

**I Played One Video Game and
Now I'm a Servant to an
ABSOLUTELY SHREDDED
Final Boss!**

BY OCTAVIUS J. OPUS

(Beta Read)

Foreword:

Thank you for volunteering to beta read my first full-length novel! I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. It's been a wild ride.

For this read, I don't need in-line comments or anything too in-depth, though if you prefer giving detailed feedback please feel free. What I'm mostly looking for is the following:

- How's my pacing? Are there any parts that dragged or seemed rushed?
- Is the story enjoyable? Who are your favorite characters?
- I feel like fight scenes are my weak point. Is there a way I can make them seem more action-packed without breaking the overall narrative style of the story?
- What do you think the main theme or message of this book is?
- This is probably a minor issue, but the title rubs me the wrong way. It's to-market for this genre but I feel like it's *so stupid*. What do you think of it? Love it? Hate it? Should I go with my original title ("Octopod!") or go back to the drawing board?

If this beta interests you enough to want to keep up with my future works, you can follow me at either

www.facebook.com/weirdstoriesforweirdpeople or

www.reddit.com/r/octopustales

Thanks again!

ACT I

Chapter 1

It was made of glass, tinted red, and had two rows of little suction cups molded along one side.

“Do people really put this thing up their cooch?” I held up the glass dildo for the cashier to see. *Lover’s Paradise* might have been a local legend because it carried so many weird novelty toys, but I still couldn’t believe anyone would spend sixty dollars on a pseudo-tentacle.

“Oh, you’d be surprised! We get those in regularly and we sell out of ‘em pretty fast,” said the cashier. “They’re supposed to be good for G-Spot stimulation. Not great for anal, though, since the glass doesn’t flex.”

I looked at the black box. “RELEASE THE KRAKEN!” was plastered across the front in yellow letters. The back of the box was plastered with phrases like “taking your pleasure to terrifying heights” and “monstrously orgasmic.” I snorted. What kind of person wanted giant tentacles writhing inside of them?

“It’s interesting, but I’m looking for something a little more human,” I said, putting the “Kraken” back in its place. As a 35-year-old woman, I was no stranger to pleasure. I’d had good lovers, great lovers, and lovers who blew my mind. (I’d also had some god-awful lovers during my promiscuous 20s that I didn’t ever want getting near my naked body ever again.) Right now, I didn’t have anyone — but I still had my “needs” to fill.

Thirty minutes passed. I settled for a small bullet to replace the one I accidentally dropped in the toilet, a clearance dong nicknamed “The Stud”, and one of my guilty pleasures – a paperback romance novel with a pack of rippling abs dominating the cover.

“Okay, that’ll be sixty-nine dollars, and six – *waitamminute.*” The young cashier giggled like a little kid. “Oh my goooood, *your total is sixty-nine sixty nine...!*”

“Is it?” A grin crawled across my face. “Bet you see that a lot here.”

“No! I’ve never seen that! Maybe it’s a sign you’re gonna be blessed by the sex gods.”

“Actually, I’m atheist,” I told her as I swiped my card. “But I officially invite any big, sexy god who wants to make magic happen in my pants to make a believer out of me.”



Rain sprinkled down from grey skies and splashed onto the lenses on my glasses. The mid-summer day wasn’t muggy yet, which meant my dyed-blond hair would only frizz to half the size of Mount Rushmore.

The air downtown smelled like a mixture of wet leaves and hot cement. I wished I was sitting at my favorite café, hearing the rain gently patter against the pink striped awning, warm chai tea in a little mug and the taste of sugar lingering on my lips.

I couldn’t do that. I had errands to run.

Maybe I can get everything done real fast and have time for a donut after, I thought, cramming the black bag under the back seat of my car.

Liar, I scolded myself. *You just spent so much time in **Lover’s Paradise** you’re seeing rubber dicks every time you blink.*

My cellphone's to-do list displayed my next task in obnoxiously-large red letters: **Nathan's Birthday – game w angels fighting giant sea monsters? Flying around. Bow and arrow or slingshot. Expensive? See Drawing.**

My whole back tensed. I had no problem with getting my nephew a big birthday present. It was his eighteenth birthday, he'd graduated near the top of his class, and he'd nabbed a few significant scholarships. That kid deserved a special day. But how did my step-sister think I'd be able to find Nathan's mystery game? I hated video games!

Nancy is a prosecuting attorney, I reminded myself. You're the receptionist at a motorcycle repair joint. You've got time to look. Remember, she's setting aside a day to treat everyone to that expensive Italian dinner. That's hard for her.

I took a deep breath, adjusted my red-rimmed glasses, and began walking towards Fourth Street.



I never thought I would enter a video game store, especially one called *Dragon's Den Gaming*. There were no windows on the ground floor, and the glass door was covered by a purple velvet curtain, so I couldn't tell what the inside was like. My mind conjured up an image of a single, cramped, dark room with dirty video game boxes haphazardly arranged on the shelves for customers to sift through. The floor would be water damaged, wooden boards groaning in protest with each step. The vague stench of black mold would be everywhere, but was the source? The boxes? Somewhere in the walls? The curtain draped over the door? And, of course, the world's worst cashier: a

bored teenager who wasn't legally old enough to work, sitting in the corner with a smartphone-turned-register in his hand, waiting for me to leave so he could get back to texting his friends about how unfair it was that he couldn't get "420" tattooed across his cheek.

My stomach turned at the imaginary Dragon's Den.

As I passed through the curtained entryway I let out the breath I was holding. Video game boxes were neatly arranged on sturdy wooden shelves. Signs dangling from the ceiling announced the types of games available – board games, tabletop gaming, video games, card games – in a faux medieval font. An enormous felt dragon tapestry on the back wall (which probably took a while to make) announced that comic books, DVDs, and collectibles were available upstairs. A woody scent hung in the air, strong enough to be noticeable but faint enough where I didn't want to puke.

The front counter had a service bell covered in tiny dragon stickers. The sign next to it read "Need something? Ring me to summon a Gaming Master." I tapped the button on top of the bell.

"Coming!" called a deep, scratchy voice.

I stiffened. The store itself was neat. The middle-aged man wearing the *Magical Boy* t-shirt heading towards me was not. He had several small metal earrings in his left ear and his patchy, curly red hair glistened with sweat.

"Good afternoon," he chirped, holding out a hairy hand for me to shake. "I'm Mac. Welcome to the Dragon's Den! What can I help you find today?"

"Hello," I said. My fingers barely wrapped around his huge hand. "I'm looking for an old game, but I don't know what it is. My nephew played it once at a friend's house, around ten years ago..."

"Do you know which system it was for?"

“...uh?”

“Which console did he play it on? MegaSys? GameGorilla? Super Pro? Maybe Tomodachi Hub?” It might have been a basic question. I couldn’t tell. My brain had spontaneously morphed into a bowl of chowder.

“I, uh, don’t know anything about games,” I finally managed. “It’s for a birthday present.”

“That’s okay!” The warm smile that broke across Mac’s face was genuine. “You know what it was about? Or the names of any of the characters? I’ve played a lot of games and a hint might help me figure out what it is.”

“Ahhh...” I was having too much difficulty processing the “geek” in front of me to focus. “He said it was a game about angels fighting giant sea monsters. He remembers flying around and using a bow and arrow, or a slingshot, or something like that.”

“Rrrright. Unfortunately, there’s more than one game that fits that description,” Mac said, “though that does narrow it down a lot. Does he remember anything else?”

“He drew a picture.” I brought up Nathan’s drawing on my smartphone. “Does this help?”

Mac’s pale grey eyes bugged. “Ohhhh yeah, I *definitely* know what that is. Oh, man.” He grimaced, revealing very square, even teeth. “We actually *do* have a copy, but...”

“What?” I let out a nervous laugh. “Is it expensive?”

“Well, I have a copy for sixty-five dollars, so it’s not too expensive, but the issue is,” Mac explained, “that it’s a region-locked game for the JP exclusive *GameGorilla HAPPY*, so you need a Japanese console and an outlet adaptor

to play it. Then, you'd need a Japanese memory card on top of that if you wanted to save. The console itself is almost impossible to find nowadays.”

“I see.” Whatever he was talking about sounded out-of-budget. “Thank you for telling me. I'll call Nancy and let her know that I'm buying him something else.”

“Hold on,” Mac's voice grew louder. “Is your nephew hard-set on playing the original? Because there was a 15th anniversary re-release last year for the FantaMeg that would be a lot cheaper, and it had a US release.”

“Uh... sure.”

“Follow me.” I saw pure joy across Mac's face for about a quarter of a second before he half-walked, half-bounced towards the staircase leading upstairs.

The second floor was slightly less neat than the downstairs, with large white boxes stuffed with comics lining tables along one of the walls. A large window let grey daylight seep into the room. In the center was a display case with several dozen figurines of animated characters midmotion underneath thick glass. I would have ignored it had I not noticed a large price tag with “SALE: \$199.99” out of the corner of my eye.

My eyebrows furrowed. Two hundred dollars *on sale*? For a piece of kitsch? I must have been seeing things. I re-read the sign. It still said two hundred dollars. My eyes trailed upward. I had to know – what character would someone spend more than two hundred dollars on?

I found myself looking at tentacles for the second time that day, these ones striped black-and-grey. They curved and looped as if they were frozen in the middle of a hypnotic underwater dance. A scientifically accurate octopus figurine? In a comic book store? No, there were only six tentacles, and there was a brown-skinned human body up top. A male body, stacked like a

superhero, with several large tattoos of tentacles wrapped around him. His clawed fingers were bent into a menacing position. His eyes...

I choked on my own saliva. A brand-new emotion shot through my chest like a miniature lightning bolt. They weren't unusual eyes for a cartoon character, big and "villainous" with a heavy brow. The "whites" of his eyes were pale yellow, and his tiny irises had horizontal pupils, like a goat. They weren't pretty eyes by anyone's standards.

OK, Liz... why is your heart pounding?

The rest of the character's face looked somewhat more attractive, with an angular jawline, squarish nose, and full lips. He had an open smile with pointed grey teeth. Thin, striped tentacles sprouted out of the sides of the figurine's otherwise-bald head and swirled around it, a twisted version of pigtails.

His eyes.

I turned away from the display case. It didn't help. My pulse still thundered in my ears.

The hell is wrong with me? Octopus-man was just a fancy piece of plastic – why did I feel like I was having my first religious experience!?

"Maybe it's a sign you're gonna be blessed by the sex gods."

The words of the *Lover's Paradise* cashier blazed through my mind. Was the octopus man a sex god? Was *I* the one who wanted tentacles writhing inside me!? I shuffled a little. It *did* feel a bit damp down there...

"Found it! Eagle's Quarry, Deluxe Anniversary Edition."

I squeaked. I'd forgot Mac was looking for Nathan's present. "Thank you," I said, plastering my best customer-service smile across my face. Mac handed me the box, to which I replied, "SHIT!"

“...Ma’am?” Mac asked.

“Oh, sorry, I just remembered something I forgot to do, and I need to get it done, and... yep!”

Those fucking eyes were right there on the cover of *Eagle’s Quarry!* The rest of the figure was bathed in shadow, looming above a band of cartoon bird warriors, but there was no mistaking those tentacle-pigtails, or the way his gaze peered out from beneath his brow.

“Is ‘tentacle hunk’ in this game?” I asked, pointing at the figure behind me with my thumb. I kept my focus on Mac so that I wouldn’t accidentally see those painted-on eyes again.

“Ooooooh, good eye!” said Mac. “That’s MC Tentachill, the Big Bad. He’s a moron! He’s got a really hard boss fight, though.”

*See, Liz? I thought. You must be imagining things. No way you’d be having a spiritual experience with someone named **MC Tentachill.***

Chapter 2

“Curiosity killed the cat. *Curiosity* killed the cat. Curiosity *killed* the cat.”

I repeated the cliché aloud, hoping I’d convince myself to return the used console and second copy of *Eagle’s Quarry* sitting in the plastic bag on the seat behind me.

Two weeks had passed between my first and second visits to Dragon’s Den. That meant I’d had at least fourteen dreams about octopuses. Some nights I would dream that I was at an aquarium, where a small one was nestled in the corner of a large tank. Other times I was scuba diving and watching several crawl around a coral reef. Usually I was floating in a dark void, a spread of grey-and-red tentacles before me and nothing else.

Last night, I realized the tentacles were my own.

This is just to shut up your stupid, overactive imagination, I told myself. You’ve done this before. Remember how you worried for three days about how gross Dragon’s Den was going to be? The nightmares you had about finding mold on everything in the fridge? This is the same thing.

My palms started to burn. At some point I’d put my poor steering wheel in a chokehold. I loosened my grip.

You’re overthinking. You’ve talked with your therapist about this. Play the game. Then you’ll realize you’re making shit up, and the weird dreams will go away.

It was a risk-free plan, even for my wallet. Everything from Dragon’s Den had a fourteen-day return policy. I only had to plug in the system, play the game for an hour or two, then return everything. Based on the cover, the game was in that tired “knights-of-old” genre. That meant it would lose my

interest, my anxiety would be eased, all the octopus dreams would stop, and I didn't even have to worry about the \$150 that I just dropped.

I heaved a sigh. In a few hours, I would finally be over those damn eyes.



I rammed against the front door to get it unstuck from its frame. The muggy season was officially here, and with it all the problems unique to an old apartment where an AC unit was against fire code. Several well-placed box fans kept the apartment cool, but did jack shit about the moisture in the air.

I threw my purse onto the kitchen table and headed to the living room area, collapsing onto the worn-out living room couch. Deep breathing techniques the entire ride home didn't ease any of my worries. What if Mac accidentally sold me a broken controller? Was the console compatible with my LCD screen? What if I actually wasn't imagining that Tentachill's eyes...

Nope, not doing this right now. I smashed my face into one of the couch cushions and breathed deeply. The smells of my childhood came rushing in – cigarettes from before dad kicked the habit, mom's favorite perfume, dust from the last forty years, a hint of spilled grape juice. My heartbeat softened and slowed. Feeling calmer, I punched "How to hook up FantastiMega 3000" into my web browser.



When I was seven years old, one of the neighbor kids invited me over to play some game about a purple cat with a ray gun. He jammed in the cartridge, jabbed the power switch, and the room instantly filled with tinny music. But when the FantastiMega 3000 flickered to life, instead a title screen, a host of buttons appeared— Shop, Internet, Profile, Settings. A bossa nova groove wafted out of my speakers. I stared at the complicated startup screen. Did I just buy a game system or a new computer?

After selecting the icon marked *Eagle's Quarry*, a blue sky with puffy white clouds came into view. A gold hawk-boy character, dressed as a medieval peasant, walked onscreen. He stared into the distance with eyes that were big and clear. A brown bird peasant, this one short and plump with beady eyes and big, round glasses, appeared behind him and placed a winglike arm on the first one's shoulder. A duck with curly lashes joined them, tears wobbling at the corners of her enormous green eyes. The world spun around, revealing that the characters were at the edge of a seaside cliff with an enormous, rampaging whirlpool before them. Angry trumpets blared, cymbals crashed, lightning bolts leaped out of the whirlpool. The words *Eagle's Quarry* faded in over the scene. Then, two smaller words in white: *Press Start*.

Which button was “Start?” My thumb accidentally bumped against one marked *B*.

“Select File,” an angelic voice cooed. (Guess I didn't have to press the tiny button marked *Start* after all.) I moved the cursor — a feathered pointing hand — over *New Game* and pressed *B* once more.

“Since ancient times, us Wingfolk have done battle with the greedy Octopods of the Sea Cave Domain.” I wasn't surprised that the game began with an old man's voice narrating over scrolling hieroglyphics. Mac had warned me that *Eagle's Quarry* was “cutscene” mini-movie heavy and that it

“interrupted play flow.” Seafoam covered the hieroglyphics, muffling the music for a few seconds. When the wave ebbed away, a carving of MC Tentachill’s silhouette filled my screen.

“The Octopus God is cruel,” the old man said. “He manipulates the will of his own people with malevolent hymns. It is only by the grace of our Village Goddess that we are unaffected by his twisted music.”

Seafoam covered the hieroglyphics again, uncovering a new scene with a squat, robed, yellow bird-man. He had a pointed hat, curly walking stick, and hairy white eyebrows that took up a quarter of his face. The hawk-boy from the title screen walked beside him with a crudely made slingshot in his feathery hand. Nearby were several grass huts. The ground below them looked like it was made of clouds, but flowers grew out of it.

“Octopod greed extends beyond the Sea Cave Domain,” the old bird continued, motioning the tip of his walking stick towards an empty pedestal. “The Blue Crystal, which keeps us prosperous and enhances the powers of our dear Village Goddess, has once again fallen into their hands. You already know the power which it holds.”

“Why me, Elder?” the hawk-boy asked. “Why not send one of the trained warriors to retrieve the Crystal?” The Elder stared off into the distance and stroked at the white feathers below his beak, which were puffed out to resemble a beard.

“My boy, the Crystal is fickle,” he said. “It favors, even above the Gods, those innocent enough to not abuse its power. Though my soldiers fight well, they have seen too much to take advantage of its grace. But you! You are still young! The Crystal will surely bless you.”

The hawk-boy closed his eyes and nodded solemnly, making a soft “Nn” noise to let the Elder know that he understood.

“We will see you at the ceremony tonight,” the Elder said. “Make sure you’re ready!” With that, he shuffled off. The hawk-boy was now standing still in the middle of the village.

The tiny amount of experience I had with video games told me to press every button and see what it did. I wiggled the joystick in a circle. The hawk-boy twirled around. I pressed the B button and hawk-boy jumped. The A button made him shoot a pellet from his slingshot. The X and Y buttons didn’t seem to do anything.

Five minutes later I was ready to give up. The gate leading out of the village was locked shut, a bird villager was constantly yelling “yoo-hoo!” at me, and a circular icon in the corner of the screen constantly flashed different words at me –leap, open, chat, crawl. The game made no sense. I growled and shut the FantastiMega off.

That sucked more than I thought it would. I thought. I’m going to return it as soon as I can.



A pale blue light, wavering as if I were looking at it from underwater. There was nothing else but a black void around it.

Tentacles, many. Where my legs should be. Where my hair should be. I felt them twitching, writhing, curling into perfect spirals. It was normal, natural to be this way.

A song, fast and steady, my body moving in time with it. My three heartbeats quickened to match its tempo. The music sounded urgent.

A voice, deep, raspy, powerful, and familiar. The voice of someone that my soul trusted. It spoke in a gurgling language that I somehow understood.

“Rise, Octopus!”

My eyes shot open to a dark bedroom. The bead-curtain-covered ceiling faintly glimmered by the light from the street lamp outside. It was still the middle of the night. There was a thick layer of sweat coating my chest and neck. Blech! I stumbled out of bed and headed for my out-of-date pink bathroom.

An octopus dream? I thought as I turned the shell-shaped shower faucet from cool to hot. *Why? I played Eagle’s Quarry, and I hated it! Why didn’t the dreams stop?*

The water from the shower was just hot enough to raise goosebumps up and down my arms. I squeezed an enormous glob of sugar-scented shower gel onto my bath puff and scrubbed vigorously at the sweat-slime on my chest. It had been years since I’d had a nightmare that caused me to wake up drenched.

It wasn’t a nightmare. A doubting thought had snuck in. *You felt nice. That was a good dream.*

Oh, shut up, brain, I snapped at myself. *Who gets the sweats from dreams that aren’t nightmares? It was either a bad dream, or I’m using too many blankets.*

My mental logic made perfect sense. Nobody ever woke up with heart pounding and enough sweat to quench a desert’s thirst from a nice dream. And it wasn’t a wet dream either, no smooth-talking hunk panting while lying on top of me. Therefore, it must have been a nightmare.

I turned the shower off. Water dripped from my hair, making heavy *thud, thud, thud* noises against the coral and cream bathroom tiles. I was lying to myself. The dream wasn't a nightmare at all.

A calling. The thought caused me to pause. Was I being contacted by something more than human?

It's him! It's MC Tentachill!

No, anxiety, it is NOT that stupid octopus man, you're just being extreme, I said to myself. *I'm going back to bed, and this time, no octopus dreams, please!*

The alarm clock next to my bed read 3:45 as I snuggled into my blankets. Stars dotted the night sky outside. The fan propped up in my window hummed softly. It should have been enough to lull me to sleep. Instead, I tossed and turned.

Should I schedule an earlier appointment with my therapist? I wondered, squeezing my knees around one of my extra pillows. There was a strange homesickness gnawing at my stomach that I didn't understand. I'd lived in the same general area for all my life, there wasn't another "home" for me to go to.

The fact that my thoughts kept returning to a cartoon character was bothering me more than the homesickness. The fictional men I daydreamed about were from novels, not kids' video games! Why couldn't I get him out of my head?

I put on my glasses, made a note in my phone to call the doctor's office in the morning, and opened my e-reader app. I knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep any time soon.

Chapter 3

“I thought we were eating at an Italian restaurant,” I yelled into the phone. “What do you mean we’re getting sushi?”

“It’s what he wants to eat.” My stepsister Nancy sounded worn out. “I tried to tell him that the Italian place was nicer, and he started whining about how he already has enough noodles because he has ramen every day. He needs to learn to cook! I don’t wanna sound old, but *kids these days*.”

“I didn’t learn to cook until I was in my twenties,” I said.

“Yes, but you weren’t an *honors student*,” Nancy said. “And I expect him to try his best, just like I expect it from my baby sister. By the way, did you find that game for him?”

“Well...” I bit my lower lip. “It turns out that the version he played was super rare. I bought him the remake. Does he have the FantastiMega 3000 system?”

“I have no idea what he has,” Nancy said. “I just know he’d be on it all hours of the day if I didn’t limit his play time.”

“Can you check? It should look like the pic I’m about to send.” I hastily snapped a photo of the FantastiMega console sitting on my living room floor.

“What am I looking at?” Nancy asked. “That photo is terrible.”

“Sorry,” I said, taking a more careful photo. “How’s that?”

“...Is that your living room, Lizzie?”

“Yes.” I hated it when she called me Lizzie. It felt like she thought I was still in elementary school. (At eight years older than me, maybe she did see it that way.)

“Did you really buy the entire console for Nathan in case he didn’t have it!?”

“No.” I was terrible at lying to my family. “It’s mine.”

“Why do you have a video game system? You hate games!”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

“Ohhh, I want *every juicy detail*,” Nancy said. I could tell she had just draped herself over her couch, one leg slung dramatically over the armrests, the same way she’d posed when she was a teenaged rock-star wannabe.

“Spill. How did you end up with a ‘Fantastic Game,’ or whatever? Some sexy gamer guy refuse to sleep with you unless you played something with him? Did he tie you up with the controller cable?”

“Nancy, I need to know if he has the system or not! Can you at least go check?”

There were shuffling noises on the phone as my sister walked to Nathan’s room.

“It has a horse with wings on the top, right?”

“Yes.”

“He has it. It’s filthy, but he has it.”

“Good. I’ll be at the Harajuku House at 6.”



The Harajuku House was built five years ago and was not the kind of tacky I enjoyed. It was a freestanding building with cutesy cartoon characters painted all over its pink brick walls and a blobby yellow roof. It looked like a child's dollhouse, but there was always a steady amount of young adults walking in and out.

“There you are!” Nancy’s voice. I turned to see my fuzzy-haired stepsister, with a strained smile on her face and Nathan, buried in his smartphone. Nancy was obviously embarrassed by her adopted son’s clothes – a baby pink shirt, baggy purple pants, and a mint green varsity jacket with “LOVELY” over the left breast pocket.

“Hi, Nathan,” I said, raising a hand in greeting. Nathan lifted his head from his phone, gave a small smile, and half-raised his hand back. “This place is... neat! What cartoon are these characters from?”

“They’re not ‘from’ anything. They’re all supposed to be the different items on the menu,” Nathan explained. He pointed to a pink and white kitten with a strawberry on its head, “Like, this one’s supposed to be their Ichigo Boba Tea.”

“I see.” I didn’t see at all.

The inside of the Harajuku House was even more outrageous than the outside, with bubble-shaped lightbulbs and cartoon pop art on every candy-colored surface. Bouncy music with squeaky-voiced singers blared out of the speakers. On each table, there was a small mat for the chef to prepare food. I wanted to take a bite out of the air. It smelled delicious!

“I have no idea why he wanted to come here,” Nancy hissed to me.

“It’s counterculture,” I whispered back. “It’s not supposed to make sense to us grown-up types.”

“It’s *stupid*,” Nancy said, pointing her thumb at the back of Nathan’s jacket, which had a shiny-eyed cartoon bear embroidered on it. “He’s way too old to be wearing shirts with teddy bears on them!”

“Remember when you had that jacket with the skulls on it? And how mom always hated when you wore it? It’s kind of the same thing.”

“It is *not*. Skulls are appropriate for teenagers. This place is for toddlers!”

“It has a full bar and a happy hour.” I pointed to a sign on the wall featuring a drunken squirrel. “And I don’t think I see a single kid in here.”

We sat at one of the tables near the far-left corner of the restaurant. A waitress in a pink maid costume approached us. I was glad that Nathan was still looking at his phone as I caught the waitress raise her eyebrows at the sight of two pasty-white adults and one very dark-skinned teenager sitting at the same booth.

“Welcome to Harajuku House, a slice of Tokyo in America,” she squeaked. “Have you been here before?”

“First time,” I said.

“All right, I’ll give you a moment to look through these. When you’re ready to order, please ring the bell!” The waitress handed each of us a thick menu, placed a bell marked “MEIDO” on the table, and trotted away.

The sourest of frowns was on my stepsister’s face as she leafed through the menu. I almost laughed, then my stomach clenched. Visiting this restaurant meant she might get even stricter on Nathan on her nights off.

“Can I get a boba tea, mom?” Nathan asked. He looked absolutely starstruck. I had a feeling he didn’t realize his mom would view the Harajuku House as an “irresponsible” place.

“It’s your celebration. You can even get a dessert today, but make sure you save room for cake at home,” Nancy said.

“What’s boba tea?” I asked.

“It’s sooooo good!” Nathan’s face lit up again. “It’s tea and juice, sometimes milk too, but it has these little candy things in it called ‘boba’ that pop in your mouth. You can put a bunch of other stuff in it too.”

“Are we ready to order?”

“I think so.”



The “Kakkui Curry” on my plate had all the vegetables cut into little hearts, which meant it was as cute as it was delicious. I also took a chance on the “Ichigo Boba Tea” and that turned out to be a sugary strawberry drink. Nathan opted for expensive sushi rolls. Nancy settled on a basic stir-fry.

Nathan wasn’t expecting me to pull a present for him out of my purse once he’d finished his sushi.

“What’s this?” he asked once he’d torn off all the wrapping.

“It’s a video game,” I said. Nathan gave me a blank look.

“Duh, it’s a video game. Why did you get me a random game?”

“It’s not random,” Nancy said. “Isn’t that the flying game you played at Lars Dawson’s house that you always wanted to find?”

Nathan squinted at the box. Something clicked and his eyes widened.

“ARE YOU SHITTING ME!? YOU FIGURED OUT WHAT GAME IT WAS OFF OF MY SHITTY DRAWING!?”

“Nathan!” Nancy snapped. “Don’t use that kind of language! Ladies don’t like it!”

“He’s technically an adult now,” I said. “He can say whatever he wants.”

“Well, *I* don’t like it,” said Nancy.

“Aunt Liz, how did you know what game it was?” Nathan was almost bouncing up and down in his chair. “I’ve been trying to track it down for five years!”

“I had a lot of help from a big guy named Mac at Dragon’s Den Gaming. I’ll take you some time.”

“I can’t believe...! I never thought...! Thanks, Aunt Liz!”

“You’re welcome, Nathan.”



“That was reeeeeally good,” I said, placing my spoon in the empty ice cream bowl. Dessert had left everyone at the table with a full stomach. “I might actually come here again.”

“I think this place might be a bit much for me,” Nancy said. “But I’m sure Nathan would love to come back.”

“The curry was perfect,” I said. “Not too dry, not soggy. That’s hard to come by. They even added coconut milk to the sauce. It might be the best curry I’ve ever had, and I’ve had a *lot* of curry.”

“We know,” Nancy said.

I stretched my arms and leaned back in my chair. A tangle of yellow tentacles appeared in the edges of my vision. I yelped.

“What’s the matter, Lizzie!?” asked Nancy. “Are you okay?”

“Octopus...” was all I could manage. I turned and pointed to the character on the wall above me, a happy octopus with an O-shaped mouth and a different flavored ice cream cone in each tentacle.

“You just noticed that? It’s been behind you the whole time,” said Nancy.

“Aunt Liz, are you afraid of octopuses?” asked Nathan.

“No!” I said. “I just wasn’t expecting to see one here.”

“If I remember right, you fight octopuses in this game,” Nathan said, holding up the *Eagle’s Quarry* box.

“I’m sure Aunt Liz would LOVE to see your game, wouldn’t you, Lizzie?” Nancy gave me a cheeky look. “She even bought a ‘Fantalo-Megalo System’ for herself.”

“Wait, you bought a FantaMeg?” Nathan asked. My fingers curled around the side of the chair. I wasn’t sure I wanted anything more to do with *Eagle’s Quarry*.

“Uh, well...”

You’re being dumb, Liz, I told myself. It’s just a game. Watch him play it. You’ll see.

And you'll figure out what your dream meant, too. Strange thoughts had crept into my mind. Embrace the calling!

*Embrace **what** calling?* I asked myself. *You don't know what you're talking about, brain.*

The answer just might be right behind you, my thoughts said. A tingle ran up my spine.

That does it.

"I did buy a FantastiMega 3000," I admitted. There was no sense in hiding all of the truth. If I lied about it, Nancy would show him the photo of my FantastiMega system on her phone. "I wanted to try out the game, but I couldn't figure out what to do."

"Never thought I'd see you pick up a video game," Nathan said.

"Lizzie does things that even surprise herself," Nancy chuckled.

"Sometimes you can't tell what she's up to. Like when she came home one day with all those beads and string, I had no idea what was going on in her little head! And then she ended up with her whole bedroom ceiling covered in those bead curtains."

"Why do you always bring up my bead curtains?" I asked.

"They're neat, Lizzie! I almost want the same thing in my room, but it wouldn't coordinate with the rest of my décor."

"I offered to make you some in the same green as your bedsheets. You said they weren't that great."

"I might've lied a little," Nancy said. Her eyes drifted to the left like they always did when she was embarrassed.

“What was it about *Eagle’s Quarry* that made you want to play it?” Nathan had brought the conversation back to the game. Now it was my turn to lie a little.

“You were looking for it for a long time, so I figured it was really good,” I said. “And the characters looked interesting.” Okay, that part wasn’t exactly untrue...

“Really?” Nathan looked suspicious. “I think the box art is kinda ugly. Looks like they just slapped on the main characters and some evil guy.”

“I can take the game back if you don’t want it,” I said.

“No! Bad box art doesn’t mean the game’s gonna be bad!” Nathan said. “We’re good, we’re good!”

I leaned back in my chair until I could see most of the yellow octopus.

I’m gonna shut you the fuck up, I thought.

Chapter 4

“Since ancient times, us Wingfolk have done battle with the greedy Octopods of the Sea Cave Domain.”

The opening movie looked less impressive on the small screen in Nathan’s bedroom, probably because there were old *Fit ‘n Yum!* protein bar wrappers all over the floor.

“The Octopus God is cruel. He manipulates the minds of his own people with malevolent hymns.”

“Do you know what’s happening right now, Aunt Liz?” Nathan asked.

“It’s a cutscene?”

“Oh, thank god.” Nathan sighed in relief. “Whenever I play games with Mom, she has no idea what’s going on. ‘Why aren’t you moving around? Why is it showing a different person? Why did you have to kill that guy? Can’t you be his friend instead?’ It’s fuckin’ annoying.”

“Sorry in advance if I say anything stupid,” I said. “I haven’t really played anything in over twenty years.”

“S’alright. Everyone starts somewhere,” Nathan shrugged.

The cutscene ended and Nathan moved the bird boy to the “yoo-hoo” villager. A box with dialogue appeared on the bottom of the screen.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

“Wha...? You couldn’t figure out how to talk?”

“Uh, I couldn’t do anything but run around and jump.”

Nathan pointed to a circular icon on the screen, which now displayed the word “chat.”

“See how that circle is green? That means you use B to do what it says.” He pointed to the matching green button on the controller.

“Ohhhh, all those thingies match the buttons,” I said. “They’re the same colors!”

“Yeah. It’s like that in a lot of games.” He ran around the village, talking to different villagers and entering some of the huts. The villagers either gave basic instructions (“Press A to shoot a pellet! Hold A to shoot a long shot!”) or babbled on about the upcoming ceremony that night.

“Is the whole game like this?” I asked.

“No, this is just the tutorial level. Here.” Nathan handed me his controller. “Think you can figure it out?”



Night had fallen, a full moon casting grey light over the little virtual village. A trio of stony-faced bald eagles pounded their wing-arms against tall floor drums in a slow, steady rhythm. The rest of the villagers formed a wide circle around a large bonfire at the edge of a cloud-cliff.

Hawk-boy, the Elder, and a tall, brown-skinned angel woman with impossibly big, curly blond hair walked towards the center of the circle. Their footsteps were slow enough to match the drums’ pace. The Elder held a triangular vial of glowing purple liquid in his hands.

I shook my sore hands vigorously. The tutorial level wouldn't be difficult for a regular player, but my fingers were clumsy and awkward. I was glad to have a cutscene break.

Hawk-boy, Elder, and the tall lady stood in front of the fire. The lady slowly raised her arms and the crowd grew silent.

“Listen with your whole heart and mind! Your Village Goddess speaks!” she shouted. The drummers beat their drums three times. I scooted a little closer to the TV. “I bring before you Tsubasa, the youth I have hand-chosen to retrieve the Blue Crystal from the hands of the Octopods! With my blessing, he shall drink of the Sacred Elixir, joining his ancestors in the long tradition... OF FLIGHT!”

Three more drum beats. The Elder handed the hawk-boy the vial. Hawk-boy popped the cork and stared down.

“Tsubasa,” the Elder quietly began, “I know how hard this must be for you. I was once in your position, sent off to retrieve the Crystal. It favored me just as I am sure it will favor you.”

“Elder.” Tsubasa's voice wavered. “I'm scared.”

“As was I. Fear not! Once you get the wind under your wings you will understand the joy of your destiny!”

