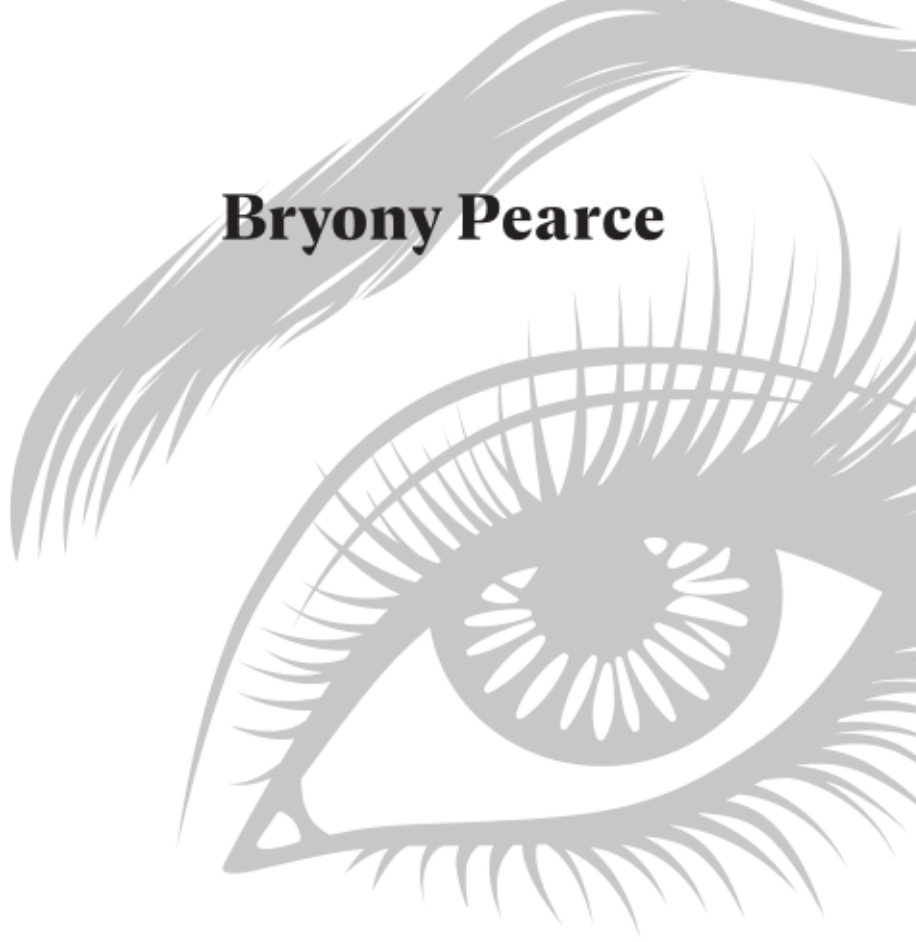




Bryony Pearce

APHRODITE

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*For my daughter, Maisie, and my son, Riley,
who are beautiful inside and out.*





PART ONE

Birth



I AWAKE BATTLING THE SEA: salt in my mouth, waves smashing into my lungs; the violence of drowning when I should have been taking my first breath.

I fight for my brand-new life, and crash into sand, gripping rock as the sea withdraws, taking with it blood from my knees and tears from my swollen eyes. My hair, salt-stiff, black as the depths, clings to my face, blinding me. I am seaweed and salt, endless mutability, the majesty and horror of the sea.

Don't hate me because I was born beautiful.



The sun beats on my back, turning my pearlescent, near-drowned skin sore and red.

As I lie gasping, clinging to land, with my feet in the surf and foam around my ankles, I hear voices. Nothing about them is

familiar. They are in no language I understand. How could they be, when I had been born only moments before?

‘ἄφρός,’ they call. *Aphrodite*. Later I would glean the meaning: *Foam-arisen*. Knowing no better, I took it as my name. The first thing I was ever given.

They lift me to my feet. Their hands are rough: fishermen’s fingers, calloused palms, the hands of working men.

There are three of them: a young man with the sea in his eyes; an older man who looks enough like the youth that they are morning and evening, tiredness drawn into lines of bitterness around his mouth; and a third, with lips as cruel as drowning, who looks at me with enough greed that instinct makes me draw my hair across my chest.

