

WATER IN THE MOON

by

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ABSTRACT

MADISON BAER. *Water in the Moon* (Under the direction of BRYN CHANCELLOR, M.F.A.)

Water in the Moon is a new adult fantasy novel with high magic and mythical creatures set in the early 1700s in England. The book follows three female character perspectives, each highlighting the joy and strife of particular phases in womanhood. The main protagonist, Mary, is a Nereid, more commonly referred to as a mermaid. She has lived her entire life secluded in the hidden sanctuary of the Ancient Horses of Meretz with her aunts, who protect her. Mary is on the precipice of womanhood, about to turn eighteen, when her life is changed, and she is forced to leave her home in the forest. Her adventure to London with her romantic interest, Zander, will eventually coincide with the two other women's stories. The second perspective belongs to the historical figure Queen Anne and is based in historical fiction. The queen has suffered the loss of seventeen children and is battling the grief that consumes her life. In the third perspective, Charlotte, Mary's long-lost Mother, you learn the story of how Mary became the only Nereid on planet earth. Charlotte is a human, and after being thrown off a ship by superstitious men, she is saved from drowning by a Nereid and transported to the City of Altalune on the Moon, the home planet of the Nereids. The novel explores themes of femininity, grief, transformation, romance, power, and vulnerability. *Water in the Moon* is a tribute to women, their intuitive power, and the inner workings of magic and love.

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by mermaids. Visiting family in Florida as a child, I would spend hours perfecting my mermaid dive in the ocean waves with my ankles firmly locked together. In my early 20s, I strongly considered spending my savings on a silicone mermaid tail and becoming a professional mermaid for children's birthday parties. I would go as far to say that I have had an obsession with mermaids my entire life. I've watched documentaries on National Geographic and read articles on Aquatic Ape Theory, and seriously pondered their existence. After all, over eighty percent of the ocean has never been mapped, explored, or seen by human eyes. Never say never. As a writer, I have always known I wanted to highlight the mystery and magic of mermaids in my fiction. The day I decided to tackle a novel, I instantly knew it had to be about mermaids. However, I did not want to feed into the cliché, trivialized tales of the modern-day mermaid. Mermaids that are reserved for little girls and rainbows and butterflies. I wanted to emphasize the raw power of mermaid energy. I wanted to credit mermaids with strength and untapped potential instead of just bubbleheaded vanity and beauty. I desired to write a fantasy novel that depicted the mermaid's connection to womanhood in a serious and grounded tone.

I first tackled a novel featuring mermaids in Dr. Gargano's Fantasy Writing for Young Adults class. While I was proud of my work and surprised by my abilities, something did not feel right about the novel story. No matter how I played with it, the book still lacked the depth and importance I was seeking. I considered this my first pancake, and I tossed it all. After scrapping the book, I sat in meditation. As a meditation teacher, I know that sometimes the best things come to us when we are not desperately

searching for them. I saw an image of a girl, on the precipice of womanhood, lying on her back in the tall grass of a secluded forest. I had no idea where it would lead me, but it felt right. In my Directed Reading with Professor Chancellor, I later learned that sometimes that is all we need to get started: an image.

For months, I carried that image in my mind, turning it around like a pebble in my brain, looking for an entry point. I took a trip to visit my grandmother in Florida. I went to the beach by myself, as I often do, to take a swim. That particular day I was feeling overly emotional, and I was hoping the salty ocean water would clear my head. I lay floating in the water, staring up at the moon; it was still visible in the daylight sky. At that moment, I was reminded of the association between women and the moon and struck with the idea for this novel.

The lore of the moon has long been deeply connected to women. Like the moon, women are bound by the cycle of death and rebirth. Through intuition, emotion, and sometimes magic, women can connect to the moon and use its power to grow and change. For my creative thesis, I planned to write the beginning chapters of a fantasy novel that highlights the expectations, fears, and societal pressures for women at all stages of life. The novel consists of the close-third person perspectives of three different women, each in a different phase of womanhood. Through this novel, I wanted to highlight the various forms and experiences of womanhood and the pain, strength, and power associated with it.

I am inspired by authors such as Neil Gaiman, Angela Carter, Ursula K. Le Guin, V.E. Schwab, Diana Gabaldon, and Deborah Harkness; authors who can take fantastical, outlandish ideas and ground them into reality with strong character development and

connection. I am influenced by writers who take fantasy and use it as a vehicle to transcend human life, teach others the expanse of the world, and show them the power that lies within us all. In particular, V.E. Schwab's most recent and acclaimed book, *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*, has encouraged me not to shy away from the pain and trauma a character experiences and has shown me how a multifaceted character is riveting and magnetic.

The authors listed above also remind me not to be afraid of my wild imagination because the most fantastical ideas are often the most captivating. I believe that fantasy lends a way through resistance for readers to discover and explore themes and concepts that were once intimidating. When readers can suspend their belief for the entirety of a book, they are in a state of openness and vulnerability where they can grow and evolve. Fantasy encourages readers to hope and heal, and this is why I write fantasy. I want to write fantasy to help others face their pain and learn that they will find purpose and transformation when coming out on the other side of trauma. Neil Gaiman once paraphrased G.K. Chesterton at the beginning of his book *Coraline* and wrote, "Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten" (*Coraline*). Fairy tales and fantasy provide readers with the knowledge that they are infinitely capable.

Mary, the main protagonist in my novel, represents "the maiden," an ancestral feminine archetype. She is a young Nereid, and her story is a tale of coming of age. I decided to use the word Nereid instead of mermaid to bypass the frivolous underscore society has placed upon the mythological creature. In Greek mythology, Nereids are sea nymphs, daughters of the sea god Nereus. Mary lives in a secluded forest with her aunts

Ada and Sylvie, who are protecting her from the world. Mary's species, Nereids, live on the Moon, and because she is the only known Nereid on the planet, she is a target for magic folk who wish to use her and abuse her power. Mary's Nereid connection to the Moon makes her an incredibly powerful being. Mary's aunts have sheltered her from this knowledge in an effort to keep her safe. Mary must embrace who she is as a woman – her passion, her sexuality, her emotion, and her vulnerability- to step fully into her magic. Mary relates to all women and their transition into adulthood.

Many would say that the idea of “prince charming” perpetuated through Disney and fantasy for young girls focuses too much on women needing men for happily ever after. While I agree that girls should not be taught that they need men to succeed, I also want to highlight the strength that can be derived from a healthy partnership with men. With my novel, I strive to impress upon young adults that having a partner to lean on and support you can positively affect your growth as a person. In my novel, Zander is Mary's love interest. Although, in the end, Mary is our heroine and has all the power within herself to succeed, the romance between her and Zander will outline the importance of having someone in your life who intimately nurtures you and holds space for you while you are discovering your truest self. I am a romantic and a feminist, and I intend to demonstrate how the two can exist simultaneously through my novel. Many of the authors I have mentioned have done the same; Gaiman with his tale of Tristan and the star in *Stardust*, Schwab and her romance of Henry and Addie, Harkness with Diana and Matthew, and Gabaldon with Claire and Jamie. In all of these stories, the women are powerful, capable, and strong, but that does not negate their drive and desire for passion and romance.

In Mary's world, I wanted to interlay the strength of another mystical creature that is often trivialized in the same way mermaids are, the unicorn. Unicorns and mermaids are often lumped together in childlike adoration. I was deeply inspired by Neil Gaiman's portrayal of the unicorn in *Stardust* and the rich character development of the unicorn in *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle. Each of these novels portrays unicorns as courageous protectors and fighters. In Beagle's novel, the last unicorn faces the beast that is the cause of their extinction, "Again she charged, and the Bull gave ground, heavy with perplexity but still quick as a fish" (Beagle 265). Gaiman's unicorn protects Tristan and the star against an evil witch, "The witch howled, then; the unicorn had speared her with its horn, through the shoulder" (Gaiman 170). Modern-day spiritualists teach of unicorns as angels, protecting humans when called upon. I decided to pick a new name for these magical beasts and dubbed them Horses of Meretz to indicate their ancient and forceful power.

The second perspective belongs to Mary's mother, Charlotte, and begins with her attempted murder when being thrown off a ship – women on a sea voyage in this time period were seen as bad luck. Mary's mother is saved by a Nereid and taken to their city on the moon, Altalune. In Altalune, Charlotte conceives Mary with a Nereid man, only to then be thrown out of the city for being a human. When Charlotte returns to earth, she is broken and therefore gives her child to Ada and Sylvie to raise and protect. In Charlotte's story, I began the journey of depicting a woman's journey with motherhood. In the historical-fiction novel *The Red Tent*, the reader learns of the importance of sisterhood and feminine support that has originated since biblical times. In ancient times, women

banned together and supported one another, and in Charlotte's story, you see an example of what happens in our modern age when women do not have a village to help them.

The third aspect of womanhood represented in my novel is with the perspective of the historical character Queen Anne of England. Anne's story in my novel lends to historical fiction as I am following the events of Queen Anne's life. I am also perpetually reading the historical biography by Anne Somerset, *Queen Anne*, to help me better understand the character. I am intimidated by the prospect of taking on historical fiction but am eager to meet the challenge. I read *Wuthering Heights* to be inspired by older British language. As a modern-day American, I am disconnected from the language that would have been used during the 18th century, and I am striving to find ways to educate myself on their dialect.

