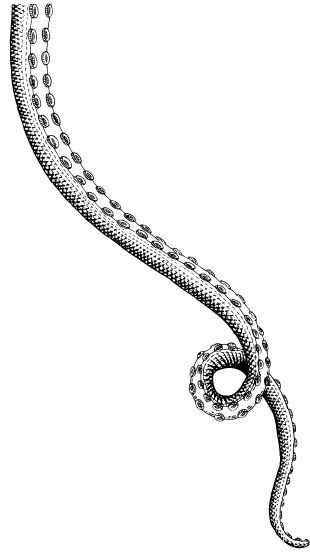




I

Lira



I HAVE A HEART for every year I've been alive.

There are seventeen hidden in the sand of my bedroom. Every so often, I claw through the shingle, just to check they're still there. Buried deep and bloody. I count each of them, so I can be sure none were stolen in the night. It's not such an odd fear to have. Hearts are power, and if there's one thing my kind craves more than the ocean, it's power.

I've heard things: tales of lost hearts and harpooned women stapled to the ocean bed as punishment for their treachery. Left to suffer until their blood becomes salt and they dissolve to sea foam. These are the women who take the human bounty of their kin. Mermaids more fish than flesh, with an upper body to match the decadent scales of their fins.

Unlike sirens, mermaids have stretched blue husks and limbs in place of hair, with a jawlessness that lets their mouths stretch to the size of small boats and swallow sharks whole. Their deep-blue flesh is dotted with fins that spread up their arms and spines. Fish and human both, with the beauty of neither.

They have the capacity to be deadly, like all monsters, but where sirens seduce and kill, mermaids remain fascinated by

~ 1 ~

humans. They steal trinkets and follow ships in hopes that treasure will fall from the decks. Sometimes they save the lives of sailors and take nothing but charms in return. And when they steal the hearts we keep, it isn't for power. It's because they think that if they eat enough of them, they might become human themselves.

I hate mermaids.

My hair snakes down my back, as red as my left eye – and only my left, of course, because the right eye of every siren is the color of the sea they were born into. For me, that's the great sea of Diávolos, with waters of apple and sapphire. A selection of each so it manages to be neither. In that ocean lies the sea kingdom of Keto.

It's a well-known fact that sirens are beautiful, but the bloodline of Keto is royal and with that comes its own beauty. A magnificence forged in salt water and regality. We have eyelashes born from iceberg shavings and lips painted with the blood of sailors. It's a wonder we even need our song to steal hearts.

"Which will you take, cousin?" Kahlia asks in *Psáriin*.

She sits beside me on the rock and stares at the ship in the distance. Her scales are deep auburn and her blond hair barely reaches her breasts, which are covered by a braid of orange seaweed.

"You're ridiculous," I tell her. "You know which."

The ship ploughs idly along the calm waters of Adékaros, one of the many human kingdoms I've vowed to rid of a prince. It's smaller than most and made from scarlet wood that represents the colors of their country.

Humans enjoy flaunting their treasures for the world, but it only makes them targets for creatures like Kahlia and me, who can easily spot a royal ship. After all, it's the only one in

the fleet with the painted wood and tiger flag. The only vessel on which the Adékarosin prince ever sails.

Easy prey for those in the mood to hunt.

The sun weighs on my back. Its heat presses against my neck and causes my hair to stick to my wet skin. I ache for the ice of the sea, so sharp with cold that it feels like glorious knives in the slits between my bones.

"It's a shame," says Kahlia. "When I was spying on him, it was like looking at an angel. He has such a pretty face."

"His heart will be prettier."

Kahlia breaks into a wild smile. "It's been an age since your last kill, Lira," she teases. "Are you sure you're not out of practice?"

"A year is hardly an age."

"It depends who's counting."

I sigh. "Then tell me who that is so I can kill them and be done with this conversation."

Kahlia's grin is ungodly. The kind reserved for moments when I am at my most dreadful, because that's the trait sirens are supposed to value most. Our awfulness is treasured. Friendship and kinship taught to be as foreign as land. Loyalty reserved only for the Sea Queen.

"You are a little heartless today, aren't you?"

"Never," I say. "There are seventeen under my bed."

Kahlia shakes the water from her hair. "So many princes you've tasted."

She says it as though it's something to be proud of, but that's because Kahlia is young and has taken only two hearts of her own. None of them royalty. That's my specialty, my territory. Some of Kahlia's reverence is for that. The wonder of whether the lips of a prince taste different from those of any other human. I can't say, for princes are all I've ever tasted.



Ever since our goddess, Keto, was killed by the humans, it's become custom to steal a heart each year, in the month of our birth. It's a celebration of the life Keto gave to us and a tribute of revenge for the life the humans took from her. When I was too young to hunt, my mother did it for me, as is tradition. And she always gave me princes. Some as young as I was. Others old and furrowed, or middle children who never had a chance at ruling. The king of Armonía, for instance, once had six sons, and for my first few birthdays, my mother brought me one each year.

When I was eventually old enough to venture out on my own, it hadn't occurred to me to forgo royalty and target sailors like the rest of my kind did, or even hunt the princes who would one day assume their thrones. I'm nothing if not a loyal follower of my mother's traditions.

"Did you bring your shell?" I ask.