Tsubasa nodded, squeezed his big eyes shut, and downed the bottle in a single gulp. Puffy-looking balls of light appeared in the air, dancing around his body. He raised his arms and the feathers on them grew until they were long and full.

The Elder also lifted his arms, revealing enormous wings even more impressive than Tsubasa's.

“Now, fly!”

Tsubasa ran towards the cliff's edge and took a leap. The screen went black as the word "LOADING" flashed in the corner.

"He died," I said.

"No, he didn't die!" Nathan didn't realize I was kidding. "You're about to learn how to fly!"

The game made a big show about flying through glittery hoops. Uplifting music with triumphant horns and swelling strings crackled through Nathan's beat-up speakers. The Elder flew close to Tsubasa, calling out loud, repetitive instructions into the wind.

"Nathan!" Nancy's voice from the doorway of the bedroom made both of us jump. "It's time to cut the cake! Come into the kitchen."

"But Aunt Liz is doing really good," Nathan whined as Tsubasa smacked into the cliffside for about the hundredth time. "Can't we wait like, another thirty minutes?"

"I want to go to bed soon," Nancy said. "So we have to either eat the cake now or wait until tomorrow. Come on, it's lemon."

"Nancy, let me finish this first," I said. "I'm having fun. I only have one hoop left, anyway."

Tsubasa dove through the last ring of sparkles, and another cutscene began to load.

"You did it!"

"You really flew!"

As Tsubasa landed on the cliff's edge, the fat bird and duck girl from the title screen ran to meet him. Tsubasa embraced them both with his new, full wings.

“That was amazing, Tsuba!” the duck cooed. She clasped her fingers together under her chin and batted her long eyelashes. It was painfully obvious who Tsubasa’s love interest was going to be.

“What was it like?” the fat bird asked, pushing his oversized glasses back into place.

“Well,” Tsubasa said, “you’ll soon be able to try for yourself!”

“Why?” his friends asked.

“Because!” The hawk-boy’s face broke out into the cartoon bird equivalent of a toothy grin. “I’ve chosen you as my mission companions!”

“That’s right,” the Elder said, shuffling his feathery arms back into his sleeves. “Although this *bird-brain* wasn’t supposed to tell you yet!” He whacked Tsubasa on the back of the head with his walking stick.

“Ow! They were going to find out sooner or later,” Tsubasa said. “I don’t understand why it has to be such a big secret!”

“It is tradition for a reason,” the Elder huffed. “Something you’ll never understand, it seems!”

“I understand tradition enough,” Tsubasa muttered, kicking a rock with pointed bird claws.

“How long is this going to take?” Nancy asked.

“Maybe like ten minutes,” Nathan said.

“Ten minutes! That’s too long. Save and turn it off.”

“You can’t save right now! I wanna see this!”

“You *own* the game! You can see it any time you want!”

“Can’t you give me like five minutes?”

“I already gave you five minutes!”

“One minute?”

“I guess we’re having cake without you!”

“Nathan, just go get your cake,” I finally yelled. “I’m not having it anyway.”

“Why not?” Nancy asked.

“I’m on a diet,” I said. “Come back after you eat your cake and I’ll tell you what you missed.”

Nathan rolled off the bed and jogged into the hallway. I returned my attention to the game. It had been impossible to hear what was going on over Nancy and Nathan’s argument.

“Why do the Octopods always take everything from us?” Tsubasa asked, staring down the side of the cloudy cliff into the vast ocean below.

“There is no good reason for what they do,” the Elder said. “Come. It is good to rest after your first flight.” Both Wingfolk turned towards their village and began walking away.

A dark cave, refashioned into a lavish throne room, faded into view. Jewel-encrusted octopus mosaics twisted around rocky and uneven walls.

“WHAT THE FUCK!?” I failed to prevent myself from screaming. It was as if someone had shown a photograph of my bedroom ceiling to the game developers. The roof of the cave was covered in the same kinds of bead curtains, right down to the same semi-haphazard way I’d hung them up.

A strange creature stumbled onscreen. It was a squishy little thing, vaguely humanoid but clearly not human, with four fat tentacles in place of legs. Four shorter tentacles hung from its head in a wacked-out aquatic bob hairdo. The

tips of its tentacles were a splotchy reddish purple. Peeking out from between the head-tentacles were what looked like two black dog ears. Fish fins? I wasn't sure. Its arms were thick and noodly with purple "mitten" hands at the ends. Was this one of the Octopods that the other characters were going on about?

The little creature's bulbous, yellow eyes squinted with worry, and its black fish lips wobbled. It fell into a low bow and began speaking in gurgling gibberish.

"[MC, they're already preparing to send out another youth!]" The noises it made were translated into English in captions on the bottom of the screen.

"[Grrrrrrrgle...! That ain't gonna fly...]" My breath caught in my throat. All that was shown was a mass of black and grey tentacles, but the deep-voiced speaker attached to them couldn't have been anyone other than MC Tentachill.

"[Do you want me to take care of them?]" the little creature asked, holding up a blowgun made of rolled up kelp.

"[We're gonna need a little more than just you.]" Tentachill's fingers wrapped themselves around a shining blue stone.

"What'd I miss? What'd I miss!?" Nathan scrambled back onto the bed with a paper plate holding a half-eaten slice of cake.

"MC Tentachill's about to make a move," I said, involuntarily squeezing the FantaMeg controller.

"Who?"

"Tentachill. You know, the...oh shit, never mind!" Nathan didn't even know the name of the game until a few hours ago. There was no way he'd recognize MC Tentachill.

“Did you seriously just spoil the name of the bad guy?” There was an amused grin in Nathan’s voice. “How much of this game did you look up?”

I couldn’t focus on my nephew’s words. Tentachill’s spell had caused the screen to turn completely black, except for a pale blue light from the crystal, wavering as if it were underwater. The fast, steady beat of a techno song thundered through the room. MC Tentachill’s eyes appeared, floating behind the Crystal’s aura. His gurgling words were familiar.

“[Rise, Octopus!]”

I dropped my controller onto the floor and sat there with my jaw completely slack. It was a shot-for-shot remake of my own dream. Shouldn’t I be screaming? Or crying? Why wasn’t I more scared?

That feeling of homesickness was sitting in my stomach again, but there was another feeling welling up inside me: a lightness in my chest, as if I was filled with warm, airy bubbles. It was almost as if I was... proud.

What are you thinking? What is there to be proud of? I asked myself. Was I proud of the little creature’s boldness? Of MC Tentachill’s magical command? It was both and neither at the same time.

“You said the bad guy’s name was what?” Nathan asked.

“Tentachill...” His name came out hoarse and breathy.

“You okay, Aunt Liz? Did you want me to get you some water?”

“Water would be good,” I croaked. I knew it wouldn’t help. My pulse had become so loud that it was as if I had three hearts. God! They were only there for a few seconds, but seeing those damned eyes moving around on screen was so much worse than seeing them painted on a plastic figure! Even virtually he set my chest ablaze with an indescribable mix of feelings. Why!?

“You can play, Nathan,” I said as I exchanged the controller for a red plastic cup of tap water with shaking hands. “I think I’m done for now.”

“Okay, real talk.” Nathan’s voice became low and serious. “What’s going on? I’ve never seen you this out of it.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I said. “It’s stupid. And if Nancy finds out, she’s going to blab to everyone she knows.”

“I’m not gonna tell mom,” said Nathan, rolling his eyes.

“I had a dream about this cutscene the other day. Seeing it in real life is weirding me out.”

“You’ve never had that happen before?”

“I have, just not...” I stopped. I didn’t want to tell him about the Octopus Feelings.

“Maybe it just means you need to play the game more,” Nathan said as Tsubasa absentmindedly ran around in small circles. “One time I had a dream about finding money at Harris’ Hot Dogs, so I started eating there instead of McDougal’s, and I actually did end up finding fifty bucks.”

“Hm.” I stared at the TV but couldn’t focus on the game.

I didn’t believe in the supernatural. I didn’t *want* to believe in the supernatural. Yet here I was, having dreams and feelings I couldn’t identify centered around an octopus-man-god. My mind wanted so badly to return to the real world. It knew messages from beyond couldn’t be real.

So why did they *feel* so real?

Chapter 5

“Fun fact! Octopuses have blue blood and three hearts.”

“Octopuses? You mean *octopi*.”

“Nope! The correct word is *octopuses*! ‘Octopi’ is slapping a Latin ending on a Greek word.”

“You’re fulla crap.”

“No, I’m not!”

“I’m gonna look it up on my phone.”

“Ma’am, you’ve written my address wrong.”

“Oh! Sorry,” I said, pulling out a fresh copy of the Andy’s Chop Shop release forms for the bearded, brawny man in front of me. His tweenaged sons stood a few feet behind him, tapping away on their phones as the taller one fact-checked the shorter one’s octopus claims.

“Son of a bi... biscuit,” the taller kid said. “It IS ‘octopuses.’”

“And what do I get for being right?”

“Uhh... you can play GameGorilla first when we get home.”

“Yesssssss.”

“Ma’am, that’s still not correct.”

“Goodness!” I said in my best customer-service voice. “I’m not sure what came over me. Could you repeat your address, please?”

I was lying, of course. The boys’ banter was the fourth time I’d had octopuses shoved into my face that day. “Tentacle” was the keyword for the

thousand-dollar giveaway on the morning radio, a billboard on my way to work advertised a new octopus exhibit at the aquarium the next city over, and when I punched into work, the mechanics in the shop were listening to a podcast about the strangest creatures you could find while deep-sea diving, which just so happened to be discussing a certain eight armed creature.

I filled out the man's paperwork and handed him a pen. He furrowed his hairy brow as he looked over everything.

"Took you long enough," he said, signing the form.

"I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"It better not."

"Liz, it's time for your lunch."

The bearded biker shrunk into a tiny ball. Standing in the doorway to the garage was Rob "Andy" Anderson, owner of the chop shop and *very* enthusiastic bodybuilder. He walked over to where I was standing, muscles bulging through his work uniform with every step. (His heart was bigger than his muscles, but I wasn't about to let the rude customer know that.)

"Thanks, Andy," I said. "Just making sure that Mr. Jones has his paperwork finished."

"Right... sorry," Andy said, scratching his head. "What were you looking to get done, Mr. Jones?"

"It's- there's- there's a few dings here and there to buff out. Don't need it done quickly, just want it done well," said Mr. Jones.

"I'm glad you came to us! The chain stores 'round here'll wreck your bike!"

"Oh, I've already learned my lesson. Last month..."

I slipped out of the room, knowing that Andy would take my place at the reception desk for a few minutes while I grabbed Ji-Hun.

Our “tech center” was a single, crowded room with over twenty computers in it, even though there were never more than five people in it at a time. The relative emptiness meant the tech center felt relaxed even on our busiest days. Several posters of vintage motorbikes were taped to the walls as an attempt to break the corporate atmosphere.

“Ji!” I called. “You in here?” A head of black, cowlicked hair rose up from the back corner.

“Busy,” he said.

“I need to take my lunch,” I said.

“Fuck.” He gently slammed his fist on the table. “I’m still working on figuring out what’s wrong with Eric’s brakes.”

“Sounds like you’re going to take a brake break,” chimed in Jerry. The broad-shouldered, greying technician always acted like he was the Chop Shop’s personal comedian. Nobody ever laughed at his jokes.

Ji trudged out the door, the top of his fluffy hair brushing against the frame. I sat down at a computer to punch out for lunch.

“Oh, COME ON!”

“Whassa matter, Liz?” That southern drawl belonged to Winonah. Despite being hired for her mechanic prowess, she was resigned to the tech room because she always wore flowing floor-length dresses and at least four necklaces.

“Someone changed the background to... an octopus or something,” I said. The peach-pink animal in the photograph had eight sucker-lined arms and a

bulbous head. It also had what looked like two flappy ears. Were there octopuses with ears?

“Awwwh, it’s a Dumbo,” Winonah said. “The internet’s favorite sea creature.”

“It’s an octopus, right?” I asked.

“Yep,” Winonah said. “World’s cutest cephalopod. Was obsessed with them for a while. Love those fins!”

I looked back at the picture. The octopus was cute with its round eyes and earlike fins. I just wasn’t expecting to see it there. Maybe I should have been.

“Pretty strong reaction to an octopus,” Jerry said. “You scared of them?”

“What’s that thing? The thing where when you notice a thing, and suddenly everything is that thing?” I asked.

“Baader-Meinhof phenomenon?” Jerry suggested.

“That’s the one,” I said. “I’ve been seeing octopuses everywhere.”

“Synchronicity!” Winonah gasped. “Y’all could have a spiritual bond with octopuses!”

“Winonah, I’m atheist,” I said. “I do *not* believe in spirits.”

“Ope, Liz said ‘do not’ instead of ‘don’t!’ If you don’t use contractions, it means you’re lying! Bad girl!” Jerry wagged a finger at me. I cringed without meaning to. Even though he was only joking, he wasn’t wrong.

“Y’all are so *obvious*, Liz.” Winonah had sat at a table near me and was resting her head in her hands, a goofy smile splashed across her face.

“You’ve been touched by an octopus, haven’t you?”

“Uh, maybe.” I hoped Winonah couldn’t tell by my reddening cheeks that she had just forced me to imagine a certain muscle-bound octopus man’s hand sliding down into my work slacks.

“Sorry if I hit a sore spot, Liz,” Jerry said, his normal half-smile gone. “Didn’t think that you’d ever, in a million years...” He went quiet and shook his balding head.

“I wasn’t planning on telling anyone,” I said.

“So, what tipped ya off?” Winonah asked. “I love hearing awakening stories!”

“Can I get my lunch first!?” I asked, my voice a bit too loud. “It’s already ten minutes into my break and I haven’t eaten anything!”

I left without waiting for an answer.



“I could hear you and Winonah all the way from the front desk. What were you guys arguing about?” Ji-Hun asked as he stood in the doorway of the Chop Shop locker room.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said, burying my face in my corned beef sandwich as I leaned against the small grey lockers. It was a lie.

I’d had another octopus dream the night before. I was entering a small cavern on the bottom of a seaside bluff. Inside, wooden bookcases held leather-bound books and strangely shaped knick-knacks. Bead curtains covered the ceiling, glass ornaments hung on the walls. A sleeping nook with

several pillows was carved into the far wall of the small room, partly hidden behind another bead curtain.

I'd curled all my crimson-tipped tentacles and made a contented gurgling noise on seeing the small den. It felt so pleasant, so *right* to be there, squeezing into that cozy little bed and snuggling into the pillows. The homesickness I'd been feeling for the last two weeks started to melt away.

I'd woken up in a state of complete calm.

I swallowed the rest of my sandwich and reached my hand to the back of my neck, feeling around where it met with the base of my head. There wasn't anything there.

Except there *was* something, something long and thin and hollow that I could feel tense with every breath. It was moving around in my dream. It continued moving after I woke up. I tried occupying myself with music and work, hoping I'd stop imagining it. It didn't work.

"Liz? Hon?" Winonah was standing in the doorway of the employee locker room. Her eyes were watery and she fidgeted with the ends of her long, curly brown hair. "I'm sorry if I got weird with you just now. I was just so excited that I... I'll shut up if you come back to the computer lab."

"I really did want to ask you a few things," I said. "I'm just not sure where to start. This whole thing is stupid."

"Liz, I think I know you pretty well. Nothin' you say could surprise me."

"Okay, how's this: there's some weird invisible tube at the base of my neck that moves when I breathe. It's been there since this morning."

"That *is* surprising," Winonah said. "But mebbe it's a 'spiritual limb' or something, to aid you in your journey through this life. Actually, have y'ever taken a goooood, long look at a Dumbo?" She pulled her phone out from a

hidden pocket in her skirt and typed something into her web browser. On the screen was a squat, finned octopus with a fleshy tube poking out between its eyes.

“There’s a…” My hand involuntarily trailed to the back of my neck.

“It’s called a ‘siphon’.” Winonah said.

“I don’t *want* to have a siphon!” I found myself yelling. “Why this? *Why him!?*”

“Him who?”

“Aaauugh, *no!* That’s the stupid part I didn’t want to tell you about!” I covered my face with my hands. I couldn’t tell Winonah that an evil cartoon octopus god’s face was now smirking at me from inside my mind, brow tilted in a way that said “gotcha.”



I nearly hacked up a lung. Winonah’s favorite metaphysical shop, Crystal Corner, absolutely reeked of herbs and incense. Colorful stones were piled into baskets on what seemed to be almost every surface, small paper signs near each explaining what they were supposed to do. Figures of different deities watched stoically from their spaces on the shelves. Some I recognized from the mythology class I took back in high school. Others I’d never seen before. Cloth hangings covered almost every inch of the light brown walls. Multicolored glass baubles hung in the window, casting rainbows all over the room. This was the last kind of place I wanted to be on a work night.

Why am I here!? Wish I was home, I thought. Instead of my apartment, an image of the octopus' den from my dream flashed through my head. I scrunched my entire face. Right, *that* was why I was here.

“Hello, Winonah,” the tan-skinned old woman behind the counter said, raising a hand with pointed purple nails and too many rings in greeting. “And who did you bring with you today?”

“This is my work friend, Liz,” Winonah said. “She’s just beginning her spiritual journey!”

“Hi,” I said.

“Oh! You’ve come to the right place,” the old woman said. “We have all sorts of books to help you get started. Was there a path you were wanting to follow? Or were you looking for spiritual assistance?”

“No, I’ve just been experiencing some weird things lately and I’m trying to make sense of them,” I explained.

“Things like what, dear?”

“Um...”

“She’s been seeing a lotta a *certain sea creature* lately,” Winonah piped up. The old woman frowned.

“Winonah, I’m sure she’s capable of speaking for herself,” she said. “When she is ready, she’ll open up.” The old woman turned to look at me and smiled again. “How about you just walk around the store and see what you’re drawn to?”

“Thank you,” I said, grateful that she’d stopped Winonah from spilling everything at once. I wasn’t sure what the old woman meant by “drawn to,” but it would be easy enough to just browse for twenty minutes and then leave.

I walked around some of the freestanding shelves, reading the effects of various gems and amusing myself by trying to guess what deities the figures were supposed to represent. A hidden back room held a selection of books and a rack of tarot card decks. I picked out a few scented candles from the “aromatherapy” section so that my visit to Crystal Corner wouldn’t be a total waste of time.

“Liz, hold this!” Winonah thrust something small and hard into my free hand.

“What’s this?” I asked. She’d given me a spiral-shaped rock.

“Don’t you feel its energy!?”

“No, just rock. What’s it supposed to do?”

“It’s an ammonite! It’s a fossil from an ancient *cephalopod*!” She enunciated the big word as if I was supposed to understand what it meant.

“Winonah, I don’t know what a suffer-low-pawed is.”

“Well,” she had a satisfied smirk on her face, “an octopus is *also* a cephalopod.”

“I don’t want a dead seffa-thing! What’s it even supposed to do? Come back to life and start talking to me?” I rolled my eyes and walked up to the front counter. I couldn’t endure Winonah’s annoying brand of enthusiasm any longer.

“Is this it?” the old woman asked, looking over my selection of candles.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s it.”

The old woman stared at me with her mouth in a little o shape, eyes squinting but focused.

“You’re not wearing anything on your head, are you, dear?” she slowly asked.

“What? No. Why, is there a bug?” I asked, ruffling my hair to get rid of any freeloading insects. The old woman’s eyes grew wide.

“Should have noticed those weren’t physical,” she muttered, shaking her head and punching numbers into the cash register.

“What?”

The old woman looked up. “Your fins,” she said matter-of-factly. “Can’t you feel them?”

“No, but there’s a tube in the back of my neck.” I was turning around to show her before I could think to make up an excuse. “You mean you can see it?”

“I do have a gift,” the old woman said, leaning closer. “But I have to admit I’ve never seen anything like this so clearly.” She reached to the left side of my head and grabbed at the air. My back tensed. She was pinching what felt like a large, thin flap of skin.

The old woman let go. I could still feel whatever it was she’d grabbed. There were two of them, one on each side of my head, slowly moving back and forth every few seconds.

“What do I do now?” I asked, my voice turning into a high-pitched whine.

“Whatever the spirit calls you to do,” the old woman said, as if fins and a siphon were perfectly normal things to have. “You’re an octopus, after all.”

Chapter 6

“You’re an octopus, after all.”

I wanted to drop a nuclear bomb on every memory I had of Crystal Corner. The old woman’s words had been crashing around inside of my ears for a week. If someone had told me I was an octopus even one month ago, I would have told them to grow the fuck up. Now, as I sat curled up between piles of pillows on my old couch, invisible fins flapping at the sides of my head, I wasn’t sure what to think.

On the TV, Tsubasa and his companions stood at the edge of a long, thin beach. In the distance, more of the small “Octopod” creatures pattered around. These had crimson-tipped tentacles and crimson lips, but otherwise looked like Tentachill’s purple-and-black messenger.

“I-it’s going to be a long journey,” the fat bird stammered. “The Sea Cave Domain is really big!”

“Are you sure you want to do this, Tsuba?” the duck asked.

“We don’t have a choice, Ahiruko,” Tsubasa said. “Our village Goddess is counting on us.” There was a silence. All three young birds stared at the ground with solemn faces.

“Ooooooh! I’m so mad!” Ahiruko suddenly yelled. She raised clenched fists to the sky and stamped a webbed foot. “Why can’t the stupid Goddess just go get the Crystal herself?”

“It’s due to the judgment of the Crystal,” the fat bird explained. He pulled out a thick book from his knapsack and opened to a page somewhere in the middle. “It favors young people, even above the powers of the Lesser Gods.

If the Village Goddess goes, there's no telling which side it will lend its power to."

"Bobbin is right," Tsubasa said. "We were hand-chosen for a reason."

"Well, I think it's just awful," Ahiruko said.

"You tell 'em, girl," I said to the imaginary duck-girl who wouldn't be able to hear me. "Fight the Man. Fight the Bird? Fight the Bird-Man."

I wasn't too keen on booting up my own copy of *Eagle's Quarry* at first. With everything that had happened so far, especially my fins and siphon, playing the video game with the villain who kicked off the whole thing was the worst idea I could think of. But my therapist's advice, after everything came pouring out in one long, babbling rant, was to continue playing. "Exposure" was what she called it. It was supposed to convince me that my fears were irrational.

"What if I can't convince myself that this is all coincidence?" I'd asked.

"Maybe then it's time to accept that things have changed," she'd said.

"Spirituality isn't always rigid." That wasn't what I wanted to hear.

The virtual Octopod soldiers were slow and clumsy. Some attacked with spears made of driftwood and sea glass. Others had their own slingshots to fight with. A few hid in the tall grass with blowguns made of rolled up seaweed, spitting out balls of black ink at Tsubasa and his companions.

I moved Tsubasa down the beach, shooting at the Octopods with his slingshot. Bobbin and Ahiruko followed closely behind, sometimes attacking on their own. Bursts of bright blue blood appeared wherever the Octopods were hit. The virtual massacre was kind of fun. It was easy to see why these games were so popular.

See, Liz? If you were one of these things, you'd feel awful killing them, I reasoned with myself. The tension in my back loosened up. This was a good sign.

The dream! Part of me apparently still wanted to argue. *Tentachill used the Crystal's power to summon **all** of the Octopods! He **needs** you!* I instantly pictured myself holding my own rolled seaweed blowgun, awaiting Tentachill's orders with eagerly flapping fins. That mysterious, warm pride bubbled up inside me so quickly that I dropped my controller into my lap.

Liz, what the fuck!? I started mentally screaming at myself the moment the feelings started to fade. *Why would you want to take orders from a bad guy? Are you really that stupid?*

I picked up my controller and moved Tsubasa out of the way of a stray ink blob just in time. Inside my chest, there was a small twinge of guilt. Was it that same pride that caused the Octopods to go out and fight? Did all cartoon minions feel this way? And why would a self-made woman like me feel the same thing?

My fins gently flapped as if answering my question.



Reaching the end of the beach was no easy task with my shitty video game skills, so I was glad to find a “Save Sphere” floating on a pedestal near the mouth of a large cave so I wouldn't have to do it again. As I moved Tsubasa closer towards the entrance, another cutscene loaded.

“[MC Tentachill!]” A new kind of tentacled menace – a different kind of Octopod, – was standing in the Octopus God’s throne room. It was white with black zig-zag stripes, much taller and thinner than the other Octopods, and had rounded horns in place of fins. Its eyes were alarmingly enormous with horizontal pupils. The undulating way it moved was unnerving. “[The Wingfolk are headed towards the entrance to the eastern caves!].”

“[Then let’s up the tempo and make ‘em dance.]” MC Tentachill’s tattooed torso filled the screen, his face obscured by a dark shadow. He gripped the crystal and waved it in front of him, causing what looked like a glowing cross between ancient runes and a neon-light rendering of a DJ’s turntable to float a few inches above his lap. He brushed his hands across a series of small “buttons,” causing a steady electronic beat to play, and then spun one of the see-through records with his clawed hand. The lanky Octopod’s eyes glowed blue, and its stance became rigid. The music had taken control.

The words “Mimic Attack!” appeared on-screen as the game thrust me into a battle that I couldn’t keep up with. The Wingfolk heroes were surrounded by four of the tall, striped Octopods. They disappeared into the sand and popped out in different places to spit out fireballs. Their constant vanishing made them hard to hit.

“Come on, die already!” Any hint of Proud Octopus Feelings had left me. I was absorbed in the game, frantically trying to avoid the fireballs and shoot pellets at the Mimics at the same time.

After I suffered at least a dozen fiery deaths, the Mimics started to fall. There were now three left. Then just two. Then only one. Then –

“HEY THERE, BABY! HEY THERE, BABY! HEY! HEY!”

My phone’s alarm screamed at me from the kitchen table. I groaned. What was I forgetting to do now?

Blood test – 11 AM. Current time: 10:15

“God dammit! I’m not even dressed yet!”



Waiting rooms always managed to feel filthy no matter how clean they were. I could never decide if they were worse than the actual exam rooms or not.

An outdated CRT TV hung from the ceiling, displaying a crumby broadcast of the local news. Piles of magazines from several months back were lumped onto small tables between the universe’s most uncomfortable purple armchairs. In a corner near the receptionist’s window, a toddler stuck one of the office’s ancient baby toys in their mouth.

I leafed through a home design magazine from the last season. Every image made me crinkle my nose. Was this really what passed for good taste nowadays?

“Hideous,” I said to myself. Then I remembered that I also had no intentions of redoing the coral-colored, seashell-themed bathroom that had come prepackaged with my own apartment. Maybe I was finally old enough to be blissfully out-of-touch.

A woman at the front desk started yelling at the receptionist, jostling me out of the pages of ugly interiors.

“I paid my copay last month!” she screamed. “Your records are bullshit!”

“Ma’am, I cannot access those kinds of records from my computer,” the receptionist replied. “If you think there is a mistake, you have to write to your insurance company. I can give you their number if you like.”

“I want you to stop trying to get more of my money!” the woman roared. “I don’t want to have to pay a fee I’ve already paid!”

My fins drooped as I lifted the magazine to cover my face. I found myself wishing that I could blend into the wall.

“Curley?” a nurse called.

Thank god, I thought as I placed the magazine down.

“Hoo-ee!” The nurse gave me a sympathetic head shake once we’d reached the blood lab. “How long has that been going on for?”

“Just started,” I said. I placed my purse on a counter next to a jumbo-sized box of tissues and sat down in the grey bloodwork chair.

“Well, I’m glad I could get you out of there, then,” the nurse said, dabbing a wet wipe against my arm. “Had anything to eat recently?”

“No, I haven’t had anything to eat in the last fourteen hours.”

The nurse wrapped a rubber strip around my arm. I slammed my eyes shut. I couldn’t bear to watch the needle worm itself underneath my flesh.

No prick came. Instead, I heard nurse make the soft “uuuuhhhhhnnnnn” hum of someone about to drop bad news on you.

“Do you have a history of blood diseases?” the nurse finally asked.

“No, why?”

“It just looks like...” The nurse shook her head again and refocused her needle on my arm with gritted teeth.

The sharp pain was immediately followed by another anxious hum from the nurse, which erupted into full-on screaming.

“WHAT THE FUCK!?” She’d dropped all professionalism as she leapt away from me and began pointing at my arm. “WHAT!? THE!? FUCK!? WHAT THE HELL IS—!? Jesus Christ!”

Trying to ignore the nausea in my stomach, I looked down at the needle. Instead of seeing red blood flowing through the tube, a steady stream of cobalt was pooling into the medical vial.

Shit!

I yanked the needle out of my arm, creating a shower of blue that sprayed everywhere.

“YOU...! YOU’RE...!” The nurse couldn’t finish her sentence.

“AN OCTOPUS! I KNOW!” I yelled back without thinking. I jammed a wad of tissues onto the open wound, yanked my purse off the counter, and darted out of the office.



The air conditioning in my car was set at its coldest temperature to offset the anxious heat in my body. I’d parked in a public lot near one of the local high schools. It wasn’t until over an hour had passed that I took another look at my arm. It was laced with dried streaks of the wrong color blood. Even the cut where the needle had been seemed to glisten the color of blue raspberry.

Blue blood. Blue blood! Why the hell do I have blue blood!? I tried to give a million different reasons for the spontaneous color change. It was something I ate. Something on the doctor's equipment had poisoned me. It was a disease, a very rare, previously undiscovered disease that caused blood to completely change structure, killing you within hours.

A specific "fun fact" about a certain eight-armed cephalopod rose above everything else in my mind. The world began to spin as if I was on a carnival ride. My blood was the same color as the Octopods' blood in *Eagle's Quarry*.

"It's called a 'siphon'. Probably there fer a reason,"

"You're an octopus, after all."

"Maybe it's time to accept that things have changed."

"You're...!"

"AN OCTOPUS! I KNOW!"

"I really *am* an Octopod," I whispered, running a trembling finger down one of the blood streaks. The situation was a bittersweet mess. I finally had proof that I wasn't making things up. I finally had a reason to believe in the dreams. I finally knew that I wasn't going insane. And a whole world of questions that I wasn't ready to answer was now spread before me.

My beliefs in the supernatural, or rather, my lack of them, were completely shattered. Was I supposed to start worshipping a god? Was there a deity of aquatic transformation? Was Tentachill real? Should I start worshipping him?

My blood had changed color. Were more changes coming? Would my legs turn into tentacles overnight? What would happen if I morphed completely into an Octopod? Would I get taken away and studied for science?

This is all your fault, you big bastard, I mentally yelled at Tentachill. I bet if I hadn't looked at those stupid eyes of yours, I wouldn't be tangled up in this situation right now.

“Aww, you know you love me.” In my mind’s eye was the octopus God, looking at me with a lopsided smirk. Something like a hot shiver passed through my chest. Even with all the shit I’d been going through, I’d never pictured Tentachill talking directly to me until just now. The image was much more vivid than I expected. He was taller than me by several feet, all his tentacles twisting in a slow and imposing way. He folded his beefy arms and cocked his head to the side in a way that asked “Whatcha gonna do about it?”

Oh fuck, he’s sexy. I immediately cringed so hard that it must have looked like I swallowed a lemon whole. There were so many strange emotions inside of my gut when I thought about him – pride, homesickness, respect – why couldn’t I stop thinking “sexy?”

“*Bet you like what you see.*” The imaginary octopus man lifted both of his arms and posed like he was the God of Love instead of an octopus god. I buried my face in my hands and felt my cheeks light up like a holiday tree. He was so obnoxious! Why did I feel *enthralled!*?

All right, all right, if I’m an Octopod, it would make sense that I’m attracted to someone like him, I reasoned with myself. *I just wish he was a bit smoother. Cooler. And without those stupid suckers for nipples!*

*But he **is** cool! He’s the big, sexy God of the Sea Cave Domain! All the octopus people want a piece of him! And can you blame them? Just look at him - yyyyyowza!*

For once, I didn't try to shut up the overenthusiastic second train of thought. It had been right about me being an Octopod. Maybe it was right about the lust I was feeling towards Tentachill, too.

The craving for a certain set of striped tentacles in my nethers was becoming too intense for me to ignore. I sighed and switched my car into Drive. *Lover's Paradise* was only a ten-minute drive away, and I knew I should at least *try* to start my new reality on a high note.

Chapter 7

“Hey, good to see you again!”

I wanted to melt into a puddle. That same damn cashier was standing at the counter of Lover’s Paradise, giving me an open smile. I was really hoping she at least wouldn’t remember me. I shuffled towards the dildo corner, trying not to make eye contact.

There it was, in all its monstrous, glassy, red glory – the *Kraken*. It was more outrageous than I remembered, with one end thin and gently curved while the other twisted into a thicker “spiral.” I picked up the box and stared at the two rows of suckers along its edge. What were they going to feel like when they were inside me?

The Kraken rung up for sixty dollars plus tax. It was more than I wanted to pay.

“Couldn’t resist the ‘Call of Cthulhu,’ eh?” The cashier had a devilish grin on her face.

“It looked interesting,” I said. “Do people usually like this one?”

“Oh, yeah. I even have my own Kraken at home now,” the cashier said. “It’s one of my favorite toys.”

“What’s it like?”

“You’re in for a wild ride! The texture is suuuuuper nice. That curve it has on the thin end? Hits all the right places.”

“I hope you’re right. I need something like this.”

“Did a sexy god make some magic happen in your pants yet?”

“Kind of,” I said, snatching the bag a little too quickly from her hands.



I laid naked on my bed with the lights off, my glasses on my nightstand and my extra pillows thrown all over the floor. The overcast sky made my room darker than usual. Distant city lights created an eerie orange glow against the low-hanging clouds.

The Kraken was resting on my upper stomach. I couldn't bring myself to use it. Covered in a layer of lube, the cool glass felt more like a real tentacle than I'd have liked.

Gonna have octopus sex? Pervert. My anxious doubts were out in full force as I watched the Kraken rise up and down with each breath. Sixty dollars to pretend to fuck an animal. Gross!

*Tentachill is not an animal, I scolded my disorder. He's a **man**.*

He's still an octopus man, you sick freak. You really want tentacles being rubbed all over your body?

Maybe I do! I mentally yelled. *Maybe that's **exactly** what I want!* I spitefully dragged the thin end of the Kraken across the top of my breasts, as if Tentachill had initiated gentle foreplay with the tip of a tentacle. I shuddered in surprising pleasure, lifting the Kraken to my face without thinking and caressing my left cheek with it. I moved the Kraken to my thigh and began swirling it around in large, slow circles. It left a trail of lube wherever it touched. Soon my whole body was covered with little slimy streaks.