Queen Anne is the antagonist of the novel, but it is clear that her destructive and adverse behavior comes from a place of pain and torment. Queen Anne suffered the loss of seventeen children, which is enough to make anyone mad. I want Queen Anne's character to show that women who appear to be villainous are often pushed to violence by society and their circumstances. As a female princess in line to succeed the throne with pressures to produce an heir, suffering the loss of seventeen children, and facing the scrutiny of her rumored romantic relationship with her best friend, Duchess Sarah Churchill, to say that she experienced societal pressure and the negative impact of her circumstances is an understatement. In my novel, when Queen Anne discovers the death of her only remaining son, Prince William, and the succession of her royal line is removed, she resorts to violence against Mary and those who protect her out of her grief and broken desire to be a mother. Mary's connection to the moon could afford the Queen

the magic she needs to sustain a pregnancy and acquire an heir. Queen Anne's antagonist role serves as one to show people that darkness is born from pain and suffering.

The perspective shifts between these three women were a challenge and continue to be. I want to transition easily between each narrative. I was fearful of all the women sounding the same and wanted to be sure they all had distinct voices. I read novels such as *All the Light you Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Beginning Place* to study perspective shifts further.

There are various other elements of craft that I focused on while drafting the beginning chapters of my novels, including dialogue and character development. I played with different ways to support dialogue, such as the character's movement and actions and detailed descriptions to provide introspection, emphasis, and speed or slow down time. I am excited to see what the long form of a novel will continue to show me about revealing who my characters are by spending so much time with them. Once I got to know my characters better with exercises, such as the ones Professor Chancellor had shared with me, I could hear their words better and worked on reflecting who they are through tone and language choice in dialogue.

Before now, I had only ever written poetry and short stories, so my adventure into novel writing taught me many things about myself as a writer and challenged me in new and exciting ways. I have learned that I am not a planner but mainly a "pantser" – as Professor Chancellor refers to it – which is both terrifying and exhilarating. I had never before discovered the struggle of writing towards the end without knowing what the end will be. Pacing had suddenly become a hurdle when it had never been before. I found myself shoving through dialogue and action in a clunky manner, ignoring my natural

propensity to enjoy internal conflict just in an effort to figure out what is going to happen in my novel. I found that writing a novel is all about balance between “hiking and camping” and knowing when it is a good time to trudge ahead and push myself to keep going and when is a good time to stop and be still with a scene or a character. I also learned that it is more than okay to write “shitty first drafts,” as Anne Lamott refers to them in her book on craft, *Bird by Bird*. When I have a goal of 60,000 words, I cannot allow myself to get hung up on making each line sing as I get it down. I must practice being okay with writing “shitty first drafts” just to get the story out.

Time and structure had also posed a challenge for me in my drafting. Knowing how to mesh time with three different perspectives, especially when one of the perspectives is in a completely different timeline, has been difficult. Knowing when to skip ahead and how to handle time lapses is something I worked on. I began by first writing scenes as they came to me – out of order- and then laying them all out in front of me like puzzle pieces and seeing how they could intertwine and serves as markers, or guideposts, on my writing path. I worked on letting the novel naturally inform me on how time should be handled. Bret Lott’s essay on “Handling Time” gave me a lot to think about in regards to pacing my novel. Lott teaches that handling time is an art form by highlighting stories such as “Bullet in the Brain” by Tobias Wolff (where the reader learns about a man’s entire life in a flash). You can do many different things to move time along quickly or stop it completely. I believe handling time in the long form of a novel will enhance my skills as a writer tenfold.

I had toyed with the idea of creating a language for the city on the moon, Altalune. I love the idea, but- for obvious reasons- I felt unprepared to take on such a

task. I am reading *The Art of Language Invention* by David J. Peterson, which was just rereleased this year, to continue to help me in my discovery. I find that novels that develop their own languages, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dune*, *Game of Thrones*, *Wheel of Time*, and *Harry Potter*, enrich the story. Fictional languages further ground the reader into the fictional reality. I still have a lot to figure out in completing this novel, and perhaps, in time, I will feel brave enough to incorporate this feature.

What continues to drive me as a writer comes from a very simple teaching from Neil Gaiman in his online Masterclass, “What does your character want?” If you know what your character wants, you have something driving your story. Of course, you must first understand who your character is to know what they want, and therefore character development will continue to be one of my main focuses while completing this novel. I hope that the experience I derive from my creative thesis will give me the confidence to finish my first novel. Writing a novel has been daunting and intimidating, and I can imagine that it will be incredibly empowering just to finish the first draft.

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PROLOGUE

Charlotte turned in her bed, begging for sleep to come. The hallow, empty feeling in her stomach was unrelenting, making sleeping, eating, and sometimes breathing impossible. The smell of vomit and mold passed through her mouth as she heaved a muffled cry. How could someone feel so much pain and still be alive and well? That was the trick of her sadness. That profound burrowing misery that radiated from her gut was so unbearable that she sometimes wished for a knife to cut it out. She was truly alone in this world now. With her mother gone and buried in the ground, she was utterly alone. The other passengers of the great ship moaned, and a splatter of fluids resounded through the cabin. The trip home to England from Ireland allowed her plenty of time to wallow in her misery. Burying her face deep within the rough sack that served as her pillow, she worked to scrub the smell of despair from her body. She silently cried for her mother; what she would give to be comforted by her one last time. To hear her mother tell her that she was proud of her, for she was the only one who ever was.

Suddenly, sharp like an unforgiving gust of cold air, two sets of hands were on her body, ripping her from her bed. Then more hands continued to grope her, pulling at her inner thigh and grasping at her breasts. The night was dark, and she couldn't see the faces of the men but could hear their sickly grunts and moist coughs as they shoved and pushed to be near her. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, but she did not scream. She pushed and pulled her limbs with what little might she had, wriggling, trying to break free. The men were consumed with finding a piece of soft flesh to touch and hold.

“Gentlemen, let's get on with it, shall we? Above deck, we go.”

The men hoisted Charlotte above their heads and carried her up the stairs to the ship's deck. The darkness speckled with starlight, and she started to make out the gnarled faces of the men. Henry, Matthew, and, unsurprisingly, Joe and Collin, and three other men she did not know. She closed her eyes and wished for it to be done with. She held her breath and body tight. But before she knew it, the feeling in her stomach had changed, lurching, gasping, as her body fell swiftly through the night sky before crashing hard into the icy ocean below. Kicking and thrashing, she used whatever will was left in her body to find the surface. Her petticoats and skirts tangled amidst her flailing legs, binding her feet and pulling her down like a sinking weight. She knew her lungs wouldn't find air, but she kicked regardless. An unseen force dragged her deeper, and the earth spun, holding her upside down in the water. She relented, gave in, accepted. Submerged, she tasted salt. The water on her skin suddenly felt like air, and her entire body began to tingle with a hot pain. A pale pink light glowed in the distance of the darkness of the sea. Charlotte's heart told her to remain still. She closed her eyes and saw her mother's face in her mind. Her mother's piercing blue eyes with flecks of yellow, just like hers, looked upon her with warmth and a comforting smile.

CHAPTER ONE

The tall grass danced in the wind as Mary lay in the meadow. Even with her eyes closed, she could see the golden sunset trickle through the tall thin reeds by her face and move across her cheek. She listened to the hum of the brook far off in the distance and the song of the reeds in the neighboring pond; she could feel the frogs plop into the rippled water, and somewhere very far away, she smelled the crashing of spring water over the falls. No matter how near or far the water was, she could always smell it, feel it, hear it. Mary lay still on her back in the stiff grass and allowed the sensations of water to consume her and blanket her in a cocoon of comfort. She could practically taste the wet mud she heard squishing under Zander's feet as he trod through the meadow, making his way to retrieve her.

"Mary!" he called.

She turned her head in his direction. "I'm over here."

Zander pushed through the sharp blades with the palms of his hands.

"Mary... your aunts are looking for you."

"I know, I know, but I just wanted to be still just a little longer." She rolled onto her side. "The horses are with me."

Roman and Sonder, two elegant white horses, were lying in the grass beside her.

"Please come inside," he said.

"Okay, alright." Mary reluctantly pulled herself up, shook leaves free from her golden, curled hair, and brushed off her pale blue linen smock.

"I'll race you." She shoved Zander's arm.

Mary took off sprinting through the field and watched beside her as Roman and Sonder flanked her right and left, galloping in pace with her stride. Their twisted horns glistened in the sunlight and bounced light off Mary's shimmering skin. Zander hung back, shook his head, and with an amused smile on his face walked behind.

As soon as the cottage was in sight, Mary slowed to a walk. Her aunts were calling in the horses for the night, and one by one, they corralled into the pasture behind the house.

Mary's aunts were tasked with protecting the ancient horses of Meretz. These horses remained unseen to the untrained eye, but some have been lucky enough to have a horse of Meretz show themselves to them willingly. The horses reach out to humans in desperate need or in serene solitude. Their existence has been written into mythology for thousands of years. While they are powerful creatures, they still require caretaking and tending to keep them safe. Much like a strong sunflower will flourish under the careful eye of a gardener.

As each horned horse passed by Sylvie, she placed a hand on their nose and wished them a goodnight. Ada stood by the gate with her eyes on Mary.

"You know that we want you home before the sun starts to set."

"I know," Mary said, but I wasn't ever alone." Roman and Sonder walked beside her like two proud guardians.

"Let me remind you that after dark, we can't help you. Our sole attention must stay with the horses." Ada placed her hands on her hips.

Mary had lived with her aunts for as long as she could remember. Aunt Ada told her that her mother brought her to them to keep her safe. The horses' sanctuary lies deep

within a forest far from any village or town in Gloucestershire, shrouded in the light of her aunt's magic, remaining unseen by human eyes, all except for Zander.

“Yes, yes, I know, but I'm not a child anymore, and I can take care of myself now. Besides, I always have Zander.” Mary gestured towards Zander, walking out of the woods.

