

Chapter 1

Wanting to cry doesn't mean you can. Or at least not in any way that can give you some sort of satisfaction. It's a luxury really. The same goes for songs and laughter, or the words whispered in the ear of a friend.

I had taken these things for granted. How was I to know that out there, in the world I had once truly lived in, something as simple as an afternoon greeting could cause unimaginable devastation?

A solitary tear traced my cheek as I stared out the second-story window of the house we were borrowing. On the cobbled streets below, a couple walked. It was a young pair, not much older than me. Or, rather, than I had been eight years ago. She was a bronze-skinned beauty, but not necessarily because of her features. No, it would have been because she was all too aware of the way she looked in the eyes of her partner. The boy— equally tanned, but far more muscular— held her hand intertwined with his own. As they walked, he looked into her eyes, lifted her hand, and kissed her eager fingers.

What must that feel like?

Wiping up the lonely tear, I closed my eyes and imagined it. The sun would be drawn to my chocolate hair, its gentle curls lifting and falling with my steps. He, whoever the faceless man in my head was, would have fingers too large to fit comfortably between mine. But that wouldn't matter. As he held my hand, I wouldn't feel the strain of my fingers being pulled wide. All there would be was his skin on mine. Without making the decision, my elbow would bend in time with his, happily following any direction he gave. Unexpectedly, warm and familiar lips would meet with my hand. I would reward him with a smile.

The sounds of Marilyn's approaching footsteps drew me from my daydream. I dabbed under my eyes once again, removing any trace of tears. Marilyn worried for me so; I couldn't let her see me sad. I pulled the window shut, and we were truly alone.

"Are you alright?" Marilyn asked, pausing at my side. Her hands, moist with the same coolness as mine, brushed my forehead.

"I'm perfect." I smiled brightly, shrugging my shoulders as if I had no reason to ever be sad. Being an actress was part of the job. Not towards my sisters necessarily, but sometimes it had to be done.

"Could you hear Her earlier?" she asked. This would be why she sought me out now: to pass on wisdom.

"I think so. This morning, right?"

"Yes! Now, what did She say?" Marilyn was beaming. How could I stay down surrounded by such enthusiasm? I sighed and tried to remember the exact wording. I dreaded getting this wrong.

"Well... I think She said that it could be in a day or two, that She was still waiting, but to be listening?" I mumbled.

"Perfect! Really, Kahlen, that was spot on. It's been, what, eight years now? You should be able to hear Her clearly by this point. Now when I'm gone, you should stay near the Sea.

She's easier to hear that way, and you can get to Her faster. Besides, there's plenty of time to see the more remote parts of the world."

I couldn't deny that. Time I had. Marilyn smiled and ran into the kitchen. Time for an indulgence.

Marilyn was a red-head and had a spirit to match her hair. But that was an acquired trait, or so I understood. This meant that, in general, we were a good pairing. My personality was naturally cheery, though I had been admittedly somber more and more often over the last few years. I was grateful to have my sister with me, but I still felt isolated. It would have been nice to know more than one person in the entirety of the world. Well, two, but for all intents and purposes, Aisling was no part of my life.

But friendship with just anyone was not an option for me.

I can't remember their names, but I used to have plenty of friends. And a family, too. Though the voices are gone, I clearly remember the action of us huddled around our dinner table talking. There were so many things in this world I longed for with an ache so big it surprised me. Most of the time, the desires of my heart were overshadowed by the day-to-day dullness of living in silence.

There were rules. All I had to do was obey— do my duty, pay my dues— and then all these little daydreams could be my reality. I could have my hand held. I could be kissed on the forehead. I could live a life of my own. I just had to wait.

The waiting was torture.

The silence was worse.

Thank God for Marilyn. Besides being easy to talk to, she was full of endless wisdom. Her sentence was coming to a close, so she knew everything I would need to do in order to pay my debt in secrecy. That was the key: to not make mistakes. Otherwise, this was all for nothing. She drove those thoughts into my head as we ran around South America. I wasn't sure which country we were in anymore; we had been to so many. But when Marilyn explained that going back to America wasn't wise in the beginning, I asked to go some place with color.

