



BLUE WATER

A STAND-ALONE TALE FROM
THE SIBYLLINE SAGA

ANNA CACKLER

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*For Bear
who loves with all his heart.*

PROLOGUE

MILES SAT AT THE BAR, TWISTING A BRACELET AROUND HIS WRIST. IT WAS a simple thing. Just a length of braided sinew with a shark eye shell threaded on. He had chosen this bracelet specifically because of the shell. It was deep hazel brown, with traces of iridescent blue following the path of the spiral.

Miles spun the bracelet around, around, around, dragging a path through the grit and sweat on his wrist.

The brown-blue of the shell reminded him of *her* eyes. That's why he'd chosen it. The woman by the shore with the sad, endless eyes had sold it to him for a saucepan.

You didn't see shells like this often, even in a seaside country. Shells like these required sharp eyes that spent many hours combing the white sand along the shore. And nobody was willing to risk that for a few trinkets.

"That's a fine bauble," the barman said. "Is it for trade?"

Miles jumped, startled. The public house was relatively quiet. Only half the tables were occupied, which didn't bode well for Miles' prospects. Small crowds meant small profits. One didn't get paid singing to an empty room.

"I'm afraid not, my friend," Miles said, putting down his empty glass with a note of finality. "Just coin today."

"As you say," the barman said, accepting the copper piece Miles tossed onto the sticky bartop.

In fact, the lack of patronage had Miles considering moving on without singing at all. He was tired and sore from travel, and the food at the pub had been so unappealing he'd left most of it in his bowl. If he got out quickly, maybe nobody would notice that the bag on his back was vaguely lute-shaped and insist that he played. Maybe he could find a piemaker stall still open where he could buy some decent dinner.

"I know you," said a melodic, male voice from behind. "You're that bard, ain't ya? Geof, it's that bard who sings about the merfolk. I heard him sing in Glenfall Cove last month."

Miles closed his eyes slowly, mentally cursing himself for not getting out sooner. Maybe if he didn't turn around, pretended he didn't hear, he could just walk out.

"It is you! I'm sure of it," the drunk continued. He slapped his knee and guffawed, delighted with his own well of knowledge. Though Miles suspected that well was more like a puddle than any□ thing. "Are you going to play then?"

Heads began to turn all around the dim room, and eyes lit up. *Shit*, Miles thought to himself. There went his prospects for dinner.

"We haven't had a bard through here the last two months to□ gether!" A middle aged woman called from the back.

"Are you going to play then, bard?" someone else asked eagerly.

"The one about the merfolk, yeah?" asked the man who had first recognized him.

Well, small profits were better than no profits at all. And besides. He had made a promise to the woman on the beach. He could still

hear her voice in his memory. *Tell them about me, Miles. And maybe then, all that happened will mean something.*

Miles turned to face the room at large, a wide, knowing smile pulling a dimple into his left cheek. Handsome smiles meant better tips.

“The merfolk?” he asked in a loud voice designed to draw people in. “Are you sure? What about the Princes of Authe Ida? Or The Blue Bannock?”

Their response was predictable. “No! No!” the disappointed group of afternoon drunks booed him until he shook his hands, placating. “The Mergirl of Bluewater!”

“Alright! Okay!” Miles said to the gathered crowd as he pulled his lute out of its bag. He plucked at the strings and turned the pegs until the notes sang clear. The shark eye bracelet slipped sideways on his wrist.

Again, he thought of the woman. Her eyes were just this color, there on the beach in the evening sun, as she braided bracelets and laughed like a woman only pretending to be alive.

“The Mergirl of Bluewater,” he said in a lower voice, as if to himself.

The crowd leaned in, clutching steins and glasses. Even the barman stopped his cleaning to lean on the bar and listen.

Miles’ fingers flew across the strings, plucking out a melancholy tune with effortless ease. Not strumming, but singsong and wistful, each note leading to the next like waves driven by the tide.

The crowd held its breath, entranced by the song even before it began.

Miles closed his eyes, and his fingers continued their rhythmic plucking without conscious thought. He drew deep on the longing in his chest, recalled the fear and hope in the woman’s eye when

she'd first spotted him walking down the beach, and when he had achieved just the right frame of mind...

He began to sing.



Stay away, they said.
Go home, they said. Flee.
Turn your back.
Close your eyes.
Look not upon the sea.

But little girls who wander
And live relentlessly,
Who disobey,
Who run away,
They're the ones who see.

CHAPTER I

THEY SAY YOU SHOULDN'T STARE TOO LONG INTO THE WATER.

But I say, if the water is so dangerous, then why did they build a whole city right on the shore?

I was born in Bluewater, and I'd been staring at the sea my whole life. Not out over the horizon or at the beautiful cloud formations or sunrises, but right down into the water. When I was little, Mama used to take me down to the rock just below our house that jutted out from the sandy shore. There, we could lay down at high tide, the sun warming our backs. We looked deep down into the wicked blue for as long as we liked, and no one would ever know.

The water was restless and old, endless and wild. It changed color or every second from cobalt blue to gray to azure to turquoise.

Closer to the shore, she pointed out the creatures that lived in the tide pools: fish and crustaceans of every size and color. But the ocean didn't care about them any more than the air cared about us.

"The ocean just is," Mama said with a wistful expression.

"And it always will be," I answered with the confidence of a child who still saw the world as a mysterious, ancient place.

Mama got up after a while and went down the beach until she was just a pink and white smudge on the shoreline. Her skirt blew

up on the wind, turning her into a billowing cloud. Air, sand, sea. All that was missing was fire.

The ocean made the people of Bluewater nervous, but they still craved its gifts - shells, pearls, and the fine, white sand. Because of that, Mama and I usually had the shoreline to ourselves. The people of Bluewater would stay behind their cement walls and let us brave the tricky water for them.

Even at ten years old, I knew there was something wrong about this arrangement. The ocean's gifts were free. To purchase them with coin turned them into trinkets, when they should be talismans.

But when The Great Hunger swept across the land, a devastating famine lasting four years when Mama was a girl, people grasped at any excuse to assign blame. It was decided that the gods had grown jealous of the Old Kind - the merfolk, faeries, witches, and mindwalkers.

And so the wall was built: a heavy, lumbering thing of white masonry and cement, hiding the view of the shore. Anyone who could hear the hidden thoughts of their neighbors was called possessed. And before long, Bluewater forgot the Old Way, and they only pretended to be people of the tides. All that was left was the name of their city and the trinkets they wore on their wrists like jewelry.

"So long as you and I don't forget, Ayana," Mama liked to say, "then the magic isn't lost."

Maybe that's why I wasn't so surprised to see a face in the water that day by the shore, when Mama was just a cloud on the horizon. To me, the magic had always been real.

Two huge eyes, black as the ink that had dried around the rim of our ink pot. Creamy gray, iridescent skin. A wide, flat nose and pert

mouth. She was just a girl, like me, with hair like slippery black seaweed pasted to her delicate shoulders.

One of the merfolk. She had to be. Why else would there be a gray-skinned girl with no clothes in the water?

I froze. She was so pretty, I just wanted to stare at her. I wanted to *be* her. Was she even real? I blinked hard, but my eyes were clear.

If I moved too fast, she'd spook and disappear beneath the gentle, rolling waves. She'd turn into salt and dissolve, or simply break apart into flotsam.

I took a tentative step forward, my bare toes barely shifting the sand.

The face in the water didn't disappear. The swell of the gentle waves rolled her slippery hair over her shoulders and sent it undulating in the water behind her. Was she real, then? Flesh and bone and blood?

If I touched her, would she stay? Would her skin feel rubbery like a shark? And what about her tail? I'd heard so many conflicting stories about the merfolk. That they had twin tails like two legs, or that they only had one muscular tail like a seabass. That their lower bodies were long and sinuous like an eel. That their tails were full of poison spines, their teeth were sharp like a shark's, and their fingers webbed and taloned with razor claws.

But she had no talons. No spines. I couldn't see this girl's teeth, but judging by the shape of her mouth, they weren't any more dangerous than mine.

I squatted down as the water licked at my toes. "Hello."

The face dipped a little lower in the water, and my heart skipped. But she didn't disappear. Not yet.

"Don't go," I said. I kept my hands clutched around my knees for fear that she'd see any reaching gesture as a threat. "What's your

name?"

The girl in the water glanced up the shoreline to where Mama stood picking through her basket. She was too far away to hear us, and too far to see a little face in the water.

"Eden," the girl said.

A smile born of wonder spread across my face. Her voice was like music. Like the morning sun reflecting off the waves. Like Mama singing as she cracked eggs into a bowl for breakfast.

"I'm Ayana," I said, creeping a little closer.

"Is this Eventide, Ayana? This shore?"

I shook my head. "No, this is the city of Bluewater. Where's Eventide? I've never heard of it"

Eden cast her too-large eyes at the heavy wall behind me, despair clouding her brow. "I don't know."

A girl so young shouldn't have to be so afraid. I wanted to fix it, make her smile. I crept a little closer, then stopped when Eden's attention darted back to me in alarm. I sat down gingerly in the shallow water.

Eden tucked her chin down and to the side, unsure of what to do. "You've never heard of Eventide? It's an island."

I shook my head. "There are many islands along this coast. That's Mona Island just there." I pointed to a distant shape on the horizon. "But I've never heard of Eventide. Is it a merfolk name? Maybe you have a different name for it than we do."

Eden shook her head. "No, there are people there, too. They're nicer there. A couple of boys threw rocks at me this morning. By the pier." She rubbed her cheek, which was a little pinker than the rest of her skin, now that I looked closer.

"What?" I said, the spark of indignation starting up in my chest. "Who did it? Where? Did they have red hair? I'll bet it was the Clark

twins. Their uncle is a merchant so they're always running about the pier, making pests of themselves."

Eden tucked away into the water, startled by my outburst. I checked my anger and tried again.

"They shouldn't have done that," I said. "Why are you looking for Eventide? Is that where you're from?"

Eden nodded again. She changed position in the water so that her tail broke the surface and flashed briefly into view. All the stories were wrong. It was longer than I expected, but not slimy and curling like an eel. Strong, powerful, muscular, and covered in beautiful scales that shone blue, green, iridescent pink, and blushing lavender. Her scales were like gemstones, and transparent blue fins rippled through the water as she moved.

"How did you get here?" I asked, transfixed.

Eden hunkered down in the water, low enough that her bottom lip went under. "The storm. I got lost."

"Oh," I breathed.

Yes, there had been a storm. About two weeks before, the winds had howled fiercely for an entire day, and the sea had risen several feet – almost to the steps of our house, which was one of the few buildings outside of the wall.

Mama and I had stayed inside, playing games and making shell curtains by lamplight, and when we came out the next day, palm fronds and tree branches and debris clogged the road and the southern wicket gate was completely blocked by a fallen palm. It took us a full day to get back into the city.

Some people had lost their houses to the fierce winds, but we were fortunate. We only lost one chicken and one of the lemon trees that flanked our front door.

“So you can’t find your way back to your family?” I asked, glancing up at Mama in the distance. I don’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t find her. And Eden was little, like me. Just a child.

“I’ll be your friend, for as long as you stay in Bluewater. That’s our house just up there.” I pointed upward where the peak of our roof was only just visible over the cliff’s edge. “If you want to talk or anything, I’m here most mornings. And nobody comes here but me and Mama, so no one will be mean to you. And if they are, I’ll stop them. Those Clark twins aren’t as tough as they like to think.”

Eden followed my pointing finger, an expression of hope on her strange, beautiful face.

