



## Prologue



*Tsar Naru*

*Name: Tsar Naru*

*Location: Rakahn Prison*

*Time in Captivity: 36.5 months*

*1900 hours*

You don't know me.

I'm just a figment of your imagination, someone you block out of your mind because the very thought of me sends chills shivering down your spine.

I'm just a forgotten memory that should cease to exist.

But I do, to most's despair.

I'm going to be the cause of this world's demise. At least people, *my* people, have been saying that for years.

And so I wait for a chance to escape this icebox of torture and break free from the past that's been haunting me for years.

Oh, you don't know me at *all*.

Shocker.

I was once an innocent boy called Tsar. I had a childhood, years before this place gleaned my origins and ripped open my roots...roots that were cursed to the very core.

I know I was never meant to be a villain. But you can't fight fate. It stalks you like a shadow man, a phantom of some sort. I wouldn't be wasting away in this blasted prison if I didn't know that much.

GIANNA OWENS

But now my patience has run cold. I can no longer  
brood in the shadows of this wasteland without  
wanting to gouge out my eyes.

I can feel it in my old, broken bones.

Change is coming.

And the traitor who tried to destroy me better hope  
she's ready for it.



## **Chapter 1**

### **After Daybreak**



*Here it comes.*

Madison Cooke whipped her head back as her boat, *Laguna*, conquered a massive wave, making the entire ocean seethe. Droplets of water ricocheted off her boat deck, spraying her in the face as she plowed through it.

If Madison were out here by herself, it would have been just her and the tides, working to find the Blacktooth shark she could've sworn had skimmed these waters.

Unfortunately, her plus-one had a different view on how they should spend their Saturday morning.

"If I spend one more second on this boat, I think I'm going to hurl," a green-faced Noah whined, trying to draw in his sketchbook over the choppy waters.

"Relax, Mr. Sunshine, we've only got one more mile to go!" Madison yelled to her brother as she jerked her sailboat's wheel left.

"Is staring at the same coral reef we've seen 300 times really worth missing the seventh-grade dance?" Noah moaned.

"It's not just any coral reef! I swear there are *Blacktooth sharks* living right by the coast! Could you think of anything more exciting than catching one in the flesh?" Madison exclaimed.

"Let's see, developing super-speed, meeting Batman, watching paint dry...literally *anything*. As cool as seeing a shark sounds, we've been looking all week and have found nothing interesting out here! Honestly, you probably just saw a sea lion or something," Noah muttered.

Frowning, Madison pushed her auburn hair behind her ears.

"That was no sea lion, Noah," she insisted, mind made up.

"Besides, I needed an escape."

*Laguna* swerved as the breeze knocked its boom to the left. Quickly, Madison tied down the mainsail and yanked the steering wheel back to the center. With a running leap, she righted the sheets and threw herself against the bow to even the boat out.

"Yes. I can see how relaxing this is for you," Noah scoffed, watching her stop a lifesaver from flipping overboard.

Okay...so maybe heading out into the choppiest part of the bay wasn't exactly serene, but whether the ocean was seething or looked as smooth as a mirror's surface, Madison longed to be on it. There was nothing like the salty breeze whipping her hair and the rhythmic rolling of the waves beneath her feet.

To keep the wheel steady, Madison tied a rope around it and joined Noah on the deck.

“Too bad. I’m not going back to the boardwalk.”

“But—”

“I’m not going back, so just shut up!” Madison snapped.

Noah recoiled at his sister’s outburst.

“Ugggh, I’m sorry, okay?” Madison sighed.

“No, I get it. *I’m* sorry.”

“The second I step foot on our dock, they’ll just go back to teasing me,” she grumbled.

Noah stopped drawing on his sketchpad to give his arm a break.

“Those idiots are just jealous they aren’t as cool as you. I mean, you’re sailing into the rockiest part of the bay to hunt a *shark* while they go to some stupid old dance. Those guys wouldn’t be that brave in a hundred years! You can’t let their insecurity get to you, okay? Their words can’t hurt you.”

“Not physically,” Madison muttered.

Maybe Noah doesn’t care what people think of him, but no matter how hard Madison tried, the words those kids had shot at her continued to catapult through her mind.

*Loser.*

*Geek.*

*Weirdo.*

Abruptly, Madison stood back up and went back to checking her boat’s radar, hoping Noah would take a hint.

He didn’t. Instead, he kept staring at her like she was some sad, abandoned puppy.

“Don’t stare at me like that,” Madison finally retorted.

Noah snapped his head back down to his sketchbook.

“Fine. If we’re not going back, can you at least help me come up with an ending for *The Adventures of 7*

*Titans?* Brody'll have my hide if I haven't finished writing the script before I get to his house."

"Yeah, of course," Madison said, softening.

"Okay, should The Sun Knight fight the Army of Shadows before or after he travels to the Land of the Dream Titans?"

