

Brian Froud's  
FAERIELANDS

Something Rich and Strange  
by  
Patricia McKillip

Introduction

by Brian Froud

For years I worked as an illustrator, crafting pictures to other people's words. But over time the spaces between the words became more and more important to me, for in those spaces my mind and my imagination were set free. In 1976 I moved from London to a small country village in Devon, along with my friend Alan Lee and his family. Walking through the woods and across the hills of Dartmoor, among stone circles and Bronze Age ruins, Alan and I soaked in the spirit of the land, the folklore surrounding us, and created the book *Faeries*. With that book I began to do more than illustrate other people's words: I began to record my own vision of the world, and stories without words, in pencil lines and paint.

I still live in the country, in a Dartmoor longhouse with a thatched roof, along with my wife, Wendy, a sculptor, and my son. My work continues to be influenced by the beautiful land surrounding me, and I've discovered under its influence that communications from Faerie are wordless: first touching the heart and soul, and only later the rational mind. And so for years now I've created images that are meant to be evocative rather than illustrative, whispering words and suggesting stories of their own.

I work intuitively, the images appearing before me and demanding attention, their meanings and voices unclear until much later, when the sketch or painting is done. This was the approach I used when I designed two of Jim Henson's movies: *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*. The scripts and the characters developed organically from my sketches and paintings rather than the other way around. And here again, in the *Faerielands* books, the drawings came first, the words second, as the authors responded to images in the art.

I created the *Faerielands* art in the summer and autumn of 1991. Later that autumn I met with the four authors who were to write the books, Charles de Lint, Patricia McKillip, Midori Snyder, and Terri Windling, along with the series co-creator Robert Gould and the producer Byron Preiss, and spread out the drawings and paintings I'd completed—over fifty of them in all. The writers divided the images among them, choosing the ones they were most drawn to, and then they each went away to write the story the pictures whispered to them. They had the freedom to write whatever they chose, just as I'd had the freedom to paint what I chose; yet we'd agreed on a central premise: a recognition that Faerie, inextricably bound as it is to nature and natural forces, is gravely threatened by the ecological crises that human beings have brought to our world.

Faerie exists at the heart of any land; it is not confined to the woods of England. Thus the stories would not be set in the landscape where the pictures were created, but in the lands the writers knew and loved best: the Canadian woods, the American Pacific coast, midwestern farmland, the Sonoran Desert. The images I've drawn show that faerielands are everywhere and anywhere. The insistent impulses of Faerie are all around us, expressed first in lines that become a root, that grow into a tree, that transform into a face, that become a magical bird that takes us into another land. Like DNA code, any small fragment of a painting or drawing has the potential to open up into complete inner worlds. The images invite viewers to step into their magical space. They are gateways into the faerie realms.

## Something Rich and Strange

The symbol of *The Wild Wood* by Charles de Lint, the first book in the Faerielands series, was the mask, a symbol of secrets. Now we have *Something Rich and Strange*, the second book in the Faerielands series, and its symbol is the rabbit, a symbol of rebirth and transformation.

When I first moved to Dartmoor, I noticed a strange design painted above the doorway of a shop in my village: three rabbits in a circle joined together by three communal ears. A little while later I spied the design once again, carved in the roof of the twelfth-century village church. The swirling motif held a mystery. What did it signify, I wondered?

I discovered that the three connected rabbits were called "tinner's rabbits" and subsequently found them dancing around many a roof boss of the old stone moorland churches. The triple rabbits were an alchemical symbol for tin, adopted as an emblem by the men who worked the tin mines that once were scattered across the hills of Dartmoor. The mining stopped centuries ago and nature has since reclaimed the tinworks, covering their stones with ivy and bracken, folding them back into the earth. Yet the tinner's rabbits still remain, a potent symbol of this land, harkening back, some say, to even older times, when the rabbit was the sign of the old religion and rabbits or hares were witches transformed.

Gradually I discovered more as I followed the trail of the rabbit through old books and legends. The rabbit (or hare, for they are interchangeable in the world of symbolism) is an emblem that can be found across Europe, in its churches, its artwork, and its myths. Some traditions equated the hare with the human ego or the soul, and as such it often made an appearance in late medieval paintings and statues of the Virgin Mary (although some interpret this symbolism differently, as triumph over lust). The ancient Greeks depicted the figure of Tragedy holding a white hare, indicating the transformation of the human soul through the fire of suffering (an idea later picked up by the medieval alchemists). The hare was also allied to Eros and Aphrodite, but more importantly to Hermes/Mercury—it was a messenger or oracular animal. The hare was a luminous symbol in Chinese, African, Egyptian, Native American, Buddhist, and Hindu mythologies as well. Worldwide it was considered a lunar animal, associated with transformation and the goddess.

The three joined hares are the triple goddess: maiden, mother, and crone. Birth, death, and renewal. The circle of the three rabbits indicates this cycle, the great cosmic dance overseen by the goddess. We know the triple goddess as an eternal archetype in the human psyche and under many guises: the three Fates, three Graces, the Thriae (three goddesses of the Delphic oracle), the three Norns, the Deae Matrones (Celtic trinity of goddesses), the three fairy queens in Arthurian legend, and the three witches in *Macbeth*. An evocative name for the triple formations of hares in medieval times was the "hunt of Venus." This was a way of expressing the concept of an ancient fertility goddess known by different names over time. In one guise the Anglo-Saxons knew her as Eostre, the goddess of the spring, bringing renewed life to plants and animals. The rabbit was Eostre's totem beast (an image that survives to this day in the form of the Easter bunny). The British queen Boudicca also used the hare as her personal totem, deliberately identifying herself with the goddess of nature.

The ancient Celts who lived on Dartmoor also knew the triple goddess, she who had dominion over the earth and the moon. To them the lunar hare represented intuition, divine madness (lunacy), rebirth, and transformation. The old tanners shared space underground with this sacred animal, knowing that the goddess whispered in its large, receptive ears, making it the carrier of divine messages. In this one beast the secrets of the earth itself were brought into the lunar light.

Finally one more secret revealed itself when I learned that to the Celts this great goddess was also the queen of the Otherworld, or Underworld: the queen of Faerie. The triple rabbit is her symbol as well. Those three rabbit-ears linked together form a three-sided gate, an entrance into the Faerie realms.

A simple painted symbol over a shop doorway was my own gateway into Mystery—a journey that

took me across Europe and through history and then brought me back to my own front door. It gave me a better understanding of my moorland home, the real world that surrounds me, and at the same time gave me insight into the mythical landscape that underlies it. The shop has since changed owners; it's a wine shop now (which must make the faeries grin). But the tinner's rabbits are still there, brightened up in fresh new paint, for those who wish to muse upon them . . . and be lured through Faerie's gate.

This is only one of the many gateways into Faerie. Dartmoor is my entrance to that realm, and so my drawings express Faerie denizens born of our rich moorland soil, wind and water, fire and stone. But every land has its gates into the Otherworld; they are universal, like the rabbit and the hare. Author Patricia McKillip has drawn inspiration from my pictures to create a story from the land she loves best, with its own gateways into Mystery. Faerie lies all around us, appearing and disappearing again as quick as a flash of long ears in the grass. If you follow the hare, it may lead you on a journey into lunacy, or death, or rebirth, or transformation . . . or into the mythical landscape that underlies the land where you live, wherever that may be.

Brian Froud

## ONE

Megan dipped her hand into the tide pool, drew the shining out of the sea.

It was the gold foil, wire, and cap from a champagne bottle someone had flicked into the water. She dropped it into the capacious pocket of her jacket, already jingling with beer caps, the plastic lid off a gallon of milk, a couple of sand dollars, blue and yellow sea glass, half of a Styrofoam float, a flattened Orange Crush can, and a three-quarter-ounce weight knotted to a foot of fishing line. She waited for the water to still, then studied the pool again. A dozen sea urchins, a starfish, chitons, anemones . . . She pulled the sand dollars out of her pocket, poised them in the sand beneath the starfish, waited for the ripples to subside. Something she had disturbed on the bottom rose to the surface of the pool. She fished it out: foil from a cigarette pack. She rolled it into a ball between her fingers, dropped it into her pocket, her mind still absorbed by the pool, the line of rock that formed it, the bits of broken shell, sandstone, agate, jumbled on the bottom. She eased into a smooth place among the barnacles beneath her, and began to draw rapidly, before the tide turned.

She was a tall, lean, taciturn young woman, with long straight pale hair that she let grow past her waist. Her blue-gray eyes could be found, not easily, under the drift of her hair, or beneath the reflections in her glasses. She drew seascapes in ink and pencil and hung them in Jonah's shop, among the jewelry and fossils and shells and other oddments he sold. Three years before, he had hired Megan to paint a shop sign. She had shown him her seascapes; he had hung a few; tourists had bought them. Somehow, despite his crotchety manner and her reticence, they had, in the sort of dart-and-dance courtship displayed by mute and easily startled fish, indicated an interest in one another. His eyes opened and glittered beneath his shaggy hair; she flashed her sudden, rare smile. So they lived together above Things Rich and Strange, the shop beside the sea, where changing tides of sound tumbled constantly about them as if they were creatures in some invisible tide pool.

Something waved at Megan from a cleft in the stone: a tiny crab, venturing out. She waited for it, drew it as it picked its way across the bottom. She studied the drawing, added some graceful fronds of sea moss. Lately she had started experimenting with pale, delicate washes of color over black ink. Jonah, who thought pastel colors were trendy, commercial, and sentimental, disapproved. "Next thing," he grumbled, "you'll be making kittens out of cowrie shells." But, as Megan pointed out, shoving massive oceanography books under his nose, the secret sea, beneath its bland surface, was garish with color.

Wind rippled the water. Megan, waiting for the starfish to come into focus again, debated color. The starfish was crimson; she could try a light red wash. Something popped suddenly to the surface and floated: the champagne cork. She stared at it, and then at her drawing, wondering if she had absently sketched a cork in among the sea anemones. She picked it out, put it in her pocket.

Gulls cried overhead; pelicans flew low over the distant tide. She tasted salt on her lips. The water shivered again, wind-stroked; the wind was rising. She felt chilled suddenly, sitting on a cold gray rock under a gray sky. She leaned down to gather her sand dollars. The wind grabbed her hair out of her jacket, tossed it over her shoulder, into her mouth, into the water. She spat hair irritably, groping for the shells. An anemone sucked at her finger. A pen she had balanced among the barnacles rolled into the water. She groped for that, too, stirring sand into a roiling cloud. Her fingers hit something smooth, hard. She pulled it out: a beer bottle.

She checked her drawing incredulously: no sign of a beer bottle. It must, she decided, have been buried in the sand; her groping had uncovered it. She stuffed it into her pocket, retrieved the shells and, finally, the pen. She gazed into the pool, thinking: Now what? The champagne bottle? The pool, suddenly limpid, gave her back her face: great, square eyes, a little hard mouth, like a parrotfish's mouth, fit for nibbling coral, long pale tentacles that searched the air for microscopic life. Entranced by the fishy vision, she no longer recognized herself.

She pulled back, remembered her own face. She slid the drawing pad into its waterproof case and stood up slowly, cramped and weighted with flotsam and jetsam. "You can't sweep the sea," Jonah would say as she pulled garbage and treasure from her pockets. "No," she would answer, "but I can tidy a tide pool." Then she would show him her drawings.

She had three that day: one a mound of sea urchins, one a carpet of anemones, and the last, which he lingered over longest, intent, musing, picking at his teeth with his thumb. He took his hand away from his mouth finally, pointed.

"I don't recognize this."

Megan looked over his shoulder; their heads touched. Sea lettuce, she was about to say, glancing at the shapeless, fluid lines. The word caught; her mouth stayed open. It wasn't algae; it had an eye; it crawled across the bottom, small, rippling, horned.

She took a breath, perplexed. "I don't either."

Jonah watched her as she pored through her books. She sat on a stool beside the counter dividing the kitchen and dining room, drinking tea out of a clay mug, her head bent, her smooth, pale hair spilling over the book, her hands, her knees. He loved her hands: slender, long-boned, beautifully proportioned. She could moor a boat with those hands, hammer a nail, pitch a tent. She could fold origami paper into a bird; she could draw a spider web strung with dew. Now her hands were flicking pages as she searched through photographs of underwater life for the odd little animal wandering through her drawing. The wind was rattling the windows; the full tide sounded as if it were heaving great driftwood logs and old sunken ships across the beach to their doorway.

He said, "What was that old tale about a ship? A flying ship?" He was sorting through rocks and fossils he had pulled from the cliffs that day: bits and pieces of sandstone, half a clam, a worm tube. They were scattered over the dining table; he was not particularly tidy. She tugged at her lip, studying something.

"The USS Enterprise?"

"No—you know. An old sailing ship. A ghost ship, wanders around scaring sailors on foggy nights."

"Oh. Flying Dutchman."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I think it's at the door."

Her eyes lifted, regarded him vaguely behind her glasses. Had he, they wondered, said what he had said? They lost interest, dropped again, to what looked like a floating candy store. Tropical fish: he had a tank when he was a kid. The thermostat broke one day; the temperature plummeted and fish went belly up, floating like petals on top of the water.

"One of those?" he asked, bored. She got obsessed, sometimes, working. She disappeared on him, the way an anemone did, drawing in tighter and tighter the more you prodded. But she heard him; she shook her head.

"No. It's not a fish. But look at those colors— lemon, turquoise, indigo—"

"Pepto-Bismol. "

"Orange sherbet."

"Pickled ginger."

"Puce."

"Lime," he shot back, but weakly; she had disarmed him with the puce. She had already submerged herself in the coral reef. He leaned over his collection: a tall, wiry man with long red-brown rippling hair, cobalt eyes, glasses in round black frames he aimed at customers like cannon muzzles if they annoyed him. He had hired Jenny Elwood to work the register for him, at Megan's suggestion; he looked, she said, too pained when someone wanted him to handle money. Megan herself looked incredulous behind the register. She picked at it dubiously as if she didn't trust it to do the same thing twice; she could barely find her mouth to answer a question.

She found her mouth now. "Nudibranch."

"Nudiwho ? "

"Or worm, maybe. Or a mollusk without a shell."

"Banana slug."

She ignored his suggestion, but became suddenly articulate. "It's so strange. I don't remember drawing it at all, it just appeared, the way things kept popping up after I cleared the water, like the champagne cork and the beer bottle. I never even noticed the beer bottle."

"Beer," he said, and went around her to the ancient refrigerator. "Want one?"

"I don't suppose the champagne bottle is in there."

"Dream on. This thing is making slime again."

"What thing?"

"The refrigerator. It's bleeding black slime out of this little pipe."

"Uh."

"The truck sounds like a motorcycle, the refrigerator's falling apart, the rent on the store is going up next month, and you're sitting there reading about naked slugs."

She lifted her head. One eye regarded him thoughtfully between strands of her hair. He saw her lips part, the beginning of her smile. He put the beer down. Her lips tasted of salt; her hair smelled of the sea; her ear was a pale, whorled thing that could only be understood by his tongue. Grazing, he loosened the jewel at her earlobe, swallowed it, and found out much later, as he lay in bed contemplating her other ear, that he had dined on opal and drunk gold.

She was reading again, naked on her stomach, her chin on one hand, absently fingering the remaining earring. She made a sudden sound, a little hiccup of discovery.

"They're not horns."

"I can't tell you how relieved I am."

"They're ears."

"A worm with ears."

"A shell-less snail. Not real ears. Rabbit ears."

"A snail with rabbit ears."

"Little protrusions that look like ears. It's called a sea hare." She paused, reading, frowning. She changed hands under her chin, fingered the other ear. "It shoots purple ink when it's disturbed, it can lay twenty million eggs, and it's both male and female."

"Wow."

"Where's my earring?"

"I ate it."

"No, really," she said, feeling around the sheets. He moved closer, pulled by some strange inner tide.

"You're obsessed by ears," he breathed, feeling the cool drop of gold on his tongue. Then she turned under him, her arms around his back, her head on the open book. He saw the sea hare floating in and out of her hair before he closed his eyes and she pulled him with her long white arms down beneath the waves.

Megan went back the next day to the tide pool. She recognized not so much the pool itself as the bare place among the barnacles where she had sat. The starfish had moved an inch or two; the anemones were closed. There was no sign of a sea hare.

She stood after a while, her arms folded, gazing out past the great rocks strewn along the tide line, where the waves churned and broke, to the vast gray plane of water. She had been looking into tide pools all her life, having grown up in the northernmost coastal town in the state. Drawing the sea, she had slowly drifted south, through small fishing ports and smaller towns where travelers could buy a tank of gas, a hamburger, a coffee cup with the name of the town on it, a motel room that overlooked the sea. Fishers, loggers, retired people lived in those tiny towns; or like Jonah, people looking for a quiet spot to read or dig up fossils for the rest of their lives. Such people clung, barnaclelike, to the cliffs, in houses facing seaward. Others, like the sea hare, traveled through, vanished, having no real business in a tide pool. Some freaky wave had flipped it that far ashore, she guessed, even while a cold, clear voice in the back of her mind said: There was no sea hare in the tide pool. The sea hare crawled into the drawing.

She didn't draw that day; she walked back into town. Though it was still barely spring, the license plates on cars were already migratory: California, Nevada, Idaho, even an Arizona on a Winnebago parked near Jonah's shop. They were wanderers, following the paths of birds and whales, wanting to bring home visions, landscapes, the echo of barking seals, the endless siren song of the waves at the edge of the world. Browsing along the street, they would buy strands of abalone beads, driftwood vases, shells for ashtrays. They would buy canned Chinook salmon at Ernie's Fish and Bait. They would get lost, scowl over maps, throw caramel corn at seagulls, snap at one another and their children. They would eat clam fritters, oyster sandwiches, crab cocktail at Lindy's Cafe. Then they would lean over the sea walls at lookout points, their faces wistful, slightly perplexed, as if they were trying to understand some lost language that they once knew, in a distant time when seals walked ashore like men, before all the mermaids changed to manatees.

What, their faces would ask, do these barking seals, this smell of brine and guano, this vastness no Winnebago can cross, have to do with me? Then they would get back into their cars so they could reach the next star on the map before dark. A wanderer herself, Megan knew the lure of the road, the peculiar quest for freedom that had the safe lights of home at the end. The journey was more important than the place; most important was to return home, with crumpled maps, salt and pepper shakers shaped like clam shells, a sweatshirt with whales on it, and to be able to say: I have been there, I have gone on a journey, I have come safely home. The world was a dangerous place for mollusks without their shells, and yet they ventured into it, restless, curious, or maybe following some ancient migratory instinct to return to the place where souls were spawned.

Megan herself wandered into Mike's Twice-Sold Tales, where she browsed among the marine-life books, hoping for some new insight into sea hares. But those she encountered led, it seemed, a life scarcely worth mentioning, tagged onto a paragraph or decorating an illustration of chains of species. Mike, a huge man with a nicotine-stained mustache, as chatty as a sea urchin, glanced up from his antique Moby Dick and lifted a thumb. Translated, it was a greeting, discussion of health, the weather, business, and a general recognition of the species Resident-Who-Has-Shared-Winter-Storms-Love-Loneliness-Stir-Craziness-General-Inbred-Insanity-that-Comes-Before-the-First-Tourist. He was back in his book, dissecting whales, before she could respond.

She went back to Jonah's shop, where he was in much the same position, reading some antique geology book on a stool in a corner, while Jenny gave change and smiled at the customers. He glared at her, a conversational gambit that said less than Mike's thumb: I'm-Okay-You're-Okay-I'm-Busy-You'll-Be-Busy-Store's-Okay-Okay? He turned a page; she went into the back room to put a pale wash of red across the starfish, and a wash of lavender so diluted it was barely visible across the sea hare.

"God, you've ruined it," Jonah commented later, on his way to the bathroom. She whirled at him, indignant.

"Jonah!"

"How about some tangerine while you're at it?"

She studied the drawing. It did need another color, something neutral. "I'm not one of your customers," she said coldly. "Go grab at them."

"I'm sorry. It hurts my eyes."

"Thanks." She lifted a shoulder as he kissed her ear. "And stay away from my ears."

"A trifle sensitive, aren't we?"

"I spent hours in the cold working on this sketch, and you just walk in and tell me I ruined it."

"It was a beautiful sketch. And then you put those Popsicle colors on it. It's just a matter of taste, that's all. I'm not trying to tell you how to paint."

"You are, too," she said between her teeth. "You have no more sensitivity than a three-year-old."

"Well, maybe you should try some primary colors while you're at it. If that's what's in the sea."

"Maybe you should go look for my earring."

"Excuse me," Jenny said, parting the back curtains. "There's someone here who makes jewelry." She closed the curtains again briskly, leaving an impression on the eye of silver rinse, glittering glasses, pink lipstick, two rhinestone cats on a chain holding her sweater together, a fashion statement that Megan associated with foxheads dangling from your shoulders and circle skirts with poodles on them. Jenny, Jonah said once, was the kind of person who would crochet a Kleenex box holder. But he needed her: She was competent, she liked people, even Jonah, she was unflappable through all his moods, even when she stumbled into a squall.

"That's all I need," Jonah said sourly. "More jewelry." He disappeared into the bathroom and called, peremptorily, "You talk to him. Her. I can't."

Megan stared icily at the curtain, wanting to toss the red wash over the top of it. A coffee wash, she thought suddenly, between the red and the lavender. Cafe au lait. A diagonal line down the rock, spilling into the sand.

She parted the curtains. The jewelry maker stood at the counter, studying what Jonah had beneath the glass. She paused half a step, blinking. There was too much of him for the shop. Too much of him for the town, she thought. He didn't belong in this tide pool. He was quite tall, dressed in black denim and leather; his short hair was whiter than Jenny's. He wore an earring in one ear. He turned at her step and smiled. He smiles, she thought. His eyes were pale green, the misty color the sea got sometimes when the sun broke behind the clouds. She was too amazed to smile back.

"This is Megan," said Jenny the unflappable. "She'll help you. Megan, this is Adam I-didn't-catch-your—"

He held out his hand, the one without the box in it. "Fin." His hand was broad, strong, gentle. "I've just come into town. I've been showing samples of my work at other shops. They all said I should talk to Jonah. You have some very nice pieces already. Are they local?"

"Mostly," Megan said. She had to clear her throat. "Jonah gets some things inland, when he goes fossil swapping. Where are you from?" In God's name, she wanted to add, and what are you doing here?

He waved a hand in the general direction of Hawaii. "East." He smiled again, showing white teeth, and she laughed a little, because it was so rare, after a long winter, to see a face that wasn't dour.

"That's west."

"Oh, yeah. I'm a little turned around on land. The mainland." He opened his box, a simple rosewood case, beautifully mitered and polished.

He used opal and onyx, all colors of jade, aventurine with gold, amethyst with malachite, pearl and garnet and peridot. Some of the settings looked antique; others were richly barbaric, or as simple and elegant as his box. She lifted her eyes to his face after a while, astonished, and saw in the simple, elegant lines of it something that might, under a wash of gold light, or a subtle change of expression, turn as wild and exotic as his work could turn. She swallowed. "It's beautiful." His face changed slightly; she blinked. "Your work. Do you do your own carving?"

He nodded. She noticed his earring then: an onyx rabbit sprinting, legs outstretched, back arched, a silver quarter moon curved over it, the moon's horns rising out of the rabbit's feet. "I see my own designs like dreams in my head," he said. "I like to make them visible."

"So do I," she said, surprised, and he looked at her. He was oddly pale for an islander, she thought suddenly. Maybe he had come even farther than she guessed: from some ancient, foreign seaport where every language in the world was spoken at once.

