

Letting her tail fall quiet, Oshana sank into the shadows beside the jumbled pile of dead coral. The expanse of sand in front of her appeared deserted. There was no movement except for a few stalks of coarse brown sea grass rippling in the current and a few small, dull gray feeder fish poking around the detritus in the remains of the coral. But, she knew well, safety among the ruins was fleeting and seldom more than an illusion. They were regularly frequented by sharks, giant eels, wild barracuda and large squids, or even more sinister things. True, any of these could be encountered in the open ocean as well and could be potentially dangerous but there, at least, the greater visibility eliminated any chance of ambush. Also, in open water, her natural camouflage would help to shield her for, like all of her kind she had pale, pallid skin on her face, hands, chest, and belly but her back was a dark bluish gray, just like many fish, to help her blend into the water whether she was seen from below or above. Her tawny yellow hair had no such concealment but it could easily be mistaken for a trailing tangle of sea grass, as could that of her fellows, whether their hair was dark or red. All of this was useless, against the stark contrast of the white sand and bleached corals around the reefs.

An amorphous shadow approached on her right and Oshana pulled back against the coral, her hand tightening on the haft of her hunting spear. But it was only a great ray gliding by overhead, its pearly underside blending with the sparkling blue above. That was the trouble in a place like this. Any motion in the water might be some harmless tiny thing or even inanimate debris drifting past, or it might be the last thing you ever saw. No point in putting it off any longer. The muscles rippled through her tail, sending her forward, skimming close to the sea bed, but not so close that she would stir up sediment and make herself more visible. She ducked under the low arch of the doorway into the coral dome beyond, removing the cover from her lantern, a sealed shell filled with tiny glowing plankton. Settling to the floor, she began to sift through the sediment, looking for any items that might still remain, especially anything small made of precisely carved bone or shell, jewelry, spear points, tools, even the internal workings for a harpoon gun, for those were the most valuable and she would need them as bonding gifts. Wendaro's family was wealthy and could demand a high price in bonding gifts, one her own family could not easily afford and so she must work to earn it and prove herself worthy.

The light from the doorway dimmed briefly as some large creature passed by outside and she stiffened slightly with nerves, wishing she had the ability of the bonded to always know what was behind them or, at least, the more prosaic defense of an extra pair of eyes, usually supplied on this sort of excursion by her friend Lowella. But Lowella had recently been bonded and was at the phase where she could only swim slowly and it was recommended she not leave her home, let alone swim around out in the open ocean and get chased by sharks. Oshana was distracted from her nerves when she encountered a hard object in the sand. Pulling it out, she saw it was a finely carved shell dish. Not as good as something smaller and more intricate but it was well made and would still be worth something. She reached to slip it into the satchel slung over her shoulder then froze, sensing something behind her. Turning cautiously to look she saw a massive crab lumbering just beyond the doorway. Like many reef crabs, this was a type that collected anemones on its shell, also huge in size to match the crab. As she watched their translucent venom laden tendrils sway in the current, Oshana shuddered. While the sting of even the large variety was usually not fatal to mermaids and she carried some neutralizing mucus in her pouch, the pain of contact could still be acute. This particular crab didn't appear to have noticed her yet but it was blocking the exit and there was no way she could slip away undetected. Oshana shrugged her harpoon off her shoulder and put a firm hand on the foregrip. Her first instinct was to wait quietly and hope it would pass by but, almost at once, its beady black eyes swiveled to look directly at her. It paused a moment, staring, then began to advance, claws open.

There was nothing for it now but to fight. Oshana raised her harpoon, sighting along the shaft, and pulled the trigger. The barbed dart flew, embedding in the second joint of the crab's front leg

behind the pincer. The creature pulled back in shock, and the line attached to the harpoon went taut. Transferring the harpoon stock to her left hand she pulled out her spear, ready to stab, as she began to retract the cable from the harpoon hoping to pull the crab through the doorway and off to the side so she could swim around it and get out. The crab was heavy enough that, as soon as it realized what was happening, it was able to resist being pulled towards her. But neither was she easily pulled towards it, swinging her tail as hard as she could to push away and trailing it in the sand to create resistance whenever she was pulled forward. Slowly, the combatants crept towards each other straining against the line between them. Of course, the crab was not intelligent enough to know to clip the line and she had fired it on the outside of the limb so it was unlikely to do so by accident. Suddenly Oshana stopped resisting the pull and, instead swam with the cable. This sent her flying forward through the water and she added all the extra force to her spear stroke as she drove it down hard. The tip of the spear caught the crab in the gap between its hard outer shell and its head. Flailing in pain, it threw up its claws, and the thick, heavy curve of the pincer caught her in the shoulder with numbing force, ripping her hands from the spear and sending her flying backwards.

