable to leave the docks until sunset, but Marin tries not to think of that. All she lets herself focus on is the slow hand over hand over hand over hand of the anchor burgeoning forward.

When the chain is a haphazard - though, as Dillon had requested, thoroughly out of the pathways of the sailors - heap on the deck and the anchor peeks its face over the rail, Marin almost shrieks with relief. Her body is tensed as if to snap. She drops the weight to the deck and a shiver runs through her as every muscle releases at once.

“Well, look who got the anchor up, first try and all,” someone drawls behind her. Marin doesn’t have to turn to know that the snarl belongs to Burgess. “It only took a half an hour. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, sir,” Marin says.

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“I know, sir,” Marin says, head down, tone neutral, submission.

“It looks like you need another task. It also looks like the deck needs swabbing. Now that’s a good job - doesn’t require too much *physical effort*.” Burgess pokes her aching shoulders. Marin clenches her teeth. “Bucket and mop is in storage belowdecks. There’s a bucket of slop water in the galley. We run a tidy ship, lad. Rungs, rails, stern to hull, I don’t want to see a single speck of bird shit. Think you can manage?”

“Yes, sir.” Marin bites back a bitter *I do believe I can*. She does not raise her head the entire trip belowdecks, but inside she is glowing. Yes, Burgess had reprimanded her. But she hadn’t failed, and she was still here, and this could work this could work this could work.

Four

After the first day, when Marin wakes up, the *Harbinger* is surrounded by water. When she climbs above the deck, mop in hand to begin swabbing, she gasps at the sight. The ocean is a deep blue, glittering and more royal than anything she has ever seen. She has the sudden urge to catapult herself over the rail just to touch it, swallow it, be consumed by it. She cranes her neck first this way and then that, but no matter what direction she looks, she cannot find a trace of land hulking on any horizon. Marin is almost dizzy with how lost she is in this vast blue.

And then Ollie climbs up the ladder behind her and grumbles about the glare of the sun sparking off the waves and the spell is broken. Marin plunges the mop down into her bucket - the water within is much filthier than the expanse all around - and begins her work.

The rest of the day - and the day after that, and the day after that, and the day after that - passes much like the first, with Marin's small, shaking muscles most frequently delegated to the simplest - and, without fail, least desirable - tasks. Surrounded by ocean, it seems impossible to her that so much bird shit could appear on the deck each morning. It seems impossible that such an amount of bilge water could build up by the end of each day. It seems impossible that all of the other sailors are so completely incapable of ridding their own excrement that Marin must do it for them, in a round and round and round of emptying chamber pots (which are more often than not reeking, moldy, half-leaking buckets). It seems impossible to Marin that she could *not* want a change in this stench of a routing, but then the seventh day dawns.

“Get up.”

Marin's eyes snap open. By the time she blinks herself into waking, Burgess has already moved on to shake the shoulder of the next unsuspecting sailor.

“What’s going on?” she asks, sliding out of her hammock.

“Black clouds on the horizon,” Burgess grunts, as Ollie scowls and swears himself awake.

“There’s a storm rollin’ in. Looks like a bad one, from the waves that are already comin’.”

Marin’s stomach churns. “What’ll we do? Outrun it?”

Burgess only “hmpfs” in response and leaves the cabin.

“What’ll we do?” Marin repeats to Ollie. The older sailor throws on his thickest coat and shrugs at her.

“We can try to outrun it. We probably would, if it were small, but with a storm this size... if we tried to outrun it, and failed, we’d have wasted any time we could have spent preparing to take it on. It might buy us a couple’a hours, but there’s never a guarantee.”

Marin swallows and nods and tries to look confident, as if her heart hasn’t dropped into her gut. Ollie gives her a grizzled smile that Marin assumes is meant to come off as reassuring. It fails.

“It’s not that bad, lad,” Ollie tells her. “There’re always storms and we always hold the ship and we always live to see another. We’ll take down the sails and -“ Ollie elbows her playfully in the stomach. “- ye won’t be able to keep anything down fer a couple days. But it’ll be okay.”

“If you say so,” Marin mutters.

When they get up to the deck, the rest of the crew is already fast at work. Marin is struck by a wall of noise: Dillon and Burgess are barking orders; the sails are slapping against the wind; the men are pounding over the deck to and fro. Even Ackley has come up from the depths of the galley to help out.

“MALACHI!” Dillon shouts as soon as he spies her. “Help Maloney lash the wheel.”

“Yes, sir,” Marin calls back. She sprints up the deck to where Eric is grappling with a length of rope.

“Tell me what to do,” she says. “Tell me what we’re doing.”

“We have to get the wheel secure,” Eric tells her. He jerks his head for her to join him, and she grabs the rope behind him. He tosses the end over the wheel and ties one, two, three thick knots. “If we’re going to get through the storm, we have to make the ship as stable as possible. If we can get the wheel lashed down so we can’t change course, and if we can position ourselves so the wind can’t tip us, and if we angle into the waves just right...”

“We might be able to make it through,” Marin finishes. Eric grits his teeth and nods as he yanks the rope tighter.

“Loop it around the base, now, while I’m holding it taut.”

Marin does as he says. As her fingers twist the rope deftly into a knot around the base of the wheel, she marvels at the callouses that have layered their way onto her palms like so many mountains.

“Tug the wheel a bit, see if it stays?” Eric asks.

Marin grips the spokes of the wheel and leans on it with all of her might. The ropes hum beneath her at the weight, but it resolutely refuses to give.

“Well...” Eric sighs, stepping back to take in the rope rig from a distance. “It’ll hold for a while, at least, and that’s the best we can hope for.”

Marin casts her eyes to the horizon and focuses for the first time on the clouds boiling in the distance. Even as she stands, she can see them riot closer like a snarling giant stomping forward. They look like they could crush the ship beneath them with their sheer weight. Marin gulps.

“Maloney! Malachi!” Burgess yelps at them. “Are you actually capable of being useful? Or are you just going to stand there blabbing until we’re twenty feet below with our skin sloughing off into food for the fish?”

“Yes, Burgess,” Eric says instantly, as Marin adds, “Sorry, sir.”

“Go help Round backwind the jib!”

“Backwind it?” Marin asks Eric. She frowns as they make their way over to where Round and Barelli are struggling to turn the headsail against the wind. “Are we backwinding the mainsail, too?”

Eric shakes his head. “Just the jib.”

“Malachi! Over to me!” Barelli calls to her. He hands her a rope and she twists it around her hand to secure her grip. This close to the sail, the wind whips and cracks. It tangles in her hair and drowns out almost all the other noise around her.

“Why just the jib?” Marin shouts to Barelli. The tail end of her question gets swallowed by a sudden gust that forces the words back down her throat.

“What?”

Marin points at the jib and then back at the mainsail. It’s a crude sign language, but Barelli gets the message.

“Need to balance against the wind,” he calls back to her, the air threatening to steal every consonant. “If we backwind one and leave the other, in theory we won’t move.”

“We’re keeping the ship stable,” Marin answers, echoing Eric’s words from before. “Right. Okay.”

It takes nearly twenty minutes for the crew to secure the ship to Dillon's specifications - which, Marin finds out increasingly, consist mostly of "do the best that you can and then pray." When she ties the last knot, rain has already begun to fleck her face. The wind is howling against her skin so hard that each step seems to take three times the ordinary effort.

"C'mon!" Eric shouts to her, when the rain has become less fleck and more stone. He shakes the water from his hair like a dog and gestures for her to join him at the trap. "We've done all we can. Now we go below and wait."

Marin knows that the same number of lanterns flicker on the walls as always. But when the waves hit the ship and make it shudder, the shadows that leap up around her seem to take up more space. They seem to warn just how easily they could surround her.

"Where do we wait?" she turns back to ask Eric as a distraction.

"Cabins, usually," he answers.

"Y'won't want to be in your hammock, though," Ackley adds, sneaking up behind her. "Give you a right nasty headache to be tossed around like a trussed up chicken all day and all night."

"No candle, either," Ackley says, when they make it into their cabin and Marin instinctively goes for the matches. "Too easy for it to tip over and set the whole ship ablaze. You'll be amazed how quickly we can go up in flames even as the water pours down on our 'eads."

"So we just wait in the dark until the storms ends?"

"Yep."

Marin chews her lip. She sits against the wall of the ship and tries not to think of the rats scurrying in the walls.

The rats are just as scared as you are, she reminds herself. No one wants to drown.

She remembers the first night, when the ship was still docked and she pretended that the waves felt like her mother rocking her asleep. Now, the motion of the ship is so rough that she cannot think of it as anything but what it is: a small wooden boat being tossed from hand to hand of a cruel giant. They are the ocean's toy. They could be so easily crushed should the giant grow bored.

After what could have been hours, or minutes, or days, or an instant, the waves become so monstrous that they threaten to toss Marin across the room. She topples over onto the floor and tries in vain to scramble back into a sitting position. She struggles to find her balance but it slips out of her grip again and again. Finally, she is forced to give in and lay with her body curled against the wood floor. Her face presses against the rough grain.

Marin doesn't know if it's the storm or the stench of the ship so close to her face or maybe some combination of the two, but her stomach rolls. She swallows back bile but then the ship is pummeled and pummeled and pummeled and she retches.

Something slides across the floor and hits her face. Before her stomach empties its contents, Marin realizes that the object is a bucket, and she leans over it gratefully.

"Thanks," she manages to gasp between heavings. She thinks she sees Ackley nod back at her, his own mouth clenched tightly shut.

Even when there is nothing left in her to vomit back up, the ocean does not cease its assault upon the ship, and Marin chokes and chokes and chokes until she fears her body will run dry and shrivel up. The bile in the bucket sloshes with each wave and spills over the edges. Marin does not have the strength to be disgusted.

She wants to pass out.

She wants to spend the rest of this hell unconscious. She does not even wish for dreams, just a rush of black oblivion.

The ocean is not so kind.

Marin is conscious, achingly conscious, for every smash of water on wood. At some point, she realizes she can feel spray leaking in through the walls. She shivers uncontrollably.

Please

Please

Please

She repeats the word in her head until it no longer has meaning. It tastes like a prayer but she does not know who she would direct it to. Maybe it is to herself. Maybe it is to the sea below. How long has it been? Hours, at least. Days. She does not know. Everything is the same in the dark.

Please.

And then, just as reckless and sudden as it began, it is over. Marin waits for the sea to howl again, but there is nothing but stillness, the rock of the ship gentle once more.

“Is it over?” she tries to ask Ackley, but the words come out a weak hiss against the floorboards. She lets her body collapse into the wood and closes her eyes. Now, perhaps, she can rest.

“It’s over,” Ackley says, after another eternity has passed. He clears his throat. “We made it through.”

A hand meets Marin’s shoulder.

“C’mon up, lad,” Ollie says gently. “You’re alright. We’re all alright.”

Marin staggers to her feet. There is the crackle of a match and the room lights up brilliantly with the glow of the candle. Marin sees Ackley picking himself up gingerly, a thin line of vomit running down his shirt. Ollie is the most stable of the group, but even his face looks ashen in the dimness - but then, Marin supposes, he always looks pallid and sickly.

“M sorry about the mess,” Marin mumbles as she looks at the floor, which is strewn with the contents of her stomach, splattered from the now-overturned bucket.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ollie assures her.

“I’ll clean it up.”

“It’s fine. We’ll all clean it up. It was a nasty storm, but we’re through it now. We’re all through it.”

Ollie doesn’t let go of her shoulder, even as they start to make their way out of the cabin.

“The others’ll be going topside to check out the damage. I’m sure somewhere, someone’ll have an extra shirt that you can borrow,” Ollie says, nodding to Marin’s stained and soiled one.

“You can just strip that one right off, here -“

Ollie reaches for her chest and Marin staggers out of the way.

“No!” she cries out. Ollie jerks back and stares at her.

“I mean,” she amends, all too late, “it’s fine. I’ll just wash this later. I don’t - don’t want to be a burden.”

Ollie ogles her as if she has sprouted horns and a tail. He squints his eyes and stares for so so long that Marin finds herself holding her breath, sucking in, wondering if this is the moment when everything comes undone. And then

“Suit yerself.” Ollie shrugs.

“Rough few days, lad?” Round calls to her when the surface on the top deck, but as soon as his eyes flicker from Marin’s chest to the rest of the ship, his teasing breaks off into a gasp. “Mary, Mother of God...”

The deck is not quite in ruins, but it is close. Mud, dirt, debris strew everywhere Marin looks. The crew crosses the deck. In the corner, Marin finds a rotted fish, its guts half purged from where it was impaled on a rail. She clenches her eyes closed at the stench and turns away to prevent her gag reflex from taking hold of her again.

As she explores the rest of the deck, the shock of the storm’s aftermath settles. For all the mess, the ship seems largely undamaged.

“Masts’re all intact!” Dillon’s voice booms across the ship. “Ackley, Maloney, Malachi - take a sail. Scurry your scrawny asses up the rigging and check for tears.”

“Yes, sir,” comes the scattered reply. As Marin makes her way past Dillon to the smallest mast at the bow of the ship, he shouts after her,

“And, Malachi - get a new shirt!”

Marin pretends not to have heard him. She dimly hears Ollie say something to Dillon in response. She hopes it’s not a comment about her odd reluctance to strip her old clothes in front of him.

The ropes are still slick with seawater, and she has to take extra care as she catapults herself from rung to rung of the rigging not to slip right off. Marin picks off a trail of seaweed and flings it down below her. Her eyes scan the sails carefully. There are no gaping holes, but she knows that even the smallest tear, left unchecked, would catch the wind and quickly expand into an unusable sail and a furious Dillon.

She pauses a moment at the top and just breathes. From here, everything looks clear and bright and unburdened. If she only had the glimmering horizon to judge by, she never would know there had been a storm. This moment, even after a sleepless night and a vomit-soaked shift, is everything that Marin needs. She inhales and holds the sea-salt air inside of her as long as she can. Across from her, on the middle mast, Eric catches her eye and smiles.

“Well?” Dillon yells up at them. Marin drinks in the feel of the sun before casting her legs in an awkward scuttle downward.

“No signs of damage, Captain,” Marin reports when she reaches the bottom.

“You’re sure?”

Marin nods. “I was thorough, I promise. I know what happens if I’m not.”

“Hmph,” Dillon answers, but there is a pleased glint in his eye. Pride bubbles up in Marin’s chest and she suppresses a smile. “Maloney? Ackley?”

“Nothing,” Eric says, as Ackley replies, “All’s good up there.”

Dillon exhales in one long, pungent stream. “God’s with us, lads. We don’t know how lucky we were. Two days of storm and we’re all still alive. There’re a few cracks along the masts, but they can be patched. I’m sure we lost some supplies, and, well, you can see how much water we’ve taken on...” Dillon gestures over the side of the ship; *The Harbinger* is bobbing much lower than usual. “But we’re still here, and there’s nothing that we can’t fix up. Say your prayers, men. Give thanks or offering or whatever you like. We can’t do that again.”

Marin shudders at the thought of a repeat storm, even as the crew scatters to begin the clean-up.

No, we definitely can’t.

As the sailors head off to their work, Marin notices that some of them are crossing themselves. Some lean over the rail and spit into the sea after a quick glance up to - what? God? Marin watches as Crom takes a tarnished coin from his pocket and presses it to his lips. Should she be praying, she wonders, to keep up appearances as well? She doesn't know who or what she would pray to. She thinks she might remember the words to the Lord's Prayer, if she concentrates hard enough. She closes her eyes and reaches up to her throat to clutch Cora's necklace.

Our Father, who art -

“Malachi!”

“Yes, Captain?” Marin's head snaps up.

“Fer god's sake. Get a new shirt.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“I've got one in my cabin,” Eric says, sweeping up alongside her. “You can borrow it until you get yours washed. Here, let's go get it -“

“No!” Marin blurts, her mind already panting for excuses even as the words leave her mouth. “There's too much to do up here. No point taking two men away from the work.” Eric frowns, and she adds, “I'll get it myself, just tell me where it is.”

“Alright... there's a crate, beside my hammock... third one on the left. The shirt should be at the bottom. You're welcome to it, if the rats haven't made a nest of it.” He elbows her playfully in the ribs, but even so, Marin is unsure how much he is joking.

“Thank you,” she says. “Truly.”

“Of course.”

Marin slips down belowdecks and into Eric's cabin alone, so blessedly alone. When she sees that the room is empty, her sigh of relief is audible. She slips off her own shirt and slips his on like she is changing skins.

This is too risky, a small voice hisses at the back of her head. *What happens when they find you? You know they're going to find you.*

Marin bats the voice away like a stray rat.

I'll be fine, Marin snaps back. *Just like the ship. I'm always fine.*

Five

Day by day, everything begins to return to normal - or, as Marin finds, normal set just-off center, everything buzzing with a peculiar energy. Burgess's laugh booms a little too loudly. Ackley hands out double portions of hard-tack one night because he cannot remember who he had or hadn't served. The storm had shaken more than just the ship itself. At night, Marin curls up in her cabin long before the other men go to sleep. Their nerves make her uneasy, and she cannot quite pinpoint why.

And then, one night when Marin finds herself again staring into the blackness of her unlit cabin and ignoring the cackling voices of the sailors down the hall, there comes a knock from the doorway.

"You in?" Eric asks. Marin looks up and finds his dark eyes staring at her.

"Huh?"

"Crown and Anchor. Ackley's starting a game in the galley."

"Huh?" Marin repeats, feeling dumb.

"Crown and Anchor?" Marin shrugs. Eric tries again. "Chuck-a-luck?"

Marin shakes her head.

"*Ancre, pique, soleil?*" Eric asks with an exaggerated French accent. He cocks an eyebrow at her and pretends to twirl a mustache. She giggles and quickly clasps a hand over her mouth, but if Eric noticed the high pitch of the sound, he doesn't mention it.

"I don't know what that is," Marin admits.

"Dice game," Eric says, miming shaking and throwing.

“Gambling?” Marin squints her eyes. Eric notices her hesitance and his face softens into a reassuring smile.

“It’s not that big, I promise. We just need to let off some steam. You bet a trinket or two. Hard tack, maybe - get an extra ration of salt beef. Eh? Eh?”

“That does sound pretty enticing,” Marin says with a grin.

“So you’re in?”

“I’m in,” Marin affirms.

“Huzzah!” Eric thrusts his fist into the air. He claps Marin on the shoulder so hard she almost stumbles and dashes off in the direction of the galley. Marin sprints after him, flushed and unsure why. His enthusiasm runs through her like a fever.

“We’ve got Mal!” Eric shouts ahead. He skids to a stop suddenly in the galley doorway and Marin almost crashes into him.

Inside is cramped as per usual, a handful of the crewmen sitting around the table. Some are on stools, some on crates, and Ackley is crouched on a rather large bucket. Burgess is there, and Ollie too, and Round and Barelli and Crom.

“Mal!” Ackley cries when he sees her, with such exuberance that Marin suspects the tankard of rum sitting next to him has been refilled several times already. Ollie and the others nod to her in greeting. Burgess gives her the typical shrewd look as he does, but, in his defense, he greets her regardless.

“Pull up a keg!” Ackley says. Eric grabs a barrel and turns it easily on its side. He motions for Marin to join him. She swallows and sits down close, too close. She feels foolish for being so nervous at the proximity - what, is he going to smell her? Is he going to magically sense the

fabric binding her chest? But no matter how irrational she knows it is, she still feels her skin tingle when his leg brushes a little too close to hers.

“How do you -?” Marin starts to whisper to Eric, but he cuts her off with a nod to the men.

“Bet’s up to Burgess,” Ackley says. “What’s the wager?”

Burgess thumps a fist on the table. When he opens it, a small coin falls out. It isn’t worth much. Tiny bets, as Eric had said.

“Crowns,” Burgess says. Marin notices that a painted board has been placed on the table. It is divided into six sections, painted with six different symbols: a heart, a spade, a diamond, a club, an anchor, and a crown. On top of the board are three wooden dice, their sides carved with each of the same six symbols. Burgess gathers the dice and shakes them. He tosses them casually back onto the board. A spade, a heart, and another spade wink back up at him. Burgess curses loudly.

“Bad luck, mate. Pay up,” Ackley chirps. Burgess growls and tosses the coin to Ackley, who Marin notices has a collection of odd objects sitting in front of him. He must be the banker, she realizes, and the pile of trinkets the pot.

“Crom, your bid.” Ackley turns to the next sailor.

“Here.” Ollie shoves a pair of metal cups at her and Eric.

Marin has never tasted rum before. It smells delicious, spiced and flavorful, like the sweet cakes that the baker in Harwich would make every Christmastide. She raises the cup to her lips and hesitates. If she knows anything about drunkards, it is their looseness, their disregard for anything secret or covert. She wonders what secrets an intoxicated version of herself would spill.

But still... the rum smells of warmth. It smells of coziness and days when Marin and Cora would pick at sweet cakes in front of the fire with no worry of sickness or cold. It smells of comfort and nothing like the dank interior of the ship.

But if she were to slip even the slightest - if she were to use the wrong name or not notice her bindings coming loose or -

But she glances around the table and sees the sailors knock back pints as if they were fresh water, and she decides that it would be even more suspicious if she didn't drink the rum at all. She'll be careful, of course, but still... one or two drinks, just to keep up appearances, that couldn't be *too* bad...

Marin takes a large gulp and immediately gags. She clamps her lips down and forces herself to swallow instead of spit all over the table. *A boy wouldn't choke on rum*, she tells herself.

It burns her throat on the way down, the heat she had sensed but couldn't possibly have braced herself for. She swears she can feel it splashing into her stomach. Her second sip she makes more cautious and decidedly smaller. This time, it goes down smoothly, and Marin decides that she likes it. Apart from the burn, it is sweet, and certainly more delicious than any of the other rations on the ship.

"Mal."

"Hmm?" Marin looks up from the rum.

"You're up," Ackley tells her. "What've ye got to bet?"

"I..." Marin blinks. She has nothing to her name, but the sailors don't know that. She takes another sip of rum to stall. "Funny stories?"

The men snort and snicker. Beside her, Eric lets out a warm, barking laugh that makes her tingle - or, the rum makes her tingle, or -

“It has to be something we can put in the pot. Somethin’ material, like.”

“I... I don’t know that I have...” Marin starts.

“You’ve got that necklace,” Burgess interrupts.

“What?” Marin’s hand flies up to her neck. “This? Bet this?”

Burgess shrugs. “Works well as anything.”

Marin swallows. Her fingers rub the small shells. “I really -“

“Come on, lad,” Burgess presses, scowling. Marin doesn’t want to get on Burgess’s bad side, especially when the round sailor was into more than a bit of rum, but when her fingers press into the necklace cord, she can’t bring herself to rip it free.

“You’ll probably get it back,” Eric says quietly. “Most men do. The odds are in your favor, really.”

“Are you going to bet or not?” Burgess asks. Marin looks at Eric, who gives her the tiniest of nods. She grabs the necklace, mentally whispering *I’m so sorry* to whatever God would bring the message to Cora, and yanks it off. One of the shells flies off the end of the cord and skitters away into a shadowed corner. Marin slaps it down on the table, trying to look confident and not as if the action feels every inch a betrayal.

“I pick hearts.”

Ackley nods sagely. “Hearts it is.”

Marin takes the dice. They are colder and bulkier in her palm than they had first appeared. She shakes them between her two hands once, twice, three times, mouthing a tiny prayer with each gesture. *Please, please, please.*

She closes her eyes and scatters them on the table.

There is a moment of hush in which Marin's heart leaps and she thinks that, perhaps, maybe, she has -

"Ah. Better luck next time, lad." Ackley sweeps away the necklace, grimacing at her. It is supposed to be consoling. It fails miserably.

"You can always win it back next time," Eric murmurs to her. Marin shrugs and takes another large sip of rum. This time, she relishes the burn on the way down.

"S'okay," she mutters. "Just a trinket."

The game goes around and around the table. When it gets back to Marin, every time, Eric lends her a coin, a small carving, and a whale tooth respectively so that she might have a chance to gain back her necklace.

"Thank you," she says after each loan, the rum or the ship or the fear of losing making her stomach squirm as she meets his eyes.

"Of course," Eric replies. The rum makes her blush. "This time, you've got this. This time, I swear."

Yet even though the other men at the table seem to have managed to keep their wins and losses more or less at zero, luck has made Marin her martyr. No matter what she bets, or how many times she shakes her hands before casting the dice, she cannot roll enough to break even.

When the bet comes to her a fourth time, she shakes her head before Eric can fish another loan out of his pockets. Her head swims.

“I’m out,” Marin says, though it takes more effort than it should to get there. Her tongue is numb. It does not want to cooperate with her mind. She pushes away from the table and stands up, and the room threatens to swallow her whole.

“M gonna go lie down f’ra bit,” she manages to loll out over lips that smash too much together. A few of the men nod at her, but most ignore her, too immersed in the game and their own swimming tankards.

Marin staggers down the hallway. She had forgotten how shivering the ship could be. She feels as if she can sense each individual wave that rolls beneath the decks. She leans against the wall and runs her fingers across it for support as she makes her way to her cabin. The wall is bumpy and distracting. Lump lump lump *splinter* lump lump she runs her fingers over and over.

“Mal!”

Lump lump *splinter* Eric’s voice catches up to her through a fog.

“Mal, wait up.” A hand settles on her shoulder.

Shrug it off he can feel you he can feel you woman woman splinter, a voice says inside her mind, or maybe it is outside of her mind; the lines between the two are as smudged as the world around her. She shakes her head and black spots tremble before her eyes.

“Have you ever had rum before?”

Eric’s eyes grasp hers steady. Blink blink they are deeper brown than she had known. Brown like... like the ship. Like mud. Like -

Marin shakes her head again. “First time.”

“Oof.” Eric exhales and it sounds like laughter, but it is not cruel. Eric is too warm for that, Marin thinks, too warm and soft and what would it feel like to touch - “Let’s get you to your cabin, then. It’s probably best if you lie down.”

He takes her arm and leads her. His hands are so big, she thinks. It’s funny what she notices in the dark. She can feel each of his fingers pressing into her arm, almost entirely encircling it, and yet she struggles to feel her tongue, or the weight of her feet below her. Some facts are warmer than others.

Her hammock does not look appealing. She slips down the edge and sits on the floor with her back against the wall. Yes, this is better, more solid-ish, though she can still feel the *slip slop, slip slop* of the waves and the splinters of the wood behind her. Eric sits down next to her. Too close too close *right* close. He will notice.

That would be bad, some voice that is hard and still alert says. *You cannot let him see.*

“You should go back,” Marin says. “Play.”

Forget, she doesn’t say. Don’t notice me. Ignore what you might learn I am.

Eric shrugs. He is so close that the movement slides along her arm. The waves seem to increase in their pulsing, or maybe that is her heartbeat, or the rats squabbling in the walls.

“I’ve played before. If I want to watch them get drunk and call each other bastards, I don’t have to look too far.” He smiles at her and squeezes her shoulder. “Besides, I don’t want to leave you alone. You look like you might need someone to... look after you.”

“I’m fine,” Marin knows she should say, but the words get halfway to her lips and fumble to a halt. She wants to be fine. She probably would be fine. It is safer if she is fine. But Eric is too close so close right close and the rum likes this. She likes this.

“Thank you,” she mumbles instead.

“Of course,” Eric replies at once. To her soggy mind, it seems as if his words overlap hers, that he knew what she was saying before she had said it. “I know it might not seem like it sometimes, but we take care of our own here.”

Marin nods. Her hair catches on the wood behind her at the motion. *Slip slop* tangle. She keeps nodding and nodding and giggles at the odd sensation. Eric watches her. The skin around his brown brown eyes crinkles in smile. Eric watches her. It is dark in the cabin but it feels like the sun. Eric watches her.

“Tell me a story,” Marin asks.

“About what?”

Marin scrunches her mouth, pucker unpucker pucker in indecision. “My granddad always used to tell me about the selkies and the sirens. He was a cart - caltog - carnograph -“

Marin screws her mouth around the stubborn word and gives up. “He made maps. For the King. He went sailing a lot but he wasn’t a sailor.”

“Oh?” Eric asks. His eyebrows raise in interest but his eyes are on her lips. Her lips? His lips, Mal’s lips. No, that must be wrong. He must be looking at her teeth or chin or maybe she has a spot or

“Use to show me maps, like the old ones, the really ones from long ago, where they still thought the world ended on the horizon and you could sail off of the edge and never be seen again.” Marin trails her finger in the air and slopes it off sharply. Her eyes cross as she tracks its movement. Her finger grazes the side of Eric’s knee and she jerks it away.

“He had this one story,” she adds, “about a mermaid. Says he saw a siren once and she was beautiful and terrifying and everything they say. ‘It,’ he called her.”

Marin frowns. “Not very nice to call her that. That’s probably why she tried to kill him, I bet. If he tried to call me ‘it’ I’d be hurt, too.”

“Probably,” Eric says, lips up smile wide close close close. Marin wants his lips to touch her that close close close.

You’re drunk, the voice in her mind says.

“D’you believe in them?” Marin asks.

“Sirens?”

“Mmhmm.”

Eric is silent for a while. Marin stares around the room. The candle in the corner flickers and she images that, in its dancing shadow, she sees her parents - no, they’re not her parents, they’re seabirds - no, they’re fish, massive as ships of their own - no -

She is suddenly exhausted. Her head lolls first to one side and then the next and then, somehow, it lands on Eric’s shoulder. She waits for him to recoil, to push away and leave her to topple over.

He doesn’t.

He leans into her, their bodies so close that Marin can feel the heat of his skin seeping through her shift.

“I don’t know,” Eric says, after Marin has inhaled and exhaled and inhaled into him. “I know a lot of men who do. Most men on this ship, in fact. Sailors are the most superstitious lot you’re like to ever meet.”

“Mmmmm,” Marin murmurs. She cannot quite remember what Eric is responding to, but she nods in response just to feel the friction of her cheek against his shoulder. He is so warm. Perhaps he is on fire. Perhaps they are both on fire. Perhaps Marin should run and call for help, but she is so tired, and her body likes it here. Perhaps she will go up in flames and no one will ever know.

“If you want a good story, ask Ollie about the time he watched a selkie bathe herself on a rock.”

A laugh bubbles up Marin’s throat and comes out half of a belch. Eric doesn’t seem to mind.

“Don’t bring up the fact that he was four months at sea and it could have been any ordinary seal. He’s convinced...” Eric is silent again for a few breaths. His arm twitches under Marin’s head and she wonders if he is contemplating holding her.

Mal, Mal, to him you are Mal. He wouldn’t want anything from a sailor boy.

“Me... well, I don’t know. Maybe it’s cowardly to not believe. I don’t like the idea that something else could be out there, toying with us, laughing at how stupid humans are.”

“We are stupid,” Marin says. She is sleepy sleepy sleepy. Her eyes flutter closed, the better to not see the flames which may or may not be eating her alive.

“Maybe,” Eric agrees. “But in that case, it seems rude for them not to reveal themselves to us all, instead of laughing at our ignorance just before they draw us to our doom.”

“And if they’re really real?” Marin mumbles. The words tangle in her mouth and Eric’s shirt and catch on his hard shoulder. She is almost surprised when he responds, so sure that he could not have heard her.

“Then maybe I’ll be lucky enough to be proven wrong before they drag me to the depths.”

“I’d like to see one,” Marin decides. “If they are real. To prove they are real. It must be the most magical death... with their teeth and their hair and the way they make you love them so much you break...”

“You’re a strange one, you know that, Mal?” Eric says, and she feels his chest compress with a chuckle. Laughter hugs you tighter than anything when you can feel it rise in someone else, Marin decides; it is powerful most when you don’t have to hear it.

“You think?”

“Indeed.”

Marin feels her hair flutter with the word. His lips must be pressed up against her head. She does not know how to process this sensation. The room is too hot and the bindings around her chest are too tight too tight too visible she is certain he will see her as she is and she will be burning burning

“Mal?”

Marin has to lick her lips once, twice, thrice before the word comes out in response: “Yeah?”

“I think you...”

Eric’s chest rises and falls in the deepest of breaths.

“It’s okay. I’m drunk,” Marin tells him, because it makes sense.

Eric laughs again, but this time it does not shiver deep enough in his torso. It is tight and false.

“I know you are. I am, too,” he adds, but Marin doesn’t quite believe it. The floor seems to be obeying Eric a lot more in carrying his weight than it is in carrying hers.

“But that’s it, that’s exactly it,” Eric continues. “I’m drunk, and I’m not getting more drunk or shouting at Burgess for being a prick or betting to win some mollusk Crom dug off the anchor. I’m drunk and I’m protecting your drunk ass.”

Marin knows he isn’t talking about her bottom but for a moment she pictures herself naked and him staring and -

She is glad the candle is not bright enough to show her blush.

“I like you, Mal. I like you a lot.”

Marin swallows and wonders if he can feel the motion. She wonders if he can feel her tongue connected to her throat connected to her ribs connected to her breasts hiding hidden too close to the surface. She waits for him to discover her.

He doesn’t.

She watches the candle burn lower. The ship is steadying, or she is steadying. She is tired. The wax drips down and she is sure this is dangerous, but she cannot bring herself to move.

“I should go,” Eric says, finally. “You’re sobering up. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He pulls himself up from under Marin gently. There is a moment where he crouches down beside her and just stares stares stares and she cannot breathe and

Then he stands up and is gone.

This is the fire and this is the flames and Marin is burning alive.

She falls asleep before she can reach the hammock.

Six

The next morning, unfortunately, dawns.

Marin's eyes snap open to a still-dark room, her bunkmates still groaning with sleep. She barely has time to run her mind back through the events of the previous night before her stomach rolls. She flips herself off of her bunk and crawls to the bucket in the corner just in time to retch. Her head throbs at the suddenness of the movement. Her vision narrows to a pinprick as dizziness washes over her.

"Uuuuhhhhhh," she moans, heaving herself into a semblance of a sitting position. Ollie's rasping laugh hovers somewhere around her left ear. A hand claps too too too so loudly on her shoulder and she flinches away.

"Never been drunk before, have ye, lad?" Ollie teases. "Never felt the howl of the morning after quite like this, eh?"

Marin moans again in response. She retches but nothing comes out, and she shoves the bucket away from her, disgusted. Ollie's hand softens its grip.

"It's alright," he says, quieter. "We've all been there. Come on, let's get yeh some water."

He gingerly helps her to her feet. When Marin wavers, her body not keen on the idea of standing, Ollie guides her back to her hammock.

"You just rest for a bit. I'll bring it to you."

Marin nods and collapses back as Ollie leaves the room. Her head lolls and wedges between the thick ropes and the rough wall. It's not comfortable, but the pinching sensation is at least a distraction from the throbbing pain that radiates through her body. Her muscles are screaming

and her mouth is full of cotton. All she wants to do is go back to bed. She imagines telling Burgess - or, worse, Dillon - that she is incapable of doing her work. She almost laughs.

“Here yeh go.”

A pair of hands shoves a biscuit into one of her fists and a tankard of water into the other. Marin raises the glass to her lips. She sloshes half of the water over her face in her haste to gulp it down. She doesn't care. Maybe it almost feels good.

The water swirls around in her emptied stomach, and she nibbles a bit of the biscuit to quiet her body.

“There, that's a good lad...” Ollie uses his shirtsleeve to mop off the spilled water from Marin's brow.

“Need to get up,” Marin mutters. “Need to swab the -“

“Ackley's already taking care of it,” Ollie tells her.

Marin frowns and takes another small bite of the hard tack. “S'not his job.”

“Yeah, well, he feels bad he got you three sheets to the wind, an' you'd never drunk before.”

Marin starts to protest, but Ollie interrupts her, “You owe him, to be sure. And Dillon's like to give you a reaming. But take the morning off.”

Marin does not press her luck by attempting to rebuke him once more. She simply nods, her head scraping against the wall of the ship, and closes her eyes.

“Thank him for me,” she mutters.

“Will do.”

And then Ollie is gone and Marin is alone with the ache the ache the god why ache.

It takes her the next half hour to finish the biscuit and water. At first, her stomach threatens to rebel again with every bite, but gradually the drink calms it. Marin makes her way to a sitting position, slowly re-acustoming herself to life in an upright state. She lets herself rest for another half hour, forcing her breath to even against the gentle rock of the ship, and then she reluctantly heads topside.

“There he is!” Burgess crows when Marin pokes her head above the deck. “How’s the rum treating you today?”

Marin grits her teeth and does not rise. Burgess is louder today, more irritating. Each word seems to land on a nerve and threatens to snap. When she gets out the mop and starts sweeping across the wood, she imagines that she is wiping the smug smile from his face with every push.

By mid-day, her body has returned to somewhat normal. She manages to laugh at a mediocre joke that Crom cracks. She devours her portion of salt beef and her stomach does not emit even a gurgle.

“How are you doing?” Eric murmurs to her, as she leans against the rail and breaths in the horizon. Marin shrugs. Today, she cannot meet his eyes. She can’t decide if she does or does not want to remember each word, each touch that had passed between them.

Probably, she thinks, it’s safer if she forgets.

“Not the best I’ve been,” she says after a while.

“Look, Mal, I know I -“

“What’s that?” Marin interrupts, before he can say something and she can say something and something will happen that should not happen and - she flings out a fist to point at a dark mass growing in the distance.

Eric follows her gaze and squints. “Looks like a storm...”

Wonderful, Marin thinks. She suppresses a wave of nausea from rolling over her. Just what she needs.

“We should tell someone,” she says aloud.

Eric frowns into the distance some more, cocking his head first this way and then that.

“Perhaps,” he says finally. “But it looks like it’s going to miss us. See, the way the clouds -“

But Marin has made the mistake of looking at his eyes, and something fierce rises inside of her, something that feels like fire and claws and wanting and before she can let it devour her, she turns away and strides to the opposite side of the deck.

She does not talk to Eric for the rest of the day. At dinner, she forces herself into conversation between Round and Ackley, laughs too loudly, avoids Eric’s eyes.

She is too afraid of what she will find.

She is too afraid of what she will not.

She curls up in bed and closes herself against it all.

Seven

“Get up. Get up. GET UP!”

Burgess shoves Marin so hard that she topples out of the hammock.

“Ow!” Marin hisses. “What the hell?!”

“Get on deck.”

Burgess is gone before he can hear the curses that stream from Marin’s mouth.

“What was that?” Marin whispers to Ollie as she picks herself up off the ground. She rubs her shoulder, wincing. “I know how Burgess is, but still...”

“Dunno...” Ollie says slowly. He shrugs and refuses to meet her eyes. Marin frowns.

“Alright...” she mutters. When they get into the hallway and find the rest of the crew stumbling blearily to the trap, Marin seeks out Eric.

“What’s happening?”

Eric doesn’t reply. Marin reaches out for his shoulder, but when she manages to clutch his sleeve, he shakes her off with a toss of his shoulder. She reaches out again, face set with determination. This time, she digs her nails into the rough cotton of his shirt and yanks him backward until they are at the back of the crowd scuffling for the trap.

“What’s - going - on?” Marin snaps through teeth taut. “Why are we all going up top - and why won’t anyone talk to me?”

“Dillon called a meeting.”

Eric turns away and reaches out for the rungs of the trap ladder, but Marin squirms around him to block his path.

“About what?”

Eric's lips thin out the slightest of increments. "There's another storm coming."

The words tumble in Marin's ears with confusion. "Another? The one from yesterday?"

Eric nods. His eyes flicker between her and the ladder, her and the ladder, her and the ladder. Marin wishes she could reach out and hold his gaze still, too. His inability to rest makes her own skin crawl and long for movement.

"But that one was on course to miss us," she says, her eyebrows drawing together. "It was going to go wide by miles!"

"Exactly."

Eric pushes past her. He is not rough, never Eric, never more than a teasing push shove tumble, but today the gesture has no play in it. Today he leaves her feeling detached and hollow. Marin swallows down her confusion and follows him to the top deck.

When she pokes her head above, she sees that the others are already gathered in a half-circle around the stern, with Dillon at its peak. He catches her eye as soon as she steps out, and at once Marin has the ominous sensation that she is trapped. Even two dozen feet away, Dillon's gaze is a cage and Marin cannot even bring herself to shake the bars.

"Thank you so much for joining us, *lad*," Dillon crows to her as she approaches. His teeth are wire, daggers, added bars on the cage. Marin wants to look away from them but she cannot.

"Now," Dillon continues, addressing the group even though he never breaks from Marin's stare, "some of you already know what I wanted to meet about. But for those of you not so well-informed... fortunately, I am kind enough to give a revision.

"We sailors are a superstitious lot. Stupid, some say. Naive, others will quote. But I think differently. I think we just know how to interpret the signs. When we see divine intervention, we

know enough to call it like it is, and over the years, we've grown to recognize the things that make God angry. Angry enough to kill. Angry enough, say..."

Dillon shrugs, but the gesture is anything but casual. There is threat in the roll of every muscle.

"Oh, I don't know. Angry enough to cause a storm... or two... or three, perhaps, if the transgression was damned enough."

A sail cracks in the wind as if to echo Dillon's exclamation. Marin's body threatens to shiver so hard it seems it would crack. She crosses her arms and holds herself still, together, there. She will not let him win, whatever wicked game he has decided she alone will play against him.

"And what transgression do you think that might be?" Marin asks. Her voice is the squeak of a rat. She is quiet, missable perhaps, but insistently present.

"Captain?" she tacks on like a cannon shot.

"The oldest one of all. Having a woman aboard."

Marin's limbs turn liquid. Her knees waver and threaten to slump her to the ground.

"That's -" She swallows once, twice, thrice. She attempts to corral her voice into submission, into strength. "That's not possible. Sir. The ship's not big enough to hide a stowaway this long. Surely someone would have found her by now if -"

"If she were not already among us, hiding right before our very eyes," Dillon interrupts. The tendrils of his voice seem to snake around her neck and threaten to strangle. Marin trembles as if with fever. She curses her weakness, her legs and their shaking, this damned inability to keep still.

“Has anyone ever seen him take his shirt off?” Dillon shouts at the men.

There is a flurry of shrugs as the sailors shake their heads and murmur in dissent. Their response is drowned out by the violent *smack smack smack* of the waves against the ship. To Marin, it sounds as if the water itself is in agreement with Dillon.

“Have ye ever seen him piss into the sea?”

Her eyes dart upward and she meets Eric’s gaze. Unlike the rest of the sailors, who have been drawing steadily closer as Dillon speaks, Eric has hung back. He leans against the rail with his arms crossed.

Say something, she begs him, *please, Eric, please, say something*.

“Don’t you find it a bit queer, lad?” Dillon snarls, and his hand starts to trail down Marin’s shoulder. “All of us men, cooped up on a scrap of wood in the middle of the sea, and not one has ever...”

His hand moves lower.

“... seen...”

It slurps down Marin’s waist.

“... your...”

She squeezes her eyes shut. *Say something, say something, someone please -*

“... prick.”

Dillon’s hand grasps at her groin and she jerks out of his reach.

“Stop it!” Marin cries. Dillon’s fingers swipe at her, attempting to regain the iron chain grip on her shoulder, but she stumbles backwards and his fist clenches tight on empty air.

“Please, God, just stop!”

A sudden gust of wind snaps the sails taut, and everyone jumps. Lightning cuts the air on the horizon, and the whole ship seems to hold its breath awaiting the thunder.

“Captain?” one of the men, Ackley, pipes up. Dillon ignores him. The thunder crashes with finality and the sound rattles around Marin’s chest in tremulous aftershocks.

“Captain?” Ackley tries again, gazing out at the black clouds. This time, Dillon listens.

“We could try to outrun her, of course,” he says of the storm, half response, half musing. “But that would take us a week off-course at least, and we’re low on drinking water as it is - assuming we’re even successful.”

Dillon turns back to Marin, and maybe it’s the darkening sky, or the vanishing sun, or the rippling shadows of the crackling sails, but when she looks into his eyes she would swear the irises were black.

“The ship is weak. She won’t survive another storm by dropping anchor. It’s a right bad streak of luck we’ve hit, I think, too much to be a coincidence. And I don’t remember angering God, do you, men?”

Another hiss of dissent. Another hiss of lightning splitting off into thunder boom in the distance. Marin fights her chattering teeth to clamp them down and keep from telling Dillon exactly how many things about his crew she imagines God would dislike.

“It must be something else, then.” Dillon steps toward her. Marin scrambles back again, but her back hits the railing of the stern. She presses against it as if it would swallow her. The rough wood bites splinters through her shirt. “And if it’s a woman hidden aboard, well, then, it would be best if she showed herself. She would have to be an awful cunt to put the fate of the rest of the crew on the line just to keep her privacy.”

Marin strains against the wood, trying to focus on the sharp tang of the splinters digging in instead of Dillon, who is marching ever-closer. One, two, three, four, five slivers of wood she counts. In her mind's eye they resemble Dillon's teeth, rotting and cracked, which he bares at her.

"You wouldn't want to endanger your crew, would you?"

Marin bids her legs stop shaking. She looks Dillon straight in his black storm eyes and juts her chin out.

"I'm not."

"Then why don't you prove it?" Dillon is inches away, splinter-teeth flashing. His voice is only a murmur. "Whip it out and show us. Simple enough."

Marin glares in response.

"Unless... you can't?" Dillon pauses, then spits the word like a curse: "Lad?"

"No."

"No, you can't?"

"No, I won't - won't do - *that*."

Dillon strikes her. It is over before she can fight back, a split-second of skin connecting to skin, and then she is falling over sideways. Her elbow hits the deck and there is a crack of bone or a crack of thunder or a crack crack crack - stars dance in front of her eyes as she gasps in a breath

And then Dillon's hands are on her shirt, and they are ripping, tearing fabric and then

Dimly, Marin hears the crew muttering in shock and anger, and she knows what they are seeing: the white muslin cloth she had wrapped around and around her breasts to bind them tight and flat.

“You filthy whore.”

Something connects with Marin’s stomach and she curls to the side in pain.

“Please,” she tries to say. The words get tangled in her throat but she coughs them out the best that she can. “Please, just let me -”

“You can swim, can’t ye, cut?”

Marin’s cheek grazes the rough deck as she nods.

“Maloney, get me a rope. Ackley, Burgess, stand her up.”

Two pairs of hands seize her under the arms and jerk her to her feet. The movement shoots pain down through her elbow and the stars are back again, twinkling in front of her line of vision so bright she can barely see.

“I’m sorry,” Ackley murmurs to her, so quietly that Dillon cannot possibly have heard him. Marin wants to tell him exactly where he can ram his “sorry,” but she cannot find her mouth. Even with Ackley and Burgess propping her up, it is enough of a struggle to stay on her feet.

