**Chapter One**

I’ll fight for love with every twitch of my hair, every pump of my fluke, every stroke of my shard, though love is rarer than a sturgeon.

No one admires a herring catcher, and a plain one at that. I’m more likely to be handed a grisly death than love, but I refuse to die as a Hunter. Grandmama hasn’t sung a single song about one being happily paired with a merman, and her Queenspearls record the history of everything in their presence. But there is a way for me, small chance though it is. Rank. The only way for mermaids to find love.

Or beauty, but there’s nothing I can do about that. Those who look down on a scar-necked clamdigger will be forced to love me as a Protector, once I earn that position. I will command them to do so. I won’t even need to command them.

I let out a single bubble. Grandmama is allowing me to compete like this, being the first to kill the kraken before it kills me. I know she’s reluctant to do so; I’m not her favorite. But now she’s handing glory to me, and I will grasp it in my fists.

Clearing Grandmama’s eelgrass meadow to stop the kraken eating her favorite sturgeon could be easily done by the top four of the Strongest, so there is the element of the ridiculous in this task. But a Protector should be able to do the work of four and I certainly hope this is the last of this sort of test.

Sometimes a kraken varies its diet of fish, worms, and other kraken with a juicy mermaid. But I will not allow that today. I take a breath, descending into darkness where, oblivious to the peril they are in, cod and herring flit in and out of the eelgrass blades.

I’m alone—my poisonous blood ensures it.

The green grass spikes sway defenselessly in the current. As they brush my abdomen, I sink lower, until only my eyes are visible. I run a finger along the edge of my amber shard. Its herring-shaped body is whetted sharp on the sides and pointed, and its rounder handle perfectly fits my hand: my only weapon.

Every task Grandmama asks of me: fighting sharks, digging out weever fish, and clearing the kelp forest of stinging jellyfish, I can do alone, but I’d rather catch a hundred herring than perform such tasks again and again. But this time is different. Grandmama, as Queen of the Stickleback kin, is offering me a reward I can’t turn down—Protector, the strategist for the ten Strongest. Though my throat constricts with each sound, I raise my chin. Every test I’m given I think I will die alone; yet every time I survive. Grandmama must believe in me to allow me to compete like this.

A movement flickers in the corner of my eye, and I stiffen, gripping my shard hard enough to impress my palms with its spiraled handle. Now! I spin in the direction of the movement without hesitation. That’s my rule for myself. Never hesitate.

A ponderous cod slides by, nibbling eelgrass. A bubble leaves my lips. I relax my stiff fluke, and wait until I can’t see my long, Stickleback fingers shaking despite my thick Cockle wrists.

If a cod tightens my fluke, what about the actual kraken? I need to be alert, but perhaps not this alert.

As I swim, I raise puffs of mud. Peering through the silty water, everything is concealed from my sight farther than my stretched-out hand. The spikes of eelgrass nearest me are clear, but even an arm’s length away, the view is grainy. Shadows move, shapeless and silent. Nothing behind me, except the same dimly lit cod. Even worse, I can hear whale song. The rise and fall of their keening will drown out the whoosh of the kraken approaching.

I was counting on that signal to give me time to prepare.

No. This is not the time for whale song, though I normally love its cadences. Since nothing I can do will silence them, I strain to listen beyond their song: the faint sloshing of the sea’s surface above; my own heartbeat; the swallowing of my spit.

As if to tease me for wishing the wait over, a large shadow slides above me. It dims the seabed until it’s almost night. The kraken has arrived.

My wretched fingers start their shaking. For too many heartbeats I freeze, my mind blank. I’ll die if I don’t do something and now!

That thought unfreezes me. I click, dolphin-like, and the echoes bounce back to my receptive forehead. The shadow comes from *above* the surface of the sea and the taps are hard and even, impenetrable. Something made of wood. It can’t be the kraken or any living thing.

A boat. I flatten myself against the seabed, glad of the muddy water now.

Boats mean makers—from the hips up they could pass for mermen, but below, crab-like legs bend in all sorts of unnatural ways. Sandbumps rise again on my skin. Even flailing in the sea, makers are dangerous. We’re taught much about them, studying their ways. Nothing has prepared me for the eerie feeling of them above me.

