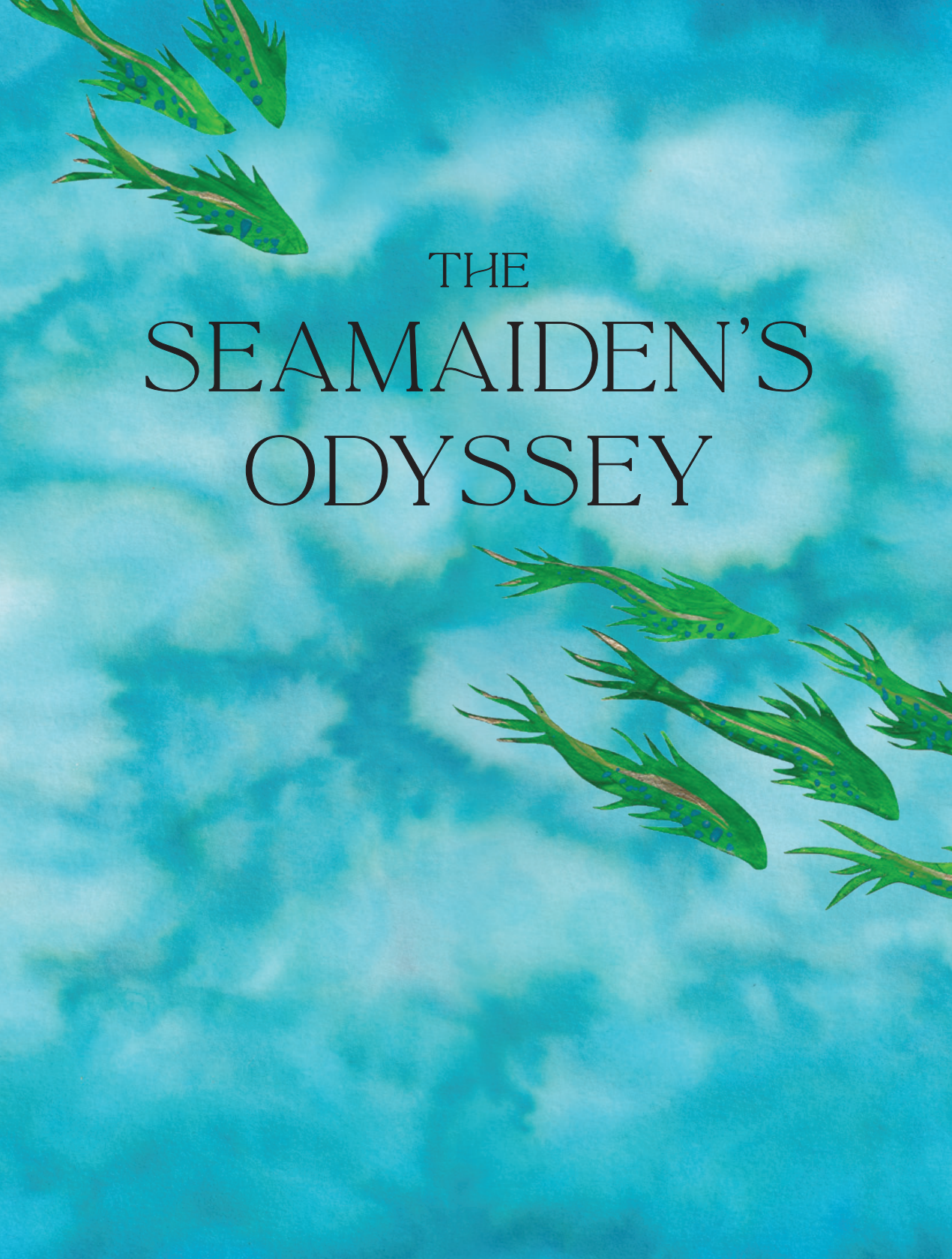
