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Siren Suicides, Book 2  
a novel by Ksenia Anske  
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*Homer, Odyssey 12. 39 ff (trans. Shewring) (Greek epic C8th B.C.):*

"[Kirke (Circe) warns Odysseus of the dangers of the journey ahead:] 'You will come to the Seirenes (Sirens) first of all; they bewitch any mortal who approaches them. If a man in ignorance draws too close and catches their music, he will never return to fine wife and little children near him and to see their joy at his homecoming; the high clear tones of the Seirenes will bewitch him. They sit in a meadow; men's corpses lie heaped up all round them, mouldering upon the bones as the skin decays. You must row past there; you must stop the ears of all your crew with sweet wax that you have kneaded, so that none of the rest may hear the song. But if you yourself are bent on hearing, then give them orders to bind you both hand and foot as you stand upright against the mast-stay, with the rope-ends tied to the mast itself; thus you may hear the two Seirenes' voices and be enraptured.'"

Chapter 1. Portage Bay

I hear them answer, the sirens. They're humming something below. The sound pulls me in. It bounds through layers of water in one turbid stream and I want to join it. I miss their tepid faces, cold arms, long hair. My sisters in death. You can't love a siren, yet you're lured in by her voice to believe you're in love. That's how we kill. How perverted is that? I shudder. Never again. Their song expands into a choral. It rears from the bottom, up and up, like a wake of unending bliss, a promise of glittery happiness, always and forever. And to my horror and fascination, I recognize verses from "Let me be", on my favorite Siren Suicides songs, the one I sang to Papa.

"Let me be happy, let me be happy

"And I will be, I will be

"Why can't I leave you..."

Chorus gains strength. I notice Canosa veer to the right and don't understand why, because the song comes from the left, and it's where I swim.

"Girls? I'm coming! I'm coming!" I shout.

I detect a separate current behind me a second too late. Canosa's hand clasps my mouth. On instinct I kick back with my

elbows but she pulls me into a headlock. I thrash my legs but her legs hold me still, her hard calf muscles press on my shins, my back folds into the outline of her body. We drift away from the song. No matter what I do, I can't shake her off me. She's stronger.

"But the girls..." I mumble into her hand, and it comes out as "Bbb.. dddd... gggg..."

"Shhhhh." She hisses into my ear. I attempt to wrestle out, twisting my body, but she tightens her grip. Close to the bottom now, our feet kick up a cloud of sand, its silica grains sparkling silver in the glow from our bodies. She pulls me away, in the opposite direction, and slowly the song fizzles out to distant murmur.

"Don't talk." She breathes into my ear and turns me around to face her, forefinger on her lips. I spread my arms in a gesture of, *Why?* Her hands on my shoulders, she shakes her head, *No.*

We face each other like two bottom dwelling seadevils, glowing and glowering, unsure of who will eat whom and why.

"Zip it, Ailen Bright. Follow me, I'll explain." Canosa mouths so quietly, that I have to read off her lips to understand her. She offers me her hand, and I take it. It's soft and cold, her long slender fingers entwine between mine. The act of holding her hand gives me a strange sense of calm.

I accept the fact that there must be a valid reason to why we're going away from other sirens, and my tired mind is grateful. It seems like I can't think anything anymore, neither do I want to. I want to be empty.

For the first time since last morning, I'm truly tranquil, drifting in quiet water, at peace. Seeing Canosa the way sirens are supposed to be, the way they're portrayed in books, letting me try on this siren skin. Perhaps it fits after all, perhaps it's the right choice. I look down at my legs and arms and torso and try to imagine myself as a devious femme fatale who lures sailors with her enchanting song and stunning looks to shipwrecks. Ailen Bright, a magical deity. A sea maiden.

Hmm, I think I like it. I think I like it very much. I'll just have to grow myself some long hair, that should do it.

Water ripples Canosa's hair away from her body. I float behind her and admire it. I admire her goddess-like shape as if carved by a Greek sculptor who happened to dream of Marilyn Monroe some three thousand years ago. Poor schmuck, he didn't know what he was missing. Her face has this alabaster sheen to it, pearly. She glances back at me and I notice her profile. Straight nose, slightly upturned nostrils, soft mouth with just enough of a curl to make every man's heart skip a beat, large oval eyes made to drown inside. She squeezes my hand.

What does it mean, do I need to squeeze it back? Can I trust her? Do I have a choice?

"Come on." Her lips say as she keeps pulling me behind her, then flips her head forward and her hair swirls in a beautiful cloud that makes me think, *I'm not made to have a mane like that.*

I sigh and touch my short hair, look over myself once more. Torn rain jacket, newly enlarged breasts that feel awkward against my boyish chest, square hips, bony ass, feet sticking out from ripped jeans. Ugh, what am I thinking? Ailen Bright, a femme fatale? Yeah, like that's going to happen.

Canosa pulls, oblivious to my trepidation. I let her. What's left to lose? Everything I had or pretended to have is gone now.

My father wants to kill me. I never visited my distant family on his side, and I'm sure they don't care. My mother's parents are long gone, and so is she. My friends? I don't have any. Hunter's face swims up in my memory and I quickly push it down. It needs to be blocked, torn out, burned.

Canosa smiles and I nod to her.

We swim into Lake Union, further east into ship canal, retracing mine and Hunter's journey last morning. I shake my head at this thought and try to push the image of Hunter deep down, focusing on what I see. Bloom of Canosa's hair, murky

water, flecks of rare fish, broken rocks on the bottom, a passing harbor seal, his soul a crooked snort of an animal. Can I eat him instead of people? Can I eat animal souls? I hold the question behind my lips before it escapes, remembering that I'm supposed to be quiet. It dawns on me now why, of course. My father must be hunting us, and my voice carries. I want to burrow my head in the sand right there and then, furious at my own stupidity.

Dark green expanse of Montlake bridge looms overhead and Canosa darts up, I tag along. We breach lake's surface and I lift my head to overwhelming noise, gulp air in deep breaths, wince and cover my ears.

HOOOOOOM! Eeeeeeeek... Chata-chata-chata-chata...

I keep my lips closed, arresting a yelp of pain, a cry of ache from sensory overload. The road above us is full of cars, full of people, full of souls in constant murmurs and tinkles and whistles and chatter. Their trivial talk and mechanical phone ringing jam afternoon air. The difference between the tranquility of the lake and human life above it is so striking, I want to dive back underwater, but Canosa grabs me by the hood.

I duck, automatically expecting a blow.

"Do we—" I begin.

"Shhhhh!" That finger again, she shushes me.

Right. I forgot. I glance up to distract myself. Cars shuffle their metal frames across steel net of the bridge. They look no more than toys from hundred feet below as if sent to skitter across by two giants playing a racing game. Their rules are simple. If you lose, you die. And I want it to be my turn.

Hunger plays tap on my ribs, and I realize I'm starving. I can eat just about anything living to silence growing agony. All it takes is to flex, jump up the bridge, crawl over its lattice work, pry open nearest car and sing. The ease with which my being a siren made it look like killing people is as mundane as making a sandwich for lunch pins me with needles of horror. Am I losing my humanity, is this it?

Canosa pulls me to shore, and I'm grateful. Movement makes my mind shut up. We wait a few minutes for pedestrians to clear off walking path underneath the bridge, then quickly scale the bank, slink over railing, and climb up complex pattern of supporting columns and beams and trusses, made from steel and painted dark green, hiding bridge's underbelly in a funky gigantic grid. Way up and directly under the road itself, we squeeze inside a half cave of sorts, a dead-end space between two steel beams, a concrete cornice and wall in the back. We sit on its edge, legs dangling down, pedestrian walk about fifty feet underneath us. People walk leisurely back and forth, some couples, some elderly folks with leashed dogs, a couple bikers

pass. None of them look up. I glance at Canosa, she grins back. And I get that this is perhaps one of her favorite hunting spots. The fact that she's showing it to me must mean I've been truly accepted into the siren family.

I grin back, but the thunder of rattling above us shakes me to the bones, and I wince. It's a great hunting place, all right, but it's loud as hell.

Canosa leans close to me, her wet hair brushes my left cheek, her cold lips touch my ear. "You look like scum." She purses her mouth and proceeds to rip open the hole in my jacket.

"Stop!" I shout. She clasps her hand over my mouth and cautiously looks down. Seems like nobody heard me, pedestrian walk is momentarily empty, but not for long. This is a popular place for afternoon strolls, although it's Tuesday after lunch, at least it's what it seems like, with air dimming into early darkness, so not many people are here today.

"Hush! Be quiet. Talk quietly, okay? Your voice carries too well, silly girl." Canosa whispers in my ear.

She must trust me, then, if she brought me here in broad daylight. I'm floored, my poor dead heart full of hope.

"Sorry!" I whisper loudly, then catch myself and bite my tongue. "Wait, does this mean I belong? The siren family... Am I part of it now?"

"We need to find you some decent clothes. This won't do."  
She traces her hand on my jacket and on my jeans. "You're supposed to be sixteen, and you look like a five year old who crawled in dirt for a whole week. No sense of fashion." She hisses and shakes her head. I let her rip off my jacket and pull it off, she grabs me by the shoulders and twists me this way and that, as if appraising a horse.

I'm momentarily stumped, not knowing how to respond. Somehow talking about clothes must be the least important topic on my mind, but I'm afraid to anger Canosa and lose this feeble beginning of a connection that I'm feeling.

"What about Ligeia and Teles? And Raidne? Are they okay?" I finally manage, to Canosa's scrunching my cheeks and turning my head this way and that. "Was it them singing?"

"They're fine, don't worry. We've set up a trap for your dear Papa, even learned how to sing your song. Clever, don't you think? They'll distract him, and I'll finally teach you."

A dozen questions crowd in my head, like, *How did you guys manage to get out of the restroom? Did you chew through those layers of concrete? Why did you come for me? Can a siren kill herself with that sonic gun?* But I keep my mouth shut, remembering how Canosa doesn't like to be asked, especially being asked stupid questions and, naturally, all of my questions

immediately sound stupid in my head. Instead, I timidly ask, "Teach me what?"

"Now use your brain and ask again." She folds her arms on her chest in that stubborn waiting demeanor, meaning I won't move from here until you answer correctly.

I glance down, flex my toes and wiggle them for a while, watch people walk underneath, then look back at Canosa. "Teach me how to hunt?"

"Finally. That didn't take too long to figure out, did it? Ailen Bright, I'm proud of you for once." She grabs my chin and pulls me closer, breathing her decaying breath right into my face. "You've got talent, silly girl, but you're young, naïve and rude. I want to help you. Help you grow and mature. I'll teach you how to use your voice at will, to kill. Do you understand?"

"Yes." I manage through scrunched lips.

"Marvelous!" She exclaims in a loud whisper and lets go of my face.

I want to ask her about mom, about our deal. And if I kill my father, will she tell me what happened to her? But I'm terrified to even mention this and stay quiet.

"First thing first. People are food. We kill them to eat their souls. I want you to remember this and to never question it. Yes?" There is such finality to her words, it makes me ache.

I nod. "Second thing, a siren hunter has no soul." She looks me straight in the eyes and it seems like she reads my mind with those piercingly blue irises of hers, light blue, almost silver. "We can only kill a siren hunter by making him hear our song. He's an empty husk, a container, a walking dead. Strangling or drowning or shooting him will only injure him but won't kill him, because death delivered at the hands of a siren has no power over a siren hunter. Are you following me?"

"Is this why..." I begin, comprehension dawning on me.

"Yes. We tried. I tried. There is..." She hesitates, twirling a lock of her hair on her finger and looking past me into distance, "...a certain history between us. Don't ask." I close my mouth, barely having opened it. "This is all you need to know for now."

She continues staring into nothing, and I remember asking her how she got turned into a siren, when I was converted, and how Pisinoe pinched my arm. It happened this morning, yet it seems like a whole year has passed. I wonder what Canosa's been through, wonder how old she is, wonder when and where she met my father, and realize, I have no idea.

"How does one become a siren hunter?" I say, my hand on my mouth a second too late.

I can't help it, this question has been burning my tongue. I wait for Canosa to scold me, but, surprisingly, she doesn't.

It looks like she didn't hear me at all, and just when I'm about to apologize that I asked, she opens her mouth to talk.

"When one falls in love with a siren. That is our curse." She glances briefly at me, and I think I see her eyes mist up, then she blinks her gorgeous eyelashes several times, and it's gone. She's back to staring into distance.

A horrible idea pierces my gut, yet I'm afraid to ask, shaking from premonition that it's valid. Not wanting it to be true. Could it be that Papa fell in love with Canosa? And married my mom to forget her? Tried to bury his pain in a living girl, yet couldn't really do it? Is this his pain? Is this what's tearing him apart? And then another idea shakes me to the bones. Hunter. Did Hunter fall in love with me this morning when I jumped out of lake and landed on the boat? Or was it because he was in love with me before I turned? Is it my fault that we can never be together? I dare to risk another question.

"So how is it that a siren hunter doesn't have a soul?" I prepare to duck. Nothing happens. Luck seems to be on my side, because Canosa keeps staring at one point as if I don't exist.

"The soul?" She speaks slowly and quietly. I hold my breath, afraid to move, afraid to interrupt her. "It gets ignited by this cursed love, like a pile of feathers. It slow burns, little by little, until one day it's gone completely.

Gone into nothing. It just vanishes into a barely visible smoke."

I open my mouth to talk, when Canosa speaks again. "It hardens the siren hunter, makes him immune to siren songs, because there is nothing left to sing to, nothing left to ignite."

"Does the siren love him back? The siren hunter?" I push my luck, but I need to know. Canosa doesn't answer, and I decide to drop the topic, terrified I went too far, reverting back to business. "How can I then kill my father then, if he has no soul?"

"With love." She looks at me. "Pure love can revive a burned out soul, can raise it back to life from its embers."

"What if I don't love him?" I say, knowing that it's a lie, knowing that deep inside I do and that Canosa knows it. Always knew it, I told her this before, back in the bathroom, locked up for hours and hours. I imagine Papa, his huge round eyes, his overwhelming reach into my guts. I think of my fear of him, my freezing at the tone of his voice like a trained animal on command, and I give in. "I hate it. I do, I love him still. Sometimes I wish I could just rip it out of me. Make it gone! I want to kill him. But I don't know if I can do it. I'm... sorry. Every time I try, it's just--" I trail off, biting my lip.

"You will." The sternness is back in her voice. She shakes her head. "And you're welcome. Where are your manners, girl? No manners, no manners at all. Simply dreadful." She sneers, her sensual beauty gone.

"Oh! Sorry. Thank you. Thank you for getting me out." I say quietly, shame flooding me at forgetting yet again.

She studies my body and I feel utterly exposed and naked. I pull up my legs and hug my knees, to cover my bare chest, wondering what she'll do now, drowning in deafening noise from above.

Her face and body changes back to those of a predator, almost shining with desire. "Are you excited? I'm excited." She exclaims with burning eyes, and my terror gets punctured by a momentary feeling of surprise at this sudden change and childish hope. She cares? She wants to teach me how to hunt, because she actually cares? I fight the urge to reach out for her hand. No use, it won't be warm like my mother's, yet it's so tempting.

Traffic slows down just enough to create a momentary pocket or silence. Canosa looks down. I hear it too. A young couple strolls along pedestrian walkway on canal bank, both in hooded rain jackets. Another minute, and they'll be directly underneath us. We can see them, but they can't see us, concealed in darkness like eagles over the prey, hidden in a place where no human would ever think to venture. Their souls are in sync, two

distinct piano solos wafting up, overlapping into a medley reminiscent of some classical sonata, some of those Hunter likes to listen to when stoned. I shake my head to chase the image of Hunter out of my thoughts, and focus on the souls. They promise to taste... lemony. My chest grumbles with hunger. We glance at each other and swallow.

"I think they're in love. Do you hear how their souls are all over each other? Like two radio stations or something, falling in sync. It's so beautiful, it's..." I whisper.

Canosa puts her finger on my lips. "Watch and learn."

And I know she's going for the kill. "No!" I mouth and grab her shoulder, but she pushes me back with such force that I roll deeper into the cave and smack my skull into concrete wall to a sickening crunch.

## Chapter 2. Montlake Bridge

Everything happens in a matter of seconds. Canosa perches on the very edge of the cornice like a wingless bird, her arms spread wide for balance. She sits on her hunches, her hair hangs in loose strands, her mouth opens wide. She hums a single low droning belly note. It shifts air down in a freezing shaft of wind. I reel, sit up and crawl back towards the edge to look down, not daring to touch her. The couple has stopped. They turn their heads left and right, puzzled, looking at each other then up. Other people pass them, unaware. Canosa's singing is focused directly on them, trailing down in an obscuring column of fog. The whole scene reminds me of a frog catching a fly in mid-air, shooting out her tongue and retracting it with great speed, swallowing her prey in one go. Except Canosa's tongue is her song in some weird language that's definitely not English, and the steam of two whisked up souls is her food.

"Why them? They didn't do anything wrong!" I whisper and cringe, remembering my first accidental kill, that fishmonger guy in the public restroom. How am I better? I touch Canosa's shoulder again, but she shakes me off and snarls. I shrink away.

She sucks in the souls, her eyes greedy, mouth gulping, veins bulging on her neck, eyes rolled back to her whites, chest protruding forward. I think I could tip her over and let her fall fifty feet down, but then it wouldn't kill her and I wonder why I even think this. Didn't she just show me her hunting spot, shouldn't I be grateful? Or is it the siren in me, wanting to be mean for no reason at all?

Part of me admires how quickly she's snuffing out not one soul, but two, and in broad daylight! She's obviously a pro.

More of her song pours down out of her mouth in one misty shaft. It sounds like some ancient lullaby, and I think perhaps she sings in Greek, her native language. I find myself listening with my mouth open. Fog thickens, rolling from her skin pores in coils and plumes, temperature drops ten degrees, fifteen. The guy and the girl below us stare up, their lips parted, their eyes glassy, their souls strung up, whooshing towards Canosa in two intertwined ribbons.

PLOP!

Both souls are gone. I can see their misty ends disappear into Canosa. She slurps them up, licks her lips and leans over the edge to look. I lean with her.

The couple drops to the ground, still shrouded in fog. The girl's knee-long rain jacket opens up and spreads about her like a dusty cloud, her face is framed by blonde hair, her eyes

unmoving. She's gone. The guy is gone too, his rain jacket crumpled, his hand over hers even in death. It looks like they decided to lie flat on their backs and gaze at the clouds, watch them drift, guess at their shapes, and share. Tell each other what they've seen, to see if their guesses matched.

"You. You... killed them!" I hiss.

"Did you see it? Did you see how fast I was?" Canosa asks with obvious pride. But I don't care for speed, I'm on the verge of crying.

"I don't give a *fuck* how long it took you!" I curl my fingers, cut them into my palms, hard. "Why them? Why the hell did you do it?"

"Hush!" She hisses back in my face. "Why not? It's what sirens do. About time you learned, Ailen Bright." She pinches my cheek, hard, and it hurts.

Below us a woman runs up to the dead couple and shrieks. Someone else runs up, dials for help. I ignore it, my attention on Canosa.

"You killed them. Some random people, just went ahead and killed them." I repeat stubbornly, as if to confirm the fact. My hands in fists.

"Yes, I did." Canosa says calmly.

"And you're not even sorry!"

"I'm not." She shrugs. "I savor it. You will too. They were looking way too happy for my taste, bitches." She spits. "Why can they have what I can't? How is that fair, tell me? Besides, they were my favorite flavor. Very... lemony." She licks her lips and smiles at me.

I gape at her, horror struck. "I'll never do this. Forget it. I'd rather cease to exist in some forgotten corner of some forgotten ocean. Fuck this shit." I dash to escape, but she pins me down with a knee to my chest, her hands on my wrists. My bruised skull smacks concrete again, and I yelp in pain.

"Oh, yes, you will. You already killed, you *will* kill again. And you *will* do your part of the deal. Then, after you're done, I might let you go." She smiles, her beauty melting from delicate to terrible. "I say I might, because I like your feistiness, silly girl. You'll make a marvelous siren." She says marvelous in a singing manner so it sounds more like *maaaaahvelous*.

"What if I don't want to," I lick my lips. "What if I changed my mind? I don't have to kill people. I can go look for my mother on my own. I don't need you. I don't..."

"Shut up!" She slaps my face. Tears spring in my eyes, but I hold them back, angry. "You... will... kill!" She sits on top of me, her thighs hold me in a cocoon, her hands pin my arms to the ground, her hair hangs on both sides of my face like a torn

dirty curtain. "You want to do it, and you know it. Hunger tears you apart, doesn't it? I can hear it." She places her right ear in between my naked breasts, and listens. I hear an audible rumble coming from the void behind my ribs, sparked by the sudden urge of the souls under the bridge, and I hate it.

The chaos of human unrest reaches us from fifty feet below. There is a shuffle and a scuffle and cries and gasping and talking on the phones. And one more noise reaches me through this jumble. Smooth motor revolutions of a Pershing 64, made by Ferretti, designed and engineered in Italy, a luxurious water machine. Papa's yacht. He's looking for me, once again. Canosa hears it too and reads my fear, jeering.

"He's never too late, your father, is he? Always on time. Always knows when to show up at the right moment." She growls. Hatred oozes from her eyes, she clamps harder on my wrists, as if it's my fault.

"Does that mean that the girls failed to distract him?" I say and immediately see that it was a very wrong thing to say. Wrath fills up Canosa's face and I quickly close my eyes, scrunch them hard, waiting for another blow.

I feel her breath on my ear. "First, you will kill your father. Then, you will kill your boyfriend, before he becomes a fully fledged siren hunter. While he still has his poor little soul."

This snaps my eyes open.

"I left him alive for you, you know? So you can have your fun, you ungrateful girl." She sits back up, still smiling at me, still holding me in her clutches. I forget my fear, rage boils up my throat, grinds my teeth, and spits out in a low hiss.

"Leave Hunter out of this."

"Oh, look who's in love. Ailen Bright, an innocent little..."

"SHUT UP!" I yell. My voice cuts through traffic buzz and carries all the way across canal. I don't care if Papa hears, if his fancy Panerai watch detects my location. My heart thumps in my chest, my head pulses with fury.

"Hush! Be quiet." Canosa snaps at me.

"It was not our deal. Hunter was *not* in our deal, so leave him alone." I visibly shake now. "Why the fuck do you do this to me? What do you want from me? What?"

"I thought I told you. Don't you remember?" She taps my forehead. "I want your father dead."

"What's Hunter got to do with it?" I nearly scream now. An image of his soul burning in his chest pops in my mind, and I know it's my doing. Pain twists my gut and I want to cry, holding it, seething at myself for having dragged him into this mess. "Please, leave him out of it." My concentration breaks under the pressure of intense grief, and I begin wailing. Tears

roll down both sides of my face, and I don't care. I only know one thing I have to do, somehow make Hunter hate me, convince him that he's no longer in love, make this process stop. Canosa stares at me, disgust all over her face.

"I don't want him to end up like Papa, please. I want to stop it. I don't want him to become a siren hunter..." I trail off, sniffing, wailing like a baby.

"Then kill him. Kill him before it's too late, it's the only choice you've got. There is nothing you can do, his soul has already ignited. I saw it." Canosa says in a dead voice, sitting over me like her previous bronze self, like back in the bathroom, unmoving, uncaring, immobile. A bronze figurine, nothing else. "Back on the beach, I saw it. Faint smoke coming out of his mouth when he looked at you. I heard it too. His soul is wounded, it's burning. You know it is, you heard it. You must have."

And she's right. Suddenly I remember running up Harbor steps when Papa chased me in his car. Hunter soul's usual Vivaldi sounded wrong back then, as if it lost its luster, its warmth. It felt like it was in pain, no longer sweet, it made me think of... sour taste. His soul has started turning sour.

"Why do you care?" I manage through sobs.

"Because I don't want to see another siren go through my hell. I don't want to relive it. I've had enough of it, thank

you very much." I hear a hint of pain in her words and watch her face go grey.

"You couldn't kill him, is that right? You let it go on for too long? Because you loved him? You... loved my father?" I say the last phrase under my breath, simultaneously realizing that I feel Canosa's pain and want to comfort her. And immediately after that hating her very guts, knowing that she's the reason my mother is dead. She's the very reason my father married my mom. No, it goes further. She is the reason he started looking for another woman in the first place. She's the reason he hates women, the reason he wanted a son and not a daughter.

"Yes." She says simply and quietly.

"Then finish the job and kill him yourself, you bitch!" I yell, full of defiance, clinging to my anger like to a crutch, before it evaporates, before my courage leaves me. For the first time, I think I glimpse a hint of fear cross her face. It quickly gets replaced with fury.

Canosa presses her knees so hard that my ribs crack. She twists her hands and I hear my wrist bones crack. Excruciating pain shoots down my arms and up my ribcage. Just when I'm about to cry out, she lets go of my arms and presses both hands on my mouth. My bruised skull spreads agony around my head in a steel belt that tightens and burns me.

"Let's be clear about who's the boss here, Ailen Bright, the girl who never listens, the stubborn naïve rude girl who thinks she knows better. So stubborn, she deserves to be tortured by 'sitting in the tub' to drive the message home." She bristles and snaps her teeth an inch away from my nose.

Dread prickles my skin. Somehow the simple expression of *sitting in the tub* sounds ominous. I wonder what she refers to. Perhaps seeing question in my eyes, Canosa explains, so close to my face, that every word is followed by a stink of her cold breath.

"It's an ancient torture. You'd be placed in a wooden tub with milk and honey painted on your face, to be devoured by flies, then maggots and worms, swimming in your own excrements, decaying alive. It's what they used to do to girls like you. It's how they used to try and kill sirens, only we didn't die. It's why humans deserve to die, for committing atrocities such as these. Do you understand?" She lets go of my mouth and sits back up, but I can't utter a sound.

Heinous disgust fills me. Images begin flashing through my head like snapshots of a camera. The grey expanse of Canosa's pleading eyes. The chokeful of her hair spread around her head, matted and greasy. Her white arms sleek as bathtub rims, being tucked away into a wooden tub. Her face covered in honey. Flies crawling over it, crowding around her eyes and her nostrils. I

shake my head and gag. There is no food in my stomach, but something comes up anyway, something stinky and bitter. A feeling of nasty shock at this atrocity. I gag again and cough.

The siren in me wakes up, perhaps disturbed by this imagery. And that sinister voice talks again. *Get her off you, it says, don't listen to the bitch, get away from her!* I try to wiggle free, and, miraculously, Canosa lets me go. She stands, brushing off her hands on her hair as if she touched something nasty, her lips pouting like those of an upset child.

"Who are you, really?" I ask, propping myself up on my elbows and sitting up. Ready to leave yet held back by curiosity.

"I'm the Siren of Canosa. The real one, the killer kind. The psychopomp." She waves down to her kill, to the pedestrian walk that's gone quiet in the meantime, cordoned off by police. Only their professional chatter reaches us, and red and blue glare from police lights reflected on the bridge's green latticework. Canosa emits a fake cackle, pitched a bit too high, and points at herself with her forefinger. "I guide the dead on their after-life journey, that's my job."

"Then aren't you supposed to go and guide those two?" I ask, motioning down.

She exhales a chill that crawls up my spine and leaves a sense of imminent dread. She steps closer to me, so cold, that I

shiver. "I like herding them in packs. So I have more time on this side, for fun. For my own pleasure." Her breath washes over me, freezing. I realize there is so much I don't know about her, and she must be ancient, even though she looks like a voluptuous twentysomething, forever young and pretty.

"How old are you?" I ask.

"Why don't you guess?" Her dark eyes shimmer, there is nothing there. I'm cold, but she's colder. I'm strong, but she's stronger. I shiver under her stare, thinking back to reading *The Odyssey* and trying to remember when Homer has written it. Something like 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC, so that means...

"Three thousand years?" I ask.

"Do I really look *that* old?" She smirks, but it's a bitter smirk, and I feel it's not funny to her.

I decide to try another angle. "No-no-no, it's not what I meant. You don't look old at all. You look young and beautiful, actually." I swallow. "I'm just curious... When did you turn into a siren?"

She simply looks at me.

"Who turned you?" I ask.

She doesn't answer, her arms crossed in front of her in that same gesture of "I will wait until you ask the right question or you will figure it out yourself." I pause and think

really hard. A sense of dread wafts through my gut and I feel like turning into an icicle.

"Is it because you failed to save Persephone from Hades, so she became the queen of the underworld? He abducted her when you were supposed to protect her, and you were punished, right?" I rack my brain for all of Greek mythology I remember. "Or is it because of Odysseus, cause he didn't die from your song? He tricked you, and you threw yourself into the sea. At least that's what I've read." I wait for some answer, but Canosa doesn't even look at me. "You'll never tell me, right?"

Silence.

"Whoever turned you..." I say in a quiet voice. "...you didn't want them to, did you?"

"Took you a while, Ailen Bright. I thought you're faster than this." Darkness oozes out of Canosa's eyes and spills terror all over me.

Suddenly it's not funny anymore. And I want to hide again. I want to run and hide and forget everything that's happened, feeling weak, small and helpless, sitting next to a monster that didn't want to be monster at first but had to get used to it. Does this mean I'll turn out like this, mean and bitter? Goosebumps prickle my skin, my limbs feel numb. I hug my knees tighter and rest my head on them, turned so I can see Canosa. She stands straight as a ramrod, her arms still crossed in front

of her, one foot slightly forward, floor long hair draping her lovely figure, dirt washed off it by our swim in the lake. Her skin glistens slightly in the dimness of our recluse.

"Canosa? Wanna know something? I didn't want to die." I whisper more to myself than to her. "Now that I think about it, I wish I could turn it all back."

Canosa just looks at me silently, expressionless, as if waiting for me to continue.

I glance into distance, into nothing in particular, focusing on trusses and beams, then on blue water underneath, then on trees covering the bank in green, smelling of fall, their leaves drying. Cars cross the bridge above us. I hear a multitude of human souls, waiting to be eaten, one note in particular is akin to sweet sugary syrup of a living melody. It fills me with mad desire, trickling down bridge's grate, drop by drop. I bite my lips to the point when it feels like they would burst, hunger rumbles and beats against my chest, shaking me, my hands and feet tingle. And I know who this soul belongs to. A baby. I hear a baby's soul and hear baby babble in a stroller above us, her mother cooking to her in this manner only mothers can do, stern and loving at the same time. I understand in disgust that I want to suck it out, right this second, until the baby is dead.

I clasp my knees tighter, swaying from side to side to silence the pain.

Understanding flashes on Canosa's face. "Hungry?"

"Yes." I manage quietly, knowing that she won.

"I know you want dessert, it's tempting. But like a proper girl, you'll have to have your dinner first, yes?" He smiles, and I find myself smiling a little. "Any siren can snuff out a baby, but it takes practice to kill grown men. I'll teach you how to do it, and then we can have dessert. Yes?"

"Yeah, sure." I manage.

"Splendid! I know just the place." She grins. "Come on."

She stretches out her hand and I take it. Her fingers feel freezing even to, freezing and brittle, like I can squeeze them and they'll crack. At the same time, holding her hand gives me comfort. It's so easy to trust her, so easy to let go and just fall into her words, to stop thinking, to be led, to rely on somebody else. To forget everything and give in.

Ailen Bright, a siren. That's who I am now.

She pulls me to my feet.

It's quiet, eerie quiet. I notice that it's dusk now, sky grows darker by the minute, obscured with heavy grey clouds. I remember about my father and his boat, yet I hear no trace of his boat's motor, nor of his car anywhere near us. I almost want to hear it, because it's what I expect. The unexpected silence

is making me nervous, making me think he's planning something more sophisticated than a simple chase this time, and deep inside me that sinister voice tells me that I'm right. That he must be planning some sort of a trap. No, I think, I'm just paranoid. What kind of a trap could it be? It's bullshit. And I put the thought out of my mind.

"Can I ask one more question?" I say.

"Yes?"

"Can a siren kill herself? You know, with a sonic gun?"

"You think I haven't tried?" There is a momentary sadness in her voice, and then bitterness, to the point of being toxic.

"So what, the gun only works in the hands of a siren hunter, is that it?" I feel my hope sink.

"Why do you think your dear friend, Hunter Crossby, has no gun?"

"Because his soul is still intact..." I say slowly. "I get it now. So a siren can only die if her song has no effect on somebody?"

"Yes. But I don't want you to." Canosa looks at the sky as she says it and the setting sun breaks through the clouds in this moment, coloring her hair golden in its evening rays. Then she gazes at me, and I feel her eyes burrow into my head, into my chest, into all of me, pinning me, holding me on a hook. A waft of sea salt reaches us on a light breeze. It's evening.

"You won't die, if that's what you're thinking. I know you won't. Not with your talent, no way. I won't allow it."

*I'm just a revenge tool for you, am I, just another way to get back at my father.* I want to say, but bite my tongue. She doesn't really care about me, after all, she cares about my talent, my potential ability to get rid of the siren hunter. So what, this is the best I've ever had, at least she cares about *something* of mine. It's not like I have much time left to find new friends, have I?

Because I know what I'm going to do. I'll play along with Canosa to learn everything I can, and then I'm going to find a way to evaporate myself to stop Hunter from turning out like my father, soulless. I need to die. I will die at my own hands. I know who won't hear my song, who never heard me, who will never hear me. It always works, works like a charm, only this time I will have to go all the way, will have to mean it so it works, will have to finish my song.

"What the hell, I'll do it. I'll kill for food. People are food, you're right." I force myself to smile in a sinister way, completing my lie, looking Canosa straight in the eyes, hoping she'll believe me, hoping I can withstand my hunger, suppress it, maybe learn to outright ignore it. At the same time, I'm tempted to give in, to really be a siren. Tempted to sing and suck in souls and revel in their juicy substance, filling myself

with warmth, sensing it travel through me, all the way to the tips of my fingers and toes, tingling. "You had to do this too, didn't you? Accept it?" I say and I really mean it.

She doesn't answer. Our eyes lock and for a moment a fleeting understanding hangs between us in a stroke of grief. She nods like she knows what I mean, I nod like I found a true friend. This is as close as I will ever get to having a family, this is one of my sisters. Maybe I don't really love her, maybe she doesn't really love me, but we belong. At least for the time being, we do.

*Ailen Bright, you're a siren, admit it.*

Perhaps because she can read my thoughts or because I'm doing such a poor job of hiding them, Canosa's beautiful face suddenly comes alight with mischief and that bad girl aura, innocent and soft on the outside, but hard as a rock and deadly inside. I grin back at her, oblivious to my nakedness from waist up, hoping with all of my dead heart that I look exactly the same way, like a perfect bad girl. A true siren. A femme fatale, like Hunter said. Small part of me, tucked deep inside my soulless chest, wishes he'd see me now. Because I'm sure he'd love it, I'm sure he'd give me thumbs up and say, *Dude, you look awesome!* Or, *What's up, brat, where you going?* Or, *Say hello to monkey boy!* And he'd make his obnoxious gorilla noises. I smile through tears, knowing that it's all I have left, and it won't

give me pain for long. Only long enough to find an end to this existence. In the meantime, I want to try it, to really try and feel what's it like. To be a predator, to be a hunter.

"Happy Birthday, Ailen." Canosa says and flashes me two rows of perfect teeth.

"Thank you." I say, surprised.

This is the first time she calls me by my first name only, and it must mean a lot to her. It certainly means a lot to me. On top of it, she remembered it's my birthday today. Blood pulses in my veins, whatever is left of my trepidation and my doubts vanishes in an instant.

I tip. I let go. It's such a relief not to fight myself anymore. I feel the hunger, it's strong, it overwhelms me, it makes me hear every single human soul passing overhead in cars, and every single one walking underneath us. They're food, nothing more. A sweet orchestra of life. My mouth goes dry, my hands shake, my chest grumbles.

"It's party time." She says and squeezes my hand.

"Party! FUCK YEAH!" I squeeze her hand back and banish all thoughts from my head except one. I'll die today, I'll die having fun.

We hold hands, step closer to the edge of cornice and leap into air, twenty feet above water.

## Chapter 3. Arboretum Park

Mist fills my lungs. The moment our feet detach from concrete, streetlights come to life and glimmer faintly, buzzing with slow electricity, warming up for yet for another cloudy evening. We look like two lucid ghosts, one framed by white mane of hair, another one in jeans and nothing else, arms stretched out, plummeting into cold evening air, hitting water head first, diving deep under bridge into numbing liquid darkness. Water gurgles in my ears, I gulp it, extract oxygen, squirt out the rest through gills. Faint glow from Canosa's body shimmers to my left. We kick our legs in dolphin stroke, propelling forward, our hands still clasped. Distant drone of living souls echoes in a type of a hushed gibberish from each bank as we swim east, toward Lake Washington. I'm high, high on being a siren. High on adrenalin wrapped in anxiety, encapsulated by some insane giddiness that's supposed to be wrong. But I don't care, this feels divine, this feels like happiness.

I look to my left and think that I have the best sister I could ever dream of. My big sister, the one who understands me, the one I can rely on, the one who can bitch out anyone who dares to hurt me. And I mean, bitch them out *big time*.

An image of my father's boat flashes in my mind. I'm worried. I want to ask about Ligeia, about Teles and Pisinoe, about where they are and when I get to see them again, but I'm afraid to break the silence, afraid to disturb this feeling of serenity, so I keep quiet, deciding to ask later. We swim for perhaps a few minutes, but it feels like an eternity, and I don't want it to end. Then Canosa glances at me briefly, points up and to the right. I follow her gaze and notice darkness increasing around us, water becoming very cold and murky, green algae hanging in big uneven clumps. We seem to be passing between islands, turning right, swimming into the thicket of... a marsh? Water tastes acidic, its surface is covered with reeds that look like torn uneven blanket from underneath, barely discernible in the diminishing light, and I know where we're going.

Once my father took my mom and I on a long boat ride, rowing all the way from our marina, across Lake Union, by Portage bay, and finally into a maze of Arboretum wetlands. Papa's muscles bulged under his lavender polo shirt in rhythm to steady movement, and I remember feeling very proud of his strength. I was maybe five or six. My hair was pulled into two pigtails and I was wearing a summer dress mom made for me from one of Papa's old shirts, light blue with tiny sail boats printed on it, original pearl buttons running along its full

length. I was dipping my hand into water, watching ducks herd their ducklings with fascination, oblivious to an argument that erupted on the other side of the boat, and then turning to the sound of a slap. I only saw my father quickly sit back down. I grabbed the side of the boat, afraid that it will overturn and I'll drown, because it bobbed so hard. Mom held on to her face, and Papa docked on the muddy bank, making us get out and walk on foot all the way to the bus station.

I swallow at this memory, trying to chase it away. It's all in the past, I'm a siren now, I don't care. All I care for is food. There seems to be not much of it, probably a few evening park strollers and dog walkers and joggers that favor this part of the park for their daily exercise. I can hear a distant echo of their souls coming at me, amplified by all this water. My chest screams at me with hunger now, sending shivers up and down my spine.

Canosa pulls on my hand and we swim up, breaching lake's surface right by one of the wooden boardwalks, its beams dark with age and covered with moss, nearly black in the dusk. I inhale the sweet smell of water lilies. A startled blackbird shrieks and flies off into lush thicket of willows, rousing a few more birds that scatter and disappear into darkness, squawking. Cattails rustle on the breeze. Constant hum of Highway 520 bridge traffic envelops my ears in an annoying buzz

of bees. I turn my head to look at Canosa and see her face pulse in rhythm to my urge to eat.

"I know you're hungry. Just hold on a little more, come on." She whispers urgently.

"Right." I say, feeling my lips tremble.

We scale up the boardwalk fence, two bleached women, and jog along the path, into the heart of the park, our bare feet skidding on wet wooden boards.

"Best place to hunt on Monday nights. Not too many people, and those that venture out are sleepy and not very cautious, still in their weekend daze." Canosa says under her breath.

"Uh-ha." I say, listening intently to about a dozen trickling melodies within a mile radius, detecting each by timbre and sound waves and tone, imagining what they would taste like, trying to conjure up an image of each soul owner. My mouth goes dry to the point where I can barely move my tongue to talk.

Wooden path ends and turns into a muddy bog trail. Sludge oozes between my toes as I plod behind Canosa, deeper into overgrown darkness, slinking and ducking, the only light being a faint glow from mine and Canosa's skin, illuminating thick canopy of high trees around us. Rare traffic lights skid across our faces, passing Lake Washington boulevard that cuts across the park. We jog faster, quietly, scaring into oblivion a pack

of raccoons, closing in on a few accidental hikers that don't know yet what's about to hit them on this fine Monday night.

Then the trail runs into an open meadow devoid of trees.

About forty feet ahead, a jogger sprints toward us, a man with a flashlight strapped to his head and clothed in bright neon-yellow vest for visibility. Sheer desire to jump at him blinds me in a wash of predatory fever. But before I have any time to react, Canosa lets go of my hand and charges at him with a venomous cry, covering the distance between them in the matter of seconds. Air shakes in resonance. Flocks of birds flee from trees, small animals scatter into holes and hide. I stand, my mouth open, momentarily enthralled by her speed.

Arrested by her voice and without a single peep, jogger stops and falls to his knees, his arms stretched out in front of him as if he's about to worship some otherworldly deity, which Canosa is, I suppose. She spreads her arms and hovers over him, her eyes emit blue light that reflects in his pupils. She ignites his soul. I gulp, shaking, wanting to eat, yearning to be part of this feast, yet holding back due to some hunting instinct, knowing that this is not my kill, knowing that I need to wait for my alpha to satisfy her hunger, to allow me to follow suit.

The man's soul melody pierces my ears with its beauty, a combination of a violin and bird calls. Perhaps he's a musician

that likes to watch birds. Minty. Fresh and minty, that's how he'd taste. Oh, it sounds incredibly delicious. Hunger burns me, scratches at my ribs from inside, I wheeze and cough, feeling my gut wretch in its emptiness. Canosa sings a few verses of her song that I don't understand, and I watch her disappear into a pocket of fog, with a barely visible line of smoke trailing at the top of it in one long ribbon. The musician's soul. I can't help it anymore, I begin walking. By the time I reach them, it's done. He'd dead, sprawled on the ground, and when I lean over his face, to see if I know him, Canosa snatches my hand and pulls me away.

"This is how it's done, see? Fast. You have to be fast, and they're yours before they know it." She says.

"Uh-ha." I manage, turning back, still feeling soul's lingering sound penetrate me, like a left-over smell of a freshly baked pie that's been eaten before I got a chance to taste it.

"Come on, no time for this. I hear a couple more ahead. They're yours. I insist." She whispers in my ear, her eyes ablaze with ravenous fervor, her hand warm with newly acquired life. I inhale the evening air, fragrant with that smell of early autumn, and nod.

"Can't... wait." My own voice comes out as a hiss.

Trilling melody of a couple souls several hundred feet away blocks out the rest of my thinking. A curtain of primitive instinct shrouds my brain, and my body takes over. Time seems to stop. My vision sharpens, as if someone focused the lens. I see every single leaf in the oncoming darkness, etched into receding dimness of the park, hear every branch creak, every little mouse scurry.

I stalk off behind Canosa in a sort of an agitated daze, reeling with hunger, salivating, pulsing with agony. Then I find myself ahead of her, running, abandoning the trail and breaking through azalea bushes, faster, aiming at two future victims, a man and a woman, and what sounds like a large dog, all three probably out on a late night stroll. I thrash through a cluster of dwarf maples and the dog starts barking, a low rasping sound. I hear the man attempt to hush it when I break out into relative light and recognize the place at once. Azalea way, dog walkers' favorite destination.

They stare at me, ignorant of their dog thrashing at the end of the leash, three figures against rapidly darkening sky.

"Freeze!" I shout, spewing saliva.

It's the first thing that comes to mind, perhaps because I heard cops use it, perhaps because I used it once before. Hey, this can become my signature siren call! I emit a noise that's half grunt, half chuckle.

All three of them freeze, standing still. The man holds a flashlight in his right hand and now it slips out, softly rolling into grass. I charge at him, attracted by the lure of his soul, a whizzing of a motor and repeated dog barks, and some other soft warble that I can't identify. It promises to taste fruity. Almost melon-like. I stop a few inches away from his face and ignite his soul with a sort of a powerful gaze, similar to bulging your eyes out of your sockets and glaring, unblinking. Blue light reflects in his pupils, and a trail of faint smoke escapes through his lips. I begin singing. The song streams effortlessly from my lips, as if it was meant to be, as if I'd done it a thousand times before and know it by heart.

"We live in the meadow

"But you don't know it

"Our grass is your sorrow

"But you won't show it..."

*What the fuck?* I want to scream. *This is the song I got converted with, how come I know the words?* Behind me Canosa comes up and ignites the woman's soul, a divine concoction of clanking pots and puppy whining. Savory. She joins me and we song the next verse together.

"Give us your pain

"Dip in our song

"Notes afloat

"Listen and love

"Listen and love

"Listen and love..."

The woman whimpers and falls to her knees, her dog whines next to her, the man follows. Steamy plumes of their warmth trail into mine and Canosa's mouths, and I imagine sucking on the best joint of my life, strongest weed you can ever find, minty flavored for added pleasure.

Within a minute, we're done. There are only two bodies left, surrounded by the fog, dog licking both its owner's faces, now dead and oblivious to his yelps. I watch everything with a kind of a sick fascination, not fully believing what I've done, without a thought or a feeling inside me, shaking from growing hunger, now unleashed and driving me to feed more.

I raise my head to another tune, another jogger, glance at Canosa as if for approval, and charge again, emerging out of the pocket of fog we created and nearly kicking my next victim of her feet. The rest happens in a mad daze. Me singing, gulping up her soul, Canosa stripping her, muttering along,

"Gotta look decent for the party, right?"

Making me peel off my torn jeans and pull on the girl's leggings with reflective stripes on each side, her silver rain jacket made of soft waterproof fabric that allows your skin to breathe when running,

"That's Seattle fashion for you," Canosa mutters, zipping it up on me and turning me this way and that, "It's called, hiking emergency. Well, looks new, so it's okay. It'll do for now. Put on her shoes." And I do, I pull them off the girl's feet and step into them, still warm, latest running sneakers that barely weigh anything on my feet, also silver.

