

“Seashell Hunt”

By Lauren Rivers

Early afternoon was Harumi’s favorite time of day, when her lessons with Hisoka were done and she could do as she pleased. Promising to remember her assignments for tomorrow’s lesson she swam home as fast as her tail would propel her, much to the chagrin of some of the other residents. From behind her she heard several shouts for her to watch where she was going. Turning back just long enough to offer a hasty apology, she continued on towards home.

The reason for her haste was the same thing that motivated her unexpected adventure among the surface dwellers. Curiosity. While exploring the ocean floor she had come across a previously undiscovered set of ruins on the outskirts of their territory. She had wanted to explore it from the moment she found it, but the journey had taken her so long it would require at least a few hours to swim back in time for her lessons with Hisoka and her daily tasks.

Against her desires she returned home but made certain to mark its location, fully intending to return later when time permitted. What interested her was not so much the ruins themselves, though no doubt they would interest some of the others, but rather what she had seen among them. Beautiful seashells dotted the structures that once almost certainly rested upon the surface. It was her intention to collect a few.

Mermaids did not develop architecture in the traditional sense. Most of their habitats were natural cave systems and such adapted to their use. While her people might hollow out spaces for their own personal use it was rare they would construct something like the surface dwellers did. Most of the underwater places were organic without flat surfaces and hard corners. The surface dwellers, like her beloved Rhodes, tended to like square buildings.

She allowed herself a moment to think about the handsome stallion who had been her companion during her time on the surface. Trapped as a land dweller she had depended on his kindness to help her until she could return to the sea and restore their friend who had accidentally transformed into a mermaid through her ring. She pictured his face and smiled. The stallion had not initially believed her status as a mermaid, though in time he came to accept it as the truth.

As a rule her people were not allowed to reveal their true natures to the surface dwellers, but in the case of Rhodes and his friends it had been unavoidable. She and Hisoka however, did not believe that they would reveal their secret and simply neglected to mention the breach to the others. Hisoka had come up with a story to explain their absence, and while there was some skepticism it was generally accepted to be the truth. Harumi knew the only reason the others believed the story was due to Hisoka. Without his influence it was entirely possible she might have been exiled to the surface for loving a surface dweller.

Everyone knew the story of Scarlet, the mermaid who had fallen in love with a being from the surface. She had given him her ring and as punishment was sentenced to never swim as a mermaid again. Betrayed by her lover, she was forced to live above the water, never again to return to the world below.

Even though Harumi's experience had been due to accidental circumstances, her people's distrust of the surface dwellers was strong enough that it would have been difficult to explain. Even now her heart beat faster at the thought of her land lover. Daydreaming, she almost swam into Mikoto, narrowly rotating her body to avoid the collision.

"Oh!" Harumi shouted.

"Where were you just now? You looked like you were a million miles away," Mikoto said. The mervixen changed orientation to follow Harumi, adjusting her speed to match the red panda mermaids rate of travel.

"Just daydreaming," she admitted.

"Oh? About anything fun?" her friend asked.

Harumi was glad Mikoto could not see her blushing under her fur. She could not tell her what she was really thinking about, so she lied her tail off. "Just thinking about collecting some seashells for my garden."

"Those must be some seashells," she said, looking like she did not entirely believe her friend's story.

Harumi nodded. "They're some of the prettiest I've seen. I was just about to go exploring for them. Want to come?"

"I'd like to, but I have things to do," Mikoto replied. "I gotta go. Hope you find a good one!" With that, her friend swam off in the opposite direction.

Returning her attention to the afternoon's quest, she returned to her living space just long enough to grab her bag and set off in the direction of the ruins. She nodded to the sentry as she passed the perimeter, informing him of her general agenda. Following her adventure on the surface it had become the policy of her people to require those leaving the colony to state their purpose for leaving and how long they anticipated being gone so as to prevent any missing mermaids, whether on the surface or below. At first she had found it cumbersome, but seeing the logic in it she eventually came to consider it normal.

The swim to the ruins was calm and quiet. Other than the occasional sea creature she did not see anything of interest in the vast stretch of ocean between here and the colony. Few mermaids from her pod had ever traveled this far out due to its apparent lack of useful resources. Harumi's ever present curiosity had brought her to wonder what lay beyond the vast stretch of mostly empty ocean. Recalling the seamarks that she had noted during her first journey, she retraced her course to the drop off which marked the location of the ruins.

Approaching it, she slowed her speed allowing herself to glide closer to the edge. She came to a stop overlooking the vast complex of surface buildings that now rested on the ocean floor, silent and unused. From her experience on the surface she was able to identify streets and shops and other items commonly found on the world above the waves, but they were not what had caught her interest.

Swimming closer she moved across the ruins towards what she assumed at some point had been a plaza or other open space where those on the surface would gather to share news of the day and speak on their way to other obligations. Not far beyond it waited the reason she had come here once more.

Some of the ruins had been partially reclaimed by the sea, resulting in an odd juxtaposition of both worlds. Seaweed, sand, and coral dotted the man made structures

having been deposited there by the currents. Swimming among the buildings she passed several schools of fish that dotted here and there mostly unconcerned with the mermaid that swam in their midst.

Sheltered from the sun it seemed many of the buildings had become home to various sea creatures that now resided in the different structures. A few of them emerged upon sensing her presence but few remained after satisfying their initial curiosity. The red panda mermaid pushed ahead with another powerful thrust of her tail sending her coasting forward towards her destination.