He tugs me by the arm, and I stumble towards him. My weight is unfamiliar and I am unable to balance on the sand, so my feet tangle and I end up leaning against the curve of his rib cage, trapped under his armpit. His shape is hard and wrong, and his odour fills my nose.

His emotions, too, press against mine: his needs, his desires, slimy as eels in weed. I shudder, and the young man tries to pull me back, a tug-of-war with me as rope. His feelings are less clear, his desires confused. Above all, he wants to protect me, worship my beauty. Something inside me stirs, acknowledging the rightness of this.

His older counterpart shouts, and I flinch. He tries to calm me, patting the air with his palms. The man who holds me tight

against him digs his fingers into the fleshy part of my arm and runs a hand over my stomach.

Their hands are blasphemies on my untouched skin, a desecration of my newness. I deplore the scent of sweat on my body. Then, a new sensation: fury. Like the currents of the sea, it sweeps through me, and tentacles, like those of the kraken, flex, unfurl and emerge from my fingers in near invisible cables, serrated and edged in sunlight.

The young man releases my wrist, covers his eyes and drops. He presses his forehead into the sand, creating a divot with his skull.

His older counterpart throws himself on top of him, pressing the boy's head into the grains with his hands, keeping his own eyes averted. 'Θεά,' he cries. *Goddess*.

The man holding me thrusts me away, as if I burn. His cries of fear are hoarse, and blend with those of the gulls that perch on the cliffs behind us: music to my ears.

My skin glows like moonlight on water, my nails are mother of pearl and my hair floats around me, dried by static.

The fisherman tries to cover his eyes. Too late, my glory burns them from his skull. It is beautiful.

The first lesson I learn is violence.



When the older men are dead and my rage is sated, I kneel by the youngest of the trio and lift his chin. He has a beard barely come in, still almost as soft as the hair on my own body.



He trembles as I kiss him in the surf, while blood soaks into the sand around us.

That is beautiful too.

When I move away from him, he holds his hands out to me, pleading. He doesn't look at his father's corpse, and I do not feel sorry. Don't all fathers have to die, eventually?

In that moment, I love him a little, or rather I love the power I have over him. He sobs when I walk away, down the beach.

The second lesson I learn is how to leave them.



AS THE SUN BLAZES, drying my skin, I hear a voice in my head telling me to come home. I look towards the sea, but I know the water is not home. Home will be a place I am welcome, wanted. I turn from the shore.

Later I will discover there are animals newly born that are soon able to run, and so it is with me. I am a foal; awkward on my feet, wobbly, getting stronger with each step. As my muscles grow used to my shifting weight and I learn to swing my arms for balance, my progress along the beach grows easier, and the sobbing of the young fisherman is swallowed by the cries of gulls. Somehow though, I continue to feel his adoration as a tickle in the back of my mind. A strengthening benediction.

I learnt to kiss before I learnt to walk. Later, Ares will laugh about that.

The sun is a furnace. Blisters develop on my arms and the tops of my feet. I pull my hair over my chest, trying to hide from its punishment, but the sand itself begins to burn. My throat dries and my lungs fill with heat.

My lips start to hurt. When I touch them, my fingertips come away bloody, and I feel the horror of skin cracking on my nose and forehead. I should never have left the sea. Staggering back to its edge, I find the water draws the heat from the sand, which takes my weight more easily.

The sea tried to kill me, and now the sun. Only on this threshold, this between place, do I feel safe. Gratefully, I allow the surf to caress my ankles.

Then, I have an idea. I kneel and scoop handful after handful of water to my lips. But something is wrong.

My tongue shrivels against the taste of salt and, moments later, as I try to stand, my stomach cramps. I vomit, regurgitating everything in hot strings that coat my thighs and knees.

Betrayed, I stagger once more from the sea.

There is one more threshold here. I shift my gaze towards the cliffs and shudder. Every crack is filled with nests of gulls that scream for heat and exhaustion to claim me: *Die. Die. Die.*

I hate them. But this time, when irritation makes me flex the kraken that lies within, very little happens: my skin glows, my hair floats, but I am too weak now to unleash my tentacles, and the birds ignore me.