"You're an artist?"

"Just pen and ink," she said, suddenly shy, unused to discussing her work with strangers. She made a brief gesture at the far wall. "Just seascapes."

He walked through the shop to see them. People glanced twice at him, recognizing him, and then trying to figure out who they imagined he was. He seemed oblivious of the attention. He studied an anemone attached to a barnacle-covered rock. Its tendrils, open and flowing with the tide, were flushed with a faint green wash. Below it, a pale pink wash spilled out of a starfish's arms, colored some algae, and drained into pearl-pale sand.

"I like the colors," he said, returning. He studied her again, as intently as he had studied the anemone. "Do you do only seascapes?"

She nodded, forgetting her shyness then, under his calm gaze. "Always. I always have. It's all I've ever wanted to draw. I don't know why. Maybe because it's a world I can't enter. I can't belong in it, the way I can belong on land. This is the closest I can get—the only way I have of belonging. Of understanding." She flushed a little. "I can't explain. I can only draw it."

"Yes," he said softly. His eyes held her a moment longer; she became aware, in the brief silence, of the tide gathering and breaking and spilling across the sand, regathering itself, breaking again. She heard his breath gathering. Then she moved, touching her glasses straight, and his face turned from her as he closed his box.

"I love your work." Her voice sounded odd. "But you'll have to talk to Jonah. It's his shop."

"I see. Then I'll leave this here for Jonah."

"You don't want to take it with you?" she asked, amazed. He put the box into her hands and smiled again, lightly.

"I'm sure it will be safe with you. Jonah has a good reputation. I'll come back tomorrow; maybe he'll see me then."

She watched him through the window as he crossed the street, turned a corner; the smooth satiny wood in her hands seemed still warm from his touch. Jenny, ever efficient, suggested briskly, "You'll want to take that upstairs before someone buys it."

Megan turned her head, stared at Jenny. "What's he doing here? He belongs south. Where everyone looks like that."

Jenny shrugged. "He washed ashore here. You did. Jonah did. Seemed nice, didn't he? More like one of us than one of them."

Megan nodded, her face easing at the familiar division of Jenny's world. "I'm just not used to one of us being one of them."

"Bet," Jenny said, springing the cash register open for a customer, "he was born here. Right here on these cliffs. There you are, Mandy. Enjoy."

Jonah, annoyed by Megan's insistence that he go upstairs and look at jewelry when the last thing the store needed was more, kept to his stool behind the register, answering questions about the fossils now and then when people interrupted his reading. He concluded, from Jenny's sporadic comments, that Megan had been persuaded by some blond in tight black jeans; she had probably not noticed much beyond that. He avoided the back room, not wanting to pick another fight while she laid New Age colors on her perfect drawings. Going upstairs finally, after he closed the shop, he found the rosewood box on the table in the middle of his rocks.

He ignored it, going to the stove where Megan was stirring dill seed into cabbage. The smell reminded him of low tide in mud flats. She wore long glittering strands of jet beads in her ears; he considered them, found them too formidable. His hands were closing in on her hips when she spoke.

"Have you looked at Adam's jewelry?"

His hands curved on air, dropped. "Adam." He wandered away, ate a piece of cabbage. "Jenny says he looks like a refugee from Beverly Hills."

"Jenny did not say that; you did." She added kielbasa to the cabbage. "He can still make jewelry."



Go look at it."

"Later." He rummaged in the fridge: no beer. Lifting his head, he saw her New Age washes staining the horizon: pale crimson shading into lilac, where the sun was going down. The close smell of cabbage, the soft spring colors, made him suddenly restless. "Let's go out."

"Now?"

"After supper. There's music at the Ancient Mariner."

"I was going to finish framing the drawings."

"Do it tomorrow."

"Adam's coming back to talk to you tomorrow."

"Funny," he said, munching more raw cabbage, "how irritating some names are. Adam. Nobody's named Adam, except Batman."

She turned slowly, gave him that blank, blue-gray stare. "What are you talking about?"

"You keep saying his name."

She rapped the spoon on the edge of the pan: maybe a comment, maybe just getting cabbage off the spoon. "What do you want me to call him?"

"Bill. Joe. I don't want you saying his name, this blond god from L.A. I want you to say my name."

Her eyes were still blank, cool, but her lips quirked suddenly. "He liked my washes."

"He would. He's from the land that invented mango garbage-can liners. Apricot bomber jackets. They don't even eat things that aren't pastel."

She rapped the spoon again, but the corners of her mouth were still crooked. "He's not from L.A. He's from the east. I mean west."

"What?"

"West. Like Hawaii. Or Fiji. Tokyo."

"That's the Far East."

"Well, maybe that's why he got confused."

"So am I. You're still talking about him."

She sighed, put the spoon down. "Jonah. You're driving me crazy."

"I know," he said penitently. "I'm sorry. Let's go out. I've got cabin fever. Turn off the cabbage. Let's go for a walk. Please?"

They went out the back door, walked until dark, picking up shells, agates, looking for glass floats. The beach was adrift with Velella, tiny purple sailboats as delicate as butterfly wings that caught the wind and sailed the surface of the sea. Some storm had tumbled them ashore; dried, light as leaves, they blew across the sand, minute ghost ships lost on land. Megan, digging in piles of kelp, kept mistaking kelp bladders for floats; Jonah walked head down, scrutinizing the tide line for jade, pearls, ambergris. They kissed finally, blown together by random currents, barely recognizing each other in the dark, the kiss cold as wind, salty from the sea.

They drifted home, ate sausage and cabbage, then went down the street to the Ancient Mariner, where a band from up north called Hellbent tried to prove it. Megan gave up on them early, blasted out the door by the harmonica player. But she held Jonah's hand until then, and she kissed him before she left. Jonah ordered another beer, wanting mindless noise, movement, wanting, suddenly, to be hellbent himself, as long as he could find his way home safely afterwards.

A woman appeared on the stage among the stocky, wild, bearded men. Jonah got a confused impression of her in the smoky light. A guest singer, he heard, from where-did-you-say-you-were-from? Her answer was lost in rowdy cheers. She wore something black, glittering, skintight. The sound system was poor; Jonah couldn't understand her words. Her voice was clear, strong; it moved up and down an impossible range. Her black hair hung to her hips; her face appeared and vanished behind it. She pulled it straight back from her brow with one hand, revealing earrings of onyx and ivory, a fall of overlapping circles, each half-black, half-white, separated by a yin-yang curve of gold that continued around the circle. Jonah, gazing at them, tasted a cool, rich wafer on his tongue. I'm possessed, he thought. I want to eat jewels. Then the woman's eyes caught his, glittering, sea green, and something snapped through him as if the air were charged.

Odd things were happening inside the sound system. Tide flowed through her voice, drowned the music, dragged back into the system on a long, slow sigh. For an instant, before it built again, he

heard her voice, high, sweet, elusive. And then he heard water again, gathering, gathering, pulling treasures out of the deep as it shaped and coiled and finally broke with a hollow, powerful moan against land, spilling stone, shell, pearl, spume across the sand. And then her voice came, low now, murmuring through the ebb.

He swallowed dryly, and realized that he heard no other sounds in the world but the singer and the sea. He turned his head to see if the mysterious tide had entranced everyone; the movement brought the bar noises crashing around him: arguments, laughter, the drummer taking a final run down the drums, a cymbal, applause. The singer, her face half-lit, half-hidden under the dark wave of hair, gave them half a smile. Her single eye found Jonah again; she pulled her hair back with her hand and let him see her face, pale as foam, as finely sculpted as any shell shaped through the ages by water and danger and necessity. For a moment, as he stared back at her, he heard, beneath the human voices, the secret gathering of the tide.

Then she stepped out of the light. He stood up, looking for her, not knowing what he was looking for. The bar was crowded; heads were every color but black. He reached the stage finally, saw only rowdy, bearded faces. There was an absence of her in the smoke-laced shadows, the flickering candlelit tables. He veered to the bar finally, ordered another beer, thinking if he waited a little, she might sing again. He downed the beer quickly, ordered another, trying to ignore the feeling that the night had suddenly split itself between the moment when he had not known of her existence and the moment when all he knew was her absence.

He got home late; Megan was asleep. She had left a light on for him, over the table. He stood groggily, blinking at fossils, at the box on the table. Everything looked strange: He could barely remember why the table was littered with stones, what significance the box held. He flipped it open absently, still looking for something, for a meaning in what he felt.

The box full of treasure dazzled his eyes. It must have come out of the sea, he thought crazily, and then saw, lying among the brilliant stones and crystals and metals, the onyx-and-ivory earrings.

## TWO

Megan woke at sunrise. A line of gold ran around the curtains. In the distance she could hear the low, lazy tide stirring the sea mosses, sorting shells. She sat up. Beside her, Jonah lay so still he might have been some ship's figurehead the sea had washed into her bed. He was breathing, though so evenly and quietly she had to untangle his breath from the sea. His skin smelled of beer and smoke. She reached for her glasses, slid out of bed; he didn't stir. She pulled some clothes on, wandered with her drawing pad into spring.

She walked a long way, in and out of dispersing mists, half dreaming, looking for a still life along the tide line. But her eye glossed over seaweed, Veleva, broken mussels, and sand dollars; they seemed an incoherent jumble. I need a bone, she thought. The moon. Something pure and simple. A seal surfaced in the waves to look at her, but did not stay to be drawn. She saw what she wanted then: a line, thin as spiderweb, cutting through a tendril of mist. She stopped. The line stretched into the tide, pulled earth and water together. A figure, shapeless in fishing boots and windbreaker, held the pole. Against the mist, the figure was a

few bunched lines, male or female, bulky, nearly colorless. Megan opened her drawing pad, pulled a pen out of her pocket. She rarely drew people; this was not a person, this was a sea species, a tide dweller, like the sandpipers and hermit crabs, sending a tentacle into the waves to see what there was to eat. Megan caught the angle of the body and the pole before the fisher reeled in to cast again. She looked seaward then, sketched a quick, feathery breaker. Something small and hard struck her shoulder, and she felt a claw in her hair.

She shook her head wildly; it scratched her scalp. Then she stilled, thinking more calmly: the fishhook. The weight had hit her shoulder; it dangled in front of her, pulling at the hook tangled in her hair. She groped for it. The fisher was walking toward her, reeling in methodically. Megan felt the hook scrape behind her ear; she caught it finally, a clump of hook and hair in her fingers as the fisher reached her.

It was a woman; Megan didn't recognize her. She had long curly iron gray hair flying out from a knitted cap; her eyes were the same oyster gray as the water. She had a lined, rugged, weathered face, about as graceless as a rockfish. Shorter than Megan, she looked hefty, shapeless under her jacket. She seemed annoyed, as if Megan's hair had crossed her line on purpose.

"Hold still," she said brusquely, and put her pole down. She picked through Megan's hair with stubby fingers. Her voice was a deep growl. "Lost the bait on that cast. At least you don't have a worm in your hair."

"Thanks," Megan muttered. Profuse apologies not being forthcoming, she added, aggrieved, "I think I'm bleeding. You could have cracked my glasses with that weight."

"I could have," the woman agreed with daunting calmness.

"Well, you should learn to cast. The ocean's that way; if you look, you can't miss it."

"I wasn't looking at the ocean. I was looking at you. Why not? You were looking at me. You were putting me down on your paper."

"You could have asked me not to, if it bothered you. You didn't have to throw things at me."

"It doesn't bother me," the woman said, shrugging. "Draw me or not. You caught my attention, and so my hook followed. It happens. Hold still; it's a triple hook."

"Great."

"What's your name?"

"Megan. More to the point, what's yours?"

The woman gave the kind of fat, raspy chuckle Megan associated with chronic smoking. "You going to sue me? Over a scratch? Humans are so delicate. Who do the manatees sue when the speedboat propellers scar their backs for life?"

"What?"

"Who do the canned dolphins sue? Who do the little violet snails sue when, floating upside down on their bubble rafts on the surface of the sea, they run into an oil slick?"

Brother, Megan thought. She said, "All right, all right, just get the damn hook out of my hair."

"Might have to cut it out. I have my fish knife."

"Oh, no. No knives. Just snap the line and I'll cut it out at home."

The woman chuckled again. "Don't be afraid. Anyway, I want my hook back. It's mine, after all. And I want to see what I reeled in. Megan. What do you do with your drawings?"

"I sell them. Ouch."

"One more prong. What else do you draw?"

"Tide pools," she muttered. "Birds. Kelp. Sea things."

"Then why me?"

"I wasn't drawing you. I was drawing a piece of sea life. Something attached to the sea, getting breakfast like an otter or a gull."

The woman gave a short seal's bark. It might have been anger or amusement; there seemed both in her expression. The hook came free in her hand. She looked into Megan's eyes then, her eyes wide, unblinking. "You must look closer," she said. "You must look closer. You don't see anything at all."

"People like my drawings," Megan protested.

"Of course they do. You show them what they expect to see. But you don't see what's really there."

You couldn't even see me." She untangled the rest of the line from Megan's hair, caught the weight before it dropped. Megan, irritated by the portentousness, answered, "Of course I see you. You've been in my hair for five minutes. You're in my drawing."

The woman gave her raspy chuckle. She picked up her pole. A toad-woman, Megan thought darkly. Toadfish. And lunatic besides. "Look at your drawing. My name is Doris. Dory, you can call me next time."

"Next time what?"

"Next time you want me." She turned, wandered back along the tide line, pole over her shoulder. Megan watched her, at once cross and curious. She wasn't local, she wasn't a tourist. She was someone's aging, eccentric sea wife, widow, maybe, living along the cliffs, her mind full of scars and barnacles, like an old whale's back, from being too long in the sea. Someone else—husband, son, sister—kept her just human enough. She went behind one of the huge rocks scattered along the beach; she didn't reappear. She must have stopped there to fish, well away from Megan's hair. Megan stooped finally, picked up her drawing.

She gave it a cursory glance. The wave had gotten smudged, but the simple essential lines were unchanged. What she had wanted to say . . . She gazed at it, pleased, despite the memory of the hook in her hair. The fisher, the line into the sea, the wave . . .

She looked more closely at the wave. She was aware of her heartbeat suddenly, a little private sound louder than the break and drag of tide. It wasn't a smudge in the wave where the line broke the water and the fishhook disappeared. It was a graceful tangle of tide-tossed hair.

Jonah, rapt, drowning at the bottom of a dream, down full fathom five among the dead men, the rotting spars and spilled treasure of sunken ships, was mildly annoyed when the white arm of a sea goddess reached endlessly and insistently down to pull him up into light. He hid in the coral where the butterflyfish slept, tried to burrow into the parrotfish's nightly cocoon; the hand pursued him.

"Jonah."

He tried to make himself invisible, one of the little ghoulish creatures living in the sea's eternal night. The hand plunged after him, scattering schools of luminous fish.

"Jonah! Wake up. You slept through the alarm."

No, I haven't, he thought, hearing the alarm all around him in the sea. Then he opened one eye, found himself in bed, with Megan, dressed and smelling of tide, sitting beside him.

He moved after a moment, dropped a hand over his eyes. "God," he breathed. "I had the strangest dream. What time is it?"

"Ten after eight. What did you dream?"

"I dreamed I was searching for fossils on the bottom of the ocean. There was a great cliff; I could swim up and down it, picking fossils out. But they weren't bivalves and trilobites—I was picking whales out of the cliff, walruses, seals, manatees, dolphins, sea turtles. Only they weren't big; they were tiny, shrunken things, and in my dream I thought: They've been forgotten; that's why they're so tiny. I'm in the future, and they're in the forgotten past."

"Well," she said comfortingly after a moment, "they're not all gone yet. I saw a seal in the tide watching me watch it."

"Did you go out drawing?" She nodded. "I didn't even know you were gone." He trailed a finger down her arm sleepily. "Did you draw?"

"I did one." Her eyes seemed opaque behind her glasses; they got that way sometimes when she didn't like her work.

"What? "

"Just something. I'm not sure if I like it."

"Let me see."

She shook her head. "Later, maybe. Let me think about it. Do you want me to bring you some coffee? "

"Coffee," he said, as if he couldn't remember what it was he drank a pot of every day. But a bit of

his mind had darted off into deeper water, in pursuit of something.

"You know. Black stuff, comes in a cup."

"Uh." He sat up suddenly. "No, I'll get up. I remember now."

"What?"

"Where my dream came from." He swung around, found the floor, and padded out to the dining room, where the box sat on the table among his rocks. He opened it.

"There they are," he said, and there they were: all the great sea animals, tiny carvings of jade, turquoise, malachite, silver, gold. "That's what made me dream." He was silent again, touching moons of black and white, rimmed with gold.

"Do you like his work?"

Megan asked.

"Oh, yes," he sighed. "Yes."

Reading on his stool behind the cash register later, while Jenny worked, he kept avoiding sea green eyes. He studied the antique Compend of Geology stubbornly; thoughts crystallized between the lines. All I have to do is sit here until the jewelry maker comes in.... "Fossils ... of extreme interest to geologists, because they reveal the nature of the former inhabitants of the earth." Then I can ask him about the woman who bought the earrings. The woman who sings. ". . . may be defined as any evidence of the former existence of a living thing." He would remember her.

But how well do I remember her? "In some cases. . . even the organic matter. . . is preserved...." Black, black hair, her hand pulling it back. Her voice like smoke, like fire, bright and dark. What she wore, night black, yet sparking light. ". . . more commonly . . . only the shells . . . and of these . . . sometimes both the form and structure and sometimes only the form." Her face, pure and mysterious as a moon shell, turning and turning inward, outward . . . the color of her eyes. The blur of color coming at me across the room, into my eyes, into my blood . . .

"Jonah, do we have any little cards explaining this one?" Jenny asked, holding up an ammonite. He rocked a little on the stool, jarred by the force of his imaginings, the boundary to another world buckling against the insistence of the real. Jenny's voice, the customer's hopeful face, the preserved form and structure . . .

"Oh." Both women looked strange, Jenny and the customer; there was only one face his eyes expected. He leaned forward, pulled at a drawer in the counter. "In here, somewhere. It's an ammonite. Mesozoic Period." He pulled out one of the cards, handwritten in Megan's calligraphy. "Here." Holding it across the counter, he looked up into sea green eyes.

The world stopped. Stopped moving, stopped making noise, twenty-seven billion forms of life stopped breathing air, drinking light. Then it started up again, with a lurch of sound like ground gears.

"Are you Jonah? I'm Adam Fin."

He held out his hand. After a moment, Jonah shook it, wondering how he could have found any similarities at all between the darkly glittering singer and this fallen angel. The green eyes narrowed faintly, a smile glinting through them, contradicting the bland innocence in his face. Jonah half expected the clamshells to clatter together in horror, the Compend to disintegrate into a pile of ash, the name to etch itself into the plate-glass window. Then he thought: This is ridiculous, I'm having a bad case of spring fever, I'm hallucinating.

"Fin?"

"One n. Like a fish." He smiled again, this time with teeth. There seemed a lot of them, white as fishbone and predatory. That, Jonah remembered, was the fashion in places where people paid attention to fashion. "So you like my work." His voice seemed deceptively gentle, silky. Jonah expected to see brine running out of his smile, as if he had just taken a shark bite of something.

"Yes." He dared not ask, he decided, which of three women had told him that. Then, abruptly, frowning, he did ask. "Did Megan tell you that? When? I only looked at it last—this morning."

"No."

"No." He drew a breath, his eyes sliding away from the chilly, smiling eyes. "Not Megan."

"I haven't seen her yet this morning."

"She's probably on the beach, drawing," he said inanely, and then, too late, heard the

undercurrent beneath Adam's words. Adam simply nodded.

"Then I'll look there for her."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want Megan?" Jenny turned to look at him, hearing the sharpness in his voice. Adam's blank, surprised expression mirrored hers. Jonah shifted, feeling somehow foolish and threatened at the same time. He said, without waiting for an answer, "I'll have to take your work on consignment."

"Fine with me," Adam said mildly. "Which pieces do you want?"

"I'll have to go upstairs and get the box."

He found it where he had left it, closed among his fossils, and brought it down. He opened it on the counter. Jenny joined him, making vague, appreciative sounds, filling his own silence as his eyes, flicking across a pirate's treasure of metal and jewels, found nothing. They must be there, he thought incredulously, the yin-and-yang wafers of onyx and ivory. They had to be there, hidden under a gold whale, under a polished black starfish. "I'll take these," he said, breaking his awkward silence, shifting jewels. "These."

"What about the black cats sitting on the fishhooks?" Jenny suggested. "I love those."

"Right. And this."

"And the sea otter pin, with the tiny abalone shell on its tummy."

"Fine." He picked up a sea turtle pin, its back malachite, its head and feet paler jade, jointed with silver. "This."

"And this little pink jade octopus; it looks like a flower, the way its arms curve like petals."

"Fine." He swallowed. "Jenny keeps the shop going; she knows our customers. There was—I thought I saw—"

"Yes?"

"We couldn't possibly have lost them—if so I'll pay for them—"

"What," Adam asked, "are you looking for?"

The world seemed to quiet again. Jonah lifted his eyes, feeling naked, vulnerable, pleading silently for mercy. "I saw a pair of onyx-and-ivory earrings. Overlapping circles, dark and light divided by gold. I don't know what happened to them."

There was no mercy in the fine, dangerous face. "You only thought you saw them in the box," Adam said gently. "But you recognized my work. I made them for my sister."

Upstairs, Megan laid two drawings on the floor and sat cross-legged, studying them.

Sea hare, she thought.

Sea hair.

Something is happening. Something very strange is happening. Things are drawing themselves into my drawings. Or am I drawing them without realizing it? But that old woman caught my hair on her hook, and that's my hair there, floating like a mermaid's in the surf. How would I have known to draw it?

She hugged her knees, staring at the drawings.

"Well," she said finally, a little wildly, "there's only one thing to do. Go back and draw again, and see what else turns up." She got up off the floor, leaving the drawings there, the beginning of some story without words that she had to pull in the shape of fish and shells and seaweed out of the sea.

She went out again, feeling a touch lunatic herself. She hadn't showered; breakfast had been a cup of coffee with Jonah before he went down to open the store. They hadn't talked much; he seemed dream-fogged, and she was dumbfounded. She walked to the beach again, hair flying, pocket full of pens and pencils, her drawing pad under her arm, her eyes wide behind her salt-flecked glasses, determined to make the mystery reveal itself or vanish.

The tide had turned; most of the tide pools were underwater. She sat on a wedge of boulder,

watched the tide bubble around it. She drew the rocks in the distance, rising above the surf like the craggy towers of some forgotten kingdom. Sea palms on lower shelves of rock curled under the tide, then popped upright, shaking their fronds. She added a cluster of them, and three pelicans, time-warped from another era, that flew along the breakers. She studied her drawing. Nothing, she thought grimly, that shouldn't be there. She added a fishing trawler crawling along the horizon, and a couple of men casting off the top of a rock. There was more impulse than art to her composition, but she began to enjoy the randomness. Everything about it was unexpected, so nothing could surprise her.

"Megan?"

She looked up, surprised. Adam Fin, looking more homogeneous in blue jeans and a windbreaker, smiled down at her, then glanced at her drawing. She, who hated people looking over her shoulder, shifted to reveal more of it to him. "Hi," she said, and patted barnacles. "Sit down."

He did so, ignoring the hoary teeth pushing against his backside. He watched the water a moment, eyes narrowed against the wind, then said, "I talked to Jonah. He took some of my work."

"I knew he would."