“Bind her wrists,” Dillon barks. And when Marin manages to blink her way past the stars, there is Eric, approaching with his hands full of rope twisted like a nest of snakes.

“Eric,” she coughs out, or, at least, she believes hard enough that she does. “Eric please please please don’t let them -”

Eric takes both of her arms and yanks them behind her back. She yelps in pain and he flinches.

“Eric...”

Their eyes meet, and Marin thinks of fog and the way it rises so thick some mornings that it seems the prow will not be able to cut through it. He coils the rope around her wrists. He knots it three times, sealing her palms pressed together in permanent prayer.

“Legs,” Dillon commands, and Eric kneels to wrap Marin’s ankles together. His mouth sits at the level of her thigh and Marin bites her tongue to keep from screaming or sobbing. Words bubble to her lips - bargains, pleas, prayers to whatever God would save her - but she is too scared or perhaps too proud and she swallows them back. Eric yanks the rope around her ankles tight to test the knots, and she almost topples over onto Ackley, so little do the bindings allow for movement.

At least this way they will not see me shake, she thinks.

“It’s bad luck to have a woman aboard the ship,” Dillon tells her, and Ackley and Burgess pull her backwards in tandem. “Not a sailor alive who doesn’t know that. I want you to remember, as you go down, that you brought this on yourself. You may have killed us all, but at least I’m going to die knowing that I did all I could to save my ship.”

Dillon stares at her for a long moment, and Marin holds his gaze as strong as she can.

I hope this ship rots, she thinks. *I hope you are buried at the bottom of the sea and your bones are never found.*

“Ackley. Burgess.”

The men raise her into the air. Some instinct, raw and human, tells Marin that she should struggle. She doesn’t. She knows it will be useless, or - and so she tells herself even as her heart pounds into her chest so fiercely she is afraid it might crack her ribs - she does not want to give Dillon the satisfaction.

“On three, then.”

She is staring face-up at the sky, Ackley’s hands gripping her thighs and Burgess’s pressing under her shoulder blades. The clouds swirl and eddy. They look like an ocean of their own, leagues away.

“One.”

Perhaps there is some other girl up there in the dark wave clouds, waiting to break through the surface.

“Two.”

Marin hopes this other girl does not expect to find a merciful world.

“Three.”

She is falling away from the sky. She thinks too late that she should hold her breath. She starts to suck in air, but then her head slams into the sea and her shoulders crack against the surface and the half-formed breath is forced back out of her mouth. Marin tries to gasp it back in again and instead swallows in salt water. She tries to choke it out but there is nothing but the sea and the sea and the sea

Her limbs jerk against the restraints involuntarily. Some primal part of her brain is screaming *SWIM* and her clothes billow around her and drag her down and

The sea and the sea and the sea and the sea and the sea and the sea and the sea and the sea and the sea and the sea and the sea and the sea

The water is so murky this far down. The light can only trickle in so far. She is caught up in the waves, which might also be the clouds, and a storm is coming. A storm is coming.

Maybe that’s why it’s so dar -

Eight

It is a year before Marin wakes up, or -

It is an hour before Marin wakes up, or -

It is three months before Marin wakes up, or -

It is so dark that at first Marin doubts that she has woken up at all. She raises her hands to her face and paws at her eyes to check that they are truly open; when she discovers that they are, she wonders if this is the afterlife. No Heaven, no God, no Lucifer either, just inky black infinity stretching out in every direction.

It's overwhelming.

It's terrifying.

Marin screams to hear the sound of her voice, to know that something can shatter the emptiness. When she hears herself ringing in her ears, she is relieved. At least there is something. Marin screams again, and again, and again, first sharp and shrill and then low and guttural, not because it sounds pleasant but because it sounds and it sounds and it sounds and -

The darkness around her crackles and she cuts off mid-shriek. Something orange and flickering blossoms in front of her. It takes her brain what feels like an eternity to recognize and name the flicker as "fire" and the short stick it derives from "match."

"Marin."

The voice is not her own. The blossom-match pricks a candle wick and the flame widens until she can make out the speaker's face.

Eric.

"We have to go."

“I’m dead,” Marin says. She knows it sounds stupid even as the words leave her mouth.

Eric clasps her hands in his own. They are rough and calloused and her heart freezes up for a moment when he touches her and she does not know why. He is warm and she thinks of the candle flame - the candle flame - but Eric was holding the candle - the candle - how could he be holding her?

“We don’t have much time,” Eric tells her. Marin blinks and he is holding the candle again. How foolish of her not to see that.

“Time before what?”

“Before it bites us.”

The candle wax drips down onto Eric’s skin. It hisses and turns raw before her eyes. Eric does not seem to notice.

“Before *what* bites us?” Marin presses.

“The flames.”

Eric sets the candle on the floor. Marin does not even have time to see it coming when, in one sharp motion, he kicks the candle over.

The fire devours the wood, a prisoner trapped too long in starvation. Marin screams. She tries to run for the door, but Eric grabs her hand and her escape jerks to a halt. She digs her heels into the floor and pulls against him.

“We have to run!”

Eric does not move.

“We’re on a *wooden ship!*” Marin screeches. “Why in the hell would you -“

Eric yanks her hand again and the motion twists her in to him. The momentum crashes her into his chest. The flames are lapping and licking and so greedy but that is not the burn that Marin feels. Every inch where her skin meets his is alive and charring peeling scarring. Every inch where her skin meets his is pulsing.

Marin swallows.

“We have to run,” she repeats, but she is no longer sure why. It is important, she remembers, but that is all.

“Soon,” Eric promises. His burning fingertips press into her jawline and turn her head up to his.

He kisses her. His lips are rough and biting. They taste they taste they taste.

Marin wants this. She is so greedy and she wants this. Her tongue licks at his or maybe that is the flames it is so hard to tell the difference.

It is the warmest way to die. The fire is rising.

“We have to run,” Marin breaks away to repeat.

He kisses her. There is the slightest shadow of hair sprouting out of his chin and it scratches her. Marin likes this bite, this twinge of almost-pain.

She kisses him.

The flames tickle her feet. They do not burn her. This does not seem odd.

“We have to run.”

He kisses her, and this time follows up with another promise.

“I will save you,” he says.

The flames nip and tug at the bottom of her dress. They churn up her body, an ocean of reds and yellows, and Marin is distracted by their beauty until Eric tugs her gaze up once again.

“I’ve got you,” Eric tells her. He bites her lip and his tongue flickers into her mouth and this, *this* is what the flames should feel like on her skin. “I will not let you burn.”

She pulls away from him again and now the fire is on her collar, her neck, spitting up onto her cheeks.

“But I’m already dead,” she tells him.

He does not understand. Marin crumples into ash.

The darkness takes her back and she is swallowed, whole.

Eight

This time, there is no empty waiting.

She is spit back out of the void as quickly as it had gulped her down. She is standing on the top deck of *The Harbinger*. There is a storm crackling on the horizon, and she is sticky with the sea salt spray of the furious water below her. The deck is almost completely deserted. The men were wise; they had gone below, she knew, wary of the deep black clouds.

She would be completely alone, but she happens to glance down, and when she does she sees that her left foot is not planted on the ship itself but on a body. Beneath her heeled boot, weakly struggling, is Dillon.

“Please,” he whispers. Marin does not feel a response. She leans into her left leg, just to see what happens. Dillon gasps for breath.

“Please,” she murmurs back at him. She cocks her head this way and that, trying the word on like a dress. “Please.”

She digs her foot into Dillon and he hisses in pain as she presses deeper, deeper, deeper. She can feel his sternum resisting, the sharpness of bone pressing up in rebellion as bone is wont to do. She eases up just as she senses it is about to crack. Marin drops into a crouch beside him and presses her lips against his ear.

“Has anyone ever seen you take your shirt off?” Marin whispers. As she does so, she realizes that she has been holding a knife the whole time. Its handle is white and gleaming, carved into the shape of a bear, or maybe it is a lion. Marin cannot tell, but it fits in her palm as if it were made for her.

The knife is haunted.

It must be, for it moves of its own accord, the tip dragging down the white fabric of Dillon's shirt without Marin being conscious of having told it to do so.

The knife is haunted, which some part of Marin's mind thinks is humorous, because isn't she the ghost?

She's not sure why she thinks that.

The fabric splits open with the smallest of screams. Underneath, Dillon's skin is raw and red and firm. It is hard in the way of strong things that beg to be broken. The knife digs its tip just under his collarbone and lazily scrawls downward. It is a light scratch, too shallow for Dillon to cry out again but still deep enough that he twitches under her touch.

Its touch.

Her touch.

Dots of blood trail down his chest, zealots following a greedy priest.

The knife nears the ridge of Dillon's trousers. The point twists in a circle and he whimpers.

"Has anyone ever seen you piss into the sea?" Marin hisses in his ear. The knife slashes open the seams and Dillon is laid bare. For the first time, Marin wants to fight the ghost controlling the knife, to take action and stab and rip and shred, but the knife does not let her. It skirts around Dillon's nakedness almost gently. The blade is a courting lover.

"Queer, isn't it?"

The knife finds purchase between his legs. Brief and darting, but it is all that it needs to be. Dillon howls. It is high-pitched and painful and it vibrates Marin's bones so beautiful. Blood spurts and spatters down to the deck. It seeks out Marin's dress and stains the blue fabric with a mind of its own. It is thicker than Marin expects, and hot, so hot that Marin can see it steam the

air around her. It burns her as it touches, leaves behind black ash that blows away when the wind streaks by. She does not pause to think this peculiar. Instead, she squeezes her fingers tighter around the handle of the knife and jerks it upwards until the point is nestled right between Dillon's ribs.

"Think back," Marin spits at him. The blood climbs her dress like a flame. She is charred and burning. "Do you remember angering God?"

She plunges the blade between his ribs. Something cracks. Something gristles and grovels and crunches and moans. Something sings. Dillon screams.

And none of it is satisfying, so she does it again. She leans in, whispers, drags cold metal knife over blazing skin and stabs. The blood is burning her body down to the bone, but still she stabs.

It is only when she feels herself dissolving, when the blood has slithered up to stain her cheeks and gnaw across her eyes, that she stops. Dillon is still.

"Bad luck," she whispers, and collapses.

The world is dark once more.

Eight

Another one?

Waking -

Ship passed... storm...

Yara saved her, drowned and bound -

WAKING -

There are people speaking, but she cannot hear them... or, rather, she can hear them, but not with her ears, or, maybe, it is that they are not speaking with their mouths. Her head feels like it is made of the water itself, full of nothing but swirling murk. She tries to calm the currents but they refuse to still.

Go after them...

WAKING -

SHE'S WAKING -

Marin blinks her eyes open.

She is surrounded by faces. When she opens her eyes, there is a ripple of water - she is under water still, she realizes dimly - as half of the faces push themselves backwards away from her.

“Who -” she starts, but when her mouth opens she notices that she no longer remembers how to speak. She sits there dumbly and opens and closes her lips. The water flows in and out with the motion, but she is not choking. She tries again to form the word “who” and blinks out into the faces around her and that’s when she sees -

They are not human.

Their faces are human, mostly, at least. Eyes and noses and mouths and ears and hair churning around them.

Their chests are human, with collarbones clinking into shoulders and rolling down into breasts.

But their waists curve inwards and do not swell back out into hips but instead tails. Large tails, small tails, some branching out into tentacles and fins, some glimmering with scales and some smooth and muscular.

Marin tries to scream but cannot remember how. She whips her arms out around her and tries to swim backwards, away from the monsters that lurk at the edge of the maps at the ends of the world. She tries to kick her legs.

And realizes she no longer has them.

In their place is her own glistening tail.

She freezes in shock, and when her stillness does not plummet her deeper into the water, she sees that her tail is moving almost of its own accord to keep her afloat.

I am dreaming, she thinks. She concentrates on the sensation that would once have moved her ankles, and her tail twitches in response. She peers down at it.

It is covered in scales and looks like the sun setting over the horizon, all purples and oranges and deep blues melding their way up and down where her thighs should be. Two small fins wave where once there were knees, and at the bottom two larger ones plume out from what once were the very tips of her toes.

It's okay.

The voice rings out clear as an alarm bell. Marin snaps her head up. One of the creatures - beasts? halflings? *mermaids*, Marin realizes - swims slowly towards her. This one has dark skin and thick hair twisted into a coil that floats obediently behind her.

It's okay. You are safe now.

“Who -” Marin tries and fails. The mermaid shakes her head.

Not like that. She presses a finger to her temple, and then reaches out to touch Marin's forehead. *In here is how we speak.*

Marin doesn't know what the mermaid means, but she concentrates on the words, imagining them resonating outwards.

Who are you? she asks.

My name is Rialta.

I'm dreaming, Marin tells her.

No. The mermaid's lips quirk upwards, but Marin cannot tell if it is in amusement or sadness.

Yes, Marin insists. It is important that the mermaids understand this. *I drowned and I died and now I am dreaming.*

It is true that you died. The mind plays tricks and games with itself when trauma happens, to make it easier to swallow. Somedays it forgets and somedays it deludes. But this... this is real. I promise you.

But, the mermaid continues, when Marin writhes and starts to protest, *if this is easier for you to swallow as dreaming, then perhaps it is best that you do.*

Marin shakes her head and shakes her head and shakes her head as if the motion will jerk the pieces back into place. When she is done, she gasps for breath and

Gasps for breath and

She does not use her lungs.

It is not even a conscious action, but when she tells her body to inhale, there is no movement in her nostrils. She reaches up to touch her nose. It is still there, unaltered, but then... Marin trails her fingers, which are now tipped with claws so sharp she has to be careful not to press her skin too hard, down her neck. They catch on something half an inch below her jawline. Marin struggles for breath again and feels the set of gills ripple in the current. The water around her head behaves as if in a whirlpool, constantly drawn into the divets in her neck and pushed out again and again.

What's happening to me? she thinks.

No answer.

She tries again, pushes the words from her mind with effort, separates the *thought* from the *spoken*.

What's happening to me?

You're one of us now. The smallest mermaid addresses her, dark eyes glittering. Her tail is gray and its fins do not yield to the current. She has a predatory look about her, as if Marin is staring shark face-to-face. *You're a Siren.*

Darya! the mermaid beside her hisses. She has skin that is the deepest brown, and from her waist coil and twist a cluster of purple tentacles. *We don't use that word.* She turns to Marin. *We're mermaids.*

And I -?

You are a mermaid now, too, the tentacled one says.

Sometimes, when one of us - a girl, a daughter, a woman - is lost to the sea, Rialta explains, we are rescued. The Sea Goddess, the Witch, the Runaway She-Who-Would-Be-Queen... the Storykeeper. These are all her names, but to us, her children, she is known as Yara. She takes us in our final moments and rebuilds us stronger. And then we end up here.

Marin swallows. *So you're all... we're all...*

Dead, the one called Darya says with an informal nod.

Oh. There is a pause in which Marin tries to breathe, or there is a pause in which Marin continues to convince herself that she is dreaming, or there is a pause in which her tail and her talons and her gills are too too too real. *Oh.*

Is this... heaven? Marin asks, after another pause.

Darya barks out a laugh. Her teeth are pointed into fangs that Marin does not doubt would slice if given the chance. The tentacled mermaid shoots Darya another pointed look, and the younger girl rolls her eyes.

No, it's not heaven, Rialta says. It's just as real as everything else. Were you to swim to shore, you would find everything exactly as it was - we're off the coast of England, not far from where you were found. A few days have passed since you have last seen the Surface, perhaps, but nothing more consequential has happened.

Then I have to get back! Marin exclaims. *My family - I never told them where I was going, I just left, and then there was the ship and the storm and - they'll never know what happened -*

No, Rialta says firmly. . This must be difficult for you, I know, but I'm sorry, Marin. This is what you are - who you are - now. There is no returning to the life that you once had.

But -

I'm sorry.

Please! Please, I have to -

Bronwen? Rialta interrupts, turning to the dark-skinned, tentacled mermaid. Would you take our Marin to the Clearing and get her some breakfast? You remember how hard the change is. She must be starving.

How do you know my name? Marin wants to ask, but then, as if on cue, her stomach rumbles loudly. She clamps her hands to her stomach - hands with fingers interspersed with deep blue webbing like a fish like a duck like a like a -

You're dreaming, Marin tells herself. You're dreaming, and you're hungry, so now you are going to follow the mermaids to breakfast. Maybe later you will wake up.

When the mermaid called Bronwen swims off, she joins the others in following.

Every girl and boy in Harwich grows up knowing how to swim. You can't live so close to the ocean without ever hearing the call of the waves lapping on shore and wondering what it would taste like on your skin. But this is so much different from the swimming that Marin had known in another life. Her tail responds even when she is not aware of having given it direction. She can feel that the muscles inside are taut and strong. She feels powerful. Her fins lap at the water and propel her forward with a speed and fluidity that she has never known. She is terrified and deluded and deeply in love all at once.

This is the Clearing, Bronwen says, when the group arrives at a space on the ocean floor that is exactly that. A handful of mossy boulders are scattered in the sand in an approximation of a ring. On one end, the boulders raise up into a jagged cliff of rock that yawns open into the mouth of a cave. *We eat here, gather when we need to, use it to commune. Over there* - Bronwen points at the cave - *is where we sleep.*

We sleep? We eat? But we're dead! Marin says, even as her stomach growls again in protest.

We were dead, Bronwen clarifies, with a smile that is not condescending. *And now we are this. Our needs are different, perhaps, but they are still needs. We eat and sleep just like the humans and the fishes alike.*

Here. A fourth mermaid hands her a package wrapped in seaweed. Her touch is gentle. *Eat.*

Marin is unsure of what to do, so she starts to untangle the seaweed. When she has unwound it three times, a head pokes out: it is a tiny fish, its eyes bulging and its mouth gaping open. She throws the package away from her and screams aloud but forgets that she cannot and swallows mouthful after mouthful of water instead.

Darya laughs again. The fourth mermaid catches the packet as it drifts lazily to the floor and rewinds the seaweed. She tosses her long black hair over her shoulder and reaches out again to Marin.

I promise, it will taste better than you can imagine. You are different now. Your body craves different things. Here. She raises the packet of seaweed and fish - *raw raw bloody fish*, Marin thinks, trying not to gag - to her mouth and bites off the edge. Her teeth slice cleanly

through. She swallows, and hands the packet to Marin, who only lets herself hesitate a fraction of a moment before taking it.

See? she says. *Harmless. Good. I promise.*

Marin raises the packet to her own mouth and bites. She tries not to think of what she is cutting through. She swallows the minute it hits her tongue, and then it is down her gullet and it is over and -

She licks her lips and tastes seaweed and fish guts. She does not want to admit how much she wants more. Her stomach grunts and cries with appreciation. She tears into the rest of the fish, crushing it between her teeth and gulping it down in two bites.

The black-haired mermaid is laughing along with Darya now, but her laugh is not teasing; it is warm and musical. *I told you. Here.*

She hands Marin another packet. This time, Marin lets herself savor it. She does not shy away from the texture but instead runs her tongue over it, finding curiosity in the rough scales and seaweed slime.

My name is Nerissa. I know there were not happy circumstances that lead to your arrival... but I am glad that you are here. You are welcome, Marin.

Marin swallows a mouthful of fish before she realizes that she does not have to in order to speak.

Thank you, Marin says with her mind, as her teeth grind away. It is bizarre and takes too much effort to do both at once.

You've met Darya, and Rialta, Bronwen says. *There are two more to our Shoal - one named Fen, and my sister, Vanora. They should be back before nightfall.*

Marin frowns. *Nightfall? We're hundreds of feet below the surface of the ocean. The light can't possibly fall this deep.*

We can see better in the dark than humans, than most creatures, in fact, Bronwen answers. *But we also have phosphorus lamps. We cover them at night. We are not human and do not need to keep a human schedule... but it can be comforting to stick to routines, maybe most of all when it is not necessary.*

Marin looks up and sees several of the lamps that Bronwen had indicated. They are shells mounted with glowing rocks, suspended in intervals over the Clearing.

They're weighted so they neither float nor sink, Nerissa explains. *They'll light us for years without needing to be replaced. The ocean has her own magic like that.*

Do we? Have magic? Marin asks. Nerissa shares a glance with Bronwen, a deliberate look that Darya is left out of.

To some extent, Bronwen answers slowly. *Most of our magic is subtle. How we communicate, for example. Our mere existence. We are stronger, faster, more powerful than most anything you will find above or below. But we cannot control the tides or cause storms.*

Yara has that power, or so they say, Nerissa adds.

The Sea Goddess?

Nerissa nods. *The one who made us, yes. But no one really knows for certain. Rialta is the only one who truly knows the lore.*

But what about - about - Marin thinks back on the worn Bible that sits up on a dust covered shelf in her parents' bedroom. She thinks of the prayers her mother whispers (*whispered*, she corrects herself, and tries not to think too hard about it) over Cora every night, a mixture of

pleas to a Christian God and her own mythologies. She thinks of the folklore of Harwich, with its crosses made of knots and sermons to a God half Holy Trinity, half salt and storm. And most of all, she thinks of her grandfather and his stories of the sirens of the deep.

It is too much to remember at once, too much intertwining of make-believe and real and the braided knots of everything in between.

Is there - is there some place I can lie down? Marin asks Nerissa. Her eyes soften with understanding.

Of course. Nerissa points across the Clearing. *You're always welcome to curl up in the cave. I know it may seem strange, or eerie, but I find it comfortable to have walls around me when I sleep.*

Thank you, Marin says, and she lingers just enough for Nerissa not to think that she is being rude. Then she darts into the cave before anyone else can notice her absence.

Nine

When Marin is tucked inside the cave, certain she is out of sight of the others, she collapses. She flings herself against the wall. She wants to cry but she does not know if she can - did mermaids make tears? Did they need to be any more ocean than they already were?

Wake up wake up wake up! she screams to herself. *Stop it! You're still alive. You never left Harwich. You never left your bed, and now you're going - to - wake - up!*

She throws herself at the wall, feels the sting as her naked skin scrapes the unforgiving rock. Again, again, again she hits herself, until the water around her is filled with droplets of blood that swirl like dark stains of oil. And then she slides along the wall until her body comes to rest, and her chest heaves. She does not know if she is choking or sobbing. She cannot find the effort to discern the difference.

Marin stays there for what might have been hours or what might have been days. With only the thin light of the phosphorus lamps peeking out at the edge of the cave, it is impossible to tell the time. She alternates between thinking too much - between reliving again and again the shouts of Dillon and the swaying of the ship and the feeling of the water crashing up to meet her - and not thinking at all, just staring out into the black.

She is disturbed from her indulgent reverie only when Rialta returns.

Marin? she calls into the cave. She hovers in the entrance for a moment and then swims forward cautiously, daringly. *I don't want to push, if you still need time. But Fen and Vanora have come back, and we like to commune at the end of the day. It might be good for you to be with others.*

When Marin does not reply, Rialta lets the silence float for a moment or two more before adding, *I know how easy it is to get lost in the dark on your own.*

You're probably right. It would be best if I joined you.

Of course I'm right, Rialta says with a smile.

Marin? she adds, before they swim out of the cave.

Yes?

It will be okay.

Marin chews her lip and keeps the silence. They float out of the cave.

Darya, Bronwen, and Nerissa are all gathered, along with another dark-skinned mermaid whose face is so familiar already that she can only be Bronwen's sister. And then, there on the side, is -

So you're the new girl.

Right up to Marin's face swims a sixth mermaid. She is small and lithe, her collarbones jutting against her fair skin as if threatening to break free. Hair so blonde it glows white in the phosphorus lamps spirals out behind her. Marin tells herself she should not stare, that it is rude, that she just arrived, that the girl is speaking to her, but then she meets the other girl's eyes and she is lost. They are wide wide wide and impossibly violet. They draw her in and this, Marin knows, is the true siren's magic.

New girl? Can you hear me?

Marin startles and nods too quickly.

Yes. I'm Marin.

The other girl smiles, no teeth, all pink lip curl in welcome.

I know, she says, and her voice is honey, is pan flute, is a wool blanket and the kiss of fire.
I'm Fen.

She reaches out a hand for Marin to shake. It is a bizarre gesture, too masculine and formal for her body, and Marin waits a moment longer than she should before taking it. Fen's hand is cool to the touch.

And I'm Vanora, the other new face adds. She gives a strange glance to Fen's outstretched hand and then mimics the gesture. Marin takes her hand in turn; it is soft and warm, the skin giving in just so. *I'm Bronwen's sister, as you might have been told.*

It's - Marin's mind trips over the word "nice." It doesn't seem to fit. *Hello.*

Fen catches her eye at the awkward exchange and laughs, high bells tolling.

You were saying? The wreck you found? Bronwen prompts. Nerissa gestures for Marin to come rest on a boulder next to her.

Right, Fen says. *So we were out by the phosphorus mines - that's where we get the rocks for the lamps*, Fen explains, turning her gaze across the circle to focus in on Marin. *They're not really mines, I suppose, or if they are, it is only because we use them as such. No humans know they exist - too deep. We had just reached the near edge of that trench next to the mines, and I thought that I spotted something across it. It looked shinier than most rocks were, and it stayed too still to be fish or crab.*

I don't think we've been past the trench before, Bronwen says. *Not looking for wrecks, at least. The currents are too weak - even in storm, it would take a lot to bring a ship down in that region. What kind?*

In time, in time - I'm being dramatic! Fen says, and her lips twirl even more upward. *Vanora stayed on the close side of the trench to get the phosphorus. When I went over... I thought I had imagined it. There was only sand and sand and still more sand. And then I saw it again, the same shiny glimmer I had seen earlier. It was mostly buried. I was lucky to have seen it. I must have caught it at just the right angle.*

And at this, Fen reaches into a sack woven of some kind of dense plant. She pulls out a necklace. It is a long string of woven gold hung with jewels of every color inset into heavy gold plates. At the bottom of the strand hangs the biggest sapphire Marin has ever seen. It is so shiny, so sharply carved that it catches even the dim light of the phosphorus and glitters.

Whoa... Darya mutters. *That's an awful big rock for someone to ditch at the bottom of the ocean.*

That's not all, Fen says. She picks up the sack at the bottom and dumps it out into the sand. What had to be over two dozen articles of jewelry and riches topple out, catching in the resistance of the water and drifting down to the floor slower than their weight should allow.

There is a pause as the entirety of the Clearing stops and stares slack-jawed at the treasure in front of them. Marin is not sure if this is a regularity for the mermaids - did immortals care for riches? Did fish have need for money? - but this is the closest she has ever been to something so valued. She wants to reach out and touch it. Would the gold feel cool or warm to the touch? Would the water hang the beads around her neck like a too-heavy noose, or would the pearls bob oh-so-slightly in the water?

What happened there? Nerissa breathes.

That's the thing, isn't it? Fen replies. Marin did not know eyes could go so wide, but Fen's do, and they dance with excitement. *There was no wreck, not like we usually find. Not like you'd expect with such a trove as this. There were boards around it, smashed, and something that looked like a lock - as if everything was kept in a chest, perhaps. But there wasn't enough of a ruin to make a full ship.*

Don't get me wrong, Fen adds, *there was something there at one point. A dinghy, perhaps. A rowboat. But not something that would have gotten this far out to sea on its own, and... that's all that I found. There were no...*

Fen gives a nervous glance to Marin before continuing. *You know. The typical things you expect to find by a ship. Remains.*

A shiver runs up Marin's spine. Surely Fen didn't mean - surely Fen *couldn't* mean that - *So someone set a trunk full of jewels on a tiny little boat and just... shoved it off the side of a ship?* Darya asks. *Who would do that?*

It's one of the stranger things I've ever seen, Fen says. She shrugs. *Maybe we'll never know.*

A pause. And then, Fen reaches into the pile and pulls out a ring. It is so plain as to seem ridiculously out of place. It is pure iron, or some dull metal of that ilk. It is not embossed or engraved with anything; no jewel glitters from its band. Fen swims over and hands the ring to Nerissa. *I didn't find any remains, but I still brought this back. I figured you would want it, just... just in case.*

Thank you, Fen.

We can sort through the rest, decide who wants what, and then dump the rest, Fen continues. *I knew we wouldn't want to keep it all, but still... I couldn't help but bring it all back. Has anyone here ever been around something worth so much?*

Not in my life, Rialta muses. *Either of them.*

She shakes her head and the group lapses into another staring silence. Then, Nerissa swims tentatively forward. She reaches out into the pile and untangles a tiara. The silver is tarnished and half of the gemstones which had once been inlaid along the brim are missing, but she sets it atop her head and juts out her chin and looks every bit a queen. She swims about the Clearing, stopping at each mermaid and posing for them. She holds out her hand for Darya to kiss, and Darya nips playfully at it. A giggle bubbles up in Marin's throat and she laughs.

And just like that, the untouchable spell of the objects' splendor is broken. Vanora races forward and drapes two, three, four strings of pearls around her neck. She grabs Nerissa and swings her around, then grabs her sister by the arm and whirls her in turn.

No, I - Bronwen starts to protest, but then she too is laughing. Nerissa tangles a necklace in Bronwen's thick hair and places a scepter in her hand, which Darya quickly steals from her and postures as a sword.

Marin doesn't know if her heart starts to race before or after Fen grabs her hand.

Come on, New Girl. Don't you want to drown yourself in riches?

Marin winces at the poor choice of words, but Fen hasn't uncurled her fingers, and she forgets to be offended.

Marin, she says instead. *My name is Marin.*

Well then, Marin, Fen says. Marin wonders if it's possible for Fen to stare at someone gently, to not have intensity burning in her violet violet eyes. Fen picks something up from the pile and hides it in her fist. *Close your eyes.*

Marin complies. She feels Fen stretch out her fingers, and then something cool slips around her index finger. Marin opens her eyes and sees that Fen has given her a golden ring topped with an emerald half the size of her fist.

Aaaaaand.... Fen darts back to the pile and grabs a crown, gold to match the ring. It is larger than Nerissa's dainty, intricate tiara. She settles it on Marin's head and beams. It is the first time that Fen has smiled with teeth. It is not threatening; no, the first word that Marin thinks of is *alive.*

Perfect, Fen says. *Now you're really one of us.*

Marin was murdered. Her body was tossed into the sea and stolen from her. Her legs had been replaced and her voice had been lost. But as the girls laugh and dance around the pile of treasure, for the briefest of moments, Marin forgets to be sad. Fen's ring burns on her finger, and it is not a painful burn. It reminds her that, for whatever reason, she is still here.

Ten

Hours later, the crown has grown heavy on Marin's head and the excitement has ceased to be enough to stave off her emotions. Nerissa stretches out on a rock, yawning. Vanora runs her fingers through Bronwen's hair; Darya dangles strips of seaweed into her own mouth and smacks on them noisily.

How did you find me? Marin asks, when the curiosity too has grown too big for her to bear. The crown slips askew on her head and she lets it topple to the ground. *After the ship - or after I was transformed, I guess - or -*

We just knew, Bronwen answers with a shrug. *We always just know.*

What, Marin asks, raising an eyebrow, *so there's some kind of beacon or flashing light or...?*

It's more subtle than that, Nerissa says. *It usually happens in the mornings, from what we know. Maybe the transformation takes a whole night to complete, or maybe Yara thinks it's easiest for the new ones to wake up in a new life at the start of a new day. But when we woke up this morning, we all felt it.*

It's kind of like... like if you get too close to a fire on a cold winter night, Darya says. *And half of you is so warm that you think you might burst into flames at any moment. And you can't move away because everywhere else is freezing, and somehow you're still shivering, and you almost convince yourself that the scorch will feel good. It's that same feeling, only in the pit of your stomach, drawing you closer and closer. And every time, we find someone new.*

So it's this Sea Goddess giving you a magical guiding vision? Marin asks. She is not entirely sure she believes, but in this dream-version of reality she woke up with a tail, so she doesn't know if she has any right to skepticism. She doesn't even know if she has the energy for it.

Yara, Rialta answers. Her warm brown eyes search Marin's face. For what, Marin doesn't know. *Her name is Yara. And... something to that effect.*

And that means... Marin pauses, looks around the circle. Rialta is the oldest, surely, maybe Marin's mother's age at most. The others are young, Bronwen and Vanora and Nerissa all looking to be in their late twenties; Fen, a year or two older than Marin; Darya, no older than fourteen.

This happened to all of you, didn't it? Marin rephrases. The transformation. Being found. You were created, not born.

Rialta nods slowly. *Very good. You're a smart one.*

So there -

Can I tell you a story? Rialta asks. The interruption is not unkind. *Perhaps it will clear some things up, make it easier.*

At Rialta's words, the other mermaids lean in in anticipation. Darya's eyes widen; Bronwen and Vanora exchange an excited glance, and a smile plays on Fen's lips. Marin looks around the Clearing and then nods.

I tell this story every time someone new arrives. There is something comforting about hearing someone else's tale, I think, something that makes it easier for you to slip into your own body and find home there. Rialta takes a breath and licks her lips before continuing. She settles deeper onto her seat on the rock, and then begins, *It is a truth, of sorts, though it may not sound like such. Some would call it folklore instead, or mythology.*

This is the story, Rialta says, *of Yara and her fall.*

Yara

In the beginning, there were mermaids.

There are mermaids now, of course, but back then they were not quite the same - no, these mermaids were born, not made. They lived not in small Shoals but in villages, in cities, in vast metropolises. They didn't just habit the coasts of England. Wherever there was water, there were mermaids, from the oceans to the rivers to the seas to the lochs. They had families and queens and wars.

They were not just women, in the beginning. They were of all genders and all bodies and all voices all living and growing and dying. It was not a perfect society, but it was a good one.

But then something happened, or maybe nothing happened, or maybe it was a comet or the weather or the will of a god, but slowly, the mermaids started dying out. Some blamed the humans, who, as the mermaids began to go extinct, bred and flooded the earth. But most said it was ridiculous, that the mermaids had simply past their time. Most said there was no way that simple humans could kill off something so strong.

These mermaids, you see, were powerful. *Sea witches*, they called themselves. They were strong like us, yes, and fast, and clever, but it was more than that - this was pure magic. They drew their power from the wind and the waves, and when they were angry, it was said, the whole earth would tremble in fear.

When this line of great sea witches at last collapsed into extinction, there was only one left to tell the story.

Some twenty years before, a baby girl was born into the royal family, just off the coast of England. She was the first of seven siblings, and her parents named her Yara. *Lady of the Water*, it means, for she was born to be queen.

Yara was a curious child, and her parents soon learned that where curiosity led, danger lurked. Not danger for Yara - even at a young age, she proved to be of a magic most potent - but danger for whatever she decided she fancied. “Curiosity” was a mask. “Curiosity” was an excuse.

“Curiosity” was the reason that, when Yara was only eight, she tricked her siblings to the Surface and told them the stars would whisper them secrets if only they held their heads above the water long enough.

“Curiosity” was the reason that, when Yara turned eleven, she fought a shark into a cave and tangled it in ropes. “Curiosity” surged magic through her fingertips as she traced the shark’s flailing body and watched it sprout blowfish spikes and swirling angelfish fins before her eyes. Yara could do other things with her magic, of course, but this thrilled her. This transformation, this transmutation, this incredible transcendence that she alone seemed able to control... this, to her, was worth the power of ten thousand storms.

By the time Yara had turned nineteen, however, even the most bold and experimental of transformations she produced held no appeal. Her siblings thrilled at the half-fish, half-crab pets she made for them. Her parents smiled tolerantly at the breathtaking wreaths she sprouted from coral reefs. But Yara herself was tired. She itched not to just watch her experiments but to be them, to know for herself the rush of becoming Another.

One night, when she no longer could stand it, she snuck out of the castle. She was overwhelmed by the water. There was so much, the pressure exhaustive. It seemed impossible to her to be constantly surrounded by all of this weight. She swam to escape, which is to say, she swam to the Surface.

This was the greatest and the most terrifying of transformations. Humans and mermaids were opposite sides of a coin, joined by their lips and hands and hair but separated by magic and might and tail. Yara did not know what would happen if she attempted to build herself a pair of legs. She did not know if she could build herself lungs, could teach her body to absorb its gills and fins and webbing in favor of such lanky limb.

She did not know if she would be able to come back.

Humans have never had magic, though many have claimed otherwise. When Yara attempted this greatest of transcendence, would she be rendered mortal and powerless, as well as two-legged?

It was the risk that scared her. It was the risk that convinced her.

When she closed her eyes and let her body float to the Surface, everything was silent. No one heard her screams as her tail ripped in two. No one came rushing as blood poured from the newfound spaces between her newfound legs. No one saw the girl who was tossed out of the water and lay still as death on the shore.

The girl lay unconscious for seven days and seven nights. When her parents noticed she was missing, they cast it off as rebellion. She would come back, they knew. She always came back.

On the eighth day, she was found.

Some myths say it was the prince himself who found her. He became immediately enchanted by her beauty and took her back to the palace to wife.

The truth is ne'er so darling.

It was not the prince who stumbled upon the girl sleeping on the sand, but a half-dozen members of his raucous court who had stumbled into the night on a drunken stroll. The prince had come of age at last, and to celebrate, an enormous ball had been thrown, and, as all good humans know, where there all balls, there is wine and rum and ale ale ale.

“Whassat?” one man slurred, pointing at Yara. “Some kinna fish?”

“Looks slimy enough,” another replied, clapping the first on the back.

“Go on an’ kiss it, Lang -“ a third added, making an obscene gesture. “’s the closest you’ll ever get to a woman’s hidden parts.”

“No...” said the first, drawing slowly closer to Yara. “’S not a fish. ’S not a fish at all... ’s a girl!”

“Yer a drunk, Lang!” the third man bellowed. “It’s a washed up, slimy ole -“

“He’s right!” the second interrupted. “’S not a fish at all. It’s a woman, bare as birth... an’ she’s a beauty...”

He knelt down beside her. He trapped his fingers in her hair and snagged through it before drawing it away from her face. He cupped her chin in his hand and -

Yara jerked upright. She spluttered and coughed. Water spurted from between her lips as her eyes flew open. The man skittered backwards.

“You alright, girl?” the first man called to her.

“I’m human,” Yara wanted to say. But she moved her lips as humans did and scratched her fingers at her throat and nothing came out. Open and close, open and close went her mouth, like a fish, a dumb drowning fish. She clawed at her throat with useless hands. This was the price she had paid for her transformation.

There was always a cost, she had learned. The shark she turned half-blowfish could only swim in circles. The wreaths she sprouted her parents out of glittering coral crumbled into dust after a fortnight. And the tail she had spliced into two lean legs had lost her her voice.

There was always a cost. That didn’t mean she was happy to pay.

Yara closed her mouth. She pressed herself forward and up, first onto her hands and then shakily up onto feet. When she put weight on her beautiful new legs, they sang in pain, as things are wont to do when they are split apart at the seams. She stood up a human and stared at the men.

Stared.

Stared.

Stared.

“What’s yer name?” the second man asked. “How’d you end up here?”

Yara blinked at them. She stood taller. These legs gave resistance the tail never could. She could press herself into the earth and draw up all her power. She braced the muscles in her thighs, and her stomach, and her chest. This was a new kind of strength.

“You deaf, girl? What’s yer name?”

Yara shook her head slowly.

“Mute, then?”

Yara stared. She was not weak, but the question stung of the implication. She grit her teeth as she nodded, drawing herself up even higher against the sand.

“Yer quite pretty for a mute.” The man who had knelt beside her came closer once more. “How’d you happen to be wandering around at night, all alone, all bare? ’S not safe for a pretty little thing like you. Not safe at all.”

Yara balled her hands into fists. She was safe. If only the men knew of her power. If only the men had seen the way her teeth could rip through scale and sinew; if only they could see the ease with which her talons could carve into the toughest rock. If only they could see what she could make them.

“He’s right.” Another of the men advanced on her. “Wouldn’t be right of us to leave you here, where anyone could stumble along and take advantage. You should come along with us. We can protect you. We can keep you safe and sound. We’re men of the court.”

At this the men bowed. The movement was exaggerated and grossly sloppy. One of the men belched, and they collapsed into big, bellowing laughter.

“Yes, court men. Very honorable,” the belching man added.

Yara was not a fool. She knew what these men wanted. She watched the way their eyes focused and unfocused on her breasts, her hips, the hollow between her thighs that was still crusted with blood. But she was strong and certain in her power, and she stared back at their hunger with fascination over fear.

“Come on, pretty little thing. Come with us back to the palace - you ever seen a palace before? We’ll take you there. We’ll keep you safe.”

And Yara nodded. She wanted to see the palace. She wanted to see what these humans called glory and elegance. She did not care what happened along the way, for if there would be a fight, it was the men who would fall.

The men laughed again, perhaps at her perceived foolishness. Yara did not care. She took their laughter and carried it around her like a cloak. She consumed the way they dismissed her as simple, as weak, as woman. She let it fuel her and keep her warm. The wind had picked up in the night, and Yara was conscious, ever conscious, of her nakedness. Though all the men wear overgarments, none had offered coat nor cloak to cover her.

“The palace is right through the woods here. You have to go straight through the woods, no other way about it,” the men told her.

Yara widened her eyes and gestured at the cleared path that rounded the forest. The men shook their heads.

“Can’t take the path. Not at all. Too... risky...” one said with a leering grin.

Yara curved her mouth in an “oh” shape and nodded. If they wanted to see a simpleton, that was what she would give them. If they wanted to see a victim... oh, Yara would love to watch them try.

“Right.. Through the woods, then. You might want to take Lang’s hand, here - it gets dark when you’ve lost sight of the way you came.”

“And if you get frightened -“ another man cut in, “- I’m sure Lang has something else he’d be happy to let you take hold of.”

Laugh, chuckle, snort. Yara clenched her fists tighter.

The moonlight had faded from their sight within a half-hour. When it was near-black, the men halted. Yara cocked her head questioningly, thrust her lip out in a pout.

“We’ve been very kind to you, haven’t we?” one of the men, Lang, asked her. “Taking you in like this. Promising to take you to the palace - a pretty little thing like you, who knows what you’d find there. Riches. Beautiful gowns. Everything.”

“You’d be like to forget us, given all that,” another man chimes in. “And after being so kind to you... so very kind... well, that wouldn’t make us feel too good, now would it?”

“Not that we think you untrustworthy,” Lang jumped in, “just that... well. In the case that you would happen to desert us later, we’d like to get a little thanks first.”

Yara swallowed. In the dark of the forest, all she could see were shadows of the men, exaggerated and bulky. Her heartbeat sped up, but it was not with fear. This was what she had been searching for, the thrill that only her own transformation could introduce her to.

When the first of the men tried to pin her, Yara struck. She did not want to reach for her magic; she wanted to feel it all. She wanted the clatter that rung up her leg when her foot connected with the first man’s groin. She wanted the sting as her knuckles grazed his jaw and came away bloody.

She wanted to be able to taste it.

The first man was crumpled on the ground before he could put up a fight. Yara tangled her fingers through his hair and planted her other fist on his chest. She snapped his neck in one motion.

The others had time to realize what was going on. The others had time to fight back. Yara darted and wove among them, watching their shadows, aiming not for what the light illuminated

but where the dim moon was blocked by their mass. She liked the force her feet gave her. She liked the way she could rise up on tiptoe and spring. There was no water to fight here, no secret other force holding her back in resistance. There was just her body and the men and the openness of the air.

She liked the way the blood felt smeared on her nakedness.

It was different from the blood that had coursed from the hollow between her thighs. That blood was thicker and left her with a gasp. This blood was cooled as it touched the air. It crusted over her breasts and her collarbone, flowed in streaks along her back. It clothed her body.

When the last hiss of soul had screamed from the men, Yara wanted to howl to the moon in delight. Instead, she shook out her hair and fled the forest. She did not care where she was going, or if the men had lied about the palace. She ran, and she ran, and she ran.

Eleven

On the third day in the Shoal, Marin wakes up before the others. She swims out of the cave and drags the fabric down from one of the phosphorus lamps. She tears a strip of seaweed and sits down in the glow to nibble on it. With a series of forced deep breaths, she lets herself just be, alone.

New Girl.

Marin looks up. Bronwen hovers in front of her, her octopus tentacles squirming to keep her level in the water.

Hello.

There was a big storm last night. A couple of us are going to search for new wrecks, see if there's anything interesting got dropped down with them. Want to join us?

New wrecks? Marin's stomach twists. *As in, ships that were sunk with - with their crews?*

Bronwen looks at her and it might be pity. She gives a slow shrug. *Well, yes.*

And you scavenge them? Marin imagines the mermaids swarming the deep, darting through ships whose hulls are condemned to a slow rot, their sailors trapped below the decks to await a similar fate. It is different than imagining a grinning Fen juggling jewels through nimble fingers. *Isn't that a little... callous?*

Bronwen shrugs again. *I suppose. But the men are dead. All of their gold, their fancy porcelain, it can't save them now.*

Marin furrows her eyebrows, and Bronwen, noticing this, continues,

Sometimes, Nerissa says that by carrying pieces of their ship back with us, we are honoring them. They'd only be forgotten, otherwise.

I guess that does makes sense, Marin says reluctantly.

It's a bit like an adventure story - exploring the deep seas. It'll help you feel like you belong here, Bronwen coaxes. She pauses, a sharp dark eyebrow raising, and then says, I know Fen was hoping you'd come along with us today.

Marin's skin prickles with excitement. She swallows and tries to keep her expression neutral. *Fen's going?*

Bronwen's lips twitch into a half-smile. *Of course. It's one of Fen's favorite times, after a storm blows through.*

Unbidden, Marin pictures the lithe mermaid flitting about the wrecks, her small lips turned up mischievously. Her skin shivers again. She nods at Bronwen. *I... I think I might come along.*

Good. Bronwen hands her a burlap sack with a rope tie, and Marin fastens it around her waist. It settles just above the ridge of scales that begin her tail.

Let's go find Fen and Nerissa, and then we'll be off.

They collect the other two mermaids from the cave and begin to swim out and away from the Shoal. Bronwen and Nerissa swoop ahead, while Fen falls into current beside Marin.

They swim in silence for a while, Marin's mind racing to find something to talk about. She doesn't know why, but she wants Fen to find her the most interesting girl in the ocean. In the quiet, Marin peeks over at Fen from the corner of her eye. She traces the careful contours of Fen's face, the freckles that scatter like so many grains of sand over her high cheekbones.

Fen glances over and catches Marin staring. She grins, pearl-white fangs glimmering, and Marin blushes back into silence.

How do you even find the wrecks, anyway? Marin asks eventually, deciding that asking even the most mundane of questions is better than asking no questions at all. *They could be anywhere in the ocean, by the time the wind settles the waves.*

They could be, Fen answers her, and Marin notes again that her voice lilts musically even when not spoken aloud, *but they usually aren't. There are certain areas that they always end up clustered. Sometimes it's around hidden groups of rocks or dangers like that, but sometimes it's not. They always seem to be drawn to concentrations of magic things.*

Magic things? Marin asks skeptically.

