

Seaborn

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ISBN: 978-0-8095-7281-6

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Juno Books
Rockville, MD
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For Alice

CHAPTER ONE

KASSANDRA

We are all *Thalassogenêis*—Seaborn.
All life began in the Ocean.
The tides, the salt, the rolling waves
are in our souls,
and the sea will always have
the power to call us home.
—Final page of the journal of
Michael Augustus Henderson

The water followed her home from the library, water in the air slipping over her skin as if afraid to touch her without permission. The sound of water played in her ears—a child’s laughter splashing, a creek burbling a mile down Atlantic Avenue—and the soft rain skipped in her footprints.

Headlights broke over the hill behind her, and the wet air *reacted*. The water snapped flat and reflective on every surface until the car passed.

The hiss of automobile tires faded into the whisper of rain and, in the distance, she watched a spray of pinpoint lights, shiny and heavy like mercury on the leaves that folded over the road.

The car was gone and the water spoke to her, words that seeped and dribbled into her head. *I will clothe you in mirror, my lady, shield you in ice, become the crown you already wear.*

She glanced around and walked faster, huddling under her backpack.

“Leave me alone.”

The rain spat and crackled like angry cellophane, but warned her of another car approaching—miles away, a shiny black sedan pulling out of the North Hampton Police Station. She turned and walked backward along the edge of the road, staring into the dark, her three long brown braids winding around her throat like a noose. She waited a moment for the car to appear, biting her lip uncertainly, and then turned away, her sandals flipping mud behind her.

“The rain’s watching me, Prax.”

Praxinos, a voice inside her, answered with a deep thrum in her jaw. *Of course it is, but its motives are rarely complicated. And you are the Wreath-wearer. It will obey, but you must learn to command.*

“It’s showing me things. I smell its life. The water’s connected.” *It’s in my veins. I am part of it, the water.* She pointed to the asphalt’s edge, broken by the woody knuckles of elms and pines. *I can smell an underground river there.* She looked away because she heard the sap coursing through the trees like blood, sticky snapping insect legs that wanted to crawl to her, capillary roots tugging at the earth as she passed.

Mud oozed between her toes and she stepped into the street, hopping to take off her sandals. The cold rumble of the Piscataqua River six miles away, a hundred brooks and streams in between, all of them coming into her body through her bare feet.

Puddles of rainwater were staring up at her, and she glared back at them.

“Get away from me.”

She looked over her shoulder, moving to the roadside—still no sign of the car. When she turned back, the rain lit up the night for her, a hundred tunnels drawn in wiry mist, tubes of gauzy moiré. They opened in the air, opening for her, beckoning, and she knew they all led to the sea. She smelled the salt and mold, the bitter rotting seawrack, tasted sand and powdery broken shells in her mouth.

“Just let me go.” She held in a sob, wringing her braids over one shoulder.

Follow the paths to the sea. You have so much to learn, my lady.

“I already know things—things I don’t want to know.”

But the rain showed her more: what she was and what she had been, sparks of memory in scrolling frames, fortress walls on the Atlantic’s floor, a woman’s teeth filed to points, a book with a voice, and the ice-filled bones of an army, two hundred and forty-thousand strong, wired together and sent to kill the dangerous girl, the Wreath-wearer—the girl with a soul of abyss-dark and noble ghosts, the girl made of inferno and restless gasoline.

“Don’t do this to me.” Her voice changed as it passed her lips. The water in her breath garbled her words, obeying another power inside her.

She tried a commanding tone: “I’ll go when I want to!” The words twisted and softened, warm candy words in her mouth, floating sweet over her tongue.

She stomped through puddles. Her angry scream coiled into a song that summoned the tide—and the Atlantic Ocean roared in answer a mile away.

She tripped in a pothole and the water in the air caught her and kept her from falling—and the rain tipped the leaves and danced on the asphalt in her wake.

Cursing under her breath, she ran recklessly, her head down, past an old lichen-covered wall. The damp between the stones bled to the edges to be near her, condensing in huddling beads.

She looked up and blinked, slowing to a walk, and the rain showed her more. Another set of ghost caves unfolded, spiraling over each other, fading to dim intestinal coils if she looked hard at them, flaring electric bright every time she blinked.

“Let the rain hit me! I don’t care.” She looked away and the superimposed ghost world pivoted with her, paths shifting to accommodate her, the axis.

The clouds heard her call; bruised purple and water heavy, they gathered over coastal New Hampshire. She looked at them through the trees and tossed her sandals away.

“What the *fuck* do you want from me?” And she spat before the water could muddle her words.

Her shout broke the storm; falling sheets of water hit the earth, and no reply came from the clouds, the rivers, the underground streams, the endless hungry Atlantic Ocean, unable to answer a queen who begged her subjects for direction.

“Pôis eipas? Epitribeiês! Is this what you want?”

Barefoot, she stepped into the middle of the road and threw her arms wide; lifting her open mouth, she drank in the storm. Hot bars of lightning burned the air. Thunder swept through her bones, the thud of their crash to the earth under her toes.

Columns of rain broke through the canopy of pine and maple. Her fingers spread wide and then closed into fists, and the storm shattered at her feet like a car’s windshield, beads of rain spiraling into razor-edged water stars that burst in rings of frost-lace and mist.

The crinkle of something alive slid up her body, coating her in armor: tight transparent sleeves, a skin of flexible arctic-blue scales, a collar of ice blades. Her fist tightened reflexively around the grip of a sword, and a crown of woven seaweed glowed cold green through her rain-wet brown hair.

She sang a storm of words, and lightning swaggered through the trees, blasting away

bark. A sixty-foot pine split with a gush of sap, smoke, and vaporized needles—and splinters rained down with the water.

Headlights shot through the hazy night and she lowered her arms. The sword vanished. The armor disappeared, melting off her body. She stood alone in the street, soaking wet in a T-shirt and shorts, her backpack hanging loose off one shoulder.

She gave the approaching police car an angry squint and turned away, taking rapid steps along the road's edge, washed in a pulse of blue light. She kept her head down because she didn't want to see the pale outlines of caves in the air, holding her breath against their salty lure. Before she covered her ears, the rain urged her to run. *Leave everything behind. Run, my lady, run where the police cannot follow. I will hide you.*

"Don't talk to me." She snapped the words into the wet air.

Her steps slowed, her body shaking, weariness dragging at her. Her backpack slipped off her shoulder, fell to the ground with a dull splash. Her books and research papers raced for the pack's zipper-toothed mouth; a binder spread its wings, scattering its brood, white sheets of neat handwriting, wet-winged butterflies briefly alive, folding sullen and colorless in the rain.

She kept walking.

The black car rolled forward, the passenger side window sliding into the door.

"You need a ride, miss? This rain isn't letting up and it's a dark road to be walking alone."

"A dark road," she whispered, and something inside her made all the words but one drift away, forgotten. "Alone." She said it aloud, blinking purposefully, trying to climb out of her head and back into the world. She glanced at the blue stripes on the shiny black fender as if noticing the car for the first time.

"The police are here," she told the other voices in her head.

A woman inside her answered snobbishly, *Tell the police to go. You do not need their help.*

She blinked, trying to answer, but ended up repeating the rain's words: "I have so much to learn."

"How much have you had to drink tonight?" The officer again—it sounded like the police officer, the patrol car rolling to match her pace.

She bent to look through the open window. Her focus hit him hard, and he choked on his words; his heart stalled, his soul falling through dark water toward her, into the abyss of her eyes.

And the rain whispered, *Alone, Lady Cassandra, you must be alone.*

Still looking at the police officer, pinning him to his seat, she answered the rain. "Silence!"

Then she plucked the officer's name right out of his head.

"I *have* been drinking, Lieutenant Pannone. I've been drinking the rain."

She released him and walked away.

Pannone's forehead hit the hard plastic of the steering wheel. His heart thumped a wild rhythm and then evened into a steady rapid beat. He sucked air in desperate gulps and flexed his numbing fingers, staring out the windows as if he was lost.

He fell back in his seat, his uniform damp against his skin. Reality snapped into place for him. He closed his eyes tight, then opened them, trying to get the blue arcs and red backlit dials of the dashboard into focus.

A squeak of wiper blades. He looked up through the windshield and remembered the young woman with the backpack walking in his headlights in the middle of Atlantic Avenue.

Pannone wiped sweat from above his lips. He grabbed a tissue off the visor, wadding it damply in one fist. He tugged out three more to wipe his forehead and rolled the car forward to again come alongside her.

“Are you on medication, miss? You supposed to be? Can I call your parents?” She made no sign that she heard him, so he went on. “A shrink? Maybe your grandparents?”

She looked over but didn’t meet his eyes. “My grandfather killed my mother. I’m going to kill him. He’s expecting it, so I must plan well.”

She noticed the officer hiding his reaction, and she scowled because it hadn’t been alarm. It was sympathy.

He leaned closer. “What’s your name?”

It was written all over his car, bleeding K’s and S’s, beads of rain lining up, a thousand *Kassandras* on the windows, weeping letters on black paint.

She turned away and covered her eyes, pressing the palms of her hands against her cheeks, her thumbs digging into the sides of her head. “Do *not* tell me what to do!”

Thunder boomed far away and the voices in her head went quiet.

The officer let his seatbelt snap away, leaning over the passenger seat, holding the wheel with his knee, showing her his open hands. “I can take you to a hospital. Just let me help. You shouldn’t be out here alone.”

She didn’t hear him, the rain shielding her from the sound of his voice.

She stopped as if she had run up against something solid in the air, her hands falling away from her face. Her world collapsed to the stretch of road the patrol car’s headlights carved out of night, stifflingly small, and she tugged at her shirt, wet and binding around her throat.

Kassandra dropped into a runner’s crouch, bending her knees deep, and launched her body down the edge of the asphalt, an off-the-blocks sprint for the lights’ edge, her three brown braids streaming like wet rope in her wake. She was through the headlight horizon and into the dark, rain like needles against her skin, arms pumping, breathing hard through her teeth.

Pannone kicked the accelerator, topping forty miles an hour to keep up. He braked hard where Mill Road crossed Atlantic Avenue, turning into a slide that took him into the oncoming lane. The young woman collided with a pickup truck at the stop sign.

Pannone swung his door open, flipped on the side-spots and jumped into the street, not bothering with his hat or coat.

The pickup’s driver stared through a rain-blurred sweep of wiper blades, his lips twitching, knuckles bone white on the wheel.

Officer Pannone crouched, examining the fender and the street along the driver’s side, his dark uniform rain-pasted to his skin, water dribbling into his mouth, off his nose and chin. He kneeled to run his flashlight under the truck. He stepped back to take in the scene from a wider view, throwing the beam of light on the street, the wheels, windshield, letting it slide across the truck’s hood.

Right in the center, the rain softened a muddy footprint. There was no other sign of her.

He turned the beam of the flashlight on dark empty Atlantic Avenue. She had vanished.

Pannone switched off the light and headed back to his car.

He slammed the door and dropped it in reverse, accelerating half a mile up Atlantic, looking for her backpack in the flashing blue. He pulled over and spent another hour walking, following depressions in the mud and blurry footprints where she had wandered into the middle of the road.

He gave up.

The rain coming through the trees annoyed him, running off the leaves, whispering his

name in his ears, tapping a rhythm that promised to be catchy, but slowed or doubled unexpectedly, and would not allow itself to be caught.

CHAPTER TWO

HIGHWAY 17

I am an outsider, but I have been so thoroughly drawn inside another world—a most alien world—that I scarcely know where to begin.

—Opening line of the journal of
Michael Augustus Henderson

Corina Lairsey dived alone on Thursdays.

She lived thirty miles inland, in Coyote, south of San Jose, and spent an hour every morning battling traffic downtown to C-COM—California College of Music.

Every Thursday she cut her afternoon classes to make time for the Pacific, and so she also drove Highway 17 alone, navigating the dipping winding double lanes up over the summit and down the west side toward Monterey Bay.

All but one of her fingers curled tight around the wheel, the loose one tapped to a rhythm in her head; a fine stream of tears ran down her cheeks.

She wiped away her tears, blinking over the steering wheel at a looming bar of red and white reflective tape, candy-caned across the back doors of a massive refrigerator truck just ahead of her.

She braked hard and cut abruptly into the parade of fast-lane hogging compact cars, glancing in the rearview at the guy flashing his headlights.

The freighter barreled down the slow lane with its cargo rocking and suspension creaking, its giant wheels circular blurs of droning gray a foot in the next lane. The slope steepened and the truck jake-braked with the rumble of an idling chainsaw that penetrated Corina's Toyota, mingling with the music in the other cars, harmonica-saturated gutter folk, boy band harmonies, and thumping technorhythmia.

Corina didn't have her music playing, except in her head.

Almost at the bottom of the Santa Cruz Mountains, she let her mind slip into replay mode—with accompanying music—watching her ex-boyfriend's mouth drop open when she told him goodbye, so long, *adiós*, don't call me, ever.

Corina wasn't weeping for the loss of Alan Yeater. She was glad to be free of him, free of another man who had started with flowers, caring, and constant attention, and ended with control over every detail of her life: where to eat, who to make friends with, who to drop, what to wear, what not to wear, how much to weigh, how much make-up, fingernail polish, toothpaste, breakfast, lunch, dinner... *Give me some damn space!*

She knew she had to end it when she saw "the look." He'd told her to change out of a flirty pink blouse, and she'd laughed and said, "What are you, my grandmother?" His face had gone rigid, his blue eyes molten, like opening a little iron door on a furnace, nothing but hot blurry anger inside.

She said goodbye, walked away, and kept walking with Alan Yeater screaming at her back, "No one walks away from me!"

The tears weren't for Alan. He'd never really seen who she was, what she was like inside and out. As if he had some unchanging picture of her in his head, and any deviation from it was a challenge to his authority.

The frenetic notes of a Beethoven string quartet coiled and jumped in the background of her imagination. Her breakup with Alan had taken no longer than it took two violins, a viola, and cello to get through the second movement of “Opus 130”—which she’d renamed “The Alan Yeater Breakup Presto.”

She sniffed back more tears, savoring the same minute and forty-nine seconds of memory over and over. At least she’d gotten rid of him quickly.

In the final stretch of 17, Corina had to deal with a few predatory stockcar racers, darting in and out of the lanes, making their own narrow passages down the shoulders. They taunted her into slaloming to the interchange. She obliged and would have outraced one of them if there hadn’t been a blur of black and white in her peripheral vision. She slowed down and slid into the right lane, letting the patrol car go by.

There were California Highway Patrol officers who made careers out of Highway 17.

Corina emerged from the death race with her vehicle and pinkslip intact, and went south on Route 1 toward Monterey. Half an hour later she pulled off at the first exit of the old army post, Fort Ord.

The road had, at one time, curved around to drop drivers at the post’s shooting range. Now it curved around into a small traffic circle with four roads shooting off in different directions.

Corina heard her phone chirping. *Alan calling.* She leaned into the wheel, grabbed her phone, and slid it up against her ear. She sucked in a deep breath.

“Yup?”

There was a long pride-swallowing pause. “It’s me.” His voice was rough, hitching in his throat.

Her mind jumped right to: *He isn’t crying, is he?* She killed the question, and her lips went tight with the effort to keep them shut. *It’s over. Make him do the talking.* She pulled up to the curb, stopping in the darkness under the overpass. The shifter knob vibrated in her hand. She dropped the car out of gear, but left the engine running.

Alan drew in a long breath. “It’s me, babe.”

She sniffed and shook her head, annoyed. *Already said that.*

“Look...I’m...” Alan’s voice smoothed out. “You going to say anything?”

“I was pretty clear the day before yesterday.”

She felt a drop in the temperature over the phone.

Alan’s voice thinned to a knife’s edge. “Are you seeing someone else?”

Else? That implies that I’m still seeing you. Corina stopped her grinding molars before they crumbled in her mouth. *Seeing someone else...* She ducked to her side mirror as a couple in a minivan passed her. “Two, actually.”

He choked. “So, this is it?”

It ended two days ago. “What more do you need me to say?”

“Fuck you! I don’t need you to—” He fumed and spit more words out. “You need me. You hear me? Crawl back to me, stupid whore, begging me! You need—”

“Save your saliva.”

She powered off her phone, took a deep breath, and stared back at herself in the rearview mirror, her brown eyes fixed with purpose. *No more tears. No asking how she got herself into these relationships. Nothing blurry, overemotional, nothing out of control.*

“Proud of you,” she whispered and her voice broke.

A couple cars passed her, entered the loop, and headed south toward the university. Old army posts never die—they’re turned into parks and unique leasing opportunities like the Presidio of San Francisco, like Ord, schools.

Corina kicked in the clutch, put the car in gear, and took the northbound road. She passed ancient barracks and clapboard warehouses, all painted tan with big black

numbers stenciled on the corners. Most were abandoned and had sat there peeling in the salt air and sun for decades. Cal State Monterey took up a large chunk of property at the other end of the post.

She turned onto a small road that swung back under the freeway toward the dunes and the bay beyond, pulling over at the end of a broken concrete pad, crunching mats of iceplant under her tires. She tucked her car up against a group of squat cypress trees.

She got out, stuffed her keys, rings and driver's license into a watertight pouch, and then unbuttoned, unzipped, and took off all her clothes.

Corina opened the door to the back and tossed her skirt, blouse, and bra across the cello case that shared the backseat with her dive gear. She squirmed into her wetsuit, black neoprene tubing that fit her body like another skin, tucking in her hair, snapping the black foamy material of the hood around her cheeks and chin.

Then she squatted and wriggled like a wet cat, getting used to the suit's squeeze on her neck and thighs. She fixed the seams along her arms and straightened her spine, reaching into the air, lifting her body on the balls of her feet, her calf muscles flexing until they burned.

She hauled her dive gear up the path that led to the endless Pacific, stopping at the crest to take it all in, the crash of surf, smooth blue folds at the horizon catching the sun in broken metal glimmers, a drawer full of wobbling teaspoons tossed over the bay's surface.

"I need you like I've never needed anyone."

She spoke the lie in a reassuring whisper even as the teeth in her mind, the hunger in her soul, fed on memories of shattered glass and steel wrung like a rag, a slick of oil and blood, brakelight fragments like wicked witch fingernails poking through the asphalt, through the oil, through the blood. And in her memories, she fell to the street and never got up, the rumble of cars coming into her skin through the warm tar surface, through her jaw, into her head; her tears pooled in the corner of her mouth, and time stopped there, a fluid that filled every yesterday, a moment long past that still rang in her ears.

She blinked at the California sun and saw her mother's hair squeezed between the seat and headrest in front of her, the *tick tick tick* of the left turn signal—and her sister's cold hospital voice interrogating her. "Why did *you* live when Mom and Dad died? What makes you so special?"

Corina had survived, dragged by firefighters from the backseat crush of metal and folded bones. Her mother and her father were dead in their seats.

Corina Lairsey cut off a whimper, but couldn't hold in her tears. They rolled from her eyes, falling down her wetsuit, soaked up by the sand—and she pushed the volume of the music in her head up to drown the endless-moment ringing. The music in her head—the only thing that softened the memory of her mother's sharp intake of breath just before impact.

The Pacific whispered loudly and Corina dragged her gear to the edge, another Thursday walking into the cold blue, and even when a part of her didn't want it to, it let her go every week.

She squinted at the sun. Smiling at a seagull, she wiped the tears away with the back of her hand, and slid the mask on, propping it on her forehead. The waves called to her and promised not to let her fall.

The Pacific was eternal. The ocean would always be there to hold her tight and make her whole, something the air just could not do.

CHAPTER THREE

FAST

Who are they, O pensive Graces,
—For I dream'd they wore your forms—
Who on shores and sea-wash'd places
Scoop the shelves and fret the storms?
Who, when ships are that way tending,
Troop across the flushing sands.
To all reefs and narrows wending,
With blown tresses, and with beckoning hands?
—“The New Sirens,” Matthew Arnold

Fast attack submarine.” Cassandra whispered the three words as if they were her favorites, running her fingers along the slick acoustic cladding of the sail—the tall fin-shaped tower sticking out of the top of the sub.

“This is the most beautiful machine I have ever seen.”

Her own words echoed in her head, and under her breath, she relayed a description of the marvelous submarine to the others inside her soul.

Kassandra had made her way several miles up the coast of New Hampshire to the mouth of the Piscataqua River, kicking against the current until she found the Naval Shipyard on the far bank. Not far. After all, her father and her bodyguard, Zypheria, told her to stay close to home.

There were two submarines in the water, one with a maintenance rack over the bell at the bow, and ropes and umbilicals running from the boat to the cleats or into the big gray utility sheds. She found two more subs in drydock, but settled on exploring one tied up at the pier.

The water from the Piscataqua dribbled from Kassandra's braids, down her back and off the rounded hull. She squatted and looked down the black sloping length of the boat, leaning against her sheathed sword, using it to keep her balance.

“Fast.” She stood and took ten even steps toward the sub's stern, trying to measure its length. “Attack.” She lifted her sword in its scabbard, tapping the steel cables running from the sail to the dock above her. “Submarine.”

She heard the approaching footsteps of one of the Shore Patrol, but she didn't run, just glanced over her shoulder at the dark river to see that her path of retreat was clear. The Navy and Coast Guard ran patrol boats along the Piscataqua, and she didn't want one racing up behind her without knowing about it. She turned a little to face the patrolman on the edge of the dock above her.

“He's cute,” she breathed the words to herself.

The patrolman looked to be in his twenties, with stubbly blond hair and vigilant eyes that shifted along the docks and submarine maintenance buildings. Kassandra's gaze followed the earpiece that stuck out a little over his cheek, then dropped along his shoulder with some stripes, insignia she didn't understand, down to his waist where a handgun was holstered. His focus had moved to the river, but well over her head. He didn't appear to notice her, invisible in a tight blue long sleeved shirt and shorts, standing motionless ten meters astern of the sail.

She cleared her throat politely.

The patrolman's gaze dropped, and he swung one hand up into a boxer's guard position. The other unsnapped the holster strap.

"Who are you?"

Kassandra pointed at her feet with her sword. "How many crewmen does it take to run one of these?"

He blinked at her as if he had trouble seeing her. There was a young woman standing on the submarine below.

He shook his head. "Uh...I mean...Over a hundred and forty officers and enlisted. What are you doing here? How did you get past the gate?"

She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder to the river behind her. "I came from the water. What kind of weaponry?" She used her sword to indicate the length of the boat. "I see vertical launch tubes. Those are for torpedoes? I've done research, but there's still a lot I don't know. What can a torpedo—one of the MKs—do in terms of damage against stone battlements, let's say twenty feet thick? How deep can they go? Deeper than the submarine? What about mines? Does this sub carry them?"

The patrolman looked increasingly concerned. Was she waving a sword around? "You can't...Does your dad work here?"

Kassandra huffed at his inability to answer her questions. Maybe he didn't know. She moved on. "How fast is fast? When you call this a fast attack submarine, are you talking thirty knots or a hundred and thirty?"

He spoke into his comm gear, his right hand slipping into the holster for his gun. "Patrol? I need back up at river five. Unauthorized—"

Kassandra sighed, and without another word, turned, tucked her sword against her side, and dove off the sub into the black green water of the Piscataqua, barely leaving a swirl in the surface to mark her passage.

By the time the harbor patrol boat roared up, she was out past 2KR, the red buoy at the Portsmouth Harbor entrance, marking the separation of the river and the Atlantic.

CHAPTER FOUR

FREE DIVING

I know human lungs have never been capable of operating efficiently with so thick a medium as seawater. They have evolved over millennia for breathing air in a relatively narrow range of surface pressures. The human fetus does not breathe amniotic fluid, but receives all the necessary nutrients and oxygen through the placenta from the mother.

—From the journal of
Michael Augustus Henderson

The Pacific slipped up Corina's legs, cold and clinging, circling her waist, the water sensing the warm life under her wetsuit, nimbly prying at the seams, seeping through the material to chill her skin.

She pushed the mask against her face, fitting it over her cheeks and forehead. Without pause or fear, she walked into the monstrous waves of ocean thundering against the beach.

Violent water swallowed her; there was a roar in her ears, a rush of ice over her body, then silence. She was under, inside the storm, inside the other world that folded over the surface of the world that didn't want her.

Then she weighed nothing.

She drew a breath, wet and loud in her ears, a gush of salt in her mouth, metallic and bitter.

She kicked hard, following the smooth sandy slope until the rocks broke it up, edging away from the floor, into open sea.

Corina was a hundred meters from shore when something in the endless blue hit her in the back, almost playfully. She kicked and paddled, turning much too slowly, her movements clumsy and heavy like an astronaut on a spacewalk. She spun, looking for the cause, a shadow that moved just beyond her peripheral vision. She was alone, but something not made of seawater had bumped forcefully into her tanks, something alive, with the weight and mischievous power of a sea lion. She sucked in a shallow breath, biting into her mouthpiece. Her skin went colder under her suit. Sharks bumped potential prey before devouring them. She paddled one more time around.

There was nothing there.

Her eyes moved in small left-to-right shifts, trying to pick up anything solid out of the wide space of water, dropping to her fins to focus on anything beyond them. The sloping floor of sand and rock darkened as it angled away from the shoreline, velvety blue fading into black.

She thumbed on her dive lights, one dangling from her wrist, the other on a strap over her left shoulder.

The Pacific's surge lifted her gently, and she watched and waited. *Enough*. She threw her hands over her head and kicked, a reflex, a reaction to tiny changes in the ocean her body somehow picked up without having any exposed skin. There was something in the water with her. She just couldn't see it.

Then it touched her, poked her in the shoulder. She kicked away, spinning right, too slowly, and it anticipated her direction; it hooked her arms and jerked her back, tugging on the hoses, nearly ripping the regulator from her mouth. Her feet flipped out in front of

her. The skin along her neck tightened, and she scooped the water, twirling to catch a glimpse of whatever it was.

Nothing there.

A chill ran through her, and she slid her hands over her wetsuit as if to wipe something off.

Her eyes stung trying to focus on anything out of the infinite gloom. She looked up and kicked. Her intuition—the combined prickling, wrenching, and screaming of several major organs at once—told her: *Get the fuck out of here! Surface. Get to the surface!*

She kicked hard, her breathing loud in her ears. She pushed her body toward the light, her mind racing with questions, twisting her thoughts into knots, strings of words circling around and repeating themselves, mostly variations on *What the hell is that?*

She didn't have any immediate answers, and the ones lurking at the edges scared her too much to state them clearly.

Corina jerked her hands back as a colder current pushed over her gloves. She slowed for half a second, stunned, and then kicked again. Her body slammed into something solid but invisible in the water, jarring her teeth. She grunted over her reg. Her mask hammered into her face. Seawater squeezed in, pooling around her nose. She slid upside down and the saltwater blinded her. Her legs swung over her head, and her heels hammered into the barrier, shaking every bone in her body.

Finger-like cables grabbed her hands. She couldn't see them. She felt them, tightening, squeezing painfully around her wrists, snaking over her biceps, under her arms and back over her shoulders.

Her hands slapped together in front of her and the tentacles dragged her through the water, towing her deeper and to the south, toward Monterey and the cliffs of the southern edge of the underwater canyon.

Corina folded her knees to create some drag, and tugged as hard as she could, fighting the thing that held her. She bit into her regulator, screaming curses in big wobbly bubbles that ripped past her face.

Her breathing quickened into a saw-like roar in her ears, making her lightheaded.

The water went black, her dive lights dancing off the rocks as her invisible captor dragged her up against the canyon wall. She kicked wildly, and tried to hook her fins on a passing ridge. She flew over the crenellated row of rock, gray in the twilight like the broken wall of a haunted castle.

Watery fingers wriggled over her body, tightening their grip, working their way down her back, around her waist, spiraling her throat. She tucked her head down, trying to stop it from choking her.

The shadowy face of the cliff came at her fast, and she drew her legs toward a meter-wide slice of pure black, a cave in the tall face of rock.

The current freed her at the mouth, and tossed her inside. Corina bent her knees and had her hands halfway up to her face when a thicket of woody-branched gorgonians caught her. Stiff pink stems of coral scraped her arms, clawing at her mask and hoses.

She kicked and clutched at the walls of the cave, tearing off a mat of sea-sponge in her scramble to right herself.

Get into open water.

She twisted her body around and climbed clumsily toward the mouth, her fins catching on the sea-growth on the floor, tiny flowers with mouths and questing tentacles, rigid patches of needlework sponge. Snags of rock cut through her gloves and her blood twisted in the water like smoke, clouding the dim light at the cave mouth. She pushed through it, and shoved her head forward.

The invisible current hit her, pushing her neck back. It tore her fingers from the rocks, and threw her deeper into the cave. She kicked madly, clawing her way to the entrance

again. She ripped a big chunk of sponge off the wall, and shoved it behind her.

Corina froze.

She forgot to breathe, and the whole ocean went silent. She turned to her left, her eyes locked on the stretch of bare rock where she had torn off the sponge.

A human handprint stood out on the flat stone face. It was like a blood painting on the wall of some Paleolithic era cave.

Corina's mind raced, throwing thoughts in every direction. *How?* She choked on her first conclusions. Questions sparked and went cold. Forty meters down. *Never. This cave's never been above the waterline. Ice age? Sea level dropped hundreds of feet. Okay, even if it ever had, the water would have washed away man's presence thousands of years ago.* She started to shake her head, her muscles just coming into sync with her thoughts. *It's paint or blood on bare rock.*

And she wanted to touch it. Badly.

Paint or blood in saltwater. Under a hundred-year-old growth of sea-sponge. Who—whose hand?

She forgot where she was, or how she had been dragged there. She stared at the print. Long fingers, a wide palm, a man's hand. The pigment blurred like webbing between the fingers.

Her eyes dropped in alarm to her own hand reaching up, fingers spreading to match the one on the rock. A stringy haze of blood seeped from her glove, twirling in the water like strips of black gauze.

She placed her right hand against the stone, over the wound-red print. Her fingers flexed but didn't reach the tips. She pressed her palm hard against the unyielding stone.

A bolt of heat rushed through her. Her arm and shoulder went numb. She sucked in air in tight little drags, rabbit breaths, in-and-out gusts seesawing in her ears.

She had...done something. The handprint was a lock of some kind. She was a key. She couldn't catch up to her thoughts to find out how she knew that. Her mind raced with a flood of...someone else's information.

She arched her back, kicking violently, struggling to get away from it. The stone cracked, and whatever was locked behind the handprint fired out of its prison and into her body.

Corina flew across the cave and slammed into the wall of sharp coral and rock.

Sobbing in terror, her mouth opened and she spit out her regulator. Something moved through her hair, against her neck...pain shot into her head like hot iron coming through bone.

The world buckled inside itself, narrowed down to the iridescent circle from her shoulder light. It danced along the cave wall and her soul nearly followed it out of her body; it remained anchored only by thin threads of sensation, the sound of her chattering teeth and the hot seep of urine down her thighs.

The motion of the world slowed to a crawl. Her legs glided up in front of her, and a sizzling sound tickled her ears.

I can't move.

Her eyes closed and she couldn't open them again. She couldn't lift her neck. She screamed...inside her head. Nothing came from her mouth.

Some primitive directive fired repeatedly, told her to close her mouth. *Do not let the ocean inside your mouth.* Too late.

Her regulator hovered over her, swaying up and back like an offended cobra. Even without her eyes, she knew it was always in reach. She couldn't lift her arms, or curl her fingers.

She sagged in the ocean's embrace, unable to stir the smallest of muscles. She tried to move her feet and wrinkle her nose. She tasted something sour, as if someone had

shoved her face in a bucket of rancid cabbage—but it wasn't her doing the tasting.

Then she heard her own voice—someone else controlling it—using a thoroughly disgusted tone. It snapped off a bunch of words in a language she didn't understand.

She felt her lips move, her throat contracting, lungs struggling to make words, but it was someone else making her mouth and throat say them. She heard bits of words: “*Lepto...*” followed by “*koost-ho...*” She didn't catch the rest, but she heard the revulsion, a bottomless hatred in the tone.

Someone using her voice said the word “*Thalassa*” several times. A compound form then burst from her mouth, “*Thalassogenêis.*”

She felt the words against the inside of her own throat, rumbling through her head, and the last of her breath escaped her lungs, passing her lips in fat shaky bubbles of air.

Her body shuddered and curled into a knot, her arms wrapping her knees. She felt her mouth move feverishly, more words she didn't know, and without any sound. Her lips opened expectantly and let the ocean inside. She tasted it, salty and ice cold against her teeth. It punched into the back of her mouth, down her throat and filled her empty lungs.

Her mind halted in terror. It was like experiencing someone else's drowning. A burn like hot metal shot up her spine, sharp cramps gripped her stomach. Every thought in her head disintegrated. Her mind went blank, dead, a bitter black pool.

CHAPTER FIVE

VISITORS

They laughed when I used the word *kissêrês*, meaning “clad in ivy,” to describe their hauberks of pointed pale green plates sewn to a thin, finely woven undergarment of a material like silk.

—Journal of Michael Augustus Henderson

Kassandra Alkimides froze, her eyes going unfocused halfway through the pages of *Jane’s Underwater Warfare Systems*. She tilted her head to listen, glaring at the doorway to the kitchen.

“Something’s in the house.” She whispered the words with only the slightest movement of her lips.

She dropped the book and curled her hand into a fist, hiding the scar tissue lining the skin between each finger.

With her hearing focused on the quiet house, she put her weight down on her heels, leaned forward, and grabbed her chair by the seat, lifting and sliding it noiselessly away from the table at the same time.

Her shorts were riding up. She gave them a tug, and then slid one hand around her back to tug her T-shirt from the waistband, loosening it by rolling her shoulders. She didn’t want her clothes to interfere in a fight.

She crept past the dining room table, then stopped moving and stopped breathing. Her gaze shot left, chasing a new noise in the house, a faint scraping sound, something metal dragged against gritty stone. A soft splattering sound followed.

She took a few steps, entering the short hall from the kitchen.

Kassandra listened at the bottom of the stairs leading to the second floor and the bedrooms. She looked up the stairwell, into the afternoon sun casting big yellow squares across the white walls, and blew a short burst of air. It returned to her a moment later and she sniffed its contents.

Whatever it was, it wasn’t upstairs.

She stepped into the kitchen, glancing past the refrigerator, the center island counter, to the sink. She released a normal breath this time, a cautious sense of relief building inside her as she approached. Her shoulders dropped.

Through the partly open window over the sink, she saw her father out in the side yard raking leaves off the drive. She looked down at the faucet. A drop of water fell from the tap and hit the drain.

Who left it running?

Kassandra pushed the lever down, furious at someone’s stupid mistake.

She turned, sniffing the air. The house still didn’t feel right; she stopped everything in her body except her heart and listened, matching the sounds her father made with the metal clicking and scraping sounds she’d heard a moment before.

They hadn’t come from the rake against the gravel.

Her arms lifted away from her sides, fingers flexing as she turned from her father toward the shadowy stairs leading deep under the house to the grotto and continuing through caves to the Atlantic. She walked around the center counter, past the fridge to

the top of the basement stairs, and blew a breath into the cool darkness.

What could get through the gate?

She grabbed the cold railings with both hands and sniffed, closing her eyes a moment to zero in on the smell. The ocean, a salty gauze that hung in the air, points of pungent seaweed...*and something...someone. Wet footsteps approaching.*

When she opened her eyes, four helmeted soldiers in green-scaled hauberks, all of them dripping seawater, stepped from the shadows of the basement landing, and pointed short heavy spears at her. The front pair had their weapons low, aimed at her knees, their cheek guards down, thick glassy green plates covering the skin of their faces. Cassandra let her eyes shift from one soldier's dark blues to the other's olive-browns. Blue-eyes coughed up a mouthful of water, spat and then blinked up at her. She stared back at them and they bared their teeth threateningly.

Like dogs.

A third soldier crouched behind them, holding his spear higher, the tip aimed at her face. The fourth she presumed to be in command, standing straighter, a less threatening posture—simply because he did not feel the need to threaten young women. His cheek guards were up like pointed ears on the sides of his helmet. His long black hair, tangled and heavy with seawater, curled in stringy lumps across his shoulders. His nose was broad, and he had tidepool-clear gray eyes that only left her face to read the word, *Thalassogenês*—Seaborn—on her bright yellow T-shirt. He gave her a moment to run or scream. When she did not, he narrowed his eyes in impatience.

“Where is the Rexenor lord who lives here?” The commanding soldier pushed a calloused broken-nailed finger at her.

She stared back at him with infuriating coolness.

Kassandra looked into his eyes, studying him. Something bubbled behind them, not fear, but uncertainty, as if he suddenly found himself unable to determine why he was there. She lifted his name and other details right out of his thoughts.

Stratolaos. These men are trusted House Dosianax soldiers. The king's House—and by blood, mine.

Kassandra let her gaze follow a glassy stream of the sea that ran down his cheek, off his chin. He swallowed the saliva collecting in his mouth, his lips curling in disgust.

Her focus dropped to the hand he extended toward her and the water that pooled in the gaps between his fingers where a thin web of skin connected each.

When she did not answer right away, he jabbed his finger again, shaking the water into the air. “Who are you? Can't you speak?”

She raised an eyebrow, mildly surprised. She tilted her head and in a well-mannered tone, said, “It is customary for visitors to introduce themselves first.”

“How dare you use that tone—”

“Stratolaos.” She said the man's name in a cold steady voice that cut through his words.

Stratolaos jumped, startled at hearing his name uttered by the young woman. His voice broke in panic, but he managed to gargle out the words: “In the name of the king, swim—move aside!”

Kassandra let her hands slide off the railings. She spread the fingers on her right hand, closed her eyes, let out a breath, and snapped her hand around a sword grip. Like crawling mats of vine, a knee-length hauberk of thousands of tiny silvery-blue scales bloomed and slid over her shoulders, tight around her waist and along her arms.

One moment she stood at the head of the stairs, a young surface woman in a yellow T-shirt and shorts, and the next, she was pointing a sword at them and in armor finer than any they'd ever seen.

Kassandra felt the influence of the warrior queen Andromache stir to life in her hands

and shoulders, a burn of excitement that raced through her muscles, waking them up with smooth flexing tugs and squeezes, preparing for any spin of advantage a battle might throw, simple intimidation to cutting out the commander's heart and lifting it above her head, bleeding through her fingers.

Kassandra opened her eyes to find the wet hands of the three spearmen re-gripping hafts and the scuffle of their feet on damp stone, shifting them for balance.

They were uncomfortable out of the water.

She thumbed closed the throat buckles of her armor, brought her sword around, the lusterless blade whistling over their heads.

Nodding at Stratolaos, she took up a fighting stance at the head of the stairway. The old maxim, *Kill the king and the army will fall*, drifted through her thoughts, and her eyes automatically followed the seams in the commander's armor.

Stratolaos blinked away his alarm and swung a crossbow up at her.

CHAPTER SIX

CAPTIVE OCEAN

There is a world deep in the Atlantic, a kingdom made up of nine great houses that have endured thousands of years without anyone on the surface, in the modern world, knowing it exists. The Seaborn have lived and perished, fought wars at a thousand fathoms, and banished noble houses to the Arctic. Many of them possess hereditary magical power, *bleeds*, that pass from parent to child or a grandchild. Some have ventured to the surface as exiles or as slaves to the Seaborn rulers—given the Porthmeus surname. Some have come to see True Helios—the sunlight—with their own eyes, reflected in the towers of surface cities. Others hide from cruel Seaborn rulers.

—Michael Henderson, notes

Corina woke with seawater heavy in her mouth, trickling to the back of her throat, her body breathing it in, her lungs expanding. She was alive.

She groped hazily for a sense of how much time had passed. She had the feeling she had been awake for some time, but everything had been so still there hadn't been enough of a difference between death and the low hum of some neutral state to make her notice.

There was motion now, her body stirring to life.

She heard clicking noises. It could have been things moving in the rocks in the cave, but it also sounded like her teeth clattering in icy seawater.

At this temperature—for any length of time—I should be dead.

Then her eyes opened.

Corina didn't open them. Someone else did, something inside her, something foreign, the prisoner she had released from the stone behind the bloody handprint. She felt it exploring her senses. She felt her lungs expand, her body living, her heart beating, everything working under the water.

Then the thing that controlled her moved her legs, her arms, her eyes, her tongue. It was a man.

Panic echoed through her mind. She'd had no trouble getting rid of Alan Yeater, but this guy—she had a feeling he would be worse than Alan Yeater—he would be more than a little difficult to walk away from.

Almost two hundred years . . .

Aleximor the Bone-gatherer blinked his new eyes. Almost two hundred years since he had last opened and closed them. These were his now. He scowled, squinted, and opened them wide. They felt strange and dry and could not see as well in the dark as his old ones.

He tried out his new voice.

“Finally, it is time for the king to die.”

A shock ran through his new body at the high pitch. He foraged for a word...*puppet?* Something similar to that, but closer to the controls, as if the puppet and master were

one, as if the master could fit inside the puppet's body and wear it like a costume.

But a thinling! Some woman from the surface had released him from his prison.

"What wonderful and awful fortune at once."

Aleximor looked down at his new host and spat, a curl of saliva tumbling through seawater. The woman had almost drowned before he realized her body would need immediate...alteration...in order to breathe under the sea. He had managed, but only just.

A female body—shorter than he was used to, with a higher voice. He doubted very much if her vocal range could come close to what he expected.

He touched the mask clinging to her face, and then his focus wandered up and down the arms of his host. He didn't understand the thick spongy skin she wore over her natural skin, dull black with violet stripes.

His new fingers glided over it to the wrists. Rough and grippy in some places, slick in others. It wasn't like any kind of clothing he recognized.

Some kind of armor? Protecting her from what?

He looked up at the jagged gap of blue coming from the cave entrance, a question starting to form. What is this surface woman doing by herself? How is it even possible for her to reach this depth?

He had dragged her part of the way, but his retrieval tools would not have selected her if she had not been below the ocean's ceiling for some time.

Aleximor paused and drew a long breath. He pulled in another one. *Alive. Again. Real death had been so close.*

He wasn't as quick with his voice and words as he had once been, his own soul sluggish after two centuries of imprisonment, his understanding too slow, this new host unfamiliar. He had tried to substitute his *psyche* for hers, but she had seeped back in with him like an octopus seeking shelter, squeezing into some impossibly narrow space.

He made an angry snorting noise. He had expected a Seaborn host, not someone from the damned surface.

Aleximor let his new fingers play over his neoprene outer covering. "I have your body for now. It is yours no longer." He spoke to the puppet on the off chance it was capable of listening.

Corina was a groggy spectator at some perverse show, watching someone else control her arms and legs. She felt the internal sensation that went along with the hair standing up on her neck, a wave of cold that spread and branched through her thoughts. A moment of paralysis caught her. Her thoughts slowly loosened and fell into place.

Think, girl.

Uh...Demons. Corina vaguely remembered some rule about demons from stories she'd read, something about wizards and demons. *Your true name is power. There are things in the world that can enslave you with your name.*

Somehow that made complete sense. *Don't let him know your name.*

She scowled on the inside, the tightening of her focus down to a pinpoint beam of thought. *Don't think your name. He controls my muscles, the entire physical side of me but I can still sense everything. I can still hear. I can feel the Pacific against my skin—his sk—our skin.*

But can he feel what I feel—emotionally feel? Does he even know I'm here? Does he know...I'm scared?

Aleximor, no sign that he heard her thoughts, pulled off her torn dive gloves and pushed them toward the back of the cave.

Corina grasped at every stray thought, but held them close like cards in a cheater's game. *Don't think your name.* Even as she thought it, she felt her mind's automated response, bringing up her name, *Cor—*

Her thoughts skidded to a stop.

She didn't like the way he stared at her hands. He stretched them out, fingers spread stiffly. She knew he wasn't admiring them. She felt his scorn. He tilted them up, studying them. There was a word, a concept rising in his thought before it reached his lips. She felt the idea, like a bubble of air in syrup.

He said something in his language that meant, "remarkable," but it was the "remarkable" someone would use to describe an insect that secreted acid as a defense mechanism.

He tugged off the rings, two of them, one with a small diamond that had been Corina's mother's. He let them go in the water, and looked back at *his* hands, long slender woman's hands with blue-painted nails—blue because it looked good against her cello's fret board.

Aleximor moved his lips, and a soft whisper came from his mouth, sweet and high, the sound almost like the sense of touch. She felt it as a smooth pressure against her skin, and deeper, in her bones. Corina shivered on the inside. *He already knows how to control my voice.* She tried to follow the words he sang.

"Dee-ah-zo-mah"—something. "Pah-rhee-steed..."

She got a sense of the meanings of the words from him, something about weaving—which was unexpected—the loom...connecting her...making her whole.

Fear derailed her attention from the words, but her musical sense followed the sounds a minute longer, then lost it. It was something with rhythmic rising and falling, a poem that he half chanted, half spoke. It had a pulse. His voice went lower—almost as low as her voice could go—and the words came faster. Corina wasn't quick enough to pick them out individually.

He curled his new fingers in a flash of short-trimmed blue nails, tapping his palm in time with the song. He pushed his hands through the water in a swimming gesture. Bringing them back in front of his eyes, he spread the fingers as wide as they would go.

Dance? A ritual dance? Corina waited for something to happen.

A slow, even warmth seeped through the skin of her hands as if she held them under a heat lamp.

Aleximor strained the muscles and tendons, trying to spread his fingers wider.

Corina's mind cycled over the same question: *What's he doing?*

He stared at his new hands. She stared at them through the eyes he now controlled. There *was* a faint glow around them, as if some faraway spotlight was trained on them. The warmth felt good. There was a gentle tickling between her fingers like someone running cotton along them.

The warmth turned to burning. The tickling became scratchy, a wire brush on her skin.

Aleximor's new body shook, and he lost his focus on his host's hands. The glow blinded him. Tears welled up and splattered the inside of the dive mask. He squinted against the pain, finally slamming his eyes shut.

Corina screamed in her thoughts. Her skin stretched, oozing and bubbling between her fingers, the pain made worse by blindness. The burning raced up her arms, running along her tendons like streaks of fire.

The heat faded. The burning between each finger died away.

Aleximor the Bone-gatherer opened the eyes of the body he now owned and blinked away the tears.

He studied his hands. They had been her hands. Now they really were his. Long fingers, her blue fingernail paint, and sheer webbing that stretched between each one.

What—

Corina stuttered every thought that attempted to get into focus. *What have you done? I'm a monster!*

“Nearly Seaborn,” he whispered softly.

Corina’s panic hit a wall on his words.

He looked down at his feet, snug in her black fins, and then back up to blink and stare out from the mouth of the cave into open water, trying to focus on something.

He tilted his head down, disappointed. “No more.”

He mumbled something in his language, but Corina understood what he meant, something like, “I will have to make her stronger.” She got the feeling that it would not require lifting weights or swimming laps.

He bent down, dug around the floor of the cave among the branches of hydroids and solitary coral cups, and picked up Corina’s rings.

Clutching the rings in one fist, he played with the big belt clip at his waist. He spent a few frustrated minutes pulling and squeezing the clip, but couldn’t figure out how to open it. Then he noticed a picture of her, his new host, in a transparent plastic pouch stuck to the arm of the strange suit.

He yanked on the zippered pocket and it ripped away from the Velcro strip along her forearm. He opened it into his palm. He fingered her rings. He touched the keys, key-ring and remote—now full of seawater and useless.

Bastard! How am I going to get into my car?

He picked them up gingerly by the ring as if he was afraid of them.

“Charm?” He whispered in her voice. He ran his thumb along the serrated edges of the keys, fascinated and cautious at the same time.

He carefully slid everything back into the pouch, and then he picked out the rectangle of flexible material. He stared at her driver’s license. His breathing quickened. He smiled with Corina’s mouth, a tight twist at the corners of her lips, a smile she only used when something really pleased her.

He pronounced her full name slowly, rolling the Rs.

“Corina Lairsey.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

ONE OF THE SEABORN

How is it possible that I am breathing in the sea while I write these words? (I write these words with an inky substance that holds to a pen, but at the touch of a sheet of pressed “paper” transfers from tip to page, adhering to it.) The answer must be tied to my other biophysics questions: I do not feel the immense pressure I ought to at this depth, and I do not feel the low temperature. I feel it, but not as discomfort. I sense the cold rather. What have they done to my ears? I swear to you—I can hear things moving in the sea a mile away!

—Journal of Michael Augustus Henderson

Corina screamed as loud as she could think about screaming. Nothing came from her mouth. Nothing. Not a damn noise in her throat, not a twitch in her lips. She was a prisoner in her own body, paralyzed, while the thing inside her had full access to the controls.

For a stunned second it occurred to her that thoughts weren’t made of the things they represented. Loud wasn’t loud in her head. Blue wasn’t blue. She imagined blue, but blue—when it was stored somewhere—had no color. Then it occurred to her that she could imagine an angry yell, just as she could imagine a bright pink sea or rich field of purple grass. The thoughts themselves might not be the things they represent but she could envision the representations. The colors and loudness somehow came through in the imagining.

Say something, asshole!

She stilled her thoughts, waiting for some kind of response.

He was either really good at ignoring her or she wasn’t getting through to him.

Okay. Size up the situation, girl. Someone is in my head, controlling me. I feel what he feels, but he doesn’t seem to feel what I do. He can act. I can’t. I can’t move, speak, do anything but think and feel.

She smelled—or tasted—the ocean. *But only when he uses my senses.*

There was also a weird sourness she had sensed when he first got into her head, like something old and rotting, something that had once been alive. It was faint now, but still present.

She sensed other things about him. *He’s old, hundreds of years old...and he isn’t quite alive.*

What else? She had a web of skin between her fingers like some sea monster. It wasn’t hideous. Not really. The skin was thin, nearly see-through, a gossamer sheet between each finger, but the idea of webbing itself was monstrous.

And my body is breathing. My lungs are working. I can breathe...underwater? She focused on his slow even respiration. The idea made her mind stumble and left her thoughts in questioning pieces. *But the pressure? Temperature?*

Diving was technical. She knew how it was supposed to work, and it wasn’t like this—this was like a blind alley.

She couldn’t read the dive meter on her wrist. He’d focused her eyes on the main buckle for her BC—buoyancy compensator, the vest like thing that held all her gear, the tanks, weights, and computer—trying to figure out how to un-do it.

She guessed that her depth was forty meters. She didn't feel the pressure. She might as well have been above the surface, out in the air.

She could hear clearly. Too clearly. She heard the shrimp clicking in the rocks all around her, things moving among the coral cups and sponge formations. She heard a soft susurration from the mouth of the cave, like the surf on a calm night.

Is that...the surface? I can hear it from this depth?

Aleximor touched her dive mask, tapping on the lenses, delicately at first, then thumping them until his head hurt. He made a few wondering noises but left her mask in place.

She followed his eyes and felt his movement. *What's he doing now?*

He wiggled around at the mouth of the cave, kicking and trying to look over his shoulder—*my shoulder*.

Then he finally unbuckled her BC and tanks and dropped them to the cave's floor. Her watch was next, tossed into the cave behind him. He stared at her fins for a minute, but he left them on.

I'm...not rising. I'm neutrally buoyant.

Corina's anger prickled. *What else has he done to me? My hearing, my hands, my body. The human body is supposed to float!*

Without warning, he tore off her mask. The muscles in his neck tensed hard for a few seconds, then went loose. The gush of cold against his face startled him. He blinked a few times slowly, getting used to the seawater around his eyelids.

She couldn't make out anything clearly coming through her dilated pupils, just big fuzzy black shapes, the lighter wedge of the cave's opening, and the ragged rows of coral and sea-sponge silhouetted against it.

Why me? It sounded pathetic and she hated herself for thinking it, but it flowed through her mind anyway. *First Alan Yeater. Now, I get possessed by some total wacko merman in a deep sea cave?*

She raced to head off any mind-derailing fits of weakness. *Solve this, Corina.*

She stopped her thoughts in a panic. Her name sounded strange. Was he doing something, taking her away, making her fade?

Then it occurred to her that this state of inner imprisonment could go on a long time, maybe forever. *This asshole's hundreds of years old. He's not yet dead.* She flipped the thought around, looking at it from all angles. *What is he? He's not...human.*

His name suddenly came to her. *Aleximoros...Aleximor*. He had named himself. It meant "warding off death." He had given himself other names, but two hundred years ago—maybe more than that—he had given himself this one.

"Rest assured, Corina Lairsey," Aleximor said in her voice, in her gloating tone, in English. Perfect English. "That I will not keep you in there for long."

Coincidence? Or can he hear me? Can he hear me clearly, or does he get the same hints of thoughts I'm getting from him?

Aleximor peeled off her hood. Her ponytail thwacked him in the shoulders. Startled, he jumped off the cave floor, bumping into the ceiling.

He ran his hands over her hair, fingering the arrangement, an elastic band at the back of her head. Then his hands went down her wetsuit, stopping at the waist and hips, rubbing the wetsuit material, pushing into it. He slid one hand over the material along his arm, feeling the difference between the violet striping and the black.

He had ditched her other gear. He might have been curious, but he was obviously looking for a way to take off the wetsuit.

Damn.

He had trouble with the zippers. He pulled down the one that ran from her throat to her waist on the right side. He frowned, watching her right breast squeeze past the

zipper.

Corina's thoughts went tight and sarcastic. *Right. Let's swim around the goddamn Pacific with my tits hanging out.*

Maybe he understood. He tugged the zipper closed.

Aleximor made a disappointed noise, and Corina picked up his reaction to her body. Repugnance. He didn't care for it. He did appear to like her suit. He definitely liked her fins, because he kept lifting them up, tilting them side to side and staring at them.

He also liked her knife, strapped around her right leg. He fiddled with the safety snaps, and drew the blade out. He examined it closely, twisting it an inch from her nose. Finished with the inspection, he slid it back inside its sheath.

He sucked in a deep breath.

Corina tasted the salt in the inhale, like breathing in the clean ocean scent off the water after a storm. A hint of the sour taste remained.

Aleximor planted his feet in their fins right at the edge of the cave, and did a weird swaying dance.

Corina saw her hands twist up in front of her, curl into hooks and draw back. It was as if he was dragging in an invisible net. Every time he pulled, the invisible bundle of stuff grew in his hands, an accumulating glob of nearly transparent jelly. She felt it oozing against her fingers, pressing into her palms.

She made the connection with the invisible tentacles that had dragged her to the cave. He had sent them out to capture her...or anyone diving in the bay.

The bundle was about a foot around when he squeezed it, compressing it until it fit inside his cupped hands. He turned it, and gave it one last push, using all the strength in his arms. Then he opened his hands like a magician who'd played some vanishing-coin trick on a group of kids.

Suddenly, he shot into open water. Corina didn't know the human body was capable of swimming that fast. He rocketed through the bay like a dolphin, ponytail whipping his shoulders, water streaming by him, roaring in his ears.

He angled steeply, following the descending line of cliffs for an hour.

Long after the last reaching rays of sunlight faded to pure black, he slowed and back-kicked while getting his bearings. He spun in slow circles, staring into what Corina perceived to be nothing but uniform dark watery space.

Still no sense of pressure, she thought. *This must be well over a hundred meters.*

Aleximor whispered something in his language. She heard it in her ears. She could just make out the meaning of some of the words and phrases, like an incompetent translator on a three-second delay.

He stepped through a dance, went through rhythmic tapping of his fingers against his palm and said something about glowing inside...where the darkness abounds, encircling the earth. He mentioned a name, then another. *Gods? Demons?*

She didn't hear the rest. Her eyes burned—just like her hands when he had modified them. It felt as if he was sticking hot needles through her pupils. Her flesh tore and cooked, boiling in her head. He felt it, too, and couldn't bear the pain. He passed out and took her with him.

Corina didn't know much time had passed. The pain had fused her thoughts into a solid hunk of useless material.

When Aleximor finally opened his eyes, Corina could see, and small pieces of her mind seemed to work.

There still wasn't much hitting the retinas. The ocean was pure black, but he could see...the violet stripe that ran along the arm of his suit. He saw color. A pale glow lit the water around him.

He floated in black space for a long time, maybe hours, and she made some guesses

about what he was doing.

Meditating? Resting? Hello?

She felt his control over her body reach some tipping point, and then fade.

He had fallen asleep. Corina felt stronger—her own strength, as if her thoughts were spreading out and taking some power back. She felt...her feet, and they hurt as if she was walking barefoot on cobblestones. This was strange because she was certain he hadn't yet reached the floor of the Monterey Canyon.

If I'm in open water, then the stones under my feet must be in here with me.

She couldn't move her body and couldn't open her eyes to see if she was anywhere near the canyon's floor, but she tried anyway.

Light flashed in front of her eyes, a burst of blue. He had closed his eyes, but she saw motion and light in them, like a movie projected against the inside of his eyelids. A row of lights, wavering like torches. A narrow cave, a rough black diamond shape, cut in the face of a cliff.

Corina hauled up every thought in her mind, and she pinned them to the scene in front of her. *That's the cave where they imprisoned him. Who imprisoned him?*

The scene became slippery, and more imaginary, unfocused. The world shifted to a different place, but still deep in the ocean somewhere.

This is a dream. He's dreaming, she thought. Then she changed her mind. *It's a nightmare.*

It was as if the *situation* was reversed, and she was now looking out through his eyes, two hundred years ago.

She peered out through his almost closed lashes. She sensed something, as if he was concentrating hard to keep still, as if he was trying to deceive his captors, pretending to be unconscious while watching them.

His guards towed him through the water, through large stone doors and into the judging chamber.

Two men held his arms behind his back, and he floated in the water between them. One of them said, "He thinks he can fool a Rexenor. He's awake, lord. Wouldn't tell us where his stronghold lies."

The judge—*lord?*—grabbed the Bone-gatherer's long black hair, and yanked his head back in order to see his face. Since he no longer needed to pretend to be unconscious, Aleximor opened his eyes. A few strands of his hair drifted in front of him.

Corina was him, Aleximor, hundreds of years ago. He was dreaming this, and she was living it.

The name of the man in front of him rose in her thoughts, but it hurt to remember it. The man wore a helmet with a tiny gold embossed seabird stamped above his brows. Strands of thick brown hair stuck out and brushed the plates that curled over his shoulders. He wore armor, scaly like a fish, sharp little shield shapes of what looked like pale lime-green plastic. He was young, maybe twenty, but he looked serious, as if his life had never been easy, and he had a long curved black dagger in his right fist. His eyes were fixed on Aleximor, cold and pitiless rings of bright bluish-green.

He drifted forward about a foot off the ground, dagger held low. His voice exploded with hatred.

"You killed my brother, Aleximoros! Dead raiser. I'm told I cannot take your life. Strates Unwinder tells me that I can, however, prevent you from taking another's."

The knife moved against the Bone-gatherer's throat.

Aleximor's neck snapped back, and he cried the man's name in agony and hatred. "Kassander! I will make you—and your king—pay for this!"

Kassander shouting back, "He is not my king!"

Aleximor woke, the heart in his new body thudding over the noise from the scene,

smears of color in a pool of syrupy black ink. He blinked and breathed deeply, folding his arms in front of him protectively.

Half an hour passed while he held his new host body tight and took in slow breaths to calm down. Then he moved on and made no comment on the nightmare.

Corina had the feeling that he had experienced this many times over the last two hundred years—and there hadn't been anything to hold on to. Nothing physical.

Aleximor stretched out his arms and legs, and kicked up a good pace, singing low to himself of blood drawing out the *psyche* and of locking it in the earth—and of someone he hated almost as much as the king, one of the names from his nightmare, Strates Unwinder.

Corina spent some thought on their depth, but she couldn't produce anything but a wide range, from one hundred to five hundred meters.

She spent some time thinking about the man with the knife in the dream, Kassander—and even the name, Strates Unwinder, wondering what he had unwound. They all belonged to some group called Rexenor...House Rexenor. The guards who brought Aleximor in to be judged called Kassander a lord, and Kassander had called Aleximor, “dead raiser.”

Any way she looked at it, it didn't sound like a good thing to be associated with.

Aleximor stopped every fifteen minutes and stared around at black empty ocean.

Swimming to the floor of the Monterey Canyon? Then what?

He followed the descending walls of rock another hour as it flattened into a field of slate colored sand, swimming faster than any human.

He kicked along the smooth floor for what felt like miles to Corina. Silt swirled in his wake, and his eyes darted to little reddish crabs, an occasional spidery tube anemone.

Aleximor stopped, startled by something, twirling his arms to keep himself upright. A cloud of dust enveloped him, settling while he floated a few feet off the ocean floor.

He pushed out his hands, straightened his legs, and planted his fins in the sand, a cloud of silt blossoming up his legs. Then he tilted his neck back, sniffing the current, and he smiled with Corina's lips.

“I taste death,” he said with her high whispering voice.

Is that what it is? Corina willed her nose to scrunch up, but nothing happened. *All I can sense is that weird sour overcooked cabbage smell. And I thought it was you.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WREATH-WEARER

The number three has special meaning for the Seaborn. Three is the minimum number of strands required to braid, three is the shape of their world. The surface is two-dimensional. The sea is three. It is a common belief among the Seaborn that the ocean's currents are three-part, and with the right power and knowledge, a current can be unbraided, broken into its three separate tracks, even controlled.

—Journal of Michael Augustus Henderson

Gregor Lord Rexenor, son of Lady Kallixene and the late Lord Nausikrates, wiped his forehead on his forearm, brought the rake up straight, and leaned on it. He tilted his head to the side to listen, scowling at the sound of someone hammering.

A female scream of frustrated rage and pain came from the house.

He dropped the rake and spun away from the driveway, his eyes stopping on the kitchen window, catching a dull flash of reflected light off moving metal.

Gregor ran for the nearest door.

Nicole and Jill were in Rye at the harbor aboard *Stormwind*. Zypheria was at North Hampton Beach. Cassandra was alone in the house.

Then he heard a high-pitched angry sea of words ending in, "Kill the old kings!" and it sucked his store of courage dry. It was his daughter screaming the Alkimides battle cry, not in English, but in the old Hellene dialect of the Seaborn.

He jumped a low stone wall, waving madly as if he could move his body faster by pushing the air behind him. Damn thin world. He could move so much quicker in water.

"Kassandra!" He cried her name before he reached the house, hoping she could hear him and take it as a sign that help was on the way.

He cleared the stairs, wrestling with the screen door. He shoved the side door in, dashed through the mudroom, and slammed clumsily into the paneled wall leading past his study. He fell into a narrow table, knocking everything off it. A lamp crashed against the wall. A stack of books skidded along the hall's polished wood floor in his wake.

The tiled kitchen floor came into view and he let out a grunt of horror, breathing in the coppery smell of blood. The floor was syrupy, a dance of bare footprints decorating it, a folded broken strip of armor scales, and long blotchy streaks where someone had slipped.

Gregor skidded at the top of the stairs that led to the grotto, his eyes following the bloody footprints on the stones.

"Kassandra?" He stuttered her name, grabbed the railings, and jumped three stairs at a time into the dark under the house.

"Dad?" Cassandra shut the refrigerator door and took another long drink of orange juice. She hadn't been able to hear him over the roar of her heart beating and the chattering of the crowd inside her head.

He spun with a jump, thumping his head on the thick beam across the basement

entrance. He came up the stairs slowly, his face pale. Then he noticed her sword on the kitchen island counter, in easy reach. She had already cleaned the blade, but she was a mess. Blood oozed between the scales, down the front of her armor and down her legs. One of her braids had come untwined. She looked as if she had just stepped out of a war.

His jaw started working before he could get sound from his throat. “What...what happened?”

She nodded, acknowledging his question. She was breathing hard, and spent a minute getting her racing heart under control. She took another sip and jutted her chin toward the blood-covered stairs. “Soldiers from my grandfather, looking for you. Four of them. I wounded two, one badly, and let the other two carry them away.” She tipped more orange juice into her mouth, swallowed it. “It was obvious they’d never fought above the waves. They knew little of the sweep and swing of a sword. The terrain was mine. One managed to get out of the stairwell and he paid for it.”

She noticed the expression on his face—neither pride nor fear, but a deep mix of them that looked like agony.

Kassandra tilted her head to the side and gave him a reproachful you-worry-too-much look. In a sweeter voice, Gregor’s daughter surfaced, and without a hint of sarcasm, said, “I was just making friends, Dad.”

He closed his mouth and thought about it. With an exasperated breath, he said, “How does *friendship* play a role?” He gestured down the bloody stairs. “You hurt them.” He bent down and picked up the torn strip of green scaled armor, turning it over to examine it. “Badly.”

“I let them go.” She said it coldly and simply, as if it was the obvious conclusion to draw, as if the only other possible path she could have taken was to kill them all. “They are at this moment cursing my grandfather for sending them unprepared against me.”

“The Wreath-wearer,” he whispered automatically, his eyes roaming thoughtfully, stopping on the half-buried crossbow bolt in the ceiling above her head.

She placed her glass in the sink, a ring of orange juice at the bottom, darkening with blood from a cut on her knuckles. She kept her right hand and arm pressed to her side, body turned toward her sword.

She gave him half a shrug. “Rumor is a capricious friend.”

Gregor’s eyes crinkled in suspicion.

