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Siren Suicides
a novel by Ksenia Anske
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1.

Have you ever met a siren? Not the mythical kind you read about in books. Not the pretty long-haired hypothetical woman sitting on an unmapped island in the who-knows-which ocean, luring in fishermen with her song as a daily job. No. A real siren. The girl next door. The one whose eyes never sit still. The way she walks, the way she talks, every man wants to have a piece of her. Wants to hear her velvety song. The song to die for. Have you met one that can sing like that? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

Twenty seconds.

"Ailen, open the door!" Daddy's voice comes muffled through two feet of water. Luke warm. Fear jumps my throat, but I choose to ignore it.

It's this game we play with Hunter. Have you ever. He'd ask, have you ever met a siren? And I'd say, what's a siren? And he'd say, you know, the killer kind. The one that comes out of the water to hunt at night in the fog. The one whose voice makes you do things. The one that can sing your soul out. And then they find you dead in the morning. They can't say what happened. They say it looks like your heart stopped. They search and

search and search and can't find anything. No footprints, nothing. And you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you'd been your happiest just before you died.

"A minute of fantasy is better than nothing." I say and watch the bubbles speed to the surface, pop, pop, pop. Watch the ceiling, a strange shade of almost blue, through all this water.

Fifty seconds.

"I said, open the damn door!" Louder. I can hear him louder. Fears pumps through my heart, but I push it down.

The bathroom is the only room in our house that locks. The only door that can be clicked shut for longer than a minute, under a pretext of monthly "girl" problems. Stomach aches, cramps, mood swings, tampons. All things Daddy doesn't want to hear about because he doesn't want to play Mommy. If only I could see her one more time.

It's this game we play with Hunter. Have you ever. It's my turn to ask, so I say, have you ever wanted to kill yourself? He is startled. He says, what? I say, have you ever wanted to kill yourself? He stares. I say, ok, ok, *if* you ever wanted to kill yourself, how would you do it? He thinks, then says, I'd get my hands on the fastest motorcycle out there, get on a highway and ride as fast as I can, without stopping for cops. And then, I say. And then I'd crash, he grins. Do you even know how to ride one, I ask. I snuck out my dad's a couple times.

The door groans under Daddy's fists. He shouts "open the door" on repeat, slamming it, slamming it.

Two minutes.

I stretch out my arms and there is no bathtub anymore. Maybe it expanded. Maybe I shrunk. I watch my sleeves float. The rainbow of rolling unconsciousness pulses into circles. Waves. Waves in a lake. I'm in a lake. I float up and I look and there she is. The siren. The real one. She stands on the beach and sings. And I want to drown in her song, forever. She looks at me and she is beautiful. Her hair hangs in thick clumps, its ends kiss the ground. Her song breaks. I interrupted her. I freeze, terrified.

"Ailen Bright. Ailen who decided she could outsmart everyone." She says.

I nod.

"Go away, silly girl." She says. "It's not your turn."

"But—" I begin.

"If you play the game, you've got to play by the rules. I make up the rules, you take turns. And I say, it's not your turn yet. Go away. What part of 'go away' do you not understand?"

I shake my head. I'm confused. "I don't know."

"Don't interrupt me. That's one of the rules. Never do it again."

I nod.

"Go on then. Move along now. Go play." She smiles.

I nod again.

She walks into the water. She looks at me, just before her head vanishes into the lake, like she says 'be a smart girl', and I nod again. She dives.

Three minutes.

I gasp for air.

I lost my nerve. Again.

The water rolls off me. I sit, frozen to the bones, as if covered with first snow. I don't notice the cold, I keep hearing that song on my head, over and over and over. I focus on the bathroom tiles, their blue eaten away into memory. The cracks between them black with age spread into a black net of a pattern. If you watch it long enough, it fades out into layers. A layer of tiles, a layer of air. A loud crack, a thump. A layer of dust. A layer of wood chips. A layer of screams.

Daddy steps on the broken door.

"Daddy?"

A layer of dust on his polished shoes. A string of swear words and accusations and warnings that one day, you just wait, one day you will turn out just like your mother. Nothing will ever become of you. Would you look what you did. You broke my toe. Do you even know how much a door costs. How much a lock costs to replace. You've broken the lock.

The only room that locks.

"Daddy?"

He doesn't hear me. He yells.

I listen and I don't hear.

I wrap shame around my head, to dampen out the sound. Focus on the tiles. The tiny specks of dark blue dots on the lighter blue ceramic, uneven, not perfect, fluid. Like the water. I hold my knees and I rock, back and forth, back and forth. And he slaps my face, hard. Then again. And again.

It's this game we play with Hunter. Have you ever. He asks me a question, but I don't hear it. I look at his face. I like it. I like his grin, it sort of splits his face in two, with that dimple on his right cheek. His hair looks funny when he brushes it back. He says a cow licked him when he was a baby. I say, yeah, right. He laughs. He shows me how to throw stones into the lake, so they skittle along like frogs.

Slap. Slap. Breathe. Slap again.

I'm numb from fear, but I don't move.

It's the only power I have. Coldness. As if I don't care, as if it doesn't hurt. I even try to smile a little. This drives Daddy nuts, and he slaps me again. I pretend my cheeks don't burn. I pretend they flush from his kisses, because today is special.

I whisper. "I'm sixteen today, Daddy."

"What did you say?"

He doesn't hear me. He never hears me. He never comes to listen to me sing in choir. Not once.

He shouts. He catches his breath.

Two seconds.

And I want to burst from hurt.

Daddy's voice shakes me to the bone. I can't lose my nerve, not now. But the familiar obedience wraps its sweet hands around my throat in a lock. I choke on an answer.

"Daddy, I'm—"

"That's right. Say it. You know what you are. You're crazy like your mother." Daddy's whisper pins me to the wall. He holds me by the neck and I slid down the tile wall into a heap of failure.

"Do you know what women were made for?"

Daddy's face fills the crack between the sanity and the freedom, waiting. His eyes bulge, veins push against the skin of his neck. I open and close my mouth, twice, like a beached fish.

"Answer the damn question." He leans in and I slide down more. Daddy grabs me by the sweatshirt and yanks me back to my feet. Play limp, just play limp, I think.

"You forgot, didn't you. Let me remind you."

His lips move in on front of my face, his neck and face purple.

"Women were made to haul water."

I stare. I heard it a thousand times.

"Don't you look at me with those innocent eyes of yours. Just like your mother. A whore in the making. It's in your voice. I can hear it when you talk. I'll root it out of you, you'll see."

Slap. Blood sprayed his freshly ironed shirt.

"Will you look at this. Will you look what you make me do!"

He drops me on the floor with disgust.

"We'll talk after school. I want you home by three. Not a minute later." He checks his tie in the mirror.

And I don't want to come home, never ever again. I'd never ever have spoken back to Daddy. Not once.

"I'm not coming back." I say.

"What?"

Two seconds.

I use his shock, I leave a wet trail across the house as I dart for the front door. I open it and he is on my heels. I stumble down the steps, backwards, barefoot, blind. Into the rain, soaking wet.

"What was that you said?" He asks. His eyes pin me down and I don't know if I can make another step. Rain drops trace my cheeks like tears, drop to my feet. Drop, drop, drop.

I whisper. "Today I'm sixteen, Daddy. Today is my birthday. And I'm not coming back."

He can't hear me. "Speak up, whore!"

I see his eyes go dark and I sprint. I hear him yell for me to come back, but I don't. I hear him wrestle with his rain jacket and boots. I hear him run for his car, open the door and start the engine. I don't look back and I run. Streets spill hooded people in my face, but I keep running. Dogs bark at my bare feet in the puddles, but I keep running. A car honks and I turn onto the bridge. It spawns over the lake in one concrete stroke, solid and high. Its metal railings bristle at me. Its cold metal sidewalk burns my feet. I came here like I always do. To gaze down. To wonder why she did it.

"Mommy." I say to the rain, and I stop, bend, and I gasp for air. My belly hurts from running. My feet hurt. I slow down to a walk. I can't hear Daddy's car. I'll stop just for a second, just for one second.

"Ailen, hey!"

I look up and there are those familiar blue eyes, and for the first time I wish I didn't see him. Not him, not now.

"Hunter?"

My heart somersaults. I stare. He stares back. His rain jacket drips with water, his hoodie frames his face kind of like

a monk, blue. My favorite color. I want to dive into his eyes and get lost, skin and flesh and bones, so I'm never found.

Daddy will come any minute and I have to run and hide, but I don't move.

"Hunter!" I say. And I'm so happy to see him.

"Where are you going? You're soaking wet!"

"Oh." I say. And I'm so happy to talk to him.

"Are you ok? Let me give you my jacket." Our fingers cross over his zipper.

"No, it's ok, I'm fine." And I'm so happy to touch him.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Can I ask you a question?"

"Yeah?"

I work up my courage.

"Have you ever—" I can't finish the sentence. I hear the screech of the tires, the splash of the water. It brakes through the traffic hum and comes right at me. Daddy. I know the sound of that car, I can tell it apart from any other, with my eyes closed. Fear opens my eyes wide, and I dive into Hunter's arms. His face breathes into mine, our noses touch.

"—kissed a girl?" He finishes for me. Sly grin again on his face.

And I don't know what to say. I shuffle my feet.

He rescues me from blushing. "Hey, guess what? I have a present for you! I was on my way to catch you before school, but then there you were, running through the rain."

And I want to say, I'm so happy to have you.

"Can I give it to you now?" He sticks his hand in his pocket.

"You already have."

Daddy's car levels with us. I can see it out of the corner of my eye. I hear him roll down the window.

"Get your hands off my daughter!" Daddy yells.

Hunter opens his mouth to say something else, but I take off.

"Ailen, wait!" I hear Hunter yell.

"Ailen! You make it to the other end of the bridge and you stop, you hear me? You stop and you get in the car!" Daddy slams his fist on his steering wheel.

I don't look. I concentrate on my legs. Left, right. Left, right. Don't slow down, keep going. You'll make it. Keep going. Another few feet. No matter what, just keep going.

"You can't run away from me, you little whore! I'm your father and you do as I say!" I dared to look ahead. The end of the bridge. So close. I run. Daddy speeds up. He veers his car to the right and smashes through the pedestrian fence to block

me. That beautiful white Audi, cracked. Its front bumper, bent. Its driver's door, open.

"Look what you did to my car!"

Daddy walks toward me. The bridge is alive with honks. A police car screams in the distance.

"Ailen!"

Hunter runs after me. The police car blocks the bridge on the other side. An officer steps out. I turn on my heels. Daddy. I turn back. Hunter. Officer. If I ran this way, the officer would get me. And what would he do? He'd hand me over to Daddy, back to my life. I hate my life.

There was only one way out. Down.

I grab the rail, I pull myself up. I step on the concrete fence and I look down. The water is blue. Blue is my favorite color. I wanted something blue for my birthday. Something small. Instead I got something big. There is so much of it, and it's so beautiful, so calm. It would never fade. It would always be there for me. It didn't look scary at all.

I hear someone gasp.

I hear Daddy shout something.

I hear the officer shout back.

I hear Hunter call my name. Once. Twice.

And I hear my heart. It's calm like the lake. And I'm calm. I'm even happy. This is the best birthday ever, with the biggest

present ever. And the best part? I don't have to share it with anyone. It's all mine.

Daddy reaches for me. I turn and step back, on the edge.

"Ailen, get down here! Now!" I search his face. Anger, fear, frustration. I balance, waiting. But there is nothing else. And I'm done waiting, I'm done hoping.

I say. "Today I'm sixteen, Daddy. Remember? Today is my birthday. And today I'm going to die."

And I jump.

2.

Have you ever jumped from a bridge? Not the fake let-me-get-scared-out-of-my-wits bungee jumping with your feet tied to a gigantic cord that holds you to the bridge railing so that when you jump, just when you're about to hit the water, it stretches and jerks you back, and they pull you up on the high ground, safe and sound. That's like being born and having never cut your umbilical cord. What I'm asking is, have you ever jumped for real? From a bridge that is very very high? So high that your breath gets stuck in your throat if you look down? Have you ever? No? So I thought. Of course you didn't. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

One second.

I'm falling, but it's not simple falling, I'm falling to death. I try to grasp something, something to stop me, but there is nothing, only air. I flail my arms around, my fingers open, close, open, close. I panic. Air whooshes past me, tears trail from my eyes up, up to my scalp, where my hair flaps in the wind. My heart fills my head and pounds there instead. Everything in my body feels misplaced. My muscles tighten and

relax, and I let go. I pee myself. I'm horrified. And then I think, it doesn't matter. I'll be wet all over any moment.

Water comes onto me. They say before you die, time slows down and your life flashes in front of you, like in the movies. Not for me. All I have time to think about is how your life always starts with a scream, but not always ends with a scream. I want to scream and I can't. I try and try and try and I can't. Instead I think of a song I wrote once:

Room pulses.

Walls press.

Air gropes.

I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe...

Sky yells.

Trees sing.

Sun spins.

I'm a breeze, I'm a breeze, I'm a breeze...

I showed it to Daddy but he said it was stupid and that I needed to stop writing stupid songs and do my homework, because if I didn't do my homework and if I didn't get good grades, I'd end up just like Mommy. Who in their right mind can make a living out of singing? Nobody can. Singing is for whores. He tore the paper and threw it into trash.

I never tried writing another song ever since.

Two seconds.

I hit the water. Hard. It hurts.

And I finally scream. But only for a moment. Then water gurgles in my ears. I speed down. It's not blue anymore. It gets dark pretty fast, then murky, then black. I can't see my hands in front of me. And it's cold. Very, very cold.

I propel down. Down, down. My skin freezes. No, it's on fire. I feel movement and look up.

"Ailen Bright. A stubborn little girl. What did I say about your turn?"

I see a face swim above me. Then it's dark again. And it's dark in my heart. I don't want to die. I take it back. I made a mistake. I want out, out!

I think I hear humming. Cold water brush. No air to breathe. Lead fills my stomach. Thump. Thump-thump. My heart explodes. She's here. She's angry. The siren, she's real. Soft touch on my neck. I jerk away. But I can't move fast. All those feelings, they tug me down like stones. Soft touch on the back of my head. I'm filled with dread, my bones turn to jello.

I'm going to die. I'm going to die. I don't want to die! I'm scared! Daddy, get me out of here! I changed my mind, please, now! Please, Daddy, I beg you!

Someone at my feet and I rush down. Something around my ankles and I go deeper.

Four seconds.

"Ailen Bright. A girl who can't remember. What did I say about not interrupting me?"

Whack! A body slams into me and leaves my lungs empty. I watch the bubbles rise to the surface. One, two, ten. Arms tighten around my neck. I shut my eyes. My chest burns, I want to inhale. I'm scared, I'm scared!

"If you play the game, you've got to play by the rules. I make up the rules, you take turns. And I say, let's play something new."

I open my eyes.

They shoot out of the dark, one, two, more. Sirens. They sing. They toss me from one to another, their hair floats, their eyes glisten. Their arms leech out in the wriggle of lust. Pinching, stroking, squeezing. They pull me down. We touch the bottom. The sand is the board and I'm the dice and they're the players.

Thirteen seconds.

"My turn." It sounds so close to my ears, eerily slow.

A pair of two strong hands grabs my waist and yanks me off. Another pair now. I'm a rag doll. They toss me, I let them. They swim with me, I go along. We're daisy petals, shaken in the

night, taken by the wind, floating, turning. He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not.

Water jingles with siren calls.

"Let go! It's her turn now." Voices boom through the water.

"Who says?"

"I said!"

"I call the rules."

She holds me. She presses me to her side. Her profile cut out of marble, perfect. Her eyes silver. A beam of shine against dark water. White hair behind her like a torn sail. Water pulses with circles. I'm losing it. I need to breathe. I thought I could last minutes.

Thirty seconds.

"And I say it's not your turn yet."

She lowers her face over mine. All goes still. The cheering stops. She cradles me, she opens her mouth. She sings. A high note, it trails through the lake, it matches my heart rhythm, it beats to staccato. A hum and a thrill amplified by all this water. I look up. We float to the surface. I'm in a castle. No, in a cathedral, where the walls are pure glass and the ceiling pure blue, the blue that I love most. A thousand violins fill the space with a sound. A sound that calms a sore throat or a high fever. Cold and soothing like mint. I want this to never end. I feel at piece. I'm not scared anymore. I'm going to be

ok. The water is clear, it looks like air. We surface. I inhale.
I black out.

Three minutes.

I'm dead. No, I'm not. I cough and shiver. I'm wet and cold
and I'm drenched by rain. I smell wet wood and rotten fish. I
move. No, the floor moves. We are in a boat. I raise my head.
The rain splatters my face. The siren looks at me, a few feet
away, her eyes huge, her body small. The blanket of her hair
glistens in the morning mist. She hums.

"Why didn't you kill me?" I say.

"Ailen Bright. The girl who can't make up her mind." She
says. Her voice rings clear, like a thousand brass bells on the
wind. I want to hear it again. She hums again. The boat floats.

"Why didn't you?"

"You stubborn little girl." She hums again.

I want to hear more.

"Please, tell me."

I notice she doesn't row. But the boat moves. It glides in
the wake of tiny waves. And she hums.

"I'll tell you when you'll listen." She says. No, she
doesn't say it. She sort of sings each syllable. And I want to
obey, only to hear her voice again. I wince and pulled myself
up, but fall back and rock the boat left to right.

"Sorry." I say.

"Here. Grab my hand." Her voice echoes off my every cell. Her hand stretched out in front of my face. I hesitate. Fear tugs me back, curiosity pulls me forward. They collapse in one tangled mess, and I don't know what to do. She urges me on, and I grab her hand.

"Now we have a deal." She smiles. It's a not a happy smile, it's a final smile, the one filled with knowledge that I don't have, and I choke on a premonition. She licks her lips. She cups my face. Her fingers frozen. Her breath rotten.

"Don't we, Ailen?" Her voice a thousand bells, big heavy secular ones, the kind that can kill you if you get in their way. They ring and they swing, their thick bronze walls ashudder with sound, their clapper as big as my head. Someone pulls on the rope, on a thousand ropes, and I wonder who it might be.

"Say it. Say that we do." She flashes two rows of perfect white teeth, she grabs my soaked sweatshirt and pulls me closer. Her hand still holds my hand. She won't let go.

Our noses touch. Her breath washes over me. I dive into her stink. I dip my head into an old pond where all fish go to die, and when they die, they rot and float bellies up and the birds feed on their bloated stomachs.

"Say it!" She commands.

"We have a deal." I say.

"Good girl." She let's go of me. And I breathe. The air. Fresh. The stink is gone. She is so beautiful, maybe I simply lost my head for a while.

"What do we do now?"

"What do you want to do, Ailen?"

And I'm stumped. I never know how to answer this question. I do what others want. They always want something of me. I know what I want. There is only one thing I want in the world. Isn't it time I tried. I look her in the eyes, and this is the moment. I cross the line. Not in the bathtub, not on the bridge, it's in her eyes. Now.

"I want to sing like you."

"Is that what you want, Ailen? To become one of us?" She tilts her head to the side, she never blinks. I hold her gaze.

"Yes." I say.

"So be it. Everything comes with a price. A soul for a soul. Are you willing to pay?"

"Yes." I say it without thinking. I don't care what it is. One minute of fantasy is better than nothing. I want it. I wanted it all these years. I want him to hear me. Daddy. "Take my soul."

We shake hands.

"Who is it for?" She asks.

"For Daddy." I say.

I hear a loud hiss. In one flow, she stands up, lifts me in the air and shakes me so hard I think I'll throw up. My head bobs back and forth and I think that she'll shake me to death. She slams me onto the wooden boat floor and leans over.

"Ailen Bright. Silly girl. Once upon a time, I was stupid just like you." She pins me to the deck with her hand. "I used to believe, just like you." I think I glimpse a flash of fear in her eyes, then it's gone.

"He'll hunt us down, won't he?"

"You silly little girl!" She shouts.

"He will, won't he?"

"They always do, you silly girl! They always do."

She shakes me.

"He's the only one I've got!" I cry.

"So innocent, you make me gag!"

She shakes me.

"What would you have done? The women in my life abandoned me!"

"What I did is none of your business."

"It's you who did it! You took my Mommy!"

She twists me around, cups hands over my mouth and hums. I try to talk through her fingers, but she won't let me. I want to scream. I want to cry. I want it all to be different.

The boat speeds up. It glides across the lake, to the far side of it, into the drizzle of rain.

Twenty minutes.

I want to die.

Thirty minutes.

I want to die.

The boat drags its bottom onto the shore and halts. Rain slaps me across the face. The city is gone into the dimness of the storm. We're on the other side of the lake, the wild side, where only the woods stand, wet and lonely, with a few houses dotted in between. I squirm but the siren holds me tight. She lifts me up like I don't weigh an ounce and steps onto the shore. All feeling drains from me, all warmth gone. I shake, cold, wet, terrified.

"Stay quiet now." She pulls me by the arm. Pine needles crunch under our feet. I follow. Into an invisible trail, into the woods. To an abandoned glass house. No, an abandoned pool. Its glass walls streaked green with decay, its windows mostly gone, its gate wide open, with vines like twisted fingers on its rusted metal teeth. Rain pelts my head, water seeps under my sweatshirt.

The front door gapes into the darkness beyond. I can see all the way through, with grey light that streams through the

broken glass walls. We step in. It smells of kelp gone bad, of crabs dead in their shells. I stumble, she shoves me in.

An hour. It's been an hour.

Grey light seeps in shafts down to the green water. It falls on the stale water of the pool, it writhes with bodies. I blink to make sure I'm seeing this right. It's like a gigantic aquariums with water unchanged for years. With dead fish bellies up, only they look human. Girls. They just float, grotesquely frozen in motion, their arms and legs stretched out or curled, eyes directed at me, greedy. I'm fresh meat, and they're starving. I want to back up, but the siren hold me tight.

"A deal is a deal." She says. The sirens crawl out, one by one, their hands like claws, their breathing laborious, their eyes bulging from hunger and dirty water. Devoid of color of life. Like someone dumped an entire supermarket's supply of bleach into the pool and forgot to stir. Everything about them was white, not the brilliant white of a new t-shirt, but a white of an old stinky wash rug in the school cafeteria.

I'm in a slaughter house.

I shudder.

"Careful, now. We've got a new player here. Say your name." The siren motions at me. I'm a leaf on the wind, shaking terribly, about to fall.

"Say your name." The siren hisses.

"Ailen Bright." I manage. She releases her grip. I slide down on the floor. I'm on gigantic bathroom's floor with the pool for a bathtub and huge broken ceramic tiles for the patterns and moss for the towels and dead hungry sirens for the bath toys.

They huddle together to take a better look at me. I think they will sniff. They don't. They hiss. One siren pushes the others aside. She's just a little girl. Her hair is parted into mangled pigtails. She waves at me.

"Hello, Ailen Bright. My name is Yoki, and I'm eleven years old." She stretches out her hand.

I don't take it. I think, I could have a little sister like her. If only Daddy didn't hit Mommy. If only Mommy didn't lose that baby. If only she didn't walk off the bridge. Maybe this is the place where I belong. On the outskirts of the sanity, not really dead but alive, not really alive but dead.

I take her hand.

"Hi. Nice to meet you."

"Is it true?" She asks. "Your Daddy is a siren hunter and he'll come and kill us all?" And all sirens hiss at that. And the siren that holds me hisses the most. They all want him dead, I know it. I knew it for years.

And I get mad.

I get really really mad.

"I didn't choose my dad! I couldn't! It's not my fault he is who he is!" I want to cry.

"Will he?" The girl repeats. They all wait for my answer.

"We'll see about that." I wipe my nose. "We'll see who gets who. We'll roll the dice and see who wins." I say and I laugh. And they all pick up into a mad echo that bounces off the broken glass walls and spills into the woods, over the clouds, into the high morning sky.

"You'll make a fine killer." The siren says. Her hair grey. Her body white marble, perfect. She steps into the pool, she pulls me with her. And I'm ready for this. This is what I wanted, right? I tell myself, yes, I'm ready for this. I'm not scared. Not at all.

3.

Have you ever soaked in ice? I don't mean swimming in really cold water and then running out with glee and shouts how cold you are before grabbing a towel and drying yourself like mad, your lips blue, your teeth chattering. That's exaggerating it a little for the amusement of your friends. No, I mean more like diving into freezing water in the dead of the winter, though a hole in the ice, and floating there for an hour. Till your lips turn not blue but black. Till your teeth don't chatter because your muscles don't work anymore. Till you stop feeling your limbs. Have you ever floated in the water this cold? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

Three seconds.

I step into the water and gasp. My breath catches. My legs cramp. I sneeze. Echoes bounce off the glass walls. The siren pulls me deeper. Until my neck is submerged. Until my chin touches the surface. Until I can't feel my legs, my arms, my belly. Only her eyes on me. She stops, I stop. Two feet of ice-cold water between us. A dozen sirens around us, relaxed, floating, holding me upright. Their fingers around my ankles, my

calves, my waist. Because I'm about to faint and go under the water.

I want to back out. They stare, they eat me with their eyes, I feel their hunger. For the living, for the warmth, for my soul. I realize, they're dead, empty. Terror floods me. Panic worms into my gut and blossoms to a sudden scream.

"I don't want to die! Let me go!"

I thrash, but they hold me still, like a gigantic octopus.

"If you play the game, you've got to play by the rules. I make up the rules, you take turns." says the siren. "We made a deal."

She spreads her arms high over her head, opens into a tuba of a throat. She hollers a chant. Guttural, painful, piercing. She empties me with her gaze, my mouth opens, my knees buckle. Heavy fog forms around us in clumps, as if we're at the end of the world, surrounded by the frozen lands encased in ice, where every breath takes our warmth, my warmth, waiting for me to give it up. How many breaths does it take, I think. How many.

The song rises an octave, soars to the ceiling, past the ceiling, into the sky. Sound surrounds me like a comfortable enclosure. I'm back in the womb, listening to Mommy's heart. Pump-pump. Pause. Pump-pump. Pause.

I lose all thought. I'm not me anymore. I'm not here. The pain is gone, so is the freezing water. I have no memories, no

past, no future. Only the song, only her voice that fills me to the brim, to the bursting point, and I want to sing back. It's not comfortable anymore, it's threatening, it's loud, louder. I can't stand the strain, the vibration is about to pop my heart. I want out, I want to be born.

"Aaaaaah!"

The desire pours out into a yelp. It snakes from my mouth, slings across our faces like a bridge, into her lips, deep into her gut. She gulps. I yelp again. She gulps more. She sings. I float. Above my life, above my worries. I'm nothing and I'm complete.

The siren drinks from me, glowering. I want to become one with her, forever. I want to give her everything there is to give. I want to give her my life. The bridge between us shimmers with all of my sixteen years. One shiny string of fog. my very essence. The last of it escapes me with a loud snap and she gobbles it up. Her tongue over her lips. Her lips smack.

The song ends.

Two minutes.

"Pity I can't have you for dinner every night. Ailen Bright. A soulcake with whipped innocence on top, sprinkled with bits of hope. Made from scratch."

She burps.

Silence falls on my ears. I can't breathe, can't move, feel like I'm dying. I'm scared. I spin in and out of reality. I dip into it, and then back. I don't want to die, I think. I don't want to die. I dip in, I dip out. I'm dying, I think. Am I dying? I'm dying! I'm already dead. I want to talk to the water under my chin. I don't feel the water nor my bones nor my skin. The silence is absolute.

I can't breathe.

Other sirens let me go, immobile spectators. Yoki's mouth opens to an 'O' of wonder.

"Cool." She says.

"Shhh." Says the siren. "Remember the rules. Don't interrupt me. Now, to the best part." She turns to me. "You'll have to inhale part of me, to start your move. To roll the dice. Guess who the dice is."

I can't breathe.

I don't want to play this game anymore. I want to go home. I'm scared. I'm so scared. But I can't say it, my mouth won't listen to me, it won't open. I can't breathe.

"Inhale." The siren commands.

And I obey.

The air splits my guts, it hurts so bad.

I scream like a newborn.

I scream, and I scream, and I scream. My eyes blind, my throat on fire, my body a tense string of anxiety and fear and shame and regret. I inhale the icy mist that comes out of the siren's mouth, it burns me, it spreads through my chest.

It feels good. I want more.

"I'm hungry." I say and wince at my voice.

"Happy Birthday, Ailen." The siren says. Impossibly loud. "You're welcome to play. It's your turn."

I hear every syllable. I hear the movement of her lips. I hear the pressing and rolling of her tongue. I hear every gush of air that wisps between the words as she speaks.

The world comes alive with sound. It explodes in my brain, behind my ears. I hear everything - the movement of the water, the gusts of air, the siren's eyes rotating in their sockets, their lips opening in a whisper. It hurts. I clasp my ears.

"Give her space. Shoo." The siren says.

They float away. I look at my hands. White. I wiggle my fingers. They work. Wait. White skin. I try to make out my reflection in the glass wall. My hair lost color, I'm my faded self, just a notch, a few grades of saturation lost. I feel the water, luke warm. I dip my head, inhale.

I reach behind my ears and feel how water sprouts out of my gills.

"Weird," I say. Clasp my mouth. I can talk under water. Other sirens giggle and burst into being noisy. This is when I wish to be deaf. I surface. Sun breaks out from the clouds. The bright light hurts my eyes. I wish to be blind. I want to scream. My throat hurts. I wish to be mute. Everything hurts. The world blares at me with discord, without inhibition.

Play multiple songs, listen to thousands of people talking at once, hear car honks, animals cries, overlap it with your heart pumps, detect a rhythm. Notice the pattern. Do you hear it? I hear it. I hear two, three. A happy one, a disjointed one, an ugly one.

"That's what life sounds like." I say. "From the other side."

I reach outside the abandoned pool. I can hear life a mile out. Two miles. Ten miles. Two hikers. So warm, so full of useless hope.

Mouthwatering.

"I'm hungry." I say. "I want to eat."

I want to flex, to stretch. I jump out of the water. My head hits the glass above, hard.

"Wow!"

Sirens clap, cheer me on. "It didn't hurt a bit!" I yell to nobody in particular. I want to hear my voice. Listening doesn't hurt anymore. "This is fun!" I wish Hunter could see me right

now. His face would light up but he wouldn't be jealous, not one bit. He'd be happy for me and he'd throw two thumbs up and ask me how the hell I did this, and I'd tell him..

Screeeeech!

It's possible for someone to shout into your ear so it hurts. But is it possible for someone to shout *inside* your entire body so not only ears but every muscle and every bone hurts? No, *hurts* is not the right word. Sings. A feeling. *Hunter wouldn't want me anymore, not as a dead girl, not as a siren.* The thought threatens to shatter me to pieces. It hurts beyond hurt. I spasm to the bottom of the pool.

I moan. "Please? It hurts."

Yoki floats up, curious. "What did you feel? Tell me, tell me!"

"I feel like throwing up. Like I wish I could turn back the time."

"That's called regret." Yoki says with a smart face. "We sirens feel everything ten times more. How to explain it." She screws her face in concentration. "Like if you listen to music and turn up the volume all the way. And your Mommy shouts turn it down, right now, Yoki Imamura, or else."

"I wish my Mommy did." I say.

Sadness booms through me, like a speaker at a night club, as if a drunk stage assistant snuck into the sound control room

and turned the volume knob to a maximum. I spasm again. The pain recedes after a while.

"Is this how newborns feel?" I wonder out loud.

"When a baby is born, her lungs expand for the first time, she hears for the first time, she sees for the first time. That's why babies cry so much." Yoki says. "It will get better, you'll see." She pats me on the back. A little sister I never had. It's all Daddy's fault.

Hate rises in me. I want to shout and bash at the pool's walls, uproot the trees, gnaw at the ground and kill. I groan in pain.

"How do you like it?" The siren asks.

The pain subsides enough so I can focus on her words.

"Splendid." I smile.

She smiles back. "Excellent."

"Am I a siren?" I blurt, hopeful.

"You're dead meat, Ailen, but I brought you back to life as a siren, yes. It's a game we play, a soul for a soul. Make your move."

"What's my move?" It feels good to use my vocal cords. They wing, ready to fly.

"Ailen Bright. The girl who doesn't listen. The dice has rolled, and it's your turn to move."

"What do I do?"

The siren takes my face in her hands.

"You kill your father." Her lips curl in a sneer, the sirens hiss around us.

"Kill him."

"Kill him."