Half dazed, she sank to the ground near the back of the room, waiting for her head to stop spinning. The crab was staggering back and forth, trying to dislodge the spear but never moving far enough to one side to allow her to escape. Besides, now it had both her weapons and she could not simply abandon them and trust the trip back through the open sea with only a knife for defense. She would have to recover her spear at least. The harpoon was lost unless she managed to kill the crab. While she could easily cut the line, allowing her to take the stock away with her, and would as soon as she knew being tied to the crab was of no further use to her, the weapon was defective until she could return home to equip fresh line and tips. Again, she cursed the necessity of going on this expedition alone which not only deprived her of an extra pair of eyes, but limited the supply of protective gear that could be carried. Now, she had the advantage however, over the slow, sand bound thing. With a great swing of her tail, she propelled herself up into the open space at the roof of the dome. This one was smaller than many homes and the edge of the dome sloped down to the doorway, where the crab was. Still, she thought she could stay high enough to be out of reach of its claws. Swimming quickly to the far wall, she began to descend cautiously, keeping the crab directly below her as it scuttled back and forth, its eye-stalks rotating in a desperate attempt to keep her in view. When she judged she was close enough, she gave a final surge and sent herself diving down to seize the spear.

The great pincers rose to greet her approach but, with a quick twist of her tail, she swung around behind the reach of its claws so it was left straining awkwardly back over its head, groping for her. Dodging the clumsy swipes with ease, she seized the shaft of the spear and began trying to pull it free, but it was deeply wedged under the hard shell of the crab and resisted removal. Curling her tail under herself, she beat it furiously, pushing back with all her strength while locking her hands around the haft and pulling as hard as she could and still weaving from side to side to evade the claws. Suddenly, she felt searing pain flow into the lower part of her tail, arching up her spine so she involuntarily released the spear as she curved backwards convulsively. At first, it seemed beyond her even to move. The pain was so great that it was as if all her nerves had shut off, all her muscles gone rigid. Her tail flopped feebly, not under her control, but it felt rooted to the spot as if it were pulling against some tether which sent additional bursts of pain spiraling through her.

And yet, somehow, she manged, by sheer dogged will, to partially straighten her back and turn her head to the side so she could see the end of her tail where it was tangled in the tentacles from the anemones on the crab's back. She could faintly see her own scales through the translucent tendrils, purple, pink, green, and white, giving her fins a strange sickly cast. The scales protected her somewhat from the worst of the venom, though they were too pliable to keep the pain out entirely while her fins were completely unprotected, allowing wave after wave of agony to pour into her. She could still

barely move from the pain of the toxin coursing through her and causing all her nerves to convulse wildly, but she had to get free before the poison, could overload her system. Her muscles feeling hard and rigid as dead coral, she flopped her tail weakly. Thankfully, the anemone tendrils had little strength and it took almost no effort to break their grip. But even free of them, she continued to feel pulse after pulse of pain, as every beat of her heart continued to circulate the venom laden blood. Rigid, with bowed back, her body drifted in the water.

Seemingly out of nowhere, she saw the crab's claw rise up towards her, the pincer opening wide. Almost, it seemed to move in slow motion as she watched in horror, but her body would not obey her and her feeble efforts to move aside achieved little. She was drifting away, back towards the center of the dome, in response to the feeble flopping of her tail, but not nearly fast enough. The claw was spread wide around her limply trailing arm, ready to snap closed. It was not strong enough to sever or, most likely, even to break bone, but it could crush and mangle skin and muscle badly. Her shoulder would not obey her to pull the arm back against her, but she was able to move the other arm slightly, which was already near her side, bringing it closer so her fingers could feel the warmth of skin and the cool smoothness of her tail. Somehow, the act of touching, of feeling different sensations, seemed to wake up the nerves in the hand, allowing the fingers to bend and curl, clutching feebly around the haft of her dagger, the only weapon remaining to her.

The claw snapped shut and she felt the ridges on its inner surface cut into her shoulder. The initial injury was minor but she could already feel the grip tightening, pressing deeper into her flesh, and, if it should start to shake its pincer, she could be flung about and shaken to bits. Every motion willed, she forced her still mostly numb arm to draw her dagger and, turning as much as her still rigid body would allow, she tried to strike at the joint at the base of the claw. Her blade, a deadly length of marlin bill that she had filed to an edge herself, came to a bitter point, perfect for piercing into the small gaps in the crab's armor. But, with her still limited control over her body, her aim was poor and the blade struck several inches from her target and glanced off the hard carapace. Again, she took aim and stabbed, trying desperately to hold her hand steady and this time the blade slid into the joint. The crab recoiled from the pain, further aggravating the wound in her arm but, in the process, its claw opened slightly and she was able to pull her arm free, using her more mobile opposite hand to help guide it out.