I'm in a feeding frenzy, feeling hot and reeling as if I'm drunk. I grip Canosa's hand and we dash across the boulevard, empty of traffic on Monday night. We skirt the Japanese garden and emerge into the parking lot that's mostly empty, apart from a few cars on its far end. We startle a group of people who walk back to their cars from soccer practice. Canosa jeers at them and yells,

"BOO!"

Then she cackles her mad lunatic laughter, killing more. I join her. We're on a spree.

Souls whisk out of people in rapid succession, turning the parking lot into a pool of fog with grotesquely smiling corpses on its bottom. They all look their happiest, like they've been struck by something utterly divine in the last minute of their lives.

I've lost count now, singing, feeling my throat turn hoarse, moving forward in a morbid determination to eat more, eat as much as I can. My saliva is acid syrup. My blood is

concentrated seawater pumped through veins by dead heart. My power is my voice, and I'm using it, using it plenty. Eating my dinner, humans served live, their souls draped over a garnish of a lack of mine. Siren food, it's supposed to satisfy me, but it makes me hungrier still, like it's the last meal I'll ever eat.

In the meantime, Canosa made herself an outfit that consists of soccer knee socks on top of leggings, bright pink rain boots, a large soccer sweatshirt that's definitely too big for her but making her look even sexier, and a yellow rain poncho on top. I didn't even notice when she did it or whom she stripped. All in all, she looks cute, even adorable, missing pink lipstick to complete the picture, totally passable for a twentysomething Seattleite, the only strange thing being her really long white hair that she tucks into the hood of the poncho.

"Well, what do you think?" she asks, twirling in front of me, under a streetlight, and I realize I have no memory of how we got here, standing on Madison street, devoid of pedestrians and glistening with old puddles. I blink. A few cars rushing by us in both direction.

"You look great." I say, not knowing what else I can say, enthralled by the feeling of warmth that spreads through my body, making me feel alive, feel human again. "How many..." I trail off, scared to ask.

"How many what?" Canosa asks, and chews on her hair absentmindedly.

"How many did I kill?" I say, not wanting to believe that what just happened was real, hoping maybe it was a bad dream and I didn't really go on a murdering spree.

"It doesn't matter now, does it? What matters is, you were great! You kicked some serious ass, girl." I notice how she doesn't say *silly girl*. "Come on, lets get out of here before cops decide to join the party." Canosa says and pulls me by the hand again, I follow, shaking my head to make myself think, retracing back our journey, from the moment we emerged by the boardwalks to the moment that I remember last, the parking lot between Japanese garden and the bottom of a soccer field. Faces flash in my memory like quick snapshots. I bend my fingers, horrified.

"Nine." I say.

"Are you counting?" Canosa is cheery, her lips actually have lively color, her cheeks are almost pink. She giggles. "Stop it, silly girl, you'll make yourself ill. Come on. I have a surprise for you." I notice how she calls me *silly girl* again and sigh.

"Ninve." I repeat under my breath and swallow, unable to believe it. Here I am, a sixteen year old murderer, an innocent

looking girl on the outside, and a ruthless predator on the inside. How does this make me better than my father?

High on recent feeding, I don't notice how we get off the right side of the road into yet another parking lot. I seem to swim in the glare of streetlights, oblivious to white noise of constant traffic, oblivious even to an increasing number of pedestrians and their mouthwatering souls. I'm full, full to the point of gagging. I don't want to eat anymore. Where did my promise go, the one that said, I won't kill, no-no-no? Turns out, I'm full of shit, turns out, I'm...

"Look." Canosa says into my ear.

I raise my head. We stand between two parked cars, shadowed by an oak, across the street from a long line of people snaking into a squat brick building the color of dirty pond with a knack for looking alarmed, with its huge black eye-windows. I notice now that the white noise is not simply white noise anymore. Ground ripples under our feet with loud music, cheering, and buoyant souls. It's night, and our faces diffuse faint brilliance, the fancy non-electric kind. Our skin doesn't glow as strong as it does in dark water, but still it shimmers, emitting a layer of fake siren halo, if you will. Great. On top of everything else, I'm a glow-in-the-dark freak now.

"Wait!" I say, suddenly aware of time and space. "It's Chop Suey!" I look at Canosa. She raises her eyebrows, as if to say, *I told you.*

"Siren Suicides! The concert! Hunter bought me two tickets, for my birthday. He was supposed to..." I trail off. Terror floods me. "Is this another hunting ground for you? This Night clubs? Night clubs in general?"

"Marvelous, Ailen, you got it right again. And looks like we're just in time for the show," Canosa whispers. "Oh, this will be juicy, I can tell." She smacks her lips, straightens in her stolen poncho. A girl's face flashes in my mind, the one she took it from, and I shudder.

"Hunter was supposed to take me tonight. To Siren Suicides concert, my favorite band. For my birthday." I repeat again, unable to let go of the idea that it's not happening. It's gone. Hunter needs to be gone from my life, which means that I have to extinguish myself by singing to my father.

Cross-armed, I hug myself, dip my chin deep into the creases of silver rain jacket, brand new, still smelling of synthetic coating, one unlucky soul's choice, now bare-skinned under Japanese maples. The thought of my first successful hunt is supposed to cheer me up, but it chills me instead. Whatever warmth has been acquired from nine souls I sucked in, it

diminishes by the minute. I feel my body cool off and demand more.

"This sucks." I suddenly exclaim. "I was so looking forward to seeing them. They've never toured in US before, you know. FUCK!" I spit.

Canosa presses into the small of my back, nudges me forward. "Who says you can't?"

Her cheek slightly brushes mine and I fail to detect her usual pond odor. I furrow my eyebrows, does this mean I smell rotten too? After having killed all those people? The idea threatens to make me gag again.

"Are you suggesting..." I flop down my pockets. "Fuck me, I lost the tickets on the beach!" I exclaim.

"Who says we need tickets?" Canosa giggles. "I say, let's go taste those guards by the door, what do you say?"

I turn my head to look. The line of people trickled next to nothing now. Three guys check everyone's ID at the door.

Canosa pushes me harder. I stumble forward, my feet numb, stuck in new silver sneakers, resinous and squeaky. September night throws a tint of periwinkle over passing cars, oblivious to the impending massacre. A cop shrills past, perhaps on the way to Arboretum park to retrieve the bodies. My knees lock then buckle.

"I can't do this." I lick my lips nervously.

"But you just did!" Canosa says impatiently. "Silly girl, will you make up your mind already?" She stomps her foot for added effect.

"I don't... I don't want to anymore."

"Oh, really? Well, I have news for you. A surprise that will make you change your mind." She grins, and I can see her horrible monstrosity show through beautiful innocence. "He's waiting for you. He's here, I can feel him." She whispers.

"Who? Hunter?" My heart drops.

"Aha. Hunter Crosby, the lover boy."

"Oh God, then I'm not going for sure." I dog-shake my head, my breathing shallow and tepid.

"Oh, but you have to. You have to! Why, I insist, Ailen Bright, I promise you, you'll enjoy it. Trust me." The glint in her eyes is part streetlights, part curiosity as to how long I will last, when will I break down, can I withstand the pull of Hunter's soul. She called me by my full name again, that means she's getting angry.

"What about the others?" I try to change the subject.

"Don't you worry about the others, they're big girls, they'll take care of themselves. We're talking about you right now, yes? So go ahead, eat your boy. Kill him, before it's too late, before you begin to suffer." Such anger flashes in her eyes that I recoil and take a step back.

"I'm... I'm not sure I can do it here. Too many people." I say, tracking back, hoping she'll buy my lie.

"Why? A night club is a perfect siren feeding ground. Loud music. People are mostly drunk or high. Some poor schmuck sliding to the ground is no big deal, especially when it happens in the restrooms. But even on the dance floor... General chaos plays to our advantage. This is siren fun. You see what I mean, Ailen?" She giggles. She called me by my first name only again. Good.

I exhale, understanding what she does. She's having a ball, I'm her new entertainment. And yet I'm too reluctant to give up on the whole big sister idea. Sisters fight and use each other too, right? So this is real family stuff.

I smile. "But those people in the park—"

"What about them?" She cocks her head to the side, tapping her foot lightly, impatient. Out of the corner of my eye I see that line of people has disappeared, and the guards disappeared with them through the main door. The concert is about to start.

"You weren't hungry. You killed them for clothes, for fun."

"For you." She stops chewing on her hair and peers at me. "I killed them for you, to show you how it's done, remember? I promised to teach you. And I want you to get it." Her finger taps on my forehead several times. "You're a *siren*, so better get used to it, better learn to enjoy it. Do you understand?"

My chest rumbles, empty again, and I nod.

"Yeah. I do." An irresistible urge to see Hunter one more time takes over me. I think, it will be just one time, just one more time, and then I'll be gone, forever. I'll go find my father, sing to him with full intent on killing him, and die.

"All right, then. Don't back off now, come on, let's go!" She tugs me at the sleeve.

"What if I won't be able to?" I retort one last time.

"Ailen, sometimes I think you're crazier than me, girl. I explained to you already, didn't I?"

I stare at her, momentarily blank. I hate it when it happens, under pressure I seem to forget the simplest things. Turning into a siren didn't cure my shitty memory, not one bit.

"I forgot. Sorry." I wince, almost expecting a blow.

Canosa moves closer to my ear, her lips brush my skin. "Here is what will happen, silly girl. I will watch you squirm, for years, tethering on the brink of dying but not quite dying yet. This is what will happen. Would you like to know how that feels?"

She stares me in the eyes.

"Is this how you felt? How you still feel?" I manage.

A man walks up to us and proceeds complaining that we're blocking his car and need to move. He's obviously drunk. Canosa's expression changes before I can read it, and the moment

is lost. Will I ever dare asking her straight out if she still loves my father? I glance at the man, furious, ready to sniff him out, then catching my impulse and suppressing it, horrified at how fast I got blinded. He opens the door to his Jeep and slams it, starts the car. Exhaust floods my nostrils and I cough.

Canosa grabs my chin and turns my face to hers. "Would you like me to kill your dear Hunter? I can do that for you. You're family now, that's what family does for each other." She's serious. I can see it in her eyes that she fully means it.

"No, no, it's okay. I'll do it."

"Good! Do you think he'll look good in an open-lid coffin, or should we have his face eaten off first, by deep water fish?" She pokes me with her finger, to top off a hideous laugh. I stand, dumbstruck. This must be siren humor.

Canosa continues, oblivious to my raised eyebrows. "You know what he did? He got drunk and then he got high. All because of you. He loves you that much." She sneers.

I hear the Jeep screech and veer into the road, but pay no attention.

"No, he didn't."

"Oh, yes, he did. Maybe he even picked up a new girl. Want to go see?" She tugs at me again, like an impatient little girl.

"No, he didn't, he couldn't... He'd never." I wring my hands.

"Well, you know him, don't you? I know him a little bit too, from all those nights he spent smoking in your bathroom. He'd hate a perfectly good ticket go to waste, wouldn't he? I saw him pick them, when you dropped them on the beach."

My eyes widen.

"You don't believe me? Go on then. Run along and see for yourself." She says, pouting her lips. "Or would you rather me send him to the bottom of the lake? My offer still stands. He'll make girls happy, a delectable surprise at the end of the day."

I become aware of the stares from security guys across the street, sucking on their smokes by the club's entrance, a disjointed duo of cheap guitars. Bitter. They drop their cigarette butts and saunter inside, shutting the double doors behind them.

I tremble from indecision, and I hate myself, hate this paralysis that overcomes me when I have to decide something important.

Canosa looks at me strange, cocking her head to the side. "So attached to him, are you? Want to know something about siren hunters?"

"What?" I hug myself tighter, to hold on to something. Anything. Cars come and go, another one pulls up into the spot next to us, left after the Jeep departed. I ignore it.

"Their job is to hunt sirens. *Hunt. Sirens.* You know what that means, right? Killing them. Exploding them into nothing. Do you understand?" She pauses and reaches out for my hand. "I didn't want to tell you, but..." She drops her gaze. "I trust you'll do what I asked you to do, so I'll go ahead and tell you. Maybe it'll help you decide."

I hold my breath, feeling that somehow I don't want to hear what she says next.

"Your mother didn't jump. They had a fight, on the bridge, with your father. He ran after her, you know that, right?" Canosa traces circles on asphalt with the tip of her pink rain boot.

I nod, afraid to say a thing.

"Well, he pushed her. I saw it."

I forget how to breathe. Reality turns inside out and I die some more. I'm double-dead, yet somehow still standing.

"WHAT?" I exhale, feeling my legs give out under me.

Canosa looks up. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, no, no." Each of my *no's* drips with regret. I study her face for a hint of lie, something. But she just looks at me, sad.

And I learn like millions learned before me, what happens when you cross that line, when you take that step, when you still breathe, but know it won't last much longer. When you want

to die so bad, you can't wait. When every single minute of existence is beyond pure pain, it's thorny agony. I want to go on a trip with no ticket back. I want to shed my skin, to withdraw, I want to cease to exist. Like those three seconds before I hit water under the Aurora bridge, this is my moment of no return.

"Well? Which one will it be?" Canosa says.

I don't answer.

I grab her hand, pull her across the street to car honks and curses, not caring to look, ignoring screeching of tires, slamming of breaks, smell of burned rubber. I march to club's entrance, stop a couple feet in front of its glass double doors, raise my right leg and kick right in the middle of one of them.

## Chapter 4. Chop Suey Club

A splintering crack is followed by tinkling of broken glass. Large shards of it land amidst dusty cloud roused from the floor, showering it with shattered crystal. A waft of blasting music mixed with stench of sweaty bodies and thick soul-soup hits me in the face. I step over the wooden bottom rail of the door frame, pulling Canosa behind me into dark corridor that separates the entrance from the dance floor, about ten feet into the club. There, behind a ticketing stand, illuminated with red lamp glow, three guards gape at us, still in shock of what they're seeing, obviously never having imagined they'd need to deal with a break-in in the middle of a concert. I meet their gaze and a maddening rage envelops me, rage aimed at them, at my father, at all men in general. I want to kill every single one of them, as if their gender itself somehow is at fault for my mother's death. And for a split second I think I understand my father's hate for women. A woman must've hurt him, hurt him really *really* bad.

Then chaos erupts. A few people at the edge of the dancing crowd turn to see what's going on, not because they heard anything, but probably because they felt us, felt cold air

oozing from the street, cooling their sweaty skin. A girl shrieks and drops her drink on the floor, another joins her, then one of the guards shakes off his slumber and swears loudly, making a step towards us on unsure legs.

"QUIET!" I yell, silencing them, their mouths open mid-shout.

Mist rolls from my lips, dropping temperature down and obscuring the entrance. Sound of my voice shakes walls once then gets swallowed by the beat of music. Dawdling drone of the band, their singing and electric guitars assault my eardrums, and I don't understand how it's possible to concentrate on feeding at a nightclub when surrounded by such loud noise. Then a fanatic yearning to see my favorite band nearly makes my knees buckle. I recognize the song, and the voices. It's Siren Suicides.

Canosa hooks her chin on my left shoulder and whispers loudly in my ear. "Who would've thought that you possess such passion, Ailen Bright, a girl full of surprises. I'm impressed. Shall we continue?"

I barely hear her over the thump-thump of the band's performance, wanting to see them and eat them at the same time. Canosa measures me in new light through her snowflake eyelashes, her pupils dilated in anticipation of a meal, her nose wrinkled, impatient.

"Life is disgusting, wouldn't you agree?" She says.

We lock eyes like we're allies, and I nod, unable to explain to her just how much her words resonate with me in this very moment.

"Yes. Yes, it is." I say.

More people notice our faintly glowing faces, some point at broken glass on the floor. Apparently, my shout didn't have as much effect due to loud music, because the first guard begins swearing again, taking small steps, his body swaying sideways, cautiously edging towards us, fists at the ready. I glance down at myself and at Canosa.

"Do we really look that scary?" I say over the noise.

"You'd be surprised." She says and emits her mad cackle. "I'll take this one, he sounds juicy enough. Those two are yours." She points at the other two guards, one of whom is dialing something on his phone, I bet 911, and another edges into the crowd, scared.

I'm enraged at their cowardice. Instead of directing my anger inward, as usual, I let it out. Second time in a row today, after having killed nine souls on our way. It feels so good to give in to my siren power.

"FREEZE!" I shout at the top of my lungs, and this time my voice is stronger, it cuts over cacophony of the jeering crowd that's still mostly oblivious to our presence. A visible sound wave rolls over their heads, rippling their hair, arresting

their bodies, as if someone put a music video on pause, yet the middle of the mass is still moving, and the lead singer is still blaring into microphone static, her song blasting through loud speakers in deafening crescendo.

I snarl and take a step forward, crushing glass shards with my stolen silver sneakers, when some semblance of morality tries to poke holes in my gut, telling me that I shouldn't do it. *You should stop and kill no more, it says, you promised.* And I shout inside, *Go fuck yourself!* and send it rallying down the depths of my soulless being, literally slamming fists into my stomach, attempting to shut it out, taking another step, crunching more glass. But it tries again. It worms under my skin, turns into a feeling of guilt that pulses behind my eyes in rhythm to music, permeating liquid trance of air with dark premonition. *Something bad is about to happen, it says.* Fear seizes my heart. *Shut up!* I think back at it, angry at my doubts, violently shaking my head, taking another step towards future victims, seeing out of the corner of my eye Canosa pass me and lunge at the fat guard that keeps swearing non-stop.

*Killing will ease my pain, I think. Why the fuck am I always so worried about others, how about for once I have an angry fit and let them worry about me? Huh? How about that, bitches?* And with that, I charge.

I leap two large steps, squat and jump onto the ticketing booth, knocking the phone out of the guard's hand with my right foot and landing next to him on the floor, inches away. His soul promptly shrouds me in a concoction of amateur guitar strumming, knuckle cracking and snoring. Salty. Well, it could've been worse. Salty is not too bad.

"Hey! How are you doing? I'm starving." I say and watch his face drain of emotion, turn ashen, his lips quivering, waiting for that bliss, that one minute of happiness promised by my singing, divine in its splendor.

Hunger drives me mad. I can't remember why I'm here in the first place, nothing matters except food standing in front of me. A poor image of a man with feeble features and a wisp of red hair, too thin for his age. He's no more than a high school graduate who got lucky and got a security job, perhaps some relative of his is friends with the owner, because the kid has no muscles for the job, his white slender fingers only fit for trembling, his shallow frame dressed in black.

I hate him.

"I hate you all." I hiss, and I want to kill him.

He stands stupefied, in a puppet-like manner. Alternating red and green lights flash across his face. There are shrieks from the crowd now, perhaps Canosa is making her way in, perhaps people finally noticing that something is wrong. Then the song

ends and in the middle of empty ambiance lead singer says into microphone.

"What the fuck, people... The door is--"

The interruption annoys me and I bark at her,

"SING!"

She grabs microphone and lets out a note, her eyes bulging out from fear, her long streaming blond hair glistening in red light. She's... She's Tara Patterson herself! My breath catches. I can't believe I just yelled at her, feeling strangely evil and giddy at the same time. There is my idol and I can command her to do anything I want. Wicked. I decide to find her after and apologize and explain everything, so she understands.

I peer into frozen faces of the crowd and yell,

"DANCE!"

Immediately, people unfreeze and begin moving. I stretch my neck and look back at my victim, blinded by desire. I lock my eyes with his, ignite his soul, suck in the air, let anger open my throat and sing, in sync with Tara, matching lyrics to my favorite song, Let me be.

"Why can't you let go of me..."

Her voice blares from the stage in her typical low timbre. My voice joins hers, resonating with it, sending shivers up my spine.

"Whispering in my ear

"Pulling on my skin

"Let me be happy, let me be happy

"And I will be, I will be..."

Fog consumes me and the guard in front of me. In the back of my mind a thought about Hunter surfaces, making me wonder where he is and if he's figured out by now that I'm here, then it gets trampled by immediate need to feed. Tendrils of dense rolling vapor roll off my skin, fitting the atmosphere perfectly, looking like one of those nightclub fog machines at work.

My voice sounds shrilly, thick with alternating high-pitched and throaty notes, matching the song on stage. I wonder if I can command a whole stadium of people, now that would be something.

"Why don't you believe in me

"Cradling my hopes

"Strangling my dreams

"Let me be happy, let me be happy

"And I will be, I will be..."

The guard falls to his knees and hugs my legs, his boots hitting floor in rhythm to the song, eyes grazing my face, mouth open. His whimpering soul hangs between us like a pendulum of delicate energy. I know he's done for and I don't feel sorry. He's food. I gulp the rest of it up and he drops dead.

"Bon appetite." Canosa says in my ear and slinks back into shadows. I didn't even notice her appearing next to me.

I lick my lips, tasting salt, feeling warmth spread though my empty chest, and then I burp. It feels good. Suddenly I remember why I'm here.

Hunter!

I step into dancing crowd like into a soup of moving limbs, listening intently for his soul, his gentle Vivaldi, and I don't hear it. I keep moving through this tangle of dancing bodies, first debating to make them all drop to the floor, then deciding against it, reeling at my power and at the fact that it's me who made them move. This is fun, this is my birthday party, these people are dancing because of me, and they'll dance as long as I like it. And Siren Suicides are singing for me, *for me*. A wide grin spreads across my face. This is the best party ever, and it's only missing one more person.

Hunter.

I grab men by their necks and turn them, searching for his face, his crooked grin, his choke of black curly hair on scrunched up forehead. His blue eyes that have no bottom.

But none of these are him. I hiss into their frightened faces, "It's my sixteenth birthday today. You're at my party. My party, my rules. DANCE," and they continue, listening like

puppets, until I stumble on this one tall guy who suddenly erupts and shrieks,

“Get your hands off me, bitch!”

“What did you call me?” I say, and then, without a moment’s hesitation, “You’re dead.”

I ignite his soul with barely a stare. His full-lipped mouth falls open under an upturned boyish nose, only the whites of his eyes visible on his dark skinned face. His soul is a mismatched trombone solo pierced by an occasional whistle against guitar background. Spicy. He folds to his knees, and I crash him to the floor with my foot, stepping on his chest and leaning over. People shift aside, dancing, giving us room, perhaps pretending like it’s none of their business.

The song weaves out of my mouth, strong and beautiful, in tune with Tara bellowing from the stage. He’s mesmerized, mumbling, “Man, you’ve got beautiful eyes, girl...” And I know it’s a lie, it all is. It’s my siren voice at work, to him I’m the ultimate dream.

His soul escapes through his lips into mine, warm, sharp and tasty, so spicy that it burns my tongue, filling me with hot energy. He’s sprawled on the floor, dark empty shape, gone.

Tara finishes her song. There is an awkward pause, and I stick my head out and over the crowd, yelling,

“STOP!”

People stop dancing, looking at me expectantly.

"Sing The Rain, please! Say it's for Ailen. It's my birthday today." My request sounds so childish, I cringe, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted it so bad.

"All right, lovely Seattle people! We have a birthday girl. Happy Birthday, Ailen. This is for you. The Rain." Tara says into the mike with her raspy British accent, and I pretend to believe that she really means it, that I didn't just make her, that it's all for me, for my party. There is another awkward silence after this, so I command them again,

"CLAP!"

The crowd erupts with applause, then quiets down.

A single clear note breaks through momentary silence, blocking out the rest of the soul discord. There he is, a few feet away from the stage and twenty feet away from me, hidden from my view by the pack of bodies. But I can hear him clearly.

"Hunter!" I yell. No response. Ravenous and exalted, I kick the bodies apart in my stroll. My appetite has barely awoken. I want desert now. That whipped heavenly sweetness on a warm crust, topped with the sound of birds and slippers on the parquet floor and the clanking of the dishes in preparation of the family dinner on a warm summer night; against the background of Vivaldi, the ultimate sweetness.

Tara begins singing.

"I'm lonely

"Watching the rain..."

People don't move, rooted to their positions, awaiting my next command. "Get out of my way, you fucking appetizers." I swear under my breath, moving through, and then losing it.

"FUCKING DANCE!" They begin moving, their sweaty faces glistening under kitsch Chinese lanterns hung from black ceiling.

For a second a sense of complete power grips me. I stop and look around me, at this rave-gone-wrong, all these people stuffed into a fifty by fifty feet dance hall with low ceiling, converging one over another in dim red light from the stage interspersed with shafts of green, for accent. They remind me of a can of sardines, packed so tightly that you have to fish them out with a fork, one by one, carefully, so as not to break off heads or fracture spines. Forget the fork. I want to sink my teeth and eat them all in one guzzle. Canosa was right, this is the perfect siren feeding ground, people being so high and drunk, they can't tell if they're being killed.

*I CAN KILL THEM ALL IF I WANT.*

Then I hear Hunter's soul again and plow forward.

"Drop by drop

"Falling

"Into my heart..."

I'm in the ticket of people's souls cacophony and blaring music, close to subwoofers oomping sound waves so loud, they crash at my body in gusts of wind. People dance like robots, parting to give me way, terror in their eyes mixed with some dazed ecstasy.

I ignore them, listening intently for Hunter's melody only. It sinks into the noise then resurfaces again. I close my eyes to hear it better. Compared to other souls, his is close to perfection, but it's out of tune, that's why I couldn't recognize it amidst this racket.

It's burning.

Two more people part like jellyfish in warm water, and suddenly he's in front of me. I stop in shock and admiration, biting my lip.

His face is young and happy. His hair is curled and sweaty, nose covered with freckles, eyes closed. He wears the same tattered grey hoodie, now damp from sweat, hanging loosely over his usual sagging jeans. He's a horrible dancer, moving in a series of jerky steps. There is a bottle of beer in his left hand and... a girl on his right arm, sipping on something frothy. She opens her eyes, and before I can stop myself, my arm is flying in front of me, kicking her drink out of her grip. It splashes its content in her face and clinks on the ground, breaking.

"Watch where you're going, bitch!" She spits at me, blinking and wiping her face, smearing heavy mascara into black streaks.

"Shut up and get out of my way." I tell her with grim satisfaction, knowing that she'll do as I say, and she obediently stumbles into the crowd, her face back at me, gaping, shocked into a doll that can't close her plastic mouth. I notice lovely lines of her diamond-shaped face, the curves under her skin-tight dress, and add. "Call me bitch one more time, and I'll kill you." She squeals and disappears.

"I see my father let you out after all. Not wasting any time, are you? Nice girlfriend." I say into Hunter's ear to make sure he hears me over the noise, momentary rage filing me with pulsing regularity.

"Huh?" He opens his eyes for a moment, blinks at me, and without a hint of recognition resumes his dance, closing his eyes again. He's not only drunk, he's high as fuck. Faint odor of weed on his breath washes over me, followed by that sour reek of too much cheap beer. I want to slap him, to make him see me, but I can't bring myself to touch him, trembling with disgust. Then hate. Then overpowering blinding fury.

"I really loved you, you know? I really did. But you're just like any other guy, aren't you?" Tears spring from my eyes and roll down my cheeks, I flick at them angrily. "All of you,

you're all the same. I hate your guts. I hate men. I hate you, I hate you, I HATE YOU!"

Uncontrollable spasms shake my body, I pass tongue over my lips, and inhale, going for the kill, oblivious to any thinking, forgetting my promises to myself to leave Hunter alone and kill myself instead, letting the siren in me fully take over.

My focus sharpens, my senses awake to their fullest. Something tells me that this feeding will be different and difficult. His soul is burning, and it might be too late. I need something else to help me, something extra. Vaguely, I remember the feeling of humming to the lake to make it move the boat, humming to the rain to make it part. Holding on to that feeling, guided by siren instinct, I exhale and produce dense mist that descends onto the crowd like a giant tongue, licking people into oblivion. I breathe out some more, it thickens, drowning out everybody except Hunter who still dances in front of me. Thumping rhythm of moving bodies and loud music dies to a mere echo.

"I tried this twice before, better not fail now. They say three times is a charm." I mutter under my breath and pull open Hunter's eyelids.

"Look at me! LOOK AT ME!" I snap fingers in front of his face, he focuses on me with some difficulty, until I feel our

gazes lock. This is my ignition point, but it's feeble, like that of a lighter that's almost out of fluid.

There is a shimmering bridge of staring between us, yet it seems weak, and it's hard for me to hold it.

I begin singing.

"There you are..."

My first notes tremble and then descend between his parted lips into the warmth of his throat. He appears to be glazed, mesmerized, moaning. I catch myself inhaling his scent, pine with musk undertones underneath the vapor of beer and weed. His soul is louder now, coming up his chest, responding to my call, still sweet but sour in places, burning. Hunter sighs. I add a couple more verses, echoing song from the stage.

"Without me you cry..."

My song streams effortlessly and strikes upon him with hypnotic force. He moans louder. I inch closer, infuse lethal tones into my voice, awakening more of his wounded soul, begging it to join me. There it comes, a thin coil of smoke, yet it feels like pulling a heavy rope that slips through my fingers. I lurch at it, greedy.

"I surround you

"Love me or I die

"I adore you

"See me or I fly..."

Hunter begins humming to my tune, his lips parted, his eyes dark and drowsy, pupils dilated.

"Ailen?" He says, suddenly recognizing me.

He must have already started turning into a siren hunter and my voice doesn't have as much effect on him. My concentration breaks and I scowl, watching whatever I managed to inhale trail back into his mouth. Before there is time to react, his face turns sinister and bitter.

"You left me." He says with such finality and accusation that my rage evaporates in an instant.

"I... I didn't..." Words escape me.

"Your dad said you'd come for me anyway, because I taste good. Because I'm food for you. I didn't believe him, you know? I told him he's full of shit. But here you are, fucking trying to suck my soul out." He laughs mechanically, his eyes turning cold, still reeling from booze and weed, but clear enough to be mean.

"This is not why..." I begin, not knowing what to say, how to explain my rage, feeling my knees give out from terrible guilt and shame and pain as to what I almost did.

"No need to explain, I get it. Go ahead, finish me. I'm pathetic, see? Normal people fall in love with normal girls, *living* girls, just like what you said. Well, not me. No-no-no. I picked a monster." His blue eyes turn greenish in the disco

light, menacing. There is no promise of warmth in them anymore. In fact, his soul doesn't sound sweet anymore, it's sour and I can barely hear it.

On the word *monster* I want to collapse and die.

Fog disintegrates around us, giving way to dancing people and pounding music. They converge on me and stare me down, as if the power of my voice has left them enraged and they want their revenge. To add to this, the blonde girl that was hanging on Hunter returns back with two fresh bottles of beer.

I get a better look at her. A perfect blonde with a silky cascade of hair, oval slanted eyes, full lips, and a good size butt that I never had, wrapped tightly in a sequin dress that sends off obnoxious sparkles.

"Is that bitch bothering you again, babe?" She says and hands Hunter the bottle of beer.

"She's already calling you babe?" I say and hiccup.

"Are you jealous?" Hunter says through teeth and takes a swig at his bottle.

"I told you not to call me a bitch." I begin towards the girl and feel no power in my voice. "I said—"

"I don't give a fuck what you said, girl." She says, and behind her angry faces of the crowd nod. I feel surrounded by them and take a step back, only to bump into some guy who pushes me back towards the middle of the circle.

"Come here, babe. I'll make you feel better." The blonde says and pulls Hunter into a greedy kiss, which he not only accepts but answers with his typical theatrics, sticking out his tongue this way and that, glancing sideways to make sure I see it.

I retch, my chest feels crushed as if air got forced out of my lungs.

"You didn't just kiss this... this... - How could you - I can't believe you're so wasted!"

"Go away. I've had enough of your drama." He mumbles through busy lips and swats at me with his beer bottle like I'm a fly, spraying foam on my silver jacket.

I feel my head lose touch with my body, stupefied, unable to move.

Hunter breaks the kiss, angry. "Whasss wrong? Want me to repeat?" He slurs loudly. "Leave it. Leave me alone. Will you go already?" Perhaps I hear tears in his voice, perhaps it's wishful thinking.

The girl plants herself over his mouth again. Disbelief doesn't let me move. I flush with jealousy, then shame, then revulsion, then utter humiliation, and then I lose it, not knowing anymore what I feel. My stomach dives a thousand feet, rises up as bitter bile.

Tara seems to have recovered from my commands as well, because she finishes yet another song and shouts from the stage,

"You're making me feel like I'm high, Seattle. Are you having a good time?"

People shout back, jeer.

I feel small and ugly, like an impostor that needs to be ejected, that has no place here. This is not my party after all, whom was I kidding?

"All right! This next song I dedicate to my parents. Thanks mum and dad. I love you. I love you very much." Her thick British accent makes me think of a man and a woman, perhaps as stalky and broad in shoulders as she is, dark blonde, maybe almost red, with proud smiles on their faces, and I want to wail, wail like a baby.

Hunter's hand travels down the blonde girl's waist, and I push them both away from me before I can stop myself.

"Fucking leave!" His face is mean, his voice a shriek. This is not Hunter I know. This is someone else, someone revolting and bitter and angry. An almost formed siren hunter and a future women hater like my father.

Bewildered, I turn and dive through watching people. Moving feels like cutting below a dream, underwater, each step heavy and excruciatingly slow. My mouth is dry, my muscles resist as if atrophied.

"Wait!" I hear Hunter stumble behind me.

But I've made up my mind. Seeing him one more time was a mistake, a big fat mistake. I need to get out of his life and disappear. A pounding migraine threatens to split my skull. I cover my ears, as if it would help. I don't want to hear Hunter's shouts. I want out of this constant noise and into complete silence, at least once in my siren life. Through the crowd I go, crashing blindly past the stage, by the bar, towards the restrooms, kicking open an unlocked steel door, turning left into a narrow corridor behind it, its walls painted bright red. A few guards try to stop me, I elbow past them, heading towards what looks like back door exit.

The door is plain wood and I kick it before realizing it's probably unlocked and I can open it in the normal fashion. I twist its cool metal handle and swing it wide open, closing my eyes, inhaling damp fresh evening air, taking a step forward, ready to run, and bumping into someone who was about to enter instead, probably one of the backstage guys unloading equipment, but then I would've heard his soul...

I open my eyes.

"Papa?" I gasp, breath caught in my throat, sweet smell of the evening forgotten.

## Chapter 5. Lake Washington

"There you are, sweetie." He seizes my right arm and presses a sonic gun in the middle of my chest. "I was wondering if I'd find you here. I've looked everywhere for you!" Barely discernable coffee breath escapes his lips as he speaks. I'm basked in a trail of expensive perfume, his signature #10 Aqua Pour Homme Marine Cologne for men by Bulgari. Italian, of course. He's dressed meticulously, in a casual yet sophisticated attire complete with shiny oxfords, dark wool jacket and a carelessly tucked in scarf, woven from finest cashmere. As if this is not a hunting occasion for him, but a visit to an opera or something. Our eyes meet, and I feel a tug in my gut, a sudden horror. I know this time he wouldn't simply let me go. He is my menacing nightmare, forever stalking me, always somehow knowing where I am. And, like in a proper nightmare, I'm always running. This seems to be our game.

"It's you. You did it. You pushed mom off the bridge. Canosa told me. How could you?" I whisper.

His eyes widen for perhaps a fraction of a second, or maybe it's my imagination. Then he proceeds with his usual response, as if he doesn't hear me. He never hears me.

"Look what you make me do, Ailen. You make me waste a whole day looking for you all over the city. I've been sick with worry. You're leaving me no choice."

And I do something I thought I'd never do, never *could* do, though I imagined it a thousand times and told Canosa about it when she was a bronze faucet in the bathroom, describing it in sickening detail, to the point where I believed I did it for real.

I lean back slightly, raise my right leg and kick him in the balls with my knee, hard. He opens his mouth in a grimace of shock and a soundless yelp of pain. Sonic gun drops out of his hand and crashes on asphalt, rolling into gutter. His grip on my arm slackens and the last I see of him is his chin, perfectly shaved and shining with freshly applied lotion, his head lowering down at me as if in slow motion, his body bending.

The horror of what I've done overpowers my rationality. I dared to hit him! I *DARED* TO HIT HIM! I fall on my butt, roll onto all fours, dive between his legs, kicking him off balance in the process, and run. My promises to die are promptly replaced by an instinct to escape imminent punishment. I feel like I'm five again and I run for my life, whatever a siren's life is worth.

I cross the street, weaving my way between cars, jogging along the pedestrian sidewalk. A focused sonic boom hits the air

behind me. Craaack! That's death on my heels, whispering in my mind. It's what I wanted, to die, right? Then why the fuck am I running? Pain pricks my ears with a thousand needles, bright circles shimmer in front of my eyes, ready to explode. I know that if I stop to even catch my breath, I'm toast.

I break through a pack of walking teenagers because they happened to be in my way. They gasp in surprise, then start cussing me out. I pay them no attention, already about twenty feet ahead, passing display windows on my right and glimpsing my reflection, that of a *mad* teenager, the one that doesn't belong, with unnaturally white skin and frightened eyes, skinny and lonely, sprinting to the point of nearly stumbling. That's a siren for you. That's me.

And I think of Canosa, or her grace and poise and elaborate meanness that can be even adorable sometimes. I wonder if she saw me leave, wonder if she's still at the club, wonder where other sirens are, but none of this seems important. The only important thing is to get away, away from it all to some place quiet where I can rest and think. Canosa's face floats up in my mind again, her words pulsing with excruciating clarity, the words she told me when I was looking down from Aurora Bridge, deciding. *Ailen Bright, do it for your mother, remember? Hurt him, for hurting you mother.* Can I, ever? There he is, not more

than forty feet behind me, and yet I'm running, running away, again.

There are more distant sonic blasts, but none of them hit me. My legs carry me forward, past closed coffee shops, by grocery stores and gas stations, faster, faster, creating a certain rhythm that in of itself is soothing, like a heartbeat in my mother's womb. One-two, three-four. One-two, three-four.

Water. I want water. Water calms me, water will rescue me, tell me what to do, soothe me like a mother would soothe a crying toddler, with silky nonsensical babble that doesn't have to have meaning, because it's the tone of it that's magical, the infusion of love and caring that's so calming.

I hop over fences, dash through backyards, race past astounded late night pedestrians, dog leashes in one hand, cups of coffee in the other. I splash through puddles, jog across evening roads, skulk through sleepy suburban alleys, all the way to Lake Washington guided only by its vibration felt on my skin, its sulfurous smell. Water. All I need right now is water.

I'm getting closer, running up the hill, then down, past flickering lampposts, across Lake Washington boulevard, through a tangle of Madrona trees on the beach, and finally onto a wooden pier jutting into lake. There it is. I made it.

I stop at the very edge of the pier, bend down, clasp my chest and breathe in short rasps, watching my faint reflection

shimmer in dark water. Old wooden beams of the pier creak timidly under my feet, mimicking the flow of waves. The whole thing is rotten and shaky. Distant drone of highway traffic gets punctured occasionally by a seagull shriek or two. Air smells moldy. After a minute of steadying my breath, I finally raise my head to look around.

It must be close to midnight, because the sky above me is dotted with stars. The lake itself is a huge velvety expanse, black like oil, about thirty four square miles in size, excavated by a glacier into a long ribbon-like shape, at least it's as much as can I remember from reading about it, imagining all the while that real sirens lived here. A smirk of irony crosses my face. If I only knew back then that it would be true. If only somebody told me.

To my left and to my right, each about two miles away, two garlands of passing lights stretch over lake's surface, 520 and I-90 floating bridges, as if the lake is my pool and the bridges are my lane ropes. As if this is an Olympic swimming competition, only I'm competing against myself. What would be my medal and who would give it to me, if I earned it?

I tighten into a string, arms pressed to my sides, two legs as one, neck straight, gaze forward. A memory of my father's sonic gun blast acts as my starting signal. I dive in head first, pierce water surface with barely a splash like a pro,

inhale the liquid, shiver, glad to get soaked. I gulp it greedily and swallow, gulp and swallow. Lake hushes me, forever oblivious to emotional drama, so muddy, stagnant, and quiet.

"Thank you." I say into water and watch dark bubbles speed to the surface. "Really, I mean it, *thank you.*"

I don't know what I'm doing, where I'm going, I simply swim, deeper and deeper into silence.

Rare fish rush aside to avoid collision as I burrow through lake's underbelly leaving a trail of woken sand behind. It's crunchy on my teeth, some of it is making its way into my mouth as I gulp more water, breathing it out through gills. Gurgling warble passes through my throat, the slosh-slosh of oxygen flow into my blood. Apart from this, all noise is gone. Darkness is cold, complete. Almost icy.

I swim deeper and daydream of a place with no sound, a place where the very absence of noise will make my ears malfunction. Yeah, right, it won't be any good. I'd still hear myself, my own breathing, my dead heart beating, my eyelashes brushing against each other. Maybe I could find a desolate cave at the base of an ocean, an echo-free chamber. I'd starve myself, hibernate. No, that won't work, my soulless chest will still ring with void, with hunger. Only one place can give me complete silence.

Death.

But I just blew my chance. What a coward. A hypocrite. Always running, pretending I'm dead, but not quite dead yet, still believing in this stupid "one minute of fantasy is better than nothing" bullshit. Deciding to stand up and sing to my father and then losing it in the most pathetic way.

I touch the bottom of the lake and hover inches above it. Water presses my silver jacket close to me, pushes on my eardrums, I must be about a hundred feet deep.

A sticky web of self-loathing, self-hatred and agony weaves its strands around me. Then an icepick of a thought strikes my mind. *This is what Papa always wanted, complete silence.* I take a handful of sand and let it sit on my palm, catching individual grains and rolling them between fingers, feeling them because I can barely see them in my glow. I slowly float forward, gazing at debris strewn about me, yet my thoughts return to where they started.

Once again, against my will, I think that maybe, just maybe, I begin to understand my father. I wonder what it's like to be a siren hunter. Was my mother's singing driving him mad, was he acutely aware of every single sound, amplified by his brain into excruciating pain, was that it? Was that why he pushed her? And what about Hunter? What's in it for him? We could still be together if not for this whole siren hunting business. Well, if I didn't jump, that is. If I didn't turn.

They say hindsight is twenty-twenty. Here you have it, prime example, except I can't turn back and fix everything, it's broken beyond repair. Hunter hates me now, he called me a *monster*. And that girl, so blonde-perfect, so warm, so alive... I'll never be like her, forget it. I can't even manage to be a proper siren. There is simply no place where I fit.

I'm a loner, a killer. Ugly, like Papa. How am I any better?

I float and enter a current that swirls me up and pulls me forward for a while, along with strands of kelp and other debris. I don't fight it, letting it carry me, feeling numb. As sudden as it started, the current lets me go. Sandy bottom turns rocky and climbs up, water gets warmer. I lazily move myself forward, not caring to move my arms or legs but humming to the lake instead, and not because I want to swim somewhere, but simply to do something. Anything. To run away from my thoughts into silence.

A few crabs zigzag between rocks, their tiny souls a clickety-clack of claws, scattering away from me. That's right, I'm a predator and they feel it. How many would it take to match one human soul, thousands? Millions? Revolting, but possible. Horror floods me. I *am* a predator, food seems to be always on my mind. Disgusting.

Here's my current tally. The fishmonger from the market, nine people on the way to Chop Suey Club, and its two guards, that makes it a dozen total. Their souls raised my body's temperature back to ninety eight degrees, but it was borrowed warmth, because I don't have any of my own. It seeps out already, leaving my body gutted, empty. Hungry.

Twelve victims in twelve hours.

I don't want to kill anymore.

The pain is too much and I kick into a mad race, flapping both legs, thrusting my arms, propelling myself forward and humming at the same time. I turn into a living torpedo, covering first hundred yards in one minute, then speeding up to ten miles per hour to finally bursting forward at fifty knots, travelling at some crazy submarine speed, turning pieces of boats and other litter in my wake and creating a rushing tunnel of turbid water behind me. On some instinctual level, I feel passing by my house and continuing forward, hearing occasional boats above me, beginning to rise to surface as soon as water turns colder and saltier.

I must be in Puget Sound, but still I keep moving, my energy ebbing yet not dulling the pain. I think that perhaps if I exhaust myself, I'll forget everything and simply linger. At least for a little bit, at least for one minute.

I keep propelling myself. An hour goes by, another, perhaps two or three more when finally my muscles tire out, my vocal cords buzz with exhaustion and I let myself swim up.

I break the surface and hit open water, bobbing on high waves to foggy dawn and pelting freezing rain. The sky is sleepy with heavy steel clouds hiding rising sun. Looks like I swam through the night and it must be early morning of the day after my birthday. Rare seagulls shriek, their cries swallowed by the magnitude of violent water lulling, the breaking and the rolling and the crashing of the waves. I breathe in salty air, realizing that I'm no longer in Puget Sound like I thought, this must be open ocean, Pacific Ocean itself. The vastness of it makes me feel free, fitting in its loneliness.

I lick my lips, salty, brush wet hair out of my face. A wave rolls over me, covering me momentarily and spitting me back out again. I glide against its swell, watching the sleeves of my jacket ripple. My growing pain sinks its teeth even deeper into me, pushes past coldness hidden so well in my marrow that it touches my bones, and I ache to hear it one more time.

"*This* is what I'm running from." I say to the sky, to the rain, finally understanding. "Hunter's soul."

Hunter.

His soul's melody is the only lullaby to which I can sleep, the only rhythm that makes me pulse and forget and dissolve. I

try to chase it away, but it just won't go. Like a stubborn bug it whizzes inside my head, bumping around my skull, making circles in my consciousness, forever restless. The flawless summer, violin concerto No. 2 in G minor, Opus 8, by Antonio Vivaldi. Set against the texture of all things warm, chirping birds, whispering slippers on parquet floor, clanking of the dinner dishes.

Now burning.

Perhaps I'll never hear its splendor again, because I'm the very cause it's expiring.

"Hunter." I say, to taste his name, to hear it and to savor its sound. This is why I keep failing at killing myself, out of the impossibility to cut him away, to lose him forever. Another wave tugs me under it. I surface and cough, a new thought drilling a hole in my pitiful heart.

*What did I do? Oh my God, what did I do? I left him. Canosa probably snuffed him out like sweet melodic pudding. How did I not think about this before? I shouldn't have left him, he was too convenient of a target for her!* I slap myself repeatedly on the head, first with a palm of my hand, then with a fist, then I scoop handfuls of my hair and pull, pull hard to feel physical pain.

