

It is nearly dawn, and the semi-darkness casts strange shadows along the footpath. Hana distracts her mind so that she doesn't imagine creatures reaching for her ankles. She is following her mother down to the sea. Her nightdress streams behind her in the soft wind. Quiet footsteps pad behind them, and she knows without looking back that her father is following with her little sister still asleep in his arms. On the shore, a handful of women are already waiting for them. She recognises their faces in the rising dawn light, but the shaman is a stranger. The holy woman wears a red and royal blue traditional hanbok dress, and as soon as they descend upon the sand, the shaman begins to dance.

The huddling figures step away from her twirling motions and form into a small group, mesmerised by the shaman's grace. She chants a greeting to the Dragon Sea God, welcoming him to their island, beckoning him to travel through the bamboo gates towards Jeju's tranquil shores. The sun sparkles on

the horizon, a pinpoint of iridescent gold, and Hana blinks at the newness of the coming day. It is a forbidden ceremony, outlawed by the occupying Japanese government, but her mother is insistent upon holding a traditional gut ritual before her first dive as a fully-fledged haenyeo. The shaman is asking for safety and a bountiful catch. As the shaman repeats the words over and over, Hana's mother nudges her shoulder and together they bow, foreheads touching the wet sand, to honour the Dragon Sea God's imminent arrival. As she stands, her sister's sleepy voice whispers, 'I want to dive, too,' and the yearning in her voice tugs on Hana's heart. 'You will be standing here one day soon, Little Sister, and I will be right beside you to welcome you,' she whispers back, confident of the future that lies ahead of them.

Salty seawater drips down her temple, and she wipes it away with the back of her hand. I am a haenyeo now, Hana thinks, watching the shaman twirl white ribbons in circles along the shore. She reaches for her sister's small hand. Side by side they stand, listening to the waves tumbling onto the beach. The ocean is the only sound as the small group silently acknowledges her acceptance into their order. When the sun rises fully above the ocean waves, she will dive with the haenyeo in deeper waters and take her place among the women of the sea. But first they must return to their homes in secret, hidden from prying eyes.



Hana, come home. Her sister's voice is loud in her ears, jolting her back to the present, to the room and the soldier still asleep on the floor beside her. The ceremony fades into the darkness. Desperate not to let it go, Hana squeezes her eyes shut.

She has been held captive for nearly two months, but time moves painfully slowly in this place. She tries not to look back on what she has endured, what they force her to do, what they command her to be. At home, she was someone else, something else.

Ages seem to have passed since then, and Hana feels nearer to the grave than to memories of home. Her mother's face swimming up to meet her in the waters. The salt water on her lips. Fragments of memories of a happier place.

The ceremony was one of power and strength, just like the women of the sea, just like Hana. The soldier lying next to her stirs. He will not defeat her, she promises herself. She lies awake all night imagining how she will escape.

Hana

Jeju Island, Summer 1943

Hana is sixteen and knows nothing but a life lived under occupation. Japan annexed Korea in 1910, and Hana speaks fluent Japanese, is educated in Japanese history and culture, and is prohibited from speaking, reading or writing in her native Korean. She is a second-class citizen with second-class rights in her own country, but that does not diminish her Korean pride. Hana and her mother are *haenyeo*, women of the sea, and they work for themselves. They live in a tiny village on Jeju Island's southern coast and dive in a cove hidden from the main road that leads into town. Hana's father is a fisherman. He navigates the South Sea with the other village men, evading imperial fishing boats that loot Korea's coastal waters for produce to repatriate back to Japan. Hana and her mother only interact with Japanese soldiers when they go to market to sell their day's catch. It creates a sense of freedom not many on the other side of the island, or even on

mainland Korea, a hundred miles to the north, enjoy. The occupation is a taboo topic, especially at market; only the brave dare to broach it, and even then only in whispers and behind cupped hands. The villagers are tired of the heavy taxes, the forced *donations* to the war effort, and the taking of men to fight on the front lines and children to work in factories in Japan.

