

As she neared the outer edges of the school, the press of bodies against her became more intense as the fish struggled frantically to make their way inward, away from the assaults of predators outside. Oshana knew this was a dangerous place indeed for she was invisible to the outside and could easily be struck by such an attack from sharks, or groupers or even from her own barracuda, despite the fact that they would never have knowingly done such a thing. Gasping for breath, she drove towards the outer edge of the ball as quickly as she could, but her tail was so constricted by the slick shapes of the fish squeezed tight around it, that she could not move it enough to generate much force. A stroke that made the entire side of her tail burn only carried her forward a few inches and then, in the split second pause as she gathered her strength for another effort, she was swept up by the momentum of the school again, carried along forcefully, probably back deeper into the ball. Again and again, she made the attempt, her entire body aching with exhaustion, in the blind swirl powerless to know how much progress, if any, she was making.

Suddenly, the fish inches from her face, exploded into wild thrashing, fleeing in all directions including directly into her, striking her stomach and already throbbing limbs. Curls of blood bloomed like flowers in the space left by the fleeing fish and hot guts left drifting in the current flowed over her. She had a split second glimpse of the toothed maw of the shark that had caused the disruption in the school, bits of flesh still clinging to its serrated jaws, jaws that had missed taking off her hand by only the smallest margin. But Oshana wasted no time in fear over her narrow escape for the other thing the shark had done was leave a hole in the side of the ball, a hole that was rapidly closing as the herring were driven forward again but the inexorable force of their fellows. Clawing with her hands and thrashing with her tail, Oshana surged into the swiftly vanishing gap, feeling the horrible constricting pressure against her start to lessen almost at once. Freed from the crush of the fish around her, she was able to breathe and move more easily and shot forward suddenly, having forgotten the strength in her own tail when she could swing it freely.

Of course, darting directly at a shark, its nostrils full of fresh blood was more than reckless at ordinary times and, even as she burst free of the school, Oshana drew her knife, to be ready if there was any trouble. The spear would have served her better but it would have been too difficult to grab over her shoulder while swimming. Fortunately, the shark turned and swam away without a glance in her direction and she allow her self to collapse, floating limply a few feet beyond the rippling wall of the school as she took great gasps of the water, recovering her breath and strength. After a moment, she looked around and saw the others were nowhere in sight. She must have emerged on the other side of the ball. Warily, she began swimming down as it would be at least as fast to go under the ball as to try to swim around it and she would be less likely to run up against predators who were still feasting on the bounty of herring.

After swimming slowly for some time, for she was unable to summon the energy to go faster, she was able to see the others gathered above her. But they were all focused on the ball and paying no attention to what was behind or under them. Oshana tried to call out but the space was so full of noises, the rush of countless bodies frantically careening through the water, dolphins eagerly clicking to each other, and even the faint cry of sky birds circling above the surface of the water, ready to dive down and seize the herring as well, that her own voice was completely drowned out. So, she struggled onward, her muscles now feeling heavy and stiff as ossified dead coral. But suddenly, she received relief from an unexpected source. Although the others remained focused on the ball, Salandra was left hovering on the outer edge of the group, clearly out of place in their consultation. Facing away from them, she would scan the surrounding ocean from time to time, perhaps to distract herself from her exclusion. Before long, her eyes fell on Oshana and she began waving her arms about and gesturing to the others and, almost at once, they had all turned towards her and began swimming in her direction.

Soon she was able to relax at last as she felt their supporting arms take hold of her, careful not

to cover her back vents, which were still spurting furiously as she tried to recover her breath, bearing her up and helping her through the water so she was able to let her own tail trail limply. She felt a hand on her chin and something hard against her cheek as one of the girls offered her some oysters kept fresh in their shells. But they were so pungent and slick with mucus that, in her exhausted state, she would not take them and tried to turn her head away. The oyster half shell was removed and a thin, smooth wedge of polished shell was placed against her mouth. Quickly recognizing it, Oshana clamped her lips around it and drew into her throat the sharp, burning pulp inside, the fermented grasses pulverized to mush and left to stew in their own juices so they could be consumed by the ill—or the exhausted like herself. It smoldered in her stomach and she felt heat and strength flowing back into her body. When they offered her the shellfish again, she was able to slurp up the slick slimy meat from the shell, greedily extracting all its nutrients. Although she knew, and they must guess as well, that the situation was dire, she did not offer any information and they did not press her until after she had eaten and drunk

“It is a red devil,” she said at last when her breathing had recovered enough that she could trust herself to speak clearly. The others exchanged worried looks and some of them went pallid, even under the already pale skin of their faces. Out of the corner of her eye, Oshana saw Onshal flinch, slightly lifting the shoulder that was freckled with a cluster of small, puckered scars, the remains of an earlier encounter with a red devil, left by the toothed suckers on its coiling arms.