The calls become a chant. "Kill the siren hunter. Suck on his soul. Feed his flesh to fish." They join hands and swirl around me.

"Kill the siren hunter. Suck on his soul. Feed his flesh to fish."

My hate collides with my childish love. I tether on the edge of indecision. I love him. I hate him. I don't want him to die. I want to torture him to death.

"Why him?"

"Because if you don't, he'll hunt us down, and he'll kill us all." They all nod. Like glowing sticks, stuck in one big glassy trash can, discarded. You know how to make one glow? You break it. Smack in the middle, with an audible crack. Sirens. All broken inside, no matter how beautiful on the surface.

"Why would he?"

"Ailen Bright. Not bright at all. Because we're sirens and he's a siren hunter. We exist to kill each other. It's a game we play. It's your turn."

I look at their faces. All forever young. And I can't help but wonder. "Can I ask a question? Before I go?"

"One." Says the siren.

I look at them. They stir. Eyes blink. They wait.

"How did you all end up here?"

Pause.

"My Mommy drove us from the bridge!" Yoki exclaims and starts a flood.

"I hung myself."

"—took sleeping pills and waded into the lake—"

"I was driving on the shore one night—"

"—put the gun in my mouth on the beach when—"

"I jumped from the bridge, just like you did."

"Shut up!" I scream.

I don't want to hear anymore. I want to run. I want to see Hunter. But I'll never see Hunter again. I'm dead. I have to kill Daddy. I want to kill him, I tell myself. I want to kill him with my song. I pour my frustration into my task. I want to make him hear me, at least once in his life. And then I'll throw it in his face, that it's too late. Too late to hear me. Tell him how much I hate him, how much I always wanted to see him die. I always wanted to, didn't I? I imagine his face. I can do it. I know I can.

"I'll do it, ok? I'll make my turn!" I yell. "Because a minute of fantasy is better than nothing." I add and I make my move.

4.

Have you ever starved yourself? Not like you forgot to eat breakfast, didn't have money for lunch and came home to an empty fridge and complained loudly that there is nothing to eat in the house. But really you were just lazy to cook that old frozen steak. Not like that. Have you ever not eaten anything at all, not even drank a drop of water, for a whole week? Have you ever starved yourself like that? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

I'm starving. It's all Daddy's fault. I'm hungry for him. I'm dying from hunger. If I don't eat right now, I'll die for sure. Only sirens can't die.

"Eat this." I say and wade out of the pool, through the tangle of bodies, over the cracked tiles, past broken windows, out the rusted gate.

Two hours.

It's been two hours since I jumped from the bridge. By now Daddy started his boat and is searching for me, for sure, he is searching for me, for my body. Of course he is. I'm sure he is. I'm sure of it.

I lick my lips. I know what women are made for, Daddy. I know, and I'll show you. Just you wait, I'm coming to show you. I inhale. I hear souls, miles away, like pictures with sounds strung into a blur of life. I ignore them, there is only one I want. Head down. Toes at the lake. Dipped. Waves lap at them like an obedient pet, licking, hoping for attention.

I breathe in the view. The clouds. The lake. It breathes back, its sobs mount and fall, ripple across, heave again, fall into waves. I look up. A cascade of droplets. Rain splatters my face. I'm ready.

I dive.

Water.

Lake water. It feels so much better than the water in the pool. Fresh, crisp, full of life. It's all around me. Fish flock a mile ahead, their souls like bicycle bells. Jing-jing. I pass kelp stems, they wave to me in a quiet "shhhhh" saying goodbye. The water itself is like a thick cloud of silence after a day at the fish market, with people shouts and merchant talk and kids screams.

I know where Daddy moors his boat. Not too far from the house, not too far from the bridge. That's where I'll find him. I know the way.

I drift.

And then I hear it. A soul. Familiar somehow. It sounds so warm. Warm like home, like warm hands, warm like someone who knows what being warm means. Hunger punches me in the stomach. And here I am, about to destroy this warmth, an ugly duckling from the other side. I used to be scared to swim alone, scared of some monster who'd pull at my feet or bite off my leg or jump out of the water and plunge me inside. I'm not scared anymore, because I'm the monster now. About to jump out and kill and feed and rejoice at the victory of my first hunt.

Forget about Daddy, I want to feed.

Ten minutes.

It's been ten minutes since I was born and I'm starving.

I drift on my back in silent water, submerged, a few feet from the surface. I shutter from hunger. It rings in my ears, slides down my throat, twists my intestines like wet rags with the hands of a washing woman. Its fingers pull at my gut until my knees hit my forehead. I have to feed. The soul inches closer. At the speed of a kayak. It's too much to bear.

I retch.

I can't do this.

I hug the pain and I float. I'm driftwood. I'm driftwood.

It's above me. He's above me. It's a he. Even better. His melody bursts into my head and wipes all thought except one. I'm a siren. I pull those in misery out. They're dead anyway, moving

through life numb and deaf. I make them hear and not just listen. I shake them alive, for one minute. Because a minute of fantasy is better than nothing.

And I strike.

I close my eyes. I don't want to see his face. It'll be easier. Because I'm scared. I tense and speed towards the surface.

It all happens on instinct. The leap in the air, the horrible shriek, mid-jump, to scare and arrest the target, the soft landing on kayak within a breath of his face. I can't see him but I can feel what he feels. Surprise. A hinge of pain. A surge of joy? It doesn't make any sense. His raincoat hoodie vibrates. From fear? He slides to his knees, grabs my shoulders. I wonder. Is this how it's supposed to be, some killer admiration before the victim's death? His mouth drops open. My eyes still closed, I lean in and sing.

Deep notes weave out of my mouth, drip into his, a kiss of death without touch. I hear him cry as if telling me something, but my song covers it up. His soul resonates with its rhythm, tunes in and morphs to its harmony. I take pleasure in bending his soul to my will, making it shed the chaos, pulse to my beat, become one with me. His warmth fills my chest, unclenches my agony, replaces the void with a fresh soul. So warm, so familiar.

I'm curious. I open my eyes.

My song dies.

His soul slides out of my lips. He slurps it up like that last drop of a fountain drink. With a burp.

"Hunter?"

I sit there with my mouth open.

He grins. Out of all things he could do, he grins his crooked smile, with that dimple on the right side of his cheek.

"What in the world are you doing in the middle of the lake?" I ask.

"Um... being killed by a siren?" He swallows hard, his eyes the size of quarters. "You look awesome, by the way." His chest heaves up and down from heavy breathing, his mouth open in admiration.

"Jeez, Hunter. You could've told me!"

"Who says I didn't try? A couple times, actually. But you were so absorbed in your performance, I had to wait till you're done. It was good though. I liked it." That grin again.

"Stop it. This is not funny, ok? This is serious. I could've killed you, you know that?"

"What a pity."

"You're impossible!" I slam him in the chest and he doubles over.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I forgot I have this strength now. Are you hurt? Sorry, sorry!"

"Nice punch." He gasps for air. "Don't kill me yet, please."

I just cradle my head. It's no use. I see him fish in his pockets. Take out a little box. Blue box with a blue ribbon. I pretend I don't notice.

He peaks through the gaps of my fingers. "Is that a smile I see?"

"Go away."

"Translation - I act like hate you but I want you to stay?"

"Fine." I swallow. "It's just hard. I'm hungry. And you're so—"

"—sweet and delicious?"

"So full of yourself!" I shout, my hands at the side of the boat. My voice carries across the open water and I shrink.

Another soul, so loathsome, so familiar, on top of the motorboat, same purr of the motor, same swish through the waves.

"Daddy." I say.

Hunter's face dark. His grin gone. "Before he interrupts us again. Happy Birthday, Ailen." He pushes the box into my hands. The size of a lipstick or a mascara. I'm giddy.

Rain polka dots the wrapping paper, now blue, now indigo, now deep royal. To match my wet blue jeans. To match my faded blue sweatshirt. My favorite color.

"Open it." He urges me on.

I savor. I pull at the ribbon, watch it uncurl. My nail under the tape, a delicate rip, unfold, now the other side. Hunter taps his fingers. "Come on, rip it open!" A cardboard box with a lid. He shields it from rain. "Um, can't get it wet." I glance inside. A sheet of paper, wrapped, dull metal peeps on both sides.

"I know it's not much." He bursts, unable to hold it anymore, waiting for my reaction.

"You wrote me a song?" I pull out the paper. "This is the best present ever."

We both turn our heads at the same time. We can't see it yet but we can hear it. Daddy's motorboat, it closes in.

"Two minutes." I say. "He'll be here in two minutes." His soul closer, his words ring in my head. Do you know what women are made for? Forget the deal with the siren. My legs are lead, my stomach flips up, my heart propels down. I'd rather die than face him again.

Hunter closes the box, puts it back in his pocket. "You'll read it later. Let's get out of here."

He shakes from adrenaline. His heartbeats go crazy. His eyes on me, his arms one with kayak paddles. Plop-whoosh. Plop-whoosh. I'm supposed to kill Daddy, but I flee instead.

"You never asked me your question." He says.

"Ah, yeah."

I work up the courage. He waits. Plop-whoosh. Plop-whoosh.

"Have you ever met a siren? A real siren?"

"Yeah." Pause. "I did." His face grows long.

"Really? When? Where?"

"Oh, it's a long story." He shakes his head, his breath coils into puffs. Droplets roll off his hoodie.

"Tell me!"

"Oh, well, I met one, about, twenty minutes ago? She jumped out of the water and scared the shit out of me."

"Hunter!" I scowl.

He drops the paddles and holds my hands. The cups of his palms on fire. His warmth fills me with summer, bird whistles and laughter, and all things home. "I'm just trying to make you feel better, ok? Why the hell did you jump off that bridge? Because of your dad? What did he do?"

I don't answer.

"Look, I'm happy I found you, that's all. I thought I never would. I thought you drowned!"

"I did, if you haven't noticed. I'm dead, Hunter, *dead*."

"No, you're not."

His eyes lock with mine.

"See this?" I crane my neck. "Those are gills." I place his hand on them. "Feel it?" I ruffle my hair and stuck it under his nose, to show him how white it is. "I'm not human, Hunter. The human Ailen is gone. Gone! I'm a siren now, understand? S-I-R-E-N. A killing machine."

"No, you're not."

"You're so stubborn sometimes, I hate you!"

"No, you don't."

I want to slap but I can't. I feel like an idiot. And I'm hungry, so very very hungry. There is food, right in front of me. All I have to do is inhale and sing. He trusts me, we're friends, he'll do anything I asked him to, like he always does. But I won't. I know I won't.

We hear a whirr.

Thirty seconds.

In thirty seconds Daddy's boat will be here. We can see it now. Which means he can see us too. I imagine Daddy's eyes, and I'm double dead. Suddenly, it's too much. I don't care about anything anymore. All I want to do is to get away from it all, as far away as possible. Hide under a rock. Disappear.

"Shit!" Hunter picks up the paddles, rows fast. Beads of sweat on his forehead. The motorboat on our tail. I see Daddy on

deck, he is shouting something, waving his arms. His hand in a fist. And I'm scared, so very scared. I tremble but I shake my head 'no'.

"I'm not coming home, Daddy." I say. "I'm not."

I lean forward, my legs in a lotus, balancing on the kayak's nose. I fold and hug the boat. That siren that took me to the pool. She made the boat move. If she can do it, I can do it.

I can hear the shouts now. He shouts my name. He points his finger at me. And I shout back.

"Today I'm sixteen, Daddy. Remember? Today is my birthday. And I'm not coming home!"

I grab the sides of the kayak and force myself to listen to the rhythm of the water. It's hard to concentrate amidst the mechanical noise.

Ten seconds.

I have ten seconds before he hits us.

I find the beat. The paddles. The rain. I let out my pain. I hum to the lake. And it hums back. Together, we create motion. The kayak slides fast. I hum more. Foam sprays us in a shower of drops, it feels like we're on a seaplane about to take off.

"This is so cool!" Hunter drops the paddles, yells over the noise. "You totally lost him!"

It takes me a moment to get back. I stop the humming. I can't hear the motorboat anymore.

"I think I can talk to the water." I'm not sure.

"Hell yeah you can!" Hunter beams. It takes so little to get him excited.

"I guess." I say and I smile. I forget I'm a siren. I feel like I'm ten, the summer we met at the lake, skipping stones, when I beat him seven to six. When we started the game, when he asked me for the first time, have you ever skipped ten? And I said, no, have you? Of course I did, he said. Liar.

"Wanna see my bike?" He asks.

"Do what?" I'm not fully here.

"Remember you asked me, how I'd want to die? It got me thinking. So I got this bike. Wanna go for a ride?"

"Where is it?"

"Right over there." He points. We're close to the boat dock, by the bridge, with rental boats bobbing by the wooden pier, just like the one the siren took me in.

"I know a good place to hide." He says.

"Sure." I say. My fear returns.

The rain stops. The sky changes to light grey. I hum a bit more.

Thump.

We bump into the pier. The ticket kiosk is closed. I hear a few souls on morning buses and in cars enroute to work. And something else.

"What is it?" Hunter asks.

"Shhhh." I listen. "A siren. Two. No, more. Must be their feeding ground, under the bridge." I point. Yellow tape wraps the bridge railing. After my jump. A familiar sight. Suicide jumpers favor it for its height.

Hunter pulls me by the arm and jerks me out my thinking slumber. We stepped on the dock and three things happen at once.

I hear the motorboat speed into the canal.

I hear the siren howl.

I hear a loud pop.

A sonic boom hits me in the back. I think my eyeballs will explode. A clean kill, Daddy would say. This is how you kill a siren, he'd say. You crack the whip and blast her with the sonic boom and she explodes into a puff of fog and recedes into the mist to be blown off, into oblivion. Not that you need to know. You disappointed me, you were supposed to be a son. Who will I give my knowledge to now? He'd slap me on the back of my head at these words, and I'd cry.

Hatred floods me. I pick myself up and I roar. I roar for all of us who jumped off that bridge. I holler at him, I want him dead. I see the boat move backwards to my roar.

"Ailen!" Hunter yells.

I make a step and someone grabs my leg. The siren. Half-way out of the water. "It's your turn, Ailen. Make your move." She hisses.

"Let her go!" Hunter yells.

I've never seen him like that. His rain jacket unzipped, his legs apart, a coiled bullwhip in his right hand, his lips set into a line.

I'm in shock. "You're a siren hunter too? Since when?"

"Since today."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was going to, but then all this stuff happened and I didn't want to scare you."

"You? Scare me?" I laugh. Amidst the craziness of it all, I simply laugh.

The siren pinches me. "I'll take care of him, you take care of your Daddy."

"No!" I yell. "He's my friend!"

"He's no friend to us, Ailen." The siren hisses. "He's a siren hunter."

The motorboat hits the pier. Another crack, missed. More cracks. I hear a scream. A siren, gone, in a puff. Another. He took down two. He takes them out like street pigeons, a gleeful boy with a slingshot. But he aims at me again. He cracks the

whip, jumps over the railing. Reaches for me. Hunter reaches for me. The siren reaches for me.

And I feel sick. Sick and angry.

"Leave me alone, all of you!"

"Nice catch, Hunter. Not bad for a first timer!" Daddy yells. I think he means me. The catch.

I pause.

Then Hunter's whip cracks. The whip flies out of Daddy's hands. Hunter strikes again. The siren lets me go. In the moment of confusion, I see Hunter's hand. And I know he's on my side.

"Come on, let's get out of here." We lock eyes. I take his hand and we run. People gawk at the scene from the bridge, but we keep running. Up the street, into the parking lot, we keep running. There, a bike. Shiny, white.

"Nice." I pant.

Hunter sticks in the key and brings it to life.

"No helmet?" I ask.

"Are you kidding?"

He mounts it, guns the throttle, I hop on the back, and we fly.

5.

Have you ever sped on a motorcycle? I don't mean just passing slower cars on a highway or revving up to scare off that gawking driver, to make him close his mouth shut. Not like that. Have you ever gone at one hundred miles per hour whipping in and out of traffic, in the rain, running red lights, sending sprays of water at every turn, feeling your tires lift off, not knowing if some idiot will get in your way and you'll end up in a ditch, head-first? No helmet, no gear? Have you ever sped on a motorcycle like that? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

Hunter speeds by rows of parked cars, veers to the right to avoid an old Beemer that's trying to locate an empty spot. I see the driver shake his head, I hear his soul panic as he jerks the wheel to the left to avoid collision. Old tires slide on wet asphalt. Bumper hits the back of an expensive convertible.

Crack!

The alarm goes off.

"You're crazy!" I yell to Hunter. He doesn't hear me. He's focused on the road. The bike slides down the driveway and we merge into traffic. Tires screech, cars honk, people shriek and

curse and gasp. One by one we set their souls alight, like flashing dots of plankton in the wake of a hand moving seawater at night. Except, it's day.

Today is my birthday, today I'm sixteen.

Today I was born. Again. As a siren.

One hour ago.

It seems like so long ago.

Hunter shifts gears. I cement my hands around his waist. The bike jerks to sixty miles per hour. More honks, a crash. Another shift. Seventy miles. Eighty.

I don't know how much longer I'll live. I don't know who'll get me first, Daddy or the siren. I don't care. I hope they kill each other on that pier where we left them. I know only one thing, if I die today, I'll die having fun.

We pass a police car, a bored police officer inside. We spray his windows with muddy water of the onramp. I flash him a smile, he flashes me the lights. Red, blue, red, blue. I think I can yell louder than his siren. I try. I scream. My voice echoes and multiplies threatening to shatter the glass of every high rise building we pass. Air whips my hair, tears mix with the rain. The noise explodes all around, shocking lazy commuters who get to work fashionably late after having had their morning coffee and a donut or two.

I scream and the water is moving. It heard me, it listens. Drop by drop, it collects into puddles, puddles run to the sides of the highway, rain parts in the middle. I create a tunnel of dry air. Hunter cheers. I scream more. The tunnel widens, cars slide to both sides of the road, their tires skid across the thin film of the liquid, their doors slam against the highway walls (correct word?), their drivers shriek in confusion.

I grin to one, next to us. I see him for a split second, an utter shock on his face, his mouth open, eyes wide. The image imprints in my memory, because we're already twenty cars past him. We veer onto an exit, police on our tail, hooded passersby our audience, downtown cobble streets our stage.

Hunter turns into a narrow alley, the bike counts every single stone, my teeth chatter in response. More souls. Noisier. Louder. We head towards the fish market. If there is one place to get lost in this town, this is it, with its labyrinth of one-door stores five layers into the ground, selling everything from fish to greens to tie-dye shirts.

We skid down the hill. There it is, the market, at the very bottom, right by the water. Braced by a thicket of cars packed into parking spots like sardines in a can. We see one pulling out, two more lining up to grab the spot. Hunter rushes right into it and pushes the brakes. The bike stutters, the back wheel locks and I stick out both legs, barefoot, to stop us from

falling. My feet make a yard long trail on wet cobble-stones. We get the spot. We slap each other high five. Then I notice the silence.

The usual buzz hangs in the air, on pause. The shoppers who dared come out here in this weather stare at me, especially an older lady by the fish display. Her mouth open, her finger still pointing to a salmon. The fisherman behind the counter gapes. Another one, in a bright yellow apron, his back to me, not in on the moment yet, shouts "Wild king salmon, thirty two dollars exactly!" and throws the fish. His voice rings sharp and he turns on his heels to see what's wrong. The guy behind the counter catches the fish into brown wrapping paper and says mechanically, "Wild king salmon, thirty dollars exactly."

The old lady raises her finger and points at me, her knee-long raincoat shakes, her crumpled face ablaze with terror. And I can't help myself. The lid on my suppressed emotions flies open. Everything that happened since morning spirals out of my stomach, up, up, up. The bile of fear, regret, disappointment, shame, guilt, hatred, helplessness, anguish. They want out. And I can't help myself.

I retch.

"Siren, a hundred dollars a pound, would you like it whole or filleted?" If I'm in a freak show, I think, I might as well act my part.

Hunter yanks me at the shoulder, "What the hell are you doing?"

I turn to him. With him I feel safe, so he gets the full blow.

"Oh, am I selling myself too cheap? Good point."

I ignore his whisper. I can't stop now, I crossed the line. I turn to the lady. The entire fish stand stares, and the flower lady, and the butcher two stands down, and a couple fruit merchants, and a few tourists with their cameras at the ready. All mesmerized by my voice.

I hear the police car turning into the alley.

I wipe my nose.

"Dear shoppers, I apologize. I was just informed that our prices went up due to limited supply. Current tag reads at a thousand dollars a pound. However, we guarantee unprecedented freshness." I turn to Hunter. "How do I put this?" I turn back to the crowd. "From a girl to a siren in three hours. Caught twenty minutes ago. Wild, fresh, hundred percent organic. You can't find a better deal anywhere else."

I spread my arms and bow.

I hear a few claps. I hear the police offices pulling the handbrake and slamming the car door.

"Stop it, Ailen!" Hunter yells. "Are you out of your mind?"

"And out of my body too." I say. "What, you're not happy with my performance? I'll make it better. I'll sing a song, how is that? Would you enjoy a song? Too bad Daddy is not here, to keep you company. The siren hunter with his catch of the day!" Anger pours out of me into each word. I point at Hunter with palms up like models do at car shows. I make my smile triple bright.

A flash blinds me, then another. People are taking pictures. I mouth into Hunter's ear, "Smile, you idiot."

"Jeez, what's wrong with you?" He takes a step back and almost bumps into the officer.

"Watch your step, sir. To the curb, both of you. ID's, please." The officer blinds us with his flashlight. Another one comes behind him.

"Sit!" I bark, and they flop into the puddle. A crowd forms, some people cheer. I ignore them and turn to Hunter.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot to answer your question. You asked what's wrong with me? Well, nothing, really. Except that I'm a living breathing walking dead, with gills and a voice that can control people and suck out their souls for food. Watch."

I pick a target, one of the tourists, a teenage girl with the biggest camera. I hate her perfectly long hair, her expensive outfit, her manicured nails, her over-protective mom and dad.

"Lie down!"

She drops right onto the dirty floor, designer skirt and all.

"See what I mean?"

Hunter stares. I continue. "Aside from this, and aside from the fact that your job is to kill me, nothing is wrong with me. I'm fine, thank you very much." I hold back the rest, I hold it back, I won't cry, I won't.

"Why are you doing this?" Raindrops collected over Hunter's eyebrows, grow bigger and drip over his eyes. He doesn't blink.

"No, why are you doing this?" I snap.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean! Stop acting like an idiot and answer the damn question!"

"Not here. NOT NOW!"

"YES, HERE AND NOW!"

Both police officers, the crowd around us, the whole block surrounding the market entrance lot falls quiet. I feel about thirty souls around, so appetizing that I want to feed right here, in public. And why not? I lost everything there is to lose. I screwed up my life. I failed to stop Mommy, I was never good enough for Daddy, I even managed to screw up my death. I need to cut off Hunter before I screw this up as well.

"Look—" He begins.

"It's ok, I know the answer. Don't bother."

"I don't want to lose you again, ok? That's why."

"But I'm dead. I'm a monster. I'm a siren, Hunter."

"I don't care."

And I deflate. I want to be mad but I can't. I simply look him in the eyes. I love their color, that greyish blue, like rainy clouds about to burst.

"Can we go now?" He tugs at me.

"Sure."

People part as we wade through the crowd, by the fish stand, down metal stairs into the belly of the labyrinth. My hand in his. My need to trust spoken. I want to believe him but I don't know if I can. I tried it once, I believed, I trusted, and I was wrong. So very very wrong.

He pulls me down, five steps at a time, when I hear Daddy's soul. It's moving in our direction, still a few miles away.

"Hunter" I breathe. We fly by another flight of stairs.

"What?"

Another flight.

"It's Daddy. He figured it out, he knows we're here." I jump over six stairs, then six more. "I can hear him."

"Shit." He spits. We make it to the bottom floor.

"Restrooms!" We dash to the right, hide a corner. To the door stamped with a walking man figure, with obscene graffiti on top.

"Cool, it's empty."

We dash inside, mad reflections in the dim mirrors lining the walls. The stench of waste and chlorine hits my nose.

"But it's a dead end!" I protest.

"Trust me." He says.

And I do.

We slide in and slam the door to the handicapped stall shut. It rattles, and I think the entire market will hear.

"He's above us!" I whisper. "I can hear him move."

"It'll take him a while, trust me. All I need is one minute." And I think, one minute of fantasy is better than nothing. I decide to trust him. He pulls me to the floor, drops his jacket and flips out a knife from his jeans.

"What the hell is this for?" I gape, my trust out the window, I press into the stall door.

"To cut your vocal cords. He won't detect you without your voice. It's temporary. They'll grow back. Just lean over the basin."

"How the hell do you know this?" I fumble to open the door latch.

"Your dad."

"He showed you how to cut a siren's vocal cords? And you watched?"

"It was just a siren, Ailen, what are you getting so worked up about?" He catches himself. Too late. He crossed the line and he knows it. His face drains color.

"Now we're talking." I hiss each word.

A man enters the restroom. We freeze. I hear the man unzip his pants and grunt. And I wish that sirens didn't have an acute sense of smell on top of exaggerated emotions and extreme hearing. I gag from hunger and disgust.

The man flashes the toilet and pulls up his pants. He mutters under his breath as he slams the stall door behind him and bumps into another man and a little boy.

"Trust me." Hunter barely moves his lips, picks up his knife and motions me to the toilet basin. Beads of sweat on his forehead. His knuckles white. His feet by the gap between the stall wall and the tiled floor.

And there, I see eyes. On a little boy's face. We stare at each other for a beat and he screams, "Dad! They're playing the operation game!"

"Son, get out of there!" I see big hands grab the boy. "What did I tell you? Never bother people in public places, you hear me?" A slap. A pause. Boy sucks in the air. Boy cries.

And I'm out.

I break the stall door.

I'm on top of the guy.

I smash his face. I scream in his ear. I yell and I holler and I sing. Thick fog forms around us, and I'm so hungry. I want his soul. If I don't eat now, I will die.

His soul slinks out of his mouth in rasped breaths, then uncoils into a smooth ribbon. Silky. I suck on it, I gulp it. It stinks of cowardice, its smeared with cold sweat. I wonder if different souls have different taste. I glance at the boy and wonder how his soul would taste. Deliciously innocent? Hunter's on my back, he shakes my shoulders, I send him to the wall with a mere slap of my hand. Nothing matters except food.

I hear Daddy turn and run down the stairs. My song, he heard my song. This is what I wanted all along, for him to hear me, right? Then why does my stomach drop to my knees? I gulp the last of the man's soul with a loud pop and dash for the door. Guilt and remorse flood me with such force, I stumble as I make it out the door and into the maze of the corridors. I think I know where I'm going. I push people apart, up a level, then another, turn, turn again. The market spits me out into a parking lot on the other side of the market, the one facing the downtown.

I burst into the street. I stop to listen. I can't hear Daddy. I think I lost him. I lost both of them. Great. I run. I run for the lake.

I hear a car whir after me. I think I know how to make it to the water, I think I recognize the streets. The problem is, they all look the same. I have no sense of direction, I realize I'm lost. You're a geographical retard, Daddy would tell me, can't you tell north from south? I dash down, wrong. I dash up, wrong again. I turn around. Panic wells up in my throat.

People stare at me.

I breathe in rapid gasps.

And I recognize that sound, I can make it out among any other noise.

Daddy's car smashes into the curb next to me.

"You're looking for me, sweetie?"

Panic pulses behind my ears now. I can't move. I see him open the door, I see him get out, I see him take out his whip, and I take a step back.

"Where do you think you're going?" He slaps the whip on his left palm repeatedly. All my strength evaporates in an instant and I feel like I've been caught red-handed and the punishment will be severe. I don't see the street, I don't see the buildings, no people, no cars. All gone, all replaced by Daddy's

eyes. Large, round, dark. They burrow a hole through me, and I flatten.

I whisper. "I'm not coming home."

"What did you say?"

He doesn't hear me. He never hears me.

"Daddy—" I can't finish. His face blocks the world.

I'm blank.

"You can't run away from me, you little whore. I'm your father and you do as I say."

He cracks his whip.

6.

Have you ever been shot with a gun? Not a water gun, not a pellet gun (what do they use in shooting games?), a real gun. Not like in movies when they aim at you and then launch into an hour-long explanation as to why you deserve to die. Not like that. Have you ever been shot with a real gun, without warning, right in your chest? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

You shoot people with guns, you kill sirens with whips.

I see Daddy's whip snake up, high into the air, pause, and then crash down in one hard line. It's as long as his boat and it explodes with the sound so deafening that I vibrate to a bursting point. I'm a sheet of glass turning to liquid. I'm a balloon filled with too much water. I'm a single drop on my way to the ground.

Snap!

My chest blasts.

Everything goes quiet and dark.

I can't see, I can't hear, but I feel. Pavement meets my head in one angry slap. Skull compresses then rebounds with a shock of a bright pain. I can't tell if it's cracked, but I'm

still alive. I feel Daddy's hands on my neck, his fingers feeling for pulse. This is dead heart pumping water through veins. It belongs to Ailen Bright.

Two hours since my fake death.

Two hours since my fake birth.

I'm a newborn and I curl up into a ball. This is my dream. This one minute of fantasy is better than nothing, worth every second, paid for with death.

He is rough, but to me his is gentle touch. He lifts me off the ground, but I think he gives me a hug. He jerks me up and over his shoulder, but I feel like he cradles my body. He stuffs me into the trunk of the car, but I imagine it's a car seat. I imagine his face over me, smiling, worried sick for my safety, buckling me up. He gives me one last punch, but I know he meant it a kiss.

He starts the car. It speeds through the rain, but I think it's the theme park boat and we're on a fun water-slide ride, the one that we never took. We scream, we laugh, we're soaked to the bones, and I clutch his hand and pretend I'm not scared. I'm a brave little girl. I search his eyes to see if he knows it, to see if he approves. I won't cry, I won't cry, I won't cry.

But I do. The minute is over, and I have nothing again.

I'm going home. I feel the car stop, the doors shudder, the wheels roll. We're moving again. I still can't see, but I think

I start hearing things. Because this can't be. A soul so warm. Warm like home, like warm hands, warm like someone who knows what being warm means. Warm like I'll never be. Ailen Bright, the cold fish of the day. I try to be mad at him and I can't. Hunger turns me inside out. I want to gobble him up, skin and bones and all the memories of the games we played.

Have you ever been so hungry, Hunter, I want to ask.

Hunter.

He is in the car. Daddy must have picked him up from the market. Or was it all pre-planned? I don't want to think anything and I hope I'm wrong. I worm to the back of the trunk and press my ear into the scratchy lining. I can hear them argue.

"She's my friend." Hunter's voice catches at the end.

"A siren. Your friend." Daddy talks in that calm manner that I know too well. Listening to him is like breathing still air moments before sky opens over your head in one downward gash.

"Yes! Not just any siren, Mr. Bright. It's Ailen and she's also your daughter!"

I hold my breath.

"Let's be clear about a few things, Hunter. I'm your boss. You listen to me and you do as I say. That thing back there is

not Ailen, Hunter. It's a siren, a clever whore, the worst of its kind. I pay you to kill them. End of discussion."

I can't draw a breath like I've been punched in my gut.

"She's not a whore!"

The car comes to a sudden halt.

"Did I say I care for your opinion? My opinion is the only one that matters here. All women are whores. Better burn that into that stupid adolescent brain of yours."

"But—"

"Did I say you could talk? Do you want to give me you're your advance and tell your mother she can't have her drugs?"

Silence.

"Don't interrupt me, rule number one. Answer my questions, rule number two. Got it? Now tell me, what do you think women were made for?"

"What do you mean, made—"

"Answer the damn question!"

"I don't know, Mr. Bright."

"Listen to me, and you'll learn fast. Women were made to haul water. Work them, work them hard, or they'll swing that lusty eye at you and charm off your pants and wrap your little dick around their finger before you know it."

"What's this got to do with anything?"

"Did I say you could talk?" Daddy shouts.

Long silence.

"I'll tell you what. Whore DNA. You can detect it in girls as young as five. The way they look at you with those innocent eyes, little whores in the making. The way they talk, the way they walk, every man wants a piece of a girl like that. Wants to hear her velvety song, a song to die for. Those are the ones that turn. It's our duty to root it out, to clean up that filth. You hear what I'm saying?"

"Yes, Mr. Bright."

"You think I like my job? It's not a question of want. It's a question of must."

"May I ask a question, Mr. Bright?"