"Is he always so intense?"

"Pretty much. He says he likes rocks better than people." She added a bit of cross-hatching to the rocks, then looked up again to find Adam's profile, turned seaward, still as marble, hair pushed back by the wind, a quarter moon glinting in one ear. For just a moment, she envisioned that profile superimposed on her sketch, as if he were dreaming the rocks, the pelicans, the kelp and tide. Light sparked across the silver quarter moon in his ear; the onyx rabbit seemed to sprint across the wind toward the tide.

"Does it mean something?" she asked curiously. "The black rabbit? Is it lucky?"

His stillness broke; he touched it, smiling a little. "I don't know. Sometimes yes, sometimes no. In old tales, rabbit is a trickster. It changes sex, it changes shape; it lures you this way and that; it steals power and gives it away; it changes the path under your feet, and in the end, it changes what you think you want into what you are really looking for."

"All that," she said, marveling.

"Sometimes it just plays tricks."

She watched it rocking under his ear, the moon caught in its paws. Her eyes strayed again to his profile. "Jenny thinks you were born here."

"She does?" There was a touch of humor in his gentle voice. "Why?"

"She says because you're more like one of us than one of them."

He still looked seaward, but the shadow deepened under his cheekbone. "One of us," he said, amused. "One of them."

"Were you?"

"Born here?" He leaned gracefully, catching a trail of foam between his fingers. "Yes. Here. Jenny's right."

"But you traveled."

"Now I'm back." He flicked the foam into the water. "You weren't born here."

"I was born—"

"In Port Jameson. Jenny told me. Up north."

"You know it?"

"I know all the towns along the coast. I'm part salesman, remember?"

"But where do you live now?"

"I'm staying with some people," he said vaguely, "until I find a place."

"You're going to stay?"

"For a while. Maybe longer. Who knows? Long enough to make some things, sell some things, make a little money."

"That's all there is around here," she commented. "A little money."

"People bring it in from up north, down south. Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles—"

"Jonah thinks you're from Beverly Hills."

He laughed at that, noiselessly, still watching the tide. "Jonah has too much imagination."

"I always thought he didn't have enough."

He leaned back, hands splayed among the barnacles, his eyes on the water, but she felt his attention shift to her. "Why do you say that?"

She shrugged. "He likes to classify things. He's very cautious. He hates the color in my drawings; he thinks it's commercial. He has good taste, but he can be rigid about some things. He didn't even want to talk to you at first; he wouldn't look at your jewelry, even when I told him how beautiful it is. I don't know why he changed his mind. When he finally looked at it, he dreamed about it."

He was silent a moment, absolutely still, the way the waves were still sometimes, just before they began to gather and turn again. Then he said slowly, "He locks up imagination maybe, frees it by night. Some people do that. Their lives are rigid, but their dreams are full of poetry. Monsters. Things rich and strange. Imagination is dangerous. It changes things. You think you know what the world is and where you are in it, and then you walk out the door, and the storm clouds are a migration of great white whales, and the moonlight on the water is a stairway down into the sea."

"A stairway into the sea," she repeated, and saw it suddenly, in her mind, moonlight and pearl, beginning just at the edge of the tide and running into the deep. She shook her head, laughing a little, and Adam's eyes turned away from the sea to her.

"What?" he asked, smiling.

"Nothing. I just saw your stairway. I've never thought that way about the sea. I've always drawn what I saw, and I never imagined anything that wasn't real."

"Pretend it's real," he suggested lazily. "What's it made of? Your stairway?"

"Moonlight. Pearl. Something dark, blue-black, like the underside of mussel shells."

"Where does it begin?"

"Just there. Where the outgoing tide draws back the farthest from the land."

"If you could—" He looked at her again, still smiling faintly, his eyes seeming at once opaque and full of light. "Would you?"

"Go down the stairs?" She nodded, pushing her hair out of her eyes to contemplate imaginary stairs. "Now I can only go as deep as a tide pool. If I could stand on the bottom of the sea and draw all the little luminous fish in the dark . . . draw kelp, looking up toward light ... I could draw these things from photographs, but I never wanted to. Anyway, Jonah would hate that more than he hates the colors."

"He hates the sea?"

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "He loves it."

"And he loves you."

She glanced at him silently, saw only a waning quarter of his face. "He's crotchety," she said slowly. "Hard to please, sometimes. But then, so am I. We're alike, in a lot of ways." She paused again. "I've never—"

"What?"

"Talked like this to anyone. I don't usually. About my drawings. About Jonah."

"Sometimes it's easiest to talk to strangers."

"Do you love anyone?"

His expression didn't change, but she had surprised him: He stopped breathing; again his body grew still. "No," he said at last. "Not for a long time. And even then, not for very long."

"It was like that for me," she said with sympathy, "before I met Jonah. It seemed—just luck, that we met. An accident."

"Maybe," he said gravely, "one of these days, I'll have an accident."

She leaned against her drawing, studying him as she studied tide pools. "You'd more likely have a collision," she said, and saw his teeth flash.

"Why?"

"Because you seem more dramatic. Exotic. Jonah and I belong in a tide pool. You belong in the great deep. Among the whales and dolphins—"

"And sharks?"

"No," she said indignantly. "Of course not. A narwhal. That's what you would be. Something real,



but not quite believable."

He looked at her, the expression in his eyes unfathomable. She wondered suddenly if she had hurt him. But he only said lightly, "Jonah would put me among the sharks."

"Jonah would not. Barnacles don't know sharks."

"And where would Jonah put you?"

She chewed the end of her pen, studying the drawing for whales. "Jonah doesn't think that way. He sees everything in black and white."

He chuckled, amused by something. "That's a perilous way to think. One day color will wash across his eyes and he'll be in a world where nothing is familiar anymore. Not even you."

She looked at him, blinking. "That's an odd thing to say."

"I see odd things," he said lightly, and leaned forward to study her drawing. "It moves," he commented. "It's hard to catch the sea moving, since the drawn line freezes it. But I can hear your sea."

She flushed, pleased. "I was just doodling. Just— something odd is happening to my work. It's going through some kind of change. I don't—I don't quite know what to expect from it now."

"In what way?" he asked gravely. She was silent a long time, while he waited; she shook her head finally, pulling her hair tight with her hands.

"It's hard to describe. I just have to keep at it until I know what it wants—what it wants to tell me."

He made a soft sound. "You draw the sea. Maybe it's the sea you're trying to hear."

She looked at him again. "You sound like that old sea witch."

"Who?"

"A woman I met this morning. She cast her hook in my hair and reeled me in like a fish. She's rude and crazy and ugly, and she changed my drawing."

"How—"

"She just did. She walked into it and changed it. Old barnacle." She could feel her face frowning and smiling at the same time. His face changed slightly; a shadow passed over it, or light. She asked surprisedly, "You know her?"

"Oh, yes," he said softly. "Dory. The Old Woman of the Sea." He stood up suddenly, as if he finally felt the barnacles. "That's what we always called her."

"Is she crazy?"

"No," he said simply. "But sometimes her sanity is terrifying." He stepped off the rock, into fingers of tide. He turned, gave her a smile. Tide washed away his footprints. She stopped watching him after a while and studied her sketch for changes. Boat. Rocks. Birds. Sea palm. Waves. Fishers. No mystery. Just land meeting sea. Birds diving out of air for food, plants growing up out of water for light. Humans hunting fish, eating from the sea.

Normal. She closed her pad and leaped onto dry sand. She picked up half a Styrofoam float that had rolled in on the foam, and a small opaque bottle with something inside it. She stuffed them in her pocket and headed home.

Jonah found them on the table among his rocks when he came upstairs after he closed the store. Megan's drawing was propped against the toaster; he studied it a moment. Birds. Fishers. Rocks. Trawler. It lacked the precision of her underwater drawings, he decided, but the lines were good. He wondered where she was. He drifted over to the table, vaguely annoyed at her absence, as he would have been vaguely annoyed by her presence. He transferred his annoyance to the junk on the table that was littering his orderly mess. He tossed the float at the garbage can. Rim shot. It bounced to the floor and slid under a cupboard. He gazed at it, motionless, a glittering shadow, a smoky cadence trailing through his thoughts. He turned restively, picked up the bottle. Something shifted inside it. He held it up to the light, looked into it.

He was standing with the bottle upraised, shaking it now and then to shift the flickering, unidentifiable lights in it, when Megan walked in. He grunted, too absorbed to speak. She set a bag

of groceries on the cupboard, then turned. She pushed at her glasses hesitantly with her forefinger, her brows going up behind them.

"What are you doing?"

"There's something in this bottle."

"What?"

"I don't know. I can hardly see.... Where'd you find it?"

"It washed ashore in the tide. What is it? A message?" She reached for it. "Let me see."

"Wait—" He held it higher. "I'm looking."

"Is it treasure? I found it. It's mine."

"Salvage belongs to the government, who shall apportion its value." He turned the bottle; weight shifted; something rattled faintly.

"In what country?"

"Florida, I think." He caught a reflection, a memory in the glass that might have been opalescent walls, windows, a tower. "Can I break it?"

"It's probably sand."

He upended the bottle, shook it over the floor. A drop of water trembled on the lip. Megan watched it, as mesmerized as he was. "Not sand. I can't tell what kind of bottle it is. Steak sauce, or something. It's not antique, is it?"

"Probably. It's been floating around in the ocean for a hundred years, waiting for someone to find it and break into it. Now it's more valuable than what's inside." She watched him patiently. "Can I see? "

"Castles," he murmured, watching the shifting lights. "Luminous fish. Reflections. Dream's. Rhinestones from Woolworth's." He yielded the bottle finally. She held it to the light a moment or two, motionless, not breathing. Then, abruptly, she dropped it into the sink and tapped it once, twice, with the marble rolling pin.

"Be careful," he breathed. The glass shattered on the third tap.

They gazed at the pieces. Megan stirred them with her finger. Jonah picked up a shard, held it to the light. She watched him. He shook his head finally. "Nothing." He drew a long breath, looked at her. "But there was something."

"There was," she said in a small voice, "until I broke it." She stirred the pieces again, her eyes wide behind her glasses. Then she began to gather the shards methodically.

"Wait," Jonah said quickly, before she threw them out. "Save me a piece. I can look at it through my hand lens."

She gave him that flat, incredulous stare before her face loosened and broke into a smile. "Oh, Jonah. You can't see it that way."

"Then what was it?" he demanded.

"Something." She tossed the pieces in the garbage, then removed her glasses and drew the back of her hand over her eyes wearily. She blinked at him, half-blind; he wondered suddenly what she was seeing. "It's like the sea hare."

"What? "

"I thought it was over, but I guess not." She put her glasses back on, began to unpack groceries.

"What's not over?"

She didn't answer, just took eggs out of the bag, then an eggplant, which he hated and she loved, and chicken livers, which she hated and he loved. She wasn't going to answer, he could tell. When she opened the refrigerator, she let her hair swing in front of her face to hide it. He opened his mouth, impatient, wanting answers. She straightened abruptly before he could speak, and pointed out the dining room window, where the lights of the town were streaking the twilight. "Look. That's what you saw. You held it that direction. You said they looked like lights."

"There was weight," he insisted, astonished. "Something rattled."

"A broken shell. Something that went down the drain."

"Sure."

Her mouth tightened. She unpacked cereal, milk. He went to her, put his hands on her shoulders, felt the tension in her. "What about the sea hare? What does that have to do with a bottle?"

She shrugged his hands away, swung the cupboard door open, narrowly missing his head. "Nothing, probably. I can't explain. I saw Adam today. He said you liked his work."

He folded his arms, backed against the counter. "You saw him today where?"

"At the beach. He stopped to watch me work."

"You never let anyone watch you work."

She shrugged. "I let him. He's an artist. He knows the sea."

"He's a hustler."

She turned to stare at him, stunned. "He's an artist. He's nice."

"Nice." He reached past her, pulled a box of crackers out of the bag. "Jenny is nice. Baby llamas are nice. Adam Fin is a barracuda."

"You are so critical." She slammed the cupboard door so hard beer in the bottom of the bag clinked. "It's a wonder you even like me. If you ever stopped, who would there be left in the world for you to like?" He stood still, blinking, hearing thoughts inside his head clink like the beer bottles. He wondered if he held one against the window, would it reflect another world, or would it simply gather into itself the lights of the world he knew?

There was something in that bottle, he thought stubbornly. And there is something else in Adam Fin. But he didn't speak. He moved into her silence, put the milk and the beer away, matching her mute arguments with his own.

### THREE

Megan sat on the floor in Mike's bookstore, her back against history, surrounded by ocean. It was a slow morning. The bell on the door had rung three times. Rain tapped against the windows, wandered off, came back, tapped again. She was aware of someone circling her now and then, but she refused to look up. No one came to Mike's for history. The books she heaved onto her knees were massive, colorful, precise. They measured the mountains beneath the sea; they plumbed the abysmal waters. They told what the narwhal ate, how the male seahorse gave birth to its young, how the sea cucumber, which flung its inner organs at its enemies to confuse them, contained a chemical that might combat cancer, and that the homely hagfish had three hearts, and what orchestrated the beat of a hagfish's hearts could also steady a human heart. They knew, from the great blue whales to the onecelled algae, who ate what. They had counted the millions of eggs an oyster might lay in a year, and the number of rhymes in the song of the humpback whale.

But they hadn't read the message in the bottle.

Nor, she decided, surfacing to the gray light, did they know that a sea hare could crawl out of the water and turn itself into ink. Or that an old woman could cast a line into a drawing of the tide and catch a human on her hook.

She leaned back against the shelves, drew her hair out of her face. She must have sighed: Mike, on his stool, lifted his unkempt head, to which air moss and air snails probably clung, and turned an eye her direction.

It was a question, his attention. He didn't care that she was littering his floor with herself and his books, but that she hadn't found what she wanted in them. No one turned a page or breathed among the stacks; the place was empty but for them.

She said wearily, hardly expecting Mike to offer much more than a crooked smile, "I keep finding odd things in the tide. But those books don't say anything about them." He was motionless, still listening, one finger marking the line he had read. She went on, talking to herself more than to him. "Yesterday I found a bottle with something in it. Something that shifted, something shining.... When I broke it open, nothing was there. But there had been something. These books are full of such strange things. Did you know that they made cloth of gold out of a fiber secreted by sea pens, and that sea pens look like long, feathery underwater quills? Maybe you could write a message with them. But these books don't say anything about what I need to know. They explain everything. They

don't see anything that's maybe there and maybe not. It's like Jonah wanting to look for a mystery under his hand lens. It won't be there. But it was there."

She stopped talking. Mike was looking at her with as much expression as an oyster, waiting patiently for her to quit making conversation so that he could get back to his book. Then his backbone straightened a little. He drew in air, a long tidal gathering through his nose. Expression, subtle as color in a kelp leaf, passed through his eyes. "Yeah," he said, and Megan stared at him in astonishment. "I know." He set his book down carefully and collapsed a little into his bulk to rummage under the counter. "I found one, too."

"One what?" she whispered.

"One of those things. One of those things that don't fit." He lifted it gently off a shelf, set it on the counter, then stilled again, gazing at it, unblinking.

Megan got to her feet, not easy after being weighted with the cumulative knowledge of the sea. The thing on Mike's counter looked like a broken roof tile. It was flat, black, square but for a corner bitten off. As she looked more closely, she saw it was latticed with fine and intricate lines that revolved, at the corners, around tiny scallop shells. Latticed, it wasn't black, she realized, but blue so dark it melted toward black. Then all the lines flowed together; it was flat, black, solid. And then latticed again, the scallop shells a faintly paler blue. And then flat. A piece of black tile.

"What on earth—"

"Nothing," Mike said simply. "That's what I figure. Nothing on earth." He touched it gently; lines flowed under his fingers. "I found it washed up in a pile of kelp. Moves like water. Like something opening and closing to water."

"Yes," she said, entranced. "It would, I guess, being underwater."

"You figure—" He hesitated, then became expansive. "You look at it maybe from their point of view. For millions of years, the sea was like those books to them. Everything's explicable, expected. Fishbones, kelp leaves, pearls, what-not. Then odd things start drifting down. They've seen wood floating, so they're not surprised by ships, cloth of gold they can guess at, and pearls they know, and the little octopus can live in porcelain teacups. So they think: This is how humans live, floating on the water, coming apart now and then, and they learn to recognize clothes, and flesh, and then, after the fish feed, they recognize bone. But now . . . Think if you were living down there, finding beer cans. Barrels of chemicals. Styrofoam coolers. Flashlight batteries. Plastic baggies. Maybe TV sets off sunken fiberglass boats. Refrigerators. Old socks. Tangled-up fishing line. If you didn't know, if you lived maybe inside a glint of light, what kind of bizarre world would you guess was falling apart and drifting out of the air down into the sea?" He turned his finding; the other side was pale and luminous as pearl. Megan stared at him, mute. "So I look at this and wonder what's down there, breaking up, washing ashore." He looked at Megan, shrugged his bulky shoulders a little. "Makes you wonder. At least it does me." Someone pushed the door open; the bell rang. He slid the finding back under the counter. Megan opened her mouth, closed it. Mike gave her his crooked, one-sided smile, then went back to being a walrus on a stool reading a book.

Jonah, taking a day off, had driven the truck to a cove north of town, to putter along the cliffs. Worm tubes and the occasional crumbling fossil clam were all he expected to find, though that morning he thought vaguely of shark teeth, or the ancient tracks of rain. Except for a couple from a camper picking through the treasures along the tide line, the cove was empty. He walked around the south arm of the cove, close to the water, where tide pools formed in the sandstone, and the cliffs were sliding shard by shard into the sand. There he picked among the broken pieces, occasionally helping the cliff down by poking into its side. The sandstone yielded easily, revealed little except the unmistakable tracks of other fossil hunters. Still, he was content in the gray, damp winds, with the roiling sea at his back, and the seagulls crying overhead.

He and Megan had mumbled back into one another's good graces; by midnight he had forgotten the color of the sea and remembered only Megan's eyes, their intentness, their sudden smile. He had been cured of earrings; Adam Fin, from wherever, was not a barracuda but harmless as a harp

seal. He crumbled mud around what looked like a brachiopod, whistling. The ghost of the brachiopod itself crumbled away, left him a handful of nothing. He let it fall, still whistling, and eyed the tide. It had moved farther out, giving him a chance to clamber along the edge of the cliff out where it dipped down into deep water, and then over to the other side, which was usually tide bound. He dropped his finds into his windbreaker pocket and began to climb.

Fifteen minutes later he was picking his way across what looked like giant ribs or backbones, partially submerged in sand, polished by the waves. There was a cave on this side of the cliff; with nothing much in it but the usual barnacles' starfish, anemones, hanging like some kind of weird living wallpaper down from where the tide stopped rising. But farther back from the water, around the outside of the cave, he had once found a perfect bivalve half the size of his palm. He went back there.

He heard the whales sing then.

He recognized them from some old record of Megan's: a flute player jamming with whales. It sounded more like whooping jungles to him, creaking timbers, demonic foghorns, than song. There were vast, deep notes that blew through him like breath trembling through a reed. I shouldn't be hearing those notes, he thought, shaken. They move through the deep sea, the leviathan call across hundreds of miles.

His eyes fell on the backbones and ribs of rock he had walked across. They seemed to be arched in a dive through time, a sea mammoth caught and frozen like a little trilobite in the floor of the ocean. But this isn't the floor, he thought, then: It was underwater once. I'm at the bottom of a fossil sea, hearing the ghosts of whales. They were all around him, the voices of the sea, whistling, scraping, ratcheting, whooping, booming. He stood still, stunned by noise, trembling in currents of sound. What is happening? he thought. Something is happening.

Then there was only one sound: a song so faint he could barely separate it from the gentle splash and sigh of water within the cave.

It was a human voice; it was the sea's voice. It flicked away foam, wandered over stones, lingered in the anemone's tendrils. It turned over a shell, scattered agates. For a moment, as the sea idled, it ranged free, sweet, deep, then impossibly clear and high. He recognized it.

He took a step toward the cave, feeling his heart beat in his throat, his lips. The cave emitted a breath of brine and guano, then cool, rainy wind. He took another step, another. A wave rolled over his footprint. The voice grew louder. His eyes stung with salt, with sweat. There was no language in his head, only the tide and the voice and the wind. He reached the mouth of the cave.

Water ran past him, lapped the mossy walls, almost reached the shadows in the back. A gentle not\_e filled the cave; he breathed it like air. Something at the back of the cave moved a little. It was slick, glittering, a mass of green and black, that melted into shadow, into stone. The voice sighed through the cave; tide pushed him forward. Again he smelled brine, guano, salt, death. And then the sweet rain. The shadowy mass stirred; a pale stone took shape, then a long, straight fall of shadow. The tide ran around his knees. He tasted the song, felt it in his throat, in his blood. Water splashed among the stones; he heard a light laugh melting in the foam. The sea wrapped itself around his thighs.

A gull cried overhead. He blinked, found himself standing at the empty, shallow cave he recognized, one with no depth for shadows. The sand at his feet was barely damp; the tide was still working its way across the tide pools. He listened for the song. Then he realized he was listening, and tears broke like a bone in his chest because he had heard the sound of fossil rain, he had seen the mermaid's hair.

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A few miles to the south, Megan walked the tide line like a scavenger, head down, ignoring the sea, intent only on what the morning tide had pushed up on the beach. Other dedicated scavengers, who had found plastic bleach bottles or gallon milk jugs washed ashore, had cut holes in them to drop in whole sand dollars, blue agates, bright pieces of mother-of-pearl. Megan, frowning at the sand, narrowly avoided collisions. She had nearly walked into surf fishers' lines a couple of times;

she barely heard their warnings. Now and then she stopped, shifted kelp with her toe, nudged a jellyfish over to see what it might be hiding. She was putting a magnifying glass to the mystery, she knew; if she looked at it directly, it would be somewhere else, behind her back, or where her shadow began. Like light flickering on water, it would never be where she had seen it last.

But still she searched for the pearl in the kelp, the bone made of coral. She filled her pockets as she walked, hardly seeing what she put into them, plastic, metal, cork, Styrofoam, tin, until her jacket swung bulkily at her hips and rattled when it hit her. She was absently trying to shove a wet towel into her bulging pocket when she ran into someone not quick enough to get out of her way.

It was Adam. He had his hands on her shoulders, steadying her as she raised her head and pulled her mind up from where the clams were blowing bubbles. She pushed her glasses up, and saw him from behind a brine-flecked mist. She pulled them off, began wiping them on the towel.

"Here," he said. "Let me." He took them, wiped them carefully on the underside of his sweatshirt. Then he slid them back on her nose, gently adjusted the earpieces under her hair, an oddly intimate gesture that made her aware suddenly of the muscle beneath the sweatshirt, the height and weight of the body blocking the wind. She shifted her own weight a little, backing a half step. He dropped his hands, looked down at the torn, sandy towel she dragged.

"Going swimming?"

"No, I was just—I was—" She paused, drawing hair away from her eyes. What had she been just? Trying to stuff a towel into her pocket. His expression changed.

"Is something wrong?"

She shook her head, sighing. "No. I was beachcombing. I got a little carried away. There's so much junk."

"Most people," he pointed out, "pick up shells."

"I'm not looking for shells."

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know. Secrets. Mysteries. Pearls and ambergris and black coral. But I keep finding garbage instead."

He shrugged lightly. There was no expression on his face. "Just leave it. The tide will pick it up again. Anyway, you didn't put it there."

"Right," she said dourly. "That's toddler mentality in a nutshell. I didn't put it there, and anyway, Mom will clean it up."

