

HUMAN VOICES WAKE US,  
AND WE DROWN

# ATLANTIA



ALLY  
CONDIE

AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

MATCHED

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Also by Ally Condie:

*Matched*

*Crossed*

*Reached*

# ATLANTIA

*A Novel*

ALLY  
CONDIE

DUTTON BOOKS

AN IMPRINT OF PENGUIN GROUP (USA) LLC

DUTTON BOOKS  
Published by the Penguin Group

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Penguin Group (USA) LLC  
375 Hudson Street  
New York, New York 10014



USA \* Canada \* UK \* Ireland \* Australia  
New Zealand \* India \* South Africa \* China

[penguin.com](http://penguin.com)

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Condie, Allyson Braithwaite.  
Atlantia : a novel / by Ally Condie.  
pages cm

Summary: "Rio has always dreamed of leaving the underwater city of Atlantia for life in the Above; however, when her twin sister Bay, makes an unexpected decision, Rio is left stranded below where she must find a way to unlock the secrets of the siren voice she has long hidden and save Atlantia from destruction"— Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-698-13560-4

[1. Fantasy. 2. Twins—Fiction. 3. Sisters—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.C7586At 2014  
[Fic]--dc23 2014020665

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Version\_1

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*For Truman, who is a creator and a maker*

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# CHAPTER

My twin sister, Bay, and I pass underneath the brown-and-turquoise banners hanging from the ceiling of the temple. Dignitaries perch on their chairs in the gallery, watching, and people crowd the pews in the nave. Statues of the gods adorn the walls and ceiling, and it seems as if they watch us, too. The temple's largest and most beautiful window, the rose window, has been lit from behind to simulate the effect of sunlight through the panes. The glass shines like a blessing—amber, green, blue, pink, purple. The colors of flower petals Above, of coral formations Below.

The Minister stands at the altar, which is made of precious wood carved in an intricate pattern of straight lines and swirls, of waves that turn into trees. Two bowls rest on top of the altar—one filled with salt water from the ocean that envelops our city, one filled with dark dirt brought down from Above.

Bay and I wait in line with the other youth our age. I feel sorry for everyone else because they don't have a brother or a sister to wait with them. Twins aren't very common in Atlantia.

"*Do you hear the city breathing?*" Bay whispers. I know she wants me to say that I do, but I shake my head. What we hear isn't breathing. It is the never-ending sound of air pumping through the walls and out into the city so that we can survive.

Bay knows that, but she's always been a little crazy about Atlantia. She's not the only one who loves our underwater city or refers to it as alive. And Atlantia does resemble a giant sea creature sprawled out in the ocean. The tentacles of our streets and thoroughfares web out from the larger round hubs of the neighborhoods and marketplaces. Everything is enclosed, of course. We live underwater, but we're still human; we need walls and air to protect us.

The Minister raises his hand, and we all fall silent.

Bay presses her lips together. She is usually calm and serene, but today she seems tense. Is she afraid that I'll go back on my word? I won't. I promised her.

We stand side by side and hand in hand, our brown hair threaded with blue ribbons and braided in intricate plaits. We both have blue eyes. We are both tall and carry ourselves the same way. But we're fraternal twins, not identical, and no one has ever had any trouble telling us apart.

Though Bay and I are not mirrors of each other, we're still as near to the same person as two

completely different people can be. We have always been close, and since my mother's death, we have drawn even more tightly together.

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"Today will be hard," Bay says.

I nod. *Today will be hard*, I think, *because I won't be doing what I always wanted to do*. But I know that's not what Bay means.

"Because it used to be her," I say.

Bay nods.

Before my mother died six months ago, *she* was the Minister of the temple and she presided over this ceremony, one of several held to mark the anniversary of the Divide. Bay and I watched each year as our mother gave the opening speech and blessed the youth of the year with water or dirt, depending on what each person chose.

"Do you think Maire is here?" Bay asks.

"No," I say. Bay is referring to our aunt, our only living relative. I keep my voice flat but use the most cutting words I can. "She doesn't belong here." The temple is our mother's place, and she and her sister, Maire, were estranged for as long as I can remember. Although, when my mother died—  
*Don't think about it.*

The Minister begins the ritual, and I close my eyes and picture my mother conducting this service instead. In my mind, she stands straight and small behind the altar. She wears her brown-and-blue robes and the Minister's insignia, the silver necklace that mimics the carving on the pulpit. She opens her arms wide, and it makes her look like one of the rays that swim through the sea gardens sometimes.

"What are the gifts given to we who live Below?" the new Minister asks.

*"Long life, health, strength, and happiness."* I chant the words with everyone else, but, for my family, at least, the first part has not been true. Both of my parents died young—my father of a disease called water-lung back when Bay and I were babies, and my mother more recently. Of course, they still lived longer than they would have Above, but their lives were far shorter than most of the people who live in Atlantia.

Then again, our family has never been like most families in Atlantia. It used to be that we were different in ways that made people turn green with jealousy, but lately Bay and I are different in ways that make people pity us. Their envy has been washed away by our misfortunes. Bay and I used to walk the halls of the temple school and everyone respected us, because we were the daughters of Oceana, the Minister. Now we are objects of pity, the orphaned children of parents who died too soon.

"What is the curse of those who live Above?" the Minister asks.

*"Short life, illness, weakness, and misery."*

Bay squeezes my hand, comforting me. She knows that I'm going to keep my promise, and that in doing so I'll have to make a choice opposite to the one I'd always planned.

"Is this fair?"

*"It is fair. It is as the gods decreed at the time of the Divide. Some have to stay Above so that humanity might survive Below."*

"Then give thanks."

*"Thanks to the gods for the sea where we live, for the air we breathe, for our lives in the Below."*

"And have mercy on us."