“But it can be a powerful ally. I let them go so that they may talk. Their story will get around the City in a matter of days.”

Gregor sighed. His daughter was in there somewhere, but that was the Wreath-wearer talking.

Gregor’s thoughts drifted to Kassandra’s mother, Ampharete, the prior wearer, who had been just like this, voices of past wearers in her head, always plotting, a princess of the royal house. She had been in exile, hiding from her father, coming north with Zypheria and her personal guards to the Rexenor fortress deep in the North Atlantic.

Gregor pointed at her with the rolled-up piece of scale armor. “The king knows you exist and his opinion sways everyone else.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“Why reveal yourself to all the Seaborn now? Tharsaleos controls the ears of every listener. He will make you the enemy.”

She smiled happily. “I’m counting on precisely that.”

Gregor waited for an elaboration, but Kassandra’s eyes went unfocused, wandering off somewhere in her head. He watched her pull a memory, a painful thought inside. The expression disappeared from her face.

“Kassandra.” He called her back, and then held a hand up in appeal, the strip of

armor rattling in the other. “You scare me when you’re like this.”

Pretend not to know what he’s talking about. She lifted her brows and gave him a questioning stare. “Like what?”

“You are like...As if you’re already...”

Kassandra frowned. It wasn’t like him to stammer. The Dosianax soldiers getting through the gate had really shaken him.

Gregor gestured with a half-folded hand, trying to hold on to an idea that was delicate and at the same time caustic. “You’re cold. You fight alone. It’s as if you believe you’re indestructible. You’re like...” His voice trailed off. Gregor dropped his hands, got a better grip on one of the rails, and gave his daughter a deeply-concerned-father look, adding one twitching eyebrow to show his uncertainty about something.

She’d seen the look before. Reading it as clear as if he’d brought the accusation to his tongue, Kassandra’s right hand went reflexively into a fist. She tugged in a breath, deep enough to hurt, and prepared to shout. She held back, furious words burning in her throat. She coughed to cover the process of stuffing her anger inside.

“I am not...” She spoke evenly, in a hard, controlled voice. “I am not like my grandfather.”

Gregor said nothing, but it was a nothing so thick it hung in the air with the words: *If you’re like this at your age, you have the potential to be worse than the king.*

That was grounds for letting the urge to yell off its leash. “How dare you! He killed my mother, your wife.”

“He sent the dead army to destroy House Rexenor.” His voice trembled. “Not to kill Ampharete.”

Her face scrunched into an indignant snarl. “That’s Lady Ampharete. And she died because of it.” Kassandra waved away his response. “Tharsaleos killed your friends, your family, your father, my grandmother Queen Pythias—his own wife.” She screamed at him. “I am not Tharsaleos!”

In her head, Kassandra heard her mother’s angry questions, followed by another woman’s snobbish voice: *Is your sword handy, dear? If that Rexenor doesn’t know his place...why not cut off his—*

“Shut the hell up, Andromache!” Kassandra’s fists went white and a stab of agony shot through her ribs on the right side. “Or I’ll come in there and put you to sleep myself.”

She blinked, held her eyes closed a few seconds, and then grabbed the counter to keep her balance. Something in her head woke, a cold bullying motion, dizziness with fingers that touched her thoughts, smooth prodding fingers, smooth like saliva.

She shook it off.

Gregor’s eyes widened and his mouth came close to a grim smile. “Queen Andromache agrees with me?”

Kassandra’s eyes swiveled to her father, focusing. She shook her head. “No. She just thinks you ought to be polite to your daughter.”

Gregor dropped his shoulders and wheeled toward the dark stairs, coiling the scrap of armor tighter in his fist. “Can you do something to protect the grotto entrance? We obviously need more than the gate if they can get through the lock.”

She nodded, her eyes going to squints of pain. “After I rest I’ll go down and summon Ochleros.”

Gregor let a minute pass, studying the green scaly armor, the expression on his face souring even more. He recognized their shape and color, the kind worn by the old Rexenor enemies, House Dosianax—the king’s house warriors. Dosianax was the Sparta of the Seaborn, rarely defeated, and only then by death. His neck went prickly at the thought of his daughter doing something to make them flee.

Gregor gave her a pleading look. “You don’t realize how much you scare me when you act like this.”

She stared back at him, silent for ten long seconds, no expression on her face. Suddenly she was too weary to pretend, and she ignored the directives in her head.

“How do you think I feel?” She was annoyed that he thought he had any idea what her life was like. “I have Andromache teaching me to kill when she’s not bickering with Praxinos about turning me into a witch. I talk with sea demons two or three times a week; without a lot of trouble I can control half an ocean.” Her voice went bitter. “I can kill a man with a teaspoon of water.”

As if to demonstrate this, Cassandra swung her left hand over her shoulder, curled two fingers, tapped a rhythm into her palm, and sang a command. The kitchen faucet flipped up and water jetted from the tap into the drain. In one sliding motion, she brought her hand forward, pointing at her father. A disk of water shot at Gregor from the stream, flattening with stiff, jagged teeth like a saw blade of ice.

Kassandra was halfway through the command to stop its motion when Gregor—much quicker than she’d anticipated—did something with one hand, deflecting the blade to the side. It flipped vertical and went four inches into the wall above the basement stairs, a hand’s width from the edge of a framed Little Mermaid movie poster.

Kassandra fixed her eyes on her father admiringly. Even with his power waning, he still had it, although he rarely let it surface. He had grown up in the fortress of House Rexenor and had been taught by a student of that famous old Rexenor mage, Strates Unwinder.

Gregor straightened out of his defensive stance, and Cassandra went on as if nothing had happened, casually stopping the flow of water into the kitchen sink with another gesture.

She brought her hand up and touched her forehead.

“You don’t know what it’s like in here.” Her voice was thin and angry, clipping the ends off the words.

She caught herself tightening up all her muscles, breathing hard through her teeth, but didn’t do anything to slow her anger.

“You have no idea. It’s every second of every day of my life.” She tapped her temple, glaring. “Never being able to hide. Someone always looking over my fucking shoulder. They were all in here the first time I kissed a boy—telling me I was doing it wrong. They were all in here advising me when I had my first period, a committee wondering what surface women did, with running commentary as I sat in the bathroom and read them the damn Tampax directions.”

She gripped her forehead in one hand and the pain made her voice go rough. “I have this thing in here that I cannot stop. I have three full time—”

Four, said a man’s eely smooth voice in her head.

Kassandra jumped, grabbing the kitchen counter to keep her feet. “Who the hell are you?”

Not quite the reception I had anticipated. The man was slightly put out. *I am King Eupheron.*

“Eupheron.” She had been warned about this one already. “Pleasure. Now, if you’ll shut up for a moment, I’m in the middle of a conversation.”

She ignored the follow-up grumbling from all four Wreath-wearers, waving at her father to continue the discussion, anything to hold off the voices in her head.

Gregor swallowed dryly and let his gaze roam over the blood-covered floor. “Do you know what King Tharsaleos will do to those men when they return without me...or you?”

“There was no other way.”

“There might have been.”

“They came to take you, probably kill you, and they’ll get what they deserve.”

He looked at her pityingly. “Don’t you understand? The king will not stop with them. Can’t you fight it? Look what it’s done to you, Cassandra. You are...” She watched his expression change, fascinated as he struggled for a word to describe her. “Ruthless.”

She jutted her chin at him, retort ready. “And what did twelve years in the King’s prisons do to you?” Cassandra bit down hard, holding her mouth steady, opening it only enough to say, “You are soft.”

She had to suppress something inside that told her to use the word, “Weak.”

He mimicked her, clamped his mouth shut, grinding his teeth, holding in whatever he was about to shout back at her. He swallowed it, took in a breath, and went on in a forced calm. “It’s a pity you couldn’t have persuaded them to—”

“With crossbow bolts coming at me and the points of their spears in my face, I didn’t have time for pity.”

“Time for cruelty, time for calculating their destruction?”

She glanced down at her feet and moved one to cover blood pooling on the floor, and then her eyes hit his eyes. They hit him hard and forced him to back up a step.

She pointed an accusing finger at him. “I am an Alkimides. The throne does not belong to that murderer.” She held in the next line of thought, which told her that she was also of House Dosianax, her grandfather’s family.

“You are Rexenor, also.”

Kassandra winced, took in a slow shuddery breath, and let it out. Her own voice in her head commanded her. *Respond harshly. Follow with an apology to soften his mood. You do not have time for this.*

“It is in my name. How am I allowed to forget your great-great-grandfather?” That had the right amount of sourness and she made a face to show that she regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth. “I didn’t mean to say it like that. I’m sorry. Lord Kassander is one of my favorite ancestors. He was a great man.”

Gregor lifted his head and his eyes held hers, black as the abyss with a thin roiling ring of blue that flowed through the irises. She blinked and focused on him, and he clenched his jaw with the effort it took to keep them there.

He dropped his shoulders and gave up his offensive. “You are fearless—whether that is always good, I do not know. But I am wrong. I didn’t mean to imply that you act like King Tharsaleos.”

She gave him a curt bow. Gregor rubbed away a tear and looked at her. “Promise me you will be careful. It’s just...I don’t understand you. I think I understand Jill. I understand Nicole to some degree. Your whole life is secret. You act as if you are in this alone, as if you are invincible.”

“I’m never alone, father. I’m not allowed to be. Invincible?” Cassandra smiled thinly. “I was unaware that that was how you perceived my actions. I assure you that I do not think that.”

She grabbed her sword off the kitchen island, slamming it into the scabbard that stuck out from her back over her left hip. “Now, please call Zypheria. She’s probably down at the beach. Tell her to meet me in my room.”

Kassandra waited for her father to leave before she let the armor dissolve off her body. Her sword vanished with it.

She gasped as if she had been holding her breath for the last ten minutes. The right side of her shirt was sliced open from her armpit to her hip and blood soaked the thin cotton in dark streaks across her back.

She turned, clutching at the kitchen counter for support. She reached into the narrow side sink where they usually washed vegetables, and picked up a long thin bolt—as long as her forearm—with a deadly black tip. Her own blood coated the shaft. It was slick on

her fingers and clotting in the spines of the fletching.

CHAPTER NINE

RECOVERY

King Eupheron was the only Wreath-wearer with two bleeds, the product of an early attempt to mend the relationship between the two mightiest Seaborn houses, Alkimides and Telkhines. The result could not have gone more wrong. Eupheron's mother, the Alkimides Queen Kleonike (and Wreath-wearer) married a lord of the Telkhines, Timasitheos. Queen Kleonike was reviled as "The Whore" by all Alkimides for producing offspring with the enemy. The Telkhines could not trust Timasitheos for marrying a usurper, and Eupheron was caught between the hatred of two powerful houses. With two bleeds, one each from his father and mother, he was the most powerful of the Wreath-wearers, and marked from the beginning as unbalanced.

—Michael Henderson, *Seaborn History*

Zypheria's scowl deepened as she pressed one of the good white bath towels against Cassandra's side, soaking up blood. A lump of bone and muscle along the ribs stuck up where the bolt had pierced her. Cassandra's torn and bloody shirt lay on the floor with her bra. She yelped when Zypheria's fingers tugged at the lip of skin, pulling it and the meaty tissue underneath smooth.

The wound edge lifted with a fresh surge of blood, and Zypheria's eyes narrowed and grew more intense, one hand working the towel over the wound to keep it closed.

"You have so much strength, milady. Only so much blood to lose. I will work the bone and sew this up." She frowned. "It is a shame that lying whore's son of a king isn't awake. Greatest *rhapsôides*. He could do things with wounds and scars that none of the other wearers could."

Kassandra tilted her head up, gulping for air. She had her face buried in her pillow to muffle the screaming. Her voice was dry. "King Eupheron?"

Yes, Lady Cassandra?

Zypheria looked warmly down at her. "He could fix the webbing on your hands."

She gave Zypheria a weak mischievous smile. "The lying whore's son is awake. He woke a little while ago."

Lovely. That can only mean that there is an Alkimides here with us, Cassandra—aside from you.

"Zypheria is here."

Charming Zypheria! Please give her a paidariôn from me.

Kassandra tried to prop herself up on one elbow and failed, her eyelids fluttering with the pain. She touched Zypheria on the shoulder and whispered, "Lean closer."

She kissed her mother's ex-bodyguard and friend on the cheek, and felt the woman jump under her lips. Zypheria's hair smelled faintly of mint. Her skin was cool and smooth, browned by the sun, and when she drew back, Kassandra saw the hairline scar along her cheek that ran to her ear, the faded badge from a childhood fight with one of her brothers, which she undoubtedly won.

Zypheria bowed her head, her eyes filling with tears. "Milady, please."

Kassandra looked up at the toughest woman she knew and, seeing her

uncomfortable, grinned as wide as the sea. “*Charming Zypheria—that wasn’t from me, it was King Eupheron.*”

Zypheria tried to hold her mouth steady, but the ends tilted into a smirk, and then she gave up, shaking her head. She looked down at Cassandra and more tears poured from her eyes. “Charming, indeed.”

Charming and... Eupheron’s voice went high in shock. *Old!*

Eupheron! said Praxinos archly, his sensibilities offended. *By my calculation, Zypheria can be no more than thirty-eight years.*

Kassandra snapped her head back into her pillow, blinking. “How are you doing that?”

I am the only Wreath-wearer who can see through your eyes—and not much clearer than a tottering old man—but I’ve never been able to do it without some discomfort to the current wearer. You will get used to it. Toughen up. No one likes a weakling.

Enough! Andromache shouted and for ten seconds, there was silence in Cassandra’s head. *Kassandra is...* It was unusual to hear diffidence in Andromache’s voice. *She is only...She needs your help, Eupheron. She is injured. A bolt went through her armor on the right side and broke at least one rib. She is bleeding.* Andromache suddenly found her resolve. *Do something, you shit-eating malignity!*

Ah, there you are, great Queen Andromache. Your stuttering and indecision puzzled me. Is it not interesting how much of a person is made up entirely of words, and completed by them, and that without their words they become nearly invisible? I swear I did not recognize you without your bitter tongue and your unsocial, frigid, and base disposition. I thought for a moment that some gentle and feeble princess like Ampharete had stirred from sleep to torment me. Kassandra felt him grinning inside her head.

Longevity, Praxinos reminded. *Kassandra’s bleeding.*

Eupheron choked. *That hurt! Androm—Why it’s Ampharete! I count you among my favorites of the wearers, but I did not expect to see you again for a century.*

Liar. Help my daughter.

Your daughter? Oh, fine! Did somebody say something about a crossbow bolt injury?

Andromache’s voice was low and cold. *Call me “somebody” again, and I’ll put out your eyes. Now, make yourself useful.*

Eupheron seemed to have no capacity for pausing or pondering, only acting. He began by reciting an *epaiodê* to stanch the flow of blood. *Ah, here we are. Right side, broken bones.*

Kassandra, too weak to protest, sank into her pillow and waited for Eupheron’s ministrations. He was inside her body in seconds, not filling her arms and legs, but like a car mechanic sticking his head under the hood. Eupheron evaluated the integrity of her rib cage from the inside, fingering the bones until he found two that were cracked and one with a splintery break.

I can mend bone and arrange the torn skin to heal without scarring. You have lost too much blood to think about performing any daring acts of war in the near future. We must feed you.

“Very good.” Kassandra breathed the words, just loud enough to hear. “I do not plan to land myself in another combat situation for another five, perhaps six days.” Zypheria gave her a reproachful scowl. “Plenty of time to regain my strength. Zypheria, can you bring up some orange juice and a PB-and-J? Extra peanut butter.”

“Milady,” said Zypheria with her lips turned down in disgust and left the room.

Kassandra closed her eyes and pulled her knees up. She lay on her left side, her arms

folded up around her face, her fingers clawing at her pillow as Eupheron kneaded her skin from the inside. He packed something that felt like oozing hot clay against her bone, stitching the fragments back into a whole.

Her face tightened but she didn't make a noise as Eupheron's fingers worked the wound closed then sealed it. He did something with fire that felt as if he was touching her skin with a red-hot wire, and she sucked in a breath every time it seared her. He used smaller and smaller points of burning until it felt as he was using hot needles.

Rest now, and I will watch the progress of your healing. Eupheron let a beat slip by. *May I ask you a question or two, nothing distressing?*

"Okay..." She dragged out the last syllable, already suspicious.

Oh-kay? There are eccentricities in your speech I have heard before. You must tell me how have you come to acquire such a deep command of the surfacer argot, and why you insist on using it with me.

Kassandra turned the question over in a quieter part of her head. "I am one."

A surfacer? Ridiculous. You are the Wreath-wearer, the Alkimides princess, you belong in the oceans.

"I grew up in Nebraska, about as far from the ocean as my grandfather could send me."

Eupheron's voice went sour. *I have to see this with my own—your own eyes. Swim to the nearest mirror. What is Neb-raskah?*

"I don't need to swim. I'm in my room." Kassandra grabbed her desk to steady her legs, staggered to the far wall, and shut her bedroom door. A full-length mirror hung on the back and she stepped in front of it.

Eupheron was silent a moment, but it was a disappointed silence. *How old are you? How did you end up on the surface, and why did you not return to the sea? Who butchered your hands?*

Kassandra folded her arms over her chest and curled her hands into fists, hiding the scarring, brown seams that lined the skin between her fingers. She hadn't felt embarrassed about them for a couple years, but the disgust in his voice brought the shame to the surface. "My grandfather had the webbing cut away when I was a year old, just before he sent me to St. Clement's—some place in Nebraska. I didn't even know I had a connection to the sea. I grew up getting the shit kicked out of me by my governess. I'm almost twenty."

You're too pale. Your hair—holy Thaumoi! It is beyond repair. Where are we?

"In my room, in my house, in North Hampton, New Hampshire."

Above the waves?

"Above the waves."

And the light? Why is this room so bright?

"That is Helios. True Helios. The evening sun coming through the windows."

Eupheron's voice was hard and angry. *Why have you tolerated this?*

Kassandra held her reply because she didn't know if he was asking her or the other wearers. Then she answered before they could. "I wear the gift of the sea's lord. It is my decision to remain here. I go in the ocean every day. The Atlantic is across the boulevard from my father's house, but this is my home."

For now.

She nodded. "For now. I will return to the Nine-cities when I have the means to take the throne from my grandfather."

That appeared to satisfy Eupheron, because he returned to criticizing her hair and the rest of her. *Your eyes are very dark. Did you get those from your Rexenor side—no those are from Kallixene, are they not?*

Kassandra's mother shifted angrily inside her head. *Speak ill of my daughter again,*

and I will—

What a uniformly delightful girl! His voice was bright and cheery, without a hint of mockery.

The door swung in. It was Zypheria with a plate of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a glass of orange juice; when she saw Cassandra out of bed, she added a pained expression to her serious face.

Kassandra stepped out of the way, leaning heavily against the wall, laughing, “Eupheron the Liar. Say it. I am a freak fish out of water. I’m the freakish granddaughter of a murdering king.”

Any other faults?

Kassandra took Zypheria’s arm, and sat down gently on her bed, trying not to disturb the freshly healed skin and bone on her side. She slid up against her desk, and took a big bite of one of the sandwiches, avoiding Zypheria’s incredulous stare.

She is headstrong.

“Headstrong is good, Andromache,” said Cassandra through a jaw-locking, roof-of-the-mouth-clinging wad of peanut butter. Zypheria groaned, loudly this time, wondering how Cassandra could stomach the nasty thick brown paste.

Kassandra nodded at her. “This is perfect, Zypheria. Thanks.”

And she’s often foolish.

“When am I foolish?”

How foolish, Ampharete? Tell me.

Kassandra persuaded four Naiads and what remains of House Rexenor—a handful of warriors led by Lady Kallixene—to make a stand against the Olethren at that school in Nebraska.

Eupheron made a choking sound. Cassandra coughed, swallowing some of the orange juice wrong. It burned in her throat—and kept on burning. She coughed again.

Two hundred and forty thousand of the drowned dead in the King’s army.

That many?

Lady Cassandra went to their fortress before they marched and she counted them.

Beyond foolish!

Kassandra swallowed. The orange juice was trying to strangle her, and her throat tightened around her words. “The freezing storm worked. Their bones were full of water that turned to slush.” She took a bite of her sandwich, thinking that something less acidic in her throat might help.

How did you escape the Olethren? They do not cease until everything is dead.

She destroyed them, Eupheron.

Tell him, said Ampharete.

Kassandra chewed through peanut butter, jam and bread, nearly gagging on it. “When water freezes, it expands. This is science—physics of water. Parresia, Limnoria, Helodes and Olivia—they’re Naiads—made an ice storm for me, and when me and Ephor—”

Her voice stopped. She dropped her sandwich, took in a breath and released it in a choppy wheeze that headed right into sobbing, all of the muscle contractions and sniffing nose, but without tears.

Me and who?

Ephoros, said Andromache sadly.

She is bold, summoning the king of the sea daimones. I do not understand the purpose of the freezing storm, but Ephoros, the wonderful old demon, made it all work, did he?

“Eph—Ephoros is dead,” whispered Cassandra. “He died in order to save his brother—to save me. He fought the king and took back the book my father created.”

He is immortal. Do not make light of such a thing.

“I misunderstood that part as well. Immortal does not mean you *cannot* die.”

Or do not want to, said Ampharete in a painfully sad whisper.

“Ephoros helped me with the last of his life. My grandfather’s mistake was to command the army to fight above the waves. The dead could not stop the water when it froze. It expanded inside their bones and shattered them. All of them.”

The entire army of the dead, gone? No more?

Kassandra laughed weakly and a wave of dizziness roared through her head. “I am not The Liar.”

All four of the wearers in her head went still. Kassandra heard her heart beat a hundred times, and the silence hurt.

Eupheron broke it. *Oh-kay. Is that how it is said?*

Praxinos and Ampharete spoke excitedly. *Tell us if it worked.*

Give me a moment, said Eupheron. *Most likely. Someone so young plotting the destruction of an army which the lords of the Telkhines could not defeat? Freak, did you say? Twenty years? Off of whom are you bleeding, Lady Kassandra?*

Kassandra frowned. She knew a little about the bleeds of power from parent to child, but it sounded as if he was talking about something else.

You are gathering the power from your Rexenor father. I can see that. You gain what he loses.

“Are you insulting me?” Kassandra winced as something sharp poked around deep in her skull.

Never! Eupheron said in a distracted voice. *Would not dream of it. You described yourself as a freak and oh, Kassandra, you truly are a freak of the most extreme kind.*

Eupheron! It was her mother’s angry voice.

I am not speaking of her hideously disfigured hands, madam, but of the bleeding.

Praxinos’ voice was cautious. *Did it work?*

“Speak to me! Do not discuss this as if I’m not in the room—or in my own head. Did what work?”

Eupheron didn’t miss a stroke. *Kassandra, you are also bleeding off your grandmother of House Megalesios.*

“Lady Kallixene? Ouch!”

Eupheron jabbed into corners of her brain she didn’t know she had, tracing lines of power.

“Stop it now!”

That is what we had hoped for, said Ampharete quietly. *Are you sure she is taking from both of them?*

“Mother, what does that mean? Taking from both?”

Not just two, Ampharete! He was shouting now, his voice a muffled echo in her mind, as if he’d crawled into the ventilation system and had to raise his voice to be heard. *Kassandra, you are also bleeding off an Alkimides source, probably that traitorous would-be Queen Isothemis.*

“What are you talking about? No one can have more than two bleeds.”

Kassandra. It was Ampharete’s serious listen-to-your-mother voice. *Do not, under any circumstances, speak of this to your father—or anyone.*

“Of what?” She had a vague notion of the subject, something that the Seaborn rarely spoke of, even among relatives or close friends. “Bleeds of power?”

You must not tell anyone, said Praxinos gravely.

She was getting dizzy. “Answer me!”

Hysterical laughter burst from Eupheron, but all she felt from Praxinos, Andromache, and Ampharete was stunned silence.

Oh, this is exquisite! I am the only Wreath-wearer with two bleeds and that is because my father was pure Telkhines. No other has had two, and I know of no other among the Seaborn with more than two. Did not know this was even possible.

Kassandra clawed at her desk, the blood loss catching up to her. Her face was bone white. Her fingers loosened, and the plate with half a sandwich crashed to the floor. Zypheria jumped to her side, grabbing her by the arm to stop her from falling off the bed.

Kassandra's eyes went unfocused. Her lips, nearly the same color as the skin around them, drew back, baring her teeth. "Eupheron! *Proktos!* Tell me now!"

Kassandra, you dear girl, you are also bleeding off your Dosianax grandfather, King Tharsaleos. Oh, I wish I could see his face. What would I not give to see that? He knows it's slipping from him, and there's nothing he can do about it.

He can kill you, muttered Andromache.

Oh, Kassandra, you have made me the happiest man in the sea! Eupheron's cheering voice swam numbingly through Kassandra's head, and she gave Zypheria one pleading look. "Make it stop." Her voice was barely audible.

She fell into a tight curl on her bed, her body shaking feverishly. She squeezed her eyes shut and shoved her hands against her ears.

Zypheria hesitated over the decision to tell Lord Gregor that his daughter needed a doctor, and then threw her arms around her, shuddering with her own inner pain, tears streaming down her face onto Kassandra's bare back. Her lips trembled with soft words, the salt of her tears on her tongue.

"Sleep, Kassandra. Everything will be fine, my baby girl. I am here." She forced her eyes open, blinking through the tears, struggling to focus on something in the outside world, because when she closed them, the same memory haunted her, the stifled cry of a little girl with big dark eyes staring up at her, begging her governess to stop hurting her.

CHAPTER TEN

THE NIGHT WANDERERS

Slash the gullet of the neck, and let the blood of this sacrificial victim flow into the murky depths of the reeds as a drink for the lifeless. Call upon primeval Earth and chthonic Hermes, escort of the dead, and ask chthonic Zeus to send up the swarm of night-wanderers from the mouths of the river, from which this melancholy off-flow water, unfit for washing hands, is sent up by Stygian springs.

—Aeschylus, *Psychagogoi*, F273a

Aleximor floated a foot above the ocean's floor, staring down at a flat stretch of dark gray sand. The gloomy water closed in around him, but he didn't notice. He whispered something to himself. Corina didn't catch all of it, but it sounded like he had said the words, "broken bones."

He raised his left hand, palm up, and spread his fingers until the webbing went tight between them. Without turning his eyes away, he reached down and pulled out the dive knife.

He gripped the handle with his thumb against the back of the blade, and cut into Corina's hand, carving deep from the meaty bulge below the thumb, diagonally across his palm to the first knuckle of the little finger.

Blood gushed in the wake of the knife blade, dark thick and red. Corina felt the pain, but the brightness of her blood startled her. When she'd cut her right hand on the cave's rocky walls, her eyes weren't capable of seeing color at that depth. It had looked like strips of black ribbon in the water.

Aleximor let his eyes stray to the horizon of sand. There was something reddish brown crawling across the floor close to him, but it was blurry, and he didn't appear to notice it. Corina urged his neck to swivel. Nothing happened. He appeared to know exactly what he was doing, and so Corina followed him in ignoring it. *It's probably a crab.*

Aleximor spun in the opposite direction, away from the reddish shape, and his eyes dropped to a soft swirling movement at his feet. He kicked and circled a small depression that had formed. The gray fluid sand eroded under clawing fingers.

Something was digging out.

"Gather to me," he said in a clear commanding voice. "To each of you, *apneumeones*, I say I bind your *psyche*, your tongue, your *thumos*, your hands, your *nous* in obedience to me. I call any who have not tasted Lethe."

He curled into something close to a sitting position while he floated a few meters off the sandy floor.

Aleximor drew a series of deep breaths to calm himself, and closed his eyes, singing softly, "a door into the pit of Erebus where dark fears darkness" and how he "possessed the secret that keeps defiled Persephone under the world."

Corina couldn't imagine that these words contained anything but some ritual meaning for him, maybe they calmed him down in preparation for some further step. He had already cut open her hand, spilling her blood into the currents.

His meditative state caused a flood of strange thoughts and knowledge to wash over

Corina's mind, words in his language, *nekuomanteion* meant a place for necromancy, a doorway to death, a place for raising or communicating with the dead. Another word, *katabasion*, was the path a *goês*—a sorcerer—followed down into death. Corina imagined a long dimly lit stone stairway and the steps crumbled to sand behind her feet. The dead were brought toward life, pulling the living sorcerer closer to death. Only the *goês* who achieved something like living-death could hope to draw the dead entirely into the living world without losing his footing and falling into death.

Then he called on the Erratic One, Akastê—she who owned the souls of the drowned.

Aleximor did something with her knife, brought it above her head, but with her eyes closed, she couldn't tell what it was. He went still for a moment and then sang, "I break the wall of the Moiriai, and make my offer to the hater of life, lady without mercy, Akastê. Bitter blood untasted. Let not this nor my challenge go unheeded. The wall thins, pass to me the psychai of the five whose flesh and bone are buried in the ocean floor, clinging to the worm-eaten ribs of the ship that bore them courageously from Iberia."

A bright light flared in front of him, orange and red like roaring flames. It radiated through his eyelids, dying after a moment to an ember's glow. He opened his eyes and slid Corina's knife into its sheath.

A rippling line of fire burned in the dark water, running from the sand to forty feet above Aleximor, as if someone had cut a long thin line in this reality and into another at a volcano's heart.

A voice as cold as the depths of the sea rumbled through the opening, a woman's low voice. "No introduction, young demander? What do you call yourself? Come closer."

Aleximor stiffened in fear. He kicked, an uncontrollable spasm. He released a breath, drew another one, and answered in a commanding tone, "Give me the names of the five, and I will close this door. Erratic One, I know you and your tricks," he added as if that added weight to his demands. "That is enough."

Corina's thought tumbled down a treacherous slope carved out by fear. They stopped on this last point. He knew the thing behind the line of fire, but he didn't want the speaker to know his name.

Aleximor! Corina screamed it without another thought. If the thing behind the door could hear her, maybe it could take him and leave her behind.

Please, help me. His name's Aleximor.

Corina felt Aleximor tighten his jaw, as if he feared that her shouting thoughts would reach his lips.

So, he can hear me clearly.

His eyes unfocused. He concentrated inward on her, and she felt him searching. Corina didn't know how to flee inside her own head, but the fear of him catching her was tempered by the feeling of rocks digging into her bare feet. There was something familiar about the pain of hard sea-rounded boulders, firm ground under her, even though Aleximor had not set her feet down on the floor. She felt him looking at her, but across some gulf that he could not cross. Then his eyes shot to the glowing line in the water.

Corina's focus snapped back to her surroundings. She heard the same deep woman's voice. "Swept from the deck of their ship by a storm, which soon broke against the waves and these five clung to its pieces all the way to the bottom. They are Porfirio, Cordareo, Damas and Alois. The fifth, Macario, is beyond. He has sworn his oath, and will never rise to your command. You may have their life's power as you have complied with the forms laid down by the Lord of the Sea."

"Surnames," Aleximor demanded.

"I offer you enough. You must..." Her voice broke off.

Corina felt Aleximor go cold under the wetsuit.

Akastê said, “Another’s blood I taste. I have no memory of it. Your voice has changed, but I know it, though I have not heard it recently. Come inside, I would speak with you.”

Aleximor’s hands went to claws, some kind of defensive position. He screamed a long string of words, something about sealing and darkness.

Corina’s sense of translation failed her when he spoke rapidly, and it was distracting to hear her own shrieking voice.

The line of fire, the doorway, burned bright then went black with a hiss, like water thrown on a campfire.

The voice of the one beyond it crackled angrily through the closing seam. “You are the *nekuomantis*, Alexim—”

The doorway closed, and Aleximor drifted in the dark, stunned into silence. He slumped forward, breathing like an enraged ox—which was also strange since he managed to do it with Corina’s body. He was moving facial muscles she didn’t know she had.

He flipped both his hands in front of him. The deep gouge in the left was already closing up, a bloodless pale lip of skin running from the lower edge of the palm to the top right corner. He focused on the shreds of roughly torn skin in his right hand. His fingers trembled, and Corina sensed both fear and anger.

He had given himself the name, Aleximor, but it wasn’t the first time he had taken a name.

While Aleximor drifted in weariness, staring at his hands, Corina’s feeling of despair returned stronger. She knew his real name. What could she do with it? It gained her nothing. What would that thing beyond the line of fire have done with him?

Corina played with one of the new words she had learned, *nekuomantis*, which meant something like “prophet of the dead.”

The feelings, the knowledge, the new words affected her in a strange way. A whole world opened up inside her soul. Her first attempt at identifying the feeling began with the assertion: *There are mountains in my mind*. This didn’t sound right, but that’s what she felt, a force wrenching her thoughts, as if they all rode along in a car and could lean back against gravity and inertia when rolling down a steep slope. *There is terrain in my soul. Thoughts have momentum*. There was something right about this, but she couldn’t pin it down or confirm it.

Aleximor tilted his head back, let out a long breath and blinked forcefully as if he had trouble staying awake. He looked over at the four dead men who had dug their way out of their tombs beneath the ocean’s floor.

They were nothing but rot-streaked bones and a few threads of tendon. Some kind of life force, given to each by the thing behind the door, burned in them and kept them together. One wore armor, a corroded shell of blackened metal that hung from his shoulder bones on broken strips of rust. It looked like something the Spanish had worn in the 1500s. He was a conquistador. He’d lost his helmet, but he still had what was left of a long skinny sword.

The four of them stood shoulder to shoulder, facing outward, on bones that shouldn’t have been able to hold them up. Aleximor circled them in the water.

They didn’t move, but the one in armor tilted his skull to follow Aleximor. The pale glow of yellow fire beamed from empty sockets of bone.

“Release me,” he begged with a thin ragged voice. “And I will serve you on death’s bor—” His voice cracked and faded. “—der.”

A weary smile stretched along Aleximor’s lips. His right hand slid down Corina’s leg to the knife. He fumbled with the snaps and tugged the blade free.

The faces of the skulls turned to him, no means of expressing feelings remained in the

threads of tissue and tendon. Aleximor kicked to position himself above the four. He started with the one named Porfirio, grabbing the Spaniard by the forehead, working the tip of the knife into the back of the skull. The blade punched through old bone. Aleximor twisted the blade and in one smooth motion, brought out a thumbnail-sized chunk of sea-rotted skull. He slid the blade back in its sheath and jammed the piece of Porfirio into Corina's water-tight pouch.

Without a word he performed the same bone-taking ritual on the others. Finished, he circled them like a predator. The hollows of their eyes followed him.

"You four, bound to me through the grudge-holding one's consent. I command you to find and guard my old stronghold. You will wait for me there."

The dead did not answer. Each one shuffled in the sand so that they faced each other, expecting further instruction.

Aleximor sang softly about the dark oceans. His new voice sounded less like her old one. Corina could hold a note, and sing well, but Aleximor created things with his voice. The sound swirled around him, a current of light spiraling in the heavy dark fluid. His voice went higher, and more currents joined the first. They came together between the four dead Spaniards. A dark glistening globe expanded in the middle of the group with the currents feeding it like umbilical cords.

A mountainous scene formed in the globe, dark and jagged against a black night. There were no stars, and Corina realized she must be looking at the bottom of the ocean somewhere else.

The view inside the globe moved closer to the underwater mountain range, like a camera mounted on a submarine. The speed increased. The mountains drew nearer. The moving scene tilted left a little and passed between a spine of crumbling black hills and sheer cliffs.

Aleximor's voice rose above the currents, directing the path they followed in the globe. He spoke of returning along the route taken by Magellan around the cape at the southern tip of South America.

Corina watched without thinking, wondering where this was leading. They moved into the Atlantic Ocean and headed directly north. She passed massifs and deepwater vents that belched boiling clouds of chemical blackness; she skirted sheer drops into the abyss, and crossed endless flats of miles-deep desert.

Aleximor's whispering told them to pass the Great City of the Seaborn, the Nine-cities. A pale blue glow on the seafloor's horizon was an entire city...*of others like him?*

Corina's thoughts begged for a better look, but the scene passed by.

The path led further north then turned west into a range of serrated rock that rose thousands of feet above the plain. These were just the foothills to distant mountains that cut through the dark in steep zigzags.

She felt Aleximor tense up. They were nearly there. The scene stopped high in the mountains, along a ledge that jutted from a cliff's vertical face. Aleximor whispered a long string of noise. She couldn't understand it. It could have been one long word, or a bunch of them run together.

A key.

The rock wall before them dissolved into a cave mouth wide enough to drive a truck through. The glow of fire or molten rock flickered against the cut and polished walls.

The movie ended, and jarred Corina's thoughts back to the Pacific and inside the body she now shared with a four-hundred year old sorcerer.

Aleximor turned his eyes to the four dead he had raised, pointed south with his arm stretched out. She could just see her metallic blue fingernail polish on the index finger.

"Go."

He had spent every ounce of energy opening the door, summoning the powers behind it, animating four of the dead, and feeding them their directions.

This body was so foreign and he was so tired, he could barely focus his eyes, but he managed to push the lids up and keep them on the four dead Spaniards as they passed out of sight.

“Which one is your favorite, Corina Lairsey? You choose, and that will be the one in which I bind your soul.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DISPLEASED

Without approaching the nature of the power (magic) possessed by the Seaborn, let me discuss my meager understanding of the process by which the power “bleeds” from parent to child or grandchild. I will also put aside the apparent differences in the bleeds of power possessed by the nearly extinct House Telkhines, which contained the old royal line, some of whom could multiply their bleeds, passing it to all their children at once.
—Michael Henderson, notes

King Tharsaleos, Lord Dosianax, ruler of all the Seaborn, kicked to the arched ceiling of the city’s pan-assembly arena, making Stratolaos, his favorite cousin, swim the tall space to him.

The hall was wide enough for an army of a thousand to stand shoulder to shoulder in a single row. Tall men could stand, sole to shoulder, in a vertical line of two hundred, without reaching the arched ceiling. The kings and queens of the Seaborn had been crowned in the hall for thousands of years.

When Stratolaos reached the king, he back-kicked and curled into a bow. “Lord.”

Tharsaleos tilted his head back, glaring at the old soldier through narrowed lids. The glow from a hundred lights, set in an even row halfway up the walls, lit them from below and cast monstrous shadows over the painted ceiling. The lights glinted off the king’s crown, a gold circlet with a single tine in the middle and two segmented horns that spiraled back through his white hair on each side.

The glow of the lights slanted off the king’s armor of gold plates so thin and flexible they appeared to dissolve into one smooth sheet.

“I am saddened, Stratolaos.” He said the words with the appropriate amount of sympathy in his expression, then went back to glaring. One corner of his mouth twisted into a sly smile that disarmed those who’d never met him. Those who had, understood the king had never been sly in his life. Cruelly deceptive and secretive, yes, but sly was for amateurs and children. Tharsaleos appeared to have never been either.

On the rare occasion when smiling was required, he assented. He smiled, for instance, when he married his first wife—Queen Pythias of Alkimides, the Wreath-wearer—and again, years later, after commanding a trusted assassin to return with her pretty head.

Stratolaos bowed his head. “I am sorry, my—”

“I am displeased with you.” The king spoke right over the old soldier’s attempt at an apology, but without raising his voice. He paused and gave every indication he was waiting for Stratolaos to say something.

“She is the—”

“I am not, however, displeased with you or your men for failing against Cassandra Alkimides, the Wreath-wearer.”

A blurry layer of water haloed Stratolaos. He was sweating. King Tharsaleos waited patiently for the soldier to continue.

“Lord, she—”

“I am displeased you allowed your story to be told outside of my confidence. I depended on your secrecy, cousin.”

Stratolaos kept his eyes on the rows of stone benches over a thousand feet below him, determined to wait out the king if every statement he made was destined to be interrupted. He felt the effort to keep his arms at his sides, and not fold them obstinately.

Tharsaleos’ eyes widened at the old soldier’s childishness. “Do you waste my time? Report.”

Stratolaos looked up into the king’s very light eyes, almost gray with a yellow tinge. He was close enough to see flecks of gold in the irises, close enough to see that the king’s glare was as cold as the abyss.

“My lord, this woman—”

“All of the Nine-cities will soon know of my granddaughter’s existence and they will speak of the fact that she wears the gift of the Earth-encircler, that it has not been lost as we had all thought.”

“I will punish—”

“Of course you will, my dear cousin.” Tharsaleos waved dismissively and let his eyes stray to the painting above him on the ceiling, one of the Nereids killing something, another blowing a horn. “It will only be a matter of time before the inquisitive citizens of our great city connect the existence of the Wreath-wearer to the loss of the Olethren.”

The blurry layer around Stratolaos blossomed. “Loss?” He stumbled over the word. The king’s ancient army of the dead was over two hundred thousand strong. She was skilled with a sword and she had someone’s powerful bleed, but what could one girl do against an army that most immortals couldn’t stop?

“Do not bother your thoughts with it, Stratolaos.”

The old soldier bowed, flinching when the king said his name. Anger reeled raw inside Stratolaos, but he kept it there, showing nothing but a tightening around his mouth on the outside. The Wreath-wearer woman had done something to his mind. He feared hearing his own name.

“I have two more tasks for you.” The king waited for their eyes to meet. “Stratolaos.” He watched the man recoil with satisfaction and then continued. “The first involves the punishment you spoke of. I have nearly reached a decision on what is to be done. Return to your post and await my command. Speak to no one. Not even your wife.”

The king waved him away, and Stratolaos bowed again before kicking off, thinking—with a release of tension—that more than one task was a good sign.

The double thump of someone’s fist on the door reached King Tharsaleos’ ears and he looked up from a topographic and bathymetric map of New Hampshire, a wedge-shaped plot of land in the Americas with a very short coastline. One of the king’s fingers was in the middle of tracing a path through the soundings a few hundred meters off the coast.

“Come.”

Two of his guardsmen—two of the trusted Eight, *Oktoloi*—pushed the doors wide and swam to him. One bowed his head, and the other extended a pale box of intricately carved whalebone a little larger than the size of a man’s head.

The king folded the map over so his guards wouldn’t see what he had been studying, and made his way to them with one powerful kick.

“Well done, Sameramis, Lazoros.”

The king studied Sameramis for a moment, a handsome man with a young son. Sameramis had the common Alkimides sandy brown hair, long and unruly corkscrews to his shoulders, some of it bound in braids like most of the *Oktoloi*. Sameramis had pale green eyes, and a bleed off one parent gave him extraordinary archery skills. He could

pin a man's heart a thousand kicks away. Sameramis was the first among the eight, the most experienced. And Sameramis was the only Alkimides in the king's trusted Eight, a concession to the house that contained the royal line.

Tharsaleos motioned for them to approach, and then lifted the lid away and stared into the box.

"My favorite cousin, Stratolaos."

A man's face stared back, something like disappointment showed on the features, the clear gray eyes wide open, clearly dead. His long black hair had been hacked off in places, his nostrils cut, his ears shorn from his head.

"Well done. I have one more task for my dear cousin. Take him to the well of eels and let them feed." The king paused as if reconsidering. "Will the eels hunger after so small a meal, do you think, Sameramis?"

"They always hunger, milord."

"Yes, you are right. Feed them also with Stratolaos' wife and son."

An hour passed, and the king had gone back to his maps, drawing a path from the depths off the New England coast to the middle of the Wreath-wearer's yard. Then he summoned his war-bard.

He showed her the path on one map of the Atlantic Ocean's floor that continued on to the map of coastal New Hampshire. "Take me there." He jabbed his finger into a green stretch of the map right on the coast.

Theoxena followed the lines with her finger, humming softly to herself. She nodded, understanding what the king wanted from her, and swam across the room to get ready. "I have heard the story of the Wreath-wearer." Theoxena glanced over her shoulder, unwrapping her lyre from its case and plucking a few strings. "That she lives among the surfacers."

"Your ears are better than most," said King Tharsaleos. She was the war-bard—whose ears could be better at picking up the rumors and currents in the city?

"Not in this. I heard it from my daughter."

The king looked up from the maps to Theoxena, watching her cross the chamber with her lyre. "Which one?"

Theoxena's delicate fingers damped the strings. With a tone as sharp as jagged shark's teeth she said, "My youngest, Nikasia."

"Nikasia has your bleed, does she not?"

"She is young. She is not me yet, my *lord*."

"How quickly do the Kirkêlatides bleed?"

"Slowly." She plucked one note and turned her eyes on him, the irises a solid feral orange. "How quickly does a Dosianax bleed?"

He held his war-bard's eyes for a moment, tempted to ask her if she was threatening him. He had known Theoxena since she was a child, trusted her as much as he trusted anyone, but he still had to be careful. The Kirkêlatides—distant descendents of Circe—were deadly. Still, he distinctly heard "Would you care to find out...how quickly a Dosianax bleeds?" in the silence after her words.

"Queen Isothemis has given me two children, Theoxena." He forced his eyes to the map with some effort.

"Neither have your bleed, so I've heard." She tilted her head to the side with something dangerously close to pity. "Nor do they have your dear wife's bleed."

King Tharsaleos kicked up from the map table, enraged, pointing to the surface thousands of feet above him. "Get on with it! Show me this woman."

Theoxena strummed a chord playfully. "Your granddaughter?"

"You push too far, Kirkêlatides, always too far. Do not play with me, wife of

Epandros!”

One of the lyre’s strings went sour and snapped with a flower of blood from Theoxena’s fingers. At the mention of her dead husband’s name, she curled into a shuddering wreck, her three black braids winding around her throat. Her fingers shook as she restrung the instrument from a spare in the case. The sea blurred around her eyes.

The king kicked to the ceiling of the chamber, glaring down on Theoxena. *I killed your beloved Epandros, poisoned him along with his seven companions.*

It was the king’s turn to express pity, but it was a condescending show, the same expression he’d worn years ago when he had lied to Theoxena—when he had told Theoxena that her husband, Epandros was dead, killed in an assassination attempt by an exiled prince, Gregor Rexenor.

The King’s face turned cruel, daring Theoxena to look up at him. *I commanded you to create eight war-horns—with voices that hate life. Who do you think blew those? Your dead husband, in my army, put one of those horns to his rotting lips, and blew the hard work of his own wife. Drink your tears, let them burn your throat, you stupid, stupid—*

“It is tuned, milord,” said Theoxena softly. “I am ready.”

Tharsaleos nodded curtly. “Let us see this Wreath-wearer, then.”

Theoxena wiped her eyes before studying the maps again, tracing the path drawn by the king across the Ocean into the shallows and above the waves to a point on the surface.

She plucked three strings, pulled two at the same time, and sang a few soft words about cleansing the location, darkening the room, sealing the walls from leaking sounds, a preparatory *epaiodê* for her song about seeing, a distant eye that watched a faraway place, the bright surface of the earth above the waves, reflecting the light into the chamber where she sang.

A disc the size of a face appeared in the water in front of King Tharsaleos, hardening into something that could be moved with strong hands, the morning sky above New Hampshire in its surface, firing a bolt of blinding blue against the king’s chest.

“Move the eye and you will find your Wreath-wearer, my lord,” sang Theoxena, her eyes showing more white than iris.

Tharsaleos curled his thick fingers around the lens. It was cold and rigid under his skin, like ice. He shoved it back, tilting the view forward and a field of green replaced the blue.

“Slowly,” said Theoxena, coming out of her trance and paddling to the king’s side.

Tharsaleos eased the lens back and...there was Cassandra in a flowery pale blue cotton dress, dancing in the middle of a long slope of rich green grass. She jumped, hanging in the air, defying the Earth’s gravity, her long legs spread, toes pointed. She dropped, did a short hop, and twirled, her arms looping above her head.

Theoxena looked puzzled. The young woman seemed fragile in her dress and her braids flying in the wind. “What is she doing?”

“That is a pirouette, I believe. Something from a dance the surfacers do.”

Theoxena reached for the lens, thinking something had gone wrong. “She is the one who defeated your Dosianax guard? That woman is the Wreath-wearer?”

Tharsaleos stared at Cassandra, puzzled by something himself. “Yes.”

“*She* defeated that killer, Stratolaos? By herself?”

The king turned to her. “Tell me everything you know of that.”

Theoxena scowled at him. “Only what has been said in the City. That Stratolaos was defeated by the Wreath-wearer, a woman from the surface. Nothing more.”

The king nodded grimly and turned back to the lens.

Kassandra sang to herself as she jumped and twirled. “...the honored sweet prophet

of summer for mortals. The Muses love you and gave you shrill song. Old age does not wear you down, wise one, earth-born one, lover of song. You cannot suffer, your flesh is bloodless, you are almost like the gods.”

“That is an old song,” said Theoxena.

Kassandra’s form drifted from view and Tharsaleos swiveled the disc right to capture her again. She had vanished. The wind off the Atlantic shook the branches of the pines, a warped watery view of a big white clapboard house in the background blurred past. Solid green filled the lens as the king shoved its view to the ground. He tugged it and the flare of True Helios filled the chamber, blinding the king and Theoxena.

“Where did she go?”

The king leaned into the elliptical window, grabbing more of it with both hands, jerking it so hard that light and color bled into each other. He held it firm, scanning the house, his nose almost touching the cold surface.

Kassandra’s face suddenly filled the window, one side of her smiling mouth lifted mischievously.

“No peeking, granddad!”

She pointed, the tip of her finger an inch from his face, wagging it, as if he was a naughty child. “You killed my grandmother, Pythias, but not before she had a daughter, Ampharete. You killed my mother, but not before she had me. I’m coming to kill you.” She stepped back, tapping her chin thoughtfully. “I was thinking of having your severed head mounted on my bedroom wall. My sisters think it’s disgusting. I think it’d be adorable. Oh, and thank you for the bleed. It will make cutting off your head that much more satisfying—knowing that I’ll be doing it with some of your own magic. Isn’t it elegant the way this has worked out?”

Theoxena’s mouth dropped open. She quickly closed it. The king killed Queen Pythias? That was the first time she had heard this. And the king’s bleed was going to the Wreath-wearer, Pythias’ granddaughter?

Tharsaleos shook off a wave of dizziness. There was something about listening to her through the lens that rattled his senses. Perhaps Kassandra was trying to trace the path back to him, a reverse trace? He started to explore that, but something she had said proved more distracting.

“Sisters? You have siblings?”

“Two. Adopted by my father. They’re not here now or I’d let you meet them. I borrowed this—” She pulled the front of her dress tight. “—from my sister, Jill. It’s so light. I’m not much of a dress girl, but I can see why she likes them.”

Kassandra’s eyes narrowed and hit him hard. Her smile drifted away and she bared her teeth at the king. In one moment, she changed into something different—but still with a girlish voice. “I let your four killers go. Next time, I won’t play nice. This is war, grandfather. You send your pet, Mr. Fenhals, snooping around and I’ll send him home in a box. Do you understand me? You send anyone...anyone comes to my doorstep, Stratolaos or some other Dosianax thug, your war-bard—” Theoxena stiffened and kicked closer. “Anyone, and I’ll eat them alive.” Kassandra opened her mouth wider and bit down twice, clicking her teeth. She jabbed her finger at him and her voice went lower and angrier. “Don’t fuck with me, you murdering piece of shit. Enjoy your throne. Take a good look around the City, because when I come home...Well, won’t that be fun?”

Kassandra put on her smile.

“Time’s up!” She shoved her open hand at the lens. It shattered, and jagged wedges of ice flew into the king’s face. The room went black. Tharsaleos kicked frantically, coming away with a deep scratch on his right cheek. A bead of blood sprouted from his eyebrow.

He kicked against the wall, rage burning him. Turning to Theoxena, he said, “See what

this monster is made of.”

“I...If she has come into her power—and she has your bleed—even I will have trouble going against her by myself, milord.” Theoxena’s gaze wandered, her lips opening slowly, and in an awed whisper, she said, “She destroyed the army of the dead.”

The king turned away, angrier. “Her father is Gregor Lord Rexenor.”

Theoxena’s gaze shot to him, wildness blazing in her eyes. Her upper lip twitched. “I will go—at least to discover the nature and extent of her plans and power. I will not promise to destroy her or return with her bracelet.” She hauled some of her anger inside, into a cold hard lump of ice. “Her father, now, he is a different matter.”

The king smiled cruelly. “You will have your moment for revenge, Theoxena. If you can kill or capture my old Rexenor slave, do it, but the Wreath-wearer is your primary concern. Do not tarry. Tell me what she knows, who she has gathered around her, what she can do, what these sisters can do. We must prepare for the war in the north. It is time to remove House Rexenor from the ocean floor, from the world, from history, out of all the memories of the Seaborn.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE NEW WORLD

Right of the Earth-encircler, dark-haired Lord of the Sea! Souls arise, with third
fore-fathers by our sides we will kill the old kings!

—Alkimides battle cry

Aleximor opened his eyes, looking out at the pure black of the deep Pacific, but there was something missing inside. He could not feel much of the presence of Corina Lairsey. She had sunk into herself, brooding or plotting. He gave her another moment's thought, and then moved on to something more pressing.

He felt it in the water, a distant repetitive thumping but so rapid that it was almost a hum, and so far away that he couldn't fix his senses on it. He looked up into the night. Something was there, moving, high above him, maybe even on the surface.

He had swum for six days, following the curve of the land to the tip of Baja California, training this new body to move correctly in the water. Then he went into open water, planning to pick up the west coast of South America at some point. He was about halfway between continents, a thousand feet deep, when he heard the slow rumble of something in the water with him.

He felt Corina stirring inside his head, weak threats and long dull pauses.

Perhaps I am not eating enough? He looked down at his host body, unsure of the correct feel of its weight. It had been so long since he had eaten anything—so long since he had needed to.

Since obtaining this body, he had snapped up a few fish with his bare hands, slicing them open with Corina's dive knife, devouring them raw.

Corina woke feeling hollow and drained of energy. She was getting used to the sense of weakness that went along with someone else controlling her physical side—but this weakness...her body was consuming itself. He just wasn't eating enough to fuel it.

Anything. Fish is fine. Just eat something.

Raw fish didn't bother her. He hadn't eaten at all the first three days—apparently out of practice. Then he figured out what that gnawing feeling in his stomach was, and started catching fish. The burn inside had made anything taste good, and Corina had watched hungrily as he peeled off the silvery skin and carved out cubes of meat.

Over the last few days depression had driven her into the background, becoming more of the listener and watcher. Her mind was still recovering from his last threat, to bind her to some rotting skeleton.

Now, she was hungry again—hungry enough to heave herself above the depression. And she was angry. If he was going to move in, the least he could do was take care of the place. *Hey shithead, get something to eat! I'm wasting away here.*

Aleximor's eyes dropped to the black foamy skin that stretched up his forearm, and then drifted to the blue Corina had used to paint her fingernails.

He was ignoring her.

To Aleximor, the woman's thoughts were strange and although she spoke English, she spoke a barbarous adaptation of it.

It had been more than two centuries since he had spoken any language. Evidently the language had changed a great deal. What else had changed?

He recalled strange tales of the surfacers' abilities to travel over the waves. When he had been imprisoned, men of the surface used wind to push their ships, long, deep wedges of wood. And sails, vast squares of billowing white, as if they'd harnessed clouds to drive their vessels.

So much time had passed and with it, he imagined, the world had changed beyond his imagining.

Tired and still hungry, Corina sank back into the dark rocky hollow in her head. She steeped in her pool of sorrow, playing five minutes of memory over and over again, the last time she'd seen her mother and father alive.

They'd gone to the movies, and halfway home a red-light running drunk driver had killed her parents and left her alive.

Her mother's smile over the front seat, her father's grin in the rearview mirror, saying things like "What do you want to do when we get home, kiddo?" All followed by pain and sorrow stronger than anything she'd ever felt.

Corina didn't know her mind could shudder, but that's what it did. It halted over one thought, that she was weak, and it caught in her head, split into jagged pieces, and repeated in overlapping flashes, a movie caught in a loop, playing the scene over and over.

Corina screamed and it stopped. But she felt its shadow, heavy, draped over every new thought, dragging her down like the ocean's surge catching her feet, coming up her legs and around her waist.

I walked away from the car.

Corina's thoughts froze because she noticed that Aleximor had tensed up, holding his new body motionless, as if listening to her. He spoke directly to her—in her own concerned voice.

"I am saddened to hear of the death of your father and mother, Corina. Is there anything crueler than purposeless death? My mother died young...at the hands of my father. I killed my father over it many years later."

Corina counted to ten slowly, arranging her thoughts in order. If this thing was going to speak to her in a meaningful way, she'd need every gram of her wits. *You can hear me?*

He answered at once. "There are times when your thoughts are unclear, almost as if your words are...I cannot think of a more appropriate word than...buried, but yes, I can hear you."

Her own voice talking to her was a strange experience. She tried to hold her thoughts still, but they moved around on their own—and unfortunately, the questions surfacing in her mind were not the ones she'd have liked to share with a centuries old raiser of the dead who happened to be sitting in the captain's chair in her body.

The thoughts came anyway, several variations of "Can you see what I imagine?" and "Will you let me go?"

He smiled with her lips, a soft compassionate tightening at the corners of her mouth. "I hear the music you dream about, most of it is very beautiful to my ears." *My ears.* "I see some of the things you imagine, but I do not understand them. It is very bright, scenes of the surface where you lived." His use of the past tense sent a cold burn through her mind. "Let you go? I will consider it, Corina."

Consider it... She repeated the words, mimicking his words using her voice. *I will consider it.*

He pointed up at the black heavens of ocean, and through her own eyes, she could just make out the blue of her fingernail polish at the edge of a field of luminescence he had created around her.

It was starting to chip.

She couldn't stop the machine in her head. *I will consider it.*

"Shhh. Do you hear that, Corina? That deep growling sound?"

Yes. A sourness crept into her thoughts. You have done something to my hearing. It's sensitive. I can hear something moving in the water below...too.

She wanted desperately to say "below me" but the word 'me' didn't seem to fit anymore.

"That is a fish, some kind of shark. Do you hear that snap of water at the end of each tail stroke. That's a deepwater shark." He felt her jolt of panic. "It will not bother us, Corina. Do not fear it."

I can hear...There is a rushing noise, faint but it's always there. I can hear that. I can also hear that really fast thumping.

"The first is the tidal motion."

The tides?

"The pull of the moon..." He started to articulate what he understood of tidal forces.

"The oceans swell in response—"

I know what tides are. You're telling me I can hear them?

"I said that, but do you not hear that new noise, lower, a rumbling rhythm?"

Her thoughts went still for a moment. *Maybe it's a motor. That's what it sounds like. A boat's propeller? Maybe a ship? How deep am I?*

"What do you mean by motor?"

An engine that turns the propellers on a ship.

"What is a propeller?" The way she used the word was strange to him.

A big metal thing with blades that spins and drives the ship. The motor turns it.

"A ship?" She heard the excitement in the words. "The sound is different, not what I have heard from any surface ship before." With that, he kicked off into the night, straight up, pushing his legs until his muscles burned.

He made tiny course corrections every ten minutes. It took him an hour to reach the first hint of sunlight in the ocean. Corina noticed the water around her brightening like pale traces of dawn, and then broad blinding daylight landed on her.

Everything went dark. Aleximor closed his eyes to prepare for the deep punch of shock that always accompanied the breaking of a barrier, and there were few as shocking to the system as the interface between the sea and the air.

Aleximor shattered the surface. A blast of dry air hit his face, tightening around his skin in a swarm of tiny pinpricks, like the clinging legs and mandibles of crabs walking over him. The water stung his eyes, he coughed, and vomited the bile in his stomach across the ocean's surface. His lungs erupted, throwing a few liters of water over his tongue, pasting it to the floor of his mouth. His throat burned, the lining of his esophagus shriveled, his lungs complained nastily, shuddering and pretending they didn't know what was expected of them.

He choked out a question. "And creatures find it comfortable living up here?"

He balled his fists and rubbed the seawater from his eyes and lashes. When he opened them, trying to focus through the blinding sun's light, he saw...*it*—a leviathan the surfacers had summoned from someplace inhabited by monsters the size of mountains.

Giant walls of orange and glistening red, streaks of rust a mile long like blood trailing along the flanks of a predator. Tiny white lettering, *Maria Draughn*, rolled along the top edge like the blazing symbols of pyromancy at the fire's finger tips.

Aleximor tilted his gaze to the sky. Rising out of the flames were battlements of

gleaming white, hard metal edges, thousands of tiny oval windows, white structural works, bars and beams bound with cables, bent in submission to some god's will. They shivered and strained against the cables, creaking wildly, ready to unfold and throw off attackers like the long fingers and blocky knuckles of a giant's hands.

"It is a white city in a bowl of fire!" Aleximor shrieked the words, but couldn't make his body move out of its way. The wall of fire cut through the waves, shoveling the ocean aside, thundering toward him. His eyes fixed on the white lettering, thinking that they might be some key to defeating it or turning it aside. "What does it mean? *Maria Draughn*?"

That's the ship's name!

"That is a ship?"

Corina's thoughts piled up in her head, but she pushed them aside to get to the really important ones. *Get out of its way. Now! Swim as fast as you can. Move, you idiot!*

Aleximor kicked onto his back, pumping his legs. High above him, a man in dark blue clothing leaned over the fire's edge and yelled at him, waving his arms madly. Others joined him, some turning to yell for more watchers.

Aleximor was certain they would wake the giant white claws to pluck him out of the sea. He curled backward and dove, but found that there was more of the ship under the water than he had expected.

A large bulb of orange metal preceded the rest of the walls through the waves, and he kicked it trying to push his body out the way.

The force of the ship's hold on the sea seized his body. The monster had him in its grasp, bending him in half, spinning Aleximor like a wheel, folding him before snapping him open. He felt the thumping of the propellers in his bones. He reached for more water in the wrong direction, one hand banging against the ship's hull, a hard ceiling, rough with stony beds of barnacles.

He sucked in seawater, his lungs protesting.

The ocean slammed him against the hull. He slid headfirst, pinned between the cruel face of the sea and unyielding steel. Barnacles sliced through wetsuit material.

Corina's ponytail whipped him in the face, jolting his thoughts into motion. He threw out his hands against the force dragging him along the hull, squinting through it to get a good look at the dark sweep of churning water coming at him, the blur of the ocean caught in the blades of the propellers and thrown behind the ship.

The collar of Corina's wetsuit hooked a barnacle outcrop, wrenched his neck, and spun his body into the working end of the ship feet first. His skull hammered against metal. The ocean flashed white, and then pulled his mind into a cold motionless night.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PLANS

There are many ancient tales of rivalry between the Telkhines and the Heliadai (sons of Helios). The Telkhines created their own star, a bright crystal in the heavens that rivaled Helios itself, and incurred the envy of the Heliadai. The Telkhines sent their star aloft in the night and brought light to the shadows, and the Heliadai conspired with Zeus to overthrow the power of the Telkhines. The island of Rhodes was once called Telkhinis, the island of the Telkhines, and Zeus Cloud-gatherer drove them from their island on the surface to the depths of the ocean.

—Journal of Michael Augustus Henderson

“Whoa! They’re kissing.”

Nicole joined Jill at the window to get a view. “About time.”

“So sweet.” Jill nodded, one side of her mouth lifting into a smile.

Nicole looked over her shoulder. “Hey, Kass! Zyph and Henderson are finally getting it on!”

Kassandra took the stairs from the kitchen two at a time and went on tiptoes to see out of the window at the landing. She cleaned up what Eupheron said in her head. “After all the hand-holding, it’s about time.”

Across Ocean Boulevard, on a bench overlooking the Atlantic, Michael Henderson kissed Zypheria of the Alkimides, his long legs stretched out on the gravel—although one shoe was digging insistently into the ground. Zypheria’s fingers played with the stubbly short hair at the back of his head, and he hooked one of his arms around her to tug on her braids, lifting her mouth to his.

Ampharete’s voice glided by in Kassandra’s thoughts. *Zypheria deserves so much—more than I can ever repay her. She brought you back to me, my daughter. For her to find love...it is something she gave up when we became sisters, when her mother took me in. It is something that only entered my life once...and even then it was...a necessity. You must tell me more about Michael Henderson. Is he handsome? Is he honorable? Does he truly love Zypheria? What are they doing at this moment?*

Kassandra flinched at the word, “necessity” referring to the one love in her mother’s life. Her eyes widened as Mr. Henderson tugged Zypheria’s braids harder and kissed her throat. There was something less than honorable about it...but in a good way.

“Yes, he does, Mother. He is tall with very short blond hair—we all think he had too much taken off. It used to be longer and it hung in his face. He wears glasses. He is a scientist and a teacher, and he’s writing a history of the Seaborn. For a surfer, he knows a great deal about life in the sea. And he has courage. Lady Kallixene gave him the curse and he stood with Rexenor at St. Clement’s against the Olethren—and he remained until the end. It’s a cool day. Autumn’s here, and the waves are gentle but noisy on the rocks. The two of them are sitting on a bench on a small cliff above the Atlantic, and Mr. Henderson is pulling Zypheria’s hair...uh...playfully.”

Ampharete sighed loudly in her head. *The rush of waves on the rocks, the wearing*

rhythm of a soft sea on the unyielding earth, the smell of salt in the air—these work deep triggers in the human soul. It is a combination stronger than a cool spring breeze carrying the scent of wild flowers.

“Wild flowers...Wild. Flowers.”