Before Madison could respond, a screeching *BEEEEEP* pierced her ears.

"The radar," she gulped. "It's doing it again! Something's here!"

In two seconds flat, Madison was in the cockpit, Noah right on her heels.

"I see a squiggly line in the middle of a beeping circle. *Very exciting,*" Noah yawned.

"Call me when you catch a great white."

"You get back here," Madison pulled him back to her side.

"Whatever this thing is, it's swimming at 40 knots."

Seeing Noah's 'I really don't care' look, Madison added shakily:

"That's two times *faster* than a great white."

Noah's eyes grew to the size of tennis balls.

"No way. What is it?"

"Give me a second," Madison said while furiously typing on the machine's keyboard.

"Whatever it is, it's getting closer to the boat."

The siblings watched in horror as the red circle on the screen flashed angrily, the squiggly line getting closer and closer to it.

"Madison," Noah whispered.

She held up her hand, listening to the ocean.

*Slosh.*

*Slosh.*

*SLOSH.*

"Brace yourself!" Madison managed to shout just before *Laguna* careened to the right.

Noah, having no time to prepare for the blow, was hurtled across the boat into a pile of fishing nets.

"I think something just hit us!" Madison hissed.

"No kidding!" Noah panted while clutching his head.

Madison scanned the vast blue sea, still churning from whatever had crossed it. The tropical waters of the Pacific lapped Maui, glittering as the sun beat down on it.

The scene would have been peaceful if Madison hadn't been shaken from getting mauled by what was hopefully a dolphin.

Or a Loch Ness monster...

"Did the radar get a reading on...whatever that was?" Noah exclaimed.

Madison dashed to the cockpit and jabbed her finger at the computer screen.

At the bottom of the monitor was a string of text, the section of words labeled size, speed, and species.

"So...this thing's 95 pounds and was moving at 40 knots. Is it some kind of mutant-dolphin?" Noah wondered, gesturing at the numbers sandwiched between the words.

Madison silently stared at the third category, marked with a big red *error*.

"No way. It didn't pick up the animal," She whispered.

"Who cares? Can we just relish the fact that, for once, Maui's worth exploring?" Noah whooped.

"There's gotta be an explanation for this," Madison craned her head out of the cockpit's window. "I'm gonna circle the reef. You can monitor the radar."

Nodding, Noah hopped into the cockpit.

"Got it, Irwin Jr.!"

*Laguna* veered left with a lurch, its nose pointing in the direction the creature had torn through.

“Alright, we just head north, then make a U-turn back home without missing a beat,” Madison muttered.

The ocean parted as the siblings scanned its tides, eerily quiet.

A little *too* quiet for Madison.

After a few minutes of restless silence, Noah leaped out of the chair, trampling the pile of fishing nets.

“Over there!” he exclaimed, pointing at the edge of the reef.

Madison squinted. The area he’d identified was peppered with sea rocks overtaken by kelp, long enough to hide a dolphin with ease.

“What?”

“Oh, false alarm,” Noah groaned, “just seaweed.”

Madison was about to move on to a different part of the reef when she heard a violent *splash*.

“Madison, look up!” Noah said while shaking her arm.

“What is *that*?”

A silvery-blue tail fractured the stillness of the ocean.

Madison did a double-take on where the water rippled.

*There.*

Farther away this time, the tail appeared again, catching rays of sunlight above the fata morgana.

“What are you?” Madison squinted.

She couldn’t make out what it was, but Madison was sure that whatever had just passed by was not a dolphin *at all*.

The animal was swishing across the cove towards a cluster of ocean rocks.

“Now or never,” Madison muttered to herself.

“Noah, you watch the boat. I’m going to get a better look at this thing.”

“But I want to...!”

“No. Don’t you remember what happened *last* time I let you get close to an animal?”

Noah slouched in his chair.

“That crab pinched me first,” he sulked.

Madison ignored her brother and dipped a tentative foot into the ocean.

Thankfully, the water was somewhat shallow, so Madison threw off her flip-flops and waded in.

Through the light, she could just make out a figure perched on one of the boulders.

Perched on the rock was a boy a little older than her, sixteen at the most, with sun-tanned skin and piercing hazel eyes. A streak of azure sliced through his dirty-blond hair and lapped the tips of his bangs. Madison’s eyes narrowed as she watched him frantically whip back and forth, eyes darting about restlessly.

*What is a kid doing out here in the middle of a reef?* She thought suspiciously.

Madison inched closer so she could see the rest of the boy's frame, but when she did, she almost fell off her rock in shock.

Where the boy's legs were supposed to be was a long, scaly fish tail, its fins aggressively hitting the waves below.

*That's impossible!* Madison told herself over and over.

Yet *it* was right there, clear as day.

*I have to check this thing out.* Madison waded a tiny bit closer to the rocks, not wanting to scare whatever was resting on them.