*"And on those who live Above."*

"This," the Minister says, "is the way the gods have decreed it must be since the Divide took place. The air was polluted, and people could no longer survive for long Above. To save humanity, they built Atlantia. Many chose to stay Above so that their loved ones could live Below.

"Those of us underwater in the Below have long, beautiful lives. We work hard, but not nearly as



hard as those on land. We have time for leisure. We don't have to breathe ruined air or have cancer in our lungs.

---

“Those Above work all their lives to support us Below. Their lungs decay, and their bodies feel tremendous pain. But they will be rewarded later, in the life after this one.

“The choice to save our world in this way was made by the gods and by our ancestors. We accept their choice every day of our lives, except for today, when we make our own. Though we believe the gods have sent us Below for a reason, we also have the chance to go Above if we wish, to dedicate our lives to sacrifice.”

The Minister has finished the speech. I open my eyes.

The new Minister is a tall man named Nevio. I still haven't gotten used to seeing the Minister's insignia hanging around his neck. I still think of it as belonging to my mother.

*Why would anyone choose to go Above if you die so young and have to work so hard?* the children of the Below used to ask each other when we were smaller. And I never answered, but I kept a long list at home of all the reasons I could think of to go Above. *You could see the stars. You could feel the sun on your face. You could touch a tree that had roots in the ground. You could walk for miles and never come across the edge of your world.*

“Come forward,” Nevio says to the first person.

“I accept my fate Below,” the girl says. A murmur of approval goes up from the crowd. For all the grand speeches about the virtue of sacrifice, the people of Atlantia like it when the youth validate their own choice to stay Below. Nevio the Minister nods and dips his fingers into the bowl of seawater and sprinkles it over the girl, speckling her face with drops too small to be tears. I wonder if it stings.

The first person to choose the Above is surrounded by the peacekeepers and swept away to a secure location. There is no opportunity to say good-bye to friends and family. Once the ceremony concludes the peacekeepers load everyone who has chosen the Above onto a transport and send them up to the surface. The finality of the decision always appealed to me—no loose ends, only leaving. I knew it would be hard to see my mother's face when I made my choice, but she would have Bay. They wouldn't be alone, and I would—at last—be Above.

But when my mother died, everything changed.

Another boy goes up for his turn. I know him by sight—Fen Cardiff, handsome and charismatic, with blond hair and dangerous, laughing eyes. There's an irreverent, ironic note in his voice even as he speaks the sacred words. “I choose sacrifice in the Above.”

I think I hear a woman cry out. She sounds surprised and wounded. His mother? Didn't he tell her what he was going to choose? He doesn't glance up into the stands—instead, he turns around to look back at the rest of us in line, as if searching for something or someone.

In the moment before the peacekeepers take him away, I find myself staring right into his eyes, eyes that will soon see the Above. I am so jealous of him I can hardly breathe. But I promised Bay I wouldn't do it, that I'd stay here with her. My palms feel sweaty. *I promised Bay.*

She is the only person I've ever told that I want to go Above. That I dream about it every night, that when I see the immense glass jar of dirt on the altar in the temple I can picture exactly how it would feel to touch it and smell it, to have it under my feet and all around. And in the years before my mother died, Bay promised that, when the time came, she'd let me go. She herself couldn't bear to leave Atlantia—she loved the city and my mother too much—but Bay assured me that she would keep my wish a secret so that no one could try to stop me. Once I declared it in front of the crowd at the temple, my mother would have no choice but to let me leave. Even the Minister and the Council cannot override the decision of each individual person regarding the Above and the Below.

I love my mother and my sister but, for as long as I can remember, I've always known that I need to see the Above.

*But I can't go.*

On the day my mother died, Bay cried so much that the water from her tears streamed down into her hair, and I had the fleeting thought that my sister might turn into a mermaid, with seaweed hair and salt always on her face. "Promise me," she said when she could finally speak, "that you won't leave me alone."

I knew Bay was right. I couldn't leave her, now that my mother was gone. "*I promise,*" I whispered to Bay.

The only way for Bay and me to stay together is to remain Below. While we can both choose to stay, both of us cannot choose to go because we are the only two children in our family. One person from each gene line must always remain in Atlantia.

A few more people, and it's my turn.

Nevio the Minister knows me, of course, but his expression when I come to the front remains impassive, the way it has for everyone else. My mother would have been the same way—she was always different in her Minister robes, more removed and regal. But would she have kept her composure if I'd said I wanted to go Above?

I will never know.

The salt water is in a blue bowl; the dirt in a brown one. I close my eyes and will myself to speak the right voice—the flat, false one my mother always insisted that I use, the one that hides the curse and gift that is my real voice.

"I accept my fate Below," I say.

The Minister flecks salt water onto my face, blessing me, and it is done.

I turn back to watch Bay come past the altar. She is moments younger than I am, or she would have gone first. Watching my sister is a bit like watching myself make the choice. The processed air of the temple moves over us as if Atlantia truly breathes.

Bay has a soft voice, but I have no trouble hearing her.

"I choose sacrifice in the Above," she says.

*No. Bay. She said the wrong line. She was nervous and made a mistake.*

I move to help her. There must be a way—

"Wait," I say. "Bay." I look at Nevio the Minister to see if he can stop this, but he stares at Bay, an expression of surprise flickering across his face. It's only a moment that I glance at him, but it's too long. Peacekeepers surround Bay, as they have the others who chose the Above.

"Wait." No one hears me or pays attention. That's the purpose of the voice I use.

"Bay," I say again, and this time there's a tiny hint of my real voice in my tone, and so she turns to look at me, almost as if in spite of herself.

I am stunned at the sadness in her eyes, but not as much as I am at the purpose I see there.

