**Chapter Two**

As the first star of the night rises, I swim at the very back of the vee of mermaids, dark heads above the surface, tails slowly pumping below. As everyone rests half their brains throughout the Journey of Sleep, I become fully alert every dozen pumps of my fluke to check myself for cuts or abrasions that might endanger the kin, from my poisonous blood, then I try to settle back into the rhythm of the Journey. So, I am always a little tired.

Tired, not lazy.

But it’s just as well that I can’t sleep with them. I have alerted the Strongest of stinging jellyfish, sharks, and even a stray orca, breaths away, over the years. Not that I received appreciation for that.

When the Journey ends, each of the Strongest takes their assigned mermaids to their territory to hunt for them. Even now, Grandmama has mentioned the kraken’s eye to no one, and I’m tempted to spread the news to all thirty mermaids before they disperse. I want each of them to know that the one they have called Scar-neck and Clam-digger may yet rise to a position above even the Strongest’s elevated rank.

Yes, my mother spent her life digging clams—she was after all a Cockle mer—but they’ve seen me hunt and eat fish as naturally as any of them. The kin have had time to become used to my parentage, but I wonder—did my parents meet at Mama’s time each month, like Stickleback pairs do? No one would have approved their pairing, so perhaps not. But in any case I wear my shark bites with pride. Yes, my lineage is questionable, but surely, I’ve proven myself now. But announcing my triumph before Grandmama does would be trouble for me.

Amber leads me deep in the center of the fronds to her hunting ground where many fish dart, singly and in schools, the territory her privilege, since Queenspearls circle her neck. In Grandmama’s territory, her own Hunter, aptly named Shard, sits in the center of a huge school of fish nose to tail. She merely writhes her loose hair to entangle one fish every ten heartbeats. Because of her rank as Hunter, she is only allowed one braid to sheath her shard, like me, but she seems to enjoy the loose hair.

Shard and I are both Hunters for royalty, yet she whispers in Grandmama’s ear with an expression of spite whenever I approach.

Despite Grandmama’s delayed announcement, once I’m alone with Amber, my heart soon rises as if from the seabed to the first golden beams through the kelp leaves. I sway my hair in their rhythm. A herring, as if by command, flits past. I maneuver my free locks around it, trapping it on all sides. It turns one way, then, another. Its gills tangle, and it backs away, but my hair wraps tight. With a practiced flip I grasp its head and nimbly lifting my shard from the sheath braid at the nape of my neck, stab it, untangle it, and hand it to Amber. She eats in one gulp, pulling the skeleton out, intact.

“Pink in the water!” Amber’s lips grow thin and turn foam white. “Wait. A thin red trail is coming from your hips. It’s your time!”

For most mermaids, this is the happiest day of their lives, but I have feared coming-of-age since the time neared. I must not harm Amber. The blood must dissipate before it reaches her! I pump to the seabed for a sponge, breaking off a pliable piece. The slit below my hips is tight, but I tuck the sea sponge in, wincing at the strange rough touch, and after a heartbeat, the pink dissolves, and the water near me is clear.

I return to Amber, searching her signs of poisoning—limp hair, gray skin, dull eyes. “Are you hurt?”

Amber pats her springy braids, blue skin glowing, bright eyes fixed on me. She quirks one side of her lips and says, “You can see I’m not. Congratulations!”

My lips stretch into a smile so wide it aches. The worst hasn’t happened. Perhaps the kin will fear me less now that I can count the time to my next bleeding. I can’t believe my coming-of-age was this simple. Disaster scenarios about this day had filled my mind in every idle moment. Killing the entire kin. Sickening Grandmama. Proving I have no place among decent mer. Each scene played repeated until I was convincedthose scenarios were inevitable.

But not now. Now is the happiest day of my life just as all who have gone before me. I have a new destiny as one of the Elderkin.

Now I will have what each Elderkin ~~all~~ have on their shard: intricate carvings; eels curling around the shard from the base to the top; a line of sturgeon mouth to tail; a large and ponderous cod. Anything in the sea – except for clams, for reasons obvious to any of the Stickleback kin. I slip my current shard from its thick braid and stare at it. It saved my life many times. But I must admit, the new one will be splendid with decoration, and, with my careful whetting, just as sharp as this one. What carving would be best for me? Perhaps, the jellyfish and the shark image I had conjured in my time of danger. The jellyfish pounding away, and the shark chasing. It’s clear which would bring me luck.

I will choose the shark.