He smiled. "Now you remind me of Dory. Never satisfied with the world. Grumbling and snorting and talking to yourself, trying to stuff all the garbage in the world into a grocery bag."

She shook her head. "I'd use a leaf bag. Thirty nine gallons, made of recycled plastic. Drag it behind me down the tide line. Or a shopping cart. I'd wheel that along the wet sand and throw cans in it, and get snarled up in fishing lines and dead kelp."

"And then you'll get annoyed at the kelp. All those untidy piles the sea drags up and leaves lying around like laundry. You'll throw that into your shopping cart."

"And what about the dead jellyfish?" she demanded. "Talk about untidy. And the crab backs from molting crabs? Not to mention all those empty shells. I'll have to buy a coat with pockets as big as the sea."

"What have you got in your pockets?" He prodded one, marveling. "Anything good?"

"Actually," she admitted, "I'm not sure. I was looking so hard for something I wasn't paying attention to what I picked up."

He made a dubious sound after a moment, his eyes still smiling a little, the opaque milky green of bottle glass tossed around in the sea for a century. "Then how do you know you haven't picked up what you were looking for in the first place?"

She was silent, looking at him. "I don't know," she said at last, and laughed a little at the thought. "Maybe I did."

"Maybe you should look."

She went up to where the sand was dry and sat down. She realized then how far she had walked, almost beyond the boundaries of the town. Great jutting curves of cliff hid the harbor; the houses on them were sparsely scattered. She had left even the fishers and the beachcombers behind; they

were alone but for flocks of gulls and sandpipers, and footprints wandering in and out of the tide. Adam sat beside her, watched her pull things out of her pockets. There were beer caps, a sardine tin, a Tinker Toy wheel, a baggie full of wet sand, a Styrofoam bait carton with a couple of dead worms in it, a fishing weight, a wool glove, a baby's teething toy, a tennis shoe.

She stopped when she saw the shoe. Adam was stretched out on his side, leaning on one elbow. His eyes, flicking from her face to the shoe, found nothing wonderful in it. She said, her voice sounding oddly high, "There are still things in my pockets."

"Take them out."

"But there's not room for a shoe in my pocket."

"It was in there," he said irrefutably. She reached into both pockets at once, pulled out an empty pickle jar, a film canister, a plastic glass with Ronald McDonald on it, the lid of a Ninja Turtle lunch box. She got to her knees, still pulling things out, her eyes wide, incredulous. Adam watched silently. She dropped a piece of a child's chalk board, a length of picture wire, a diving mask, a bicycle chain, and a fan belt before she stood up. Adam didn't move, except his head, lifting a little to see her face.

"What is this?" she breathed. "What is all this?" Still things came out: a jump-rope handle, a hairbrush without any bristles, the plastic nozzle of a vacuum cleaner. "This is not what I was looking for."

"It's what you found."

She stared at him. Expression had finally surfaced in his eyes: a sorrow as deep and complete as if, she thought, he were watching the world die.

And then she realized he was.

A wave fanned across the sand, spilled around him, began to tug the bottle caps, the Styrofoam back into the sea. It tugged at Adam, who lay in water as easily as on sand, indifferent as a seal to the turning of the tide.

She began to tremble, feeling the weight in her pockets and knowing that there was not time enough in the world to empty them. She whispered, "What are you?"

Jonah drifted back home at twilight. He moved, he felt, through the evening tide. It sang in the back of his mind, insistent, pervasive, the way the sound of the sea seemed ingrained in the floorboards of the apartment. No window could shut it out, no dream. He found Megan sitting idly on a kitchen stool, gazing at nothing, a peculiar, distant look in her eyes. He went to the refrigerator, got a beer, and glanced at her again.

"Did you draw?"

She shook her head. "No. I just walked."

"Oh."

"You?"

He nodded. "Same." He added, making an effort, "I found a couple of things."

"Oh." She drew a breath, subsided. He glanced out the window over the sink. Twilight drew a thin line of sapphire above the sea. He watched it darken, forgetting the beer in his hand, following the pale, elusive frills of foam as the black waves broke. A star moved over the water toward the harbor: a trawler coming home. He drank finally, and remembered Megan, so silent he had forgotten she was there. She got that way sometimes, chewing over her work.

He moved, touched the cold stove. "I'll cook." She murmured something. "What?"

"Okay." She added, after a moment, "I'm not very hungry."

"I'll cook that frozen tortellini."

"Okay."

He opened a cupboard, rattled a pot loose from a clutter of lids. He said without looking at her, "That Adam. The jewelry maker." She made another noise. "Where does he live?"

"He does—he said—" He looked up then; she shook her hair over her face, finding words. "He said he was with some friends."

"What friends? Where?"

"He didn't say."

He grunted, kicked the cupboard door closed. He set the pot in the sink, ran water into it. "Reason I ask," he said to the water, "is Jenny thinks we should get a few more pieces from him."

"Oh."

He set the pot on the stove, turned on heat. "Did you buy sauce?"

"No."

"You know how to make it?"

"Yeah. You get out the butter."

He gazed into the water, stirred it aimlessly for a while with a wooden spoon. "Then what?" he asked, rousing. "After you get out the butter?"

"That's it. You toss some butter and salt and pepper in the tortellini and it'll be fine."

He blinked, pulled earthward by a vague sense of incongruity. "Do we have butter?"

"No," she said after a while.

He turned the water off, looked at her. She was hunched, her face a quarter moon within her hair. He couldn't find an expression, let alone read it. He set the water aside, pulled a frying pan out of the stove drawer. "Eggs, then. Scrambled?"

"Fine."

"Did he leave a number with you?"

"What? "

"Adam Fin. A phone number?"

She shook her head, straightening a little; he heard her sigh. "No."

"Well, then how do I get in touch with him?"

"I guess you'll have to wait until he finds a place to live."

He cracked an egg against the pan with more force than necessary. "That's it? Just wait until he wanders back in? It could be days!"

"It could be. So what?"

So, he wanted to shout, I have to wait days to find out if the woman singing in the bar he says is his sister, is the woman who sang to me in a cave, or if I just dreamed their voices were alike and that there was the shadow of her long black hair against the rock? His mouth felt dry. He dumped eggshells, knowing suddenly how an oyster felt, waking up to a grain of sand in its bed, trying to live around it, only to find it growing larger, luminous, more insistent the harder the oyster worked to ignore it.

"I think," he said finally, "I just think it's odd he left all that with us and not even a number where we can reach him. It's expensive stuff."

"I guess he trusts us," she said wearily, and added after a moment, "I don't know why. Anyway. You don't even like him."

He didn't answer. He stirred eggs, pushed a couple of pieces of bread into the toaster. He found himself staring down into it, watching the flush of heat along the element. He looked up to find Megan watching him, her eyes speaking suddenly, but nothing he could decipher. Do you? they asked. Have you ever? Would you believe?

"Jonah? "

"Huh?" he said, and then, "Oh, shit, there's no butter for the toast."

"There's some diet margarine."

"I hate that stuff. Tastes like salad oil." He got a couple of plates, spilled egg onto them, added dry toast. He handed a plate to Megan. She looked at it bewilderedly, as if wondering what he expected her to do with yellow lumps and a piece of cardboard. He lifted his own plate, eyed it, and set it down abruptly.

"I'm going out."

He felt her watching him until he closed the door, but she did not even say his name.

His feet led him to the Ancient Mariner, where he bought a beer and hunched over it, listening, beneath the sounds of the jukebox and some weird woman haranguing the bartender, for an echo of the voice in his head. He upended the beer, drank half, and fell deeper into the music, chasing a spindrift song through the caves in his head. Finishing the beer in another burst of energy, he



found the woman eyeing him.

She looked, he thought, like an oyster. Lumpy, gray, with a ruffled and colorless shell. The bartender, Sharon, who was married to Marty down the street who ran the arts and crafts gallery, lifted an eyebrow at Jonah.

"Another?"

"He'll have one," the older woman said. "I'm buying."

"No, I have to—"

"Name's Doris. You can call me Dory." She brought herself and her glass over, sat down beside him. "If you can hear that much beneath the music."

"I can hear," he said, despite Aerosmith going at it from the jukebox. She fixed him with her oyster eye.

"Sing me what you hear."

"I can't sing."

"You'll have to, for her. You'll have to wring music from your bones." She shoved his beer at him. "Drink it."

He could not, he thought, drinking with impolite haste, have heard what she said. He put the glass down, and smelled it suddenly, from the woman, from a crack in the wall: brine, guano, new rain falling in a new season. He closed his eyes, felt the sting of brine behind them. The woman was saying something else.

"There's a price. Everything has its price."

"Beer?" He reached into his pocket. "I've got it."

"Money's not worth much, down there. Gets old and crusty, hidden under kelp; coral grows around it. Coral likes money. It's hard, you can build on coin. I've seen gold like eyes peering out of coral skeletons. No. The price wouldn't be coin. You won't want to buy what that coin makes, the way it ends up down there."

"What?" he said, mildly buzzed and not having the foggiest notion what the old bivalve was talking about. "What ends up down where?"

She joggled his elbow crossly. "Down underwater. You should see what crawls out of those rusting barrels. It's an army of ghosts that eats everything in sight. Eats coral, eats the little plankton, eats the chemicals drawing one fish to another, so they can't breed, and if they do, it eats their eggs. You think you see everything, with your lenses, your this scopes and that scopes, your radars drawing pictures of sound. You don't see what's not there anymore. It makes things disappear." She turned to Sharon, called in her rattly voice, "He'll have another."

"No, thanks. I've got to go."

"He'll have another." Her hand clamped on his wrist; he saw her eye again, fierce and gray as a gale. "You'll stay. I know what you want. I can hear the singing in your head."

He stood still. His mouth was very dry. He reached for his bottle; it was empty. He waited while Sharon, looking amused, brought another.

"Where's Megan?" she asked, throwing the name at him like a lifeline from another world. It was too short and too late.

He gulped beer. "Megan? Doing some drawing. Or thinking about it. I'm looking," he said to both women, "for a man named Adam Fin. Tall, blond—" They were both nodding. "He left some jewelry with me," he added, and saw the oyster eye narrow in a smile. "But no address, no phone."

"And you want," Dory said, chuckling, "a certain pair of earrings."

He had to breathe twice before he could answer. "Yes. You know him."

"I know him." She drank her own drink, sea green and rimed with salt. "I know her. They're mine, him and her. My first and greatest and most wild children."

Megan dipped her hand in the tide, drew the shining out of the sea.

It flowed like gossamer from her hand, cloth woven of foam, of light. In the bright morning it was barely visible, yet of substance: wind stirred it, or invisible tides. She draped it around her neck; it woundç itself through her hair. She continued walking. Long ribbons colored like mother-of-pearl floated in on a breaking wave, lay in the wet sand like reflections of sunset. She picked them up, wrapped them around her wrist; they streaked the air behind her with changing shades of blue. The next wave brought her a living crown.

It was a band of giant, irregular pearls hung with a net of tendrils to which seahorses clung, and tiny sand dollars, delicate, feathery worms, minute, transparent fish. She put the crown on her head; the net fell over her shoulders like a cloak. Now, she thought, I must have my scepter, and the sea rolled it to her feet: a stark white bone with a starfish impaled on its pointed tip. She raised it, and felt the net wrap around her so tightly a seahorse embedded itself in her cheek.

She sat up. She was tangled in sheets. Jonah, uncovered beside her, mumbled something and groped. His hand found nothing; one eye opened, thoughtless as a fish's eye. She felt her cheek, shook him until the other eye opened.

"Jonah. There's a seahorse in my cheek."

He squinted at her. "There's no seahorse in your cheek."

"Are you sure? I can feel something scaly."

"There's no seahorse." He yawned. "That's a baby starfish." He rolled out of bed, padded to the bathroom. Megan, rubbing her cheek with one hand, untangled herself with the other. She reached for her glasses.

When she put them on the world turned to water, and she saw it, washed with moonlight and foam: the stairway down into the sea.

She woke up. She was tangled in sheets; Jonah was gone. Then she realized he hadn't been there. It was still night, and heÉ had never come home. She pulled herself across the bed to peer at the luminous dial on the clock. Five minutes to three in the morning. She dropped back, her eyes wide in the dark, remembering. He had left his scrambled eggs on the counter, gone out abruptly. She had scarcely noticed; all her attention had been on Adam, lying in the surf on the kitchen floor. Maybe, she had thought after a while, Jonah had gone for butter. She got up finally, scraped cold eggs into the garbage, and made a tuna sandwich with the toast.

She had fallen asleep listening for him.

She put her glasses on, turned on the lamp. She went into the kitchen to see if he had left a trace of himself: a beer bottle, a fossil. Then she looked among his rocks to see if he had left a note. She flicked on the bathroom light: no message on the mirror. She sat down on the bed, hugging herself, feeling a hollowness in her bones, as if she were blown out of glass and the blow falling at her out of the dark would shatter her.

She whispered, "Jonah."

She heard his key in the lock then. The door opened. She went out to meet him, found him standing in the doorway, blinking at all the lights. He held the doorknob with one hand, and the door frame with the other; seeing her, he swayed in surprise and would have sat down on the floor if he hadn't been hanging on.

"It's you," he said.

"I live here," she said a trifle crossly. "I'm Megan. If you're looking for someone else, you got the wrong apartment."

"How did you know?"

"How did I know what?"

"That I'm looking for her?"

She felt herself grow rigid with shock. Her ±mouth shaped words; no words came for a moment.

"Who ? "

"Who?"

"Who her?"

"What?"

"What her are you looking for?" It came out, to her ears, all in one word. He blinked, swaying

again, then deciphered it.

"Her."

Her voice rose. "Her who?"

"The singer."

"You met a singer?" She covered her mouth with her hands. "You met a singer with that band that night?"

"No." He shook his head so emphatically his glasses nearly fell off. "I haven't met her yet. I can't find her."

She felt an absurd urge to laugh and cry and throw a brachiopod at his head at the same time. "Jonah, what the hell are you talking about? You have a crush on some singer in a band? Is that where you've been? Listening to her?"

He blinked at her again, his eyes round and heavy behind his glasses. "It's not a crush. It's an obsession."

"For a woman you haven't met?"

"I knew you wouldn't understand."

"What," she said tightly. "Don't. I. Understand."

"Obsessions. They don't have anything to do with what's real. This doesn't have anything to do with you."

"Jonah, it's three in the morning and you're shitfaced! Don't tell me this has nothing to do with me. You're obsessed with rocks and you leave them all over the house—"

"Fossils."

"Don't tell me that has nothing to do with me when I step on a worm tube getting out of the bathtub! Where are you going to put this obsession? On the kitchen counter?"

"In my head," he said, and she made a sound she had never made before. He let go of the doorknob, raised a hand, and lurched a half step. "Now," he said. "Now. Now."

"Don't 'now' me."

"She's a dream—"

"I gather."

"I mean in my head. I think. That's where she sings. In my head."

Megan closed her eyes, wondering if she were dreaming Jonah. But he was still there, breathing fumes and gazing at her hopefully. "Jonah."

"Megan."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, she sang at the bar, too."

"Uh-huh."

"And then in the cave."

"What's that? Some jazz club?"

"The cave," he said patiently. "Around where I was looking for fossils. She sang. And whales sang. Maybe they sang because she drew them there—"

"Did you dream this?" she asked sharply. He shook his head again, top-heavy.

"I thought yes. Then no. That's why I have to find Adam Fin."

She felt her throat close; her hands closed over her arms. "Adam," she whispered, and heard the sound of water, running into dark, secret places. "What does this have to do with Adam?"

"Adam," he mocked. "Adam. You keep saying his name. I don't even know her name. The old oyster wouldn't tell me. 'Ask her,' she said. 'Ask her. She'll tell you the price of her name.' So I have to find Adam Fin. I was just out asking people."

"Why?" Her voice jerked. "Why Adam?"

"Because he knows where she is. When she walks on land. He knows her."

She felt the blood run cold and thin under her skin. The stairway, she thought, out of the sea. She went to Jonah, took his arm very gently away from the door frame, and locked the door behind him, though she knew that in the end, no door would keep out the sea.

Jonah, bleary-eyed and stubbled, sat behind the shop counter the next morning, his eyes on the Compend, which was written in some troublesome language of which he only understood a word or two here and there. The conch shells, and big cowries and the chambered nautilus on the shelves sang faintly to the rhythm of the waves. Their music, delicate as notes played on a glass, kept drifting between his eyes and the page. He listened as intently to the bell on the door, to the quality of voices, though they all spoke the obscure language of the Compend. Jenny, cheerful and efficient, only disturbed him when she had to; she seemed to sense how he needed to seep, fossil-like, into the wall, while he waited for Adam Fin's pale, calm face, his mocking eyes.

Finally, after hours of listening for a voice that never spoke, he despaired, snapped the Compend shut with a sound that made Jenny start.

"I have to go," he said.

"I'm just about to leave for lunch, Jonah. You seem a little under the weather. Have you caught a bug?"

He smiled a little, crookedly. "Some kind of a bug, yeah. Megan's upstairs. Call her and she'll cover your lunch break. I have to get out of here."

"Well," she said, her voice mild, innocent of subterfuge, "I hope you feel better soon." She reached for the phone. She had never heard the music of the chambered nautilus, Jonah guessed. She had never wept over a darkly glittering shadow, a scent of brine. For a moment he envied her.

He drove the truck to the cove again, knowing he would find nothing. He wanted to stand at the mouth of the cave, just stand there, in the place where she had been, not hoping she would be there, but to feed his heart with memories. The tide was coming in, but he climbed along the side of the cliff anyway, then around its face. Tide licked at his heels, as he made his way across the long bones of rock. Ruthless afternoon sunlight scoured the cave clean of shadows; the rough, exuberant waves shouted but refused to sing. Still he stood there, staring at the sea life along the cave walls and trying to find the mystery behind the barnacles.

The sea poured around him suddenly, hit the back wall; it echoed laughter as the wave withdrew. He grabbed at rock, cut his palm on a crusty barnacle. He waited for the powerful drag on his body to end, then slogged back over the whale bones between waves, wet to the crotch. Hugging the cliff above the deep water, where the lip of rock was narrowest, he came face-to-face with Adam Fin.

He was laughing the deep booming laughter in the cave. He didn't cling to the cliff, he leaned gracefully into it, so finely balanced that Jonah might have knocked him off with a pebble, except that he had no desire to see what Adam Fin would do in water. Dissolve, grow a fish's tail, turn a seal's face up at Jonah, or worse—whatever it was, he might not be found easily again. His teeth seemed even sharper in the sunlight.

"Got a little wet," he commented. "Didn't you." He reached out suddenly, caught Jonah's wrist. Jonah, hanging on by one hand, nearly fell. He pushed himself back against the cliff, panting, and found Adam looking at his hand. "Cave bite?"

"Barnacle," Jonah said tersely. There was another wrench at his precarious balance; Adam twisted his hand back, held it over the water. Three drops of blood fell. Jonah turned his face into the cliff, swallowed a taste like iron in his throat. He forced himself to speak.

"She said—Dory said—there is a price. Is this part of it?"

"No. I'm just being perverse." He laughed without sound at Jonah's stare; his eyes were cold as rime. "What is it you want, Jonah?"

"I want—" He stopped at the edge of saying, drew breath. He said to the barren cliff, "You know what I want. You knew before you laid eyes on me. She's your sister. That's all I know. But she's nothing like you. She's timeless, and she is the face of the sea, all its beautiful shapes and colors and all its songs. I don't even know her name. She haunts me and she won't let me find her. Help me. Tell me her name."

"Storm," Adam said. "Undertow. Rapture of the deep." Still he held Jonah's hand over the sea, where green water weltered against stone. "You know her. She has shown her face before, rising in the wake of wrecked ships, singing to the doomed. Turn your face to land again, where you are loved. You could never pay her price. And the price you will pay will be too high."

"What price?"

"Megan."

Jonah blinked at the word. It seemed incongruous, irrelevant, like an apple tree growing placidly out of the middle of the sea. "Megan. This has nothing to do with her. She'll understand. And she can take care of herself."

The grip on his wrist tightened; he wrenched at it, then caught wildly at Adam's wrist to keep from falling. They stood poised like dancers on the fine edge between land and sea. A high wave spun against the cliff's edge; brine fanned into the air, flecked their hands, Adam's eyes, Jonah's mouth with bitterness.

"You don't know her," Adam said.

"I don't know who? Megan? Of course I know her." He stopped, blinking at another flick of water; his eyes narrowed, searching the pale, seawashed face for a hint of expression. "You." He tasted brine again, and spat. "You follow her. She lets you watch her draw. She talks to you. It's you she wants, not me. So why are you throwing her name at me? You take care of her. Until this is over."

"You think you can walk on water to return to land." Still his face held no more expression than a clam.

"I am walking on water," Jonah said tightly. "That's all I can see, all I can hear. Tide and her voice, calling. Tell me where I can find her."

"What if I offer you something instead of her?"

"There is nothing." He swallowed, his throat tight. "Nothing instead of. Nothing without."

"What if I offer you freedom?"

"Freedom? "

"From her."

His eyes widened; his hold tightened, as if the cliff had shifted beneath him at the words. "No."

"Look at yourself," Adam said softly. "You can't even see out of your own eyes; you can't remember your own past. You are already adrift in the sea, without enough sense to be afraid. You're a stranger in your own life. The only voice you hear is hers, and she's not even human. I'll tell you how to stop that voice in your brain, in your blood. I'll show you how to return to land before she pulls you underneath the waves."

"No."

"I warn you." He spoke softly but very clearly through the tide spilling around them and the gulls crying overhead. "You will find her price too high."

"She can have whatever she wants," Jonah said wearily. "Just tell me. Tell me where to find her. I'll give you what you want for that. Anything."

The familiar cold, mocking smile surfaced finally in Adam's eyes, like a shark fin cutting the calm surface of the sea. "You are so reckless with your promises, you humans. Don't you pay attention to your own tales?"

"I can't pay attention to anything," Jonah whispered. "I can't see words anymore. I can't even think. You offer me something I can't refuse, then you laugh at me because I can't refuse it. Just tell me where I can find her."

"You can find her where land touches sea, where lost ships founder against the siren's song, where the last light of the sun and the first light of the moon touch the sea." He dropped Jonah's hand, and added, as Jonah groped wildly for him, "Or you can find her at the Ancient Mariner Friday night. She'll be singing then."

He slid out of Jonah's grip like a fish. Jonah turned his face to the cliff. He heard the splash a moment later; the sea reached up to touch his cheek.

i

Megan, haunted by the dreams and shadows of memory cast up out of forgotten places in her brain, spent a frantic hour or two in Mike's bookstore after Jenny came back from lunch.

"They," she demanded of Mike. "Who are they? Where do they live?"

Mike wrapped his book around a thumb, sank his head onto one fist, and tapped a tooth meditatively with a forefinger. He removed the finger finally and said, "If you want names, names are in mythology."

"Mythology. But that's not real. This is real."