Jill looked over at Kass with a curious expression.

Gregor appeared at the bottom of the stairs. “What’s up?”

Jill and Nicole spun and, at the same time, said, “Michael and Zypheria are finally getting to the good part.”

“Really?” Gregor climbed up have a look. His smile was a little sad. “About time.”

Kassandra watched a minute longer, then turned, climbed the next flight of stairs, and took a seat on the top step, resting her chin in her hands. “How do you know about wild flowers, mother? I thought you had never been above the waves.”

I have never seen the surface with my own eyes.

“Then...”

Lady Kallixene told me stories and showed me things. House Rexenor has communicated and befriended surfacers from the beginning, from the day the Cloud-gatherer betrayed our ancestors and sent us to the abyss. It is why Kassander’s father, Geryllos, chose a seabird, a creature of the air with wings that lives in or near the sea, as the new sign of his house. Without appearing to change the subject, Ampharete shocked the hell out her with, Do you know why Lady Kallixene arranged my marriage to Gregor?

Kassandra’s eyes landed on her father, who still wore his serenely sad smile as he took the stairs back down to the kitchen.

“I didn’t even know it was arranged. I just thought...you were in love.”

It worked out that way, but it would never have happened without Kallixene’s proposal and my pursuit. It certainly did not begin with love. I did not even like him when we met the first time—although... Her voice changed, shortening the spaces between each word. He did have a seadragon, Barenis, the only one I have ever seen.

Kassandra’s scowl deepened. It was suddenly a girl’s discussion about a guy’s suitability based on the vehicle he drove—Did you see what he pulled into the parking lot driving?

Ampharete sighed. Barenis was beautiful, purple as squid’s ink, a dangerous slice of the abyss with wings, and she spoke to me. I think she liked me. She was very old. Barenis, she said the name, reminiscing. Dragons are something out of Telkhines stories, and very few survived the Alkimides purge. Gregor even let me ride her. He...intrigued me, but he was too shy and spent too much time in the library or traveling with his teacher, Agathonumos.

“The abyss mage, the student of Strates Unwinder.” Kassandra’s voice went high. “Dad had his own seadragon?” And then even higher. “You pursued him? What happened? How did you two, you know, hook up?”

She felt her mother frown over her words. *Kallixene told me something.*

Kassandra let a few seconds slip by. “You’re going to tell me or do I have to guess?”

Gregor had the bleed of magic off Lord Nausikrates, and that the Rexenor nobility bled wide and fast, and that her son nearly had all of it off his father.

Kassandra folded her arms when she felt a course change. The conversation turned directly into uncomfortable territory.

“I know this now,” she said irritably.

Kallixene told me that her power was still secure, that neither of her children had been chosen to take it from her...and that a granddaughter most certainly would. Kallixene spent years above the waves when she was in her twenties, going

to school, learning everything she could about the surface, their machines and their science.

“What are you talking about, science, like genetics? Lady Kallixene knew that if you and Dad had me that I would get her bleed?”

And Gregor’s bleed. You would have both, something extremely rare among the Seaborn.

“So, you and Dad—”

Do not use that phrase, “hooked up.” It sounds like you are catching fish.

Kassandra’s body tightened with rage, and she held as much of it in as possible. “Funny, I don’t see the difference.” Her voice turned bitter. “Trolling for Rexenors instead? What did you use for a lure? Something shiny?”

How dare—

“Don’t tell me what I will or will not dare.”

And do not tell me that you are not plotting something grander than I could ever imagine. I feel it in your thoughts, Cassandra. You hide it well. Making plans for years—and in the end, you will use every friend and enemy in your path to secure them. I know. I have floated in the same space. Tharsaleos—my own father—killed my mother. I spent every day of my life hiding from him. I was not fated to have the bleed from anyone. Not one drop! I had nothing but the Wreath of Poseidon. And I will tell you what you may dare when we speak of the decisions I had to make. I made them because I was forced to. I did not go to Rexenor seeking a husband—or have a child. I went seeking allies. Rexenor, the hated, the outcasts, the exiled great house. But plans change. I had to change with them. I understood. Zypheria understood. Lady Kallixene understood.

“Did you even ask Father? Did he understand?”

Yes! He loved me—enough to help me win back my throne, enough to seek something that even the great Strates Unwinder thought a fool’s errand.

“That damn Telkhines book? You sent him into defeat—on that fool’s errand.”

Kassandra felt her own heart racing along with the leaden weight fall of her mother’s shame. There was a long painful silence.

I know. Ampharete sobbed. I am so sorry. It was never your father’s fault. It was mine. I drove him off when our love grew strong. It scared me, and I hurt him, and to win me back, he left me...on that fool’s errand. His love competed with the Wreath. Anything else on earth or in the sea is ultimately going to lose against the gift of Poseidon. I felt guilty at having it while I denied everything to Zypheria. She had no life outside of protecting me. The few who were bold enough to approach her, soon learned how high the price would be for loving my friend, my protector, my sister. She swore to protect me with her life. I accepted her vow, and held her to it. She would die in place of me...and I would have let her. I would have ordered it—I did order it!

“You ended up on the wrong side of that one.”

Agathonumos created an island for the porthmeus. When I passed the Wreath to you, I went with it. An echo of me remained inside my body, enough to hold the door against the Olethren for a short time, until they broke it down and ripped me apart. I commanded Zypheria to die saving your life, and she did what she could. Both of us did.

“Zypheria’s my friend and protector now. I’m not sure she would die for me. I don’t think I could ask her to—although she acts like I have when I ask for a peanut butter sandwich.” Kassandra brought Zypheria to her thoughts and smiled at her reaction to some of the foods she liked. “She’s like an older sister who bosses me around and knows things I will never know. She’s still loyal to you.”

And you.

“I won’t ask her to give up her love.”

Make your plans, plot against my father, promise anything to anyone, except that. That is all I ask of you, daughter. Do not take it away from her.

“Agreed.”

Promise me also, that you will protect her.

“I promise. No harm will come to her that does not come to me first.” Cassandra’s voice sharpened, whittled to a point as she waited. “Would you have me promise the same for Father?”

Yes. Of course.

“Good. I wanted to hear you say it. I have already sworn that. I will not allow Tharsaleos to take him away from me.” Her voice went quieter. “You know he sits on the same bench in the evenings, and he looks at the silver waves and the moonrise. Do you know what he does, Mother?” She didn’t wait for Ampharete’s answer. “He cries. He sobs like a child. Not for me. Not for the years he spent inside a tomb in the prison of the king. Not for some old dragon. Not for his failed House, not for his father, not for the poverty his mother and sister endured for years. He cries for you.”

Kassandra threw the back door open, slammed it behind her, and stopped on the concrete walk, breathing in the ocean air. She bounded down the stone steps, her bare feet digging into the moss and soft grass.

She spun once, waited for something to happen, a feeling to well up inside her, and then spun again. *This is good, but what is it about it that makes Jill giddy?* Jill was the dancer—a theatre major with an emphasis in dance—and when she stepped onto the lawn and moved, the whole world brightened.

I can only make it gloomier.

A cold wind sliced through the pines, making them creak and gyrate. The sky was pale and faraway with streaks of white thinned to translucence like a sheet of cotton spread tight over a still blue background.

Kassandra wandered across the yard in the general direction of Nicole, who was on her stomach in the shade with her sketchbook, using the low stone wall as a windbreak. She was doing something white against dark blue in oil pastels.

Nicole Garcia had it all; she was an artist and an exceptional student, breezing through her political science degree. Kassandra watched her working in her sketchbook, her long brown fingers gripping a stick of pastel, sharp strokes defining a human figure in pale blue, several more fluid movements filling in the spaces, graceful and strong.

Kassandra felt a stir of feelings, a mix of admiration, and love, and even a mild current of envy. Nicole was tall, with beautiful skin, browner than her own, long black hair that she always wore in braids as if she’d come from the sea, and she had a well of calm in her soul that Kassandra wished she could tap into.

Kassandra didn’t want to intrude, and took a seat on the stacked granite that walled in the yard, waving at Zypheria and Mr. Henderson on the other side of the street as they strolled by, holding hands, on their way to North Hampton Beach.

Nicole glanced up when they passed. She noticed Kassandra sitting nearby. “Are you okay?”

Kassandra looked over at her, distracted. “Fine. What’s up?”

Nicole paused with a frown. Pointing across Ocean Boulevard with a piece of dark pastel, she asked, “Question for you or your Wreath buddies. What happens if Michael and Zypheria have a child? Is it a Seaborn or a human—I mean surfacer? Do you make a child go through the drowning?”

Kassandra chewed at her lip. “If you’re asking if babies are born with the curse, then

yes. Eupheron says that's most likely." After a pause with her eyes fixed in the distance, she added, "My mother says to ask Lady Kallixene when she arrives."

Nicole's shoulders tightened and she sat herself up in a cross-legged position, flipping slowly through sketchbook pages.

Kassandra leaned toward her. "Is that Jill?"

Nicole nodded, grinning mischievously at a picture of a slender blond girl at the beach, hand on her hip, long tanned legs braced apart. "With tiara."

She tugged a few pages back and folded the rest around the end of the book. Nicole rubbed one finger through the color along Jill's cheek.

Kassandra sat on the grass next to her. "That's really good. Just like her."

Nicole looked over, smiling. "Jill the princess."

"Perfect skin, tiny feet, no hips. More of one than I'll ever be."

Nicole laughed and flipped another page around, the dark blue one with a pale girl in the foreground, dropping through the ocean, one hand above her head, releasing a final breath like a bouquet of bubbles, saying goodbye to someone on the surface.

"Me?"

Nicole shrugged uncertainly. "I took some liberties. You never say goodbye, no blowing kisses. You just go. No looking back. So I made sure to put a hand wave in."

Kassandra stared at the girl in the water, her skin white with a blue tint, a sword in her right hand, three long braids sticking straight up as she sank in the deep. "Why am I so pale? I'm like a ghost."

"You're the Ocean, Kass—capital O." Nicole ran a finger into the gradient blue background, bright turquoise at the top, nearly black at the bottom. "This is what I see when I picture you underwater. You're cold even in the shallows, playful but with a mean streak." Nicole gave her a smirk. "You're a siren. Lure them onto the rocks, girl. That's where you're strongest. Look what you did to an entire army when they came out of the water to get you." Nicole moved her shoulders in a flowing wave motion. "You have eternal rhythm, just like the tides, the roll of the surf is like your heartbeat." Nicole's eyes drifted away from Kassandra to the Atlantic, and her voice dropped to a cheerless whisper. "Bitterly sad even when you are the cause of the birds' sweet cry, and the most important advice for anyone you meet?" Nicole swung her eyes back to Kassandra. "Same thing you tell anyone exploring the seashore. You tell them never to turn their backs on you."

Kassandra choked down a retort. She held Nicole's hard coppery eyes a moment longer, scowled over the decision to admire her for her honesty in nailing her character to the wall, gave her a nod, and then turned toward the ocean, child to a mother, watching the long iron gray bars tumbling into the coast of New Hampshire.

"You are the smart one, Nicole," she said in a faint whisper. "That is why it must be you."

"What must be me?"

"Nothing. I have to go." Without looking back, Kassandra jumped the stone wall, dashed across Ocean Boulevard, went down the face of the cliff and into the cold gray waves.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ICED WINE

Eupheron grew up behind the scenes of the Seaborn court, constantly guarded; well educated, but alone and friendless. There were no less than eight attempts on his life. In spite of all this, Queen Kleonike eventually crowned Eupheron king, arranged his marriage to a prominent noblewoman, Daphne, and passed on the Wreath of Poseidon at the end of her reign. He was called Eupheron the Liar the moment he took the throne.
—Michael Henderson, *Seaborn History*

Captain Martim Teixeira was almost sixty years old and he'd been at sea, or very close to it, for all of them. He wasn't tall or intimidating; he was a quiet, fair man with three features that qualified him for commanding a cargo ship: piercing eyes, a fine aristocratic nose, and large brown hands that had worked every wheel, bolt, switch, and cover on every ship on which they'd found themselves. He was an intuitive sailor, and he trusted the feelings his mind sent him.

There was a young woman in his medic's quarters with sheer connective tissue between her fingers—not her toes however. She'd surfaced a hundred meters off the bow where the forewatch spotted her, and she'd survived a horrible headlong drag along the ship's hull, squeezed between the *Maria Draughn* and the Pacific. She'd fought her way clear of a slow-moving propeller but became disoriented and slammed her head into the rudder.

An engineer and a third officer fished her out of the water, getting her to another third who doubled as a medic on board. She was breathing and, except for some cuts, bruising and lack of consciousness, appeared healthy.

Teixeira held the report from the spotter in one hand and the California driver's license issued to Corina Lairsey in the other. If there were such things as mermaids, they did not carry licenses to drive cars in America.

The crew, all eighteen of them, had come up to see the woman—who they called “mermaid” or “gorgona” or “nixie” depending on where they were from. Teixeira had already disciplined Pinnet and another of his crew for fighting over Miss Lairsey—and she hadn't even opened her eyes yet.

Gabriel Pinnet, of the engineer's crew, was always in trouble, always throwing his fists around. The captain had already signed the man's termination papers. This would be Pinnet's last run on any vessel captained by Martim Teixeira.

The rap of knuckles on his cabin door drew the captain's eyes from Corina's driver's license.

“Come in.”

The door swung in with the second officer, Trevor Aldrich, taking up most of the doorway. “Sir, you wanted to see me?”

“Sit down, Trevor.”

The second officer nodded, crossed the captain's quarters, and took a seat under one of the forward-facing windows. Teixeira had selected Aldrich to keep an eye on Pinnet

because he was the tallest and most intimidating deck officer on board. He had a burning glare that could cut holes in softer metals. He shaved his head regularly, he had big white teeth and looked as if he could eat the ship's low-grade bunker 380 fuel and suffer nothing more than a few cramps and some belching.

"I hate to do this to you." Teixeira rubbed his tired eyes. "I can't lock Pinnet in his cabin, but I can't let him have the run of the ship either. And with this woman aboard..." He handed the second Corina's driver's license. "The man's unpredictable. I confined him to quarters until 1600 for using his fists in an idiotic squabble over Miss Lairsey. He seems to be under the impression that our mermaid is attracted to him. He's either an idiot or she's put him under a spell because he's told me that he'd do anything including die for her. Take your pick as to which one's more likely. He's free now, but I cannot have him...disturbing her."

"You want me to watch him?" The look he gave the captain held more meaning than in his words.

"Keep him occupied, play cards with him, anything to keep him from bothering the woman—at least until she wakes."

"No problem, captain."

Gabriel Pinnet glared like a caged animal when Second Officer Trevor Aldrich stopped by his cabin with two bottles of wine and some cards.

His face expressionless, Aldrich gave Pinnet a good going over, noting a drool of something oily staining the front of the man's uniform. Damp blooms of perspiration under his arms spread toward the rolled-up sleeves at his elbows; grease streaked his forearms. There was a sweaty sheen to his cheeks and stubbly chin.

Pinnet had a raw oozing cut that ran from the center of his forehead into his hairline on the right side, the result of one of his earlier scuffles over the woman in the medic's quarters.

McHutcheon, a third officer with medical training, had tired of patching up Pinnet weeks ago, and although he had gone to school to study forensics and medicine, and was considered "the doc" at sea, he'd never sworn anything to Hippocrates or stated out loud or in writing that he would continue offering medical treatment to those who didn't appreciate his effort. Captain Teixeira was fine with that.

Aldrich grinned and shook his head. "You're a swine, Pinnet. When did you shower last?"

Pinnet's slow gaze landed on the bottles of wine, remained there thoughtfully for a moment, and then he returned the officer's grin. "In my own sweat, sir? Or a proper one from the stalls?"

Aldrich was already looking beyond Pinnet, around the man's cabin. The bunk was piled with dirty clothes and garbage. None of the lamps were on and the stink of rotting food, urine and old engine oil crept into the hall, up Aldrich's legs, chest and into his nostrils, needling his senses and making his eyes water. He forgot about Pinnet's counter questions and took one step back, clutching the bottles of wine higher as if the stench could somehow seep through cork and affect the contents.

"A couple drinks and some cards tonight, Mr. Pinnet?"

"Here?" He threw a thumb over his shoulder.

"No. I was thinking my cabin. Have a wash and meet me upstairs in ten minutes."

Pinnet didn't answer at once, but stared at Aldrich blankly while whatever mental arrangement he had in his head fell into place. Aldrich's expression went cold. He knew Pinnet as a weasely underhanded bastard, and he went with the be-careful vibe his subconscious was feeding him.

Pinnet ran his tongue along his lips and nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll wash and run by the

galley on the way up and pick up some ice?”

Aldrich’s mind went through the ship’s layout in under a second, determining if Pinnet could somehow reach the woman without him knowing. The galley was another two decks down, and McHutcheon’s cabin where the woman slept was two above. Aldrich would wait at the foot of the stairs for the lout, and lead him directly to his cabin. Then it was his plan to play cards and get Pinnet too drunk to bother anyone, something that shouldn’t be difficult since—judging by the smell of the man’s breath—the third engineer was halfway along that path.

With all routes to Corina Lairsey secured against Pinnet, Aldrich then spent a moment wondering about the ice. They were approaching the canal at Panama. It was a hot day and the evening wasn’t going to cool down. The idea of diluting wine with ice wasn’t pleasant but he’d play along. “Sure. Ice for the wine. Bring enough for both of us.”

Three hours later, Second Officer Aldrich had won four hands of Mexican Poker and his iced Cabernet was going down as smoothly as the evening. It wasn’t until he kept losing contact with reality in two minute chunks that he thought something was wrong. He leaned heavily on his elbows and couldn’t lift his head.

Pinnet placed one hand firmly on the table across from him, cards against his chest, grinning. “I made your tray of ice especially for my beautiful mermaid, something to loosen her up, but since you brought the wine, I had no choice but to cool you down with it.” Pinnet licked his lips. “Sir. Perhaps she is still asleep, waiting for my kiss to waken her.” Pinnet’s burbling laugh made Aldrich’s stomach lurch.

Pinnet poured himself another glass of wine, dumped his cards on the table, and waited for Second Officer Aldrich to slide off his chair to the floor.

Ten minutes later, a little before midnight, Pinnet lifted his glass to the unconscious Aldrich and rose from the table.

“Good night.” Pinnet staggered off with the officer’s keys.

Corina heard the rattle of keys, hard metal clicking, and the slow whine of heavy steel hinges. The clicks and rattles were sharp with a trailing echo, sound hitting heavily painted metal walls. The world came into her senses slowly. She felt a slow rocking motion, the gentle touch of gravity pulling at her ankles, then at her shoulders.

Confusion folded in on her like the branches and briars of a haunted forest. *Where am I? I’m on board a boat.* She repeated the thought because there was something odd about it. *I am on board...I am...I am awake? But he is not.*

Time slipped by faster than she could push her thoughts into focus, connect them, draw conclusions and act. *There are mountains in my mind.* She felt the strange feeling again, and she spent a few seconds trying to put some order around them. Thoughts flowed and merged over her mind’s—the closest word she could attach to it—terrain. *Sometimes it’s shallow and rippling like the surface of a sheltered cove, sometimes it plummets like a waterfall, and in places—she felt these by a prickling fear—there were edges to the terrain, sharp edges that led to something bottomless, suffocating, black as pitch.* To go over an edge was to fall into madness. Somehow a normal mind steered away from these edges, but there seemed to be no guides or guardrails along the terrain where Aleximor had stuffed her.

I can hear with my ears. I can smell with my...I can smell the ocean, salt in the air. I can smell someone in the room with me. A man, perspiring, smelling like...sour dirt and motor oil. I hear his breath, solid thumping puffs of air. I can hear his heart racing, exhilarated, the fear of getting caught.

The intruder’s warm, moist hands slipped around her wrists, dragged her arms over her head, and held them against a soft pliable surface. *A bed,* she guessed. *I’m lying on a mattress.*

Corina pushed her thoughts toward something that felt like higher ground. One of the man's heavy calloused hands held her wrists down, while the other worked at a zipper at her throat. Hard scratchy knuckles rubbed along her neck, below her ear.

Something was different...about the zipper. It lifted the soft material away from her skin when he tugged on it. *I'm not wearing my wetsuit. They've taken my gear. Someone's dressed me in something else.* It felt like sweatshirt material.

The zipper growled open to her navel, where the thick cloth folded and hung up the zipper's progress. The intruder gasped in frustration, hitting Corina's sense of smell with a gush of wine.

He's been drinking...a lot.

She processed everything like an observer, with detached analysis, breaking down the intruder's movements on her body, studying every bit of information coming in through her senses. Her anger stirred slowly, but it was a deep volcanic rumbling that sent shivers and twists seismically through the terrain of her mind.

Then her motor functions kicked in.

She stamped her left foot flat against the bed, throwing the bottom half of her body into the air, brought her right leg against her chest, and hooked his neck in the crook of her knee, holding the intruder's head in place with her thigh.

Crush his throat.

She heard the words in her inner voice but wasn't certain they were her own. She gritted her teeth and thrust her legs together.

"Wait, Corina. I have thought of something more suitable." Her own lips moved, and made the sounds, but the thought behind them wasn't her own. "A broken man would be of no use to me."

Her body came alive and released the intruder, kneed him in the face, and kicked him away. Pinnet staggered across the room, falling backward. The keys went flying. His hands went to his face, and Corina sprang into the air, bounding from the bed to the center I-beam running the length of the ceiling. Her fingers curled around the flat blade of metal, snapped open, and dropped her to the floor. She landed in a crouch like a cat.

Corina hadn't made her body jump six feet in the air to the ceiling. Aleximor was awake and in control.

"He is a most disagreeable person." Aleximor straightened and closed the zipper, sniffing with distaste, watching the man on the floor. "Thank you, Corina. You have undoubtedly saved us from a painful and humiliating experience. For my part, I will see that our unwashed, groping friend never again has the chance to take an innocent young lady against her will."

Pinnet crawled away, shaking his head, as if to throw off confusion. His nose hurt and he couldn't stop his eyes watering. He backed into the far wall, pushed off the floor and stood up. He tried to focus on Corina and his lips pulled away from his teeth, yellow stumps lining his mouth.

Aleximor watched him coolly, digging blue-painted fingernails into his palm and then tapping softly with the pads of each finger, the thin webbing between each undulating with the motion. He sang softly.

There was a sound like fingernails tearing loose and hooks materialized in the air in front of Aleximor's hands, four hooks that looked like jagged coral. Two of them drifted together and joined along the stem with the deadly sharp arcs a finger's width apart.

Across the room, Pinnet stared back, the muscles in his face slackening in wonder. His eyes—starting to clear—went wide and fixed on a point just beyond Aleximor's fingertips.

The hooks shot away and looped around Pinnet's head. He started to twist his neck around to follow them when they stopped sharply, the double hook an inch from the tip

of his nose, the two singles aligned with each ear.

Pinnet's brows ground together. His eyes crossed slightly, trying to focus on what was obviously some kind of weapon floating in front of him. He reached a hand up cautiously.

The double hook dipped as it drove in and caught his nostrils. The singles punched through his ears into the sides of his skull. The four of them went rigid, stems toward the ceiling on invisible line, and lifted Pinnet off the floor.

Pinnet wriggled around in the air, struggling in silence a few seconds, as surprised as Corina. Then he shrieked, his fingers clawing at the hooks.

Aleximor sang a swift stream of words, calling his familiar, something that looked like a cross between a monkey and a clawed hand of metal. It dropped out of the air and scuttled across the floor on ten legs like a crab.

The thing hopped, caught hold of Pinnet's swinging ankles, and crawled up the front of his body. Its pointed claws worked through Pinnet's uniform like a walking pair of scissors. It dropped blue threads and snipped wedges of material in its wake.

It circled under Pinnet's left arm and walked along his shoulders, ducking under his arms, puncturing and scissoring, severing tendons, until his arms hung loose at his sides, dead weight with reflexive twitching in his hands. It crawled up Pinnet's spine and emerged on the top of his head, its ten arms extending and clenching like a giant's armored fist, getting a firm seat.

The thing dug six of its legs into the back of Pinnet's head while four in the front extended, swung in over Pinnet's pain-contorted face, and neatly scooped out his eyes, juggling them on sharp metallic points.

It stuffed the white lumpy knots into Pinnet's screaming mouth and, edging forward over Pinnet's brow, it forced the eyes down his throat. Pinnet gagged and spit, biting the metal arms as they plunged at the back of his throat. His teeth broke against the crab's legs, crumbling in his mouth like chalk.

Then Aleximor's pet lifted its body a few inches off Pinnet's forehead. A glowing faceted orb of blue fire ran down the wrinkled bridge of the engineer's nose, burning a dark line along the skin. It stopped against the stem of the hooks in Pinnet's nostrils. The forward fingers caught it, rolled it around the obstruction, and pushed it past Pinnet's lips to the back of his throat.

The blue fire scorched his esophagus smooth. It settled in the pit of his stomach, cutting through the lining, muscle tissue and bone, cauterizing as it passed through each. The blue ball of fire dropped from between Pinnet's legs and spun smoldering across the floor. A quart of thick brown bubbling fluid followed, seeping down his legs, the combined liquid contents of his stomach, intestines, bladder, mingling into a oily runnel.

Aleximor made a few gestures with his fingers, snapping them into his palm, and the hooks vanished, dropping Pinnet inelegantly to the floor. He ignored Corina's screaming for him to stop. He walked over and dug one foot under Pinnet's corpse and gave it a shove.

"*Skatophagoi* surfacers. They will pay for sending this animal to threaten me. They will all pay."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LADY KALLIXENE

The Seaborn use several names to identify their power, with *goeteias* (sorcery, magic) the common term used. The bleed-holder can maintain his or her power as long as there are no genetic descendants able to receive it. The bleed selects the recipient, not the bleed-holder, and although in almost every case, the bleed line is restricted to direct descendants, it is possible to jump branches on the family tree and flow to a niece, nephew, grandchildren. As awful as this sounds, there are many stories of siblings killing each other over the bleed of a parent, either to eliminate competition, or out of hatred of the one who finally does receive it.

—Michael Henderson, notes

“What did she say?” Cassandra tried to read the look on Nic’s face. Nicole was digging through short-term memory for the sounds Jill had made over the phone a moment before. The sounds formed words that were repeatable but incomprehensible. “She said...something about reverse French...and glitter something...” She showed her teeth with a tentative smile. “I don’t know. You talk to her.”

Kassandra stared blankly. “Reverse French...braids? Her hair? Is that what she’s talking about? Something with her hair?” She shook her head, convinced. “Lady Kallixene isn’t going to want glitter in her hair.”

“I don’t think so either.” Nicole’s expression softened, thinking back on her only memories of the Rexenor ruler, commanding soldiers on the front steps of St. Clement’s. “Kah-lix-uh-nee. I love her name. She’s a classic Queen Elizabeth I archetype.”

“Right-o,” said Cassandra in what she thought sounded like a British accent. “But with a sword she’s actually killed with. And don’t forget to put ‘Lady’ before her name. Always.”

Nicole hesitated, then said, “Are you Seaborn always fighting? Always at war with one another?”

Kassandra frowned and rolled her eyes as she punched in Jill’s phone number. “Apparently. The nine dominate politics and their cities back up against each other inside one giant city, someone’s idiotic idea to pack them all into one place and hope they behave.”

“The Nine-cities. *Enneapolis*. The silent cities,” said Nicole in awe. “Is it beautiful?”

Kassandra slid her phone against her ear, nodding. “Beyond anything you can imagine, and I’ve only seen it from a distance.” She pointed at Nicole and gave her a steady gaze. “I will see to it that one day you will get a view from the most commanding position in the city. I’m working on it. For now, picture a curvier, taller, floating New York City against a pure black sky, lit up blue—hang on, Nic. Jill? I can tell you right now, Lady Kallixene isn’t going to want sparkles or whatever you have planned for her hair.” Kassandra nodded again, staring into the distance. “But Nic said you said something about reverse French something with glitter. Oh. Okay.” She tilted her phone down, jutting her chin at Nicole. “Not hair. Jill’s made a nail appointment for Lady Kallixene.”

Nicole pulled her mouth into a worried upside-down smile. “And that’s going to go

over better than the hair?"

"We'll ask her and see what happens." Cassandra shrugged. "In fact, I have a few questions for Grandma myself."

"She's here?" Gregor called over his shoulder halfway down the basement stairs.

Kassandra opened her eyes and released a breath, focusing on the kitchen and the faces of her sisters. She nodded her head.

Zypheria, who didn't like the defensive shortcomings of the kitchen, stood off to one side unarmed, her hands curled into fists. Gregor had sent Michael Henderson to the store for wine and, on the way back, a pick-up order for a couple boats of sushi and sashimi at Shizuko's.

"She's here."

"Kassandra, stand in the middle. Girls, I'll get the—"

"She's already through the gate, Dad." Cassandra was the only one who seemed relaxed.

Gregor's cheerful voice came from the basement. "Oh. Hello, Phaidra!"

Gregor's sister was the first to appear at the bottom of the stairs, dressed...like a surfer, in shorts and a tight orange Lycra shirt that showed off her muscular build. She held a drawn sword like a dagger, point down. Seawater drained out of her black braids, splattering the concrete at her feet. She didn't smile but her eyebrows jumped when she saw Gregor. She gave his arm a squeeze then her eyes lifted warily to the kitchen.

"I have to secure the location myself, Gregor. You know Mother."

He followed her up the stairs and leaned against the fridge, waiting beside Nicole, Kassandra, and Jill.

Phaidra gave short bows to the three girls standing with their backs to the counter in the center of the kitchen and nodded to Zypheria. She paused to scowl at the crossbow bolt sticking out of the ceiling above the sink, made a signal with her left hand, and headed into the living room. A dozen soldiers in silver-scaled armor climbed the stairs in two rows, swords drawn, eyeing Gregor, his daughters, and Zypheria unemotionally, dividing into several groups to search the house.

Kassandra felt Andromache respond to the armed men. The warrior queen within her forced a sheathed sword to appear in Kassandra's left hand. She clutched it tight and quickly hid it behind her back.

Zypheria gave her a nod and her lips stretched into something close to a smile. She mouthed the words, "Do not ever bow first."

Gregor breathed in the strong ocean scent coming up from the grotto and sighed.

Jill leaned forward in front of Kassandra with a grin at Nicole. "Did you see what Aunt Phaidra was wearing?"

Nicole nodded and jerked her head to the stairs. At the same time a piercing whistle came from somewhere in the house.

Both of them snapped to attention.

Lady Kallixene moved into the kitchen as if she was floating on the air, her long gold brocaded gown rustling like seaweed on the concrete steps. Even her arms moved fluidly as she lifted one over her head, her elbow slightly bent, her fingers spread, webbing tight. Her other arm slipped low in the opposite gesture, making a large S.

"What does it mean?" Nicole leaned against Kassandra's shoulder and breathed the words through her smile.

"Think it's a formal..." Kassandra whispered back, her voice trailing off as she spotted three young men in silver brocaded tunics with the Rexenor seabird stitched in black, following Lady Kallixene, several steps behind her.

Jill did her worried scowl without appearing to scowl expression, a hardening of the

skin around her eyes. Nicole simply glowered at them. Cassandra let the smile that was forming inside her rise to her lips.

Damn you, Grandmother, you are bold to bring them along. She noted that two of them had the Rexenor family appearance, the dark hair, the wider buttonish nose with blue-green eyes—and the third had lighter shoulder-length curly hair. Obviously from an unrelated noble family, no doubt intended to be Cassandra's escort.

Lady Kallixene stopped a few paces from her granddaughters. Her hair was a lot grayer than they remembered and her braids were nearly cotton white with a few granite stripes. Her eyes were as dark as ever, piercing points of infinity scanning the kitchen with a mother's it'll-do borderline approval. They rested on Zypheria and then each of the girls in turn, stopping an instant too long on Cassandra, before moving past Nicole to Gregor.

"You look well, my son."

"As do you, Mother."

"Except for your eyes, which seem to have lost most of their ability to perceive. I am old as the sea, Gregor."

He smiled. "You will not hear it from me."

A smile pulled at her lips. She bowed her head and he bowed back at almost the same time. She bowed to Zypheria who managed to bow her head right before Lady Kallixene. She bowed to Jill, met her eyes, and, taking in the thousand-dollar pale yellow skirt and jacket she was wearing, said, "You are stunning, Jillian. Your skill with sailing boats, and your keen eye and candor are welcome in my family. You remind me...of myself when I was young."

"I'm very honored, Lady Kallixene," said Jill, curtsying. She straightened, leaned forward, and whispered loudly and conspiratorially at the same time. "By the way, I love your gown. Is that silk? We're going to have to get you down to Newberry Street for shopping. I've also made you an appointment with my manicurist to get something fancy for your nails."

Kallixene nodded. "I look forward to it."

Jill's eyes slid to the right and met Cassandra's for a moment. She gave her a thank-you nod for advising her to change into something more conservative, taking Kass's recommendation that a short skirt with fishnets would not necessarily be received as "going for an 'oceanic' look."

Kallixene bowed to Nicole, held her eyes while the seconds ticked by, and a smile came to her lips before she released her. "Nikoletta? You have grown wiser. I welcome your strength and understanding in my household."

"You honor me, Lady Kallixene," said Nicole and bowed low, grinning at the Hellene form of her full name.

Phaidra and her troop of soldiers appeared in the kitchen, swords in scabbards. Three of them slipped behind Kallixene to stand beside Zypheria, hands behind their backs, legs braced apart.

Kallixene took a step closer to Cassandra, and they locked eyes for nearly a minute. Jill shuffled nervously. Phaidra and Zypheria wore identical suspicious expressions. Some of the Rexenor soldiers and all three of the young men in her wake exchanged wondering looks. Cassandra blinked, tilting her head down with a warm, genuine smile, and Kallixene followed her, but with tears pouring from her eyes.

"Lady Cassandra, you are truly Poseidon's Chosen."

Then Kallixene bent down and got on her knees.

There were several gasps, but Cassandra's shocked yelp drowned them. She dropped to the floor and threw her arms around Kallixene, her sword still in her hand, the scabbard digging into the gold brocade as she squeezed.

Phaidra and her soldiers snapped alert, their hands going to their swords. The three young men backed up to the top of the stairs. Zypheria kicked open the cabinet below her and the stock of a loaded crossbow fell against her thigh. She didn't reach for it. She pulled an entire drawn sword out of nowhere, and gave Phaidra and the entire Rexenor guard a look that clearly said: who wants a window seat on Charon's boat?

Kassandra kissed the tears off her grandmother's cheeks. "Do not do this, Lady Kallixene. Please, get up." She released her grandmother, helping her up with her right hand. Kallixene noticed the sword in Kassandra's left hand. She blinked, the sight of the weapon right in front of her taking her by surprise.

Kallixene swung her head to Phaidra, who had her blade half-drawn. "The house is clear of danger, daughter? You gave me the signal!"

Kassandra took in Zypheria's stance and weapon and then tossed her sword to her. She grabbed Kallixene's left hand and helped her to her feet, still scowling at Zypheria. "What the hell's going on?"

Zypheria bowed low, leaning back at the same time, surreptitiously shoving the crossbow inside the cabinet. She flipped the two swords she now held, hilt out, and slid them onto the kitchen counter behind her.

Kassandra's eyes moved over the Rexenor soldiers, to Phaidra, then back to Zypheria. "Answer me!"

Zypheria tilted her head down. "Milady. The Rexenor guard moved in offensive preparation when they noticed you had your sword."

Kassandra held her gaze another moment. Nodding curtly, she said, "Very well. Sorry, Grandmother. Sorry, Phaidra. Queen Andromache got a little tense when your guard came up the stairs with weapons drawn. She summoned it. I did not."

Kassandra sighed and let her gaze stop on her aunt, and then moved to the guards. She rapidly curled two of her fingers in, a hand-me-my-sword gesture, to Zypheria, who slid it off the counter and tossed it back to her. Halfway across the space between them it dissolved in the air, vanishing, and every Rexenor guard blinked in surprise. The three young men at the stairs gaped.

Ten seconds of silence followed, ending when the back door slammed.

"Who's hungry?" Michael Henderson shouted over the soldiers crowding the kitchen. He shouldered his way in with the groceries.

"Coming through." He stood a head taller than some of them, six-foot-six with a lanky frame and four overstuffed plastic grocery bags in his fists. "Fellow Rexenors, stand aside there. Excuse me, please. Fresh sushi! Shizuko says hello, Gregor. Man, the store was packed. They didn't have the wine I wanted. Got something from Australia to try. I also got a couple cold white Zinfandels. Let me get those in the fridge. Why's everybody hanging out in the kitchen? It's nice outside. Sun's out and Zyp and I set up tables and chairs this morning."

Then he noticed Kallixene and Kassandra just getting to their feet in the middle of the room. He swung the bags around and handed them off to Phaidra and Gregor without bothering to confirm that either of them had taken them. "Lady Kallixene! You're crying? It's the young ladies, isn't it. Aren't they amazing? Give me a hug!"

Kallixene smiled, wiped her eyes, and held him at arm's length, bending back to get a good look at him. "You have not changed, except you're hair is so short, Michael Henderson. You look like a criminal."

"Why thank you, my lady, and yours..." He looked her over for a few seconds. "Is a whole lot whiter. Fortress construction contractors stressing you out?" He bent down and drew her into his arms, cupping her shoulder under his chin and knocking his glasses askew. "You need a little vacation, Lady Kallixene. You, me, a couple friends." He winked at Zypheria. "Let's head out to Fiji for some wreck diving. What do you say?"

Don't answer now. Think about it. We'll talk later on." He released her, but left one arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"Come on, everyone." He waved them out of the kitchen, mildly annoyed at their anti-social behavior. "Wine glasses are in the cupboard behind Zypheria. Hand those out, will you dear? Grab a chair in the backyard. Gregor and I will bring the boats around. Shizuko set us up with some exotic stuff this time. I also have sake if you're interested. Anyone know how to use chopsticks? Don't worry. Your fingers work just as well. If you don't like sushi or sashimi, then...hmmmm. There's always peanut butter and jelly. I also have a bag of potato chips. After that you're on your own."

"Peanut butter?" Kallixene shook her head. "I must have some. Just a spoonful. I have not tasted peanut butter in thirty years."

Kassandra tilted her head to Zypheria. "See?"

Zypheria handed two wine glasses to a pair of Rexenor guards and shot back a look that plainly read: this only proves the existence of mental illness among Americans and the Seaborn nobility.

"What would you like, Mother?" Gregor pulled one of the wine bottles from the bag.

"Perhaps you can start by explaining the bolt in your ceiling?" She pointed to the fletching and shaft sticking out at a shallow angle over the kitchen sink.

His mouth opened, but Zypheria, in a perfectly serious voice, said, "We're going to hang a plant from it. Lady Kassandra found a beautiful fuchsia at the nursery, and I was looking for something unique for a hook."

Kallixene raised an eyebrow but followed Kassandra through the living room and out to the back walk. They descended imperiously to the grass, Kallixene's arm looped through Kassandra's.

"She doesn't lie nearly as well as you, Granddaughter."

"Few do."

Her grandmother leaned in and whispered accusingly, "What have you done to Nicole?"

Kassandra pulled away. "What do you mean?"

"I can hear her say her own name in her thoughts and it is not 'Nicole' or 'Nicolette,' but 'Nikoletta.' What are you doing to her?"

"I have taught her Hellene." Kassandra shrugged innocently. "She likes the traditional form of her name."

"You have dragged her into some plot of yours. Don't lie to me."

Kassandra stopped and swung Kallixene closer. Her voice dropped to a cold monotone. "I doubt, Grandmother, that you would be able to determine if anything I say is true or false. I have the Lying King in here." Kassandra tapped the side of her head.

"I know you are grooming *Nikoletta* for something. *Her* mind is open to me. Is she to replace Zypheria? Be your bodyguard? What is it?"

"My father adopted us all. She is my sister. That is all you need to know."

They strolled among the pines in silence for a moment.

"Your hand is hot, Granddaughter. Do you have a fever?" Kallixene looked over at her.

"No."

"Perhaps you should go for a swim?"

"Perhaps I will."

"How often do you go into the ocean?"

"Nearly every day."

"Where do you go?"

"Here and there."

"And everywhere?" She tugged Kassandra's sleeve up without warning. "Why are

there burns on your arms?"

Kassandra jerked her sleeve down. "What makes you think I would answer such a question?"

"I know what you are doing, girl."

"Don't call me that. And you have no idea, Grandmother, because if you did, you would do everything in your power to stop me." Her expression changed in a heartbeat from coldly serious to carefree happiness, a storm cloud suddenly shoved aside to let the sun through. She laughed lightly. "Oh, that's right. Everything in your power still wouldn't be enough." Her smile curled maliciously. "You do play smart, Grandmother, and I will always admire you for that."

"What are you talking about?"

"Getting on your knees? Welcome to my family? The tears, the three young...suits matched to your three young granddaughters." Kassandra's jaw tightened as if she was trying to lock down her words to a moderate level of civility. She gave up. "What, are you still pimping for Rexenor?"

"How dare you!"

Kassandra rolled her eyes. "Do not tell me you haven't calculated all of this to make it difficult for me to..." She ground her teeth.

"To what? Hurt me?"

"If you like."

Kallixene took in a slow deep breath as if trying to make it go on forever. She waved in admission.

Kassandra glanced over at the three young men hovering around Jill. Kallixene followed her gaze to the lighter-haired one.

"That is Menophon's youngest son, Nereus."

"Stop it." Kassandra's eyes snapped to hers. Lady Kallixene's commander of the guard, Menophon, had died horribly in the battle with the king's dead army, dragged into their midst and torn apart. "Don't make me angry or I'll break your soul like you and my mother broke my father's."

Kallixene's expression started toward a questioning scowl.

Kassandra raised a warning finger. "Pretending not to know what I'm talking about is a fine way to make me angry. It's unspeakable what you did to him. You hurt him badly, pushed him into a relationship with the Wreath-wearer."

Her grandmother paused while a pair of motorcycles roared up Ocean Boulevard. "I did not *do* anything. She loved him. I wanted...I wanted desperately to help Ampharete. Nothing more."

Help Ampharete? Nothing more? "You cannot lie to me." Kassandra leaned in close, bumping shoulders with Kallixene, whispering furiously. "Between you and my mother's *love*, you broke my father's soul."

"I did no such thing!"

Kassandra grabbed her grandmother roughly and swung her face to hers. "Then look me in the eyes and tell me you did not sell your only son cheap to the Wreath-wearer—a son who was perhaps going to be greater than Kassandra. I am the Wreath-wearer. I know what we're capable of—and how high we'll go to get what we want."

Kallixene spun out of her grip and they continued walking, not meeting eyes. They circled the yard and approached the white plastic tables with half a dozen Rexenor guards. Some of them looked up to watch them. Phaidra stood off to one side talking to Nicole, and both of them broke off to turn in their direction. All three of the young nobles remained around Jill, and she swatted one playfully in the shoulder, her laughter cutting through the air like sunlight.

"Can we take this conversation someplace private?" Kallixene's voice was cool, a

little louder, so that the others in the party could hear her. “And then, *Lady* Cassandra, I will answer your questions.”

Kassandra stopped grinding her teeth to say, “Certainly.” She left Kallixene in the protection of her guards, turned, and sang softly. The wind whispered, and she walked into it. When Nicole turned, Kassandra was gone.

She needed to feel the ocean on her skin. She dove out of the air and into the water a mile offshore, a small disturbance in the slide of blue between the crests of two great waves. In three minutes, she was over the edge of the continental shelf, missing through the water at a hundred knots, an angry snarl of turbulence following her, Eupheron’s voice in her head, telling her she needed less drag or her wake would grow and overwhelm her. She was doing well, but she needed more “throughness.” She needed to move not just through the water, but *all the way through the water, between it, not in it, but inside it. That is how the immortals do it.*

Kassandra returned home two hours later as the sun was setting. She came up through the grotto gate and the basement into the kitchen, her head tilted to one side, listening to one of the noble young men singing to Jill on the back steps. She smiled, rummaging through the medicine drawer for the burn cream. There was a hole scorched through the shoulder of her shirt. She dabbed the ointment on and went upstairs to change into something less deteriorated.

The three young men in Kallixene’s party had latched on to Jill like remoras, gliding in circles, hovering on every word on her lips, one taking her hand and leading her to the far side of the yard, while another followed and sang of the sorrow of Thetis.

Kassandra slipped by them—in the air—unseen, and overheard one of them whisper to his brother the ancient Hellene equivalent of “surface girls are so hot.”

Kassandra slipped out of the air right behind Jill, startling them all. She nodded her head to Menophon’s son to continue his song and slid her fingers through Jill’s hair.

“Kass, where have you been?”

“Here and there.” She closed her mouth to see what Jill would follow with.

“And everywhere?”

Kassandra froze at the same phrase Kallixene had used. She then pulled Jill’s long gold hair into three even sets, twining them, slipping the soft bundles over her fingers.

“And everywhere.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FIRST BINDING

The ancient historians (*archaioi sungrapheis*), the chroniclers and keepers of genealogies among the Seaborn tell us that there were nine original houses (*poleis*) of the Telkhines sent to the ocean's floor, and that centuries later, other disruptive families and individuals unwillingly joined them. Among the latter groups are the offspring of sea divinities of various strengths and forms (e.g., sea *daimones*), and at least one line, the Kirkêlatides, are said to be descendents of Circe (*Kirkê*), sorceress nymph of the island Aiaia, daughter of Helios and Perseis and grand-daughter of Okeanos, of whom Odysseus and his crew ran afoul. (She turned Odysseus' crew into swine).

—Journal of Michael Augustus Henderson

“Corina?”

She stopped screaming when her own voice started calling her with a concerned tone.

“Corina, you are upset?”

That didn't approach what she was feeling. *I'm having trouble understanding what you just did to that poor man. That was the most horrifying thing I have ever witnessed.* Deep within, Corina wondered about her use of the word, “horrifying”—it wasn't one she would normally use. *Am I picking up your speech patterns?* A truly horrifying thought then occurred to her: *I know your songs—all the words to the one about drawing out the soul in blood. Am I turning into you?*

Aleximor frowned, then kicked Pinnet again. “I do not at all comprehend your reason for showing this thing sympathy, Corina. It was not a man, not a ‘poor man’, not any thing that deserved sympathy. It was an unleashed animal with vicious proclivities, a thing that deserved nothing more than to be hunted and mercilessly killed. It was sent to harm me and, for that, even a king must pay.” His words tightened with anger at the end of his statement. He managed to unclamp his teeth and add, “Even a king must pay eventually.”

Aleximor gave Pinnet another kick and stepped over the body, placing his feet carefully to avoid setting them down in the pungent brown fluid pooling around the abdomen and legs. He stopped at the heavy wooden door and turned to take in the room.

He nervously tapped his fingers in the center of his palm, webbing going tight. He recognized some of the pieces of furniture, but everything was sharp and boxy, angular planes joined to each other, horizontal spaces fitted into perpendicular ones. Even some of the softer, pliable shapes, pillows and cushions, had corners and edges. He blinked repeatedly. The room was difficult to look at, so flat and shiny and sharp.

To Corina, it looked like what she'd expect from a modern crew cabin aboard a ship. There were dark-stained wood cabinets lining one wall, a simple single bed on a matching dark wooden frame. The ceiling was high, painted a high-gloss light yellow, with three I-beams running the room's length. There were medical books in a bookcase underneath a small porthole window. The bed stuck out into the room's center and beyond it was an alcove with an accordion door that served as the bathroom with a toilet, stainless steel sink, and mirror.

“What is this place?”

A cabin on board a ship, probably the ship you didn't get out of the way of. I think it's sort of a Law of the Sea, that a ship must stop to help someone in distress.

He was only half listening to her, distracted by the alien space, staring around the room. “The world of the surfacers is exceedingly strange. It's flat and there are so many edges and surfaces. Perhaps it is because I cannot see it from above or even from a different angle. I am fixed to the floor and can only observe the world through eyes at this height.”

Have you been to the surface before, I mean before you ended up inside the cave?

“Never. I have heard many stories, however. I had no desire to see it, a world so bright that it blinds you, so hot with Helios burning in the heavens that it bakes your skin and organs.”

Total darkness is better? How are you able to see at all below a hundred feet?

“That is also why I could not come to the surface. I enhanced the organs with which Nature provided me. I *could* see in complete darkness.”

Then it wasn't complete.

“Not complete for me. It is for most others. Because of this, I could come no nearer to the surface than ten or fifteen times my height. True Helios would have destroyed my sight.”

True Helios?

“The sun.”

I take it there's a false one?

“A twin. It follows a hemispheric path over the Nine-cities of the Thalassogenêis. A bright white ball of fire that some sorcerer with a self-damned soul formed and put into motion a thousand years ago.” Anticipating another question, he added, “I do not know if the Helios in the deep follows the same path and duration as the one above.”

That wasn't the answer to the question she was going to ask. She wanted to know what self-damnation meant and what it had to do with fire, but she ignored the questions spinning through her mind.

Aleximor glanced down at Pinnet's body, frowning at the smell.

It's beginning to stink like a public bathroom. Let's get out of here.

Aleximor closed the door and stepped into a narrow hallway with blue industrial low-pile carpeting. There were three other doors in the hall, all of them closed. The air smelled salty, but there were dull mildewy drifts, the tangy scent of fresh paint, and something else, the smell of dirt and oil, which reminded Aleximor of the stink of the man he'd just killed.

Obnoxiously bright yellow lights cast overlapping angles and blocks of shadow along the shiny walls.

What time is it?

“Tide will tell.” Aleximor looked down the hall and then turned back into the Medic's quarters. “I cannot hear the ocean clearly enough to determine. Is there something on a ship that will show me the time of the day?”

How about a clock?

Aleximor smiled at Corina's sarcasm. He had originally concluded that Corina had lost her senses permanently during the change. She'd seemed outlandish, confused, even deranged, made of bursts of thought that made no sense, long trains of violent music playing in her imagination, the same simple thoughts repeated hundreds of times, abusive language, and bouts of incoherent shrieking.

Now that she was speaking to him, he'd revised his estimation of her cognitive

abilities. They were indeed intact. The sarcasm gave him one more hint of what she must have been like before he stole her body. *Perhaps*, he thought, *all surface women were this odd.*

“I have seen a clock before, tarnished and green with age, and when I cleaned it—knowing that it must have been something important to the surfacers—there was, underneath the coral growth and creeping sponge, a very delicate instrument with gears and metal bands and tiny fasteners. The front of the clock had numbers and metal bars that seemed to turn and point to them.”

Aleximor swung his eyes around the medic’s quarters looking for something clock-ish, but without much to go on in terms of shape or size other than flat and about as big around as his head. He’d last seen a real clock almost two hundred years ago.

Whoa! Turn back to the bed. Big red numbers. There!

Aleximor fixed his eyes on three fiery square digits, a 2, a 3, then an 8, followed by the tiny letters, am. Even the numbers in this surfer’s world were blocky and sharp. He wondered if anything flowed, curved, undulated here. Was there nothing of grace and pliancy in the world above the waves?

Two-thirty in the morning—if that is the correct time. A ship like this must pass through several time zones on every trip.

“Is that late or early?”

Depends who you are.

Aleximor frowned, thinking that, on the other hand, too much sarcasm wasn’t healthy.

Corina caught his vibe. *It’s early. Everyone on board, except maybe the officers controlling the ship, is probably asleep. The sun won’t be up until six o’clock or somewhere around there, so nearly four hours to ourselves. Let’s find out where we are. I mean, where we are in the world, but we should also get our bearings on board this ship, find out how big it is. The one that ran over you was a cargo ship with containers on the deck and cranes.*

“Maria Draughn.”

Corina felt a wave of something soft float over her thoughts, a warm breeze, a mother’s breath on her child. She shuddered, certain that what she felt was the glow of admiration from Aleximor. Then he confirmed her fear.

“Corina, you definitely improve on acquaintance.”

In what manner have I improved?

“To name a few, civility. You have a strong will. You have a calculating mind, Corina. There is strategy in your words. I will take your advice, but I have one task to complete before we explore the ship.”

What is it?

He ignored her, looking around the room, mumbling to himself, “They took my knife.”

He stepped back into the medic’s quarters and closed the door softly, heading for the bathroom alcove. He rummaged through the drawers and pulled out a sharp-tipped pair of stainless hair-cutting scissors.

Corina stopped her thoughts, alarmed as he grabbed the scissors like a dagger, her blue fingernail polish, chipping but intact, the webbing between her fingers tucked neatly into her fist.

What are you going to do with that?

“I cannot do this alone. I am going to bind our handy friend to me, and use him to do some of the more difficult work. He’s fresh, so this will not be as dangerous as raising the Spaniards. I will not have to deal with Akastê.” He paused, considering something, then added, “On the other hand, you’re fully alive.”

I’ve always taken that to be a good thing.

He made a disdainful ticking noise with his tongue. “Normally, yes. But for someone

like me, a whole, unadulterated life is a burden. It limits my abilities.”

Aleximor approached the body carefully as if it could jump up at any moment with a surprise attack. The pinkish brown liquid was drying in the carpet, leaving a darker ring at the edges. It was like wet sand at the shoreline, except the intestinal soup was crusting up along the perimeter.

Aleximor crouched next to the corpse and turned Pinnet’s head so that the blank stare of empty bloody eye sockets faced him.

“Stiffening in the neck and shoulders.”

She felt the urge to wash her hands. *What are you, like a coroner?*

“I do not understand the word, Corina, although, it is similar to your name. Does it have something to do with the king or crown? Are you a coroner?”

A coroner is a medical examiner, someone who determines the cause of death. And no, I am not, nor do I want to be a coroner. She couldn’t hold back an accompanying contemptuous remark. Nor do I want to be a bone-gatherer—or whatever you are.

“*Ostologos* is an old title, the sorcerer who helps the king or queen manage the dead army, the Olethren. I am, however, much more than that. I have my own fortress and army, bound to me alone, and far superior to the king’s ancient army of the drowned dead.”

Knowing this was a ridiculous question given what she’d already witnessed, she threw it out just to see what he’d respond with: *What good is an army that’s dead?*

He sighed.

“When my eyes last looked on the abyss, there were over a hundred thousand of them in the Olethren, pulled from broken ships, sea caves, from the floor silt that swallowed their bones. There may be many more of them now. They are the remains of surfacers who have drowned. The Sea has taken their spirits, and in many cases, with the right enticement, can be made to relinquish them.”

Corina wondered about this. He said the Sea with a capital S, making it sound as if the Sea were someone hawking souls for the right price.

He picked up her thoughts.

“Very dangerous. Tempestuous bitch. She goes by many names. Akastê—the Erratic One—is what she’s called herself with me. She takes many forms, has power over the ocean’s currents, and she owns anyone who drowns in them. You met her when I forced her to give me the Spaniards. My ancestors bargained with her, and—for a price—she has allowed us to bring the dead back from death into our world and bind them to the soul of the king of the Thalassogenêis.”

Seaborn. She translated the word without thinking. *These drowned dead people can fight?*

“Walk and swim and hold weapons...and above all, kill. They kill everything they touch. Some are given spears or other devices of destruction. They bite, they claw out eyes, they snap bones. And they cannot be stopped. The Olethren do not surrender and they do not take prisoners. Once the Seaborn king or queen releases them, they do not stop until all life is driven from the foe’s stronghold. Then they return to their fortress.”

And this happens often?

“They have been used by the Thalassogenêis for over two thousand years. I have only seen a king bring them out for war twice. They were created by the current royal house, Alkimides, in order to bring down the former royal house, Telkhines. An immortal would fear them. They can be broken individually, but the army cannot be defeated without defeating them all, and with so many of them, that is impossible.”

While he spoke, Aleximor’s eyes drifted to the dead man’s greasy blue coveralls, stopping on the oval patch with the name, *Pinnet* stitched into it.

“Pinnet.”

The bone-gatherer bent closer, turning his neck to line up his face with the corpse’s pasty gray face. He dragged the zipper down, tugging the blue material, exposing the upper chest and shoulder on the right side.

“Pinnet. Mr. Pinnet.” Corina shuddered hearing her own voice sing to the corpse. “I hope, for your sake, that you will be a good deal more helpful to me in death than you were in life.”

With that, Aleximor drew his arm back and hammered the scissors deep into Pinnet’s shoulder. Blood oozed from the wound instead of spurting. There was no heart pumping it through the body. It pooled in the depression made by Aleximor’s fist, thick and oily, seeping between his fingers.

What are you doing? Corina shrieked the thought.

“Something the king’s Oletren cannot do—take the souls of those they kill. My army is far fewer, only five thousand, yet far greater in ability and speed than the king’s. I have also devised a method for harnessing the *psychai* of the freshly slain, a temporary binding that passes the harvested *psyche* back to the master binder—me.”

With that, he got back to work. He slammed the scissors into Pinnet five times, cutting away a flap of muscle, spraying wet chunks of flesh and chips of bone against the wall, splatters of it peppering Corina’s face. He was after the bone, for the same reason he’d taken pieces of the four Spaniards. Corina watched in horror as Aleximor raised one of the larger fragments right in front of her face, and she saw her own fingers running with blood, slick on her nails, gathering in the webbing between each finger and damming up against the ridge of muscle across the top of her palm.

It hurt her...mind to see her own bloody hands, but she didn’t feel the least bit sick—because Aleximor didn’t.

Aleximor sang softly, a litany about death and life and the trading of one for the other. The cramps started in Corina’s chest, stabbing into her belly; muscles contracted, squeezing her lungs, tearing them from her ribs. Her body felt too small for her bones. Her joints ached, and there was a separate agony in the space between each vertebra. The color drained from several hundred strands of hair, going pure white from scalp to tip.

She gasped the words, *What have you done to me!*

“Death, Corina Lairsey. I have given some of this life in order to bring Pinnet back. He is now bound to me, completely in my control.” He paused at another jolt of spinal pain. “Do...not...worry.” He breathed, squeezing tears from Corina’s eyes. “I have accepted some of death and given some of your life in return. It is perfectly safe. I have done this before. Pinnet is fresh and will not require a significant amount.” His words trailed off into a gurgling rasp and saliva oozed from her sagging mouth. Corina’s bloody hand opened and the chip of bone had been reduced to powder, mixing grittily with Pinnet’s blood.

“Slowly. It must be done in very small amounts.”

Until what? Answer me! What is the result?

“I will have restored the form of the soul and position I once created for myself. Until I have traded every last piece of life away, and I have become not dead, but death itself. That is when I cannot be harmed in life, and where complete power lies.”

Corina’s thoughts split and shuddered apart, crumbling into uselessness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RITUAL DROWNING

In the absence of any studies or teachers of fire magic, Lady Cassandra of the Alkimides relied on her influence with the immortals, the sea *daimones*—especially Ochleros, to teach her the methods for summoning and manipulating fire, molten rock, and controlling their energy and reactions. She learned many other skills from them as well.

—Michael Augustus Henderson, notes on a conversation with the Wreath-wearer

Jill thumbed the remote, swung her purse off her shoulder, and hopped into the minivan's driver's seat. The morning sun, low over the ocean, beamed through the tinted glass windows. The side doors slid back automatically with a growl of metal wheels on tracks. Nicole jumped in the third-row seat. On the opposite side of the van, Aunt Phaidra nodded her head, thanking the door for its apparent courtesy, and slid into the seat.

Kassandra got in next to her, holding in a smile at Phaidra's alien world alertness, eyes darting to everything that moved, touching unrecognizable knobs and vents. She nodded again at the door as it slid closed automatically.

Phaidra played with the armrests, which swiveled up and down while everyone else put their seatbelts on. Jill started the engine, and the jet of air from the vents startled Kallixene, and made Phaidra jump into some sort of seated combat position, one hand out, fingers spread, and the other curled into a fist.

Kassandra rested a warm hand on her arm, and leaned close. She slid her eyes forward, indicating Jill and Kallixene. "While the girlies are getting their nails done, would you like to shop somewhere else?"

Phaidra spread her fingers, staring down at her nails curiously. "What colors do they paint them?"

Kassandra shrugged. "Anything you want." She reached up front and tapped Jill on the shoulder. "What about the webbing between Lady Kallixene's fingers?"

"No problem." Jill gave her a sympathetic look with one eyebrow raised in the mirror. She kept the look as she turned and backed the van into Atlantic Avenue. "I told Maxine my grandmother's a mermaid."

"You *what*?" Nicole shouted from the third row seat.

Jill took the sunglasses off the top of her head and slid them on, pushing the transmission into drive. She adjusted the side mirrors as they sped west toward Route 1, and then she glanced back in the rearview.

"I told her that Lady Kallixene's a mermaid and she wants her nails done. Something retro gorgeous, like a reverse French in a sky blue, but with something new and fun—a glittery edge or stars, you know." She saw the worried looks from Phaidra, Kass, and Nic. "What? Everything's covered. Maxine's cool. This is a private appointment. And just to be sure I told her that if she told anyone about the mermaid thing, my grandmother would turn her into a barracuda."

Kallixene smiled, pleased for the most part—but there was a sinister edge that made it

clear that if Maxine talked, the best she could hope for was a barracuda. She patted Jill's arm indulgently. "We're fine."

The air jetted from the vents and Phaidra kept tilting them to direct the currents toward Cassandra, who eventually reached up and shut off all the air to the back seats.

"So..." Nicole began, ". . . tell me and Jill about the drowning thing." No one really wanted to talk about it, but that had never stopped Nicole. She cleared her throat from her seat in the back row and continued. "What happens? Kass says it hurts a little. Who's going to be there. Is it all underwater? Give me the whole run down, start to finish."

Kassandra leaned sideways against the sliding door. "Did you ask Michael Henderson?"

Nicole shook her head.

Phaidra twisted around and grabbed Nicole's hand, firm but affectionate. "Gregor will be there. Lady Cassandra, some of our guards. Mother will sing to you. You will release all of your air. Close your eyes then. Do not watch it rise above you, for I have heard that surfacers see their life in the air they breathe, and watching it leave their bodies is distressing. Do not panic. Let the ocean come inside you. You will become one of us. It will be safe with Mother guiding the change to your bodies."

Jill made a face and glanced in the rearview at the mention of bodies changing.

"Zits," said Kassandra. "That's another thing. My skin's clear in the water. But it never fails. I won't be above the waves an hour before a raging pustule shows up on my nose or chin." She pointed to one along her jaw.

Jill made another face in the mirror.

"The change is different for other mammals and cetaceans," Kassandra added. "Our dolphins and orcas may be sea creatures, but they need to live in depths unnatural to them and they can't surface for air, so they must change, too."

"Michael did explain that once," said Nicole.

Kallixene listened intently without turning around. She pulled down the visor and lifted the lid to her mirror. The lights blinded her for a moment, and she squinted through her lashes at the close-up of her face.

Phaidra turned back, the vanity mirror diverting her thoughts. "What do you have around your eyes, Mother?"

"What is it called? Eye liner?"

Jill added, "A metallic violet liner that matches her top."

Kallixene let Jill dress her, and she came out of her bedroom wearing a black skirt and hose with a sleeveless top made of some purplish material that warped and pulsed in iridescent splashes when she moved. Nicole had muttered something about "taking Grandma clubbing." Phaidra had stared at her mother as if she didn't recognize her. Kassandra had simply shaken her head.

"What changes exactly?" Jill looked at Phaidra in the mirror and then at Kallixene.

"You will not feel the cold in the water or the pressure," said Phaidra.

"Your hearing is affected," said Kassandra. "Your eyes will become more sensitive, but most of the changes are on the inside, doing things that permit your body to take in the sea and live off its power. It only works in the water. The hardest part is coming back out to the Thin. You have to get the water out of your lungs. Your new power will help you with this, but it burns a little."

Nicole slouched in her seat, stared thoughtfully out the window, and whispered, "My new power."

Kallixene slapped the mirror shut, swung up the visor, and turned in her seat to give Kassandra a hard stare. "And what surprise do you have up your sleeve?"

Kassandra just smiled. "It wouldn't be a surprise then, would it?"

Jill swung into a space right in front of the Triple M (Mad Maxine's Manicures) and killed the engine, jumping out of the minivan with a delight that seemed to halve the gravity of the entire planet.

"Come on, Grandmother, we're right on time." She held the door for Lady Kallixene, and waited a moment for any other takers.

Kassandra and Nicole glanced at their watches, wondering how eight minutes after the hour could be considered "on time". Phaidra glared through the open door at the scrawny heavily eye lined, nose-ringed teen with stringy blond hair manning the cash register.

She shook her head, and turned to Nicole. "Where else can we go?"

"This way. See you in a few, Jillie," she shot over her shoulder, and headed across the parking lot to a mega sporting goods store.

"A few...minutes?" Phaidra asked hopefully.

"Hours," Nic and Kass harmonized.

Inside the store, Kassandra had to lead Phaidra around by the elbow, because her aunt kept stopping in the middle of the aisle and staring at the boats and paragliders hanging from the ceiling. "Come on, we'll check out Zypheria's favorite place in the store."

Nicole chewed her lip and followed them. "Diving and swimming section?"