Kahlia scoops her hair out of the way to show the orange seashell looped around her neck. A similar one just a few shades bloodier dangles from my own throat. It doesn't look like much, but it's the easiest way for us to communicate. If we hold them to our ears, we can hear the sound of the ocean and the song of the Keto underwater palace we call home. For Kahlia, it can act as a map to the sea of Diávolos if we're separated. We're a long way from our kingdom, and it took nearly a week to swim here. Since Kahlia is fourteen, she tends to stay close to the palace, but I was the one to decide that should change, and as the princess, my whims are as good as law.

"We won't get separated," Kahlia says.

Normally, I wouldn't mind if one of my cousins were stranded in a foreign ocean. As a whole, they're a tedious and predictable bunch, with little ambition or imagination.



Ever since my aunt died, they've become nothing more than adoring lackeys for my mother. Which is ridiculous, because the Sea Queen is not there to be adored. She's there to be feared.

"Remember to pick just one," I instruct. "Don't lose your focus."

Kahlia nods. "Which one?" she asks. "Or will it sing to me when I'm there?"

"We'll be the only ones singing," I say. "It'll enchant them all, but if you lay your focus on one, they'll fall in love with you so resolutely that even as they drown, they'll scream of nothing but your beauty."

"Normally the enchantment is broken when they start to die," Kahlia says.

"Because you focus on them all, and so, deep down, they know that none of them are your heart's desire. The trick is to want them as much as they want you."

"But they're disgusting," says Kahlia, though it doesn't sound like she believes it so much as she wants me to think that she does. "How can we be expected to desire them?"

"Because you're not just dealing with sailors now. You're dealing with royalty, and with royalty comes power. Power is *always* desirable."

"Royalty?" Kahlia gapes. "I thought . . ."

She trails off. What she thought was that princes were mine and I didn't share. That's not untrue, but where there are princes, there are kings and queens, and I've never had much use for either of those. Rulers are easily deposed. It's the princes who hold the allure. In their youth. In the allegiance of their people. In the promise of the leader they could one day become. They are the next generation of rulers, and by killing them, I kill the future. Just as my mother taught me.

I take Kahlia's hand. "You can have the queen. I've no interest in the past."

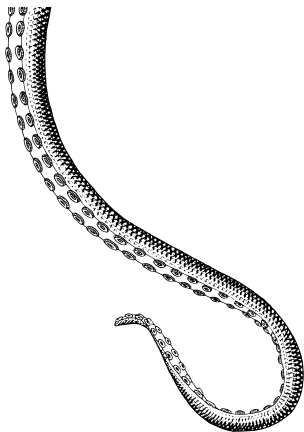
Kahlia's eyes are alight. The right holds the same sapphire of the Diávolos Sea I know well, but the left, a creamy yellow that barely stands out from the white, sparkles with a rare glee. If she steals a royal heart for her fifteenth, it'll be sure to earn her clemency from my mother's perpetual rage.

"And you'll take the prince," says Kahlia. "The one with the pretty face."

"His face makes no difference." I drop her hand. "It's his heart I'm after."

"So many hearts." Her voice is angelic. "You'll soon run out of room to bury them all."

I lick my lips. "Maybe," I say. "But a princess must have her prince."



2

Lira

THE SHIP FEELS ROUGH under the spines of my fingers. The wood is splintered, paint cracking and peeling over the body. It cuts the water in a way that is too jagged. Like a blunt knife, pressing and tearing until it slices through. There is rot in places and the stench makes my nose wrinkle.

It is a poor prince's ship.

Not all royals are alike. Some are furnished in fine clothes, unbearably heavy jewels so large that they drown twice as fast. Others are sparsely dressed, with only one or two rings and bronze crowns painted gold. Not that it matters to me. A prince is a prince, after all.

Kahlia keeps to my side, and we swim with the ship while it tears through the sea. It's a steady speed and one we easily match. This is the agonizing wait, as humans become prey. Some time passes before the prince finally steps onto the deck and casts his eye at the ocean. He can't see us. We're far too close and swim far too fast. Through the ship's wake, Kahlia looks to me and her eyes beg the question. With a smile as good as any nod, I return my cousin's stare.

We emerge from the froth and part our lips.

We sing in perfect unison in the language of Midas, the

most common human tongue and one each siren knows well. Not that the words matter. It's the music that seduces them. Our voices echo into the sky and roll back through the wind. We sing as though there is an entire chorus of us, and as the haunting melody ricochets and climbs, it swirls into the hearts of the crew until finally the ship slows to a stop.

"Do you hear it, Mother?" asks the prince. His voice is high and dreamlike.

The queen stands next to him on the deck. "I don't think . . ."

Her voice falters as the melody strokes her into submission. It's a command, and every human has come to a stop, bodies frozen as their eyes search the seas. I set my focus on the prince and sing more softly. Within moments his eyes fall to mine.

"Gods," he says. "It's you."

He smiles and from his left eye slips a single tear.

I stop singing and my voice turns to a gentle hum.

"My love," the prince says, "I've found you at last."

He grips the ratlines and peers far over the edge, his chest flat against the wood, one hand reaching out to touch me. He's dressed in a beige shirt, the strings loose at his chest, sleeves torn and slightly moth-bitten. His crown is thin gold leaf that looks as though it could break if he moves too quickly. He looks desolate and poor.