“You can tell me what it’s like to be merfolk. And I can tell you all about people,” I suggested.

“I know about people,” Eden said, perking up a little. “I have lots of human friends on Eventide. The people there like to swim with us.”

“Really?” I asked. “They’re not afraid of the sea?”

“No. Why would they be?”

“They say it’s bad luck to stare into the water. No one swims here.”

“That’s so sad,” Eden said. “Do you swim?”

“Ayana!” Mama’s voice floated down the beach on the wind. “Ayana! It’s getting late! Are you ready to go?”

Eden slipped down into the water until only her eyes were visible.

“I’ll come back later!” I whispered to her, and she nodded once before disappearing completely.

I scrambled out of the water and fetched my basket from the sand where I had left it, half full of shells and sea stones worn

smooth with the tumbling crash of the waves. I ran down the beach toward Mama, scattering wet sand as I went.



What happened by the water?
To make them so afraid?
They had forgot
And never thought
Of how much fear could weigh.

But when they turned to fire,
To terror and to blade,
The girl, she knew
What she must do.
The choice already made.

CHAPTER 2

“WHY DO WE HAVE TO LEAVE SO SOON, MAMA?” I ASKED AS SOON AS I was close enough to be heard over the wind and the crashing waves.

Mama wiped her dark, wild hair away from her grim expression. She had rolled up her white, linen sleeves, and her skirt still blew in the relentless wind. “There’s a burning today, sweetheart.”

I stopped short, my brows drawing together in consternation. I had only ever been to one burning before; they didn’t happen often. I was very little, and I couldn’t remember much. But the smell is something you never forget.

“Do we have to go?”

Mama shifted her basket to her other arm and gripped my shoulder in a firm, comforting hand. “Yes, Ayana. We have to. It’s the law.”

I wanted to argue, but I didn’t know how. So when Mama turned me back toward the house, just barely visible on the cliff way down the beach, I didn’t pull away.

I don’t know when the burnings started. Long before I was born, certainly. Mama always said it began when Eustis Metaxis came into power, but everyone else claims we’ve been doing it forever. Ever

since The Great Hunger, so that the gods would see our purity and be kind.

But I knew one thing for sure and certain: nobody else in Authe Ida burned their mindwalkers. Just us. Only Bluewater.

Mama and I entered the city through the southern wicket gate and joined the crowd gathered around the pyre in the district square. Tall buildings rose around us in swaths of brightly painted cement, and eucalyptus trees in tidy squares of gravel protected us from the afternoon sun.

I clung to Mama's side as the people elbowed us along. Mama caught sight of a friend nearer the front, and she pulled me through the crowd.

"Hello, Marta," Mama said, and the two women greeted each other with a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. Marta had a baby boy, Nikolas, who was busy drooling on her shoulder. He wasn't big enough to stand yet, but he saw me over his mother's shoulder and babbled a happy greeting to me as well.

"Hi, Nik!" I said. For a moment, I forgot where we were and our reason for coming. There was only this happy baby with a poof of black hair on his head. And when I hid my face with my hands and uncovered it again, he squealed with delight.

And since the entire district was required to attend a burning, Marta and baby Nikolas weren't the only familiar faces in the crowd. A flash of orange hair caught my eyes, and I flushed red with sudden anger. It was the Clark twins, Kris and Andrei. They were nearly two years older than me and loved to push their weight around. Even now, they were throwing pumpkin seeds at the back of a younger boy's head, delighting in his confused agitation.

"Ow!" cried Marta. "Don't pull my hair Nik!"

Marta moved Nikolas from one shoulder to the other, effectively ending the game I had been playing with him. But that was okay. The sight of the twins had fired my blood so much that I didn't want to play anymore anyway. These were the two that had thrown rocks at my new friend Eden at the pier, and for what? Just because she was a little different? Just because they could?

I was halfway toward the Clarks when I spotted yet another familiar face in the crowd: my best friend Hollis. Hollis lived up the street from me, the oldest of seven children, all of them golden as the midday sun. Hollis shoved through the crowd toward me, and a patch of afternoon light set his blond hair glowing. He slipped behind Andrei Clark, and a flash of silver at his waist made me wince.

I grinned. The flash of silver had been a sharp little knife. Hollis had swiped his blade across the bag of pumpkin seeds, spilling its contents over the cobbles. He was there and gone before either of the twins noticed him. Their ammunition was all over the ground, damning them, and they were caught. Their victim's father rounded on them, yelling.

Hollis sidled up to me and smiled pleasantly.

"Those two are the worst," I said.

"I'm sure they wouldn't agree with you on that," Hollis said, crossing his arms and looking satisfied with himself. His brothers and sisters appeared around him, like baby chicks trailing after their mother through the crowded courtyard.

I greeted them all, and we fell into laughing and chasing each other, shoving people aside for our play. Nikolas squealed and laughed, kicking with delight in his mother's arms.

We were so wrapped up in our game that we didn't notice when the courtyard fell silent. It took Mama grabbing my arm and hissing

for me to stand quiet for me to remember why we had gathered there.

We were near enough to the front of the crowd that I could just peak over Grady Larson's shoulder and see what was going on. In the center of the square stood a great pyre, taller than a man. A ladder had been laid against one side to reach a crude, narrow platform on top. Through the center of the platform thrust the straight trunk of a palm tree, still green from felling.

That they would sacrifice an entire palm tree for this showed just how serious the burnings were.

"Do you know his name?" I asked Hollis.

"Who?"

"The mindwalker they caught?"

"No," he said.

"Kealan," a stranger said next to me. "He's my neighbor's cousin. A fisherman."

I stared up at the man who had spoken, my heart breaking a little. "I'm sorry, mister."

The man harrumphed. "Don't be sorry, girl. Be glad we caught him. These mindwalkers look just like us. You'd never know they were in your head, would you? It's terrifying."

I edged away from the angry man and tightened my grip on Mama's hand. She kept her eyes straight ahead and expressionless. Only her firm hold on my hand belied her feelings.

A swell of chatter arose from the front of the crowd, signaling to the rest of us that it had begun. Two soldiers led a swaying man up the ladder to the platform. That must be Kealan. He grinned maniacally, his eyes unfocused as he was positioned against the wooden post.

"Why is he smiling?" I asked Mama, feeling a little sick.

“They gave him medicine to make him calm,” Mama answered. She squeezed my hand once, commanding me to be quiet.

“It’s a mercy,” Marta said next to her with a grim voice. “It’s a kindness so he won’t suffer while the magic is burned out of him.”

But as I watched Kealan stumble up the ladder, it didn’t seem like a kindness. This man was about to die, and he wasn’t even allowed to be afraid.

I searched Hollis’ face, then Mama’s, looking for answers. This wasn’t right, but everyone was just standing around, watching.

One of the soldiers tied Kealan’s hands behind him and around the palm trunk. The mindwalker let him do it without fighting. He leaned back against the palm, grinning up at the sky.

The entire square went quiet so that we all heard Kealan’s stuttering giggles and muttering. It was an eerie feeling, knowing that he went happily to his death.

Then a crier stood on the pyre to be easily seen over the heads of the crowd. Kealan stared at the back of his head, fascinated by something that probably wasn’t there.

“Hear now, all gathered,” the crier called out over the crowd. He rang a large brass bell twice to get our attention. “Here stands Kealan Muscor, who has confessed of his own volition to be a mindwalker. He possesses vile magic that must be purged from our lawful society. Alderman Petritis, acting as the representative of Eustis Metaxis, our lord of Bluewater, sentences Kealan Muscor to death by burning. This we do in remembrance of The Great Hunger, which was a punishment from the gods for harboring evil in our midst.”

There followed a haunting call and answer. The crier spoke a phrase, and everyone in the crowd repeated it in a rumble of many voices.

“This we do to remember The Great Hunger, that we may never want again.”

“This we do to protect ourselves from demons, wickedness, and spirits, lest they contaminate us all.”

“This we do with courage, not fear.”

“This we do with justice, not vengeance.”

He rang the bell once more. The chime bounced off of the cement buildings that surrounded the square, startling a bevy of pigeons to take off in alarm.

Silence met this perfunctory speech, except the accused. Kealan whooped, as if cheering for a friend who dared to jump off the end of the city’s main dock, where the water was deep enough for a frigate. His giggles filtered between us, putting every person in the crowd on edge. I cringed and clung closer to Mama.

The crier was wrong. This wasn’t courage or justice. It was fear, pure and simple. And what justice? What crime had been done? Kealan had been a fisherman, a cousin. He was someone’s son. Maybe someone’s father or husband. Did anyone cry for him in the crowd? I couldn’t tell. Too many bodies pressed close.

I thought again of the little girl in the water. The mergirl named Eden with wide eyes and beautiful skin. If anyone knew about her, she’d be burned, too.

My feet began moving on their own. My vision narrowed to the ladder, which was being lifted away. It didn’t matter, I could climb. I pushed through the few people in front of us, not hearing Mama’s cry of alarm, and scrambled up the pyre toward Kealan.

The branches were coated in some slippery, oily substance that shone greenish on my hands and stained my shirt. I pulled myself up hand over hand, using the piled branches to lever myself up until I stood on the platform, panting with urgency.

Kealan grinned down at me, eyes wide. He made faces at me in a horrible mockery of the game I had been playing with Nikolas a few minutes before. *Peek-a-boo!*

I shuddered. What now? I didn't have a knife to cut his ropes. I couldn't get him away from the guards or away from the surging crowd that stood around and did nothing to help me.

But there was no time to stand around and think. The soldiers had already lunged forward to fetch me down. Panicked, I reached for the rope that held Kealan's wrists secure behind the palm trunk. I yanked at the knots even as the ladder was thrown back against the pyre and two soldiers climbed up.

"No! No!" I said under my breath, hopping with agitation. One knot came free just as big hands wrapped around my waist. My fingers immediately moved to pry on the next knot, but it was too late. The soldier lifted me bodily off the platform and the ropes ripped out of my little hands.

"No!" I screamed, my voice pitched high in childish fury. "No! It's not right! Let me go!"

I kicked and struggled, but I was just a kid. The soldiers passed me down from the pyre, ignoring my flailing fists.

"It's not right! It's not right!" I squealed, screamed, kicked, and raged. But I might have been a hermit crab in the beak of a seagull for all the good it did.

"Ayana!" Mama's terrified voice cut through my screams.

"Is she yours?" One soldier asked.

"If you can't keep her under control, we'll do it for you!" barked the man who carried me.

I was passed off to Mama, who picked me up and carried me away from the pyre and back through the crowd. Marta trailed after, clutching a wailing Nikolas to her chest.

I continued screaming, prying at Mama's grip on me. I couldn't hit her – not like I could the soldiers. I pushed and pulled and tried to squirm out of her arms, but she was like me: fierce, determined, and strong. There was nothing I could do.

The crowd jeered and hissed at us as we moved through them. "He's a demon, girl!" "Teach your daughter better!" "Witch lover!" "Go home!" "This is what comes of living outside the wall!" They parted like water before Mama, Marta following close behind. Nikolas squirmed and screamed in her arms in a little mimic of my anger.

"It's not right!" I cried through furious tears. "It's not right!"

If anyone heard me over the shouting crowd, they didn't care. To them, Kealan was a monster, and killing him was the right thing to do.

Hollis' golden head popped into view as the crowd jostled. He watched me borne away, holding his youngest sisters by the hand. And for a second, I thought there might be a little hope.

"Hollis!" I screamed. "Hollis, help him! It's not right!"

But he didn't move. He pulled his sisters closer and just watched us go. My heart sank. Hollis had been my last hope. The one who always knew what to do and how to do it right. But he just stood there.