"No, we go down that aisle for a laugh. Soon, you will too. Hunting's her favorite section. You should see her with the crossbows. It's like Christmas. If I let her, she'd be in here for hours, chatting with the geezers behind the counter about carbon fiber gunstocks, arrow ballistics, and killing penetration. She's very discreet with her fingers—the webbing, and completely lies about her underwater purposes." She gave them a lopsided smile. "Of course, they all fell in lust with her when she told them her favorite time to hunt was in the pouring rain." Kassandra dropped her voice. "I usually have to drag her out of here. She thinks it's funny. It's *damned* embarrassing. If she's here more than fifteen minutes, all the men line up at the front counter, right against it, the one with the fishing reels..."

"Why?"

"Let's just say my Zypheria arouses—not another word, Eupheron—arouses certain thoughts in them. I'm guessing it has something to do with fantasies of her running through the forest in a soaking wet T-shirt, no bra, and a loaded crossbow."

Sure enough, when the three of them approached the hunting section, one of the salesmen, a gray-haired red-nosed man in a short-sleeved collar shirt, spotted Kassandra, grinned and asked, "Did you bring the huntress with you?"

Nicole ran with it, smirking at the old man. Then in a flat bored voice, she said, "Artemis sent us down to look for stiffer quarrels."

He went red, cleared his throat, and pretended to straighten the stack of safety guides on the glass counter. "What can I do for you ladies?"

Kassandra brought her hand down flat and her name bracelet rapped against the glass. "Same thing. Let's see the crossbows."

An hour and a half later, with their heads stuffed with crossbow stats, "over 350 FPS of velocity, a nice flat trajectory, includes a fiber-optic sight," and a tree of numbers hanging off terms like "draw weight" and "power stroke," they walked away from the counter with three big boxes and several bags of accessories, mostly ammunition. Phaidra stared down the old man who jokingly asked, "You stocking up for a war?"

They took a table in a sandwich shop three windows down from Mad Maxine's where Phaidra almost threw up when Nicole urged her to try some Ranch dressing. Kassandra said she didn't feel well and ate nothing. Aunt Phaidra ended up with an

obsessive hunger for kettle chips, scaring the young man behind the counter by going back four times and wanting to pay more for each bag than the marked price.

They spotted Lady Kallixene and Jill coming out of Maxine's, and only just managed to stop Phaidra from going right through a clear section in the window after them. They steered her through the door and she dashed into the street with Cassandra and Nicole following.

Kassandra slowed her pace, scanning the shoppers. Nicole lost her grin when she looked over at her sister's cold serious stare. "Kass, what is it?"

Kassandra didn't look back. She just held up a finger.

A second later, she said, "Someone's here, in the crowd. I can feel it." She jutted her chin at Nicole. "Take a walk. Head toward the toy store and then circle around on the sidewalk. Tell me if you notice anyone like us."

Nicole started to frown but stopped when she understood "like us" meant "Seaborn". Determination settled into her expression and gaze. "You got it."

"All the way around. We'll pick you up at the end, past the video store. Watch the way they walk. I'm going out to the street to get a wider view. Phaidra's with Lady Kallixene."

Phaidra had jogged away from them, going to the minivan, meeting her mother and Jill. Kallixene opened the passenger door, but stood in the gap, immediately aware that something was wrong. Her gaze met Cassandra's and she jerked back at the amount of information hitting her. She nodded, got in and slammed the door. Phaidra got in the back, the doors clicked shut, and Jill backed the van out of the space, cruising along the store windows and strolling shoppers.

Kassandra crossed the parking lot, sliding between cars, surreptitiously glancing behind her, or tilting her head back, pretending to watch a small airplane droning overhead while dropping her gaze to roam over the shoppers: a family pushing groceries in two carts, a construction worker with a toolbelt heading for his truck, a woman with a crying baby. She lost Nicole and scanned the storefronts, picking her out halfway along the strip with a video store on the end—and, right in front of her sister, walked a tall woman with long black hair, moving with a graceful gliding motion, her arms pumping the air energetically. She wore a long dress with leggings, Seaborn fashion.

Kassandra doubled back, angling toward the video store to meet Nicole there, following the woman with long hair, trying not to focus sharply on her in case the Seaborn could feel it. She scowled when Nicole picked up her pace and walked right by the woman, then slowed to match her speed, several shoppers in front of her. Cassandra jutted her head sideways, trying to warn her. Didn't Nicole notice her?

Then she understood what her sister was doing. Nicole slowed in front of a bakery, let the two shoppers pass her, and—without appearing to look—walked right into the black haired woman, almost knocking her over, grabbing her arm, in the last second, to steady her.

"Bold, Nic."

Kassandra picked up speed and crossed behind a row of cars. She watched Nicole apologize, smiling stupidly, gesturing at the stores as if they had distracted her. Then Nicole turned and continued at a quick, properly embarrassed pace to the end of the row of stores. She walked into the parking lot and stopped next to a boxy silver Honda with roof racks. Pretending the car was hers, she fumbled in her pockets for imaginary keys. The lady with black hair reached the sidewalk's end, turned around and headed back the way she had come, looking through the shop windows.

Kassandra slid around a Jeep with enormous tires and caught up with Nicole as Jill drove up with the passenger side sliding door open. Nicole jumped into the backseat, nodding her head. "Yup. She's one of us. I walked into her, pretending to be clumsy,

and noticed her hands. She has webbing.”

Kassandra and Phaidra kneeled backwards on their seats, their arms over the headrests. Hidden behind the dark-tinted van windows, they watched the woman walk away. “Who is she, Lady Kassandra?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen her before. She felt different too. I picked something up from her, a different sort of...signature.” Her eyes went unfocused, her brows knuckling up with internal concentration, and she whispered a song in someone else’s voice. “Something ancient, a sweetness too pure to find among mortals and mortal voices.”

There was a chilly silence in the van. Jill slowed down, cautiously passing a parked North Hampton police cruiser bristling with speed-trap gear. She passed through two more intersections along Lafayette before her heart slowed to a normal rhythm.

When they turned right on Atlantic, heading east, Kallixene held up her hands, webbing tight, her fingers straight, the moons of the nails a creamy opaque and the ends an iridescent bluish red.

“She’s gone. Forget about her. Look at my nails!”

While the noble ladies went into town to have their nails done and shop for archery supplies, Gregor, Michael Henderson, Zypheria, and seven of Kallixene’s Rexenor guard piled into a pick-up truck and headed out to Rye to prep *Stormwind* for sailing.

Michael Henderson led a basic sailing course. “*Stormwind’s* a cutter, which means she’s got a single mast. She’s a fore-and-aft-rigged boat with multiple headsails—she’s got three. Notice also that the mast is set further aft than a sloop’s.”

The Rexenor guards, none of whom had ever set foot on a sailboat, noticed only because he pointed at the shaft of metal sticking up out the boat, all of them exchanging the same puzzled look: “What in Poseidon’s name is a ‘sloops’?”

Henderson paced the forty-two feet, stem to stern, while he explained the purpose of the multiple jibs, which, “with the forestaysail dropped and combined with a reefed mainsail and the full staysail, makes for a damn tight rough-weather rig.”

He lost them all at “forestaysail,” although there was some nodding at reefing the mainsail because they all knew what a reef looked like, and one of them made a knowing draping motion with his hands, as if at some point they’d take the sail off and stow it under the boat, but only when they approached the tropics. One of the Rexenors stared at the harbor’s mouth and out to sea, wondering if there was a reef within a thousand leagues.

“Michael,” said Zypheria, interrupting his monologue on how much weather justified flying the small jib. “I think it would be wiser to show them how the machinery works, how to raise and lower the sails, what the wheel does, and maybe a little bit about how the wind works.”

“Excellent! Gather round.” He pushed the chrome wheel one way then the other. “This is how we steer *Stormwind*.”

Lady Kallixene and her party drove up in the middle of the afternoon, dressed for getting wet. In forty-five minutes they were underway with Jill skippering, the sunlight in her hair, fingers tight on the wheel, her favorite place in the world. Nicole and Michael Henderson handled the cloth, and everyone else was just along for the ride, gulping in gusts of salty air and pointing at seagulls, fascinated at things with wings.

Kassandra sat at the bow, chin in her hands, brooding about the strange Seaborn woman in North Hampton.

They passed the Isles of Shoals, flat slabs of brown rock miles off the port side. There was mild chop and a good wind. They sailed until they reached a uniform horizon, a flat line of blue that was almost black, broken with little ruffles of white in every direction. Jill

yelled that *Stormwind* was coming about; the sails snapped and the boom swept the space over her head. Nicole dropped the jib while Mr. Henderson hauled down the mainsail, and left the boat drifting in the currents.

"I believe we are ready," said Lady Kallixene, but the wind whipped her words away.

Kassandra tugged on the elastic of her bathing suit bottoms, snapping it lower on her butt. She hopped lightly to the narrow runner along *Stormwind's* starboard side, arms out for balance, her face lifted to Helios, her eyes closed, and one tear rolling down her right cheek, a silvery line on her skin.

"Kassandra?" Gregor called from the mast where he was helping Michael Henderson furl the mainsail. "Are you okay?"

She ignored him, but everyone else on board turned to her as she let her head fall forward, and the teardrop slipped off her skin into the sea. Breathing in spasming sobs, she dug something gold out of the tiny pocket in the shoulder of her long-sleeved shirt, clutching it in one fist, and without looking back, dove in after her tear.

The Rexenor guards moved to the starboard side, glancing at Lady Kallixene and Phaidra for cues. Kassandra surfaced a minute later, her eyes red and swollen, wearing a defenseless smile. She sounded like a little girl. "Come on in. The water's great."

Nicole didn't have to be told twice. She peeled off her sweatpants and shirt, wearing a dark blue one-piece suit underneath, and dove in. She came up shivering, her teeth clattering, cutting through her words, urging them to hurry.

Zypheria, Lady Kallixene, Phaidra and all but two of the guards went in at the same time, hardly moving the surface of the ocean. Michael Henderson and the remaining Rexenors were going to take *Stormwind* for a trip up around Newfoundland before returning to Rye.

Jill was last, hugging Gregor, who jumped in just before her.

Kassandra circled and then surfaced between her sisters, pulling them together with a hug. She kissed each on the cheek and whispered, "Be calm. This will be over in a minute. Afterward, we'll dive deep to the Rexenor stronghold. You are my sisters. You will be Seaborn. You will have everything afforded to you by right."

She kicked to a position behind them as Phaidra took hold of Jill's shoulders and Zypheria took hold of Nicole's. Lady Kallixene faced them, but kept shooting Kassandra suspicious looks. Then she noticed the thing that had come from Kassandra's tear, thundering out of the ocean like an island. The Wreath-wearer couldn't cry because she used her tears as doorways for Ochleros, a king among sea demons.

Ochleros' head and shoulders stuck up out of the blue right behind Kassandra, an enormously muscular humanoid made of the waves and foam and turbulence. His head was bald and splotchy gray, like a granite boulder rounded by storm waves, with a craggy brow ridge over abyss-deep black orbs that stared without pupils or detectible focus. Ridges of clashing currents rolled up his back. His shoulders tumbled into the ocean five feet on either side of Kassandra. She looked like a child in front of him, braids swinging in the wind, innocently unaware that the shadow she cast on the face of the sea had monstrously long teeth and claws, but a closer look revealed a drop of it in her soul, like a splatter of ink on white paper, a stain of his power in her dark eyes.

Lady Kallixene snapped her hands open nervously, spraying water. "I cannot concentrate with him here."

"He's helping me." Kassandra rubbed her eyes.

Jill and Nicole glanced over their shoulders to see what the problem was, but they had met Ochleros several times and, on the list of anxieties, ranked him lower than imminent drowning.

"Helping with what?"

"Mind your own business, Grandmother. Get on with it, or I will do it for you."

Phaidra's mouth dropped open, stunned at hearing anyone command her mother. Zypheria shook her head, resignedly. Nothing Cassandra did surprised her.

Kallixene let out a long controlled breath, trying to hold on—with her iridescent fingernails—to her patience. “Very well. My granddaughters, Nicole and Jill, you have agreed to go with us, and we have selected your partners in the rite. Close your eyes, take your final breath, a shallow one, and push as much of it out of your lungs as you can, then we will begin.”

Nicole glanced at Jill, and winked before shutting her eyes and emptying her lungs. Zypheria flipped upside down, grabbed Nicole's ankles in her strong hands, and kicked into the depths.

Nicole shuddered as the dark water closed over her head. The cold on her face was like a slap, and she opened her eyes because her lungs reflexively pulled in the sea. There was no air left in them.

Jill gave a last exhale and launched a fist-sized mass of bubbles to the surface. She jerked her legs hard, trying to break Phaidra's grip, but kept her eyes shut tight.

Lady Kallixene dropped into the sea with them, starting her song about a home in the dark sea and bestowing the curse on her two beautiful granddaughters. She sang about “the flow of life from birth to death, first to last breath...breathless breathing...doom of the Cloud-gatherer, boon of the Earth-encircler.”

Kallixene sang, her eyes half-closed, and the Rexenor guard formed a semi-circle around her, their hands white on the grips of their swords. They feared the huge demon accompanying the Wreath-wearer, although all of them had seen this one and benefited from his presence once before, in the final moments of the battle in Nebraska against the king's dead army.

Behind her back, Cassandra took a small curved knife from Ochleros, flinching as she touched the tip to her skin. She cut an inch long crescent-shape into the meaty part of her left palm. Reversing the step, she cut the shape into her own right palm.

Jill's eyes fluttered open, snapped wide, and then relaxed as she drew the ocean inside her. Nicole closed her eyes as her lungs worked the fluid, straining to move it. Sharp cramps prodded and poked their insides, rearranging organ functions. A burn raced through their bones, stepping up their spines, fanning over their shoulders and their arms to their fingertips. Nicole made chewing motions against the ache in her jaw, and opened her eyes.

Cassandra swung her hands from behind her, blood following like a cape of sheer black. She grabbed Jill by the back of the neck and cut a small crescent in the muscle tissue on the left side, then the opposite with Nicole. She glanced down at the knife and heaved it over her shoulder to Ochleros. Before Kallixene or Gregor could question her, she placed the cuts seeping blood from her palms directly over those on her sisters' necks, digging her fingers into their skin.

“Do it, Ochleros.”

“Are you certain, Lady Kass—”

“I said, do it!”

Cassandra closed her eyes. She felt a jolt through her body that shoved her organs around. There was a metallic taste in her mouth. A burn deep in her stomach...reminded her that she hadn't eaten yet today.

“What happened?” she whispered over her shoulder, her fingers still clawed into Nicole's and Jill's necks. “I didn't feel anything.”

Ochleros' voice was a deep volcanic rumble. “You have not yet given up who you are, Lady Cassandra. Perhaps that is when you will feel something?”

She whispered, her thoughts a mile away, “Or maybe nothing is exactly what you feel when you give it up.”

Kassandra released her sisters as Gregor swam to her, a look of horror on his face. “What have you done?” He looked at her hands and then at Nicole and Jill.

She sounded disappointed. “Nothing, apparently.”

She waved him away, holding one hand out to Ochleros. Her fingers trembled and she focused on them to keep them still. She held up her other hand. The blood and the deep cuts were gone. There were no marks of the knife on her sisters’ necks.

She blinked away the rush of questions, and lifted her eyes to her grandmother, nodding. “Please, put your bracelets away, Lady Kallixene. I have brought my own.”

Ochleros’ enormous fingers opened and a small jumble of gold fell into her hand. She picked out two of the bracelets. Then she spun Nicole and Jill by the shoulders in opposite directions so that they now faced her.

She held each of their gazes for several seconds.

“Close your eyes, my sisters. Think back to lovely St. Clement’s Education Center. Dammit, Jill, you knew everyone in that school. Remember the day you two scared the hell out of me, the day you brought me to the administration office to meet Mrs. Lindsey, the day she dug out my personal effects envelope and gave me my name bracelet, collecting dust for years. It was the day you ended my sentence, the day I discovered the school was no longer my prison, that I was free to go. I had my name back. I became an Alkimides again.”

She flipped over the faceplates in her palm, pushed one over Jill’s pale hand and the other over Nicole’s brown hand. They looked down at them, bright against their wrists, staring at the Alkimides stamp.

Kassandra took their hands, tugged them around so that they faced their grandmother. “By the grace and generosity of Lady Kallixene, we are Rexenor and Megalesios. We are also Dosianax, the house of the current king, may his rule end soon. But above all, we are Alkimides, the royal house of the Thalassogenêis, the chosen of the Lord of the Sea, may his rule never end.”

Lady Kallixene bowed to Kassandra, and then to her sisters.

“Welcome, Jill and Nicole, to our world.”

Nicole turned to Kassandra, opening her mouth, releasing the heavy fluid, an expression of wonder struck deep into her features. “So, this is what you’ve been doing all this time?”

Kassandra laughed. “This isn’t half of it. Wait until you see the Rexenor fortress or the Nine-cities.” Her eyes went unfocused at her own mentioning of the city, as if a particular distant memory had the power to magnetically attract all of the thoughts in her head toward a single point on some mental horizon.

Jill put her hand on Kassandra’s shoulder, bowed her head to Lady Kallixene, and tried out her voice under the sea. “You took my breath away, Grandmother.”

Kallixene started to smile, but at that moment Kassandra—in a burst of possessed rage—threw one fist above her head and half-sang half-screamed the Alkimides war cry, her voice a siren’s song that hooked their senses and chilled the thoughts in their heads.

“On Alkimides!” She was a young woman on the outside. “Right of the Earth-encircler, dark-haired Lord of the Sea!” On the inside, part of her had been there, storming the walls of Telkhines outposts with three thousand of the drowned dead—the seed of the Olethren. “Souls arise, with third fore-fathers by our sides...” She drove the Telkhines from the Nine-cities, led the hunt for them to their old homes in Rhodes, and to the ends of the earth.

“We will kill the old kings!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HOUSE REXENOR

The food of the Seaborn is simple, fish and arthropods making up the main dishes with various plants of the sea—grown in the light of Helios' Twin—used for flavoring. I have heard that there are confectioners in the Nine-cities that create wonderful gelatin cakes, but over all, Seaborn fare appears very limited. It can be assumed that some Seaborn traveling to the surface have found the cuisine above the waves so superior that living out of the ocean is preferable.

—Michael Henderson, notes

The Rexenor fortress blended into the volcanic stone of a serrated branch of the mid-Atlantic mountain range, thousands of meters below the surface of the ocean, high walls with concave faces and needle-like spires shooting into pure black hydrospace. A dance of light hit the Lasthenes Massif, a central tower of lumpy rock rising above the walls and capped with a smaller fortress. A cold blue orb floated a few hundred meters above the walls, spraying light in all directions, mimicking the sun Jill and Nicole had left behind. It shimmered in velvety bands off a protective shield that domed the entire fortress and half the mountain.

Lady Kallixene's party dove through the night, gliding on a barge as big as a school bus on currents that knew no sun, through a fluid as black as ink, a darkness that played with the human senses in ways that Jill and Nicole had never experienced. Light blinded and hurt the senses. Darkness thrilled them until they spent every moment striving to perceive. The senses delighted in its purity.

Jill suddenly understood why Cassandra referred to anything that went up, rose, or lifted as wrong or bad in some sense. Thin was evil and depth was good for people who lived at the bottom of the ocean.

Nicole pointed at a small array of lights like fireflies fanning out in the blackness a mile way.

"Those are mine," said Lady Kallixene. "The perimeter guard has detected our presence and they're preparing for our arrival, two lines of guards to guide us to the front gates."

"What if it was a trap? What if we kidnapped you, took all of your guards hostage, dressed up as Rexenors and came calling as the Lady of the fortress?" Nicole said it in a half-joking tone.

Kallixene stared at her with a serious expression. She let it fade into a smile. "Who is this 'we' that will do these things?"

Nicole shrugged. "I don't know. Me and Kass."

Kallixene nodded. "We have ways of verifying our numbers and condition long before we approach home." She pointed into the nightwater, and Nicole, leaning forward, caught faint outlines of soldiers, glints off spears, the flat mammalian caudal fins of dolphins and killer whales enlisted in the service of Rexenor. "They have trailed us for miles. Not all the flashes of bioluminescence you see are anglerfishes and comb jellies.

Some of them are my own scouts, and...you and Kass do not know the codes with which we signal in response.”

Nicole shook her head at what appeared to be bitter sarcasm in her grandmother’s voice. “It just occurred to me, Lady Kallixene. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Nothing ever just occurs when Lady Cassandra—or any Wreath-wearer—has a finger in it. Do not forget that.” She didn’t want to say it, but the words spilled out like a tipped box of needles. “You can bet that she has already planned her own funeral.”

As if on cue, a blaze of pale blue light streaked across the night like a comet.

“Speak of the devil.”

Kassandra had not ridden the barge on its descent, instead bolting off to the east without a goodbye-wave right after the ritual. She tired of Kallixene’s snippy tone and her father’s concerned questioning glare—which made her soul curl into a hot lump of torment every time he caught her attention. Fear weighed down every word from his lips, but it was something in his eyes that pleaded with her to let him help her, that some madness had crept into his daughter, and if she would just come to her senses for a moment, he would explain the method for expelling it.

Of all those present at the ritual, Kassandra felt her father might be the only one who had a hint of what she was planning. He had been the one with the bleed in the family, and he was as accomplished a sorcerer as she knew—outside of her own head. She couldn’t risk his questions. At least not in front of others.

She had kicked into the night—passing *between the water* as Eupheron put it, not *through* the water—sobbing without tears, circling the coastline of the Bay of Biscay twice before returning to meet the party as it arrived at the rebuilt fortress of House Rexenor.

The pale green glow of the Wreath faded and went dark halfway through a spiraling path under Lady Kallixene’s party, and her personal guard snapped alert, drawing swords at a signal from Phaidra.

Kallixene had one of her guards signal the scouts to expect Lady Cassandra and let her through their defenses, but frowned when they reported their inability to find her.

Just as Kallixene passed an angry reply to her signaler, a huge killer whale swept in from the left hand side, gliding up to the edge of the barge with a saluting Rexenor soldier in the saddle and Kassandra standing in a crouched position right behind the orca’s dorsal fin, her arms tucked in hydrodynamically.

As they approached and slowed, Kassandra danced out of the archer’s stirrups, slipped around the front of the armored orcaman and pushed up the cheek-guards on his helmet, leaning in to kiss him. She closed her eyes and kissed him again, harder. Then she danced away, slapping the soldier on the shoulder before landing on Lady Kallixene’s barge.

“Did you see that?” she said to Nicole and Jill. “King Eupheron has taught me to suppress the damn Christmas-tree glow of the Wreath so you can’t see me coming.”

“Great. Just what we need.” Kallixene gave her signaler’s arm a squeeze to tell him to cancel her message to the scouts. She glared at the departing killer whale and its rider. “Who was that?” She snapped each word off like a prisoner’s fingers in the hands of a torturer. “How did you manage to—” She struggled to find a word other than infiltrate. “—get a ride from one of my own house lords without approval?”

Kassandra waved in her escort’s direction with a puzzled look, blinking as if hurt by her grandmother’s suspicion. “That’s Nereus, Menophon’s handsome youngest son, the escort you chose for me.” Then her confused expression and tone slid into open contempt. “I thought we were supposed to be friendly. I arranged to meet *my* assigned escort before he departed, and he happily agreed—more than happily. I believe his words were, ‘I would do anything for you, Lady Kassandra.’ I thought it was part of

your purpose in bringing three noblemen to my father's house, pairing them up with your granddaughters. Please, I beg you to correct me if that was not your intention."

Nicole shook her head, wondering how Cassandra had the audacity to schedule an assignation with the young man, apparently for the sole purpose of using him to mock her grandmother's fortress defenses.

Lady Kallixene closed her mouth, collected the line of attack she had organized, and threw it away. She displayed a sharp smile and bowed her head. "I am pleased you understood my intention so thoroughly, Lady Cassandra."

"What are you girls going to do first?" Gregor slipped back to sit next to Cassandra, his purpose to break up the tension his biological daughter had smuggled aboard. Jill and Nicole sat cross-legged on the barge's floor, staring into the black space above, occasionally pointing out flashes of light.

Nicole glanced at Cassandra, held her eyes a moment, and then turned to Gregor and said, "What did you do first when you came out of the sea, Dad?"

He laughed bitterly. "I was one of the king's porthmeus slaves."

Kassandra flinched and grabbed his arm, shaking him as if to jog something loose. "The *very* first time above the waves?"

He shook his head as if that set of memories belonged to another life and he had to plug it in and give it a minute to come online. He blinked. "Oh, yes. Mother took me shopping in Boston when I was eight. We walked right out of the Charles River, into downtown traffic, and a taxicab almost hit me." He laughed. "She dragged me up and down streets with nothing but clothing shops—and all the surfacers stared at us."

Kallixene's face brightened. "And the only place you wanted to see was the store with the big metal bear out front."

Phaidra laughed. "The toy store. I remember that!"

"F.A.O. Schwartz," said Kallixene. "I bought him a submarine made of little yellow plastic blocks. It had little surfacers that went inside and they wore masks if they wanted to explore our world." Anticipating the next question, she added, "It survived the Olethren and the destruction of the old fortress, buried in the sand."

Gregor stared off into empty water with a reminiscing smile. "I remember how difficult it was to put together because there were so many little pieces and the box and directions disintegrated before we reached home."

He said the word "home" and squeezed his eyes closed to hold off tears.

"I am deeply sorry." Gregor blinked and looked at his daughters. "There is a reason I do not visit the fortress often. The painted plaster walls of our house in New Hampshire do not invade my dreams."

Kassandra tilted her head back, suddenly understanding. "The stone. Walls of stone."

His eyes slid over to her. "I have nightmares." He nodded to Jill's puzzled look. "The lithotombs. I spent twelve years in them."

"But they're filled with air, I thought," said Nicole.

Kallixene fell silent, folding her arms as if she were cold, staring down at them.

"I cannot imagine the pain of the lithotombs," said Phaidra.

Kassandra looked at Kallixene, but she spoke to her aunt. "How long do you think you could endure it, Lady Phaidra?"

"Not an hour!"

"No," said Kassandra seriously. "I mean really. How long?"

Phaidra looked at Gregor who stared at the barge's floor. Kallixene came out of her daydream scowling at her granddaughter.

Kassandra asked her question again. "How long would you be able to survive the lithotombs, Aunt Phaidra?"

“Why do you press me, Lady Cassandra? I do not plan to find myself inside one. Any answer is irrelevant.”

“I would expect that very few of those in the king’s prisons anticipated finding themselves there, and yet, there they are, inside a block of stone without the water on their skin, screaming in panic, clawing their fingernails raw on the walls of a sealed stone box swinging from chains in the floor of the abyss. Punishment worse than death.” She leaned toward Phaidra. “Guess if you must. You know how curious I am. How long would you last, Phaidra?”

“Kassandra!” Kallixene’s voice trembled with the shout, as if the question burned her. “Please.”

Kassandra leaned back. “It’s funny, Grandmother.” There was nothing funny in her voice. “Have you even been to the lithotombs? I can still hear the pain in my father’s voice, shouting at me, calling me a liar—through the stone wall, because he thought I was another of King Tharsaleos’ tortures, the voice of a girl with his daughter’s name taunting him, trying to trick him. I relive the nightmare of running to find him in the prison. Of running away from Nebraska into an ocean I didn’t know with a demon I met the day before to find my father in the abyss, and no matter how fast I swim, no matter how loud I plead with Poseidon, I never make it in time. I always arrive minutes after the king has taken him away. All I can hear is the ring of the chains that once held the tomb to the floor as Ochleros moves them with his claws.” She held her mouth shut, holding her teeth so tight they hurt, locking eyes with Kallixene. *I didn’t see any goddamn Rexenors down there looking for him!*

“I don’t have time, Lady Cassandra.” Kallixene kicked away, grabbing a thick waxy tablet out of an assistant’s hands, marking it with a stylus, and handing it back.

“When?” Kassandra trailed her.

“You have done nothing but torment me since we came above the waves. Please give me some peace.”

“Not until I get what I came for.”

“And then you will give me peace? What is it? More about your father?” She beckoned her to one side of the main assembly hall, a vast room with raised benches and her throne, and then into an empty dining hall.

Kassandra followed, shoulder to shoulder, glaring at her. “Torment *you*? You saw my father on the barge. You did that to him, Grandmother.”

Kallixene held a hand up while she sealed the door behind them.

Kassandra continued in an enraged whisper. “You fed my father to the Wreath-wearer.” Everything that had been building since Kallixene had cut short their argument in the backyard stacked up in the front of her mind.

Kallixene whirled with an accusing finger pointed at her. “He loved Ampharete, and he willing—”

“He had no will!” She shouted at Kallixene. “Once my mother wanted him, he had no will. *Shut up, Mother!*” Her gaze flew back to her grandmother. “You might as well have cut him up and fed him to sharks. They would have treated him with more kindness.”

“How dare you!”

Kassandra threw her arms above her head in exasperation. “Why does everyone use that phrase with me? As if you or anyone can do anything to limit what I dare.”

Kallixene glared at her, grinding her teeth.

”Go on, Grandmother.” Kassandra’s tone softened. *She’s bluffing. Call her on it, steer the talk toward bleeding.* “I can see plainly how you maneuver. You think you still have *enough* to take me on?”

“The Megalesios line does not bleed quickly.”

“Quicker than you think.”

“And you have your father’s bleed.”

“Nearly all of it.”

Kallixene accepted defeat, dropping her shoulders. “With two bleeds you are—”

“I have four of them.” The shock of rising emotion frightened her. She tried not to sob. “I am a monster, Kallixene. My head is so full it feels as if it will explode.” She loosened her fists and took in a deep pull of the ocean.

Kallixene’s shock tightened all the muscles in her face. “Four? Is that even possible?”

“Without losing my sanity? I’m not sure...I’m not sure I’d know it when—or if—the answer ever comes to me.” *Use the word ‘trust’ in a statement. She will follow, defeated. Chase with an apology.* “Or if I’d even trust you enough to tell you.”

The fury died in Kallixene’s eyes. “Your anger frightens me. You are nothing like the girl who followed Ephoros into the sea.”

“No, I’m not...anymore. Ephoros is dead, and I have grown up. I’m sorry. It’s not as if I’m angry enough to kill you—I wouldn’t have given you this much time to argue about it if that were true. I wouldn’t even be speaking to you if I did not think—”

“If you did not think you would get something from me?”

Kassandra hit her with a hard focus, nodding. “You do have insight into what the Wreath-wearers are like, Grandmother. It will make this easier.”

“Easier to what?”

“As you said, hurt you.” Kassandra whispered the words. “I love you, Grandmother. If I had a choice, I would not ask anything of you. You have already given one life to the Alkimides line.”

“I have given many.”

“I am speaking of your own blood. Of your own flesh, my lady.”

Her grandmother lowered her eyes. “In private, call me Kallixene. You did a moment ago.”

Kassandra leaned forward, about to say something, and stopped herself, studying her grandmother. *That was very smooth. It’s some kind of reliance-building tactic she’s throwing back at me. Does she keep up the title and formality in order to have this kind of disarming leverage when she needs it? I was close to accepting it without thinking. She offers a high value gift that creates an obligation, and obligations can be called in. Damn, you are good at this, Kallixene.*

Kassandra gave her a quick bow of her head. “I cannot get a straight answer out of the others inside, but I think I have finally figured what the Wreath really is—part of its purpose at least. It’s a strategy engine. An instant general—just add seawater. It was Lord Poseidon’s attempt to better the ruling power of the Seaborn, something like a benign monarch development process. I want to do the right thing...only there are days I think that...” She shook her head, hesitating over the rest of her statement.

“What?”

“Benignity is overrated. I have a thousand plots going, Kallixene, all in pots on the stove, and half of them are on high—everything else is simmering. I have a scheduling system in here—” She tapped the side of her head. “—that giganto-corporate project managers would kill for. I have the generalship of Andromache plugged so far into my brain, she can become a part of me any time I wish. I have immortals at my beck and call. The ocean has submitted to me. I can open my eyes a certain way and see walkways right through the air...because there is moisture in it. And I cannot stop until Tharsaleos is off the throne. I have four bleeds of power coming into me at once. Compared to my mother, compared to any of the Telkhines, compared to any other Wreath-wearer, I am a monster.”

Kallixene looked at her in terror. “Or a goddess.”

“And the difference is?”

Kallixene scowled, confused, and her eyes started filling with tears. It was like some devil’s bargain, coming back to haunt her, returning again and again, taking more. “What do you want from me, Cassandra?” She sobbed the words.

“You bargained with *her*. I want the same thing the last Wreath-wearer wanted.”

Kallixene’s eyes filled with a gush of fresh tears, but she didn’t understand, shaking her head. “Your father?”

“One of your children, Kallixene. I’m talking about Phaidra.” Cassandra brought out the third bracelet with the Alkimides name on it and handed it to Kallixene. “This is for Aunt Phaidra. I need her to be my eyes inside the City, and she won’t be able to get in with her head on her shoulders as a Rexenor.” Cassandra turned at the door. “I love you, Grandmother. I promise you that I will do everything in my power to see that as little harm as possible comes to her. If I succeed, Rexenor will return from exile in greater standing than any other house in the Nine-cities. I will see to it personally.”

“Why don’t you get along with Lady Kallixene?”

Nicole’s question took a few seconds to penetrate Cassandra’s mood as they kicked across the assembly hall, weaving through small groups of Rexenors awaiting judgment or approvals from the Lady of Rexenor. Some looked up, staring at the two sisters as they passed.

“It is not your enemies who are most likely to thwart your plans, but your friends.”

“Okay, now try answering me without maxims, Ms. Bonaparte. And that’s it. You’ve used up your ‘thwart’ ticket. You only get one thwart in a lifetime. I’d better not hear that word out of your mouth ever again.”

Kassandra stopped in the water, one side of her mouth turned up, a finger crossing her heart. “Not as long as we live. I promise. ‘Frustrate’?”

“‘Frustrate’ is fine. How about just plain old ‘prevent’? What’s wrong with ‘prevention’? Why should anyone suffer the indignity of being thwarted?”

“How come you get to use thwa—the T-word so much? And I only get one?”

Nicole shrugged simply. “I’m on the Dean’s List. You’re not. Honors students get certain privileges.”

“Speaking of, has anyone mentioned the library?”

“What library? Whoa.” Nicole grabbed her shoulder. “No changing the subject. Not until you tell me what’s up with you and Lady Kallixene.”

Kassandra’s thoughts had already started plodding down a mental side street. “Didn’t Napoleon crown himself emperor?”

“Something like that. Pope Pius the Seventh wasn’t good enough. Napoleon handed over a pile of land to the Vatican in exchange for the approval of placing the crown on his own head. Thinking of doing the same?”

Kassandra looked at her with an unreadable expression. “I’m not asking anyone’s approval. It’s the former king or queen—or someone honorable—who traditionally place the crown of the ruler of all the Seaborn on anyone’s head. I will do the crowning myself.”

Nicole elbowed her. “Enough. Tell me about you and Lady Kallixene.”

“Okay.” She looked around to see if anyone was watching them. “This way.”

Kassandra grabbed her sister’s wrist, turned, and hauled her to the end of the crowded assembly hall, down a brightly lit tunnel and into a large room with a low ceiling, full of armor on racks.

“Where are we going?”

“Where we can’t be overheard. Sound travels fast through water.” Cassandra snapped the lock on the door, turned and gestured over her shoulder, in the direction of the hall where Lady Kallixene oversaw all of House Rexenor’s administration. “It’s not that we don’t see eye to eye. It’s that we do.”

Nicole frowned at her.

Kassandra frowned back. “I would trust her with my life, but not my schedule or my plans. She meddles too mu—”

“Kass! Listen to yourself. That’s shit and you know it. You tell me the real reasons.” Nicole glared, her fists going tight. “And you better not give me one more bullshit Wreath-wearer line.”

Kassandra jabbed a finger at her. “Then you better be damned sure you want to hear this!” she shouted, holding Nicole’s eyes, surprised at the strength of her mental defenses.

Nicole swallowed, leaned back, and nodded her head. “Please? It hurts to see you two fight. I feel the anger whenever you’re in the same room. I thought you loved her.”

“I do, okay?” Kassandra nodded. “Kallixene made the decision to bring me into this world.” Kassandra glanced around the empty room. “And she traded my father to Ampharete to have me.”

“Traded? To your mother?”

“Do you know why my mother named me Cassandra?”

“After the greatest Rexenor lord. You’ve told me.”

“But do you know why?”

Nicole shook her head.

“Because my father, Gregor Lord Rexenor, was going to *be* the next Kassander, but she knew he wasn’t going to make it through all of this...intact. I am named after my mother’s and Kallixene’s two-bleeds-in-one-person experiment! I am named after the original promise of the man who got used up in the research, Nicole.”

“But Dad’s awesome. He’s—”

“*Dad* isn’t even a tenth of the man he was when he was our age. Dad was one of the most powerful sorcerers in this place. Dad could talk to the old ones of Rhodes, what remains of the Telkhines. Dad had his own seadragon. Do you know who carries around the other ninety-something percent of what used to be his power? Me! I die every time I look at him—because it’s me who’s killing him. And I can’t even cry about it! I am his destroyer, Nic, and my mother and my grandmother made me what I am. Is this what you wanted to hear?”

Nicole shook her head, her mouth open but empty of words, her eyes filling up.

“No Wreath-wearer bullshit, Nicole. Welcome to my family. Just desperate plans for regaining the throne and restoration of an exiled great house—and we’ll walk over our own goddamn children to get there.”

Nicole grabbed Cassandra by the shoulders, her tears smearing the water in front of her face. She embraced her sister and held her so tight that the wound on her right side throbbed.

“I’m sorry.” Kass dug her chin into Nicole’s shoulder. “I should have told you this. I need you. To hold me together. Just for a little while longer. You are the smart one. You’re the artist. You’re the Renaissance Woman. You’re on that damned Dean’s List.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Please. I will give you anything. Just promise me you will help me get that murderer off the throne.”

“I promise.” Nicole released her, holding her at arms length, trying to read anything in her dark eyes. “We’re sisters. I promise.”

Kassandra closed her eyes, shivering, her face going pale.

“Are you okay?”

Kassandra waved at her wearily. “Fine. I did something...and I don’t think it worked the way I wanted it to. Besides, you want to ask me something.”

“I do? I mean, yes, I do.”

“What is it?”

“Are you...” Nicole hesitated. “Are you the disease or the cure?”

“I’m the Wreath-wearer. Part of me doesn’t even think in those terms. Part of me is scared that I am the first.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “I don’t understand why you don’t take the throne right now.”

Kassandra pointed to her head. “Because it’s telling me I’m not ready. I still need many things. Some of the things it wants me to do I can’t even tell you—or I’m ashamed to tell you. One I can. I need an army—either created and trained by me, persuaded to fight for me, or somehow compelled or paid to fight. Less than five thousand.”

“From where?”

“I’ve answered that a hundred ways. Everything from kidnapping Navy SEALs to the appearance of an entire army out of thin air. A hundred paths. I’ve set them all in motion. One of them is bound to succeed.”

Nicole looked doubtful. “SEALs—as in elite fighting forces?”

Kassandra placed a hand on her hip. “Not really kidnapping. You don’t think I could persuade them?”

“How?” An answer shot to the surface of her mind and she blushed.

“What do you take me for?” Kassandra’s mock anger slid off her face, replaced with a scheming smile. “Sure, I could do them all. I did think of that—but only because I was listing every possible method of getting them to fight for me.”

“And how would you *actually* do it?”

“Give them the curse. If I have assessed them correctly, very few would refuse to join me in return for the powers you now have.”

In a whisper, Nicole said, “I guess I can see that. One more?”

“Sure.” The word was bright, a forced cheerfulness, and the effort it took was obvious.

“I have to know. Did you plan to tell me this? I mean what you said about your mother and Lady Kallixene. Is this part of some schedule?”

Kassandra nodded before she even considered a lie, and then a look of panic hit her features. “I’m so sorry. I am the Wreath-wearer. I can’t turn it off. I have it all in here. Down to you standing up to me and squeezing me tight and forcing me to shed my tear and summoning Ochleros with—”

“Lady Kassandra,” said the demon’s rumbling voice. “I have brought Lady Nikoletta’s armor and sword as you requested.”

Nicole spun away from Kassandra, glaring at Ochleros.

“Please believe me, Nic.”

“It’s okay.” Nicole sounded distracted, and held up one hand approvingly. “I stood up to you. I think I expected it. I would have...I had already made up my mind not to believe you if you said this wasn’t planned. I promised without making it a condition on the rest. I will help you.” She stared at the knee-length hauberk of silver scales Ochleros held out to her. “You’re giving me my own armor?”

“And a sword.”

Nicole kicked up to Ochleros, unafraid, and took the armor off a stiff frame made from what looked like a tree of some woody kind of coral. There was more scale armor clothing folded over one of the branches.

“Pants too?”

Kassandra nodded. “Put them on. This is a three-dimensional world. They can come

at you from any direction. An attack from underneath is especially effective. You don't want a spear up your twat."

"That's—" Nicole stuttered the next word. She squeezed her legs together, looking down with a worried look. "—d-dishonorable!"

"To say the least." Cassandra laughed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TRIBUNAL AT SEA

The Wreath of Poseidon was a gift of the Lord of the Sea to the Alkimides family for their victory over the Seaborn Royal House, Telkhines. Bitter, as are many gifts of the sea, the Wreath quickly became a burden to the new Royal House, steering the Alkimides more than guiding them in their rule over the Seaborn.

—Michael Henderson, notes

Deputy Art Ramirez of the Monterey County Sheriff's Department stepped cautiously from his patrol vehicle, coming around the back to use the armored sedan for cover. He twisted up the magnification on his lenses and scanned the spectral data of the compact car parked in the weeds next to a couple of wind-gnarled cypress trees. A week's layer of sand and dust coated the old Toyota compact, opaquely sheeting the windows. He noted the lack of footprints near the vehicle and approached cautiously.

Nothing appeared out of the ordinary in the scan of the car, blocks of color with a lot of warm pink because the sun had baked the metal and plastic body for . . .

SatStat cut into his comm in a pleasant woman's voice with, "The target vehicle appeared in its current location between 08:14 hours PST October 4 and 17:50 hours PST October 4."

Deputy Ramirez crouched down and wiped the sand from the Toyota's rear license plate with one gloved hand, and whispered, "Nine days."

Satellite Status continued after a computationally intensive pause with, "Single occupant for the target vehicle, possibly female, shoes: no, footprints lead west from vehicle, terminate in the Pacific Ocean."

Ramirez stood up, turning to face the low wind-smoothed dunes. Nothing but the gulls crying and grass shooting from caps of creamy sand.

The plate-run status service cut in, this time in a man's clipped tones, "Target vehicle registered to Corina Lairsey. C-O-R-I-N-A. First name. L-A-I-R-S-E-Y. Last name. Female. Age: Twenty-two. Height: five feet seven inches, one hundred and seventy point one eight centimeters..."

He let the voice slide into the background as he scraped the powder off the rear driver's side window and peered inside. Corina Lairsey's clothes and shoes had been thrown into the backseat on top of what looked like a large musical instrument case, and next to it, a wad of elastic webbing used to hold scuba tanks in place.

Ramirez straightened, a chill running under his armor. "Repeat that, Status."

The service paused for context and then responded. "Report filed October 6 with MPU. Corina Lairsey reported last seen AM October 4."

Ramirez's twelve-year-old daughter, Catherine, was taking diving lessons in Sand City while he stood beside the vehicle of a diver who had apparently gone into the Pacific nine days before and never come out.

"Stat, I need a Coast Guard notify on Corina Lairsey, and a vehicle pick up."

The deputy climbed to the peak of the dunes and stared out at the Pacific Ocean, empty except for rec traffic, mostly sailboats. "Where did you go, Corina Lairsey?"

“Corina Lairsey?”

She couldn't focus, her thoughts gathering too much momentum to stop when she needed them to, stumbling by like a drunk trying to stick a key in a lock. She heard someone calling her name through the ice-cold alcohol rinse she seemed to be soaking in. It was a man's voice, with an accent she couldn't place, something close to Spanish. For a moment, she dreamed that the voice was Aleximor's real one, that she'd been rescued and Aleximor had been expelled, and her body was hers again.

But it wasn't his voice.

There was a torrent of thoughts sloshing around her mind, the rush of a fear so deep-cutting it hurt to remember, and looking back meant blindness.

Don't look back. You're not going back. He's going to kill you. He's going to kill you slowly.

The scene in front of Aleximor's eyes pushed through her defenses.

She saw the captain of a ship and two other officers sitting across from her. Corina's thoughts coalesced, and took in the scene as clearly as she was able to through whatever psychological game Aleximor was playing. *What's wrong with you? Did they give you something to...um...calm your nerves? It doesn't feel like you're pretending.* After a moment's consideration, she added, *I don't need you weirding out on me.*

He rocked back and forth, staring vacantly at the table, occasionally glancing up at the three men.

She didn't like the cold bureaucratic looks the officers wore.

Oh my God, they're going to try me and execute me.

They'd caught her with scissors, blood everywhere, running down her arm, Pinnet's body on the floor—obviously one of the crew—and there she was with the murder weapon. Thoughts piled up in her mind, tumbling over one another. *What kind of laws prevail at sea? Can they hang me from the yardarm? Plank walking. International waters. Whose jurisdiction? No passport, sold into slavery, Interpol, South American prison, Count of Monte Cristo, nameless grave.* She thought of never seeing her sister or aunt again. She thought about the cool Pacific on her skin—her own skin, about her music, about her car parked next to a cypress tree, baking in the dry California sun.

Cypress branches, the symbol of mourning.

The oldest of the ship's officers, a gray haired grandfatherly man, watched her with intense rust-brown eyes. He leaned across the table, sliding his hat aside and patting the arm of the man on his left, a huge angry bald man in an officer's uniform with a handgun in a holster on the table in front of him.

The captain said softly, “Miss Lairsey? Please tell us what happened.”

A sharp biting anger uncoiled inside Corina. *When did you kill Mr. Pinnet? How many days have passed?*

She remembered a dream of night, infinite darkness, loose gravel under her bare feet, blindness, and a strong wind at her back, as if she had been teleported somewhere outside her body.

Where have I been?

Aleximor was tight with his memories and thoughts, and it was only when he let his guard down or in his dreams that Corina picked them up clearly. He opened something up in his soul and told her, *Two days have passed, Corina. I thought you might tell me where you have been. I have called for you. I thought you had somehow fallen into insanity or...departed.*

She spent a few seconds entertaining insanity and how pleasant that might be.

What do they want? Tell them that Pinnet tried to rape me, he touched me, tried to rip my clothes off.

Her own voice, rough with pain, echoed her thoughts for the uniformed men in the room. “Pinnet attacked me and tried to rape me, he touched me, and tried to tear off my clothes.”

Corina wondered if Aleximor had been playing the confused victim in order to buy time for her, because he suddenly lifted his head, making eye contact with the officers and spoke clearly.

“He held my hands down, and then I kicked him.”

Stay in character. You need to put some pain back in your voice. Look, the older one’s shoulders just dropped. He’s relieved to hear you say Pinnet attacked you. This was self-defense. Tell them that everything happened so fast. The man pinned you to the bed and the next second you were grabbing the scissors out of the bathroom drawer. Tell them!

Aleximor dialed up the mental disarray. “Every...thing. It happened very quickly. He pinned me to the bed. I did not know what to do. I—”

The next thing you remember!

“The next thing I remember...I was taking the scissors from the drawer and...and...”
You don’t know what happened next. It’s all a blur.

He brought her voice down to a whisper. “I do not remember what happened after that.”

Now, cover your face with your hands. Can you cry?

Aleximor gasped loudly and sobbed into his hands.

Not bad. Don’t overdo it.

The captain cleared his throat. “I apologize, Miss Lairsey. I am so sorry.”

Don’t look up. Keep your head down. It’s the older one in the middle speaking.

“I am Martim Teixeira, Captain of the *Maria Draughn*. Mr. Pinnet was a...violent man, and I am terribly sorry for what has happened.”

Corina wondered what kind of name Ta-shay-rah was.

“Miss Lairsey,” said the skinny boyish looking officer to the captain’s right in a polite British accent. “I...er...have a few questions for you. I’m Second Officer McHutcheon. I cover the medical needs of the crew. Can you explain the skin between your fingers?”

Smile sheepishly. Corina felt Aleximor tense up. Don’t know what a sheep is? Guiltily, as if your friends talked you into getting your nipples pierced. More muscles tensing. Didn’t you do anything outrageous when you were a kid—just to piss off your parents? Hurry! Make a face. Say, “It’s all the rage in Hollywood. Cosmetic mermaid surgery. All the girls are getting it done.” Say it just like that.

“...all the girls are getting it done.”

McHutcheon stared at Corina as if an eye had opened in the middle of her forehead.

Shrug your shoulders and glare at him defiantly. Do it!

“Fine,” said McHutcheon softly, not knowing how to respond to someone who purposefully mutilated her hands. Californians, they were notorious for such behavior. “Can you tell me, Miss Lairsey, what happened to Mr. Pinnet’s eyes?”

Oh shit. He ate them?

“Miss Lairsey, we looked around my cabin when we cleaned up...after the mess, and his eyes...they’re gone.”

Tell them you don’t remember. Say it, “I don’t know.” Put your face in your hands, sob a little.

“I don’t know,” whispered Aleximor, curling into a shuddering knot, burying his face in his hands.

The room was still except for Corina’s trembling and sniffing. The three officers watched her with varying levels of concern. The second officer, Trevor Aldrich, was on Teixeira’s left. His fingers played with the snap on the holster strap, his little finger tapping

the handgun's black plastic grip.

Aldrich cleared his throat. "Miss Lairsey. I have a couple questions."

Aleximor looked up, eyes puffy and red, then he went into a full breakdown with tears streaming down his face. "Stop staring at me, please. I am not a monster. I don't know what happened. I don't remember."

Yes, you are.

The captain and McHutcheon looked away, uncomfortable. Aldrich seemed unmoved by the display. "This doesn't have anything to do with Pinnet's attack. I'm simply curious."

Corina felt something heavy drop inside her body. Aleximor sensed danger in Aldrich's tone.

Aleximor brought Corina's voice low and solemn. "What is it?"

"We brought you on board and you had a sealed container for your driver's license and a few other possessions." He gestured casually with an open hand. "Why are there two rings in the pouch when, with the skin between your fingers, you cannot wear rings?"

Ha! Get out of that one. What you get for fucking with my hands!

Aleximor nodded, relieved, wiping the tears from his eyes. "They belonged to my mother. She and my father died in a...terrible . . .

Fucker! Car accident. Say it. A drunk driver killed them.

...and I carry them for..." Aleximor's whispering voice trailed off. He was fishing for something to say.

Damn you! You carry them because they mean a lot to you, it's like Mom is with me, when I carry them.

"...because they remind me of my mother, as if she is with me when I carry them."

"Return everything to Miss Lairsey," said the captain, annoyed at Aldrich's question. Aleximor's eyes dropped to his hands, but he looked up at the slim watertight pouch Aldrich slid across the table, grabbing the gun on the return trip and putting it out of sight.

"I'm sorry," said Aldrich roughly. "I didn't mean to upset you further." He didn't ask his last question—why there were four pieces of what looked like bone in the sealable pouch.

"I think we are done for now, Miss Lairsey," said Teixeira, turning to McHutcheon. "Can she return to your cabin, Daniel?"

"Yes, sir. The room's been cleaned. We don't have any women's clothing on board. Sorry, Miss Lairsey, but we have collected something for you to wear."

Aleximor bowed Corina's head almost to the table and whispered dejectedly, "That will be fine. Thank you."

McHutcheon continued as if speaking of nothing more serious than the weather. "We've zipped Pinnet in the bag and put him in the cooler on deck three. Phari turned the refrigeration on for me. I can perform a cursory examination for cause of death, sir."

Teixeira cleared his throat, indicating with a sour look that, although a response was required, he found it distasteful. "The insurance company suggested it and more. I told them we would do what we could." He held up a hand to stop McHutcheon from continuing the discussion, and turned to Aldrich. "See that Miss Lairsey gets to her room safely, Trevor."

"Sir." Aldrich stood, scraping his chair against the rough wood floor.

He led Corina up a flight of metal stairs into the sunlight. Aleximor, stunned for a moment, held his hands over his eyes, squinting painfully at the dark blue surface of the ocean off the starboard side the *Maria Draughn*. He breathed in a lungful of the sea air.

"Beautiful."

"This way, Miss Lairsey," said Aldrich, directing her along the open corridor to a white painted metal door standing ajar at the other end. They went through it, down a

flight of stairs, turned right at the crossing of two long hallways. They made a left down a short hall with a white metal wall at the end, blank except for a big red fire extinguisher below a sign that had the word “Fire” in half a dozen languages.

He opened McHutcheon’s cabin with his set of keys, and held the door for her. At the threshold, he gave Corina a curt nod, his face tight with something he wanted to say. “I don’t trust you,” he managed in a low voice. “I don’t know what it is about you, but you haven’t been truthful.”

Aleximor took this in with an appropriate blank stare. “I am not certain I understand you.” His gaze dropped to the name badge. “Officer Aldrich.”

Aldrich didn’t answer, but gave her another nod and extended his arm to the door.

Corina’s thoughts sharpened to a bitter edge. *Which means you will be the first to die, Officer Aldrich.*

Aleximor latched the door and made a careful circuit of the room, looking in all the corners for intruders before smiling to himself and responding to Corina. “You heartless villain. Aldrich is not next.”

It seemed to me your obvious next move. Who then?

“The physician, McHutcheon.”

Why? I liked him. He scared me the least of the three.

“Did you not catch the current—the curiosity—in his tone when he asked about Mr. Pinnet’s eyes? Not Aldrich, but McHutcheon. He is meddlesome, but incautious. Aldrich is wary, and anticipates a move against him. It will not come for days.”

Saving the best for last?

“I would not say best, but the one who possesses a moderate amount of common sense. Intelligence, wisdom, these are simpler things to manipulate. Common sense is another matter. The captain is another one to watch.” Aleximor stopped to ponder something. “Corina.” He paused as if selecting his words carefully. “You have astonished me several times...in the great similarity in the turn of our minds.” He actually sounded nervous, which scared Corina more than his anger. “We are alike in many ways, and, in such a short number of days, I have come to have a high opinion of your judgment. So much, that I cannot help fancying that with enough time together you and I will grow to...enjoy each other’s company.”

Please... Her thoughts begged for a response, rolling awkwardly over each other. Don’t. I can’t... She reined in every stray notion, held them in mental fists with knuckles going white, and then continued in a controlled manner. At this time I can only consider you an unavoidable evil. I see no resemblance in our characters, motives, or judgments, and certainly nothing that approaches a faithful portrait. And because nearly all of her thoughts surfaced as something Aleximor heard: Why am I speaking like this?

“Have it as you choose, dear heart. We must dance together for some time. Until I can devise a method for extracting you.”

She didn’t want to piss him off, either. *What did you expect? That my acceptance of this would be ready, that I would be grateful? I said unavoidable. It doesn’t mean I won’t speak to you. Or think to you...or whatever this is called.*

“I happily accept that, Corina Lairsey.”

Go to the mirror.

She felt her body tense up. “For what?”

Normally one stands before a mirror to see what one looks like. I just want to see what you’ve done to me.

Aleximor made his way to the alcove that served as the cabin’s bathroom, pushing the accordion door back as he stepped inside.

I look like shit! I have bags under my eyes. Ponytail’s still tied—and a Bride of

Frankenstein stripe of white hair. I'm still wearing the sweatshirt and pants you killed Pinnet in? And that's blood all over me? You didn't change? She didn't wait for him to answer. You've let me go to hell. Open my mouth! Holy fuck! Brush my teeth! You let me sit in front of those three—and speak—with my teeth looking like that?

“How do I brush my teeth?”

Corina sighed. *You sea people—they must be rotting in your skulls.*

He grinned, showing her teeth again in the mirror. “Sharks do not clean theirs.”

They also have several sets of them. There should be a tube of something. This is the doctor's cabin, so there must be toothpaste. Look at the bed. I think someone's laid clothes out for me. There may be other stuff.

There were two pairs of sweatpants about her size, two T-shirts, one a faded black cotton, another with *¡Vamos a vacilar!* in bold white letters. Aleximor picked through a plastic baggy full of what looked like supplies someone had accumulated from various Mexican resort hotels, a toothbrush, tube of toothpaste, hair brush, shower cap, a razor and little bottles of shampoo and lotion.

He looked at the razor curiously.

That's for my legs.

Corina felt the muscles in her face tighten into a questioning scowl. Aleximor twirled the handle between two fingers. “How do you use this for your legs?”

Shaving. Underarms too.

“Must I?”

Yes, it is...expected. With you in here, I am dreading taking a shower. I don't even want to think about...other things.

“A shower?”

People up here take a shower or bath, get in the water once a day to clean off.

“Do they really? And Mr. Pinnet?”

Apparently had a disregard for society's rules. Probably didn't brush his teeth either. Most people take a shower every day. They get up, they brush their teeth, they take a shower, they go to work or school.

“And what did you do, Corina?”

God, it's the weirdest thing, hearing my own voice ask me questions. I went to school. I worked in a coffee shop in downtown SJ.

“What sort of school?”

Music. I play the cello. I'm a comp major.

Which meant nothing to Aleximor. “Comp? What is a chello?”

Composition. It means I am being trained to compose, to make music. A cello is a string instrument, usually played with a bow.

“I have not played in many years.”

Centuries.

“Yes,” he said almost sadly. He made a defenseless gesture toward the baggy full of bathroom supplies and the sink. “If you would, Corina, instruct me in what to do.”

Teeth first. Get the tube and the little brush. The big brush is for my hair. Open the cap. Squeeze a little onto the bristles. A little! Okay, wipe some of that off. Not on the damn towel! Scrape a little off with your finger and let it go down the drain. Turn the water on. Right knob is cold water. Now brush.

Aleximor stuck the brush in tentatively and the toothpaste spread over her molars. He pushed harder, rubbing the paste into the teeth.

He gagged, his eyes watering. “Buggering Hades!” He bent forward and spit foam all over the counter. A spray of white hit the mirror. “It hurts! This paste is poison.” He cupped water in his hand and slurped it into her mouth, spitting and coughing.

It's minty. All toothpaste is like that. Don't be such a weakling. You didn't even start brushing. At least two minutes in there. Come on.

He reluctantly stuck the brush back in her mouth, pushing it along her teeth and gums, making painful faces, glaring at himself in the mirror—and in effect, glaring at Corina. “If this is some sort of trick, I will make you pay.” He used the same tone he had used with the corpse of Pinnet, telling it that he would make them all pay, but with the toothbrush and a mouthful of foaming toothpaste, Corina had trouble understanding his threat, and so she ignored him.

Spit it all out. Rinse the brush. Okay, let's move on to the hair. Take the ponytail out. Let's see what we have to work with.

Her hair came out of the ponytail like an unfolding dragon, snapping and shuddering like chiropteran wings—everything short of breathing fire. Her hair stuck out and poked her shoulders in stiff wiry bundles.

That's just gross. My hair's crunchy. Shit, I need a shower.

CHAPTER TWENTY

AT THE CAPTAIN'S TABLE

Naiads are long-lived river witches, descendents of the Potameides, with far-reaching powers over freshwater lakes and rivers. Some of them have cultivated powers over rain storms. They are traditionally at odds with—and sometimes outright enemies of—the Seaborn, but Cassandra managed to sway an entire family to help her fight the great army of the drowned dead, the Olethren, carrying out her plans with freezing rain and weather.

—Michael Henderson, notes

Bend over. Place the towel evenly on both sides, bring them together at the forehead and twist. Tighter. Okay, now straighten up and push the top over my head. That's it.

Aleximor stood in front of the mirror with a decent towel twist. The black T-shirt, which smelled strongly of laundry detergent, was too short, curling just above Corina's navel. The faded blue sweats were baggy, bunching up around the ankles, and hung so low on Corina's hips, it showed the top of the V-cut of her pelvis. She sighed to herself when Aleximor's eyes dropped to the skin above the waistband.

Fourteen or four-hundred, that's still all you males think about. God, I'm totally skanked in these. Maybe you can make a belt or something.

"If the waist of the pants is excessively low, that is skanked?"

Something like that. It's not something I—or even you—should strive for. Open the drawer next to the sink. See if the doc has safety pins.

Five minutes later, with blood oozing from pin sticks in both thumbs, and Aleximor in a sour mood, Corina had her way and the sweatpants clung nicely over her hips. They still belled around her feet, but that couldn't be helped without cutting them, and they had probably confiscated all the scissors during Pinnet's cleanup.

A knock on the door brought Aleximor around, bringing his webbed hands up into claws. He froze, a song starting in his throat.

Say, who is it?

He cleared his throat. "Who is it?"

"Aldrich, Miss Lairsey. The captain has asked me to escort you to the dining room for lunch."

Aleximor turned to look in the mirror with a questioning stare.

Don't you know anything? Tell him we're not ready. Come back in ten minutes.

"We're—I am not ready, Mr. Aldrich. Will the captain allow me ten more minutes?"

"Certainly. I'll wait here in the hall."

Let's look at my hair. Hang the towel. Don't just throw it on the floor.

Let's...um...run my fingers through my hair. Oh. It doesn't work with the mermaid hands. Get the brush. What do the Seaborn do with their hair?

"Braids, for the most part." He brushed her hair straight and used one finger to split it into three even sections. "Most commonly in three braids, two on the side, one in the center."

Interesting. Do you know how to braid hair? And keep it down. Mr. Common Sense is right outside the door.

“Certainly,” he whispered. “Men braid their hair as well.”

Really? I’d like to see that.

“It is mainly a preparation for war—or special occasions.” Aleximor stared into the distance, his vision going foggy as he concentrated on twisting and looping Corina’s hair into braids. He found rubber bands in one of the bathroom drawers and tied them off. “We will not remain here long. You will see many of them—as soon as my work here is complete.”

She was afraid she already knew the answer, but asked anyway, “Work?”

“Gathering the dead,” he said casually, pausing because her question interrupted his thoughts. “What was I...oh, yes, braids. The king’s trusted, the *oktoloji*, wear theirs in braids every day. They are killers. Every day is war for them. They are the front line to the king.” As if he couldn’t remember mentioning it, he said, “I am going to kill the king, you know.”

Yes, I am aware of your...displeasure with the Seaborn royalty. And some group called Rexenor. That Kassander, the one I saw in your dreams, he was a Rexenor. Then there’s a guy named Strates Unwinder. You sure hate a lot of people.

With a very satisfied voice, he said, “Then it is settled.” His voice dropped. “Let us kill everyone on board the *Maria Draughn*. We will then go the Nine-cities and find a way to kill the King of all the Seaborn.”

Corina’s soul shuddered, nothing settling inside her.

Barefoot, in baggy blue sweats and a tight black T-shirt, Aleximor stepped Corina’s body into the hall, looking up and back for Aldrich. The officer stood in the shadows of the nearest junction of hallways, holding his open hand in the direction of the stairs.

“This way, Miss Lairsey.” He gave Corina a quick, professional look. “I see that you have found everything. I’m sorry about the clothing. Captain Teixeira requested the smallest sizes of the crew.”

Aleximor looked down at Corina’s body in the somewhat skanky attire. “These work quite well, thank you. And please thank those of your crew who provided them. I shall find a way to return the favor.”

I’m sure you will.

The dining room fell silent when Corina stepped through the door with Second Officer Aldrich, forks lifted halfway to mouths, heads swiveling toward her, eyes narrowing. The captain sat at a table in one corner with two officers and five empty chairs. Eleven of the crew occupied three more tables in the room. Aleximor looked around, taking in some of their expressions. Most of them puzzled him, but he thought he saw admiration in one or two, deep curiosity in several more.

It appears that Mr. Pinnet was not well liked among the crew. There is fear in their eyes, but praise as well. Corina huffed—in her imagination. Praise? Are you making me talk—think like this? Her thoughts seemed to come out normally, but then they quickly adjusted to some kind of mold imposed by Aleximor’s thought patterns. It was like hearing the echo of her voice—she shouted her thoughts across the canyon and somehow the canyon walls changed them on the bounce.

Captain Teixeira stood, folding a white cloth napkin. He placed it next to his plate, pulled out the chair to his right for Corina, and held it while she tried to figure out how to use one. She gripped the seat as if it was going to buck her off it. She had trouble sliding it closer to the table. Wedged between the chair’s back and table’s edge, she picked up the dessert spoon, staring at it, an inch from her nose, put it back in its place. She shifted the forks, clinking the salad with the entree. She looked around the dining room as if she had never seen one before.

“Is everything fine, dear?” Captain Teixeira leaned toward her. “You look lost.”

Aleximor snapped straight, sliding up in the seat. “Yes, Captain Teixeira. As well as any can expect after the journey I have had. I understand that I have you and your generous crew to thank for finding clothes for a wayfarer on such limited notice. Please pass on my gratitude.”