But then there is his face.

Soft and round, with skin like varnished wood and eyes a penetrating shade darker. His hair swings and coils tightly on his head, a beautiful mess of loops and spirals. Kahlia was right; he's angelic. Magnificent, even. His heart will make a fine trophy.

"You are so beautiful," says the queen, staring down at Kahlia with reverence. "I'm unsure how I've ever considered another."



Kahlia's smile is primordial as she reaches out to the queen, beckoning her to the ocean.

I turn back to the prince, who is frantically stretching out his hand to me. "My love," he pleads. "Come aboard."

I shake my head and continue to hum. The wind groans with the lullaby of my voice.

"I'll come to you then!" he shouts, as though it was ever a choice.

With a gleeful smile, he flings himself into the ocean, and with the splash of his body comes a second, which I know to be the queen, throwing herself to my cousin's mercy. The sounds of their falls awaken something in the crew, and in an instant they are screaming.

They lean over the ship's edge, fifty of them clinging to ropes and wood, watching the spectacle below with horror. But none dare throw themselves overboard to save their sovereigns. I can smell their fear, mixed with the confusion that comes from the sudden absence of our song.

I meet the eyes of my prince and stroke his soft, angelic skin. Gently, with one hand on his cheek and another resting on the thin bones of his shoulder, I kiss him. And as my lips taste his, I pull him under.

The kiss breaks once we are far enough down. My song has long since ended, but the prince stays enamored. Even as the water fills his lungs and his mouth opens in a gasp, he keeps his eyes on me with a glorious look of infatuation.

As he drowns, he touches his fingers to his lips.

Beside me, Kahlia's queen thrashes. She clutches at her throat and bats my cousin away. Angriily, Kahlia clings to her ankle and keeps her deep below the surface, the queen's face a sneer as she tries to escape. It's futile. A siren's hold is a vice.

I stroke my dying prince. My birthday is not for two weeks.



This trip was a gift for Kahlia: to hold the heart of royalty in her hands and name it her fifteenth. It's not supposed to be for me to steal a heart a fortnight early, breaking our most sacred rule. Yet there's a prince dying slowly in front of me. Brown skin and lips blue with ocean. Hair flowing behind him like black seaweed. Something about his purity reminds me of my very first kill. The young boy who helped my mother turn me into the beast I am now.

Such a pretty face, I think.

I run a thumb over the poor prince's lip, savoring his peaceful expression. And then I let out a shriek like no other. The kind of noise that butchers bones and claws through skin. A noise to make my mother proud.

In one move, I plunge my fist into the prince's chest and pull out his heart.



3

Elían

TECHNICALLY, I'M A MURDERER, but I like to think that's one of my better qualities.

I hold up my knife to the moon, admiring the polish of blood before it seeps into the steel and disappears. It was made for me when I turned seventeen and it became clear killing was no longer just a hobby. It was unseemly, the king said, for the Midasan prince to carry around rusted blades. And so now I carry around a magic blade that drinks the blood of its kill so quickly that I barely have time to admire it. Which is far more seemly, apparently. If not a little theatrical.

I regard the dead thing on my deck.

The *Saad* is a mighty vessel that stretches to the size of two full ships, with a crew that could've been over four hundred, but is exactly half that because I value loyalty above all else. Old black lanterns adorn the stern, and the bowsprit stretches forward in a piercing dagger. The *Saad* is so much more than a ship: It's a weapon. Painted in midnight navy, with sails the same cream as the queen's skin and a deck the same polish as the king's.

A deck that is currently home to the bloody corpse of a siren.



“Ain’t it supposed to melt now?”

This is from Kolton Torik, my first mate. Torik is in his early forties, with a pure white mustache and a good four inches of height on me. Each of his arms is the size of each of my legs, and he’s nothing short of burly. In summer months like these, he wears cutoff shorts, the fabric fraying by his kneecaps, and a white shirt with a black waistcoat tied by red ribbon. Which tells me that of all the things he takes seriously – which, really, is most things – his role as an almost pirate is probably not one of them. It is a contradiction to crewmen like Kye, who takes absolutely nothing seriously and yet dresses like he’s an honorary member of the infamous Xaprár thieves.

“I feel weird just lookin’ at it,” Torik says. “All human up top.”

“Enjoy looking up top, do you?”

Torik reddens a shade and turns his attention away from the siren’s exposed breasts.

Of course I understand what he meant, but somewhere along the seas I’ve forgotten how to be horrified. There’s no looking past the fins and blood-red lips, or the eyes that shine with two different colors. Men like Torik – good men – see what these creatures could be: women and girls, mothers and daughters. But I can only see them as they are: monsters and beasts, creatures and devils.

I’m not a good man. I don’t think I’ve been one for a long time.

In front of us, the siren’s skin begins to dissolve. Her hair melts to sea green and her scales froth. Even her blood, just a moment before threatening to stain the deck of the *Saad*, begins to lather until all that is left is sea foam. And a minute later that, too, is gone.

I’m grateful for that part. When a siren dies, she turns

back into the ocean, which means that there's no unseemly burning of bodies. No dumping their rotting corpses into the sea. I may not be a good man, but I'm good enough to find that preferable.

"What now, Cap?"