“That's not possible,” objected Messema. “Even the tightest herring ball couldn't hold together with one of those monsters ripping it apart from the inside.”

“That's just it,” cried Oshana between gulps of water over her gills and further swallows of the liquor. “It wasn't attacking at all. Just sitting there doing nothing. It goes against everything we know about the creatures.”

Wenesh shook all over. “I feel hunger,” she said in a hollow voice. “Great gnawing hunger like the need to devour an entire feast alone.”

Messema grabbed her shoulder. “Is it the red devil's hunger you feel?” she asked sharply.

“I don't know. I just feel the hunger. I can't tell where it comes from but what else could it be? It is so great, it must be a very strong mind.”

“I always thought the scarlet squid were just mindless savage animals,” objected Onshal fiercely.

“And that was bad enough,” Oshana agreed grimly. “But, again, this one was not eating. How could it be hungry?”

“Never mind that now. Someone needs to get back to the reefnest as quickly as possible, to warn the others,” said Messema, her voice tense.

“Not Oshana, for certain,” countered Wenesh, her brow furrowed in concern. “She's completely worn out.”

“I was not suggesting that.” Messema frowned.

“Salandra is a very fast swimmer,” Oshana gasped, still not having fully recovered her breath.

Salandra turned slowly and looked at her with wide eyes. “Are you sure?” she asked in a small voice. “Do you really trust me?”

“Yes, little sister. We are relying on you to save us all. This is a chance to do something that will impress your future bond mother far more than spearing a few fish.”

“I would rather make my bond sister proud.” Salandra turned and went streaking away through the water, her pale blond hair streaming in a plume behind her.

“What do we do now?” asked Onshal in a small voice as Salandra vanished into the blue expanse of the ocean.

“We stay here,” said Messema firmly, though they could hear a slight catch in her voice, “and, if

they move towards the reefnest we try to turn them aside or stall them for as long as we can.”

“Stall...that?” another asked doubtfully, pointing towards the roiling mass of gleaming fish, rendered even more ominous by the thought of what waited inside. Oshana remembered the horrible slimy pressure of the bodies all around her and wanted to be as far away from the school as possible to avoid any risk of it ever happening again. But there was nothing for it. They had to buy time for Salandra to give the warning and bring help if possible. They did not have to wait long. Soon, the glinting sphere of the ball began to flatten out and elongate, uncoiling into a great serpent of living bodies. If they had needed any further indication that the school were controlled by an unnatural intelligence, this would have eliminated all doubt. No school would willingly place themselves in such a vulnerable position when surrounded by predators and, indeed, as the ball began to loosen, the sharks and dolphins surged forward, tearing great mouthfuls out of the living mass. The barracuda twitched restlessly, some even making short dashes forward, but reined in by sharp commands from their handlers.

But only at first. Soon many of the predators, especially the more intelligent ones, began to pull back, spooked by the unnatural behavior of the school. Further, the snake of fish began to weave from side to side, with a coordination not possible without a central animating consciousness, skillfully dodging and evading many of the sallies made against it. Slowly, the wedge-shaped end swung back and forth as if orienting itself. At last, seeming to find the direction for which it was aiming, the entire body of the school began surging forward at a speed they would have hardly thought possible. It flew straight but the long tail rippling behind still weaved about dodging the few predators who had not fled by now. There was no sign of the beast that lurked within but they knew it must be there. How else could the school execute these unusual behaviors with such precision?

“It's heading towards the reefnest,” Messema cried desperately. “We must stop it.”

Messema's words roused the group to action. Harpoons were cocked, spears raised to shoulders, barracuda called to heel, as they gathered themselves into their own wedge, though more broad and flat in shape than the oncoming one, close packed but not so close that it would impede the use of their weapons. They knew many or all of them were unlikely to survive in a fight against such a fearsome opponent but this did not matter. All they cared about was at stake and they had come forth eager for the chance to prove themselves. That chance had been given and they would not squander it now. Oshana was as aware of the danger as any other and, beyond, was still heavy with weariness from her ordeal within the ball but she was as determined as the rest, grimly fitting the shaft into her harpoon gun and holding it ready as they began swimming forward to intercept the onrushing school. Again, Oshana felt her gills flutter desperately in her throat, all the muscles in her tail become heavy and rigid and every attempt to move them sent pain arching through her. But she would not let herself think of that and narrowed her mind to the single focus and will to make her tail keep beating up and down so that she kept pace with her companions.