"It's my fault!" I cry to the sky. "All my fault!"

But the sky doesn't answer, it keeps sending rain on my upturned face like a million tiny slaps.

I deserve to be slapped. Because I didn't have enough strength to do it myself. My needy selfish *me* got so scared; my poor little *me* wanted so badly to run away; my sorry egotistic *me* was so afraid to face my father. Me, me, me. All I think about is *me*. Good job, Ailen, Hunter is probably dead right now and you're stuck to live on.

Suddenly I want to scream. The wind picks up as if in tune to my need. Waves roll over me, hurtling me underwater, kicking me back out again. I flap madly with my arms, twirl my legs to stay afloat, hating my wet sticky jeans because they restrict movement, noticing that my feet are bare. Somewhere in the rush of speed I must have lost both sneakers.

"Breathe, Ailen, breathe." I tell myself.

I inhale and exhale, on repeat, to prevent myself from hyperventilating. A mile away a large animal or animals must be on the move, maybe killer orca whales, their souls a gentle chorus of cymbals. Can I eat those, maybe? I violently shake my head to stop thinking about food.

"You didn't finish him? What's wrong with you? Are you a siren or not?!?" Canosa's voice breaks over tumbling water, and I spin around, startled, promptly forgetting every single one of

my worries, having them sliced off my horizon by her sudden appearance.

"Canosa?" I say. A seagull shrieks, then another. Rain patters softly, streaking down my face. Waves crash and roll.

"CANOSA?"

"No need to yell, silly girl, would you learn your manners! I'm right here." Canosa's head bobs up to the surface and she glides towards me until we're a few feet apart. Her long hair streams in white tendrils next to her body, perfect as always, alabaster white, as if chiseled from finest marble. I tear my eyes away from her body to stop staring, stop wishing mine was like hers and not the boyish type, new breasts or not.

"Canosa!" I say again, as if to ascertain myself that she is real, that she is here. "How did you know where to find me?"

"You're not the only one who can swim fast, you know." She wrings out her hair, as if it won't get wet right away. "And I don't like ocean water, it makes my hair all tangled up and dull. Ugh."

"I was just thinking about you. I was just wondering..." The question dies on my lips. I was going to ask her whether or not she killed Hunter, but the idea itself somehow threatens to become real if spoken out loud.

"Go ahead, finish. What were you going to ask?" She says.

"I was just wondering..." I start again, unable to say it.

"Did your mother do everything for you, is that what you're used to? I don't recall you telling me that part, but I'm inclined to believe it's true. Three times. You've had three perfect opportunities, and you blew them!"

She glares at me, and in the middle of an open ocean her grin reminds me of open jaws, jaws that belong to a shark that's about to eat me.

"I..."

"DO YOU REALIZE IT'S HARDER TO KILL A SIREN HUNTER THE MORE HE FALLS IN LOVE, SILLY GIRL?" She yells in my face with such force, that I feel like even ocean water itself retreats and I'm suddenly dry and wind-slapped, my ears ringing.

"He doesn't love me. He told me I'm a monster. And my mother never..."

Canosa grabs me by the shoulders and literally raises me out of the water about a foot, shaking me violently for a few seconds and then dropping me, so that for a moment I go under.

I swim up and cough. "What was that for?"

"I set it up for you. Background noise for cover, perfect location, target drunk, pumped with drugs. I even got him a girl, to make you jealous. What else did you need me to do? How do you intend to be part of our family if you can't even kill a budding siren hunter? Explain yourself, Ailen Bright!"

I enter a state of shocked lamb that can only do one thing, stare, stare with innocent stupid eyes that spell out, *I'm scared, I don't know what to do, kill me!* This always happens to me when someone shouts in my face and I'm not prepared. My father used to do it all the time, to make me stand up to him, make me break this habit. Needless to say, it only made things worse.

"Stop staring at me like you're mute, say something!" Canosa is fuming. Her pretty lips quiver from anger, her beautiful eyes have taken on a menacing sheen. Her otherwise lovely features look sharp and prickly.

"I couldn't..." I start saying and want to slap myself. This is my typical response, to apologize. Everything is always my fault, my father made me apologize to him for every wrong-going, no matter who did it.

"Oh, don't cry." She pouts her lips and brushes my cheeks lightly. "All I want to hear from you is a good enough reason why. Why couldn't you do it." She smiles, her anger gone.

"Because..." I swallow. "Because I love him." I say finally. Another wave crashes over us, and this time I let it carry me several feet down, not caring to come up, not caring to do anything anymore, wanting to simply drift until I cease to exist.

Canosa hooks her arm around my waist and pulls me up.

I breathe in salty ocean air, letting her hold me. We bob like this for a minute, or maybe for an hour, two sisters bound by the same grief, in the middle of nowhere. She gazes into my eyes, and I see sadness, deep inside her, lurking quietly, before she manages to push it down and appear cheery again. Cheery and mean, her old usual self.

"Then I will make you." She says. "That's what family does. We help each other in difficult times. Do you understand?"

"What are you going to do?" I say, my words rushing out faster than usual.

"Hmmm..." She trails off, tapping a finger on her chin.

"No, not Hunter! No-no-no! What are you going to do to him?" I break out of her embrace, shivering.

"Well- I haven't decided yet. But I think I have an idea." She twirls her finger around a lock of her hair and chews on it.

"WHAT?" I scream. "What idea?" Then I begin spitting questions one after another, as if a dam was opened in my mind and everything held up in it finally has been permitted to move out. "Wait, is he okay? Did you see him at the club after I left? Did he leave? And did that girl leave with him? Did he drive in his truck? Does that mean, he fixed it? But he was drunk, so did he drive drunk? Did you see my father? Did he..."

I take another breath to continue my tirade when Canosa waves her hand at me and dives, a fountain of frothy water

erupting in the place where she just kicked her feet. A streak of white foam burrows into steel-blue of ocean water and I realize she left me alone, moving away at enormous speed.

"WAIT!" I yell, and dive after her.

A swirl of eddies promptly grabs me and twists me around, threatening to snap my bones. This is what it must feel like to be caught in a turbulent submarine wake.

"CANOSA, WAIT!" I yell into churning liquid. I get dragged further down by the current, it saps my energy, envelops me in a cloak of gurgling noise and rough salty taste.

"Where are you?" I peer into darkness around me, moving arms and legs, and then falling slack, still turning this way and that like a puppet, but slower now. Wake recedes, and I begin swimming without any idea which direction I came from and which direction Canosa went.

"Canosa, please. Why do you always have to leave like this?"

I decide to swim up to orient myself and kick with both legs, moving slowly towards the light. I surface, join the rain and suddenly begin to cry. I can't fight anymore, I have nothing left to fight with. Guilt surges through me like a focused jet of scalding hot water, sears my intestines, sets my face on fire.

"Please! Don't do it, don't harm him. I'll make up the courage. I'll go back and finish the job. I promise." I don't know why I say it and to whom, it's no use. I know I have barely enough strength left to stay afloat unless I eat a soul, and I decided not to kill anymore. The sky weeps with me, it must know that my crying is not enough. I wish I could drown in its tears, lose myself and disappear.

If I could only listen to Hunter's soul one more time.

"I'm lost." I say, as if the sky will help me. "I'm tired, and I'm lost. What do I do?" I can barely move my lips and I need to eat, soon.

Ocean swells around me, a liquid mass of ignorance. Its waterline breaks my world in two, above and below. Both pewter-grey, one light, one dark.

*Which one will it be, Ailen Bright? I think to myself. Are you going to run like a coward, unable to stand moods ripping through you like chopping knives, the perpetual up-and-downs of extreme emotions? Will you keep choosing this slippery, numbing existence of a recluse, fluctuating between bouts of endless amnesia? Or will you go after your love, even if it means death? Take your pick.*

Indecision sobs within me, striking a precarious balance act. I forgot what it's preserving, life or death or something else. Doesn't matter.

*FUCKING DOESN'T MATTER.*

Then what does? WHAT? I wait for some answer, buoyant, anxious, prone to fleeing.

Rain stops. Waves subside. Morning advances its imminent arrival, thinning the clouds. Sky turns pink. Ocean's turbid water turns almost turquoise, standing still like paint in a giant stone bucket. Fog clings to distant mountains, patches of snow rest untouched on their tops. First sunrays burn my skin and I scowl. My instinct is to run again.

"STOP IT!" I yell at myself. "Stop running away all the time, you chicken! At least once in your stupid pathetic little life, STOP... FUCKING... *RUNNING!*"

But it's the only thing I know how to do well. To run.

"I need... to stop... running away... from myself." I whisper. Air feels thin, breathing hurts, oxygen deserts me. It's not a panic attack, no, I'm just disoriented. I don't suffer from a mental disorder, no, I'm simply extra sensitive. I don't need help, thank you, I'm fine on my own. Debilitated suicidal teenager, moronic siren, femme fatale gone crazy. What else am I good for? I know the answer.

"Women were not made to haul water on their backs, Papa." I say, laying flat on my back on quiet water, floating like a sea star, watching the sky clear off the clouds.

"You got it all wrong. We're not evil!" My angry cry forces excess air through vocal cords, coughing up each word with phlegm. I feel energy rise in me, something that was reserved and got woken up not by hate but by something else.

"It's love that you see in our gaze. Women were made to love. The way we look at you, the way we talk, the way we walk. Of course every man wants a piece of that. IT'S CALLED LOVE." I cry at this, loudly, letting it all out the way I never allowed myself, always keeping it in check.

"Yes, men want to hear our song, a song to die for, because love is the only thing worth dying for, Papa. Have you ever loved in your life? Have you? TELL ME, HAVE YOU?"

I don't talk to the sky anymore, I simply scream. My voice echoes off its open dome, magnified tenfold.

"DID YOU LOVE CANOSA? WAS THAT REAL? OR WAS IT FAKE LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE?"

As soon as last words leave my lips, I know that if he's a siren hunter, that must mean he really *did* love her, if what Canosa says is true. Perhaps not everything is lost with my father, perhaps there is something that's still left alive in him, deep inside.

And I'm done running.

Calm settles over me, pushing the rest of emotions askance. The retreating game is over. I think of a plan to clean up my

mess. It's simple. I'll try to revive my father's soul, see if I can bring it back to life. I won't kill him, I'll let him live. And I'll try to stop Hunter from loving me, try to revert the process, make him normal again. Both of them. I'll need to reason with Canosa and the girls so they leave them alone. Probably fight, maybe even die in the process. For real.

"Sounds like a plan. This time when I finally bite the dust, at least it won't be for nothing." I say and grin.

World rights itself. I find myself humming and drifting to the shore, minutes ago miles and miles away and now within a couple hundred feet or so. Sheer will propels me forward, my movements dull and automatic, my head above water, body below, rain jacket rippling in the current. I'm close to the stream mouth of Salish Sea, that point where it flows into Pacific ocean. A couple fishing boats make its way out on their daily prowl. And there is the line of the beach. I see its dirty sand, slippery logs scattered about like giant's fingers, bumping and bobbing in the surf. Beyond that dark woods grin at me, their branches bristle, their tops graze the bottom of the sky that rapidly turns blue.

A crowd of seals rests on a jutting rock, more like a velvet carpet of something brown and breathing. One of them barks, another answers. Their souls overlap each other like badly played tubas in an orchestra, sounding rich and fatty.

*This, I think, I can eat this.*

I glide along with the tide, my head turned left, taking in the scene, when a large amount of water feels misplaced to my right. A loud snort follows a gigantic splash. My heart skips a beat, and I get doused by a wave. Underwater, our eyes meet for a brief second. Within an arm's reach from me, a humpback whale passes, its large glistening body crusted over with shells, its tail rising and falling slowly in motion. Its magnificent soul envelops me in a boom of a lowest note a pipe organ can produce, accented by high-pitched wails and trilling, as if it pursed its lips and frowned at me, shaking its head, saying, *don't you even think about it.*

I'm dumbstruck.

It takes me a few minutes and I float up.

"I swear... I'll, never. Ever." I say and swallow.

The whale answers me with one last snort, it sounds like a laugh, but it's approving.

I feel insignificant in its presence, small, pathetic, my problems somehow unimportant. The whale swims away from me, beautiful, overpowering in its grace, its tail breaching the surface in one last goodbye wave. This is what I needed, last push, to be sure about what I'm doing.

Salty water rolls over my head as I dive and speed towards the city.

## Chapter 6. Seattle

I part murky water, gliding fast, propelling myself forward by desire to share what I've seen, what I've felt, my hunger blocked out and put to rest in the deepest corner of my ribcage. I want to hold on to this overflowing emotion, pour its exuberance into a song and wake my father's soul, make it rise from its ashes. Can I do it? Or is it burned to the ground, with nothing left but hate? And what about Hunter? My heart twists from ache, but pain no longer stops me. I'm not running anymore, I'm moving forward. *Hunter, hold on, I'm coming.* Hours fly by like minutes. I make it through Salish sea curve, pass interconnected basins of the Puget Sound, feeling water warm up the closer I get to the city, and finally reaching ship canal. I turn into it, moving cautiously so as not to attract attention. Commuter souls make a racket on their way to work, in cars, on bikes, on foot. The hustle intensifies as I close in on the main city artery - Aurora bridge, the bridge that I gazed down from, thinking about my mother, about what she felt, why she jumped, never imagining the truth.

I surface by our marina. It's the day after my birthday, and it's not morning anymore, rather lunchtime, judging by the

sun and the amount of foot traffic on Fremont bridge. Sunrays break through milky haze of a typical September afternoon that by midday will probably completely disappear behind the clouds. Smell of gasoline hits me, stinky in contrast to open ocean air that was fresh and salty. I gaze up, drifting unconsciously to my right where my father usually moors his boat, but I don't see its slender nose poking out. He must be on the prow, cruising, perhaps looking for me, or for Canosa?

I breathe faster, licking water off my lips, passing a hand through wet hair. It's been hours and hours since she left. Where is she now, what is she doing? Where do I need to go first? I'm trying to decide if I should swing by my house or by Hunter's house, or if I should check out Seward park, the siren meadow, to maybe find her there, when I hear something. A song. And hysterical barking that sounds faintly familiar. A siren is feeding on someone right by Burke Gilman trail. What, in the middle of the day? Across marina where a siren hunter moors his boat?

Curious, I follow the sound, quickly diving to cross the canal. There, where the asphalt road hugs the shore, curving into an S shape, a pocket of mist hangs in the air, obviously out of place.

I raise my head barely a few inches above the water, to be able to see and hopefully not being spotted by some eager

tourist gazing from either bridge. "Shit!" I proclaim and cover my mouth. "Who could it be? Certainly Canosa is not THAT stupid."

Mist grows thicker, in billowing plumes of steam, partly reaching over the ground, partly sitting in the water. As far as I understand, it's designed to hide the feeding siren and her victim, rolling off a siren's skin amidst the song, but not in plain sight and at the busiest foot traffic time! Maybe it's a trap, maybe my father has setup some fog machine to lure me? I cautiously swim towards it, crossing the canal, diving to avoid a pair of kayakers, resurfacing again about fifty feet away.

A couple bikers point at it now, pedaling, passing by, mesmerized by the echo seeping out of the cloud mixed with dog's yelps. A man with a cane walks by, never lifts his head, continuing on his trek, wherever it is he's going. A couple women chat jogging by, barely throwing a glance, too busy to break and investigate, occupied with their daily exercise routine. My fears fall to rest. This is Seattle for you. You'd have to be dead and bleeding profusely for anyone to notice, which only happens in this neck of the woods when a suicide jumper decides to land on the ground instead of the water. Namely, a parking lot that's right by the trail.

Human ignorance is a convenient cover-up for sirens, isn't it? I understand night clubs, but this... Perhaps there is an

element of magic to the song and the fog, but still. Whoever is doing it, is either bold or stupid, and I decide I really want to see.

I drift closer, plunge and dare to surface right inside the fog pocket, on its very edge, careful not to make the siren notice me.

She glows bright white against the dimness of the haze. Her petite body shivers in tune to the song. She's submerged up to her waist in the lake, her arms stick out like two colorless limbs, hair cascades down her back in long waves, strands of it flowing in the water. A faint odor of decay wafts from her, but not too strong, mixed with a trace of a scent of a lily.

"Pisinoe." I mutter under my breath, recognizing her tilt of the head, her slender teenage-like figure. She's short, so definitely not Ligeia; she'd not chubby, so not Teles either, and not enough curves to be Canosa.

"Yep, that's her." I whisper.

Her song trills in high lovely tones of a choir singer, a soloist, one of those super-gifted girls you see on TV in talent competitions. I realize I never heard her sing.

"...want me a lamb,

"A white little lamb.

"I'd feed it, I'd pet it, I'd kiss it, I'd hug it.

"I'd make it a pillow, I'd walk it, I'd tug it."

On each *it* she sways to her left or her right, twirling hands in the air then clasping them together like a little girl, rolling her head, almost dancing.

I carefully step forward, feeling cold sand under my feet, wincing at the barking, barely making out shapes of the victims in the shifting fog. A white poodle thrashes on a taut leash, his breath puffing into the cloud. Its owner appears to be an elderly lady, slumped on the rocks, her comfortable walking shoes dipped in water, their pinkish beige skin soaked, her eyes transfixed, her hair a crown of dandelion fuzz about to blown away into oblivion.

I stifle a gasp, *Missis Elliott! Oh my God, It's missis Elliott and her Lamb-chop!*

No matter the weather, my neighbor always went out on early morning and early evening walks with her poodle, huffing and puffing up the steps back to Raye street, claiming it was her solution to long life any time she saw me, shaking her finger at me and demanding I do the same. And every time Seattle sky decided to play peek-a-boo with the sun, she'd be out in a flash, pulling her poor poodle with her, soaking in *vitamin D goodness*, as she's always tell me when lecturing me on why my skin is so white. This sun-walk is killing her now, as if life itself said, *You thought you could predict me, old lady? Eat this!*

I'm on the fence, do I want to save her? Last time I checked, I hated her guts. Last time she saw Papa slap me on the porch, she conveniently averted her eyes and then proceeded gossiping about it to Mr. Thompson, our immediate neighbor, her convenient ear for stories of any kind. I know because I saw them give me weird glances when I went to school that day, shaking their heads and bowing next to each other so close, their noses nearly touched, as if they discussed some secret conspiracy. On top of this, last time she said anything nice to me was, never. Always scolding, always bitter and disappointed.

"Old bitch." I mutter.

Of course her soul sounds like whispering lips, that and the sound of breaking plates and rushing of frilly cotton. Underscored by some other disgustingly sounding scrubbing. Powdery. Ugh. Pisinoe must really want her dog, to be able to stand the taste. Missis Elliott's soul strings across the mist, leaves her body, and oozes into Pisinoe's mouth with an audible pop.

"I got me a lamb,

"A while little lamb."

Last verse of the song dies and the old lady looks straight at me, with such pleading in her eyes that I should've known better. I'm probably the last person she sees who could help her. How am I different from Papa? What did I just do with my

little pitiful hate? I instinctively raise my right arm to reach out. Too late. Her life is gone, she folds down into a heap of pastel cotton, her head falls on the rocks with a dull thud. A smile of utter happiness spreads across her wrinkly face, making it appear younger, as if it belongs to a sweet old woman who loved everyone in her life and baked cookies for her neighbors every single day.

I unfreeze. "Pisinoe!" I yell.

"Huh?" She turns and smiles broadly. "Ailen!" Without missing a beat, she turns back, sways to the shore and seizes the dog by the scruff of its neck, jerking the leash out of Missis Elliott's cooling hands. The dog is hysterical, so is Pisinoe.

"Shhh, quiet now. I got you, I got you. You're a strange little lamb. How about I call you Daisy. Is it ok if I call you Daisy?"

She covers it with kisses. The dog barks like mad, trembling all over, its tail twitching, its paws hitting the air.

"Pisinoe, number one, it's not a lamb, it's Missis Elliott's dog and his name is Lamb-chop. Number two, you can't feed in plain sight, are you out of your mind?"

"I got Daisy, look. My first pet lamb. I finally have a pet! I'm so excited!" She stretches her arms out. The poodle

twists madly in her grip, its eyes roll in terror. It stopped yelping and only whimpers now.

"I said, it's not a lamb, *it's a dog*. Can't you tell the difference? And where are the others, where is Canosa?"

"Oh, well, Ligeia wouldn't hunt with me, she's with Teles. I hate her. Stupid cow." Her pretty face clears as she shifts attention back to her newfound pet. "But isn't she cute? She's so soft and warm." She buries her face in the poodle's mane when I hear the boat. I don't even care to tell Pisinoe that the dog is a boy, not a girl like she wants it to be. There is no mistaking of the engine's purring.

"Fuck, did you hear that?" I grab Pisinoe by the elbow.

"Hear what?" She says with wide eyes.

"My father! The siren hunter! Do you hear it? The boat!"

"I don't hear anything. You're playing a trick on me!" She pouts.

"I'm not, Jesus, girl, I swear! My father - the siren hunter - he's coming. We need to get out of here, now. Please, put the dog back on the ground. Let's go." I tug at her.

"I'm not leaving my pet. I'm taking Daisy with me." She purses her lips and attempts to dive. I grab her shoulders and block her. Without either of us singing, fog disintegrates. A biker stops, uncertain. I can see his silhouette shimmering through the remaining haze.

"Drop it!" I hiss through gritted teeth.

"But I just got it!" Pisinoe wiggles out of my hold, her voice a stockade of bells. Lamb-chop starts barking again. Fog lifts completely, revealing two more onlookers. Whatever mesmerizing magic was in the air is dying quickly.

My father's yacht purrs louder, coming closer, he's no doubt maneuvering around boat traffic to get here as fast as he can. He's still several miles away, but I can discern the Pershing motor clearly through surrounding white noise.

My impulse is to drop everything and run. I tell myself, *I'm done running, remember? I have to face him.* Papa's voice interjects into my thoughts, *Women were made to haul water, Ailen.* Familiar fear jumps my throat, but this time I choose to ignore it.

"I'll show you what women were made for, Papa, I promise." I whisper, struggling with Pisinoe, shouting in her face. "Please, leave the dog, NOW!"

"But! It's my Daisy! You can't take her away from me. You cant, *you can't!* I just got her -"

"It's not her, it's *him!*"

"-cause I always wanted a pet. You have your boyfriend, and what do I have? Nothing. Please don't tell Canosa, she wouldn't let me... Have you ever wanted something really *really* bad?" She

pleads with tears in her eyes, probably understanding that I'll win the fight and deciding to try and convince me.

Hunter's face flashes in my mind. "I don't have a boyfriend." I say, slacking my grip, feeling sorry for her and for her wish to have a warm body next to her, a body that's living, understanding this simple desire for someone who simply loves you without any questions asked.

Tears cascade down her lovely cheeks, as if she is playing a game of pretense that went too far and got serious. She reminds me of me, the night before my mother left, when I begged her to sing one more song, knowing that it will anger Papa, and still demanding until I made her do it. And after she tucked me in and left, I heard him yell at her through two closed doors, my bedroom's and theirs; heard him hit her repeatedly, storm out, stomp downstairs, then slam the front door of our house so hard that the walls shook. That evening was the last time I saw my mother, alive or dead. It was my fault he pushed her. My fault...

"Have you?" Pisinoe repeats, looking into my face, pressing poor Lamb-chop to her chest so hard, the dog can barely breathe, whining quietly.

"Yes." I blink. "Yes - I still do. Still want it really bad."

"See, I knew it, I knew it! What kind? What kind?" Her eyes sparkle again.

"I don't want a pet, Pisinoe. I want my mother back." I say.

"Oh." Her mouth forms a perfect 'O' of surprise.

I look away, staring hard and swallowing. There, below the Aurora Bridge, Papa's silver yacht is visible now, breaking speed limit and rushing towards us, sending clouds of spray up its sides, its nose diving and rising, diving and rising. We have a minute at the most.

Shouts make me look back at the shore. Several people run towards us to investigate. Another few yards, and they'll be upon us. I use Pisinoe's distraction and yank the poodle out of her hands, but as I lift my arms to toss it back on solid ground, she shrieks, jumps out of the water, and lands on top of us both.

We sink. Water gurgles in a mess of bubbles, hair, and struggle. Pisinoe's hands circle around the dog's neck, I hear his laborious breathing. He's suffocating. I thrust my hands into her armpits and surface, she comes up with me. We play tug-of-war with the poodle that is now wet and slippery, is shivering like crazy, and is biting my arm in agony.

"You're killing it, let go!" I scream.

A man shouts something, his hand on Missis Elliott's neck checking for pulse. He points at us, flips open his phone. Two more people run up, one takes off shoes and steps into the lake. I swirl to look back. My father's Pershing 64 is about a hundred feet away, complete with its engine-whirr and ethanol stink.

We struggle above water, then again below it. I'm stronger, but Pisinoe holds on to the poodle for dear life. Lamb-chop gulps for air, water slushes down his throat. Great. Now I have to get him back out and revive him too.

I hear motor revolutions. They resonate in waves, louder, louder. Too late to do anything else now except to try and get Pisinoe away, no time to explain to her why I need to see my father alone and not with her in tow.

Dog firmly in Pisinoe's arms, both of them firmly in mine, I kick off and dive, away from the boat, across the canal, deeper into Lake union. At that moment Lamb-chop's soul escapes his little body, the obnoxiously crunchy noise of gnawing on bones. Promising to taste raw. One second it lingers close to its muzzle, another it disappears into murky water in a bubble of life, barely visible, glistening with faint iridescence and then popping.

I keep swimming deeper on autopilot, mesmerized by what I just witnessed. I wonder if dying people, people who die of natural causes, let go of their souls exactly like that, and a

new idea on how to satisfy my hunger visits me like some morbid joke. Perhaps I can catch souls of the dying, perhaps...

Pisinoe bites me. I'm so surprised, I let her go.

"Daisy! My Daisy! Oh, no!" She shakes the poodle. Its mane swirls in slow motion, its bead-like eyes open, tongue lolling out, lifeless, floating to the rhythm of her shaking.

"He's dead, it's no use." I clasp her forearm.

"You! You did it! It's your fault! You interrupted me when I didn't ask you to!" Pisinoe lets go of the dog and kicks me in the ribs with both fists. "You killed it, you did, you did!"

I quickly circle around her, come up from behind and press my hand over her mouth, but she keeps trying to scream, so some mumbling escapes through my fingers. Slippery little thing, she twists out of my grip just as my father's yacht, now within maybe twenty feet, takes a sharp ninety degree angle turn. I know the maneuver really well, it's an emergency stopping technique, to avoid hitting something on the water, because simply pulling the throttle back won't work. Papa is a master at stopping directly where he plans to, having boasted about it to my mother so many times. Precise as always, he stops his Pershing 64 directly over our heads. He found us after all.

Waves smooth out their feathers and the lake's surface stands calm. Boat's hull hovers over us in a dark ominous oval. Dog forgotten, there is momentary stillness. We're about ten

feet underwater, floating silently, our bodies shimmering faintly in the gloom. We both look up, then at each other, and in a split second an understanding of what's about to happen passes between us.

I look up.

A huge bubble the size of a lifesaver erupts from the hull's bow, from a protruding conical contraption of some sort in its front part, right at the waterline. It quickly grows, first doubling in size, then tripling. I watch it, enthralled, as if in slow motion, because in reality not even a second goes by. Time turns elastic. The bubble reaches its maximum size and bursts into a kind of a foam-cloud, as if a fizzy tablet has been dropped into the lake. A million tiny bubbles speed towards us in a focused jet of a sonic blast.

BOOM.

I'm caught in a violent current that yanks me down several feet, dousing me with sparkling bursts of gas, and hissing into my ears, stretching my eardrums inward, to the point where I think they'll pop. Miraculously, they don't. My arms and legs go numb, but I can feel my gills spurting water. This fact tells me that I'm still alive. Carried downward by inertia, I begin flexing my fingers, one by one, until the drag subsides and I can finally open my eyes, not afraid anymore that my eyeballs

will burst from the blast's pressure. The problem is, I can't see shit.

My eyes feel like they've been boiled, making everything around me dark and blurry. Sand particles dance all around me, and that's all I can see. Something crunches on my teeth as I swallow, wincing at the pain of inhaling and exhaling, my right side is one gigantic bruise. I move my legs, attempting to swim up, advancing slowly, thinking that this is what it's like, to be hunted. This is so Papa's style. Let machinery do the job for him, fire blindly, hoping to hit the target, never having to get wet or even pull on the fishing line. Do it the clean way.

Fury pokes its head in my chest, raising my blood pressure, pounding in my ears, dancing on my skin in a million needles. I struggle to push it down, searching for every single memory of my father that brought me any kind of joy, but coming up empty, and my weak attempt at love ruptures like a sheet of wet tracing paper.

*This is fucking blast fishing, I think, floating higher, hunting siren grade, perfectly legal and admirable, huh? No casualties to report, only a burst of bubbles.*

I want to yell at him. A perfect tirade is forming in my head, pumping in rhythm to my growing anger. I want to shout it in his face so he can hear me.

*We're fish that's supposed to float belly up, is that what we are to you, Papa? Fish, to collect in an easy catch? Our swim bladders ruptured, our eyes exploded, our bodies gone, gone, gone? Who cares about sirens, it's the sport that matters. We're not even human, right? We're some vile undead creatures that want to thwart the very spirit of A MAN. Hey there, siren, dare to sing prettily to me? Come here, I'll whack you on the head, shut your mouth and make you die. Want to suck out my soul? Come closer, girly, closer. I'll rupture your vocal cords with a homemade gun, a plastic blaster filled with capsules of powdered women-hate. Innocent bystanders, step aside. Clear out an eighty foot radius. On one, two, three..*

BOOM!

Another blast shakes me to the bones, but this time it misses me, brushing me merely with its echo. My ears explode with brilliant pain. It shakes me up from head to toe and I go limp, but it only lasts a few seconds. I'm recovering quickly. I flex my fingers, one by one. Slowly, they move. Good.

I raise my hands and work my jaw, up and down, left and right, until I can feel my tongue and talk.

"Pisinoe." I croak into the water, barely audible.

"Pisinoe!" Louder.

Above me, her white body floats, belly down, arms and legs spread wide in a star-like shape.

She got hit, and she got it worse. Her eyes are two question marks, her mouth a silent 'why' as she drifts upward, eyelids aflutter. There is that look again, that last cry for help, as if her face is my mirror, magnified and distorted. Pisinoe, the girly flirty capricious me that never happened. The long-haired flaunty me that didn't dare to exist. The little woman I'll never become, stuck forever at sixteen. Obliterated. Eradicated. Like an endangered species at high risk of becoming extinct. A femme fatale disease that threatens to spoil a man's very spirit. Deadly.

"Hang on, I'm coming!" I yell, thinking, *I will not give you the satisfaction, Papa. I won't, I wont!* I kick up and reach for Pisinoe's ankles, yanking her down, weak from concentration, straining in effort. She's not answering me, not blinking, her mouth open, her arms slack. We're face to face, and I'm no better than a child, shaking her like she shook Lamb-chop not too long ago, knowing that it won't make her any more alive, and still not giving in, clinging to some crazy hope that everything will be all right.

"Don't you die on me." I croak. "DON'T YOU EVER..."

BOOM!

Another explosion moves through muddy water at an alarming speed of a mile per second. It hits Pisinoe directly in her head, ripples along her body and exits at her feet. I feel her

begin disintegrating in my hands, like I'm not holding a solid girl but a piece of a fluctuating Jell-O. She jiggles once, then simply bursts into what looks like a million bubbles. Bubbles pop. And Pisinoe's gone.

Gone, like my mother.

I stare at empty water.

Rage rises in my stomach and fills up my entire body with one blinding urge to kill.

"NO!"

My scream shakes the water around me, and like to my humming before, the lake answers. It swirls and rushes into a mad undercurrent, twisting everything in its wake. I forget who I am, I cease to exist as a thinking reasoning being and become primal, become some living organism that's high on a murderous rush, crazed with grief, exalted at the prospect of killing.

Time comes to a standstill.

My mind is gone, my siren instinct takes over.

"Here I come, Papa. Hear me. HERE I COME." I say quietly, yet somehow I know he heard my warning, or sensed it.

Nothing matters anymore except that oval shape ten feet above me, the boat's hull. A sharp pang singes my throat, eager to exit. Something dark and sinister wakes inside me, and it's mad. Mad for being disturbed. It seeps into my very muscles, fills me with hatred. Irrational, consuming, blind.

My vision rolls into a focused tunnel. A perfect joint, I suck on it, inhale with my stomach, hold it in, then let it out to grim satisfaction, knowing that I'm only getting warmed up.

Another boom brushes past me. I merely flinch.

"I. SAID. NO!!!"

One powerful stroke is all it takes. I surge upwards and leap out of the water.

## Chapter 7. Lake Union

Imagine being shot from a cannon, that would be me. But it's *not* just me anymore, not my will and muscles alone. Water. Water cradles and pushes me up, creating a fountain jet, with my body on top of it. First my head, then my shoulders, then my torso break the surface, rain jacket and jeans sticking to my skin. I sail up. Light, noises, and smells all hit me at once, making me ravenous. At some point I realize that my toes don't touch the lake anymore, yet I keep moving upward, perceiving everything in one tenth of a speed of normal time. I'm propelled about ten feet into the air, riding a singular spurt of water when its force recedes and for a moment I pause mid-leap, arms stretched out to my sides like that of a flying bird, legs folded beneath me in a diamond shape, feet soles fully touching. I take a mental snapshot of the view, to remember it later.

Lake Union shines at me with its Tuesday afternoon splendor. It's almost sunny today, almost. To my right, about a mile away, Seattle downtown glistens with its typical grey glass highrises, cutting a jiggedy jaggedy horizon line into thin clouds, trailing west, ending with Space Needle, its tall silhouette topped with a flying saucer. Which is really a

restaurant. My father's favorite place to eat, alone. I've never been.

Across the whole expanse of the lake a few sailboats flaunt their sails at me like triangular teeth, grinning. A winged seaplane rolls its motor to life and speeds north, prepping for takeoff.

To my left, a couple hundred feet away, Gas Works park sticks out its ridiculous landscape composed of brightly painted machinery that's been dead for half a century, its pipes curving this way and that like legs of an overturned insect. Burgundy red. Perhaps from rage of being stuck on a green grassy hill to be stomped about by kite flyers.

And right in front of me, about five feet below, is my father's boat, the silver-grey Pershing 64, sixty four feet long true to its name, its slender nose traced with oak veneer path accented by steel rail and covered with silver paneling, a white leather padded sitting area smack in the middle it. Upper deck extends all the way to the cockpit that rises up at a sleek forty five degree angle into a long rectangular window. Its polished glass reflects an overcast sky and me in the middle of it, slightly dull in terms of color, but absolutely furious and wild in appearance.

I can't see my father behind the glare, but I sense his presence, sense his staring. Still hovering, in the momentary

pause of not moving up anymore and not yet falling, I holler a guttery animal cry, radiating mean energy, pouring out my dismay for him to hear.

"YOU!"

My voice expands into a circular sound-wave that travels quickly. I feel nearby living souls vanish into holes to hide, reverberating to my accord, terrified. Fish, crabs, dogs, even people, boaters, drivers. They flinch and are overtaken by desire to run. Only my father doesn't run, he stays in his cockpit. I hear his leather-gloved hands grip the steering wheel, hear his cleanly shaved jaw hang open, imagine his eyes grow big and vacant. Unbelieving. Shocked. And perhaps jealous in some way. I hope.

Gravity does its job and I fall, but not before forcing my trajectory forward. His boat's deck is my landing target. As I descend, I continue bellowing, oblivious to anything or anyone in my path, living or dead. My mouth opens wide in a poisoning agony, spitting a terrible cry all over the lake's basin, echoing off sails, building facades, marina garage walls, any flat surfaces it can find.

"YOU KILLED HER!!!"

Cockpit glass shimmers to my cry. You'd run for your life if you heard me. But I have no effect on my father, his soul is long dead, so the boat doesn't move. It only careens on the

waves, wider, harder. Waves are rising. They play with it like with a dull plastic toy in an enormous bathtub. I realize that the waves didn't come from the wind. There is no wind. The waves are of my making.

I land on the deck with a soft slap, directly into the padded area, and crouch, my legs spread wide for balance, large glass pane the only obstacle between me and my father. Behind me, a mass of water crashes down and over the deck, whatever was left from the jet that propelled me upwards.

"I HATE! YOUR! GUTS!!!"

My cry resonates with the entire body of water. It shakes every molecule of it, makes wood crack and splinter because wood has moisture. Any material that has any kind of liquid in it answers me and expands. I can call it to me and break everything in my path, except perhaps steel or other metals. After taking another breath, I instinctively dive into "Let me be" by Siren Suicides, the song that I didn't get a chance to finished, never making it to the end in the Pike Place market restroom. I'll finish it this time, no matter the cost. I'm going for it, I think, I'm going for it. Only one of us will be left alive after this. Only one.

"Why can't you let go of me

"Whispering in my ear

"Pulling on my skin

"Let me be happy, let me be happy

"And I will be, I *WILL BE!*"

Waves crash against the yacht, in tune with my singing. I take a breath as wind picks up and a dark cloud rolls over the sky, blotting out breaking sun. Cockpit window grows dark and I see my father behind it. His face is a mix of awe and disbelief. We stare at each other.

"Why don't you believe in me

"Cradling my hopes

"Strangling my dreams

"LET ME BE HAPPY, LET ME BE HAPPY

"AND I WILL BE, *I WILL BE!*"

Once second there is only a thin layer of crystal between us, another there is nothing. It explodes into a shower of shiny reflections, gone. Papa shields his face, cups his ears. He doesn't want to hear me, he never hears me. This time he will.

I'm a predator ready for attack, spreading my arms wide, lifting my head up, opening my mouth until it cracks, and howling my deadly call.

"WHY CAN'T I LEAVE YOU

"STUMBLING IN MY STEPS

"THRASHING IN MY HASTE

"LET ME BE HAPPY, *LET ME BE HAPPY*

"AND I WILL BE, *I WILL BE...*

*"I! WILL! BE!!! I WILL!!!"*

My song is completed. I take a liberty of adding an extra line, because it feels good to shout it, because I wanted it to come out of me before I died, to be heard, to be proclaimed, so that maybe for a few seconds it would feel like it's real. That last note, the word "will", overwhelmed, I shriek it a pitch too high, and the sky amplifies my raging pain like an enormous loud speaker and slams it back into the lake with immense power. Its rush hits water like a boulder with a deafening crash.

This is it, I'm going to explode right now. He hasn't heard me, he never does. Passively, I watch chaos erupt around me into a fierce flower of a whirlpool.

All around the boat, water rises in wet dirty sheets topped with foam, gliding higher, creating a crater with me and my father in the middle, glued to each other by an invisible bridge of mutual hate. Where is this love I was thinking about, that divine experience I had with the whale? I can't find it, it vanished, leaving me deserted, bitter and empty. That desire to ignite his soul back to life, gone. I'm full of hate, and I'm about to pay the price. The very last piece of goodness that maybe kept hiding in the corner of my existence is now crushed and stomped on and ground into nothing.

I'm a cause for this landslide, this glacier calving, this meteorite impact, whatever you want to call it. This large solid

rock of loathing hardened by sixteen years of oppression, dropping all the way from heaven and onto the source of my hate. As if sedated by imminent end, my mind resorts to facts. I survey erupted water and come up with a factual name for it. A local circular tsunami with Ailen Bright being its epicenter, its very source.

Sheets of muddy liquid keep rising around us in solid walls, now about five feet high, now about ten, now about fifteen. I calmly note specific numbers. At this precise moment waves crest and roll down, causing the boat to bob and spin. I attempt to grasp at something around me to hold on to, but there is nothing, only smooth surface of wet leather. It's slippery, and I fall and slide, breaking my gaze and closing my eyes, making no attempt to grab anything in my way, ready to die.

A roaring crash makes me look up as I'm gliding off the deck. The giant wave continues towards the shore, breaks on it, sweeps over empty picnic tables and benches bolted to the ground, then recedes at the base of the Gas Works empty factory building, before reaching the parking lot and the road. Astounded drivers stop cars, roll down their windows and gawk. There is honking, shrieking and general chaos.

Guided by some left over survival instinct, I dig my nails and teeth into leather, but it rips and I'm sliding again, suppressing any attempt to hold on. Turbulent water sloshes back

and forth, carrying lifesavers, pillows, and soaked clothes and magazines in its wake, no doubt my father's precious items, sweeping over deck and nearly washing me off it. I glide to the left and get stuck in the railing. My chest slams into its steel pipe, knees hit it the hardest, then the boat careens to the other side and I'm forced to glide back up and to the other side. I bunch up against the railing again, a sorry sack of wet clothes, my feet dangling in the air. Spray from waves showers me, startled seagulls fly around in circles, shrieking.

After a couple more rounds of this back and forth, the boat stops spinning and more or less rights itself. My fingers feel numb. I manage to steal a glance at the cockpit. There is nobody there. Did my father get washed off? The yacht groans. I feel its paneling give out, its screws come lose.

I lick my lips and croak, "How come I'm still alive?" The sound of my voice assures one very scary idea. Does this mean I somehow managed to kill my father with my song? It's impossible. He must be drowning!

I begin crawling towards the railing to look down.

Two more almost simultaneous rolling crashes shake the air, resembling an echo of a bomb explosion. The same gigantic wave that swept Gas Works park less than a minute ago now finally reached two other lakeside roads opposite the park, because they were farther away from the impact, Westlake and Eastlake

avenues. Both waves were not as high as the first one, merely dousing the ground and creating more noise than destruction. Doesn't matter. Traffic comes to a standstill. Some people scream, others open car doors and scurry, either out of curiosity or fear. Car alarms go off, air fills up with this dusty smell of disaster.

And souls. The overwhelming melody of frightened souls, a soup of them, a savory mouthwatering concoction of flavors. I inhale it with greedy nostrils, and I forget who I am or where I'm going or what was it I was supposed to do. I let my guard down with this indifference and readiness to die. My sinister *me* grins a wicked smile and swiftly takes over.

There is about one thousand feet to either shore from the boat. Both stretches of land are covered with running people the size of ants. Suddenly, distance doesn't matter. A blinding curtain shuts off my mind like a swift guillotine. Hunger overwhelms me, hunger perhaps brought on by spending the last of my energy on this tsunami outrage. Blotted out by primitive desire to feed, there are no more thoughts left in my head except one, pulsing, flashing, demanding.

*I'm a siren, and I'm starving.*

"Papa, if you're alive, watch me now!" I holler, unclench myself into a crouching position, turn around, grab the railing and focus on people on the shore.

It's impossible to make eye contact from this far away, but I don't care, giving in to my siren instinct. It seems the only thing I need to do is single out a particular soul by its melody and tune in on it, hum to it, matching its overall tone. Pretend I'm a gigantic toad and my humming is my one-thousand-foot-long tongue that strikes with surgical precision. My heart rate goes berserk, chest grumbles with terrible void, hearing sharpens to the level of detecting hair movement on people's backs. I gaze at the pack of stalled cars and fleeing people on Westlake avenue, merely dark silhouettes from here, and ignite their souls in this manner one by one, spitting out rolled up wads of siren-whine precisely hitting each target. They light up by one by one like firebugs, without a single one missed. I sing one low note and suck out their souls before any of them have time to utter a scream or moan. Savory, astringent, lukewarm, soggy. I'm not picky. I gulp them all up like mad. They drop on the ground in scores, dead and happy.

Thick fog rolls off my skin, puffing up sleeves of my rain jacket and oozing from under my jeans. A lacework of soul ribbons hangs in misty contrails, creating ethereal bridges from shore to the boat, as if a few airplanes decided to play doodle too low to the ground, leaving white tracks in the sky. I'm shrouded in my own vapor, slurping a few more, unable to see anything due to the mist but not needing to. I can hear them.

This is siren binge-eating. Compulsive, uncontrollable. Excessive. I want to fill myself to the brim, to be full, to gorge up on this sweetness. To feel warm again? Yes. Impossible to stop, it feels divine, making my fingers tingle. I'm not warm anymore, I'm nearly boiling hot. In fact, I start feeling drowsy as if I'm about to faint from a heat stroke. One more, I think, no, a couple more. Just a couple more, or a dozen. There, I want that one. Pure syrupy sweetness. It's a baby onboard of an empty car. She's wailing loudly, her soul hopelessly delicious, pure sugar with a touch of vanilla.

Greediness makes me feel superior, unstoppable.

I decide to feed some more and leave the baby for desert. She isn't going anywhere, none of them are. I rule them. I rule them all. I stand in the middle of the upper deck and holler into mist. Holler more. Holler as loud as I can, emitting newfound power from feeding in reverberating cascades of soprano. I inhale the odor of ruin and the stink of panic. My arms spread-eagle over the chaos, godlike. And I feel like a goddess, I feel like Hera, majestic, beautiful and terrible, possessing the power to kill at will, to rule the water, to...

My father appears out of the cockpit, first his head, then his hands and elbows. He pulls himself up and out of the hole where there used to be the window, his gloved hands and suited knees meet the deck in a hope of being able to hold on. He falls

face first, then picks himself up, stands on all fours, and slowly raises his head. I don't fully register the importance of this yet, still enthralled in my all-powerful mood.

"Was that loud enough for you, Papa? Did you hear me this time?" I say.

He blinks and licks his lips.

"You did? Wow! Well, how was it, tell me? I'm dying to know here, see." I spread my arms wide, showcasing the chaos I have created, the dampened fog, the dead bodies strewn along the shores, the shrieking of mechanical police sirens in the distance, the distinct chop-chop of a news helicopter. It takes a beat and the shock of seeing him alive, the shock of understanding that we're both still alive renders me speechless.

I open and close my mouth, when a shadow sweeps over me. Something, no, someone, flies through the air. Before I get what's going on, Canosa propels over me in a wide arc, sneering, not in a good way, in a "I'm about to eat your lunch" kind of way. For a brief moment she passes directly over me and we look each other in the face, except her face is upside down and six feet above me.