She meant to do this.

In the seconds that it takes to wrap my mind around the impossible—*This is no mistake, Bay wants to leave*—they pull my sister out of reach.

I push through the crowd quickly and quietly, trying not to cause a scene because a scene will be stopped. The priests all know me, and they know that Bay and I are inseparable. Already some of them move in my direction to block my path, sympathetic expressions on their faces.

*Why would Bay do this?*

Justus, one of the kinder priests, comes closer and reaches out to me.

"No," I say, my real voice, my real pain and anger cutting and coming out, and Justus drops his arm down to his side. I look up and see his face—shocked, stunned, slapped with the sound of me speaking.

I've done what I always promised I wouldn't. I've used my true voice in public. And it is as my

mother always warned me it would be—there's no way to take it back. I can't bear to look at the horror on Justus's face. Justus, who has known me all my life. I don't dare glance back at the crowd to see who else has heard.

Though my feet are firmly on the ground of Atlantia, I'm dissolving.

*My sister's gone.*

She decided to go Above.

*She would never do this.*

She did.

Bay asked me if I heard the city breathing.

I hear my own breathing now, in and out and in and out. I live here. I will die here.

I am never going to leave.

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## CHAPTER 1

Down in the deepmarket, the sellers call out, nudging their carts into people's backs and bodies to get attention.

"Pure air!" someone shouts. "All flavors and scents. Cinnamon, cayenne, rose! Cedar, lilac, saffron!"

"Something new to wear!" another cries. There are shops up closer to the surface, near the temple but down here the wares are much more varied—a jumbled flotsam and jetsam of junk and treasures. The goods are tumbled out in carts and stalls instead of arranged precisely behind glass windows. The selling stalls are dilapidated but utilitarian, pieced together out of old metal pilings and plastic slats.

Bay and I used to go everywhere together, and, after the temple, the deepmarket was the place we came most often after our mother died. I haven't found any clues in the temple as to why Bay left, so I've come here to look for something. Anything. A message. A note. Any sign from her at all.

After the peacekeepers released me on the day Bay left, I went back to the room the two of us shared and tore it apart.

I had to find *something* that could explain what she'd done. *Maybe, I thought, there would be a letter, labeled in her neat handwriting, explaining everything, bringing her motives to light.*

I turned out the pockets of all of her clothes. I pulled off the bedspread, blankets, and sheets from her bed, heaved the mattress from the springs and looked underneath. I went through all of my own belongings, just in case. I even steeled myself and opened the box in the closet where we kept the last of my mother's things, but everything was exactly as it had been when we packed it away. No note.

Nothing.

To go so suddenly, without any explanation, was cruel, and Bay was never cruel. She could be annoyed and sharp when she was tired or under stress. But those qualities in her were never as strong as they were in me—she was the gentler sister, quicker to laugh, certainly better suited to follow in my mother's footsteps. I never resented it when people said that, because I knew it was true.

In the days since Bay left, I've done everything I can think of to get to her. I fought through the crowd at the temple until the peacekeepers pulled me back and put me in a holding area with other family members who'd shown signs of causing a scene. After they released us, I went to see the

transport go to the surface, but of course it had already left. I stood there, trying to think of a way to follow, but the Council keeps a close watch on the transports and the locks that take them up. That is the only safe way for the living to go Above. Most of the transports are not pressurized for human survival. They're meant for the transfer of goods and food between the Above and the Below.

And even in my most desperate imaginings, I know the Council won't let me join my sister Above. They'll never permit me to go and I can't think of a viable way to escape.

As I walk past a stall in the deepmarket, I see brocades embroidered by someone well-skilled, and almost reach out to touch the fabric, to linger looking over the designs. But I keep moving, pacing the length of the market way, leaving behind the crawl of stalls and coming out into the area at the edge of the deepmarket where the races take place.

In spite of the crush of people, it gets very cold in the deepmarket. The market's hours are limited. Closing time coincides with the dimming time in order to conserve the energy it takes to heat this part of the city and keep the air going. We are deep down here. I shiver, though the walls of Atlantia have never been breached or broken in any significant way.

When the people prepared for the Divide long ago, they asked for inspiration in designing Atlantia. The story is that the Minister at the time had a dream, in which the gods told him that our city should be patterned after the grand cities of old. The Minister saw Atlantia clearly in his dream—a beautiful place of temples and churches set on plazas. He saw colorful buildings with shops on the ground floor and apartments rising above them, and boulevards and streets connecting everything together.

But, of course, it all had to be underwater.

And so Atlantia was conceived as a series of enormous enclosed bubbles, some higher than others, some lower, connected by canals and walkways. The engineers discovered that it was better to make smaller habitats and join them together than to create one large bubble for everything. The centermost sphere is the most desirable part of Atlantia. It holds the temple, the Council buildings, the upmarket and several living areas. Other, smaller enclosures encompass the lesser churches, markets, and neighborhoods. Some of the deepest bubbles of all are the areas that encompass the machineries of Atlantia, the bays where the mining drones come in for repair and storage, and the deepmarket.

The engineers spent years designing all of this. Some of the original blueprints are on display in a special glass case in one of the antechambers of the temple. There are rusty stains and splatters on the diagrams. The rumor is that, as the engineers were dying, they sometimes coughed blood onto the papers. They couldn't stop in their task or humankind would have perished, so they kept on at their sacred, consecrated work. When I mentioned the rumor about the spots on the paper being blood to my mother, she did not debunk it or say the stains were something else. "So many sacrificed for us to live," she said, and her eyes were very sad.