Thankfully, Messema called a halt before they had had to keep up this pace for long. At least it seemed that way to Oshana, though she had no way of knowing for sure how much time had passed while she had been thinking only of forcing herself to go on. “Ready missiles,” Messema yelled, her voice vibrating and resonating through the water. Oshana raised her harpoon to her shoulder and prepared to take aim but, as she sighted along the length of the shaft, she saw with amazement and fear that in its wild rush of speed, the school was closing the gap between them with incredible rapidity. No wonder Messema had called a halt so quickly. At this pace, it would be too close for effective fire in less than a minute. At this speed, it was useless trying to hit a single target, especially in the mass of surging bodies, all crossing and diving over and under each other. Not bothering to waste time on more precise aim, she pointed her weapon in the general direction of the shimmering mass and pulled the trigger. As she did so, she felt the surge in the water around her as other missiles flew passed. Once all

the mermaids who had them had fired their harpoons, those who had extra spears waited until the herring were in range and threw them as well. A few tried to reload and fire their harpoons but Oshana knew she would never be able to reel in the line and re-fit the shaft into the groove in time. All her companions who had made a successful hit had already had to cut their lines to prevent being pulled along with the school.

Once all options for long range combat had been exhausted, they looked again at the oncoming swarm and saw with dismay that they had barely made a dent in it. Although a few bodies floated down into the depths of the sea, impaled, this was the only sign that they had done any damage at all. The main body of the school appeared unscathed, the dead fish already replaced in the formation by the vast numbers behind them. Now, the forefront of the wedge was close enough that they could see the eyes of the herring. There was no time for fear, or for further plans. Oshana looked around at her companions as she pulled her spear off her shoulder and took a firmer grip on it. They too looked grim as they held their weapons steadily. Onshal gave a small sad smile as if to say, "If today is my last day, I'm glad I spend it with you," and others were nodding and exchanging similar sentiments through their expressions, there not being time left for embraces or even a hand clasp. Then Lenuel began a deep thrumming, pulsing sound, like a beating heart, like blood surging through the veins, that steadied them, excited them, making them feel as one, part of the same great heart that was their people. But Oshana felt a pang of longing for Wendaro. Glad as she was to give her life beside her companions, defending their homes and families, she could not bear the thought of final separation from her beloved. It was easy for Onshal to be brave when she knew that she and Lenuel could never be separated and would stand or fall as one. Oshana's final thought, in the last seconds before the horde of herring was upon them was how glad she was that she had saved Salandra, even if only inadvertently.

Then the vanguard of the school crashed into them, the force of the water pushed in front of that mass of bodies almost knocking the breath from her before she even had a chance to raise her spear. At once the fish were all around them. She drew back the shaft of her spear to stab but, before she could, it was batted to the side and almost ripped from her hand by the rush of the school around her. With great difficulty, she brought the long, unwieldy weapon back to her side and attempted to strike twice more before she gave up. Spears were useless. Not only was there no room to swing and thrust but the fish moved so rapidly and there were so many of them that trying to spit one of them was all but impossible. Even if one could succeed, in the roiling swarm, this was often a liability. To her left, she saw Wenesh struggling desperately to remove a body jammed on to the end of her spear, rendering her defenseless as more of the herring buffeted her from all sides. In frustration, Oshana replaced her spear on her back with difficulty and drew her knife.

At least the fish had no way of seriously injuring them. Lacking teeth or spines, all they could do was use their own bodies as missiles, battering against them with dull heavy thuds, but this was bad enough. Oshana felt bruised and winded and the constant rush of bodies around her prevented her from acting or even thinking effectively. It was impossible to tell if this was actually deliberate or simply the side effect of their wild onward rush. A hurtling body struck with force into the shoulder of her fighting arm, making her flail. By tensing the already aching muscles of her arm as hard as she could, she was able to halt the uncontrolled swing and bring her knife back to her side, scoring it across the side of a passing fish in the process. But she did not even look to see if she had killed it for another shot past, less than an inch for her face on the other side and she instinctively sprang back from it, raising her hands to protect her eyes so that a cluster of the oncoming fish slammed into her half turned body below the shoulder blades, knocking the water from her throat and chest cavity and momentarily winding her. There was a painful tightness in her chest as the muscles worked frantically to draw in more oxygen rich water but, even as this happened, she had the presence of mind to raise her knife, catching one of the fish under its chin so it was sliced in half by the force of its own speed. How long

this exhausting repetition of dodge and strike went on, she had no idea. By now they were surrounded so thickly by the school that it had become dark, the sun being unable to penetrate effectively among the swarming bodies. The water around them was foul, full of blood and floating guts from the fish they had killed, thrown against them over and over in the frantically churning water so they were coated with a slick film of offal. Despite the fact that they were becoming increasingly difficult to control, they had to send their barracuda to the back and outer edges of the fight, lest they accidentally injure them in the darkness and confusion. It was fortunate indeed that the sharks and wild barracuda had long since abandoned their pursuit of the school.

“Curse this darkness,” she heard Messema yell from somewhere behind her shoulder, sounding far away in the roil of the battle. “I can barely see in front of my face.”