"Ailen Bright! What are you looking at? Help me finish him, go on. Go on, silly girl! I haven't got all day." She yells, flings the weight of her body spear-like and scoops my father off the deck like an eagle would fetch a jumping salmon right

out of the water. He flails his arms and legs mid-air, strains to say something and reaches for me, pleadingly, his eyes... are wet? "Sweetie..." I hear it, faintly, but it's there. Was that a hint of worry on his face? He heard me. He talked to me. He needs me! Suddenly I'm aware of my own breathing and have to think about it.

They plunge into the lake.

For a few seconds I gape, paralyzed.

Then it hits me. He's alive. I'm alive. I finished my song. If it didn't have an effect on him, I would've exploded. But I didn't. Does that mean... Does that mean, that... Mad hope rolls over me and I stumble to the railing to follow them, diving in head first.

Water brings usual calm, and new energy from feeding on so many souls makes my movements fast and fluid. Papa floats about twenty feet ahead, mouth opening and closing in a way a beached fish does when caught and taken off the hook. His arms are stretched in front of him in a gesture of a welcoming hug, fingers opening and closing, opening and closing. I can barely see him amongst all the debris and sand floating around. But I can see Canosa and her glow. She spoons him from behind, her arms belted around his waist in a deadly grip, her floor-long hair flowing in torn strands, her white teeth shining, her face spread in a gleeful smile.

"No!" I yell, "Get off him, you stupid bathroom fixture bitch. Get off him, now! Leave him alone!" So much for the art of persuasion, I only cause her to speed up.

I kick and speed up, burrowing through this gumbo of liquid mud, until I'm upon them, a foot away from my father's face, his skin grey, his eyes glassy. Yet there is something that tells me he's still alive, something so faint I can barely grasp it with my ears, it's more like I feel it with my skin. A barely detectable tune, almost like a breaking distant echo of a flute, fragile and uneven, played by an amateur from the top of a mountain, brought to me on the wings of the wind, distorted, yet there.

"Finally. For once you did a good job, Ailen Bright, I'm proud of you, I'm..." Canosa continues her typical condescending babble, yet it has no usual effect on me. It fades and I catch another whiff, another glimpse into a flute. And something else. Butterflies. The hush and quiet patter of fluttering butterfly wings.

"Your soul." I whisper, overtaken by the moment, peering into Papa's eyes, my lips quivering. "Papa, I have ignited your soul." I say.

He blinks, unseeing me, lets out a bubble of air, then a few more. I have maybe ten, twenty seconds at best.

"LET HIM GO!" I shout at Canosa and grab her arms trying to wiggle him out of her embrace, but her grip is strong. She hisses at me. This is no easy fight with Pisinoe over Lamb-chop, no tug-of-war. This is a fight to death, and my father's life is at stake.

"This is how you replay me, for everything I'd done for you. Very well." She spits into the water. "I'll show you what happens when you betray your family, I'll give you the taste. Let's see how you like it."

Water gets colder, we rapidly sink deeper, more bubbles escape my father's mouth. I resort to biting and fighting like a pathetic little girl, grabbing handfuls of Canosa's hair, tearing at it, kicking her and punching her, scratching her face with my nonexistent nails, only to make her produce a mad triumphant cackle, still not letting go.

"You're hurting him! You'll kill him like this!" I shout.

"And what if that is my intent?" She grins.

"LET - HIM -- GO!"

Papa blinks me directly in the face, his cheeks fall in, his hands suddenly on his throat, his body convulsing. Then his arms begin pounding everywhere he can reach, with barely any strength. We're face to face, a foot apart. He scoops a handful of my rain jacket and pulls me closer.

I recoil at his gaze. He looks mad, thrashing, holding his lips pressed tightly, obviously fighting the urge to inhale water.

"He's suffocating!" I shout, wrestling with her iron grip.

"Suffocating?" Canosa laughs. "Your father, suffocating?" Her cackle makes me bristle.

"YES!" I come too close to her face. She bumps her forehead into mine and I let go, blinded with pain.

"Good, that he should. And you should get out of this game. This is my business now, your father and me. You nearly ruined my trap and caused a huge racket. What an annoying girl, impulsive, flaky, weak. And you're being mean to me, irresponsible and forgetful. I can't stand it no longer."

"It was a trap? You used Pisinoe as bait?" I gulp water, unbelieving.

"Now you're getting it? Finally. I'm impressed." Her lips move slowly, chewing on each word. "Maybe there is hope for you, after all. Tell me, were you planning to finish your dear Papa? Like we agreed, were you? Or was this just another attempt to show off what you can do, to get a compliment for your performance?"

Papa stops thrashing. His hands fall off his mouth and he gulps water. Immediately, his body goes limp, his eyelids flutter, eyeballs roll to whites, head hangs and rolls in rhythm

to floating, his dark hair creating a fuzzy halo. Off in an unmeasurable distance, I detect a tinkling of a flute. He's still alive.

"Don't you die on me now! I don't want you to die! Hold on!" I scream and bite into Canosa's right hand.

She kicks me in the face with her foot and I let go, furious, gazing into her eyes, searching them for some sign of compassion.

"You're quite a pest, aren't you? Why won't you give up? He killed your mother. He treated you like dirt your entire life. *Why* are you trying to save him?" She says. In her eyes there is a terrible absence of any emotion, a coldness so deep that I think my heart will stop. I dip in and out of her gaze, in a clench of this final fear, knowing that in a few seconds this will be over, crying into water, feeling my promises and hopes vanish, when Papa swiftly reaches behind Canosa's neck and with a piercing yelp she lets him go.

I freeze. It was a performance after all. Didn't Canosa tell me that a siren can't kill a siren hunter with an ordinary drowning or strangling or stabbing or any other way a normal human being would kill another? Didn't she tell me that the only way to kill one is to ignite back his soul and then sing out in a normal siren-manner?

He tricked me, again, then used me, as always. Perfect.

Canosa continues shrieking, her face distorted with pain, her hands on her neck, knees into her face framed by flowing hair.

"What did you do to her?" I say.

My father doesn't answer. Not like he can talk under water, but still, I at least expected a nod. Instead, he glances at me with his typical disapproval, then kicks off to swim up, reaching with his muscular arms, bending his legs and flapping them, reaching again with such precision, as if swimming fully clothed in a fine Italian suit is the latest fashion nowadays. I watch him, in awe and horror, dumbstruck, unsure if I should follow him or if it's best I leave him alone.

Canosa's moans kick me into action.

I need to keep her from hurting him. I need to keep them both apart from hurting each other. I don't know what he did to her, and yes, she yelled at me and stuff, but I feel like I can't leave her here, all alone and in pain. In fact, I feel like I'm caught in between two fighting parents. The thought makes me shudder. What am I after this, a diplomatic child? Does this feeling mean I betrayed the memory of my mother? Before I go deeper into my typical self-lynching, I shake my head and switch to the task at hand. *One thing at a time, Ailen, one thing at a time.*

I reach for Canosa's ankles and pull her toward me, wincing at the rain of her curses, struggles and kicks.

"You can kick all you want, I won't let go. That's what family does, remember? We care for each other. You're the one who told me." I whisper, determined to keep her here as long as I possibly can, to let my father make his escape.

Canosa thrashes around, screams. We sink until we bump against lake's bottom. She picks up a rock and smashes it at my arms, I still hold on. I hold on to her for dear life like Pisinoe held on to Missis Elliott's poodle, never letting go, hoping Papa would make it to the surface all right, hoping he will be okay.

"Oh, I'm not done with you yet. Ailen Bright, the girl who thinks only about herself." More kicks.

I squeeze my eyes shut and dial the pain down a notch, then another, make myself numb and, finally, feel nothing. How long I hold on like this, I don't know, but after a while my knuckles threaten to burst through skin and my muscles ache from constant strain, fingers curled in a deadly grip that will take minutes to unravel.

At this point my energy ebbs, because Canosa manages to swim, pulling me along with her, up, up.

We surface to chaos.

## Chapter 8. Union Bay

Air shakes from multitude of noises, crashing on my ears with deafening force. A helicopter cruises right above us, the annoying "chop-chop-chop" of its blades cutting through the white drone of traffic, sending down waves of gasoline-stinking wind. Police cars whiz by on their way to the scene of tsunami aftermath. Add to that the usual cacophony of human souls spiked with freight and extreme emotion that's typical at times of distress, and you got what it sounds like. In contrast to this, the lake is as calm as if it never erupted. The only evidence of the storm being brown leaves, twigs, and other debris like empty plastic bags peacefully floating in a layer of trash, like it belongs here and nowhere else. I look around. We seem to have drifted a good distance away, close to Union bay that opens up into Lake Washington.

"He stuck his filthy fingers in my gills! The bastard!" Canosa fumes, spits water out of her mouth, combs hair with her fingers, pulling it nervously out of the water and wringing it like long off-white cotton sheets that started greying with age. Her lips quiver with hurt. I decide that she's clearly very upset and best not talked to right now, mentally noting that

gills must be a very vulnerable spot for a siren, involuntarily raising my arm and touching mine slightly, feeling their rough edges, not daring to stick a finger inside to discover how it feels.

I drop my gaze and focus on my sleeves floating in their silver silence, play with algae, catching its green slimy mass between my fingers and squeezing it, catching and squeezing, catching and...

"You've had your fun, now can we go?" Canosa says finally.

"I'm not holding you, you can go anywhere you want." I say, bemused, not fully understanding why she's asking.

"We are going together." She pulls me closer. "Now, tell me, your father..." She begins, twirling a lock of her hair around her finger, glancing up at me and then back at her hair. "Did you really hear his soul?"

Her voice reaches me from far away, as if it's been spoken into one end of a tunnel, and I'm hiding at another. "Yeah." I say, moving my tongue with difficulty, watching algae float around me as if in a trance. "Yeah, I did. I thought it would be... different."

She purses her lips, clearly disappointed. "What did it sound like?"

"Oh... You didn't hear it?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I, well..." Another pause. "It sounds different when it's reborn. It's very weak, at first. It was too weak for me to hear. So I'm just curious."

"Ah." I say and catch her forceful stare. "Well... It sounded like a flute. A flute and butterfly wings, flapping. I didn't expect it to be so pretty. And then there was something else. I don't know what. I didn't hear it very clearly." I say, afraid to dig deeper into the memory of the sound, afraid to discover what I think it might be.

"Butterflies." Canosa looks into the sky, as if hoping to see one. "Butterflies and a flute?"

"Yeah, it was like their wings were whispering, you know? Like they were brushing against each other."

"That is *fascinating*." She says with fake dreaminess in her voice.

"Wait!" An idea pierces my mind. "What did it sound like before? When you..." I catch myself mid-sentence, terrified I'll make her angry again by asking about her past, and terrified at my own curiosity. I shouldn't. I should condemn this, I should hate her. She was, after all, my father's lover. His only true love. How can I even think this right now, when my mother is dead, when...

Mechanical wailing breaks up the flow of my thoughts. A harbor patrol boat closes in on us and we momentarily duck underwater, to avoid it.

When we surface again, a few minutes later, I look around once more, realizing I'm searching for Papa's presence, for anything, any sign of him making it okay on land. He's nowhere in sight, of course; we're too far away from where we fought. Still, I fear for the worst. My heart sinks, and I promptly hate myself.

"I'm sorry." I say, perhaps to my mother, perhaps to nobody in particular, or perhaps to all those people whom I killed, hoping that this simple declaration will change things for the better. How naïve.

I don't notice Canosa pulling on my arm, don't notice us drifting deeper into a wide expanse of water lilies. After a while, we stop. She bobs next to me, her perfect marble-statue body waist-deep amongst flat heart-shaped leaves and their slightly lemony aroma. She sweeps her purposefully innocent gaze over me, through a tangle of matted hair. Evening sun breaks through clouds for barely a moment and reflects in her eyes, coloring her hair bronze.

I have a feeling of déjà vu, like I'm back in the tub and she's my big bronze sister, merely a bathroom statue.

"I decided. Apology not accepted." She says.

"What? I don't understand..." I say, disoriented.

"It will take something more than that, Ailen Bright. You naughty, naughty girl. You promised me to kill the siren hunter. Did you do it? No. What did you do? You blew my chance, my carefully set up plan. You interrupted. I'm happy that at least you have revived his soul in the process. At least you did *that* much." She looks at me like she'll bite me in the face.

"At least?" I balk.

"Yes. Good job. But I'm still mad." She narrows her eyes. "After everything I've done for you, after I granted your wish, turned you into a siren, was helpful every step of the way... No gratitude. None! Not a single word of thanks!" She shakes her head. "No wonder you have no manners, your mother obviously didn't teach you."

On the word *mother* I snap.

"Don't you dare mentioning my mother. You. You started it all. It's all your fault." I curl my hands into fists. "Why me? Why didn't you let me die, back in the bathtub, why wouldn't you just leave me alone? What do you want from me?"

She stares me down for a moment.

"Oh, I was bored. We've played every possible game already with the girls and were running out of ideas. So I went for a swim, and that's when you showed up. I didn't even think you'd have the guts to drown yourself, you nearly ruined my plan. I

mean, I had to wait until you turned sixteen, *on the dot*, to change you." She chews on her hair, awaiting my response.

"What?" Her last words hit me with their poison, yet I don't fully grasp them. A few ducks quack and scatter as we drift closer to the shore. Cars shuffle back and forth on the 520 highway onramp above us.

"What do you mean?" I gasp, thinking back to the time I jumped off the bridge, which must have been a few minutes after the time I was born, on September 7<sup>th</sup>, at 6:30 in the morning.

Canosa raises her eyebrows and continues droning on, oblivious to my distress.

"The bastard, fetched himself a living girl and managed to lose her. Idiot. He knew one day I'd try to get my hands on you, so he kept you well locked up. The problem is, he locked you up in the wrong room." She grins. "When you were born, that's when I had an idea, how to get back at him, you know. How to make him pay." She smiles, but there is no warmth in her smile at all.

"You... You planned this all along? But how..." I think about our marble bathtub and my father telling me it was Bright's family relic, to cherish and not to trample or play with. "How the fuck did you turn into that thing, that bronze statue?"

"Who says I did?" She smiles with knowledge that only she has and I don't. I can see it in her eyes.

"Then how... It looks so much like you. Did he commission it or something? To make it look exactly like you? So he can have you next to him at all times, when he takes a bath? Is that what he did?"

She blinks so innocently it looks fake.

"I can't believe this." I think back to mom cleaning our bathroom, always taking care to wipe every marble siren on each corner, taking time to polish Canosa's bronze body with a special paste until it sparkled, because she knew how much my father loved it, loved to take a long bath after a long day of work, locking himself up for hours. In contrast to his distaste of all things wet, of the rain, or of having to dip his toes into a river or a lake, he simply went ecstatic when it came to bath time. I shudder, trying not to imagine exactly what he did in there.

"I'm just a tool for you, am I? A tool for both of you, to get back at each other, is that right?" I say. Disgust tugs at my gut. I want to claw out her pretty eyes, smash her pretty teeth into a gaping hole, kick her until she begs me to stop.

"I hate you." I say in her face, quietly but with such force that my own fury terrifies me. "I hate you both."

Canosa doesn't flinch, as if this is exactly what she thought I'd say. "I'm glad we got this straightened out. I hate you too. Very well. What does this change? Nothing. So, it's

time we get back to business." She pulls on my sleeve unceremoniously, as if I'm supposed to tug along without a single question.

"Don't touch me! Leave me alone! Where are you dragging me?" I thrash, ripping the jacket sleeve in the process. Canosa ignores me, her grip tightens on my arm. I decide to test my theory about siren's gills being a vulnerable spot and lunge for her neck. As if expecting me to do it, she easily avoids me.

"No-no-no-no, not your filthy fingers too, silly girl. Don't even try. I think you'll want to quiet down. Because you want to see your friend alive, am I right?"

"What friend? Who are you talking about?" I ask, but I know as soon as I do.

"You have more than one?" She smirks. "I was always under the impression that there was only one and one alone. That's what you told me."

And she's right, I never had any friends, always shunned at school, always ridiculed or laughed at, never part of the cool crowd. I shake my head to stop drifting back into unpleasant high school memories, concentrate on watching us turn into Lake Washington, moving south, passing fancy houses right by the beach, a tall apartment complex, a small park.

Afraid to say his name out loud, afraid to confirm what I think, it takes me a while.

"Hunter?" I exhale and my heart fills with dread. Since I reached Lake Union this afternoon and got distracted by Pisinoe, not a single thought about him flashed through my mind. Guilt skewers my gut, followed by shame, followed by disgust and, finally, excruciating pain.

"Did you really have to ask? Tsk-tsk-tsk." She shakes her head, her right arm splashes arcs of drops as she tows me behind her, parting the carpet of water lilies like melted butter.

"He's alive, is he? Canosa, please tell me he's alive. Please. Where is he? What did you do to him? You didn't do anything to him, did you?" I say and bit my lip to stop asking questions, stop trying to say something, to fill up the air with my voice and silence my guilt. To keep babbling to drown it out.

"I didn't do anything to him yet. The girls, however... I told them not to, but you know how they are. They never listen to me. Hurry up then. Come along, let's go check."

I hang my head and follow her, feeling empty. What did I get Hunter into? Why do I always end up screwing up everything around me, everything I touch?

Minutes pass by.

My eyes drift along the lake's surface, picking out shapes and colors in no particular order, for no particular reason, perhaps simply to focus on something, anything at all, to make myself stop thinking.

It's not water we swim in, it's pea soup. Debris floats up and around us after being disturbed from the bottom of the lake, rank brown muck mixed in with patches of green algae, clumps of kelp and dead fish bobbing belly up. A pair of greedy eagles that usually perches on the streetlight by the onramp circles above, shrieking, no doubt waiting for us to pass so they can dine in peace, undisturbed.

We make it out into the middle of Lake Washington, where water clears up, and Canosa pulls me into a dive. I hold on to her hand, and let her movement carry me, barely flexing a muscle, slicing into dark liquid with my sorrow and shame, watching her hair flow in long torn strands like bleached seaweed. How much time passes? I don't know.

Finally, we surface.

Evening now is in full bloom, opening up its lavender depths to dusk and rare bird calls, getting ready for the night. Sky is hiding behind clouds with no sign of rain. About fifty feet away is the shore. I recognize it. This time it's the south end of Seward park peninsula, the one that conveniently houses the siren lair, their sweet siren meadow. I remember the chant, from when I was turned, from that moment when they asked me to kill my father for the first time.

*Kill the siren hunter. Sing his mind away. Watch his flayed skin shrivel. Leave his bones rot in a pile. Bury him in the sweet siren meadow.*

If this is not enough, I remember finding out about Hunter's job, on the side of the park, on the north beach, remember our fight, remember the sirens emerge from the woods, and my father shooting at me. I should've trusted my gut. I should've gone here first, I should've never been distracted by Pisinoe.

"Canosa? He's alive for sure, is he?" I ask again. "There is no chance that Ligeia or Teles have done anything to him while you were gone, is there? Please, tell me?"

"Oh, I would never deprive you of the pleasure. We are family, after all." She throws at me, without turning her head.

"Right." I mutter, not knowing what else to say, but knowing what she expects me to do, and dreading it, dreading the very idea.

We near the beach and come out of the lake, lucky not to scare any evening joggers. Darkness is our cover. Although popular during daylight, not many people dare to venture this far into the park after dusk. Good for them. We're a sure recipe for a heart attack, one wet female clothed in her own hair, rising stone-faced out of the water, shining like a glow-stick, and another one, clad in stolen jeans and torn silver rain

jacket, paddling out on bare feet, looking as deadly. Certainly not your typical northwestern workout swimmers, rather two washed out candidates for a 911 call, to be scooped up, driven away, and thrown into a nut house.

I can hear maybe only a dozen souls meandering in the distance, in the parking on the other side of the park, a popular spot for teens to park their cars and blast music. And then there is an echo of something else. There, it's very close. I can hear it trail along warm evening wind.

"Hunter." I say under my breath.

I look down, irritated at pebbles on the beach. They grit into my soles and interrupt the divine melody of the most beautiful sound in the world, that soft warm tune I was dying to hear one more time, the desire I was seeking to blot out with my eating binge, to replace the void somehow, to stuff it with a million souls if I must, underneath it all knowing with piercing certainty that I'll never find the same tune in another human being, no matter how many I kill, no matter how far I go. All of Seattle's babies combined, whipped up into one heavenly soul-cake, will never be enough. Every lover in every single city, bunched up into one big pile especially for me, wouldn't even come close. The entire planet with its people, living creatures, plants, heck, even stones with their utter absence of life, would that make me satisfied? Never. I know the answer is *never*.

This knowledge rises in me like a curse, obliterating coherent thought, logic, and reasoning. It makes me stumble.

And another thing I hear. The wound. His soul is burning, it's smoldering with sour taste and it makes his melody snap out of tune every few seconds, fluctuating as if performed by an amateur who didn't have enough practice.

Pain rips me apart. This means he still loves me, yet I have to make him stop.

"I'm coming, Hunter, I'm coming." I breathe, trotting after Canosa, across the hiking trail and up, into woods, towards the amphitheater where we both goofed off only yesterday, and now it seems like it was years ago.

Pine needles stick to my feet with every step, forming a disarrayed criss-cross pattern on my white skin. As if they show me, right in my face, how confused are my feelings, how overlapping, without any sense of direction, how meager. Not fully green and innocent anymore, but yellowing, turning brown, because the summer of my youth is over.

It's fall. It's September. And it starts to drizzle.

Bushes part like a toothless mouth, letting us in.

I raise my head and survey the siren meadow. Not that there is much to survey, I can barely make it out. Fog is everywhere. Its entire expanse, the size of a small soccer field, is blanketed with it like with a low sitting cloud. Barely visible

through milky haze, two freestanding post-and-beam frames, twenty feet tall and five feet wide, flank the stage on both sides like two gigantic doorways into nothing, hidden from full view by a pack of tall furs. This time I'm entering the meadow from behind, from where actors would prep for the performance, from backstage, if you will, if you can call it that.

I step onto its platform and blink, to make sure I'm seeing right.

Evening light hangs in shafts of dark purple, jutting into mist, promising to turn black very soon. Smells of rotten wood and decay circle around my head in a stagnant cloud. And the chant, now performed live, tears through the air. Goosebumps run up my spine and cover my scalp and face. I don't want to hear it, I don't want to see what I see, but I can't help it.

"...kill the siren hunter," it rings, deep in the pocket of fog to my left. "Sing his mind away. Watch his flayed skin shrivel. Leave his bones to rot in a pile. Bury him in the sweet siren meadow." It's the sirens, Teles and Ligeia. I step closer, peer up into the mist, and shudder.

About ten feet up, on top of one of these weird empty doorframes, gleeful and hungry, two writhing bodies hold something down like two squirming maggots inspecting their catch.

"Girls, look who is here!" Canosa claps one time and the chant stops.

"Teles? Ligeia? Is that you guys?" I say.

They turn their faces down, sneer at me, and promptly get back to their chanting,

"Kill the siren hunter, sing his mind away..."

Swinging on the beam in a way two drunken albino crows would,

"watch his flayed skin shrivel, leave his bones to rot in a pile,"

coming close to but not quite falling, their bodies featherless, perhaps picked off in a drunken fight,

"bury him in the sweet siren meadow,"

but with plenty of hair hanging down in two muddy curtains.

"Kill the siren hunter, sing his mind away..."

I have a feeling you typically get when watching a bad horror movie, getting ready for the massacre scene, knowing that it doesn't happen for real and still dreading it, biting your knuckles, hating the stupid actors for their awful performance. Hating them for the fact that you are actually scared.

My heart surges, then sinks, as I make out the shape in the middle, as if I didn't know who it was all along. That somebody they're squirming over, his feet tied to the beam with dry

vines, his hands tied behind his back, his hoodie loosely draped over his head.

Hunter.

It's Hunter and he's hanging upside down.

## Chapter 9. Siren Meadow

He appears to be sleeping. And I'm looking at him the way I'd look at him if I found him asleep in his bed, peacefully snoozing away the evening, sinking into the night. Wisps of fog make up for his missing blanket, overlapping haze for crinkles in his cotton sheets, full of drowsiness, with no pillow to rest his head on. Perhaps he knocked it down. A mad daze spread across his face must be a bad dream, nothing more than a passing nightmare. His lips are blue, haggard and tired. I want to collect the leftover summer from the air, if there is any, and tuck him in it, warm him up, sing him a lullaby, the one that is never-ending, the one that can soothe his pain. But I can't. If I sing to him, I'll accelerate his soul's burning and destroy him for good. If I don't sing to him, he'll turn into a fully fledged siren hunter and destroy me. It's a matter of a simple choice, really. A choice I already made, then why all this doubt? Why do I want to slide in between these ethereal sheets, cuddle close to him and lie like this, forever?

I flinch at Canosa's voice.

"I told you not to touch the boy. Off! Get off him, both of you. Go!" She shoos the sirens away. They scowl and hiss, but

obey, despite the fact that she told me they never listen to her. Their long hair catches on the moss as they scramble down, deprived of a treat yet obedient, shouting back their displeasure, hissing through full lips and pouting like two upset little girls who were told to leave their favorite doll behind and go to bed. Canosa hushes them with a cry, yells at them now, and they flee through gaps between trees and are gone. I'm sure they won't make it far but will be hiding and watching us from behind the overgrown furs and cedars.

I gape upward, at several feet of endless distance separating me from Hunter.

"Don't just stand there, get on with it." Canosa prods into the small of my back and I stumble closer.

"Get on with what?" I say with hope that maybe she forgot.

"Finish him! Before he turns into a ruthless killing machine and wipes us all out, together with your beloved Papa." She jeers, taps her small feet across the stage and jumps off it onto one of the benches, turns around and plops gently down, her hair spread around her in a matted blanket, her legs crossed, hands clasped, face expectant, ready for my performance.

I take a quick second to think, wondering what I can do to stop the process of turning and still keep Hunter alive, maybe even reversing it somehow, restoring him to the way he was

before he saw me jump out of the lake. Making him stop loving me, this seems to be the only way.

I dare not take any more time, afraid Canosa will think I'm hesitating for an important reason and start asking me questions. I lick my lips.

"Hunter!" I call and wait. "Hunter, it's me. Are you okay?" It's a dumb question to ask, of course he is not okay, and I don't know why I say it.

He doesn't respond, but opens his eyes. Traces of dark circles make his irises bluer than I remember, now almost over-saturated against the background of growing darkness. He blinks several times, turning his head this way and that, until he finds me. A big grin stretches his cracked lips and parts his face in two, in this lovely way I grew to adore. I forget our squabble at the dance club last night, forget the girl that was hanging on him, his bitter words, forget I'm a siren, forget I'm dead. I rush to him, reach up, grasp at empty air. He hangs too high.

"Fuck!Fuck-fuck-fuck..."

His soul's faint murmur overpowers my quiet swearing.

"Hunter! Can you talk? Say something, please." I say.

He loses his concentration, his lips fall slack, his eyes close again. I squat, ready to jump up and untie him, when Canosa shrieks.

"STOP!"

I freeze.

She bends forward, indifferent and cold as a fish, points at Hunter with a conductor's gesture.

"My dear boy, your last wish has been granted. I promised I would bring her, and I fulfilled my promise. Now it's your turn." She looks at me. "Do not disappoint me this time, Ailen Bright. Do you understand? I don't like being disappointed. It makes my skin dry." She rubs her forehead then flings her hair back and pinches her eyebrows, perhaps to make them look more arched.

"What last wish?" I say and understand. "You wanted to die from my song, not from Canosa's?"

Hunter's eyelashes flutter, but that's all I get. Fog recedes now and I can see him better, but it's getting dark.

"How darling of you to explain. Thank you for sparing me the trouble." Canosa clicks her tongue loudly on *trouble* for a dramatic effect and stubs her finger at my chest. "I haven't got all day. Go on, silly girl, sing already."

Only now I notice that she is not wearing those stolen clothes anymore and wonder what she's done with them, feeling my sanity slip away from me in being distracted by little details like this that are totally out of sync with time and importance.

"Why didn't you do it yourself?" I say, hoping to prolong the moment of starting some more.

"You're hurting me. You're being mean again. I want to help, we're family, remember? You had trouble doing it at the club, well, here he is, all ready for you, tied up and not going anywhere. You really know how to try my patience, don't you, little sister?" She shakes her head in a stern big sister kind of way, and I notice how for the first time she calls me *sister*.

By the look on her face I realize she fully means this. To her, in her world, she is doing me a favor, letting me finish my kill, like proper predators do in a pack, like I let her finish her kill in Arboretum park, by some newly found hunting instinct.

"Thank you." I say, before I can catch it. It comes out automatically, prewired into my brain from small age, from the times when I had to thank for everything, even for a slap my father would administer, because it was a favor that he did to me, it was supposed to teach me. This must be the help she was talking about when she found me floating in the Pacific ocean.

"Can I take him down before I do it? Please?" I say, hopeful, considering my options. Can I fight Canosa? She is obviously stronger than me. Do I stand a chance?

"No. He's not going anywhere. I'll take him down myself, when he's dead. You still can't make up your mind, can you?"

What's stopping you?" I detect a hint of familial worry in her voice.

I swallow. "Nothing. I'm just..."

"Ailen?" I hear from above. Hunter's voice sounds hollow and cracked. "Nice to see you, turkey. Hey, I'm sorry for yesterday. For shouting and stuff. I didn't really mean it."

I look up and peer into his face, blue from hanging upside down, but his eyes fully alert. That must be it, he is really turning, otherwise how would he be able to hang upside down for so long and still function?

"No-no-no, it's ok." I say. "I'm sorry for leaving you. For getting mad. I'm - I don't know what happened. Something made me so angry, and then--" I trail off, not sure what exactly happened *then* and how to explain it. How to communicate my fear of never being enough, of not being perfect for him; my jealousy towards normal girls, beautiful and warm, soft and curvy, womanly and weak and capricious, the way I'll never be. How to tell him that he deserves better.

"I just wanted to hear your voice one more time." Hunter says, his eyes glistening with brimming tears. He blinks hard, trying to hide it.

"You did? Really? *Why?*" I say, looking up into his face, now almost purple in color, barely visible in the darkness.

"Cause it's awesome. I love it."

"No, you don't. It's fake. You think you love it, but you don't really. It's because I'm a siren. Everybody loves a siren's voice, it's supposed to work like this, it means that my deadly magic is working." I breathe in and breathe out. "I wonder..." I take another breath, "I wonder why mine. I mean, did it sound especially charming or something?" I try to sound even, but my voice catches at the end and I sniff.

"Yeah, totally. For real, I swear. Has nothing to do with your siren thing, I always loved your voice. I tried telling you, but you wouldn't listen." A shiver takes over him, he coughs and bends upright, then drops back down, hanging, swaying.

There is a corridor of space between us, and everything else stops existing. I don't hear naught but Hunter's soul and voice, don't see anything else but him.

"No, you don't get it. What I'm trying to say is, it's not me that you want, it's her. She. The siren inside me. *Not* me, not the Ailen you know. Anyway... Forget it, I'm rambling--" I hang my head, furious at myself for not being able to explain what seemed to clear a second ago in my mind. Not knowing what to tell him, how to make him stop loving me, how to make him hate me, failing miserably.

"That's simply not true. You know that, so stop fishing for a compliment. You is you is you, voice or not, siren or not or

whatever freak you decide to be, I don't care. Like when we met at the lake, remember? Skipping stones? You tinkled like a thousand bells. You kept asking me questions, and I kept answering them in a half-ass way, just to make sure you'll ask me some more. So I could hear you talk." A series of coughs interrupt him, and he twists and bends again.

My neck hurts from looking up, drizzle collect on my face in drops, the glide and hang off my chin, but I ignore them. An urgent need to cry threatens to spill from my throat and it takes an enormous effort to hold it.

"Hunter, why are you doing this to me?"

Hanging upside down, he still manages to shrug his shoulders, like he always does before blushing. "I'm not doing anything." He averts his eyes, studying something immensely interesting on his shoulder. "I just love you."

And it sounds so true, it makes me want to die on the spot.

I search for words, to say something. No, I know what I want to say, but it gets stuck on the tip of my tongue, scared because it doesn't believe itself to be true. Because it can't be true, it has no right to exist, I must kill it, I must root it out of me. I shake my head, feeling ridiculous.

"I love you too." I say finally, unable to suppress it.

Time stretches and becomes endless. There is a column of anticipation between us, that one minute of fantasy that's

better than nothing, trapped in the freezing fog up to our wits, Hunter's head down, my head up. Several feet apart. Our hearts beating like crazy, his alive, mine dead.

Night clouds lounge above us, sending filtered moonlight through the gaps in the drizzle. Lazy humming of distant traffic trickles through. And at this moment Canosa breaks our sacred silence.

She claps. She stands and claps some more. Loudly, obnoxiously, tearing us out of our stupor, bringing us back to reality.

"Oh, how splendid! Please, spice it up, children, not enough emotion for me. More genuine feelings. I beg you, indulge me. Make it exciting, this advent of imminent death, this exploding finale."

Shame flushes my face, I forgot she is here.

"Hunter, tell her how you planned to kill her. Go on."

"You did?" I say.

"Oh, he told us all about it, it was very entertaining."

Hunter doesn't look at me, coughing.

I pause at a loss of words. Canosa hops on stage next to me. "Lovely, kids, very lovely. This is so much fun to watch. I'm delighted. Not boring at all!" She grabs my chin and brings my face close to hers. "Of course he did, darling sister. He's a siren hunter, what did you expect? Please, continue."

She lets go of me, hops off and sits on the front bench again, cupping her head like a little girl ready for the spectacle of a lifetime.

I take a step back. "You planned to kill me? When?"

Hunter shakes his head. He still has a bit of warmth left. It envelops me, and I dare not to move so as not to disturb that feeling. Frankly, I don't care what he's about to say, as long as we get to stay like this, together.

He moves his lips, struggling to say something. I block out the discord of the noises to hear only him. I watch his lips to make sure I don't leave out a single detail of what he's saying.

"I did. It's not what you think though--" He begins.

And I rush in to say it before I get scared. "I don't think anything. I get it. I'm a siren, you're a siren hunter. What else is there to expect? So it's okay. It's all right. I don't mind."

I glance back at Canosa and see her scowl. I smile back at her, as if to say, I win this time, *bitch*.

"Do it!" She shouts at me.

I look back up at Hunter. Pain flashes his face. I notice his eyes became bloodshot. He's wet and shivering from cold. His heart accelerates as he lifts himself with a grunt and folds over his legs, then lets go and dangles again. I can only imagine the discomfort he is in. And I realize I don't know how

long a person can hang upside down before dying, siren hunter or not. I wonder again if I stand a chance against Canosa, if Ligeia and Teles will help her or if I can persuade them to help me. Or, if not, what will it take for me to wrestle all three of them and free him, run away somewhere, and then let him go. Will I be able to resist the urge to feed? Will I be able to resist finishing him off?

"Just hear me out, okay?" Comes from above. "Then you can beat me up later." He mumbles. "I wanted to distract your dad, wanted to make him think I'll do my job well, wanted too..."

"It's fine, I don't care. Stop apologizing. I get it!" I say.

He gapes at me. "You do? You don't hate me?"

At this I remember what I have to do, but my heart wouldn't let me go ahead and serve it straight and raw, so I decide to tell the truth.

"You have to stop loving me." I say.

"What? Why?" He says.

"Your soul is burning." I say.

"That's enough!" Canosa erupts. "Either finish him off right now or I will do it. We don't have much time, and I'd prefer it you two stopped talking."

My hope evaporates, and I take one last glance at Hunter's face, trying to etch into my memory the line of his jaw, the

roughness of his cheeks, the piercing blue of his eyes, his mop of unruly hair, the funny way he tilts his head when he's intently listening, like right now.

I take a step back, deciding to die fighting if that's what it takes, but still try to unclench him from this stupid teenage love thing we both fell victims of. One more thing, one more thing to say, and hopefully, after I'm gone, if I succeed, he will understand.

"Just one more question, I promise." I tell Canosa, and before she can respond, quickly say to Hunter. "Hey, have you ever wanted to do anything it takes to save someone you love?"

He opens his eyes wide, I hear Canosa begin cursing and moving swiftly towards me, and I grunt and make myself hate everyone and everything, dig deep into my siren core, awake my hunger, hunger for Hunter, hunger for anything living, attempting to get to that place where I don't care, where I turn into a ruthless murderer.

Just in time, because as soon as I feel Canosa dig her fingernails into my shoulder, the unmistakable timbre of the voice I despise so much quietly asserts itself to our surprise.

"Nice setup you got going here, impressive size. I'd say it lacks a roof, a door, and air conditioning, but aside from that, not bad. Glad I found the right time to visit."

"Papa is here." I mouth.

This makes me jump. I didn't hear him approach, none of us did. Yet now I hear it, the faint echo of a flute. It's barely audible, like a whisper of butterfly wings that only a trained hear can detect, yet it's there.

"Would you look at that, the bastard is back." Canosa hisses and lets go of my shoulders, turning to face my father.

It's the first time I see them talk to each other, apart from Canosa shouting at him "Die, siren hunter, DIE!" at Pike Place market restroom, and on some level I watch the exchange with abated breath, disgusted and morbidly curious at the same time. Is there anything left between them? There must be, because where there is hate, there is always a possibility of love underneath.

"You didn't even think about this possibility, did you? You always forget things, always wrapped up in that little head of yours." Papa taps on his head, I bristle for a moment, then realize he's not talking to me, he's talking to Canosa.

"GIRLS?" She shouts, without breaking her gaze, leaning forward and sticking her arms back like an angry bird ready for a fight.

I see first a round face peek out from behind thick fur tree, and then Ligeia steps out, cautiously moving forward, pulling Teles behind her by the hand. Their two bodies are

shrouded in glistening hair, glimmering slightly, one short and chubby, another lanky and tall.

Goosebumps trail up my back. I know I have to face Papa. I don't know if I should be happy he survived or not, don't know what it means that I have reawakened his soul, even if it's only a little. No matter. I have to. I finally dare to turn.

Dark soot of his outline mars the drizzle over the meadow like graffiti on a clear shower curtain. Menacing in its presence, darker than evening darkness. Water drips from his hair, down his face. His clothes are soaked, fine Italian wool pants and a polo shirt, covered with spider webs and pine needles, which means he probably has been crashing through the woods to get here in the same manner me and Hunter did yesterday when we fled the beach. His round eyes study me, two powerful arms reside at his sides, a bullwhip at the ready in his right hand, left hand curled into a fist. His legs are spread apart in a military stance, his Gucci loafers miraculously still on his feet.

How did I not hear his sloshing steps? And a whip... I remember seeing a collection of whips on the wall of his man cave. A whip can produce a sonic boom, not as powerful as from the sonic gun, but still. How clever. A whip? He must have had one tucked into his pants or something. So much like my father, always having a hand-crafted alternative to a highly desirable

technological tool, just in case. I bet his whip is made from Italian leather.

His words trail through my mind, the words he readied for his future son never to be, the words he repeated to me ad nauseam whenever he blasted my face with the back of his hand.

*The most effective way to teach a woman a lesson is to slap her, it humiliates her and makes her remember better. Here is how you do it. You keep your palm open, like this, then strike with the back of your hand as if you crack a whip, deliberate and fast.*

Deliberate and fast. I can see he is ready to do it. His right hand twitches, long slender fingers curled tight. I remember being little, remember badly wanting those hands to hug me, hold me, make me feel safe and solid and warm, make me know that nothing bad could ever happen to me in those strong hands. He never hugged me. No use daydreaming now, awakened soul or not.

Barely a second has passed since Canosa shouted.

In this moment of shock, to my surprise, instead of attacking my father, she swiftly jumps behind me and wraps me in a headlock, hooks her chin on my shoulder, her breath a fish purgatory in need of a thorough cleaning, rank and rotten.

"I was beginning to worry you'd never show up. You're late. Well, don't just stand there, come closer. Come, I have

something to tell you." She beckons him with her finger, tightening her lock on me. He doesn't move, standing firm, studying us both, never glancing up at Hunter. Ligeia and Teles come up to us on both sides. I choke, clawing on her arms to no avail, unable to speak.

"If you came for her, she's mine. Mine alone. Now, you may go away. You're interrupting a splendid performance. Not like you can do much with that toy of yours anyway." Canosa says with quiet force, pointing a finger at the whip.

"A toy, you say? Very well. I can see this is a game to you, is it? I thought we have discussed this already, and I was hoping you'd remember the consequences. Get your hands off my daughter. Please." Papa says, his voice calm. I know this tone too well, it's not to be threatened, or it will erupt in terrible fury.

"He's scaring me." Teles whispers to Ligeia.

"Shut up." Ligeia whispers back.

Canosa shushes them both with a low hiss.

"You can try taking her. But she's still mine. You all are. One day you'll all die, whether you want it or not. And then we'll meet again, in this siren meadow. I'll take your hand and I'll guide you on your after-life journey. All the way this time, *all* the way." She cackles, and I can't help myself but to

think that on some level she is completely insane, mythological creature or not.

"I'm the Siren of Canosa and Death is my girlfriend. Would you like me to invite her to our little party?" Her laugh turns to raucous clucking, to some sick glee. Spit flies out of her mouth, her teeth bared to the sky.

I shake in rhythm to her hysterical convulsions, appalled. And yet her laughter makes me feel a strange awe toward her, toward my *siren* family, a new affection I haven't detected before. It's this unyielding force, unbending will, this desire to fight and stand up no matter what, no matter the threat.

I catch Papa's stare at me, as if he doesn't care for this outburst and is only waiting for my reaction, waiting to see what I'll do. Is this some kind of a test? I hear his soul, his its echo again, and for a split second a childish desire for praise, for validation, the wish to be a good girl, a girl who deserves a standing ovation, overwhelms me.

"Papa, you made it!" I say and smile like a total idiot, wanting to drop through the stage and disappear. Yet I'm not done, that little girl inside me is giddy, is happy he's alive, he didn't sink, he's here. He came for me, after all. Isn't it worth something?

"You and me, we'll have a little chat. Later." He says and spits.

My giddiness is squashed just like that. It vanishes. For a second I get a feeling that this is it, I'll never escape this, this broken crazy ugly concoction of people that hate each other's guts and have caused each other so much pain that it must've killed them by now but amazingly it didn't, this is my weird Frankenstein family, sirens and siren hunters. Lovely.

Papa raises his right arm. Whip uncoils like a deadly snake that woke up from an evening slumber, its thong falling softly into grass. Familiar fear spreads across my chest. Of all times, why now? Why am I so scared and so pathetically needy? I reach out and clutch to the beam for balance.

Canosa shrieks, lets me go, and jumps with a hideous cry.

But Papa is faster, he's lightning fast. He takes a half-step back and arches his arm behind him, but not too much, just enough to turn into a tight line of muscle that is poised to throw a powerful crack. Whip thong follows his arm in a long curve, and then, as one, they both lunge forward. Papa's arm snaps into a straight line, whip circles about a foot above his head for a fraction of a second and then uncoils, flying fast, reaching a straight line, its end curling around Canosa's hair. And I notice something else.

He doesn't even look at her, he looks at me.

CRACK!

## Chapter 10. Green Stage

All of this looks surreal, like an ink drawing on dark evening paper. As the deafening crack splits the air, I flinch and cover my ears, but keep staring, mesmerized. The whip is a black delicate outline of a angry snake, producing a momentary gust of wind, within one second having unfolded, twisted, snapped, and yanked Canosa out of mid-air. Her glowing body leaves a shimmering trace in the fog as she slams into the ground by my father's feet. I hear both Ligeia and Teles quietly retreat behind my back and slink into woods. Stinking cowards, without their alpha and her commands they're nothing.

I stand still, studying the face of my father, the man who I know has killed so many and came for me, most likely not out of love but out of his obsession with purification. His desire to rid mankind of siren corruption, of their lethal perverted love-inducing songs. Love. If love even exists in his vocabulary. It must have had, at one time. I wonder. I wonder if his mother ever loved him, my grandmother whom I never knew, and what she did to him to screw him up to badly, to make him hate women with such ferocity. What did she do?

Canosa writhes under my father's foot, shrieking. He cracks the whip again, close to her head, not to kill her but to torture her, I'm sure, because at this distance if he wanted to, he'd probably already have evaporated her into a million drops and make her vanish like a puff of fog. He cracks his whip again, and I flinch again. He watches me, watches the effect it has on me, smiling. It creeps me out and I shudder. This is a smile of a killer.

I don't know why I'm still standing here, not acting and simply staring. I must do something.

White hair spread wide in a torn blanket over grass between two rows of wooden benches, face and body glowing in almost full darkness, Canosa stubbornly begins singing her song, perhaps to irritate my father more, perhaps to try and kill his newly ignited soul.

"We live in the meadow

"But you don't know it..."

Papa cracks the whip again,

"Our grass is your sorrow..."

and again,

"But you won't show it..."

and again,

"Give us your pain

"Dip into our song..."

until he makes her stop.

Each time bullwhip cracks, a wave of pain similar to an electric surge passes through my body, shattering all hope and longing and desire. Yet I'm unable to move, enthralled by the violence of the scene, and deep inside me feeling the satisfaction of revenge, the thought of *this is what you get, you bitch, for making my father fall in love with you. It should have been my mother, he should have never met you.*

At last, she is quiet. My father raises his head. It's so dark by now, I barely make out his eye whites.

"This is what happens to women who don't listen." He says, and he means me.

My heart aches and I grasp the beam harder, to stay upright. I swallow.

"This is what will happen to you."

My soulless chest rings with horror at his words. Surely, if he wanted to kill me, he would've done so by now, then why this theater? And still I can't move, as if someone shot industrial strength staples through my feet and bound me to the stage.

"This is what women were made for, to haul water. That's all they're good for." He grabs a handful of Canosa's hair, wraps it around her head several times and stuffs the end in her

mouth. She lies motionless, stripped of her mane, knocked out by repeated blasts.

I begin shaking, glowing in the dark with the silver of a freshly caught fish, trembling at the end of the line, one sorry little thing, too small to be fried for dinner, yet caught for some reason nonetheless. I fight familiar urge to run, run for my life.

"Did you... Is it true? Did you push mom off the bridge?" I ask, moving my tongue with difficulty.

"Do me a favor, repeat what you said?" His jaw works slowly over each word, he wipes drizzle out of his face.