Hollis didn't do anything at all.

Two familiar, laughing voices wove through the throng, and I turned to see the Clark twins leering at me. Mocking me. In a haze of petulant rage, I ducked my hand into Mama's basket of shells and hurled as many as I could in their direction as we passed. They shielded their faces from the sharp little things, scowling at me.

"How does it feel?" I screeched at them, referring to how they'd thrown rocks at Eden.

But they must have assumed I meant the pumpkin seeds, because they threw the last few they had at Mama's retreating back, shouting bile at us both, just like their parents.

And far behind, where I could barely see over the crowd, a fire burst into existence. Finally, my furious screaming halted in my throat. The oiled logs caught eagerly, and I watched in mute horror as Kealan disappeared, laughing, into the flames.



The years cannot be halted.
There is no time to wait.
Stuck between
The land and sea
The girl must face her fate.

CHAPTER 3

13 YEARS LATER

“WHAT’S THAT ONE CALLED?” NIKOLAS ASKED, POINTING AT A SHELL IN the shallow water. I had brought the boy with me today, promising he could wait with me for Eden to return with news. He had been in and out of the water all morning long, and it shed off his high, black curls in energetic droplets.

Nikolas had grown a good two inches that summer alone, all elbows and knees. Gone was the baby fat and round cheeks. When had he grown up? I’d missed it somehow. Soon he’d be taller than me, and I’d never hear the end of it.

I had grown as well, though from his perspective, I’d always been an adult. It didn’t help that I’d latched onto him like the aunt he never had, protective, watchful, friend.

Nikolas slipped off the rock and into the water up to his knees. A moment later, he had the shell in question in his hands. He rinsed the sand away and held it up for me to see.

I rested my head on my arm. “You should know this one, Nik,” I said.

“Scotch bonnet?” he guessed.

“Close,” I said. “It’s a whelk. See the elongated end?”

“Whelk,” he said, examining the shell more closely. “Do they have seashells in the north?”

I chewed on my lip. Was this sadness in his voice? Or longing? “Well, they don’t have a sea, so probably not. But they have snow.”

He looked up, a new light in his eyes. “I can’t wait to see snow! Mother says it gets higher than your head in some places.”

I grinned at the happiness in his voice. “I’ve heard that, too.”

“You should come with us,” Nikolas said, his attention already back on the seashells in the sand. “Don’t you want to see snow? And they have different fruit there. Apples and peaches. Have you ever had one of those?”

“No,” I said. “Have you?”

“Of course not,” he said. “But I will. I’ll plant a tree in our garden when we find a place to live. And pears and... and what was that other one you told me about?”

“Plums?”

“Yeah, plums!” He pulled back his arm and threw a broken shell out into the deeper water. “You could come visit us and try some of everything.”

“Maybe,” I said, but in my heart of hearts, I knew I never would. I looked out over the water, and my heart beat in time with the waves. My skin glowed with the heat of the sun. How could I ever leave this? How could I ever go somewhere Eden couldn’t follow me?

Nikolas' expression stilled. “I understand. It’s hard to leave your home. I’m excited to meet Eden, though.”

I reached out and squeezed his hand. “Soon. You’ll meet her soon. But Nik, you have to be more careful than that. I know you feel safe with me, but you need to practice responding to what I say, not what I’m thinking.”

Nikolas threw another broken shell out to sea, this time with a little more force and a stiffness to his shoulders. "Not in the north. I won't have to pretend there."

"I bet you will. At least a little bit. Everybody pretends about something most of the time."

When he didn't turn around and his shoulders didn't relax, I splashed some water at him. I got him good. The splash hit his full body from waist to head. He cowered and turned to face me with an incredulous expression.

"What was that for?"

"To make you smile," I said.

A devilish grin spread across his face. He bent down and thrashed his arms through the water, sending huge splashes in my general direction. I cringed away, laughing, protecting my face. I didn't get terribly wet; he had no technique. But every chilly drop sent a shiver down my body.

"I should have known I'd find you two here."

The familiar voice worked its way to me through the noise of the crashing waves and the crying gulls. I turned to see Hollis making his way toward us down the sandy path from my house. His wavy blond hair reflected the morning light, turning it to bright gold. He smirked when he saw me laying on my rock, staring at the sea again when I should be working.

"I've been looking for you two everywhere. Hi Nik."

"Hiya, Hollis!" Nikolas waved.

I lay back down, exposing my bare back to the sun once more, tossing my messy black braid over my shoulder. The warmth spread through me, contrasting beautifully with the icy droplets of seawater that kissed my skin. I draped my arm into the water and dragged my fingers through the sand. "We're hunting for shells."

“No, you’re not,” Hollis said with the long suffering tone of someone who has heard this excuse a thousand times. He sat cross legged on the rock next to me.

“Yes, we were!” Nikolas said. He sloshed over to my rock to hold up a basket half full with scotch bonnets, kings crowns, naticas, shark eyes, and a dozen others. They rattled against each other in happy click clacks.

These shells would become curtains, necklaces, wall hangings, and talismans. Simple things. Pretty things. That’s what Mama and I had always done. I’d been helping her hunt for shells since I was old enough to pick them up without putting them directly into my mouth, sand and all.

But it had been just me the past few years. Mama had married a gentle man and moved inland. As for me? I couldn't bear to leave the sea.

“Any pearls today?” Hollis asked. He picked up Nikolas' whelk and inspected it.

I sighed and rested my chin on my arm. “Not today.”

“So, no visits from the mysterious Eden, then? This diver you’re always talking about.” His voice carried a hint of teasing.

I flicked my hand through the water, sending droplets scattering. “Nope. She usually comes in the evenings.”

“Why haven’t I met her yet?” Hollis asked, then pointed at Nikolas. “Have you met her?”

Nikolas shook his head truthfully. Silently I begged him not to say anything about Eden at all. Nothing. Don’t even mention we were here waiting for her. I had no way to know if he heard me, so I had to simply trust that the message got through.

“Why are you the only one she sells her pearls to?” Hollis asked.

I half shrugged. I had been asked this question a dozen times, and I'd never been any good at lying. So the smartest answer was no answer at all. Let them think what they wanted about the pearl diver no one had met.

Hollis continued. "If she would just sell to more people, she'd make a fortune. Divers are few and far between these days."

Nikolas chipped in. "Ayana's the only one I know who has pearls always."

Hollis nodded sagely, as if this thirteen year old boy was the highest and best authority on the subject of the pearl market. I could practically hear the knowing grin stretching across his face. "Or is there some other reason why you keep so quiet about her?"

"Stop it, Hollis," I said, but there was no fight in my voice.

"You like her," he said with a confident nod. "I knew it. That's dangerous, you know."

Nikolas' devilish grin returned, then instantly faded. He didn't know how to take this statement, and neither did I.

My heart skipped. "What? What do you mean?"

He glanced down at me, still teasing. "Mixing business with romance. Nik's right. You're the only artist in town with a steady supply of pearl. You're doing well. But what if you mess things up with this Eden person? Then where will you be? There are no other divers around to trade with. Haven't been for a while."

My heart slowed, and I settled back down on my arm. "Some things are worth the risk," I said. In my mind, I pictured her dark hair flowing through the water. Her slow smile, the way her hand felt like silk on mine. I thought of her laugh as we sat out the sunset together.

But this morning, I had been waiting for Eden for an entirely different reason. She had promised me news as soon as she got back,

news that could save Nikolas' life. News of passage to the north, where a mindwalker could live without fear.

"Which brings me back around to the big question," Hollis said, unaware of my worries. "Why haven't I met her yet?"

I chewed my lip. "You will someday."

He laughed. "I'll bet. Someday. Do you know what you really need, though?"

Oh, this should be good. "What's that?" I asked.

"You need some handsome stranger to come walking down the beach, fall in love with you, and finally convince you to leave the water for good. It worked for your mother, it'll work for you."

I laughed out loud. "They'd have to be very handsome indeed!"

"As handsome as me, at least," Hollis said.

"No one's as handsome as you," I said, flicking water at him. "And you'd be the first to say so, you vain prick. And if you could never get me to fall in love, then I doubt any man ever could."

"A woman then," he amended, still determined to outwit me.

"The only woman I ever loved was the sea herself." I gestured out over the water, at the roiling waves, green as glass in the sunshine. "How could I not?"

Nikolas laughed.

"No!" Hollis cried in mock defeat. He clutched at his heart in dramatic fashion. "Anyone but the sea! She'll fool you, mark my words. She'll pull you under and never let you out again."

I thought of Eden, and of the warnings I'd been told all my life. *Don't stare into the water. Stay away. Go home.*

I hadn't heeded any of them. Not one.

"Stuck, you are," Hollis continued, squinting his eyes against the sun.

"I'm not stuck."

“Yes, you are. Stuck between the land and the sea.” He leveled his blue eyes at me. “You always have been. It’s not healthy. Your mother knew it. She got out. When are you going to do the same?”

“Why did you come looking for me?” I asked to change the subject. But when I saw his mood shift, the way his shoulders slumped and his expression turned grim, I instantly regretted it. “No. Never mind. Forget I asked.”

“You have to come to the burning today, Ayana,” Hollis said.

Nikolas turned his back to us

I refused to face him. “I don’t want to.”

“Me either,” Nikolas said, still facing out to the open ocean. He squatted down in the water and pretended to search for more shells in the sand.

“You missed the last one in our district,” Hollis said to me in an undertone. “People noticed. If you miss another one they will start talking. And with you living so close to the water...”

He trailed off, because we all knew what he was insinuating. Mama and I had always lived on the edge of Bluewater, both metaphorically and literally. And now that it was just me, the little girl who once tried to save a mindwalker, everything had gotten worse.

They saw me as a necessary evil, the only reliable source of seashells, pearls, and sand. Even the other jewelry makers bought their shells from me, unwilling as they were to come to the shore themselves.

Only my oldest friends acknowledged me outside of market days: Hollis, Marta, and Nikolas. But that was just fine by me. The rest of them thought it was a good idea to burn people alive.

“It’s grotesque,” I said, my upper lip curling up in disgust.

“All the same,” he said in an exhausted tone.

I stared down into the water once more. Eden hadn't come this morning, but that wasn't unusual. She came when she could, and I savored every stolen moment we had. And this time she'd gone on such a long journey, it might be another day before she got back.

I dipped my fingers into the water again. The light filtering through the water gave my golden skin a bluish tint. "They just want to scare us. It's all a big show so we'll betray our neighbors to save ourselves."

"I know," Hollis said.

"If they have to work so hard to make us afraid of the mindwalkers, then maybe they're not as bad as they want us to think."

Nokolas' back was taut with tension, no matter how well he tried to hide it. He kept his eyes on the seafloor under his knees.

"We've been over this so many times, Ayana," Hollis said. "It doesn't bear repeating again."

I stood abruptly and glared at him, then remembered Hollis wasn't the one burning people alive. I softened my voice, but kept the determination in it. "It always bears repeating, Hollis. Always."

I turned back to the water. "I'm not going, Hollis. Never again."

"Ayana—"

"I'm not going."

"You can't sit on the beach forever, Ayana."

"Watch me!"

Hollis sighed, but he didn't push me further. "Nik, your mother's waiting for you."

Nikolas threw a pebble into the water with frustration. But he trudged out of the water obediently and followed Hollis away from the beach.



What was built in decades
Could never stand on lies.

A secret love,
A little shove,
Will herald her demise.

