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FOUR DEAD QUEENS

# THE VANISHING DEEP

ASTRID SCHOLTE

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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*For Andrew,  
I would cross the ocean for you.*



**Palindrome**—*a word, number, phrase, sentence, or sequence of symbols or elements whose meaning can be interpreted the same way both forward and in reverse.*

*We begin as we end, we end as we begin.*

*It's the middle we must hold on to.*





# CHAPTER ONE

## TEMPEST

*Sunday: 8:00 a.m.*

I DIDN'T WANT to resurrect my sister because I loved her.

I didn't want one final goodbye, to whisper words left unsaid or clear my conscience of any slights between us. I didn't want to hear her voice say my name, *Tempe*, one last time.

I wanted to soothe the anger that scorched through me. An anger that had a life of its own, taking hold within me, propelling me to action—even on the days when I was exhausted from the early morning dive, even when I'd had enough of this scrappy life.

I wanted to drown memories of her long dark hair, curling in the water as she dove deeper ahead of me, always knowing where to search next. I wanted to extinguish memories of her dancer limbs twirling above her head as storms raged nearby. I wanted to forget her now silenced bell-like voice once and for all.

As much as the thought of her name angered me, the

thought of never hearing it again angered me even more.

Her name had begun to fade in the two years since her death, like the last rumble of thunder in a storm. In the beginning, friends—all Elysea’s—would say “your sister,” as if saying her name would send a fresh wave of tears down my already flushed cheeks. Then, as days turned into weeks, her name was said soft and tentative, signaling to me that it was time to start moving on. To get out of bed, to live my life.

When weeks turned into months, people stopped speaking about her altogether. As though she never existed.

Then I’d heard something that changed how I felt about her, transforming my grief to anger.

So now I *needed* to hear her voice one last time. I needed the truth. And for that, I needed to resurrect her.

Neither of us could rest until I did.

The boat shifted with the waves; I adjusted my footing so I didn’t fall into the sea. The *Sunrise* had been my parents’ transportation to work. Small, but swift. The shell-colored deck was triangular, with two “wings” underneath the back side of the boat, which hooked down and into the water to keep balance at high speeds. A cramped cabin was suspended below, its belly dipping into the sea like an overfed familfish.

I gazed at the deep blue waters. From above, you could see a slight turbulence beneath—a hint of something other than sand, salt and sea.

A sunken city—one which I had scavenged for years, and from which I had never returned empty-handed. My deeply

tanned olive skin spoke of the years I'd spent on and under the water, scavenging for scraps.

Today would be my last dive here. Elysea had found this site when I was twelve years old, and after five years, I knew every twist and turn of the labyrinth of steel, glass and stone. There was only one room left untouched. And I wasn't leaving until I explored it. After that, I would need to find a new dive site, and hope it hadn't already been ravaged like so many sunken cities in this section of the sea.

I tightened the straps of my flippers, made from blunted blades of Old World knives. The rusty, thin metal sheets shrieked as I flexed my foot to test the movement.

"Oh, shut up," I said. The flippers were my mother's, and I couldn't afford new ones. I wouldn't waste Notes on anything other than reviving my sister, or topping off my breather.

*One last dive*, I thought as I put the breathing tube in my mouth and pulled the pliable transparent dome over my head. As I clipped it onto the neck of my diving skin, the dome inflated.

*One final goodbye*. Another memory to shelve, another link to Elysea forever severed. The thought should've brought a wave of sadness, but I felt only cold, steely determination. Soon I too could forget Elysea's name.

I took a shallow breath to check the gas levels of the small cylinder attached to my belt.

My breather beeped twice.

*Oxygen low.*

I yanked the dome off and spat out my breather. Aside from food, diving gas was the most expensive commodity. It allowed us to search for relics from the Old World—for anything useful to use in the new one. My dive finds barely covered the costs of living on the Equinox Reef and what was left went toward my sister's resurrection. I was hoping I could unearth something from the remaining room to fund topping off my breather and allow me time to locate a new ruin, without having to dip into my savings.

I placed the breather back in my mouth and pulled the dome over my face. The levels would have to be enough.

I rattled some black stones with iridescent blue spirals in my palm, like miniature swirling galaxies. I dropped one into the ocean, saying a prayer to the Gods below, to allow me to enter their world, their sacred sanctuary—and survive it. It was a childish habit. When Elysea and I were young we'd thought it was the will of the Gods below who took souls from boats in a storm and the air from the lungs of divers. We didn't realize it was simply chance, bad luck or unskilled diving. The perils of our world.

Together, we'd learned to conquer the ocean. Or so I'd thought. Until Elysea had drowned, almost exactly two years ago.

Before I allowed any further doubt to muddy my mind, I grabbed my oilskin bag, clipped it to my diving belt and tilted backward off the boat.

The water was cold, but only my fingertips were cool, the

rest of my body protected by my diving skin—a material made of thin rubbery blue plates stitched-together like fish scales, which I always wore under my clothes. I kicked my weighted metal flippers, which coaxed me downward.

*Take shallow, steady breaths.* I couldn't help but hear my sister's voice in my head. She'd taught me how to dive, after all.

"The free fall is easy," she would say. "Save your air for the return trip. When you'll need it. Just follow me into the dark, Tempe." She never called me by my full name—Tempest—saying it was too harsh for her little sister. "Tempee sounds sweeter," she'd said.

I could barely remember the little girl I'd once been.

A plume of bright light shone from the corner of my eye—my map to the world below. I kicked toward it as I fell. Before long, my vision was illuminated by shades of blue, purple and pink, dotted along shafts of rusted metal. Since the Great Waves around five hundred years ago, bioluminescent coral had grown along sunken buildings, lighting the way toward the ocean floor, like Old World lights on cobbled streets, or the stars in the night sky. A sunken constellation.

The sight never failed to take my breath away. And even though the building was long dead, it glowed with life. It was beautiful.

I followed the path downward.

