

OUT OF PLACE

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THE FAIRY GIFTS

BOOK 2

OUT OF PLACE

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THE FAIRY GIFTS – BOOK II
ZAZKAL

Chapter 1 – A Less Than Willing Sorcerer's Apprentice

Chapter 2 – Power Pebbles

NOTE TO THE READER

It is a little known fact that fairies have pockets in their wings for the occasional small but important things they must carry with them. Miriam Mermelstein was not a fairy. However, her cat Tefnut was half magic and able to claim a certain advantage in this area. Tefnut was also an expert at plotting, conniving and long-term planning. As a result, Miriam was currently in possession of a regulation pair of wings, complete with pockets.

PROLOGUE

I found Rose sitting cross-legged on the garden swing reading a book, leaning back and forth just enough to keep the swing going. Using my best stalking technique, I crept over so quietly, that even the grass didn't know I was there. Then, with the perfect timing of which I am undoubtedly the master, I jumped and landed next to Rose, without the slightest interference in the rhythm of the swing.

It's what I do.

It's not my way to start a conversation, so I tucked in my paws, curled up my tail, and made myself comfortable, enjoying my moment of total invisibility. While the early spring sun warmed my fur, slowly, lovingly, penetrating all the way down to my bones, I waited.

Eventually, Rose got the subliminal message, put down her book and looked to see whose eyes had been boring into the back of her head.

"Oh, Tefnut, it's you. Don't watch me like that, it makes me nervous."

"We have to talk."

"Okay, now I'm really nervous. This had better not be about Miriam."

"It is."

"Oy! Wait, I'm getting Ben."



"Now we're both here," she said after Rose and Ben were both settled. "Talk."



"...Its not the being there that worries me, Tefnut," Rose was saying. "Its the getting there."

"She has her gifts," I answered. "There won't be any problems."

"Miriam lacks the experience to make good decisions," Ben said. "Her little bag of tricks and a pair of grafted-on wings will only get her into trouble. She won't be able to manage them properly. She can't go alone."

"Oh yes she can," I said.

PART 1 KIDNAPPED



CHAPTER 1 WING POCKETS

The minute I unfolded my left wing, the ocean wind, obviously confusing me with a kite, grabbed it and pushed. I was reduced to hopping all over the road just to keep my balance while Mom and Dad zigzagged along behind trying to catch up.

“She’s headed your way, Ben,” Mom, called. “Quick, grab her.”

“Hang on, Miriam,” he hollered. He grabbed. The wind changed. Dad missed and landed on his tush, while I was blown, spinning and bouncing, like a badly launched kite, in the opposite direction.

“Open your other wing, honey,” Mom, already huffing and puffing, wheezed out, “so we can catch you.”

True, two wings would be better. At least I would be pushed in a straight line. But, this wing thing was still new to me. For sure, with both wings open, I would be blown up and away like a lost umbrella.

“Miriam. Sit.” Dad’s insight came from the fact that his recent effort had left him in a similar position.

I sat. Mom grabbed me and helped me tuck my wing back in. Then we all walked over to the car, propped me against it facing into the wind and started over.

This time I spread the wing out against the side of the car and let the wind blow all it wanted while I took Mom’s necklace out of the left wing pocket. Wing pockets don’t have zippers. They keep things in by being very tight. It’s never good to be in a hurry to get something out of a wing pocket.

I had two fingers in and could just feel the chain with the tip of one finger. A little further in and I had it hooked. Using my free hand I stretched the pocket a little wider — not too much, or it hurt — so that the delicate charm wouldn’t be damaged as I pulled it out.

“You know,” I said when I finally got it out all in one piece. “There’s a reason that whoever invented wing pockets isn’t famous.”

Hanging from a silver chain was my ticket to the Twilight Zone, disguised as an ordinary fish scale. Out of the water, it looked thick and dull. It was a part of the ocean. A place where I didn’t belong. But I was going there anyway.

My first big trip away from home. Am I going to Grandma’s on a plane? Off to summer camp on the other side of the country? Nooo, nothing so ordinary for me. I’m going to go and play with the fishies. All by myself.

“Let me, dear,” Mom said. I handed over the necklace and pulled my wing back under my shoulder blade where it stayed nicely hidden. Mom got behind me and straightened the back of my t-shirt while I pulled my hair out of the way. She put the necklace around

my neck and closed the catch, finishing with a reverse hug, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and nuzzling my hair. I could feel wet tears soaking through to my scalp.

"Now, you remember how to use the necklace?" she sniffed. "Do you need me to show you again?" I wiggled free of her damp embrace.

"Mo-om! I remember."

Dad went right into high-speed lecture-mode. A sure sign of parental distress.

"Don't forget," he said. "You'll be perfectly safe as long as you stay under the water. Fairies, including mermaids, are not on the food chain and that's exactly what everyone will think you are. Oh, and don't say 'mermaid' when you get there. It's not considered polite. The preferred term for double breathers is 'Sky'. Don't forget. And don't forget to give your grandparents the photos we gave you. And call," he added. "Whatever happens...Don't...Forget...To Call."

"Okay. Okay. Why are you so worried? You're the ones who spent the last four days convincing me how safe I'll be underwater."

I was not about to admit to them that my heart was pounding so hard I could feel the ka-thumps bouncing off my eardrums. They would both jump at any excuse to cancel this trip.

My parents are normally pretty intense anyway, but we just spent three days cooped up together in the car. We were now as far south as you can get without a passport and Mom and Dad are a wreck.

I spent three days sitting by myself, in the back seat, listening to music and rereading my old Harry Potter books. Boring, but not crazy-making. Mom and Dad spent the same three days together in the front seat, getting on each others nerves and worrying themselves into a frenzy.

"Come on, let's do it," Dad said with his cute crooked smile. "I want to see the Great Transformation." He turned to lock up the car. Mom wiped her eyes on her sleeve and took my arm. Dad put the keys in his pocket and took my other arm. With me squeezed tight in the middle, we stepped off the pavement onto the deserted beach and started walking across the sand to the sea.

It was only the middle of June. But even with the umbrella-grabbing wind off the water, the weather was a lot warmer than anyone expected. Only the wind kept it from being sweaty-hot. I opened the drawstring pouch that hung like a mutant fanny pack at my waist.

"I'm starving," I lied. I wasn't hungry, I was nervous. "How about a snack from the sampo." One at a time, I pulled three ice cream cones out of the bag: Rocky Road in a sugar cone for Mom, the family chocoholic; pistachio in a fancy waffle cone for Dad, the gourmet chef; and vanilla with rainbow sprinkles in a plain cone for me. It's what I always get. Dad held his ice cream at arm's length and looked at it like he was pondering a great work of art.

"Rum raisin, right?" I said, already taking out a new cone. Rum raisin is Dad's other favorite flavor.

"Mmmmm. I think so," he said thoughtfully. I handed him the replacement and shoved the unacceptable pistachio cone, ice cream first, back into my bag.

"Ahh. Instant gratification," Dad said, slurping happily.

"Ewww, Miriam," Mom squealed. "How are you going to clean that out."

"No problemo. Here. Hold this." I handed her my vanilla cone so I could use both hands to turn the bag inside out. It was empty...and clean. "See. My sampo is self-cleaning."

"What happened to the photos for your grandparents?" Dad asked severely.

"Easy. Magic, presto, change-o." I turned the bag right side in and pulled out a small plastic photo album.

"I'll never get used to you having that thing," said Dad.

"It's okay, Ben," Mom said, happily licking away at her Rocky Road. "After all, all the best dragonfly fairies have one. Mmmmm," she added, totally focused on her ice cream.

"Our daughter is not a fairy," Dad said testily. He had never completely forgiven the dragonfly fairies for grafting wings onto his precious daughter, a.k.a., me, without asking him first.

"She may be human," Mom replied, "but she has all the right equipment."

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one," he said tartly. Look at her. She has legs, so she's human but she's about to acquire a tail, so she's a fish, wings...that makes her a bird and a couple of built-in pockets which I believe--correct me if I'm wrong--means our only child is a marsupial."

"Hey, come-oon," I said. "Why are you so touchy? I'm on my way to visit Grandma and Grandpa Mermaid. Everyone's happy, happy, happy. Remember?"

At least we were supposed to be happy, happy, happy. But Dad was right, I was like some mythical creature. The kind that's made up of lots of different animals. What would my adopted Grandparents think of me when they met me for the first time? What if I was too weird even for them?

"It will be all right, Ben," Mom said, getting right to the heart of what was really bugging Dad. She put her arm around his shoulder. "Relax. You know as well as I do that Miriam will be perfectly safe as long as she's under the water," she reminded him. "Even in bad weather, as long as she stays in deep water, she'll be fine. The worst thing that could happen is that someone might be rude to her. But no one will hurt her. Not while she's in fairy form."

"Mmph." Dad had succumbed to the lure of Rum Raisin, grunting his agreement between licks.

We reached the water's edge and the beginning of an old fishing pier. The wind was even stronger now that we were over the water. I had to hold my hair back with one hand to keep it from whipping around into my ice cream. The stiff breeze kept pushing me back the way I had come. It was like the ocean didn't want me to be there.

The clacking of our shoes as we walked on the weathered planks echoed back from the empty sky, attracting out of nowhere a flock of scruffy-looking seagulls looking for the avian equivalent of spare change.

Ignoring the gulls and each other, we concentrated on our ice cream cones until we got to the end of the deserted pier. I stared down at the deep water under the pier, then out to the whitecaps on the horizon. This was the moment I had been waiting for.

CHAPTER 2

GIRL WITH GILLS

With a shake of my long fluffy hair, I would dive gracefully into the sea, giving an artful flip with my tail fin as I disappeared into the depths. My parents would gasp with admiration at my power and beauty.

That was the vision...

...then there was the reality.

My parents gasped all right. It was either that or laugh out loud and risk one of their hormonally challenged daughter's tantrums.

Sucking in my breath for courage, I gave the necklace a quick twist. Almost before I finished, my pale skinny legs disappeared, replaced by a large muscular fishtail, the kind worn by mermaids in all the best storybooks.

I was left standing on my tail. But not for long. No knees. No feet either. Without feet to support me and with a lower half that felt more like Tefnut's tail than stuck-together legs, I slithered gracelessly to the ground, then flopped myself into the water.

"Sheesh. For someone whose mother spent a big chunk of her childhood as a mermaid, you should be better at it than this," Dad choked out, in between belly laughs.

"Next time, Miriam," Mom said through quivering lips, "twist the scale after you jump."

"Thanks a lot, Mom. You could have told me before I bruised my butt...or whatever it is."

"Sorry, Doll," she sniggered.

"Oh, look." Mom pointed to a place just behind me. "Miriam, you still have your wings." I wiggled my shoulder blades and could feel the pull of the current tugging on the wings poking out from under my t-shirt.

"My daughter," she sighed with mock pride, "the flying mermaid. Speaking of which, is Poppy's cape all right?"

Flying mermaid? I pressed my lips together and didn't say the words that wanted to come out. It's all right for them to make fun of me, but look out if I try to defend myself with a funny comeback.

So, I kept my mouth shut and checked the right wing pocket. I could feel the little lump that was the shadow-coat that Poppy, had given me, the day I received my wing buds and sampo from the rest of the dragonfly fairies. The wing pocket was still nice and tight.

"Snug as a bug," I answered.

"What about the sampo? Is it still there?" Dad said anxiously and perfectly reasonably, since my pants were not. I checked.

"Yes. It's here."

I was still wearing my T-shirt, but except for the drawstring bag around my waist, the rest of my clothes seemed to have disappeared. My new blue-green tail was covered with shiny scales almost, but not quite identical to the charm around my neck which had taken on a translucent glow. Giving the necklace another twist I felt the weight of wet sneakers and jeans on my skinny legs and quickly twisted myself right back to tail again.

"I wondered about that," I said. "But this T-shirt, ugh. I must look awful, and it feels worse. Wait a minute," I said to my parents. "And don't look."

Swimming under the pier for privacy, I switched to legs and climbed onto a sheared-off, out of use pylon. First I took off my squishy sneakers.

"Here. Catch." I called up to Mom and Dad." Reaching out and leaning as far as I could towards the edge of the decking above me, I tossed them up one at a time onto the dock, sneaker, sock, sneaker, sock. Thump, plop, thump, plop. Four perfect landings.

Next, I opened my bag. Out came a tiny bra top made of seashells.

"I hope you're not looking," I hollered out.

I held the thing at arm's length to examine it. Two big shells, mother-of-pearl smooth on the inside, each one decorated with a border of tiny golden-yellow conch shells. Dozens of small, oval shells were strung together to make the straps.

I put the whole thing gingerly across my chest over the wet T-shirt. Six years old, I thought. When I was six, I would have eaten mashed peas to have one of these. I think I blushed.

"I can not do this," I muttered to myself. Making a face, I quickly shoved the Little Mermaid Bra Top back into my bag.

Impulsively, I pulled off my T-shirt and stuffed it in on top of the seashells. Now this is what a real mermaid would wear, I thought, opening my arms wide to get the full effect.

This worked for about two seconds. Then I crossed my arms over my bare chest, looking around and up through the cracks in the wooden pier to make sure that Mom and Dad weren't peeking and that the deserted stretch of beach was still deserted.

Finally, out of my bag, came a bikini, my size, my style. Since I'm not a real mermaid, I guess this will be okay, I thought. My jeans and underpants were the next thing to hit the deck.

"Keep not looking," I shouted. Crouching naked on the pylon, I put on the bathing suit and lowered myself back into the water. Another twist on the necklace and the bathing suit bottom was gone. I was back in my new fishy form. There is no way I'm going to wear a bunch of seashells on my chest, I thought, swimming out from under the pier.

"Like my new outfit?" I said to Mom and Dad as soon as I got to where they could see me. The bikini top felt a little silly with my tail, but it was comfortable.

"Looks great," Mom said. "Have you tested the gills yet?"

"No."

"So, do it. You'll love it."

The truth was, that I wasn't in a hurry to figure out the breathing part. You think everybody wants to be able to breathe underwater, right? But faced with actually doing it is scary. Just the thought of sucking in water made me feel panicky.

I put a hand to the back of one ear. The skin was rough and scabby. I felt behind the other ear. Same thing.

"That's them. Those are the gills," Mom said.

"Can you see them?" I said nervously. "Do they show a lot? Do they look right?"

"We can't see them from here," she said, "but they'll work just fine. Go ahead and try it out."

"I guess I have to do this sometime, don't I," I sighed.

"Yes, and now is a good time," Dad said. "If you mess up we can pull you out." Mom elbowed him in the ribs.

"Ben, she can't mess up. It's impossible.

“Miriam,” Mom called down to me. “Don’t worry. You can’t make a mistake with this. Just relax and breathe comfortably...you don’t even have to relax. Go ahead. Be tense. The gills work all by themselves.”

“Well... goodbye,” I said as I ducked reluctantly under the water.

I started out by opening my eyes just a little. Then, I opened them a lot. It was like wearing goggles on your eyeballs. Everything was crystal clear and the salt water didn’t sting.

So I tried a little sniff through my nose. Just the barest smallest sniff I could manage. Water went in. Nothing bad happened. I sniffed in a teensy bit more. It was still okay. I sniffed in a lot.

It was great. I was breathing under water. The water went in my nose and out my gills. It never went near my lungs.

I opened my mouth and let a little water in. It went out the gills just like the nose water. I tried swallowing some. I gagged.

It tasted terrible. But I was all right. I was still breathing...breathing water.

I powered up my tail and dolphined out of the water and took a deep breath. It still worked. I was officially a double breather.

“I love it,” I shouted. “This is great.” I did a couple more leaps, accidentally on purpose too close to the pier. Mom and Dad were soaked. Then I dove deep and came back up further away.

“I love you,” I called out to them, swimming backwards and waving with both hands. “I’ll call you tonight. Bye.”

“Don’t mess around with any rogue Sky and stay away from humans,” Mom shouted into the wind. “Stay far away from boats and don’t even think about teasing any scuba divers.”

CHAPTER 3

BOATS

Mom and Dad stood with their arms around each other, their heads leaning in and just touching. Mom held out her free hand like she does when we watch weepy movies. It means: 'Ben. Give me a tissue. Hurry up!'

I missed them already.

"Don't worry," I shouted, counting on the wind to carry my voice back to them. "I won't go near any boats. You can trust me," I hollered, trying to remember where and when she told me about something called a rogue Sky. I waved one more time and dove under the water where the swimming would be easier.

It would have been easier too, but my wings made for an extra complication. They wouldn't stay tucked in. Instead, they kept floating off without permission. Eventually, I gave in and let them hang loose.

Once the wing-thing was settled, I still had trouble keeping a steady pace. I always wanted straight hair. Now I had it. Not only straight, but floaty. Perfect mermaid hair. Small problem. Every time I looked behind me, my gorgeous mermaid hair got in my mouth, my eyes and my nose.

My fault. I kept twisting around to watch my wings billow out behind me as I swam. This slowed me down, but they were sooo beautiful underwater. They were like the fins on the back of some exquisite goldfish and with all the colors of a shiny wet pebble.



By now, I was far enough from land, so that the water was pretty sparsely populated, not much more than the occasional school of little silver fish, always looking like they knew exactly where they were going. If I moved too quickly, they scattered in a hundred different directions like flashing silver stars.

But if I didn't make any jerky movements, they acted like I wasn't there, sliding across my skin without a break in their swim rhythm, as if I was nothing more than a big lump of coral. It was kind of nice. Not slippery. Maybe a little ticklish, but mostly like dozens of short soft strokes all over my body. I almost purred.

I don't really know a lot about the ocean. I guess I should have studied for this trip, but I didn't. I asked one of the silver fish what they were called.

"We are the salt people," it said. I was pretty sure that that wasn't what they were called when they were turned into fishsticks.

I don't know much about different kinds of sharks either, but I was also pretty sure that the gray shape headed straight towards me was a pretty classic example of the species. Dull gray, skin. Streamlined shape and of course the requisite menacing dorsal fin. Okay, Miriam, I tell myself. Stay cool. Remember. You're not on the food chain.

I'm not on the food chain. I'm not on the food chain, I kept repeating to myself, trying not to look as nervous as I felt.

"Hello, Sky." The shark spoke in a flat monotone. It was about half my size, plenty big enough. "Anything good to eat back in that direction?"

"N...no, not really," somebody outside my head answered while inside my head my real self kept singing tunelessly...not on the food chain...not on the food chain."

The shark grunted and turned around, coming a hair's breadth to brushing against me with its sandpaper skin then it headed out to sea. People around here have no sense of

personal space. “Not on the food chain...not on the food chain,” I kept humming. I thought of the wonderful cloud of silver fish and changed my tune. “Safe for another day...safe for another day.”

Nevertheless, I was still making pretty good time. Occasionally surfacing to keep the coastline in sight as a guide, I was headed south to the warm waters where my mother’s adoptive Sky-parents lived. At first, I felt jet propelled. This fishtail thing was so much faster than walking, even running.

But after a couple of hours of nothing but swimming and admiring myself, I started to think the unthinkable. I started to think about how long this trip was going to take and how much I wanted to meet my adoptive Grandparents now, not days from now. I started to think about a boat.

Now I realize that the middle of the ocean is not a particularly good place for hitchhikers. There was, for example, the small problem of explaining to the occupants of any boat I might find, how I came to be happily drifting with the currents.

So here I was, swimming along thoughtfully, thinking about cruise ships, the kind of boat where a kid could go undiscovered for a day or two. I was so lost in the fantasy of the beautiful mysterious girl on the Love Boat, that I never noticed the very small boat just over my head.

Small boat. Large fishing net. I didn’t notice that either. The net whomped closed, catching me and an assortment of small fish that had the bad luck to be nearby, and began to rise slowly to the surface.

I had no idea what kind of people were at the other end of the net, but I did know that I was not dressed for the party. I could feel the pressure building on the panic button that I keep right next to the butterflies in the pit of my stomach.

Then I remembered the sampo. It would give me anything I needed, including something to cut the net with. Even while I worried about what would happen to the bag if water got into it, I was trying to open it.

But I had tied the sampo extra snugly around my waist for fear of losing it in the water, and now the combination of trembling fingers and wet knots kept my bag closed tight.

Meanwhile, I could see, the surface of the water and the bottom of the boat above me, getting closer. I frantically worked to open the bag. There was no way I was going to get the sampo open in time. I was trapped.

Panic rose like vomit, from my stomach into my throat, choking me. I put my hands over my face and closed my eyes. If I can’t see it, maybe it will go away.

On their way to my face, my fingers brushed against the silver necklace, reminding me that I still had options. I twisted the charm and got my legs back just as the net reached the surface. But I still didn’t have the nerve to open my eyes and face whatever was waiting above the water.

Although I couldn’t bear to look, I could hear voices. I seemed to be the topic-du-jour.

“...not a dolphin, not a shark.”

“Giant manta ray!”

“Too skinny.”

“Tuna. Really big tuna fish. Yum.”

“Don’t be stupid. Tuna only come in cans.”

Cans? I cracked my eyes the thinnest slit I was able and could just see three scruffy looking heads peering down over the side of the boat.

"Hey, there's a kid in the net. She must have fallen off a boat," the middle head said.

"Fish don't live on boats."