On Hana's island, diving is women's work. Their bodies suit the cold depths of the ocean better than men's. They can hold their breath longer, swim deeper, and keep their body temperature warmer, so for centuries, Jeju women have enjoyed a rare independence. Hana followed her mother into the sea at an early age. Learning to swim began the moment she could lift her head on her own, though she was nearly eleven the first time her mother took her into the deeper waters and showed her how to cut an abalone from a rock on the sea floor. In her excitement, Hana lost her breath sooner than expected and had to race upwards for air. Her lungs burned. When she finally broke the surface, she breathed in more water than oxygen. Sputtering with her chin barely above the waves, she was disorientated and began to panic. A sudden swell rolled over her, submerging her in an instant. She swallowed more water as her head dipped beneath the surface.

With one hand, her mother lifted Hana's face above the water. Hana gulped in air between racking coughs. Her nose and throat burned. Her mother's hand, secured at the nape of her neck, reassured her until she recovered.

'Always look to the shore when you rise, or you can lose your way,' her mother said, and turned Hana to face the land. There on the sand, her younger sister sat protecting the buckets containing the day's catch. 'Look for your sister after each dive. Never forget. If you see her, you are safe.'

When Hana's breaths had returned to normal, her mother released her and commenced diving with a slow forward somersault down into

the ocean's depths. Hana watched her sister a few moments longer, taking in the serene sight of her resting on the beach, waiting for her family to return from the sea. Fully recovered, Hana swam to the buoy and added her abalone to her mother's catch, which was stowed safely in a net. Then she performed her own somersault, down into the ocean's thrumming interior, in search of another sea creature to add to their harvest.

Her sister was too young to dive with them when they were that far from the shore. Sometimes, when Hana surfaced, she would look first to the shore to find her sister chasing after seagulls, waving sticks wildly in the air. She was like a butterfly dancing across Hana's sightline.

Hana was already seven years old when her sister was finally born. She had worried she would be an only child her whole life. She had wished for a younger sibling for so long – all of her friends had two, three, or sometimes even four brothers and sisters to play with each day and to share the burden of household chores, while she had to suffer everything alone. But then her mother became pregnant, and Hana swelled with such hope that she beamed each time she caught a glimpse of her mother's growing stomach.

'You're much fatter today, aren't you, Mother?' she asked the morning of her sister's birth.

'Very, very fat and uncomfortable!' her mother replied, and tickled Hana's taut stomach.

She tumbled onto her back and giggled with delight. Once she had caught her breath, Hana sat beside her mother and placed a hand on the outermost curve of her bulging stomach.

'My sister or brother must be nearly done, right, Mother?'

'Nearly done? You speak as though I'm boiling rice inside my belly, silly girl!'

'Not rice, my new sister . . . or brother,' Hana added quickly, and felt a timid kick against her hand. 'When will she, or he, come out?'

‘Such an impatient daughter sits before me.’ Her mother shook her head in resignation. ‘Which would you prefer, a sister or a brother?’

Hana knew the correct answer was a brother, so that her father would have a son to share his fishing knowledge with, but in her head she answered differently. *I hope you have a daughter, so that one day, she can swim in the sea with me.*

Her mother went into labour that evening, and when they showed Hana her baby sister, she couldn’t contain her happiness. She smiled the widest smile her face had ever known, yet tried with all her might to speak as though she was disappointed.

‘I’m sorry that she is not a son, Mother, truly sorry,’ Hana said, shaking her head in mock sorrow.

Then Hana turned to her father and pulled his shirtsleeve. He leaned down, and she cupped her hands around his ear.

‘Father, I must confess something to you. I’m very sorry for you, that she is not a son to learn your fishing skills, but . . .’ She took a deep breath before finishing. ‘But I’m so happy I have a sister to swim with.’

‘Is that so?’ he asked.

‘Yes, but don’t tell Mother.’

At seven years old, Hana was not skilled in the art of whispering, and gentle laughter rippled through the group of her parents’ closest friends. Hana grew quiet. Her ears burned. She hid behind her father and peeked at her mother from underneath his arm to see if she had also heard. Her mother gazed at her eldest daughter and then looked down at the hungry infant suckling her breast and whispered to her newest daughter, just loud enough for Hana to hear.

‘You are the most loved little sister in the whole of Jeju Island. Do you know that? No one will ever love you more than your big sister.’

When she looked up at Hana, she motioned for her to come to her

side. The adults in the room grew quiet as Hana knelt beside her mother.

‘You are her protector now, Hana,’ her mother said in a serious tone.