But that's when she realized she had forgotten all about her brother.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING OVER THERE?" She heard Noah bellow from ten yards away.

The merboy whipped his head around so sharply Madison could hear the wind whoosh as he frantically dove back into the water.

"What *was* that thing?" Noah shouted.

Madison pulled herself up and squeezed out the water in her shorts.

"It...it was a seal," she fibbed.

Noah glared at her.

"That was *not* a seal, Madison. We saw that thing with our own eyes. I'm not cool with you lying to me."

"But I'm not!" Madison snapped. "There's no way...no how...what we saw was real. We were far away from it, so we can't even say for sure *what* it was."

Madison raised her arm above her eyes like a visor. The ocean waves broke where the creature had sliced the tides with its tail, leaving behind a frothing trail of bubbles.

"Besides, it's gone."

Noah joined Madison on the side of the boat and kicked the waves, unsatisfied.

"Our parents said to be back in an hour, and we're nearly over that. I have to go help Mom over at the aquarium," Madison forced herself to tell him.

"Yeah, sure you do," Noah grumbled.

Madison's hands gripped *Laguna's* railing tighter.

"We're both being ridiculous. There's no such thing as mermaids," she whispered.

Her brother went back to drawing superheroes in his sketchbook, pencil leaving angry black marks as it zig-zagged across the paper.

Madison risked one more glance back at the great blue ocean, the sunlight on its surface showering the water in golden droplets. The salty zephyr whipped her already wind-blown hair, seagulls squawking their battle cries overhead. There was something almost magical about the sea. Of course, not in the way she was thinking.

Those deep hazel eyes glinting with mystery were *especially* just a part of her imagination.

Yet she couldn't shake the strange feeling in her gut telling her otherwise.



It took Madison 10 minutes longer than it would've to get back to her home if she hadn't taken the long way, which avoided the boardwalk. Still, despite all her attempts to avoid the kids who'd messed with her before, they still lived in her neighborhood and were bound to be close.

Just as Madison went round a street corner, she nearly ran smack into a group of middle-schoolers in the street, who were sporting sharp suits and dresses from the dance.

Madison scrambled behind a trash can, Noah close behind.

"That's them?"

"That's them."

"I'd be happy to punch each of their faces if you want me to," Noah whispered to her.

"Tempting, but the last thing I wanna do is start another fight," Madison replied, crouching lower behind the garbage bin.

The boys were pushing and shoving each other, laughing as the girls admired their corsages. Just then, one of the boys nudged another too far, causing him to tumble down right in front of the trash cans.

*Oh no*, Madison thought, trying to scurry out of eye line as the boy came closer and closer...

"Hey!" the boy cried, causing his friends to start flocking over to Madison's trash can.

*Shoot.*

"Looks like the biggest losers in Maui just got back from their little expedition," one kid sneered.

"Did you find that Zebra Shark, Madison?" A young girl jeered.

Madison's mouth went numb as she looked down at her shoes to avoid the girl's gaze.

"Technically, it was a Blacktooth shark. Zebra sharks aren't even native to Hawaii, so, no," she grumbled.

"Told you she was crazy. As if anyone could catch a Blacktooth, much less one this close to the coast," another girl laughed to her friends before turning back to Madison. "You're so weird. I mean, you missed a *dance* to go stare at some clownfish. It's no wonder you don't have any friends."

One of the boys shoved Madison into the trash can, sending her barreling to the ground.

"Knock it off!" Noah shot at him, pushing the kid back harder.

"First off, she's got me, so good for her for setting her standards above you guys. Secondly, at least we're doing something productive instead of picking a fight with everyone who passes us on the street. Now, if you'll excuse us, we're gonna go talk to people actually worth our time."

Noah pivoted on his heels and went to walk away, dragging Madison with him.

"Weirdo," a girl muttered.

Without turning around, Noah stopped.

"I prefer 'superhero nerd'; if you're gonna insult me, do it properly."

With that, Noah grabbed Madison's arm and pulled her away from the group of bullies before they could do anything to stop them.

"Thanks," Madison mumbled when she was out of earshot from the mean kids.

"Don't mention it. Now, I promised I'd head up to my friend Brody's house after the dance. You gonna be okay?"

"Of course!" Madison forced a fake smile, but she could feel her teeth grinding.

"You looked constipated when you said that."

"Did not!"

“You know you can’t lie to me.”

“I promise, I’m good! Go have fun with your friend, really.”

Noah pursed his lips.

“I could always cancel —”

“Bye, Noah!”

Sighing, Noah rounded a corner, leaving Madison as she headed towards the house across the street. The Cooke villa was practically a mini botanical garden. The many, *many* fruit trees in their front yard swallowed the villa, the clusters of blueberry bushes eating at the porch steps. Madison pushed through hanging ivy to get to the doorway, knocking.