He gazed at her so long she wondered if he, too, were about to change into something unexpected: answer her with a sea lion's bark, or show her the webs between his fingers. He said finally, "There is the Kingdom of Ys, the beautiful, drowned cityΣ haunted by its princess, who sings to mortals and drags them down under the sea when they come to her. Someday, it is said, Ys will rise again. There is Sorcha, the sea kingdom of the selkies, the enchanted children of the king, who can live in the sea and on land, and who are tormented by their longing for both. There is Tir na n'Og, Land of the Forever Young, one of the Isles of the Blest, which appear out of the sea mists floating on the waves just long enough for mortals to see their unattainable richness and magic, before they sink back down beneath the waves. There is the Island of Glass, with its castles of light and crystal, that you might glimpse within the weaving strands of Òsunlight on the sea, if you don't look directly at it. There is the realm up north, ruled by Sedna, whose temper is terrible and whose looks can kill, who watches with her single eye over the mammals of the ocean. There is Fata Morgana, the dream palace made of clouds which appears in the first misty light of morning, or in the last light over the sea before night. But." He shrugged a little. "None of that will do you any good."

A couple of browsers, who had never heard him speak more than dollars and cents, gave him scattered applause among the shelves. Megan, entranced by glimpses of the hidden realms in Mike's head, pleaded, "Why not?"

"You said it. Mythology is what was real. What's real now is for you to see. For you to say. That's why it's nowhere in here." He opened his book. "But go ahead and look."

So she did, and found water kingdoms everywhere under the sea, but all safely bound between the lines of language, all belonging to someone else. She found the seals who walked ashore in human form and the sea goddess named Doris, who had fifty children, and the sirens who sang so sweetly on rocks that they lured sailors to their deaths in the sea. But the sailors were trapped in the amber of tales, safe and unchangeable. None walked around now, drunk on secret music; none felt pain or gave it. Jonah, she thought, and felt the nick at her heart of fear and betrayal. Would he wreck his boat on the rocks or could she rescue him? Did he want to be rescued? Would she bother? And the sorrow in Adam Fin's eyes was not a yearning for human love, but grief for something else. He had not filled her pockets with pearls, but with the broken pieces of the world she knew.

But what was his world? A glint of light in a wave? In a bottle? Or was it more accessible? She closed the books and went out to where the true sea blew spindrift at her glasses and flowed over her feet, drowning her footprints as she passed. Mike had found a piece of it; there must be other pieces she could puzzle together, as they might puzzle, trying to fit together a jump-rope handle and a vacuum-cleaner nozzle and a bicycle chain. This time she ignored her own world; she let the garbage lie, and the agates and even the perfect sand dollars. Her pockets empty, she looked for nameless things to put in them.

The long walk wearied her; her thoughts drifted, unmoored. The warm late afternoon light worked its odd magic on familiar things in her path. Her eye, persistent in its quest, transformed them. The sand dollar, whole and white as bone, was distinct as a moon on the wet sand; the world was upside down. Great ropy tangles of kelp with their dark, scaly leaves were mermaids, their thick golden hair coiled around them as they slept. Agates and sea glass shone like jewels; horses, white as foam, rode the waves, manes streaming behind them as they raced along the border between worlds, then vanished back into their own. Song drifted endlessly from the waves, luring, coaxing, pleading, in some forgotten language. The dead jellyfish had been a tiny, delicate floating kingdom of glass; the purple mussel shell a flake of dark castle wall; the white seal lying just beyond the surf was a man.

She stopped, seeing the seal again, long, pale, and graceful. And then Adam. He turned seal's eyes to look at her. And then they were sea eyes, foamy green. He was sunbathing. He was pale everywhere, sleek and muscled, a swimmer. He wore bathing trunks, but the way he looked at her, he might as well have worn nothing.

She swallowed. Light lay between them, a curl of water. She took a step back. He was on his feet

then, a movement too quick for the mortal eye. He stood in front of her, wordless, insistent, his skin speaking, luring, coaxing. His eyes promised knowledge, promised gentleness.

She drew breath, loosed it slowly. She put the back of her hand to her mouth, and took another step away from him. She whispered, "Jonah."

He spoke her name; a pearl dropped out of his mouth into his hand. He touched her then, took her hand, smiling gently. He laid the pearl on her palm and closed her fingers over it. Light or sea ran between them; when she blinked, he was gone.

The Ancient Mariner was crowded when Jonah walked into it on Friday. The musicians were still setting up. Whoops and crackles and other underwater noises came out of the sound system. In the dim light, faces looked unfamiliar, oddly shadowed. No one had the long dark hair he remembered. He went to the bar, ordered beer. He didn't recognize the bartender.

"Where's Sharon?"

The bartender, a slender, bearded young man with a shell in his ear, gave him a cheerful smile, but seemed not to hear his question. Jonah swallowed beer, feeling light-headed, edgy. He looked around more carefully. Faces crowded into the shadows, talking, laughing. She would not be laughing, he thought. Her face would be calm, mysterious as the moon, until she sang. But he did not see her.

He finished the beer quickly; the bronze fixtures along the bar gleamed with a mellower light. The bartender passed him another. A familiar gravelly voice caught his ear; he ducked behind his bottle, upending it.

He found someone at his elbow; he thought he recognized her, and then didn't. There were a number of strangers, friends of the band probably, from other little towns along the coast. Here and there, at the candlelit tables, was the well-dressed tourist, wearing a skirt, heels, a tie. The band had changed; instead of being Hellbent they were the Undertow. There seemed a lot of them, as they moved around the stage, and they all seemed to look alike. Jonah, finishing his second beer, decided that was a trick of the lighting.

Dory jostled along the bar, moored herself beside him. "So you've come," she said.

"Where is she?"

"She'll be here." She sipped her briny drink and surveyed herself in the bar mirror. She touched her wild hair approvingly, widened a crepey gray eye, then settled into her normal expression of mingled crankiness and amusement. "She's looking for Adam."

"Last I saw," he said sourly, "he was feeding my blood to the sharks."

She chuckled. "He has his ways." She touched her glass rim, licked salt off her finger. "He'll be back."

"I can't wait."

"He went looking for something, he said, along the tide line. Something he said you gave him."

"I didn't give him anything," Jonah said shortly, raising his empty bottle at the bartender.

"You gave him something. You must have. You wouldn't be here for free."

"Oh." He ran a hand over his face, felt the stubble on it with surprise. He caught a glimpse of his own face in the mirror. It seemed ghostly, unfamiliar, the hair too long and fiery, the face gaunt, chalky. Can't be mine, he thought. Dory was gazing at the face, too, curiously.

"What did you give him?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Whatever he wanted." He turned restively toward the stage. Lights flickered; something else flowed, glittered, just within the door beside the stage. He watched it, thoughtless, entranced. Dory's voice jarred him again.

"Don't you want to know?"

"What?"

"What you gave him?" He looked at her, wondering what she was talking about. She gave her rumbling, bitter chuckle. "What do you think he wanted from you? A fossil? A pair of earrings?"

He turned impatiently, seeking the glittering shadow. "What does it matter? What in my life is

worth anything to me anymore? Is that her? Is that her in the doorway?" He felt her: the undertow in his thoughts, in his blood. He didn't hear Dory's answer.

He didn't see anyone as he crossed the room, only the fine, star-shot shadow, shifting between dark green and black. The musicians, tuning, taping cable down, ignored him. He reached the door, stepped into the dark and heard the hollow, crashing boom of the tide.

Cool, briny wind blew through the passage; an invisible breaker, flooding the shadows, flicked seawater on his lips. The narrow strip of light from the open door slanted across a still, pale face, a single pearl in an earlobe, dark hair falling over a dark fall of glittering fabric spilling open above a foam-white breast.

He heard his heart pound. He made some noise, some movement; she lifted a hand, long and pale and as delicately jointed as coral.

"Not yet." Her voice, light, murmuring, was barely audible above the invisible tide. The hand moved out of the light; he felt it, touching his mouth. He lifted his hands to catch it, his lips parting as her finger traced them. Her hand slipped through his like water; in the light, he saw her eyes smile, an alien, luminous smile.

He swallowed, his throat parched, lips burning, as if he had drunk seawater. "I don't know your name," he whispered.

"My name is Nereis." A secret wave gathered and broke; she swayed a little as if it swirled around her; the glittering, tide-tugged, parted between her breasts. He didn't know he had lifted his own hand until he saw it in the light; his fingertips barely grazed cloth before she caught them.

"When?" he demanded, and didn't recognize his voice. "You call me and I try to find you, and you vanish, and now I've found you, you can touch me, but I can't touch you—" He felt her tongue slide between his clenched fingers, and his voice broke. He stumbled forward, brought himself up against the blank wall.

"Jonah." She spoke from where he had stood near the open door, her face in shadow now. "I am very old. Older than the little fossils you pick out of cliffs. Older than the cliffs themselves. And I am very dangerous."

He swallowed again, gazing at her, pushed against the wall as if by some churning onslaught of water. The water loosed him finally, pulled him off balance, a step toward her. He couldn't see her face, but he saw, where her hair was swept back, the pearl a shade paler than her earlobe, that would be small and hard and silken against his tongue. He closed his eyes against it, pleaded, "Why? Why did you come to me in that cave?"

"Because you heard my voice. I sang to you and you stood in the ancient seas and listened." He felt her fingers again, light and quick, a touch of spindrift against his chest, and then the tide rising, flowing around his thighs, idling a moment, soundless and full, before its strong, churning pull away from his body. "You listened," she said again, as he opened his mouth, drew breath, sagging against the wall. "And you love the forgotten sea. Jonah."

"Yes," he whispered.

"Do you want me?"

"Yes."

"Then you must find me."

He opened his eyes again. "I have found you."

"In your world," she said, "but you must find me in mine. I cannot stay long on land. I am too ancient, too tide-drawn. You must come to me. If you want me."

"I want you," he whispered, swaying in the invisible tide. "I want you at the oldest place under the sea. The place where fossils and time began. But how can I live under the sea? I'll drown, loving you. All through history, people have drowned, loving you." The tide, playing around him, ebbed slowly, pulling him into its long, powerful embrace; he fell to his knees at her feet. He gazed up at her, saw her face in shadow, and then in light as she bent suddenly. Her fingers tangled in his hair; she drew his head back, kissed his open mouth, and he felt her breath flowing into him like tide, full, relentless, endless, until he heard his own blood sing with her voice. Then the tide turned; he felt it drawing back around his face, his groping hands. It dropped him, receded into shadow, into silence. He lay stranded, beached on the floorboards, swallowing the pearl she had left in his mouth.



Memory burned his lips as he rose; he gripped the door a moment, blind. He made his way out as unobtrusively as possible, clinging to the shadows, looking at no one, until he found the bar and leaned on it. He lifted his eyes then, saw the room behind him in the mirror.

He stared at it senselessly. It was made of pearl, of glass, of light. Moonshells crawled across the floor; bubbles drifted,ü popped, spoke words. He turned abruptly. On a stage of crystal, the musicians played strands of light. Fish darted in and out of the strands. The musicians' hair drifted, full of colored snails, brilliant, rippling ribbons of sea slugs. Their faces were so translucent he could almost see the fine bones beneath the skin, as if they were related to the strange, luminous fish in the deep of the sea. Pearls floated from their mouths as they sang, clustered on the rocky ceiling above their heads. The listeners, with hair and beards of sea moss, foam, the gold secretions of pen shells, lifted hands drawn long and fine by endless currents, and sipped from mussel shells as blue-black as their eyes.

"What?" Jonah whispered; a bubble escaped him, joined the pearls along the cave roof. He felt a touch and whirled. Starfish clung to the bar; a fish swam under his nose. He felt his knees give, and clung to the bar, feeling sea life stir under his grip. Something rippled between his hands, a solitary, shell-less wanderer. He remembered it swimming in and out of Megan's hair: the little sea hare in her drawing.

He inhaled a great breath of water as easily as air. "Megan." Her name choked him, turned his chest to fire. Adam, polishing an abalone shell behind the bar, smiled.

"Welcome," he said softly, "to the belly of the whale."

## FIVE

Jonah had vanished.

Megan, white-faced and stunned, searched the town for him; no one had seen him. She went to the Ancient Mariner; no band, she was told, had played there recently. She tracked Hellbent down in a nearby town: they had never, she was told, had a female singer. No bodies clutching fossils had been dragged to shore by the tide. He was in love with someone; he had run away. That was obvious, she told herself, as she stared, numb and mute with shock, at the blank wall of his absence. Still she looked for some hint of where he had gone, some aberration of his life among his socks, something peculiar among his rocks, a message between the lines of the Compend he had left lying open on his stool in the shop. And even while she searched the obvious, the impossible fact of where he had gone lay stark and clear as the moon in the dark of her mind.

He had fallen in love with a mermaid and had gone to live in the sea.

He had, it seemed, taken all the mystery in the world along with him. She could find neither Adam Fin nor Dory. Even Mike had forgotten how to talk. When she asked about the Otherworld, the Land Beneath the Waves, he only grunted, his eyes on his book, and pointed a finger at the shelves. She spent days sketching, hoping that her pen would reveal some message of him, but the sea- told her nothing; her sketches remained stubbornly unmysterious.

So she changed them, sitting for long hours on the sand, drawing feverishly, desperately. She drew roads of light leading to palaces of cloud and glass rising into the morning mists. She drew underwater creatures: angelfish with legs and rippling wings and narrow, delicate fish faces; butterflyfish that flew in great clouds of color above the water; goatfish with slitted yellow eyes and slender, hooved legs that galloped along the sea floor, herded by the damselfish and her dogfish. She drew a seal with Adam's face; she drew his body with a seal's face. She drew Jonah, with his long red floating hair and his glasses, and a scaly mer-tail, sitting at the bottom of the sea on a giant clam, reading. She was crying long before she finished it; the lines of his body were starred with tears of sorrow that he had gone, tears of fury that he had left her for another woman, tears of helplessness because the sea showed her only its flat blank face and would not speak to her.

She left Jenny to run the shop, except at lunchtime. Jenny, worried over Megan's hollowed, white face, said, "He'd never have just left you, the store, everything. You should call the police."

"He left me," Megan said crossly, "for another woman."

"What other woman? You know all the women he knows. You are so close; why would he have left you for someone else?"

Megan, practicing at the register, which she loathed, banged the drawer shut. "Well, he did. Maybe he'll be back, maybe not. I'll just have to keep the store open until we run out of things to sell. Jonah handled all that."

"He'll be back," Jenny said, with her exasperating optimism. People, Megan decided dourly, existed in different worlds at the same time: the people who inhabited Jenny's world never ventured farther out to sea than the surf for a little fishing and if they were lured out of that world into someone else's less predictable world, they probably did come back. "Anyway, he'd never have left his fossils."

Megan's mouth tightened; a tear fell, in— spite of her, among the register keys. He vanished, she thought, into a drop of water. Into light. And Adam Fin knows where he is. And Dory knows. But they won't tell me. And I don't know why they took him. She said, punching keys, "He told me he was obsessed by another woman. Some singer. He said it didn't have anything to do with me. How he figured that, I don't know."

"Who is she?" Jenny asked, startled. "Where does she live?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me."

"Well," Jenny said practically after a moment, "he has all his money tied up in the store. He has to come back and deal with it. Don't you think?"

"I don't know." She folded her arms against the register, dropped her face against them. The register made a noise; the drawer sprang open against her ribs. "Don't hold your breath."

She walked on the beach later in the dark, dryeyed, pleading silently for a hook to fly out of nowhere and catch her by the hair. Or for Adam Fin to appear in her path. Maybe he would have taken me where Jonah is, she thought wearily, if I had wanted him. But I didn't want a mystery. I just want Jonah back, leaving rocks all over the place, and cooking for me, and criticizing my work. I want his bony body and his cobalt eyes behind his glasses, and his mouth nibbling the earrings out of my ears if I forget to take them off. She tripped over something and kicked it irritably into the surf. What could they want with him, anyway? He's crotchety, he sits around reading all the time, he complains about everything, and he hates meeting people. But he loves me, and he feels like smooth wood in my hands. And he loves my art, and he loves the sea.

Too much, apparently, she thought, and felt the sting of salt behind her eyes. What if he doesn't want to come back?

She sent another bit of something in her way flying into the waves, touched her glasses back up her nose, her eyes wide. He's human, she thought, not fish. Not whatever they are. He can't live in their world.

Seven years, the tales said. Seven years, and even then, some mortals did not want to return to the real world.

So, she thought, dry-eyed again, her hair wild in the wind, whipping across her mouth. I'll find him and ask him. I'll know, then. I'll know. But how?

She stopped, staring out at the vast, restless dark. If I find Adam, she thought, maybe we can bargain. If he wants me. But I don't think that's what he wants. I don't think that's what he wants at all. But maybe, when I see him, he'll tell me what he wants for Jonah. Or what she wants.

She.

A face sketched itself in Megan's mind: a model's face, with wide-set, sea green eyes, hair black as the sea on a moonless night, cheekbones that could cut. She shivered. She wrapped her arms around herself, felt the hollows between her ribs.

Or me. With my hands colored with washes, my glasses sliding down my nose, my big feet. I can't sing a note to save my life. Even if I do find him, will he want to come back? But if I don't find him, I'll never know. So I'll find him.

But how? The waves took up her question, curled it under them, withdrew on long sighs of how? She stood a long time listening, but they never answered.

Jonah sat against the figurehead of an ancient wreck. Her hair was green with moss, her smile was sweet, distant, the only thing visible in a blind, green face. He leaned his head between her breasts, his back against her fishy waist. She was the only mermaid he had seen down here; he found her smile wry and oddly comforting.

The wreck lay on a shelf of rock that plunged into shadow. Or it lay in a room so vast the ship seemed simply a piece of decor: a graceful pile of wormeaten wood, out of which a skeletal hand waved now and then. If he looked for it, he saw the structure of the room, great walls of pearl and watery light, windows of thin sheets of mother-of-pearl through which water moved like air. If he looked hard, he saw the people in the room, glints of light forming faces, shimmering garments. They took more human form to look at him, as if he were some kind of mirror; even then their faces, like living fossils, were disturbing. They were immortal, and as old as water; they could resemble what they wanted. They could wear periwinkles for eyes on a kelp-leaf face. When they took human faces, their beauty could be inhuman.

So far, only Adam had spoken to him. Others brought him things to eat and drink; what, exactly, he refused to guess. Everything tasted strange, briny, wet; he might have been eating jellyfish or sea slugs, for all he knew. Eating was one of the two preoccupations in the sea. If he looked straight into it, huddling close to the figurehead, he saw the lovely anemones turn into mouths surrounded by fingers with which they stung and guided their food. He watched starfish cling to clams, force them open little by little, suck out the helpless inhabitants from their homes. He saw the sea cucumber extend a sticky finger to dredge plankton from the sea floor; the great-eyed, luminous dragonfish jut out its spiky lower jaw to pin and take in prey larger than itself. He watched the squid rise up from the deep waters below the cliff, pass silently as a nightmare on its way to graze the warmer, livelier upper regions. He watched the sperm whale dive past him as silently to search for the leviathan that never showed itself above the dark; he watched sharks eat the whale, leaving him in a cloud of blood that he could taste. Nothing scented him, though; he left no more trace of himself in the water than if he had been a dream.

Sometimes he would find the entire sea mating around him. Then some undulation of a great fish's tail would bring him a memory of the curved, darkly glittering mass in the shadows of the cave. He would grow blind and deaf as the figurehead with desire, and find, when the urgency around him faded, only Adam's mocking face.

"Where can I find her?"

"She'll tell you where. She'll tell you how." He cracked an oyster between his fingers, drew out the pearl and ate it, amused at Jonah's expression. "Be patient. Here, only the fish hurry."

Jonah dropped his head back against the mossy breast. "Am I dead? In my world?"

"This is your world."

"You know what I mean."

"You're not dead. You are living in the great whale's eye. You have become something rich and strange." He tossed the oyster in the path of a passing starfish. "Strange, at any rate. Your eyes are haunted; there are little snails in your hair. You should have stayed with Megan."

"Megan." She was another life, the Otherworld of air and light.

"Remember Megan?"

"Of course I do," he said irritably.

"You vanished out of her life. She stands at the edge of the sea and mourns."

"She knows?" he said, so startled he nearly became aware of the water in his throat. "She knows I'm here? How could she possibly?"

"We gave her pieces; she put them together."

"But why?"

Adam shrugged a little. In the sea, he wore a sort of bodysuit of a glistening, fish-scale blue that covered everything and hid nothing. He looked, Jonah thought sourly, like something out of Action Comics: Aqua-Man, hero of the deep, capable of tying the giant squid into knots while processing oxygen out of water in his lungs to share with the beautiful, unconscious scientist with one foot

caught in a giant clam. Except for his eyes, which viewed Jonah with as much tenderness as a shark. "She'll tell you."

"Who? Megan?"

"My sister." He touched the figurehead lightly; for a moment he wore its sweet, human smile.

"She chose you." He pulled moss off the face, bared one worm-eaten eye.

"She said for me to find her, in her world. I'm here. She brought me. As if—as if she might have wanted me. I mean—<" He swallowed, touched his glasses, across which a minute snail was crawling. "Maybe all she wanted was another set of bones."

"No."

"I mean, what am I? Some longhaired, shortsighted booworm whose idea of a good time is picking brachiopods out of a cliff. And she—" He loosed the word again, on a long, slow whisper, trailing bubbles like tiny pearls that caught in the mermaid's moss. "She..." He stirred restively, blind with the memory of her kiss, of the swelling tide that had touched him everywhere. "How could she want me? She just brought me down here to torment me, the way she tormented me in my world."

"My sister never takes what she doesn't want. The sea changes itself at every touch of light, but it is never false."

"Then where is she? Is there another price to pay for her? What more can I pay than this?"

"She'll tell you," Adam said equivocally. "And you still owe me."

"I know," Jonah said indifferently. "But what have I got left?"

"Your ears. Your eyes." He flashed his teeth at Jonah's horror. "Time. Your fingers. How can you feel stone with no fingers? Your teeth. You have a lot that you don't seem to value. Your voice. Shall I take away your voice in return for my sister?"

"What," Jonah asked tersely, "do you really want?"

Adam pulled more moss from the wooden face, uncovered a pearl in its other eye. His face changed. Jonah, watching in astonishment, felt his own face melt into expression. He lifted one hand after a moment, caught what fell from Adam's eyes and floated down as pearls.

Maybe, Megan thought, standing on the cliff above the tide pools, I could get there by drowning.

The tide pools were appearing and disappearing under the rush and drag of water. Barnacles opened and sent out feathery legs to catch at food roiling over them. Anemones' graceful tendrils stunned the minute transparent animals tumbling past, who were themselves filtering the rich brine through nets of mucus in their mouths. The feeding frenzy, invisible to Megan's eye, yet vivid to her mind's eye from all the books she had been reading, made her wonder what Jonah ate. Sushi, she decided morosely. If I throw myself into the water, maybe they would rescue me, guide me into their world. Or maybe they would just let me drown.

Then she snatched at the word, remembering it from half-forgotten tales. Guide. I need a guide.

She sat down on the cliff, flung a pebble into the water instead of her body. What could possibly guide her from the wonderful yet predictable sea, where nothing was left uncounted, undissected, unexamined, and ultimately uneaten, to that world where the sea sang with a siren's voice and the wild breakers blowing spume changed into the white horses of the king? Something had led Jonah there, where his mermaid languished and blew bubbles and showed him, no doubt, how to make love to something whose appropriate parts resembled a tuna fish. But she walked, Megan remembered; she had legs when she walked on land.

She sighed, and tossed another pebble.

How had all this begun? she wondered. There was a time before the singer, and a time before Dory and before Adam Fin. When there was no magic, just Jonah and me living together, and the shop, and my drawings. Then one day, then once upon a time, then something happened....

The sea hare crawled into my drawing. The sea hare brought the magic.

She contemplated that, frowning. Follow a sea hare into the sea? It would be akin to following a slug through a forest. And she had found the sea hare in her drawing, not in the tide pool. She would

have to walk through that sea of paper and ink to follow it.

