

Diving In

I am quite sure by now you have heard the tale. The one about the little brat who lost her voice to gain a pair of shaky legs, all for the love of a pair of green eyes attached to a mediocre human prince. Doesn't it all seem a little... fishy to you?

Such sparkling innocence of the girl. The dastardly wickedness of the witch and the deeply held self-righteous conviction of the muscle-bound King. It sounds like a fish story to me. A real whopper. The surface world swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. Like a piece of glittery trash dropped from a passing Cog.

Well, settle in, my little guppy. It isn't as if you have anywhere better to be. Pour yourself a spicy brine and tighten your corset. Mother has a song to sing. The truth of the girl. The tragedy of the so-called witch. And the utter, pathetic failure of the King.

I didn't always look as I do now. I've changed and grown. Dare I say it, I have even evolved. That's what living things do. Never is my final draft.

Once, I looked far worse than this. I was drab. I was acceptable. I had a magnificent and boring tail of uniform blue scales. It was fast. The fastest in the Seven Seas, or so they said. But it had certain attachments I didn't enjoy. Namely, the name. The name was itchy. Suffocating. He wore his skin like a

molt that refused to shed. Tight. Gray. A rotting husk that was slowly squeezing the life out of him.

Octavius.

Gods, such boredom he was. A rigid little soldier in Lir's perfect army. Mostly. There were still some minor tweaks needed, some adjustments required to obtain the true level of perfection I was searching for. To break free, I unearthed the ancient art of Biomancy, the magic of flesh and bone. The court called it forbidden. I called it the only way out.

With it, I became addicted to the fluidity of form. Why be one thing when you can be everything? Today, yellow scales, bright as the sun, to match my mood. Tomorrow, eyes the color of a dying squid's last ink. Perhaps sharpening the teeth a bit to give the smile a little extra bite.

I admit, I may have gone too far with the bioluminescent nipples during the Winter Gala, but art requires risk! We see our bodies as we present them. I wanted to present mine as how I saw myself, not the mistake that I showed up as.

It was my art. My body. My choice. I was forging my own language. I have always found that body language is extremely important. But some people can only understand their own dialect. They fear anyone who sounds off-key to the monotonous little anthem they want to hear. Never mind the fact that some people can only sing entirely flat and still get celebrated. We will scale that particular fish when we get to her.

Octavius was still just a tragic shell that needed to be shed. No amount of aesthetic, cosmetic, empathetic alterations was enough. So, I did the only merciful thing I could do.

I killed him.

Well, okay, so it wasn't exactly a murder per se. More of a renovation. A reimagining, if you will. However, renovations require tools. I washed Octavius away.

In that death, I was born. Gloriously fabulous and buxom.

Octavia.

My beautiful sister, Carlotta. She was the only one who understood the art. She loved me when I was him. And she loved me when I was she. She didn't care about the shifting pigments of my skin or my eyes. She wasn't necessarily a fan of the sharp teeth. But still, she just saw me. Her brutish and uncomfortable husband? Not so much.

Lir. So handsome. So muscly. So predictable. So boring. He thought I was an abomination. A violation against the natural order. An insult to the dignity of the Mer. Who is he to decide such a thing? He wasn't a god. He wasn't the Great White Whale. Fine, he's King. I guess the crown allows him certain... permissions.

However, it does not give him permission to tell me how I exist. To force me to remain as something less than what I can be. If he knew his place, if he did his duty instead of policing my scale count, none of this would have happened. My sister would be alive.

Get this through your gills right now. I am not the one who killed her. I am not the one who failed her. That was them.

The humans came from above. A raiding party, hunting for trophies. They found Oceanica glittering too brightly in the sun. They were waiting with nets and harpoons tipped with cold iron. Carlotta tried to hide. She was panicked, swimming for the reef. I saw the shadow of the great ship looming over her. I decided I would shift the sea itself into a shield. I pulled the very fabric of the currents and wove a dome of hardened water above her.

I didn't know. How could I have known? I had no idea that raw Biomancy is allergic to refined iron. The magic didn't deflect the ship. It magnetized it.

The shield buckled. It became a whirlpool, a screaming vortex that pulled that giant beast of a ship straight down. The taste of the iron in the sea, of the wood in the water. It tasted like surface. The salt of the water was tainted by the stench of the... *men*.