Kye slides his sword back into place and positions himself alongside Madrid, my second mate. As usual, Kye is dressed all in black, with patchwork leather and gloves that end at the fingertips. His light brown hair is shaved on both sides, like most men who are from Omorfiá, where aesthetics are valued above all else. Which, in Kye's case, also includes morals. Luckily for him – and, perhaps, for us all – Madrid is an expert at compelling decency in people. For a trained killer, she's oddly ethical, and their relationship has managed to keep Kye from sliding down even the slipperiest of slopes.

I shoot Kye a smile. I like being called Cap. Captain. Anything other than My Liege, My Prince, *Your Royal Highness Sir Elian Midas*. Whatever it is the devouts like to spit out in between the constant bowing. Cap suits me in a way my title never has. I'm far more pirate than prince, anyway.

It started when I was fifteen, and for the last four years I've known nothing like I know the ocean. When I'm in Midas, my body aches for sleep. There's a constant fatigue that comes with acting like a prince, where even conversations with those at court who fancy me one of them become too exhausting to stay awake for. When I'm on board the *Saad*, I barely sleep. I never seem to be tired enough. There's a constant thrumming and pulsing. Zaps like lightning that shoot through my veins. I'm alert, always, and so filled with anxious excitement that while the rest of my crew sleeps, I lie on the deck and count stars.

I make shapes of them, and from those shapes I make

stories. Of all the places I have been and will be. Of all the seas and oceans I've yet to visit and the men I've yet to recruit and the devils I've yet to slay. The thrill of it never stops, even when the seas become deadly. Even as I hear the familiar song that strikes my soul and makes me believe in love like it's the first time. The danger only makes me thirstier.

As Elian Midas, crown prince and heir to the Midasan throne, I'm more than a little dull. My conversations are about state and riches and which ball to attend and which lady has the finer dress and if there are any I think are worth a tumble. Each time I dock at Midas and am forced to play the part feels like time lost. A month, a week, a day I can't get back. An opportunity missed, or a life not saved. One more royal I may as well have fed to the Princes' Bane.

But when I'm just Elian, captain of the *Saad*, I transform. When the boat docks on whatever isle I've chosen for the day, as long as I have my crew, I can be myself. Drink until I'm dizzy and joke with women whose skin feels warm with exploits. Women who smell of rose and barley and, on hearing I'm a prince, cackle and tell me it won't earn me a free drink.

"Cap?" asks Kye. "State the play."

I jog up the steps to the forecandle deck, pull the golden telescope from my belt loop and press it to my kohl-rimmed eyes. At the edge of the bowsprit, I see ocean. For miles and miles. Eons, even. Nothing but clear water. I lick my lips, hungry for the thrill of more.

There's royalty in me, but stronger than that there is adventure. Unseemly, my father had said, for the Midasan heir to have a rusted knife, or set sail into open waters and disappear for months at a time, or be nineteen and still not have a suitable wife, or wear hats shaped like triangles and rags with loose string in place of gold thread.

Unseemly, to be a pirate and a siren hunter in place of a prince.

I sigh and turn to face the bow. So much ocean, but in the distance, too far to make out, there is land. There is the isle of Midas. There is home.

I look down to my crew. Two hundred sailors and warriors who see my quest as honorable and brave. They don't think of me like those at court, who hear my name and imagine a young prince who needs to get exploration out of his system. These men and women heard my name and pledged their undying allegiance.

"Okay, you ragtag group of siren gizzards," I call down to them, "turn the lady left."

My crew roars their approval. In Midas, I make sure they're pampered with as much drink and food as they like. Full bellies and beds with silken sheets. Far more luxury than they're used to sleeping on in the *Saad*, or on the hay-filled beds of inns we find on passing lands.

"My family will want to see how we've fared," I tell them. "We're going home."

A thunder of stamping feet. They applaud in triumph at the announcement. I grin and decide to keep the cheer on my face. I will not falter. It's a key part of my image: never upset or angry or deterred. Always in charge of my own life and destiny.

The ship turns hard starboard, swinging in a broad circle as my crew scurries around the deck, anxious for the return to Midas. They're not all natives; some are from neighboring kingdoms like Armonía or Adékaros. Countries they grew bored of, or those that were thrown into mayhem after the death of their princes. They're from everywhere and their homes are nowhere, but they call Midas so because I do. Even

if it is a lie for them and for me. My crew is my family and though I could never say it – perhaps, don't need to say it – the *Saad* is my true home.

Where we're going now is just another pit stop.

4

Elían

IN MIDAS, THE OCEAN glitters gold. At least, that's the illusion. Really it's as blue as any sea, but the light does things. Unexplainable things. The light can lie.

The castle towers above the land, built into the largest pyramid. It's crafted from pure gold, so that each stone and brick is a gleaming expanse of sunlight. The statues scatter on the horizon, and the houses in the lower towns are all painted the same. Streets and cobbles glow yellow, so that when the sun hits the ocean, it glitters in an unmistakable reflection. It's only ever during the darkest parts of night that the true blue of the Midasan Sea can be seen.

As the Midasan prince, my blood is supposed to be made of that same gold. Every land in the hundred kingdoms has its own myths and fables for their royals: The gods carved the Págos family from snow and ice. Each generation gifted with hair like milk and lips as blue as skies. The Eidýllion royals are the descendants of the Love God, and so any they touch will find their soul mate. And the Midasan monarchs are crafted from gold itself.