Like us, Fen answers, grinning. Her teeth are sharp and glitter white bright. *I think Yara has something to do with it.*

Do you believe in her? Marin asks, before she can stop herself. She knows it's touchy, knows it's not exactly something you should poke and prod in someone that you want to like you, but her curiosity floods over her logic and she cannot help it.

In Yara?

Yes, of course I do, Fen replies matter-of-factly.

Why?

Silence. Marin's heart flip-flops and she worries for a moment that she has pushed too far, but then Fen flicks back her long blonde hair with a swift twitch of her wrist and says,

Well, why shouldn't I? Something rescued us, Marin. Something keeps us safe.

Fen pauses, and then she adds, so quietly that Marin has to inch her way closer just to hear, *And besides. It's nice to have a God for once who twists things in our favor.*

Marin silently agrees.

An excited shout comes from up ahead, and Marin turns away from Fen to see Nerissa streaking towards them.

We found one!

Fen smiles at Marin and races off after Nerissa. Marin hurries off after them.

It's a big one, Nerissa bubbles as they go, so much energy sparking off of her that Marin can practically hear the water crackle. *Looks fancy, too - and wait until you see the figurehead, Fen, you'll love it.*

Nerissa, beaming, leads them through a tangle of seaweed - rather unnecessarily, Marin thinks, as they could easily just swim above it. She stops minding when a streak of plant gets caught in her hair and Fen giggles.

Very nice. The latest fashion, I'm sure. Fen reaches over and yanks the strand of seaweed out, and Marin's breath hitches.

Here it is.

Nerissa parts the last of the seaweed dramatically. Marin almost gasps as the wreck comes into view.

Before them is the largest, most elaborate ship she has ever seen, or at least, the remainder of it. The massive stern is closest to them, its wood dashed in until all that remains is a chaos of splinters. Further on, tipped onto its side, Marin can see that the enormous mast has cracked completely in two. In contrast, the paint is almost entirely unchipped, shiny blacks and golds that still shimmer in the dim light that has managed to filter down. This is not a cheap trading vessel, kept together with sticky tar and halfhearted prayer. This ship was once important.

Come on, Fen whispers to her.

They push back the boards of the stern that are the least damaged and slither inside. It is almost pitch-black, and even the mermaids' eyes cannot quite adjust to the gloom.

Wait, Bronwen's voice comes from Marin's right. She pulls a handful of small objects from the cloth sack tied to her waist. Immediately, the girls are surrounded by a dim but resolutely glowing light.

Here, Bronwen says, giving a phosphorus-filled shell to Fen, Nerissa, and Marin before weaving her own into her hair as an improvised lamp. Bronwen takes off into the darkness, soon reduced to a bobbing and dipping light in the distance.

Meet you later, Nerissa chirps before heading off.

See you in a bit? Fen asks. Marin hesitates, wanting to ask the other girl to stay with her. Nerissa's enthusiasm is contagious, but Marin can't help but wonder what she is about to find in this carcass.

But what are we looking for? Marin asks, but she has paused too long in her deliberations, and Fen has already raced off, leaving Marin alone in the glow of her shell.

Marin settles her lamp behind her ear and backs up until she finds an intact wall. She will go slowly, she decides, just until she has adjusted. Then she'll be able to find something wonderful, something to brag to Fen about that will make her violet eyes light up in wonder.

She starts to make her way along the wall of the ship, scanning every detail and only moving on when she is certain she has not missed anything. Her fingers catch on every splinter and gouge of rotting wood. She pauses at each dark shape that breaks through the dimness, unsure if this barrel, this wall carving, this discarded china plate is significant.

It takes less than ten minutes of painstaking exploration to realize that this ship is nothing at all like the *Harbinger*. The room she is in appears to have once been storage, but even something dedicated to such a mundane and menial purpose shrieks of pomp. When it still floated atop the sea rather than nestled within it, Marin guesses that the barrels and crates were all stacked neatly, with no holes made by scurrying rats and certainly no trace of rot. She pries a few of the boxes open half-heartedly in case someone thought to secret away some riches, but she soon determines there is nothing too exciting that can be found in a storeroom, and she floats over to a hole that vaguely resembles a doorway.

The next room is what Marin assumes was the galley, or, more likely on a ship of this size, one galley of several. A few of the cupboards are still intact, and their softened wood cracks away to reveal a handful of shattered plates and some silverware. Marin finds a set of knives with elaborately-carved whalebone handles that she slips into her sack. They are not terribly impressive, but they are pretty at the least, and there is one whose handle is a rearing stallion that Marin thinks Fen might like.

She shifts a few boards in front of the doorway to the next room, and what she sees makes her blood run cold. The next room is a dining room, and there are bodies inside.

There is a great oak table. The floor is littered with smashed china and scattered silverware. Remains of a great dinner smear some of the intact plates. And there are bodies.

They look too still, too peaceful for Marin to think of them as human. They have settled to the bottom of the ship, lining the bottoms of the walls like some grotesque garland. Nearly all of them had abandoned the table, and now they are trapped in their search for escape. Some of the hands are still outstretched, the eyes gaping and mouths gasping. One man's fingers are

tangled together, his eyes closed, and Marin thinks he might be in prayer. There are seven of them around the walls, five men and two women, and then, at the table -

There is one body still sitting down for dinner. One body resting, or maybe just resigned. Its eyes are wide and glassy. It is a child, a girl, no more than five years old. Her dress is silk and her hair wrapped in ribbons. Her tiny mouth rests in an “oh” shape, as if her last breath came less as a plea for survival and more of a surprise, like a runaway balloon or a broken toy.

Marin swallows, drifting closer to the little girl. One of the child’s hands is balled into a fist. She grasps the fingers gently, her stomach recoiling at their clamminess, the way the flesh seems to threaten to slough off under Marin’s touch. She carefully unwraps each of the girl’s fingers and finds a small figurine. Marin holds it up to her phosphorus lamp.

It’s a sculpture of a mermaid. Its hair is sleek, the long curls impossibly detailed and minute, its face delicate and smiling. Its tail does not look like it could crush a man. It is not vengeful or cruel; no fangs peek out from its sweet lips. It is a fairytale personified, and the little girl had clutched to it as her soul slipped out of her body.

Marin?

Marin does not answer; she cannot answer. She is not aware that her body is shaking as if it might shatter until suddenly there is a pair of arms surrounding her, firm and calming. Bronwen.

Shhh... Bronwen murmurs in her ear. Shhh... it’s alright, you’re alright... there’s nothing we can do...

The girl, Marin says. The girl the girl the girl the girl the -

It's alright, Bronwen repeats, and Marin just keeps stammering and shivering, as if she is afraid her own body will wither and collapse if she is still or silent for too long. *I'm sorry you found this. There are always rooms like this in the wrecks, always bodies and souls trapped underneath. But I'm sorry you had to see this.*

Bronwen?

Fen and Nerissa swim into the room. Nerissa freezes in the doorway when she sees the gruesome scene. Fen recoils for a moment but then draws nearer to where Marin trembles in Bronwen's strong grip. She reaches out a hand and strokes Marin's hair.

Are you okay? Fen whispers in her ear.

The girl the girl the girl, Marin says by way of response. Someone has to hear her - someone has to understand that Marin is not the tragedy, not the one to be pitied in this morbid array. Marin needs someone else to see the little girl, and her toy mermaid, needs someone else to understand what exactly was lost in the storm.

I see her, Fen says, as if she has read Marin's mind. Her mouth is pressed so close that Marin can feel her lips. *I see her, and you see her, and now we'll remember.*

She draws back and presses a kiss to Marin's hair, like a mother would, Marin tells herself, like a sister. Careful. Caring.

Maybe we should go back, Nerissa says softly. Bronwen nods.

No - Marin protests. *If you haven't - I don't want - you came all the way out here for this. I don't want to be the reason you have to cut it short. I can handle it. I can get over -*

It? Her? Marin does not know how to end it, so she doesn't.

No, Bronwen insists. *It's just a wreck. The ocean is full of them. We can always come back, once you're safe, once you're okay.*

I-

We're leaving, Fen presses. *It's okay, Marin. It's okay.* And then, softer, so no one else would hear, *We see her. We remember.*

Fen takes Marin's hand and doesn't let go until they've reached the Clearing. Marin holds the girl's toy mermaid and does not know if she can let go.

Twelve

After dinner that night, Marin is restless. If she sits still, she thinks, and if she thinks, all she sees is the girl the girl the girl -

She does not let herself sit still.

Instead, she makes laps around the Shoal. She makes it her challenge to dart into every nook and cranny, to quite literally leave no stone unturned. She counts the number of crabs she finds creeping along the walls of the sleeping cave; she traces the designs on their shells and imagines what they would look like painted. She forces herself to be fascinated by the patterns of rock fissures in the slick mossy boulders where they eat meals. There is one that looks almost like a map of England, and Marin distracts her mind for nearly a full ten minutes by attempting to pinpoint where exactly Harwich would be.

She is attempting to chart out from Harwich what the trajectory of the *Harbinger* had been when a hand settles on her shoulder.

Marin jumps and whirls around.

Nerissa! You startled me.

Are you doing alright? Nerissa asks her. Her eyes are creased with worry.

Of course! Marin chirps back, but the words come out too forced-cheery, and they grate inside her mind. She swallows and, with a conscious effort to lower her tone, adds, *Why wouldn't I be?*

You've been staring at the same rock for over an hour, Nerissa says, without a trace of humor. *You haven't talked to anyone since we got back from the wreck. We're worried about you. I'm worried about you.*

I'm fine, Marin insists. I'm a bit tired.

Nerissa holds her gaze. Her lips tighten slightly and it feels like disappointment. *Marin, please don't patronize me by lying.*

When Marin doesn't respond, Nerissa places her hand back on her shoulder and rubs gentle circles. *You're not weak, you know. You think we're hardened, insensitive, but the truth is that we were all like you once. We were all terrified. Uncertain. I think there was a part of us... there was a part of me, at least, certainly.... That wondered if it would have been less cruel for Yara to just leave us dead. The only difference between us is that we've had years - hundreds, in some cases - to get used to it.*

Marin bites her lip and shrugs against Nerissa's hand. Somehow she doubts that Nerissa had ever been rendered babbling and incoherent. Somehow she doubts that everyone had ever been worried about bubbly, smiling, sunshine Nerissa.

After we explored my first wreck, I ran away, Nerissa confesses. She says the words simply, as if they are not meant to console or to manipulate, but as if they were simply truth. It wasn't even as bad as this one -

The girl the girl the girl - Marin flinches and swallows. Without missing a beat, Nerissa's hand increases the pressure of rubbing circles on Marin's back.

Sorry. It's not that this one was bad, there just - there aren't usually as many - you know. Nerissa's face scrunches up apologetically. Bodies. My first wreck was small, maybe twice the size of this clearing, if that. I think we only explored it because Bronwen wanted to cheer me up, to be honest. It was so small that it hardly seemed like something she would have wanted to spend time on.

Nerissa smiles at the memory, her bright lips curling upward. *It didn't exactly work.*

You found the dead? Marin asks.

Nerissa nods. *The dead - singular. There was only one crewman, or perhaps the others escaped, I don't know. But he...*

Nerissa draws in a breath and shakes her head, her eyes wide. *The people we found, they were a rarity. We must have gotten to them quite soon after they sunk. I know that you do not feel lucky for what you saw - and you shouldn't,* Nerissa adds hastily, *not at all, but it could have ended worse.*

What do you mean?

Nerissa's smile twists into gruesome rue. *I mean, it's a rarity that we find them so... intact.*

Marin's stomach turns. *You mean you find them in - in - in pieces?*

No, no, no, not quite - well - not really like that. I mean only that, well, the ocean is composed of a lot of carnivores, scavengers, things that see the dead and decomposing and think only of a meal.

This does not seem to Marin like a much better alternative. Her stomach clenches and unclenches and she tries not to think of the little girl girl girl being eaten torn apart - she shakes her head violently to clear it and swallows back bile.

I'm sorry if that was harsh. But it's part of the cycle here. Things are made and they die and the new things need fuel for the making. So when we found the sailor, the lone man on my first wreck... we were not the first creatures to find him.

It felt so wrong, Nerissa says. *When you're human, you spend your days thinking that you are the most that there is. You treat the creatures beneath you - the fish and eels and other things that*

creep so deep below - as, well... beneath you. You think you are so infinite. It is easy to get caught up in your own immortality. And maybe that's just the way it is, and maybe that's the way it should be - maybe we should be allowed these moments of hope, these moments where we forget how we can be broken - but when you're human and you're dead... under the water, there is no hierarchy. The dead are the dead and nothing more.

And I couldn't help thinking how no one would know about him. He would become the sea - his flesh would crumble, his muscles masticated meal - and there would be no evidence.

Nerissa licks her lips and looks at Marin. The stare is questioning, is vulnerable; it asks Marin for trust and confidence. Marin doesn't know how to give this much back, so she just holds Nerissa's gaze as long as she can.

I didn't have much of a family, before I died. And after... there was no evidence. If Yara had never found me, no one would have wondered at my disappearance. A clean vanishing, it would have been.

When I found the sailor, already in - in the middle of a vanishing act - I knew that I had to make sure he was honored. Even if it was just one person, just me, someone had to know he was there.

He had a coil of rope knotted around his wrist, a braided bracelet. I cut it off of him and took it with me. Bronwen didn't ask me why, even though it wasn't useful and it wasn't valuable in any way. I think she didn't want to risk taking away something that she thought had placated me, had contented me. I don't know. That night I snuck out of the Shoal when everyone else was sleeping. I found a safe space, close enough that I wouldn't get lost, but far enough that I wouldn't be

interrupted if someone noticed I had gone. I held down the bracelet in the sand with a pile of stones, and I prayed.

Nerissa gave a small smile, without mirth. *I don't know who I prayed to. Maybe it was Yara. Maybe it was to a human God, though I don't know if I ever believed in a Him. Maybe I was praying to myself, in hope or consolation, or maybe to whatever ghosts the sailor had left behind. But I stayed all night and I prayed that the sailor was at rest. I prayed that he would be forgiven, not absolved, necessarily - I didn't know him or whatever he may have done - but still, forgiven. I prayed that, if there was anyone out there who would worry about him or care that he had gone, they would have peace. And most of all I prayed that someone would remember, even if that someone was just me. I prayed I would never be allowed to forget.*

That's a lot of prayer, Marin comments, simply to have something to say. And then she wonders if her parents ever prayed for her. Her mother would, likely. They didn't go to church every Sunday. Marin doubted that the priest in Harwich knew their family's name. But her mother prayed each evening, and some days, when Cora was getting really bad, Marin would wake to find even her father kneeling over their bedside.

Would they know she was dead? Would they somehow feel it - would Cora feel it? And then, the worse thought: would she feel it, if something happened to Cora? Marin shakes her head, trying to banish the thoughts that are too heavy for her to carry all at once. She is tired. She is so tired.

I started going with Bronwen to every wreck, Nerissa continues. If she notices Marin's distraction, she doesn't comment. *If there were dead, I would make it a point to find them. I tried not to be cruel about it, or disrespectful, but I would always take something back for each person*

that I found. Something little, but enough that even if they weren't remembered on Land, some part of them would be kept safe from decay. Some part of them would survive the abyss. Eventually, the spot where I had attempted to bury them became less of a grave marker and more of an altar, a shrine to the dead, if you will. The others all know about it. I'm the one who mostly takes care of it, but the others go to it at times, if they find a particularly difficult wreck - if they see something that cannot - should not - be dismissed.

Nerissa squeezes Marin's shoulder again. *I know you've been holding onto the little girl's mermaid. I thought... it might be good for you to come to the shrine. You can set the mermaid there, say a prayer - if you want. You can let her go.*

Marin chews her lip. She is thinking of the girl and she is not thinking of the girl - or, rather, she is thinking of another girl, far away and trembling in a bed too cold for her fevered body. She nods to Nerissa, slowly.

I think that would be good. I think she needs to be remembered.

Nerissa smiles, not with enthusiasm but with comfort. *I thought you would agree. We can go now, if you like.*

Marin nods again. This wouldn't save Cora, but for now, saving *someone* seemed enough.

Thirteen

It's a bit farther out than most things we use here, like the phosphorus mines, or the fishing grounds, Nerissa explains, as they swim further and further out to sea. They duck and weave through a thick patch of seaweed and under an archway of stones. *Apart from not wanting to be disturbed, I thought it might be irreverent to keep it too close. This kind of thing wants its own space.*

Fortunately, Nerissa adds, *space is not something that we're lacking here in the ocean.*

Marin smiles. She clenches her fist tighter around the mermaid statue, until the ridges of the carving dig into her palm and threaten to split it.

Just a bit further, Nerissa says, and as she does Marin begins to make out something on the horizon. It starts out small, a black splotch no bigger than Marin's thumb, but as they draw closer it stops being something that she spies but something that takes control of her vision, looms before her. Even when they are still a few dozen feet away, it is clear that the shrine stands at least three times Marin's height. Objects of every kind branch out from it. Here, there is a locket; there, a rotting pair of leather gloves; at the top of one spire, a wedding ring. In some places, the construction is haphazard, as if Nerissa had simply tossed the items wherever they would fit. In other places, it is deliberate, an architectural feat that can be called nothing short of magnificent.

Nerissa, it's... it's...

And all at once the implications of its size hit her with all the force of a cannon's bellow. If Nerissa took an item for every one found dead...

I know, Nerissa says. I know. Try to remember the good that can come from this, and remember it alongside, not instead of, the bad. It's a lot, but it is still something, and that's how I comfort myself.

Marin swims slowly around the altar. She wonders how many mermaids would have to link arms in order to circle its massive girth. When she looks up at it from the right angle, it almost looks like a throne. *A perch for the God of Death*, she thinks, and then mentally chastises herself for her own morbidity.

Here. Nerissa swims up to her and takes the hand which carries the mermaid. *Why don't we place it a little bit higher? Maybe this way, when the skies are clear, she can see a little light.*

Nerissa guides her up to the topmost spires of the shrine. The artifacts sprawl out below her like tendrils of a city. Out of the corner of her eye, Marin spies a rubber ball. She carefully digs a resting spot amongst the other items, and then settles the mermaid in. Perhaps it is nothing, or, perhaps, the ball had once belonged to a little boy who had found his end with the same unexpected gasp for breath. Perhaps the little lost boy and the little mermaid girl could be friends.

Do you want to say anything? You don't have to, Nerissa adds. *I don't know if you believe anything. You don't have to. But it can help, I think, even just to say the words. It puts an ending to it.*

Marin takes a deep breath. She is certain, for a few moments, that she is content with the silence. It makes sense to let the toy settle amongst its fallen fellows. But then the words rise to the top of her mind, and she is saying them almost before she can acknowledge it.

Let her be okay. God. Yara. Someone, please, let her be okay. Let her know that someone found her story, in the end, and someone will remember her. Marin, and Fen, and Bronwen, and Nerissa, we all saw her. Let that be enough.

Nerissa grabs her shoulder and squeezes. *That was good. I'm sure she heard you, and it helped. Do you feel... was this useful, to you?*

Marin nods. She does not know if she feels any different. To say that she was positive the little ghost girl was there with them, had heard her words and now was released from wandering the earth - well, that would be a lie. But there is a part of Marin that feels a little more secure, settled in and tied back down. She no longer fears she will float away in overwhelm. She nods again. *Yes. I think it was. Thank you, Nerissa.*

Of course.

Nerissa takes out a few more items in handfuls from a pouch tied at her waist, and scatters them over the shrine. Marin counts them as they float to stillness. There is one for each other body found in the ship.

Nerissa's eyelids flutter shut. If she says a prayer, it is not out loud, but Marin gives her space and silence.

Alright, Nerissa says at last. Thank you, Marin, for coming with me. I am glad to have been able to give you some comfort. It's not... life down here is not always smooth, but it is not always that harrowing either. Whatever you're feeling, you should know that it's okay.

Marin nods, breath in and out and in and out of her gills.

It's okay.

The two mermaids swim back to the Clearing in something that looks almost like hope.

Fourteen

The next morning, at breakfast, Marin is quiet. No longer dwelling on the girl, her thoughts are now occupied by the wreck itself - and, beyond that, another ship that she knows has settled into sleep on the ocean floor. Her mind bubbles with the potential of all of this. She pulls apart her seaweed meticulously, less eating it and more watching the shreds float away on the current.

Fen flicks her fins on Marin's tail.

You know, we're underwater, she says, her purple eyes twinkling. *The fish can feed themselves.*

Marin laughs, her mind at once thousand miles away and tangled in Fen's eyes.

Hey. Fen floats closer and puts her hand on Marin's arm. She lowers her voice so the others can't hear. *You can tell me if something is bothering you.*

Marin bites her lip, thinking. *I... It's not bothering me. It's just an idea that I had. It's probably silly. Probably completely unfeasible.*

Less feasible than this? Fen asks, waving her tail back and forth. *Less feasible than these?* She puffs her cheeks with air and makes her gills flare out. *Less feasible than everything else that's happened?*

Fair point, Marin says, a giggle making its way out of her lips. Fen shrugs.

After a while, you get used to it. You start to believe that, if so many things you had previously thought to be myth, thought to be nothing but stories are real, who's to say that anything at all is impossible? She flicks Marin's tail again playfully. Marin smiles wider. *So go on, what's your idea?*

You said - well, Bronwen said - there are wrecks scattered all around here, right?

Mmmmmhmmmm.

And, well, you found me nearby, right?

Fen's eyes narrow and she bites down on her lip.

Yes... she says, slow and cautious. Marin, where is this going?

I had this necklace. It's - it's silly, I told you, she adds when Fen arches her eyebrow. But it's the last thing that I had from before I left home. Cora made it for me once, with shells she found on the shore. I lost it aboard the Harbinger in a game of dice, and I was just thinking that...

Fen is still scrutinizing her, so Marin swallows and rushes the rest of her words until they almost blend together.

I was just thinking that it was still on the ship when the storm came and it wouldn't have been able to float and if the ship went down it would have been nearby and maybe just maybe it would still be there so if we went to look -

You want to find the wreck of the men who killed you? Fen interrupts, her voice high with incredulity.

I want to find Cora's necklace, Marin clarifies.

You want to find the wreck of the men who killed you... Fen repeats slowly, ... for a piece of jewelry?

It's the only thing I have left. And I know I can't go back, and I don't want to, Marin says, even though as she speaks the words she is uncertain if they are really true. *But I just want something to... to make me know it was all real. That I had a family who loved me, and that I existed before -*

Marin breaks off. “Before I died,” seems too blunt; “before they drowned me,” seems too crass. But though Fen is still chewing her lip with concern, her eyes have softened, and Marin decides to leave the sentence dangling.

I don't know if this is a good idea, Fen starts. *You could find - it's not that I don't think you could face it, but you could find - but...*

She sits for a moment, as if trying to decide whether or not she truly wants to finish her proposition. Her tail flicks from side to side as she thinks, and Marin is reminded of the game she and Cora used to play with flower petals - *he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not.*

But...? Marin prompts Fen. Her tail flicks to the left one last time and settles. Marin wonders whether, in the petal game, it would be a *love* or *not*.

But, Fen continues, *if it really means that much to you, we can see if we can talk Bronwen and Nerissa into another expedition. If your wreck really is out there, Bronwen will be able to find it.*

You didn't find it right away after the storm? Marin asks. Fen shrugs, one half of her lips twitching up playfully.

As you might remember, we had other big things that we were concerned about. Namely, you.

Oh. Right.

We also... tend not to scavenge the wrecks that are related to those who come to us, Fen adds slowly. *Not everyone was drowned off of a ship, of course, but when they are... well. We don't want to bring up any bad memories.*

Marin nods. *That makes sense.*

And Marin, if we do this, you know what we might find, right?

Marin knows she isn't talking about the necklace. *I know.*

Fen pauses again. She reaches out a hand tentatively and squeezes Marin's own. *I know how bad it was for you. I know that you won't miss them if they're gone, that you might even be more peaceful. I... I would be.*

This is the closest that Fen has come to being honest and open about her past, and Marin is bursting with curiosity, but she knows that now is not the time to press. She nods at Fen to go on.

But, Fen continues, there is a difference between wanting someone dead and finding their corpse. And I don't want to be the one to show you something like that.

I know, Marin says again. She squeezes Fen's hand back. She wants to tell Fen that she could never be the one to hurt her, that for whatever reason she felt like even the worst of truths couldn't cut her when she was with Fen, but she can barely phrase it inside of her head, let alone aloud, so she swallows the words back.

Well, Fen says, if you're sure -

I'm sure, Marin interrupts. She squeezes Fen's hand one last time before releasing it.

Then let's go get Bronwen.

They swim to the opposite side of the makeshift dining room, where Bronwen is laughing with Vanora and Nerissa and finishing off a chunk of raw fish wrapped tightly in seaweed.

Ahhhh, you've decided to grace us with your presence, have you? Bronwen teases as the two approach. *Thank you, we feel blessed.*

Cute. Really, Fen says dryly, but her dimples are showing with the hint of a smile. *Actually, we have a challenge for you - for all of you, if you want.*

Ooh, I'm interested, Nerissa grins.

You might want to hear the challenge before you agree to it, Fen says. Marin can hear the warning behind even Fen's light tone.

Then you don't know us well enough, Bronwen smirks back.

You probably want to hear it first, Marin says quietly. She is suddenly self-conscious of what she is asking. There was a reason, after all, wasn't there, that the mermaids had never before explored a wreck of one of their peers? Maybe it was too much, too taboo... and for a small trinket, a necklace that likely was already swallowed in the sea anyway... Marin begins to take it back, but Fen has already started,

Marin wants to find her wreck.

No one gasps. No one shrieks or falls over in shock. But Marin can still see them tense, the way Nerissa's eyebrows shoot up and Vanora focuses intently on polishing one of her tentacles with her thumb instead of looking Marin in the eye.

Bronwen is the first to speak. She fixes Marin with a pointed, unflinching stare.

Is Marin sure about that?

Marin thinks, *no, not at all*, but she does not want to take it back in front of half of the Shoal, so she says instead, with a confidence she does not feel, *Yes*.

Then that's all I need. Let's go.

Marin frowns. She had expected... she wasn't quite sure what she expected, but nothing so easy as this. *That's it? You'll do it?*

Bronwen shrugs slowly. Marin is still caught in her careful gaze. She blinks but cannot bring herself to look away. There is something about Bronwen that is one part serious, one part soothing. Marin trusts her.

If you are sure that you want to do this... we are a Shoal. We are there for each other. Her face breaks into an easy smile. *And besides, who am I to turn away a challenge?*

If you're really sure... Marin says, and Bronwen nods. *Then alright. Let's go.*

I'm in, too! Nerissa adds. She gulps down the last of her breakfast in one swift motion. *Van?*

Vanora shakes her head. *I'm out.*

Please? Nerissa pleads. She tugs on Vanora's hand. *Just this once?*

No. Wrecks aren't for me. Vanora looks apologetically at Marin. Her tentacles twine together, twisting one way and the next in anxious motion. *It's not you, Marin. I promise. But I'm going to sit this one out.*

Nerissa makes a show of sighing overdramatically. *Suit yourself.*

I expect the story when you get back, though, Vanora says, as if to make up for her resistance.

Of course, Nerissa chirps back.

Alright, Bronwen says, as the crew begins to make their way out of the Clearing. *I know roughly where we found you, and that's a good start, but that's not quite going to be enough. We never find anyone exactly where they were - where they were last.*

Is there a reason for that? Marin asks.

No one knows. I think, though... Nerissa says, *... it might be out of kindness. So you don't have to relive everything as soon as you wake up.*

But it'll still be there, right? Yara wouldn't destroy a whole ship just out of courtesy... would she?

Nerissa frowns. *I don't actually know. It should be... but I've never gone searching for one of our wrecks before. If it's out there, Bronwen will find it, that's for certain.*

Damn right I will, Bronwen says.

Would it help if I told you where we were when I was - before I would have hit the water?

You remember that? Fen asks, her eyebrows shooting up. Something in Marin sparks at how impressed Fen sounds. *Would you be able to find it again?*

Yes, Marin says, and the moment she says it, she realizes it is true. She doesn't know how, but something in her bones knows the orientation of every bit of this space as true as she knows herself. She knows that she could trace the route of the ship to the very inch.

It's as good a place as any to start. Might be more exact than where we found you, too. The ship could have travelled several miles after, especially if they did hit the storm. Bronwen squints her eyes at Marin. *I don't suppose you remember what way the wind was blowing?*

Marin closes her eyes and concentrates. She doesn't remember observing it at the time, but then, when she pictures the ship and the rock of the waves and the sound of Dillon's voice snapping at her like the sails... *Southeast. 7 knots. Maybe 8.*

That's brilliant, Fen says. Marin feels heat rush to her cheeks and she bows her head. *Most of us have a heightened sense of direction after the Change - it's like we're not just in the water, but we're a part of it, or, rather, it's a part of us. But still.. That's a nice trick, new girl.*

Thanks, Marin mutters.

In that case... lead the way, Bronwen says, gesturing for Marin to take the point of their meandering group.

They cross the ocean faster than any ship ever could. Marin's body feels like an arrow fired from the strongest bow. She stretches her arms out in front of her in a point and laughs, giddy with the sensation of the water rushing past her. She hears laughter echoing behind her, light and musical, and she knows it is Fen. Her face tingles with heat.

Fish skim beside her as she goes: brightly colored ones with scales that glitter and shine; small ones that flicker across her vision and are gone as soon as she can notice them; large, lithe eels that cause Nerissa and Fen to shriek as they slither past. Marin reaches out to brush her fingers against a shimmering silver fish the size of her fist. Maybe it is the adrenaline, but it seems to purr underneath her touch. It skates past her ear and around her head once before settling just above her right shoulder.

Hello there, Marin says on impulse. It's a silly prospect, imagining that she could talk to fish, but in that moment of wonder and delight in her own power, it seems right. Marin pictures the fish smiling and wagging its fins in happy response.

The tugging under Marin's skin jolts her back into presence. She rears her tail forward and skids to a halt.

This is it. This is where we hit the storm - where - where I went under.

We should split up, Bronwen chimes in. *No telling how far it traveled in the wind, and we'll cover more ground apart.*

Are you alright? Nerissa asks her quietly. *This will not be easy.*

I know, Marin answers her. I can do this. I want - I need my necklace back. I need to have something to prove that I was part of a time before, a good time before.

Okay. If you need anything...

I'll go with her, Fen interrupts. She hastily glances at Marin's face for approval. If that's alright - if that's something you would want.

Yes, Marin jumps in quickly. Yes. I think that would be...

She forces herself to blink so she does not fall into Fen's violet whirlpool eyes.

I think that would be helpful.

After almost an hour has passed, however, the joy has faded. There is no trace of the ship, not a splintered hull, not a single sail peeking out from a shelter of sand. Even Fen's coaxing smile cannot stop Marin from letting out a screech of frustration. She slaps the ocean floor with her tail as if the ensuing plume of dust will give her answers.

Where is it?! Where the hell is it?

Hey, hey, hey - Fen wheels around so both of her hands (her bare hands skin brushing against Marin's collarbones Marin's heartbeat falters just a moment just a moment) are on Marin's shoulders. There's a chance we won't find it. We knew that. The ocean is hundreds of thousands of leagues wide, and hundreds of thousands of leagues more deep. Who knows where the wind could have taken one small ship?

I know! I should know, I was on it! Marin interjects. She whirls around again, sure that if she looks hard enough in any direction she'll see something, anything, anything.

Also, Fen continues, as if she has not heard Marin. She fixes her in her violet gaze until Marin cannot help but breathe deeply. There is a chance it is not still... entirely intact. The storm

could have been worse than any of us can imagine. If the ship hit the rocks... by now, it could be nothing but driftwood floating about. We could search for years and never find your necklace.

But I - Marin starts to protest, but Fen squeezes her shoulders gently and the words trail off into the water. Fen is right, and they both know it.

Maybe it's better if you let it go. Just for now - Fen adds quickly. *But maybe... if it's meant to come back to you, it'll come back to you. Maybe it's a good thing to make yourself give it up.*

Maybe you're right... Marin concedes. And with Fen's eyes still on her as if she is the only thing worth seeing in the entire ocean, Marin thinks that maybe she can start to believe it.

Fifteen

At dinner, between the thrill of being being being in her body and the frustration at not finding the *Harbinger* wreck, Marin is exhausted. She rubs her eyes and has to concentrate on not smearing seaweed in them as she sleepily mashes the food in her mouth. She barely notices when Rialta takes her place at the centermost rock in the Clearing to return again to the world of Yara.

Psssst, Fen elbows her. *You awake?*

I'm awake, Marin replies blearily. The words are muddled and come out fuzzier than she intended.

You gotta stay awake - this is the good part! Fen says, her hand moving to Marin's forearm to shake her awake. Marin's lips quirk up. Every part is "the good part" to Fen. But Marin still shakes her head, attempting to shed the sleep from her body.

Fen's hand does not move from Marin's arm.

Marin is suddenly wide awake.

And Rialta begins to talk.

Yara

The men had spoken true. After an hour, or five, or maybe an eternity, Yara burst through the edge of the forest and the palace loomed in front of her. The party had long ago dispersed, but there were still lights in the windows, and when Yara reached the gates she went inside. She ran up the white marble steps. The great oak doors led to a ballroom.

She was greeted with screams - what else would befit the entrance of a girl dressed only in blood, hair and eyes wild with moonlight? Most of the guests had left or retired, but there, in the middle of the floor was the prince. He alone met Yara not with fear but intrigue, not shock but curiosity.

Curiosity.

Curiosity.

The prince ordered the servants to take this mysterious ghost girl into their care. He ordered a bath, and a bed, and a fresh set of clothes. His eyes lingered on her nakedness for only a moment. His tongue did not lick as he glanced over her breasts. When the servants took her away, Yara could feel him watch her with every step.

The bathwater stung Yara's skin, not with temperature but with lust, as if the water itself knew what she was and wanted to pry her back into its domain.

"You do not belong here," the water said with every splash. "You are not of this world, Sea Witch, Fish Girl. Come back, come back, come back."

But Yara was not finished with her charade. She was happy. She was excited. And as the prince was under her - metaphorical - spell, so entranced was she with him at first sight. She liked him. She wanted him.

She went to sleep that night not in the bed - it was too cushioned for her, in the way that humans like to make things too comfortable, too easy - but curled next to it. Her hands nestled underneath the nightdress that the servants had given her and settled between her thighs. She ran her fingers along and up and down and into the hollow therein and gasped in pleasure at what she found.

Yara ached with what she had discovered, what she had become. This was a new kind of transformation.

When the servants woke her the next morning, they did not comment on what they found - her position at the foot of the bed, the hand that was still curled between her legs. They simply stood her up and readied her for the day.

Yara liked this, too. She was not used to all of these layers that the humans put on. There was not just the clothing, with its skirts and its skirts and its skirts and its corsets and chemises and gowns, but the behaviors. The servants brushed her hair and prodded her into the proper stature. She was being groomed and groomed and groomed.

“We’re to take you to the prince, m’lady,” one of the servants told her, when at last her cheeks had been reddened and her lips painted and her body all propped up like a doll. “He requested your presence at breakfast.”

The girl, though older than Yara, spoke softly, as if cautious that a single misplaced word could shatter the air around them. Yara nodded and smiled at her. She made the twist of her lips as gentle as the girl’s words.

The dining room where breakfast was held could fit a large pond. The royal table was headed not by the queen but by the king; it stretched almost from one end of the room to another in its

expanse. The prince was seated at the king's right hand side, and when Yara entered, he gestured for her to join him.

The prince did not know Yara's name. He did not know a thing about her. Yet the moment she settled into the high-backed wooden chair, he began to chatter away as if they were old friends.

"You look wonderful," he murmured to her, before raising his voice. "Your Majesty, this is the girl I was talking about, the one who so miraculously stumbled upon us last night. Isn't she breathtaking, as I had said?"

Yara blushed. He was flattering her, of course, and she knew that. She could, she reasoned to herself, be flattered and on her guard at the same time. She understood that fun occasionally demanded risk taking. So she smiled and nodded her head in modesty at the King and the Queen.

"It's true she has no voice?" the King asked. Yara nodded in false shyness and fluttered her eyelashes. Out of the corner of her gaze she noticed how the prince watched her, slightly, lightly, as if she were something fragile. It was untruth and it felt wonderful.

Yara dined with the royal family three times that day. After dinner, the prince - whose name, she learned, was Adam - offered her his arm and took her on a tour through the gardens. As he pointed at each blossom and leaf in turn, Yara itched to work her magic with them. They did not have flowers like this underwater, so stiff and prideful and delicate all in one. The seaweed was too limp, the coral too harsh and grating. But these... these were bright and marvelous. Yara wondered what they would look like spliced together. How would they look transformed into birds, or trees? Yara lingered her fingers on a yellow one, its petals wide and spiraling, and then one a deep red, with thorns that tore at her skin. She liked that one the best; it could protect itself. Its beauty did not detract from its deadliness.

“It’s gorgeous,” she moved her mouth to say, skating breath over her lips in an exhale. She knew Prince Adam was watching her.

“You are gorgeous as well. You know that, right?”

Yara cast her eyes down in modesty and rubbed the petals of the blood flower. Of course, she knew of her own beauty. That was part of the Sea Witch’s power, their high cheekbones, their arching eyebrows and plump pouting lips. They made you want to protect them. They convinced you they were simple and harmless. They convinced you to be wrong.

So deep down, when something stirred within her at the prince’s words, Yara forced it back. She knew of her own beauty. His affirmation was only that.

On the first day of the second week of her stay at the palace, on what had become their customary post-dinner stroll around the grounds, Adam stopped her.

“I’ve been thinking about giving you a name.”

Yara’s eyes widened and she almost fell into a bush of her favorite blood flowers.

“A name?” she mouthed.

“I know you must have one,” Prince Adam continued, “and I don’t mean to offend. But I... I am quite fond of you, you must know, and I would like to have something to call you by. It feels silly to avoid all forms of address, just because I don’t know your titles.”

Princess, Yara wanted to clarify. *Princess, soon to be Queen, of a land you never have nor never will see*. He could have just asked her, and avoided the fuss. There might have been a few things lost in the translation from her lips to his eyes, but that was not the worst thing to ever occur.

“I was thinking...” Prince Adam trailed his hands over the blood flower bush. His thumb and forefinger closed around a stem, unflinching at its bite. With a jerk, he ripped a bud from the plant. “... Rose.”

He cupped her chin with one hand. His fingers were smooth, uncalloused, and warmer than she expected, warmer than the sun on her face. He tucked back a strand of her silver-white hair and nestled the flower behind her ear.

“I think it suits you. Do you agree?”

Yara suits me, Yara wanted to say, but there was another part of her that thrilled at this disguise, his unknowing contribution to the transformation-creation of Yara-the-Human. Rose, this version of her would be called. Rose like blood.

Yes, Rose would suit her fine.

Yara nodded. Eric’s fingers still lingered on her skin. He leaned closer to her and murmured in her ear, “Then Rose it is...”

He was so close to her that she could feel his breath, warm and coaxing. He was so close to her that Yara did not notice when he moved his lips from her ear to her mouth.

And then he was kissing her

Kissing

Curiosity Kissing Her

Curiosity

Kissing

Yara pulled away with a gasp for air.

She had kissed before, underwater. There, her gills swirled with air even when her eyes were closed and her body was too open to breathe. But this was different. This had a greed she had never before known. She felt that if she stayed there long enough, it would destroy her. This was a dangerous hunger.

“I hope that was alright,” Adam said. His eyebrows wrinkled with concern.

Yara did not nod in response but instead pressed her lips again to his. She wanted her world to end in this consumption.

“Ahem.”

They broke apart. Yara stared at the servant who had interrupted them with part contempt and part goading. *You liked watching us*, she wanted to say. *You wanted it to go on. Admit it. Go on. Admit it.* She glanced at Prince Adam. His head was bowed in modesty; his ears were tipped with red embarrassment. Yara quickly altered her stance to mimic his, allowing her face to flush and her teeth to bite her lips.

“His Majesty has requested your presence,” the servant said. Her face was neutral as all the servants’ were, but this time, when Yara looked at her, she noticed that the gentle servility was a mask. There was a hollowness to it, and an intriguing falseness hidden in its careful crevices.

“We’ll be in shortly,” Prince Adam told the servant.

“Just you,” the servant said sharply, and then quickly amended, “Your Highness. Your father has requested that you come alone.”

Yara raised her eyebrows in surprise and submission. In truth, she had expected this. The King was never anything but polite, but it was politeness that tasted as the servants’ soft words. It was not true. Beneath it simmered something that Yara judged to be somewhere between

contempt and distrust. It was understandable, of course. She had burst into their ballroom drenched in blood, after all, and though the King and Queen and all their court believed her victim not victor, her mysterious origin hung always in the air. She was a girl, yes, innocuous and harmless, but she was still so much unknown, a layer of beauty that hid... what? Anything.

She didn't dwell on the mistrust. She knew it was inconsequential. She knew the King saw the fondness in Prince Adam's gaze, knew he watched the way that his hands lingered on the back of her chair a moment more than was necessary. The King might not be overly fond of her, but he loved his son, and he would not risk taking away that which thrilled him.

"I'll see you at supper?" Eric asked her. Yara nodded, always nodded, ever-always-always nodded. "Take care, Rose."

His third kiss did not land on her lips but chastely on her hand. It sunburned all the same.

When he left her in the garden, she fluttered her hands over the rose bush. Birds would be nice, as she originally thought. Birds the color of blood, perhaps with thorns where claws should be. She never truly knew how her transformations would result. That was where the pleasure came from. She closed her eyes and concentrated on drawing her magic upwards and outwards.

One

Two

Three

She opened her eyes. The rosebush remained unchanged. Her body felt no sparks, no familiar rush. She closed her eyes and tried again. Magic was a skill, and left unpracticed for so long as she had - what was it now, three weeks since her feet had been one and her lungs instead gills? - Well, it was unsurprising that she would falter. She closed her eyes again.

One

Two

Three

Nothing.

One Two

One Two

And then she knew.

This was the trade.

Her voice had been lost but that was a trifle; mermaid to human cost so much more. Yara clenched hands into fists and dug her nails in. *Fool! Fool! How stupid you were to not see!* Not voice for limb and air but magic was what she paid. She was human as she willed, but she was also trapped.

That night, she did not go to supper. Instead, she locked herself in her chambers and barricaded the door. Her exploration had become nightmare. Her dream had become cage. She cursed herself again and again for her foolishness. She dug her nails into her palms until blood spilled out in tears. If only she had told her parents, her siblings, *someone* of her plans. If there was anyone out looking for the lost princess, future queen, they would never find her here.

Sixteen

Marin does not notice when Rialta stops talking. Fueled by tiredness, maybe, or the spell of the story, or maybe something more, her body has gravitated closer and closer to Fen's until they are almost intertwined. Fen's arm rests around her shoulders, the ends of her long blonde hair tickling her chin. Marin's fingers tangle in Fen's other hand, tracing the careful webbing that runs between the joint of her fingers and her palm. It is delicate and rigged and Marin is fascinated. Her head rests on Fen's chest - on Fen's chest - on Fen's chest - on Fen's chest - and there, quiet but insistent, is a heartbeat. She does not know the last time she had heard the thrum of someone else's body.

One by one, the mermaids disentangle and trail off to the cave to fall asleep. And then, so subtly that for several moments Marin doesn't even notice, she and Fen are alone. They are still woven together, each point of contact thrumming through Marin's entire body, and when Fen does not move to separate, Marin does not either.

This is nice, floating here. This is comfortable. And, with a sudden shiver that rushes through her, Marin realizes that this could really be home for her.

Traitor, a voice hisses in her mind. *How quickly you forget where you come from when confronted with a pretty face and a simpering smile.*

I didn't forget! Marin tells herself, but even as she thinks it, the words vibrate with the too-high tremor of untruth. Once, her adventures had had purpose. Once, a girl had cut off all her hair and run away to join the sailors in order to help her little sister. Now that girl was dead and useless and the sister - the sister could be -

Fen's fins trail up and down Marin's tail and she smiles up at her.

You look so far away, Fen says. You're always so pensive...What are you thinking about?

Marin tilts her head and winds her fingers around Fen's curls. The gesture seems natural, as if she had done it a hundred times before and will do it still again and again. Her hair is so long that Marin is afraid it will tangle in her fumbling grip, but Fen never complains.

You.

Fen smirks. *You're a terrible liar.*

Marin looks away in response, her hand still woven in Fen's hair.

Marin?

It's nothing.

Marin.

I don't think you'll like it, Fen.

Fen reaches out and takes Marin's hand. Her thumb traces slow circles on Marin's palm before she presses it to her mouth in a kiss. For a moment, Marin is sure she must be dreaming. Marin wonders how something so gentle can make her feel so strong.

Says who? Fen murmurs, her lips still against Marin's hand. Fen's touch tingles - no, it burns - no, it shocks - no, it - Marin bites her fangs down onto her lip to steady her thoughts.

It's Cora.

Fen freezes.

I can't stop thinking about her.

Fen drops her grip, and Marin's hand floats down into the water beside her.

She has hair just like yours, Marin says. Long and curling. I used to brush it for her sometimes, when she told me she wanted to feel pretty.

Stop it, Fen snaps. She jerks her head to the side so Marin's fingers are forced to extricate from her hair.

We almost cut it off, once. There was a man who came to town, a traveling salesman, or so he said. Mother didn't believe him. She told us to stay away.

Marin, stop it, Fen interrupts, but Marin ignores her. If she concentrates, she can remember what it feels like to walk in tandem with Cora, the press of the cobblestones against their feet, always in the same loping rhythm.

The salesman took one look at Cora and said she her hair was like spun gold, like a fairytale, so beautiful he almost couldn't bear to stare at it for so long. He told us that he would pay twice what my father makes in a week, if only we would let him have the full length of it. Said there were ladies in London willing to kill to have locks like Cora's.

Fen watches Marin intently, but though her gaze is not hostile, neither does it hold any warmth.

The salesman didn't even look at me. I wasn't jealous of her. Is that strange? I was just happy. Father told him no, of course, though sometimes I wonder if he regrets it. But Cora... the look on her face, Fen, when the salesman said that. It didn't even cross her mind to be afraid of him or to wonder at his sincerity. She just lit up. When she smiles, you think to yourself that this is what happiness feels like. You think to yourself that you would do anything to protect this girl, this child, this thing that is so incapable of feeling anything but hope. And Fen, I - I don't even know if she's still - still -

Marin feels her chest tense up, and she panics for a moment that she has stopped breathing, that her gills have somehow refused to keep working. Then she realizes that this is

what crying feels like when you take away the tears. It is an isolation. It is a contraction. It is a need for something you cannot place.