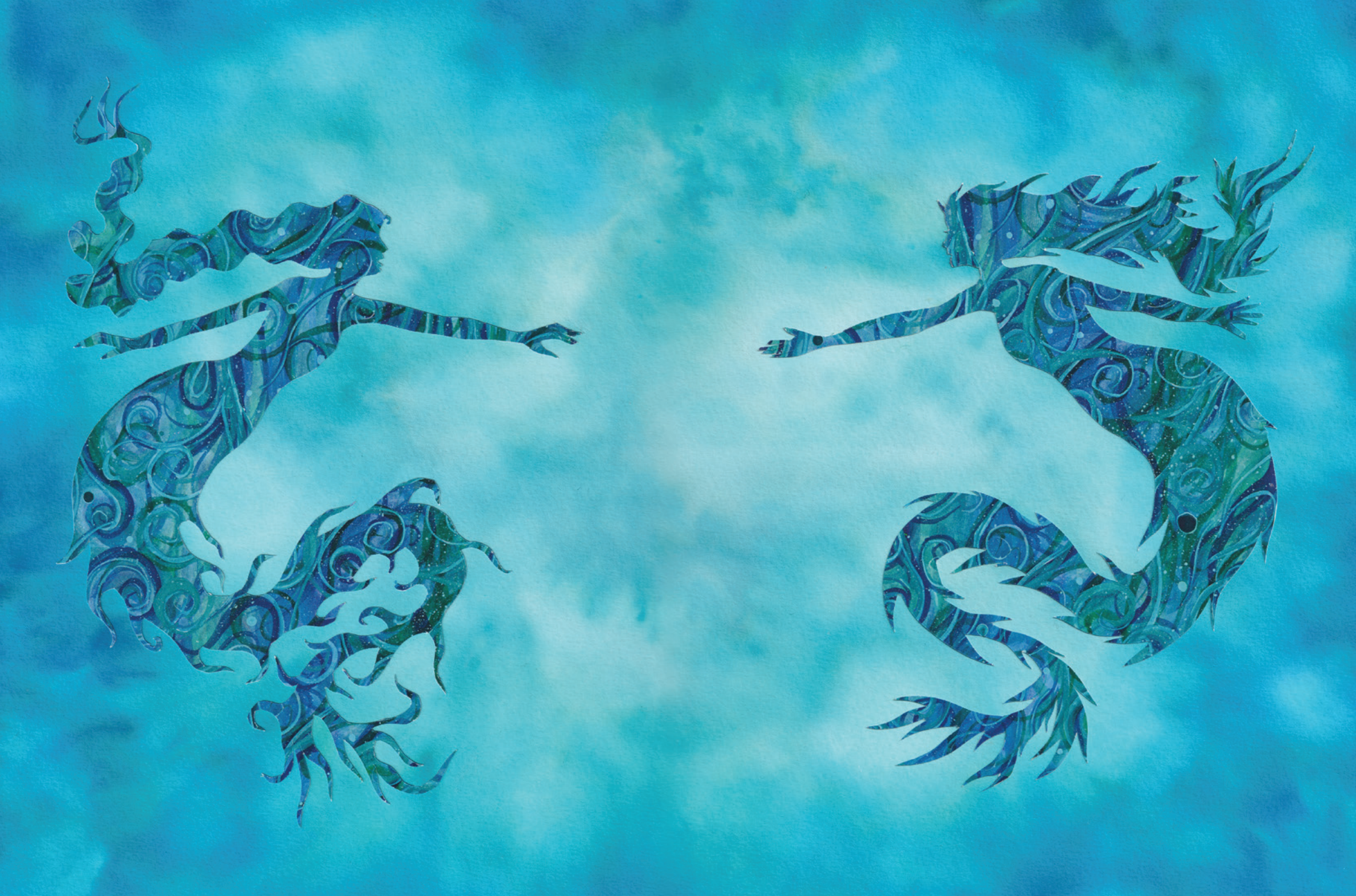