CHAPTER 4

ALONE ONCE MORE, I SETTLED DOWN ON MY ROCK TO WAIT. I FORCED myself not to look around when a whiff of smoke laced through the air. I didn't want to see the column of black billowing up into the sky over the wall behind me.

Instead I turned my attention to my craft. I had brought my tools down to the rock as I often did and continued work on a few bracelets. Even if I didn't open my market booth today, at least I could be productive. I drilled careful holes in the shells with my auger and braided them into sinew cords, finishing them off with clever knots for luck.

As I tied off the fifth one, a splashing sound worked its way into my brain. A splash at the seaside was nothing to take notice of, but this one didn't fit the regular pattern of low waves sloshing against the rocks.

I glanced up, hardly aware that I'd heard anything at all, and my heart leapt. A pair of large black eyes watched me from just above the water's surface. Human eyes at first glance, set in creamy pale skin and unblinking. But if you looked closely, the skin had a grayish cast to it, the black hair was almost iridescent, and the eyes weren't

just large; they were too large. The inky black irises blended so perfectly with the pupil that I couldn't distinguish one from the other.

And when I noticed them, they squinted into an unmistakable smile.

"Eden," I gasped. I dumped my half finished bracelet and my tools into the box next to me and scrambled for the edge of the rock. As I slipped into the water, Eden rose a bit higher above the surface, exposing her small nose and elongated face.

I pushed my way through the water toward her. But Eden was one of the merfolk, and the sea was her home. With one flick of her powerful tail, she closed the distance between us. I wrapped my arms around her, burying my face in her cool neck. She laughed a little as we sagged back down into the water. She couldn't stand, so I sank down onto my knees, submerging us both up to our shoulders.

"It's been three days," I said.

"I know, I'm so sorry."

"I was so worried!" I pulled back, framing her face in my hands. I brushed away her slippery hair.

"It was a long journey," Eden said, her eyebrows drawing together. Her shoulders drooped, and the way she gripped my arms spoke of pure exhaustion.

Of course she was tired. She had been swimming for three days straight.

"I know, I know. Thank you for going." I pulled her to me and kissed her. I lingered against her mouth as her lips curled into another smile. Every time it was like the first time. Not just the spark of heat that swelled under my skin, but the comfort, the assuredness. With Eden I was home.

"I'm here now," she said.

I settled more comfortably in the water and readied myself for bad news. "Did you find her? The old woman that Nik dreamt about? You didn't find her, did you?"

"I did," Eden said. "I found her! I told you I would."

I sat up a little straighter, my hands up in an abortive gesture of triumph.

"She was right where he said. In that little fishing town with the broken pier."

"Glenfall Cove?" I supplied, and Eden nodded.

"She was waiting for me on the beach," Eden said, and a ghost of discomfort passed over her large eyes. "She was expecting me, Ayana."

I tucked my chin down. "Do you not trust her? Will she help us?"

"She says she will," Eden said, shrugging one slim shoulder. "She says she'll meet us here tonight at sunset. I swam as fast as I could to get here in time. But Ayana, how did she know I'd be there looking for her?"

I shook my head and swiped my wild hair away with a wet hand. "She's supposed to be a mindwalker like Nikolas. Maybe she saw a vision of you. But how can she get here by tonight? It would take twice as long to walk here as it did for you to swim."

"I don't know," Eden said. "But I wouldn't doubt her. She was old, but her eyes were sharp. Why do we even need her? Can't your friends just walk north?"

I shook my head. "There's no way. Not without drawing suspicion. There's nothing north of Bluewater but the border. No one goes through the northern gate unless they're on a diplomatic mission. And even if they went the long way, taking the eastern gate and cutting through the salt flats, there are sentinel stations all along the

border for miles. They'd never get through. Too many people have tried and failed."

"If that's the case, I wonder how the old woman could make any difference. The elderly are slower, right? They aren't as able."

"I don't know," I said. "But Nik says she's their way out of Blue□ water. She's been coming to him in dreams for weeks, and always she leads him to safety. We have to trust that. We have to trust him."

"I hope it's enough," she answered.

"I'm just glad you're back," I said, pulling her into another embrace.

But Eden stiffened in my arms.

"What is it?" I asked.

She didn't answer. Instead she slipped soundlessly under the water and propelled herself far enough away that the reflection of the sun and sky hid her presence.

I spun around in the water, my heart thumping. We weren't alone. My worst nightmare had finally come to pass. After years of meeting Eden in secret at the water's edge, someone had found my little protected cove.

But it wasn't just anybody. A wash of relief blew through me. "Hollis!" I said as I took in his lean build and golden curls of my oldest friend.

Then I saw the expression on his face, and the relief turned to ice in my chest. "Hollis?" I said again, less sure of myself.

"One of the seafolk, Ayana?" he asked in a voice so low I almost didn't hear it over the swell of the ocean.

I glanced behind me, and Eden popped the top half of her face above the surface. Just enough to clearly see what was going on.

"Hollis, it's not that bad," I said.

“Is this Eden, then? Your *diver* who brings you pearls? Are you insane?”

“I know it’s dangerous, but—”

He spoke over me. “Dangerous? Yes, Ayana. It’s dangerous. Completely aside from the fact that *it’s not human!*”

I cringed and glanced back at the huge black eyes visible above the water behind me. Eden’s hair floated beneath the surface, creating an inky black cloud.

Hollis barreled on. “If anyone saw this you’d be burned at the stake. Just like that woman today. What would your mother say if she could see you now? To see her daughter consorting with one of the Old Kind?”

I glowered at him. “Consorting? Don’t talk about my mother like that. You don’t speak for her!”

He took an angry step forward and jabbed a finger at me. “Well somebody has to look out for you. You were kissing it!”

“Her! I was kissing her!” I shouted. “Were you spying on us?”

“Of course I was spying!” Hollis shot back. “Did you think I didn’t notice how strange you were acting this morning? You and Nikolas? And then you didn’t open your booth today? To come sit by the ocean? I wanted to know why!”

I couldn’t find an answer to this.

Hollis’ shoulders dropped, and he cast about as if he might see a signpost planted in the sand somewhere. “Ayana’s sanity – 5 miles east.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this, Ayana?” he asked. “How could you keep this from me?”

The victimized tone in his voice set my chest ablaze. “Are you kidding?” I seethed. “Because I knew how you would react, Hollis! I

knew that you would call Eden an 'it!' This was one conversation I *never* wanted to have with you! Best friend or not!"

His mouth curled into an angry snarl. "Don't you understand that your choices affect other people? What about me? What about my brothers and sisters? What do you think will happen to them if the city believes I knew about this? If they think I kept this secret for you? They need me, Ayana!"

"Well which way would you rather it be, Hollis? Should I have told you or not? Because either way I'm to blame, aren't I?"

"You shouldn't have consorted with it at all!" he bellowed.

"Her!" I screeched.

Hollis' mouth snapped shut. He spun on his heel, slipping a bit in the loose sand, then stalked off around the outcropping of stone that concealed us.

I let him go and slid down into the water. My entire body shook with rage. How could he dare? I had expected some negative reaction, but to play the victim? My best friend, a man who had been as good as a brother my whole life, could only see his own hurt in this situation. It didn't have anything to do with him!

Eden's cool hand slipped around my arm. She wrapped me in a calming embrace from behind. Her tail came to rest against my leg, and I pulled her a little closer for comfort. Her bright scales were like nacre, shimmering blue, green, and even a little pink when the light hit them just right through the rippling water. As beautiful as the day I first saw her.

"You should go after him," she said in a low voice.

"He doesn't deserve it," I said, glowering at the water.

"He's your best friend."

I turned around in her embrace, incredulous. "Didn't you hear what he said? He called you an 'it!' And then to- to--"

“He cares about you,” she said. “He’s worried.”

“Let him worry,” I said.

We sat in the water together for a few quiet minutes, and my heart slowed back down to its usual rhythm in time with the waves.

“Ayana, he heard our conversation.”

“I know!” Apparently I still had a little fight left in me after all. “Doesn’t he have anything better to do than sit around and spy on me? I’ve never known him to be such a sneak. It’s disgusting behavior.”

“No, I mean he heard our conversation about Nikolas and the old woman. About our plan to get your friends out of Bluewater.”

The anger turned to slime in my chest, sinking low into my gut like a pit of tar. “He won’t—” I swallowed hard. “He wouldn’t betray us. He won’t tell anyone.”

“You’re sure?”

No, I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure about anything anymore. “Yes. I’m sure,” I said instead. “He won’t say anything.”

Eden nodded, squeezing my hand. “If that’s true, then maybe he does deserve to have you go after him.”

I chewed my lip. “I have to go tell Nik and Marta about our meeting tonight. Will you wait here for me? I’ll come right back.”

“I’ll be here,” Eden promised.

I pressed my mouth to hers, to steady myself as much as to say goodbye. I savored the salty taste of her mouth and lingered for just a second longer than I normally would, and when I pulled away, a wry smile teased her lips.



I WENT STRAIGHT TO THE LEATHERWORKS BOOTH THAT MARTA AND Nikolas ran at the market and made small talk with them, admiring the orderly row of shoes on display. Silently I thought about the meeting planned for that night, and Nikolas gave me a nod and an anxious smile to confirm he'd gotten the message.

"Have you seen Hollis since the burning?" I asked Marta.

She shook her head, eyebrows drawn. "No. Why?"

"He and I—" I paused, unsure how to tell her what happened without the risk of being overheard by Julet, who sold produce in the neighboring stand. I couldn't just say that Hollis had caught me with my merfolk lover, could I? I settled with, "We had an argument. I need to apologize."

"I expect he's at work this time of day," Marta said with a shrug. "Go ask Fathima."

So I said goodbye and went next to the palace, where Hollis worked as a server. Considering he had spent the last hour spying on me, I didn't really think I'd find him at work. But it was worth checking.

I entered the palace by the kitchen door as usual and pushed my way through the scullery maids and cooks toward the butler's office.

"Hollis didn't come to work today," said Fathima, the under-butler. "He sent along a message that he had some personal things to take care of."

"Oh, yes of course," I lied, not wanting to alert her that something may be wrong. "I think I know where to find him. Thank you Fathima!"

"Any time, dear," she answered.

I left the same way I entered, the tar pit in my stomach solidifying into actual fear. What if I was wrong? What if Hollis did betray

us? There was no way to change the meeting with the old woman. If we missed our chance tonight, that was it. There would be no second attempt.

And as much as I didn't want to entertain the thought, a pang of guilt gnawed at my ribs. Hollis was not right to react the way he did, but he was right about one thing: I had lied to him. I hadn't trusted my best friend with a secret so close to my heart that it had become a part of me. I should have told him about Eden years ago. I should have faced the inevitable bad reaction that anyone in Bluewater would have had, and given him time to adjust. I should have trusted him.

There was nothing left to do but go back to Eden at the cove. We could only wait and hope.

We waited in companionable silence. Eden sunned herself on the rock next to me while I continued work on my bracelets. After a while, she slipped back into the water and began picking through the sand much the same way Nikolas had done that morning. She sucked snails out of their shells and passed them to me to use in my craft, laughing at the disgust on my face when she offered me a bite.

As the sun moved toward the western horizon, I set aside my auger and lay back down on the rock in my favorite position. I watched Eden foraging, mesmerized by her grace, the way she moved through the water like it was a part of her. Her black hair rippled around her bare shoulders, curving around her arms like the silkiest oil. And her tail – that beautiful, muscular limb shone like gemstones while the fins fluttered through the water in delicate ripples.

"She's quite beautiful, isn't she?" said a high, rasping voice over my head.