"Moron. It's not a fish. It's a kid."

"It's a fish. I saw a fish."

"Jerk. Fish don't have legs."

"Yea, well, kids don't breathe under water. It's a fish. We can eat it."

Meanwhile, the net with me in it was still slowly rising and almost level with the boat. I could feel something hook into the netting, pulling it and me over to the Three Stooges.

"Look at that," one of them said. "It's half dead." I got a bruisingly hard poke in the ribs, but I was too weak from fright to react. The only thing I did, was squeeze my eyes even tighter.

"Maybe, it's all dead."

"If it's dead, can we eat it?"

"Shut up."

"It's a kid, all right. It must have fallen off a boat."

"What boat? I saw a fish."

"Forget the fish. You saw a dolphin. Dolphins rescue people all the time. Look at it. It's practically drowned. The dolphin was probably trying to get it to the surface."

"But I saw a fish."

"Yea, well, you're stupid."

"Yea, you don't know anything."

CHAPTER 4

CAPTURED

Hands were everywhere. The net containing me and my new fishy friends swung over the boat rail and down. I landed so hard on the deck that my eyes popped open. The three heads had been joined by a fourth and I was now looking up at four of the most bizarre-looking people I had ever seen.

You could hardly see their skin for all the hair and dirt. Their clothes were so raggy and faded that it was actually difficult to tell exactly where clothes ended and skin began.

They honestly looked more like big shaggy dogs than people. They were that weird. Each of them seemed to be marked, doggie style, in different shades of gray with fur cut long and short in patches; like the brownish-gray bandanna around one neck that might have once been red, or the gray jacket on another that from the look of it was originally blue denim.

The boat didn't look a whole lot better than its owners. The splintery wood of the deck was worn to gray, with patches of green stuff growing on the wood, like moss on a rock. Probably, they left the splinters to keep from slipping on the green stuff.

Anywhere there was metal, there was rust, especially the enormous winch that had dragged me out of the deep blue sea. It swallowed up the whole stern end of the boat. I also had a feeling that if I swam underneath to do a barnacle check on the hull, I wouldn't be disappointed.

As soon as the doggie dudes saw that I was more or less alive, they backed off, moving to stand next to a low cabin at the front of the boat. They huddled together, more muttering all at once than actually speaking, occasionally waving their arms around and shouting out words that I could hear, but that made no sense at all.

One of them was tall and kind of vacant looking. He got my vote for the --it's a fish, can we eat it-- award. One was short and pudgy with tiny greedy eyes that weren't nice to look at.

The other two were almost as skinny as I am, with long narrow faces and buckteeth, kind of like big rats. They both had matted black hair, but no beards or mustaches, so they might have been women, but who could tell. Even their voices were more like each other than anything else, a little high for men and a little low for women.

They kept looking over at their unintended catch still caught up in the net. Me and the tangle of fish that surrounded me were clearly not what they had been looking for.

The thing was, that when I closed my eyes and just listened, even though the words didn't make sense, it sounded like at least a dozen different voices were speaking, but when I looked, I could only see four of them. I shook my head to clear the cobwebs and started to count again.

My headshake drew their attention. They all stopped talking and stared at me. Then, Greedy Eyes, glanced at the others, drew a short knife out from somewhere in his furry-looking jacket, if that's what it was, and walked purposefully straight over to where I sat caught in the folds of the fish net.

Unlike a proper heroine who would have thrown off the nets and leaped into action, the sight of the knife and the menacing approach of its owner left me frozen. I could feel my eyes bulging out of my head and I know my mouth was hanging open. I sucked air hard but I couldn't make a sound as he bent over me, the blade between us...

...and cut the cord that held my bag.

I breathed out.

The other three watched as he untangled the sampo from the net, opened it up and stuck his hand inside.

"It's empty," he said, handing it to the others who proceeded to poke, shake and turn it inside out, a fat grubby hand finally flinging it over the side.

"My bag," I gasped, leaping to my feet at last. At least in my mind I leapt to my feet. What actually happened was, being tangled in the net, I kind of half rose, dripping fish, lost my balance and thumped back down, the poor fish squishing out from underneath me as I landed.

"What?" said No Beard Number One, looking hard at me. "What's your name, kid? How did you get into the water?"

"Ohhhhhhhhh!" I groaned, and No Beard Number One and the others turned away. Having already decided that I was a dolphin rescue, I don't think they were really interested in my name.

Tall and Vacant picked up another fishing net, hooked it onto the winch and tossed the whole thing into the water. He practically folded himself in half, leaning over the side of the boat, maybe to help the net along, maybe just to look. I don't know.

But then Greedy Eyes tippy toed on his pudgy little feet up to Tall and Vacant's exposed rear end. He put his grimy hands on Tall And Vacant's butt and shoved.

CHAPTER 5

FISH DINNER

There was a splash, but no shouting or calling from the water. The No Beards watched passively as an expressionless Greedy Eyes took hold of the winch handle and started to lower the net.

The other two watched Greedy Eyes sweat and grunt as he pushed and pulled the rusty handle. Nobody could talk over the eyeball popping noise of the winch. The sun beat down on the deck, heating everything up. I couldn't stop shivering.

Finally, to everyone's relief, he was finished and the remaining three fur people, dripping dirt balls as they walked, retreated back to the cabin, where they resumed their huddle. But the muted conversation quickly changed to into an argument between Greedy Eyes and the No Beard Twins, that was loud enough for me to hear.

"Sell it," Greedy Eyes was saying.

"Too puny," No Beard Number One barked out.

"Yea," said No Beard Number Two. "Throw it back. Let the dolphin keep it."

"Lots of people want kids," Greedy Eyes snarled at them. "They'll pay all right."

"Not for this one," No Beard Number One snarled right back. "You're so stupid. People only want babies."

"I know a place where they always want kids," Greedy Eyes lowered his voice, so it was hard to hear.

"This one isn't big enough for the mines. They won't pay you dipshit for it," Number One growled.

"Yea. It's too small for the mines and too big for people who want babies. Throw it back," No Beard Number Two whined. "It's useless."

"Little fish have parents," Greedy Eyes said, clearly determined to turn me into treasure. "Sell it to the parents."

It's a good thing Tall And Vacant isn't here, I thought, or I would be fish dinner for sure.

They continued this way for a while, trying to decide whether there might be anybody willing to pay money to get me back, whether I was worth ransoming and if it was a good idea in general. Meanwhile, I'm thinking, I have to get out of here and it better be soon.

All of a sudden, the winch started acting up on its own. They ran back to the winch so fast that the boat rocked, and started to pull up the net. Greedy Eyes cranked the handle while the two No Beards pulled at the chain. At last, after much heaving and complaining, they pulled aboard some big crates. Along with the crates came Tall And Vacant with a silly grin on his face. The thing was...he was totally dry.

Things were quickly found for prying open the boxes and pretty soon they were cheering, hollering, jumping up and down and generally celebrating. Drinks appeared and were sloshed around with a lot of singing and back thumping.

I tried to rise up through the tangle of nets to see if I could catch a glimpse of the contents of the boxes. I was spotted, of course, and an empty crate was immediately turned upside down on top of me and tied down with ropes to keep me from pushing it off.

I could see almost nothing out of the cracks in the sides but the bottom of the box, which was now my roof, was partly broken open, giving a view of the sky. Someone was raising a signal flag on the boat's single mast.

For someone with so many advantages, I was in a pretty bad mess. I couldn't fit out the top of the crate to fly away. I couldn't get to the water to swim away, and my sampo was gone.

Mom's last words were stuck on instant replay in my head. 'Don't go near any boats.' It looks like my parents won't be getting any phone calls from me tonight. My guilt button started competing with my panic button. I deserved to be somebody's fish dinner.

CHAPTER 6

ABANDONED

I applied myself to getting untangled from the net. I had finally realized that there was still one thing that I could do.

If...while inside my tiny little living quarters, I could get the net off and the shadow-coat on; and if...one of the fur-people came over to check on me; and if...when he didn't see me, because I was wearing the shadow-coat, he untied the crate and lifted it up to look; then...all I had to do was walk away. All they would notice would be the splash or maybe the trail of small fish that I would undoubtedly leave in my wake.

I was just pushing aside the last bits of net and feeling very proud of my plan, not to mention impressed by my amazing flexibility, when I looked up and saw two eyes peering down at me.

"Oh no," I thought, suddenly feeling groggy, even while our eyes were locked together. I haven't got my coat on yet. Who knows when they'll decide to check up on me again? He kept staring at me and did something funny with his eyes. I had to go to sleep. I just had to. I curled up on top of the net and fell instantly asleep.



The tooth-grinding screech of the winch woke me up. I was stiff, salty and surrounded by dead fish. The smell was not good.

From the cracks in my crate I could see that we were pulled alongside a small ship. It was morning, or rather the beginnings of day, more gray than black, with a few stars still in the sky. Next to me, half tucked under me, was my sampo.

Those strange people must have seen it floating in the water and pulled it out for me, I thought, thinking kind thoughts about them. I couldn't see anyone, but I could hear voices, so they must be awake.

I was so hungry that even the smell of dead fish couldn't keep me from my breakfast. I took a banana and a bread and jelly sandwich out of my sampo and tried not to breathe in too deeply while I ate. Meanwhile, the ship began pulling away from our boat and by the time I finished eating, it was gone.

By now, I had to pee really bad. Therefore, it was time for plan B. Speed things up. Not without some difficulty, since I didn't dare uncross my legs, I got Poppy's shadow-coat out of my right wing pocket. As I twisted myself around to put it on, I saw through the cracks in my smelly new home, a bunch of scruffy looking seagulls fly up and away from the boat. I counted four.

That was when I realized that the voices I thought I had heard while I was eating weren't voices at all, but the noisy bickering of the seagulls and that with their departure, the boat was now quiet. The fur-people must have gone back to sleep.

As soon as I finished putting on the shadow-coat I started calling for attention--a soft "Hey" at first and then a lot of screaming and hollering when no one answered.

"Hey, wake up everybody, I have to go to the bathroom!"

No one came.

I needed action and I needed it now. Taking a small hand saw out of my sampo, I used it to make one of the cracks in the crate large enough to get my arm through. After that, it was no problem to cut through one of the ropes holding down the crate. One rope was enough. I pushed and the box came loose enough for me to tip over.

Taking the three short steps down to the cabin in one flying leap, I found the toilet and used it. In the process, I discovered that the boat was not only empty, it was really empty. There was nothing left to show that anyone had ever been on this boat. No mysterious but somehow revealing message on a discarded scrap of paper, no half eaten food, in fact no food or water at all, not even a left-behind dirty sock.

The gas tank was about half full and, peering over the back, I saw painted there the boat's registration number together with its name, Maiden Voyage. Dumb name. Rust-And-Dust, maybe, but Maiden Voyage? No way. This boat is almost as scuzzy-looking as those fur-people. However, this is my maiden voyage. Maybe it's a sign.

Visions of me, gripping the helm and looking noble, ran through my head, as I guided my pitifully small ship across the vast ocean to some unspecified but desperately important task. After all, when Mom said to stay away from boats, she was really talking about the people who were on the boats. She didn't mean the boats themselves.

That was when I remembered what I had been trying to forget. My phone call. Mom and Dad must be worried sick. I was supposed to call them last night. Sitting on one of the storage benches that ran the length of both sides of the boat, I took a cell phone out of the sampo. What could I tell them?

That I wasn't paying attention the way I promised and ran into a boat? That I was kidnapped by furry cannibals who were going to hold me for ransom but decided to leave me to starve instead?

I knew exactly what they would say. Stop. Come home immediately. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two hundred dollars. Do not visit your grandparents. Go To Jail.

I racked my brain for a suitable excuse. There was nothing I could say that would keep me out of deep doodoo that didn't involve serious, major whoppers.

How could I lie? I just spent nearly a year practically not talking to Mom and Dad because I thought they were keeping secrets from me, lying and making up stories about Grandma and Grandpa mermaid. I had sworn up and down that there would be no more lies and no more secrets in our family. Mom and Dad needed to know that I was okay and I had to tell them the truth.

I picked up the phone and started to dial. Halfway through I noticed something catching the light from inside the rusty chain wrapped around the winch. It's pretty obvious that this boat hasn't been washed or polished for months, maybe years. There is nothing here that's clean enough to shine in the sun like that.

Intensely curious, I put the phone down on the bench and went over to examine the winch. The world will not collapse if my call to Mom and Dad has to wait another five minutes.

CHAPTER 7

MIRIAM, PHONE HOME

As soon as I got close, the twinkle disappeared. I backed off until I could see it again, then kept my eyes fixed on the spot until I was close enough to touch it. Bending over I peered into the links looking for a shiny spot. Nothing. Just layers and layers of rusty chain.

Maybe if I unwound the chain a little, it would loosen things up, so I could see better. Marking the spot with a piece of red tape from the sampo so I wouldn't have to play hide and seek again, I tested the handle.

It didn't budge.

I'm on the junior swim team at the JCC. I may be skinny, but I'm a whole lot stronger than I look. I checked for some kind of locking device, and found it. It was open. Those fur people must be professional weight lifters.

The end of the chain trailed along the deck and hung over the side of the boat. I peered over the edge and saw a drag anchor tied to the chain and hanging just above the water level. My god. Those crazy people left the boat to drift. They were never coming back.

That was the good news. The bad news? I could be anywhere. I could be in the middle of the ocean.

I can't call now. I can't tell Mom and Dad that I'm lost at sea. What are they going to do? Send the Coast Guard? Where? I looked at the sun. It was balanced on the horizon like a big egg yolk. It's still early. They can wait.

It looks like I'll be traveling by boat after all. I strode over to the helm taking deep shaky breaths with each step. I was really going to do this. At least I knew what I had to do. Check the compass, point the boat to where the shoreline is supposed to be, and pray that I wasn't more than a tank-full of gas from something familiar that would put me back on course.

The controls were on a kind of dashboard attached to the front of the cabin. A captain's chair was screwed to the deck on an extra tall post so that the pilot could see over the roof of the cabin.

I climbed onto the chair and took a good look at the controls. The engine used a key lock, but there was no key, so I took one out of the sampo. It fit. The engine started easily and sounded smooth. Opening the throttle slightly, I checked the compass and turned the boat towards shore, gradually pushing the throttle up to almost full speed.

At speed, the Maiden Voyage left an impressive wake fanning out at the back like a double peacock tail. The bow cut deeply into the sunrise streaked water, spraying me with warm droplets of salty ocean.

I gave a silent thank you to my Uncle Andy who taught me how to pilot his cabin cruiser. That was the bay. This is the ocean. But the boats work basically the same way and so as long as the sea stays nice and smooth, this wasn't a whole lot different.

After about a half hour of being surrounded by empty horizon, sailing from nowhere to nowhere, I started to get that prickly feeling at the back of my neck, like when someone's watching you. Boats don't have rear view mirrors. It's not real important to know what's behind you. Usually nothing. But the prickly feeling wouldn't go away. My shoulders started to twitch, like when a ghost walks over your grave.

I couldn't help thinking that somehow, one of the fur people was following the boat. It would have to be Vacant Eyes. He really did drown yesterday and it was his ghost that came back out of the sea. That's why he wasn't wet. Now he's here. He wants his boat back.

Slowly, I turned. A dark shape under the water, as long as a grown man was following the boat. My heart stopped completely for one long second until I realized what it must be.

Way cool, I have a dolphin. It's come to rescue me. I looked around for more, but that was it. Slowing the boat's speed, I watched for a while, hoping for a display of dolphin-frolic. No show. My dolphin continued, boringly and very undolphinly, to swim steadily along at the tail end of the boat's wake, so that, even though it was near the surface, the choppy water obscured its shape.

Bored, I returned to scrutinizing the horizon ahead. Less than ten minutes later, I spotted a sliver of land on the horizon. What a relief.

Now that I was approaching land, there was liable to be more human activity. Finally deciding that maybe parents occasionally give good advice, I kept my eyes peeled for other boats, so I could avoid them.

I also watched the emerging shoreline and it didn't take long to spot a big orange water tower with a sailboat painted on the side that I had seen not long before I ran into the fishing net.

I'm back on course. It's time to go. I get off the boat. I call Mom and Dad, let them know that everything is okay. Leave the Maiden Voyage to her fate and pick up where I left off.

I kept glancing back to check on my tail. I'm beginning to think that this is not the dolphin rescue society. I wonder if I can call 911 and tell them I'm being stalked by a fish. I know I'm 'not on the food chain' as Dad so graphically put it, but Big Fish was still there, a dark shadow in the boat's wake. Well, whatever it is, will probably go away when we get closer to shore. I can get off the boat then.

The red tape I had left to mark the sun-twinkle was staring at me from across the deck. This won't take long, I thought, turning the throttle down to neutral and leaving the boat to rock gently on the barely-there waves. I took a cleaning rag and a small can of Four-In-One oil out of my bag and applied myself to the gears that turned the winch. I proceeded to scrape, rub, tighten and loosen until my arms ached.

Forty-five minutes later, the sun no longer anywhere near the horizon, I gave up. There was no sign of Big Fish. He must have given up too. Taking a water bottle and a PB&J out of my bag, I sat on the deck using the winch for a backrest. I made a deal with myself. First I eat. Then I call. Then, if I can't get the winch moving, I'm out of here. I took another cell phone out of the bag and put it down next to me. This would be my reminder.

I felt a lot less aggravated once I had eaten. I'll bet those gears just needed some time for the oil to sink in, I thought. I reached out and pushed the handle. No dice.

Maybe it just needs thicker grease, I thought. I'll give it another ten minutes. I took a can of 'Thicker Grease' out of my bag and put the phone on the bench next to the first one so it wouldn't get greasy.

It took all of the ten minutes I had allowed myself just to get the lid off the can but finally I was ready. Taking the 'Thicker Grease Spreading Cloth' that came with it, I got to work.

Another ten minutes and the handle jiggled when I pushed. Something fell out, bounced a couple of times and rolled into a corner.

I knew it. Those creepy people were smuggling jewels. This is the proof. I scooped up the small blue-gray pebble from the deck. It felt warm to the touch, probably from the friction of the moving chain. It was pretty, and certainly shiny enough to catch the sunlight, but it wasn't a diamond or a ruby, or any jewel I knew about.

Hmmm. It must be some kind of uncut jewel, I thought, turning the stone over in my hand. Something special. Something so rare that only an expert would recognize it.

Like a jewel thief. Maybe a cat burglar, or a pirate. A pirate would have to know all about jewels. I looked up at the mast to where the Jolly Roger would be flying.

This boat is perfect for modern day pirates. It's so small, so shabby, no one would suspect a thing. Pirates would have no trouble sneaking up on even the biggest boat.

We would swarm out of the hold...dozens of us...and board the unsuspecting ship. We will leave no one alive and our gold and jewels will be crusted with human blood.

I looked around for dark stains on the deck. The green stuff that was growing between the splinters, I wondered what kind of nutrients it needed to grow.

I bet I'm not the first person to steal this boat. Besides, it would be a shame to leave such a valuable boat to its fate. If I can just get the anchor to work, I can leave it somewhere safe.

I tucked the pebble into my wing pocket picked up the can of Thicker Grease, and got back to work on the winch. I'll get this boat safely stowed away and then call Mom and Dad and tell them everything. They'll be so proud of me.

CHAPTER 8

OUT OF GAS

Big Fish showed up again when I turned the Maiden Voyage south along the coastline. I kept looking for a likely spot to bring her in, but the buildings were getting fewer and fewer and the gas gauge was getting lower and lower—as were my hopes of finding a marina where I could dock my boat.

After awhile, there was nothing at all but thick jungle-looking trees and bushes growing right up to the water. The only thing that had changed was the fluffy white clouds on the horizon. They were still there, only they weren't white anymore.

But the sky remained sunny, the sea stayed smooth and the dark clouds stayed at the edge of the world for the next two hours of nothing but trees and bushes.

Then they made their move.

Fat gray clouds unrolled across the sky like a carpet. Within minutes, the wind picked up and the whole sky went black. I smelled the rain before I saw it, a distant curtain of dark on dark. It was still a long way off, but moving in fast.

Big Fish must have seen it too. I watched the dark shape turn and head back out to deep water.

"Coward," I called out. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

Meanwhile, the needle on the gas gauge hovered just under the big E, and I'm thinking, this boat is toast. It's time to bail. Now I know why Mom and Dad told me to stay away from boats. If I could only find a strip of beach, I thought desperately, I could maybe pull the boat up onto the sand and tie it off somewhere and still get to deep water before the storm hits.

Two seconds later, and not a moment too soon, I found something even better. A real honest to goodness pirates cove. A whale-bite out of the coastline, just big enough to shelter one pint-sized pirate ship.

The wind stirred up the waves. It was getting a little choppy, but nothing serious. I cut the speed to head in slowly, not knowing how deep the water was near shore. The sputter I heard as I lowered the throttle was not the sound I expected.

Oh great. This is just great. The gas couldn't last another five minutes? Now I have to do the tugboat thing. I looked back at the rain. It seemed to have settled down at about the halfway mark. So I turned off the engine and stomped my way to the front of the boat, carefully stepping around the green patches...you never know.

A coil of rope was tied off to a cleat with a sailor's knot where the two sides of the hull came to a point at the very front of the boat. I tied the loose end around my waist and jumped. This time I remembered not to twist my necklace until after I was in the water.