THE
SEAMAIDEN'S
ODYSSEY



For Billy – B.D.

For Errol Le Cain – T.R.

The Seamaiden's Odyssey is a uclanpublishing book

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by
uclanpublishing
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

Text copyright © Berlie Doherty, 2024
Illustrations copyright © Tamsin Rosewell, 2024

Hardback: 978-1-916747-19-7
Paperback: 978-1-916747-36-4

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The right of Berlie Doherty and Tamsin Rosewell to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work respectively has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Text design by Becky Chilcott.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

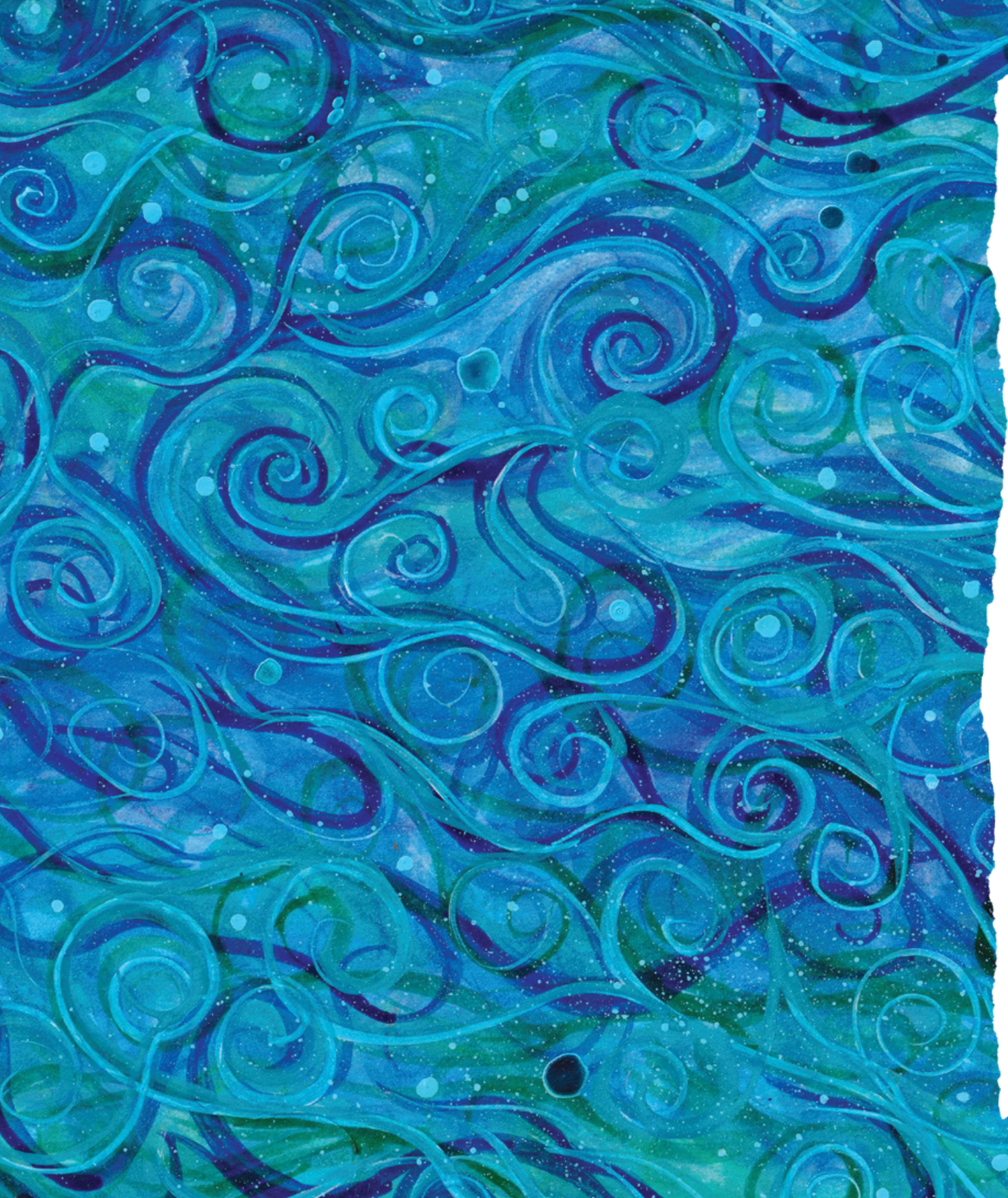
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Page Bros Ltd.

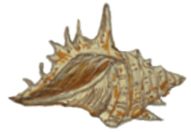
THE SEAMAIDEN'S ODYSSEY

BERLIE DOHERTY

TAMSIN ROSEWELL

uclanpublishing





PROLOGUE

IT WAS A GOLDEN AFTERNOON IN LATE October. Sasha Morgan lingered on her way home from her work at the Otterport Marine Life Sanctury to watch the incoming evening tide. The slipping sun had turned the sea to a glowing, liquid gold. The glitter on the waves was like tossed coins, ceaselessly flipping and spinning. Gulls were flocking round the old fishing boat, the *Sea Friend*, which was bobbing its way to shore. It belonged to Bill, a recently retired fisherman who had become a coastal volunteer for the sanctuary, patrolling the shores for signs of distressed and wounded sea animals.

When he noticed Sasha, Bill stood up in the boat, cupping his hands round his mouth to yell something to her. Faintly, she caught the words, 'I've found something wonderful for you!'.

She laughed and waved. He loved his work so much that everything was wonderful to him. *It looks as if I won't be going home tonight after all,* she thought, watching as Bill nosed the *Sea Friend* onto the entrance slipway of the sanctuary.

'Look, Sasha.' He was shouting with excitement. 'Look at this! Have you ever seen anything like it?'

He watched her face as she leant over the side of the boat. She gasped and pulled back instantly, her hands over her mouth. She stared at him in disbelief, then leant forwards to look again.

Lying in the hull of the boat was a writhing animal, flowing with brilliantly coloured strands like trailing ribbons of fins, or hair, shimmering with blue and gold and titanium. It was thrashing about, desperately trying to free itself from the weed-slimed ropes that were twined round it, tugging them away with what looked like . . . arms and hands. Like a human!

'Where on earth did you get this?' Sasha whispered.

Bill waved his hand vaguely out to sea. 'It was just floating, splashing, tangled up in those ropes. I thought – well, I didn't know what to think. I hauled it in to loosen the ropes and I couldn't believe what I'd found.'

