

Hidden

Halfnote, youngest girl apprentice in Verre House of Glass Singers, knew very well she wasn't supposed to see Octavia's test. Only those who had already passed the singer's test – glass singers and masters of a glassmaking house – could attend. That meant, as strange as it seemed, that Mama stood among the crowd of witnesses and Grandma did not. It also meant that Halfnote should be in the kitchen with the other Verre House apprentices helping cook Alma prepare for Octavia's victory celebration.

But I have to be here.

The mental picture of Alma and the other apprentices hard at work in the kitchen gave her a guilty pang. She tugged nervously on the end of one tight braid. What if Alma sent someone to look for her?

I'll just make sure they don't find me.

Halfnote pressed her lips together firmly in the way that she knew Octavia did when she made up her mind about something. And no one would dare to disturb Octavia's test. Not even Alma.

Nevertheless, Halfnote kept very still in her hiding place under the black marble stairs. She'd made a spot for herself between some worn out bellows and an old supply cart with a broken wheel. From here, she could stay hidden and still see the making platform.

Octavia stood ready – back straight, hands clasped – on the platform, also built out of black marble. The freshly scrubbed hard stone still showed signs of the wear left by its use by generations of glass singers.

A leather work scarf, meant as protection against errant sparks, covered Octavia's carefully braided black hair.

Bright sunlight from three clear glass windows set into the rounded ceiling filtered down onto the raised forming dais just behind Octavia.

She doesn't even look worried. Halfnote felt her own jittery stomach clench. *Of course Octavia isn't nervous.*

But how could she not be? Octavia had to pass this test to become a glass singer. If she failed, Octavia would have to find another trade.

Of course she won't fail. Octavia never failed at anything.

Octavia took a breath and considered the wrinkles around the knuckles of her tightly clasped hands. She felt the indrawn air pressing out against the wall of her lungs.

Balance ... she told herself, slowly pushing the air out again. *Harmony. I have completed these tasks a thousand times. I only need to stay calm and do what I already know how to do.*

Would the test never begin?

Halfnote took a breath and peered out at the twenty or so witnesses lined around one side of the former cavern that now held Verre House's main creation room. By sheer chance, or the designs of dragons, depending on who told the story, the walls of this rounded, underground space naturally caught and amplified sounds voiced from the center of the forming dais. Halfnote knew no other glass house could boast such a wonder.

By looking carefully through the forest of legs in front of her hiding place she could just find Mama at the front of the crowd of witnesses, near the cluster of Verre House staff. For once Mama wore her light brown hair in the tight braids of a glass worker instead of her

usual decorative shells and loose Khelani bun. Tiny motes of light flashed off the clear crystal of Mama's dragon's head charm, sign that she was a singer in the Guild of Glass Singers.

The strangest thing, to Halfnote, was Mama's clothing.

For the first time that she could remember, Mama wore the full red and green robes of a Verre House singer. Mama earned her robes, and her dragon's head, in those hard-to-imagine years that Halfnote could only think of as *before*.

Before you were born, Mama would say with a smile as she began some story. Or, even more impossible to consider, *before I met your father ...*

As Halfnote watched, Mama's river green eyes sought out and found Octavia's black eyes. Octavia flinched and looked away. A thrill of nerves scurried up Halfnote's back. The nest of crow's feet around Mama's eyes deepened. Mama's mouth twisted into an expression both proud and concerned. Halfnote crinkled her own eyes in dismay.

Could ever confident Octavia truly feel afraid on this most important of days?

Octavia's test

Grandpa, resplendent as always in the full red and gold robes that declared him Grand Master of Verre House, stepped forward into the center of the room. He gave a polite bow to the trio of solemn-faced judges who stood to one side. They responded in kind. Besides the colorful robes of their respective houses, Grandpa and each of the judges wore the heavy gold charms that declared them grand masters. The senior judge, a white haired woman bent with age, gestured with one shaking hand. The witnesses fell silent. Grandpa, his coal black eyes bright with pride, smiled at Octavia, as did Mama and most of the audience. So did Halfnote. She forgot for the moment that she couldn't, or at least, shouldn't, be seen. Octavia swallowed and nodded.

"The test begins."

Grandpa's practiced bass tones reverberated off the rounded walls as he stepped quickly back out of the way.

"The test begins ... begins ... begins ..."

Octavia built up the fire under the cooling bath, bringing the coals to a steady, moderate burn. She wanted the water warm, not hot.

It must be just cool enough that the glass solidified instantly when it dropped into the bath. If the water was too hot, the creation would remain liquid and lose its shape. Too cool and the piece would shatter on impact.

Octavia's test drop – a single, molten tear – hit the water and formed a perfect ball. Despite the strict rule of silence during a test, Halfnote heard the slightest hum of a group exhalation. Octavia had easily passed the first challenge.

Octavia sighed as well. The tightness in her shoulders eased ever so slightly. Sweat dripped from the edges of her leather hair covering. The sweat darkened the back of her cream-colored work dress; made new for the occasion, of course, and of a shade that naturally set off Octavia's raven hair and eyes. Halfnote felt her own shoulders relax a bit.

Octavia filled the granite melting box with yellow sand: one, two, three scoops and an extra sprinkle for luck. She worked the foot bellows until fierce flames surrounded the granite container evenly on all sides.