I jerked up and choked on my own gasp of shock. Scrambling to my feet, I swallowed hard and took in the old woman standing before me.

Old was an understatement. Her skin looked like vellum handled carelessly for too many years. A cloud of white hair haloed her face, the frizzled locks breaking free of a ratty braid that fell over her hunched shoulder. Her gnarled fingers grasped a staff taller than she was. Feathers, bones, and beads had been strung along the top of it, obscuring a worn carving at the top.

“You– Are you–”

The old woman thumped her staff on the ground impatiently and shifted her weight. “I’m Theo,” she said in her hissing voice. “Your merfolk friend here said there was a mindwalker in need of assistance.”

I glanced around, but Eden didn’t seem to notice that Theo had arrived. Her full attention was on the seafloor about ten feet away. She ran her fingers through the sand, picked over stones, looking for another tasty bite.

“Well?” asked the old woman.

“How did you get here so fast?” I asked warily.

Theo shrugged, unconcerned. “What is time?” she asked, as if that was any kind of an answer. “What about the mindwalker? A boy was it?” She looked around, as if Nikolas would simply be there.

“They’re on their way,” I said. “I expect them any moment.”

“They’ eh?” Theo’s dark eyes landed on me and stayed there.

I squirmed under her intense stare. “Yes, Nikolas and his mother, Marta.”

“And which one is the mindwalker?”

“Nikolas. He’s thirteen.”

Theo chewed on her lip and ambled away. "Well, that's some□ thing, at least." She eased herself down onto a low rock. She groaned, holding onto her stick for dear life.

I darted forward to help her, but she waved me away with an annoyed expression.

I settled down on my usual rock right at the water's edge. With a splash, Eden emerged from the water, still chewing the contents of the shells she had found.

"Here's two more. This one's got a little pink in it." She froze when she caught sight of Theo and hunkered back down until only her eyes were visible above the rock to stare at the old woman.

I edged closer to Eden to give her something a little more tangi□ ble to hide behind. "This is Theo," I said. "Theo, you remember Eden?"

Theo nodded deeply. "Yes, Eden. Good to see you again."

"Thank you for coming," Eden said from her hiding place behind the rock. Her voice was so quiet, I barely heard her over the sound of the rushing water. How well did Theo hear at her advanced age?

"You asked, so I came," Theo said, proving her hearing to be quite good after all.

We all sat in silence, Eden and I nervous, and Theo apparently bored. After a few minutes of awkward staring at each of us in turn, Theo tipped her staff in my direction, the bones rattling against each other. "You. Why are you sad?"

"I, um—" I stared around, unwilling to talk about such personal things with a stranger.

"Ayana's friend, Hollis, doesn't approve of me," Eden said with uncharacteristic boldness.

"Eden!" I scolded.

"They had a fight this afternoon," she continued, undaunted.

I covered my face with my hand.

"Who is Ayana?" Theo asked, sounding annoyed again. Like she shouldn't have to keep track of so many names.

"I am," I said.

"This Hollis person? Blond hair? Quite tall?"

I stared at her. Mindwalkers could be so unnerving. Would Nikolas grow up to talk like this old woman? Would he blurt out things he shouldn't know when he got old enough to stop caring what people thought of him? Or had this Theo woman always been this way?

"Ye- yes," I stammered.

"Yelled at him, did you? Say something you regret?"

I scowled. "He said just as much that he should be regretting!"

Theo cocked her head to one side, like an owl watching me from a low branch in the dark. "And what makes you think he doesn't regret it?"

My mouth snapped open, then shut again. "I- I don't--"

Theo blew past my stammers and leaned her stick toward Eden next. "Your turn," she said. "Why are you sad?"

"Eden isn't sad!" I said, glancing down at her for validation of this statement.

But Eden's eyes went wide, and she ducked down a little lower in the water.

"Eden?" I asked, my voice much softer. "Are you sad?" I wracked my brain for any hint that Eden wasn't perfectly happy. Had there been a frown, or a downward cast to her eyes, or had she looked away? But no. The entire afternoon she had been the picture of contentment, just like always.

"Everyone's a little sad about something all the time," Theo cut in, sounding bored again.

“Oh?” I asked, rounding on her. “Then why are you sad, old woman?”

“Ayana,” Eden said in a gentle voice. She didn’t need to say anything further. I knew what worried her. We needed Theo to save Nikolas. I couldn’t afford to drive her away.

But I couldn’t help it. The indifferent expression on the old woman’s face drove me to distraction. “Instead of going around, picking at other people, why don’t you answer your own question?”

“I am sad,” Theo said on a deep breath. She shifted her weight before thoughtfully continuing. “I am sad because I am going to die soon.

That shut me up. I eyed her, unsure of how to respond.

But Theo didn’t seem to need a response. “I always thought I’d be glad when the moment came. I’ve been walking this earth for so long, far longer than any person should several times over. But now that the time has come, I find myself growing nostalgic for my younger years. For the people I knew back then. I find myself visiting them more often than I should. I can’t help it.”

Her sharp eyes fell on our flabbergasted expressions, and she came back to herself.

“Perhaps that is why I decided to meet you now. To put off the inevitable just a little longer. To do one more good thing before the end.”

“You speak in riddles,” I said.

One side of her mouth turned upward. “Yes, I suppose I do. Your friends are coming, by the way. I thought you said there were only two. A boy and his mother?”

A pang of fear stopped my heart, and Eden slipped under the water. “There should be only two. Nikolas and Marta. How many are coming?”

Theo shook her head and waved her staff as if to say, *It doesn't matter.*

"How many are coming?" I asked again in a stronger voice. I stood over her, as if just by making her look up at me she would have to answer.

But before she could reply or even react to my disrespectful tone, Nikolas came bounding around the outcropping of stone that hid my little cove from view. Behind him came Marta at a more careful pace, and after her appeared...

"Hollis!" I breathed.

My friend's bright hair caught the sun as usual, and I was struck once again with how beautiful he really was. His blue gaze broke my dominant stance, like staring down the entire sky. Even now, with his angular jaw clenched tight and his hands balled into fists at his sides, his bearing was of pride and restraint.

He had come to listen.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Nikolas attached himself to my side, his eyes on Theo and her staff of bone and feathers.

"Hello, Granny," Nikolas said politely, his fists tight on my arm.

"Ho, boy," Theo responded.

"I dreamed of you. Have you come to lead us out of Bluewater?"

"That depends," she answered and gestured with her staff. "Let's have a look at you."

Nikolas shifted his weight from foot to foot as Marta made her way to us. They were both loaded down with heavy packs clanking with cooking pots and the leatherworking tools they'd need to make a trade for themselves. They were ready to go now. Just up and leave the only home they'd ever known. Anything to save Nikolas from the fire.

Marta eyed Theo as the two mindwalkers stood in silence, measuring each other up. Then Nikolas' face broke out into a mischievous grin and he laughed at a joke only he could hear.

Theo gave a perfunctory nod, her own grin the twin of his. "Yes, I'll take him. We can leave straight away. Say goodbye to your mother, boy."

The burst of relief in my chest fizzled as Theo's words worked their way into my brain. "What?"

"What?" Marta asked at the same time. Her hand closed around Nikolas' shoulder in a tight, possessive grip.

Eden rose out of the water with a splash. "What did she say?"

Hollis remained on the outskirts of our little group and said nothing. His sky blue gaze remained fixed on Theo as if she might burst into flame at any second and consume us all.

Theo eased herself up onto her feet with a grim expression. "I said let's go."

"I'm going, too," Marta said flatly. "He's not going without me. I'm his mother."

"Fine," Theo said. "Best of luck to you. Not sure why you called me here if you're just going to reject my help."

"Take them both out of the city," I said sternly. "Both of them. That was the deal."

"There was no deal," Theo said.

"Why can't I go with you?" Marta asked. "What difference does one more person make? I won't be a burden. I'm capable and strong. You need me."

"Wrong," Theo answered. "You're the one that needs me. Without me, your only path is through eastern gate and attempt to go north through the salt flats. It will take you nearly a day to cross it in blistering sun with no water save what you bring with you. Beyond

that is the Brakish Lands. Salt swamps up to your waists. It's not as wide as the salt flats but it'll take twice as long to cross. Still no fresh water. Only rot. Nothing grows there but red algae and stink. If you survive that, then maybe you get to habitable land and can cross the border into the Sacred Wood. If you're good of heart, the wood witch that lives there will let you pass. But don't dawdle. Again, best of luck to you."

"And with you?" Marta asked. "If that's the path on our own, then what path would you take us on?"

"Him," Theo corrected. "I would take him on a faster path through the void between worlds. It is instant and safe. But it is a journey only a mindwalker can survive. Your mind cannot leave this world. If I took your body, your mind would be left behind and you would be dead before we arrived. Him, on the other hand." She jerked her staff at Nikolas, whose expression had lost all hint of levity. "He can be in another land in an instant. Gone before you can blink. Safe and sound."

Theo turned her attention to Nikolas. "It's your choice boy. Not your mother's, not mine. Your choice."

Nikolas shied away from Theo and gripped his mother's hand. "I'm going with Mother. We'll go through the salt flats."

Theo nodded and turned away. "Makes no difference to me."

"Wait." Marta's voice was barely a squeak, but it stopped us all in our tracks.

"Mother, no," Nikolas said. "I'm going with you."

Marta gripped him by his shoulders and set her jaw. "You're going with Granny. I will go the long way, and I'll meet you there."

"No, Mama!" Nikolas said.

"Nik you dreamed of Granny, right? You said yourself that she was the way out. Here she is. Things aren't exactly how we imagi-

ined, but you said this was the way.”

“What if I was wrong?” Nikolas asked.

“You’re not wrong,” Theo cut in.

We all turned to the old woman.

“Prove it,” Hollis said.

All heads turned toward him next, but no one knew what to say.

“Excuse me?” Theo asked.

“I said to prove it. Prove to this woman that her son is safe in your hands. It’s the least you can do.”

“The least I can do is go right now and leave you all to your fates. You all asked me here, not the other way around.” Theo sniffed and thumped her staff on the sand.

“Then leave!” Hollis said, unflinching.

Theo took five unsteady steps toward him and stared up into his sky blue eyes. He held his ground, daring her with his expression to make a move.

“Hollis, eh?” Theo said. “Did you know Hollis, that one day you will save the world?”

That got his attention. “What?”

“It’s true. Oh, don’t get all up in arms. It won’t be some big heroic battle or desperate fight to the death. But one day, you will tell the truth to the right person, and that little act of integrity will change the fates of every human living on this continent and beyond. Hundreds of thousands of lives will be saved.”

Hollis lowered his eyebrows. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because if I didn’t, you would never know. You would go home thinking, ‘My, what a strange person that was.’ And the world would keep on turning for you. Every day like the one before. But now you know. Your honesty is greatly appreciated.”

“You’re talking in riddles again,” I said, drawing Theo’s attention away from Hollis. “What a clever story that is. It can never be proven one way or the other, can it? But you can prove that Nik will be safe with you, like Hollis asked in the first place. If Marta is to travel all that way alone, at least give her some hope that Nik will be there waiting for her on the other side.”

Theo rolled her eyes like an indolent teenager. “This is what I get for coming among people again,” she said. “I could be dead by now, you know! I could be done with all this!”

“No more talking!” I said. “It’s time to do or not. The longer we stay on the beach like this in a group, the greater the chance we’re discovered.”

Hollis glanced reflexively up along the wall. My house perched on the low cliff just below it, the peak of the roof only just visible. I followed his gaze on instinct, certain for a second that he had seen people up there, but the outcropping was as empty as ever. Even so, we needed to finish this.