Normally, I wouldn't be able to swim very far with a boat around my waist, but now I had a tail and it was almost easy. Under the surface, the water was turbulent and murky. Even with mermaid eyes, I had to stay on top to see where I was going. The wind seemed to be blowing from every direction at once and the waves were getting bigger, but it was kind of fun.

U-u-u-p and over. U-u-u-p and over I went, splashing down from the peak of each wave into the deep between-space. The salt didn't sting my eyes and the water didn't get up my nose. Well, actually, it did get up my nose, but that was okay.

It took ten, maybe fifteen minutes of hard work to get to the entrance of the cove. As soon as I was inside, the waves quieted down to light choppy. That was good. I was ready for some easier swimming.

The last thing I saw before the rain hit was the true shape of the cove. Two inlets on either side made the shoreline of my pirate cove look like a cats head with two pointy little ears at the top.

That was it. One quick look and then the rain was on me. Visibility was zero. The water went completely smooth as the rain pounded down so hard, that I could feel it hitting my tail under the water. There was so much of it that it muffled the sound of the wind. Blinded by the rain above the water and the stirred up sand below, I pulled, in what I hoped was the direction of the larger of the two inlets. I was a tired little tugboat.

I don't know what would have happened if the boat hadn't stopped of its own accord. Then my tailfin brushed bottom and I realized that I had gone about as far as I could go. I turned around and pulled on the rope until I was all pulled out, to finish grounding the boat. It was the best I could do. Without bothering to untie the rope from my waist, I sank to the bottom and did nothing for a long time.

CHAPTER 9

UNDERTOW

When I was finally ready to surface, it was like I didn't. Under water. Over water. It was the same. Swimming blindly through the wall of rain, unless of course I was still under the water--a distinct possibility--I wondered how I would know when the water stopped and the shore began. That was about when I not only couldn't tell above from below, but I was not so sure about my forward progress either.

After a couple of seconds of still swimming but going nowhere, I realized that like the Maiden Voyage, I was grounded. Reversing to legs, I scrambled onto the spongy earth, groping around until I bumped into a tree.

Okay. This is good, I thought rubbing my bruised forehead. A tree is what I need. Wrapping my arms around the trunk, I searched for my fingers and couldn't find them. Excellent. This tree has been here for a long time, and probably will stay here for a long time to come.

Pulling in all the slack I could get from the rope, and keeping one hand on the trunk so I wouldn't get lost, I started to walk around the tree. Three passes used up most of my rope. Then ten minutes of untying the rope from my waist and tying it off to the tree, neither of which, the rope nor the tree, I could actually see. Now I was ready for the hard part. Tree number two.

Somehow, I had to get back on the boat, get another rope, find another tree, and tie off the stern end the same way. I had seen a ladder hanging from the back corner of the boat. That was how I would get back on. All I had to do was...get to the ladder. The simplest way would be to follow the rope back to the boat and feel my way along the side, until I reached the ladder.

Small problem. From the way the rope was jerking around in my hands, the Maiden Voyage wasn't exactly sitting still in the water. If I wasn't careful, the little fishies would be having mashed mermaid for supper tonight.

Failing any brilliant ideas, I decided to go ahead and use the side of the boat to guide me to the ladder. It turned out to be a pretty good choice because, even with my tail back on, the alternate push and pull of the increasingly powerful undertow as I got closer to the back of the boat was hard to go against and leaning into the boat, moving side to side as it rocked in the water, helped me to keep moving in the right direction.

All in all, it went well, and I made it to the back of the boat with only a few extra bumps and bruises. As I reached for the ladder and got ready to switch back to legs, I looked up and caught sight of a huge wave big enough to make it through the cove, all the way to the inlet. Of course, visibility being what it was, I only saw it a split second before it crashed into me.

Pow. I was pushed flat against the back of the boat just like on The Cyclone anti-gravity ride. This must be the mashed mermaid part, I thought. I was a complete prisoner for four, maybe five very long, very uncomfortable seconds, helpless to move even an eyelash.

Then, in a complete and total reversal, the ocean changed its mind and started to pull. Rolling me over and over, I was sucked out, out of the cove and out to sea. The last thing I remember is thinking... Wait, oh wait, I didn't get to lower the anchor!

CHAPTER 10

NOT DEAD YET

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was that everything hurt. Not only was I not dead, but my tail was just as bruised and abused as the rest of me. That was good. That I had a tail, not that it hurt, because I was still underwater and couldn't for the life of me remember if I was legs or tail when the wave hit. I guess it was tail.

The second thing I noticed was how calm the water was. No more nasty weather. That's two good things. Looking around, I saw that the storm had pushed me into some kind of cave.

Well, no, not exactly a cave, this place was more like a big pile of rocks, with an empty space in the middle. The rocks were wedged together with bits of coral and broken shells. Fist sized holes where the pieces didn't fit, let the light in.

I wiggled just the tip of my tender tail and floated up. Not much, but enough for me to see that although there were lots of openings, no way I could have fit through any of them, not to mention fitting back out again. Uh oh!

Breathing: accelerates.

Brain: starts to shut down...

Relax, I tell myself. Just re-lax. Some of these rocks must have rolled in with me and blocked up the entrance. Find the spot where I washed in, push the rocks out of the way and I am gone.

I back paddled a little to improve the view. Swimming hurt my storm battered body, so I was moving slowly when I bumped into something soft where I expected rock wall. I was so not in the mood for surprises. I shot straight up through the water, squealing the whole way.

"Aiiiii...Ouch!"

Naturally, my little trip came to an abrupt end when my head made contact with the ceiling.

Isn't that interesting, I thought dully as I slowly sank back to the sand. I didn't know you could see stars underwater. It's just like the cartoons, isn't it?

"Is this a cartoon?"

"Be quiet," the soft something said harshly. Blunt fingers began poking at my head. I winced. "And stay still, dammit."

The stars started to clear and I began to see the outline of a face above me. Thick gray-white skin, black hair, a long twisty pale mouth, and black eyes that stared at my head and face without seeing me. My eyes traveled down a man's naked chest to a fish's tail.

"You're a merman," I croaked out painfully.

Oops! The black eyes narrowed, like they just noticed that there was someone in my head after all, and weren't too pleased about the fact.

"Sorry," I mumbled, "I meant Sky." The Sky man didn't speak, but returned to his increasingly painful probing.

"Ouch. OUCH! What are you doing?"

"Be quiet," he answered sharply. "I'm listening for concussion."

"You can't listen with your fingers," I whined. Then I remembered how blind people 'see' with their fingers. "Anyway," I amended, "you can't feel a concussion. You have to do some kind of test."

“Well, you have one. Not much, but enough. Don’t talk and don’t move. After all,” he said with a nasty smile that made me wish I was back with the fur people, “it wouldn’t do to have Mele’ and Floradora think that I allowed their precious granddaughter to come to harm.”

“How do you know who I am?” I gasped. But he was already gone. I saw his tail end disappear through a large opening in the ceiling. No way that hole had been there a minute ago. I blinked and looked again. The doorway was gone. I was back in prison.

Since I didn’t really feel much like moving anyway, except maybe to throw-up, I decided to be agreeable. I justified my wimp-hood by keeping my eyes glued to the spot where the Sky had gotten out. Maybe I’ll see how the door works when he comes back. If he comes back.

Naturally, when he returned a few minutes later, it was at the other end of the rock pile. As I was still dutifully watching the ceiling, I missed the whole thing.

He swam over and with another terse “Don’t move,” began to rub something into my very tender scalp.

“Stay still,” he growled out when I winced, and said it in a way that made me stay very still indeed. Once my head was apparently gooed-up to his satisfaction, he proceeded to rub the stuff under my eyes, on the tip of my nose, my mouth and my ear lobes. I was starting to feel like the subject of some weird New Age ritual. It was time to assert my personhood.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing?” I used Mom’s ‘caught in the act’ voice...it always works on me.

“Ignorant drylanders,” he said with considerable contempt, “who don’t even know enough to head for deep water in a storm, should learn to keep their mouths shut. Now do what you’re told. Be quiet and don’t move.” He put his fingers back on my head and felt around for a bit.

“Humph,” he snorted, “you’ll do.”

“What do you mean, I’ll do? I thought you said I had a concussion.”

“Well, you don’t anymore.” He smiled his creepy smile again.

“Yea, well, how come I still have this?” I rubbed my hand very lightly over the large goose egg on my head.

“Really,” he said derisively. “You do expect a lot, don’t you? It took me three days to find you and another two days wasted while you played pirate. Any moron knows a tail is worth a dozen legs and a hundred boats. If you hadn’t clung to that rotting hulk, you could be at Casalot by now, whining at your grandparents instead of me.”

“You!” I said, shocked into understanding. “You’re Big Fish. You were stalking me.” For this insight, I received an impressively withering stare.

“My name is Zazkal.” He spoke very slowly and very, very quietly. I got the feeling that it would be a really bad idea to call him Big Fish again.

CHAPTER 11

FREE AT LAST

"Just give me the bag," Zazkal said. "I'm out of time, out of patience and out of temper."

"Bag? What bag?" I stammered.

Zazkal's expression grew fierce and his face got all red. Air bubbles streamed out of his nose. He got right in my face, so close, that when he breathed out, the air bubbles slid across my skin on their way up to heaven. I felt very small and very breakable. I backed up.

"Give me the bag," he hissed and moved closer.

"Oh, this bag," I said meekly, trying not to breathe in his bubbles. "You don't want this. It only works for me."

"Let me have it or I'll rip it off."

"Sure, sure, just give me a sec to take it off. You'll see, it's no good really." I tried to untie the cord from around my waist, but my fingers were shaking so much, that not a whole lot was happening.

"Take out a knife and cut it," he snarled.

"Okay, okay. I got it. I got it. Just, just give me a little space here, I mean..." I was babbling.

I shut up, and focused on the sampo taking out a small scissor. My heart, not willing to go for complete silence, kept throwing itself against my ribcage. I tried to ignore the almost painful kathumping as I used the scissor to cut as close to the knot as I could. Zazkal snatched away the sampo practically before I finished -- pulling so hard that the cord left a red welt where it tore across my waist.

He backed off, stuck his hand in the bag and closed his eyes. I held my breath and watched. His face got that twisty-squinty look people have when they concentrate really hard. Every muscle of his body knotted up and twitched, like he was having a fit or something.

After an excruciatingly long wait... Like maybe a minute, Zazkal relaxed and graced me with another one of his nasty, stingy, cat-that-just-ate-the-canary-and-what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it smiles, pulled out his hand and slowly opened his fist so I could see the tiny gold coin on his palm.

"How did you do that?" I was flabbergasted, too shocked to be scared. "Nobody else is supposed to be able to do that."

"I am not without resources," Zazkal said stiffly. "Once I have completely mastered control of this bag, I will make far better use of it than you ever would have, my little mermaid." He used the land term for me with special derision.

"I have no further use for you at the moment," Zazkal said, almost lightly, "but..." and his tone changed to slow and scary, "I think you should stay in the water and available."

As he spoke, the pieces of broken coral, shell and rock that made up the walls of my prison collapsed and fell to the ground, landing everywhere except where we were floating. It was so fast I didn't have a chance to duck, which was okay, since I didn't need to.

We were now floating in open water. Just as I figured out what was going on and was about to swim for all I was worth, Zazkal grabbed my necklace and squeezed.

When he opened his hand, the fragments of the destroyed magic scale sank slowly to the sandy bottom.

I couldn't move. I was in total and absolute shock. Zazkal began to laugh.

"Welcome to the ocean, little Sky" he said, "because that's what you really are now. I'll let you know when I need you again." He laughed and laughed and laughed his rotten rusty laugh.

Misery hit me right in the stomach instantly followed by serious panic. I raced away miserable and terrified.

CHAPTER 12

NOT A MERMAID ANYMORE

I hit the surface, opened my dripping wings and flew.

Nothing.

My tail-end was too heavy. The best I could do was skim along the surface like a flying fish, my bottom half dragging in the sea, salt water pouring off my wings and out of my eyes.

My eyes flooded with the wet tears that didn't work properly underwater. With big shoulder shaking sobs, I struggled to become airborne. It was useless. I belonged to the ocean now.

Diving deep, I swam blindly as fast as I could for I don't know how long, scattering every school of fish I passed with my speed and intensity. I swam until I couldn't swim another inch. My body was trembling so violently from exhaustion, it sent little waves of water away from me in all directions. This strange country was now my home forever. I would never see Mom and Dad again.

I was also now completely and utterly lost in one of the many vast empty places in the ocean where almost nothing grew or swam. The already dim water darkened as daylight faded far above me. Well, let the dark come, I thought, numbly, letting myself sink slowly back down to the ocean floor. Let me sleep. Let me dream. Let me dream it all away.



I woke up and I guess it was morning since the water was marginally lighter than when I had fallen asleep. I wonder how far down I am. Whale deep, I thought, maybe deeper.

I'm hungry and it isn't going to be easy to find anything to eat in this underwater desert. Even in the dim light, I can see for miles. It must be the underwater eyes that go with my new body. The sea bottom is as flat as the ocean surface on a windless day. Nothing growing. Nothing swimming. Nothing but rocks. And not too many of those.

Adding insult to injury, all of my many bumps and bruises seemed to have ripened overnight. Especially one spot that was so tender that it felt like I was sitting on a stone.

Dummy! This is probably because I am sitting on a stone. I floated up stiffly and looked for the offending object. Some stone, I thought, feeling like the Princess and the Pea, it's just a piece of cloth.

Oops! Double take!

My sampo! I was lying on my sampo!

He found me. I looked around nervously. That horrible fish-man is here. He knows where I am.

Sure enough, something big was headed this way. It was still too far to tell what it was, but around here? Who else would come to this God-forsaken place?

Right on time. Perish the thought I should get to eat breakfast first. That guy really gives me the creeps. Well, I guess it's gonna be flee first. Eat second. I am a gone girl.

Pretending I was a big flat flounder, I stayed as close to the ground as I could and slithered away. Fat chance he's not going to notice me wiggling along like this. My top half was sort of sand colored, but the wings were a dead give away. Not to mention my tail, formerly known as beautifully sparkly. Not so practical now, I think.

Reaching behind and grabbing my wingtips, I pulled them around me like a cape, trying to make them at least slightly less conspicuous.

It took all of two seconds, maybe three for my fingers to notice the lump in my wingpocket where Poppy's shadow coat was.

Okay, new strategy. Much better strategy. I quelled the rising panic and relaxed. Still swimming in high gear, I took out Poppy's cape, letting the rushing water help unfold it. It was made out of black silky stuff, so thin that I could fold it into the three inch square that fit in my wingpocket, so it took a lot of unfolding to get it all the way open.

The click of the silver dragonfly clasp around my neck let me know that I was now officially invisible. But I kept swimming anyway. Just because Big Fish can't see me, who's to say he doesn't have other ways of finding me. Whatever happens, I am not going to make this easy.

I glanced back to see what kind of lead I had. He was still too far back to make out his shape, but he was closer. Close enough to see that he was the right size to be who I thought he was and close enough to see that there was now two of him

Great, just great, I thought. He brought a friend. I am fish food.

CHAPTER 13

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

"Well, here's another fine mess you've gotten us into Stanley. Here we are in the middle of nowhere and there's no sign of anyone."

"Oh, Ollie. I'm so sorry. I was sure something echoed from over this way."

"Well, now we'll just have to go all the way back and start over, won't we? Someone else will find her first, and we'll just look like a couple of dummies, and whose fault is that?"

"Look, Ollie. Over there. Something is echoing."

"It's just a big manta ray. Let's go. This is a stupid place to look. I don't know why I ever listen to you."

"It doesn't sound like a manta ray, Ollie. My echo is coming back too lumpy. Let's go see what it is. It must be awfully lonely all by itself. Maybe it wants to play. Let's play, Ollie."



There was no place to hide. I was swimming as fast as I could, but they were still gaining on me. I needed a new strategy. Giving up on the ground-hugging thing, I shot straight up and focused on speed.



"Look, Ollie, I was right. It wants to play. Come on. Let's chase it."

"Don't be foolish, Stanley. It's trying to get away. Leave it alone."

"Maybe it knows where Miriam is. We should ask it."



I looked back. Still gaining. My gills hurt. My lungs burned. I don't know why. I wasn't using them.

What's the use? This is hopeless. It doesn't matter anyway. It's not like I have anything else to do for the rest of my life.



"Look. She stopped. She's waiting for us. Yoohoo, Miss Miriam."

"Dummy. Whoever it is can't hear you. We're too far away."

"Well, use heartspeak."

"What's the matter with you Stanley? You can't use heartspeak on someone you don't even know."



They were closing in on me. Close enough now so that I could see that they were people-sized fish, not Sky. Must be more sharks, I thought grimly. I wonder if that food chain thing counts if you're really, really hungry? After all, there's not much to eat around here besides me.

"Yoohoo, Miss Miriam. Can you hear us yet?"

I sure could. What is it with this place? How come everybody knows me? Well at least they're not planning on dinner. After all, you can't eat someone if you know their name. I think there's a rule about that somewhere.

They got closer, and I finally relaxed for real. These weren't sharks. They were dolphins.

Now that the rest of me wasn't so tight, I could feel my fingernails digging into my skin and realized that I had a death grip on the sampo. I opened my cramped fingers and

tied the bag back around my waist. The cut cord seemed to have grown back to its original length. How interesting. I took off my coat and waited.

When they finally got close enough, the slightly larger of the two otherwise identical dolphins was the first to speak.

“Miriam Mermelstein, I presume,” he said grandly. “Allow me to present myself. I am Oliver, and this is my colleague, Stanley.

“We’ve come to rescue you,” Stanley said, getting right to the important part.

“I can live with that,” I answered, feeling better by the minute.

“Your grandparents,” Oliver said, “appointed us specially to search the seas until you were found.”

“Don’t be silly, Ollie,” the smaller one dolphin said, “she sent lots of us out to find Miriam.”

“That’s because we were all sent specially. Don’t you know anything, Stanley? But we are the ones who found her. We are the only ones who have completed the mission. Come, Miriam Mermelstein. Let us retreat to the surface for a bit of fresh air and then I will return you to your beloved grandparents.”

CHAPTER 14

OUT OF RANGE

We were swimming near the surface so that Oliver and Stanley could put their heads out of the water to breathe whenever they felt like it, or in Stanley's case for a little high jumping. He always angled his body just before hitting the water, for maximum splash.

"I don't know why you persist in these childish games, Stanley," Oliver said. "Real bubble-breathers pride themselves on a fine, smooth return at the end of a dive," he explained to me. "All that splashing is terribly uncouth."

"I like it, Ollie. It's fun. You should try it."

"Well, we have business to conduct. We must escort Miriam to Casalot with all haste. Your little games just slow us down."

"I'm sorry Ollie. Say, those are a lot of nice purple bruises," Stanley said, deciding to change the subject. "How did you get them?"

"Now, Stanley," Oliver chided, "you know it's not polite to ask personal questions."

"No, it's okay," I cut in. "I got caught by a big wave and dragged out to sea." Stanley looked me over.

"It must have been a pretty big one," he remarked. "You're just covered."

"Well, it was raining pretty hard, and I didn't see it coming, and..."

"What in the seven seas were you doing on the surface during a storm?" Oliver sounded shocked. "Didn't your parents teach you anything?"

"They did," I answered shamefacedly. "They told me to head for deep water at the first sign of bad weather, but I thought I still had time."

"Tsk, ts, such a willful child."

"Oh, Ollie, don't you remember the time that we..."

"That was entirely different, Stanley. We were on an important mission."

"But we were only going to visit..."

"Stuff and nonsense, Stanley."

"I think I'll swim on the surface for a while," I said, feeling uncomfortable. "Anybody want to come?"

"I'll come, Stanley answered enthusiastically. "Do you know how to play tag and tickle?"

"I was born playing tag and tickle," I said with equal enthusiasm, forgetting for a second that I was supposed to be miserable. My body hurt all over and my heart ached for my lost family.

"Oh, wait a minute. There's something I have to do first. I'll catch up."

When I got to the surface, I lifted my bag out of the water and took out yet another cell phone. I could spend hours figuring out what to say, so I didn't. I just dialed and waited for the inevitable.

I waited some more. The inevitable wasn't happening. In fact, nothing was happening. I checked the phone to make sure it was turned on. The screen was flashing -- "calling; calling; calling" -- but there was no ring.

Then I noticed the little distance-symbol in the corner of the screen. I was too late. I was out of range.

"Mom and Dad will never know what happened to me. I'm trapped in the ocean forever and I can't even call my parents to say goodbye."

PART 2 CASALOT



CHAPTER 15 BOBBING BREASTS

“Well, we’re here,” Stanley announced.

“Here? Where is here?” I was confused. All I could see was empty water all around, north, south, east, west...nothing.

“Why, Casalot, of course,” he said politely. “It’s down there.”

“Oh, down there.” I still wasn’t used to thinking of ‘all around’ as a direction that included up and down.

“Oooo! It’s so pretty.” From here, the castle looked like a far-away tower of tiny twinkling lights.

“Give us but a moment to fill our lungs,” Oliver said, “and we will then escort you directly to your grandparents.”