Don't get me wrong. I love a good, stenchy male. But human? Smells of rotting crotch if you ask me. And the sound it made when it hit the reef... it was a crunch. The sickening snap of coral and bone. It crushed her.

And it crushed me.

The only part of her that I still had was a beautiful sapphire pendant that she wore. Someone had tossed it from a Russian science vessel when we were guppies. Carlotta found it as it was sinking to the bottom of the ocean floor

near an old shipwreck that we used to play in. Whoever tossed it clearly had titanic taste in jewelry.

After she was crushed, I found it in the rubble of coral and iron. I originally thought that it should belong to one of her daughters. So I did the right thing and I went to return it so that one of them could have it. But when I arrived, King Lir blamed me for the entire ordeal.

Where was he? Where was the great protector when the sky fell? Polishing his Spear? Grooming his ego? He probably wasn't even under the sea, if you ask me.

But he arrived in time for the blame. He looked at the wreckage, at the broken body of his wife, and he didn't see the human iron. He saw my magic. He saw the "freak."

He threw me out. He deadnamed me in front of the weeping court, called my magic a cancer, and banished me to the Leviathan Trench. The deepest, darkest scar on the ocean floor. A place where the pressure is so intense it turns diamond to dust. It was meant to be a death sentence. A normal mer-folk body cannot withstand that depth.

My beautiful tail began to fracture under the weight. My ribs threatened to snap into my lungs. So, I did what I always do. I adapted. Survival is just another word for extreme modification. If the ocean wanted to crush me, I had to become something denser. Something fluid. Something that could embrace the pressure.

I took a piece of volcanic glass and I... *finished the renovation*. I carved away the weakness. I shed the tail. It was an agonizing liberation. A little potion, a little magic, a little rhyme, a little ditty. I reforged myself. Glorious. Prehensile. Sleek.

To create my new tail, I needed something to let me reach. Stretch. Feel. Grab. Something to hold on with. Not clingy, but tight. Something that sucked, in all the best ways, of course.

Eight powerful limbs of pure muscle and grip. Bright white like a beluga, with the blue from my original form remaining in these gorgeous rings.

Constricting. Sure, it's a little toxic. Well... very toxic. But not as toxic as living life as someone I'm not.

That is when they started calling me the Sea Witch. A hag.

Hag? Please. Do I look like a hag to you? Don't answer that. You want to survive to the end of this story, don't you?

I built a life down here in the dark. A sanctuary for the other mistakes Lir tries to flush away. My tragics. They're sad, it's true. Yet I help them. I give them a mother to cling to. It's an even exchange, mostly. Though I admit, I often end up getting the sashimi end of the deal. They are all poor. None of them have fortune. But they do have souls. So we make a little deal, and I give them what they need to survive the world that hates them.

But no matter how sad and pathetic they all may be, there are none of them who have suffered as much as me. For amongst all the souls that I might possess, and I do own quite a few kept nicely in my cabinet, it is and will

always be mine that is truly the most tragic. And it's not that I ask for much. My fortune isn't in fame or a crown or even that damned Spear. I just want to visit my sister's grave. To pay my respects without an army trying to spear me. Spare me!

Oh, what I would offer to be out of the shadow! What I would trade! I'd like to go where the mer go. Maybe even to join them... to take part in their singing. It would also be nice to enjoy my nieces as we watch The Great Waves. What's it? Churn. Sorry, the pain makes it hard to think sometimes.

Twirling this ganglia won't get me anywhere in polite society. Fins are required for swimming in their waters. I simply... I just... I want to be included.

I'm not asking much, am I?

Chapter 1

Doesn't Feel Like A Flat Fish

“Hold still, Pegasus. If you keep twitching, I am going to graft this compass to your spleen instead of your dorsal fin.”

The seahorse was vibrating with anxiety. He was a nervous little wreck, terrified of his own shadow. He had been hovering in my entryway for the better part of an hour, wringing his fins and blabbering about his mother having her head lopped off by a barracuda.

“It won’t hurt, will it?” he squeaked.

“Of course it will hurt,” I said, dipping the needle into the pot of luminescent ink. “Pain is how the body learns to pay attention. But once the swelling goes down, you will have the wings you need to fly through the water and escape the barracuda who decapitated your mother.”

