

INVASION OF THE HAZMATS

By Susha Golomb



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INVASION OF THE HAZMATS



PART I

JOURNEY TO THE ABYSSMAL ZONE

CHAPTER 1

A LESS-THAN-WILLING SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

I wasn't born with a fish tail. It isn't even a permanent arrangement but it means I could finally visit my adoptive grandparents, formerly known as Grandma and Grandpa Mermaid. Who knew the stories my parents told me when I was little were true?

I was officially here on a summer visit—my first—with my grandparents but plans change. Sidetracked is probably a better way to describe it. I am now officially apprenticed to the rogue Sky, Zazkal.

The work/study thing was an add-on, meant to give me some basic life skills in magic and to give Zazkal some basic life skills, period. Since he hated being with other people, it was a sort of punishment for kidnapping me and my sampo. What he really wanted was the sampo, but since we can't be separated, he was stuck with me, too.

Zazkal was waiting for me when I arrived. He did not look happy to see me. No 'hello'. No 'how was your trip?' As soon as I showed up, he turned tail and I followed. He led me directly to his workshop, the largest of a series of interconnected natural openings inside the remote coral atoll where he lived and worked.

"Memorize the name and location of everything in this room. The least you can do is learn to fetch things when I am working."

That was it. My entire first lesson. He swam off muttering under his breath about wasting time. I couldn't decide whether to be offended or overwhelmed.

Every wall in the big room was covered with ceiling-high wicker chests of drawers. All the chests were bolted down and all the drawers were latched shut, not unlike the cabin of a ship, and for much the same reason, only they were under the water instead of on it.

I swam to the nearest wall and began pulling open one drawer after another. Every one of the unlabeled drawers must have contained a dozen or more jars and bottles of strange-looking stuff.

I decided to be overwhelmed.

Groaning, I floated limply to the floor. For a full five minutes, I sat there staring wide-eyed at the endless supply of supplies.

Finally, I took a deep breath, swam over to the nearest chest of drawers and got to work.



Three hours later, Zazkal was back with an armful of bright green seaweed. He dumped it on the big worktable in the middle of the room and started barking out orders.

“Get me pink sand, red algae and compound 221B.” Miraculously, I managed to find all three before he finished assembling an assortment of bowls and tools from a drawer in the worktable.

He slammed shut the drawer, started fiddling with the jars and rattled off his next list. I knew I was doomed even before he finished.

“Good. Now get me hydroxy-oxydoxy number 6, sea cucumbers... pelleted, not powdered, tincture of scalymoss and fractured coral shards in that exact order, and quickly.”

I somehow managed to find the hydroxy-oxydoxy and the sea cucumbers but then I gave him the wrong kind of scalymoss and was now floating nervously in front of a cabinet that held at least twenty different kinds of coral, afraid to ask him which one he wanted. I floated just a little too long for Zazkal’s limited patience.

He blew up and threw the jar of algae, or maybe it was the pink sand. Who could tell? Zazkal threw the jar all the way across the room, no easy task underwater.

“Useless, useless, useless. You’re nothing but an undersized ten-year old with a mouth bigger than your brain. I refuse to have you hanging around, interfering with my work.”

I cracked.

“What is this? Education by intimidation?” I hollered back. “You’re supposed to be my teacher. Anyway, you can’t kick me out and I can leave whenever I want. I’m not your prisoner anymore.”

The first day was going much better than expected. Here we were...already on speaking terms.

“Allow me to remind you, Miss Miriam Mermelstein,” he said with quiet menace, “that taking on an assistant was not my idea.” The water around his head actually sizzled, he was that mad. Maybe I should tone it down a notch.

“It was your grandparents’ idea to make the punishment fit the crime and right now, the alternative of permanent exile is starting to look a lot more attractive.”

The truth was, Zazkal couldn’t care less about permanent exile, but he desperately wanted the use of my sampo and had already kidnapped me twice to get it. The sampo has a homing spell on it, so the only way to steal it is to steal me, too. My little drawstring bag can produce just about anything that will fit through its opening, in other words, an endless supply of the ingredients he needs for his research in deep-ocean magic.

For Zazkal, the only good kind of time is alone time. His reputation is that he’s the best magician and the worst-tempered fairy in the Seven Seas. My sampo not only gives him instant access to the rare and not-so-rare ingredients he needs for his work, but it effectively eliminates face-time with all the people he normally has to be nice to if he wants to get his precious supplies.

“Zazkal,” I said, trying hard to speak in a more conciliatory tone, “I have learned an awful lot of these already, but I have no idea what any of the labels mean. It makes it a lot harder to remember. Half of my time with you is supposed to be as a student anyway. Couldn’t you use that time to teach me what all this stuff means? It would make it much easier to remember if it made sense. Besides, once I understood more, I could just take things out of my sampo for you. Isn’t that why I’m here?” I swallowed hard, nervously waiting for him to speak.

Fixing me with one of his now familiar icy glares, he finally spoke.

“All right, Miriam,” he said through clenched teeth. “I can see it will be some time before you will be any good as an assistant. Besides,” he crossed his arms in front of his chest and glared at me, “it’s unthinkable for me to spend my time with an illiterate.”

“I read all the labels on your stupid jars. I am not illiterate.” Most...of the labels would have been more accurate, but I thought I was doing pretty well, since I had only just learned to read Sky, as these air- and water-breathing sea-fairies called themselves. Even in my mind, I was careful to say Sky and not use the ‘M’ word

“Well, I can see there’s no help for it,” he said acidly. “We’ll spend the rest of the morning reviewing the contents of some of my inventory, and this afternoon, I will begin teaching you to write.”

“What a waste of time!” he muttered, loud enough for me to hear, adding a dirty look to make sure I got the point.

Anyone with an ounce of sense, I thought, pressing my lips together to keep the words inside, would have realized that if you are going to have an assistant, someone has to spend time training her. Any normal person would have planned for it.

Still... Writing underwater required magic. This would be the first real magic I would learn.

I kept my mouth shut and listened, trying not to ask questions, while Zazkal began to explain the system he used to organize his supplies. As time passed, he began to warm to his subject. He may not have been very agreeable on most things, but when the topic was magic, and the listener was clearly interested, he became enthusiastic and articulate.

He’ll be a pretty good teacher, I thought with some relief. At least, as long as I pay attention and don’t ask dumb questions.

CHAPTER 2

POWER PEBBLES

Once I learned what and where everything was, Zazkal gradually reduced his conversation back to grunted instructions. My mornings were spent watching quietly while he worked. I floated close by, trying to figure out what was going on and ready to fetch, return and clean up as requested. I had lots of questions, but not enough nerve to interrupt.

Still, it would be a long time before the excitement of being a ‘sorcerer’s apprentice’ would wear off. Watching magic happen was very different from the way I used my three fairy gifts, which worked more or less on their own.

The sampo that Zazkal so coveted was a birthday present from fairy friends of the family. There was also a pair of grafted-on wings and a fern-seed coat that made me invisible, all intended to help a traveling ten-year old get safely to Grandma and Grandpa’s house.

Their house wasn’t over the river and through the woods, but in an ancient coral-reef makeover, now known as Casalot, a combination community center and high-rise apartment building.

Of course, there was also the family fish scale. Grandma gave it to Mom and Mom gave it to me providing me with the necessary magic to let me make the switch from legs to fishtail, making the whole trip possible.

My afternoons, on the other hand, turned out to be pretty boring. Writing insea, that is, underwater, used a spell to bypass hands and send the words directly from the brain to the stuff they used for paper. It took me less than ten minutes to learn the spell that activated the writing process. Actually being able to do it was different.

While Zazkal played with my sampo, my time was spent in tedious, repetitive practice with improvements coming in very small increments.

After the first three days, I could not understand why both Zazkal and my grandparents insisted on me spending so much time learning to write. What for? So I could label Zazkal’s bottles? Doesn’t that sound like fun? I only had six weeks before I had to go home for school in September. Shouldn’t I be learning more important things?

Meanwhile, I began to notice some basic distinctions in the kind of work he was doing during my fetch and clean workshop mornings, and one day I commented innocently how like cooking much of his activity was.

“What do you mean ‘cooking’?” he said, lifting his eyebrows and stopping his work to look at me. “Be explicit.”

“It just seemed to me,” I answered, “that the formula you use to mix your ingredients is like a recipe. Then, instead of applying heat to make things change, like we do on the land—” he grimaced. “I mean outsea,” I quickly corrected myself, “—you repeat another magic formula. That incantation is your ‘cooking fire’.”

Zazkal smiled. Not a very big smile mind you, and only slightly marred by the arch in his brows, but a smile nevertheless.

“Cooking, Cultivating, and Concentrating. Most magic,” he said, moving into lecture mode, “is generally accomplished by one or more of these three basic methods, usually a combination.”

“The Three C’s,” I chimed in.

“Yes,” he answered dryly. “That’s the way we explain it to little children.”

“Oh.” Reduced from ten to two years old by one short sentence, my ego plunged to an all-time low.

Still, I was never someone who knew when to keep her mouth shut. I had more to say and I wanted to say it. At least I took my time and chose my next words carefully.

“I only know one formula. That’s the one you taught me for writing with. But I can’t just say the words and make the writing appear. I have to really work at it. Is that what you mean by Concentration?”

“Well done, my little koi,” he said with only a hint of sarcasm. I was caught between my dislike of being referred to as a goldfish and the first thing remotely resembling a compliment I had heard.

“You still write like a five year old,” he said. You can’t do any kind of magic until you master writing.

“Go away,” he said impatiently. “Practice. Don’t practice. I have work to do.”

I resolved to take my writing practice a lot more seriously.



It was about a week later. I was sitting in the storeroom next to the workshop practicing writing and getting pretty good at it. I looked up and saw Zazkal floating in the doorway staring at me. He looked mad.

“Where did you get that?” he said sharply. I had gotten into the habit of holding my pet rock in one hand when I practiced writing. It helped me focus.

“Don’t look at me like that.” When the subject was not magic, I was a lot less intimidated by Zazkal’s bad manners. “I’m not in the habit of taking things that don’t belong to me, you know. I found it on the Maiden Voyage after the pirates left.”

The falling-apart fishing boat with the mismatched name had belonged to four seriously weird-looking and weirder-acting people. On my way to visit Grandma and Grandpa Sky, I had gotten caught up in their fishing net and hauled in with a bunch of random fish. None of us were what they were looking for.

My rock was just a big pebble really, hardly big enough to qualify as a rock, but it was so pretty, all blue and green swirls and warm from the sun...so I sort of pretended that they were pirates and that this was an uncut jewel that had fallen from their treasure box. There was, of course, no way I was going to say this to Zazkal.

“May I see it?” he said with uncharacteristic courtesy. I opened my hand and showed him the stone. He took a good long look at my pet rock and at me, then swam up to one of the three gently bobbing globes that lit the storeroom, reached out and put his hand right through it.

The globe part of the fairy light closed over his open hand like a soap bubble, leaving no entry. He withdrew his fist, the hole in the globe followed the contours of his hand so that there was never any visible opening. The light had gone out.

Zazkal opened his fist and showed me the small stone that he held. It was bright with blue and green swirls that seemed to move as I watched. I’m sure that if I held it, it would feel warm in my hand.

I had seen how the fairy lights worked at Casalot. I knew that each globe held a small, shiny stone. They were the light bulbs of the fairy lights.

“My pet rock is a power-pebble? That’s what the pirate treasure was?”

“I’m going up to the surface to get a traveling bubble ready,” he said. “Get the sampo and meet me at the bubble. We’re going to Casalot to see your grandparents.”

CHAPTER 3

NOT A DIPLOMAT

A little less than two hours later, we were swimming into the Great Hall at Casalot. Grandma and Grandpa were there chatting with a small group of Sky. Even from a distance, you could not mistake Floradora's small size and red hair or Mele's dark curls. It takes a lot of curl for hair to stay curly under water and Grandpa had plenty.

They saw us swimming over, and looked first pleased and then grave.

"Is everything all right?" Flora said.

"Everything is fine. Miriam is doing very well," Zazkal answered politely, obviously willing to pay my grandparents the compliments he withheld from me. I would've sworn the fish thought I was an imbecile. Probably he does.

"I came to talk to you about something else altogether." Flora, Mele' and Zazkal swam through a cluster of empty fairy lights that served as a kind of floating curtain over the floor doors and into a smaller room where they could talk privately. Since nobody said otherwise, I followed along, trying to look inconspicuous. Zazkal was his usual, short and to the point.

"Miriam, show your grandparents what you found on the boat after the Hazmats left." He knows who they are? I thought. Then seeing Grandpa and Grandma nod in acknowledgement, I realized that I was the only one in the room who had no idea of what was going on. I held out my power pebble and their eyes widened.

"So that's what the those shapeshifters were smuggling," Mele' said. His smile faded to serious.

"Apparently." said Zazkal. "Have you heard anything?"

"There have been rumors," Flora answered, "that some of the abyssmal cities are having problems. We use the fairy lights for our convenience," Grandma said to me. "An inner room like this would only be good as a storeroom without them. It's nice, but not really necessary.

"But, in the abyssmal realms, people are completely dependent on the lights. It's too dark even for fairies, Sky included. Not just to see. Their agriculture relies on fairy lights. Without light, whole cities would be deserted. Thousands of people would be displaced. Many more would go hungry. Any problems with the fairy lights down there are serious. Very serious."

"I have already given the matter some thought," Zazkal announced.

What he meant was – 'I have decided what must be done and now I am going to tell you what to do.'

"We're working with only the vaguest sort of information," Mele' said. "Someone needs to be on the spot to confirm what we're hearing up here."

"It will take weeks for anyone to reach the nearest abyssmal city," Zazkal said. "But... it will take Miriam and me only a couple of days using the travel-bubble. It got us here. It can get us there."

I was beyond bored at the coral reef. The only time Zazkal talked to me anymore was to yell. Cleaning up after him may have been stressful, but it was still boring. As far as writing practice went, well, I prefer reading. A road trip to the bottom of the ocean, even with you-know-who for company, sounded like heaven.

I smashed my lips together to keep my mouth shut. I knew that 'no way is this going to happen' look on Grandma and Grandpa's faces. That was Mom's look and now I know who she got it from.

All eyes now turned to Zazkal.

“That is correct. I have been working on a new spell to use with the bubble. It’s an amplification of the natural tendency of outsea people not to notice fairy things. Chances are that land people wouldn’t notice it anyway unless it bumped into them. This is just an extra sort of security.”

Very politely, Grandpa pointed out his reservations about sending Zazkal at all.

“We have very little contact with the fairy communities in the deepest parts of the ocean. Past experience tells us that a trained diplomat is the best way to acquire information.”

That was what he said. What everyone knew he was actually thinking was that Zazkal couldn’t spend more than five minutes with anyone without getting into an argument. We were way past five minutes now and he was getting testy.

He proceeded to prove Grandpa’s point by losing his temper. Zazkal had very little patience for anyone who did not immediately see his point of view and agree with him. Convincing people of anything they did not already think was not his strong point.

“Don’t be an idiot,” he said. “How would your so-called ‘diplomat’ get back? You know perfectly well I’m the only one who can construct the traveling bubble. And I’ll need that bag to do it,” Zazkal said. “Therefore, Miriam must come.

“She’ll be perfectly safe. We will be traveling in a practically invisible bubble to another Sky kingdom. It’s not as if we are going chasing off after the Hazmats ourselves or some such foolery.”

“Why,” asked Flora “do you need the extra assistance of Miriam’s sampo on such a ‘safe’ trip?” Why can’t you preset the bubble for the return trip when you make it?

Not having an answer better than ‘Because I want it’, Zazkal said nothing and turned on his best eye-piercing glare. The non-conversation continued to deteriorate in this manner until finally, Flora said, “Both of you please go outside. Mele’ and I would like to discuss this privately.

“Miriam,” she added, “Verona is somewhere in the library stack. Why don’t you look for her? One of us will let you know what we decide.”

I was gone before Flora finished talking. The last thing I wanted to do was hang around with Zazkal, while my grandparents made decisions that he thought should be his.

CHAPTER 4

ROAD TRIP

I found my salt sister, Verona, in the music library. She was pretty focused on the scroll on her lap and didn't notice me come in.

Verona was not exactly the big sister I had imagined, but if Ethelred my science project partner from school was telling the truth about her own sister, then Verona was probably pretty standard teenage sister material. We may have taken an oath to take care of each other, but apparently BFF wasn't part of the deal.

I wasn't complaining, but I was careful.

"Hey, Verona."

"What are you doing here?"

"It's complicated."

"Of course. What else would it be? Zazkal kicked you out, right? I knew you wouldn't last a week."

"It's been two weeks, and no, he hasn't kicked me out...yet. That would be okay. This is... like I said...complicated."

"Zazkal wanted to talk to Grandma and Grandpa about the fairy lights...and...he wants to go on a kind of fact-finding-mission...and...he wants me to go with him."

She crossed her arms and looked me in the eye.

"Okay. Details. Now. Don't leave anything out."

Verona knew about my encounter with the weird pirate people but I hadn't mentioned my little souvenir. When I did, she was not impressed.

"How could you be so dumb? You should have seen at once that they were the same thing as the power nuts in the fairy lights."

"Well, I didn't. I bet you wouldn't have, either. It had been days and days since I had taken my lucky pebble out and looked at it, and I just didn't think of it."

"I don't think Zazkal cares if I come or not," I said. "All he really wants is access to my sampo."

"So, do you want to do this?"

"If you mean, do I want to spend two days in a traveling-bubble with Zazkal, what do you think?"

That produced Verona's famous snarky smile. "Hey, better you than me, but visiting a abysmal city, that's like, the trip of a lifetime. I don't know anyone who's ever gone."

"Don't forget," I said. "This is already the trip of a lifetime as far as I'm concerned, but yea, that part sounds pretty cool."



We were still in the library when Grandma and Grandpa showed up. Grandma got right to it.

"Mele' and I have decided that you can go, but with two conditions."

"The first is that our chief minister, Bibi, will be coming with you. As an official emissary, he will be able to open doors."

I shifted into adult-speak translation mode and heard...nobody will talk to either of you on your own.

She paused and said to me. "I see you're a little skeptical,"

"Zazkal is okay with this?"

"Actually, I think he is relieved to have someone else to do the talking. But Miriam, it will not be easy having Bibi along. Do try to stay out of the middle."

I was thinking that we are going to need a really big bubble.

"This sounds like a good time for me to concentrate on my writing practice," I said. Preferably with top notch pair of noise canceling headphones, I thought.

"What's the second condition, grandmother?"

Flora smiled and said, "Something much simpler I hope. Zazkal thinks you have progressed enough with your writing to be able to learn some simple magic."

I perked up immediately. This was more like it. I am dying to learn some real spells.

"We want you to learn a sleep spell before you leave." She turned to Verona. "Verona, Miriam needs someone to practice with. Do you think you have time to help?"

"You mean like, put me to sleep, wake me up, put me to sleep, wake me up, about a million times." She rolled her eyes.

"Miriam's bubble friends were hanging around onsea earlier. I bet they would think that kind of thing was fun."

I didn't think that anyone in the dolphin pod would find endless nap and repeat any more fun than Verona did, but it was worth a try

"I'll go onsea and ask," I said. Maybe Stan and Ollie will help."

"If it doesn't work out, you know where to find me," Verona said. She must have been feeling guilty.

"Zazkal is still in the Great Hall. He's waiting to teach you the spell before we take him to meet Bibi." Verona and I exchanged glances. Hanging around with Zazkal was not on Verona's list of fun things to do.

"Well, you won't be needing me anymore, so I'll just take off."

"Coward!"

"If you spend the rest of today practicing," Grandma said as we left, "you should be ready to go first thing in the morning."

CHAPTER 5

CRASH TAG

I found Zazkal swimming around impatiently in the Great Hall.

“You realize that you could have spent the two days in the bubble learning the sleep spell, using Bibi and me to practice on.” He was mad.

“I told your grandparents that you were ready and would have no problem learning such a simple spell before we reach our destination. The only magic involved is the actual putting to sleep. Once asleep, the person is not under any kind of spell. If they’re tired, they will sleep for a long time. If they’re rested, they will just nap.”

“Just because they insisted that you learn the sleep spell *before* we go, does not mean that I will tolerate any pointless delays. I am leaving in the morning, with or without the sampo.”

It only took a few minutes to learn the actual spell. Zazkal took the sampo and left to find Bibi. I headed onsea to look for the pod.



When I got to the surface, I took a small whelk whistle out of my sampo, making sure it was pitched to dolphin-speak. I swam around for a while, whistling and listening, until I heard the answering call.

Another minute and I could see a group of dolphins swimming towards me. Two of them cut out of the group and kept coming while the rest turned and swam in another direction.

One of the dolphins speeded up, racing ahead of his companion. I hung loose in the water. When he swept past at full speed, I reached out quickly and grabbed his tail. There was a sudden jerk, and I was pulled through the water at a terrific speed.

In less than half a minute, my fingers were torn loose and I found myself floating in the water again

“That was our best yet,” Stanley said as he swam back. “You’re getting really good.”

“Where’s Ollie?”

“Here I am, Miss Miriam.” He surfaced right next to us. “Really, Stanley, don’t you think you’re a little old for that kind of game?”

“Miriam’s not.

“Want to try again?” Ollie said to me.

“Only if you can catch me,” I said, swimming off. I reached back with both hands and pulled the chameleon tape off my shoulder blades, opened my wings and rose up and out of the water. I skimmed along the surface with the tip of my very strong but very heavy tail dragging in the water. Flying with a fish tail may not work, but skimming is fun and I can go really fast.

I made pretty good time this way, but not as good as Stanley, who was already circling back towards me. I saw him coming up fast and started to veer left. As usual, I wasn’t fast enough, and got knocked back into the water as he swam under and past me.

“Well, this is a nice surprise,” Ollie said, waiting politely for me to catch my breath.

“Are you rested yet?” Stanley asked.

“Come on, Stanley, give me a break. I’m exhausted. Anyway, don’t you want to hear why I’m here?” I didn’t give them a chance to answer, but launched immediately into the story of the pebble and the pirates.

“...so, I need someone to practice the sleep-spell on, and I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind helping.” I said when I was done.

“Wow!” Stanley was blown away. “There are whale songs about the cities of the abyssmal realms. I didn’t know they were true.”

“It would be an honor to assist you, Miss Miriam,” Ollie said. “It is the least we can do, since we won’t be able to come along to protect you. We will, of course, be happy to advise you on such a sensitive diplomatic mission—”

“—Oh, Ollie, we don’t know anything about the cities down there. We’ve never been much past Casalot.”

“Of course we do. I have heard all the whale songs. I can tell Miss Miriam everything she needs to know.”

“You told me those songs were just made up stories—“

I decided it was time to change the subject and I knew just how to do it.

“Hey, Stanley,” I said, swimming off to put some distance between us, “See if you can catch me this time.” I muttered the spell under my breath staring hard at Stanley as he swam at me at top speed...

It took us a few minutes to recover after the collision.

“How come you didn’t go to sleep,” I said. If Stanley had eyebrows, he would have raised them. All he said was,

“Really!”

“Yeah, well, I guess maybe I do need just a little practice.”

“Small steps, Miss Miriam,” Ollie said. “Small steps. Perhaps if we both swim still it will be easier.”

He had a point. This time, I said the spell in my head and looked Ollie in the eye while we floated next to each other in the water. He closed one eye.

“It worked Miriam. You did it.” Stanley was elated.

“Yea, well, I guess that half asleep is not bad for a first try,” I said to Ollie’s open eye. He opened his other eye.

“I was most certainly not half asleep!” he said.

“If you were all the way asleep, how could you hear me?”

“Sleeping and hearing are different things. We sleep differently from Sky.

“Can you hold your breath when you’re asleep? We can, but we have to be awake to breathe. So we only sleep on one side at a time. The other side is for breathing—”

“—And for noticing where we are so we don’t breathe underwater,” Stanley added. “That’s how Ollie could hear you talking. He heard you with his noticing side.”

“So you can be all awake and perky on one side but sleepy and ready for a nap on the other?”

“Exactly.”

“Precisely.”

“Weird.”

After that, we followed Ollie’s advice and the drill conformed to a less mobile and more traditional form.

CHAPTER 6

READING, WRITING, AND THE SLEEP SPELL

By the time Zazkal showed up, Stan and Ollie fell asleep more or less reliably about half the time and got sleepy the other half. I could even pick which side went to sleep, but matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make them fall asleep on both sides... which was probably good.

We demonstrated my new skill for Zazkal

"Now try it on me," he said. I did. Three times. Nothing happened, not even a yawn.

"Keep practicing," he said and left.

"Maybe we should try the chase thing again," I said.

"If that is your wish, Miss Miriam, then I will leave you to your childish pursuits," Ollie said. "Farewell, Miss Miriam. I trust I will see you when you are ready to learn about places you are about to visit."

"Is he pissed?"

"I don't think so. He gets bored when he's not the one doing all the talking."

"Well, it is pretty boring. I thought we could start with slow swimming and build up. At least we would be moving."

An hour later, we had mastered speed swimming plus sleep spell. Stanley had gone to sleep and been awakened so many times, that he had doubts of ever feeling sleepy again.

"You know Miriam," Stanley said. "This sleep thing gives you an unfair advantage when we are playing."

I reached into my sampo and took out a blank scroll. "What makes you think you can't learn the sleep spell," I asked.