Sasha stretched her hand out tentatively to touch the

creature's back. 'It's scaly!' she said, mystified. 'And yet – it has hands! What on earth is it?'

The animal moaned softly and twisted away from her. Sasha straightened up and shook her head. 'We'd better take it in straight away. It think it's in pain. It's wounded.'

With infinite care, they lifted the sea creature into the trailer and hauled it up through the big double doors of The Otterport Marine Life Sanctuary.

Sasha switched on the power, and carefully they lowered the creature into the inspection pool.

'It's beautiful.' Sasha breathed. 'Beautiful.'

'Aye,' Bill agreed. 'But what is it?'

The creature turned slowly onto its back. The colourful strands drifted away like feathery plumes and it gazed up at them, deeply afraid. It had the face of a young woman.



It appears to be a female mammal, Sasha wrote in the log, much later that night. She could hardly type out the words fast enough. *It was found and presented by* Bill Alderley *at 17:30. It weighs 55 kilograms and is roughly 160 centimetres long. The upper torso resembles that of a female human. The lower torso resembles a large fish.*

Yet it is neither fish nor human. She paused, wanting to write that it was an extraordinarily beautiful creature, but she refrained. That would not be a scientific observation. But *she*, definitely *she. She has sustained deep lacerations on the tail, which impedes her ability to swim. The size of her tail indicates that she is naturally capable of swimming long distances. It is my opinion that her injuries may be life-threatening and, certainly until they are healed, she should be nursed in the sanctuary. I have removed all the remaining ropes that had bound her. Either she had been caught in a net, or someone had tried to lasso her and drag her through the water. She was in a great deal of distress, as well as in considerable pain. She was crying. Lost and lonely and hurt and afraid. I'll never forget the sound of her voice, sobbing in pain. I have sedated her and, with advice from our medical team, I have begun the process of medication, logged elsewhere. I will take full responsibility for overseeing this healing process, and for conducting constant observations on her progress.*

Sasha closed down the log. She had no intention of going home tonight. Bill had left reluctantly, anxious to help, but she had assured him that there was nothing more he could do.

'You won't be releasing it back to the sea yet?' he had asked.

'Not till she's well enough,' Sasha said. 'Not till all the other scientists here have had time to study her.'

When Bill had gone, she went back to the side of the inspection pool and squatted down so she could see the beautiful sea animal again before she dimmed the lights.

'Don't be afraid,' Sasha whispered. 'All I want to do is to help you.'

To the owners and directors of the sanctuary, the arrival of the 'strange visitor', as they liked to call her, was a heaven-sent gift.

'It will be a huge source of revenue,' the Director of the Board of Trustees promised. 'And in the meantime, no amount of funding for your research will be spared. The finding of this singular specimen is of international scientific importance.' His voice brimmed with pride. 'And it is here, in our own sanctuary!'

There was a murmur of agreement round the table. Sasha glanced towards the inspection pool, feeling deeply uncomfortable. *We can't think of her as a specimen.* Privately, she thought of her as a woman of the sea, and had named her Marissa. In the days since her arrival, Sasha had scarcely left the building; had watched her and talked to her, coaxed her

to accept her medical care. To her amazement, Marissa had responded by gazing up at her with her dark, sorrowing eyes as if she understood what was being said. And then, just two days after Bill found her, Marissa spoke to her. At first her sounds were like delicate, broken bubbles, but gradually they became surer and recognisable. 'Thank you' had been her first words. And then, 'Take me home'.

Even though Sasha knew full well that she was acting against all the principles of teamwork and research, she kept this knowledge to herself. It was as though this private communication from Marissa was a gift and would shatter if it was shared.

'But along with government funding comes a specific clause. Education,' the director continued. 'It's not in the interests of general science to deny the public access to this phenomenon of the oceans. It is of enormous educational significance. It must be housed permanently in the viewing pool, open to the general public.' He rubbed his hands together, imagining the press interviews he would be asked to give. 'Our sanctuary will be a very popular venue for visitors, which will bring us much needed income. And we will need all the extra funds we can get to give this creature appropriate medical care and scientific support. We'll need to improve the visitor facilities. We could be sheltering it here for a long time.'

'No!' Sasha gasped. 'You mean, as a tourist attraction? You want to keep her in captivity . . . like a zoo animal?'

'At the moment, we are keeping it alive,' the director reminded her, and closed the meeting.

In Sasha's care, Marissa grew stronger by the day. The iridescent colours of her scales and tail brightened and, when they caught light, shimmered like titanium. At first, she could only roll in the water in a pitiful, lop-sided manner, but within weeks she was able to swim in a straight line from one end of the pool to the other; up and down, up and down, round and round. Finally, the public and parties of school children were allowed to come into the sanctuary to view her – with queues growing longer every day. The visitors gazed at Marissa with wonder and incredulity, took photographs, called out to her. Marine scientists of various specialisms studied her, weighed her, took blood and skin specimens, put on wetsuits and swam alongside her.