It was certainly full of color here. The trees practically glowed green, and the sky was a shade of blue I didn't know existed. The people were colorful, too. In Ohio I had seen a whole lot of white and a fair amount of black, but here people were brown, mocha, honey, and olive. I didn't know so many skin tones existed.

We were currently borrowing a home that must have housed at least a half a dozen daughters. That was lucky for us because we needed the clothes. And though we couldn't read the signs or notes around the house, we had no trouble deciphering the words we heard through the windows.

Language was never a barrier for us since we never had to speak it and could always understand it. Marilyn, for example, was from England, but when she spoke I never heard her accent. It must have been in there somewhere, but it never visited my ears. The only real clue I had to her nationality or era was the phrases she used from time to time. I sometimes wondered if my voice managed to pick up a British accent on the way to her ears.

This was part of how it worked. I think it was because sisters came from all over the world, and we had to be able to speak to one another since there could never be anyone else. And when we sang, the sounds encompassed so many languages, it seemed natural. We must have been infused with every possible dialect. I never did ask about that, so I could have been wrong.

Maybe it's simply that our voices weren't our own anymore.

Marilyn reentered the room with a bowl full of fruit. She chewed a piece of melon slowly, truly enjoying the taste. I could understand the draw. Once she left us, would she ever taste anything from this corner of the world ever again? Would she somehow long for it, but not even know what it was?

I loved Marilyn. It was an easy thing to do. She had been vulnerable and honest with me from the very beginning, and that made adjusting to this life easier. She hid none of her own struggle from me, so I hid nothing from her.

Marilyn was seventeen when she became a siren. She had discovered that her fiancé was having an affair, and when I say "discovered," I don't mean through overhearing gossip or discovering a love note. I mean that she actually endured walking in and seeing the man she loved in bed with another woman. He wasn't even sorry. He told her to get out while the other girl laid there and laughed.

She was just too young to know what to do with herself. She felt betrayed, unwanted, ashamed and couldn't bear the thought of facing him or her family. Having tied rocks to her feet, she jumped in the Ocean hoping to never be found. Her clothes alone could have done the job.

As she sank, she felt the stupidity of her actions. She wasn't the terrible person, he was! She shouldn't be suffering, he should! Regret washed over her. She wished that she had been stronger and had really done something with her life, and with that in her heart she cried out to live.

The Ocean consented.

Everyone in her family thought she had died. And it left her former fiancé free to marry the other girl— not that he even really wanted that.

It's hard to stay away at first; that's why you just go somewhere else. You miss the ones you've left behind, of course, but what's worse is knowing they miss you for no reason. You're still there. You're stronger than you've ever been. You're sturdier than they are.

But there's nothing to be done. Rules. After a while, there's no one left to go back to. That makes it a little better. And a little worse.

The only remnant of that life was Marilyn's engagement ring— a token she kept to make herself calmer, braver, better.

My story was a bit different than Marilyn's. I don't remember much, but I'm sure it was 1921. And I think the month was June.

"Where do you think you'll live once I'm gone?" Marilyn asked casually. I hated to talk about it. Of course, I was happy for her, but I didn't know how I would tolerate being even more alone than I was now.

“I really haven’t thought about it. I might stay around here; I like it here. I’ll be sad to be alone, but I don’t think I’m prepared to live with Aisling.” I rolled my eyes.

Marilyn laughed. It was contagious. The release of sound lifted my whole body. The longing of my earlier voyeurism disappeared in the lightness of my voice set free.

While Marilyn was full of spirit, Aisling, our other sister, was bitter. She had a deep regret of this life, but wasn’t brave enough to cross the Ocean in such a way that the deal would be revoked. Aisling still had some time to go— less than I did, but much more than Marilyn. Marilyn was set to leave us within the year, and I would desperately miss her. Aisling had kept to herself, and I only ever saw her on those times when the Ocean called us together. It had been more than a year now since we had to serve last. I wasn’t looking forward to the reunion.