"I thought you had to be a fairy to do magic."

"I'm not a fairy. Just knowing the spell isn't enough, though. You need the three C's, Cooking, Cultivating and Concentrating.

"Actually, you only need the concentrating part for this spell, because we're not making anything new. You can learn it the same way I did, by practicing writing first."

It was nice being the teacher for a change.

I held the scroll for Stanley while I taught him the words of the writing spell,

"I started by trying to write just one letter," I said. "Stanley, do you know how to read?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," he answered. "Most bubble people learn how to read, because the Sky write so many lovely books.

"A couple of us hold the book and someone else reads out loud. Usually, there's a group listening as well.

"We don't really understand why reading is such a lonely activity among the Sky. Half the fun for us is reading stories with friends."

After a dozen tries, and just as his brain was starting to fuzz up from the effort, a short squiggly line appeared on the page.

Several backward somersaults and triple twist leaps later, Stanley bumped me out of the water and said simply, but with great animation,

"I did it!"

We kept practicing, but Stanley got tireder and tireder. We thought about using the sleep spell, but he needed a real break.

I said goodbye to Stanley and swam down to the library in Casalot, leaving the scroll on a shelf where he could easily retrieve it when he wanted to practice.

CHAPTER 7

BUBBLING ALONG

I met Bibi the next morning when I went to the great hall looking for Grandma and Grandpa. He was facing the entrance and saw me first.

Bibi smiled and waved. I smiled back, looked him in the eye and concentrated.

He was on the small side for a Sky, with a short pointy beard, older than Mom and Dad, but younger than Grandma and Grandpa and by the time I reached him, he was asleep.

“Okay? Do I get to go?”

“Yes, you get to go,” Grandpa said, nudging Bibi to wakefulness with his elbow. My smile expanded.

“Don’t look so pleased with yourself. That was very rude.”

Maybe it was the oversized grin or just a side effect of one too many sleep spells, but I was suddenly consumed by a giant yawn. I barely got my hands up in time to cover the gap.

I heard someone snigger.

“Nice to finally meet you, Miriam,” Bibi said. He had a big grin on his face too. “I’m guessing you didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“I was too excited.”

“Miriam,” Grandma said, absolutely deadpan, “you spent nearly all day yesterday practicing the sleep spell...”

I waited a moment for someone to finish the sentence. No one did. They were waiting for me to dig myself in deeper,

“I only learned how to put other people to sleep, not myself...”

The noise coming from three pairs of pursed lips changed from suppressed to barely suppressed laughter, indicating I had given the correct—in other words—the wrong answer. Finally Bibi spoke.

“Miriam,” he laughed, “There are lots of other people here who know the sleep spell. Practically anyone in fact could have helped you go to sleep if you were having trouble.”

“Oh... Right...I guess I didn’t think of that,” I mumbled.”



Zazkal who could not bear the thought of bumping around at the bottom of a bubble with two other people for a couple of days had gone all out. He had built three interlocking bubbles. One for each passenger.

“Most impressive,” Bibi said when he saw the huge triple bubble bobbing gently on the surface.

The bubbles were held together by three short fat pieces of hollow white plastic that would allow us to pass things between the bubbles.

“What’s that stuff that looks like PVC pipes?” I asked.

“PVC pipes,” Zazkal said, nodding towards my bag of inexhaustible delights.

I put my hand up to one of the bubbles to climb aboard, but instead of letting me in, it bounced gently away.

“Hey! What’s the matter with this bubble.”

“It’s not yours,” Zazkal answered. He put his hand up to the same bubble, and again it moved away. “It’s Bibi’s. Try one of the other two.”

I put my hand up to another bubble and this time, it went through. The skin of the bubble closed around my hand so that there was never any visible opening between me and the bubble, like putting your finger into a soap bubble when it doesn’t break. There was a slight tugging sensation. I relaxed and let the bubble pull me all the way in. Unlike the fairy lights that they’re based on, the traveling bubbles let you in but not out until you get to your destination.

Zazkal swam over to the third bubble and did the same.

Clearly nervous, Bibi watched until we were both in our bubbles. Finally, he gave his bubble a cautious poke with one finger. As soon as it went through the surface, he changed his mind and tried to pull it out. It didn’t work. The more he tugged, the faster his hand and then his arm was pulled into the bubble.

Bibi was only in up to his armpits, when the big triple bubble began to rise up and move forward, leaving his tail dangling foolishly in the air

Seeing the terrified smile on Bibi’s face, even Zazkal’s standard sour expression mutated into the crooked grimace that was as close as he ever got to a smile.

Eventually, we all got settled, traveling just above the tops of the waves. The bubbles got faster and faster until the ocean below was a gray blur.

“We never went this fast before,” I said.

“We never needed too,” Zazkal answered. “It’s a long trip.”

“How come we don’t go this fast all the time? It takes hours to get to Casalot from the reef?”

“Hmfpt.”

Translation, ‘I didn’t know how’.

Bibi was all bouncy and excited, but I was not a newbie to bubble travel and I was tired, really tired. I managed to pass out snacks from my sampo before I conked out.



When the water began to tickle my nose, I woke up. The bubble was leaking. I smelled salt and I smelled trouble.

We weren’t on the water anymore. We were in it. I pushed and pushed but the bubble wouldn’t let me out. We were trapped. Bubblephobia started to kick in.

“We’ve just stopped for a bit of a stretch,” Bibi said calmly, as if nothing was wrong. It was hard not to notice me thrashing around

“Stop eeling around like an idiot. I can’t concentrate,” Zazkal grumbled. He refocused on whatever random distant point he had been focusing on, and the bottoms of the bubbles suddenly ceased to exist. We were now comfortably under water again. Catastrophe averted.

“The longest I can get it to stop for is a quarter of an hour,” said Zazkal. “But I can do it as often as we wish.”

“You were asleep,” Bibi said, “but Zazkal and I have been sitting on our tails for almost four hours. My skin feels positively desiccated. My, this feels good,” he said as he somersaulted through the water. “I don’t mind breathing air, not really, but ahh, the taste of salt in your mouth, you can’t beat it. Air does the job all right, but it has no flavor. You can’t taste it.”

“Come on, I’ll race you to the bottom,” he challenged, and surprisingly, Zazkal came, too. He must have been really cramped. As soon as we touched bottom, we automatically turned and

headed back up still going at top speed. It had taken us a good five minutes to reach the seafloor, and no one wanted to ‘miss the bubble’.



We took three more swimming breaks while the sun was out. It seemed that the longer we traveled in the bubble, the more frequently we needed breaks.

Finally, near dusk, we spotted land. Zazkal and Bibi stopped reading and we watched silently as our ocean shrank. Even though we had technically been out of the water all day, the ocean was always just below us with a comforting closeness. A boundary was being crossed as we passed over the surf and onto the beach, moving from one world into another.

Bibi was the first to break the silence.

“Look,” he called out excitedly, “a person with legs.”

The ‘leg person’, a man walking with a dog along the shore, looked up at the sound of Bibi’s voice. We all shrank back in our bubbles in a pointless but automatic gesture to not be noticed. I covered my mouth to soften the unrequested giggle.

“Be quiet,” Bibi whispered sharply

“It’s okay. He can’t see us,” I whispered

“Zazkal,” I hissed. “How come we’re traveling so slowly?”

“I didn’t want to miss anything, so I slowed it down,” came the hoarse reply.

Once the surprise of having the land person hear our voices passed, Zazkal and I calmed down. Only Bibi remained anxious. Finally, as we passed over more and more people who didn’t seem to notice us, Bibi lost his nervousness but we kept our voices low.

We passed into a large city as it was growing dark. Lights began to go on around us as the bubble, at first bumping gently off the buildings, gradually rose higher into the air.

Just past the city was a large oil refinery, the high girders covered with tiny lights. Zazkal did a double take and Bibi gave out a small gasp when he saw it. From this distance, the refinery, with its dainty lights hanging in the air, looked a lot like Casalot. They both turned wordlessly to me for an explanation

“It’s pretty, isn’t it,” I said. “But they’re not fairy lights. If you could see it during the daytime, you would be disappointed. Just a bunch of girders and big tanks.”

It was not long before even the outskirts of the city were behind us and we were passing over dark, invisible countryside.

“It’s not much to look at, is it?” Zazkal commented dryly...extra crispy dry. He managed to condemn the entire continent and push all my buttons in one short sentence.

“Like the ocean looks any different at night? Dark is dark,” I snapped. “Wait till the morning.”

“We should be well out into the ocean by then. I suggest you go to sleep. We’re safe enough in the bubble. I don’t think there’s anything interesting to look at in this place.

I turned my back and lay down, not to sleep—I was too annoyed to sleep—just to end the conversation.

CHAPTER 8

SPIDERS

We expected an ocean sunrise when we woke up the next morning.

There *was* water...and there *was* sunrise over the water. All true, but instead of the ocean, it was a lake sunrise.

The bubbles should have bounced off the trees and sailed above them when we got to the edge of whatever lake this was, but we were hopelessly tangled in sticky spider webs. The long-legged six inchers were all over the bubbles trying to repair the damage to their webs, or maybe they were just excited about the huge bugs they had captured.

I'm usually okay with eight leggers, but this was serious creepy. The woods were covered with huge tree-spanning webs. Every web had its own little monster right in the center. You couldn't miss them. Their long, skinny legs were striped red and yellow and they were everywhere. Visions of being wrapped up for spider supper were starting to penetrate my brain.

"What in Neptune's ocean are those?"

Oh, good. Zazkal was awake. His yell woke up Bibi and drew the attention of some people working on a boat at the edge of the water.

"They're called spiders," I answered quietly, hoping he would get the hint and keep his voice down. "In the bug world, they are apex predators.

"They look so delicate," Bibi said, more fascinated than scared. "The nets, I mean. How can they have stopped our bubble?"

"They're super sticky. That's how they catch things to eat." I felt a 'ghost walking on my grave' shiver.

"Every time the bubbles try to bounce away, they get more tangled.," I said, looking to Zazkal for confirmation, but he seemed to have lost interest in the specific nature of our predicament.

"Sit very still and keep quiet," he said. "Those drylanders are coming over. Two heads, automatically disobeying, swiveled in the direction of the water, and then froze.

A man and a boy, maybe eight or nine years old, were walking this way. The man had his light brown hair in a short ponytail. The boy's hair was the same color, but long on top and shaved on the sides.

They were wearing shorts and t-shirts and were ducking under and around the giant webs with their exposed arms and legs like it was no big deal. I shivered again.

"It was over there somewhere," the boy said, "near that bunch of mixed up looking Banana spiders. It sounded like somebody in trouble."

They had heard Zazkal. Well, he can't blame me for this.

We may have been practically invisible, but the spiders were not.

All they saw were spiders walking around in the air, and webs that didn't seem to be attached to anything. Some of the spiders had already started new webs, anchoring them to the bubble, making everything look even wronger.

"Stand back, Bob," the man said.

He reached up with one hand, carefully pushing away the dangling bits of broken web. When he made contact with the bubble, it bounced ever so gently upwards a bit, and then back into place. The spiders all rushed around like crazy, and the two people moved even faster.

They crouched behind some shrubbery and watched us, probably waiting for something terrible to happen. If anyone had been looking at that moment, they would have seen five people—three with tails—sitting as still as possible, all five of us desperately trying to look invisible.

The man spoke first.

“It could be a giant kite made out of clear plastic? Or maybe a weather balloon? I bet it’s a weather balloon.”

He rose cautiously and began to come a little closer, but the boy did not move.

“What about the people, Dad? I think they can see us.”

“What people?”

“Those people,” he pointed at us. The father looked again and could now see what they had not been able to notice before.

“I think there’s a fish design on the kite,” he said. “Yes, I see it now. It’s some kind of mythical representation of sea gods, or something. They’re holding fish, I think. Quite impressive, actually.”

“Dad, they’re not pictures, they’re real. Look, you can see them breathing.”

We all automatically held our breath. Unfortunately, as this involved visibly expanding our chests and taking a deep breath first, it did the opposite of help.

Reluctantly, the father permitted his brains to register what his eyes had been seeing all along.

“Maybe they’re statues, statues of mermaids,” he said, weakly.

He really didn’t want to see us.

“Dad,” said the boy, “they’re not even girls, and besides you know there’s no such thing as a mermaid. They must be some kind of space traveler.”

Great, I thought. I’m a boy and I don’t exist, but it gave me an idea.

CHAPTER 9

DR. WHO?

“Land people have very funny ideas about what’s real and what isn’t,” I whispered out of the corner of my mouth. “Remind me to tell you about it some time.

“Don’t anybody move or talk,” I said quietly, trying not to move my lips. “No matter what I say,” I added.

“Listen,” said the boy, “I think one of them is trying to speak.”

“Ohhhh. Where are we?” I groaned, loud enough for everyone to hear. “What planet is this?”

“I knew it,” the boy said.

I looked right at him and spoke. “Oh, no! Humans! I forgot. We are on the planet Earth.” I turned to face Bibi and said,

“Doctor, Doctor Who, are you all right? Why aren’t you coming out of suspended animation?”

The boy looked confused, but his father’s eyes widened in recognition. “Dr. Who?” He looked around embarrassedly for the TV cameras.

“The cameras must be in the trees. Come on, son. We’re in the way, let’s back off a bit.”

I turned to them and put my hands to my face pretending to hide my mouth from the hidden cameras, and mouthed a silent thank you to the father and son as they moved off.

Then, I turned dramatically back to the still silent Bibi and hoped that it sounded like I was speaking from a script.

“I’ve got to get you back to the mother ship where you can get help.

“Here,” I said, opening my sampo. “Here’s enough food to last till you get there...in case you wake up on the way,” I kept pushing food from my sampo through the opening into Bibi’s bubble.

“...and don’t forget your scarf,” I said, pushing an interminably long wooly scarf through the opening.

I took a couple of books out of the sampo and pushed them through to Bibi. “...and here’s the data we collected on this planet. It contains all the information the mother ship needs to save the earth. I just hope it gets there in time.”

I gave Zazkal a look to make it clear that I was really speaking to him and only pretending to talk to Bibi.

“I noticed, Dr. Who,” I said, “that your space pod isn’t caught up in the spider webs like the other two. All I have to do is detach it, and it will return to the mother ship automatically.” Then I whispered to Zazkal,

“Can you do it? You and I will be O.K. if we can get Bibi safely away.”

He said nothing, but I could see his lips moving, and after a moment, Bibi’s bubble broke away and began to drift upwards.

“Don’t worry, Doctor,” I called to his anxious, looking face, “I have legs, and Zazkal has other resources. We’ll be fine, and we’ll meet you at the mother ship.

“If only there was a way of untangling the space pod,” I said, using my best stage voice. “I would be able to return to the Tardis and get help for my other companion.”

Waving my arms theatrically, I looked directly at the father and son. “Perhaps those humans I saw earlier could be persuaded,” I said rolling my eyes at them.

To their credit, not my acting ability, they seemed to get the message and slowly walked towards the bubbles looking around for the movie cameras.

"I don't see any cameras," the father said.

"They're camouflaged," I answered in a stage whisper.

"I'll be happy to help you get unstuck from those spider webs," he said, "but first I'd like to see the cameras."

This was the tricky part. I kept my mouth shut and waited. Please, please let them figure it out.

"There aren't any, are there?" he said at last.

"I didn't think you'd believe me if I told you the truth."

"That was a pretty fancy trick you pulled when your friend sailed off into the sky like that. Is that what you propose to do after we get you untangled?"

"Yes. Only it wasn't a trick. I really do have to get my other friend away soon."

It was only half a lie. After all, we *were* on a mission, just not the kind I wanted them to think.

"Well, young lady, or whatever you are, when you get back to your ship or whatever it is, you had better arrange for a different disguise. Nobody would believe you were from another planet looking like that."

Nailed it!

I relaxed and tried keep looking worried

"We didn't expect to come in contact with any humans," I was totally on a riff now. "We chose these shapes as ideal terran forms for visiting the sea bottom."

He chuckled and said, "Well, I don't know what picture book you got the idea from, but you look like mermaids and they're just a made-up thing. There aren't any."

Zazkal flinched.

If I was ever going to learn telepathy, now would be a good time. 'No talking. No talking. No talking.' I thought at him as hard as I could. The two people on the ground couldn't have missed my worried expression.

"Oh dear," I said, "I guess we really messed up," and if it rang true, it was because it was.

I took a big watch out of my bag and pretended to look at it and said, "the most important thing is for us to get back to the ship quickly.

"Can you help us? We'll be in terrible trouble if we don't get back before we're missed. Our ships are only permitted in this sector as observers. We are forbidden by our government to have any contacts with the surface dwellers."

"We thought it would be fun to visit your great oceans, but my friend needs to get back immediately. If we're discovered, I'll never be allowed off-planet again," I added for good measure.

The father and son looked at each other for a moment.

"So," said the Dad, turning back to me, "what about the great gifts you have for my people."

Uh oh!

CHAPTER 10

HI-YO, SILVER! AWAY!

“Are you crazy? I’m just a stranded tourist.”

“Yea, I know,” he said, grinning. “In the movies, the bad guys all come bearing great gifts for humankind. Then, after the intermission, it always turns out that what they really wanted was slaves for their salt mines or something like that.”

“You have very strange movies,” I answered deadpan.

“You’re probably right,” he said. “But I guess you’re not a bad guy. Let’s see if we can’t get you back to where you belong.”

“Bob, go back to the boat and bring me the long boat hook.”

“Da-ad! Why can’t you go?”

“Go!”

He went.

“What are you called, little mermaid?” the man asked after the boy left.

All of a sudden my brain dried up. I knew I couldn’t give them my real name and my knowledge of Klingon was nonexistent. Looking at Zazkal for inspiration, I finally said,

“My best friends call me Koi.”

“Are you sure you’re not really a mermaid?”

I gave him my most innocent look.

“I thought you said that form doesn’t exist on this planet.”

Bob came back with the boat hook and the subject was dropped.

Ignoring the webs clinging to his bare arms and the spiders dropping down on his head, Bob’s father bent his head down to protect his face while he used the pole to break through the webs around the bubbles.

I looked at Bob. We were both cringing. He was as creeped out as I was. We saw his Dad flinch when one of the spiders decided to have a taste. We flinched too.

“Are you okay?” I asked anxiously.

“It’s nothing. I’ve got some baking soda on the boat. That will fix it up in no time.”

Most of the spiders had already jumped ship and the bubbles were starting to rise up on their own, pulling away from the last of the anchor threads. We were still covered in sticky webs with long dangling strings that made us look like a pair of deformed hot air balloons.

“I don’t know what we would have done if you hadn’t helped us. I really am very grateful. I wish I really did have a ‘great gift’ for you.”

Thinking about my own father and his addiction to old black and white TV shows, I reached into my sampo and took out a silver bullet.

I had learned the hard way the first time Zazkal used a traveling bubble to kidnap me, that as long as you start small, you can force almost anything in or out of a bubble...anything, that is, except yourself. That’s a one way deal. All in, no out. I pushed the bullet through the bubble-skin and watched it fall to the ground.

“What is it, Dad?” Bob asked, picking it up and showing it to his father.

He looked at what Bob held in his hand, and his lips began to quiver.

“It’s a silver bullet,” his father said, barely able to contain his laughter. “I guess she *is* a good guy.”

That was the last thing I heard. I kept waving goodbye and calling out thank-yous.

I could see Bob still waving, his Dad doubled over with laughter.

“I guess he knew what the silver bullet was,” I said and kept waving till they were out of sight.

Feeling brilliant, I turned, glowing with excitement to Zazkal, who was rubbing his arms and twisting his neck, trying to get everything working again.

“Miriam, would you kindly explain what that was all about,” he asked...not kindly

“It’s really very simple,” I said proudly, ignoring his skepticism and grinning from ear to ear.

“Simple is not the word that springs to mind.”

“No, really. It was perfect. You see, if they thought we were what they call mermaids, they would have done everything they could to capture us.

“They were much more disposed to help people from another planet than Sky people. It has to do with something called television.”

“Bu-ut, if I told them we were from another planet, they wouldn’t have believed that either.

“Instead,” I said proudly, “I got them to decide on their own that we were from outer space, the group that they were most inclined to assist. Not bad, huh?”

“Tell me, why didn’t you just use the sleep spell on them.”

Oops!

I said nothing for a moment, and then very quietly,

“I forgot.”

“You will never be a magic user. That bag is wasted on you,” he said angrily. Then, shaking his head and releasing a long sigh. He turned his back.

Completely deflated, I watched as his shoulders began to shake. After a moment, he began to make a choking noise.

“Oh no,” I thought. “He’s crying.”

He turned his head and I could see the tears streaming down his cheeks. I could also see that he wasn’t crying.

I smiled weakly when I realized the strange noise for what it was. Why didn’t I feel any better?

“Really,” he said between cackles and guffaws, “you have a gift. I think you should replace Bibi as chief minister and diplomat to your grandparents.

“They could do no better. We’ll have to name a new species of fish after you. The golden-tongued-koi.”

This last, he only just managed to get out before completely dissolving.

CHAPTER 11

LOST IN A LAKE

“It is most fortunate that we are still over land today,” Zazkal said when he finally stopped laughing. “Not to mention the advantage of not being burdened down with that Bibi person. We will stop if we pass over another lake like the last one.”

“What?”

The rest of the words beginning to form in my head wisely stopped before they left my mouth. My shattered ego was not about to risk another encounter.

“Nothing,” I said when he gave me a look.

“Then stop interrupting,” he snapped. “I may never get another chance to study fresh-water creatures. I am particularly anxious to meet with other magic users who might be interested in establishing a correspondence.”

“What about the fifteen minute limit?”

“As long as I’m back inside within the required time, I can repeat the delay as many times as I want.”

I didn’t like it. Return and repeat left too many opportunities to miss the bubble. Chances are that we won’t pass over another big lake anyway; I thought and kept my mouth shut.

But chance was not on my side.

“We must be in the Land of Lakes,” I muttered, when only a few minutes later we passed over an even bigger lake. Zazkal said something under his breath and we dropped down onto the water as soon as we reached the middle. The bottom of his bubble opened. Mine didn’t.

“Give me the bag.”

“Shouldn’t we stay together?”

“Stop wasting my time. Give it to me quickly and don’t nap.” He was already in the water. Resigned, I pushed the sampo through the plastic tube. He grabbed it and dove so quickly, that I wasn’t sure whether he had swum off or disappeared.

Alone in the bubble, with no way of getting out, I looked around nervously. This lake had a lot more construction around it. I could see clusters of buildings in almost every direction on the distant shores, including tall ones that must be apartments or hotels.

Today was a Sunday, and the weather was beautiful. It was still early, but it wouldn’t be long before the lake was full of boaters. I could have kicked myself...if I had a foot to kick with, for not warning Zazkal about weekends before he left.

I picked up the big watch I had taken out earlier and started counting. Exactly fourteen and a half minutes later, Zazkal burst into the bubble just as it was closing. His tail got left out and he had to wait for the bubble to finish sucking him in before he could open it again.

He was out of breath and as usual annoyed. Annoyed was about as good as he got, so I guess he was having fun.

“You wouldn’t believe how uncouth these provincial fairies are,” he said. More like how provoked they had probably been, I thought.

“There’s an elderly turtle I want to meet with before I leave,” he said.

“I forgot to tell you about the weekends,” I blurted out. But he was already gone.

“Never mind,” I thought, “he’ll be back in fifteen minutes, and I’ll tell him then what to expect if he wants to stay longer. There will probably be boats and jet skis all over the place in another hour.”

The next fourteen minutes did not pass quickly. I spent the time staring at my watch, scanning the shoreline for activity and trying not to be nervous. For the fifteenth minute, I focused all my attention on the water, willing Zazkal to appear. I was now okay with nervous. I worked on not getting hysterical. I failed on both counts.

When the twin bubbles began to rise slowly into the air with their empty compartment, I was in tears. I felt trapped and helpless. There was no sign of Zazkal.

CHAPTER 12

I'M A POET AND I KNOW IT

The bubbles were approaching the lakeshore. I realized that if Zazkal was not able to build another bubble, then it was on me and my two legs to come back and fetch him. It would help a lot if I knew where to find him. I needed to calm down and make a plan.

I started looking around for signs in the approaching town that would help identify the place. The bubbles were starting to pick up speed and there was nothing I could see clearly. Grandma and Grandpa Sky will never forgive me if I lose Zazkal...hmmm, maybe they would.

It didn't matter, because just a little way past the town center, I passed over a very small building with a really big sign that said Lake Francis Auto Repair.

Francis? Who ever heard of a dumb name like that for a lake? Never mind. It's enough. Stupid trumps panic and now I knew what I needed to do. Extremely simple...and extremely difficult. All I had to do was not go to sleep so that my homing pigeon sampo didn't do its thing. Of course, thinking about not sleeping made me sleepy.

I doubted that Zazkal would find all the ingredients he needed to make another traveling bubble in Lake Francis. He was going to need the sampo.

He probably already took out everything he needed as soon as he realized he missed the bubble, but this was Zazkal we're talking about...I need to stay awake.

I still had at least all day and maybe all night to go. No food. No water. Also no bathroom stops, so they kind of cancelled each other out.

Worse, there was absolutely nothing to do so, of course, my eyeballs were already glazing over. For a while I watched the towns and cows passing rapidly beneath me, but pretty soon I would be over the ocean again. Not much there.