Hana gazed at her tiny baby sister. She reached out to caress the black tuft of hair sprouting from her scalp.

‘She’s so soft,’ Hana said with wonder.

‘Did you hear what I said? You are a big sister now, and with that comes responsibilities, and the first one is that of protector. I won’t always be around; diving in the sea and selling at the market keeps us fed, and it will be left up to you to watch over your little sister from now on when I can’t. Can I rely on you?’ her mother asked, her voice stern.

Hana’s hand shot back to her side. She bowed her head and dutifully answered.

‘Yes, Mother, I will keep her safe. I promise.’

‘A promise is forever, Hana. Never forget.’

‘I will remember, Mother, always,’ Hana said, her eyes glued onto her little sister’s peacefully dozing face. Milk dripped from the side of the baby’s open mouth, and her mother wiped it with a swipe of her thumb.

As the years passed, and Hana began to dive with her mother in the deeper waters, she grew accustomed to seeing her sister in the distance, the girl who shared her blankets at night and whispered silly stories into the darkness, until she finally succumbed to sleep. The girl who laughed at everything and anything, a sound that made everyone nearby join in. She became Hana’s anchor, to the shore and to life.



Hana knows that protecting her sister means keeping her away from Japanese soldiers. Her mother has drilled the lesson into her: *Never let*

them see you! And most of all, do not let yourself be caught alone with one! Her mother's words of warning are filled with an ominous fear, and at sixteen Hana feels lucky this has never happened. But that changes on a hot summer day.

It is late in the afternoon, long after the other divers have gone to the market, when Hana first sees Corporal Morimoto. Her mother wanted to fill an extra net for a friend who was ill and couldn't dive that day. Her mother is always the first to offer help. Hana comes up for air and looks to the shore. Her sister is squatting on the sand, shading her eyes to look out towards Hana and their mother. At nine years of age, her sister is now old enough to stay on the shore alone but still too young to swim in the deeper waters with Hana and her mother. She is small for her age and not yet a strong swimmer.

Hana has just found a large conch and is ready to shout at her sister to express her joy, when she notices a man heading towards the beach. Treading water so that she can lift herself higher to see him more clearly, Hana realises the man is a Japanese soldier. Her stomach knots into a sudden cramp. Why is he here? They never come this far from the villages. She scans the beach within the cove to see if there are more, but he's the only one. He is heading straight for her sister.

A ridge of rocks shields her sister from his view, but it won't do so for long. If he stays on his current path, he will stumble upon her, and then he will take her away – ship her off to a factory in Japan like the other young girls who disappear from the villages. Her sister isn't strong enough to survive factory work or the brutal conditions they are subjected to. She is too young, and too loved, to be taken away.

Searching the horizon for her mother, Hana realises she is down below, oblivious to the Japanese soldier heading towards the water's edge. She has no time to wait for her mother to resurface, and even if she did, her mother is too far away, hunting near the edge of the reef

where it drops into a cavernous void with no sea floor in sight for miles. It is Hana's job to protect her little sister. She made a promise to her mother, and she intends to keep it.

Hana dives beneath the waves, swimming at full speed towards the beach. She can only hope to reach her sister before the soldier does. If she can distract him long enough, perhaps her sister can slip away and hide in the nearby cove, and then Hana can escape back into the ocean. Surely he wouldn't follow her into the water?

The current crushes against her as though desperate to push her back out to sea, towards safety. Panicking, she breaches the water's surface and takes in a deep breath, catching a glimpse of the soldier's progress. He is still headed for the rocky ledge.

She starts to swim above the waves, aware she is exposing herself but unable to bear staying too long beneath the water for fear of missing the soldier's advance. Hana is halfway to her sister when she sees him stop. He digs in his pocket for something. Plunging her head back into the water, she swims even faster. In her next breath, she sees him light a cigarette. With every subsequent breath, he moves just a little more. He blows out a puff of smoke, takes a drag, breathes it out, again and again with each lift of her head, until the last breath, when he looks out at the sea and notices Hana's race towards him.

Only ten metres away from the shore, she hopes he can't see her little sister from where he stands. She is still hidden by the rocks, but not for long. Her small hands are on the stony sand, and she is beginning to push herself up to standing. Hana can't shout at her to stay down. She swims faster.

