



CHAPTER ONE

The bottom of the Taijin Sea tasted of salt, slime, and disappointment. But for a few faint beams of mysterious light, it was darker than the deepest chasm. Hardly the magnificent watery realm dragons were said to call home.

I sat up on Seryu's back as he slowed, his long whiskers vibrating toward one beam in particular. Maybe I'd imagined it, but the beam shone brighter than the rest—almost violet.

“You ready?” Seryu asked.

Ready for what? I thought, but I nodded.

With a flip of his tail, he dove through the violet beam—and everything changed.

The water turned azure, and puffs of coppery mist hissed from beds of sand and crystal. And light! There was light everywhere, radiating from an unseen sun.

My heart began to race with anticipation, and I clung to Seryu's horns as he accelerated down, swimming so fast that I almost let go of my breath.

We're almost there, Kiki, I thought excitedly in our shared,

unspoken language, but she didn't respond. A peek into my sleeve told me why: my poor paper bird had fainted.

I didn't blame her. We were moving at dizzying speeds, and my head pounded like a storm when I tried to see straight. But I couldn't afford to faint. I didn't even dare close my eyes.

I wanted to see everything.

At last we arrived at a labyrinth of bright coral reefs, fathoms below the mortal sea. Seagrass swayed in an unseen current, dunes of white sand and gold-veined rocks dotted the grounds, and canopies of braided seaflowers formed the roofs of underwater villas.

So this was Ai'long, home of the dragons.

It was a world few mortals would ever glimpse. At a glance, it didn't seem so different from land. In place of trees were pillars of coral, some slender and some thick, most with spiraling branches adorned with bracelets of moss. Even the way the fish glided, their tapered fins spread out like wings, reminded me of birds soaring across the sky.

And yet . . . it was like nothing I'd ever seen. The movement of the water, constantly tossing and turning, was revealed by flashes of color and flurries of fish. The way the seagrass tickled the fish that swept by, as if they could speak to one another.

Seryu smirked as I drank in the view. "I told you you'd be dazzled."

He was right, of course. I *was* dazzled. Then again, Ai'long was meant to astound mortal eyes such as mine. That was its danger, after all. Its trap.

A place so beautiful that even time held its breath.

Every hour you spend here is a day lost at home—if not more, I reminded myself sharply. That time would add up quickly, and I'd been away from my father and brothers so long I didn't want to waste a single minute.

Let's go. I signaled with a kick to the dragon's long serpentine side.

"I'm not a horse, you know." Seryu's green eyebrows arched as he twisted to view me. "Why so quiet, Shiori? You're not holding your breath, are you?"

When I didn't reply, he tossed me off his back, and his claw shot out and pinched my nose.

Out escaped a jet of bubbles—the air I'd been preciously hoarding. But great gods, I could breathe! Or at least it felt like I was breathing. The water tasted sweet instead of salty—intoxicating, like a heady plum wine when I inhaled too deeply, but maybe that was because my head was still spinning.

"So long as you're wearing a piece of my pearl, you can breathe underwater," Seryu explained, reminding me of the glowing fragment I wore around my neck. "It might not be inside your heart anymore, so we can't share thoughts . . . but you do know you can talk, right?"

"Of course I know," I lied.

Covering up my relief, I touched the tiny pearl. Even this deep in the sea, it shone like a bead of moonlight.

"You might want to keep it hidden," said Seryu. "People could get the wrong idea."

“I thought it was just to help me breathe. Why would they—”

“It’s too complicated to explain,” the dragon mumbled with a grunt. “I forgot how many questions you ask. Maybe I *should* have let you keep holding your breath.”

My brows knit into a frown. “You’re in a sour mood.”

“Humans aren’t exactly welcome in Ai’long,” said Seryu thinly. “I’m thinking of the infinite ways your visit can go wrong.”

I didn’t believe him. He had been in a mood all day, starting with when he’d come for me onshore. He’d barely greeted my brothers, had ignored Takkan entirely. . . .

