



Rainbow swooshed up to Maya and nudged her arm. “Maya, the others want us to go and play fin-ball!”

Maya looked up from her book and wriggled. “Rainbow, you’re tickling me!” She gave her dolphin a gentle push, and spotted her friends from Moon Pearl dorm – Amber, Isla and Cora – treading water a little way off with their dolphins, Flash, Bubble and Sparkle.

“Come on,” said Rainbow. “Let’s go and play.” She wriggled her nose under Maya’s arm. “Pleeeeeeease!”



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Maya hesitated. Lessons had finished for the day and the first-year students were relaxing in The Singing Circle, but Maya had been hoping to read her new library book, *Bubble Tunnels for Beginners*. After that she planned to sketch the little nibbler fish who liked to chomp on the coral walls of Mermaid Academy.

“Get a swish on, Maya!” called Isla. “The boys from Sea Jet have challenged us to a rematch.”

“This time we are definitely going to win!” said Amber.

Maya felt torn. Fin-ball was fun but she really did want to finish her book before tomorrow’s lesson. Making bubble tunnels was a new topic and Maya liked to get things right first time, even if it meant putting extra work in. She’d been awarded two sea-star points by her teachers that day for being prepared for her lessons, and she hoped to get some more the next day. “You lot go



## Maya and Rainbow

on without me,” she said, her eyes already straying back to the page.

“No, Maya,” protested Amber, swimming over. “We won’t be such a good team without you.”

“Pleeeeeease come!” chorused Isla and Cora, joining her.

Rainbow swooshed her tail through Maya’s hair then used her nose to flip the book shut. She gave Maya a cheeky smile. “Don’t be a boring barnacle, Maya! Let’s have some fun.”



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“I’m not a boring barnacle!” Maya protested. “I just want to make sure I’m ready for tomorrow’s lesson.”

“You will be. You’re always top of every class. Come on,” Rainbow said. Slapping her flippers against her sides, she chanted, “Play! Play! Play!”

Maya gave in. Rainbow, a pretty pink dolphin who was patterned with bright rainbows, loved having a good time and Maya knew Rainbow wouldn’t stop until she got her own way.

“OK, I’ll carry on reading after dinner,” Maya said, slipping her book into her bag. As she got up, her tail tingled with anticipation and she realised she was really looking forward to the game. Since joining Mermaid Academy, she’d been practising fin-ball whenever she had spare time and now was an opportunity to test out her moves.



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Her friends high-fived her and Rainbow turned a delighted somersault then pushed her back fin into Maya’s hand. “Let’s go!”

Following her friends, Maya let Rainbow pull her through the sparkling turquoise water, her purple, blue and pink hair streaming out behind her. Moon Pearl dived whooshed out of The Singing Circle, dodging between two of Mermaid Academy’s majestic coral towers. Beyond the buildings, the grounds of the school stretched in all directions. Maya and her friends passed the playpark with its awesome spinning clams and twisty mother-of-pearl slides, then glided through the Tranquillity Haven with its winding shell paths and beds of gently waving anemones.

“Who wants to race?” called Amber, smiling at her dolphin, Flash.

“Me!” shouted Isla and Bubble together, and the four of them sped ahead in a swirl of bubbles.



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Maya and Cora grinned at each other as they continued to swim along with their dolphins. Cora liked to look at wildlife as she swam and Maya wasn't keen on racing, so she was content to chat to Cora and look at the creatures she pointed out.

Catching up with Isla and Amber at the fin-ball pitches, they saw the merboys from Sea Jet dorm practising their tail passes, flicking the sponge ball between themselves and their dolphins.

"We were starting to think you'd changed your mind about a rematch," said Obasi, catching the ball and spinning it on one finger.

"As if!" said Amber with a grin.

As they launched into the game, Maya quickly forgot about bubble tunnels. She charged up and down the pitch, ducking and diving their opponents, and when she finally won the ball, she executed a perfect upside-down tail flick, smashing the sponge ball into their goal!



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It was a fast and furious match and by the time the two teams gathered at the centre for the last throw, it was three goals each. Nimesh got the ball but Amber caught it during his pass and flicked it to Flash, who nosed it on to Maya. Maya looked for Rainbow but she was too far away, so Maya whacked the ball to Isla. Bubble swam for the goal and Isla flicked him the ball so he could hit it into the net.

“Yaaay! Four-three to us!” whooped Amber. “We win!”

Maya looked round for Rainbow as all her friends high-finned their dolphins. She thought Rainbow might congratulate her on her improved goal-scoring ability, but Rainbow was busy teasing Arlo’s dolphin for losing the match. Maya’s happiness faded a little as she trod water. Rainbow sometimes got so distracted that she seemed to forget about her.



## Maya and Rainbow

*Maybe it will be different when we bond,* Maya thought, glancing at Isla and Cora’s tails. When a student and a dolphin bonded, their tail fins changed colour to match. Isla and Bubble’s tail fins were now both violet and yellow while Cora and Sparkle’s fins were light blue and green. Since bonding, they and their dolphins were barely apart and they seemed so in tune with each other. Maya wondered if she and Rainbow would ever be so close. They were very different. Rainbow came from a large, noisy family and loved being surrounded by friends – the more the better. She was also easily distracted, always looking for the next fun thing to do. Maya, an only mermaid, was a planner who never rushed into things tail first and, while she loved having friends, she also needed lots of quiet time.

A worrying thought crept into Maya’s mind. When the students and dolphins had chosen

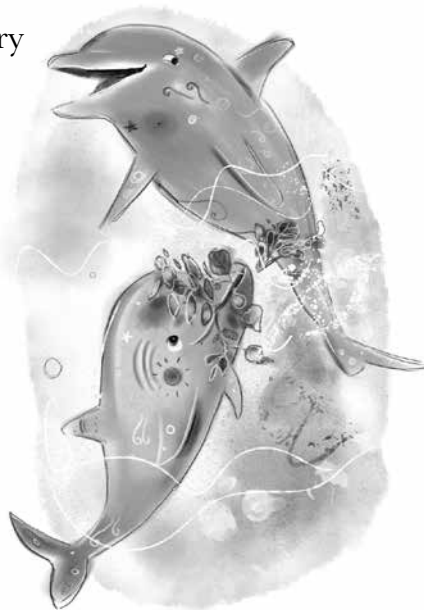


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each other at the start of term, Dr Oceania, the school's headteacher, had said that students and their dolphins nearly always bonded. But what if she and Rainbow didn't? What if they were one of the few pairs who were just too different to ever become true partners? A knot of anxiety twisted in her tummy. She hoped that wouldn't be the case. We must try harder, she thought.

"Rainbow!" she called.

Rainbow whistled happily and started to swim over, but at the last moment she was distracted by a feathery piece of seaweed. Snatching it up in her mouth, she swam silently up behind Bubble and tickled him with it, making him squeal with laughter.



## Maya and Rainbow

Spinning round, he retaliated by blowing a stream of bubbles that bounced off Rainbow's head. Rainbow twirled in the water, giggling as she popped the bubbles.

Maya sighed with frustration. Rainbow was always so distracted, it was no wonder they hadn't bonded yet. *I need to make it happen*, she decided. *But how?*