The destruction Above meant that there were few natural materials left for use Below. Our city's underpinnings are made mostly of manufactured goods, with some precious overlays of old materials like the wooden pulpit in the temple and the stones covering a few of the best streets. But Atlantia is still beautiful. One of the things we Atlantians are most proud of is our trees—made of steel trunks and individual, shimmering metallic leaves, they are as lovely as anything that ever existed Above.

So people say.

The engineers used the transportation from one of those old cities—a romantic system of canals and boats called gondolas—as a model for our public transit down here. Of course, our gondolas are modernized—they have engines and run on tracks through dry concrete canals. The people of Atlantia love the gondolas although they require constant maintenance. Even though workers repair the gondolas each night after curfew, it's not uncommon to see a boat beached off its track during the day, machinists swarming around like mermaids gathering about the hulls of shipwrecks in pre-Divide illustrations.

My mother found the architecture of Atlantia fascinating, and she loved the trees and the gondolas almost as much as she loved the temple. “Flourishes in the face of death,” she told Bay and me once we looked at the diagrams. “The engineers left their signature in every working of Atlantia. They made the city useful *and* beautiful.”

“It’s a second kind of immortality,” Bay said. “They live on in heaven, and in Atlantia herself.”

My mother looked over at Bay, and their love of the city was so palpable that I felt left out. I love Atlantia, but not the way they did.

These lower areas have less embellishment and look more utilitarian than some of the other parts of Atlantia. Here, the rivets are clearly visible on the walls, and the sky is lower. Up at the temple, the soaring rises inside the building echo the high arches of the false sky outside.

I pass by one of the stalls that sells masks. They aren’t the air masks we carry strapped over our backs—the ones we’re told to keep with us at all times in case of a breach in Atlantia’s walls. The masks sold in the deepmarket are designed to be worn for fun, so you can pretend to be someone else. I feign interest in them, touching the faces of fantastic creatures that used to live in the Above—lions, tigers, horses—all of them known to me only from pictures in books. There are also more fanciful masks—a variety of sea witches, some with green faces, some blue.

Children delight in telling one another stories about the sea witches. We talked about them at school and when we played together in the plazas. Once, when my mother wanted me to come with her to the temple for a late service and I didn’t want to go, I tried to use what I’d heard as an excuse. “If I go out near the dimming time a sea witch might get me,” I told my mother. “Or a siren.”

“Sea witches are an old superstition,” my mother said. She didn’t deny the existence of sirens—people, usually women, who can use their voices to convince others to do their bidding—because everyone knows sirens exist. They were the first miracle that came about after the Divide. They were born to the younger generation of those who came Below, and they have been serving Atlantia ever since.

I am a siren.

It is a secret my mother decided to keep because sirens’ lives are consecrated to the service of Atlantia, and siren children are given to the Council to raise. My mother didn’t want to give me up.

“Sea witches *are* real,” I told my mother. “They have names.” *Maybe*, I thought, *people know who they’re sea witches, but they keep it a secret, the way I keep my secret about being a siren.* The thought thrilled me.

“And what are the witches’ names?” my mother asked in the amused voice I loved, the one that meant she was willing to go along with my game.

“Maire,” I said, thinking of a story I’d heard the day before at school. “One of them is named Maire.”

“What did you say?” My mother sounded shocked.

“Maire,” I said. “She’s a sea witch *and* a siren. She has magic, more than just her voice. She gets what she wants from you and then she turns you into sea foam before your family even has a chance to bring your body to the floodgates.” One of the girls at school told me that Maire *drank* the foam, but decided to spare my mother this gory detail since her hands had gone to her mouth and her eyes were wide. Too wide. She wasn’t pretending to be horrified. She *was* horrified, and my mother was not easily shocked.

“Don’t tell that story anymore,” she said. Her voice trembled and I felt sorry. Perhaps I’d used too much of my voice in telling the story. I hadn’t meant to frighten her.

“I won’t,” I said. “I promise.”

Some people said that sirens didn’t have souls, and so I asked my mother if that were true of Maire. “No,” my mother said. “Every living thing has a soul. Maire has a soul.” And of course, my mother

knew what I was really asking. “You have a soul, Rio,” she told me. “Never doubt that.”

It wasn't until later that our mother told us the truth—that the siren Maire was her sister. Our aunt said, “But we no longer speak to each other,” my mother said, a great sorrow in her voice, and Bay and I looked at each other, terrified. How could sisters grow so far apart?

“Don't worry,” my mother said, seeing our expressions. “It won't happen to you. They came and took Maire away when they found out she was a siren, and we weren't raised together. We grew apart. You see? It's one of the reasons we have to keep Rio's secret. We don't want her to be separated from us. We don't want to lose her.”

Bay and I nodded. We understood perfectly.

And this was an enormous secret for my mother to keep from the Council, especially later when she became Minister. She was supposed to report to the other Council members and work with them closely. She was not supposed to have secrets from them.

But she did have secrets. At least one, and maybe more.

It was on Maire's doorstep that they found my mother the night she died. She went to see her sister but I don't know why.



I've made it to the edge of the deepmarket, where they keep the swimming lanes—several heavy cement canals once used for the gondolas. Years ago, some enterprising group hauled the lanes down here and set them up for racing. It must have been difficult to move something so heavy.

Aldo, the man who organizes the races, nods to me as I approach. “I heard your sister went Above,” he calls out. “I'm sorry to hear that.” Aldo is a few years older than Bay and me. Even though his blue eyes and dark curly hair and smooth features should make him handsome, they don't.

“Thank you.” Those two words are all I can manage to say without emotion when people offer me their condolences.

Aldo's moment of civility has already ended. “I'm going to have to redo all the race brackets for this weekend now that she won't be swimming.”

“Did she leave anything here for me?” I ask.

“What would she leave?”

“A note,” I say. “Or something else. I'm not sure.”