When I passed a red-brown metal turret, I took a slight turn to the left. Rusticles, like fossilized seaweed, dripped from every edge. The holes that were once doorways and windows

into a lively world were now the soulless eyes of a watchful, watery tomb.

A lost city. A drowned society. The perfect harvest.

My breather beeped again. I took shallower breaths, hoping the Gods were in favor of my presence. Many divers had searched for the Gods below. A temple, a shrine, a palace. *Anything*. But they'd remained undiscovered. It gave naysayers ammunition to doubt the deities' existence.

But in a world almost entirely water, we needed our guides. The Old World believed in the Gods above and followed the stars to journey across the land. But with hardly any land remaining, it was pointless to look to the sky. The water was our master.

I wished we'd begun with the lower levels of the building when we'd initially discovered this site. But it had been my first dive. Elysea had wanted to start closer to the surface, even though I'd argued that I was ready. She'd only been two years older than me, but she'd acted older than that. Back then, I'd barely fit into my mom's abandoned flippers.

"You'll grow into them," Elysea had said, fastening them as tight as she could around my then-small feet. "It's better that they're big so you can use them for longer."

I hadn't argued, excited to be included on the dive.

After five years, I was now one of the best divers on our home of the Equinox. While other kids went to school, sailed with their parents, swam with their friends, danced with their siblings, I dove. And dove and dove.

There was nothing on the surface for me now.

I dove deeper, keeping my breaths shallow to save gas.

As much as I missed diving with Elysea, I liked being by myself. With nothing but the waters to guide me, the Gods below protecting me, and the quiet to soothe my restless mind. My anger.

Elysea had been lucky to find this ruin. It must've broken free from a larger cluster of buildings during the Great Waves. Most sunken cities were overcrowded with divers, and few relics were left to be found. Not this building. This ruin was all mine.

The dive site was located close to the isle of Palindromena, and most divers steered clear of the brutal waves that crashed against the jagged coast. Too many people drowned there. Plus, those who lived on the Equinox were superstitious. The island was cloaked in mystery and tainted by death.

But I wasn't afraid of Palindromena. The facility had always been a specter in my life, but never touched it directly, like a looming shadow.

When I reached the ocean floor, I darted through a knocked-out window. Coral had grown around the frame, lighting the entrance. Many people believed the Gods below were to thank for the coral that had appeared in the years since the Great Waves, lighting the way to sunken treasures. Without the Gods, and their coral, the Old World would've been lost to the ocean.

My breather let out another warning beep. I had to be quick.

The building's ground floor had been a row of tiny shops, all

interconnected. More coral bloomed inside, illuminating the rooms. The first shop was some kind of eatery. Tables tipped upside down, slivers of ceramic plates and glass cups were now debris in the water.

I rushed through the room, keeping my eye out for anything I might've missed. Anything *valuable*. Old cups were interesting, but not worth many Notes. I needed something useful for more diving gas and to fund Elysea's resurrection.

Down here, skeletons were as common as the yellow famil-fish that traveled in schools of hundreds up near the Equinox. Coral had grown in the gaps of disintegrated bone, piecing together the skeletons and fortifying them from further decomposition. They floated through doorways and rooms as though they continued to live and breathe, while their flesh and muscle had long peeled away.

I was twelve when I first saw a glowing patchwork skeleton, providing fuel for a week's worth of nightmares. Now they were friends. I'd given them names, backgrounds, personalities. It made it less creepy. *Slightly*.

I'd never made friends easily, but down here, the skeletons didn't have a choice.

I nodded to Adrei. His red and pink calcified skull rested on the café counter, his bony hand beside his face as though I'd caught him deep in thought. On the ocean floor, there was little movement, no currents or fish to disturb him. As I swam by, my flippers rippled through the water and his luminous fingers rattled, as if to say hello.



I continued on to the next room.

“Hey, Celci,” I said to a skeleton stuck floating between two corridors. I’d named her after my old aunt, who’d passed away from crystal lung when I was a child. I still remembered her teeth too large for her face, like this skeleton. I gently nudged Celci as I passed, moving her into the next room to be with Adrei. Even the dead shouldn’t be alone.

The shop next door had been a bookstore; I passed without a second look. The room had been sealed before I’d forced open the door. While I’d managed to salvage some books, the rest had quickly broken down and clouded the room. The books I’d already retrieved weren’t worth much; as soon as they were brought to the surface, the pages began to decompose in the humid salty air. Perhaps it would’ve been better to leave them down here, their words trapped within the pages, their untold stories safe.

So much of our history had disappeared. Most of the tales of the Old Gods had been forgotten, giving rise to the New Gods. People believed the Old Gods had turned away from us and our selfishness and didn’t warn us of the impending waves.

When the Great Waves hit, people struggled to hold on to their faith.

It wasn’t until the coral began blooming that people believed we weren’t alone. We hadn’t been abandoned by the Gods after all. Like the stars in the sky, the coral would guide us to supplies submerged below.

We could survive this new world with the remnants of the past.

My mom had believed in the Gods below, but my father hadn't. Did Dad's lack of faith cause their deaths? Did he misread the churning waters and darkening skies that became the vicious storm that destroyed their boat? But then, Elysea—

My breather let off a few frantic shrieks. *I hear you*, I thought. *But I'm not done yet.*

I arrived at the last untouched room and jimmied the door open with my diving pliers. I held my breath, not only to save diving gas but in anticipation. But I couldn't see anything inside. I snapped off a piece of coral from the door frame and swam into the room.

I let out a disappointed breath.

Bits of once-colorful material hung in threads from rusted poles, fallen from the ceiling.

A clothing shop.

Located at the back of the building, I'd hoped the room had been protected from the impact of the waves, like the bookshop had, but the shop's window faced an internal courtyard. And the glass was long gone.

I shifted old bits of clothing around in hopes of finding jewelry, trinkets, *anything*. But the Great Waves had drained all life from this room.