"Yes."

"What if I won't be able to?"

"You will."

"But she's your daughter."

"I wanted a son!"

I shrink into a fleck of dust. I'm nothing. I want to cease to exist. I want out of this triangular race. This triangle thing we have. I want Daddy, Daddy wants Hunter, Hunter wants me. I think I can turn it into a straight line. Hunter never had a dad, but I did. I never had a mom, Hunter did. His mom was dying of cancer, and he had jobs since grade school. He boasted about this new high paying job he found and was going to tell me

about soon. That was it. Daddy hired him as a siren hunter. Daddy wants a son, Hunter would be perfect. Hunter wants a dad, Daddy would finally get a son he always wanted. I need to get out of the picture, and the only way out is down, the only way down is death.

I could feel Daddy boiling, his body pulse made my empty stomach churn.

I could feel Hunter hurt.

"You're not allowed to fail this time. I'm not a maid to take out your trash. You started the job, you will finish it. And you'll get paid."

I heard something like a yes from Hunter.

That's it then, I decided, fate sealed.

We speed around the lake. I recognize the turns and the sound of asphalt under the tires. We're going home.

Inside the car the silence thickens.

"If all women are whores, what does this make your mother." Hunter whispers under his breath. I feel him holding back something. Tears of anger.

Daddy pushes on the breaks. I roll into the back of the trunk with a thump.

"What did you say?" I hear Daddy hiss.

"You heard it."

Cars honk. I sense anger rise as one tall tsunami wave. Now it hit Daddy, now it hit Hunter, now drivers behind us, now drivers ahead, and finally me.

I feel anger everywhere. It tears at my chest, I want to cry out, so I do.

"Damn it, she's awake!" Daddy presses into the gas pedal.

Souls flutter aside as we zigzag through the streets flooded with lunch goers.

Hunter's soul is close. I feel his hand pressed in the middle of the seat, towards me. I press my hand back, from the trunk. I'm here, I want to say, and I'll get out of your way. I'll get out of everybody's way, soon.

Four and a half hours.

We enter the woods, hit the familiar gravel road, and stop by the boat hangar, I can tell by the movement of the wheels. We back up into it. Off limits to me, no matter how much I begged, now I get to see it.

The car trunk flies open. Bright fluorescent light hits my eyes and I cringe.

"Get her out!" Daddy commands.

Hunter gives me his hand. I squeeze it. He's afraid to talk, his face torn and crumpled over the conflict inside. I want to tell him, I'll make it easy for you, don't you worry, you'll do just fine and you'll keep your job. He helps me get

over the edge, to my feet, I stumble on the concrete floor. My knees give out and I slump on it. Its square large enough to hold two boats, now empty, its walls thick enough to dampen all sound, its roof high enough to echo a scream.

The rolling garage door clicks shut. My eyes adjust. Walls lined with rows of boxes, stack and stacks of them, organized to precision, next to metal chests of drawers with tools, nets, fishing supplies. To fish for sirens, to hunt them, to kill. A collection of whip, all coiled and oiled and hung in a neat pattern, each on its own nail. The thick, the long, the compact.

Our gazes cross, and Daddy spits.

He stands with his feet apart, a whip in his hand, ready to take me out at the first sign of an attack.

"Daddy, I don't want to harm you, I swear." I croak.

He slashes the whip inches from my head. My ears explode, I roll to one side.

"Silence!" He takes a step back. "Do your job, shut her up!"

Hunter jerks out his whip, but I see only Daddy.

I search his eyes for my being wrong, for something that tells me he didn't mean what he said. I search his face. Anger, fear, frustration. I wait. But there is nothing else. And I'm done waiting, done hoping.

I open my mouth. I see terror darken his face.

I say. "Today I'm sixteen, Daddy. Remember? Today is my birthday. And today I'm going to die."

All I want for him is to hear me sing. And I do.

I sing.

He clasps his ears, turn to Hunter, like I don't exist.

"Do it, now!" He turns on his heel and dashes for the side door, locks it with a sharp metal clang, leaves us in silence. Because I break my song. The back of his head is the last I will see of him, I think.

"Yes, Mr. Bright." Hunter's words scatter at the sound of a fan. Daddy must have turned it on. To suck out the moisture. Me, that is. After I get blown up.

I'm ready to die. I close my eyes.

I wait, but nothing happens.

Instead, Hunter pulls me up.

"Remember the game we play?"

I open my eyes.

"Want to ask me again?"

I'm numb. I've pushed all feelings down, ready to die. I'm just a piece of meat to him, I think. I don't care, so I play along.

"Have you ever—" I begin. But it sounds fake and I can't finish my thought.

His soul so close, I want to suck it all out in one big gulp.

"—kissed a girl?" He says and cradles my face. I don't move, I don't talk. I just stand there and let him. Why not, I think. I'll be dead soon anyway. And his eyes are so blue, my favorite color. I swim in them. I want to dive inside, deep, deeper, and never come out. I want to believe the lie. I wish it be true.

He senses my resolve, and stops a breath away. "What do you want me to do?"

"Kill me."

"I can't."

"You're such a liar. You need the money. Your mom needs the money. Come on, do it already." I wait.

"I can't, Ailen. I just can't."

"Then you're a fucking loser! Kill me, you idiot! Get rid of this!" I push him away and stick my hands under his nose.

"See this? Feel it!" I grab his hand. "What does it feel like?"

"What do you mean?"

"Jeez, Hunter, I hate it when you act like an idiot! You know exactly what I mean. How does my hand feel to you?"

"Cold—"

I pressed his hand on my chest.

"How about here?"

He blinks.

"Answer me! Do you feel my heart?"

"Sure."

"You know what it pumps?"

"N-n-not really—" He stammers.

"Not really? Stop lying! Every siren hunter knows. It pumps water, cold dark water. It's dead, get it? Dead!" I must look scary, because Hunter steps back.

"I get it. Honest."

"I'm dead, Hunter. D-E-A-D. Get it? This—" I tap my face, touch my gills, spread out my fingers, put both hands on my tarnished sweatshirt "—is fake, ok? It's not real, it can't live. Then what's the point of this existence, tell me, what?"

"You." He says under his breath.

"Liar!" I cry. "You only say it because you pity me! I don't need your pity! I won't fall for this again, I won't, I won't!" Tears run down my cheeks. "Do it, do it, now! Why do you always make everything so difficult?"

He just stands there. He looks so helpless. He doesn't know what to do with his hands so he wrings them, his head down. It makes me angrier.

"Fine. If you can't do it, I'll do it. I will kill you, Daddy will kill me, and he'll live happily ever after."

"Sure." Hunter agrees just like that.

It makes no sense. I hate him, I hate the day we met,
throwing rocks into the lake, being all innocent and happy. The
thought disgusts me.

Everything that's I've been bottling up erupts.

And I sing.

I pour my pain out. Hunter opens his arms and lets his soul
escape into me. A thin ribbon of his precious sixteen years,
just like mine did not too long ago in the pool full of sirens.
A silky strand of his essence. I taste it on the tip of my
tongue and suddenly I'm so hungry. I want to gulp him up, I suck
it in with a whoosh and I can't stop. It feels good, like a
first drink after a day in the desert. Not enough, I want more.
I won't stop until it's all mine. Never mind me wanting to dive
in his eyes, it'd be him swimming inside me now.

His soul strings between us in a ribbon of mist.

It gives me power.

I inhale and holler. The walls shake, the ground moves
under my feet, the door jams in the frame. The lake splashes
onto the shore and creeps towards me. I command the water, I
command it to come. Hunter falls to his knees, his soul
illuminates the air between us. The roof above us shatters.
Water seeps through the cracks.

I look down at Hunter, ready to finish him.

He looks up.

It's the first time I see him cry. He falls back, his face grey. He's dying.

And I gag.

I fail. I can't do it.

I kneel down. "I'm sorry." I say.

The door shakes. Daddy heard the commotion. He can't open it. "Ailen, open the door!"

My heart jumps out of habit, but it's not as strong. Hunter pulls on my sleeve, I duck and hover inches away from his face. "I never had."

"What?"

"Never kissed a girl."

"Liar." I say and I feel my anger evaporate. I try really hard not to smile.

"I said, open the damn door!" Louder. I can hear Daddy louder. The door rattles but it's jammed pretty well and it doesn't give.

A sense of freedom flashes between me and Hunter as we glance towards the door and then back at each other.

Hunter grins and I love how his face splits in two, with that dimple on his right cheek. It pulls me in like a magnet, closer, until our lips touch. I gasp. We kiss. His kiss, it burns me with this warmth. And I let go. I exhale his soul back into him, I give him all I have. I wish I could give more, I

wish I could give everything there was to give. But I can't. I've nothing, only a dead's girl fantasy. I'm a thief, I'm simply returning his stolen soul. The thought hurts.

"Ailen Bright. The girl who thinks she knows it all. It's time you paid, we made a deal. Remember?"

I brake away.

"That felt... cool. You are cold." Hunter says, his eyes dreamy. I don't hear him.

I look around and listen. The siren is not here. I hear a crack, then another. Daddy has made it around the house and is now breaking the garage door.

I lean over Hunter but the voice says again, "Ailen Bright, the girl with no memory. Nothing is free, remember that. You have to pay." I begin to panic.

"You're doing good! You've got a boy, with that sweet voice of yours. Not bad, not bad. Now, your part of the deal."

I recoil. I look at Hunter, at his eyes, half-closed. And I get it. It's not me that he likes. I mesmerized him with my voice just like a siren is supposed to. It's all fake. I shudder.

It hurts.

I stand up.

"Where are you going?" He asks.

"You picked the wrong girl, ok? Find somebody else."

"But I don't want somebody else."

I explode.

"You're so full of shit!" I scream. "I want out of these walls, I want out of this skin, I want out!"

"Ailen Bright—" A voice begins, and I yell,

"Shut up!"

I hear the siren whisper.

I hear Hunter call my name.

I hear Daddy pound on the door.

"Leave me alone, all of you!"

I jump toward the concrete ceiling, head first.

7.

Have you ever smashed through a ceiling? I don't mean poking a stick through a few inches of plaster or trying to break that drywall sheet covered with asbestos popcorn because your grandma is overdue for a remodel. Not like that. Have you ever smashed through a few feet of solid concrete with nothing else but your head for a battering ram? Of course you didn't. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

I propel upwards, a hard line of muscle and disgust. I'm not good enough, not good enough. Not good enough for Hunter, not good enough for Daddy, not good enough for the siren. I don't want to be me anymore.

Half-a-second.

I want to smash to pieces. I imagine myself as a slimy mess, which is exactly what I am. I can't even die properly, can't seem to be able to find a way to do it for sure. Maybe this will work.

One second.

I hit the ceiling with my head. It hits me back with a fist of a flat packed sound. I hope for the best, but it parts like clay. Whatever water there is, it condenses in one spot and

softens the cement into mush. I curse. I curse and I shoot through this aggregate mass into an afternoon sky. Dark clouds, no rain, no sun.

Five hours into my birthday.

My jeans and sweatshirt torn, covered in grey sand, smeared with madness and dirt.

"I hate it, I hate it, I hate it!" I yell. "How can I make myself cease to exist?"

"Not your turn, Ailen Bright, won't you listen? Come here." The voice comes from the lake. I choose not to look.

I'm on the roof. I'm by the hole. The wet spot of the stone womb, I made it out instead of in. I'm two stories high. I wish it two hundred, to step off the roof and smash to death.

"Come here." The siren sings. "I'll tell you why it's not your turn. Not yet."

"Will you leave me alone!" I yell, but my feet move. I'm in the air, on the ground, between the boats, past the car, and inside the lake, washing off the concrete dust. The water hugs me. We're both cold. I float. It's my gigantic bathtub, it's my therapy, my home. I turn and speed towards the middle of the lake. Seldom fish squirt by, kelp stalks shimmer in a forest, then darkness. There's nothing but darkness, and I'm glad soon I'll see those that are sick like me. We don't need to pity each

other and nod our heads and say that we understand. We get it without words. We sing.

We sirens, the low scum who decided to call it quits.

"This is where I belong." I say and I hear them answer.

Their song pulls me in. It bounds through layers of water in one turbid stream. I want to join. I miss their broken stories, cold arms, and long hair. My sisters in death. You can't love a siren, you're lured by her voice to believe you're in love. That's how we kill. How perverted is that. I shudder.

Never again.

The song expands into a choral. It rears from the bottom, up and up, a wake of crescendo and bliss.

"I'm coming!" I shout.

I detect a separate current behind me a second too late. A hand clasps my mouth. The siren's hand. 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. We start sinking down. No matter what I do, I can't move. She's stronger than me.

"Shhhhh." She hisses into my ear. We drift. I try to twist free, but she tightens her grip. Our feet touch the sand on the bottom of the lake. Faint glow emanates from our faces. The siren song fizzles out to a distant murmur.

"Don't talk." She breathes into my ear and turns me around to face her, her forefinger on her lips. I spread my arms "why".

She reaches out and puts her hands on my shoulders, shakes her head. 'Because I said no' I read on her lips. Water moves her hair slightly, away from her body, a museum goddess, carved by some sculptor way back. Her face as perfect as white marble. Straight nose, slightly upturned nostrils, soft mouth with just enough of a curl to make every man's heart skip a beat, her olive shaped eyes made to drown inside. She towers over me.

Can I trust her? Do I have a choice?

'Come.' I read on her lips as she pulls at my hand.

I could let her do whatever she wants. What am I going to lose? I've already lost everything I had, or pretended I did. Hunter's face swims up in my memory but I quickly push it out. It needs to be blocked, torn out, gone.

I look at the siren and I nod.

She smiles.

Ten minutes.

We swim. We retrace mine and Hunter's kayak journey this morning, from the narrow end of the lake to the suicide bridge. Through the murk of the water, flecks of rare fish, over the broken rocks that cover the bottom. A harbor seal passes, his soul a crooked snort of an animal. Can I eat him instead? I'm afraid to ask out loud. My thoughts dampen out of my head by the hum of the afternoon traffic. We enter the canal.

The siren surfaces under the suicide bridge.

I lift my head to the overwhelming noise. Road swishes with tires, under the cars full of people, their souls in constant murmurs and tinkles and whistles and snores, their gasps and their crooning jam the afternoon air. Cars shuffle their tires across the metal net of the bridge. They look like toys from underneath, upside down, as if sent to skitter across by two giant boys in an endless game. I almost hear them squeal in delight, then get bored, then chatter to decide whether or not they want to stomp on the bridge to squish it and move on to the next game. It's this game we all play. If you lose, you die.

Hunger taps my chest. I realize I'm very hungry. I can eat just about anything to silence the growing agony. All it takes is to flex and to jump on the bridge, pry open the nearest car and sing.

But the siren leads me to the shore.

We wait for a moment. No souls on the bank.

We crawl up the metal grid that protects the bridge underbelly from trespassers. The siren opens a hole and we squeeze inside a dark half-cave with bridge beams as sides and its abutment as a back wall. We sit. The thunder of rattling metal adds to the noise, I wince. The siren's lips almost touch my ear.

"You can talk now. Quietly. Your voice carries too well."

"What's going on?" I say, because this question burned me for the last twenty minutes.

"I'm changing the deal."

"I thought you'll explain why it's not my turn?"

"First, you have to pay." There is such finality to her words, it makes me ache.

"I wish it was easy." I say, thinking of Daddy, his eyes, his overwhelming reach into my fears. My freezing at the tone of his voice, like a trained animal on command. "I don't know if I can do it. Is that bad?"

We sit under the bridge, in this deafening noise and I can hardly hear her. She speaks in hushed quick sentences.

"I'll show you how." She says.

The traffic slows down just enough to create a momentary pocket or silence. She looks down. I hear it too. A young couple strolls along the pedestrian walkway on the canal bank. We can see them. They can't see us, concealed by darkness, like eagles over the prey, hidden in a place where no human would think to venture.

We both swallow, hungry.

"Watch and learn." She says and starts to hum.

The couple stops. They turn their heads, puzzled as to the source of the melody. They like it, they don't want to move. They grab each other's arms.

The siren edges the hum up a notch.

They look up.

Other people pass, unaware. The siren's hum is directed only at the couple beneath us. A column of fog obscures them.

"Why them? They didn't do anything wrong!" I whisper. I remember my first accidental kill, that guy in the public restroom, and I cringe. I left a boy without a father. I touch to stop her, she shakes me off.

She sings. It's a quiet song, but it streams down in one misty shaft. The fog thickens. The guy and the girl jerk up their faces, open their lips. Their souls string up and whoosh towards the siren in two intertwined ribbons.

Plop!

Their souls gone, they drop to the ground.

"It took you, what, ten seconds?" I gasp. "Why?" I want to bring them back to life. The girl's dress spreads in a white cloud, her face framed by blonde hair. She's gone. He's gone too, his hand over hers, even in death.

"Why the hell did you do it?" I almost scream.

"Why not?" She says. "That's what we do. It's about time you learned."

A woman below us shrieks. Somebody shouts. I look at the siren.

"You killed them!"

"I did." She says.

"You're not even sorry!"

"I'm not." She shrugs. "I savor it. You will too."

"No, I won't!" I dash to escape, but she pins me down.

"Yes, you will. You will kill. And you'll do your part of the deal. Then, after you pay, it will be your turn." She smiles. "If you want."

"I don't want to kill!"

"Yes you do." She says and sits on top of me, her hands on my wrists. I can't move.

The shuffle underneath us meets the scuffle above. Police cars, fire trucks, onlookers all buzz to life, clean up, and leave. Silence falls. I can't move. I pretend I'm not there.

I tense as I hear Daddy boat motor by. He's looking for me, again. The siren feels my fear.

"Thinking about your friend Hunter?" She asks.

"Leave him alone!" The traffic slows down to a trickle, and my voice carries all the way across the canal. I don't care if Daddy hears.

"Shhhh! Be quiet." She glances around.

"What do you want?" I say.

"I want your father dead."

"Then why don't you do it yourself? He's right there, hear his boat?"

"I tried. I failed. I planned to try again." For the first time, I think I glimpse a hint of fear cross her face. "Then you came along. When I told you, it's not your turn!" She bristles.

"Sorry I didn't time it properly, I seem to have a knack for messing things up. I should've consulted with you, of course." I motion up to the bridge. "I apologize. Would you elaborate as to how I've disturbed whatever it is that you planned? Cause I hate being left in the dark."

She inhales and exhales a chill that crawls up my spine and leaves a sense of imminent dread.

"This is not dark enough yet." She leans close to my ear. She is so cold, I shiver. "Your turn will be when I tell it is."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know what I mean." She smiles. Her breath washes over me, and it's cold, so very cold.

"No, I don't." I say defiantly.

"Ailen Bright. One stubborn little girl."

"I don't know what you mean!" I say.

"If you play the game, you've got to play by the rules. I make up the rules, you take turns. And I say, it's not your turn yet. What part of 'not your turn' do you not understand?"

"What game? I don't want to play any game."

"You already are, you have no choice."

"Who are you?" I ask. "What's your name?"

"Why don't you tell me?"

She stares at me, blank.

I see her dark eyes swim. There is nothing there. I'm cold, but she's colder. I'm strong, but she's stronger.

"How old are you?" I ask.

"I have no age."

"How did you turn into a siren?"

"I didn't. I'm not."

I stare.

"This doesn't make any sense."

"It does, if you listen."

I pause. I think really hard. I think back to the bathtub. She said it was not my turn, not my turn to die. I freeze.

"You're Death?" I say.

"You called me, and I came." She smiles, and darkness oozes out of her eyes. It spills terror all over me, and I tremble.

"I didn't want to die." I whisper. "I wish I could turn it all back." I glance into distance, into nothing in particular. A car crosses above us, and I feel as if sugar syrup trickles down the bridge grate, a baby's soul. I understand in disgust that I want to suck it out until the baby is dead.

"Then why didn't you kill Daddy yourself?"

"You messed up my plans. You will fix them for me." She lets me go. I sit up. I clasped my knees. I sway from side to side to silence the pain.

"I don't understand."

"It's a game we all play. For now, you won. Are you hungry?"

"Maybe." I say.

"Good. Let's get some food into you, fast."

"That would be lovely." I manage.

"I know just the place." She grins. I look at her, so reassured, I feel I'll be ok. She stretches out her hand. "Come on."

And I give her mine. It was so easy to trust her, so easy to let go and just fall into her words, to not think, to be led, to rely on somebody else. To rely on Death. I shudder.

It's quiet. Eerie quiet.

"Can you just kill me right now?" I ask. "I changed my mind."

"How about we have some fun first? Then you pay. Then we'll have a little talk?"

"How can a siren kill herself?"

"A siren dies if her song doesn't have an effect."

And I know what to do. I know how I will die. I know who won't hear my song, who never heard me, and who never will.

"I will. I will pay." I say.

"You will kill who I tell you to kill."

"Yes." I say.

"Good. That's a deal."

She nods like she knew.

We hold hands and leap into the air.

Six hours into my birthday. Six hours into the day that I die.

Mist fills my lungs. I realize I have the best friend I could ever have. We run towards glimmering lights of the downtown, like two white ghosts, hopping from bushes to parks to streets, scaring into oblivion all passersby. We don't care to hide and jump between cars on major streets causing accidents, nobody understands what happened, we move this fast.

"It's party time. I give you the feast of the year." Death proclaims when we stop.

8.

Have you ever overdosed? Not like you took Ibuprofen, ten pills too many, to show off and to scare the living lights out of your mom, but secretly laughing, your goal accomplished, this focused attention while tucked in bed. Not like that. Have you ever taken drugs three times too much, knowing full well that it can mean only one thing. Have you overdosed like that? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

My drug is my fear. I'm high on adrenalin wrapped in anxiety, in a capsule of some insane giddiness, supposed to dissolve ten seconds after I swallow. I swallow a lot. My saliva a syrup of acid, my blood concentrated sea water, pumped through the veins by a dead heart. My power is my voice, but I think I've lost it. I forgot how to scream. I see what I don't want to see.

We stand in a narrow back alley lined with recycling bins, in the shadows. Not that it helps. We can pass as lights ourselves, the fancy non-electric glow-in-the-dark kind. A one-story building shimmers a few yards ahead in the pool of light from a single lamp over the door. Ground ripples with loud music and human souls.

I think I will fall.

Death nudges me forward to the back door of the building, shut closed. It's metal edges beaten up by use. It's peeling paint so dear and close to memories I thought I have lost.

A dance club of some sort.

"He's waiting for you. He's here." She says.

"Not him. I can't." I plead.

"Oh, yes you will." Death says. I can tell she decides, should she do me now or should she do me later. Should she play a little bit longer, her favorite game.

"I don't want him to die. Can't you take me instead?" I whisper.

"I will. When I've had my fun. Ailen Bright likes to change her mind twenty times a day." She giggles.

I understand what she does. She's having a ball, I'm her new entertainment.

"Why are you sending me to do your job?"

"There's only one of me, but there are hordes of you, being born every day. I like to have little helpers like," she flips up my face, "Ailen Bright. Besides, I like watching you squirm."

"What if I won't?"

"Then I'll watch you squirm for years and years, tethering on the brink of dying but not letting you die for good. Would you like to know how that feels? Would you like me to take

Hunter with me? Do you think he'll look good in a coffin with an open lid, or should I have fish eat off his face?"

She pokes me with her finger, to top off her hideous laugh.

"Want to know what he did? He got drunk and then he got high. All because of you."

"That's a big fat lie."

"You know it's not." She says.

"He did not, he did not." I wring my hands.

"Go on. Run along and play your part." She says. "Or would you rather me send him to the bottom of the lake?"

"No, no, no, no." I drip my regret. I learn like millions learned before me, what happens when they cross that line, when they take that step, when they can still breathe, when they learn it's not what it seems. It's a trip with no ticket back. It's that sinking awareness that you know you won't be able to share. It's that moment you want to shed your skin, to turn back the time, but you know you can't. It's the moment of no return.

"Well? Which one will it be?"

I don't answer.

I flex and kick the door off its hinges.

A waft of music mixed with the stench of sweaty bodies and the thick soup of their souls hit me in the face. The curtains are down, the disco ball under the ceiling sends rays of light. The music pulses liquid trance into the air, dark, loud. I'm

under the water. I've been hungry before but never like this. I hate them for living, hate them so much, I want to eat them all. Anger opens my throat.

"Life is disgusting, would you agree?" Death whispers in my ear. I do.

About a hundred people converge one over another in the open space. Their glimmering bodies remind me of a can of sardines, packed so tightly that you have to fish them out with a fork, one by one, carefully, to not break off their heads or fracture their spines. Forget the fork. I want to sink in my teeth and eat them all in one guzzle. Gulp up the oil and the brine, lick the can clean, and throw it into a trashcan to hear the satisfying clink of empty metal.

I dash inside.

A guy, his back towards me, in a deep conversation with a girl, dressed in black. Now he is stupefied by the fallen door. Now by my sneer. Now the girl falls silent too. I think she wants to say something but she can't. It's that hush of a toddler, before she sucks in her breath to utter a terrified scream. Their pause hangs in the air long enough for me to start.

I inhale and sing.

Mist rolls over us three. The crowd oblivious, thinking perhaps this is a dance club trick, this rolling fog with no smell.

My voice glows in each droplet of water. Shiny, thrilling, thick with high-pitched and throaty notes. I mix it into a rhythm, a choppy staccato, one, two, one, two. It has no words. It commands movement. You move if you heard it, whether you want to or not. The girl does. She slides on the floor and creeps towards me, her boots tangled in the pile of skirt, her long locks brushing the floor, her eyes locked on my face, studded lips open in a wide 'o'. Her whimpering soul hangs in the air between us, a delicate mist of energy. I know she's done for, and I don't feel sorry. She's food.

"Bon appetite." Death says in my ear.

I swig the last of her and lick my lip. She tastes like fried fish. I burp. One done, one more to go.

I thicken the fog.

The guy's mouth falls open. He edges away from the girl's body, like she's some poisonous puddle. What a prick. He deserves to die.

"What's with the look—"

The song weaves out of my mouth, strong and beautiful. I pour out my pain. I notice that the guy has a boyish upturned nose. His soul a mismatch of a trombone solo pierced by an

occasional whistle. He folds to his knees. His fingers close on my torn sleeve.

"Man, you've got beautiful eyes", he mumbles. And I know it's a lie, it all is. He's mesmerized by my voice, to him I'm the ultimate dream. His soul escapes through his lips into mine. It feels warm. I gulp it up. He sprawls down on the floor, gone. His soul fills me in, it's not very tasty, but it'll do. I think I'm satisfied but I'm wrong, my appetite wakes. I hunger for more. I hunger for the one that tastes like dessert. The whipped heavenly sweetness on a warm crust, topped with the sound of birds.

There he is.

A single clear note blocks out the rest of the noise.

I kick the body with my foot. Dead appetizer.

I want the cream of the crop.

I step out of the fog. Two guys gawk at me. Their souls don't sound tasty, so I pushed them aside and dive into the middle of the wet mass of bodies, music, and smell.

The perfect feeding ground, people so high, they can't tell if they're killed.

I step into the ticket of blaring music. Black light flickers on and off, grabbing stills of dancing people in grotesque forms, their white teeth and t-shirts sprinkled

through the crowd. People turn to size me up, wave, continue their dance. I ignore them.

I feel people tap my shoulders.

I shrug them off.

I listen intently for one note. It sinks in the noise then resurfaces again. I close my eyes to hear it better. Among these rhythmic holes, high-pitched scratches and out of tune woodwinds, it's close to perfection. Hunter's soul.

I open my eyes and wedge ahead through the tangle of bodies. Faces jumped to the beat, sweaty limbs surround me like scores of jellyfish in shallow water. Two girls give me thumbs up as the black light hits my face and highlights my white hair. I press forward, to that beautiful pulsing sound. And then I see him.

Hunter. His face young and happy. I feel as if I see him for the first, and the last. His curls plastered in sweat, his face covered with freckles, eyes closed under thick eyebrows. Wires of muscle under the t-shirt and jeans, moving all wrong. He's a horrible dancer. He has a drink in his hand, dancing next to a blonde girl, a bottle of something in her hand. She lifts her head and waves the bottle at me, I push her aside. She tips the bottle into her mouth and stumbles away into the crowd.

"I see you went on a hunt for a girl. That was fast." I say.

"Huh?" Hunter is drunk. He opens his eyes for a moment, blinks at me, and without a hint of recognition, resumes his dance, eyes closed. How I want to slap his face. How I hate all these people, so alive, so warm, so behind a well-off dad and a well-off mom. So protected from the likes of me. A drowned walking corpse, bleached and flat and slimy. I tremble with disgust. Disgust with myself. I hate my guts, I hate his guts. So be it. We'll both die.

"I'm going for the kill." I whisper to Death.

"Good girl." She hovers behind.

I pass the tongue over my lips, inhale and breathe out. Dense mist descends onto the crowd like a giant tongue, licking people into oblivion. I breathe out some more, the mist thickened, drowning everything, except Hunter who still dances in front of me.

The thumping rhythm of the music dies to an echo.

I tried this before, now I have to finish the job.

I sing a single low note. It trembles, weaves around his head and into his ears. I catch myself inhaling his scent, pine with musk undertones underneath the vapor of hard liquor. He smiles and sighs, still dancing, eyes still closed.

I add a couple more notes. My song streams effortlessly and strikes upon his ears with hypnotic force. He moans. I inch

closer, infuse the song with the lethal force of my voice, aimed at awakening his soul.

He hears it all right, sways to the rhythm. I can tell he wants more. He should run. Only animals know to run from it, to run for their lives.

He stays put, hums to the tune, two breaths away. He opens his eyes, dark and drowsy, and focuses on my face. His pupils widen.

"Ailen?" he says.

It's those blue eyes, it's all their fault.

I lose it. My song breaks mid-note, as abruptly as if someone has crushed my chest and forced all air out of my lungs.

"Finish!" Death hisses.

"I can't!" My voice comes out croaked.

"You picked the wrong party, girl." He finishes with a belch.

"I can't believe you're so wasted. You—" I can't finish.

"Go away." He swats at me like at a fly.

I feel my head lose touch with my body, stupefied. The answer dies on my lips. The fog disassembles. Music and chatter seep through. People look in our direction with haze in their eyes, still dancing.

"Whasss wrong? Want me to repeat?" He slurs. "Leave it. Leave me alone. Will you go already?" Hunter pushes me in the chest.

Disbelief doesn't let me move.

"Hey, are you real or you're some siren ghost now?" He waves his hand in front of my face, as if that would make me disappear. He focuses his eyes on my hair, of all things, and nods with approval.

"No, you're Ailen, right?" He frowns. "Go away. I tell ya, this party is wrong."

I flush with anger, then shame, then hate. It's all mixed up. My stomach dives a thousand feet, rises back up in a bitter bile. My tongue wouldn't move.

"You don't wanna go? What, you like me all of a sudden? You should not!" He shakes his forefinger in front of me, like that teacher at school. "I get it. You changed your mind and decided to come back to this poor schmuck." He slaps his chest. "But it's different now. You like me as food, you think I taste good. Well, finish the job. Go ahead!" His voice rises into a shriek.

This is not Hunter I know. This is someone else, someone revolting and bitter and angry.

Bewildered, I push him away, turned and dive through watching people.

"Ailen, wait!" I hear him stumble after.

I don't want to hear his shouts, I don't want to think, I want silence. For once in my life. I'm surrounded by constant noise. I don't think I can take this anymore. I push my way through, I see mouths open, shouting, I feel Death tug at my sleeves. I aim for the door that I kicked off the hinges, I make it, and bump smack into the chest of a man who's about to enter.

I shove him aside. He lifts his left leg and I trip over it. I look up.

"Daddy?"

"Will you look who is here."

He's dressed in the siren hunter's fishermen type jacket, pants tucked into tall lace-up boots. His greying hair cropped close to his scalp, same sickly greenish tint to his face. Our eyes meet, and for a second I feel a tug in my gut, a sudden horror. I know this time he wouldn't simply let me go.

"Daddy, I'm scared."

He doesn't hear me. He never hears me.

"Look what you make me do. You make me waste a whole day."

He reaches behind his back and pulls out his whip. This does it. The last I see is his right arm stretched out into an arc.

I dive between his legs and run.

9.

Have you ever run for your life? Not while playing tag or running away from bullies that would beat you into pulp if you don't or from a store after stealing that bar of chocolate you couldn't afford. Not like that. Have you ever ran from death itself, knowing that this is no game, it's no joke, it's real. Knowing that if you stop even to catch your breath, you're toast. Have you? Of course, not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

I run for life.