“No,” Aldo says. “She always took her gear with her. We don't have room to store much down here. You know that.”

I do. The racing lanes themselves use most of the available space, and the spectator stands take up what's left. There is a small bank of rent-by-the-hour lockers pushed up near the wall where Aldo posts the brackets; we can keep our things there while we race.

“Could there be anything in the lockers?” I ask.

“No,” Aldo says. “I went through them last night. They were all empty.”

He says it in a disinterested tone, and I believe that he tells the truth. My heart sinks.

So. She didn't leave anything here, either. Aldo turns and walks away.

The water slaps against the walls of the cement canals. Steely thin bleachers rise up on either side, calling to mind the seats in the temple. The priests knew Bay began racing here after my mother's death, and they turned a blind eye to it. We needed the money. The temple takes care of all of its students' room and board, of course, but all our work there is considered consecrated and we receive

no coin in return. Almost everyone else had two parents to watch over them, to give them pocket money and pay for books and buy new clothes. But the Minister also takes no money for her work, only room and board and clothing. Our mother looked out for us by selling her personal possessions when we needed something new. However, she'd gone through most of those items by the time she died.

So Bay set out to earn money. It was surprising, how clearly she knew exactly what to do. After I promised to stay, she still grieved deeply, but she was back to her old self in other ways—calm and collected, thinking things through.

“They have races in the deepmarket,” she told me. “Swimming ones. People bet on them.”

I knew about the races, even though up until then Bay and I rarely watched them. The priests discouraged it. “But those people have been swimming for years,” I said.

“We can learn fast,” she said. “It’s in our genes.”

Bay and I both take after my father physically—we are tall and strong, while my mother was small and delicate. When we were twelve, we passed her in height and kept on growing; she laughed that she had to look up to the two of us.

My father was a racer, back when it was an approved sport and they had fancy sleek swimming lanes erected in the plazas on weekends. That’s how my mother met him. She was attending one of the races, and he came out of the water after finishing and looked up and saw her. In a crowd of people stirring and shouting there was one spot of stillness: my mother. She stood up because that’s what everyone else was doing, but she kept on reading the book she’d brought with her. That intrigued him. What was so interesting that she couldn’t even be bothered to watch the race? So he climbed up in the stands and found her and asked her to go to one of the cafés with him. She agreed. That was the beginning.

“But racing is what might have given him water-lung,” I protested.

“They’ve never proven the link,” Bay said.

She sold one of my mother’s few remaining personal possessions—a tiger god statue—and used the coin to buy each of us a training suit and practice time in the lanes.

“I feel naked,” I told Bay the day we first tried on the suits.

“You shouldn’t,” she said. “These things are almost as modest as our temple robes. We’re covered from stem to stern.”

That made me laugh, which I hadn’t done often since my mother died, and Bay smiled. We went out to the lanes together, and the teacher shook his head. “Aldo didn’t tell me you were so old,” he said. “It’s no use for me to teach you.”

“We’re only fifteen,” Bay said.

“Still too old,” the man said. “You have to start younger than this.”

“We paid you to teach us,” Bay said. “It’s no concern to you how fast we are as long as you have your coin.”

Of course, when we both picked up swimming fairly quickly, he acted as though he’d predicted it all along. “It’s in your genes, of course,” he said. “You’ll never be as good as you could have been, if you’d started younger. But I suppose your mother wanted to keep you up at the temple. I can’t say I blame her.”

“It doesn’t matter if I’m not in the faster brackets,” Bay said to me quietly. “I only have to be good enough to enter and win some of the races.”

“Wait,” I said. She’d said I, not we. “What about me?”

“No,” Bay said. “It’s too dangerous.”

Because of my voice. I knew that was the reason. It always was, for everything. But this time, I didn’t see why.



“It’s like everything else,” Bay said. “Anything you do in public runs the risk of exposure. It’s better if you watch. You can tell me if anyone tries to cheat. You can keep an eye on the clock and see if Aldo tries to rig the results.”

I fumed. “If I’m not going to race, why did I bother learning to swim?”

“It’s part of who we are,” she said. “Our father knew how. And doesn’t it seem stupid that most of us don’t know how to swim? When we live underwater?”

“Not really,” I said. “If there’s ever a breach, we’ll all die anyway.”

“Don’t think like that,” Bay said. So we kept training together, day after day, but I never raced.

Aldo comes back out with more papers to post on the wall. The rustling of the pages brings me back to the present.

“I could swim in her bracket,” I say. Racing would be a connection to Bay. A way to burn off some of the restlessness eating me up inside.

Aldo raises his eyebrows. I can tell that he likes this idea, because he is both sharp and lazy and this will save him some work. “When the two of you trained side by side, you always kept up with her.”

“Yes,” I say. “I did.”

“I don’t have a problem with it,” he says. “But the other racers will have to agree with the substitution. And I’ll need to let the bettors know.”

I nod.

“Come again tomorrow and I’ll tell you what they say,” Aldo says. He heads back in the direction of the stall where he takes the bets.

I stand there for a moment more, watching the smooth turquoise water wash against the sides of the racing lane. Aldo colors the water artificially so that it looks more enticing. For the first time since Bay left I feel a tiny bit better. If I make my body tired, maybe my mind can rest, even if only for the moments when I swim and stare down at the line on the bottom of the lane and think about nothing but pushing through my own fatigue.

“*Rio*,” a voice says behind me.

And in one heartbeat my thoughts go from blue to black.

I know that voice, though I haven’t heard it in a long time, not since my mother’s funeral.

She’s here.

*Maire*.

My mother’s sister.

The siren woman some people call a witch.

The one I think might have killed my mother.

How else to explain her crumpled figure on Maire’s doorstep? Or why Maire never said anything, never offered a single word of explanation as to why my mother might have come to her?