Hana pitches beneath the surface, pulling the water out of her way with each stroke, until her hands touch the sandy ground. Then she shoots to her feet and runs through the last few metres of shallow water. If he has called out to her as she runs to the ledge, she can't hear him. Her heart thunders in her ears, blocking out all sound. It feels

like she has travelled across half the earth in that sprint to the shore, but she can't stop yet. Her feet fly across the sand towards her sister, who is smiling at her in ignorance and preparing to greet Hana. Before her sister can speak, Hana lunges at her, seizing her shoulders and knocking her to the ground.

She covers her sister's mouth with her hand to keep her from crying out. When she sees Hana's face hovering above her, she knows better than to cry. Hana gives her a look only a little sister would understand. She pushes her sister into the sand, wishing she could bury her to hide her from the soldier's sight, but she has no time.

'Where did you go?' the soldier calls down to Hana. He is standing on a low rock ledge overlooking the beach. If he stands on the edge he could look down and see them both lying beneath him. 'Has the mermaid transformed into a girl?'

His boots crunch on the stones above them. Her sister's trembling body feels fragile in Hana's hands. Her fear is contagious, and Hana, too, begins to tremble. She realises there is nowhere for her sister to run. From his vantage point, he can see in every direction. They will both have to escape into the ocean, but her sister can't swim for very long. Hana can remain in the deep water for hours, but her little sister will drown if the soldier decides to wait them out. She has no plan. No escape. The realisation sits heavy in her gut.

Slowly, she releases her sister's mouth and takes one last look into her frightened face before standing. His eyes are sharp, and she feels their piercing touch as they creep over her body.

'Not a girl, but a grown woman,' he says, and lets out a low, grumbling laugh.

He is wearing a beige uniform and field boots, with a cap that shades his face. His eyes are black like the rocky ledge beneath his feet. Hana is still recovering from her swim to shore, and each time she gasps for breath, he glances at her chest. Her white cotton diving

shirt is thin and she hurriedly covers her breasts with her hair. Her cotton shorts drip water down her shivering legs.

‘What are you hiding from me?’ he asks, trying to peer over the ledge.

‘Nothing,’ Hana quickly answers. She steps away from her sister, willing his gaze to follow her. ‘It’s just . . . a special catch. I didn’t want you to think it was not claimed. It’s mine, you see.’ She hauls one of the buckets onto the ledge, leading him further away from where her sister lies.

His attention remains on Hana. After a pause, he glances out to sea and up and down the beach.

‘Why are you still here? All the other divers have gone off to the market.’

‘My friend is ill, so I’m catching her share so she won’t go hungry.’ It is a partial truth and comes easily.

He keeps looking around as though searching for witnesses. Hana looks out to her mother’s buoy, but she is not there. She still hasn’t seen the soldier or even noticed Hana’s absence. Hana begins to worry her mother is in trouble beneath the surface. Too many thoughts flood her mind. He starts to inspect the edge of the rock ledge once more, as though he senses her sister’s presence beneath him. Hana thinks quickly.

‘I can sell them to you, if you’re hungry. Perhaps you can take some back to your friends.’

He doesn’t seem convinced, so she tries to push the bucket closer to him. Seawater spills over the rim, and he quickly sidesteps to avoid its drenching his boots.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she says quickly, steadying the bucket.

‘Where is your family?’ he suddenly asks.

His question catches Hana off guard. She looks over the water and sees her mother’s head duck beneath a wave. Her father’s boat is

far out to sea. She and her sister are alone with this soldier. She turns back to him in time to see two more soldiers. They are heading towards her.

Her mother's words echo in her mind: *Most of all, do not let yourself be caught alone with one.* Nothing Hana says will save her now. She has no power or autonomy against imperial soldiers. They may do with her as they wish, she knows this, but she is not the only one at risk. She tears her eyes away from the rolling waves that beckon her to dive back in, to escape.

'They're dead.' The words sound true even to her own ears. If she is an orphan, then there is no one to silence for her abduction. Her family will be safe.

'A tragic mermaid,' he says, and smiles. 'There *are* treasures to be found at sea.'

'What have you got there, Corporal Morimoto?' one of the approaching soldiers calls out.