I clear my throat. "Off the bridge. Canosa said - is it true that you pushed mom? Is it because she didn't give you a son?" The second I finish talking, I think I'll die from fear. How dare I to contradict him, how dare I to argue. But I did kick him in the balls before, what's wrong with me now? I only know that I want to disappear, shrink to the size of some whirligig beetle, swim rapidly in circles, alarmed, until I find a gap to wiggle into, narrow and hidden and so deep that nobody could ever get me out.

Hunter moans above me.

I have absolutely forgotten about him! But before I can take a look, Papa walks up to the stage, pulls himself up and places a hand on my shoulder in that 'don't you think about

running away' gesture, pointing the handle of his whip at my chest. I can hear his soul now better, and I bask in its sound, elated. I did it, I did it, I...

"Son? You failed your first assignment. You're fired." Papa says into the fog above us.

I hear Hunter's mouth open to say something, but don't dare looking up, consumed with Papa's stare, cold and merciless. I freeze into the ground under the weight of his hand, and yet I can still hear his soul. I can hear his soul!

"About your mother—" He begins. A tugging sensation spreads through my chest. I don't like this feeling, I can't be weak right now. I have to be strong, and yet I seem to have forgotten how to breathe, let alone sing, let alone stand upright and not crumble. Never mind me being able to cause a tsunami, it all evaporated in an instant.

Hunter's voice says from above, "But... Mr. Bright..."

"That's enough! Dismissed. I don't want to talk about this right now, not ever. Understood?" He tells Hunter, never raising his head, looking directly at me.

"Fuck you." Hunter whispers.

Full moon breaks through a layer of clouds and illuminates the meadow in an eerie clarity, fog completely gone.

"Now, get yourself off this comic bird perch and get out of here. I need to have a word with my daughter." He turns and

blows his nose loudly into the grass, pinching one nostril and exhaling through another. Looking down at his snot flying, I want to throw up.

Hunter grunts above. "I can't..."

"Ailen, get him down already, will you?" This is directed at me.

Too happy to oblige and yearning to get away from his hand and his stare, I climb the slippery beam, pull myself up and balance on the top beam, tightrope-walk to the place where Hunter's feet are bound with what appears to be a thorny blackberry vine. I saddle the beam and begin untangling wet knots, stripping my skin in the process, sucking on the cuts out of habit. It's not blood that I taste, it's salty sea water. Cold, slimy, and revolting.

*What am I doing? What am I doing?* Pulses in my head.

"Hurry up, now!" Papa calls. "You know I don't like to wait."

I hook the beam behind my knees and swing down, work Hunter's hands free, pull myself up and sit upright, both exhilarated and terrified by my agility and power. Then why the fuck am I not fighting my father right now?

I shake my head, confused.

Hunter moans as he pulls himself up, his fingers unbending. I grab his arm,

"I got ya, I got ya,"

untie the rest of the vine to free his feet, tearing his jeans a little in the process. His right hand slips off the wet beam and he dangles down, nearly falls.

"Hang on!" I clasp his left hand, then wrap my other hand around his wrist and gently lower him, until he manages to circle his legs around the post. I let him go so he can slide down, arms and legs wrapped, like firemen do on their steel pole.

All the time my father is watching us, silent.

Hunter reaches the ground and holds on to the post, perhaps dizzy. Then he simply collapses down into a heap of soaked clothes, hangs his head and wipes his face.

"Get out of here." Papa says.

Hunter props himself up on all fours, tries to stand, stumbles, leans on the post. Its wood is shiny from the drizzle, glistening in the moonlight.

"I said, get out. Move!"

Ignoring my father, Hunter raises his head at me,

"Ailen, you all right, brat?"

and I know that if I won't do it now, I'll never summon enough courage to do it all. I take a breath, let out all air from my lungs, then inhale again and shriek in the craziest

voice I can muster, still perched on top of the beam like a strange bird of a girl gone coo coo.

"Yeah, get out of here, you slime!" I look him in the eye. *Slime* sounds stupid. I was always bad at creative cursing.

He doesn't buy it, obviously, raising one of his eyebrows in a questioning manner that suggests, *are you out of your mind?*

"You're joking, right?" He says.

He knows me too well to detect my lies. No matter, I have to keep going. I want to cry, but my throat dries out and I barely croak. I cough and try again.

"You... You betrayed me. Your... your father left your mom because of you, because you're an unworthy son. That's right. You can't even kill a siren, fuck, you can't even hold a job long enough to buy meds for your mother!" That does it. His face contorts in pain. Before I feel any kind of compassion, I lunge into my tirade, shouting louder, shaking fists in the air, nearly convincing myself that what I'm yelling is absolutely true.

"And your mother never wanted you, never wanted a son, she always wanted a daughter, she told me, this one time when I came over on spring break, remember, when she asked you to leave the room?" I watch Hunter open his mouth, close it, open it again, and then take a step back, another, gaping at me, his silhouette skirting the stage.

I'm on a roll. "And I never loved you! I lied! You were just a sidekick for me, that's all! It was all a game of pretense! I don't care for you, you're food! If you ever cross my path, know this, fuckhead! I'll finish you if I ever see you again, got it? Now you get your sorry ass out of here, you *slime!*" There we go, why did I have to say *slime* again?

Step by step, his sneakers slide in dirt. I hope for something, for a glance, for a word, for a signal that maybe on some level he understands why I'm doing this. Instead I hear his soul's warmth desert me. He doesn't make an effort to hide his disgust, even in the silvery moonlight I can see it on his face. We're miles of pain apart. Score.

"FUCK YOU, YOU PATHETIC SIREN LOVER! FIND YOURSELF A REAL LIVING GIRL, OR HAVE YOU GOT NO BALLS FOR THAT? YOU LIKE THEM DEAD AND COLD INSTEAD? IS THAT YOUR PROBLEM? IS IT? *IS IT?*" I throw, for the perfect end, and I truly mean it this time, convulsing into sobs.

Hunter turns and stumbles away into black woods.

And I want to die, I want to die so bad, I begin hitting my own head with fists, biting my arms, hitting my head into the beam, wishing it to be concrete and not wood so I would feel some kind of pain, something to silence the agony.

"Ailen, sweetie, stop this, stop monkeying around. Get down, please." My father says.

I watch myself obey. My butt slides along the beam towards the post, my hands work their way down the post, my feet meet the ground, and I slowly sink, tracing the beam with my back, meeting soft ground with my butt.

"What was that all about?" My father asks, sticks his hands into my armpit, hoists me up and props me on the spectator's bench. "Sit. Explain."

He is waiting for me talk. His parental care, or at least a resemblance of it, the trace of his soul's melody, my forceful breaking up with Hunter, Canosa spread-eagled a few feet away, the memory of my mother, everything swirls up and turns into a ball of grief that needs to get out. I begin wailing like a baby.

He slaps me hard on my face. I stop crying out of shock. And, as usual, he slaps the other side of my face, for symmetry.

*Blast her. That's what he used to tell me, administering his cheek-smacking lessons. Blast her. It hurts but leaves no mark, how about it? Genius, I'd say. That makes her shut her mouth, makes her stop all this incessant whining. Have you read Walter Perry? No? You should. Wise man. "Their song," he said, "though irresistibly sweet, was no less sad than sweet, and lapped both body and soul in a fatal lethargy, the forerunner of death and corruption." Listen to his words. You, women, corrupt us, men. That's what you do. And because I happen to have a*

*daughter, I have to work hard on rooting this out of you, do you understand?*

Here we go again. Siren or not, nothing changed after all. My knees go to liquid and I slouch down. Papa sits next to me, about a foot away. Canosa lies at our feet, motionless. We're drenched, it's still drizzling. There is barely audible hissing in the woods. Ligeia and Teles must be watching us from a safe distance. Good. At least it gives me comfort in knowing they didn't follow Hunter, didn't chase him into the dark. Not that any of this matters.

Loneliness buries me.

Hunter. Hunter is gone. I did it.

I make a concentrated effort to push my pain as deep as I possibly can and go numb. I know I'm about to slide into stupefied daydreaming, always happens when I do this, I guess it helps my body continuing to function on some autopilot, while my mind is elsewhere, gone.

I face Papa's stare. It's empty and cold. There is no emotion in it, no love, no hate, nothing.

I search his dark round eyes. He didn't gasp, didn't say 'no' when I asked him about mom. He never answered my question, never recoiled at it, never protested. He pushed her, then, he must have. I feel like I'm staring into the eyes of death itself. I'm no longer Ailen I know, he's no longer Papa I know.

It all got corrupted somehow along the way, got changed to the point where it can't be reversed, no matter what I do.

"Back to your question, about your mother." He finally breaks the silence. "What you don't understand is that the mere act of you *asking* this question leads me to believe that you, as is typical of you, never even considered--"

I shrink and tune him out. Because I know that whatever follows is a lie and a lecture on how I'm wrong and he's right, his typical tirade that always follows the slapping. My highly valuable learning experience, the one I can't get anywhere else, the one I have to listen to with abated breath and be able to repeat after word for word, if I were to avoid any more blows in my face. It's easy to turn his droning voice into white noise, I'm used to it. Years of relentless practice. It turns out, I don't want to hear it. Especially not now.

In some corner of my mad childish wish, I cling to the hope of turning everything around, of going back to the bathroom, having him knock on the door, getting out of the water, wrapping myself up in a warm towel, shaking all of this off like a bad dream and nothing else. Wouldn't it be great if life was like that? Any time you didn't like it, you could pinch yourself and wake up?

Involuntarily, I raise my right hand and pinch the top of my left hand, hard. I even twist it, for added measure. *Yeah,*

*right, nice try, Ailen Bright.* It hurts, and I snap back into what Papa is saying.

“—tried saving her, tried pulling her up, but she just wouldn’t listen. One stupid stubborn woman, your mother. And here I was, standing there like a fool, after all these years, thinking that maybe once, just this once, she might—”

Something did change. He’s telling me an actual story of how it happened, and I missed it! He’s actually sharing with me how he felt when it happened. He...

“—slippery little thing, unfortunately. I tried to hold on, but it was a question of either both of us--”

I sit up straight at once, alert and mad at myself for sliding into my typical slumber. Shit! I listen intently to his next words, rolling out in his low timbre against soft patter of the rain and the crunching of pine needles. Pine needles. The sound snaps my attention again and I turn to look behind us.

Nothing, there is nothing there, only my paranoia.

I turn back. My father is on a roll. He gets this way occasionally, especially if you pretend that you’re listening intently, nodding and not saying anything in return. That’s the most important part, to agree with everything. He loves it. Hence, my learned ability to tune him out, where on the surface I would appear alert and nodding, but my mind would be gone.

I try to pick up where I left off, to tune back into his monologue, but once I'm gone, it's almost impossible for me to return fully. Instead, I see his face grimace as he talks, with volume turned to zero, and I realize how much hate I've been carrying inside me towards this face when I tuned it out. I remember images that would pop in my head while watching him and nodding.

My favorite one was of his throat being ripped out, his vocal cords dangling in my hand like ripe grapes, his voice about to be squished between my fingers. Another one, of every bone in his body broken into a jagged landscape of shards, with me sitting on top of the pile like a victorious siren, giddy. Or I'd imagine him hanging off a streetlamp, dangling, and me pointing underneath at him, screaming for help, knowing inside that it was me who did it. Most of all, I loved to imagine my song poisoning his ears, grinding him into dirt, all the way until his head would disappear, and then mom rising out of the lake, walking up to him and stomping on his head, laughing, chortling, giggling, spit flying out of her mouth...

At this image I jerk upright, shudder at the horrors I've conjured. I realize I forgot my mother's face. I've completely forgotten it.

"—to tell me. Are you having fun?" Papa's voice comes at me from the far end of a tunnel.

"What?" I say weakly, like an old feeble woman. He's talking to me, he's actually talking to me about me having fun. He asked me a question, an impossible question. At once, there are so many things I want to say, so many things to ask. My tongue has a mind of its own and it blows itself up so thick I can't swallow, let alone move it to produce an articulate sound.

"I asked you a question, sweetie. Are you having fun?" He cocks his head to the right, his eyes are so big, so frightening. Steam rolls out of his mouth into the drizzle. He is wet and looks cold, but doesn't shiver. How is this humanly possible? Must be a siren hunter thing.

I have to remind myself to breathe. In, out. Repeat.

"Yeah. I mean, no. No, I'm not. Fun - Doing what?" I squeak in a small mouse-like voice.

This is so awkward, we've never talked like this before and I don't know how to behave. Why the interest?

"That's not very descriptive. Please, I want you to elaborate on your behavior on the lake. It cost me my boat, it's ruined now. Do you know how much I paid for it? Do you know what a pain in the ass it will be for me to replace it?" He sneezes, and it jolts me from my apathy.

My tongue unrolls. I think I can talk again. He means all those people, of course. All those people whose souls I ate.

Guilt floods me and makes me stutter. "I didn't want to, I swear. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry!"

He opens his mouth, as if in shock.

"You're sorry? You're *SORRY*?" And then he laughs. I can't remember the last time I've seen him laughing. Mouth open wide, he throws his head back and shakes in a silent spasm, as if a giant invisible hand is gagging him, its rainy fist burrowed deep into his throat. Chest heaving, eyes watering, arteries bulging, hands jumping over knees, he shakes quietly, and then ends it with a series of cackles.

"Did I say anything wrong?" I ask.

He wipes his eyes, steadies his breath. "A siren. A siren is sorry. For killing people. I didn't know you actually had a sense of humor, Ailen." He looks at me with a hint of a new appreciation, and I think I'm supposed to be grateful.

"I do? I'm sorry." I say and bite my lip. Why did I have to say *sorry* again?

His face falls.

I press my lips together, so as not to say anything else stupid. I'm so afraid to disturb the flow of our conversation, the first in years that I remember that involves actual talking, a real exchange as opposed to a one-sided lecture, that I choke on words. There, I screwed it up again, as always.

His eyes fill with lead and dart to the sides, then down at Canosa's lifeless body. I strain to listen, but there is no sign of Ligeia or Teles. God, I hope they're not after Hunter.

"When will you learn to stand up for yourself, huh? When? When will you learn to defend your own words? What you're demonstrating to me with your apologies is a sign of weakness. Never apologize for what you have to say!" He presses his lips into a thin line and strokes his whip. Rain drops roll from his bushy eyebrows over long curly eyelashes, almost girly, in stark contrast to the rest of this face, and spill on his cheeks, silvery in the moonlight.

Am I mistaken, or did he just demonstrate some compassion towards me? I gape. Of course, whatever it is I said, is wrong, and I broke the magic.

"Sorry." I mumble.

"I don't want you to apologize!" He explodes.

I clasp my hands over my mouth to not say another *sorry*.

"I want you to show me what you're made of, how did it make you feel. All right? Tell me, how did it *feel* wiping out dozens lives for fun as opposed to simply satisfying your hunger. I must admit, on some level, I thoroughly enjoyed your show." There is an excited shine in his face, spreading rapidly from glistening eyes to a stretched mouth to the parade of

meticulously brushed teeth and mint breath despite a recent dip into the lake.

I feel like I said something wrong again, not understanding where this is leading, hoping to maintain this new connection we have.

"It wasn't a show, I swear!" But it was. It was a show, to show him that I *can*. Can sing, can move an entire lake with my song. Can move anything I want, can reignite his soul back to life from its ashes. Can make him listen to me, make him hear me, make him tell me I'm good enough for him. At least once in my life, hear him tell me that I turned out okay, that he loves me.

Rain stops and a light breeze picks up.

I decide to try harder, to play along and be evil, like he obviously wants to see me. I sit up straight and clasp my knees for support.

"Well, it was no big deal. Just a warm-up." I deliver my line with the iciest tone I can muster, and stretch my lips into a fake grin, hoping he won't notice.

"A warm-up? A warm-up for what?" Papa unrolls his whip, the corners of his mouth twitching into a smile. His chest muscles tighten under the wet film of his shirt, the virgin pink of brushed cotton, Hugo Boss, complete with pearl buttons and

immaculate stitching on every seam, now dull and grey in the moonlight, sagging from the moisture.

"For a city-wide massacre." I make myself smile.

"Really? And you expect me to believe you?" He says, but I detect appreciative notes in his voice, as if my play is paying off.

"Yeah. Why wouldn't you? I'm a siren, right? Made to kill."

"That was..." He scratches his chin, "...spectacular, I must admit. Would you care to let me know in advance next time? I wouldn't want to forego another performance, don't want to miss any more *deadly* singing." He cackles and smacks the whip on the bench like a tiger would smash his tail before jumping at prey. That's his attempt at humor. At another time, I would've fainted from this amazing miracle. Not right now. Right now the only thing I know is that he has just cut right into my wound.

"You never came to hear me sing in school choir. Never came to any of my school performances, for that matter." It's too late to stop now, I try very hard not to cry, terrified at my own boldness but pressing forward, trying to connect. I was never able to tell him this before, tell him how much it mattered to me.

Nature sounds wither, pausing, eager for us to continue.

"What?" He's taken aback. "What did you say?"

Ancient hurt blossoms in me like a tumor of a fast-spreading cancer, and I can't stop myself.

"Everybody else's parents were there, taking pictures, bringing flowers, you know, bringing cookies. And I was the only one alone. The only one. Do you know how that feels?" I force myself to look at him, because his eyes have gone from steel to brooding darkness. "Would you like me to explain? Because I can. I can demonstrate it right here." I dare to stand and inhale, only to see Papa move lightning fast, uncoil his whip and curl it around my neck in one wrist movement.

CRACK!

## Chapter 11. Amphitheater

The Bullwhip breaks the speed of sound and the small sonic boom it produces rips right into my ear, deafening me and making my muscles fluctuate. Leather thong coils around my neck and knocks me off my feet, the cracker biting into my skin. So much for our first real conversation. I land in between two rows of benches, face first. Dirt mashes into my nose, grass stalks tickle it. Slippery lining of rain jacket sticks to my chest. My father quickly untwists the whip from around my neck with practiced fingers, fists my hoodie and, carefully stepping along the aisle, drags me out into the nave, the central approach to the stage covered in more grass. I get to scrape crisscross pattern in it with my fingers. Weakened, again, by my own stupidity. He lets me go and I land next to Canosa, feeling one of his soft-leather loafers on my back, my face pressed firmly into turf. I mistake its earthy smell for a whiff of strong medical marijuana, herbal with fruity undertones, sweet and pungent on the heels of recent rain. I wish I could take a long good drag right now and get high.

"Here's the deal, sweetie." Papa's voice reaches me from above. "I've dealt with the likes of you for my entire life so

don't you try playing games with me. Daughter, no daughter, makes no difference. Understood?" He presses harder. I mumble back my agreement, sickened and disappointed in myself.

"Good. An idea occurred to me just now. You might be worthy something, after all. Too melodramatic, but we can work out the kinks, I think." Pause. "Yes, it might work. Let me think about it for a minute..." He trails off.

I hold my breath. He isn't going to kill me. He's going to use me somehow, just like everyone else usually does. Like Canosa did until she got all tangled up in her own hair thanks to her grandiose belief in her own invincibility.

Everybody always uses me, and it's not their problem, it's mine. I'm the one who lets them do it. It's all me. This thought hurts.

I get angry at myself. How did I end up on the ground, face streaked with dirt, after splashing upward an entire lake into a tsunami and sucking close to several dozen souls into oblivion? Memory of my binge perks up newly born hunger. It growls in my chest, waking again. As if in answer to it, Papa cracks his whip right over my ears and I go limp. The sound waves it sends make my bones feel syrupy, my whole body weightless and about ready to explode, to expand, then to contract and collapse into itself again, in a painful spasm.

He crouches down and whispers in my ear, pressing the end of the whip handle in between my shoulder blades so hard that it nearly punctures my skin through the rain jacket. "What I'm thinking is... you'll be my right hand from now on. A helper, of sorts, catching other sirens. Clever, wouldn't you agree?" He chuckles at his own pathetic joke.

It's so clever that for a second I forget how to breathe. I'm shocked at the idea and produce an involuntary "Uhuh," thinking, are there more out there, are there others that I haven't met yet? Hiding in other lakes, seas, oceans?

"Good. I knew you'd like it, it speaks of your nature." He lets out a heavy sigh, like he's the victim here, suffering from the impact of such an important decision. "Do me a favor, don't pull any of this singing of yours on me anymore, all right? Let's make this easy on both of us. Do I hear an agreement?"

I produce another "Uhuh."

And I hear the echo of his soul again, a barely detectable tune, a distant trickle of a flute accented by fragile butterfly wings, flapping, hushed and covered with another melody that I can't quite detect, but it's there. Promising to taste tart, tart like my soul felt in Canosa's chest when she converted me. Tart and burned, charred like an unripe persimmon that someone decided to fry on a pan without oil. Like someone ripped off his soul when it was still green and set it on fire. I think I know

who that might have been, long before Canosa surfaced on the scene, long before my father even knew how to hate. His mother, my grandmother, the mysterious woman whose grave he wouldn't visit, whose name he wouldn't say, whom he tried to erase from his life, to no avail.

I feel his usual concentration waver, and hunger rises in me, hunger to kill.

"Is that a "yes?" It better be." He says.

I blow grass away from my lips, it tickles and it's hard to talk with its stalks exploring my mouth.

"I can't hear you, sweetie. Yes or no?" He presses his foot into my right gill this time. I wanted to know what it feels like, didn't I? Conveniently, he read my mind. Pain shoots around my neck in a steel belt and then through my spine, making me break out cold sweat. It's like pushing on a day-old bruise, hard, right in the spot where it hurts most. No, it's like ripping open a wound that started to grow new skin, slowly, savoring every second. I struggle to respond, breathing hard into wet grass.

"What's the matter, cat got your tongue?" Comes from above.

I mumble into ground.

"Can't hear you." He sort of sings it, *caaaan't heeeear yooou*. This makes me borderline lunatic, ravenous for revenge, his fake care combined with his soul's burned taste. I twist my

neck to the right with as much force as I can gather, still weakened.

"What if I don't?" I say, before I get scared and swallow the words.

"Not a thought in your head, is there? Stupid and stubborn, just like your mother." He presses his foot harder into my gill and spits on the grass next to me. I watch his saliva roll down the yellow stalk, lying still, with only one movement within me. A nagging growing rage. But this is what he wants me to feel, he wants me to get angry, so I try to suppress it, remembering my resolve to let him live, to find good in him, to fight for it. "Always need to be directed, always. Never appreciative of the help I give you, the advice. Is there nothing you can do on your own, Ailen? Open your eyes and look to your right."

I glance at Canosa's hair a few feet away from me, tangled with grass, swaddling her face like a veil.

"Do you *like* what you see? Do you want to end up like her?" He abruptly steps off me, and I catch sight of him, poking his whip at Canosa. She doesn't move. He eyes are rolled up, whites showing beneath thick eyelashes, the womanly shape of her pristine body smeared with mud like a corpse of a recently recovered floater.

I forget it's Canosa, I only think of her as a little girl who was once naïve and happy, who had dreams, reveled in

innocence and yearned for love, and then something happened to her that turned her bitter. Something at a hand of a man, I'm sure of it, something connected to violated trust, which explains her distaste for couples, her hunger to kill them off, during their most precious moments of affection, like that couple she snuffed out under the bridge. The thought is enough for me gain strength in my voice.

I study my father standing over Canosa, poking at her like at a fresh catch on a fishing trip, eyes ablaze with glee, and I see him as a threat to all things *girly*, all things I could never be, because of him. Because of the likes of him. My resolve is forgotten in an instant. Anger rears up its ugly head, adds to my hatred, fuels me, rattles the lid I have so carefully put over my emotions, pushes against it until it pops and flies off and I spill.

"You're not a father to me. You may have produced me, but you're not my father. You don't even know how to be one, you should've never had kids. Because you're one *fucking* asshole, that's who you are." I say into grass, shaking, gathering strength to stand up, not caring how primitive this sounded, trying to come up with more hurtful ugly words, on some level terrified to death because I've never called my father *fucking* before.

"What did you say?" He promptly steps over and leans over me, whip handle back between my shoulder blades.

"I said, you're one revolting women-hating disgusting piece of *shit!*" It comes out as a scream and catches at the end. I desperately try to come up with a whole array of swear words to make it sound hurtful and biting like you see in the movies.

"Watch your mouth, little whore!" He snaps, stepping on my gill again.

I wince. He called me a whore before, but never in such open hateful manner. For a second, it lacerates my heart, but only for a second. I ignore the pain, years of practice kick in at the right moment. First tear of anger rolls down my cheek.

"Oh yeah? Why should I? You think I need to? Well, *I* don't think so. You *need* me. Just like Canosa needed me. I happen to have talent, true siren talent, and you know it. And you know that I know it, you're just afraid to let me see it, always beating me down, always trying to make me think like I'm nothing." I take a shaking breath. There is silence on the other end and less pressure into my back.

"You've seen it, you heard me sing, you witnessed me rousing a whole *fucking* lake, did you not?" It feels good swearing at him again, something I never dared to do before. I almost want to say *fucking* before each word, to assert myself, to see how far I can go with this. In one concentrated effort, I

prop myself up as if rising from a push-up, my palms sinking into soft turf, my body a straight line, and watch my father take a tentative step to the left and raise his whip at me.

"Go ahead, Papa, crack it. I know you want to." I say, kneeling into mud, pulling myself up, grabbing my shins, then my knees, taking a what-the-fuck-do-you-want stance of a disoriented drunk, reeling from dizziness but holding my ground, curling my toes around grass stalks for support and waving my arms around.

Moon shines upon us, waiting.

"Shut up! Don't you dare talking to me like that!" he shouts. His voice wavers at the end. There is a moment of hesitation in his movement, but he flings his arm and cracks the whip. An earsplitting clap shakes the air and my muscles give out to its vibration. I plop back on the ground with my ass, producing a low and wet smack, and still I raise my head back up, defiant, not willing to give up since I started, sensing that something is giving in him, something is growing in me. For once, it feels like I'm in control.

"How does it make you feel? You like it, don't you? Don't you, Papa?" I realize I'm asking him questions, and each one makes his eyes grow larger, his mouth hang open to the point where I think it will snap, his hand tremble slightly, his skin painted grey with a silver sheen of moonlight.

"Did your mother hug you, when you were little, did she kiss you?" I take a step toward him. He edges back and nearly stumbles on a spectator's bench.

"Did your mother tell you she loved you? DID SHE *EVER* TELL YOU THAT?" My voice echoes across the meadow, now perfectly dark and clear of fog.

"Shut your mouth if you want to live! Shut it, right now! Don't touch me!" His scream borders on a hysterical outburst. All intelligence is gone out of it, and I'm not even close to him, there are good ten feet between us. This is not a father I know, it's a scared little boy that stands before me. I search for pity within me, but there is none, only a perverted pleasure in causing him pain.

"What if I don't, Papa, huh? Did you ever think of that? What if I don't want to live, what if I *want* to die? What if there is nothing for me to live for after you pushed mom off the bridge? Go ahead, kill me." I stop walking and spread my arms wide, noting gentle crinkling of the rain jacket's waterproof fabric, it's gluey pull on my skin. Noting the rustling of the wind in the trees, the nightly smell of tranquility. And I'm really ready to die in this moment.

He must have sensed it, because he raises his whip again, pauses, drops his arm, licks his lips.

"You think you know what you're doing, sweetie? You think you're smart, you think you've actually figured it all out, don't you?" He makes himself smile, if a slight crack of his lips can be called anything remotely close to that. I can see the strain on his face, barely illuminated in the dark.

"I don't." I say, taking another step forward. "I don't know shit. You're the one who knows everything. You tell me. Did your mother love you?"

A grimace of pain takes over his face, true agony, something I've never seen before in my entire life with him. It looks like a face of a man after a heart attack, when one side goes slack and the other scrunches up to compensate for tension. That's it, that must be it. I struck gold.

"Or was she a whore, like a siren?" I finish my thought.

"Shut your mouth! How dare you." Papa's hands shake and he strikes me with his whip, but misses by a couple feet without producing a sonic boom. He's retreating into the benches now, and I'm advancing, on a roll, ideas and images swirling in my mind, wanting to get out.

"So she was a whore, wasn't she? At least that's what you concluded years later, because you couldn't come up with another explanation with your primitive mind. She was simply trying to find a new life, after her husband died in the war." It strikes me at this point that I know virtually nothing about my

grandfather except this fact and that his name was Maximilian Bright. "So she dragged men into her house and slept with each and every one of them, because what else could a widow do in those times, huh? And they hurt little Rogie, didn't they? Those men? Because he was a cry baby, because he was adorable, too adorable for their taste. And maybe she hurt you too, because you reminded her too much of her husband who left her with his death to live such a miserable life!" I throw my last word out with such force it rings clear and almost hangs in a air a second after I said it.

"Shut up! SHUT UP! SHUTUPSHUTUPSHUTUP!!!" Papa is now at the far end of the row, backing into the woods.

At this moment loud hissing comes from the trees, and we both turn to look, startled. Ligeia and Teles jump out from behind a growth of furs. They must have been standing there all along, listening to our conversation, too scared to come out, but now food is simply too close not to act. They must hear his soul like I do, intriguing in its burned tartness. It rings louder now, cleaner. Before either of us can react, they jeer and spill over my father in one hairy blanket.

He curses, shakes them both off with a practiced move, takes a stance of a fighter and begins a series of misdirected cracks. His arm wavers and the whip jerks mid-flight instead of soaring seamlessly to curl up and break the speed of sound. No

cracks come out, each flip is dry and poorly performed, until its leather thong catches on a nearby branch and the whole thing hangs listlessly, yanked out of my father's hand. I must have shaken him up to the core and nudged his soul closer to revival.

He searches my face, and there is no malice in his stare, only pleading for help. I do nothing, watching Ligeia and Teles converge on him, strangely calm and ignorant. I'm buried in an observer's curiosity at how this will turn out. Perhaps that's how true sirens are supposed to feel, cold, oblivious, viewing people as food, like Canosa told me. My father shouts my name, asking for help, his usual confidence shaken. I pretend I watch a movie, sit on the bench and prop my face with both hands.

Briefly, Ligeia pauses, as if she remembered I'm here and this is my father. "Ailen, you don't mind?" She asks.

"Yeah, do you mind?" Teles picks up.

"Girls, have at it." I say, without a single pause, without considering that this might be the death of him, not caring, not even appalled at my own indifference.

Both sirens nod and circle-dance around him, shimmering in the dark with their glistening skin and tangles hair, grabbing his arms and then letting go, pinching him, playing with him the way they played with me when I got turned. He groans with exertion and terror, weaponless, his usual focus and precision gone, reduced to a frail human again, not fully, but close. He

drops on the ground, Ligeia on top of him, squirming, Teles on top of both of them. He shouts my name again.

"Sorry, I can't hear you." I say. And I don't recognize myself, but doubt quickly vanishes to be replaced with murderous glee. I watch the scene unfold, curious, elated, thirsty. My father's mouth gapes open in a scream, in a plea for help, the sirens start singing their lethal song.

"We live in the meadow

"But you don't know it..."

Their voices join into a terrible contralto, misaligned.

"Our grass is your sorrow

"But you won't show it..."

Fogs rolls off their skin and obscures them in a new level of bone-chilling coldness.

"Give us your pain

"Dip in our song

"Notes afloat

"Listen and love

"Listen and love

"Listen and love..."

The temperature drops another twenty degrees down. I can't see more than lucid figures moving in the mist that begins spreading across the meadow in a thin blanket.

"We wade in the lake

"Why do you frown?"

"Our wish is your wake

"Why do you drown?"

I catch myself liking this. My father's agony, I can't stop listening to it. I'm soothed by his cries. This earning for pain revolts me and I make myself look away.

"Give us your soul

"Breathe in our song

"Words apart

"Listen and love

"Listen and love

"Listen and love..."

Where did the promise of letting him live go? That stone-hard decision to revive his soul but not to kill him? To talk remaining sirens into leaving him alone? I don't want to answer any of these questions, not right now. And yet I can't bear listening to his cries anymore.

Like a coward, I start crawling away on all fours, smearing my borrowed jeans with more dirt, thinking that maybe I don't want to commit suicide anymore, maybe I want to survive. This thought fills me with strength and I crawl faster, ignoring liquid mud oozing between my fingers. Maybe that's why I got turned, to help catch and eradicate the likes of my father. Siren hunters, women haters, and other denigrating scum. That's

why I'm a monster, because the likes of him simply don't deserve to live. Maybe it's truly my calling, my destiny, to have this power. I want to tell Canosa, I know she'd appreciate it. I'd tell her, *guess what, you were right. And you know what? I think I found myself, I found my place, I know what I need to do. Ailen Bright, a siren. That's me. I'm with you, all the way. Let's do it.*

And she'd smile at me and maybe even give me a hug, like a real big sister that's proud of her little sis. And I'd tell her more, I'd say, *it was not for my father, by the way, and not for my mother either, if that's what you're thinking. It's for me, I'm doing it for me. And check it out, I helped trap my father, he's gone now, well, almost. Can you please tell me everything that happened to my mother? What did she do when she got there, on the bridge? How did he push her? Did they struggle? And how did she hit the water, did she sink right away? What happened to her body? Where did her body go, do you know, did you see it? You promised me you'd tell me, if I killed the siren hunter, you promised!*

But Canosa lies on the ground, motionless, and I watch her lifeless face stuffed with her own hair, now shrouded in hazy tongues of mist flowing low to the ground. I know she's not dead, her body would have to explode into a myriad of droplets to truly vanish, but I'm afraid to touch her, afraid to break up

Ligeia's and Teles's feeding binge if I make a noise. Later, I decide. I'll ask her later. For now, I need to go somewhere and just be alone. Think it all out, feel it, be okay with it, flex my muscles. That's what I need to do.

I look up into the darkness beyond the meadow, pitch-black in weak silvery light of the moon, scramble to my feet and run.

## Chapter 12. Seward Beach

I'm running again, but not really away, more to simply run and feel comfortable in my siren skin, for once, to bask in my power. I break through spider-web infested woodland, jump over raccoon holes, skirt bushes, grab maple trunks for support, revel in the speed and agility of my body, finding new strength, listening to the orchestra of animal souls in the dark. And yet my mind keeps telling me, *Ailen, you promised yourself you won't run anymore.* And I counter, *I'm NOT! I just needed to move. I stood up to him, see? I talked to him. This is not running, I need to warm up my muscles for a bit, need to be alone.* My mind says back, *bullshit, Ailen, total bullshit, and you know it.* I try to silence my thoughts, but they keep crawling in like annoying spiders that land on my face and shoulders as I make it through the park.

Fallen branches crack under my feet. Startled owls flap their wings and screech their displeasure as I pass them. Sleeping trees exude their sappy aroma. I notice it all and I don't at the same time, letting my feet carry me forward. Moving seems to help me process stuff, maybe it's a siren trait, similar to that of animals getting restless after sitting in one

place for too long. Maybe not, I don't know. I keep running and thinking.

I think about life having a tendency to play cruel games, games of choices that don't exist. It's like it's mocking people, mocking me. I can picture it sitting behind some desk like a clerk, pushing up glasses, looking up at me, asking, *Ailen Bright is your name? Let's see here. Your father is a misogynist, a fancy name for a women-hater. Choose. Your mother is a weakling that decided to commit suicide instead of fighting. Choose! Your best friend loved you but after that tirade you gave him he probably hates your guts. CHOOSE! Ain't I full of choices?* I can see life standing up and parading around in front of me, twirling, showing off. *Ain't I full of splendid colors?* And I can see myself nodding, defeated, because what else is there to do? What choice do I have but to accept it? There is no skipping turns or rolling doubles. The gameboard of life is bleak and straightforward.

I hang my head, automatically moving my legs, hopping, breaking through obstacles, when abruptly there is nothing to break through anymore. I make it out of the forest into a clearing. No, it's not a clearing, it's a beach. A clump of pine trees there, a fistful of bushes here, it's devoid of any other vegetation, stretching in a silver line against dark water of the lake, dimly lit by the moon that's playing peekaboo with

heavy clouds. I fall into dirty sand palms first, spread my fingers wide, grab handfuls of it, wet and cold, sit on my hunches. Raindrops slink off pine needles and one ends up splashing on my nose, but there is no rain and the lake is clear of traffic. Distant noise of ambulances and cop patrols making their way to and from the bridge echoes across empty water. They're probably still clearing out the aftermath of my little performance. I wait, wait for it to surface, but no pang of guilt emerges from anywhere in my ribcage. Only desire to eat more.

Hunger grumbles in my soulless void, and I hear something. Something so warm it hurts my frozen innards. Impossible. I stand and stumble step by step towards water, feeling soft sand change to pebbles under my feet, turning right, following the melody, and then seeing a solitary figure hunched up on a washed up log about a hundred yards away. A tiny black speck against the vastness of the open landscape.

Hunter.

I break into a jog.

*You're not supposed to see him, you're not supposed to, stop it, stop, go in the opposite direction, go away! NOW!*

But it's Hunter! I can't, can't turn myself around. I just can't. I have to see him, have to explain to him what happened, why I did it. Then I'll go, I promise.

NOOOOOOO!

I ignore what's happening in my head, concentrating on movement, being drawn to Hunter in a way a pathetic scrap of steel is being drawn to a powerful magnet.

It takes me but a minute to reach him. About twenty feet away or so I start slowing down. I'm sure he hears me, but he doesn't flinch, doesn't even raise his head to look. The log is long and twisted, ghostly white in the moonlight, covered in bark forming an intricate pattern. Its thick end dips into water. Hunter sits on top of it, his sneakers half-dipped into the lake, so I'm sure his feet are soaking. He doesn't move, staring into nothing. I step into water and come close, touch his shoulder. He slowly turns and looks up at me, a shrunken version of himself, eyes vacant, distant. I suppress an urge to ask, *what's wrong?* Because everything is, it seems, and it was my doing, on purpose.

"Hey..." Is all I manage and fall silent, not sure how to continue.

Without saying anything, he lowers his head, and I see now his palms are turned up, resting on his knees, and that is where he's staring. His soul sounds healthier, cleaner, no sour notes I started detecting a while back, only full bloom of magnificent summer season by Vivaldi, hiccupping here and there, but not damaged much, not really burning. Which means I did manage to

kill some of his love. It makes me want to break down right there and then, sobbing. And it makes me ravenous, famished, like I've been starving for a year. I want to eat his soul, lap it up whole. Two conflicting forces swirl into a tangle of war inside my chest, and I hold it, press it down, squeeze it, until it stops threatening to erupt.

"Hey, Hunter... I'm... About what I said..." I motion back at the woods and fall silent again. My words sound small and pathetic, and I lose all hope that I'll be able to explain anything at all.

"You don't need to apologize, I get it." He says without looking at me. His voice cracks as if it hasn't been used for a while.

"Oh, you do?" I ask and immediately feel stupid, searching for the right thing to say and coming up empty, biting my lip and curling my fingers into fists.

"What, your chat with your *Papa* didn't go so well, did it? So now you're back on the prowl?" He raises his eyes at me, and there is so much hurt in them, I want to break off a thick branch from the log and stab myself, make a hole so big that it hurts like madness, and then twist it, until I hear myself cry from agony and fall.

"Hunter, please, hear me out. All that stuff that I said, I really didn't m..." I begin, but he interrupts me.

"Oh, yes, you did. YES, YOU DID!" His lower lip trembles and his breathing becomes ragged.

I gag on his rage and don't know what to say.

"Look, see this?" He spreads his arms. "It's called beach. Do you know the word beach? Want me to spell it for you?"

I shake my head.

"I'm glad you understand the word. Now, let me explain to you its meaning. You know what a beach means? A beach in the park? Public property. You can go anywhere you want. But no, you had to fucking find me, didn't you. You had to make sure it worked, had to see for yourself." He sniffs and spits, wiping his face with the sleeve of his hoodie.

"No-no-no, it's not like that, I swear I didn't—" I begin, but he cuts me off again, visibly shaking.

"Why should I believe anything you say, Ailen, why? Leave me alone already, will ya? Jesus, girl! Get a life!" He gets up and hops off the log to a quiet splash, wades out on the beach and begins walking away, pebbles grating soles of his sneakers.

"Wait! I'm sorry!" I say the first thing that comes to mind, the only thing I know will maybe help repairing what I've broken.

He abruptly stops and turns around so fast, I think he's ready to strike me. "FUCK YOU! You're not sorry, so spare me the bullshit, please. You're just some... some crazy hideous monster

thing. Like your perverted father. Both of you. Christ, what did I get myself into..." He cradles his temples. And then, under his breath, "Sometimes I wish I never met you."

Every one of his words nails me into a coffin of grief. I wish to be back in the tub but not filled with simple water. I want it to be filled with poison, with some strong acid that would melt me as soon as stepped in, that would melt the whole thing, the bathtub marble, the sirens, the bronze faucet and stupid Canosa with it, the bathroom, my house, all of it, burying me in a liquid of death, drowning me, making me die for good, to never come up, never surface.

Instead, I still stand, looking at my bare feet.

Hunter's stare crawls all over my skin. I can tell he's fuming. I'm afraid to look at him, afraid to say anything else that will cause him more pain. He squats next to me and looks up into my face, passing a hand through the mop of his hair.

"All right, fine. Sorry I yelled, I got a little... agitated. All that stuff you said, you know how much it hurt?"

"I just..." I begin.

"I'm not an idiot to stop trying to explain everything to me!" He erupts again.

"I'm sorry." I say.

"Stop apologizing!"

I fall silent, terrified to even open my mouth, noticing water in my eyes, blinking first tears away.

"I'm the one who is sorry, all right? So let me finish, please. I'm trying to say something important here." He stands and takes my chin into his warm hands. Our eyes meet. I fight the urge to melt and crumble into him, press my cheek into his chest and beg him to hug me, to hold me.

"Listen. I thought it all over, when sitting here. I think it's a good thing, for the both of us." He grills me with his stare.

I have a very bad premonition about what he's going to say next, swallowing, trying to hold it in.

"I'm... I'm sorry it has to end like this. I really am. Truly. But it has to end, you get it, right? It has to." He lets go of my face and hugs himself. A sharp pain sears me open from the top of my head to the bottom of my stomach. He's breaking up with me, that's what he is doing. And I'm the one who started it, I'm the one who wanted it, I yelled at him all those ugly words for this very purpose. Then why am I ready to die right now from pain, why?

"We can't be together. It's too painful. You fighting your urges, you know, fighting the need to eat me. Don't shake your head, I know you do. And me... well..." He trails off, looking over

the water. I trace his gaze, glancing over gentle waves lapping at each other, oblivious to our drama.

"How the hell am I supposed to get drugs for my mom now... shit." He says quietly and spits, tracing circles in pebbles with the tip of his foot.

I drop down my gaze, empty, and become engrossed in his sneakers. Six eyelets on the left, six eyelets on the right. Shoelaces dirty woven patterns of closure, closure between us. I'm dying to tell him about my love, and I don't know how to do it, not daring to think he'll believe me, not after I lied.

"Hey, turkey, don't be quiet."

He called me turkey, he's not mad anymore. I raise my eyes.

"It's killing me when you're quiet, you know that, right? I'd feel better if you said something." He pushes the hood up and over his face, sticks his hands in the pockets of his jeans and shivers lightly.

"Like what?" I manage.

"I don't know, anything." He begins jumping from one foot to another. Left, right. Left, right. Change in his pockets jingle in rhythm.

He always starts moving when impatient, getting restless, like a little boy who needs to pee. For some reason, this playfulness angers me. How can he be playful when we're talking

life or death here? At least to me it feels like life or death, does he even get it?

"Your soul, it started burning. When you saw me jump out of the lake yesterday, when you..." I take a breath, not able to say, *fell in love with me*. "I'm simply trying to save it, trying to stop you from turning into a siren hunter, to become like my father. I suppose it's none of my business and I should stop and leave you alone." Tears decide to grace me with their sudden appearance. I blink several times, vigorously, as if something got caught in my eye, quickly wiping my face with the back of my palm, sniffing.

"Did I ask you to save me? Did I ever?" He says and stops hopping, waiting for my answer.

I lick my lips. "No, I assumed... I shouldn't have." I want to say, *I'm sorry*, but bite my tongue at the last moment. "At least you... at least you have a mom and a home to go back to, so it's okay..."

He interrupts me again. "Oh yeah? But I don't have a job now, thanks to you. So it's not okay! It's fucking crazy! How am I supposed to show my face at home, huh? How am I supposed to provide for my mom?"

I shrug. "You're sixteen, you shouldn't be responsible for providing for your mother. Isn't there some insurance thing or something that your father left, I mean, after the divorce. Are

you saying, you're the one paying her hospital bills? I don't believe it for a second." I say and hear my father talking through my words, his cold reasoning without emotion. I bite my tongue before I say any more.

Heavy silence hangs between us, pierced only by a distant cry of some nocturnal bird.

"Right. Of course." Hunter picks up a pebble and throws it into the lake. "What the fuck do you care, anyway. Your mother is dead. I don't want *my mother* to die, do you get it?" He says it with force, and I know he means to hurt me, to get back at me somehow for everything I said.

It works. "Leave my mother out of this." I say through teeth.

"Oh yeah? Why so sentimental all of a sudden? My dear Ailen, I'm so sorry for hurting your feelings." He sort of dances and clasps his hands by his heart at this, his typical theatrics. I glare at him.

"But that's the only thing I'm sorry about, get it? The rest of the stuff, all this crazy siren shit -- Jesus, it's fucked up! It's FUCKED UP! Do you hear me?" He waits for some response, I count the pebbles.

This is typical Hunter, once on a roll, there is no stopping him. Whatever it is he decided to do in his head, he'll keep moving forward until he completes it, even if it's against

his better judgement. The current goal seems to hurt me back in any way he can.

"You're not even listening to me. You don't give a fuck, do you. I can't believe this. Whatever." He digs his heel into the shore making pebbles clink and scatter.

Now he's fishing for my answer, and of course I seal my lips tight, defiant, determined to make him suffer, bunching up my hair and overall projecting a look of I'm-just-taking-a-midnight-stroll-here.

We fall silent again, like two animals that fought for a while, then got tired, stopped, and forgot the reason why they started to fight in the first place, not knowing where to pick up.