'It breaks my heart to see her being stared at and inspected like this,' Sasha confided in Bill. He had taken to calling in at the sanctuary from time to time, to see how Marissa was progressing. 'It makes me think we shouldn't have brought her here in the first place. She doesn't belong here.'

'What else could we have done?' Bill asked. 'It – she – was a wounded animal. That's what the sanctuary's here for, isn't it? To look after injured sea creatures.'

'Not to put them on parade, though. Maybe we should have left her where you found her, in her own environment, to cope as best she could.'

'I'm struggling to understand you,' said Bill, raising his hands up in a gesture of annoyance. 'I've sometimes risked my life to bring injured animals to the sanctuary. And, as far as I can tell, you've abandoned your social life and work here all the hours God sends to look after them! And now you're saying we should just leave them to fend for themselves after all?'

A difficult silence hung between them. 'It's a question that all conservationists should ask themselves,' Sasha said slowly. 'Do we have the right to intervene with nature in order to preserve it?'

Bill paced to the observation pool and stared into it. Below the surface, the sea creature seemed to be sleeping, motionless. 'She doesn't seem to be bothered by all this attention.'

'She doesn't even seem to notice it. It's as if all those visitors are invisible.'

Bill laughed. 'There you are then. Stop worrying.'

When he had gone, Sasha took up her usual place at the side of the pool and called softly, 'Marissa. They've all gone now.'

This was their quiet, private time – a time of simple friendship. Not even Bill knew their secret. It was a great wonder to Sasha that Marissa could speak, and in words that she understood. The language she used did not come easily to her, as natural speech would, but were like drifting syllables from half-remembered songs. Now Marissa rose to the surface of the viewing pool and began to sing. Her voice was sweet and sad, the words strange and filled with the sound of longing. 'That is my home song,' she said quietly.

Sasha closed her eyes. She knew what Marissa wanted. Any other animal would have been released back to the wild by now. 'Not yet,' the scientists kept repeating. 'We're still studying her.'

'Not yet,' the director said. 'She's too important to the sanctuary.'

Not yet, Sasha's heart said. *She needs my care. I need her.*

'Marissa, can you tell me about your home, and how you know my language?' she asked. Up until now, she had never asked her direct questions about her past, or her life in the sea. 'What's your real name?'

'My name is my private self,' Marissa responded with quiet dignity.

Sasha bowed her head slightly. 'I'm sorry. I do understand. And yet – we've learnt a lot from studying you. All kinds of scientific documents and articles will be written about you. I have files and files of information. But, in fact, we know nothing about you at all – where you lived before you came here, how you live, what kind of society you come from.' She hesitated at the word 'society' but couldn't think of a better one. 'I wish I knew your story. For me, I mean. Just me. I just want to know you better.'

Marissa frisked away from her, diving down to the deepest part of the pool. It was a playful, childish movement, but it hurt Sasha. She dimmed the lights and closed up the sanctuary for

the night. Outside, the sea's voice surged. Ripples like sighing voices lapped against the wall. She leant against the railings, gazing out into the deep, navy darkness. How mysterious the sea is, how wide and wild and unknowable, how little we'll ever learn about its creatures. *I'll never get to know Marissa, not really,* she thought. *Perhaps it isn't possible for us to be friends. I have no right to expect it.*

As each day passed, Sasha longed to know more about Marissa. She still found it hard to take her eyes off her. When she was working at her desk, she kept glancing out of the viewing room window, just watching her, admiring her lovely, easy grace and the brilliance of her colours. But now, since that night, Sasha noticed a change in Marissa. Her movements had slowed, her swimming had become sluggish. She often stayed for hours underwater, ignoring calls for her to let visitors see her. She hardly ever came to talk to Sasha at the end of the day, and, if she did, she was listless and barely communicative. Her colours were actually fading, Sasha realised. Her ribbons and strands were growing limp, wrapping themselves together like bunches of old seaweed instead of streaming behind her like a glorious

peacock tail. And yet, the results of her medical tests were fine. She was healthy and strong.

'Marissa,' Sasha said one evening. 'What's wrong?'

'You know what's wrong. You pretend to care for me, yet you think you own me.'

The words hung between them into a painful silence. It was as if they were both, now, measuring the meaning of 'care for'. Did she mean care as in look after, or care as in to have deep friendship for? And was the friendship mutual? Yes, they both knew it was.

'And yet,' Marissa whispered, 'you have turned me into an object, something to be stared at. An . . . exhibit.'

Sasha was wounded by the strength of Marissa's last remark. Yet she knew Marissa was absolutely right. 'I'm sorry,' she said, awkward because she knew that was not enough. 'We just want to keep you safe.'