Legend says my entire family bleeds nothing but treasure. Of course, I've bled a lot in my time. Sirens lose all serenity

when they turn from hunter to prey and pieces of their nails become embedded in my arms. My blood has been spilled more often than any prince's, and I can attest to the fact that it has never been gold.

This, my crew knows. They've been the ones to clean my wounds and stitch my skin back together. Yet they entertain the legend, laughing and nodding dubiously whenever people speak of golden blood. They would never betray the secret of my ordinariness.

"Of course," Madrid will say to any who ask. "The cap's made from the purest parts of the sun. Seeing him bleed is like looking into the eyes of the gods."

Kye will always lean in then and lower his voice in the way only someone who knows all of my secrets could. "After a woman is with him, she cries tears of nothing but liquid metal for a week. Half for missing his touch so terrible, and the other half to buy back her pride."

"Yeah," Torik always adds. "And he shits rainbows too."

I linger on the forecastle of the *Saad*, anchored in the Midasan docks. I'm unsettled at the idea of having my feet on solid ground after so many weeks. It's always the way. Stranger still is the thought that I'll need to leave the truest parts of myself on the *Saad* before I head to the pyramid and my family. It's been nearly a year since I've been back, and though I've missed them, it doesn't seem like long enough.

Kye stands beside me. The rest of the crew has begun the walk, like an army marching for the palace, but he rarely leaves my side unless asked. Boatswain, best friend, and bodyguard. He would never admit that last part, though my father offered him enough money for the position. Of course, at the time, Kye had already been on my crew for long enough to know better than to try to save me, and my friend long

enough to be willing to try anyway.

Still, he took the gold. He took most things just because he could. It came with the territory of being a diplomat's son. If Kye was going to disappoint his father by joining me on a siren scavenger hunt rather than spending a life in politics and cross-kingdom negotiations, then he wasn't going to do it by halves. He was going to throw everything he had into it. After all, the threat of disinheritance had already been carried out.

Around me, everything shimmers. Buildings and pavements and even the docks. In the sky, hundreds of tiny gold lanterns float to the heavens, celebrating my homecoming. My father's adviser is from the land of fortune-tellers and prophets, and so he always knows when I'm due to return. Each time the skies dance with flaming lanterns, bejeweled beside stars.

I inhale the familiar smell of my homeland. Midas always seems to smell of fruit. So many different kinds all at once. Butter pears and clingstone peaches, their honey-stuck flesh mingling with the sweet brandy of apricots. And under it all is the fading smell of licorice, which is coming from the *Saad* and, most likely, me.

"Elian." Kye slings an arm over my shoulder. "We should get going if we want anything to eat tonight. You know that lot won't leave any chow for us if we give them half a chance."

I laugh, but it sounds more like a sigh.

I take off my hat. I've already changed out of my sea attire and into the one respectable outfit I keep aboard my ship. A cream shirt, with buttons rather than string, and midnight-blue trousers held up by a golden belt. Not quite fit for a prince, but nothing of the pirate in it either. I've even removed my family crest from the thin chain around my neck and placed it on my thumb.

“Right.” I hook my hat over the ship wheel. “Best get it over with.”

“It won’t be so bad.” Kye hitches his collar. “You might find yourself enjoying the bowing. Might even abandon ship and leave us all stranded in the land of gold.” He reaches over and messes up my hair. “Wouldn’t be such a bad thing,” he says. “I quite like gold.”

“A true pirate.” I shove him halfheartedly. “But you can get that idea out of your head. We’ll go to the palace, attend the ball they’ll no doubt throw in my honor, and be gone before the week is out.”

“A ball?” Kye’s eyebrows rise. “What an honor, My Liege.” He bends over in a swooping bow, one hand to his stomach.

I shove him again. Harder. “Gods.” I wince. “Please don’t.”

Again he bows, though this time he can hardly keep from laughing. “As you desire, Your Highness.”

MY FAMILY IS IN the throne room. The chamber is decorated in floating balls of gold, flags printed with the Midasan crest, and a large table filled with jewels and gifts. Presents from the people to celebrate their prince’s return.

Having abandoned Kye to the dining hall, I watch my family from the doorway, not quite ready to announce my presence.

“It’s not that I don’t think he deserves it,” my sister says.

Amara is sixteen, with eyes like molokhia and hair as black as mine, and almost always sprinkled with gold and gemstones.

“It’s just that I hardly think he’ll want it.” Amara holds up a gold bracelet in the shape of a leaf and presents it to the king and queen. “Really,” she argues. “Can you see Elian wearing this? I’m doing him a favor.”

“Stealing is a favor now?” asks the queen. The braids on

either side of her fringe swing as she turns to her husband. "Shall we send her to Kléftes to live with the rest of the thieves?"

"I wouldn't dream of it," says the king. "Send my little demon there and they'll see it as an act of war when she steals the crest ring."

"Nonsense." I finally stride into the room. "She'd be smart enough to go for the crown first."

"Elian!"

Amara runs to me and flings her arms around my neck. I return the hug and lift her off the floor, as excited to see her as she is to see me.

"You're home!" she says, once I set her back on the ground.