I tried to coax him out of it by teasing, “Will I have no fun stories to share when I go home? Here I was, telling everyone that the prince of dragons himself was going to give me a grand tour of his kingdom.”

“The shorter your visit is, the better.” Seryu’s red eyes flicked to my satchel, which hung off my shoulder. “You’re here to deliver something to my grandfather, not frolic about.”

So much for cheering him up. Now *I* was in a sour mood too.

I pried my satchel open—just a pinch. That *something* I was supposed to deliver was a dark and broken dragon pearl. Raikama had left it to me before she died, and its power was so strong I could feel it fighting against my satchel’s enchantment, which kept it safely confined and concealed. No surprise that Seryu’s grandfather wanted it.

It wasn’t the only thing inside the bag, though. I’d also

brought my starstroke net—for some protection against the Dragon King—and the sketchbook Takkan had given me when we said goodbye.

“More letters?” I’d asked, taking the book in both hands.

“Better,” Takkan promised. “So you don’t forget me.”

What could be better than his letters? I stared wistfully at the sketchbook, wishing I could brush my knuckles against its soft spine and flip through its charcoal-stained pages. But I supposed it would be rude to read while I was in Seryu’s company.

Seryu certainly thought so. He narrowed his eyes at me. “I’ve never seen you blush while looking at the pearl.”

“Its light gets bright,” I said quickly. “Makes my face warm.”

He scoffed at the lie. “At least your human lordling didn’t jump into the sea after us. The way he was making fish eyes at you for leaving, I half thought he might. He wouldn’t have made it past the reefs before the sharks got to him.”

I closed the satchel. “Really, sharks?”

“Grandfather employs a platoon of them.” Seryu smirked. “They’re always hungry. We’ll encounter some shortly.”

My heart thumped in my chest. Were we that close to Nazayun’s palace?

Seryu misread my apprehension, and his tone lightened a little. “Worry not—the sharks don’t have an appetite for a stringy human like you.”

They might change their mind, I thought. Once the Dragon King learned why I was *really* in Ai’long, I’d be lucky if he granted me such a swift death.

Nervously, I glided back to Seryu, kicking harder than I needed to. Swimming in Ai'long was nothing like swimming in regular water. The water here was as light as air, and tiny currents tracked under my feet, propelling me where I needed to go. Almost like flying.

I overshot the dragon, jetting a hair too high. Out of nowhere, a bloom of jellyfish descended upon me.

There were at least a dozen of them. Their bodies were shaped like luminous umbrellas, tentacles swirling in a sinuous dance. They approached boldly, brushing against my arms and legs and even weaving through my long hair. I giggled at how it tickled—until Seryu let out a growl.

“Leave her alone.” His red eyes flashed at the intruders. “She’s with me.”

The jellyfish recoiled, but they didn’t disperse. Quite the opposite. As Seryu tried to tow me away by grabbing my hair, they followed and drew even closer.

Then, like the Taijin Sea, they changed.

The gold light radiating in their bodies went out in a flash, and their tentacles, soft as silk ribbons, turned hard and pointed. Two slid between Seryu and me, forcing us apart. The rest surrounded us.

I reached for the knife I kept hidden inside my sash. I barely got a chance to brandish it. Cold, slick tentacles suctioned onto my back and encircled my arms.

Tiny barbs grew out of my attacker’s tentacles, grazing my skin: a lethal warning not to resist. One sting, and I’d be paralyzed for life.

Defeated, I went still and dropped my knife, letting it float beyond my grasp. In return, the jellyfish relaxed its grip, but only slightly. Its tentacles began to search me for other hidden weapons, and as they rifled through my satchel and robes, Kiki darted out of my sleeve.

She was groggy, her wings in a dramatic midstretch as she yawned to announce she was awake. But when her inky eyes popped open and she saw the jellyfish, she shrieked.

Bubbling, blazing demons of Tambu!

“It’s not a demon,” I assured her, hugging my satchel as tentacles attempted to pry it open. “It’s a jellyfish.”

A what?

The jellyfish loomed over Kiki, scrutinizing her intently.