“Mom, I’m back!” Madison cried, shoving open the door.

“So, did you end up catching that Blacktooth?” Mrs. Cooke remarked as her daughter trudged into their villa.

“Oh, right. That,” Madison grumbled.

She walked in to find her mother, as usual, typing on her laptop, gaze switching between the screen and a file of papers in her lap.

“HONEY, I CAN’T FIND MY GLASSES!” Mr. Cooke bellowed from another room.

“Did you check your pocket?” Madison’s mom called back calmly.

“OF COURSE I DID! WHADDA YOU TAKE ME FOR, AN IDIOT?”

“Did you check your *head*?”

“OF COURSE I...”

There was some awkward rustling from the opposite side of the wall.

“Oh.”

Madison’s father came into the living room, face a darkened red, glasses resting crookedly on his nose.

“Hey, Da—”

“What happened to you?”

Madison tried to brush out bits of trash that had fallen into her hair when she'd been crouching behind it, suddenly self-conscious.

"I— sorry."

Madison's dad gave her a weird look, then softened.

"Don't apologize." he pulled her into a hug, seeing the scratch marks on her face. "Again with the scratches? Is it the kids on Emerald Street again?"

Madison looked down.

"Yeah."

"One of these days, you better shove them back, or they'll keep beating you down."

Madison shuffled past him and nestled into her personal desk, pulling out her journal and a bag of colored pencils.

"Mmmm."

Out of the blue, Madison's mother muttered, "it might just be my maternal intuition, but I think you're talking less than you want to about your trip."

Madison's pencil fell with a *thud*. Sometimes, her mom was so good it scared her.

"What makes you say that?"

Mrs. Cooke gave her an 'isn't it obvious?' look as she scooted out of her chair and plopped down next to her daughter.

"You're writing in your science notebook. Only interesting sea creatures get into that."

Madison tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"I promise, I didn't find anything..."

She trailed off, inwardly kicking herself.  
"Interesting."

Mrs. Cooke pursed her lips. If there was one thing she knew about her daughter, it was that she couldn't tell a lie.

"Alright, alright, don't tell me. I'll just be over here, writing a report on old Monty."

Madison perked up at the word 'Monty.'

"Is he out of the shelter yet?" She exclaimed.

Her mother laughed.

"Oh, so now you want to talk. Sadly, our favorite manatee isn't out of the woods yet. But I have faith that he'll pass this last health test and finally be released into the ocean."

With a frown, Madison pictured Monty in his bare exhibit, clumsily trying to swim with his damaged fin.

"I wish I knew how to help him. Ever since he got in a fight with one of his aquarium mates, he hasn't been the same."

Her mother reached for her coffee with a sigh.

"That's true. The manatee that attacked him got removed. I heard an electric eel's replacing him."

"I'm sure Noah will *love* that." Madison shuddered.

Mrs. Cooke breathed a laugh.

"That kid is prone to danger, eh?"

"I think it's the other way around." Madison smiled while pretending to stifle a yawn. "Well, I am beat! I'm gonna head to bed."

Madison kissed both her parents' cheeks before they could say another word.

"Love you guys!"

Mrs. and Mr. Cooke exchanged looks as Madison scrambled up the stairs, clutching her sketchbook tightly to her chest.

Careful not to draw attention to herself, Madison shut the door as quietly as she could and flopped onto her cushiony comforter, scowling at the picture she drew in her book. The merman stared back, unblinking. His piercing eyes seemed to pin her wherever she moved.

"Impossible," Madison murmured to herself.

Madison was so deep in thought she almost didn't hear the *PINK PINK* against her windowpane.

Assuming it was just the breeze hurtling leaves at the glass, Madison frantically returned to her sketching.

*Pink, pink.*

*Pink, pink.*

*Pink, pink.*

“Okay, what is going on?”

Irritated, Madison threw back her curtains.

Her villa overlooked the beach and the ocean beyond it, both shrouded in the shadows of night. A lonely crescent moon hung above the horizon, casting its eerie glow on the marina. A few stray blackbirds soared through the sky, blending in perfectly with the darkness.

The view was so tranquil that Madison couldn’t imagine a more peaceful place could exist on the planet.

*PINK, PINK!*

“Ack!”

Madison jumped and pressed her nose against the glass. Below her, a small person was jumping up and waving.

"Noah!" Madison gasped.

*"Meet me out here!"* He mouthed.

Madison frowned.

"I won't be able to get past Mom!" She answered.

Noah tapped his foot impatiently.

Madison face-palmed. He wasn't going to leave until he saw her down there. Madison shrugged on a jacket and scurried down the stairs. Looking to make sure her mom was still in the living room, she crept to the back of the house and flipped open their security tablet.

"Eight-eight-three-two," she muttered, and the alarm disabled with a *buzz*.