Something felt very wrong to Oshana. The fish were darting all around her. She could not hold her arm out without it being struck but she *could* hold it out. “How can it be so dark?” she cried aloud. “Even in the middle of the ball, when they were so close around me that I could hardly move, there was more light than this.” In response, a quivering tremor of sound came from Lenua and she knew it was a cry of fear.

“Because it isn't that the fish alone that are blocking out the sun,” she heard Onshal gasp in dismay. “It is ink. Look.” Oshana did not want to look but was unable to avoid registering what she could not help seeing, the black tendrils drifting forward through the water, coiling around the flicking sliver shapes of the fish, seeming to grab for her and when she looked up, she could see them stretching out overhead like a vast roof. The red devil was casting its black net over them. Being surrounded by ink from a squid that size would be alarming in any circumstance as it would prevent seeing to effectively defend oneself against it. But here, who knew what foul magic might be in the creature? If it could command the vast school of herring, perhaps it could invest its ink with corrupting poison, able to sap their strength, wither their bodies, and corrode their skin and will even as they fought against it. Oshana drew a shuddering breath and tried not to think of this, focusing only on slashing through the next opponent and then the next as the undulating darkness crept closer and closer.

Steadily it grew darker, until they could only with great difficulty see anything beyond the flashes of pale silver as the herring dashed past them out of the blackness and, soon, their eyes were so focused on these flashes that they were unable to see anything else, even had the light permitted. They knew nothing but the flashes, straining to pick them out of the dark water and then, if one was close enough, to lunge at it with spear or knife, occasionally being rewarded with gush of slimy liquid against their skin, letting them know they had found their target. They could not see each other and the sound of the school pouring past them in an endless stream meant they could not locate one another by movement either. There was no way of knowing if they were drifting farther and farther apart so each was alone in the empty blackness or, worse, if they were drawing nearer together and might accidentally strike one another in the fray.

The swelling call of Lenua came through the darkness, making the water around them hum with energy and power. It gave them courage, reminding them of the beautiful sunlit world and the home for which they were fighting, even though it now felt separated from them by a gulf of eternity. His voice also gave them place and physical reality again, helping them locate themselves in the empty void. Now they could hear how far they were from Onshal and try to orient themselves accordingly, though they still could not hear how close they were to one another. Some of the girls tried to call out periodically to help them stay in formation but, their voices did not possess the resonance of a merman's and they were frequently swallowed up in the rush and gurgle of the motion all around them. It was not wholly futile. Oshana narrowly avoided stabbing Wenesh when she heard her suddenly yell out directly in front of her, but establishing anything even remotely like systematic communication was beyond their ability. If only they had all been bonded or at least more of them had been. Then their

mates could have spoken to one another with ease. This was one of the main reasons older women were more often chosen for dangerous tasks like this but chance had allotted this fight to them and they must hold the advance for as long as they could.

Their eyes straining to find their targets, and their ears straining to gather what limited information they could about one another's whereabouts, they had no room to spare for thinking and so did not notice at first when the flashes of the darting fish were joined by others, larger, longer, flashes that, faintly at first, then more strongly, began to pulse with a red tint. Suddenly, quite clearly, unobstructed by the water or the surge around them, she heard Wenesh scream "It is here," her voice cracking as it climbed rapidly to a shrill pitch of horror. Above them and below them, to their sides almost surrounding them, they could see the scarlet tentacles trailing in and out of the black ink, their pulsing casting bloody reflections on the hordes of herring. At first, they were nothing more than ominous threats looming in the background, distracting the defenders with fear, and with the strobing flashes that made everything seem to repeatedly start and stop again, making it hard to keep their aim steady on the fish. But, gradually, they moved closer and closer, until they were near enough to strike at the mermaids themselves. Soon the fish were abandoned in the face of this much greater threat, but were still all around them, blocking their strokes, hurling them bodily into the grasping arms, exhausting them by forcing them to battle the current they had stirred up. There was nothing to be done but hold on and try to navigate these new perils as best they could.

One of the scarlet tendrils came whipping out of the darkness, wrapping itself around Oshana's arm before she could dart aside. It gripped her, rubbery, cold, and heavy. She felt it flex and pulse against her, the hideous strength hidden in the flaccid limb, enough maybe to tear her arm off should it have a mind to, sensed the suckers feel their way across her skin like horrible searching fingers. And then it was as if she had been pieced by a hundred tiny needles as the teeth inside the suckers gripped her, boring into her flesh so she could not tear the arm away. The fish were still buffeting her and she fought on, ignoring the pain as best she could, her attacks now hampered by the dead weight on her arm. But slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the slippery appendage began to pull against her, drawing her forward through the water.