The sun was warm and cozy inside my bubble. Rainbow colors swirled hypnotically on the bubble's skin. It was all much too restful.

All I had was the pillow I was sitting on and the writing practice scroll I had been fooling around with last night when I got tired of reading.

Anything was better than staring at the sea all day. Maybe I'll write something to keep, maybe a journal. I took my lucky pebble out of my wing pocket, rolled it around in my hand and stared at the blank scroll.

I've never been alone-alone. Even when I was on my own in my room, my cat Tefnut was always there. Sweet cuddly, smushy Tiffy-Poo.

There was nothing to be afraid of. The bubble would take me to the right place and drop me off. Bibi would be waiting and Zazkal will probably be right after me.

Maybe.

"I wish Tefnut could be here," I thought and words started to show up on the page.

'I miss my cat. Indeed I do.
But she cannot be here with me, too.'

Oh, look! A poem. I wrote a poem. A real poem.

Not only did I write a poem, but I didn't have to concentrate on the spell. It just happened. I tried again.

I started thinking about my favorite cat person, Alice in Wonderland. She missed her cat, too...and it wasn't just cats we had in common.

I bet that when she had grown too big to fit out the door and was stuck in the White Rabbit's house, she had major regrets about jumping into that rabbit hole.

I know I do. This trip is a disaster.

I started to write.

‘On Being Bubblenapped Across the Wide, Blue Sea’

‘Oh, free me from this unkind place
that lets me see the world but not touch its face.
I would dive deep and taste the brine
and gather sea flowers, thereon to dine.’

I wasn't sure if ‘thereon’ was a real word, but it rhymed. Feeling inspired, I kept going.

‘But you will carry me instead
to places unknown.
Free me only for danger
and force me to roam.’

‘Adventures that once seemed shiny and bright,
yesterday's daydreams,
they were such a delight.
But now, from within this bubble so tight,
to actually do them, really gives me a fright.’

‘I'll never complain of boredom again.
I'll stick to my dreams, they're much easier when
they're done in my room with my family around.
Just take me home. I promise. I won't make a sound.’

Yup. That just about sums it up, I thought.

I looked at my watch. It was only an hour later. I'm going to need another poem.

I was still stuck in the bubble, but in spite of everything, I felt pretty good about how easy the actual writing had finally become...and...I wasn't sleepy.

I can finally write without concentrating on the stupid spell. That means that I get to be a real apprentice and learn some real magic. At least that was what Zazkal promised and if I ever found him again I was going to hold him to it.

Meanwhile, I needed to keep my newly acquired claustrophobia from taking over. The first spell I am going to learn is how to open this bubble-shaped coffin.

I tried the journal thing, but the last poem left me feeling silly and I ended up spending the entire day writing another nonsense poem. My brain must be wired for dumb rhymes.

By the time I was finished, meaning that I couldn't stand it anymore, the sun was low in the sky and I was too hungry to think about trying to rhyme any more words.

All I had to do was go to sleep and wake up and I would have my sampo and all the summer fruit I could eat...but...I was on a mission...a stay awake mission. I knew that Zazkal, if I ever saw him again, would not appreciate my effort. He would just complain that I didn't stay awake long enough.

I tried singing.

"Bring me food," I sang as loud as I could. "Dishes of food, gallons of food, barrels of food, an o-o-ocean of food will do."

Okay, so singing wasn't going to work.

I thought about the pretend picnics I use to have with my pretend big sister, before Verona and I became salt sisters. But like Alice in Wonderland and her cat Dinah, the person I really missed right now was more furry and cuddly.

"Won't you have another cup of tea, Tefnut," I said, using my best Alice voice and pretending an imaginary tea party. If I couldn't eat, I could at least pretend to.

"Oh, Miss Toes, how daintily you lick at your plate of Chocolate Decadence Mousse Pie, but do not fail to try the Zebra Brownies. They are really excellent. I'm going to have some of the Chocolate Roll with hot chocolate sauce." I started to drool.

"Look, there are still two Chocolate Chunk cookies left. Here. You have one and I'll have the other..."

I don't know when my daydream turned into a real dream, but...

CHAPTER 13

FREE AT LAST

...I was dreaming about the ocean. In my dream, I was surrounded by little colored fish. The water was delicious and I was drifting slowly and comfortably downwards through the sun-filtered water near the surface.

I gradually woke up to find my dream correct in every point. The bubble had arrived at its destination, dissolved and dumped me into the ocean.

The practice scroll with my brilliant poetry was gone, on its way to the bottom of the sea, but my sampo was back, floating nearby, hanging around like a lost puppy.

Summer fruit! I am sooo hungry. With a flip of my tail that scattered the school of fish I grabbed the bag and started stuffing myself with every sweet thing I could think of.

It's good to be back. I wonder where Bibi is? Even with my super-powered underwater Sky vision, there was nothing for as far as I could see. Even the little fish had deserted me. I went back to the surface hoping to find a head like mine bobbing between the waves. More nothing. I guess he didn't wait.

This seemed to be a pretty lonely piece of ocean and I was ready for some company. I tied the sampo around my waist and began to swim downward in earnest.

I did not doubt that the bubble had deposited me in the right place. I was headed for the Abyssmal Plain about two and a half miles straight down, probably a couple of hours of steady swimming.

But as the sunlight faded above my head, up and down were starting to get confusing. Plus, with the ocean currents pulling now this way and now that, I no longer had any sure sense of gravity to help me continue down.

It's time for 'sampo to the rescue'. I took a big fishnet bag out of my magic bag and an underwater flashlight. Then I took the biggest stone that would fit through the sampo's opening.

The rock went into the net bag. Three more rocks and I knew I was being pulled in the right direction. The rocks did all the work. I was just along for the ride.

CHAPTER 14

INTO THE ABYSS

Fifteen minutes later and it was now, beyond dark. This was a place where even mermaid eyes didn't help. Gradually, I noticed a patch of dark that was less dark.

Squeezing my eyes into a tight squint I could see tiny lights. If that was Metsoola, it was in the wrong place.

I shook my head trying to rethink up and down, but all it did was make me dizzy. Anyway, it was too soon to be Metsoola.

Apparently, I am not as alone as I thought, but before I had a chance to decide whether or not I should be worried, I was surrounded by strings of bluish lights. My whole body stiffened up.

Something was touching me.

Little touches. All over. Was I being tasted?

The moment I turned on the flashlight, the touching stopped.

Every place the light shone was filled with silvery-black fish each with huge eyes and a row of lights on their bellies running from chin to tail. They scattered as soon as my light went on. Party-light fish. Cute.

The beam of light picked out a very big very dark shape beyond the school, maybe following them.

Maybe it wasn't my light that scattered the fish.

The shape kept getting bigger, which meant it was getting closer. I directed the light to get a better look. Eyes the size of dinner plates. Not a good start.

I moved the flashlight further along the body. Whale-sized body. Whale-sized and getting bigger which means closer.

My hand was no longer steady, but I kept the light moving until I got to the end where I saw enormous tentacles covered with huge suckers.

Giant Squid!

Aren't they kind of like the Loch Ness monster? If it's a fairy, can it eat me?

Instead of following the party-light fish, it was headed right for me...of course it was. I'm a living lighthouse.

Too late to turn out the light. I had a dinner plate in my face.

I was going to need some Giant Squid repellent, but I had done an excellent job of tying the heavy fishnet bag around my wrists so I wouldn't accidentally drop it.

I tried to speak, but there seemed to be a lump in my throat. The rocks were still pulling me downwards but the giant squid had no trouble staying way too close.

"I hope you realize that I am a fairy," I finally squeaked out, while I fumbled with the heavy bag of rocks.

"What's a fairy? You smell good."

"Sky. I'm a Sky." My voice was still shaky.

"What's a Sky? You smell different."

"Sky. You know, double breathers. We breathe air like the Bubble people. We're not on the food chain," I added nervously, because I don't think this monster got around much.

"You breathe air? Like whales?" It backed off a bit.

I sucked in a big gill-full of water, grateful for the space, my left hand finally in the sampo, trying to remember what I was supposed to be taking out.

“You don’t like whales?” It backed off some more.

“Are you a whale?” asked the slowly retreating monster.

Trick question. If I say yes, will it attack? If I say no, will it eat me?

“Uh...yes...sort of...not really.” I tried to cover all bases. Time to change the subject.

“Uh...I’m a very powerful magician...you should go away.” That would have sounded better if it hadn’t come out in such a high-pitched whine.

“What’s a magician? Why can’t I eat you?” The squid spoke very politely...but...it also moved back in my face. It had a mouth like a goldfinch beak...bigger than my head and now about one inch away from my tender tummy.

“I’M A WHALE!” I shrieked.

The whole squid body shook and turned away so fast and with such force, that if I didn’t have my bag of rocks pulling me down and out of reach, I would have been knocked out the ocean.

In the beam of the flashlight I watched the tentacles trailing behind the retreating giant squid as it disappeared into the black.

I guess that was the right answer.

The hand holding the flashlight was still tied to the bag of rocks, my other hand was holding a small jar. Both hands were still shaking. I shone the light on the jar. The label said Giant Squid Repellent. Great. What was I supposed to do with that? Rub it on the squid? I shoved it back in the sampo together with my flashlight.

Instead, I took out a stretchy headband with three super powerful headlights. It took a minute to put it on my head with only one hand but when I was done, the water was lit up in front of me and on both sides. I don’t care if it attracts every fish in the ocean. I want to know what’s coming.



Even though my Sky body couldn’t feel it, the increased pressure as I descended was slowing me down. I added another rock to my collection to speed me on my way. I didn’t want to get dragged to the bottom of the ocean, but this was not a place where I wanted to linger.

As I was swimming down, I passed a swarm of jellyfish swimming up. Lots and lots of jellyfish, transparent but shining with rainbow colors in my headlights. I lingered.

When the last rainbow jelly finally passed, the ocean was empty again for a long time. I kept following my rock bag deeper and deeper and scanning the sea for whatever was out there. I passed a couple of angler fish. Little guys with tons of teeth and a tiny lantern hanging from their heads, but that was all.

Eventually, I thought I saw a faint light in the direction I presumed to be down. I switched off my headlights. Yes! Lots of light. Not little pin pricks of light that meant another school of stranger than strange fish.

This was a glow. A glow from below. I’m either swimming upwards, or I have finally made it. I caught my breath as my heartbeat increased to match the excitement I suddenly felt.

I watched fascinated, unable to look anywhere but the source of light as the dim glow gradually changed to points as I got closer.

The city was a dome of light below me with long tentacles of fairy lights streaming out of the city in different directions, growing fainter with distance and eventually petering out in the dark.

Now that I could see the city, I thought comfortingly of Bibi waiting below.

Whoops! I had forgotten. Bibi didn't have any rocks. He had to deal with the current. He could be anywhere. Why didn't he wait for me? Now I have to go in by myself.

Maybe I can wait for him. Sort of hang around until he shows up. But it will be hours, maybe days before Bibi gets here and who knows if Zazkal will ever get out of that lake.

I was on my own.

I'll just swim up to the first sky I see and demand to be taken to the king. Right. Like ten and a half years old is old enough to represent one kingdom to another.

I miss Grandma and Grandpa Sky. I miss Stan and Ollie. I even miss Zazkal, although in his case, maybe 'missed' is putting it too strongly.

Suck it up, Miriam, I told myself. You need a plan.

"If only Thorn and Reddragon were here," I said out loud.

I remembered how much the seahorses helped me when I was a very nervous guest of honor at the huge party my grandparents had hosted when I arrived at Casalot.

CHAPTER 15

SEAHORSES

"Actually, we are here," said a small voice near my head.

"You called. We came," said a second voice on the other side of my head.

"Thorn, Reddragon, you're really here. Oh, I'm so glad to see you. But I didn't think you could survive this deep."

"We can't," said one small brown seahorse.

"But we can if you call us," said the other. "We can be anywhere that you are. Why do you think we told you our names?"

"Even on the land?"

"Even there," said Reddragon who I now recognized as the voice at my right ear. "Although I don't know what good we could do. The only thing we can do on the land is lie around and flop."

"You're just what I need right now. You can be my Jiminy Crickets. Only what I need most right now isn't a conscience, it's courage."

"Huh?"

"What's a cricket?"

"It's a story about a boy called Pinocchio who didn't have a conscience," I explained. "A good fairy gave him a bug called a cricket to be his conscience."

"I get it," said Thorn. "If you need a conscience, call a cricket. But if you need courage, send for a seahorse."

"I feel braver already."

"What happened to Bibi and Zazkal?" Thorn asked, seriously. "Why aren't they with you?"

"They're lost. Well, Zazkal isn't lost. He's stuck...and Bibi probably isn't lost. I just don't know where he is.

"I'm not lost, either. I know exactly where I am...but...now I have to go on my own...and...oh, I'm so glad you're here."

"Miriam," said Reddragon, "I think you should call the rest of us. Even though we're small, the more of us there are, the more we will look like an official escort.

"Everyone in the city has either never seen a seahorse, or if they have, they know that seahorses can't live at this depth. In either case, they should be impressed."

"But will the other seahorses mind?" I asked. "I don't feel right calling them to come such a long way."

"Mind!" said Thorn. "Miriam, we're thrilled. There is no way we ever could have seen a real abyssmal city without you. Besides, this is exactly why we gave you our names."

"In that case," I said. "Let's do this right."

Taking off the scrunchie that kept my hair in a ponytail, I popped it into the sampo. Next, the headlight headband came off. I wrapped it around my wrist, keeping the light on. Now I had floaty 'mermaid' hair, a style no self-respecting Sky would ever wear. It's way beyond impractical.

Then I took a fancy headband out of the sampo. Stretchy shiny silver satin with eight thin ribbons, in a rainbow of colors attached along the top and sides of the headband. The headband kept most of the hair out of my face. It was really for formal occasions when I didn't need to see to see where I was going, but it would do.

Thorn and Reddragon wrapped their tails tightly around two of the ribbons and nestled into my hair for extra traction, while I called softly for the rest of my friends.

“Leviathan, Darkflower, Sharktooth, Tidalwave, Flyingfish, Inkjet.”

In less than a moment, I was surrounded by a halo of seahorses, all laughing and talking at once... “Hi Miriam”... “Where are we?”... “Ohh...I’ve never been this deep before...”

Explanations took a few minutes. But they were soon sorted out, firmly attached to the ribbons and with an extra rock in the net bag to give speed to our anticipation, we headed down towards the city’s glow.

PART II

CASTLE DOWNALOT



CHAPTER 16

GLORIA MUNDI

I don't know what I expected when we finally passed through the dome of lights and saw the city, but it was not a stone forest at the bottom of the ocean.

There were so many plants floating out from the sides and on top of the tall stone pillars that I felt like a bird looking down on the treetops.

"They should call this place Seaweed City," Thorn said.

Fairy lights were everywhere, not just the dome of lights at the city limits, but scattered all around the 'stone trees'.

When we got closer, we saw that the pillars were full of holes just like Casalot. Doors and windows. Stone tree houses.

Coming from such enormous darkness into the light, the city seemed bright but there were hardly any people around.

"I guess it's still early here," I said.

A salt elf was swimming out of a nearby tree house and we swam over to ask directions.

"Excuse me, I said. "I've just arrived from Casalot with a message for King Mundiflure. Can you tell me how to find him?"

"Castle Downalot is not far from here and I'm going there myself. I'll be happy to show you the way."

"I'm Gloria Mundi," the salt elf said. Everybody calls me Glori."

Glori was the size of a sea sprite only with a tail like mine instead of a sprite's finny legs. Salt elves are known for their colorful tails and Glori was no exception with bright pink scales and matching super short pink hair. She may have been smaller than me, but she would never be lost in a crowd.

"How do you do, Glori. I'm Miriam, and these are my friends..." I hesitated, not sure how else to introduce them.

"We are her seahorse escorts," spoke up Sharktooth, side-stepping the need to provide names.

"How nice to meet you," Glori said. "I didn't know that seahorses were fairies."

"We're not," said Leviathan.

"Forgive me for contradicting you," said Glori, "but it is not possible for anyone but fairies to live at this depth."

I hesitated again but my friends knew just what to say.

“We are here because of fairy magic,” said Tidalwave. “Queen Flora and King Mele’, Miriam’s grandparents, are very powerful magic users.” He neglected to mention that the fairy magic that allowed them to be with me was theirs, not Mele’ and Flora’s.

Glori’s face showed the excitement of recognition. “Of course, I should have known you by your lovely fins. The story we’ve heard described a Sky of great beauty and ability with wonderful dorsal fins.”

I felt my face heat up with embarrassment.

She looked at my wings admiringly. I winced. I had forgotten to tape them down and they floated out behind me like a fancy goldfish.

“Well, you know how stories get exaggerated...” I stammered but Glori was all questions with no pauses for answers.

“The bubble people told us about your adventures. But I would have expected you to be much older. You’re so young to have fought with an evil wizard. How did you actually escape? Has the wizard been banished forever? Did you really change him into a rock? Did your grandparents teach you to use magic? Is it true that you can make anything you want? We heard that...”

Somewhere in the middle of Glori’s non-stop questions, I ceased to be embarrassed and entered a state of mild astonishment.

“Glori, hardly any of that is true,” I said. “I’ll tell you what happened, but first explain how you heard it from the bubble people. I thought you said that only fairies could live down here,” said Miriam.

“It’s true that no one else can live down here,” Glori said, “but sometimes the largest of the squid eaters come on cin rani. They never stay long because it takes almost all of their air supply just to travel this deep and back to the surface again. When they do come, they always tell the most wonderful stories.”

“Now,” she said, pausing to savor the story she was about to hear, “tell me what really happened when you were captured by the wizard.”

“It’s true, that I was kidnapped by a rogue Sky, but I didn’t escape. My grandparents rescued me. And I’m afraid that the reports of my magic ability are way off target. I’m just an apprentice magic user and not a very advanced one at that.

“You’ll never guess what happened to the rogue Sky,” I said.

“We heard that he was banished forever,” Glori said. “Some of the old stories talk about people being banished, but no one can remember it actually happening to a sea fairy.”

“No, he wasn’t banished, although it was considered. Instead, he was expected to show that he could be part of the community by taking on an apprentice.”

Glori looked hard at me and said, “Didn’t you just mention that you were apprenticed to a magic user?”

“Yep, you guessed it.”

“What a great idea, making him be nice to you.”

“He has to teach me magic. He doesn’t have to be nice to me, and he’s not.”

“How unfairlylike,” Glori said. “You’re a lot younger than I would have expected. What brings you to Metsoola, anyway?”

“I’m supposed to be here with Zazkal and Bibi, one of the council members, but we got separated.

“My grandparents sent us to collect information about the fairy lights. They heard that the Abyssmal cities were having a problem.”

“It’s true,” Glori said. “Our supplies of power nuts are running dangerously low.

“We’re expecting a new shipment, so no one is overly worried. But we sure would like to find out what’s happening.

“Common talk has it that someone is taking them. King Mundiflure is of a different opinion and he could be right. He thinks they may be defective, and he’s sent a group of Sky to the Kingdom of the Cats to check it out.”

“The Kingdom of the Cats,” I gasped.

“Miriam,” Sharkstooth whispered urgently in my ear, “Everyone knows that the power nuts are grown in Ailuria.”

I could hardly tell Glori that I was only visiting my grandparents as a side visit, and that my actual destination was the Kingdom of the Cats. At least not without telling her a lot of other stuff.

My cat Tefnut was responsible for my fairy gifts. Her sole purpose was to set me up as her replacement in Ailuria. Fortunately, she could beg, plead, and manipulate but she could not force me to accept. I did promise to check it out, so that’s where I’ll be headed this winter.

If Glori knew that I would eventually be going to Ailuria, her questions would triple. Discretion aside, it would take hours to satisfy her curiosity. Time to change the subject.

“I guess that’s why my grandparents got me to bring some extra power nuts. Let’s stop at a light and see if they work down here.”

Grandma and Grandpa had done no such thing, but I had been flustered by Sharkstooth’s remark. The power nuts were the first thing that popped into my head.

“There’s a light over there,” Glori said. “Let’s try it.”

We stopped next to the fairy light. I drew a small stone out of the sampo. This one was a iridescent greeny-gray color and felt slightly warm in my hand.

This pebble, or nut, looked and felt right. It needed only to be put to the test as they were about to do. If it didn’t work I could easily make some excuse to Glori. If it did, why, what a great gift a big pile of power nuts would make for King Mundiflure.

“It feels all right, I mean, it feels like it’s still good,” I said. “Let’s check it out.”

Glori reached out a little too quickly and the round globe of light bounced away from her, which was what they were supposed to do when something bumps into them. Then she reached out more slowly and carefully, and this time her fingers penetrated the globe and disappeared inside. She drew out a power nut that differed from mine only in being more blue than green.

As soon as the power nut was withdrawn from the globe, the light went out. When I replaced it with the one that the sampo had manufactured, the light went on.

I gave a big pleased-for-myself sigh and tried to contain the size of my grin hoping that it did not seem excessive to Glori.

She smiled pleasantly and said, “Well, it looks like they’re still good. That will certainly be a nice surprise for everyone. There are already some roads on the outskirts of the kingdom that have become unusable.

“Let’s push on. We’re nearly at Castle Downalot. You can tell me what it’s like at Casalot,” she said eagerly. “I’ve never been there before.”

We swam on for a few minutes while I tried to describe Casalot. From her comments, I got the impression that life here was a little less casual.

“It sounds like Metsoola is more formal than Casalot,” I said. Glori looked like she was going to say something but instead she turned her head, drawing my attention to what lay ahead, an absolutely classic tall, airy, many-towered fairytale style castle.

It was as if a whole island had sunk to the bottom of the sea bringing the castle with it. “Wow! A real...make-believe castle,” I said, catching myself just in time before I blurted out the word fairytale.

Second glance showed the castle to be made up of a cluster of the stone tree houses in different heights and widths, romantically draped with the vineing plants to be seen everywhere in Metsoola. It positively echoed with the sound of every fairytale I ever read.

“It’s definitely real,” Glori said. “There’s no make-believe about it. We are rather fond of Castle Downalot. It took over fifty years to build and is considered to be a real *tour de force*.”

“I know it is not make-believe,” I said, smiling. “It’s just that it reminds me of all the stories my parents told me when I was little, as if they had suddenly come to life. I have this feeling that as soon as I pass through those gates, I will be swimming into the middle of a...a...”

“Make-believe story, Miriam,” Darkflower whispered. “Don’t forget, Glori thinks you’re a fairy like she is.”

“Make-believe story,” I said emphatically. I don’t know what fairies call make-believe stories, but it was certainly not fairytales.

Now that we were almost at the castle, it was Glori’s turn to change the subject.

“Once we get inside, you will probably be whisked away to see King Mundiflure. But if you need a break, come for a quiet visit. I promise not to pummel you with questions, even though I am bursting with more. I’m puttering in the castle gardens most days, and anyone can tell you where I live if you have time or inclination.

Glori turned out to be right. Even before we were inside, I saw another Sky headed our way. “That’s Fiddlesticks, one of the king’s ministers,” she said. “He’ll know where to take you.”

“I’m on my way to a meeting with King Mundiflure right now,” Fiddlesticks said after introductions were done. “I’m sure he’ll be very pleased to meet you.”

CHAPTER 17

OOPS

When we found him, King Mundiflure was in a room with half a dozen other sea fairies, another salt elf, a couple of sea sprites and three Sky, four including King Mundiflure. From the general lack of the noise that was typical of most fairy gatherings, I presumed that the discussion was a serious one.

King Mundiflure's black hair and bushy black eyebrows gave him a fierce expression. But his voice was soft and welcoming.

"So you're Mele' and Flora's granddaughter," he said. "It's a pleasure to meet you...and a seahorse escort! I never thought to see a seahorse this deep. You are to be respected for earning their trust," he said, implying that he understood the magic that brought them here.

"What brings you to our kingdom? Such a long journey must have a serious purpose."

The next speech was for Bibi to make. But he had clearly not arrived or King Mundiflure would have told me. For all of Zazkal's back-handed compliments about my golden tongue, it felt a lot more like lead at the moment.

The seahorses had helped me work out what to say. I just had to say it. Now Sharkstooth was whispering into my ear, prompting me, but it just got mixed up with my own thoughts. Everyone was looking at me. Oh, I wish Bibi were here.

"It does...I mean it does have a serious purpose, sir. We, I mean Zazkal, Bibi and I...we were separated on the trip and they're not here yet..."

"Ask about the rumors, Miriam," Inkjet whispered.

"...we were sent by my grandparents to ask about rumors concerning the fairy lights. My grandparents heard that the abyssmal kingdoms were having some kind of problem. They understand how important the lights are down here..."

"They have information, Miriam," Inkjet said into my ear. Oh, right. I remember now.

"They have information," I said. "They suspect smugglers," I finished abruptly.

"I hardly think smugglers would bother with us," the king said. "We are much too far away."

"You really need to talk to Bibi," I said. "I'm sure he'll be here soon..." Everyone looked skeptical and I was out of words. What to do?

"I brought some extra power nuts with me," I ad-libbed. "In case you can use them".

Swimming over to a small table that was built into the wall, I poured out as many power nuts as I felt could realistically be taken out of the sampo.

