

The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of watercolor seashells. The shells are rendered in various colors including purple, blue, orange, red, and green, with soft, blended edges. They are scattered across the white background, some overlapping. A vertical dashed line runs down the center of the page, separating the left and right halves of the pattern.

MIRA AND THE SEA FESTIVAL

a mermaid tale

The ocean sparkled with excitement. Coral reefs pulsed with color, kelp danced in gentle waves, and glittering fish zipped through the water like living confetti. It was the most magical day of the year—The Sea Festival—and Mira the mermaid couldn't stop wiggling with excitement.

"This is going to be the best day ever!" she squealed, twirling in a swirl of shimmering blue and green fins.

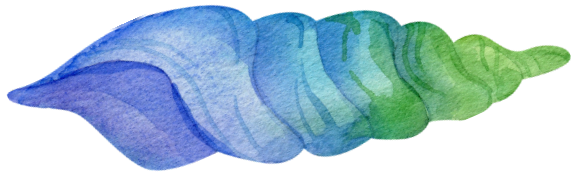
Her best friend, Bloop the pufferfish, puffed up slightly and floated beside her. "You say that every year, Mira. And then last year you got tangled in seaweed trying to limbo."

Mira giggled. "That was one time! And I won 'Funniest Fall'—don't forget that."

Bloop rolled his eyes. "You wore the seaweed like a wig for the rest of the night."

"I was starting a trend," she said with a grin.

The two friends swam quickly through the coral caverns, Mira clutching a large, swirly shell nestled in a net bag. It was her prized possession—an enormous, pink-and-gold spiral shell with shimmering ridges that sparkled like sunrise on the water. She was entering it in this year's Biggest Shell Contest, one of the most exciting parts of the festival.



The Sea Festival wasn't just any celebration. It was the celebration. Creatures came from the farthest kelp forests and the deepest trenches. There were booths made of clam shells, dance stages carved from driftwood, and food vendors balancing plates of crispy sea slugs, salted seagrass chips, and the ever-famous seaweed spaghetti, served in long floating strands by jellyfish waiters.

There were competitions, too. The Bubble Blowing Bonanza, the Crab Curling Championship, the Singing Swordfish Showcase, and of course—Mira's favorite—the Biggest Shell Contest, held right in the center of Starfish Square.

As they arrived at the edge of the festival, Mira gasped. It was even bigger than last year.

Stingrays painted signs in the water using ink from friendly squids. Colorful bunting made from sea glass and coral beads stretched from one reef to another. A pod of dolphins leapt overhead in a perfect spiral, scattering glittering bubbles everywhere.

"I want to do everything!" Mira cried. "After I check in for the contest, of course."

Bloop nodded. "Good plan. The sooner you enter, the sooner we can get to the Seaweed Toss. I've been practicing my flippers."

They swam toward the Shell Tent, where contestants were lining up with their entries. Mira took a deep breath and stepped forward.

A tall, elegant sea slug with round glasses sat behind a coral podium. "Name?" she asked in a slow voice.

"Mira Seabright," Mira said proudly, holding up her shell.

"Ooooh," the sea slug whistled. "That's a beauty."

The shell glistened in the light like spun candy. Mira smiled. "I found it at the edge of the Moonlight Trench. Took me three days to roll it home."

"You're all checked in," the slug said. "Display table is to the left. Judging starts at sun-high."

As they swam to the table, Mira's eyes widened. There were some big shells.

One was carried in on the back of a sea turtle by a grumpy-looking eel named Eustace. Another entry looked like a trumpet and had a pearl lodged in the middle. Mira placed her shell carefully at the end of the row and patted it gently.

"She's not the biggest," she whispered to Bloop, "but she shines. I think that counts."

"Charm points," Bloop agreed. "It's like the pageant of shells."

They backed away, and Mira took one last proud look at her entry. "Let's go enjoy the festival!"

Everywhere they went, the water buzzed with excitement. Mira and Bloop visited the Octopus Art Grotto, where kids painted with glowing ink. They danced at the Clam Slam Jam, where a band of crustaceans rocked out using driftwood drums and barnacle bells.

Bloop ate four plates of seaweed spaghetti.

"I regret nothing," he said between mouthfuls. "Except maybe the extra garlic kelp."

Mira laughed until her stomach hurt. Then they joined the Jellyfish Limbo, where Mira managed to avoid falling this time (though Bloop tripped and bounced into a sea sponge). They took selfies with a jellyfish queen, got their tails glittered, and cheered on the Singing Swordfish, whose song about a lovesick squid made the whole crowd weep dramatically into their fins.

"This is the best day ever," Mira sighed happily.

"I'll admit it," Bloop said. "You were right."

But as the laughter settled and the sunbeam above began to reach its highest point, Mira sat up straight.

"The contest! It's almost judging time!"

They rushed back to Starfish Square.

But something was wrong.

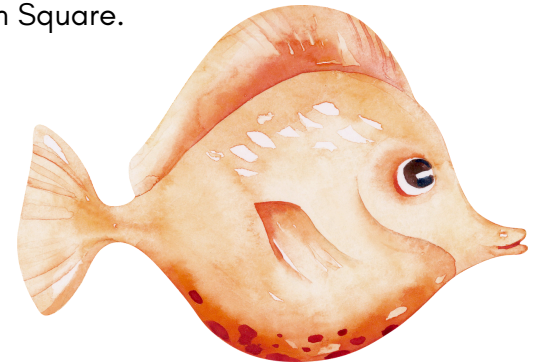
The table. Her shell.