“I...will,” said the captain roughly, put off balance by her formal tone. “I would ask you a few questions, Miss—”

Aleximor put one hand on the white linen next to his arm, folding the web of skin between each finger neatly into the palm. “Please call me Corina.”

Are you flirting with the old man?

“I am Martim.” He bowed his head formally, his gray brows curling into each other, as if to say that it was perfectly acceptable to use his first name. He lifted his head, his rust-colored eyes fixed on her face, thinking that he had been at sea for three of this young woman’s lifetimes. “I have worked on ships of every type on every ocean in this world, Corina. I have the sea in my soul. I have lived near the water or on it over sixty years. So long, that I cannot help but imagine ocean in all directions, and the sight of brown rock and steel cities standing above the blue always surprises me. I won’t say that anything I have witnessed in the last two days surprises me because I know the Sea, I have felt her fingers, and her clay. The medium in which she works, *is* the unimaginable.”

Aleximor tensed up at the mention of the Sea, taking his hand off the table and placing it in his lap.

Teixeira picked up her tension and patted the table where her arm had rested. “You have nothing to fear now. I have alerted Interpol and the American embassy in São Paulo. We are scheduled into São Luís in three days and Pôrto Alegre in eleven. I will see to it that you have transportation from there to São Paulo.”

“That is very kind of you,” said Aleximor in a whisper, eyes on the empty ornate china, his fingers absently pleating the hem of the black T-shirt. Corina heard the stream of thoughts flowing in his mind, a waterfall’s noisy rush for the bottom of the gorge.

Corina answered a couple of his obvious questions. *Interpol is the international police. They will question you about the killing. And they will mean business—not like the officers on a merchant ship. That talking to earlier was more likely a standard questioning with witnesses for insurance purposes. If Interpol doesn’t like what they hear, we could end up in jail.*

Aleximor twitched at the last word, making fists and curling his toes into the plastic tiled floor.

Captain Teixeira went on in a calm grandfatherly tone. “When you have settled in, I would love to hear your story.” His eyes met Aldrich’s on the other side of Corina. “We all would. We have asked ourselves how is it that you managed to swim close to eighty kilometers offshore? We have found no acceptable explanation.” He hoped this would be enough to spark the answers to questions he felt uncomfortable asking, such as how she had managed to survive the drag beneath the ship. “Do not answer now, or give thought to it. Please eat. Mr. Wilkins has made excellent chicken salad sandwiches. There is also a green salad, apple pie.”

The captain waved for the tray and poured ice water into the glass in front Corina. The sandwiches looked good, even with the wilted lettuce and skimpy amount of chicken.

Damn, I’m hungry. I love chicken salad—you love chicken salad. Take two.

Aldrich sat on Corina’s right, his face impenetrably serious. He picked at a couple potato chips, pushing them around his plate, breaking them one at a time with his index finger.

Aleximor held a triangular cut half a sandwich inches from Corina’s face, sniffing it,

fingers sinking into the bread, swallowing dryly at the thought of putting it in his mouth. What was this hideously creamy chunky mixture squeezed between two wedges of a stiff foamy substance? This did not even look like food.

Take a bite! I'm starving! Are you the Bone-gatherer or aren't you? You work with rotting human corpses for a living—you raise them from the dead! And you're going to let a little chicken and mayo hold you up?

He took a bite, teeth sinking through bread into the fibrous meat. The gush of tart creamy mayonnaise over his tongue made his stomach lurch. A slippery piece of lettuce poked at his gag reflex. He clamped his mouth shut tearing the rest of the sandwich away, fingers shaking as he dropped it onto the plate. He held his face still with intense concentration and chewed, crushing the mix with his molars, grinding it into smaller swallowable lumps of sour buttery fibrousness.

He managed to get one bite down, and by the way he glared at the remains of the sandwich on his plate, it was clear that he wasn't going for seconds.

The potato chips, on the other hand, he adored. He munched them, snapped them into pieces between his front teeth, licked his fingers, let them soften into a salty potato-y paste on his tongue.

"These are divine!" Aleximor declared, sliding another pile onto his plate and devouring them, ignoring the stares from around the dining room.

Officer Aldrich, Corina's unofficial escort, led her to *Maria Draughn's* bow to show her the coast of Panama off the port side. The ship was enormous to Aleximor's mind, even with Corina telling him that, as far as modern ships went, it was relatively small. Like Officer McHutcheon's cabin, everything was flat and angular, painted dull red or yellow.

"That is Cambutal and there's Venao coming up." He pointed over the bow. "We're heading into the Gulf of Panama."

Aleximor was silent, content to listen to Aldrich's geography lessons, astounded that the surfacers had managed to carve a channel through the land, joining two seas in the process.

Officer McHutcheon made his way through the containers on the deck to the bow. "Miss Lairsey, the captain has asked me to check on your wounds."

Aleximor turned, and Corina hoped her own effort to put a questioning scowl on her face helped. "What wounds?"

McHutcheon looked at Aldrich with a puzzled expression. His gaze swung back to Corina. "Your back, Miss. I stitched four lacerations and bandaged the rest. You don't appear to be in discomfort. I can provide medicine if you like."

Tell him to stop calling me "Miss". Corina's fine. So, you managed to "lacerate" my back on your devil-and-the-deep-blue-sea hull-length joy ride? Why don't I feel anything?

"You may call me Corina. Please do. And I feel fine, Mr. McHutcheon." Aleximor tilted his head back, which Corina realized was what sea-people did to mean the same thing as shaking the head. "What would you have me do?"

McHutcheon looked at Aldrich again for approval, but spoke to Corina. "If you could come back to my—well, your cabin for a few minutes, I'd like to see if the stitching is secure. I'll also change your bandages and check for infection."

"Very well."

She followed Aldrich and McHutcheon along the hatch covers, through shadowy passages between deck-mounted containers, forty-foot long orange and blue metal boxes.

Some nice dark hiding places there, said Corina in mock suspicion as Aleximor took in every detail of the ship's crowded deck. He didn't answer her.

McHutcheon shut the cabin's door and Aleximor—apparently without thinking—pulled off the thin black T-shirt.

What the fuck are you doing! Cover yourself. McHutcheon wants to look at your back. Not your front. Corina collected her anger, and commanded Aleximor. *Ask him where he wants you to sit.*

“Where would you like me to sit, Mr. McHutcheon?”

“Daniel, ma’am,” he said, eyes averted, cheeks a little red. “Anywhere is fine.” He pointed to the edge of the bed and opened a kit of first aid supplies and stainless steel tools, mainly tweezers and scissors.

Aldrich, who had stopped just inside the door, took a few steps closer, frowning and jutting his chin at Corina’s back. Two strips of cotton gauze with thin brown lines of dried blood ran at opposite angles across her scapulas. Seven clear adhesive strips crisscrossed her back. There had been other scrapes and bruising when they hauled Corina from the Pacific.

They were gone.

McHutcheon nodded to Aldrich with a scowl, peeling off one of the bandages for a three-centimeter long gouge that he’d sewn together. His mouth parted, dropping all the way open by the time he worked halfway through the gauze removal. “Th—the stitches are gone?”

Aleximor looked over his shoulder. “I heal quickly, Daniel.”

The officer’s hands trembled and he let go of the bandage.

Aleximor added an insistent look. “Can you remove them? They itch.”

“Sure, Miss...Corina.” He removed both inch-wide strips of gauze and tape. Her skin was unblemished beneath them. He removed the other bandages, leaned back and attempted, unsuccessfully, to shake his head. “Quick—quickly is one thing. You don’t even have scarring. Nothing. Very unusual. It’s as if...” His voice trailed off. He started over. “When we took you from the water, the back of your wetsuit was in shreds. The skin on your back—from your shoulders to about your hips, was scraped and ripped in twenty places. I soaked up a towel-full of blood.”

“And now they’re gone,” added Aldrich, his voice dripping suspicion.

“I hope it will not sink me in your esteem,” said Aleximor with a pause and a tightening at the corners of Corina’s mouth, a hint of a smile.

What was that? Are you getting snarky?

Aleximor ignored her. “May I replace my top?”

McHutcheon stuttered something and nodded, packing away his tools.

Officer Aldrich rubbed the back of his bald head, a tired I-really-don’t-need-this look on his face. He folded his arms and glared at her as she stood up, walked to the curtain-covered window and put the black shirt back on.

McHutcheon left the cabin in a hurry, and Aldrich, filling the doorway, pointed at Corina. He kept his voice low. “You’re trouble. I know it when I see it. I want you off this ship.” His voice went icy. “And I’ll do what I think necessary to remove you.”

“My thoughts are clearly bent the same way, Officer Aldrich.”

He spent a second wondering if she was referring to getting herself off the ship or him. He went with the first and held out his open hands in an I-don’t-want-any-trouble gesture. “If you are not the evil I feel you are...”

Aleximor turned. “In which case you may be sure of my pardon.”

Boy, he’s got you pegged. You’re sure McHutcheon’s going first?

As soon as Aldrich left the room, Aleximor lifted his eyes to the center I-beam and called down his familiar, the metal crab thing. It dropped to the all-weather industrial carpeting, landing in a crouch. “I am certain, Corina.”

Aleximor fared better at dinner because the ship's excellent cook, Mr. Wilkins, made a broiled white fish for the captain and his party. The wine went straight to his and her mind, and half an hour into the meal, they were slurring words and making up a fabulous tale of their appearance eighty—no one-hundred—kilometers off the coast of Guatemala.

Corina listened with the rest of the crew—except those who manned the controls—as Aleximor, who was in top form, explained how he had been diving off Southern California and came up to find his boat missing.

Pirates took it?

Corina helped out with modern terms and places, because left on his own he came up with wilder tales: How he was picked up by fishermen—Corina had to reel him in a little at this point—and how they “sailed” to Mexico, where they dumped her overboard when she refused to “. . .work the fishing nets.”

Corina interrupted him and demanded that he change the action to working instead of...performing something else—knowing that the East Coast Swing and conga lines weren't high on the list in Aleximor's mind of things she was expected to perform with—or on—the crew.

This is getting more ridiculous with every word. But Aleximor plodded on. *They dumped you overboard with your wetsuit on?*

“...and to my inexpressible vexation, I found myself far at sea—at night!” he made a gasping expression, and turned up the tension. “A shark circled three times. I went very still and he departed without my blood.”

Look at them. Do they really believe this crap?

McHutcheon caught Teixeira's eye from the door, and the captain waved the second officer over. Aldrich was right behind him. The officer who doubled as ship's physician looked sick; his fingers trembled, his face bone-pale with sweat dripping from his chin. He held his hands in a surgeon's just-scrubbed arrangement, stiffly in front of him.

Teixeira stood up, looking past the doc to Aldrich. “What is it?”

“He did a prelim autopsy, captain.”

Teixeira leaned away from them. “Already? I thought it was just an examination. Where?” With a frown at McHutcheon, “You always are an enthusiastic fellow.”

“In the cooler on deck three. I think you should hear this directly from McHutcheon,” said Aldrich, pushing the doc forward.

“What is it, Daniel?”

“To rule out some kind of food-borne poison I... Pinnet's eyes, sir.”

Teixeira waved dismissively. “Miss Lairsey gouged them out, I know. It's a horrendous thing, but look what he was about to do to her.”

“But the eyes, sir.” It looked as if McHutcheon was going to lose his lunch. All of the blood drained from his face. “I found them in his stomach, sir. Pinnet ate his own eyes.”

Teixeira's mouth dropped open, and then he fell back into his chair.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DREAMING

Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
To hear the sea-maid's music.
—*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare

Spend your time and thought—and energy—wisely.

Kassandra frowned at her mother's words.

She means spend them on the war, said Praxinos. *Not on that young man.*

The Wreath-wearers were divided over where she should spend her time and thought and energy.

He is a soldier. Learn from him, said Andromache.

He's gorgeous. Eupheron mimicked Andromache's stern voice. *Learn from him.*

Kassandra smiled, liking Eupheron more and more. "Nereus."

Her whisper became a shape in the water that darted in the darkness before her. She indicated a direction with a finger and it swam off like a fish seeking Nereus, slipping under doors, passing guards, courtyards, windows, until it found the son of Menophon sleeping in his bed.

Her whisper circled his body, gathering all its remaining power, then drove into his chest and touched his heart.

Nereus woke, clutching his bed, his blood thumping in his ears.

"Kassandra?"

He felt her, an echo of her warmth, as if she had been in his bed a moment before.

After calming his heart, Nereus kicked across his room, changed into something presentable, and left his family's house. He found Kassandra perched on the south facing wall of the Lasthenes Massif, the tower of rock that loomed over the rest of the Rexenor fortress.

He looked left and right as he swam to her. "Where are your guards?"

She didn't turn around. "I sent them away." Then, understanding his question, she added, "I don't think they're protecting me, so much as protecting the rest of Rexenor from me." Before he could ask why, she glanced over her shoulder and said, "I don't just bite." Then clicked her teeth.

She just caught his grin before she looked away. He rolled in the water, landing with his toes right on the edge of the wall on Kassandra's right. To a thinling, the move would have been acrobatic, but all the Seaborn moved as he did.

So smooth in the water. She looked down at his feet, and then let her focus wander up to his shoulder before she turned away. "Why aren't you afraid of me?"

"I am. Why don't you ever look me in the eyes?"

She felt her neck muscles tense, wanting to turn toward him. "I want to." She stared at

his open hand instead, the gesture he'd made with the question. "I can't. Because I can turn you inside out with a look, Nereus." She liked saying his name. "Because I can make you...do things you don't want to do...with a look."

Eupheron chuckled in her head. *Let's see if we can get him to turn you inside out. Eupheron!* Ampharete shouted and Cassandra bent against the pain in her head.

"Shut up, all of you." She grabbed Nereus by the arm, and he leaned back to hold her up.

The two of them stood on the edge of the battlement, staring into the pure night of the abyss. Nereus sang softly about seabirds, the wet sand capturing their prints, the hollow roar of the waves, and the cry of a tern flying over the ocean, through storms and arctic winds, a bird that flies away and never returns to land.

There was no magic in him. He did not have a bleed from either of his parents, but there was something in the song. She felt it in the water, then inside her, a fluttering in her stomach, a sweetness in her mouth.

"The air is so weak." She whispered her thoughts aloud. "It cannot carry a song like the sea does. Music's effect on surfacers is so diluted, yet it still has the power to capture their souls—even my soul."

After a few minutes, Nereus pulled her fingers off his arm and took her hand. "I wouldn't mind it."

"Mind what?"

"If you...turned me inside out."

Kassandra was silent a minute, then looked down at the Rexenor fortress. "Not here."

"Anywhere. I will follow."

She gripped his hand tighter and went headfirst off the wall, straight down into the dark. They were through the front gate, saluting guards, and into open water in seconds.

Kassandra squeezed with her fingers. "Do you trust me?"

"I am here, milady."

She frowned at the formality. "Want to go to the surface? Not to my house. There's some witch watching the place. Let's go someplace else."

Nereus smiled. "Lead on."

"Okay. I'm still learning this. I've never taken anyone along with me—so hold on."

He bowed his head to her. "Always."

She took in the solemn expression on his face. "Really. I mean, whatever you do, don't let go of me. The Ocean will rip you into pieces if we are not in contact. We'll be going fast. Even with practice I'm not always certain where I'll end up."

Kassandra embraced the young man and sang the song that dimmed the glow of the Wreath. Holding Nereus with both hands, she called on the Ocean.

Nereus gasped, then shut his mouth. They were rocketing through the sea. He closed his eyes against the strain, his fingers digging into her skin.

It was over in what felt like minutes.

They surfaced along a sandy beach with tall buildings and bright city lights to their right, Kassandra stepping out of the water, bending once to get the sea out of her lungs. Nereus, not nearly as accomplished an interfacier, took a few minutes, coughing out water and sucking in gurgling lungfuls of air before he was ready to discover where she had taken him.

Kassandra grabbed Nereus' hand and led him up a set of stairs to an esplanade that ran along the ocean. She walked up to a man in a suit who was just putting away his cell phone. She smiled and said, "Buen día señor. ¿Sería tan amable en recomendarnos el mejor hotel de la ciudad, el más lujoso, con una gran vista al mar?"

The man looked at her for a moment, startled by her appearance. She was strangely dressed and soaking wet. But then he nodded knowingly, pointed in the direction of the

city lights, and spoke in the same language.

Kassandra thanked him and pulled Nereus after her. “Come on. This way.”

“What did you ask him?” Nereus looked around, jogging along with her. “Where are we?”

“Just south of Buenos Aires.” She ran ahead, stopped and spun on her heels, closed her eyes when she kissed him. Digging one hand into the pocket of her shorts, she took out a small plastic packet. “I have my dad’s credit cards. Let’s get the biggest, most expensive room we can find.”

Lord Gregor and his three daughters from the surface stayed for twenty-one days before Kallixene wanted a break, wanted her quiet fortress back to herself, and politely told them to go home—at least for a few days. The formalities tired her, the constant swimming around, and every family with a boy—and even a few with girls—begging an audience.

The young men of Rexenor kicked after the young ladies with their old-fashioned manners and formalities, singing them songs, asking permission to hold their hands, trying to catch their eyes when they passed by, fighting each other to be the first to bring them giant blooms of bristly serpulid worms that looked like bright red and yellow Christmas trees.

Jill was still the most approachable, perhaps because she fit in the least. Lady Kassandra—although obviously Seaborn, fluent in their native tongue and manners—scared them. Her ever-present crown—the Wreath—glowing green around her head, the gift of a god. Only Nereus asked for her hand in any of the dancing at the festivals. Nicole kept trying on her armor, in love with its smooth pliable fit on her body, appearing at one of the celebrations with her sword which, for some reason, put the boys off. She blushed when one of them, at Kassandra’s instigation, called her *basileia*—princess—and then word got around that she, too, understood Hellene.

On the final evening, Gregor and his daughters met in the open fortress at the top of the Lasthenes Massif with Lady Kallixene, Phaidra and a small party of nobles and important friends of the family. The Lady of Rexenor gave each of her granddaughters a long dress of gold brocade, similar to the one she wore at her entrance in New Hampshire—which quickly jerked Jill from her steep envy-dive over Nicole’s new armor.

Previously unaware of Jill’s feelings—and angry at herself for not seeing them—Kassandra left in the middle of the party, returning less than an hour later with a small gold ring with an oval-cut emerald, presenting it to Jill without telling her that she had dug it out of the sand under the wreck of a Spanish ship.

Nicole nudged Kassandra. “Aunt Phaidra’s looking for you. She was frantic when she heard you’d left. You didn’t tell anyone where you were going.”

“But I didn’t say goodbye,” said Kassandra as if this should have been enough for them to anticipate her quick return.

Jill and Nicole shouted back at her at the same time, “You never say goodbye!”

Phaidra swam up, excited, a blaze in her eyes that Kassandra remembered from their initial meeting in the shallows off the coast of Texas, back when Phaidra hated her niece on first sight.

She surprised Kassandra with a hug, flashing her Alkimides bracelet, and putting her lips to her ear, whispering, “The City! I have never been there. Why didn’t you just ask me? Why go through mother? I’ll bet she gave you a terrible time.”

Kassandra looked sad for a moment. Recovering, she said, “Oh, come on. She’s a pushover.” She cleared her throat. “We’ll be back from New Hampshire in a few days, and we’ll plan the whole thing. I chose you because...” Kassandra drew away and

showed her a clever smile. “Because I know you’re not one to cower down here in the dark.”

Phaidra jerked back, stunned, then grinned when she recognized the words. “You accused me of doing that when we first met.”

“Remember that? I thought you were going to kill me—with your bare hands—and I had my sword out.” Cassandra shook her head. “I think I said, I give you permission to cower down in the dark, which is even worse.”

“Gods, even then you were a...What is the word surfacers use?”

“Bitch?” Cassandra ventured.

“Bitch! Yes!” Phaidra laughed. “Mother says you are different now. No, you’re just more of one. That damned Wreath is a bitch maker.”

Jill and Nicole floated off to one side, mouths open, frozen halfway to laughing.

Kassandra looked at Phaidra sagely. “Not its primary function, but I will add that to my list of things it does to me.” She gripped her aunt’s shoulder tight and pulled her closer. “Now, before we return from New Hampshire, you must participate in the assembly here, learn the rules of conduct, the order of presentation, what your mother says in response, how she is addressed by those who wait on her. Everything that you can learn here. I need you to know it.”

“What?” Phaidra looked sickened. “Why?”

“It’s what surfacers call homework. Five days. We’re going to back to New Hampshire to check on the house, find out more about one of the king’s spies watching the place—the woman with long black hair we saw in town—then we’re coming right back here.”

Kassandra released Phaidra and kicked to Jill and Nicole.

“We have to go.”

Nicole stared straight up at thousands of meters of pure black ocean, opening her arms wide, a broad smile on her face. “I wish I could stay here forever.”

The silence made her look down, her eyes wandering to her sisters. Jill grinned, understanding, but Nicole regretted saying it because she didn’t like the sudden intensity in Cassandra’s eyes. She attempted to recover with, “I mean, I don’t feel like returning to the mundane. I know it’s just a few days on the surface...we’ll be back here soon.”

Kassandra let half a smile reach her lips. “I know what you meant, Nic.”

The house in North Hampton, New Hampshire gave her nightmares. Cassandra whimpered and made a growling noise deep in her throat, but she didn’t wake up.

Tharsaleos. *Fucking murdering Tharsaleos*. She pictured his snarling gaunt features, his coiled gray hair and jutting beard. She hated calling him king, and stopped herself whenever the word came to her lips. He was her grandfather—the only living one she had because this one had killed the other one, Nausikrates Lord Rexenor.

In her dream, the kitchen downstairs swung into view and four soldiers, all with Tharsaleos’ face, came up the stairs, spears stabbing at her. She had her sword out, ready to lop heads off shoulders. Their hands would be next—take their identifying bracelets. She let loose her battle cry and swung at the first to reach the top step.

Then their faces changed, becoming different soldiers. They were men with families. They had children. They had mothers who worried when they left the Nine-cities on a secret mission for their king.

Stratolaos, their commander, at the bottom of the stairs, reloaded his crossbow.

The three others, two with blue eyes, one with milky greenish-brown irises—these men were not the king, but in his service. They were loyal House Dosianax soldiers—some of the deadliest killers known to the Seaborn.

She shouted at them, warning them off. “Don’t make me kill you!”

She had to fight them as well as her own sword skills. She had to fight Andromache inside her, who wanted to end this quickly. She had to placate the Wreath, which had other plans for these men. She steered the blade away from a thrust that would cut through the man's spine, driving it into his shoulder instead—something from which he'd heal.

Then she felt light, her feet leaving the floor. The world tilted steeply. All the air left her lungs. Her back hit the kitchen island counter, and it shook every thought from her head. Her sword clattered on the kitchen tiles. She stared up at the ceiling, wondering what had happened. Minutes seemed to pass before she noticed the spiky end of the bolt sticking out from her armor on her right side.

She tugged at it curiously, then climbed to her feet, anger flooding into her mind—an anger that overwhelmed her, that could wipe continents off the earth. She begged the other wearers in her head: *Please make it stop!* The anger took control of her. She didn't even feel the bolt standing stiffly from her side; the endorphin drive had kicked into high.

She screamed the Alkimides war cry and hacked into the right arm of the nearest Seaborn, into the bone, cutting away armor scales. Blood ran down her sword, globs of it floating off the edge, hitting the floor in little drumbeats. Her voice came through the noise of blood cold and clear, and she caught Stratolaos' eyes before he could look away. *"...têi kreagrai tôn orchipedôn helkoimên es abysson."*

Zypheria grabbed Cassandra by her shoulders and shook her. "Milady, wake up."

Her eyes closed tight, Cassandra screamed, "Don't make me kill you!"

"Come on, Kass," said Nicole.

"Please, milady, wake up." Zypheria shook her harder.

Kassandra grabbed her attacker's throat with one hand, blocking her left, and swung her legs around Zypheria's middle, locking her ankles behind her back. She shoved Zypheria's head back, releasing her throat, lining it up for a clean cut. Her sword slapped into her fist in the middle of her swing.

"Kass!" Jill's shriek broke her dream.

Kassandra stopped her sword at Zypheria's neck, drawing a line of blood that dribbled along the edge to the tip, staining the sheets with a dark bloom. Kassandra jerked back in horror, throwing the blade away. It hit the plaster and fell into the space between her bed and the wall. She held her hands open and climbed off Zypheria, shaking uncontrollably.

She staggered away, getting her back against her dresser. There was a hint of recognition in her gaze as it darted to Jill and Nicole and then back to Zypheria.

"Is it her? Or is it Andromache?" Nicole's voice came from far away.

Kassandra blinked, focusing on Zypheria. "No. It is me. I would be holding Zypheria's head right now if Andromache had been here. I am not half the swordswoman she is."

The four of them stood rooted to the floor for a minute, silent, wondering what to say next. Kassandra dropped her gaze to the floor, ashamed to look at them. She sat down on the bed, her face in her hands.

Michael Henderson and Gregor reached the door at the same time from opposite ends of the hall, jolted out of sleep, Gregor tying his robe closed.

"What's the screaming about?" said Michael groggily.

Gregor stared at Kassandra, but said nothing.

Zypheria gave them each a look that clearly told them to get lost. "It's girl talk. Go back to bed." She said something about calling on the Dark Mother and some nonsense about the Mysteries, nothing for the men to see.

Henderson and Gregor exchanged glances and wandered back to their rooms.

Zypheria kept one hand to her neck, nodding to Nicole. “Can you get me a towel? Jillian, please heat some water, enough for all of us to have hot chocolate.”

With the sisters out of the room, she sat down next to Cassandra and put her arm around her. “What is wrong?”

“I killed them,” Cassandra sobbed. “I killed their wives, their children.”

“You let them go, milady.”

“So that the Nine-cities would finally have news of me and my grandfather could do something far worse. I used them. I should have beheaded them and taken their bracelets when I had the chance. They would have died honorably—in battle. But I am *evil*.” She gave Zypheria a pleading look. “What is wrong with me? Why would I do that? I knew what the king would do. I decided their fates while their spears were pushing at me. I stopped Andromache from taking their lives and let the king do it for me. If only that damned Stratolaos had missed me.”

“How would it be different? Eupheron has healed you.”

Eyes red and swollen, Cassandra clutched at Zypheria’s knee. “Something happened when the bolt hit me...went through me. The Wreath took control of me. Have you seen the paint on the ceiling in the kitchen?”

Zypheria scowled, shaking her head. “I noticed the hole in the wall over the basement stairs.”

“I melted the paint. It dripped from the ceiling. It had me like a monster—I *am* that monster. For an instant, I could have sunk continents under the waves. I could have killed a billion people without a thought.”

There was doubt in Zypheria’s voice. “You are the Wreath-wearer. It is a burden. Your mother fought it all her short life.”

“But my mother had no bleeds.”

“And you have Gregor’s?” As if broaching a delicate subject, she added, “Do you also have Lady Kallixene’s?”

Kassandra hesitated, shaking her head to one of the other wearers. “I have my father’s, Kallixene’s, Isothemis’ and Tharsaleos’ bleeds. Four of them.”

“*What!*” Zypheria gasped, terror on her face. She jumped to her feet, whirling with one hand in a fist. “How did this happen?” She didn’t expect an answer and, by the way her brows knotted angrily, she had concluded much of it already. She suddenly understood Cassandra’s unpredictability over the last year, especially when she was in the same room with Lady Kallixene. She opened her mouth to curse the bloody stupid Rexenors. Then she realized she couldn’t because Lady Cassandra was one, and the tangle of deeds and desire so tight and intricate that it would only cause harm.

She wiped her expression clear when she heard footsteps coming down the hall. She stood and went to the door to get the towel from Nicole. “Can you start a fire in the fireplace, milady? We will be down in a few minutes.”

Nicole nodded and went downstairs.

Zypheria cursed the universe under her breath and sat down on the end of the bed. “People say the Telkhines went bad because they could host more than one bleed. Two bleeds and they went insane. They ended up like King Eupheron, who could not have a normal life. You know what he is like. He was king in name only. Queen Daphne ruled the Seaborn. The tales I heard from Lady Ampharete made my thoughts freeze. Power beyond his control—and he could not stop.”

That sounded familiar.

Kassandra started to nod, then went still. Her face went gray. She jumped up, holding her mouth as she raced for the bathroom to throw up. Zypheria followed resignedly with a change of pajamas.

Zypheria took a cautious sip of hot chocolate, swallowed it, then cleared her throat to get the attention of the three sisters. They sat around the fireplace next to the kitchen, Cassandra in a big leather chair, Jill and Nicole sitting together on a couch. Zypheria sat on the coffee table between them.

“Michael has asked me to marry him, and I...” She bowed her head to Cassandra. “I have come for your consent.”

“Congratulations,” said Cassandra, raising her mug with Jill and Nicole. “I wish you all the joy in the sea.”

She bowed her head. “Milady. I appear to have all of it already. I only wish I could return some to you.”

Kassandra stared at her. Choking back emotion, she said, “Zypheria, you’re like a mother to me. You were a sister to Ampharete. You are my family. I would not expect Jill or Nic to call me ‘milady’. I want you to stop calling me that.”

“I am your maid and your soldier. I will do anything you ask but that.”

“Please?”

“Do not ask it of me, milady. I could no more do that than call the queen by her first name. It would be scandalous.”

“Since when does scandal bother you? You don’t call Tharsaleos king.”

“He is not Alkimides. And he is not the Wreath-wearer.”

“I’m telling you it’s okay.”

Zypheria shook her head. “Instead, if I could ask one thing?”

“Name it.”

“Please...please don’t ever ask me to make you a peanut butter sandwich again.”

Completely serious, Cassandra bowed her head. “You have my word.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MCHUTCHEON'S FIRE

Within the abyss, Lethe, measureless in sweep, glides smoothly on with placid stream, and takes away our cares; and, that there may be no power to retrace the path, with windings manifold it takes its sluggish way, even as the vagrant Maeander with its inconstant waters plays along, now retreats upon itself, now presses on, in doubt whether to seek the seashore or its source.

—Seneca, *Hercules Furens*, 679

Daniel McHutcheon nearly fainted when he walked into the cold storage room on deck three, his footsteps echoing off the insulated aluminum walls. It was empty on the *Maria Draughn*'s return trip, large enough to store two hundred pallets of boxed fresh fruit, and could be sealed and gassed with ethylene and other decay inhibitors. It was also supposed to be cold, which made McHutcheon pause at the open door.

He backed out and looked along the metal walkway around the forty-foot wide shaft into the lower decks. "Who's there? Aldrich? Why'd you leave the door open? The stink's bad enough." Halfheartedly, he added, "Now you let the cold out."

It was hot and humid above decks and even the closed hatches didn't keep in the cool. McHutcheon walked in, the temporary fluorescents he had clamped to the beams buzzing like insects above his head. Dual halogens on a tripod, hot bolts of sunlight standing at the head of the table, hit Gabriel Pinnet's decaying body in hard white light as it lay in the black zipper bag, the abdomen sliced open from McHutcheon's foray into forensics. He had taken three anatomy courses in college, two with real corpses—pieces of them actually, and several passes in complete virtual. He had performed an abdominal section twice, and so that was where he started with Pinnet, stopping as soon as he discovered the eyes melting in digestive juices in the stomach.

Other things had come in with the warm air and McHutcheon, while he snapped on surgical gloves, bent close to Pinnet's gaunt face to inspect the tiny squirming white barrel-shaped thing. It looked like a grain of rice, moving clumsily along Pinnet's right nostril.

A spasm of disgust rolled up McHutcheon's throat, and he swallowed a sour fluid surge from his stomach. He had seen maggots before, but not on a dead human, and even on a human as foul as Pinnet had been, the tiny crawling thing made him shudder. He noticed more of them, a cluster around one of Pinnet's eye sockets, glistening and oozing over each other, making faint wet crackling noises. Not strong enough to eat through the skin, the larvae gathered at the openings into the body.

McHutcheon stretched his hand out, extended one finger and tugged on Pinnet's chin. The jaw was tight, but he worked it open, using two fingers, while keeping his distance. The teeth parted and a swollen maggot-covered tongue filled the space.

"Oh, God," whispered McHutcheon, turning his head. At the same moment, a flood of incongruous thoughts piled into each other in his head. How could anyone decay this quickly? Pinnet had been stuffed in the body bag an hour after Miss Lairsey had killed him, and from there straight to cold storage. There were no flies down here, not inside

the cold room. It didn't make sense.

McHutcheon got a firm grip on his stomach, kept his eyes away from Pinnet's face, and lifted the right hand. Pieces of skin sloughed off in his grip, slipping fluidly away like pieces of an oily surgical glove.

Pinnet was falling apart in front of him. It was as if, instead of lying in frozen sleep on a rack in cold storage, they had thrown Pinnet on deck, exposed to the humid air, tropical temperature and flying insects.

McHutcheon backed away, turning his gloves inside out and tossing them into a cardboard box he was using as a trash bin. There was no sense proceeding if the room wasn't being chilled. He followed a web of conduit to a weatherproof box on the far wall, closing the thick insulated storage room door on his way over. He cut his thumb shoving the slide latch up, but that was enough to open the thick metal cover. There were two rows of black rocker switches inside and a faded handwritten legend on the inside of the door. He scanned the illegible list and then went with his impulse to try all of the switches. He found six loose levers and moved each one to the right in turn. The last one in the row seemed broken, unfastened from the hinge, and it wouldn't stick when he thumbed it to the right.

McHutcheon fiddled with the breaker, shoving the lever back and forth, frowning up at the chiller. If he could not get the storage room cold again, Pinnet was going to turn to soup in the body bag. He heard the drip of fluid from the table to the floor. The corpse was already well along the autolysis cycle, in which the body's enzymes ate through the cell walls, releasing all the internal fluids, and heading—at a good pace—for bloating. At this rate, the body would be a slack self-digested liquid mess by the time they made their first port. He doubted if the coroner in São Luís would even be able to recognize Pinnet when they showed up with a bag of rot and bones.

So it was quite a shock to Daniel McHutcheon when he felt Pinnet's firm grip on his shoulder.

Aleximor lurched, grabbing the first shelf in the bookcase and tipped all of McHutcheon's medical books onto the floor. The muscles in the host body's legs gave way and he tumbled over the corner of the bed, somersaulted, and landed on his back, splayed across the thin blue industrial carpeting.

What the hell is this? What are you doing! Corina felt a tingling along her spine; deep cramps uncoiled in her stomach. A hissing sound filled her ears, going thin and stinging, a noise like needles.

Aleximor couldn't answer in words. He rolled on his side, curling his legs up in agony, squeezing his eyes as tight as the muscles would push. He made some deep grunting noises with Corina's throat; eyes filled with tears that dribbled down her face. Her body shuddered and twitched. A dark bruise blossomed on her forearm, another one, sickle shaped, spun blurrily around the right side of her ribs.

In Corina's pain-twisted voice, he said, "He has acquired his first one."

Who? Acquired what? A deep chill swept through Corina's mind.

"Mr. Pinnet has killed and performed the binding."

Who? McHutcheon?

"That would be...my...presumption."

Corina felt a dozen separate dull pains shoot up through her feet, as if she was standing on a floor of small knuckle-sized cobbles. Lifting one foot transferred all her weight to the other, making it worse.

There was darkness all around her.

"What are you doing?" Corina's voice was loud in her ears, but it was *her* own voice under *her* control.

Aleximor did not answer.

“Shit.” She felt mentally cold. Her first thought shoved all the others out of her head. “I’ve lost touch with my body.” She tried to bend the last word into a question, but didn’t have enough evidence to turn it all the way into one. She couldn’t move her body’s fingers or open her eyes to take in McHutcheon’s cabin. *This must be somewhere else. Am I in some other body?*

She tried her voice again. “The place with the roaring black wind.”

She had a body of some kind. She could not see it, but she felt its presence, gravity weighing her down, pressure in her lungs, the touch of a strong wind on her skin, the emptiness around her. She crouched down—her toes spreading painfully wide over the rocky ground, sharp points sticking into her bent knee—and picked up a handful of stones; some of them were jagged, stabbing her fingers, but most were rounded smooth by the constant wind.

A mordant question shot directly from her mind to her mouth: “Wouldn’t it be gross if these turned out to be knuckle bones, billions of them?”

She was mildly disappointed when they turned out to be simple gray-mottled, non-ossiferous beach rocks. She could see them suddenly, dark against her hand, as if someone had switched on a dim light.

She dropped the stones and jumped to her feet, wincing at the sharp points pressing into her bare soles. A bright yellow star fell in the infinite night, across the sky, flying in the wind’s direction, away from her. It lit the ground under her, just enough to allow her to make out details. Corina reached for the star, not wanting it to leave her alone in the dark—and because of the lack of reference points it appeared to be right overhead.

The black wind shifted and slapped her in the face, roaring stronger in her ears, whipping her hair. Dust blinded her, blotting out most of the star’s light. She took a step back, swinging around to find a softer foothold, but she kept her hand out, grasping for the only thing that seemed alive in this place, the bright ball of light passing over her head.

She blinked in the dimness, glancing down to keep her balance. There was an edge to her new dark inner world, cutting a sharp black emptiness through the gravelly surface under her feet.

The rocky platform brightened, going gray and shadowy while the void beyond its edge remained perfect black. She looked up in time to catch the star...sort of. It passed right through her grasping hand, through her wrist, to lodge in the center of her chest just above the curve of her breasts, knocking her on her back.

She opened her eyes, and for a moment she thought the blindness had returned. Then she lifted her hand and saw it glowed with an inner light. She had fallen inches from the edge of nothing, one shoulder and her head hanging into it, her open eyes staring into the abyss.

Corina rolled and clawed frantically away from the edge, shoving rocks and hand-sized plates of loose slate-like stone over the edge. She waited, holding her breath, but never heard them hit the bottom.

She stood and looked down at her glowing body, a dim gold light spreading from the core—where the star had landed in her chest—out to her limbs. Her bones and muscle were pale shadows against her skin.

Corina sighed with a sharp annoyed edge.

Why is one always—*always!*—naked in dreams like this?

She glared up at the pure black sky. “Fuck natural! Where are my damn clothes?”

She cried the words to the endless gusting night.

She held her arms up, flexing her hands. A spark ignited her anger. The webbing Aleximor had added to her fingers had come through with her.

“Whose body is this?” She demanded to the darkness. “I want my old one back!”

Corina sat down angrily, ramming a sharp stone against her tailbone and cursing Aleximor. She folded her legs in front of her, breathed the night’s air and stacked flat stones on top of each other until she had a slightly lopsided tower over two feet tall.

The second movement of Beethoven’s “Opus 130” played in her head. She tapped the rhythm on her bare knee, thinking that it felt as if she had broken up with Alan Yeater a year ago. There was a faint melancholy accompaniment, not enough to rile her, just enough to bore her. It seemed a long and uncomplicated time ago, a minor ripple in the pond, a wisp of low altitude cloud in an otherwise full sky of meteorological activity.

She got to her feet, holding back the urge to kick over her little stone tower, and marched off along the rim.

She walked the perimeter of her sharp, rocky...un-world...counting paces, determined to calculate its size. The glow from the captured star—or whatever it was—allowed her to see ten feet around and she stepped and stubbed her toes in a circuitous march along the edge.

“The circumference is little over three hundred paces,” whispered Corina when she came upon her stone tower from the opposite direction. “What would that be? A good step is three feet. Nine-hundred feet around. Circumference divided by π —3.14 equals the diameter...a little over two hundred and eighty-six feet across.” She made a mildly impressed frown, thinking that un-worlds usually come in smaller sizes, and that she must have done something right in life to be upgraded to a roughly circular platform nearly three hundred feet wide. “Okay, so the radius is half the diameter. One forty three. Area’s π -R-squared. Three point one four times one forty three is...four hundred forty nine point zero two...times one forty three ...sixty-four thousand two-hundred nine point eight six square feet.” In the tone of a perky real estate agent, she said, “Spacious living area, open concept design, upgraded kitchens and bathrooms, stone entryway, views of eternity from every window.” Her voice went higher and perkier. “I love it! When can I move in?”

She looked down at the ten-foot section of illuminated gray rock around her, shrugging. “It could be worse,” she said and began counting the ways. “It’s like prison, but without the three hots and a cot—not to mention the benefits of companionship.”

A rattle of stones off to her left broke her concentration right in the middle of debating the up- and downsides of being left here alone or exiled with someone she hated.

Corina felt the mental chill again as she walked carefully over the loose stones in the direction of the noise. She reached the edge before she found anything.

She looked over the broken lip of stone and jerked back. The floor of her stomach was pushing at the back of her throat; a raging fear of falling off shook her and she backed up several steps.

Her eyes chased a sound into the blackness. Something was moving...out there, across the void.

“Who’s there?”

“Corina?” It was Aleximor. She heard his unique pronunciation, but his voice had a rough wet rotting quality. It was his original voice, his male voice.

“What do you want?”

There were sharp clicking and scraping noises like metal on stone. “You must return.”

“You’re lying. Why?”

“You have something of mine.”

“You have something of mine!” She shouted back at him.

“We can cooperate, kill the Seaborn king and House Rexenor. I sensed that you and I are alike, and now you have proven it. I don’t want to make you join me, Corina. I could do that, but that would break you, and I do not want to.”

“I don’t want to have anything to do with you. I don’t know where I am, but until a minute ago you weren’t here, so I was starting to feel comfortable again, something I haven’t felt since you got inside me—you...killing, raising the dead, soul binding—and you’re slowly killing me in the process. I don’t want to have any part of it—or you!”

“You are part of me, Corina.” She could hear a hint of laughter in his voice. “After what you have done, I am not certain I could extract you from your old host body. You have made your decision to help me, to become like me.”

“Fuck off! I’ll never do it! I am not like you!”

“You already have. You are. You made your decision when you reached up and plucked him out of the sky, dear, dear Corina. You see how simple it is for you? He was mine, but you took McHutcheon inside you and bound him to your soul.”

She looked down, horrified at her glowing body, at the star burning inside her, at the pale glow she gave off, lighting the gray stone around her.

“You see. You are my *Melinoe*. You would make a fine *ostologos*. Your slave’s physical form is hiding below the deck, but he is free to roam the ship—and he will. He must live off something. Even I cannot control him in death. McHutcheon is yours, Corina.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE CANAL

I call on you Melinoe, saffron-veiled, of the earth, to whom dread Persephone, venerable queen, gave birth at the mouth of the mournful river Kokytos, on the bed of Zeus Kronion. Zeus deceived with guileful arts dark Persephone, mating with her in the guise of Hades. Hence, partly dark thy limbs and partly white. From Hades shadow, from Zeus ethereal bright. Thy colored members, men by night inspire when seen in spectered forms with terrors dire; Now darkly visible, made of night. Shining in darkness they meet the fearful fight. Terrestrial queen expel wherever found the soul's mad fears to earth's remotest bound; With holy aspect on our incense shrine, and bless thy mystics, and the rites divine.

—Orphic Hymn 71: "To Melinoe"

Corina woke inside her body, the fluorescent glow from McHutcheon's former cabin in her eyes. It took her a few minutes to figure out she was on her back. Her first impulse was to get up and run; there was a hint of hope that she had control back. Her eyes blinked. Hope died. Aleximor moved in just before her, taking the reins, and shutting her out of the control room. Then he made good use of her happily gloating voice. "You will see, in time, we will make a wonderful pair."

Her second impulse was to go with the silent treatment, but questions were piling up inside her mind and demanding answers. Besides, she hated the silent treatment. It was a total coward's way out.

Where were we a second ago? The darkness, the rocky sixty-four thousand square foot shelf in space? What was that place? What were the clicking noises coming from you? Why were we both there? They sounded like idiotic questions and something told her that there might be an advantage in keeping them to herself, in allowing Aleximor to believe she knew exactly where she had been. But she didn't have a trace of a thought to pin them to. Nothing in her head had prepared her for instantaneous appearance in a place so strange and then, in another instant, to be back to earth.

A man's voice, rough with the lack of sleep, answered Aleximor. "In time, Miss Lairsey? The captain has paired us up for the entire journey to São Luís, which is where I've convinced him to drop you off—not waiting all the way to São Paulo."

Aleximor sat up, getting his bearings. He remembered falling on the floor, but couldn't account for a significant gap in time during which his host body had apparently been moved to the bed.

He smiled flirtatiously at Officer Aldrich. *Scary as hell*, thought Corina. "That is kind of you, Mr. Aldrich. To look after me for the journey—even a shortened one. And you are right. We already make a wonderful pair."

"I know you won't try anything now," said Aldrich with a warning finger pointed at

her, trying to ignore her light tone.

Testing the waters, Aleximor raised one eyebrow, slid one of Corina's hands along her hip down her thigh. "And what makes you so certain, Mr. Aldrich?"

Suddenly you're the femme fatale. Corina couldn't believe how quickly the monster inside her had grown accustomed to her skin, known how to use every muscle on her face.

The officer jutted his chin at the ceiling, which presumably meant the control room forty feet above them. "The pilot from the canal authority is aboard. There are security boats on both sides of the locks. The ship won't be entirely under Captain Teixeira's command until we're beyond the Port of Cristobal."

"Locks?"

He might have had a secure lock on her body and its expressions, but he knew nothing about the world above the waves. Corina cursed, but couldn't help herself. *We are going through the canal, the Panama Canal, a channel cut through Central America from the Pacific to the Caribbean Sea. A lock is like a big room without a ceiling—big enough to fit the whole ship inside.*

Aleximor couldn't keep the wonder out of Corina's voice. "Into the Caribbean Sea, and from there into the Atlantic Ocean."

The ship sails in, the door is closed, water is pumped in, the ship floats to the next level, the door opens on the other side, and the ship sails on.

"The locks are a series of steps to bring the *Maria Draughn* to the level of Lake Gatun in central Panama—the lake is about eighty-five feet higher than the Pacific," Aldrich explained. "Then there's another set of locks that step us down into the Caribbean. While we're going through, there's always a crew from the Panama Canal Authority aboard."

Aleximor looked at him with more interest. "Now, why would you tell me such a thing?"

Aldrich started to shake his head, not understanding her question. "I want to be here when you make your...next move. Then I will stop you."

"Next move?"

"McHutcheon's missing. Officer McHutcheon. I know you had something to do with it."

"Daniel? The doctor? Missing?" Aleximor put on his most convincing clueless posture and tone of voice. He covered his mouth with one hand, horrified. "And you suspect *me*? That I had something to do with it?"

"More than suspect."

It took a moment too long, but Aleximor managed to raise one of Corina's eyebrows. "Really?"

"You killed Pinnet, Miss Lairsey. I knew Pinnet for a year—but I've known violent men like him all my life. I knew what he was capable of. Sure, he told us all stories, and he lied and exaggerated on a regular basis, but I have seen the real thing with my own eyes. I knew what he could destroy with his fists. I have been deceived by him—right under my own nose. And then you come along... You didn't just kill him. You butchered him. Gouged his eyes out and shoved them down his throat. You cut the tendons in his arms so that he couldn't use them. I think you tortured him. I don't know how you managed to surprise him, but you did. He grew up in some of the worst boroughs of London, brawling and breaking bones since he was nine years old. There is simply no way you could have overpowered him without...I don't know, some extraordinary ability."

Aleximor stared at him, face expressionless. With some effort, he forced a weary smile. "Oh, very well, Mr. Aldrich. Think what you may. For now, I feel cramped in this

box. If we are to be paired up, can you lead me outside? I would love to see the water. And these locks, these steps to the lake.”

Aldrich got to his feet, holding one hand to the door, still the gentleman with the enemy right in front of him. “After you, Miss Lairsey.” He said her name with a stiffness that discouraged familiarity. “We have passed Miraflores, and we’re just about to enter the Pedro Miguel Locks. If you’ve never been this way before, it’s worth seeing.”

The air was thick and moist, and squeaks and shrieks—strange to Aleximor’s ears—came from the trees that lined the narrow channel leading to the Gatun locks.

Aldrich pointed out one of the security boats keeping pace with the *Maria Draughn*, but Aleximor couldn’t take his eyes away from the car carrier passing them, heading out of the Pacific-bound locks. It was larger than the *Maria Draughn*, not longer, but its hull towered over them, shiny blue and gray walls with long black slotted vents and windows.

One of the carrier’s crew—or one of the canal authority’s line handlers—waved, and Aleximor lifted one open hand, webbed fingers stretched apart in the air.

He had counted at least four handlers aboard the *Maria Draughn* and, as Aldrich had given away the plans, he had no intention of causing trouble before the ship finished its journey through the land of Panama.

He was also interested in the skill and technology required to bring ships from one ocean to another by cutting channels through the land. The surfacers, he realized again, had progressed so far from his day.

Small noisy machines on rails rolled along with the *Maria Draughn*, pulling the ship through the locks on braided blue cords as thick around as Corina’s arm. Doors as large as the front gates of the Nine-cities opened and let the ship pass into another long narrow box.

Every half hour one of the crew of the *Maria Draughn* stopped to convey orders from Captain Teixeira to Officer Aldrich, or receive a status from him. Aleximor watched them openly, taking in the kinds of clothes they wore, their hair and skin color. The surfacers’ skin ranged far beyond the medium browns of the Seaborn, from nearly black to pale like the inside of a shell. Some spoke English in accents so thick he couldn’t understand their speech. They came from all over the surface of the world, mostly from places he had heard of, like England or India or Africa, but a few had come into the world on tiny islands in the Pacific or in central Asia from countries he didn’t know existed.

The crew members glanced at Corina repeatedly in the few minutes they spent with Officer Aldrich. Pinnet was dead, Officer McHutcheon had vanished. The trouble was obviously caused by the mermaid they’d mistakenly—or stupidly—taken aboard. The question was clear on all their faces: Who will be her next victim?

The *Maria Draughn* entered a large forest-lined lake with clumpy islands at the edges, a steady slow ridge of green water left in her wake.

Aldrich leaned on the railing, watching his charge.

Corina Lairsey stared out at Lake Gatun, her focus darting to every boat, every shadow under the surface, like a child who has never seen so much water in one place. Her obvious sense of wonder took him back to his teens in Portsmouth where—not paying attention—he nearly ran down a young Royal Marine standing on the shoreline, staring out at the wide sea. Instead of getting angry, the Marine simply asked him if he “lived around here.” When he nodded, the Marine called him lucky, explaining that he’d never seen water wide enough to not “have land at the other end.”

“Have you any ships that go under the water, Officer Aldrich?”

“Have I been on one, a submarine? Never.”

“Submarine.” Aleximor said the word slowly, savoring it. “How deep do they dive?”

He shook his head, frowning with a guess. “Regularly, a thousand meters, probably

more if they wanted to. Research subs go much deeper, to the abyss, the bottoms of the deepest trenches in the Pacific.”

Aleximor pressed the heels of his palms into the railing, looking along the *Maria Draughn's* hull. “Meters?”

Aldrich shook his head. *Americans*. “Thirty-nine inches. About this high.” He held his hand flat at hip level.

“To the ship’s deck? Half of a fathom or so?”

He nodded, his brows rolling into a suspicious scowl at the question. Who understood a fathom’s length but did not know what a meter was? He shook off the obvious answer.

A mermaid.

He saw the fear in the crew’s eyes, and where there was fear, there would be hatred and violence. Half the crew were as certain as he that Corina had something to do with McHutcheon’s disappearance. The other half went all the way over to the other side, declaring Corina to be a sea-demon in the form of a woman. This brought Aldrich’s mind around to the reason he was guarding her. He paused. Or was he guarding the rest of the crew *from her?*

Aldrich cleared his throat, and let his angry scowl settle into place. “You know, there is a very old rule that goes back to Admiralty Law, and probably earlier, that goes something like, “He who kills a man on shipboard, shall be bound to the dead man and thrown into the sea.”

Aleximor leaned away from the railing and looked down at his host body, thinking that it was fortunate that it would not apply to Corina, being a woman.

He lifted his gaze and smiled, saying instead, “Well, that would be something to experience—at least once.” His gaze dropped again, but to Gatun’s swirling dark green water. “I imagine it is quite painful to hit the water from this height—especially since everything falls so easily through this thin air.”

Aldrich’s focus swung to the lake—but only for a moment. “Probably break half the bones in your body.”

“How do you get off of a ship, once on one?”

“The tugboats push us up against the pier, we tie up, and lower the walkway.”

“And when there is an urgent situation?”

He hesitated over explaining emergency procedures, finally deciding to just point the lifeboats out. “The orange boat there, mounted on those rails—that’s the starboard lifeboat. There’s another on the portside.”

Aleximor stared hard at the two bright orange elliptical pods, trying to guess how they were used, but decided to cut his curiosity short. Aldrich was suspicious. There was no sense in handing him fuel for more suspicion—or any other advantage.

He mimicked Aldrich and leaned on the rail, watching the other canal traffic pass them in the opposite direction, a gleaming white yacht, a sharp gray military vessel with missile tubes and a forest of antennas, and two other cargo ships with orange, red and blue boxes stacked high on their decks.

The pilot boat came alongside just before the Gatun Locks, and another pilot boarded. A security boat made a pass as the ship slipped into the first chamber, and Aldrich led Corina to the bow where they would be able to look over the top of the lock gates, into the chamber below. The Port of Cristobal stuck up through the haze in the distance, and beyond that, the Caribbean.

“I love the Pacific,” whispered Aldrich, almost to himself. “But this is my side of the ocean. I’m just more comfortable here.”

“This is my side also,” said Aleximor. His prison had been in the Pacific. This was like coming home after a two hundred year absence. He looked back along the rail, most of his view blocked by cargo containers. “Extraordinary, Officer Aldrich. That you

surface—that someone had the skill to cut a channel of water through the land, joining two oceans—and for ships of this size. Magnificent.”

He stared at her, getting the I’m-not-from-this-planet feeling again, along with a deep out-of-time vibe. “Where in California are you from? I’ve visited the Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach many times. I have sat in the backseat of a car on a six-lane road full of cars that did not move for fifteen minutes. I’ve walked down Hollywood Boulevard, seen a movie at Grauman’s Chinese Theater. I don’t know much about Californians, but, Miss Lairsey, you have...unsettled me several times with your questions and replies.”

Tell him you’re from Berkeley.

“I am from Berkeley.” Aleximor said it flatly as if that would settle all manner of bizarre behavior. Aldrich nodded, accepting this.

That was easier than...What is that?

A spasm of pain swept through Corina’s middle, cutting deeply, as if someone had shoved a spinning circular saw blade into her kidneys and let it rip up through the bottom of her rib cage. She felt heat and a dull thudding in her bones, then something hot and wet leaking inside her.

Aleximor clutched at the railing, fingers slipping on the thick paint. The red metal deck swung into view. He fell into it, and everything went dark.

Corina shoved her hands into the gray slabs of stone. She was on her knees, sobbing because the glow around her in the lightless space had doubled.

“Why? Another one!” she shouted into the night. The question filled a deep cup of anger and she stirred in the answer. She didn’t want to ask who. Officer McHutcheon—dead Officer McHutcheon—had killed someone and passed the bound soul to her.

“I am as bad as you are, you fucking monster! You have done this to me!”

The wind howled past her, throwing smaller chips of stone into the air and over the edge into nothingness. A rain of gray flaky material dissolved into clouds in the gusts. She picked a few bits out of her hair, twisting one braid around to examine its white tip. More of her hair had lost its color.

“Corina, please.” Aleximor’s voice came from the black space beyond the edge of her prison. She heard clicking sounds as he moved. “You have succeeded where I expected you to fail. I have given you the chance to live for a thousand years or more.”

“I am not alive. This is not living!” She looked down at the doubly bright glow coming from her body. There were deeper shadows at the edges of the flat gray stones under her feet. *Shadows from the light coming from me—from two souls I have stolen from their original owners.*

“This is your life, Corina.” Aleximor’s voice was calm, bordering on amused. “You made this place. This *is* you. The black sky, this roaring wind, the stones underfoot.”

Her anger died and her voice came out in a whisper. “You see this as I see it? This place is mine?”

“We all build the worlds in our own souls.”

“But then why is this place...so wrong?” *My favorite things are music and the Pacific. Where are the violins and surf? Where’s the concert hall in my head? Where’s the ocean? Where’s my damned Pacific Ocean?* She spun away from Aleximor’s direction and walked to the other end of her plot of soul-space. There was something right in Aleximor’s words. She could feel it. *The deaths of my mother and father are here, not buried in memories, but part of the air I breathe, part of the earth under my feet. Everything, it’s here.*

She felt a flash of shame at the thought that her parents might show up, like something out of a dream, and boy would they be disappointed when they found out their

daughter's GPA had slipped to 3.24 last semester, not to mention she was now joyriding through Panama on a cargo ship, stealing the souls of the crew.

After a minute of appraisal, Aleximor answered her. "Interesting. It is not unformed. You are a complicated soul."

"Go fuck yourself," she muttered.

She reached the edge, the sharp line separating rock from nothingness, then turned and walked back. She looked up from the the gray stones to the clicking in the darkness.

"What are you? Why are you making that noise. Are you walking?"

"In a manner of speaking."

A bright star blazed into existence a little to the left of the direction she was facing. She squinted against the stab of light, its beams fiercely attacking the pure black space, clawing for something to perceive it.

She whispered in awe. "Is that you? I can't even look directly at you." The cause suddenly hit her. "Holy shit! How many souls have *you*...taken?"

Aleximor stood up, his long black hair twisting around his shoulders in greasy clumps, a thin black cloak tossed over one shoulder and across his body, one hand raised in greeting. The ground at his feet was smooth, flat, and gave off a metallic sheen. Then she realized he was standing on top of a huge machine with legs like a crab. It was a giant version of his familiar, the crab thing he had summoned to walk all over Pinnet, cutting tendons and gouging eyeballs as it went. He had been inside it, driving it—inside her soul-space, and then like an armored-division commander surveying a battlefield, he popped the hatch and climbed out to take in the view.

"I have lost count, Corina. Tens of thousands at least."

Stepping away from the edge, she headed toward the center of her space—giving new meaning to mooning. *Kiss my glowing ass, Aleximor*. Over her shoulder she asked, "Who is Melinoe? You called me that just before I left this place the last time."

"Melinoe is a beautiful queen of the dead."

"Really?" she asked, distracted by an unexpected flash of color in her empty black and white and gray world. She nearly tripped over the leg of a burgundy velvet chair with carved wood legs and back. The chair looked familiar. She had sat in this very one...somewhere.

She stopped and grabbed the chair for support. In front of it was a music stand and her cello. She leaned forward to read the sheets. *Beethoven's String Quartet, Opus 130, Second Movement* at the top of the page.

"One of the last things I remember hearing before *you* showed up."

She resisted the urge to sit and play, but not for long. "Oh, all right. One time through." She took her cello off its stand, tuned it, and closed her eyes. As soon as she jumped into the first bar, the sound of a violin began accompanying her. Then another. Then a viola.

Her tears started halfway through, but didn't run down her cheeks. They drifted off her face into the air. She slumped over the cello after the last note, exhausted, the bow slipping from her fingers to the rounded gray rocks.

Her head shot up when the sense of disembodiment returned, the feeling of being inside her body without control over it. The view of her soul slid away and when her eyes opened, a chipping, dull-red painted surface came into view, unfocused at first.

Aleximor dragged her body to its knees. Aldrich, wary of a trap, had let Corina slide off the railing and fall to the deck. He'd left her there after turning her over and calling for an ice pack for the swelling on her forehead.

"How long?" Corina's voice was dry and choked with mucus. Aleximor looked over at Officer Aldrich's shiny black shoes and coughed. "How long have I been lying here?"

"Thirty minutes." His voice was slow with indecision.

Aleximor waved away Aldrich's help and climbed to the ship's railing. "You left me lying on the deck? Exposed to Hel—the sun? A gentleman would have carried me to my room."

A gentleman would have caught me, said Corina as Aleximor gingerly touched the knot on her forehead.

Aldrich stood back, his arms folded, glaring at her. "I had one of the crew carry you into the shade." He indicated a pair of shipping containers stacked two high and casting a slightly cooler shadow over the bow.

"The crew? I find your behavior to be nothing like a gentleman's."

I think you're overdoing it.

"And I find yours to be nothing like a lady's. It was my opinion that you were faking an illness—and that I was again to be the dupe. Pinnet fooled me a few days ago. You have fooled us all—including Captain Teixeira, whom I consider near unfoolable. I won't let it happen again." He paused, his manners kicking in. "If you are truly not well, and this is not part of some plot of yours, then I apologize."

Aleximor looked up into his clear gray-blue eyes and held them defiantly for a moment. "I accept your conditional apology, Officer Aldrich."

Aldrich nodded, swallowing dryly. Despite all, he found something innocent and...melancholy about her that made him clamp his teeth shut to keep anything he might say from being said.

Aldrich nearly choked when, in a quiet, lost voice, Corina said, "A gentleman would have caught me." But then Aleximor spoiled the moment by adding, "Everything falls so quickly in the Thin—through the air."

Aldrich replaced his I'm-babysitting-an-alien scowl. Or mermaid, or whatever-monster-from-Berkeley-in-human-form.

He gestured to the bow. "We will enter the Caribbean shortly. A day and a half out from São Luís." He swung his hand to the stern. "I think you should get some rest. The captain is expecting us for dinner."

Dinner was quiet and later than normal, nearly nine o'clock in the evening. The only people in the dining room were Captain Teixeira, Corina, and Aldrich. They ate in silence and when the captain departed for the bridge, Aldrich told Corina to return to McHutcheon's quarters.

Aleximor fell asleep quickly and Corina spent another few hours playing her inner cello, some Shostakovich, parts of a Beethoven sonata with the accompanying piano supplied by her own imagination—although she also imagined the possibility of a whole network of people locked inside their heads with some kind of link between them all, and apparently there was at least one pianist among them.

Aleximor woke suddenly in the middle of the night. Corina surfaced with him, taking in everything he sensed. He jumped off McHutcheon's bed, pulling the sweat pants higher so as not to appear the least bit "skanked."

Someone was trying to get into the room.

Corina heard them outside the door, but Aldrich hadn't. The second officer leaned against the wall on a stool, dozing, his eyes fluttering every couple minutes at small shifts in the sea.

Is my hearing this good?

There were four of them in the hallway. She heard their breathing, the mingled thumping of their troubled heartbeats. One of them wore flip-flops—and he was pacing. Another kept running his fingers through his hair nervously.

What time is it?

Aleximor looked over at the clock. Four-twenty in the morning. He swung his gaze

back to the cabin's door.

There was a raw scraping metallic sound, but not of keys. They were sliding something into the lock, trying to pick it, but it was clear there wasn't consensus on the next step.

"What'll we do?"

"What if she's awake?"

"She's a vampire. We must take her—"

Someone shushed him.

Aleximor, who had no idea what a vampire was, distinctly heard, "We must take her" while Corina, who did, heard, "We must stake her." Aleximor was curious enough to open his thoughts to her directly.

Where would they want to take me, Corina?

Stake me. They want to put a thick piece of wood—a stake—through my heart.

Why in the sea would they want to do that? That is folly. Besides he did not say, stake, but take. Why else would the other one make the shhh noise to quiet him? Your argument rests on the false assumption that the speaker had finished speaking, when he obviously had not. "We must stake her" is a complete statement, while, without the mention of a location, "We must take her" is incomplete, hence the shhh to stop the speaker from continuing.

Jackass. How about "We must stake her through the heart?" My statement is incomplete as well.

You knew, simply in the context of four words, that the target for this assumed stake would be the heart. Why would you presume that these men would require elaboration? Where else would they put the stake?

Corina thought of several places she'd like to put the stake—once Aleximor was out of her body. *Shut up. We're missing their conversation.*

A new voice from the welcome committee in the hall whispered, "You saw Pinnet's face after she was through. Eyes ripped out. Skin blue, blood drained. I'm not saying he didn't deserve it, but she did that to him."

"You could be next."

"Also, Pinnet's corpse is gone."

"The doctor's missing. And now Phari, too."

Corina broke into Aleximor's planning for combat against four armed assailants with, *I think you should wake Aldrich.*

"Why would I want to wake him? I have no fear of these four."

Corina sighed. *Because you do not want to reveal your power in front of Aldrich. Not yet.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

FUTILITY

One of the first activities that take up a new Seaborn ruler's time, shortly after crowning, is to tear down the former king's or queen's "Protection," a clear, permeable shield wider than the walls of the Nine-cities, and higher than the highest of its floating cities. The Protection typically allows inanimate objects of a certain size through, as well as fish and other sea creatures who do not pose a threat to the Seaborn. The original purpose of the Protection was to shield the city from the dead army, the Olethren.

—Michael Henderson on Seaborn tradition

"There is something in the sea that wants me, Nereus." Cassandra stared out from the battlements of the Rexenor fortress, arms folded across her chest, her fingers gripping the smooth material along the sleeves of her shirt. "I can feel it...looking for me."

Nereus, standing behind her, slid his hands across her shoulders, down her arms, and pulled her into a protective hug. "You are shaking?" It came out more of a question than he'd intended, running rough over his effort to keep the surprise out of his voice.

She nodded, leaning back against him, her toes hooking the edge of the south-facing wall. She stared into the deep, and let her braids coil in the water, sending one to circle Nereus, winding loosely around his neck, binding him to her.