When she realized this, Oshana fought back desperately, thrashing her tail so that it pummeled against the heavy bodies of the fish surrounding her. At her first act of resistance, searing white pain exploded all down her arm as her pulling back put additional pressure on the hooks sunk into her skin but still she struggled, again cursing the restriction of her movement caused by the press of the school around her that prevented her from bringing the full strength of her tail to bear. And then out of the blackness before her she saw the whole vast expanse of its body come rippling into view, pulsing red, pulsing, pulsing, like the frantic hammering of her heart, like the throb of pain where it gripped her arm. It was drawing her in, dragging her to the beak. Overcome with panic, Oshana slashed wildly with her knife, striking the gripping tendril over and over until it began to loosen its hold, but she would not relent and, when it jerked away, it left part of its severed length still clinging to her. Though, of course, it took some of her skin with it in exchange as well. Freed, Oshana glanced around wildly. The darkness of the ink must be dissipating. That and the hellish flashes from the red devil were illuminating the surrounding sea. She could see some of the others also caught in its grasp, being drawn in as she had been. She made a dash for the nearest one, feeling the racing members of the school strike her as she tried to swim across their path and calling for her barracuda as she did so. Soon, almost too soon, they were by her side, lunging at the herring with a savagery she had never seen before. Angrily, she commanded them to aid her in attacking the squid but they ignored her, the nearest crushing another herring body between its jaws then letting it fall and drift away on the current. Not daring to waste any more time on her hunting fish's disobedience, Oshana turned back to her companions in distress.

The closest victim was Wenesh, the tentacle wrapped around her torso, and Oshana could see the raw, red patches where it had already gripped once and then released to take a firmer hold slightly above. Wenesh's head was thrown back as she writhed in agony, her tail arching wildly through the water, trailing foam, dyed pink in the bloody light. She had either lost her knife, was unable to reach it, or had forgotten it in her panic, for she was grappling with the tentacle, trying to free herself from it with her bare hands. With a final surge of strength, Oshana shot forward to reach her, hacking at the coiling appendage until it released her. Wenesh doubled over gasping, as if she had been having trouble breathing in addition to her other injuries. Her body was streaked with the dense blue of the red devil's blood and more tendrils of it curled through the water nearby but Oshana could take no comfort in this for, whatever wounds they had dealt the creature were certainly not enough to kill it, or even induce it to turn back. And then she saw, to her vast annoyance, that the barracuda still had not aided her in attacking it but, instead, were gliding about savaging the herring. Oshana began to yell with frustration. It was true this is how they would instinctively respond but she thought she had trained them better than that. She yelled again but the long sleek bodies sped by without even acknowledging her, plunging into the clouds of blood and offal, with a ferocity she had never witnessed before.

"They can't hear you," said a small sad voice by her ear. It must be very closer for her to hear it so clearly amidst the tumult of combat. Turning, she saw Wenesh had recovered somewhat, though her chest still heaved and her eyes were wild. The pale skin of her torso was smeared with dark slimy blotches, fish guts, ink, some horrible melding of the two, and she clutched her knife in her hand now, having drawn it as soon as she was able, slashing at the bodies around her even as she spoke to Oshana. "It is in their minds," she said grimly.

"What?" Oshana was only half listening, slashing at the tendril that had reared up again and was now attempting to encircle them both.

"It hungers. It hungers." Wenesh moaned and rocked back and forth, doubling over again. Her difficulty breathing seemed to come as much from the horror in her mind as from any physical exertion. "But it does not hunger for food. It hunger for life, life devoured, the power of the life spark extinguished and absorbed into the one who consumes. It can reach weaker minds and drive them to kill and kill and each kill makes them stronger."

Oshana looked around at the barracuda again, more closely this time, as best she could with the herring bodies, living and dead filling the water and the deadly scarlet ribbon dancing inches from her face, the toothed pits on its underside opening wide to grasp for her. They did seem to show an unnatural strength and speed and there was a directness in their flight, a keenness in their eyes that was indeed uncanny. They dashed from one member of the school to the next, slashing, rending, devouring, seemingly intent on sowing the maximum amount of violence and pain, all in direct opposition to their training to kill as cleanly as possible and bring the body back whole.

"But why would it want to make the fish that serve us stronger?" she cried in frantic objection.

"Because, when the sharks come in and eat them it will make the sharks stronger." Wenesh's voice sounded vague, almost dreamy and the sweep of her dagger was perilously slow as she moved to fend off another coil of the grasping arms.

"What sharks?" cried Oshana in a panic. "The sharks that came here to feed on the ball all ran away."