Marissa had turned onto her back and was gazing away from Sasha, as if she could see something far away in the depths of her memory. 'You asked me about my home. My real home.'

'I'm sorry,' Sasha said again. 'I realise now that it made you sad.'

'Of course it made me sad. Listen, you are very kind, and you've looked after me and made me well again, and so I have a story for you. It's about my people. But I want something in return.'

Sasha breathed out slowly. She thought she'd ruined everything by asking too much.

'Yes, that's fine,' she said.

'You promise?' asked Marissa.

'Yes, Marissa. I promise.'



1

'MERRYN WOULD NEVER FORGET THE day her sister Jania was stolen,' Marissa began. 'It haunted her like a ghostly shark shadow, never leaving her . . .'

There was the sound of screaming, of wailing songs, of utter turmoil above her head. She struck up through the water, desperate to find the cause of the harrowing cries. When she neared the surface, she saw her sisters and her mother in a huddle of terror, frantically trying to pull apart the thick ropes of a net. Something was inside it, and now she could see that it was her sister – her beautiful favourite sister-friend.

'Jania!' Merryn screamed, and her sister turned her terrified face towards her as the net was hauled up out of the water towards a boat of jeering men-monsters.



'Come here, my beauty. Let me get my arms round you!' one of the men shouted.

The more Jania struggled to be free, the more her arms become entangled in the ropes of the net. Terrified by the men's yells and coarse laughter, Merryn's older sisters, Edyn and Tesh, and her Aunt Hanin dropped away from the net one by one,



their arms held high in supplication. Only their mother clung on. One of the men shouted, 'Are you coming too, old witch?' He drove a hooked stick down towards her, and with a despairing wail she flung up her arms and fell backwards into the sea. Her eyes streamed with blood.

Helpless now, the sisters watched as the men dragged the net on to their fishing boat. Crabs and fishes and a dolphin were flung unwanted overboard, and the boat skimmed away with the high waves tossing around it. Merryn was quite sure she would never see Jania again. She could hear her screams, she could hear the shouts and excited laughter of the fishermen as the boat sped away with its precious cargo, and the seagulls streamed round it, filling the air with their sobbing cries.

'Save yourselves, my sisters!' Jania's distant voice rang out and then faded – as the light of the setting sun fades into the ocean, into memory, into dreams.

Of course, it was never forgotten. As soon as he heard what had happened to his favourite daughter, the Sea Lord created a storm to try to wreck the boat and free her, but it was too late. Now he turned his rage against Jania herself. 'She disobeyed me!'

he shouted. 'She brought all this on herself. Don't weep for her. Don't mourn for her, daughters. She deserved what happened to her. She's gone – gone for ever – and it's her fault. I have no pity for her now. I have no love left for her. Look what she's done to her mother. Her life is broken, she is in darkness. Take warning, daughters, or you too will be lost.'

No amount of consoling or reasoning would make him see that Jania was not to blame. He was beside himself with anger and grief, and he and the Sea Queen swam away from the place where it had all happened. His many other daughters and sons lived in scattered parts of the oceans, and he needed to be with them now and to tell them the tragic story of their stolen sister. He left Merryn and his other young daughters Edyn and Tesh in the care of gentle Aunt Hanin and Kessa, their ancient grandmother. She had nursed and taught all her grandchildren until they were old enough to make their own homes and families in different parts of the world's oceans. Jania, the twins and Merryn were the youngest of them all, and now Jania had gone.

'This terrible business has broken your father's heart, and turned your mother's world to darkness,' Kessa told the girls. 'Your elders have grown old before their time.'

'And all because of Jania's foolishness,' Aunt Hanin added. 'That's why your father is so angry.'

Merryn was confused. She had never seen her father behave like this before. 'But what did Jania do?' she asked. '*How* did she bring this upon herself, as Father said?'

Grandmother Kessa shook her head sadly. 'Just keep away from menfolk,' was all she would say. 'Never let them see you, that's the thing.'

'I think Jania went to the surface of the sea,' Edyn whispered. 'In daylight!'

'On her own,' Tesh added in hushed tones, her eyes wide with wonder. 'She often did it. She said she'd take me one day.'

'And me,' Edyn said, not to be outdone. 'She promised me too. She couldn't take you without me.'

'She didn't mention you.' Tesh swished her head so her hair strands streamed like waves of light.

Grandmother Kessa, the grand-she of all the seawomen, cruised towards the twins, separating them with a thrust of her scaly arms. Her voice was so deep these days that it was like the distant booming of waves in caverns. 'I hear you!' she said. '*Never* go to the surface of the sea unguarded. *Never* be seen.

Menfolk will never befriend you. They only want to own you, or to do you harm. I have travelled the many oceans of the world for a thousand of our years, and I know this is true.'