“Maire wouldn’t have killed her,” Bay said, when I told her about my suspicions. “A sister couldn’t do that.”

I turn around and look back at the throngs in the deepmarket, but I can’t find Maire among the moving cloaks and banners and faces. Still, I feel her watching me, even if I can’t see exactly where she is. Does she expect me to answer her?

Maire doesn’t know about my voice. My mother took great care to keep that part of me hidden from everyone, even her own sister.

“But if Maire has a voice like mine, won’t people expect me to have one, too?” I asked once, when I was small.

“No,” my mother said. “There have never been two sirens in the same family line. We’ve always believed that the siren voices are a gift from the gods, not simple genetics.”

“Then why don’t you treat it like a gift?”

Her eyes softened. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I wish we could. But it is a gift, just not one you can use right now.”

“When?” I asked.

She had no answer for me, but I had one for myself. After I went Above. My mother was always so pleased with my self-control. She didn’t know that the reason I could manage it was because I never planned to do it forever. I thought I would go Above and speak at last.

“Maire is your greatest protection,” my mother said. “Because she has a siren voice, people aren’t looking for any of us to have one as well.”

*Rio.* I hear my name again now, a single, clear word meant for me.

I start walking, fast, away from the rows of sellers and stalls and back up toward the lower reaches of Atlantia’s neighborhoods.

I think I feel Maire following me, and I think I hear her, too. It’s almost as though she’s whispering to me, sentences I can’t quite make out, hiding an undercurrent of words in the sound of the air channeling through the walls of the city. And I can’t help myself. I wonder, *Could I do that, too?*

If I use my voice, I’ll be like Maire. I’ll be marked as a siren and people will fear me.

Every time I see Justus, the priest, he won’t meet my gaze. Even though he heard me speak only a single word in my real voice, it was enough to make him keep his distance. That’s the safest response for me, and I should be glad. But I’m sad about it. He was my mother’s best friend, the gentlest priest the one Bay and I hoped the others would choose as Minister after she died.

But they didn’t. They chose Nevio.

A group of teenagers push past, laughing and talking together. They glance over at me and then look away. For a minute I’m tempted to call to them in my real voice. I could play upon the boys; I could make the girls feel jealous, wish they’d never ignored me.

“*Hello,*” a voice says, persuasive, delicious, and for a moment I think I’ve done it, I’ve spoken. But I haven’t.

Maire stands in front of me in her black robes, with her disheveled hair. Her face is at once too sharp to be anything like my mother’s and yet too intelligent to be dissimilar. I have never seen her so close before.

“I need to speak to you,” Maire says. “About your mother. And your sister.”

*You do not,* I almost say, in my true voice, but I have been so long silent that it seems a pity to speak now. To ruin anything for an aunt who cares nothing for me.

I walk past her. She follows. I hear her boots on the street behind me. I feel the dark of my losses, those words *mother* and *sister*, in the way she said them so they would echo in my mind, cold as a cathedral with no candles.

I have always known that if I stayed Below I would be made small, and I feel it happening.

“Rio?” Maire says. “I was there at the temple the day Bay left. And I heard you speak.”

I stop.

It wasn’t only Justus who heard me.

“I always wondered if you were a siren, too,” Maire says, a ring of happiness in her voice, and I flinch in spite of myself.

“If,” Maire says, “there is ever *anything* you want, or need, I can help you. I helped your mother, you know. Even Oceana the Minister needed *me*.”

That’s a lie. And my mother would be proud of how my voice comes out even and flat, although I want to scream. “My mother didn’t need you,” I say. “She had us. Her daughters.”

“There are some things you only tell a sister,” Maire says. “And some things you only ask of a sister.” Now her voice sounds soft and sad, faraway, even though she stands close to me. It’s

unnerving. “You think that I am the evil sister, and that your mother was good,” she says. “But Ocean did need me. And Bay needed me, too.”

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Bay didn't need Maire. Bay had me.

“She left something for you,” Maire says. “Come along and I'll give it to you.”

I'm caught between two things I know to be true.

Bay wouldn't have gone Above without leaving me some kind of message or explanation.

She also would never have left that message or explanation with Maire.

Would she?

Maire's voice is tangling things, confusing me.

A gondola comes behind us, slipping along in its cement canal. I want to get away from Maire and back to the temple. I break into a run.

“We need to talk, you and I.” Maire's voice follows me. “I can help you get what you want, your deepest desire.”

Does she even know my deepest desire? To go Above?

I have the terrible feeling that she might. That she might know my whole heart and mind.

“I can help you get Above,” Maire says, her voice fading, haunting. “But it has to be soon. We are running out of time. Can't you hear the way the city is breathing?”

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## CHAPTER 1

I sit down in a pew in the temple and let the familiar scents of candle wax, stone and water, and old cloth settle over me. I take a deep breath and wait for my racing heart to slow down. It's been pounding since my encounter with Maire.

The priests move through the nave, their robes brushing the ground and making hushing sounds. I keep my head bowed in order to avoid eye contact. I don't want any more condolences about Bay leaving.

I should be safe from my aunt here. Those known to be sirens are not allowed in the temple. They have their own place of worship, somewhere among the tight restricted maze of Council buildings. But it wasn't always that way. In fact, in the beginning, many sirens were priests, using their voices to cry out warnings about pride and sin and to call people to sacrifice. But then some became intoxicated with their own power, and started using their voices to hurt or manipulate, and the Council began taking the siren children to raise so that they couldn't use their voices for ill, only for the good of Atlantia.

A woman at the front of the nave lights a candle. People sit in almost every pew. I wonder if anyone else is mourning someone who left for the Above. I'm certainly not alone in seeking solace here tonight. The temple never closes. It is the one place you are always allowed to stay once the curfew call has sounded.