With her still awkward tail and her good arm together she was able to generate enough momentum for her to drift upwards out of reach of the crab and there she hovered groping in her satchel for the remedy she carried to counter-act the venom of sea creatures like the anemone. Clumsily she fished out the shell container, broke the wax seal, and began to smear the jelly-like substance on her opposite hand and fins. Thankfully, the cooling smoothness of the poultice helped sooth the angry flesh and, as it did, she found she could move more easily. The cut on her shoulder also stung badly, but it was not dangerous and the bleeding had already slowed so it would not be worth the time and effort to tend. Instead, she turned herself around and looked down at the creature lumbering about below her, frowning as she considered her best course of action. Somehow, she needed to incapacitate the crab or at least both recover her spear and move it away from the door and she was poorly equipped to do so. She had only her knife that gave her a pathetically small reach compared to its long claws and was unable to pierce its shell, except in very precise weak spots.

It was a tricky situation no matter the angle she approached it from but, to begin with, she needed to be fully functional and so, as she watched the crab, wracking her brains for an idea, she continued to flex and massage her numb arm, feeling the life gradually come back into it, sharp twinging pains running up and down it as the nerves recovered. Even so, her movements were slow and stiff at first and it took her a long time to regain full mobility, or as close as she could come without an extended rest, which gave her plenty of time to watch her opponent lumber about. Once it turned around and shuffled part way out the entrance and Oshana held her breath, tensing herself to follow,

both to take advantage of the opening and because it would take her spear with it. But it did not go far and soon sidled back through the doorway. But as it came edging its way back in, its legs scuttling on the sandy floor, sending up eddies of little particles swirling around them, her eyes suddenly lit on the pale waving fronds of the anemones on its back. They were the true difficulty. The crab she could evade with relative ease but they made the space behind it, where she was safely out of reach of its claws, at least as hazardous as being in front of it. She would have to find some way to eliminate the threat of the anemones if she were to have any hope of recovering the spear.

Taking a firm grip on her dagger, Oshana turned and dove down, streaking through the water, towards the crab as it lumbered back and forth below. She was careful to stay clear of the grasping pincers, though in truth, her target was beyond them in any case. The knife flashed, cleaving the water, and shore through the pale tendrils of the anemones as they reached for her. Quickly pulling back out of range, she struck again and again, hacking off the writhing coils. Points of pain peppered her body where she had been unable to dodge or sever fast enough but, as soon as she felt it, she would pull away, leaving her with patches of angry skin but nothing more serious. When she had cut back the tentacles to the point where they could not easily reach her, she sheathed her knife and grasped the spear haft again, trying to wrench it free. Her original thrust had been good, too good, and the spear was deeply wedged into the narrow space between the joins of the carapace. Her arms burned from the force of her pulling, especially the injured one through which traces of the venom still moved sluggishly and the cut on the shoulder throbbed. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she pulled harder and was rewarded by a slight movement in the spear, feeling it grate against the horny thickness of the shell. Encouraged, Oshana renewed her efforts. She could feel the gills inside her throat heaving in an attempt to draw in more air, the breath drained water fairly jetting from the two small vents under her shoulder blades, and she opened her mouth, gulping water to assist them.

It felt as if every part of her was on fire with the strain but, even as the burning, both in her mouth and in her muscles, reached the point of being unendurable, she felt the resistance on the shaft in her hands start to give more, and suddenly, the spear came loose, sending her tumbling backwards through the water and narrowly avoiding striking the rough wall of the coral behind her. But, even as she struggled to slow and right herself, her back was latticed with a thousand tiny points of white hot pain as her momentum had carried her within range of the, now shortened, stinging tentacles. Convulsing her body and tail, she struggled to throw herself sideways and, even though this had little effect, almost at once, the agonizing contact was broken as the crab lumbered sideways, taking the anemones on its back out of reach. However, this was its own source of danger as the crab was attempting to turn around so it could reach her with its claws. But she was so close to the wall that, to do this effectively, it had to move out of the door way for at least a brief moment. Oshana watched, twisting her body into the correct orientation and, as soon as she saw enough of the arch cleared that she thought she would be able to fit through, she dived for it, slipping under the lintel like an eel, her back inches from the rough coral. As soon as she was free, she twisted again, orienting herself vertically and shot up into the open water, out of the reach of the crab. Although it was not the safest place to be, she swam over to the top of the dome and sank down to rest, breathing hard, as she heard her attacker lumber about in confusion below.

The exhilaration of her escape buoyed her up during the long swim back to the reefnest and this was fortunate as the cut on her shoulder and the places on her body where the anemones had touched were still sore and she could only swim slowly. In addition, she had much to feel despondent about. She had lost important components of one of her best harpoons and had only managed to retrieve the one shell bowl. Just from a material level, the trip had left her poorer than she was before, to say nothing of the additional cost of time and injury. Still, she could not help feeling pleased about the way she had handled the crab and its troublesome passenger as the deep blue of the ocean slid by below her.

