

CHAPTER ONE

BRIGHT ONE:

CAY AND STARLET

Living this close to the Deep made twilight the most dangerous time of each bright for his blessing. As shadows lengthened in the fading light, predators crept closer unseen.

Cay's twisted ebony and pearl horn gleamed, caught in a shaft of light stabbing from the surface into the ocean depths.

His muscular chest tapered to a long, slender, prehensile tail, which was currently wrapped around a pale pink coral outcropping, anchoring him in place, while his tail's caudal fin floated gently below him.

The herd leader swayed gracefully in the shifting current, flicking his snout side to side, remaining alert as he stood guard.

He cast a fond glance down at Starlet, heavy with their second fry, admiring the dappled sunlight on her golden scales.

Ever attuned to her mate, the young seamare lifted her head, dipping her muzzle to acknowledge the touch of his mind, she turned back to watch their frisking offspring.

Whip was busy exploring the reef in front of the massive coral colony that served as both home and fortress. A fascinating variety of life surrounded him, but he was too inexperienced to recognize the dangers.

Unlike their much smaller, hornless, seahorse cousins, seanicorn males did not produce hundreds of young. Their females carried a single fry to term in their rounded wombs, and—with luck—had a live birthing.

They were a long-lived species, despite (or perhaps because of) their relatively small size. Yet offspring were uncommon, so much treasured.

Cay's mate, Starlet, carrying a second fry was a testament to his virility and marked him as a worthy herd leader.

Starlet wasn't alone in her watchfulness. Since young were so rare, their son captivated the herd, and he became the focus of attention everywhere he went.

The older seanicorns viewed his sweetly awkward gamboling with tolerance, or amusement, though in many sorrow tinged their pleasure.

In the 'long ago' the coral colony had overflowed with brilliantly colored seanicorns. Though young were not born often, every mated pair had a fry or two during their long lifespans. Now, most lived their entire lives never having seen a fry.

So the birth of Whip, and the imminent birth of his sibling, were much anticipated events for the blessing.

Starlet sent out a light touch to those minds nearest her, greeting and responding to greetings as she undulated the dorsal fin on her spine in mild surges, to remain floating in place. Slowly waving the pectoral fins at her sides, she gently rocked back and forth.

At the very edge her thoughts could reach, she hit a blank.

She hesitated. This wasn't an empty space, or the non-thinking of their home's developing coral polyp clones. This was another seanicorn with a shield so rigid it was like swimming full speed into a rock wall, where one expected an opening.

It was Anemone, of course. Who else would close themselves off so tightly? Ever since the death of her mate, the seamare had withdrawn into herself, closing her mind and shutting out every offer of comfort.

Perhaps this is her first step back to the herd. Starlet kept her hopeful thought damped down, knowing how touchy the older female was. She sent a gentle coaxing tendril of sympathy and welcome towards the blanked psyche.

An onslaught of fury blasted her senses with such force, Starlet recoiled, whirling in a dizzy half-circle, and wincing with pain. Whip caught the edge of her distress and gave a whinny of fright.

She detected a flash of emotions—envy and grief simmering in malice. Then blankness slammed down, cutting them off.

The cold emptiness faded away, as Anemone retreated to her chamber in the bowels of the colony, out of range of Starlet's awareness.

Shaken by this unexpected backlash, she reached out for Cay, even as she sent a soothing thought-touch to Whip. She sensed her mate's distraction—something about a shadow.

Starlet felt him stiffen, and heard his thoughts, but at first his words made no sense to her battered mind.

[Movement... YES! There! At the edge of the atoll...] Then a loud sending to the entire group.
[BARRACUDA!]

Sharp fear drove out all other concerns. She was already racing towards Whip by the time Cay trumpeted a warning to the blessing. Wrapping her tail firmly around her fry, she became a golden dart, piercing the nearest opening in the colony wall.

Warriors rushed out past her into open water, brandishing defiant horns, as they hurried to guard the herd's retreat to safety. All about them, flashes of color dove into the protection of the domed coral colony.

Starlet dampened her thoughts as she shepherded Whip under cover, but their bond was strong, and Cay sensed her distress. He sent soothing reassurance, as he continued to twist his head sharply in every direction, tasting the water for any danger scent, and watching for further signs of the intruder.