“Your new shard will have an intricate herring carving, perhaps herring ensnared in delicate swirls of hair,” Amber announces.

Hair around a herring? After I single-handedly killed a kraken? I will blow more bubbles to Amber than anyone else does, feed her, listen to her commands and complaints, but I must insist on sharks for my shard. It’s no use for me to be angry at her—she doesn’t know about the kraken, and I can’t tell her. I smooth a crease in my forehead with one palm, but Amber seems to notice that less-than-gentle response and waits.

I say, “Herring are important. Yes. But you should prepare yourself to replace me, for I might have another role, perhaps soon. I insist on a carving of sharks, curving teeth to tail. When I look at it, I will remember their ferocity.”

Amber tilts her head. “Aren’t the scars on your neck enough of a reminder of sharks?”

“I don’t see those.” True enough, but it’s not like the other kin don’t comment on them regularly.

“I don’t think your destiny is to act like a shark.” She folds her arms, glaring more like an older sister than royalty. And since she’s Grandmama’s true grandchild, we are, indeed, sisters of a sort though no one thinks of me that way. “You’re a genius at snaring fish for me. That’s safer. I overheard Grandmama promising you could be Protector if you killed a kraken. I don’t want you to. I’ll die if you die.”

“That’s an exaggeration.” A corner of my lip twitches up. “You can’t kill yourself. You’re the next Queen.”

I catch another herring and hand it to her. I’m hungry, but my own fish will have to wait. Hunters always eat last. When I’m Protector…well I guess then I will still eat last, but not because of my rank, and that is what matters most. While Amber nibbles at the herring’s tail, I change the subject. “You must be looking forward to your own carved shard. One step closer to being Queen.”

“I guess so.” She swallows, voice flat as if she meant the opposite.

Given a chance, Amber eagerly passes out the extra fish I provide to the elderly and resolves boundary disputes. She holds the newest merlings while their mothers hunt. She finds the freshest purple seaweed for the sick. She brings broken shards to our ancient carver and her apprentice, so they know how many to carve.

Why would she dread a role she is born for?

I woulddo anything for a proper role. The Protector of the kin will always be in danger, expected to swim last in the journey of sleep. But the reason for being last is to keep the kin safe, and they will know that and love me for it. Not like my current reason for being last: poisonous blood that mustn’t reach them.

I don’t comment on her shard’s ornamentation. Queens always get a carving of Queenspearls with swirls of decorative additions on them.

To my surprise Amber brings it up herself. “I want kelp leaves on mine,” Amber touches her throat then drops her hand as if her pearls are hot. “I want to feel reassured that I’m at home with the kin whenever I see it.”

That must be an indirect criticism of Grandmama. *Her* engraving on her shard was Queenspearls. “I don’t think you’ll get that choice.”

“I’ll talk to Grandmama about it. She sometimes listens to me.”

Though she loves her, Grandmama doesn’t listen to Amber. Amber’s ideas for how to run the kin are too soft-hearted, naïve, and will lead to weakness for the Sticklebacks, according to Grandmama. When busy singing or overseeing the Strongest’s training, she ignores Amber’s actions. If Amber helps the kin, well, then, it won’t change anything. If one of the hungriest is given an extra cod, perhaps that is all that can be hoped for.

“If Grandmama won’t let me, I’ll die,” Amber says, taking another nibble.

“Again, that’s not your choice.” I shake my head at her conduct, holding out a hand and cradle a kelp leaf. It waves back and forth in the current, tickling my palm. I feel a sudden pride over my success with the kraken’s eye. “It seems strange that we’re old enough now to talk about shard carvings. I thought I’d be catching herring for you forever. Now I can change rank.”

“You’ll still hunt for me.”

I’m impatient~~,~~ but her smile softens the blow. “There is one thing I’ll enjoy about our coming-of-age - our mate assignment. Remember that merman who caught us smoothing our skin on the Sliding Rock? The one with the broadest shoulders and liveliest hair? My glimpse through the kelp of his full lips opening in a laugh as we slipped and twisted, sliding across the rock, still makes me shiver. Remember his blushes when he saw that we’d caught him? His rank is high enough that he and I have a chance to be paired!”

I would love it if my only worry is whether my favorite has a high enough rank. I try not to think of my fisherman, with his broad shoulders and resonant voice. A voice that pierces my sternum. A voice made to pull me up to the surface so he can kill me. I shiver.

Anyway, I will be paired with a merman, not a maker, so it’s irrelevant. “Did you ever find out his name?”