Lowella would be impressed by how she had cleverly managed to retrieve her spear with just a knife, even if no one else would be. She frowned, thinking of who was almost certain to not be impressed and, at the implications of that, she gradually sank back into gloom.

Still, approaching the settlement, she could feel her heart beat with excitement at the thought that she would soon see Wendaro again. She hoped he had not strained himself swimming all the way out to the net again, though she knew that it was a sign of his love for her that he did so. And, of course, he worried about her off in the dangerous ruins. She glanced ruefully at the wound on her arm where the crab's claw had closed on her. He was sure to scold her and fuss over it. But, really, while it would not be true to say she had been in no danger, she knew what she was doing and was as safe as anyone could be out in the open ocean. It would be useless to try to catch a glimpse of him so, instead of straining her eyes, Oshana strained her ears to see if she could catch the vibrations of him sending out a welcoming song for her.

The song of the mermen was the most exquisitely beautiful thing anywhere in the ocean. They could not form true words but the shivering, spiraling notes of their songs conveyed more than words ever could. While mermaids could sing as well, the wonder of their song was hampered by voices fashioned for speech and fell far short of the heart-stopping perfection of their male counter-parts. The vaunted physical beauty of the mermaids with their silken shining skin, clouds of flowing hair, delicately rippling fins veiling their gem like scales that sparkled in a rainbow of hues, as well as their legendary vanity as they sought to enhance what nature had given them with an endless parade of jewelry and adornment, was nothing more than a desperate attempt to compensate. Oshana, no less vain than the others, had, at first, been ashamed for Wendaro to see her, fresh from the ocean, without her jewels, hair uncombed. But his song had surrounded her, caressing her with its admiration, despite her flawed appearance and, in time, she had lost her shyness at being seen this way.

Today, however, she could not hear him and entertained a hope that he had stayed home. Well, closer to home anyway. She would have liked some private time with him before having to meet with her future bond parents. She knew they meant well and wanted the best for their son but, still, it stung that they so rarely seemed satisfied by the finds she brought back...and one shell dish was certainly not going to impress. She frowned briefly at the thought as she approached the low wall around the outskirts of the reefnest, surmounted by a net of fine seaweed carefully twisted together by the mermaids, designed to keep out some of the larger ocean pests and hazards. She swam down towards the net, long habit guiding her straight to one of the openings, woven tubes that gradually narrowed, even though they were all but invisible from a distance. The tapering of the tubes discouraged unintelligent creatures from trying to enter them in addition to being covered at both ends with loose curtains of sea grass and, although this could easily be pushed through, Oshana did find the system tiresome at times, especially now when she was weary and sore. Nevertheless, she tensed the muscles of her tail, driving it down for an additional burst of speed that sent her shooting strait into the tube. The light was cut off for a brief moment and she felt the sea grass brush against her, slimy and slightly rough against her skin. Then she was through and home.

The dwelling of the mermaids was constructed into the side of a living coral reef. Like in the ruins she had just left, the coral had been trained to grow into hollow spheres for them to live inside. Most homes consisted of a single, albeit large, dome which, although the occupants could swim, were located at ground level to take advantage of the sandy sea floor for resting objects on so there was no risk of those objects damaging or being damaged by the rough coral. In truth, a clean and well raked sandy floor was the sign of a prestigious and well kept mermaid home. Some of the wealthier families, like Wendaro's, had additional small chambers located higher up in the reef, for storage or additional privacy, reached by narrow channels inside the coral. Sometimes these could be discerned as small bulges standing out from the larger structure of the reef or their ventilation holes as well as those of the

larger chambers could be seen as dark spots against the pale coral, connected to structures designed to guide light and fresh water down into the dwellings, while deterring fish and other small pests. But, most of the time, they were hidden behind the waving mass of brilliant colored reef plants.