My mother sometimes worked late at night, hearing the prayers and pleas of those who came with their crises of faith, their screamings of doubt, their whimpers and roars of sin. She believed it was important to listen to people, so much so that she kept working the occasional late shift even after she became the Minister.

She also believed that sirens should be allowed inside the temple, but she could never get enough priests to vote in favor of changing the rule. She saw the temple as the house of the gods *and* the people, the place where they could come together, and she thought it wrong that some were excluded from that opportunity. "They say that the sirens are miracles, not people," she told Bay and me once, in a rare moment of frustration with her work. "Can you imagine believing such a thing? People can be miracles."

I look up at the stone carvings above me, the buttresses and the gallery and the grim gargoyles gods watching us.

The gods are shown as different animals of the Above. On the pillar nearest me is the god Efram, who, because he is fierce and cunning, is represented by a tiger carving. There are many tiger gods, but if you know what you are looking for, it is easy to tell them apart. Efram, for example, has the largest eyes. He sees the most.

“The gods know everything,” my mother used to say when I had a hard time hiding my voice. “They know how difficult this is. And they are pleased with you, Rio.”

*Are they pleased with me for being a siren—or for hiding it?* I wanted to ask. But I never did.

When I was small, I realized I could make Bay do what I wanted with the way I said something. But I could never control my mother. Even when I cried my hardest or pleaded fervently, she could resist me. It wasn't always easy. When I wept or begged or tried to manipulate her, she closed her eyes, and I knew she prayed for strength to overcome me. The gods always granted it to her. It was a sign of their favor. Ministers cannot be swayed by sirens. They are chosen, in part, for their ability to resist.

I remember the day when we were five and I made Bay cry so hard she could barely breathe. I did on purpose. I liked it when I was doing it—I felt hot and cruel and clever and powerful—but afterward, I broke down in remorse. My mother held me tight. She was crying, too. “You are a good girl, Rio,” she said. She sounded relieved.

“I hurt Bay,” I said. “And I wanted to.”

“But you were sorry after,” my mother said, “and you don't want to do it again.”

I nodded. She was right.

“That is the difference,” my mother said, almost as if she were no longer speaking to me. “That is the difference.”

She put her hands on either side of my face and looked at me with love. “Rio,” she said, “everyone wants to hurt someone else at some time in his or her life. It is part of being human. But you were born with more power to do it than most. That is why you have to keep your voice under control.” And, of course, there was the other, equally important reason. We didn't want the Council to take me away.

My mother knew I was a siren very early on, from when I began to babble as a baby. She had to take leave from her work—she couldn't allow anyone else to take care of Bay and me until I was old enough to learn how to mask my voice. She gave the excuse that I was sickly.

Some of my earliest memories are of my mother coaching me, telling me how to speak safely, and of Bay helping me practice. I tried to make my voice like hers, soft and quiet, but it never sounded quite the same. Still, the voice I use now is one I learned from trying to be like Bay.

In my dreams, I always speak in my real voice, and so I looked forward to going to sleep. After my mother died, I often found Bay next to me when I awoke, burrowed close for warmth, her hands cold and the smell of salt water on her. I never knew when she climbed in with me, but I was glad she came to me for comfort.

I don't sleep well now. I don't care about hearing my voice any longer. I want to hear Bay's.

I'm weeping now, and I try to hide that fact. I know the priests are concerned about how profound I mourn my sister. At some point they will tell me to accept her choice and return to work full-time instead of keeping these irregular hours. But for now, they extend me grace. They loved her, too.

I run my hand along the varnished wood of the pew in front of me. The pews are carved out of old trees, like the pulpit, and they are extremely valuable, since there are not many wooden seats in Atlantia. But anyone and everyone can sit on the pews, can touch them. When my mother was Minister, she let me touch the pulpit, too, feel the curls of the waves and the leaves of the trees with

my fingers, and I knew my religion better in those moments than I have before or since. I felt a reverence mixed with resignation and righteousness that I thought must be faith, must be the way Bay and my mother felt all of the time.

Someone sits down at the edge of my bench, and I slide a little farther in the other direction. There are plenty of empty pews, and I am annoyed that someone has chosen this one under Efram. *Find another god*, I whisper in my mind. *Try one of the lion gods, like Cale. Ask him to roar your prayer to the heavens.* Instead, the person slides closer and reaches out to take a hymnal from the shelf in front of us. Under the clean scent of soap, I detect the faint but unmistakable smell of machinery oil. His hands are work worn and his fingers careful and sure, and I think I know what his trade must be. A machinist, someone who repairs broken things.

"I heard you," he says. "I thought I should see if you were all right."

I wipe my sleeve across my face. "There's no shame in crying," I say flatly, though it feels like there is.

"Of course not," he says. Then there's a moment of quiet, when even the priests seem to have stopped rustling about in the temple and Atlantia does not breathe. Then. "My name is True Beck," he says. I still don't look at his face, though his voice sounds kind and deep. He turns the pages of the hymnal, and I wonder if he's looking at them or at me. "I know your sister left to go Above. My best friend did, too."

I don't say anything. I don't think much of ties that aren't blood. No bond is the same as that between sisters.

"His name was Fen Cardiff," True says. That's the name of the boy who left right before Bay, and in spite of myself I look at True. When I do, my first thought is: brown and blue. Brown hair, brown eyes, blue shirt, blue shadows under his eyes. I've seen him before. Atlantia is a small enough place that we see each face in passing at one time or another, but large enough that we don't know every name.

"I didn't know he was going," True says.

