



CHRIS HOWARD

SEABORN

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For Alice

CHAPTER ONE

KASSANDRA

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

—Final page of a journal by
Michael Augustus Henderson

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

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

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

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

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

“Leave me alone.”

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

“The rain’s watching me, Prax.”

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

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

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

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

“Get away from me.”

She looked over her shoulder, moving to the roadside—still no sign of the car. When she turned back, the rain lit up the night for her, a hundred tunnels drawn in wiry mist, tubes of gauzy moiré. They opened in the air, opening for her, beckoning, and she knew they all led to the sea.

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She smelled the salt and mold, the bitter rotting seawrack, tasted sand and powdery broken shells in her mouth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She sang a storm of words, and lightning swaggered through the trees, blasting away bark. A sixty-foot pine split with a gush of sap, smoke, and vaporized needles; splinters rained down with the water.

Headlights shot through the hazy night and she lowered her arms. The sword vanished. The armor disappeared,

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melting off her body. She stood alone in the street, soaking wet in a T-shirt and shorts, her backpack hanging loose off one shoulder.

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

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

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

She kept walking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I *have* been drinking, Lieutenant Pannone. I’ve been drinking the rain.”

She released him and walked away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He leaned closer. "What's your name?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He gave up.

The rain coming through the trees annoyed him, running off the leaves, whispering his name in his ears, tapping a rhythm that promised to be catchy, but slowed or doubled unexpectedly, and would not allow itself to be caught.

CHAPTER TWO

HIGHWAY 17

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

—Opening line of a journal by
Michael Augustus Henderson

Corina Lairsey dived alone on Thursdays. She lived thirty miles inland, in Coyote, south of San José, and spent an hour every morning battling traffic downtown to C-COM—California College of Music.

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

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

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

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

The freighter barreled down the slow lane with its cargo rocking and suspension creaking, its giant wheels

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yup?"

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

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

Alan drew in a long breath. "It's me, babe."

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

"Look . . . I'm . . ." Alan's voice smoothed out. "You going to say anything?"

"I was pretty clear the day before yesterday."

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She felt a drop in the temperature over the phone.

Alan's voice thinned to a knife's edge. "Are you seeing someone else?"

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

He choked. "So, this is it?"

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

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

"Save your saliva."

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

"Proud of you," she whispered and her voice broke.

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

Corina kicked in the clutch, put the car in gear, and took the northbound road. She passed ancient barracks and clapboard warehouses, all painted tan with big black numbers stenciled on the corners. Most were abandoned and had sat there peeling in the salt air and sun for decades. Cal State Monterey took up a large chunk of property at the other end of the post.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER THREE

FAST

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

—“The New Sirens,” Matthew Arnold

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

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

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

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

There were two submarines in the water, one with a maintenance rack over the bell at the bow, and ropes

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and umbilicals running from the boat to the cleats or into the big gray utility sheds. She found two more subs in drydock, but settled on exploring one tied up at the pier.

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

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

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

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

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

She cleared her throat politely.

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

"Who are you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FOUR

FREE DIVING

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

—From a journal by
Michael Augustus Henderson

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

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

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

Then she weighed nothing.

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

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

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

There was nothing there.

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

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

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

Then it touched her, poked her in the shoulder. She kicked away, spinning right, too slowly, and it anticipated her direction; it hooked her arms and jerked her back, tugging on the hoses, nearly ripping the regulator from her mouth. Her feet flipped out in front of her. The skin along her neck tightened, and she scooped the water, twirling to catch a glimpse of whatever it was.

Nothing there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Get into open water.

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

The invisible current hit her, pushing her neck back. It tore her fingers from the rocks, and threw her deeper into the cave. She kicked madly, clawing her way to the entrance again. She ripped a big chunk of sponge off the wall, and shoved it behind her.

Corina froze.

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

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

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

And she wanted to touch it. Badly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I can't move.

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

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

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

She sagged in the ocean's embrace, unable to stir the smallest of muscles. She tried to move her feet and wrinkle her nose. She tasted something sour, as if someone had shoved her face in a bucket of rancid cabbage—but it wasn't her doing the tasting.