Mermaids had no lawns, the sandy paths between the houses stretching from wall to wall, also carefully manicured but not nearly as much as the floors inside the homes. Instead, their gardens were the living walls of their homes where they organized and cultivated the vegetation that grew naturally on the coral structures. There were delicate branching fans swaying gently in the current in every color from pure white to vivid blood red, a hundred varieties of coral formed into tubes, branches and knobs, or long undulating waves, the pink of the dawn, the green of the depths, or a brilliant light purple like no color ever seen elsewhere. The clusters of coral were designed to delight not only by their shape and color, but by their texture as well, with some bumpy or speckled with tiny holes and others with close packed ridges, running in fine curves up and down the coral, doubtless one of the main inspirations for the patterns the mermaids loved to rake into the sand below. Of course, not all the brilliantly colored fronds in the gardens were technically plants. Anemones, of the small safe variety, very different from the sort Oshana had recently encountered, added their translucent tendrils to the riot of color and motion. One variety formed a writhing mass of thread-like filaments, often affectionately named mermaid's hair for the way it streamed through the water like their own precious tresses. Others were bulbous, almost rubbery in appearance, though even young children knew better than to touch them, and the most beautiful of all were those in the form of a circle, that opened from the center like great blossoms. A cluster of them, pallid green and bright pink was arranged on a small outcropping near the outer wall. Oshana's favorite however were the anemones with tips of sharply contrasting color. Though not much of a gardener herself, she had gotten a small colony of ivory stalks with lilac tips to grow by her door. And the reef plants, and plant-like creatures like the anemone, attracted the reef fish, angel fish with trailing fins, almost as magnificent as the mermaids' own, parrot fish with their giant blue lips, box fish and file fish, striped, stippled, and speckled, as well as thousands of tiny varieties in a rainbow of colors, even, at times, a cuttlefish or small octopus drifting past, constantly morphing to match the shifting mass of colors around them.

A low outlier to the reef, reinforced with stones circled in front of the reefnest, closing off the open end of the U shape and it was to this that the protective net was attached. This left an open space of sand between the net and the start of the houses which was used for trading as well as for public gatherings and celebrations, at which times it would be so packed that swimming could become difficult. But, even on an ordinary day, there were always a few people moving about there and it was nearly impossible to cross the square without seeing at least one person you knew and exchanging greetings. At this particular moment, Oshana noticed Weshene, swimming through the open space between the wall and reef, turn to wave at her as she slipped through the net and her mood lifted at once as she returned the wave. Still, she was glad Weshene did not show a desire to swim over and start a conversation. Normally, Oshana would have been glad of the company but now she was still sore about how poorly her excursion had gone and did not want to rehash the details just yet. Besides, she was extremely focused on finding Wendaro as soon as possible and so she went skimming over the open space as quickly as she could, glad that its relative emptiness meant she did not have to waste time trying to thread her way around people. Here, the sand, while still carefully pristine, was not raked as the amount of activity above it would quickly negate such effort. Instead, the floor of the open area was combed into a natural pattern of beautiful windswept ripples by the wakes of all the mermaids constantly crossing back and forth over it. Oshana spared herself a brief glance at the sunlight playing off the ridges and furrows below her, before raising her head to look at the shapes of coral looming nearer.

Then she saw Wendaro swimming towards her. Of course, for someone like him, it took a great

deal of effort to move any distance. It had probably taken him almost as long to come so far from his house as it had for her to swim the distance from the ruin back here and Oshana felt a flicker of sorrow, thinking of the many things she had seen that he never had. She longed for the time when they were finally bonded and she could bring him with her, out into the wild sea and show him all the things that were dear to her. He saw her too and redoubled his efforts and she heard a low crooning followed by a high pitched note, quivering slightly as he called out a greeting to her. With a great stroke of her tail she sent herself shooting across the open space just inside the net, fins and hair streaming behind her, as other mermaids scrambled to get out of her way with muttered complaints.

But Oshana gave no thought to them. As she pulled up beside Wendaro she held out her hand to him and he gratefully settled into it, lying in the hollow of her palm as she curled her fingers up to form a curve for him to rest against. She gazed down at him, a dull gray, green worm with a few stubby fins and no scales, the better for him to hide during the perilous time before he had bonded and secured a larger protector. He positioned himself on her hand so that his over-sized head was supported and he was able to gaze up at her. The front of the face was flat with no nose and a mouth too weak to eat anything but the softest food. Once they were bonded, one of the first things she would do was give him his first taste of real, fresh meat. The only features worth noticing in the face, were a pair of round, glassy eyes, like those of a fish, now brimming with longing as they met hers, accompanied by the trilling ripple of sound that she knew meant herself, the “name” Wendaro had given her in the beautiful language of his song. Oshana felt a sweet warmth spread through her and her lips softened into a smile.

But almost at once Wendaro broken into an urgent thrumming sound. He had noticed her injury and was worried. “I’m sorry, love,” she said gently. “It’s not serious and I’m sure your mother will take care of it for me.” Privately, she thought the lady might also be pleased by her willingness to risk injury to win her bonding, which wasn’t all bad. What Oshana lacked in wealth she made up for in courage, but Wendaro had nothing but respect for his mother, so she kept this thought to herself. Instead, having transferred him to her shoulder, she swam through the reefnest, past the women weaving bell spider silk on their looms, past the rocks where fish were being gutted and cleaned, then diced small, some to be eaten right away, while others were loaded into woven sea grass baskets and taken across the reefnest to the place where they, along with choice plants and fermenting cultures were packed into shells and sealed with wax to be enjoyed later, the flat rocks where leather was being scrapped and beaten, and the buried mounds of rotting refuse being slowly turned into wax, as she told him about what had happened in the ruins. He made noises of admiration for her bravery and concern over the danger she had been in which, despite her best intentions, she could not help playing up slightly--his concern was so gratifying, and it might impress his mother as well. But she did not say anything about what she had found and he did not ask. The topic was too raw for both of them, the aching longing for oneness, never knowing for how long it would be denied.