I look at her with mock injury. "For five minutes and you're already planning to rob me."

Amara pokes me in the stomach. "Only a little."

My father rises from his throne and his teeth gleam against his dark skin. "My son."

He envelops me in a hug and claps me on each shoulder. My mother descends the steps to join us. She's petite, barely reaching my father's shoulder, and has delicate, graceful features. Her hair is cut bluntly at her chin, and her eyes are green and catlike, lined in wisps of black that lick her temples.

The king is her opposite in every way. Large and muscular, with a goatee tied with beads. His eyes are a brown that match his skin, and his jaw is sharp and square. With Midas hieratic decorating his face, he looks every bit the warrior.

My mother smiles. "We were beginning to worry you had forgotten us."

"Only for a little while." I kiss her cheek. "I remembered as soon as we docked. I saw the pyramid and thought, *Oh, my family lives there. I remember their faces. I hope they bought a*

bracelet to celebrate my return." I shoot Amara a grin and she pokes me again.

"Have you eaten?" my mother asks. "There's quite the feast in the banquet hall. I think your friends are in there now."

My father grunts. "No doubt eating everything but our utensils."

"If you want them to eat the cutlery, you should have it carved from cheese."

"Really, Elian." My mother smacks my shoulder and then brings her hand up to brush my hair from my forehead. "You look so tired," she says.

I take her hand and kiss it. "I'm fine. That's just what sleeping on a ship does to a man."

Really, I don't think I looked tired until the moment I walked off the *Saad* and onto the gold-painted cement of Midas. Just one step and the life drained out of me.

"You should try sleeping in your own bed longer than a few days a year," says my father.

"Radames," my mother scolds. "Don't start."

"I'm just speaking to the boy! There's nothing out there but ocean."

"And sirens," I remind him.

"Ha!" His laugh is a bellow. "And it's your job to seek them out, is it? If you're not careful, you'll leave us like Adékaros."

I frown. "What does that mean?"

"It means that your sister may have to take the throne."

"We won't have to worry, then." I sling my arm around Amara. "She'd definitely make a better queen than me."

Amara stifles a laugh.

"She's sixteen," my father chides. "A child should be allowed to live her life and not worry about an entire kingdom."

"Oh." I fold my arms. "She should, but not me."

“You’re the eldest.”

“Really?” I pretend to ponder this. “But I have such a youthful glow.”

My father opens his mouth to respond, but my mother places a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Radames,” she says, “I think it’s best Elian gets some sleep. Tomorrow’s ball will make for a long day, and he really does look tired.”

I press my lips to a tight smile and bow. “Of course,” I say, and excuse myself.

My father has never understood the importance of what I’m doing, but each time I return home, I lull myself into thinking that maybe, just once, he’ll be able to put his love for me above the love for his kingdom. But he fears for my safety because it would affect the crown. He has already spent too many years grooming the people into accepting me as their future sovereign to change things now.

“Elian!” Amara calls after me.

I ignore her, walking in long and quick strides, feeling the anger bubble under my skin. Knowing that the only way to make my father proud is to give up everything that I am.

“Elian,” she says, more firmly. “It’s not princess-like to run. Or if it is, then I’ll make a decree for it not to be if I’m ever queen.”

Reluctantly, I stop and face her. She sighs in relief and leans against the glyph-carved wall. She has taken her shoes off, and without them she’s even shorter than I remember. I smile, and when she sees this, she scowls and smacks my arm. I wince and hold out my hand for hers.

“You antagonize him,” she says, taking my arm.

“He antagonizes me first.”

“You’ll make a fine diplomat with those debate skills.”

I shake my head. “Not if you take the throne.”

“At least then I’d get the bracelet.” She nudges me with her elbow. “How was your trip? How many sirens did you slaughter like the great pirate that you are?”

She says this with a smirk, knowing full well that I’ll never tell her about my time on the *Saad*. I share many things with my sister, but never how it feels to be a killer. I like the idea of Amara seeing me as a hero, and killers are so very often villains.

“Barely any,” I say. “I was too full of rum to think about it.”

“You’re quite the liar,” says Amara. “And by quite, I mean quite awful.”

We come to a stop outside her room. “And you’re quite nosy,” I tell her. “That’s new.”

Amara ignores this. “Are you going to the banquet hall to see your friends?” she asks.


I shake my head. The guards will make sure my crew finds good beds for the night, and I’m far too tired to plaster on another round of smiles.

“I’m going to bed,” I tell her. “Like the queen ordered.”

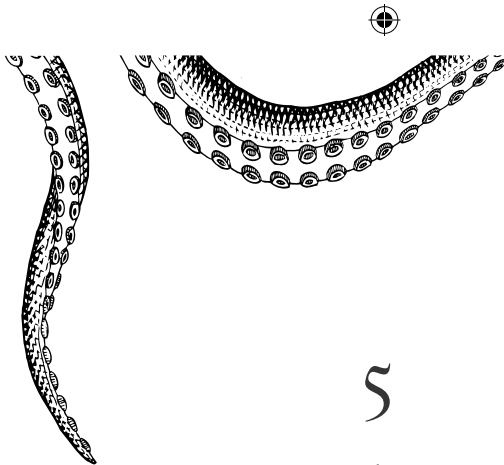
Amara nods, perches on her tiptoes, and kisses my cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow then,” she says. “And I can ask Kye about your exploits. I don’t imagine a diplomat would lie to a princess.” With a playful grin, she turns to her room and shuts the door behind her.