There's a way for us to become human again.

Fen sends out the words so quietly that Marin is not quite sure she didn't imagine them.

What?

It's not permanent. It only lasts a few hours. And it's painful, the worst pain you have ever felt.

Worse than dying? Marin says with a small smile. Fen doesn't even smirk.

Worse than dying. But for some, it's worth the price.

The derision in Fen's tone doesn't even bite; Marin is too caught on the potential of her words.

I could walk on land again? I could see if Cora is -?

Her chest feels again as if it would buckle, and she stops. She lets herself float in the water for a moment, regaining control, and then tries again.

You would really show me?

There is a terrible, too-long pause in which Marin is terrified Fen has changed her mind. Fen's eyes are unreadable, just violet violet violet. And then -

Yes.

Why? Marin asks before she can stop it. *You hate humans. You hate the life Before. Why would you help me with this?*

She hates herself for asking as soon as the words leave her; if she dwells too long on it, if she pries too hard and waits too much, maybe Fen will change her mind.

Because I like you. And -

And what?

There is an infinite pause.

And because maybe if I help you go back, you'll remember what it's really like up there.

It's not just the love and happiness and - and wanting to protect someone. It's pain.

Fen's eyes glint. Marin wonders if the light is changing or if it's just her perception, but they seem to glow brighter. It scares her. It draws her.

It's pain and getting hurt and always wondering when you're going to have to give up protecting someone else just to be able to protect yourself. I want you to see that again, for real.

So, yes, I'll show you.

Marin pauses. She looks at Fen and Fen looks at her and she knows the difference in the two ways of "looking" is as large as the sea itself. She reaches out for Fen's hand, and Fen takes it.

When? Marin asks.

Tonight. If you want to. It's easiest when the moon is full - as easy as it ever is, anyway.

It's like the water is spitting you out, giving you back.

Okay.

I'll take you after the sun goes down.

Okay.

They drift together in silence, still joined by their hands.

Thank you, Marin murmurs, too late.

Fen doesn't answer, but she squeezes Marin's palm in a heartbeat-quick pulse.

Seventeen

Fen disappears right before dusk, or rather, what Marin assumes to be dusk. They are too far down to actually see the movements of the sun, and the glow of the phosphorus lamps is steady and unchanging. The other mermaids claim to be able to tell time instinctually - Darya crows that she can tell to the half-hour just by watching how fast the fish swim - but for all Marin knows it is perpetually night.

When Fen returns, she is carrying a handful of rags.

What is that?

Clothes. Fen smiles, white glitter. *You're not exactly wearing any at present, and I think someone might notice if you try to walk through town bollock-naked.*

She turns from Marin and starts to swim off.

Now come on, let's go before I change my mind.

They swim upward and outward for what feels to Marin like hours, but is perhaps maybe only minutes, until the water starts to thin and Marin can barely avoid dragging her tail on the sand with every stroke. When it gets too shallow to continue, Marin presses her palms into the ocean floor and arches her back to break the surface.

Fen shoots out a hand to stop her.

Wait. You won't be able to breathe.

Marin frowns and points at her nose.

That's just show now, Fen tells her. *It's useless unless you're human. You'll suffocate. That's part of what makes this so difficult - the timing. The breath changes last; if you go up too early, you'll still have gills. Too late and you'll drown.*

Show me.

I will. But I have to explain it first. Once we Change, we won't be able to speak - not through our minds, not out loud.

Alright.

You'll only have a few hours, Fen tells her. After that, it doesn't matter where you are or who is watching - your body knows what it truly is and where it belongs, and you'll start to Change back, so you best make sure you're by water when you do.

What happens if I'm not? Marin asks.

You die, Fen says simply. *Fish weren't made to live on Land.*

Marin nods and tries to look stoic. If it doesn't work, Fen doesn't give any indication.

Rule number two - don't let anyone see you. Particularly when you Change, but even when you're human. You're supposed to be dead.

Anger flares in Marin's stomach, warm and writhing.

I thought you were taking me to see my sister, she snaps at Fen.

I am, Fen replies, her tone clipped. *I never said anything about letting her see you. Communication was not a part of the bargain.*

Bargain? When did this become a bargain? I thought you wanted me -

Do you want me to show you how to Change or not? Fen whips back, her perfect eyebrows narrowing sharp enough to cut.

Marin swallows back her annoyance. Rialta would show her, she knows, and maybe even Vanora or Nerissa. But she wants Fen to show her this gift, this sacred thing that hurts and pulls, and so she answers,

Yes. I do.

Good. Fen flips onto her back so she balances on her elbows with her hair trailing in the sand. *In order to Change, you need to imagine what it is to be human. You can't just think about it, or remember it, you really have to feel it. The thoughts and the emotions and the sensations. And then you have to want it. You have to want it so badly that you would give up what makes you, you, just to be human again. Can you do that?*

Marin nods and twists herself onto her back to mimic Fen.

Good, Fen says again. *Together?*

Something warm rises in Marin's chest, but this time she doesn't think it's anger.

Together.

Fen closes her eyes, and Marin follows suit.

Imagine what it is to be human, she thinks to herself.

She pictures Cora, before she got sick, her long honey-brown hair catching the air like a sail as she raced Marin down the beach to the shoreline. She pictures her mother, the feel of her strong hands stroking her back, the murmur of prayer in her ear at the end of each day. She pictures the wrinkles next to her mother's eyes, the ones that always squeezed together when she laughed and when she cried. She pictures the tangles of her father's beard and -

She feels nothing. She opens her eyes and sees that her tail is still floating gently before her. If she concentrates, she can feel the water filtering through her gills.

Be human, she tells herself again, and once more she closes her eyes and imagines her family. Cora. Mother. Father. Cora. Mother. Father. Cora. Mother. Father. How could this not be human?

She feels Fen twitch beside her. She looks over.

Fen is screaming.

Her face is contorted and her back arches so sharply that Marin is afraid that it will crack and her mouth is open but no sound is coming out, not pulsing into the water nor inside Marin's mind.

And then there is a ripping noise, and Marin feels it more than hears it, feels the skin and bone and sinew tearing from each other as if they were hers, and Fen is screaming screaming screaming.

And Marin is lying there watching, a spectator, a bystander. She is watching Fen twist and writhe before her as if through someone else's eyes or someone else's life. She is watching Fen in pain and she is doing nothing and Fen is screaming screaming screaming and Marin just wants it to stop. She wants Fen to stop screaming and she wants to stop watching and she wants this to be over and she imagines her mother's strong hands stroking her back and hears the same prayers. The words are on her lips before she is conscious of wanting to say them, but she mouths them and holds tight to the feeling of her mother's hands, the press of her palms. Marin's eyes are closed again but she can still feel, can still sense Fen screaming screaming beside her and there is her mother, strong hands stroking -

Something white hot stabs through the lower half of Marin's body, and now she is the one screaming. It is as if someone is peeling off her very scales, intent on ripping her in half layer by layer, and Marin understands why torture is slow. Her body is on fire. There is a tearing noise that brings bile to her throat, and she tries to twist away from it but it is buried under her own skin and pain pain pain pain she grits her teeth and bites through her bottom lip and she thinks

she tastes blood or maybe she is blood and please God please if you exist let the pain pain pain stop.

The knife now laps at her throat, pricks and rips and gnashes into Marin, and then the water is rushing into her mouth. She swallows it even though she knows she mustn't, knows something bad will happen. She coughs and splutters and she is back on the *Harbinger* and she is drowning again.

But hands grip her and pull her up out of the waves. Her face breaks the surface and she tries to suck in the frigid night air. Something smacks against her stomach and she vomits up sea water, the salt and bile dribbling down her chest, spilling over her legs and onto the sand -

Spilling over her legs and -

Legs. She has legs again. Marin chokes out the last of the sea and wipes her eyes. She runs her hands up her calves and over her thighs and up to the place where the two limbs meet. She rubs her skin again and again. The pain is still there, but it has ebbed, less sword and more stone, pressed against her but not wounding. She inches her fingers to her neck and finds only smoothness. Her gills are gone. Her nose tickles with the coolness of the air against her insides.

Marin looks around to find the hands that saved her. She finds Fen lounging against a rock, looking at her with an expression that might be bemusement and might be pity.

She is beautiful. That is all Marin can think. Her feet are small and dainty, calves curving into less-than-muscular thighs which join - Marin's breath hitches - together just below thin-boned hips. Marin tells herself to stop staring, but she finds herself unable to look away.

Fen's lips twitch as she mouths the word, "what?"

“You’re beautiful,” Marin mouths back at her, and the moonlight is dim and insufficient but Marin swears she can see Fen blush. “No, really. You are.”

Fen shakes her head and offers the bundle of sopping clothing to Marin. She blinks. She had forgotten that she was naked, or perhaps she had forgotten that “naked” is a thing she is not supposed to be.

Gingerly, Marin presses herself to her feet. She almost topples over with pain; it is as if she is standing not on sand but on nails, each one slicing deeper into her flesh with each passing moment. She grits her teeth and forces herself to remain upright as she shakes out the clothing.

It is a dress, misshapen and full of holes and probably torn off of a rotting corpse twenty leagues below them, but it is a dress nevertheless, and Marin pulls the drenched fabric up over her skin. Fen steps over and helps draw the limp leather cording of the back tight.

She instantly feels too covered. She feels heavy and hidden and her skin itches to feel the hiss of the night. The wet cloth weighs her down as if to say, “Stop. Think.”

It is only once she is fully clothed that she realizes there is not a second dress for Fen. She gestures between the two of them and then points at the buildings of Harwich in the distance. Fen shakes her head. She points instead at herself, and then at the sand. The meaning is clear: it is an ultimatum. *I’ll be waiting*, Fen’s gesture says. *I’ll be here, so you have to come back*.

Marin looks off at the town, and then back at Fen, and without pausing to think she launches herself at the other girl in a fierce embrace.

“Thank you,” she whispers noiselessly in Fen’s ear, her lips tickling on the dripping curls of Fen’s hair. She becomes suddenly sharply aware of the press of Fen’s chest against her own, each curve and sharp angle bending into her. She lets go suddenly, before her arms can forget to

release. She takes one last moment to stare at Fen in the moonlight before she turns and starts making her way towards Harwich.

Small towns have their own kind of quiet. The houses huddle together in silent communion. There is a certain trust in the noiselessness. There is no snap of bolts and chains, no one peering out of windows in fear of an intruder.

Marin knows that likely no one will venture from the warmth of their fireplaces at this time of night, but she still avoids the center of town, instead choosing to wind her way through side streets and back alleys that only the occasional rat or stray cat ever chances to cross. The air catches on the wet fabric of the dress and her skin sprouts goosebumps. She shivers and hugs herself and carries on.

And then, at once too soon and not soon enough, she sees it. Her old home hobbles over the horizon. The small window that sits next to the thick wooden door makes it look like the house is giving her a crooked smile.

Hello, old friend, the house seems to say to her. *Welcome back. It's been too long.*

Marin skirts to the side as she approaches, avoiding the windows. She is here to see and not to be seen. She won't disappoint Fen. But she can't resist pressing her hands against the wood siding, letting her skin catch on every knot and splinter. She inhales deeply, just to see if she can catch a whiff of her mother's cooking or the smoky scent that follows her father around. She can't, of course, but if she squeezes her eyes shut hard enough, she can almost pretend.

And then she reaches the window that overlooks the bed she shared with Cora. Against the screaming of her feet, she pushes up onto tiptoe and peers in.

The glass of the window is thick and fogs up almost instantly with her breath. Marin reaches up and brushes it away with the still-dripping sleeve of her dress.

Cora is below her, the smallest of bundles under a ratted quilt. Marin's grandmother had made the quilt for Marin at her birth. Once upon a time, Marin was sure it must have held vibrant blues and greens and swirling patterns; the quilt squares are cut to illustrate the ocean waves. Even in Marin's earliest memories, though, the quilt is already faded and worn thin. Its body had quickly given out in exhaustion from too many nights spent being the only defense from the bitter wind. Now, years later, Marin is surprised that the quilt is even in one piece.

All Marin can see poking out of the quilt is a puff of blonde hair. Where once its sheen could catch the smallest of light and glimmer, it is now dull and thinning. As Marin watches, the curled-up lump that is Cora shivers. Her bones rattle the quilt. She was always small, but now even under the blanket Marin can see that her body is a hollowed out husk.

I haven't helped.

The thought comes to Marin unbidden, unsolicited, with as much force as a dagger to her stomach.

I ran away and nothing changed a bit.

Marin wants to hit something. She punches at the wall and her knuckles scrape away with red blood. Cora twitches under the blanket and Marin aims her fury at the ground instead, stomping and stomping and stomping until she thinks her feet will split open with the pain.

She punctuates each impact with a chorus of *useless useless useless useless useless!*

When she is finished, she struggles for breath. The familiar wood siding no longer seems as welcoming. The crooked smile of the window and door is more like a snarl, and Marin cannot

stand to be there one moment longer. She turns away and runs runs runs as fast as she can bear it. By the time she reaches the sand and finds Fen huddled in hiding against a rock, she collapses onto her hands and knees. She gulps down air.

A small hand finds her chin. Fen's fingers gently lift her head. Marin meets her quizzical eyes and shakes her head frantically.

"What happened?" Fen mouths. "What's wrong?"

But Marin only keeps shaking her head, until Fen's arms reach under her own and haul her to standing in an embrace. When she lets go, she jerks her head to the water and then helps Marin unlace the dress. *Come on*, the gesture says. *Let's go home*.

Fen does not tell her how to Change back, but she does not have to. The moment the water rises to lap at Marin's legs, she feels it: softly at first, then more urgent, like a child tugging at its mother's skirt or an impatient lover. She plunges under. The transformation stabs and peels and pricks at her. Her legs are drawn together by an irresistible force and then meld into one. Her back arches (she screams) and her toes-now-fins curl (she screams) and then it is over.

Marin?

Marin opens her eyes and Fen is beside her. She wants to answer, but she doesn't know if she can bring herself to voice the thoughts still chasing her. Fen reaches out and twines her pinkie finger around Marin's, and this is how they swim together back to the Shoal.

I told you it would be like that, Fen says softly. *I'm sorry, Marin. Really. Whatever you saw - I'm sorry. It's never as easy as you want to think. It's better that way. You'll see that.*

Marin does not answer. She knows her silence works its way between their fingers and builds the tallest of walls. It cuts off the warmth of the touch as surely as blowing out a flame.

But she does not say a single word until they make it back to the Clearing. She untwines her fingers and leaves Fen alone with the dress and the quiet.

Eighteen

The next morning at breakfast, Fen acts like nothing has happened. She smiles her small soft smile and greets Marin as lightly and brightly as always. The only indication she gives that she remembers Marin's too-loud silence is in the way her hand settles a little too long on Marin's as she passes her a piece of fish. Her fingers pulse around Marin's wrist in a quick squeeze before she lets go. Marin wonders, as she rips away at her breakfast, whether the touch stings more with care or smugness. She wonders why it can't be both.

Marin.

Nerissa swims over to her when most of the Shoal has finished eating and departs on their day.

You're quiet, she says. She swims behind Marin and her fingers begin to stroke through Marin's hair. *Anything on your mind?*

No, Marin says. The word is hollow and as soon as the lie leaves her she wants to rinse it from her mouth. Nerissa watches her closely as she speaks and Marin knows she sees the transparency of the lie as clearly as she sees through the water itself, but she doesn't comment. Instead, she says,

I'm going to go collect some seaweed and clams to shuck for dinner tonight. Would you like to join me?

I'd like to be alone, Marin wants to say, or, *I'd like to help my sister,* or, *I'd like to be able to do something, anything, instead of just sitting here where no one will ever find my body,* but she just shrugs.

It's very mindless work, Nerissa adds. Her fingers twine in and out of Marin's hair in a web of small braids. *Good for when you want to think... good for when you don't want to think. It's good for most things, actually.*

Marin can hear the smile in her voice, and that, above all else, is what makes her nod.

Alright, she says, and Nerissa's hands drop from her hair.

Let's go, then! It's not too far from here. It'll be good, Marin. I promise.

Nerissa is right. Wrapping the seaweed is mindless, leaving her thoughts so much room to grow and churn that for the first few minutes Marin is afraid she might drown in them. And then, forcing her way up from the guilt and the fear and the *useless useless useless*, she does the only thing left for her to do. She begins to plan.

The moon is no longer full, but it still hangs heavy in the sky, and Marin cannot make herself wait until the next lunar cycle. She pictures Cora, lying in bed, coughing up blood; or Cora, shivering under a threadbare blanket, her face flushed crimson; or Cora, still as stone and -

No. It needs to be soon.

That night, she curls up in the cave along with everyone else. She lets herself float close enough to Fen to not arouse suspicion but not so close that they are intertwined. She closes her eyes and settles in to wait. She counts one hundred breaths, then two hundred, and then, only when the fear of missing her window of opportunity overcomes her, does she dare slip from under Fen's fins.

Fen twitches and rolls over. Marin freezes, but the mermaid only sighs and settles deeper against the wall. Marin barely holds in a sigh of relief. She weaves her way over Bronwen and exits the cave. She snags one of the sacks they use for exploring wrecks and tucks Fen's dress

into it. She takes a phosphorus lamp from beside the cave entrance and knots it into her hair, praying she will be able to find her way back to Nerissa's altar.

Fish flick around her as she swims, their spines and scales rubbing into Marin and catching her by surprise. Marin doesn't know whether their presence is comforting or unnerving. It's not as if she's never seen a fish before, not as if they didn't swarm and cluster around the Shoal sometimes, but there is something about the darkness that adds an "extra" to the "ordinary."

The ocean is enormous at night.

She never quite loses consciousness of its size in the day, but when the massive phosphorus lamps are on and even the dimmest of sun rays can slither their way down to the Shoal, the size of the ocean feels less menace and more magic.

Now, it threatens, as if to remind Marin that she has wandered into its massive maw all by herself and now is at its mercy. Every current, every eddy, every glimmer of a wave seems to hiss at Marin the reminder that she has already gone under; she is already swallowed.

It's horrifying.

It's wonderful.

Marin's heart rattles against her chest as if it wishes to jailbreak her body and run away in surrender. She feels her breath speed up, her gills rippling slightly to keep up with her mind's sudden craving for more oxygen. Everything is heightened in this dark landscape. She feels a thrill but, beyond that, coated in all this shadow and vastness, she feels powerful. She tightens the fear and adrenaline around her like a cloak as she makes her way through the seaweed tangle.

More and more fish seem to gather around her, the closer she gets to the shrine. She wonders if it is the nighttime, or if they can sense that she is alone and vulnerable, in need of companions.

A fish the size of her head that she thinks is called an angelfish nestles against her neck. Its fins tickle her, and she can't help but grin. She imagines herself the head of an army, the queen warrior, and then she thinks that imagining is a lot easier in the dark. There is no fear that she will catch a reflection of herself and find it repulsive.

After surely a half hour has passed, Marin knows that she has swam over this boulder three times. Just when she is about to give up, certain that she is lost and wouldn't even be able to discern the altar in the blackness until she was on top of it, the glow of her phosphorus lamp falls on something shiny.

Marin darts down and picks up the object; it's a coin. It is small and almost rubbed smooth by the currents, but it's definitely manmade. Marin runs her fingers over it and cautiously swims forward. Another coin falls into her range of vision, and then another, and a cracked pearl necklace, and then -

The haphazard monolith of Nerissa's altar to the dead seems to burst forth into existence in front of her. Marin is frozen in wonder. In the darkness, the structure is even more magnificent, its towers and turrets and clusters of found treasure spiraling off into shadow in every direction. It is not just a shrine, not just a monument meant to honor; it is a magnificent construction in and of itself. It matches the ocean in its mass, the way it towers over the viewer and seems to, through simply existing, remind them of their own mortality. Marin thinks, again, of just how many had to die in order for Nerissa to build it so tall. She is not superstitious, but this night, her neck pinching as she stares up at the shrine, she understands why people believe in ghosts.

She breaks herself out of her reverie and starts a slow circle around the shrine. She tries to find the perfect artifact to pilfer. It has to be something valuable, but nothing too distinctive;

nothing that Nerissa would miss nor something that would attract too much attention when dumped at her parents' door. She tucks a few coins into the bag, and then a gold ring whose stone is cracked but otherwise largely untarnished. *I'm sorry*, she murmurs after each one. *I'm sorry. It's for my sister. Be at peace. I'm so sorry.*

She picks up a necklace. It is silver, with a heavy pendant at the bottom embossed with initials and several glinting green stones. Certainly valuable. She weighs it in her palm, hovering it just above the opening to the sack, and traces the unknowable letters with her fingers. She presses the knob on the bottom and the pendant springs open.

It is a locket - and not an empty one. Wedged into one half is a lock of hair, dark and tangled and knotted off with a bow of emerald silk. In the other half is a piece of paper, or, rather, the half-disintegrated soggy remnants of it. The ink is stained and smudged, but something still catches in Marin's throat. More than any of the other trinkets she has cast into her bag, *this* locket.... This was someone's. This mattered.

She closes the locket with a click and puts it back on the pile. She does not give this an apology but rather a prayer, for the owner of the lock of hair and the owner of the locket in tandem. *Let them be okay. Let them be at peace. Let them still know love, wherever they are.* She shuts her eyes as she murmurs the words, resting for several beats before she can bring herself to move on.

She starts to move forward, opening her eyes, and -

She stops dead.

Her heart rattles once more against her chest, this time, finding no escape through her ribs, threatening to leap right out of her throat.

Right in front of her, teeth bared in the loudest of warnings, is a massive shark. Its black eyes, set deep into either side of its head, are fixed directly on her. Marin has seen sharks before, of course, has watched them pass by the Shoal and seen Darya bait them and dance with their young... but never has she seen one and thought the word “monster.”

The shark’s tail swishes lazily from side to side. It is not still but swaying just enough to keep its gills rushing with water. They flare out with the action, and though Marin knows it is just breathing, just keeping itself afloat, it still reads like a threat.

You are stronger than it, Marin tells herself, but she does not know if she can believe. The night no longer feels like her protector; she notices that her coalition of fish followers has vanished. It is just her, and the shark, and the ghosts of the shrine.

I am stronger than you, Marin says, aloud. She forces herself to bare her teeth right back at the shark, forces herself to perform a confidence and a certainty that she can barely even imagine feeling. *I am stronger than you, and I have done no wrong. I have just as much right to this ocean as you.*

Marin stares at the shark.

The shark stares back.

Marin wonders whose fangs are sharper. Marin wonders whose skin would split first. Marin wonders who would take longer to bleed.

Marin tells herself to stop wondering.

Marin stares at the shark.

The shark stares back.

Who are you to disturb the dead? It seems to ask. Marin does not know how much she is imagining and how much the shark is really casting into the water. She has never spoken to the ocean's life before, but it would not be the strangest thing she has encountered. She swallows. She wonders if Nerissa has appointed the shark some kind of guardian to the dead, a protector of the shrine ready to rip and shred any who dared shatter its consecrated bounds.

Don't be foolish, Marin tells herself. *It's Nerissa. She wouldn't harm anyone. She wouldn't distrust anyone.*

The words are at once guilt and reassurance, but Marin forces herself to believe them regardless.

I am stronger than you, Marin repeats. She pulls her lips back even further. Before she can realize fully the stupidity of her choice, she swims closer to the shark. She hopes this will look like an intimidating advance instead of a weak, foolish girl surrendering to her death.

No one's going to die! she chides herself.

Marin stares. Shark stares. Marin. Shark. Marin.

And then

Unbelievably

The shark backs away. Marin makes herself move forward again, reclaim more territory. The shark moves backward faster now; it is no longer just a coincidence. The shark is afraid. Marin grins a wide, terrible smile. She snaps her teeth at the shark. She hisses.

I am stronger than you! she says a fourth time, and with one final glare the shark whips around and retreats into the inky distance.

Marin does not know if it was a “victory,” but it feels good to count it as one. The night settles back around her as if in celebration. She feels something nip at her neck and looks to find the angelfish settling back into its place.

Still, even with the shark retreated, she takes a few moments to scout the darkness before she goes back to scavenging the shrine. Only when she is sure that nothing else is going to emerge does she let herself resume her contemplative circling.

She picks a few more choice coins, another ring, and a handful of ivory carvings that are unique enough to fetch a price but not enough to fetch undue attention. With one final apology and one final *thank you* to the ghosts of the shrine, Marin ties off her sack and begins the journey to the Surface.

The swollen moon is lower in the sky than Marin would have liked by the time she reaches shore and breaks the top half of her head above the water. Still, for a quick trip up to her parents’ home and back, she is sure she will have ample time to return to the Shoal before anyone can notice she is gone. She throws the sack up onto the shore and closes her eyes.

To say the Change is easier this time would be the same as saying an amputation or a stab wound is less painful the second time around. Marin knows the feeling to search for. She knows now what Fen meant by “be human,” and it is not the summoning of emotions or the conviction or the catalyst to the Change that makes it difficult. It is that, no matter how vividly the agony is seared into her memory, it still does not prepare her for the first scars of shooting pain that race through her. At the last moment, she remembers to push her head above the water just as her gills dissolve into her skin. She gasps in and shoves herself onto shore.

Once safely out of the range of the tides, she collapses onto her back. For a few moments, she stares at the sky and just breathes. The clouds are thick and black tonight. The moon swims in and out of view, and every now and then a star breaches through.

When the breath of fresh night air in her lungs has lost its novelty, Marin staggers to her feet. She slips into the dress and fumbles with the laces before giving up and tying a crude knot. She needs the dress to stay on her body, not to make her look fancy. She reties the sack full of treasures around her waist and heads out to town.

The difficult part arrives when she reaches her house. Marin needs to plant the trinkets somewhere her parents will be sure to find them, but she also needs to make sure that they pick them up, that they realize they are not just lost belongings but gifts. Marin wishes she could write, could leave some kind of message or hint or anything. She settles on making the gift as elaborate as she can. She gathers some moss from the nearby trees and empties the sack on top of it. She stacks the heavier gifts on top of the smaller ones and then frames the whole pile with a ring of rocks and knotted grass.

This is for Cora, she thinks as she molds the display. This is for Cora for you to find, for you to sell, for you to help. This is for Cora, to save her.

She doesn't know how much she believes in the power of intention, but thinking the words solidifies the fact that, yes, finally, she is doing something. This is more than Malachi the Sailor could ever have hoped to provide.

Marin steps back and admires her design. It is no artistic masterpiece, but it is impossible to miss. She backs away into the trees on the eastern side of her house. When she is almost completely hidden, she takes a fistful of rocks and throws them at the window. She does this

once, twice, three times, until there is no way that the house has gone unawakened in the clatter. As soon as she sees the knob of the door begin to creak open, she sprints with all of her might through the trees and into the town. Her body screams for her to stop, feet throbbing with every step, but Marin shoves the pain aside roughly. She does not have time to groan and cry.

“Hello?” she hears the faintest of calls echo behind her. “Who’s there? Who’s -“

She is too far gone to hear the rest. She shimmies out of Fen’s dress and tosses it into the ocean the minute her feet hit the sand. The water seems to open up before her. She dives in head-first and screams back into the body that is now her own. When she reaches the Shoal, she slips back into the cave undetected. Before sleep claims her, she thinks dimly that this was easy, too easy.

So impossibly easy, in fact, that she knows she will do it again.

Nineteen

Marin spends each day exploring wrecks with Bronwen and helping Nerissa with the food and racing with Darya. In between and swimming all throughout is Fen, Fen, Fen - passing her food at breakfast and chatting with her amongst the strewn wood of sunken ships and sometimes, beautiful sometimes, touching her hair and her face and her tail with her small, lithe fingers. Marin wonders when the charm of being the new girl will wear off and Fen will grow bored with her. The moment will come, she knows, and then Fen will treat her the way she treats the others, which is kind and gentle but has no spark to make a heart race.

At night, she and Fen sleep away from the others. She is not quite sure how this strange tradition started, if it was she and Fen who started drifting away or if it was the others who noticed their closeness and edged back to give them privacy. Regardless, they curl up at the back of the Cave and wind so close together that some nights Marin wakes up with Fen's hair tickling her nose, or with the other girl's arm thrown over her shoulders. The proximity is thrilling, but it makes it all the more difficult to sneak out, which she does, twice a week like clockwork.

She does not take as much from Nerissa's shrine as she did the first time. Marin has never been good at estimating value, but she knows that the stock she brought her family that first night she snuck up to Land is worth more than her father brought home for the first few years of her childhood. She takes one, sometimes two items, worried that the more trips she makes the more likely it is that Nerissa will notice their absence. Each night she leaves her treasure on her parents' doorstep in her own kind of shrine. There is never anything left the next time she visits. After the first night, she doesn't let herself peek in the window, even for just a moment. She is too afraid of Cora waking up. Or, perhaps, one day her father will be wondering who keeps

leaving gifts for the family, and will have stationed himself by the window in order to catch a glimpse.

Or, perhaps, she is too afraid that she will look in the window and see the exact same thing she saw the first night: Cora, asleep, shivering, dying. Alone. Unhelped.

This is the thought that comes to her one night, almost a month after her first venture. It gnaws at her as she twines through the cobblestone back streets through the town. It worms her way into her thoughts like gravel pebbles getting caught between her bare toes. It eats her from the inside out until, when she finally arrives, there is only one thing she can do.

Marin's breath fogs up the thick glass of the window as she peers down at Cora's sleeping form. Her heart squeezes tightly at what she might find.

It is a cool night, but the stove is glowing with warmth, which means that the Carraways could afford to keep the stove lit, which means that things are finally getting better. Marin feels proud embers light inside her own stomach. Finally, she has done something right, has helped instead of hindered.

Even Cora looks better, though it could just be the thickness of the glass or it could just be Marin's hope bubbling over her imagination, but it seems as if her cheeks are no longer as sunken, and her skin is not waxy but rosy with health. Her breathing is even; her chest rises and falls under the sheets without labor.

"I miss you," Marin mouths silently. She feels the tug in her chest that she has come to associate with the mermaids' pathetic approximation of crying, and she presses her fingers against the glass until her palm is flat and sweating. "I miss you, I miss you, I miss you."

Cora twitches in her sleep. Marin pretends it is in response.

“I wish I could spend a day with you. Or an hour, I’d take an hour. I could tell you what it’s like, living under the sea, and we could make believe that none of it ever happened.”

Cora’s foot kicks out. Her arm shifts against the straw mattress. Marin wonders what she is dreaming.

“Oh, Cor. It would make the best fairytale. You would love it.”

Cora kicks again, and again, and again, and then she opens her mouth wide to scream but no sound comes out.

“Cora?” Marin asks, but even if she could speak, she doubts that Cora could hear her. “Cora!”

She pounds her fist against first the glass, and then straight against the wall. She wishes she could reach right through and shake Cora out of her nightmares.

She smacks the wall again and again and then stares desperately through the window and
Bright blue eyes meet her own staring curious needing needing needing

Cora opens her mouth to scream. Marin shakes her head frantically and Cora cuts herself off at the last minute, clapping her small pale hands over her mouth. Her eyes stay staring, wide and unblinking. Her fingers slowly unpeel themselves from her lips.

“Marin?” her lips mouth. Marin nods.

“Marin!” she exclaims, and then quickly looks around to see if anyone had overheard. She meets Marin’s eyes one more time and then her head vanishes from the window. Marin strains on tiptoe to see in and catches only a glimpse of the door banging shut.

And then something small and warm cannonballs itself against Marin’s waist in a crushing hug. Cora’s spindly arms retract almost immediately as she blinks up at her older sister.

“God, you’re soaking wet!”

A second later, she seems to decide not to care, and reattaches herself. Her face buries into Marin’s chest, her arms squeezing so tightly that if Cora were any larger she could cut off Marin’s very breath. Marin hugs her back. She knows she shouldn’t. She knows she is breaking Fen’s Most Important Rule but then her hands stroke through Cora’s beautiful hair and press into her back which is no longer skin and bone, still small but soft and all Cora Cora Cora is all she can think.

“I missed you,” she mouths, though no sound comes out. The words are rendered unnecessary, though, when moments after Cora mumbles into Fen’s dress,

“I missed you. I missed you, Marin, I missed you, I missed you. Marin, Marin, Marin -“ she breaks off and her grip loosens slightly. “Are you... are you really here?”

Marin nods.

“Yes,” she mouths, trying to make the word as slow and clear as possible on her lips. “I’m here.”

“Your voice -?”

Marin shakes her head “no,” and then realizes how hopelessly inadequate that explanation is. She can barely tell Cora one-word answers. Explaining the impossibility of her situation - her running away and finding the *Harbinger* and the storm and her death and Yara and Rialta and Fen - not even to mention asking Cora to believe it all... it is all Marin can do to shake her head again and grope at her own throat in frustration.

It’s not like you can stay anyway, a small voice at the back of her mind reminds her. *What does it matter if she understands? You knew this was only a temporary fix.*

“I thought... some nights,” Cora whispers, “in the fever... I thought that I had imagined you. Sometimes it seemed like you never had existed. I couldn’t remember your face, or what you looked like. I thought I was so lonely and sick and that I had just made up a sister to take care of me, like how some kids in the village have their own imaginary friends. And then other nights... I could see you so clearly in my mind that it was like you never had left. No, not even in my mind - I would see you, really see you, like you were there! Mum would come in and I would see you standing behind her - and I would call out to you, I would scream and shake and try to get your attention - but you never answered. That’s when I knew you were a ghost. You are, aren’t you, Mar?” Cora looks up at her and she is unafraid. “You’re dead.”

It is not quite the truth, Marin’s ghostliness, but it tastes enough like honesty that Marin lets Cora swallow it. Marin nods.

“That means you’re not coming back for good, doesn’t it?”

Another nod.

“I miss you, Mar. I miss you so, so, so much.”

“I love you, Cora,” Marin mouths, and this time Cora catches the words. She squeezes Marin again around the waist.

“I love you, too.” She chews her lip, small white teeth puncturing pink. Then the words fling themselves out, “Can you stay tonight? Just tonight.” When Marin hesitates, Cora adds, “I know you can’t stay forever, I know that. But please? Just for a little while, just this once?”

To say that the word “no” never crosses Marin’s mind would be a lie. It crosses, and stomps, and marks its path so roughly that Marin’s head pounds with the weight of it. But from

the moment the question leaves Cora's lips, Marin knows what her answer will be, Fen be damned. The Shoal might be her home now, but Cora is her sister, and that is an always-fact.

“Yes,” Marin kisses into Cora's forehead. “Yes, I will. Tonight.”

“You'll come inside, won't you? Can you?”

Marin shakes her head, then pauses, seeing the way her breath fogs up in the chill air. It can't be good for Cora's health to stay out in the cold. She looks so warm, so alive, but if Marin knows anything it is that the glow in Cora's cheeks is a fragile thing.

“Okay.”

Cora takes her hand and leads her inside.

“Oh, Mar, you're dripping!” she exclaims, when Marin's muddy feet cross the threshold. Cora stops her in her tracks. “Here, we can dry your dress on the stove - do you see the stove? Father just replaced it. It's wonderful, it's so warm and cozy and if you feed it right it can go for hours on end!”

Marin pauses, unsure how to articulate that she has no other clothing, but then Cora pads over to her bed and shyly slips something out from under her pillow. She shakes it out and Marin sees that it is her old nightshift.

“Mum packed away most of your clothes when you - when you left,” Cora says, blushing and not meeting Marin's eyes. “She said she was saving them for when you got back, but I think it just made her sad to look at them. It's hard for them, I think, to be parents of a dead -“ Cora cuts herself off and swallows before continuing, “But I stole this back before she could hide it. I wanted... I wanted to remember what you smelled like,” Cora finishes in a jumble so quiet that it takes Marin a few seconds to untangle the letters. Not for the first time, Marin is taken by a pang

of guilt. Yes, she had helped them in her death, in ways no one could have anticipated. But there was no way for her parents to know that when they woke up to a half-empty bed where another daughter had once lain.

There was so little evidence of where she had gone that her parents assumed her dead. Her mother had packed away her clothes because it was too painful to remember. That was the legacy she had left: nothing but trauma worthy only of being hidden.

She wants almost to take it back.

Just for a day, a night, a single wish-moment, she thinks about the “what-ifs.” She imagines waking up the next morning in bed with Cora. She imagines the feel of the wooden spoon against her hand and the heat in her face as she stirs a pot of porridge - hot porridge! So different from fish - over the stove. She imagines, and it is easy and sweet as summer berries. She imagines, and she wants. And then she shakes her head to clear it and drops Fen’s dress to the ground with a wet *thunk*.

“Eeeew,” Cora says, wrinkling her nose as she trades Marin her old nightshift. “Are ghosts always so... soggy?”

Marin laughs until her body shakes. “No,” she shakes her head as she wheezes. “No, we’re not.”

“There,” Cora says, laying Fen’s dress over the stove. “It’ll dry.”

Cora does not question why ghosts need clothes, or how Marin got to be that way, or anything about the past. Instead, she says, with confidence and not a single blink,

“It’s you who’s leaving the gifts for us.”

“Yes.” Marin slips on the nightshift. It is the first time dry fabric has touched her skin in months. She almost shivers at the sensation. It feels so light, so warm, so... free.

“I knew it!” Cora spins around and around in an excited dance. “I knew it was you. Mum and Father thought it was someone playing a trick at first. They weren’t going to take the ring or the locket or any of it, but I told them that it was a sign from you. I told them you were taking care of me, and they listened.”

“Course,” Cora continues with a grin, “I don’t know if they *really* believed me or if they thought the fever had gotten to my brain and they wanted to hush me up. But still. Oh, Marin... can you see how much better things are?”

Marin steals a glance at her parents’ door, pauses a moment to listen for her parents’ breathing. It sounds even and still indicative of sleep, but she does not want to let herself relax so much into Cora’s warmth that she lets down her guard completely. She is a ghost. She is not supposed to be seen.

“I can,” she mouths in response to Cora at last.

“Thanks to you,” Cora says, taking her hand again and leading her to the bed. She lays back onto it and curls against Marin, a mirror of the exact way she did when Marin was still alive. “Father hired someone to fix the roof, and we got new windows in Mum’s room... and a new quilt for me! Do you see?”

Cora rubs it against Marin’s palm. Underneath, Marin can see her grandmother’s threadbare quilt poking through. Cora is good at holding onto things, she knows. She is good at remembering.

“It’s beautiful,” Marin mouths. “And warm.”

“Very warm,” Cora affirms, nodding proudly. “We even had meat the other night, in a stew. I got to go with Mum to the butcher’s, even though it’s winter and cold and almost all the cows have been slaughtered. We got to look -“

And this is how Cora chatters through the night. Her high, soft voice curls up against Marin’s ear like a lullaby. She has grown old, Marin thinks, watching carefully as Cora prattles on. She is... what? Eleven? Twelve? Marin cannot remember. Has she missed Cora’s birthday? Marin pushes aside the guilt. She traces the line of Cora’s face with her gaze. Her cheeks are no longer gaunt, but neither are they full and childish anymore. The only part of her that remains unchanged are her eyes, still wide, still searching always for something more.

Stay like that, Marin wants to tell her. Whatever you do, stay searching.

“And then, a week ago, we -” Cora breaks off. “Marin?”

Marin had shuddered as a spasm of pain ripped through her legs. She shakes her head and mouths “it’s fine,” but halfway through the motion the burning sensation slices through her again and she gasps for breath. Cora’s eyes widen with concern, glinting in the dim rays of dawn only just beginning to creep their way over the horizon.

No, Marin thinks. No, no, oh no.

Dawn.

She doesn’t know how many hours it’s been since she got to Cora, but as she doubles over once again as invisible knives pierce her feet, she knows that it’s been too many. She’s Changing back, whether she likes it or not, and the water is half a mile away.

“I have to go!” she says, the words dangling pitifully unvoiced in the air. “I have to go, I have to go!”

She jumps up and spearheads thrust into her heels. She teeters dangerously but remains upright.

“Marin?” Cora asks.

“I love you, Cora. Remember that. I’ll see you soon, but I have to go - I love you!” Marin mouths over her shoulder as she starts to run, banging through the door and down the gravel path. Cora blinks in her wake. Marin doesn’t know if she can read her lips, but she keeps mouthing “I love you,” over and over, until the houses become too dense and she is forced to look forward in danger of running face-first into brick.

As she approaches the middle of Harwich, legs pricking, feet searing, Marin is forced to make a decision: to skirt the edge of the town as she usually does, or to cut straight through to the docks. The latter is the quickest way to the water, but is also infinitely more risky. The sailors will already be beginning their morning’s work, she knows, and though the only shipmen she truly got to know were those who sank on the *Harbinger*, the fear of being recognized still plunges like ice into her stomach.

But now the pains are so frequent that she is incapable of standing on one foot for too long, her swift and panicked run turning more into a series of leaps from foot-to-foot to keep from crying out in agony. Marin knows that she can’t have long before she Changes completely, and the time that it would take to circumnavigate the town would almost certainly be too much.

She makes the choice at the last minute and barrels down the main cobblestone road that will take her to the docks. She prays that whatever sailors there are will be too busy tending the ships to notice.

Marin feels something trickle down her leg. She glances down and sees a tiny stream of blood trailing out of the hem of her skirt. The stream widens, and then, on the top of her foot, she sees something sharp and shiny poking through: a scale.

No, no, no, no - Marin swings her legs faster and faster, gritting her teeth so hard against the pain that she is surprised they do not crack. She hurtles down the docks, her feet kissing the harsh wood.

“Mal?”

Her feet stutter in response. Her heart clatters against her chest, screaming against the harsh bone bars of her ribcage. She knows she shouldn't stop. She knows she is mere minutes, seconds away from Changing, but that voice... that voice should be impossible.

And even though every instinct is telling her to keep going, Marin turns.

Eric.

He is supposed to be dead. But there he is, plain as the breaking dawn, dark brows scrunched together in confusion and mouth shaped with surprise.

“It's not possible...” he whispers.

It is all Marin can do to keep breathing.

“You... you...” Eric's eyes rove over Marin's body, and Marin's heart *THUMP THUMP THUMPS* in her chest, knowing what he must be seeing: hair matted with seasalt, dress limp and torn, blood now streaming down her legs, and, piercing through her skin -

Her neck sears with agony and she finds herself trying to scream. Her hand whips up to her neck and she feels spines shuddering to the surface. The air filling her lungs becomes thicker

and thicker and Eric is staring at her and *THUMP THUMP THUMP* she needs to get to the water now and -

She whips away from Eric, tearing her dress away from her body. She knows she is naked but there is no time for her to care as she races to the end of the dock. She flings herself off just as the air becomes unbreathable.

Twenty

When she gets back to the Shoal, she finds that she is not the only one awake.

Where in the hell were you? Fen snaps at her the moment Marin is in earshot. *I*

was...

There is a pause, a long, painful pause in which Marin considers all the lies she could tell Fen and all the universes in which they both could pretend this never happened and all the ways this could go back to normal. There is a pause, a long, painful pause in which Marin looks at Fen's face, even contorted as it is with hurt and anger, and Marin knows that she cannot lie to her. Marin swallows and deliberately breaks Fen's gaze before confessing,

I was with Cora.

Fen's mind falls so quiet that Marin swears she can hear the currents.

... you were where? Fen asks, after an eternity.

I was on Land. With Cora.

You mean to say you were watching Cora, right? Fen prompts, and again, Marin can taste the lie in her throat, saccharine and so, so easy.

No, Marin answers quietly. *I mean to say I was with her. Talking with her... or, I suppose, listening mostly.*

Fen's teeth clench and her lips part and Marin wonders if it is intentionally a snarl. Her hair seems to flare out around her face, and Marin has never before realized that something so delicate could also be menacing.

What did I tell you? Fen growls, her normally musical voice low and dangerous, thrumming with power. *What is the one rule that I told you can - not - be - broken?*

Something inside of Marin snaps and she rips her lips back to bare her fangs at Fen. *She's my sister!*

She was your sister! You're one of us now and being one of us means that above all else you do not let yourself be seen. Fen makes a wordless shriek. *Dammit, Marin! Do you think I liked this, showing you how to be human? Do you think I liked watching how much you wanted to leave us? I taught you because I trusted you and because I - I wanted you to be happy and I thought that you were smart enough not to fuck that up!*

'Fuck that up'? Marin asks, her voice rising. *My sister was dying the last time I spoke to her, Fen. And I was just supposed to forget about her because I have - what? Some gills and two fewer legs? Well I'm glad that's enough to make you happy, but some of us want more than that.*

Fen reels back as if Marin had slapped her. The space between them is thick, charged, crackling and too too too much. Marin wants to condense it. She wants to absorb everything that lingers. She wants to swallow it back and swallow Fen into her arms.

Fine. Fen says coolly. Her hair no longer flares out around her like a halo, instead tangling limp and flat around her neck. *You're right. We all have different things that make us happy.*

Fen - Marin starts, but Fen interrupts, Where's the dress?

What?

The dress. That I gave you to use on Land. Fen's jaw is tense. *Fabric doesn't tend to hold up very long down here, as I'm sure you've noticed, so we tend to keep a firm grip on what we find.*

It's gone. I left it on the docks. Marin pauses, then adds as an afterthought, *Sorry.*

Fen goes dangerously still.

Why were you on the docks?

It was faster, Marin says, though the bite of defense has drained out of her voice. I was talking with Cora - Gods, Fen, it felt so good, too good, if only you understood - I was talking with her, and then it was dawn, and I was Changing back. I didn't have time to go around town, I would have suffocated, so I figured that if I went fast enough no one would see me and it would be fine -

Was it? Fen cut in.

I -

Marin's heart pounds against her chest so fiercely that she is surprised Fen cannot hear it.

Truth or lie truth or lie truth or lie or truth or -

Sort of. I was seen by... by one of the men from the ship that I was - was on.

Fen's gills shudder as she inhales sharply. *The Harbinger? But they all died.*

That's what I thought, but then - then I was on the docks and I was Changing and I ripped the dress and I wasn't thinking and - Eric stopped me. He called me 'Mal' - that's what I went by, on the ship -

No.

I think he thought I was a ghost, that I wasn't real - Fen, it probably -

No.

Fen -

Your sister is one thing. She's - what? Eleven. Twelve. But I can't believe that you would let yourself be seen by a man.

Why is it that much worse? Marin pleads. What is one more person who believes the myth, who thinks they've seen a phantom woman? What does it matter?