I imagined myself smaller, softer, with spiraling tentacles in place of my hair and legs. Every touch from the Kraken felt sweet and sensual and perfectly sexy.

“You really are one of mine, aren’t you?” the Tentachill in my mind asked. The thought of that caused all my pretend tentacles to curl with joy. I knew that once I was done masturbating, all my insecurities would come back. I’d be embarrassed about everything I was imagining, and I’d probably throw the Kraken in the trash so that I was never tempted to have this particular fantasy again. In that moment, though, I was his. I was a short, squishy Octopod who was so, so loyal. I wanted to make him happy. I wanted to pleasure him. I wanted to see him wracked with lust, tongue lolling out and laughing. It was an almost instinctual desire, deep and uncontrollable.

My groin was on fire. I squeezed more lube onto the Kraken and spread my legs.

“Get inside me, you fuckhead,” I growled to the air. I shoved the Kraken inside of me, letting out a gasp as my hole filled with the cold, wet glass.

I slid the dildo back and forth. The glass suckers were shaped so that the top wall of my vagina was almost over-stimulated. I moved more vigorously, building more desire inside of me with each insistent thrust.

“Grrrrrg... thassit. Now show me how I make you feel!”



It was over.

Light, tingling afterglow covered every inch of my body. I panted and set the Kraken down on the nightstand, thinking through everything that had happened that day.

I'd never orgasmed on command before. Hell, I'd never orgasmed like that at all. My climax was all the things Hollywood liked to pretend sex felt like and then some. Maybe the myth about penetrative vs clitoral orgasms had a grain of truth to it. Or maybe it was because of the invisible man with the oversized sucker-nipples whose brand of cocky couldn't be compared to anything else.

I still wanted him, but not inside of me. I wanted to be next to him, his tentacles wrapped around mine in a twisted embrace, one clawed hand playing with my tentacle-hair as my fins flapped contentedly. I'd make a gurgling noise and he'd respond with a deep, rumbling chuckle.

What kind of little schoolgirl fantasy crush is this, Liz? My angry self-doubts were back. Even if he was real, he wouldn't be in a relationship with someone like you. He's an immortal, idiot.

I don't want to be in a 'relationship' with him, was my automatic reply. I just want to make him happy.

I slammed my face into the mattress and moaned angrily. What was I thinking? Did I really want to be in a *one-sided* relationship?

I rolled over in bed and stared blankly out the window. Some of the clouds had cleared up and a yellow half-moon was peeking out. I picked up a pillow from the floor and hugged to my chest, accidentally forcing myself to remember the little octopus' den that had appeared in my dreams.

That's right. I was an octopus. Or, rather, a strange kind of octopus person – an Octopod. How long had I been one of them? Since the first visit to

Dragon's Den? But I'd decorated my room just like them over a decade before then. Did that mean I'd been an Octopod my whole life? Was it just waiting for the right push to come out? The inside of my stomach went from warm to cold. I didn't know much about Octopods other than dreams and feelings. How deep did this run?

My body was drenched with sweat. Octopus slime? After seeing my own bright blue blood, I wasn't sure anymore. I pushed myself out of bed and walked my naked, gooey self to the bathroom.

The hot shower eased the tension in my back, but it didn't end my worries. Was it still safe to say I was human? How should I break the news to my family? If I continued changing, where was I going to go? Did I need to adopt a seafood diet?

The box fan blew chilly air against my skin, making me shiver. I quickly collected my pillows from off the floor and made my usual pillow-nest. More questions filled my mind. Was surrounding myself with pillows another Octopod Thing? Was I speeding up the transformation by indulging in downy comfort?

Liz, there's nothing you can do in the middle of the night, I reminded myself. *You'll have to dump everything on your therapist tomorrow afternoon.*

I ran my hand along my chest. There was still a very faint layer of ooze coating my skin.

That's mine, I realized. *That's me making that slime.* Underneath the disgust, I felt the tiniest tingle of Octopod pride.

You're proud of that? Oh, Liz... what have you become?

Chapter 8

“Liz, what are you typing so fast for? Hold your horses! Or should I say ‘hold your octopuses’?”

I ignored Jerry’s quip and continued to read the Eagle’s Quarry Wiki.

Mimic Octopod

Height: 5’11”

Class: Mini-Boss, Mid-Level Enemy

Allegiance: Sea Cave Domain

Powers: Fire Inkball, Ice Inkball, Camouflage Dart

Mimic Octopods are a type of Octopod based on the Mimic Octopus. They appear early in the game as a mini-boss troop and in later levels as singular enemies. Mimic Octopods are one of the few Octopod variants in the game who do not have fins or tentacle hair on their head. Instead, they have two hornlike structures in the shape of real-life Mimic Octopus eyes.

Mimic Octopods are one of just three enemies in Eagle’s Quarry capable of disappearing for short periods of time. They are magic wielders who can spit one of two kinds of charged Inkballs: fire or ice. Mimic Octopods pose a challenge in early levels but can easily be taken down once Bobbin learns Ground Bomb.

A Mimic Octopod makes an appearance in a cutscene as a messenger for MC Tentachill.

“Okay, but what are they LIKE?” I asked the web page. I was at a loss. The Eagle’s Quarry Wiki had over a hundred pages on it. I would probably have to go to the “List of Octopods” and click each one individually.

Common Octopod

Height: 2'4"

Class: Low-Level Enemy

Allegiance: Sea Cave Domain

Variants: Spear Soldier, Slingshot Soldier, Seaweed Sniper

Powers: Inkball (Sniper Only)

My invisible fins started to flap a little faster. The image next to the stat box showed one of the small grey-and-red Octopods.

Common Octopods are the base soldiers of the Octopod army and appear in many positions throughout the game. They are loosely based on octopuses in the *Grimpoteuthis* classification.

Common Octopods come in three colors: Red, Blue, and Purple. Blue Common Octopods have higher stamina and move more quickly than their Red counterparts, but are otherwise identical and appear at the same frequency. Purple Common Octopods are the rarest as well as the strongest and fastest Common Octopods.

A Purple Common Octopod makes an early appearance as a messenger for MC Tentachill.

Cephalogolem pilot Flats appears to be an overgrown Red Common Octopod.

See Also: Spear Soldier, Slingshot Soldier, Seaweed Sniper

Another article filled with nothing but game statistics. I thought for a moment about reading the article for *Flats*, but I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be piloting a "Cephalogolem" any time soon.

"Liz, your celery," Ji-Hun said. There was a crunch as I bit down. I'd completely forgotten about the stalk hanging halfway out of my mouth.

"You okay?" Ji asked, plopping down in the swivel chair next to me.

"Jerry's right. You look really out of it."

“Doing some research,” I said. “I have to get it done fast.” I moved my mouse over the search bar. There was an article that I was scared to check.

MC Tentachill

Height: 8' (humanoid) Over 500' (Kraken)

Class: Lesser God

Allegiance: Sea Cave Domain

Powers: Musical control, Fire Inkball, Teleport, Ink Manipulation, Kraken Transformation

Status: Dead

“Dead?”

“Who’s dead?” Ji asked, leaning over to get a better look at my screen.

“Wait, MC Tentachill? Is he what you’re researching?”

“N-no, he’s not what I’m researching! Wait, how do you know even who he is?”

“I pre-ordered *Eagle’s Quarry* when the re-release came out,” Ji said. “It’s a good game.”

“Ooooh, what a hunk!” Jerry mock-cooed seeing the image of Tentachill posing on the Wiki page. “Look at those muscles! This your dream man, Liz?”

“Tentachill is NOT my dream man, Jerry.” Was that another lie? I couldn’t tell this time. “He’s just a character in the game I’m playing.”

“Are you stuck on the Kraken fight?” Ji asked. “It took me four days to beat.”

“Kraken fight? No, I’m just…” I shook my head to clear it. “I just need to read this, okay?”

MC Tentachill was the Lesser God of the Sea Cave Domain. His design is loosely based on a Larger Pacific Striped Octopus.

During his nearly 300 years of godhood, Tentachill ruled the Octopod people with a form of mind-controlling music. This modern-world sound is unique to the Sea Cave Domain and may be an allusion to the advanced intelligence of real-life octopuses.

Canonically, Tentachill is considered extremely attractive by the Octopod people. In an interview with game developer Matsuya Hideki, Tentachill was revealed to have frequent sexual relations with the other Octopods. This more adult side of Tentachill is not shown in the game.

“Ope, see? Look how red her face is! Dream man right there.”

“It started talking about *sex!*”

“Sex?” Ji asked, leaning even closer to my computer. “Weird! The game is so clean they advertised it on Kid-O Network.”

“I heard ‘sex.’ Are we talkin’ about ‘Not Safe For Work’ things while actually sitting at work?” Winonah walked in the door carrying a plastic tray of vegetables.

“Liz is looking at sexy pictures!” Jerry said.

“*I am not!* I’m trying to research a video game and it started talking about dirty shit!”

“Oh mah god, he’s part octopus! Ohhh, Liz, is this spiritual research? Is this the octopus that touched you?”

“Could you maybe never say that sentence ever again?”

“I’m sure Liz would be really happy if an octopus like THAT touched her.” Jerry said.

“Ew, no, he’s weird,” Ji said, making a face. “He’s got these buggy yellow eyes and he’s always sticking his tongue out.”

“So he’s Gene Simmons?” Jerry asked.

“Can you all just let me read this?”

Tentachill is unique in that his body appears less human than the other Gods. According to the Official Eagle’s Quarry Fan Book, Tentachill was initially offered a fully humanoid form on his ascension from mortality to Lesser Godhood. He refused, demanding a body that more closely matched the rest of the Octopod People. The compromised form resembles the mythical Cecaelia. Tentachill also chose his name himself, rejecting the traditional Lesser Godhood title (God of the Sea Kingdom).

As a Lesser God, MC Tentachill can harness the powers of the Blue Crystal to both call upon large sea beasts and to induce the transformation into an enormous Kraken. (See: Kraken) Matsuya Hideki states that the Crystal gives him supergenius intelligence, which helps him perfect the Octopods’ Cephalogolems as well as operate his turntables.

“Liz, ya got about ten minutes before you have to get back to work,” Winonah reminded me. “You’re going to want to finish eating.”

“Thanks,” I said, picking up another celery stick. “Website doesn’t have what I’m looking for anyway.”



“Winonah, can I talk to you?”

The Chop Shop had closed twenty minutes ago. Jerry and Ji were still chattering away in the computer lab, while Andy and the rest of the closing mechanics were setting up the garage for the next morning. That left just me and Winonah in the Chop Shop locker room.

“Sure, Liz,” Winonah said. “Whassa matter?”

“Is it normal for ‘spiritual experiences’ to be from something... fake?” I asked.

“How do you mean?”

“The octopus man on the computer,” I said. “I’ve had some dreams about him, and I think they might be related to my fins.”

“Spiritual messages can come from all sorts of places,” Winonah said.

“What are your dreams about?”

“Uh... I don’t remember.” I didn’t want to explain to Winonah that I was possibly being called to serve an evil god via the powers of a magical crystal that shouldn’t exist.

“You don’t remember nothin’ at all?”

“I’ve had a lot of different octopus dreams ever since I... since about a month ago.” *Watch it, Liz. You almost told her about the figurine.*

“Ahhh, dreams are usually metaphorical,” Winonah said. “If you can figure out what the metaphor is, you can figure out the direction that the Universe wants you to take.”

“What do I do if that direction is impossible?”

“How do you mean?” Winonah asked again.

“I can’t tell you,” I said. “It doesn’t make any sense.” I was wracked with fear. Winonah would continue to pry for sure, and I’d have to take off my

bandage and show her the blue wound on my arm. Then she'd yell for everyone in the office to come look. And then I'd be taken away for science!

"Liz, spiritual experiences are often *very* private." Winonah's response surprised me. "Wouldn't feel right askin' you to expose every little thing, much as I wanna know what's up."

"Liz! Winonah!" Andy peeked into the chop shop locker room. "Are you both planning on staying here all night? Come on, I want to go home."

"Liz is probably talking about that hunky octopus guy," Jerry called from a distance.

"Hunky octopus guy?" Andy's eyebrows furrowed.

"He's just being obnoxious," I said, wishing that Jerry's jokes never hit their targets.

Chapter 9

“Nancy, I have an important question to ask you. I know this is going to sound stupid...”

“What is it, Lizzie? You’re lucky I had a free hour today!”

“If I changed,” I gripping my hand around my smartphone so tightly that my hand hurt, “would you let me stay in your house?”

“Are you thinking of switching jobs? Why couldn’t you just stay in your apartment?”

“No,” I said. There was no good way to sugarcoat the question. “I mean if I literally changed into a monster. Would you take me in?”

“What are you asking me for? That isn’t going to happen.”

“Nance... it’s already happening.”

Silence for ten seconds. Then...

“Are you sick? Should I take you to the hospital?”

“No!” I shouted. “Not the hospital. Please.”

“Why not?”

“My blood is blue, Nancy. I know how impossible that might sound, so I want to make sure you –”

“I’m coming to pick you up.” Silence. She’d hung up the phone. I paced around in a tiny circle. Why did I think someone like Nancy, more wrapped up in logic and efficiency than I was, would believe me?

I smashed my face into the old couch cushions and inhaled. Even the smells of the past couldn't ease my pounding heart. My anxiety disorder was quick to remind me of the changes I was undergoing.

These smells are from when you were human! You're an octopus now!

Octopod, not octopus, I tried to reassure myself. *They're different.*

Tentacles! Tentacles! You're going to grow tentacles! My anxious thoughts mocked me in a sing-song voice. *Gross, slimy, grimy tentacles! Wriggling like little worms! Nobody likes tentacles. And that's what you'll have!*

I couldn't look away from the horror movie in my mind playing out the entire transformation in vivid detail. I would be standing at the front desk, trying to ignore that my legs were beginning to feel like half-melted butter. Then I would crash to the floor as they ripped open into four distinct, boneless appendages that coiled into spirals at the ends. My head would begin to morph, four more tentacles bursting out of my scalp, writhing and twisting. Little popping noises would fill the air as all my suckers grew in one-by-one.

The client at the other end of the desk would start shrieking. I'd try to cover my face, but there would be no disguising my lips ballooning to a ridiculous size, or the ways my eyes would start to bulge in their sockets.

“What happened to you, Liz?” Andy would try not to panic at the unearthly creature sitting where I once stood. I would stare back at him, my brand-new tentacles in tense little curls. And Andy would find a mirror to show me what had happened, and in its reflection I'd see the ugly, yellow eyes of a Common Octopod staring back at me.

Oh. The tone of the daydream changed. Instead of feeling fear, I was at peace with myself. In my mind's eye, I began admiring what I saw, turning my head this way and that and moving my head-tentacles to test them out.

This is making you feel good? How stupid.

It's who I am.

Excuse me, what exactly does that mean, brain?

The door to my apartment unlocked, snapping me out of my inner debate, and Nancy rushed into the room.

“Get off that couch,” she said, dropping her spare key and grabbing my arm. “We’re going to the hospital.”

“Grrrrrgaaaaaaaagghhhhhh!” Whatever I’d meant to say came out as a gargling noise. Nancy froze. Her fingernails dug into my skin.

“What the hell was that?” she asked.

“Can you stop impaling me with your hand, please?” I said. Nancy let go and a look of disgust slowly crawled over her face.

“Eeeugh, what do you have on your arms?” she asked, wringing her hand out.

“Mucus?” I ventured. “Nancy, you’re going to want to sit down for this. Really.”

“Lizzie, we have to get you to a hospital. You’re saying things that don’t make sense! You’ll thank me later.”

“Five minutes is all I ask. Please sit down.”

Nancy rolled her eyes and sat down on the couch next to me. I took a deep breath. Saying one wrong thing could cause Nancy to fly into a frenzy.

“I’m changing, Nancy,” I said. “I went to get bloodwork done and my blood came out blue. Look.”

I removed the bandage from my arm, hoping her first reaction wouldn't be to scream. Nancy leaned towards me and squinted her eyes.

“What am I supposed to be seeing?” she asked. I looked down. The wound had closed, no trace of blue left.

“Shit. Okay, if I cut my arm open, I can show you -”

“Lizzie!” Nancy screamed, throwing her arms around my legs. “What are you saying!? We're going to the hospital *now!*” I stopped mid-motion. Nancy's eyes were misty and her hands shook against my thigh. It took a lot to get her this upset.

But if the doctors see my blood, they'll react the same way as before...

For the first time in my life I caught Nancy making a nearly inaudible whimper.

“All right,” I agreed, “I'll go to the hospital to get checked out. Just don't be surprised if something happens.”



“How are we feeling today, Miss Curley?”

Rotund Dr. Atwood was all smiles as he stepped into the room. It didn't make me feel better about the stark white hospital room around me.

“I'm doing all right,” I said.

“I think she's on drugs,” Nancy said. “Or she's snapped. She tried to cut herself earlier!”

“Is this true?” Dr. Atwood asked.

“Not exactly,” I said. “What happened was –“

“She’s been going on about her blood,” Nancy butted in. “She told me that it was blue!”

“It is!” I said. There was no use hiding it from the doctor. “I went to get my blood drawn at the Springfield Clinic. We didn’t even get to finish because the nurse started screaming.”

“Now, now, Miss Curley,” said Atwood, his tone changing to a sickeningly nice one usually reserved for small children. “There’s no need to get excited. You’re in a safe place, and we’re going to get you the help you need. But first, we *are* going to have to get some bloodwork done. Is that okay?”

“Fine,” I said. “You can see for yourself.”

Dr. Atwood left the room, leaving the air filled with the beeping of medical equipment and distant chatter from the nurses.

“My baby sister,” Nancy was saying in a low, quiet voice. Her eyes were unfocused as she faced the generic painting of flowers on the wall above my head. “My sweet baby sister...” A sympathetic gurgle rumbled softly in the back of my throat. If Nancy heard it, she didn’t react.

“Curley?” The nurse’s voice seemed too loud as she wheeled a cart of blood drawing supplies into the room. “Heard you’re not feeling too well!”

“I’m doing all right,” I repeated.

“Well, let’s do some bloodwork on you and see if everything’s in order, okie-dokie?”

Against my better judgment, I stared intently at where the needle was about to go. Nancy had a point – blue blood from a human being was impossible.

Maybe she was right. Maybe I'd hallucinated up the events of the last few days and just needed some medicine. If that was the case, then I wasn't really turning into an Octopod! That would be wonderful.

The syringe dove into my skin. I was so focused that I forgot to flinch.

"What in the—!?" The vials meant to hold my blood clattered against the floor one by one.

"It really *is* blue," Nancy breathed.

"DOCTOR ATWOOD? I THINK YOU SHOULD SEE THIS!"

A deadly expression shrouded Nancy's face. She shoved the nurse out of the way, yanked the needle out of my arm, and pulled me off of the bed. The hospital was a blur of color and sound as we sprinted down corridors and crashed through half-open doors, Nancy quietly repeating "move, move, move," all the way.



Fanciful, emerald green bedsheets were spread across a double bed with an expensive, magnificent wooden headboard. Hanging on the walls were shadowboxes with pressed roses, one of Nancy's oldest hobbies. The carpeting was plush, dense, and felt luxurious underneath my bare feet. I couldn't help but feel Nancy's guest room would look more regal with green-and-gold bead curtains suspended from the ceiling.

Nancy walked through the doorway with a pink mug of hot cocoa and a spare pair of pajamas that probably wouldn't fit over the pudge on my stomach.

"This is for you," she said, draping the pajamas across my lap and handing me the mug. "I've already texted Nathan and told him that we need to look after you for the time being. He's not the type of kid to poke and pry, so you don't have to worry about him finding anything out."

"Nancy, you really don't have to do this," I said. "I can stay at my own house for now. How about I just call you if I see any more changes?"

"No such thing, Lizzie!" Nancy's expression was sour. "I can't just stand by and watch when my baby sister is undergoing an unholy metamorphosis! You need special care."

I took a sip from the mug of hot cocoa. Nancy had added so many marshmallows that my teeth hurt a little bit. My lips curled into a tiny smile. She might not always understand what was best for me, but she knew exactly how I liked my cocoa.

"Anyway, we need to find out why this is happening so we can stop it," Nancy said. "Tell me everything. When did you first start seeing the changes? Were you doing anything unusual before then?"

"Can't I finish my cocoa first, Nance?"

"No. Your transformation isn't waiting, and neither am I."

"When you're right, you're *really* right." I set the cocoa down on the bedside table, hoping that the hot mug wouldn't ruin the finish. "It started around the time I bought Nathan his birthday present. I was having a lot of dreams about octopuses."

"Dreams about octopuses? What does that have to do with anything?"

“Octopuses have blue blood...”

“You’re turning into an octopus?”

“It’s something like that.” My words trailed off into a mutter as I stared at the carpet. Any explanation I gave her would sound absurd.

“What do you mean, ‘something like that?’ A squid?”

“Do you remember the game I bought for Nathan? The bad guys are octopus people called Octopods, and I think I’m turning into one of them.”

“What the hell?”

“I know it makes no sense,” I said, fins flopping a little bit faster than usual. “You have to listen to me. There’s a part early in the game where the Octopods’ god summons them all to fight using a magical crystal. I saw the whole thing in a dream *before* I played the game. And that’s about when the changes started, too.”

“That makes no sense. Even if you really *did* have a... Deja Vu thing, why would it cause you to start changing?”

“I think, maybe, I’m being summoned by the octopus God.”

Nancy didn’t process what I’d said right away. She looked at me for a few moments, opening and closing her mouth while drumming her fingers on her knee.

“You need to stay far away from that game,” she finally said. “I’ll have to throw it out so that Nathan doesn’t also get summoned and start transforming. Too dangerous!”

“No! Don’t do that!” I exclaimed. “If I do need special care as an Octopod, that game is the only thing that can show me what to do!”

“Oh.” Nancy fell back onto the bed, arms spread-eagled, and made a soft “hoooh” noise. I laid down next to her and saw that her eyes were teary for the third time that day.

“Nancy, I’m not dead,” I reminded her, wriggling into a more comfortable position. “Octopod or human, I’m still your baby sister.”

“I don’t want my baby sister to have tentacles,” Nancy sobbed. “What am I supposed to tell Nathan? And you’re becoming a *bad guy*, on top of that!”

I sucked in a breath. I wanted to comfort her. I wanted to tell her “No, I’m not becoming a bad guy.” But how could I say that when, in the deepest throes of Octopod Pride, my heart and body wanted to obey an evil mastermind like Tentachill?

“Mom? I’m home!” Nathan’s voice called from the living room.

Nancy and I exchanged glances.

Chapter 10

“Let me get this straight. You *want* to watch me play video games?”

“Not just any game,” Nancy said, arms tightly crossed. “*Eagle’s Nest.*”

“*Eagle’s Quarry,*” I said.

“Whatever!”

“Why do you want to see me play that?” Nathan asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to follow what’s going on. It’s pretty fast paced.”

“We just need to see it,” Nancy said. “Put the game in now, Nathan.”

I tried my hardest not to roll my eyes. Nathan might not be confrontational enough to press his mom for further questions, but Nancy was about as subtle as a chunk of beef jerky in a handful of chocolate kisses. I knew I’d have to explain the situation to Nathan later, when Nancy wasn’t around to stop me.

After cleaning the empty *Fit ‘n Yum!* wrappers off his floor, the three of us huddled around Nathan’s dusty, small TV.

“How far did you get?” I asked. “I made it up to the Mimic fight.”

“Only the first one? I passed that a long time ago,” Nathan said.

“Yyyeah, I’m not great at games.”

“I think I’m getting close to the third boss fight.”

Tsubasa and his companions were standing in a network of caves. Clusters of glowing, multicolored mushrooms grew on every surface, giving the underground world an ethereal ambience. Fanciful paintings of octopuses

decorated the rocky walls. The pathway before the Wingfolk heroes sprawled this way and that, some of it heading into smaller caves and some leading far into the distance.

A small, white Octopod with an orange striped seashell helmet and segmented chest armor hovered several inches off the ground. In its noodly arms it held a large lantern. It had six tentacle-legs, and there was a big tube where its mouth should be. Its droopy eyes made it look sad. It locked its gaze on the Wingfolk but kept itself at a healthy distance.

“Right, I’m supposed to catch that nautilus fucker,” said Nathan. Tsubasa and his friends charged towards the Nautilus-Octopod, which squeaked and swam away in mid-air.

“Is that what an Octopod is?” Nancy asked, confusion splashed all over her face.

“All the bad guys are Octopods,” said Nathan. “Watch. I’ll show you another one.” Tsubasa took a hard left and entered one of the smaller caves. I bit the inside of my lower lip. It was a little den almost identical to the one I’d seen in my dreams. The Red Common Octopod standing inside of it gurgled-screamed and grabbed a spear off of the wall to defend itself. It was too late. Bobbin had cast a magical spell to encase it in ice.

“See? That’s a different kind of Octopod,” Nathan said. “There’s tall ones, too.”

“I’m already lost,” Nancy said. “Why did you just kill it?”

“You get extra loot for every Octopod you beat,” Nathan explained.

Nausea burned in the pit of my stomach. Something about the way the Wingfolk had entered the den and destroyed its inhabitant was bone chilling. The Octopod wasn’t doing anything besides sitting in its house. Then again, why sympathize with bad guys? Tsubasa, Bobbin, and Ahiruko were hand-

chosen warriors. The Blue Crystal had been taken from their peaceful village by an evil God. That meant that the Wingfolk were the heroes.

What kind of hero raids civilian houses?

“Hey, Nathan? Why do you have to kill the Octopods?” I asked.

“Huh? They’re evil,” Nathan said.

“No, I mean, what’s the motivation? Why are they evil? Your mom’s right this time. You just raided a random house. Wouldn’t that make *you* the bad guy?”

“House? I thought they were weapons storerooms.”

“Looked like a house to me.”

Nathan moved Tsubasa into another small cave. The Red Common Octopod sitting inside hadn’t noticed the Wingfolk kids yet. It sat at a small desk with a book in its mitten-hands. Glass baubles and paintings hung on the walls. The only weapon in sight was a spear leaning next to the bed.

“Oh shit,” Nathan said. “This is one of those grey-morality games.”

“So... are you playing a bad guy or a good guy?” Nancy asked.

“You could be either good or bad,” Nathan said. “It’s sort of an artsy-fartsy way of making a game. You’re supposed to decide who’s in the right yourself.”

“You mean the Octopods aren’t even evil?” I asked.

“They could still be evil. Sometimes both sides are bad.”

I jiggled my left knee. I didn’t feel as guilty for sympathizing with the Octopods now that I knew how ruthless the Wingfolk kids were. Maybe the Octopods had a good reason to take the Crystal for themselves other than “Tentachill wants it.”

Tentachill still uses mind control, I reminded myself. That's not good.

He doesn't kill civilians, a second train of thought argued. That's worse than mind control.

It doesn't matter, brain! Free will is important. You don't take that away from people!

Not even if the mind control feels goooooood?

Oh, listen to yourself, Liz! It's like you're brainwashed from across dimensions! You're in so deep now that you're probably going to enjoy those stupid tentacles when they pop out.

I am not!

Are too!

What's wrong with having tentacles!?

"I'm going to take a bath," I said, standing up from my spot on the floor. My head was beginning to pound from the three-way argument with myself.

"Don't you want to see what happens next?" Nathan asked. "I just caught the nautilus."

"No," I said, power-walking out of the room. I couldn't bear to continue to watch the small Octopod squirming in Ahiruko's feathered arms.



Nancy believed in having a spa-like ambience in all her bathrooms. That meant that all three of them had a waterproof pillow, bubble bath, and a

vanilla scent diffuser plugged into the wall. I woke up three hours later with painful, pruny fingers.

“You’re still playing?” I asked as I entered Nathan’s room.

“I took a break while you were sleeping,” Nathan said. “The boss is really hard. The difficulty curve on this game is insane.”

I sat myself down on Nathan’s bed. The waistline of Nancy’s spare pajamas dug into my stomach. I would have to ask her to pick up some of my own clothes for tomorrow.

Tsubasa and his friends were flying around an underground arena. In the middle was what looked like a giant stone octopus with round, floating boulders making up its eight arms. Inside an open cockpit between its eyes, a blobby grey-and-red Octopod with a droopy face and uneven eyes hunched over a control panel.

“He’s huge!” I said.

“It’s a golem,” Nathan said. “It’s supposed to be big.” One of the golem’s arms crashed down just inches away from Tsubasa, causing both Nathan and I to flinch.

“Not the golem,” I said. “The big guy inside the golem.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess you missed that part,” said Nathan, swerving Tsubasa to the left to avoid another crushing attack. “That’s – that’s Flats.”

“Flats.” I recognized the name from reading the *Eagle’s Quarry* Wiki.

“What does he do?”

“Seems like he’s an elite,” Nathan said. “He’s piloting a golem. And doing a *really fucking good job at it*, too.”

Flats' golem raised four of its arms and spun in a circle. Nathan couldn't move Tsubasa out of the way in time. The words "Game Over" appeared in golden letters, accompanied by a sinister sounding electric tune.

"Fuck dammit!" Nathan slammed his controller against the ground. "He's still killing me! Why does he have to be so hard?"

"Maybe he's horny," I said without thinking.

"What!?"

"Uhm... you said he was hard."

Nathan turned to me with a shocked expression, then burst out laughing.

"I am *not* used to you making dirty jokes, Aunt Liz," he said.

"You're old enough to hear 'em," I said.

"Am I old enough to know what you're sick with?" Nathan asked. "Mom acted like it was something I couldn't handle."

I blew a stream of air through my lips, making a soft "pbbs" sound. Part of me wanted to tell him everything – the dreams, the fins, the blue blood. I couldn't do that. He was about to go to college. He didn't need my problems on top of that.

"Maybe later," I said to Nathan. "When I'm feeling more up to it. It's kind of a long story." Nathan shrugged and reloaded the level. Flats gurgled something incomprehensible as he activated the giant octopus golem. Tsubasa, Bobbin, and Ahiruko leapt into the air and the battle began again.

Chapter 11

“Lizzie, put on some clothes.” Nancy nudged my shoulder, waking me out of a very long nap.

“Noooo... Five more minutes...” I moaned, curling myself around tightly around the plump body pillow Nancy had bought for me. A week without work caused my mind to feel like it belonged to a schoolkid in the middle of a lazy summer vacation. My body was heavy with sleep. The gentle rain tapping against the window was a final guarantee that my eyes would be staying shut.

“Your friends are here,” Nancy said.

“What?” *Now* I was awake. “Which friends?”

“Gerald and Jay. You’d better get out there,” Nancy said. “You wouldn’t want them to get upset.”

I scrambled out of bed and dashed to the closet to grab a pair of pajamas. My co-workers wouldn’t actually get mad at me if I was ‘too sick’ to see them, but I would enjoy having the company of someone other than my family for a while.

Jerry and Ji-Hun were chattering away at the dining room table when I entered the room in an oversized t-shirt and striped pajama pants.

“There’s the sick bird!” Jerry said. I had no idea what he meant by “sick bird.” He handed me a large yellow bag with “GET WELL SOON” written on it.

“Everyone at work chipped in to get you a little something,” Ji said. “We’re all worried about you.”

“You should see Andy’s face every time he walks by the front desk,” Jerry nodded. “The Chop Shop feels empty without you around.”

“I’m hoping things get better soon,” I said, opening the bag and digging through the ocean of wadded up tissue paper. Inside the bag was a greeting card, several gift cards for local carryout places, a bouquet of fake flowers, and a pink stuffed animal that had eight long...

“Oh, come on, Jerry,” I said, pulling out the plush toy octopus by one of its tentacles. “Did you really have to get me this?” Jerry cackled and slapped his knee.

“That’s from Winonah!” he grinned. “She said you might need its energies or something. She’s always going on about crazy things like that. Be glad I convinced her to get you a stuffed animal. She almost got you a rock!”

I wrapped my arms around the stuffed octopus and hugged it to my chest. It had marshmallowy-soft faux fur. I hadn’t owned a stuffed animal in over a decade, but it wouldn’t be out of place in my pillow pile.

“Thanks, guys,” I said. “I do feel a little better now.”

“Aunt Liz!” Nathan half-hopped into the room with his FantaMeg controller in hand. “I think there’s about to be another cutscene!” I jumped up from the table without thinking. I’d been watching every cutscene from *Eagle’s Quarry* hoping for more information about the Octopods.

“Shit,” I said, seeing the looks on my co-workers’ faces. “Uhh... I’ve been watching Nathan play his game and I’m getting invested in the story. I’ll be back in a couple minutes.”

“What game is it?” Ji asked.

“*Eagle’s Quarry*,” said Nathan.

“Oh! I preordered that so I could have it on release day!” Ji said, a wide smile spreading across his face. “It’s one of my favorite games ever!”

“It’s *hard*,” Nathan said. “It’s been almost a month and I’m still stuck on the fourth level. And there’s too many cutscenes!”

“That’s just Matsuya’s style,” Ji said. “He has a background in cinema, and he likes to show off his film chops. Have you ever heard of *Dense Heart*?”

“No, what’s that?”

“It’s an anime movie. Late 80s. It was his last project before he started going into games. The animation will blow your mind.”

“I don’t get why you kids are all into Japanimation,” Jerry said. “Only anime movie I ever saw was *Mega Monsters the Movie* with my little niece, and that was on TV. It had this annoying yellow guy in it that said ‘choo-choo’ at the end of every sentence. If it was a train, that would make sense, but this was a rat-looking thing.”

“Soooo,” said Nathan, obviously annoyed by Jerry comparing *Eagle’s Quarry* to *Mega Monsters*, “Are you coming or not?”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I told my co-workers.

“Is it OK if I watch, too?” asked Ji. “I haven’t played *Eagle’s Quarry* in a while.”

“You can come if you want,” shrugged Nathan. “My room’s messy though.”

“I’ll stay here and make sure your octopus doesn’t crawl away,” Jerry joked.

Nathan had less *Fit ‘n Yum!* wrappers on the floor than usual, probably because I’d been hanging out in his room for the last week. I made myself

comfortable on the bed as Nathan and Ji-Hun scrunched up next to each other on the floor.

A Save Sphere hovered above its pedestal next to a set of red doors with golden octopus-shaped embellishments. Tsubasa and his friends stood several feet away, looking bored.