Eden wrapped a comforting hand around my ankle, as high as she could reach from the water.

“Fine!” Theo said, then disappeared.

“What the—” Hollis gasped and threw out his hands in shock.

“Is that proof enough for you?” Theo’s voice came from a long way off, and we all whirled around to see her standing about fifty yards down the beach. She was just a black smudge on the pale landscape, her white hair whipping about in the wind.

“How did you—” I began, then stopped as Theo reappeared in front of us, as if she hadn’t moved at all. I had never – *no one* had ever heard of such a gift before. To disappear and reappear instantly somewhere else? This woman was like no mindwalker on earth, surely.

“Instantaneous travel,” Theo said, sounding bored again. “An incredibly rare skill among mindwalkers, and one that I am happy to use in order to help this boy get to safety.” She gestured her staff at Nikolas to emphasize her point. “But I am a very busy person, and I don’t have time to stand around bleating at each other like a bunch of old goats!”

“Nik, you have to go,” Marta said, turning him to face her. “You go with Granny, and I’ll meet you in the north. Nobody cares about me, so even if the border guard stops us, they won’t prevent us from passing. But if they find out what you are, it’s over! And I can’t bear that! So you have to go!”

“Mama, no!” Nikolas said, tears starting in his eyes. “I want to stay with you.”

Marta hugged him tight, then pushed him toward Theo with a determined shove. “Go before I change my mind!” she said in a cracking voice.

And that was it. Theo wrapped her hand around the boy’s arm, and they were gone. Where before Theo and Nikolas had stood in the fine white sand, all that was left of them were their footprints.

Marta let out one heart-wrenching sob and covered her face with her hands. I put my arms around her, shushing uselessly. How could a person comfort a woman who had just said goodbye to her teenage son? Possibly forever.

“Oh stop your sniveling!”

Theo’s voice jerked us all back to attention with a cry of alarm. Theo stood in her own footprints once more, but Nikolas was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is my son? Where is Nik?” Marta shrieked.

“Will you calm down?” Theo said. “I took him three weeks into the future and left him with you on the southern border of Mouland,

which is the first small town you'll come to after the Sacred Wood."

"The future?" Marta breathed.

"But I don't advise that you stay in Mauland for long," Theo continued, waving her hand as if this were an afterthought. "As soon as you're stable, move a bit more north to settle down. You don't want to be there when... well, nevermind. Don't stay in Mauland."

We all stared at her, mouths hanging open in shock

"Well don't stand there gaping like a bunch of fish heads! You have a long way to go, woman! Find someone to go with you. Someone who travels for a living. Go now."

When Marta remained frozen in my arms, Theo shooed her away with her rattling staff. "Go!"

Marta jumped out of her skin. "Okay. Thank you Ayana. And Eden. I have too..." But she couldn't finish her sentence. The last twenty minutes had just been too much. She squeezed my hand one last time and fled up the path and out of sight.

"Oh no, don't thank me," Theo said to her retreating back with a sour expression. She turned to Hollis, Eden, and me, working her mouth like a cow chewing cud. Then, like a stormcloud throwing lightning bolts at random, she pointed her staff at each of us in turn and destroyed everything in her path with just a few well-chosen words. "She plans to leave forever," she said, pointing at Eden. "He already betrayed her," she said at Hollis, then turned to me. "And this one would have carried the secret of her merfolk lover to the grave without ever thinking twice. So I think you all have a lot of talking to do. And maybe some running."

And Theo disappeared once more. Something about the tone in her voice convinced me she wasn't coming back this time.

The three of us were left gaping at each other. I couldn't fathom what was going on in their heads. Hollis had betrayed me after all? My oldest friend, who I'd known even longer than Eden. How far had he gone? Had he told the authorities about Eden? Had he simply told them where they could catch me in my protected little cove? Had he come here just to lead the way? Were they coming even now?

But even though all of these questions were vital and immediate, all I could think about was what Theo had said about Eden.

"You're leaving me?" I choked out. I slipped down into the water so I was eye level with her.

"I- I don't..." she stammered.

"When? Where will you go? You're leaving?" My voice rose to a panicked squeak and broke off.

"I don't know! Maybe!" Her cool hands gathered up my fingers, and I held on for dear life. If I didn't let her go, she couldn't leave.

"Why now? Where will you go?"

"I met an old friend when I went to Glenfall Cove to find Theo. He told me the way to Eventide. I can go home, Ayana! My family is still there! I can see them again!"

I gripped her hands close. "You're leaving me?" I said again in a whisper.

"I'm so sorry, Ayana." She pulled me close and I wrapped my arms around her. She fit so perfectly against me. How could this be wrong? How could we be apart when we were made for each other?

"Let her go, Ayana," Hollis said. "Let her go home. She doesn't belong here."

Something snapped inside me at the sound of his voice. "What do you know about it?" I hissed at him. I clambered out of the water, ignoring Eden's protests, and advanced on the man that had been

my best friend for as long as I could remember. But not anymore. "You've known about her for one day. One fucking day, Hollis! You don't know her! You don't know us! All you know is what you've been told by a city made of cement, stone, and stucco. We're supposed to be one with the sea!"

"And what do you know?" Hollis shot back. "You're just a silly girl with a crush! You don't know anything about being responsible for people you care about! All you can think about is your girlfriend! Where do you think this will end, Ayana? You can't live with her in the water, and she can't join you on the land. There is no future here!"

"How dare you!" In a flash of blind rage, I lashed out. I'm not sure what happened, but I felt pressure on my hands and a surge in my shoulders and arms, and the next thing I knew, Hollis was sprawled out on the sand.

"Ayana! Don't!" Eden cried out in alarm.

But it was too late for warnings. I'd shoved him down. I'd pushed him like a child in the school yard arguing over a toy. I stood over him, shaking. I should back down. I should apologize and help him up.

But his words kept cycling through my mind. *There's no future here. You're just a girl with a crush. Just a girl with a crush. Just a crush.*

"You don't know anything about me," I spat down at him.

"I know you better than you know yourself." He propped himself up on his elbows and glared back. "I know when you found out I had betrayed you just now, all you cared about was your girlfriend leaving."

"Is that it, then? You're jealous? You think I care about her more than I care about you?"

Hollis picked himself up and made a few half hearted swipes at the sand that stuck to his skin and clothes. "First of all, yes. I do think that. And don't you try to deny it. You've proven that already several times over."

"I don't—"

But he cut me off before I could get in a retort. "But if you would just listen to me for once in your damned life, maybe you'd hear something beside the voice in your own head! I betrayed you, Ayana! I told them about Eden! I told them you would be here. I'm surprised they're not here already!"

"I know, you asshole!" I screeched, and I tried to shove him again.

But he caught my hands in mid air and held on like a vice. "Shut up and listen!" he said over my grunts of effort as I struggled to pull out of his grasp. "I was scared and angry. I was afraid for my brothers and sisters, and I did the only thing I could think of to keep them safe. I shouldn't have told the guard, but I did. And I'm sorry."

I stopped struggling and scowled at him. "You think that makes it better?"

"No, you idiot," he said. "But I needed to say it. Now you need to stop fighting me and run."

"Ahh!" Eden cried out in sudden alarm, and with a splash she disappeared under the water.

"Eden?" I said, peering down into the water. But she was nowhere to be found.

Then a blur went by my head, only a couple of feet away, and an arrow sliced into the water right where Eden had been a second before.

"Eden!" I screamed.

There was no blood in the water. She hadn't been hit. Oh please, don't let her be hit.

Hollis grabbed me from behind and hauled me away from the water. "Here! She's here!" He cried as loud as his voice would go.

"Hollis! Stop!"

But it was too late. The soldiers had spotted us on the beach and were already halfway down the path toward us. There were only six, but that was more than enough to subdue me, especially with Hollis handing me over like a sack of grain at tax time. They were fully armed with daggers and clubs, with one bowman and one captain with a double headed axe.

Among them were Kris and Andrei Clark, the hateful red-headed twins that had once thrown rocks at Eden. Andrei was the bowman, and Kris carried a vicious dagger in one strong fist.

"Hold her!" Kris Clark shouted as Andrei raised his bow once more. He didn't draw the string yet, but he aimed the arrow directly at my face so that I stared down the quivering shaft.

"I should have known it would be you two," I hissed at them.

"Come quietly, water witch!" said another soldier whose name I didn't know.

"We don't want to hurt you!" Andrei said from behind his bow.

That lie sent chills down my spine. I could see it in their manic eyes, in their self-righteous smiles. They couldn't wait to drug me and lead me up to the pyre.

But I wouldn't go happily to my death. Not ever. It was my right to be afraid.

Hollis' arms were like a vice around my body. I beat and pried at his arms, scratched at his skin, but I couldn't get him off me.

The seconds stretched into hours as one horrible certainty be-
came clear in my mind. Hollis was giving me up. I wasn't safe with

him.

And the soldiers edged closer with every stuttering effort to breathe. Their leather armor squeaked, their weapons clanked against each other. Their boots were like thunder rolling in over the tides.

I was going to die. This was the end. If they didn't kill me right here and now, they'd burn me in the morning, just like Kealan. They'd feed me the tonic and I'd laugh my way up the pyre, just like all the rest. Whether I wanted to or not.

"Throw me to the ground, and then run," Hollis said in my ear. "Do it now! And don't stop!"

Still half panicked, I latched onto his instructions and obeyed. I heaved him to the side, and with his cooperation, I threw him to the ground. Stumbling a bit in the sand, I scrambled to my feet and ran, the soldiers not far behind.

But I wasn't fast enough. One heavy hand slammed onto my shoulder, causing me to lose my footing. It was Kris Clark. He scrabbled at my shirt, trying to get a good hold of me through his heavy gloves.

"No!" I screamed, just as panicked as I had once been trying to save a man called Kealan. I hadn't been able to fight off the soldiers then, but I was bigger now.

I swiped my hand through the sand, grabbing as much as I could in my fist, and flung it at Kris' eyes. He screamed and spat, letting go of me long enough to scrape at his face. I hoped he went blind. What justice that would be.

"Stop!" Andrei yelled, pulling his bow. The arrow whistled through the air, but his aim was wide. The arrow caught at the skin on my shoulder, leaving a stinging cut. But it wasn't enough to stop

me. I scrambled to my feet once more and ran as fast as I could down the beach.

My wet clothes clung to my legs. The sand chafed at my skin. The wind in my ears drove out all sound, so that the thunder of the soldier's chase faded to nothing. My lungs burned with the effort of getting air in and out, in and out, as my feet pounded along the compacted, wet sand.

Run. Just keep running.

Don't look back.

Run.



All is done and ended,
The boy was finally free.
But she was left
A deep unrest
Alone, by the sea.

CHAPTER 5

HOW FAR DID I RUN BEFORE I COLLAPSED? I COULDN'T GUESS. THE END□
less beach and crashing waves blended together into a continuous stream of blue, beige, and white. I passed all landmarks I knew, went further than I ever had before. And finally, when my shaking legs threatened to give out, I stumbled toward a clump of gorse bushes and crumpled to the sand in their shade.

I peaked between the yellow flowers down the beach, but there was only a single line of footprints in the sand. No one had followed me this far. Likely they never would. It wasn't safe to stay close to the water for too long, after all.

I collapsed flat on my back, my chest heaving and my breath loud in my ears. Now that the danger had passed, the reality of my situation slammed into focus. Nikolas and Marta had gotten out safe, and I was grateful for that. But it had cost me everything.