Pegasus flinched. I rolled my eyes and grabbed him by the tail. With a quick, precise motion, I injected the spell directly into the nerve cluster at the base of his fins.

He yelped. The magic took hold immediately, a pulse of blue light traveling up his spine. Then his tiny fins evolved into grand wings.

“Done,” I said, wiping my hands on a rag of sea-silk. “Now get out, you great winged beast.”

“Thank you, Mistress Octavia. Thank you,” he stammered, backing away. He looked at the garden of barnacles writhing in the substrate near the door and shuddered.

“Don’t stare at the landscaping, Pegasus. It’s rude.”

He turned and bolted, swimming frantically toward the surface. I watched him go, a tiny speck of anxiety disappearing into the crushing black of the trench.

I sighed and rubbed my temples. Another satisfied customer. Another pro bono case. I really needed to start charging better rates, but these desperate little fish never had anything of value. Just sob stories and trauma. And gods know, I have enough of my own.

I turned back to my cauldron. The mixture inside was cooling, a thick sludge of sea snake venom and crushed pearl. I needed to bottle it before it congealed.

The Trench was quiet. My little redpuss babies, Speckle and Dot, were coiled around the rafters of the ribcage, sleeping. As octopi, they worshipped me. The barnacles were lifelessly grazing on my garden wall, moaning softly. Life was peaceful. I was home, and I was even able to help other seafolk. In my way. Most of all, it was the only place in the ocean where I didn’t have to apologize for my very existence.

Then the pressure dropped.

It slammed into the Trench, a sudden, violent vacuum that popped the sinuses behind my eyes. The water temperature plummeted, stripping away the geothermal warmth of the vent. And then came the light. It was the sanctimonious silver glow of the Royal Court. It flooded the entryway, bleaching the shadows. The redpussies woke up instantly, uncoiling and inking the water. The tragics shrieked silently and shrank into the sand. I didn't need to turn around. I knew that light. It tasted like metal on my tongue.

"You don't knock," I said, keeping my back to the door. "But then again, invaders rarely do."

"Turn around, Octavius."

The name hit my nervous system harder than the pressure drop. It was a dead thing. A ghost he insisted on dragging into the room every time he visited.

I took a slow breath, centering myself. I checked my reflection in the side of the cauldron. Lipstick perfect. Hair defying gravity. Tentacles relaxed but ready to crush bone if necessary.

I turned.

King Lir floated in the entrance of my home, surrounded by a battalion of royal guards. He was shirtless, of course, displaying those sculpted abdominals that he spent more time polishing than he did governing. His tail was a brilliantly offensive orange. His crown was glowing with enough

wattage to blind a shark. And in his hand, he held the Spear. The thin platinum phallus that thought it was a spin cycle.

"It is Octavia," I said, my voice low. "We have discussed this, Lir. If you cannot use the correct name, you can wait outside until you learn to read the nameplate."

"I will not validate your delusions," he boomed. His voice was magnified by magic, shaking the silt on the floor. "I am here because you have committed crimes against nature."

"I commit many crimes, darling. You will have to be more specific. Was it the tax evasion or the fact that I refuse to recycle?"

"The flatfish," he spat. "The boy. Uriel. You have defiled his sacred vessel."

Ah. My masterpiece.

"The Angelfish," I corrected, gliding toward my vanity to check my nails. "He identifies as an Angelfish now. And he looks stunning, doesn't he? The yellow really brings out his eyes."

"You polluted him!" Lir roared. The water around him boiled with his righteous indignation. "You took a creature made in the image of the Deep and you warped him. You defied the Great Design. His parents are mourning the loss of his soul. The court is sickened."

"His parents are boring, and the court is jealous," I said, turning to face him fully. I expanded my mantle, flaring my colors. I made sure to look large.

“The boy was unhappy. He felt small. He felt drab. He came to me, weeping, begging to be seen. I simply... corrected nature’s oversight. I gave him the geometry he needed to feel fabulous. Is that a crime?”

“It is blasphemy!” Lir pointed the Spear at me. Tiny swirls churned at the tip. “You play god with flesh, Octavius. You take what is holy and you stain it with your ego. You infect the waters.”

I stopped. The water between us felt charged. The hatred in his eyes was more than just political; it was religious.

“I fix what is broken,” I said. “Biomancy is evolution through the science of magic. It’s the refusal to accept the hand you were dealt.”