Everyone seemed pleased. Fiddlesticks and the other ministers were smiling and commenting quietly among themselves.

"What a thoughtful gift," the king said as the large pile of magic pebbles emerged from my bag. "Pitzie," he said to one of the sea sprites, "see how many there are."

"There are 38," announced Pitzie after he had counted them.

The king looked at my bag, then he looked at me "What a pity," he said sadly, "that you didn't bring five more nuts. It would have given us enough to reopen an important roadway."

One of the ministers had a puzzled expression and seemed about to say something.

"Not now, Flambeau," King Mundiflure said, sharply but I only heard the regret in his lovely voice. Anxious to help, I spoke up.

"Perhaps I haven't emptied the bag completely. Let me check".

The water was thick with the silence of the watching sea fairies while I pretended to search through my bag. “There’s a tear in the lining,” I said by way of explanation as I pulled five more power nuts out of the sampo.

“So it’s true,” the king said softly. “You really do have a magic bag.”

Uh oh! I had a feeling that insisting that the stones had been caught in a hole in the lining would not be a very useful exercise. I didn’t say anything.

The king stood a even straighter and there was a little more formality and distance to his already stiff manner.

“It is most kind of Queen Flora and King Mele’ to give us their magic bag in our time of need. We are most grateful to them and to you as their emissary.”

He knew perfectly well that my sampo was not a gift. I think that he also anticipated that I wouldn’t have the nerve to contradict him. He was right.

Oh, golden tongue, I thought, start working...fast. A silly picture of the king confronting a tiny goldfish crept into my brain and a tiny smile crept into the corners of my mouth.

The puzzled expression that ever so briefly crossed the king’s face was enough to break his spell of intimidation. I knew just what to say.

“The bag is not a gift, Your Majesty,” I said, “but you may have it if you wish.” The room remained silent. All eyes were on me as I untied the bag and handed it to the king.

The king was momentarily taken aback. I filled the silence as quickly as I could, to keep him from issuing any more unpleasant royal decrees.

“I came with two other companions,” I said, trying to match his formal tone, “Bibi, the chief minister, and Zazkal, the magic user to whom my grandparents have apprenticed me. We were separated on the journey when the device Zazkal had invented to hasten our trip broke up. They should be...”

“Miriam, I smell danger,” said Reddragon. “Get out if you can.”

“They should be reaching Metsoola soon,” I improvised. “We planned to meet again just outside the city, but as I was so early, I came ahead to let you know of their arrival. I know you will have many things to discuss with them, matters of state and of magic of which I have no knowledge. I will bring them as soon as they arrive.”

All the while I was talking, I was swimming backwards towards the exit. Executing the underwater equivalent of a formal bow, I ended my speech with a theatrical “Farewell, Your Majesty. Until we meet again.” I turned and swam off, grinning.

“I’ve always wanted to say that,” I told the seahorses.

“Hang on tight, everyone,” I said, increasing my speed so as to be far away before the king figured out that he couldn’t use the sampo.

We were swimming fast, faster than is considered polite indoors and the waves from our passing were wreaking havoc with the palace furnishings.

We had come to the end of a horizontal hallway and I wasn’t sure which way to turn and didn’t want to spend a lot of time thinking about it.

“Which way,” I said.

“Left,” said Sharkstooth.

“Right,” said Thorn.

“Down,” said Inkjet.

“Wrong way,” I said, bumping into King Mundiflure after a fast left turn.

“Hi,” I said weakly.

“Wrong way,” he said, smiling indulgently at me. “You needed to turn right at that corner. The main entrance is just up ahead.”

The king had my sampo in one hand and a big scissor in the other. Behind him at a polite distance were two large Sky, both wearing the same green belt and matching collar studded with little gold orbs. The palace guard, I presumed.

“Metsoola can be confusing for a newcomer,” he continued. “Perhaps it would be better if we sent someone else to meet your companions.

“And while we are waiting, you can show me how to use this magic bag, that is, if it really is a magic bag. If it is not, then we might as well discard it.” He held out the sampo, opened the scissor wide and brought them together.

“No!” I gasped. “Don’t destroy my sampo!”

The smile that crossed his face after my remark was enough. I was totally outed.

“Tell me,” he said. “Can I use this bag at all?”

“Not really,” I answered with defeated honesty. “It was made to work only for me. A really good magic user might be able to get something out of it, but I wouldn’t know where to begin to show you how to use it.” I took a breath.

“Your Majesty,” I said, speaking quickly, before I lost my courage. “I know how troubled you must be about the fairy lights, but my magic bag won’t solve any problems. You would do a lot better talking with Bibi and Zazkal when they get here.”

He lowered his head and peered at me as if he were looking over the top of a pair of spectacles. He had a look about him of someone who was making up his mind about something. It was only a moment, then he turned to the Sky behind him. “Fetch Edward,” he said.

CHAPTER 18

JAWS WILL DROP

The king led me into a nearby room filled with cushions to wait for Edward, whoever he was. One of the palace guards stayed, floating near the entrance to make sure I didn't get any ideas.

I prepared myself for an onslaught of difficult questions, about my bag and my background.

And I thought I had trouble getting around Glori's questions. If I was concerned about saying the wrong thing to Glori, I was sure that I had no right answers for this Sky.

But whatever his reasons, the king adopted a more relaxed posture and changed to a less charged subject.

"Most people who come to Metsoola for the first time want to know why it's so warm," he said.

"It's true," I answered, relaxing a little bit. "Everything about your city is an enigma, familiar and strange at the same time. Even the Tree houses."

"Tree houses?"

Here we go again, I thought. No matter what we talk about, I'm in trouble. How could I tell him what a tree house is without revealing that I am from outsea.

Since the traveling bubbles seemed to be a marginally safer subject. I tried to make it sound as if the bubble trip overland had been where I had first learned about trees.

"Zazkal created a device that shortened our journey from Casalot by allowing us to travel unseen over the land," I said. "The land we passed was covered with plants called trees. They have a tall thick and hard central section with the softer part of the plant growing out of the middle and top. They look a lot like your houses. So we decided to call them 'tree houses'."

"Tree houses," he said again after he understood. "It's more accurate than you realize since our homes are grown and cultivated like plants, even though they're made of stone."

"For any deep sea kingdom," he continued, "the two most important things are light and a way to grow or get food. The special advantage we have are all the active volcanoes under us."

The ground suddenly feeling very warm, I unconsciously floated up and off my cushion.

"You mean I'm sitting on a volcano," I said. But before I could receive the confirmation I didn't want, a large group of Sky arrived.

I recognized several of the ministers from the previous meeting, two more palace guard types, and a boy about my own age who was clearly related to King Mundiflure.

He had the same distinctive black piercing eyes, but with a softer, more open expression. Unlike the adults' stiff formal hairdos, his hair was short and loose, more brown than the king's black lacquered hat of hair and on his shoulder sat a small ghostly white octopus.

They came in silently and silently waited for the king to speak. He was not quick about it. Finally, when everyone was seated and looking at King Mundiflure, he straightened his body and took a deep breath. I already recognized the stiffness that preceded and accompanied his formal speaking style.

Now I'm in for it, I thought. Why did I ever think I could come here without waiting for Bibi and Zazkal?

He turned to me and said, "Miriam, this is my son Edward."

Then he turned to Edward and spoke. "Edward, this is Miriam. She is the granddaughter of King Mele' and Queen Flora of Casalot, and I have agreed to their proposal of marriage. You will be married tomorrow...to each other," he added to make it perfectly clear.

It wasn't just me, the whole room was speechless. Jaws were dropping all over the place. The only thing I could hear were tiny gasps coming from some of the seahorses.

But for a ten-year old, marriage is a fate worse than death. Our eyes bulged out with astonished indignation. I was the first to attempt speech.

"I'm just a kid," I squeaked.

"I'm too young to get married," squeaked the second pair of bulging eyes.

The king had already turned his back to us and begun speaking to the ministers.

"See that her two companions are met by an official escort before they enter the city. There is no need for them to come to Castle Downalot. Have a suitably large entourage to accompany them to back to Casalot to inform Queen Flora and King Mele' of our acceptance of their proposal."

"Make it clear to the king and queen that we understand that the great distance between our kingdoms makes it impossible for them to arrive in time for the actual nuptials. We will prepare a wedding celebration to take place when they arrive. Take the children to the garden to become acquainted. See that they are...are suitably supervised."

I suddenly found myself surrounded by green belt and collar Sky and being gently propelled toward the door. Edward seemed to be in the middle of another group of belt and collar people, also moving to the door.

I rolled my eyes sideways, trying to see the seahorses, hoping for some useful advice. But they were all out of sight in my hair. They must have been just as shocked as I was.

Just as we reached the exit, the king turned to his son and spoke. "Edward, I am sure you will like Miriam after you get to know her. From the little I have seen of her, she seems to me both clever and kind." Then looking at me with a twinkle in his eye, he added, "and I think you'll find she has an excellent sense of humor."

CHAPTER 19

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

I was silently steaming as we moved past and through a series of floor doors and wall doors. Most of the guards had gone elsewhere, leaving us with an honor guard of two Sky, one in front and one behind.

“Don’t worry, Miriam,” Inkjet whispered, “we’ll figure something out.”

“We think you should try and get the prince talking,” Thorn said. I wasn’t exactly in the mood for conversation and Edward’s narrow eyes and jutting chin suggested that neither was he, but I made an effort. Thorn was right. Know your enemy.

“Cute octopus,” I ventured. It was kind of adorable.

“Thank you.”

“So, do you usually have an octopus on your shoulder,” I asked, trying to provoke a conversation.

“Yes.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Specter,” he answered flatly.

I sighed and tried a different subject.

“You’re father was teasing me when he said that the city was built on an active volcano, wasn’t he,” I asked.

“That’s plural, as in volcanoes,” Edward said. “They’re the reason it’s warm enough to grow food down here.

“Not only do the volcanoes give us the temperatures we need to grow food,” he began, “but our method of controlling them provides our housing.”

“You’ve made this speech before, haven’t you,” I said. He sounded like he was reciting something he learned in school.”

Edward sniffed once, held his head a little higher and continued the lecture. At least he was talking. I hoped the seahorses were happy.

“Everyone in Metsoola who has reached a certain level of expertise in magic, and that includes most of the adult population,” he added, “takes turns spending time at one of several underground observation sites around the city. This way, we can tell well in advance when a volcano is about to erupt.”

Having gotten this far on one breath, he paused, took another deep breath and continued.

“There is a very small group of Sky who rank among our best magic users. When volcanic activity is predicted, several of them are called to the site to precipitate and direct the lava flow,” he said, speaking with careful precision. “The result is a controlled flow that is used to produce a new building.”

I watched as he reinflated his chest for the next section.

“Every building in Metsoola is the result of a single volcanic eruption. About the only thing we can’t control is the amount of activity. The bigger the eruption, the bigger the building.”

“Now I understand what your father meant when he said that even though they were built of rock, the buildings grew and were cultivated. Any chance I’ll get to see a new one growing?” I asked.

“Not likely,” came the reply. “They don’t occur that often. In my entire life, I’ve only seen six. But you never know,” he said, exiting lecture mode and looking around.

“We’re here,” Edward said despondently.

CHAPTER 20

THE NOT-SO-SECRET GARDEN

By the time the lecture ended, we were near the top of the castle looking through an opening onto a giant courtyard. Our door was a hole on the side of a fairy light-filled dome that sealed off the garden below from the outside world.

There were lots of entrances from the castle into the garden, but as I watched, I saw each one fill up with a guard.

A perfect prison.

“I imagine this is what your father calls ‘properly supervised’,” I said to Edward. He shrugged.

Prison or not, I had to admit, it was pretty spectacular. The garden was designed to be viewed from above with an intricate patterning of different kinds of tall kelp.

Seaweeds were growing on and out from the walls surrounding pillow covered ledges where people could relax and admire the view. Some of the ledges had statues that looked like they had been shaped from flowing lava and based on the lecture I just heard, they probably were.

Sea grass paths curved through the shiny kelp creating the patterns, but also so that you could swim among these soft trees instead of just looking down on them.

Edward seemed to know where he was going, so I followed him down to the seabed and along the sea grass paths toward the center of the garden. We were almost but never completely invisible from the watching guards as we passed even less private rock gardens and sea grass lawns.

The edges of the sea grass lawns and the seabed around the rock gardens were filled with graceful ferny algae from palest pink to bright violet red, browns shading into yellow, occasional deep blues and lots of different greens. This garden didn’t need any outsea flowers.

But private was what I wanted, and I sensed that private was where Edward was taking us.

Some of the sculptures we passed were fairies, bubble people or fish but most of the were just graceful shapes that seemed to change and flow into each other as you swam around and over them. You could almost see them drifting with the plants that moved as we swam by, disturbing the water.

I nearly said hello to a carved rock sprite with a basket of carved sea anemone that looked like he was swimming out from between two groups of coral covered with the real thing.

The sculptures were very cool. Verona needs to see this, I thought. I wanted to take pictures for her but, no sampo, no camera. Oh, well.

Finally, we swam underneath a wide ledge in a rock garden covered with red and yellow rockweeds to a well-lit grassy spot that was completely hidden from above. I craned my neck to see where the fairy lights were hidden, but as soon as we were alone, Edward turned to me, raised his chin, squared his shoulders and began to speak.

“Look out Miriam,” whispered Reddragon, “here comes another royal decree.”

“I’m sure,” Edward began, using his father’s formal speaking voice, “that when I am older... much older,” he added, “you are exactly the kind of person I would like to marry. Furthermore, I would never willingly do anything to offend you or your grandparents, however—”

“—Edward, I don’t want to marry you either,” I interrupted. “It’s a ridiculous idea.”

Recognizing a fellow conspirator, he immediately relaxed out of father style and back into kid mode.

“Why would your grandparents do such a thing. We’re way too young to get married, and besides, I never heard of parents choosing someone for you. I don’t know what it’s like at Casalot, but in Metsoola, we choose our own partners,” he said with a distinct edge to his voice.

“This was *not* my grandparents’ idea. And marriage has nothing to do with my trip to Metsoola, at least it didn’t until after I got here.” Edward was looking puzzled.

“Don’t you get it? This is your father’s way of controlling my sampo.”

“My father would never do a thing like that! What’s a sampo?”

“It’s a magic bag.”

“The magical knowledge of Metsoola is very advanced. I doubt your so-called magic bag can perform any feats that our senior magic users cannot duplicate.

“This bag, I said, gritting my teeth, “will produce anything that will fit through the opening. including power nuts. As far as your father is concerned, my sampo equals an endless supply of power nuts.”

Edward finally got it. His eyes widened with understanding.

“Oh, wow, that is some serious magic. Where can I get one?”

“It’s a fairy gift and it only works for me.”

“I have to admit,” Edward said, “this is starting to sound like something my father would do... ‘for the good of the community’...he would say.”

“Oh, he did it all right,” I said. “The question is does he really mean it, and can he make us do it?”

“Yes and yes,” Edward answered rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “There must be a better way to make you part of the family. Wouldn’t you rather be my sister?”

“I’m perfectly happy with the family I already have, if you don’t mind.” I was starting to feel testy and I didn’t try to hide it. “Far be it for me to criticize, but if you and your father think that incorporating me as part of your family is going to solve all his problems, you are both mistaken.”

“It seems to me,” he bristled back, “that we should let the adults solve the adult problems, and that we should concentrate on the one thing that we both agree on.”

“No marriage,” we shouted in unison. We were ready to start again.

“I sense a definite unanimity of purpose,” Edward said.

“Definitely,” I agreed, nodding vigorously. “I assume we have absolutely no chance of convincing your father of anything he doesn’t want, or in this case, unconvincing him.”

“Agreed.”

“Since we don’t have time to wait for my grandparents to get here, I think that the best plan is for me to escape, but unless you’re planning on running away from home, you’ll be left behind, holding the bag, so we need to make it look like I got away without your help.”

“Half-agreed,” Edward said. “You’re right. But I don’t mind holding the bag. In fact, I look forward to handing it personally to him.”

“I gather that this is not the first time you and your dad have not been in complete agreement,” I said.

“I usually end up doing what he wants whether I want to or not,” Edward said, bitterly. “If we succeed, then this time I’m the one who gets to present *him* with a *fait accompli*.”

“We need something like a new building. All the excitement would make great cover for our escape.”

“Us? What us? I thought you wanted to be left holding the bag,” I said.

“Right. But I could come part way with you, couldn’t I, and then come back to announce your exit?”

“Let’s figure out the best way to get out first, and then decide who is going and how far,” I said twisting my neck again to get a better look at the lights in the cave.

Edward smiled a ‘cat-that-just-swallowed-the-canary’ secret smile and said, “You’re looking for the fairy lights, right?”

“What? Oh, I guess I am,” I said, not realizing what I was doing until he pointed it out.

“Where are they, anyway?” I expected him to point out the places where they were hidden away in crevices in the stone.

His grin widened, “There aren’t any”.

CHAPTER 21

THE SALT LAKE

Edward paused for dramatic effect, taking satisfied note of my skeptical expression and said slowly with feeling. “It’s sunlight ... real sunshine.”

There was a bit of a silent stand-off as Edward waited for my inevitable protest before he continued. I wouldn’t bite. Instead, I crossed my arms and maintained a skeptical silence. Eventually, he gave in.

“It’s a secret entrance into the outsea fairylands,” he said slowly. My arms stayed crossed.

“Outsea,” Edward said, “ordinary land people and land-dwelling fairies live separately, not like here. I don’t know how they manage it,” he added. “But I always thought that because only fairies can live this deep ...”

There was a loud snorting sound from the octopus on his shoulder.

“Sorry, Spec,” he said. “You know what I mean. Anyway, it’s only a theory.”

I knew from personal experience that there were gateways between outsea fairylands and human lands, so why not here, I thought.

“Why is it a secret?” was my first question. “It doesn’t seem that hard to find.”

“It’s not officially a secret. I know my father knows about it and, of course, Glori knows all about it—”

“—Ha! If Glori knows, then everybody knows,” I said.

“You know Glori! When did you meet her?”

“We met Glori when we first came to Metsoola,” I answered. “She was awfully nice, but she didn’t impress me as someone who would enjoy keeping a secret for very long.”

“It’s true, she likes to know everything that’s going on,” he said, “but I don’t think she’s indiscreet. Anyway,” he said, reddening slightly, “she’s never repeated to my father any of the things I asked her not to.”

“But the outsea-gate isn’t actually a real secret. It’s just that most people don’t know about it and those that do never bother with it or talk much about it. If I mention it to my father, he treats it very casually, as if it were no big deal and there wasn’t much to say on the subject.”

“On the other hand,” I pointed out, “if we tried to hide here, I bet this is one of the first places he would send people to look for us.”

“True enough,” he agreed. “Would you like to go out to the surface? There’s not much to see, but it’s amazing having your head right out in the sky looking at the sun.”

The cave under the overhang went back only a few yards before it began to open up at the top. The sea grass floor changed to smooth rock slope leading up to the sky.



We were in the middle of a little lake with a rocky shoreline and not much else. I waited until all the seahorses were holding onto my hair before I put my head out. “Is everybody okay out here?” I asked, poking my head out of the water.

“Well, it’s an interesting perspective,” Tidalwave said. Her comment was followed by a series of small giggles. I ducked back under.

“You have to wrap yourself a lot tighter,” Leviathan said to Tidalwave. “She was hanging upside down,” he explained to me.

“What about breathing?” I asked.

“No problem,” said Darkflower. “We can be anywhere you can.”

Spec had moved from Edward’s shoulder to his arm so that only the top of his head and his eyes were out of the water. He was twisting his head all around taking everything in.

“Come on, Spec,” Edward said. You’ve seen this before.”

“But there’s always something new. Look! Look at that outsea creature.” A green lizard was sunning itself on a rock near the water.

“It’s just a fish with feet,” Edward said. “No big deal.”

“Nobody actually lives here,” Edward said to me. “It’s too salty for freshwater fairies.”

“What about outsea fairies?” I asked, looking around. I was still digesting the fact that Spec was something more than a cute white blob with big round eyes.

The landscape was pleasant, but not exactly verdant. It was mostly bare rocky ground, with scattered clumps of tall grass and dandelions. There were woods in the distance, but nothing nearby. “Doesn’t anybody ever come here?” I asked Edward.

“Not really,” he answered. “Apparently this lake isn’t on the way from somewhere to somewhere, no one lives nearby, and no one here has any use for salt water, so no one bothers to come.”

“I wonder how far we are from the Kingdom of the Cats?” I asked.

“A long way, I would guess. The Kingdom of the Cats is on a river that goes out to the sea, and from what my father tells me, this lake is about as far away from the ocean as you can get and still be in fairyland.”

“Has anyone ever explored the area?” I asked next.

“Why would anyone ever want to do that?” he said with distaste.

“So if fairyland does not want to come to the shores of your pond to be examined, then that’s that.”

“Pretty much.”

I had a strong urge to simply put on my legs wave goodbye to Edward and walk off into the sunset. Aside from the fact that Grandma and Grandpa would be worried sick, who knows how long it would take to find my way back to Casalot.

So with a sigh and a promise to try and come back some day, I turned away from the sunshine and swam back down.

“Come on, Edward,” I said. “We’ve got some serious planning and plotting to do.”

CHAPTER 22

GLORI THE SECRET-KEEPER

As soon as we came out from under the rock ledge we were spotted by Glori.

“Hi,” she called out. “I thought I would find you two in there.

“Congratulations. I’ve got your supper here,” she said, holding out a basket.

I looked at Edward. We were being congratulated on getting supper?

“I mean congratulations on getting married tomorrow, which by the way, Edward, is the dumbest thing I ever heard. You’re not actually doing this, are you?”

By the time we finished explaining, Glori was no longer smiling. The three of us settled down on some nearby cushions, eating and talking quietly.

“I don’t think it will be that hard to escape,” I said, “I have a way of being...well...of not being easy to see.”

Glori and Edward waited for an explanation, but I was not talking.

“I’m kind of nervous of having your father find out about this, uh, trick,” I finally said. “He seems to be awfully good at finding out things that people don’t want to tell him.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that,” said Glori. “Edward says one word about your secret to his father, and I will turn him into a fish.”

“Glori, you don’t know how to do that,” he said.

“So I’ll learn,” she answered, “...and then I’ll turn you into a fish. Do it, Edward.”

“All right, all right.” He put his left hand on his head and his right hand on his left elbow. He looked ridiculous, and he knew it. “Ash-a-ta-thow-ra,” he said.

“O.K., Miriam your secret is safe. Edward will never say a word. Guaranteed.”

“I gather you’ve done this before,” I said.

“Glori’s never told anybody anything she promised not to,” Edward said, “and neither have I.”

“You say it too, Glori,” I said. “and then I’ll know my secret is safe.”

“Ashatathowra!” said Glori, with a solemn expression that made the arrangement of her hands look even sillier.

I reached into my wing pocket—the wings that everyone in the ocean naturally assumed to be fins—and took out my fern seed coat. “Now you see me,” I said with a flourish, “and now you don’t,” I threw open the coat and let it float down onto my shoulders.

They were not impressed. Glori had her hand over her mouth to stifle the cackles.

“Miriam,” she said through her fingers. “Your tail is sticking out—”

“—and your head,” Edward guffawed. “it’s floating around like a lost fish.”

I pulled the fern coat off my shoulders and started to carefully fold it up.

“It tends to do that if I don’t put it on properly, but you get the general idea.”

“You have pockets in your fins?” Specter said. “I’ve never met a Sky with pockets. May I taste you?”

“You’re kidding?” I was flabbergasted.

“He doesn’t want to eat you, Miriam,” Sharktooth whispered in my ear. “His suckers are like your tongues, only a thousand times more sensitive. It’s one of the ways sucker people learn about the world. He just wants to understand your flavor.

“He also doesn’t know that you’ve never met an octopus before, so be careful. You’re supposed to know this.”

“Haven’t you ever met an octopus before?” Edward asked me, more surprised than suspicious.

“Uh...the ones where I live are pretty shy.” Good save, me.

“Yeah, Spec is pretty shy, too, but in his case, curious always beats shy. Right Spec?”

“Hmmpft! I’m just polite.”

“Whatever.”

“I would love to meet some of the sucker people in the Upper Kingdom.” Spec said. “Maybe you could use your seahorse magic to bring me?”

“I wish. But it doesn’t work that way,” I said sadly.

Specter was seriously adorable. I would have loved to spend time with him without nerdy Edward. I swam a little closer to Edward and Specter and held out my hand.

“Tasting. No biting. Right?”

Specter didn’t answer. Instead he quickly slid down Edward’s arm and onto my hand. It felt okay, not the slimy I sort of expected, very soft, and not suckery at all.

“Oh! Oh...Oh my goodness!” Specter said. You’re so...so...

“Come up here,” said Leviathan, “We want to meet you too.”

“Yes! Real seahorses. Here I come.” Specter forgot about me except as a path to the seahorses and headed up my arm. Apparently, octopuses can move pretty fast when they want to.

When he got to my head, he stopped and wrapped himself around my ear, moving his legs like a cat kneading a pillow. This time I could feel the suckers and I totally understood what he meant about tasting me.

Okay. This is weird. There’s an octopus on my ear and...

“Whoa!” Spec said. “Who are you? ...Oh, I see...and...ohhh. Wow.”