"It wants something from me."

He looked doubtful. "It?"

"In the same way there is an *it* about me. I am *she*—mostly. But there is a part deep inside me, a controlling part that is an *it*, the part that has plans for this world."

Nereus closed his eyes, his breathing slowing as he focused his thought on her explanation. "You are the Wreath-wearer." He pretended to know what that really meant, while relying entirely on the legends and rumors of Alkimides power. A long moment of silence, then he whispered, "Perhaps it is you?"

"No. What I feel is outside, something else in the ocean."

He bent down and kissed her behind the ear. "I will protect you from it, my love."

Kassandra kept her first reaction to herself—she wanted to laugh—then his statement unwound, a thick rope unraveling into separate threads, becoming a hundred paths winding through the internal ocean of her soul, touching many places she didn't want touched. His words stabbed into shadowy feelings, unlocking them, letting them loose in her head to displace other thoughts. There was a roar of chaos that made her wince and close her eyes. She wanted to weep over his sentiment, cry with joy, slip helplessly into his arms. Another part of her wanted to hide inside his soul, where no one would ever find her. She rolled in the water to face him, a quick look up at his serious face, his eyes searching for some hint of her feelings in her expression.

She glanced away, giving him a smile instead. Her voice came out hoarse. "Why?"

He finished her question. "Why do I love you?"

She reached up and buried her face in his throat, kissed him there, her fingers working through his hair. "And do not tell me it is because Lady Kallixene wishes it."

A little jump ran through his body, the start of a laugh. "The Lady has told me to stay away from you."

He felt Cassandra's smile against the skin under his jaw, felt it sharpen mischievously. "And you, my dear Nereus, do not heed her command? You defy your Lady?"

"No Rexenor lord or lady may demand such a thing. It is her wish not her command."

Kassandra let a few moments pass to think about this. "Did Lady Kallixene give you her reasons?"

"One only: If I am too close to you, I will perish. You will not hesitate to lead me to my death. She grew angry when I compared our love to her great love with Lord Nausikrates—he gave his life in order to save hers when the Olethren stormed our fortress."

Startled, Kassandra pulled out of his arms. "Just angry?"

He nodded sadly. "Angry at herself for allowing us to meet, for playing her part in bringing us together. Then at me...well, us...saying I was cursed to fall in love with you and I would get in return what I deserved for my stupidity and blindness."

Horried, Kassandra let her focus dart to Nereus' face, then away, sensing the turmoil in his soul, but not catching enough to understand it. "And you do not fear that this is true?"

"Fear?" His fingers slid under her chin and tilted her face up to his. "I hope it is, my lady."

She kept her eyes closed tight, squeezed them tighter when his lips touched hers. She kissed him harder when she felt the approach of an orca team, some pressing business she would—no doubt—have to immediately attend to. She didn't open her eyes and look away until Nicole had called her a third time.

"Yes?" She felt Nereus drift from her, but grabbed him back to her, unashamed of their embrace on the battlements overlooking the great Rexenor fortress and the distant practicing teams of hoplites, orcariders charging targets with lances down.

Nicole stood up in the fore saddle of her own orca, gave Kassandra a quick nod, then pointed behind her at an older man in blue scaled armor and long gray braids, dozens of them hanging down his chest, over his shoulders.

"Milady, we have discovered the trace of intruders from the south in our nets along the mountains."

"King's spies?"

"Yes, milady."

"We brought Nereus' orca, his armor, and lances," put in Nicole, swinging around to motion another team up with a ready mount. "We're doing a sweep of the outlying seas."

Kassandra closed her eyes a moment, her body going still, while her armor slipped up her legs, along her arms, encasing the rest of her. She kicked off the stones, twirling over Nereus in a cartwheel, to land in the archer's stirrups behind the long sleek mammal's dorsal fin.

Nereus kicked to his orca, planting his feet in the saddle. He pulled his hauberk over his head, jamming the long line of snaps closed with the heel of his palm. He jumped into blue scaled leggings, drawing the straps tight, snapping on his sword and the extra armor orcariders required.

Kassandra turned to the commander of the team as she loaded the pair of crossbows cabled to the archer rack. "Lead on, Lord Meidimos. Let us hunt spies from my grandfather."

Meidimos smiled, and she returned it, grabbing the rail as Nereus darted with a deep roll into the formation of outsea riders.

The team shot to the floor, some of the Rexenors singing up lights to seek ahead, smoldering pinpoints the orcas could follow in the pure darkness.

They rode for hours, then Meidimos called the lights back and snuffed them out as they drew near the spellnets guarding the edge of Rexenor's province. He waved some

of his team off on the flanks. They'd come back in at the right time to circle the enemy.

Kassandra used hand signals to talk to Nereus, pointing off to their right. The message went out, and Meidimos swung his team in for the attack. It was over in seconds, the flanking orcas swept in, riders with strong bleeds launching binding spells,

There were two of them; one—a thin wiry man with his hair cropped like a criminal's—wore the green scale armor of House Dosianax, rows of sheathed knives strapped to his legs and arms. He couldn't move with the wrapping job the Rexenors had performed on him. He floated, struggling in a bluish cocoon of woven threads. Everything above his shoulders was uncovered, and he twisted his neck this way and that, trying to get a better look at his captors.

Meidimos stood in his saddle dealing with the other spy, who looked to be in far better condition. He had long light brown hair in braids and bright blue eyes, some kind of vision enhancement he'd made permanent. Meidimos sang something about opening, prying the seams in the man's mental shielding. The spy had been hit with a stun attack that left his arms and legs dangling heavy and useless from his body, but his mental faculties were intact.

He laughed at Meidimos, curling his fingers, the paralysis in his limbs already wearing off. One of the Rexenor scouts, holding the spy's weapons, a sword and a pair of knives, sang a few sharp notes, intending to shut the spy up. It had the opposite effect, making him laugh harder.

Meidimos turned to Lady Kassandra with a questioning gesture.

She had been standing in the archer's stirrups on Nereus' orca, arms folded, making little huffing noises, a labored display of her crumbling patience.

The captured scout turned with everyone else to Kassandra, and gave her a defiant sneer. "R Xenor witch, you can't find my thoughts. You can't—"

She caught his eyes, felt him struggle against her will, and then she sang a short string of notes that lit up her crown, pale green bands of the Wreath of Poseidon.

"I'm afraid I fail to follow you," she said with deliberate formality. "What can't I do to you?" She made a spiral flexing of her fingers, curling them into a fist, opening them again like a flower. A burst of pale blue light floated above her, casting sharp shadows across her face. Only her eyes glowed through, fixed on the scout of King Tharsaleos.

All the blood drained from his face. He made gasping noises, jumping in short violent spasms, trying to break away, while Kassandra calmly folded her arms, her toes sliding down the orca's smooth flank, pushing off. She drifted closer to him, one side of her mouth sharpening as she felt his will give way, broken, dribbling like sand through her fingers.

"What is it I can't do?" Then she pulled everything she wanted to know out of his head, including his name. "Tell me, my good Bistharos, how many veterans in the king's train? How many on orcas, how many long spears, how many heavy armored, how many light? Which Houses does my old grandfather marshal against Rexenor? Does he or does he not bring my dear Alkimides sisters and brothers into the fight?"

Bistharos opened his mouth, his tongue thrashing behind his teeth. Kassandra lifted one finger and his body went rigid, his throat contracting and expanding, his voice working. The figures spilled out of the spy's mouth, his eyes going wide at the sound of his own voice telling the Rexenors everything he knew. She watched his face tighten with the struggle—enjoying it. He couldn't stop the words: the story of the muster of Dosianax and Aktaios and Demonax, how many archery barges, one of the king's trusted Eight to lead the campaign. He talked for half an hour, giving Rexenor everything he was privy to—not the king's detailed battle plans, but enough to be useful.

Kassandra nodded to the Rexenor soldier holding the spy's weapons, and took them from his shaking hands. The Rexenors feared her powers as much as the king's. She just

happened to be on their side, the daughter of the Rexenor lord.

Kassandra let the spy go—lifted her focus and released her hold on him. He brought his hands up to his face, to cover his shame. The paralysis had worn off entirely, and the Rexenor outsea guards brought their spears and crossbows up, ready for anything—anything but what Lady Cassandra did next.

She turned the sword point down, and handed the spy his weapons, the sword and two knives that he mechanically slid into sheathes along his legs. He immediately turned his sword around, point driving at her throat.

He froze in the water, the tip an inch from her skin.

Kassandra smiled cruelly. “Now, now, Bistharos. That is not nice at all.”

He struggled against her control, a blur of sweat coming off his body in a shivery halo. His eyes filled with tears at a silent command she’d passed to him—tears that shimmered in the water around his face.

He shook his head. “Please,” he begged. “Do not make me.” His voice came out thin, words grinding through his teeth.

Hands shaking, he spun to his companion, the scout in Dosianax green, bound and floating on his right, and without hesitating, drove his sword through the man’s chest high on the right side. The blade punched through the chest plates, slid out of the back of his armor with a burst of blood and a confetti spray of scales. The Dosianax scout shrieked, wriggling pathetically. He cursed Bistharos, Rexenor, Cassandra.

Bistharos kicked reflexively, pulled his sword free, and brought it back for a sweep through the man’s throat. His whisper came crawling from his lips. “I beg you, milady, do not do this to me.”

“Kass!” Nicole shouted at her, a command that hit her sister like a slap.

Kassandra blinked, throwing her arms out for balance as if waking from a dream worlds away.

Nereus kicked in and grabbed the weapons from the spy. Other guards closed on Bistharos, binding his arms and legs, taking back his knives. He sagged in their grip, his head lolling to one side, trying to focus on the Wreath-wearer. His eyes still held a dim hatred he was now too weary to pursue.

Kassandra raised her hand, pointed one shaking finger at him. “Do not tell me what I cannot do, Bistharos. I will have every thought in your soul spilled out before me if that is my wish.” Her voice rose, and the ocean around her glowed a brighter green with the Wreath. “I can cut everything out of your soul and leave you empty, slave of a doomed king. Do not tempt me.”

When she turned to Nereus, she found him staring at her, the spy’s pair of knives forgotten in his hands. He was playing with them absently, one of his fingers bleeding. She looked away, startled at how close she had come to pushing right through his gaze and into his soul. “I’m sorry, my love.” She looked into open ocean, but leaned in close to Nereus to speak to him. “Who will protect you from me?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE CREW OF THE MARIA DRAUGHN

Out of Erebus and Chaos she called Nox and the Di Nocti and poured a prayer with long-drawn wailing cries to Hecate...A groan came from the ground, the bushes blanched, the spattered sward was soaked with goutts of blood, stones brayed and bellowed, dogs began to bark, black snakes swarmed on the soil and ghostly shapes of silent spirits floated through the air.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.403

Aldrich shot awake in an instant and stood up, smoothing his uniform. He rubbed his knuckles over his eyes, blinked, and it was as if he'd never fallen asleep.

It must be a sailor thing, thought Corina.

Aldrich grabbed the knob and opened the cabin's big wooden door.

"Gentlemen? What can I do for you?"

Four of the crew crouched in front of the lock, staring up at the biggest baldest officer on board, shock and fear frozen on their faces. They had not expected Aldrich...but the harpy.

Their surprise wore off in seconds, and they backed away to line up against the far wall, their eyes remaining with Aldrich most of the time, occasionally wandering off to the room behind him, trying to catch a glimpse of the vampire mermaid.

Aldrich's eyes stopped on each of them, taking their names, Jan Achille, Brendan Cortner, Elijah Doubrava, and Emilio Poma.

Achille, a first engineer, stepped forward and gave Aldrich a nod. "Sir, we were just...discussing the trouble we are having with..." His voice trailed off and he jutted his chin over Aldrich's shoulder. "The...er...missing crew."

Aldrich, stepped aside, giving them a full view of McHutcheon's old cabin. Corina stood against the far wall, one hand pressed flat against the cool metal, the other clutching the bookcase for support. Aleximor was doing an exemplary job of radiating fear and vulnerability.

"Jan, you can see that Miss Lairsey is well, and not a monster."

Achille nodded, embarrassed. "I can see, sir."

Corina studied the expressions on the faces of the crew. *Whatever you're doing, keep it up, Aleximor. Do not say anything unless they ask you a question—because you'll just fuck it up. Let Aldrich handle it.*

Aleximor let tears come to his eyes, and let his focus drift left, listless, wronged, the accused victim in all the nonsense about the crew disappearing.

Aldrich glanced over his shoulder at Corina. "I have not left Miss Lairsey alone in a day and a half."

"But you know Phari's missing?" one of them asked indignantly.

Aldrich glared at the man and nodded. "I do and I can tell you with all certainty that Miss Lairsey could not have been directly involved, because I have not left her without a

guard in that time.”

Corina tried to focus on Aldrich, who was a blurry human shape at the edge of Aleximor’s gaze. Something was wrong with his speech. He spoke carefully, a little too slowly, even for someone wrenched out of sleep. His words weren’t slurred or halting. Aldrich spoke them surely, but there was something wrong. Corina felt it in his choice of words and the spaces between them.

Aldrich took the lock-picking pins from the door and handed them to Achille. Then he gave each of them a stern look, nodded his head, and said, “Goodnight, gentlemen.” He closed the door firmly and turned the lock.

He only gave Corina a passing glance as he headed for the phone and called up a pot of coffee and rolls.

Mr. Wilkins knocked on the door twenty minutes later with a tray bearing a stainless steel pot of coffee, two mugs, and a plate of dinner rolls and butter. He was a thin old man with watery blue eyes. He’d dressed in a hurry and his shirt was untucked, the sleeves turned up. He wore sandals instead of shoes.

Corina didn’t like the annoyed look Mr. Wilkins shot her, but the coffee smelled so good that she urged Aleximor to smile. *Tell him the coffee smells delicious and thank him.*

“I thank you, Mr. Wilkins, and I am terribly sorry for waking you at such an early hour.” Aleximor said nothing about the coffee. He didn’t think the coffee smelled delicious. There was a thick toasty smell, but somewhere twined in with the rest was something that smelled like sour urine.

“Coffee, Miss Lairsey?” Aldrich flipped the mugs over, raised the pot, and stood poised to pour.

Yes! Drink some coffee. Everyone on the surface drinks coffee, so Aldrich will suspect something if you refuse.

“Cream and sugar?” Aldrich filled her cup then put the pot down. “How many?”

Two spoons of sugar.

“Two spoons of the sugar, if you please.”

Where are you? Corina felt Aleximor’s focus slip away as Aldrich stirred in the sugar and cream.

Aleximor?

He didn’t answer or give any sign he heard her thoughts.

Aldrich was stirring cream and sugar into his own cup, talking about their location, just this side of the canal, heading into the Carribean. He took a sip, swallowed, and said, “It’s not that hot,” when he noticed Corina sitting still, staring down into her coffee.

Aleximor snapped back into control a moment later, lifting his eyes to Aldrich, and blinking. “I am sorry, Officer Aldrich. I appear to have dozed off right in the middle of what you were saying. I beg your pardon.”

“No need to apologize. We’ll be in open sea in a few hours and will then take an easterly course.”

“East.” Aleximor breathed the word in a pleased tone. He picked up the coffee cup delicately and touched the surface of the brown fluid with the tip of his tongue. He blinked, scowled, and dipped his tongue in further, tasting the hint of sweetness. “This coffee is good, very good.”

He watched Aldrich drinking, and copied him, letting a small amount pour into his mouth, even copying the little gasp after swallowing the sweet liquid.

I told you coffee is good. Now, where were you? She didn’t want to say she was scared. She hadn’t considered the possibility of Aleximor leaving her body without first allowing her to regain control. What would happen if it went on for an extended period?

Answer me! Where did you go? Corina started off angry, but all the tone dropped

from her thought as she felt the stabbing pain. She knew where Aleximor had been. He had somehow communicated with his slave Pinnet, who had just killed someone.

Aleximor set the coffee cup down roughly, nearly tipping it. He grabbed his host body around the middle, wincing as another stab of pain rammed his insides.

Who is Pinnet killing? Corina screamed the words in her thoughts. She felt a burn in her chest, not painful, but hot and living—and knew it wasn't Pinnet alone taking lives. She sank into herself, part of her dropping softly into her soul-space. Another part of her remained in her body, shuddering at the thought that the pain had not been as severe this time, that she was getting used to it.

Aleximor blinked at Aldrich and said, "I am not feeling well. This coffee is delicious, though." He opened his thoughts briefly, enough to tell Corina, *I had Pinnet lure the four below the deck where your slave McHutcheon was hiding. They have killed all of them. I am sorry to say that I didn't receive Mr. Wilkins' sneer very well, and I sent Pinnet to kill him as well. It is unfortunate, because this coffee is exceedingly flavorful—and now, I fear he will not survive long enough to make us another pot.*

You...animal!

Thinking that Corina was upset about his error, the sudden loss of the coffee maker, Wilkins, he lifted his eyes to Aldrich, and asked, "Is coffee difficult to create?"

Aldrich stood up with his mug and walked to the small portal window over McHutcheon's bookcase, frowning at her use of the word "create" to refer to making coffee. He pointed at the pot with his mug. "That'll last us a while, but we can always call Wilkins for another pot."

No we can't.

"Sun will be up in less than an hour. Do you want to get some fresh air?"

"I would love to, Officer Aldrich. May I bring the coffee?"

He indicated, with tightening fingers, that he was bringing his mug, but Corina picked up the whole pot, and carried it with them to the deck.

The sun was just burning through the haze at the horizon when they reached the bow. The wind was light, but the morning was too cool to be outside for long. Aldrich looked over at Corina, who appeared not to feel it, while he huddled over his mug of coffee, trying to hold onto any stray warmth coming off it.

Both of them turned at the sound of hurried footsteps. A thin dark-haired man in blue coveralls ran up, breathing hard and looking behind him fearfully.

Aldrich crouched, set his mug on the deck, and shot to his feet, stepping forward in one motion. The morning chill vanished, replaced with a hot rush of adrenalin.

"Bhavesh? What is it?" He grabbed the man by the shoulder, but leaned right to get a better view between the containers.

Bhavesh tilted his head back and forth, pointing back the way he had come. "It is Pinnet. I saw him. What remains of him."

"Where?" Aldrich was already heading down the aisle between the double stacked containers. He glanced back, waving Corina to follow him.

Aleximor set the coffee pot and mug on the deck next to Aldrich's, singing lightly as he straightened. He twirled his fingers in a rhythm, tapping his palm.

Bhavesh folded his arms, faced Aldrich, and shook his head vigorously. "I am not going back."

Aldrich stopped. "What did you see?"

"Pinnet. I saw Pinnet! He jumped on Wellard outside the laundry. He broke Wellard's neck." His hands shook. "I heard the bones snap. Pinnet wrenched his head around till the neck snapped."

"Pinnet's alive?"

Bhavesh shook his head. "Not that I could tell. Half his face is rotted off and a sour

gray liquid dripped out of him when he walked. He should be easy to follow, but I won't do it."

"But..." Aldrich's eyes went to Corina. He turned to go, then spun back around and pointed a shaking finger. "What have you done?"

Aleximor just smiled, finishing up his shifting dance, his arms swaying, fingers spreading, webbing tight, until all the movement passed through his body.

A worried look came over Bhavesh's face. He gestured toward Aldrich, tilting his head to one side. "Sir, you have something on the back of your neck."

Aleximor sang a command and Aldrich's body stiffened. His eyes bulged. His jaw fell open. His eyes shifted to one side then the other, trying to see what held him in place.

Aleximor used Corina's gentlest voice. "Not yet, Officer Aldrich. Your time has not come."

Bhavesh turned slowly around, realizing his mistake too late. One of Aleximor's hooks fired from a point in front of his fingers, flattening out as it crossed the space between them. The point caught Bhavesh in the throat, tearing half of it away with a spray of blood and tissue. His head snapped back with another gush of dark red.

Bhavesh turned as he fell, eyes staring, his arms spiraling, his fingers clawing at the air.

Aleximor stepped over Bhavesh's body, up to Aldrich's frozen form, lifted one hand to his face, and with the flaking blue polish still clinging to the nails, ran the tips of Corina's fingers along his cheek. Aleximor sang another song, and the muscles in Aldrich's face relaxed. The officer turned to the right and Aleximor released him.

The metal crab peeked above Aldrich's collar, four of its front appendages burrowing into the skin at the nape; another two had burned right through the bone at the base of the skull. Skin mushroomed around the hard tubes of metal as if adapting to the foreign invader, growing over the legs inserted up to the middle joint into flesh and bone.

Aleximor turned away from Aldrich, and walked back to the bow. He lifted the coffee pot, invitingly. "Another cup, Officer Aldrich?"

Before we kill the rest of them.

Corina sang a song, a variation on one of Aleximor's, pleading with him to spare Captain Teixeira, to send him instead to the Sea.

Corina copied his dance in her soul-space, snapping her webbed fingers into her palm. Her voice passed from her inner throat into her living muscles, causing Aleximor to flinch in surprise.

But he was also curious, and he let the words and tones flow from his lips, aloud, into the cool morning air.

Aldrich nodded slowly as if he was agreeing before he had finished comprehending the command. "I will pass your offer along to Captain Teixeira, Miss Lairsey."

Aleximor stared at Aldrich, picking at his teeth with his tongue as he thought it over. "Corina, I have underestimated your intellect and musical abilities. Strange that you should choose to reveal them to me in such an honorable way. I will see it is done, if the captain chooses that course."

He is a surfer in name only. You heard him. He has lived on or near the ocean since his birth. If he is to die here, it is only fitting. He was meant to be with Her.

"You have deprived me of another soul, Corina, but in a manner that is not unpleasing." He looked up at Aldrich's compliant features, and filled the officer's coffee mug. "Come, Aldrich. To Captain Teixeira, the one you claimed could not be fooled. We have granted him a wish. When I can arrange it, he will get his chance to feel the embrace of the Sea."

Aleximor up-ended the mug and swallowed the last of the warm sweet coffee, then threw the empty mug over the side into the Caribbean. He handed the pot to Aldrich, waving him away. When he had some room, he swayed forward and back, pulling in an

invisible net, singing into his hands, extending his fingers and blowing the song into the wind.

Pinnet shuffled forward between the containers toward the bow. His hair was pasted down on one side with someone else's dried blood. Half his jaw hung loose, broken down the middle. His skin was transparent in places, speckled with maggots growing large on subcutaneous fat. His blue coveralls hung off his shrinking shoulders.

McHutcheon followed him, his eyes colorless, the whites dry and caved in. His hair was still relatively neat, parted on the left and combed over. His face was gray, lumpy in places where decomposition had begun. The bacteria in his mouth had chewed through the palate and his brain was leaking out, globs of it oozing over his lips and off his chin.

Seven more of the dead followed, two more officers in their uniforms, the first engineer, and all four of the men who had come to pick the lock and stake the vampire, Achille—still holding the lock picking tools, Poma, Cortner, and Doubrava, terror in their dead faces. Combined with Bhavesh, Aleximor's crew outnumbered the living crew.

They stormed the bridge, killing those who remained. They shut down the engine, and turned the ship into a northeasterly course. One of the deck officers attempted to get to the portside lifeboat, but Pinnet caught him at the launch controls. Captain Teixeira was the second to the last to die, his skull crushed, one eye shattered, his shaking hands open, pleading for Corina Lairsey to stop the pain. She pulled her braids off her face, nearly as much white as reddish-brown in them, and smiled down at him. Then she waved to Aldrich to proceed. The second officer asked the captain if he would like to see Akastê, the Sea.

Aleximor took the lack of an answer as an affirmative.

Trevor Aldrich was the final living member of the crew. Aleximor ordered his crab device to extract itself; he allowed Aldrich to have a few moments of horror, his will restored, his mind his own, then took his life swiftly.

Aleximor ordered his slaves into the lifeboats, and they rode the drop cables into the water. He cast off and then took them all over the side, beneath the waves, leaving the *Maria Draughn* to drift free in the Caribbean.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

GATHERING FORCES

It is common among the Seaborn to believe the Wreath-wearers are mortal gods, with powers bestowed on them by the greatest of immortals, the god who was the Sea itself, Poseidon—the “Earth-encircler.” The wearers possess much of the knowledge of their ancestors, ready in their minds. They have direct, sometimes “merged” access to the knowledge and power of those ancestors, ancient kings and queens, the past wearers who have awakened in the new Wreath-wearer. Beyond these abilities—known to almost all Seaborn—what the Wreath-wearers can do is clouded in rumor and exaggerated tales. The belief that the wearers cannot die—cannot even be killed—is strong, and that each has selected his or her own time to pass the crown on to the next generation.

—Michael Henderson, notes

Nicole threw her arms out to catch her balance in the Thin. She was getting better at pushing the water from her lungs, moving between the sea and surface and coughing up seawater, but this time the lack of substance in the air caught her by surprise.

Her brain spun around in her head dizzily. She looked down, as if by the strength of her will she could tell her feet to keep her upright. She discovered that she was standing on gritty painted metal, the deck of a ship. She said “Oh” out loud without meaning to, realizing that it was the movement underfoot that had hit her equilibrium wrong.

Nicole looked up at Cassandra. “Where are we?”

Her sister moved cautiously between the towering stacks of orange and blue painted steel shipping containers, wiping seawater from her mouth with the back of her hand. “A ship in the Caribbean Sea. Something happened here. I feel it—I’ve felt it for days.”

Looking over her shoulder, following the trail of water to the railing, Nicole asked, “How did we get here? I mean, so high up?”

Kassandra crouched to peer around the corner of a container into a wide aisle that ran up and down the ship’s deck. She straightened, satisfied that the coast was clear, and turned around, scanning the high steel walls. Then she looked directly at Nicole, put a finger to her lips, and fed her a long stream of words.

Nicole jerked back, found herself nodding, taking in the information, then caught up to her sister, who had turned on her heel and walked down the aisle between the containers toward the stern.

They stopped at one point, and Cassandra went to her knees, smelling something, running her fingers along the deck to smear what looked like blood—wet blood—swirling it into various shapes, letters, whispering a song that Nicole couldn’t catch over the background roar of the sea.

Kassandra jumped to her feet and marched on.

Nicole followed, hopping over the mess, staying close, glancing behind her repeatedly. They jogged through the lower decks, up brightly lit stairwells where even the soft touch

of their bare feet made loud brushing noises against the metal walls.

The ship was empty or, Nicole surmised, had been emptied by someone or something, probably from the sea. Cassandra's motives for being here still baffled her, something about "hearing the call" and that the Ocean told her hints of things going on in its realm—things that were wrong. But wasn't this above the Ocean's realm? A ship on the surface?

Kassandra spent half an hour exploring the bridge, the highest point of the vessel, a big room capping the tower at the stern with broad windows that gave them a panoramic view of the container-filled decks and sea beyond. She waved Nicole back, while she tiptoed around the room, ran her hands up the walls, her fingers coming away with more blood.

Nicole paced up and down the walkway outside, coming back to the open door to whisper, "The portside lifeboat is gone."

Kassandra stepped through the door on the other side of the bridge, nodding when she returned. "Gone on this side, too. There's another ship out there. I can hear it."

She grabbed a pair of binoculars off the console and scanned the horizon. Then waved Nicole inside while she turned slowly from one side of the bridge windows to the other.

"Two of them."

Kassandra pointed off the port. "A US Navy destroyer there." Then swung her arm around to starboard. "A Chilean destroyer a little ahead of us over there. Part of a North and South American joint task force in the Caribbean."

Nicole frowned at the bizarre military details her sister seemed to know more and more about as the days toward the coming battle with the Seaborn passed.

They both looked up as if they could see through the ceiling. The slow thumping of a helicopter, dull black and nearly invisible in the night, slid right over the bridge to hover above the first stack of containers.

A blast of white light flooded the passageways between the giant steel boxes, and a group of soldiers in black, lumpy in battle armor with gear and guns dangling from their harnesses, shot down droplines from the helicopter into the maze of containers below.

Kassandra touched Nicole's shoulder. "Come on. Time to go."

They met one of the commandos on the stairs. He looked like something out of an alien invasion movie, all in non-reflective black, helmet, facemask, gloves. He went into a defensive crouch when he saw them, short perforated gun barrel aimed right at them while he rattled off status information into his comm gear in a low voice.

Kassandra shifted on the stairs, getting in front of Nicole, holding out her open hands. Then she said something that made the hair on Nicole's neck stand up, more the way she said it than her actual words.

Kassandra calmly took another three steps toward the soldier, and whispered, "I'm not going to hurt you."

He hesitated a second, then lowered his gun. Kassandra took another step, singing softly. She closed the space between them, drifting down the stairs fluidly, her gaze fixed on the man's eyes behind his mask. He nodded at something she was telling him to do. In the same steady voice, he said, "All clear. I'm on the port stairwell up to the bridge. Repeat. All clear."

"Thank you." Kassandra took two more steps and reached him, put one hand on his arm, ran her other hand up his armor. She lifted his facemask over his forehead, letting it hang free on straps at the back of his neck.

Then she kissed him, leaning into him hungrily, her mouth on his, fingers climbing into his hair. Nicole watched her with arms folded and a disappointed sniff.

Kassandra released him. She backed away, let her hand slide along his face, running

her tongue over her lips as if tasting something. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Then she turned and took Nicole’s hand and led her to the deck level of the ship.

Nicole shouldered her, and said with clear sarcasm, “What did you do back there?”

“Asked him a few questions. The Chilean ship found both lifeboats empty.”

“Seaborn?”

“Still a puzzle to me. I need to give it some thought. And we don’t have much time—we have a battle to win.”

Kassandra gripped Nicole’s hand harder, and yanked her off her feet. They jumped the rail, the sea rushing up in a spout to meet them, to break their fall, to hide them from watchers on the circling warships.

They vanished in the deep.

House Rexenor gathered its forces, one thousand on orcas, many of whom had never seen battle before. Some were veterans of a hundred skirmishes and battles, the survivors of the failed defense against the last assault of the Seaborn armies—and the destruction of the old Rexenor fortress by Olethren. Many of these had also fought at Kassandra’s side against the Olethren a second time, above the waves in the heart of the land above, the near-fabled Nebraska. A few hundred more soldiers loyal to Rexenor trickled in over several days from outposts in the North Sea and off the coast of Greenland.

“Not enough.” Kassandra watched them form ranks, charge fences of targets dressed in Dosianax green. She swam in circles—shark-like—over the training space with Nicole and her personal guards and advisors.

Gregor Lord Rexenor came out every other day with a handful of old abyss mages to practice combat casting, conjuring walls of defensive netting to stop crossbow barrages, invoking spells that sent coils of boiling seawater shooting across miles of open ocean. Even Jill swam out with a group of dolphin trainers, days into the strategy sessions, kicking silently at Kassandra’s side, watching her sister nervously as if at any moment she’d be ordered back inside the walls. Kassandra had become overprotective, stationing guards with Nicole, commanding Zypheria to watch Jill.

Days passed and the training progressed slowly. “Too slowly,” said Kassandra to Queen Andromache in her head. “They will not be ready.”

They will be as ready as you are, said the old warrior queen.

Kassandra took that advice to heart, spending more and more time in her head with King Eupheron, learning how to be ready for war, learning things no sane ruler of the Seaborn would want to know. She kept coming back for more. Eupheron even created a quiet space, walled off from the other wearers, where she could explore her powers without criticism.

Then in a surprise move, Kassandra relinquished all command over the Rexenor forces for a week, turning the training over to Nicole and her advisors, swimming north by herself, telling everyone that she needed to practice a few moves that might be dangerous to perform anywhere near the Rexenor fortress.

When she returned, she pronounced House Rexenor as ready for battle as they would ever be, and for days afterward, Kassandra wore a strange smile that hadn’t been there before, and not even Nicole’s angry rant about being deserted by her sister could take it off her face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE LIVING FORTRESS

My inclination—the word reminds me of the “clines” of the ocean: thermocline, halocline, pycnocline—my inclination is to begin at the bottom, the deep ocean, for this is where I find myself, at some extreme dark depth, the abyss, breathing fluid which by all physical studies should not contain enough dissolved oxygen to sustain an adult human. I pull the sea inside my lungs and expel it with each breath. The water feels heavy in my mouth, a fullness that somehow makes me whole, as if by taking the ocean into my lungs, I have become a living breathing part of the three dimensional hydrospace, the plenum, the fluid continuum.

—Journal of Michael Augustus Henderson

It was the presence of life that frightened Aleximor. He reached out one of Corina’s hands, letting her fingertips slip along a stem of soft flowery coral, frayed slippery fronds of pale pink and white ruffled edges. The flexible stalk grew where nothing should grow, where nothing had grown for thousands of years.

There had always been bacteria, tiny scavenging crabs, and marrow-hungry worms, life at the edge of death, all of it small and tuned to feeding off the dead, but nothing higher, nobler—nothing that lived off life, the wanderers in the currents, or the chemicals in the water.

He swam along the foot of the great fortress of the Olethren, thousands of stone blocks, each one as tall as Corina, fitted into smooth vertical faces fifty times her height. Deep water corals blossomed in the channel that ran along the base of the walls. Clusters of tube worms danced in the current: flexible, impossibly tall pale lipstick tubes with buttery rich red tips.

The solid rush of noise hurt Aleximor’s ears, exoskeletal scrapings of a million foraging arthropods. Tendrils of dusty pink bacteria leached up the dark stone like blood poison tracery across hard flat skin.

The living sea had returned to claim the dead army’s fortress, a fierce chemosynthetic nature, immune to death as it was immune to the scalding fumes of the vent communities or the chemical mix of cold seeps and, like death, preferring certain colors, bleached whites and dark blood reds.

Aleximor stared stupidly at the wealth of life, his whole world turned on edge, an offensive impossibility made real.

He looked over his shoulder at the crew of the *Maria Draughn*, eighteen of them, following him, bones and rotting tissue hanging off them as they stumped through the silt to the foot of the fortress walls.

Aleximor turned his back on them and kicked off the ocean floor, pulling water past him. Corina’s arms ached with strain as he swam straight up the west wall, eyes fixed on the crown’s edge.

He reached out and touched the stone facing, passing in blurry slate smears. His

fingers connecting then drawing back, afraid of the soft carpet of algae and the living things—unimportantly small, hatching, growing, thriving and dying in the space of months, building on each other—life blooming out of death; the tips of his murderer’s fingers brushing against it and snapping back, identical magnetic poles, repellent because they were the same.

The walls of the fortress of the Olethren, the army of the dead, rose out of the plane at the foot of the mountains many miles south of the Nine-cities. Vast walls of death’s tyranny, towering over thousands of rows of wired-together rotting human forms, split bones, streaks of dusty white rot, limp tendons, soft digested threads of muscle tissue, and hollow eye sockets.

Aleximor kicked desperately. He needed to see them, the dead that filled the central plane inside the walls.

“A light perhaps...” Corina heard Aleximor’s distressed mumbling through his unintelligible, wild guesses to explain life where death reigned.

The Nine-cities was not distant enough to dispel Aleximor’s caution, but he would venture a light. He prepared the song in his head, his voice dipping and winding in the filmy shallows of his power, fingers tapping rhythmically, constructing a channel, intravenous-like, through the skin that sufficed for most work, to draw from the depths where his real power raged hot and violent. It would take more than a simple light to show him what was wrong with the Olethren and their fortress.

He reached out, hooked his fingers on the hard stone, swinging his body over. He paused on the outside edge of the wide stone cap, high over the plain, fearing to look in.

The faint presence of the Nine-cities caught his attention again, but when he faced north, it vanished. If he held Corina’s head at an angle to the north and east he could just make out a mountainous outline, the light of the city behind them, serrated slate blue against pure black.

“Not far enough.”

Is that the city, the Nine-cities?

He waved absently. “Yes. North and around a bend in the mountains. Quiet, now, my sweet. I need to cast a light.”

Corina was about to answer him but stopped her thoughts. Aleximor seemed to be on the verge of tears, something she wouldn’t have thought possible from something like him. He sounded genuinely distressed.

“It is all wrong.” He whispered the words of a child faced with a world he didn’t understand.

He made fists, cleared his throat, and sang a trigger. A burst of bright sickly green flashed in his hands, and he pitched it into the darkness beyond the wall’s edge. The ball of light flew through space, angling up, growing, gathering speed. Half a mile away it exploded, an umbrella-shape of light fragments ripping through water, smears of yellowy green that rammed up and slid around a fixed diameter.

Aleximor drifted cautiously to the inner edge of the fortress wall. He set Corina’s feet down, toes sliding along the stone, and he looked inside the walls.

Corina felt him move her tongue, heard the starts of words in her throat. A shudder rolled through him. Then silence. Corina’s legs folded under him weakly, and he started to sob.

Klonassa, a veteran rider along the south plains abyss border, went still when she spotted the flare of green on the horizon. Then spat a piece of fish from her mouth, choking on the chewings already on their way down. She coughed out a command. One hand slipped along the smooth flank of her orca, Lochus, urging him into a rapid caudal dash, straight for the glow.

She bent forward along the whale's head, and shoved the rest of her meal into her stirrup bag. Her fingers worked to loosen the straps on her lance. She took the reins in her teeth and slapped her cheek guards down over her face. In seconds she was riding an eight-ton bullet in the water, tucked neatly along Lochus' body, her lance, thick around as her forearm, sticking sharply into the night, four meters beyond the orca's nose.

She knew these waters like the Dosianax fields—the playing fields of her childhood—where she'd played with daggers, and the training fields—playing with killer whales taught to spot the armor and crests of enemy houses, and eat through them.

The waters far to the south of the Nine-cities were hers to watch, serene with the calmness of death. The Olethren had always kept the living away. She had grown up daring her fellow guards to run to the Olethren fortress—when it contained a quarter million of the dead—touch the stone wall, and return without shitting in their armor. Few could stomach their presence, the stench of an army that decomposed as it stood in ranks, the wrongness of so much death brought back into life, the wickedness of so monstrous a creation.

Klonassa tugged at the reins, leaning to bring Lochus around. One pass at the light-maker, loop, and run him through with her lance. Death to all who sought it. No questions, no right answers, no pleading, those were the laws for anyone caught near the fortress of the Olethren. They were the king's property, not to be seen by others' eyes.

Klonassa wondered if the laws still applied with the Olethren gone. It certainly did while the army was off warring, but, as the king had recently admitted, they would war no more, for the woman who was the king's granddaughter, enemy of all the Seaborn, the Wreath-wearer, had destroyed them, brought them to her realm above the waves and taken their power away, shattering their bones with her fury.

Klonassa had read the Word of the King, had nodded in relief with the population of the Nine-cities at the news of the dead army's destruction. At least it could not be used against them. The king's Word, along with an artist's sketch of an unstable-looking woman with knotty brown hair, eyes filled with evil, had listed her wrongs and condemned her as a traitor, an enemy of the Seaborn.

Lochus banked sharply, charging toward the light-caster, a pale figure kneeling at the lip of the battlements. As she swung closer she saw that it was a young woman with pure white braids coiling in the currents around her head.

Klonassa slid her hand down Lochus' head, easing his speed. The lawbreaker on the battlements did not look like something she needed to fear. She didn't know what she looked like. Klonassa had never seen anyone like her, a woman with milky white hair, her skin smooth—she was young, but dying in her eyes.

The pale woman lifted her head from her hands, the sea a blurry mess of tears in front of her, and turned to face Klonassa, opening her arms and standing, inviting the lance to slide through her body and take her life.

This, even more than the woman's appearance, made Klonassa pull Lochus up and guide her lance wide, halting the orca ten kicks from the pale woman.

"Who are you and what is your purpose here, witch?" Klonassa felt the woman's power in the current, streaming off her, staining the water like her tears.

Aleximor straightened Corina's body, lowering the arms, fixing eyes on the border guard.

"Corina." He whispered the name.

"Your name?" Klonassa's voice was demanding. "What house claims you?"

"One of the line of the *ostologoi*."

Klonassa stared for a moment, a command caught in her throat. "The bone-gatherers," she whispered, the name like something out of childhood stories. Then

she scowled at the way her own body recoiled at thoughts inside her own head. “What is your purpose here?”

Aleximor tilted his head to the side, a gesture of questioning he had picked up from his host. “Am I not permitted to see what has become of the army?”

Klonassa lowered her lance, the tip a few fingers from Corina’s chin. “The army belonged to the king, they walked for the king, killed for the king, and no one else. Your line is past, *ostologos*, your family wasted, your power dissolved ice in the warm sea, salt melting in the currents.” She stopped her rambling words, vigorously stirring her feelings to dilute a thick hemorrhaging fear. Her mouth tasted like bitter metal. The woman *did* look like one of the dead-raisers. Not that Klonassa had ever encountered one in or out of the City. “Speak! What do you seek so far from your home?”

The pale woman dropped her shoulders and let her body sink, collapsing on the battlements, distraught. “I had hoped...” She sniffled, trying to hold back more tears. “I hoped, good lady, that I would find the army in place, at peace, in ranks in their home.”

Aleximor lifted his head, displaying a mix of expressions: betrayal, pain, a fragile rebelliousness easily conquered by the commanding presence of the border guard. He dropped his voice to a low whisper. “My father...” He broke down in tears. “My father is cruel and will not permit me to go to the Nine-cities. I have heard no news, only rumor on the current, the taste of war.” Aleximor opened one hand weakly, pleading. “Perhaps you, good lady, could tell me what has happened here?”

Klonassa blinked, doubt raking through her resolve. “I do not know what you mean, *ostologos*.” It *was* a title, a rank one traded for life. “Have you not heard the tales of the Wreath-wearer?”

“Tales?”

“She lives among the thinlings. When little more than a child, she destroyed the army of the dead, snapped every bone, walked among them and crushed them beneath her heel, a girl with power beyond our imagining. They say she whispers, and mile-thick ice at the bottom of the world slides into the sea. They say she owns the oceans, that she will kill us all, that her tears bring doom, her song empties a man’s mind. And she has declared war, this Wreath-wearer called Cassandra. Even her name is a curse.”

“Cassandra.” Aleximor whispered the name, liking what it meant. “And she is not a queen, this Wreath-wearer?”

“No,” said Klonassa. “She is the king’s granddaughter, the spawn of the king’s first wife, the first queen’s hidden daughter.”

“What twisty lives,” said Aleximor in a voice too light to keep Klonassa’s suspicion asleep.

“Who are you, Corina of the *ostologoi*?” Her lance wavered, but this time the tip stood three-fingers from Corina’s nose.

“I have given you my name, my family, even my purpose. Perhaps you would like a taste of the strategy that builds inside me, that grows with this news of an enemy of the king—and from the king’s own blood no less. Is that what you desire, border guard?” Aleximor lifted his head. “I do not hear your answer?”

Aleximor grabbed the lance from Klonassa’s grip, tugging it free and releasing it into the open water over the fortress’ edge.

“I still hear no answer from you.” Aleximor pushed the guard’s sleeve up, revealing the gold name bracelet. “Klonassa?” He slipped the chain off her wrist, placing it around his own. “What a pretty name.”

And Aleximor took on the new role he planned to play in the Nine-cities—and beyond that if it suited him...or her, since he already had the perfect costume. He became the pale woman, and she bent her wrist back, fingers fanning, a dainty gesture to show off her new trinket. “I think I shall play the part of Klonassa for a while. What fun!”

Klonassa, like a statue in her saddle, a cold glare frozen on her face, made a thin gurgling noise in her throat.

The pale woman snapped the reins from her fist, and taking Klonassa's stiff outstretched hand, eased her from the orca's saddle onto the wide stone of the battlements.

Aleximor's familiar had its spiky crab claws into Klonassa's spine, cutting nerves, snipping through bone to reach the core. Klonassa shuddered once, as the crab hollowed out her spine. She felt nothing below her neck, but her eyes moved in jerky shots of focus.

The pale woman spent a moment weaving a spell of obedience on the orca, then turned back to her prey. She kneeled over Klonassa, looking closely at her face. The pale woman's fingers slid over the guard's throat to the first buckle in her armor and unsnapped it.

"I have changed my plans, dear Corina."

You are going to enter the city? Dressed as Klonassa and riding her killer whale?

The pale woman smiled. Still looking into Klonassa's frightened eyes, she answered Corina. "I believe I will someday grow tired of finding I do not have to explain my plans to you, dear."

You talk too much. It's clear that this Cassandra isn't working alone. And since she hates the king, she's our friend. She's organized a revolt, probably has her own army, and will certainly have spies inside the walls of the city. We must find them.

The pale woman stood up and made her way to the edge of the fortress wall, a puzzled look on her face. "Are all surface women this..."

Strategic?

"Yes, strategic."

Where do you think our new friend, Cassandra, learned to destroy armies?

Aleximor slipped out of character for a moment, caught himself, cleared his throat, and became the pale woman again, asking with a sour tone. "Is this mockery?"

Of course it is, you dolt. You think they take all girls aside when they're fourteen for an intensive study of Clausewitz?

"I do not know. Who is Clausewitz?"

A military strategist.

"How do you—a music student—know about war? Are you perhaps related to the war-bards, the Kirkêlatides?"

Corina didn't know what that meant, but she knew the answer to the question. *My uncle went to West Point. The military academy. He has all these books on military history, huge books with maps of Napoleon's campaigns and the Civil War. I like maps. I read a lot.*

The pale woman kept her features relaxed because Corina would be able to read something in them from the inside, but Aleximor's hidden thoughts rolled and punched around in his soul, plots unfolding like wings, only to fly away a moment later. He hated knowing Corina could help him—had helped him—in so many ways, hated his dependency on her, even hated *her* dependency on him.

Over the last month, she had grown more and more familiar with him, accustomed to his presence, his moods, his plans, and—even worse—she understood them. She urged him on. She pointed out weaknesses in his scheme for revenge. She understood his world far better than he understood hers ... and she could sing. She'd memorized many of his spell songs, many of his dances and incantations. She was becoming more like him than he liked.

Corina squirmed in a body that no longer felt like hers. She was sharing it with Aleximor, talking like him, becoming more like him, the two of them merging. She felt his thoughts, his reaction to her shift in power. Corina flitted through his dreams, entered them at will, steered them. She moved on a gradually tilting floor, forced to take a step closer to him every day, and she knew he felt the same sliding feeling from his side, the fear of losing part of himself to his captive—gaining advantages she had, but losing control of some of his strength to her.

“It is most disconcerting,” The pale woman said to herself, mirroring Corina’s thoughts.

Corina ignored *her*, sinking into her soul, running her fingers along the neck of her cello.

This isn’t even my life anymore. It’s not my body. It’s some other woman, a dead-pale thing with white hair—who kills people, and takes their souls. I am a parasite, stuck in the corner of this thing’s—this woman’s—mind—while she plays with human bones, knitting them together.

Corina’s fingers plucked the strings, a fevery coil of climbing notes; the last note hit a high G flat that led into a low A, starting the sequence over again.

There is no “me”. I am just something that annoys the pale woman. I am smoke, a memory so thin and a presence so weak that it does not catch her eye. The pale woman isn’t even alive. Even her body knows it’s dead. She cannot make life, only death.

Corina cut her fingers on the strings and she stared at the meaty ridges in her ghostly glowing skin.

The music stopped. Her fingers shook on the frets and grabbed the cello, something to hold onto, some piece of her life; she curled her legs and arms around it.

She didn’t unfold her body when something punched her in the shoulder. Something hit her again, running up her back. She realized it was her own body shuddering. Her chin hit the smooth curved side of the cello. The strings thrummed. She clutched at the music, shaking and holding on while her body shuddered and tried to free itself.

From what? What would it free itself from?

The pain shook her violently, knocking the inside of her elbow against the soft wood with a low boom.

I am broken.

Her mind shook out a string of related garbage. *Glass splinters. Shards. Shattered light bulb.* The lamp was broken and her father was going to be angry—the lamp she knocked off the end-table during a game of living room baseball.

Broken pieces. Broke.

Corina let all the thoughts slide out of her soul, all of them except one.

Fix it. She wanted to, but then the pale woman would kill her.

She will kill me anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

NINE-CITIES

The three greater ‘houses’ or *poleis* (pl. of *polis*) of the Seaborn are Telkhinos, Alkimides, and Rexenor, and the rivalry between these three accounts for most of wars over the last two thousand years. The hatred of Alkimides for Rexenor goes back to the first Wreath-wearer, Polemachos, the bastard son of the Alkimides princess and a minor Rexenor noble—although the rift stems from Rexenor refusing to join forces with Alkimides against the old royal house, Telkhinos.

—Michael Henderson, notes

The pale woman smiled pale lips at the Roll Seep Gate guards, eighteen of them in blue-scaled armor, protectors of the rarely used southern entrance into the Nine-cities. They formed up in two neat rows, passing information to each other with hand signals.

And they were going to die. Not all of them. She would leave one or two alive, bound to her, tools to help her swim deeper into the city, keys to other gates.

She paused just outside the wall to catch the tone of the water, feeling for the wash and wake of any other Seaborn nearby, and when she knew she was alone with the guards, she donned a mien that intermingled impatience and tenderness, a sharp lust for something she didn’t make clear.

Her look told each of them that she would like to kiss them all, and that she would like to ram sharp objects in their ears—and then sing of love.

She whispered, “Come bloody, come strong, come along my pretty soldiers.”

She opened one hand with a flourish and brought the inside of her delicate wrist into her teeth, tearing the skin, bright red globules, a spray of life that she sucked into her mouth. The wound closed as soon as her lips released it.

“Come.” She showed them red teeth and a shy girlish smile.

The guards stared, and the woman with hair the color of bones danced among them, slithering against their armor, pursing her lips, planting a kiss on each of their cheeks, a dab of her blood like a tiny blossom.

She ran bone-white fingers—unmercifully cold fingers—along the throat of the youngest guard. His lips moved, the words caught in his mouth.

“Come along my pretty soldier.”

He gave her an eager nod.

Aleximor’s song slithered between the guards, separating them, gliding into their hearts, slippery knives that unhooked their thoughts, plucked at the rigid training in their souls.

Her high voice slid into them, slick fingers in their ears. “Separate and destroy, each piece weak on its own.”

She rubbed in seeds of rage, a delicious pain with a shape, webbed branches, a fan spreading, a sharp burn of release, and her slow fingers wandered through their heads.

She left a flavor in their mouths, prickly sweet, candy and puncture wounds and glossy silk, a sugary ache deep in their lungs—and their breathing quickened, fingers flexing, reaching for weapons.

Corina watched as the spell took hold, nailing their souls to their physical forms. *What are you doing to them?*

“Just watch, dearest.”

The pale woman pouted, sinking in the water, her head dropping to one shoulder, her sadness shuddering through their servile minds, and her nimble words urged them to make her happy and whole again.

“If only you can,” she sighed and kicked to the gate’s commander, her lips sliding along his jaw line, a gentle kiss beside his ear.

Then she raked her nails over his eyes, cutting through the lids, popping one eye with a gush of fluid. His body went rigid, and the pale woman kicked backward and let the other guards finish the job for her.

The commander tried to scream for help, but the woman had paralyzed him. Blinded, he felt combat motion in the water around him, spears drawn close for stabbing. He tasted blood in the water, his own and others’ gushing from sword wounds; he tasted *her* blood where her tiny red blossom kiss had burned a hole through his cheek into his mouth, tendrils of it cutting into his tongue and throat and through the fleshy roof into his brain.

The pale woman kicked into the Nine-cities, the youngest guard at her shoulder—in tow—while the seventeen remaining guards of the Roll Seep Gate hacked each other to pieces.

Aleximor sank deeper into the role of the pale woman, and went home with the young guard, Theudas, into a poorer area of the city of House Aktaios, to dark tunnels and a single-room with clothes and trash strewn at various depths, most of it drifting around the ceiling. The water inside stank and tasted sour, fouled by the remains of meals and a general lack of cleanliness.

An old Seaborn woman who lived nearby called to see if Theudas had eaten or needed anything from the market; she’d been mothering him for months, plotting to match him with one of her granddaughters. At the pale woman’s command, Theudas told her to never return or bother him again. Aleximor lit up the room, glowing yellow, and commanded Theudas to clean while he plotted his next foray.

So much of what he had understood of the world above the waves had changed; so much of the Seaborn world had not.

The cities of each of the greater houses, Telkhines, Alkimides, Aktaios, Dosianax, Rexenor, Lykos, Damnameneos, Megalesios, and Demonax endured in the deeps, and little had changed about their walls, their floating towers, their streaming lights and coral garlands. The Telkhines city remained empty, locked and sealed, asleep as it had been for the last two thousand years—no spell being capable of unlocking its doors. House Rexenor’s city had been sacked, its walls crumbling, its lights burned out, and nothing floated in the water above it. Rexenor had been a dead house for nearly twenty years, but it surprised no one that the Rexenors had somehow come back to life, rebuilding their fortress in the north.

Aleximor became the pale woman, sent Theudas out for a cloak with a hood, and then with her white hair and death pale skin hidden, she killed and stole money, and bought gifts for the guards at other gates in the city—gates that led into the king’s fortress.

She swam through the Nine-cities, picking up its currents, where the power had shifted in the last two hundred years, picking up any news of the coming war in the north with House Rexenor, and rumors of the Alkimides Wreath-wearer from the surface who was plotting to kill them all.

Days passed, and the pale woman found more paths closed against her, the

Nine-cities closing down in preparation for battle, suspicion at every turn.

The pale woman passed a funeral procession high in the water, and had to stop and watch, smiling when she discovered it was for a man named Eudoridas who had been a guard at the Roll Seep Gate—but a tinge of anger when the stories of the gate massacre mostly laid blame on the mysterious Cassandra, the Wreath-wearer.

Everywhere she turned, every current he followed, the name “Kassandra” surfaced, the king’s granddaughter, plotting revenge, powerful beyond their imagining. Cassandra began to haunt the pale woman’s dreams...when she had dreams.

The pale woman rarely slept, feeling less of the need to as she released more of Corina’s life into death.

Every few days Aleximor slipped out of the pale woman role, and tried to become what he remembered of his original manners and behavior. Part of him was already beginning to wonder if it mattered.

“The king will pay,” whispered Aleximor and considered everything he had learned about King Tharsaleos: Lord of House Dosianax, which meant he had been raised to kill. Tharsaleos had the bleed in his family, which meant he had some power. Nothing like his own, Aleximor was certain, but magic nonetheless. Tharsaleos gained the throne by marrying into the Alkimides royal family, first to Princess Pythias, and on her death, marrying Pythias’ sister Isothemis.

Aleximor learned the *oktoloji* were mostly of the king’s own house, Dosianax, which made them a particularly dangerous wall to break through. It would not be a simple task to separate and destroy them, as it had been at the gate.

Every day he chanced more, testing the boundaries around the king, pressing a cold finger into softer layers only to hit stone walls, or whispering enslaving spells into the ear of one guard only to find that he had no keys to the next gate in.

He imagined it might be easier to return to his family stronghold, marshal his own army of the dead, and storm the city.

A new day, and Aleximor woke as the pale woman. She whispered, “Once more,” and gathered up her cloak. “Come, Theudas, put on your armor, let us see how deep—how close to the heart of the king’s fortress—they will let us swim today.”

The pale woman noticed something else that had not changed in the last couple centuries. There were many gates in the Nine-cities. Individual House domains had their own gates. The central fortress of the king had well-trafficked gates that faced west, and a series of “cold” gates facing away from the heat and light of Helios’ Twin, guarded by those still climbing the ranks, small teams stationed up the deserted backside of the fortress.

There were four guards at the Sixth Cold Gate, drifting opposite each other, each taking a quadrant around a circle cut through the wall, talking in whispers. A lip of veined white bricks had been fitted around the cut, capped with a keystone with a carved Gorgon’s tentacled cameo.

The pale woman’s eyes stopped on the blue transparent bars filling the circle, and then went to the lock—it looked like a fist-sized blob of green foam. She had never seen anything like it, and spent enough time staring that she triggered the guards’ suspicion.

“What is your business here?” One of the Cold Gate guards swam forward, more disappointed than cautious. His eyes glowed faintly, a vision spell he’d cast on himself to augment the faint glow from two white globes high on the wall. The cold gates, a staggered series of seven of them, faced east, and the beams of Helios’ Twin never reached them.

The pale woman smiled because the guard had fixed his eyes on Theudas, assuming that *he* was leading *her*.

The single pair of eyes watching the pale woman belonged to the only woman among

the four gate guards, an angry pinning stare, her three black braids sweeping around her throat as she approached, sword down along her arm, held like a knife.

The pale woman dropped her gaze, bringing her hands together; her white fingertips touched and when she pulled them apart, a bar of darkness stretched the gap between them, thickening to a soft-edged piece of nothingness shot with threads electric blue.

The water crackled, and at a command from the pale woman, Theudas brought his spear up and charged.

One guard aimed a crossbow just in time and put a bolt into Theudas' chest. It punched through his armor, a spray of bone and blood exploding from the middle of his back.

The guard didn't get a second shot. A slice of night black spun out of the bar of nothingness the pale woman held between her fingertips and neatly severed the guard's head. The crossbow drifted to the stone floor in front of the gate along with its owner's headless body.

Another night blade caught the closest guard, the first speaker, cutting through his arm at the elbow and then through his neck—and the light in his eyes died.

One guard kicked off the wall at a steep angle, fleeing the fight.

The female guard cursed him and brought her sword up in front, hilt above her head, point down, her left hand braced against the back of the blade near the tip. She brought her knees up, did a weird shrugging motion that propelled her backward in the water, and planted her feet against the gate's glowing bars.

A blade caught the fleeing guard through the ankles, and then arced into the back of his neck.

Blood clouded the water and armored guards glided limply to the platform running the length of the sixth tier.

The pale woman turned back to the last guard crouched in her strange stance, perpendicular to the wall, sword point down, the sharp edge facing out.

A night blade shot at her, hit the sword, and spun off in two pieces, turning to smoke before hitting the stone wall.

The pale woman's arms shook with the effort of keeping the gap of night open. "Who are you?"

"Phaidra." She said it proudly, as if releasing some of the pressure of hiding her identity for months.

"You are lucky only once, Phaidra," said the pale woman in Corina's gloating voice. She twisted her fingers in an arcane motion and four pure-black sickle shapes spun through the water.

Phaidra kicked off the gate, her legs wheeling over her head. She caught one of Aleximor's blades, but missed the other three. One clipped her helmet, tearing it from her head with a spurt of blood from her scalp. Another sliced deep through the scales armoring her thigh. The last missed her, taking a wedge of stone out of the wall.

Phaidra dropped her sword and fell into a curl of supplication, weeping. One hand opened to the pale witch.

"Please."

Her right hand, hidden from the white-haired woman's view, snapped and flexed. A cable as thin as a strand of hair whipped across the space between them, towed by a tiny metal weight, and dragging a bulb the size of a balled up fist. The cable coiled up the pale woman's legs, spiraling and tightening them together. The bulb popped, expanded with gas, and threw her bound ankles straight up.

The pale woman lost her grip on the bar of darkness between her fingers and it vanished.

Phaidra kicked off the wall, grabbed the woman's white braids as she shot past, and

tugged her head and neck into a wrestling hold, a knife against her throat.

“Do not move.” Phaidra breathed the words an inch from the pale woman’s ear. “Or I will. Say nothing, until I ask. Keep your hands free, away from your body. If you remain still and silent, I will take that as assent. Otherwise, I will take your head and let the rest of you fly to the apex of the King’s Protection, where you can bounce around headless, spewing your blood until the guards cut the float from your legs. My blade will be into your spine before you can call on whatever power you possess. I am not some stupid Dosianax. I am a Rexenor. I have fought the Oletren. Twice.”

Phaidra tightened her grip, chasing the twitch that ran through Aleximor’s body.

“So, you know where we swim, Miss Pale Hair. You know I am no friend of Tharsaleos, and must also believe you are not. I have told you who I am, and in this city, that knowledge will get me a stone box in the king’s prison—if I am not slain before that. If you cannot gain my trust, I will kill you. Now, turn your hand so that I may see your bracelet. Slowly.”

Aleximor twisted his wrist, keeping his fingers together, until the gold plate of the name bracelet faced Phaidra.

“Klonassa,” said Phaidra in an almost friendly whisper, “of Dosianax. One of the king’s near-border scouts. I must hear your tale, *Klonassa*. How is it possible to ride off for duty in the mountains with black hair and return with white?” Her tone thinned to a knife’s edge. “I smell sourness on you. Bitter blood. You are warm, but not with your own life. Someone else’s you have taken.”

Aleximor shivered again, and Phaidra took this for a spasm of fear.

“Do not fret, Pale One. I will allow you to speak. I hated Klonassa and bear you no grudge for killing her. Now. Very slowly. Very quietly. Speak to me. Tell me your story. Begin with your real name.”

“Corina,” Aleximor managed to whisper. “I am a daughter of the *ostologos*.”

“You lie. You...look like one, so I am willing to give you another moment of life. There is no *ostologos*, for all of that work has been taken up by the king himself.”

“So I have heard.”

“My ancestor put yours into a prison on the far side of the world, never to touch the sea’s warmth on his skin again.”

Aleximor held his jaw tight to keep the smile pushing at his lips in. “I take you to be some distant relative of old Kassander?”

“He was my great-great-grandfather.”

Aleximor’s body jumped again, and he felt the knife push into his soft throat. “Then you are a lady of Rexenor?”

“I am. Tell me why you are here, why one of the old line of the *ostologoi* would find herself in the king’s fortress—and six gates in?”

“We are here—six gates in—for the same reasons, lady.”

“I have not given you my reasons.”

“Our causes may differ, Phaidra of Rexenor, but our hatred of kings runs a parallel current. Rexenor was betrayed by them. My family was as well. We fight them from different sides, but we are bound by our hatred.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

PHAIDRA

The lure of fire magic, the combining of the liquid elements of the sea with the solid earth, was strong among the Telkhines, and there is universal consensus among the Seaborn that the study and practice of fire magic led to House Telkhines' downfall. It was forbidden among all the other houses, and all books on the uses of fire—as well as any Telkhines teachers—were destroyed during the overthrow.
—Seaborn history, Michael Henderson

“Lady Cassandra is my niece,” Phaidra admitted quietly, running her fingers over the healed wound in her scalp. The pale witch, Corina, had fixed the deep rip in her leg as well, then led Phaidra back to Theudas' former residence.

Aleximor stared with Corina's eyes, shark-like, ravenous, his lips parting for words, more of his teeth showing.

“How young is she?”

“Twenty.” Phaidra didn't add that age didn't really matter to the Wreath-wearers once they came into their power—not when they had thousand-year-old royalty in their heads telling them what to say and what to do.

The pale woman's smiled even more like a shark.

Phaidra could only let her guard down so far before every internal signal blared warnings and told her to keep it up. *It's just information among enemies with a greater common enemy. Sharing information. That is all.*

She had to be careful, but even with the warnings, Phaidra found herself wanting to trust Corina, tiring of the months of secrecy, of wearing an agreeable mask when others talked of ridding the world of Rexenor or the Wreath-wearer, singing their songs, clasping their hands, and chaining some piece of her soul to their side. She had struggled in her new life of twisted mirror loyalties. So much easier to hate your enemies.

The pale woman kicked closer, her expression softening, hunger still in her words. “Are there others like you in the City?”

Phaidra closed her mouth into a tight cautious line. Do not answer the question she is asking, she told herself, *but the sense of the question*. “There are many discontented.”

“Of House Rexenor?” The pale woman gave her an incredulous stare.

“No.”

Corina tilted her head back, understanding. “Yes, this King Tharsaleos is not that stupid.”

Phaidra stopped herself from grinning back, but allowed a wary smile onto her lips. “Even for a Dosianax, yes.”

Both of them laughed, cruel and happy and bitterly sad laughter that died as soon as each heard the identical feeling of loss, a deep welling sorrow each of them had in their souls.

Phaidra was the first to relax her shoulders. “There is something...” She was about to say that there was something about Corina that reminded her of Cassandra.

“Something? What is it?”

“I think you are right, Corina. We are alike.”

The two of them shared Theudas’ old room, went on night forays into the king’s fortress, and nodded, unsurprised by the spread of rumors about the Wreath-wearer’s agents penetrating the Nine-cities. First, the Roll Seep Gate attack and now another unusual attack six gates in toward King Tharsaleos. There was a guard from the Sixth Cold Gate who had vanished, and—strangest of all—one of the attackers in the king’s fortress had been a missing young man from the Roll Seep.

As fond as Aleximor had become of his Rexenor accomplice, he knew it was time to change his strategy. He decided to return home to the old stronghold of the bone-gatherers north of the city.

“I want to meet the Wreath-wearer, Phaidra.”

The Lady Rexenor gave her a hard look, tilted her head forward in assent. She pulled off her earrings. “I must remain here, in her service. Will you give her a message for me?”

“How do you speak to each other or pass messages now?”

“Twice she has spoken to me...in my thoughts.”

Corina moved closer. “Commands? Questions? And do you answer her?”

Phaidra stiffened and looked away, either unable or unwilling to explain.

Corina smiled, soft and a little hurt—then answered in a carefree voice, kicking to the ceiling and waving a hand that dismissed any of the barriers between them. “Why wouldn’t I pass along your message?”