"They didn't go far. It can call them back quickly and the sharks will devour the barracuda, already strong from killing so many herring. And then a pair of young serpents, on their very first foray up from the depths, small enough we could still try to kill them, will eat the sharks. And when they reach the reefnest they will eat the mermaids. All our knowledge, all our power will go into them...and then the red devil will eat the serpents." Cold dread beyond anything she had the ability to bend her mind around, coursed through Oshana and, in her horror, her mind wavered and she slashed at

the snaking tendril a split second too late. She felt the cold sliminess of it close around her shoulder and torso, pinning her arms and felt herself tense, waiting for the suckers to bite. But, before they could, the arm suddenly loosed its clutches but, before she could even drop to slip out from under it, she saw part of it explode in a great burst of livid blue ichor and she turned to see Voresha, who had come up, unnoticed in the struggle, standing beside them with a grim expression, holding her knife in one hand and the end of the severed tentacle, still feebly twitching, in the other, but under the flush of battle, her face was pallid and hollow.

“I heard what you said,” she said in a dull, flat voice. “It will eat our souls.”

“Yes, if it reaches home, we are all doomed.” Wenesh did not look up to meet Voresha's eyes.

“The others have to know.”

She turned and darted away through the water, buffeted mercilessly by the darting fish as she tried to swim across their path, even as Oshana yelled after her “No, don't do that. We don't want them to be so frightened they lose heart.” But her words were lost in the rushing of the water around her and the pounding of her own blood inside her head. Almost at once, however, she had to turn her attention back to repelling the coiling arm that reached for them again, not being quite quick enough and taking a wound on her shoulder before she got free, and, when she was able to pause again to catch her breath, Voresha was lost in the chaos of combat around them, so she never knew how many she reached with her unwanted message. Probably not many for, like Oshana herself, it was unlikely she could swim many feet without having to stop and beat away one of the clutching arms of the red devil. Regardless, from the little she could see around her, Oshana gathered that just as she and Wenesh did, the other mermaids continued to fight their best fight despite their ever growing pain, exhaustion, and despair.

But, as might have been predicted, their efforts were not enough. They were too few and too inexperienced to effectively oppose even a smaller and less powerful red devil, to say nothing of how the ceaseless battering from the fish it governed distracted them and sapped their strength. They were putting up a good fight. They had severed or wounded several tentacles but there were always more to rise and take their place. They were using all their strength to resist being pulled closer and, sometimes, by exerting all their effort, they were able to halt the advance to a crawl but then their strength would flag and it would have the upper hand again. Steadily and inexorably, they were all being drawn in, nearer and nearer to the snapping beak. It gleamed faintly, like dark, shiny obsidian, the hectic pulses giving it a deep red cast, as if it were crusted with dried blood. Now they could hear the clacking sound of the great beak snapping closer and closer and their doom could not be delayed for long. Some of the girls were beginning to break down with weariness and the horror of the situation but a few, including Meseema and Onshal, who still had the strength and courage to fight, stood before the others, shielding them until the last possible moment. But that could not be far away now. The great beak gaped before them as Meseema prepared to call on the others to rouse themselves for the final resistance. She opened her mouth but Oshana could not hear the words she spoke. The sound of the beak snapping filled all the space around them and was the only sound that could be heard now, with their minds if not with their ears.

Then through the horror of the obscene clacking another sound cut. A long, clear resonance that made the water thrum. It was answered by another, similar sound, farther away but rapidly approaching and through a cloudy daze, like something in a dream, Oshana recognized the calls of the shell horns the mermaids used to communicate over long distances. Then, close behind them came the resonating cries of the mermen and, the relief gradually coming alive inside her, Oshana realized that Salandra had succeeded in her mission. Help had arrived only just in time. The herring were scattering in every direction as the sea filled with mermaids, their hair swirling about them, spears sweeping. Their onrush drove back some of the clouds of ink and light came streaming in.

A soft hand was laid on Oshana's shoulder and she turned to see Lenellis, her mother's sister,

standing beside her, a spear held ready in her other hand. “You've done more than enough,” she said, leaning close so she could be heard over the noise around them. “Go back now and have someone take care of you.” Behind the protective screen of the newcomers, it was easy for Oshana to disengage from the battle, pulling back until she was beyond the cloud of ink and the press of the school, where the sun could fall freely on her again and, when she reached the clear open water, she could see several of her companions who had been able to withdraw in a similar manner. Still, the thought of the long swim back to the reefnest, weary and wounded as she was, was incredibly daunting.

“Come,” called Onshal, trying to encourage the others, though, as she flexed her aching tail to follow, Oshana noted sourly that Onshal appeared comparatively uninjured and had Lenuel to help encourage her. But even if it was a bit much coming from her, Onshal was correct. They needed to get home and the fact that many of them were weary or sorely injured only made it the more imperative. So they set off swimming, but their progress was painfully slow. Every push forward through the water hurt and she was not even the worst off. Others had lost a great deal of blood from the cruel wounds the red devil's arms had rent in their flesh and while they had tried to staunch them with basic wraps they carried in their hunting pouches, they had been allowed no time to apply them properly and there was little true assistance they could give without the supplies and comforts of the reefnest. The battle was barely out of sight behind them when they felt the last reserves of their strength start to flag.