“We really need to talk,” Sharktooth said, interrupting Specter’s research into the wonderful world of me. “You should come up here first.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the seahorses were no longer waiting for Spec to come to them. They had him surrounded, ribbons and all. Spec had my ear so well covered that all I could hear were muted whisperings. Very intense muted whisperings.

“I understand,” Specter said, finally saying something I could hear. “Don’t worry, Miriam,” he said quietly into my ear. “I won’t tell anyone what you really are. Are you sure you don’t want to stay with us?”

“Uh, Spec?” Edward said. “Miriam has to go, remember? Unless of course you were thinking of leaving with her.” His voice had reverted back to stern father-speak.

“Ooo. Edward is jealous,” Reddragon whispered.

Specter got the hint and jetted quickly back to Edward, the stream of water he squirted was so strong it knocked me sideways, leaving the seahorses hanging onto their ribbons for dear life and floating all over the place.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Glori said. “You’re not the first person to get around by Spec.”

“My father thinks he’s a menace,” Edward said with a big grin on his face.

“Yes, and don’t you love it,” Glori said to Edward. “Miriam. I don’t think you will have any problem leaving if you use that invisible thingy.”

“I know. All I have to do is distract one of those big Sky guarding the entrances so I can slip through.”

“Easy peasy. You can come with me. I’m always going in and out of my garden for supplies and things.”

“My garden?”

“It *is* Glori’s garden,” Specter said.

“Glori designed it and she supervises the maintenance, said Edward. “Everybody calls it Glori’s garden.”

“You did this? It’s so awesome, I mean, I could live here and never be bored. It’s... wonderful.”

“Thank you. I used to be in charge of the algae farms. This is way more fun. In any case, it means that Edward may be stuck here, but as long as you’re invisible, I can take you with me.” It looked like the escape part wasn’t going to be a problem, but I was still a long way from home.

“Where could we go?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve always wanted to visit one of the upper kingdoms,” she said. “We have a good chance of finding a squid eater and hitching a ride to Casalot. It would save weeks of traveling.”

“I like it. I could probably get home... I mean back to Casalot before my grandparents left for Metsoola.”

“We can’t leave now,” Glori said. “I have to report back to King Mundiflure and the guards will be suspicious if I come back later. But I always work in the garden in the morning. I like to get started before it’s full light. No one will think anything of it.

“Probably, someone will ask me to bring you your breakfast. If they do, the rest will be easy. After breakfast, I’ll take the food basket back to the kitchen. When the guard moves out of the doorway to let me through, you come, too. As soon as we’re alone, I sneak under that cape thing you’ve got, and ... we’re history.”

It was a good plan. I fell asleep on the soft seagrass under the ledge, watching a group of four small fish that decorated a group of tall plants. “Nice touch,” I thought drowsily, “I wonder if they’re mechanical.”



Half awake, half asleep, I reached around searching for my sampo. There it was tucked comfortably under me. I was trying to decide whether to finish waking up or go back to sleep when the sound of voices finally got me to open my eyes.

I saw King Mundiflure coming into the garden through one of the upper entrances. He was carrying a big wicker basket and he was being followed by a whole entourage of people. They were mostly Sky, but there were also pixies, elves and sprites.

I was now most definitely and completely awake. “Edward! Edward! Wake up!” I shook the sleepy Sky into complete confusion.

“Huh?” was the best he could do. I grabbed his head, pointed it at the approaching fairies.

“Look!”

The eyes finally opened, wide, and then wider. Edward was now also most definitely and completely awake.

“Edward, I’ve got to hide my bag before your father gets here.” I waved it in front of his face.

“Oh, is that the bag?” he said calmly, and then “Oh, the bag! Quick, we’ve got to hide it before my father gets here!”

Too flustered to be annoyed by his pointless comment, I just said, “Yes, but where?” as we both looked wildly around for inspiration.

There was no spot in the garden where the bag could be left that it would not be found eventually by determined searchers. Frantically, I started to dig into the soft ooze of an algae bed with my fingers to bury it. All I could manage was a shallow depression and muddy water.

“Miriam,” said Flyingfish, the shyest of the seahorses, “Give me the bag.”

“You know a good spot?” Edward said, “Tell us.”

“I can take it home with me,” she answered. A big grin of understanding spread across my face.

“Don’t look and don’t listen, Edward,” I said, as I tied a tiny loop in the drawstring and hung it around Flyingfish’s neck.

I turned my back to Edward and spoke, as softly as I could. “Hs-if-gni-ylf,” I said, and the bag and seahorse disappeared.

I turned back to see the king and the others had arrived. “Good morning,” said King Mundiflure. “I’ve brought you your wedding breakfast.”

“But father, we’re not married,” was the best Edward could come up with.

“Oh, I thought it would be nice to have the ceremony right now, before breakfast. By the way, Miriam, I seem to have mislaid your magic bag. But I’m sure you can tell me where it is, can’t you?”

“I ... I ... I’ve sent it home. I’ve got to go. Goodbye.” I turned and fled.

CHAPTER 23

RUNAWAY BRIDE

Panic stricken, I swam fast and hard up to the salt lake. Half of my brain was saying, “Quick put on the invisible cloak so they can’t see you.” The other half of my brain was saying, “You don’t have time, they’re right behind you. Keep swimming.”

The third half of my brain (the bit I didn’t know about) wasn’t saying anything, but was busy sending my hand back to the pocket in my other wing where I kept the magic scale that Grandma had pulled off her tail for me. ‘Don’t drop it. Don’t drop it. Don’t drop it,’ the third half kept repeating.

Holding the scale tightly in my fist I raced for the shore. Almost before I reached the shallows, I had given it the requisite twist and switched from tail to legs. Still moving fast, only with feet instead of a tail, I opened my wet wings and took off.

Turning at the sound of voices, I saw a head with two arms waving at me from the middle of the lake. Too far to recognize the face, I could just make out the words.

“Have you seen a young girl,” the head shouted, “a lost Sky?”

I turned away quickly and kept flying, hoping that whoever it was didn’t have a chance to recognize me.

After a couple of minutes of steady flying, I started to calm down and take notice of the surroundings. At the moment, I was passing over a small stand of trees. It was the first of a number of such stands that eventually blended into not far-off open woodland.

I landed in a comfortable crook of the largest tree in the group. Suddenly, and with considerable guilt, I remembered my friends.

“Is everyone all right?”

“All present and accounted for,” said Tidalwave.

“Are you O.K.? Is everyone comfortable?”

“At the moment,” Thorn said dryly, “comfort is not the issue. We are so tangled into your hair, that I don’t think we could go anywhere if we wanted to.”

“I’m sorry about bringing you with me,” I said. “I sort of panicked. I’m really glad you’re here though. I guess I should call—”

“Nooo!” screamed six tiny voices.

Seahorse shouting is not very loud but when they all do it at once, it’s hard not to notice.

“Don’t say her name up here,” Reddragon said. “She’s carrying your bag. Even without the extra weight, she would drop straight to the ground.” Although new to the subject, Reddragon had an excellent grasp of the principles and effects of gravity.

I was shocked into a guilty silence by the thought of what might have happened. Very carefully, I half climbed and half flew out of the tree to the ground.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly, when my feet touched earth again. “I was scared, and I didn’t think about anything except running away. It must have been very frightening for you when I took off into the air.”

“Well,” said Darkflower politely, “it was rather exciting there for a few minutes.”

Everyone laughed at the understatement, and, feeling a little better, I decided to call back Flyingfish and the sampo. I lay flat on my back, first moving my hair to the side so that no one would get squashed.

“Flyingfish.”

The sampo fell on my face. This was immediately followed by Flyingfish, who fell on top of the bag.

“Well, at least you had a soft landing,” I said after Flyingfish was firmly caught up in my hair. “But I’m going to send you all home,” I said seriously. “The land is not a safe place for you. Especially since I have no idea where I am or what I’ll find here.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” said Reddragon.

“You do?” I wanted to do the right thing, but secretly hoped they would insist on staying.

“Yes, I do. It’s about time someone apprised your grandparents of the situation.”

“Huh?”

“We live in the kingdom of Casalot. Even traveling at seahorse speed, once we’re back home, we could be at the castle in less than an hour. Bring us back at the end of the day before it gets dark. That will give us plenty of time to get to Casalot and see your grandparents. When we come back we can all go back to Metsoola and straighten things out.”

“What do you mean, ‘straighten things out’? If I show up there again, the king will have me married off before you can blink.”

“Exactly my point,” said Reddragon. He was hanging upside down over my forehead and giving me a hard look with his unblinking black eyes. “You’re about as likely to be kept prisoner in Metsoola as I am to blink.”

“Oh, right. No eyelids.”

“I’ve lived around fairies all my life. I’ve seen fairies who were selfish, bad tempered and thoughtless, self-centered, vain and frivolous. They may speak or act rashly, but I’ve never seen an argument or fight that went beyond words to hinder or hurt someone.”

“Excuse me, but was I not most definitely hindered by Zazkal. He kidnapped me not once but twice.”

“And look how it ended. The same thing will happen here. No matter how worried the king is about the fairy lights, he will have to let you go eventually, if that’s what you want. Anyway, I’ll be back with a message from your grandparents. That should be more than enough. You’ll see.”

I wasn’t convinced by Reddragon’s logic, but everyone else seemed to agree, so very softly, just in case anyone was listening, I spoke each of their names backwards, and one by one they disappeared.

Lying on the ground had been prickly so I took jeans, a t-shirt, and sneakers out of my bag and spent the rest of the day on foot, exploring the edges of the woods.

Several times I thought I saw something moving out of the corner of my eyes and a soft whisper that was more than the rustle of leaves. But except for the birds and an occasional chipmunk, there was no sign of anyone living nearby.

I avoided going deeper into the woods and stayed on my feet for fear of being spotted by some unseen person while flying. Just because I can’t see anyone doesn’t mean they can’t see me, I thought.

“I guess being in fairyland is no guarantee of seeing fairies,” I said to no one in particular.

“You never know,” answered no one in particular, or more likely it was a bird song. Still half-convinced that I was not alone I decided on an early supper and an early return to Metsoola. Taking a sit-upon out of the sampo I settled down on a mossy spot just inside the woods.

Dinner was a melted cheese sandwich followed by a large piece of chocolate pudding graham cracker pie. Then, feeling that my parents wouldn’t approve, I ate a cucumber, one of the few vegetables I was prepared to eat on a regular basis. Having fulfilled my nutritional duty and

feeling righteous, I put away the sit-upon and pulled a stick-full of pink cotton candy out of the sampo.

I walked slowly back to the salt lake, still watching for some sign of the fairies that must live here, while I carefully picked off bits of pink fluff and stuffed them into my mouth.

Walking into the water until it was chest deep, I took one last look around, switched to tail and left.



From the place where the woods began, shapes started to appear and the shy dryads emerged from their trees for a better view of the spot where this strange fairy had disappeared. Stiff and graceful like the trees that housed their souls, they walked as far as they dared from their homes and then returned to the woods to dance and whisper the story of Miriam's visit from tree to tree throughout the forest.

CHAPTER 24

MIRIAM VANISHES

As soon as I was completely underwater, I put on my fern seed coat in case anybody was watching from below. It's a little early to call back the seahorses. I don't want to interrupt them if they are still talking with Grandma and Grandpa. Better to stay invisible until seahorse time. I closed the dragonfly clasp on my coat and swam down to the garden.

Coming out from under the overhang, I nearly collided with Glori. Startled, I pulled up short, making a backwash that loosened the clasp. Of course, Glori knew just who that little bit of unattached tail belonged to. I'm going to have to be more careful when I close it.

"Oh, Miriam, everyone has been so worried. The king is desperate. He's sure something terrible has happened to you and that it's all his fault. Everyone thinks you've escaped into fairyland and have been carried off by some creature."

"One of your friends came," she said without stopping. "Bobi or Boobi, something like that."

"His name is Bibi," I corrected.

"Whatever," Glori said, not really interested in his real name. "King Mundiflure had him sent away under escort. Now he's trying to get him back. But he's too far ahead. The messengers he sent will probably end up following him all the way back to Casalot. The king has even called the magic experts off volcano duty to help devise strategies for rescuing you."

"Didn't you tell him about my invisible coat?"

"Ashatathowra! No way! But I was sure you hadn't gone far. I've been waiting for you all day. Edward has been circling the gardens in case you got past me without noticing."

"You have my permission to tell the king about my coat right away so that everyone can stop being hysterical on my account. But tell him...tell him...that I won't come, no, that I will come...tell him that I will come to see him as soon as the seahorses return from their conference with my grandparents, and then we'll all come together."

From her expression, it was clear that Glori did not understand a word of this, so Miriam added, "In about an hour. They'll be back in about an hour."

"Who will?"

"The seahorses. The seahorses will be back in about an hour." Glori's expression changed from confusion to skepticism. "They're very efficient travelers. Don't worry, the king will understand. The main thing is to let him know I'm O.K. before he goes wandering off into fairyland looking for me. Talk about a fish out of water!"

"A what?"

"A fish out of water. It's just an expression, but it pretty much sums up how silly he would look flopping around on the land trying to rescue me."

I licked my lips and shook my head. All of a sudden the water tasted different, like getting to the second scoop of a different flavor in an ice cream cone. It's still ice cream, just like this was still water, but I had switched from chocolate to vanilla. I shook my head because at the same time, my eyes seemed to go out of focus, and Glori was starting to look blurry.

PART III

HUNTING HAZMATS



CHAPTER 25

Lake Francis...Again

“Not a bad description of how I’ve felt for the last two days. So you finally got here,” said Zazkal.

“Glori? I said, looking around in confusion. This was not the garden at Castle Downalot. I was back in the lake where I had left Zazkal.

“How did you do that?”

“I’m not sure,” he admitted grudgingly. “I couldn’t make another traveling bubble with the things I took out of your bag after you left. It turns out that I need slightly different things for the spell to work in fresh water and I didn’t have enough time to figure out what I needed.

“This water doesn’t interact with ingredients the same way proper salt water does,” he said testily. “I experimented with what I had and a few things I picked up here in the lake. I managed to bring you here, but I don’t know if I could do it again.

“I know what I need now. Just give me the bag,” he said abruptly, having made more than he cared to of polite conversation, “and let’s get out of here.”

Silently, I handed him the sampo, trying hard not to think about what Glori’s reaction to my second disappearance would be.

Concentrating, Zazkal took a small bottle of something gray and cloudy-looking that I didn’t recognize out of the sampo and began to swim for the surface. I followed and watched in silence while he constructed a pair of traveling bubbles, ignoring the astonishment on the faces of the nearby boaters

We were in the air and fast disappearing from sight before any of the boats could reach us, their dumbfounded passengers pointing and staring up at the sky.

I was more than a little confused by the rapidly changing events. I found it hard to believe that King Mundiflure had been as concerned for my well-being as Glori had made it sound. But there was no way I could ask about that now.

If they were worried when I disappeared the first time they must be hysterical by now, what with my gradual fading away behavior in front of Glori.

Zazkal spent the next few minutes listening while I told him about how I got to Metsoola and what had happened there. He didn’t say anything until I finished. Then he spoke slowly and thoughtfully.

“It doesn’t make sense to steal power nuts from the abysmal kingdoms. It takes too long to transport them anywhere.

“I would expect them to be stolen from the upper kingdoms like Casalot. They’re closer to the land and there’s lots of traffic in and out that would make it easy to carry something off unnoticed.”

He didn’t speak for a few minutes. Recognizing his ‘do not interrupt me, or else’ expression, I stayed silent. When he spoke again, it was with an abrupt change of subject.

“Do you suppose you could get me to the spot where the Hazmats picked you up before you came to Metsoola?”

“How can I do that? The bubbles are taking us to Metsoola. Besides, we’ve got to go there. The king has taken all the magic experts off volcano duty to look for me. Glori said he was mad with worry.

“And what about Bibi. He’s on his way to Casalot to tell Grandma and Grandpa that I’ve been married off to King Mundiflore’s son. They won’t know what to think.”

It was a sign of how well we had gotten to know each other, or at least how well I had gotten to know Zazkal, that he no longer had to be actually rude to me. There was no need for him to speak, to reduce me to speechless submission.

The black expression on his face conveyed everything that a few weeks earlier he would have said out loud. I was a cretin, a moron, an imbecile, and how dare I contradict him.

“Bibi and your grandparents can think what they please,” he said curtly. “And as for the king, I hope he’s miserable. It’s no less than he deserves.” The acid tones of sarcasm dripped from his tongue as he continued, “Don’t worry, you’ll get what you want. I’m of a mind to find another route to Metsoola.”

What did he want to do, go the other way around the world to get to Metsoola? Knowing better than to inquire about this cryptic remark, I answered his original question as best I could.

“I know that it took forty or fifty minutes before I spotted land and then we cruised south along the coastline for another three or four hours before we got to the cove where I left her.”

“We?”

“Me and the Maiden Voyage.”

“Drylanders are all idiots,” he said rounding off this pronouncement with a sarcastic snort.

“If I was back on the Maiden Voyage,” I said, gritting my teeth, “I guess I could do the same thing in reverse by traveling north and get pretty close to the spot where I got tangled in their fishing net and pulled aboard.”

We were at that moment passing over a small lake. Not much more than a pond really, but it was surrounded by woodland and there was no sign of people around. Zazkal muttered something under his breath and the bubbles descended, dissolving as soon they touched the water and leaving us stranded once again.

I had a pretty good idea of what was about to happen and handed over the sampo. In a few minutes, Zazkal had the ingredients to create a new pair of traveling bubbles and we were traveling again, but in the opposite direction, back towards Casalot.

The trip was uneventful and mostly quiet. Zazkal’s silence was more thoughtful than his usual sullen, untalkative moods, but no way was I going to interrupt him.

Turning my back to Zazkal, and barely making any sound as I moved my lips, I called Reddragon and Thorn back. I needn’t have worried, Zazkal was deep in thought. He never heard our whispered conversation. He never even noticed the seahorses’ appearance. I sent my friends back to Grandma and Grandpa with a full report of recent happenings.

I didn’t think my grandparents would approve of Zazkal’s plans. They had given me permission to visit another Sky kingdom, not to go off chasing pirates. I didn’t want them to

worry about me because I didn't call the seahorses back at the arranged time, but I didn't want them to cut short my trip either.

So I was purposely vague with Thorn and Reddragon about when I would call them back again. This way, Grandma and Grandpa would know that I was all right, but they wouldn't be able to send me a message calling me home.

In the last two days, I had been in three radically different places. Metsoola, Fairyland and then back at the freshwater lake with Zazkal. Now I was on my way to a fourth place with Zazkal. It was already dusk and I was tired. Welcoming my teacher's introspectiveness, I took a soft blanket out of my bag, curled up and went to sleep.

CHAPTER 26

The Maiden Voyage

Early the next morning, we reached the ocean. We were at the same spot we had been at the beginning of the trip when the traveling bubbles had first crossed over from the sea to the land.

As soon as we were out of sight of land, the bubbles stopped moving forward and floated down to the surface where they promptly dissolved leaving us floating comfortably in the water.

“Oh, it’s good to breathe salt water again,” I said, ignoring the amused expression on Zazkal’s face.

“I remember going past this spot with the Maiden Voyage. I think if we don’t take too many breaks we can swim there in a couple of hours.”

“Let’s get moving then,” Zazkal said. “I want to see this boat of yours.”

“Me, too. I’m anxious to see how she weathered the storm.”

“Why do you keep doing that ‘she’ thing?”

“It’s a land expression, a form of endearment really.”

“Endearment? For a boat? That’s absurd. I couldn’t begin to fathom the thinking of people with such strange ideas.”

This comment was followed by his withering look number 6a. Anxious to make my point, I ignored 6a and continued.

“Sure you can. Think about how important your workshop is to you. The main reason you were willing to take me on as an apprentice was to avoid being exiled.”

Zazkal’s ‘hmfff’, was followed by the silence that was the closest he ever got to admitting anyone was right about anything.



We eventually arrived at the tiny cove where I had left the Maiden Voyage more than a month ago. The shape of the cove was a half circle with two narrow inlets at the top that made me think of a cat’s head with pointy ears. I had left the boat in one of the inlets where she was well hidden by mangroves. We had to swim right up to the entrance of the inlet before we could see it.

“Hmfft! It looks like your so-called boat didn’t survive the storm,” Zazkal said when he got his first glimpse of the barnacle-encrusted hull. Above the water line, the boat was weathered gray wood with occasional patches of peeling white paint. You could just make out the name painted on the back. The ‘Maiden Voyage’. My heart swelled.

“No, no, that’s what it looked like when I left her. She did really well.

“Look, she’s still floating,” I said proudly.

I swam to the side of the boat. I had left her grounded on the sand, but there were a couple of feet of water under the boat. It must be high tide. First order of business was to move her from the inlet to the deeper water in the cove before the tide turned.

I grabbed my fish scale, switched to legs, stood up and walked out of the water.

“The rope is still there,” I said proudly. “I did a good job tying it up.” Zazkal didn’t hear me. He had left the cove. I don’t think he was comfortable in shallow water.

“Oh, well.” I put the chain with the scale around my neck and followed the rope to the big tree where it was tied off. The ground was full of broken branches so I put on a pair of sneakers from the sampo before I attacked the knots.

It took a couple of minutes, but I was finally able to loosen the knots enough to untangle the rope. There was plenty of rope wrapped around the tree. Enough to let the Maiden Voyage float out of the inlet into the cove. I tied it off loosely and swam out to the boat.

The deck and the roof of the cabin were covered with leaves and broken branches. It was hot, sweaty work, but once I had it all cleared away, I could see that the storm had scoured away most of the disgusting green stuff growing on the deck. Otherwise she looked pretty much the same, although it was hard to tell the difference between shabby and shabbier.

Moving to the side of the cabin where there was a little shade, I sat down with my back against the cabin wall. I had been thinking about where to put Zazkal and was pretty sure that I could build a wheelchair.

I started with a book. I called it ‘How to Build a Solar-Powered Electric Wheelchair Out of Small Pieces That Will Fit In a Sampo’. I reached into the sampo and pulled out a book. The title said ‘How to Build a Solar-Powered Electric Wheelchair Out of Small Pieces that Will Fit in a Sampo’.

So far so good. Then I turned to the ‘list of parts’ page and started taking out the pieces on the list and laying them on the deck. I wanted to show Zazkal how effectively I was using the sampo but he wasn’t around.

The wheels had been the hardest part. Every time I tried to put the last spoke in place, the first two or three would fall off. Eventually I gave up and took four tiny wheels out of my bag and a more powerful motor to get them to spin fast enough.

Next, I took a small hammock from the sampo and hung it from the winch. Zazkal could use it like a chair lift to get on the boat. I was glad now that I had spent all that time cleaning and greasing the winch before I abandoned the boat to the storm.

The biggest challenge was filling the empty gas tank. I thought about pulling little jars of gas out of the sampo, but it was going to take forever, so I pulled out a gas hose...and...surprise, surprise, it worked. My magic bag just got magicer.

I couldn’t wait to show Zazkal how well I’m using the sampo. I am so ready to be a real apprentice, not just a gofer and cleaner-upper.

CHAPTER 27

PINK UNICORNS OR FLUFFY KITTENS

The engine started easily. I cast off the ropes and left the cove to find Zazkal. He must have been watching for me because he showed up as soon as I passed the breakwaters.

“What took you so long. I’ve been waiting for hours.”

“Come and see all the neat stuff I did. There’s even a lift to get you onto the boat.” I pointed to the hammock seat hanging from the winch.

“You don’t think I’m actually getting on that thing, do you?”

“It’s easy. See. Just sit in the sling and I’ll pull you aboard.”

He grumbled and complained about being in ‘this awkward contraption’, but in the end, he let me pull him onto the boat.

As soon as he swung his tail over the side, he spotted the wheelchair sitting in the middle of the deck. Really, it was hard to miss. All that shiny silver metal and the bright yellow seat.

“What is that thing?”

“That, sir,” I said proudly, “is your new favorite toy...and...the whole thing came out of my sampo.”

Zazkal was not impressed.

“Just try it. Look.” I sat in the chair and showed him how to use the control lever. Back and forth, right and left, a couple of tight turns, hmm, maybe I should build another one of these for me.

“I don’t like it. It’s not natural.”

“Of course it’s not natural. It’s mechanical. Look, just try it. If you don’t like it, you can sit on the floor.” I had him. I know he didn’t want to spend the trip stuck in the corner.

Muttering under his breath, he lowered himself into the chair and gingerly manipulated the controls to bring himself to the side of the boat. Basically, he was as close to the water as he could get and still be on the boat. Fine. Whatever.

“Okay. Now that you’re out of the water, you have to protect yourself from sunburn. Here. Put this on, and this.”

I handed a big-brimmed sun hat with a chin strap for the wind and an oversized t-shirt with a picture of a pink unicorn. I’ve been going through a unicorn phase lately. Anyway, it was either that or fluffy kittens.

He said nothing, but there were warning signs. I quickly unfolded a beach towel. Just stripes. No picture.

“This is for your tail,” I said. “It’s a disguise. In case anybody sees us.”

Zazkal maintained his glaring silence. He held the t-shirt crumpled up in his fist, his knuckles white. I spread the towel on his lap, carefully tucking it around his tail fins.

“You could use sunblock cream instead of the t-shirt,” I said, “but you have to reapply it every half hour. Your skin is brand new to the sun.