I hear a crack of focused boom hit the air behind me as I duck. Pain shoots through my ears in a thousand of needles, I feel deaf, but I still move.

I run for life, whatever a siren's life is worth.

Death on my heels, her whisper in my mind.

I still run.

I hop over fences, dash through backyards, past astounded people, across the road, all the way to the lake, guided only by its vibration felt on my skin. I can't hear. My ears ring with the echo of the boom.

Dark water greets me.

I tighten into a string, arms pressed to the sides, two legs as one. I dive. I inhale the water and shake all over, glad to get soaked. The water hushes me. Quiet.

"Thank you."

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

Rare fish rush aside to avoid collision as I burrow through the lake's underbelly leaving a trail of woken sand behind. Slosh-slosh in my ears. Noise gone. Darkness complete. I swim and I dream of a place with no sound, a place where the very absence of noise will make my ears ring. Even then I would hear myself, my existence breathing, my dead heart beating, my eyelashes brushing against each other when I open and close my eyes. I could find a place, a desolate cave at the base of some ocean. Even then I'd hear my ears rings with void. Only one place can give me complete silence - death.

I blew my chance.

I'm a coward.

I pretend like I'm dead.

One minute of fantasy is better than nothing.

I float. I can't help but to listen. This deep nothing big makes acquaintance with life, only a few crabs zigzag between the rocks. Their tiny souls a clickety-clack of their claws. I'd have to eat a thousand to even come close to matching a human

soul. I revolt at the thought, I'm an animal who can only think about food.

The man from the market restroom, two kids from the party, all my kills didn't make me warmer one bit. It's a borrowed warmth, because there is none of my own.

I don't want to kill anymore.

Twelve hours since I jumped.

One hour since I dove.

I follow the stream on the bottom, all the way to the sea.

I hit open water, the vastness of it makes me feel free. I fit in its loneliness. I push past coldness so deep, it touches my bones, and I ache to hear it one more time. This is what I'm running from. Hunter's soul. 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 against the skull's walls, making circles in my consciousness, forever restless. I left him to Death, and now he's probably gone. I didn't have enough strength to finish him and get rid of myself. My little selfish me got so scared, my little me wanted so badly to run away, to not face Daddy. It's all my fault, now Hunter is dead and I'm destined to live on.

Suddenly I want a gulp of air. The upward current a column of need, me inside, me wanting out, me heading towards the sky.

I surface. I breathe in. It's night. A few stars twinkle into the velvet of the dome over the mountain tops. The city is miles and miles away. I'm alone.

What is this pain and why can't I push it away?

"Ailen Bright. The girl who pretends too much."

I startle, spin.

"Who is it?" I know the answer but still I yell. "Who's here?"

"You took your turn. You lost. Now I roll the dice."

"What did you do to him?"

"What do you think?"

"It was not his time!" Silence. "Where are you? I can't see." I peer into darkness, but there is nothing there, but I have this feeling I'm being watched.

"What did you do to him? Tell me, what?" I cry.

"Come and see."

Guilt surges through me like a focused jet of scalding hot water, my intestines seared, my brain on fire, my face hot.

"Please! Don't make your move. I'll make up the courage and go back and finish the job. I promise!" I don't know why I say it, it's no use.

"It's too late. It's my turn."

"No!" I cry. Rain starts. The sky weeps for me, because it knows I can't. I wish I could drown in its tears, lose myself

inside and disappear from this world. I only want to listen to Hunter's soul one more time. I try to remember the melody, it slips away. I grab its tail, but it vanishes. There was nothing else I want more.

"I'm not done with mine!"

I slash my arms through the sea.

"Back off, I'm not done with my turn!"

My feet kick up the foam.

"Do you hear me? Back off. Come on, give me a break, I got scared!"

I wait for the answer, there is none. I'm glad and I'm not. Guilt pumps me with speed to get back.

Five hours gone in a blink.

The rain stops.

The sky turns pink then pre-dawn blue.

I slash at the sea.

Its turquoise water stands still as if it's no more than paint in a giant stone bucket. Fog clings to distant mountains, patches of snow rest untouched on the rocks. First sunrays burned my skin and blinded me and I scowl. I want to run from the sun.

"This needs to stop!" I yell at myself now. "I need to stop running away, at least once in my life."

It's the only thing I know how to do well.

"I need to stop running away from myself." It's a whisper, and I know I'm right, because it hurts.

The party is over.

I think of a plan. I need to clean up the mess I made. And I don't mean it as a joke. It's not a joke, not a game. This is real. Kill Hunter, kill Daddy, kill me. If Hunter is still alive.

"That's three turns in a row. Not sure if I want to pass."
Says Death in my head.

"Is Hunter alive?"

"Ailen Bright. A girl who demands."

I an idea wiggles its way into my thoughts.

"You said you need little helpers like me. So I'm game. Use me, until you don't need me anymore. You can dispose of me any time." I say. I'm calm. I know she needs me. It occurs to me that if she didn't, she'd finish me off long ago.

Pause.

"I can."

"Well then, I'm on my way."

She's puzzled. I speed towards the city, hope pumps in my heart.

I make it to the canal, I turn in. First commuter souls make a racket on their way to work, in cars, on bikes, on foot. The hustle of morning intensifies as I close in on the main city

artery - the high bridge, the suicide bridge that I loved so much to gaze down from when thinking about Mommy. About why she jumped. Now I gaze up. I try to decide if I should go to the night club or to Hunter's house when I hear something. I hear a song. And hysterical barking. A siren feeds on someone under the bridge.

I swim by the concrete bank covered in graffiti. Straight ahead hangs a single pocket of mist, its right side rests on the bank, its left side dips into water. A couple bikers point at it from the bridge, mesmerized by the echo of the song seeping out of the cloud mixed with the dog's yelps. Whoever is doing it, is either bold or stupid, I decide, and I want to see who.

I plunge and dare to surface right into the pocket of mist, on its very edge, careful not to make the siren notice me.

Her little body shivers in tune to the song, her arm two colorless insect-sticks, her hair parted into two long pig-tails.

Yoki, the little siren girl.

I wince at the barking, barely making out shapes in the shifting fog. A white poodle thrashes on a taut leash, yelping puffs of steam into the cold cloud. His owner, an elderly lady, slumps over the metal railing, her eyes transfixed, her hair a crown of dandelion fuzz, about to blown away into oblivion. Her soul strings across the mist, leaves her body, and oozes into

Yoki's mouth with an audible pop. Her soul gone, she folds down into a heap of pastel cotton. Yoki sways past the railing and seizes the dog in one mad dash. The dog is hysterical, so is Yoki.

"Shhh, quiet now. Yoki's got you. You like to bark. Barker. I'll call you Barker, ok?"

She kisses the dog and sees me.

"Yoki! You can't feed in plain sight, are you out of your mind?"

"I got Barker, look!" She stretches her arms out. The poodle twists this way and that, its eyes roll in terror. It stopped yelping and only whimpers now and again.

"I see that. Where are the other sirens?"

"They wouldn't come with me. But isn't he cute? He's so soft and warm." She buries her face in the poodle's mane when I hear the boat. There was no mistaking of the purring of the engine.

"Daddy." I grab Yoki. "We need to get you out of here, now. Please put the dog on the bank."

"But I just got it!" Yoki wiggles out of my grip. The dog barks. The fog thins out to the pleasure of the onlookers on the bridge.

The boat comes from the open sea, from where I saw the night before. Does this he was after me the whole time? I have to face him. A memory surfaces from this morning.

I remember Daddy's voice coming muffled through two feet of water, "Ailen, open the door!" Fear jumps my throat, just like then, but I choose to ignore it.

"I will, Daddy, I promise." I whisper.

"Yoki, please, leave the dog, and let's go."

"But! It's my Barker! You can't just take him away from me. I've always wanted a pet. Have you ever wanted a pet really really bad?" She pleads. She reminds me of me, on the night Mommy left to never return.

"I did. I always wanted a dog."

"What kind did you get?"

"Daddy wouldn't let me."

"That's too bad."

The boat turns into canal.

Several people run down the steps to the bank to investigate.

I use Yoki's distraction and yank the poodle out of her hands, but as I lift it to deposit it back on the solid ground, she shrieks, jumps out of the water, and lands on top of us. Her hands close in on the dog, I hear it suffocating.

"You're killing it, let go!" I scream. A man shouts something on the bank, his hand on the elderly woman's body, he points at us, flips open his phone. The boat is visible now.

We struggled above the water, then below it. I'm stronger, but Yoki holds on to the dog for dear life. The dog gulps for air, I hear water slushing down its throat. Great. Now I have to get it back out and revive it too.

The boat is nearing. I hear the motor's purr. Faster. Too late to do anything. Dog firmly in Yoki's arms, Yoki firmly in mine, I kick off and dive, away from the boat, across the canal, deeper into the lake. Then I hear the dog's soul escape its little body. Yoki bites me. I'm so surprised, I let her go.

"Barker! My Barker!" Yoki shakes the dog. Its mane swirls in slow motion, its eyes open, its tongue out, lifeless, bobbing to the rhythm of the shaking.

"He's dead, it's no use." I try to stop her.

"It's all your fault!" Yoki kicks me in the ribs. "You killed it, you did, you did!"

I press my hand over Yoki's 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 the boat stops over our heads.

Boom.

My ears explode with brilliant pain.

If you ever heard dynamite blow up in a river, that's what it sounded like. Me and Yoki, we're fish to float up with swollen bellies, to be collected as an easy catch.

BOOM!

Pain shutters me from head to toe and I go limp. I flex my fingers and toes, I'm weak but can move. I flip my head to the side. Yoki! Yoki is hit much worse. She lets the dog out of her hands and questions me with her eyes, her mouth open into a 'why' as she drifts upward.

I can see her eyes close, my hands on her ankles, I yank her down.

I want to scream but I can't. My vocal cords wouldn't respond. I'm no better than a little child as I shake her like she shook the dog not too long ago, knowing that it won't make her open those eyes.

"Don't you dare dying on me!" I croak.

BOOM!

The sound moves through the murky water in one focused jet. It hits Yoki's head, ripples along her body and exits at her feet. It travels down, rousing a puff of sand as it hits the bottom. I feel Yoki turn into jello in my hands, and then she simply bursts into a thousand of bubbles. Bubbles pop. She's gone.

"No!!!"

My scream shakes me to the bone, shakes the water around me, and the lake answers. It swirls and rushes into a mad undercurrent. I forget who I am or where I need to go.

Time stops.

Nothing matters except that oval shape above me, the bottom of Daddy's boat. A sharp pang singes my throat shut. Something dark and sinister wakes up inside my chest, and it's mad. Mad for being disturbed. It seeps into my mind, fills me with hatred. Irrational, consuming, blind.

Deadly.

Another boom shatters the lake. I merely flinch.

"I SAID, NO!!!"

I leap out of the water in one powerful stroke. I holler a guttery animal moan. Mean energy radiates from me in waves. All living souls vanish into holes and gaps to hide, as their bodies reverberate to my accord. And only Daddy stares at me, his mouth open, his hands on the boat's steering wheel.

I continue upward, I bellow, to him who dared to disturb my quiet, oblivious to anything or anyone in my path, living or dead. My mouth opens wide in a poisoning agony, spitting my terrible voice all over the lake's basin, with echoes bouncing off the bridge, other boats, and the buildings surrounding the lake. You'd run for your life if you heard me. But the boat

can't run. It shakes together with the water. The water plays with it like with a toy.

I land on the boat's deck.

My song resonates with the entire lake. It shakes the boat, it makes its wood crack and splinter.

We stare at each other, Daddy and me, only the cabin's glass between us. Now it explodes to my voice. Now it's gone. Daddy shields his face. He presses his ears closed. He doesn't want to hear me, he never hears me. This time he will.

I lift my head and I howl. The sky amplifies my rage like an enormous loud speaker, and slams it into the lake with immense power. It hits the water like a small mountain, forcing vertical waves to splash the banks and then converge upon themselves. High. Higher. It's a tsunami.

The boat groans under my feet. It's about to split in half.

10.

Have you ever sunk on a boat? Not that paper boat you sent into the gutter by throwing stones, and not that inflatable mattress you thought floats like a boat until it got punctured and went under water with a quick hiss. Have you ever sunk a real motor boat, within minutes, in the middle of a lake? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

Water sweeps over the boat's deck. Good. I want to destroy it. I inhale to let out another cry. The bridge creaks and shakes, people in cars scream, some open the doors and stumble out. I suck out their souls before they die. A car hits the lake. I slurp a few more. I'm on a binge. I want to fill myself to the brim, to be full, to gorge up on this sweetness. I can't stop. One more, a biker blown off by a wave. I only register it's a woman, before I shift my focus to a car that's about to sink. There's a baby on board, her soul impossibly delicious, pure sugar.

I holler more. I holler as loud as I can.

Daddy opens the cabin door and trips, his hands meet the deck in a hope of being able to hold on.

I'm loud enough. He heard me.

So did she.

Death propels over us in a wide arc, aiming at me.

"Stop!" She yells, as she flings the weight of her body and scoops me off the deck. That breaks the flow of my song. Mid-air, I see Daddy get up on all fours, steady himself, stand up and open his arms, reaching for me. I think I see a hint of worry on his face. Suddenly I'm aware of my breathing and have to think about it. I lose it.

We plunge. I struggle.

"No!" I screech, "No, not you, not now!"

I wiggle in her embrace, but she's stronger. The boat sinks fast. I want to make sure that Daddy is fine, but she won't let me go. I hear police cars in the distance amidst the cacophony of human screams and baby wails and car honks, muffled by layers of water above us.

We sink.

"You're hurting me! Let me go!"

"Hurting you?" Death's nose touches mine. "I'm... hurting... you?" She says.

"Daddy's on the boat! The boat is sinking! He's sinking!" I answer.

"Not bad for a first try, I'm impressed." Her lips brush my ears. "Tell me, were you planning to finish him off in the lake?"

"I don't want him to die!"

"It's part of the deal. If you're calling it off, you're playing a dangerous game, Ailen Bright. I'm the one who is calling the rules and you're stepping on my toes. Besides, you've killed all those people - that's my job, not yours."

"I was hungry so I had to feed." I snap.

"Oh, I noticed as much." She looks at me, hard.

"I don't want to do this anymore. I'm tired. I want to go home!" I almost cry. She squeezes me tighter. My ribcage threatens to fracture.

"You're playing my game, by my rules. And you're breaking my rules. How would you like me to end your turn?"

In her eyes there is a terrible absence of any compassion, there is coldness so deep I think it will stop my heart. I dip in and out of her gaze, in a clench of this final fear, when you know there is no way back. When you let all your promises vanish at the touch of the threat to your life, and all you care for is you, not your mom, not your dad, not your pet.

"I don't. I don't want to die." I whisper.

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

She pulls me along, up, up.

We surface to chaos. The bridge lies in the water, broken, a few cars still on it. A helicopter clicks to life with the

distinct "chop-chop-chop" of its blades cutting through other noises. Police cars come to abrupt breaks at both ends of the bridge. The lake is calm as if it never erupted.

I search for Daddy's boat, it's nowhere in sight. I fear for the worst. My heart sinks.

"I'm sorry." I say to nobody in particular, or maybe to all of them, for what I did.

"Sorry for what?"

And I snap. "You! You made me do it. It's all your fault!" I pound on her chest with my fists. "Why me? Why didn't you kill me, why wouldn't you just leave me alone?"

"I always win. I was bored. Then you showed up. You've spiced up my game. You're my new favorite moving piece." She smiles. There is no warmth in it at all.

Disgust tugs at my gut. I want to claw out her pretty eyes, I want to smash her pretty teeth into a gaping hole.

"I hate you." I try to scream it into her face, but it comes out in a wobbled croak.

"Time to make your next move." She says and tugs me with her towards the shore.

"But I don't want to! What move? Where are you taking me?"

"To see your favorite friend."

"Hunter?"

"Who else?" She says, her right arm splashes arcs of drops, her left holds me close to her torso. We move away from the noise of the tsunami's aftermath, hushed to a tolerable level. It's not the water we swim in, it's pea soup. Debris floats up and around us after being disturbed from the bottom of the lake, mixed with clouds of plankton, clumps of kelp and dead fish.

We near the shore. I recognize it. It's the place where I dove into the lake for the first time as a newborn siren.

It's been one day.

"He's alive?" I ask. "You didn't kill him then?"

"Oh, I wouldn't deprive you of the pleasure, would I?"

We hit the shore and came out of the lake. I trot after her, to the woods, onto the pathway.

Pine needles crunch under our feet. Then I see it again. The abandoned pool with its broken walls, jagged windows, a wide open gate like a toothless mouth into a siren's lair. Grey light hangs in shafts of dust over the basin that smells of death and decay, full of writhing bodies, gleeful, hungry. A pile of squirming maggots on top of their catch.

They hold him, they want to eat him so bad.

Hunter.

I gasp out his name.

He looks up.

My heart first surges, then sinks.

"I told you not to touch the boy. Off! Get off him, all you. Go!" Death shoos the sirens out of the pool. They scowl and hiss, but obey. Their long hair brushes the moss off the tiles as they scramble out of the stagnant water, deprived of a treat, mad yet obedient. Some shout back their displeasure, shake fists in the air. Death hushes them with a cry, they scatter through the gaps in the walls and are gone.

I gape.

"Don't just stand there, get in." Death prods the small of my back and I stumble into the freezing water.

"Hunter!" I call. "Hunter, it's me! Are you ok?" He doesn't respond, a mad daze spread across his face. Dark circles make his eyes bluer than I remember. His lips are also blue, from being cold. He looks haggard and tired and wet. I forget I'm a siren, forget I'm dead. I rush to him. I hear his soul, faint, the overpowering melody of all things comfortable, the clanking of dishes and the shuffling of slippers on the wooden floors and the chirping of the birds. How I want to drown in it and to never come back up.

Death appears behind me, as silent as sleep, takes Hunter's face in her hands. "My dear boy, your last wish has been granted." She turns to me. "Don't disappoint me this time. Please. I don't like being disappointed."

"Wait. What? What last wish?" I say, and I understand. "You wanted to die off my song, not hers?"

"How darling of you to explain." Death clicks her tongue loudly after the end of the sentence for a dramatic effect and points her finger at me. "I haven't got all day. Please, proceed."

"I wanted to hear your voice one more time." Hunter says.

"So you made a deal with her? For that? For me to come and sing you a song?"

"Yeah, I love your voice."

"Of course you do. Cause I'm a siren, everyone loves my voice. What, mine sounds especially charming or something?"

"No, it's not like that. For real, I swear. I tried telling you, but you wouldn't listen." A shiver takes over him, he coughs.

"It's not me that you want, it's her. She. I mean, the siren in me, not me, Ailen."

"That's not true. You sound the same, just like that day when we met on the lake, throwing stones. Your voice tinkled like a thousand bells. You kept asking me questions, and I kept answering in such a way, that you'd ask one more, and one more, so I could hear you talk."

I want to cry but I hold it back.

"Hunter, why are you doing this to me?"

"I'm not doing anything. I just care."

I want to say something and I don't know what. We stand in freezing water up to our waists, Hunter leaning against the side of the pool, me standing a foot across. The clouds circle ahead, sending filtered light through the gaps in the ceiling.

Death claps. "Please, spice it up, kids, not enough emotion for me. I want more, more genuine feelings exchanged before the advent of the imminent death. Hunter, tell her how you planned to kill her with one crack of your whip. Go on."

Anger flushes my face, I forget Death is here.

"You did?" I say.

Hunter drops his eyes.

"Oh, it's too much fun to watch. This is not boring at all. Of course he did, darling. He is a siren hunter. Please, continue." Death says.

I shake Hunter.

"You planned to kill me? Is it true?"

Hunter takes my hand. He still has some warmth left. It envelops me, I dare not move so as not to disturb this feeling. Frankly, I don't care what he's about to say, as long as we get to stand like this, together.

I block out the discord of the noises outside, on the lake, the shouting of the policemen and the chopping of the helicopter and all the nearby souls talking. I strain to tune it all out to

hear only Hunter. I watch his lips too, to make sure I don't leave out a single detail of what he is saying.

"I did. But it's not what you think it is." Hunter began.

"I don't think anything." I interrupt. "I get it! I'm a siren, you're a siren hunter. What else did I dare to expect?" I jerk my hand out of his.

Pain flashes his face.

"Just hear me out, ok? Then you can beat me up." His head hangs low, then he steals a glance at me with those blue eyes, and I can't be mad anymore no matter how hard I try. He's nervous, but I wait. I don't care. Whoever dares to interrupt us will have to deal with me, because I can move a whole lake again if I wanted to. I have a flicker of hope, I hope it's about me. I hope he really does care.

"I wanted to distract your dad, ok? Wanted to make him think I will do my job. And my mom is out of meds, so I had to get my first pay. I had no choice."

My hope evaporates.

"I understand." I say and back off.

"Don't! Don't go!"

"I get it. It's fine. Here I am then, do your job."

Hunter studies his hands.

"You remember the game we play?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever wanted to do anything it takes to save someone you love?"

There is not even a trace of my hope left. I don't need to make myself hate Hunter, it happens naturally. In fact, I hate both of them. I hated everyone and everything. It's a quiet hate, something that I felt all along and now it simply got confirmed.

"I did." I say. "I know you love your mom. I wish I had a mother. But I don't. She left me. It's just me and, well, Death over here."

"You forgot about me." Daddy's voice makes me jump. I didn't hear him approach, none of us did. "You always do, always wrapped up in that little head of yours." I know I have to face him, I dare to turn and look.

The light through the pool's gate frames him in a dark outline. Water drips from his hair, down his face, his clothes soaked. His grey eyes study me, his powerful hands at his sides, a whip over his right hip at the ready, legs spread apart in a military stance. I remember being little and badly wanting those hands to hug me and hold me so that I knew that nothing bad could ever happen to me, in those solid hands. He never did.

In the moment of shock, Death wraps her hands around me.

"If you came for her, she is mine. Mine alone. Go away."

"Get your hands off my daughter." He says, his voice calm.

"You can try taking her. She's mine. You all are, one day. There is always that day when you'll die, want it or not."

"Daddy? Daddy, you made it!" I smile. He's alive, he didn't sink, he's here.

"You and me, we'll have a little talk." He says. "But business first."

I clutch Hunter's hand, Death hisses and shoots out of the water, as Daddy cracks his whip and tangles it around her long hair.

11.

Have you ever faced a serial killer? Not the one in the movies while sitting on the couch and biting your nails off. Not like that. Have you ever stood face to face with a man who you know killed many and now has come for you? Have you? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

Death slams on the floor and writhes under Daddy's boot. He cracks his whip again, watching me the whole time, watching for the effect it has on me.

Death sings. Daddy cracks his whip again, and again, and again, until she gags on her song. He cracks it above her head. I can hear the crack, but it has no effect on me.

"This is what happens to women that don't listen. This is what will happen to you." He takes out tape and wraps it around Death's head several times to close her mouth. She lies motionless, knocked out.

"Is this what you did to Mommy?"

"Can you repeat what you said?"

I clear my throat. "I said, is this what you did to Mommy? Because she didn't give you a son?" The second I finish, I want to die from fear. I dared to contradict him, to argue. I want to

disappear. I want to shrink to a size of an insect and crawl into a gap in the concrete's floor, so deep that nobody could get me out.

Daddy walks up to me and places his left hand on my shoulder, then points his right hand with the whip handle at Hunter. "You, dismissed."

Hunter opens his mouth to say something, then glances at me, then crawls out of the pool, his movements slow, cold. I wish I could reach out to him, to comfort him, but I can't move. It seems I froze to the floor under the weight of Daddy's hand, my eyes on the water, afraid to look up. A tugging sensation spreads through my chest. I don't like the feeling of it, 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.

Hunter stands, uncertain. Water drips from his clothes.

"Go! We'll talk later." Daddy says.

"Yes, Mr. Bright." Hunter says and walks out.

"No, don't leave me alone with him!" I want to cry, but my throat dries out and I barely croak. I watch Hunter silhouette against the entrance to the pool. I want to scream but I can't. Daddy's hand has pinned me to this floor forever and all my muscles have atrophied.

Daddy pulls me out of the pool and pushes me towards a broken pool bench.

"Sit."

My knees go to jello and I slouch down. Daddy sits next to me. Death is still on the floor, motionless. I can hear hissing in the woods. I think the other sirens heard the commotion and are on their way back.

I face Daddy's stare. There is no emotion in it, no love, no hate, nothing. I feel like I stare into the eyes of death itself. I'm no longer the Ailen I know, he's no longer Daddy I know.

"Having fun?" His voice makes me shrink deeper.

"What?" I say. My voice comes out like an old feeble woman. I shake from anxiety. He is talking to me, he's actually talking to me. He asked me a question. There are so many things I want to say, so many things to ask. My tongue has a mind of its own and it bloats itself up so thick I can't swallow, let alone move it to produce an articulate sound.

"I've asked you a question. Are you having fun?" He cocks his head to the right, his eyes so big, so frightening. I have to remind myself to breathe. In, out. In, out.

"No." I squeak in a small mouse-like voice.

"That's not very descriptive. Please elaborate."

My tongue unrolls. I think I can talk again. "I didn't want to, I swear." I knew I killed people. I knew that he knew, he saw me do it. He knew it was me who wrecked the whole lake just

an hour ago. He always knew everything. He knew where to find me and Hunter. There was no hiding, no lying. He always saw right through me, and I both liked it and loathed it at the same time.

"We're not talking about your wants here, Ailen. I asked you to please elaborate. Explain to me, *please*, as to what made you to destroy the bridge and to wipe out dozens of lives as opposed to simply satisfying your hunger. What was the goal of the show?"

"It wasn't a show. I swear." But it was. It was to show him that I can. I can sing, I can move an entire lake with my song. But not him. He'd never listen, never hear, never tell me it was good. Never good enough. I have to try harder. I have to show him that I can. I dare to agree with myself. I sit up straight and clasp my knees for support. "It was a warm-up." I deliver my line with the iciest tone I can muster, and stretched my lips into a grin.

"Oh?" Daddy unrolls his whip. "Would you care to let me know in advance next time, Ailen? I wouldn't want to miss another performance, I hear there's some spectacular singing not to be missed." He smacks the whip on the floor, like a tiger would smash his tail on the ground before jumping at prey. And he cuts right into my wound.

"You never came to hear me song in the choir." I say. I try very hard not to cry. "But, no need to wait, I can demonstrate

right here." I dare to stand up, only to see Daddy uncoil his whip and curl it around my neck in one go. The crack deafens me and the pull knocks me off my feet. He pulls me by the neck all the way across the tile floor, so that I get to scrape the crisscross pattern with my fingers. Weakened, again, by my own stupidity. Daddy puts one of his boots on my back, my face pressed firmly against the floor.

"Here is the deal. I've dealt with the likes of you my entire life so don't you try playing games with me. Is that understood?" He presses with his boot harder. I mumble back my agreement. "Good. You will do as I say from now on, and you will report to me at the end of each day."

So he wasn't going to kill me. He was going to use me, just like everyone else has done.

I'm angry, angry at myself. How did I end up on the floor after blowing up an entire lake?

Daddy crouches down and whispers in my ear, pressing the end of the whip in between my shoulder blades so hard that it punctures my skin. "You will be my right hand. Of sorts. You will help me catch other sirens."

I manage an "Uh-hum" in agreement.

"Good." Daddy continues. "Tonight, between the sunset and midnight, they will be feeding at the park by the pier, the one below the market. They usually do. You are to lure them further

into the park, to the parking lot. I will be waiting there with other siren hunters. Understood."

I struggle to respond.

"What did you say?"

I mumbled into the floor.

"I can't hear you." Daddy's lips brush my ear slightly as he hisses into it. I twist my neck to the side with as much force as I can gather, still weakened by the cracking of the whip.

"What if I don't?" I say.

"Then you'll end up like her." He abruptly stands up, and I catch sight of him, poking his whip at Death. She doesn't move.

"Why does it always come to this?" I suddenly scream.

"What did you expect?"

"Why does it always have to be the strong one that wins? It's not fair!"

I want to throw a fit.

I attempt to grab Daddy, but he cracks his whip again and my muscles give out to the vibration of the air. I plop on the floor on my butt. It hurts.

"You think you know what you're doing. You think you're smart, you think you've figured it out." Daddy almost smiles, if you can call the slight crack of his lips a smile.

I hear hissing in the windows as he flips his head to the side. He heard it too. The other sirens peer inside, ready to feed. The clamber over the edge of the windows and spill around Daddy in one moving blanket.

Fear spills into my intestines, into my bloodstream, all the way to the marrow of my bones and the roots of my teeth. I watch them circle him, I watch him take a stance of a fighter and crack his whip. I watch them converge on him. I watch him give me a glance. I don't move, I just watch. I watch them close in and begin their song, I hear Daddy groan with exertion.

I don't move.

Daddy shouts, Daddy looks at me. He shouts for me to come and help.

"I can't hear you." I say. And I don't. I can only see. His mouth gaping open in a scream, in a plea for help, the sirens singing their lethal song.

I take a step back, then another, then I want to run. Suddenly, I want to survive. I can't continue with this plan of killing myself, I have to live. This thought fills me with strength. I find myself, I find my place, I know what I need to do.

And it's not for Daddy, it's for me.

Sirens keep closing in on Daddy in once circle. Tighter, tighter. He slips on the floor. His voice booms across the space as he shouts and cracks his whip and shouts again, on repeat.

And I like it. I like his agony, I can't stop watching it.

I find myself soothed by his cries.

Hunter is here. I turn around.

He grabs my hand.

"Let's get out of here."

I watch Daddy covered with sirens. Mesmerized, I don't move.

"Come on, let's go." He takes my hand. I look at him, I look at Daddy.

"Ailen, please!" Daddy's cry comes out through the song.

"Come on." Says Hunter. "Make up your mind."

I stand in the middle, torn.

To my left, Daddy's fighting the sirens.

To my right, Hunter is about to leave.

I lose all feeling. I see Daddy's hands flail, I hear the sirens sing. Soon, they will take his soul. And I don't care.

I decide.

I take Hunter's hand and he pulls out of this dreadful place. We run. We run to the lake, on the shore, away as far as we can.

Ten minutes.

We run.

Twenty minutes.

We stop. Pine trees surround us and crawl close to the shore of the lake. Rain drops slink off the needles, but the sky is clear, the lake is clear of the traffic. I hear distant noise of the emergency vehicles making their way to and from the bridge.

Hunter folds over to catch his breath. I try to take his hand but he brushes me off.

"Hunter? What happened?" I say.

Hunter stands upright. His face doesn't move, not a single muscle. His eyes lock with mine, and yet they don't. I'm afraid to open my mouth to say anything, when he finally speaks again.

"You're a monster, that's what happened. And I don't even know why I'm still here."

"Why are you saying this?"

"I heard it. I heard everything you said. It was you who destroyed the bridge, who killed all those people. I should've known that. I should've know that all along."

"Ah." I exhale. "I knew this was coming. I tried telling you to stay away from me, but you wouldn't listen. So you finally saw it for yourself." I stretched out my hand and Hunter inches away from it as if something disgusting is about to touch him.

"Life's a zoo, Ailen, and we're all divided into two categories, people and animals. But you're something special, you know that? You're not even an animal anymore, you're a monster." His nostrils blare with hatred, his eyes remain immobile. Dead almost.

If I think I'm dead already, I must be wrong. This is worse than death, this is a continuous torture of dying but not quite being dead yet. Never. I'm losing Hunter. No, I've lost him. I know it. He must be thinking that somehow I can be a siren and yet remain human, such a goody two-shoes girl. Whom is he kidding. He is wrong. We're both wrong. I can on his face that we agree on this point.

"Oh yeah? And who are you?" I brush away his hand. "After practicing taking out tonsils from a siren? And planning to kill me? What does this make you? A glorified siren hunter, reveled by society, to protect them from the likes of me? I thought you were my best friend. But never mind." I drop in the ground and lower my hand between my hands, my knees propped up.

I feel hunter looking at me. I feel I'm being watched. I look back up. He looks like he sees me for the very last time.

"Everything beautiful dies. That's just the way of life. It starts out pretty and it ends up ugly."

"Yeah." I echo. "I agree. What do we do now?"

"What do you want to do?" He asks.

I shut my eyes for a moment.