You do realize how many of us got here, right? Fen hisses at her. Her eyes are so bright with wild energy that Marin almost flinches. Because 'one more person' - one more human - decided that the world would be better off without us. Do you think that sentiment went away when we died? Do you think that if they realize we are still around - and, more than that, that we are now better, stronger than they are... Marin, do you think that he would hesitate to kill you again if he got the chance?

Yes, Marin wants to say. Yes, Eric would hesitate. Yes, Eric would not kill her. He wasn't the murderer on the ship. He was her friend, the only person who had actually valued her as a person and not just another stupid little boy looking for an adventure he would never find.

He's different, Marin tells Fen. Eric is different than the rest of them, I swear.

And even as she says this, her brain prickles with doubt. He didn't stop them, a small voice inside of her whispers insidiously. He tied you up and bound you without a second thought. He'd do it again if Dillon commanded. He only cared about Mal the boy. Why would he spare any feelings for Marin the traitor who almost had them drowned?

Fen, she says aloud. Fen shakes her head. Her hands clench and unclench, forming and then breaking fists over and over and over in a pulsing rhythm.

I think, Fen says, her teeth grinding together, fangs pointing out, I think that I need to be alone for a while. I think it would be best if we didn't speak.

Marin reaches out for her, but Fen has already whirled away. She kicks off into the distance. Her tail leaves a current in her wake that shoves Marin backwards so hard she feels her heart clench.

No, Marin thinks, she was not gasping for breath before, back up on the docks as her gills screeched their way through her skin.

This, watching Fen's blonde hair stream beside her, gentle fingers twisted into fists.... *This*, Marin knows, is what it really feels like to suffocate.

That night, when they gather around the Clearing to hear the story of Yara, Fen skirts as far around Marin as possible. She settles between Vanora and Bronwen and crosses her arms over her chest. She will not meet Marin's eyes. The distance between them is loud. It seems to scream across the space that everything is wrong. Bronwen's eyes flicker between Fen and Marin and back again. She frowns, but does not say anything. If Rialta notices anything different, she too does not comment before taking her position and beginning.

Yara

The first hours of isolation were spent in self-deprecating anger. When servants knocked at her door to call her down and out, she pounded her fists back until they bled. She wanted to scream., so she did. No one could hear it.

The next hour she cried, and when she discovered that this new water tasted like salt - like home like the world she would never go back to - she cried more. She did not think. She did not let herself think.

As the rays of morning peered in through her window, her tears had dried.

This is what you wanted, she convinced herself. You have your body and your strength. It is different, yes, but not gone.

And, the voice of conviction she forced to be her own added, you have Adam. He wants you. Perhaps he loves you, or he will, and one day you might yet be Queen.

Hours later, when the servants came again to draw her out to breakfast, Yara molded herself to the human she was. She scrubbed the tears from her cheeks with her palm and pressed her lips into a ripped-open smile. She put on a mask, painted layer and layer, until at last she opened the door.

She bowed her head in mock-embarrassment to the servants when they chided her for missing dinner. Their chastisements were only echoes. They had no real power, and everyone in the room was burning aware.

At breakfast, the prince greeted her with a smile and a kiss on the back of her palm that pressed too hard and left her too dizzy.

“We missed your presence last night,” he whispered to her as he pulled out her chair. “I hope you are doing well.”

Yara bowed her head in an approximation of a curtsy. “Yes,” she mouthed. “Very well.”

When she looked up, she saw the King and Queen exchanging a dark glance. Something inside of her warmed with pride at this; if they had thought she was harmless, they would not be afraid of her. They saw the way Prince Adam saw her. The idea of a mute stranger taking on the throne was terrifying to them, Yara thought, and this only made her more determined. She did not need her magic to take power.

The days of mortality blurred into weeks, and the weeks sang on. Yara was happy, or she had managed to convince herself that she was happy, or she was too distracted to discern the truth. Each day, she had decided, was a game, another chance to fan the flames of the prince’s affections. Each day was another chance to prove to the King and Queen that they had something to fear. This was just what she had wanted, wasn’t it? A challenge? A risk?

One night, when the moon was near full and pooled in through her window, there came a knock at Yara’s door.

She didn’t move to get it, at first. It was late, or early, depending on who you were. It seemed unlikely that it was something that couldn’t wait until morning. She stared up and traced the patterns woven into the canopy above her.

Rap rap rap.

This time the sound was accompanied by a word:

“Rose?”

Adam.

Yara slipped from beneath her covers and padded across the woven carpets to her door. She paused a moment, wondering whether it would be more enticing for her to remain in her thin nightgown or to don a light robe. Neither was particularly modest. She settled with the nightgown, satisfied with the way it hung and swayed around her breasts, the way the moonlight peeked almost all the way through.

“Rose?” Adam’s voice came again, and Yara opened the door. She blinked up at him through her eyelids and rubbed a bleary fist in her eye for good measure. She feigned a yawn.

“I’m sorry to disturb you - I know it’s late - but I needed to see you.”

Yara opened the door the slightest bit. She knew how to play this game. Humans were good at faking and she was good at being human. Eager but timid. Come-hither but not-too-close.

“I know it’s not proper, but... Rose, can I come in?”

Yara opened the door a bit further, and then further, and finally, as if it were some great task, she let him in.

“Thank you,” Adam said. Yara stepped backwards until the backs of her thighs connected with her bed. She clasped her fingers behind her and raised her eyebrows in her best nonverbal question.

“You looked radiant tonight at dinner. I couldn’t take my eyes off of you.”

Yara knew this. He had stared so much he had even made the porcelain servants uncomfortable. The gown she wore was midnight blue. It made her skin seem so light as to be translucent, her hair like to a moonbeam, or so she imagined he would describe it to be. And her breasts... well. Adam was a good prince, a proper prince, not at all like the dead bloody men of his court, but she still caught him running the tip of his tongue over his lips at the sight of her.

“Thank you,” she mouthed at him. “I dressed for you, you know.”

From the vacancy of his eyes as he watched her lips, Yara knew that he would not have even understood her words had they been the focus. But that did not matter. She knew what happened next in this dance. She had practiced the steps alone.

Sure enough, Adam walked closer. He was not hesitant, but neither was he too bold.

A good prince.

A proper prince.

When his lips met hers, Yara told herself that she feigned the moment of give, the moment in which her body collided with his without any taut inhibitions. She told herself that she was in control of the moment when she let herself be pushed onto the bed, let his hands wander over her nightdress and then over her body. She told herself the sighs that escaped her lips were manufactured, carefully constructed, each pitch chosen, not wrenched from her lips at his hands his hands his fingers her body open and singing

When he touched her the stars danced

When he touched her it did not feel like magic but

When he touched her she forgot what magic was and why she had ever thought she needed it.

That night, when he left her and her breath took half an hour to return to her body, she did not think of the crown. She did not think of anything at all.

In the morning, the prince showed only the smallest of signs that he remembered what had passed. He spoke to her as much as usual, glanced at her lips only when he thought Yara wasn't looking, and when their hands met accidentally on the table, he did not blush before pulling

away. But there was something lingered, made each instance alive and glimmering, a promise that he knew what had happened and it would happen again and again and again.

And somehow, the King knew, too.

He did not speak to Yara at all that morning, though that was nothing new. His Royal Highness rarely graced her with his attention, if not to stare and glare. But neither did he speak to his son, and when his lips parted to his wife, the words that came out were clipped and terse.

“Wait,” the King said, when the plates had been cleared and Adam had risen from the table. “Stay. We need to talk.”

“Alright,” Adam said, and his tone was air, was flight, was in consequence feigned so perfectly Yara could almost miss the seams.

“In my study,” the King added. A game played out in the distance between them.

“Alright,” Adam said again.

“Alone.”

“I shall meet you in half an hour, if that please Your Grace.”

“It does.”

“Good.”

Yara excused herself. No one noted her exit.

She knew how to make her steps fall so they would not echo. The King’s study was tucked away in the far corners of the palace. Its location was supposed to be a secret to her, the stranger, the intruder. That had only made it easier for her to find. She slipped inside and not a soul had seen.

There was a window on the far side of the room whose curtains were almost never drawn aside. The King liked his privacy, his darkness, his control. Yara burrowed her way into the curtains. She knelt on the ledge, letting the fabric settle back in front of her, and she waited.

The door opened and slammed. Yara sucked in her limbs and held her breath as the curtains fluttered with the sudden breeze.

“Sit,” the King said.

There was a pause in which Yara assumed the Prince sat.

“The girl.”

Yara bit down on her lip. She had assumed, of course, that this was about her, but to hear it out loud was different. Having the King definitively working against her put a damper on her plans, to be sure.

“What about her?”

“She likes you.”

The Prince sniffed. “Of course she does. I’m a prince. She could be a peasant, for all we know.”

“I’m glad you remember that.”

A pause. Yara’s body started to tremble and shake. The effort of holding a still position for so long, of course. She clenched her arms tighter around her legs.

“May I ask what the problem is, then?” the Prince asked.

“I’m starting to worry that you like her, too. You’ve been with her.”

Yes, Yara wanted to say. Yes, he has, and he does. How could he resist?

“I’ve been with her, yes. Once. But where’s the harm? She’s a mute. She couldn’t tell anyone even if she wanted. No one will know.”

Yara’s knee trembled so hard it hit the curtain. She waited for the uproar, but neither the King nor the Prince had noticed.

“Of course they won’t. Because you’re going to tell her the truth, and you’re going to make sure that nothing - not a word, nor letter, nor... hell, a drawing in the sand - gets loose. Once she knows - once the wedding is over and we have proved that we upheld our end of the bargain - well. Keep her on as your concubine, I don’t care, but make sure she is aware of the situation or I will have her removed. I don’t want some girl ruining everything we have worked so hard to build. Do you understand?”

Beat

Beat

Heart Beat

“Yes, Father. I understand.”

Two pairs of footsteps strode to the door. It opened. It closed.

Yara screamed and no one heard.

At lunch, she pretended nothing had occurred. She smiled at Prince Adam’s conversation, sipped her wine with precision formality, and took his arm when he proposed again their daily stroll through the gardens.

When they paused at the rose bush, the blood bush, the bush of her namesake, Yara pretended surprise.

“I am afraid that I may not have been entirely forward with you.”

You seemed forward enough last night, Yara wanted to tell him. Instead she was perfect. Instead she raised her eyebrows and shook her head in pantomime misunderstanding.

“I am afraid that I may have lead you to believe that there was something more than... companionship... that was occurring between us.”

More than companionship that trickled down my thigh; more than companionship that made you bray like a donkey with desire, Yara wanted to hiss. But instead she was perfect.

“I am afraid that I may have lead you to believe,” the Prince continued, “that I had romantic intentions. In truth, I am betrothed to another, a young woman in line for the throne of her own kingdom.”

A marriage of convenience. A falsehood.

“It is a marriage that benefits all. My father gets to make a powerful alliance, which I will inherit in time. The kingdom gets a favorable trading partner. And I... I get to wed the woman I love.”

It was a small wonder that the earth did not crack open and swallow Yara whole. Everything was too loud, too bright; everything was extra. She cursed the sun and the absent clouds. She could hear the birds in the trees and wanted to strangle them. She wanted to snap their throats or, more, to have her magic back, to bind their bodies to the branches and listen to their cries. She wanted to break something. She wanted to break.

Yara ground her teeth together. She nodded civilly. She nodded like a queen.

“Her name is Victoria. She is the most exquisite woman I have ever met. Her hair is as dark as night, and her voice - her voice is like a warm fire. When she sings, you wish you too could go

up in flames. You will understand when you meet her why I fell in love. You will meet her, of course, if you choose to stay.”

Nails dug into fists. Skin ripped open into drops of blood. Yara only regretted that it was her own and not that of the boy in front of her who claimed manhood or the girl whose name meant she had already won.

“I would like it if you stayed. I think you are quite beautiful. I find you fascinating, and you have... certain charms...” Prince Adam cleared his throat. In Yara’s mind’s eye, she heard him moan. She felt him squirm on top of her, the way he shuddered when she scraped her fingernails down his back. That was the blood she longed to draw again again again.

“No one could know, of course. A handful of confidantes, if need be. My parents. Your handmaidens - you’d get to keep one, or two, if you’d like.”

Victoria? Would Victoria know? Would she hear tell of the sounds that echoed in your throat that formed into my name?

“Victoria, of course, would know,” Adam added, as if he had heard. Yara hoped he had heard. “Wouldn’t want a nasty little confrontation to occur should I attempt to hide you from her, and should you be discovered. Perhaps we’d even be able to have... relations... between the three of us. That would be quite exciting, don’t you think?”

He did not give space for Yara to reply.

“You’d have to move to smaller quarters. Close to where the servants live, I imagine.

“We’d stop our walks, of course. We likely wouldn’t communicate outside of, well, if you forgive my crudity, your bedchamber. It wouldn’t be proper, after all, for the crown Prince to be seen with a whore. Forgive me,” Adam amended, “but it is the common parlance.”

Yara fought to keep her lip from curling up in a snarl. Her teeth still retained a semblance of point and prick. She hoped he had noticed. *Seen with a whore.*

“I know it’s not ideal. It’s probably not what you envisioned in the slightest. But I imagine you’ll say yes. Won’t you, pet?” Adam smiled at her, danger, no softness. “It has to be better than whatever you were fleeing. You didn’t come from anywhere important. Don’t think that we hadn’t noticed that. No one has come looking for you. You haven’t asked to go back. I don’t even think you can read, or write, or communicate at all.”

Yara swallowed back venom.

“So? What say you? Maybe not the title of Queen, but still... consort to a King. Many would die to have such an honor.”

And this was the way it ended, Yara thought. It was not the loss of her powers. It was not a trade with a price too steep. No, it was the transformation that she had no control over; it was the Once-Would-Be-Queen turned Prince’s Whore.

You should have stayed in the water, a voice whispered. You should have recognized that risks come with more than just rewards.

“Rose? Forgive me. But, truly, I would like for you to stay.”

The game had not stopped for her folly. Adam was still waiting for her response.

One

Two

Three

Yara swallowed back venom. Rose put on a smile and nodded.

“Of course,” she simpered silently.

“Wonderful!” Adam replied, clapping his hands together. “I am very glad you settled on this conclusion. It makes things so much simpler, don’t you agree?”

Smile, nod. *Yes, Adam. Of course, Adam.* Smile, nod, play the game.

Twenty-One

The days pass, and still Fen will not speak to Marin. At night, when they curl up in the cave to sleep, Fen curls up with her forehead pressed against the slick wall and ignores every word Marin attempts to throw at her. If Marin reaches out for her, she stiffens; when Marin's fins accidentally brush against Fen's, the latter winces away. Eventually, Marin migrates to sleep by Darya, who thrashes and sometimes kicks in her sleep but at least doesn't treat Marin's touch like a disease.

Marin tries to give Fen her space after that. She sits with Nerissa at breakfast, and spends her free hours exploring and raiding wrecks with Bronwen. She does not go back on Land. She tries not to miss her legs. She tells herself that this is just as much life as it was before.

Yet sometimes her mind wanders, and she finds herself spending hours ruminating on the way Fen's nose crinkles when she laughs, how the freckles splashed across her face seem to shiver. Fen doesn't laugh anymore, or, if she does, she doesn't let Marin see. Marin misses the glint of her sparkle white teeth, the smiles that shone so much differently than the snarls that Fen aims at her now.

If you're going to mope, you should at least do something productive with it.

It is just after breakfast, the sixth day since Marin's last trip to Land, the fifth day of stomach-piercing silence between her and Fen. Darya comes gliding over to where Marin is slumped with her head in her hands and a scowl strewn across her face.

Who says I'm moping? Marin snaps. Darya just grins at her. It is different than Fen's, less giddy and innocent, more cutting and sly.

Bronwen. Darya's shark tail flicks from side to side. She says that the last wreck you visited, you smashed every other vase you saw, and then claimed it was already broken when you found it.

Well, Bronwen's a liar, Marin answers flatly. And besides, most of the vases were too cracked to be useful anyway.

Whatever you say, Darya says, still smirking. But I think you're spending too much time dwelling. Fen's been around for a while. She'll get over it eventually - everyone gets over everything when you have eternity. All you can do right now is make the wait more...

She rolls over in the water and winks at Marin.

... interesting.

Interesting... how?

Darya taps her fingers on her mouth as if pondering. It is an overdramatic mime show, but Darya overdoes it so much that it is almost endearing. She is nothing like Cora in any way but her young age, but deep inside Marin's chest she feels the same stirrings of protectiveness towards her.

What do you know about Siren legends? Darya asks, after she has drawn out the moment of false-thought as long as possible. *Not our lore, not our truths. The legends that humans tell.*

Only the stories my mother used to tell me, Marin answers, after a moment of thought. *They were usually of sailors, lost at sea, dreaming of beautiful women who drew them to their deaths. Things like that.*

And do you know how the women killed the sailors? Darya presses.

They... they sang, didn't they?

They sang. Darya's smile widens, and suddenly it is not just her tail that is reminiscent of a shark. There is something too predator about the gleam in her eye. *Tell me, Marrrrrrrin.* She draws out Marin's name into a noise akin to a purr. *Do you sing?*

I don't know. When I was a girl, I suppose I did?

No, no, but have you tried it since you Changed? Since you became a Siren?

No...?

Ohhhh, but don't you want to? Darya glides up close to Marin, so close that her amber eyes loom and appear to pulse, glowing in the light of the phosphorous lamps. *Aren't you curious to try it?*

Marin frowns, and tries to casually push herself backwards. *I haven't really thought about it.*

But you're thinking about it now.

Well, yes, because you -

I can show you. I've done it before. Darya doesn't move back closer to Marin, but her whole body is taut with intensity. It simultaneously terrifies Marin and entrances her. She wants to know this power, this spark that makes sullen Darya shine. *It will distract you, I promise. You won't even think about her.*

Okay, Marin says, before she has time to change her mind.

Eeeek! Hurrah! Darya grabs both of her hands and spins her around. In the blink of an eye she has transformed once again from tempest-born Siren back to the smiling girl who is not Cora but could be. *Oh, thank you, Marin! You'll love it, I promise, you'll love it!*

Okay, Darya.

And Marin finds herself smiling, too.

Darya drops one of Marin's hands and drags her through the water, away from the Shoal.

Where are you going? Rialta calls after them. Marin pauses.

I'm taking Marin to remember what sunlight looks like, Darya says. *Maybe it will stop her from being so gloomy all of the time!*

An unpleasant feeling hums through Marin's gut at the lie, but she shakes it off. Darya and Rialta feud so frequently that Marin doubts Darya ever tells her the truth about anything.

Alright, Rialta says tensely, her eyes narrowing as her gaze travels over Darya and comes to rest on Marin. *Just don't be too long.*

Don't bring along anything fragile, Bronwen teases, overhearing. *You might find it accidentally smashed.*

Very amusing, Marin replies, but her tone is friendly. *I'll be sure to bring you back the shards of anything discover. I'm sure you'll tell me how useful they could have been.*

Please do, Bronwen grins.

And be careful! Rialta shouts, as Darya grabs Marin's hand again and pulls her away.

They swim up and outward, in the direction where Marin knows Harwich lies. When they finally breach the surface, bobbing with their heads just above the water and their gills still nestled safely beneath the waves, Marin is surprised to see how close they are to the shore.

At most, they are just over a few hundred feet from the docks. Marin can make out the sailors climbing the rigging of the anchored ships, the men and young boys scurrying about like rats to finish the morning's work.

Won't we be seen?

Darya shakes her head with a disdainful snort. *By those men? They never look at anything properly. Besides, we want an audience, don't we?*

Don't we? Marin echoes doubtfully.

Marin. It will be fine. What's the worst they can do - see us?

Yes!

And then what?

Marin pauses. For all of Rialta's warnings, for all of Fen's shunning of her, not once had anyone mentioned a single reason why being seen was the be-all-end-all for the Shoal.

Exactly, Darya says, taking Marin's silence as a response. *Nothing. They see us, and they think they're imagining things. They think they had a little too much rum, or they didn't get enough sleep. And then they tell their friends and their wives and their children and we turn into one more legend about the Sirens of the Sea. Where's the danger in that?*

I... I... Marin bites her lip. *I suppose you're right.*

Of course I am. Darya reaches over and takes Marin's hand. Her fingers are so small, they are swallowed in Marin's own. She squeezes tightly. *It's okay. This will be fun, I promise.*

Marin looks away, and Darya squeezes her hand again. *I promise.*

Okay.

And Darya opens her mouth and begins to sing.

And the ocean waves do roll....

At first, Marin does not understand where the sound is coming from. It is louder than the mermaids' typical fashion of speaking. It worms its way into Marin's ear and rattles around inside until Marin's whole head is vibrating with its power.

And the stormy winds do blow...

Marin looks over at Darya and swears she can see the air around her shimmer. Something is pouring out of her mouth, incandescent and almost invisible, less than mist but more than nothing, but that is impossible; Marin has tried to speak, to scream, to shriek and shout since she was transformed, all without success. And yet Marin can *hear* the song, truly hear it. It shivers within her but also without. Somehow, Darya is singing aloud.

And we poor sailors are skipping at the top, while the landlubbers lie down below, below, below. While the landlubbers lie down below....

Darya trails off, her head cocked to the side as if to watch the last effervescent effects of her music dissipate over the water. Her eyes are fixed on the docks with something that Marin almost mistakes for longing.

That's the sailors' song! Marin realizes. *I've heard them chanting it to each other, on the Harbinger. I... I used to chant it with them.*

Of course it is, Darya says. *That's why we're taking it back. Don't you want to own something?*

And the ocean waves do roll... she starts again, and this time Marin raises her voice to join her.

She is not entirely sure how she does it. She holds the words in her mind right before she opens her mouth and then, perhaps without any conscious effort on her part at all, they are flowing out of her. She can see them, patches of air shivering just above the ocean in front of her, rolling along the waves and up onto the docks.

And the stormy winds do blow. And we poor sailors are skipping at the top, while the landlubbers lie down below, below, below.

She watches the song disperse along the docks, and each time it courses around a sailor, he pauses and closes his eyes. Over the crash of the waves and the noise of the men bustling about the ships, it is surely impossible for them to hear Darya and Marin's song, and yet...

While the landlubbers lie down below....

One particularly strong stream of song twines its way around the legs of a man with shaggy dark hair who has a barrel thrown over his broad shoulders. He freezes, and a tendril of the song winds its way up past his knee.

Yes... Darya murmurs, and when she plunges back into song it is with so much force that Marin's whole body shakes.

More branches of song join the first one wrapped around the man, Marin's and Darya's voices braiding together. The sailor sets down the barrel and starts to walk towards the end of the docks. His steps are slow and tentative, his gaze out but unfocused. He stares out at the ocean and then, in one heart-stopping motion, his eyes pass over the two mermaids.

Marin almost falls below the surface in shock, her singing cut off abruptly, but Darya continues unfazed.

He - he saw us! Marin hisses at Darya. *We have to leave!*

Darya does not take her eyes off of the man, her eyes focused sharp as knife-points. She pauses her song only long enough to tell Marin, *No*.

Marin tugs on Darya's hand, but the younger girl is stronger than she appears, and she breaks Marin's grip with no more force than if she was brushing off a tangle of seaweed.

Darya! Marin insists. *He looked straight at us. He's walking right toward - right -*

The sailor reaches the edge of the dock, and, as if he could sense her words, his eyes lock on Marin. This time she actually does fall beneath the water in shock, water splashing into her gaping mouth. She spits it out as she resurfaces, wiping her eyes once, twice, three times to make sure she had not simply imagined -

But no. The sailor, who is now swaying just at the end of the dock, his feet a short drop away from the sea, is *Eric*. His eyes are glassed over, unfocused, looking at them but not really seeing.

She knows she should look away. She knows she should drag Darya back down to the Shoal with her and never set her sights on Land again. But she does neither of those things, instead watching hungrily as Eric starts swaying more and more violently, his body pulled first this way and then that by the strings of Darya's song, which are now so strong that Marin no longer has to strain to see them. Eric closes his eyes with a smile and then -

He jumps.

His feet cut the water so smoothly there is barely a *crash*. He vanishes beneath the surface in the time it takes to blink, and Darya is still singing singing singing.

Marin waits for him to resurface.

He is swimming, she tells herself.

He is swimming.

He is bathing.

He dove into the water to retrieve something he dropped.

He will come up again.

But the minutes pass and *the landlubbers lie down below, below, below, the landlubbers lie down below, below, below* and Eric is still under the water. The sailors on the docks either have not noticed his plunge or do not care, but no one is rushing in after him.

Darya... Marin hedges. *Darya, we have to do something!*

Darya continues her song for a line or two more, fervently watching the spot where Eric vanished into the deep, before turning to Marin.

Don't you see? We just did.

And Eric's swaying and Darya's lie to Rialta and the way the singing seemed to hum and throb with its own life force all collide together in Marin's head like a ship dashing itself against the rocks. The sailors told stories of beautiful women who called them to their deaths. The sailors told stories they did not know to be truths.

Marin doesn't stop to think about what she is about to do. She dives beneath the water, racing to the spot where she saw Eric disappear.

Eric! she sends out, though she does not know if he would even be able to hear her, even if he is still -

She swallows back the thought. It cannot have been more than a few minutes since he dropped under. He is still alive. He has to be.

Darya has started singing again, the sound resonating even under the water. Marin does not even consider going back to stop her. She knows the younger girl would not listen, and even without the Siren's song Marin does not know if Eric would return.

And then she sees him, fighting his way through the water. At first she thinks that he is struggling to the surface, but then she realizes that he is swimming away from the docks, each

jerking stroke taking him deeper and deeper. His body is still tangled in song, strings jerking him further from breaching water like a grotesque marionette.

Eric! she calls again, but he does not falter. Bubbles escape from his lips and Marin knows it is only a matter of time before they run out. She urges her tail to push faster, harder.

She reaches him and flings her arms around him, not giving a thought to secrecy or stealth. She tries to pull him upwards. She knows she is stronger than him, can feel the muscles in her tail and her arms straining, but she did not count on him fighting back. His fists collide with her stomach and she bites back the urge to recoil in pain. She tightens her grip, but he kicks out, and they roll through the water. He kicks her again, and she tries to use her tail to wrap his legs still.

His breath bubbles are slowing, becoming more and more infrequent and smaller with every exhale. Logic tells Marin that this should make him weak, but Darya's song strains remain unbroken, and still he fights her.

Another voice joins Darya's singing. It is deep and thrums with Marin's heartbeat.

Eric falls limp.

The two voices resonate, the new one not complementing, not harmonizing, but creating haunting dissonance against Darya. Marin's hair stands on end, her arms prickling into gooseflesh.

Eric is immobile. A new tangle of song curls around the first, forcing it to unwind from around his body. No more bursts of breath split his lips. Marin whips her tail as fast as she can, cradling him in her arms like an oversized child as she races to the shore.

Stay alive stay alive stay alive, she pleads. She presses his body tighter to her own in hopes that she can make out a heartbeat. There is a faint fluttering in his chest, she thinks, but perhaps that is just her own imagination, or perhaps it is just the current playing tricks on her, or perhaps -

They break the surface on the sand a few hundred feet from the docks. Marin gulps water through her gills, storing as much oxygen as she can, and then pushes herself onto the sand beside Eric. She remembers Fen kicking her stomach to clear her body of water, so she presses her palms to Eric's chest and pushes down, once, twice, three times.

Nothing happens.

Stay alive stay alive please - my fault, my fault -

Once, twice, three more times. Marin's head starts to pound from holding her breath. One, two, three, one, two, three, one, two - stars dance in front of her eyes and she is forced to pause to duck her head back underwater and chug more air before resuming - one, two, three, one, two -

Eric coughs and splutters. If she had a voice, Marin would squeal in delight. Instead, she merely stares, mute, as he spits up sea water.

Don't linger, she tells herself, but she can't help but watch him. As soon as he opens his eyes, she promises herself, she'll be gone. For now, she lets her gaze wander, allowing herself to drink in the sight of him. This is the closest they have stood since the night Marin drowned.

He looks older, much older, though no more than three months could have passed since she last saw him. His cheeks are hollow, and there are dark circles under his eyes. His skin looks cracked and weathered, even more than is typical for a sun-worn sailor. For a moment, Marin lets

herself believe that this transformation is in her honor, a degeneration caused by guilt and shame for having let Dillon's crew humiliate and murder her.

Eric is choking up less and less water and breathing in more and more air. All of Marin's instincts scream for her to dive under the water, to get away before he can see her, but she hesitates a moment too long, her stare fixed on his straggled black hair, and then -

Eric's eyes snap open, focused right on Marin's face. His mouth fumbles as if he is trying to form words but cannot quite grip them. His hands claw at his eyes, attempting to clear them.

"It's not possible," he whispers. Marin wants to touch him, but she doesn't.

"You're dead," Eric says. Marin nods, and he repeats, "It's not possible."

His eyes wander down her body. Marin first remembers that she is naked from the waist up, and then she remembers what she is from the waist down.

"You're..." Eric starts, but by then Marin has snapped back into reality, every part of her taught with fight-or-flight, adrenaline pumping through her. She scrambles backwards until her body is submerged under the water, and swims away as quickly as she can.

She is furious with herself. She risked being seen - she *was* seen - to save the life of a man who would not, had not repaid the favor when given the chance. Darya will kill her again once she finds out, and Fen... Marin's stomach flops. She doesn't know how Fen could forgive her for this.

She makes her way back to where she left Darya and her hideous song. She finds her a few hundred feet below, accompanied by Rialta.

There you are! Rialta huffs as Marin approaches. *Where the devil did you go?*

I... Marin looks from Rialta to Darya. She knows Darya saw her dive after Eric, but if the younger girl had been caught by Rialta, there was no way she could have seen Marin rescue him, could she? Marin takes a deep breath and swallows. *I...*

Well? Rialta asks, her tone tinged with impatience.

I... Marin repeats. She looks at Darya, who is staring anywhere but at the two other mermaids. She thinks of Fen, who already can't stand to touch her. The lie comes out as easy as saying her name. *I wanted to see what happened. To the sailor.*

Rialta's eyes narrow. Marin is sure she sees through the untruth, but the older woman doesn't call her on it.

And were you satisfied with what you saw? Rialta asks her instead.

I don't know, Marin says. *I didn't see much. I got scared and swam away before I could find out if he - if he -*

Marin forces her voice to crack. It isn't difficult; she is already so anxious that Rialta will catch her lie.

If he died, she finishes tremulously.

Rialta purses her lips at Marin for a moment more, but then she rounds back on Darya.

Did she know? she asks. *Did you tell her what you were about to do?*

Sort of... Darya mutters.

What is that supposed to mean?

I told her about the Siren legends, how they said that we could lure the sailors to their deaths with only our voices. And then... then I asked her to come sing with me.

Did you know what you were doing? Rialta barks back at Marin.

I...

Marin looks at Darya, who has finally lifted her head. Her jaw is set, and while it would be a stretch to say she looks abashed, her eyes are wide and pleading. She looks nothing like Cora, her hair too dark and her eyebrows too severe and everything just a little too angular, but Marin wants her to be, needs someone to protect.

I did, Marin says, and Darya's exhale of relief is palpable. *I knew exactly what would happen. I was curious, and I was upset, and I just wanted to...*

Hurt something? Kill something? Feel something? Marin swallows.

I just wanted to, she finishes lamely.

Rialta's gills flare.

This cannot happen again. I can't express how important it is that you understand that - both of you, Darya, both of you, since apparently three other warnings weren't enough to sink through your skull.

Darya grits her teeth but has the decency to look down.

I don't care about your little vendetta against the humans, Rialta continues. *In fact, I wouldn't care if you killed a hundred men. What is that to me? But allowing yourself to potentially be seen - endangering the entire Shoal? That is selfish and inexcusable.*

Marin decides that this is not the time to mention that Eric has now seen her not just once but twice. If he was not convinced the first time of her existence, her magical evasion of death, seeing her tail was the last of the dirt on her grave. Marin decides that this is not the time to mention that at this point she has likely "endangered the entire Shoal" more than all of Darya's singing excursions ever could.

From now on, Darya, you don't go anywhere alone. You take Bronwen, or Vanora, or Nerissa, or Fen, or me, but you do not leave sight of the Shoal without someone to hold you accountable to your actions.

What about Marin? Darya asks innocently.

Marin... Rialta chooses her words carefully, one-by-one. Marin has shown poor judgment. And maybe it was not entirely your fault, Rialta says, in response to a protest that Marin did not voice, *but you did not stop her. You're new here still. I understand that. But because you are new, it is important that you learn first and foremost that we - are - a - family. Am I clear?*

Yes, Rialta, Marin responds.

Then let's get back to the Shoal before either of you can find any more havoc to wreak.

When they reach the Shoal, they are greeted in the Clearing by the others. Nerissa clasps her hands across her mouth in relief before she lunges forward to pull Darya into a fierce hug. Bronwen's gills flare in an exhale. Marin scans their faces to find Fen staring at her with an injured expression. The moment Marin meets her eyes, she looks away guiltily. If Marin isn't mistaken, there is a hint of a blush on her cheeks, though from embarrassment or fury, Marin isn't sure she wants to know.

It's fine, Rialta announces to the group. *They're both safe, no harm done.*

Were they seen? Fen snaps. Her eyes are locked on Rialta, but the words land on Marin like a punch.

No, Marin snarls back, as Rialta replies, *Perhaps, by their victim, a sailor, but he drowned. We have been very lucky, and I am sure that the girls know exactly how much their*

good fortune is the only reason they are still breathing. I am sure that there will be no more risks like this taken in the future.

That's what you said last time! Fen shrieks. And the time before that, and the time before that... and apparently that hasn't sunk in for Darya, and it sure as hell hasn't sunk in for Little Miss Surface over here -

Fen, what are you talking about? Vanora interrupts.

Marin wasn't here the last time Darya - Rialta starts, but Fen, the flush in her cheeks rising again, barrels on,

She - was - seen! she spits. She went up to the Surface - she's been going up to the Surface for months, and she's been seen, and does she give a rat's ass what happens to us because of her selfishness?

No! Fen answers her own question. No, she doesn't! In fact, I bet she's still been going up there. I bet it was her idea to use the Call - anything to parley longer with her dearest, darlingest humans!

Fen... Nerissa cautions. Marin is shaking, her chest heaving with every breath. She does not want to show weakness, not now, not in front of Fen, but she cannot help the fact that each word seems to peel her apart from the inside out.

And you all let her! She comes in here - months old, barely even knows how to use her words or her fins - and you all let her get away with every little thing! You treat her as if she is a child, Poor Marin, Breakable Marin, Fragile Marin - we're all fragile! We've all been through Hell and back, but there's one difference: we know to stick together.

Fucking hell, Fen! Darya whips back, and Marin feels a rush of affection for the younger girl. *Lay off her, okay? You want to know who's been risking our hides, as I'm sure you see it? Me! Mostly me! It was my idea to use the Call tonight, and do you know why I did it? Because you're too fucking sensitive and your silent act was pushing Marin off the edge. Anyone can see that!*

We're all obviously very upset, Nerissa cuts in, *and blaming each other -*

My silent act? Fen rounds on Darya. *So this is my fault now?*

Nerissa's right, we all care about each other - Bronwen adds, but Darya is on the attack again.

Yeah, you know what, I think it is your fault, she snarls at Fen. *Marin was seen before, you say? Well, who the hell taught her to Change in the first place? Because it sure wasn't any of us. But maybe you were just too in love -*

Shut your mouth. Fen's tone makes the whole Shoal fall silent and still as the eye of a storm. Marin's heart has started a stampede in her chest at Darya's words. In love, she had said. With -

I'm leaving, Fen continues. *Don't come after me, I'll be fine on my own. But it's clear that we all need some time to figure out our priorities, and I... I think my priorities would be better sorted out alone. I'll be back when I'm ready. I'll be back when I think you've got it right.*

And she goes without another word, leaving Marin thinking that her memories of Fen are composed less by the time they spend together and more by the time that Fen spends swimming away.

Twenty-Two

When Fen does not return to the Shoal that night, she finds Darya, as if the other girl - Marin tries to think of her as not the Cause, not the Reason for Fen's running; that was Marin all to herself - will bring her comfort.

Why do you do it? Marin corners her, after the others have left the Clearning and turned in for the night.

Do what? Darya wrinkles her nose.

Call the men. Rialta says this is not the first time you've done it.

And you think it's cruel? Darya retorts, rolling her eyes. *Please. Don't act like I'm the monster here. We've all seen what they do up there, what the men on Land think passes as sport and fun and happy.*

Of course I have, Marin answers. In her mind she is staring up at an ocean of clouds, her wrists bound together.

Darya takes a while to respond. And then -

My parents never wanted a girl, Darya says. She curls her arms underneath her and rests her chin on her tail. *Not that they needed any more boys, either - by the time I was born, they already had eight - but they never wanted a girl. Nine mouths to feed was enough when they at least were worth something, when they at least could work the fields for their keep. I was useless until my wedding day. Even then, they'd have to pay to get someone to take me off their hands.*

Marin reaches out to touch Darya, to comfort her, but a muscle clenches at the corner of Darya's jaw and Marin retracts.

When I was little, they would just ignore me, and that wasn't so bad. Even my family couldn't bring themselves to be horrible to a kid. Darya's tone is a hollow monotone left unpainted with emotion. Marin fights the urge to remind Darya that she is still a kid, though even as she thinks it, she watches Darya's faraway eyes and doubts that she has ever seen anyone so old.

My brothers, they used to act like I was invisible. They would walk into a room and stare right at me and then say, 'Has anyone seen No One?', like I wasn't even there. That was their nickname for me. No One. They thought it was so funny. I guess, for a while, I thought it was funny, too, like we were all making a game. It took me years to realize that I was the only one playing.

"Once I figured that out, though, I started avoiding them. If I wasn't around, I thought, I could never be a target. I would be the one in control. I made myself wake up early to hide from them. I would get up before it was even light out and sneak out to the fields, or to the barn, and I would see how quiet I could be until the sun went down again. My parents never looked for me. I don't know if they noticed that I was gone - or maybe I know, deep down, that they did, and they just didn't care.

Darya swallows. Pauses. Clenches her teeth for a moment and then continues.

My brothers would find me, though, somehow they always found me. I suppose I should have realized how hard it would be to hide from eight pairs of determined eyes. Somedays, I think they followed me, no matter how early I would wake up.

Another pause. Marin opens her mouth and then realizes that she would have nothing to say, even if she thought that Darya would listen. She closes her mouth again and just watches.

They never hit me. Isn't that odd? Darya cocks her head to the side and almost smiles. It didn't seem strange at the time. I suppose I should count myself lucky. But now I wonder what it was that made them so hesitant to touch me, kick me, bite me. I was always a small child; it's not like it would have been difficult for them, or that they were afraid I would fight back... or even that my parents would punish them.

Maybe it was because, if they never laid a hand on me, they could see what they did to me as friendly teasing, like all boys did to their little sisters. They could still think of themselves as good sons.

But part of me thinks it was just another part of their act, just an extension of the time when they pretended I did not exist. If they didn't touch me, I had only their words, nothing tangible to prove that I was real.

Darya's tone doesn't change, but Marin sees her grip clench on the rocks below her until her knuckles are white.

I started to wonder if they were right when they said that I was No One. I would make up challenges for myself, call them games, to prove that I wasn't Only Make Believe. I would jab myself with rocks, telling myself that if I bled, that meant I had to be real. I would eat rotten berries until I was sick. I held my breath and jumped out of trees and ran until I passed out and all sorts of things. But that didn't make me better, it just made me... keep going.

Darya squeezes her eyes shut. Pauses. Breathes.

Even if, for a single day, I managed to believe in my humanity, my brothers didn't stop. It got to the point where the little tests that I did, the little tricks I played to believe, they weren't enough, so the games that I played got bigger and bigger until -

Darya swallows. She digs her chin into her tail. There is a pause that Marin thinks could fill the whole ocean. Darya looks up at Marin, and for the first time, she looks vulnerable. Her eyes are wide, not blank but pleading, staring at Marin as if she is a lifeboat.

I didn't do it on purpose. Really, I didn't. I know some people try to - to -

Darya shakes her head frantically.

But I didn't. It was just another game, another trick. We went into town one day, for... something. I don't remember. Maybe it was one of my brother's birthdays, and they wanted to treat him. I don't know. But we went into town, and we walked past the docks, and as we did I started to wonder what it would feel like to just jump into the water. I wondered what someone real would feel. Would they sink? Would they float? Would it be different from what I did?

No one noticed when I stopped following my brothers and ended up on the docks. It wasn't a large town, but it was large enough for a small girl to be wandering about without anyone thinking it was odd.

It was a cold day, and the water chilled me when it splashed up. The wind was making everything churn. I remember standing over the water peering in and thinking how dark it looked down there. I remember the darkness so well, but after - after -

This time, Marin slips over and reaches an arm around Darya. The other girl makes no sign she notices Marin's presence except to clutch at her tightly.

They tell me that I drowned myself.

Marin holds her firmer in response and strokes Darya's hair.

It makes sense. I didn't know how to swim. Why would I jump into the water if I wasn't trying to die?

The worst part is that I don't even know if they're right or not. I can't remember anything past standing on the edge of the dock. Rialta says I probably blocked it out, that that happens sometimes, after trauma. Maybe my mind thought it would be better if I wouldn't be able to remember what it feels like to want to end yourself.

I'm sorry, Marin says. Dar...

Darya squeezes her eyes shut. Marin does not think of Fen or Eric or the men Darya has led into the water. Instead, she thinks of the girl curled up at her chest, small and afraid and alone in the middle of the water. Marin holds Darya until she falls asleep.

Twenty-Three

Fen does not return the next night, nor the night after that. Marin did not realize it was possible to feel an absence so acutely. She did not realize that her days could turn so easily into a series of stutters and interruptions, a pattern of her anticipating Fen's smile or laugh or gentle reply and her stomach lurching when none comes. She braids the ring that Fen had given her on the first night into her hair. No one mentions the addition. Indeed, not a single soul has even said Fen's name - or, Marin muses, has said her name where Marin might overhear - since she left.

When the fourth day passes and Fen has not shown up at any meal, Marin starts to wonder why the rest of the mermaids do not seem worried. That night, after dinner, Marin grabs Bronwen's arm before she can drift off away from the group.

Can I talk to you?

Of course, Bronwen says, hanging a newly-found piece of burlap over one of the phosphorus lamps to start the transition to nighttime.

Fen's not coming back, is she?

Huh? Bronwen looks up.

Fen, Marin repeats. She stares off into the water, far off in the distance where everything looks cold and murky. *She's not going to come back to us, is she?*

Bronwen doesn't reply. Marin wonders if she heard the question, but she doesn't think she has the strength to repeat it. She sits beside Bronwen in silence, her fingers digging into the mossy rock. And then, when Marin had almost forgotten that she had spoken, Bronwen says,

She's back. She's been back.

Marin jerks her head around to face Bronwen so fast that something in her neck cracks.

What?

Fen... never really left, Bronwen says slowly. She seems to weigh each word in her mouth with great care. Well, she did, at first, when she found out - when you - she went out past the wrecks for a while. But she came back, and she's been around, she just -

- is avoiding me, Marin finishes. Her chest aches, and she clenches her fists tighter. She can barely stand to be in the same ocean as me.

Bronwen doesn't correct her.

Can I ask -? Marin starts. Bronwen nods. *Do you hate me?*

Bronwen snorts, bubbles shooting out her nose. *Nah.*

Why?

The Shoal has been around for hundreds of years. I've been around for a fair few of those. You should hear some of the stupid things I've done.

Marin waits for her to expand on the sentiment, but she doesn't. She raises an eyebrow at Bronwen.

Oh, I'm not going to tell you! Bronwen laughs. *But the point is - none of us are entirely blameless. If we left for dead everyone who screwed up... we'd be extinct within the decade.*

Do the others agree?

Well, Darya doesn't agree with much, Bronwen smiles, but she listens to Rialta, and she respects her decisions. She respects you, too, I think. You've been good to her.

And Rialta -? Vanora?

Bronwen shrugs. *They think a lot like I do. We're all just tiny fish in a big, big sea. They won't forget, necessarily, not that quickly, but I can promise that we've all already forgiven you.*

Except Fen.

Bronwen's eyebrows furrow, and she takes another long pause before she speaks again.

Fen... Fen is a special case.

Darya is a special case, Marin corrects her. Fen wishes I was never brought here.

That's not true. Fen cares about you. We all can see that. But she's hurt... and confused...

and... Bronwen trails off.

And? Marin prompts.

How much do you know about Fen's life? Her human life, I mean.

Marin frowns. *Not much, I guess. I never really - Fen never seemed to want to talk about it.*

Fen's life was - was - well, none of us had it easy. That's why we're here, isn't it?

Bronwen gives a wry smile.

How do you mean?

If I tell you this, Bronwen cautions, you have to swear never to repeat it. Fen can't know that I told you. She doesn't like people knowing where she came from. She says that's because it's no longer relevant, that the only form and memories of hers that matter are the ones that came after she was transformed. I think she's trying to protect herself.

I won't say a word, Marin promises, pressing her hand over her lips in oath. Not that she would get a chance to say anything to Fen, even if by some miracle Fen happened to allow herself to be in the same place with her at the same time.

Fen grew up in a small town, like your Harwich, up in the Scottish Highlands, Bronwen began. Her parents kept sheep, I think, or something like that. They weren't well off, but as far as I can tell, they loved Fen, and they treated her as best as they could.

Growing up, she was friends with a local village boy. Samuel, I think his name was. Bronwen pauses, her eyes far away. Fen doesn't use his name much when she talks about him.

They were inseparable. They used to play make-believe and pirates and mermaids on the rocks by the sea. The village was on the cliffside, but you could climb down the face to the water if you were careful and the winds weren't too strong, and that's exactly what Fen and Samuel did. Sometimes, Samuel would pretend that he was a sailor, and Fen was his wife. Fen never minded. She loved Samuel.

Perhaps sensing the way Marin tensed up, the way her fingers gripped the rock so tightly that parts of it chipped off and swirled and eddied, Bronwen hastily amended, *Loved him like a brother - like the closest thing you could get to family without blood.*

Samuel's family wasn't exactly rich either, but they had more than Fen's, and when Fen turned sixteen, Samuel proposed to her. Her father accepted the marriage offer. Fen didn't have a say, but even if she had, she would have married him anyway. He was her best friend, it helped her family to have one less mouth to feed, and when compared to some of the bone-chilling stories the women in the village told about arranged marriages... it sounded like a happy ending. She wasn't in love with him, but she loved him, and she was content.

