

Alive and well

Octavia pulled her mass of dark braids into a tight bun with quick, practiced hands. She glanced at the mirror to make sure all was in order. Her eyes flinched instantly away from the round glass's silver surface. Taking a calming breath, she forced herself to look back at her reflection. She kept looking at it until her heart's pounding slowed to normal.

Only the undisturbed image of her own black eyes returned her determined gaze.

"I am Octavia Breydon, a glass singer of Verre House." Alone in her room in the early morning no one else would hear. "I survived the monstrous mirror. Perhaps not by my own voice, but still. I survive." She took another breath. "Now I have a new gift to share."

Octavia smiled. Her double smiled back.

See, her image seemed to tell her, *all is well. All will be well.*

"Octavia?" Sylvia called. "Are you awake?"

Halfnote, youngest apprentice of Verre House of Glass Singing, put the heavy tray down on the table outside her grandparents' door. Both Grand Master and Madame Verre had recently recovered from the plague and so chose to breakfast in their own chambers.

Halfnote raised a hand to knock. She paused at the sound of voices inside. Of course she shouldn't listen. Of course she couldn't help overhearing anyway.

"Fortis, you look nearly as ill as when you suffered from plague. Shall we ask Octavia in to diagnose this new ailment?" Grandma asked. Halfnote could not make out the words in Grandpa's rumbling response.

"Honestly, Fortis. Must you worry? Surely this new ability of Octavia's is a blessing and not a curse. She is well. Thanks to her we are all alive and well."

"This apparent gift ... I'm afraid it means that the tainted mirror's influence continues," Grandpa said.

Halfnote sucked in her breath. From the sound of it, so did Grandma. "Will Octavia become *mortolo* after all?"

"Not a monster, no. I believe that danger is past, dragons be praised." Halfnote let out a relieved breath.

"But ..." Halfnote strained to hear the answer.

"I don't know," Grandpa admitted. "I just don't know what will happen next. *That* is what concerns me. I have read every scroll in our library. I am writing to all of the most learned scholars. As far I can find out, no one else has ever survived the monstrous glass. That's why I asked Physician Cornelius to observe Octavia as she makes her diagnoses. If anything unusual happens perhaps he will know what to do. And you may be right. I may worry unnecessarily."

"But," Grandma prompted again. "You must have some reason for your concern."

"There are rumors, ancient stories of glass walkers; who deliberately entered the living glass and returned."

"Alive?"

"Ye...es, though not always unchanged."

"Octavia appears ... better for her experience."

"I hope so. But she will now certainly be of interest to anyone who dabbles in the dark arts. I have already received some enquiries which give me reason for concern. If anyone is still foolish enough to try creating living glass, they will most certainly have an interest in Octavia."

Halfnote considered her own encounter with the mirror. Would it affect her as well? She didn't feel any different. She wanted to ask Grandpa but now certainly didn't seem like the right time.

"Sandrigal, I do not understand. Explain what is happening in Albermarle. How could anyone survive the *mortolo*?" Bhima Suresha Niliya Anula, Queen Mother of Samoya, demanded. She stood in an outer room of her tower chambers, peering out the great window at the clear morning sky. Queen's Companion Clara stood straight-backed beside the curtain, hands clasped, attentive to whatever her mistress might require.

"I do beg your pardon, Brightest Star," Sandrigal, the Queen's Scryer, replied. Daylight reflected off the intricately intertwined red and silver dragons decorating the giant looking glass's frame. "I can add little to what you already know. As far as I can tell, your great-grandson's report was correct in every detail."

"So this Octavia was devoured by the unformed healing mirror?"

"Indeed, my Queen. Grand Master Verre was already stricken with plague when they attempted to make the mirror. He fainted at a critical point. The singer naturally moved to protect her grandfather. She saved him but was taken herself."

"Yet she survived even though the mirror was destroyed."

"As the Intan reported."

"Was the *mortolo* truly destroyed?"

"Yes, Illumined One. Completely destroyed."

"And yet, Verre House discovered and disseminated the cure to a plague no one else could stop. What of Octavia? My agents say she now diagnoses the sick. Apparently she brought back remedies for all other ailments as well."

"It does appear that Octavia absorbed the unformed mirror's healing properties. She spends her hours observing the ill and providing remedies, as a mirror would."

"A human *Hygeia potencia*," Queen Anula murmured. "In all your days, Sandrigal, have you ever heard of such a thing?"

"No, Great Lady. There is no precedent that I am aware of."

"Has she become a true creature of the glass? I wonder ... I have heard stories of others who walked through living mirrors. Not *mortolo*, of course, but formed and settled mirrors such as yourself. Having entered a mirror and returned once, do you think Octavia could do so again?"

A moment passed. "It seems likely."

"Yes. Excellent. You will bring her to me. You *can* bring her, can't you, Sandrigal?"

His silver surface rippled. Clara thought the looking glass seemed agitated, if that was possible of a solid object.

"Sandrigal. Answer. Can you bring her to me?"