Aisling was beautiful, of course. She was blonde and pale and exquisite. Marilyn told me once that Aisling was Swedish, but I had no way of telling myself. While we were all somehow graceful, she pulled it off the best. She, like Marilyn, had glorious blue eyes, like tiny jewels on her flawless face. And something in those eyes that I could never name... it made you long for unknown things when you looked at her. But she was mean-spirited. I think it was our first encounter that left such a horrible impression. I admired her for all of five minutes when I saw her, and then she spoke to me.

“Don’t waste your time; you can’t pull this off,” she had said.

“Aisling, if you’re going to be like that, just leave,” Marilyn told her.

“I think I will. After all that noise, I need some quiet. Nice knowing you,” she said to me, as if she expected me to give up once she left and would never see me again. It seemed like Aisling forgot awfully fast how she felt when it was her turn. Hate is a very strong word, but it wouldn’t be too far of a stretch to say I hated Aisling.

“No, I don’t think you have the patience for Aisling,” Marilyn said. I think if it had been possible, she would have choked on the bit of fruit in her mouth.

“Hey, I can be patient! I’m fun to live with, aren’t I?” That was pointlessly defensive; I couldn’t stand Aisling. But it felt good to sound that way. I felt like a teenager.

“Of course you are, dear. Best roommate ever. But I’ve lived with Aisling, and it’s enough to drive you mad.”

“Exactly when and why did you live with Aisling?” The thought was revolting.

“In the beginning, just like you. It was *so* different. I didn’t even make it a week with Aisling. Think about that: we have years and years, and the two of us couldn’t survive a week! Could you imagine if I left you alone after your first week?”

I trembled. “Oh, I would have been completely lost! Why didn’t she want to stay with you?”

“I don’t think it was *me* exactly. I think she just wanted to be alone. She made it very clear that she wasn’t enjoying being watched all the time. She yelled at me and threw a fit if I got too close or said too much. She just didn’t like it.” Marilyn shrugged at the memory.

“What did you do?”

“I left. That was what she wanted. Aisling asked me to explain everything to her one

more time, and then said she'd stay close to the Ocean and ask Her if she was needed until she could understand on her own. Stubborn as a mule!" Marilyn concluded with a laugh.

I laughed along with her. "Who do you think was ready to leave first?"

"I think we were both pretty tired of each other. I tried to stick it out, honestly. But I went south, and she went north, and it's better that way. I'm not sure if one sister has ever tried to dispose of another, but we weren't far off!" The thought of trying to destroy another sister was something that was truly laughable. I don't know how that would even begin to work. "Seriously, I broke a plate over her head one night."

"What!?" I exclaimed. That sent us into another round of giggles.

"She called me something, I forget what, and I just grabbed a plate and hit her on the head!" The laughs continued. "I mean, it didn't hurt her, but I think she got the picture."

Only Marilyn would come up with something like that. I loved her so much. I was going to miss her.

I soaked up the moments of laughter. It was a beautiful and private sound. I had discovered that breaths weren't harmful— like a breathy chuckle— but if a drop of our voices leaked into the sound, there were problems. Sighs, sniffs, and huffs were all benign. But laughing, speaking, crying, and even whispering are music in their own ways. These were to be guarded. So we bound them up tight before we ventured out for the afternoon.

I was always desperate for distractions; I was more myself when I was active. Just walking on the beaches helped me to feel more normal. The boys whistled at us as we passed. We must have seemed exotic here. Between Marilyn's red hair and my pale skin, it was obvious we weren't locals.

In the wee hours of the night, when no one was there to see, Marilyn and I would sometimes sink into the surf. The Sea must have felt how much I distrusted Her but never bothered to address it. The waters here in the middle latitudes were constantly warm and teemed with life. Fish swam past with fluid grace, practically dancing in their underwater world. Out, just past the lengths where a normal human would feel comfortable traveling, the sands gave way to jagged rocks covered with skinny strings of seaweeds that looked like they were waving to me each time I passed. I would go out there, grateful for the change of scenery, and stay under the water facing belly up. The moon wiggled as waves passed, and I felt the truth of this life: we all depended on Her.