And for the first time since the kissing and killing at the Roll Seep Gate, the Corina inside the pale woman spoke, pleading with Aleximor, just four words: *Do not hurt her.*

Phaidra kicked off one wall and took Corina’s hands, pushing her earrings into her palm and folding her white fingers over them. “Give these to Lady Cassandra as a token of my confidence in you and tell her exactly this: Tharsaleos will marshal all house forces except Alkimides. He does not trust Alkimides, and will keep them in the Nine-cities, fearing they will betray him by taking the Wreath-wearer’s side in the battle.”

There was a flash of anger on the pale woman’s face before she pushed away. “Why did you not tell *me* this? Who will lead the king’s army into the north, the king himself?”

Phaidra tensed, her knees coming up and hands curling into fists. “Because Lady Cassandra is to lead Rexenor in battle. I do not know who will lead the Seaborn army. I suspect the king, but then he would take House Alkimides with him to remain under his eye. And there is one Alkimides in the *oktoloji*, the first of the king’s Eight, Sameramis. Does the king go without one of his most trusted? Does he bring some of the Alkimides but not the bulk of the army?” Phaidra kicked away from the pale woman, sensing the threat behind her words. “I do not understand your reaction, Corina.” A sudden shocking conclusion tumbled into place in Phaidra’s mind, and she leaned forward without meaning to, her eyes going wide. “You are of the *ostologoi*. Do you have an army?”

The pale woman smiled and closed her eyes to regain her self-control. “Rexenor,” she whispered, and Phaidra couldn’t tell if she was talking to her or some imagined historical Rexenor. “Most clever beside the Telkhines. Only you could have devised a way to imprison...one of us. Why are you not the royal house?”

Phaidra returned a musing smile. “In a way, it *was* Rexenor who defeated the Telkhines two thousand years ago.”

Corina returned a doubtful look. “How?”

“The first Alkimides king, Polemachos, was a bastard of a lesser Rexenor nobleman and the Alkimides princess—and King Polemachos had the bleed off his father.”

Corina nodded. “Now you have an heir to the throne from a Rexenor Lord and an Alkimides royal.”

“And she is the Wreath-wearer.”

“Whose blood does she have? What are her strengths?”

The pale woman’s eagerness sparked Phaidra’s suspicion, and she brought her fists up again. “My brother’s. I cannot pin down her direction. Ask her when you meet her.”

Corina didn’t notice Phaidra’s uneasiness. She had a faraway look in her eyes as she grasped the earrings firmly in her hand.

“That I will, my dear Phaidra Lady Rexenor. I will ask her when I see her.”

Phaidra opened her eyes, startled by a heavy thud behind her. Someone was banging on the door, trying to break it down.

She tried to lift her head and then her hands, but her body would not respond. Her arms and legs felt heavy; a hollow burning itch crawled around inside her stomach, something alive injecting a boiling fluid into her muscles.

“Corina?” Her voice sounded muffled and too slow, her tongue dropping to one side in her mouth, garbling the words. Had she been poisoned?

A slow prickling started at the base of her spine and roamed hot up her back. She knew Corina wasn’t there.

She blinked and tried to hold her thoughts steady. Corina, smiling after their talk, agreeable, too agreeable, taking her earrings. Phaidra remembered a line of fire and a woman’s demanding voice, and Corina bargaining with her—and the woman behind the line of fire gave her something...something wrong, something that slithered into her head, a segmented thing without a face, just rings of teeth.

Phaidra? There was a voice in her head, a woman’s concerned voice—not the woman from behind the fire.

Phaidra, close your eyes. Let me show you something.

“Lady Cassandra?” Her voice sounded clearer, the burning in her muscles easing.

Yes, it’s me. Close your eyes. Just watch. This is the hard part.

“Watch?”

Wait. There’s something inside you. I think this was meant for me. Did my grandfather do this to you? Panic filled Cassandra’s voice. Where are you? Has he caught you?

“No. Cor...” Phaidra couldn’t say her name. “Pale woman.”

It’s here. It has come across my link to you. It’s inside me, searching for something...something it wants from me. I have taken it from you. I’ll deal with it later. You should be free of it. Now listen to me, Phaidra. Not much time. I’m going to show you something that will happen in the future. You have to trust me. You have to hold on...Oh, gods. It hurts now. What did this pale woman give you?

Phaidra, trust me. Watch. I will come for you. I promise.

Kassandra’s voice faded and Phaidra saw a flicker of blue light in her imagination, a high stone judge’s seat, and the king’s guards were holding her arms. One of them hit her in the face. Teeth loosening. The king was there shouting at her. The scene slipped away, replaced by a bright ball that filled the heavens over the Nine-cities, Helios’ Twin, and a woman in armor like nothing Phaidra had ever seen, flexible, shimmering gold, with vivid blue at the seams. It was the Wreath-wearer and she was marching into the Nine-cities with her army behind her. It was Cassandra, but she had cut off her braids, and there were streaks of color in her hair. And there was the demon, Ochleros, monstrous teeth and claws and fluid body oozing over buildings—and Cassandra looked up. She commanded him, “Go, Ochleros, release Phaidra from her prison. Rexenor is ready to come home.”

Phaidra opened her eyes. The thing Corina had put inside her was gone, transferred to Cassandra. She kicked into the water of Theudas’ room—then everything in the world

went wrong.

She looked at her wrist, at an unfamiliar name bracelet.

“Klonassa.”

The door shattered and a beam of light hit her. The king’s guard flooded the tunnels and tiny room, swords out. A silky braided wire whipped over her head and tightened around her throat, a noose at the end of a long pole. Two more grabbed her arms. One of the guards shot forward and jammed something in her mouth that hooked her tongue and teeth and held them in place.

They dragged her through the narrow tunnel, into the square in front of Theudas’ house, and loaded her onto a float barge that sped off toward the brooding walls surrounding the assembly, the justice seats, and the holding prison for the accused.

Lord Gypselos, king’s judge, leaned over the justice stone, tapping a finger against his bony jutting chin. He looked over at King Tharsaleos for the final decision.

“Let her speak.”

The king’s guard, ten of them, drifted at different depths around the woman accused of murdering twenty-two gate guards and a border guard, treason against all Seaborn, and for being a Rexenor within the walls of the Nine-cities.

As soon as they removed the gag, Phaidra stretched her mouth open wide to get feeling into her mouth and jaws.

“Speak, Rexenor, why have you come to the Nine-cities where you do not belong?”

Phaidra glared up at the judge. “Ram your fist up your ass, Gypselos.” She fought against the noose bindings, twisting her head as far around as they allowed. The king floated blurry in her peripheral vision.

“Lady Cassandra has a message for you, Tharsaleos.” She paused when the king lifted a finger to one of the guards. A big bearded man in blue armor kicked up to her and threw one of his fists into the side of her face.

“You will use his title. *King* Tharsaleos.”

Phaidra shook the blood away from her eyes. There was a sour taste in her mouth, and a wobbly motion in her head. “King Tharsaleos, these are Lady Cassandra’s words: You make your own enemies. You put me on the surface and from there you will always find defeat.”

King Tharsaleos smiled calmly and tugged at his short white beard. His granddaughter had obviously chosen her terrain and would wait for him to attack her, but he had no intention of sending his army above the waves—not when it had proven fatal the first time.

Phaidra gave him a knowing sneer. “Lady Cassandra said you would smile at this point. Now I am to tell you that—her exact words—you are a fool to think the surface is only above you. Look below your feet, old man, and tell me what you see.” She shrieked the last few words through the repeated battering fists of the guard.

King Tharsaleos kicked up with his Eight, waving for Gypselos to continue, making a strange cupped hand gesture, and saying aloud, “She may be of use.”

The judge pointed through an arch cut through the north wall. “Lithotombs. Till death.”

Phaidra bit the hand of the guard trying to re-insert the gag.

“The Wreath-wearer is coming to get you, Tharsaleos!” Another punch to the jaw, two of her teeth on the right side went through her tongue. Hot blood pumped in her mouth.

She spat red and gave the Nine-cities something to talk about, an event so unusual that news of it traveled to every district in the city before the king’s guards sealed the stone door of the lithotomb over Phaidra’s head.

Phaidra threw her head back and for the first time in history, a Rexenor screamed the

Alkimides war cry. "Right of the Earth-encirler, dark-haired Lord of the Sea! Souls arise, with third fore-fathers by our sides we will kill the old kings!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE ARMY OF THE BONE-GATHERER

From here is the road that leads to the dismal waters of Acheron. Here a whirlpool boils with mud and immense swirlings of water, spouting up all the slimy sand of Cocytus. A dreadful ferryman looks after the river crossing, Charon.

—Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.297

The pale woman was not the last of the *ostologoi*. The last paddled feebly and curled into a formal bow that obviously caused him pain in his old joints. The pale woman smiled, enjoying it.

The old Seaborn's voice was like a handful of shells rubbed together, slippery and hard and clattery, the voice of someone she did not trust.

"Mistress...it is you."

"You have no idea who I am, old man."

"You are of the family, there is no doubt. You sent the dead here to open our stronghold—although they would not allow us to enter. We knew one of us would come. Finally. It is time."

The pale woman stared at him and turned her mouth down in disgust. "My stronghold. My time has come. My family." She said each in a very exclusionary manner. "And there was never any doubt."

The old man flinched, stung by her tone. He bowed again, grimacing. "What would you wish of us, milady?"

"Us?"

"My wife, Agathe, my sons, Pleistonax and Thennas, and my brother and his daughter Phaustine. All that remains of the *ostologoi*."

"That is all? What is your name?"

"Sopheas."

"And your brother's?"

"Skyllias."

"Very good. What do I wish, Sopheas?" The pale woman's face brightened with delight. Her eyes did not, her focus pinned to Sopheas as if she were sighting a crossbow. "I wish to see all of you for a grand welcome home, of course. Finally, I am home. Now get someone to tend to my orca."

She sprang into the water, kicked over his head to a high ledge jutting from the side of a mountain. A glow like a dragon's mouth, heat-distorted water shimmering orange and yellow, through a broad arched doorway.

The pale woman recognized a man's decaying bones and teeth on the ledge. She smiled, a genuinely sincere smile, warm as the light spilling from the gate of the stronghold of the *ostologoi*.

"We meet again, Alois. I see you found my home without trouble—and even opened the gates for me."

She winked at the animated dead frame of a five-hundred year old Spanish soldier who had drowned when his ship sank on the far side of the world.

“Do not allow anyone to pass you, Alois.”

Alois returned a smoldering soul-light stare, the glow of the arch behind him coming through the holes in his skull and out of his ruined eye sockets.

“Unlike you, my dear Corina—” The pale woman frowned and glanced over her shoulder at the decaying home of the remaining *ostologoi*. “—and what is left of my once great bloodline, you can always count on the dead.”

Corina surfaced in the body that used to be hers, wiping away her tears, leaving her tiny gray island to come back into her head, the first time since Aleximor had fed an Akastê’s parasite to Phaidra. Corina had cried and pleaded with him, trying to persuade him to spare the Rexenor, but the pale woman had returned at that moment and betrayed Phaidra to King Tharsaleos.

Corina, broken and hollow, stared out of the eyes that had been hers so long ago.

The stronghold’s exterior looked like a rough abyssal mountainside. Inside it was a palace decorated in a rich but weird mix of rococo and the soft organic feel of the inside of a seashell.

The pale woman kicked down the long orange-lit central hall lined with framed portraits of the bone-gatherers of the past, shriveled bony figures with long stringy hair. The ceiling was painted the dark red of bloodstains, the walls were as yellow as sulfur.

Unlit doorways broke up the procession of ugly ghost men and women every six portraits, and the Greek key moldings along the floor lost their geometry at each one, morphing into columns of carved lace, knobby coral polyps and crinoidal spirals.

The pale woman kicked harder, reaching her hands toward the bright open end of the hall, where the wall design changed to arched folds of rock lined with carved human figures, throats cut, bones bent at wrong angles, pronounced channels cut for blood and the cooling ingots of their souls.

The pale woman swam through the arch at the end, entering a chamber as vast as the mountain itself, its walls polished smooth, soft pink like the inside of a conch.

The floor of the chamber was hidden under the shadow of the army.

Corina clutched at her broken mental space, trying to hold on long enough to see the army of the bone-gatherer. There were thousands of them, straight formations of skulls and dull black breastplates, spears butted, points up, three times the height of the tallest skeleton.

“I had not expected them all to be here—and hoped that some remained.” He sighed. “Isn’t it glorious, Corina? Not one appears out of place.”

How...how many are there?

“My *synomotia*, bound to me. Five *Khilarkhia*, what you would call a brigade, each containing over a thousand, every single one of them with many times the power of the Olethren. And in the front, two Merarches, commanders of two brigades each. The fifth is mine, as is the overall generalship.”

Corina’s soul thawed. *Saving them for the king?*

“And Rexenor, dearest. Rexenor first.”

You...liked Phaidra—and then you betrayed her. I detected a hint of admiration for Rexenor when you joined with Phaidra. What happened?

“They killed my old body and imprisoned me for two hundred years. That is what happened. Strates was damned—I fed him through the fire to Akastê.

Kassander—probably the very namesake of this bitch granddaughter of the king—ruined me, bound my *psyche* inside the earth.”

Kassandra is both: royal line and Rexenor.

“Perhaps it will be sufficient to kill her? Is that what you are saying? She is not enough.” The pale woman laughed suddenly, cold knife laughter with teeth bared.

“Corina, you doubt my abilities. That is what you’re after, isn’t it? You do not want me to pursue the king and Rexenor because if I fail you will die with me. Have I discovered another of your plots?”

Corina begged, *I just want to live. Please. I just want my life back.*

“You are dead, Corina. You were dead the moment you touched the lock, the moment you freed me. Give it up.”

I can’t.

The pale woman waved a hand through the water impatiently and kicked above her army.

“To the north. To battle. March now, and I will meet up with you before we settle on allies and a battlespace.” She laughed grimly. “I have not yet decided who our enemy or enemies will be, not before meeting with Cassandra. *Eis orthon apodunai!*”

The ranks of dead lined up into four tight columns, lifting their spears off the floor of the chamber, slamming them down with thunder that shook the earth and lifting them again.

“Paragoge!”

The army moved, thundering footsteps and creaking armor, the left column first, through the wide arch and down the hall. The others followed in perfect ranks, the two taller fiercer looking dead *Merarches* leading the way.

There were a handful of living dead standing off to one side, the remains of the *Maria Draughn’s* crew in tattered uniforms and rotting strips of flesh, along with three of the Spaniards, nothing left but broken bones streaked with rust.

The pale woman smiled at them. “Come, Captain Teixeira, I promised you a meeting with the Sea. It is time.”

She swam from the army’s chamber, down the hall and through the front gates, giving dead Alois another wink. The dead followed, stumping and dragging along the flagstones, lining up next to the bone-gatherer on a flat stretch of ground halfway between the stronghold entrance and the family home.

The remaining members of the *ostologoi* stood back, huddled together, fueled by the excitement of one of their number returning—and with power enough to raise the dead and bind *psychai*, enough to send the army forth.

The pale woman swam to them, smiling gently, running her fingers through the white-blond hair of the youngest boy.

“What is your name, beautiful young man?”

The boy looked up fearfully at his mother, who nodded back encouragingly.

“Thennas, milady.” His voice was a hoarse whisper.

The pale woman curled her knees and dropped down to look into his eyes. “Now, Thennas, I have a task for you. A special task. Do you know how to feed an orca?”

Thennas shook his head.

“Would you like to learn? It’s very simple.”

He stared at her, afraid the wrong expression or gesture might cause her to take away her gift, but the pale woman put her cold hands on his shoulders. “Do not be afraid, Thennas. All you must do is ride my orca to the east for as long as it takes you to count slowly to one thousand, and then turn her around and ride her back. If she hasn’t found something to chase and eat by then, she is not hungry. Can you do that for me?”

She gave his shoulders a squeeze and the boy dropped his head in assent.

“Good. Now swim along, count to a thousand and then you will return and we can begin our whole new life together.”

Thennas kicked off enthusiastically without looking back, and the pale woman leaned in conspiratorially to the rest of the family. “This is not something the young one should witness.”

Sopheas and his wife and older son, and Skyllias and his daughter agreed with smiles and murmurs of how thoughtful the pale lady was.

“Captain Teixeira. I need you to stand here, on this side of my loyal family.”

Corina’s thoughts withered in her head. *You’re going to kill them all, aren’t you?*

Aleximor went through the steps Corina recognized, cutting deep into her right wrist, switching the knife to the other hand and using the tip to slice open the vein in the pit of her elbow.

Blood flowered and sloshed in the water, rolling like clouds, dark murderous red, a veil of blood around the pale woman.

Corina didn’t even feel the pain. Her life was thin and barely noticeable, her heartbeat unnecessary, the even cadence of her lungs a habit only. She watched the knife cut into her skin, open veins, and vanish behind the pulse of thick inky red.

The pale woman sucked it into her mouth and sang of the door into death, blowing blood through her teeth like cigarette smoke. It was so much simpler to perform with most of the original Corina Lairsey, the woman from California, already gone to feed the things beyond the door.

The line of fire burst from the end of the knife, tearing wider as something on the other side smelled the life of Sopheas and Agathe and their son, Pleistonax, and Skyllias and his lovely daughter, Phaustine.

“Step closer, my family, and feel the warm touch of my lady, Akastê, the Sea.”

The fire engulfed them, and Thennas, nine hundred counts away heard their screaming.

“It is your turn, Captain Teixeira, to meet her.” With a flourish, fanning one delicate hand over her head, the pale woman laughed, “Your wish is my command.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE HOLLOW MAN

My grandfather the king—Tharsaleos—is a master of enslaving constructs and spells. He imprisoned Zypheria inside a shell, a slave construct, using her to control me, to keep me in my prison, to break me. My grandfather did not know I possessed the Wreath of Poseidon. He did this to Zypheria because he thought she was my mother, and he could think of no greater punishment for a mother than to force her to break the soul of her own child. She still has nightmares of the time she was told to kill me when I was four years old—and quite helpless. I hear her crying over it in the middle of the night—as do you, Michael Henderson. Lucky for me, she chose drowning as the way to do me in. —Michael Henderson, notes from a conversation with the Wreath-wearer

His wife was a monster. He was convinced.

“Sam?” She tugged at her long black braids, something she always did when she was uncomfortable. “Sameramis?”

Sameramis was the first of the King’s Eight, the most trusted of all soldiers in the Nine-cities, sworn to give his life for the ruler of all the Seaborn. He couldn’t piece together how it had happened, but somehow he had lost direction, lost control of his life, his soul tossed about in the currents of warring oceans.

He had killed for his king, had always led the Eight immediately against any of the king’s enemies at every command, but lately he had trouble swimming in his own house. His life had become a dream—not even his own, but someone else’s dream.

He blinked and tried to focus on his wife.

Is she really this young? She could not be more than half his forty years. Beautiful, painfully beautiful. Flawless monstrous beauty. She danced in the water. Her long slender legs moved like the fluid around her, her bare arms opening, inviting, the sheer web of skin between each perfect finger pulled tight, thin, transparent. It made him ache. It made his scalp tingle and itch as if he had just taken his helmet off.

He watched her hands. Her fingernails were so small they frightened him, made him bring up his own large hands and study his squared off broken fingernails. *How many Seaborn have I killed for my king with these?* And somehow he knew that just one of her soft hands could reach into him and squeeze his heart to a stop.

His jaw hurt at the joint, a sharp needling when he opened it—a childhood injury, the result of solid hit from his brother’s fist. *Why am I opening my mouth? I have nothing to say to her. She fills my mouth with words not my own. She kisses me and I taste how cold she is.*

“You do not look well, dearest.”

Why is she speaking to me?

“I dreamed, dearest, that you went to war in the north and you did not return as you left.”

"I leave to battle Rexenor soon. You dreamed I returned?" He felt the heat of his body coming off in waves. *Do not say more! She will put your words in her mouth. She will warm them in her hands. She will take your words and she will use them, twine them in her hair, make them part of her, make something that she will use to draw your blood.*

She pulled her hands back, a slight pout pushing her lips out. "Perhaps I should tell you another time. You look ill, Sameramis."

"A dream? What kind of dream?" *Is that really my own voice, so harsh?*

"My dream was short and bitter." She shrugged her pretty shoulders and her braids twirled in the water around her head like tentacles. Her smile returned sharp, cutting into him delicately, knife-sweet. "R Xenor set a trap and brought you into their fortress in chains. They locked you in a prison and fed you only metal, gold and bronze, dull silver, rare metals that broke your teeth—and still you ate them, you ate them all. You were so hungry. Then they melted metal in a cauldron, white liquid metal rolling to the brim, breaking through the hard cooling crust, and they opened your mouth and poured it inside you. It filled you, and when you cooled, they sent you home, but not as you are. As one of the machine-creatures of the god Hephaistos, creaking joints and soulless."

He kicked away from her, knocking over a tall chair.

"What is it, Sameramis?"

She is a witch. Poison. She has poisoned you. Do not look at her. Poisoned your eyes. Words coiled at the back of his throat, but he was afraid to speak them. He kicked harder, hit the wall behind him, and grabbed at the edge of a dark hallway. He forced his body through.

Light spilled from an open arch on his right. A boy looked up at him, carved stone orcas in his hands, toy soldiers astride them with spears. One toy soldier fell to the floor slowly, stiff and lifeless, seesawing in the water.

It was the boy again. He remembered seeing this one before.

"Hello, father." The boy smiled, a clever smile with tiny white teeth showing. He held up the orca and rider in his right hand. "House Alkimides has killed Dosianax again."

"Wish that it were so, my boy." Sameramis squeezed his eyes shut. *A son? I have a child?*

"What is wrong, father?"

Get out. Leave before Alkimides kills Dosianax.

The king's voice held everything right in the sea, level-toned, paternal, deeply honest.

"Do you trust me, Sameramis?"

"As I trust myself, milord." He could think in the presence of the king, his mind clear. His hands were not shaking.

"Our houses, privileged among the Nine, have never been agreeable."

"I am one of *your* trusted Eight."

"First among them."

"But no more or less worthy of trust than the eighth, milord."

Tharsaleos kicked into the water over the balcony, smooth strong strokes that brought him high above the royal keep to his study, his private apartment. He looked down, tugging on his short white beard, waving Sameramis up. "And Euchaon of Dosianax?"

"Will be ready to pledge his life to you when there are seven of us."

"Tell me how your dear Aischyline of Dosianax behaves."

Sameramis' body tightened in surprise. Even her name stung him, an electric buzz deep in his stomach. "My wife suspects something is wrong with me."

"Wrong?"

"In the way I look and act. Even my son has noticed."

The king looked disappointed. “Young Stasenor has said something?”

Stasenor? That is his name? How can I not remember my own son’s name? “He fights with toys, always Alkimides and Dosianax, and—forgive me lord—always Alkimides kills Dosianax. His game never changes. Alkimides kills Dosianax. It frightens me.”

The king ran his tongue along his lips, a thoughtful look on his face. “As it should, Sameramis.”

King Tharsaleos waited for his most trusted warrior, most trusted among the *oktoloji*, to land on the ledge outside his study, before swimming inside with a few strong kicks.

“Come inside. Stand over there.” The king pointed at a clear space against one wall. The rest of the room was crammed with books, scrolls falling off the ends of tables, two desks covered in strange surfacer technology like clocks and electronic parts sealed in plastic bags; a dull orange glow bulb drifted lazily around the center of the ceiling.

“I trust you, Sam, even though you are Alkimides.”

The king’s carnivore smile made Sameramis’ lips draw back, a jest among rival houses. The start of a laugh dried up. The knife in the king’s hand sucked in all his attention.

“Show me your hands, Sam.”

The first of the *oktoloji* held them up, callused, soldier’s hands, lead-colored spots forming around the knuckles. Sameramis frowned as if noticing the spots for the first time. “What have you done to me? Something monstrous.”

The yellow in Tharsaleos’ eyes was closer to orange in the light, his old man’s face cadaverous, triangular shadows below his cheekbones, his beard fiery, smoldering. The king was a monster, he was sure.

Quicker than Sameramis could react, the king’s fist shot out and the tip of the knife poked him square in the chest.

“I am giving you the command of my army in the north. That is what is happening.”

Sameramis couldn’t help lifting the corners of his mouth at the gift, leading the king’s army, all houses—except his own. He would be the one Alkimides in battlespace, the one to make history against the Rexenors.

“This *is* about monsters. There are mollusks, animals that have the softest mantles and godwork in the colors on their shells, whose beauty will stun you. And some of them are monsters. Some have a small tube they insert into their prey, injecting the acid from their stomachs right into another animal. The acid dissolves the prey from the inside out, leaving a bag of fluid food behind for the monster to suck dry. What is happening to you? I have instructed your wife to give you something to hollow you out to make room for...well, for me.”

The silence lasted longer than Tharsaleos anticipated. “Do you trust me?”

Sameramis had no choice but to bow his head, assenting. “With all my heart.”

“Well put, Sameramis of Alkimides, General of all Seaborn forces.”

The king drove the knife through his breastbone, into his heart.

Tharsaleos, Lord Dosianax, King of all Seaborn, planted his elbows on a desk in his study, focused all of his thought, and bent his head into his hands. The room lit up and he could see—see through the eyes of his general.

He swam through the arch, over the ledge and dove straight down to the level of the royal keep where seven of the *oktoloji* and their squires stood around waiting for Sameramis.

The king’s war-bard Theoxena stood alone, one hand resting on the wall at the edge

of the patio, her gaze wandering over the Nine-cities.

She turned before the first of the *oktoloji* could speak. He dropped his feet on the paving and bowed with an almost comical flourish. "The king wishes you to begin assembly of the weapons, milady." He leaned in and whispered, "You know the ones I mean."

She glared at him, baring her teeth. "The king commands me. No one else. Not through anyone else. Speak to me in that tone again and I will flay you and press your skin into paper."

King Tharsaleos smiled up in his study, all his thought bent on moving and speaking through Sameramis.

"One day, milady, but for now the king would be displeased with you. For he has granted me a high rank." He spun and swam to one of the squires, a young dark haired man in armor. "Euchaon!" He placed one firm hand on the young man's shoulder. "You are now the eighth." He turned to one of the trusted. "Polemakles. You are now the first among the *oktoloji*."

Polemakles jumped away from the wall, a foot into the water, a look of concern on his face. "And you?"

"Our lord has graciously given me command of the army of the north. I am to lead the final destruction of Rexenor."

"Well! Glorious!" Polemakles clapped him on the back.

"Yes. Yes it is," said Sameramis, the smile vanishing. "I ride in the morning. Good night to you."

"No celebration?" a few of them asked.

Sameramis returned a scheming smile. "Not tonight, most trusted. I mean to celebrate it with my wife."

He threw Theoxena the same smile and kicked past her, down the tower to the streets where he joined a flow of float-carts and dolphin teams to the Alkimides city.

He swam around one of the finer areas looking for Sameramis' estate, and kicked right in when he found it. Servants bowed to him and he dismissed them as he passed.

A boy swam from an open arch, holding toy orcas and soldiers. "Father?"

"Who wins the battle, my boy?"

"Alkimides has killed Dosianax again."

He took the boy's head in his hands, fingers digging into the back of his neck and he twisted until the spinal column snapped apart.

"How unfortunate."

He released the child's body in the water and continued down the dark tunnel into a broad room brightly lit, globes rolling around in the ceiling in pairs.

Aischyline smiled and swam to him, and he took her by the wrist, hauling her to the bedroom. He locked the door and his smile was gone when he turned around.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

AN AUDIENCE

The Nine-cities—*Enneapolis*—is built on a mass of deep sea vents, an upside down root system of extremely hot water, some of it coming out over 370°C (around 700°F), which nonetheless does not boil because the surrounding water pressure is so great. —Michael Henderson, notes

Nicole opened her hands to slow her motion in the water, running her toes along the ceiling as she stopped Cassandra in the hall outside their bedrooms. “Jill has some competition.”

Kassandra stared at her a moment too long without answering, then caught herself and asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Are you okay?” Nicole grabbed her shoulder, yanking Cassandra through the water to get a closer look. “You’re sick.”

“Nothing. Just something...I ate.”

Nicole didn’t release her, but answered her first question. “There’s a visitor in the gallery, to see the Lady of Rexenor and you.”

“Who is it?”

“Some woman with hair lighter than Jill’s. There’s already a group of ogling men around her, even with Lady Kallixene telling them to back off.”

“Blonder than Jill?”

“More like white.”

“Is she pale?”

“Very.”

Kassandra looked right at her, but her eyes weren’t focused. After a minute, she said, “Really? Let’s go meet her. Stay with me.”

Nicole kicked hard to keep up in the long underground tunnels. She bumped Cassandra’s shoulder. “I’m so nervous. You going to be able to handle a battle?”

“I don’t have a choice.” Kassandra had lost her secret smile as the battle loomed. She slowed to let her sister through a narrow door first, pressing her hand against a sharp pain in her stomach.

They kicked through crowded halls of the Rexenor fortress, passing men and women carrying armor and spears, through the crowded barracks, and into the training arena where they found Jill playing with the teams of dolphins taught to attack House Dosianax soldiers.

The trainers reined them all in with whistling noises when the Wreath-wearer kicked into the arena. Jill looked up, curious, and then swam to her sisters, waving excitedly.

“Dolphins are *so* cute, even when they team up and rip the Dosianax manikins apart.”

Green scales and parts of dismembered dummies littered the floor of the arena, and Kassandra hugged her tight because she liked the blaze in her eyes.

Jill leaned back, studying her for a moment. “You don’t look good, Kass. You’re skin’s nearly gray. Are you sleeping?”

Kassandra’s eyes clouded, then cleared. “I don’t sleep much anymore.”

“This battle’s going to kill you.” Jill said it lightly, an attempt at cheeriness.

Zypheria and Michael Henderson swam up at that moment. They didn’t hear Cassandra mumble, “Not like I haven’t wished.”

Kass took Jill’s hand, tugging her up toward the hole in the arena’s domed ceiling. “We’re going to meet a visitor from the south. Come on.”

Jill couldn’t hide the flash of surprise that lit her face. Cassandra never took her anywhere, always preferring Nicole for any kind of audience, adventure, or battle training.

Zypheria swam close, so quick in the water she dragged Michael along almost as an afterthought. Cassandra glanced at Jill, noticed her joy, but she was in the middle of whispering something and fingering the water, the gestures that hid the glow of the Wreath.

Nicole watched her with sudden concern, then exchanged a concerned look with Zypheria. “Do you know who it is? Why are you hiding who you are? How do you know she’s from the south?”

Kassandra shook her head. “I have some news of her, but not much. I’ve dreamed of her. I want you to pretend to trust her, but I don’t know why.”

The pale woman’s hair was milky white, her skin soft, and even whiter than her hair, nearly transparent: veins and arteries visible beneath. There was death in her eyes.

She smiled when three young women and an older couple swam through the wide door at the hall’s end. Kallixene’s guards fanned out, spears butted, standing on the stones between their lady and the visitor.

Kassandra released Jill, kicking across the chamber at a good pace, inches off the flagstones, directly toward Kallixene’s carved stone seat. She pulled up at the last second, plucking a dull metallic crablike device off the right wing of the chair, just as its mandibular claws reached for Kallixene’s shoulder.

Holding the crab, Cassandra twisted upright and stood behind her grandmother, placing one hand on her shoulder. Kallixene put her hand on Cassandra’s, and then nodded, smiling at Jill on her right and Nicole on the other side of Cassandra.

Zypheria and Michael, arms around each other, stood immediately behind Jill.

The pale woman looked up at one person in the room and bowed her head in reverence. “Lady Cassandra.”

Kallixene’s smile faded, a flight of questions swimming through her mind. She turned, tilting her head up to give her granddaughter a sharp look and found that she had cast her Wreath-hiding spell.

Had Cassandra met this strange woman before? Did the woman somehow see who Cassandra was without the glow of the Wreath?

The pale woman pouted, an exaggerated girlish expression, her gaze dropping to the wriggling metallic crab in Cassandra’s hand. “Oh, you found my pet, Lady Cassandra.” She moved to rise, but Kallixene’s guard reacted, blocking her path, and she sat back down, slightly put out. “Forgive me. He has a mind of his own, wandering off.” She waved airily, but then assumed an uncomfortable pose and shamed expression as if some impropriety had been exposed.

Jill leaned back to look over at Cassandra, rolling her eyes, muttering, “Trying a bit hard, isn’t she?”

“Ouch!” Cassandra jerked her hand back, grabbing the crab by the rear legs. She brought it close, inspecting its mouth and the haze of blood around its mandibles.

“It bit me.”

A flood of anger raced hot through her veins. Cassandra made a growling noise, a rumble in her throat that flowed into a short song. She flexed her fingers, made a swirling

gesture, and the mouth and mandibles of the metal crab retracted, burning and twisting into white lumps. A wiry stream of gold and purple continued off her fingers, melting the features off the face of the device. The metal cooled and flakes of silver drifted away in the current.

When Cassandra looked up, she noticed Kallixene's sitting room was silent and every eye was on her.

The pale woman fixed her eyes on her, but her focus was inside, adding what she had just witnessed into her strategy.

Kassandra kicked off the floor, shooting over the heads of Kallixene's guards and sliding gently down next to Corina. She handed over the metallic crab.

"Please keep your pets to yourself." She gave Corina a meaningful stare. "You don't happen to have any *other* pets lurking about do you?"

Corina held her eyes, but only for a moment, dropping them to her open hand. Two linked gold beads rolled in the center of her palm.

Kassandra picked them up. "My aunt's earrings. A birthday present. I gave these to her, you know."

Corina sat up straight, her voice chilling to an even controlled tone. "Of course. That is why she sent them with me."

Kassandra slid them into her pocket. "Look at me, Corina. And answer my question."

The pale woman stared at her empty hands for a moment's indecision. She lifted her gaze. "The only other is the one you carry inside you."

Kassandra played with her right braid, twirling it in her fingers. Behind her, half the guards went alert at her signal. Zypheria had her sword in her hand before most began to react. She elbowed Michael behind her, grabbing Jill by the collar, lifting her off her feet. Lady Kallixene was already into a spell chant.

Kassandra leaned closer to the pale woman, whispering, "Are you so confident in your power that you can enter Rexenor fortress by yourself and believe you will leave here with your head?"

The Wreath-wearer pinned her to her seat with her piercing eyes. The pale woman couldn't move, she couldn't use her voice to whisper the command that would wake Akastê's parasite inside Cassandra. She couldn't move her lips, her tongue dead in her mouth; her heartbeat slowed. The water went still in her throat, her final breath a warm swirl against the back of her teeth.

The pale woman was a prisoner in the abyss of the Wreath-wearer's eyes.

Kassandra caught her by the chin, steadied her face, and dug into her soul, a deep and intricate dark space with islands and welling currents, something ancient and assuring and so much like the space in her own soul that she gasped in surprise. Cassandra picked up the woman's name from the currents.

"Corina?"

"Yes?"

Yes?

Kassandra's eyes widened, and she kicked away in a rush of fear, somersaulting and landing on her feet beside Lady Kallixene.

"Aleximor! How? How did you break free from your prison? Strates used an earth binding that I've never been able to understand."

The pale woman went stone still, but it only took her a moment to recover. She crossed her legs and calmly rested her hands on them. "Even I must admire Strates' depth of knowledge—used to anyway. I, on the other hand, understand exactly what old Strates Unwinder did to create the prison. I had nearly two hundred years to study it."

Kallixene scowled, gripping the arm of her throne. "Aleximor?"

The question was echoed around the room as the lady's guard positioned themselves

to defend her.

Kassandra turned to Nicole's questioning glare. "Aleximor is a very old *ostologos* Kassander imprisoned on the far side of the world. Lord Neokles' killer—ended up killing Strates Unwinder as well. He's escaped his prison and he's inside this woman's body. The *ostologoi* are the creators and minders of the Olethren. They were once anyway."

Kassandra turned back to Corina, jutting her chin to indicate the physical form. "Where did you manage to find *her*?"

"California. She was a surfer."

"Ah," Kassandra nodded. "She released you. *Her* name's Corina. I saw you for a moment, but not her. She's still in there, isn't she? That wasn't some dead echo of her that answered me?"

"She is."

Kassandra tilted her head, simply curious, "You don't happen to have an army, do you?"

The pale woman jerked in surprise.

The room exploded with motion, streaks of shiny armor and sweeping weapons. The pale woman kicked into the water column, barking a command with the name, "Akastê" in it. Kassandra doubled over, grabbing her stomach. Nicole gripped the back of Kallixene's throne and pulled her body over it, diving in front of her sister.

The thing inside Kassandra—squirming in her guts for days—erupted with teeth, gnawing through her core and into her head.

Kassandra spun, slapping her open hand on Nicole's back. Her own silvery-blue scaled armor slipped over Nicole's body along with her sword. She jabbed an angry finger at Nicole, mouthing the words, "Protect Jill. Your life..."

Kassandra stood in the rushing black currents inside the Wreath, inside her own soul. She had only been here once before, at the end of the fierce battle with the Olethren, the king's vast army of the dead—and it had been old Ephoros, brother of Ochleros, who had died feeding her the last of his strength—just enough to push her up through the center pit and into the raging torrent.

She looked around, knowing the room so well because she saw it in her dreams, felt its current against her thighs when she used its power, almost as if half of her self always stood in the whirl of turbulence in the ring-shaped room.

Feeling the stone floor with her toes, she made her way carefully to the edge and dragged herself out of the water, onto the gray stone walkway that circled the whirlpool and the black pit in the center.

Ninety-six tunnels fed the circular room, and one of the doors on the opposite side of the water seemed to call to her, the touch of a cold breeze and the information carried on it, clicking crab noises, soft metal electric on her skin, three points on the end of a tall spear.

"Wonder what's in there." She breathed the words in the lowest voice she could summon and every sound ricocheted off the hard walls, chorusing into a loud raucous scream, an echo that didn't merely return the original voice, but raised the volume and pitch.

"You're inside?" The voice was strange, a man's smooth tone, every syllable correct, perfect, and Kassandra turned to one of the ninety-six yawning black tunnels that entered the room, the one that led to the water mirror door, and to the great abyss where the past Wreath-wearers resided.

Four years before, she had gone inside during the battle's final moments. She had wakened Ampharete, she had found her mother.

“Eupheron?”

“Who else, dear?”

“It’s just, you sound different on the inside, maybe because I can’t hear you in my head, just through my ears now.”

“You are louder as well, but your voice is the same. Where are you?”

“Next to the center pool. My bleeds have given me the strength to enter the Wreath.”

“We must meet, then. I have never heard of a wearer other than you entering the Wreath alive. I remember...or dreamed...You said something that wakened me, something about coming inside to get Andromache, and it was enough to jolt me out of sleep.”

Kassandra was halfway down the dark hall when she stopped, turning toward a rhythmic wet scraping sound behind her, following her.

“I’m not alone.” Stunned, she forgot to whisper the words. She covered her ears because her own voice hurt, Kassandra turned and ran.

“Who comes inside?”

“The worm, the thing Aleximor fed to Phaidra in the Nine-cities, the thing that came to me through the thread I stitched to Phaidra before she departed.”

“Inside here?”

“Yes, it’s inside me!” Panic edged her voice, and she slammed into the wall, off balance as she held her ears.

“What does it seek?” Andromache’s voice came down the hall, a cutting commanding tone.

“Hurry, Kassandra,” Ampharete urged.

She felt its weight on the stones under her toes, and then she saw its reflection in the mirror door, lifting its head right behind her.

A massive worm’s body in segmented rust-brown armor, with arms, hundreds of arms with human hands at the end, long rotten green fingernails clawing at the stone. The worm moved in fluid ups and downs, its head extending and dipping to the paving, the rest of its body lunging forward. It had no eyes. Its face was a giant disk, wet and drooling with open pores big enough to stick a finger into, a thick ridge of bone wrapping around the outside edge. Three concentric rings of knife-sharp teeth circled a hole that was its mouth.

A nightmare slid through Kassandra’s head, three seconds of the thing devouring her, digesting her, and regurgitating her bones onto the floor—a sloppy wet stack of chalky white and stringy yellow, mucous-dripping pick-up sticks.

“Don’t touch the door!” Eupheron shouted the command, her fingers an inch away, ready to push through the silvery face of water.

She pulled her hand back as if burned.

“Why not?”

“She intends to trap you in here.”

“Who?” She asked the question and turned to face the worm, her legs unsteady. Her vision blurred, the world jumping in pieces, sliding too late into focus.

A woman stood where the worm had been, her long dark hair undulating and shifting around her shoulders like the ocean’s surge, a spray of white at the tips. Her skin was a pale, creamy blue, and her fingers ended in nails like the teeth on the worm.

Kassandra reached for the wall for support. “Who are you?”

“Akastê.”

“*What* are you?”

“The Sea, Kassandra, I am the Sea.”

Eupheron beat her to it with, “That’s preposterous.”

“No you’re not. Lord Poseidon is the Sea.”

Akastê laughed, delicate clear water over a strand, burning cold, smooth violence, a voice velvet soft, as cutting as a garrote. “Please, do not make the mistake of thinking that you—a mortal with the Telkhines curse and a twist of seaweed—can instruct *me*. I have come for what is mine. Give me the crown.”

Kassandra was trying to look into the woman’s eyes, but they moved and flowed in their sockets, no irises, no pupils, swirling gray threads over blue, each an ocean world.

“Your eyes...”

“Look into them, Wreath-wearer...and dream.”

Kassandra felt her hand slip on the wall, leaning toward the woman, trapped inside her ocean eyes. She tried to shake her head, but her muscles wouldn’t work. Eupheron screamed obscenities, but he was far away.

“Now, bring me my crown.”

Kassandra bit down hard, trying to tear away from Akastê’s eyes, managing a few struggling grunting noises. She felt her foot lift and take a step...and the world split, another young woman—a dream version of her...

...turned her back and walked away from her.

“Don’t leave me,” Kassandra pleaded with the woman who looked just like her.

The woman double tucked her arms in, leaned forward, and ran down the dark tunnel, looking for the crown. She stopped at the ledge around the circling water and the black pit in the center, inching her way around to another tunnel, the one that had called to her when she surfaced inside the Wreath. She took a cautious step at first, looked back to see if anyone was following her before turning and running down the tunnel in search of the crown.

The room at the end blazed with precious metal and mother of pearl, an emperor’s treasury—stacks of gold boxes, masks, musical instruments of all kinds—leaning against thrones, racks of weapons, and branched coral figurines. Armor that looked like the spiky shell of a crab hung on a stand in the corner.

“Find the crown,” the young woman whispered.

“Bring me the armor,” another voice told her, a voice that sounded exactly like her own. “And a sword.”

“But *she* wants the crown.”

“She can have any crown you find. Just bring me armor and a sword.”

Inside the room across the water, the woman-who-looked-like-Kassandra picked up a heavy spear with a three-pronged head on it and leaned it against the wall. She didn’t see a crown anywhere in the room—and she was afraid.

“Running out of time.”

She reached for the armor. Her fingers worked the clips up the back of the armor, thumbing them open, a hundred of them popping and snapping.

Looking up, she saw a helmet on the stand, lifted it off its peg and jammed it on her head. The cheek-guards came alive to curl over her skin, under her jaw line.

She pulled the armor off the rack and slipped her body inside it. It was lighter than she expected and so strange in appearance that she looked around for a mirror. The armor flexed and changed shape to fit her body. The fasteners up the back folded over and locked her in, rolling up from her butt to the nape of her neck like a zipper closing.

“The crown. Where’s the crown.” She couldn’t return without it. “*She* will be angry.”

“Tell her you don’t have one,” said her own voice.

She nodded and drew a long sword from its scabbard. She stopped to look at the blade because it looked so much like the one she used to have.

“Nicole has it, protecting you on the outside. Jill and Nicole are still out there with the pale woman. Save them. Forget about yourself. They must not die—or all will be lost.”

“Where is the crown?”

“Forget the crown. Come back to me.”

The double hesitated, gave the room one more sweep of her gaze, and ran back to herself . . .

Kassandra stood in front of Akastê—with her ocean eyes and hair that rolled like the tides—and blinked as if startled from a dream...startled to discover that it had not been a dream.

She was wearing the crab-like armor, its knobby plates and pale bony points stuck out past her shoulders. There was a sword in her hand.

“Where is my crown?” The woman was getting angry—and she didn’t even seem to notice any change in Kassandra.

“I don’t have one.”

Get out of here. Do not let her trap you in here. Kassandra jumped, grabbed the wall with a sharp intake of breath. It was strange to hear her own thoughts and no one else’s, not the Wreath’s.

“Give me the crown.”

Kassandra felt a surge of defiance as the hold on her drifted away. “I don’t have one.”

Akastê’s eyes changed from ocean world blue to something normal: ice blue irises, dilated black pupils. Then, like a spill of mercury, silver spread mirror-smooth over the whites, reflecting Kassandra’s fear back at her.

“Find the crown and bring it to me, Kassandra. Do not make me angry.”

“I—I don’t know where to look.”

“Find it and I will allow you to live. Fail and you will be the last Wreath-wearer.”

“You will address me as *Lady* Kassandra. I don’t have your crown.” She threw the words at the woman and managed to summon just enough anger to say, “Find it yourself.”

Akastê’s shiny silver eyes widened.

Kassandra swallowed the saliva pooling in her mouth. She was so used to hearing the advice, directions from the other Wreath-wearers. The silence hurt, an absence so sharp it cut into her.

She heard eight overlapping heartbeats, different rhythms flowing over each other—like an eight-way intersection of speeding cars timed so perfectly that each slid between the others without touching—and every minute they merged into one hammering thud inside her body.

“Family? Lovers? Who are these eight, Kassandra? You care for them or their hearts would not be in your soul.”

“What on earth would make you think I would tell you?” She gripped the sword, trying to ignore the tiny movements of the armor, which seemed to be alive, a living shell that fit her body.

Akastê stopped, clicking her yellow knife fingernails together, her mouth turning down sourly. “What an interesting choice of words. What on earth, indeed.”

Kassandra tensed because the armor sensed something. Akastê rolled in on herself, expanding into the worm with rings of teeth and human hands.

The worm’s head extended, crushing Kassandra against the stone wall. The teeth curled in, each one fixed in a socket with muscles it manipulated, hooking her arms, her shoulder, squeezing her into the expanding hole of its mouth.

It swallowed Kassandra’s legs. The sword slipped from her hand, point down, ringing off the thing’s teeth.

Acid burn inched up her legs, digestive fluid, the stomach walls flexing and working its prey as if to massage the flesh from the bones.

Kassandra reached for the sword but the blade went past her hip, inside the worm, pinned between her armor and the stomach wall. She curled one shoulder over the end

of the grip and shoved the blade deeper, down, past her toes, into the oily slick lining, the sword cutting through it, into connective tissue and muscle.

The worm arched in pain, a spasm that rolled through its belly from the tail. Every ring of muscle contracted in sequence and ejected Cassandra and the sword onto the floor.

“Kassandra?”

“Lady Kassandra.”

“Milady, wake up.”

”Kass? Come on.”

She opened her eyes, a shock of adrenalin, a hundred voices calling her name, inside her head, outside, telling her to wake up.

She staggered to her feet, the skin of her legs burned white and peeling. The crab armor and sword were gone. Her head ached as if someone had drilled a few holes into it.

She reached out, grabbing the wall of the tunnel. A long charred line marked the floor and she scowled at it a moment until her memory caught up.

“Kassandra?”

“Yes! Shut up. I hear you.” Her own voice was deafeningly loud and she fell to her knees, pressing her hands against her ears.

“Where is Akastê?” It was Eupheron’s concerned voice.

She looked down at the floor. “There’s nothing left of the worm but a burn mark on the stone.”

“And Corina...Aleximoros?”

The name startled her, and without another thought she ran down the tunnel, thinking of Jill and Nicole, and dove off the ledge into the whirlpool.

Kassandra opened her eyes, choking on the heaviness of the water in her mouth. She kicked off the floor, taking in the room in a moment. Corina was gone. Jill and Nicole stood beside Zypheria and Michael Henderson.

Kallixene held a spear and pointed through the roof of the room. “I sent my guards and a team of orcas after her.”

“Let her go.” Kassandra stopped ten feet off the floor and spun upside down to drift down to Kallixene’s side.

“What happened to your legs?” Nicole kicked up to her, concerned.

Kassandra blinked at her and then her eyes went unfocused. “Eupheron, can you do something about this? It burns.”

Kallixene dismissed her guard, ordered the room cleared, then gave the Wreath-wearer a knowing stare.

Kassandra stopped at the door with Jill and Nicole. “You go on. I need to talk to Lady Kallixene for a bit.”

Jill frowned but had expected to be sent away. Nicole stopped abruptly, one hand open, questioning, her face holding the same expression.

“Just me. I need to be alone with her for a moment. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Jill’s frown deepened with sadness, understanding that “you” referred to Nicole only, not “both of you.” Her lip twitched and she turned and swam through the door. Nicole nodded and kicked after her.

Kassandra closed the door and slid the bolt, her fingers so tight on the knob that her knuckles were white. She drew deeply of the ocean and turned to her grandmother.

Kallixene, never one to waste time, was halfway across the room, swimming to her.

“Kassandra.”

“Kallixene.” Kassandra whispered her name, so soft it barely left her lips.

The Lady of Rexenor held out her hands and Cassandra took them, feeling how papery smooth her skin was. They kicked up into the dome of the room, wondering how informal the other was going to keep it, offering little nods and shadow smiles, and Cassandra couldn't help noticing how much her grandmother had aged in the last four years.

"My granddaughter, I counted our forces." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "One thousand, eight hundred and eighty, a little more than half of them on orcas. Many of them untrained. Do you know what Tharsaleos sends against us?"

"I have an idea."

"Many more than we have."

"I'm expecting that." She shrugged consolingly. "He has alienated House Alkimides."

"You are about to alienate all of the Seaborn."

Kassandra scowled. "In what way?"

"Fire, girl. No one in the sea will trust you." She grabbed Cassandra's arm, but she pulled out of her grip.

"I wear long-sleeved shirts everywhere. I have burn scars up my arms. They already know." Kassandra shook her head.

"Rexenor is somewhat tolerant of...abnormal behavior—and they keep their mouths shut. The rest of them however..."

"What's a little fire magic? I have four bleeds. What happens when they find out about that? And they will. Two would be enough to mark me as abnormal—a monster, some sort of throwback to the tyrant Telkhines. I will never be trusted, Lady Kallixene." She felt her grandmother stiffen at the formal shift in the conversation. "Who will ever trust me? I have already put that into my calculations. However, I *will* be feared. They will all fear me before this is over."

Tears drifted blurry into the currents from Kallixene's eyes, and she bowed her head to hide them, sobbing, "I'm so sorry for doing this to you."

"Don't be." Kassandra squeezed her hands. "Knowing what I now know, I would have done the same thing."

Kallixene sobbed louder, her body shuddering. "That is why I am sorry. I have turned you into someone who will destroy the lives of her children, her friends, her grandchildren."

"If that is all you are sorry about, then...I will just say that you have no idea what you have done—or what I have already done to myself and others—or are planning to do."

Kallixene withdrew her hands from Cassandra's. "Do not tell me. I only want to know if you will be able to defeat Tharsaleos. I have placed all of the hope of House Rexenor in you. I have given you nearly everything that is mine to give, my army, a whole generation of Rexenors, my son and daughter, my bleed."

"*Nearly* everything." Kassandra nodded, understanding. "Then I will not fail." She tightened her lips stoically.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

NO DIPLOMACY

True Helios is the star at the center of our solar system, the light of the surfacers. The Seaborn refer to the “star” set in a hemispheric path over the Nine-cities as Helios’ Twin. This enables the Seaborn to grow crops— kelps and seaweeds — for food and textiles. It’s origin is uncertain, but is likely tied to the abomination of working fire magic. Helios’ Twin was created by someone whose magic, whose own tools, devoured him—as it does all tempted by the fire.
—Michael Henderson, notes

Kassandra kicked into the water column over the Rexenor fortress, flipped upside down, and took Nereus’ hand loosely. She rolled, her fingers gearing through his until her feet touched the edge of the battlement. She pushed off with her toes to kiss him, her eyes closed.

She glanced over her shoulder, noticing the anxiety in Nicole’s expression, the way she danced uneasily in the water, fiddled with the grip of her sword.

“Please give me some time with my sister, my love.”

Nereus bowed his head. “Anything for you, milady.” Turning to Nicole, he bowed again. “And you, milady.”

“Thank you.”

He released Kassandra’s hand with a final squeeze. “Call on me, and I will return to your side.”

Kassandra lowered her gaze to his hands. She closed her eyes, squeezed them tight, nodding.

Nicole stared at the longing in her face, the pull at the corners of her mouth, a small shudder—her sister holding back what would be tears if she could shed them.

“I will send for you.”

Nereus swam off, and when Kassandra looked up, any tenderness in her expression was gone. The Wreath-wearer, the commander of all the forces of Rexenor, the heir to the throne of all the Seaborn, was back. She motioned Nicole to her and turned to stare south into nothing.

“There is nothing purer than this.”

Nicole looked over at her, the Wreath glowing fiery seaweed green, casting light like pale squirming ghost snakes over the stones at her feet. She looked around carefully before asking, “You scared?”

Kassandra turned and held her eyes for a moment, deeper, crawling inside her to hold her soul, tempted to curl up and remain there, then blinked and tore herself away. “To death, Nic. Scared to death.”

“Then why are you so calm?”

“You know this isn’t me on the outside.” She flexed her fingers below the collar of her scale armor. “I am all of us. King Eupheron is looking at you at this moment through my eyes. I have let Andromache take over some of my thought and movements. There is no *me* left. There is only the Wreath-wearer.”

Nicole looked away and Kassandra followed her gaze over the battlements.

“They’re not far. I can feel it. The ocean...tells me so many things.”

Nicole tried to look deeper into the perfect black. “Do you know how many are coming?”

Kassandra nodded. “More than three thousand Seaborn, most of them trained soldiers. I don’t know who leads. Some strange weapons. And they’re bringing whales, eleven of them, toothed whales that have endured the Telkhines curse, never to surface again.”

“Where’s Ochleros?”

Kassandra shot her a sharp look mixed with admiration. *She's already thinking of the battle. You're the smart one, Nicole. What I would not give for ten of you.* "He's running an errand for me."

Nicole started to frown, and then both of them turned at the sound of an enraged scream. A handful of Rexenor guards—Kassandra's bodyguards—drew swords, but at a wave from the Wreath-wearer, slid them home and backed away. Nicole moved closer.

"Jill? What's wrong?" Kassandra finished a cartwheel and gripped the edge of a crenelated wall with her toes.

Zypheria kicked up the north side of the massif followed by Jill cursing her, tears streaming off her face in long tendrils. She tried to get by Zypheria, darting here and there and spiraling to get out of reach. Everywhere she turned Zypheria was there first, kicking, bending fluidly to block Jill's approach, deflecting her fists.

"Let me go!"

Zypheria stiffened, her eyes going a wide at some invisible command from Kassandra. She held her hands up, fingers spread, a hands-off gesture, and turned to bow her head.

"Why can't I see you?" Jill kicked past, right up to Kassandra, shouting at her, inches from her face. "Why have you set *her* to watch over me? What is she, like my babysitter?"

"I told Zypheria..." Kassandra's voice trailed off.

"To protect me? I don't need protection."

"I told Zypheria that if anything happens to you I will kill her."

Jill backed away with a frightened kick, too stunned to answer. She turned to Nicole, her first friend at St. Clement's Education Center, her best friend, and she regained some of her anger. "Why are *you* here, but I can't be?"

Nicole looked away.

Kassandra lifted her hands in appeal. "Jill, listen to me."

"You listen to me!" Fresh tears blurred the water. She screamed at Kassandra through her sobbing. "Why are you doing this? I thought we were...sisters. What did I do to you?"

Kassandra reached out but didn't touch her. "Nothing must happen to you."

"What the *fuck* does that mean?"

Kassandra pulled her hand back. "I should not have brought you, but the house isn't safe."

Jill couldn't speak for a moment, shocked by Kassandra's admission. She cried and her body shuddered, then her fists tightened. "So, you regret bringing me? What have I done to you? You ignore me, you give Nicole a sword and armor—and who knows what else. You take her with you wherever you go. You leave me behind. It hurts me." She was pleading. "What did I do?"

Kassandra looked shocked, and stuttered a few words. "I didn't mean..." She looked down at her shaking hands and told them to be still. Then she caught all her thoughts up in a net and let them out slowly, one at a time. "Jill, please. I'm *not* hurting you. Don't let me interfere with your life, because if you do, I will ruin you—and in ruining you, I will ruin myself. You are my tie to the surface. I need you to remain as you are as much as I need Nic to go with me. You are...I know this sounds weird. I *have* given you something. You are my happiness, Jill—effortless happiness. You are my sight above the waves. You are the incorruptible part of me. Helios isn't *my* true sun. It is you. You are the brightness I cannot find in myself. You *are* my sister. I am bound to you as tight as I am bound to Nic, and I cannot do this without you or her. Please trust me and go with Zypheria and be safe. If anything happens to you, I will not survive."

Jill only heard part of it, her anger boiling over. She pointed at Nicole. "And she

stays? With a sword *you* gave her. In her shiny armor. Did you ruin *her* life?"

Kassandra tucked her knees up, kicking to stop her forward motion. She rested her toes on the wall's outer edge. A sad expression appeared on her face for an instant, and then smoothed off her brow and out of her eyes.

"More than you will ever know."

Nicole turned to her, frightened and in pain, clutching her stomach. Kassandra felt it too, and kicked a foot off the edge of the parapet. There was a thumping deep inside her followed by a wobbly rumble in her gut as if everything between her rib cage and pelvis had turned to jelly.

She looked from Jill's stricken features to Nicole's. "You felt that?"

Both sisters nodded.

Well, well. Eupheron's sarcastic tone cut through her thoughts, cold and unkind. *The old bastard never told anyone. It appears that King Tharsaleos has two bleeds.*

Kassandra's gaze wandered off into the black space above. "How do you know?"

Because you now have five.

Kassandra rode through the front gates on a large orca to meet the king's ambassador and his entourage. The Rexenor standard-bearer rode on her left, Lord Gregor—the first time she'd seen him in armor—on her right. Nicole stood crouched in the archer's stirrups behind the dorsal fin of her orca. A hundred more riders formed a wall that circled her; Menophon's son, Nereus, was among them.

She looked over at Gregor, reached out a hand. "I'm glad you're with me, Dad."

He stared at her a moment, then took her hand, squeezed it, and bowed his head. "We are all glad you are here." His lip twitched and he closed his eyes a moment. "You have my bleed, my father's bleed, his mother's bleed, her mother's bleed, her father's bleed—Kassander's bleed. Very pure. Very strong. You are the Wreath-wearer. I know you will do the right thing."

She bowed her head and let go of his hand, wishing she could cry tears. She bit down hard, gripping the reins, and swung in the saddle to take in her escort, Nicole ready with her crossbow, her standard bearer.

Sharp black birds followed the bearer's spear like a pennant in the wind, a long line of cormorants, cursed to remain in the sea, and trained to follow the bearer's lead.

Kassandra watched them dance and coil, bunching up beak to tail, when the bearer turned or slowed. She had seen other mammals with the curse, but never a bird. It showed how powerfully magical House Rexenor had been in its day. They were capable of modifying the curse to apply to an avian, where it had only ever worked on humans and cetaceans.

A similarly arranged group of Seaborn on orcas waited for them a mile out and a thousand feet above the Rexenor fortress, lighted globes floating in the water around them.

Kassandra reined in and held up her right hand for her party to halt, nodding to the king's ambassador, a bony thin man in a uselessly decorated black helmet and billowing cape.

He scrunched up his nose as if he smelled something foul in the water, clearly an expression he had practiced to show the Rexenors that he found them distasteful.

Kassandra laughed lightly, a girl's giggle, calculated to frighten them. She smiled at the Ambassador's jerk and the effort it took him to ignore her. She pulled her feet from the stirrups and kicked closer, waving Nicole and her guards back. Now it was just a game of who could push the other closer to the edge.

He glanced up at her, uncomfortable, his shoulders tightening. She was too close, but he wasn't going to be the one to back away. He waved over one of the glowing bulbs

and unrolled a long sheet of parchment, clearing his throat.

“The glorious and mighty King Tharsaleos, Lord Dosianax, Ruler of All the Seaborn, has graciously offered these terms to House Rexenor: All males and females over the age of nineteen will be put to death mercifully, all mages and their apprentices of any age will be put to death.” Cassandra raised an eyebrow at the lack of the word, “mercifully” for the mages. “The noble house, including Kallixene—”

The man stopped abruptly as the tip of Cassandra’s sword slid against his throat. He hadn’t even seen her draw it, and had no time to react, except to stop the words in his open mouth.

Kassandra unclenched her jaw. “Now, my good ambassador, you will begin again with ‘The noble house’ and you will say *Lady* Kallixene. Otherwise, you will lose your head.” She gave him a smirk. “As I’m sure you understand, I’m a bit of a stickler for formalities.”

The man stared at her, eyes wide with fear. He was afraid to move, so Cassandra gave him a nudge with her sword to help him out.

“Come ambassador, you do this all the time. This is where you bow to me, say ‘I apologize, Lady Cassandra, for my stupidity and rudeness,’ and then you begin again with the words, *the noble house...*”

She withdrew her sword and slid it into its scabbard.

The ambassador bowed, swallowing hard with a little growling sound. He tried to give her a fiercely defiant look, but found his soul shriveling inside him when he locked eyes with the woman. He looked down into deeper water. “I apologize, milady, for my...”

“Stupidity and rudeness,” said Cassandra helpfully.

“For my stupidity and rudeness.” He held up the roll of parchment with the king’s terms, and continued with it rattling furiously in his hands. “The noble house, including Lady Kallixene, will surrender themselves to the king’s mercy for fair judgment under his law.”

Kassandra waited patiently for more, glanced over her shoulder at her father, gave the ambassador a slight frown, and looked off into the black space above them as if thinking it over.

She tapped her chin. “Uh...no. I don’t think those terms are acceptable.” She dropped her cold glare to the ambassador, and jabbed a finger at him. “In fact, you tell Tharsaleos that he can bugger himself with his own spear for wasting my time.”

The ambassador kicked back, furious, his teeth making snapping motions. At a signal from him, his crossbow guard raised their weapons and fired at her.

She felt the casting of several spells behind her, waves of them washing over her armor, one from her father.

“Halt!” She cried the word to her own crossbow guards, including Nicole. They were a fraction of a second away from launching a counter attack, but her command also appeared to work on the forty barbed arrows coming at her. They stopped as if time around them stopped. She kicked in a casual circle, plucking them out of the water, and then smacked the bundle of them against her open hand, watching the enemy as if deciding what to do with them.

She looked down into the blackness, sensing something, a tide of thunder that rolled from the abyss, and she kicked out of its way. Something made out of the water itself roared up from the depths, sweeping claws herding men and orcas into a tight tumbling ball. It opened its giant jaws, and sucked the screaming ambassador and fifty orcamen and their mounts into its mouth. Long sharp teeth, giant jagged peaks of ice, closed around them.

“Nice timing, Ochleros.”

The demon turned to her, nodding and asking her something. She could tell it was a

question by the rise in pitch at the end of a mangled string of growling noises, like gargling with a mouthful of armored soldiers and orcas.

She smiled and shook her head. “No. Do not eat them. Let them go. I can’t blame them completely. They *were* acting on the command of a stupid man. Nothing more.” Something in the way she stressed the past tense of their ineffective action made them stop struggling in Ochleros’ jaws.

She closed her mouth, deciding not to enlighten them on the identity of the “stupid man,” whether she meant the ambassador or Tharsaleos.

Kassandra turned around, swimming to her orca, hooking her feet in the stirrups. “Come. It is nearly time.” She led them straight down into the black, spiraling north where the ocean’s floor glowed faintly in the light of the Wreath.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

SEA BATTLE

The Seaborn refer to their ability to live underwater, in extreme cold, at extreme pressures, in total darkness, as the “Telkhines Curse.” Their formative myths posit Zeus Cloud-Gatherer as the one who placed their ancestors under the curse, and drove them from their homes. The Telkhines were, after all, surfacers from the isle that we call Rhodes, but was at one time called, Telkhinis.

—Michael Henderson, notes

Kassandra kicked out of the stirrups of her orca, into the open, in front of the Rexenor army, trying to take in the mass of the king’s forces forming up a mile away. She could make out their center block and wings, six of them, by the glowing orbs casting light over thousands of helmets and glistening black and white killer whales, a mass of blazing stars in the pure night of the abyss.

Her eyes darted to every corner of a rough ellipse shaped formation of a dozen different kinds of soldiers and weapons, and she felt the charge in her skin like electricity, a tightening in her muscles, certain that if she touched anyone at that moment they would burn to cinders in her hands.

That is a beautiful array, Lady Kassandra. Andromache was watching everything through some remote hookup provided by Eupheron. I must admit House Dosianax knows how to fight. Knows how to assemble an army. Are you ready to face it?