Before her mom realized what was happening, Madison slipped out the door and slowly shut it behind her.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed the second she reached their porch.

"I snuck out of Brody's house after everyone fell asleep," Noah answered guiltily.

"Again, *what* are you doing here!"

"Look, if you thought I was gonna let today go, you're kidding yourself. There is something impossible out there in the bay, and I gotta get to the bottom of this." Noah said firmly. "But I can't go alone."

Before Madison could resist, he grabbed his sister's arm and dragged her to the silver-studded oasis.

"Noah, stop. You saw that *thing* swim away, and it's too late to take a round trip!" Madison tried to free her wrist from her brother's iron grip, but he wouldn't budge.

"I don't think so," Noah squinted through the darkness. "On my way over here, I saw something."

Madison followed his gaze out to the sea, where something faint was making the murky water gleam. Its odd glow dissolved from salmon to cobalt to a dashing lavender hue.

The ring of light bobbed further away from the cove, heading straight for a cave barely attached to the marina. It was isolated, hostile, and apprehensive. Yet Madison felt uncontrollably captivated by it. The feeling lingered in her heart and vibrated through her bones, filling her with insatiable curiosity.

"I'm going this way." Noah darted along the only sandbank path accessible to the cave and headed towards the yawning hole in the side of the cove.

And this time, Madison made no attempt to stop her brother. Instead, she crunched through leaves and fallen branches right behind him, carefully navigating through the brush over to the clearing. Through the thickets of the oasis's grove, she could see the alluring light swerving up and down through the bay. Madison shoved through the vegetation and found her way to Noah.

"Well," he whispered courageously, "I'm going in. You coming with me?"

Madison nodded numbly.

Knees knocking, the two siblings gradually crept into the foreboding death pit.



Inside was pitch-black at all sides, up and down, everywhere, in every nook and every cranny.

“You know what?” Madison exclaimed, common sense finally kicking in. “I think we’re making a really big mistake here, Noah.”

There was no response.

“Noah?” Madison shouted shrilly, panic creeping into her voice.

Then, a peal of Nikes pounding on dirt ground sounded a couple hundred yards away.

Heart hammering, Madison bolted deeper into the endless tunnel.

“Noah!”

*I am going to kill him!* Madison thought before instantly wanting to take it back. At this point, she just needed him to be here with her, safe and sound.

“NOAH!”

The sound of his shoes grew quieter as Madison turned a sharp corner.

It didn’t take her long to figure out why.

The path ended and split into a three-way fork.

*Which one, which one?* Madison looked back and forth between the tunnels frantically, the darkness making it almost impossible to see where they led.

Just as she was about to give up hope of ever finding her brother again, a tiny sound echoed through the uncompromising stone, urging her to follow.

A sign of life.

“Noah!” Elated, Madison trailed the direction of sound into the third tunnel.

“Noah, I...!”

But it wasn't her brother.

The *pitter-pitter* was coming from a waterfall cascading down hundreds of feet into a sinkhole.

Tons of saltwater were gushing through a gaping hole in the cave's cavernous ceiling with enough strength to crush anyone who stood under it.

Taken off guard, Madison threw herself back, away from the ledge she was standing on. Doing a double take, she squinted at the breathtaking scene and realized the waterfall looked almost...unreal, like someone had slapped a green screen on and told everyone to believe the lie. Madison felt water droplets spray her face, but they didn't have the salty smell of the sea like they did when she went out sailboating with her dad.

A strange gurgling noise drowned out Madison's thoughts.

Curious, the girl peered down at the sinkhole, squinting into the abyss below. She could barely make it out, but it almost looked like water was

slowly bubbling to the surface, turning into an underground lake.

But that wasn't even the weirdest part.

The water in the sinkhole began to swirl faster and faster around in circles.

"What the...?"

Madison moved towards the tip of her ledge as much as she dared, watching the phenomenon unfold. Soon, the spiraling water grew even more lethal, seething like a kettle of caramel. As Madison watched the sinkhole evolve, she realized what was so...*off* about this place. From the rumbling of the earth below to the way the rock began to sway beneath her, it became clear that this was no ordinary cavern.

Instead, Madison realized she was standing on the brink of an erupting geyser.

With an earth-shattering roar, the sinkhole collapsed on itself, and the spewing geyser erupted.

*BOOOM.*

Madison was flung against the cave's rigid walls, eardrums throbbing as the volcano consumed the looming waterfall and absorbed it like a sponge. Together, the two forces crashed together, causing a gigantic *WHOOSH*.

The cross between a hurricane and a cyclone whipped Madison relentlessly, making it impossible for her to even make a move to escape. She let out a bloodcurdling scream and tried to escape the storm, but just as she bolted towards the exit, the winds plucked her from the ground with brute strength and threw her into the whirlpool's center. With no time to brace herself for impact, Madison sank deep into the murky waters, everything beaten out of her.