But it was too early, too bright for any such excursion. Instead, we did as the natives did. We found a little band playing in a courtyard and went to listen. I loved the music here, it was all so fresh. We sat on a bench at the edge of the courtyard, just watching. A canopy kept most of the sun away as people rested in chairs. Flowers bloomed everywhere, filling the air with their perfume; it was still so exotic to me. The band all wore similar shirts in a light cream color, but still looked very casual— like everything else here.

A few couples were dancing in time to the music. There were children holding hands and hopping in a circle. An older man danced with a girl who must have been his granddaughter. I could hear him quietly telling her she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. I was glad to

have been close enough to hear that. There was no one here to ask me to dance, so I settled for the next best thing. I grabbed Marilyn's hand to pull her up to dance with me. I finally tugged hard enough to get her to comply when we both heard it.

The breeze blew Her voice in, that voice that I was just starting to hear like Marilyn could. But it wasn't the same message as this morning. If I heard right... She said something about the Sea of Japan and another sister. We were to hurry.

Marilyn and I looked at each other. We couldn't speak here, but that message was a strange one. Another sister? Obviously to replace Marilyn, but I was still so new. There wasn't time to think about what it all meant.

My mentality switched in a serious second. I was no longer the girl dancing under a canopy. I was a siren. I had a job to do. I had to obey.

We couldn't just dive into the Ocean in front of all these people. We weren't planning on resurfacing, and that would surely raise questions. We sprinted down the coast looking for an unoccupied stretch. People's heads turned as we ran past, kicking up sand as we moved at top speed. Our borrowed skirts of bright yellows and pinks danced around in the wind. I noticed Marilyn edge close to the water as she ran for a moment. With her feet in the surf she could explain: We were on our way. There were just too many witnesses.

The words the people on the beach spoke should have been in Spanish, but every syllable was crystal clear.

"Look at those girls run!"

"Nice legs, honey!"

We ignored them, running on and on without stopping. One of the benefits of not really needing your lungs was never being caught breathless. A habit more than a necessity.

It seemed to take forever to find a bend in the beach. I was worried. The Ocean knew we were coming, but our new sister did not. I hoped she would be alright for the handful of moments it would take to get to her. When a cluster of trees jutted out shielding a section of beach, Marilyn and I slowed to look back and make sure no one could see. Without another hesitation, we jumped in, not bothering to take a breath.

We didn't swim exactly, not when She had a specific place in mind. It was more like we were propelled. A weaker body would have caved from the force, but it almost tickled me every time. Usually, I felt a sense of dread when I moved this way, fully aware that I was about to assist in a massacre of sorts. I tried to take comfort in the knowledge that I wasn't the one who wanted these lives. Along with the worry, I felt a strange surge of strength and beauty. I was, at least for a few people, the last thing they would see or hear, and I knew that on both counts I would be hauntingly perfect.

As we moved through the water, our clothes disintegrated. The speed, I think, was the cause. Buttons and zippers held up against the beating pretty well, but with nothing to hold onto, they sank like tiny pebbles. Marilyn's engagement ring took the pounding with no sign of the wear. I came into this world without any jewelry of my own to test this force with.

There were no signs of location or time to what we wore when we were together singing. We were united, equals. As our clothing stripped away from our bodies, the Ocean would release all the salt in Her veins. These tiny particles would affix themselves to our bodies creating long, flowing dresses. They looked something like sea foam. Light and dazzling, they were never exactly the same, but always somehow similar. The colors were all Her shades— greens, blues, tans— a rainbow of Herself. We bathed in them. The dresses were timeless and wonderful and sensual in a way. Probably the only perk I had found so far of the life I was leading.

Sometimes I would wear my dress until it fell apart. One little grain at a time, it would dissolve, and I would watch with sadness as it turned into salt on the floor. I adored them. And certainly, as we stood there on the open waters with such a costume, it would cause a man to forget what he was doing was insanity. Once we were at our final destination, the bare parts of our skin would shimmer in the light from the salt. And when we opened our mouths in song, there would be no resisting the temptation. Whatever danger our beauty was masking would be noticed far too late.