Halfnote didn't have to see the sand to know what happened next. The yellow grains of sand would sit there as the air around the melting box grew hotter. Suddenly, just as an inattentive maker might grow bored and look away, golden liquid would bubble up and swallow the dry grains from below. Soon even the last stubborn bits in the middle vanished into liquid.

Octavia started to sway and hum. The sand's transformation was complete. Halfnote bit her lip in anticipation as Octavia produced a deep, toneless vibrato from the center of her diaphragm.

Octavia's clear soprano, caught and magnified by the swirling grooves in the forming chamber's spiral granite columns, swelled until the vibrations shook the dust free from the floor. Halfnote clapped both hands over her mouth and nose to keep from sneezing. Any unexpected sound at this point would be disastrous.

The forming process began.

Breathing in a deep, rhythmic fashion, Octavia focused her tones on the molten glass. Carefully, ever so carefully, she wrapped the sound of her voice around the swirling ball of liquid. By the response of the vibrations holding that globe Octavia could tell its weight and size. By subtly changing pitch and frequency Octavia could shrink or expand the ball, or even divide it into pieces.

Time all but stopped. Halfnote watched the sphere coalesce. She shifted impatiently, knowing Octavia wouldn't settle for anything less than a perfect globe. Sometimes she wished Octavia could stand a little less perfection.

The pitch of Octavia's song rose and the whirling, glowing ball rose with it. Carried by rhythmic pulses of voice the ball moved up from the melting box to hover in the center of the forming chamber, directly above the cooling bath.

Octavia's song changed again, its vibrations intensifying. The hot and swirling ball elongated as she quickened her rhythm. Now the pulsing movement of sound began to push the liquid glass into the creation's basic shape.

Most apprentices chose a fairly simple object for their test – a many-petaled stalk of lavender or aconite, with the leaves and petals easily spinning out from the center; or an ornate, twisting representation of a dragon, again with the exterior decorations spinning out from the fast-moving center.

As usual, however, Octavia wanted to impress. Halfnote knew Octavia's plans. The two sisters had discussed little else in the preceding weeks.

Octavia intended to create not one dragon, but three.

She meant to make a representation of Mother Piasa from a central clockwise swirl. At the same time she planned to create Mother Piasa's two surviving children. And, just to show she could, she would make them simultaneously, with a counter clockwise swirl.

"But that's master's work," Halfnote gasped when Octavia first told her.

"I know," Octavia smiled. "That's the point."

That afternoon they had been assigned to do Verre House's monthly mending. They settled comfortably on to one of the double beds in the apprentice girls' room to talk and sew. Halfnote replaced buttons and straightened sagging hems while Octavia tackled ripped sleeves, burnt cuffs and more complicated issues.

“Grandfather doesn’t think I can do the counter clockwise swirl.” She glared at her needle and thread as if they had somehow insulted her as well. “I want to add color, too. Just a hint of green on the edges but he won’t let me.”

“Why not? I’ve seen you do it lots of times.”

The sound of a throat clearing made them both jump. Halfnote looked up to see Grandma, still dressed in a simple blue house dress, standing in the doorway. Her long, thick hair was freshly dyed a bright red. It had been curled and wrapped in protective cotton cloths in preparation for her evening performance at Albermarle’s Grand Dragon Theater.

“The craft exam is meant only as a test of basic skills, dear heart.” Grandma’s elaborate curls bounced as she spoke. “A simple melody clearly sung will pass. A complicated chorus performed poorly will not. We all know you have great talent. Why make things more difficult for yourself?”

Octavia’s lips thinned and her nostrils flared but she didn’t say anything. Halfnote wondered if this might be a good time to drop a button so she would have to crawl under the bed to retrieve it.

Grandma considered the girls a moment longer with the river green eyes she’d bequeathed to Mama and sighed.

“Anyway, hurry up with the mending. Once it’s finished you’re needed in the smaller making room.”

“I’m still doing the counter clockwise swirl,” Octavia muttered into her sewing, but only when she knew for certain that Grandma couldn’t hear her.

With this image in mind, Halfnote simply smiled when, under the quickening vibrations of Octavia’s song, two smaller balls separated from the central sphere of molten glass. Some of the witnesses looked worried. They thought Octavia was losing control.

She’ll show them. The making energy set her thick braids to trembling.

Halfnote’s smile broadened as Octavia began a double vibrato. The main pulse of her voice shaped the central sphere while the counter pulse carefully slowed and separated the courses of the two smaller balls. Slowly, carefully, the three whirling pieces lengthened into their final shapes. Halfnote heard the in-drawing of breath around the room as Octavia’s plan became apparent to everyone else. Octavia’s voice deepened triumphantly as she added the final touches to all three pieces. Not just a rendering of Mother Piasa and her children, but a very detailed creation including perked ears, hooked tails, individual scales, grasping claws.

She’s done it. Halfnote barely suppressed a cheer.

The glass screams

I’ve done it, Octavia thought. Arms extended, she drew in the deep breath necessary for her notes of completion.

A shrill screaming filled the room.

What?

What? Halfnote jumped, banging her head painfully against the thick stone above.

The glass is screaming. But why?

Halfnote stuffed her hands into her mouth to keep from crying out as she watched Octavia, white with shock, falter.