They scream on: *Die. Die. Die.*



I sense that my kraken wants me closer to my fisherman; demands his worship to feed her strength. I consider returning to his side, but can't bear the thought of the journey back, or of being reliant on the worship of such a weak boy. I will find strength elsewhere.

Shaking, I watch the gulls fly towards the sea and back. As far as I know, this is the whole world: beach, cliffs, sea. But if that's true, why do I hear a voice telling me to come home? And if this beach is the whole world, where did my fisherman come from? There are other people, so there is more to see.

The line of darkness beneath the walls calls to me like the song of a siren. I clench my fists and hike up the beach to the cracked edges of the land.

Stepping into the shadow cast by the cliffs is pure relief. Even my eyes open wider; I hadn't realised that brightness had been forcing me to squint. Now I can see further and without a halo encroaching on my vision. Immediately, my skin starts to heal as the gloom soothes my burns.

I exhale, releasing my shoulders and tossing back my hair. Wings swoop above me, and feathers drift onto the sand. I ignore them, despite the press of a thousand crimson eyes against my skin. Even these birds, with their awful cries, cannot make me leave the shade.

Relaxed, I can finally focus on the hymn of my blood. As it pulses through my veins it beats: *home, home*, and drives me to find a way off the beach.

But where is *home*? What does that mean? Safety from the birds and the sea and the sand and the heat and profane hands? I hope so. I walk on, staying close to the cliffs, hissing each time the sun brushes an exposed limb.

The sand here cannot burn me, but it is difficult to walk on. With each step I sink into it. Soon my calves ache, and I hiss each time my soles meet rocks; shards of the earth that say, *go back into the surf. You are not wanted here.*

I am about to give up, to turn back to my fisherman, when my leading foot lands on sand that remains firm beneath me. Curious, I look down to see water bleeding from the indents of my toes. A few more steps and I locate the cause: a stream spat from the chalk, pooling between rocks.

I am reluctant to drink again; my lips are caked with salt from my last attempt. But this trickle does not come from the sea, and so perhaps it does not hate me.

Dipping my knuckles beneath the surface, I begin to play. The water is clear, and I stare at the way my fingers distort in the ripples. Finally, I touch my tongue to my left palm. I still taste salt, but this flavour is beneath the freshness of the water; no more than the taste of my own skin. I wash my hands, scrubbing away every last streak of white. Then, bent almost double, I cup water into my mouth, until my throat is cold and my stomach bloated. Nothing since that moment has ever tasted better.

I would have stayed with my stream, but am unable to resist the pull of the call. It gets stronger with each beat of my heart, and



it draws me to follow the flow of water to a kind of step that leads up the cliffs: handholds and footholds.

Without hesitation, I climb, fingers and toes crushing the flowers that bloom inside crevices. I slip, and my heel smashes a nest, a shell cracks and yolk slimes my skin. The cries of the gulls turn furious, accusing me of bringing death, as if they had not been wishing it upon me. I push my way higher.

My hair trails behind me, whipping in a breeze that grows stronger the longer I climb. Its coolness kisses my skin and I throw my head back and laugh. I look down. Far below, the sea crackles against sand, leaving a line of debris as it pulses and pulls: weed that collects in damp clumps; the pierced shells of hulled creatures; pieces of wood, sawn into planks; tangles of netting. Offerings to the gulls that line the shore, or perhaps an apology to me; regret at my leaving. Too late.

I tilt my head and peer upwards, squinting into the glare. The cliff face consists of ochre rocks, interlined with veins of red and yellow that peel off in my fingernails. Roots forced into cracks morph into branches that twist into the sky, frilled with brown-edged leaves that crackle in the wind. Just beyond my fingers, the cliff juts into slices, ledge after ledge of stairs bisected by a line of sky. I have no sense of what might await me at the top, but still I climb, my nails snapping, my knees scraping, my toes bleeding. And all the time, the voice in my blood calls: *home*.

Finally, I crawl over the edge, breathing heavily, my hair in tangles that the wind has blown over my eyes. I can see no further

than my reaching hand, which I curl around the root of a vine that aided me the last little way. A tiny snake, soft-bellied, slithers across my knuckles and disappears into a crevice.