My breather started beeping more consistently. I had minutes left and I still needed to start my staggered ascent to avoid decompression sickness. I was going to have to buy

more diving gas and hope it didn't take too long to find another dive site.

Then something caught my eye. Something nestled within a patch of bright pink coral. Something green. A rare color, certainly down here.

I swam through the shop's missing window and glanced up. Part of the building had collapsed onto itself, sealing the courtyard within. No wonder I'd never seen it.

But that wasn't what had caught my attention.

I swam forward, my heart beating in time with the increasing beeps of my breather. *It can't be. It can't be.*

When my fingertips touched the waxy green surface, I took in a dangerously deep breath. My breather started wailing, but it barely registered.

It was a plant. A *plant*! Thank the Gods below!

My breaths came in gasps now. A plant would be worth hundreds, thousands, of Notes.

I would be ready. Ready to go to Palindromena. Ready to at last say a final goodbye, to Elysea.

My hands hovered over the plant, scared it would disintegrate at my touch.

How was this possible? Sure, some divers found plants, but most had perished in the waves. Only the crops on the few remaining islands continued to grow. Islands like Palindromena.

I pushed debris away from the plant. Something had fallen on top of it and covered most of the foliage. Something organic,

from the soft and granular feel of the debris. A tree! It must've fallen in the waves and protected the plant from decomposing.

I took in an excited breath, only to come up short. The breather's beeping had turned into a constant shriek.

I was out of air.

I shoved my fingers into the soil and dug around for the roots. *There.* I gave the plant a gentle tug, and it came up easily. A few leaves and branches snapped off. If I could get this plant to the surface intact, it would be a miracle.

A burn began to build in my chest as I pulled a transparent sleeve from my bag and wrapped it around the roots. Heat seared through me, shooting down my veins and bubbling at my lips.

*Air. I need air.*

I wouldn't be able to make it back through the shops and to the surface. I needed a quicker way out.

I glanced up. It was my only chance.

Tucking the plant under my arm, I kicked my flippers. Hard. The burn began to flame in my muscles.

*Surface. Now.*

I swam upward, reaching the blockage which had sealed in the courtyard. It was a section of plaster knocked askew from a nearby wall. I shoved the plaster with my shoulder, hoping it would give way and lead me up and into the light. This building had been good to me. Surely it wouldn't let me down. Not now.

The breather stopped beeping, no longer needing to warn

me. I was either dead or at the surface. Still, I had time. Years of diving experience had expanded my lungs. I held the small amount of oxygen in my chest. I had a few minutes left.

The plaster began to break free as I rammed into it, fragile from the hundreds of years of being submerged. I tore at the wall, until I saw the glimmer of the sun. The surface!

I swam through the opening, but there wasn't time for a steady ascent. When I made it to the surface, I would have to take a recompression pill to neutralize the bubbles that were currently forming in my muscles and bloodstream. But that was the least of my problems.

The small amount of oxygen in my lungs was gone. My lungs were done. My legs were done.

I thought of Elysea. This was how she'd felt in her final moments. All around her, blue. All around me, blue. The burn. The ache. The terror.

But no one would find me down here. There was no one left to find me. I should've stayed down with Adrei. I didn't want to die alone, like my sister had.

I kicked and kicked, but the light seemed too far away. I heaved for another breath, but there was nothing left. I spat out the breather inside my dome, defeated.

This was it, my last moments. I thought of Mom and Dad. And Elysea—even after everything she'd done. I hoped I would see them again, in whatever happens after death.

As my vision dimmed, my stubborn lungs tried one last time, heaving in a breath.

Air! I almost choked on it. Of course! A small amount of air had been used to inflate the dome.

My lungs expanded in relief. And the breath of oxygen was gone.

But it was enough.

I pushed for the surface.

# CHAPTER TWO

## LOR

*Sunday: 2:00 p.m.*

I TRIED to ignore the bodies as they watched me from their tanks. I failed. Every damn time.

I hated this place. I hated the smell. I hated the dim lighting. I hated everything it stood for. Most of all, I hated death. But I didn't hate the bodies. It wasn't their fault they'd gotten caught up in Palindromena's scheme to save the planet. They believed they held our future in their hands because it was their scientists who sustained the crops. If the crops died. We all died.

I should've been used to this place by now. I'd been working, and living, down in Palindromena's basement, the Aquarium—as other employees affectionately called it—for two years. But I'd never get used to the dead.

The island of Palindromena had been named after the facility, which was in the business of reviving the dead if only for twenty-four hours. Most people wished for a last opportunity to say goodbye to their loved ones, and Palindromena could

provide it, if you could afford the fee of three thousand Notes. Those who did fork over the Notes claimed it was worth it, but the price had always seemed like extortion to me.

I knew the other employees thought the procedure was a miracle, allowing for more time—a gift from the Gods below—but there was nothing miraculous about the revival process. In the end, death was a bastard. And he never played fair.

Then why did I choose to surround myself with the dead?

I didn't deserve to be with the living.

It was time to admit defeat and get out of bed. I'd been awake since early this morning, after a routine nightmare. After two years of the same dream, you'd think it would lessen the impact. But I always woke yelling Calen's name. There was no relief, not even in sleep. Not that I deserved it. My unconscious mind loved reminding me of what I'd done. Last night was no exception.

When I'd finally faded into the numbness of sleep around four in the morning, *that* day rose bright as a sunrise. And it was as though it were only yesterday and not two years ago.

I was out on the cliffs of Palindromena. Rock climbing was the only time I felt completely myself. A feeling of control that otherwise always felt out of reach. On a climb, I could set my own pace, path and destination. No one controlled my movements, no one set expectations. It was something that was all mine. Something I wanted. Unlike the island of Palindromena, which I felt held captive by.

My best friend Calen was not as confident a climber, but he



was always by my side, matching my movements. Sometimes he looked different—his hair short or black or brown, rather than long and blond—and sometimes I knew I was dreaming, but he was always there. In every dream. Every night.

