**Chapter Three**

All the kelp fronds flow one way and then the other in the shifting current. Amber purses her shell-like lips. “No one else is coming?”

 So, she too, thought someone else would fight alongside me. My living hair droops and flops over my eyes. I shake my head to awaken it, before my shame is obvious to Amber. “Anyone else with me could be poisoned.”

 Amber presses her forehead with one palm, her braids stiff around her dainty face. “I don’t care,” she whispers. “You’ll be killed. Don’t do it.”

“Think like a Queen! The Orb is necessary. If I stay alive, I’ll have a real role—Protector. You know I must.” And Grandmama’s voice will lose its deliberate smoothness; will no longer be as slick as wave-tumbled pebbles.

“See!” Now Amber’s chin rises. “The chance that you’ll die this time is almost certain. You do not need to be Protector. You have a permanent role already. Keeping *me* safe and fed.”

That permanent role will suffocate me. I let out a single bubble. “I won’t die. And sharks usually hunt alone.”

 “So now you’ll attack the Cockle kin *alone* every time there’s a problem? That’s the worst plan Grandmama has ever come up with.”

I pull back, but Amber takes my hands and squeezes so tight that my fingertips turn mauve.

I gently remove my hands from hers. “What about when you said it was Grandmama’s worst plan when she wanted feed the mer of highest rank first?”

“It was!”

I fidget with my plain amber shard, turning it over in my hand. “You’ll be the better Queen.”

Amber puts a hand to her throat and lowers her eyes. After a moment, she forces a smile.

I don’t understand her reaction. She doesn’t brag herself, but why not take a compliment from me?

I search her face, and, since her smile seems more relaxed, I ask, “Could you tell Grandmama I came-of-age?” The news would be so much better coming from her. ~~I~~f Grandmama knows my news is public, she’ll carve the shard for sure. Otherwise, she would look petty.

Amber rubs her face with her hands. “I suppose the only other choice would be you telling her. So, yes, I’ll be glad to help you with Grandmama, if you don’t mind if I wait until she’s in a good mood.”

“Thank you,” I say. Are Grandmama’s moods reaching as far up the ranks as Amber? I had no idea.

If my new shard was carved, even if I don’t return, Amber could keep it to remember me. I’m sure she could choose one of her extra braids for its sheath.

“Do you have a strategy in mind for fighting the Cockle kin?” Amber asks. Her hair is laying flat. What does she have to worry her? She’ll be safe in the heart of the kin.

 “To mete out justice for their thievery, I shouldn’t worry about killing the Cockle kin.” I twist my fingers together.

Amber’s forehead wrinkles in a delicate frown.

“But,” I say, “if they took revenge for my attack, they’d simply spill their blood in the kelp forest. Everyone would die; if it came to war, we would lose. So, I’ll get the Orb, but I won’t kill. Is that cowardly?”

 “I wish you were truly cowardly! Stay here!”

I hope that the fact they share my blood isn’t part of my reasoning for sparing them. “All right,” I say. “Give me a bit of time alone before I leave.”

“May the sea hold you.”

“And you.”

If anyone sees me travelling this way, I do not want to explain. But everyone is busy—the Hunters hunting; the Strongest patrolling for danger, the Healers healing and those of good blood eating their fill. Unless I’m assigned a task, only Amber worries about my whereabouts.

At times, that’s useful.

At the far edge of the kelp forest, I come to a bare area in the mud, the spot where I placed a stone in each of my birthdays, the anniversary of Mama’s death. I pump my flukes against the current, hovering above it. One stone each year since I was old enough to lift one—her little cairn. Building a cairn would be traditional for any daughter, so that isn’t why I fidget and let my eyes dart. I have hidden this practice, because the tradition doesn’t extend to honoring a Cockle mer. The barnacled stones lie, silt covered and still. Anyone stumbling into this deserted barren place would think the pile random.

“Mama.” My throat tightens until I can’t swallow, and I rest my forehead on the rough stones, palms on the muddy bed. I’m not longing for my mother to cradle my head. Of course not. Only a fresh-born merling would ask for something that sentimental.

“You would never have stolen our Orb, would you, Mama?” She surely must have wanted my sire to have the seal fat to make it through the winter, and he was Stickleback. But perhaps she had no feelings for him. Perhaps Mama would be ashamed that my loyalties are with my sire’s kin.

“Enough. I’m off to fight your kin. I hope you understand, given what they have done. Watch over me.” Would Mama choose her own daughter to protect, or her kin? I don’t want to think about it. Without Mama’s protection, I am more alone than ever.