She was thrust and flung from one place to another, battered, bruised, exhausted. Soon, Madison began to lose track of which direction was up.

Nevertheless, she kicked and fought to get to the surface, but something as heavy as cement kept weighing her down, deeper and deeper into the sinkhole before it swallowed her whole.

Alarming black dots danced in front of her eyes as Madison's lungs tightened, yearning for a breath of air.

She could feel herself slipping away.

Then, a horrible pain impaled Madison's side, and everything went a desolate, empty, gut-wrenching black.



## Chapter 2

### Dead of Night



Madison jostled awake to find herself lying on the dirt floor.

“Where am I?” A violent cough rattled her lungs as she tried to get her bearings.

“Isn’t it awesome?” A hoarse voice rasped from behind her.

A familiar voice.

“Noah?” Madison crawled blindly around in the dark, following the direction her brother’s voice had come from.

“Noah! Oh, thank goodness! I was so worried! Are you hurt? Did you break something?!”

“I’m fine, really! Just a little bruised and battered,” Noah assured her. “Where are you?”

Madison couldn’t answer that question. The space around her was pitch-black, making it impossible to scope out anything properly. Except for a faint glimmer of light flickering behind a shadowy column of stalagmites, Madison was completely besieged in darkness.

“Noah, watch it!” Madison pulled him back just as he was going to step into a pile of mud.

Now that she looked closer, Madison realized the cavern was drenched with water. Puddles of muddy goop littered the floor, feeding off the droplets trickling down the jeering stalactites above.

“Was this...the place with that freak whirlpool?” Noah remarked.

“That would explain all the water.” Madison shuddered. “Look, there’s a lake over there.”

Both siblings veered to the left, where a pond sat like the king of the puddles. Unlike before, its surface was calm and smooth.

“How do you think we got down here?” Noah exclaimed.

“See that hole up there? That was where the sinkhole was. I bet we came through that.”

“How do we get out of here?”

“There must be a way out where that light is coming from.”

She could tell her brother was on the same page as her as they shuffled closer to the illuminated column, frightened out of their wits. As they closed in on the column, the two began to walk on their tiptoes, hesitant to break the suffocating silence enveloping the cave. Through winding tunnels, up piles of rocks, and down steep cliffs, they made a beeline for the tiny glimmer of light.

The underground world was a completely different scene than at the surface, with screeching bats and visibility reduced to a slim zero. Madison tried to focus on the *drip, drip* sound of water trickling down rock formations as they hiked on, hoping it would ease her nerves.

*Plink, plink.*

*Splatter, splatter.*

Time grew restless, making it feel like hours when only minutes had gone by.

But finally, the light grew even brighter, and Madison beckoned Noah to follow.

“This way.”

At the same time, Madison and Noah pounced, ready for an attack of some sort.

To Madison's great satisfaction and Noah's disappointment, there was no unexpected ambush awaiting them.

"Um... Can anyone explain to me what I'm looking at here?" Noah stage-whispered, voice wobbling.

Madison was as confused as her brother at the puzzling scene before her.

The mysterious spark of yellow was coming from an almost square-shaped bed of white-gold mist. Basking in the glorious light like a seal sunbathing were seven little trinkets levitating impossibly above the dirt ground, giving Madison ominous goosebumps.

"There's a riddle engraved in the stone." Madison jabbed her finger at the cryptic writing and read:

*"Crafted from Moon, mended from Sun.*

*Your trek down destiny has not yet begun.*

*Your choice is your fate, and a single mistake.*

*Will leave you stranded, lost in its wake."*

Madison could almost see Noah marveling at the complicated verses of the ancient riddle. For a second, she thought he had actually deciphered the code.

Apparently, that was too much to hope for.

"Well, that just makes a boatload of sense," Noah whisper-yelled sarcastically. "It's like I'm looking at Shakespeare's mumbo-jumbo poetry stuff right now."

Madison sighed.

"I know we can figure this out. We just have *tooooo...*"

Madison's words suddenly slurred together as one of the items floating loftily in the blinding white tugged at her consciousness, making the object impossible to ignore.

Time seemed to slow to a stop, dulling all the vibrant splashes of the multicolored light beams. The only artifact still in color was a moon-pendant necklace with an indigo gemstone dangling inside the crescent.

*Don't do it, Madison,* a tiny voice whispered, but it was drowned out by the rhythmic thumping in her heart as she crept towards the necklace. Unable to shake the hypnotic feeling, Madison stalked closer to the artifact and took it off of its intangible pedestal.

And just like that, the world returned back to normal. Madison felt like she had been suspended in a time warp. Forcing her pupils to adapt to her dim surroundings, she rubbed her eyes and found Noah clutching a snow globe. A porcelain figure with the upper body of a beautiful woman and the lower body of a salmon posed in the globe, blinking in and out of sight behind the sparkles.