The ocean floor wasn’t all that far down and the castle got bigger quickly as we swam closer. Still, it was a lot deeper than I expected.

“My parents told me that Casalot was an ancient coral reef,” I said, “but I thought coral reefs grew near the surface.”

“Not this one,” Stanley said. “It’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“Tsk, ts, really, Stanley. Centuries ago, Miss Miriam. It died centuries ago. Some trivial change of water temperature, I believe. The Sky of that period preserved it and moved the entire reef to a more private location. It was a major feat of magic, never since duplicated.”

“That’s because everyone fought so much about where to put it, that nobody wanted to do it again,” Stanley said.

As we got deeper, we started to see more and more Sky heading to and from the castle. My fears were confirmed. Bobbing breasts were everywhere.

I positioned myself between Stanley and Oliver, trying to look small, wishing I had chosen a more neutral color for my top. Like flesh. Great choice. But electric blue and orange, being my current favorite color combination was what I was wearing. Very in your face, hard to miss, blue and orange.

On the swim over with Stanley and Oliver, I had done the light bulb over the head thing and decided to exchange my bikini top for a sports bra. The new top covered my shoulder blades and when my wings were folded up, it held them in.

So, I could leave the top on and look weird, or I could take it off, exposing the two highly inadequate bumps on my chest and my oversized, seriously conspicuous wings. There were no good choices. Already, I was not fitting in.

CHAPTER 16

CASALOT

Could it get worse? Of course it could. But first there was Casalot. So impressive, that I forgot my self-consciousness for a good ten seconds.

As promised, the castle was made of coral, but without any of the little bumps and branches where the coral animals used to live. I guess it's entitled to some smoothing out after the first couple of centuries. The closer I got, the more Casalot reminded me of the drip-sand castles I used to make when I was a kid -- lumpy but not bumpy.

The ancient coral reef was surrounded by hundreds of dainty fairy lights. I had seen lights like that before, in my backyard, the night the dragonfly fairies came to celebrate me getting my wing-buds. But these were bigger, and they floated in the water, instead of in the air.

The color of the coral, was, I don't know, kind of a gray-white, I guess, but the neatest thing was the way the slick coral reflected the underwater lighting system. The walls glowed like polished silver. A couple of towers and some turrets and it would have been the perfect fairytale castle.

Ten seconds was enough to take it all in. Then I was back to remembering that every Sky we passed, and there were plenty, must be staring at me. I couldn't tell for sure, because I wasn't up to looking anybody in the eye.

We didn't go in the main entrance, because there wasn't any. The windows were the doors and the doors were the windows. This, I could tell from the fact that there were fish and fairies swimming in and out of all of them. I guess there must have been as many different kinds of sea-people living or at least visiting Casalot as on a living reef.

I caught my first sight of a sea sprite disappearing into one of the window-doors in the castle wall. Little-kid-sized people with arms and legs like mine, at least like mine used to be, but with fins on their arms, their legs, all along their backs and fins for feet. They were water breathers. Mom had told me that Sky were the only air-breathing fairies in the ocean. She didn't know about fresh-water fairies.

Stanley and Oliver led me through an opening near the top, then through a series of big and little rooms, all lit with fairy lights that bounced out of the way when we swam too close.

We passed any number of sea people, both fish and fairy, going the other way, or just hanging around, but I couldn't say how many because I was trying really hard not to look, especially at the other Sky. They probably thought that red was my natural skin color.

None of the rooms had anything like what I would call furniture. What they did have in almost every room were at least a couple of big cushions. Sometimes, they covered the whole floor two or three deep. I just hoped that there weren't any lurking floor-doors under those comfy looking cushions.

I figured we had gotten to wherever we were going when Stanley and Oliver stopped in front of a supersized window-door with a green and turquoise patterned curtain hanging across it.

"Wait here, Miss Miriam," Oliver said starting to nose the curtain aside.

"I want to come, too, Ollie."

"You stay here, Stanley. Someone has to guard Miss Miriam."

"I don't need to be guarded."

"She certainly doesn't," Stanley seconded.

"Well, someone has to announce her, and that someone should be me."

"Poo. She doesn't need to be announced. Come on, Miss Miriam. Let's go." Stanley flipped his tail and opened the curtain all the way.

Heads turned. We were looking into a truly humongous room in what must have been the center of the old coral reef. Twenty or thirty Sky were lounging on an equally enormous pile of pillows. They looked almost insignificant sitting there surrounded by all that empty space.

They were all looking at me. Me and my electric blue and orange bathing suit. I developed a sudden interest in the ceiling. It was filled with hundreds of fairy lights that lit up the giant room like a sunny day.

Two of the Sky were swimming towards me. Must be Grandpa and Grandma Mermaid. I guess I'd better start thinking about them as Grandpa and Grandma Sky, so I don't accidentally call them mermaids, but it will be hard. I grew up with stories about Grandpa and Grandma Mermaid. They were my favorite make-believe people. At least I thought they were make-believe at the time.

Besides, these two people looked exactly like I always thought Grandma and Grandpa Mermaid would look. Old, but not very old. Nice, friendly faces. Soft, huggy arms. Black eyes for Grandpa Mermaid-Sky. Blue ones for Grandma. Grandma had red hair. I wasn't expecting that, but I liked it. Grandpa's hair was black and curly, just like it should be. I hoped it was really them. Already, I could feel a teeny smile starting up.

"What happened, child?" the not-smiling back, maybe Grandpa Sky, maybe someone else, said, severely. "Why didn't you call your parents?"

My whole face, smile included, froze solid. I had a pretty good idea of how silly I must have looked right about then, but that only made my death-skull smile freeze harder.

"Ahem, ahem." Oliver cleared his throat. The two Skys turned to my friends, my only friends at the moment.

"Forgive our manners," maybe-Grandma Sky said. "You must be Stanley and Oliver. We got your message this morning. Word has already been sent to Rose of your success. We are extremely grateful."

Oliver and Stanley didn't have much in the way of facial expressions, but there was something about how Oliver hung in the water that reminded me of my cat Tefnut when she was especially pleased with herself.

"It has been our great pleasure to be of service, Queen Floradora," Oliver said with a bowing nod.

"We're just glad to help," Stanley said, "but we have to go, really bad." Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Oliver give Stanley a little whap with his tail.

"Well, I don't know about you, Oliver, but I'm just about bursting."

"Stanley!" a clearly shocked Oliver said, under his breath, but loud enough for everyone to hear on the other side of the hall.

"You poor things," said Grandma Sky. "You must be starving for air. I hope you will both return tomorrow with the rest of your pod, so that we may express our thanks in a more public setting and with all of the appropriate and greatly deserved formalities."

There may not have been much air left in his lungs, but this time, Oliver's chest definitely got bigger. Then, both dolphins turned and fled. I was on my own.

CHAPTER 17

INSEA, OUTSEA, ONSEA

“Well, Miriam,” not-so-huggy-looking-now Grandma, said. “What do you have to say for yourself?” There was a long pause while they waited for me to answer.

“I was kidnapped?” I finally said in the smallest voice I could manage. They didn’t buy it. They were still waiting.

“Twice?” I squeaked out. Eyebrows went up. Grandpa Sky turned to the people on the other side of the room and said loudly,

“We’re taking Miriam for some refreshment. Please don’t wait.”

“I’m not really hungry,” I said even squeakier.

“This way, please,” Grandpa Sky said sternly. I was no longer worried that I would accidentally think of them as Grandma and Grandpa Mermaid.

They led me through another curtained doorway into an empty room. On the opposite wall was a smaller curtainless opening. I followed Grandma and Grandpa Sky through this door into a smaller room with no other way out. What it did have, was plenty of lights and plenty of pillows. With the big room between us and the main hall, we had privacy to spare.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Grandpa Sky said, sinking down onto the pillows. “I assume this is going to be a long story.”

It was. When I got to the part about Zazkal squashing my charm, I couldn’t keep my bottom lip from quivering. Meanwhile, Grandma Sky got so amazingly still, that it seemed as if the water had frozen solid around her. At the same time, Grandpa Sky leaned forward, squinting, acting like he couldn’t quite make out what I was saying. When I finished, he let out a big sigh and shook his head.

“I can’t believe Zazkal did this,” he said. “It’s...It’s...It’s not Sky.” Grandpa kept slowly shaking his head from side to side, adding an occasional sigh, and muttering under his breath. Eventually, Grandma Sky, still hardly moving, spoke.

“That rogue-Sky has gone too far this time.” She was speaking slowly and she sounded mad, that is, a lot madder than she already was. “There will have to be sanctions.” She gave Grandpa a black look that he didn’t seem to notice.

All this was very interesting, but it wasn’t doing anything about my quiver. The deed was done. Punishing Big Fish wasn’t going to get me back to Kansas. Grandma and Grandpa Sky finally noticed that I was getting dangerously close to the hysterical sobbing stage.

“Don’t worry, Miriam,” Grandma Sky said politely, but not with any of the sympathy I had been hoping for. “This is not hard to fix...although Zazkal wouldn’t have known that,” she said darkly. She reached down and put her hand on her tail near a little white spot I hadn’t noticed before. Then, she closed her eyes and got quiet. Kind of like Zazkal did when he took the coin out of my bag.

Grandma Sky opened her eyes and held out her hand. She was holding an identical twin to the magic scale that Zazkal had crushed. On her tail, there were now two white spots.

“Oh, Thank you!” My words carried the force of all the unhappiness I had been feeling. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” I would have kissed her feet if she had any.

"Be careful with this one," Grandma Sky said. "They don't grow back when you take them off this way." I thought I saw a flicker of a smile, but it was probably just wishful thinking.

Next, Grandma reached up and took a long black hairpin out of her hair.

"You use hairpins underwater?" I asked. I thought mermaid hair was supposed to be all free and floaty, which of course hers wasn't, which I would have seen if I had bothered to notice. Grandma and Grandpa both looked down and then at each other, clearly puzzled.

"Under? Water?" Grandpa said. "My dear, we're not under the water, we're in it."

"How could we possibly be under the water?" Grandma asked, still holding out the hairpin. "I suppose we could dig a hole in the ground, but then the water would fill it, so we still wouldn't be under the water."

They were right, but considering the present circumstances, I was left with a serious gap in my vocabulary.

"Well, what do you call here?" I asked, grateful for at least a temporary change of subject. "Where we are now, not in the castle, but in the water?"

"In the water is correct," Grandpa said. "What we say is that we are insea."

"And on the land, where I live, what do you call that?"

"Outsea," Grandma answered for him. I thought about that for a minute, and then asked,

"What about when you're swimming on the surface. You know, with some of you in the water and some of you out of the water? Is that insea or outsea?"

"That's onsea," Grandma Sky answered. "Here, use this." She handed me the hairpin. "Put a hole in that scale so you can keep it on your necklace."

I had been too busy not looking at people to notice hairdos. But, now that I thought about it, I realized that most of the people I passed had their hair short or pulled back in some way. Sky-hair made a lot more sense than mermaid-hair. I already knew from personal experience that floaty hair gets in your mouth when you eat.

The conversation, if that's what you can call what we were doing, sort of petered out after that. No one said anything at all while I was putting the new scale on my necklace. No one offered to help, either, when I had trouble taking off the necklace without dropping the scale.

"Miriam," not-so-huggy Grandma Sky began when I was done. "That was very careless of you to get caught up in those fishing nets."

I've been here before and I knew what was coming. Sometimes, when Mom and Dad are really mad at me, it can take hours for them to finish telling me what a jerk I am. Shrinking down into the pillows in an agony of misery, I prayed for short and sweet.

"Outsea dwellers cannot be trusted the way sea people can," Grandma Sky said, angry, maybe at the fur people, but probably at me. "You were lucky to get away unharmed." Meanwhile, I'm thinking, but not saying; Oh! So I guess that means that this Zazkal is not a real sea person.

"In spite of your difficulties," Grandpa Sky contributed, "it seems to me that you had plenty of opportunities to call your parents. Plus, I still can't believe you hung onto that boat when the storm came," he added.

"Even worse foolishness." Grandma acknowledged. "Nevertheless, Miriam, you had lots of time to call Rose and Ben while you were alone on the boat, but Miriam, why

didn't you at least call your parents this morning after Stanley and Oliver found you. Did you actually forget?"

"I didn't. I didn't forget. I called right after Stanley and Oliver came, well, almost right away, but I was too far from home. My phone was out of range."

"You're not like your mother, are you?" Grandma said dryly. "Why didn't you just take out a long-distance cell phone?"

"I didn't realize there was such a thing."

"There is in there." She pointed to my sampo. "You have a lot to learn about using that bag, Miriam. Zazkal was right about one thing. He would have made a lot better use of your sampo than you will."

CHAPTER 18

VERONA CORONA

"Well, what's done is done," Grandma said. "Let's go back into the Great Hall. There's someone I want you to meet."

"You're not mad at me anymore?"

"We were never mad, Miriam," Grandma said. She was supposed to look surprised when she said that, but she didn't. She still looked mad to me.

"What we are is disappointed. You may not realize it but we're considerably more than fond of you. We've waited a long time to get to know you and your visit means as much to us as it does to you."

As an expert speaker of parentese, I automatically did my usual instantaneous translation.

We were never mad. We were disappointed. Translation: They're mad.

We are more than fond of you. Translation: Adult who is unable to say, I love you.

We have waited a long time. Your visit means a lot. Translation: We have feelings too, you snotty-nosed brat.

"Miriam," Grandma Sky said, an edge of excitement coming into her voice. "Come out and meet your new sister." Grandpa gave her a sideways look.

"Now, Flora..."

"A sister? I have a sister?" I was flabbergasted.

Meanwhile, Grandpa Sky actually put his arm around me.

"Wait and see," he said gently, looking over my shoulder and giving Grandma a dirty look.

"Come on, Miriam," Grandma Sky said brightly. "Let's go find her." I followed them out to the big hall, making fidgety little flutters with my tail fin. Nervous, excited, afraid to ask, I said nothing.

"Wait here with Grandpa," Grandma Sky said. "I'll get someone to find Verona." She disappeared through yet another curtained entry in the outer room. Grandpa Sky and I took our time swimming over to the vacant pillows in the middle of the now empty main hall. My guess was that I wasn't the only person who didn't want to be around when Grandma Sky was mad. She was back, almost before we settled down.

"Verona's on her way,"

"What about Zazkal?" Grandpa Sky said. "We can't let him eel his way out, this time."

"Eel?" I interrupted.

"Eel! Long skinny fish," Grandma Sky said curtly. "Very slippery. I saw Agatha," she said, speaking to Grandpa now. "She's going to arrange a summoning spell."

"It will take the entire council to make it strong enough for that Sky," he commented dryly.

"That's exactly what she's planning to do. Look! Here's Verona." Grandma Sky was smiling now. A big happy smile that lit up her whole face.

Verona had red hair like Grandma's that she wore in a long braid that came almost to her waist. She was bigger than me, but smaller than Grandma and Grandpa. Exactly big sister size.

Her tail was a perfect complement to her whiter-than-white skin, rosy cheeks and rosy lips. It was a beautiful shade of pale aqua, with a scattering of scales in a deeper shade. Verona was the first polka-dotted Sky I had seen.

She held something out in front of her as she swam. When she got close enough, I saw that she had two small-lidded yellow bowls, one in each hand.

“Verona, dear, do you have everything?”

“Yes, Aunt Floradora. I brought ambrosia-soaked seafruit and salted kelp seeds.”

“Perfect,” Grandma Sky said, still beaming. “Miriam, this is your cousin, Verona Corona. She has agreed to become your salt sister.”

Of course! I thought, finally understanding. She couldn’t possibly be my real sister. I am so dumb. Verona must have seen the disappointment on my face. She wrinkled up her nose and gave me a look.

“I don’t know what it’s like for you drylanders,” she said haughtily, “but around here, a salt sister is equal to any birth sister. More equal. It’s not just for life, it’s forever. Our children will be just as bound as we are, and so will their children and their children...” I was impressed, but not enough to want to find out exactly how many generations this sister thing was going to last.

“Does this happen a lot?” I asked, interrupting the stream of children.

“Of course not. It’s too important,” Verona answered. She didn’t say so, but her supercilious expression was clear. Like, how could I possibly not have known something so obvious? I was embarrassed.

“There are no other firstgen salt siblings in our community,” Verona added, “but there are a number of salts.”

“She means people with salt siblings in their ancestry,” Grandpa Sky explained.

“We can do the ceremony whenever you’re both ready,” Grandma Sky said.

“I’m ready,” I said eagerly. As usual, my mouth was way ahead of my brain. “Uhh, wait a minute. Does it hurt?” I was wondering if salt sisters were anything like blood brothers. I was pretty sure that blood brothers involved knives and a certain amount of pain.

I got a “tsk” and some eye rolling from Verona.

“No, honey, it doesn’t hurt,” Grandpa Sky said. “It’s just an exchange of vows. But, maybe you two would like to get to know each other a little better before you go ahead with the salt-ceremony.”

“I can’t see any point in waiting,” Verona said. “We might as well get it over with.” I can be a little slow sometimes, but I finally started to notice that maybe this Verona wasn’t going to be the big sister of my dreams.

“Well, maybe,” I said slowly, “maybe Grandpa is right. I could wait.” Then I saw Grandma Sky’s face. In less than a nanosecond, her expression went from absolute happiness to utter misery.

I felt a sharp pain in my chest. Talk about looks could kill, it was like she had stabbed me right through the heart with her sadness.

I hardly knew Grandma Sky. Also, I was pretty sure that she was not exactly thrilled with who I was, but all of a sudden, I couldn’t bear to disappoint her.

“I guess I’m ready if you are, Verona,” I said. Grandma was smiling again. It was worth it...I think.

CHAPTER 19

SALT SISTERS

"Mele', will you put up a privacy barrier for us?" Grandma Sky said."

"Certainly, dear."

Grandpa Sky didn't seem to do anything special, but all of a sudden, the entire building disappeared. We were still floating just above the big pillow-pile that used to be in the Great Hall, only now the water was filled with lots of nothing as far as I could see.

"Hey! Where's the castle?"

"Oh, it's still there," Grandpa Sky said. "The barrier is real. No one can get within ten feet of us, but the rest is just illusion. We think we can't see or hear anyone outside the barrier, and they think they can't see or hear us." I nodded my understanding, even though I didn't.

"Flora, do you have the contract?"

"Right here dear," she answered.

I have no idea where they came from, but Grandma Sky was now holding something that looked like a pair of stuck together rolling pins. She separated the cylinders, unrolling a sheet of plastic paper.

"Ooo, Aunt Floradora. It's so pretty," Verona cooed. "I just love all the little fish in the border."

I politely refrained from saying that the paper was blank, that the Emperor had no clothes, and what the hell were they looking at, anyway?

Unfortunately, I have never been very good at hiding my feelings. Mom used to holler at me before I even spoke. She just had to look at me to know exactly what I was thinking, and, I'm sorry to say, so does the rest of the world, including Verona.

Verona turned her back to me and stage-whispered, so that I couldn't possibly miss a syllable. She used that fake shocked voice that makes my skin crawl.

"Uncle Melvin, Aunt Floradora. She's illiterate. She can't even write her name."

"Maybe you could teach Miriam to read and write," Grandpa Sky said, tossing an affectionate smile in my direction. "It would be a very sisterly thing to do."

"I suppose I could do that," Verona said, offering me a not-affectionate, but clearly fake smile.

After we're sisters, Verona won't be like this, I thought. She'll feel differently when she has a real little sister. I bet she's just nervous, like I am.

"I thought you could both do handprints instead of signatures," Grandma said.

"Anyone can do it and it looks pretty."

"This is more of a ritual document than a real contract," Grandpa told me. "It repeats in writing the vows that you two will be saying to each other. The ceremony is simple and private. The celebration afterwards, however, is not."

"Not simple, or not private?"

"Neither, Grandma Sky said. "Tonight in the Great Hall..." she waved her arm to indicate the space around us, and all of a sudden we were back where we started in the Great Hall of Casalot. Neat trick. "...tonight, there will be so many people, this place will seem small."

"A party?"

“A party,” she confirmed, happily. “A big one.” Grandpa nodded his head and Casalot was gone again.

“Verona, you start,” he said. “Miriam, all you have to do is copy Verona and eat whatever she gives you.”

Verona handed me one of the yellow bowls. She took the lid off the other one and tucked it underneath. So did I.

Verona closed her eyes. She took a deep breath, opened her eyes and looked into mine. So did I.

Her eyes were dark, dark blue. Almost black, but not. She was serious now, not smiling, not snarling. Reaching into her bowl, she gave me something about the size of an apricot, only deep purple, like the big concord grapes at the supermarket. Not my favorite kind.

I took a bite, anyway. Hey, I can be reckless when I want to. Breaking the skin when I bit into the fruit, released its scent into the water. I smelled the heady fragrance before the juice had a chance to reach my taste buds. It smelled like summer and it tasted like honey.

Not the plastic-honeybear honey I put on my pancakes at home. This was grass honey and rose honey and hummingbird honey and bright warm sunshine honey. This was summer honey, my new favorite food. It was gone in two bites. I looked up at Verona, a happy grin on my face.