I watch the indentation made by his sneaker suck in water with a slurp, turn into a tiny puddle, its glistening surface reflecting starry sky that is slowly changing from black to blue. Blue is my favorite color. Three is my favorite number. It takes three minutes for an average person to drown, I remember reading it somewhere, remember thinking it yesterday morning when preparing to drown.

I peer over the lake, trace its horizon curve, hop from ripple to ripple, simple gazing without any purpose. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Hunter do the same. We steal a glance at each other and both quickly look away, as if neither of us meant

it, only to find staring at each other a minute later, both of us suppressing a smile.

I'm mad at myself that I can't stay mad at Hunter for longer than a few minutes. Ugh!

I bend my knees and plop down on the shore, letting rocks bite into my ass through borrowed jeans, not caring. Every piece of me is broken and confused, my abdomen feeling heavy with emotions. I notice Hunter sitting down next to me, a few feet away. Involuntarily and before I can stop myself, I stretch out my arm to touch him, but he yanks his hand away.

"Hunter? What's wrong?" I say the very phrase I avoided to say at the beginning. Score, Ailen, score.

His face doesn't move, not a single muscle, skin grey in receding moonlight. His eyes lock with mine, and yet they don't, sort of floating in and out of focus. I'm afraid to open my mouth, when he speaks.

"What's wrong? After all of this you're asking me what's wrong?" He emits a chuckle of incredulity, and I smile. It does all sound ridiculous, everything that happened so far is so ridiculous, it's hard to believe it's real.

"Nothing. Nothing, of course." He attempts a smile. It looks sour. "You're just being you. That fucking siren monster thing or whatever or not, you're still as Ailen as you can be. I don't know why I'm still here, though, to be honest. You're

right, it must be your siren voice that holds me, I suppose." He kicks into the ground again. And I know what he really means to say but can't, coward just like me.

"Why? I mean, why are you telling me this now? I tried warning you, remember?" I say.

Hunter jumps to his feet, suddenly agitated.

"I heard you." He nearly shrieks. "When those girlfriends of yours were dragging me to their stinking siren meadow, which was *my* favorite place to smoke *my* joints, by the way, I heard everything you did! It was so fucking loud, did I think I would miss it? You killed people, innocent people! For fun! You weren't even hungry, were you, tell me!"

He glares at me for a second, I lower my eyes.

"See, you're a fucking hypocrite. I don't care what you say, I should've known. Should've known it all along. They're just food for you, nothing else. I'm food for you. Always will be. Stinking siren, awesome my ass." Then he is empty, I can see it in his face, this was the last thing he had to get off his chest, the thing that probably bothered him most.

"Ah, that." I exhale. "I knew this was coming. I tried telling you to stay away from me, but you wouldn't listen. So you finally heard it for yourself."

"What was I supposed to do, plug my ears with pine needles or something?"

"I think you were supposed to hunt me with my father, but you got yourself drunk and off the job." At the thought of my father my hands begin to tremble. I wonder if he's alive or not, and I wonder why I care. Isn't this what I always wanted, to get rid of him and be free?

"Ooooo, listen to that. So in love with her Papa, sweet little pumpkin Ailen--"

"FUCK YOU!" I jump up now.

"Thanks, but no, thanks." He takes a step back.

We're back to ogling each other like two predators over one last scrap of meat.

"Didn't think so. And congratulations. I'm glad you got it off your chest. Feeling better now?" I step forward and Hunter inches away from me as if something disgusting is about to touch him. Breath coils in pockets of steam from his open mouth.

"Anything else you want to say? Go for it, monkey boy, I'm all ears." I say and take another step.

"Sure, I got more to say. You wanna hear something interesting?" He squints at me. "Life's a zoo, Ailen, can you imagine? You don't get it, do you? Let me say in a more formal way, then. Ladies and gentlemen, I want your attention, please." He wipes his hands on his sweatshirt, flattens his hair and spreads his arms in a show announcer gesture. "Based on the

latest scientific research, it appears we're all divided into two categories. Who would like to make an educated guess?"

"Stop it!" I want to slap him, but he steps back to avoid my blow, nearly stumbles on a mossy log.

"No guesses? Tsk-tsk. I don't dare to hold you in the throws of wonder forever. Here is the answer. Are you ready? DRUMROLL! It's people... and animals!"

"I said, stop it!"

"But, let me present to you a rare specimen, something so very special, something you paid your honestly earned wages to see, today and today only. A siren, a crossbreed between an animal and a human. One of a kind. It is, what they call, a true living monster." His nostrils flare, eyes remain immobile.

Silence veils over us, flapped only by the last warmth of a September night.

I cradle my head. If I thought I was dead already, I must've been wrong. This is worse than death, this is continuous torture of dying but not quite getting there. Never. It's called, a stupid squabble of two teenage lovers who are too chicken to admit that they can't exist without each other. Great. I've lost my mother, I've potentially lost my father, and now I'm losing Hunter. All of this at my hands.

Familiar fear creeps down my spine, air becomes thick and difficult to swallow.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm a monster. I was wrong to think that somehow I could be a siren and yet remain human, in a way, be some goody two-shoes girl. Whom was I kidding. I was wrong. And you're right. You're right. Run away now, before it's too late. Go. Or I will *fucking* EAT YOU." I begin to hyperventilate, but make no effort to stop it.

Pebbles crunch under Hunter's feet.

"Well, thank you for permission, I'm much obliged." He bows theatrically. "Now you're trying to make me feel bad." He says it with force, but I hear guilt undertones, over the beauty of his soul's concerto, the summer season, four violins... I shake my head in an effort to tune it out.

"I'm not trying anything. I just don't care anymore, okay? If you wanna go, go." I dismiss him with the flick of my hand. He scoffs. "You got fired, so what? You still have your mother. I might be a fucking orphan at this point."

"Thanks to you, I might be not too far from it either." He says.

"Great. Glad to hear it. Then why the fuck are you still here? Go run to your mama, monkey boy!" I stomp in defiance and wince at rocks biting into my sole.

"FUCK YOU!" He shrieks.

"Boo-hoo, would you listen to that. Bad language. Your mom will be washing out your mouth with soap and water."

"God, you're nuts, girl! Maybe you should've died! Think about it, evolution weeds out people for a reason. Some are born to die, some to shine." He spits.

His words stab me in the gut, and I go full out.

"Oh, I get it. Shine. Right. I apologize for thwarting your ambitions. You're probably hoping to be on the cover of a magazine one day, right? I can see it, all glossy. Nice fat letters, red. No, make them golden. *Hunter Crossby, the glorified siren hunter, reveled by society, sent out on the quest to protect humanity from the likes of Ailen Bright.* I thought you were my best friend. But never mind." I put my arms on my hips.

"You know what? I'm done listening to this shit!" He glares at me, yet doesn't move.

"Then don't! Go away. Why don't you?" And I begin crying in earnest, wailing like a little baby, unable to hold it anymore, spilling it all out.

"I HATE YOU! BECAUSE I LOVE YOU AND I KNOW I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO, BUT I CAN'T HELP IT!" I yell.

Hunter freezes, exhales sharply, watching me. I cover my face and sob into my hands.

## Chapter 13. Stolen Boat

I let go. I weep rivers, bawling, sobbing, smearing snot and tears all over my face with my sleeves. All sixteen years of my pain propel outward, every instance of ache turns into a moan. They ring loudly in the night, ooze upward into the sky, tracing its velvety darkness with impossible hurt, bleeding focus out of my eyesight. I blink and rub my eyes. There it is, I can almost see it, our sweet apparition. If you could imagine a strong feeling having solid flesh, this is it. A nearly visible thickness of a magnetic field. It hangs in the air between us, our stupid teenage love, the perfect fantasy projected through rose-colored glasses, strengthening. Vision by vision, dream by dream, it snowballs into a thing that I can almost touch with my hands. Now, it grows fast. Now, it covers us both. Hush! It takes us in fully, and we both know it.

I look at Hunter and don't see him, he's simply a black blurry outline against equally black night gently lit by moonlight. I listen to his soul. It changed its tune, burning again. Not just burning, it's wild with fire, crackling, spitting out scattered notes, bristling with a cacophony of tunes. Jumbled, crazy. No, it can't be, no-no-no-no!!! His

outline shimmers, he shrieks briefly and then falls quiet. I'm enthralled and can't move. Warmth trickles out of his melody leaving behind focused precision, like that from a skilled violinist who can deliver but can't feel, dispassionate yet forever present. It's the end, the closing concerto movement. A faint trace of fumes escapes Hunter's lips as he breathes out. And then even that sound is gone. Puff! It evaporates, and silence settles over.

Absolute silence.

Goosebumps raise hairs on my skin, my muscles tingle.

"NO!!!" I scream and take a step, but my strength gives out and I stumble, falling with my knees into pebbles.

"No!!!" I repeat. "No, you didn't. No, tell me, please, you didn't. Oh, what did I do, what did I do..." I rock back and forth, pinned into nothingness, afraid to look up.

"Man, that hurt!" Pause. "This feels weird. I'm not cold anymore." Hunter says, and I hear him cracking his knuckles. "I think I actually like it, that's what it's supposed to feel like? Fuck, this is cool."

I want to tear out my hair. I completed his transformation, instead of reversing it. *Great job, Ailen, always thinking about yourself, how about it? He's a fully fledged siren hunter, right there, look! Standing in front of you.* I lower my head even further.

"Come on, get up, no use crying." His voice sounds metallic in the absence of his soul. No wondering what happened to him, no freaking out, no comment, nothing.

Astounded, I find my voice again. "Do you know what just happened? I turned you... I was afraid of it... I'm sorry, I just wanted to see you one last time, to explain to you..." I can't find words and pause.

He hoists me up and I stand, swaying. There is coldness in his eyes, so close to mine, and yet so distant.

"I really only wa..."

He puts a finger across my lips and presses gently. I swallow and fall silent.

"I love you too. Always have, but you didn't hear me, did you, turkey?" He says. "You know it now, don't you? You have your proof. Listen to this." He guides my head down, so my ear slides across rough cotton of his sweatshirt and stops directly over the middle of his chest. There is not a sound except the beating of his heart. "Happy?"

I sniff loudly, smiling despite myself.

"I don't know." I say it and I mean it, yet pain leaves me. "At least we're clear who is who, and why." I say into his shirt and then raise my head.

"Yeah, you got that right." He says. It sounds automatic. He traces my chin with his fingers. They are cold.

I can barely discern the color of his eyes in the darkness, but I know they're blue, and I search for hunger within me, to see where it went, after Hunter's soul burned to the ground. To my horror I find it, transformed. It's worse and stronger now, like a chronic pain that flares up the closer I stand to him, yet I won't ever be able to satisfy it, because there is nothing to satisfy it with. His soul is gone. The very thing I crave, I'm cursed to desire forever. This is the horror Canosa spoke to me about, this is what she tried to shield me from. I understand her wish, there is no worse pain in this world. It doesn't compare to anything physical, it's psychic. It's like going mad and knowing you're going mad, but never quite leaving sanity, always balancing on the precipice, never falling.

I chase thoughts about her and my father away, not wanting to think about what happened in the meadow.

My psychic hunger for Hunter bolts through my head like an icepick. I clasp my head to stop it, press my hands against my ears to no avail. It grows stronger, seeping from my head into my limbs like deadly poison, liquid acid of love that is wrong and can't exist.

"It hurts." I exhale finally.

"It did... It does." Hunter echoes.

We part and look at each other for a good minute or two. Wind ruffles our hair, owls screech in the distance. Lake keeps

murmuring with its surf, rolling in low waves onto the beach and retreating, rolling and retreating.

"So you knew all along? About soul burning and stuff?" I ask.

"What do you think? Of course I did. Your father told me." He says.

"Right." I say and fall silent again, pushing thoughts about my father away, pushing them away.

Then curiosity takes hold of me and before I can push that back too and another questions spills. "How does it feel? Don't you suddenly want to kill me or something?"

"Hah!" He chuckles and sniff, hands in pockets again. "It's sort of like I... hardened. Like there was heat in my chest, you know, like from flu, but ten times worse. Only for a moment though, then it died and cooled off. And I sort of, hardened all over. Like, I'm not freezing anymore. My sneakers are fucking wet and I didn't feel my toes, but now I do. They even feel warm. It's weird. I guess I'm super strong on some level? I dunno." He picks up a stone and throws it far into the lake. It makes about hundred yards into the distance. Hunter whistles, I open my mouth.

"Wow!" He shouts.

"And you don't..." I begin. "You don't even want to..."

I can see in his eyes that he understood what I meant to ask. He takes his hands out of his pockets and stretches out his arms.

"I have this crazy idea that strangling you would be the best thing in the world, you know, imagining digging my fingers into your neck and tearing it open." He says as he steps towards me and circles my neck with his hands.

I gasp. "For real?"

"Yeah, it's like a love-hate thing. A very strong one." He tickles behind my ears and lets go, but not before I notice true menacing sparkle flash across his eyes. Lethal. "I love you and I hate you at the same time, and I don't which one will win."

"Jesus, that's fucked up." I say, thinking about Canosa and my father and what must have felt like.

We measure each other up, like two fighters that are friends but have been put in the boxing ring and have to pummel each other whether they want to or not.

"I guess that's it then." Hunter says finally, breaching the awkwardness.

"I guess that's it." I join.

He takes a tentative step towards me, pauses, minces his sweatshirt with shaking fingers. I swallow hard, lost in indecision. So we gaze at each other, hold invisible hands, blow nonexistent goodbye kisses, dip in and out of numbness for

several minutes. Or several hours. Or years. I can't feel the time anymore.

We can't be together and we both know it. What we don't know is when the urge to kill each other will win and how much longer we can continue talking.

"You know, I've noticed..." Hunter says, looking out over the lake, hands in his jean pockets. "Everything beautiful dies. That's just the way of life. It starts out beautiful and for whatever reason ends up ugly. I don't know why."

"Yeah." I echo, trying to see in the water what he is looking at. "That's how it usually goes."

Hunter shivers, dog-shakes his head. Hood falls off his head and folds up funny. I'm tired of standing so I plop and bury my head in my knees. A wave laps at my feet, then another.

"Hey, can't you feel the cold at all? I mean, your butt is soaked, you're sitting right in the water." Comes from behind.

"Do I?" I ask. "Oh." I scoot back. "No, I don't feel a thing."

"Me neither." He sits next to me. We gaze out over the lake a little more.

I decide to try and lighten the mood. "Welcome to freak club. We collect membership in dead souls, one per day or ten per month, take your pick." I say and wait for reaction, but there is nothing except an attempt at a chuckle. "Sorry, bad

joke." I want to bury my head in the sand. Why did I say this? Why do I always say stupid shit like this, at the worst possible moments?

"No biggie. Hey, don't you wanna go check on your father or something? What's he doing there for so long, do you know?"

"Being killed by sirens." I say with strange satisfaction. But as soon as the words leave my lips, I revolt at the feeling, pull shame over my head and sulk, disgusted and immediately aware how vulnerable we are on the shore, alone. "We need to get out of here." I say in alarm and glance back at the woods. Nothing there.

"Wait, what? When the hell did that happen? Are you serious?" Hunter traces my glance.

"Yeah, I'm serious." Dread fills me.

"Who, the other two?"

"Yep." I say, stand and pick up a flat stone, squint, measure the distance, then throw. The pebble revolves itself in a blur, touches the lake's surface. Once, twice, three times. Each a gentle prod for suitable grave. Is it deep enough, is the lake greedy enough to swallow me? I count till nine, then it sinks with a barely audible 'blup'.

"And you're not going to do anything about it?" Next to me Hunter's breath rolls out into transparent cotton candy. I catch myself on the thought of wanting to lick it.

I scoop a handful of stones and throw them with such force, they ricochet off the water in one staccato succession.

Plup. Plip-plup. Plip-plip-plip.

It's as if time became elastic and we're ten again, the day we met on the lake, skipping stones, goofing off and running around without a care in the world. Except it's the opposite picture, looked at through a magnifying glass gone wrong. We're both grown, bitter and freshly turned into monsters. A siren and a siren hunter. Lovely.

Hunter picks up a handful of rocks and we both throw them like we used to. I beat Hunter, as always, of course, ten to nine. Yet there is no joy, no jeering or celebrating, only draining pain and confusion. We glare at each other, I'm triumphant, Hunter defeated, and for a moment childhood memories overpower me and I see its reflection in his eyes. It lingers there for one second, and then the moment is gone. The reality drones back in as a swift blow in the face.

"What do we do now?" I ask, the question I've been trying to avoid.

"I dunno. I still have to go see mom."

"You left her alone?!?" I ask.

"She's fine, she can move around the house just fine. And a hospital nurse comes every day, so it's cool."

"Ah." I'm trying to imagine what it's like for her to wonder where her son disappeared, worried sick, and I can't. I feel empty, there is no compassion. Is this a siren thing?

"What about you?" Hunter asks.

"Don't know." I say and shut my eyes for a moment. An image of Papa's face floats up, white, dead, with bluish marks on his neck from the siren's fingers. I shake my head to get rid of it, wondering for the first time how much time has passed and what happened, yet at the same time not wanting to know. I quickly glance at the woods, realizing we stood here for quite a while and could've been easily attacked while in middle of our drama.

"I'll help you. Is that okay?" I say rather quickly.

"What do you mean?"

"How about I give you a ride?" I hope he doesn't detect me being desperate. "Let's find a boat. I'm sure we can find one."

He looks at me, strange, cocking his head on one side.

"Sure. Can I ask you a question though, before we go?"

"Yeah?"

He passes his tongue over his lips. "Why did you do it? Why did you jump?" It sounds like a final farewell, and I shrink at the idea.

"Do we need to do this right now?" I say, stepping from one foot to another and repeatedly looking at the woods, increasingly getting a bad premonition.

"Yeah, right now."

"Why?"

"Because. I need to know."

This is Hunter and his typical stubbornness. Once he sets his mind to something, there is not turning him around, he's like a heavy stubborn bull. I want to drag his ass out of here, I have to answer. The worst part is, he knows that I know, and he counts exactly on this fact.

"I hate you." I hiss.

"Please, answer the question."

I sigh. "Well... I secretly believed in that story you told me, about sirens, remember? I thought, if I turn, I'd create more love and beauty in the world. Being immortal, singing beautiful songs, helping people, you know? Shit, now that I say it out loud, it sounds so corny." I close my eyes and squint. "It didn't quite work out the way I imagined. All those people... gone. That fishmonger guy, the guards at the club, several dozen people on the lake..." I let my head hang, hoping he'll believe my lie. He is quiet.

"And now I've lost you as a friend on top of it."

"No, you didn't." He says under his breath. "I'll always be your friend. Siren or not, don't matter to me." But it sounds like he's lying now.

"I don't believe you."

"Whatever." His voice breaks. I glance up. He shrugs his shoulders. I feel instant regret for what I said.

"I'm sorry."

"STOP. Stop apologizing all the time. No harm done. Let's start new, like we just met, okay?" His voice is resigned, like he wanted to get something out of me and didn't succeed and decided to give up.

"What if I don't want to." I mumble and study my palms in the dark, listening to water lap at my bare feet.

"You're such a bad liar for a siren, you know that?" I hear a hint of joke and my heart leaps all the way up. I steal a look. He jumps into an announcer pose, one leg stuck out in front of him, arms outstretched.

"Hi, my name is Hunter Crossby. I'm a siren hunter. What's your name?"

"Ailen Bright. Siren." I say automatically.

"Hello, siren Ailen Bright, you look ridiculous."

I hide a smile and look down at myself. Torn silver rain jacket, soiled skin-tight jeans, bare feet caked in pine needles and mud.

"I hate this outfit." I try really hard not to giggle. It's the first time since this morning that I feel good. Like we're on a backpacking trip. And somehow, amidst the craziness of it all, I feel normal.

"Let's get moving." Hunter decides, suddenly nervous, and grabs my hand. I whirl around and feel it too. There is movement in the forest. Something is moving towards us, quietly and cautiously, and it's not an animal. A few branches snap, then all is still again.

*Who? Father? Canosa? Ligeia? Teles? A fucking wild bear? Who? Who could it be?* Guesses swirl in my head, and I dare not say any one of them.

"Somebody is coming, you hear that? Shit." I say, peering into darkness. "I told you! What if..."

"Come... on!" Hunter urges me on.

I clasp his hand and we break into a jog, skirting the beach and making our way south to where about a hundred yards away a dark shape sticks out the water, with another shape bobbing next to it. A wooden pier and a boat.

"See that?" I gasp while running, pointing with my finger.

"No, I'm blind. Of course I see that! It's exactly where we're going." He throws in bursts.

He pants, but not as hard as he used to, and I find that I have to run quickly to catch up with him. Looks like this transformation did have an effect, making him somewhat invincible and stronger. Two things I know for sure. He can now fire a sonic gun and he can't die from my hands. When it comes

to it, when it gets really unbearable, maybe I can talk him into shooting me. This thought comforts me and I pick up speed.

We plop along a stretch of grass and then on top of creaky wooden boards to the very end of the pier. There, tied to a rusty nail sticking out of the beam, floats a simple wooden rowboat, its paint washed off and peeling, of unidentifiable color in the moonlight. I perk up and listen for any noises behind us. Nothing, only animals souls, scurrying mice, raccoons and a few nocturnal bird cries.

Hunter jumps in and pulls at my sleeve, I nearly topple over. The prospect of dipping my hands into the lake wins over, and my gills ache at the idea of ducking into water.

"Hey, that's called stealing." I say under my breath and carefully step into the hull of the boat. Cold water puddles on its bottom and swishes around my ankles.

"Listen to you, since when do you care? We're only borrowing it for a little while." Hunter unties the rope, motioning to me. "Come on, do your thing." He grabs the oars and they scream in their rowlocks, creaking and groaning.

I scoff. "Yes, sir!"

"Sorry, I just mean, can you do your humming thing again, please? So we can get out of here faster?" He situates himself on the middle bench with his back to me and begins rowing,

splashing oar blades into the mirror of the lake, making the boat glide a few feet away from the pier, slowly.

"Sure, boss. Yes, boss. It's what I was planning on doing anyway, you monkey." I say defiantly, drop on my stomach, grab both sides of the boat and pull myself forward so that the front bench is under my hips and my chest protrudes directly from the bow, like I'm one of those wooden statues on a pirate ship. I dip my hands into water, and it greets me with familiar calmness, quieting down my nerves. I pick out a melody in my head and hum. One of Siren Suicides's songs, of course, the usual.

Rowboat speeds away from the shore, first ten feet, then another fifty within a few seconds. Foam sprays my face and I lick it off, exalted to get moving. Hunter drops the oars and turns behind me to face me. I steer us north, away from the park, though first we have to make it past it, gliding in parallel to its west side along Lake Washington boulevard. Water glistens lightly then becomes dull black. Moon disappears behind the clouds, wind picks up and so does moisture in the air. I don't like the feeling of it. To add to this, temperature drops rapidly, first about ten degrees and then another ten within a space of thirty seconds.

I think I know the answer to my question. Who could it be.

I focus on humming. It gets harder not to try and turn my head to the right to see what I feel all over my skin, like a liquid gloom ready to jump at us, thirsty for revenge, angry and pissed.

Familiar calls interrupt me and I can't ignore them anymore.

"Ailen Bright! Where to, silly girl? Care to wait up?"

I turn my head to the right, my humming interrupted, Hunter does the same behind me, and we both see them. Sirens, stepping out of the woods, about couple hundred feet away. The remaining three, their naked bodies glowing, shrouded in long hair. That means my father is gone for sure. My heart sinks and I feel numb. Of course, what else did I expect? And yet on some level I was hoping to see *him* instead of them. I did, didn't I? Yes, with a pathetic childish hope that he survived, that he changed, that this time it will be different.

Our stolen boat drifts a little farther by inertia and then stops moving all together, bobbing gently on the waves I created with my humming. Canosa first, Ligeia after her, judging by her height, and after both of them Teles, chubby and moving her short legs quickly to catch up, they cross the walking path that separates the forest from the beach and without any hesitation step into water.

"Wait up, silly girl, I've got something important to tell you! I think you will want to hear it!" Canosa shouts before her head disappears underwater. It will take them, what, about a minute or two to reach us?

"Fuck me running... she's alive after all." Hunter says, his mouth open, oars forgotten.

I lift off the bow, turn to sit on the bench and wipe my forehead. "Hunter, I think we're toast."

## Chapter 14. Along Boulevard

In the space of half a second, I'm split in two. Part of me wants to lodge underwater, soothe my aching gills, become one with the world of songs, sirens, soul sucking, and all things morbid that come with the package of being a predator. I want to buy into this illusion of divine existence however perverted it sounds, want to be part of the siren family. It feels easy, to give in, to define Hunter as enemy, no more. To define people as food. To forget about my father. Yet another part of me yearns for air, for the dreamy uncertainty of living, loving, and feeling, that amateur orchestra called life. In it, soul or no soul, Hunter is my star, the most skilled concertmaster subordinate only to the conductor, to be listened to and admired from a distance, lest I dare move too close and destroy him. Exactly how will we be able to coexist like this? I watch his face, beckoning me to squash it and achingly loveable at the same time. And I don't know which part of me will win.

An ethereal bridge forms between us, a trajectory of a question asked with my eyes, like a violin's string beaded with dew. Half a second is gone and I blink, chasing circles of this strange vision away. Be gone. There is no string, no violin,

none of this romantic bullshit, but sirens are very real, lunging through the lake's underbelly in a burst of excitement right this very moment, flapping their feet, advancing toward us. I'm sure Canosa wants revenge, for me not saving her, for nearly dying. I have to decide, I have to do something, I have to act now!

But what about Papa... I gaze into the darkness of the woods, hoping to guess, to see beyond, to believe that maybe by some miracle he has escaped, maybe... I realize why I'm thinking this and angry tears burst their way through, spilling quickly down my cheeks, before I have time to wipe them off. I wish I could just take a torch and extract my naïve love for my father, watch it burn, watch it scream and blacken and sizzle, with grim satisfaction of a torture master. I want to kill it, kill it, kill it!!!

The lake bristles and stretches its toothless smile into a series of waves. Boat shakes and that takes me out of my stupor. I shake my head hard, rubbing my eyes, pretending like I had simply something caught in my eye and am trying to get it out.

"What did you say?" I notice that Hunter was talking and is now waiting for me to respond.

"I said, it took them a while." He licks his lips. I detect nervous notes in his voice. "Looks like the hunt is on. That's good news, I suppose, right? Never a dull moment." He raises his

eyebrows at me and waves his hand in this gesture of could-you-speed-up-a-little. "Do you mind?" At this, he lifts his legs, turns on his butt half a circle, plops feet on the boat's bottom with a splash, picks up the oars and begins rowing like mad. The boat jerks into motion and I nearly fall forward.

None of this fully registers in my mind. I don't really hear him, distracted again. "Canosa's alive, did you see that? That means my father's gone for sure..." I say it under the weight of comprehension, mostly to hear it and taste the sound of it, to try it on. And it feels horrible. Guilt washes over me. "Hunter, what have I done? I shouldn't have left him like that. I should've fought for him. I could've saved him, but I ran away like a coward. I could've—"

"Would you--?" He drops the right oar, turns his head back to look at me and motions impatiently, twirling his hand again, before returning to his rowing, bending forward, falling back, pivoting the oars, letting them screech in their rusty rowlocks.

"What?" I ask, disoriented.

"Hum, please? Pretty please? They'll be here any minute, your femme fatale friends from the deep fucking realm of the glorious Lake Washington, do you get that? I, for one, have no interest in meeting them one more time. So, can you?" He says without turning his head. Forced pleasantness rips thin over his irritation.

"Did you hear what I said?" I try.

"I did. I heard you, Ailen."

"So? What do you think?"

"So!" He drops both oars and twists around to face me. I've never seen his face contorted with fury quite like now. "You're his daughter! But you know what? He'd kill you in a heartbeat. So why would you feel obligating to help him when he's been hating you your entire life? He's a fucking asshole, all right?" He is breathing hard.

I blink.

"Look, I'm sorry, but can we talk about this some other time?" He glances back over the boat, slides into position, picks up the oars and dips them into the lake. Splish-splash, splish-splash.

"No, he wouldn't!" I'm angry and hurt, fighting tears. Damn it. I'm not going to cry, I'm not!

"Dude, we'll be eaten alive here in, like, a minute? Do you mind helping me out?" Hunter shout over his shoulder.

"Sure, sure. Sorry."

I crawl back over the bow and hum. Immediately, we jolt into speeding, but thoughts of my father lying dead in the middle of the siren meadow won't let me concentrate. We make it past the north tip of Seward park, and I break again.

"Fuck, Ailen, what's wrong now?" Hunter yells.

I turn around, Hunter does the same. We're several feet apart, sitting on opposite benches. I look at him and don't see him, looking through him as I talk. "Hey, I know it might not look like that, but I know he loves me. On some level, somewhere deep down, he does. Or... I mean, he did." I wipe my eyes and my nose on the sleeve, glancing nervously at the surface of the lake, expecting Canosa to surface any second and yet unable to move.

Hunter slaps the bench with both palms in exasperation.

"Awesome, Ailen, just awesome. Let's see if I understand. What you're saying is, this is the rare occurrence of the mysterious beast called *familial love*. Ever heard the term? I'll explain. You're referring to one of those twisted love-hate relationships between parents and their children that qualify as a norm nowadays, you following me? Here is what it looks like."

He makes his typical theatrical face, enacting everything he says with extra care and an increasingly annoying exaggerated voice.

"I hate your guts, but I won't show it. Oh, no-no-no. I'll display an image of the perfect parent, loaded, over-protective, totally admired by neighbors, teachers, other parents, whatever, you name it. The classic passive-aggressive. This is what you're talking about. Well, sorry to break it to you, Ailen, but that's not what familial love is."

He pushes my desperate wish, my hot button, what he's very good at, and I explode.

"Oh yeah? How would you know. At least my father didn't leave me like yours. I mean, think about it. He left you the same day you guys found out about your mom's cancer. Really? I mean, really?!? Great timing, asshole! Same day! What a jerk." The instant I close my mouth, I know I said too much.

It's still dark, but pre-dawn dimness begins trickling in, enough for me to see blood drain from Hunter's face. He goes pale, darkness circles his eyes, his whole posture tilts and weathers with pain. Both oars hang aimlessly along the sides, rotating slowly in the'r locks and squeaking in rhythm to shallow waves. Our boat drifts slowly north. A few cars whiz by, flashing darkness out of the sleepy boulevard, either very early commuters or late night bar hoppers returning home. I barely notice the sound of their souls, consumed by the wish to dig my fingers into Hunter's neck and rip it off his shoulders.

At this image I shudder. Bitter regret spills into my mouth from like bile. Gasping, I mumble.

"Shit... Sorry. Sorry! I didn't mean to - It just came out like this, I swear. I didn't... Oh shit." I cover my mouth, before I say anything else.

"Don't you... ever... mention my father leaving. *Ever...* again." Hunter speaks each word slowly, with force. "Got it? If you ever

mention him *again*, I'll *fucking* skin you alive." Veins bulge on his neck, he clenches the sides of the boat so tight that I can see knuckles turn white in the darkness. Immediately, he twists around, picks up both oars and begins rowing like mad.

After his threat, I'm not sorry anymore. Blood pumps my face full of bitterness and dismay. I reach out and slap him on his back. He turns in surprise.

"Go ahead, monkey boy, knock yourself out, why don't you?" I sift through teeth.

We glare at each other.

"Fuck you." He says under his breath and turns back to rowing. I slap his shoulder again.

"What now?" He yells, angry, drops both oars and turns around to face me. He opens his mouth to say something else, but this time I talk first.

"Fuck me? Did you say, *fuck me*?" I'm fishing for anything I can sink my teeth into, to keep fighting, to satisfy my urge. He is an enemy to me, is he not?

"I thought we covered this topic already, didn't we? So don't you *fucking* tell me what I can or can't talk about. Get that, monkey boy? Besides, I'd like to hear what's so special about your father that can't be said out loud. What are you, too chicken to say the truth?"

"Just keep your nose out of my life, will ya?" He fumes. "I can make it on my own, thank you very much. Get out of my boat. Go on, join your freaky sisters." He points to the water.

"Sure." I say with grim satisfaction. "Never mind me, then. Sorry to have bothered you. I think I'll go for a swim, like you're suggesting. That might do me good. See ya." I make a motion as if to tip over the edge of the boat.

Hunter's eyes open wide at this, but he says, "Go ahead. And stop reporting to me every single thing I want to do. What am I, a parent to you or something? I don't give a fuck."

"Oh, you don't? Really. Hear that?" I say and press a finger to my lips indicating silence.

Faint echoing of Canosa's voice pierces through several yards of water behind us. It comes out warbled, in a weird roaring noise that can be mistaken for a murmur of a boat's engine that is choking on the lack of gas, blurting out its last revolutions before it dies for good.

"Hear what?" Hunter says and flips back his hair.

"The sirens. Singing. They're close now. Another twenty seconds or so, and they'll be here in all of their, as you said, *femme fatale splendor*." I smile and cock my head to the side, knowing that I won. Because Hunter's bravado wilts and he finger-combs his hair again, then adjust his hood, like it needed adjusting.

This is Hunter, though, and he is stubborn, never letting me win without putting up a good fight. I see an idea flash through his eyes. He smiles back at me.

"Oh, but I shouldn't be scared. Ailen here will use her magical humming thing or whatever, and she'll get us out of it. Out of this shit. She always does, the glorious savior, the hero of the moment. Come on, turkey, prove me wrong. I'm waiting." He crosses his arms in front of his chest.

I gawk at first, not expecting him to pull the hero card, then immediately retort. "I get it. Now you need me all of a sudden. Good luck." I cross my arms in the gesture of make-me-or-else, mimicking him.

A few seconds slink by.

Canosa's voice is louder now, but we both ignore it, like two stubborn drivers speeding towards one another in the same lane, thinking that it's the other one who will yield, all the way till the imminent crash. The invisible tension between us is so thick, it can be sliced in two. A blanket of defiance, pulled from one side to the other until it rips in the middle and one of us finally falls flat on the face. I realize it's time to choose. What's it gonna be, Ailen, sirens and water or Hunter and air? Air or water? Water or...

"I thought you smarter than this." Hunter finally says, turns around and picks up the oars.

Plop-swish, plop-swish.

Back muscles roll under his sweatshirt and I can almost hear his teeth grinding. The boat slides north, away from Seward park. Not fast enough, though, nowhere near fast enough for us to escape.

"Ouch. That hurt. I'm so hurt I can't breathe." I say, but it comes out weak and pathetic. Hunter ignores me and keeps rowing. For a second I study my fingernails. Their bluish tint reminds me of that of a corpse, my skin reminds me of wet paper with traces of veins catering to my dead heart. Faint ugly pumping emanates from my chest. I think I detect an echo of Hunter's soul, but it can't be, it must be wishful thinking.

I crash into the abyss of regret, all the way from highs of my fury deep into throes of vile and forlorn thoughts, in the matter of seconds. It feels exhausting, debilitating, paralyzing. My mood swings tie me into a pretzel of self-hate. I don't dare to talk, to move, afraid to disturb the flow, lucky to be sitting next to Hunter, savoring the moment, balancing on the edge of indecision, when the unthinkable happens.

He drops both oars, turns back around to face me and takes my right hand into both of his. I jolt with surprise. His skin is so hot, it almost burns me. I force myself to sit still, for fear of him taking it away.

"I just can't seem to be able to get you out of my system, no matter what I do. Sometimes it makes me so mad, it's like--" He falls quiet, perhaps trying to find the right words.

Then we both hear them.

Canosa, Ligeia and Teles surface. Their arms snake out of the water all around the boat like tentacles of a gigantic octopus, hell-bent on getting what it wants.

"Ailen Bright, the girl who thought she could run away from it all. It--" Canosa says to my right, her eyes open wide and glistening in the dark with faint bluish glow.

"He's mine this time, I called him." Teles interjects, swimming along the left side of the boat, edging towards Hunter. He drops my hand and turns to face her, shrieking "Shoo, shoo!" on repeat, as if he can't come up with anything more intelligent at the moment.

"Shut up! You didn't call nothing." Ligeia silences Teles, coming up behind Canosa, looking important.

"--is not as easy as you think." Canosa continues, smacking Ligeia's face without looking and making both of them fall quiet. "Trust me, the game is only starting. Don't you want to know what happened to your beloved Papa?" Clutching with her left hand to the boat, she stretches out her right one to touch me.

Her voice jingles with beautiful bells against the stillness of the dawn, and I study her face, instantly knowing that I will become as bitter as her if I cave in to my siren instincts and join her. I will become a men-hater, a love-hater, a hater of all things that I could never have. What good will it do me? It will consume me, just like her, guts and all, and still it won't give me relief from my pain. As if to illustrate, her pretty face grimaces in a way a stunning woman would wince seeing that her usual charm failed to work.

This is it. Forget water, air wins. Within a second, I sway away from her touch, sit up straight, inhale with great force, as if I was suffocating, push myself off the bench with both arms and turn mid-air to plop down on my stomach, facing forward, grabbing both edges, becoming one with the nose of the boat. My chest expands, I exhale through the nose and utter a loud humming call.

The lake responds like it was waiting for my command, obedient, happy to oblige. I feel its particles gather in an urgent uproar, beginning from the bottom, forming a current, picking up speed and catching the hull of the boat in its wake. In one powerful lurch, we propel forward. Canosa's hands slide and rip off the boat's side. Out of the corner of my eye I glimpse her closing empty fists over the memory of where we've been a second ago. She roars her displeasure, Ligeia and Teles

join her, all three of them screaming and writhing in one spot, splashing at the foam that formed from the current, like a nest of crawling maggots smack in the middle of open water. I stop glancing back and concentrate on moving us forward.

"Whoa!" Comes from behind. "Holy shit, Ailen! Not so fast, I almost fell out!"

I grin, humming more, partially happy I finally made a decision, partially wanting to show off my power, to get another *Whoa!* out of him. Humming, humming like mad, feeling the vibration of water atoms resonate to my rhythm, talking to me, singing with me, making motion together.

Sky turns from black to purple, its very bottom alighting with a shade of lavender. Dawn enters the air, splashing my face with cold shower. It must be, what, after 3am in the morning? My jacket ripples in the wind. Usual clouds hang in a thick layer of weight over the lake. More and more cars come to life and make their way into roads, but no morning joggers yet, no dog walkers, it's still too early.

We skim along mostly empty boulevard to our left and within minutes make it to Interstate 90 floating bridge, pass under the onramp, and keep speeding north, reaching another floating bridge, highway 520. Boulevard to our left snakes out of sight, giving way to apartment buildings, boat piers, and sand. We skirt Madison beach, quickly, and splash through Arboretum

wetlands where I was so content with Canosa's company not too long ago. Boat's hull cuts through the blanket of water lilies, making them circle behind us together with their sweet aroma as we dash into Union bay, nearing the green latticework of Montlake bridge, entering the usual noise of the city, no matter the time of day or night, annoying and constant in its everlasting presence.

Our escape is too good to be true. And it's not, not good. No matter how far I go, I won't be able to escape myself fully, as hard as I try to pretend I'm cool, like I got over my issues and am happy as a clam. I'm not. I hum and move us forward, but my thoughts keep turning back, to the siren meadow. Sadness takes over me in waves, sadness for not being good enough, for leaving my father to die, for staying alive myself. It seeps into my humming, no matter how hard I try to hold it, and begins speaking to the rain the way I did when parting it, riding on the back of stolen Ducati. Only there is no rain now, yet I feel it's coming down, coming to show me how I should weep properly.

We pass under the bridge and at once the sky opens into a downpour. Several seconds, and we're both drenched.

"Dammit, it's pouring. Can you maybe stop it? I'm soaking wet!" I hear behind me.

I shake my head without turning it, knowing that I can't break now or we'll lose momentum again. At the same time, I

don't want to withdraw from the melody that it gushing out of me, giving me some kind of relief, letting me shed my tears in the most grand way possible, feeling raindrops pummel my face and being content with that, soaking it all in. Humming.

Purifying my aching soulless void, if a siren can be purified in the most primitive sense of this word. If such a thing is even possible.

"All right, fine. Was just wondering..." Hunter mutters behind me. I suppress the urge to stop, turn around, and squeeze his hand for comfort.

We keep gliding, perhaps at the speed of eight knots, no more. I slow the boat down, afraid to attract too much attention, playing it safe.

Red brick buildings swim past us on the right, student dormitories. Rain pummels the streets, slants at a diagonal against patchwork of houses, doors, and windows. Tall streetlights burn receding darkness away, their shining lamps blinking yellow in the mist. Rare pedestrians huddle in rain coats to hide from bone-chilling humidity. But I love it. Rain makes me happy again. I watch the drops plummet through the sky and, on impulse, stick out my tongue to catch them, still humming but now sort of half-singing.

"Look up

"The sky is grey

"Can you see..."

In this moment, I'm back to being six or seven, to that instance of wonder and tranquility when my mother was with me, and, I mean, truly with me and not spacing out into her daydreaming or her songs. I don't remember much of my childhood, and every time I do, it's a treat. Elated, oblivious to everything else, taking a chance on the danger we're in, I let the memory carry me away.

## Chapter 15. Fremont Canal

It was an early morning, not as early as now, but still, early enough that it was dark. My mother walked me to the school bus stop, it must have been winter. It was raining. I didn't like the rain and complained loudly, but mom said it's really sugar water because the clouds are really cotton candy. She said, if I didn't believe her, I should try catching a drop and tasting it for myself. I looked at her in disbelief, but then my childish curiosity won and I stuck out my tongue. Mom did the same. So we stood there, waiting, catching raindrops and swallowing. I didn't detect much sugar but it did taste sort of sweetish, maybe in a wishful thinking sort of way. I dropped my coat's hoodie and opened my face to the rain, catching it. Ten minutes before the bus arrived flew by in a glow of happiness and laughter, one of my few dips into exquisite treasure, a rare moment of love that transpired between us, to be etched into my memory forever and then pushed deep inside. Whilst it decided to float up and bother me with its utter affection and beauty.

As it does now, it rips me apart and I wish I didn't recall it, I wish it would stay where it was, in the dark corners of my forgotten memories. Too late. I notice I stopped humming and the

rowboat stopped moving. By some fate or perhaps automatically, I ended up guiding us directly to the spot where my mother must have hit the water when she jumped, underneath the Aurora bridge, across the Fremont bridge, where Lake Union flows in the narrow canal-sleeve that cuts through Fremont.

I pull myself up on the bench and turn around. My first impulse is to look for Papa's boat. Of course it's not there, and I quickly glance away.

"Why did you stop?" Hunter eyes me quizzically, and then turns to survey the Burke-Gilman trail and beyond, in the direction of his street. I know what he is thinking, he longs to go see his mother, it would be only a ten minute walk from here if we moored.

"You want to lead them to my house? No fucking way. Come on... let's get moving!" He licks drops off his lips and passes a hand through his wet hair. His grey hoodie is soaking, nearly black in faint glow of the street lights from the bridge.

I grin at him, oblivious to his sentiment, partially still in throes of my memory, my tongue lolling out like that of a happy dog.

"Got one!" I exclaim, clucking my tongue with delight. The raindrop I caught tastes like sweet water. "Mmm."

"We're, like, being chased right now, and you're catching rain drops?" He slaps his knees and dog-shakes his head, sending

spray everywhere. He leans over the boat and loudly blows his nose, wipes face with his sleeve, sniffing.

I watch all of this in some kind of a daze. It takes me a second or two to focus on his words and understand him.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize. Right. You're right. I must have stopped here automatically." I blink, shaking off the vision that's dominating my head.

*Back to reality, Ailen, back to reality. You're not six, you're sixteen. Your mother is gone. Your father is... most likely gone. And you're dead, do you hear me, dead! You're a siren, and your friend here is a siren hunter. You've got two choices: avoid each other or kill each other.*

Is there not a third choice? I wonder.

Another wave of loathing nearly makes me gag. There he is, right in front of me, and all it would take is a simple push, a tug underwater, and then... And then nothing. A siren hunter can't die from the hands of the siren, that's what Canosa said. He can be injured, yes, but his soul would have to be revived first, reignited to life, to be snuffed out of his body.

"So can we...?" He twirls his hand, impatiently.

I suppress my wish to strike him and nod, realizing that this fight against my primitive instinct will wear me down sooner or later and I will simply give in when I least expect it. Perhaps the same goes for Hunter. Perhaps.

I gaze into his steady eyes, cold and blue, unwavering, his mouth pressed into a thin line, his knuckles white from clamping around the oars too tight. I must be right.

Rain patters softly on the lake's surface.

I take a big a breath and try humming, but my voice breaks. Too much emotional chaos going on in the background. Splendid. I force a cheer.

"Hey, I'm trying, okay? Besides, I think it'll take them a while, trust me. I can totally outrun them, piece of cake, right? I'll hear them before they even get a chance to see us."

"Fantastic. Sounds like a plan." He says through teeth. "And you'll be catching raindrops in the meantime?"

"Oh, come on, stop being such a bore. You used to love it. We used to do it together, remember?" I say and catch another one, not willing to let go of my momentary happiness just yet.

He studies me quizzically, head to the side like that of a confused dog. I see a veil of understanding pass over his face the way a cloud passes briefly over the sun. His eyes flash with sorrow, barely detectible, but it's there.

"Please, please, pretty please? Just for a minute?" I say, playing a little girl, and then add without pretense, quietly add. "I need it. Really need it right now."

"I see." He drops his gaze. "Sure." He takes both of my hands into his. "So you wanna play it right now?"

I nod enthusiastically, grateful that he didn't ask me anything, aware of a slight change to his voice's tone. And maybe a whiff of his soul's melody? Or is it playing in my head again because I want to hear it so bad? It's hard to tell against the background of trickling traffic on both bridges and sleepy soul-soup licking my hearing from deep inside the neighborhoods on either shore. I make myself smile.

"All right." He raises his head and opens his mouth wide, sticks out his tongue, retracts it back, clicks his teeth together and looks at me with the air of some important business being completed, ready to move on. "I got two."

"Yeah, right. Like I believe you. You didn't even count." I say. "Watch this."

"Wait." He grabs my arm, eyes ablaze with new light. "Are you going to show me a new siren trick?" His whole face lights up, expectant.