That doesn't sound bad, Marin said. She tried to swallow back the notes of jealousy as she imagined Fen letting someone in so completely, the fact that there was someone out there

who knew all of Fen's vulnerabilities and pleasures and fears and hopes, and the fact that - though Marin hated this thought - this person would probably never be Marin.

That's not where it ends, Bronwen says, her voice slow and mournful. Fen was just turned seventeen when she was married. Do you know how old she was when Yara turned her?

Eighteen, wasn't she?

Exactly.

What happened in the year between?

Fen wasn't in love with Samuel, but Samuel was in love with Fen. They were kids when they first were married, barely old enough to know what marriage even was. The months after the wedding were still a game of make believe to them. Samuel would go out to work with his father in the morning, and he would come home to a warm supper that Fen made in the evening, and they would sleep under the same sheets in the same bed less like lovers and more like siblings.

And then, one night, Samuel decided that he wanted more. He wanted Fen like, he told her, husbands should want their wives, and like wives should want their husbands back.

But Fen didn't want him! Marin interjected. Bronwen shook her head slowly.

No. She didn't. But Fen... you know her. Fen is small, and Samuel was big, and if he wanted something, Fen could do very little to resist.

He forced her? Marin's stomach rolled.

Not at first, I don't think. At first, he only tried to convince her - said that it was what was proper, what was expected of them, that they couldn't play make-believe any longer and it was time to be grown-up about it all. He let Fen deny him for a few weeks, but then...

Then? Marin asked, though she was no longer sure she wanted to know the answer.

He became violent. It started small, so that Fen barely noticed it until it was too late. He would grab her arm too sharply, or start stroking her hair gently and end up pulling it until Fen shrieked. When they got into bed at night, if Fen resisted his advances, he would hold her down.

Marin felt like she was going to be sick. *Why didn't Fen leave him?*

She did, eventually, Bronwen replied, but it took her over a year. She didn't know what Samuel was doing was wrong. She looked at him and only wanted to see the best friend who had played pirates on the rocks with her, the little boy who named her his Queen. Fen thought that this was the way all marriages worked. She thought that this was what love felt like.

But she did leave him?

She did. One night, before he came home, she packed the few things that she had for her own and ran down to the shore. She thought that even if he realized she was gone, she would be able to run too far for him to ever catch her. But Fen made the mistake of thinking that just because Samuel the boy was gone, Samuel the man had forgotten. He came back early that night, and the first place he looked for her when he discovered she was gone was -

The shore where they had played, Marin finishes. She can sense where this story ends.

He got angry the way a storm does, his fists docile waves that turn into drowning waters. He pushed her back further and further until she fell back into the sea. And then he held her down, just like he did at night, held her down until she stopped thrashing against him. He killed her. Just like that. His wife. His best friend. And he didn't even bother to bury her body. He left her there for the sea to devour, like she was no more than a beached fish.

Fen... Marin whispers, and for a long time this is the only response she can give.

When you think about it... Bronwen says, ... *you can't really blame her, can you?*

Yes. No. Marin does not know.

Twenty-Four

The next few days, Marin spends a lot of time thinking about apologies. She tries to remember the face of the last person she looked in the eyes and murmured an honest *I'm sorry*. It's definitely not Fen. It's not Rialta, or Bronwen, or any of the other mermaids. It's not any of the sailors aboard the *Harbinger*, not that they would deserve her remorse even if she felt it. She had locked any apologies inside her lips the moment she set foot on deck, knowing that even the first syllable of "sorry" would immediately mark her as weak. Cora, then, maybe? Do apologies still count if no one can hear them? But even then, as Marin skirts over memories of her last night on shore, she cannot recall even attempting to tell Cora how much she regretted

But that's the rub, isn't it?

Marin does not know if she regrets. She looks back on her history as if it were a painting made by other hands, each part not colored "good" or "bad," just... well-made. Existing. She feels guilt, to be sure, but guilt is different. Guilt does not tug at her with the same nostalgia as regret does, as regret should. She feels guilty for leaving Cora and her family, but no matter how hard her mind romanticizes what-once-was, she does not know if she could have made any other choice. She feels guilty for endangering the Shoal, for betraying them in Fen's eyes. She feels guilty for *Fen*.

But if she had the chance to go back - and this, this is the part that finds her at night, the fact that threatens to choke her and pull her under into the dark - she would have done everything all the same. She is still herself, still Marin, after all, still too much chaos and want and yearning to do anything differently. She does not regret.

But Fen. Fen, Fen, beautiful Fen.

Apologies can choke you in their own right, if you let them, Marin decides. They spin you around until you are too dizzy to decide who is in the right and who is in the wrong, until the words tumble out of your mouth and you are not sure whether you mean them or it is just the inertia.

Marin is sick of the spin. The next evening, after supper, Marin goes to work. She grabs one of Bronwen's scavenging sacks and ties it around her waist. She scans the ocean floor for a rock and rams it against the side of the cave until its point bites at her skin and the water swallows a trickle of her blood. When she leaves, no one questions her. When she leaves, she knows exactly where to go. It is as if her mind has been anticipating this moment; as soon as she imagines her destination, she can recall the route there perfectly.

It takes her less than a quarter of an hour to find the wreck of the grandiose ship where Bronwen had taken her on one of her first days at the Shoal. This time, Marin does not go inside. She already knows what ghosts lie there. Their stories are for another day. She swims around instead of within, making her way to the prow of the ship.

Wait until you see the figurehead, Bronwen had said to Fen. You'll love it.

The first trip to the wreck had been too fraught for Marin to make it that far in the ship, but when she reaches the prow, she knows that Bronwen had been exactly right.

The figurehead is a mermaid. Not a pretty one of the stories like the small toy that Marin had prized from the grip of the little girl; no, this mermaid was a proper one, mouth open wide in a scream to reveal fangs carved so sharply that Marin knew they could pierce her skin if she got too close. Her wooden eyes are wild. Her arms, though thin, are corded with muscle that strains against carved ropes which stretch her wrists on either side of the prow.

But though she is not pretty and complacent, she is still beautiful in her danger. Even as chills run over her skin, Marin admires the detail in the carefully-carved curls of her hair, the fullness of her lips, the curve of her bare breasts. She is the kind of mermaid who would give you death only after you begged her for it. This mermaid could make death an enviable lover.

Marin takes the sharpened rock from the sack at her waist and begins to hack it apart from the ship. She takes her time as she does, careful not to chip away a single extra bit of the wood already soft with rot.

It's a foolish project. The figurehead is almost Marin's size. If the wood had once been light and easy to carry, it was now weighted down with water. Even as she works, one of the mermaid's fingers crumbles into her hand. Marin doesn't know what Fen would do with it - stare at it? - even if she manages to pry it free and cart it back to the Shoal in one place. Marin doesn't know what Fen would do with it even if, she quietly admits to herself, Fen will let Marin find her and speak to her. It's an offering that could easily prove useless. But perhaps this is exactly why she continues the endeavor. There is something satisfying - or, rather, something perfectly consuming and distracting - about focusing so minutely on a task which almost certainly will fail. It leaves no room for Marin to think.

Marin chisels away the last of the wood binding the very end of the figurehead's tail to the ship. It falls forward into her arms. As Marin catches its stiff form, she tries not to think of its resemblance to a lifeless body. She awkwardly repositions it so it settles onto her back, and begins the trek back to the Shoal.

Darya is the first to see her swim into view.

What the - she starts.

Where's Fen? Marin interrupts.

Darya shrugs. *Not here. You know that.*

Bronwen told me the truth, Marin says, forcing herself to hold her ground, even as she knows that in a contest of stubbornness, Darya will always be the victor. *I know she's been back, and I know she doesn't want to see me, but I would really like to speak with her, Dar, and I don't think you want to get in my way.*

Darya bites her lip. Her gaze flickers between Marin and the figurehead, until finally she rolls her eyes and sighs dramatically. *She's with Nerissa out by the phosphorus mine.*

Will you go get her?

She's not going to talk to you.

So don't tell her that it's me. Tell her that Rialta wants her, or that Bronwen needs her for - for something, I don't know. But get her.

Please, Marin adds as an afterthought.

Okay, Darya huffs. *Fine. I'll do it. But I'm not a part of this, you know.*

I know, Marin answers, only barely holding her tongue and refraining from acidly adding, *We all know how much you hate doing anything that could possibly rile anyone up.* Darya is helping her, after all, and she's right: this is not her fight. There is enough anger in the Shoal already.

When Darya swims off, Marin shifts her weight awkwardly from side to side. It's silly for the phosphorus field to be this far away, she thinks one moment; the next, she is wishing that it has magically moved halfway across the ocean and Darya won't be back for months on end.

But of course it hasn't moved, and in too little time or too much time her short black bob comes into view, shortly followed by - Marin's heart speeds up until it is less of a beat and more of a vibration - Fen's trailing blonde hair.

If Rialta wanted to - Fen is in the middle of saying, but then her eyes catch Marin's and her whole face shuts blank like a door slamming closed. *What is she doing here?*

Fen -

Darya is already swimming off, looking back once over her shoulder to call, *Not a part of it!*

Fen - Marin starts again, but Fen cuts her off with a ferocious glare.

I suppose Rialta didn't want to talk to me after all, she cuts. *Well. I'm here. What do you want? And what the hell is on your back?*

Marin stares at her, wide-eyed and silent. She starts and stops an infinity of sentences, and finally decides that perhaps it is better to start without preamble. Marin slides the figurehead off of her back and awkwardly grasps it around to waist to present it to Fen.

Here.

Fen stares at the figurehead, unblinking.

What is that?

It's the figurehead. From the first ship that Bronwen took me - took us to.

Fen continues to stare at it in silence. She does not answer, but slowly, her slim fingers reach out to run up and down and over and over the rotted wood as if they can polish it new. When Fen does not rebuke her, Marin tentatively continues,

I know that gifts cannot change anything, and maybe they're just an attempt to buy your favor back - and I don't want you to think that I think that - that you're the kind of person who can be bought back, or something, because I know you're not like that at all, but... but I remembered Bronwen saying that you would like it, and then I found it and it was beautiful and terrifying and so inhumanly lovely and it - it sang with you and I just needed you to have it, and I think -

It is beautiful, Fen cuts her off. You're right.

Marin looks away. She doesn't speak, leaving the space open for Fen or for apologies or for thanks or any number of empty hopes. In the end, though, Fen stares at the statue for so long that Marin is afraid the other girl will forget she is there. Marin breaks the silence.

Do you think that maybe you and I could... Marin takes a breath. "Be friends" seemed too simple; "go back to the way things were" too far away. *Do you think that maybe we could not be enemies anymore?*

Fen lets out an exhale that might be exasperation. *We're not enemies, Marin.*

Well, you know, it feels like we -

I'm not going to be sorry for being angry, Fen interrupts. *I think, have thought, will always continue to think that what you did was stupid and reckless and selfish and so - and so -*

Fen pauses. Her eyes flutter closed and after a few minutes she has composed herself.

I'm not going to be sorry. But I've never thought of you as my enemy.

Then do you think we could go back to -? Marin dangles the sentence in front of her.

Fen picks at her fingernails, deliberately not meeting Marin's eyes. *Are you going to drop it?*

Drop what?

Land. Fen tugs at her cuticle until it splits. A tiny bubble of red floats out of the cut.

Humans. Pause. *Being human.*

You're asking if I'll ever see my sister again?

In essence. Yes.

Marin swallows. In her mind, the memory of her last night on Land replays in some sort of disjointed montage, alternating between the floating happiness of seeing Cora, of sitting with her and listening to her laugh for the first time in months, and the raw terror of the transformation, the gnawing fear that she wouldn't make it back in time.

What was it good for, the last time you saw her? Fen presses. *You saw her. She spoke to you. And you - what? Pretended to smile? Laughed as if she could hear you? You act as if Changing makes everything exactly as it was, as if someday you'll just get stuck like that.*

Don't be silly, Marin snaps. *Of course I don't believe that.*

But you act like it, Fen retorts. *Sometimes it feels like - like you hate it here. Like you hate who you are, and you just can't wait to shed your tail and be rid of us. Like you're that much better than those of us who don't have anyone else left up there.*

Fen, I don't want to argue about this!

Then why did you save him? Fen flings the words at Marin, and to Marin, it seems a rough approximation of what it would feel like to be stabbed through the chest. She can sense the water rushing through her gills, but she somehow is still short of breath. She gulps at the water for a moment, and then a moment more.

How did you know about that? she asks finally. Her voice is steadier than she expects, but it is hollow, and falls flat between them. Across from her, Fen seems to crumple, her tail stopping its usual trill and her chest buckling inward. Her eyes are impossibly wide, impossibly violet, impossibly impossible.

I didn't, Fen whispers. *I had guessed, but -*

Her chest shudders again.

Darya said that you lured that sailor into the water, and that you wanted to see it up close, see what it was like, so you dove in after him. Fen keeps her words neat and even with taut effort, not giving herself the chance to stutter or stumble. *I wanted to believe her. But then I remembered when we found the body on the ship, and the way you shook for hours after, and... I know you. You aren't cruel.*

Fen licks her lips, pink and shining. *Then I thought - hoped, maybe - that you had run away because you were afraid, and you lied to Darya because you didn't want her to tease you. But I worried, because it was him. It's always him - on the Harbinger, that last night on Land, when you were with Darya. You wouldn't let him drown.*

Fen looks up at Marin through her pale lashes. Her impossible eyes are greedy. They grasp at Marin's stare as if they could pull a denial from their depths.

I'm sorry, Marin says, and it is all the second confirmation that Fen needs.

Do you love him?

No, Marin answers.

But there's something there. Something that makes him special, better than the others.

The phrase “better than me” is left unvoiced, but it readable in every inch of Fen’s body language, in the way her chest contracts as if crying and the tremble of her hands.

Maybe there’s something, Marin admits slowly. She is tired of lying, and though she knows it might hurt Fen, the thought of attempting to cover whatever “it” is up makes her head throb. *But I don’t love him, Fen. I haven’t and I don’t.*

And what about me?

Marin cocks her head to the side, confused. She tries to seek explanation in Fen’s face, in the questioning arches of her thin eyebrows, in the expanse of her wide wide eyes, in the curl of her small pink mouth and the sprinkle of her freckles and the curl of her mouth her mouth her mouth -

And Marin kisses her.

It is only when she thinks that this is nothing at all like she anticipated that she realizes that she had been anticipating this, this collision, this softness, this moment of Fen and only Fen.

Fen freezes up the first instant that their lips meet, but her stillness lasts for so brief a moment that Marin doesn’t even have time to worry. Marin feels the sculpture brush against her leg as Fen drops it aside. Fen is colder than she imagined, not warmth and embracing but like stumbling on a cold current where you thought you would burn up. She tangles her fingers through Marin’s hair to pull her closer, and their teeth clink together like the clatter of porcelain china. Marin tilts her head to readjust and her nose smudges into Fen’s. It is messy and wrong, or messy and right, or maybe just messy. Marin doesn’t want Fen to end.

Fen’s fins trace her own, gentle and light as if asking for permission. Marin presses her hands into Fen’s back, her shoulders, her neck in response. She feels Fen’s skin against hers so

acutely and yet not nearly enough. She wants to hold her so close they become. She wants to hold her so close that she shatters into herself. This longing, wanting, needing - this constant yearning to break and be broken and yet never being satisfied. Maybe this is love. Maybe it is not. But Marin holds and holds and holds Fen until she does not know if her arms will ever remember to let go.

Twenty-Five

At some point - Marin does not dare take any part of her mind away from *Fen, Fen, Fen* enough to remember - they make their way back to the Cave, hands and fins and lips still knotted together. Marin floats backwards until she is pressed up against the cool rock wall. If there is space left between her body and Fen's, she cannot find it. Marin is swallowed in the sensation of it all. With her eyes closed, she can feel against her hipbone the exact place where Fen's smooth skin sprouts scale and turns into fin. She almost giggles when Fen arches her back and she can feel her ribs tickle at her own, but then Fen pushes herself further against Marin and her ribs are the last thing on her mind. Carefully, each fingertip painting a hesitant question of permission, Marin's fingers dance closer to Fen's small breasts. As soon as she recognizes this, Fen's fingers encircle Marin's and reaffirm her grip, splay her palm more firmly over Fen's soft chest while Fen's other hand swirls circles further and further down Marin's back. They cross from skin to tail and hug the curve just below Marin's hips. There is no need to stop for breath, and yet Marin is dizzy for want of air.

The border between curling around Fen in the kiss and curling around Fen in sleep blurs itself. Fen is trailing kisses down Marin's chest and cuddling into her side and tracing her tail up and around and then Marin's mind goes blank.

She knows she must have fallen asleep at some point, however, because the next thing that she can call firmly a memory is the spill of light from the phosphorus lamps making its way into the almost-deserted Cave. Marin rubs the night from her eyes and slowly untwines herself from Fen.

Rialta, Bronwen, and Vanora are gathered along the rocks in a corner of the clearing. Their voices are hushed, and their bodies are all clustered so Marin cannot see their faces. She can, however, see Vanora clenching and unclenching her tentacles; she can see that the muscles in Bronwen's back are taught, as if her whole body were a spring coiled and ready to strike.

What is it? Fen swims up behind her, stretching out her arms and yawning.

I don't know, Marin answers. She frowns, her curiosity beckoning her closer but the visible tension of the trio holding her back. She knows that her lie about what really happened when she and Darya used the Call kept Rialta from harboring too many ill feelings, but she doesn't want to push her luck. With Fen speaking to her again - and *more*, Marin thinks, fighting to keep a blush away even just remembering - she would rather not make waves.

Well... Fen says, twining her fingers through Marin's, *we could always just ask them.*

I don't think that we should -

But it is too late. Fen is already dragging Marin across the clearing.

What's going on? Fen asks. Her tone is light but pointed.

For a moment, there is nothing but a weighted silence. Rialta, Bronwen, and Vanora exchange glances. There is a pause of everything unsaid and then, almost in unison, the three mermaids turn their gaze on Marin.

There's been a ship sighted, Rialta says finally.

Marin shares a look with Fen, whose thin eyebrows have crinkled in confusion. Marin frowns even more. *Well, of course there has. We're in the ocean.*

Rialta shakes her head. *There are merchant ships, and there are war ships, and there are pirate ships, and they all come and go. Those we expect. This one came and it's not leaving.*

What do you mean? Fen asks.

It's been circling and anchoring closer and closer to the Shoal for the past week. This is not a ship with a destination; this ship is looking for something.

You think they know about us, Marin says. The currents do not change but suddenly she feels as if she is plunging downward. *You think they're looking for the Shoal.*

Fen shakes her head, her white hair whipping around her. *That's not possible.*

Isn't it? Vanora asks. Her eyes are still on Marin. She has never been overly warm, but now her expression borders on hostile, and Marin has to concentrate to keep from flinching. *It's not like we haven't taken any risks lately. Not like we couldn't have been seen.*

This time Marin actually flinches back.

Van... Bronwen says in warning.

I'm not saying anything we haven't all thought, Vanora counters.

Why are you so quick to assume this is Marin's fault? Fen jumps in. Marin gapes at her, shocked that Fen has switched her anti-human, anti-Land, anti-Marin-to-blame stance so abruptly. Maybe it was the kiss. Maybe it was all the skin on skin on skin on -

Fen squeezes Marin's hand so tight Marin fears she might break it. *Darya goes to the Surface more often than Marin does. Nerissa does her rituals. We've all been risky - and we've all been here longer. Who's to say it's her fault more than anyone else's?*

Because, Vanora snaps, but Bronwen interrupts her by clamping a firm hand on her arm. A dark look passes between the sisters. Vanora's lips tighten into a thin line and she yanks her arm away.

Because, Bronwen continues, her tone softer but still heavy, it's not just any ship that is so bent on finding us. It's the Harbinger.

Marin's blood turns to ice in her veins. She is suddenly too much in her body, overwhelmed by the sound of the water rushing through her gills and the constant *flap flap flap* of her tail keeping her afloat and her heartbeat her heartbeat her heartbeat so loud.

No, she says, her mouth detached from her brain, which is still trying to figure out how her own body could be so heavy, no no no no no no no no -

We've been watching them for a while, Rialta says slowly, ever since we realized what ship it was. We can't get too close, of course, and it's difficult to hear anything. But they're looking for something, and they're too close to the Shoal for it to be a coincidence... and they're armed.

They're men, of course they're armed, Fen says sharply. Rialta shakes her head.

I don't mean guns or cannons. They have harpoons. Nets. They are hunters armed to kill a very specific kind of prey.

Us, Marin says. She feels like she is about to throw up.

But they're just humans, Fen interjects. So they're hunting us - it's not like they haven't threatened us before. They're humans and they're fragile and they're weak. All we have to do is avoid the Surface and they'll either give up or starve or drown.

Is that what happened before? Rialta snaps at her. Fen recoils. Is that what happened the first time someone came looking for us?

You know what happened.

Yes. I do. But I want to hear you say it, Fen. I want them to know who you are to tell them to sit still at the bottom of the ocean, scared and shivering and captive while we're hunted from above.

There is a horrible pause in which Fen and Rialta stare at each other. Rialta looks calm, her expression neutral, but Marin has never been more afraid of her. She looks the way the sky does before the clouds explode into thunder. Fen swallows.

The last time... she begins. She swallows again. Marin wants to squeeze her hand, to comfort her, but she is too transfixed, too anxious for what she is about to hear. *The last time, we slaughtered them.*

Fen? Marin asks.

They were fishermen. We didn't pay them any heed at first. They saw us one night but... we ignored it. They left within a few days anyway. But they came back. At first, we thought we could outlast them, that they would give up in a month or two, but they had prepared, stocked up on food and water and rum enough for a trip twice across the ocean. All just to wait us out.

Fen is trembling. She clenches her eyes shut as she continues, and Marin wonders what horrors are playing out in her memory.

There were fewer of us, then. It was just Rialta, and me, and... Tulia.

Tulia? Marin asks. Fen doesn't answer, lost inside her own mind.

Two and a half months in, Fen continues, *and we thought they would be growing weak. We weren't going to provoke them, or anything, but we figured that we no longer had to confine ourselves to the very bottom of the sea. Tulia.... She was little. She wasn't more than ten, and she*

was restless. She hated being trapped down here, day in and day out. She wanted to go to the Surface.

I didn't tell her yes, Fen says. I'm not that dumb. I knew it was dangerous, even if the men were off their guard. But I didn't just tell her 'no,' either. I forbid her. I... I screamed at her. I told her they would kill her and that, even if she survived, we would never forgive her if she left the Shoal, and we would never let her back. I didn't mean it, Marin, I swear, I just wanted to protect her - I wanted to scare her into staying.

Marin grabs Fen's forearms. She is shaking so hard she might shatter.

She was little. And little kids... if you tell them not to do something, of course they don't listen. If you forbid them, it only makes them want it more. And maybe if I had just told her no, or if I had distracted her -

Fen breaks off and shakes her head violently, over and over again the white hair thrashing around her like a tempest.

Marin pulls Fen into her arms. She holds the other girl as tight as she can, until her own muscles are trembling with the effort, and then she holds tighter still.

Tulia went out when we were asleep, Rialta takes over. I don't know how long it took for us to realize she was gone. An hour? Two? It wouldn't have mattered. We woke up and we knew. We just knew.

There was blood, so much blood, and that's how we found her, Rialta continues. All we had to do was follow the trail. They had speared her, hauled her up onto their ship... they were just some fishermen, just a stupid mistake that had made them chase after a beautiful myth.

They didn't even leave her body in the water, Fen whispers. Marin buries her face in her hair. She doesn't know what to say, so she doesn't say anything. *She was alive when we got there, barely, but still alive... and then one of the men struck her... and we watched her -*

Fen breaks off and clutches Marin like she is the only solid thing left in the entire ocean.

We don't lose one of our own very often, Rialta says. *And when we do... we don't die like humans. We are no longer creatures of flesh, but creatures of the sea and air. When we die, our bodies dissolve into sea foam. There is nothing left.*

Of course, Rialta continues, *the fishermen didn't know this. They thought they were carrying home a prize trophy, and then, right before their eyes, it vanished. They were confused. Angry. And then we Changed. It wasn't a conscious decision, or maybe it was, or maybe it was the only thing left that our bodies knew how to do.*

And we killed them, Fen says. *We climbed on the ship and we killed them all.*

There were more of them - five, maybe, Rialta adds. *Six. I don't know. But we were stronger and they were caught off-guard. We set the ship and all the bodies on fire and left them to go to ash. It was the only way we could end it.*

So we fight them, then, Marin says. *That's the moral of the story, isn't it? If it's going to be us or them... we fight them.*

No! Fen ejects, ripping herself from Marin's arms, at the same time that Rialta nods and says, *I agree.*

What? Fen says. She looks from Rialta to Marin and back again with incredulity. *The last time we decided to go on the war path, we lost someone. All we made was bloodshed, and all we got was bloodshed in return, and you think it's a good idea to try again?*

Fen, last time -

Fen whirls on Marin, and her violet eyes are crackling. *You have no idea what it was like last time. Do you know what it's like to lose someone?*

Marin thinks of Cora, sick and pale, and her heart clenches in her chest. She nods vigorously. This only makes Fen laugh, a wild, wicked cackle that claws its way out of her throat in hysteria.

Oh, right. Your sister - who is still alive, isn't she? Fen snarls. *Your precious sailor boy - oh, never mind, he survived as well. You know nothing of loss.*

That's not fair.

Marin? Bronwen is frowning at her. *Is it true?*

Is what true?

The sailor that you and Darya Called. He survived.

I - I don't - Marin looks down. She doesn't want to do this now, and she doesn't understand why the others don't agree. The *Harbinger* is back and searching for them. There are bigger problems at hand.

She saved him, Fen spits. *Darya Called him and she saved him and he probably saw her, and now look what's happened.*

Marin - Bronwen starts, but Marin ignores her.

What happened to 'why do you think it's Marin's fault?' Marin hurls at her. She is breathing as if she had just swum a race. *What happened to you defending me?*

That was before you decided that a massacre was the only way to end this! Fen shrieks back. Marin opens her mouth to retort, but to her surprise Bronwen beats her to it.

You tried it the other way last time. Bronwen's voice is low and lethal as a guillotine. As I recall from your story, that didn't work out so well.

Fen blinks at her. *Bron...*

Maybe it didn't work out last time, Vanora says, but that's not an excuse to charge into the fray. It doesn't have to end in death again. These men are foolish. They take risks. Who is to say they won't damn themselves in time?

Who's to say they will? Marin asks. Isn't that taking a risk as well?

We have greater numbers this time, Bronwen adds. We're stronger. We can end this, cut off the head before it even gets the chance to devour us.

You don't understand what -

No. Rialta, who has been watching the whole exchange silently, pushes herself to the center of the circle and extends her palms out on either side of her in between the quarreling women. This is not a productive fight to have.

Thank you, Fen says, her face softening into relief.

I am not taking your side, Rialta tells her firmly. Fen's chest crumples.

What? But you were there last time, you -

The Shoal protects its own, Rialta says. Last time... we didn't know what we were doing. There were fewer of us. We did what we thought was best, and that meant waiting it out. But I can't just let us sit here and cross our fingers that it works out better this time. And even if it does - Fen, if they survive and make it back to Land, there will be others. We can wait out one ship, but what about ten? Twenty? What if entire navies hear the story of the Mermaids? Do you still think, then, that we can survive?

But -

I am in charge of the Shoal. We do what's right, and this time... I think Bronwen and Marin are right. I think we have to stop the men before this escalates. I think we have to kill them.

I can't do that, Vanora says. Her tentacles are twisted up underneath her; she is holding every inch of herself as close as she can as if she is afraid of losing it. I will not try to stop you but please, please understand that I cannot -

What's going on?

Darya and Nerissa swim up, Darya eyeing Fen and Marin shrewdly as if from one look she can sense all that has passed.

Marin's ship is hunting us, Vanora says quietly.

And Rialta wants to fight, Fen adds with venom in her voice. Nerissa's eyes widen and she shrinks back.

We can't, she says.

What choice do we have? Darya snaps. Rialta holds up her hands again to prevent another outbreak of quarreling.

This is not a discussion. The Shoal is fighting, and that is the end of it. Rialta takes a minute to meet each of their eyes. When it gets to Marin, she is not afraid; she meets Rialta's eyes and her mouth hardens with determination. This is solidarity. This is having a plan.

Everyone is silent. Marin watches Fen, who bits her lip and is playing with her fingernails. She is about to do something and Marin fears what it will be and -

Then maybe I am no longer a part of the Shoal.

Her voice is too high. It trembles as she speaks, but her jaw is clenched and her chin juts out. Marin waits for Rialta to snap at her, to shut her down and call her out, but she doesn't. Instead, she merely stares at Fen for a moment, pondering. And then, slowly, she nods.

You know what that means, Rialta says, and it is half-question, half-assertation. Fen swallows but for her part stays steady as she nods back.

I know.

You will not be welcomed back here.

What? Marin interjects, panic sparking inside of her. *Why?*

Rialta and Fen ignore her. Fen's eyes narrow slightly but that is the only sign she has heard Marin's outcry as she replies, *I know.*

We will not help you, nor will we expect you to come to our aid.

I know, Fen says. This time she is firm with conviction.

Then you also know that I cannot stop you. Rialta looks at Fen with a strange kind of sadness in her eyes. Marin thinks how hard it is to tell the difference between disappointment and pride when both are tinged with sorrow.

I'm going with her, Vanora says. *If this - this war - is truly your choice... Bron...*

Vanora. Bronwen reaches out for her sister but Vanora shakes her head.

You know I can't fight. I love you, Vanora insists, and for a moment all of her tentacles seem to stretch out in longing. *But you cannot expect me to stay and be complicit in this.*

I'm staying, Darya says, though no one has questioned her and no one is surprised. Her teeth are bared and she seems to Marin to be excited. Marin tries to pretend the excitement away but she cannot unsee the cruelty sparking behind Darya's eyes.

Rialta looks at Bronwen and Marin, and they both nod to the unasked question.

Nerissa?

They turn to the quiet girl, the gentle girl who prays for every victim of the wrecks, and Marin knows what is coming.

I can't, Nerissa says in a whisper that sounds like an apology. *I - I just can't.*

She turns to Marin, and her eyes are pleading. Marin has the urge to spout words of forgiveness, to wrap the other girl in her arms and whisper that it will be okay, even though she knows it will not. Instead, Marin looks away. She feels rather than sees Nerissa's hurt at the gesture.

I'm joining Fen and Vanora, Nerissa says. *It is the only thing I can do. I hope... I hope you understand.*

And though Marin is still avoiding her gaze, she feels as if the last words were directed straight at her. She gives Nerissa the tiniest of nods.

The women, the girls, the broken and the saved all stand together, saying nothing. Then, Bronwen cracks the silence, guilt infusing her every word:

I suppose you'll be leaving now, then.

I suppose, Vanora says. Her voice wavers, and then in one fluid motion she darts over to her sister, and their chests are heaving and their muscles are trembling and it aches for Marin to look at them so she looks away -

And instead her gaze finds Fen, beautiful Fen, gentle Fen whose freckles are no longer dancing but whose lips she can still taste on her own and the girl she will now spend the rest of eternity always remembering and never being with and -

Fen, she whispers.

Fen looks at her, not with pity, not with anger or fear or righteousness. For a moment, Fen simply looks at her. She looks at Marin and her lips move, but she is not saying anything. Marin blinks in confusion. Marin stares at Fen's lips and then, in one great stroke of realization, she finds the words dancing on Fen's mouth:

I love you.

Please don't do this.

I love you.

I'm sorry.

Marin's heart clatters in her chest, and in that moment she feels not like a girl but a stampede.

Fen loves her. Fen kissed her and Fen loves her and Fen is leaving.

Fen, she whispers again. She wants to open her own mouth in silent reply, but as soon as she thinks this she realizes she does not know what she would say.

Fen looks at her for what is both too long and not long enough, and still Marin says nothing. Something sharp and aching springs up in the depths of Fen's eyes and she breaks Marin's gaze. Marin is a stampede stumbling; her heartbeat slows to a sickening stop. Something has passed between them as she stayed silent, though she doesn't know what.

We should go, Fen says to Vanora and Nerissa, who nod back at her. *Rialta... Darya... Bron...* Fen nods at them all. Her lips tighten before she adds, *Marin*.

Be safe, Rialta tells them.

Shouldn't I be saying that to you? Fen asks. Her tone is inscrutable, but Marin hopes that somewhere in there she hears sincerity. For her part, Rialta smiles sadly.

Yara guide you, Bronwen says.

Yara guide you, the departing trio recite back. And then, one by one, they turn and vanish into the murky deep.

Twenty-Six

No one speaks for a while after they have gone. Bronwen perches atop a rock, sticking and unsticking her tentacles with an unnerving *squelch*. Darya races circles around the Clearing with dizzying speed until, several dozen laps later, Rialta snaps at her to stop. And Marin cannot stop staring in the direction where Fen had once been. She hugs her tail to her chest and nestles her chin on top. Eventually, a rumble in her stomach tells her to eat something. She ignores it. A tugging in her chest that has now become familiar tells her that the sun is setting. She does not care. It is merely an observation that holds no meaning anymore, no weight or promise or definition.

Hours later, Bronwen disappears and returns with a sack full of still-wriggling fish.

Might as well eat, she mutters, dropping the sack in the middle of the Clearing. She picks out a violently yellow guppy but does not put it to her lips. Instead, she stares at it, as if daring it to give her an answer.

Darya darts up to the sack and grabs two fistfuls of fish. She tears into them immediately.

I was starving, she exclaims. She rips meat from bone with a forced enthusiasm.

Marin does not decide to speak until the words are already out of her mind. *Why can the others never come back?*

Bronwen and Darya both turn to Rialta. The older mermaid sighs.

It's a pact we made, long ago, she starts, but Marin interrupts.

So it's just an agreement? Just a promise? It can be broken then, right?

No, Bronwen interjects firmly. When Marin turns to her with questions pooling in her eyes, Bronwen shakes her head and nods back at Rialta.

Down here... we survive on trust. We survive on the ability to know that sometimes you may have to give up what you think is right for the preservation of the greater Shoal. If you disagree with a decision so completely that you cannot possibly go along with it... what's to keep you from doing it again? And again and again and again?

So you either agree or you're cast out? What the hell? Marin snaps. *That hardly seems fair -*

We have little to quarrel about here, Rialta shrugs. *It is easy to agree. Most of the time. But the times when it is not are often the times that matter most. We need to know that everyone is on the same side, fighting for the same cause. If you have a disagreement, it is a permanent one.*

But Darya breaks the rules all the time!

Hey! Darya looks up from her mutilated fish and scowls.

One person prodding and poking at the rules is different. Darya may not always follow them, but she understands why they are in place... do you not?

Darya nods, face still furrowed.

But if Fen were to apologize -

No. We cannot make exceptions. Rialta's face softens suddenly, a compassion that melts into creases on the sides of her eyes. *I am sorry, Marin. I know this is difficult for you.*

Marin does not answer. No one answers, for a while. And then -

Perhaps... Rialta starts quietly, *it would be good to have a story.*

Marin does not know that she wants to listen - she knows there will be no happy ending - but she doesn't have the energy to protest. Deep down, a part of her that she only lets out when the sun goes down believes that maybe, just maybe, if Rialta returns to the routine, the others will come back.

For just a moment, she closes her eyes and lets herself hope.

Yara

That night after dinner, Yara was lead to a new bedchamber. This one had only one window, set high up in the corner, so only the smallest triangle of light shone through. Down here, it was cold and clammy. The boudoir was chipped, the dresser worn, the carpets almost threadbare. The most ornate facet of the room was the bed. It had silk sheets and pillows stacked almost to Yara's head. Yara had the urge to rip them apart with her teeth.

The next morning, the servant who came to fetch her for breakfast took her not to the great dining hall but down a great spiral staircase to the kitchen.

The kitchen.

The servants' kitchen.

They handed her a chunk of bread. It was stale, but it felt good to tear something apart. They handed her a square of cheese and she crumbled it in her fist. She waited for someone to speak to her. She waited for someone to apologize; she waited for someone to tell her, "I am so sorry - you were right. You will rise."

No one did.

When she accidentally knocked over a mug of water, she knelt to clean the spill and heard a hiss of "whore" slip past her like the swipe of a dagger.

She retired to her bedchamber and did not leave for the rest of the morning. She perched on the windowsill, which overlooked the back gates. They were gates meant for secrecy. They were the gates meant for those the royal family did not want to have seen entering.

When the sun had crested its highest point, the gates opened. In came a procession of wooden carts. They were stacked high with a range of things that Yara couldn't have imagined - great

swaths of silk piled dozens of feet high; hundreds upon hundreds of braided bread loaves; brilliant wreaths of flowers more extravagant than any Yara could find in the garden. She stared and stared as if her gaze alone could penetrate the mystery of this parade, and when the last of the wagons had barreled through and the gates clanked shut with finality, she stared some more.

There was no servant at her door when dinner time came. She waited until the sun had set and her stomach was rumbling unbearably before she lit the candle next to her bed and snuck out of the room.

The servants' kitchen was less bustling but not altogether empty at night. Yara tucked herself into a corner with another stale chunk of bread and a few scraps of an unidentifiable meat. She picked it apart and dangled the strings into her mouth.

“You’re the prince’s whore.”

A tall, curvy woman who couldn’t be more than a few years older than Yara wiped her hands on an apron. It wasn’t a question. Yara’s mouth dropped open, unsure of how to respond, unsure of how to present herself.

“It’s not an insult,” the woman said, when Yara did not answer. She shrugged, her thin, dark eyebrows raising and lowering with a jerk. “It’s just a fact. No shame in it at all - we all have to work... and you’re not the first we’ve seen. The most interesting, possibly. We all heard about the silent girl of blood who burst into the Prince’s birthday. But you’re not the first.”

Yara tore the bread in two. It took a satisfying amount of effort.

“I heard you didn’t know. About the arrangement, about the wedding... about what it meant to bed but not wed the Prince. And I’m sorry. Especially with the ceremony so soon...”

Yara dropped the other half of her bread on the floor.

“He didn’t tell you that, either, did he? Right bastard he is. Sorry - “ the woman added quickly, “- I know you must care about him. But... well, you must have seen the carts coming in. The whole castle is in a flurry. Giving us only six days to prepare, really, I don’t know who he thinks he is. Even for a prince, that’s low and rotten.”

The woman watched Yara shrewdly as she spoke, as if trying to gauge exactly where each of her words landed on the other girl’s skin.

“Be a boring day for you, I expect. You’ll be invited to the ceremony, of course - all the staff always are... but it’ll be a lonely night, won’t it, when he’s screaming her name and licking her thigh -“

The stool Yara had been sitting on clattered over too too too loudly when she stood up and knocked a fist into the woman’s face. The skin rippled around the point of collision. Knuckle rocked bone and then did the woman’s nerves catch up. She screamed and screamed and Yara was running, out of the kitchen and down the hall and into her chambers and away away.

The Prince did not come for her that night. She wondered briefly if it had anything to do with her assault on the servant woman, but thought it not likely. No one bothered to help the help. The Prince did not come for her that night, or the night after, nor the night after that, but two days before the wedding, there was a knock at Yara’s door.

This time, she did not pretend humility. They both knew what this was. There was no hiding beneath the sheets.

He did not kiss her afterwards. Instead, when he collapsed sweating beside her, he paused for only a few breaths before wiping himself down and leaving. But Yara remembered every detail.

She pressed into her memory each time he had screamed out for Rose, each time his body had spasmed. Like it or not, he needed her.

The morning of the wedding dawned red. When Yara awoke, she saw that someone had draped a gown on her dresser. It was crimson silk that seemed to spill through her fingers. Beadwork shimmered around the collar and the sleeves. It was not as ornate as any garment that the royal family would be porting today, but it was not the wear of a servant. Someone had wanted to mark her apart.

Someone rapped on her door and Yara almost jumped.

Surely not his wedding morning... she thought. She quelled whatever was rising in her chest and ignored the notion that it might be hope. True enough, when she opened the door, it was not the prince who greeted her, but instead a mousy servant girl.

“I’ve been sent to help the lady prepare for the ceremony.”

Yara ushered her in and slammed the door behind her.

“S a beautiful gown he ordered you,” the girl said as she strode over to the dresser and cradled the garment in her arms. “You’re quite lucky, miss.”

Yara clenched her jaw. In place of a response, she dropped her nightgown. She refused to shudder for the chill of the air.

The servant girl jerked Yara’s body around like a dog on a chain as she crushed into a corset and skirts and skirts and skirts. By the time the gown went on top, her “good luck” weighed heavier than stone.

When the girl reached for Yara’s hair, Yara twisted out of her grip.

“Leave it down,” she mouthed. The girl frowned.

“I’m sorry, miss, but that’d be improper... I’ve had instruction on how to do a lady’s hair, I can make it look quite lovely - and your hair is so soft and silvery anyway, ’t’d look so nice.”

“Down,” Yara mouthed. She bared her teeth and felt the memory of a snarl in her throat. The girl swallowed loudly.

“Alright, miss. If you insist.”

The girl opened a drawer of the boudoir and took out a worn brush. Most of the bristles were missing, though Yara hadn’t touched it since she had been given the room. From her right pocket, the girl produced a jar of thick paste; from her left, a series of hairpins with sparkling red jewels set on top.

“For shine,” she told Yara as she unscrewed the jar. The paste reeked of onions. Yara watched in the splotchy mirror as the girl dabbed it on her hair and brushed it through. Her hair did look brighter, Yara had to admit. The jeweled pins glittered where the dim light caught them as if a handful of beetles were scurrying about in her hair. She liked it. It made her feel unkempt, dirty, improper; it was a reclamation of everything the Prince wanted to hide about his whore.

“You look wonderful,” the girl said, when at last Yara had been dusted and shined to perfection. Yara nodded. She resisted mouthing “I know.”

She was stunning, she knew. The Prince would probably seat her in the back of the hall, but everyone would see her anyway. Everyone would stare.

Hours later, a cluster of servants came to fetch her. The ceremony was to take place in the ballroom; after, there would be a feast, and after that, a dance. The servants were only invited, they told her, to the former, and not the latter. It was kindness to invite the commoners to the wedding. It was foolishness to invite them to the rest.

The first time Yara had seen the ballroom, it had been for the Prince's birthday, not a mild affair. It was even more elaborately decorated this time around. There was not a banister around that had been left unstrewn with bejeweled garlands and silver-painted flowers. The palace that Yara had grown up in was not at all lacking in riches, but Yara still gasped when she entered. The servants on either side of her did not react, and Yara realized that they must be the ones responsible for this transformation, even as she had hid in her room and cursed the Prince's name. None of the other servants were in finery like hers. The women wore dresses and the men embroidered cloaks, but theirs held no jewels, the fabrics only as bright as muted dusk.

They were seated, as Yara had expected, at the very back of the ballroom. All of the other guests had arrived, the ceremony waiting only for the servants to shuffle in as discretely as possible. Yara grabbed the back of her designated wooden chair and scraped it against the floor. It screamed in protest. The noise echoed off of the arched ceiling, bounced off the banisters, and seemed to amplify in the afterbirth. Almost in unison, a thousand courtly heads whipped around to stare at the peace breaker. When their gaze landed on Yara, the silence drew so taut it seemed alive. *A servant*, they seemed to say, *a servant who dares to disrupt*.

Yara smiled. She knew how radiant it was. She knew that her teeth were brilliantly white and just pointed enough to hiss, *look at how dangerous I am. Look at how I scare you. Look at your fear that you will not be able to resist*.

She glared to the front of the room where, on gilded thrones, the Queen and King sat. She held eyes with the King as she sat down with painful slowness.

Look at how I scare you.

The King cleared his throat. A band of musicians on one side of the ballroom struck up a merry tune, and one by one the audience turned back to face the front. Still, the King met her glance as challenge. Yara would not be the first to look away.

The ceremony was as bland as it was ornate. There were orators and false smiles and presentations from both parties of grand gifts. The King looked away before ten minutes had passed. Yara did not falter in her gaze.

The sun was raining down through the stained-glass ceiling when the trumpets sounded and she entered. The bride. The victor.

Yara broke her stare as the woman strode the aisle.

Victoria.

She was too plain.

Yara was confident in this. She knew it was not just the assertion of jealousy because she could see the disappointment that landed on every brow in the crowd; the masked horror of the realization that this, this lack-beauty, this non-distinguished, *this* was soon to be the Queen.

Her hair was brown but not in the way of chocolate or polished wood. Her brows were too thick and hovered flat too high above plump cheeks. She was too thin. Her dress hung off of her like white lace curtains billowing in an invisible breeze. Each step seemed to threaten to snap her spindly limbs in two. Her mouth was her only redeeming feature. It was small and bowed in just the right way, painted a deep red that accentuated every motion of her lips and seemed to glow like a beacon against the pale bone white of her skin.

Yara had not noticed that the Prince was even in the room until he stepped forward to meet his bride. He beamed as he watched her approach, eyes bright enough to light the darkest of

nights. In her turn, Victoria did not bare teeth in a smile, only let her blood lips swing upwards as he clasped her hands in his. She was a complacent bride. She would not be a good match for him, Yara knew. It would not take much force for him to break her.

And then there was a priest, or a guard, or someone with power who said words that held weight and their own kind of magic. There was more music that was too false-cheerful. The King stood and gave a speech that Yara heard but did not listen to.

And then it was over, or, at least, close to over, and the servants were hastening out of the room before anyone could notice them again. Yara split from the group on the stairs, slinking back to her own chambers. No one bothered to stop her. No one asked for her help. She wondered how many knew who or what she was.

Twenty-Seven

The morning comes. The others do not come back with it.

Instead, there are the too-few four of them. They fill so little space inside the cave that for the first time, Marin is afraid of the dark.

Do you want to come with? Bronwen asks, that morning at breakfast.

Where?

To the Surface. To scout the sailors - see what they're up to, see what we can learn about them.

Marin frowns. *Me? Are you sure it's wise?*

Bronwen shrugs. *Rialta wants us to go up in pairs... and she's not too keen on having Darya go, even with a chaperone.*

Marin laughs. The impulse is genuine, but she forces it out, forces it to echo a joy she doesn't feel. There hasn't been enough laughter lately. The ocean around them seems too large now that the Shoal's numbers are split in half; it seems too greedy, too eager to absorb sound.

What happens if they see me? Marin asks.

They won't see us. We'll be careful. And even if they do, we stay our distance. Rialta says that the worst we can do by being seen is confirm what they already know: that we exist. That we live here. If we're seen, we narrow down their search field. That's all.

If you think so...

Marin. Bronwen puts a firm hand on her shoulder and forces her to meet her gaze. *You need to stop worrying that this is your fault.*

And you have to stop telling me that it's not my fault.

