



*The
Surface
Breaks*

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Chapter

1

YOU ARE NOT *ready, my child. Be patient.*
Your time will come.

I have been listening to my grandmother say these things to me for as long as I can remember. “But when will I be ready?” I kept asking her. “When, Grandmother? When, *when?*”

And she told me to be quiet. “It’s for your own good,” she said. “You know how your father feels about the human world. Do not let him catch you speaking in such a fashion.”

I have never been allowed to talk much. My father doesn’t care for curious girls, so I bit my tongue and I waited. The days of my childhood kept turning over, dissolving like sea-foam on the crest of the waves. I have

been counting them, the days and the nights, the weeks, the months, the years. I have been waiting for this day.

And now, at last, it has arrived. I am fifteen and I shall be allowed to break the surface, catch my first glimpse of the world above us. Maybe there, I will find some answers. I have so many questions, you see. I have spent my years swallowing them down, burning bitter at the back of my throat.

“Happy birthday, my beloved Muirgen,” Grandmother Thalassa says, placing a wreath of lilies on my head. I am sitting on a throne carved from coral, staring at my reflection in the cracked mirror in front of me. It is a relic from a ship that was wrecked two years ago. The Rusalkas rose to the surface to sing the sailors to a watery grave, stuffing death into their bloated lungs. They sing so sweetly, the Salkas do. They sing for revenge for all that has been inflicted upon them.

My room in the palace is full of such finds: remnants of humans that descend from their world into ours, and that I hoard for my collection, piece by piece. A broken comb that I use to tame my long, red hair; a jeweled ring that my sisters covet and beg to borrow, but I shall not share. A statue of alabaster white, of a young man’s face and torso. I wonder who he is, he whose face has been whittled out of marble. I wonder if he ever looks at the

sea and considers its depths, ponders what could be found in its belly if he looked hard enough. I wonder if he knows that we even exist.

“It is difficult to believe that it is your fifteenth birthday,” Grandmother says. “I remember the day you were born so clearly.”

Everyone in the kingdom remembers my birthday, but not because of me. She knits a pearl into my fishtail, piercing the flesh with a razor shell. I watch as the blood drips away, trembling on the water before it melts. The pearls are large, heavy, and I must wear six of them for fear the other mer-people will somehow forget that I am royalty and therefore their superior in all ways. “It was clear you were special,” my grandmother says. “Even then.” But not special enough. Not special enough to make my mother stay.

Grandmother scrapes the scales away, ignoring my gasp of pain. Thalassa of the Green Sea does not care to hear such complaints. *One cannot have beauty for nothing*, she would tell me. *There is always a price to pay*, and she would gesture at her own tail with its twelve pearls. My grandmother is not royalty-born, so she is expected to be grateful for this decoration bestowed upon her by her son-in-law, the Sea King, and even more grateful that the privilege wasn’t revoked when her daughter . . .

misbehaved as she did. Grandmother's family was of high birth, and well respected, but my mother was their ticket to the throne. Perhaps my grandmother did not realize the price her daughter would have to pay. Perhaps she did not care.

When my grandmother calls me "special," she means "beautiful." That is the only way a woman can be special in the kingdom. And I am beautiful. All of the Sea King's daughters are, each princess more lovely than the next, but I am the fairest of them all. I am the diamond in my father's crown and he is determined to wear me as such. He will hold my prettiness out for display, and he will take any ensuing admiration as his due.

"My name is Gaia," I say. "That is what my mother called me."

"Let us not speak of your mother," Grandmother says. "Muireann had many ideas that would have been better ignored."

My breath catches a little. *Muireann*. We hear my mother's name so rarely. "But—"

"Shhh," she says, looking over her shoulder. "I should never have told you the name she chose for you."

But she did. My fifth birthday, and I begged her to tell me something, *anything* about my mother. *She called*

you Gaia, I was told, and when I heard it, I felt as if I was coming home to myself.

“Gaia is not a name of the sea, my child,” my grandmother says now.

“But it was what my mother wanted, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” she sighs.

“And my father, he agreed, didn’t he? Even though Gaia was a name of the earth, and not of our kind.”

“The Sea King was very fond of Muireann in those days. He wished to see her happy.”

They thought my mother’s love of the human world was innocent in the beginning. That was before she started to act strangely. Before she disappeared for hours at a time, giving increasingly elaborate excuses to explain her absence upon return. Before she was taken.

“And then my mother—”

“Your mother is dead, Muirgen,” my grandmother says. “Let us not speak of her anymore.”

But I don’t know if she is dead, despite what they tell me. All I know is this: When someone disappears on your first birthday, your entire life becomes a question, a puzzle that needs solving. And so, I look up. I have spent my life looking up, thinking about her.

“She could still be alive,” I say.

“She’s not.”

“But how can you be so sure, Grandmother? All we know is that she was taken. Maybe—”

“Muirgen.” Her voice is serious. I meet her eyes, blue, like mine. Everything is blue down here. “It does not do a woman good to ask too many questions.”

“But I just want—”

“It doesn’t do a woman good to want too much either. Try and remember that.”

Muireann of the Green Sea wanted too much. *You’re so like your mother*, the old folk tell me (though only when my father is out of earshot—my father will not have talk of my mother at court), *the resemblance is . . .* (Freakish? Odd? What?) But they never finish their sentences. *Such a pity what happened to her*, they say instead. They have all accepted she’s dead, even if we never had a body to bury in the deep sands. They think it’s a shame, but what else could a woman like my mother expect? She had her own needs, her own desires. She wanted to escape, so she looked up too. And she was punished for it.

My grandmother picks up the final pearl now, her tongue sticking out in concentration. My tail must look perfect for the ball this evening. My father is always in a rather exacting mood on this date.

I wait until she is rapt in her work, and I look up again. I look at the dark sea, the crashing waves, straining to see the faint light beyond. That was where my mother went, up there. And that is where I must go to find the answers I need.

Grandmother tugs at my tail but I keep my head tilted back, staring at the surface. For I am fifteen now, and I can do as I please.