“I give you honey,” she said, flashing me a crooked smile, “to add sweetness to your life.” There was a purple fruit in my bowl too. I gave it to Verona and she ate it, never taking her eyes off me, back to serious again.

“I give you honey to sweeten your life,” I repeated, looking into her blue-black eyes. Great eyes. Exactly the right color for a big sister.

“Verona finished her fruit, reached back into her bowl and handed me something roughly the size and shape of an almond. Fearless, as ever, I put the whole thing in my mouth and crunched.

There was a hardly-there nutty taste, but mostly it was tart and salty like a pickled cucumber. A good pickle. A fine pickle, but not the flavor I wanted to have lingering in my mouth.

I would have to see if I could get more summer-fruit out of my sampo. Pickles, too. Dad will adore them. I can see him now, standing at the kitchen sink eating pickle-nut after pickle-nut, chewing slowly, analyzing the different flavor notes, while Mom and I sit at the kitchen table stuffing ourselves with summer-fruit. The ache in my chest told me how much I missed them.

“I give you salt to sustain you,” Verona said.

I almost missed it. I unglazed my eyes and looked in my bowl. Another pickle-nut lay in the bottom. I handed it to Verona and watched her slowly chew and swallow.

“I give you salt to sustain you,” I said.

“Know that you are a sister to me,” Verona said. “I will bring sweetness to your life and I will sustain you in times of trouble.” There was nothing else to eat and Verona seemed to be finished talking, so I went straight to the speaking part.

“Know that you are a sister to me,” I repeated. “I will bring sweetness to your life and I will sustain you in times of trouble.”

I waited for someone to pronounce us sister and sister, but that was it. Grandma and Grandpa Sky gave us hugs and kisses, and even Verona was smiling shyly. It had all been easy, no big deal, but I had a feeling that Verona had just done something very hard.

We each put our hand on the contract. Just for a moment, I saw the pale outline of my hand as I lifted it from the paper. I blinked, and then it was gone.

CHAPTER 20

POWER PEBBLES

“Verona, take Miriam and show her around.”

“Yes, Aunt Floradora.” Verona sighed, chin up, eyes averted

I watched her forehead wrinkle as she pushed her eyebrows up into the appropriate position. Oh, please, I thought, not the fate worse than death thing.

“Come on, Miriam,” she snapped, giving me a dirty look. “I don’t have a lot of time. I have to get ready for the party.”

“Miriam!” Grandma Sky called after us in that strict teacher voice that makes me want to find a window to stare out of. “I expect you to behave. No more disappearing acts, please.”

I followed meekly behind Verona on what I suspected was going to be a whirlwind tour of the castle.

It was.

First, she took me through a floor-door for the briefest of peeks into a room that was almost as big around as the Great Hall, but only about three people high. High enough, but nothing like the Great Hall.

There were tall tables all over the floor and people everywhere, most of them Sky, but a lot of sea sprites, some salt-water pixies and a scattering of various combinations of fish and fairy that I would have loved to learn more about.

The walls were covered with floor-to-ceiling shelves. Netting across the front kept things from floating around. Wall-doors led into more rooms with more shelves. Every space on every shelf was jammed with boxes, bags, jars and bottles. There were bottles so small, they could have come from a toy tea set, and jars that were big enough to hold one of Ali Baba’s forty thieves.

“This is the main kitchen,” Verona said. “The rest of the kitchen column is that way.” She waved an arm toward the ceiling on the other side of the room. “They’re busy getting ready for tonight. You can look around some other time. Let’s go.”

“Would it be okay if I called my parents?”

“We don’t have time. You can do it when we finish. Come on. Hurry up. There’s a lot to see.

“These are the sleeping columns,” she said nodding towards a series of curtained window-doors, as we emerged from the giant kitchen. “They’re private. Let’s go. Over that way are...”

Eventually, I figured out that a castle column was the same thing as a wing of a house, only the rooms were up and down instead of side by side. During the next ten minutes, I learned that in addition to the sleeping column, there were dining columns, official meeting room columns, casual meeting room columns, lounging room columns, library and study columns, classroom columns and columns of workrooms, including art and music studios. There was also a one-room-wide column of smaller kitchens, linked at the bottom to the main kitchen.

I now knew what there was, but where it was, was another question. I just hoped nobody expected me to actually find my way around this place.

“Say, Verona, how do these things work,” I asked, shouldering my way through a thick cluster of fairy lights.

"Hmmpf. Simple," she answered. You can do this..." She put out a finger and jabbed at one of the lights. It bounced away and drifted towards another smaller cluster of lights. "...or you can do this." This time Verona moved her finger slowly. The light stayed put and her finger went through the surface, which didn't break, but closed around her finger.

"Cool. Can I do that?"

"I have to go. You can play with the lights if you want."

"Uh, are there any rules or special things I should know about when I meet people?"

"Yes, don't act like a jerk," she said, took one look at me and my open-book face and turned bright red.

"Regardless of what you're thinking," Verona said breathing ice water in my direction, "my manners are considered to be impeccable."

Meanwhile, I'm thinking, I should probably learn how to play poker, or statues, or something, anything that teaches me how to display zero expression.

Verona started to swim off.

"Wait! Where am I supposed to go?"

"Oh, someone will find you eventually. Don't worry," she said as she disappeared through a floor door.

I was on my own. Just me and the fairy lights.

I ran my hands all around one, looking for strings. Nope. No strings. Next, I wrapped my arms around the nearest light, swam to the other side of the room and let go. Sure enough, it bobbed gently back to hang with its friends.

Turning to the nearest light, I poked it slowly and my finger went right through. The skin had a gooey jellyfish feel, but the inside was empty, even of water, although down here, nothing but air was probably considered full, not empty. They made me think of air bubbles that decided to stay put and raise a family.

The hole closed up as I pulled my finger out. A little experimentation showed that I could put my whole hand inside, and the soft, transparent material still closed right over it, sealing the globe from the water outside.

Although it looked empty enough, except for air, which didn't really count as something, and the light shining out of it, which also didn't count, there was something in this one. I closed my fist and pulled it out. I was holding a shiny, blue-gray pebble, still warm from being in the fairy light. I guessed that it had fallen into the globe the way my finger did, but wasn't heavy enough to fall out through the bottom.

I nearly tossed it away, but I happened to glance at the light first.

Oh my god! The light's out. I broke it. Like I'm not in enough trouble already.

Looking around nervously, I tried putting the stone back in. It worked. The light was back on. I was saved. I repeated the experiment with another light. Same result. All the lights had a little power-pebble inside.

Okay, mystery solved...sort of. I still didn't know what was keeping the lights in place. Magic, I guessed with a shrug.

I turned my tail off automatic flip 'n float and let myself sink down onto one of the floor-pillows. If Big Fish could use my bag underwater...ummm, that would be insea. Good grief. How am I going to remember to say insea and outsea all the time? Just thinking it sounds weird.

Never mind, I told myself and opened the bag. I took out what I hoped was an insect-long-distance-cell-phone. When I turned it on, the screen lit up. So far, so good. I dialed and it started to ring. Even better.

“Hello?” It was Dad. I blanked. “Hello, who is this?”

“Hi!” I tried something simple. Maybe if I focused on short sentences and monosyllabic words, I just might get through this.

“Miriam, is that you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Miriam, we were so worried.” Is everything okay?” That was when I lost it.

CHAPTER 21

THE PHONE CALL

“Daddy!” I bawled. “I’m having a really bad day.” Except for the tears, I was blubbering like a baby.”

“It’s okay, princess. Everything’s all right now.”

“No, it’s not,” I wailed. “Everybody’s mad at me.”

“But you’re with Grandma and Grandpa?”

“Them, too. They’re the maddest.

“Nobody has wings. Nobody has shirts on, my hair is all floaty, and everything I say is wrong.”

“Miriam, are you safe?”

“Yes.”

“Does anything hurt?”

“No.”

“Are you breathing?”

“Huh?”

“Are you breathing?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, do it slower.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Slower. De-ee-ep breath in. Slo-oo-owly let it out. Again. De-ee-ep”

“Oh, Daddy. I can’t do that. I feel silly.”

“Silly is good.

My dad can always make me laugh. It’s his best quality. Mom got on another phone and I did details. They didn’t holler. They didn’t say anything about all my stupid mistakes. This was not like them. They must have been really worried.

They told me they loved me and to be brave. Brave is not my best quality. Shriek and flee is more my style. I said I would call again when I had a chance, and that was it. I felt better, but not for long. Trouble was coming.

“Miriam! Where have you been?” It was Grandma Sky and she was pissed.

“Everyone’s looking for you. I can’t believe that you actually managed to get lost again.” Every word that came out of her mouth was careful and precise, like she had to make sure the poor retard didn’t miss anything.

“But...”

“No, buts. We’re late.”

Grandma Sky never stopped. She came in through a floor-door and by the time she finished talking she was halfway through a ceiling-door. I had to really move my tail to catch up. Once or twice, I lost sight of her, but she was easy to find. Grandma churned up so much water that the pillows floated all over any room she swam through. I guess she was in a hurry.

There was a low rumbling sound that got louder as we swam. We finally stopped at a huge wall-door, complete with billowing green curtain. Grandpa was waiting for us.

"Swim still," Grandma said. "You can't have dinner with your hair all over the place like that." My face got hot, and, thinking about what my face must look like right now, it got even hotter. Grandma pushed my hair behind my ears and used hairpins to make it stay.

"Well, it's not fancy, but it looks pretty enough, and it will stay out of your face," she said.

Grandma and Grandpa Sky had their hair in big stiff curls all over their heads. I wondered what kind of hairspray they used. Whatever it was, there was a lot of it, because nothing moved. Nestled into the curls, probably also glued down, were wreaths made of silver colored seaweed. Grandma had a matching seaweed necklace, and Grandpa had this really cool bracelet that wrapped around his arm. It was gold with sparkly green snake eyes. I wondered if he would let me borrow it sometime.

"Here you go, Miriam," Grandpa Sky said. "Verona made this for you." He handed me another seaweed wreath, the pretty sea-green and dull-gold color of tarnished brass. When I took it in my hands, I realized that tarnished brass was exactly what it was made of and that Grandma and Grandpa's crowns must be real silver, and, if Grandpa's bracelet was what I thought it was, it must weigh a ton. The detail on my headpiece was exquisite. Each narrow leaf was different from every other, in their shading, in their patterns, and in the graceful way they all fit together.

Ribbons that changed from blue to green as they moved, hung from the back of the crown. Each one had a weight in the shape of a beautifully made, tiny brown seahorse to keep them from floating around too much. They were adorable, even nicer than the delicate metalwork of my fake-seaweed crown.

I held it up to get a better look at these wonderful little seahorses.

"Oh, Verona didn't make those," Grandpa Sky said, "I invited them last week."

"Hi, Miriam," a small voice near my left ear, said. With the fastest underwater head jerk I could manage, I put as much distance as I politely could between my face and the bodiless voice.

"It was your Grandpa's idea," the voice continued. "We've been practicing patterns for two days. Want to see?" Although I couldn't tell for sure exactly who was doing the talking, it was clear that these particular seahorses were not made of plastic. There was a group giggle from the others and then they began to weave in and out, looping up and down in a ribbon dance that made me think of a maypole, only the pole was going to be me. It was so sweet, I forgot to be frightened.

"Is everybody okay?" I asked, slowly moving the crown to my head and carefully setting it into place.

"Perfect," someone said. "Your hair is wonderful. Just like seaweed. No one will see us until we want them too."

Grandma Sky leaned forward and adjusted it a little so it fit snug tight. She backed off to get a better look and nodded her approval.

“Much better. Here,” she said, picking up a garland of something that looked like just my crown. It couldn’t have been metal, because it was soft and flexible. Grandma laid the blue and gold seaweedy-looking stuff over my shoulders where it clung to the neckline of my sports bra, front and back, like sewn on decorations. Even I could see that this was a big improvement to my seriously conspicuous modesty shield. Now I could pretend that my top was there to hold up the trim, instead of me.”

“It’s time,” Grandpa said. He pulled aside the curtain, the noise stopped and there we were.

CHAPTER 22

LITTLE VOICES

The walls of the Great Hall were draped from the ceiling to the far-below floor with wide panels of silk, or something very like it. Any color I could name, and lots I couldn't, hung in between the reds and the yellows and the blues, like a giant color wheel.

The long curtains shimmered in the concentrated light that came from having all the fairy lights crowded around the edges of the ceiling, and whenever anyone swam too close to the wall, the nearest panels would billow out, flashing glimpses of something bright and glinty hiding underneath.

The middle of the ceiling had not been left undecorated. If I looked up and squinted my eyes, I could see huge multicolored tropical fish caught up in a fancy fishnet. If I didn't, they looked an awful lot like giant-economy-size floor pillows.

The last time I was here, which was not all that long ago, the Great Hall was empty. Now, it was anything but. The room was stuffed with sea-people, all of them, including my new hair-friends, dead silent, and all of them looking at us.

The crowd parted in front of us, making a wide people-tunnel to a raised platform in the middle of the floor. There sat my new salt sister, dead center, on a floor pillow, the only floor pillow, if you didn't count the ceiling. She was gazing around the Great Hall like a bored queen.

If Verona was not looking at us as we swam -- way too slowly -- towards the platform, everybody else was. I felt a jillion fish eyes boring into my brain. It didn't hurt, but it was not comfortable.

"Hello, Aunt Floradora, hello, Uncle Mele'," Verona said, when we arrived at the platform. "Oh, hello there, Miriam," she said, with a weak 'I'm only pretending to be nice', smile. Verona's sugary sweet voice sounded like a fog horn in the great silent hall. I tried not to cringe, but could see from her pleased expression that I had not been successful.

With a positively regal wave of her arm, Verona indicated that I should move behind her so she would not be forced to gaze upon my lowly face. I always thought that I was pretty good at the 'snub'. But this was Art.

Too excited to notice, or maybe pretending to not notice, Grandma swam above our heads, turning slowly in the water so that she could see everyone.

"Fish and Fairy, Bubble and Sky," she boomed out. "Welcome, All. May I present the newly pledged salt-sisters, our niece, Verona Corona, and our granddaughter, Miriam Mermelstein."

There was a very loud, very brief cheer from the assembled masses, instantly shifting into everyone talking at once. Nobody listening, just talking. I'm not positive about this, because at the same time, everybody turned their back to us to stare at the walls.

Grandpa Sky swam up a little way past Grandma. He floated upright and raised his arms above his head. The next part is kind of hard to explain unless the Hall was wired for sound, which I'm pretty sure it wasn't. Nobody looked, nobody stopped talking, but from every corner of the room Grandpa's voice rang out.

"Let the banquet begin."

"Miriam, quick, look up," said one of my hair friends. The silk panels were loose. They floated to the ground in a surprisingly orderly fashion, with some help from the

nearest sea-people onto whose heads they had drifted. The glint behind the curtains turned out to be big round mirrors covered with the same gold net that was holding up the ceiling pillows. When I looked up, the ceiling net was gone and the pillows were drifting slowly to the ground.

“Oo, it’s so pretty,” said a voice behind my left ear. I thought so, too. Each mirror was a study in elegance, with platters of carefully arranged foods held in place by the tightly stretched net. The fairy lights, the food, the people and the falling cushions were all reflected on the mirror-covered walls and the oohs and aahs of the partygoers showed how pleased they were.

The moment of admiration, however, was brief, as everyone started scrambling for a seat. In this case, scrambling for a seat turned out to be a giant slow-motion pillow fight. The people moved fast enough, but the pillows dragged against the water. Anyone under attack had plenty of time to escape the slow-moving pillows aimed at their heads.

Verona and Grandma and Grandpa Sky had disappeared somewhere into the crowd. I didn’t think my tiny seahorses would be very happy about people hitting me in the head with pillows, so I just watched, and learned about slow pillow-fighting strategy. Truly, a life-enhancing skill.

Ganging up worked and there were quite a few knots of people pummeling some hapless victim in the middle. Many took advantage of the crowded circumstances to beat on their neighbors. Laughing too hard was a distinct disadvantage since it left you helpless to fend off attacks. Sneaking up behind was an excellent strategy if you could do it. Most people couldn’t maintain the necessary silence. Giggling gave them away.

“Is this how people work up an appetite around here?” I asked, wondering if the seahorses could hear me above the noise that seemed to consist primarily of the screaming, giggling and laughing that accompanies any contact sport among mixed company.

“It’s a sea fairy thing,” someone said, “...and we have a great view from the top of your head.” I refrained from a sudden desire to scratch my head.

Talking directly into my ear was a real advantage in such a noisy place. But I couldn’t see anyone, so I had no idea who was doing the talking.

“There’s so many of you. How do I know who I’m talking to?”

“You were talking to me. My name is Redragon.” Redragon was so close I could feel the water move in my ear as he spoke. Even so, he said his name so softly that I almost didn’t hear it.

“Well, how do you do, Re...?” I began, and just like that, I knew. I knew that I mustn’t speak his name where anyone could hear it. I put my hand in front of my mouth so no one could accidentally read my lips and whispered as low as I could. “Thank you, Redragon. Thank you for telling me your name. I’ll always know who you are, now.”

First in one ear, then in the other, the rest of the seahorses told me their names. Now I could hear the differences in their voices. I also knew that when I saw them they wouldn’t look alike anymore.

“I didn’t know that seahorses were magic,” I said when they had told all.

“We’re not,” Leviathan said. “It’s a fairy gift. Most of the stories about how we got the gift have to do with rescuing a land fairy, but it’s been so long that no one knows for sure.”

“Heads up!” said Darkflower. “Here comes your dinner.”

“Thanks, Darkflower,” I whispered.

Groups of two or three people, each clutching their trophy pillows tightly with one hand, began to take the mirrors off the wall, unfolding coffee table height legs before setting them down. No one tried to steal pillows from the people carrying tables. Holding onto a table was ‘safe on base.’

Gradually, there were more and more people sitting on cushions around mirror tables, and fewer and fewer still up in the water playing pillow games. The last few pillow fights ended quickly when they saw everyone else waiting patiently below.

Grandma and Grandpa Sky brought a mirror table to the platform and sat down. Others came, dragging their captured floor pillows along with them. There were ten of us sitting shoulder to shoulder on our squished and overlapping pillows. The table didn’t look so big anymore.

I ended up sitting on my tail, on the dent between two floor pillows, wedged in between Verona on one side, and the first really old-looking Sky I had seen. Old as in, ancient. Old, as in, doddering. So, here I was, with Verona trying to shoulder me out of the way on one side and Old-as-in-ancient drooling on my head on the other. The best thing I could say is that I was really glad we were underwater at the moment.

Grandma and Grandpa were across the table. On Verona’s other side were two more Sky. The one next to her was the reason I was getting squashed. She was surrounded by herself, like a quivering jellyfish with a silly grin on its face. I could forgive Verona breathing down my neck. If I had to cuddle up to one of us I would choose me, too.

I was already leaning over onto Old-as-in-ancient who didn’t seem to mind, so it was no big deal to move my bottom half the last few inches that separated it from my companion’s tail end. Verona filled in the gap, before it was empty. I was still squished, but I was squished straight.

“Thanks,” she whispered out of the corner of her mouth, making no effort to remove her elbow from my ribs.

Another Sky sat next to the jellyfish. Her immense presence made him look even smaller than he was. Only the dainty salt-and-pepper beard told me that this pint sized person was not a little kid. People don’t get dirty enough down here to get smelly, but this Sky must have done something along those lines, because, unlike the rest of us squashed and mashed around the table, he occupied the very center of a floor pillow and occupied it exclusively, with a faint smile and a glazed expression. There was no way of knowing if he was always like that, or just not interested.

I noticed the jellyfish looking me over, and looked back.

Howww do you dooo?” she said. “YOU,” she emphasized, “must be Miriam. It’s sooo nice to meet you. I am YukTwotuktuk and this is MY salt sibling YukOnetuk. We are fourth generation salts,” she said proudly.

“Welcome, dear, to our little salt community. YukOnetuk acknowledged the introduction with the barest nod and a small lip-twitch (one side only). I smiled, a real smile, and nodded at both Tuks. The other Tuk did her best to smile without unpursing her lips.

“This is Ert,” Grandpa said, indicating the man sitting next to him, “Verona’s culture mentor.”

“Here, Miriam,” Ert said. “Catch.” Ert reached under the netting, pulled out a random piece of food and threw it at me. There was plenty of time for me to unstartle, unstick my

arms from my sides and still catch the unknown edible floating my way. I was holding something about the size and color of a mandarin orange.

“Consider this your first insea etiquette lesson,” he said. “Now, let’s get this net off,” he announced to the assembled Sky at the table, “and show Miriam how it’s done.”

CHAPTER 23

DINNER IS SERVED

Ert took hold of the net with both hands and pulled. The net floated up a few feet, and then started to sink back down, threatening to land not on, but in our dinner. Squished bodies unsquished and re-tangled as everyone made a grab for the renegade net. Grandpa won, bundled it up and shoved it under the table with his tail.

Meanwhile, the multitude of plates and bowls overflowing with food, that covered our table, started to wobble dangerously. Bits of food began to rise off their plates without permission. Everyone sank slowly and carefully back to their seats and sat very still while the dishes settled down on the table.

After that, things started to get a little silly.

“Oh, YukTwo,” Ert said. “Would you mind passing the molded mush?”