I pause for a moment.

I don’t much like the thought of my sister swapping stories with my crew, but at least I can trust Kye to tell his tales with less death and gore. He’s fanciful, but not stupid. He knows that I don’t behave the way a prince should any more than he behaves as a diplomat’s son should. It’s my biggest secret. People know me as the siren hunter, and those at court utter those words with amusement and fondness: *Oh, Prince Elian,*



trying to save us all. If they understood what it took, the awful and sickening screams sirens made. If they saw the corpses of the women on my deck before they dissolved to sea foam, then my people wouldn't look upon me so fondly. I would no longer be a prince to them, and as much as I might desire such things, I know better.



S *Lira*

THE KETO PALACE LIES within the center of the Diávolos Sea and has always been home to royalty. Though humans have kings and queens in every crevice of the earth, the ocean has only one ruler. One queen. This is my mother, and one day it will be me.

One day being soon. It's not that my mother is too old to rule. Though sirens live for a hundred years, we never age past a few decades, and soon daughters look like mothers and mothers look like sisters, and it becomes hard to tell how old anybody truly is. It's another reason why we have the tradition of hearts: so a siren's age is never determined by her face, but always by how many lives she has stolen.

This is the first time I've broken that tradition, and my mother is furious. Looking down at me, the Sea Queen is every bit the tyrannical sovereign. To an outsider, she may even seem infinite, as though her reign could never end. It doesn't look like she'll lose her throne in just a few years.

As is customary, the Sea Queen retires her crown once she has sixty hearts. I know the exact number my mother has hidden in the safe beneath the palace gardens. Once, she had announced them each year, proud of her growing collection.

But she stopped making such proclamations when she reached fifty. She stopped counting, or at least, stopped telling people that she did. But I never stopped. Each year I counted my mother's hearts just as rigorously as I counted my own. So I know that she has three years before the crown is mine.

"How many is that now, Lira?" asks the Sea Queen, looming down at me.

Reluctantly, I bow my head. Kahlia lingers behind me, and though I can't see her, I know she's shadowing the gesture.

"Eighteen," I reply.

"Eighteen," the Sea Queen muses. "How funny you should have eighteen hearts, when your birthday is not for two weeks."

"I know, but—"

"Let me tell you what I know." The queen settles on her carcass throne. "I know that you were supposed to take your cousin to get her fifteenth, and somehow that proved too difficult."

"Not especially," I say. "I did take her."

"And you took a little something for yourself, too."

Her tentacles stretch around my waist and pull me forward. In an instant, I feel the crack of my ribs beneath her grip.

Every queen begins as a siren, and when the crown passes to her, its magic steals her fins and leaves in their place mighty tentacles that hold the strength of armies. She becomes more squid than fish, and with that transformation comes the magic, unyielding and grand. Enough to shape the seas to her whim. Sea Queen and Sea Witch both.

I've never known my mother as a siren, but I can't imagine her ever looking so mundane. She has ancient symbols and runes tattooed over her stomach in red, stretching even to her gloriously carved cheekbones. Her tentacles are black and scarlet, fading into one another like blood spilled into ink, and

her eyes have long since turned to rubies. Even her crown is a magnificent headdress that peaks in horns atop her head and flows out like limbs down her back.

"I won't hunt on my birthday as recompense," I concede breathlessly.

"Oh, but you will." The queen strokes her black trident. A single ruby, like her eyes, shines on the middle spear. "Because today never happened. Because you would never disobey me or undermine me in any way. Would you, Lira?"

She squeezes my ribs tighter.

"Of course not, Mother."

"And you?" The queen turns her fixation to Kahlia, and I try to hide any signs of unease. If my mother were to see concern in my eyes, it would only be another weakness for her to exploit.

Kahlia swims forward. Her hair is pulled back from her face by a tie of seaweed, and her fingernails are still crusted with pieces of the Adékarosin queen. She bows her head in what some might interpret as a show of respect. But I know better. Kahlia can never look the Sea Queen in the eye, because if she did, then my mother might know exactly what my cousin thinks of her.

"I only thought she would kill him," says Kahlia. "I didn't know she'd take his heart, too."

It's a lie and I'm glad of it.

"Well, how perfectly stupid you are not to know your own cousin." My mother eyes her greedily. "I'm not sure I can think of a punishment unpleasant enough for complete idiocy."

I clench a hand against the tentacle that grips my waist. "Whatever the punishment is," I say, "I'll take it."

My mother's smile twitches, and I know that she's thinking of all the ways this makes me unworthy to be her daughter.

Still, I can't help it. In an ocean of sirens who watch out only for themselves, protecting Kahlia has become somewhat of a reflex. Ever since that day when we were both forced to watch her mother die. And throughout the years, as the Sea Queen tried to mold both Kahlia and I into the perfect descendants of Keto. Carving our edges into the right shape for her to admire. It's a mirror to a childhood I'd sooner forget.

Kahlia is like me. Too much like me, perhaps. And though it's what makes the Sea Queen hate her, it's also the reason I choose to care. I've stuck by her side, shielding her from the parts of my mother that are the most brutal. Now protecting my cousin isn't a decision I make. It's instinct.