We'd been best friends since we were young, exploring the island while our mothers worked together. While most Palindromena employees lived on the nearby Equinox, and travelled by boat each day, our families stayed at the few island cottages to keep a close watch on the facility. While Calen eventually moved to the Equinox to attend school there, I stayed behind with my mother. I'd promised my grandparents that I would look after her once they were gone. I was all she had left.

Calen would visit every weekend, often bringing across friends from the Reef to see the infamous Palindromena. And while he'd become more interested in girls and boats and parties, I wanted to conquer the island. The last remaining challenge was the Hallowed Mountain—the tallest of the island's cliffs. At an almost invert angle toward the top, climbing was strictly off limits. But that didn't deter us.

In the dream, as in real life, our friends watched from below. They called out to us as an ominous cloud circled the island.

"We should climb down," Calen said, the fear visible in his eyes.

But just as I had two years ago, I said, "We're almost there. We'll make it to the top before the storm hits."

I kept climbing, desperate to see the world beyond the

island. And Calen was tethered to me. But I was wrong.

We didn't make it.

The rain cloud broke, pummeling us with warm water. I wiped my face with the back of my hand and something salty coated my lips. I glanced down at my hands. They were coated in blood.

I looked to Calen, but the blood rain hadn't touched him. As he pulled himself up to my level, his grip slipped. Blood had coated the rock. He scrambled for a moment, trying to find a purchase, before falling. Below us, our friends screamed.

I quickly closed the rope belay to halt Calen's descent. I jerked, as the rope pulled tight, his weight nearly wrenching me from the cliff.

"Hold on!" I cried, as he dangled helplessly beside me.

He didn't respond, his face impassive, his eyes devoid of any life. That was when I realized the truth.

I was dreaming. And Calen was already dead. Still, I was desperate to change the outcome.

I tried to take in the rope and pull Calen back toward the rock's face, but my hands couldn't form a grip, they were too slick with blood.

"This is your fault," Calen said, his face still crushingly placid.

"No, no, no, no!"

But the rope went slack. And, as always, Calen was gone, falling to the rocks below and to our friends who watched on in horror.

I'd been stupid. Arrogant. Childish. Egotistical. Convinced I could climb any surface on the island. That I could conquer Palindromena. Then the world.

All it had taken was one wet slippery rock. A long fall to the ground. And one of my closest friends had died. Because of my arrogance. Because of me.

When I'd woken up, it had been relief to be back in the Aquarium. I didn't close my eyes again, knowing I would only return to that cliff.

I rolled out the tension from my shoulders and reached for a book from the shelves behind my bunk. The library had been my grandparents', when they were still alive. A vast collection from the Old World. Stories about places you could travel on foot or by rover—and not by boat. Life was different back then. It wasn't about survival. It was about living. Truly living.

This damned new life was for the dead.

For today's diversion, I selected a book on the wonders of Old World architecture and how the government instructed cities build taller structures to accommodate overcrowding. Some Old World buildings rose thousands of stories into the air. Of course, these were the first to topple in the Great Waves.

Then I began my daily routine of walking the aisles of the Aquarium to check for any leaks, my book never far from my face. There were hundreds of bodies down here, awaiting the possibility of a final farewell with their loved ones. The facility would keep the bodies for ten years, then dispose of them.

As one of the few remaining islands, space was at a premium. Palindromena couldn't house the dead forever.

Even if your loved ones couldn't afford to revive you, the facility owned your body after death. It was part of the arrangement with the Conservators of the Reefs. In exchange for providing human subjects for scientific research, the Reefs received fresh produce and vital medicine for life on the water. A fair trade, right? After all, what did you need your body for once you were dead?

As I walked the glowing aisles, I kept my eyes trained on my book, trying to avoid any movement in my periphery. While the dead wore their hair under a tight translucent cap, some strands would inevitably escape and float around their faces like seaweed. The luminous tank water was made from crushed coral, which prevented the bodies from decomposing. They bobbed up and down in the liquid, seemingly reanimated.

Worst of all were their eyes. Open, they watched with colorless irises, pupils contracted to a pinhole. As I turned a corner, one of those eyes blinked.

I stumbled backward, dropping my book and crashing into a cart of chemicals behind me. The bottles clanged and rolled onto the floor. Luckily, none shattered.

The entire basement echoed my mistake. The corpse laughed.

"Raylan!" I snapped, realizing the face belonged to someone standing behind an empty tank and not inside it. I picked up my book and shoved it into my back pocket. "What in cursed waters do you think you're doing?"

Raylan stepped out from behind the tank then doubled over in laughter. His tawny-brown skin was highlighted by the illuminated tanks, his cropped curly hair appearing a bluish black. "You should've seen your face!" He clutched his chest and bugged out his eyes in a ridiculous imitation of me. He was wearing the typical employee uniform of a beige T-shirt with the Palindromena logo of two hands cupping a leaf printed on the front. He'd added some Reef flare by looping a black cord around his neck with a giant garseal tooth dangling from it. It looked more like a weapon than jewelry and contrasted with his easy grin, which was usually at my expense.

"Playing with the dead isn't funny, Ray." But I couldn't suppress my joy at seeing him. Someone to talk to other than the deceased. Although Ray was eighteen, with only a year separating us, he seemed so much younger than me. I assumed that was the consequence of guilt and the dead as my constant companions. "Why are you screwing around down here?" I asked.

"I brought you some fish cakes," he said, holding out a small metal container as though it were some sort of peace offering. "Thought you might want to try my latest batch."

I forced myself not to snatch the container out of his hands and devour the entire contents. Ray's fish cakes were the best thing in this sodden world.

"Thank you," I said with my mouth full of fish, because I couldn't help myself. "They're amazing."

He grinned. "I made them for the party last night. You should've come."

My shoulders tensed and I swallowed roughly. “I told you, I was busy.”

“Busy? Doing what?”