Kassandra felt sick, the legs of a lobster unfolding in her stomach. Part of her felt horrified, wanted to curl into a ball, pee in her armor, and close her eyes. At the same time, her excitement doubled, a thrum in her bones, her fingers fidgeting with her sword.

“Why am I enjoying this?”

That is me, you feel.

“Oh.” Kassandra pointed high on the right side of the battle array. “What is that blur of light there?”

Something in the water. Perhaps a chemical, a poison, something the king is planning to use against us.

“What about them?”

Armored barges, crossbow platforms. Watch them. They will be moved into position somewhere in the middle of the battle. Beside them, and at the ends of four of the six wings, he has arranged his phalanxes, many-sided, with sarissas. Dosianax favors shorter, stouter poles, but Tharsaleos is unusual in his ability to absorb new techniques and weapons. The phalanxes can form a ring, wrapping around itself, points out, that can roll right through our infantry—and even do well against orcas.

“How do you know all this?”

Andromache laughed grimly at the obvious. *I was part of your grandmother, Pythias, and she married him.*

Kassandra found her eyes closing, sorrow weighing them down.

You could say that I know the man...intimately.

Her eyes snapped open. A shudder of disgust swept through her. “Gross. Too much info, Andromache.”

Keep your head on the battle. This will begin at any moment. What unusual weapons or defenses do we have that you have not shown me?

Kassandra’s voice came out in a croaking whisper. “Sunglasses.”

Andromache made a mildly disappointed humming noise. *Something you and Eupheron have cooked up?*

“You could say that.”

Good. More?

“There’s always Ochleros.”

That is what the toothed whales are for.

“I know.”

Toothed whales—the mightiest wrestlers in the sea. Bring them if your enemies bring one of the sea daimones against you. For all his stupidity, King Tharsaleos is an experienced strategos. A king among them. Perhaps fooled elsewhere, but not in battlespace.

“We must send Ochleros out early, then.”

You have learned. Kassandra felt Andromache smile inside her. That was your thought alone—and the correct strategy. The loss of one so great late in the battle will destroy us. Better to let him go before the Rexenor confidence and spirit fades.

“Right,” said Kassandra firmly, kicking back to her orca. “Let’s review our side.”

Lead the way, Lady Kassandra.

Nicole crouched in the stirrups behind her, a crossbow resting in the crook of her arm, fingers tapping the stock nervously. She grabbed the saddle-ring just in time as Kassandra signaled the animal and they shot straight down, right along a line of Rexenor orcamen.

They cheered as she passed, shouting battle cries, and she reached into the water with one hand, as high as she could, because Andromache told her to.

Kassandra arranged her army in four wings, long lines like spokes on a wheel, with Ochleros drifting in the center, the hub. She soared to the end of the downward face, and then shouted for all wings to rotate a quarter turn.

She watched the faces of the Rexenor men and women she passed, nods and secret smiles, quiet “milady’s,” knuckles white on reins, hands lifting to drop cheek guards into place, eyes like stained glass, smoldering, fearful, shiny bright dots of light reflecting the galaxy of the king’s army a mile away.

As Kassandra flew past the tail of the wing, one old soldier, a *zoarches*—commander of a team of orcas—raised a pair of pink cat-eye sunglasses, a souvenir from the battle on the surface against the Olethren.

Nicole tapped her on the shoulder. “They’ve all got sunglasses.”

Kassandra nodded, pointing along the wing that now stretched out in northwest direction from the hub. “Me and Ochleros picked those up over the summer.”

A dull boom sounded from the enemy ranks, followed by a sharp flash of blue a little left of center. Kassandra kicked her orca around, turning its nose toward the streak of fire hurtling at her southwest wing.

Something new Tharsaleos is using. Let us get closer.

She kicked after it, hoping to get near enough to see what it was. Over her shoulder, she felt Nicole tensing, rising a little in her stirrups to aim at the little brick at the head of the straight line of fire.

“Clear!” shouted Kassandra, but her archers along the southwest spoke were already kicking madly to get out of the thing’s way.

It caught eleven of them. The brick stopped suddenly in the water, two pale umbrella

shapes firing out of each end, expanding into a semi-transparent ball fifty feet across.

Kassandra raced up, jumping from her stirrups as Nicole climbed up the length of the orca to take the reins. *Put your hand against it.* Andromache's command fired through her head, and she flattened her hand and fingers against the glassy smooth ball.

"Some kind of shield spell. Spherical."

The soldiers inside stabbed their spears into the barrier, a hard unbreakable transparent globe, the work of some mad neritic glazier. They clawed at the inside, screaming for help as the sea trapped inside the sphere depressurized.

"The brick in the center has wires coming out of it. What the hell is it?"

Eupheron's smooth voice slid by her. *No idea. I've never seen anything like it.*

Andromache's command went straight to her muscles. *Back away. Now!*

The brick exploded. She felt the concussion, a sharp ring of motion fired from the sphere's rigid outer shell. It contained most of the shock, liquefying everything inside.

Kassandra swam up to the globe, pressing her hands against the hot glass surface, her ears ringing. It drifted in the middle of her southwest wing, half filled with a thick slush of blood and bone.

Nicole circled around, gliding past Kassandra. "Get on. They're firing more of them." She pointed halfway along the king's right wing. "They're coming from there."

Kassandra grabbed Nicole by the shoulders. "Get me to Ochleros."

The demon was already on his way, firing out from the center, nodding as Kassandra pointed at the source of the new weapon.

She turned and ordered her spear-bearing cavalry to counter a charge of orcamen from the king's far right, attempting to outflank them.

Eupheron's voice was like a smooth flow of water in the back of her head, describing battle details to other wearers: "...with a spherical shield spell that envelops a group of Rexenors, depressurizing the interior just as the explosive ignites."

Kassandra pointed to the center of her army, guiding Nicole, then stood upright, twisting to face the lines, signaling for all wings to advance.

She turned back to Tharsaleos' army to see the whales get Ochleros. The demon grew, arms stretching across a hundred feet of ocean, claws cutting into their thick hide, sinking into one whale, while the other whales teamed up and took his arms in their teeth. One had him by the throat, two more bit into his watery flesh and, as a group, drove Ochleros into the abyss, a twirling mass of giants, grunting, whistling, roaring like thunder.

One of the king's phalanxes broke and scattered to get out its way, a handful of them caught in the motion of the whales' massive caudal fins, crushed in their armor, spears snapping like toothpicks.

The entire battle halted, both sides watching, fascinated, as the grappling giants fell into darkness a thousand feet below them.

Eupheron was the first to speak. *That's something you don't see every day.*

Most impressive, added Andromache.

"He's gone," said Kassandra finally, incredulous, staring into the darkness.

No time. There's a battle going on. More of those explosive things coming.

A flight of crossbow bolts swept across the Rexenor center, one glancing off Kassandra's helmet, knocking her head back. A stab of pain fired down her neck.

"Holy shit! Nicole!" She swam through a rain of arrows, singing a deflecting spell, grabbing Nicole around the waist just as four bolts went deep into her orca, war-barbs that ripped through the flesh, killing it.

Kassandra waved her guard over, and Gregor kicked up with one of the Rexenor mages. "Close one. Let's build a barrier across—"

He didn't finish. The whole ocean slowed, coming into Kassandra's senses in a smooth flowing crawl. She punched Nicole in the back, throwing her spinning through the

water, away from her. Her father was turning around, fear just starting to reach his face.

Kassandra kicked, grabbed him by the arm, and propelled herself in front of him, catching the brick of explosive just as its shield spell deployed.

A strong flow of cold metal burst through her fingers, expanding in every direction. The globe formed, sealing her father and the mage, and twenty of her own guards, inside with her.

Sing carefully. Do it right. Praxinos' soothing voice was in her head, but she was way ahead, already into the chorus, building her own shield around the explosive force the detonator would unleash any second.

The noise inside the sphere was deafening. Her guards cursed, hammering at the shield's wall, breaking their swords against it, sobbing in anger and terror, kicking off one side of the shell and then stabbing with all their momentum at the opposite wall.

Gregor fired something like a needle of ice. It shattered against the shield. Then he and the mage discussed possible exit strategies in a rapid exchange of ideas, immediately turning to share power and try some of them.

Kassandra closed her eyes, her song coming to an end. She felt the explosive's ignition in her hands, running cold through her bones. There was a painful shudder as she almost let it go, holding it tighter, humming against her skin. Then it stopped, frozen in time, cupped between her fingers.

She opened her eyes, arching her back, sucking in water through her teeth. She jerked her chin to her sword at her hip, glaring at the nearest Rexenor guard.

"Cut us out of here."

"Milady, swords do not—"

"Please." She closed her eyes a moment to calm herself. "Do not make me repeat myself." Jutting her hip out further, a snort of involuntary laughter over what Andromache wanted her to tell the guard.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Nicole hacking futilely at the sphere's outer skin.

The Rexenor pulled Kassandra's sword from its scabbard, kicked up some momentum and drove the blade, made by the Telkhines masters thousands of years before, right through the glass wall.

The globe burst like a bubble.

Nicole swam in, looking horrified from Gregor—the only father she had ever known—to Kassandra—the Wreath-wearer, a mix of feelings stricken in her features: incomprehension, the pain of loss, the notion that someone could kill Kassandra. *The Wreath-wearer cannot die!* She held it as a law in her soul, even when she knew there were a hundred generations of dead wearers inside Kassandra, four of them that talked to her.

Nicole looked as if she was coming in for a bear hug and Kassandra edged away fearfully. "Please, don't touch me. This is my first time. Not sure how delicate this thing is."

Then she noticed Gregor and the Rexenor mage circling, still discussing the nature of the explosive—and how Kassandra had contained it.

She shook her head with a strange blend of disappointment and wonder. Moments from decompression guaranteed to burst half the cells in the human body swiftly followed by fiery death, and there they were spending—no, wasting—them trying to understand how they were about die.

She echoed Andromache's thoughts in modern terms. "Damn magic geeks."

An orca slid up and halted right in front of her, the rider one of the messengers from the left flank. The man pushed up his cheek-guards. "Milady, Dardanis has engaged the king's phalanx, Grapte has led his orcas around the far right of the king's fourth flank."

She nodded as he sped off, turning to Nicole. “Signal Imeria and Damo to advance. Get me Nereus. We’re going for a ride. I’ll be right back.”

Nicole frowned at the mention of Nereus. He was so obviously in love with the Wreath-wearer, yet Cassandra seemed to have no trouble asking him to go on the most dangerous expeditions.

Nicole waved to get her attention. “Where are you going?”

“I need to get rid of this thing.” Cassandra jutted her chin at the frozen storm of explosion between her fingers. “Then I’ll be right back to ruin my reputation. Just get Nereus here in two minutes.”

The Rexenor army watched their *strategos*, with her Wreath glowing like a comet, vanish halfway to the enemy line. Cassandra rocketed through the water, carefully creating enough of a wake to make Tharsaleos’ army feel it, but not enough to slow her down—or make her a target. She was into their ranks, row upon row of black-and-white killer whales blending together, and then she was through to the other side, behind the army, releasing the ball of fire. She swam away into an arc that took her miles above the battle, soaring through the ocean.

She toyed with the idea of flying away and never returning. It would be so easy. Only one of the immortals could catch her when she was inside the water, moving effortlessly, crossing oceans in minutes. Not the king. Not any other Seaborn. Only one of *them*.

She never slowed down, continuing in a circle that brought her right up against the Rexenor fortress walls, tightening the arc to come through the center of her army, slowing down, and looping to reclaim her momentum right in front of Nereus, sitting ready on his orca.

He bowed his head. Blood hung like a cloud around him, probably his own as well as others’. “My lady, what would you have me do?”

She knew he would do anything she asked.

She circled under his orca and came up feet first, wheeling to lock them in the archer’s stirrups.

She smacked him on the shoulder playfully. “Let’s go kill the one who commands Tharsaleos’ army.”

Without flinching, Nereus nodded. “Point him out and it will be done, milady.”

The storm of the explosion Cassandra had first contained and then freed finally broke from the bond she had created around it, releasing all the energy on the far side of Tharsaleos’ army. There was a fierce bolt of light, then a shockwave. A ring of rapidly expanding fire lit the sea for miles, waves of rainbow color, and the entire army of the Seaborn king turned in confusion, wide-eyed, expecting a surprise attack from the south.

Cassandra didn’t wait for the shockwave to wash over them. One hand still gripping Nereus’ shoulder, she turned to Nicole and four of her messengers. “It is time. Send the command along. Helios!” She shouted the signal for putting on the sunglasses, a pair passed out to every Rexenor, thousands of them plundered from a shipping container that—as luck would have it—fell off the deck of an Atlantic freighter a month before right into Rexenor hands.

“This is my turn,” said Cassandra and Andromache completely withdrew from her body and mind.

Then the Rexenor ranks heard the command and slid their sunglasses over their eyes, darkness complete.

Cassandra swam past Nereus, tossing her helmet to him as she went by, stopping a hundred feet in front of her army, outside the shade.

The king’s army recovered from the explosion, formed up, and readied to charge. The final charge that would destroy House Rexenor forever was at hand.

Cassandra sang long flowing notes at a high pitch while a low growling noise

accompanied it from the depths of her throat. Her fists tightened, and a deep volcanic rumble made miles of Atlantic Ocean shiver as it rolled up from the abyss.

An orange glow danced off her armor, silvery scales turned to jets of reflected flame. A ball of fire, rippling tongues of scarlet leaping out of it, floated up from a deep seam in the earth's crust. Then they all knew—all of Rexenor and all of the Seaborn host—that the Wreath-wearer had doomed her soul, delving into fire magic that never failed to consume the mage.

Kassandra floated between the two armies like Phaeton at the reins of a newborn star.

The armies only had a few moments to ponder her fate before the cold orange skin cracked open and white-hot light blazed in the space between her hands, the birth of a star in the depths of the ocean, fists of liquid light punching into the water around it, and anyone inside two miles not wearing sunglasses threw their hands over their eyes, or turned away, twisting in the water like stunned animals.

Kassandra somersaulted, waved her guard to her right, and signaled a hundred more to fall in behind them. She slowed just enough to catch her helmet from Menophon's son, and then shot out in front, leading the charge straight up. She flew through the water in front of Nereus' orca, her sword out, the blade tucked along her thigh.

High above the blinded armies, she flipped on her back and headed down, her guards wearing sunglasses, riding a blur of five-ton orcas in her wake.

She slipped back under Nereus' killer whale, rolling up into the archer's stirrups as they reached and ripped through the top of the king's army, punching through one phalanx, broken spears and men scattering before them. The charge caught a House Dosianax regiment of orcamen broadside, cutting it in half.

They crossed open sea between the orcas and a mass of soldiers with very long spears, forming up into a deep layered wall facing the charge. Kassandra kicked over Nereus' head, shot out in front, gathering a song behind her teeth, let it flow into her fist. She punched the water and the shock wave hit the phalanx head on, scattering it with a sheet of light off their spears, like silver schooling fish darting away from a predator. A hole opened in the center of the fleeing spear brigade, ringed in a fringe of kicking legs, and Nereus led the charge right through it.

In seconds, they hit the vanguard at the army's center where a tall commanding figure stood on the saddle of his orca, blinking and trying to see through the blaze of white light.

Blinded, he could still cast his explosives at Rexenor and released a long sour note that sent a grayish brick from his hands across the mile-wide gap between the armies.

Kassandra leaped over Nereus, a bullet fired at the king's general. She tucked her head down, flipping over, slowing down at the same time. She spread her legs and caught him around the middle, gripping him with her thighs, knocking him off his saddle.

The two of them tumbled, end over end, down through another blinded Dosianax orca regiment, followed by Nereus and the rest of the charging Rexenors.

Kassandra felt lightheaded, her rage like white hot threads running through her body, tensing her muscles. One swift sword sweep and she was holding his gold name bracelet. His severed hand, fingers in the middle of a cast, flew over her shoulder, snapped up by one of the orcas in her wake.

The enemy commander stared, his face a mask of frozen shock as she slid the dull side of the blade along his shoulder, angling it enough to cut through his helmet strap. The helmet flew off his head.

Then she leaned forward and grabbed a fistful of hair, pulling his face close, locking eyes with him.

"Who are you?" She growled.

Kassandra looked deeper, digging into the pits of the man's eyes, stunned to discover

that he was an Alkimides, a loyal soldier, one of the king's *oktoloji*.

An Alkimides.

A thick oily fear slipped over her. *I'm about to kill one of my own house.* She was in his soul and out the back of it in a moment. He was...*thin*, and she had just started to roll some explanations into place when she saw the eyes staring back at her.

It was King Tharsaleos, controlling this man's physical form. She saw him watching her with his burning grayish yellow eyes, hollow cheeks, a carnivorous smile. He spoke to her. "You are about to kill one of your own, granddaughter. Is it not a sign of the end of your line, Wreath-wearer, when Alkimides kills Alkimides, and the one who craves my throne is a bitch with fire magic burning in her soul?"

Do it, or let me do it for you, Cassandra.

Kassandra jerked in shock at Andromache's command. "I thought this *was* you!"

Take his head now!

She threw her head back in anguish and screamed the Alkimides war cry. She let the bracelet go, catching it in her teeth, and shoved the general's head back, exposing his throat. Her sword was a dark blur, a strong controlled arc, and just like her push into his hollowed-out soul, the blade was into his neck and through the other side in a moment, his blood washing through her mouth, her braids, her armor.

She spat out his bracelet and it fell, heavy in the water.

She was still vomiting when the charge returned to the Rexenor line, her stomach empty and heaving, her sword shaking in her hand.

She had nothing more to lose when Dardanis' messenger rode up on his orca, frantically waving his helmet. "Milady, Dardanis pleads for help. We have lost half our hundred riders. An army of the dead has come from the south, a new Oletthren are upon us!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE INNER OCEAN

Hekate Einodia, Trioditis, lovely dame, of earthly, watery, and celestial frame, sepulchral, in a saffron veil arrayed, pleased with dark ghosts that wander through the shade; Perseis, solitary goddess, hail! The world's key-bearer, never doomed to fail; in stags rejoicing, huntress, nightly seen, and drawn by bulls, unconquerable queen; Leader, Nympe, nurse, on mountains wandering, hear the suppliants who with holy rites thy power revere, and to the herdsman with a favoring mind draw near.

—*Orphic Hymn 1 to Hekate*

“The pale woman’s back.” Cassandra pushed the words through her teeth, lifting the cheek-guards on her helmet.

“Who now leads the king’s army?” Gregor pointed at the troop movements.

Kassandra—with Praxinos guiding her—cast several combinations of sighting spells. “Whoever it is, is weighing down his right and bottom wings.”

Her blinding star burned in the space between Rexenor and the king’s army. Her four wings of orcamen and phalanxes had engaged four of the king’s. The remaining two wings of Tharsaleos’ army did not wrap around the Rexenor lines, seastar-on-a-scallop, as she had anticipated, but folded back, directed to the bottom and right.

Kassandra pointed, squinting through the glare. “They’re engaging Aleximor’s dead army there.”

Gregor finished a song that did something to his vision, kicking forward, using her shoulder as leverage. “The *ostologos* has brought his army against both of us?”

One of the Rexenor abyss mages spoke up. “Perhaps with the dead against the living it is unavoidable?”

Kassandra kicked in front of her guard’s position to take in her lines of battle, sensing something big moving in the water. She waved the others back, including Nicole.

“Ochleros?” She called his name in three high-pitched notes bending low in the middle.

Off to her right, another of the king’s phalanxes pulled back from Rexenor. “Orderly retreat.” She pointed. “They’re falling back and rolling behind their lines to shore up the ranks against the dead army.” She looked over her shoulder nodding to a messenger. “Call Bryanthis’ wing back. Do not pursue them. Fold in. Guard our flank. I go to Dardanis’ aid.”

Her guards exchanged looks with Gregor and Lady Nikoletta, pausing for direction as Kassandra threw her arms over her head and pointed her toes, dropping below their position, farther out of range of their protection.

“By herself?” Nereus turned to Nicole, now riding archer on his orca. “What is she doing?”

Nicole watched a second longer and shrugged.

Kassandra bent her knees hitting, something solid in the sea, putting one hand out to dig her fingers into Ochleros’ upper arm. Her feet were flat in the palm of his hand, and she was smiling grimly up at his face.

“You’ve finished wrestling a bit sooner than I expected, old friend.”

“Whales have long memories.” His deep voice made the water shiver around him.

“One of them owed me a debt of life. I once saved her mother from the harpoon.”

Kassandra nodded, pointing down. “The story another time perhaps. I would give nearly anything to hear it. Battle calls.”

She waved her guard over, shouting “To me, Rexenor!”

The vanguard spun to face the floor a mile below and dove straight down, a hundred on orcas following one side of the rage and blood of the left Rexenor wing and two of the king’s phalanxes.

Praxinos’ voice rode smoothly through her thoughts. *Rexenor has fought the dead twice. They do well.*

No. Andromache corrected him. *The bone-gatherer has weighted his ranks against the king more than us. See, the dead have outflanked them.*

“It does not go well for either of us.”

Hearing her, a Rexenor mage pointed out, “Dardanis’ line holds.”

“Dardanis is dead,” said Kassandra quietly. She turned slowly and shouted over her shoulder, “I want the pale woman alive!” She held out her left arm, directing them to broaden the face of their attack.

With Kassandra’s burning star behind the charge, it was like diving out of the sun. They could see well, but their enemies had to look into the blinding light.

“Who knows what the dead can see,” said Kassandra grimly.

The Rexenor charge swung under a column of the dead, punching a wide gap through them. The orcas, blinded by Kassandra’s star on the last charge and directed entirely by their riders, were finally able to see their prey. The second ranks in the charge held their lances out, ducking against crushed plates of armor and high-velocity broken bone.

Nearing the command formation of the dead army, Kassandra slipped out of Ochleros’ fist, her sword gliding through bone and armor. A spear point caught her in the shoulder, sending her into a rapid spin.

The ocean rolled in front of her, blurs of shiny black orca and bone white, the battle roar so loud she couldn’t hear Ochleros over it. A blink of time showed her his mouth full of giant teeth closing over twenty of the dead. The pale woman spun by, arms wide, fingers curled into claws, calling something darker than the abyss between them.

Kassandra cupped a hand to slow her spin, the cry of her senses jumping right to her muscles, throwing her body sideways, upside down.

A thin slice of darkness, the size of a small ship, winged past her. She turned to follow its path through twenty orcas and Rexenors, cutting them into pieces, a cloud of blood in its wake.

The Rexenor charge broke into a red ocean of screaming, dodging, tumbling orcas and Seaborn. Another black sickle shape shot through them, taking Ochleros’ left arm off at the elbow.

Kassandra ducked a tangle of spear-length claws still curling around a handful of dead in broken armor.

“Nereus!” Kassandra looked around for him. One of the pale woman’s blades came at her. She tucked in her legs, turning sideways to it, bracing the back of her sword with her feet—an old trick Phaidra had taught her. The slice of dark split on the edge of her Telkhines blade, firing off in opposite directions. She followed one shard whirling through the middle ranks of the bone-gatherer’s own army, a row of fifty skulls in helmets popping off in sequence.

Nereus rode up with Nicole firing bolts in every direction. “My lady! The king’s army is in flight!”

Kassandra pointed vigorously away. “Get her out of here!”

She blinked, startled, a jolt of electricity. Nicole dropped her crossbow, a bolt shooting wide, agony on her face, and Kassandra clamped her teeth shut against the rage

that seized her.

A flood of heat slid up her spine, a hot current firing along her back into her brain. The ocean went silent, the battle frozen in time, the only movement was Ochleros' solid black eyes sliding toward her, a grimace of pain on his face.

Kassandra opened her mouth to scream, and a storm two miles above her on the surface of the Atlantic Ocean flattened to glass.

"Kallixene!" She cried her grandmother's name, feeling the full bleed of the Lady of Rexenor ram belligerently into her soul.

There was a click in her ears, deep and needle-like. Time started and the battle noise hit her like a fist, shaking her senses, a sudden blur of motion, orca teeth and twisting armor, and thick red blood everywhere.

Kallixene had taken her own life, giving her granddaughter every last thing she possessed.

Kassandra turned and charged through a thick ring of the dead, one sweep from her shoulder that ended with her holding the blade point out, both hands white on the sword grip as she broke through the line.

The pale woman spun slowly toward her, her mouth just starting to open for a song, teeth glistening, her tongue lifting. The thick black bar between her fingers shattered and drifted away like smoke, and Kassandra drove her sword to the hilt through the center of Corina's chest.

Kassandra swung her legs up to circle Corina's waist, locking her ankles behind her back. She uncurled her fingers from the haft of her sword and dug them into the pale woman's face, tilting it back to force their eyes to meet—and then she was swimming into Corina's soul.

Corina screamed, a bolt of agony shooting through her body. The scary woman, Kassandra, rammed the point of her sword into her, through her breastbone, cutting her heart into pieces, sliding through muscle and vertebrae, sticking three feet from her back. Blindness and crushing pain in her chest, the taste of her own blood in her mouth, then the water stilled behind her teeth.

End it. Even the Pacific, my protector, has abandoned me. My body's dead. Destroy me, destroy my soul.

"I was already dead." She cried the words in despair, dropping solidly onto the gray rocks of her inner world. She twisted her ankle and fell to her knees, sobbing, tears and snot running off her chin.

The jagged flat stones cut her skin, and she ran her fingers through it, streaking blood up her thighs. She snorted something bitter about shock and internal bleeding, and stood up on wobbly weak legs.

"I died the day..." She was about to say, *I placed my hand on the print in the cave in Monterey and released this monster into my body*, but paused and said, instead, "My mother and father died. What made *me* so special?"

Hopelessness emptied her mind, nothing but a running slick of pain pooling in the bottom. She ran screaming for the edge of her gray inner world. The rocks cut her toes. The roaring wind hit her in the face, throwing her hair back. She wanted to fall forever, through the pure black space.

A dim line from the glow of her body showed the edge of her gray island. She kicked her legs harder and ran off the end of her inner world, into the void.

Corina was flying.

The roaring wind lifted her in its arms, a smooth certain grasp on every inch of her body. She tumbled forward and the wind flipped her upside down and pushed her back.

Not falling.

She was caught in a current that threw her toward her island. She slowed as she approached the rocky edge. *Too slow.*

She stretched out her arms, her fingers stiff, reaching for her barren haven, tears streaming off her face in blurry tendrils, her hair coiling around her head like tentacles.

She was falling, slowing down, headed directly for the cliff face, a long wedge of blackness cut into it, the opening of a cave the same shape as the one that had once held Aleximor.

A blast of wind hit her in the back and threw her into the dark. She tumbled over the rocks, skidding up to wall, scraping her chin and knees.

She brought her hands up, bloody and raw. Beyond them she saw a smooth blank space on the wall of the cave, right where the handprint had been, where Aleximor had been locked inside the earth.

She gave it another glance before stumbling to the edge of the cave. Leaning out, she found a handhold, reached up, and began to climb.

Corina reached for a ridge of rock, hooking her toes in a depression in the cliff face. "I hate you!" She screamed it to the world—her inner world. "I hate you, Aleximor!" It made her feel strong to hear her voice. "The killing, betrayal, binding souls, waking armies of the dead, to the bottom of the sea and into a battle where the woman leading the Rexenor army runs her sword through me! I hate you! Do you hear me! All of it for nothing. I should have given up the day you took my body over. I have tried to fight you and look where it ends."

She was halfway to the top when her killer floated up behind her.

"You're nearly there," said Cassandra. "Don't give up."

Corina lost her footing and made a panicked grab for any knob of rock in reach. She pressed her body against the cliff, breathing hard.

When she felt safe again, she threw Cassandra an angry look over her shoulder. The murdering bitch drifted ten feet away, in her fish-scale armor.

"You're trying to make me fall! Have you come to gloat? To drop me into death?"

"Fall?" Cassandra didn't understand. She extended her arms over her head, rubbed her fingers together, and then stuck out her tongue. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. "I recognize this, Corina. It appears thinner, but it is not air or wind. Currents in the Pacific Ocean off the west coast of America—that's what you have filled your soul with."

"What?"

"This is the Pacific. You have the ocean in your soul."

Corina's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. "You found it. My ocean. It's been here the whole time. I just didn't know it."

"Swim up to me, Corina. All of this is yours. Why would you allow yourself to fall? Why would you even think that?"

"But I'm not like you. I'm a surfer."

"From California, right. I am a surfer, too. I grew up in Nebraska, as far from the sea as my grandfather could arrange."

Corina reached out one hand and kicked away from the cliff. "Who are you?"

Kassandra took her hand. "You know my name."

They dropped down smoothly onto the gray stones of Corina's island. Cassandra looked cautiously around. "Where is he?"

"Aleximor?"

Kassandra held up a hand. "Do not say his name."

"He's on another island over there," whispered Corina, pointing.

"He can't just swim over?"

"He doesn't know—or hasn't guessed—it's the ocean any more than I knew."

“He thinks because you are a thinling—a surfer— that your inner world must be filled with air. Another fool.”

Aleximor’s cold voice filled the space, a little slow, groggy-sounding as if he was just waking from a deep sleep. “Corina?”

Corina grabbed Cassandra’s arm, pleading. “Don’t leave me! He’s going to kill me. Please.”

Kassandra shrugged her off, fingers working the buttons and clips down the front of her armor. She stepped out of it and pulled the thigh-length underpadding over her head.

Corina watched her, panicking. “Then he’s going to kill you. He’s bargained with something called Akastê. She looks like a woman...but she’s not.”

“We’ve met.”

“Corina!” Aleximor roared her name. “Silence!”

“He plans to kill the king! This is all about revenge. Stop—”

“Tell her nothing!”

Kassandra rolled up the underpadding in her fingers, pushed it over Corina’s head, and guided her arms through the sleeves. It was almost like dressing a doll.

“He killed everyone on a freighter that went through the Panama Canal. The whole crew. Killed them.” She sobbed. “He even tricked me into binding a man’s soul.” Tears poured out of her eyes. “I didn’t mean to.”

Kassandra nodded. “I know. Just get this on. It will protect you.” She bent down to steer Corina’s legs into the armor, straightened to tug the collar even, then pushed every clip closed.

“He killed the rest of the *ostologoi*. All of his descendants except one little boy.”

Kassandra grabbed her wrist and pushed the handle of a knife into her hand, folding her fingers over it. “Don’t give up. Don’t let him get you, Corina from California. I will do what I can on the out—”

Kassandra vanished.

The pale woman pulled the sword from her chest, first by the hilt, then grabbing the bare blade and jerking it through the bone and tissue.

She sang of death and the path that leads into it through the throne room of the Sea, and then brought the Wreath-wearer’s sword down to slice open the world. The fiery glow blinded her, and the hollow noises and demands of the things beyond the door hurt her ears.

The pale woman brought up her elbow and knocked Cassandra’s head back, unhooked her legs, and kicked the granddaughter of King Tharsaleos into the fire.

Kassandra opened her eyes, stunned, her armor gone, her grip on the living world lost. She turned her head to Ochleros, her fingers grabbing at the edge of the dark sea, the rest of her body burning in the fire beyond the door.

“I command you! Protect her—Corina! Do not let any Rexenor come near her! I command you, Ochleros!” Her eyes, wild with fear, shifted and she saw Jill swimming right behind the demon, her blond hair blazing bright, lit up against the dark ranks of bone-gatherer’s army. Cassandra’s voice begged her. “Why are you here?”

Zypheria kicked up and grabbed Jill by the shoulders. Nicole had her sword out, charging Corina. “Do not hurt—!”

The fire sealed around the Wreath-wearer and she slipped away.

“One down...”

Aleximor stood on the edge of his island inside Corina’s soul, making growling noises and kicking stones into the abyss, the glow of ten thousand bound souls lighting her inner world like a sun.

His eyes were fixed on Corina in the distance, across the void, on her island.

“I will destroy you! You told her everything!” He roared at her.

“And you killed her! You fed her to that *thing*!”

Rage burning in his veins, he backed up fifty paces and made a running leap.

Aleximor spread his arms and he was flying across the space. He landed on her island on his feet, kicking loose stones behind him, chasing her. The ground of her soul shook under him.

Her cello fell off its stand, hitting the rocks, the strings pulsing with a discordant moan. Corina screamed and ran for the far edge.

He saw her clearly now, her glow diminished by something she was wearing. “She gave you armor!”

Her breathing came quick, short frightened breaths as she ran. He was faster than Corina. She heard him right behind her, his fingers extending, inches from her shoulder. She hooked her foot on the edge of the world and leaped off it into the void, Aleximor one stride behind, his fingers catching her hair and the scales covering her shoulder.

Then the roaring current caught them both.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

A MINOR REXENOR NOBLE

The tale how at the very first the mighty god Poseidon smote the mountains with the three-forked sword which the Telkhines fashioned for him, and wrought the islands in the sea, and from their lowest foundations lifted them all as with a lever and rolled them into the sea. And them in the depths he rooted from their foundations that they might forget the mainland.

—Callimachus, “Hymn IV to Delos”

Kassandra dropped to her knees and vomited a thin bilious fluid onto the stone floor. Her lungs erupted and liters of seawater followed the meager contents of her stomach, washing some of it into a dark band of shadow against the wall.

She coughed, ragged sour fire in her throat. She choked on another cough because something moved in the shadows at the wall’s base. She pushed herself backward a few inches.

“Put your mind at ease. The few who pass this way do not hang about.”

She threw a startled look at an old man on a bed against the wall to her left. Her voice came out in a raspy whisper. “Why don’t they...hang about?”

“She comes for you quickly—not directly. No. She will send a guard around shortly to take you to see *her*.”

“Why has she not come for you?”

He laughed, a short choppy sound. “She tells me, ‘It is not yet your time.’ Between you and me, I don’t think - *she* even knows what that means. I think she *cannot* kill me. I’m cursed, or don’t taste good.” He rolled over, clutching at his blanket so that it did not touch the floor, but his hands worked absently while he stared at her, his mouth open, his short gray beard twitching. “Do you know what she tells me when I ask her for a sign that it is my time?”

Kassandra got to her feet, eyeing the shadows warily. She turned to a heavy wood door, like something out of a castle dungeon. She frowned and pressed her hands against it. “What?”

“A woman who asks the wrong questions will come to me.”

Kassandra glanced over her shoulder. “Am I asking the wrong questions?”

His gaze shifted from her eyes to the glow of the Wreath. “I wouldn’t know. Different. Yours are different. Others who find themselves here always ask for the way out.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “I already assumed you wouldn’t be here if you knew the way out.”

He laughed again and it stirred up the sounds in the shadows. Kassandra spun at a man’s screaming voice, “Use the key before he escapes!”

She reached for her sword but it wasn’t there. Her voice came out in a brittle shriek. “What was that?”

“The shadows, they steal the prisoners’ last words—and then repeat them. They lurk in the corners. Those are *my* final words, a command to my greatest student.”

“And did he use the key?”

“That is the wrong question.”

“Answer it.”

He dismissed her command with a wave. “Answer some of mine.”

She leaned her back against the door and nodded for him continue.

“What is your name?”

“Kassandra.”

He jerked away, as if the name burned him, grabbing the blanket closer. He stared at her, dazed and wild, fire on the edge of an open grassy plain, hurricane winds screaming through the trees, thunder waves grinding everything they touch to sand. He whispered her name, slow and reverent.

“Kassandra.”

She pressed her back harder against the door, frowning with her teeth showing. He was starting to creep her out. “Why are you talking like that?”

“You have answered your own question. Yes. The answer is yes. He *did* use the key.”

“You got that from my name?”

The old man nodded. “*His* name was Kassander.”

“Rexenor? Lord Kassander is my namesake.”

The wildness blazed higher in his eyes. “He must have used the key in time because if he had not, then you would not be here.” He eyed the glow around her head again. “You are Alkimides.”

“My father is Gregor Lord Rexenor.”

“Of course.” He nodded, smiling delightedly, a man at the end of a long life that somehow all made sense minutes before he was to die. “I am Strates Unwinder. I have been waiting for you, Kassandra.” His eyes looked far away. “A long time.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Old Strates Unwinder. I have heard your name many times over the last four years. Why have you been waiting for me?”

“Another wrong question,” he said absently, but he didn’t look upset about it. “I believe you are supposed to kill me. I need to die by your hands. I don’t know much more than that.”

Kassandra dropped instinctively into a fighting stance, bringing her fists up.

“Why?”

Strates vanished in a cloud of blue that momentarily held his shape and then drifted away. The blankets on the bed sagged, empty woolen folds.

Kassandra felt cold on her neck and turned, cupping her hands as if she was still underwater. Too slowly. Strates hadn’t vanished. He moved faster than she could track with her eyes. He climbed the walls. He stood, feet planted to the ceiling of the jail cell, upside down, his slender brown fingers digging into her hair, unweaving.

She pulled her braids out of his reach. His fingers weren’t in her hair, but in the Wreath, fistfuls of seaweed tearing loose and a pain in her head like serrated metal cutting through bone.

He screamed in anguish along with her, and yanking harder, grabbing desperately at the wound bands of her crown, green blades, shiny wet with seawater, popping and breaking, bloody in his fingers.

The voices in her head screamed.

Kassandra reached up and dug her fingers into his wrists, his wiry muscles throbbing. She couldn’t get enough leverage to hit him. “Stop! You’re hurting me.”

He twisted her neck, ripping more of the wreath loose. Salt water and blood streamed down his hands, trickling along her arms.

“I said stop!” Kassandra kicked off the floor, using Strates’ arms for support, and

clawed his face. She jumped again, jabbing her fingers into his throat, crushing his windpipe.

Strates' eyes closed, still holding the wreath, and he fell from the ceiling, crashing into Cassandra. She closed her eyes and both of them fell.

Then she was fighting to keep her feet with thigh-deep raging black water rushing around her, and Strates was in front of her, triumphant, holding several long strands of green and brown and red seaweeds. They coiled up his arms and over his shoulders, sharp stripes trailing in the current.

"What have you done!" she screamed angrily at him and brought a fist up to hit him. "I didn't will this. You have sent me inside!" Then she noticed that Strates was here with her, in the currents, inside the Wreath of Poseidon.

He shifted to steady himself against the strong moving water. Looking around the room, he saw a circular ledge of dark stone surrounding a raging torrent that spilled into a pit in the center, black arched doorways leading into the room on all sides.

"What is this place?" He whispered the words hoarsely, rubbing his throat.

Kassandra turned away, walking against the current to the ledge and climbed out of the water. She sat down, dropping her feet back into the swirl of black. "This is the Wreath, inside it." A horrible thought jumped to the front of her mind. "I have not killed you. You've just killed me."

He climbed out, carefully wrapping the seaweed around his shoulders so that he wouldn't lose it, and then he sat down next to her.

"Do you often go inside the Wreath?"

"Only twice. Once, several years ago—just before we defeated the Olethren—and yesterday."

"And you lived through it?"

"Twice."

"Why, then, would you assume that you will not live through this?"

She let out an infuriated breath and moved away from him. "Because the last time I was in here, some sick old man didn't rip the Wreath off my head. That's why."

He laughed and stood up. "Where are the past wearers? I have heard that they can be found inside your soul. I must see them."

"Why?"

He indicated the seaweed. "I need to use this to wake the first wearer, Polemachos."

"That's not enough of an answer."

"The first Alkimides king will tell you what he knows. All I know is that I had one final purpose in life, to remove the sea-wreath and use it to wake up the first wearer."

Suspicion nearly blinded her and she brought her fist back to hit him. "What do you know about all of this?"

"We do not have time, milady. *She* will come for you and you must be ready." He saw the doubt in her eyes. "You are not dead. I am Strates, old Strates Unwinder. You *know* who I am. Trust me. The crown has been revealed. We must wake the first, and I need your help."

"Through that doorway." She pointed behind her, but her gaze didn't move from a door halfway across, and the dim glow spilling from it.

He saw her hesitate. "We must hurry."

Kassandra stood, pushing past him. "How did you do that moving very fast thing? And walking on the ceiling?"

"An old trick. Run."

"And how did you manage to follow me inside the wreath?"

"I am the Unwinder, the accursed. I was born to follow you inside here. I just did not know the course would be so long and twisting."

“Accursed?”

“I gave my only son to the Earth-encircler. I was young and stupid, and could not deny an immortal. I gave him what he came for.”

Kassandra stopped at the entrance to one of the dark hallways leading into the room. “You’ve met the Lord of the Sea.”

“Please hurry, milady. I have met the Sea’s ruler twice now.” He smiled sadly. “My son was Polemachos, the first Alkimides king. They call me old Strates, and I am old—really old. I was a minor Rexenor noble with a solid bleed from my mother, and I fell in love with the Alkimides Lord’s eldest daughter, Philista. The rift between Rexenor and Alkimides began with me. Philista died soon after giving birth to Polemachos, and Lord Poseidon paid the price I set on my son—that I was to live and keep my bleed as long as Polemachos’ soul remained in this world. I have died, but not for long, and my bleed is intact...because Polemachos has remained in your line, the Wreath-wearers.”

They marched deeper into the dark tunnel with rough slate-colored stone. Kassandra sped up. Somewhere outside, there was a war going on, and Nicole was there, and Ochleros—and *Jill!*

“And you’re here to return the Wreath to Polemachos?”

He shook his head. “Just the wrapping, the seaweed that Lord Poseidon twined around his own crown to conceal it.”

Kassandra stopped, grabbing the wet stone wall to keep her balance.

“Milady, we must hurry. Polemachos needs to tell us something when he wakes.”

She waved him on. Following, she suddenly remembered she could cry real tears while inside the wreath. They streamed down her cheeks and off her chin, and she gulped air, sobbing and cursing her life.

She looked up from the floor when the walls became smooth gray stone under her fingers. They were nearing the mirror door, a sheet of water that allowed her inside the abyssal chamber where the past Wreath-wearers dwelled after they passed away.

“What do we do now, milady?”

She looked up and walked past him, straight through the shiny wall of liquid, into the dark seawater beyond. Strates followed her, clutching the coil of seaweed, looking back at the glowing rectangle with curiosity.

The wakened Wreath-wearers met them a few kicks away, standing at the crest of a sandy hill, Kassandra’s mother, Ampharete, King Praxinos, the grandson of Polemachos, Queen Andromache, and finally King Eupheron, hurrying up with a grave look on his face.

“Hello, Mother.” Kassandra swam to Ampharete, hugging her, but she felt the stiffness in her embrace. “What’s wrong?”

When she pulled away, and let her gaze shift to each of them, she read every thought in their heads. A suffocating fear dominated the mix, bright threads of wonder, an overwhelming urge to not say the wrong thing. Then she noticed that they had not said a word...in a long time.

“Why aren’t you speaking to me?”

Praxinos was the first to move forward, drifting lightly over the sand. He bowed his head. “My lady,” was all he could say.

Before any of the others could speak, Strates took her by the elbow. “Come, Lady Kassandra. We must find Polemachos asleep on his stone bed.”

Kassandra kicked away, stirring up a little vortex of sand. Glancing over her shoulder, she frowned at the other wearers, unmoving on the hilltop.

She waved them to her. “Come on. I want you all to see this.”

After exchanging looks of surprise, they kicked after her, following a long row of alcoves carved out of the cliff face, each one lit dimly by phosphorescent growth on the

walls. One of the Wreath-wearers of the past lay on a stone platform in each one. Four alcoves out of a seemingly endless procession were empty—one for each of the awakened wearers.

They stopped before the first alcove where a gray-bearded man in armor rested on the platform. Strates pushed himself into the shallow depression in the wall and leaned over the man, pulling off his helmet, and laying his head back on the stone.

“Polemachos? My son? Wake.”

Kassandra moved into the alcove on the opposite side, annoyed that none of the other wearers—even her own mother—were bold enough to stand near her.

Strates looked down at the bundle of seaweed as if he wasn't certain what to do with it. He placed it square on Polemachos' chest, over the shiny breastplate with the face of Poseidon stamped into it.

Polemachos' fingers stirred and then reached up and curled around the coils of seaweed. He opened his eyes, cold iron-gray eyes, staring straight up at the glowing rock only for a moment. Then they shifted to Kassandra's face.

“It is time?”

She shook her head, mouthing the words, “I don't know.” And she was crying again, tears blurring around her face.

Polemachos sat up, holding the seaweed tight in one hand. “So, the Lord of the Sea is truly gone out of the oceans?”

“How do you know?” Kassandra sobbed.

“Because you are here, wearing the crown of the seas' ruler. They belong to you now.”

“But I don't—”

“In the moment—he placed the Wreath on my head, he commanded me to say these words to you. These were for my ears alone, for I was the first of the line, and I held the command in my soul, and let no others hear it. ‘Final Wreath-wearer, my throne is yours, my kingdom is yours, all of the things others have given to me I give to you. Do not tarry, for there are others who crave these things.’”

Kassandra waited a moment longer. “That's it? I was just getting used to—”

Eupheron kicked closer—but not too close, panicking and pointing back along the line of alcoves. “Return, milady. Someone on the outside is coming for you.”

She sprang into open water, and without looking back, swam away. The bright line of alcoves blurred into a streak of fire and she was through the water door, hunched over in the stone hallway, coughing up everything in her lungs.

She ran, seawater running off her, pale stone walls darkening to the rough slate. She crossed the ledge in one bound and dove into the whirl of black water, slipping effortlessly through them, into the pit in the center.

Kassandra opened her eyes at the rattling of keys, staring up at the prison cell's ceiling for a second before realizing where she was.

She jumped to her feet, nearly tripping over Strates as she moved to get her back to the wall, opposite the door. It swung in on smooth hinges and a huge guard in scaly armor and helmet stood in the doorway, bared sword in one hand, keyring in the other.

He looked up from Strates, dead on the floor, to Kassandra, blood streaming down her arms. He stared harder, leaning forward. He opened his mouth, a thread of saliva stretching between his top and bottom teeth. Then he turned and ran, leaving the door open, dropping his sword and keys halfway down a long corridor.

“Yeah, you better run.”

She wiped her hands on her shirt and stepped over Strates to peer out the door. The long hallway was empty and dark, the guard's sword glinting on the stones between her

cell's door and a wider open archway—glinting with the light her crown threw off.

“And I thought I was lit like a damn Christmas tree before.”

Lady Cassandra?

It was Strates' voice, inside the Wreath, inside her head, a rough thrum that ran through her jaw. “What is it?”

Take my body home to Rexenor. Please.

Without thinking, Cassandra turned back, and crouched to pick up Strates' body. He was as tall as she was, and weighed quite a bit more, but she lifted him into her arms without feeling the weight. His head sagged over her elbow, and she shifted him so that he leaned against her shoulder, eyes closed, peaceful, dead.

“Can you help me get back to my battle?”

You must find a way to re-open the outside door—the one through which you came.

She followed the trail left by the prison guard, kicking the sword to the side as she passed, turned right, stepping over the keys on their ring. The rustle of clothing and harsh whispering helped her navigate a course through the halls until she came to a giant gilt door carved with shell spirals, tentacles, winged creatures of the sea, shark's jaws; and everywhere wove the curls of waves, the dominant feature of an ocean world, tribute to the most important substance in the universe.

Water.

Kassandra kicked the door and a dull boom echoed into some vast empty space beyond.

She backed up quickly as the huge gold door swung open. Cassandra took another step when she noticed a gray haired man in a modern white ship's officer's uniform pushing it open for her. He wore a round white hat like a captain with leafy brass decorations. There were black bars with more brass on his shoulders.

“What is this,” she said under her breath. “The fucking *Love Boat*?”

She scowled at him, and he returned a calm smile as if there was nothing out of the ordinary—a young woman carrying an old man with lines of fresh blood down her arms and a crown that blinded him.

Kassandra gave him a nod. “Who are you?”

The man in the uniform bowed low. “I am Captain Martim Teixeira. My mistress, the Sea, bids you welcome, Wreath-wearer.”

She gave him a curt we'll-see-about-that nod and entered a hall as big as a football field with a ceiling she could not see—even with the light her crown gave off.

“Where's the water?” She breathed the words to the past wearers. “Everything has a sea theme, but there isn't any water.”

It's as if it used to reverberate and move with the tides, said Eupheron with an awed tone she had never heard him use before. *But someone has removed the sea.*

At the far end, sitting on a throne made of white polished shells was the woman with ocean eyes and hair that roiled and lapped around her shoulders. And her mouth was wide open, shocked at the young woman with the crown.

She is one of the immortals, said Eupheron. After a stunned pause, he added, *She is on your throne, milady.*

“Akastê.” She let the whispered words float out of her mouth and somehow made them coil back into her own ears so that no one else could hear them. “I've left Jill and Nicole alone against an army of the *ostologos* and what's left of my grandfather's forces. I do not have time for this.”

Tell her that.

Kassandra placed Strates' body gently on the tiles and stepped to one side of him.

“I am the Sea,” shouted the woman petulantly, jumping to her feet. “Give me my

crown!”

“I don’t...” Cassandra waved a hand around the room. “I don’t see any water. I’m not sure I like what you’ve done with the place.” Anger rose in her throat, a burn in her veins. She watched the woman standing in front of the throne. “I am more of the Sea than you will ever be. You’ve just had more time to play with your hair.”

Kassandra’s voice broke at the end when her fingers curled around something heavy and ice cold. She looked over at a thick shaft of smooth black metal in her hand, a spear much taller than she was, capped with three squared sharp tines. Startled, she let it slip through her hand.

The shaft of the trident hit the tiles and the earth shook. Cassandra grabbed it tight, fearing that dropping it might break the world.

Akastê jumped back, her fingernails clicking nervously.

Kassandra didn’t bother looking up at her. Her attention was on the crack the trident had made in the tiles and the ocean pooling around her feet, slipping up the sides of Strates’ body.

Then she knew what to do. She took the trident in both hands and slammed the end into the floor.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

BATTLE'S END

Two thousand years ago, the Alkimides stormed the Telkhines outposts in the Mediterranean Sea with the seed of what was to become the Olethren, an army of three thousand dead, gathered off the ocean's floor and brought back into this world to kill anything that lived.

—Michael Henderson, conversation
with the Wreath-wearer

Aleximor caught Corina by the arm and spun her around to face him, his long black hair like bands of seaweed ink curling around his face and neck.

“Ruinous untrusting bitch.”

Corina saw her captor's face for the first time, clear, up close, chalky white with bruised purpling around his cold eyes. His teeth were yellow, pointed, a monster's smile spreading on his lips.

“You are mine. Do not forget that.”

The roaring black current caught them both and threw them into the wedge cut into the cliff face, and Corina jerked her body to one side to shift their weight. She landed on top him, sliding across the cave floor, slamming into the back wall.

Aleximor, his body blazing white, shoved her off him, springing to his feet, her wrist gripped in one strong fist. She turned, jerking away, breaking his hold. Squinting against the glare, she sprang at him, and brought the Wreath-wearer's knife around, cutting into his throat.

The blade caught on something in his neck, then cut completely through.

His head flew back, eyes wide, mouth locked open in surprise. He released her wrist, kicked away. Corina dropped the knife and lunged at him, blood gushing over her hands. She found a song somewhere deep in her soul, a song she had heard Aleximor sing many times.

Corina reached up, and closed her hand over Aleximor's open throat as if trying to stanch the flow. His eyes pitched back in his head. A thick red cloud pumped through her fingers.

The light died in the cave. The blaze of captured souls went dim, and the blood on her hands roiled and glowed like lava.

She pulled away from him, spun to the clear area on the cave wall, and slapped her open hand hard and flat against the unyielding surface.

She closed her eyes. Her body went cold, her arm numb, and the thing that was inside her—Aleximor on the cave floor—went screaming into the earth, into the wall in the solid world she had created inside her soul.

Her body shaking, Corina lifted her hand away and stared at the blood print on the cave wall, a woman's hand, blurred between the fingers.

Corina Lairsey rubbed her hands together, sobbing softly. She turned and swam up through the Pacific and into her own senses, her own body, commanding every piece of ground and every instant of time in her soul.

Then she was...back at the battle. She blinked to make sure she was awake, and her

mouth dropped open. Aleximor's army of the dead surrounded her, spears thrust out. Beyond them was a one-armed monster the size of an apartment building circling her, teeth bared, roaring at the living soldiers of Cassandra's army. The battle noise was deafening, and the bright star the Wreath-wearer had conjured burned and blinded her.

They're going to kill me!

She raised a hand, and she knew what to do. She sang a short command, and her army of the dead froze.

"Analabe to doru!"

Panic drove through her for a moment at the thought that she might not be able to control them.

Each dead soldier in the army of thousands shifted his long spear to one bony hand, standing it on end, straight up.

The ocean went silent.

The Rexenor army eased back, spears out, orcas reined in, but ready to charge. Corina looked around, paddling slowly. They were waiting for her.

"I..." Her voice sounded tiny. "I am back...inside I mean. My name is Corina Lairsey. I'm from California. Aleximor was inside me, controlling me, but I have imprisoned him."

A young woman with short black braids kicked to the giant demon's hand.

"Lady Nikoletta," said the huge demon warily. He still wasn't going to let Nicole near the pale woman.

She bowed to it, and then looked down at Corina.

"What have you done to the Wreath-wearer?"

"I didn't do anything." She pointed to herself. "It was him, Aleximor, doing it. Did it. I didn't—"

Nicole pointed her sword at her. "Bring her back!" She turned to another group of soldiers swimming up. "Father? Cassandra's not..."

A stream of black like squid's ink blossomed in the ocean next to Corina, soft velvet petals unfolding, curling around itself. Corina kicked back in fear, running into a rotting soldier and knocking his spear loose.

Kassandra swam through the ink and it flowed away in the currents behind her. She wasn't wearing the Wreath, but a blazing white crown, and she held a man in her arms.

She glanced around, taking in the stand-down and tensions between the two armies, making assumptions about the situation. She looked at Corina and gave her a clever smile.

"Where in California are you from?"

"Uh...Co—Coyote. South of San Jose."

Kassandra fixed her gaze on her for a minute. "Can I get you to withdraw the army of the *ostologos*?"

Corina nodded and turned to shout orders at the dead.

The Rexenor army positioned itself around Kassandra, closing ranks, to hear over the murmurs of guesses, of the return of the Wreath-wearer, the man she held in her arms, and the brilliant glow around her head, which a twining of seaweed anymore, but an actual crown that looked as if it was made of ice.

Kassandra spun slowly in the water. "Where are you, Father?"

Gregor pulled off his helmet and swam up with Michael Henderson. Jill was right behind them, dragging Zypheria.

"Stand with me, Dad. I have a couple things to say to all of Rexenor." Kassandra swam higher in the water, dropping her feet on Ochleros' shoulder, leaning her elbow on his ear.

"House Rexenor, you have defeated the army of the King of all the Seaborn." She spoke right over their cheering, and it dried up like a desert. "But this is a sad day for our

house. We have lost our Lady.”

She waited while the rush of whispering flowed and ebbed. “I would tell you something. It is not something we normally speak of.” She laughed grimly. “But what does a surfacer know of Seaborn etiquette?”

“What do bloody Rexenors know of it?” Someone shouted and there was a murmur of agreement.

Her lips sharpened at the corners. “I have Lady Kallixene’s bleed.” She glanced down in time to see Gregor’s mouth drop open. Behind him, Michael Henderson was sobbing and he had no intention of hiding it.

“I felt the rush of her bleed during our battle. She gave me...everything. She created me, made me what I am. I would not be here without Lady Kallixene. In return, I promised her—and I promise you—that I will bring House Rexenor home, that *we* will again be honored in the Nine-cities.”

They waited because she obviously had more to say. Her crown was blindingly bright. There was a dead man draped in her arms—and she hadn’t said anything about him yet.

“I made another promise, just a little while ago, that I would bring the body of my friend, Strates Unwinder, home to his House.”

Gregor’s mouth opened wider, and Cassandra handed over Strates’ body to him.

“I went beyond the door of fire, into the halls of the Sea’s ruler, and I have returned. I found Strates Unwinder there, waiting many years to perform one final task before returning home to Rexenor.”

She stopped there, closing her mouth, not certain of how much she needed to share about Akastê and the throne of the Sea—or the new look of her crown.

She straightened and let her gaze take in the Rexenor army, then she bowed to them.

Jill rushed up, crying, “Kallixene’s gone. I can’t believe she’s gone.” Even Nicole couldn’t hold in her tears, her body shaking, and Cassandra threw her arms around both of them.

“I know,” she said softly. “Ephoros. Kallixene. I am cursed—cursed to have all who love me die for me.”

Nicole sobbed louder, barely getting out the name, “Nereus.”

Kassandra lifted her head. “Where is he?” She took in Nicole’s expression of pain, but didn’t understand it for a moment. Then the blood drained from her face. Her stomach lurched. She shook her head, lost. “But...I need him to...No!”

Nicole’s pleading voice was like sandpaper on her nerves. “Kass, he thought you were dead. Thought you weren’t coming back. *I told him*...I told him you always leave, you never say goodbye, you always come back. I couldn’t stop him, charging by himself into the army.”

Kassandra pushed her sisters away, kicking into clear water above Ochleros. Her hands were shaking and she couldn’t stop them. Her heart pounded like a hammer in her chest.

Don’t let it take hold of you! It was her mother’s panicked shriek.

Kassandra ignored her. Enraged, she threw back her head and screamed.

The Rexenor army shoved their hands against their ears. The dead stopped in their tracks. The temperature of the sea dropped, and the brilliant star she had had summoned during the battle burst, oozing white trails of hot light, cooling to black as they fell into the abyss.

And the sea went dark.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

THE NEW ARMY

“Glaukos, look: waves are troubling the deep sea.”
—Archilochus, Fragment 103

Kassandra smiled wearily at Nicole and Jill seated at dinner across the wide table. Both of them waved back, eager to swim over and ask her about going through the line of fire and finding Strates Unwinder—and her new crown. Every moment of time since the battle had been filled with audiences, formal dinners, healing Ochleros, and mourning Nereus and Lady Kallixene—and no time for questions or answers.

Gregor was now Lord of Rexenor, and Kassandra would sit in assembly with him, judging grievances and helping with administration tasks. She had hardly seen her sisters over the last two days, spending a lot of time with Corina and Aleximor’s army of the dead. Zypheria, on the other hand, would not leave Corina alone.

“Will you give it a rest?” Kassandra gave Zypheria an annoyed shove.

Zypheria bowed her head with a quick glance, tapping the hilt of her sword, her focus sliding right back to Corina.

She hadn’t left Kassandra’s side since the battle’s end, making bitter remarks to Corina through the night and the next morning. “You may have fooled Lady Kassandra. Tell me something that will earn *my* trust.”

Kassandra turned to Zypheria hovering next to her chair in the dining hall. “What are you doing?”

Zypheria bowed. “Milady. Please. Not until we are certain that she really is the surfacer, Corina Lairsey. How do we know the bone-gatherer is not playing a part, biding his time?”

“Because I climbed inside her soul. I have seen with my own eyes the binding that holds him.”

Zypheria didn’t move.

Kassandra placed her hand on Zypheria’s arm. “She has given me an army—an army of the dead. They are bound to me, not her. Three thousand remain of Aleximor’s five thousand. A fitting number, wouldn’t you say?”

“Indeed.” She nodded stiffly.

Kassandra turned to Corina, who didn’t appear to be enjoying the meal. “She can’t eat with you hovering, Zyp.”

“It’s not that,” said Corina, looking up at the tiled ceiling of the dining hall.

Kassandra looked straight up, her brow wrinkling, her gaze appearing to go through the ceiling into ocean above. “It’s around lunch time in New Hampshire.”

“Lunch,” Corina gasped the word, pushing away her food. “I feel hollow, emptied out. I want a cup of coffee so bad.”

Kassandra smiled sadly and squeezed Zypheria’s arm. “Would the bone-gatherer want coffee?”

“I’m so hungry, and I—except for on the ship, he ate nothing but raw fish. I can’t go home—at least not yet—he did something to me. I’m not even sure I’m living—that I am

alive anymore. He gave so much of me away. But I want to go back up there.” Corina looked up.

“To the surface,” said Cassandra helpfully.

“The surface,” Corina whispered as if it were a magical place. “God, what I’d give for a bagel or spaghetti or Thai food or a nice thick peanut butter and jelly sandwich on toasted sliced sourdough bread.”

A sad smile appeared on Cassandra’s face, and Zypheria pounded her fist on the end of her sword, disappointed.

“Good enough for you?”

“Milady,” said Zypheria sourly, nodded to Corina, and swam off.

Kassandra turned to her sisters, bowed her head to them, and then waved them over.

The next day Cassandra summoned House Rexenor to an assembly in order to deal with the three hundred and eighty-four prisoners from the king’s army, captured after the battle.

The vast arena, open to the black heavens, was booming with noise. Every Rexenor able to swim—including children—turning out to see the Wreath-wearer who had used real fire magic in the battle—to see someone more damned than themselves.

The hall went silent when Cassandra swam into open water with her father, the Lord of Rexenor, in his formal brocaded tunic with the black seabird on his chest, a thin gold band on his brow. She was dressed plainly, a long-sleeved top and tight black leggings. No jewelry, no armor, no weapons. Just her blinding white crown.

Kassandra turned and called her sisters to her side, Nicole on her right and Jill on her left. “I am going to introduce you. Do not be afraid,” she said softly, taking their hands, squeezing tight. “When everyone else is afraid, you will not be.”

“Your hands are so cold.” Jill let the words drift from her lips, barely audible, looking from Cassandra’s crown to her fingers.

“It is yours that are warm.”

Nicole squeezed back. “What happened? On the other side of the fire? It’s like you’re older. You’re not the same Cassandra. You’re different.”

Kassandra turned, her face expressionless. “I was given something—armor, weapons, new enemies. I’ll show you some of it in a moment. The rest we’ll speak of another time. Today...today I want everyone here to know who I am and who my sisters are.”

She released their hands and they kicked higher, Cassandra waving at her guard.

“Bring them before me.”

The prisoners kicked into the arena, ringed by Rexenors on orcas with lances down. Half of the three hundred and eighty-four were wounded on litters borne by those with less debilitating injuries.

Kassandra kicked a little higher. She let a minute slip by as if turning something over in her thoughts, pausing over a decision.

“Do you know who I am?” Her voice cut through the water, clear and icy.

The prisoners stared at her crown—or tried to. They knew the rumors of the woman from the surface who would destroy them all.

They were afraid to move.

“You do not have to fear speaking to me. I have released you without ransom or any other condition.”

That was news to the Rexenors. The noise of a thousand voices talking at once spun through the hall, and Cassandra raised her hand to quiet House Rexenor.

“I have released you. You are free to return to your homes. I just wanted you to know who I am before you go.”

“You are the Wreath-wearer named Cassandra,” said one defiant old soldier in

Dosianax armor, his head bandaged and his arm broken.

Two Rexenor guards looked to her for a command, something to punish the Dosianax for not using the right tone. She waved them back.

“Very good, kinsman. But I want to give you a clear message that you can take home with you.” She paused and she felt every eye in the room on her. The silence was complete.

Kassandra closed her eyes, lids fluttering against an inner strain. The crab carapace armor slipped around her body, knobby and purple, bleeding red into white around the sharp edges at her shoulders. Her fist tightened around the trident, cold and metal, somehow floating, weightless, and at the same time as heavy as the world in her hand.

She opened her eyes and every current in the water stilled, every heart in the room paused between beats. The orcas closed their eyes. The column of water that held her, miles from the ocean floor to the surface, went perfectly still, and sunlight passed through it, a white bar of radiance that shimmered around Kassandra, Jill and Nicole.

Her voice was soft, the roll of clear seawater on time-smoothed sand.

“I have two sisters.”

She turned to her left. “Jill is my voice above the waves, brilliant as Helios, true and far-ranging as any tide, the moon in the night sky.”

Jill floated behind Kassandra, wanting to curl inside herself, but froze in the water, something firm inside her keeping her back straight. Nicole glanced over and winked, and the fear melted away. Jill smiled and looked down at the staring faces of the Seaborn.

Then Kassandra turned to Nicole, indicating her with a push of her fist with the trident.

“Nicole is...my right hand, storm bright, unyielding current of the deep...” Kassandra stopped as if she had more to say, but after a quick shuffle of thoughts, had decided that she had said enough.

She lifted the trident above her head and continued in the same quiet tone.

“I am Kassandra Alkimides. I am the daughter of Gregor Lord Rexenor and Lady Ampharete of Alkimides. I am the granddaughter of Tharsaleos of Dosianax and Queen Pythias of Alkimides.” She held up her left hand, spread her fingers, showing them the scar tissue lining each. “Your king had the webbing cut from my hands when I was an infant. I grew up a slave—with the Porthmeus surname—as far from the nurturing sea as your king could arrange. But I have broken my bonds. I have returned to the deep. I have five bleeds, including two coming from your own king. I play with fire in the abyss. I am the chosen of Lord Poseidon. I *was* the Wreath-wearer. I am the Sea.”

She nodded to her guards to let the prisoners go.

In a softer voice that still carried like the tide through the vast hall, she said, “We will all meet again soon, and I would like you to remember me—and my sisters—when you decide whose side you are on.”

The End