The Ocean was full of dangers. I, like the rest of mankind, had assumed the worst was ice burgs or hurricanes— a collection of natural disasters. The truth was these things were avoidable almost all the time. The true danger was the voice shielded under my unbreakable skin.

Take, for example, the Titanic. Headlines credited this ship's foundering to ice in the water. I attributed it to Marilyn and Aisling, who sang the ship into its deadly course. Long before people were able to go see it, I went to find the wreckage myself. Marilyn refused to go with me, so I went alone. This was only a few months into this life, before I had to bring down a ship myself and couldn't quite understand her aversion. I didn't know how it would haunt me later. The Ocean took me there with ease, gently guiding me to the wreckage. I was surprised by Her willingness, by the care She took with me when I asked for something so obviously bizarre. I was intimidated by Her, but my curiosity won out.

I expected to be in awe of the ship somehow, but I was mistaken. It was a horrifying sight.

The ship was broken in half and strewn all over. I was drawn to it by its name, by its place in the memory of the world. But this was a silent graveyard of metal and debris. A porcelain doll. A pair of shoes. A dinner plate. I was suddenly aware that if I searched the Ocean's floor, I could find what was left of my ship. Things that belonged to me were scattered around on the sand like this. This wasn't an experiment in engineering. This wasn't a headline. This was what was left of the lives that we had a hand in taking. One of hundreds of unmapped ghost towns at the bottom of the Sea.

But I wasn't off to cause destruction like that. Not today. Today I was off to the side of an unknown friend. How old was she? Where did she come from? How did she end up in this position? And then, a more serious question arose. If the Ocean was in need of eating, as She had told us this morning, why did She spare this girl? The Ocean would have heard that question as I thought it, but it didn't seem like She was going to give me any kind of answer. I was bothered by the way the Ocean seemed to warm at my thoughts.

I could commune with Her like Marilyn did, but I wasn't sure how close I wanted to get at this point. Of course, I saw Her unspoken answer the moment I laid eyes on the tiny creature. As we coasted up to the shore, only barely lit by the sun, I saw our new sister.

She was beautiful. Striking. She was so petite she looked fragile. Her black hair was hanging by her shoulders as she sat hugging herself. Her face was a quiet kind of beautiful, with smooth features and dark eyes. Her addition to the image— and I supposed the sound as well— would be irresistible. She was gently crying as Marilyn and I approached, taking careful steps out of the waves. We didn't want to add to her obvious fear.

Aisling wasn't there yet. I guessed she was intentionally dragging her feet. That would seem about right based on the way she welcomed me. I walked to the girl as quickly as I could without being frightening. We could already see the fear in her eyes as she watched us... but also, a sort of awe. I knew the feeling.

I was out of the habit of speaking to people, so I jumped a little bit when Marilyn addressed her.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Miaka,” the little girl whimpered. Her head jerked involuntarily with one of her sobs.

“Miaka, you don't have to be afraid. We're not going to hurt you. We're here to help you.” Marilyn's tone was that of helpful teacher. Miaka looked at her with apprehension in her eyes. I couldn't blame her.

“Are you angels?” she asked. Marilyn and I both choked back the laughter. Between the dresses, the glowing skin, and the general aura we sent out, I guess that's how we would look.

“No,” Marilyn said. “You're not dead. We aren't angels.”

“I don't understand. I was dying... I felt it. I couldn't breathe.” As she spoke the words, it all came back to me.

With strange clarity, my mind went to that first and last second, the minute it all changed. I could remember my muscles aching from struggling in the water, my lungs feeling like they were on fire from the pressure. I heard the sound of a ghost-like voice calling from somewhere in the dark. A swirl of dark water, my mouth forced open, and numbness driving away any taste of pain. At ease in the water, I knew something was wrong.

“Yes, you were dying,” Marilyn said. “But you asked to live, didn't you?”

Miaka looked shocked. “I did! I did! I begged to live, and then I heard a voice. I thought it was my ancestors calling me home.”