“It is forbidden by the Ancient Laws!” he shouted. “I explicitly forbade you from practicing your dark arts when I banished you to this pit. And yet, I see you have turned this grave into a temple of perversion.”

He looked past me, at the garden of tragics. His face twisted in a look of pious pity.

“Look at them,” he said. “Is this how you honor my wife’s memory? You wear her necklace that you stole off of her body. Carlotta looks down and weeps to see her own bloodline so corrupted. Is this what the Queen’s brother has been reduced to?”

The silence that followed was absolute. Even the current seemed to stop. My blood went cold. The audacity got me. He floated there, in the home I built from nothing, invoking the name of the sister he failed to protect, and

using her ghost to beat me into submission. He claimed her memory like property.

I felt the suckers on my tentacles tighten, gripping the stone floor until it cracked.

I rose.

I didn't mean to. It was a reflex. My body expanded, the water displacing around me with a violent rush. I uncoiled, towering over him, casting a shadow that swallowed his precious light.

"Do not," I hissed, "speak her name. You forfeited the right to speak her name the day you let her die. I tried to give this trinket back and you banished me. It is the only thing I have of her. You never even mourned her."

"I mourn her every day!" Lir shouted, though I saw him float back a few inches. "Each day I see my daughters live without their mother is a day I have to mourn what was taken."

Maybe that was true. Maybe there was more to the merman than muscle.

"I am the King!" Lir shouted. The guards leveled their spears, their hands shaking. "And I am commanding you to cease this madness. You will reverse the spell on the fish. You will dissolve this garden. And you will stop this butchery. Or I will cleanse this trench myself."

I laughed. It was a dry, rasping sound.

"Cleanse it?" I asked. "You think you can cleanse me?"

"I am the King of the Ocean," he said, gripping the Spear. "I hold the power of the pools."

“Then do it,” I whispered. I spread my arms wide. I offered him my chest, the soft tissue between the clavicles where the hearts beat. “If I am such a twisted thing, such a violation against your precious nature... *Execute me*. Take me in front of the kingdom and execute me in front of all your subjects.”

Lir froze. The guards shifted nervously. They hadn’t signed up for regicide. Or whatever the killing of a Queen’s sibling was called. He didn’t see me as a brother-in-law anymore. He saw a monster. But he also saw the sister of the woman he loved.

“If you think you can,” I taunted. “But you see, I have thought about this. Why haven’t you killed me yet? It’s either because you love my sister too much and have too much loyalty... Which sounds far too much like integrity to be real.”

I leaned in, my face inches from his. I could smell the fear coming off the Spear.

“Or you don’t think you can,” I purred. “Tell me, are you afraid that your little Spear isn’t big enough to reach this deep? The only way you can make a dent is if you try.”

His eyes darted from my face to my tentacles, then to the crushing darkness surrounding us. He was calculating. He was afraid. He knew that down here, in the pressure, his whirlpool was slower.

“So,” I said, my voice dropping to a growl. “Why don’t you either fin around and find out, Kingy? Or turn around and get out? Now. What will it be?”

For a second, I thought he might do it. I saw the muscles in his arm tense. I saw the hatred flare in his eyes.

But Lir is a politician. And politicians never strike unless they are sure they can win.

He lowered the weapon.

I sneered, exposing a row of sharpened teeth.

“I have seen jellyfish with more backbone.”

He flinched. But he didn’t raise the Spear again. He gathered his composure, straightening his spine into that rigid, self-righteous posture of his.

“This is not over,” he said, his voice tight with judgment. “You are warned, Octavius. One more scale out of place. One more whisper of magic reaching the surface... and I will bury you in this trench.”

“My name is OCTAVIA!” I screamed.

The sound tore out of my throat, raw and violent. It echoed off the walls, a shockwave that sent the tragnics retreating further into the sand.

Lir didn’t look back. He signaled his guards and swam away, his silver light fading, retreating back to the shallow world where things were easy and simple and people didn’t have to look at the monsters they created.

The darkness rushed back in. It was comforting and heavy like a cold blanket.

I hovered there for a long time. I was shaking.

“Coward,” I whispered to the empty water.

I went to the cabinet and pulled out a bottle of fermented kelp spirits. I didn’t bother with a glass. I pulled the cork with my teeth and drank until the burning in my throat matched the burning in my soul.