Morimoto doesn't look back at them, his eyes remaining on Hana. The two men flank her, one on either side. Morimoto nods at them, a curt tip of his head, before trudging back up the sand the way he came. The soldiers grab her arms and drag her behind him.

Hana doesn't scream. If her sister tried to help, they would just take her, too. Hana will not break her promise to keep her sister safe. So she goes without saying a word, but her legs defend her in wordless opposition by refusing to work. They hang from her body like useless logs, weighing her down, but it doesn't deter the soldiers. They grip her harder and raise her off the ground so that her toes drag thin trails in the sand.

Emi

Jeju Island, December 2011

A thin orange line streaks across the horizon, illuminating the grey December sky above the dark waters of the South Sea. Emi's knees protest in the cold predawn hours. Her left leg feels heavy. It drags slightly behind her as she shuffles down to the shore. The other women are already there, donning wetsuits and masks. Only a handful of the usual divers stand beside the water's edge, shivering in various stages of undress. Emi blames the wintry morning for the scant attendance. In her younger days, she too would have thought twice about leaving her warm bed to dive beneath icy waters, but age has toughened her.

Halfway across the rocky beach, Emi can hear JinHee telling the women a story. It's one of Emi's favourites. She and JinHee grew up together. Their friendship has spanned nearly seven decades, surviving two wars. JinHee's arms swing wildly like a broken windmill,

and Emi listens for the dramatic pause that always comes before the laughter. A gust of wind lifts a blue tarp into the air, revealing an old fishing boat, its white paint peeled into curls. A cackle of laughter chases the wind, and the boat disappears beneath the blue plastic sheet. Her friends' weather-roughened voices bring pleasure to her ears. JinHee sees Emi hobbling towards them at her turtle's pace and raises her hand in her faithful *hello* salute. The other ladies turn and wave in welcome.

'We're waiting for you,' JinHee shouts. 'Late riser today?'

Emi doesn't waste her energy responding. She is carefully scanning the sharp stones on the beach to avoid slipping. Her knees have loosened up, making her limp less prominent. Her left leg nearly steps in time with her right. The other divers wait for her to reach them before they trail into the water. Emi is already wearing her wetsuit. Living in a house steps from the beach has its perks, even if it is only a tiny shack. Her children are both grown and living in Seoul, so all she needs is a place to sleep and cook her meals, and a shack is nothing more and nothing less than that. JinHee hands Emi a mask when she arrives.

'What's this?' Emi asks. 'I have my own.' She lifts her mask from her styrofoam cooler and shows it to JinHee.

'That old thing? It's cracked and the strap has broken a hundred times.' JinHee spits onto the beach. 'This one's new. My son brought me two from Taejon.' She taps the glass of an identical mask already strapped to her face.

Emi gives the new mask a good looking over. It's bright red and has *TEMPERED* printed on the glass. It's pretty, and she feels tired when she looks back at her old one. The rubber strap is tied in double knots in three places, and there's a chip on the left side of the glass that obscures her view underwater. It hasn't leaked yet, but it will one of these days.

‘Go ahead, put it on, you’ll see,’ JinHee urges.

Emi hesitates. She fingers the shiny plate glass. In the sea, the other ladies have already released their buoys to mark their spots. Their heads bobble next to the floating orange buoys, and one after the other they dive beneath the gentle morning waves. Emi watches them for a moment before handing the mask back to JinHee.

‘I brought it for you,’ JinHee says, and pushes it away. ‘I don’t want it. I only need one new one.’

JinHee mutters to herself as she waddles towards the water, her fins slapping the surface with each step. Emi knows she can say nothing to change JinHee’s mind. Her stubbornness is second to none. Looking down at the two masks, Emi holds them in front of her, side by side. Her black mask looks ancient next to the red one, but it would be a shame for her to accept JinHee’s gift. She wouldn’t be able to put it to good use for very long.

‘Yours is cracked, and you know you go too deep. It’ll explode one of these days, and then you’ll be blind!’ JinHee shouts over her shoulder before she dives beneath the water to swim out to her favourite spot.

Emi places the red mask inside JinHee’s cooler and stoops to put on her fins. Then she follows her old friend into the sea. The cold sends a shock wave through her bones.

JinHee waits for Emi to come up beside her, the water lapping at her chest.