Marilyn continued to try and ease her. “You have survived. You have been given a second chance, Miaka.”

“I'm alive? Are you sure? I should feel pain, but I don't. And you look like angels... I must be dead...” she trailed off, speaking more to herself than to us.

“No, sweet Miaka, you survived,” I said. I liked her already. She was so small and in such desperate need. I could take care of her; she would need someone like me. I didn't know yet if sisters took turns, but there was no way Aisling was taking Miaka from me. Marilyn and I would watch over her.

Miaka searched our faces for a hint of a lie. Right then, when she fully looked at us, I saw the extent of her beauty. I had the feeling it had been looked over before now. She stared at us for a long time, and then seeing the genuine looks on our faces, decided we must be telling the truth.

“I’m alive!? Oh... oh, that’s wonderful! Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!” she squealed, thinking we had somehow saved her. “Oh, please, can you help me? Can you take me to my father?”

I couldn’t speak. I felt the longing in her voice— it was my own. Lots of details had already started disappearing, but I knew one of my brothers had survived. I longed to go peek in on his life, but I wasn’t sure if something even that small held any consequences, if just looking in would be trouble. I couldn’t risk it.

“No,” Marilyn said simply.

“But... but he’ll wonder where I am. I fell off the boat while I was fishing with my brothers. I can’t swim... I am usually much more careful. They didn’t see me fall, and I couldn’t breathe enough to call them. They’ll know I fell over, though. I don’t know where they are now.”

“They’re very far away, Miaka. And you can’t go back to them. I’m sorry,” Marilyn said sweetly, but with authority.

Miaka’s face fell. “...Why?”

“We told you the truth when we said you had survived. You asked for your life back, and you have received it, but at a price. You have to pay for your second chance,” Marilyn said.

“You certainly do.” Aisling had appeared behind us. She walked over sinuously, showing off her grace. “Did I miss anything?”

“Hello, Aisling,” Marilyn said. “Meet our newest sister. This is Miaka.” Marilyn gestured down to the small girl. I saw little Miaka’s eyes race at the word “sister.”

“Hello, Miaka,” Aisling said, looking and sounding completely unimpressed.

“We were just about to explain her new life to her. May I continue?”

“Why bother? She doesn’t look like she’ll make it. I’m betting on, hmm, three days. Five tops,” Aisling said, walking away. It was meant for Miaka, but it stung me.

“Don’t let her bother you,” I whispered to Miaka. Aisling was the least of her worries. At least she should be.

“Aisling, do something helpful and stand in the surf.” Marilyn was firm.

“Fine,” Aisling said. She walked down to the coast to be our connection to the Sea, and we turned our attention turned back to our new sister.

“Miaka,” Marilyn began, “Aisling, Kahlen, and I are sirens. Have you heard of a siren before?”

Miaka shook her head.

“We are singers. There are legends about us. There was a time when people believed in us, or at least suspected our existence. But now, we are a sisterhood of secrets, hidden away from the world. We belong to the Ocean. You see, She’s a very large creature, and She gives endlessly to the earth. To be strong enough to sustain this planet, She has to eat. We help Her eat by

singing for Her. It's not very often, but it is our duty, and this is what you must do now, if you choose to."

I watched the questions form in her head. I wondered which would be first.

"What does the Ocean eat?" she asked.

"People," I said quietly.

"People?!" She looked horrified. I saw her face start to collapse in fear, the whimpers of fright hiding just below the surface.

Marilyn acted quickly. "Yes, but we do not assist in this often. Once a year, maybe less. People end their lives in the Sea all the time, and that helps. I tried to on purpose, and you almost did by accident. But when there aren't enough, we help Her."

Miaka absorbed that. Her onyx eyes darted around, either searching for her own questions or waiting for the next explanation. It's no small thing to discover the planet has been hiding something from you.

She was much more composed than I had been. I had stuttered and interrupted and flailed my hands. Miaka obviously had been trained to be reserved. When she saw that we were giving her time, she looked up at Marilyn to ask one of the dozens she must have had. She wasn't calm exactly, but at least not in hysterics.