Oshana frowned, rounding a corner to see the curve of Wendaro’s house rise before them. Located where a horn of the reef jutted out into the water, it was one of the largest homes in the reefnest. Using the underside of the horn as a kind of roof beam, the curved sides of the dome spread out below it, gleaming white where they were not blanketed in the rainbow sweep of sea grasses and anemones, encompassing a vast space on the seafloor. Most of the smaller chambers were hidden under the vegetation but she knew there was one tunnel that went up inside the horn itself to a small little room on its very tip where residents could look out over the beauty of the reef spread below them. Reaching her hand up, she gave Wendaro’s head an affectionate scratch as she removed him from her shoulder. Their time of sweet closeness was over. Now was the time to lay in insurance towards their future closeness by doing her best to impress her future bond parents and she knew Menenda would certainly not approve of this level of familiarity. With a resigned sigh, Oshana swam up to the doorway

and slipped her hand through the curtain of living sea grass hanging over the opening, waiting politely to be invited in.

Before long, the curtain was pulled aside by Wendaro's sister, Salandra, who beckoned her into the home's main room, a dome of coral with a hole at the top to let in light. But in a wealthy home like this the dome was vast, allowing ample room to swim about inside, and pierced with various vents and channels to encourage the water to circulate freely as well as larger openings leading to the various side chambers. One of the signs of how well off they were was the fact that the interior of the house formed a perfect sphere. Those who could not afford such a large house or to build it in such a structurally sound spot, often had to make do with other shapes. In Oshana's house, for example, the dome was not able to extend very far into the reef wall so it formed a kind of lopsided shape, like a bladder from which some of the air had escaped, with the interior side of the chamber much more shallow.

Oshana had a great liking for Salandra. The girl was strong and quick for her age and quite clever. She excelled at chasing and herding the colorful reef fish, one of the favorite pastimes of mermaid children, especially before they became bored with the limited world inside the reefnest or found their courage to venture out for adventures in the wide ocean beyond. The youngest, singly or in groups, would simply dart after whatever sea-creature took their fancy at the moment, shrieking and laughing. But Salandra and others her age preferred more structured games, organizing races to see who could drive a fish before them from one point to another the fastest, or spreading out to search the reef in an attempt to be the first to collect a preset number of various kinds or colors of fish. Oshana still sometimes found these kinds of games entertaining, though she would not always admit it, unless some of her peers were staging a strictly competitive tournament, and she needed to save her strength for trips to the ruins in any case, but she rarely hesitated to play with Salandra.

Because she had no female relatives who were even close in age, Salandra was often lonely. The close knit web of sisters, nieces, and young aunts, that formed the bedrock of most mermaid social groups, as well as the gateway to larger society, was foreign to her and, by extension, so were many of life's mysteries. Experiences like bonding and going on one's first hunt, or even trips outside the reefnest for any reason, details of which would ripple along the strands of the web in the forms of excited giggles or reverent whispers, Salandra had only a passing understanding of. Was it any wonder that she had, almost desperately, embraced Oshana as the big sister she had never had and Oshana had done her best to respond in kind, both because it would please Wendaro and his parents and for Salandra herself. Although shy and awkward because of her limited social contact, her skill at herding and running with the fish showed he had real promise. In a year or two, when she was ready to go on her first hunt, Oshana should be her sister in truth by then--please, please let it be so, let Menenda not force her to wait that long—and would be able to speak for her with no difficulties.

As usual, Salandra seized her arm eagerly, peppering her with questions about her trip. “Where did you go? What did you find? Oh it must have been lovely. Tell me everything.” Oshana wanted nothing more than to satisfy the curiosity in those wide eyes and, conveniently, at the same time, to brag about her own daring exploits against the crab, to flash her wound and get admiring looks from the younger girl. But she restrained herself, both because it would worry Wendaro who was still hovering near and because the lack of privacy in mermaid homes meant that she would very soon be in Menenda's presence, expected to give her her full attention and, especially, not be distracted by flaunting her own accomplishments which, regardless of how Salandra might feel, would certainly not impress Menenda.