“Doing what I always do: guarding the basement.” I hated lying to him, but I couldn’t tell him why I was down here. My friends had seen everything that day. *I’d* forced Calen to climb that mountain, and didn’t listen when he wanted to go climb down. While my subconscious mind liked to add some gory details, my dreams were annoyingly accurate. I often wondered if the memory would ever fade, or if I’d be forced to relive that day for the rest of my life.

While I couldn’t hide from what happened, I *could* hide from everyone who knew me. So I’d disappeared from the world.

Ray studied me for a moment before asking, “Why don’t they ever let you have a night off? I know the Director can be intimidating, but I’m sure she’d understand. You need a life outside this place.”

But that was exactly the point of being down here. I couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—leave the Aquarium. I didn’t deserve to have a life beyond this damp, dim basement. I didn’t deserve to enjoy the world outside when I’d stolen it from Calen. In truth, I also didn’t deserve Ray’s friendship, even though I couldn’t seem to push him away.

When he’d first come down to the Aquarium six months ago, he’d been looking for somewhere to hide out after his first revival. The grief of the patient’s family had been too much for him. While my initial instinct had been to ignore Ray, I’d

found myself stepping out of the shadows to console him. I told him it was this place, it drew death toward us like the tide to the shore. And all we could do was wait for tomorrow, and hope it would be brighter.

Ironical, considering I would never allow myself to leave the basement. Living down here, away from—*almost*—everyone, was my penance.

"I have a life," I said, finally. "And I need the money." It was a thin excuse, and not at all true, but I hoped he'd accept it. As he usually did.

"For what? More Old World books? I think you've got those covered." He chuckled. "*Covered*, get it?"

"That's not funny." Although I smiled. It was impossible not to when Ray was around.

He slapped my bare forearm. "You're so pale you're beginning to look like them!" He was from one of the Reefs—the Equinox—and his ochre-brown skin had further deepened from years on the water.

"Thanks for the support, Ray." I'd heard that from him before. *As pale as a corpse*. Or my favorite: *wearing the skin of the dead*.

His smile faded. Had I kept him at a distance for too long? After all, we'd been friends for six months; eventually my evasiveness was going to wear thin. So I said, "Maybe next time." Even though that could never happen.

"Great!" Luckily, he was easy to appease. I worried about the day he would push for more answers.

“So how was the party?” I asked, changing the subject.

“The best.” He beamed. Whenever he spoke about the Equinox, he got that look on his face. “I met this really cute guy. You should’ve come! There were lots of nice girls there.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, noncommittally. I wasn’t even sure I’d remember how to talk to a girl, let alone flirt with one.

Ray followed behind me, his footsteps heavy as he shuffled along behind me. A few years ago, he’d been in an accident. Two angling boats had collided, and his left foot had been caught between them, shattering the bones in his ankle. While he got around well enough, I’d often see him grimacing in pain at the end of a long day.

“You doing okay?” I asked.

“Me?” He gave me his trade-mark grin, the gap flashing between his front teeth. “I’m always good, bud.”

While I knew he didn’t like talking about his accident, I hated seeing him in pain. Not the pain of his injury, but losing the one thing that made him who he was.

Ray’s passion for the ocean could be traced back to his ancestors who were seafarers even before the Great Waves. Ray used to be a spear-fisherman, spending more hours deep below the surface than above it. But he didn’t want to go back into the ocean after his accident, knowing he wouldn’t be able to swim as he once did. He needed the balance of two strong feet to work deep-sea flippers, or so he’d told me. And for that, he would have to heal the damaged tendons in his foot, and the best place to research healing was Palindromena.



But while scientists had found a way to heal the injuries of the dead, it wasn't permanent; the tissue would return to its previous state after only twenty-four hours. Ray spent most of his free time helping out in the medical division, hoping to find a way to also heal the living.

"Who was your client today?" I asked, changing the topic.

"A really nice lady," Ray said fondly. Despite being constantly surrounded by death, he still empathized with the clients and patients. I wondered if that would fade, in time. A common consequence of working in this place was that you began to see death as something ordinary—something that happened every day. Something that didn't destroy families and futures.

"And the revived?"

"Her son." This time his voice was definitely soft. "Died of crystal lung."

"The mother wanted me there with her at the end."

"Really?" Usually the clients wanted to be alone with their revived loved ones.

"I explained that wasn't the way it worked. We don't want patients to realize what's happening. And you know I don't like being around the revived." He made a face. "It creeps me out."

I raised my eyebrow. "How many times do I have to tell you that the revived don't smell? They're alive, completely. For twenty-four hours." Until they weren't.

"They smell different to me." He tapped his nose. "My mother says I have a sense for these things."

“Your mother is afraid of her own shadow.”

He held a finger up, opened his mouth to argue, then said, “Fair point.”

Ray had told me that his mother still believed in the Old Gods. She hated Palindromena and how they used the dead for money. She had visited just after Ray started here, begging him to quit his job and return to the Equinox. But she’d spent only an hour on the island before retreating to her boat. She claimed the whole place reeked of death. It was probably the smell of the crops she found so unfamiliar.

Still, she wasn’t wrong. This island was death, and death was this island. They couldn’t be separated from each other.

I didn’t believe in the Gods below or the Old Gods. It was a waste of time. We determined our own fate. No one knew that better than I did.

“So while I’m here . . .” Ray cleared his throat. “I need to ask you a favor.”

“No,” I said, without looking at him.

“Oh, come on!” He slung an arm around my shoulder. He had to stand on his toes to reach. “It’s an easy favor, bud.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” From what Ray told me, he was always getting into trouble. His casual honesty went against Palindromena’s penchants for secrets.

“It is. I swear on the Gods below.” The cockiness had leached from his voice. His open face was surprisingly cautious.

He was worried about my reaction. This couldn’t be good.

“Come on, then,” I said. “Out with it.”

His eyes darted to the furnace behind me. We'd found ourselves at the back of the Aquarium, where the previously revived bodies were stored before being buried at the temple at the bottom of the sea. With little land left, it was an honor to be buried there, but few could afford the price the facility set, which created a divide between the people who lived on the Reefs and the workers on the isle who could afford it.