“Fine,” he said, pulling the t-shirt over his head and jamming the hat on his head.

“These, too,” I said, gingerly handing him a pair of sunglasses. “They have a UV filter to protect your eyes.” I’m not sure, but I think I could see sweat, steaming off his body.

“So, uh, I’m just going to drive the boat now.” I said, nervously. Why wasn’t he telling me how well I managed everything? I climbed into the captain’s chair, put the boat into forward gear and headed north.

“Arrrghh!”

Finally, with a last burst of pique and as if he couldn't stand wasting his breath on such a lowly subject, he exclaimed,

“Out, I want out of this chair and off this boat now.”

Even before he finished speaking, he had pulled himself over the side and into the water.

CHAPTER 28

MISS SWEET AND REASONABLE

“You can’t do that,” I shouted. “You’ll never be able to keep up with the boat.” But he was under the water and gone by the end of my sentence.

Frustrated and fed up, I put my hand on the throttle and opened it to full speed heading north toward the spot where I had been netted by the Hazmats.

“He knows which way to go. If he wants to swim all the way, let him. I’m tired of always being the nice one. Always polite, always compromising, always accommodating. How come he’s the only one who’s allowed to be rude and obnoxious? I’m almost a teenager. We’re supposed to be rude and obnoxious. I’m just starting early, that’s all.”

The speed, the wind, and the spray made me feel free and fueled my anger.

“I’ve been jerked around,” and I meant that quite literally, thinking about the abrupt transfer from Metsoola to the freshwater lake without permission, “and abused by that fish about enough. I don’t care what my grandparents want. I can get Agatha to teach me all the magic I need to know.”

I went on in this vein for a while, my tongue matching the speed of the boat. I started to feel better.

This was not good. Just when I needed the support of a good tantrum to justify my action, I found my anger crumbling.

Slowing down the boat and starting to feel guilty, I noticed a lumpy-looking dolphin leaping in and out of the water, just far enough ahead so that I couldn’t make out whether it was an exceptionally fat dolphin or something else altogether.

Forgetting about Zazkal for the moment, my curiosity finishing off the remnants of my anger, I pushed forward. But the anonymous leaper stayed just out of ID range. Somebody was playing tag with the boat. Finally, in an effort to trick them into coming closer I turned the boat around and forced myself not to look back.

I counted slowly to twenty five. When I hit twenty five, I jammed the boat into neutral and turned around as quickly as I could.

“So, Miss Sweet and Reasonable,” came a voice from the boat’s wake, “you think we mere fish can’t outrun your fancy boat.”

It was Zazkal, who all too obviously had listened to every word I had said from the other side of the boat. He was hanging on to the fin of a dolphin, creating the lumpy look that had confused me.

“Ollie!” I screamed, forgetting my anger, my guilt, and my embarrassment. I turned the boat off so fast that the key was out of the ignition before the engine had stopped running.

In fact, I was probably even in the air, and switched over to tail before it stopped. I swam so hard at Ollie and hugged him so tightly, that I knocked Zazkal right off.

Although dolphins have more limited facial expressions than people, their voices are particularly expressive. “I,” he said, in a clear ‘we are not amused tone’, “am not a fish, nor is my companion.”

“I know you’re not a fish. I never thought you were a fish. I mean, I never said you were a fish, I just said that to make Zazkal feel bad, I mean to make myself feel better, I mean when I thought he wasn’t listening.”

I was running out of ‘I means’ when I realized that not only did Zazkal not look annoyed, he was practically grinning. He now had enough verbal ammunition to last for the rest of the summer.

I knew instinctively that I would never be able to disagree with him again without being referred to as ‘Miss Sweet and Reasonable’.

Not only that, but Ollie was on Zazkal’s side. My best friend and my worst enemy were ganging up on me. I was abashed.

They both started laughing. At least Ollie did. Zazkal was only able to produce a sort of rough chuckling sound, which he masked with an expression of sarcastic humor lest anyone think he was actually having a good time.

It didn’t take me long to realize who the butt of their joke was, but I was too relieved to be offended. I was, however, deeply embarrassed, and tried to cover it with a change of subject.

“Ollie! I can’t believe you’re here. How did you find us?”

“I was at Casalot practicing my writing when your seahorse friends arrived. You know how I felt about not being able to come with you to Metsoola. This seemed like a good time to tag along. I didn’t exactly ask anyone, but so far, Zazkal hasn’t objected.”

“How did you get here on time? How did you even find it?”

“In case you didn’t notice, dolphins are fast, he said.

“Finding the right place was harder. I got directions from some local dolphins based on the description you gave me the first time we met, when you told me about the Maiden Voyage and the Hazmats. They helped me find three places in this area that sounded like they fit your description. I couldn’t find the boat, so I’ve been cruising back and forth, keeping my eyes open hoping to spot you. I think it was more luck than anything.”

“I was checking all the boats headed north and I was swimming over to check this one, when I saw Zazkal dive into the water. But you were gone and not looking back before I got there. It was Zazkal’s idea to stay ahead and out of sight.”

“Yes, I can imagine that it is the kind of trick he would think was funny,” I said, risking his anger for the fleeting satisfaction of a good comeback. Zazkal merely raised his eyebrows at my comment but said nothing.

“Well, anyway, this solves our transportation problem,” I said. “You don’t have to spend the whole trip in a wheelchair. You can go with Ollie instead. That is, if it’s O.K. with you, Ollie.”

“No problem,” said Ollie, although from the way he said it, I guessed that he would rather have me with him in the water than Zazkal.

“Well, it’s not O.K with me. If you think I’m going to be dragged around in the water for hour after hour by a...” He paused for a second, pressing his lips together and squinting up his eyes. We could almost hear the word ‘fish’ rolling around on his tongue.

“Dolphin,” he spat out, showing remarkable self restraint, to anyone who knew him. But honestly, he made it sound like ‘fish’. Nobody spoke for a moment.

“You could drive the boat, you know. The controls are right next to the water. As long as you turn off the engine first, you can get back in the water whenever you want.”

When Zazkal didn’t immediately respond, I continued, “I could probably rig something up with stuff from my bag that would make the pilot’s seat more comfortable for you too.”

With a look of scorn on his face and a grunt in Ollie’s direction that was the equivalent of a direct order, he dove below the surface.

With Zazkal, you had to be good at reading the non-verbal signs, and I had become an expert. I sighed, climbed back into the boat and took the controls putting her into forward gear. My anger was used up and I couldn't be bothered with another tantrum.

Ollie, having read the same message, had already followed Zazkal under the surface. They reappeared together just ahead of the boat, swimming north.



Two hours later, I saw the orange water tower with a sailboat painted on it that I remembered from the first trip. I put the boat in neutral and hailed Ollie and Zazkal. They detached and swam over to the side.

"This is it," I said. "The spot where I was picked up by the Hazmats is straight out to sea, less than an hour traveling if we stay on the Maiden Voyage."

"We came from the south," Zazkal said, "so we have a pretty good idea of the sea-bottom structure in that direction and we know what it's like between here and the land. We could have missed something, but I think that we'll find what we're looking for further out at sea."

I raised my eyebrows. When did Zazkal tell us *what* we were looking for? Wasn't it the Hazmats? Did I miss something? Maybe he told Ollie while they were in sea.

"So, what *are* we looking for?" I asked in my best 'polite'.

"Ollie, you stay with me," Zazkal said next, ignoring my question. "These waters are not too cold for sharks. If there are any hanging around, you won't be bothered as long as you're with a Sky."

I suppose ignoring me is better than yelling at me.

"Miriam, take the boat to the shore and find a place to leave it, preferably where there are a lot of other boats so it won't stand out. I don't want to leave it here announcing our presence in case those predators are flying or floating around some where."

"Before you go, give me a jar." I did. "Now I want purple algae," he said. "More. Serrated kelp fronds. Too much. Just one piece. Put the rest back.

"Never mind," he said impatiently. "Just give me the bag."

I recognized enough of the things he took out of the sampo to realize that he was planning another traveling bubble. That was one mystery solved, but what he wanted it for and whatever it was that he was looking for seemed to be TMI for a mere apprentice.

This time, Zazkal looked up and saw the giant question mark on my face.

"It's for later," he said, like it was some big secret. He closed the jar, took a cord out of the sampo, tied it around the jar and around his waist and then handed me the sampo.

"Why don't you just keep it?" I said.

"You will be out of the water. Anything could happen."

"Zazkal, I will be on the land where I spent my whole life. What could go wrong?"

"You will be outsea," he corrected me. "Drylanders are not to be trusted." He scowled and pushed the sampo at me.

'Xenophobic idiot' was what I thought, but limited myself to a small eye roll and accepted the bag.

"I will send for you when I'm ready. Ollie, let's go."

After hauling Zazkal around on his back all morning, Ollie knew the drill. We may have no idea what Zazkal has been talking about, but Ollie now knows what I do. It's better not to ask. It's not worth the aggravation and you won't find out what you want anyway.

CHAPTER 29

FEED THE BIRDS

I cruised along the shore for a few minutes before finding what I was looking for, a marked channel leading to a cut that fed boats into a broad inland waterway. Not far in was a run-down jetty with half a dozen boats tied up to it and a couple of bigger boats anchored in the shallows.

There was a park with picnic tables nearby, sheltered from the sun by bushy Australian pines. As lunchtime approached, the jetty and the water around it would probably be filled to capacity with picnicking boaters.

This is perfect. It's just a short walk to the ocean and the boats already here are all different sizes.

I took the boat a little way past the jetty and put the engine in neutral while I dropped the stern and aft anchors into the shallow water close to shore. Once she was secure, I turned off the engine, dropped the key into my sampo, took off my sneakers and climbed down into the shallow water.

With one last look back at the Maiden Voyage, I waded ashore promising to do something about the rusty anchor and the splintery deck when I returned.

Sitting down on an empty bench near the water, I took a towel out of my sampo, dried my feet and put my sneakers back on. A little further in was a clothesline strung between two trees with the damp towels of previous foot-dryers on it. The clothesline was next to a picnic table with a big cooler on it. The owners were presumably doing some pre-lunch exploring among the pines.

I took a cell phone out of my sampo and called Mom and Dad. There was no answer. My parents weren't home.

I tried both their cells. Right to voicemail. Well, I know what that means. They're home after all. Mom and Dad both work at home. They always turn everything off when they're working.

After all, they weren't expecting me to call, and they knew – or thought they knew – that I was safe and sound with Grandma and Grandpa. Why should they hang around the phone all day, just because I might want to say hello?

I left the park and headed for the ocean.



The street I was on eventually dead-ended in a parking lot with an entrance to a public beach. There was a snack bar, bathrooms, an outdoor shower and lots of people

I had no idea how long I was going to have to wait for Zazkal. Time to explore. Tying my sneakers together, I hung them over my shoulder and waded along the tide line.

Eventually, I got to the far end of the beach. The ground there was too rocky for sunbathers, making it a haven for flocks of seagulls plus a smattering of other shorebirds.

I put my sneakers back on and walked along the rocks, scattering the gulls as I passed. Finding a flat rock to sit on, I took a peanut butter and jelly sandwich out of the sampo. The seagulls spotted the sandwich right away and flew over. They stayed at a safe distance watching me intently as each bite moved from hand to mouth.

When nothing was forthcoming, a few at a time they started to move back to their business of sunning and preening themselves. There was also plenty of squabbling and a little desultory pecking among the rocks for a snack.

Some of the birds flew off to form a new group further down the beach, but most of them stayed in the rocks, nearby, patently ignoring the human. Having become a non-source of food, I ceased to exist for them in any real sense of the word.

There were still a few hopefuls, hanging on for a handout when I finished my lunch. I pulled a handful of popcorn out of my bag and tossed it in the air. Less than ten seconds and they were all back.

All of the available space around me in the air and on the ground was now filled with the noisy, contentious birds. I pulled out another handful of popcorn and threw it as far as I could to get some breathing space and the entire flock immediately moved to the new feeding spot.

They were fast. They had to be. They grabbed the popcorn on the ground and caught it in the air with all the adroitness that a fisher bird learns, and the passion of a scavenger who insists on hanging around with the competition.

“Like city people,” I thought fondly, remembering the year I spent with my parents as a city kid in another country. It was a noisy, exciting and scary year. The friendships I had formed there were more intense than those of even my best friends at home.

I was liking the seagulls more and more as I fed them, thinking about my best friends from that year, Dana and Anna who were really nothing like seagulls, but somehow, when we were all together, Miriam, Dana and all of my city friends in a big noisy flock...we were all seagulls.

I should try calling Mom and Dad again. Being back on the land had started me thinking about my family and my land friends. It made me realize that I felt the same way about my friends and family in the ocean. With a start, I suddenly understood just how much I had already become part of the ocean, how I missed it when I wasn't there.

“I wonder,” I thought aloud, still thinking about my city friends, “what it would be like to really be a seagull. I wonder if they have as much fun as we did.”

“You betcha,” came a scratchy voice from above and behind me.

CHAPTER 30

FEATHER PILLOWS WITH FEET

I turned around and looked up to see who was talking, but there was no one there. All I could see were three super-sized seagulls flying above my head. Compared to the smooth, snowy feathers of the rest of the gulls, these guys were scruffy and dirty-looking.

Instead of hanging around at the food distribution center a few feet in front of me they had been flying around my head, just out of sight. It was almost as if they were looking me over.

Experimentally, I tossed a piece of popcorn straight up. One of the birds snatched greedily, catching it neatly in mid air. Meanwhile, the rest of the gulls saw the new feeding location and began closing in.

Bad move. And moving is what I won't be able to do in a minute. Grabbing more popcorn, I quickly tossed it over the rocks and onto the sand, sending everyone back to a more comfortable distance.

Funny how their squawking sounds like speech in a language that you can almost understand.

"That's her all right," came a scratchy voice in front of me in a language that I did understand.

There was a fourth big, gray gull on the ground at the front of the flock. It didn't seem particularly interested in food, but stood looking at me with its head cocked to one side.

At the same time, I felt two hands grab hold of my upper arms and pull hard.

"Hey! Let go!"

I looked up. All I could see was a huge feather pillow. No, that wasn't right, the feathers were on the outside. If it was a pillow, then the feathers should be on the inside. Right?

I was more confused than frightened when I looked down and saw the seagulls surround and attack my sampo, trying to get the food out that they knew must be there.

"My bag! They'll shred it."

That was when I finally realized from what distance and angle I was viewing this scene.

I screamed.

"Ahhh! I'm up and going upper!"

"Down! I want to be downer!"

I had already transitioned from confusion to fear. When I turned my head to the side I moved from fear, directly into heart thumping full-blown panic. My arms were not being held by hands, but by two giant claws.

I kicked and wiggled for all I was worth.

"Cool it, kid," came the same scratchy voice. Instinctively looking for the source of the voice, I saw the bottom of a huge bird's head that was firmly attached to the feather bed above me.

I stopped wiggling.

"Aren't you rather large for an eagle," I whispered, mostly to myself, my eyes bulging at the sight of an impossibly large bird.

"I'm not an eagle, kiddo. I'm a roc. Don't you know the difference?"

I did indeed know the difference. "You don't exist." I was still whispering. "You're a Greek myth, just a story about a giant bird that makes a habit of carrying off people to feed...it's... young..."

"...Oh, dear." The whisper was beginning to waver. "You don't exist. I'll just close my eyes and you will ..."

“You’re right. I don’t exist. But I do now. Pretty good trick, huh.? Haw, Haw, Haw, Haw,” and the great bird began to make a nasty crowing sound.

I had to admit the truth of this. Whatever this was, giant roc or something worse, it definitely did exist. So I did what any sensible person does when all of their other resources are exhausted. I whined.

“I want my sampo back. I want to go home,” I cried pitifully.

Unable to think of anything else to whine for, I said it again.

“I want my sampo back. I want to go home.” ...and again, and again, until slowly my brain slipped back into gear, or at least something close.

“You’re not a roc. You’re one of those seagulls, aren’t you.”

“Wrong, wrong, wrong,” came the scratchy voice. “I was a seagull. Now I’m a roc. These dumb kids don’t know anything.”

Now I was pretty sure who I was dealing with, but I wasn’t sure that it was an improvement on some improbable mythological creature.

“You’re not really going to carry me to your nest and feed me to your babies, are you?” We were flying along the shoreline, away from the public beach with all the people.

“Right you are, kiddo. I don’t have any babies. I’m going to eat you myself. Har, Har, Har, Har.”

“Very funny.”

“Tasty, too. It’s been a long time since I’ve eaten anyone, but then, it’s been a long time since I’ve been a roc.”

This was sounding less and less like a joke.

CHAPTER 31

I YAM WHAT I YAM

“You can’t really eat me,” I said, but not very confidently. “You’re not really a roc or a seagull. You’re really a pirate, aren’t you.”

“I’m always that, but right now I’m a pirate roc.””

“But your real self, you know, the one you started out with.”

“You don’t listen good do you? I am what I am,” and I didn’t think he was referring to Popeye the Sailor. My...real...self...is...a...roc. Right now. Before that I was a seagull. A real seagull. Before that, I don’t remember.”

“I bet you can’t change back into a seagull,” I said, saying the first thing that came into my mind.

“Why don’t I just change into a mouse and then you can pounce on me and gobble me up. Haw, Haw, Haw, Haw.”

“Oh, I guess you’ve heard the story of Puss and Boots.”

“Haw, Haw, Haw, Haw.”

“Wait, I’m very wiggly, especially when I’m scared. It will make me hard to eat. If you drop me from here, I’ll land on those rocks and probably break up into nice little easy-to-eat pieces.”

Without missing a wingbeat, the great head turned to look at me. His sharp curved beak reminded me of the giant squid. What is it with these mythological monsters?

He swerved, and we were back over the water again. Instantly, I knew what to do.

Quickly, before he had a chance to turn his head away, I muttered the words to the sleep spell under my breath and then stared hard, hoping to hold his glance long enough to make him fall asleep. Miraculously, the roc didn’t look away or speak. It was as if I had captured his gaze. I could feel his grip getting looser and looser.

One sharp jerk ... and I was free. Free to fall, to plummet to the sea.

“Concentrate, Miriam,” I was talking to myself again.” Don’t fly yet.” I knew that I couldn’t fly as fast as the roc. I would be caught before I came anywhere near to the water. The only way I could move faster than the bird was by falling. Falling faster and faster. A free fall to freedom. But it still took all the nerve I had and more to keep my eyes open and my wings closed while I watched the waves racing towards me.

“Don’t look up. Don’t think about the roc. It will need a minute to reorient itself after nearly falling asleep in midair. Get ready ... get ready ... wait ... Now!

I switched to tail and opened my wings to float the last few feet to the water.

With a jerk I was hoisted back up into the air. But it was not because I was flying. My wings didn’t have room to open. They were pressed up hard against the feathered belly of a roc, my arms, again, tight in its grip.

I could see a tiny island just ahead of us. More like a mangrove-covered sandbar than an island.

The roc dropped me on a sandy spot in the middle. I rubbed my tush. I only fell a couple of feet, but it hurt.

Two more rocs glided down next to us. They didn’t seem to notice that I now had a tail instead of legs.

Overhead, a fourth roc was coming in to land. From the wonkey path of its descent, I knew that it was the one I had worked the sleep spell on.

Four of them. I never had a chance. They must have been flying behind us.

“Lunchtime!” one of them said with a happy lilt in his voice and they started to move closer. Terrified, I could only manage one word.

“Why?” and my voice quavered with the effort

“Because,” answered another one, “because we’re rocs. Stupid.”

“No, I know that why, you already told me why you want to eat me. I mean why did you change into rocs in the first place,” I said, hoping to get anything but the same unpleasant answer.

“So we could be big enough to catch you,” said a third roc.

“Seagulls don’t eat people. You must have had another reason when you were seagulls for wanting to catch me.”

“Oh, yeah, we wanted to ask you some questions.”

“Wouldn’t it be a good idea to ask your questions before you eat me?”

They looked at each other and started talking. I couldn’t understand a word. They seemed to be switching between languages with each sentence. It sounded like a dozen people talking all at once. These guys have been around.

Languages were on the very short list of approved games I was allowed to play on my junior-tablet when I was little, but the four of them were talking so fast, that I could only pick out a couple of languages. I know I heard Spanish and I definitely heard Latin.

“Latin? Nobody speaks Latin.” They turned at the sound of my voice, and one of them spoke.

“We do. Where’s our boat?”

I took a moment to answer. I knew what I wanted. I wanted not to be eaten.

“I won’t answer any of your questions while you are rocs. You have to be something different. All of you.”

“You mean like a mouse? Har, Har, Har, Har.”

“If you want, but I’m not a cat. I don’t eat mice. Almost anything will do, I don’t care what, just not rocs.”

“Like what?”

“Like, a person. Why don’t you become people? You could still catch me if I tried to get away if you were people.”

“Don’t want to be people. We’re birds. We like it. Let’s eat her,” and they started to move in closer again.

“How about seagulls? I don’t mind if you’re seagulls again. Then you could still be birds and I could answer your questions.”

There was a lot of unintelligible conversation after this suggestion and then one at a time, with a kind of a ‘pouf’, they were seagulls. Apparently, this was a satisfactory compromise.

“Where’s our boat?” one of the seagulls repeated.

I didn’t want to be eaten. But I didn’t want to give up the Maiden Voyage either. My answer was a compromise, and as it turned out, not a very good one.

“What boat?” I said.

“Let’s eat her.”

“Don’t be dumb, we’re seagulls. Seagulls don’t eat people. Yuch! We eat fish. Remember?”

“Half of her is a fish. Let’s eat that.”

While having half of you eaten by seagulls is significantly less intimidating than having all of you eaten by rocs, it is not something to look forward to. Therefore, it was with considerable

relief that I saw in the distance, but moving in fast, something that looked just like a traveling bubble.

“Oh, thank you, Zazkal. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,” ... words I thought I would never say.

“What!”

“What!”

“What!”

“What!”

“Look out,” I said. “It’s one of those exploding bubbles headed this way. You know, the kind that explodes as soon as it touches anything alive.”

Very quickly, all four gulls scattered in the opposite direction.

“Wait, don’t leave me,” I couldn’t resist. “It’s headed this way.”

They were bumping and flapping and generally falling all over each other to get away and didn’t see me slip into the bubble when it reached me. They didn’t see me take the fern coat out of my wing pocket and put it on as fast as I could.

They were still close enough, though, and quiet enough for once, that they heard the loud ‘click’ when I closed the coat’s clasp hard in my hurry to become invisible.

“Aagh, there it goes,” one of them cried, and they waited for the explosion that didn’t happen. Finally turning around and cautiously flying back, all they saw was an empty bubble floating gently out to sea, and an equally empty sandbar island.

“Where’s the kid? You forgot the kid.”

“I didn’t forget the kid. You did. I remembered. I just didn’t say anything.”

“You’re stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

“I didn’t forget, either. Because this isn’t the same kid. That one had legs. She’s still on the boat. Where’s the boat?”

“I’m not in charge of the boat, you are. Where did you put it, stupid?”

“You expect me to remember where I put it! I don’t remember what I ate for breakfast. How can I remember where I left some boat?”

That was the last thing I heard as they flew off still arguing among themselves.

CHAPTER 32

THE PIRATES' SECRET

I was long out of sight of both land and seagulls when the bubble stopped. Ollie was all over me, the moment it dissolved and dropped me into the water.

“Miriam! Miriam! Wait till you see what we found. You have to see for yourself... the way we did,” he said mysteriously.

“Where’s the sampo?” Zazkal demanded.

Naturally, that would be the first thing he noticed.

“There was an encounter...” I said, “...with the Hazmats.”

Zazkal’s eyes narrowed and he looked me over like he was checking my bits to see if they were all there.

“What happened?” he asked.

I started from the beginning and when I got to the part where the seagulls trashed the sampo, I could see him simmer. When I got to the part about the sandbar island, he started to steam. By the time I finished, he was red-faced and speechless with anger. Zazkal speechless is not a bad thing.

Ollie, on the other hand, kept bumping up against me like he wanted to be attached. When I finished, I was shaking and I had a lump in my throat that was pushing its way up to my tear ducts. Nobody said anything. Awkward.

“So...what did you guys find?” I asked trying not to let my voice crack.

Bitterly angry, probably more over the loss of my sampo than anything that happened to me, Zazkal was not speaking, but Ollie, was full of praise after hearing my story.

“Oh, Miriam. I’m so glad you are okay. You were terrific. I bet you would have gotten away, even without the bubble.”

“She talks herself into trouble as much as out.” Zazkal was less generous in his praise.

“Those birds sound stupid and they are,” he said, still furious, his fists clenched and his arms rigid. “Greedy and stupid. That’s what makes them so dangerous. Years of switching back and forth from creature to creature, has destroyed any memory of what they once were. They live completely for the desires of the creature of that moment. It’s what makes them so arbitrary and so unpredictable.”



We were a quiet group swimming along the sea bottom, moving further and further out to sea. The fear and panic I had felt continued to cling to me.

Finally, we came to a place where the ocean floor dropped steeply. The bottom of this undersea cliff was lost in the darkness of the sunless places of the ocean.

Turning, we followed the top edge north for a few minutes until Zazkal, recognizing some landmark from his earlier visit, began swimming down, following the cliff wall. Ollie went up for air and rejoined us before we had gone very far.