After all, the house was already filled with many fine specimens of carved shell and coral. Exterior light filtered in through panes of shell in the walls of the house, planed so thin as to be translucent and the darker corners were illuminated by lanterns of glowing plankton, much larger and finer than Oshana's tiny portable one, providing a clear view of the luxurious interior. Menenda had

bonded into a wealthy family, although, by that time, she had already amassed a small fortune by scavenging fresh fruit floating at the surface, a rare delicacy that the mermaids were always pleased to acquire, and she took great pleasure in displaying her fortune prominently. Not only were there numerous examples of shells etched with the delicate flowing and spiraling lines the mermaids loved, either in renditions of undersea scenes or increasingly stylized to the point of abstraction, but the living coral itself had been shaped and molded into the elegant curves where it protruded from the walls to form shelves or storage recesses. Even the lanterns themselves had been carved so the light shining through them picked out the hair thin lines etched into their surfaces. There were hooks in the walls for hanging hammocks from as well as stands on the ground for the same purpose and the floor itself was pale pristine sand, carefully combed into decorative patterns, which Oshana knew to avoid brushing with her tail, an act her future bond mother would find very rude, by swimming high enough in the water.

Being careful not to bump into anything, she followed Salandra as she escorted her past a stack of artfully arranged conch shells, the pink glow along their mouths only slightly obscured by the waxy film filling the opening, marking them as not just beautiful but also utilitarian as a place to store strips of preserved seaweed and fish meat, to the far side of the dome where Menenda and Lowen, Salandra and Wendaro's parents, were sitting in one of the hammocks and Oshana respectfully waited for them to rise and come to greet her. She bowed her head, allowing Menenda to make the requisite blessing touch on her crown, then strengthened up and prepared to deliver her rehearsed apology for her scanty haul.

"Child, you're bleeding," Menenda cried before she could even get her mouth open. "You must sit down right away. Salandra, fetch that seaweed wrap and the herbal poultice" She quickly escorted Oshana over to the hammocks, scolding her gently the entire time for worrying them, with a concerned mummer from Lowen forming a base line to her agitation. Not that Oshana objected to being fussed over. She sank contentedly into the soft net of the hammock, its edges weighted so it would form a comfortable shape, perfect for lying back in or sitting up with her tail hanging over the side, then reached out to accept the skewer-stand Menenda offered her. This delicately fluted pillar of carved bone was covered with little spines on which bits of fish meat, had been stuck, along with small bundles of fermented plants and even a couple small pieces of fresh fruit, a privilege she knew to be sufficiently grateful for. After picking off several, she set the stand back down on the table within easy reach.

After a moment, she became aware that Menenda had settled into a hammock opposite her and was looking at her expectantly, sitting upright. "Thank you very much for the help," Oshana said, glancing over at her shoulder. "It feels much better now."

Menenda's lips curled into a smile, but one without feeling behind it. Plainly this was not the answer she had been looking for. "I'm glad to hear it," she said, again with only surface warmth. "And how did your excursion fare?"

Only careful training stopped Oshana from making a face at this. Of course that was what Menenda was after...always. "Unfortunately, not well," she replied with equally elaborate, and false, politeness. "As you can see I was interrupted." She shrugged her shoulder slightly, carefully concealing the way this made the cut twinge. "Still, I did manage to find something." She reached into her bag and pulled out the shell bowl, doing her best to seem confident in its worth but not to appear to brag, as that would expose her actions as the front they were. Menenda leaned forward and took the bowl in her hands, turning and tilting both it and her head as she examined it carefully from every side.

Salandra, with Wendaro on her shoulder, swam closer to get a better look, settling at the end of the hammock. "Oshana, it's beautiful," she gushed. "Look at the craftsmanship in those carvings. Will you take me to the ruins with you sometime?"

"Of course," Oshana replied soothingly, "when you are a bit older." She thought it best to

reassure Menenda that she was wasn't about to take *both* her children out into the dangerous ocean in the immediate future, even though she knew Salandra was longing to go. Menenda smiled at her but, instead of the grateful smile she had hoped to see, it was a cool, almost superior smile.

“When I was Salandra's age, I was already out in the ocean, working hard to gather bonding gifts for my future mate. I was not lazy, waiting around until I had a specific merman picked out.” This was a thing that many of the girls these days, including Oshana, had done. Although most were eager to go on hunts for the sheer fun of it, they rarely worried about trying to build up a store of bonding gifts until they became serious about bonding. Oshana had been going to the ruins before that because her family needed the income and because she wanted to support Lowella, who had already become eage to be bonded, but she had certainly stepped up the frequency of her trips after she became close with Wendaro. “I knew if I wanted the best,” a subtle dig that Wendaro was too good for her, “I needed to apply myself as soon as possible.”