It was gone.

Mira's heart stopped.

"Where is it? I left it right there!" she cried, swimming in frantic circles. "It was here! I put it right on the end of the table!"

Bloop looked around. "It couldn't have swum off on its own."



"Mira Seabright," Mira said proudly, holding up her shell.

"Ooooh," the sea slug whistled. "That's a beauty."

The shell glistened in the light like spun candy. Mira smiled. "I found it at the edge of the Moonlight Trench. Took me three days to roll it home."

"You're all checked in," the slug said. "Display table is to the left. Judging starts at sun-high."

As they swam to the table, Mira's eyes widened. There were some big shells.

One was carried in on the back of a sea turtle by a grumpy-looking eel named Eustace. Another entry looked like a trumpet and had a pearl lodged in the middle. Mira placed her shell carefully at the end of the row and patted it gently.

"She's not the biggest," she whispered to Bloop, "but she shines. I think that counts."

"Charm points," Bloop agreed. "It's like the pageant of shells."

They backed away, and Mira took one last proud look at her entry. "Let's go enjoy the festival!"

Everywhere they went, the water buzzed with excitement. Mira and Bloop visited the Octopus Art Grotto, where kids painted with glowing ink. They danced at the Clam Slam Jam, where a band of crustaceans rocked out using driftwood drums and barnacle bells.

Bloop ate four plates of seaweed spaghetti.

"I regret nothing," he said between mouthfuls. "Except maybe the extra garlic kelp."

Mira laughed until her stomach hurt. Then they joined the Jellyfish Limbo, where Mira managed to avoid falling this time (though Bloop tripped and bounced into a sea sponge). They took selfies with a jellyfish queen, got their tails glittered, and cheered on the Singing Swordfish, whose song about a lovesick squid made the whole crowd weep dramatically into their fins.

"This is the best day ever," Mira sighed happily.

"I'll admit it," Bloop said. "You were right."

But as the laughter settled and the sunbeam above began to reach its highest point, Mira sat up straight.

"The contest! It's almost judging time!"

They rushed back to Starfish Square.

But something was wrong.

The table. Her shell.

It was gone.

Mira's heart stopped.

"Where is it? I left it right there!" she cried, swimming in frantic circles. "It was here! I put it right on the end of the table!"

Bloop looked around. "It couldn't have swum off on its own."



"I—I must've forgotten it somewhere," Mira whispered, panicking.
"Maybe I dropped it at the spaghetti stand?"

They retraced their steps. Through the food court. Around the game stalls. Back to the jellyfish bandstand and the art grotto.

Nothing.

They even peeked inside a grumpy sea clam (who told them off with a loud snap!), but no luck.

Finally, Mira slumped against a rock. "It's gone," she said softly. "I lost it."

Bloop floated close. "You didn't lose you, though."

She looked at him through watery eyes. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Bloop said, puffing slightly, "you still sparkle. With or without a big fancy shell."

Mira gave a half-laugh. "That's cheesy."

"It's the sea. Everything's a little salty."

She chuckled for real this time and wiped a tear from her cheek.
"Okay. Let's go watch the contest, at least."

They returned to Starfish Square, just as the sea slug announced,
"Final judging begins in five minutes!"

A crowd had gathered. The judges—an elderly seahorse, a royal shrimp, and a very serious-looking manta ray—floated over the entries.

Mira watched quietly as each shell was examined, measured, sniffed, and tapped.

Suddenly, a small voice chirped from the edge of the crowd.

"Excuse me! Excuse me!"

A tiny crab—no bigger than a coin—scuttled forward, struggling to carry something enormous on his back.

It was Mira's shell.

The crowd gasped. The shell sparkled in the light like a golden sunbeam. Mira's eyes widened in shock.

"That's mine!" she swam forward. "Where did you find it?"

The crab blinked up at her. "It rolled into the Trench Slide by the bounce tents. I thought it was a fancy hat! But then I heard everyone looking for a shell and thought, maybe this is it?"

"Oh, thank you," Mira said, hugging the little crab gently. "You're amazing!"

The sea slug floated over. "Looks like we have a last-minute entry returning to the table!"

The judges conferred, then nodded and placed the shell back with the others. Mira stood at the edge, nervous and overwhelmed.

When the final scores were tallied, the winner of the Biggest Shell Contest was the grumpy eel Eustace (his shell really was enormous), but the judges gave Mira the Spirit of the Sea Festival Award for her kindness, joy, and graceful heart.

"It's not about the biggest shell," the manta ray said in his deep voice. "It's about the biggest spirit."

Mira's eyes sparkled brighter than her shell.

They placed a starfish-shaped necklace around her neck, and the whole crowd cheered.

"Speech! Speech!" Bloop called out.

Mira swam forward and held up the necklace. "I thought losing my shell meant losing my chance. But today I learned that sometimes the best things happen when everything doesn't go as planned."

"Like garlic seaweed," Bloop whispered loudly.

Mira grinned. "Or friends who carry your spirit when you feel empty."

The little crab waved from the front row. Mira waved back.



As the festival faded into twilight, and glowing plankton lit up the water like stars, Mira floated beside Bloop.

"Best. Day. Ever."

"You said that last year too," Bloop teased.

"And I'll say it again next year," Mira said, flicking water at him with her tail.

Can you draw your own shell to enter in the contest?