"I said, watch me!" I inhale, open my mouth wide, and sing a single note.

I sing it a capella style, without instrumental accompaniment. My voice folds into a column of wind and shoots past cloud layers resembling an audible blast being shot out of the sonic gun. I feel it make a mile, then another, tearing through piles of atmospheric foam, from nimbo to strato to whatever you call the highest one. There is pauses and

solidifies, pulls on surrounding moisture, then hardens it crystal by crystal, scoops it up into a bucket of ice gems, ready to be tipped over and spill. My breath is exhausted and I break to inhale some more. The last of my note travels upward and adds to the abundance of liquid in that one spot. Then it overflows.

Tiny shards of ice plummet down in a dazzling shower of diamonds, tinkling. It takes them but a fraction of a second. They fall, fall and melt as they go. A thousand of them, or maybe two, I can't quite feel the exact number, nervous to make sure it works and Hunter gets blown away and says another *Whoa!*

A thousand feet over my head a small round spot of sky darkens, grows, and instead of a few trickling drops of rain all at once my face gets splattered with a shower, like a bucket full of water has been overturned. Boat shakes and I gulp, drenched, calculating with some strange ability to calculate that doesn't come from my mind, but from my skin feeling the speed and the force of impact at which the droplets hit me. Not all of them make it into my mouth, most of them fall around me in a loud splash.

"Two hundred." I say and wipe my face. "Two hundred raindrops. Can you beat that?"

"Holy cow!" Hunter is impressed, his mouth hangs open. "How the hell did you do that?"

"Cause I can. Siren magic." I sort of sing it, *siiiiireeen maaagic*. "That means, no matter what you do, I win." I prop my hands on my hips, letting the rain streak my face.

"Wait, we're competing? Not fair!" Hunter glances up at the sky then at me, pulling his hood over his head and hugging himself.

"Says who?"

"Hey! If we're playing, then it doesn't count. You're not supposed to use your siren powers or any other stuff. Siren magic? That's, like, breaking the rules." He theatrically sticks out his lower lip as if in defiance, and stomps his right foot for a good measure. Cold water gurgles on the bottom and the boat lurches to the side.

"Shit, I can't even properly get mad in this thing." He exclaims, grabs the sides and begins shaking the boat violently.

I hold on to the wooden bench I'm sitting on and burst out laughing. He joins me, and we're laughing together, swaying the boat, splashing each other with water, stomping our feet, shaking our heads, drifting into bliss of forgetfulness.

This is it. Not one minute of fantasy, but one minute of real life as it's supposed to be. A boat trip. A girl and a boy goofing off in the rain. They'll get wet and cold and tired, they'll moor their boat, hop out and go to get a hot drink at some coffee shop. Then they'll get warm and sleepy and go home,

where breakfast is waiting in the loving hands of someone who cares. A pillow, a blanket, and a long deep nap.

Hunter pats me on the shoulder and I snap out of my thoughts. "Hey, how you feeling?"

"Better." I lie, studying the horizon that is rapidly turning lavender, with shades of pink. White noise of traffic picks up in intensity. Boats at the marina cling and clang their masts with metallic regularity. A seagull shrieks, then another. It must be close to 4am in the morning.

"So you think you're okay to get us... you know, to keep the boat moving?" He glances around, before looking back at me.

"Yeah." I say, distant.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Where do you want us to go?"

"I don't care where, as long as it's far away from here and we go now. Like... NOW." At this he curses, pulls sticky sweatshirt over his head and rings it out over the lake, shivering in his black t-shirt, his skin erupting in goosebumps. He flaps his hoodie once over the lake to get rid of any remaining moisture and pulls it over his head, grimacing at wet sticky cotton.

I gaze out over the bridge. The smell of the city washes over me. Gasoline, more gasoline, and rubber. I perk up and try to detect siren's singing or any other noise they could

potentially make. Electric street lights flicker in the gloom of dawn. Dark office buildings blink to life, a few of their windows alight with yellow glow like a distorted glistening mosaic. Somebody must like to come to work early, or maybe it's the janitors. First commuters cross the bridge, huddled in hooded jackets or under umbrellas, most of them grey or some other unidentifiable color. Always grey, to match the misery of the weather. How very Seattle.

I squint beyond Burke-Gilman trail, to thin trees, patches of grass, inhale acrid air. I scan the dark water in either direction of the boat. It laps lazily at the waking morning, in low waves. No sign of any disturbance anywhere. Nothing. Except extra patrol cars and police officers strolling into cafes for their morning coffee, no doubt prompted by me causing a tsunami on the lake not too long ago.

"I can't hear them, but that doesn't mean they're not close." I say finally. "Hold on, I'll get us moving." I tense to turn into position, then look at Hunter again. "Wait.. you have absolutely no idea *where* you want to go?"

"Well, I was thinking, we could go to Ballard locks and hide there." He says with hope.

"That's not very far."

"Yeah, I know. At least it'll give us a break and we'll get some time to think about what to do next, right?" He glances

back up and beyond Burke-Gilman trail. Several blocks away, tucked into Fremont neighborhood, on Linden avenue, sunk deep into her bed cushions, Hunter's mother is being eaten away by cancer and by her worry for her son. And I think that we're both so hopelessly lost and confused and scared, that if I don't get us moving now, we'll meander here until some cop starts asking what the hell we're doing on the lake, in a stolen boat, when normal teenagers are dutifully reporting to school and can he see some ID's, please, and can we tell him our names.

"All right, all right, Ballard Locks it is. Hold on." I say.

"Give me the ride of a lifetime, turkey." Hunter says, grinning into a forced smile, and squeezing the bench with both hands.

"You got it." I say and turn around, pull myself into position at the bow and hum, picking up the same song where I left off.

We jolt and glide under the Fremont bridge, west along Fremont canal at double the cruising speed limit, close to twenty knots, parting water like melted butter, coming against the Ballard bridge fast. I hear Hunter's hair flip in the wind, in rhythm with the flapping of my torn silver rain jacket.

Rain stops. My hands trail across lake's surface, soothing me into a sort of a tired slumber. Sirens don't need to sleep,

but I suppose we need to rest once in a while, and I've had enough stuff happening to me in the last 48 hours, from changing into a siren to upturning an entire lake in a tsunami, of which there is no sign, all debris already cleared out by volunteers and harbor patrol, no doubt. Astounding, but then again, this is Seattle, where even candy wrappers get recycled immediately after consumption, or else.

A few more minutes, and we'll make it to our destination. I hum and get lost in the melody. It resonates through my skin, and I sing to water in earnest, closing my eyes, feeling the movement of the water, commanding it to steer us, letting my arms hang over the sides of the boat so they get splashed in the waves. I lower my head and allow it to bob in the wind, nodding off. It feels good, to be able to relax and have momentum carry me.

One minute goes by, we must be close, yet it feels like a whole hour passed, perhaps even an entire lifetime.

A curtain of déjà vu swipes my internal vision back to the bathtub, back home, to how it was two mornings ago, my head still underwater, arms up and out of the tub, hanging over the rims. It's a great daydream. I'm in it the way I was before Canosa sucked out my soul, before she made me a ruthless murderer, a femme fatale destined to crave living souls, cursed to love and hate every single siren hunter, especially the one I

loved most before getting converted. I'm a normal human Ailen Bright again, sixteen years old, dressed in my favorite jeans and my favorite Siren Suicides hoodie, still alive, floating in chlorinated water, holding my breath. And I catch myself wanting to turn it all back, badly, yet I can't move. Instead of blood some sort of liquid lead is flowing in my veins, in my capillaries, turning me heavy and pinning me to the bottom of our marble bathtub, dragging me deeper, sinking me. My heart bats slowly, not in a healthy rhythm, rather in a rhythm of someone who's about to give up on life.

Yet not everything is lost. I hear something. It might be steps, might be hits on the wall or the door. Someone is banging on something, someone is coming near. I want to look, but my eyelids are glued together, made from heavy cloth that is too hard to lift. I strain to open my eyes and moan, letting out a few bubbles of air through my lips, grunting to lift my head out of the water. It's heavy, oh so heavy. My body weighs a ton and it will snap my neck off if I move. My chest wants to burn from fire, from pressure to inhale, and a shadow passes over me.

On sheer will and with enormous effort, I split my eyelids open and peer through the slits. Everything is blurry. There is grey light that could be electric lighting in a bathroom, or could be overcast morning sky. Either way, the dark shape looms above me, and I still can't move. I send my every single thought

and desire in a muted cry for help, hoping I will get noticed, floating all the way on the bottom, yearning for this someone to pull me out and save my life. I attempt to move my fingers, they barely twitch. The dark someone leans closer. Great! I'm elated, my chest rises in a mad desire to breathe. Two arms detach from the shape and reach for me, clasp my shoulders in their cold fingers and yank me out of my haze, shaking me like crazy. Shaking me so hard, I think my head will snap off and roll and hop all the way down the steps and out of my house, until it stops in the gutter, gazing out into nothing.

I still don't understand where I am when shaking turns desperate. Someone is shouting at me something. It's slurry and warbled as if coming through a layer of water. I try to discern the words but I can't. I try to shout back but my tongue won't move, my lips won't open. Until finally I find myself in a sitting position, shaking and swaying, being held fast by that someone. I manage to rip my lips open and inhale with a loud *woosh*, gulping up the air, gasping, dizziness dripping out of me with every doze of oxygen, my vision clearing, my hearing sharpening, my skin feeling wind, of all things. Cold biting wind. A tremor comes over me and I shake my head, attempting to come back to whatever it is I needed to come back to. Anything to replace this drugged-like state of total incomprehension.

I blink and objects float into focus. It is sky after all, not electric ceiling light. It's grey and menacing, curling in restless tongues of clouds anywhere I look, feeling my head bob around and having no strength to stop it, trying to understand where I am and who is shaking me. Because this whole time someone keeps threatening to dislocate my shoulders and bruise my skin with a deathly grip, and then someone slaps me across the cheek and lets go. I nearly fall back, gasp in surprise, open my eyes wide and finally see.

It's Hunter. He's sitting across me in the same rowboat, the one he talked me into "borrowing" on the Seward park shore. His eyes are bulging, and he plants his unbending fingers into my shoulders again like I'm his last resort in the matter of life or death.

"Shit, Ailen, snap out of it already! Wake up! Wake up, *dammit!* Look! We're in the middle of the ocean!"

"What?" I croak and turn my head left, then right, straining to stay upright in the swaying boat, first hearing the drone of waves turn their volume up and then seeing them, gigantic silky beasts. I inhale salty air and realize that there is no land to see in any direction. The only thing there is to see is mad ocean water.

## Chapter 16. Pacific Ocean

I'm at a loss for words, and then a flood of questions erupts in my mind. *How the hell did we get here? When? Why? Was it me who did it?* I quickly rub my eyes, as if it will change a damn thing, like a child who's desperate to chase the nightmare away, to know that it wasn't real, it was all imagined. Tough luck, this is as real as it gets, complete with a few gruesome facts that don't concern me as much as they concern Hunter, who even with his enhanced abilities won't make it for longer than an hour in this freezing water if the boat gets overturned by a large wave, and I don't feel like testing how long it takes for a siren hunter to die from natural causes. I squint into distance, surveying our predicament, and chew on my knuckles absentmindedly to distract myself from internal pain and focus on task at hand.

We're floating in the middle of the ocean. Well, not exactly middle, but pretty far from the shore, probably miles and miles away. And not just any ocean, but Pacific Ocean that is the world's largest water reservoir spread sixty million square miles over a third of the planet, thirty five thousand feet deep, ranging in color from cerulean to indigo to blue.

Facts. Numbers, details, statistical babble. Facts always calm me down. I let out all air from my lungs in one sharp wheeze. Hunter continues shouting to the point of hysteria, but for a moment I ignore him and thankfully he lets go of my shoulders. It's like they tell you on airplanes, in case there is a breach in the body of the plane and all hell breaks loose, put an oxygen mask on yourself first and then on your child. I don't know why this just popped into my head, but it feels like it's my turn to take care of Hunter here, not the other way around.

"—will take us forever! Did you hear what I said?" Breaks through to me from Hunter.

"Yeah, yeah, I did." I say, without listening, managing to nod occasionally to his tirade to assure him that I'm here.

A new sensation is about to erupt deep in my guts, and for a moment I suppress it as well, wanting to gain as much calm from assessing facts as I can, on some level perhaps feeling a premonition that terrible things are about to happen but not wanting to give in to that idea just yet, still enthralled in the magnificence of this huge body of water. This is no Olympic pool, this is a cradle for life itself. But my life ended two mornings ago. A marble bathtub was my coffin, tiled floor was my abyss, liquid was my gloom. I guess the image is fresh in my head due to this stupid déjà vu, like I'm looking at everything

through some perverted magnifying glass, blown away by sheer overwhelming quality of its vista. It feels like I'm high, but I smoked my last joint two days ago and the acid effect must have worn off by now for sure. Then what's wrong?

"—listening or just simply nodding your head?" Another shriek from Hunter interrupts my thinking.

"No, no, I heard it. I'm listening." I say.

"Then tell me the last thing that I said just now." He demands, but I'm lost again, looking deep inside myself, feeling for this unsettling change and its source.

The sense of wrong keeps growing rapidly, touching my diaphragm with its cold fingers and making its way into my throat, strumming it like strings of a broken lyre, tuning my pins to a place I haven't been before. Getting me ready. For what? A part of me wants to fight, to squish it down, and that part is losing miserably. In fact, it has already lost.

The last protective loving layer falls off my hearing, no, it's being violently ripped off by this growing want.

At once and out of nowhere, out of complete silence, and I mean, Hunter's soul's silence, it's quiet no more. Wait, didn't it burn to the ground? What the hell is going on? I hear it again.

It echoes all around in a terrible warble and it makes me mad, it makes me want to kill him or run away from him, and yet

I'm attracted to this broken melody like to a drug, knowing that one day it will destroy me.

"What the hell..." I start.

"That's not what I said. What I said was..." Hunter begins unevenly.

"SHUT UP!" I yell, putting up both of my palms in the gesture of keeping it quiet for a second, and pressing my legs up, hugging the bench to stay upright. Perhaps shocked at my sudden change in attitude, Hunter falls quiet. A wave rolls over the side of the boat and douses us both in cold salty water. I grab the bench and Hunter curses under his breath, holding on to the side of the boat for dear life.

It's hard for me to tune out the drone of the waves, yet there it is again. His soul, distorted and breaking up like a badly transmitted radio signal. A badly performed Summer Season by Antonio Vivaldi.

"What the fuck... I can hear your soul again!" I exclaim, licking water off my lips.

"What?" It's Hunter's turn to gape, which stops his teeth from chattering for a moment.

Another wave sends us both swaying to our right. Not strong enough to turn the boat over. It's still upright, its oars grinding wildly in rowlocks on the verge of being torn off.

"Your soul! I can hear it again!" I shout over the noise to make sure he hears me and gaze into his blue eyes, thinking that this promises to be an amazing torture, both of us being unable to be together or to be apart.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" He doesn't understand me, scrunching his eyebrows and tilting his head to the side.

"YOUR SOUL!" I try again. He shakes his head, holding on to one side of the boat with one hand, pointing at me with another, twirling it, demanding an explanation.

I know I need to move closer to him and tell him, but I'm paralyzed by new knowledge that pierces me with increasing understanding. How very clever, I think, a siren and a siren hunter stuck in this rut forever, to make sure that one of them will make the other obsolete. I get my father's and Canosa's pain now, their inability to kill one other, desperately trying each time and failing, trying and failing, and by now probably unable to do it because they got addicted to the game itself. Does this mean then... Does it mean that maybe...

I'm afraid to finish my own thought, afraid to believe whatever it is I wanted to believe in, because it might not turn out true and the disappointment will be too much for me to bear.

Hunter blinks, and I realize that perhaps like my father and Canosa, we also won't be able to succeed in this eradication

of one another. I wipe my face, still thinking, and, as it always does, my stupefied silence drives Hunter mad, middle of the ocean or not.

"What the *fuck*, Ailen? What's wrong with my soul now? I have none, remember? Thanks to you! So don't you start telling me—"

Hunter continues yelling at me in earnest, using his favorite repertoire of swear words that are meant to hurt. This is unlike him, and his stare at me is cold, even mad. To add to this, seagulls shriek at me. Crashing waves deafen me. Sea salt in the air burns my throat instead of refreshing it like it did last time. The boat rocks my equilibrium, makes it hard to focus on anything in particular. On top of it all, clouds rumble with displeasure, brewing a storm. Great, just what we need. I have moved a whole lake before, but a whole ocean? And not making it erupt into a tsunami, but have the opposite effect? Try to quiet it down? I don't think I can do this.

Finished with his tempter tantrum, Hunter throws his arms in the air as if he gives up and slides to the bottom of the boat so as not to be thrown overboard, rubbing his hands and blowing on them. I forget he must feel cold, siren hunter or not, his sweatshirt and jeans completely wet and dripping.

Waves fall still, in a way a tiger sits still before jumping his prey. Boat stops swaying wildly. I slide to the

bottom too, facing him, and we're both are sitting with our legs almost completely covered with water. Old wooden boards creak with our every move and I don't know how much longer it will hold. Hunter is hugging himself, his lips purple and trembling, his face ashen, eyes cast into distance.

"Are you done?" I ask.

"Did you even hear what I said?" He throws at me without looking. "Were you listening? I mean, back by the bridge, when I asked you to get us *far* away? You didn't, obviously." He traces the vastness of the horizon with his right hand.

"Did you hear what I said? About your soul?" I interject. He ignores me, and I get a bad feeling of déjà vu again.

"So let me clarify, okay? *Far* doesn't mean open ocean, all right? That's taking it a bit to an extreme. You follow me? I mean, look at it." He turns to pin me with his stare, and there isn't much compassion in it, but a lot of anger. "Let's get outta here before some shark swallows us—"

"There are no sharks in—"

"--or some huge wave trips us over, or the boat falls apart, or some other shit happens." Hunter licks his lips and rubs his face. "Man, I'd give anything for a drag right now."

"Are you done finally?" I repeat, irritated at every instance of noise that penetrates my eardrums and starts dancing

polka from skull bone to skull bone. Or is it Hunter's voice in particular? I can't tell.

"No, I'm done. Thank you for asking." His voice turns icy, his face agitated. He leans closer to me. "This is just wrong."

"What is?"

"Everything. You being siren. Me being siren hunter. Well, a fired siren hunter now, but a totally functioning one. Us, sitting here in the middle of the ocean—"

"We're not in the middle—"

"Whatever! All of this. It's just wrong. Two days ago I was happy as a clam. My life was perfect, well, close to perfect. I had a job, I was going to get paid, was going to get my mom her meds. I got you tickets to Siren Suicides concert, for Chris's sake. Everything was fucking *fantastic*. And now, this. We're stranded in the middle—"

"It's not the middle—" I raise my voice.

"I get it, all right? You know exactly what I mean, stop interrupting me. Jeez. How the hell did we get here? It's just - crazy." He finger-combs his hair and lets his hands rest there, frozen in the moment of thought. Eyes glazed, staring into nothing.

Ocean calms now even more, and it unsettles me.

I exhale. "I don't know." And then, almost timidly, "I can hear your soul again."

"What?" He is shocked as if he heard it for the first time. "Why didn't you tell me before?" The incredulity on his face is genuine, and I deflate before erupting.

"I did, but you weren't listening." This answer sounds so much like I would say to my father, that it hurts me deep in my chest, to the point of physical pain. "I tried telling you when you were all freaking out about us being stranded here. What I'm saying is..." I pause, straining to listen. Yes, it's there, broken and torn, as if transmitted specifically to irritate me. "It comes at me like an echo, you know, like a distorted radio signal." I finish.

"What the hell?" Hunter says. "I don't feel any different. Wait, yeah, I guess I do. I want, err... Well..." He winces. "I get this urge to rip your head off, you know, like for real, and it's scary."

"Yeah, I feel the same. It's like..." I pause, feeling my heart fall, gathering courage to continue. "It's like... this is what will ultimately drive us to kill each other, this super-strong love-hate thing or whatever you want to call it. It's the best I can describe it. Is this how you feel too?" I ask with hope in my voice.

"Shit." Is all he says, studying his palms, pulling his legs closer to his chest and hugging them, propping his chin on his knees.

"What do we do now?" I ask, and it sounds to stupid and childish, yet I can't help myself. I have to say it out loud to get rid of the impending pain.

"I don't know." Hunter mumbles into jeans. "For one, I'm freezing my ass off sitting in this brine and I want to get out of here. Before, you know..."

"I get it." I say.

We fall silent. A seagull cries and a distant bray of a ship's horn blasts in the distance.

"Since we're not at the docks, and I don't know if we'll make it there or not, you need to tell me now, before we go to hell." He looks up.

"What are you talking about?" I raise my eyebrows, genuinely unaware of what he means this time, yet aware of another bout of hate towards him, about to erupt, about to cloud my vision. I wonder if he also feels it in waves, like me. If he does, there is no indication of it right now. He's sitting calmly across me, as if he doesn't feel a thing or as if he made up his mind about something final and doesn't care.

In a way the ocean provides a perfect background for stillness by being smooth as a mirror. Wind has died and even the seagulls have fallen silent.

"If you thought I'd buy your lie, you're wrong. I know you inside and out, Ailen, I can read you, so no use hiding. I know

you don't want to tell me. Well, newsflash, it's fess up time. It's now, or never. So come on, spill it. Looks like we're not going anywhere anyway unless you decide to hum us all the way back before nightfall." He sniffs loudly and blows his nose overboard.

"Fess up what?" I ask.

"All of it." He wipes his mouth with his sleeve. "Why you did it. Jumped. Suicide. Not the bullshit you've been feeding me, sing beautiful songs, make the world a better place, blah-blah-blah. Tell me the real reason. Couldn't you just talk to your father? I mean, he is a real human being, after all. It wasn't *that* bad between you two, was it?" He grills me with his stare and for the first time I'm loathing the blue in his eyes, it's steel cold, and I think I know where this question is coming from.

He *has* turned into a true siren hunter after all, emotionless and calculating, and now he needs facts from me to make a decision. And who did this? Me. Of course. Always me, screwing up other people's lives.

"Wait... " I begin, uncertain. "Weren't you the one advising me that he hated my guts since I was born?"

"Look, all I'm trying to say is—"

A curtain of hate blinds me, coming out of nowhere.

"FUCK YOU!" I scream at the top of my lungs. "What kind of a friend are you? You're supposed to support me, and here you are, giving me a lecture in the middle—"

"You said we're not in the middle—" He spits at me.

At this I scream and he promptly shuts up, breathing hard, rising to stand on his knees, both hands rooted firmly to the sides of the boat, his face inches away from mine, yet instead of swooning as usual I detest his closeness.

"You have no idea, okay?" I hiss. "So don't you bother trying to understand, you won't get it. Never, you hear me. Nobody does. Nobody ever gets it. It's always 'poor Ailen', or 'we understand', or 'why don't you see the school counselor' or 'there are coping techniques' or 'it gets better with time' or 'find some friends, be more social, go out'. It's easy for you to say, isn't it? But try living in my shoes for a minute, why don't you!" I stand and rock the boat.

Hunter shrinks back, raising his hands protectively in front of his face.

"Okay, okay, I understand. Honest." And yet he looks too much like a cold calculating creature that decided to retreat for a moment, serving a grander purpose.

"No, you fucking don't!" I shout.

Ocean wakes up from its slumber. Sea foam sprays us with puffs of stinky wetness.

"You're a guy!" I yell.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He pouts his lower lip. It looks like he's hurt by my remark.

"When a guy has sex with a girl-- No, when a guy has sex with a lot of girls, he's a fucking rock star, right? It's like an admirable thing. And what about a girl? If a girl has sex with a lot of guys? Suddenly she's a bitch and a cunt and a whore. You see what I mean?" I take a breath.

"I think so..." Hunter says in an unsure kind of way, but his hands come down.

"I'll explain. What if you were born with the looks that made people think that all you want is to seduce, corrupt, steal... when none of has ever crossed your mind? All because you happen to look sexy and scrumptious? I'm not talking pretty here, I'm talking desirable. Why is it bad all of a sudden? Can you imagine living like this? Like a second sort? Being told that you're no good, no good for nothing except hauling water?" I catch my breath again. The sky quickly darkens, rolling heavy clouds into a blanket of fog. Wind picks up and Hunter hugs himself.

"Um... I never thought of it this way." He says, his teeth chattering again. Strangely, I don't feel my usual urge to comfort him and make him warmer. Quite the opposite. I want to see how long he lasts, freezing like this.

"Course you didn't. Nobody does. It's like a bicycle. I can tell you for hours how to ride one, but you won't get it until you actually ride one for real and feel the balance. You know where all of this is coming from?"

Hunter blinks at me with a confused look on his face. "What do you mean, all of it?"

"All of it. The stuff you called *wrong*."

"Um..."

I plop on the bench across him and move my face close, within inches of his nose. Boat rocks slightly.

"You have no clue, do you? Well, since it's fess up time, like you said, I'll tell you. I'm not sure this is what you had in mind, but here you go." I prop my hands on my knees.

"We used to be free of this shit, we used to be hunter-gatherers. We lived in big piles of hundred to hundred and fifty people, and everyone fucked everyone, and it was all right. Until we settled. And then suddenly you had to pass on your land to someone, and who would that be? A mother always knew her child, but what about the father? How could he tell? Why, own the woman, of course, *and* the child. Make her marry him, make her carry his name. You know what that's called? It's not marriage. No. It's ownership. *OWNERSHIP*."

"How do you know?" he retorts and moves slightly away from me. I press on.

"I read it in a book, all right? In many books. And I lived it, so I know. We're like cattle to you, women to men, no good for nothing except to be fucked, give birth to children, cook meals and scrub your dirty pants while you suck on your smokes and discuss worldly matters with each other. Men. Like you're better than us or something?" I spit. My chest heaves up and down, air whistles passing in and out of my lungs at top speed.

"Wow, girl. That's a bit drastic, don't you think?" He offers, a look of surprise on his face.

I'm on a roll and can't stop. "Think about it. What's a siren?" I say.

"Well, in Greek mythology—"

"No! Not that. Remember, in the bathroom. You told me, not the mythical kind, the real siren, the girl next door?"

"Oh, that? I was kidding. Come one, I was stoned out of my mind..."

"Well, I'm not. I'm not kidding right now and I'm not stoned." I pause, think back to Papa's words, the ones I overheard in his car trunk. *You see, if it was only about the flesh, but no. They corrupt our very spirit. Steal our very souls. It's our duty to root them out, to clean up this filth, to let our spirit shine again, unvarnished. You hear what I'm saying?*

"Girls can be turned into sirens at sixteen, so that means at puberty, right? When they get their first period, or shortly after, when they're—"

"--biologically ready for sex."

We both finish at the same time and fall quiet for a second after the word *sex*, perhaps both thinking to all those times we snuck in a couple bangs, while being stoned out of our minds. At least I know I do.

"And it's only the prettiest girls that get converted, or the most talented in terms of sexy-talented, right? Like me, I mean, I'm not pretty in the pretty sense of the word, but guys would always look at me in that strange way, you know? At least that's what I got from Canosa, in terms of an explanation. She didn't exactly spell it out for me in this way, I sort of concluded it on my own. SO I think It's like our punishment for sticking out. Do you get it now? The whole siren hunting business, where it's coming from?" I say.

"I think..." Hunter says through chattering teeth.

I both see him and I don't, in awe of my own sudden understanding, having voiced it out loud and trying to imagine explaining this, bit by bit, to my father. I imagine telling him that he got it all wrong, describing how deeply this pain tore me apart, how I missed my mother and how I hated him for driving her insane, for making her leave the house for weeks at a time,

only to come home with a hanging head, patiently suffering his scolding, slapping, and, ultimately, hitting and abusing her behind closed doors while he thought I was asleep and didn't hear a thing. That is, of course, if by some miracle he's alive, if my theory about the relationship between him and Canosa is right, if... There are so many ifs, my head begins to spin.

I realize I very much would like to forget my resolve to let him live, and, if he is indeed alive, kill him, slowly, inflicting as much pain in the process as I can.

I grin at the thought.

"You know why I jumped?" I say quietly, drawing circles in the water on the bottom of the boat with my toes.

"Why? Hunter echoes quietly.

"It just seemed like the logical thing to do. It all led from one thing to another. Mom's suicide, Papa's controlling my every step, his wanting a son and not a daughter... He never came to hear me sing in choir, not once. I don't think he even knew I had choir practice." I fall silent, numb. "All I ever wanted was for him to hear me sing, if only once. For him to hear me, to hug me. You know, to tell me he loves me."

Tears roll down my cheeks in a sudden cascade, I brush them off, infuriated at my own weakness.

Hunter's face softens, he reaches out, but I turn away. "So you thought he'd listen to you if you turn into a siren?"

"No. I wanted to die. Simple as that."

"Why?"

"'Cause there's nothing worth living for."

"Yes, there is." Hunter takes my hand. I jerk it out.

"Maybe for you, but not for me. I'm empty."

"No, you're not."

"Like you would know."

"I do."

"I'm a dead soulless creature, Hunter." I say and stare away, at the ocean and the sky.

"So I heard." Comes from behind, but I don't turn.

"I kill people for food." I say.

"Aha."

"And I wanted to kill you." Sharp pain makes me cry this out. "I want to kill you now!"

"No, you don't."

"Stop saying 'no' to me!" I yell. "I'm not the girl for you, Hunter, would you get that into that stupid brain of yours?" I turn, all wild, eyes glaring, and tap on his temple.

"I'm not worth the effort, get it? Screwed up, broken, and cold. How many times do I have to tell you?" I begin raining my fists on his chest. It must hurt, because I'm strong. He lets me, until I stop. Until I get it all out, using his shoulders as support, leaning on him, breathing hard into his wet hoodie.

The boat shakes dangerously on a wave. I hear another bray of a ship's horn, raise my head and see what looks like a fishing vessel about a hundred feet away from us. A trawler of some sort, its net drum manned by fishermen in orange overalls, looking like fire ants from this distance. Sea gulls scatter away from it, screeching.

I want to turn my head to take a better look, but Hunter cups my face in his hands. He must still have warmth left in him, because I feel it spreading from my chin up to my cheeks and forehead.

"Feeling better?" He asks.

"Yeah." I say and mean it.

"Good."

And before I can say anything else, he kisses me. Just like that, in the middle of the ocean.

One second I strain against it, another I give in. His lips are cold, but his tongue is warm, and his breath comes at me in waves of fire, searing my crying and spreading from my face to my neck to the tips of my fingers, making them glow and tingle. It feels like a hot soak after freezing outside for hours, like some bubbly goodness that turns my skin all prune and rosy. I let go and hug him, hug him hard and braid my fingers into his wet hair, feeling its silky texture, inhaling his scent, a little bit of pine and a little bit of sweat.

The echo of his soul sings the secret dream of my life. It's like it's meant only for me, to torture me. Somehow this makes sense. I never heard my father's soul until I revived him, but Canosa must have heard it every single time, craved it, even. Is this the beginning of my daily suffering? Vivaldi at his best? The magnificent virtuoso, four violins thunderstruck with affection into second movement, adagio, presto, or however you say *fast* in Italian music speak? Irreparably broken, reaching me through an annoying radio static, never clear and beautiful like it was before, forever teasing me and never fully satisfying?

A sigh escapes me. Movement in the water breaks my bliss. I glance behind the outline of Hunter's head and see the trawler cruise towards us at leisurely speed. It's easily four times the length of our twelve-foot boat. Its many outriggers stick out this way and that like legs of a giant insect that's gone belly up, holding its prey in a tangle of nets wrapped around the gallows on the deck. A scary looking metallic creature.

*You can eat my what? I think. I'm not breaking the kiss for you, go around, damn it.*

Oblivious to my internal monologue - and of course it is, why wouldn't it -- it steadily glides closer. Its clunky engine revolutions and fishermen's souls interrupt the general buzz of the ocean. Mysteriously, I'm not annoyed. I decide, there is

enough time to steer our rowboat away before they reach us, and close my eyes, perhaps making a decision that I'll thoroughly regret minutes later.

But not now. Now I'm deep inside what I call a real kiss, a general melting into each other without time or worry or memories of any kind. I'm enveloped in Hunter's melody, broken or not, I'm willing to listen to it as is, catching bits and pieces of clear sound and tuning the rest of the static out. I don't care if someone sees us from aboard and calls the cops. I'll deal with them later. Nothing exists right now except this overwhelming warmth. I want more. I don't want it to end.

We sway, glued to each other. I dig my fingers deeper into his shoulder, massage his scalp, loving this motion, this rocking, this--

My thoughts, my feelings, my everything good that I dared to have for a moment, gets interrupted in a very rude manner, and several very unpleasant things happen in rapid succession, one following another and unfolding very very fast.

## Chapter 17. Stern Trawler

I can feel her with my skin before I see her. Canosa materializes out of nowhere, surfaces next to the boat, props herself up on its edge and pops her head close to our ears to deliver her message, grinning, whispering with her usual condescending braw, "Ailen Bright, my favorite food kisser, I asked you to wait up, didn't I? Was it so hard to do?" We break the kiss and turn our heads, startled, but there is no time to react, and I'm slow, still enthralled in Hunter's warmth. She grabs left side of the boat, curls her fingers around its rim, and with words, "But no, you made me follow you for 200 miles. 200 miles! All because of some *boy!*" yanks it up. I barely have time to register what she's saying. Old wooden boards creak with a sodden sigh and we tilt to the right. Our heads bump once mid-air, our gazes cross in that bewildered amusement that precedes a bout of fear. Another second, and we tip, dunking into freezing water. The boat follows, covering us with darkness.

Every single instance of sound dampens, water gurgles in my ears, my gills unfold, grateful for ocean water, gulping it and syphoning it out on instinct, but there is no time to dwell. I flap my arms and legs like mad and turn around to see something

I've seen before, only it's not my father now, it's Hunter who is entwined into Canosa's hold, her arms and legs resembling long white tentacles of an octopus. I almost expect her to expulse ink to make it harder for me to see. No need, the water is dark on its own, dark and thick like plasma brimming with salt. Hunter's face opens into an inaudible scream through the murk. Canosa's hands circle his neck, her fingers close under his chin, suffocating him. She sports a victorious smile, her mad hair flowing around her shiny body in a crazy halo of some sea monster. I kick towards them and this time I know exactly what to do to make her let him go.

She doesn't flinch away, as if expecting my attack and convinced of her invincibility, as if this is a game of sorts for her, to see how I would react, or maybe to *make* me to react. Why? I have no time to think, no time to answer it. I'm now ten feet away from them, now five, now I'm upon them, twisting my body and making a u-turn to position myself directly behind her, away from Hunter's eyes lest he will distract me into doing something stupid.

Canosa spins to face me, I spin behind her. For a second or two we spiral into a downward whirlpool, until I sense a perfect moment, her hair trailing around her in a silky helix, exposing her neck. It flashes directly in front of my eyes. I pull the sleeves of my rain jacket over my hands so that the sharp edges

of the Velcro closures sit on top of my forefingers, then I raise my arms and stick both fingers into Canosa's gill openings, pressing hard, turning once, feeling her frayed skin edges rip.

She utters a high-pitched shriek that pierces me with its agony and travels for yards, scaring ocean life into holes and crevices to hide. I yank my fingers out just in time. She lets go of Hunter, lifts her arms and covers her gills, bending forward and doubling down. I swim up, push her away by kicking my feet into her temple, somersault and twist at the same time, ending up in front of Hunter, inches away from his face, deathly pale, eyes bulging out of their sockets, a burst of air bubbles coming out of his nose and mouth.

I press my hand over his mouth and pinch his nostrils. He gets the message and stops exhaling, nodding to me once.

"Hold on!" I yell, not knowing if he'd hear my voice underwater or not. He does, immediately reaching and digging his trembling hands into my shoulders. I seize him under armpits, throw my legs into a speedy scissor kick creating a powerful stream of water that propels us upward. We're not very deep, perhaps ten feet at best. A few seconds and we breach the tumultuous ocean surface, rolling into waves and gasping for air.

Well, I don't exactly gasp for air, not feeling deprived of oxygen in the least but for whatever reason acting the same way Hunter does, mimicking his panic, gulping air in quick short inhales and shivering all over.

"She nearly killed me! She..." His teeth chatter. "Man, she's strong. Did you see what she did to the boat?" His lips quiver, two purple lines across his ashen face. His dancing fingers stop shaking and clamp onto me like iron grips. "How the hell did she find us?"

"That bitch." I say through pressed lips and turn my head around to look for Canosa. She's nowhere in sight. Instead, the annoying clickety-clack of a diesel engine looms over my back. I twist in time to see the trawler advance upon us.

"What the fuck is that?" Hunter mutters through dancing teeth, jabbing his fingers deeper into my shoulders.

"I dunno. Some fishing boat? A trawler I think it's called?" I say, cradling his waist to keep him from sinking.

An inverted creature, the thing glides on its hull like on a scaly back, the only image missing would be its protruding outriggers twitching it a way an insect's legs jerk when its body is upturned on a polished floor, not letting it tip over and scuttle away. Only in this case the polished surface is that of the Pacific Ocean, and the insect is the trawler, black tire fenders acting like its eyes, wire pattern of its rusted

handrails acting like its teeth or multiple beaks of whatever it is insects use to tear you apart and eat you. It rocks forward, bobbing on the waves, closing in on us, barely twenty feet away.

In a split second I narrow my focus and detect two, no, three human souls onboard, not necessarily appetizing, mostly salty like seawater, and fishy, reeking of that unmistakable taste. One must be the captain, standing behind the wheel in the pilothouse. Another one crouches on the deck, and the third one is on the nautical bridge, hiding behind the railing, and not very successfully, more like an inexperienced troublemaker. I only have time to see his -- and it's a he for sure -- orange bib peek out as he rises and throws his right arm full out, a toothy grin spreading between his beard and his knit beanie, his gloved hand holding a plastic loudspeaker aimed at me. Only it's not a speaker, and I know I made this mistake before, identifying it wrong. I open my mouth in surprise when a shot rings through me.

CRACK!

It's a powerful sonic blast, and it hits my right side, the one conveniently turned towards the trawler. I go limp and begin losing my hold on Hunter's waist, but not before registering how the man who shot me throws both his arms up and jumps with glee, shouting, "I got it, I got it!" like he never shot anything in his life before.

"Ailen! Ailen, oh my God, are you okay?" Hunter shouts in my ear.

"Where the hell did you get that thing? Who gave it to you, you asshole, huh? Who--" Hunter yells at the guy on the trawler. The rest I don't hear, turning inward.

Searing pain traces my throat and my eyeballs threaten to pop, eyelids droop over them for protection. The world takes on a blurry quality as if viewed through a thin layer of dirty water. Wobbly, muddy, discolored. Hunter's still holding on to me, still shouting something in my ear, but it comes in as ringing noise, distorted by my momentary deafness. I move my legs weakly, struggling to stay afloat, and dip my head backwards, pivoting my body into a horizontal position, hoping to relax and make myself buoyant, yet feeling the weight of Hunter's body pin me down and under.

Two of the three fishermen, both in knit caps and what looks like protective headphones on top, lean over the railing, the bearded one aiming his sonic weapon at me, like the one my father used, only bigger, looking like a gigantic plastic toy in his stubby fingers. He's short and squat, and the other guy is tall and scrawny, his soul sounding nervous. Before I have enough sanity to wonder where they got the gun and how do they know how to use it, more, who to use it on, we sink.

One second I inhale air, another I'm under the surface, my gills beginning their steady pumping job, the clacking of the trawler engine subsiding into an annoying echo. My grip loosens completely and Hunter drifts out of my arms. I splash in a tangle of surprise and fear, too slow, too chaotic to move me in any direction except flail aimlessly and drift around in one spot. It feels like being in a dream and trying to run through a pool, trying to control muscles that are not listening as if they acquired a mind of their own and are in no particular hurry, no matter how loud you scream or yell, no matter how hard you to kick, deathly danger or not.

I struggle for a moment and then cave in to the pull of unconsciousness, weakened by the long journey and needing food to gain new energy. Alas, I'm empty and the temptation to simply give up is too strong to resist. My eyelids close fully, I can only hear distorted noises through the thicket of the sea, some distant grinding and revolving and metallic crunching, first to my right and now right over me. A feeling of dread takes hold of my mind and I attempt to move, even if for a little bit. The effort seems to take me forever. I finally manage to lift my hands and force my eyelids apart, to see. It's dark and I appear to be drifting directly under the trawler's belly. And something else, like a pattern of some sort is hanging in the water making

it appear checkered. It takes me several blinks to will my vision into focus.

A net. It's a fishing net. I'm inside a net!

I grope around and feel a stretch of rope, multiple ropes, rough to touch and slippery, covered with a layer of mold and some other grime, oily. I glance around, moving my neck with difficulty. The net looks like a cone, with me slowly drifting into its narrow end, the checkered pattern shrinking rapidly and enveloping me like a gigantic cheesecloth. I'm about to be squeezed of excess liquid. Great.

Noise intensifies and the net digs into my flesh, pushes something towards my back. I'm unable to move around to look but I feel the warmth through thin fabric of my rain jacket. It's Hunter, must be Hunter. There is his barely detectable echo of a soul, my personal torture. Although right now his out of tune notes give me more comfort than that rusty clutter above.

We're inside a trawl net being pulled up, a catch of the day, together with a few fish caught by accident, flipping their silvery bodies and wiggling like worms around me, desperate to escape. Another second, and we're lifted out of the water, crushed into one another like fresh cheese, me on top of Hunter, and a few fish on top of me doing their crazy dance. The racket of the machinery erupts and intensifies, constant in its buzz, as if a cloud of bees decided to descend upon me, all at once,

their humming magnified ten times. I want to cover my ears but I can't move, arms pressed to the sides, legs bent, face jammed into one of the square openings of the net, its ropes cutting across my forehead and over my lips, another two tracing vertical lines on my cheeks, with my nose sticking out right in the middle.

What worries me most right now is not how I feel, but what I feel behind me. There is no talking, no movement at all, only a limp body. I can't even detect breathing, only warmth, remaining warmth. I don't know how long it will last, hoping Hunter will stay alive. I struggle to move and fail, open my mouth to sing and only emit a sad low croak.

A crane arm creaks, lifting us up, slowly. Out of the corner of my eye I see a drum turn, winding on one end of the net, tightening it, like a gigantic spool on top of a floating sewing machine, ready to pass us under its needle and stitch us into a pattern of misery. There are shouts underneath. Two men in orange bibs appear to be directing the guy in the pilothouse on where to move the net and how high and more to the left and now a little bit to the right and now a bit forward. I smell machinery and this tangy electric stink coming from some sort of exhaust, straining under the load. Not that we're heavy, it must be old equipment, no more. I have no muscle strength to tear the ropes to get out, so I decide to make another attempt at

singing, to move ocean water like I moved the lake. I clear my throat, take in a deep inhale and..

BOOM!

Another shot passes through my ribs and I faint. Blackness is absolute and its soothing. I actually like it.

The slow throbbing pain in the back of my head is akin to dipping in and out of reality, bumping your skull in the process, a small price to pay for this quiet. At least it's quiet, and I'm unable to think anymore, which is bliss.

The net must be swaying, or maybe it's me swaying in this darkness, or somewhere else entirely? I don't know anything anymore. I only feel motion, gentle movement from side to side, easy rocking. Perhaps I'm small again, I'm a baby, and my mother is rocking me in an old-fashioned crib, and she's singing me a lullaby. I hear it and I don't, drifting into that twilight between wakefulness and sleep.

I'm on a playground, on an oscillating hanging seat of a continuous pendulum, a fancy way to describe simple children's swings. I know how to work it, my mother has taught me. Lean forward, pump it, then lean back and drop your head upwards, look into sky, see if you can spot a fish in the clouds or a scary sea monster. Then lunge ahead, then retreat. Forward again, fly up, reach to the clouds, hope to touch them. But I

never do, this is a clever torture. The second I think I'm there, the swing pulls me back.

I gaze up. Perhaps it's not a sky at all, but a mirror without reflection. Suspended from ropes, I peer in, thinking that maybe, if I let go and stretch out my arms, it will part and let me go into another world, another life, one without pain or noise or interruptions, a complete bliss. Except it's missing something. The light. It's dark around me, like I'm in a bag made of the darkest blackest velvet. I can't even see my own hands, not even when they're inches away from my nose. Can happiness be found in this gloom? Forget it. I'd rather suffer from blinding light, no matter how ugly it makes the things it illuminates, no matter how clearly it shows its imperfections. This is life, and it's never perfect. I guess I don't want to go, not just yet, I want to wake up.

Decision made, I open my eyes and take a breath.

Not much has changed, I must have blacked out only for a few seconds. My body is still on top of Hunter's, firmly pressed together inside the latticework of ropes. Light assaults my eyes with its brightness and I squint to make it bearable. A migraine hits me, prompted by a combination of blinding brightness, the saw-blade noise of the net drum, the whine of the wind, the shrieking of the seagulls, and the shouting from the trawler's deck below. My arms ripple with gooseflesh, mouth tightens in

the grimace of pain, agonizing pain from sensory overload. Did I mention that it stinks on top of this? Yes, it stinks in a way it would butcher your nose if you dared to stick it into a pile of rotten fish guts in the back of the fish market, right there, by the trash cans. Foul.

The crane arm positions us directly over the deck, all the while producing a racket that punctures my eardrums with its intensity, adding to the strain and the creaking of the gallows, suspending us for an execution. Bright orange flotation work suits of the fisherman are reeking of mildew, in a way rotten eggs do. Rough twines cut into the skin of my face, a nylon and polypropylene wonder of modern fishing, rough and scratchy. I ignore the discomfort, peering down, famished. My only hope to gain any strength is the sound of those three souls below. I don't care if they taste salty or fishy. They're food, and that's all that matters at the moment.

The gantry crane stops abruptly and lowers us. We jerk forward and swing back on inertia, dangling from the hook, moving down until we're about five feet over the deck's sole. Another lurch, and we stop, swaying in rhythm with the rocking motion of the trawler.