Gulls along the tide line began shrieking, bickering over something edible that had washed ashore. Burrowed beneath their feet, the clams siphoned water through holes in the sand, filtering out microscopic suppers. She and Jonah ate the clams, except when some pesticide dump contaminated them.

Then the plankton ate the pesticides, the clams ate the plankton, someone else ate the poisoned clams. So far, always someone else. Not, she remembered sadly, that it mattered anymore. Not to Jonah, who had been eaten by the sea.

Is he still alive? she wondered, chilled. Did they leave his bones somewhere so deep he'll become a fossil before he ever gets washed ashore? Jonah, lying in the dark abyss, slowly covered by a constant fall of sea debris... "No," she whispered, shaking hair out of her face, "they didn't take him to kill him." She thought of Adam, lying in the surf, watching her pull garbage out of her pockets, the look on his face as if he were the one dying....

She stood up restively, frustrated by so many pieces that didn't fit. Adam. Dory and her fishhook. The singer. She had never met the singer; she had spent five minutes with Dory; Adam she knew a little better.... She began to walk along the cliff, toward town. Adam had watched her draw. Adam had watched her recognize him as something more or less than human. Adam had stood in the tide, willing her to touch him, and then he had turned her name into a pearl. She had put the pearl in a little box with her grandmother's gold wedding band, a tiny perfect sand dollar no bigger than a nickel that Jonah had given her, a fossil shark tooth she had found, a dried rose from some forgotten dance, the opal-and-gold earring that Jonah hadn't eaten.

She began to walk a little faster. From the time after the coming of the sea hare, there were her two drawings, and there was Adam's jewelry. She hadn't looked at either for some time; for all she knew, the sea hare had crawled back out of the picture carrying all of Adam's things. If not, maybe there was some clue, somewhere. An inky arrow, a dotted line, a trail of earrings showing the way. Follow the yellow brick road, the path of the setting sun, take the road not taken....

At home, she checked her drawings first. The tide pool, matted but not yet framed, still held its unexpected visitor. Her hair still floated in the tide, tangled in Dory's hook. She went downstairs, into the shop, where Jenny was wrapping a necklace of moonstones for a customer. She went behind the counter, gazed down through the glass at the shelf where Adam's jewelry was displayed. Jenny turned to her as the customer left.

"He's selling very well," she commented. "Don't you think we should get a few more pieces? And we have some money for him he never picked up."

Megan, finding no messages in the gold spirals, the penguin pin of moonstone and onyx, made a noise. She straightened, her eyes still on the fine work. "I don't know where he is."

"He must have left a phone number."

"Not with me."

"An address?" Her white brows rose above her glasses. "He must have given Jonah some idea . . . Now where did Jonah put—" She opened a drawer or two, then lifted the phone and removed the address book beneath it. "What is his last name?"

"Fin." Megan slid her hands over her eyes, feeling a sudden urge to laugh. "Adam Fin."

Jenny ruffled pages. "Well, he's not under Fin. Maybe Adam?"

"I don't think even Jonah knew. He asked me once where Adam lived."

"He never left a number?"

"No." Her voice came out unexpectedly husky; she bent over the counter again, swallowing past the burn in her throat. "He didn't leave anything. Except these."

"Well," Jenny said again, blankly. "That's odd. He'll be back, sooner or later, to check, I'm sure. I've sold at least one thing every day. And someone said she'd think about the penguin pin. Someone bought the sea otter pin just yesterday—I told Jonah to take that. And the blue whale earrings got snapped up right away."

Megan, chin on her palm, swiveled to look at her. "What else?" she asked dully. "Do you remember?"

"Of course. I made a list. How else would we know what to pay him?"

"Oh."

Jenny smiled a little and produced it efficiently from the drawer beneath the register. "The sea turtle pin. The cats-on-fishhooks earrings. The bracelet of silver dolphins. The rabbit-moon earrings."

"Which?"

"The black rabbits running under the quarter moons."

"But I remember—" She moved abruptly; her elbow slid jarringly off the counter. "But Adam was wearing one when he first came."

Jenny shrugged. "He must like them. The gold-and-amethyst pendant—"

"Hare."

"What?"

She was staring at Jenny. "Hare. Not rabbit."

"Well," Jenny said tolerantly, "whichever." She went back to her list, while Megan, gazing at amethyst and moonstone through the glass, followed the trail of the sea hare into her life.

Jonah, left alone for a long time under the mermaid's smile, was driven finally, by her blind stare of pearl and wormwood, to leave her for something that could see him. He moved easily, he found, through an element that seemed to shift constantly between air and shadow, water and light. Sometimes he saw clearly how he wandered, along with whale and mackerel and jellyfish, through rooms whose walls were living coral, with ceilings of pearl and gold, or walls of giant kelp rising open to the light, jeweled fish darting among the leaves. Occasionally figures passed him, so vague he barely recognized the sudden sketch of color, the swirl of water, until he felt their eyes, their attention. Once or twice, he followed more familiar forms, humans of a dreamlike beauty, long hair bound with pearls and cowrie shells, slender feet disturbing not a grain of sand. These he would have expected, if he had ever thought about such a place. They would melt away eventually, reappear with hands of scallop shells and jet black eyes that never blinked. Sometimes they followed him; he would feel their eyes and turn, and find something part kelp, part luminous, and always with those intense, unblinking eyes. They never spoke. Once, compelled to turn, he found a tiny purple animal rippling after him, leaving a glistening trail that hardened into mother-of-pearl. He recognized the sea hare. Something that looked like a fat gray cucumber flowed up behind it and ate it. He heard Adam's laughter.

He began seeing odd human things: bits of time frozen on the ocean floor. Some he expected: the pirate's chest sagging open, spilling coins and diamonds; the marble head of a warrior gazing pensively at a brain coral; a gold goblet; a steel buckler lost in some sea battle; cannonballs, like the eggs of some huge sea turtle, scattered in the sand. These lay where they had fallen, in the midst of gardens blown of glass, in hallways, on tables, in fountains that spilled air instead of water. In one of the gardens, where colorless roses glistened like ice around him, and he walked a path of darkly gleaming fish scales, he heard the faint, gentle song that haunted him.

He stopped. It came from everywhere. The light changed, or his vision became unearthly for a moment: The shining towers of light and gold, the gardens spun of glass, the windows of every fish's color, were of such loveliness he knew he had stepped beyond his world. A pearl fell from his eye. And then the vision was gone, leaving him alone, neither of one world or another. But the song, stealing like rapture into his blood, was unchanged, and it beckoned now from one fixed place in the sea.

He moved again, more quickly. The sea itself lured him: A leaf traced his lips with its fine edge as he pushed through a stand of kelp; others clung briefly, intimately, like hands. He found a path of soft white sand or crushed pearl beyond the kelp; the song, flowing on its own warm current, grew stronger. He followed the path, tripped over a wooden mast with a rotting sail, then climbed over a cargo of burst oak barrels. Within the slats of one barrel, he saw the mad, bald, "old-man's face of an eel; it chilled him, but did not notice him. Something nibbled delicately at his ear: a tiny fish grazing as through the inner whorls of a shell. The path vanished under a huge tangle of cable; he

climbed it, and then what looked like a jungle of plumbing pipes, scarcely noticing what he picked his way over, intent only on finding the path again. He found it, meandering like the song into a garden whose walls of coral and anemone and stone rose higher than his head, lining the path. Pale anemones opened slowly as he passed, showing him their hungry mouths. The path veered sharply, ended at a wall. He stopped; the song beckoned on the other side. He retraced his steps, turned a corner, another, and was stopped again, by a solid mass of crimson coral. The song, stronger now, came from beyond it. He stood a moment, bewildered, while small fish darted through his floating hair. And then he recognized the maze.

He gave a cry of frustration and longing; all around him coral polyps snapped shut. But the singing, deep, languorous, soothed him, coaxed him to turn, try again, turn down the next branch, where the singer would be, pale as pearl, sleek and naked as a fish, her long black hair jeweled with bright anemone; there, she would be, not there, but there, not this turning, but that, or most certainly that. She would be there, singing, her long fingers gently sliding over, under an oyster, feeling for its pearl.

He reached the end, found not a mermaid, but a little ivory door set in a vast black wall that cut across the center of the maze. There were no more choices to make, there was only the closed door, and the singing on the other side of the wall. He opened it, resigned to finding the other half of the maze. The singing drifted over him, through him, murmuring, enticing.

What lay before him stunned him.

He closed the door after a long time, stood with his face against it, trembling. Still the singer called to him, the haunting voice of the siren, with her hair of drifting kelp and her icy fingers of foam: Come to me. Come. I am all the beauty in the sea, leave your mortal world and come....

He felt someone beside him, knew without looking who it was. He whispered, "That's death in there."

Adam leaned beside the door, his own face carved of ivory, as colorless and hard. "You see."

She was still singing, still pulling at his heart, his bones. "Why? Why there?"

"She is waiting for you," Adam said shortly. "That is where she chooses to wait. You followed her between earth and water to find her. You wanted her that badly."

He stared at the door, as if he could see through it across the dark and terrible waste, to the luminous tower at its heart. "I can't." He swallowed; there was a pearl caught in his throat, pearls trapped behind his eyes. "I can't fight my way across that."

"Then find your own way back to your world," Adam said. His eyes were deadly as the eel's eyes; his voice colder than the abyss. "This is her price: You will find her in that tower. This is mine: If you refuse, you will stay here forever, between earth and water, neither of one world or another; you will never die, and you will never cease to hear her sing.

"Choose."

## SIX

Megan gazed into the tide pool, looking for the sea hare. She had brought her drawing pad, to try to coax it back into the world. The anemones were still there; the starfish had crawled away; the chiton, nibbling pink algae, had turned pinker. She dipped her hand into the pool, stirred the bottom. Nothing popped to the surface; nothing shifted itself beneath the sand into her hand. She dried her hand on her knee, leaning over to watch the water still. It reflected the blank morning mists, the shadow of her face.

She whispered, "Adam."

And he was there, looking up at her, through her dark reflection.

She jerked back, with a cry. He lifted his hand above the surface of the water, seized her wrist. He didn't pull her, just held her: an arm coming out of a circle of rocks holding eight inches of water. She felt like a shrimp grabbed by an anemone.

He said nothing; his face, colorless, expressionless, beautiful, seemed hardly human. He wore

something that looked like fish scales; a tiny sand dollar, like the one in her box, clung to his hair. A basket starfish, its intricate arms weaving and branching, spread itself across his chest.

She was shaking with shock, with his sudden unfamiliarity. She found her voice finally. "I was — I'm looking for Jonah." Still he said nothing, his face underwater rippling a little, as the wind brushed the pool. She heard her heart pound, in his silence. "Can you help me?"

He spoke finally. "There is a price."

She nodded, hardly hearing, so relieved that he still spoke, and in a language she understood. "I'll pay it. I just want Jonah bac]k."

"He does not know his own way back."

She nodded again, jerkily. "So. Then I'll come for him." She paused, her eyes on the unblinking, sea green eyes. "But will he—will he come with me?"

She got no answer for a moment. Then, in a swift, graceful seal's movement, he had slid out of the pool to the rocks beside her, so effortlessly she never felt his weight, just the altered position of his hand. He seemed camouflaged against the rocks, almost invisible; his scaly garment had changed color to suit his background.

"I don't know," he said. He shrugged lightly. "He's drifting like a ghost between worlds, neither here nor there, enchanted by a song, afraid to reach the singer. When he cries, he cries pearls; sea mosses drift against him and cling. He won't die there, but it's not much of a life."

Her eyes were huge behind her glasses. She opened her mouth; words stuck, burning. "Pearls ?"

"It's pointless, crying tears in the sea."

"Jonah—Jonah doesn't cry."

He looked at her; something behind his eyes— ice, a smile—made her shift. "He learned."

She drew breath through her open mouth. She said somberly, her eyes on the line where the pale mists touched the sea, "I'd better go and get him."

"If you want him. Why would you? He left you."

"You took him," she said, and glanced at his fingers on her wrist. "You wanted him. I don't know why. That little sea hare in my drawing— that was you. You make the rules."

"Still," he answered softly, "he may not want to return I can't promise that he will."

"Well." She withheld tears stubbornly, turning her face to let the wind hide it beneath her hair. "What if he does want to come back and he doesn't know how? I can't just let him float around like a kelp leaf, dropping pearls and wishing he had something to read."

He smiled slightly. "You still love him? In spite of her ?"

"Ma,ybe, maybe not. I don't know. But I can't leave him there with nothing human to talk to." She lifted her head, shook hair out of her face. "How do I get down there? How did he find his way down?"

"He was seduced by the sea."

She blinked. Then she met his eyes and felt the blood burn in her face. "That's how."

"That's one way."

"Well." She licked her lips. "What are the other ways ?"

His smile deepened. "I could take you there. Why don't you let me? It is the simplest way. Like falling into a dream. You take me in, I take you in. Simple."

"I know, but—"

"Why? Jonah was unfaithful to you. He can't expect you to be faithful to him."

"Yes, but—"

"Am I so unattractive to you?"

"You're beautiful, but you frighten me. Jonah, I know. And you'd make it easy for me to get into your world, but how easy would it be for me to get back? Nobody told Jonah how to get back."

He made a soft sound, and loosed her wrist finally. "Shrewd. You want to get there and back again."

"With Jonah."

"If he chooses. It will cost you," he reminded her.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"



"Yes, whatever it will cost."

"Not so shrewd."

"No," she sighed, "but I don't know how to bargain for Jonah. I don't know how to say, you can have this for him, but not this. I don't know what he's not worth because right now he's costing me everything. So take what's left. What do you want? "

"I'll tell you when you find me again."

"Where—" She reached out then, to hold him, but he was sliding back down into the tide pool. "Wait! Adam!" She plunged her hand in after him, caught his hair; it turned into sea moss and left a tiny sand dollar in her fingers. She flung it in despair back into the pool. "Adam!"

Three bubbles surfaced, floated a moment, and then popped, one after another, sending words into the air. "Draw," they said, "the stairs."

So she opened her drawing pad and sat there, drawing the stairs she remembered from her dream. They began in the tide, each ebbing wave revealing another step, and then another. As she drew, the mists overhead blew inland and sunlight streaked the water. She made the steps out of pearls and kelp leaf, coral, scallop shells, the first step visible where the first wave broke, and the others sloping down, while the waves scrolled above them. As they descended into deep water, she drew kelp forests and seals and perch, sharks, the great winged rays, the whales that swam along her path. On the top step, she drew the sea hare.

She looked up then, and saw the light glistening, breaking, glistening on something that the waves, stroke by stroke, were excavating like a lost city from the sand. She dropped paper and pen and ran, leaping off the rocks into the shallow surf, splashing through the tide, deeper and deeper until she reached the first white step. She looked down and saw them unfolding endlessly down, so far that the creatures of the deep swam, as she had drawn them, in vast cliffs of water along the stairs. She went down one step, a second, a third. Just before the walls broke and flooded together over her head, she saw the gold towers shining at the bottom of the sea.

Jonah, left alone, stayed for a long time beside the door, sitting on the pearl path, his ear to the ivory, as close as he could get to the ancient and beautiful face of the singer. Twice, he rose and opened the door. Twice, he closed it, sat back down, unable to enter, unable to turn away from the woman for whom he had swallowed the sea. Finally he rose, drifted through the coral maze as if he were following the halting, incoherent pattern of his thoughts. He turned a corner at random and found Dory unexpectedly, pruning coral with a parrotfish.

She wore a long, flowing pale green garment; but for the fish in her hand, she might have been some Victorian dowager tidying her garden. Her wild gray hair was being tidied by tinier fish, who picked the bubbles and dead plankton out of it as she worked. She glanced at Jonah before he could back out; he passed her, his shoulders hunched a little, against the hooked barbel of her derision.

But she said only, "You're not the first."

He stopped. "The first what?"

"The first to look at that and turn away." She gestured with the fish. "Sit."

How did, on a ledge of dead coral, grateful beyond words that she deigned to speak. He asked uneasily, "What happened to the others?"

"Adam keeps his word. They've faded by now, overgrown with mosses, barnacles. They haunt the pilings of rotting piers; they fling themselves into every tide, hoping to be cast ashore."

"Did anyone—did anyone ever try to cross the waste? "

She scratched her head with the parrotfish, thinking back. "A few," she said, "but that was before it got so bad."

"Before—"

"The waste changes, grows like some living, malignant thing."

"What happened to them?"

"I don't know. They never came back out, that's what I do know. Whether they reached Nereis or not, they never returned through the maze."

He watched her shift the parrotfish along a branch of coral. The graceful, flowing tendrils of the open polyps turned dark, in his mind's eye: a long fall of shadow down a shell white face, the single, glistening pearl. She had watched the first creature secrete the first shell, wrapping itself in delicate armor; she had watched it settle in the mud, the preserved form and structure; millions of years later, she had watched Jonah searching for it in cliffs formed after she was born. His back was to her; she sang, so that he would turn and face the living sea. "But why?" he whispered desperately, seeing the waste again. "Why?"

Dory shrugged a little. "She's untamed, like the sea. No one questions her; no one questions the spindrift, or the shark's tooth. It's there, that's all, to be dealt with or not. My other daughters—they've done their share of mischief, following ships, singing sailors overboard on a whim. Some mortals lived to tell about it; others didn't. Some even coaxed my children ashore, for a time. But Nereis—she makes her own rules. What she wants, she takes, for her reasons, and there's always a reason, for she rules the sea. She taught the great whales how to sing; she rides the dolphins as they leap. She set the spirals in the narwhal's first horn, turning and turning with her hands. She is the restless eye of the sea; all its living things swim through her mind. She took you for a reason."

"Why?" His voice had no sound.

"Ask her." He did not answer; she shrugged again, shifting the parrotfish. "Then what will you do? Drift between earth and sea until you become a shadow, a ghost, a reflection of yourself, always wanting her and always afraid, mourning what you might have had, but never certain exactly what it was you lost, because you never had the courage to stare that darkness down?"

"It's more than dark. And it will take more than courage. I never had much to begin with. Or I never had to think about it."

"Adam told you your future: the open door or the closed door. There is nothing for you out here. No hope. No chance of escape. He won't bargain with you. He knows all the faces of the sea, and all her moods He takes for himself where he can, when he wants He teases humans and sets them adrift in their own desires; sometimes he sees them safely back to shore. But, serving Nereis, he is implacable. She sets her terms; he won't oppose her and he won't help you."

"No mercy."

"As much," she murmured obscurely, "as you give her."

He stirred himself to ask, then didn't. Mercy, like courage, was one of those nebulous words contingent on action; he preferred going through life without needing to use them. He sat silently, hunched over himself, feeling his hair already drifting like moss. The siren song melted through him again, dark, husky, tender; he closed his eyes, felt the singer's hands, the wild, roiling embrace of the sea, the pearl that had slid between her lips into his mouth. It's simple, the song said. Just open the door and enter and come to me. I'm here in the tower, waiting for you. The rest is unimportant. Shadows. Dreams. Ignore them. I am the only reality. Nothing can keep you from me. I am the Queen of the Sea, and I am all the beauty in the sea, and more beautiful than any tale. Come to me. Come.

He drew breath; pearls slid down his face. Dory glanced at him, a quick, sidelong question. He said, "After all, I never thought I could breathe water, either. I've already done one impossible thing."

Dory nodded vehemently, disturbing the little fish in her hair. "Yes."

"I'll die in there."

"Possibly."

"But there's an end to dying, in there. There's no end out here. Just that song in me producing an inexhaustible supply of pearls. And Adam's pitiless eyes."

"They are pitiless, aren't they?"

"His laughter's worse."

"Worse. Much worse."

"And I might not die."

"No."

"And if I don't die, I'll see her face instead of his."

"Much more preferable."

"I remember her eyes, the first time I saw her sing. In that noisy, smoky bar. She met my eyes and I felt like I'd swallowed a lightning bolt. Did you ever feel like that?"

"A hundred times."

"Even if I die, even if she's cruel enough just to lure me in there to watch me be eaten, at least the song will stop."

"Is it so terrible?"

"Oh, yes." He felt the pearls brush down his face again. Dory turned; he met her eyes and let her see the new pearls forming. "Anything that beautiful is terrible. Because it's outside of you. It's not you. You'll do anything to make it part of you. You'd eat it, drown in it, kill it, let it kill you. Anything to stop it from not being you." He rose. "Even this."

"Wait," Dory said quickly. She collected the pearls he had wept, put them in his pocket. "To remind you," she said obscurely. He said nothing, waited, his eyes on the wall beyond the maze, until her busy hands found the last pearl, and she let him go.

Megan reached the bottom of the stairway into the sea. The steps vanished, she had noticed some time back, one by one as she left them behind her. The ocean flowed tumultuously around her, behind her, overhead, but it never touched her. In this world she had entered, the ocean was the dream. The delicate walls and towers shimmering in the timeless golden light of a gentle summer afternoon were more substantial than the school of mackerel overhead. Was it Ys? she wondered. Or was it Tir na n'Og, Land of the Forever Young? Or were all these just human dreams, and this the land beneath the sea that had no human name? Or maybe, she thought uneasily, it was simply what she expected, and the truth lay beyond her eyesight, beyond human imagining.

The last step vanished; she stood on a path of moonstones that led to the closed gate of the palace. The gate and walls were of crystal and glass, outlined in gold. Within, she could see a garden blown of glass: roses, hedgerows, stately trees whose great ridged leaves resembled kelp. She saw no one.

There was a glass bell beside the gate, she saw as she came closer. A little glass hammer hung beside it. She wondered, as she lifted the hammer, if the entire world of glass would shatter around her when she struck the bell, to reveal the wildness behind its pristine face. Not even the bell cracked, but the deep sound that came from it, reverberating through the palace, seemed to shake even the light.

The gate opened immediately, on its own accord, or by invisible hands. Megan stepped into the garden. She waited. No one came. What is this? she thought. This isn't Adam's world. This is like my drawings. This is some story out of a book. Where is the man who slithered up through a tide pool like a seal, with a starfish riding on his chest?

She said aloud, tentatively, "Adam?" No one answered but the trees, their glass leaves ringing like small bells.

She wandered through the garden, saw glass sea anemones among the windflowers; both moved gently to unseen currents. There were glass benches here and there among the trees, and statues of animals with fishtails: a mer-lion, a mer-peacock, a mer-swan, a mermaid. She looked closely at the mermaid. Its hair coiled over its shoulder like flowing honey; its brows slanted over wide-set eyes; the icy contours of cheekbone and jaw were seal-sleek and beautiful. Megan's glasses misted suddenly. She touched them, swallowing, and forced herself to move.

Maybe, she thought, all this is just a way to cushion the fact that Jonah wants to stay. A consolation present for Megan. She saw a door into the palace in the distance, the color of pale coral, limned in gold. As she neared, it opened.

She stepped into a vast hall. Soft corals grew in pots, fanned gently by air or water. A grove of giant kelp stretched from floor to ceiling in one corner. Light from stained-glass windows drenched it; the colors danced like fish among the leaves. There was a wainscoting of white scallop shells along the walls; the shells were taller than she. Above them, more beasts frolicked in the sea: mer-unicorns, merdragons, mer-wolves, mer-elephants, even, Megan saw with astonishment, a mer-sphinx. Looking more closely at a mer-dragon, she realized it was alive: The walls were coral and all

the vivid sea animals formed of coral polyps, pulsing gently to invisible tides.

Am I in air or water? she wondered. She spoke Adam's name again, watching for a bubble to form in the air. The name only dwindled in the silence.