"You said... you said 'if I choose to.' What if I don't?" Miaka asked. I didn't ask that one. She believed faster than I did; maybe she was just generally smarter.

"I'm sorry, Miaka, but if you don't become one of us, we have to give you to the Ocean. You were meant to die moments ago, so we would have to let Her have you. But if you choose to stay, we can explain how you must live now." Marilyn said all of this sweetly.

I prayed Miaka would stay. I wanted her! And I couldn't disobey the Ocean if She asked me to drag Miaka into the water, but I didn't know if my heart could stand me doing that with my own hands. I hoped the expression on our faces would make it clear that we wanted her. Well, at least two of us did.

"Just walk into the water, honey, you'll never make it," Aisling called. She was meandering aimlessly in the water, completely uninterested.

I threw a look at Aisling. Now *there* was someone I wouldn't mind hurting. "Really," I said to Miaka quietly, "don't let her get to you. You won't have to see her often."

Miaka looked at me. Our eyes met in a serious gaze. It was greedy, I know, with Marilyn about to go, but if there were only to be a handful of us, I wanted her here, too. I smiled at her, and I hoped she could see my affection for her. She looked from me to Marilyn.

"Marilyn, right?" she asked. Marilyn nodded. "Can I know how I'm supposed to live... before I decide?"

"Yes," Marilyn said, and then repeated the words she told me eight years earlier. "If you join us, you have to leave everything behind. You can never go back to your family. You would be the fourth siren, and that's all there ever are at once. While the Ocean doesn't need our services, we are free to live wherever we like. There are a few adjustments to make, but I can

explain those later. You can choose to live alone, as Aisling does, but in the beginning it's best if you stay with someone else.

"Your body is, for the most part, frozen. You won't age, you cannot get sick, and you cannot die while you're a siren. When your time is up, your body will pick up at this moment, and you will continue to grow older. You can get married, have a family, do whatever you want. The life you live *now* is the Ocean's, but *that* life will be completely yours. And you will be superior to most other people because you will have had time to perfect yourself. It's almost like an extra gift. Your character will be outstanding, though how it came to be that way may be a mystery. For instance, I am much braver than I used to be. When I leave this life, I may not remember the experiences that made me that way, but it won't change that characteristic; it's just part of who I am now.

"But until that time comes, you must never do anything that might expose our secret. This means that, in general, you cannot form close bonds with humans. Besides the fact that they will all grow old while you remain so young, you won't be able to speak to them. Your voice will call them into water and make them want to drown themselves. It's the essence of who we are. Even if you're far away from water, they might do something as simple as stick their heads in a sink. You can speak to us, and you can always commune with the Ocean, but you are deadly to humans. You are, essentially, a weapon. A very beautiful weapon.

"I won't lie to you, it can be a lonely existence, but once you are done, you get to *live*. Whatever you grow into now becomes ingrained into your very being; your passion stays with you. All you have to give, for now, is obedience and time," Marilyn concluded.

Miaka had listened intently to all of this. I respected her cool head. She had just practically experienced death, been separated from her family, and been told she was lethal. Still, she was rational. The tears that glistened in her eyes didn't affect the thinking behind them.

She was braver than I was; she was actually considering if it were better to let the Ocean have her. Each second that passed, I worried that the reasoning in her head would tell her that anything, even death, would be better than this. I tried to mentally will her into staying. She looked at Marilyn and braced herself for the answer to one of the most essential questions.

"How long?" she asked.

"One-hundred years," Marilyn replied.

She fell back into thought. I wondered what she was debating. I had been too emotional to think that much. It was silent for a long time. Even the Ocean was patient while she decided. Miaka bit her lip for a moment. Finally, she looked up at us.

"I am not afraid to die. I don't want to hurt other people. But I do want another life. A different one than I had." She stood. "I'll stay. I'll join you."

Aisling did nothing. Marilyn sighed in relief. And I closed the gap between us so I could hug Miaka. She accepted me easily.

"Welcome to the sisterhood of sirens," I whispered in her ear.