“I remember this part,” Ji said. “You’re about to fight another Cephalogolem.”

“I hope it’s not as hard as the last boss,” Nathan groaned. “Flats killed me like a thousand times.”

Tsubasa pushed open the door and the screen went dark for a few seconds. An image of the Blue Crystal faded into the center of the screen. After twenty seconds of staring at the Crystal, I started to feel anxious. Was this really how the cutscene was supposed to go?

“Game’s frozen,” said Ji.

“I noticed,” Nathan grumbled.

“Try cleaning off the disc,” I suggested. “That’s what I used to do when my CDs skipped.”

“I didn’t save,” Nathan said. “I went to get you and forgot to activate the Save Sphere.”

A long, piercing screech from Nathan’s TV cut the conversation short. The Crystal on screen started to vibrate. Beams of blue light shot out from it in all directions.

“The fuck is that noise?” Jerry yelled, rushing into the room. One of the Crystal’s beams shot out of the TV screen and ricocheted off one of Nathan’s anime posters with a sound like shattered glass. The tiny TV rattled around

for several seconds before rising a foot into the air. A second beam bounced off the window on the back wall.

Something I couldn't see wrapped itself around my legs and squeezed. I was yanked off the mattress and pulled across the floor towards the floating TV. Nathan grabbed one of the legs of his bed and held on desperately. Ji wrapped his arms around Nathan's waist, his legs raised upward as if being held by an invisible giant. I grabbed onto Ji's foot and tried to maneuver my way back onto the bed.

"Everybody out of the room!" Jerry roared with a serious tone I'd never heard him use. But even he was sliding towards the little TV screen. There was a loud noise like a cross between a train horn and a whalesong, and I lost my grip. I was launched into the air, my body hurtling towards the image of the Crystal.

ACT II

Chapter 12

Thwoomph!

My face crashed into soft sand. I opened my eyes to find myself stranded on a long, wide beach under a clear night sky. Wrapped around the beach was a tall, imposing bluff. It was too sheer for me to climb, and it looked like it went on for miles.

The sea was calm for the moment. If I was on a real vacation, instead of stranded at god-knows-where in a pair of pajamas, the sound of the waves lapping against the shore would have been soothing. Instead, I was teetering on the edge of the biggest meltdown of my life. As if turning into an Octopod wasn't bad enough, the damned *Blue Crystal itself* had decided to suck me through a TV and dump me on a random beach – and without my glasses! Was it toying with me? Could it be that twisted?

Thanks a lot, you fucking good-for-nothing Crystal, I thought. What do you want me to do out here in the wilderness? Starve to death? I'm a receptionist, not an Eagle Scout!

I shook the sand off my body and started walking. The full moon in front of me was unnaturally enormous and almost as bright as sunlight. My vision was too fuzzy to see the end of the beach stretching into the distance.

I grew tired quickly. The sand was so soft that it made moving my feet difficult. Stress and worry brought their own breed of fatigue. And there was a lump in my throat that wouldn't leave no matter how many deep breaths I took.

A pain shot through my right leg. I wailed. A spiny seashell had torn open the bottom of my foot, leaving three deep gashes.

No, no, no, no, no! The word ran through my head at least fifty times. *I can't lose use of my foot!*

I pulled off my shirt and wrapped it around my injured foot as best as I could. Sand wouldn't be able to get into the cut as easily with a ball of cloth covering it, but the makeshift cast made walking cumbersome. Less than five minutes passed before I had to lay down.

Shelter, I thought. I have to find shelter. That way I can rest my foot.

The beach was littered with driftwood. I would have to gather some of the larger pieces and make a small hut to protect me from the wind and the rain throughout the night.

I tried to stand up. No good. The pain in my foot had grown worse, shooting all the way into my hip every time I moved my leg. My anxiety gave way to a consuming terror. I began to scream, long, loud cries that were fueled by both the pain in my leg and raw fear. I didn't care who heard me. I didn't care that a stranger might see me without a shirt. My inhibitions were gone, replaced by a primal instinct to get attention in any way I could.

As I drew in another breath, a familiar low gurgling noise sounded in the distance.

No fucking way.

A stubby, squat silhouette was crawling towards me on four fat tentacles, vaguely humanoid but clearly not human. The tentacles on its head were raised in alarm. Its two fins flapped wildly.

"Hullo!?" it called out from a distance. "Is someone out there!?"

"Yes, hello!" I shouted, waving both of my arms. "My foot is hurt!"

The Common Octopod was about fifty feet from me. Through my blurry vision I could barely make out its big eyes glowing in the moonlight and the

crimson tips of its tentacles. Slung around its shoulder was a brown sack. My heart sank. The Octopod was less than three feet tall. Even if it was willing to help, how would it move me off the beach?

The Octopod's jaw went slack. It rubbed its buggy eyes in disbelief. I couldn't blame the thing for being surprised. Humans, obviously, never showed up on Octopod turf. Maybe a few corpses from dead sailors here and there. To see one alive would be –

“MY GODDESS!” the Octopod shouted, throwing itself into an enthusiastic full-body bow and pressing its face against the sand. “Forgive me – I didn't realize what you were!”

“Goddess?” I asked. “I'm a human.” The Octopod raised its head to look at me.

“Hyoooooo-min?” it repeated, feeling the unfamiliar word in its mouth. “But your body! It has all the classic beauty of the divine!”

“I'm flattered,” I said, covering up my bare chest. “But I'm not a Goddess. I'm just an ordinary, mortal human.”

“Whassa hyoo-min?” the Octopod asked.

“You mean you've never seen a human before?” I asked.

“Nope.”

I hesitated. How on earth was I supposed to explain what humans were? A burst of pain shot through my leg again. I screamed and doubled over.

“Shit! Your foot!” the Octopod swore. “Can I take a look at it?”

I unwrapped the makeshift cast to show the Octopod my wound. My foot had become coated with bright blue, and the bleeding didn't seem to be

slowing down. The Octopod gently picked up my foot to get a better look. Its little hands were very cold.

“This looks bad,” it said. “You had a good idea covering it up, but it needs a tighter wrap.” The Octopod opened the pack around its shoulder and pulled out a cloth, a jar of grey paste, and what looked like a small ball of kelp. It cleaned off the blood, gently applied some of the paste to the area around the gashes, then began unraveling the kelp and tightly wrapping my foot.

“You’re a nurse?” I asked.

“First aid response unit,” it replied. “There. The cream should numb the pain, and the wrap should stop the bleeding within a few hours. You’ll have to rest your leg until at least sunset tomorrow.”

I stared down at my seaweed-wrapped foot. An uneasiness twitched in my throat. Something seemed off about this situation. What was it?

“I’m going to see if I can find you some shelter, hyoo-min,” the Octopod said. “Please don’t try to move. I’ll be back real soon!” With that, it scrambled off. I sat there in a stupor, trying to come to terms with what was going on.

There were for-real Octopods in whatever world I was in, and one of them had just tended to my injured foot with seaweed and strange medicine. Weren’t the Octopods supposed to be hostile towards invaders to protect the Crystal? Why did this one help me without question? Could it tell that I was turning into one of them?

No, Liz, it’s because you look like one of their Goddesses, I thought. It thinks you’re something to be revered.

Or it’s leading you into a trap. They’re bad guys. They’ll brainwash you!

Will you shut up, brain? I actually get help when I need it, and you manage to turn it into a red flag!

*You just watch. Next thing you know you'll be a member of the Octopod Military, with your **very own peashooter**, diligently taking orders all day without an original thought in your head. Now that I think about it, maybe that kind of life suits someone as stupid as you.*

*I am **not** going to join the Octopod Military!* I yelled at myself, trying to block out the involuntary daydream I was having of launching a glob of ink through a kelp blowgun. I'd aim it directly at Tsubasa's face, and when it hit, there'd be so much ink in his eyes that the rest of us would easily be able to take him down and –

Octopod military. My thought-voice had a smug tone.

Just shut up! I could feel my cheeks growing hot with embarrassment even though nobody could read my mind. That sense of Octopod Pride was there, too, happily sparkling away underneath the flurry of anxious feelings.

Two figures appeared in the distance. One was the Octopod who had wrapped my foot. The other could have almost been a giant blob of putty, with two stringy arms and tentacles fatter than my body was wide. It moved slowly, and the Common Octopod had to wait several times for it to catch up. As it got closer, I saw that the blobby Octopod's crimson-tipped tentacles were flat on the end, as if someone had cut off the ends with a knife. He had a half-dopey, half-concerned expression on a droopy head with splotches of crimson flecks on his face and uneven eyes.

"Flats," I whispered. "It went and got *Flats!*?"

"Oh, my gods! It's a Goddess!" The big Octopod's voice had a higher pitch than I was expecting. "You didn't tell me the situation was *that* important!"

“This is Flats,” said the Common Octopod, confirming what I already knew. “He’s one of our Cephalogolem specialists. It’s not an ideal situation, but he has space in his Den where you can stay.”

“Flats,” I repeated in disbelief.

“*She said m-my name!*” Flats gasped, raising his tiny, three-fingered hands to his mouth. “The Goddess *acknowledged me!*”

“No, no, no. I’m not a Goddess,” I said. “I’m a human.” Flats cocked his head and blinked his uneven eyes twice.

“Uhh, what’s a hyoo-min?” he asked.

“Oh god, there aren’t humans in this world, are there?” I realized out loud. “I’m the only one.”

“Wha...?” Flats squinted.

“I’m from another world.” All I could think to tell them was the truth. “I think I was summoned here by the Blue Crystal.”

“Ohhh!” Flats smiled as if what I’d said explained everything. Knowing that Crystal, maybe it did.

“And I’d like to go back home,” I hastily added. “I don’t know why I was sent here.” The second statement was the biggest lie I’d told all week. The phrase *you’re among your own kind* was a broken record in my mind’s ear. I wasn’t sure I disliked the feeling.

“The MC might be able to bring you back home,” Flats suggested. “He’s real powerful.”

“Nah. Getting an audience with Tentachill when the Wingfolk are running around is almost impossible,” said the smaller Octopod.

“Right. *Them.*” Flats gritted his teeth. His mouth was full of sharp, grey fangs.

“I’d rather not see MC Tentachill, thank you,” I said. The lump in my throat throbbed. It wasn’t just that I’d had embarrassing fantasies about him (although that was part of it). He was a God. He’d probably recognize what I was turning into and force me to stay with the other Octopods.

That’s not what I want, I thought.

Sure it is!

Shut up, brain.

“You’re at least going to come to my place, right?” asked Flats, his thick head-tentacles raised slightly, like a dog’s ears when it hears the word “treat.” “I’d hate to think of you sitting here when the tide rolls in!”

“I don’t think I have another choice,” I said. “My leg is numbed.”

“Uhh, I-I’ll have to carry you,” Flats said, a note of anxiety in his voice. “Is that okay?”

“...Be gentle, please.”

Flats bent over and wrapped his thin arms around my body, lifting me up to his chest with surprising strength. We slowly made our way down the beach, the small Octopod again having to wait to catch up with Flats’ movements.

“When’s the last time you ate?” Flats asked me. My stomach growled as if it was giving a conscious answer. Flats gave a half-nervous, half-amused chuckle.

“Ooh, save me some leftovers for when my shift’s done,” said the small Octopod. “Your cooking’s as good as your piloting.”

“No, it’s not!” Flats sounded offended.

“It’s a compliment, Flats,” I said.

“But I want to be a better pilot than a cook!” Flats whined, his fins flapping faster. “I’ve put hundreds of hours into golem study!”

“You also have lots of guests,” said the small Octopod. “And you’re always cooking for them.”

“That’s just courtesy,” Flats huffed.

The two Octopods bickered back and forth in a semi-friendly way for a while. Flats seemed genuinely concerned that people were going to know him more for his hospitality than for his military prowess. I was tempted to tell him about how many times Nathan had fallen to his Golem, but didn’t want to have to explain that he was in a video game world. Eventually, the three of us reached the mouth of a cavern in the cliffside, covered by a cloth door and a mass of glass bead curtains.

“This is it,” Flats said, ducking his big head and carrying me inside.

Chapter 13

Flats' den would have been warm and inviting no matter what species you were. He had all sorts of fancy rugs spread out on the floor and decorative octopus tapestries on every wall. On the ceiling were a few bead curtains and a myriad of fancy shaped baubles that glimmered in the light of a large fireplace. A row of cabinets and a counter near the front door made a small kitchen space. The air smelled like a mixture of spices. The corner at the far end had a big sleeping nook carved into the wall that Flats insisted I lie down in.

“I-I don't fit in there anymore anyway,” he explained as he placed a kettle on the fire.

Flats had several bookshelves made from salvaged shipwreck wood, all full to bursting with different books. I squinted at the shelf. Something was off about Flats' collection of Golem Piloting books, too. What was it? They were ordinary sizes and shapes, and the titles weren't anything too strange...

The titles!

My back tensed so tight that it nearly upset my half-numbered foot. From what I could make out through my blurry vision, all of Flats' books were written in a spiraling, loopy language that looked nothing like English. I was able to read every one with ease.

Why can I understand them!? I couldn't believe I didn't make the connection earlier. The Octopods were supposed to speak in a language made of gurgles and grumbles. It was the *Wingfolk* who spoke in English.

“Be careful, it's hot,” said Flats as he held out a steaming mug of tea. I screamed. Now that I thought to listen closely, Flats was clearly speaking in

the Octopod language. Flats screamed back, dropping the mug and all the hot water onto the rugs.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t realize you were afraid of tea!” Flats said. Every word was a rumble in the back of his throat.

“I’m not afraid of tea!” I yelled. “I just don’t know what’s going on! Help!” I could feel the same rumbling language coming out of me from a spot somewhere near the center of my neck.

“You’re in my house!” Flats said. “I’m making you food! I hope that’s okay!?”

“Flats, you don’t unders-*hurk!*” The lump in my throat had swelled up to double its size in the last ten seconds and caused me to gag. My stomach lurched. I retched several times. Flats realized what was going on and he quickly grabbed a large, deep bowl from atop his counter.

Vomiting isn’t fun, even if you have something to vomit into. And it’s especially not fun when it comes out gooey, sticky, and dark grey, and smells briny, and it looks more like...

“Oh, you have an ink sac, too?” Flats asked. “I hate when that happens!”

“Humans aren’t supposed to have an ink sac,” I said as I placed the bowl of ink on the floor. The lump in the back of my throat (my ink sac, I supposed) was barely noticeable now.

“Y-you’re not supposed to have an ink sac, but you have one anyway?” Flats cocked his head so far that one of his drooping cheeks smooshed against his torso. He picked up the bowl and looked into it. “Wow! Hyoo-min ink almost looks like Octopod ink.”

That was all it took. I burst into tears and smashed my face into Flats’ bed, kicking my good leg against the mattress and pounding my fists on some of

the extra pillows. It was the first tantrum I'd thrown since childhood, spurred on by a blend of emotions I wasn't ready to face. After a few minutes, I felt Flats' hand rest on my shoulder.

"How 'bout I make you another cup of tea," he said softly, "and you can tell me what's going on?"



"I think the Crystal knows what I am. And it's been changing me so I can carry out my duties."

Flats took a sip out of a chipped green mug. It looked like he was thinking through everything I'd just said.

I didn't mean to tell him the whole story. Flats' honest interest in what I had to say and gentle expression had coaxed the entire thing out of me — and the delicious spiced tea he'd made wasn't making my lips any less loose. I'd rambled on about everything from the figurine of Tentachill to the ink sac in my throat. Flats had a dazed look in his round eyes. I wondered if it was too much information at once for him.

"So, you're an Octopod, too," he finally said.

"Yes," I said.

"Why would an Octopod serving Tentachill be a bad thing?" Flats asked. "And you can help him without joining the military, y'know."

"He's not... not good," I said, trying my hardest not to think of those damned yellow eyes.

“What do you mean he’s not good?”

“The mind control thing,” I muttered. I felt like shriveling into a Liz-flavored raisin. Sweet as Flats seemed, he was completely loyal to Tentachill. Maybe I should have lied.

“Oh! You mean the music!” A goofy grin spread across Flats’ face. “Good stuff.”

“What?” Now I was the confused one. I expected Flats to be upset about being controlled, or angry at me for questioning Tentachill’s rule. Instead, he sounded happy.

“I mean, we’re pretty pathetic,” Flats shrugged. “It does a lot to help us.”

“The music *helps* you?”

“It makes you calm and gets you to focus,” said Flats. “What’d you think it did?”

I gazed into my mug and swished the last drops of tea around. Flats’ single-sentence explanation of Tentachill’s powers made it sound like a miracle cure for my anxiety issues. But I knew that what he was saying wasn’t true. I’d seen how the Mimics’ eyes had glowed and the way their bodies had stiffened when Tentachill had activated the turntable runes. Maybe Flats was too simple to notice he was being controlled.

“The food’s probably ready by now,” Flats said. He hummed cheerfully as he turned to the pot he’d put on the fire, scooping out a creamy white mash into some bowls.

“Thank you again for letting me stay with you,” I said as he handed me a bowl with a wooden spoon. The food looked and felt very thick. After waiting several minutes in silence for it to cool, I lifted a spoonful of it to my mouth. It was somewhat like a cream soup filled with meat from several

different types of shellfish, but the broth had a hint of bitter vegetable taste to it.

“This’s called ‘Sea’s Bounty,’” Flats said, motioning to his bowl. “Did they have this in your old world?”

“We had something like this. Chowder,” I said. “And we usually served it with crackers.”

“Ever try it with ink?”

“Ink...?”

“Yeah, it’s delicious with ink.”

“Waitamminute... *your* ink!”

“I-it’s not like I’m spitting right into the soup!” Flats frowned. “You preserve it in a jar and let it ferment first.” He pulled down a glass bottle full of dark liquid from a kitchen shelf and offered it to me. I recoiled and held my bowl close to my chest.

“No thanks,” I said. I wasn’t comfortable with putting Flats’ bodily fluids into my food just yet.

“It’s here if you ever change your mind,” said Flats, splashing some of the bottled ink into his own bowl.

You’d have enjoyed it, I found myself thinking.



What I thought would be an uncomfortable night in an unfamiliar place ended up giving way to calm and peaceful sleep. Flats' sleeping nook had so many comfy pillows that when I closed my eyes, I was able to pretend I was back in my bed at home. His snoring even sounded a little like my box fan.

When I woke, I could hear faint sounds from the world outside – seagulls screeching, waves crashing against the shoreline, and a steady, synthesized drumbeat.

Tentachill's music, I realized with a start. I jammed one of Flats' more flexible pillows over my ears and began mustering up as much willpower as I could. Even if I was Octopod enough to have an ink sac, I refused to let myself be controlled.

Flats mumbled something I couldn't hear through the pillow, scratching his rotund stomach with a mitten-hand and slowly blinking his eyes. Then he shook his head and his entire demeanor changed. His eyes opened wide as he stood tall at attention with his fins sticking straight out to the sides.

“*They're coming*,” he said. He looked from me to the door and then back to me. “You still can't move, can you?”

“I'm still supposed to be resting my foot,” I said as I took the pillow off my head. The thunk-thunk-thunk of the drum vibrated through the mattress, making the pillow useless.

“Breakfast first, then,” Flats said. “A quick one.” He grabbed a large knife from a drawer and hastily cut up several fruits. He threw together a plate of uneven slices and handed it to me, tossed a few books onto the side of the bed, scarfed down the remaining fruit within seconds, and left as swiftly as he could.

I was a little worried that fruit from the world of *Eagle's Quarry* would be a lot stranger than the chowder I'd had the night before. Thankfully, what was

on my plate wasn't much different from earth fruit. Some of the slices were unmistakably from pocket-sized melons. A few of them were crunchy and tasted like a halfway point between apple and pear. One particularly juicy slice reminded me a lot of a peach, but with a spicy bite to it. All of it was delicious.

The music continued, growing louder every minute. It had a deep, repeating bassline and a "crystal" synth straight out of an 80s B-film. I picked up a book titled *Seaside Feasts* and began leafing through it, hoping that thinking about cooking would be a good enough distraction to help me resist the powers of Tentachill's music.

Nope.

I felt my pulse quicken until it matched the song's tempo. My body stiffened and I sat up straighter. My finger tapped against the back of the book in rhythm and my head began to bob.

It's got you, Liz! The music's got you! Resist! My mental warning to myself was drowned out by the secret message that the music was carrying:

Wingfolk attack! Do what you can!

The anxious fog that usually clouded my mind was gone, in its place a strong sense of purpose and duty. I had to help the Octopods somehow. But I was still bed-bound until evening. What could I do?

I won't be able to help if I don't position my leg properly to heal. I moved myself into a more natural position and propped up the injured foot on a stiff pillow to encourage blood flow. Then I flipped through *Seaside Feasts*, searching for a recipe simple enough for me to prepare. I'd need to eat sometime, and Flats would be hungry if he came home that night.

What are you doing, Liz!?! This is all wrong! You're not Tentachill's slave! Fight it!

My mental response came automatically and effortlessly.

I don't want to.

Chapter 14

“The fuck’s a zefwad?”

“I-I put one on your plate this morning!”

“Just because I ate it doesn’t mean I knew what it was called!”

I was standing next to the kitchen counter with a spread of ingredients before me. The exhausted Flats was allowed to return to his den for the night while he was relieved from his position, which was good for me — it turned out I couldn’t reach the ingredients in the higher cabinets.

“B-be careful how fast you stir! This stuff stains!” Flats warned.

“I’ve never eaten a ‘dinner jelly’ before,” I said, making sure that the blob of ingredients stayed inside the mixing bowl.

“Dinner jelly was my favorite when I was a li’l squish,” Flats said. “I remember my Den Guardian making real big plates of the sour kind. I was already so big compared to the others that I needed a whole second plate!”

“Den Guardian?”

“Oh, that’s an Octopod Thing,” Flats said. He let out a long yawn as he continued. “It’s what you call the adult Octopods who take care of the Octolets.”

“Oh, parents.”

“Not exactly parents,” said Flats, his face turning bright blue in what was obviously an Octopod blush. “Cuz we don’t... we can’t reproduce.” I nearly dropped the bowl of dinner jelly.

“Then how do you... babies?” Was there a polite way to ask about making babies while preparing food? Flats looked up at the ceiling and was silent for a few moments.

“Mera,” he finally replied.

“Who’s that?” I asked. Flats looked down at me with an amused smile creeping across his face.

“Y-you’ve got a lot to learn about being an Octopod,” he said.

I slowly opened my mouth and took a deep breath. I wanted to say “no.” I wanted to tell Flats that I didn’t want to learn any more about the Octopod people. I wanted to fly into a rage about what the music had done to me and demand he help me get home.

At least, that’s what I was *supposed* to want.

“She’s gotta be around here somewhere. We found her shirt.” A familiar, frustrated voice sounded from outside the bead curtains.

“Coated in *blue blood*, Ji. She’s dead.” Make that two familiar, frustrated voices.

“It’s only been a day, Jerry. It took me until early afternoon to find you. Maybe she’s camping out in one of these caves.”

“I-it’s the Wingfolk!” Flats whimpered.

“No,” I whispered. “Humans.”

“Oh! Should I invite them in for dinner? The jelly’s probably thickened by now!”

“They don’t speak the Octopod language, remember?” My back was tensing up again, and I could feel my ink sac starting to swell.

“Do you think she’s being held hostage?” The sound of footsteps on sand approaching. Flats looked at me with alarm.

“I’m over here!” I ran towards Flats’ cloth-and-bead-covered door and popped my head out for my co-workers to see. “I’m alive! Just... don’t come in, I’m not wearing a shirt!”

Ji and Jerry looked at me with the most bewildered expressions imaginable. Both had dirt-stained, sweat-drenched clothing and glistening faces. They’d probably been walking for hours.

“The hell are you doing in there!?” Jerry asked. “That’s an Octopod house! We almost had to kill one of those fuckers!”

“Um, I think it’s abandoned,” I said, feeling my ink sac throb at the mention of Octopod near-death. “I came in here to rest when I accidentally hurt my foot. No Octopods yet!”

“I’m so glad you’re alive.” Ji had tears running down his cheeks. “So, so glad.”

“C’mon out,” Jerry said. “We don’t care if you’re not wearing a shirt. This is a survival situation.”

“Ohhhh no, nope, I’m too modest for that.” It was already getting hard to come up with excuses. “There’s some linens in here that I can probably steal and wrap around myself. Give me a few minutes.” I ducked back into Flats’ house and started shoveling some of the jelly into my mouth, knowing it might be the last good meal I’d have in a while. It had the consistency of lumpy cranberry sauce.

“You’re going with them?” Flats sounded very sad. That surprised me – was he hoping I’d stay?

“I can’t tell them that I speak the Octopod language,” I explained. “They’d get scared of me.”

“Why? That’s not scary.”

“Flats, you’re not a human,” I said. “You wouldn’t understand it.” I placed my spoon on Flats’ counter and began folding one of the blankets from the sleeping nook into a toga. “And you wouldn’t understand why I need to wear this, either.”

“You’ll probably use it more than I do,” he sighed.

“Thank you for everything.” The words were a soft gurgle in my throat.

“Take some z-zefwads with you before you go,” Flats said. “You’ll get hungry.”

I grabbed three of the small melons, nodded at Flats, and passed through the bead-curtains hanging in the doorway. Ji and Jerry were resting against the cliff wall.

“The hell are those?” Ji asked.

“I did some foraging today,” I said. “They taste like cantaloupe.”

“Ope, now that’s using your melon,” Jerry smiled weakly. He stared at the bead curtain doorway. “What else is in there?”

“Shit!” I yelled. “I mean, *my shit!* I didn’t have another place to go to the bathroom! Don’t go in, please. It’s gross.”

Jerry gave me a raised eyebrow and a downturned mouth.

“Why wouldn’t you just go on the beach?” he asked.

“I don’t fare well in survival situations,” I said, glad to be able to say one thing that was true. “I wasn’t thinking. Anyhow, everything else in there is in bad shape.”

“I’m famished,” said Ji. “Let’s eat.”

“We have to ration them,” said Jerry. He cracked one of the thick-skinned Zefwads on the rocky cliff wall, causing juice to fly everywhere. I felt like the universe’s biggest asshole. Flats had plenty of food just inches away from where my co-workers were splitting a single fruit, and he was willing to share it all. I decided I’d ask him for some extra food when the others fell asleep.

“This is as good a spot as any to make camp,” Jerry said, wiping zefwad juice off his lips. “Liz, if you’re not going to eat anything, start gathering wood so we can make a shelter and a fire.”

“Right,” I said. I began grabbing armfuls of nearby driftwood and plopped it in a pile near Jerry and Ji. There was still a tiny bit of Octopod music still bouncing around inside my heart, propelling me to do the best job that I could.



Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

The distant sound of Tentachill’s music caused me to stir from a restless sleep. I stretched my arms upward, hoping to relieve my sore shoulders. Sleeping on the ground, even if that ground was made of soft sugar sand, was not good for my back.

Propped up at the edge of the driftwood shelter was a pillowcase stuffed full of fruit. Flats had no problems with giving my friends more to eat, but it was

obvious how angry he was at me by the way he'd avoided eye contact the entire time.

“What’s wrong with being an Octopod, huh?” he’d kept muttering.

I crawled out of the driftwood shelter and stretched again. My head bopped involuntarily to the song’s beat. I could already feel that sense of Octopod duty blossoming inside me. I knew I would have to forcefully redirect the energy towards helping my friends survive.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. The music was slowly growing louder. The bassline was more frantic than the day before, and the beat was quicker. The Wingfolk were a bigger threat than expected. Tentachill needed reinforcements.

Shit, I’m gonna have to empty my ink sac, I realized as I felt that familiar lump bobbing around in my throat. I walked to the edge of the beach until I was ankle deep in warm water and leaned over, intending to simply dump all the black goo into the sea.

I wonder how far I can shoot this stuff? The thought entered my head before I could spit out anything.

That’s Tentachill talking, not you, Liz, I warned myself. *You’re a human. You don’t need to shoot ink.*

Defense! My self-reply was clearer than I was expecting. *If something attacks, you have a built-in weapon. At least figure out how to aim.*

It was an argument that I hated to admit made sense. Me befriending a few Octopods didn’t guarantee our safety. If we were attacked by anything less-than-friendly, we would need a way to protect ourselves. Ink, though unusual, could be useful.

I dug my fingers into one of the spicy peaches (Flats had called them “dhurkins”) and smeared the red, pulpy flesh onto a smooth area of the cliff wall to make a crude target. Then I stood back, positioned myself into an attack stance, closed one eye, and tried picturing the lump in my neck being squeezed.

“*Pfflllllbbbbb!*” Ink burst out of my mouth in a messy spray and dribbled down my chin. Apparently, my lips were too close together for me to spit anything out properly. I groaned and cleaned my face off with the bottom of my toga. The lump in my throat was still there, though it had grown a bit smaller. I aimed at the wall again, this time with my jaw loose.

“*Pweh!*” A grapefruit-sized ball of ink squeezed itself out of my mouth and splattered against the wall, close to the center of the target. My heart surged. Was I in tune with my Octopod instincts? Or was it just dumb luck?

“*I like that.*” I found myself imagining Tentachill watching me, muscular arms folded and smirking confidently as I worked up another ball of ink in my throat. The silliest “Huh huh huh huh” giggle I’d ever heard spilled out of my mouth.

Dammit, Liz! Be normal for once! Fight it! The frantic thoughts seemed fainter than usual thanks to the music. I launched another glob of ink at the makeshift target. This one hit dead center.

“*You make a **real** good octopus.*”

“Huh huh huh huh.”

“Aaaaaagh, damned music!” Jerry’s voice roaring from the driftwood shelter shifted me from a dreamy daze into panic mode. Tentachill’s music had grown loud, which meant that Flats would be leaving his den soon. I needed to distract Jerry and Ji.

“The *Eagle’s Quarry* Gods blessed us!” I declared, running over to the shelter and shoving the half-squashed dhurkin in Ji’s face. “They gave us a bag of food!”

“For real?” Ji asked. “That’s great!” He dug into the pillowcase, pulled out another dhurkin, and took a big bite. “Oh! It’s spicy!”

“Whoop. Guess I should have warned you.”

“Wait, there’s *more than one god* in this world?” Jerry asked.

“There’s Lesser Gods and Upper Gods,” said Ji through a mouthful of dhurkin. “I’ll bet a Lesser God dropped the food there for us. They live among mortals.” Jerry placed a hand on his chin and scrunched his face so tight that it looked like he’d just depthroated twenty jumbo sourballs.

“Ji... how powerful are these ‘Lesser Gods?’” he asked.

“Not as powerful as the Upper Gods,” Ji said. “They’re more like superheroes than divine beings.”

“Are they powerful enough to get us back home?”

Ji’s jaw dropped. His eye pupils dilated several times as he stared into the distance.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” he whispered.

“That’s ok.” Jerry broke out into a big, open grin. “At least we might have a way out of this hellscape. Now.” He clapped his big hands together.

“Breakfast!” Jerry pulled out the biggest fruit he could find. I sat down and started munching on the rest of my dhurkin. The clanking of bead curtains and a wet, shuffling noise came from behind the shelter. Flats was awake.

“So, Ji, about those Gods,” I said, hoping to take my co-workers’ attention away from the flabby Octopod about to emerge from the cave directly behind

us. “What is it that they *do*? Tentachill does the mind control bit, but what else?”

“God, it’s been so long since I’ve played *Eagle’s Quarry*,” Ji said. “The Wingfolk goddess does a lot of magical blessing. Tentachill... despite the dumb way he talks, I think he’s supposed to be hyperintelligent. He might’ve invented the golems? Not sure. I know he invented the mind-control music.”

“Tentachill...” Goosebumps rose on my arms and legs as I pictured those damned eyes smiling at me for the second time that day. There was a chance I’d get to see those eyes for real. What would I do if it came to that?

“What did you just say?” Ji asked. His lips were pursed together as he squinted at me. What was he giving me that look for? It wasn’t like I’d said something in another language.

Wait. *Shit*.

“Tentachill,” I repeated, hoping my words came out in English this time. “I’m just thinking about him, that’s all.”

“He’s probably the closest Lesser God to us, but I doubt he’d help,” said Ji. “He’d probably brainwash us with his music instead. Guy’s always gotta be in control.”

“I really don’t like these octo-fucks,” Jerry said. “First, one of them charges at us, and now you tell me they worship a God who fucks up minds?”

“WINGFOLK SPOTTED BEACHSIDE! ASSUME EMERGENCY POSITIONS! I REPEAT, WINGFOLK SPOTTED BEACHSIDE!”

I dropped the dhurkin pit and scrambled to my feet, adrenaline searing through my veins. Dozens of Octopods were filing out of hidden cave entrances and assembling into small groups along the beach. The ink sac in my throat churned.

“Motherfuck,” Jerry growled. “They know we’re here. Pick up something sharp and get ready to fight.” He stood up and pulled a Swiss Army Knife out of his pants pocket. Ji picked up a jagged rock and the sack of fruit. I grabbed a large piece of driftwood off the roof of the shelter and held it like a club.

It wasn’t the Octopods I was worried about.

Chapter 15

Liz, you gotta think of something. My thoughts were frantic as we walked along the beach with weapons in hand. Gotta make an excuse. Gotta make sure your people aren't killed by Jerry and Ji.

*'Your people'? Your co-workers **are** 'your people', dumbass. You're human. Don't let that music convince your stupid little brain otherwise.*

Why lie to yourself? You haven't been human in a while. Tell your friends the truth. They might back off on the other Octopods, especially since you can communicate with them.

I can't tell them the truth, brain! They'll think I'm a traitor to the whole human race!

"They're not attacking us," Ji said. The Common Octopods around us were staring with wide eyes, curious expressions, and lowered weapons. Their tentacles twisted in a slow, unsure way.

"They probably think we're Gods," I said.

"The hell would they think that?" Jerry asked. "We're not *that* good looking."

"All the Gods in the world of *Eagle's Quarry* look like humans," I explained, relieved that I didn't have to come up with an elaborate untruth. "I don't think regular humans even exist here."

"You're totally right," said Ji, relaxing his stance. "Even Tentachill looks like an octo... mermaid... man...thing. I bet the Octopods are afraid of us."

"Oh, yeah? Then why did Liz get attacked by one this morning?" Jerry asked.

“The fuck are you talking about?” I crinkled my nose. Jerry usually made up crummy jokes, not tall tales.