A door opened across the room, inviting her. She didn't argue. Someone was thinking all of this, but why and how were beyond her speculation. The door led her up a spiral staircase. The tiles lining the steps were black, dark blue, and white, with tiny scallop shells at their corners. Colors changed; the lines in them opened and closed as if to the flow of water. There was a tile missing on one step. She knew, before she studied it, that a piece of one corner would be still embedded in the step.

Maybe this is Mike's palace, she thought. What he dreamed up, around the tile, when he thought about it.

The door at the top of the stairs opened to a bedchamber. It was a tiny tower room, with a bed and a chest, and windows that looked out over other gardens, other towers. She couldn't see beyond the palace; the light was too bright. The bed was carved of oxblood coral; ropes of kelp hung in a canopy over it. The chest was a giant clam. It opened as she looked at it, revealed a dark, shimmering, close-fitting dress of fish scale and black pearl. It weighed nothing in her hands. Beneath it was, she decided finally, a net made of jellyfish tendrils. Beneath that was a cloak made out of starfish. Beneath that was a glowing ball of glass filled with water and tiny, luminous lanternfish. Beside that was a trident as long as her arm. It was made of bone and its three points were barbed.

She touched a point, uneasy again. I can ignore all this, she thought, and tried to close the clamshell. It would not close. Nor would the chamber door open, no matter how she tugged.

"Fine," she muttered finally, dourly. "Fine." She pulled her clothes off, tugged the scaly garment over her head. It had a light, papery feel, and it glittered silver-dark. The black pearls at sleeve and hem weighted it. Shoes had fallen out of orbit when she unfolded it; reluctantly she discarded her Reeboks.

Shod in thin fish-scale slippers, she felt suddenly vulnerable. What, she wondered, am I supposed to do with a trident while I'm practically barefoot? To placate the clamshell, she tossed the cloak and the net over her arm. When she picked up lantern and weapon, the clam began to close.

The chamber door opened.

She went back down the stairs. A different door opened; she entered another huge airy room with a long table in the center of it. A single chair fashioned of mother-of-pearl stood at one end of the table. As she looked at it uncertainly, she smelled clam chowder.

She pleaded, "Adam, I don't want lunch, I want Jonah."

But silent, invisible servants entered, carrying a formidable array of dishware and flatware; it arranged itself with precision in front of the chair. Chowder was ladled into a clamshell; steamed scallops appeared on a scallop shell; boiled lobster was served in its own shell on a bed of tiny shrimp. Her chair shifted back, waited for her.

She felt a moment's revulsion, as if she were being served fillet of merman's tail. But the smell of the chowder made her feel hollow. Everything eats and is eaten, she thought. I'd eat this at home. Except the lobster; we can never afford lobster. She sat down tentatively, ate a scallop. Nothing happened. She picked up one of three spoons, dipped into the chowder. Her goblets were filled: white wine, champagne, water. Somewhere above her, music began to play softly.

This, she thought after a while, when the lobster was a litter of shell and she was finishing the champagne, is what they do to the condemned. Feed you all your favorite things, then send you out to die.

She lowered her glass, and found a merman sitting on the other end of the table.

She jumped, splashing herself, before she recognized Adam. It wasn't so much the long, graceful, darkly glittering tail that disguised him, as his expression. He seemed remote, as he had in the tide pool: a wild, beautiful, unpredictable creature shaped by water and tidal forces, ruled by nothing human. She was surprised that he didn't speak in bubbles, or in the language of whales.

He said, "The dress and the starfish cloak are camouflage. You'll need the lantern; sometimes the water is dark. The net and the trident may come in handy; I don't know. No one has ever used them before."

"For what?" she whispered.

"You want Jonah. For whatever reasons. You must ask the Queen of the Sea for permission to take him back to your world. You will find her in her tower, singing to him."

"Where—" Her voice jumped.

He looked behind him, at a little ivory door that had just unlatched itself and begun to open.

"Through there. If you must have him. If he wants you."

She tossed back the champagne and rose. "Come with me," she pleaded suddenly, glimpsing the darkness behind the door. "Adam." He didn't respond. Perhaps, she thought hopelessly, he had discarded his name along with his humanity. She bundled everything into the net. She touched her glasses straight, looking at him uncertainly, then walked without looking at him into the dark beyond the door.

Jonah stood in the ivory doorway, looking out over a wasteland.

It reminded him of videos of a war zone at night, flashes of light revealing an indecipherable landscape, or of some dim, barren planet that was a constant open sore of volcanic activity. It was a sullen, mutant sea around the beautiful tower, and it seemed to have created its own crazed life. Dark, bulky scavengers patrolled the waters; their skeletons, like those of the tiny fish in regions light could not reach, were luminous. Figures that looked almost human, glowing eerie, phosphorescent colors that might have seeped out of rotting chemical barrels, prowled through the debris at the bottom.

There were great, nightmarish piles of it, junk that cascaded in sudden avalanches to resculpt the shape of the waste. Ghostly jellyfish trailing endless tentacles bobbed like underwater torches around the distant black hillocks of debris that rose between Jonah and the tower. A step sideways would have hidden it from him, but not its gentle light, nor the mermaid's voice.

He realized that the prowling, phosphorescent figures were turning faces in his direction, scenting him as nothing else did in the sea. He ducked, moving as slowly as everything else in the strange, motionless water, as if it were heavier than the flowing sea beyond the door, or slightly viscous. He crawled, a bottom fish, hiding behind debris, behind dead coral colonies, within stunted, pallid kelp that grew no higher than his head. Once he saw eyes, a face drifting at him out of the murk. It was only a sad-eyed manatee. Its front flippers had been mangled; its back was badly scarred. It moved past him slowly, using its tail, to nose at some pallid sea grass. Things crept through the debris around him, showing a claw now and then, a glassy carapace over bright organs. Once the tentacles of a massive, glowing jellyfish touched a huge, upraised claw. In the electric flash, the scavenger was illuminated. It was longer than Jonah.

Some vast slanted wall appeared in front of him as he rounded a pile; it hid the tower. He recognized it finally, from old World War II movies: a sunken vessel lying on its side, crusted with gigantic mussels. It seemed safer to drift over it than go around; he clung close to it, guiding himself up across the deck from mussel to mussel. He peered over the top, saw other huge old scuttled ships like toys on the sea bottom. Liquid seeped slowly, constantly from their holds, turning the mussels vivid colors; whatever had been buried inside them wasn't staying put. Jellyfish swimming through the seepage occasionally sparked flashes along their tentacles. One spark shimmered back down the seepage into the hold near him. He heard a muffled explosion. Mussels bounced off the side of the hulk, followed by a stream of black liquid.

The mermaid's song, low and gentle across the terrible waste, coaxed him; he gazed at her tower awhile, delicate and pale in the distance, ringed by a moat of empty water. Finally he pulled himself down the side of the ship. The ships lay end to end in a jagged line; he found only more debris in front of him. He crouched under the keel, watching for movement, then slowly crept forward. He found a huge turtle lying on its back, little more than an empty shell but for its head and the plastic bag over it. He shook the shell; the fragments floated away. A dark shadow looming overhead snapped up the head in its wrapper. Jonah dove under the shell. But the shadow had lost interest in food; it thrashed away, drawing the attention of crabs hidden around Jonah. He huddled under the

shell until the shadow finally stopped writhing and drifted to the bottom. The crabs moved then, shifting out of the debris, rising out of the sand; one crawled out of an old bathtub. Jonah, turned turtle on all fours, snuck away under the shell while the crabs fed.

He saw a pale, webbed foot and froze, clinging to the shell. Other mottled feet stalked past him on both sides. He felt a thump on the shell and waited in terror, for the kick that would wrench the shell from his grasp and leave him as defenseless as the turtle. But the ghostly mer-demons passed him silently. He moved finally, crawling over a lead pipe that must have bounced off the turtle's shell.

Another enormous shadow passed overhead, sending a plaintive moan reverberating through the water. Only an explosion within one of the sunken hulks answered it, as a passing jellyfish ignited something volatile. That silenced the whale briefly; Jonah heard the siren's voice again, light, drifting, soothing, and he wondered for a moment which of them she sang to. The whale answered her, and then passed on, silent again, a solitary Ancient Mariner searching for its kind.

Moving closer to the tower from garbage heap to garbage heap in his undignified scuttle, he began to hear the song more clearly. Sometimes he thought he understood a word, though the language she sang was older than the human voice. It enraptured him, her closeness; her voice teased his attention from the dangers of his journey; it seemed a caress of praise, of pride at his courage. I'm coming, he told her, picking his way past what looked like a demolished building tossed into the sea. He dodged pipes sticking crazily out of lumps of concrete and rounded a toilet standing upright with a baby crab's eyes peering over the rim. I'm coming.... He saw the glistening rain of tentacles sweeping toward him half a second before they hit.

He froze in horror. They struck; light flashed down them, hit the turtle shell, and then his face. He flinched, trying to scream, and nearly inhaled a tentacle. They kept coming, dropping down around him, surrounding the turtle shell. He cowered beneath it; pale ribbons massed against his face. Something bounced against the shell and rolled into the pile of tentacles. He tried to crawl; the tentacles had tangled around the shell. He shrugged the shell away finally, started to rise, and slipped into the massive body of the jellyfish.

It was dead. He stood up, staring at it, picking tentacles away from his body. It had been alive, charged, when it hit him. But he had never felt the shock. The jellyfish, it seemed, had not been so fortunate. Then he felt the shock of illumination throughout his body.

It touched me and died, he thought. I killed it.

He stared at it, then lifted his head at a movement, and found the eerie waste guardians gathering around him. He tensed, searching wildly for escape. But they came so far and no farther, just stood, scenting him, their blurred faces rippling with undecipherable expressions.

They backed away from him slowly, left him to his kill.

He gazed after them, bewildered; they glanced back at him now and then as they scattered, disappeared behind the debris. For a moment, his astonishment overwhelmed even the siren's song.

They're afraid of me. I wonder why.

Then the mermaid's song whispered through him again, and he pushed blindly through the ruined sea toward its heart.

## SEVEN

Megan walked into a sea of dreams.

It was very dark at first. The light from her living lantern revealed a great forest of mer-trees, the tall, gently swaying trees of glass she had seen in the garden, though these had fish-scale bark and leaves of kelp. Fish, shining like jewels in the dark, browsed among the leaves. She stopped there, laid her bundle on the sea bottom and drew out the starfish cloak. She put it on, trying to remember what ate starfish. Something slow-moving, she hoped, and small.

She picked up the net again, and the trident of bone. The lantern, caught in a current, or unbalanced by some inner tumult, rolled away from her through the trees. She followed in a slow-

motion sprint' the long gown flowing, the starfish a glowing, undulating wave behind her. The lantern was always ahead of her groping fingers. She had almost caught up with it when a mer-lion leaped out from between the trees and roared.

The roar was a splash of light. Its tail was gold, its mane adorned with beads of tiny cowrie shells. Its teeth were shark's teeth, huge, primitive, irregular. She hiccuped a bubble and dove under the starfish. After a while she lifted a corner of the cloak. The sea was dark again; the lantern had stopped moving. Still huddled, she crawled closer to it. It stayed still. She gripped it tightly and stood up.

She walked into a storm of minute, glowing things as intricately formed as snowflakes. They whirled around her, a blizzard of light, then swarmed away. Something else flowed after them, leaving an impression on her mind's eye of a flock of startled mer-ravens, with black wings and scaly tails. She stood still, uneasy in the quiet water, waiting. A great mer-unicorn bounded through the kelp trees, moon white, with a narwhal's spiral horn and a fish's tail that propelled it up through the water as its forefeet touched bottom. A small trident sped after it, touched its flank. Megan dropped again, but not before she had seen the wild hunt that chased the hind: the riders blowing conches, the pack of dogfish, the seahorses striving under the urging of the intent, beautiful, merciless hunters fitting tridents of fishbone into their bows. She hid, a mound of starfish, while the seahorses, their manes and tails elegant masses of colored filament, bounded through the water above her head.

The sand settled; the water was finally still again. She rose, her eyes wide, her hair drifting around her, catching the interest of the tiny jewelfish, who darted through it as if it were seaweed. She went on through the forest. Now and then she caught the flash of gaudy wings as parrotfish and cardinalfish swam into her light, but nothing more disturbing. Finally she reached the edge of the forest and the water began to brighten.

She stood among the trees, looking out over the edge of a cliff. Far below she could see the land beneath the waves. It was not made of glass, but of pearl and coral and pirate's gold. Its banners were flying fish, its gate was the bone of some great fish's mouth. The road leading into the gate was paved with scallop shells. She could see where it ended, but not where it began, nor how she could get from the top of the cliff to the city below.

I could float down, she thought. Just step over and drop.

But what rules prevailed in that mer-world she was uncertain. Things mirrored the earth too closely, and even covered with starfish, she was reluctant to fling herself over a sheer wall of stone. Besides, what might they make of her, the avid hunters with their bows and tridents, seeing her drift down, a trespasser without a tail? They might make target practice of her.

She pondered, kneeling at the cliff's edge, watching tiny movements, flickers of color within the city walls.

Is Jonah in there? she wondered, her eyes on a tower taller than the rest, made out of moon shells, with round windows like portholes ringed the top. Adam said he was wandering around with snails in his hair, crying pearls. Is he with the sea queen now? Did he weep enough pearls?

She stilled her thoughts, leaned over the cliff edge, straining to catch a note or two of the song that had lured Jonah out of the world. But she only heard the distant voices of whales.

She rose after a while, walked slowly along the cliff edge, watching the road below for the hunters. The road was swallowed by forest before she saw them return on it. She wandered on. The cliff began to slope; the kelp trees thinned; bushes of coral grew among them: sea fans, mushroom coral, fire coral, oxblood coral, angel's skin. She saw an angelfish overhead, its tail a pearly white, its wings of delicate, feathery tentacles. Its face resembled Adam's. She stopped, wanting to speak to it, but its eyes were closed, as if it prayed.

She closed her own eyes, briefly. What is this world? she thought. Where am I really?

When she opened her eyes, she saw a flock of goatfish gamboling along the cliff, pausing to eat eelgrass and sea cucumbers. She waited for the damselfish who herded them, but the goatfish, black and amber-eyed, were apparently wild. They cast slitted glances at her starfish cloak, but did not come close. As they browsed through the coral, they startled butterflyfish, who swarmed up and darted toward the kelp forest.

She continued along the slope. It leveled for a while, into a meadow of grasses and sea lilies, but it was high above the floor where the city stood, and still she saw no way down. Beyond the meadow stood another dark kelp forest. Leaning out over the cliff as far as she dared, she saw the wall of rock stretch into the distance, with not a hint of road winding down from it. She had left the city behind. All she could see of it was the high tower made of pearl; the rest was hidden by forest, and by the misty shadow of the cliff.

Now what? she wondered, sighing. Turning, she saw a rabbitfish on the meadow grass.

Its back to her, it nibbled something between its paws, balanced on its green mer-tail. She felt something in her grow focused, very still. For this, she had the net. For this, she carried the trident. To pin down the changing sea and look into its eye to see what it truly saw. She crept up behind it so quietly she thought it must hear her stillness. She held out the net, weighted it with her body, and fell with it over the sea hare.

It struggled beneath her; she held it tight, and felt it change. She clung fast, spreading the net with her hands, gripping the tail between her knees. It stopped moving then. She felt a face against her face.

She angled the trident swiftly against his throat. She sat up carefully, keeping him tangled in the net: the merman caught by the fisher, the hare caught by the hunter. She said, "You must be worth something. A wish or two, at least."

For a moment he was silent, looking at her out of alien eyes. Then he surrendered a human smile of acquiescence and amusement. "Only if you drag me out of the sea into your boat and threaten to cast me ashore."

"Can you make an exception?" She was smiling now, for he had never really left her alone in the sea: He had given her the net and himself to catch.

"Perhaps. For you. What do you wish, mortal maid?"

"I wish, merman, for you to guide me through your sea."

His smile faded; he considered her wish. He lifted a finger through the net, shifted the trident from his throat. "You don't have much to bargain with. And you already owe me."

"I'll pay you" later. This sea is full of human words."

"So humans made it."

"I want to see your sea. Out of your eyes. I want to see what you are made of, what you are behind all your faces."

"Why?"

"Because," she said softly, "you came into my drawing for a reason, and you haven't told me what it is. All you've given me is what I've read about, what I've drawn."

He was silent again; nothing of the smile lingered. "It costs," he warned her. "More than you can imagine. It may cost you your heart."

She held his eyes. "I'll pay it," she said recklessly, not sure any longer what her heart was worth in the sea. He shook off her net and rose.

"Come."

Jonah stood in a snowfall of plankton.

He assumed it was plankton, vaguely recalling pictures in Megan's books. Microscopic plants and animals with intricate, transparent structures: They looked like lilies, or space stations, or roulette wheels radiating strands of light. Alive they floated on the waves; dead they drifted down until they were eaten, or until they reached the sea bottom. These were drifting, but either he had shrunk or they were huge as cars. Some had legs, some had chambered shells, some carried a Catherine wheel of filaments. They bounced down around Jonah, stirring up storms of sand and mud. Caught in an open ring between the tower and the ships and piles of debris, he dodged them wildly. There seemed no end to the fall. He crawled finally beneath what looked like an egg, heaving one bulky, liquid side up, as if he were trying to lift a water bed. Whatever had been growing in it was dead, chewed apart by something dark and cloying inside.



After a long time the drift came to an end. He crawled out. The crabs were beginning to move among the plankton; their great claws mowed a ragged path through it. Jonah, finding it easier to dodge them, shifted to let them pass, then followed after them. Others came up behind him, surprising him, but they seemed uninterested. Withdrawing their eyestalks, clicking claws at him, they scuttled away sideways. He moved among them, barely noticing their cleanup operation, only that they were clearing his way to the tower, which always, he noticed, was farther than it looked, as if perspective changed constantly in that fluid world. He was working his way toward it patiently when the water became very dark.

All around him the scavengers began to scatter, crawling over one another in their haste. Jonah, staring upward, found the night falling into the sea. He clambered over the scavengers, sliding on their slick shells, riding them until they bumped him off. Finally the darkness hit. A solid wave of sand roiled over him, blinding him, throwing him down, nearly burying him. Sounds too loud to hear reverberated through him. The sand kept coming, churned up, throwing him when he tried to stand. Something else sagged over him. Trying to flee the sandstorm, he tangled in it and fell. Struggling, he only drew it more tightly around him.

A net, he realized finally, as cord pulled across his face. He was caught in a net along with some writhing, bellowing sea animal who was flailing on top of layers of crushed crab and monstrous plankton. He could see little in the gritty water, but he guessed from the sound and the fury that he was caught in a net with one of the great whales. He clung to the net to keep it from cutting into his face, and rode out the storm until the wild thrashing eased a little. Trying to grope his way out, he hit something sharp, hard, at his back. He felt along it, recognized it finally as a shard of squashed crab shell. He loosened it, and, bringing his arm up as far as he could in the tight embrace of the net, he began to saw himself free.

By the time he finished, the whale only shook itself from time to time, thrashed a fluke, stirred up sand; he escaped while the sand was settling. He had to stumble, half-blind, through cloudy water, tripping against busy crabs and decaying plankton, before he saw the tower again.

He could make out details by then. The tower walls spiraled with grooves like a narwhal's horn; a single window glowed, darkly translucent, over an open doorway. Tears stung his eyes at the sight of the open door. He caught them, put them in his pocket, as Dory had done. He sat down to rest a moment, gazing at it, hearing the mournful cries of the whale mingling with the mermaid's song. Nothing moved between him and the tower except a strand or three of sea grass. The waste was empty, littered with broken shell. He rose, pulled onward, tide-drawn, driven, like a turtle to its island, a whale to its mating ground, a salmon to the river of its birth.

By the time he reached the tower door, he barely knew what he was: a man swallowed by the sea, who had swallowed the sea. The light, sweet voice drew him up winding stairs inlaid with starfish; walking on them, he hardly knew if they were alive or dead. He had no idea, by this time, which he was, nor did he care, as long as he saw the dark glittering at the top of the stairs, and the long dark hair, and the pale, slender hands reaching out to take him to the peaceful place on the other side of mystery.

He heard a muffled thud; water spiraling up the stairs pushed against him, jostled him up the last few steps. The door below had shut, he thought, and then reached out to cling to the doorposts at the end of the stairs as the water began to swirl. Or was it the tower revolving, as if it were caught in some vast whirlpool? It shook him loose, flung him across the little chamber at the top of the tower. He hung against the wall, his back to it, his eyes closed, unable to move in the force of the spin. He felt something dragged out of him by the roots, and a hollow where his heart had been.

The song had stopped.

"Jonah."

He looked into the center of the maelstrom, into the mermaid's eyes.

On the cliff, the merman disappeared.

Then the cliff beneath Megan disappeared. The city below peeled away like wrapping paper; all

the human language—mer-lion and goatfish—left the sea. Megan, losing track of her own shape as the water jerked her fourteen ways, pulled hair away from her eyes, looked frantically for Adam. He was beside her, in a streak of light. And then he was gone. And then there again, his eyes of water and light, his skin foam, sand, light. Around her the sea lilies curled into balls, and the giant kelp bowed to the wild currents.

"What is it?" she cried. "What's happening?"

He didn't answer. She felt an arm drawing her upward; the rest of him was barely a reflection in the water. A school of anchovy darted by, turned molten silver, flashed away the other direction. A kelp tore loose from its mooring, a swirl of leaves and yellow bladders that clung to Megan, laid rubbery leaves against her face. She pushed at it, found a cloud of bubbles where Adam's face should have been.

"Adam?"

They broke the surface. He turned to foam then; spindrift shaped him in the wind, then fell back into the waves. She heard a sound as if the world was being sucked down a drain.

She saw it then: the end of the world. It was a gigantic maelstrom, the eye of the sea, a vast, revolving hurricane of water that whirled around its own deep funnel. She made a noise on an indrawn breath that scraped her throat.

"Adam! "

He found his mouth finally. "It's my sister."

"What do you mean, it's your sister? That's your sister? "

He nodded. The sea around him turned green as his eyes; for a moment all she could see of him was his eyes, and the heave of green water. Then foam shaped his mouth again. "One of her faces."

She stared at it, horrified, fascinated. Then she heard the maelstrom's singing, deep, wild, beautiful, and she felt her heart turn to ice. "Adam!" She tried to grip him, realized that her own hands were foam. She was drawn and shaped like light across the surface of the sea. Her mind remembered a body; the need, answered a moment later, found her fingers again, white as foam, but solid. "The same sister? Jonah's singer?"

He developed an ear and a profile; she had a disconcerting feeling that the other half of his face was missing. The profile nodded. Its mouth was set, unamused. "The sea queen. In your words."

Her voice vanished; somehow he heard her anyway. "Where is Jonah?"

"With her, I would guess."

She stared at the edge of the world again. Gulls, bits of blown white paper, circled above, as if the deadly current were reflected in the wind. Cold tears of brine struck her face. "Is he dead?"

"I don't think that's what she had in mind."

Her voice tore out of her then, shrieking. "Well, what did she have in mind?"

"Let's find out."

"Where? "

"Down there," he said simply. Kelp rope circled her wrist, tugged, and she scattered water and foam and seaweed hair. She felt the relentless tide of the maelstrom.