Just as she felt she could swim no more she saw a blur of motion before them and a figure resolved out of the swirling expanse of the water, swimming restlessly back and forth, her pale almost white hair and deep green fins making a cloud around her. As she saw the group approaching, she swam towards them and Oshana realized it was Salandra. “What are you doing here?” Oshana gasped as the younger girl gently offered her her arm. “I told you to stay out of this.” She winced as the effort of speaking forcefully made her side twinge.

“Rest easy,” said Salandra. “I'm not going to try to enter the battle.” As she spoke she was swimming forward, drawing Oshana along with easy but firm pressure. “I just came to make sure you got back safe. I owe you that much after you made the effort to watch out for me on my first real hunt.”

“Some first hunt,” they heard the girl behind them grumble. “From now on, you'll either be far too scared to go on another or find them all horribly dull.”

Salandra gave a quick laugh in response that did wonders to raise all their spirits. “Besides,” she turned and almost winked at Oshana. “Wendaro insisted that I do so. It was the only way I could get him to stop badgering me incessantly and very loudly too I might add.” Her statement earned several chuckles from her companions, sore and weary as they were. But, despite Salandra's encouragement, the return swim was trying indeed and Oshana was bone weary by the time they made their way through the net. It was such a relief to reach her own home and sink into the soft support of a hammock. Most of her family were out fighting in the defense but her youngest sister was still there and moved quickly to bring her a nourishing paste of ground and compressed fish heads, rich with all the goodness of the eyes and brain and bind broad-leafed seaweed over her hurts. Much soothed by the care she drifted off into an exhausted sleep.

A few days later, when she and most of the others who had gone on the hunt were recovered, at least enough so to get out of bed, a great feast was prepared to celebrate the defense of their home. Even Lowella had emerged from her house for the occasion. She had to swim slowly and her family brought a special hammock so she could sit more comfortably but she was still insistent on not missing the event. The spread of food was vast, fresh oysters served in in their shells, delicate slices of cuttlefish and sea snail wrapped in a variety of weeds and grasses to create subtle varieties of flavor, whole fish, tuna, herring, sea bass, halibut, stuffed with shredded crab meat and flavorful pastes of ground seaweed and polyps, even fresh fruit from the surface, and Oshana wondered how they could

have assembled and prepared it all so quickly, though, of course, the salted and fermented meat and sea grass pastes came from their stores and so was easy to provide. The open square just inside the net was a riot of color, garlands made from bright shells and fresh seaweed accented with sprays of the most colorful algae and corals from the living walls of their homes were draped over every available surface, even threaded through the weave of the net, and lopped around the edges of the round tables, shells of giant clams and sea turtles balanced on rocks, that had been brought out for the occasion.

Not only the square itself but the mermaids as well were beautifully adorned with shells and blossoms, their gossamer robes floating about them. Because of her heroic role in the defense, Oshana's mother and sister made much of her and spent hours making sure she looked perfect, spreading ribbons of brightly colored seaweed through the elaborately braided hairdo they constructed and draping her with all of the family's most precious adornments, including their most prized piece, a great collar formed of interlaced strands of brightly colored coral beads ending in a large oval shell coated in rainbow mother-of-pearl resting against her chest and casting shards of light onto her skin and her other bangles. She also had strands of linked cowries that hung down almost to the start of her scales, a shell diadem on her forehead, and so many bracelets they clinked every time she moved. They also fussed about her make up, staining her eyes and lips with the most vivid dyes made from the reds and purples of sea snails, the paler, more delicate hues of sponges, and outlining her eyes with the glossy hue of squid ink. Oshana flinched slightly at the sight of the ink even though she knew the squid it had come from was small and harmless but quickly forgot her discomfort in the admiring gasps from the other women. Of course, even her best would look plain in comparison to the wealthier mermaids, like the women of Wendaro's family, but Oshana did not care. She felt glamorous indeed as she swam down the path and everyone she passed called out congratulations for her recovery and the role she had played in their escape.

When she reached the square, the celebration was already well under way. Music filled the air, with the blowing of horns and the beating on shells of various sizes, accompanied by the mermaids singing with words and well as the transcendent voices of the mermen underlying everything. A great dance was in progress as the entire reefnest assembled, the mermaids weaving gracefully in and out around each other, graciously making space for the newcomers as they arrived. Although the dance formed a harmonious whole, there was no preset pattern. All the mermaids kept swimming continuously, moving fluidly through whatever opening happened to appear in the space around them, up, down, or weaving around their companions, sweeping their arms and tossing their hair to the melody. But the dance was more than just a thing of aesthetic beauty, it was a chance to see and be seen and to greet all of one's neighbors. As the cluster of mermaids spiraled around each other, they called out to those they passed, making gestures of welcome and, of course, noting who had the most impressive costume, jewelry, and hairstyle. They were particularly eager to greet Oshana as one of the heroines of the celebrated hunt, and so she found herself, quickly swept up into the dance and was soon bowing and gesturing in every direction, the salutations so constant she could hardly think. It took everything she had to simply return proper greetings and keep moving.