Although Zander was soft and sweet in heart, he was tall and sturdy as an oak. His brown curls were tousled and in disarray, and his kind smile lit up his face.

“Thank you for helping us, Zander. Are you hungry?” Sylvie asked as she closed the gate behind the last horse.

“Zander, come inside and help me make a fire,” said Ada.

“Yes, Ma'am”

“I thought we would have roast chicken for dinner, and I still have some of that cured pork you like so much.”

Ada had laid out bowls of roasted mushrooms and persimmon pudding, and the smell of the chicken on the spit tickled the taste buds. They all sat together, and Sylvie waved her delicate hand over the table, candles igniting light for their meal. Wax dripped into the crevices of the table surface, and they all ate without a word. Hunger surpassed the need for talk, and they are all family here, and sometimes words just aren't needed.

After finishing his meal, Zander rose, “Ada, Sylvie, can I bring you some firewood for the night?”

“No, thank you, Zander, we are all set, sweetie,” said Sylvie, “You have a good night, and we will see you tomorrow.”

Mary watched Zander as he spoke to her aunts, taking in his broad shoulders. He was always so steadfast. He was the only other person residing in the forest. Mary was unsure if there were more men like him out in the world, but she doubted it. The horse's haven is well hidden from humans, but something seemed to have pulled Zander to this place. He had stumbled upon their sanctuary about four years ago on his way home to Edinburg. They were still unsure how he passed through the charms that protected their land. Mary was only fourteen at the time, and she was lying in a pond drenched with the smell of jasmine, sunning her scales and talking to a frog sitting on the bank – the frogs never talked back, but she was lonely, and they were good listeners. Mary laid stomach down in the earthy water, her head on her elbows and her tail flapping in the air.

“Hi,” he said.

Mary jumped and then froze, she couldn't transfigure that quickly, and the pond was a shallow pool not suitable for diving. Her throat constricted, and her skin prickled.

“Hi,” she replied.

Zander leaned in. “How are you this afternoon?”

“Fine, thanks,” said Mary.

Why was he not running? How was he so calm? Her aunts had assured her that no one had ever seen a creature like her before, and this man stood before her utterly unfazed by her transfiguration.

After a moment of gathering courage, she asked, “How did you find our forest? What do you want?”

Zander moved closer and sat on a large rock just a few feet from her pond, “Your forest? I just walked in.”

“Why aren’t you afraid of me?” she asked.

“Why would I be afraid of you?”

She motioned to her tail with her hand.

“Have you ever seen someone like me?”

And in that exact moment, the sunlight glinted off his foggy eyes. His gaze seemed to look right past her head.

“I don’t see anything anymore,” he responded.

“Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t realize.”

“No need to be sorry, I’m not.”

Once Zander found the aunts’ cabin in the woods, he lodged himself there and never moved. What was he running from? Why was he so content with their small lives in seclusion?

Now Mary rose from the dinner table and placed a hand on his shoulder, thanking him for being so good to her aunts.

“Goodnight, everyone; I love you all,” she said as she walked to her room.

Mary entered her room and saw that Aunt Sylvie had filled her wooden tub with cool water. She quickly removed her dress and shift and slipped in. Lavender hit her nose, seaweed slipped between her toes, and salt prickled her skin. She laid her head back on the edge of the tub, closed her eyes, and released a deep sigh of relief. Her ankles stretched, and her thighs relaxed as they slowly melded into one another. Iridescent magenta scales trickled down over her conjoined knees and slid into her unfurling tail fin. Her body yawned, and she sank deeper into the tub submerging her head. She took

another deep breath in, filling her lungs with the salty water air and blowing bubbles with her round pink lips as she exhaled out. Mary nestled in.

Mary adored bathing in the stream, the pond, or the small lake within the woods, but nothing compared to the salty elixir her aunt would brew for her each night. Mary craved the sea; despite her love for the crisp freshwater of her forest, salt revived her body. Mary did not know much about her origin or people like her. Her aunts had kept her in the dark mostly, but one thing they shared, salt was crucial to Mary's wellbeing. So, every night Mary would settle down into her watery bed. While she slept, the salt fueled her magic. This was the last of the salt until they went to market, so Mary tried to relax and allow her tail to absorb as much as it possibly could.

That night Mary dreamt of her mother's sunflower eyes. This was the one memory Mary had of her mother, if she could even call it a memory, but when she thought of her mother, she could see her face. Soft round cheeks, a dainty pointed nose, and dark brown waves of hair. That's all she had to hold onto of her mother.

The next day the sun trickled through the shutters and streaked itself across Mary's tub. She fought to stay asleep until she remembered. Today was Market Day!

Once a year, Ada would take Mary to the market in the nearest village. This was the only time Mary ever interacted with people outside of her aunts and Zander. She couldn't understand how Zander had the option to leave the forest anytime he wanted but never did. He could go to the market year-round or visit the sea but never left the woods. Why would you reject that type of freedom?

Mary and Ada always went to the market in the fall when the harvest was plentiful, and squash was big as her head. The trees had just shed their leaves, and the forest floor was ablaze with red and orange. Mary sat on the wooden steps of the cottage with her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands and waited.

Tapping her foot on the step, she called to her aunt. "Are you ready to go yet?"

"Yes, yes, I am coming; go get Roman and Sonder ready."

Mary jumped up and ran to the meadow. Roman was lying down asleep in the tall grass while Sonder had his neck stretched upwards, reaching for an apple in a tall branch of a tree.

"Let's go, boys!" Mary called.

Roman sleepily opened his eyes, shook his tousled ivory mane, and leisurely stood up. Roman and Sonder were just foals when Mary arrived at their sanctuary; they grew up together. She understood them without words, and they had assumed unassigned roles as her guardians. One could distinguish Roman by the flecks of gold-leaf swirling in his horn from Sonder, who had memorable cool grey socks above his hooves.

Sonder had ignored Mary's call and was focused on winning his fruit from the apple tree. Sonder was always hungry; he was in a constant search for food, and Mary traipsed over to help him.

"Here you go, you sweet, silly horse." She magicked the apple down from its hiding place with a flick of her wrist, and it landed with a thud onto the ground before Sonder.

Roman walked up behind her and playfully nibbled at the hair behind her neck.

“Of course, I’m sorry I didn’t forget about you too, sweet boy.” Another twitch of her wrist and a secondary bright red apple gently floated down and landed in Mary’s hand before Roman.

“Are you boys ready to go now?” Roman’s teeth sliced through the apple, squirting juice into Mary’s face.

It was a two-day ride to the market, and Mary was eager to get going. She led Roman and Sonder back to the cabin where Sylvie was waiting for them with a knapsack for each horse.

Horses of Meretz are not like domesticated horses; they cannot be broken; they can only be asked. It is with their permission alone that Ada and Mary could ride them to market. Mary slung two brightly woven blankets on the backs of the horses; no saddle was needed because riding a Horse of Meretz was unlike riding any earthly creature. One felt light as a feather when riding a Horse of Meretz, as if they were riding along upon a soft cloud that kindly embraced each curve of your body. The blankets were merely for show, decorative because they made Roman and Sonder feel special.

“Take care of our girl, Roman,” Zander said as he helped Mary onto the horse’s back.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” asked Mary.

“Yes, you go and have fun. Someone needs to stay behind and help Sylvie with the horses.”

“Have a good time, you two; please make sure to bring back the sugar cubes,” said Sylvie. Sonder’s ears perked up at the mention.

Ada took it upon herself to turn the entire ride to market into a magic lesson, which Mary tuned out for the most part. Ada went on and on about the power of moonlight and how you could harness it to work with your magic, but while Ada talked, Mary watched the animals. Small animals that would usually scurry away when hearing travelers walk through the woods leaned in closer to get a peek at the Horses of Meretz. Squirrels hung down from branches curiously, and birds flew close overhead, swooping and diving around the heads and horns of Sonder and Roman. The horses had this effect on nature, and Mary noticed the same thing happened to her when she was in her Nereid form. Playful otters would saunter up with their lunch, smash eggs on the rocks, and offer them to her. Schools of trout would form a cloud of protection around her as she swam in the lake until she told them to go. She recalled a time when she was tired from swimming for hours – cooling off after a fight with her aunts about wanting to go to the market more than once a year- and she hoisted herself onto the bank into a pile of soft sweetgrass to take a nap. When she awoke, she felt something soft prickling her scales, and she looked down to see a tiny fawn nestled in the notch of her tail fast asleep. Does strategically hide their young during the day while they go off to hunt for food, which meant a mother trusted Mary so deeply that she entrusted her little one into her care. Mary was honored by the gesture, and she named the fawn, Cineátlas, which means kindness in Gaelic. While Mary’s aunts wouldn’t tell her much about her mother, she knew she was Irish, and Celtic magic was in her blood. Cineátlas came every day that year to see Mary, and Mary would always be waiting with a handful of freshly forged mushrooms, which were Cineátlas’ favorite.

“My sweet, sweet little prince,” Mary would coo as Cineátlas’ little lips and teeth nibbled her palm.

Mary cried for weeks after Cineátlas left the forest. She remembered looking at his antlers a few days prior.

“You are getting very big now, my little one. Soon it will be your time to go.”

“Mary. Mary. Mary, are you listening to me?” Ada’s voice brought her back to the unwelcomed magic lesson.

“Yes, I know how to heat the water, Ada.” Mary said

“But, do you remember that you can’t survive off land salt alone for long? You must have ocean salt; this is why we go to the market each year,” Ada responded.

“I know!”

Ada shook her head and patted Sonder on the neck.

“A stream isn’t far; I can smell it,” said Mary.

“Great, lead the way, and we will make camp. If we set out tomorrow by sunrise, we will be to the market by midday,” said Ada.