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

She felt her lips move, her throat contracting, lungs struggling to make words, but it was someone else making

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her mouth and throat say them. She heard bits of words: “*Lepto . . .*” followed by “*koost-ho . . .*” She didn’t catch the rest, but she heard the revulsion, a bottomless hatred in the tone.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FIVE

VISITORS

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

—Journals of Michael Augustus Henderson

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

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

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

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

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

She crept past the dining room table, then stopped moving and stopped breathing. Her gaze shot left, chasing

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a new noise in the house, a faint scraping sound, something metal dragged against gritty stone. A soft splattering sound followed.

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

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

Whatever it was, it wasn't upstairs.

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

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

Who left it running?

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

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

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

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

What could get through the gate?

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

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

Like dogs.

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

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

She stared back at him with infuriating coolness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How dare you use that tone—”

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

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

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

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

Kassandra felt the influence of the warrior queen Andromache stir to life in her hands and shoulders, a burn of excitement that raced through her muscles, waking them up with smooth flexing tugs and squeezes, preparing

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for any spin of advantage a battle might throw, simple intimidation to cutting out the commander's heart and lifting it above her head, bleeding through her fingers.

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

They were uncomfortable out of the water.

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

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

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

CHAPTER SIX

CAPTIVE OCEAN

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

—Michael Henderson, notes

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

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

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There was motion now, her body stirring to life.

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

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

Then her eyes opened.

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

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

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

ALMOST TWO HUNDRED YEARS . . .

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

He tried out his new voice.

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

A shock ran through his new body at the high pitch. He foraged for a word . . . *puppet?* Something similar to that, but closer to the controls, as if the puppet and master were one, as if the master could fit inside the puppet's body and wear it like a costume.

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

“What wonderful and awful fortune at once.”

Aleximor looked down at his new host and spat, a curl of saliva tumbling through seawater. The woman had

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almost drowned before he realized her body would need immediate . . . alteration . . . in order to breathe under the sea. He had managed, but only just.

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

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

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

Some kind of armor? Protecting her from what?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Think, girl.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her thoughts skidded to a stop.

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

He said something in his language that meant, "remarkable," but it was the "remarkable" someone would

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use to describe an insect that secreted acid as a defense mechanism.

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

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

“Dee-ah-zo-mah”—something. “Pah-rhee-steed . . .”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What—

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

"Nearly Seaborn," he whispered softly.

Corina's panic hit a wall on his words.

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

He tilted his head down, disappointed. "No more."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He pronounced her full name slowly, rolling the Rs.

"Corina Lairsey."

CHAPTER SEVEN

ONE OF THE SEABORN

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

—Journal of Michael Augustus Henderson

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

For a stunned second it occurred to her that thoughts weren't made of the things they represented. Loud wasn't LOUD in her head. Blue wasn't BLUE. She imagined blue, but blue—when it was stored somewhere—had no color. Then it occurred to her that she could imagine an angry yell, just as she could imagine a bright pink sea or rich field of purple grass. The thoughts themselves might not

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be the things they represent but she could envision the representations. The colors and loudness somehow came through in the imagining.

Say something, asshole!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Damn.

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

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

Maybe he understood. He tugged the zipper closed.

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

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

He sucked in a deep breath.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He floated in black space for a long time, maybe hours, and she made some guesses about what he was doing.

Meditating? Resting? Hello?

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

He had fallen asleep. Corina felt stronger—her own strength, as if her thoughts were spreading out and taking

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some power back. She felt . . . her feet, and they hurt as if she was walking barefoot on cobblestones. This was strange because she was certain he hadn't yet reached the floor of the Monterey Canyon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The judge—*lord?*—grabbed the Bone-gatherer's long black hair, and yanked his head back in order to see his face. Since he no longer needed to pretend to be

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unconscious, Aleximor opened his eyes. A few strands of his hair drifted in front of him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kassander shouting back, “He is not my king!”

Aleximor woke, the heart in his new body thudding over the noise from the scene, smears of color in a pool of syrupy black ink. He blinked and breathed deeply, folding his arms in front of him protectively.

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

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

Aleximor stretched out his arms and legs, and kicked up a good pace, singing low to himself of blood drawing

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out the *psyche* and of locking it in the earth—and of someone he hated almost as much as the king, one of the names from his nightmare, Strates Unwinder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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