"My Gracious Queen ... the matter is complex. Much depends on Melampus. Perhaps ... at the peak of the full moon ... we do not know if she has changed ...

"How can we know that?"

"Further observations ..."

"Pah. The time for watching is done. Now is the time to act. If we wait too long someone else will take her. We will know for certain if she can do what I require when she enters the mirror."

“Apologies, Beautiful Majesty, but I must recommend caution. If she is not been changed, Octavia might still be brought to us by Melampus; however, once she enters the mirror she will not leave it. To destroy such a talent ...”

“Once inside the mirror, changed or not, will the glass singer do as I require?”

“If she survives the entry, Bright Star, I believe so. However, I do not believe she could live through such a thing unless she has undergone a true metamorphosis.”

“Surely this healing ability she now manifests is a sign of transformation.”

“Not ... necessarily.”

“Enough, Sandrigal. You grow as cautious as the girl’s cowardly grandfather. It is time to put theory into practice. Clara, call Melampus. Our preparations begin.”

It looked almost like a normal day at Verre House, Halfnote thought as she joined the breakfast table. She sat with Robbie and cook Alma next to the kitchen. The rest of the apprentices sat next to them. The older staff, those with the hard-earned rank of singer, argued noisily about the uses of melody at the other end.

Octavia and their grandparents were the only usual occupants missing. No visitors remained. The now healthy Samoyan royal party and their shrill-voiced crown prince, the Intan Negarawan, left as soon as the quarantine was lifted. Even new master Lorraine and her husband Geoffrey had returned to their own home.

Halfnote sighed. Mama and Papa were also gone. They left the day after the Samoyans, eager to collect baby Cadie and cousin Mischa from the northern village of Haverley. They would return in a few days, but she always missed them when they were away.

Alma, Verre House’s portly cook, surprised everyone with the announcement of a trip to the market.

“Can I go?” Marissa, the oldest apprentice, asked eagerly. “I’m desperate for some fresh air.”

“Oh me too,” the other apprentices echoed. Halfnote and Robbie just grinned at each other. As the youngest apprentices they *had* to go to the market with Alma.

“Settle down. I can’t take everyone. Dan, Galliard, you’ll stay and wash up.”

Galliard, the oldest boy apprentice stopped whistling his scales long enough to nod. Dan, the next oldest boy, scowled and dropped his fork onto his plate with a loud clatter. Alma ignored him.

“When you’ve finished the dishes, go see Master Verre. He needs to send some messages to the aviary, to let your families know that you are well.”

Galliard whistled cheerful agreement. Dan’s scowl deepened

“Is the aviary even open?” Frank, the oldest singer, asked. He blinked at Alma through thick spectacles.

“I think so. They always send the first flight of pigeons out about dawn. Didn’t you hear them this morning? All that fluttering and cooing just after first light?”

“But what about the market? The quarantine only ended a couple of days ago. Will the farmers know they can come back?”

The cook shrugged. “Somehow word always gets around. I have to think that at least the closest farmers will come in. People still need to eat; and to earn a living. We can’t be the only household in Albermarle running out of just about everything. Robbie, Halfnote, when you’re finished eating, grab the shopping bags. Marissa, when *you’re* done, hail a carriage. Frank, what do you need on the business side?”

“As you say, Alma, we’re out of just about everything. Dan and Galliard can help me do an inventory after they get back from the aviary. If you could just see who’s open for business, that would help.”

The cook nodded. “We’re also in desperate need of ordinary bowls and plates and cutlery. The Samoyans cleared us out.”

“What did they want with our dishes?” perennially cranky Phyllis asked. The singer’s spindly fingers tugged on the buttons of her blouse the way they always did when she was nervous.

“Well, they all wanted their souvenir of Verre House, didn’t they?” Alma laughed. “We are the founding house of glass singing, after all. This is the place where dragon and human made their amazing pact of cooperation. Even the Samoyans are impressed by that. And our glass is famous for not breaking, among other things. After everything that happened I could hardly begrudge them a few plates and spoons. If one of you singers could organize the making of a full set I’d appreciate it. I’ve made a list of what we need. Add the supplies for that to your inventory, Frank.”

Phyllis scowled again but Martin, another singer, spoke up before she could break into a fresh complaint. “I’ll lead the making.” He ran a hand across his bare head. Most glass singers, male and female alike, kept their uncut hair in thick braids.

Halfnote knew Martin considered braiding too much trouble, so opted for a clean shave instead. “Can the twins help me get started after breakfast?”

Annie and Alice, apprentices a year and a half older than Halfnote, nodded. Annie smiled.

“Oh, and while you’re at it, I could use a mirror,” the cook added. “I gave mine to Healer Argana.”

The table fell silent until Frank cleared his throat. “All right Alma,” he said, though he blinked furiously behind his spectacles, “I’ll see to the mirror. I’d rather make just about anything than scrub another floor.”

Halfnote’s eyes lingered on the empty chair next to Sylvia. Octavia had left at dawn to speak to the city physicians and to continue her diagnoses of the sick. It wouldn’t really be a normal day at Verre House until her sister returned to singing the glass with everyone else.