They arrived at the stream. Ada started to collect wood for a fire, and Mary proved to her aunt that she was not entirely incapable. Wading into the stream, her magenta scales popped up one by one down her legs, and she quickly removed her skirt and sat in the rocks covered by shallow water just as her tail took full form. She cupped the fresh water in her hands and ignited it with a soft glow that emanated from her palms. Steam rose, and the water bubbled and erupted. The water sparkled as tiny crystalline salt droplets rose to the surface of the water. Mary poured the salty water over her head and breathed in deeply. Her pores opened, soaked in the salt, and Mary felt her energy lift.

Mary continued to magic handfuls of saltwater to shower over herself, replenishing her body. Her aunt was right, though. Land salt was not the same as sea salt. They had run out sooner than expected – hence their trip to the market today – and spending even one day without it made her feel fatigued. There was this slight thirst that could not be quenched, and her lips were so dry they flaked and burned. Ada scolded her for not being more mindful of her ocean salt consumption. The stream sang as it cascaded over the rocks, and Mary lost herself in the music of the water. Her tail glided from side to side as it dipped in the water, and she rocked herself to move with it.

That night they ate rabbit from a spit over the fire that Ada caught in a trap. The aunts didn't believe in using magic to capture animals; it was unfair. Mary wiggled her toes as she lay by the fire listening to Ada snore. Sometimes she couldn't decide if she preferred her feet or her tail. Toes were dainty, nimble, and sensitive. Her tail was powerful and strong. The first time the aunts let Mary swim in the lake, she was six. To unleash the full power of her Nereid form was liberating. She glided through the water with a flick of her tail; her speed and endurance were effortless. She swam far out into the center of the lake when she finally stopped and rose to the surface. Ada's winged guardian Horse of Meretz, Barius, was hovering above her. It was not until she turned twelve that her aunts let her leave the cabin without Barius trailing along.

When she turned twelve, she was finally allowed to leave alone, as long as she took Roman and Sonder with her. But Roman and Sonder could not fly, so when she swam to the center of the lake, she was truly alone. Back then, she craved to be alone, but now all she wanted was to be around more people. Even though she relished their annual

trips to the market, they also made her long for a life she did not have. It reminded her of how controlled she was by her aunts, and whenever she saw girls her age at the market, on their own, or even with children of their own, it twisted a knife into her gut. Those girls were not children, and they were not being told what to do but were instead the ones responsible for someone else.

Mary could not keep her eyes shut. Instead, she watched the fire as it lipped up over the cracked wood, and embers leapt up and tried to escape into the night sky. She thought of Zander and how he tended the fires at the cabin. Mary wondered what he was doing at that very moment, and a flutter moved across her chest.

The next morning, they left at daybreak as discussed, and after a few short hours ride, they arrived to the market. Ada tied Roman and Sonder to a wooden pole and asked them to stay put. The aunts never tied up the horses unless they went to a neighboring village. No bonds can contain a Horse of Meretz, but Roman and Sonder promised to play pretend for the villager's behalf. They did not want to draw attention to themselves. Horses of Meretz' wings, horns, or magical markings were invisible to the ordinary eye, so, as long as they played the part, the villagers only assumed they were a pair of plain white horses.

“Stay near me,” Ada said.

“I know, please don't worry, I will be fine.” Mary kissed Roman on the nose, “Like I am every year,” she whispered to him.

Ada went straight to the salt and spice merchant. Mary milled through the market, trailing her fingers over lumpy squash and warted pumpkins. A greasy man at the

horseshoeing stall leered at her from across the street. She felt his lust roll down her spine, and she shivered, walking quickly in the opposite direction.

At the end of the row, there was a stall that was not there last year. An old woman with salt and peppered hair sat huddled before a table with a deck of cards.

The woman caught Mary's stare. "Come over, please, please. Come sit."

Mary quickly looked down at a jar of honey she reached out for but slowly glanced back up at the woman out of the corner of her eye.

"Yes, you beautiful girl. Come here," the woman said.

Reluctant and skeptical, Mary walked over to the woman.

"Care to have your fortune read?" the woman said.

Mary shook her head. "No, thank you."

"Nevermind pay; the first draw of the cards is free."

Ada and Sylvie had warned her about cards; while they could be used with light and pure intention, if a reader used them with hatred in their heart, the fortune was poison.

"No, thank you, my aunt will come looking for me any minute." Mary turned to leave. "In fact, I better get going."

The woman's hand shot out and caught Mary by the wrist. The seemingly frail woman pulled Mary towards her with immense force.

"I see the Moon in your eyes," she said, peering into Mary's wide and frightened pupils.

"How?" the woman asked.

“Let go of me.” Mary ripped her arm free of her tawny, gnarled fingers. “Don’t touch me again.”

Mary heard the crowd complain and hooves trotting down the dirt aisle of the market. The next moment, Roman was between her and the old woman, his large eye glaring into the woman’s haggard face.

“So, she is your charge then?” the woman said to him.

“Mary!” As Ada called, Roman led Mary away, but as he did, Mary felt a demanding tug in her belly. Like someone was trying to pull her very essence from her gut. She turned her back to the woman, and the energetic pull sprouted from her stomach out through the back of her spine and towards the woman. Something inside told Mary to breathe. *Take a deep, deep breath.* The wind shifted. While the chaos of the market hummed around her, she halted and closed her eyes. Mary took a deep inhale, and with her out-breath, she pushed back. With a sharp, effective shove, Mary broke the woman’s magic grip. Her eyes opened again. She had never called on her magic in this way before; it ignited her blood; it bubbled and sang, protecting her. Power trickled down her arms, and Mary shuddered. A daze blinded her to the once enthralling bustle of the people around her. She couldn’t hear their peddling and haggling.

Roman nudged her elbow with his muzzle. She shook off the sensation of her magic, not ready for what it might mean. She peered over her shoulder to get one last glimpse of the old woman. She was gone. A stall filled with butchered meats was in her place: bleeding lambs, pigs, and cows were strewn across a table. Tongues were sticking out of their lifeless heads cut from their bodies. A cluster of rabbits dangling by their hind ankles on a string.

Roman kneeled before her urging her to leave. She braced her hands upon his sturdy back and swung her leg over. Gripping his gleaming white mane in her fists, she squeezed. He rose, and Mary saw Ada standing ahead with Sonder, whose packs were brimming with purchases. She was not ready to tell her what had just happened, but she knew she must.

CHAPTER TWO

Charlotte sunk into the sea. The ocean swallowed her, folding her body into itself. She thought of her life now that her mother was gone. There was nothing left for her anymore but a life of strife and hardships, scrapping and scrounging. Her life was a joke. A friendless, now family less, barmaid whose primary focus was deflecting drunken men's groping each day. That is how her life began, and that is how her life ended. Charlotte surrendered to the rip of the sea depths. She stretched her arms out and let go.

Then two delicate hands reached out and pulled her into an embrace. A beautiful woman with bright green eyes that shone through the dark water gently pressed her pink lips to Charlotte's. She blew air down into Charlotte's lungs and into her blood. Her blood started to sing, and her heart beat strong. As Charlotte remained asleep, the woman wrapped her arm beneath Charlotte's arm and around the small of her back, placing her hand tightly on Charlotte's sternum. She dove deeper into complete darkness with a powerful thrash of her tail.

Charlotte awoke to a light wind sweeping through the soft linen on her skin. Billowed sheer fabric hung all around her, and a gentle face looked down on her. The woman placed her hand on Charlotte's forehead.

Saltwater shoved inside her lungs, burning and aching; that was the last thing she could remember. She sat up in the bed, and her torso tugged as her muscles contracted.

"How are you feeling?" the beautiful woman asked.

"Sore," Charlotte rubbed her ribs. "Where am I?" She was not entirely convinced that she had not died in the sea last night.

“Altalune,” replied the woman, “the city of the moon.”

Charlotte laughed, and the woman simply smiled. Her collected coolness halted Charlotte’s breathing.

“I’m sorry, did you say the moon?” asked Charlotte. Suddenly, Charlotte was curious to see what was behind the bed’s curtained canopy.

“My name is Callista; I brought you here as a safe place to rest and heal before you go home.” Callista rose from her seat on the bed and walked to a small table with an iridescent crystal basin. She soaked a clean white cloth in the contents of the basin and returned to Charlotte’s side.

“Put this behind your neck; it will help.”

Lavender, calendula, and chamomile whirled in Charlotte’s nose, and she exhaled a deep sigh. Many questions filled her mind, but the most pressing was finding out how exactly one gets to the moon.

“Did we fly here?”

Callista giggled a sweet sound and tucked her blonde hair behind her ear, which Charlotte realized had swatches of the palest pink dashed throughout.

“No, Nereids do not fly; we swam, of course.”

What in the world is a Nereid? And whoever heard of the idea that someone could swim to the moon? Absolutely preposterous, thought Charlotte.

And as if she could hear what Charlotte was thinking, Callista drew back the covers of her bed and ushered her up.

“Come look, come see.”

Charlotte slid her legs out one by one, and Callista supported her torso by wrapping her arm around Charlotte's waist. *She was stronger than she looked.* They both walked to the border of the room, and Callista drew back the fabric hanging before them to reveal a watery city, dazzling and glittering in the sunlight.

Small white domed houses decorated the horizon, and between each, there was nothing but water. Not a single space of land was anywhere to be seen. Bright colored plants rose out of the water and climbed up the sides of the houses. Charlotte once heard of a place similar to this, a city made entirely of water, but this seemed different. The walls of the buildings were pristine as if they had never been assaulted by dirty rain. The water fluctuated between an ice blue color and a deep midnight hue and was completely free of rubbish or algae. The sky was bright and cloudless. She walked past the curtain and down five marble steps to a landing that entered right into the water.