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When I reach her, Grandmama is sitting with Shard, who is braiding Grandmama’s hair in the large territory Grandmama claimed. Light filters down through the green and yellow leaves of the kelp with shadows of darting herring above.

It takes all my energy to keep my face blank, only allowing the unseen hair on the back of my head to twitch. She doesn’t meet my eyes, talking to my ear, my cleft chin, my wide lips.

“Hmm, what can I say that will help?” Grandmama asks. “They have those evil-looking shards they use for opening clams. Nothing like our decent herring-shaped shards. Just the fat appearance of them gives me the shivers. Like bloated sea cucumbers. I’m sure they’d be happy to slit your neck with one of those.”

 How is that something that will help? I tilt my head and turn, hiding a frown. When my back is to her, Grandmama lets out a burst of bubbles and needs to go up for a breath. Why? Is it funny that I’m about to die?

Even Kelp and the rest of the Strongest would be afraid under these conditions. I don’t wait for Grandmama to return, though I haven’t been formally dismissed. My back to my beloved kelp forest, I begin the strong rhythmic pumping of my fluke that I adopt for a long trip. The Strongest can’t call me clam-digger if I return the Orb. They’ll know that I’ve chosen my loyalties.

The journey is long. Whenever a stray thought about sea cucumber-shaped shards at my throat slows my flukes, I repeat—*I am like a shark. I will be Protector. Grandmama will lose her slick pebble voice*. I won’t slow. If I do, that will give the Cockle mer the time to hide the Orb far from the clam beds, perhaps, or master a new way of slitting throats.

Sharks never stop. They move forward or sink, then die.

*I am like a shark. I will be Protector. Grandmama will lose her slick pebble voice*. My stomach roils like a spoon worm caught by the tail. I pump on until I must eat. Without the kelp to camouflage me, my hair doesn’t fool the fish; I’ll have to catch something slow. Goby dart across the sand, dipping their heads below the grains. Too fast. The grit gets in my eyes, even with the inner lids shut. A cod swims an arm’s length from me, and rushes away.

I rise for a breath. The surface heaves rough and windy, though the area around me is free of boats. In the distance, fishermen pull a dark grey dolphin from the sea. The net digs into its flesh. Even this far away, it’s mouth opening and shutting as it writhes brings sandbumps to my arms. Dolphins play with us often; they are our sisters.

But what can a mermaid alone do? Those brutes will eat that dolphin, and never pause to imagine the life they are cutting off; the hunting with friends; the playful leaps, the loving motherhood. Dolphins have souls; do makers? The one whose song enticed me, perhaps. But no, he too would have plunged a harpoon in me if I were a dolphin.

I sink. With little time to eat, I slow my heartbeat and sink the image of the murder I witnessed below my current thoughts. A brown lobster lifts a claw out of the grass, and I stab it with my shard between the beginning of the tail and the thorax, killing it. I flinch at the thought of the long lifetime I’m cutting off. But at least her eggs drift off with no need for their mother or friends.

At first, used to protecting others from my blood, I use the tips of my fingers, delicately taking one edge of the claw’s shell and pulling it gently away from the meat inside. But there are some advantages to being alone. Here, a drop of my blood will murder no one; my hair smooths, and my heart lifts. I crush the tail and other claw with my bare hands and grab chunks. I’m still hungry, but I have no more time to waste. The lobster gives me enough energy that I can swim until the light is too dim for even my excellent vision to penetrate. The night’s journey of sleep is more restful than usual: I can let each half of my mind relax fully in turn without fear, and awake refreshed.

The next day, I slide over stretches of gray mud spreading unrelieved in front of me for several hours. I put my hands in front of my eyes, just to see something else. Since fewer fishes swim here, fewer makers float above in their boats.

I surface on the far side of an island near its sandy shore.

The screeching of an eagle startles me. *I am like a shark. I will be Protector. Grandmama will lose her slick pebble voice*. I hug the coast, keeping the sandy banks one fluke’s pump away.

The Cockle mer will soon click and then I will be seen in the echoes. The short sandy passage between the island and the coast, three breaths long, is the last thing between me and the clam beds.

 The sun turns the sea crimson. At sunrise and sunset, the Cockle Queen uses her Queenspearls to sing stories for the merlings—a bad time to swim in for the Orb. Their Queen will be sitting right on the clam beds.

The Cockle Kin probably have someone to guard the Orb all the time, including at night, but then, most of them are on the Journey of Sleep. All the sea beneath them would be relatively safe for travel. They will only be dimly aware of the sea around them. The guards will be tired, waiting alone in the dark water, likely to be less alert.