The life I had known was over. I could never go back to Bluewa□
ter. Not ever. They'd remember the girl who consorted with the merfolk. They'd arrest me at first sight, no questions asked.

I'd never see my mother again. I had planned to travel inland at the solstice, to visit her and her new family for the holidays, but that

would never happen now. How long before news of my blasphemy reached her? What would she think of me?

I'd never know.

And Hollis...

Dear Hollis had faltered, but in the end he had been my friend after all. At least he had tried to be. I couldn't imagine how hard it had been, knowing that his brothers and sisters were in danger if he were complicit. He had done the only thing he could think of to keep his own name clean and get me out at the same time.

And now, just like my mother, like my stall at the market square, like my house with the lacy curtains and the stove where Mama had taught me to cook – it was all lost to me. Forever.

And Eden was gone. Even if she tried to find me, I wouldn't be in my little cove. She wouldn't know where to look.

It didn't make a difference, though. She should be halfway home to Eventide by now. If she were smart, she'd never look back. She'd stay with her family, where she was safe.

So what else was there to do but lay there in the sand on an unfamiliar beach, listen to the crash of uncaring waves, and cry?



TIME PASSES SLOWLY WHEN YOU'RE ALONE. I SHOULD HAVE MOVED ON, should have kept going until I found a town where I could start over. What was keeping me at the water's edge? Nothing.

But I couldn't leave the shore. I found myself staring out over the water for hours on end, chasing the shade of the palms as the sun moved overhead. I didn't think Eden would come looking for me. Really, I didn't.

But what if she did?

So I stayed. After a while I had to get up and do practical things. I needed shelter from the sun and the unpredictable rain. I needed food and water.

These things were all easy to obtain. Some driftwood and palm fronds made an acceptable shelter, and banana leaves set up over coconut husks provided plenty of rain collection. I had run off with out my box of tools, but I was able to make a rudimentary fishing net by spinning coconut fibers between my fingers and knotting the threads together.

I spent my days on menial tasks: spinning, crafting, basket weaving. These could be done with one eye on my work and the other on the sea.

What if?

One day, a young man with dark hair and a large pack came walking down the beach. At first I hid, but the absurdity of it nearly got a laugh out of me. How could I hide with my shelter and all my half finished projects lying about?

“Ho, there!” the man said with a wave. “It’s bad luck to stay too long by the water, you know.”

I forced friendly confidence into my voice. “I could say the same to you.”

The man laughed, putting his dimples on display. “Fair enough! I’m Miles. What’s your name?”

“Ayana.”

“Good to meet you, Ayana. What are you making there?”

I held up the shark eye shell I was braiding into a sinew bracelet.

He knelt down to examine my work. “You don’t see shells like this very often. Is it for trade?”

“It’s not finished,” I said.

“But it’s close, right? Then I’ll sit with you a while if you like.”

“What will you trade for it?”

“Would you take a song?” he asked, patting his bag. Looking closer, the shape indicated it probably held some kind of stringed instrument. A bard, then.

“I have no use for songs,” I said.

“Everyone has a use for songs,” he said. “But I won’t insist. What will you take for it.”

“A saucepan,” I said.

Miles’ eyebrows shot up. “A saucepan?”

I gestured at my cook fire. “I’m tired of roasting things. There are some good clams down the way and I need a pan to cook them right.”

He spread his arms wide and gave me a disarming smile. “I don’t have a saucepan.”

“Then you don’t have a bracelet, either,” I said.

“What about some bread and honey?”

My hands froze on the bracelet and I narrowed my gaze on his face. I really needed a saucepan, but my mouth watered at the thought of real bread. Of anything sweet.

Miles arched his eyebrows enticingly. He’d caught me, and he knew it. “Eh? What do you say?”

“Let’s see it, then,” I said.

He fished out a loaf of hard, crusty bread wrapped in an oil cloth and a crock of honey with a tight fitting lid. His lunch for the day, no doubt. I could smell it even over the briny sea.

“You have yourself a deal,” I said.

We spent the afternoon eating honey bread and talking companionably about nothing of consequence, and by the afternoon he had a bracelet and I had a full belly.

Two days later, Miles came back. This time he brought his sister, Annaliese. She oohed and aahed over the baskets and bracelets that I had busied myself making over the last few weeks and traded a linen handkerchief for one.

“And this is for you,” Miles said, and tugged a small saucepan out of his pack.

“You already paid for your bracelet,” I said, eyeing the shark’s eye that glinted dully on his wrist. It looked good on him.

“Consider it a gift,” he said.

And as much as I wanted to refuse, the thought of doing without a saucepan for even one more meal was intolerable. What harm would it do, to accept a small gift? “Thank you.”

Annaliese was a flighty thing – running here and there along the beach and loving everything she saw. Her blonde hair reflected the sun, just like Hollis’ used to do.

I turned my eyes away from her and back to the shells in my hands.

Where Annaliese ran wild in the surf, Miles sat with me. He helped me improve my shelter by adding supports to the walls and extra thatch to the roof. Sometimes he pulled out his lute and practiced his music. He was in the middle of writing a song about a blue bannock that rolled out of a baker’s basket and made it all the way to the sea.

It was a silly, nonsensical song, and I found myself laughing more than once. It was a strange feeling. I hadn’t laughed in weeks.

“Come into town with me,” he said, his dimples on full display. “I’m playing tonight in the square. We can have a drink, make a night of it.”

The laughter died in my throat, and I shrank down onto myself. The thought of going into town — of leaving the water to go any□

where — it felt like dying.

Miles' smile faded. "Or I can bring you a drink next time I come. How's that sound? You're getting a private concert now anyway. Why would you want to hear me play again?" He plucked at his lute and flexed his hand on the frets, pulling a silly twang out of it.

I wrapped my arms around my knees and smiled again, but it was just a mask now.

Miles didn't ask why I stayed by the water, and I didn't offer. If I could manage it, I'd never think about Bluewater again.

The pair of them visited me often, bringing me tools and supplies in exchange for my bracelets and baskets, which they sold in town. Soon I had the makings of a real home there on the beach. A place to stay forever and stare at the water. Neither on land or at sea. Stuck in between, just like Hollis always feared.

What if?

"Have you ever been in love?" Miles asked me one day. He had come alone, leaving Annaliese behind with her beau in town. He plucked the strings on his lute absently, adding a gentle melody to the rhythm of the waves.

I chewed my lip. "Once. You?"

"Not real love, I think," he said. "I've had my flings. The girls in town hear me sing and think themselves in love, but it's never true."

"What brought this up?" I asked and adjusted my position on my woven mat in the shade of the gorse bushes.

"Annaliese wants to marry her man. They plan to do it in the spring when the cassia trees bloom again."

"It sounds lovely. Do you object to it or something? Don't like the man, maybe?"

He shook his head. "No, nothing like that. It's just that she's sacrificed so much to be with him, and I can't help but wonder if it was

worth it.”

“Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t,” I said.

“What would you do to have your lover back?”

“Gods, anything,” I said. “I’d do anything.”

“Would you even go so far as to wait by the sea forever? Hoping she’ll come find you?”

I looked up in horror, but Miles only had a knowing smile. “Word travels fast, Ayana. A crafter from Bluewater who fell for one of the merfolk? You didn’t even change your name.”

“Miles, please. You can’t tell anybody. Have you told anyone?”

He put a calming hand on my arm, and I had to fight the urge to jerk away. Miles was my friend, but then again, Hollis had been my friend, too. “Don’t worry. No one knows but me. Not even Annaliese has made the connection. And we haven’t told a soul that you’re here. We know better than to gossip about anyone living on the beach. You wouldn’t be here if you wanted to be found. You have nothing to worry about.”

I clenched the auger he’d brought me a few weeks ago. It had made my work go much faster. The one tool I couldn’t make myself. I gripped it so tight my fingers hurt against the steel. “Is that why you came here, then? To interrogate me?”

“Not interrogate. Just confirm my suspicions. I don’t mean you any harm, Ayana. Honest.”

“Well, they’re confirmed.” I tried to get up, but his hand on my arm held firm.

“Don’t go. Stay here with me a bit. Tell me about her.”

I hesitated. I could tell him about her hair, slippery as oil and dark as ink. About her blush gray skin, her iridescent tail with the flowing fins. I could tell him about her laugh, about the way she used to chase me with snails, giggling, until I tackled her. I could tell

him about how we used to lay on the rock below my house for hours, not saying anything at all.

"It doesn't matter anymore," I said instead. "She's gone. It's over. She's not coming back."

"Then why do you stay here?" he asked.

What if?

"Where the hell else am I supposed to go?"

"You could come into town with me."

I threw out both hands, gaping. "You say that. You make it sound so easy. Like I can just get up and go with you."

"What's stopping you?"

I opened my mouth, closed it again. Grunted in frustration. Conflicting desires clogged up my mind like a drain swollen with debris after a hurricane. I wanted to be alone, to have company, to yell and scream, to beg him to take me along. I wanted to go, to stay, to wait, to start over, to go back.

He was right. Nothing was stopping me from moving on. Nothing at all. I had lost everyone and everything I had ever loved, and still I could not leave the beach. I couldn't let go of Miles any more than I could let go of my hope that Eden might come back.

What if?

Miles' warm hand squeezed my arm, and my face crumpled in unexpected emotion. It was the first time anyone had touched me in months.

"Tell me about her," he said again in a low voice.

So I did. I told him everything. I gave him the gift that Hollis had always wanted: honesty. The words came pouring out of me in a torrent. At first they came hastily, angrily. But as I fell into the story, my voice smoothed out, and the telling came easier. I talked about how Eden and I had met, and how I'd failed to save Kealan as a

child, how Nikolas had grown up before my eyes, how Mama had done the one thing I never learned how to do: move on.

The ending was harder. I had to force the words out. I didn't want to relive the experience of betrayal and loss, of running away. But as I muddled my way through, the burden grew a little lighter.

We sat in silence for a long time afterward. The endless rushing of the waves soothed my raw soul. My voice was sore, and my heart felt empty.

"So you're waiting for her, then?"

"No," I said, then chewed on my lip. The lie didn't feel as strong as it used to.

"What if she never comes?"

"She won't."

"How long will you wait?"

"I don't know!"

He had no response to that, just a helpless expression of hope. He wanted to help me, he just didn't know how.

"I'm tired, Miles. Come back another time."

We didn't talk about it again. I could tell he wanted to. It was in the way he sometimes opened his mouth, just to shut it again. It was in the way he took to staring at the water, just like I did.

But his compassion always won out, and he never brought it up. Not once.

Winter passed, and Annaliese married her man in the spring, just like she planned. I sent a net of white scotch bonnets to dress her hair with, but I didn't go myself.

Miles came a few times a week to sit with me and write his songs. "I just need to get away from it all," he said, sighing into the breeze. He helped me maintain my shelter and I taught him how to

dig for clams. We ate together, worked together. He became my only link to the rest of the world.

And one day in May, for no apparent reason, I thought it might be nice to go visit Miles in town. To try the bakery he always talked about, and see if there were any fabrics for sale in the market that I liked. Maybe I could make a new shirt.

It was a surreal thought. Such a momentous change should have come with an epic battle or a valiant effort. It should have been difficult. Climactic. But it just happened. No fanfare, no one to even witness it.

Would it be so hard to start over? No. Probably not. People did it every day.

Miles noticed my changed mood that morning when he came ambling down the path. There was no hiding my shy smile of anticipation. "What's got you all worked up?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Nothing, really. Have you finished your new song?"

"It's not nothing," he said, pointing at how I clutched my fingers together.