I never said that, Bronwen says with a small smile. But whether or not you caused it or anyone caused it or it was the biggest of coincidences... there's nothing any of us can do now. We have our course to follow. Self-loathing, self-pity - none of these can help us. We need your energy here, Marin. With us.

Marin bites her lip, her fangs skating along the soft skin but not breaking through.

I'm right. You know I'm right.

I know, Marin answers softly.

Now come on, let's go laugh at some sailors.

Bronwen takes her to the Surface, swimming up and out in the opposite direction they would have taken to the shore. Marin notices that she has gotten better at gauging distances than she was right after she was transformed, though whether this is due to magic or her body simply acclimating to her new shape and speed she does not know. Regardless, she estimates that the spot where Bronwen draws to a hover just beneath the Surface is about a day's travel by ship off away from the Land.

The ship is just over there, Bronwen says, pointing. A hundred feet away, the water is darkened with shadow, and Marin can see something looming just above the surface.

Aren't they worried about being seen by other ships? Marin asks. If anyone passes by, won't they find it odd that they're just... sitting out here?

Would you?

Marin thinks. She wants to say *yes, of course*. She wants to tell Bronwen how fascinated she was by the sea and the ships and, above all, the sailors and their pride. But even in her memories, the lure of the sail had never been something she searched for on the horizon. She remembered

the sailors as they were on land: loud, raucous, frequently drunken. She remembered the way the ships looked tied up on the docks, all sitting neatly in their rows with their own little crew bustling about, never mixing. She remembered the excitement of hearing a new ship had come in on the tides... but she didn't remember watching for them. All the intrigue of the ships happened after they came in to dock. Harwich had seen too much of the ocean over its hundreds and hundreds of quiet years to be fascinated by it now.

I suppose not, she replies to Bronwen finally. Bronwen scrutinizes her for a moment, and then continues,

There are two different ways to go about this. We can stay here, at a distance. We'll be able to see the deck, or at least a portion of it, but we likely won't be able to hear what they're saying. Staying at a distance also ensures that we can escape quickly. Even if they spot us, we can dive under and be back to the Shoal before they can figure out what exactly happened or how to react.

And the other way? Marin asks.

We swim to the underside of the ship and climb up to the Surface. We won't be able to see the deck over the curve of the ship - we can't get that far up without our gills breaching the water - but we'll be able to hear almost everything they say. It'll give us a more concrete idea what they are planning, what they know.

And it's more dangerous, Marin finishes for her.

And it's more dangerous, Bronwen agrees. *But in the end, Rialta thinks it's better to know what we're up against. She thinks the reward of actually being prepared this time will outweigh the risks of being caught.*

I'll go to the far side of the ship, to the stern, Bronwen continues. Can you take the bow on the near side?

Marin takes a deep breath and nods.

Don't let yourself go above for more than a few minutes at a time. We'll meet back here in an hour's time. If anything goes wrong, don't be afraid to call out for me. The men won't hear it, I swear - the fools don't hear anything, unless you scream it in their ear. Bronwen grins and Marin gives her a weak smile back.

It'll be fine, Marin tells herself. It's not like before.

She thinks of the shark from weeks - months? Years? It felt like longer - ago; she remembers how powerful she felt then, how gloriously inhuman. She tries baring her teeth but only manages a weak grimace. Now, she feels less warrior, more fish to be caught and left to flounder.

I am stronger than them.

She doesn't realize she has spoken aloud until Bronwen's grin widens and she replies, *Yes, you are. Remember that.*

When Marin's face does not release its tension, Bronwen reaches out again to squeeze her shoulder.

I'm not going to make you do this, Bronwen promises, but that doesn't mean I don't think you can. What they did to you was horrible. I may not know the details, I don't need to, but I know that it was terrifying and wrong. And maybe Marin, fragile, human Marin did not survive, but you did - Marin the strong. Marin the Siren. Maybe facing them again is exactly what you need to do.

Bronwen looks at her. Her eyes are warm and full of intensity and, though they look nothing alike, there is something there that reminds Marin of her mother. Suddenly, all Marin can think is how little she knows of Bronwen's past. What happened to her and Vanora? What trauma could possibly have taken not one sister but two?

What do you say?

I - Marin pauses. She inhales. She tries not to see Eric when she blinks, or moves, or breathes. She swallows back the dream or not-dream or almost-waking vision of his mouth on her own, which feels at once ancient and as if it happened only yesterday. *I can do this.*

I know. Let's go.

Bronwen takes off, her tentacles pulsing in powerful rhythm. Marin follows her, trying to feel the same strength in her own muscles and fins. It takes only a few too-short moments before the light above them dims with the weight of the *Harbinger*. Bronwen glances back at her one last time before disappearing over her edge of the ship. Just like that, Marin is alone.

The bottom of the ship is only a few feet above her head. She reaches up her hand and closes her eyes as her fingers meet the water-worn wood. She curls her nails under and fights the urge to dig them in. She wonders how deep she could scratch. In her mind's eye, she watches as her talons split the hull of the ship as easy as tearing through parchment; she hears the crack of the wood and watches as the water siphons in, so hungry and so restless. It would be easy this way. Poetic, too.

But instead she lets her nails trail harmlessly against the wood as she kicks herself up towards the Surface.

It never ceases to surprise her how loud it is above.

As soon as her ears breach the top of the water, she can hear the crash of the waves reverberating like thunder. A seabird *caws* in the distance, shrill and echoing. The wind whips into the sails and makes them crack and snap in argument.

And, of course, there is the sound of the men.

Marin remembers what voices sound like, of course. She can perfectly recall the tambour of each word Cora told her on her last visit. But the men are different, and it is almost startling. It takes her a moment to adjust to their loudness, the way their words seem to boom almost as loud as the sails themselves. Even without picking out individual words, Marin can just *hear* how certain they are, how unapologetic.

One of them - Dillon? Burgess? After however many months, and without seeing their faces, Marin cannot tell which - is shouting orders, something harsh about the sails and knots. Someone is singing, or, at least, they start to sing, only to have someone snap at them to shut up. And then, in response -

Marin's stomach tightens as if to strangle itself. And then, in response, had come a barking laugh that could only belong to one person. *Eric*.

Marin presses her palms against the grain of the wood and stretches upward until the water laps dangerously at the top of her gills. She waits to hear Eric again, and when he booms again with laughter, her stomach squirms again. She does not wonder why she is so eager to hear this, or why her breath seems to catch when she does. She does not wonder why this feels so much like happiness.

The first speaker (Dillon, she decides, not Burgess after all) calls out for the men to break for supper. The clamor dies down slowly, until only the wind and the waves remain. Marin thinks

that she should yell out to Bronwen, to ask if they should stay though the men were all gone, but then a voice dances over the side of the ship.

“It was a Friday morn when we set sail, and we were not far from the land...” the voice sings. It is deep and vibrates Marin’s very core with the sound. Her whole body tingles as the voice continues, “when our captain, he spied a fish mermaid with a comb and a glass in her hand...”

“Oh the ocean waves do roll... and the stormy winds do blow...”

The song is familiar. She doesn’t know why, but she knows it’s not just the sound itself that shivers through her body.

“And we poor sailors are skipping at the top, while the landlubbers lie down below, below, below... while the landlubbers lie down below...”

With a jolt, Marin realizes why it sounds familiar: it’s the song the sailors had chanted when she was aboard the *Harbinger*; yes. But, moreover, it’s the song that Darya had used to Call Eric. It might be a coincidence. Anyone could be singing. But the singer could be...

Marin cranes her neck. There, just over the rail, she glimpses a head of thick black hair. A hand trails along the wood. If she squints, she can make out the fingers, their cracked skin and thick callous. As Eric walks lazily around the edge of the ship, the railing begins to block her view. Soon, unless she moves, she will lose sight of him completely.

It’s stupid. It’s foolish and dangerous and, anyway, Bronwen had told her to stick to her end of the ship. But most of the men are belowdecks, and the last time she saw Eric he may have been dead, and before Marin realizes she has given the order to her tail to move, she is following him.

“Oh the ocean waves do roll,” Eric repeats, and Marin’s lips move in tandem. She finds herself mouthing the words - not singing them, certainly not *Calling* them - as if they were a substitute for conversation. As if by forming the words along with him, Marin is closer to him. He stops halfway along the ship and looks out over the horizon. Marin aligns her palms on the ship’s hull with the position of Eric’s on the rail.

She wonders how much he remembers. It was a common enough shanty for the sailors to sing. Marin herself had belted it out when climbing the sails or swabbing the decks. That Eric had chosen this particular ballad meant nothing at all. Memory loss happens around trauma, Rialta had told her. It is entirely possible - probable, maybe - that Eric does not even remember being Called in the first place, that his recollections of that day begin only when Marin dragged him out of the water.

Marin does not know which she wants more: for him to have forgotten, or for him to remember that it was she who killed him. She was the one who watched as she drowned. It might be nice to have him fear her, for him to know the scars that could be left by neglect.

She watches him as he runs a hand through his hair. His fist clenches at the top.

“Where are you?” he murmurs. “What have you become?”

Marin falls back under the water in shock. For a moment, she forgets how to breathe.

It’s an ambiguous phrase. He could be talking about Dillon, or his family, or anyone else from his past that Marin is blind to. But from the way his knuckles clench in his hair and on the rail, and the glint in his eyes... Marin’s stomach clenches and she knows he is talking about her.

She kicks her way back to the Surface, breaching with only the slightest of splashes. She leans to look back up at Eric

Only to find him staring right back at her.

Marin does not move.

Eric does not move.

Marin does not move even though she knows she should she knows he could kill her she knows he is so so too too close

“Mal?” Eric whispers, the sound escaping like a fog. He looks behind him both ways, then repeats, slightly louder, “Malachi?”

Dive dive dive dive dive, her brain is screaming at her, but instead Marin locks Eric’s bright eyes in her own and slowly nods.

Marin, she mouths. She does not know why, but she wants him to know this. *My name is Marin.*

Eric either doesn’t see or doesn’t understand her, but he continues speaking to her anyway.

“I thought I dreamed it. You. Dillon was more ready to believe my own story than I was...”

He breaks off and just stares at her. Marin is too-conscious of her gills and her tail and her fangs - can he see her fangs from here? She curls her lips over them.

“You’re real, aren’t you? I need to know.” He runs his hand through his hair again, this time slapping it back down on the rail with a harsh *thud* when it completes its circuit. “I thought I dreamed it... because of what I did to you - what Dillon did to you. I didn’t sleep for a week after that, you know. When I finally did, I had nightmares. I saw you, under the water, screaming and... and rotting and... in one dream, I was there with you, and we were on fire...”

Marin reaches her hand further up the hull, as if, if she tries hard enough, she can touch him. She does not want to forgive him - she does not know if she can - but she wants to hold him, and,

more than that, she wants him to understand the difference; she wants him to know that pain and wanting can exist hand in hand.

“Who are you talking to?”

A second voice pounds across the deck.

“No one.”

“Doesn’t sound like it.”

Burgess, she thinks. She hugs the hull of the ship closer and retreats as far under as she can. Eric turns around and leans his back on the rail. She does not know if it is enough to block Burgess’s view of her should he decide to peer out over the rail, but she does not want to return to Bronwen empty handed, and this might be her chance to overhear something useful.

“I thought I saw something,” Eric answers, and his tone is so smooth that ice runs through Marin’s veins and for a moment she fears that he is mere syllables away from selling her out. “I thought it might be one of them, and if I talked to it, I could coax it out.”

The word *it* stings Marin like talons, but she grits her teeth and forces it back. He is posturing for Burgess, she tells herself. He needs to act detached.

“And?”

Eric shrugs. “Must’ve just been a fish or something.”

Burgess grunts. “That’s what I’ve been saying. Crom thinks he saw one of them the other night. Said she had sleek hair and skin as dark as dusk. I asked him, if that was true, how could he see her when the sun wasn’t out? We’ve been out here too long, I say. We’re all seeing things. Doesn’t make ‘em mermaids.”

Eric snorts in fake amusement.

A pause.

Then -

“Dillon’s getting restless.”

Eric barks out a forced laugh. “Dillon’s always restless.”

“Not like this. He reckons we should start dropping mines, force them out.”

Marin’s heart is throbbing fit to burst as it jumps to her throat and lodges there. *Mines*. Explosives. The mermaids may be stronger than the average man, but Marin didn’t think they were fireproof.

“And if you hit one of them?” Eric asks. Marin hopes she is not imagining the hint of panic that tinges his otherwise neutral tone. She hopes he is afraid. She hopes he is worried about her. “Then what? The lore says they turn to mist, vanish. Do you think Dillon will be less restless once they’re all dead and gone?”

“Beats sitting here day in, day out and chasing our own shadows.”

Eric exhales. In the silence that follows, Marin waits to hear him agree with Burgess. When he doesn’t, she tries to keep herself from feeling relief.

“You should grab something to eat before it’s gone,” Burgess says after a while.

“I’ll be down in a bit. I’m just going to clear my head a while.”

“Suit yourself.”

Eric waits until Burgess’s steps have faded from the deck before he turns back around to face the sea. Marin watches as he bites his lip and sighs.

“You heard all of that?” he asks her finally.

Marin nods.

“Dillon doesn’t want to kill you. We don’t know for sure what happens when a - when one of you is killed. But Dillon is superstitious enough that he’s not going to risk watching his prize dissolve into sea foam.”

Eric’s lips form apologetically around the word “prize,” but it still rumbles in Marin’s gut, reminds her that to him - no matter on what level - she is not enough to be a person.

“But Dillon also knows that if he hurts one of you, the others will come for vengeance. He’s not stupid. He’s not going to explode the entire ocean. I don’t know how many mines he has, but it’s enough to cause the harm he intends. It’s more than you could all survive, should he... get angry.”

So why don’t you stop him? Marin thinks.

“Mal, you need to leave here - not just you, all of you. Whatever you are, however many of you... it’s not enough. Dillon is determined, and now he’s frustrated, and he’s not going to stop until he’s won or he’s dead.”

So why don’t you kill him?

“Go. Tell them - tell the others. Warn them what Dillon is about to do... warn him what he’s *capable* of doing. If anyone knows it, it’s you.”

Marin stares up at him. She waits for him to feel the weight of his words. She wants to see some shred of guilt in his eyes, and when she finds none, she wants to be able to hate him for it. For Eric’s part, he looks at her like a lost opportunity. Marin wonders which part of her is which.

With one last glance that is nothing that she needs it to be, Marin turns and dives below the water.

Twenty-Eight

I say we sneak on board and ka-boom everything before they can.

Darya's teeth are bared, her tail splashing from side to side, and Marin thinks that she has never looked more like a predator.

And how, exactly, were you planning to get off before they explode? Rialta asks with a raised eyebrow.

Darya frowns. *Very quickly?*

Rialta snorts. *Good try.*

Eric - Marin starts, but a piercing glare from Darya makes her amend quickly, *I mean, the sailor said that we should run. Maybe he's right.*

You think we should abandon our home? Bronwen asks her softly. Marin chews her lip and thinks before responding.

I know... that I haven't been here as long. I know it's not as much home to me as it is to all of you. But we could come back, in a few months, a year. What's a few cycles of the moon to us who live forever?

Bronwen shakes her head. *You're right. You haven't been here long. You don't know what it means to finally have a home, have a place that is sacred and special to you. And besides, if we don't fight, if we leave them alive, there will be more. If we leave, we'll never be able to come back.*

Maybe we were meant to wander.

Is it really wandering if we have no other options? Rialta cuts in. *Can we be "wanderers" if we're being chased?*

Marin blinks sullenly back.

If you won't think of us... Bronwen starts again, ... think of Fen.

Marin clenches her jaw. *Fen isn't here anymore.*

Exactly. And neither is Vanora, and neither is Nerissa. So if Dillon and his lackeys start dropping mines, they will have no one to warn them.

So we find them and we warn them! Marin bursts out.

And we run and we run and we run? Darya snaps. *That's not fair to us, Marin, and you know it. We either end this here and we end it now or it - never - stops. Agh!*

Darya screeches in frustration. *What happened? You were all gung-ho, let's kill them, let's finish this, let's all live, and now what?*

I don't know!

Darya's mouth drops open and her eyebrows leap up. *It's him, isn't it? Your sailor boy. Fen was right. You can't stand the thought of hurting him.*

So what if that's true? Marin whips back. She doesn't want to show how much Darya's words have stung her; she doesn't want Darya's words to have stung her. *He helped us. We wouldn't know about the mines unless he made sure we overheard. Now we have time to react, to plan - time to get out with everyone alive!*

Oh, that was very kind of him. Letting us know exactly how they plan to kill us. Do you know what would have been "helpful," Marin? If he stopped them. If he even tried to dissuade them. And yet, there he is, dining and fighting and working with those who won't stop until we're bound and gagged and - and - Darya splutters, her hands gripping into fists so tight that tiny drops of blood float out from where her talons have dug into her skin.

Marin... Rialta interrupts smoothly. Darya is right. We cannot pretend that anything he offers us can make up for the fact that there is a ship of men who have been hunting us for weeks.

Then we kill them! Marin pleads. We kill all the others, just... just leave Eric alive. For me. Don't you owe me that?

We don't owe anyone anything, Bronwen says. The words are not unkind, but they still make Marin feel like she is a toddler who has been caught and reprimanded.

I'm not saying I will try to kill him, Bronwen adds, and I think the others -

Darya snarls and Bronwen amends, I think Rialta will agree. But if it comes to a fight, I will not take my attention away from protecting one of us to protecting one of them.

Marin chews her lip. She thinks of Eric, who tried. She thinks of Fen, who ran not like a coward but like a peacekeeper. She thinks of them both, bent and bleeding, and wonders which she would run to first.

I'm sorry, Marin says. She does not meet anyone's eyes. I know you're right. I know you're all right. We stay, and we fight, and if that means -

Eric bent, Eric bleeding, Fen Fen Fen.

Whatever that means, she forces herself to continue, we fight.

We fight, and soon, Rialta adds. The longer we wait, the higher the risk that they'll start dropping mines. I say we have a day, two at most.

We'll need weapons, Bronwen says. Nothing sophisticated. We don't have the time to find or make anything special, but there are a few wrecks I know of where we can get exactly what we need. A few daggers, maybe a rapier or two. There are four of us and ten of them, and no matter

how strong we are, those odds are still too skewed against us to risk relying on our fists and teeth alone.

Once we have those, we'll want to practice with them somewhere on Land, Rialta adds. It's one thing to know how to slice and jab while counterweighting your own tail, or the current. It's another to have to balance on feet.

When Marin laughs at this, all three of the others give her weighted looks.

You have to remember, most of us do not take trips onto Land lightly, Rialta says, and it sounds like a chiding. I don't think any of us have worn our legs in thirty years.

More than thirty, Darya says, quiet as a knife is. Being human isn't an experience we all like to remember.

Marin looks away. There is a pause in which they all think about the past, or someone else's past, or a past in which none of this has happened.

We'll scavenge for weapons tonight, Rialta says. Tomorrow, when the sun rises, we'll find someplace quiet, where we won't be disturbed, and relearn how our bodies can fight. We'll plan the attack for tomorrow, just after the sun goes down. If we're lucky, they'll be getting ready to sleep - or better, getting drunk.

And right now? Marin asks.

We breathe. We sit together and we breathe while we still can.

Twenty-Nine

The first half of the trip to the wreck is made in silence. Marin feels as if each of her limbs are bands of rubber, stretching and stretching and stretching with an unseen tension, waiting for the smallest of *twang*'s to make them snap. The water between her and Bronwen seems thick with this same tautness. From the stiffness of Bronwen's arms, the pointed determination with which her tentacles pulse through the water, Marin knows that she is not imagining it. Whatever this energy is, Bronwen feels it, too.

I understand, Bronwen says, when an hour of nothing but current has passed between them. *You. And Eric. I don't empathize with you, exactly, but I understand.*

Darya doesn't. Marin says quietly.

Bronwen laughs. *Did you really expect her to? What Darya knows of humans - what Darya has seen and felt and been burned by - none of it has lead her to feel particularly warm and cheerful towards them.*

But you do?

In a manner.

Marin waits for her to elaborate. She is left waiting for a while.

In life... Bronwen starts, and then she trails off. Marin can almost see her thoughts forming in the storm of her expression.

As humans, Bronwen tries again, *Vanora and I...*

Bronwen breaks off for a second time. Marin does not push her. For someone usually so calm and collected, it is fiercely unnerving to see Bronwen rendered incapable of speech. Marin gives her space, though she is not certain what she'll find when Bronwen takes it.

We died, Bronwen finishes finally. We died, and it was at the hands of other humans, and that was that. There was no kindness or mercy that we found. But as mermaids, as Sirens, as Darya and Fen are fond of saying, things were so very different. Not just with the Shoal, but on Land, too.

What do you mean?

You are not the only among us to have found a human love.

Bronwen's words hit the water and strike like a bell. For once, Marin does not try to protest or deny the claims of her affection for Eric.

You fell in love with a human? Marin asks. Bronwen shakes her head.

I didn't. But Vanora did.

For a while, Bronwen explains, the first year or so - you have to understand that neither of us was eager to go back on Land. But Vanora was always the most social of the two of us, and after a while... with only the others for company... well. You can understand how quickly she got bored. She didn't ask to go on Land for companionship, per se, but simply to experience something different for once. The first time I went with her, we spent an entire night just staring into empty shop windows, imagining the people who would go there in the daytime. What their lives must be like, who they saw and fought with and loved...

When Vanora wanted to go more often, we started going down shore to a larger city. It took longer to get there, but its size meant we wouldn't be noticed, even if we went in the middle of the day. Rialta wasn't keen on that, as you can imagine, but even she could see how much happier Vanora was.

She's quiet, as you know her, Bronwen says, and at this Marin nods, but she wasn't always like that. She isn't always like that, she just needs... well, people. Lots of people. Van thrives around people.

I'm not as social as she is, Bronwen adds. I don't need the constant company. But still, there was so much to do in the city that we could never find in the Shoal, or even in the smaller towns. Shops and pubs and markets in the streets...

Bronwen smiles sadly at Marin. If things were different, maybe I would want to take you there sometime.

Marin wants to say that if things were different, she would say yes, but she senses that Bronwen is not yet finished and that this story does not need her voice, so she stays quiet.

At the peak of our visits, we were going once or twice a week. We didn't wait for the moon to be full. I know it made Rialta nervous, and there were days and weeks at a time where Fen wouldn't speak to us. Eventually, it grew to be too much, even for me. I didn't want to leave Vanora alone, but Changing that often is exhausting, and someday, it - Bronwen draws a shaky breath. Well. You know. Somedays it hurts to be reminded of what you no longer have, especially if you never had it to begin with.

So I told Vanora that I didn't want to go as often, that I maybe didn't even want to go at all. And she didn't get mad - it was so irritating, growing up, but Van never gets mad - she just told me that she understood, but she was going to keep returning to Land regardless of who did or did not come with her. This made us uneasy, made me uneasy, but by then we had passed the point of being able to stop her.

Each night, she would come home and tell me what she had seen, what she had done and where she had gone. Part of it was excitement; no matter how many times she made the trip onto Land, it never seemed to lose its newness, its appeal. But part of it, I think, was that she felt the need to reassure me that it was alright, that she had done nothing wrong and we were all safe.

And then, one night... Bronwen shakes her head and shrugs. She came back and didn't say a thing.

What happened? Marin asks.

She had met someone. A man. Bronwen smiles with rue in her eyes. It took weeks until I finally coaxed her into telling me. I was furious that she had kept it a secret, but at the same time I understood. A man - handsome, white, and well-off - courting a young woman - black, mute, and alone? What conclusions would you have drawn?

But he loved her, she said. He gave her trinkets and sweets and spoiled her silly. And maybe I was a little envious, at first, but mostly I was happy for her. It was like Vanora was given a second chance at being human. It was like she was given a second chance to be ordinary, in the loveliest of ways.

But what happened? Marin asks again.

Nothing. They were happy.

Marin frowns and meets Bronwen's eyes, trying to find a shred of scorn or pity or falseness.

But Vanora -

He died, of course, Bronwen says after a while. She looks straight forward, her voice half conversation and half distance too far for Marin to cross. He got old and Van didn't. It broke her heart in the worst way for it to break, because she didn't even notice it until it was too late.

People don't decay overnight. It was slow, and it was painful, and they were too in love to care. And then one day, Van stopped going to the Surface, and we all knew not to ask why.

I thought you said they were happy, Marin says quietly.

They were. But just because stories don't have violent endings doesn't mean they can't have sad ones.

They lapse into silence as the ruins of an enormous warship gather in front of them. If any of the ships they had explored truly merited the title of "wreck," it would be this one. Its wood, which is almost completely obscured by a thick layer of moss, has been scattered so only the slightest of outlines to hint at its ship-ness remains. As Marin and Bronwen swim over the outer ring of debris, a handful of heavy cannons leer up at them from where they are half-buried in the sand.

What are we looking for? Marin asks.

Depends. How hard do you want to stab them?

What?!

It was a joke, Marin. But it does depend on what you are comfortable with. Daggers, knives, shorter things... they're more intimate. You have to be prepared to look them in the eye as they bleed. You have to be prepared for who you may be looking in the eye as they bleed.

Marin clenches her teeth to suppress the chill that runs through her at Bronwen's words. *I think... I think I'll want a sword.*

Bronwen eyes her, and then nods. *That's probably for the best. I know I've seen a few of those hidden around here. Just...* Bronwen pauses and squints her eyes, as if deciding how best to phrase it. *Just know that some of them may still be attached to bones.*

This time, Marin does not hold in the shiver.

The other wrecks that Marin had seen were largely still intact, still explorable the way that one might creep through an old or even crumbling house. This one seems less resting place and more testimony to the strength of the ocean. This one reminds Marin why Nerissa is always afraid of forgetting. The water has not sought to preserve this ship but to reclaim her.

Where, with the other wrecks, she is used to being able to float through and stumble upon things useful, with this one she has to search. She hovers just above the ocean floor, so close that her tail drags a dotted line in the dust every time it slaps down to propel her forward. Nestled against the remains of the outer wall of the ship, she finds the grip of something that looks promisingly sword-like. Remembering Bronwen's words, she steels herself for what she might find before she claws her fingers into the sand and starts to dig.

She doesn't find bone until she has sifted through the fifth fistful of earth. The sand pools and whirls in the water around her fingers until she is left with a cluster of white too hard to be wood and too soft to be stone. She thinks for a moment that she should be repulsed, but she isn't. Whatever humanity had lingered on the bones had peeled away and dissolved far ago along with the flesh. Marin pins one of the bones between her thumb and index finger and holds it up to her other hand. A knucklebone, maybe, once wound tight in a grip around the sword buried beside it.

Marin isn't sure why, but she presses the knuckle to her lips and kisses it. It does not give beneath her touch.

This was a person, a voice in her head - which sounds a lot like Nerissa - reminds her. Do not stare. Let them rest.

Marin keeps the bone at her mouth as she thinks a soft prayer, though even as she does, she questions why. It has been decades, maybe even centuries, since this body was given up. If the sailor had not found rest by now, she doubts there is any god who cares enough to let it.

But she still ties the bone in her hair with the intent of settling it in Nerissa's shrine. She wonders if anyone will keep up with it, now that the other mermaid has gone. Would Nerissa return, though she couldn't come back to the Shoal? If she didn't, would the ghosts miss those who had prayed?

If she didn't, would there be anyone left pray for the sailors on the *Harbinger*?

Marin shakes her head to clear her thoughts and returns to unearthing the sword. When most of the sand around it has been dug up, she grips the hilt and shudders it free.

Rialta had sent them to search for weapons, and this decidedly fit the bill. Though it was rusted and the blade was nothing close to sharp, Marin could still tell that this was something meant to wound. It was not adorned or elaborately carved. It was not a status marker, but a sword which was only ever meant to be a sword.

Marin tightens her fist and swings the sword in front of her. It takes a queer sort of strength to slice through the water, and for a moment - before she has time to stifle the thought and bury it - Marin wonders how akin the resistance is to that of the flesh.

You found something? Bronwen swims up beside her. She reaches out for the sword and Marin gives it to her. *Hm.*

Bronwen's eyes dart around until they settle on a boulder on the opposite side of the wreck. Bronwen's muscles tighten and she hurls herself towards it with an alarming speed. At the last

moment, she swings the sword in a mighty arc to clash down on the rock. It hits with a reverberation so strong that Marin clamps her hands over her ears.

Good, Bronwen says as she swims back to Marin. You never know with these old things. Sometimes the rust can eat away at the blade, make them wont to shatter when you smash them on things. And while I wouldn't like to be the sailor who got splinters of a sword stuck in his middle... it's probably best that this one stay intact.

She hands the sword back, her fingers lingering on the blade. *This'll need sharpening, but we can do that easily enough.*

Did you find something?

Bronwen nods and points up into her hair. Up close, Marin can see where she has tangled two daggers in a knot on the top of her head.

They're small, Marin says. You'll have to be close.

I don't have anything I'm afraid to lose.

Bronwen's words are deliberate, and Marin knows that when she says "anything," she means "anyone." Marin does not know if she should be jealous.

Thirty

Marin and Bronwen get back to the Shoal before the others, and they wait in silence. Marin clasps and unclasps her hand around the sword hilt, as if suddenly it will feel lighter or heavier under her touch. She swings first the flat side of the blade through the water, then slices with the thin to feel the resistance pare away.

When Darya and Rialta return, they dump out a large sack in the middle of the clearing. A half-dozen swords and daggers clatter out, ranging in length from the size of Marin's hand to half of her height.

We figured we might as well bring them all, Rialta says. *We can all get accustomed to a variety of different weapons, and this way even if -* She breaks off and shares a meaningful look with Bronwen. *Well. We'll have enough, regardless of what happens.*

Marin frowns. She tries not to interpret this as hope that the other half of the Shoal would somehow break the pact and return. The idea of Fen holding a dagger and Nerissa slashing through skin makes her nauseated. She had not wanted them to leave, but now she does not know how she could ever wish to ask this of them.

Bronwen heads over to the pile and starts picking through the weapons. She tosses a dagger to Darya, who tracks its slow path through the water and catches it lazily.

Sharpen this, yeah? Bronwen asks, and Darya nods. She scrounges the sand and finds a small rock. She scrapes it against the blade with a noise that vibrates through the water so shrilly Marin clasps her hands over her ears. Darya examines the blade, shrugs, and continues the horrible scraping. Rialta picks a rock and follows suit, and, after Bronwen raises her eyebrows in hint,

Marin does the same. She grits her teeth together as she brings the rock down on the rusted steel. Soon, the water is alive with the ringing.

There's a stretch of shore not too far from here that's hidden by cliffside, Rialta calls over the cacophony. We did a little searching once we had gathered the weapons. We should be able to practice with these there without being interrupted.

And if we are interrupted? Marin thinks, but she keeps silent.

If we leave soon, we should have time to rest before - Bronwen pauses and licks her lips. *Before we meet the men.*

Marin wonders what other word she would have chosen. Before the slaughter? Before the war?

Before we fight for our survival, Marin decides to think of it. Before we fight to keep Fen safe.

Rialta tosses the last of the sharpened swords back into the sack and slings it over her back like, in another life, she might have carried a child.

The Land which Rialta and Darya have spotted to fight cannot be more than a day and half's journey from Harwich, yet Marin could never remember having been there; it is the kind of place, she supposes, you would not be able to find unless you already knew where it was. It is the kind of place which is perfect for secrecy and creatures who do not exist.

Ready? Rialta asks, once the water has gotten so shallow that they can no longer stay completely submerged. Bronwen and Marin nod, but Darya's eyes have gone wide and her jaw is tensed.

Yes, she whispers, and it is the most unconvincing “yes” that Marin has ever heard. She is pale and her entire body is clenched as if suppressing a tremor. Marin reaches over and squeezes the younger girl’s hand. Darya replies with a death grip. Marin has never seen her so unnerved.

It’ll be okay, Marin whispers, pulsing her fingers against Darya’s hand. *I promise. It’ll be okay.*

I know, Darya says. The lie sits between them, scattered only when Bronwen begins to groan with the start of the Change.

It’ll be okay, Marin says once more, and then she closes her eyes and wills herself to be anything but supernatural.

Marin never thinks the Change is easy, but this morning it comes to her as if it were waiting, her human body buzzing just below her skin like a dog pawing at the door awaiting his master’s return. When her back arches and a scream slips through her, it feels less agony and more release. She almost welcomes the knives slashing at her fins legs fins legs fins -

And then it is over, as suddenly as it had begun. Marin pushes herself up onto the shore and shivers the water off. The morning is crisp, but the early sun hits her skin with just enough warmth. Her feet still sear with each step and she still stumbles for a few minutes before she remembers her balance, but today... today she feels strong and alive, and she cannot help but smile as she sucks air in through her nose.

She looks around. Rialta is still sitting on the sand, her calloused hands massaging her feet. She grips one calf and plants her foot in the sand, testing her weight on it as if the lower half of her body is some grotesque marionette, incapable of independent movement. Bronwen is on her feet already, though she hunches over and rests her hands on her thighs for support. And Darya -

She is lying in the sand, her feet still dangling in the water. For a moment, she does not appear to be breathing, and Marin's heart leaps into her throat as she races to the younger girl's side. As she kneels down, she realizes that Darya is indeed alive, but she is still as a statue. The only movement is in the gentle rise and fall of her chest, the blinking of her eyes which are pointed to the sky. Marin lays a hand on Darya's shoulder, and Darya shakes her head viciously, her meaning clear: *leave me alone*.

Marin chews her lip but nods and turns back to the others.

Bronwen and Rialta have made their, albeit shaky, way to their feet. Bronwen pulls the twin daggers from her hair and tests them out. She gives a tentative jab first this way and then that. Her muscles swell and tighten with the movements. Marin's eyes skate along her body, not intimately but curiously. Bronwen is not as tall as she is, but she is bigger; her thighs are thick with muscle, and though her steps are hesitant, she is fully in command as she plants her feet in the sand. For not the first time in the past week, Marin wonders where Bronwen came from and what she had seen.

Rialta presses the sword into Marin's hand. It is even heavier on land than in the water, and Marin almost staggers under its unexpected weight. She is grateful for whatever strength she had built up from hauling ropes on the *Harbinger*, and even more so for the mysterious strength her body had gained after Yara's transformation. Without it, she doubts she would be able to swing the sword even with two hands.

Rialta picks up a long dagger, halfway between the length of Marin's sword and Bronwen's own weapons. She slashes it with no great skill or technique, but with a terrifying speed. Even if

the sailors were more prepped to fight than they were, Marin doubts that they would be quick of mind or body enough to evade Rialta's assault.

Bronwen gestures at Marin to come join her. Marin looks at the length of her sword, looks at the smallness of Bronwen's daggers in comparison, and shakes her head.

It's not fair, she mouths. Bronwen raises an eyebrow and fixes her with a dark stare. Though she cannot hear Bronwen's thoughts, Marin grasps her meaning with crystalline clarity.

Nothing is fair, Marin imagines Bronwen saying. *The sailors will not fight fair, so why should we play as if they will?*

Marin nods at her and steps forward. She raises the sword in front of her, feeling her muscles already straining at the effort. She digs her heels into the sand and prepares for -

Bronwen slashes at her sword arm with unexpected quickness, darting around her blade before Marin has time to swing it in response. Marin stumbles backward in retreat, waiting for Bronwen to stop her attack so she can breathe and get her bearings, but no relief comes. Bronwen keeps pressing forward, and Marin can do nothing but dodge, trapped in some kind of twisted dance across the sand. Her feet scramble for purchase and slide out from beneath her.

She gasps as she tumbles down to the ground and lands sharply on her rear. Bronwen pins her down with one hand and presses a dagger to her throat. Her eyes glitter with a mixture of pride and severity.

Got you, she seems to say.

And then she presses herself up off of Marin and extends a hand to help her to her feet.

Work on it, Bronwen mouths, each word slow and deliberate so Marin cannot miss the meaning. Marin nods, and Bronwen goes over to spar with Rialta.

Marin turns to Darya, who is still laying in the sand. She grabs a sword from Rialta's bag and works it into Darya's fist. Darya does not move, but neither does her hand go slack on the sword. Marin crouches above her and grips the other girl's shoulders.

Come on. Get up.

Darya shakes her head again, but this time Marin ignores her and jerks her up.

Come on.

No.

Come on! Marin yanks under Darya's shoulders one more time, pulling her to her feet. Darya glares at her.

I need time, she mouths, and something inside Marin snaps.

You need time? That's great, Marin snarls at her, the words landing infuriatingly unvoiced in the air. *We all need time. I'm sure we'd all love to have days - a week - hell, an eternity - before our home bursts into ash and we all are either captured or dead. And I'm sorry, Darya, I'm really sorry for whatever you saw or went through before you came to the Shoal. I'm sorry that you have to be human again. But at this point, we don't have any other choice, and if you weren't prepared for this - if you were all talk and no fight - if you were a coward - maybe you should have thought of that sooner and left with the others, because then I wouldn't be wasting my time.*

Marin glares at her, her chest heaving. Darya stares back blankly, and Marin knows that the other girl hasn't understood a single word of the tirade. Marin huffs a sigh.

Fine.

She turns away. She'll practice on her own, and if Darya is the first to die because of her own stubbornness, well, it wouldn't be Marin's fault. Marin scowls and starts to swing her sword against an imaginary opponent and -

Cold steel slams down on her shoulder and she almost falls.

Marin whirls around, bringing her sword up. Darya raises her own arm for another attack, and their blades clash together with a jolt so satisfying that Marin almost grins.

There we go, she thinks. She grips the hilt of the sword tighter and advances on Darya for a counterattack.

Darya is more closely matched to her than Bronwen. She is tiny and agile, but she is reckless. The blows she attempts to land are not placed with strategy, and Marin finds herself able to predict their path often enough to block the majority.

She swings her sword right to cut off a stab to her stomach almost without thinking. She knows she is not a "good" swordsman, but she discovers a talent for pretending. She discovers that she is able to land more swipes at Darya when she slings her blade with confidence than with fear. She starts paying less attention to her sword arm and more to her opponent. Marin notices that Darya's left shoulder twitches back just before she slices her sword to the right. She learns that whenever Darya's right heel steadies itself deeper in the sand, she should prepare for a blow to her upper body; if it is the left heel that plants itself, she should defend her legs.

Marin knows it is dangerous, this false confidence, this pretended expertise. But in the moment, she cannot feel anything but strength, and she delights in it. When the sword tugs her arms with momentum, she smiles and almost laughs.

In the end, she manages to knock Darya to her knees. She grabs her hair from behind and reaches around to press her sword against Darya's throat. When Marin helps her up, both girls are panting with effort. The sun is high in the sky by now, and though it is not warm, Marin is dripping with sweat. She shakes her hair out of her eyes and drops down to the sand to rest.

Bronwen clatters her daggers down beside her and sits.

You're alright, she mouths.

Thanks.

There is so much more that Marin wants to say, but without words, no gesture seems sufficient.

Will "alright" be good enough? she wants to ask. *Are our strength and speed enough to overtake an entire crew?*

Is it stupid to have hope?

Instead of asking anything, she gives Bronwen a tired half-smile.

Rialta steps into their vision and points at the sky, where the sun leers almost directly above them. Rialta moves her finger to point at an angle to the west, and then points at the sea. Marin understands the crude sign: an hour or so more of practice-sparring, and then they needed to return to the water before their bodies Changed of their own accord.

She leans back into the sand and closes her eyes, allowing herself a few more minutes of rest. She thumbs the point of the sword, feeling a prick, and when she brings her finger up to her mouth she licks off a drop of blood. It stings her mouth with its copper taste. She remembers once, when she was no more than five years old and she tripped while running up the streets of Harwich. Her knee was stubbled open. Tiny pearls of blood oozed out when she scraped away

the gravel. She remembers pressing her mouth to her knee in the strongest impulse of curiosity, and she remembers sucking at the taste instead of spitting it out.

“Marin!” her mother had exclaimed, when she noticed her fallen daughter. “What are you doing?”

Marin had raised her head, blood smeared on her lips. “I taste funny.”

“Lord above...” Marin’s mother had muttered, before drawing out an old handkerchief and pressing it to the wound. “Stop licking it - it’s like to get infected now.”

Marin had traced her tongue along her lips. “I don’t taste like me.”

“People aren’t meant to taste like anything,” her mother had told her. “They’re not meant to be split open.”

And then the memory dissolves, and Marin blinks her eyes open and finds herself lying on the sand once more. She stares off over the ocean and watches the waves swirl in from the horizon. They crash against rocks a hundred feet out, sending fountains of white spray spurting into the air. The water distorts the sunlight. It casts strange shadows behind the rocks, and if Marin squints her eyes she can pretend that the shadows are a silhouette, and the silhouette is Fen, and -

Marin frowns. It’s not just a trick of the light. There *is* a silhouette behind the rocks, a head poking out of the water. Marin knows that it isn’t Fen, that it can’t be, but at the same time how can it be anything but? She pushes herself up onto her elbows and squints closer at the shadow, willing it to come closer, to manifest into something more solid.

Darya elbows her. *What is it?*

In the half-moments it takes for her to look away to read Darya's lips, the silhouette has vanished, and there is not even a ripple left in its wake. Marin shakes her head.

Nothing.

She makes her way up to her knees and finds her sword.

Go again? she asks Bronwen. Bronwen brushes off the sand and readies her daggers in response.

Bronwen is still better than her. Marin cannot trick her own confidence into believing that she is superior to the other woman, or even a match. But this time, she does not allow herself to retreat. She watches Bronwen's body, looks for the tells in her twitching muscles and the directions her eyes flicker as they squint against the sun. She knows where Bronwen's daggers will land, and even if she is not fast enough to block them, she knows how to dodge them without losing ground. It is still mere minutes before Bronwen manages to knock her to the ground, but Marin falls with the pride of knowing that, were this a real fight, she would have at least wounded her opponent several times over.

As she picks herself up, she watches Darya and Rialta. Rialta flickers her knife in and out of space, feinting this way and that. Darya falls for it each time, her sword coming up again and again to block a strike that never comes. Minutes later, it is not Rialta who fells Darya, but Darya's own exhaustion. She drops her sword to the sand with a defeated *thump* and raises her hands in surrender. Darya does her best to keep her expression neutral, but her lips are pursed a little too tightly, and Marin knows she is frustrated by her own weakness.

You're doing well, Marin mouths, as she helps Darya to her feet. Darya brushes her off.

Rialta lays a gentle but determined hand on both of their backs and nods in the direction of the ocean. *We should go*, she implies.

Marin helps Bronwen toss the rest of the weapons back in the sack. They wade back into the sea, and something twists inside of Marin. It is hope and despair and fear and exhilaration and exhaustion all muddled into one. She is tired, so tired, and sleep is too far away.

In the water, her legs shudder and collapse back into her tail. Her mouth opens to scream in pain pain pain but her mind is not present. She has been here before, so many times. There is nothing new to be found in the agony.

Thirty-One

Back at the Clearing, they circle up around a pile of pebbles and seaweed. Bronwen fashions the rocks into a rough oval, pointed on either end: the outline of the *Harbinger*. She hands a fistful of pebbles and a strand of seaweed to Marin.

You know the ship, Bronwen tells her. *You know the layout, and their weaponry, and you know where people are likely to be and when.*

Marin swallows. If she forgets something now, or misremembers, there may be bodies behind her mistakes. She closes her eyes and breathes slowly in and out. *Remember*, she tells herself. *All you have to do is remember.*

The same tugging sensation that led her back to the first wreck, that told her where she had dropped off the *Harbinger* in the first place, nestles back into her navel. She knows this. She can feel it.

They won't all be up top, likely, she says aloud. She makes another outline of the *Harbinger* next to the first, to represent the lower deck. *Since it's night, there will only be two or three men on the top deck to keep watch. There's usually only one, but I expect because - well, I expect there'll be more.*

She places three larger rocks along the first deck; one at the stern, one at the bow, and one right in the middle. *They won't be standing still. They'll be on a rotation, if you could call it that - it won't be organized, they'll just be wandering. I... don't know how attentive they'll be. They could get bored and lazy. They could be drunk. Or they could be perfectly awake and waiting for a fight.*

That's the one we'll be prepared for, then, Rialta says.

So we'll Call them, Darya jumps in. We'll take them out before they even notice. With all of us singing, it should be easy.

Bronwen raises her eyebrows and shrugs. *That could work. Maybe... maybe we won't even have to go aboard.*

No... I don't think so. Rialta frowns and stares at the rocks as if willing them to move. *The Call will take care of the ones above, yes, but what about the ones below? The song won't reach through the wood of the hull.*

So we let them scream, Darya says, her lips curling up. We leave one of them out of the Call until the last moment. Let him watch as we drown his fellows, and by the time he's made enough ruckus to draw the rest out, we'll drown him as well.

That could work... Rialta says, *or it could just give the others more time to prepare, more warning for what they're up against. No, I think we need to keep surprise on our side for as long as we can.*

Then we'll go aboard, Bronwen says, low and steady. Change. Climb up the sides. Take out as many as we can before they can raise an alarm.

That's exactly what I was thinking. Marin? Rialta asks. *What are we looking at for the other levels? How many, and where?*

There are two traps that lead down to the lower deck, Marin says. She uses the seaweed to square off two trapdoors on both the first and second outlines. The first opens near the galley, the kitchen. There might be one man in there. Ackl -

She starts to name him and then breaks off. *Not relevant, she tells herself. They don't need names. Not for this.*

She places a bland rock in the galley. She tries not to think about it.

One man, she continues. But he might also be in his cabin. All the sleeping cabins are by the second trap door. On one side is the captain's cabin. There'll definitely be someone in there.

She drops another rock for Dillon. She picks the roughest of them all.

He's tough. Big. Short, but more mass than any of us combined. I don't know about many of the others, but he, at least, will have a sword. He will know how to use it, and his fists, too.

Marin grabs a pile of five more rocks. *No names*, she repeats to herself as she dribbles them in where the other two cabins are. *No names. No faces. They're just pebbles in the sand.*

Out loud, she adds, *There are two more sleeping cabins on the other side of the trap. They hold four men each, but depending on who's up top, they could hold two or three or only one.*

Between the cabins and the galley is storage, cargo. No one should be in there, but be warned - the rooms are full of boxes and barrels and all manner of things that can be hid behind. Marin stacks seaweed in the cargo holds to illustrate the cramped space. There could also be oil in any of the barrels, and the walls are lined with lanterns, candles. We don't want the two to mix. And somewhere... there'll be the mines. I don't know how much it takes to set them off, but still.