"If I only knew what would happen because of me jumping off that bridge, I would've never done it. Trust me." I pause.

"Never ever. I swear."

"I believe you."

"How selfish of me to think only about my own pain. How did I not see this before?"

"You couldn't. You had to go through it to see. You couldn't have known what you didn't know in the first place."

"Yeah, you're right. I thought I'd create more love and beauty in the world, by being immortal, by singing beautiful songs, by having super powers and helping people. And what have I done so far? In the course of a single day?" I close my eyes and try to remember. "I've freaked out that old lady at the market, and all the tourists, I killed that little boy's dad, killed those people at the night club for nothing. I failed to save Yoki, and now I've destroyed the bridge and snuffed out a couple dozen more lives. And I've lost you as a friend." I let my head hang.

"No, you didn't." He says.

"Liar."

"I swear!" His voice breaks.

"Too late to change anything! And for one, you can stop pretending and trying to make me feel good." I want to shut him out.

"Hey." He says.

I ignore him.

"Hey, I never gave you the present, remember?" He pulls out the blue box from the pocket of his rain jacket, now torn at the sleeves after the siren attack. Its cardboard is wet and mushy. He peels off the pieces, slides off the ribbon. He knows he got my attention, because now I look out of the corner of my eye, pretending I don't, but dying to know what's inside.

"Here, kitty, kitty." He mocks.

"Shut up!" I say, but I stand up to look.

A silvery shape peels out of the wet paper, with the help of his clumsy fingers.

"Here, let me." I reach out.

"Nope It's my job. You wait." He brushes me off and continues to peel.

"It's a harmonica!" I gasp.

He places it in my hand. An ornate 'A' is etched into its top. Curiosity wins over politeness as I turn it over and am surprised to see myself staring back at me, etched into the body of the harmonica. Me smiling.

"Did you draw this?" I ask.

"It's you." He glances at me, then at the harmonica, and his cheeks turn red which makes him mad.

"I see that." I say. "I was just... I didn't mean to..." I trail off, unsure what to say next.

"You're such a bad liar for a siren, you know that?" Is it a hint of joke that I hear? My heart leaps all the way up. "And you look ridiculous."

I looked down at myself. A torn muddy wet sweatshirt spills over dirty jeans, also wet, curled up over feet covered in pine needles and sand.

"I hate this outfit," I try really hard not to smile.

It's been a little more than a day since I jumped.

It's the first time since that morning that I feel good. I feel like we're on a backpacking trip, and somehow, amidst the craziness of it all, I feel normal. I chase the thought away. I never was normal, never will be. I might as well accept that fact once and for all, especially because I have not much left to live anyway. I inhale.

"Something wrong?" Hunter says.

And then hunger leaps its ugly head into my stomach. Wait, what? I've had a bunch of souls just an hour ago, is it time to feed again? How long do they last, anyway?

"Let's get moving." Hunter decides for us, and I follow his lead. It feels good, to rely on someone and now having to decide what to do next, even if just for one minute.

I feel like I belong.

We come across a parked boat.

"Hey, that's called stealing!"

"We're only borrowing it for a little while." Hunter unties the rope and jumps inside, motioning with his arm to me. "Come on, get in."

I step in. I watch the shore, Hunter watches me.

"Can you do that little trick of yours again? That humming you did last time?"

"Sure." I say and inhale. As I begin to hum, the boat moves, first feet, then yards away. Then I hear them, then I see them, then Hunter sees them too. A pack of sirens peer through the pine trees and come out onto the sand, a moment's hesitation before they step into the water.

12.

Have you ever raced sharks? When you know you can't outswim them, yet you paddle away as fast as you can, not looking back, but waiting for that jaw to clench on your foot and yank it off with a sickening crunch? Have you ever raced sharks like this? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

Sirens lunge in a burst of excitement, flap their feet in the air one more time, and vanish under the water. The lake bristles at that, stretching its toothless smile into a series of waves. One, two, three. Gone.

"Took them a while." Hunter says. I detect nervous notes in his voice. "Looks like the hunt is on."

I stop humming. Guilt washes over me. "Hunter, what have I done? I shouldn't have left him like that. I should've fought."

"For what?"

"He's my dad!"

"So. You're his daughter. But you know what? He'd kill you in a heartbeat. So why should you save him when he's been hating you your entire life?"

"No, he didn't!" I'm angry and hurt. Tears in my eyes. Push them back, push them back. Damned, go back! I'm not going to cry.

"Oh, so you call this love. Ok. Is this one of those twisted love-hate relationships that qualify as a norm? Well, sorry to break the news to you, Ailen, but it's not."

"How would you know. At least he stayed. He didn't leave me like your dad did when your mom got sick!" I said too much. Hunter's face drains blood. Gets pale, then dark. Dusk of circles under his eyes. He's old, weathered by his pain. Added more by my words.

"Don't ever mention this. Ever again. Understand?"

"And why not? What's so special about it that can't be said out loud?"

"Just keep your nose out of my life." He fumes. His want for his dad so plain on his face, I wish I could take back everything I said.

Whoosh. Whoosh-whoosh.

"You hear that?" I say.

"Hear what?"

"The sirens, they're close to the boat. Another minute, and they'll catch up." I heave my chest up and down, too angry to start the humming again.

"Go ahead, do your magical thing and get us out of this. You always manage to. Come on."

"Oh, now you need me all of a sudden?" I cross my arms in the gesture of make-me-or-else.

Thirty seconds.

"I thought you're smarter than this." He says and picks up the paddles. Plop-swish, plop-swish. Muscles roll under his skin. The boat moves. Not fast enough, nowhere near fast enough for us to escape them.

"Ouch. That hurts. Oh, I'm so hurt I can't even breathe." I say, but his gaze is stronger than my resolve. Head down, I study my fingernails. Their blue tint that of a corpse, their skin akin to wet paper with traces of veins carrying water to and from my dead heart. I hear the melody of his soul.

Ten seconds.

I dare not to disturb the flow. I'm lucky to sit next to him and to savor this, when the unthinkable happens. He takes my hand. I don't move, for fear of him taking it away.

"I'm sorry." He says.

They arrive. Arms snake out of the water. An octopus of lust, hell bent on getting the food they want.

And I hum.

We propel forward. Siren's arms close in an empty fist over the memory of the boat. Two seconds ago we would've been a rare

occurrence of crawling maggots in the middle of the lake. Now we're gone.

We hold hands. He's silent. I hum.

I listen for sirens. Nothing.

We speed into the canal. Into the noise of the city, annoying and constant. Sadness takes over me in waves, sadness for not being good enough. I can't weep, so the sky weeps for me. It opens into a downpour.

Ten seconds, and we're drenched.

Rain pummels the streets. A patchwork of doors and windows stretches along the bank. Tall street lights turn on to glower in the mist, rare passersby cower in rainproof coats to hide from the bone-chilling humidity in the air. But I love it. Rain makes me happy again. I watch the drops plummet through the air and I stick my tongue out to catch them.

"Two!" Hunter shows me his tongue.

"You're breaking my flow!" I say. "Watch this."

I inhale and hum to the rain, then stick out my tongue. Somewhere high in the cloud drops form a column and rush down. My face gets splattered with them as I swallow.

"Two hundred. Can you beat that?"

"That's not fair!"

"I win!"

"You just wait."

I laugh. Hunter smiles.

This is it. One minute of life as it's supposed to be. A trip on a boat. A girl and a boy having fun in the rain. When they get cold, they have a hot drink. When they get tired, they go home. Where dinner is waiting, and the loving hands of someone who cares. A pillow, a blanket, and a long deep sleep.

Hunter paddles to direct the boat and I snap out of my thoughts. We dock at the bay, by the pier, connected to the buildings on the water by walking bridges full of puddles. Across the street the neon lights of restaurants and bars glisten like a distorted mosaic through the rain, cars spit out and collected bar hoppers. And beyond the strip of the restaurants a pier park stretched into the gloom. Tall thin trees. Patches of grass. Shopping carts piled with bundles of clothes. Ground littered with bums, plastic garbage bags split over their heads to ward off the rain.

"The feeding ground." I say.

"It's hunting ground for us." Hunter says.

"How many of you are out there?"

"As many as you, I'd imagine."

"So you don't know?"

"I just started. I have no idea."

"I don't like this place, let's get out of here."

"Roger that."

He paddles and I hum.

I hum us out of the city to the open ocean. The sky darkens. Nigh is coming. The rain stops.

I pause to catch my breath. The boat shakes in the waves. The shore miles away, with tiny lights glistening in the oncoming dark.

"This is just wrong." Hunter says.

"What is?"

"You, a siren. Me, a hunter. Us sitting here. All of this. It's just wrong, you know what I mean?"

I nod. "I know."

"Ailen, why did you do it?"

"I had to."

"Did you, really? Was there not other way?"

Was there? I never stopped to really think why I did it, it just seemed the logical thing to do, it all led from one little thing to another, from Mommy stepping off that bridge to Daddy trying to control my every step, to him wanting a son and not a daughter. To Daddy never hearing me, never even coming to my choir practice.

"All I ever wanted was for him to hear me sing, just once."

"So you decided he'd listen if you turn into a siren?"

"No. I just wanted to die."

"Why?"

"Because there is nothing worth living for."

"Yes there is." Hunter says.

"Maybe for you, not for me. I'm empty."

"No, you're not."

"Like you know."

"I do."

"I caused that whole bridge to collapse."

"So I heard."

"I killed people for food."

"Aha."

"And I wanted to kill you!" Sudden hunger makes me cry this out. "I want to kill you now, for food!"

"No, you don't."

"Stop saying 'no' to me!" I yell. "I'm just not the girl for you, Hunter, would you get that into that stupid brain of yours?" I tap on his temple. "Not worth the effort, get it? Screwed up, broken, and cold. How many times do I have to tell you?" I rain my fists on him. It must hurt, because I'm strong. He lets me do it until I stop. Until I get it all out.

Then he lifts my face up.

"Feel better?"

"Yeah." I say.

"Good." And he kisses me. I give in. His soul sings the secret dream of my life. Late night fishermen's boats cruise

past us across the sea. I don't care if they see. Nothing exists for me except the tingling of this warmth. I want more. I don't want this to end. We sway. I love this motion, this rocking, this...

Bump.

The boat tips over, we break the kiss in the water.

"What the hell?" Hunter yells.

"I think we've been hit!"

And I'm right.

We splash in a tangle of surprise and anger and fear. Hunter yells, I yell. I twist around to see. A gillnetter bobs on the waves. We dip under water, head and all. I see the net. We're inside. It lifts. The drum turns, the net tightens. I thrash to get out, get tangled.

I want to sing, I want to move the entire sea like I moved the lake. But my gills are cut with the strings of the net, and Hunter is fainting from the lack of air. I can't, I can't.

"We need to get out!"

I press on the net. It doesn't give. I don't see it. Sirens don't see certain colors just like fish don't. I curse. The clank of the chain. We're closer to surface. The drum rotates. The noise intensifies, as if a cloud of bees decides to descend on me, all at once, their buzzing magnified ten times. I clasp my ears.

I push my legs against the net. A moment of darkness, then bright light. Two lights sear into me from the gillnetter, and we're in the air, and we're dropped on the deck.

Two men, with big clunky headphones, in fishermen's overalls, peer at us, their features sharp and sinister in the electric light. I sense the lurk of the fear in their bones. It gave me an immediate satisfaction, and I think I even manage a smile.

One of them, the tall haggard looking one with irregular stubble covering his chin, points a flashlight at me. Blinded, I retract. Hunter groans. The drone of the metal chain unrolls and I twist in pain, cover my ears, as if it can help. I try to make out the people on board. Two, no, three. There is one more in the cabin.

"Would you look at that." Says the tall man, his soul jumps in fear. "Let's get this done and get out of here."

"God almighty, it's just a couple of kids!" The other says, the squat short man with a round friendly face, scathed by winds into a red muzzle of a beer drinker. "Hey boy, are you all right?" He leans over to touch Hunter's face.

"You want your pay, you keep your mouth shut. Let's haul them in and be done." They push us down into the belly of the boat (have to research later to find out the correct type of the boat and how it's actually done). The short man leaves, while

the tall one mutters under his breath, his fingers on his coat, uncertain, then he too leaves for the cabin.

Then, bam, the door slams shut, the lights and the sound go out at once.

Disoriented, I feel around for Hunter, I call his name, but talking hurts. My words sound hollow in the hushed silence.

"Are you hurt?" Hunter peers into my face, but my thoughts are already elsewhere.

"What's happening?" I say. My voice comes out dull. I sing a note. All sharpness and thrill gets sucked out of it the second it leaves my lips.

"It's soundproof!"

"Course it is." Hunter says.

"How so?"

"It's a siren hunter's boat. I can tell."

"Oh yeah? So you're the smart one here? Ok then. 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! We'll figure it out when we're there." He stomps on the floor in frustration.

"When we're where? When we'll somehow manage to open the metal belly of this beast, quickly, too, before those guys are back, then we'd swim out and fly off into the night sky, on some

magic wings, and land on a paradise island with a loud splat?"

It's not the time to be sarcastic, but I can't help myself.

"What do you suggest?" Hunter says angrily.

"I'd survive swimming in cold water for hours, but not you."

"What do you care?" His voice catches at the end. I immediately feel awful.

"Why so bitter all of a sudden?" It comes out wrong, of course. I reach out, but Hunter jerks his hand away. "What's wrong? What did I say wrong?"

Pause.

"I'm just scared is all." Hunter deflates. He drops his gaze to the floor and tinkers with the end of his rain jacket sleeve.

"So you're mad at me cause you're scared? First, you're not scared, then you are. Scared of what? I don't understand. I—"

"Scared of losing you. Again."

I don't know what to say. And I didn't need to, because before I can say anything, a voice comes alive behind us, in the corner of the boat's belly.

"Ailen Bright. What a catch."

That's one leech I badly want to see wriggle to death at the moment, and that's her.

"You're alive?" I gasp and turn around.

"Lovely, I must say. I'm tearing up here. Frankly, I couldn't hope for more. Thank you, thank you. What a game."

"You!" I start.

The door over our heads opens. Two fishermen in headphones materialize on either side. The tall one reaches for Hunter, but I pushed Hunter aside and pull the man in, head down.

I hear Hunter yell something but I tune him out before he can stop me. I sing. I inhale and forced my entire being into the air. And it ends there, because a sound explodes around me and then in my head, and I go limp.

"Unless you want to hurt your lover boy here, I suggest you save your breath. Ailen." Daddy pronounces my name as if he struggles with each letter.

"Daddy?" I gasp.

"I'm your father. You do as I say. We're going home."

Bam!

The sonic boom explodes next to my ear.

I black out.

13.

Have you ever burned at the stake? When you smell your own hair singed with heat, hear your skin crack as it starts to blacken and curl and split, the sweet vapor of your juices wafting up in your nose, your brain about to boil. Have you experiences any of this? I thought not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

My chest burns. My gills feel cracked and dry. I open my eyes. I'm on the floor of a padded room. A single light flickers on padded ceiling through a net of protective wires. Series of square pillows cover walls the color of dirty sand. I smell the stench of fake leather and I hear nothing. Try moving. No use. White cotton holds me in a cocoon, same cotton fills my mouth. I can't move a finger, but I can bend. I flex like a caterpillar pinned under a stick. Wiggle. Roll over. Retch. Pause for breath. Roll again.

Two minutes.

One more flex. To the wall. Bend, hit the wall with my feet. Once, twice, three times. Hit again. Nothing, no sound. Not even the tiniest vibration. How many layers of concrete does it take?

I hit the wall again, then again.

Paused to rest. Hit again. Repeat.

One hour. Two? I've lost sense of time. Is it night or day?

Feet stomp on the wall one more time.

Something gives. The jingle of keys, the turn of the lock.

Door opens. Enter familiar face. I hear his soul, I don't need to see, yet I raise my head and look him straight in the eyes.

Daddy came to check on me, what a treat.

He holds my gaze, steps inside, closes the door.

Three seconds, that's as long as I last.

Terror flash in my gut. All courage gone, back on the highway of fear.

His obvious distaste hits me with such force, I cringe. I don't want to see. That grey hair pulled away from strained forehead, those raised questioning eyebrows. Those eyes drill that into mine. The air fills with chlorinated smell of faucet water, freshly scrubbed hands, and soap. I breathe in, ready to faint.

He hovers a hand over me in that gesture of parental impulse to console. "There, there. Quiet now. So nice to have you back." His face blocks the lamp.

I shrink, my tongue and limbs tied, flat on the floor, nice target for his shoes, to be stepped on and kicked and kicked. I expect no less.

"You all right?"

Eat my guts, I want to say. Like you care.

His soul wavers with a tint of fear. I smile. He leans closer, face hard.

"Sorry, I couldn't quite hear you. What was that you said?"
His hand curls over an ear, all attention.

I go through a repertoire of foul words in my mind, from bastard to asshole to creep. I try humming them. My throat wouldn't budge. Some mumble, ragged nasal breathing. I glance back.

"What you don't understand is, your future is what's at stake." Daddy stands, I glean the bottom of his shoe. He kicks my neck right by the gills, direction swift and precise. Hear the sound of impact. Yelp into cotton. Fold onto myself. That's what I do. My Daddy, he stands and looks. I witness the sole of his shoe one more time. A twisted neck later, I'm back to our lovely exchange of a family gazing.

It'll take more than that, Daddy, you know that, I'm sure. Eyes can talk. I see my message reflect in his face.

"What you don't understand is, life is hard. It's not all clear water, sand castles, and sun. It's a mirage. The second you dip a foot in the water, you sink into a swamp. What I want you to learn is, good things come to those who wade all the way through, to the other side."

Another kick.

"Oh, does it hurt? Tell me how you feel." He strokes my gills with one finger, gnarled and thick. I wince. The muscles behind his ears stretch his lips into a long thin grin, toothy and cold.

I look straight into his watery colorless eyes.

"What I want you to learn is, discipline is the answer. Learn to suppress the pain, learn to carry on even when you feel like you want to die." He steps on my neck. I can't breathe. Blood swelling in my vessels, blood filling my eyes, blood pulsing in my ears. That's how it feels. My gills open and close. I can't be strangled to death, yet I suffer the pain all the same.

My cry for help is taped shut.

One minute.

Foot off. He lets go.

"Push down the pain. Practice silence. Good."

I breathe in through the nose, sharp. My nostrils flare. His face convulses in disgust, he steps away from me as if from a road kill that stinks.

"Listen to me, Ailen. Silence is what makes you think. Noise is akin to chaos. It distracts you. Without discipline you're nothing, just a piece of sweet meat. Think about your life, think what you want."

I want to sing!

"Contrary to what I think, I care for you. Deeply. That's why I'm being so hard on you. I want to help you carve out a place in this world. When we cut your vocal cords, you'll be useful again. You can help me with an important task. You can help me kill the sirens, every one of them, and I'll let you stay alive."

A chill runs down my spine. I want to shake my head 'no.'

He pounds a fist on the door. It creaks open. I want to gasp, I want to turn away, I want to be deaf. I don't want to hear! Not now, not this. Not the melody of the happiness I can never have.

Hunter. His head down, he takes a timid step, wheels in a metal gurney.

"Strap her in."

"Yes, Mr. Bright."

He never takes his eyes off the gurney, readying the straps, so I can't quite see his face. He leans in to hoist me up, and I see his face now, tight mask with a hint of grief and strain.

"Hunter!" I say into the gag. "Don't do this, please."
Hushed mumble comes out.

"Don't talk." Daddy says. "It's better that way. Learn to be quiet."

Beads of sweat prickle Hunter's forehead, then he forces himself to the task of heaving my body off the floor, a bundle cloth, anger, and fear. Over his shoulder. Off on the gurney. Legs down, back straight. He straps in my feet with brown leather bands, buckles them in. Two more bands over my torso, crisscross. One more over the forehead. Done.

"Good job, Hunter. You know where to go."

"Yes, Mr. Bright."

Roll into an ugly beige corridor, lined with a few identical doors. Everything here is soft. Padded walls. Carpeted floor. Even the doors have a layer of foam underneath the fake leather that stinks of damp hair, glue, and decay.

Soundproof. Yell all you want.

Slowly, it comes to me. The forbidden trap door. The place I never dared to explore. Not that I could, it was always locked.

I'm in the basement of our house.

We pass a door. I think I hear a song? I think I feel another siren? I'm not sure. What I'm sure about is this is where they go. I've been sleeping above this my entire life. Shudder takes over my thoughts. I want to throw up.

We stop in front of a door that has a little red sign. Daddy's so quiet, so important. His hand in his pocket. The

clickety-clack of keys, smooth on insert. The turn of the spindle, the click of the bolt. Hinges groan, door opens.

Click.

Bright light floods me with tears. I'm blind.

Hunter props me against the wall. I blink and take in the room. I wish my eyes were gagged, not my mouth.

The room is not padded, it's solid concrete, empty except for a raised platform in the middle and a white ceramic tub on top. It's a bathroom gone wrong, with leather straps tied over metal rings embedded in the tubs sides, a tall faucet over one end, and a tray of metal tool on the other.

My guts fills with lead.

"Please, proceed." Daddy waves a hand at Hunter.

Hunter unstraps me, picks me up gently and lays me into the tub, buckles me in, tight with tension under Daddy's watchful eyes. I study his face, he turns his head sideways so as not to make eye contact. I can't even moan, cotton stuck all the way down my throat, but I burn a hole in his forehead, staring, and he finally looks up.

"Hunter, please," I say. Well, I try. Nothing really comes out. He's nervous, I can hear. His soul a mix of sad sweetness, guilt, and shame. I let myself get lost in it, just to retreat from reality into the sound. The sound that only I can hear.

Daddy steps over and checks the straps.

"Good. You can start."

I want to kick the bathtub, but I can't. I try making a sounds, I form a thousand escape plans in my head, then I feel the energy leave me. It's final, I know it, there is no way out. It's this knowledge you get when locked with a stranger under the ground, when you hope against hope, but you know it's too late. I try to focus on something else, on the distant souls of the trees and the lake behind the window. Seems like they answer to my ragged breathing, or maybe I simply imagine it.

Click.

Another bright light shines into my face, tears stream down my cheeks, and I can't turn my head to avoid it. I couldn't turn my head to avoid staring into them. Even when I closed my eyelids, they still shone through, there was no escape from them. The Boss entered the room and brought with Eyes closed, no use. Light shines through the eye lids, making everything a dim shade of blue.

Daddy stinks of disinfectant and sick anticipation. He wants it so bad, I can tell.

"Ailen, listen to me. Hunter will fill the tub, cut open your throat, and remove your vocal cords. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes. Nice and clean. I can hold your hand, if you want."

I'm scared. You're not my father, you're a butcher, I want to die. I wish I was never born. Not for this.

Ailen Bright, the gutted fish. My bed is the pile of my steaming entrails, iridescent in this fake light. My gut is my song, my song is my life. If he takes it away, will I live? Will he cut me open just to see what I'm made of?

"Let me know if you're uncomfortable, ok?" Daddy says. So caring, I want to puke. So steady that it seems he has no emotions at all. "Hunter, we haven't got all day."

Hunter nods, wipes sweat off his face, pulls on resin gloves, turns the faucet. Screech, screech, flow. Water over my feet. The tub half filled, the tub full. Water over my face, so wonderfully cold. The cotton soaked. I can breathe through my gills.

Hunter takes something from the tray of tools and hangs with a knife in hand, I can see him through the layer of water. He stands at the ready.

Ten seconds, a minute.

"I'm waiting?" Surprise written all over Daddy's face, blurred by the water I'm looking through.

Hunter's hand shakes. Daddy places his hand on Hunter's shoulder.

"Steady, boy. Steady yourself. You did this before. Just like practice, remember? Breathe."

Hunter shakes.

"You can do it. Reach in, a simple slit, take out the cords, staple the gap, and done."

Hunter nods. I try to sink deeper.

He dips into water and cuts the cotton off my neck. Carefully. Gently. Not a scrape on my skin.

"There. Now, cut inside. It's easier under the water, softer. You'll see."

Pause.

"Go on."

Hunter drops the knife.

It floats down the tub, under my back, turns a few times and lies still. Hunter steps back.

"I won't. I won't do it. I can't. Do it yourself!" I hear tears in his voice. "She's my friend!"

"All right. I thought this might happen. Go home, tell your mother you've been fired from the job and she won't be able to afford her meds. Go ahead."

One minute.

Hunter reaches under me, takes out the knife, looks me in the eyes.

"Ailen, please, forgive me if you can."

My eyes bulged out in fear. I tighten my muscles, I hear the fabric give. Not enough. It can't move. I try again, until

Daddy with a tired expression on his face takes out a whip and cracks it over the tub. I hang limp.

Hunter lifts the knife.

I yell at myself.

Do something! Scream! Sing!

Instead, I shut my eyes, Daddy pries my eyelids open.

No, I don't want to see it!

"Look, Ailen, look. It's a state of the art procedure, you don't want to miss it." And I know Daddy's soul is dead. That's what makes him immune, there is nothing to eat. It died a long time ago, and Hunter's soul will die too. Every siren hunter's soul is like that.

No matter how far I roll my eyes, I still see every little detail of what's being performed. Hunter lowers the knife and with one blow cuts me open, through fabric and skin and meat. I shudder in pain and scream a muffled cry. I hear him cry too. I hear slime ooze out of the hole in my throat, I can see it floating up in clouds of goo. Hunter digs into the cavity and touches my vocal cords.

Nothing happens, at first. Then I feel like a mini-earthquake shakes the building, then my body turns to liquid as if someone threw a stone deep into my middle. I'm a circular wave, two, three. I turn to ripples, reach a crescendo and shimmer.

BUZZ!

Hunter jerks his hand out with a loud yelp and I hear him collapse on the floor.

14.

Have you ever conducted electricity? Have you ever stuck your fingers in the socket, dropped a working hairdryer while sitting in a bathtub, or touched an open wire in the rain? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

Me, I'm an electric eel, happy to shock anyone who dares touching my voice. Daddy, he's bent on having Hunter do it.

"Get up, Hunter. Be a man and finish the job." Daddy's voice comes muffled through two feet of water. Cold water. Cold anger curls up my throat, but I suppress it. "Get up, I said! Finish what you started." I hear a kick and a moan. The pattern repeats. It's me he's kicking, not Hunter. It's me who hurts, it's me who wants to cry. It's me who's bitter, helpless, the wet discarded cotton roll soaked in tears. Useless, useless, useless!

"Get up, you little peace of shit!"

We used to play a game with Hunter. Have you ever. He asked me once, have you ever met a siren? And I said, what's a siren? And he said, the one with a voice that makes you do things. The one that can sing your soul out. The killer kind.

I am the killer kind. The 'me' I have to stop pretending I can ignore.

"A minute of fantasy is all I have." I think, and I get mad, really really mad.

I strain to expand, to break out of this cocoon, to snap off the straps. They stretch and moan. Rigid. I grunt with effort. A few threads tear. Then it's a dozen, then a hundred. I give it all I have. Eyes closed, I concentrate on dissolving their very atoms into liquid. When I look up, there is no bathtub anymore. Has it expanded, have I shrunk? Shrunk to a single maggot shriveling in open sea, I float up and there she is again. The siren. A maggot like myself, wrapped in her own hair, with mouth taped and eyes proclaiming pain.

She doesn't need to talk, I know what she'll say.

Ailen Bright, the girl without a spine.

I nod.

I know what to do.

Open the eyes. Back in the tub. Hunter's pale face over the water, Daddy holding his hand. I'm full of quiet concentrated rage. There's nothing left in me but this. It clears my mind.

I close my throat, I knit it shut.

I hum.

I feel my way through ceiling, through the walls, up onto the roof where me and Hunter used to gaze at stars. It's night. It's full of drizzle. I hum to it and it hears me.

One second.

From droplet to droplet, rain carries my song all the way into the cloud. The cloud shrinks, collapses on itself like a giant magnet, pulling moisture from miles away, all into one spot, directly over the roof of my house.

And then it gushes down in one focused cascade, towards the roof, through several feet of concrete like it's no more than dirty sand packed by a child on a beach.

Two seconds.

I'm in the zone. I hum some more. I pull and nag and coax every single water drop in my vicinity to move. Water spurts through every crevice and hole and gap it finds and floods the room. I hear it rising.

Then I see Daddy.

We lock eyes, he smiles very sweetly.

He holds a gun to Hunter's head.

My humming dies.

"No!" I yell into the gag. Hunter slumps against Daddy like a rag doll, eyes wild, nose bloody.

"Do we have an agreement, Ailen?" Daddy says. "No singing unless instructed. I'm tired of repeating this, but didn't I

tell you that if you wanted to see your lover boy alive, you better cooperate? Please?"

All I can do is nod.

"Good. Let's try this again, shall we?"

Hunter tries to say something.

"Please, no talking. It's better this way. Hold on to the wall, Hunter, the floor is wet. Let's get out of here, to some place nice and dry. There we'll have a talk."

Daddy reaches over my feet and unplugs the tub. Water gurgles down, a slow swirl. He walks over to the other side of the tub.

Splosh, splosh.

His face blocks the light. Buckles unstrapped. I'm a swaddled baby. I've been bad and I wet myself.

Three days since death.

Three days since birth.

This is my dream. This one minute of fantasy that's better than nothing, worth every second, paid for with death. Daddy coming to change me into nice clean clothes, swaddle me up, and sing me to sleep. Daddy yanks me out of the tub, but I think he lifts me with a soft smile. He hoists me up and over his shoulder, but I feel like he strokes my face, telling me what a bad bad girl I'm to wet myself from head to toe. He bumps my head on the door sill, but I imagine he throws me into the air

so high that I brush the ceiling with the top of my head. He drags me into his room and stuffs me into a chair, rips off wet cotton, but I know he means to unswaddle me, give me a warm bath, wrap me up in a towel and give me a kiss.

He ungags me.

"You're not allowed to talk unless I tell you so. Do you understand?"

I nod.

"Good."

He slaps his desk in frustration, but I think it's a clapping game, and I know how to play. I'll pick up the rhythm, I'll learn the tempo, I'm a smart little girl. I search his eyes to see if he knows it, to see if he approves. I won't cry, I won't cry, I won't cry.

But I almost do.

Hunter slumps into a brown overstuffed chair next to me, directly across Daddy's desk. Its surface so clean, it gleams in the single desk light, the back wall covered with dead sea stars, dried rare specimen of fish behind glass in wooden frames, and shelves full of shells.

I see one, the blue oval shaped one, the one Mommy gave to Daddy the night she left, to step off the bridge.

"Are you all right, Hunter?"

"Yes, Mr. Bright."

"Good."

He asks Hunter first, not me. Of course, Hunter is more important. He is the son my father never had. He is a siren hunter. I wonder how many siren hunters are out there. I wonder how Daddy chooses men to become siren hunters, I wonder what being fired from the job means. Perhaps it means serving as choice meat for newborn sirens in training. Like me. The thought makes me hungry. I yearn for Hunter's soul.

Daddy makes himself comfortable behind his desk. His grey hair glistens white in the single lamp, the rest of the room drowned in shadows.

"Do you have an explanation for your behavior, Ailen?"

I flare up.

"I wanted to sing."

He has this pained expression on his face. I can hear his soul shudder in disgust, as if he has to dig in a pile of rotten fish with his bare hands.

"Shh. Practice silence. Talk quietly, please. Answer the question."

"It's what I was born to do, to sing."

Daddy cradles his head. "Do we have to go through this again?" He reaches for the gun, points it at Hunter. Terror blinds me.

"I talk. You listen. I ask, you answer. What part of the word 'answer' do you not understand, Ailen? Take a lead from Hunter."

Hunter hangs his bruised face into his hands.

"Remember, noise is akin to chaos. Organize your mind, learn to obey. Answer my question."

A stream of words pushes its way out of my mouth in a stutter, before I can arrest it or even realize what I'm saying.

"You did this to Mommy."

Strike.

A whip cracks by my face. I slide down the chair. I curse my brain, I want to kick myself, I bite my tongue really hard. Tears spring from my eyes. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it!

"Sometimes I wish I was mute." I say.

He doesn't hear me. He never hears me.

"Let's not strain from the topic, please. Hunter is eager to hear the details of this particular assignment, so he can finally return home and check on his mom. Right, Hunter?"

"Yes." Hunter says.

I'm afraid to look up. I devour my bare bloodless feet, Hunter's sneakers, and Daddy's shiny oxfords sticking from under the table.