“Delighted,” YukTwoTuktuk answered and she broke off a piece of something greenish brown from a bowl in front of her, gave it a little shove and sent it floating over to Ert. He put the whole thing in his mouth and looked heavenward.

“Perfection,” he uttered. It may have been perfection, but it didn’t fit into my color category of acceptable edibles. Old-and-doddering was the next to speak up.

“Floradora,” he said and I realized that I didn’t know who he was yet, “I believe you’re sitting right next to the fermented frangipani weed.”

“My pleasure,” Grandma Sky answered, and sent it flying. Cool, I thought, a super polite food fight. I raised the orange thing to my mouth and took a tentative lick ...and melted. Summer fruit! What a great party. That was when things started to get a little hairy.

Everyone wanted food and they all seemed to want whatever was at the other end of the table. Voices were getting louder just to make themselves heard and food was flying, or floating pretty fast, anyway. The water wasn’t still anymore, and nothing seemed to move in a straight line. Stuff would hit a current caused by some other passing bit and take a right turn, somehow ending up with the person who originally requested it.

At the same time, the dishes on the table didn’t budge. Nary a wobble. Hands reached out and delicately picked out just the right piece without disturbing a thing.

I believe what I was now watching could be best described as a combination food fight, shouting match and underwater ballet. I looked around at the rest of the Great Hall. Everybody was doing it. The noise level was rock-concert loud. There was more food flying around in the water than there was on the tables. It wasn’t clear whether the point of the party was eating food or playing with it. I nibbled on my summer fruit, trying to make it last as long as possible.

All good things must come to an end and I finally finished it. There was a dish of purple fuzzy things that looked like they might be another kind of summer fruit that were close enough for me to reach if I could get my other arm unstuck.

My arm was finally free and I was going for the purple when YukTwoTuktuk caught my eye and gave me the ‘come over here I have something to say to you’ eyebrow lift. Most people who wanted to talk were swimming over to their designated listener because the room was too noisy for anything more complicated than ‘pass the gorp.’ I smiled back. I don’t know how all those people managed to move around without making

enough waves to send everything flying off the table and I wasn't about to try, so I just smiled and nodded, like I didn't understand.

I guess YukTwo-etc. didn't want to lose her spot, because, instead of swimming over to me, she leaned across Verona. Verona was forced to lean back. She leaned back some more. She leaned back so far that the only reason she didn't float off her seat was because YukTwoTuktuk had her tail pinned to the pillow.

"So, Miriam dear, is it true" that you're going to visit The Kingdom of the Cats?" I felt like a celebrity confronting a gossip columnist.

"Yes," I answered, relying on the less is better approach.

"Oh, right," Verona piped up from floor level. "I heard all about that. Miss Queen of the Cats." I winced. If I ever really did have to do the queen thing, my first act would be to change that stupid name. Meanwhile, I had to practice not wincing, because I could see from the sly little smile on Verona's nearly upside down face, that Queen of the Cats was a phrase that I would be hearing a lot.

Verona was still trying to dislodge her tail.

"Do you mind," she finally said, giving YukTwo a dirty look." YukTwo favored her with a brief glance and turned back to me.

"How interesting," she gushed. "Are you really a queen?"

"Oh no," I answered, hoping to defuse Verona's comment. It's just that I love cats so much," and smiled broadly.

"Cats? Nasty little carnivores. If we didn't depend on them for power nuts, no one insea would have anything to do with them at all."

"Really," I said, "so you don't like cats."

"Don't do it, Miriam," a little voice whispered in my ear. I flashed on Jiminy Cricket and then remembered the seahorses, who probably knew what they were talking about. The only time I ever think of a really good comeback, is when I can't use it and I had at least a dozen ready for this lady. So I sat there grinning idiotically waiting for someone to rescue me.

It turned out to be Grandpa Sky.

"Miriam," he said. "I would like you to meet Agatha. She's an old friend and a member of our governing council." I leaned forward to see around, forcing YukTwoTuktuk to pull back. Verona finally got to sit up.

When the rearranging of body parts was done, I saw that there was a sea sprite sitting on YukOnetuk's pillow.

"Hey, where's the other Tuk?"

"He's a little uncomfortable with crowds," Grandpa said. "He left right after we began eating."

"You should have seen his face," Verona added. "He looked like a swarm of barracudas was after him."

"Of course, I insisted that he come," YukTwo-etc. said, "but he wouldn't stay. Large meals tend to be difficult for YukOnetuk." I knew how he felt. I wouldn't have minded joining him wherever he was.

"Hey, Miriam. Nice to meet you," Agatha said and looked like she meant it.

"You, too," I answered.

"That's an amazingly wonderful crown and bib you're wearing. Did Verona make it?"

“She most certainly did,” said the ancient Sky on my other side. “We haven’t been introduced yet. I’m Widdershins, Verona’s art teacher. Verona’s my best student. I’m sure she’ll choose the tactile arts.”

“Indeed?” said Ert. “The child shows too much promise as an historian. Her enthusiasm for ancient cultures is so evident that I can’t imagine why she would want to do anything else.”

“I’ve read some of her poetry. It is so the essence of who she is. Verona will be a poet,” YukTwo-etc. announced.

“There are some people I have to see,” Verona said...and she was gone. I was confused and I guess it showed, because Grandpa Sky decided to enlighten me.

“Every Sky chooses an avocation during their thirteenth year,” he said. “Verona’s time is now.”

Verona got to pick whatever she wanted to do and this bothered her? I had zero choices. I was marked and sold down the river by my own cat. My family pretended that I didn’t have to do it, but I knew better. My future was signed, sealed and delivered. No nice, normal life for me. I was the sacrificial lamb for Tefnut’s retirement plans. I was the crown princess of cats, doomed to become Queen of the Cats.

CHAPTER 24

INADEQUATE AND CONSPICIOUS

You're never too big to be tucked in. That's my new motto. Last night when Grandma Sky noticed that I was falling asleep at the table, she took me home, tucked me in and kissed me goodnight. She didn't say the L word, but I felt it. When I woke up in the morning, I still felt kissed and tucked.

I was in my own sleeping room in between Verona's room above and Grandma and Grandpa Sky's room below. It was a not-too-big, not-too-small room with a heavy privacy curtain on the single wall door and no floor doors to accidentally fall through while I was dreaming. Deliciously soft and sinkable pillows, piled three deep covered the floor from wall to wall. This was not a room, it was a nest. I couldn't wait to show Stanley.

The sleeping rooms I saw yesterday all had polished coral table tops glued to floor-pillows like supersized beanbag-lap desks. Mine sat in the corner with my crown and necklace on top. No seahorses. I guess they all had families to go home to. Then I remembered. All I had to do was whisper their names and I would have friends to share my happiness with.

Before I could even think their names, a hand reached around the door-curtain and pulled it aside. The hand was attached to a sour-faced Verona.

"Miriam, Aunt Floradora sent me to wake you up. It's late."

Bummer. There goes my good mood. This sister thing is going to take a lot of work.

"Hi, Verona," I said, determined to wring a smile out of her. I sat up and stretched giving my bathing suit top a tug to make it more comfortable.

"You look really stupid with that thing on you're chest."

"I know, but I have this problem," I started to say, determined to be nice.

"You have a problem all right. Everyone here thinks you're a snob. It's like you don't want anybody to forget that you're better than the rest of us. But all you really look like is a truly dumb drylander."

"People really think that?"

"Of course," she said, scornfully, folding her arms across her chest.

"Is that how you feel?"

"Like, what else could anybody think?"

Thus ensued the battle of the brain.

My right side speaks first: If I show Verona my wings, she'll understand and she won't think I'm a show-off. We can be friends.

Left side: Go ahead, show her. She'll love it. She'll love the fact that she has something she can use against you. She'll tell everyone, but she'll make it sound awful ...But, hey. Risk is my second name.

I looked Verona in the eye. Forget about being friends. I'd do anything just to wipe that smirk off her face. Score one point for the right side of my brain. I took off my shirt.

Her eyes were just about popping out of her head.

"Those are gorgeous. No way I would hide them if I had fins like that."

"The problem," I finally said, "is that they're not fins."

"Like what? They're wings?"

"Yeah."

Verona looked heavenward and rolled her eyes around.

"Not very functional, are they, sweetie?"

"Not underwater, but they're fine outsea. Would you like to see?" I said, trying really, really hard to be nice.

"I most certainly would. With witnesses."

What Verona really wanted, was to see me fail...with witnesses. I needed someone safe.

"How about Grandma or Grandpa?"

"They're busy. How about Ert. I just finished a class with him."

"I guess."

Verona swam away to find Ert. I took the necklace out of my wing pocket, put my sports bra back on and swam up to the surface to wait for them. I took my time, wondering whether or not my good intentions were going to pay off.

They were waiting for me when I got there. Verona's smirk was back. Ert looked concerned. I took a big swallow of fresh ocean air, wondering why it didn't taste as good as I thought it should, while Ert swam over to me, waving to Verona to stay put.

"Miriam," he said quietly. "We need to talk." This is adult speak for 'I talk. You listen.' I got ready to listen.

"Miriam, you can't get people to like you by bragging. Especially about things you can't possibly do. Verona's a great kid. Why don't you just tell her the real reason you don't want to take off your chest cover. The sooner you feel comfortable without it, the more you'll look like everyone else and the more you'll feel like everyone else."

"But..."

"Don't forget, I've spent most of my life studying history and culture, including outsea civilization. I tried to explain to Verona the drylander's prohibitions about nudity and how hard it is to overcome, but I think it will make more sense to her if you tell her yourself. Besides, I would love to see those beautiful dorsal fins of yours. Go on." He shooed me over to Verona. Ert sounded more like my school counselor than an historian and just as hard to ignore.

I shooed.

Halfway between them I stopped and took off my shirt. Ert had it right about drylanders and nudity. I felt like a flasher. I kept the bathing suit clutched to my chest and turned to Ert for approval.

"That's great, Miriam. Now tell Verona how you feel."

"Is it all right if I show her?"

"Of course. Go ahead." I twisted my necklace to legs and took off.

...And it was good. Being able to fly, made up for a lot of crummy things in my life right now. I did a few swoops and looked down from my new and improved vantage point.

The double jaw-drop below me was deeply satisfying. Also, I learned something new. Wet wings still work. At least mine did. Maybe I was part duck. This led to some serious thinking about migrating the hell out of there and going home to Mommy and Daddy. I did a couple of double spirals and loop the loops to prolong the fun part, then sighed, realizing I would have to come down sometime.

I decided on the classic cannon ball landing for maximum splash, hugging my knees to my chest and twisting my necklace to tail at the last possible second. I must have caught

Ert and Verona with their jaws still dropped because they were both sputtering and shaking their heads when I surfaced. Verona recovered first, sending eye-daggers in my direction, but Ert was the first to speak, probably because he still had his mouth open.

“Miriam!” How wonderful. How impossibly wonderful. I thought a drylander had to be a fairy to have wings. Is there something I don’t know. Are you really one of us? You must tell me all about it.”

Talk about disaster. Verona’s beloved mentor thought I was some kind of wonderful and Verona was not happy. She threw me another set of eye daggers and dove.

At least I didn’t have to watch her hang around and pout.

CHAPTER 25

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

"I used to be a pretty ordinary person," I said to Ert after she left. "I don't know what I am now. I'm pretty sure I'm not a fairy. I think I'm still basically a drylander, only different. Really, really different. Weird, isn't it."

Ert fussed over me the rest of the day. He wanted to know everything. We had a picnic lunch onsea from my bag. I introduced him to macaroni and cheese. He loved it. But he wanted to know how it was made and when I explained to him about milk and cows, he was totally grossed out.

I told Ert as much as I could about my parents and Tefnut. I told him about the dragonfly fairies. He never seemed to run out of questions. But he was very nice and I felt comfortable talking to him. No wonder Verona liked this guy.

He even helped me solve my wing problem. At Ert's suggestion, I took a mirror and a roll of Chameleon-brand waterproof duct tape out of my bag. I pulled my wings back under my shoulder blades and Ert taped them down. The mirrors were so I could supervise. After a couple of minutes, the tape matched my skin color so closely it was invisible. Ert said that the tape was true invisible, like magic-invisible and he couldn't even find the edges. I don't think you can buy Chameleon-brand at the mall.

Ert was right about one thing. I spent the rest of the day with my arms crossed over my chest.

I was still uncomfortable about anyone seeing me without a shirt after Ert left, so I headed back to the privacy of my sleeping rooms. Grandma Sky was waiting for me. Her eyebrows went up at the sight of my shirtless self, but she didn't say anything about it. Grandma Sky had other things on her mind.

"Where have you been all day? I've looked everywhere."

"Uh, with Verona and Ert." She smiled. "Oh, with Verona."

"Well, actually, only a little while with Verona. Mostly with Ert."

"Miriam, today is your first whole day at Casalot. Don't you think you should have spent it with your family? We had plans."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." Just to make sure I did know, she started ticking them off on her fingers.

"There was a meeting of the General Council this morning. You were expected. Many of the members had prepared speeches of welcome. I even sent Verona to get you."

"But—"

"You were expected at a luncheon in your honor given by the Tucks."

"Nobody told me."

"You make it your business to know, young lady."

Who took away the Grandma who tucked me in last night?

"Agatha brought a group of sea sprites who wanted to meet you and Mele' said that the seahorses were looking for you. It is a great honor to be befriended by them and I can't see anything you've done to earn it."

Dinner was a disaster. Everyone was mad at me. Again. Even Grandpa Sky. Nobody threw food at me and I didn't have the nerve to ask. I couldn't wait to get back to my sleeping room and get something to eat out of my bag. This time, it was Verona who was lurking around outside my room. She looked a lot like Grandma. Uh-oh. This must be

payback time for this morning, just in case not telling Grandma where I was all day wasn't enough. I geared back up for nice and pretended not to notice the water around her beginning to boil.

"Verona. Hi. I had a good time with Ert today. He's really nice." It didn't work. She went directly to the topic at hand. Me.

"What makes you so special, that you deserve all that stuff," Verona said. "You shouldn't have it. It just makes you think you're better than everyone else, which you certainly are not."

I don't know which straw that was, but it was definitely the last one. Any residual sympathy I might have had drained away. So she was stressed out about the Choosing thing. So what. That was no excuse. Being nice to this Sky was never going to work. My whole body shook with anger. I was hungry and I was pissed.

"Do you actually think I asked for any of this? Do you think it's so great having everyone think you're a freak of nature? Anyway, I'm tired of being nice to you. I'm nice to you, and all you are is mean, no matter how hard I try. Don't think I don't know that you're trying to sabotage me with Grandma and Grandpa Sky. You're just a nasty person, and I've had enough." I wasn't shouting, but I was close.

"I always wanted a big sister. Always, always, always! But not you. You're the worst sister anyone could have."

The whole time I was talking, Verona's face kept getting redder and redder. Her tail was swishing harder and harder. When I finished, she said nothing but turned and swam out still swishing.

The next morning I woke early and went looking for Grandma and Grandpa Sky to get my orders for the day. I found Grandpa right away. There is a library column right next to our sleeping column. He was sitting on the floor at floor-pillow desk covered with open scrolls all of which appeared to be completely blank. Still there must have been something there, because he was concentrating so hard, he didn't notice me until I got close enough for him to feel the water moving over his skin.

"Miriam," he said. No smile. "Good morning. I'm busy."

"Sorry," I said. "I just wanted to know where you want me to be today."

"Not here. Your friend Stanley came by earlier. I think he's waiting for you onsea. Be back for lunch." He waved me away.

CHAPTER 26

SKYNAPPED!

I was teaching Stanley the joys of floating on your back on a sunny day. The game was inevitably and deliciously shifting to naptime, when, from the far corner of my barely open right eye, I almost saw something, almost moving. No big deal. Not enough to get me to roll over and soak my sun-warm tummy. Stanley's eyes, however, were positioned on his head a little differently from mine and he must have gotten a better look...enough to give him a good scare.

"Miriam! Dive!"

He set the example by disappearing under the water himself.

Too sun sleepy to follow, I compromised by moving my head ever so slightly to the side, hoping to get a better look without disturbing the rest of me.

"Come on up, Stanley. It's just a big fairy light."

He surfaced a little too close and a little too enthusiastically, destroying my savoir faire along with my balance.

"Hey! Sometimes it's nice to be dry."

"Miriam, that thing is weird. I've never seen anything like it. I don't think it's a fairy light."

"Sure it is," I insisted. "This must be what happens to the fairy lights when they lose their power nuts. They float to the surface and swell bigger and bigger till they burst."

"Maybe," he said without any conviction. Whatever it was, it was bobbing in the air just above the surface only a few yards away from us. It was at least as big around as I was tall.

We swam over for a close-up look.

The big bubble seemed to be completely smooth, transparent and empty. The sun colored it up like a soap bubble giving it a friendly kind of feeling. Still, Stanley's suspicious attitude kept me cautious. We were being careful, but on our third or fourth slow circle, Stanley accidentally gave it a nudge. The bubble bounced gently, just like a fairy light.

When it didn't break, he shoved it again a little harder. It reacted the same way. After a few more shoves, I was convinced.

"Stanley, this is a broken fairy light. I bet if we put a power nut in, it would work again. Look, I can put my hand right through it, just like a regular fairy light." I reached out to touch the bubble.

"Miriam! Wait! Onsea is where you find drylanders. Anything really strange is usually something they've put there, and it's usually worth staying away from. Let's go back to Casalot and find someone who knows what it is."

"We can't do that. It will float away or burst and we'll never find it again. It might be important."

"Fine. I'll stay with the bubble. You get your grandparents."

"No, I'll stay here. You're faster and you know more people." Finally, after a lot of back and forth discussion, we agreed that I would very gently try to put part of one finger in and out like I did with the real fairy lights. If it worked, Stanley would stay and watch the bubble while I went to find a power nut to see if we could fix it.

Under Stanley's watchful eye, I touched the side of the bubble with my fingertip.

“Here goes nothing,” I said, slowly applying pressure. My fingertip went in easily. The bubble didn’t break or change in any way we could see.

“Success!” I cried out with a big grin, and still moving carefully, started to withdraw my hand. But, my finger didn’t come out quite as easily as it had gone in. I dropped the grin and gave a little tug. Nothing.

I pulled harder, still with no effect.

“Miriam,” Stanley said. “Don’t be so rough, you’re pushing your hand further in.”

“I’m not. It’s growing around my hand and I can’t get it out.”

“Grab my tail with your other hand,” he said. I did and he swam off at top speed, but the bubble followed along firmly attached to my hand. Stanley dove under the water but the bubble did not follow. Unfortunately, the bubble’s hold on me was a lot stronger than my hold on Stanley. It gently bounced along the surface and kept on sucking me up.

“I guess we didn’t need to worry about breaking it,” I joked nervously, just before my head followed my shoulder into the bubble.

After that, the bubble began to rise in the air taking me with it. My head and shoulders now caught and the rest of me dangling helplessly, not to mention, ridiculously. This was good. Embarrassed always beats scared. I felt too stupid to be really worried.

CHAPTER 27

JUST BUBBLING ALONG

Stanley butted the bubble as hard as he could, again and again, but this had to be out of pure frustration, because no matter how hard he hit, the bubble bounced gently away and moved a little higher.

His leaps were becoming increasingly impressive, but eventually the bubble and I were out of reach. At this point, we stopped rising and started to travel, picking up speed as the last bit of my tail was swallowed up inside. Stanley stayed with us as long as he could, but the bubble got faster and faster until it was way past dolphin speed.

“Miriam,” he called. “Don’t worry. I’m going to put out the dolphin alarm.” He dove under the water and was gone.

My god. A week ago I would have been hysterical. I can’t believe I’m getting used to this. My body’s pre-panic functions were getting to be just a little too familiar.

Why do these things keep happening to me?

“All right, Miriam,” I muttered to me, “it’s time to take control of your life.” Gently I pushed on the skin of the bubble hoping to get out the same way I got in, but it was a one-way bubble. I was good and stuck.

I took in a deep shaky breath. But by the time I let the breath out, the pre-panic was no longer ‘pre-’ and control was no longer the issue.

I threw myself against the wall...the ceiling...the floor. My tail packs a lot of pushing power, but I wasn’t going anywhere.

So, my luck wasn’t any better than Stanley’s. Big surprise. This stupid bubble is as bouncy on the inside as it is on the outside.

In spite of our speed, the air inside the bubble was still, and the colors were even prettier on the inside, almost mesmerizing. Out of breath and unable to look away from the moving colors with nothing but sea and sky beyond, I could feel the lure of another powerful nap attack...

It was twilight when I woke up.

So much for taking control of my life.

I grabbed my bag, determined to belatedly take charge of my destiny. Taking out a small stone the size of a power nut, I used one finger to push it through the bubble skin. Splash! The stone was gone but my finger was still here.

Next thing out of my bag was a plain white handkerchief. This, I wrapped around my hand and tried pushing one cotton covered finger through the bubble again. This time my finger kept going. I added more fingers and they kept going. Finally, just past my wrist, I reached the end of the handkerchief. I watched it fall away into the ocean while the bubble grew back over my hand like a giant pimple.

Ha! I am so smart. It’s just me that can’t get out. The garbage disposal works fine. All I need now is a really big handkerchief.