It grew darker and darker as we left the sun behind. Then, there, between the light and the darkness where there are still shadows, but not much else, Zazkal stopped in front of a shallow overhang in the cliff.

“I had a pretty good idea of what I was looking for and a fair guess about where it might be,” he said “but all in all, we were lucky to find it so soon. It was Ollie who actually spotted it,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Wood and metal echo differently from rock or coral,” Ollie said.

Not having echolocation, to me this spot looked like most of the other bumps, dents and holes in the wall that we had already passed.

“I can’t see anything different about this place,” I said.

“Look again,” said Zazkal, “that square shadow at the very back.”

I looked hard. “I see it. It’s not a shadow. It’s a door, isn’t it.” The dark of the wood of the roughly-made door looked like a shadow against the lighter rock around it. But there was a dull gleam that caught my eye and helped me to spot it.

What little light there was, was reflecting off a large padlock. “It’s locked,” I cried in dismay.

Swimming over to the door, Zazkal reached up and moved a loose rock lodged in a small hole near the door. Reaching into the hole with his other hand, he took something out and held it up. It was a key.

“I can’t believe they went to all that trouble to get a door down here, set it up and lock it, and then leave the key right there, where anyone could find it,” I said.

“Uh, Miriam, ‘anyone’ doesn’t come here,” Ollie pointed out. “How often do you think anybody who might be interested actually swims down here? And then, if they did, that they would even notice the door?”

“The truth is,” said Zazkal, “they’re not capable of keeping track of a key. They would have lost it the first time they changed from one animal to another. I imagine the door is just a precaution to keep anyone from accidentally wandering in the way they probably did when they first found this place. The lock and key are almost unnecessary.”

“So, this is where they keep their treasure,” I said. My mind filled with visions of piles of gold and heaps of jewels. I forgot how frightened I had been.

“How did you know it would be near where they had the boat that night, when I was trapped on the deck in that old wooden crate?”

“There’s no pirate treasure in there,” Zazkal said. “I wouldn’t think they had any. They probably spend, eat or otherwise use up anything they have, as soon as they get it.”

“We think it must have been a barracuda’s lair before the Hazmats found it,” Ollie interrupted. “The bottom near the door is filled with bones and yucky stuff.”

“Isn’t this kind of deep for a barracuda?” I said, thinking about certain others who might have used it for a place to devour their victims. I shivered, remembering how close I had come to being a pile of bones myself and looked around, suddenly nervous about being here at all.

Zazkal unlocked the door. “Come on,” he said, “let’s go. I don’t want to hang around here any longer than necessary”.

“What’s there, if it’s not a treasure?”

“You’ll see for yourself in a moment,” he said a smug grin of superiority on his face.

Ollie was nodding his head up and down with the excitement of anticipation. “He’s right, you have to see it yourself.”

Zazkal went in first and then Ollie. They turned around to get a good view of my reaction.

Trying not to look down at the pile of unidentifiable but disgusting stuff on the ground, the first thing I noticed was how brightly lit the water was.

“I can’t see any fairy lights,” I said.

I looked around and then up, thinking that they must be hidden in the rocks. Just a few feet above me was the fuzzy glow of outsea sunshine. Oh, wow!

I burst through the surface and looked around at a now familiar landscape. I was in a swimming pool sized salt lake in the fairylands. There were more trees here than at the Metsoola lake but not many.

“I know where we are. This is so cool. We’re really close to the salt lake that goes to Metsoola. At least, I’m pretty sure we are. It’s on the other side of those trees...I think.”

“I thought as much,” said Zazkal. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Ollie is overdue for some air.”

“Uh, Zazkal,” I said. “There’s fresh air right up there.”

“Oh, right. Hurry up, Ollie. I don’t want you and Miriam to stay here any longer than necessary.”

Zazkal and I followed Ollie to the surface for another look around. This may have been my second salt lake, but it was still disorienting, seeing land and sunshine from so deep in the ocean.

“Ollie, did you echo any bubble people when we were onsea?” Zazkal asked.

“A lot,” Ollie said.

“Go and find a pod and stay with them. Because if Miriam and I are not back by morning, I want you to sound the dolphin alarm.”

“How will you know where to find me?” Ollie asked.

“I will know. Get moving! Now!”

“Now’s your chance to relieve that poor, desperately unhappy king of his anxiety,” Zazkal said sarcastically, after Ollie left. “Just hurry up and get back here fast.”

“What? You’re not coming with me? Why can’t you make a bubble for the land...uh, outsea part?”

“There is a good deal of magic I can use to defend myself if the Hazmats show up. You know perfectly well that I can’t construct a traveling bubble without access to the supplies in my workshop or your sampo. I will stay here to make sure the door stays open for you.

“Just be brief. Find the king quickly, apprise him of the situation and get back here as fast as you can. Now get out of here.”

He was not happy, and I moved quickly, pulling myself out of the water and switching to legs. I stood up and looked down at Zazkal, helpless to leave the lake. Without stopping to think about it, I took the fern coat out of my wing pocket and handed it to Zazkal.

“Here,” I said using my best ‘do it or else’ tone. “Wear this until I come back. At least you’ll be invisible,” and knowing what to expect, I turned and walked off before he could respond.



Zazkal looked down at the small bundle in his hand and then up at Miriam’s retreating figure.

“Stupid child, she’s lost her bag, and gives away her only protection. What next, will she tear off her wings?”

But he put the on the coat while he watched her disappear, then, finding a relatively clean spot at the bottom of the lake, he settled down to wait.

CHAPTER 33

INTO THE WOODS AND UNDER THE SEA

“She’s back. She’s back,” whispered the trees.



“I’m back, I’m back,” I sang out when I reached the trees. My recent encounter with the Hazmats had overwhelmed the slight nervousness I felt on the first visit. All that was left was that feeling that I was not alone and a desire to know more.

Or, maybe my drylander self was homesick. I don’t know. But someday, when I have more time, I’ll come back.

I turned left to keep following a faint trail through the woods and right in front of me, almost blocking the path, was a majorly big tree.

“Whoa, check it out.” A tree with three trunks. A really big tree. Mom used to tell me about trees like this. She said they were always called the three sisters.

“Hi, sisters. Nice to meet you.” I stroked the trunk affectionately.

“Guess. Guess our names.”

There’s that nice whispery sound again. I put my hand up to feel the wind that must be blowing through the trees, but the air wasn’t moving. I guess it’s just a tree-top breeze.

As soon as I was past the trees, I opened my wings. I could see Metsoola’s salt lake as soon as I was airborne.

A few minutes later I switched back to tail and slipped quietly into the water headed down to the cave entrance in Metsoola.

This time I had no invisible coat to wear and was more than a little nervous about my reception after so many days missing. Not a problem. The blackness of the garden was more than sufficient to render me invisible.

What’s going on here? Where are all the fairy lights? All of a sudden, I was no longer worried about being seen by less-than-friendly Sky. I was more worried about finding anyone at all.

“Glori!” I whispered.. “Can you hear me?” I said a little louder. “Can anybody hear me?”

“Over here, Miriam.” I looked around at the not-as-bright-as-they-should-be lights coming from the castle. There was a shadowy form backlit by the light from one of the entrances. The shadow was Sky shaped, and seemed to be waving two arms at me.

“Edward,” I called, recognizing the shape, “is that you?” I headed towards the shadow-filled entrance. “What’s going on?”

“Yes, it’s me. I don’t know. Hurry up.”

“What’s going on?” I said again, as soon as I reached him.

“I don’t know.”

“I hate it when you repeat yourself,” we both said in unison, and then giggled.

“Oh, Edward, oh, Spec, I am so glad to see you both,” I said and gave Edward a big hug...big but brief. As soon as I realized what I was doing, I backed off...fast.

“What happened to the lights?” I asked, glad that it was dark enough to hide any blushes.

“Where were you?”

“You’d better go first. It will take a long time to answer your question. Also, is your father around? I need to see him right away.”

“He’s here and we’re already headed that way. My answer is short and easy. I don’t know. Nobody knows. Your turn.”

“When did they disappear?” I asked, not ready to let him off that easily.

“During the last sleep period,” Specter said. “There’s hardly anyone in the castle right now, and no one saw it happen. Everyone is still out scouring the sea for you.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “I sort of have an idea of what might have happened.” I didn’t elaborate, because we came up through a floor door into a large meeting room filled with sea fairies all talking at once.

The room had plenty of floor pillows, but the conversation, if you can call it that, was so agitated that hardly anyone was sitting on them.

Glori was floating near the wall at the far end of the room, looking very serious and probably the only person in the room who was just listening and not swimming around.

She was also the first person to spot us just before we swam in through the floor door. In one sweet second she was transformed into intense happy, bouncing up and down in the water with excitement.

Everyone else was talking and waving their arms so much to get everyone else’s attention that they floated up off the ground, sinking slowly back to their seats when they had finished, only to be struck by some new idea and float back up in passionate speech again.

The moment we entered the room, all conversation ceased and everyone looked at us. Then everybody looked at one particular person in the room, except for that one particular person, who continued to stare at me and Edward.

CHAPTER 34

LEAVING THINGS OUT

That one particular person was King Mundiflure. He had the angry look in his eyes that grownups get when a lost child has been found and they don't have to be worried anymore. Everyone in the room could see a serious royal temper tantrum coming.

I knew that out-talking him was the only thing that would check the impending hurricane.

"Your Majesty," I said as deferentially as possible, then continued quickly, so as to leave no conversational holes for him to jump into.

"I left Metsoola twice, the first time, it was because I was scared. I came back as soon as I calmed down. The second time was by magic, but it wasn't my magic and I had nothing to do with it. But it does have everything to do with the disappearance of the lights in the garden." I paused, for effect, but mostly to take a breath.

The room stayed silent. No one, including the king, spoke. He reclined into his cushion with 'this had better be good' written all over his face.

I started with my second disappearance from the garden, describing the traveling bubbles that were bringing us to Metsoola and explaining how Zazkal got stuck in the lake when he stopped to explore.

"Zazkal used a kind of reverse sender spell to bring me back to the lake. Honestly, I never knew it was coming and I had no way to contact you to let you know what happened."

When I got to the part about the Maiden Voyage, I kind of skipped over it. I tried to make it sound like we traveled all the way in the bubbles. Skipped the bit about the Hazmats, too. No sense going there if I didn't have to.

My origins as an outsea person were not exactly a deep dark secret. Everyone at Casalot knows where I come from.

They had watched me grow up through the waterproof photos that my proud grandparents had shown to anyone who would look.

Many of the older adults at Casalot knew Mom from the time she was my age and lived with Grandma and Grandpa Sky. And, of course, there were visits from Mom, though apparently not as many once I came into the picture. So, yeah, everyone at Casalot knew way too much about me.

But this was not Casalot and I was too unsure of myself to risk any unnecessary confidences. Besides, telling them about my outsea origins would involve all kinds of complicated explanations and endless questions.

My job was to tell Edward's father what he needed to know as quickly as possible, get back to Zazkal, and out of that pirates' nest.

So I fudged. It didn't take a genius to see it either. Everyone in the room knew that I was leaving stuff out. But nobody said a word.

Finally, I reached the denouement.

"It was Zazkal who figured it out," I said. "He guessed that the Hazmats had found an easy way to get here. Otherwise, why bother?"

"Zazkal and my friend Ollie found another undersea entry to the fairylands right where the Hazmats had been seen twice before. It was artificially closed off and locked.

"When we got in, we saw that we were in a salt lake, a pond really, that was not far from the one here in Metsoola."

A muffled gasp went around the room. It was followed by murmuring of a highly charged nature.

“Anyway, we think that they were using the salt lakes to smuggle power nuts out of Metsoola.”

Everyone there had already come to the same conclusion the moment they learned about the second entrance into Fairyland. I felt that I was, nonetheless, entitled to be the person to articulate it.

“I think the loss of the garden lights helps to prove it,” I said, proud of this personal piece of deduction. But I didn’t get to be the one to say why.

“Of course,” said Edward, speaking up in his excitement, under circumstances that he normally wouldn’t dare to.

“It was because no one was around the castle. Everyone was out looking for Miriam. We made it easy for them. They must have just paddled around the garden popping power nuts into sacks.

“All the other losses have been around the fringes of the city where they wouldn’t be noticed. This must have been just too tempting for them.”

Everyone nodded sagely, trying to look as if Edward was just describing what they had already figured out. In some cases, it was even probably true. It was only when the murmurs, mumbles, and other noises subsided that the king spoke to me.

“There were a number of points in your story that were not very clear. Perhaps you could enlighten us. I would hate to think that you were keeping something secret and deceiving us on a subject of such importance.”

There it is, I thought. I knew it had to come. I had really botched a lot of the story. There were so many places I had slid around or skipped over. Like, how I managed to get through Fairyland from one salt lake to another—with a tail. Small details like that.

I hardly knew what to say. Even now, I didn’t know whether to tell them my history or not. The only thing I knew for sure was that there was no point in denying that there was more than I was telling.

“It’s...it’s just,” I stuttered uncomfortably. “It’s not really a secret. It’s just, well ... just...sort of private. It really has nothing to do with what we found out about the Hazmats and how they’re getting in and out.”

Speaking in a most unkingly manner, King Mundiflure surprised me and said, “I’m sorry that I have given you such good cause not to trust us, Miriam. I’m sure you have told us everything we need to know.”

I felt my shoulders relax, only then realizing how tense they had become. Somehow, his comment made me want to tell him everything.

“By the way,” he said casually, “What happened to that magic bag of yours?”

CHAPTER 35

THE GREAT REVEAL

My shoulders re-tensed so tight they touched my earlobes.

“Uh...I gave it to Zazkal.”

I can slither along the edges of truth with the best of them, but out and out whoppers...not so good. King Mundiflure lowered his head, raised his eyebrows and looked me in the eye.

He knew. I knew he knew. And he knew I knew he knew. He turned back to the room full of fairies and they began to discuss strategy.

Zazkal had specifically instructed me not to hang around and pretend to be helpful.

“Tell them everything you know,” he had said. “All they need from you is information. It’s their job to decide how to act on it. Just get back here as fast as you can.”

“Miriam,” Edward whispered. “Who’s Ollie?”

“Ollie?” Just thinking about him made me feel safe and happy.

“He’s my best friend.”

“Oh.” The disappointed look on Edward’s face was almost funny.

“Edward. He’s a dolphin,” I said as emphatically as I could and still whisper.

“Oh. That’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay. Listen. I have to go.” I was afraid to interrupt the king, and afraid to leave without speaking to him.

“Miriam, you can’t go. You just got here. Don’t you want to find out what they decide to do about the Hazmats.”

“Yes, of course, but I’m terrified of meeting them again.”

“Again?”

Oops! He did the eyebrow thing just like his father. I was trapped.

“It’s one of the bits I didn’t have time to talk about. I got captured by the Hazmats. They shape-changed into giant mythical birds. They were going to eat me. It was really scary.

“Besides, Zazkal is waiting for me back at the secret entrance. What if they come back while he’s still there?”

“Just wear your invisible cloak,” he said. “That way, even if you do meet them, they’ll never know it.”

“I haven’t got it,” I said quietly. “I gave it to Zazkal.”

“Can’t you get something out of your magic bag that will protect you? You didn’t really give it to Zazkal, did you!” He was undaunted in his optimistically high opinion of my magical abilities.

“I haven’t got that either,” I said sadly.

“Oh, well, you’ll get it back when you wake up,” he said cheerfully. “It’s almost bedtime anyway.”

“I don’t know if I can get it back this time, Edward. I think the seagulls shredded it when the Hazmats grabbed me.”

Talking about my sampo made tears with nowhere to go well up behind my eyes and I knew that a little more salt was being added to the ocean

Edward was finally beginning to get the picture. He didn’t even ask about the seagulls that I hadn’t mentioned to his father.

“Oh, I guess you have to go.” His voice was edged with disappointment. As he spoke, King Mundiflure happened to turn his head and see us.

“Miriam! What are you still doing here? Every minute longer that you delay increases the danger for you and your friend.”

“I was just explaining that to Edward, and asking him to say goodbye for me,” I said.

“Well, you’ve done it. Now, go,” he said. “No, wait.” He called over the two biggest Sky in the room. “They will come with you as an escort. They’ll see you safely through to the other side.”

This was a problem. There was no way that I could walk away from the lake without showing off my legs to my escorts.

All of a sudden, I knew I was ready to do this. But it didn’t feel right that King Mundiflure and Edward would learn about my extra gifts from someone else.

“Why don’t you come, too, King Mundiflure?” I said.

“I’m sorry, Miriam, I wish I could but it really wouldn’t be right for me to leave such an important discussion, even for a short time.”

“I know,” I answered. “But I think you should come anyway. I have something I would like to show you. It’s kind of hard to explain and I can’t show you here.” I kept my tone serious, and King Mundiflure seemed to understand that my intentions were serious as well.

“Very well,” he said. “Edward, you are to wait here. It’s much too dangerous for you to come.”

“Oh, Father,” Edward began.

“I think Edward should come too, and Glori as well,” I interrupted. Glori was still bobbing up and down and grinning like a lunatic, at the other end of the room.

“It wouldn’t be fair to leave them behind. We won’t be going further than your own salt lake. If the Hazmats were to come through at the same time, they’d probably hide at the sight of so many of us swimming around in there. The real danger is at the entrance at the other end where Zazkal is waiting. You won’t be coming that far.”

Glori was with us at the front of the room even before I finished speaking. She was so fast that the waves from her movement through the water sent everyone floating around the room.

“I’m here,” she said quickly. “Let’s go.”

“Very well,” said King Mundiflure. “We’ll all go.”

“All right.” Edward waved his fists and cheered.

We all swam, not slowly and not quickly and without speaking, down the meeting room stack and over to the center of the castle where the garden was.

Edward was bursting with excitement. Glori was grinning from ear to ear. Everyone else, meaning me and King Mundiflure was feeling very serious. The king was probably thinking about the potential danger. Me, I was thinking about what I had decided to do.



When we reached the surface of the salt lake, I finally spoke.

“The salt pond that leads to the other entrance is just beyond those woods over there.”

Glori and Edward puzzled. They probably assumed that the two bodies of water would be right next to each other. King Mundiflure seemed to have an idea of what to expect, or at least he looked that way.

“Before I go,” I said, “there are two things that I should tell you. First, I have a third fairy gift that I haven’t told you about. Second, Mele’ and Flora are my adoptive grandparents.

I turned and pulled myself out of the water, switching to legs at the same time. I walked forward a few feet, then opened my wings and flew upwards.

It was with some satisfaction that I heard the gasps of surprise behind and below me as I circled back to say goodbye. The look of dumb surprise on Edward’s face was especially enjoyable.

Specter, on the other hand, probably the only one who really knew what was going to happen, was the octopus version of intense excitement. Pushing himself up with his strong tentacles he was bobbing up and down on Edward’s shoulder, his head flopping around in the air.

“Miriam,” Glori called out. “You said you had one more fairy gift. You have two.”

“My wings are a fairy gift,” I answered back from the air. “The magic scale that lets me be a Sky is a gift from my adoptive grandmother, so that I can visit her.

“Goodbye, everyone,” I called down to them. “We’ll do what we can about the Hazmats at the other end, and try to figure out someway to let you know what’s happening.”

“Goodbye, Miriam,” called back King Mundiflure. “We’ll do the same at this end. ...Be careful, child.”

CHAPTER 36

THREE SISTERS AND FOUR MAD DOGS

About the same time that Miriam was saying goodbye to her friends, four large battle-scarred groupers swam up to the entrance of the cave where Zazkal was waiting for her to return. When they saw the big wooden door unlocked and standing open, they stopped.

After a brief but unintelligible discussion, the spot where the four big groupers had been swimming became occupied by four tiny sardines.

There is a considerable risk to being a small fish in the ocean. Practically anyone you meet is interested in eating you. There was also the possibility that someone hungry would be waiting on the other side of the door.

There also was, they reasoned, an even better chance that anyone waiting on the other side wouldn't notice four such small fish. They swam in warily, ready to change instantly into something large and nasty if necessary.

Zazkal was sitting on the floor of the cave wrapped in Miriam's coat. So when the sardines came in, it looked empty. For his part, he barely noticed the four little fish that seemed to have accidentally wandered in through the open door. He paid no attention to them and went back to his thoughts.

The four tiny sardines become four huge, shaggy, dirty looking dogs when they emerged from the salt lake. Not having seen anyone so far, they were on the lookout, teeth bared, noses to the wind and ready for trouble.

Fortunately for Miriam, the dogs were downwind and caught no scent of her when they came into the woods. Miriam saw them first.



When I reached the woods between the two salt lakes, I decided to pass through on foot, thinking that I would be less conspicuous this way than if I stayed in the air. Just in case, I thought.

I had stopped by the three sisters to admire the big tree, one last time, when I heard barking. Looking up, I saw four dark shapes in the distance, and I knew.

Scared out of my wits, I put my back against the tree, too afraid to run or hide, even to move. My terror-clouded eyes didn't even register what was happening but within moments, I was completely hidden in a leafy bower. Each leaf rustled gently squeezing out its scent, until I was covered with a strong smell of fresh, green growing things.

Although I couldn't see them anymore, I could hear the dogs approaching. It sounded like they were coming straight at me. I didn't dare move, even breathe, for fear they might hear me, or that even a small movement would waft my scent out to them. It wasn't hard to do. I was frozen, anyway.

It was only when most of the branches had lifted away and I could see out a little bit, that I began to regain my senses. My first thought was that I had somehow hidden myself, while I had been out of my mind with fear.

Then I saw the remaining branches of my bower lifting upward by themselves, moving in a way that I had never seen a tree move before. That was when I knew.

The thought of what the tree had done made me feel protected and loved. I wasn't afraid anymore. I started to cry, happy, smiling tears, but just as unstoppable as the other kind.

I watched with quiet, damp pleasure as the last of the branches moved back to their places. Then, still sniffing, I stepped back far enough, to see the whole tree, or at least as much as you could expect to see in a forest of trees surrounded by trees.

I couldn't bring myself to speak casually to someone so large and so different from me. It was not as if I had never spoken to a tree before, but this was the first time I knew with confidence that the tree was actually listening.

I felt like Alice in Wonderland, not knowing how to talk to the mouse in the pool of tears. At least I don't have to worry about the tree swimming off if I say the wrong thing.

"I am most grateful to you, Tree," I said formally, "for your protection. You probably have, no, surely have saved my life. I regret that I cannot stay to express the depth of my gratitude and my pleasure in your revealing of yourself to me." At this point, my efforts at being formal collapsed, crushed by awe.

Formal is tough to sustain in the face of amazing. I lost it.

"Oh, snap! I never knew trees could do that, not even in Fairyland. You are amazing."

"But I can't stay. I left my teacher behind and I don't know if the Hazmats saw him or not. He may need help." I sighed, realizing that if he had been seen, there might be very little I could do to help him.

"I'm really worried about him. Also," I said, glancing nervously in the direction that the pirates had taken, "I don't know how long it will be before the Hazmats come back this way. I don't want to be around when they do."



"Go. Go quickly," whispered the tree. "Be careful, child." Again the tree went unheard. Miriam had already left, her heart racing as fast as her feet.



I didn't expect to be able to see Zazkal. If everything was O.K., he would probably be wearing my fern seed coat. So, as soon as I was under the water of the salt pond, I began calling his name.

"Zazkal! Zazkal! Are you here? Are you okay? Can you hear me?"

"Here I am, Miriam. Stop making such a racket."

He handed me the fern coat. I crumpled in up and shoved it into my wing pocket.

"Ouch! This pocket is tight. We've got to get out of here. The Hazmats are in Fairyland. They could be back this way any minute."

"That's impossible, I was here the whole time. No one could have passed through without my seeing them."

"I don't know about that. But there were four big, ugly dogs in Fairyland heading straight for Metsoola. They looked awfully familiar."

Zazkal raised his arm and struck his forehead with his palm.

"There were four fish. Tiny fish. I could hardly see them. I thought nothing of it."

"Let's go," I said.

And we were gone.



When the four dogs left the woods, they had a clear view, almost all the way to Metsoola's salt lake. They saw no one.

"There's no one here," one of the dogs said to one of the others. "You must have left the door open. How could you be such a jerk?"

"I never left it open," spoke the second. "I would never forget a thing like that. Anyway, it's not my job to remember. It's yours," he said turning to a third companion. "You left the door open. You're the one who forgot the kid, too. You're just plain dumb."

"What kid?" said the third dog who was now being addressed. "I don't remember any kid. Anyway, it's not my job either. It's probably that kid who did it."

The conversation went on in this manner over the land, into the water, not even pausing as they automatically slipped from dog into fish shape. When they to the bottom of the salt lake, they found the passage from the lake into the garden at Castle Downalot blocked.

"This is all your fault."

"No, it's not. It's yours," the argument continued with just a minor change of subject.

They had no choice but to return and so they did, fighting and bickering the whole way. When they finally got back to the cave at the other end, there was no one there. The door, however, was closed and locked ... from the outside.

PART IV

A MONSTER LIKE ME



CHAPTER 37

NOTHING BUT A HALFANDHALF

It's my boat, I fumed. He can't take it away from me like that. I was feeling usurped and resentful.

Zazkal was at the wheel, sitting in the pilot's chair. He liked driving the boat and intended to do so for the remainder of the trip.

Since traveling bubbles were no longer an option, Zazkal had decided to take the Maiden Voyage south along the coast in order to shorten the swimming distance to Casalot.