"What...?" Shocked, Noah nearly dropped his snow globe in surprise. "Where did *that* come from?"

"I have no idea," Madison shook herself vigorously.

Noah whipped his head once to the left, then quickly to the right.

"Well...this isn't an Indiana Jones-themed mystery. I have yet to see any giant boulders busting out of walls yet, sooooo....there's a good sign."

"Yep," Madison replied. "I think we're in the clear."

But she spoke too soon.

Suddenly, pointy stones above them began to tremble.

"Noah," Madison shrieked. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything!" Noah exclaimed.

Dust rained down from the slippery mouth of the cave, followed by much larger boulders soon after. "We have got to go *now!*" Madison grabbed her brother and dashed through the maze of flying stones, leaping over gaping cracks and dodging incoming rocks.

"Where does the cave end?" Noah yelled, panic-stricken.

"I see it! Follow me!" Madison tugged on Noah's hand harder as she made a running leap for the skimpy exit tunnel.

But they were too late.

With one final shudder, the cavern's roof collapsed, trapping Noah and Madison under millions of stone debris.

"Look out!" Noah heaved Madison to his side just as a massive boulder smashed the ground where she had been crouching.

The shaking continued to destroy the space, growing even more vigorous with each passing second.

Groaning, Madison attempted to move some of the boulders out of the way, but it was no use. As the air continued to thicken, it became clear there was no way to escape.

"Noah?" Madison's thoughts almost felt... fuzzy.

Hacking loudly, her brother moaned in response, "Is it just me, or is it getting really...hard...to breathe in here...?"

Not able to answer, Madison nodded as her eyelids became heavier and heavier, muddled by the smog of dust surrounding them. The boulders looked blurry for some reason, and soon, Madison found it impossible to sit up from the ground.

"I...can't...get...up," she whispered.

In seconds, the debris faded entirely, and Madison sunk to the dirt floor, much too exhausted to fight the fatigue anymore.

*Clunk.*

*Clunk.*

*CLUNK.*

Light streaked Madison's cheek as her eyelids opened.

A blob that looked remarkably human-like emerged from the haze, shadowy hands outstretched. There was a sound like a dagger slicing against stone, and a strong hand pulled her up onto her feet.

"Come with me," it said gruffly.

Madison shook her head meekly.

"Won't...leave...Noah."

The figure didn't say a thing but simply waved what appeared to be his hand in front of her.

Madison blinked twice.

"Whoa, okay, how did you do that?"

All of a sudden, Madison felt much more keen and could even stand up again.

"Later," the silhouette of a person slid his arm into his side and pulled out something very slanted and *very* sharp.

"Can you walk?"

Madison squinted through her foggy vision.

"I think so. Who are you?"

The shadow froze.

"Later," he repeated.

Out of the corner of her eye, Madison saw something squirm groggily.

"Noah!" Madison cried feebly.

"Where did that guy come from?" Noah pushed himself onto his haunches so he could get a better view of the stranger.

"I have no idea," Madison whispered.

There was an ear-splitting *shiiinnng*, and the figure grabbed Noah and Madison before they could say another word.

"This way." The figure led them toward a ring of light coming from a hole in the cave.

Madison pulled Noah behind her, dust pelting the siblings as they fought to keep up.

*We're going to get out of here.* Madison forced her throbbing legs to tread faster, focusing her energy on the halo of light.

As the exit began to grow closer, the cavern started rumbling harder and harder.

"It's shaking again!" Madison shrieked.

"JUST GO!" The figure pushed the siblings through the tunnel, plummeting rocks nearly sweeping them off their feet.

There was an earth-shattering *BOOM*, and Madison and Noah dove onto the earth outside, the cavern crumbling into a mountain of rubble behind them.

"Ha! We made it!" Noah sounded delirious as he slumped down the side of a rock to lay on the sand, noticeably several yards from the pile of debris.

Trying to tame the migraine pounding through her head, Madison realized something was off.

Instead of emerging on the opposite side of her home's marina, like she'd believed they had, Madison and Noah were now standing on an abandoned island in the middle of the ocean, endless blue waters stretching out for as far as the eye could see.

"Oh, no, no, no," Madison exclaimed, panic threatening to take over.

"What?" For the first time, Noah examined their surroundings, big brown eyes growing rounder in fear.

"Oh, *man*."

Frantically, Madison replayed the crazy adventure she had just endured and shook her head, nothing adding up.

"Wasn't...wasn't there a person who got us out of there? Where did he go?" Madison attempted to block the sun out of her eyes as she searched for their rescuer.

"I dunno." Noah lazily threw his arms up in an 'I don't have a clue' gesture, still too exhausted to get as worked up as his sister.

"I'm right here."

Boldly, a boy about Madison's age stepped out from some sandy rocks and cleared his throat.