Two of the three men onboard, looking rather funny in their clunky headphones over beanies, peer at me, both their features sharp and sinister in the ocean mist. I sense lurking fear in

their bones, hear their souls afire with trepidation. It gives me immediate satisfaction, even a smile, which I do despite the rope cutting into my lips.

They're afraid of me, and they know that I know it. I'm a beast they've been instructed to catch, I'm sure, without prior knowledge of who I am or what I can do, and that thought gives them the shivers. I don't want to think about who instructed them, and chase the thought away.

The squat man points the sonic gun at me, holding it with both hands in a manner he would hold it if it was made of steel. Another one, the tall haggard forty-something looking man with irregular stubble on his chin, points a flashlight at me. Blinded, I scowl. My elbows dig into Hunter's stomach and he groans. Good, he is consciousness then. I let out a sigh of relief. Not enough, I want to scream, *he's alive!* When the siren part of me says, *you knew it already, so stop being so melodramatic.* Right. I bite my lip. The echo of his melody never left me, only retreated a bit, and now it's back at half the volume. The distorted concerto of what used to be a divine symphony. It makes me loath his sound again. I manage to twist my hand, find his neck and feel for his skin. It's cold. He's suffering from hypothermia. I need to get us out of here and warm him up before it's too late.

Somewhere a heavy chain begins rolling with a terribly loud drone. It makes me wince and attempt to cover my ears, but my arms still won't move. Not that it would've helped any, it's too loud to ignore. I attempt to escape into my mind.

*Focus, Ailen, Focus. Find out who's manning this trawler, where did they get the sonic weapon and how did they know how to use it.*

Questions swirl in my head one on top of another like a pile of restless maggots. That's a good thing, I suppose, I'm gaining some degree of sanity, finally. When all else fails, facts, facts are my crutch. Let's see here, if I were to divorce myself from emotions and apply logic... the logical thing to conclude would be, there are other siren hunters besides my father. Could there be any, for real? In theory, there could be, right? I mean, what if there are other places with... Wait, does this mean there could be other sirens out there? Perhaps not one or two but a hundred or even a thousand? More? It strikes me that the ocean is vast and I have no idea how many there might be. But it makes sense, doesn't it?

I dig and curl my fingers around the ropes of the net, stretching out my neck in an effort to listen through this racket. Still same number as before. Three human souls, an auditory version of mixing different colors of paint into one ghastly brown mess. The one on the bridge, the skipper, promises

to taste like stale fish. I stifle a gag reflex, wondering if they seem so rotten on purpose, like a protective measure from a siren. That would be clever, even cleverer would be if once you swallow a soul of a fellow like that, it poisons you from inside out. I shake my head to concentrate on the task at hand.

*Keep counting, Ailen, keep counting.*

Two guys in front of me, that's all. I hear nobody else. That could mean there is a siren hunter on board, the one I don't know and can't hear, of course. Because if my father is alive, I would've heard him, since I've managed to revive his soul. This intense thinking took me barely a second. Hunger overpowers the rest, and I open my mouth in an attempt to sing, but I can't make a single sound, can't even cough to clear my throat. Great. I must look like beached fish.

I realize the tall man is staring me in the eyes, about six feet away, our eyes perfectly level, him standing on the swaying deck of the trawler, and me hanging in the swaying trawl net.

He whistles, clearly astounded. I grin back, trying to look sinister. It works, he blinks several times and takes a step back.

"Are you out of your *fucking* mind, Jimmy? You never whistle on a boat, it's bad luck!" The squat man shouts at the tall one, at Jimmy, sending one of his headphones askew with a slap of his meaty hand, holding firmly the sonic weapon in the other, still

pointing at me. I'm sure this was done in an effort to make Jimmy hear what he just said. It seems like the tall guy is an amateur and a newbie.

"Sweet Jesus, mother Mary, the blessed virgin, save me." Jimmy says it in a fast blur, *sweet-Jesus-mother-Mary-the-blessed-virgin*. "Would you look at that..." His soul jumps in fear as he points with his index finger in our direction.

"God almighty, it's just a couple kids! It's jus'... I didn't sign up for this. No way." He shakes his head and falls quiet. His face turns long and grey. He gapes at me, massages both sides of his open mouth with his thumb and forefinger, scratching his stubble with pallid blue resin of the glove in that non-existent mustache rubbing kind of way.

The squat man pulls down his own headphones, letting them sit on his thick neck, and jerks Jimmy's headphones off his beanie completely, sending them flying across the deck. He tiptoes to lift himself up and yells into his ear.

"You heard what the man said, he wants them alive. We get the cash and wash our hands. So quit your whining and stop being a sissy. Let's be done with it." He grins an unpleasant smile that cuts through the middle of his round face, scathed by ocean winds into a red muzzle of a beer drinker.

Jimmy glances around, perhaps to locate his headphones, sticks his hands in and kneads his pockets. "He didn't say they'd be kids, did he? If I woulda known... He said—"

"Never mind what he said!" The squat man cuts him off. "You want to repair the roof of house or not? How many years had it been now?"

"Since Tammy..." Jimmy mutters under his breath, takes out one hand and folds fingers into his palm, mouthing the numbers. "Three, I reckon. That'd sound about right, three years."

"Hey, Glen, what's the holdup?" The third fishermen leans over the railing of the pilothouse, shouting and waving his arm in that hurry-up gesture. That means Jimmy is not important. I get the hierarchy. Whoever is paying these guys must be the boss.

"Just a minute, Stevie! Getting her situated here." The squat man shouts back, Glen is his name.

"All right, you're worried about them, Jimmy? How about this. How about we ask them to quiet your mind, eh?"

He looks up at me, points the sonic gun again and opens his mouth so wide, I can see rows of yellowing teeth frame his purplish tongue, trying not to think what his breath might smell like.

"Hey kids, you all right?" He shouts. I attempt to pull myself up from Hunter, but my muscles give out, and all I do is curl my fingers into fists of weak hate.

"There. See, they're fine." Glen slaps Jimmy on the back with his free hand and waves to the skipper, Stevie.

"But they didn't—" Jimmy begins.

"I said, they're *fine*." Glen says with finality, and I see Jimmy give in to his authority, averting his eyes and kneading his pockets once more, studying his huge black rain boots.

The drums begin its rolling dance again, cling-clang, cling-clang. We descend another several feet, jerking, now hovering over the floor, nearly touching it.

"Unzip her." Glen commands with a wave of the gun.

Jimmy nervously steps closer, grabs the rope from somewhere underneath me, pulling on it and then stopping.

"Glen, I'm not sure about this..."

"I can't hear you, you idiot." He taps on his headphones which he managed to put back on in the meantime, then shouts into Jimmy's face.

"You want your pay, you keep your mouth shut. Haul them in and be done. Let her loose!" By *her* I suppose he means the net, must be some affectionate fishermen speak or something.

Jimmy glances at us again, unsure, and with a heavy sigh yanks at the rope. In this moment a word flashes through my

head. Codend. That's what they call the end of the trawling net, I remember reading it in some book at some point in time. Not that it matters now.

Codend or not, it unzips underneath Hunter like a loose thread of a sweater, loop by loop. Another jerk, and we fall out of the net onto slimy deck with a sickening crunch and the sound of slapping on a bare skin. Hunter moans when I land on top of him, then the floor begins moving. No, it's not the floor, it's a white plastic side of a chute of some sort, an opening on the deck that I didn't see. And it's not moving, the trawler is moving, causing us to slip into square opening the size of a large manhole, cold and stinky. For a beat, we hang folded over its rim - it reminds me of a polished rim of my bathtub -- and then, with an unceremonious rainboot shove in my ass, Glen sends us both flying down.

*Down the rabbit hole, crosses my mind, down the rabbit hole I go.*

## Chapter 18. Fish Factory

We tumble into freezing darkness. Hunter grunts and groans with every twist of the shaft. I don't have a chance to look at him, to make sure he's okay, banging my head against metal walls, unable to stop work of gravity, being pulled further and further. It feels like going down one of those closed waterslides at an amusement park, except it has no water and it's covered with fishy slime, no doubt having never been cleaned since this vessel started operating. As abruptly as our fall started, we stop moving, slamming into flat surface, and I land on top of Hunter again. He shrieks involuntarily. I shriek too, feebly at first and then coughing up salt water and finding my voice again, shaky but sounding clear for the most part. Good, at least I have my weapon back. I cough again and raise my head to look around, blinking, on some level afraid to try to talk in case it won't work.

Soft grey light emanates from low ceiling painted dirty beige and jammed full of pipes, aluminum chutes and bundles of wires, with a few flickering fluorescent lamps in between. The light comes from them. I blink again, my eyes begin to water. We're both lying flat on what appears to be a 3 foot wide

conveyor belt used to sort and process fish. Or sirens. Who knows what these guys are catching here.

Hunter's body is twitching underneath me, his head face down and propped against a low metallic lip that prevented us from sliding another 3 feet to the floor. My legs are still up in the chute opening behind me. I hold on to the slippery belt-rim, wiggle and roll off to the left, scrambling to all fours and leaning to look.

"Hunter?" I try. It comes out warbled, in the low register of an old woman who hasn't used her voice in years. I clear my throat, feeling very weak all over. "Hunter, you all right?" I shake his shoulder, wet cotton of his sweatshirt clammy under my palm, and then my arm gives out from effort.

"Huh... Wha... I... sssss..." He mutters, his colorless lips flush with the conveyor belt, his head turned to the left, hair bunched over closed eyes.

"Talk to me, please. Are you—"

Before I have a chance to finish, a low whine of a motor comes to life and the belt jerks to the right, it's rubbery surface squeaking under Hunter's sneakers. How did he manage not to lose them in this chaos, I have no idea. Before my thought gets finished, I fall over, not having expected the thing to move. By the time I gain balance and scramble on all fours again, the belt falls out from under us and we get dumped on the

floor, roll forward another few feet and end up hitting a freezing wall, even by my standards. It's covered with frost and crunches lightly as my forehead rams into it.

I shake my head and manage to sit, trembling from strain to stay upright, rubbing my face and eyes, gagging from the stink of what smells like spoiled herring, on top of oozing condensed coldness, in a way it must ooze from a gigantic commercial grade freezer. I fight sudden dizziness and literally hold my head in my hands to prevent my vision from spinning.

"Oh my God..." I say involuntarily. Because my hunch was right, this does look like a freezer. Worse. What's directly in front of me resembles cells, sort of like cooling compartments for fish, except they appear too large for that purpose and remind me more of tiny rooms, the likes you see in prison, complete with black iron grate doors that can be locked, judging from heavy locks hanging by knob-handles.

"Jesus Christ..." I mumble under my breath, everything else forgotten, my eyes open wide, taking in the interior, digesting its information, conjuring up images of what must be going on here on a daily basis. I'm unable to stop myself, gawking, for a second not even aware of Hunter's moans next to me.

Four, no, five units about six feet high and four feet wide line the wall, or, rather, are *dug* into the wall, if you were to dig out cells in a mountain of ice, rounding entrance corners

and doing a rough job, because the walls are white and irregular, completely covered with rime and ice in places. There are no lamps inside of them, only in front of each, and that makes them look grey like open mouths of five toothless monsters. Underneath the ice in places paint is visible, white perhaps years and years ago, but now dirty and peeling, reeking of iron underneath. Rusty, eroded, tarnished.

A heavy thump from above yanks me out of my daydreaming, just in time, before I started thinking about how a siren might fit into one of these, or *how many* sirens might fit.

"Hunter!" I yelp, aware of my negligence.

He is curled up on the floor, shivering.

"Hey, look at me." I lean in and cradle his face in my hands, attempting to lift it, when another thump shakes the ceiling and causes lights to flicker out briefly, for a fraction of a second, making me see halos of swimming after-images, before the light gets back on again.

"What the fuck?" I glance up briefly, then get consumed by my worry again.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" I keep his face in my left hand and shake him lightly with the right one. His breath warms my palm in short raspy gasps.

"Can you talk? Are you cold? Shit, of course you are. It's freezing here, and you're wet all over. I wonder if I can—" I

don't finish, perking up at the noise coming from above, feeling Hunter's face slide from my grip back onto floor.

Glenn - I can hear his soul, a mix of loud chewing (seems like he loves to eat), fire crackers (a fire fetish?) and some annoying mechanical whine on top of it, promising to taste of raw fish and iron -- walks across the deck away from the chute hole where the net got unzipped. I tilt my head up for a moment, listening. Ragged breathing comes in. It's Jimmy. His soul has a simple melody to it, shuffling of hard paper, perhaps playing cards, and tinkering with metalling sounding tools or bells. He appears to be leaning in to check, to make sure we got swallowed properly into the depth of the trawler, yet still uncertain, muttering under his breath.

Then...

BANG!

...the lid over the opening slams shut, and all lights go out at once.

"Hey!" I shriek from surprise and lick my lips.

It's pitch black. Disoriented, my hands empty, I feel around for Hunter, call his name frantically several times. My words sound hollow in the hushed silence. Slowly, my skin begins to glow, faintly, probably because I'm hurt, but it's enough to make out shapes that are close.

"Hunter! Hunter, you all right? Are you hurt? Where are you?" Panic subsides and I find him a few feet away from me, stumbling right into his chest and groping it like mad, traveling with my fingers all the way to his face. He's sitting upright and coughing up moist puffs of air into my face.

"Never felt better, thanks for asking." This comes out weak, but with his usual sarcasm. It tells me that he feels awful, but is fighting it by trying to appear cool. "What about you, you okay?" He groans, more of his breath rolls over me in a wave of warmth. His face is barely visible, a grey ghost in darkness.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Are you hurt? Are you okay?"

Now a stream of his distorted soul echo hits me square in the ribcage, especially pronounced amidst these walls, maybe soundproof walls, because every word that I speak dies momentarily, with barely a chance to escape my lips. I have an urge to circle my hands around his neck and suffocate him. It takes an enormous effort and a deep exhale for me to suppress it. How much longer will I be able to withstand the urge? I don't know and choose not to think about this now, not *here*.

We perform mutual palpation, like in one of those kiddie games, playing doctor or hospital, feeling each other, touching each other's faces, necks, shoulders, not daring to let our

hands slip down for more but feeling tension rise with excruciating clarity, like it always does at the wrong moment.

"I was so worried, I thought you got hypothermia. That stupid bitch. She has a thing for you, I swear." I break the silence, touching his cheek and then tracing the smooth bridge of his nose, my hands shaking, every muscle jittering, tired, in a way a marathon runner's muscles must be tired at the end of a long trek.

"Nah, it'd take more than her to nuke me." His usual bravado comes out. It's a good sign, it means he feels more or less fine. Shaken, but fine. "I'm surprised she managed to find us, I wonder how it works, actually. Can you hear her if she's miles away?"

And at that, we dive into small talk, pretending like everything is normal, in an effort not to face our weakness, terrified of impending danger. I'm guessing, of course, but I'm pretty sure Hunter feels the same as me.

"Nope. At least, I haven't yet. I mean, I could feel her just before she jumped out, but that's about it." I say, wondering if I could attempt to detect her presence on purpose, to try and tune to her the way you would tune to a particular radio station. "I could try?" Small talk is working, I start getting a sense of normalcy.

"Hmmm... Interesting." Hunter appears to be thinking, and then quickly changes the subject. "Man, it's cold in here..." He shifts and rubs his hands, and before I can ask him if I can warm him somehow, launches into another one of those attempts to fill up silence, like weather talk, only tailored to our situation. "Hey, did you see the gun? They used a sonic gun on you. The guy with the beard, the short one..." Hunter falls quiet, perhaps realizing that of course I saw the gun, felt it, too. His pause is leading me to believe he's as afraid as I am to breach the subject on who gave it to the guy and why.

My fingers now trace his lower lip, and he nips on them lightly. "And the headphones?" I add. "Did you see them? Must be against my voice, right?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I think fishermen use them all the time, because it's loud on the trawler, you know, chains and engines and stuff." His hands feel my shoulders through thin polyester fabric of the rain jacket, and I want to crumble into his embrace. "What is this place, did you get a chance to see when the light was on?"

I follow the folds of his ears, from outer pinna edges of to inner cartilage, letting my fingers travel across their soft smooth landscapes. Hunter lets me, I can even detect him moving a bit closer and holding very still. Unbelievable as it is, touching him gives me comfort, makes me feel less fatigued. I

sense that it gives both of us comfort, not to the point where we can give up past conflicts and our yearning to kill each other for good, and not to the point of gaining strength to try and climb back up, to kick off the lid, or at least to go search for some door and try to open it. No. Not yet, but we're getting close.

"They said some guy hired them, did you hear that? I wonder who. I wonder if... there might be other siren hunters out there?" There, I said it. I fall quiet, scared of Hunter's reaction.

"Who knows." Is all he manages, clearly not tuned in on the conversation, his hands slowly traveling down to my waist and under my jacket.

"That *bitch* Canosa," I relish the word *bitch*, usually afraid to use it in case I might offend someone, but thinking that this use is absolutely appropriate, after what she had done, perking up even, "oh my God, can you believe it? I thought I could trust her. I still don't get it how..." I swallow, feeling Hunter's breath grow faster and shallower, blowing hot air against my cheek. "...still don't get it how she found us. By my voice, I suppose. I suppose I need to try it myself. I bet I can do it too, don't you think?"

"Yeah. I think... This is so weird, you glowing like this... It's also kinda awesome..." Hunter mumbles, his fingers counting my ribs, moving higher, my heart ramming against my chest. I get

ready to fall through the floor in the fear that he might hear it.

"Jeez, you're freezing!" I get my own hands under his sweatshirt. "I wish I could warm you up somehow. God, I hate it that I'm cold-blooded." I grit my teeth and begin rubbing his belly unceremoniously, exerting myself too much but not caring. As cold as Hunter is, my hands must be colder, because he abruptly yanks his arms from under my jacket and grabs my hands to stop me.

"Don't." I sense another word freeze on his lips, as if he bit his tongue at the last moment.

"Why?" I ask, taken aback, knowing that he must have meant to say, *your hands are cold*, and then thinking that he would hurt me with it.

"You're not helping, Ailen. Relax and enjoy the scenery, all right?" He's nervous and exhausted, his voice trembles, and I think my eyes have adjusted enough to see a faint outline of his profile. He turns his head in the direction of the freezing cells, no doubt wondering what the hell that is and not being able to clearly see it.

A momentary pause is all it takes. Our magic is sapped clean from the air, leaving only teenage awkwardness behind. I sigh, sad to feel it go, my hands still in Hunter's, held tight, but with no affection. Only with a desire to hold on to

something, like to a steel pole in the middle of exploding chaos.

I quietly lean my head on his shoulder, he doesn't push me away. For that I'm grateful, scrambling for anything I can get, to gain an ounce of my strength back. At least something. Trying to remember how long the sonic blast rendered me immobile last time.

But, instead, thinking back to every single time we had sex in the past, each lovely occurrence transpiring while being high on weed and not feeling much of it. Neither of us was brave enough to attempt it when fully awake and alert, making feeble passes at each other and never going past kissing and some affectionate squeezing on the couch or pressing stomach to stomach against the door of my bathroom. I always thought perhaps I was not attractive enough for him, blaming my tiny breasts. Maybe the fact that Canosa made them bigger when she converted me is playing a role right now? Does he really want me? Can I ask? Never, never in my life. No matter how little of it's left.

"I'm sorry—" I begin into his sweatshirt and pause, not knowing what it is I'm apologizing for.

"Huh?" Hunter seems to be residing deep in thought, shivering.

"Wait, listen -" What downed on me briefly before, blooms into full knowledge. "Do you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"Listen." I say and lift my head. "La-la-la..." I sort attempt to sing, but my voice comes out dull. Usual sharpness and thrill gets sucked out of it the second it leaves my lips.

"It's soundproof! This place! Holy shit!" I say.

"'Course it is." Hunter says.

"What do you mean, *of course*? How would you know?" I retort, wanting to yank my hands out of his and curbing the urge, conserving energy. I don't know when I'll have another opportunity for an intimate moment like this, bizarre as it is, both of us having narrowly escaped death and now freezing our asses off, locked up in an enormous ice maker.

"I dunno. Just guessing. But it's one hell of a siren hunter's boat, I tell ya." He glances at the cells and I think I see his lips crack into a grin, though it's hard to tell for sure in this darkness. "Your father's thing is a toy compared to this baby. This is how the big guys play. Yeah."

There is a tone of admiration in his voice, badly covered up by deliberate sarcasm. On some deep level his comment pokes me in the wrong place, and I feel like defending my father's boat and his hunting legacy. Plus, he bought it for my mom, which has a special meaning to me. I'm mad at both thoughts. Too

late. They immediately make me angry and form the words before I can arrest them.

"I think my father hired these guys. There, I said it. Isn't *that* what you were thinking about?" I wait for his answer, suspecting that we had this same thought on both of our minds ever since we got here.

"How would you know for sure?" Hunter counters, without answering. I must be right.

"I don't, but I'm positive it's him. Who else would be smart enough to do this? Somehow he has survived, he must have. Perhaps this trawler was his all along, and he simply never told me." I notice a tone of pride in my voice.

Hunter must notice it too, lashing out at me. "Smart enough? You mean, you actually have to have a brain to hunt a siren? Look at you, Papa's girl all over again, are you?" Badly covered contempt seeps through his remark. It feels like he pumps himself up to be angry on purpose. That's as far as my logic goes. Suddenly, fury pounds in my skull with blazing intensity.

"What, we're animals to you, is that it?" I throw at him.

"That's not what I said!" He raises his voice.

"Well, it's not what I said either." I hiss. "What I said has nothing to do with my father. I hate him, and you know it!"

"Awesome. Point taken. Agree." He exhales loudly. "Hey, I don't know about you, but I don't feel like arguing anymore. I feel like a nice long joint on my favorite couch under a warm fuzzy blanket, okay? So unless you object, I vote we try to find our way outta here." He scoots away, scraping the floor with his wet jeans. It must drain a lot out him, because he stops after a while, panting.

"Oh yeah? So you're the smart one here? Okay. Explain to me how exactly you're planning to escape. I'm all ears." I cross my arms and wait. I can't believe I was actually kissing this guy not too long ago.

"I don't know. Out! JUST OUT!" He bangs his fist on a wall in a childish move of frustration, and yelps in pain. "We'll figure it out when we get there." Despite the pain, he continues hitting it again and again, sending small sparkles of snowflakes flying at me. They stick to my face without melting like they would normally do if I were still a normal girl, if I were... Ache seizes me from top to bottom.

"When we get *where*?" Since I can't beat him up like I usually do when upset, I lunge into hurtful words. "Let's see here, let me see if I understand. We somehow manage to pry open the metal belly of this beast, quickly, too, before those guys are back. And then we'll swim out and fly off into night sky, on magic wings, and then we'll land on some fucking paradise island

with a loud splat. Am I right?" It's not the time to be sarcastic, but I can't help it. "Is that what you have in mind? That my siren magic will save the day? Is that what you're counting on?"

"What do *you* suggest?" Hunter says angrily, and then sneezes loudly, several times. I can hear him wipe off the snot with his sleeve.

"See, you're already sick. If it was just me-- I can survive swimming in cold water, even in freezing water, but you can't, siren hunter or not, do you get it? Look at you, you're shaking." Not that I can see him, but I feel his vibrations come at me through the air.

"What do *you* care?" His voice catches at the end. I immediately feel awful.

"Why are you so bitter all of a sudden? Everything was fine just an hour ago." It comes out wrong, of course. I grope for him in the dark, but Hunter scoots farther away. "What's wrong? What did I say wrong?"

Heavy breathing.

"Nothing."

I wait. Sometimes silence is the best answer. Sometimes knowing when to shut up is better than knowing what to say. Sure enough, it works.

"I'm just scared is all." Hunter deflates, sniffs, shuffles his sneakers on the floor.

"So you're mad at me because you're scared? First, you're not scared, acting all brave and funny. Now you are scared. I'm confused. Scared of what? I don't understand. If it's my father who's manning this boat, he'll welcome you with open arms, I'm sure. He'll give you a personal ride home, you can count on it."

"It's not that..." He trails off.

"Then what?"

"We're stuck here. I can barely move, everything hurts, breathing hurts." I hear tears in his voice. "And I don't know what will happen to us, what will those people do..." Pause. "...to you." Another pause. "You're like a magnet. I can't tear myself away from you, it's just... Here I am, sitting and talking, doing anything I can to keep talking, to keep hearing your voice, when any other normal guy would pound on the door and cry for help." He catches his breath.

Contrary to him, I can't breathe. I seem to have forgotten how to do it. I want to say, *ditto*, but don't dare, don't dare telling him that snatching a moment of being together is more important to me than escaping my fate.

"I'm scared.. of losing you. Again." He says.

Thick silence hangs between us, broken only by steady pounding of the trawler's engine, rolling ocean noise echoing from far above, and Hunter's occasional sniffing.

I don't know what to say. And I don't need to, because before I can say anything, a voice comes alive from behind us, no, two voices, in the corner of the lab. I twist around to look.

About thirty feet away, deep in velvety darkness, a lock turns, and then a door bursts open with a sharp metallic clang.

"Watch out!" Hunter yells at me.

"No need to look for a way out now." I mutter under my breath, squinting like an animal caught at the end of its hole, blinded with torch fire.

## Chapter 19. Wet Lab

I rub my eyes and blink. A shaft of daylight breaks through the opening in a dusty triangle. Jimmy and Glen materialize on either side of the doorframe, their soul melodies assaulting my hearing and making me hungry. Good, maybe it'll give me much needed strength. A waft of sea air follows the light and breaks up the fishy odor of our enclosure, making it fouler by contrast. I drag in a huge inhale and smell the stink again, taking in the cacophony of Jimmy's and Glen's souls, sandwiched together into a noxious duo. Repulsive, but edible. My chest agrees with a growl of famished void, ready to make me pounce. Pipes and wires stick out eerily this way and that in the narrow corridor that separates me from fishermen standing by the door, mincing their steps. They must be afraid of me. The thought gives me pleasure and I hiss involuntarily, pumping myself up for a fight.

The sinister siren part of me is grinning, makes me break into a smile. It tells me, *It's show time, Ailen. You can do it.* It nags at me, *Come on, eat them! It's what you've been made for, isn't it? You like it, admit it, you LOVE it. Get back at them, get back at your father for all the pain he's inflicted*

*upon you. He doesn't deserve to live, nor do THEY deserve to live, the bastards. Suck out their lives, you can do it. Gather your remaining power, come... ON! Remember to sing at one hundred thirty decibels to make them lose their minds, bend their sorry wills with your voice, gut those babies, make their every bone pop and break. Like at Lake Union, remember? DO IT!*

*I know, I know, I want to answer, but I'm terrified that I can't do it at will, that I need a powerful emotion to kick myself into gear. This drives me mad, mad at my own constant self-doubt, at fear of being myself, of accepting myself as I am. I decide I know what to do.*

*Barely a second goes by since the door opened.*

*Hunter glances at me, his mouth opens to say something. I press a finger to my lips, telling him to be quiet. He nods his head, eyes expectant, miraculously trusting me this time.*

*Ailen Bright, I tell myself, you're a siren. Then fucking act like one!*

*There is muttering by the door, a few phrases exchanged in a hushed whisper, and then Glen, the squat bearded guy, takes a few tentative steps into the corridor,*

*"Hey, kids, easy now. Easy..."*

*and, emboldened by our unresponsiveness, crosses the rest of the distance, his resin boots squeaking on the floor. A sonic*

gun in one hand, pointed at me, he reaches for Hunter with another. That's my cue.

"Uncle Glen here, to take you kids upstairs. I have me a gun, you hear? Let's not—"

The rest gets lost unspoken. I shriek, lunge forward, push Hunter aside and grab Glen's orange suspenders that hug his beer belly. Surprised, he gasps and loses his footing, kneeling forward like a sack of potatoes with a dull thud. That must hurt his knees, and he yelps to confirm my suspicion. Good. Before he gets control of his upper body, I straight-arm his chest and he folds back, falling flat on the floor, his head smacking it in a juicy crack, without a beanie to protect it from naked metal. He shrieks. I hop on top of him, pinning his right wrist to the floor until his fingers uncurl and lose grip on the plastic weapon. The trawler rocks and the gun rolls away into darkness. Hunter catches it, scoots into shadows, out of sight.

I hug Glen with my thighs and squeeze hard, to not allow him to move, pressing his other wrist to the floor and lowering my face to within inches of his nose.

"Hi there, fatty. Nice beer belly." I say into his face and, seized by a mad desire to scare him, jiggle my butt, making his stomach gurgle.

He gapes at me, momentarily speechless.

Hunter shouts behind me at the tall guy, Jimmy.

"What the fuck are you looking at? Get your sorry ass out of here while you can, you stupid dickhead!" He spits. It's his way of attacking, yelling obscenities before he gets scared or before his opponent realizes he's scared. I smile. This is Hunter I know, he's back, and I also realize I love him so much, it hurts.

"Hey, don't point that thing at me, son, you hear me? Put it down, put it down!" Jimmy's voice yelps back.

It doesn't even cross my mind to interfere and help Hunter with the other fisherman. The vibrations of his soul escalate from normal to panicked, his body emits sick odor of sweat and fear, and I know he's a coward who wouldn't dare to interrupt me. If I try to participate in wrangling him, I'll hurt Hunter's pride. So I focus on the task at hand.

It feels disgusting sitting on Glen's belly, sensing his gas and intestine movements, like I'm on top of a water filled pillow that constantly shifts and sloshes underneath me. God, I hope he doesn't pee himself from fear.

"Please, please..." Is all he manages to say, his assaulting courage gone, replaced with pathetic mumbling. His eyes droop deep into his sockets, a thin sliver of saliva makes its way down his beard.

"You're a piece of *shit*, you know that?" I say, relishing the word *shit*, considering to use it again, having always been afraid to swear at a grown man as a result of Papa's lessons.

"Miss, please... I didn't do nothing. Please, let me go, please... I only--"

His muttering annoys me. Without thinking, I tilt my head back and hit him hard with my forehead, knocking him out and making him shut up. He promptly goes limp and lets his bladder loose.

"SHIT!" I exclaim, sensing warmth and quickly jumping off him, afraid it will touch me. "He peed himself!" I announce and turn around, looking for Hunter.

The place where he was a few seconds ago is vacant now, and I see him charge forward, a dark shadow in the gloom of the corridor, legs spread wide against the rocking of the trawler, left hand threading the wall for balance, right hand firmly clasping the sonic gun pointed at Jimmy.

"Who hired you? Who the *fuck* hired you?" Hunter yells.

Jimmy, on the other hand, seems to be frozen to the spot, clutching to the door frame, either because he's unable to move, afraid of what his boss will do to him for not fulfilling his orders, or mesmerized by my voice, I can't tell. He does stare at me, though, not at Hunter, that much is obvious. Then it downs on me. I forget that I'm glowing, my skin is glowing in

the dark, and my eyes stream a kind of blue electric light you see streaming from fluorescent bulbs. That must be a freaky sight.

Boat lurches on what must be a particularly large wave. We plunge ahead with it. I lose my footing and grab on the grille of one of the cell doors to my right.

Simultaneously, Hunter fires the sonic gun.

CRACK!

The echo of the blast reverberates in a stream of hollow popping sounds, finally reaching me all the way in the back. Deafened, bending in pain, curling my fingers around the iron latticework so as not to fall, I emit an involuntary moan, feeling my feet slide apart on wet floor.

"No." I intend to yell it, but it comes out as a barely audible croak. I attempt to focus on facts again, to distract myself, to function.

*Hunter, I want to cry, why did you fire, you stupid head? That thing doesn't work on people.*

My tongue won't move, my neck won't listen to me. I zero in on the iron bar in front of me and on my breathing, deciding that he didn't do it on purpose, it was an accident. Yes, that's what it was. It's easy to simply have your finger slip and push a button on that thing as opposed to pulling on a real trigger. Facts, facts will pull me out of this haze of oncoming

dizziness. He is a siren hunter, he can fire a sonic gun now. Yes, that is correct. And yet it makes no sense. If this is true, then how could Glen shoot me? I can still hear his fishy soul intact. He is not a siren hunter, is he? Why did the sonic weapon work in his hand?

Bout of nausea passes and I raise my head, when another blast throws me off balance again. Its echo erupts around the room, bouncing off the soundproof walls once and hushing. Like the previous blast this one was not directed at me, yet its ambiance seems to be enough to weaken me. I tighten every muscle in my body to power through vibration of pain, feeling as though a hot metal spike has been rammed through my eardrums and turned. Once, twice, three times. It drives its sharp end deeper, it pierces my brain in a thousand places at once.

I swallow a cry.

Another blast.

BAM!

*What the hell is going on?* I want to shout, but of course I can't. Can't even look up, eyelids closed, lest my eyeballs decide to pop and render me blind. Agony threatens to break my skull and shatter my every bone. It seems intolerable, as if my teeth are being drilled without anesthesia, past their roots, all the way into jawbone. I retch into my hands, sort of half-hanging, half-standing, clutching to iron bars for dear life.

Distant shouting emanates from the corridor. Without looking up, I have a pretty good idea about what's going on. The tall guy, Jimmy, appears to be fleeing with a wail, his boots paddling the floor and squeaking. Hunter shouts something after him. Both sounds come at me as if from an end of a tunnel, perhaps a yard long or more, warbled. I cough.

*Hunter, you all right? What's happening?* I want to shout, but wince at opening my mouth. It hurts. Everything hurts. Sonic boom aftershock buzzes with its hundred flies around my head, nagging and constant. Metallic tasting bile fills my throat, and I force it down. After a couple breaths I manage to raise my head long enough to look in the direction of the door. There, framed by daylight and facing me, stands Hunter. His face is grey in dim light, stretched into a mask of surprise and horror. He yells something to me, something that has my name, waves his arms, but my ears refuse to do their duty at discerning speech patterns and my head falls back down. I hear him drop the gun and run toward me.

A series of squeaky steps, both his hands on my face later, can hear him clearly from this close.

"Ailen! Ailen, dude, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Shit, I didn't think it would have this effect on you, I was pointing at the guy, I—" He looks into my face, and I glance back at him through slits, letting my head lean into his hands for support,

my fingers still curled tight around the bar, afraid to tumble if I let go.

"Hey, I know what you need." Hunter smiles and points to Glen's body on the floor, whose belly rhythmically moves up and down. He's breathing, he's alive.

I manage to nod.

"Okay, hold on to me. I'll help you get over. Here, take my hand." Hunter unclenches my fingers one by one, takes my hands in his and leans me on his shoulder. I take one tentative step, then another, knees shaking, swaying, until he gently lowers me next to Glen's face. I suppress a gag at the stink of urine, plopping on the floor and not being able to move on my own out of weakness. Hunter sits next to me, embraces me. I lean my head on his shoulder, terrified that if I attempt to shift any more, I'll fall face first into Glen's breathing stomach.

"There. You need to feed." Hunter says.

This shocks me into opening my eyes wide.

"Are you out of your mind?" I say, but it comes out more like "ah.. ou... offa mannn..?"

"You'll need all the strength you can get to fight these guys, baby."

I hold my breath, instantly doused in a rush of emotional melting. My heart attempts to jump out, pounding fast. Faster. Hunter never called me *baby* before, it was always *brat* or

turkey, or dude thrown in together with my name. I want to freeze the time. No, I want to rewind it and hear him say it again. And again. And again.

"You can't even stand on your own. It won't do. I should've..." He sighs, unaware of my inner turmoil. "Come on, someone is getting ready to run back here right this minute. That Jimmy dude is probably bitching about us right now, so..." He points to Glen's face and pulls open his eyelids. "This is how it works, right? You've got to establish eye contact?"

I nod, speechless. A siren hunter helping a siren to feed?

"You realize what you're doing?" It come out more or less distinctly.

"Yes, yes, here you go." He lets go of my shoulder, raises his arm and slaps Glen several times on the face, to which the guy groans. His eyes turn from glazed into some semblance of comprehension, still not seeing me yet seeing something on the ceiling, studying it under furrowed eyebrows. He coughs. The sound of his soul does the rest.

I don't care how revolting it would taste. Hunger overwhelms me. I lean over his face, plop my arms on either side to support me, shaking. Hunter holds my waist. I root my stare directly into Glen's pulsing irises, then deeper, into his pupils. It seems to be enough. They stop flexing. He fixates his stare at me, until his irises stop pulsing as well, shimmering

with an eerie light of ignition. His mouth cracks open and a faint puff of smoke trails into the air. That's it, I ignited his soul. Now onto feeding.

"Come on, Ailen, we don't have much time!" Hunter rubs his fingers on my waist. Half-hanging in his embrace, I nod in agreement and produce a feeble first note. It sounds sad and weak. I cough, take a deep breath and sing another note, bolder, stronger.

This time it works. Glen's reddish eyelashes flutter like that of a shy boy, now bleached and thinned out with age. His pupils slowly widen, get fully dilated, his gaze turns drowsy, then blank. The sound of his soul overwhelms me with its ugliness. In fact, it's so repulsive, I don't know if I can eat it, a mix of rotten fish and constant chewing. Perhaps this is why he was able to shoot me, perhaps he's a special kind of a man, one of those women haters that have been hating us for so long, their souls rotted out without having to be burned, without having to fall in love with a siren. Perhaps not being able to fall in love at all.

It's the last thought that crosses my mind. I wince and make myself eat, digging with my song deep into his slime, knowing that I need this for survival, if only to hear Hunter call me *baby* again. Maybe it'll give me will to continue to live. Maybe, just maybe.

"I live in the meadow

"But you don't know it..."

I link my first few notes with the melody of his soul, no matter how ghastly it sounds. They become one in tone and merge, in a way two different chorus voices merge, ringing into harmony, becoming a slur of life itself. There it comes, more of its divine essence, another rivulet of steam through Glen's open lips. I gulp it. My arms stop shaking, my skin begins oozing its usual fog, nearing my temperature to that of the freezing room we're in.

I don't know how I know this, and I don't have time to think about this, I just do. It flows.

"Why do you frown?"

"My wish is your wake..."

There is a faint snap, an audible popping, and thick soul vapor shimmers between us in surrounding darkness, pumping from Glen's mouth to mine in a fast-flowing river. In that instant, his face softens with childish glow. His wrinkles smooth out, lips stretch into a smile, showing off yellowing teeth framed by a reddish beard. And his eyes... his eyes glow with wonder and admiration, the type you see on a toddler's face when petting a puppy for the first time or getting a huge cotton candy at a street fair.

"Calm down and let go..."

I sing and remember what Hunter said about siren's victims, back in the bathroom, two days ago, or two years. *They find you dead in the morning. They can't say what happened. It looks like your heart stopped. They search and can't find anything. No footprints, nothing. What's creepy is that you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest just before you died.*

It crosses my mind that sirens are most vulnerable while feeding, because of the necessary eye contact and time it takes to sing out a soul. I brush the thought aside, feeling Hunter's hands on my waist, knowing that I'm safe. My chest rumbles with hunger, wanting more. Glen's soul wavers, the rest of it hinges on his lips, its hazy presence tender like spring breath and no longer revolting. This is the very end of his life, all of it, all of his bells and whistles and drunken tunes.

Taken over by the moment, I can't help myself and break the song.

"I'm sorry, Glen." I say, looking into his eyes. He doesn't see me, dazed.

"I will kill you now. But before that, I will make you happy. I promise. Because one minute of happiness is better than nothing. I owe you that much." I inhale and force my voice into the last string of notes, making them to come out loud and clear despite soundproof walls that threaten to hush them into nothing.

"Give me your life

"End in my song

"Because you

"Listen and love

"Listen and love

"Listen and love."

The word *love* dies in the air, and my song ends. So does Glen's life, with a swift whoosh. I lick up the rest of it and burp. His life explodes in my chest, trickles its essence into my limbs, my head.

"You all right on your own now?" Hunter asks and unclenches his fingers.

Overwhelmed and gorging like I ate too much to the point of nausea, I nod, attempt to stand up and promptly go limp, falling with my face directly onto Glen's beer-belly. Too much good, too fast. Great, just what I was trying to avoid. The smell of his sweat mixed with the stench of years of fishing and spoiling his gut with beer drinking and who knows what else make me gag and roll over him.

"Ugh!" I exclaim, sit up and brush my face with my hands, sputtering, then yank on my jacket, attempting to get rid of the rotten stink. "God, I hope I can keep it down. It was so disgusting, you have no idea. It was like... remember when we were

at the Pike Place Market? When those guys throw the fish away, the spoiled stuff th--"

I begin brushing my jeans and stop, noticing ominous silence. There is also an occasional almost after-thought of some noise, familiar to the point of a headache. I turn my head to look at Hunter and see him staring with his mouth open towards the door, his right hand groping for mine, finding it, squeezing it.

I squeeze it back and follow his gaze.

What I see at the end of the corridor is something I thought I'd never get a chance to see again, and yet I knew it. On some level deep inside me, I always knew. I think Hunter did too. I sit and gawk, in a way one would gawk when one's privacy is violated in a place that locks -- the only place where men and women are equally vulnerable, the bathroom -- sitting on a toilet, doing one's sacred business, when someone unceremoniously barges in. No amount of blinking changes my vision.

It's not a vision. It's real. He's real.

"Papa..." I say and swallow. "But the sirens..." I lose the rest of what I wanted to say.

My father's figure is dark against hazy morning light, as if traced with a black marker on top of rectangular door opening, each corner rounded so it won't appear too sharp,

illuminated from the back and making its edges glow. He's dressed in the same orange overalls and jacket as the two other fishermen, but somehow his suit smells of newness, of resin and synthetic lining and protective waterproof coating, as if snagged from the factory's floor while still warm. I gag, doused in chemical odor. Even his rain boots emit a scent of rubber latex. That's not the worst of it. The worst is his soul, breaking through ocean drone in bursts of static, incomprehensible in its beauty. It simply can't belong to man like that. Distant trickle of a flute? Flap of butterfly wings? Really? Does this mean there is good in him, after all?

"Wow, you're alive. I thought you died." I finally manage, translating my relief into words, letting out a big exhale, close to a moan, gulping up air in an equally big inhale, tasting tartness in the air. His soul would taste burned and tart, if I were to eat it. I suppress the urge and stand, feeling blood rush into my head and Glen's warmth give me energy.

"I'm so sorry to disappoint you, sweetie. I admit, I was hoping for something... more than this. Oh well." He says in his usual calm manner and steps into the corridor.

His boots make a whiny sound, like he's rubbing a tightly inflated balloon. His face stretches into a knowing smile, just

as my heart both soars, *He's alive!*, and drops, *He's alive*, soars and drops, on repeat.

"We're fucked." Hunter whispers to my left, standing.

"I don't think so." I mouth to him and squeeze his hand a couple times, to assure him and to assure myself. Of what? I don't know exactly, hoping for the best, putting my faith into my father's good. There must be some left. There must. I believe it, I can feel it.

"Hello, Mister Bright. Nice boat you have here." Hunter says at full volume.

"That's my girl. Good work." My father ignores the greeting and points at Glen. "I was going to fire him anyway, though his kind is hard to find lately, I give you that. It makes me, in some way, very disappointed."

He takes another few steps in, holding his right arm behind his back. On one level, I know what he has there. A sonic weapon, for sure, his fingers probably curled tightly around it. He seems to have an endless supply of these. I wonder who makes them? Where does he get them made? He must be using his antique bathroom fixture suppliers in China, the ones that ship the stuff for his store.

On another level, I refuse to believe it. I want to think it might be something else, or nothing, or if he has a gun, he won't use it. Not this time. Did I fail to grow up? Would the

child in me never shut up? I shake my head, confused by two opposing forces.

*Focus on the facts, Ailen, focus. He talked about Glen, so ask him about Glen. Go on.*

"And what kind would that be?" I ask and flex, casually, in a manner that suggests my legs have become numb and I needed to stretch them, noticing with some element of glee that my father seems to be talking to me only and is completely ignoring Hunter, no usual son or any mention of him at all, not even a *hello*. This is wrong to think, very very wrong, but I can't help myself. The little girl in me, that needy creature, is aglow with pride.

"We will save this discussion for later, if you please." He says and takes a few more steps. We're about ten feet apart.

"No, we won't. I want to know now. Right now. And whatever happened to Ligeia and Teles? How the hell did you manage to get away? Whose trawler is this, anyway?" I say, and cringe. My questions come out like a demand of a toddler. All I'm missing is to stomp my feet and the impression would be complete. I need to be smarter than this. Sure enough, he ignores me, employing his usual treatment as an indication of I-won't-answer-your-stupid-demands. The need for his approval overpowers my logic and dampens siren hunger. And the music of his soul... burned and broken as it is, it gives me hope instead.

"Ailen--" He levels his eyes with mine, pronouncing my name as if he struggles with each letter.

There is something different in how he says it. Something.. human, in a way he hasn't been able to say my name before. As if there is a trace of affection in it. I trust my intuition, letting go of capricious little girl commanding my thoughts, trusting into the siren within me, knowing that no matter what he does to me, I'm stronger.

I'm trying to read his facial expression, barely making it out in the gloom that's illuminated only by my glow. Strangely, in this moment I feel calm, guessing what he'll do and willing to see how far he'll go, trusting love is left in his heart.

"--unless you want to bore your lover boy here, I suggest you save your breath. Just don't talk and listen. What I'm saying is, I'm glad to see you. Despite the fact that you abandoned me in your haste. It was very inconsiderate of you."

He takes another step. I don't move, don't flinch. This is not defiance, no, this is a dare to myself, to finally face what I have to face. Right here, right now, without my usual squirming. I look my father in the eyes, my heart is open.

His right hand trembles slightly behind his back, his smile even in this darkness is all-accommodating and fake-welcoming. Yet he's nervous, stinking of fear and sick wonder.

Instead of being scared, I'm happy that he made it, happy that my fears can be put to rest. I know he's horrible, and yet he's the only parent have. My only true family, by blood. There must be still a chance... There must be, and I'm willing to take it.

"We'll talk when we get home." On the word *home* I know I guessed right.

"Sure, Papa." I say and pause. "Take me home." I spread my arms wide.

"What the hell, Ailen, w--" Hunter begins on my left.

But it's too late. My father takes his hand from behind his back and aims at me the wide muzzle of a huge sonic gun.

BOOM!

A blast of condensed wind explodes around my head.

I black out.