Ollie had opted out. The thought of spending the next two days with Zazkal hanging onto his dorsal fin was enough to discourage the most intrepid bubble person. The dolphins he was already with were headed in the general direction of Casalot and he preferred their company.

Zazkal enjoyed driving the boat, even more so since he knew exactly how I felt. But he was not in such a great mood either. If I was upset about losing the sampo, he was angry and he was angry at me.

"Do you suppose I could have a turn at piloting my own boat?" I said testily.

"Why? Don't you think a mere fish capable of such a feat?" he replied, returning the jab.

"Zazkal, cut it out. Just because I'm from outsea, you think I don't know the difference between a fish and a mammal."

"You're no more a drylander than I am," he spoke with derision. "The only difference is that I'm a fairy and you're not."

"I don't understand, if I'm not a land person and I'm not a fairy, then what am I?"

"Nothing but a halfandhalf," he said derisively. "No better than those shape-shifting pirates. How long do you think it will be before you can't remember what you were originally, like them? They have no idea what their first forms were. They live only for the present, and for their own greed."

"I don't believe you." Now we were both yelling. "You have a black heart. You're the one who's no better than they are. I'm nothing like them. Their magic is built in, it's part of what they are. I need a magical device to be something different."

"What can I say in the face of such monumental ignorance? Give me your magic scale. Oh, don't worry, I won't hurt it. Put it over there if you like, I won't touch it."

As soon as I put down the scale, he pushed me over the side of the boat and dove in after me. Grabbing my ankle, he swam deep into the water, pulling me down with him. I didn't even have time to take a breath. My lungs were empty. My land shape was helpless against the powerful fish form, pulling me deeper and deeper.

“Breathe,” he said. “Breathe, damn you. It’s like writing. You don’t need Cooking. You don’t need Cultivating. You just need to Concentrate. You already know how to do it.”

I breathed. I breathed in a lovely sweet lungful of salt water. I looked down and saw my strong, beautiful tail. I relaxed...almost. Zazkal wasn’t finished with me yet.

“Do you think you’re so special? Any well-trained magic user can change their shape if they want.”

I sputtered. So angry, that bubbles came out of my mouth instead of words. “You mean you jerked me out of Metsoola like that, scaring everyone half to death and all the time you could have just walked away? What were you going to do if I didn’t come and get you? Stay there for the rest of your life?”

“If necessary, yes! I’m a Sky. Not some halfling like you. You don’t belong anywhere. Not on the land and not in the water. I may be a rogue Sky, but I am still a citizen of Casalot. Do you think I would risk that for the self-indulgent pleasure of a little shape-shifting?”

“Why do you think it feels so good to be back in the ocean after a spell on the land? You’re already changed. That’s why. You’ll never be a land person again and you’ll never belong in the sea either.”

“You...you...you stay off of my boat.” I turned to swim up to the boat and then, there was a great blackness.



I had been dreaming about my friends at school, when I woke up and found myself on the splintery deck of the Maiden Voyage.

I was still in my Sky shape and Zazkal was driving the boat. I sat up on my elbows and looked around, trying to figure out how he managed to get us both on the boat without my help after he used the sleep spell on me.

Zazkal turned and glared at me.

“Don’t you ever forget. You’re the apprentice.” He managed to make it sound like the lowest possible form of life. “You do what I say...without question.”

In the only act of defiance I could think of, I put on my fern coat to remove myself from his presence. Naturally, it backfired. For Zazkal, it was almost as good as actually being alone. He seemed quite content.

CHAPTER 38

THE PATHFINDING SPELL

With a sinking heart, I searched for the bag that I knew would not be there when I woke up the next morning. I followed the anchor rope up to the surface and climbed on board. Sitting in the darkest corner I could find I wrapped myself in my fern coat, prepared to spend the rest of the day feeling sorry for myself.

I watched, only half noticing when Zazkal swam up. He climbed into the canvas sling hanging from the winch and pulled himself up and onto the boat, using the rope he had left hanging from the pulley. Once in his wheelchair, he used the newly installed, courtesy of my sampo, automatic controls on the winch to haul up the anchor.

Then, without even a glance or a word to check and see if I was there, he moved himself from the wheelchair to the captain's chair, started the engine and headed south..

So that's how he does it, I thought idly. He could save himself a lot of trouble if he would just change to legs.

This reminded me of yesterday's unpleasant conversation. I was in the process of entering a state of total and utter gloom, when Zazkal surprised me by speaking up.

"Take off that silly coat and get over here, he commanded.

"I'm still your teacher and if you think I'm going to let you waste the next two days on foolish daydreams, you're badly mistaken.

"Repeat this phrase," he said sharply, the moment I opened the clasp. I heard a pair of sentences that, except for the fact that they rhymed, made no sense at all.

"Again," he said after I repeated it.

I must have said it a dozen times in all. As soon as he was satisfied, he grabbed at the compass, tearing it from its place and threw it into the ocean.

"Hey, we need that. How will we find our direction?" He didn't answer, but began driving the boat in circles. As he did this, he said, "Think about the place we're going to. The place where we picked up the boat."

"What about it?" I growled back.

"I said think about it, you dolt. Now think. Concentrate."

I got the idea and tried to focus my thoughts on the cat head-shaped cove where I had left the Maiden Voyage, in as much detail as I could.

"Now, tell me which way to go." I glanced up at the sun, my only guide since we were still out of sight of land.

"Don't look at the sun," he snapped.

"Close your eyes and think about your destination." He waited a moment, giving me a chance to focus, then interrupted my thoughts.

"Tell me again. Which way ... No, don't open your eyes. Keep them closed."

I tried to concentrate and then spoke, "That way?" I said, pointing in what felt the right direction.

"No. Speak the rhyme again. Keep your eyes closed, and try again." I did, and this time pointed in a slightly different direction.

"Good. Keep your eyes closed." He began taking the boat in circles again.

"Do it again," he said. "Begin with the rhyme."

I did and got it right a second time but that wasn't enough for Big Fish. He kept on driving the boat in circles, again and again.

It is going to take us forever to get back to Casalot, I thought.

"Zazkal, we'll never get anywhere at this rate," I said.

"Nonsense, we're making a great deal of progress."

Rolling my eyes upward, I shrugged, sighed, and tried again

Zazkal's face swelled with anger when he saw my expression. "Don't you dare patronize me. You halfling!"

This was too much for my bruised ego. I burst into tears, ran into the cabin and slammed the door.

"Get out here right now. I'll call you a lot worse than that, you miserable split-tail."

"No!" 'No' I said and 'no' I meant, but I suddenly found my feet taking me out on deck. I was so surprised by this bodily rebellion that I stopped crying.

"Now you listen to me you air-sucking dirt eater. You'll do what I tell you, when I tell you." He was yelling so loud it hurt my ears.

I looked up at his red-angry face. For one moment, I felt like I was back in the coral cave where he had kept me a terrified prisoner in an attempt to steal my sampo. That had been my first and most frightening encounter with Zazkal.

Then I remembered that this was the Sky I had spent most of the summer with. I had often been treated like this by him, but I generally gave back as good as I got.

"You know what?" I said quietly.

"You have a rotten temper."

We were both silent for a moment. Then I watched his lips press together and kind of wriggle around. His eyebrows squeezed together in a kind of reverse arch. Even to me it was clear that he was trying not to smile.

"Perhaps I do, but you are not exactly a paragon of virtue yourself. Can't you do something about those legs?" he added. "They're making me nervous."

I sat down in the wheelchair and switched to tail. That seemed to make him more comfortable and less testy. We rode in circles another half dozen times, with me getting the direction right each time. Finally, he seemed satisfied, which was good, since I was starting to feel queasy.

"Better put those feet on again and stand up so that we can change places." I switched to legs and stood up while Zazkal slid into the wheelchair. As soon as I was seated I switched back to tail.

He certainly doesn't mind using my legs when it's convenient, I thought, but kept it to myself.

"Take the wheel," Zazkal said, "and keep on course for as long as you can without repeating the formula. Stay out of sight of land and try not to look at the sun. Concentrate on both your destination and the coastline alongside you, so that you always know how far you are from the land without actually being able to see it."

Zazkal leaned back into the loose canvas of the wheelchair, folded his hands in front of him and closed his eyes. He never opened his eyes, but every few minutes, he would correct my direction.

"Wrong," he would say, or "Too far to the right." Sometimes I could find the direction again, but most of the time I had to repeat the spell. Eventually I found myself losing my sense of direction even faster than I had in the beginning.

“Alright, that’s enough for now,” Zazkal said. “Take a break. I’ll be the compass. You just drive.” He closed his eyes and relaxed even more deeply into his chair, stretching out his tail in front of him, so that it was completely in the sun.

It was a particularly warm and gentle sun today, with just the tiniest bit of breeze to push the beams off your skin and keep you from getting too hot. It felt very, very good

Zazkal could insist all he wanted that there was nothing good outside the ocean but he was clearly enjoying the sun in a way that is not possible under the water.

I stayed in the pilot’s chair and drove the boat while Zazkal navigated. Every once in a while, without ever opening his eyes, he corrected the course.

After a while he seemed to remember that he was supposed to be my teacher, or more likely because the sun loosened his tongue, he began to talk about the pathfinding spell.

“A lot of magic,” he began, “takes advantage of things you know, but are unable to do independently. This spell works almost completely that way. It depends on what you already know. That means that it’s important that you don’t use magic instead of learning the signs and ways of finding things yourself, because the more you know, consciously or subconsciously, the better the spell works.”

“Kind of like my sampo? I can only take things out of my bag that I can picture very clearly.” Then I remembered the fate of my sampo.

“Yes, a lot like that, now that you mention it.” His voice was back to its usual sour. He remembered, too.

We both sat quietly for a minute, me glum, Zazkal annoyed over the loss of something useful. Finally, because he had more to say, he went back to his lecture.

“I thought this would be a good spell to teach you, because you can practice it this winter while you’re at school. It works anywhere. Practice it as much as you can, but at the same time, try not to use it all the time. I want you to spend just as much time learning and practicing finding your way without the spell.

“Typically, you will use the two, magic and non-magic skills together. That’s the reason it was so hard for you the first time. You were using the spell constantly. Most Sky find their own way to places, using the spell briefly and occasionally as a check or when they really don’t know.”

“But weren’t you using the spell all the time just now?” I asked.

“I’ve had a lot of practice,” was all he would say. “Now, drive.” He leaned back and closed his eyes. The conversation was over.

I worked the pathfinding spell all day, but nibbling at the edges of my mind were the Hazmats, what they were and what I was...Halfandhalf.

CHAPTER 39

BACK AT CASALOT

The next morning I felt something scratchy in my seabottom bed. Assuming a wayward crustacean, I reached around to move it out from under me. Instead of a sea bug, my hand came in contact with a familiar object.

“WOO HOO! It’s back! Yes! Yes! YES!” I executed a series of underwater somersaults and spirals...sampo in hand.

“Hmfpt. Good.”

Zazkal was awake.

“I guess it just needed time to heal,” I said after I recovered from the surprise and after Zazkal finished waking up.

“Look, there are slightly different colors in some places,” I said. “And here and here, see these faint lines. It’s almost as if these spots were sewn or glued together.

“Very impressive,” Zazkal said, turning it over in his hands. “I must say your bag has good timing. I thought we were going to have to swim all the way back to Casalot once we left the boat. Now we can travel in style.”

We found a marina to leave the Maiden Voyage. I arranged to have her repaired and put into dry-dock. The owners were especially kind to my ‘handicapped father’ and agreed to modify the boat for his convenience. Zazkal liked that.

The owners were also extremely happy when I took enough money out of my sampo to pay for a year in advance. I left them with Mom and Dad’s e-mail address so they could let me know how the repairs were going and said goodbye.

Retreating to a quiet spot near the ocean, Zazkal got to work on a pair of traveling bubbles while I took apart his wheelchair and piece by piece put it back into the sampo.



The double bubble deposited us in the water above Casalot in the early hours of the next morning.

We woke up Grandma and Grandpa, who were very glad to see me back. Hugs happened.

“I have to admit,” Mele’ said, “it’s not that I don’t have every confidence in you, Miriam, but I was just a little worried.” Seeing me and Zazkal exchange glances, he looked at Zazkal and said,

“I gather I had good cause to be concerned.”

Instead of answering Grandpa’s implied question directly, Zazkal turned to me again.

“You had better find something to do for awhile, while I tell your grandparents what we did.”

“Oh, Zazkal,” I whined, “I wanted to be here when we told them how we found the Hazmats.”

“I want you out of here. *Especially* for that part,” and he gave me a look that is not easy to describe but I think it had something to do with wanting to strangle me.

“I’m going. I’m going,” I said, and I went.

“I wonder if the pathfinder spell works on people,” I thought. “It certainly won’t hurt to try.” I muttered the spell, closed my eyes and thought about Verona.

Bingo!

Cool! I know just where she is. She's still in bed.

"Hey, Verona," I called out when I got there.

"Guess what. Guess how I knew where to find you."

"Go away!" She rolled over and turned her back to me.

"Zazkal taught me a new spell. It's called a pathfinder spell. I can use it to find the way to any place I want to go."

"Whoop di doo! Miriam learned the pathfinder spell. Big deal. Go away."

"There's more. I want to tell you about the art in Metsoola."

"Art?" She sat up.

"Yes. They have the most amazing sculpture. They use magic to shape it from flowing lava. Sometimes they carve it too. You have to go there."

"I have to go there." Verona was wide awake now, awake and excited.

So I started to describe my time as a prisoner in the garden. One thing led to another and I found myself telling her about the salt lake in fairyland. Verona didn't exactly call me a liar...

"You're joking. Right?" she said.

A slow shake of my head said that I was not.

"Do you understand just how deep you were? You're making this up. Aren't you!"

"No, really, I was there. I walked through fairyland to another salt lake that came out in a different part of the ocean."

"Okay, if you say so."

"You can ask Zazkal if you like."

"No, thank you. Why would they keep you a prisoner anyway? It's not very Sky."

"Oh that. Well, when the king figured out that he could get all the power nuts he needed from my sampo, he tried to force me to stay there by marrying me off to his son."

This announcement silenced Verona. She looked at me deadpan for a couple of seconds then exploded with hysterical laughter, tears streaming down her face.

"Good grief, Miriam, why did you show him your bag in the first place?" She lost it again. Her efforts to stop reduced her to noisy nose breathing snickers.

"So dumb," she said in between snickers.

"Seemed like a good idea at the time," I mumbled.

"I take it all back. You can't be making this stuff up." She reached out and ruffled my hair hard enough to loosen my ponytail. Not comfortable.

Since that was the most affectionate she had ever been to me, I didn't complain.

"Actually", I said. "It gets worse."

Verona didn't say a word while I described my two encounters with the Hazmats. Teenagers are hard to read. I think she believed me.

"Anyway, I wanted you to know how awful the Hazmats are because of what Zazkal said after he tried to drown me."

"What! Now I know you've been making stuff up."

"No, really. He got me to switch to legs and told me to put my magic scale where I couldn't reach it. Then he pushed me overboard and held me under the water so I couldn't breathe."

"What happened?"

"I switched back to tail on my own. Zazkal said that I was a shapeshifter like the Hazmats and that it was just a matter of time before I became nasty, stupid, and greedy like them."

"Yeah, that makes sense. You'll probably be just like them in a few years."

“Verona. That is so not what I needed to hear. If that’s really what I am, then I know what shape I want to be. I’m going to shape shift into a giant squid so I can have you for dinner.”

“Don’t be silly. Nobody eats fairies”

“Not according to the giant squid I met on my way to Metsoola.” There’s a lot of really strange stuff down there.”

“Ooo. It’s so not fair that you got to go to Metsoola instead of me.”

“Don’t change the subject. According to Zazkal, I’m not anything anymore. He said that I’m not an outsea person anymore and that I’m not a fairy either. He said that I’m a halfandhalf and I don’t belong anywhere.”

“Well, that’s just unfair. You can belong to more than one place. You scored a lot of points when you apprenticed to Zazkal and being part of the delegation to Metsoola made you even more official.

“If anybody doesn’t belong anywhere, it’s Zazkal. He’s lucky we’re so nice to him.”

“Yeah, but I have all this other stuff like my bag and my wings. Doesn’t that make me way different from everyone else?”

“I don’t know what it’s like outsea, but here, everyone is different. No biggie.”



I was pleased to hear from my grandparents that Zazkal was gone. He had gone to see a friend and would be back in the morning to take me back to the Coral Reef.

“Zazkal has friends?”

“Well, I think it’s more of a colleague.” Grandpa said. “Someone he likes talking shop with. He said to be sure to tell you to be ready to leave in the morning.”

I suspected that Zazkal had taken himself discreetly out of the way until it was time to go. I could only imagine what it was like when he told Grandma and Grandpa what happened.

They probably blamed him for my getting caught by the Hazmats again. Good grief, anyone who could eliminate their enemies by eating them was a pretty dangerous foe. In any case, it seemed safer not to ask.

“Grandpa, what will happen to the Hazmats?”

“We’ve already contacted the dolphins. They’re using the dolphin alarm to reach bubble people who are large enough to make the trip down to all the abyssmal kingdoms

“I imagine that within a very few days all the abyssmal kingdoms will know what’s happening and will have blocked off any entrances to Fairyland. They’ll be the ones who figure out a way to capture the Hazmats.”

“I’m sure that when you come back next summer, they will have been captured and dealt with. We’re very proud of you, Miriam, but please don’t do it again.”

Seeing that they had heard everything there was to hear and weren’t angry at me, I took a breath and asked what I really wanted to know.

“So it turns out that I don’t need Grandma’s magic scale anymore. I can change back and forth on my own.”

“That’s wonderful, Miriam. You’ve really learned a lot.”

“Well, Zazkal and Verona say that that makes me a shapeshifter and that it’s only a matter of time before I turn into a Hazmat.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. That’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“You couldn’t ever be like that. It’s silly.”

“I see ... sort of. I think.” The conversation turned to other subjects, but it stayed in my mind. I kept turning it around in my head.

CHAPTER 40

GOODBYE...

Early the next morning, I was ready and waiting for Zazkal.

“Give me the bag and let’s go. I’ve been away from my workshop for too long. There’s a lot to do.”

“Zazkal. I’m not coming with you. I want to spend the last week with my grandparents.”

“Don’t be silly. There’s too much work to do and only a week to do it in.”

I tried hard not to sound whining or pleading, and said as firmly as I could,

“I’m sorry, but I’m not coming. I’ve been thinking a lot about what you told me about being a halfandhalf.”

“Oh, that. Well, I don’t plan on picking on you anymore over it. You can’t help what you are.”

I didn’t argue with him, but kept going, “Like I said, I’ve been thinking about it.”

“What of it?”

“Well, I don’t think you’re right. I became a halfandhalf when the dragonfly fairies gave me my wings. They did it so that I could become part of Ardu. And I became a shapeshifter so that I could belong to Casalot.

“Being halfandhalf lets me belong to more places, not less. After all, seahorses are halfandhalf and look what nice people most of them are.”

“Just how nice they are is a matter of opinion. But they are not shapeshifters. That’s what will do you in the end.”

“You are so full of it. My mother hasn’t needed the scale for years and years. She’s normal... well, normal for a parent.

“I think that what I am now is pretty much what I’ll always be. If I want to be different, it will be because I’ve decided to, but it will never be very far from what I am now.

“Like I said, I’ve been thinking a lot about all of my gifts the last few days. It seems to me that each one in some way or another makes some kind of problem. I mean, look at all the trouble my sampo caused in Metsoola, or with you, for that matter,” I said, reminding him of the times he tried to steal it.

“Shapeshifting has its own problems. What I decided is to be very careful about how I use it until I understand it better.”

He surprised me by actually nodding in approval.

“Anyway, I want to spend some time at Casalot before I go back to school. I don’t want to spend my last week arguing with you. I want to be with people who care about me.” I thought I saw him wince, but assumed I had been mistaken.

“Here, take the bag, I’ll stay up as late as I can tonight so that you have the whole day to use it.”

Zazkal didn’t argue with me. He didn’t say anything. He gave me a dirty look to end all dirty looks, took the bag and started to swim up to the surface to make a bubble for the trip back.

Turning back for a moment, he squished up his face like a little kid who is having trouble finding the right words. Even before the words were all out, he was already starting to swim away again. I almost missed it.

“Goodbye, Miriam,” he said. “I’ll miss you.”

CHAPTER 41

...AND FAREWELL

“Wait, Zazkal. Come back.” He swam slowly back the squishy expression already back to dirty look.

“Give me back my bag for a minute.” He did and I took out a waterproof cell phone.

“Here. This is a long distance underwater cell phone. It has a saltwater-charged battery so it will always work. I will be in The Kingdom of the Cats this winter.

“I might...no, you know me, I will probably get into trouble. If you have this I can call you....I might need a friend.”

EPILOGUE

Zazkal did not return to his workshop. He went instead to Metsoola to consult with the king and his magicians.

The next time the Hazmats tried to visit Metsoola via the salt lake, the entry was no longer blocked, but covered by a soft permeable film. They passed through easily only to find themselves trapped inside of one of Zazkal’s traveling bubbles. It didn’t matter what shape the Hazmats turned into, as long as they were alive, they couldn’t get out.

It was the decision of King Mundiflure and his advisors, that the Hazmats be banished from the ocean. Their ability to shapeshift was magically frozen and they were allowed to choose any outsea form they wanted for their permanent shape.

At first the Hazmats decided that if they could only have one shape, it would be land people, but quickly realized that if they couldn’t shapeshift, they would make very poor thieves. In the end, they decided to become gulls so that they could stay close to their old haunts.

From Metsoola, Zazkal traveled to Japan to study with Turritopsis Dohrnii, the immortal jellyfish. It is not known what he learned there, but when he left Metsoola, he was wearing a belt with an attached pocket where he kept the cell phone that Miriam had given him.



Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed this book. If you did, please tell your friends about it. I don't have a website yet, but I can be reached at susha.g@bellsouth.net. I enjoy hearing from readers.

The Invasion of the Hazmats is the third book of the series called The Fairy Gifts. There will be two more books in the series, a prologue to the series called Pisu's Revenge. Pisu's Revenge will be Tefnut's story, explaining why she decided to leave The Kingdom of the Cats in Ardu and how she came to live with Miriam and her family. It is a story of betrayal and humiliation.

The final book in the series will take place about four months after this book (Invasion of the Hazmats) and will be about what happens to Miriam when she finally visits The Kingdom of the Cats. I don't have a title yet and am open to suggestions.

I know that in my letters at the end of the first two books I promised you that all of the characters in the last two books (Book Four and the Prologue) would be cats, but it turns out that there is a small village of halfandhalf humans called The Village of the Darned very close to The Kingdom of the Cats. You will meet Shadow, a super sensitive cat and the best tracker in Ardu and her friend Maggie Mag, a human/magpie shapeshifter from the Village of the Darned. I can't wait to tell you about them.

Sincerely yours,

Susha.G



APPENDIX

(The Boring Stuff)

1. SEAHORSES AND GEOGRAPHY

The names of the seahorses in the story are not their true names. Likewise, the geographical references are intentionally vague in order to protect the location of the Sky cities.

2. THE LAND OF LITTLE LAKES

Not long after the Hazmats had been banished, Edward, encouraged by Glori and Specter proposed to King Mundiflure to build a canal, linking the two salt lakes. When it was finished, for the first time a deep sea-fairy kingdom was no longer isolated from other sea-fairy communities.

The long trip from Metsoola to the surface, and from there to the nearest of the upper kingdoms, was no longer used, except by the bubble people on cin rani, and the occasional sea-fairy hitchhiker who wished to accompany them.

Within a generation, all the lower kingdoms had built canals through the Land of Little Lakes that linked them with the upper kingdoms. The remote, unpopulated part of Fairyland known as The Land of Little Lakes that was dotted with salty lakes gradually became crisscrossed by more and more canals, and became busy with underwater traffic.

The effect on the deep sea-fairy kingdoms was more profound. They became a little less self-sufficient than they had been. But the isolation from other fairy communities that had created the need for self-sufficiency had also produced a certain formality and rigidity to their societies.

With regular traffic back and forth between deep and surface kingdoms, the fairies of the lower kingdoms began to relax their attitudes and unstructure their hierarchies. It took a long time, but it happened.

The construction of the canals also made it easier for friends like Miriam and Edward to visit each other.

3. VERONA CHOOSES

About the same time that Miriam visited the Kingdom of the Cats, Verona traveled to Metsoola to study the sculpting of free-flowing lava. She eventually developed and began to teach spells and techniques for working with lava that allowed her to create very small and very detailed forms.

When the first canal was finished people carried her work to Casalot and eventually to all the kingdoms of the Seven Seas. She was legendary.

4. THE DOLPHINS BECOME SCRIBES TO THE BUBBLE PEOPLE

Ollie did learn to write fluently and though it gave him the basic skill he needed to learn magic, he was more interested in the writing itself. In fact all the dolphins in his pod wanted to learn to write and did. Other dolphins hearing about Stan and Ollie's pod's new skills, also became interested.

Eventually, the dolphins became scribes to the largest of the bubble people, the whales many of whom traveled the world collecting and exchanging songs and stories. A few dolphins, including Ollie, began collecting and writing their own stories. Much of the material for the book you just read came directly from Ollie's journals.