Oshana had to exert herself even harder not to scowl or even to make a snide remark. She hated the constant implications that she had chosen Wendaro for his wealth and prestige, not for himself. Really, when it came down to it, the choosing had been more Wendaro's than hers. She shivered slightly, remembering when they had first met and desperately hoping Menenda did not notice. Wendaro had been too shy to approach her around others and, of course, too slow a swimmer to ever catch her on her own, though, as he had explained to her later, he had wanted to ever since the feast to celebrate her aunt's bonding where she had been asked to recount the thrilling story of the hunt where she and her companions had been surprised by a juvenile shark and she had leaped forward to spear it when it went for one of the other girls and he had been enthralled by her courage, as he saw it, as well as the engaging and animated way she told the story. So he had taken to hiding in the fronds at a place on the reef where she liked to go to rest and watch the fish go past. On that day, some months later, she had been feeling sad because she had had a quarrel with Onshal, perhaps jealous over the fact that the other girl had bonded so early and so easily, and, in the midst of her melancholy, the most beautiful sound began to wash over her, cool and soothing as the gentle flowing current, delicate as the swaying fronds that surrounded her. She had curled against the curve of the coral, cushioned by a carpet of soft sea-sponges and let the music surround her and flow through her. Mind drifting, body relaxing, she had not fully registered at first how the song had seemed to come closer and closer until the trilling notes felt like they were vibrating directly beside her ear.

Then, realizing suddenly, she had abruptly sat upright, opening her eyes...and saw him. He was so small and his camouflage blended almost perfectly with the blade of sea grass he was resting on that it would have been easy to overlook him and yet Oshana's gaze had gone immediately to the spot where he was. His great round eyes, that took up almost all of his face, dark but reflecting the surrounding colors and shifting lights, looked back into hers, solemn and still as the song fell silent and floated away with the current and then, in the silence, Oshana had been acutely aware of the beating of her own heart and all memory of her sadness had shivered into fragments, liked shadow in the rippling water.

Of course, it had not ended there. She had started coming to the place far more often then before in the hopes of meeting him there again, a hope which often bore fruit and he would sing to her, setting the water about her thrumming with his beautiful soothing melodies and, in return, she told him stories about her trips outside the reefnest, especially after she learned why he had originally begun to seek her out and Wendaro had thrilled with excitement to her accounts. It was clear he was not content with the limited, sheltered life available to an unbonded merman but craved new sights and wider vistas and, while Oshana was powerless to provide that, she did try to make life more interesting for him by carrying him on her shoulder about the town so he could see the market or the crafters at work far more often than he could have swimming under his own power. She made sure he was always in the thick of

activity at festivals, at least when he wasn't being rigorously watched over by his parents, and she swam with him up near the top of the net so he could see all the vivid colors of the reef gardens spread out below them.

But his wish to see the far places of the open sea grew all the same and, one day, when they were back in her secluded resting spot, the longing had come welling out in his song so strongly that it brought the little salt crystals to her eyes and she had cried out, "I'll find a way to take you with me." Again, silence had fallen as they stared into each other's eyes, awkward again after months of familiarity, as it gradually dawned on them what she had said and, as full realization came over her, she was sobbing again but for joy this time while Wendaro began to make the rapid bubbling sound that was the merman equivalent of the same emotion. He had perched on her shoulder a hundred times but, this time, when he came to settle there so she could carry him back to his house, just the first faint brush of contact made her whole body shudder as, suddenly, her mind could not help wondering eagerly what bonding would feel like. But, of course, he would not have shared any of that with his mother. The idea that Menenda could determine that she wanted "the best" without having someone specific in mind was offensive to Oshana as it necessitated reducing best to shallow, generic qualities like wealth.

"I was up every morning to scour the surface for fresh fruit. I had no time to waste on chasing fish or making rainbow collections of seastars. That is how one shows her love..and her character. Sometimes I think the mermen these days have no standards seeing as they're so ready to bond with girls who aren't willing to sacrifice and suffer for them." Oshana bit her lip and said nothing. There was no point in arguing with the woman. She had learned long ago that Menenda could be stubbornly dense when she had a mind to be. A quick glance at Wendaro told her he remained oblivious to the insult. Not that he would have countered his mother to speak in her defense in any case but she might have hoped for some sympathy from him later if he had noticed. So Oshana kept her smile stiffly plastered on her face, grudgingly picking at the food with one hand while she clenched the other below the edge of the hammock, trying to keep herself together while she waited impatiently for the first opportunity to leave without being openly rude. As she was moving with controlled dignity out of the house, she caught a glimpse of Salandra out of the corner of her eye, bottom lip curled under, pinched between teeth, skin pale, eyes wide and stricken. Oshana drew a deep, shaking breath. Of course, seeing her demeaned like that would upset her admiring little sister surrogate. She wished she could go to Salandra and reassure her she was not badly hurt, even though it was a lie. But there was no help for it. Menenda would certainly not allow any such thing, so she turned and left without acknowledging Salandra, willing her heart to be dead to this additional hurt.