I stay in the passageway, hidden behind some rocks, until the first star pierces the sky. The sky gleams the silvery gray of twilight, and the waters around me deepen to gray. Hard to see the Cockle kin in these lighting conditions without clicking and giving myself away. Eventually, I must click to find the Orb, but I should be closer and ready to fight. I grip my shard, the handle digging into my palm.

The sky and the sea darken to the gray of the stones I’m hiding behind. Something slippery touches my back as I swim toward the clam bed, and I shiver and look up. A slender sea-blue fluke moves back and forth just above me, a long line of tails reaching into the distance. The Journey of Sleep.

A whole clan of mermaids swim above me. They could grasp me with their lazy fingers and slit my throat. I dive deeper into blackness. *They* don’t have to be alone. *All* of them are poisonous. It doesn’t seem fair. But my mother’s death wasn’t fair either.

You can’t count on fairness in the sea. Sharks rarely follow rules.

I sink deeper. No one follows me, but without echoes to guide me, I must hope no guard lurks at the sea floor. As tense as herring wrapped tight in hair, I wait for a click from the guards. When my outstretched hands scrape the seabed, I know I’m deep enough. I slide my palms along the rough rasp of gravel, then over the sharper clams. No Orb. Did I think this was going to be easy?

I click, turning my head side to side to pinpoint the returning echoes’ origins. In an instant they ring out: the smoother round sound of the Orb, distinct from the clear-but-rough sound of the shells around it.

In front, the dim forms of three guards flash into my ears. The echoes of their bones are ominous: thicker than a Stickleback’s by a worm’s breadth; one of them had a bone broken, then healed. The three huddle around the Orb upright shoulder to shoulder. Now the echoes must have showed them I am here, eyes shining in the dark.

Is Mama looking over me?

I slip my shard from my thick braid, wrapping my fingers tightly around it. I pump my tail hard enough to burn.

A click from the guards lights me for a second but also shows their exact position. “Hoy there!” they call. I shift my trajectory, pumping my flukes even harder, and drive my head into a guard, doubling her over in a spray of bubbles. It’s all her air; now, she must rise.

A hand grasps one lock of my hair tight enough that I wince. I slice that lock off with my shard and dive. Sharp pain, then throbbing, crowding my mind—drowning out the decisions I need to make to escape. That section of hair will never move again. I replace the shard in its sheath and sweep my arm across the clams until I feel the rough Orb.

I heft it, letting its weight pull me down and around.

“Aaah!” In the complete dark, I can only guess what I hit, then I click. The echoes show I hit one of the guards whose and see the guard’s shard is now drifting down.

Only one guard is coming after me. I have a fair chance.

“Let me go and I won’t fight you,” I call.

“This Orb is a valued gift on loan,” she says. “The trouble we’ll be in if we don’t have it when asked!”

 An instant later an alarm call comes from above. One of the kin awakes and will soon arouse the others. Sandbumps rise on my arms.

I try I spinning with the Orb to slam the one remaining guard, but before my spin completes an orbit, a slug-fat shard presses against my back from behind, its round tip pushing into me. Injured, I complete the loop, dislodging the shard. The guard grabs my other arm and jerks me against herself. I concentrate on keeping hold of the Orb. Before the guard raises her shard to my chest, I bite her hand, hard, and she drops it.

Diving away from her with my tail pressing into the clam beds I slide away along the seabed making myself harder to distinguish from the rocks and clamshells around me.

The sound of “A thief!” and “Below us!” comes from above. I will be safer farther from their clicks.

I cling to the Orb, lower my head and pound my flukes fast, then faster, keeping just ahead of the clicks.

The darkened shapes of about sixty heads lit only by moonlight swarm toward me. Clicks ring out vibrating against my skin. The water pulls against the Orb and a distinctive click emerges from the others, coming closer and closer. I burst away, but it isn’t enough. The sound of a fluke splashing, matching me stroke for stroke, rises behind me.

“Halt!” The voice comes from a tail’s length away. The mermaid throws her shard at me through the air, hitting my shoulder. The blood flows behind me, but it won’t kill anyone here.

“No! I refuse to let my kin die without the seal hunt!”

“Seals?” the mermaid asks, pausing for the second I need.

I dive, clutching the Stickleback Orb to my chest.

I redouble my speed, as a shark would in the last seconds before it catches its prey, and the next click behind touches my tail, then just my fluke, then I no longer feel a click. I am safe for now. I let my heartbeat slow, then dive down out of the moonlight. My shoulder throbs, and my missing lock of hair aches as if it were still there.

Will I be able to hunt with my hair so badly damaged? If not, being named Protector will be my only chance for a role with the Stickleback Kin.