Like a magician pulling silks out of a hat, I slowly pulled a big double sheet out of my sampo and spread it neatly across the bottom of the bubble. Wiggling over to the middle, I bounced up and down a couple of times, just in case. No dice. I was going to have to do it the slow way. Starting with the tip of one fin instead of a finger, I did the gentle pushing thing again. By the time I got to what used to be my knees, the weight of my body started to speed things up, and before I realized what was happening, I was once

again, hanging by my armpits, the sheet spread out on the surface of the water like an enormous jellyfish disappearing into the distance as me and my bubble moved inexorably to who knows where.

All righty. What I need now is a bigger sheet. Much bigger. Maybe a tent. Something with a zipper to make sure I can't get caught again. I waited patiently for the bubble to suck me back in enough to reach my sampo and get started on my successful, final attempt but somehow, I didn't seem to be making any progress in either direction.

Confused, I looked around as if an explanation would be written out on the wall of the bubble. There was of course, nothing written. In fact there was no clue at all, but there was something.

Having been so fixated on my tail's lack of progress, I hadn't noticed an island in the near distance. I noticed it now, though. A big double ring of land. A coral atoll.

The thicker center reef almost looked like a small island with a big lake in the middle. It was covered with sea grasses and shrubby plants. Not even the requisite coconut tree. The outer ring was even less inviting, mostly coral rock with a few pockets of soil and grass.

I never got to demonstrate my mastery over my traveling prison. The bubble decided on an abrupt halt right over the middle of the lake, leaving my loose tail swinging so hard it hurt my waist. But it didn't just stop moving, it also stopped existing, dumping me tail first into a strange place.



The momentum from my fall carried me to the bottom of the reef-lake. As I slowed, I was able to look around, including up and down.

I was confused. This was not like any natural coral formation I'd ever seen on the Nature Channel.

First of all, there was no coral, kind of a basic requirement for a coral reef, not to mention plants growing out of it; mollusks growing on it; and fish swimming around it. There was, in fact, nothing alive and nothing green.

I was sitting on a smooth-as-glass pale-gray bottom curving up to the surface like a gigantic swimming pool in the middle of the ocean.

"Welcome to my fishbowl," said a familiar voice. I turned to see a smiling Zazkal swimming towards me. This time I was almost as pissed as I was scared.

"Oh, no! Not again!" I groaned.

The smile was withdrawn and Zazkal held out his hand.

"The bag!"

I crossed my arms over my chest. There was only a small twitch in the tip of my tail to betray my nervousness. Otherwise, I matched him dirty look for dirty look.

This time Zazkal had his own knife. I didn't move while he cut the sampo from my waist.

"Big fish," I hissed at his retreating back. "Big, stupid fish." He stopped swimming and turned back to me managing to look both extremely annoyed and really angry.

"Big fish eat little fish," he said. "Stay out of my way, little fish. Now go to sleep," and I did



When I woke up, it was still daytime and Zazkal was still there.

Oooo! Bad, bad dream I muttered, groggily.

“Well,” he said. “Have you got it?” Nothing was making sense, unless I really was still asleep. Good idea.

“What do you want me for? You’ve got my bag.” I started to lower my head back to the ground to go back to sleep, but no, that was not allowed. I was the designated listener.

“It would seem,” Zazkal said formally, sounding like he was launching into a prepared speech which he probably was, “that we will be keeping company for sometime. Your bag, you see, cannot be stolen. Or at least it cannot be stolen for very long.

“Sit up,” he snapped.

I sat.

Zazkal reached over and picked up the sampo from the spot where I had been lying.

“I’ve never kept a pet before, but now it seems I will be responsible for a rather exotic little fish. When I have time, I will have to work out a way to make the wall of your fishbowl transparent. It will be pleasant to watch you swimming prettily around in your tank when I am not working.”

I finally got the point. I could feel the color draining from my face, also from my tail and my fingers as all my blood raced to the middle of my chest where it formed an oppressively heavy lump.

“You mean you’re going to keep me here forever?” I gasped out, not bothering to close my mouth.

“Close enough,” he answered. “Unless I find a way to duplicate the bag, but I don’t expect that I will need to. All in all, I’ve always lived alone, and I rather like the idea of having a pet.

“I’ll be back in the morning, and I’ll bring you some breakfast.” This time I could see him leave. A hole opened in the wall when he got close, just like it did in the rock-pile prison. Through the opening I could see the living coral.

“Don’t bother tying it on again tomorrow,” Zazkal said. “You’ll just use up the cord if I have to keep cutting it off.” Then he was gone, and the smooth wall returned.

So, the bag comes back to me when I’m sleeping. That explains a lot.

It isn’t easy swimming with a 50-pound lump in the middle of your chest. I slowly made my way to the surface and dragged myself to a sitting position on the edge of the reef to check out the rest of Zazkal’s security measures. They weren’t very good. I was suspicious. A ten-foot wall stood about six feet from the water’s edge. All I had to do was switch to legs, walk over, pile up some rocks and climb over. Hell, I could just fly out of here.

I swished my tail nervously back and forth in the water. Maybe he wants me to try to escape. But why? Why, why, why?

Light bulbs didn’t start flashing on over my head, but somebody had their hand on the dimmer switch and was slowly turning it from nothing to enlightenment. At the same time, the 50-pound lump was getting a little lighter.

What I eventually realized was that Zazkal didn’t know that I had wings. Not only that, but he didn’t know I had access to legs, either. I had put my necklace back in my wingpocket to keep it safe since I didn’t expect to need it until I went home.

There wasn’t anything scary on the other side of the wall, because Zazkal didn’t know he needed it. ...Probably.

I was still swishing my tail, and the lump finally got light enough to rise up and stick in my throat. There was nothing to keep me from peeling off the tape and flying out of here right now. Why was I still so nervous?

Because I wanted someone to tell me it was okay, that I could do this and everything would be all right. I started to cry. I didn't want Grandma and Grandpa Sky, I wanted Grandma and Grandpa mermaid. I wanted my mommy and daddy and I wanted to go home.

CHAPTER 28

HEARTSPEAK

My whole body was awash with a powerful feeling of affection. It was if I was under a loving-attack. A welling up of emotion, but not mine. It took only a moment for me to recognize what it was.

“Grandmother, Grandfather, I hear you, I mean, I feel you, I mean... Well, okay, so I don’t know what I mean, but I know what I feel and who it comes from. Can you hear me?”

“Don’t cry, Miriam. Everything will be all right.”

Now I was hearing voices as well. There was someone here. It wasn’t Grandma and Grandpa and it sure didn’t sound like Zazkal.

“What? What? Who’s there?” I jerked my head around trying looking for the invisible whisperer.

“It’s me, Verona. I’m almost at the reef.”

“Verona? What are you doing here? How come I can hear you?”

“Aunt Flora sent me. I’m here to rescue you. You can hear me because we’re using heartspeak.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?” she said impatiently.

“Verona! It really is you! How come you can use heartspeak? We’re not even friends.”

“We’re salt sisters, Miriam. And anyway, I’m not using heartspeak, you are. You’re blasting at full power.”

“How did you know where I am? I don’t even know where I am.”

“Aunt Floradora and the dolphin alarm. I’m here with your friends, Stanley and Oliver and their pod. It’s complicated. I’ll explain later. First, we have to get you out of there.

“Oh, that’s easy. I’m pretty sure that Zazkal doesn’t know I have wings. I should be able to fly out, but I have no idea where to go. Where are you? How can I find you?”

“We’re not far, that’s why I can use heartspeak to talk to you. Use a locator spell.”

“A what?”

“A locator spell. Can’t you even do that? This is so humiliating. What will I tell my friends?

“Never mind. Just stay there. We’ll come and get you.”

“What are you going to do? Just swim up, knock on the door and say ‘Can Miriam come out and play?’ Zazkal will never let me go.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic. He has no choice. Nobody messes with a dolphin pod if they don’t want to be messed with.



There’s nothing like knowing that thirty or forty dolphins were on their way to rescue you to make a person feel better, and I did feel a whole lot better. Still, Zazkal was one scary fish, and I was not completely confident, especially if the rest of the family was like Stanley and Oliver...really nice guys, but not heavyweight types. Secrecy still made a lot more sense than an all out frontal attack.

This is a job for the invisible woman.

I peeled off the tape, took the shadow coat out of my left wing pocket and tried to hurry the tediously long process of unfolding it. I poked my arms through the sleeves and

my wings out of the wing slits. I didn't relax until I heard the click of the silver dragonfly clasp around my neck. My hands, wings and the sticking out part of my tail were as invisible as the rest of me and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Next, came the necklace from the left wing pocket. I put it on and switched to feet. Everything after that was a piece of cake. Spreading my wings and taking off, I flew up, over and out.

That was simple, I thought looking around for the dolphins. They were swimming near the surface and easy to spot. I smiled, knowing exactly what I wanted to do next. I am so sneaky.

Landing just behind the pod, I put my tail back on and looked around to see what was happening. That was when I learned that there was seeing and there was seeing and invisibility was relative to who was doing the looking.

"Hey, Miriam. Wait for me."

"Stanley?" Apparently I wasn't the only one lagging behind the pod. "You can see me? Why aren't you with everyone else?"

"I was bored. Now that you mention it, I can't see you, but I sure can echo-hear you and you hear great." He caught up and gave me a few affectionate bumps. "How come I can't see you?"

"I've got this cape thingy that makes me invisible." I demonstrated by opening the dragonfly clasp for a second. Tell the rest of your pod to pretend I'm not here. I'll feel a lot better if Zazkal doesn't know where I am."

"That's going to be tough. We're bringing him back with us."

"No way. There's no way I'm traveling in the same pod with him, even invisible. He is one bad fish and all I want is to be a million miles away."

We had reached Zazkal's atoll. Stanley and I were swimming behind and a little above the pod. We could see Verona at the front. We didn't have to see her to hear her though.

"ZAZKAL. THIS IS VERONA CORONA." Verona's voice was everywhere. She sounded like Grandpa Sky did at the party when he announced the banquet only not so nice. Must be a magic thing.

"I AM HERE AT THE BEHEST OF THE CASALOT GREAT COUNCIL. YOU ARE UNDER THREAT OF TOTAL BANISHMENT AND ORDERED TO APPEAR AT THE NEXT COUNCIL MEETING IN TWO DAYS' TIME. WE ARE HERE TO ESCORT YOU. YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES TO APPEAR WITH MIRIAM MERMELSTEIN AND THEN WE'RE COMING IN."

I wasn't going to admit it, but I was impressed. Verona had a lot going for her besides mean and nasty. She did a great scary and intimidating. Still, she had a long way to go to beat out Zazkal in this category.

I wondered if heartspeak worked like telepathy. I scrunched up my mind and tried to connect with Verona.

Verona, I thought. I'm here. I'm behind you. Verona. Can you hear me. Verona?

Okay, so heartspeak didn't work like telepathy, but then, I had no idea how to do telepathy either.

If I were to guess, I would say that exactly four minutes and fifty-nine seconds had passed since Verona had finished speaking when Zazkal showed up. He had a death grip on my sampo in one hand and some kind of spear thing in the other. Score one point for Verona.

“Stanley. Go and tell Verona that I’m here, but please, please don’t let Zazkal know.”

“Right” He raced off.

I wasn’t close enough to understand the words, but I could hear Zazkal’s loud angry voice. Good luck, Verona.

After a minute or two he went into the atoll and came back out empty handed.

You go, girl! Two points.

Everybody, and I mean everybody turned and started swimming in my direction. I dove deep so fast, I hadn’t even thought of it yet. Either all the dolphins knew to ignore me or they didn’t see me because they weren’t looking for anyone. I watched from below as Verona and Zazkal, surrounded on all sides passed overhead. Two dolphins stayed behind.

CHAPTER 29

FLYING FISH

“Yoo hoo! Miss Miriam! It is I. Oliver...and my companion, Stanley. We are here to rescue you once again.”

I smiled. Stan and Ollie! Verona gets ten points for that one.

“There she is, Ollie. Down there. Miriam, you can turn off your magic. Zazkal is gone.”

I took off the shadow coat, balled it up, shoved it in my wing pocket where it made a slightly painful bulge and hurried to the surface to join my friends. I would have to fold it up properly sooner rather than later.

“I am so glad to see you guys,” I said as soon as I got close enough for hugs. Dolphins don’t hug, but I do. “You are both the best thing that happened to me since I turned tail and hit the water.” I hugged them some more. They had no idea what I said, but they knew what I meant. Ollie swelled and Stanley did his happy little head shake. I think he also tried to do something sort of smile-like with his face, but it’s hard to tell without lips.

“We were all terribly worried at first when Zazkal said he couldn’t find you,” Ollie said, “but Verona Corona didn’t get upset at all. She assigned us to stay behind and find you. Of course, now I understand and naturally, I appreciate the honor of once again being your official escort, but Miss Miriam, why couldn’t you just come along with the rest of the pod?”

I shivered.

“Trust me,” I said, not really wanting to talk about Zazkal. “This is better. Want to see me be a flying fish?”

“You mean those fins?” Stanley said. “I thought they were part of that thing you took off,” Stanley said, “but they’re still there, aren’t they?”

“Yes, Miss Miriam, where have you been hiding such beautiful dorsal fins?” Ollie asked.

“They fit under my shoulder blades, but they don’t stay unless I have something to hold them in. Come on, I’ll show you how they work.”

First, I did the flying fish thing with my tail dragging in the water. Stanley loved it. He stalked me underwater and then suddenly leaped over me like a cat pouncing. We did stalk and pounce for a while and then I switched to legs and took off.

“Catch me now, Stanley... If you can,” I called, flying temptingly low. Too low, actually. Stanley did an impressive leap that knocked me out of the sky with the kind of gigantic splash that Ollie so abhorred.

After that, Ollie and order ruled and we made our way sedately in the direction of Casalot.

That night Ollie and Stan took turns standing guard overhead while I slept. It was very comforting. The next day I felt a lot calmer, so calm, in fact, that there was room in my brain for thinking about things other than fight or flight, and thinking is mostly what I did for the next couple of days. By the time we got to Casalot, I knew what I wanted to do, and I knew what I needed to do. Unfortunately, they were not the same thing.

PART 3 CHOICES



CHAPTER 30 MERMAID'S TEARS

Grandma Sky must have some kind of early warning system because she showed up almost as soon as we got within sight of Casalot. She was jet propelled, her face black with anger. In a hurry to tell me what a jerk I was no doubt.

"Miriam," she said in fast forward. "How could you be so foolish? How could you be so careless? How could you be so stupid? How could you fall for that Sky's trick? Why did you let him? Why? Tell me why. Answer me. Tell me the reason."

This was a new level of angry for Grandma Sky. Way beyond pissed off. I looked at her, furious and trembling. She was so mad, I couldn't compete.

I remembered the time I fell into someone's swimming pool when I was little. I don't remember the details of how I got in or out of the water, but I remember Dad. It was the maddest I've ever seen him. It took him an hour to calm down and stop screaming at me. He was so unfair.

At that moment, I decided to forgive them both.

"So, I guess you missed me, huh?" I said to Grandma with a grin. She burst into tears. She cried so hard I could actually see some of the teardrops come out before they dissolved into the ocean. Real mermaid's tears. No wonder the sea is so salty. She needed a hug and I provided one.

"It's all right, Grandma," I whispered into her ear. "Don't cry. I'll be more careful next time," I lied." It was the right thing to say.

"Oh, Miriam," she sobbed. "We were so worried." She wrapped her arms around me and held me tight. Better than a tuck. Grandpa Sky finally caught up with Grandma. He was wearing a huge grin on his face. He swam over and put an arm around Grandma.

"Now, now dear. Don't cry. It's all over." He was still smiling ear to ear. Over Grandma's shoulder, I noticed Stan and Ollie discreetly sneaking away.

"Miriam, dear," Grandpa said, "As much as possible, Flora and I want Casalot to be your home. It's not a fairy gift, but we will always be here when you need us, no matter how old you get." I felt so warm and happy inside, I was in danger of melting away.

Finally the moment was over. I wouldn't call Grandma calm, but she was calmer. We broke hug and swam the rest of the way to Casalot holding hands. Me in the middle. I love me in the middle.

CHAPTER 31

FORGIVE AND FORGET

I knew what to do. I didn't want to do it. I needed to talk it out with someone. Maybe Ert. I hunted down Verona, to find out where he lived. Besides, I had something to say to her. Part of my new 'do the right thing' campaign.

My so called salt-sister was in the kitchen column. The kitchen on her level was tiny. Just a room with wall shelves all around and a low table in the middle. Verona was floating up near one of the higher shelves, pulling something out of a jar and stuffing it in her mouth. She looked like a little kid with a cookie jar.

"Hey. Verona. Hi." She turned around with a mouth full of food and a guilty look on her face. As soon as she saw it was me, the look went from guilty to scornful. The bulging cheeks kind of took the edge off the scorn. I tried hard not to grin.

"What do you want?" Caught in the act is not a good way to start a conversation, but I wanted to do this and get it over with.

"Uh...thanks for saving my tail back there," I said.

"You're welcome," she said, still chewing.

"I, uh, especially appreciated it when you arranged it so I could come back with Stan and Ollie instead of you and Zazkal. That was very, uh, insightful of you."

"Not really. I would have felt the same way. He's a creep. If you want to thank me, thank me for spending two whole days with him. What a jerk."

"Thank you." We were now faced with the meaningless silence that always follows acts of contrition, and believe me, mine was an act of contrition. I decided on the go-for-details response.

"So, uh, how did you find me anyway?" I asked?

"Dolphin alarm. It's a little like whale's singing only no one can hear it except other dolphins. Your friend Stanley sent a message to the nearest pod, who sent the message to the next nearest pod and so forth, until they tracked you down. Flora knew you were in trouble, but she couldn't find you without the dolphins."

"How did Grandma know I was missing?"

"Heartspeak. She's a worrier. If she loves you, she's on your wavelength all the time, just in case. Your mom uses heartspeak all the way from outsea and Flora can pick it up."

"Can you show me how to do it?"

"I don't know," Verona said, and a big grin spread across her face. "You're already pretty good at it. You nearly knocked me out of the water back at Zazkal's place."

What a nice smile, I thought. She doesn't look ugly anymore. I opened my mouth to say so and stopped. For once, I waited to let my brain catch up with my mouth. Brain speaking here: Big mistake. Do not say ugly.

Okay, I thought. I'll just tell her that she looks pretty when she smiles.

This is your brain again. Do not say pretty. Pretty is the opposite of ugly, which is what you will be telling her that she is when she doesn't smile. Best choice? Close your mouth and say nothing.

"Close your mouth," Verona said scornfully. "You're a Sky, not a Fish."

Hey, I'm thinking. She called me a Sky. I felt so good, so grateful; I really wanted to say something nice back, so I shut off the danger signal ringing in my head/chest and spoke anyway.

"You have a nice smile," I said. "It makes you look..." think Miriam, think.
"...prettier," I said at last.

"Listen Miriam," Verona said in a serious but surprisingly unmean voice. "What you said about always wanting a big sister, and that other stuff. I thought about it a lot, and well, the truth is, I always wanted a little sister."

Live and learn, I thought.

"I only did the salt sister thing because it was so important to Aunt Flora. But, if you still want it, I'll be your salt sister for real.

"Works for me."

"Of course, I still get to let you know when you act like a little twit."

"Hey, part of the territory. Besides, I reserve the right to get really ticked off when you do."

"Fair enough."

"If you're ready to start the sister-for-real thing, I need to talk to someone about this idea I have. It's a great idea, but it's also something I really, really don't want to do." I was going to ask Ert, but that was before...before, you know, this." I waved my arms around vaguely to somehow demonstrate what 'this' was.

"My big sister ears are turned on and waiting for input."

"Zazkal is kind of an outsider, isn't he," I began.

"He's a Rogue Sky. You don't get more outside than that. Well, except for you, of course."

"Thanks a lot."

"Any time, Sis."

"So you agree, we're both outsiders."

"Right, only Zazkal is smart."

"Ha, ha. Very funny. Look. What if Zazkal did something nice for someone, sort of to make-up?" Would that make him less of an outsider?"

"That would make everyone very surprised. Zazkal has never done anything for anyone. But if it was for you, I guess people would think of it as a kind of an atonement."

"What about me? Like you said, I'm about as outside as you can get. How could I be more accepted? What would it take?"

"Give it up Miriam. You can never be a real Sky. You're too different."

"A person can be different but still be part of a group, can't they? What if I studied magic? How would people feel about me then?"

"Not a bad idea. Every Sky kid learns basic magic. I think people might respect you more if you did that. Yes, that would work. You should do that. Aunt Flora and Uncle Mele' are fabulous magic users. They would be great teachers."

"Yes, but what if I also did something nice for someone else. What if I helped someone, helped them with something they couldn't do by themselves? Wouldn't that work for me as well as Zazkal?"

"Pulling things out of your magic bag whenever somebody needed something would not make you popular. People would resent you even more."

"No, not that. Something that had nothing to do with any of my extra stuff. Something that would be really, really, and I mean really, hard for me?"

"Oh, no. You can't be thinking what I think you're thinking."