‘What was it today?’ JinHee asks.

Somehow JinHee always knows when Emi has had the nightmare. Perhaps her old friend can see the evidence in Emi’s expression, or maybe another silver hair has grown overnight. Without fail JinHee will demand to know which demon has swallowed the faceless girl.

This morning, Emi doesn’t want to recall the creature that awoke her in such a fright, but she knows her friend will never let it rest. Emi stares at the calm waters and lets herself remember.

There's the voice she only hears in her dreams. It is a girl's voice, at once familiar but also strange, so that Emi does not recognise the speaker. The girl calls Emi's name; her voice wafts towards Emi in waves, as though travelling from across a thousand leagues of empty sea.

She wishes she could call to the girl, but as is often the case in dreams, she cannot speak. She can only stand on the rocky cliff and listen to the girl's cries upon the whirling wind, as Emi clings to the razor-sharp rock with her bare toes, straining to see the small figure through her wild hurricane hair, which lashes against her face.

A tiny boat rides the choppy waves towards the cliff where Emi stands, and a young girl sits in the boat calling her name. Her face is a white featureless dot amidst the dark sea. Emi lets out a silent scream as the girl tumbles overboard, swallowed by a great blue whale that is sometimes a grey squid and at other times a terrifying shark, but last night, it was a whale, midnight blue with razor-sharp teeth like a monster. Then she awoke, clutching her throat, parched and sweating, and the dream faded from her waking memory, leaving her with an image of a girl lost to a war long ago.

'The squid, I think,' Emi tells JinHee, though she is not certain why she lied. Perhaps it is easier to listen to JinHee harp on about a false dream rather than a true one. 'Yes, it was the squid.' She nods her head determinedly, as though that is the end of the conversation, but JinHee won't let her off so easily.

'Was it grey again? Or white this time?' She prods Emi. 'Come on, I'm trying to help you.'

'What does the colour matter?' Emi shakes her head, wiping a lock of hair from her eyes. 'It swallows her just the same.'

'Grey is sickly and white is unnatural, ghostly. A healthy squid is red or brownish-red, sometimes bright orange. What is haunting you may be a ghost squid, a phantom from your past.'

Emi hisses through her teeth. JinHee has always been fantastical

but is even more so this morning. She wades deeper into the sea, moving just as slowly as she did on the shore, but once the waves reach her shoulders, she dives and is suddenly transformed. Emi is a fish, at one with the sea, weightless, and beautiful. The vacuumed silence beneath the waves soothes her as she searches the seabed for the day's haul.

Diving is a gift. That's what her mother told her when it was her turn to learn the trade. At seventy-seven years of age, Emi thinks she finally understands what her mother meant. Her body has not aged well. It aches on these cold winter mornings, rebels in the summer heat, and threatens to quit each waking day, but she knows that she just has to manage the pain until she can get into the water; then she can be free from the shackles of age. Weightlessness calms her ailing body. Holding her breath for up to two minutes at a time as she dives in search of the ocean's bounty is like meditation.

It's dark eighty to a hundred feet beneath the waves. It feels like falling into a deep womb, the only sound the throbbing in her ears from the slow, steady beat of her pumping heart. Slivers of sunlight pierce through the gloom in shards, and her old eyes quickly acclimatise to the dim haze. She dives head first, her body held firm, searching for the familiar reef of her hunting ground. Her mind relaxes, thinking only of what she will find when she reaches it. Seconds pass, slowly, and a voice intrudes upon her solitude.

Sleep now, the voice urges, calm and serene, like a hand gently caressing her face. *Let go of this life*. Emi stops her descent before she crashes into the rocky floor. Her years of experience aid her. She pushes the voice from her thoughts, forcing her eyes to focus.

After scouring through a few bunches of swaying seaweed, she spies the red octopus stalking a blue crab. The crab skitters sideways, sensing danger, but the octopus is sly and hides inside a crevice. The crab halts and resumes its scavenging. The octopus slides two legs along the sand, stretching until its bulbous body emerges, surrounded

by its radial tentacles. It becomes an underwater blur, snatching the crab and disappearing back into the crevice. Emi has witnessed this tragic play many times over the last year. Emi feels a kinship with the octopus and its battle-scarred skin. One of its tentacles is shorter than the others, probably from a lucky escape. Unlike Emi's lame leg, the tentacle will repair itself, and it will be as though nothing ever happened.