For a long time afterwards, the young sisters stayed deep in the sea; so deep and dark there were hardly any flickers of sunlight filtering down. From time to time one or other of the twins, usually Edyn, would float right up to the surface, but if any boats were in sight they would dive deep down again until they felt sure they were safe. Then they would giggle and boast about their daring. They would tell Merryn tales of the seabirds and the clouds that they saw in the huge sky, and of the rocking boats that looked like birds as they spread their sails and skimmed across the water.

Sometimes, Kessa would take Merryn up to the surface at night-time to breathe the strange air and feel its dry, cool touch on her skin. In the safety of the darkness, Merryn loved to see the glimmer of millions of stars in the black sky, the changing shape of the moon and the reflections of silvery sparkle on the dark water.

'We're so lucky to live in this beautiful world of sea and sky,' Kessa told her, her voice dreamy and soft with the wonders that

she loved to share with her young ones. 'And this is the best time of all, this starry time.'

'But what's day like?' Merryn asked, longing for more.

'You'll find out, when you're ready.' Grandmother Kessa shook away the tiny fish that were feeding inside her frills and streamers.

'I'm ready now! I'm old enough. Edyn and Tesh go to the surface now, in full daylight, and you know it. And they're not much older than me. They watch the dolphins leaping!'

'Enough! I am your guardian,' Kessa said firmly, 'and I have to keep you safe. I must do as your father wishes. Now that Jania has gone, he wants me to instruct you in the ways of the sea and the ways of our world, and that means keeping you away from landfolk.'

'But why? Why me?'

'Because you're special, Merryn.'

Merryn splashed around her in a small tight circle of impatience. 'Why do I have to be special? I don't *want* to be special,' she muttered. 'And what does it mean, anyway? Youngest? Does that make me special? But there's always been a youngest, and now I'm the last of them. You told me Father has more than a

hundred daughters round the seas, and they're all older than me. Oh, but I want to meet them! I want to travel the oceans, like they have. I want to know everything about everywhere! And one day, I will!'

'Stop trying to create a storm, Merryn. You're wearing me out,' sighed Kessa. She yawned, and then fell asleep.

Edyn and Tesh laughed at Merryn. 'We'll tell you what *special* means. It means you have to do what Father says!' they taunted. They flicked themselves into twisting somersaults and swam up into the light of day, their privilege for not being special. Aunt Hanin swam after them, scolding and laughing at the same time, remembering her own impatience to touch the outside world.

It wasn't as if Merryn was unhappy. After all, down near the seabed she was as free as any of the sea creatures who floated and flickered around her. It never occurred to her that she was different from any of them. Her friends were the ocean animals, the seals and the brilliant fishes, the turtles; she liked to chase the shoals of smaller fishes and to follow them into all their spaces. Water was her element. Sometimes she shared her

games with Daw, her closest friend, though now that they were growing older, he had become strangely shy of her . . . and she of him. She saw how his colours were growing deeper, while hers were becoming more vivid. And if she was watching him, aware now of how strong and good-looking he was becoming, she thrilled at the thought that he might be watching her too. Chasing games were no longer competitive. She had always been faster than he or the twins, but Daw had become stronger now and could plough through the water for hours on end. Sometimes he'd swum alongside her, deliberately teasing her, so that he could whisk and dodge around her till she tumbled against him and away again, both gasping with the fun and joy of it.

But now, as if the familiar currents had changed, everything was different. Edyn and Tesh had secrets of their own that they no longer wanted to share with her. Daw stopped coming to see her. Grandmother Kessa was always at her side – teaching her, telling her stories, her constant companion – but Merryn longed for the friends of her childhood. She found herself watching out for Daw, and when he did turn up, she feigned indifference.

'Where do you go when you're not here?' she asked, carelessly twisting her hair.

'Oh, with my brothers. They go into deeper waters than this. It's cold and dark and exciting, Merryn! Strange creatures that I've never seen before swim there, slow as mountains! Sometimes they take me to see islands and the strange land creatures who live on them, but we have to be careful not to be seen.'

'What are they like, the land creatures?'

'They're all different from us and they're all different from each other,' he told her. 'Some of them have tails, and others don't. Some walk on two legs, some on four. And hardly any of them have scales. I don't know where to start. The land creatures are wonderful and strange, but they can also be dangerous.'

The horror of the day Jania was stolen from the sea came flashing back to her. She heard again the jeering, shouting voices, the loud laughter; the sounds of land-men. It was not like any other sound she had ever heard. And she never wanted to hear it again.

'I'd like to see what land looks like, all the same,' she said wistfully. 'I wish I could go with you.'

'You'd be terrified.'

'Of course I wouldn't!' Merryn replied fiercely.

Daw swam away from her with strong, powerful strokes, turned once to wave, and dived up towards the light.