Fish rode the maelstrom with them: tuna, whales, octopus. She saw the great white shark so close she looked for her reflection in its eye. It was cold, dead space, that eye, a piece of the abysmal sea. Schools of small fish, clouds of shrimp blew past them like leaves. Soft coral, starfish, sea urchins, an old boat hatch, a smiling figurehead, whatever wasn't nailed down to the bottom of the sea spun in the current, dredged up to be sucked down again. She felt the current quicken as they grew closer to the funnel. An improbably long, graceful, pearly head followed by an interminable length of legs slid past her for some time: a shy giant hurried out of the deepest waters.

She heard her voice again, rising against the mermaid's voice. "Why him? Why Jonah? He always had his face in a book or a cliff."

"He turned his back to the sea," Adam answered, out of some configuration of light.

"So? Why didn't she take somebody off one of those floating factory ships that can take an entire whale apart and package it before lunch?"

"Maybe she tried. Maybe they could never hear her singing."

Megan was silent. They were spinning near the edge of the funnel; she could see one part of its

narrowing wall, things flashing through it too fast to recognize. She said, "I'm going to die."

"No."

"I can't survive that."

"Give me your wrist," he said, and wrapped a kelp-leaf hand around it. They skimmed the edge of the mermaid's song. And then they dropped, whirling so fast down one long note that Megan could barely separate water from light, or her body from her terror, except for the kelp wrapped around what she assumed was a piece of her.

The world drained into a dark and silent sea.

Megan, drifting, hit bottom and found her body again. She raised her head, stared through the murky waters. Something crawled here; something thrashed there; a dozen derelict ships bled swampgas colors into the water. She felt a touch, found herself eye to eye with a giant crab. Its shell was so thin she could see through it.

She whispered, "Adam." The crab veered nervously. There were people in the distance, naked, faceless, their skin glowing odd, sickly colors. They seemed to sense her, but, like the crab, shifted uneasily away from her attention, withdrew behind the

oddly shaped mounds rising all around them. Something crawling near the top of one of the mounds near her lost its hold, came down in a wild slide of incongruous and familiar shapes. She watched, motionless, incredulous, as a Formica table with no legs careened to a halt against what looked like an enormous flattened bubble with a broken shell inside. She almost recognized it, decided not to. Coral skeletons, hard and bare, shimmered ghostly white in the eerie light; the stunted kelp, the few blades of sea grass alive in the deadly water, were colorless as the coral.

Her throat constricted; she heard herself make a little whimpering noise of fear and bewilderment. "What is this place? What is this terrible place? Where did all the bright fish go? Where are all the colors?"

Nothing answered her but the great thrashing shadow, a deep, tuneless mourning that sounded to her ears like the last voice left in the sea. Turning toward the only sound, she saw the tower beyond it, a delicate spiraling thing, luminous and perfect, all the beauty in the waste.

She heard the mermaid's song.

She felt her eyes grow wide, aching and heavy with pearls. It was the pure voice of the nautilus shell, the sound of limpid water wandering from chamber to glistening chamber. It sang to Jonah, that voice, lovely, husky, haunted with storm and spindrift, but quiet now, the ebb tide, or the full tide idling a moment, at rest before it turned, dragging hard across the sand, flooding back into foam. It was singing to Jonah now, from within the tower, where he listened, in that private world, safe from the dark and ruined sea around him, safe from any human eyes.

The pearls slid down her face at last; she felt the dark, lifeless waters seep into her heart, into her blood. She brushed the pearls away; more fell. Jonah was inside the narwhal's horn, among the glinting lights inside the bottle. He had locked her out, left her stranded in a dead sea with only a dying whale to sing to her. She heard her own voice making human noises of grief and desolation. She couldn't move except to brush at pearls, which drifted slowly to her feet. She would root herself there, she thought, become a skeleton of coral, because there was no path out of this waste; she would carry it in her heart

wherever she went, on land or in sea, so it did not matter anymore what she did, where she went....

The whale stopped singing.

The heartbeats of silence were so unexpected that she lifted her head, shaking away pearls, to stare at it. It moved again, finally, and made its ratcheting noise, but more weakly. She watched it shudder from fins to flukes, and then call again. There was no blood, that she could see, no reason for its agony. But something made it cry sorrow, or perhaps for help in that bleak water. She moved finally toward it, feeling that if it died of sorrow so would she; alone in this waste, she would dwindle into something pallid and stunted and unrecognizable. Around her, the crabs were feeding on what looked like enormous, decaying plankton. Some circled the whale. Its flukes, driving down hard, scattered them; so did Megan, moving among them on what felt like a layer of broken glass. They were shell fragments, she realized: the broken crabs the whale had crushed in its thrashing. And

then she saw the net.

One corner was torn; the rest was tangled securely around the whale, tightening as it struggled. The whale was huge and had teeth; that much she could make out in the dim sea. It raised clouds of sand as it struggled, but, as far as she could tell, not blood. She edged past its flukes, her hands sliding over broken shell. She nicked her finger on a piece, lifted her head sharply, still, as if her silence could hide what a drop of blood revealed of her presence in the water. But no mutant, glowing shark nosed her out. She tugged at the net; it might as well have been wrapped around a submarine. She picked among the shell fragments, found a razor-edged shard, and began to cut.

The net, rotten with brine, parted easily. She walked along the whale's side, slicing her hand sometimes, and the whale's scarred back at other times, feeling its dull roaring vibrating through her bones. She still dropped pearls, but she didn't notice them; instead of making the scratchy, reedy sound that had come out of her at first, she whispered, hardly hearing herself, "This can't be real. Is it the future? Where will you go if I free you? Is there any sea left beyond this place? It's so dark. So terrible. So dark . . ."~

She climbed the net up to the whale's back, to cut above its thrashing flippers. It heaved, feeling the net give; she lost her balance and fell, caught herself in the net. She worked her way back up, kept cutting, clinging to one side of the tearing net so that when the whale broke loose, she might be thrown free. It lay quietly for a few moments. It's dead, she thought starkly. It finally ran out of air. And then it arched up, tearing at the net, a frenzy that made her lose everything—balance, shell—except her hold of the net. It tore further under her weight. She hung on, her face pushed against the whale's side, not daring to fall so near its heavy, rolling body. And then she fell, down into a roil of collapsing net.

There was something softer than crab shell under her. She opened her eyes and found Adam, head and flukes still caught in the net, his face pearl white, his skin grazed by her shell. He opened his eyes. She stared at him, pearls falling silently down her face. He lifted his hand to catch one. And then, as his arms slid gently around her, and she eased against him, she knew that she had lost her heart to the sea.

Jonah stood inside the mermaid's song.

It was wild and bitter and desolate, a song without words, of spindrift whipped from heaving water washed with colors not even Megan would use; of the cries of battered seals, wind-battered birds screaming over great schools of fish, blind and still, sliding like leaves across the surface of the storm; of the voices of whales and porpoises as they fled the relentless stalking shadows above them that tracked their every move. Brine lashed his eyes, his mouth; kelp torn from the sea bottom tangled around his hands; barnacles and starfish struck him, clung. An empty moon shell, tumbled through the water, caught painfully over his ear; even in its pale, lovely hollows he heard the mermaid's storm.

He had no idea where he was; now and then he glimpsed, behind a wash of green and foam, the tower's white wall curving around him, and knew he still stood in the mermaid's eye. And then the sea would change around him, so that he saw it from the fierce and hungry gull's eye, as it swooped over the sickly waters, or he would be tossed among the frantic whales, buffeted by their voices. Every fish he saw, dead and alive, seemed to have the mermaid's eyes.

He began to hear her speak, perhaps out of the moon shell, or perhaps she stood in front of him, in the tower, while the storm raged through his head.

"You saw what had killed me. You could have buried it before it killed again."

A òsea turtle slowly sank through the turbulent waters, a plastic bag twisted around its head. He could not see its eyes, but he knew they would be hers. He whispered to it, "I'm sorry."

"You saw what mangled me."

The manatee, with its torn flippers, pushed by every wild current, struggled for balance with its tail. He saw the crosshatched scars of propeller blades on its back. It looked at him as it passed, not with the patient, wistful gaze he remembered, but with the sea's icy foam-washed green.

"I'm sorry." His hands were clasped in front of him, bound with kelp; he bowed his head, a prisoner of the storm, the moon shell still caught against one ear. A barnacle clung to one lens in his glasses; he dared not lift a finger to move it.

"You gave the manatee a human face for centuries, and yet when you finally see its true face, you have no pity for it."

"It was your face we gave it," he whispered, remembering her from another life.

She answered sharply, "Its face is my face. And this was my song."

He heard the whale again, crying for help as it struggled in the net. His head sank; the sound reverberated through the moon shell. "I'm sorry. I didn't think. All I thought—all I heard—you put such beauty in front of me, you told me to find you; you were all I could see."

"Yes! All!" He glimpsed a curve of wall behind a wave, and then a dark glittering whirling away from him. He watched it numbly until it changed into a fish's receding tail. "The dead coral, the crabs with their shells grown thin and fragile in those waters, the poisoned grasses and kelp, the jellyfish that died because you kill everything you touch—I am all that you see here, and I am that dark and barren sea."

"Yes." He cleared his throat, found his voice again. "I'm sorry. It was—I didn't recognize you."

"No. Nor did you recognize yourself reflected in the waste."

"How could I? I wasn't looking for myself. I was only looking for you." He saw her face briefly then, foam white and wild, and beautiful as the secret, inward turnings of a shell. The image turned to foam and swirled away. "Your singing was so beautiful," he said helplessly. "It made me blind, it made me stupid. You made me hunger for you, and told me how to reach you. How could I have stopped to listen to any other song? I'm no different from all the ancient sailors who flung themselves into the sea, following your song, and drowned. I didn't drown, and I did find you, but I didn't know that I was never what you wanted."

"Yes, you are." Her fierceness startled him. "You loved me. You loved my past. But how else could I draw your eyes to my living and endangered sea except to show you what you expected to see? You saw this face. You felt these hands. These you wanted."

"Want," he said without hope. He shook his head a little; the barnacle floated free. "I'm only human."

"You must be more than human."

"How?"

"You must be part of me. You owe me. I want your life."

He swallowed nothing, felt the blood beat in the back of his throat. For a turtle? he wondered blankly. For a whale's life? He moved finally, reached up to touch his glasses. "Yes," he said with an effort. "Alive down here? Or do you just want me dead?"

She was silent; finally he saw all of her, the pearls in her sea-tossed hair, the flowing, tide-swirled garment that constantly shifted, revealing, concealing. He watched, mute, while she considered. "If I let you choose," she said at last, "which would you choose? A life in this waste, cleaning my sea with a shell, or death?"

He started to speak, stopped. She watched him, her face as hard and cold as Adam's, while the sea showed him a quarter moon of breast, a slender knee. "Was what I did that terrible?" he asked helplessly. "Just following your song? We have always loved the sea. We leave ourselves in you constantly. A sunken galleon, an amphora, a billion barrels of oil, our bones. We can't separate ourselves from you. You still flow in our blood. You feed us. You rage at us, wreck our cities, drown our children, and still we come past safety to stand at the edge of your fury to watch all your deadly beauty. Without you, we will die."

"You are killing me."

"Then we will die. And I will," he laddered on a breath, "here, now, if you want. Or I will clean up the waste with a snail shell if you promise me—"

"I will not bargain."

"No. But I can ask. If you will sing to me. The way you sang in the cave. As if the world had begun in that place, and I was listening to the first song ever heard. As long as I can listen to you, I would choose to live."

Something happened to her face, and to his: he felt it, a tear that was not a pearl, and saw on her face the faint suggestion that it was not carved of stone. He began to hear the song again, faint, mingling with the currents within the moon shell. He met her eyes, saw the storm in them, as ancient and as new as tide, as her song, as all her intricate faces. He whispered, "You choose my fate. It seems fair. We have shown you yours."

"Yes," she said, and turned her head, as at the touch of an unexpected current moving through the sad, dark waters.

Megan walked into the chamber.

## EIGHT

Her eyes were red, her hair was full of pearls, she wore gleaming fish scales and thin slippers of scale. She cast an eye at Jonah almost as cold as the mermaid's; her glance snagged on the moon shell, on the kelp rope around his wrists. She tried to turn away from him, then saw the expression in his own eyes. A tear fell from him, and then a pearl. He whispered, stunned, "Megan?"

She stopped. He saw her swallow, saw the red deepen around her eyes. Then she shook her hair over her face, and turned away from him to the sea queen.

She had vanished, leaving only a dozen bright butterflyfish that had been clinging to her hair startling through the water. Jonah said again, "Megan?"

She folded her arms tightly, showed him a white, set profile, and then three quarters of her face. Then she showed him her full face, for nothing about him had the look she expected, of a man fed oysters and pearls from the sea queen's fingers, who could barely remember the unenchanted world. "You look awful," she said abruptly. "You look as though you drowned. You're growing moss in your beard. You're growing a beard."

"I should have used a razor clam," he said weakly, feeling human tears sting again. "You look beautiful. You should always wear pearls in your hair."

"They're tears," she said stonily, and twitched behind her hair again. He watched her, wanting her familiar thin, secretive face, the blue-gray eyes, lovely and easily startled, behind her glasses. She came out finally, frowning at the kelp.

"What's that for? And why are you wearing that shell on your ear?"

He lifted his hands, removed it finally. "There was a storm—"

Her eyes widened a little. "I know. I saw it. Adam said it was her doing it. She." Her hands tightened a little on her arms. "Your mermaid."

"Adam."

"He showed me how to get down here."

He blinked, aware suddenly of some sharkshadow of danger. "He did." Her eyes challenged him; he drew breath, asked anyway, "How did you get here?"

"I walked," she said stiffly.

"What do you mean, you walked?"

"I drew the stairs into the sea and walked down them. Adam told me to do it that way."

"In return for what?" he demanded. "He doesn't hand out things for free."

"You have some nerve asking. Walking is not how you got down here."

He was silent, remembering: a kiss, a pearl. "No," he said softly. "I followed the siren's song. I'm sorry."

"For what? That you followed it? Or for me?"

"I couldn't help it," he pleaded. "That's why it's called a siren's song."

She was silent then, feeling the blood gather again behind her eyes. She whispered finally, "I know. I heard it."

"You—"

"Out there. In that terrible sea. I was out there, alone, and you were in the white tower with the sea queen singing to you, and you didn't know I was out there, and I knew you wouldn't have cared."

"Oh, Megan." He held out his hands, trailing kelp leaves and yellow bladders. "Look at me! What does this look like?"

"Something kinky," she muttered darkly. But she frowned at him uncertainly, more puzzled now than angry. "If—" she said finally, "if it wasn't for that, then what? What did she want you for? Didn't you make love to her? Isn't that what mermaids do? They drag you under, into the magic sea, and trap you there, if they don't kill you first." Her face smoothed suddenly, froze; she took a step toward him. "Jonah?"

"Ye-s. That's pretty much how it goes."

"Wait—" She stared at him, breathing quickly. "Wait. She trapped you in this tower? She can't want to kill you. That doesn't make sense. Adam said—"

"Adam," he said between his teeth.

"He said I had to ask permission from the sea queen to take you back with me. If I still want you. He wouldn't have said that unless there were a way."

"Do you?"

"What? "

"Still want me?"

"Oh, Jonah, I'm here. What do you think?"

For an instant, he was uncertain. The shadow loomed overhead, turned toward him with sleek, deadly grace. Then it swam out of eyesight. He bowed his head, said bleakly, "I don't think she'll let me go. I've promised her—whatever life I have left."

She put her hands over her mouth. "No," she whispered.

"That sea out there." He paused, swallowed, still staring at his hands. "I didn't recognize her."

"What? "

"She—there were things I could have done. Should have done. Things I should have realized. She brought me down here to see, and I couldn't see anything at all, only her. I hardly even heard the whale, and it nearly fell on top of me. I just wanted it to be quiet so that I could hear her song again. Did you see it out there? The whale?"

She nodded jerkily. She was crying suddenly, noiselessly, her eyes wide behind her glasses, her mouth still hidden behind her hands. "Yes. I saw it."

"She's very angry with me. That was her song, too, she said. The whale's song. I just—" He shook his head slightly, dislodging a tiny snail. "I just wasn't listening. I wasn't seeing. All I could see was this tower. All I could hear was her voice. So." He drew a long breath, looked at her finally. "You might have made a trip for nothing." He paused; she still gazed at him wordlessly, weeping tears from one eye, pearls from the other. He added, "But thank you," fixing her in his memory one last time: her long pale floating hair, her lean body, mysterious beneath its dark shimmer of fish scale. "It was more than I deserved. Considering."

"Oh, Jonah!" She had crossed the distance between them suddenly. "Why didn't you help the damn whale?" Her fists pounded at him a moment. "It wasn't that hard!" She stopped beating him, and pushed herself against him, her arms around him tightly, her face against his neck. "She can't keep you. It's not fair. Maybe there's some way—" She drew back abruptly, tugged impatiently at the kelp around his wrists, unweaving the long golden ropes, while he stared, his face still, at the top of her head. "Maybe if I talk to her. Or Adam does. He told me to come here and ask, so I'll ask—Where is she, anyway?"

"What do you mean," he asked slowly, "it wasn't that hard?"

"What?"

"About the whale. You said it about the whale."

"Oh. I just used a piece of broken crab shell. It cut like a knife. And there . . ." Her voice faltered oddly. "And it wasn't—it wasn't a real whale. I mean, it was until I freed it. And then it changed."

"Into what?" he whispered. She lifted her head after a long silence, met his eyes.

"Adam."

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he saw Adam standing beside his sister.

They did look alike, he realized numbly. Some of Adam's wildness shaped her beauty; some of her ceaseless, desperate love for her realm shaped his. Nereis put her hand on Adam's shoulder, said to him as the butterflyfish darted back into the tendrils of her hair, "You did well. Far better than I did."

"You sang far too well," he said gently. Megan, startled, had turned in Jonah's hold. For a moment, her eyes clung to Adam, until he gave her a smile, bittersweet and without malice, that amazed Jonah. Then her eyes moved to his sister.

Staring at the ancient, sea-formed face, she said, "Oh," soundlessly; the word, caught in a round bubble, floated upward. She shifted closer to Jonah. "You're not," she said shakily to Nereis, "at all what I thought you would be. I thought you would be more human. If I had—if I had known—I would never have dared come for him."

"If I had known him better," Nereis said, "I would have sung to you instead." The sharpness in her voice sent a tremor through the water; the butterflyfish swarmed and flashed uneasily.

Megan felt the tremor pass through Jonah. She drew breath, said helplessly, "I think I've bargained away everything I own to Adam. But if I have anything left—anything worth Jonah's life—it's yours. Adam told me I could ask you to free him. If you would let him return with me. If he wants to come. If you will free him. I'll give you what you want."

"Why?" Jonah whispered. "Why, Megan? I vanished out of your life to follow a singer. A song. Why did you come for me? Why did you bother?"

"You were part of a puzzle," she said without looking at him. "The sea came into my drawings, it walked into your store, it flooded into my life and it took me like it took you—I wanted to know why. And. Because. I missed you." She looked at him finally; her voice softened. "I missed you. I thought you might be missing the world. In tales, people do."

"In and out of tales," he said starkly, "people die in the sea. I won't let you sacrifice anything more for me. I've already promised my life to the sea. I won't bargain away that promise."

"That," the sea queen sighed, "is the first sign of hope you have given me. I want both your lives." Adam glanced at his sister swiftly; she read his thoughts. "No. She is not for you. She is for me."

His mouth tightened a little. "You're sending them back."

"How else can they help me?"

"Can I bargain with you?"

"No. You are far too subject to whim to make any human happy. Unless you want me to give you up, send you with them to live and die among humans."

He opened his mouth to answer, then hesitated. Megan was stunned by the expression on his face; so, it seemed, was the sea queen. Jonah's hand closed suddenly on Megan's shoulder. They said, the three of them, before Adam chose, "No."

He blinked, as if some chasm had opened and then vanished again in front of him. He looked reproachfully at Megan. She said, her eyes stinging in the brine, "You already have my heart. You'll forget me long before I forget you."

"Perhaps," he said softly, "you are right. But watch for me anyway in your drawings. I have a very long memory."

"And you also will leave your heart in the sea," the sea queen said to Jonah. "You will return to land, but your eyes and thoughts and your life belong to me. I am dying. You saw th

at. For the rest of your life, you will stay within the sound of my voice, the sound of the changing tide. Your life is linked to mine. As I die, so will you; as I become stronger, so will you. You must help us both. For so long I watched you caring about the lost, forgotten life of the sea, when I was young and all life came from me. I sang to you because I need you to see me as I am now. You must find ways in your world to help me. I am no stronger than the most minute life in the sea. If you kill that, I begin to die. The smallest thing you can do to help me will give me strength to live. My song will be in your blood, in your dreams, in your past and future. If my life is short, so will yours be. When my voice stops, so will your heart, for I hold your heart in mine for the rest of our lives."

Jonah bowed his head. He heard her song again, sweet, haunting, within the sound of the tide; beneath it, within it, he heard his own heartbeat. He whispered, "You hold all of our hearts in your heart."

Water shaped itself against him; he felt her, the intimate tide, her song flooding around him until he could no longer stand. His mouth filled with her; she caught his swaying body, dragged him deep into foam and brine, a churning rush of water that slid over him, under him, searched him for buried treasure and fought him for his bones, and cast him finally, with a wild plunge and roil of



froth, piecemeal on the sand, where he lay with his lips to the, receding tide. Megan, borne ashore on a silken wave of foam, felt its pale fingers everywhere before it loosed her reluctantly to land.

She rolled onto her back, heard the seagulls cry. She felt Jonah's hand groping, touching hers. After a wave or two, she slid her fingers into his; their hands locked. After another breath or three, she opened her eyes to the cool purple and gold of the setting sun.

Jonah raised himself on one elbow, put his arm around her, gathered her as close as he could, until only the most persistent waters came between them. Something cold touched his mouth; he stirred finally, opened his eyes.

A black rabbit running under a quarter moon of silver hung from her ear. She heard his breath still, and raised her face blurrily. Salt was drying on her glasses; he had lost his. She pulled hers off, dropped them in the sand, and saw his eyes, turned seaward then, haunted, troubled, as if he were losing some great treasure beneath the waves, and would bail out the sea with a scallop shell to save it.

The expression faded; he crossed the distance, came back to her. She kissed him swiftly, knowing he would be possessed, he would leave her like that, again and again, as long as she stayed with him. He kissed her back, awkwardly, tentatively. He shifted suddenly, as something hard met bone; he loosed her, turned a little, to push one hand into his pocket. He brought out a handful of pearls.

"To remind me," he said finally, a little bitterly, as he looked at them. She nodded.

"I know. I have one, too." She slid one of her fishscale slippers off, shook it. A pearl, large and slightly misshapen, glistening with grays and purples, dropped between them; she picked it quickly out of the foam. She turned it in her hand, watching the colors change, for a long time before she felt his eyes.

She met his gaze, saw him unsure, this time, what he had lost, or if he had lost anything at all, or everything. She smiled a little, unsure herself, halfhuman, half-mermaid with her pale wet hair, her legs gleaming darkly with fish scale, curled gracefully under her. Then she tossed the pearl back to a receding wave.

"It was just a gift," she said. "Like yours."

He blinked, his face easing, and leaned forward to kiss her again, before he said, "Mine are tears."

They rose finally, walked hand in hand out of the tide. He looked back once, and so did she, seeking the place where steps might have begun that led down to the land beneath the waves, where a sea hare might wait for her, carrying a dark pearl between its horns. She saw a little ribbon of foam, headed back to sea, turned purple by the dusk.