"What you don't understand is, siren hunters don't make mistakes." Pause. "Since you two are so inseparable, I'll send you both on a job."

He looks us over.

"Hunter, you'll be in charge. Ailen, you do what he tells you to do. Is that clear?"

"Yes." We answer.

"You'll go to the siren's feeding ground. You'll kill every single one of them. Those that escape you'll track down to the abandoned pool and finish them there. If you complete this, Ailen, I'll allow you to keep your voice."

"You got it. Mr. Bright." Hunter smiles, clotted blood peels off from under his nose.

"Excellent." I detect irritation in Daddy's voice. Sweetest sound in the world. Second to Hunter's soul.

"Any questions?"

"What if we fail?" Hunter asks.

"You're asking the wrong question, Hunter. I thought I made myself clear. Siren hunters don't make mistakes, siren hunter's don't fail."

The message is clear. Do it, or die.

We got it at the same time, and turned to look at each other, momentarily turning back in surprise.

"What you may never forget is, siren hunters don't leave witnesses." Daddy drones on about the rules, but I don't listen I don't hear.

I watch Hunter. He adopts a cheerful expression and nods to everything with enthusiasm. I can sense it's fake, but it makes me mad all the same. I want to scream, to grab him by the collar and shake him and tell him that this is serious, to wipe that smirk off his face, but I can't. Daddy's watching. And I'm afraid to make another move, because I don't want Daddy to hurt Hunter any more.

Daddy finished his speech with a few broad hand strokes in the air.

"Remember, Ailen. You complete the assignment, your lover boy here stays alive." Hi smiles. I don't know if I can muster enough hate to radiate out of my eyes, afraid to utter a sound. Daddy holds a whip in his hand. It imprints in my retina, I stare at it so hard.

"I'll be watching you. Off you go. You can use one of my kayaks."

I open the door. The house I lived in, now so foreign. The floor boards creak in the same places, but it's not the same. There is no ground under my feet, there is another layer of padded terror, and maybe more. I walk past my room. I don't even want to look.

The front door opens with a creak. I ran out of this door three days ago, into what? Into this, into being trapped again, worse then before.

Hunter takes my hand.

"We'll be all right."

"I hope."

We walk to the lake, to where Daddy usually parks his boats. It's a rainy night, with rare vessels in the distance barely breaking up the slow drone of the highway nearby. Nothing prevents us from jumping into the water and swimming away. Into the open water, into freedom.

We stand by the shore, we hold hands, to steady them from shaking. Rain pours down our faces, but neither of us made an effort to wipe it off.

"I'm sorry." I say. "It's my fault you got dragged into this. I should've never—"

"Ailen, I'm a siren hunter, remember? One way or another, I would've ended up doing this. You only accelerated the pace." Hunter's words drop like stones into water. He motions me to the kayak, I sit, he pushes it off the shore.

"I didn't mean to." I say and hum the boat to speed.

"I know." Hunter's voice catches in a cough.

There is nothing else to say. Hunter falls silent. His soul's steady sound envelopes me in the familiar warmth. And

maybe for a few minutes I stop caring about what would happen. Humming, sliding along the lake on a boat together makes me happy. I close my eyes. I feel at home. His melody tunes out other noises, the whizzing of the cars, the discord of human unrest as it presses on the water from all shores, unoriginal, fragmented, stale. Turning and twisting and not able to sleep.

I open my eyes. The moon comes out. Its light bathes the lake in a silvery film. I watch rain droplets hit the lake's surface. I stop the humming. It's beautiful.

"Hunter?"

"Huh?" He wakes up from his slumber.

"Did you ever feel like you're faking it?"

"Faking what?"

"You know, life. Like you're pretending to live it, just to get by. To show everyone that you can, where really you don't give a crap. You don't really care."

"Is that why you jumped?"

"Where is the reason not to die? I remember throwing stones with you into this lake. I was so happy to live. When was that mark when it all changed for me, when I was ten, twelve, fifteen? When?"

"You mean, when you decided to turn it all off, because it hurt so bad, that it was easier that way?"

"I wish I knew it'd come to this. This dream of a song, I was wrong. Look at me, I'm like a dirty plastic bag of a person that got stuck in a puddle, torn. That has no bottom because it fell out, and no handles because they both broke." I look at my hands.

"That's not true." Hunter reaches for my hands, but I jerk them away.

"Yes, it is. I couldn't hold that weight anymore, that's why. I'm empty, dry, bare. Like an abandoned well. You lean over and look, and you know there must be water there, deep deep down. You throw a rock, but you never hear a splash."

I look at the water, it sparks with the midnight moon.

"I can fill you in."

I pretend I don't hear.

"I wish we could just drop it all and swim away. Into the open sea. I wish I could swim away from myself, but I can't."

The kayak sways in the tiniest waves. There is no wind. Distant light of the city flicker on and off. Stars sprinkle the sky.

"Promise me something?" Hunter says.

"What?"

He leans and holds my face. I'm so silent, look him in the eyes. Darkness reflects around his pupils.

"Promise me, you'll sing me my song, the one that I wrote for you, for your Birthday?"

"Oh, sure." I deflate in relief. "Do you really want to hear me sing? I don't mean, like now... I mean..."

"I know what you mean. I do."

"You sure?"

He sighs and pulls me into a kiss. Our noses touch, mine cold, his warm. Then our lips. Then our tongues. Rain splatters our faces, joined in a bizarre moment of a dare. A dare to those that don't believe anymore.

We swirl. We swirl for real. We break the kiss.

With a quiet hum, with joined hands, they form a circle, they tug at the boat. We don't need to go to the feeding ground anymore. They came to us. I don't need to say it, but I still do.

"The sirens are here."

15.

Have you ever swam in a whirlpool? Have you ever fought its tremendous sucking power, being dragged down the swirling vortex only to disappear below muddy waters? Have you ever been sucked down a gigantic lake drain? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

There is a dozen of them. The sirens. Their hair glistens in the moon light, dripping with water, braided with lust. They join hands. They join voices. They sing.

The air rings with a high pitch, multiplied by twelve. Multiplied by the emptiness over the lake. Reaching high, all the way to the moon, in a reverse vortex directly over the boat.

One second.

We watch in awe, arrested by the beauty of a pause before a storm. When it all stands still, when it's about to erupt, when it hangs but by a moment of hesitation.

Then it tips.

Something shifts in the air, as if we all agree. Something passes between us all, between Hunter and me and the sirens, a question so dark that it has only one answer.

Down, down, down.

In response, sirens tilt their heads and begin to swirl. They're a circle of doom, we're a speck of life about to be swallowed, just like we all agreed. The water begins to turn. The kayak tilts precariously towards the lake, then flops back upright and tips to the other side. I see the decision on Hunter's face. I know what he's decided to do. And it's all my fault.

Forget about the whirlpool. It's nothing compared to shame. Shame floods me with a renewed force. Shame for thinking only about myself and pretending I care for anyone else. Shame for being selfish, for thinking that by jumping off that bridge I'd feel better, I'd escape into some wonderful beautiful world and show everyone that I can. I can sing. I can sing so well, I can kill with a song. I wanted them all to hear. I wanted Daddy to hear.

Shame on me.

"It was not the right song." I say. "I got it all wrong."

"I know. I knew all along. Will you sing the one I gave you, for me? Can you, please?" Hunter sits across me, his whip at his feet. He doesn't bend down to reach it, he's calm. He's decided, for good.

Ten seconds.

Water rushes around us, the kayak tilts further to the side, like a coin down the spiral wishing well.

I remember what my song did. It left a boy without a father. It destroyed a bridge, it killed dozens, it sucked out those unlucky souls at a night club. Can I create instead of destroying, can I?

"Remember our game?" I say.

"Yes." Hunter says.

"Remember what I asked you last time?" I struggle not to scream, it's hard to hear over the siren's song.

Hunter just looks.

"I asked, have you ever wanted to kill yourself? You said, if you'd ever wanted to, you'd get your hands on the fastest motorcycle out there, get on a highway and ride as fast as you can, without stopping for cops. And then, you said, you'd crash."

Hunter just looks at me.

"What I'm trying to say is." At this point, I scream. "This is not a motorcycle! Are you sure you want to do it this way?"

He grins. His hair flaps in the light breeze. We spiral faster. The song intensifies.

"As long as we do it together, I don't care!"

"Hunter, what about your mom?" I scream.

"She'll know why, she'll understand!" Hunter yells over the song, "let's enjoy the ride! And you promised me, you'll sing my song!"

We hold hands. Mine are cold, his are warm.

We no longer struggle against the current. We're ready to go.

I lick my lips. I know what women are made for, Daddy. I know, and I'll show you. Just you wait. I inhale.

And I sing. I sing his song. For us to go in style.

Light notes weave out of my mouth, slink into his, a kiss of life without touch. I hear his soul sing to my rhythm, tune in and morph to its harmony. His warmth fills my chest, unclenches my agony, replaces the void with his soul.

I'm empty and he wants to fill me. He fills me now, to the brim. Pop! The last of his soul escapes, and I gulp.

Hunter stares at me, his eyes dead yet alive. His soul is gone.

"My turn." I say.

Moonlight pierces the night with the white glow. The siren song blares over the vortex, we swirl in its wake. The lake is about to consume us, boat and all.

The chorus booms over the water. The whirlpool tightens and drags everything that a minute ago sat still on the surface of the lake. Boats parked by the shore, a large barge loading dock, soil, trees, a tug. The sucking force reaches the siren feeding ground and pulls at a few homeless people who decided to camp out on the pier at night. The pier groans and moves, torn from

the bed of sand, it's supporting structure collapsed. I hear souls, torn, rotten, desperate, not willing to die. They collapse on each other, a week-old stew reeking of spoiled meat, too slimy to swallow.

There is something else. Tossed like a piece of paper, struggling against the current. Daddy's boat.

I'm stronger, I think. Hear me, Daddy, hear! But a new feeling takes hold of me. Its ugly head grinning an ugly smirk. I realize what it is. I'm scared. Scared of the power I have. Petrified. Before I knew I had it, I used it carelessly, not knowing what I can do. Now I know, and suddenly I'm afraid it won't work like it did before.

"I thought it was over, I thought I was through with that!" I feel lost. "I can't!" I shout.

The vortex breaks.

"I don't want you to die!" I shake Hunter, but it's too late. The water closes in on itself with a powerful rush. The kayak flips and we float into the water, into the mess of the sirens, their arms open and fishing for us. Fishing for Hunter. I know I failed. All I want to do is to make it all stop, to go hide, to never come out.

I feel like I've lost it. I thought I could make it better, but I can't make it better through Death.

"I don't want it to work like that!" I scream into the water. Pain tears me up, from inside out. I float in the middle of a life snap-shot, everything frozen mid-frame. On pause.

I can't decide what to do next, paralyzed. I'm a mess. All of this is complicated, it tugs at me in so many different directions, and I can only go in one direction at a time. I find myself entwined in the ribbon of the circular stream, it binds me, lifts me and whisks me away, away to where there is no pain, no happiness, just nothing. And then I let go. And I fall, fall, fall.

I curl up into a fetal position, shut out all sound, all thought, everything. I'll just drift like this, I think. I want complete darkness. I look up. The vast ocean of the blue slips away from me, like the promise of an early summer that was late because of the constant rain. Liar. Liar.

The sirens grab me, grab Hunter. We sink in a tight formation. Fish, seals, and any other living creature rush aside as they hear us approach. I see Hunter's face, his mouth open on that surprised 'O'.

Ailen Bright, the girl who only thinks about herself.

No!

I kick. I kick at siren's arms, I yank Hunter out. I kick towards the surface. I'm not ready, it's not my turn, it's not his turn. This is my game, and I say we skip the move!

The lake spits us out, and I take a breath. There, where the lights of the city are swallowed by the forest into darkness. There we would go.

The sirens are on my tail.

Daddy's boat is on theirs.

I swim. I splash my feet, rotate my free arm. Dip in, pull out, dip in, pull out. I tug Hunter behind me. I feel his soul inside me, beating fast. I feel his heart. He's alive. Water lapses around us. My lips move, struggling to say something. I don't know what. I try to formulate words, to say it out loud, and I can't. I can only do one thing, move forward, stubbornly, with blind determination. The velvet of the sky blinks at me, like it can understand, blinks at me with its stars, so distant and ignorant.

They're closer now, I can hear them try to snag at my feet. I kick and propel forward.

Thirty minutes?

I lose track of time. I bump onto the shore, climbed out and crawl, by the gaping hole left from the torn pier, into the pier park, into the siren feeding ground, stone by stone, tree by tree, under the yellow street lights, and then I collapse.

A minute, an hour?

Commotion ensues over the destruction on the lake.

Bright light shines into my face.

"Hello? Can you hear me? What's your name?"

"Ailen Bright." I say automatically. I clutch Hunter's arm, to make sure he's there.

"Ailen, are you feeling all right? Can you tell me what happened?" I see a policeman lean over me. He studies my pupils, then talks into his portable radio, then back to me. "Were you in the lake when the whirlpool occurred?"

"Yeah, I was." I say.

"What about your friend?"

I twist to look. He breathes, he is alive! Hunter coughs up the water. "Hunter. Hunter Crossby."

"What were you kids doing out on the lake, in the middle of the night?" The officer asks. "I need you to tell me your parents names and their phone numbers."

I'm so sick of pretense, I charge forward.

"My name is Ailen Bright. I'm a siren."

"You're a what?" I knew I got his attention now.

"Ailen, what the hell are you doing?" I hear Hunter hiss, but choose to ignore him.

"A siren. You know, we live under water, because that's where the seductive girls belong, right? We're the killer kind. We kill people by singing their souls out. We like the ones that sound exquisite, like a delicacy. Yours, for example, stinks.

But I'll eat it, anyway." I smack my lips for an added effect, but it seems like the words were enough.

The officer's pupils widen, and he feels my forehead. Then he talks into the radio, calling for help.

"Sir, please, don't listen to her, she's delusional. You know, we just barely made it out of the lake."

"Two kids, sir. Yes." Into the radio, then he turns to us. "Don't move, just lay where you are."

I hear Daddy's boat halt a mile away from the shore, then turn around. I don't hear a sign of the sirens, they must be gone. I fight the urge to give in to my power, to not snuff out the soul of this officer, to not turn around to those who gathered on the shore, curious, to not tell them to jump into the water or sing or drop on the ground and pretend like they're dead. Or, I can ask them to find Mommy. To look for her everywhere. To never stop until they find her. Maybe I don't want to know, I think. Maybe it's better for me not to know.

I tug at Hunter. "Let's get out of here."

"You didn't finish my song." I hear such bitterness in Hunter's voice, it stings.

"Yes I did."

More officers arrive at the scene, a crowd gather around us. I hear the their hum pierced by a cry. A little girl's cry, high-pitched and hysterical. I raise my head. A siren climbs

onto the bank, and a little girl stands screaming her head off, right in the siren's path. The girl has two pig tails, just like me, when I was little. The siren advances towards her. The crowd hasn't registered yet what happened.

This can't be. She is supposed to be dead.

"Ailen Bright. The girl who is always hungry. Care to join me for a snack?"

"Leave her alone!" I scream at the top of my lungs. My voice resonates across the pier park, bounces off the walls, causes people to cover their ears. I don't care. It takes me a couple jumps to reach the shore and hop down into the mist.

"Grab my hand!" I shout at the girl, her face hidden by her hooded raincoat. She turns to look at me, her eyes wide with terror. We both scream. The siren grabs the girl and is gone. Water boils with foam from two bodies wrestling. Wild. Her hair flaps in the water, face hungry and dark. People shift to the scene, shouting, pointing, police officers run down the steps.

The girl surfaces enough above the water to gulp for air. The other sirens join, fight for her like for a toy. I dive in.

I swam up to the wriggling bodies and surfaced right in between.

"Let go of her!" I shout, and she hisses, "Just in time, darling, you can have the better half." A whip cracks over our heads and takes the siren out of the water by her hair, several

feet above, but she grabs the whip mid-air with both hands and sinks her teeth into it. The leather tears, sending the siren back onto our heads, me firmly holding the girl, her gasping for air, shivering, and Hunter speaking over it in a calm voice.

"Ailen, move aside, please."

The siren recovers and stretches her arm out to yank the girl from my hold, fizzing out some ugly sound that can't even qualify as a song, yet it makes the girl open her mouth and I see her soul, strung in mid-air, traveling into the siren's throat, when Hunter cracks his whip again.

The soul returns to the girl's body with a 'pop.'

I catch my breath, using the moment to swim towards the shore, girl tucked under my arm. This time, I didn't fail.

"It's ok, it's ok, you're ok." The girl shakes with sobs, clutching to my shoulder for dear life. I walk out onto the pavement. People run over to me. Police officers. Security guards. At the sight of me, they freeze in their tracks. I recognize the officer who stopped his car to prevent me from jumping off the bridge.

"Back from the dead." He clasps his mouth.

The number of people on the shore swells. The sirens decide to retreat.

"Ailen Bright, we will meet again, soon." I hear from behind. "You've broken the rules of my game twice, you'll have to answer for that." I hear them dive and swim away.

I heard Hunter cracking his whip.

I hear several police car making their way towards the scene.

There is no reason to hide anymore.

"We need to leave." Hunter says.

"Move!" My voice booms through the air. I feel like a conductor, helping my orchestra find its tune. Faces look at me, expectantly. "I said, move, now!" They didn't need to be told twice. They all turned and walked, civilians and police, then they ran, overtaken by instinct.

"You ok?" I ask Hunter.

"Yeah, I'm fine." But his eyes don't radiate the life they used to.

"I have to give you back your soul." I say.

Hunter presses his lips together. "It was a birthday gift. You don't give the gifts back, ever."

"What do you mean, a birthday gift? You gave me a song, not your soul!"

"Yes, I did. I'm a siren hunter now, Ailen. Complete, without a soul. Like your dad."

"What?" I gasp.

"It was all part of the plan." He says, his eyes vacant.

"No, I'll give it back!" I shout.

"It's too late." He says.

16.

Have you ever choked on a bone? I don't mean biting on a chicken wing and swallowing a piece of it by accident, then coughing it up later. No. Have you ever had a large fish bone wedge itself in your throat so that you can't take a single breath, can't close your mouth, your eyes fill with tears, your head pounds with blood, you know you have seconds left? Have you choked on a bone like that? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

I gag. I want to take in some air, but I can't. I try to rip myself open. Good luck. Hunter's soul gives me warmth I don't want to have. I'm fine being cold, I'm fine, I'm fine! I want to turn back the time, to reverse what's been done. Words jam in my mouth, I open and close it like a beached fish.

"Come on, Ailen. Let's go." Hunter says.

A breath. Two. I stumble after him through the deserted waterfront save for the blinking streetlights waiting to go out at dawn. I want to ask where we're going, instead I watch my bare feet paddle the asphalt. I want to say I'm sorry, instead I grip Hunter's hand tighter, fingers entwined. I want to ask why

we're playing this game, instead I notice glowing windows form patterns on the buildings we pass.

We turn into a narrow alley and suddenly it busts with life. While the rest of the town is sleeping, the fish market prepares for the day.

"I just need some time to think." Hunter says.

I get it, I nod, still unable to speak.

We trot down the cobblestone hill. There is the market, swarmed with morning souls, carrying boxes to and fro, shouting greetings, sipping their first cups of coffee, puffing the air with delight after each gulp. Trucks pull into the parking lot, trucks pull out. Repeat.

"Look!" I hear a hint of joy in Hunter's voice, just a hint as he picks up the pace, drops my hand, points. "Look, Ailen, it's still there! I can't believe it, do you see?" His dead eyes smile. I don't know what he means. And there it is.

His bike. White drop of speed amidst clumsy trucks. Parked where we left it. The day I was born, the day I was turned.

It's been three days. Or three years?

Hunter's ecstatic.

"That's how I wanted to go." He beams, but there is no laughter in his eyes. Nothing at all. Just emptiness, calm. Me, I'm a perverted moth, drawn to darkness instead of light.

Wishing for vacuum. Suck me in, keep me blind, never let me go.
Hunter, he's the lamp with no bulb.

"Care for a ride?" His hand doesn't shake. Long slender
fingers. An upturned palm. And this look.

One second.

"Yes." I say. I can talk again.

"It's a little wet, hang on."

He sticks in the key, gives gas. Loud spatter. Again. And
again. Pause. One more time.

Vroom!

"It's alive." I say.

He mounts it, guns the throttle, motions me to hop on the
back. Merchants gape, shake their heads. We're disrupting their
flow.

"Where to?" Hunter yells over the roar.

"To the other side!"

And we fly.

People point, but we're up on the hill and out of the way.
The roads are dry. The sky turns pink. Morning enters the air.
And the wind. It rips at my face. It ruptures my bubble of fear,
guilt, and shame. My regret, disappointment, my hatred and hope.
They're out, they're gone.

We speed by the row of police cars patrolling the ramp to
the bridge. Broken by me. They notice us a second too late.

Flashing lights on, Hunter answers by shifting into the fifth gear (right?). We try to get on the boulevard around the lake. Every road is blocked.

Police sirens go off in the back.

"We've got to lose them before it's too late!" I yell. Hunter doesn't hear me, but he feels the need. Our knees almost scrape the ground when we veer onto the onramp. No traffic this time.

Seventy miles per hour. Eighty. One hundred. Over the hill. They can't see us. Exit, slow down, and hide. We skid into the bushes by the road, dirt splatters upward and over the bike. We hear the police cars whiz by. (I will write this better - have to research.)

"Where to now?" I ask.

Hunter pants. "Up." He shifts gears. We wait.

Five minutes.

It's still. Sleepy houses stir with life. First dog walkers gawk at us pulling the bike onto the road and wheeling it over the hill, away from the highway.

The bike roars to life, I grab Hunter's waist, and we're off. Towards the back-roads, full of twists and turns to enjoy one last time.

One hour. Two.

We stop at the base of a mountain. The road zigzags up into the clouds, all the way to the top, rock to the right, void to the left. The valley still sleepy under the blanket of fog.

Hunter squeezes my hand, I give a squeeze in return.

"Ready?" He asks.

I don't hear. I try to make out the peak in the clouds, golden in the first rays of sun.

"Does this answer your question?" I say.

He turns to take a look at my face.

"I get it. You're right. This is my bridge."

"That's not what I mean." I say.

"Ah." His head drops. "Yes. It does."

"Tell me why, then. Tell me when. I think I deserve to know."

Pause.

"That week. The week father left. I thought I could fix it. I thought I could fix anything, but I couldn't. There is no magic pill. I felt useless..."

"...and you decided you couldn't hold the weight anymore. It was too painful to bear."

"Something like that. But I fought. I found a way to push back the date. Your dad, the siren hunter job, you know. Suddenly, I could afford her meds." I hear tears in his voice. "But it's fake! It only extended what I knew would happen all

along! She doesn't even recognize me anymore, she asks my name every day. So what's the point, tell me, what's the point!"

He shakes me.

"At least you have a mom." I say.

He falls silent.

"At least you have a dad."

"You call that a dad?" It's my turn to shake. "That control freak, that sicko woman-hater, asshole, pervert, that..." I catch my breath. "That..."

I cry.

He cradles my face. "What else can I give?"

"Have you ever given someone a ride of a lifetime?" We exchange a smile. It's this game we play. Have you ever. Hunter and me.

"What's a ride of a lifetime?" He asks.

"You know, the killer kind."

"Nope, never have."

"Can I be the first?"

"Of course."

Can't suppress anymore, on impulse, we kiss. Desperate to feel the most of it, we press hard. We gobble each other up. No room for a breath, no room for thought, only this.

A minute of fantasy is better than nothing, I think. His hands in my hair, I ball up the collar of his still wet shirt. I

watch the clouds drift and reveal the blue of the sky. My favorite color. I close my eyes, one last time. I imagine what my body would sound like, flying through the abyss, cascading down the mountain rocks, crashing through the pines. And, when it lands, will my eyes be closed or open.

I feel our thoughts entwine into one.

We reach for a breath.

"How long to the top?" I ask.

"Twenty minutes."

"I love you to death," I say before it's too late.

"I love you more." He grins.

We're ready to go.

A surge of excitement runs through me, pins and needles. My hands shake. Hunter starts the bike.

We whiz up the path and onto the mountain road, higher, higher, taking tight turns at incredible speed, waiting for that perfect drop-off.

Thirteen minutes.

Each turn makes my heart stop, and each turn is not it. Not quite it. I know, he knows. We ride higher still. A layer of fog palms the tops of the trees, ever so gently, I dare not to breathe, not to blow it away.

Six minutes.

Trees recede, give way to meadow bushes, tickled with berries and dew. One more turn.

Sun hits us with the glory of gold. This is it. It shines down onto the basin of dawn, to our left, milky and thick. Colors the mountain pink, to our right. No, not quite it.

One minute.

Hunter guns the throttle. I know it's near, we're almost to the top.

Thirty seconds.

The final stretch. The final big turn.

I clench my arms around his waist.

Ten seconds.

We go in a straight line, right into the sun. There. Where the road turns, we do not.

One second.

Tires hug the road one last time. Roll onto the rocks, off the cliff, into the air.

We fly.

"Yeah!!!" Hunter's voice echoes into the space. He takes his hands off the handles, I join. Fingers clasped, we spread our arms like wings. Bike roars and falls out from under us. We speed down after, wind flaps in our shirts, Hunter face first, I'm floating over his back.

Two seconds.

We tear through the cover of fog. The forest is near, pines lined up as spikes. My instinct kicks in.

I scream. Water condenses around us and wafts down in a river of rain. I clench my arms into a tight hold and twist in the air, my back to the ground, Hunter embraced.

Smash!

We burrow through pines. Their limbs crack in our wake.

Thud!

My back lands on wet ground, softened by water. A wave of sound travels through my spine from collision with such force that it breaks every bone, but my muscles hold tight.

Wallop, wallop, repeat.

I clench my fingers and roll, through the underbrush, in a tangle of wet dirt, pine needles, and twigs. I still scream. Water cushions my roll, all the way into the meadow covered in grass. We stop. We lie on our left side, I cradle him from the back. Grass and flowers crunched under my arm, a tall pine tree towering over us like a protective giant.

I wait a few seconds. I feel. I'm alive. I can't hear hunter's soul. For a second, I forget, he doesn't have one left. No sound at all. Then he coughs up blood.

"You're alive, you're alive!" I wail. Then I laugh. I release my fear into laughter. It rings off the mountain walls, hushed by the wind.

"I'll give you back your soul." I say. "Just hang on." I can hear him breathe in short gasps. I can't move my arms. I have to wait till my body repairs itself. A couple hours, maybe more. I tremble. I want to make sure he's ok.

"Can you talk? Say something, Hunter, can you..." My voice breaks, my throat sore from screaming. I feel his warm blood seep into my sleeves. "Hunter, answer me, can you talk?" I want to shake him, but I can't. Instead, he shakes me. Like a leaf on the wind, then he's still.

"I'm here, I'm with you. It'll be ok." I whisper.

No response.

I don't know if I want to know. I want to cling to hope. I have to wait. He takes a breath. I think I will faint.

"Yes." He says, barely audible.

"We didn't die." I say. "See, it's not our turn. At least, not yet."

Rapid breathing.

My muscles knit together, I will them to mend, fast. I hear the scratching of the bones, broken ends against broken ends, growing soft, sticking together, hardening into one solid mass.

Ten minutes.

I flex my fingers. They work. My hands can't quite move. Hunter's breathing slows down. No, don't panic, don't panic, I think. It's ok, it will be ok.

Twenty minutes.

I can move my arms. I try to prop myself on one elbow and collapse back into the grass.

Thirty minutes.

I try again. This time, it holds. I roll over Hunter to another side.

I don't want to see what I see. His face is mush, one bloody mess caked into a mask of pain. I touch his nose. I think his scream would never end. I tear my hand back.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Hunter convulses. I work on his shirt, rip it open. Rins are intact, perhaps a broken arm. It's twisted at a strange angle. I touch it, Hunter wails, then coughs up more blood. I feel his life dance in his ribcage like a moth at the light, wanting to flee, thrashing, breaking its delicate wings. It cries out to me, it begs for mercy.

And I can't help myself. I hum. My tears transform into a sound. Soft, velvety, they drip into a song, one by one, creating a stream of calming water. Like a plop of rain drops into a puddle, one by one, one by one. I inhale and hum some more. Hunter gives another cry and faints from pain. I sing more. I sing and I sing and I sing, pouring out my wish to take his pain away.

Hunter's soul stirs inside me.

I sing more.

Something shifts in the air. And I can't, it just doesn't listen, it's half digested already, it's too late.

I stop my song, I want to cry, but I can't. I sit up, put my hand on Hunter's chest. His bloodied face turns suddenly old, his eyes dull, buried in the wrinkles on pain. Hollow.

"No!" I yell at him. "No, no, no!!!" I try again. I sing. It comes out all ugly and torn and disjointed, but I don't care. I don't want him to die, not now, not after all this. I don't know what else to do. I have to bring him back. He's not fully gone yet, I hear faint breathing, slow beating of his heart, in spurts, here and there, like a flickering light. Each flicker I hope will repeat.

I call to the mountain. I call to the pines, to the grass. I feel them sway in sorrow together with me. I call to every living soul I can detect around me, miles away, plants, insects, animals, people. I call them all, one by one, asking, begging. They don't budge, they saunter on with their lives, oblivious, ignorant. I don't give up, I kept searching. I cast my voice farther out, as far as I can, until I find it.

Find her.

"Ailen Bright. The girl who breaks all my rules."

"You!"

"Who else? Guess whose turn it is."

"I hate you!!!" I scream.

"Can we do without screaming, please?" Hunter croaked. "I'm kind of trying to recover here."

"Hunter!" I kneel over him, white teeth of a smile across bloody face. Eyes open, intact. We pause, then we laugh, because all of this is just so absurd.

"Hunter? How long were you awake?" I ask.

"Who is it you're talking to?"

I shake my head. I can't tell. I'm not ready for this.

I try not to panic.

I will myself to stillness. I make myself concentrate on math, on calculating how many hours it would take for me to fully recover, against how many hours it would take the siren to reach us.

I watch the sky fade into the pinkish glow of an early morning. No rain today. I know I need to rest. My cuts heal into scars, but everything hurts.

"Are you ok?"

"I'm just perfect." I say, eyeing the pine above us. I glance at the sky, I listen for any sound, but it's quiet. I try listening for the siren, but her voice is gone.

"I don't like this silence." I say.

"What's wrong?" Hunter asks, then faints.

I sit next to him, listening to the morning life in the woods. A mouse here, a bird there, and deer. Many many deer. Graze on the grass. Their souls a soft rustle of the leaves in the wind. Pine needles crunch under their hooves. Pine needles fall.

Pine needles fall on my head. I look up and meet two eyes. The eyes of the siren descending down the tree, with a hiss.

17.

Have you ever been in a fight? I don't mean a friendly fist fight where the most damage you sustain are a couple bruises. No, not like that. Have you ever been in a real fight where the winner kicks the loser to death? Have you? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

I stop breathing. I feel stillness in the air. I see only one thing, those eyes a few feet away from my face. Hungry. Ageless. I forget how long I sit here, staring, immobile, glued to the ground. That white mane over an eerie face, those large milky eyes. How I get lost in them. How their chill makes me shrink. How I think it's impossible for me to get any colder. How I know this is not a game anymore.

"Ailen Bright, welcome to your turn."

That's her opening point.

"I thought you were out of the game."

She's not alone.

Without breaking the gaze, from the corners of my eyes I see droplets of water caught between pine needles. And half a dozen hungry eyes that peer from above, glistening with anticipation. Cold, distant, bent on feeding their lust.

The sirens.

Hunting.

And I'm born. Of air. This is my opening point. A note rises into my throat, forces my lips open. I scream. Trees sway in response, the mountain pulses to the rhythm, ground shifts under my feet. I scream an animal scream, a wild call to protect my territory. It means 'back off, or I'll claw at your eyes and rip at your heart and feast on your flesh and crunch on your bones and spit you out to rot.'

The siren above me answer with a guttural wail. It booms through the trees and picks up in the echoes of the siren pack, whining and howling and moaning, hungry, waiting for their alpha to make her first move.

And she does.

She lets go of her grip and lands on my back. She tosses me to the ground. I clutch her shoulders and we roll away from the tree. Dirt stuffs my eyes, my mouth. Bitter, crunchy. She tightens her grip on me, she's strong, but I'm faster, even though I'm not fully healed yet. I twist in her grip and kick her face with the back of my head. She lets go with a cry. I crawl back towards the tree. Hunter stirs.