We should be careful, Rialta finishes for her. *Very, very careful. Which is why, again, we want to keep the surprise. The longer we can sneak through the ship unnoticed, the greater the chance we'll be caught in those cargo holds and have to brawl amongst the very thing we're attempting to save ourselves from.*

Do we all want to go down the same trap? Or split ourselves up? Bronwen asks.

Split up, Darya says. We'll go faster, and that way, if they get us, they don't get us all. Not all at once, at least.

There is a pause at the end of Darya's bluntness in which they all pretend not to find the fear - or the truth - in her prediction.

Right... Bronwen says slowly. You're right. We'll split up, then.

One to the galley, three to the sleeping cabins, Marin says. She surprises even herself with the certainty in her voice. We don't even know if anyone will be in the galley. It would be foolish to send more than one person.

Darya can do that, Rialta says.

What? Darya screeches. Why can't I go with you? I'm good, you know it. I'll be more useful in the sleeping cabins!

You'll go to the galley, Rialta says, her voice firm and bordering on dangerous. If you - Rialta takes only the smallest of pauses - finish quickly, you can meet back up with us at the sleeping cabins. That'll mean you'll have to sneak back through the cargo hold. You're the smallest. If something goes wrong, you have the best chance of being able to hide.

But -

You'll go to the galley.

Alright, Darya says. Her lips are closed so tightly they are reduced to a line.

And... that's it. Isn't it? Bronwen asks. If it all... if it goes well. We'll get out of there.

Set it on fire, Rialta says. Get the mines. Drop them somewhere no one will find them, where they can't ever be lit. And then...well, Nerissa says - used to say - says that some honor the dead by burning the bodies. It's the least we can do, and this way, the ship won't be found and

questions won't be asked. On our way out, we spill the oil, and when we're all on the top deck, we set it all off.

Something flickers in Marin's memory, a dream of a dream of a dream. Fire climbing up the walls of a ship, everything turning to ash, and in the middle... her and Eric, consumed in the flames more than one way, everything heat and everything burn. A knot starts to tangle in her stomach. She wants to undo it, but she also wants to crush it and force it down, so instead she does nothing.

Are we done? she blurts.

I... suppose we are... Rialta says, eyebrows bunching at Marin in concern, ... *unless we want to go over it a few more times?*

I think - Bronwen starts, but then Marin interrupts,

Please. I need... need to sleep.

I need to get out of here, she substitutes in her mind. *Need to stop thinking. Need to stop being able to think.*

Rialta scrutinizes her for a moment more, and then concedes, *Alright. Rest will be good, for all of us.*

Thirty-Two

In the cave, she dreams of bodies.

Not others - not Fen's or Bronwen's or Darya's or Cora's or her mother's - but her own, replicated over and over and over as far as she can see, all floating on the surface, bloated and lifeless. On some of the bodies, her hair is long, tangled around her rotting limbs like a dark and hungry moss. On others, it is chopped short, and her tail is slashed and bloody. On a few, her chest is bound tight and her feet and hands clamped together with ropes. She swims up to each and reaches out to them - reaches out to the bodies which are hers and not hers all at once. The moment her fingers brush the corpses, the bodies collapse into sea foam. The only evidence they leave behind of their existence is the slightest of ripples and froth.

She works through them all this way, touch collapse touch collapse touch, until the water is churning with bright red foam. It is only when she exhales in relief, alone at last, that she realizes she missed one. This corpse is young - Marin at nine or ten years old. Her hair swirls around her and seems to reach out to present-Marin as she approaches, as if it was a whirlpool, or worse, a mouth waiting to suck her in. Marin reaches out her hand.

The corpse's eyes fly open.

"Please," the child's lips breathe. "Please."

Marin blinks. She does not know what the girl-corpse is asking for. Her fingers wander closer, inches away from touch.

"What do you want?" Marin asks, mesmerized.

"Please."

Marin drags her fingers along the body from shoulder to hip.

The girl screams, one long note that vibrates through her and Marin and her and Marin and she *is* Marin there is no difference so young so lost so -

Marin wakes up screaming. A hand clamps over her mouth. She twists against it in a panic, shoving her elbows back and thrashing her tail.

Shhh... shhh... Marin, stop it! Calm down!

Marin freezes.

Fen?

Shhhhh.

Marin squints into the darkness. The phosphorus lamps have all been left out of the cave, but if she strains, she can make out a pair of billowing fins and a straggle of blonde hair.

Marin bites her lip. *You're not supposed to be here.*

I know. Fen reaches out as if to take Marin's hand, but stops mid-gesture. The water sways in her wake.

You're not coming back to join us. You can't. Rialta said the pact -

I know, Fen repeats.

So why are you here? If Rialta finds you, she'll -

Let's make sure Rialta doesn't find me, then.

Marin glances at the opposite end of the cave, where Rialta and Bronwen are floating. They look fast asleep, but Marin can't really tell. If they knew that Fen had come back, would they wake and oust her, or would they stay feigning sleep until she had said something incriminating? Marin never asked Rialta the consequences of the Second Shoal's return. Would they chase her away? Or - she does not let herself think of any other possibilities.

Instead, she wonders... would she defend Fen if they did?

Marin closes her eyes and makes a choice.

Alright. Follow me.

She swims out of the cave as gently as she can. She doesn't look back to check if Fen is behind her, or if Rialta and Bronwen are still asleep. She rounds the corner of the cave and rests her back against the rock.

What do you want, Fen? Marin asks when the other girl emerges. To her own ears, her voice does not sound irritated or derisive. She just sounds tired.

This is not an apology, Fen starts. Marin keeps her face neutral and nods. She hadn't expected one. *I just think that you have the right to know what you will be going up against.*

What do you mean?

We, the Second Shoal, have decided that we will not let you do this so unhindered, Fen says, her tone awkwardly formal. Practiced, Marin notices. It's practiced. Impossible eyes blink impossibly calm up at Marin.

So... what? Marin asks her. *You're going to... steal our weapons? Barricade us into the cave? Coat the Harbinger in tar so we stick to the sides and are trapped?*

Don't, Fen says, and there is warning in her voice. *I don't have to be here, you know. None of the others - not just Rialta and Bronwen, but none of my Shoal - know I am doing this. I'm risking a lot right now, so please, please Marin, can you listen?*

Again, Marin wonders what she's risking. She pictures Rialta's arm wrapped around Fen's neck, choking out her gills, Bronwen's tentacles suckering over Fen's mouth and - she shakes it off. *I'm listening.*

When you go to fight tonight - yes, we know it's tonight, Fen adds, before Marin can interrupt.
When you go to fight... know that you will not be fighting only sailors. We will not join you in violence, but we will be there to stop you.

Marin swallows. *You mean to hurt us?*

We mean to stop you, Fen repeats. *We don't want to cause you harm.*

Fen, how -

Marin?

Both Fen and Marin freeze as Rialta calls out from inside the cave.

Marin? Where are you?

I - I needed to stretch out, Marin lies. She angles her body in a way she hopes would hide Fen, should Rialta come barreling out.

Stay in the cave, stay in the cave, stay in the cave, she prays silently. Out loud, she adds, *I'll be back in to sleep in a moment.*

She strains to feel the currents coming from the cave, trying to suss out whether or not Rialta had settled or was coming closer.

I should go, Fen whispers. *Marin... be careful.*

And before Marin can realize what she is doing, Fen bends in and brushes her lips against the other girl's cheek. Marin's heart beats beats beats, her eyes frozen open in permanent surprise. She turns to Fen to say - what? She is not sure. But the other mermaid is already disappearing into the distance.

There is the slightest of waves and Rialta appears from inside the cave.

I couldn't sleep either.

For a few moments, the two lean against the cave and float in silence. Marin plays and re-plays and re-re-re-re-plays her encounter with Fen. She expects the details to blur and evaporate, but each time they only get more vivid, until she swears she could taste the texture of Fen's hair, tangling her tongue, choking her. She should tell Rialta. She owes Fen nothing, and even if she did, is she so sure it would be secrecy? And yet she cannot help but cradle the news of the Second Shoal's counterattack inside of her, unsure and unwilling to let it out. Fen's kiss tickles across her cheek, her heart's rhythm furious still.

Instead, she stalls.

Do you ever think about what we're doing and... the end of the story? The end of Yara? she asks Rialta. It is half a tactic to buy her time, half truth.

What do you mean?

She was punished for her cruelty in revenge. And maybe - maybe you have different reasons to want to destroy the Harbinger, and maybe I have those reasons, too, but... Marin takes a deep breath. After I died, before I was Changed, before I woke up... I had dreams of torturing them. I took a knife and stabbed it through the captain's heart and then, when he was dead, I kept stabbing and stabbing and stabbing... and what if that's what this is about? What if I'm just trying to live out my revenge? That's what the story teaches us, after all - that Yara was curious and jealous and greedy and vengeful, and those things will always be punished.

It is the first time that Marin has said these things aloud, and the first time she has allowed herself to admit what she considered. The words do not feel freeing. They seem to writhe in the water like maggots. They only remind her of death.

Who says the story was meant to teach us?

Marin frowns. *But why else would the gods damn Yara?*

Rialta shrugs. *Maybe they like the power. Maybe they woke up on the wrong side of the bed and needed to curse something. Maybe they were bored and they just wanted a Storyteller.*

Rialta's hand reaches out to rub Marin's back. *Maybe they were tired of being alone.*

Even so, Marin protests, *that doesn't mean I'm in the right. That doesn't mean what I'm doing isn't selfish.*

And maybe it is! Maybe it is the most selfish, cruel thing in the world to want to slash and burn and bleed the men who hurt you.

The imagined maggots churn in the water and her stomach. *So you think what we're doing is wrong?*

I think I've been here so long that I've stopped believing in what is right and what is wrong. I do what I do to survive and protect my own. To me, that's all that matters. Let others with their own priorities and beliefs judge me all they wish.

They lapse back into silence, and after heartbeat heartbeat heartbeat, the words squirm their way out of Marin's mind:

Fen and the others are going to fight.

Rialta's head whips around so hard that Marin is surprised there is no echo of thunder.

What?

Not with us, Marin clarifies hastily. *Against us. Not... with the sailors, I don't think. But Fen said they would stop us however they could and whatever it took.*

How do you know this? Did Fen say something to you before the split?

Marin does not give herself time to pause and think before she answers, *No. She came to me after. A few... some time ago.*

Rialta tenses but, to Marin's relief, does not explode with fury. *She shouldn't have done that. But to give us warning... perhaps she is hoping we will want to avoid fighting our own so much that we will not fight at all. I am grateful.*

But we're not going to back down. We're still going to fight, are we not?

Rialta nods. *Yes. We are. With luck, we'll be able to take the ship by surprise before the Second Shoal will realize when we are mounting the attack.*

No pause to think, no pause for guilt, no pause before Marin blurts, *They know already.*

At Rialta's sharp look, she adds, *I didn't tell Fen. I promise. I wouldn't do that to the Shoal. But somehow, they know that we are going to attack tonight.*

Then we have to go. If we don't... if the Second Shoal shows up and we are not there, they will not know about the mines.

If we go, we fight them... Marin says slowly, and if we don't go...

They all could die, Rialta finishes for her. To Marin, the water all around has never seemed so thick.

So that's it, then, Marin says.

That's it, Rialta agrees.

The water presses down on Marin. Her body feels heavy, too heavy, and suddenly she wants nothing more than to fall asleep.

I think I need to rest some more. I'm not - I don't think I'm - Marin struggles for the words but does not know if the proper ones even exist. *I'll see you soon.*

It's for the best, Rialta calls after her as Marin makes her way to the cave. Marin does not ask Rialta to what she is referring.

Thirty-Three

When Marin wakes next, Rialta and Bronwen are already up. Darya is stretched out in a corner. She does not sleep curled in a ball as Marin does, but with her body wide, as if every inch of her is reaching out to grasp something just out of range. She sleeps with her body wide, as if she has no fear of being a target.

It's an odd thought, but Marin does not question it when it comes. Everything now is pinned in terms of target and archer, of predator and prey.

Bronwen sits in front of Rialta as the older woman's fingers weave nimbly through the younger's hair. Marin watches, transfixed, as a crown of braids appears under Rialta's touch. No, not a crown - a helmet. It is the mermaids' version of a suit of armor. It does not cover Bronwen's face, nor offer any guise of protection, but its design is cool and practical. It is intended to keep the hair out of Bronwen's eyes, to discourage anyone from seizing it in the middle of battle.

Battle. The word slips into her thoughts as easily as the word "target." How quickly her vocabulary has changed. She likes "battle" more than "fight," she decides. "Battle" is formal. "Battle" is a word of fairytales and folklore. It is nothing so real that it could wound her.

You should wake her, Bronwen says, when she notices Marin stirring. She nods at Darya, whose shark tail waves in pleasure at some hidden dream. Marin swims over and shakes the other girl gently by the shoulders.

Dar... Dar... DARYA!

Darya jerks awake. Her hands curl reflex into fists which Marin only barely escapes.

Get the fuck off of - Darya's eyes focus on Marin and the tension in her body drains. *Oh. Marin.*

She unclenches her fists knuckle by knuckle, and stares listlessly at the point where they had almost collided with Marin's face. *Sorry.*

You should get your things prepared, Marin tells her, in lieu of accepting the apology. *I think we're ready to - I think it's almost time.*

Darya nods. She rubs her eyes and shakes the sleep from her spine. Bronwen and Rialta have switched places, and Bronwen now plaits Rialta's hair atop her head in her own costume of war.

Perhaps they should have scrounged the wrecks for armor, Marin muses. In the light of the phosphorus lamps, in the light of the night, their skin looks so fragile it is almost translucent. Will it split easy as it had when they were all human and true alive? It seems a poor substitute for even the light cloth that will guard the men from the blows of their swords. Canvas broke easy enough, but maybe they were foolish to underestimate it. Maybe that would be the tipping point. Maybe -

Marin forces the thoughts from her mind. More likely, the armor would only weigh them down. Their speed is too valuable an asset to throw away in the hopes of rusted breastplates and rotted shields. She banishes the *what ifs* and *maybes* and finds her sword. She does not know what to do with it - carry it in front of her? Tuck it under her arm? - but then she sees Darya fashioning a belt from a length of rope and tucking her own sword in, so Marin does the same. Marin is not sure if this armament makes Darya look comically too too young, a little girl playing at war, or too too old, a seasoned soldier ready to never come home. Neither effect is soothing.

Dar. Bronwen calls. *Let me tie back your hair.*

'S short enough, Darya mutters. *'S fine.*

It's long enough to get in your eyes, Bronwen counters, and where will that get you?

Darya says nothing in response but sits down in front of Bronwen, who weaves the stray strands back on Darya's head and ties them off with a knot of seaweed. Bronwen's touch is as gentle as a mother's.

There. It barely took a minute, and it's better, isn't it?

Darya shrugs. Bronwen squeezes the younger girl's shoulder, and for the briefest of moments, Darya leans into the touch.

Bronwen and Rialta each equip themselves with their daggers, and then -

Well, Bronwen says. Let's go.

It is the last thing that they say until they reach the ship. Marin spends the trip running her hand up and down the hilt of her sword. She busies her thoughts with trying to memorize the pattern engraved on it, the way each ridge relates to the ridges on her palms. Ahead of her, Bronwen stares out at the distance. Her eyes are focused on nothing. To her side, Darya's teeth are bared in a permanent snarl. Marin wonders if she thinks she looks frightening; it is funny, she thinks, how little difference there is between a threat and a smile.

The ship looms over them so suddenly that Marin almost wishes they had doubled back, had taken the long route, had come up from shore or anything that may have delayed the trip just a moment more. They swim up to the hull, so close that Marin skates her fingers over it, and then they swim outwards in hopes of catching a glimpse of the top deck.

Wait, Marin says, just before they pop their heads above the Surface. The silence collapses around her. Should we get rid of these first?

She points to their phosphorus lamps.

No reason, Rialta says. They're not strong enough for them to see anything distinct at this distance.

And if they do, let them, Darya says, her eyes glinting. Let them be scared before they die. Let them be terrified.

Dar... Marin starts to reprimand, but the nickname dies before it reaches out. She pushes her eyes, nose, mouth above the Surface, feeling the chill air bowing down to meet her until only her gills are left covered.

What do you see? Rialta asks.

Two men, Bronwen answers, both on the stern. Wait, no, there's a third - he's more towards the center of the ship, behind the mast there, do you see him?

I do, Marin says. She squints into the darkness, trying to make out the stature, the height, the hair, anything on the men. The first two that Bronwen had spotted are both too short. In the light of the half-full moon, Marin imagines that their hair is blonde, or silver maybe. Not black. Not black at all.

The third man, however, is just the right height. His hair does not glint in the dull moonshine. It is so dark that it absorbs the night as if it were part of it. It is so dark that he could be -

Ready? Rialta says softly. Marin swallows and nods with the others.

This time, the Call has no words. It flows around them in a thick swirl of untongued syllables and humming. Maybe it is Marin's imagination, but the Call looks darker this time, as if the magic can sense the charged intention. Darya was playing a game the last time - a cruel one, to be sure, but only a game. This is different. This Call is churning, bubbling, boiling. This Call bursts over the water with no pretense to its vindictiveness.

Marin watches it reach the edge of the ship and snarl up and over the side ready to consume and then

It stutters. It stops.

What the hell -? Bronwen interrupts her song to exclaim.

And then, staring at the ship, she sees that there is not just one gelatinous tangle of the Call, but two, interweaving and - no, not just interweaving. Struggling. Fighting. The second cluster of Call is not dark and shadowed in hue but opalescent. It shimmers faintly with whites and silvers and pinks and golds and blues.

Fuck, Darya hisses. *Do you know what that is?*

Marin shakes her head.

It's another Call. It's blocking us. It's the Second Shoal.

Marin feels as if all the water has drained out from under her.

What do we do? she asks.

We get closer, Bronwen says. *We keep singing. There are more of us, we should be able to overpower them.*

Marin does not duck her head underwater as they swim closer to the ship. She, and Darya, and Bronwen, and Rialta all keep singing, adding more and more shivering Call to the feud on the side of the ship. Marin watches the dark Call twine around the light, strangling it, crushing it. It is small, but slowly, the dark starts to overtake. It starts inching up the ship, getting closer and closer to the rail.

We're going to make it, Marin thinks, without allowing herself to wonder what Fen's Second Shoal will do if their first attempt to stall fails.

Closer snakes the dark Call.

Closer.

Closer -

“What the hell?!”

No, Marin thinks.

A head leans over the side of the ship, its nose inches from the murk of Call. Black hair flops over the face, but an angular chin sticks out beyond it. Marin has the briefest of moments to feel her body vibrate with relief that it’s Crom, not Eric, not Eric, not Eric, before -

“Burgess! Mackie! Get over here! Holy shit...”

Crom stares at the Call, and then his gaze extends out, over the plane of the ocean. His eyes land on Marin and she wants to drop into the water under their weight.

“IT’S THEM!” Crom screams. “IT’S THEM!”

Fuck! Darya hisses, louder. She amplifies her Call, and Bronwen and Rialta follow her, even as Marin can hear footsteps pounding closer across the deck. Their Call smashes through the other and billows towards Crom. It snakes up his face and strangles off his cry. And then his eyes glaze over empty and he is leaning forward and

CRASH comes the water up to meet him when he topples over the rail. Marin can feel the impact through the rolling waves and tries not to imagine the body dropping down, slowed by the water’s stubborn grip.

“Crom?” Two more heads poke over the rail. “Jesus christ - CROM!”

But the mermaids are still singing and Crom is already under not coming back. The others push the Call harder, further, and it tangles around Mackie. Marin wants to help them, even as

the white Call whips helplessly around Mackie's face searching for purchase. She wants - should want, needs to want - to add to their Call, but instead her eyes are drawn to Burgess. He staggers backwards out of reach. His eyes threaten to bug out of his face as he watches Mackie raise his arms out like begging for the cross and dives over the rail and *CRASH* again the water blares in welcome.

“DILLON!” Burgess screams. “DILLON, OLLIE, MALONEY - GET UP HERE! IT'S THEM! THEY HAVE CROM AND MACKIE! IT'S THEM!”

More footsteps pounding.

Something soars over the side of the deck.

Get out of the way! Bronwen shouts, and she tackles Marin and drags her under. The harpoon rockets past her. It skims the surface of her tail and a pinprick of blood seeps out. *Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck - we need to get aboard.*

We need to regroup, replan! Marin argues.

There's no time. They saw us. I don't know where the other Shoal is, but they probably saw them too. They have harpoons and likely nets and definitely mines, and if we don't get on that ship, we won't be able to fight back. We're all going to be slaughtered.

Alright, Marin says, but even as she speaks she watches Bronwen and the others shudder under the water, already writhing mid-change.

She slips into her human body easily, so easily. There is no other choice this time, no other way for this to end, and it is as if her legs know that. Every inch of her is already alive and thrumming and waiting. When she opens her mouth to scream in agony, it feels like a battle cry, the pain her armor clenching her tight. When her gills collapse inward, she throws her head

above the water and spits out seawater like venom. She shoots out a hand and digs her nails into the ship's hull. The sword bangs against her hip as she claws herself up an inch, and then an inch further. She works her way hand-over-hand until she makes her way to the rail.

CRACK.

A sword swings down exactly where her hand was moments away from settling. Marin swings herself to the right and leaps over the railing. Her feet scream in protest as she whirls to face the sword's owner.

Ackley.

When he sees her face, he stumbles backward.

"Jesus christ," he whispers. His eyes widen as he takes in her naked body.

Fight, Marin's instincts whisper, but she is frozen. Around her, she hears the others landing on the deck. Out of the corner of her eye, the silver of Bronwen's daggers flashes in the moonlight.

"You're supposed to be dead."

Ackley. Who taught her how to play Crown and Dagger. Who gave her an extra piece of hard tack every meal. Who held her down and tossed her into the sea.

She grabs her sword by the hilt and swings it.

Ackley's sword comes up just in time to block the blow. The clash of steel-on-steel screams. They struggle with locked swords. Ackley is taller than her, and wiry with muscle, but Marin is stronger. She pushes him off and he stumbles. She swings at him again, and again, and again.

Don't get reckless! the voice in her mind whispers. She slows her thrusts. *Get him to the ground.*

She feints as if to swipe at Ackley's knee, and when he bends to defend it, she grabs his shoulder and forces him down. She kneels over his body. Wisps of the Call, dark and light alike, swirl around her feet. Someone must still be down there in the water, a last-ditch attempt to draw the men under.

A body hits the ground next to her and Marin screams, but Bronwen is up as soon as she hits the ground. She meets Marin's eyes for a heartbeat. She looks down at Ackley and then glares back up at Marin.

Do it, she seems to say. And then her daggers fly up to meet a blow from Burgess, and she is gone.

Marin presses the point of her sword to his throat.

"Mal - please!" Ackley moans. His Adam's apple bobs against the sword. He hisses in pain and Marin feels the flesh give the slightest bit. It is soft.

Easy.

Do it.

She closes her eyes and thrusts. The skin splits open before her touch. Ackley's scream is cut off before the sound can resonate. His body flails underneath her and she squeezes her knees around his waist to keep him still as she leans into the sword. Something cracks beneath her weight. Blood spurts up onto her bare chest, wet and hot. It lands in her mouth and she gags, her eyes flying open.

And there is Ackley. His throat is a mess of meat. He does not move. His eyes are glassy and stare up at the cloudless night.

Forgive me, Marin mouths. *Oh god oh god oh god forgive me please.*

She wants to be done now. She wants to vanish back into the deep, but all around her blades are shrieking and people are screaming and who knows how many have died. She grasps the hilt of the sword with both hands and jerks it out of Ackley's no-longer-living, no-longer-human. She doesn't stop to wipe the blade.

Marin grips her sword in front of her and scans the ship. Darya is laughing and dancing around a snarling Ollie. Marin watches as Darya leaps over a body - hair a light brown, Barelli, it must be, *god have mercy thank you*, Marin whispers to herself. On the other side, Bronwen is struggling to fend off both Burgess and Round at once. Even as she watches, Round stumbles backwards and his ankle is caught in a tendril of dark Call. His face goes blank instantly. He walks calmly to the rail and stares out.

"Round!" Burgess screams. "ROUND!"

Bronwen whirls and digs her elbow into Round's side. The brief moment of impact is all it takes for him to topple over the edge. Bronwen doesn't pause to watch him hit the water. She swings her daggers viciously at Burgess, who raises his own to meet her with surprising agility.

"Don't - let it - touch - you!" Burgess yells out to the others. "Whatever you - do!"

Rialta is not on board. She must be the one still sending out the Call.

At the opposite railing, the last two sailors are shooting out a pile of spears and harpoons. Dillon and Eric. Their backs are to her, but they're aiming the wrong direction - Rialta is on the other side of the ship, where the black Call still seeps. Marin laughs silently at their foolishness before she realizes

There are two different Calls, coming from two separate sides of the ship.

They aren't aiming at Rialta.

They're aiming at the second Shoal.

Marin does not think twice. She runs at Dillon, her sword held high. Her bare feet are quiet on the deck, but even with the roar of the battle around her there must be some vibration left to hear. At the last second, he whips around and blocks her blow. The spear he is holding cracks in two at the impact, but it is enough to keep the sword from smashing into his face. He steps back out of range and snaps his own sword from his belt.

"I knew you'd come," he snarls at her. His face does not show surprise. Marin bares her teeth as wide as she can and slices at his belly. He brings his own sword up in defense almost lazily. "Couldn't resist a fight, could you?"

CLANG CLANG CLANG.

Marin slashes and Dillon blocks and Marin slashes and Dillon blocks and Marin slashes slashes slashes.

"Couldn't resist the chance to get back at those who wronged you?"

CLANG.

"Did we, though? We survived, cunt. Did you noticed that? We threw you over and *we survived the storm.*"

CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG. Marin knows she is faster than him. She swings her sword so wildly that he cannot have a hope of knowing where to block but

How

Is

He

Always

There

CLANG!

“MALONEY!” Dillon shouts. “You’re staring. Never seen a pair of breasts so close to you before? Those beasts in the water aren’t going anywhere. Why don’t you come give me a hand - unless you’re too distracted by the sight of her cunt?”

Marin stumbles in her attack for a single breath. Her eyes flicker to Eric, facing her, watching her, staring at her body and

Hot pain rips through her breast and Dillon’s sword drips rubies in the moonlight. Dillon cackles.

It’s just a scratch, Marin thinks, just a scratch, you’ve had worse -

She readjusts her grip on the sword and advances on Dillon again.

Slow.

Steady.

Watch him.

The blood trickles down her chest. Marin feints as if to hit the side of Dillon’s neck. At the last moment, she pulls the sword away harmlessly and sees his left shoulder twitch just before he brings his sword up to block.

Feint, dodge, feint, dodge. She makes a new rhythm for their fight. Her feet learn the dance on the wooden deck as she learns the dance of Dillon’s body. She can do this. She almost starts to smile and

The slightest of winds at her hip are her only warning before something crashes into her and she stumbles down. Her sword skitters out of her hand and across the deck. She rolls to the side just before the length of plank can slam down on her again.

“Sorry, Mal,” Ollie mutters.

Ollie.

But he had been fighting Darya...

Marin rolls to the other side as *CRASH* goes the plank again and

No

No no no

No no nonononononono

Darya’s legs are splayed out at unnatural angles. A dark puddle is forming around her head, matting in her hair, spraying from her skull. The only motion in her body is the uneven rise and fall of her chest. Each gasp takes a monumental effort to force out. She is breathing, but barely.

No no no not Darya please not Darya please.

“DARYA!” Marin tries to scream but always she is silent always she is too quiet always she is too late too late “DARYA!”

Marin lunges for her sword. Ollie slams the plank down onto her spine and pain erupts in front of her eyes in black stars. She pushes past it. Her fingers flutter around the hilt of the sword and then secure. When she hears Ollie come up behind her, she flips onto her back and stabs the sword up with all of her might. It impales right through Ollie’s stomach. Blood bubbles at his lips. He chokes and falls to the deck, the sword clattering down beside him, and Marin does not wait to watch him die. She springs to her feet and runs to Darya

“Not so fast.”

Dillon seizes her arm and wrenches her in until his sword presses against her neck.

“Please!” Marin tries to scream, but the words come out a sorry rasp against the blade. “Let me go to her please please please -“

“I think it’s a little too late.”

Marin squirms against him. She is stronger she is stronger she is stronger but his grip pins her so that she cannot move more than a few inches without piercing pain. His forearm squeezes her breast and blood oozes from the wound already there.

Instead of running to her side, she watches Darya’s breath shudder out of her body.

Bronwen, still tangled in Burgess and his knives, does not see. Her back is turned as she lunges low and her blades shriek and she does not see.

Marin and Dillon and Eric are the only ones left to watch. The time between each gasp stretches thick. And then

One moment, Darya is there, and the next, her body is crumpling in on itself. She is one part air, one part water, her body rolling and roiling and boiling, the moonlight streaming through her. The edges that separate Her from the Not quiver. Marin’s eyes water but she does not let herself blink; if she doesn’t close her eyes, she tells herself, Darya cannot leave.

But Marin’s eyes are still open

And she does not look away

And then Darya is gone. Seafoam splashes to the deck where her body had been.

“DARYA!”

Marin thrashes against Dillon. Her elbow lands a sharp blow to his ribs and his body buckles slightly - just slightly - but it is enough. She wrenches herself from his grip and sprints for her sword, still half-embedded in what had once been Ollie.

“Thought that might happen,” Dillon calls after her. “Pity we had to lose one in order to find out for certain, but there’s always a loss before a gain, isn’t there, cunt?”

She yanks out the sword - *do not think of the blood do not think of the meat* - and lunges at Dillon. She lashes out at him and she misses his flesh by inches.

“Stop!” Eric shouts. “Dillon - Mal - Burgess - STOP!”

Neither Dillon nor Marin cease their assault. Eyes still razor-focused, Dillon shouts over to Burgess, “Go below! Get the mines! We’ll force them out!”

The mines.

Fen.

Marin makes one last hopeless thrust at Dillon. She grazes the fabric of his shirt, hears the rough cotton tear and watches the blood spatter down to the deck. It is not a deep cut, but it is enough to distract him. She sprints after Bronwen, who is already chasing Burgess down below the deck.

“Go back!” she mouths, grabbing Bronwen’s arm when she catches up to her. “Keep the others safe - I know the ship! I’ll stop Burgess.”

She does not know how much of her speech Bronwen catches, but she does not wait to find out before hurling herself down the trap and below decks. She lands cat-like on the floor and peels herself upwards. She can hear Burgess rumbling around down the hallway, and she darts after him, sword held out in front of her like a torch. Her eyes adjust quickly to the darkness.

This is familiar. With the waves lapping against the ship's hull right beside her, it is almost as if she is back underwater. This is her territory now.

She takes a deep breath before entering the cargo hold. Burgess is bent over a barrel. His thick hands probe its contents gently before cradling each item into the crook of his elbow.

The mines.

Marin does not know how easily they will boom the ship out of existence. If she strikes Burgess and the explosives fall back into the barrel, will she have doomed them all?

Instead, she drags the tip of the sword against the wooden floor. The stutter of the metal makes Burgess's head snap up. His eyes catch hers. Marin draws herself up to her full height, feels the throb in her feet and renames it power. When he sees that she does not immediately slash out at him, Burgess puts one hand up in a gesture of surrender and sets the mines down one by one.

Good man, Marin thinks. And then she strikes.

Burgess's hand is halfway to the daggers at his waist, but it is halfway too much distance. By the time his fingers dance against the hilts, Marin's blade is already buried in his chest. She feels it wedge between two ribs, the bones setting a path as she leans in. Burgess's eyes bulge, so much white white white as he stares at her. His lips gape, a fish's mirror, as he mouths words at her or maybe to god or maybe to no one but himself. Marin cannot hear anything but the rushing in her ears. The blood that wells up around the sword follows the rhythm of her own heart throbbing *help help help help*. She does not break his stare. She did not get this moment with Darya. She wants to watch the light they say leaves the eyes, the lighthouse flickering off.

She can tell, when he is gone. She cannot say how. He is already limp against the sword, and when she screeches the blade from his chest, his body topples down. The wood accepts his weight with a *thud*.

“Mal?”

Marin whirls around. Flecks of blood follow the arc of her sword and she thinks that this is a symbol, she the girl that death will follow and follow and follow and -

“Mal...?” Eric repeats. His eyes are wide. The whites threaten to overtake his whole pupil, just like Burgess’s as Marin’s blade cut -

“Marin,” she mouths. She does not know why. Behind her, there is a body and blood and barrels full of land mines ready to collapse in but now, here, she needs him to know her name. She needs Eric to watch her deeds and not connect them to some imaginary self. She needs Eric to know what she can do. “My name is Marin.”

Eric’s eyebrows caterpillar together. “I don’t - I -“

His gaze finds Burgess’s body and Marin watches his adam’s apple bob with a dry swallow. When he looks back up at her, fear sparks like a cornered animal in his eye.

Marin is not conscious of her fingers loosening their grip on the sword until it skitters on the wood below. She reaches out her hands, slick and dried and peeling with blood, palms up like an offering. She is conscious of her skin, all out to the air and to Eric’s eyes. She knows why they now call undressed scars “naked wounds.” Her body has never felt more open.

“Marin,” she repeats, again and again and again and not even sure why. “Marin. My name is Marin.”

Eric backs away from her, one foot after the other. “Mal... what are you...?”

The question trails off and hangs between them. Marin does not know how to explain. She needs him to understand and yet she does not know what. She keeps her hands out and shakes them at him, mouthing, “Marin Marin Marin,” until the word has lost its meaning even to her. She does not want to be here. She wants to be back in another world, where she is reaching out to Eric with different hands and a different mouth or maybe she is still tangled in Fen in the Cave and she does not remember what it is to be human or maybe

Eric turns on his heel and runs. It takes Marin’s mind a split-second to catch up with reality. She scoops up the sword and follows him up to the deck.

Bronwen and Dillon stand at opposite ends of the ship. Bronwen is panting heavily, her hand clasped against her upper thigh, where blood oozes like a sigh from a deep slash. Dillon has cuts on both shoulders that blot his shirt with red. They hold their weapons halfheartedly up against each other, as if the battle had been suspended, held on pause.

And there, in the corner -

No. She wouldn’t.

But there is Fen, pale and glowing in the moonlight like a ghost. She kneels in the pool of Darya’s blood, smears of scarlet across her bare chest as if she had tried to summon the other girl back to life in some hysteric ritual. Tendrils of the Call float around her. She looks up when Marin and Eric emerge and her eyes pool with something something hurt something love something Fen oh Fen

“Did you get -“ Dillon starts, but Eric interrupts,

“Burgess is dead. Malachi killed him.”

Dillon's face turns white. And then he is sprinting at her, his body lurching as it fights off its wounds, sword held high and gleaming screaming

"NO!" Bronwen shrieks too quite too silent and Marin's sword comes up just in time. The shock vibrates through her but she pushes it off, pushes him off. Dillon hacks at her manically. His swings are wild and unpredictable and she is not good at this, she is not meant for this swing and dodge and duck and fight fight fight

Bronwen limps forward but she is too slow to get there before Dillon's sword slips against Marin's shin and she feels the prick of blood welling up. Eric's arms seize around Dillon's waist and try to drag him back, but the other man is so much bigger so much more weight, and still he advances, and still he advances sword like a beacon

He elbows Eric and the other man stumbles just enough for Dillon to swing and he swings and

His sword catches on

On

On

In

Blood spills across the deck.

It is not her own but all the same Marin cannot breathe because Fen had leaped in front of her because Fen had tried to save her because Fen

Is now ripped open.

Her body goes limp and crashes to the deck. Marin dives for her. She barely registers Bronwen in the background, digging her daggers into Dillon's side and jerking up and Marin is

jerking up Dillon's sword out of Fen and feels every inch of muscle and bone and body body that the blade catches on on its way out. She throws the metal behind her. She doesn't care what it hits because it's already hit already done its damage

Fen is spilling across the deck

Marin cannot breathe. She is screaming and yet she is not screaming and *why won't her body let her scream* - oh, you stupid gods just let her scream cry Fen Fen Fen

Marin pulls Fen up and close to her. Fen's head lolls limp on her shoulder. Her collarbones are barely moving with her breath. Marin kisses Fen's hair kisses Fen's hair kisses Fen's hair presses her fingers into Fen's back as if she could draw the breath out herself as if she could squeeze her back to life dear gods what would happen if she just refused to let go? Fen's blood is on her, it must be on her, it is hot and sticky and refuses to dry in the wind

Marin does not lift her lips from Fen she will not let her end let this end Fen's breasts press against her own

They sat like this once before in embrace, each refusing to let the other end

And Marin realizes that loving someone is knowing you might watch them die but holding on anyway

And Marin realizes she is watching Fen die

And then there is a sound like an exhalation. There is the sound of letting go. And Marin is no longer holding Fen but sea foam, the clean mist shattering on her face Marin's arms are paralyzed in the same position she cannot put them down she keeps trying to clench Fen tighter to her chest she will not let her go she will not let her go she will not let her go let her go let her go let her go let her go

A hand grabs her shoulder gently and Marin screams and wrenches her body away. She skitters backward across the deck until her head bangs against the rail and her hand finds a sword finds a knife finds something sharp. She scrambles to her feet and whirls the blade around so the handle is clenched in her fist and for the first time since Fen Fen gone Fen impossible violet gone she sees

Dillon, body, dead, right arm chopped off where the wrist should be not bleeding anymore, torso torn open by Bronwen's knives (Fen hadn't wanted to fight Fen was the peacekeeper she ran because she wanted everyone to survive), his sword accidental sheath in body too brittle to contain it

Torso torn open by Bronwen who does not look triumphant does not look like she just won something (did she see Fen did she watch her die watch her fade away how many were left as witnesses)

Eric, unarmed, standing above it all, unarmed, watching her, unarmed and if only he had picked a side and saved Fen and saved her

But that was it, wasn't it?

If he hadn't let them kill Marin

If he hadn't told Dillon of the mermaids

If he had stopped the *Harbinger* before it had gone on the hunt

He was always in the "if" and never in the "doing" and Marin Marin Marin she always picked a side, Fen always picked a side even in the end she had joined the fight she had not wanted to but she had but Eric stupid foolish selfish mortal

Couldn't he see what was at stake

Marin's vision floods with red and she raises her head and emits a soundless scream up to the moon half-floating in sky and

She is going to kill him.

She knows this like she knows herself - her name is Marin Carraway and she comes from Harwich by the sea and she was seventeen at the time of her murder like Fen was nineteen when she was killed when she was killed again again - and she is going to kill him.

She rushes at him but Bronwen is in her way. Marin digs her heels into the ground, flails with all her weight, but Bronwen is bigger, older, stronger. Bronwen grabs Marin's shoulders to steady her. Marin refuses to look her in the eye. Over Bronwen's shoulder Marin sees Eric, still watching, still unarmed. His eyes are wide and frightened like before. He knows what she has become.

Good

She wants to think this is good.

"Marin," she sees on Bronwen's lips. "Marin, please. Marin."

Marin should use the knife should break free not hurt Bronwen not kill her just show her what she is capable of - doesn't she know she should be afraid like Eric -

"Marin, don't do this. It's over. We've won."

Eric does not take his eyes off of her, just like always, just like he hadn't taken his eyes off of her when sword on sword slip clang Fen is gone and

Why won't he stop staring doesn't he know that Marin is already dead

"Marin, please. Fen wanted this to stop."

Marin screams. Bronwen did not hold her as she died. Bronwen has no right to say her name as if she knew what Fen

Marin holds off her flailing just long enough for Bronwen to relax her grip and then she thrashes once more. She breaks free and runs at Eric and he does not try to stop her

Even in the moment of his death he will not pick a side

Fen picked a side

Fen

Marin stops. She looks at Eric's eyes and the fear does not feel like something she can take pride in.

The knife falls to the deck.

It clatters against the wood and blood and sea foam spray and

This is the story. This is what is leftover to be found.

Marin's tail and gills find her in midair when she throws herself over the rail. She does not say goodbye.

She is making a choice. Perhaps, one day, it will be the right one.

Yara's End

This evening, Yara stood rather than crouched at her window. Her whole body ached with the weight of her attire, but she did not remove a single piece. She watched as the light sank and her reflection became more and more apparent in the glass. The pins in her hair no longer seemed like beetles but like embers waiting to land on firewood and consume consume consume. Yara waited until the only light left was her flickering candle, and then she waited more, and then still more. The festivities would last long into the night, she knew, but the Prince was not so patient. He would want his consummation.

She slipped out of her room. Would the happy couple be in the Prince's own chambers, or would they be tucked away somewhere more secluded? His own chambers, Yara decided. This was an act he wanted to flaunt. His marriage was a public one, and the partnering would be no different.

The palace was still alive with activity, though most was from flocks of servants, and the few noblemen and women she passed were too in drunken stupor to notice her. The servants, if they thought anything odd about the Prince's whore wandering in full celebration gown long past midnight, were too busy to comment or halt her. It was so easy to walk past that Yara beamed at everyone she met.

"Good evening," she mouthed with a curtsy. They never bowed back, and this made Yara laugh. How she wished her cackle could be audible; how she wished they could hear her coming.

There were two guards outside the Prince's door.

"The Prince and his bride are not to be disturbed," the one managed to get out before Yara darted her hands to his neck and snapped it with a quick twist. For all his companion's bulk, he

was slow and dim-witted. He seemed too taken aback at the image of a beautiful gentlewoman felling his fellow that he did not fight back.

Their large size was inconvenient. When she dragged the first behind a set of thick curtains, the fabric lumped oddly. Someone would notice, and more likely sooner than later. This was inconsequential. It would still be too late to stop her.

When she tucked the second man behind a second set of curtains, she glanced for a moment at the sword on his hip. It was two parts menace, one part decoration. There was no chance it would be left unsharpened. But Yara dismissed it and walked away empty-handed. She had her eyes on another joy.

The room was dim when she entered. There were candles lining the walls, not sitting sadly in pools of their own wax but mounted in gleaming silver candelabras. Not all were lit, but enough to give off a glow that should have been warm.

In the center of the room was a bed with deep purple sheets. The pillows were rumpled, half tossed aside; the hangings had been ripped open. Before it, in a trail that led from door to mattress, were scattered the happy couple's wedding garments. Yara knelt before them and found what she had waited for. The hilt was carved with a level of detail that could serve no purpose but to boast itself. It was too big for her palm, but it was not heavy. The metal was crafted for ceremony, not use. She only hoped it would be sharp enough. She straightened up and turned her attention back to the bed.

They were so absorbed in their own skins that they had not noticed anything. Funny, Yara thought, how sweat and lust could make you blind and deaf in one fell swoop. They were naked and moaning and *oh oh ohhhhhhhh*

Sighs turned screams when the pale bride glimpsed Yara behind her lover's back.

Yara did not let Adam turn around. She raised his own sword above his back and -

Everything stopped.

It was as if the entire palace and all of its occupants had turned to glass. Adam was frozen mid-thrust; Victoria stopped mid-scream. A chill passed through the room. The room turned muted, as if a plug had been pulled and all the colors had been drained out. The candles on the walls were no longer flickering but paused mid-ignition.

Something swirled around her legs. It was a pool of... what? Mist? Fog? It was thick and dark, churning like water, or maybe like the clouds, or maybe -

Yara.

The voice rang not only in the walls but in the air and in the curtains and in Yara's very mind.

Yara.

Yara shrieked, and then, when her voice streaked out of her throat with sound sound *sound*, she shrieked again.

"Who's there?" she said she said she said aloud the words sang. "What's happening?"

The mist rose up in front of her. It might have been in the shape of a person, though even as her mind had captured this idea, the mist had already shifted into something new. It could have been one being, or it could have been twenty. As soon as Yara decided something about it, it was no longer in existence.

"Who's there?" she repeated.

You know us.

“No, I don’t. Show yourself!” she commanded, bravery snaking through her veins with the return of her voice.

We are the water and we are the waves. We are creation itself. We are that which begets and that which destroys, end and end and end and end.

“So you are gods. Is that it? And you’ve come to... what? Help me in my heroic journey?”

We are not gods. We are the gods. And we have come to punish you.

“For what?” Yara laughed, cackled, crowed. “For being lied to? For being taken advantage of?”

Your people are dying, Yara. You watch them dwindle from year to year and still you abandon them, the Runaway She-Who-Would-Be-Queen. You build yourself the body of a fool and are surprised when your play turns to tragedy. What is there that we would ever reward?

“Revenge! The regaining of my honor!”

You are a torturer and a murderess. You have no honor left.

“Then grant me finish this one task. I’ll return to my people, I’ll set them free, I’ll help them, I’ll -“

You have no magic left. Do you forget?

Yara bowed her head. The mist swirled and twisted so she was unable to avoid its presence.

“No,” she answered, cowed.

Then how would you presume to return?

Yara gripped the sword hilt tighter and raised it above her head. “Please, just let me finish -“

If you kill them, you will be damned.

Yara paused. And then -

“Then I will make sure that Hell is full of company.”

She swung the sword.

Color rushed back into the room. The mist churned and snarled. It swarmed around her in a hurricane that made her hair whip into her eyes and mouth. She spat it out and thrust the sword with all of her might.

Yara plunged Adam’s own blade into his back, and when it was buried up to the hilt, she pushed him down on top of his bride and impaled her too.

The scream stopped.

The blood spurted.

The mist roared.

You will never get to rest! You will watch your people die out one by one and be powerless to stop it. You, the Runaway Would-Be-Queen always away too long. You, the Watcher of Silence. You, the Storykeeper.

The mist curled into her. It stained her jeweled dress as it poured over her body. It tangled in her nose and mouth. It seeped into her eyes. It wound its way between her legs and snaked into her hollowness. It filled every pore and pushed and pushed until she thought she would burst, until she could no longer think.

You are doomed to be one of us. You will watch your people die out and when they are gone, you will crave their presence so strongly that you will try to make more. You will seek out the drowned and the helpless. You will seek out the ones who are made mirrors, in whose faces and souls you see your own likeness. And you will give them new bodies like you gave so many others, and again, and again, and again you will only be able to watch as they destroy

themselves. No matter how hard you try, you will only create more ruin, until one day you will learn.

There is no salvation.

There is only the hope that your story will be told.

You will tell the stories, Yara.

You will collect them from the fallen and you will remember every word, every note, every line.

They will not be forgotten.

This is your punishment. This is your reward.

And then Yara was no longer Yara but the mist itself

And then Yara was no longer Yara but the air and the walls and up up up beyond below into the water where everything was doomed and dying and only she could see

And then Yara was no longer

And then Yara was.