The sound of whales stops and, in the quiet, a faint, musical sound drifts down from the boat. My scars don’t react with normal electricity as they would with Grandmama’s songs, so perhaps a maker Queen isn’t riding in their boat, instructing grown fishermen in their jobs or teaching them history. That would be bizarre anyway. Queens would never lower themselves to such a thing, and why would those fisherfolk need to hear a Queen’s song?

The song seems to be made by many masculine voices: a single maker, then a group in turn. I can’t quite hear what words they’re singing, though after thousands of years of listening to makers both in their boats and while drowning, mermaids can understand their words. The song above me is lively and employs many more notes than Grandmama uses. I’m mesmerized by the sound. Perhaps that’s the point of it. Perhaps makers want us to come and listen so that they can trap us.

It would almost be worthwhile.

A splash comes from above, and I quiet my roiling hair, pressing against the flattened grass. A fibrous net descends deep enough to graze my back, but I don’t move. My yellow-and-green hair is loose except for my sheath-braid and is meant to hide me in the kelp forest. My cerulean-blue skin matches the water anywhere in the sea. The grass presses into my cheek, itching, and I want to rub it, but I relax myself forcefully from tail to scalp.

A faint whoosh washes over me. I swallow. I click again and softer taps from the echoes reveal the massive mantle, an eye below and a cluster of eight arms with two long feeding paddles, larger than an orca and swimming straight toward me. I strain to see, but nothing. My hair moves without my consent, and I can’t smooth it. Now there is danger from both above and below!

The herring and cod dart away in all directions. Another whoosh, and the kraken is within sight. Even though the echoes told me different, I thought it would be smaller. Its arms fill my sight, undulating, with its enormous eyes locking with mine. My heart pounds like a jellyfish fleeing a shark. In the name of the sea, let me be the shark, not the jellyfish.

My stomach turns sour, and I swallow hard, holding my shard out in front of me with a visible tremor. Do the makers see the kraken? I rise with the net on my back.

“Ho there!” I hear from above. The net is moving, trying to snag me. If I sink away from it, the kraken will surely attack.

The kraken’s baleful eyes are still on mine, and I blink.

Its feeding paddle, longer than its other arms and ending in an oval of sharp suckers, pulls back and I brace myself. It whips toward me, flies past my shoulder, and I dodge. I brush the net. This time I avoid being tangled. The feeding paddle passes my cheek by a finger’s thickness. As the paddle slips back, I slash at it with my shard, cutting it away and I see it sinking into the grass below. My hair twitches exuberantly as my shard has proved its sharpness, but will it be enough?

The kraken doesn’t stop advancing.

Please, let me be the shark. Please.

It flings its other feeding paddle, and hits, chafing as if a barnacled rock scrapes my shoulder. My hair tightens and I twist to avoid being grabbed by the kraken’s arms. My thumb tangles in the net, the fibers pinching and tightening as I struggle. I hold my shard to the base of my thumb, willing myself to make the slice but I can’t; my shard is shaking too hard. When I force myself to relax, the strands loosen enough for me to maneuver out and slide out of the kraken’s reach. If avoiding death was enough, I’d flee now while I have the chance. But Grandmama sent me here as my test. I’ll give my life for the chance to improve my rank.

I wiggle closer and the kraken’s remaining paddle swings inches from my face. I grab one of its smooth muscular arms, strong and flexible, and pull its head within range of my shard. The kraken, faster than I can react, grabs my neck with its sharp paddle, shaking me and spraying ink so I can barely see. My heart constricts.

I need another breath. Shouldn’t my breath have lasted at least through the fight? Perhaps the extra time with the boat is the problem. The pressure in my chest tightens from my ribs to my throat, and I can’t surface until the boat leaves.

I *can’t* surface, but I must!

I pump my flukes toward the looming boat, but the kraken tightens its grip, maneuvering me into its arms. The suckers pull at my skin as the arms squeeze my waist; the last of my air comes out in a stream. I watch, fluke to scalp tight, as the column of bubbles rises erratically to the surface. The makers will see and know I’m here. Dizziness sweeps over me. The surface never seemed so far away.