"I want to hear your song!"

"Bull shit!" he said with a laugh. "What happened?"

"I just —" It was still hard to say out loud, but the time had come to be brave. "I was thinking I might go with you into town. If the offer is still good, that is."

He threw out both hands, grinning broadly. "Yes! The offer is good! Let's go!"

"No! No. Not now. Not today. But soon."

"Soon?" he asked with hope.

"I'm getting there."

He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "I'll take soon. This is good. You feel good?"

I took a deep breath and let it out in a huff. "I feel good. For the first time in a long time, I feel like me again."

He clapped a hand on my shoulder and nodded, pleased. "So do you want to hear my song then?" he asked.

"Yes, yes!" I said, and we settled down in our favorite shady spot under the gorse bushes.

He began to play, the notes pouring out of his lute like it had a mind of its own. I settled back against a palm trunk and closed my eyes, letting the music wash over me.

I had gotten so used to hearing him play over the past months, that when his fingers stumbled on the strings, I almost didn't understand what had happened. The melody faltered for a few beats, then fell silent. I opened my eyes, confused.

Miles sat calmly next to me, staring out over the water. I followed his gaze, but there was nothing remarkable about the shifting blue.

"What is it?" I asked.

He broke his stare and resumed plucking at the lute, but the melody had changed to a simpler tune that I'd heard plenty of times before. "Can I ask you a hypothetical question?"

"Okay."

"This new excitement you have to go into town, it seems like a first step to starting over. Yes?"

"I suppose."

"Does this mean you finally believe Eden won't come back?"

I sighed. "She was never going to come back, Miles."

"That's not what I asked."

I chewed on my lip. "It's not that I believe it. I just want – It's just time to choose. The way I see it, I could live on this beach forever, or

turn my back on it and go inland like Mama did.”

Miles nodded without interrupting.

“I’m tired of being alone, of having to scrape and scramble. I love the sea, I love everything about it. But it’s just not enough on its own. And I’m thinking, maybe it never was.” I shrugged and half-smiled. “Plus I’d like a real bed. I’ve missed sleeping in a bed.”

“So—” His fingers stilled on his lute. “So if you left the beach, where would you go?”

I shrugged again. “I don’t know. I’d figure it out.”

“You could stay with Annaliese until you found your feet. Or you could... you could come with me. I’ll be doing some traveling now that the weather is warm, singing all over Authe Ida. Maybe one day I’ll even go north, seek my fortune.” He gave me a rueful grin. “You could come with me if you wanted.”

The thought settled in my mind, sprouting idea after idea. All my life had been lived on the beach. I’d never been anywhere. And now, here was my opportunity to go and see the world. Maybe we could even go far enough to visit Nikolas and Marta, see for myself that they were happy in their new home.

The idea drew a smile to my chapped lips. “Yeah. Maybe.”

But Miles didn’t return my smile. His worried expression doused the niggling excitement that his offer had sparked.

“What is it, Miles?”

“I just— It’s just that...” He trailed off, frowning at his lute. “I wanted you to think about it for a bit before...”

“Before what?”

“I wanted you to have a real choice. I wanted you to decide. I don’t want you coming with me just because Eden never came back. And I don’t want you staying here with her just because she did

come. You should choose one or the other because it's what you want, Ayana. You need to choose. For yourself."

I shook my head. "I'm confused. What are you saying to me?"

"I'm saying she came back." He gestured out to the water with the neck of his flute. "I saw her. Her face above the water, just like you described. Then she was gone before you looked. She's here. I think maybe she's waiting until I leave."

I stared at him for several seconds, eyes wide, before rising mechanically to my feet. I stumbled toward the water, scanning the waves for any sign of Eden's face.

"But I don't want to go," Miles said behind me. "Not unless you're coming with me. You're the best friend I ever had, and I want you to be happy. But I can't stand the idea of you wasting away here on this beach for the rest of your life. Not for her or anybody else."

I couldn't answer him. Was she really here? No. He must have imagined it. Saw a bit of seaweed and imagined the rest.

But then... Yes! There, in the rolling water, was a face with eyes just above the surface. Too large, inky black, set in a pale gray face. I'd know those eyes anywhere.

I stood as if in a trance. My muscles moved, but I could only think about her. *She's here. Oh gods, it's her. She's here.*

As my feet moved across the sand, Eden rose a little higher out of the water. Her brow wrinkled in desperate hope, her smile broad and real.

My throat closed up as I stepped into the water. "You're here," I croaked.

"I've been looking for you everywhere!" she said, reaching for me.

"I've been waiting for you," I said, and collapsed into her arms. I held her as tight as I could, determined never to let her go again.

"I found it, Ayana!" she said into my hair. Her voice was just like I remembered: musical, soothing, soft. "I found it, and I want you to come back with me. We'll be safe there. Come with me. Say you'll come! I've been looking for you to bring you back with me."

"Yes! Anywhere. I'll come with you. Where?"

She smiled at me again, true joy like I'd never seen in her eyes.

"Eventide. Home."

I glanced back at the home I'd built there on the beach. The shelter Miles had helped me build. My crafts half finished, laying about in tidy piles on their mats and in baskets.

And there was Miles himself, his lute laid to rest on top of its bag in the shade. He stood at the water's edge, a little line between his brows. He'd heard every word.

"Wait one second," I said to Eden, squeezing her hand. Then I waded back to Miles and threw my arms around his neck. I soaked his clothes immediately, but he just held me tight anyway.

"You've made your choice then?" he asked into my hair.

I smiled up at him. "I think I made this choice when I was ten years old. I just wasn't ready for it yet."

He nodded and set me away from him. "Go then. And live with abandon, mergirl."

"Write a song about me," I said with a grin.

"What makes you think I haven't already?"

I laughed, but there was a sadness to it.

"Tell them about me," I said. "Then maybe everything that happened will mean something."

He nodded once, squeezing my hand. "I will."

I didn't know how to say goodbye. That was one thing I'd never learned. So I just turned away and waded back out to where Eden waited in the shallows.

“How will we get to Eventide?” I asked her.

“We swim straight south. A person could never swim that far, but I can carry you. It’ll take most of a day, but I can get you there fast.”

An excitement I hadn’t known in months welled up in my chest. “What if” had come true, finally.

I kissed my hand and raised it to Miles, who gave me a knowing smile in return. He would miss me, just as I’d miss him. But we both knew I’d been waiting for this. He’d understand I couldn’t stay.

I tucked the auger in my back pocket – the one tool I couldn’t make – and turned my back on the shore.

Eden’s hand in mine, I set my eyes to the shimmering sea.

“Let’s go, and never look back.”

Eden grinned. “Never look back.”



What became of salt and hope?
Of girls who cannot stay?
Did love abide?
And brave the tide?
My friends, I cannot say.

But there upon the empty shore,
Where friendship used to be,
I sat alone
And smiled alone,
Staring at the sea.

EPILOGUE

AS THE HARDWOOD FLOORS, STIFF CHAIRS, AND SOPPY DRUNKS ABSORBED the final ringing notes, Miles almost wished it wasn't over. This was why he'd written the song, after all. To help him stay close to Ayana. To tell her story. And every time the song ended, he was left on that beach all over again, watching her disappear into the water.

"Did you know her, then? Ayana of Bluewater?" asked a man in the crowd.

An expectant hush fell over the room. Miles chewed the inside of his cheek as he considered this. Ayana's story was common knowledge by then, and understandably so. The story of a girl accused of consorting with the merfolk spread like wildfire through the country, picking up speed with each telling as embellishments and outright lies added to the drama.

Unfortunately, kindness was not exciting, so by this point Ayana had become little more than a victim at best, and a villain at worst.

That was a big reason why Miles' version had become so infamous. To paint both Ayana and Eden as sympathetic? As the heroes of the story? It just wasn't done. And it certainly wasn't supposed to be so compelling.

“It’s true I met a woman on the beach, and her name was Ayana,” he said. “But the rest is simply the way I saw her. It is the truth I saw in her eyes.”

The crowd held its collective breath, unsure of how to take his tale.

“Ayana was a criminal,” someone said from the middle of the crowd.

Miles pursed his lips and cringed internally.

“It’s just a story!” cried his wife next to him. “Merfolk aren’t real.”

Miles let out a heavy sigh and leaned back against the bar.

“Full well they are!” said someone else.

“Yeah, but they ain’t like in the song! They’re vicious. My mam told me.”

“What does your mam know?”

“I saw a merfolk once when I was a kid! She was just like Eden in the tale!”

“You saw a seal, you idiot!”

Miles tucked his lute close to his body and slid sideways along the bar to escape. This always happened after he sang the Mergirl of Bluewater. The arguments started. The folk tales and the anecdotes.

The voices overlapped each other like waves, sometimes swelling into yelling, other times laughter. But always, always, the story grew and passed from hand to hand, like gossip.

But sometimes, if he was lucky, someone really listened. Tonight it was a little boy, about twelve years old. He sat at the back of the public house, his expression alight with hopeful wonder.

Miles escaped the growing argument at the bar and paused by the door to look him over. The boy wore a good linen shirt and held

a fine straw hat in his hands. He'd probably been sent to fetch his father home for supper and stayed to hear the song.

"Is it true, sir?" the boy asked in a quiet voice. None of the arguing folk at the bar heard or paid either of them the slightest bit of attention.

Miles looped the strap of his lute bag across his body and squared his shoulders. He glanced back at the bar. None of the cheap bastards had given him a coin. Not one. But it looked like the night hadn't been a total waste.

Miles fingered the shark eye bracelet and winked at the boy by the door. Then he walked out into the cool night air. On to the next town, the next crowd. Maybe someday he'd go north, find out what stories they had to tell. Maybe he'd try to find the young man called Nikolas, who knew what it was to travel between the worlds.

But the boy in the pub, he'd never leave. He knew it in his heart, like the girl in the story, that he'd never love anything like the sea. And someday, if he stared at the water long enough, maybe someone might stare back.

THANKS FOR READING!

I hope you enjoyed reading Bluewater as much as I loved writing it! The inspiration for this story came from a one-off line in a previous story, called [The Glass Wheel](#). In it, the main character's father mentioned merfolk living in the southern sea, and that's all it took for me to start itching for a mermaid story!

Thus Eden was conceived. I set the tale in Bluewater because that city is an important part of The Sibylline Saga universe, and I felt it needed more page time. In fact, when reading [Little Owl](#), you may recognize a few characters from this story!

I'd love to know what you thought of Bluewater. Shoot me a message online on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Tiktok](#), or via email at anna@annacackler.com. Or [leave a review here](#)! There's nothing better than learning a reader felt a real connection with my books. :)

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And as always, thanks to Kevin, without whom none of this would be possible. Thanks love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I love to read and write romance, fantasy, adventure, and humor – in that order! My favorite books are those that feature a satisfying and healthy romance between realistic characters.

I have a degree in writing from the University of Central Arkansas. At the time, a Creative Writing degree was not available, but I consider that to be a blessing in disguise. Not only did I study storytelling, but I also dove deep into the worlds of audience, technical writing, non-fiction, and academic writing. And though my writing education has continued over the years in the school of life, I will be forever grateful for that solid foundation I received in the writing community at UCA.

Though I grew up in Arkansas and Oklahoma, I currently live in Puerto Rico, where it never gets cold! My family and I love going to the beach year-round, where I soak up the sun and inspiration.

I have a wide range of hobbies, including crochet, spinning thread, cross stitch, painting, home improvement, cake decorating, and piano. Most of my writing is done outside with my chickens, and I'd spend every minute of the day with them if I could.