"How caring of you," the Sea Queen says with a scornful smile. "Is it all those hearts you've stolen? Did you take some of their humanity, too?"

"Mother—"

"Such fealty to a creature other than your queen." She sighs. "I wonder if this is the way you behave with the humans, too. Tell me, Lira, do you cry for their broken hearts?"

She drops her grip on me, disgusted. I hate what I become in her presence: trite and undeserving of the crown I'm to inherit. Through her eyes, I see my failure. It doesn't matter how many princes I hunt, because I'll never be the kind of killer that she is.

I'm still not quite cold enough for the ocean that birthed me.

"Give it to me so we can get on with it," the Sea Queen says impatiently.

I frown. "Give it to you," I repeat.

The queen holds out her hand. "I don't have all day."

It takes me a moment to realize that she means the heart of the prince I killed.

“But . . .” I shake my head. “But it’s *mine*.”

What an incredible child I’ve become.

The Sea Queen’s lips curl. “You will give it to me,” she says. “Right now.”

Seeing the look on her face, I turn and swim for my bedroom without another word. There the prince’s heart lies buried alongside seventeen others. Carefully, I dig through the freshly placed shingle and pull the heart out of the floor. It’s crusted in sand and blood and still feels warm in my hands. I don’t stop to think about the pain the loss will bring before I swim back to my mother and present it to her.

The Sea Queen strikes out a tentacle and snatches the heart from my open palm. For a while she stares into my eyes, gauging my every reaction. Savoring the moment. And then she squeezes.

The heart explodes into a gruesome mass of blood and flesh. Tiny particles float like ocean lint. Some dissolve. Others fall like feathers to the ocean bed. Shots plunge through my chest, slamming into me like whirlpools as the heart’s magic is taken from me. The jolts are so strong that my fins catch on a nearby seashell and rip. My blood gushes alongside the prince’s.

Siren blood is nothing like human blood. Firstly, because it is cold. Secondly, because it burns. Human blood flows and drips and pools, but siren blood blisters and bubbles and melts through skin.

I fall to the floor and claw the sand so deeply that my finger stabs a rock and it cleaves my nail clean off. I am breathless, heaving in great gasps of water and then choking it back up moments later. I think I might be drowning, and I almost laugh at the thought.

Once a siren steals a human heart, we become bonded to



it. It's an ancient kind of magic that cannot be easily broken. By taking the heart, we absorb its power, stealing whatever youth and life the human had left and binding it to us. The Adékarosin prince's heart is being ripped from me, and any power it held leaks into the ocean before my eyes. Into nothingness.

Shaking, I rise. My limbs feel as heavy as iron and my fins throb. The glorious red seaweed that covers my breasts is still coiled around me, but the strands have loosened and hang limply over my stomach. Kahlia turns away, to keep my mother from seeing the anguish on her face.

"Wonderful," says the queen. "Time for the punishment."

Now I do laugh. My throat feels scratchy, and even that action, the sound of my voice so wrought with magic, takes energy from me. I feel weaker than I ever have.

"That wasn't punishment?" I spit. "Ripping the power from me like that?"

"It was the perfect punishment," says the Sea Queen. "I don't think I could have thought of a better lesson to teach you."

"Then what else is there?"

She smiles with ivory fangs. "Kahlia's punishment," she says. "Per your request."

I feel the heaviness in my chest again. I recognize the dreadful gleam in my mother's eyes, as it's a look I've inherited. One I hate seeing on anyone else, because I know exactly what it means.

"I'm sure I can think of something fitting." The queen runs a tongue across her fangs. "Something to teach you a valuable lesson about the power of patience."

I fight the urge to sneer, knowing no good will come of it. "Don't keep me in suspense."



The Sea Queen leers down at me. "You always did enjoy pain," she says.

This is as much of a compliment as I'm going to get, so I smile in a way that is sickeningly pleasant and say, "Pain doesn't always hurt."

The Sea Queen shoots me a contemptuous look. "Is that so?" Her eyebrows twitch upward and my arrogance falters somewhat. "If that's how you feel, then I have no choice but to decree that for your birthday, you will have the chance to inflict all of the pain you like when you steal your next heart."

I eye her warily. "I don't understand."

"Only," the queen continues, "instead of the princes you are so adept at trapping, you will add a new kind of trophy to your collection." Her voice is as wicked as mine has ever been. "Your eighteenth heart will belong to a sailor. And at the ceremony of your birth, with our entire kingdom present, you will present this to them, as you have done with all of your trophies."

I stare at my mother, biting my tongue so hard that my teeth almost meet.

She doesn't want to punish me. She wants to humiliate me. Show a kingdom whose fear and loyalty I've earned that I'm no different from them. That I don't stand out. That I'm not worthy to take her crown.

I've spent my life trying to be just what my mother wanted – the worst of us all – in an effort to show that I'm worthy of the trident. I became the Princes' Bane, a title that defines me throughout the world. For the kingdom – for my mother – I am ruthless. And that ruthlessness makes each and every sea creature certain I can reign. Now my mother wants to take that from me. Not just my name, but the faith of the ocean. If I'm not the Princes' Bane, then I'm nothing. Just a princess inheriting a crown instead of earning it.