Despite her concern, she couldn't help admiring her mate's courage; the way his black and white scales bristled; and how his firm, supple tail held him anchored in place.

She knew he was a formidable fighter, and before moving deeper under cover, she allowed her eyes to run over his solid form with smug possessiveness.

The supple line of his spine tapered sharply below his wide chest. Progressively smaller bones dwindled to a length of thick cord, before widening into the elegant full fan of his tail's forked caudal fin, which floated free on the currents.

Starlet shivered as she recalled the strength of that tail holding her close during their mating and felt his wry amusement as he caught her recollections.

With Whip anchored to her side, Starlet stayed to watch her mate from behind a wall of protective warriors.

Cay stood his ground until all were under cover and the last warrior retreated inside the colony.

As he uncurled his tail and floated free of the coral, a torpedo-shaped body shot out of the shadows.

Cay made a quick dart to the right, and its wicked mouth missed him—though its double-curved pectoral fin sent a glancing blow across his flank, whirling him aside in a torrential backwash.

This fortunate accident saved him further injury, as the creature's wildly thrashing caudal fin whipped past his muzzle, so close it grazed his nose, its oily scent staining the ocean as it swept by.

With a savage twist of its body, the fish returned with incredible swiftness.

Ignoring the pain in his side, Cay's wide tail fin churned furiously, propelling him forward at top speed. His dorsal fin beat the water, and his pectoral fins flashed up and down.

He plunged to safety a bare moment before the barracuda surged past, snapping at the feathering of his elegant trailing fins. Its beady black eye rolled in his direction, rows of razor-sharp teeth revealed in its gaping jaws.

Its impossibly elongated body passed their sanctuary for several lengthy seconds, the scars of previous battles showing stark-white against its dark side.

[Not today!] Cay sent a fierce message after the brutal predator. [You shall not harm my blessing this day.]

He sensed the beast's distant disgruntled acceptance of his sending, then with a disdainful flip of its tail, it disappeared back out to the murky waters of the Deep surrounding the reef.

A wave of pungent backwash bathed the coral, a parting gift from their ancient foe.

Released tension filled the fortress with whinnies and movement, but Cay held everyone inside as he sent warriors out to ensure the creature had truly gone.

The anxiety of those around him frightened Whip, who butted his soft horn-nub into the side of Starlet's neck. She gave a tender whicker, rubbing his head with her muzzle.

With a last backward glance, a final assurance of her mate's safety, she led her fry deeper into the coral.

Once the excitement died down, and Cay was certain he was the only one injured, he made his weary way to their chamber.

He held Starlet's constant presence in the back of his mind, so knew she and the fry were safe, but needed to see them for himself.

Whip, exhausted from his first day outside; followed by confusion and fright; was soon fast asleep. His parents nestled on either side of him, shielding their thoughts as they talked together.

[Was it HIM?] Starlet's mental thread was little more than a whisper.

Cay didn't need to read any deeper to know who she meant. *[Yes, it was him.]* His own feelings shaded dark and grim. *[He's getting bolder. I named him Sly for a reason! I'll have to warn the warriors to be careful.]*

He shifted, trying to ease his bruised side. *[Maybe I should double the patrols for a while, until we discourage him.]*

Whip whimpered in his sleep, and Starlet responded. *[Talk about something else. You know how sensitive he is.]*

Cay wisely said nothing about Whip being too inexperienced to broach their shields. Or that it was his mate who didn't want to discuss the creature who killed her father.

[Speaking of our fry,] Cay obliged by putting his head against her bulging stomach, [how is our daughter today?]

[Daughter, is it!] Starlet forced a laugh, glad to change the subject. [It's still early for the fry to be sending. You can't know it's a girl!]

[Our daughter is special.] Cay boasted. [I just feel sure it's a girl. Hello little one, this is your father speaking.]

Starlet's stomach rippled as the unborn fry moved inside her. Cay crowed aloud, and she hushed him before he woke Whip.

*

They talked and laughed together, as parents everywhere have talked and laughed over their young for generations, until sleep claimed them, Cay first, with Starlet close behind.

Her last thought was that she had forgotten to tell him about Anemone's odd behavior.

I hate to burden him. He already deals with so much... but I think something serious may be wrong with her...

Her lips tightened as she considered her options.

Perhaps, this is a problem best handled female to female. Satisfied with this solution, she followed her mate into sleep as dark covered the depths.