Near the crevice is a crop of sea urchins, and Emi plucks them from the sea floor. The octopus senses her and ejects an inky-black cloud, shrouding the crevice in underwater smoke. She waves it away and feels, for an instant, spongy flesh, soft against her fingers. She yanks her hand to her chest and then shoots upwards, swimming towards the surface, while watching the fleeing octopus disappear into the murky horizon.

As Emi catches her breath, ChoSun chides her. 'Next time why don't you stab it with your blade? Mr Lee will pay a good price for that octopus, yet you always let it get away. Such a waste.'

The women keep eyes on one another as they dive. They have trained themselves to watch out for those diving nearest them, in case one of them gets into difficulty. *Mulsum*, water-breath, means death for *haenyeo*, and two have already lost their lives this year. Still, Emi wishes they wouldn't watch her so closely. She has no desire to stay below longer than her breath allows. Perhaps ChoSun is waiting to take Emi's spot in the order of things, to take over her diving territory and finally have a chance to cut the life from the old octopus.

'Let her be,' JinHee says, her voice stern.

ChoSun shrugs and dives in an elegant forward somersault with hardly any splash, like a sea lion.

'She's just jealous you can hold your breath longer than she can, you know that,' JinHee says, blowing water from her nostrils.

'You agree with her,' Emi says.

'Of course I don't,' JinHee retorts, turning her nose up. She adjusts her green net, and the mollusc shells clatter.

'It's all right. I know it doesn't make sense. It just seems a shame to capture that octopus. She's like an old friend.'

'Old friend indeed!' JinHee laughs, choking on seawater. She splashes Emi and shakes her head. They dive together and resume their scouring.

When her net is a quarter full, Emi surfaces to rest her lungs. They feel tight today, and she's not swimming as well as usual. Her mind is foggy. JinHee surfaces next to her.

'You OK?'

Emi searches the sky and gazes towards the rising sun. It hovers over the horizon. Soon it will launch upwards into the sky and the sea will awaken and the fishermen will invade the waters with their motorboats and nets. The voice in her head is silent. The only sounds are the lapping of the waves against her buoy, the high-pitched fragmented chorus of *sumbi* by her friends as they expel the remaining air from their lungs each time they surface, and the seabirds cawing overhead in the morning sky. Emi turns to JinHee and catches her eye.

'You off so soon?' JinHee asks.

'Yes, it's time. Will you take my catch to market?'

'Of course. I wish you luck,' she says, and gives a curt goodbye salute.

Emi nods and swims back towards the beach. She glides through the water, enjoying the gift her mother gave her. It feels like a thousand years have come and gone since she first learned to dive. It hurts too much to remember the past, and Emi pushes the memory away. She reaches the shore and commences the arduous journey back up to her shack. On land, the heavy meat of her flesh hangs on her slender bones. She trips on a stone and pauses to regain her balance.

A thin cloud cover is blowing in, turning everything grey once

again. Emi suddenly feels her age plus ten more years thrust upon her. A slight pause follows each careful step forward, as her left leg takes its time catching up. Picking her way along the beach, she likens herself to the blue crab scuttling along the seabed. One step at a time, she finds her footing among the rocks, slowly, carefully, for she knows all too well anything can happen in the blink of an eye. Unlike the crab, the old octopus won't get her today. There is somewhere she needs to be, and time is not on her side.

Hana

Jeju Island, Summer 1943

The Japanese soldiers force Hana into the back of a truck with four other girls. A couple of them bear marks on their faces. They must have resisted. The girls ride in silence, from shock and fear. Hana glances at their faces, wondering if she recognises them, perhaps from the market. Two of the girls are a few years older than her and one much older, while the fourth girl is much younger than them all. She reminds Hana of her little sister, and she holds on to the thought. That girl is in this truck because she doesn't have an older sister to save her. Hana tries to send the girl comforting thoughts, but tears continue to trail down the girl's cheeks. Crying is the furthest thing from Hana's mind. She doesn't want the soldiers to see her fear.

The truck arrives at the police station as the sun dips beneath the roof. A few of the girls' eyes light up at the sight of the station. Hana