"There aren't any boats," Charlotte said. "How do you get around?"

"We swim." Callista walked down to the landing to join Charlotte and sat.

She wore a sheer white skirt tied to one side on her hip, and Charlotte could see her bare legs through a slit in the fabric as it fell away. She dipped one toe into the water. Blue-green light seemed to spread across her knees and painted her ankles. Charlotte looked closer and noticed that they were scales, glinting in the sunlight. As the scales passed her ankles, her feet morphed and contorted, smushing together into a cocoon of teal. Then, like a flower blossoming, they unfurled into a dolphin's tail.

Charlotte felt a tingly sensation move down her arms as the blood left her head. She, too, took a seat. Callista untied her skirt and tossed it to the side; she removed her

blouse to reveal two large breasts covered in scales. Her pink, splattered blonde hair fell to her belly button.

“Can I show you?” She motioned to Charlotte with an open hand.

Charlotte’s breath halted, but her blood leapt with excitement. She reached out and took Callista’s hand, and Callista slipped into the water pulling Charlotte in with her. The water was refreshing and cool and licked against Charlotte’s skin.

Callista held both her hands now. Callista leaned in towards Charlotte’s lips, and Charlotte pulled back.

“This is how I helped you after you were thrown from the ship,” said Callista.

Callista took Charlotte’s face in her hands and pulled her in. Their lips met, and Charlotte felt a cool tingle trickle in through her mouth and fall down her throat.

“Let’s go,” said Callista, and she disappeared beneath the surface.

Charlotte took a deep breath and dove. Every pore in her body opened and pulled in air as she descended into the water. Her skin was breathing. She released the air in her lungs, and bubbles escaped her lips. She pulled in more air through the ends of her hair, and oxygen traveled up each strand. Her eyes adjusted and displayed before her was another city; this one emanated a soft glow beneath the water’s surface. Other people with tails like Callista’s swam amidst the underwater buildings. Her nightgown dragged as she moved through the water, and there was a whirling in her ears. The city was illuminating light without a single flame or lantern. The roots of the plants that grew above water twisted in knotted patterns in vibrant shades of green, blue, and magenta. Callista darted between two buildings and out of sight.

CHAPTER THREE

Anne traced the intricate carvings into the arm of her chair and listened to the snoring of Caesar on the stone beneath her feet. He rolled onto his side and stretched all four paws, and his nails scraped along the floor.

Sixteen. Sixteen. Sixteen. The number rolled around in her mind like a misshapen pebble. Sixteen. Her breath trembled. She saw the doctor's face red and sweating; *I'm sorry, your Royal Highness*. After twenty-four hours of pain and screaming, she watched Sarah whisk away her motionless son wrapped in linen. Her sixteenth child to join God.

A knock on her bedroom door. Caesar's head popped up.

"Good morning." Sarah let herself in. "My love, this isn't good for you; you mustn't sit in the dark like this." Sarah went to the window and threw back the crimson blood curtains. She went to Anne, knelt by her chair, and put her hands in her lap.

"Please come to the dining room and have breakfast with me." Sarah took Anne's hands and pressed her lips to her soft white knuckles.

"I'm not hungry. How is Willy?"

"The prince is doing much better this morning, and I know he would love to see you."

Anne shook her head. "Not yet; tell him I will visit him this evening."

"Anne, do you remember the stories I have told you of the moon's power over the womb?"

"Sarah, please, I cannot waste time on your childish stories."

"They are not stories, Anne; they are real. And I know a man who can help us."

Sarah stood and paced the length of the bedroom, "Anne, if you can wield the power of

the moon, then you can bless your next child, you can bless your next birth. You can undo the curse of your maidenhood and bring honor and joy back to your reign.”

“Sarah, I am not interested in your outlandish dreams. Prince William is my heir; I do not desire to have more children.”

Sarah knelt again by Anne’s side and placed both hands on her cheeks.

“You will see, my love, we will make this better.” She gently kissed Anne, rose, and exited the bed-chamber.

The day passed by, and night fell. Anne stood in her bed-chamber looking at her reflection in the tall gilded mirror by candlelight. Her long brown hair hung down around her shoulders, and her shift billowed around her ample hips. Her fingers traced the wrinkles along her upper cheek, trailing up alongside the corner of her eyes. She studied each crease, wondering when they all arrived on her face. *This one* from Mary, who never saw her third birthday. *This one* from George, who lived for just a few minutes, just long enough to be baptized. *This one* belonged to Anne Sophia, just nine months old when she died. The line that grew out from the right side of her mouth was from her second Mary, who came early; no matter how hard she tried to keep her in, she came early and left only two hours later. Her fingers trailed over all the other lines, peppered from the children she never got to name, stillborn, miscarried, forgotten to everyone else but her. The children who never got to open their eyes and see her. The children they never let her hold. Her son from two years past was dead for days before they birthed him. Her physician told her that the son she birthed yesterday was gone for almost a month before he came. It’s is

getting worse. It is the world's way of telling her that she should stop. Stop trying. She knew it was time to stop. Sixteen years. Sixteen children taken from her.

A knock. *That will be Sarah again.*

Only seconds later, Sarah pushed through the door. Sarah had been there for Anne since they were girls. They met when Anne was eight and Sarah was thirteen, and they spent their time chasing each other around the King's palace. But right now, she really did just want to be alone, and Sarah wouldn't allow it.

"Did you eat anything?" Sarah looked at the dinner tray, untouched on the coffee table. "I see they came and tended your fire as I asked," she said.

Sarah went to Anne, stood behind her, and wrapped her arms around her, peering at their combined reflection rippling in the mirror.

"You're so beautiful," said Sarah.

"Please don't lie to me," Anne said as she shrugged Sarah off her. "It just reveals that you want something."

"Yes, I do want something. I want you to listen to me. We can make this better. The witch that I told you of has heard rumors."

"You are being ridiculous," said Anne.

"Why are you being so stubborn?" said Sarah.

"Sarah, I said no! Now for once in your life, relent, stop pushing."

Sarah was stunned into silence. Anne rarely raised her voice and practically never at her.

"The rumors about us are enough for me right now. Don't bring more attention to us; please just let it go. Let it go, or I will have to ask you to leave the palace," said Anne.

Her malice wasn't truly meant for Sarah, but it had to go somewhere. She instantly regretted her harsh words and went to Sarah.

"Please, can we just focus on Willy?" She held Sarah and then pushed her blonde hair behind her ear.

"You two are all that I need. I am happy, I promise."

Sarah looked at Anne with doubt but said no more. Anne led Sarah to bed; they snuffed the light and went to sleep.

A few months passed, and Anne came back to herself. Her belly ached less, and she could breathe a little easier. Sarah had let go of her childish pursuit, and she had ceased all talk of moon magic. It was Prince William's birthday in just a few days, and the entire palace had thrown themselves into preparations. Anne walked down a large corridor, rounded the corner, and saw Sarah scolding a servant.

"Princess Anne specifically said there were to be no dangerous, silly games!"

The man holding a burlap sack looked confused.

"It is just a harmless relay," he said.

As Anne grew closer, she said, "A harmless game that could easily snap my son's neck."

"Your Royal Highness." the dirty-faced man bowed his head to acknowledge her presence.

Sarah glared at the man triumphantly, and Anne dismissed him with a wave of her hand. Sarah hooked her arm into Anne's, and they walked together.

Sarah said, "You are not harsh enough with them, my dear. They push their boundaries because you give them so much lead."

"I have no desire to cause anyone pain. We all have enough to suffer privately in this life."

"Good morning, sweetheart!" Anne beamed as her son entered the palace hall. "How do you like your new rooms?"

William was of frail stature and timid build. His poor health could be read on his dull, narrow face, like his mother.

"I like them fine, Ma'ma, but I do not see why I could not have stayed in the nursery."

"Because you are turning eleven, my darling, and you are the Duke of Gloucester. You are no longer a child but becoming a man," said Anne as she grabbed her son's shoulders and looked him over.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"Well, enough," he said.

"Do you feel alright?"

"Fine." William was very quiet and did not speak often. He stood silently in front of his mother and looked at his feet, and she continued to fawn over him.

"Your party tomorrow will be a grand affair; I have everything planned perfectly."

"Fine," William repeated.

Anne pinched his cheeks, but nothing ever seemed to bring color to his sickly pale face. Even a nip of whiskey did nothing to combat William's cold complexion. Anne's concern must have been apparent because Sarah quickly interjected.

"You!" she shouted at a servant passing by. "Draw a hot bath for the prince and ensure he soaks for at least a half-hour."

Anne kissed his cheek, and then William was whisked away by the frail servant girl.

Anne watched William sit at his elegant birthday table outside in the garden. Blue and yellow-painted china and various sizes and shapes of cutlery littered the surface. Large plates of roasted vegetables scattered about, and in the center of the table, a fat roasted pig with an apple shoved in his mouth. William sat quietly – as he usually did – and watched the children play. Anne was glad that he chose to sit safely on the sidelines but was concerned for her son nonetheless. *He will be King one day*, she thought to herself, and then he will thank her for the protection she has afforded to him all these years.

"Do you think Willy is enjoying his birthday?" she asked her husband.

"Yes, of course, why wouldn't he be," said George.

George was useless, a kind and gentle drab. Anne did not wish him malice, but she loathed having to pretend in public that she was an adoring wife. Sarah sat at a chair by the table, watching Anne and her husband speak. Sarah always watched her when she spoke to George.

It took five servants to carry out William's oversized cake to him. It was white with 12 bright red slender candles. Everyone sang, and when it was time for William to blow out his candles, he sat motionless.