The dead couldn't be revived a second time; their hearts couldn't take it. If relatives couldn't afford to move their loved ones to the temple, they would be destroyed in the furnace. Luckily, that wasn't part of my job description. Nessandra, the Director of Palindromena, took care of body disposal.

"Umm," Ray said, his eyes landing on everywhere but me. "I have a client tomorrow—"

"Absolutely not." I jammed my hands into my pants pockets, putting two and two together.

"Come ooonnnn. It's just one client. One measly client. All you have to do is babysit. It's easy. Everything is automated." He grinned and tapped the screen on the metal echolink on his wrist. The technology of a Warden: it tracked a patients' revival. I hated the sight of them.

"Great, then you can do it tomorrow." I started walking again.

Ray stumbled. "I need you to welcome the client, make sure they're calm and—"

"I do tank maintenance, I'm not a Warden. And you know it's against the rules." As a Warden, you were responsible for

the patient for the duration of their revival. You were to ensure they didn't realize they were once dead or leave the facility. Working at Palindromena was a coveted position, as you would earn five times more than any other profession. But the job came with a steep price. Which Ray was well aware of as a trainee Warden. "I can't believe you're even asking me this. Nessandra would have your head."

"We don't have to tell the Director," he said, softly.

Nessandra, or the Queen of Death, as the employees called her, had strict rules to protect her company from any critics on the Reefs. Aside from Ray, she was the only person who knew I was down here. I couldn't jeopardize my one refuge.

"No." I faced death enough down here, I wouldn't see it up close as a Warden. What Palindromena was doing was wrong. They masqueraded as a company that cared about your loss. But they didn't. Your grief was merely a means to a profitable end. And everyone paid the price. The dead *and* the living.

"*Please, Lor,*" Ray said, his voice low, imploring.

I stopped walking and turned. It wasn't often Ray was serious. "What's going on?"

His brow furrowed. "A doctor is visiting the Equinox from the Northern Reefs. I booked an appointment with her weeks ago." He took a breath. "She specializes in rehabilitation."

I glanced at his left foot. Before coming to Palindromena, Ray had seen every doctor within two thousand miles. No one had a solution. And while Ray was hopeful he could heal

his foot here, this was the first time he had mentioned *rehab*, rather than researching a remedy. Was he preparing to move on? Did he realize there was another future out there for him, that he didn't have to be stuck in the past? He didn't have to be like me?

"I wasn't supposed to be rostered tomorrow," he said, "but a revival was just booked in. I'm the most suitable, as I'm a similar age to the client and all the other young Wardens are busy. You know I wouldn't ask if I didn't have to, but I'm already in deep shit with the Director. I can't lose my position here."

Part of the mystery to Palindromena was intentional. Scientists wanted the process to seem mystical and blessed by the Gods below. Last week, Ray had been put on probation for telling a client that if you took a body out of the tanks for more than a few hours without being revived, then it would start to decompose and liquify in front of your eyes. The more years since their death, the quicker the decomposition; something I'd once told him in passing. Raylan hadn't meant to scare the client, but his loose lips had lost Nessandra a precious customer. Many people on the Equinox already didn't trust Palindromena. And word of mouth was everything. They had to feel their deceased loved ones were safe here, and that their taxes were being well spent.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I can't leave my post." For years, Calen had been my one connection to the world outside the island. Now he was dead, it was like that world no longer existed.

Ray was the only reminder of what lay outside the basement walls.

"Please." He pressed his palms together, almost in prayer. "It's twenty-four hours and then you can return to this dingy basement and hide away from life."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I'm not hiding."

"Really? Then why don't you ever leave the Aquarium?" There was a challenge in his voice.

I'd always thought I'd fooled him. Perhaps I didn't give him enough credit.

"Of course I leave." I forced a laugh. "I leave all the time. Don't be ridiculous."

"Lor," he said slowly, carefully, "I've seen your bunk in the back."

I wanted to snap at him, to tell him to get out. Tell him that he was wrong. I didn't live down here. I should push him away. But I faltered, the lies not forming.

"I won't tell anyone," he said quickly, realizing my fear. "I'll keep your secret. I understand if you don't want to talk about it."

I huffed. He didn't understand at all. How could he? I'd spent the last six months lying to him—my friend. A friend who was asking for my help.

I could see the desperation behind his eyes as his chance to see this doctor was slipping away. I knew what it felt like to be haunted by your past. I wish I could free him of it.

I should have said no. Never seen Ray again.

But the thought of a silent future that stretched out for years and years burrowed a cavernous hole within me. I needed something to hold on to. And that was Ray.

If I showed him that I could leave the Aquarium, perhaps I could keep our friendship, for a little while longer. I knew I couldn't keep up this charade forever, but at least I would have tomorrow.

"Fine," I said. "I'll cover for you. Just this once."

His face lit up. "Seriously?"

I nodded like it was nothing. Like stepping out of this self-imposed prison wasn't an insult to Calen's memory. When he died, I'd promised to never forget him. And that I would pay for taking his life.

"Thank you!" Ray slapped my back. "Just pretend to be me for twenty-four hours. Your job as a Warden is to guide the client through the revival process and be there in case anything goes wrong. And it won't. Smooth sailing, bud. Smooth sailing."

Only time would tell if I'd live to regret this.

# CHAPTER THREE

## TEMPEST

*Monday: 10:00 a.m.*

*Two hours before revival*

I STILL COULDN'T BELIEVE my plant had been acquired by the Equinox Conservators for a staggering four thousand Notes. Normally, I had to beg someone to take my found goods off my hands. Soggy books, shards of plates, shreds of material—none of that was worth much. But a plant . . . A plant was everything. It was worth more than I'd managed to cobble together in the past five years combined. Elysea would've been proud.