The kraken slides me toward its razor-sharp beak and my fluke slips inside, grazing the edges of the beak. This will not be a painless death; I will be slowly dissolved by its stomach acid.

I wish at least this would be recorded for songs, but that is a privilege only bestowed on the Queen. If I had the Queenspearls, like Grandmama, and Amber, they would record my exact story, my history, for the rest of time.

But I’m a Hunter. If I die, no one will know how. And who would even notice if I never came back? Of course, Amber will. My adoptive sister and the Queen-in-Waiting will worry if I don’t show up to hunt herring for her tonight.

The kraken shifts slightly so that a current is flowing into its beak, helping it maneuver me in. My chest spasms like the time, as a merling, I entered a deep cave. As I explored, one turn and another blended in my mind, confusing me. The roof blocked me from reaching the air, as the boat does now. The same pain fills me.

I thrash my fluke, trying to make myself harder to ingest. The creature inches me in. I slide as far as my waist and the sting of its stomach acid hits me. Blackness swallows me. The only thing keeping me conscious is raw pain on my skin from its acid. I stab its belly, but it doesn’t flinch. Fully in, I pull my shard from its liver to its ink sac. A stream of its blood runs down my raised arm to my neck.

The kraken’s beak falls open. Yanking my shard out of its flesh, I shoot up for a shuddering breath.

“Ho, there!”

Before I can blink at the piercing sun, the fishing net encases my head, my chin catching on the edge.

The sailors whoop. “The biggest dolphin I’ve seen!”

“Good job, mates!”

A harpoon is aimed straight at me.

The itching of the net’s fibers is unbearable as it rubs my acid-etched flesh, but I have only moments to think. In my struggles to dislodge my head, I accidentally thrust an arm through a hole in the netting.

“It’s a mermaid!” a young sailor calls. His voice reverberates in my sternum with the timber of the leader of the beautiful songs. Seen from my angle, he could be a broad-shouldered merman, hair like sun rays filtered through kelp twitching playfully in the breeze. But I have only rarely even seen a merman. The mermen, of course, hunt alone.

His eyes pierce me, but I look away. I put a hand to my chest to keep my heart contained.

What is wrong with me? I’m being foolish. He is not a merman, but a monster!

His men also spot me, and the harpoon drops to the deck, unused. So, as a mermaid, they want me alive.

As they lift me, they struggle with my unwieldy squirming. “Watch out! She’s a slippery one!” I lift my chin the highest it’s ever been and the net slips off my head. My arm is still tight in the hole. Cursing, I hold the rope at the bottom, widening it enough to pull free.

As I slip my arm out, an unobserved tension in my fluke loosens, and I descend to the seabed.

Flattened on the eelgrass, I peer at the defeated kraken, tentacles limp in death.

I examine myself. I’m mauve from the acid, and I sting all over, but the inner layers of my skin are intact.

A drop of blood. I’ll have to wait before returning to the kin, so I won’t poison any.

The sailors’ net descends over and over, but I have time before my next breath, and I wait them out. The ink from the kraken fight slowly clears, until I can see the boat’s dark hull unmoving. I relax my muscles and slow my heart, conserving the air I have. A sea trout nudges my hair and takes a nibble. I don’t so much as twitch a hair, though they are delicious.

Finally, they leave. I hope I’ll never see that sun-rayed hair or hear that mesmerizing song again.

I use my shard to extricate the kraken’s right eye from its mantle. Grandmama has insisted it be at least the size of our Stickleback Orb—a rough, grey sphere, the size of a fresh-born merling’s head—to count for my initiation as Protector. A strange request, but the eye will certainly be larger, though it’s been a while since I’ve seen the Orb. When the leaves of the kelp fall, and the cod can no longer be fooled by our hair, we need its magic to call seals for us to hunt to get us through winter. Every autumn Grandmama uses our Orb, to fill the sea with vibrations.

I went into the belly of the kraken and came back to this beautiful meadow. The eye is enormous, but surprisingly light. I collapse in the swaying eelgrass, gripping the eye to my chest. Is this what it feels like to be the shark? For once, I don’t need to apologize for my blood. I’m alive. I’ve killed the kraken and taken its eye. I avoided being trapped by makers.