He had dark hazel eyes shrouded under long, dirty-blond bangs. When he strutted out from behind the rock, Madison got to see his outfit, which consisted of a tunic that looked like it had been woven with palm tree fronds, draping over pants so golden they could easily have been mistaken for the Sun. But the thing that drew her eyes the most was the strange blue marks spiraling up his legs into the folds of his pants.

Madison almost thought he looked familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

"What were you doing in the Megalith!" He shouted at them angrily. "Don't you know how deadly that place is?"

Noah coughed.

"Umm...not really?"

The boy stared at Madison's brother as if he said he was planning on eating spinach for breakfast.

"If it's so dangerous, then why were *you* in there?" Madison retorted, trying not to lash out at the bizarre stranger.

"I was helping my father," the boy snapped, still eyeing them with contempt.

"Look, we didn't mean to intrude," Madison piped up, "but we need to get back home to Maui. Is there any way to get off this island?"

The judgmental boy looked like he was conjuring up another scornful glare when realization washed over his face, turning into urgency.

"What're your names?"

Madison crossed her arms, still wary of the stranger.

"Madison Cooke," she spat begrudgingly while throwing a glance at her brother. "That's Noah. Who are *you*?"

The boy straightened his rumpled tunic the best he could.

"I am Lord Kai, son of Aquarius, High Governor of Atlantis. But I think you know very well who I am."

Madison slinked further away from him.

"I've never seen you in my life," she said, though her voice fell flat.

That's when everything clicked.

"*You!*" Madison suddenly gasped. "You're the mutant fish-boy I saw at the beach!"

"I'd really prefer *merman*, but let's not split scales here," the merman, Kai, began muttering inaudibly, pacing back and forth.

Then, he abruptly stopped at the sight of something.

"What is that in your hand?" He said harshly to Madison.

Kai had dropped his gaze to the moon pendant necklace Madison still had a death grip on.

"Give it to me," he said in a low voice.

"What?"

"Give it to me!" he suddenly roared at her.

Madison practically threw the necklace at Kai, not wanting to hold onto it any longer. The merman snatched the trinket out of midair, only to drop it instantly after.

"How did you..." he sputtered, scrambling away from the necklace as if it were a wasp nest. "No...you can't be..."

Madison and Noah huddled together, shaken, as Kai began to pace back and forth frantically.

"Pull it together, pull it together. You're a Cliffryde. A *Cliffryde*," he snapped at himself.

After several deep breaths and more aggressive murmuring, Kai locked eyes with Noah.

"I know you have one, too."

Madison watched Noah slide the snow globe further into his pocket.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said cleverly.

Kai loomed over him, the desperation in his eyes making Noah shrivel back.

"Give it to me, or I will leave you stranded on this island," Kai's voice was so urgent it was shaking.

Noah thrust out the snow globe, and Kai took it just as rapidly.

"Okay, rebels. You're both coming with me to the shore. Right this instant," he thundered at the siblings.

"Do you really expect us to follow you?" Noah shrieked, grabbing Madison by the arm to pull her behind him.

"Do you have another way off this place?" Kai countered, gesturing at the waves lapping the beach.

"What are we supposed to do? Swim to shore that's who-knows-how-far?" Madison shot back.

Kai rubbed his temples, like being around her and Noah was the most irritating thing in the world.

“Look, if you guys don’t even know what the Megalith is, then what I’m about to do will be *very* disturbing if I can’t get this through your head now. I’m a *Cliffryde*; I shouldn’t have to put up with such lucrative nonsense.” He paced back and forth. “Okay, I can’t exactly cover this up, now that you went through the Megalith and witnessed it firsthand. The floating objects you saw in the cave, the hurricane cyclone thing you fell through, it all has a very logical explanation, and that is...”

Kai stopped to rub his temples again and whispered something under his breath.

“And that is magic is real.”

Madison and Noah were both stunned and silent.

Then, a deranged, delirious, absurdly raucous laugh escaped Noah’s mouth.

“I knew it. I knew it!” Noah shrieked, nearly yanking Madison’s arm off.

“No, no, no. That’s...you’re all insane...that’s not a logical explanation, that’s...that’s...”

Madison’s head was spinning so much that the world was starting to look dizzy.

“Magic is impossible!”

“Okay, Miss Logic.” Kai was now towering over Madison, matching her animated tone.

“Let’s examine the facts, shall we? You survived a cyclone, a whirlpool, a collapsing cave, and you managed to bring out...” Kai trailed off to stare at the moon necklace, then violently shuddered. “Now, you’ve gone from Maui to an island across the ocean and have no explanation as to how. No person has ever been able to do what you two have done today.”

Kai’s stare seemed to twinkle slightly as he uttered the five words that changed everything.

“You’re not human, Madison and Noah. And you never have been.”

GIANNA OWENS