"Don't move!" I yell.

The siren stares me down, calculating. Her nostrils flare, her eyes pin me down, lips tight. She pulls herself back up, no

shred of clothing on her muscular body except her hair. It's so long it touches her feet.

She glances up. A signal. Another siren, short and bulky, squats next to her. They look at me, waiting. I know they're here just along for the ride. They don't care if I die or not, only the main siren hungers for my death, or, perhaps, she's not done playing with me yet. But I realize I am. I'm not wanting to play this game anymore.

"Bravo. This will give you bragging rights. How many sirens did you bring to take me down? Ten? Twelve? Against an injured newborn? Does it really take that many?"

The siren stiffens. A loud hiss.

"And, of course, you decided to wait for me to fall off the cliff and break all my bones. I'm sorry it took me so long."

"Ailen Bright, the girl who never listens. We made a deal, you didn't hold up your end of the bargain. I came for my payment."

"What, you were afraid to come talk to me, one on one? You had to bring your whole pack to stand by in case something awful might happen? Ailen Bright, the little girl who turned out to be so dangerous and terrifying. With her terrible dangerous friend, only injured from a fall off the cliff of the mountain."

A few sirens giggled.

"Shut up!" Yells the short siren. Alpha siren is quiet.

By now Hunter manages to sit up. His hand pokes around his hip for the whip. Alas, it's not there. I can hear his laborious breathing without looking, backing away towards him, spreading my arms in a protective gesture.

"I'm not afraid of you, if that's what you're implying. The little thief that stole my catch. Again." She wipes the dirt off her face and sneers, showing rows of jagged teeth.

"Just say the word." The other siren, the one who is short and squat, stands up, her voice melodic yet harsh. Her hair curly and thin, barely covering her body.

"Oh, so you only act on command? That's a lovely arrangement." I say, eyeing three more sirens landing softly on the ground, surrounding us, their matted hair their only cover. A general murmur of distaste.

"Shut up! Back off, all of you." The main sirens says.

My mind races. What I should do next, how can I overpower five strong sirens, my bones still knitting together, Hunter injured and weak at my side.

The siren leans over for her next move.

"What do we have here?" Hunter says.

"Looks like a party, in honor of our jump." I say. "Care to join?"

"I'm not sure I'm dressed for the occasion."

"Hunter Crossby, the siren hunter galore. Nice to see you again. How's the mom?"

I sense Hunter tense all over, I sense his hatred, and then it's gone. I can't believe his self-control.

"Fine, thanks. How's yours?"

A fizz of anger. Several steps.

"Move it! I'll deal with the boy later."

The sirens step back, make a half-circle around the pine tree. It's one against one, at least for now.

My heart sinks. I'm just a plaything to her. This is not a fight, it's slaughter, and perhaps she'll leave me alive after it, just to play some more. Perhaps she'll kill Hunter in front of my eyes, just to see what I'd do, how I'd react. She's bound to win.

I decide my only defense is my voice.

I concentrate on inhaling a lung-full of air.

Too late. One second she flexes her muscles, the other she clasps her hands around my neck, cutting off my air. Not that I need to breathe, but I can't make a sound without breathing. I hear Hunter groan, as I kick the alpha between her legs with my foot and tried to grasp at her hair, but it's so smooth and slippery that my fingers keep slipping. The best I can do is hug her head and not let her go.

The best I can do is... wish myself deaf.

So that I don't hear what's happening. So that my ears are blocked. But I do, I hear every bit of it, even though I can't turn my neck and look back.

I hear the sirens descend on Hunter, pin him down, laugh. In my mind, he's back in the pool, covered with the moving mass of maggots. They can't sing out his soul, it's gone, it's in me. But they can tear him apart. I hear him cry in pain.

"I said, leave the boy alone!"

The alpha blares her lethal cry. It bends other sirens to her will, hushing the rest of the noises into a thick layer of fog.

And it gives me a break I need.

Half a second.

I think it over, fast. She's slippery, yet dry and smooth to the touch. She must've been out of the water for quite some time. She must hurt. Her gills must hurt, those little gaps below her ears that my fingers keep sliding over.

That's it.

I lean forward. Taken by surprise, she falls over me, we roll. I let go of her head, scoop two handfuls of pine needles and stuff them inside her gills, pushing with my fingers, hard. The shock on her face quickly changes to a grimace of utmost concentration and finally gets replaced by a cry of pain. I feel her fingers slack. I grab two more fistfuls and stuff them,

stuff them in, make her writhe in agony, like a leech on dry hot sand. I sit on top of her, push down her wrists into the soft ground.

And I sing in her face.

The mist dims the forest, rolls over the meadow, over the sirens, over Hunter. I sing. I rise an octave higher, then higher. I thank the tree for the needles, I thank the fog for the water. The siren tries clawing at my face.

I shriek loud and high.

Pop!

A siren blows up into a burst of droplets. Gone. I blew her up, I realize. Delirious, I shriek again, and again, pitching my voice to the impossible height. I see sirens twist and cover their ears. Another one pops. I shriek more. The fog becomes so thick, it starts to feel like light rain. I make out Hunter's body curled up amidst the wailing sirens on the ground around him. He looks up.

"Come on, Ailen. Only two? Look at me, I got them all down with my good looks alone." He grins. That dimple in his right cheek, that hair, all messed up and dirty. His breath, a mushroom of steam into the cold misty air.

I take a breath, my throat hurts.

"Oh, shut up. I've had some big fish to fry."

The siren underneath me wiggles.

"I don't recall ordering fish for lunch?" He says.

"Last time I heard, you ordered a ride."

Sirens to stir back to life in the silence. The siren underneath me clasps at my calves to throw me off, just as I lean and shriek directly into her ears, making her twist.

Terror surges through me, then anger, then the feeling of power. I have power and I know it.

I can sing.

I wish Daddy would hear.

I stand up and away from the siren. I stand tall, my feet apart, armed with my voice alone. I sing. My voice feels its way through the drizzle for the frequency of the rhythm, the tempo that causes alpha's particles move, the little water cells that make up her body and her mind. I try to match her pulse, to lead her to an exploding crescendo. I try to listen, to unravel her, octave by octave, note by note.

And I feel it.

I watch her stand up and take a gulp of wet air to begin to sing. Big mistake. Her singing gives me her pitch, the key to the melody, the core of her rhythm.

The other sirens step away, some crawl, some dart into the woods and are gone.

I raise my arms high and yowl an ear-splitting discord. Me, I'm the drop of a stone into the lake. My voice, it's a wake

from the stone. It's a visible wave of destruction. It travels outward, splatters needles from the pines, tears the pines out of the ground. It lifts the siren and sends her away, rolling and flapping in the air. It jolts everything out of place as it goes, and goes, and goes, for miles, tearing out a good chunk of the woods, causing the fog to thicken into mist. Too heavy to hang in the air. Needing to fall.

It rains.

All sirens are gone, swept miles away by my voice.

I stop. The silence is absolute. But I'm afraid of it, it's wrong. A wasteland in place of the meadow, I'm the peg in the center, proud and still. I'm afraid to look.

Hunter. Hunter is gone.

Then I see a pile of mud next to an overturned tree. A hand clutches a broken stump from a branch, the rest is covered with dirt.

"No!" I scream. "No, no, no!" I drop to my knees and lean over, I scrub the dirt away.

Hunter's face. He coughs, opens his eyes.

"You're alive." I grab him and press him against me, hard. "You're alive, you're alive!"

Hunter is disoriented.

"Talk to me."

His face is bewildered. He shakes his head.

"What? What is it? What's wrong?"

"Ailen, I can't." Hunter's face hard, his voice quiet and garbled.

"Come on, let me carry you, let's figure out a way to get out of here!" I dive under his waist to pull him up, but he grabs my arm and pulls me closer to him.

"Stop it, Ailen. I can't hear you. STOP!"

The strength drains from me. All I remember is the sirens surrounding us and that feeling of dread, of knowing that I would die not how I want, but how she wants. It's too much. I break into a hysteria.

"What do you mean, stop? What do you mean, you can't hear me? Listen to me! Are you out of your mind? We didn't die, see? We can live, we can run away, we can..."

Hunter shakes his head. This makes me angry.

I shout, but all I see in response is pain flashing across his face, and I know I went a little too far.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that... It's just... I was..." I trail off, not sure what to say.

"I can't hear you." Hunter looks at me, his words slowly sink in. "I can't even hear myself talk."

His words slowly sunk in.

"You can't hear me?"

He nods.

"Oh no, did I blow up your eardrums? I did, didn't I?"

He just looks.

I want to cry. It's the moment to feel the tears rolling down my cheeks. But I can't. Rain cries for me, drips down my face, over my tattered sweatshirt, into the ground.

"What did I do. What did I do?" I'm numb.

He screws his face in concentration. He reads off my lips.

"You blew me right out of the job, Ailen. Not that I care. I decided to call it quits, anyway. Only it didn't work. And now I'm deaf. You know how weird it feels talking and not hearing what you say? Do you think I want to exist with this pain for the rest of my life? If you can tall it life."

He holds back tears.

"A siren hunter that can't hear. What a joke. And why bother. You blew them all up by opening your mouth, just like that, pop, pop, pop! What's the need for me after this? Nice job, Ailen. Go brag to your Daddy."

That hurts.

"Oh, it was MY JOB?" I rise to my feet. My world turns upside down. He looks at me, he can't figure out what I said.

Raindrops splatter into smaller droplets over tree trunks and drip down into the ground. The air is still. Hunter starts to shiver. I keep forgetting that he has to be warm and dry to feel good. It's me who feels good under the rain, not him. I

can't hear his soul, I forget I gobbled it up. He doesn't sound like home anymore, he doesn't sound like anything at all. Quiet. Invisible to sirens. The perfect siren hunter. And now I made him deaf. He opens and closes his mouth like a fish out of the water, but no words come out. I wait.

He avoids my eyes. He seems to be looking into the distance, but I see he doesn't look at anything at all. His eyes are empty.

"This hurts, you know." He finally says in such a small voice, as if his whole body shrunk. He's in pain, I can hear it, and I dash in to comfort him. He shifts away, and I stop.

"I want to be alone. Can you please leave me alone? Go away."

I can't believe it. I want to reach out to him, to cry, to call him back, to hold him.

"You really are a monster." He says, looking at me, looking past me, and then turning his back on me. He pulls himself up over the trunk, moaning in pain.

I stretch out my arms to help him and then drop them down. Hunter turns to look. I never saw his eyes that cold.

"I don't ever want to see you again, you hear me?" His voice catches at the end. "Never."

He turns away.

"Mission accomplished." I whisper. My muscles atrophy. He decided to leave. I could hear the finality in his words. The best I can do, I decide, is give him one last ride.

I hum. Water seeps out of the ground, now it rises a foot, over the dirt, swirls into a pond of broken tree limbs and patches of grass and brown liquid. Hunter looks at me, clutches the fallen tree trunk, pulls himself over it, water up to his ankles, then knees, then waist.

I still wait. I hope he will reach out, he'll tell me that it's all be ok, that he doesn't mean any of it, but I know it's a waste of my time. He keeps staring under his nose, half-turned away from me, silent.

And I think, at least I had it, a minute of fantasy. It's better than nothing. Now I can let it go.

Water reaches up to our shoulders now, water gurgles, fills the basin between the mountains. Trees float, I float, until there is no ground under my feet. Hunter clutches to the tree trunk for dear life, but he wouldn't even turn to look at me. I hum until I feel a boat in the distance. I feel it through the vibration of the water, and all it takes for me is to change the tune enough to create an undercurrent.

Five minutes.

I can see it in the distance. A dot on the horizon. The new line of water where the line of clouds used to be, a siren-made

lake between the mountains. The lake I made with my voice. A gigantic bathtub chiseled in stone, adorned by forests, steaming with the morning mist.

"There, that's for you." I point. Hunter doesn't even look at me. I glance at myself, my arms, my shoulders.

You're a monster, I think, remember that. Won't you ever forget your place. Admit it and move on.

I hum more.

Ten minutes.

The boat is bigger, it's a row boat, empty, not a soul on it. Good.

I close my eyes and hum more. I can feel it move, feel it tug at my thoughts, feel it want to come close. And it does.

Twenty minutes.

I can feel it bob next to Hunter, half-submerged in the thick soup of the water I conjured. I open my eyes.

I stand very still.

Daddy sits in the boat, the paddles loose in his hands. He smiles.

"Excellent job, Ailen. Very good. Ten sirens gone, alpha damaged. I'm very pleased."

I gape. Out of all boats, I had to pick out the one with him. Seems like there is no escape.

"Sorry I left you hanging, Ailen." Daddy looks at me with a new look in his face, the look that I don't recognize. "Will you forgive me?" He has never apologized to me in my entire life, ever. He stretches out his hand to me, his grey hair moves in the breeze, his lips form a perfect smile.

"Help me pull in Hunter here, please?"

I hesitate a moment. Maybe Hunter is right, maybe I'm a monster after all. Then where is my place? With others like me. With my family. At Daddy's side.

I pull at Hunter and help him over the board, then grab Daddy's hand and pull myself in.

"Let's go home." Daddy says.

18.

Have you ever been buried alive? I don't mean being stuck in the sand on the beach with your head sticking out. Not like that. Have you ever been inside a coffin, six feet underground, knowing that no matter how loud you scream, not one living soul will hear you? Have you? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

I'm in the boat, I'm on the lake.

Two hours of daze later, I'm home.

Buried alive, sealed off, with no way out. I know I still breathe, but I know I'll die right here. The walls are my coffin, shut doors are its nails. To be here is my choice. I sit across Daddy's desk, numb.

Four days.

"It's a perfect blend of art and science, wouldn't you say?" Daddy interrupts my stupor.

He lifts a glass sphere from his desk and turns it this way and that, squints at the water against the light that filters through the cloth blinds, causing the fish to scatter in all directions, to bump into walls, into each other. Locked in their glass casket till they die.

"Yeah..." I trail off.

I feel like I'll never be able to speak again. I lost the ability to move my tongue, to formulate thoughts into words, words into sentences, sentences into stories. And what's the point? Who'll want to listen, anyway? Hunter hates me, and Daddy never listens.

But I can sing.

Not to make him hear me. No.

To destroy it all.

Because that will destroy me too.

"Why so quiet? Don't you have anything to say?" Daddy places the glass orb back on his desk. He comes up to me and lifts my chin towards the light, like he just did with the orb. He peers into my face. I'm not transparent, Daddy, I'm empty. I have no soul.

"Sorry..." I say. Habit.

"No need to apologize, Ailen. You're my star, after everything you've accomplished. Albeit a bit messy, but I understand. We all love a little fame, don't we?" He pats me on the shoulder. I barely notice, I can't feel.

"I don't care."

"I see."

He's back in the chair behind his desk, opens a drawer, pulls out something small and places it in front of him.

"Let me explain something to you, perhaps it will help. Do you know what this is?"

Does he take me for an idiot? "A pearl."

"No. Not just any pearl, it's natural. Do you know the difference between a cultured and a natural pearl?"

The way he says it, I feel dumb. The way I'll explain it, he won't hear. I give him the excuse to shine. "No. I don't know."

"Most pearls you see in stores are cultured, grown on pearl farms. It's a fascinating process, really. They take a tiny mother-of-pearl bead or a piece of sand and implant it into a mollusk. The host." He pauses, waits for reaction.

I nod.

"This one," he puts it on his palm, "was made by nature. It's perfectly round, which is extremely rare. Look." He lifts it against the light, pinched between his manicured fingers. "Very pretty. The closer it is to an ideal spherical shape, the more expensive. Up until last century they've been valued above all other gems. You know why?"

I shake my head.

"Not for their beauty. For their rarity."

He gives me that long look. I shift uncomfortably. Something sinister in his eyes, I can't place. He leans over the desk.

"Tell me how natural pearl are made."

I stare.

"By a parasite."

I recoil. He continues.

"The parasite enters a mollusk's body so that it can't be expelled. The mollusk fights back by producing calcium carbonate and protein, to cover it up, layer upon layer upon layer, until it's completely enclosed. Dead. It becomes a cyst, a cancerous growth. That's what a natural pearl is, Ailen."

Me. He means me. I'm the parasite. Enclosed in a beautiful shell. I'm his most precious pearl. A work of art and science combined.

I shrink into the seat. I feel so out of place, I want to run. Too late. There is nowhere to run this time, Ailen, I tell myself.

A sudden temptation overwhelms me, and I throw my next words at Daddy like I don't care.

"You forgot something."

Daddy raises his eyebrows, taps his fingers on the table.

"Please, enlighten me."

"You forgot to check if the parasite is still alive." I savor the pause.

"Not for long." He stretches his lips, but his eyes don't smile. The air grows thick with anticipation. "We'll be staging

your funeral today. To quiet the towns folk and stop the rumors. To give you a proper goodbye."

The rest I don't hear. I just sit there, whatever life is left in me, vanishes. This is backwards. This can't be. I know I'm supposed to scream, to jump up, to kill him with a song. Instead, I feel nothing. Maybe I'm finally dead for good, shell and all.

"Where would you like to go?"

"What?"

"After the funeral, where would you like to settle? You didn't hear me, did you? How typical."

I gape. "Sorry."

"I'm doing this for you, Ailen. I screwed up, I apologize. Once you're 'buried', we'll take off and start a new life, just you and me. What do you say? Where would you like to go?"

I shake my head to make sure I heard it right.

"You're serious? You mean it? For real?"

"Of course! How about that for a birthday present?"

I'm scared, I'm so scared to believe. I choke on my own tears, I don't let them out. No, stay inside.

"Can this be true?"

"Can't an old man change at the end of his life? Come on, Ailen, give me some credit."

I want to hug him, but I can't move. Isn't that what I wanted all along? To have him all to myself for once? To sing to him, better than Mommy? To have him admit that I can sing, after all?

"I don't care. You pick, I guess. What do I do?"

"You play dead. Hunter will brief you, I'm sure you'd like that." My heart falls, but I nod. "I have to leave to prep the venue and the boat."

"The boat?"

"For the burial-at-sea."

"Ah." I say.

Daddy leaves, Hunter enters the room.

The rest of the day speeds by in a blur.

One hour, two, three.

Hunter talks to Daddy on the phone. Hunter tells me the details. Hunter tells me to play dead. I cooperate by being still and quiet, doing what I'm asked to do. I'm so happy, I don't care. I think funerals are my new special favorite way to pass the time. It's where families get reunited.

Hunter asks me to take a bath. His look vacant, his eyes blank. He looks at me, looks through me, looks into some distant beyond.

I step in and pour cold water. I soak. He knocks on the door, he asks if it's ok to step in and give me a set of clean clothes, he won't look. I say, come in.

He comes in, shuts the door, his eyes down, hands me the towel, then plain white cotton shirt and pants and socks. I get out of the bathtub, dry myself, sit down on the edge of it and dress.

I prick up my ears. He hears it too. A song. No, multiple songs. Strong vibrations come from the outside. Hunter's eyes wide. He pulls at the door handle, it's locked.

He pull at it, harder. It doesn't give.

"What the..." He curses under his breath.

I'm dressed. I stand up and we both struggle against the door. No use. The song comes through the walls, like a chorus of some ancient opera.

"She's here, she wants me! She didn't die!" I panic. I open my mouth to sing. A powerful sound penetrates through us, we crouch and clasp our ears.

I roar.

"Give me your hand," I yell, and then hum the water to motion. It bursts from the faucet and fills up the tub, then spills on the floor, higher, higher. I propel my body towards the door. One time, two, three. The door starts to give, it's close to breaking. I sway more.

"Harder!" Hunter urges me on.

"I'm trying!" I yell.

We push one more time, the pressure of the water helps. The door bursts open, water rushes out into one wet blanket over a dozen sirens, their manes matted, their naked bodies slick with dripping water.

The alpha siren in front. She laughs.

"Not good," says Hunter, standing up and pulling me to my feet.

"Like I'm blind," I hiss.

All eyes on us.

There is no time to think. It's not your typical 'staring-at-each-other-for-sizing-each-other-up' moment. Forget it. We don't talk like we did in the meadow valley by the mountain, that was child's play. The game is over. To say that they leap at us is to rob your imagination.

They crash at us in a wave, ear-splitting in its shrill, all-consuming in its wake, tearing and howling and twisting in its fury. Their hair thrashes about. Their limbs bulge with veins. Their mouths open to the cracking sound of their skulls, their teeth sink into my arms, my stomach, my face.

I'm about to be eaten alive.

I don't care. I only have one target in mind. The alpha.

I burst into a song.

I feel my throat split open, my body gnawed on, still I sing. I draw on the water around me, on the pulse of life. It all melts into one.

A voice booms through me, the voice that makes me choke on my song.

Alpha.

"Leave her! We've got to have a little chat." Whatever is left of me, gets abandoned in a haste.

Alpha approaches on light feet. I can't get up, my leg muscles are torn. I can only lie there, on my bathroom floor, and wait for her to come near me.

Silence thickens.

Alpha's face swims into view. It's beautiful in an eternal sort of way, forever young, yet menacing, darkened by age, a face that you dream about for soothing your pain, but when it comes at last, you want to run from, screaming, screaming.

"There you are. I've been thinking about you. Have you been thinking about me?" She touches my face.

I choke on words. I can't look away, wishing she never came, yet drawn into her eyes, drinking from them some sort of coldness that binds me first, then spreads through my agony, soothing.

"You have been thinking about me, haven't you?"

I shake from head to toe. She plays with my muscles, string that need to be tuned. Only there is no music. I want to gag in revulsion.

"Ailen Bright. You thought you could kill me. You silly girl." Alpha pulls my face closer to hers. "It takes more than a song. You're not the first, you know. Many tried before you. He tried."

She motioned towards Hunter, who lay motionless on the floor. I want to scream but I can't.

My throat constricts.

"I'll let you in on a little secret. A secret only for you and me, what do you say?" Her breath on my face, I nod. I need to keep talking. I don't feel the pain anymore, my muscles knit together, heal. I need to keep her talking.

"You can't kill me. Nobody can." Alpha whispers.

The air around us agrees, it nods in silence.

"You're just some dead meat that can sing." I croak.

"That's what you wanted to be, isn't it? Isn't it what you are now, Ailen Bright?"

"No." I shake my head stubbornly.

"Go on then. Carry on. Pretend to live. Pretend we never met. How about it? How would you like to play this game?"

"I'm tired of your games."

"You silly girl! Ailen Bright, you're not just silly, you're rude! Didn't your mother teach you proper manners?"

I shrink.

Mommy was never there to teach me anything, I want to say.

"You did it all by yourself! Aren't you proud? You took it all into your own little hands. You asked for me, you called me, and I came. Like thousands before you. Are you glad?" Alpha's nostrils flare.

I shake my head 'no'.

"You're a spoiled little brat, that's what you are. Thinking about yourself, saving only your own skin. Disgusting." Alpha stands up and spits.

"You can't balance on this edge forever, you're smart enough to know that. Not after you've crossed to the other side. It's only a matter of time till you tip." She says it in a voice of authority not to be questioned. "One day we'll meet again. Like old friends." She beams.

"Until then, stay out of my way. This is a final warning. You let me do my business, I let you do yours. Agreed?" She stretches out her hand for me.

I stare it down, both terrified and relieved. Terrified because I don't quite know what this means. Relieved because at least something is certain. I make a choice. I take her hand.

She lifts me up. The parasite, broken out of her prison.

"Thank you for payment, it was long overdue." Alpha snaps her fingers. Two sirens hold up Hunter under his armpits. He hangs between, unconscious.

"For what?"

"For all those that I lost. Because of you." Alpha laughs. She shakes, sending vibrations across the floor, through the house, all the way to the lake.

"No!!!" I yell.

She pins me down. "Enough of this! You think you can outsmart me. Well, I tell you what, you think too much." She taps on my head. "Stop thinking, start to listen. Listen!"

And she sings. I find myself entwined in the ribbon of her song. It binds me, lifted me up and whisks me away, away to where there is no pain, no happiness, just nothing.

I let go, and I fall, fall, fall.

19.

Have you ever been in a mass grave? Have you ever been one of those bodies stuffed into a large gaping hole in the ground? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

I fall into the mass of bodies, sirens, a colorless mess of bare skin and tangled hair, waist-long, knee-long, floor-long. Their faces taut with shiny skin. I fall inside. I become part of this mass. It breathes as one gigantic body, white, all-consuming, rhythmic. I want to erupt with everything I feel, and I can't. I can't breathe. It's not air that I can't breathe, it's water. Water rushes over my gills.

Water presses on me. A current propels me on, towards the bottom of the lake, ten feet, twenty, a few hundred, until my chest is ready to explode. I forget how to use my gills, have to think how to open and close them, how to inhale and exhale. We dive deeper.

One hour? One day?

Darkness all around. Sirens glow. I make myself look around.

Alpha speeds in the lead, Hunter firmly in her hold, limp.

His eyes open, dead.

It's all my fault.

I can't take another breath. I have to get out.

Daddy is all I have left.

I feel like I see his face, peering from above, big as the sky, calling my name. Pulling me out.

"I'm coming, Daddy, I'm coming."

Sirens move down, a chorus whose song reverberates though them as one body, amplifies the sound. The sound I don't want to hear. I hang in the water, free of the current, watch the glow darken, glimpse Alpha waving me her goodbye.

The lake spits me out, and I take a breath.

"I'm coming home, Daddy, you were right. I'm coming home."

I swim. I don't feel a thing, only emptiness. Water lapses around me. I lose track of time, until I bump into the shore, climb out and crawl, stone by stone, tree by tree, to the familiar porch, up the stairs. I clasp the wood of each step, chip the paint with my nails, peel it, layer by layer. Listen, inhale the dank smell of abandonment, packed around me, moldy.

I push the front door open. It groans. It doesn't want to let me in, as if I'm no longer welcome.

Muted stillness clings in shards to my face, floor gives way under my palms and knees. I move in fast, crawl to the bathroom, the only room with the door that locks. But it's broken, by Alpha. I prop it up, pretend like it's shut. I feel

for the tub's edge and pull myself up. There is the light, a mere outline of the usual warmth, broken. There is the ceramic bathtub, white, glistening with contempt. Lines snake across its shattered ceramic coating.

I slide down, inside. I feel I fit in this dark lonely place. I push past coldness so deep, it touches my frozen bones. I want to warm up, I want to hear Hunter's soul, but it's gone. Hunter is gone.

I try to imagine his sound. To bring back that feeling of home, the sound of the food being cooked on the stove, the clanking of the dishes, the shuffling of the feet in slippers on the wooden floor, the laughter, the anticipation of the meal, the chirping of the birds behind an open window, the buzzing of insects basking in the rays of the morning sun.

I can't.

I don't remember how it sounds.

I clutch my knees and rock, back and forth, back and forth.

Hours pass.

I create my own rhythm. I try to soothe myself to something, something like sleep. Sirens don't sleep. This is as close it gets. I brood in a self-induced slumber. When will it break? And for what? What do I have inside? Emptiness, nothing else. I want to call on Alpha, to ask her to fill me in.

"One minute of fantasy is better than nothing."

I want to feel it, the happiness and the joy. I want to call for Alpha, because I can't remember what it all means anymore, and her song is so beautiful, so overpowering, it makes me feel like there is some meaning to this, like I can be validated, even if only for one single minute, before being snuffed out for good.

Crunch.

The gravel by the front door moves under Daddy's car.

My heart fish out of the water, aflutter.

He'll save me, he'll take me away.

I'm afraid he'll be mad and will change his mind. When he sees what I've done.

My head pounds, a fish struck on the edge of a bucket, to die.

Whack!

The front door slams. Foot steps.

"Ailen?"

I'm one with the tub.

It's like four days never passed. It's like the morning of my birthday, all over again.

"I know you're here, sweetie. Answer me."

I want to make a dent in the tub, to disappear.

Steps.

Two shoes stop in front of the broken door, I see them through the gap. I have a wild idea, I want to blow the air and see if the shoes will sail away, like two boats, into the ocean, far far away. Gone forever.

"Ailen, you're here?" Breathing.

Daddy lifts the door and props it against the wall.

"Will you look at this." I hear anger in his voice. He turns on the flashlight and steps in. The light hits me in the face stronger than the sun. It's electric intensity colored in blue, my favorite color. Blue against dark hole where the door used to be. Where Daddy stands. Where his mouth is open, where his eyes are mad. Where his finger points.

"Look what you did."

All I can do is stare.

"You know how much it costs to replace a door? And the tub? And the light?"

"Daddy, it wasn't me, I swear." I say.

He doesn't hear me, he never hears. He points at me.

"Look at you. I'm supposed to pick you up, all clean and made up. The funeral starts in one hour. And you look like a stinking mess!"

His finger in my chest, under my nose.

"Do you smell it? What's it smell like?"

I don't answer.

"Talk to me. Your father asked you a question. What's it smell like?"

"You said we were going away after the funeral..."

"Answer me, Ailen!"

"I don't know."

"It smells like death. Dead meat. You know how much a funeral costs? You know how much it will cost me to make it all happen, to abandon my business, to move away?"

I'm filled with terror. He looks at my face, he sees it, he takes a breath.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, I didn't mean to scare you."

My silence is his agreement.

"Let's just get through this, and we'll go away. Tomorrow, we'll start a new life, how is that?"

"You mean it?"

"I mean it. Where would you like to go?"

"I don't care where, as long as we're together."

"Ok, I'll take my pick. A small house by a lake?"

I nod. It's my moment to live, but I'm dead.

"And you're ok with me being, you know..."

"Yes. Of course I am. I'm your Daddy, remember? Let's not waste any time."

I nod.

"That's my girl." He smiles. "Now, get up, let's get you cleaned up and changed. Here is what we do."

He talks and talks. He talks fast. He explains it all. Reception. The guests. The venue. The boat. The burial at sea. The speech. The passing of the coffin. The dip. The goodbye.

"Then you'll break out and swim, to that abandoned pool, remember? Don't worry, it's empty and clean. I'll meet you there after dark and we'll leave. Deal?" He stretches his hand out, I shake it. It's the first time we touch when I don't flinch away.

"Hunter is gone."

"I know. Daddy will find you another boy in no time." He smiles and I don't know if he jokes or if he truly doesn't care.

The funeral. Our extended family will be there. Hunter's mom will be there, if she can make it. Half the town will be there. Remorse gnaws its silky torture into my chest. I try to inhale. There isn't enough air.

"I'm scared." I say.

"You'll be fine. Pretend it's a game. Your role is to play dead." A pat on the back. "Let's get going."

I wash. I change. I get to the car. I lie down in the coffin, Daddy closes the lid. (Describe in more detail later.)

The engine starts.

The car moves.

We drive through the city, I feel every turn and stop,
every soul. We blink through the streets, veer in and out, pause
in traffic, enter the highway, speed up. The rain pummels the
car's roof, the town is full of the human chatter.

We pass a tunnel, I can tell by the echo the tires make.
Turn into a cobble street, then into a road covered with little
pebbles and pieces of rock. Daddy parks the car.

He opens and closes the door, calls for help. I hear a pure
majestic opera of human souls. They waft from the distance,
about fifteen of them. The sound moves towards me, rapidly. I
revel in it, imagining what it would feel like to have this
music within me, to be one of them, to live their life. Full of
warmth. Rich as velvet. It seems I've been gone for a century
and forgot how it feels.

It's been five days.

I lay still.

More cars arrive. People pile out, pull their children with
them, help their elderly, check themselves in the mirrors of the
entrance hall, greet. I can hear it so clear through the
coffin's lid, like I'm part of the party.

And I'm about to be.

Several men come towards the car, open the back door, and
gently lift me up. I swim on their shoulders, towards the house,
into the main hall, onto the table. People mill around,

chattering, drinking, eating. They hush as we pass through, into a big empty room. I hear their foot steps echo off the wooden floor.

They stop.

They put me down.

Set. On the table. Done.

Daddy opens the lid.

20.

Have you ever attended your own funeral? Not as a guest, but as a body in a box with a lid. I imagine you're wondering now, it's impossible. But you're wrong. All of us will. One day. Today is mine. Yours hasn't come yet. Go away. Don't answer me, I know. Of course you haven't attended your own funeral. Because if you did, you'd have to be dead.

I open my eyes just a sliver of pain, of the anticipation. I steal a glance around me.