At first, my heart soars to the clouds, but no matter what I do, I can’t hold onto my pride for long. Soon a lifetime of slights, invisibility, bullying reminds me of what I truly am: a scar necked clamdigger, who must fight for any scraps of respect. My thumb tightens on the eye and alarmed, I relax it.

The Strongest, though they shield all thirty of their fellow mermaids from dangers, won’t be pleased if I’m anointed Protector. But *then* I won’t care about their displeasure. I’ll hold onto my soaring heart then. Once I’m the strategist for the Strongest, not their target, I will finally have a legitimate place among them. I will be able to look anyone in the eye.

When she sees the eye, Grandmama will smile as bright as sunlight on ripples.

If I can only forget the maker who made the lively music.

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I wait to return until I don’t leak even a drop of blood, and the sea glows rose and orange. As I near the clearing, I remind myself, ‘don’t squeeze the eye. Be gentle.’

Grandmama sings the last note of a song to the merlings. With her stiff mouth, tight nostrils and neck hanging loose, her age shows, but the wrinkles around her mouth smooth as she sings. When she sees me, her eyebrows flash up, but as I register that, her face smooths to the one she uses when giving a speech. “Between! What can I do for you, my dear?”

I’d rather not be called by my given name. It insinuates that I’m neither Cockle nor Stickleback. But I blow a long stream of bubbles, and she acknowledges the sign of respect with a brief nod. I have a bad feeling about this.

I hold up my prize, sinking below Grandmama’s eyes. She gives my prize the merest glance. Her gaze is not seal soft when she looked at me. Why does that still sting so much? Surely, I should be able to maintain my pride despite Grandmama’s reactions. I try hard not to make her glance personal, since her eyes *never* soften for me nor at most of the thirty mermaids in her kingdom. When she gazes at Amber, that’s another story. But once, when I struck a shark on the nose which had slipped behind Amber teeth bared, I had seen Grandmama’s eyes brighten for me, but that had been years ago.

I glance away.

To be fair, Amber has the delicate features of a Queen, a dainty mouth, smooth sea-blue neck with white Queenspearls growing in it. Grandmama’s pearls are as large as a merling’s fist, while Amber’s are scallop-sized, almost like they were when she was young. With those six pearls imbedded in an even ring around Amber’s throat, she’s regal—a Queen-in-Waiting. She is allowed six braids because of her rank; they slowly undulate around her like kelp in a current. Anyone’s eyes would be drawn to such perfection.

And I trust her alone of the kin. When I was first anointed Hunter as a merling, illness befell me, and I collapsed, no ability to rise for a breath. Shadows of kin passing flitted through my silt-filled thoughts. No one approached. Finally, Amber carried me to the surface. In my delirium, I gasped before reaching the surface and choked. She wailed and clutching my with her smooth hands, kept me in the air all day until my head cleared.

I would risk my life for her.

My mouth spreads wide. My chin is cleft, and bone-white scars mar my cerulean-blue neck. My smooth skin, long elegant fingers, and even my neatly braided sheath of hair—luxuriant enough to enclose my amber shard safely—make no difference. With my cleft chin and thick wrists, it’s clear I have Cockle blood. I am plain. Perhaps that is why Grandmama never looks straight into my eyes.

Grandmama pokes the kraken’s pupil with a finger, pressing her lips together. Finally, she smiles, though her eyes don’t crinkle. “Hand that to me.”

“Yes, Grandmama.” I would rather swallow jagged amber chips than wait to check the size. Of course, Grandmama isn’t going to make an announcement. Why did I think otherwise? I must hold my head up, no matter what Grandmama thinks. But even now, each proof of her distain lowers my chin and stings my heart. But perhaps once Grandmama compares the eye to the Orb, the kin will know everything. She can’t keep my anointing secret.

Grandmama let a bubble release from her lips. “You may go.”

My jaw clenches. I notice and relax it. “Yes, Grandmama.” Go? Without comparing the eye to the Orb?

I turn my back on her and dash away without further niceties, longing to look back and see Grandmama’s expression, but will it have changed? No, and I’m unwilling to give her the satisfaction.

When I return to Amber’s hunting grounds, I scream. Why did Grandmama adopt me, again? Not from love. Love is too rare and precious for me to expect, but it’s all I want.