“Yeah. That’s what I’m thinking, all right. You can’t begin to imagine how much I don’t like this idea. But it works, doesn’t it?”

“Well, the sacrifice would certainly count in your favor. Nobody would willingly spend any time with him. Personally, I’d rather be unpopular.”

“Me, too... I think. But you should have heard what G. and G. said about Casalot being my home. This is not gonna happen all by itself.”

“Come on, let’s go tell them. See what they think.”

“Oh, no. I’m not going to say anything. You’re going to tell them. It has to sound like it’s your idea. It’s going to be horrible, anyway. Do you have any idea what that fish would do to me if he knew I thought of this.”

CHAPTER 32

THE BIG MEETING

There was a meeting of the Grand Council that night. According to Verona, everyone showed. I waited nervously in my nest for the formal invite. I had not been successful in persuading the G's that my presence was not necessary.

About a hundred years later, Verona finally poked her head through the door. "Talk time is over. Flora sent me to get you."

"Wait. You have to help me stick my wings back in. I don't want Zazkal to know about them... Just in case."

"What? Just in case you need to make another flying escape?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Not gonna happen."

"Please?"

"Okay, but you are way too paranoid." I took the Chameleon tape out of the sampo and pulled my wings in while Verona stuck them down. We worked fast and it only took a minute.

"Thanks"

"You're welcome. Hurry up, we're late."

"I so do not want to be around when they tell Zazkal what his punishment is," Verona said as we speed-swam to the meeting room on our level and then up the column to the council meeting room. "He's counting on a nice, long banishment."

"How do you know the Council will agree?"

"It's not like anyone on the Council has to live with him. Nobody would agree to what they're about to make you do."

We could hear the buzz of conversation as we approached the meeting room. Floor and ceiling doors don't have curtains and as soon as we got to the adjacent room, we could see that the Council room below us was big and that it was packed to capacity. No furniture, no pillows, just people. It was also dead silent from the moment we entered.

"Good, you're here," Flora said, not smiling. "Someone fetch Zazkal."

He showed up through a curtained side door after a couple of very long, very silent minutes. I was near the same door for purposes of fast escape, and turned my head away to avoid eye contact, wishing for my shadow coat. Everybody else must have felt the same way, because the crowd parted leaving a straight path to Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma got right to the point.

"Zazkal, if you have anything to say in your defense, you may speak now, and you may speak again after we have given you our judgment." He remained silent.

"Very well, she continued. I will begin. May we assume that the barrier which was suffocating the coral reef has been removed?"

"It has," he replied.

"Good."

"Zazkal," Flora said. "You have been tolerated in our community as a harmless eccentric, even admired for your dedication to and skill in magic. Your recent behavior changed all that. At this point, the only difference that formal banishment will make is to cut you off from the supplies you need for your experiments."

“It is the consensus of this group,” she continued, “that your punishment should be in the form of restitution to the person who was most injured by your actions. My granddaughter needs to learn magic. You’re going to teach her.”

“Wh...what?” Grandma Flora really caught Zazkal by surprise. He actually sputtered. Must be a first.

“Miriam has two months before she has to resume her outsea education. You will begin today and you will continue during her outsea educational breaks. You will continue until she has reached a B-level in magic practice, however long that takes. In order to maximize your time available for teaching, you may use Miriam’s sampo while she is with you for necessary supplies.”

“Hmphf!” Zazkal folded his arms across his chest and stared at me. Nothing special, just your basic scary, I’ll get you for this, glare. Oh my god, I thought. He knows.

“She’s smarter than she looks,” he said, still staring at me. Then, he looked around the room like he was trying to memorize every face. A group shudder passed through the crowd.

“But I still won’t do it,” he said, scowling at Grandma.

“You should have thought of that before you decided to become a serial kidnapper,” she answered, matching him scowl for scowl.

“You are not being given a choice in this matter. Other than exile and banishment, which you indeed may choose. Otherwise, it is our opinion that an apprenticeship will represent a period of probation for you and the effectiveness with which you educate your apprentice will be an excellent indicator of your ability to reenter the community.

“You’re telling me that my fitness as a Sky will be based entirely on the ability of this little twit, this...this submoronic pseudo-Sky to learn the skills that have taken me my whole life? I won’t—”

“Exactly,” Grandma said, cutting him off. “That is exactly what we are telling you.”

“Now I would like everyone else to leave,” Grandma said, “so that Mele’, Zazkal and I can discuss the details.”

The room was empty before she finished. Everyone wanted to be as far away as possible for the next part. Verona was behind me nudging me out the door.

“My job is to get you out of here before he blows up,” she whispered into my ear.

“Good idea. But I don’t need any help. I am going, going, gone.”

CHAPTER 33

THE LITTLE MEETING

Another day, another meeting. The next morning there was another meeting. A small one. Grandma and Grandpa, me and you know who. Not my idea of a fun way to start the day.

When I got there, the G's were telling Zazkal my story about the weirdos with the boat. I winced. That was not my fault. Nobody told me about fishing nets.

Listen to them, I thought. They sound like old friends. Don't they know they're supposed to hate each other.

"I think I know the fish you mean," Zazkal was saying.

"They weren't fish," Grandpa said. "Miriam said they were dirty-looking land people."

"They have usually been fish when I have seen them. Common knowledge has it that they were originally humans, although I don't give the story much credit.

"Apparently, at some point, they acquired, presumably dishonestly, the knack for changing shape, like your little granddaughter. They are disreputable and dangerous. They belong to no one but themselves and their only interest is in themselves.

"She was lucky to get away from them so easily. If the Hazmats are putting in an appearance in our part of the world, it would be wise to try and find out more about what they were doing."

"From Miriam's description," Mele' said, "it sounds like they finished whatever business they had and should be long gone."

"I'm not so sure," said Flora. "Remember those rumors we heard last month--"

"I'll come back later when you're finished," I said, not trying to hide my resentment.

"Well, well. It's my little koi," Zazkal said, smiling when his remark had the expected effect on me. "It looks as if we will be together for a while after all." The smile faded

"Your grandparents have promised me that you will be an excellent student, and I will accept nothing less. I'm extremely dubious about just how much help you will actually be able to provide me. At the very least, I expect you to not make it harder."

"The first thing you will have to do is learn to read and write. I refuse to travel with an illiterate imbecile." My ears perked up. Traveling was not something that fit in with my idea of what an apprentice did.

"I have been talking with your grandparents about the pirates you met. When you can read and write and when you have mastered a basic grasp of the principles of magic, I will consider exploring the subject a little further. It would be most interesting to see what those four are up to."

"We'll see," Grandpa said.

CHAPTER 34

THE CHOOSING

Two days later, another meeting of the Grand Council was called. Verona had announced that she was ready for her Choosing Ceremony. She wouldn't say a word about her decision to anyone and speculation was rampant. Everywhere I went, people were talking about Verona. I had the impression that bets were being laid on the outcome, although I had no idea what people here used for money. All of a sudden I could go places without being the center of attention and I liked it. I was feeling more like a real Sky by the day.

This time, the meeting was in the Great Hall. It was a festive occasion, so I dressed. With my hair in a ponytail, I put on Verona's headpiece and ran the ribbons through the scrunchie so that they mixed in with my hair. The scrunchie was from my sampo and matched all the ribbon colors. Two more ribbon-colored scrunchies on my wrists and I was ready.

Beautiful as it was, the big necklace Verona made for me stayed home. It was too embarrassing. I was sort of okay with the topless thing, but I was not yet ready for anything that drew attention to my almost boobs. Bad enough that they were there at all.

There were a ton of people in the Great Hall, but it was nowhere near full. The guest list included the complete Council, Verona's teachers, so many that they must have included her kindergarten teachers, and a half dozen Sky about Verona's age who hung together in a tight group. They had to be friends. Surprise, Verona has friends. Everyone was in full party gear, so I was okay on that score.

I swam over to Grandma and Grandpa who were talking to another couple. The woman looked enough like Grandpa to be his daughter.

"Miriam," Grandpa said. "Meet my baby sister Merle and her husband Pearl, Verona's parents."

"Hi."

"We're very glad to meet you, Miriam," her father said.

"Did Verona tell you...?"

"She won't say a word to us either," Verona's mother said. "Not even a hint. We're just as much in the dark as everyone else."



Verona floated in the water with her beaming parents on one side and all her teachers, including Grandma and Grandpa on the other. She faced the Council members and spoke in a loud ringing voice.

"Members of the Grand Council... I have chosen." Everyone waited out the long pause Verona imposed on us.

"What I want to tell you is that there isn't one thing I want to spend all my time on. Not if I have to give up all the other things I love learning and doing." By now, everyone was holding their breath.

"So, I have chosen not to choose." The silence turned to buzz, but Verona's voice carried and everyone heard what she said next.

"There may never be something I want to spend all my time on, but if there is, I'll do it when I'm ready, not when I'm supposed to be ready. This is my choice."

“But, child...” her mother started to say. Verona smiled her most beautiful smile at her mom.

“I think it’s okay to be a little different,” she said, giving me a wink.

THE END

THE FAIRY GIFTS BOOK 3



ZAZKAL, OR THE PEBBLE AND THE PIRATES

PART I JOURNEY TO THE ABYSSMAL ZONE

CHAPTER 1 A LESS THAN WILLING SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

I wasn't born with a fish tail. It isn't even a permanent arrangement but it means I could finally visit my adopted grandparents, formerly known as Grandma and Grandpa Mermaid. Who knew the stories my parents told me when I was little were true?

I was officially here on a summer visit -- my first -- with my grandparents but plans change. Sidetracked is probably a better way to describe it. I am now officially apprenticed to the rogue Sky, Zazkal.

The work/study thing was an add-on, meant to give me some basic life skills in magic and to give Zazkal some basic life skills, period. Since he hated being with other people, it was a sort of punishment for kidnapping me and my sampo. What he really wanted was the sampo, but since we can't be separated, he was stuck with me too.



Zazkal was waiting for me when I arrived. He did not look happy to see me. No 'hello'. No 'how was your trip'? As soon as I showed up, he turned tail and I followed. He led me directly to his workshop, the largest of a series of interconnected natural openings inside the remote coral atoll where he lived and worked.

"Memorize the name and location of everything in this room. The least you can do is learn to fetch things when I am working."

That was it. My entire first lesson. He swam off muttering under his breath about wasting time. I couldn't decide whether to be offended or overwhelmed.

Every wall in the big room was covered with ceiling-high wicker chests of drawers. All the chests were bolted down and all the drawers were latched shut, not unlike the cabin of a ship, and for much the same reason, only they were under the water instead of on it.

I swam to the nearest wall and began pulling open one drawer after another. Every one of the unlabeled drawers must have contained a dozen or more jars and bottles of strange-looking stuff.

I decided to be overwhelmed.

Groaning, I floated limply to the floor. For a full five minutes, I sat there staring wide-eyed at the endless supply of supplies.

Finally, I took a deep breath, swam over to the nearest chest of drawers and got to work.



Three hours later, Zazkal was back with an armful of bright green seaweed. He dumped it on the big long-legged worktable in the middle of the room and started barking out orders.

“Get me pink sand, red algae and compound 221B.” Miraculously, I managed to find all three before he finished assembling an assortment of bowls and tools from a drawer in the worktable.

He slammed shut the drawer, started fiddling with the jars and rattled off his next list. I knew I was doomed even before he finished.

“Good. Now get me hydroxy-oxydoxy number 6, sea cucumbers...pelleted, not powdered, tincture of scalymoss and fractated coral shards in that exact order, and quickly”

I somehow managed to find the hydroxy-oxydoxy and the sea cucumbers but then I gave him the wrong kind of scalymoss and was now floating nervously in front of a cabinet that held at least twenty different kinds of coral, afraid to ask him which one he wanted. I floated just a little too long for Zazkal’s limited patience.

He blew up and threw the jar of algae, or maybe it was the pink sand. Who could tell? Zazkal threw the jar all the way across the room, no easy task underwater.

“Useless, useless, useless. You’re nothing but an undersized ten-year old with a mouth bigger than your brain. I refuse to have you hanging around, interfering with my work.”

I cracked.

“What is this? Education by intimidation?” I hollered back. “You’re supposed to be my teacher. Anyway, you can’t kick me out and I can leave whenever I want. I’m not your prisoner anymore.”

The first day was going much better than expected. Here we are...already on speaking terms.

“Allow me to remind you, Miss Miriam Mermelstein,” he said with quiet menace, “that taking on an assistant was not my idea.” The water around his head actually sizzled, he was that mad. Maybe I should tone it down a notch.

“It was your grandparents’ idea to make the punishment fit the crime and right now, the alternative of permanent exile is starting to look a lot more attractive.”

The truth was, Zazkal couldn’t care less about permanent exile, but he desperately wanted the use of my sampo and had already kidnapped me twice to get it. The sampo has a homing spell on it, so the only way to steal it is to steal me, too. My little drawstring bag can produce just about anything that will fit through its opening, in other

words, an endless supply of the ingredients he needs for his research in deep-ocean magic.

For Zazkal, the only good kind of time is alone time. His reputation is that he's the best magician and the worst-tempered fairy in the seven seas. My sampo not only gives him instant access to the rare and not so rare ingredients he needs for his work, but it effectively eliminates face time with all the people he normally has to be nice to if he wants to get his precious supplies.

"Zazkal," I said, trying hard to speak in a more conciliatory tone, "I have learned an awful lot of these already, but I have no idea what any of the labels mean. It makes it a lot harder to remember. Half of my time with you is supposed to be as a student anyway. Couldn't you use that time to teach me what all this stuff means? It would make it much easier to remember if it made sense. Besides, once I understood more, I could just take things out of my sampo for you. Isn't that why I'm here?" I swallowed hard, nervously waiting for him to speak.

Fixing me with one of his now familiar icy glares, he finally spoke.

"All right, Miriam," he said through clenched teeth. "I can see it will be some time before you will be any good as an assistant. Besides," he crossed his arms in front of his chest and glared at me, "it's unthinkable for me to spend my time with an illiterate."

"I read all the labels on your stupid jars. I am not illiterate." Most...of the labels would have been more accurate, but I thought I was doing pretty well, since I had only just learned to read Sky, as these air- and water-breathing sea-fairies called themselves. Even in my mind, I was careful to say Sky and not use the 'M' word

"Well, I can see there's no help for it," he said acidly. "We'll spend the rest of the morning reviewing the contents of some of my inventory, and this afternoon, I will begin teaching you to write."

"What a waste of time!" he muttered, loud enough for me to hear, adding a dirty look to make sure I got the point.

Anyone with an ounce of sense, I thought, pressing my lips together to keep the words inside, would have realized that if you are going to have an assistant, someone has to spend time training her. Any normal person would have planned for it.

Still... Writing underwater required magic. This would be the first real magic I would learn.

I kept my mouth shut and listened, trying not to ask questions, while Zazkal began to explain the system he used to organize his supplies. As time passed, he began to warm to his subject. He may not have been very agreeable on most things, but when the topic was magic, and the listener was clearly interested, he became enthusiastic and articulate.

He'll be a pretty good teacher, I thought with some relief. At least, as long as I pay attention and don't ask dumb questions.

CHAPTER 2

POWER PEBBLES

Once I learned what and where everything was, Zazkal gradually reduced his conversation back to grunted instructions. My mornings were spent watching quietly while he worked. I floated close by, trying to figure out what was going on and ready to fetch, return and clean up as requested. I had lots of questions, but not enough nerve to interrupt.

Still, it would be a long time before the excitement of being a ‘sorcerer’s apprentice’ would wear off. Watching magic happen was very different from the way I used my three fairy gifts, which worked more or less on their own.

The sampo that Zazkal so coveted was a birthday present from fairy friends of the family. There was also a pair of grafted on wings and a coat that made me invisible, all intended to help a traveling ten-year old get safely to Grandma and Grandpa’s house.

Their house wasn’t over the river and through the woods, but in an ancient coral-reef makeover, now known as Casalot, a combination community center and high-rise apartment building.

Of course, there was also the family fish scale. Grandma gave it to Mom and Mom gave it to me providing me with the necessary magic to let me make the switch from legs to fish-tail, making the whole trip possible.

My afternoons, on the other hand, turned out to be pretty boring. Writing in sea used a spell to bypass hands and send the words directly from the brain to the stuff they used for paper. It took me less than ten minutes to learn the spell that activated the writing process. Actually being able to do it was different.

While Zazkal played with my sampo, my time was spent in tedious, repetitive practice with improvements coming in very small increments.

After the first three days, I could not understand why both Zazkal and my grandparents insisted on me spending so much time learning to write. What for? So I could label Zazkal’s bottles? Doesn’t that sound like fun? I only had six weeks before I had to go home for school in September. Shouldn’t I be learning more important things?

Meanwhile, I began to notice some basic distinctions in the kind of work he was doing during my fetch and clean workshop mornings, and one day I commented innocently how like cooking much of his activity was.

“What do you mean ‘cooking’?” he said, lifting his eyebrows and stopping his work to look at me. “Be explicit.”

“It just seemed to me,” I answered, “that the formula you use to mix your ingredients is like a recipe. Then, instead of applying heat to make things change, like we do on the land—” he grimaced. “I mean outsea,” I quickly corrected myself, “—you repeat another magic formula. That incantation is your ‘cooking fire’.”

Zazkal smiled. Not a very big smile mind you, and only slightly marred by the arch in his brows, but a smile nevertheless.

“Cooking, Cultivating, and Concentrating. Most magic,” he said, “is generally accomplished by one or more of these three basic methods, usually a combination.”

“The Three C’s,” I chimed in.

“Yes,” he answered dryly. “That’s the way we explain it to little children.”

“Oh,” Reduced from ten to two years old by one short sentence, my ego plunged to an all-time low.

Still, I was never someone who knew when to keep her mouth shut. I had more to say and I wanted to say it. At least I took my time and chose my next words carefully.

“I only know one formula. That’s the one you taught me for writing with. But I can’t just say the words and make the writing appear. I have to really work at it. Is that what you mean by Concentration?”

“Well done, my little koi,” he said. I was caught between my dislike of being referred to as a goldfish and the first thing remotely resembling a compliment I had heard.

“Only after you have learned to write easily, will you be able to begin learning basic magic,” he said. I resolved to take my writing practice a lot more seriously.



It was about a week later. I was sitting in the storeroom next to the workshop practicing writing and getting pretty good at it. I looked up and saw Zazkal floating in the doorway staring at me. He looked mad.

“Where did you get that?” he said sharply. I had gotten into the habit of holding my pet rock in one hand when I practiced writing. It helped me focus.

“Don’t look at me like that.” When the subject was not magic, I was a lot less intimidated by Zazkal’s bad manners. “I’m not in the habit of taking things that don’t belong to me, you know. I found it on the Maiden Voyage after the pirates left.”

The falling-apart fishing boat had belonged to four seriously weird looking and weirder acting people. On my way to visit Grandma and Grandpa Sky, I had gotten caught up in their fishing net and hauled in with a bunch of random fish. None of us were what they were looking for.

My rock was just a big pebble really, hardly big enough to qualify as a rock, but it was so pretty, all blue and green swirls and warm from the sun...so I sort of pretended that they were pirates and that this was an uncut jewel that had fallen from their treasure box. There was, of course, no way I was going to say this to Zazkal.

“May I see it?” Zazkal said with uncharacteristic courtesy. I opened my hand and showed him the stone. He took a good long look at my pet rock and at me, then swam up to one of the three gently bobbing globes that lit the storeroom, reached out and put his hand right through it.

The globe part of the fairy light closed over his open hand like a soap bubble, leaving no entry. He withdrew his fist, the hole in the globe followed the contours of his hand so that there was never any visible opening. The light had gone out.

Zazkal opened his fist and showed me the small stone that he held. It was bright with blue and green swirls that seemed to move as I watched. I’m sure that if I held it, it would feel warm in my hand.

I had seen how the fairy lights worked at Casalot. I knew that each globe held a small, shiny stone. They were the light bulbs of the fairy lights.

“My pet rock is a power-pebble? That’s what the pirate treasure was?”

“I’m going up to the surface to get a traveling bubble ready,” he said. “Get the sampo and meet me at the bubble. We’re going to Casalot to see your grandparents.”

READ THE REST OF ZAZKAL SOON

(Try to imagine Miriam and Zazkal stuck together in a traveling bubble for days on end.
#recipiefordisaster)



Dear Reader,

If you enjoyed this book, please tell your friends. I am working hard to finish Zazkal. Please be patient.

Out of Place is the second book of The Fairy Gifts. If you haven't read the first book, it is called Magic Sucks. Magic Sucks is a story about Miriam, her cat, Tefnut, her parents...and the entire kingdom of Ardu, which is located in the SE corner of Fairyland.

Zazkal will be the third book in the series. In Zazkal, Miriam and Zazkal become detectives, working more or less together to locate and bring to justice the shape-shifting pirates that she met in the beginning of Out of Place.

The fourth book will be the story of what happens to Miriam when she finally arrives in Ailuria to meet Tefnut's family, friends...and enemies. There is also a prequel that will tell the full story of how Tefnut came to live with Miriam and her family. All the characters are cats.

So that's where The Fairy Gifts is now. I am writing as fast as I can. I don't have a website, but you can write to me at susha.g@bellsouth.net.

Sincerely,
Susha G.



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