"Darling, make a wish," said Anne.

"I don't feel well, mother. Can I please just go lie down?"

"Of course, of course," Anne said as she swiftly escorted him from his chair and walked with him into the palace.

Once they were away from prying eyes, she stopped in the hall and knelt to look William in the eyes; they were glassy. She held the back of her hand to his forehead, and heat warmed her skin.

"Someone call the doctor!" she yelled.

"Malignant fever," the doctor said as he walked out of the prince's bedroom.

"Will he be alright?" Anne asked.

Sarah stood by her side with her hand placed on Anne's elbow.

"All we must do now is wait for the fever to break," he said.

"There's nothing more you can do, but wait? What a doctor you are," Sarah said as she dismissed the doctor and turned to Anne.

"Let me call a healer; William needs real medicine," said Sarah.

George heard her speaking of magic and rose.

"You will not bring those witches in here to my son!" He pointed towards the door with a heavy finger, "Get out! Get out of my son's room!"

“Your son!?” said Sarah, laughing as she spoke. “How often do you spend time with your son? You are ashamed of your sickly boy and never have the time to afford him because he can’t join you on your precious hunts.”

“Who do you think you are speaking to me in this manner? You forget your station. Anne has chosen to keep you close, but that does not elevate you above the Prince of Denmark,” said George.

Anne stepped between them both.

“Your arguing is not helping my son.”

George walked back to his seat by his chair.

“Sarah, we do not need your healers; William will be fine,” said Anne. Looking at the servant tending the fire, she commanded, “Bring another bowl of fresh water and clean linens.”

Anne wouldn’t allow herself to think of any alternative outcome for her son. He was going to get better, and there was no other option.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mary knew they were close to home when Roman picked up speed. About an hour out from the cottage, and Roman was so eager to get home he would practically fly the rest of the way. Ada hadn't spoken to her the entire trip back. Ada's silence was worse than any scolding or lecture she could have given. Mary could often feel her loved one's emotions, like foreign water moving beneath her skin. Mary felt her aunt's fear burrowing deep into her stomach now, and that was worse than feeling her anger.

Sylvie tended to the lavender flowers in the garden box when they arrived and stopped what she was doing when she saw them. Sylvie went to Roman, held his muzzle in her hands, and then looked at Mary.

"What happened?" she asked.

"There was a woman at the market. I had never seen her before." Mary fiddled with Roman's mane. She was twirling it between her fingertips.

"She did something to me with her magic, or she tried to," she continued.

Ada and Sonder came up behind them.

"Go find Zander, Mary. I need to speak to Sylvie alone."

Chided like a schoolgirl, Mary dismounted Roman, removed his pack, set it on the steps of the cottage, and led him into the forest.

"If the conversation is about me, maybe I should be included in it," Mary whispered to Roman as they walked away.

Mary was tired of being treated like she was incapable. Did her aunts think she was so incompetent? Maybe they would value her opinion and ask her to stay during important conversations such as this one day.

Zander was splitting wood from a tree that fell a few days ago. His white shirt clung to his back as both arms swung down with a resounding crack.

Without turning to greet them, he said, “How was the market?”

“Something strange happened, and Ada is currently complaining to Sylvie about what a mess I made of things,” said Mary

“It couldn’t have been that bad,” he stopped what he was doing and put down the axe.

“Yes, it was; I just don’t understand why,” she said.

Zander walked over and looked at her. Even though his milky eyes looked just past her head, she always felt as if he was looking directly at her. He may have been blind, but his vision pierced her skin like sunlight.

“What happened?” he asked.

“There was this woman who insisted on reading my cards, but I did not like how she looked at me. Like she was searching for something. When I refused, she grabbed at me, but not just physically; she lurched her magic deep within my being.”

Zander listened intently.

“She told me that she ‘saw the moon in my eyes,’ whatever that means.”

A thud landed behind Mary, and she turned around to see a hare motionless on the forest floor. She moved towards it, and it thrashed and torqued its body to get away from her. Mary held out her hands and calmed the rabbit with her magic. Scooping him up in the apron of her dress, she stroked the space between his eyes with her thumb.

“A hawk must have dropped him,” she said, inspecting the punctured holes around his neck where warm red blood dribbled out. Mary began to cry.

“I don’t think I can help him,” she said.

Still kneeling in the dirt, she held her hands over the rabbit’s body, closed her eyes, and chanted. She slammed her hands down into the ground.

“Useless!” she said.

Zander kneeled next to her. “Let me see.”

Zander picked the rabbit up with his firm, calloused hands and closed his eyes. *What is he looking for?* Mary wondered. The wind bellowed and whistled in Mary’s ears, and leaves picked up around them.

“There’s nothing I can do,” he said, handing the rabbit back to Mary.

Mary cradled the small thing in her arms and continued to cry.

“Please don’t bring him to Sylvie. He fought so hard to be free, to live, and I can’t stand the thought of him in one of her stews.”

“He’s still suffering,” said Zander, “let me help him.”

Mary cried still but turned him over. Zander removed a small dagger from his belt. Mary turned her face away into his shoulder. The rabbit stopped wheezing as he slowly plunged his knife into its tiny beating heart. Mary bit her lip and stifled a weeping sound.

“Should we bury him?” he asked. Zander pulled his dirt and sweat-caked shirt over his head and handed it to her.

Wrapping the limp but already stiffening body in the white cloth, she whispered, “I am sorry.”

What was the point of all the magic training she endured with Ada and Sylvie if she couldn't even save a tiny rabbit? Zander plunged his hands into the earth and dug. The earthy smell wafted in her nose.

"I can at least help you with the hole," she said, raising her hands.

"No, don't. I enjoy it," he said, "Let me show you."

Zander reached for her hands with both of his and sunk them into the soil. Lessons of the earth's healing properties rang in her ears. A surge of warmth moved up her wrists into her forearms. Scooping handful after handful of earth away, her sadness lessened. They placed the small bundle in the ground and patted the earth around him with love. The warm orange sun was setting behind the trees and the air chilled.

"Let's head back," said Zander standing and reaching out a hand to help her up.

Mary took his hand and stood, but she didn't let go. She ran her dirty thumb over the bloody dirt dried in the creases of his knuckles. She looked at his bare chest and pressed her palm to it.

"You're freezing; you should head home and get in a bath," she said.

"I'll walk you home first," said Zander.

She released his hand and brushed the leaves from her dress.

Zander opened the cabin door for Mary. Sylvie sat at the table with her head between her hands, and Ada stood by the stove making dinner. The warmth of the fire in the hearth welcomed them in, but the look on her aunts' faces struck Mary cold to the bone.

“Aunt Sylvie, I am fine,” said Mary rushing to her aunt’s side at the table.

“Whatever the old witch tried to do, she didn’t succeed.” She took Sylvie’s hands in her own. Her aunts were both silent. Mary looked from Ada to Sylvie to Zander. Stone silent, all of them. Mary’s mind flitted from one assumption to another, frantically searching. She was tired of being on the outside, always.

“Somebody, talk to me!” she yelled. She instantly regretted her outburst. The broth Ada was stirring bubbled loudly. Sylvie stood and collected four bowls from the shelf above the stove.

“Let’s all eat first,” said Sylvie. She placed a bowl at each place at the table, and Zander sat.

“I’ve got this; go sit,” Sylvie said to Ada.

Ada pushed a strand of her red hair back into her bun, patted her cheeks, and went to sit at the table.

They all ate in silence, and the cabin seemed to shrink in upon them. Mary had to force down every spoonful, her stomach wanting to reject every bite. Zander seemed to remain calm, as always. She watched him sitting across from her eat his soup. A sturdy post in a storm, he seemed so still. Mary wished she could borrow some of his steady nerves. Her entire body pulsed with anger and fear. She watched his curly hair fall in his face when he raised the spoon to his lips. Mary put her spoon down; she couldn’t force another bite.

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on,” she said so low she wondered if she could be heard. “You all are scaring me.”

Ada sat to Mary's right and turned to her. "Do you know how much we love you? We were two bored spinster friends alone with our horses before you found us. You brought so much life and excitement into this house."

Ada had never spoken like this before. Mary blinked away tears.

"I love you too," she said.

Sylvie stood from her place at the head of the table and came to Mary's left side. She placed a silver thimble in Mary's hand.

"I know that it seems silly, but my mother gave this to me when I left to come here with the horses, and she said to think of her every time I mended a shirt." Sylvie smiled. "Which, of course, I never did, once I learned how to mend them with magic, but it became my lucky charm."

"Are you all leaving me?" Mary asked. Her voice shook as she spoke.

"It's time for you to leave us," said Ada. She placed her hand on Mary's back.

"Whatever I did wrong, tell me how to fix it," said Mary.

"This place isn't safe for your anymore," said Ada.

"Well, then come with me, let's go together."

"I wish we could, my darling, but the horses need us still," said Sylvie.

"Zander will take you. I have taught you all that I can, and now you need to learn more to keep yourself safe. I can't keep you put away in the woods here for the rest of your life," said Ada.

Mary had wanted more than anything to leave the forest and set out on her own, but right now, she couldn't think of anything less inviting.

“That’s enough for now. It’s time for your bath, and we can talk more about this in the morning.” Sylvie rose from the table.

Mary remained seated, gaping with an open mouth and glistening eyes. Mary got up from the table, and Zander stood as she did. He walked up to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Don’t worry, we are going together; I won’t leave your side. I promise,” said Zander.

Mary smiled at him half-heartedly and left with Sylvie.