There is dimness to the air behind the glass doors, there are people's heads, blonde, ashen, dark, heads in hats. Women's hats, black with bows, black with veils, black round and black flat. Children with their hair made up and brushed and clean for the occasion. Men in dark suits. Curiosity presses against the glass. Hushed chatter spills through the cracks.

Hello, how are you. Well, how about yourself. Oh, not too bad. What a tragedy. Nice appetizers. Fancy flowers. Look at the table, there she is. I wonder what they used for the smell. Five days, must be decomposed by now. You don't say. It took them this long. Wouldn't have fish eaten off her face? Teenagers, so selfish these days, don't give a second thought about their

parents. I say, it's in the genes, remember her mother. Pardon me, excuse me, coming through.

A server squeezes through, drinks carefully balanced on his tray. Hands reach out for a glass here and there, like white snakes out of a black writhing mass. All the relatives and friends whom I never met, who pretend to care. Who came to see the famous Roger Bright in his grief, one by one, forming a line, eager to get that rare delicacy rationed from the table ahead, the final goodbye.

Me on the table. A table a mile long, with a coffin on top, so thin and slender and final. I'm here, and I'm not.

I wait for Daddy.

I wonder what he'll say. I know.

He'll say he loved me, he'll say he misses me so much.
He'll cry.

The clock strikes two. The crowd murmurs. They wait for Daddy, I do too, that much we have in common. But that's all. I'm dead, and they're alive. I'm rudely cold, they're ever-warm, full of free food and drinks, strapped into that new dress or hat or shoes, right out of the brand new car. Obligated to be here. Death makes it hard to be excused.

Two ten.

They press more. Anticipation mixed with wonder.

Two twenty.

The crowd says one word, quietly, ever-politely, until a girl about seven years old hears it escape her mother's lips and says it out loud.

"Is her Daddy late?"

My heart a barking seal, a yelp of pain, it won't shut up. Something must have happened, something must have delayed him, where did he go, he was just here! I want to turn my head and look, but I don't dare. I strain to listen, but I don't hear him. Not anywhere near.

Two thirty.

They open the doors.

The sea of people trickles in, then swallows me up in the noise of their souls, exchanged glances, wiped fake tears, sniffing noses, gloved hands, craned necks to be the first to see. They wind around, lean in, burn my forehead with a mandatory kiss, whisper something that means nothing to me but perhaps means to them they did their good deed of the day. They move on.

"Isn't it lovely, Ailen Bright?"

I shrink. She hovers over my face, clothed in proper funeral attire, black dress and black gloves and black hat and black smile.

I catch the starting of a sentence before it forms on my lips, arrest it, push it in. Surprise gives way to shock to wonder what she's up to and why she's here and what I should do.

"Your flower arrangement, it's so lovely. White lilies. Mine were hydrangeas. Ugh. Looked to stupid, almost made me gag."

I correct my face, look dead, wait for Daddy, ignore. What should I do, what should I do.

A kiss that doesn't burn because it's cold like me.

"Poor darling, darling girl. So very sad. Your Daddy must miss you so much, he's late."

She sniffles. Liar.

My ears a drum pummeled into pulp of disgust.

My head a balloon ready to explode.

My fingers curl up into fists under the white cloth, white knuckles match its bluish shade.

"He's late for a reason." The words escaped me before I can take a moment to think. Too late.

"Ailen Bright, I came here to say. Don't meddle into my business, and I won't meddle into yours, understood?"

I fume.

"I'll take your silence as a yes. Oh, and I came here to sing, just for you." The motion of her arm is for me to see what she didn't say, what didn't need to say. The choir of sirens,

the dozen of eyes, blinking from faces shrouded in black. No pine needles this time, only silk and chiffon and gauze.

"I think he's here, I'll go pay my dues." We both hear the wheels of another car.

She saunters away.

My body a string of nerves, tight, tighter, wound up to the breaking point.

Silence rolls over the crowd with a final gulp, volume down as if I dipped under water.

Calls puncture through, trace his path. The well wishes of the sympathetic, light afire and fizzle out in his wake.

Mr. Bright, over here. Step aside for Mr. Bright. My condolences, Mr. Bright. Here, through these doors.

He moves through the bodies, wedges in, accepting, nodding shaking hands, responding in his ever-present politeness and tact. Answering to the voices. Some of them melodic. I hear what I sensed already. Concealed, one dozen, two dozen, more.

The sirens.

Ready for a feast.

I have to warn Daddy.

I wait.

He makes it to the table, to my coffin, he stands. I feel him, I feel a layer of family friends and a horde of guests

behind him, pressing on his back, waiting for the spectacle to begin.

He stands tall, his hands clasped together in front, a question on his face. The shuffling of the feet, the moving of the chairs, the polite coughing and sneezing, excusing your neighbor, the settling of the crowd to be ready for my father's words.

All still.

He begins.

"My name is Roger Bright. I thank you for gathering here today to remember my daughter, Ailen Bright. I want to say a few words in her memory."

Shuffling, sniffing.

My nerves are about to snap. I want to tug at his sleeve, to let him know who's in the crowd.

"It's a terrible terrible thing, to outlive your children. Ailen Bright lived a remarkable life, one filled with wonder, joy, and happiness. An obedient daughter, an exemplary student, she had a bright future ahead of her."

I hear bitterness in his voice. I never amounted to anything. I want to hide from it, to run, to scream my head off, but I have to play dead. To keep Daddy alive, to not meddle into Alpha's business. That much I can do.

Daddy drones on.

A child whimpers, a woman cries. A theater of death performed for the living, so they don't dare to forget. Alpha's words ring in my head on repeat, "You're all alone in this, aren't you, silly girl. Are you scared?" She's here, and that knowledge prickles my skin.

I have to warn Daddy somehow.

"Stop!" I want to shout. "Look, she's here!" I want to say, but I play dead. I try to listen to what he says, but I don't hear. I try to feel around me to find out how many of them are there. And I want to hear those special words. I make myself still, I listen, this is what I hear.

A momentary silence between two gasps for breath, and then Daddy's voice rings loud and clear.

"She was Daddy's girl, you could say. She told me one day, she loved me more than her mother, that she did." He drops his head. Lair! I want to scream. I never said that! But the effect is immediate, a wave of compassion rolls through the air in stifled sobs and nods of approval and shakes of the hats on their heads.

My face a mask of pretense. Concealed surprise. Not the mother, leave my mother alone! Don't touch her, Daddy!

My gut sears with pain, every ounce of strength deserts me.

I wait. I wait for him to say it.

How much he loved me. How much he misses me. And still it doesn't come. He talks of what I could be, of my shiny future that never came, of how proud I could've made my father. Him. It's all about him. The speech. The funeral. The guests. The attention.

I'm out of the picture. I'm not even here. He lied. Again. And I fell for it, again. I fell for it like I always did. Like Mommy did before me. Lies, all lies and beautiful empty words. He waited to dispose of me, like he disposed of her, like he disposed of sirens, the women made for one purpose only. To haul water. That's it.

I realize, there is no life ever after. It's one big fat lie.

But I cling to the hope. I still hope that I'm wrong. I don't believe it, I tell my mind to shut up.

I wait some more.

He finishes his speech. Nothing else. Of course, it never came. Not a tear. Maybe that's why. He knows I'm alive, as alive as a siren can get. I cling to this though. That must be it. He steps off the platform, cameras click.

He bends for one final kiss.

Click.

"Sorry for being late, sweetie, I had to arrange out voyage. It's all taken care of, just endure this a little more."

Guilt turns me inside out, how could I think he doesn't care. He does. I want to sing.

"Alpha is here," I whisper instead.

He doesn't hear me, steps away, gives directions to men. They lift up the coffin and proceed out of the house, spill onto the manicured lawn, to the boat shaking in the lake waters, the guests behind, trailing to board for the show of a burial at sea.

The crowd boards, the sirens with them.

I have to tell Daddy.

Last person steps on the boat.

The captain shouts the signal, the ropes come off, the engine starts.

I wait, I can't hear him talk. He's coming, he's coming, he's just late as always.

There. I hear him jump on just before the boat pushes off the shore. The pressure of the unknown lifts off me by his movement. I can breathe.

I hear Daddy's voice.

"I'm so sorry for being late, I apologize. Please, sit down and make yourselves comfortable." On command, people hastily make their way about to find a free spot and sit down expectedly, ready for another dose of the theater and free food,

their souls in discord of mild fear of open water and a pinch of childish curiosity at the fantastic and the impossible.

All at once thunder explodes out of nowhere and the sky dims behind heavy clouds that roll in at an abnormal rate, spraying the windows with angry foam of new rain and sea. Everyone glances up on instinct, and then sideways into the windows. The shore disappeared no telling how long ago. Several women now cry out, some soothe their children, men swear, and the yacht speeds towards the open sea with a terrible speed, manned by the undead beings and their insatiable hunger.

I have to warn Daddy.

Lighting strikes. People ooohh and aaahh, the imminent explosion of terror in their bulging eyes, their gaping mouths, quickened heartbeats, ready to spill.

I don't need to see it, I hear it all around me. Their fear imprints in my mind like a single frame taken out of context, a snapshot of dread.

Dread of the unknown.

Dread of death.

I'm a fake. Like Daddy, I like the show. I tried to die for the show of it, to make him run to me and feel sorry, to see the pain on his face, to have my last laugh, to be right. Turns out, I'm afraid to die, just like everyone of them here, on this boat. Turn out, I run from death all along, I balance on the

precipice of dare, always one foot on the ground, to never tip,
to not loose the balance of the game, to no cross the line.

I'm as scared as any of them.

One hour. Amidst foul weather we make it into the open sea.
I feel it's expanse in every direction.

I don't want to die.

"So you think, Ailen Bright. Sometimes you think too much.
Remember, don't interrupt me, is that clear?"

The yacht slows down and the sirens begin their accent. The
choir assembles on the far side of the deck. They start their
song.

Daddy!

The song rings clear, soars in one voice, then ten, then
two dozen, more. Sirens scatter the perimeter of the boat's
deck, reach a crescendo. Five seconds is all it takes. Glass
shatters, relieves the pressure of the anticipation into shouts
and cries, first disjointed, then pulsing to a deathly rhythm.

I wait for Daddy. I wait for him to break out his whip and
burst them all apart. He doesn't move. I don't understand why.

I play dead.

I can't interfere.

Souls whisk into oblivion amidst the forming fog around me.

I play dead. I'm dead.

Daddy, why are you still?

They're on a rampage. I can hear them. One siren grabs a man out of the crowd, shouts in his ear. He faints, she gobbles his soul up, moves on to the next. People cower, scream, ribbons of their souls escape them to the rhythm of the song.

I'm dead.

Daddy, Daddy, what's happening, tell me, please!

He watches.

I'm still, in the middle of a bloodless bath.

I need to do something.

"Make one move, silly girl, and he's dead." Alpha says into my ear, sweet as a charm. "Lay still, enjoy the show."

I want to scream.

He stays still. And I get it.

He knows. He knew all along. He struck a bargain of some kind. He's not going to stop them. This is the payment for them to stay away, all those people, a terrible price to pay for his cowardice and fame.

The song turns to a throb of a single living being, an awful choir, with Alpha as a conductor, directing the tenor of the sirens to contrast with the sopranos and the altos of the victims, creating an accompaniment to the feast, accented by the cracks of the thunder.

More thunder. More rain.

One more soul pops with a sickening splatter in the air. The song rises to a shrill, with a snap and a collective siren laughter. The sinister happiness of my kind, full to the brim, on the way to satisfaction at last. No, they're not done yet, about a dozen people still left alive on the boat.

A little girl runs up to me, clutches the coffin's edge, her heart beats a million times a minute.

A siren jumps up to her.

"NOOOOOO!!!" I holler and sit up.

21.

Have you ever risen from the dead? Of course not. Because you'd have to die first. And you're not dead yet, I know. You're too afraid to go there, are you?

I sit in the coffin.

There is a momentary silence.

Then shock. On girl's face, on people's faces, on siren faces, on Daddy's face. Daddy loses all color, can't divert his eyes. I look inside him, and all I see is another weak old man, sorry and unhappy and scared. Daddy, a little boy who doesn't know how to escape his misery except to play in some imaginary world. Like me. Like all of us.

"One minute is better than nothing, Daddy, right? Is that what you think?" I want to ask him.

I speed into the past, into that time when I wanted to sing so bad, I went to choir practice every day and worked myself up to a sore throat. I remember inviting Daddy to my first performance, but he never came, he forgot, he didn't care.

I wanted to sing as beautifully as Mommy did. Maybe then, I thought, I could sing him out of his misery, if only for one minute, to make him happy, make him smile.

He never smiles. Never did, never will.

It's this game we used to play, Hunter and me. Have you ever. Have you ever been afraid to die, he's ask. And I'd say, yes, I was. But that was so long ago, it's been five days, or maybe five years. I'm not afraid anymore.

This is how sirens die. I've read it in the books.

If I sing to someone who doesn't hear. If that someone doesn't hear a single note, as if nothing shook the air, as if he is deaf. As if I don't exist. I will sing, he won't hear, I will die.

"I forgive you." I say.

"Mommy, she's alive!" The little girl screams, other people scream. Screams take the boat afloat.

"You never came to my choir performance, but I forgive you." I stand up.

The sirens hiss and close in on me at Alpha's command.

"You never bothered to hear me sing, never hears me when I talked, never heard what I had to say. But it's ok, I get it. It's over now. I forgive you."

I spread my arms into the thicket of this fearful noise.

"Ailen Bright, the girl who can't follow simple rules. I thought I told you not to meddle into my business." Alpha's screech mixes in with the roaring of the other sirens. I ignore her.

"You told me I'll never amount to anything. You were right."

He just stares.

"You never even noticed I was there. It took for me to die for you to see. But it's ok, I get it. I forgive you."

Sirens advance on me. Alpha jumps onto Daddy, clasps his neck from behind, he doesn't move.

"This is for you."

I inhale and let out a note of pain, pain so penetrating and overpowering, so full of grief and hurt and longing. It rises steadily over the harmony of the massacre, thick with urge, guttural, hypnotic.

The crowd gasps in their obvious admiration, their faces clear. They don't even turn to look when thunder strikes, when clouds thicken and the storm spies over the boat with one round eye.

They listen. Even Alpha pauses her deadly pursuit.

I wonder if Daddy hears me. He stares. He doesn't move.

I keep pouring. There is so much of it, I simply can't stop. The flood of memories, the rare cherished moments between us make it into the song, and I see Daddy's eyes mist in recognition. I push the sound an octave higher, then another and another, overpowering the noise around me, silencing even the mad weather.

The little girl grabs my arm, someone else pulls on me from behind. Hands tear at me, looking for a piece of that sweetness, that something to quench their thirst, the yearning for the knowledge that they, too, belong, in this careless existence that we like to call happiness. The one that sirens are bred to induce. The fake. The lure for them to die. As food.

"Get off her, she belongs to me!"

Alpha drops Daddy's neck and dives through people, salivating, sinks her nails and teeth into my flesh.

"You belong to me, silly girl. To me."

She utters a growl of a satisfied animal, eating at last.

Others join into a tangle of wild hair and white bodies. Limbs reach to me in unison, like dozens of frog tongues flicking at their catch, missing, wanting more. I spread my arms to the sides, give myself away, reach for the air to keep singing. I still have a lot of pain left, and they eat it all up.

Ailen Bright, the center of the feast.

The main dish, the desert, the works.

Arms work its way up my face, my torso covered with them like with shriveling leeches, gorging themselves, sucking on the sugar, drop by drop. Thunder strikes again, the boat shakes, the crowd collapses on me in a wave, biting, tearing, wet with feeding frenzy.

I feel my core open, and I choke on the song.

"Daddy!"

My throat torn apart, my voice still rings, "Daddy! Can you hear me? Daddy, please!", until someone, something, takes it out. The very source of it. My vocal cords. Gone.

My voice dies.

Ailen Bright, to be buried at sea.

The maggot mass of arms tosses me on the floor. I'm empty, useless shell. They hunger after that thing now, the vocal cords, that something that produced elation in them, that woke them up, that made them feel.

They forget all about me.

I fall. And in that moment, before striking the floor, I see him one more time. Daddy. He stands, out of the crowd, his shirt perfectly ironed, his face lifeless, his whip missing, staring at me, still staring.

"Did you like it? My song, did you like it?" I mouth the words, no sound comes out. But something clicks.

He shouts a silent "No!" and darts to me.

"No, not Ailen, not my baby. Not my Ailen, no, no." He cradles my head in his lap, he stroked my hair, and it's real. It's for real this time, not pretend.

"Baby, don't go. Daddy is here, hold on to Daddy. Don't you dare going, Ailen, don't you dare!"

He holds my hands, he kisses my fingers. He presses his cheek to my forehead, and it's real.

"Daddy loves you, you silly girl. Daddy always loved you! Don't you ever forget it. Oh, Ailen, what have I done." I have to look twice to make sure I'm not dreaming. Tears roll down his face in two feeble lines.

"Talk to me, baby. Talk to me."

And I can't answer. My voice is gone. I can only stare, no tears left inside to spill. My eyes, they hurt. I close them.

This game we used to play with Hunter, he'd ask me, was it worth it? You know, killing yourself, was it worth all this trouble and pain and angst? And I'd say, this moment, this, right now, was worth dying for. I'd die for it twenty times over, if that's what it took. And he's just nod, I know, he'd understand. And we'd sit like that, silent, for hours.

Daddy rocks me. Back and forth, back and forth. I fly. He kisses my forehead. I soar. He sings me a lullaby. I dream.

I hear the chant of the crowd die. They scatter towards the abyss of death, one by one. Until it all stops. The noise stops. The thunder stops. The boat comes to a halt. And only Daddy's song lulls in the silence.

I weep inside, happy.

I think I fall asleep, for the first time in five days.

I dream about Hunter and the lake and the flat stones that we send scattering against evening sun. I dream about Mommy and the way she used to sing to me, to chase the nightmares away, her soft hands in my hair, her smile, her wave goodbye before she left on that day, left for good.

Hours, days?

I open my eyes.

The sky is clear. The clouds give way to the brilliant blue of the afternoon. The wind dies down to a gentle breeze, sifting through the torn curtains, the broken windows, the gaps in the boat walls. Water splatters in the aftermath of the storm.

Drip. Drip.

The air stands fresh and still, ready to be taken in by those hungry for relief.

There are two of us left. And the quiet of the sea, the gigantic mirror that reflects the absurdity of life, if you dare to look.

"Daddy?" I want to call out.

I feel as though some tiny creatures crawl all over me, knitting my muscles back together, mending my bones, closing my skin. I'm still very much alive, but my voice is gone. My throat closes off, seals the emptiness of the larynx.

Ailen Bright, mute.

The wind picks up, clears off the vapor of death from the cabin, moves life along, oblivious to the rest.

Horror overcomes me. I listen for any sound of a siren, any movement in the water, any trail of a song.

Instead, I hear footsteps, shuffling of the clothes against the wooden floor.

I sit up.

Daddy hovers over the bodies, closes their eyes, pulls them towards the boat's side, into one neat row, absorbed in the task. Quiet. His arms swift, his movements steady. I lay back down, lose what little energy I could muster. He hears.

"Ailen? Ailen, are you all right?"

I wait for my turn, hearing nothing except his laborious breathing and the squeaking of his soles on the wet floor. He's over me.

The floor around me empty, Daddy sits down.

"Did you sleep ok?"

"Sirens don't sleep, Daddy," I want to say. I smile.

He turns my head, brushes the hair off my face, picks at the individual strands and peels them off my wet skin, one by one, until my forehead is clean to his satisfaction. I wanted to scream, to ask,

"are they all gone? Are there any left? Are they going to attack us again? Why did you do it, why?"

But he keeps on brushing my hair, so it's perfectly slick, for his own comfort rather than mine. I quiet down and drift into a semi-slumber and I know that I have to remember this moment. And I'm not afraid, not afraid to die. Because I have this.

"They're all gone, don't you worry. Ok?" Daddy continues smoothing my hair to the gentle bobbing of the yacht, stranded in the middle of the sea, with no shore to be seen for miles, no captain to get us back.

I point to my throat, finger the spot where my vocal cords used to be, make cutting motions, hope he'll understand.

"I know, I saw."

Pause.

I follow his gaze. Untouched, as if protected by some otherworldly force, the coffin sits on the table, looking over us as if it understands.

"Look, Ailen." It's hard for him. He rubs his eyes. "Look, I'm sorry, it's all Daddy's fault." He hangs his head. I want to stop the clock, right then.

"I forgive you." I form with my lips each word, carefully, so he would understand. No sound comes forth except a strange smacking of the lips. He looks, he understands.

"I heard you." He says.

He heard me. He told me he heard me. Can this be true?

"Thank you." He brushes my cheek.

He holds me.

I purge all thought from my head, I try to forget how to think, I try to be here and now, to allow myself to feel, to be ok with it, with the overwhelming thirst for the closeness and the pain that inevitably comes with it, try to accept the fact that one is inseparable from another, like life is inseparable from death.

Something shifts somewhere at the edge of the sea, in the air, enough to send off a sense of the barely detectable draft, a shadow of a wave across the water, tiny, then larger, reaching the yacht, lifting it a fraction of an inch, obvious only to me.

Alpha.

She didn't die.

22.

Have you ever forgotten to wake up? Have you ever slept for days, months, even years? Of course not. Cause if you did, you'd be dead.

I'm in a dream. That's what it is. It's a dream. I want to be in a dream. I'll pinch myself and I'll wake up. It won't be true. This isn't true, it can't be. Not now. Not fair! I can feel it somehow in my gut, but I can't stop it. I hear a song. Alpha's song. She sings with my voice. Louder, louder.

I look at Daddy in alarm. Can he hear it too?

He does. How I wish I could speak. Maybe he'll read off my lips.

I yank on his sleeve, with full permission of a little girl who is scared. "Daddy!" I want to say. He doesn't move, looks out the window, like he isn't even here.

I try shaking him.

"Daddy, it's Alpha! She'll come back and kill you for sure! Daddy, I wish you could hear what I have to say!"

"Shhh." He puts his fingers against my lips. He hears me, he got it. Now, that I have no voice, he can hear me, at last.

"Don't listen to her, Daddy, don't!"

Alpha comes in closer, fast.

"Daddy!" I want to scream, but he gently lays me on the floor and steps to the broken window. I want to stop him, but I'm too weak to move.

I listen. Vibrations penetrate the air. It will be another minute before she is here, judging by the sound.

I crawl toward him.

"It's ok, Ailen, don't worry. It's ok." His look vacant.

I don't like it. I hug his legs, like I used to so long ago. No reaction.

"if only I could sing, I'd send the storm her way, I'd hum us to the ocean, far, far away, like we wanted to. We'd like on an island, just you and me." I want to say.

Daddy looks at me with a smile.

We both feel the floor tilt lightly. The boat is breached, I hear water seep into its belly.

Crack!

"Daddy!" I shake him, I want to scream.

He just stands, looks at me.

"Come," he pulls me up.

We pass a line of bodies, step carefully around, out onto the dock, to the warm sun of the afternoon, so wrongly bright and welcoming. It burns my skin, but I don't care, don't flinch, don't even utter a moan.

Daddy stand by the rail, dark against the brightness of the sea, uncertain, as if all words escaped. I don't understand.

The sea waits, so does the sun, so do I.

The breeze quiets down to an occasional gush of air, the waves calm. Only the heat shimmers on the horizon, blurs its line into a living breathing mirage.

"For those of you who don't know me, my name is Roger Bright, and I'm the last siren hunter." He tensed at my touch. No siren was ever present at a siren hunter's funeral. I took my hand away.

"No, keep it there." He said. "I'll start again." He cleared his throat.

"My name is Hunter Faraday, and I'm the last siren hunter." He speaks to the water.

"Daddy, what are you doing?" I tug at his sleeve.

He turns to me and clears his throat.

"I want to say a few words to my daughter, Ailen Bright. I want to tell her how much I love her, and what a fool I was not repeat it every single day. I wish I knew, I wish."

I touch his hand.

"I want to ask her for forgiveness."

We both ignore the whooshing of the water, the sinking of the boat. Alpha is here, but we don't care.

"My dear Ailen, I will miss you. You're sixteen, you're such a big girl, look at you. My baby, Ailen Bright."

Alpha jumps on the boat's dock.

The boat creaks and dips further down.

I sway forward. I want to protect him I want to chase her away. I want to shake him loose, I want to run away, forget everything that happened and never come back. I have no strength left, and I slide on the floor. I can't talk, can't move, can't fight.

Alpha takes Daddy's hand and tell me.

"Ailen Bright, we meet again. Ailen Bright, the girl who thinks she can get things for free. Everything comes at a price, silly girl. The more exquisite the product, the higher the price." She turns to Daddy.

I crawl forward. I want to stop them both.

"No, I just got you back, Daddy. Don't go! It's not fair!"

"Goodbye." He says.

He leaves me, like everyone did before. Like Mommy. Like Hunter. They all left me, alone. And it's all my fault. Alpha told me not to meddle into her business, but I did. With blind determination, I move forward another foot, clasp Alpha's ankles and try to pull myself up.

"Take me! Take me instead. Please! I don't want to be left alone, I can't. It's not fair. He's the only one I have left. Please." I beg her.

She looks down at me and she is beautiful. Her hair hangs in thick clumps, its ends kiss the boat's floor.

"Ailen Bright. Ailen who decided she could outsmart everyone." She says.

I nod.

"Go away, silly girl." She says. "It's not your turn. Remember? I told you, it's not your turn yet."

"I remember, but—" I begin.

"If you play the game, you've got to play by the rules. Who makes up the rules? I do. You take turns. I repeat, it's not your turn yet. Go away. What part of 'go away' do you not understand?"

I shake my head, confused. "You told me this before. But—"

"Don't interrupt me, remember? That's one of the rules. Never do it again."

I nod.

"Go on then. Move along now. Go play." She smiles.

I nod again.

The boat levels with the sea.

She takes Daddy's hand and walks into the water. They both turn back to look at me, just before their heads vanish in the sea, as if they approve, and I nod again. They dive.

She took him away. They're gone.

Boat sinks, I float.

The coffin floats next to me, empty, and then it goes down too. With a sad little gulp.

The burial at sea, now complete.

No land, only water around me, and evening sun, like a single light bulb on the blue tiled sky.

I'm alone.

I think of the game we used to play.

Hunter will hear me.

I yell.

Have you ever? Hunter, have you ever lived?

I peer into the water. I think I see his face. Maybe I imagine it, but I don't care.

He's there, he smiles. He blinks. I focus on his eyes. Blue, with a few golden specks, like the afterglow of the sun on the evening sea. He calms me down with those eyes of his, like he always did.

Hunter? I ask. Hunter. Have you ever lived? And he blinks. The water blinks back at me.

Please, answer me, have you ever lived?

Have you? He says.

Have I?

I think. I don't know. I've been so busy running away from life, so busy thinking about death, that maybe somewhere along the ride I forgot how to do it.

Blink-blink-blink.

He blinks.

Is this what you mean, is this what you want to say? That I forgot how to live? I don't ask this, I think it out loud, I talk to myself. I hear my voice ring, inside my head, as if a ribbon of thought passes through water, through space, and folds neatly into my head, into my thought stream, splatters the surface with masterfully twisted pebbles, plop-plop-plop, one by one, before sinking in. My question uncoils inside. I feel every syllable tinkle. Plop-plop-plop, in.

The drops drip into water.

Plop-plop-plop, in.

The world is a shimmering bridge over the constant flow of thought. I throw in words, one after another, without any coherent structure, at random. They sink. I watch them go down into the water, watch them rest on the ceramic floor.

A sudden realization fills me to the brim of my emotional capacity. It pushes so hard, I want to burst. All weariness of my predicament forgotten, I'm a kid again, at the moment of an

amazing discovery, and I want to share, I want to share it so bad.

I want to live!

I say it out loud, again and again.

I want to live, I want to live.

I want to laugh.

I want to run around, holler, be silly, dance under the rain. I want to break into a song, I want to explode into a myriad of bells, at once.

The sun squints brightly at the edges of the sea, they foam up, so white, so smooth. I think if I reach up and out, I will touch them, they're so close.

Hunter, what should I do? I ask.

Live.

Sounds good, I say, and grin.

I reach out and clasp my hands on the edges. I can touch them, cold, white. I cause waves. They roll over each other, bubbles slink into tiny swirls and then dissolve. More waves. Rising, dipping. My arms, my legs. Rising, dipping, rising.

Twenty seconds.

"Ailen, open the door!" Daddy's voice comes muffled through two feet of water. It's cold. I'm not afraid anymore.

"I want to live." I say and watch the bubbles speed to the surface, pop, pop, pop. Watch the ceiling, a strange shade of almost blue, through all this water.

Fifty seconds.

"I said, open the damn door!" Louder. I can hear him louder.

Two minutes.

I pull myself up and out of the water.

I sit and take a shuddering gasp for air. Another, another. I'm so happy I can breathe, I want to cry.

I stretch out my arms and pull myself up. Water drips from my sweatshirt and jeans. I step out onto the tile floor and strip.

I can breathe. I'm ok.

Towel. I need to get a towel.

The door groans under Daddy's fists. He shouts "open the door" on repeat, slamming it, slamming it.

"I'm dressing!" I yell.

"Well, what took you so long!"

"Sorry!"

I blot my face, my shoulders, my belly. I lean over and squeeze my wet clothes over the tub, pull on the plug, let the water run. I watch it swirl. I look in the mirror.

"Ailen Bright. What do you know, you're alive."

I wrap the towel around me and unlock the door.

"Daddy?"

Instead of words I hear a string of swear words and accusations and warnings that one day, you just wait, one day you will turn out just like your mother.

"I already did, Daddy. Did you know, I can sing?"

He doesn't hear me, he never hears me. He yells.

And I grab him by the shoulders and shake him up.

"Listen to me! Did you hear what I said?"

The utter shock on his face replaces the anger. He's silent, for once.

"Listen, Daddy! I have a performance today, in the choir. I told you, but you forgot. You better be there, you got it? I want you to hear me sing!"

"What?" He doesn't grasp it.

I repeat.

I look into his face.

"Oh, a choir performance? Why didn't you tell me before? I have work to do, I have—"

"I told you, but you wouldn't listen! Listen to me now, you are going, and that's all I've got to say. For mom."

And he falls silent. And I know I won.

"OK." He grunts, and looks at the floor. "What time did you say it starts?" He mumbles to himself. "Always knew it, same genes, what would you do. Just like your mother, crazy, crazy."

"No, I'm not, and don't you ever call Mommy that word, you hear me?"

"I don't want to listen—"

"Yes, you do. It's your daughter talking here, and I have something to say."

"And what's that?"

"Do you know what women were made for?"

Daddy's face floats between disgust and shock and anger, all at once. His eyes bulge, veins push against the skin of his neck, he opens and closes his mouth like a beached fish.

"Answer the question." I say.

"Don't you start talking to me like that, young lady. I'm your father, and you do as I say." But I see less glint in his eyes. He wonders what happened. And I give it to him.

"Women were made to sing."

"Where did you get this idea?"

"And there is something you forgot. Today I'm sixteen, Daddy. Today is my birthday." And I know I got all of him this time. He slumps.

There is a knock.

"Hunter!" I yell and run to open the door.

There he stands, wet from the rain.

"Here, happy birthday, brat." He grins, hands me over the present.

"I think I know what it is."

"Oh?" His eyes open wide.

"You wrote me a song?"

"How did you know?" He gasps.

"Just guessed. Want to come in?"

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`"Have you ever lived?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, not pretend live, when you smile politely to others and say hi and bye and thank you and please. But when you make good grades and do what your parents tell you to do, but secretly you hate your life?"

"Hmmm." Hunter thinks.

"Have you ever lived, you know, for real? Have you ever soared above it all, when nothing mattered, nothing at all, except now, except you and your soaring and this feeling of weightlessness that you hope will never end? Have you ever felt like there was no yesterday, no tomorrow, but only today? Have you?"

"Let me think."

"If you didn't, how about you start now?"

"Wait, I did. Of course I did. Have you?"

"I don't think so. I'm sixteen today, and I want to start to live. But I don't really know how, I've always only wanted to—" I stumble.

"You always wanted to what?"

"I need your help. Will you help me figure out how to live, what it means, how to make friends? I feel so lonely sometimes, it hurts. Will you come with me to the lake today, to talk, to throw stones and watch them plop-plop-plop? Will you be my friend? Will you, please?"

I pause. He grins.

"Of course! Always. Wanna start now?"