While I didn't think the plant would produce anything edible, it meant something had survived down there. It would give the Conservators hope. While the crops on Palindromena fed the nearby Reefs, including the Equinox, there wasn't enough to feed the growing populations. We needed to find an alternative food source. And if plants could live underwater, then we wouldn't be tied to the island of Palindromena.

The Equinox had been struggling for years now. While we



were the closest Reef to Palindromena, we needed something to trade for food. All the nearby dive sites had been pillaged dry. In the next few years we'd only be living off fish and seaweed hauled from the deep. Adequate, but not very satisfying. Not compared to the Reefs farther south, which still had sunken cities at their fingertips, allowing them to pay for root vegetables, rice, fruit and herbs. All grown on Palindromena.

I wasn't sure how the Equinox would survive into the next decade. But that wasn't my problem. At least, not right now.

When I'd brought the plant to the midday auction yesterday, the Equinox Conservators were elated. They peppered me with questions.

*Did you find more land?*

No.

*Where did you find the plant?*

Trapped beneath a sunken building.

*Are there more plants?*

No.

*Take us there. Now!*

Okay, so they weren't all questions.

I gave them the coordinates of the dive site, knowing I had no need to return.

While the citizens of the Equinox were expected to do the physical work, if there was anything ever *truly* valuable, then the Conservators would shut down the site and send in their own team to ensure proper care was taken in an object's retrieval. My building would be crawling with conservation

divers within the hour. Not that there was anything left to find.

I wished my little plant well when I handed it over. While the waxy green plant should mean more to me than the dyed woven sheets of seaweed in my hand, they didn't. Notes were all that mattered now.

Most of the Notes would go toward reviving Elysea. Every decision I'd made in the last two years was about reviving my dead sister. I wasn't sure who I'd be once I left the memory of her behind. I wasn't sure who I *wanted* to be.

I shook my head. I'd worry about tomorrow later. Today, I had a date with Palindromena.

I hadn't slept at all last night. My body was fueled by anticipation. I was going to see Elysea again. I'd finally get the truth about my parents.

Once back in my quarters, I tipped the Notes from my bag onto the bed. I counted three thousand Notes and shoved them into my clam jewelry box. I flittered my fingers across the remaining one thousand. No more scavenging for moldy seaweed and fish scraps from the canteen's trash.

I placed the jewelry box into my oilskin bag and took one more look around the room. I may have removed most of Elysea's personal belongings, but she was still frustratingly present. She'd painted the rusted metal walls a green with seaweed paste, to remind us of the times when there were whole forests and not a few trees left on the remaining islands. Of a time when there had been fields of flowers. But that was centuries

ago. Blue was our reality now. Water our home. Green had disappeared into its depths. Or so I'd thought, until I'd found that plant.

Even the way the glasses were positioned on the narrow metal shelves reminded me of her. She was always reprimanding me for placing the cups right-side-up, claiming her prized coffee tasted salty from the dust in the air. If the cups were placed upside down, salt-dust couldn't collect in them.

I hadn't understood the issue. Why was salty coffee bad? Everything in our world was not only awash in blue, but crystallized in salt. Everything was crunchy, crusty, dry, hard. Our mother had taught us to shake the crystal dust from our blankets each evening before climbing into bed, although you couldn't prevent the salt from lining your lips overnight and gluing your eyelids shut.

Now, I grabbed her favorite shell mug and flipped it so salt could collect in the glass. Elysea wasn't ever coming back to reprimand me. No one was.

I left my quarters and headed toward the crowded harbor.

The sun was high in the sky, and the air was already thick with humidity and salt, like breathing through a wet blanket. My lungs dragged, feeling dull and heavy like holding your breath underwater. I brushed tendrils of dry black briny hair behind my ears.

I walked along one of the rusty gangplanks that was once the skeleton of an Old World building. After the Great Waves, survivors from all over the world congregated on the

few remaining islands, uniting various cultures. But they soon realized that the land was best saved for growing crops, and so the Reefs were built from bits and pieces of sunken Old World cities hauled from below. Now, large anchors tethered the floating metal structure to the land my ancestors once called home.

Around fifteen thousand Reefs existed today with each zoned to the closest island in a five-hundred-mile radius. Anything beyond that was too far for crops to travel before they perished. And the Equinox was the biggest Reef of its kind, home to over ten thousand people.

I passed by the center of the Equinox; a circular building that housed the Conservators' hall on the bottom floor with an atrium for the communal canteen above it. On the roof sat a towering lightning rod, which generated power for the turbines beneath the Equinox—our only form of electricity. Branching off from the main building were several sprawling residential arms, each cluttered with metal houses. The houses had curved roofs like the back of a spoon, to aid in the collection of rainwater, used for drinking and washing.

Kids, younger than school-age, were dotted along the edge of the gangways that crisscrossed between the residential arms, fishing rods dangling from their small hands. They'd be lucky if they caught a minuscule sugarcod. You had to leave the harbor to catch anything decent; the fish were afraid of the whine of the turbines.

All the older kids attended the composite Equinox school—

an open-air classroom bolted onto the side of the Conservator hall. The classroom was packed; you could hardly see the metal grate the children were sitting on. I overheard the teacher mention the name *Ilani* as I walked by. The Ice Nation.

My ancestors had once lived close to Ilani, and it was, therefore, one of the first lands to be submerged. Before then, the Old World had been on the brink of war, with land at a premium and every nation grossly overpopulated. The only untouched land was locked beneath a slab of ice—Ilani—and it had once covered more than a third of the planet.

The governments all came to an agreement to unlock the land to end the global population and resource crisis. Their plan had been to defrost a portion of the land, but the flare bomb had been too effective. The ice of Ilani melted entirely, raising the ocean globally and killing billions.

Some people could say the governments got exactly what they wanted in reducing the population. But I wouldn't dare insult the dead by saying such things.

When I was at school, I saw pictures of the land my ancestors once lived on, and it was difficult to grasp something so vast and dry. Different regions had existed across the enormous continent with millions upon millions of buildings cluttering its surface.