My bird covered her head with a wing. *Oh gods*, she moaned. *Let me faint again.*

To Kiki’s relief, the jellyfish deemed her unworthy of its attention and returned to my satchel. Its tentacles tugged hard at the straps, but I held on as tight as I could.

“Sting me all you like,” I said. “You are not taking this.”

The jellyfish hissed and bared its poisonous barbs.

“Away!” Seryu barked. His tail lashed back and forth, creating innumerable ripples, like tiny tempests. With a swipe of his claw, there came a fierce rip in the water.

While the jellyfish struggled against the sudden current, Seryu slung me onto his back and dove into a jungle of coral, swimming for the crystal spires ahead. He tossed my knife onto my lap. “Really, Shiori? This is what you bring to Ai’long?”

I gave a careless shrug. “Did you think I’d come unarmed?”

“You’ve met my grandfather before. This little dagger of yours would hardly be a splinter.”

“Splinters can still hurt” was all I said, tucking the blade back into my sash. “What were those jellyfish?”

“Patrols.”

“For what?”

“Trespassers and assassins.”

He didn’t elaborate, a signal to let it go. But I was too curious. “There was magic about them.”

“Most of Grandfather’s subjects have . . . a certain ability. It helps fend off those who try to enter Ai’long without an invitation.”

“But why search me? I have an invitation.”

“They were looking for your stepmother’s pearl, obviously,” said Seryu testily. “The jellyfish have a taste for dark magic. They also specialize in sensing deception.”

A wave of unease fell over me. “Deception?”

“Yes, like that steel needle you didn’t deign to tell me you brought.” Seryu’s voice hardened. “Worry not. Your time in Ai’long will be short; you won’t have to experience our court.”

That wasn’t what worried me, but I kept silent and glanced at Kiki.

She’d swooned on my palm, and her wings were wilted into a dejected lump. Thankfully, she hadn’t been paying attention to my conversation with Seryu. I loved her dearly, but keeping secrets wasn’t one of her gifts.

Are we nearly there? she moaned. *I should have stayed on land. I feel seasick.*

“No one gets seasick underwater.”

Kiki wrinkled her beak, letting out a theatrical sigh. *Can't you tell the dragon to swim with more care? Even whales move more daintily than he does.*

“You tell him. He's been surly all day.”

Why? Her brow crinkled. *Is he upset with you?*

“Of course not.”

Is it the jellyfish? Gods, Shiori—do you think they know? Maybe you should tell him you plan on keeping Raikama's p—

My eyes went wide, and I stuffed her into my sleeve before Seryu heard.

Raikama's pearl, Kiki had almost blurted.

No, I hadn't told him. I didn't plan to.

Guilt nibbled at my conscience, but I shoved it away. There was nothing to feel guilty about. I wasn't renegeing on my word. I *had* promised Seryu I would bring Raikama's pearl to his grandfather. . . . I just never said I'd let him keep it.

“Only give it to the dragon with the strength to make it whole once more,” Raikama had made me swear before she died.

As if it could read my thoughts, the pearl inside my satchel began to pulse. I could practically see it in my mind—spinning and scheming, trying to find a way out. It was only the size of a peach, barely larger than my palm, but at its peak brilliance, it glowed like a bead of sunlight. But now that Raikama was gone, its light was muted, the fracture in its center seeming to widen more every time I looked at it.

That crack would not heal until the pearl was reunited with its true owner. I had a feeling the grief I buried inside

me was the same, deepening the hollow in my heart until my promise to Raikama was kept.

“A promise is not a kiss in the wind, to be thrown about without care,” I murmured to myself. “It is a piece of yourself that is given away and will not return until your pledge is fulfilled.”

They were my stepmother’s words from long ago. Words I used to hate because they needled me with guilt, even as I ignored them. Never would I have guessed that I would draw upon them for comfort.

The pearl trembled, responding to my unease, and I lifted the satchel onto my lap so Seryu wouldn’t notice. Too many times I had broken my word—to Raikama more than anyone. Not this time.

I will see you made whole again, I vowed to the pearl silently. *I will take you home.*

No matter the cost.