The water of her tub relaxed her tense muscles and her aching heart. She took deep breaths and tried to forget what was happening. She traced the scales on her hip with her fingers and tried to distract herself with their iridescent glimmer. Sylvie folded her clothes and put them on the dresser, where she retrieved a brush. She pulled a wooden stool from the closet and sat behind Mary’s tub. Mary tilted her head back and closed her eyes.

“You are ready. You are strong,” said Sylvie as she ran the comb through her wet hair.

“I don’t feel that way,” said Mary.

“You are so much more special than you realize, and one day you will.”

The brush tugged at the ends of her hair, and the relieving pressure soothed Mary’s scalp.

“Just remember not to be so hard on yourself. You are so kind to everyone around you, but you are forever unforgiving to yourself.”

Sylvie's words consoled Mary, and she began to feel heavy with sleep. Or perhaps Sylvie had spelled the brush as she sometimes did when Mary was a child. Mary often had emotional fits that she couldn't pull herself out of. The whole world felt like it was trying to fit inside her chest and there just wasn't enough room.

Sylvie's brush would put her fast to sleep and hold her there until morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Callista had spent four days showing Charlotte the City of Altalune. She studied the underwater architecture and learned how to listen to their silent language. While a good part of Altalune was above land, the majority of the city was submerged. The city was a place of refuge for Charlotte. There was always an abundance of time and never a scarcity of food. The waters of the miraculous city were washing away the grief of the loss of her mother. She would always carry it with her, but here in Altalune with Callista, she felt her mother's love. It was in the way the people cared for one another. Everyone looked out for their neighbor. And Callista reminded her of her mother. Strong, attentive, and yet somehow still soft.

While underwater, the Nereids communicated with their minds. Charlotte had not honed the ability to send her thoughts to others, but she had trained her mind to relax enough to receive their words.

Callista taught her how to scavenge through the oyster beds and coax pearls from their shells; this was Callista's family business, pearl merchants. Pearls had healing properties in Altalune and were not considered simply beautiful jewelry, as they were on earth.

"Pearls are the only gemstone created in tandem with a living creature, and that gives them power," Callista communicated to Charlotte.

The pearls could ease a mother's birth, remedy a broken heart, and help a woman successfully conceive. They came in various shades and hues, from a peachy skin color to a green aquamarine blue.

“You have to coax the pearl out, don’t force it,” said Callista. She stuck one finger gently to the opening of the oyster’s lips.

“If you are too rough and harm the animal, her gift will lose its magic,” she continued.

Charlotte watched attentively. Callista seemed almost to tickle the oyster. That seemed ridiculous, but nothing surprised Charlotte at this point. Then Callista closed her eyes and began to hum a magical melody. A magenta pearl plopped from the mouth of the oyster and into the palm of her hand.

“Now you try,” Callista gestured to Charlotte.

It took Charlotte a full day of observing and listening to the other Nereids hum and practicing, but she finally succeeded. After several oysters sealed shut in her presence, one finally opened to her.

Charlotte had never felt so free in her life. The water in Altalune was always the perfect temperature, warm and inviting but cool and refreshing at the same time. The water pulled through her hair as she swam and floated in a cloudlike halo around her head when she came to a halt. Callista had presented her with beautiful garments to wear while they swam through Altalune. She stitched together scales from her own tail to fashion pieces of clothing to cover Charlotte’s most private parts. At first, Charlotte was reluctant to relinquish her shift - swimming around in just her shift was scandalous enough. However, working in the oyster beds proved difficult, with the edge of her dress weighing her down and constantly catching on coral. Tired of getting tangled up in cloth, she wore Callista’s garments. Putting on the scanty clothes, Charlotte felt exposed.

She had never been so naked in front of other people before, but no one noticed her. The citizens of Altalune were wild and free folk that were not unfamiliar with the curves of a feminine figure. However, one Nereid Aegaeon, Callista's brother, took attention of her. His eyes tracked her movement as she went about her day. Or was that all in her head? She felt uneasy when she was around him. The sense that he wanted her but didn't know she existed confused and intrigued Charlotte. He had never spoken directly to her, but, from time to time, when she was focused on retrieving a pearl from the soft pink muscle of the oyster shell, she swore she could feel his eyes on the back of her neck. It prickled and sent tingles dripping down into her chest.

Back at Charlotte's convalescence quarters, Callista laid strewn out on the marble floor, her tail glistening in the light of the day and her fin dipped in the water. Charlotte sat next to her with a woven basket full of pearls. They pulled them out one by one and placed them in piles on the floor. Categorizing by color and counting the day's yield.

"Callista, what were you doing on earth the night that you saved me?" asked Charlotte.

Callista looked around as if to make sure they were out of earshot of unwanted listeners. She pulled herself up into a seated position.

"I told my parents I was just curious and was exploring your world for the first time, but in truth, I had been there before," she said. "My late aunt, Damara, entrusted me to carry on her tradition." Callista plucked a pale pink pearl from the pile and held it up.

"Once a year, my aunt would travel to your world and plant one of our pearls in your sea. She would spell it and place a blessing over it." Callista held the pale pink pearl

in the palm of her left hand and then hovered her right hand above it. She chanted four Nereidians words softly.

“The pearl would call to it the person who deserved the magical properties it was ready to bestow.”

Callista put the pearl in Charlotte’s hand. “Next year, I will show you.”

“Why do you have to keep it a secret?” asked Charlotte

The Nereidians were so blessed with their magic and the other beauties the city bestowed. What was one pearl a year? Surely, they wouldn’t miss it.

“Our council does not believe we should risk sharing our magic with the humans. They say they are selfish, cruel, and violent. And that such beings do not deserve the magic of Altalune,” said Callista. She rolled onto her stomach and placed her chin in her hands.

“But my aunt told me stories that had been passed down to her. Tales of love and valor, and she believed the humans just need a little help.”

Charlotte thought of the myths and fairy tales taught to children growing up in Ireland. Of women who danced by the light of the moon and prayed to its divine feminine power. Callista interrupted her thoughts and changed the subject.

“The healers say it is time for you to leave their temple, and mama and papa have invited you to stay with us.”

Charlotte’s heart leapt at the thought of being so close to her friend and then dipped a little when she thought of her friend’s brother.

CHAPTER SIX

On Monday, after days of lying in bed, it seemed promising that William would make a recovery. Dr. Radcliffe, the third of three different doctors called in to tend to the prince, had taken to bleeding the boy regularly, which now seemed to be causing him more pain than his illness. Anne had not spoken to Sarah in two days and had not left her son's bed-chamber since he fell ill.

“Your highness, it is time for you to leave your son's room,” said Dr. Radcliffe, “your looming won't help him get better.”

Anne looked at her helpless son, face stricken white and curly brown hair matted to his hairline by sweat.

“I won't leave him,” she said without looking at the doctor. Her gaze remained on her son. She feared if she tore it away, for even a second, he would be pulled away from her like all the others. That's how fast it happens. One moment they are there, and the next, they are gone. Ripped away by the wind like they were just little wisps of time. Forgotten and decaying in the earth. She saw the cemetery in her mind—all those tiny little headstones.

“Your highness, I really must insist.” The physician grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to her feet. He ripped her away. She fought to keep her eyes on William. Her sightline was broken, she felt blood rush up to meet her vision, and everything went dark.

“Anne. Anne, my sweet.” Sarah patted a cool rag on her forehead. “You fainted,” she said. The room around Anne came into focus; someone moved her to her own quarters.

“Take me to Willy,” Anne said, sitting up quickly.

“George and Dr. Radcliffe are with him,” said Sarah. She pressed on Anne’s shoulders, encouraging her to lay back down. Anne resisted.

“I don’t need to lie down. I need to see my son,” said Anne.

“You are not well,” said Sarah.

“I am only unwell because I was forced to leave Willy.”

Despite what she said, Anne wondered if her fainting had anything to do with her courses being almost a full week delayed. She couldn’t let herself think about the potential of another pregnancy. That was unfair to her son. One child could never replace another. The men in her life, even sometimes Sarah, acted as if they were interchangeable. *Do not worry yourself; your next child will take*, they would reassure her. As if they were a litter of pups, and they were betting on which one would be the healthiest champ. Her children were each stricken on her heart, and a new one never made up for losing the one before. She once again shrugged off Sarah’s clinging hand and sat up.

“I’m going to see Willy,” said Anne. “Please don’t make me repeat it.”

Sarah relented with a disapproving look and fetched Anne’s robe.

Anne arrived at Willy’s room. They were bleeding him again. Crimson blood was sucked from a puncture in his artery and drained into a heated cup in the doctor’s hands.

George sat by Willy and held his hand as the poor boy cried. Each of his tears felt like a needle silently shoved into Anne’s chest, making it more and more difficult for her to breathe. Clutching her chest, she sat down in an armchair in the corner of the room. She looked upon the neglected toys on the floor, a red toy drum, a toy gun, a sack of

marbles, and a trundling hoop and stick. She thought of all the years she had had with Willy. Watching his body stretch and grow to take the shape of a young man. Willy was her saving grace.

But, in the end, he, too, was taken from her. When he died, she was stricken with unimaginable grief. Her strong little boy had held on for ten long agonizing days. What had she done to be punished this way? Why was God punishing her? Was she not as worthy as any other woman to be a mother?

For a few days after his death, a small shred of Anne clung to the hope of another birth, but it was not long before blood dripped down her inner thigh, and along with it fell her hope of ever being a mother to a living child again. She laid in bed for days in the dark. Sarah would come to visit her, slide under the covers, cup her face in the palm of her hands, and kiss her tear-soaked cheeks.

Not a word was spoken to one another. Anne wanted to be lost in the silence. The silence became an otherworldly place for her. She had left the land of noise, chaos, and death and retreated to the numbing silence of her pain. The silence tried to shield her from the light of day by creating a cocoon of padding around her to dampen the sound of her own pain.