“You’ve got inkstains on your robe,” he said. Oh. Flats’ bedsheets were covered in black streaks from that morning’s failed target practice.

“That’s not from an Octopod attack,” I said. “It was from one of the fruits in the bag. It had black juice and when I bit into it, it got everywhere.”

“Hang on a sec.” Jerry had stopped walking. I saw his eyes flick up and down my body several times. Ji followed Jerry’s gaze, and he raised a hand to his mouth.

“You see it, too?” Jerry asked.

“Oh, yeah,” nodded Ji.

“What are you two talking about?” I nervously laughed. I felt my fins press against the side of my head. Were my co-workers able to see them?

“Liz,” Ji said, raising his hands. “Stop moving.”

“Um, I’m not moving,” I said. “I’m standing right here.”

“That’s not what I mean!” Ji’s voice was panicked. “I mean stop bobbing your head!”

Jerry marched forward until he was a foot in front of me, then slapped me in the face. The sudden pain caused me to instinctively spit up an ink ball, which beamed Jerry in the forehead and exploded. Black goo flew everywhere. I buried my face in my hands as Ji helped the temporarily-blinded Jerry find his way to the sea to wash himself off. The half-dozen Octopods around me began to murmur.

“Ink?”

“Ink!”

“Is she an Octopod goddess?”

“I see fins! Just like ours!”

“She understands the music! Look!”

“Uhh, hello!” I said as the Octopods slowly began to approach me with happy faces.

“We’re so glad you’re here, Goddess,” a blue Octopod holding a long spear said, dipping his head in a bow that looked semi-comical. The rest of the Octopods did the same, some of them accidentally falling face-first into the sand.

“Please... don’t do that,” I said. The display was embarrassing.

“But aren’t you here to help us with the Wingfolk?” the spear Octopod asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m not. My friends and I are trying to get back home. Do any of you know a way—”

“GET AWAY FROM HER, FUCKHEADS!” Jerry tackled the Spear Soldier and jammed his Swiss Army Knife into the Octopod’s throat, causing a spray of blood the same shade of blue as my own. The Octopod writhed in pain, gave a few choking gasps, and went limp. The other Octopods snapped into battle poses, but froze. None of them wanted to risk attacking an “angry God.” Jerry kicked the body a few times to make sure it was dead. Ji grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the Octopod soldiers.

“Liz. Say something in English. Anything,” Ji said.

“Jerry killed him!” I screamed, waterfalls streaming down my cheeks.

“Jerry killed an innocent Octopod!”

“Innocent...? Oh, Liz! You’re being controlled!” My vision was too blurred to tell, but it sounded like he was crying, too.

“It’s a good thing I’m a vet, or you wouldn’t be here right now,” said Jerry.

“You didn’t have to kill him, asshole!” I snapped.

“Oh, I’m *so sorry*.” Jerry’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “Next time you start *speaking in tongues* I just won’t interfere!”

“You were almost completely gone,” said Ji. “We heard you talking in the Octopod language. If Jerry didn’t step in, who knows what they would have done to you?”

We walked in silence for a while. I stared at the ground, insides ablaze with guilt and tears wobbling in the corners of my eyes. If I’d have told them I could talk to Octopods earlier, the Spear Soldier might still be alive. We would have been able to ask for food and shelter. We might have even been able to find a faster way off the beach.

I looked back at the group of Octopod soldiers in the distance. Their heads were bowed as they stood in a circle around their dead companion and held hands. One of them appeared to be leading the rest in prayer. My heart felt like it was weighed down by twenty sandbags. My own stubbornness had cost him his life.

“Sorry for making you barf,” Jerry said suddenly.

“Barf...?” Once again, I had no idea what Jerry was talking about.

“I slapped you, and you threw up in my face,” Jerry said. “Maybe your brain’s too fried to remember.”

“I’m still in shock from watching someone die three feet away from me,” I said. “It’s not something I’m used to.”

“Don’t feel too bad for them,” Ji said. “Their only purpose is to obey Tentachill. The whole point of *Eagle’s Quarry* was to warn about the dangers of blind loyalty.”

“You sure?” I asked. “Nathan said it was a – whaddya call it – grey-totality game. Where you don’t know which side is good or bad.”

“Grey *morality*? What made him say that?”

“For one thing, the Wingfolk can enter houses and kill the civilians. That’s not heroic. I think the story’s more complicated than good vs evil.”

“That definitely sounds more like a Matsuya production than what I was thinking,” Ji said. “You even have to kill a certain number of Octopods to get the hidden bonus cutscene. I’ll have to replay *Eagle’s Quarry* when we make it back home.”

“Here’s the thing,” Jerry said. “*Eagle’s Quarry*? It’s a game. It’s fake. Where we are now? That’s *reality*. The Octopods could be the most peaceful race in all of Game-Gorilla-Land, and that wouldn’t stop them from being dangerous here. We just saw them use their mind-control powers on Liz.”

“They weren’t using mind-control powers,” I said. “Jerry, Ji…there’s something I have to tell you. I –”

“WINGFOLK!”

I let out a “Gruggguuuuu?” noise and whirled around. A familiar trio of feathered teenagers were in a frenzied battle with the Octopod soldiers. Screams and gurgles filled the air. Spears clashed. Ink balls launched in all directions. In moments, there was a fresh pile of dead Octopods on the ground. The knot in my gut grew harder.

“Any chance you nerds know what those bird things are?” Jerry asked.

“Wingfolk,” Ji and I said.

“Rrrrrright. Should we be running?”

“Hail, Gods and Goddess!” Tsubasa called out in English, waving one of his feathery arms. “Will you bless us on our quest?”

“Told you they thought we were Gods,” I mumbled. The lump in my throat was heavier than ever. I wanted to launch all my ink at the Wingfolk in one massive, frustrated shot for killing a group of mourning Octopods. It wasn’t a fair thing to think. The Octopods were soldiers and knew they were putting their lives on the line.

Tsubasa, Bobbin, and Ahiruko were walking towards us now, and as they grew near my anger softened. Their clothes were tattered and stained with dirt. Ahiruko was limping, her leg wrapped with bloodstained bandages. All three had thin faces.

“They’re little kids!” Jerry gasped.

“They’re teenagers,” said Ji. “The Crystal gives superpowers to people who are young, so the Wingfolk send out teenagers to get it back.”

“That’s bullshit!” Jerry said. “Sending out *kids* just to get a dumb rock!?”

“That ‘dumb rock’ is what brought us here,” I said.

“Greetings from Takako village!” Bobbin said, the edges of his little beak somehow curved in a smile. “We are warriors on a journey to retrieve the Blue Crystal from the hands of the Octopods!”

“We really could use your aid,” Ahiruko said. Her ridiculous eyelashes looked even longer in person.

“I think you’ve got it wrong,” Jerry said. He squatted until he was staring the three-and-a-half-foot-tall Tsubasa in the face. “We’re not Gods. We’re humans. Mortals.”

“Mortals? You look just like Gods!” said Bobbin. “Is it a trick? Are you in a disguise? Teach me!”

“What is a human?” Tsubasa asked. “I’ve never heard of one before.

“Well, a human’s kind of like a hairless monkey,” said Jerry. “Except we’re smarter and we can talk.”

“And we don’t live in trees,” added Ji.

“We look like Gods, but we’re not,” I finished.

“Does that mean you can’t help us?” Bobbin asked.

“Of course we’ll still help you! Any enemy of those Octo-fucks is a friend of mine,” Jerry declared, folding his arms. Ahiruko giggled.

“Octo-fucks,” she repeated. “That’s funny.”

“Hey, don’t swear!” Tsubasa said, though the cheeky grin on his face said that he’d like to hear it again.

“Why not?” Ahiruko asked. “It’s not like the Elder’s here to whack us with his cane!”

“Shit, piss, fuck, ass, cloaca!” Bobbin yelled. The swear words bounced off the cliff and echoed at close to full volume. Tsubasa and Ahiruko doubled over with laughter.

“Hey, how do you kids feel about fruit?” asked Jerry. “The *real* Gods gave us a whole sackful.”



Pick a side, Liz.

My co-workers and the Wingfolk kids were sitting on the beach, eating fruit and discussing possible ways we could get back home. I sat among them, eating another zefwad. Flats would be devastated if he found out that his food was being used to feed the enemy. On the other hand... they were hungry kids.

You're an Octopod. Helping the Wingfolk doesn't cancel out who you are. And besides – think about Tentachill! You're already loyal to him, even without the music. Just let yourself be the squishy octopus that you are!

Don't you dare listen to those brainwashed thoughts, Liz.

“You're almost at the entrance to a mountain path that leads to our village,” Tsubasa was saying. “It's about a mile down the beach. I know our Village Goddess would be happy to help you. She's known for her kindness.”

“We're headed that way,” said Bobbin, wiping off his beak with his wrist. “We can be your escorts!”

The Wingfolk Village Goddess might be able to turn you completely human again. Things will go back to normal. Then you'll be happy again, Liz.

You weren't happy before and you know it.

“Any chance there's an inn along the way?” Jerry asked. “We could use some sleep in a real bed.”

“Drainer's Inn,” Tsubasa said. “Run by a Furman family. It's not too far past the top of the cliff.”

“Perfect!” Jerry said. “Then I can get to sleep *inn*.”

“We don’t have any money,” I reminded Jerry. “How are we going to pay for it?”

“Gotcha covered!” Ahiruko said, pulling a bag out of the pouch around her hips and tossing it into my lap. It was filled with gold coins. “It’s the least we can do to thank you for the food.” I had a feeling the money was from Octopod civilian raids.

“*Vomit!*” I jumped to my feet, ran out until I was knee-deep in sea, and launched several globs of ink into the rolling waves. I clutched my stomach and faked a few loud moans.

“Geez louise, Liz, how much of that black fruit did you eat!?” Jerry yelled.

“Too much!” I yelled back before launching a fourth ink ball into the water. The painful lump in my throat was gone, but I knew it would come back within a few hours. I returned to my spot on the beach and hugged my knees.

Tonight, when the Wingfolk are gone, I thought. That’s when I’ll tell my friends the truth.

Chapter 16

“Nice night,” Bobbin said.

“Yep,” I sighed, leaning onto the inn’s gnarled, knotty balcony railing.

My luck couldn’t have been worse. Instead of simply escorting us to the inn, the young Wingfolk decided that they would accompany us on the day-long journey back to their village. That meant I couldn’t reveal that I was an Octopod to my friends.

*But it **does** mean that I might get to go back to being completely human,* I thought. Tsubasa had assured us that once the Crystal was back in its place at Takako, their Goddess would be able to invoke the favor of the Upper Gods.

“And if they don’t agree to help,” Ahiruko had chimed in, “you’re more than welcome to stay at my family’s place.”

Waves crashed into the shore in the distance. My thoughts returned to the squad of Octopod soldiers. I’d only seen them for about twenty minutes, but every moment of the encounter was burned into my memory. I couldn’t sleep with their death weighing on me.

They could see my fins, I remembered. *Can the Wingfolk see them, too?* I glanced over at Bobbin, who was engrossed in a thick book by the light of a small, floating fireball.

“Bobbin?” I asked. He turned to face me. His beady little eyes glistened in the firelight.

“Yeah?”

“Never mind.” I couldn’t think of a way to ask a Wingfolk Hero “do I have fins” without raising suspicion. I turned my gaze back towards the strip of sand in the distance.

Did you want to go back? For once, I wasn’t chastising myself.

I don’t know why, but I do. Probably residual brainwashing.

Go on, then. You know what you are.

I can’t, brain. My place is Earth, with my friends and family. Not with weird octopus things on... whatever planet this is.

The huge moon hung high in the sky and was just as full as the first night. A beachside breeze tousled my hair and fins. My chest was growing hot with uncertainty.

Wish I knew what to do.

Thoom. Thoom. Thoom.

A beat made from electronic toms, coming from the direction of the beach. They were slower than the drums used to signal the Wingfolk threat. I felt myself being gently beckoned by them.

Well?

*I am **not** going down there,* I told myself.

You just asked what to do. Maybe this is your sign!

“Octo-fucks are up to somethin’,” Bobbin said, closing his book. “Betcha they’re going to attack us!”

“I don’t think that’s it,” I muttered. Bobbin heard me and tilted his head in a painfully birdlike manner.

“What do you mean?” he asked. I didn’t have an answer. My fins flapped in time with the music as I looked towards the sea. The Octopods looked like little ants traveling along the beach.

Thoom. Th-th-thoom. Thoom. Th-th-thoom.

“How can you tell that the Octopods aren’t going to attack?” Bobbin asked, his words slow and deliberate.

“Just a hunch,” I said. “I’m probably wrong. You should go wake up the others!”

Bobbin adjusted his glasses. He was wearing a suspicious look that was far too cold for someone his age. He walked around me in a circle, hands folded behind his back. Then he started muttering something under his breath, speaking so quickly that it took me a moment to realize what he was doing.

“...Crystal, I implore your power from afar, if she is an Octopod, help me smite—”

My ink sac swelled and I instinctively launched an ink ball at Bobbin’s head, knocking him flat onto his back. Time screeched to a halt as my brain processed what had just happened. Bobbin rubbed the ink off of his eyes and stared up at me with his beak hanging open.

Then he screamed.

I dashed down the staircase leading to the front door of the inn. Behind me, Bobbin pounded on the wooden door leading to Tsubasa and Ahiruko’s room. In his panicked blubbers I heard something about me being an ‘Octopod Spy.’ I wasn’t planning on turning around to argue. Through the ceiling, I could hear Tsubasa and Ahiruko’s clawed feet scraping the floor as they scrambled to get their weapons.



I couldn't believe myself.

I was curled up inside a big, hollow stump, hoping that the beating of wings wouldn't get too close. If I was caught, I would get killed by three overzealous bird-teenagers. It was the most dangerous situation I'd ever been in, and I needed complete focus. So why was I carrying on a full argument in my head!?

You really fucked up, didn't you, idiot? You had a chance to get back to your normal, human life, and you opened your big, fat mouth. Now where are you going to go?

The Octopods will protect you! Head to the sea!

Yeah, they'll protect you alright, but at what cost? The rest of your humanity? Wouldn't that be perfect? The Queen Idiot saves her life and loses it at the same time!

Liz, you just hurled a ball of ink at a Wingfolk Hero out of pure Octopod instinct. How much humanity can you honestly say you have left? Half? Maybe less?

"Octo-fuck got away," I heard Tsubasa call out. "Probably used that damned camouflage magic."

"Should we do one last sweep?" Ahiruko shouted. There was the sound of something heavy smacking into a tree followed by something crashing onto a pile of leaves.

"You okay, Tsuba?" Bobbin's voice was quieter than Ahiruko's.

“Gonna have to prop me up,” Tsubasa said. Shuffling noises and three different sets of grunts followed.

I waited until the Wingfolk’s footsteps had completely faded to exit my hiding place. The hollow stump was only about fifty feet away from the road. How did they miss me? Just dumb luck? The power of the Blue Crystal? One of the Gods?

The Gods...

My feet were bare, so I walked in the cool grass alongside the pebbly road leading towards the beach. The unnatural full moon bathed everything in a milky cream color. Crickets chirped and owls hooted. The atmosphere was peaceful. It didn’t make me feel any better about what I was about to do.

I hadn’t seriously prayed to anyone since early high school. Organized religion made me gag for a number of reasons. Now, trapped in a different world where I knew there was a multitude of real deities, the first one I was going to thank was the wild-eyed DJ octopus man that spoke in music puns and somehow put my panties in a twist. What was I thinking? Was I thinking at all?

MC Tentachill, if you’re listening... thanks for helping save my ass. Guess I owe you one. I was too nervous to recite a formal prayer, but Tentachill wasn’t exactly a formal God. I had a feeling he’d appreciate the attention no matter what I said.

The soft beach sand was a welcome texture under my bare feet. The last remaining Octopods – a pair of Mimics –were heading towards a massive cave in the cliff wall that hadn’t been there earlier. Next to the mouth of the cave was what couldn’t have been anything but a Save Sphere. The Mimic Octopods rubbed it gently before entering. I waited for a few moments until the Mimics had disappeared, then gingerly brushed my fingertips against the

Sphere. It was warm and smooth, like heated glass, and sent a tingle up my spine.

I walked into the sloping underground passageways, following the Mimics from a distance. Mushrooms with caps the size of my face filled the tunnels with blue and purple light. Unlike the sprawling underground chambers where I'd watched Nathan chase down a Nautilus, this cave was a single, long, winding tunnel. The artwork of Octopods on the walls was elaborate, with vibrant colors and intricate carved details. Every so often, a wiggly black sun was painted in the sky.

The tunnel opened into an enormous room containing a small, very deep lake and a ceiling so high that it faded into blackness. Thousands of Octopods lined the shores, packed so tightly that there wasn't room to move. The drums were loud. The Octopods themselves remained silent. All eyes were locked on the large, ornate pavilion connected to a long dock at the far end of the lake.

Underneath a wooden roof carved to look like entwined tentacles was a group of about twenty different Octopods dressed in beaded robes that glimmered in the mushroom-light. Sitting behind them, dripping in jewels, was a muscular figure that I would recognize anywhere.

It's him.

The drums stopped and MC Tentachill stood up. He crawled forward on his striped tentacle legs, jewelry clinking with every move, until he was standing at the edge of the dock. Then he raised his left hand and held it out to the side.

“MERA! MERA!” he called out in his deep voice. He chanted in a language that was neither English nor Octopod, and pressed something to his forehead. When he finished speaking, he tossed the object into the water.

There were several minutes of complete silence before huge ripples started to spread out from the center of the lake. A dark mass was rising from far below. Hundreds of wiggling black tentacles breached the surface. I drew in a breath. The image on the cave walls wasn't a "black sun" at all. It was *Mera*.

Mera rose high into the air and opened her eyes, revealing golden irises and barbell-shaped pupils that seemed to contain all the knowledge in the galaxy inside them. She slowly turned around, as if taking stock of everyone in the cave, while making a deep rumbling noise that vibrated my core. Her eyes met mine, and she paused.

Energy inside welled up inside my gut and surged out over my body. In an instant, I'd gone from human to Octopod. I could feel all my tentacles, control every sucker as naturally as if I'd had them my whole life. I didn't ever want the feeling to end. Was this an illusion caused by Mera's power, or had she truly caused a change to manifest?

A beautiful soprano voice began to sing, causing Mera to turn from me and face the pavilion. The voice belonged to one of the robed Octopods. The slow, melancholy love song she sang was in an older form of the Octopod language, and I didn't recognize many of the words. The other robed Octopods joined in, creating a loud chorus. Their eerie harmonies bounced off the cave walls, filling the cave with a sound that was otherworldly and ancient.

Mera made a loud, strained gurgle that contained centuries of sadness. She tilted forwards. Huge tears fell from her golden eyes and splashed into the lake. The water fizzed where they landed, then burst into boiling geysers. Dense fog spread throughout the cave. The choir sung on.

A crew of Octopods outfitted with bulging over-the-shoulder satchels lowered themselves into the water and swam towards the center of the lake. I

squinted and leaned forward, but it was impossible to see what they were doing through the mist. After a long wait, they began to reappear. Tiny, wailing Octopod infants were nestled in their arms. I heaved a sob and fell to my knees, finally understanding. Mera was the mother of us all.

The last of the Octopod attendants returned to the shore, and the choir ended their song with one long, sustained chord. As the last echoes faded, Mera slowly turned to look at her audience for a second time. Again her gaze landed on me.

What do you want me to do, Mera? I asked her in my head. *I'm listening.* If Mera heard my prayer, she didn't answer. Anxious murmurs began to roll through the crowd.

“What is she doing?”

“Why isn't she going back to sleep?”

“What does she see?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tentachill slide off the pavilion and make his way into the crowd, parting the sea of Octopods. Panic washed over me. I tried to stand but my body couldn't decide whether it was human or Octopod. My legs twisted in an unnatural way and I fell backwards, crashing head-first on the hard cave floor.

As the world around me faded, I caught a glimpse of those damned yellow eyes.

Chapter 17

Even though my eyes were still closed, I knew I'd woken up in an Octopod den. I was smashed between a pile of pillows in a space that felt very small and comfortable. The smell of spices from recent cooking lingered in the air around me.

My fins flapped. They felt a lot more solid than before. So did my siphon as it bumped against the back of my neck with every breath.

I've transformed, I thought. *I'm an Octopod for real now*. I felt around for a larger pillow and wrapped myself around it as best I could. The essence of excitement itself was flowing through my veins. Finally, I could stop lying to everyone. Finally, I could stop making excuses. Finally, I could –

“Holy shit, Liz!”

I heard someone rush through the bead-curtained front door, and my eyes popped open. The den was very dark. I could barely make out the tall silhouette of Ji heading towards me.

“What are you doing here!?” I yelled, sitting up too quickly and accidentally knocking my already-sore head on the top of the sleeping nook. Stars filled my vision and I crumpled into a heap on the mattress.

“What do you mean, ‘what am I doing here’? You’ve been missing for days!” he said.

“Days? I’ve been out for *days!?*” This time I was a lot more careful getting out of the sleeping nook. I stood up on two human legs, looked down at my human body, and reached towards my face with my two human hands. I could feel strips of seaweed wrapped around my head.

Ji was staring at me with a defeated posture. He rubbed his eyes for ten seconds straight.

“Ears,” he said.

“What?”

“On your head.”

“Oh. My fins,” I said.

Ji sputtered a few half-formed words before pointing at me and launching into a full-volume scream. I covered my ears. I didn’t know Ji’s voice could get that loud!

Ohhhh, he can see what you are for sure! If my anxiety was a separate person, it would have been cackling and rubbing its hands with glee.

Let him see. I told my sadistic thoughts. *I don’t have a reason to keep it a secret. Not in this world.*

“Awwww, man, another one? And it’s loud. Great.” A Nautilus-Octopod entered the den carrying a basket. He was very tall and slender for a Nautilus, reaching up to my chin instead of my waist. He slammed the basket on his kitchen counter and started a fire in the hearth.

The messy den faded into view. There were wooden figurines scattered all over the floor, half-detached tapestries on the wall, and a kitchen even smaller than Flats’ with stained countertops. Inside the basket the Octopod had brought in were a pile of dead crabs.

Ji’s screams turned to screeches. The Octopod stared at him with a single, buggy eye.

“Whassa matter with you? Never seen a one-eye before?” the Nautilus asked, putting his hands just above the toolbelt on his hips and cocking his

head to the side in a way that made it obvious he was still in the twilight of teenage angst.

“He doesn’t speak Octopod language,” I said.

“Okaaaaaay, but... Tentachill said *you* were an Octopod. So ain’t this person an Octopod, too?”

“No fins,” I said, pointing at the flapping appendages on the sides of my head. The Nautilus folded his arms and let out a sigh through his tube mouth.

“I give up. Not a god, not an Octopod, what are they?”

“Human,” I said. I turned to Ji, whose shrieks had turned to heavy breaths with whimpers sprinkled between. His face was slowly turning from terrified to dumbfounded. “And, uhhhh, I think I need to explain a lot to him.”

“Whatevs. Guess I’m cookin’ for three.” The Nautilus dumped crabs all over the counter and began to sort them.

“You... it... the...” Ji stammered.

“He’s making us dinner,” I said.

“What the fuck did they do to you!? You’ve got *fins* for Christ’s sake!”

“I’ve had them for a while. You just couldn’t see them until I met Mera.”

“*Mera!*?”

“The Mother Octopod,” I said. “Ji, I’ve been turning into an Octopod for weeks. I got chased out of two doctors’ appointments because my blood came out blue. And a psychic lady that Winonah knows could see my fins before they grew in.”

Ji said nothing.

“I don’t know why I can speak the language,” I continued, hoping to break the uncomfortable, heavy silence. “I think the Crystal did something to me. In any case, since I can speak Octopod, we can ask the Octopods for food and shelter. They’re actually pretty nice, and their cooking is... good...”

Ji remained silent.

“I know. I should’ve told you and Jerry sooner.” I hung my head. “I just didn’t because... it’s stupid.”

Ji let go of the breath he was holding. He scratched the back of his head and looked at the Nautilus, who was chopping up crab meat and throwing it into a large pot. Then he turned back at me with a strained smile on his face.

“So the Wingfolk were right,” he half-joked, a tremor in his voice. “What other Octopod powers do you have that I should know about?”

“I can launch balls of ink,” I said. “Which is why the Wingfolk came after me.”

Ji’s expression was pained. He looked around the room with his jaw clenched and his hands balled up, tapping his foot against the floor.

“Is it bothering you that I’m an Octopod?” I asked. That might have been a stupid question.

“You’ve been keeping this a secret for how long?” he asked.

“About a month,” I said. “I saw a figurine of Tentachill in a video game store and I knew there was something about him. I just didn’t think it was *this*.”

“God, that’s such a short fuckin’ time.” Ji said. He locked his gaze on the bead-curtains on the ceiling and took a deep breath. The next few words came out rushed and mashed together: “I have my own secret. I’m transgender. I’m a woman. Have been for as long as I can remember. So,

like, I know how much it sucks to keep a big part of yourself hidden. And I know I should have told you sooner but I was scared to say anything at work.”

“Oh.” I said, then immediately winced. I didn’t have any openly transgender friends (until now), but I’d visited enough gay bars during my promiscuous years to know that “oh” wasn’t the right thing to say when someone came out, no matter how spur-of-the-moment that coming out was.

“Do you have a different name?” I ventured.

Ji took his... no, *her* eyes off the ceiling and gave me another of those nervous smiles. I couldn’t blame her. Keeping my Octopod identity hidden, even for just a month, had torn me up inside. I couldn’t imagine what *years* of secret-keeping would do.

“Samantha,” she said. “Been using it online forever.”

“Samantha,” I repeated. “I’ll remember that for you.”

“*Please* don’t tell Jerry. He sometimes makes these comments to me about how I should or shouldn’t do things because I’m a ‘young man,’” Samantha said. “It makes me sick, but I can’t come out to him ‘cuz he’d just make ‘Korean Tranny’ jokes.”

“Yick, you know Jerry doesn’t make *racist* jokes,” I said.

“Alright, but he’d probably still make nasty comments,” Samantha said.

“Yeah, Jerry’s not the best when it comes to this kind of shit. Winonah told me he said something stupid about her being a girl mechanic when she first got hired. She almost slapped him in the face.”

“I miss Winonah so goddamn much,” said Samantha. “When we get back to the ‘real world’ I’m gonna hug the hell out of her.”

I opened my mouth, but only a long, high-pitched squeak came out. Samantha looked at me with fear in her brown eyes.

“You’re really staying here?” she asked.

“I might,” I said.

“Crabs are done,” called the Nautilus from his spot in the kitchen. “How much ink sauce you want?”

“What’s the matter? What did they just say?” asked Samantha upon seeing my scrunched face.

“Octopods use their own ink to cook,” I whispered, even though the Octopod wouldn’t be able to understand my English.

“What!? They just... spit into the food!?”

“No, they store it and let it ferment. *Then* they put it into the food.”

“So we’re eating crabs with fermented spit!?”

“I guess. He wants to know how much ‘ink sauce’ we want.”

“Blech! Tell him I don’t want any!”

“My friend doesn’t want any!” I told the Nautilus.

“What about you?” he asked.

“Just a little bit,” I said. If I was going to stay among the Octopods, I realized, I would have to get used to their customs. The Nautilus shook the bottle several times over my plate, coating the meat in a thin layer of black. Samantha’s eyes grew wide again as she saw the ink on my plate.

“You’re really going to eat it like that?” she asked.

“I’m an Octopod,” I said. “May as well eat like one.” I raised a forkful of crab meat to my mouth and bit in.

Holy fucking shit. I already liked crab, but the Nautilus' ink had a rich, salty, slightly-spicy flavor that tasted better than it had any right to. All at once I realized how empty my stomach was and began shoveling the inky crabmeat into my mouth.

“That good?” Samantha asked.

“Look, I haven't eaten in days,” I said. “I'm either Octopod enough to like it this way or I'm just that desperate. Either way, it's delicious.”

“So what's your deal?” asked the Nautilus through a tubeful of ink-drenched crab. “Tentachill said you were an Octopod, not a Goddess, but you weren't born outta Mera's tears or he'd recognize you. Where'd you come from?”

“Well, Ji... shit, sorry, *Samantha* and I are from a different world called Earth,” I explained in the Octopod language. “There's humans and wild octopuses, but not Octopods. I thought I was a human for a long time.”

“Even with your fins?”

“Those didn't come out until I saw Mera.”

“He was real interested in you, y'know.”

“Who, Mera?”

“No, Tentachill. When he carried you out of Mera's chamber—”

“*He did what!?*” Crab flew everywhere as my plate crashed to the floor. I felt my face flush blue. Tentachill himself had touched my body. More than that, he'd *held* me. Carried me. Even though I knew it was far from a romantic moment, knowing that I'd been lying in his arms filled me with butterflies.

“Ahaaaaa, you got the hots for the MC,” the Nautilus said with a twinkling eye.

“Don’t I know it,” I said. “There’s something in his eyes that just gets me.”

“Tentachill has fuckin’ *insane* eyes,” the Nautilus agreed. “One look and you know he’s a firecracker. Uhh, lemme get you some more crab.” As the Nautilus crawled towards the kitchen, my eyes trailed to Samantha. She had a big grin on her face.

“What’s that look for?” I asked, hoping my language was switched back to English.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said.

“Gotta be something.”

“You look so *natural*. I almost started screaming again when you said you were going to stay here, but as soon as you switched to the Octo language it was like you melted into a whole new person. I’ve never seen you like this before. You seem happy.”

The Nautilus handed me a new plate of crab, this one with more ink on it than the last. The only things that broke the silence were distant electronic music and the quiet sound of chewing.

“No Octopods where you came from?” the Nautilus suddenly asked.

“Not a single one,” I said.

“’Cept you.”

“Right. Except me.”

“Must’ve sucked,” he said. “Bet you’re glad you’re here.”

“Yeah.”

You're among your own kind. This time I knew it was a good feeling. Samantha was right. Back on Earth, I worried what people would think of me even while I was alone in my apartment. But around the clumsy, overly enthusiastic Octopods, the self-conscious Liz began to disappear, in its place someone who wasn't quite as afraid to screw up or look ridiculous. I felt at home.

“Hey, where’s Jerry?” I asked Samantha.

“Hopefully nowhere near here,” she said, popping the last bite of crab meat in her mouth.

“Is he looking for me, too?”

“Fuck. He said he’d meet me back here. I’d better get him off your scent.” Samantha handed the Nautilus her plate, nodded in thanks, and trotted out the door. Several minutes later, I heard a familiar angry voice echoing off cave walls.

“THE FUCK DO YOU MEAN, ‘SHE’S DEAD!?’”

Chapter 18

“Jerry,” I whispered.

“Who’s Jerry?” the Nautilus asked.

“Get your weapon ready,” I said. “He might not listen to me.”

“Wingfolk?” the Nautilus asked, picking up a long spear from off the wall and pointing it towards the doorway.

“No, but just as deadly,” I said.

“I’LL KILL EVERY LAST ONE OF THEM!”

Bruised skin, tattered clothes, matted hair. Jerry crashed through the beaded curtain and filled the low doorway with the picture of rage and hatred. In his hand he clenched his Swiss Army Knife, which was now covered with dark indigo bloodstains. The ink sac in my throat ballooned. Those stains had come from other Octopods.

The Nautilus-Octopod immediately pointed the end of his spear at Jerry’s throat, his noodly arms tense and ready to thrust.

“Outta my den,” he gurgled.

“Wait,” I said. “I want to try and talk with him.”

Jerry’s stained knife clattered against the floor as I walked towards him, arms folded and footsteps heavy.

“You’re alive,” Jerry said quietly.

“Yes, Jerry, I’m alive,” I said. “And you’re being ridiculous.”

“Ji said that the Octo-fucks killed you.” His voice wavered. I turned to the spear-wielding Nautilus.

“Lower that. I think he’ll actually listen,” I said. The Nautilus rolled his big eye and moved away from Jerry, whose jaw had dropped lower than I thought possible.

“Alright, what the hell is going on?” Jerry asked.

“You tell me,” I said. “How did you know where I was?”

“*Those kids*,” Jerry said. “They knew the Octopods had you, so they showed us the nearest entrance to the underground world. We’ve been searching every cave for the last three days.”

“Is that what they told you? That the Octopods ‘had me?’”

“Well, they gave us some cock-and-bull story about how you were an Octopod spy. I tried to tell ‘em that the music got to you and made you act weird, but they wouldn’t listen.”

“Did they also tell you that Bobbin started casting a spell to *kill me*?”

“Fuck. I knew they were hiding something,” Jerry spat. He grabbed my shoulders and looked me dead in the eyes. “Doesn’t matter. We’re not going to lose you again. We still have plenty of gold, we ditched the bird kids, and I got a map from the Drainers so we can find our way to a different town with a Lesser God. All we have to do is get back out of these caves, and *what the hell is on your head?*”

“Those are my fins,” I said, a mile-long grin sprawling across my face as that particular sparkling pride welled up inside me again. “I’m an Octopod.”

“What? No. That’s... not right,” Jerry said. He let go of me, his expression blank. “You’re being controlled. By the music. The Lesser God, remember? MC Tentachill?”

“Jerry, I’ve been an Octopod since before we came to this world,” I said. “I have blue blood and fins and even an ink sac. I didn’t want to tell you at first

because I thought you'd get scared. But, well... I guess it's who I am." I took a few steps back and spread my arms in a silent "ta-da."

Jerry blinked. His face twisted in confusion. Then, he smacked his palm to his forehead and began to laugh. It was an anxious laugh, high-pitched, fragile, and stretched thin.

"Ohhhhh my god," he said, his voice dipping into a vocal-fried low octave. "They've completely wrecked your brain. Incredible."

"Nobody wrecked anybody's brain. I really *am* an Octopod!"

"And I'm the King of Russia." Jerry strode towards me with his big arms outstretched. "C'mon. Let's get you back to the world you *really* belong in."

"Touch me and you get a face full of ink," I said, backing up against the wall with the sleeping nook. My fins raised as if to make myself look bigger. "I'm serious."

"I would *love* to see a human do that," Jerry smirked. I loosened my jaw. If he insisted...

"*Gllllluuuahh!*" Jerry's hands were on my shoulders when the biggest ink ball I could manage launched. It hit his head with a sickening thud and he was knocked onto his back, completely still. My right hand slowly rose to my mouth.