Is this it then? Merryn wondered. *Am I supposed to stick around here for ever, just because my father wants me to? What are they really like, these distant oceans of the world?* She tried to imagine the strange creatures of the deep waters, and the frisking of dolphins on the surface. Must she dabble with the small fry, and collect pebbles and shells and make pretty gardens with them, as if she were a child? Even Edyn and Tesh had better things to do these days than visit Merryn. When they came, they filled her heart with pictures of where they'd been and what they'd seen, and their stories were like distant dreams.

Sometimes she swam after them, desperate to keep up and share their adventures. She saw them mingling with her brothers and other boys. Sometimes she picked out Daw, with the familiar flash of white in his hair. But when she swam to join them, Grandmother Kessa always knew, always sang to her to come back, and then, laughing, Tesh or Edyn would grasp her hand and swim her home. 'Not yet, not yet!' they would say, full of mystery.

'Why are you keeping me away from everything?' Merryn demanded of her grandmother. 'Let me go. You have to let me go!'

'I can't,' Kessa said. 'You have to stay here until your father comes back.'

'Then I hate my father!'

Kessa looked at her sharply, then decided to ignore what she had said. Maybe hate was too big an emotion for her to talk about.

'And why doesn't he come to see me, if he thinks I'm so special? Why doesn't my mother come?'

'They're far away now. The world is huge, and it takes a long, long time to travel all the way round it, as they must when they visit all their children. You know that, Merryn. It's always like that. We have our turn for his visits. And he is ill with sadness, and so is your mother. All he wants, all he really wants, is to be able to bring Jania home.'

'Then why doesn't he? Surely there must be a way?'

Kessa shook her head sadly. 'There is no way. Once a seamaid crosses onto the land world, we who are left behind are helpless. She has to find her own way back, by showing that she's stronger than the men who stole her away. No one has ever returned to

the sea. So your parents must grieve, and they must rest. Be sure, they'll come back to you one day.'

Merryn turned away. *What a strange life it is for them,* she thought. *Lord and Lady of the Seas. Never settling anywhere. But seeing everything! That would be wonderful, to see the whole of our world! What a curious adventure!*

'I heard you asking Daw about landfolk,' Kessa said. 'I'll take you up to the surface very soon, and you can watch them from a distance and see daylight world for yourself.'

'Now!' Merryn was thrilled. 'Can we go now?'

'I need to show you something else first. Come with me – we have other, stranger, things in our oceans than the creatures Daw described.'

They floated slowly together for several hours till they came to a cold area full of huge rocks that reared up, away from the seabed. Scattered among them lay strange metal spars and crusted wooden shafts.

'These are the sunken ships that foundered on these rocks on stormy nights. They were once the sea homes of land-men,' the old seawoman said, shaking her head sorrowfully. 'They lived in them while they travelled over the water, but when the ships

sank, the land-men drowned. There are wrecks like throughout the oceans.'

'*Men can't live in the sea, and we can't live on the land. The sea is ours, and the land is theirs. This is where we belong.*' Merryn slowly repeated the words she had learnt as a child. It was a kind of mantra, but it had meant nothing to her till now. Now she knew what the sea could do to the people who didn't belong there.

'That's right! Always remember that.'

'But at least they tried!' Merryn protested. 'Wasn't it brave of them! Doesn't it show how much they wanted to know about our world? Why is the sea so cruel to them? Why do they risk their lives by coming out on the sea at all? And why *should* they have to stay where they belong! What does that mean anyway? What does it mean to belong anywhere?'

'Well, do these belong here, Merryn?' Kessa floated down to the tangles of weed-strewn skeletons that were thrown around the ship's wreckage. 'Bones of dead land-men. You can touch them if you want.'

Merryn shuddered and drew away. 'No! I couldn't!'

'Go on. Touch them.'



Timidly, Merryn stretched out her fingers towards the bones. 'I can't,' she whispered. Yet, she was fascinated. She couldn't take her eyes off them, wondering how these drowned men had looked when they were living, moving creatures. Men and boys, like Daw and his brothers. But not like them. What would it feel like, to be close to living men? To touch them? Would it be as frightening as touching their cold bones?

Kessa's sleepy voice interrupted her thoughts. 'Oh, they can't harm you, not now. But never touch their living bodies. And never, never let them touch yours.'

Wearily, the old seawoman stretched herself out and slept. She had her eyes closed but, as Merryn knew well, half her brain was alert for any sounds of danger. She had promised the Sea Lord that Merryn would be kept safe at all times.

Merryn squeezed through the hatches, into the smashed cabins of the sunken wrecks and wondered about the strange creatures who once lived in them. She glided round the skeletons, listening through the silence for their lost voices. Finally, cautiously, she dared to reach out to the pale bones of the long-dead men. Her fingers touched a skull and gently turned it over. A crab scuttled out of its gaping mouth.