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Opening extract from
Atlantia

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CHAPTER 1

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.

"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 eat 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 in 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.