"Did you seriously just kill him with a single ink ball!?" the Nautilus asked, crawling over to the spot where Jerry lay.

"N-no, I didn't m-mean to," I stammered, leaning down to check Jerry's body. His stomach was moving up and down. I sighed with relief.

"He was asking for every ounce of that," Samantha said. I let out a loud, gargling scream and nearly jumped a foot in the air. I didn't know she'd come back in the room!

“So what’s the deal with these hyoo-mins?” the Nautilus asked. “Why d’they keep breakin’ into my den?”

“Remember when I said we were from another world?” I asked.

“Yeah...?”

“They want to go back there,” I explained. “And I wanted to go back at first, too. They were trying to find me.” The Nautilus lowered his brow in what was unmistakably a frown.

“Why don’t you guys just appeal to Tentachill?” he asked. “He could probably get you back.”

“Uhhh, they don’t like him.”

“This guy seems like he doesn’t like *anyone*.” The Nautilus nudged Jerry with the blunt end of his spear. Jerry’s body wiggled a little.

“He thinks we’re dangerous. I want to change that.” A light tingle ran down my back as I realized I’d just referred to the Octopods and myself as a group. Was this what it felt like to belong? Or was I just being...

“Stupid.” The Nautilus finished my thought. “We’re not dangerous unless we have to be.”

“Liz, can you maybe fill me in on what you’re talking about?” Samantha asked. “I can’t understand Octo Talk.” I closed my eyes and took a long, deep breath.

“Jerry’s going to hate me for this, but I think we should try asking T...T...Tentachill if he can get you two back home,” I said. My face grew hot saying his name. “He’s the closest Lesser God we have. I’ll probably have to speak on your behalf.”

“Uh, your cheeks are turning blue. You okay?” Samantha asked.

“Nope. Not gonna talk about it.” I snapped my head towards the ground, hoping Samantha didn’t remember a certain “fun fact” about octopuses.

“Octopod! Blue blood! *You’re blushing!*” She did.

“Thank you *so* much for pointing it out,” I said. “I had no idea.”

“Why? Because of Tentachill!?”

“...yes.”

“Oh my god, Jerry was right. Your dream man.” If I didn’t know better, I’d have mistaken Samantha’s expression of disbelief for one of awe. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth hung open in a shocked smile. I smooshed myself inside the sleeping nook and let out a loud whine into one of the pillows. I was hoping I could keep the burning fascination I had for the obnoxious God to myself!

Now the entire appeal to Tentachill is going to be awkward. Why couldn’t you just keep your big mouth shut? I asked myself. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

Oh, come on. Every Octopod you’ve met so far wore their heart on their sleeve. Makes sense that you would, too, that optimistic train of thought reminded myself. Anyway, why hide your love for the one you’re going to be serving? You saw what he was like at the ceremony. Damn amazing.

I lifted my head from the pillow to see Samantha squatting near me with a cheeky expression.

“So, it’s true what they say about Octopods finding him ‘extremely attractive,’ eh?” she asked. “What is it about him? I like guys as much as I like girls, but I can’t wrap my head around it.”

“His eyes? The way he talks? His hair? I don’t know, to be honest.” I couldn’t wrap my head around what I liked about him either. “He’s sexy, somehow. You’d probably have to be an Octopod to understand.”

A groan came from the center of the floor. Jerry was stirring.

“Yo, should I point my spear at this guy?” the Nautilus asked.

“Probably a good idea,” I said. The Nautilus gave a sharp nod and aimed his spear at Jerry’s neck. I started to push myself out of the sleeping nook.

“Let me talk to him,” Samantha said. She crouched down next to Jerry and smeared some of the ink off his face with her shirt. Jerry’s eyes popped open. His gaze landed on the Octopod, then on the tip of the spear, and finally on Samantha’s gentle smile.

“How you feeling?” Samantha asked.

“Octo-fucker,” Jerry growled.

“They’ve been taking care of Liz, Jerry. We were wrong about them. They’re not bad people.”

“Yes... they are...Ji,” Jerry grunted. “Mind control.”

“Uh...”

“The music isn’t mind control,” I cut in. “I mean, I guess it is, but it’s not *bad* mind control. It feels good. I mean... uh, don’t worry about it?” I wanted to fade out of existence for the next five hours. Every word I said made Tentachill’s music sound worse. I wished I could have explained it the way Flats did.

Jerry’s breathing was rattly and forced. I bit the inside of my lower lip. Obnoxious as he was, Jerry didn’t deserve to die. Not when he was only trying to protect me.

“Hey, Nautilus,” I said.

“It’s ‘Deedi’.” The Nautilus-Octopod sounded annoyed.

“Deedi,” I began again. “Jerry needs a medic.”

“*What!?*”

“I know, I know, but I don’t want him to die!”

“He’s not gonna jump up and grab me the minute I move my spear?”

“I don’t think he has the strength.”

“Okay, but if you’re wrong...!” The Nautilus cautiously moved his spear away from Jerry’s neck, his body on guard. Jerry hacked up a wad of ink and groaned. He tried to prop himself up into a sitting position but failed and slumped back onto the floor.

“Don’t move,” Samantha said. “Just rest.”

Jerry rubbed his hand across his neck, which was still coated in black goo, and weakly raised his now-stained fingers up to his face.

“Ink,” he said.

“*My* ink,” I said.

“Liz, why?”

“You rushed at me. I was scared.”

“No... why do you want... to be an octopus?”

“I wish I could explain it, Jerry,” I said. “Really, I do. At this point I’ve decided to just accept it.”

“But... nnngh... Tentachill?”

“I like him,” I muttered. Jerry responded with three loud, wet coughs. Samantha lifted a hand to her mouth and glanced at me. “Deedi went out to find you a medic,” I continued. “We’re going to get you taken care of.”

“No,” Jerry said. “No octopus medicine.”

“Like you have another choice down here,” Samantha said.

The next hour was spent with me recounting everything that had led up to that moment to my coworkers, from the early octopus dreams to my encounter with Mera. Samantha nodded her head and asked questions the whole time. Jerry laid there scowling, alert but silent.

Finally, Deedi returned to his den. The peach-pink Octopod medic with him had no facial features aside from two round, dark eyes and a pair of flapping fins on her oblong head. She was slightly taller than Samantha with a willowy build and had billowing flaps of skin between her six tentacles. She gently lifted Jerry's head in her hands, which were made of two suckered fingers and a wiggly thumb.

"Mendako Octopod," Samantha whispered. "I don't believe it!"

"What? Why?" I asked.

"They were a scrapped concept that never ended up in the game," Samantha said. "I didn't think they existed."

"Did you think *any* of this existed?"

"Haha, shut up! You know what I mean."

"Where does it hurt the most?" the Octopod asked Jerry in a gentle gurgle.

"He doesn't speak the language," I explained to the Mendako. She cocked her bulbous head.

"Does he speak Standard?" she asked. She returned to Jerry and began speaking near-perfect English with a guttural accent. "Do you speak Standard? Can you tell me where it hurts most?"

"WHY THE FUCK DOES IT TALK!?"

"That's a yes."

Chapter 19

“Hullo?”

“Oh, thank god you’re home, Flats. We need –”

“Y-YOU’RE ALIVE!?” Flats smashed me into a big bear hug. “Ohhhhhh, I thought the Wingfolk got you for sure! *For sure!*”

“Flats... hrrrrrg... good to see you, too,” I said, failing to wiggle out of the Octopod’s arms. I glanced over my shoulder at my co-workers. Jerry, head wrapped in strips of seaweed, had his arms folded in a scowl. Samantha was trying not to laugh. Flats gasped and his hands flew to his mouth.

“Are those the Hyoo-mins!?” he asked in a whisper loud enough for everyone nearby to hear.

“They are,” I said. “Meet Samantha and Jerry, my co-workers.”

“Hi, Smin-thaw and Jury! I’m Flats!” Flats said, waving his arms wildly in greeting.

“We need a place to stay,” I said. “At least until we can talk to Tentachill. Any chance you still have room in your den?”

“Tentachill!” Flats’ hands returned to his mouth. “Wow, you must have something *real* important to discuss!”

“They’re still trying to get back to their world,” I said. Flats’ face melted into a sad stare.

“Your world must be awful nice,” he said softly, “for you to want to return to it so badly.”

“Flats, listen carefully. I said *they* are trying to get back to *their* world.”

“Y-y’mean...!?” Flats opened his eyes so wide that I half-expected them to fall out of their sockets.

“Yep. I’m stay—*hhhuogh!*” Flats wrapped his arms around me in an even bigger hug that was so strong that my feet lifted off the ground. He bounced around as best as his heavy body would let him and twirled in a slow, small circle.

“Ha-ha! You’re staying! *You’re staying!* I’m so happy I could pee!” After a few minutes of being pressed against Flats’ chest, he placed me back onto the sand. “S-sorry, I got excited! Come inside! We’ll have a special tea to celebrate. Maybe some dinner jelly...ooh, and I could also make—!”

-x-

“Damn. Octopod tea is *really* good,” Samantha said. She and I sat on the edge of Flats’ sleeping nook, drinking a fruity spiced blend from slightly chipped mugs. Jerry had his own cup, but he hadn’t taken a sip yet. He leaned against the wall, eyes scanning everything in the room.

“I’m going to be drinking a lot more of this from now on,” I said before taking another swig. “And that’s fine by me.”

“Jerry, your tea’s gotta be cool by now,” Samantha said. “Drink.”

“I don’t understand how you two can be so fuckin’ calm about this whole situation,” Jerry said. “I mean, look at that thing!” He jerked his thumb towards Flats, who was stirring a bowl of Sour Dinner Jelly as he hummed what sounded like an off-key pirate jig.

“That ‘thing’ has a name,” I said. “Flats.”

“So, is that *Flats Flats*?” Samantha asked. “The same guy that rides in the golem?”

“That’s him,” I said.

“I thought it was, but I wasn’t gonna say anything,” Samantha said. “His boss fight was hell!”

“He’d be happy if he heard you say that,” I said, looking over at the big Octopod lifting the lid on the kettle hanging over the fire. “He’s proud of his golem work.”

“Aaaargh, Liz, you’re brainwashing me with your evil octopus powers!” Samantha said, lips curving in a smile. “Forcing me to sympathize with *Octopods!*”

“You two need to take the situation more seriously,” Jerry said, placing his still-full cup of tea on the top of one of Flats’ bookcases and heading towards the door. “Or it’s going to bite you in the ass.” He thrust aside the bead curtains and stormed out of the den.

“Where’s he going?” Flats asked.

“Ignore him,” I said to Flats. “He’s being a baby.”

“Uhh, w-was it something I did?”

“It’s not you. He’s been refusing food for the last few days.”

“B-but... Eating is important!”

“I know.” I stood up from my spot in the sleeping nook. Flats was right. Jerry hadn’t had a real meal since leaving Drainer’s Inn. “I’m going to go talk to him.”

“Try to make it fast! Dinner will be ready soon!”

The evening air was thick with moisture. The sun was sinking into the horizon, filling the sky with rich red. What looked like brown seagulls with red-tipped wings pattered around the beach, picking at dead fish that had

been washed ashore. The driftwood shelter we'd made was still in one piece. Jerry was balled up inside, staring at the waves rolling in and out.

"Jerry, you need to eat something," I said, sitting down next to my sullen co-worker. "We're all worried about you."

Jerry let out a sigh. It was a long sigh tinted with the sadness he'd been holding back. For the first time since we arrived in the world of *Eagle's Quarry*, I saw tears building up in his eyes.

"Liz, how can you be so stupid!?" he asked. Anxiety flared in my chest.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't know how you managed to convince Ji that you're okay," he said. He sighed again and his gaze returned to the water. "What you're doing is wrong. Changing your identity? Your *species*? Just because someone else told you to? Think about it. Does that sound like Liz Curley?"

"It— No, but—"

"You always told me that was why you were *against* religion. That you didn't want to be controlled by it. Now look what you're doing. You're being controlled by a— by a *god*! I know you. This isn't who you are. You've stopped fighting for yourself, and I want to know why."

A million insecurities blanketed themselves over me, making my skin prickle. Jerry was right. I'd spent most of my life trying to avoid anything to do with gods. If they were real, I'd always said, they must be very manipulative, evil entities, bent on playing with free will. Yet here I was, more than comfortable with the way Tentachill's music gripped my heart in its melodies and didn't let go. Why was that? Was I weak? Was he more powerful than I thought? Was it those eyes? Those stupid eyes? Those damned, yellow, fiery, *beautiful* eyes that burned with all the passion of a thousand other Octopods at once?

Those eyes have seen me, I remembered, shivers passing through my body. What did it feel like when he held me that day, I wondered? Was it rough? Gentle? Did he hold me close to him? Would I have been able to feel his hearts beat through his muscles? Did his sucker-nipples accidentally grab onto me and give me little hickeys on my skin? That would be both strange *and* adorable.

“Christ, you’re thinking about him again!”

“Wha?”

“Motherfuck,” Jerry growled through gritted teeth. “Every time you think about that damned Tentachill you get the *stupidest* expression on your face. It’s so obvious.”

“I’m sorry.”

Quiet followed. The sun had dipped behind the water, turning the sky into a gradient of purple and blue. All the seagulls had disappeared. The only sound was the water splashing against the sand.

“I’m just worried you’re letting your crush get to your head.” Jerry broke the silence with a softer tone.

“Crush?”

“On Tentachill.”

“I don’t have a crush on Tentachill!” I shouted. My burning blue cheeks told a different story.

“You do.” Jerry said. “Er, you aren’t seeking an audience with him just to meet him, are you?”

“No, Jerry, I really think he’ll be able to help,” I said. “To be honest, I’m dreading seeing him up close. I don’t know how I’ll handle meeting a God for real.”

“Hey, you guys?” Samantha called from the doorway. “Food’s ready! Come ‘n get it!”

“Oop, you don’t want to miss out on Flats’ cooking,” I said, standing up. “C’mon. You haven’t eaten in days.”

“I’ll eat, but on one condition,” Jerry said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

Jerry stood up and looked at me with cold, piercing eyes.

“Rethink your decision.”



Flats had prepared an extra-hearty version of Sea’s Bounty that night with vegetables and mushrooms in it. A small amount of Sour Dinner Jelly, which had a familiar lemony flavor, was served as a side dish.

Jerry ate slowly, chewing every bite thoroughly before swallowing. He kept his gaze locked on Flats, even when he lifted his mug to drink his tea. I rolled my eyes. Even after I’d convinced him to eat, he was still suspicious of his host.

“W-w-why is he staring at me like that?” Flats asked.

“He’s worried you’re going to use some sort of mind control on him,” I said.

“I can’t do that! Only Tentachill!”

“He doesn’t know that. He’s been afraid of being controlled this whole time.”

“You two talking about how to scramble my brain?” Jerry asked. I stiffened. I knew he was just making another joke, but the fact that his guess was correct was still unsettling.

I put another spoonful of Sea’s Bounty in my mouth. Flats’ ink tasted different than Deedi’s, slightly sweeter and mellower with a thicker, pasty texture.

What does mine taste like? I wondered. I squeezed my ink sac until there was a small amount of ink in my mouth and swished it around. Ugh! It didn’t taste suitable for cooking in the slightest, bitter and briny beyond belief. Maybe aging it would change the flavor into something a little more palatable.

“So, when will you be seeing the MC?” Flats asked.

“In four days,” I said. The Mendako medic Deedi had brought with him was so high-ranking that she’d been able to request an audience with the God for us within hours of treating Jerry. Everything was falling in place a little too perfectly.

“That fast? He must *want* to see you,” said Flats. Butterflies exploded inside my stomach, which clenched up like a bear trap as if to catch them.

“Why would Tentachill want to see me?” I asked. “I’m nobody!”

“Well, you traveled across dimensions to get here,” Flats said, “so you must be pretty loyal to him. Maybe he wants to recognize that.”

“Loyal little fucker, aren’t you? Gooooood,” an imaginary Tentachill purred in my head as he caressed my face in a clawed hand.

“Huh huh huh huh.” God dammit. There was that idiotic laugh again, spilling out of my mouth before I could stop it.

Tentachill is not going to cater to all the dirty octopus fantasies you keep having, I told myself. You barely know him. You’re in love with the ideas you’re having, not Tentachill himself. And you’ll figure that out soon enough.

Chapter 20

The next few days passed slowly, an uncomfortable feeling lingering inside me the entire time. The Wingfolk hadn't returned to the area yet, which meant Flats had nowhere to be. He was using the time off from Golem piloting to go over some of the basics of living in the Sea Cave Domain with me.

"You'll be designated a Den suited for your size and shape," he told me. "A-and you'll have to head to the Career Office soon after so you can get a job that fits your skills."

On the third day, we harvested wild zefwads from a sprawling field. The afternoon sun was so intense that it made my fins droop. Hotter than the sun was the question that had been burning inside of me since before the ceremony with Mera.

"What's Tentachill like?" I asked.

"Huh? You're asking m-me?" Flats asked. "I haven't visited him in a long time."

"Visited him? You're friends with a God?" Was that possible? Flats had said there was no such thing as too many friends. Could you include divinity among your friends?

"No, not friends... we..." Flats' face went from pale grey to dark indigo as he muttered a million hasty words under his breath. His eyes trailed everywhere except for me as he twiddled his little thumbs.

"Something happen between you two?"

"Lots of somethings..."

The zefwad I was pulling at had a vine that refused to snap. I mustered up all my energy in my arms and gave the fruit a sharp tug. The zefwad slipped out of my fingers and promptly divebombed onto my foot.

“You okay?” Flats asked. “You can’t just pull on them like that! You have to snap the vine close to the base.”

“I’m fine, I just have sore toes,” I said. I bent down and gave the base of the vine a twist. The zefwad popped off with little effort. I placed it in the large basket near Flats. The big Octopod still had flushed cheeks and was biting his lower lip with a single, sharp tooth. Whatever happened between him and Tentachill must have been humiliating.

Unless...!

“Did you have sex with MC Tentachill?” I blurted out. It was such an awkward question that I regretted asking it the moment it left my lips. Flats let out a wobbly scream towards the sky and attempted to bury his giant face in his tiny hands.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t figure it out!” he whined.

“You were blushing real hard,” I said. “But Tentachill has a lot of sex, doesn’t he?”

“Oh, he does!” Flats said. “I just didn’t want to tell you because I thought you didn’t like him.”

“Flats, every time you bring him up, I’m reduced to a sighing, lovesick mess. You honestly didn’t notice?”

“I thought m-maybe those were angry sighs.”

“It’s so stupid,” I said, snapping another zefwad off of its vine. “I have a vision in my head of what I think he’ll be like, and it’s probably wrong, and

I'm probably just an idiot. I want to know the truth about him so I can shut up my stupid brain."

"Right. Uhh, let's see. The MC..." Flats began, shuffling into a more comfortable position on the ground. "He's not your typical Lesser God. He's got tentacles like we do, and big Octopod eyes, even the beaky-teeth we have. The Upper Gods were real mad when he refused his 'True Godhood' form. He didn't want to abandon his roots as an Octopod, though, so the Upper Gods made a compromise with him."

"So is he big on upholding tradition?" I asked.

"Oh, no! Not at all!" Flats said. "I'd say he's... someone you have to experience in person to understand. You'll see what I mean when you meet him."

"Flats, that doesn't help."

"W-well, he's got this way of talking." Flats' face started going blue again. "Never heard anything like it. Puts my octo-pussy in a frenzy when he says ___"

"*Excuse me!?*"

"Whoops. T-too much information?"

"*Octo-pussy!?*"

"Yes...? What did you want me to call it?" Flats had no idea how ridiculous the word sounded. Even worse, I had instantly become curious about what Octopod genitalia were like!

Pussy. I thought. That's a hole. Flats has a hole!

Of course he has a hole, idiot. What else would he have? A dick on his underside? How would that even work? His tentacles are on the ground. He'd drag it everywhere!

Maybe one of the tips of his tentacles could be a dick instead.

A tenta-dick? You come up with the weirdest ideas sometimes.

All my attention hyperfocused on my groin. What if my vagina had changed without me noticing it? If I reached down and felt around, would it seem alien? Almost worse, what if Octopod genitals were identical to human ones and Flats was walking around with a perky, crimson pussy?

I caught my hand absentmindedly trailing towards my crotch.

“Gotta pee,” I croaked, heading towards a nearby cluster of trees and bushes.

“Try not to pee on any zefwads!” Flats said. “Other people need them!”

Once I was certain I was hidden away from Flats, I yanked down my pants and shoved my hand between my legs, bracing for the worst.

It's in the middle of changing, I realized with more fascination than fear. The shape was still about the same, but the curly hair I'd been neglecting to shave for the last few months had become patchy and sparse. The texture of my skin was different, too, somewhat meatier and thicker than usual, with a thick layer of Octopod mucus slime.

Knowing that every part of you is slowly transforming into a new self, especially your most personal bits, fills your stomach with a blended cocktail of emotions. That I was losing every physical feature I'd ever known terrified me to my core. But there was an excitement alongside the fear, one that remembered my experience with Mera and awaited my altered body eagerly. I wasn't sure which feeling was stronger.

I moved my hand out from between my legs, and as I did the edge of my palm brushed against what felt like a sensitive, sticky disc stuck to the edge of my inner thigh.

Oh, HELL no.

Any joy I'd felt from anticipating my Octopod form promptly fizzled out as I realized that one of the stranger features of an octopus had sprouted on my leg within the last half a day.

"Are you okay over there?" Flats called from a distance.

"I grew a sucker!" I yelled back.

"Wow! That's great!"

"No! It's weird!" I pulled up my cotton pants and walked back to where Flats was standing, trying not to imagine dozens more up and down the inside of my legs by tomorrow.

"So you're really changing shape, huh?" he said.

"I think I'm going to end up as an ordinary Common Octopod," I said, picking up the nearest zefwad. "That's what I felt like I was when Mera was watching me."

"That's what I am!" Flats grinned. "Course, I-I'm a bit of a different shape than usual. Growth issues."

Soon the basket was full of fruit. Flats and I made our way back to the pebbly cliffside road leading back to the long beach. I had to take plodding steps so that Flats wouldn't get left behind.

"I keep having these daydreams," I confessed, "that I'm using a kelp blowgun. I don't know why."

“Maybe you should join the military like I did,” Flats said. “You could be a real good Seaweed Sniper!”

“No, I’m not a soldier,” I said.

“Well, at least think about it. You’ve got the overactive ink sac for it,” he said.

“Overactive?”

“You’re always dumping it,” Flats said with a chuckle. “Didn’t you notice?”

“That’s not normal?”

“Nope.”

I stared down at the ground and kicked a stone out of the way. When I went to the “Career Office” that Flats had talked about, would they say the same thing as him? Doubts began to swirl around in my head as I realized that I had no idea what kinds of jobs Octopods usually held. What if I wasn’t given another option other than joining the Octopod army?

“Rethink your decision.” Could Jerry be right? Was I making a horrible mistake by choosing to stay in this world?

*Oh, **now** you realize how stupid this is? Staying in a world you know nothing about! And why? Because you felt nice a few times. Pathetic!*

“Did you want to split a zefwad?” Flats asked, cutting into my self-criticism. The big Octopod was rummaging around in the basket. “I’m thirsty.”

“I am, too,” I said, fanning myself. The sun was still at its peak, its blazing rays beating down on us without mercy. Flats cracked open a large zefwad on a nearby road sign. It split perfectly in quarters, juices dripping down the

sides. He handed two slices to me. The fruit's flesh was cool and felt good in my dry mouth.

Flats would be so sad if I went back to Earth, I remembered. He wants me to accept what I am.

Nancy and Nathan are still in the other world. Do you care about Flats more than your family?

What about my encounter with Mera? Nothing on earth has given me a feeling like when she looked at me. I felt so whole.

You've said that about some of the guys you've fucked, too. Remember how your "world was changed" after certain orgasms?

Tentachill! Tentachill won't let me go home even if I want to, because I'm an Octopod. So I'm stuck here no matter what I say, right?

Face it. You're only staying here because you want to be pounded in the puss by a God.



The beach that I had once tried to escape from had become a welcome sight. I darted forward and dunked my whole body in the water, eyes squeezed shut and breath held tight. When I emerged a few seconds later, I saw Flats easing his way into the sea as well. The zefwad basket sat on the sand away from the water's reach.

“You can swim?” I asked.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Flats asked. “We have to go in the water every so often, or we dry up.” He crawled past me into deeper waters, took a long, loud breath, and ducked beneath the waves. He sat there with his eyes open, a contented smile on his face. Part of me wanted to join him, but I wasn’t sure my body was Octopod enough to hold my breath that long, or that I would be able to handle saltwater in my eyes. I floated on my back instead, watching puffy clouds drift by.

Inside my mind, the two worlds I knew wrestled for my attention. Returning to Earth seemed like the obvious “right decision.” I’d spent my whole life there among humans, anxious but satisfied. It was a world I knew well, a world I sometimes loved and sometimes loathed. If I went back, I would have my apartment, my family, my friends.

But there was that homesickness, I thought, remembering the deep ache within my stomach that kept me up at night for weeks. That feeling had faded from the moment I’d entered Flats’ den. Was that a guarantee that my place was among the Octopods?

I twisted myself so that I was floating my stomach and blew frustrated bubbles into the sea. The decision was too big for me to handle.

I turned my head to the side and saw that Flats was swimming back and forth underwater. He’d slow for a moment and spread his tentacles wide, then pull them all together and dart forward, bubbles jetting out of the siphon on the back of his head.

That looks like fun, I found myself thinking. *Wish I could do that.*

You can learn to do it if you stay here.

I can’t stay here!

Sounds like you’ve made your choice.

I sighed and rolled back onto my back. That was it, then. I was going back to Earth. Tomorrow I would ask Tentacill to stop the transformation and return me to my real home.

Chapter 21

There was a tense atmosphere between Jerry, Samantha and I the next morning as we ate our fruit breakfast in silence. Though it remained unspoken, the same question was running through all of our minds: what would we do if we couldn't go back home?

A Mimic Octopod with a serious expression showed up at Flats' door to personally escort us to MC Tentachill's chamber. I was anticipating an hours-long walk back to the underground world. Instead, an entrance to Tentachill's palace had opened itself in the cliffside a short distance away from Flats' den.

"I've never seen him this impatient," the Mimic said. "He must be *real* interested in you."

The Mimic led us down several lavishly decorated cavern corridors until we reached a towering set of double doors. They were ornate, with golden octopuses, squids, and nautilus embossed in the surface, their tentacles curled around glittering black-and-red gemstones. Several sets of handles were bolted near the base for different sized Octopods to use.

"One moment. I need to see if he is ready," the Mimic told me. They opened one of the doors and slipped inside. An uncomfortable feeling shot through my chest. We were at the mercy of Tentachill's desires.

"Jerry... 'Ji-Hun'," I said. "I want to let you know that, whatever happens, I've appreciated your friendship so much. Not everyone would try to protect me from danger in a video game world."

"Liz, you're speaking in the Octopod language," Samantha said.

"Shit. Sorry. I want you to know—"

“Still Octopod.”

I mustered up all my willpower and concentrated on what English was supposed to sound like.

“Am I speaking in English now?”

“Gurgles,” Jerry said, shaking his head.

“Liz, can you still understand what I’m saying?” Samantha asked. A warm tear rolled down my cheek and I bit my lower lip as I nodded. If I’d lost my ability to speak, was I too far gone to go back home?

“Probably because we’re near that damned MC,” Jerry said. “And his freaky-ass powers.”

“You don’t want to insult a God,” Samantha said. “Not when he might be our only way home.”

The Mimic reappeared in the doorway, a polite smile on their face. “The Master of Ceremonies will see you now.”

Jewel-encrusted octopus mosaics twisted around rocky and uneven walls. The ceiling was covered with so many bead curtains that you couldn’t tell where one ended and another began. Hundreds of gems embedded in the ground created a long, shimmering walkway leading to a raised platform with an enormous throne. There the Lesser God my heart ached for sat, leaning his head on one of his fists with a lopsided smile on his face.

“Talk to me.” The order was casual, careless, and given in English.

“Your Excellency,” Jerry began with a formal tone that was so unlike him that his voice sounded uncanny, “we are but humble mortals, brought to this world by the powers of the Blue Crystal.”

“I know who you are,” Tentachill said. “You ain’t gotta spit that fire at me. The Upper Gods are *real pissed* that you’re here. You ain’t supposed to be in this world.”

“My name is Liz,” I said, my voice a chirp as I took several brave steps towards the seated God. “I used to be a hyoo-min...uh, human. And I’d like to be turned back so I... can go... home...!” My voice trailed into a whispered squeak as Tentachill slunk off the throne and crawled forward on his six tentacle legs towards me.

The Lesser God stood so close that I could see the tattoos on his chest expand as he breathed. He stared at me with curiosity in those damned yellow eyes. The tentacles on his head flicked back and forth slowly, as if he was processing what I’d just said. He circled me several times. The frown on his face gave way to a knowing smirk.

“Why, you haven’t been human in years,” he said in the Octopod language.

“Wha? Yes I have!” Why did I say that? No way I was going to be able to win an argument against a God!

“Say what’cha wanna, but you’re still an Octopod,” he said. “Y’know, you can be honest wit’ me. The others can’t tell what we’re sayin’.”

“It seems nice here,” I gurgled back. “Part of me wants to stay. But I’d be leaving my friends and family back on Earth.”

“*I’m* in this world,” Tentachill said, shrugging in an exaggerated way that was nothing short of full of himself.

Fuck! Don’t say shit like that! After all the mental preparation I’d done, the one thing I hadn’t counted on was Tentachill having the exact brand of cocky

I'd imagined on my night with the Kraken. Now I could barely think over my heart's pounding beat.

"You got a thing for me," Tentachill said. It wasn't a question.

"Sh-shut up!" I said, failing to hide my grin or my glowing indigo cheeks behind my hands.

"S'alright. Everyone does," he said. He gave me a wink and stuck the tip of his tongue out between his teeth.

"Huh huh huh huh huh." The stupid-sounding giggle poured out of my mouth once more as he gently curled the end of a tentacle around my chin. Was Tentachill this friendly with everyone? Did I even care!? It was like he'd lit a match in my pants and started a bonfire!

But I knew the feeling wasn't supposed to last beyond this moment. I didn't belong here.

Sure you do, Liz. You're an Octopod.

I belonged on Earth, with people.

*The Octopods **are** people.*

In a place where I had friends.

Flats is your friend, and he'll miss you.

In a place where I had family.

Mera is here, too.

In a place where I was happy.

You weren't happy on Earth and you know it. Joy and sorrow mingled in the tears in the corners of my eyes.

Why am I arguing with myself? I can't stay here!

“Sorry, MC,” I said, taking a step backward. “It’s been wonderful living here for the past few weeks, but I belong on Earth, with Jerry and Samantha.”

Tentachill stared at me for what felt like half a century, his lips pursed and his head tilted to one side. A tiny, secret part of me, buried deep beneath my anxiety and insecurities, wanted him to disagree with my decision and say I was one of his. Eventually, he shrugged again.

“If you really wanna be a human and go back to that ‘Uuuurth’ world, I ain’t gonna force ya to stay here,” he said.

“Thank you, MC,” I said, giving a slight bow. “I promise I’ll never forget you.” That made his face light up into another amused smirk.

“You think it’s possible to forget me?” He already knew the answer.

Tentachill crawled back up onto the platform next to his throne and grabbed something small off of a wooden pedestal next to his throne. Between his clawed fingers, I saw the glint of a familiar shade of blue. He pressed his fist to his forehead, closed his eyes, and prayed quietly in an ancient language that I did not speak. The object in his hand glimmered as if it were a light shining underwater.

“Awww, yeah! We got ourselves a party!” Tentachill said as the Blue Crystal floated upwards until it was level with his face. The little Crystal darted away from the Lesser God and flew across the room, stopping above the double doors. It flashed brilliant white three times. One of the doors swung open, revealing a cascading mass of blue. Half-visible through the swirling energy was an image of a cramped bedroom with anime posters on the walls and several discarded *Fit ‘n Yum!* wrappers on the floor.

“That’s it!” Jerry yelled, dashing towards the portal. Within seconds he’d passed the threshold, entering Nathan’s bedroom as easily as walking

through an ordinary doorway. His peasant clothes twisted themselves into a polo shirt and khaki slacks identical to the ones he'd been wearing the day he'd come to visit me. Jerry picked up my pink plush octopus off of the floor and tossed it into the air several times before collapsing onto Nathan's unmade bed, laughing.

Samantha took four steps towards the portal, then hesitated. She began looking around the room. I tapped her on the shoulder and raised my eyebrows to ask her what was going on.

"You first," she said. "I want to take one last look at this place before I return to the 'real' world." I nodded and walked towards the throne room's double doors.

A sadness was nagging me in my chest. There should have been relief, since the biggest dangers of the world of *Eagle's Quarry* – dangerous Wingfolk, the wrath of evil Gods, long journeys on foot – were things I no longer had to worry about. But knowing that I'd never again get a chance to see the Octopods outside of a TV screen filled me with a soft melancholy. I was going to miss them, with their open emotions, their plain way of talking, their almost simple-minded way of viewing the world...

Maybe this will inspire me to write one of those "fan fiction" things that Nathan is always talking about.

"REMAIN!"

The word sounded like a thousand people shrieking at once. It pierced my eardrums as I collided with the wall of blue energy and was launched several feet into the air. From behind me I heard the deep voice of MC Tentachill say "The shell?"

"Liz!" Samantha ran over to where I'd crash landed. "Are you alright? What happened?"

Even if I'd have been able to speak English, I wouldn't have been able to answer Samantha's question. A powerful, unnatural force was pulsing through my legs, causing them to swell outward until they looked more like two giant sausages than human limbs. With a surprisingly painless snap, they each split into two boneless appendages, rows of round suckers formed perfectly underneath them. A sticky, slimy sensation began to build between my fingers. I raised a hand to my face and watched with horror as my fingers melted together into a crimson-colored mitten shape.

“FUCK! SHIT! I'M CHANGING!” I gurgle-screamed.

Dull pressure engulfed me from all sides as the room, and everything in it, began to stretch over me. Tentachill jumped off of his throne and rushed to my side.

“You fucking liar!” I shouted at the Lesser God through a pair of lips that felt overly-thick and clumsy. “You told me I could go back home!”

“Damn,” Tentachill said, his voice quiet. “Didn't think the Crystal would interfere.”