Now there was nothing left of that land, aside from the fifty new islands that had been created when the Great Waves struck. They were once mountains, or cliffs, which had managed to keep their heads above water. Most islands were now

owned by private research facilities—in hope of finding a way to prolong our life upon this waterlogged world.

One such island was Palindromena—my destination for the day.

I'd grown up a child of Palindromena employees; my dad had been Head Warden, who managed the revival program, and my mom had been the lead botanist, tending to the few crops left to feed this part of the world. Even though my parents had worked there, neither my mom nor my dad would speak about their work in any detail. Mom used to tell me not to dwell on death and only think of the light, placing a flower behind my ear—a flower she had pulled from the fields on Palindromena.

Not long after, she had died in a storm along with my father. And Elysea had drowned three years later. I wished Mom had told me more about the place I was soon to visit. It might have quelled the panic spiking up my spine.

The *Sunrise* stood out among the hundreds of moored boats in the harbor. While most vessels were made from scraps of land vehicles from the Old World, the *Sunrise* was sleek and shiny. An expensive boat provided by Palindromena. A parting gift from my dead parents. They'd been on our old dive boat the night they were caught in a storm and thrown into the side of the Equinox. I wouldn't dare disrespect them by saying I was lucky they'd taken the older boat. I didn't believe in luck, I believed in the Gods below and what they determined for my future. Why they had chosen to take my parents *and* my sister, I wasn't sure.

Today, I hoped to find that out.

While I had sold everything belonging to my family, I couldn't bear to part with the *Sunrise*. Too many memories were attached to this boat, like the barnacles that clung to its belly. When we were young, my parents took my sister and me out at sunset to watch the silvery garseals leap through the air. And after my parents died, Elysea and I spent our days with our feet dangling in the water, imagining a different life. A better one.

Letting go of the *Sunrise* would sever all ties with my past. I needed the *Sunrise's* steady pulse beneath my feet, like a heartbeat.

I climbed onto the boat's deck and started the engine. The *Sunrise*, like most vessels, ran on solar power. As I left the dock, a vibration was automatically sent through the waves—a signal that would transmit to the Watchtower. No one entered or left the Equinox undetected.

"Equinox Watchtower," a woman's smooth voice called over the transmitter before I had even shifted from the dock. "Equinox Watchtower to pier B20. Acknowledge."

"This is Quicksilver *Sunrise*," I said. "I acknowledge."

The watchtower tracked the coming and goings of boats, ensuring the weight of the floating metal island could support ten thousand people. Weight restrictions needed to be upheld, down to how many fish were farmed each day and how many children a family could have. The Conservators wouldn't risk sinking the Equinox to the bottom of the ocean like the buildings of the past.

If a family had more than two children, they had a choice: try to survive on their own, untethered to any Reef. Or hope another Reef accepted new residents. Either way, they had to leave the Equinox.

“What is your destination today, *Sunrise*?” she asked.

“Palindromena,” I said with a heavy sigh. I waited for her response. Most people on the Equinox either disliked or feared the facility. While they needed the island’s produce and medical supplies, like recompression pills, they thought bringing back the dead was against the Gods’ wishes. Both Old and New. But unless we learned how to grow crops underwater, those on land held all the power.

“Right.” Her voice was curt. I was just another person giving Palindromena exactly what they wanted. More money. And a further hold on the Equinox’s future. “What time will you return?”

“Before tomorrow evening.”

“The time is noted,” the woman said. “We will expect you then.”

She didn’t have to say it. If I failed to return on time, no one would come looking for me. If my boat was snagged in a storm, if I was thrown into swirling waters, if I found myself caught between a creature’s teeth, that was not their problem. Many people disappeared in the waves as they searched to improve their lives. The ocean between the Reefs was unpredictable, with storms looming on nearly every horizon. It was easy to meet a watery end.



There were also the stories of something *other*. Something in the water whose hunger couldn't be satisfied. But they were merely stories. The sea was dangerous enough on its own; it didn't need the creative minds of those half drunk on ragar at the Spring Tide to fashion new reasons to fear the ocean.

If I didn't return to the Equinox tomorrow night, my death would be noted, my belongings seized and my rooms reasigned to someone else. No one would bat an eyelid. In fact, the Conservators would see it as further proof that you shouldn't engage in Palindromena's services.

"Acknowledged," I said to the Watchtower.

"Sail away, then, *Sunrise*."

Once I cleared the moored boats within the harbor, I looked back to the Equinox. The numerous suspended residential arms that connected to the circular Conservator hall made the structure look like the body of a sea creature with long reaching tentacles. Even with its enormous anchors, there was a subtle sway to the floating city.

South of the Equinox, I could see a line of blinking silver buoys that comprised Palindromena's sonar perimeter and ran their territory's boundary. While other islands used tracking systems to monitor boat activity, Palindromena used theirs to detain any vessels that crossed from other regions. In the decades before the perimeter, boats would travel to Palindromena, ambush the workers and steal crops for themselves. Since then, Palindromena enforced a law that only facility-built boats with embedded sensors could journey through

their demarcation line; any other vessels would be met with their weaponized fleet.

Beyond the silver buoys lay the only ungoverned passage of ocean called the Untied Sea. Ruled by Remorans, ruthless nomads who ransacked boats for parts and left a trail of sunken boats in their wake, you'd have to be incredibly desperate or stupid to cross it.

I turned back to the direction of Palindromena. The striking island could be glimpsed through the salty haze. Four sheer cliff faces punched up from the water like determined fingers, as if the land had reached for the sky with its final breath. In its "palm" were the crops that fed all the nearby Reefs. Mom used to talk about *her* plants for hours, as though they were her children. How they each needed different amounts of water, sunlight and feed. When I was little, I wanted to be a botanist like her. I liked the idea of bringing something new into the world.

I gritted my teeth and swallowed down the memory. Today I would have my answers. I would find out what happened to my parents.

I couldn't help but wonder if somehow Elysea knew I was coming, and whether she sensed my fury.