He is handsome, the type of boy who looks as though he might once have had sun on his skin, though that's impossible this far down. He has intelligent eyes and the kind of strength that isn't bulk and belligerent but streamlined and swift instead. I notice all of this and it means nothing to me. Since Bay left, I haven't felt anything but loss.

"Are you older or younger than Fen?" I ask. Because if True is younger, then what does he have to complain about? All he has to do is wait, choose to go Above, and find his friend.

He doesn't answer me. "Listen," he says. "I think you and I should talk. Maybe not here."

"About what?"

"*Them*," he says. "Bay and Fen." His voice has a hint of urgency in it, and the way he pairs their names seems significant. As if they go together: Bay and Fen. And a dark cold spill of doubt curls through my heart. Did Bay leave because of that boy? A boy I never even knew was important to her?

"I saw them together," True says, as if he knows what I'm thinking. "More than once."

"That can't be," I say. "Bay never told me anything about him."

"I think we can help each other."

"What do you need my help with?" I ask. "You seem to know everything already."

"I don't know *anything*," True says, and the despair in his voice sounds something like the sorrow I've been holding in my heart, that I haven't even been able to speak to myself because it would overwhelm me. True leans closer, gripping the hymnal very tightly, bending the thick cover. "I don't know why he left. You don't know why she left. You and I have the same question. Maybe we could come to an answer together."

Justus walks past, his head turned away as if he's searching the pews for someone, but he's not,

he's trying to avoid someone he's already seen. Me. Because he heard my real voice that day when Bay left. ~~He's a good man and was a friend to my mother, so he doesn't ask me any questions, he leaves me alone. He hasn't told anyone, or I wouldn't be allowed in the temple. His reaction to my voice has been the best one that I could hope for, and yet it still hurts.~~

"Bay and Fen are gone," I say to True. "We're here. There's nothing to talk about."

"You don't know that," True says. "Someone might know something. *I might know something.* You can't decide not to talk to people."

He's so urgent, so earnest, and I have to bend my head so that he won't be able to tell that I'm trying not to laugh. He has no idea what he's saying. He has no idea that he's speaking to someone who never *could* talk to people. To someone who only two people ever really knew. And now those two people are gone.

True draws in his breath. I wonder if I've offended him. "If you change your mind," he says, "I go to the deepmarket most evenings."

I can't go back to the deepmarket. That's where Maire found me.

Up at the altar, candle wax drips. Cale and Efram and all the rest stare down at us. Someone rustles hymnal pages, a priest speaks softly in another pew, and the city breathes. Ever since Bay left, I haven't been able to stop listening to Atlantia. Sometimes I could swear that the city *is* a person—breathing easily in some moments, wheezing and laboring in others.

*Can't you hear the way the city is breathing?* Maire asked.

And in that moment, I have my answer about what I must do, and I want to laugh because it's so obvious. I've wasted my time in the few days since Bay left trying to find out why she left. But the best way to learn why is to go Above and ask her. There has to be a way, in spite of all the obstacles.

Bay has set me free. All I have to hold me here is gone. Just because no one has ever managed to escape to the Above before doesn't mean that I can't be the first. If I die trying to get there, at least I didn't die locked down here in Atlantia. At least I died trying to get to my sister and the world I've always wanted to see.

I stand up and walk to the altar and take one of the candles and light it. Our candles don't last long so that we can conserve our precious air. I kneel and act like I'm praying for a few minutes, until my candle drips and the wick begins to blacken and fall apart on itself. When it finishes burning, I stand up.

True is gone.



Back in my room, I lie down on my bed and stare up at the ceiling.

I wish more than anything that I could hear Bay laugh. Even before she left, her laughter had gone. Sometimes, to tease me, Bay would make a list of all the reasons to stay Below as a sort of companion for my list of reasons I wanted to go Above. She wrote down things like: *The sea gardens are full of color. The cafés are alive with laughter. The leaves on the metal trees catch the light. The plazas have wishing pools where we can toss our gold coins to send to the needy Above. The water changes as much as the sky.* She and I compared notes, whispering so that no one else could hear us.

I roll over onto my side, feeling my braid underneath my head as I do. I haven't undone it since Bay left. It's wound with those blue ribbons, a complicated, beautiful style, and though I know I look rough and that pieces are coming out, flyaway bits escaping, I don't want to undo it. I braided her hair

this way that morning, but it's much easier to do on someone else than it is to do for yourself. Once I take it out, I won't be able to put it back.

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Is Bay having the same trouble Above? Did she throw away the blue ribbons? Do they prefer to wear other colors where she is now?

Maybe if I talked to Maire, she could help me. She could teach me how to use and manipulate my voice to get what I need. And she said she knew what I wanted.

But has using her voice really worked for my aunt, the sea witch? There are stories about her, and people are afraid of her, but has *she* ever gotten what she wanted? What good has it done her, in the end?

Look what happened when I said one little word, *no*. Now Justus can't look at me and Maire won't leave me alone. What if someone else, a stranger, had heard me?

I hear Maire in my mind again. *You think I'm the evil sister, and that your mother was good.*

Must there always be one of each? That's what I've always secretly wondered. If so, I know which sister I am. Bay is not perfect, but she is good. She believes in the gods. She loves our city and our people. She meant to stay Below and serve them all her life.

So if everything is reversed, if she's gone Above and I'm trapped Below, then perhaps *I* am the good sister after all.

I don't feel it. And if I use my voice on purpose, I will have crossed a line, and there will be no coming back.

Maire is not the answer.

I know I need to go Above. I don't yet know how. The wave of hope I felt in the temple has spent itself on the shore of exhaustion and loss.

The pillow is wet from my tears. Perhaps I should try to catch them in a bowl and give them to the priests to use for those who decide to spend their lives down here in the dark Below. We'll all weep and bless one another, those of us too scared or stupid or late to try a life Above.



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