I drag myself onto flat land and lie face down, panting. Beneath my skin, the earth is gritty, not soft, as the sand had been. Stones dig into my ribs, and I am forced to blink dust from my eyes. When I can breathe again, I clamber to my knees, shove my hair over my shoulders and stare at this strange new world, wondering if *this* is home.

It stretches out in front of me, as far as I can see: fields and hills bisected by streams which shimmer and evaporate under the same sun that beats on my shoulders. Bushes grow haphazard and spiny, and low walls tame plots into angles. I narrow my eyes at dots that move beneath the trees: white and brown, four-legged. I recognise that they are not like me and dismiss them. I will later discover their names: sheep and goats. I spy buildings too, which hunch against the heat; the people walking amongst them are tiny with distance.

The weakest of connections, tingling deep inside, draws my attention back towards the fisherman sobbing on the beach. I am buffeted by longing that is not mine and of which I want no part. I conclude that his desire is not my responsibility, and decide that I want no more of this from others. I turn away from the habitations.

A little downhill, to my right, there is an orchard: trees bracketed by another of those walls made from piles of stone. These trees, however, are different from the ones that cling to life



on the cliff. These are tall and green-leafed, with fruit dangling from every branch. The fruit is round and golden, ripening to red and glistening, begging to be touched.

Helplessly drawn, mouth watering, I drift down the hill. I hobble as my feet are scraped by stones and impaled by thorns, but I don't stop until I reach the wall. This I climb over, jamming my toes into cracks between rocks, and swinging my legs over the top.

Finally, I hop down and land on a shock of green, softer even than the sand. The trees block the sun from my skin, and I moan in relief. Then I reach up and close my fingers around a fruit, hesitating at the feel of firm flesh against my own. A quick tug and it pulls free.

I stand with the fruit in my hand. My stomach, empty of all but water, rumbles, begging me to eat, but at the same time I remember the betrayal of seawater in my mouth and do not dare. Instead, I sniff, inhaling a fresh, bright sweetness that brings tears to my eyes. I run the fruit over my bleeding lips. It is so smooth, so perfect. Can it be real?

With a flick of my tongue, I lick the skin, but there is no flavour. The scent, however, grows sweeter, taunting me to sink my teeth in. Still, I hesitate. Beauty and danger go hand-in-hand. If nothing else, I am proof of that.

"It's ripe." The voice behind me makes me jump. "You can eat it."

I whip around, my hair already lifting from the roots, my skin

beginning to glow. I want nothing of men, and hope my kraken has the strength to kill this one quickly.

And yet . . . from this new arrival, I feel none of the sticky, throbbing need that poured over me when the fishermen touched my skin.

Beneath his wide-brimmed hat, this man is smiling. He makes no move to come closer and seems oblivious to the danger he is in, watching me instead as if he simply wants to know what I will do next.

Curious, I let my monster retreat and hide the stolen fruit behind my back.

He smiles at my gesture. "Don't you understand?" he says.

I frown. I don't know what he is saying, but his tone soothes me.

Keeping his eyes on mine, he reaches up and plucks his own fruit. Unnecessarily, he shines it on his tunic and then, still watching me, he sinks his teeth into the flesh. The crunch shivers through me and I stare as he chews, juice sluicing from one side of his mouth and wetting his beard. Then he grins. "See? Good."

He wipes his mouth and I lick my lips, still watching as he bites again, eating around the fruit until there is only a core. Then he picks out brown seeds, smoother even than the apple itself, and drops them into a small sack at his belt.

"Good." I shape my lips around the sound, and his smile widens. I take my prize from behind my back and bite.

The firmness kindles an ache in my teeth and the coolness



makes my lips tremble, but the flood of juice on my tongue makes me groan. This is nothing like water.

I devour the fruit down to the membrane, stopping only when the taste becomes bitter, remembering at the last to pick out the seeds and hold them out. When he takes them, our fingers brush and I feel his heart: his enormous, giving heart, guileless, simple and a little broken. Life has not been kind to him. Or rather, people have not.

I want to raze them to the ground for him. Instead, I kiss his cheek and reach for another apple.

There will be time.