My eyes bulged far beyond their sockets as tentacles exploded out of my scalp, causing a shower of half-dyed-blonde hair to rain to the ground. I screamed as a white-hot barrage of new instincts flooded my mind. Then, as quickly as it began, the change was over, leaving me cold, limp, and trembling in a smaller, boneless body.

Samantha was shouting something I couldn't wrap my head around. At first I thought she'd gotten so panicked she'd begun speaking in Korean. Then the truth hit me.

“I can't speak English anymore?” I asked.

“Crystal must not think you need it,” Tentachill said. “Lemme talk to your friend.”

The exchange between Tentachill and Samantha was hard to watch, even without understanding a single word. Tears rolled down Samantha's reddened face as she demanded things of the Lesser God with pointed fingers and stomped feet. Tentachill spoke calmly, but it was obvious by his tightly folded arms and twitching tentacle-pigtails that he was having difficulty swallowing the Blue Crystal's judgment as well.

After a while Samantha's screams turned into hiccups and sniffles. She walked towards the Crystal's portal, arms wrapped around herself in a defensive pose. I spread my arms to try and give her a good-bye hug, but her gaze was locked on her shoes.

Samantha passed effortlessly through the portal, which closed the moment she'd fully emerged in Nathan's bedroom. The Crystal flew back to its place on the pedestal and returned to the sheen of an ordinary gemstone. That left me alone with Tentachill in the throne room. The God sighed.

"Ya been remixed," he said.

"I didn't want to be remixed!" I shouted. "I was supposed to go home!"

"The Crystal is a Divine Artifact. Higher power than me," Tentachill explained in a stiff voice. "And it wants you to be an Octopod. I can invoke its power, but I can't stop it from doing what it wants."

"I... no... I can't..." Sentences wouldn't form. My insides felt hollow, a rattling triple-heartbeat echoing in the center of my chest. Tears formed at the corners of my eyes. They were a different texture than human tears, much more viscous and thick. They landed on the gemstone pathway with loud thudding noises.

I would never go back to earth. Never again see my friends or family. Never again to smell the family couch. Never again read a romance novel

while snuggled up under the covers of a big bed in a comfy little apartment on the south side of town.

And it was all because of that awful, evil Blue Crystal.

*But I **wanted** to stay here,* I thought, remembering my many conversations with Flats over the past week as we waited for the meeting with Tentachill. *I was close to leaving everything behind of my own accord. If the Crystal is bad for keeping me here, what does that make me?*

An Octopod. It makes you an Octopod.

I buried my face in my little mitten-hands. Part of me was starting to wonder if being forced to stay here would turn out to be a *good thing!* What was wrong with me!?

Between my sobs I heard squishing noises. Then...

“C’mere,” Tentachill said. “Cuddle up with your MC.”

What...?

I rubbed goopy tears out of my eyes and looked up to see that Tentachill had nestled himself on the ground and sprawled out his tentacle legs. He patted what could have been called his lap. My face grew hot and the ends of my head-tentacles seized up into tight curls.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I asked, my voice low and wavering as my fins pressed against the sides of my head. “I don’t deserve to touch you. You’re a God. I’m Liz. I’m nobody.”

“Gotta take care of my own,” said Tentachill. “And you’re one of mine. C’mere.”

One of his... A tiny spark of joy flashed beneath the flurry of confusion in my body.

“This your first time hugging? Hugging’s fire,” Tentachill continued. “It slows your rhythm when your beat’s gone all wild and unsteady. Right now you’re way out of step.”

The ghost of a smile caused my lips to twitch. He talked like the campiest Hip-Hop DJ I’d ever heard. I loved it.

“Gonna guess that humans don’t do this too much,” said Tentachill as I approached him on my four tentacles.

“Not much,” I said, maneuvering myself until I was sitting on the thin webbing that made up his lap. “Except with romantic partners.”

“Mmmmh.” Tentachill gently wrapped a massive arm around my plump, grey stomach. “Gonna warn you right now, that ain’t us Octopods. Cuddles are just how we do. You’ll get used to it.”

I rolled over, leaned my cheek against his abdomen, and breathed deeply. From up close I could see dozens of little scratches, dents, and scars on his skin. I lightly ran the tip of my mitten-hand along a long, pale, half-healed gash. Where had it come from? Wingfolk? Another God? How recent was it? Tentachill was over three hundred years old. I couldn’t imagine how many battles he’d been in.

I breathed in again, taking in Tentachill’s scent as he gently fidgeted with the end of one of my head-tentacles with a clawed hand. He smelled as if he were not only the God of the Octopods, but the embodiment of the seashore itself - salty and earthy, perhaps even a touch fishy, just like the beach I’d come to know over the past few weeks. There was a spiciness hidden underneath the nature smells, a delicious bite that smelled something like ginger or fresh wasabi. And, buried deeper still, a hint of musk that was almost human, but not quite.

My breathing slowed. Tentachill's skin was warm and smooth and exactly what I needed in that moment.

"That good?" Tentachill asked.

"I... feel..." The room around me blurred and swayed.

"Hey, you chill?"

"Bluhhr..."

When a person in a werewolf movie transforms, they lift their head to the sky, howl at the moon, and scamper off into the forest, filled with raw primal energy. This is the pinnacle of Hollywood bullshit. What really happens after your body undergoes an unholy metamorphosis is that you faint in the lap of the very sexy God you're about to start serving.

ACT III

Chapter 22

“This is the Remix? She looks so... normal.”

“Idiot. There’s only one Remix, if there were more they’d all look normal.”

I sat on a carved stone table in a small underground cave, my front two tentacles hanging off the edge. The stalactites on the ceiling were covered in hundreds of tiny seashells and old coins. Nearby, a stone counter displayed an uncomfortable amount of familiar, sharp, metal tools. The crimson-tipped tentacles growing out the top of my head were coiled tightly. Even as a two foot tall, grey-and-red Octopod, I still hated doctors’ offices!

“I call Seahorse Shit. There’s gotta be something wrong with her, and I’m gonna find it.” The Blue Common Octopod medic to my right squinted his buggy yellow eyes as he lifted my arm high above his head. The boneless limb sagged slightly in the center, but held firm.

“Calm down, Teeks,” said the Mendako medic, gently wrapping peach-pink suckered fingers around my other arm and giving the Common Octopod a glare. “This is supposed to be a routine check-up, not a dissection.”

“I can’t make sense of MC Tentachill’s briefing,” Teeks said, uncurling my front right tentacle and inspecting the double row of white suckers underneath. “Whassa ‘hyoo-min,’ anyway? And why would one be an Octopod at the same time? You’re either hyoo-min or Octopod. You can’t be *both*.”

“Blue Crystal’s up to something that only it knows, prob’ly. Hold still, Remix,” a Nautilus-Octopod medic said as something cold was pressed into my upper back. I hoped it wasn’t the end of his tube mouth. It did feel about the same shape and size...

“Furl, how’s her mucus content?” the Mendako asked the Nautilus while turning my back left tentacle-leg over in their hand.

“Seems normal,” Furl responded, holding up a small abalone shell full of my own slime. “It’s the right viscosity and it’s not discolored.”

“Her limbs seem normal, too,” the Mendako said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think she’d been born of Mera’s tears.”

“Except she *wasn’t*,” Teeks said. “She’s an outsider. Outsiders are trouble!”

“Uhh, didn’t you buy milk from a Furman trader last night?” Furl asked.

“That’s *different*,” Teeks said, whacking the Nautilus on his shell. “A trader who comes here betrays his village. That’s why we can trust them!”

“That makes no sense.”

“Shut up!”

“Ignore them,” the Mendako whispered, leaning their mouthless head closer to me. “They do good work, but they were raised by the same Den Guardian, so they sometimes get a little...”

“Ugh, been there,” I said. The doctors’ banter reminded me of arguments I’d had with Nancy.

“Back to business – are you still sore?” the Mendako asked.

“I stopped being sore a few days ago,” I said. The metamorphosis had left my body an achy mess for a full week. It was a relief when I woke up one morning and could curl my tentacles without pain shooting all the way up to my stomach.

“You’re staying with Gamumber, correct?” the Mendako asked, picking up a large wooden bucket.

“Gamumber?” I asked. “I’m staying with Flats.”

“‘Flats’ is Gamumber’s nickname. You’re staying with him?”

“Well...” I said, biting my fat lower lip with one of my sharp grey beak-fangs. “I have been, but this morning there was a gift from Tentachill on Flats’ kitchen counter.”

“A gift?”

“Yeah. A bag of money and a note that said ‘Deck your new pad with the good shit,’” I said. “He wants me to move into my own Den.”

“How wonderful!” The Mendako’s black eyes were smiling. “Bet you’re looking forward to that!”

I didn’t answer.

“All we have left to do is test your ink sac capacity.” The Mendako had to half-shout to make themselves heard over Furl and Teeks’ increasingly heated argument. It tilted the bucket towards me. “How full does your sac feel?”

“Almost bursting,” I said. A large lump bobbed in the back of my throat with every word I spoke.

“Excellent. Aim here, please.”

I hocked up an inkball with so much force that the Mendako was knocked back several feet. Furl and Teeks promptly shut up and stared at the now-almost-full bucket.

“Seaweed Sniper,” they said in unison.

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” I asked.

“You’ve got an overactive —”

“I know, I know, I got an overactive ink sac. But I’m not a soldier. I’m not cut out for it,” I said.

“You should give it a shot,” said Furl. “Tentachill always needs more snipers!”

“Tentachill... needs...?” For a moment, I stared blankly at the Nautilus-Octopod with my jaw hanging open. Then, I shook my head to clear it. Me? A soldier? Fighting Wingfolk “Heroes” and who knows what else? What was I thinking!?

“At least consider it,” Teeks said, helping me off of the carved stone examination table. “It’s rare that someone’s ink sac is so... spacious.” I wasn’t sure if that was an insult, a medical fact, or a weirdly-worded compliment.

I crawled out of the examination room and headed back down the tunnel towards the main room which served as a hub for the underground infirmary. Flats was waiting for me near the entrance with his uneven eyes closed and his flat-tipped tentacles curled. As I got closer I heard soft snoring.

“Flats? I’m done,” I said, gently nudging his stomach with the tip of my mitten-hand.

“How’d it go?” Flats yawned.

“Diagnosis: Octopod,” I said.

“Whuh?”

“They can’t find anything wrong with me,” I said. “All of my humanity is...” I couldn’t bring myself to finish the sentence.

Truth be told, I wasn’t bothered much by my new form. I was already used to looking down and seeing a spread of grey-and-crimson tentacles jutting out from beneath a plump grey stomach. I barely took notice of the little

cream-colored suckers on the undersides of my head-tentacles that were ever-present in the corners of my vision. My new body felt normal and natural.

And that was what was worrying me.

“I-if I’m right, Gloop shouldn’t be too busy,” Flats said as we slid out of the waiting room and into a winding tunnel. It was so narrow that the walls and ceiling grazed against Flats’ body, but he managed to move down the pathway with ease.

“Gloop?” I asked.

“My childhood best friend!” he said. (Though, I had my suspicions that Flats had more than one childhood best friend.) “She’s fun to shop with. You’ll have a real good time!”

“We’re going shopping?”

“Oh, n-not me! Just you and Gloop. I have Golem work to do.” Flats’ fins drooped and he tapped the tips of the largest of his three fingers together. “I mean, I *did* want to help you decorate your den, but...you know.”

We crawled in silence for some time after that. Though he hadn’t said it out loud, I knew exactly what Flats’ words meant. The Wingfolk Heroes were on the move towards the Sea Cave Kingdom. Flats might have to put his life on the line. The thought made my insides feel like a tangle of cold spaghetti.

“This is the last night I’m going to see you,” I said.

“For now,” he said.

“Right. For now.”

More silence. There were fanciful paintings of wild octopuses, squids, and nautiluses in every color imaginable painted on the cragged walls. They were

much more vivid than the murals I'd seen in Mera's tunnel. Was the mushroom-light brighter here, or were my new, bulbous eyes simply more suited for the underground world? As we turned a corner into a larger tunnel, my thoughts tumbled over each other.

Octopod. I'm an Octopod. An Octopod. A real Octopod. It's comfortable down here. Should I be this comfortable? Why doesn't this feel weird? Is it the Crystal's magic? Or is it because I'm an Octopod? I'm an Octopod. Why am I an Octopod? Because of the Crystal? Was I always an Octopod? It must be the Crystal. Why did the Crystal want me to be an Octopod? Does it know something I don't? Of course it does. It's a Divine Artifact. It's the Blue Crystal.

You're an idiot. A second train of thoughts had poked its ugly head into my mind.

Will you shut up, brain? I'm not an idiot. I'm an Octopod.

*Oh, haven't you noticed? Octopods **are** idiots.*

"We're here," Flats said. I stopped staring at my tentacles and looked around. Our walk had ended at a long, tall cave with dozens of curtained doorways along each wall. Above us, a series of wooden walkways led to more curtained doorways. To the right of each door was a wooden plaque displaying a series of numbers.

"Apartments?" I asked.

"What are apurr... apat... a-aprutty.... whatever it was you just said?" Flats asked. "This is a Den District."

"Right. Dens," I said, my voice cracking on the second word. It was such an *Octopod* word. Humans didn't live in dens. Neither did the Wingfolk, or even the wolfish Furmen. Only the slimy, squishy, tentacled Octopods holed up in cliffside dens.

And by this time tomorrow, I'll have one of my very own.

“Uhh, y-you’ll have to get Gloog for me,” Flats said. “She’s in Den 13-30, on the first walkway. I can’t go on the walkways.” He spread his arms out, gesturing to his body. “Too big.”

“Gloog doesn’t know who I am,” I said.

“Just say that I’m here. She’ll come out.”

“If you say so.” I made my way up the wooden ramp leading to the second set of Octopod homes. Beneath my tentacles, I could feel my suckers twisting and turning to avoid mashing against the stray pebbles scattered around the walkway. I’d never noticed that before. I lifted my front right tentacle and tried to move one of the smaller suckers at the tip. It twitched and rotated from left to right.

Shit. Which Den did Flats say Gloog was in again?

“Did I hear Flats’ voice?” came a deep, scratchy voice from several curtains down. A willowy, striped Octopod - a Mimic - with seaweed and half-wilted wildflowers wrapped around her horns poked her head out of the curtain and slunk out onto the walkway. “I did! HI, FLATS!”

“Gloog!” Flats’ face looked like it was ready to explode with happiness as he shouted upwards to his friend. “Gloog, are you gonna be busy tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Thought you’d have Golem work!”

“N-not for me! For my new friend, the Remix!”

“Gggguurrrruurr??? What’s a ‘Remix?’”

“She’s right there!” Flats pointed to me. Gloog looked me up and down with big, golden eyes.

“Flats, this is a Common Octopod,” she said in a quiet voice that Flats had no way of hearing.

“I know what you’re thinking, but that’s the Remix!” Flats said. “C’mere, I’ll explain everything!”



“... and the Blue Crystal blocked me from going through the portal home. It completely changed me into a Common Octopod. I’ve been staying with Flats ever since.” As usual, it was me who’d ended up telling the story of how I wound up in the video game world of *Eagle’s Quarry* to a wide-eyed Octopod.

“Let me get this straight,” Gloog said, the horns on her head twitching. “A hyoo-min is a mortal God?”

“Kind of? Not really,” I said.

“She sure *looked* like she was a Goddess!” Flats cut in. “I thought she was divine for sure! But she’s an Octopod, like us.”

“Man, the Crystal’s crazy,” Gloog said. “Who’d’ve thought it could pick out an Octopod in a totally different form?”

“She had the fins since the beginning,” said Flats, pointing to his own fins with one of his three fingers. “Maybe that’s how it knew. The other hyoo-mins had these weird round things there.”

“Wait, you could see my fins the whole time?” I asked.

“Huh? Yeah, of course I could,” said Flats.

“None of my human friends could see them until after the Birthing Ceremony!” I said. “Not even me! I only knew they were there because I could feel them!”

“Wha?” Flats blinked and turned to look at Gloog, who shrugged but remained silent. He turned back to look at me and scratched his head. “Then, ahh, I guess we *all* knew you were an Octopod, we just didn’t know we knew, o-or something...”

“Don’t think about it too hard,” Gloog said. “Cuz I just did, and I think I strained my siphon.”

“I don’t want to think about it, either,” I said. “I don’t think I’ll ever figure out that Crystal.”

“What’s there to figure out?” Gloog asked. “I mean, yeah, it’s dangerous, and sometimes it has a mind of its own, but it makes Tentachill smarter, it makes Octopod magic stronger, and it makes our crops grow faster, so it’s prob’ly not *evil*.”

“So that’s why we want it?” I said. “Because it makes things better for us?”

“Geez, kid,” said Gloog, who was maybe two years older than me at the most, “they didn’t teach you *nothin*’ about being an Octopod, did they?”

“Th-that’s actually why I came calling,” Flats said. “She’s moving into her Den tomorrow, a-and she needs help picking out the essentials.”

“*Shopping?*” Gloog’s horns twitched three times. “Shit, Flats, you’re lucky I have a free day tomorrow! I mean, I want to go anyway, but...”

“Well, I certainly can’t go!” Flats frowned. “I have Golem work to do!”

“What would you have done if I wasn’t here?”

“I would have asked Tramber!”

“Oh, him. Yeah, he’s always ready to shop.”

“So you’ll help me?” I asked.

“Sure. I owe Flats a favor anyway,” Gloog shrugged.

Chapter 23

It was made of glass, tinted red, and had two rows of little suction cups molded along one side.

“Gloog, do they happen to call this thing ‘The Kraken?’” I asked. She turned her head to look at the toy in my hand, then stifled a giggle.

“You kiddin’ me?” she asked. “Waaaaay too small to be a Kraken.”

Overnight my sexual impulses had returned with a burning vengeance. The simple rimmed hole nestled between my tentacles was aching for something to fill it. I’d quietly mentioned my problem to Gloog that morning, whose entire face lit up with a wicked grin.

“You’re gonna need a Shove-‘em-up Shop,” she’d said.

“A what?” I’d asked.

“You know... a shop for dildos. We’ll stop there first.”

“Oh.” So *that* was what ‘Shove-’em-up’ meant.

“Whatcha think about this? How ‘full’ do you like to feel?” Gloog handed me something green and wavy that was heavier than it looked.

“Not sure what my cooch can take anymore,” I said. “I haven’t exactly had a chance for ‘solo time’ in a while.”

“Why d’you keep calling your octo-pussy your *ccccooooorrrrrccch*?” The Mimic tried to repeat the slang word, but it got caught between gurgles.

“Because I can’t bring myself to say... the actual thing,” I said, hoping she wouldn’t say it again.

“Octo-pussy?” God dammit.

“Yes, that,” I said. “Stop saying it, please.”

“What’s wrong with ‘octo-pussy’?”

“Ugh! Forget it. I shouldn’t be buying this stuff,” I sighed, handing back the green dildo. “I’ve got a Den to fill.”

“You gotta at least buy something small. You never know when ‘the mood’ will strike.”

“It’s already here,” I said. Gloop was right. I would have to scratch that itch sooner rather than later.

Gloop rummaged through a bin marked “sale” and pulled out a gently curved pink stone. “How about this? It’s good for beginners.”

“*No!!!*” That wasn’t an answer to her question - I’d finally caught sight of the huge section of Tentachill fan merchandise on the far end of the store. A table covered in striped glass tentacles sat proudly under hand-woven wall tapestries of Tentachill’s angular face. Bookcases looming high above my head held carved wooden figurines in different action poses, his tentacle pigtails swirling around his muscular body. On the ground, a basket filled with clay mugs with an Octopod phrase that roughly translated to something like “Tentachill’s Bitch” on their sides. Leaning against a stone shelf was something I’d only seen in the backgrounds of TV coverages of comic conventions – a long pillow with a full-body painting of Tentachill sprawled out in a “come hither” pose. I gulped. It looked like he was hoping for someone to crawl on top of him, wrap around all their tentacles, and start to...

“See someone you like?” Gloop nudged me gently in the side. My tentacles were inching me towards the MC department.

“They have a whole damn section dedicated to him?” I asked.

“Why wouldn’t they?” Gloop had another cheeky grin on her face. “He’s hot, immortal, and loves to fuck.”

“So you’re into him.”

“Heh-heh-heh. Thought you were the only one, kid?”

I picked up one of the striped dildos and turned it over in my hand. A paper tag attached by a piece of string read “Actual Size!” Blue blood flooded my cheeks. If just the Kraken had caused orgasmic fireworks in my body, what would something close to the real thing do?

“How about this?” Gloop was holding up the body pillow, which was almost as tall as her. “You can cram it in your sleeping nook AND have some one-on-one with the MC!”

“But I’m not into, uhm…” I couldn’t finish my sentence. I’d made the mistake of staring directly into pillow-Tentachill’s painted-on eyes. Now I was lost inside their power, my three hearts racing as blazing-hot shivers cascaded up my boneless arms and exploded in my chest. I crawled a little closer to the pillow and put my hand on it. It felt velvety, not wholly unlike the real thing.

“It’s got a back side,” Gloop turned the pillow around to reveal Tentachill lying on his stomach, wearing a toothy grin as he looked over his bulging shoulder. The tentacle tattoos that wrapped around his front were attached to a single giant squid. At the spot where his torso met his six tentacle-legs was the crack of a very firm, very human-looking behind.

*Holy mother of ass. I’ve sat on his lap. **How did I miss that!?***

“Well?” Gloop asked.

“I’m not sure that’s for me,” I said, taking it from her anyway and holding it close to my chest. “I haven’t humped a pillow since I was a virgin.”

“Did you ever hump a pillow with MC Tentachill on it?” Gloop raised her hairless brow.

“No, but...” I looked down at the pillow. The painting of Tentachill was exquisite. His blue tongue even looked glossy and slick. It would be so easy to imagine him licking my soft, grey chest with it, his tentacles entwined with mine, labored and lusty breaths in my ear, the smells of sand and sea and spice on his skin...

Something beneath me throbbed.

“Not now!” I yelled, hurtling the pillow back at its corner and power-crawling towards the exit. “Den comes first! Maybe if there’s some money left over!”

“Dammit! Just admit you want it,” I heard Gloop swear quietly.



39-03, 39-02... I'm going the wrong way.

I held a piece of parchment from the Den Office reading *Den 39-29* in my right mitten-hand as Gloop and I walked the perimeter of the cavern. Both of us dragged small rental wagons full of baubles, cooking supplies, handmade soaps, and pillows behind us.

“39-29,” Gloop read aloud. “Here it is!”

I froze. The pink curtain over the doorway looked dusty. What if the inside was even worse? The scent of mildew might be wafting out of damp, old pillows in a dingy sleeping nook, too filthy for me to use. That meant I'd

have to give it a thorough cleaning, which would take days. The kitchen area might be a good size, but the last occupant would have left gobs of food crusted on everything, sitting there for so long that it had bound itself to the countertops. The bead curtains on the ceiling had probably snapped, leaving beads all over the floor for me to pick up. I'd want to go back to the Den Office and ask for a new housing assignment, but they'd just say, "No, it's your *duty* as an Octopod to sleep here, and by the way, your military training starts tomorrow. Sorry for the short notice."

You're doing the 'thing' again, Liz, I told myself. You haven't even seen the inside of your den and you're worrying about the military!

I rolled my cart inside. In the dim light I could make out the arch of a large fireplace in one corner and a dark blob – probably the sleeping nook – on the left. There was a faint dustiness in the air, but no mold scent. Beneath my suckers I felt the plush nubs of a large rug.

"Gonna need a light," said Gloop. Her yellow eyes faintly glowed in the darkness. There was a fizzing noise followed by a small flame hovering in mid-air. Gloop had lit a match. She waved it near the fireplace and squinted. "I think there's some good wood in there."

A roaring fire filled the room with a warm glow. A round blue rug with a golden starburst in the center covered most of the floor. The rest of the Den was bare, except for different-sized hooks all over the walls and ceiling. The kitchen area was as large as the one in Flats' den, with a huge fireplace to match. I opened one of the counter drawers and found that someone had left behind a few clean knives.

"Wow! They gave you a real nice den!" Gloop said, pulling a green pillow out of the cart.

“*Den*,” I quietly repeated, feeling the word rumble in my throat in the Octopod language. “*My den*.” It was strange to say, and even stranger to accept. I’d spent my human life hopping between different cramped apartments, wishing I had a spacious house like my stepsister’s. Now I was moving into a rocky cave that was about the size of my last apartment’s living room – nothing short of den-like. I should have been upset, but my insides felt cozy with Octopod Pride instead.

“Where do you want these baubles?” Gloop asked.

“How about here?” I suggested, pointing to a set of hooks near the kitchen.

“Can’t,” Gloop said. “The glass is so thin it might melt if it’s that close to the fire.”

“Oh. Near the sleeping nook?”

“Awright,” Gloop said. “We can throw all your pillows inside while we’re at it.”

We wheeled our carts over to the sleeping nook on the far-left wall. The little hole in the wall was only a few feet deep. I made an anxious burbling noise.

“Whassa matter?” Gloop asked.

“I don’t think I’ll fit in there,” I said. “There must have been a mistake.”

“Hah? There’s plenty of room for you,” Gloop said, shoving a pillow in the nook and making the space even smaller. “You’re just used to Flats’ mega-bed.”

“But, it’s so—”

“Did you have bones when you were a hyoo-min?” Gloop seemed to have abruptly changed the topic.

“Wha-? Of course I had bones,” I said. “Humans are mammals.”

“No wonder you don’t think you’ll fit! You’re not used to being an octopus. Check this out.” Gloop placed her two front tentacles in the sleeping nook. I watched, dumbfounded, as her four tentacle legs disappeared inside the hole within a matter of seconds.

“Wh... how!?” was what spilled out of my mouth.

“I have no idea how we do it,” she said, sliding back out onto the floor. “But if I can fit half of myself in there, you should have no problem getting in. Give it a shot.”

My back was tense as I placed the tips of my front two tentacles in the sleeping nook, the same way Gloop had. I gripped onto the mattress with my suckers and pulled myself forward. Octopod instincts activated, my body twisted itself around, dragging my other tentacles underneath me one by one until my whole body was curled up inside the sleeping nook.

“Grrrrrruuugrr...” I wrapped my arms around a pillow and closed my eyes. It was as if the cave itself was giving me a hug.

“You gonna take a nap?” asked Gloop. I managed a low grunt. Exhaustion from all-day shopping had caught up with me. Gloop said something that I only half-heard about helping me organize as the world faded to black.



When I re-lit the fire several hours later, I found the rental wagons gone, the cooking supplies neatly in my drawers, and all the remaining baubles spread

out all over the floor. There was also something I didn't want to think about propped up next to the sleeping nook, something that reminded me of the rich, deep desire stirring in the center of my tentacles.

"Where should this go?" I asked loudly, my eyes trailing around the room as I picked one of the baubles off the floor. The edge of the "thing" grazed against the corner of my vision. I jerked my head away. I could almost feel its painted-on stare burning into my slimy skin.

"Can you at least let me decorate my room first?" I demanded of the Tentachill body pillow. "I've got baubles all over the floor and I don't want to step... er, crawl on them."

The pillow didn't respond. I knew if it could answer, it would say something obnoxious that would make my octo-cooch throb.

I fidgeted with the bauble in my hands. I knew what I wanted. With Gloop gone, it was a good time for it.

"I'm nervous," I murmured. "I haven't done this in so long."

"*Cuz there wasn't anyone worth doin' it with before me,*" the Tentachill in my mind said. "*C'mon. Let ya body set the tempo tonight.*"

"Only if you keep saying things like that," I teased. I was talking to a pillow. It should have been embarrassing, but it wasn't. Maybe it was because the pillow had the visage of a God, one who was fond of erotic forms of worship. If you thought about it in a particular way, what I was about to do could have even been considered sacred.

I cleared a large space on the floor and laid the pillow flat, crawled on top of it, and looked down directly into the rendering of those damned yellow eyes. Between the pillow's firmness and the painting's sprawled-out position, it was like a miniature Tentachill was lying on the floor of my own den.

I gripped the pillow with the suckers on the edges of my tentacles and began to move my hips back and forth, softly rubbing my underside against the pillow. Energy glowed in my groin, causing me to shiver. With my spread-out tentacles completely exposing it, the fleshy rim around the hole on my underside had grown sensitive. It could feel all the little bumps and curves of the paint. I found myself letting out deep rumbling noises. Imaginary Tentachill snorted.

“Remember the last time we fucked?” he asked. *“You had to gurgle in yo’ mind. Now listen to you! Gurglin’ for **real**. Feels reeeeeeal good to be an octopus, don’t it?”*

“You feel good,” I huffed, grinding harder, enjoying the way the pillow’s texture tickled my undersides. The tentacles on my head curled into little spirals at the ends.

“Grgllll... glad I make your octo-pussy happy.” I had no need to imagine that smirk of his today. It was right in front of me, painted in perfect 2D detail. *“Tell me more about what I do to you.”*

“Huoh... Tentachill, you...” It was getting hard to talk. I could already feel a familiar heat growing in my Octopod loins. Overcome with passion, I leaned forward until my entire body was rubbing against the pillow with every thrust. My memories generated his earthy, spicy musk as my face pressed into his painted-on chest.

“I wanna hear how hot I make you,” the lusty God demanded. Heat bubbled in my gut and spilled out into my arms at his words. If I’d still been human, I’d have had goosebumps.

“I’m really f-f-fuckin’ turned on by you,” I said between grunts. “You set m-my cooch on fire!”

*“Cooch? Daaaamn. Say the **real** word. For me!”*

“Oh god,” I panted. I knew exactly what word imaginary-Tentachill was talking about. “Why?”

“I wanna hear you talk like the cute little Octopod you are.”

“God...! Fine! My *octo-pussy*...! MY OCTO-PUSSY...!” God dammit, I’d done it. I’d shrieked a word I was afraid to even whisper, just for him. I couldn’t resist his command. Not when he had me on top of him, my hips swinging back and forth, breaths heavy. “My octo-pussy f-feels... sooooo good right now...! *Because of you!*”

“Awww, yeeeeeah! Now tell me who’s making you feel this good!”

“MC T-t-tentachillllll...” His name came out slurred. Imaginary Tentachill laughed. Then he cocked his head and made a watery purring noise.

“How long you think you can cum for?” he asked as electricity radiated inside of me.

Before that moment, I’d thought I’d felt it all. I’d been underneath, on top of, and next to so many men, men who had taken my body and pleased it in ways I’d never forget. I’d even had my mind blown by a cute little red dildo called The Kraken back in a small apartment on Earth. But nothing could have prepared me for the explosive energy that was an Octopod orgasm. It was almost too intense, stronger than a human orgasm and much, much longer. I was consumed by it, thrashing against the pillow as wave after wave of pleasure rippled through me until the tingles subsided, giving way to a sweet and warm afterglow.

Imaginary Tentachill gently brushed the edge of one of his hair-tentacles against my cheek.

“I like that,” he said. *“Orgasm looks good on ya.”*

Is this really what you wanted? that old, familiar anxiety tried to ask. *Anime body pillow sex in a room the size of a studio apartment?* I didn't have time to answer my own question. I was too busy burying my face against the pillow's chest, a contented gargle humming in the back of my throat.

Chapter 24

“So, you think you can be an Octopod soldier, punks!?” the muscular Mimic Octopod standing before us spat. I stiffened my stance and clamped my arms to my side. A seven-foot tall Octopod commander is scary when you’re only two and a half feet high.

Why am I here!? I ran through the week’s events in my mind to try and figure out how the hell I’d ended up in the Octopod Military.

At the Career Office, I was given a series of aptitude tests to determine what positions would suit me. There was a written knowledge exam, a long personality test, and a short but intense obstacle course. Afterwards I was given a handwritten list of potential careers. At the top of the list in bright red ink was the phrase “Seaweed Sniper.”

“Why’s everyone telling me to be a Seaweed Sniper?” I muttered loud enough for the Red Common Octopod receptionist to overhear.

“Wow, Seaweed Sniper?” he repeated. “You don’t see many people who meet that requirement. Tentachill always needs more Snipers!”

“Oh, for the love of...”

In what could only be described as an ungodly cross between blind loyalty and pure spite I’d circled the red words at the top of the list.

Dammit, Liz! You’re no soldier! You better get yourself out of this before you get killed by the Wingfolk! My thoughts were frantic as the Mimic Drill Sergeant crawled up and down the line of new recruits, inspecting us one by one with his three-fingered hands folded behind his back. He stopped at me and squinted his huge eyes.

“What’s your name, soldier?” he barked.

“Lurtz!” I squeaked, then felt my face scrunch. “Wait, um, no, hang on…”

“What!? What is it!?”

“Ooh! You got an Octopod name,” I heard a familiar, deep, godly voice hiss in my ear. “Roll with it.”

Shit! Have you been watching me this whole time!?

“Nah. Ain’t powerful enough to watch everyone at once. Just sensed you adjusted ya rhythm a bit and decided to peep what changed,” Tentachill said.

“What is your name!?” the Mimic yelled again, oblivious that his God was talking to me.

“Lurtz, sir!” I said, this time with conviction.

“Heeeeell yeah.” Tentachill.

“Lurtz!” the sergeant repeated. “Well, Lurtz, I hope you’re prepared for your journey. In fact, I hope that all of you are prepared for your journey! The road to becoming an Octopod soldier is not a stroll on the shore! It is grueling! It is exhausting! You will work until your body aches, your tentacles quake, and your suckers want to fall off one-by-one! Is that clear?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” the line of Octopod recruits yelled in one voice.

“Alright! Now I want each and every one of you to head over to the assignment boards on the wall! That’s where you’ll find the name of the superior who will *personally* see you’re whipped into shape over the next six weeks!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” The bravado in our voices was faked. I and the other Common Octopods in line were in no hurry to reach the wooden bulletin boards on the back wall of the cave. If the Mimic hadn’t been glaring at us

with his fists smashed into his hips, I'm not sure any of us would have moved.

“Head Sniper Tarkle,” I read aloud, my fins pressed flat against the side of my head. I could only imagine how grueling the next few weeks would be under the watchful eye of a “Head Sniper.”