After a solid month drenched in her solitude, Sarah ordered she be brought to the garden. Anne couldn't bring herself to move. So, a tall solid servant lifted her to her armchair, and three others helped him carry her in her chair to the garden. Anne sat and watched the birds and felt nothing. She listened to the soft buzz of the bees in the roses

and felt nothing. Water trickled from the hand of the stone statue. And she felt nothing. Each day the servants carried her in her chair to the garden. And each day, she felt nothing.

On Tuesday, news came from Parliament, after serious debate, it had been decided. Anne's line would end with her. She would be the last Monarch of the House of Stuart. With her death, the line of succession would transfer to Sophia, Electress of Hanover, and her Protestant descendants. George came to Anne's chamber one morning to deliver the news. She felt her despair shift and take a new form. It turned and molded into a hot red heat within her belly. Her arms tingled, and rage slithered and moved down all her limbs consuming her nerves in fire. She stood, and she was on the move for the first time in months. Pacing the confines of her room, she stewed. Tugging at her hair and clutching at her belly, she felt her insides moving outside her skin. Sarah's words rung in her head, *There's another way*. She walked to the wall and tugged on the large red braided rope. Within seconds a servant appeared.

"Call on the Duchess of Marlborough. Tell her to come to me at once," said Anne.

The servant hurried off, and Anne was once again alone. She sat on her bed and stared at the gold thread that ran through the pattern on her bedspread. Touching it daintily with her middle finger, the strand seemed to come alive. It moved through her and brought the promise of a new life. As Queen, she would bow to no one; gold would course through her life like the thread consumed the quilt, touching all and connecting everything with a glimmer of iridescent wonder. She tucked her nail under the thread and

plucked. She strummed the cord until it pulled free. And she just kept pulling. As it unraveled, so did her mind. Tugging and pulling, she continued.

A knock at the door broke her concentration, and the thread's light dissipated.

“Enter,” she said. Sarah came rushing in.

Her face froze, and she scanned the bed. Anne looked down and saw the piles of tangled fibers, fine strands twisted and knotted up.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Sarah, tell me more about the magic.”

“You’ve heard the stories of the moon and its powers of persuasion over a woman’s courses and ability to be seeded.” Sarah took a seat on the edge of the bed next to her. “But you haven’t heard the rumors. There are creatures that exist on the moon itself. And every once in a century, they have been seen on Earth.”

Anne may have thought to ask how these creatures could help. She could have learned more about what they did with the beast once finding it. These are things she would have once cared about. She was aware that Sarah ran in circles with many magic makers carrying darkness within them. At one time, that frightened Anne, but no longer. She did not want to know. She did not really care.

“The magic folk talk, and they have seen her, a Nereid with the connection to the Moon required to harness the type of magic you need,” said Sarah.

Anne turned away from Sarah, laid down on her side in the mess of fabric, and looked out the window at the horizon. The sun was setting, and a golden orange dipped through the windows and painted her room.

“Find her,” she said.

CHATER SEVEN

A dark wind shook the house, and Mary's tub trembled, waking her. She had forgotten where she was and rolled in the seaweed wrapped around her torso. Blinking slowly, she returned to her room. She sat up, and a cold, clammy shudder ran down her arms. Something was wrong. She reached for the candle on the tiny circular table next to her tub. But before she could light it, Aunt Sylvie's scream pierced the air. Dropping the unlit candle into the tub, she hoisted herself from the water and rolled out onto the floor. She frantically stroked her tail with orange glowing hands, and one by one, the scales dissolved. She couldn't dry fast enough. Mary sat helplessly on the floor, and an overturned table echoed from the living room. Tears dripped from Mary's eyes, and adrenaline coursed through her body. She kept at her scales.

"Come on, come on!" she wailed to herself.

The wind continued to beat at the cabin walls, and the trees shook with unbeholden violence. Her knees began to form and separate, but her fin was still sopping wet. Someone burst into her room, and Mary held her breath. It was Zander.

"What's happening? Where are my aunts?" said Mary.

Zander didn't respond, and he moved through her room, grabbing objects and throwing them into a sack. He grabbed a blanket from the bed, wrapped it around Mary, and swiftly scooped her up into his arms.

"I don't know where Ada is," replied Zander.

"But what about Sylvie?"

Zander's silence drained all the blood from Mary's face. He tore through the dark house, shaking her as he moved.

“Zander, where is Sylvie!?”

He stopped and looked into her eyes.

“Tell me where she is!”

Zander then exited the house with her still in his arms, and from the porch, Mary saw a large mass huddled in the grass by the horses’ gate.

“Sylvie!” Mary screamed. “Zander, take me to her.”

Looking around, Zander nervously ran to Sylvie’s side. He knelt and set Mary next to her aunt’s frozen body. Sylvie’s open eyes stared wildly at the sky. White figures were scattering in the distance. The horses were okay; they were okay. She searched her aunt’s body looking for a wound but found nothing. Her mind searched for the meaning. What to do. How to fix it.

“We can’t stay here; you can’t help her, Mary. She’s gone.”

Mary clung to her aunt, and Zander pulled her from her, hoisting her up into his arms once again.

“I could try,” Mary’s hysterical words were muffled and achy. “Alexander, put me down now!” Mary beat his burly back with her fists.

Zander took off through the forest. Mary’s head hung behind his shoulder, and she cried.

“Take me back, Zander, take me back!”

“Roman,” she called softly. She wanted to see Roman. She needed him.

Zander leapt over roots, ducked under branches, and walked for what seemed like hours. He brought her to a brook on the edge of the valley, where he finally stopped and set her down on her now returned feet.

“How could you!?” she screamed. “You left them!”

“Mary, I had to!”

She stormed off absently in a random direction, and Zander followed her, “Mary, please, you have to listen. They knew this would happen one day. They knew it was coming.” She stopped and turned towards him.

“How long have you known this?” she asked. Zander reached for her hand, and she ripped it away.

“The woods aren’t safe, and we have to keep going. Come here, let me teach you how to navigate the dark.” When he first came to the sanctuary, Ada had taught Zander how to use magic to see without his eyes.

“No.” Mary was still angry with him and did not want to be close to him.

“I’ll be fine; I don’t need your help.” Deep down, she knew she did.

Mary cupped her hands, and an orange flame floated in the palms of her hands. The light was not bright enough to see Zander, but it put off enough light to watch her footing. As long as she kept walking forward and didn’t trip, she’d be fine.

With her sight gone, she was keenly aware of the sounds of the forest—animals rustled in the fallen leaves. Zander’s leather boots trekked across the forest floor. Branches creaked in the moonlight. Tiny feet scurried up a tree. She thought of Ada and Sylvie and Roman and Sonder. The silence made her grief loud. Perhaps if she kept walking through the woods in the quiet darkness, she could find a way to bring them back. Maybe if she squeezed her eyes tight and hard enough, her loved ones would reappear when she opened them again, along with the sunlight. She remembered that she

was naked under her blanket as a cool breeze moved along her scaleless breasts. It chilled her.

“They didn’t want to worry you…” Zander started. She walked away faster. She had no idea where she was going. Or what to do. Collapsing to her knees in the grass, she let her spark die. She was plunged into darkness. She held her face in her hand and began to sob. Zander knelt beside her. “Please, Mary,” he wrapped her up in his arms. “I had to get you out. It’s what they wanted. It’s what I promised.”

Mary relaxed into his chest and continued to cry. Despair settled into her stomach and ripped at her heart. Zander’s shirt smelled of fresh dirt, and she nuzzled her face deep in its grounding aroma. She let out a heavy breath.

“Zander.” She pulled back and faced him. “What do we do now?”

“Ada told me to go see a friend named Luelle. We will make our way to her.”

Mary took another deep inhale. And ran her hands around his waist. She drew power from his embrace. She looked up into his eyes and, for the first time, realized that they were emanating a soft blue glow—a side effect of the magic he used to navigate the world illuminated by the darkness. The blue reminded her of the stories of the ocean. She noticed the sack on his back.

“Did you grab me some clothes by chance?” she said.

He smiled and lowered the pack to the ground.

“I’m not sure what I took, but I did my best,” he said, handing it to her.

She lit the small flame in her hand once more and looked inside; she dug out a shift, corset, sea-green dress, and a handful of ribbons.

“This is perfect,” she said.

Zander turned around and walked a few steps away. She dropped the blanket and shivered. Quickly she shimmied the shift over her body. Zander had packed a corset that laced up the back instead of the front. She fidgeted and tugged at the edges. *Good enough*, she thought. She put on the dress and then handed the bag back to him.

“We should keep moving until we get further away,” he said.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“Zander, did you see what happened?”

He began to walk as he talked.

“I felt a strange wind move through my cabin and knew something was wrong. By the time I got to your house, I could not find Ada, and Sylvie was gone.”

Mary caught herself clenching her thumb in her fists. This was all her fault. They came for her.

“Why do they want me, Zander?”

“That they never told me, but I think Luella will have answers.”

Daybreak started to brighten the sky.

“Let’s keep walking as long as we can, and we will make camp when we need to rest,” he said.

She shook her head.

“Alright,” she said.

Mary tucked her hands into her armpits. The forest began to come alive with light, and everything looked different now. A surreal haunting shuddered through her body. They were really gone. Sylvie. Ada. Roman. Sonder. Her heart longed for them. It ached and tugged and promised tears that never came. Something inside told her that this was

only the beginning. The moon was full and still visible in the sky against the pastel purple, blue clouds, and it spoke to her. It whispered stories in her ears, tales of who she was and who she was meant to be.