Once the majority of the residents were assembled, the dance gradually broke apart and the mermaids settled down onto the various resting places, smooth rocks and masses of coral that formed part of the normal ambiance of the open area, as well as various slings and hammocks that had been brought out and set up specially for the occasion, clearing the water above the feast tables. Now it was time for contests and games as various members vied at chasing down and capturing fish, casting spears at targets, and racing to grab a small net full of tightly packed sponges. As the sport gradually gave way to feasting, there were stirring tales of great hunts passed and beautiful songs from some of the most accomplished merman soloists but there was also long periods of time when the only sound was the excited ripple of conversation. As in the dance, Oshana often found it hard to get in a mouthful

as others were constantly coming up to congratulate her or ask her excited questions about the battle and she was very glad of the times when others were speaking or signing and all would fall quiet to allow her some time to eat in peace.

After they had feasted and rejoiced for several hours, a vibrating trill sounded from the middle of the square, a merman calling for silence, cutting through all the ripples of conversation which rapidly died away as Lenellis rose from her place and swam up above them, her arms spread wide, tail beating gently to keep her in place. Anyone who wished to could speak at a feast, but Lenellis most often took this role as she was a fine speaker and valued for her wisdom. “We have come here to rejoice that our reefnest is safe.” She paused for a moment and held up her hand to stay the cheering that was already starting to erupt. “We honor the foresight of Wenesh who sensed the danger and trusted her instincts, we honor the steadiness and clear thinking of Meseema who organized the defense and held the group together so they could stand their ground until the rest of us arrived, and we honor the swiftness of Salandra to bring us the warning in time.” As she named each, she gestured to them and they swam up to stand beside her as those below cheered and waved colorful streamers of seaweed. Lenellis paused looking over the gathering before continuing. “But most of all we honor the courage and endurance of Oshana. It was her daring and perseverance in penetrating to the center of the school of herring and fighting back out so that the truth could be known that we have most to thank for the fact that we are still here today.”

She lowered her hand as Oshana came to join the others and the watchers were finally free to give vent to their exuberant joy and she could feel the very water vibrate with the volume of their cries, the blowing of horns, and, especially, the deep rolling calls of the mermen. Oshana felt herself shiver with the profoundness of the honor given her. Being recognized as a savior of home and people was one of the very highest forms of social blessing a mermaid could receive, that many did not receive even in an entire lifetime. The space below her was a riot of motion and she felt slightly dizzy when she looked down at it, especially combined with the pulsing of sound in the water and the wild sense of elation surging through her. With all the waving hands and the many colored pennants of seaweed arcing back and forth made the square below her look like a heaving rainbow, rippling rapidly so, for a moment, she could see no individuals, only the motion and she felt the waves of their admiration washing over her like caressing waves of warm water near the surface on a calm day. But gradually, she became aware of an incongruous movement at one of the round tables that did not wave back and forth like the others. It took her a few more seconds to realize it was one of the mermaids rising and swimming up to them and a few moments more to recognize the tawny hair, sandy orange tail and especially elaborate jewelry of her future bond mother.

As they were still cheering, Menenda came up close beside her. Raising a hand, she gradually stilled the cheering, claiming her turn to speak. “Oshana, the courage, quick thinking, and perseverance you showed mark you as more than fit to be counted as a woman,” she said graciously but with a warm undertone that Oshana had never heard Menenda use towards her before. Her heart leaped wildly within her, hardly daring to hope, sure the older woman could not really mean what Oshana so desperately wanted her to mean. “The services you have rendered here are worth far more to me, and to all of us, than any amount of trinkets scavenged from the ruins and so, as of today, I am proud to officially call you bond daughter.” Oshana felt faint with joy as the salt crystals oozed from her eyes and scarcely remembered to bow her head as Menenda slipped a garland of shining pearls and shells around her neck as a betrothal gift. She saw her friends, her parents, the entire community watching her, thrilled by her great good fortune. And then she forget everything else, all thought swallowed up in the swelling surge that was Wendaro's song of euphoria, so close she felt she could almost touch it. He must have ridden up here along with Salandra to reach her so quickly at this moment. The crystal notes rang out making all the water vibrate with the strength of his love as she saw him hover briefly

before her then vanish, as he darted around behind her, followed by a wonderful prickling sensation as he curled against the base of her spine where soon they would be joined, never more to be apart.