Upon a mound of sand rested her prize, a perfect seashell, pristine and flawless in its structure. Most likely abandoned by some smaller sea life that no longer needed it the beautiful shell rested gently among the ocean plants, highlighted by a ray of light from the surface which fell perfectly upon its magnificence.

The shell would be perfect for her garden. Placed among the plants it would provide a beautiful complement to the rest of her decorations. Harumi even had the perfect place picked out. It would go right in the center next to her bed of seaweed. All she had to do was reach out and collect it.

As she extended her hand to pick it up, she had been so focused on her prize she had not noticed the black furred paw coming from the opposite direction. Surprised, she withdrew her own as she looked up to identify her unexpected company. Before her waited a mermaid she had never seen before, a red panda like herself with beautiful blue and light green hair cascading over her shoulders. Gentle green eyes with an equally surprised expression stared back at her. No doubt she had not seen her any more than Harumi had noticed another mermaid among the ruins.

Beside the other mermaid swam a sea turtle she assumed was her companion, noting the creature did not stray far from its mistress. Whether it was a simple pet or something more she could not tell. Both continued to watch her as she floated a few feet away with all present still off balance from the unplanned encounter.

Deciding she should be the one to break the stalemate Harumi offered a gracious smile. "Hello," she said, "I apologize for not seeing you sooner. My name is Harumi. My pod is a few hours travel from here. I was exploring and looking for seashells to decorate my garden. And you?"

"Jade," the other mermaid replied, offering a meek but friendly smile in return. "My turtle and I were swimming nearby when I saw the shell reflected in the sunlight. It looked so lovely I thought I would come in for a closer look, but I did not see you or else I would have declared myself." As if responding to her mention of it, the turtle came in closer, pressing itself against Jade's paw. She caressed it affectionately giving it a few gentle kisses before returning her attention to Harumi.

Harumi touched her paw to her chest. "I think we are both guilty of that." Seeing the shells in the other mermaid's bag, she gestured towards the shell. "You take it. I can find another."

Jade reached for it but then hesitated. "No, that would not be fair, you saw it at the same time I did. I would not feel right taking it when you have as much right to it as I."

Harumi smiled. "So how shall we settle it?"

Looking across the vast length of the ruins, Jade gestured towards a tall building on the opposite side. “A race. You and I swim to that building and back. Whoever returns first is the rightful owner of the shell. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Harumi replied.

Both mermaids swam beside the turtle taking up a position on either side of it. Harumi cast a glance at the other mermaid confirming she was ready with a nod. Less than a moment later, the turtle beat its flippers, signaling the start of the race.

With a great slap of her tail she propelled herself forward towards the ruins. Speeding forward at a remarkable speed she soon lost sight of her competition as she dashed between the buildings seeking the shortest route to the midpoint. Beating her fins as hard as she could she flew through one of the buildings emerging from the darkness back out into the plaza just in time to see Jade pulling ahead of her.

Swimming faster, she cut through the water with such elegance and precision. It would be difficult to match her skills. Jade maintained such flawless control over her movements it was like poetry in motion.

Not to be outdone, Harumi summoned a burst of speed pulling ahead of her in the last few seconds before the curve, making the fluid change of direction as smooth as if she had simply flicked her tail. In reality the movement required a fair amount of power and control but she had trained well and was more than prepared. Harumi moved her fins with as much power as she dared apply, keeping her eyes forward.

Despite the temptation to see where Jade was she resisted, maintaining her focus towards the goal. Swimming between the buildings she could see the turtle waiting for them along with their prize, the beautiful seashell nestled directly underneath Jade’s companion.

Pushing forward with one final mighty thrust of her tail she sped forward so quickly the turtle spun around from the force of the water. As Harumi slowed down and turned around she offered an apologetic pet to the animal as its mistress came over the finish line.

“Congratulations,” Jade offered.

Harumi petted the turtle gently. “Thank you, though I think I inadvertently surprised your turtle.”

“He appears unharmed, so let us just call it a race.” Jade embraced the turtle, picking up the shell and presenting it to Harumi. “Your prize.”

Harumi took the shell into her paws and considered it for a moment. As she watched Jade start to swim away, she held up her paw and called out to her. “Wait!”

Turning back, Jade tilted her head quizzically. “Yes?”

“This is for you,” she said, handing her the seashell.

Jade accepted it with some hesitation, returning her gaze with confusion. “I don’t understand. You won the race.”

“Yes, and I’m gifting the prize to you.” Harumi nodded.

“But why?” Jade asked.

Harumi shrugged. “I can find a shell anywhere. One thing I can’t find lying around is a new friend.”

With a smile, Jade graciously accepted the seashell, placing it in her bag. “Until we meet again.” Offering a wave of farewell, the other red panda mermaid swam away and back the way she had come.

The return trip saw her arrival at the entrance to the caves just in time for evening meal. Harumi nodded towards the sentry, swimming inside where she spotted Mikoto who greeted her with a hug.

“How was your excursion?” she asked.

“Productive,” she said. “I didn’t find what I was looking for, but I think I made a new friend.” As she told her companion about her encounter she did not know if or when she would meet Jade again, but that was the fun of exploration. There were always new things to discover.