“Stone.” Amber blushes mauve and ducks her head.

I guess it’s nice to have a crush, but that’s a luxury I don’t have. My priority is giving my merlings a better life than I had and that means a merman with good blood whether his shoulders are broad or narrow, his hair limp or lively. His chin simply must not be cleft.

An approaching mermaid causes us to pause our chatter.

It’s Grandmama. Amber stops mid-bite and lets go of the herring, and wipes her hands on her smooth blue belly. When Grandmama arrives—holding the kraken’s eye—we blow a stream of bubbles in greeting.

Amber clenches her jaw at the sight of the eye and purses her lips. Did she already know I procured it? She hates me going into danger.

I open my mouth to tell Grandmama that I came-of-age.

“We don’t have much time,” Grandmama says before I can speak. The wrinkles around her mouth deepen, though you had to know her well to notice. I nod and Grandmama’s eyes meet mine, then shift to Amber’s where they linger. A smile that only Amber calls forth lights Grandmama’s face.

Perhaps once Grandmama sees how much larger the eye is than the Orb, she will smile like that at me. I have worked my whole life for that smile.

Amber nods, then surfaces for a breath. Grandmama hands me the eye, its delicate surface showing wear. When I hold it in my hands, the top reaches my elbows, large concentric circles of blue and black form its iris and pupil. My fingers dent it. Grandmama nods at Amber in dismissal.

Grandmama takes a breath to prepare for the journey while I wait politely and then take mine. Following her indigo tail, I dive through fronds of kelp, light filtering through in shafts at first, bright spots of plankton floating in the water. We swim past schools of herring and cod, past solitary eels and pipefish hiding in plain sight, their tails wrapping around the stalks of kelp. I shift the eye against my chest, so it pulls less against the current.

The fronds change from the bright yellow and green of the surface to darker green and almost brown as they soak in less and less light. We sink into gradually cooler water, where the light becomes thinner and fewer fish swim, until we are within arm’s reach of the branching yellow holdfasts which anchor the kelp. The light is so dim Grandmama’s eyes shine.

Hollow Stones, the place where the kin keep the Orb, lies ahead. To keep the kelp fronds from tangling with my hair, I hold out an arm. The clearing, covered in silt, looks undisturbed. Only one place is free of silt—the disk-shaped rock that holds the Stickleback Orb.

It’s gone. The empty hole leers at me as one of the Strongest would on a bad day and I flinch.

Grandmama’s face jerks around to look at me, glaring. We have only one enemy who could have done this.

Clam-diggers!

I freeze, my fingers numb. The kraken’s eye tumbles to the seabed. What if Grandmama thinks I, with my mixed birth, have collaborated with this? My head spins as wildly as a loose kelp in a storm. Without the seal blubber, we will starve this winter.

The Cockle mer don’t need the Orb. They eat clams all year.

“Despicable,” Grandmama says. “This is what comes of their hatred of us.”

“I didn’t know anything about this! What do you want me to do? I’ll do anything.”

“Go, retrieve it, and kill as many of that cursed kin as you can. Naturally, since we can’t compare the size of the eye, this is your true test to be anointed Protector.” Grandmama puts her hands on my shoulders as if to wish me well. It’s the briefest gesture. My shoulders warm, and I close my eyes. The proof she loves me is so fleeting, and the dismissal of my Protectorship so awful, that I almost refuse. But all the Stickleback kin will die this winter if no one retrieves it.

“The Strongest and me, against sixty mermaids?” It seems terrible odds.

Grandmama pauses, then strokes her Queenspearls, luminous even in the dim light, and says, “Just you.”

I swallow hard. I’ve never even tried to fight Kelp and her crew. One against ten. Difficult. Ten against sixty. Terrible. But one against sixty? Isn’t that impossible?

Grandmama has never given me a task that I couldn’t do.

“Yes, Grandmama.”

She nods and we float to the surface. Grandmama pulls in a deep luxurious breath. With the bright sun on my face, I relax my mouth into a neutral line and take a moment to watch the serene clouds until my heartbeat slows. I descend with Grandmama. “I’m honored you have chosen me for this difficult mission. I’m sure you have the best reasons for me to go alone.”

“Have you forgotten?” Grandmama asks a wisp of a smile flashing across her face, her voice slick as a waved-tumbled pebble. “You’re the only one who could survive. The others would be poisoned.”

My hair twitches. Yes, only I will be immune since I share their blood.