*Oh, but you **chose** this, remember?* I reminded myself as I and the others headed up the long, sandy path towards the training grounds on the surface. *You had over a dozen other choices, but this is the job your idiot self **wanted**. Seaweed-Fuckin’-Sniper. Told you that you were dumb enough to join the Octopod Military.*

Shut your damn mouth, I told my thoughts in a voice that was confident and brave and nothing at all like me. *Octopod soldiers are tough and strong! We have no time for wimpy thoughts like you! We’re preoccupied with the battlefield!*

...you’re terrified.

Yep.

Told you. Stupid.

At least give it a chance, Liz – er, Lurtz. You might surprise yourself.

Give it a chance? For what? Let me guess – “those damned yellow eyes.”

The training grounds were on a gorgeous white-sand beach hidden away in a small cove. Wooden obstacle courses and clusters of painted targets were everywhere. More experienced Common Octopod soldiers were crawling around, shouting out their names and waving their arms in the air to locate the recruits in their group.

My fists were tensed as tightly as the ends of my head-tentacles. Even though the atmosphere of the training grounds was more like a summer camp

than a boot camp, I knew there must be a scowling, battle-scarred Sniper named Tarkle somewhere nearby, waiting with bated breath to give me my first orders as a soldier. Was there a protocol for meeting your military superior? Was I supposed to bow? Did I have to use his full name and rank when I addressed him?

“Tarkle! Anyone for Tarkle?” a voice called.

“Present!” I yelled, whirling around and slamming face-first into the Octopod standing behind me. When I opened my eyes, a Purple Common Octopod with a friendly face and a leather belt was sprawled out on his back in front of me. At his left hip there was a holster with a rolled-up seaweed tube inside of it. The Octopod shook his head for several seconds, then grinned.

“Hiya!” he said. He stood up and brushed the sand off his arms. “I’m Tarkle. Welcome to your first day of training.”

“Oh shit, I’m sorry,” I said, all my thoughts about formalities cast to the rolling waves. “I didn’t mean to knock you over!”

“That’s all right,” Tarkle said, standing up tall and puffing out his little chest. “It’d take more than a little bump like that to stop me!”

I frowned. He looked familiar. Had I met him before?

“Uhh, I’m Lurtz. Nice to meet you,” I said. I stook out my hand for him to shake. He stared at it with a blank expression.

“Is this a hyoo-min thing?” he half-whispered. My cheeks turned blue so quickly that I almost imploded.

“I didn’t realize you didn’t know what a handshake was,” I muttered.

“You know, the higher-ups warned me about you,” Tarkle said. “Said you might do some pretty funny things. But I gotta say, I admire your loyalty. It’s impressive.”

“Loyalty?” I asked. “What did I do?”

“What did you do!? You came here from another world, with the body of a *Goddess*, and you gave up everything you ever knew so you could serve Tentachill! As one of *us*! Now that’s dedication to your people!”

“I – That’s not – I was turning into an Octopod anyway.” I felt like my tongue was a lump of clay. Every word came out clunky and awkward. “I’m not even sure I had a choice. Tentachill summoned all the Octopods using the Blue Crystal, and for some reason, I was summoned too –”

“But you answered the call,” Tarkle cut in.

“I did.”

Tarkle gave me an open smile. “Welcome home.”

“Home...?” My fat lower lip wobbled and I was soon reminded how gooey and thick Octopod tears were. I’d never been *welcomed home* before, not even when I visited family. The feeling was new and filled me with a strange warmth that sat thick and heavy in my chest. Viscous tears slowly rolled down my cheeks and plopped into the sand.

“Tears of joy...!” Tarkle said, his voice awed. My sobs turned uglier. “You should all take notice!” Tarkle called out, raising both his hands to get the attention of the other Octopods nearby. “This here is a model Octopod soldier! I want all of you to be as loyal as she is!”

“Th-thank you!” I wailed. Tarkle put a hand on my shoulder, saying nothing.

After my crying fit had subsided, Tarkle led me to a series of targets painted sloppily onto flat-faced seaside rocks and handed me a rolled tube of seaweed just like the one in his holster. The seaweed felt papery but sturdy in my hands.

“Do you know how to use a seaweed blowgun?” Tarkle asked.

“Put it in your mouth and spit?”

“Well, yeah, but no,” he said, scratching the siphon on the back of his head. “Your tongue has to be out of the way, or ink’ll explode in your face. And I know it’s comfortable, but don’t wedge it between the gaps in your beak! You’ll end up shooting sideways.”

I stuck the narrow end of the blowgun in my mouth and pressed my tongue against the bottom so that there was a clear path to my throat. The dried seaweed had a bitter, earthy taste.

“Put your right hand a little farther forward,” Tarkle said. “And move your left hand close to your face.”

“Lek dis???” I asked through a mouthful of blowgun.

“Close enough,” he said. “All right. First, I want you to try and hit the center of all five of these targets.”

The test couldn’t have gone worse. The blowgun aimed the globs of ink in whichever way it was tilted, meaning I had to aim with my hands instead of my face. All my ink balls were different sizes, a failed attempt at conserving enough ink for five shots. Only two ink balls landed inside the targets at all, none of them close to the center.

“Yeesh, really?” Tarkle said once there were five stains on the wall.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m used to spitting them at people without a blowgun.”

Tarkle blinked. “Who did you have to attack? Wingfolk?”

“Wingfolk *and* a human.”

“Hmm...” Tarkle rubbed the tip of his mitten-hand against his chin. “Think you could hit the center of the targets without a blowgun?”

“No clue,” I said. “But I can try once my ink sac refills.”

“Hey, want to see something great?” Tarkle asked. There was a gleam in his eye. He pulled his own blowgun out of his holster, stuck the narrow end in his mouth, and aimed at the wall. The first glob of ink hit the center of the furthest left target. Tarkle sprung into a backflip, shooting out more ink in mid-air. The inkball slammed against the middle of the second target, creating a dark splatter on the cliffside. The last three shots were in such quick succession I wasn’t sure how he had time to inhale. All of them were bullseyes.

I stood there with my jaw so slack my chin almost grazed against the sandy beach. None of the Seaweed Snipers in the game *Eagle’s Quarry* were able to pull off moves like that! How did he do it? Was it because he was a Purple Common Octopod and not a Red or Blue one? Was I going to learn to do it, too!? That idea thrilled me more than I’d care to admit.

“That’s rad,” I said. “Can all Head Snipers do that?”

“They don’t call me ‘Turbo-Tentacles Tarkle’ for nothing!” he said, getting into a battle-ready stance and closing an eye while mock-aiming his blowgun. “That’s how I got to be one of Tentachill’s personal messengers!”

“That’s it! Messenger!” I exclaimed. No wonder he looked familiar – he was the first Octopod in the game! “You told Tentachill about the Wingfolk flying ceremony!”

“Whaaa—!?” His voice hushed. “How did *you* know that?” The tentacles on my head twitched. Tarkle’s messages to the MC probably weren’t public knowledge.

“Uh, there’s a game called *Eagle’s Quarry*,” I hastily explained. “You’re in a cutscene.”

“Cutscene?”

“Never mind,” I said. “It’s a thing humans have that Octopods don’t.”

“Hyoo-mins know about Octopods? But you’re from a different world! How do you know about Octopods if you’re from a different world!?”

I sighed and prepared to tell my story to yet another curious, wide-eyed Octopod. Would I ever learn?

Chapter 25

I squeezed my body pillow to my chest and scrunched up into a little ball. I didn't want to wake up yet. Not even with light flooding the room, not even with birds chirping outside of the window, not even with the scent of bacon and eggs in the air. I smiled. Nancy always made bacon and eggs when she wanted to celebrate something.

Wait.

My eyes opened to a regal green and gold bedspread and walls with framed pressed flowers. Next to me was a plump body pillow in a plain white case and a fluffy pink octopus plush toy. On the bedside table were several "Get Well Soon" cards and a small pot of flowers.

I'm back in Nancy's guest room, I realized. The Blue Crystal must have sent me back overnight. Did I do something wrong? Tackle had said my first week of sniper training was going well, Tentachill didn't seem to have any problems with me, and I was already getting used to dunking myself underwater every few days to make sure I didn't dry out.

I must have made a worse Octopod than I realized, I thought, sliding out of bed and landing on the floor with a wet thud.

"Lizzie? Did you get up?" My frizzy-haired step-sister walked into the room holding a tray with hot breakfast on it and stared at me.

"Gruuurrrgh aaaaaagh gluuuuurrrrr!" I'd meant to shout "What the hell is going on here," but my words came out in a series of gurgles and gargles that I couldn't understand.

Nancy loomed over me. In fact, everything in the room loomed over me. The world around me was human, but the body I had was anything but.

There was a spread of four fat red-and-grey tentacles before me, a pudgy stomach, and two crimson mitten hands. Nancy set the breakfast tray on the bed and rolled her eyes.

“I knew this would happen,” she said, scooping me up and lifting me until her face was parallel to mine. “I just knew one day my little Busy Lizzie would end up like this.”

“Graaargh?” The ends of my head-tentacles curled. What did she mean?

“Nathan told me everything he could about *Eagle’s Quarry*,” she said, “That’s when it clicked.”

“Brru?”

“Octopods have *low intelligence!*” Nancy smiled. “It makes so much sense! That’s why you’ve always been so... dumb.”

“Grurrrt!” I burbled indignantly.

“It’s okay, my sweet little octopus,” Nancy said, holding me close as if I were a stuffed teddy bear. “I’ll take very special care of my favorite baby sister from now on. After all... you’re stupid. You can’t take care of yourself when you’re stupid.”

“Goor gaaaaaaaah! Grrrrruugh! GRRRRRUUGH!” I squirmed to try to get out of her grip. Nancy chuckled and placed me on the bed next to the tray of food. I huffed but picked up a piece of bacon and ate it. There was no use arguing with her. Not after what Tarkle had told me.

“Is that Liz?” Nathan asked. He walked into the room with his smartphone in hand. “Wow! You weren’t kidding, mom! She really is an Octopod!”

“Shhhh, Nathan!” Nancy said. “She’s very stupid, so she startles easily.”

“My friends aren’t going to believe this!” Nathan said, snapping a photo burst of me. “A real, live video game character, right in my house! Everyone will be so jealous!”

“Careful, you don’t want to overstimulate her tiny little mind.”

“Hey... hey, buddy...” I jumped. A gurgling voice rang out through the air, louder than Nancy and Nathan’s voices. “You okay? You’re thrashing real hard.”

My eyes snapped open. I was waist deep in a large pool of warm, bubbling water. Above me were blue and gold bead curtains strung across a smooth stone ceiling. Small clusters of relaxed Octopods talked and laughed around me. I’d fallen asleep in the underground hot spring communal bath that Tarkle had recommended I visit to calm my nerves. Now there was a familiar one-eyed Nautilus Octopod staring at me with concern.

“Deedi?” I asked.

“Okay, we’ve never met. How the fuck do you know my name?” he asked.

“Remember the ‘human Octopod’ who stayed in your Den after the Birthing Ceremony?” I asked.

“Shit, how was I supposed to recognize you like *that*?” he asked, clapping a hand to his shelled forehead. “You’re Common Octopod from head to tip.”

“Yeah...” My voice trailed off as I remembered the conversation I’d had with Tarkle just hours before, a conversation that made me wish I wasn’t a Common Octopod.

There was no warning for the bad news. Tarkle had made a comment about me being a fast learner. I’d told him I didn’t feel like I was picking things up all that quickly. He told me that Common Octopods were “usually kinda dim,” including himself, so it was okay if I took things slow. I’d opened my

mouth. I'd wanted to tell Tackle he was wrong. But all that came out was a long whine.

"You look stressed," Deedi said, sitting down next to me on the rock ledge. "What's got your tentacles in a twist?"

"I'm stupid," I said.

"So what?" Deedi asked. "That's kind of a normal Common Octopod thing. Normal for us Nautilus Octopods, too. I ain't that smart."

I smacked my face into the hot spring and let out a loud groan, causing an explosion of bubbles to engulf my head. I was *stupid*. The proof had been staring me in the face, and I was too dumb to notice it. The other Common Octopods I'd met were simple-minded. Even Flats seemed to have a hard time understanding anything other than cooking and piloting. Me not making the connection probably meant I was the stupidest of them all.

*This is what I've been telling you all along! my thoughts jeered. **You're stupid!** And now we've figured out why! An Octopod is a simple little minion! You're one of them – you're **meant** to be a moron!*

Okay. I get it, brain! I understand! You don't have to rub it in my face!

What a good idiot you make! it continued. Not even caring how silly you've grown to look with those weird fish lips, those big, dumb eyes, those gross tentacles...

*My tentacles are **great**, thank you, I tried to correct my self-criticism. I'm an Octopod. I'm supposed to have them.*

And you're also supposed to have a very small mind!

Shit.

"Uh, why're you so bugged by this?" Deedi asked.

“I’ve spent my whole life trying to *not* be stupid,” I said. “And now, come to find out, I’m about as smart as a sack of rocks.”

“Rocks? Really?” Deedi’s eye looked unamused. “Pretty sure you’re stretching it.”

“Not really,” I said. “If you’re stupid, you’re stupid. Nobody likes stupid people.”

“Is that what hyoo-mins think?”

“Humans? It’s *common sense*,” I said. “Stupid people never do anything right. And they always ask questions with obvious answers. Who wants to be around an annoying fuck-up?”

“Uhh…” Deedi squinted his eye and paused. It was almost like I could see how slowly the wheels in his head were turning. “Flats.”

“Flats likes everyone,” I said.

“Nah, Flats has no time for people he thinks are shitheads,” Deedi said.

“His voice gets cold and his face goes all steely. It ain’t pretty.”

Now it was my turn to squint. It was difficult to imagine Flats with anything other than a half-dazed expression and a bounce in his voice.

“I can’t see it,” I finally said. “It’s *Flats*.”

“You gotta remember, the guy’s a killer when he has to be,” Deedi continued. “His Golem’s smashed Wingfolk kids into a pulp more than once. He doesn’t wanna do it, he just does cuz it’s the right thing to do. No idea how he keeps that sunny attitude outside of battle. Guess he’s just strong.”

“I’m in the military,” I said. “I don’t know why I joined. I’m not strong like Flats. I should have picked another job. It just proves what I was saying: I’m stupid.”

“That’s not stupid. You’re fulfilling your duty as an Octopod,” said Deedi.

“Duty?”

“Ehh, not *really* your duty, since it’s not required, but Tentachill and the other guys in charge want all capable Octopods to join the military at some point,” said Deedi, folding his arms. “Our people are the enemy of every neighboring territory and we need all the defense we can get.”

“The enemy? Why?”

“In a clamshell, everyone hates us. Wingfolk kids raid random houses, Furmen tackle Octopod traders, Hoptoads chase us away from their villages... your hyoo-min friend hated us, too.”

His words surprised me. The cause of the feud between the Octopods and the Wingfolk was clear; they were fighting over a Divine Artifact with powers that would only benefit one race at a time. But for us to be public enemy number one? What were the Octopods doing wrong? Were we an aggressive species? Was it our strange appearance next to slightly more humanlike species like the Wingfolk and the Furmen? Was there something wrong with glass baubles and seafood dinners?

“So what position are you?” Deedi asked.

“I’m in training to become a Seaweed Sniper,” I said.

“Seaweed Sniper, shit! No wonder you kept burping up ink in your sleep,” Deedi said, his eye going wide. “You got an overactive ink sac!”

“Ugh, I know.”

We sat there for a while in silence. A burst of hot air bubbled up from a crack in the stone floor directly underneath the tip of my right front tentacle, gently tickling my suckers. I curled my tentacle inward to move it out of the way.

“I’m just not sure how to feel,” I told Deedi.

“About what?” he asked.

“About myself,” I said.

“You should feel like an Octopod,” Deedi said. “Seriously, you gotta relax. You’re more normal than you think.”

You haven’t been human in years. Tentachill’s words drifted into my mind. Was Deedi right? Was I a simple-minded soldier before ever setting foot in the Sea Cave Kingdom?

I had no time to mull it over. Loud, fast drums filled the air and everyone in the hot spring stiffened with their fins sticking straight out to the sides. Though there were no lyrics, or even synthesizers, the message was clear: there were Wingfolk in the immediate area.

“Know where the nearest weapons storeroom is?” Deedi asked as he climbed out of the water.

“Am I supposed to fight?” I asked. I didn’t need his answer. That burning sense of Octopod duty in my chest was pushing me to defend the Underground even if I didn’t have to.

Deedi led me to a small hidden cavern with weapons crammed on the walls. I pulled a rolled seaweed tube off of a rack and fitted a holster belt around my chubby waist. Deedi picked up a sea glass spear.

“Hope I remember how to use this thing,” he muttered.

I was silent as I lifted the seaweed blowgun to my face. It felt like a brick sat in the center of my stomach. I was about to put myself in very real danger to defend the Octopod people — *my* people. What would happen once the Wingfolk passed through? Would I survive? What about the others?

A noise interrupted my thoughts. Somewhere nearby someone was crying out the same few words again and again. The loud hum of Octopod voices slowly faded into a hush, and the music faded to a soft, steady tom beat. Each of the crier's words hit me with unnerving clarity.

“Flats has fallen! Do not proceed! DO NOT PROCEED! Flats has fallen!”

Chapter 26

Flats has fallen!

“No. No! There must be a mistake,” I whispered, more for myself than for Deedi. “Flats is a Cephalogolem pilot, right? How could three kids possibly take down a whole Golem?”

“Even the best Golems have their weaknesses,” Deedi said, shaking his head. “They’ve got the Crystal helping them, too. Must’ve given them enough of an edge to destroy it.”

“He can’t be gone,” I said. “He works so hard. He works on his Golem every chance he gets. He doesn’t deserve this!”

“That’s the ugly side of the Crystal,” Deedi said. “It ‘favors youth and innocence.’ The more experience you have, the less likely you are to win in a fight, even if it’s twelve adults to one little kid.”

“But that’s not fair!”

“Fair doesn’t matter,” Deedi said. “The Crystal is a Divine Artifact. That makes it a God, and you don’t want to argue with a God. That’s how you get cursed an’ shit.”

I balled my mitten hands into fists as my vision blurred with thick tears. I would never again see the big, smiley Octopod man who had welcomed me with stringy-but-open arms from nearly the first hour I’d arrived in the world of *Eagle’s Quarry*. I wouldn’t get to hear that cheery high-pitched voice or smell the spices from a meal prepared inside a Den full of soft rugs and octopus tapestries. I hadn’t even seen him since the afternoon he’d introduced me to his friend Gloop.

If I'd known he'd be gone so soon...

Just as they had when Jerry killed the Spear Soldier with his knife, the two dozen Octopods around me formed a circle, linked hands, and bowed their heads. I joined the others, clasping Deedi's right hand in my left and a stranger's hand in my right.

"MC Tentachill," began the Red Common Octopod who'd brought the news of Flats' death, "one of your own has fallen on this day. His name was Gamumber, but he was known to most as 'Flats' for the flattened ends of his tentacles. He was a Cephalogolem Pilot, a fantastic cook, and a friend to all Octopods big and small." The Red Common Octopod paused for several seconds. "If there is anyone here who would like to share a memory, please come forward."

A Blue Common Octopod standing across from me crawled into the center of the circle.

"Three years ago, my Den District flooded," she began. "It forced three dozen Octopods out of their homes. I lost everything I owned. Flats offered to help *real* fast. He gave me a place to stay for four nights until I could move into a new Den."

The Blue Common Octopod returned to her spot in the circle. This time, Deedi let go of my hand and crawled forward.

"Awright, most of you probably know the big guy for his hospitality, but Flats was one shell of a soldier. He was the one who trained me on how to fix a Golem," he said. "You ain't never seen a pilot as careful as him. It just doesn't happen. Now that he's gone..." Deedi's voice cracked into a choke and his big eye grew misty as the tentacles on his head scrunched into spirals. He couldn't bring himself to finish. Instead, he buried his tearful eye in his hands and returned to his spot next to me.

Several more Octopods crawled to the center of the circle, each telling their own story about Flats. Finally, I took a breath and slithered forward.

“My name is Lurtz,” I said. “I wasn’t born an Octopod. I used to be a different kind of being called a human.” Murmurs from the strangers around me. I continued. “A few months ago, the Blue Crystal pulled me into this world against my will and forced me to stay here.” I felt a hiccup building in my throat and tried to swallow it. “The f-first night here, I hurt my foot and needed a place to stay while it healed. That’s when I met Flats.” My voice wavered. The “hiccup” seemed like it was getting bigger. An inkball? “F-Flats let me stay with him for over three w-weeks... and I really, *really* wish... that I...!”

The thing in my throat finally burst outward and I discovered that it was not a hiccup or an inkball, but a long, loud cry of grief. One by one, the Octopods in the circle around me joined in the screaming, some of them staring helplessly at the ceiling, some of them with their mitten-hands clenched, some of them clutching their stomach or the sides of their head without meaning to. The loud thudding of heavy tears on the cave floor intermingled with our wails, which careened off the walls and drowned out the last few beats of Tentachill’s music.

It was impossible to tell how long we screamed for.

Once everyone calmed down, we relinked our hands as the Red Common Octopod crier concluded the ritual with a now-hoarse voice.

“MC Tentachill, we ask that you appeal to the Upper Gods to lift Gamumber’s warrior’s soul and grant him a peaceful afterlife.” The Octopods around me made a gurgling grunt of affirmation as the circle was broken for the final time.

“Are we still going to have to fight? I asked Deedi with a scratchy voice as we headed towards the main tunnels.

“We might,” Deedi rasped. “Keep your blowgun on you.”

As if on cue, three young voices sounded in the distance, talking in a language I no longer knew. I reached to pull my blowgun from its holster, but the Octopods around me had a different idea. They pressed themselves into notches in the cave walls and closed their eyes. I watched with fascination as their skin began to change color and texture to match the rocky hallway.

“How do I change color?” I whispered to Deedi, who had already changed from bright white to greyish brown.

“What!? You don’t know how to use camouflage magic!?” he hissed back.

“I didn’t know I could use magic at all!”

The Wingfolk voices were growing louder.

“Smooosh yourself into the wall and, uhhhh, imagine turning into a rock,” Deedi said. “Real fast!”

I crammed my boneless body into a small hole in the tunnel wall, pressed my fins against the sides of my head, then squeezed my eyes shut and began to visualize. A strange prickling overcame my limbs. I half-opened an eye to find that my body was turning brownish and bumpy.

Thank the Gods for Octopod Instincts. I closed my eye again and held my breath as three pairs of clawed bird legs scraped by. Maybe it was the wrong way to feel, but knowing how dangerous they were - and after losing one of the only friends I had in this world to their crusade for the Crystal - I had less sympathy for the plucky kids from Takako village. I wanted to see how badly Flats had damaged them in his final moments, but the yellow glow of

my eyes in the dim cave would give away my position. I remained still until their voices were nothing more than faint echoes in the distance.

“Shouldn’t we go after them?” I asked as I slid back out of the hole.

“Are you dense!?” a nearby Octopod snapped. “They’re still supercharged from the Crystal. They’ll massacre all of us!” My back tensed at the insult, but he was right. There was no point in trying to stop Tsubasa and his partners while they had the Blue Crystal’s favor.

You’re not being fair, Crystal, I thought as I headed towards the little Den I called home. *Flats didn’t deserve to die. Not like that!*

The Crystal didn’t hear me, or if it did, it didn’t respond. That made a tiny bit of gladness sparkle under my sorrow. I didn’t really want to have to hear the amalgamate of voices it spoke in ever again.

Chapter 27

Time over the next month was erratic, minutes that dragged on for hours sandwiched between hours that seemed to pass by in a matter of seconds. Days ran together and I sometimes forgot to eat. I spent hours alone in my den, curled up in my sleeping nook and ruminating on questions I had no answer to.

We were in a war, and I was a soldier in that war. It was the role I'd chosen, and I still wasn't sure why. Loyalty? Pride? Sheer stupidity? Was it simply the right thing to do? Or had I been forced into it by insidious, glorious mind control? If it really was because of Tentachill's music, did I care? *Should* I care?

I'd hoped that Seaweed Sniper training would somehow act as a distraction from the grim reality I'd been thrust into. Instead it raised more questions. How long was I willing to keep playing soldier before I quit? Would I end as Flats did, sacrificing myself for the good of the Octopod people? And, if it did come to that, would it have been worth it?

"Your form's gotten better," Tarkle told me one afternoon after I'd made more bullseyes than I'd missed. "I think you might be ready for patrolling by the end of next week."

"It's not enough," I said.

"Sure it is. You're doing fine," said Tarkle.

"I still missed a lot of them," I said. "If I miss any shots when fighting for real, I'll die, just like Flats."

"That's still weighing on your mind." It wasn't a question.

“He worked for *years* on his Golem, Tarkle,” I said. “And those goddamned kids still managed to kill him. If they can do that, what chance do I have?”

“That’s why we gotta outnumber them,” said Tarkle, clenching his fists with an overconfident expression. “We’ll train hard and carry each other to victory!”

“That won’t work,” I said. “Even if we all come at them at once, we’re *supposed* to lose.”

“‘Supposed to?’ What do you mean?”

“I should have said something sooner. In a video game,” I explained, “there are a lot of weak bad guys for the player to kill. You kind of just mash the button and mow them all down.”

“Uhh, right. And what does that have to do with fighting Wingfolk?” Tarkle asked.

“*Eagle’s Quarry*. The game we’re in,” I said, my fins flapping faster. “Common Octopods are the bad guys the heroes kill the easiest. Red Common Octopods are weakest. I’ll go down in one shot!”

“Wait!” Tarkle held up his purple mitten hands. “What if the *Eagle’s Quarry* thingamajig is wrong? Maybe what it says isn’t true. Relax!”

“How am I supposed to relax, Tarkle!?” I yelled. “I’m not a soldier! I’m barely even an Octopod! I’m just a dumbass hyoo-min who got stuck in this world because the Crystal does whatever the fuck it wants!”

“Whoa! Don’t insult the Crystal!” said Tarkle. “It might hear you!”

“I don’t fucking care,” I said, dropping my blowgun on the ground and removing my holster belt. “I’ve had enough. I quit.”

“Quit!?” Now Tarkle’s fins were flapping with alarm, too. “Why!?”

“It’s not worth continuing with death hanging over me,” I said. ”I’m going to go back to the Career Office tomorrow and pick a new job from my other options.”

Tarkle looked crestfallen. He picked up my blowgun in one hand and my holster in the other. He stared at them for a long time.

“You’d have made one shelluva Seaweed Sniper,” he said without looking up.

“Maybe. But it’s like I said before — I’m no soldier,” I said. “And I knew that before I signed up. I was just being stupid.” I started to thank Tarkle for all he’d done for me, but my words were drowned out by thundering drums, dissonant pads, and a searing acid lead synth instrument. My fins stuck straight out to the side and my heartbeat quickened to match the music’s tempo. The incoming Wingfolk had new, stronger weapons.

I yanked the belt out of Tarkle’s hands and flung it around my waist, then grabbed the blowgun and made the Octopod equivalent of a mad dash towards the fray.

“Lurtz!? What the shell are you doing!?”

*Holy Sea’s Bounty - WHAT THE HELL **AM** I DOING!?*

I stopped and turned around. Tarkle’s jaw was slack and his eyes were wide. I couldn’t blame him. After all I’d just said about not being a soldier, the last thing I’d expected myself to do during a Wingfolk attack was immediately rush towards the frontlines. Inside my mind an argument raged.

Hide, Liz! It’s not worth your life!

Fight, Lurtz! You can’t just do nothing!

What are you, one of MC Tentachill's stupid little brainwashed minions?

*Yes! **Yes I am!***

As I crawled towards the entrance to the tunnel leading back underground and moved my blowgun into position, Common Octopods of all shapes and sizes around me were putting their weapons at the ready. I stayed back several meters from the rest of the group. Tarkle had drilled it into me that I had to remain at a distance if I wanted any chance at getting an effective shot.

We were completely still, except for our heads, which bobbed in time with the music. All eyes were fixed on the entrance to the cave tunnel, the only access point to the sandy cove.

We should have looked up.

There was a whizzing noise followed by a scream. One of the Spear Soldiers in front had lost an eye to a flying rock. Tsubasa dropped from the sky, holding a larger and much sturdier slingshot than he'd had before. His arm was a blur as he reloaded his weapon again and again. Ahiruko landed shortly after with a jagged red-bladed dagger in her feathery hand. She pounced on the nearest fallen Octopod and made a deft slash, which was followed by a geyser of bright blue blood.

I raised my blowgun and aimed at the duck girl. What I really wanted to do was wipe the look of glee off of Tsubasa's face with a single, carefully-aimed inkball, but Ahiruko paused for several seconds each time she brandished her knife. That made her an easier target.

“The Crystal isn't helping them!” someone called out. “Chaaaaaarge!”

“For Tentachill!” One of the Spear Soldiers jumped onto Tsubasa's back, latching all of her tentacles around his torso and covering his eyes with her

mitten hands. Tsubasa buckled under the Spear Soldier's weight. He grabbed at her tentacles, but the suckers held tight.

“Ahiruko!” Tsubasa cried, then yelled something in English that I couldn't understand. It was too late for him. Dozens of Spear Soldiers had taken the cue and were now piling on top of the hawk boy. Tackle's strategy was working. Without the power of the Crystal to back them up, the Wingfolk didn't know who to focus on first. Ahiruko frantically slashed left and right, hoping to keep the approaching band of Slingshot Soldiers away. I raised my rolled seaweed gun to my face and wrapped my lips around the end of the tube, aiming at the duck girl's head.

Wait... where the fuck is Bobbin?

As if answering my question with a sick smile, a wall of fire exploded out of the entrance of the cave and set the closest Octopods ablaze. They scrambled towards the water to extinguish themselves. One of them fell, unable to carry on. I swallowed a mixture of ink and vomit as his corpse smouldered into a charred, black blob atop the white-sand beach. The sight was gruesome enough to make me feel faint, but the commanding *thump, thump, thump* of Tentachill's beats muted my panic and shifted my focus back to Bobbin.

The chubby bird boy walked out of the cave calmly, spellbook in hand and a large, pointed wizard's hat with a wide brim on his head in the same emerald green as his new, long robes. Around him was a faint but clear cloud in a familiar shade of shimmering blue.

Bobbin muttered something and a green flame appeared in his free hand. He threw it at the pile of soldiers atop Tsubasa. The Octopods flew through the air in all directions. Tsubasa stood up, then moaned as he fell back over, clutching his left leg. Bobbin ran over to his friend and generated an aura of white balls above Tsubasa with a wave of his arm.

“HE’S CASTING HEAL UP X!” someone yelled. I raised my blowgun to my face again and aimed at Bobbin’s spellbook. Aiming directly at a supercharged Bobbin might not end well for me, but maybe, if I could knock the book out of his arms...

A heavy weight slammed into my side and I fell. Ahiruko had pinned me to the ground. She pointed her red dagger at my throat. For one brief, awful moment I saw her for what she truly was: just a kid who’d gotten pulled into an almost pointless war. Pity blossomed somewhere in my chest.

Then her dagger dove towards my neck.

An inkball crashed into Ahiruko, knocking her off of me just as the tip of the blade grazed my slimy skin.

“Thank The MC you’re okay,” Tarkle said, helping me off the ground with an outstretched mitten-hand.

“The wizard kid’s book!” I said. “Knock it out of his hands!”

“Wha?”

“It’s his spellbook! He can’t fight without it!”

“Right!” Tarkle nodded and moved into a battle-ready position. Bobbin’s head snapped towards us and in an instant he’d conjured a black-and-purple cluster of electric energy above his head.

Tarkle’s inkball launched out of his gun at the exact same speed that Bobbin hurled his energy ball. Ink splattered and purple lightning danced across the ground as the projectiles collided. A mighty wind whipped through the beach, blowing fine white sand everywhere. I raised my gun to my lips. If I squinted, I could barely make out a fat bird silhouette with a hefty book in its winglike arms through the dust.

Now!

With a silent prayer to Tentachill for good aim, I spat out an ink ball through my blowgun. It cut through the sandy air and hit Bobbin's spellbook, smashing it into his face. Tarkle sprang forward and blasted out three additional shots in the same direction, covering the bird wizard in a dark, gloppy ink coating. Bobbin crashed onto his back, squirmed for a few moments, then fell still.

As the sandstorm calmed, the war cries around me were steadily replaced by the quiet buzz of sea meeting shore.

"Did we win?" a Spear Soldier finally asked aloud. It crawled forward and jabbed Tsubasa in the side with the pointed end of its sea glass spear. Tsubasa's body bled but didn't move.

"This one's dead as dirt!" yelled a Slingshot Soldier near Ahiruko's body.

"So is this one," the Spear Soldier yelled back.

"What about the fat kid?" someone called out.

"You kidding? No way he survived three direct hits from Tarkle," someone else said. "I mean, look at him!"

"We won?" I asked in a quiet voice as cheers erupted around me. "The Sea Cave Kingdom is saved?" I turned to Tarkle, who was grinning from fin-to-fin.

"You really do make one shelluva Seaweed Sniper, Lurtz," he said.

I'd never felt so proud to be an Octopod.

Chapter 28

“Lurtz! Stop flapping your fins!”

“I c-can’t help it! You’re tickling me!”

Gloog took a crawling step back from where I was standing and frowned.

“Still doesn’t look right,” she said, taking her rolled paper measuring tape and re-measuring my head and fins with it.

“I can’t tell how it looks,” I said. “You aren’t letting me see myself in the mirror.”

“Cuz you’re not supposed to see it until I’m finished,” Gloog said. “Which means I’m not finished. Hold still.”

“Forget the daisies. I don’t need them. I’m done,” I said. Even though I needed dress robes for the Soldier Recognition Ceremony I was about to be a part of, after three hours in the dressing room I was tired of being “Robe Master” Gloog’s canvas for her latest clothing masterpiece.

“Beaded robe and headwear set is standard for ceremonies,” Gloog told me. “You’ll look weird if you don’t have *something* on your head.” Gloog wrapped the daisy chain around my left fin in the exact same way she had before. My fin twitched as soft petals brushed against it. This time I felt the daisy chain snap. Gloog swore.

“It’s overkill,” I said, lifting an arm covered in a sleeve made completely out of strung-together lightweight glass beads. “And *Tarkle* killed Bobbin, not me. Why do I have to go on stage?”

“Uh, ‘cuz you hit the wizard kid with his own spellbook, which gave the Head Sniper a chance to kill him? Duh,” said Gloog, wrapping a different

flower chain around my fin. She put a hand underneath her mouth, tilted her head to one side, and squinted. “Yyyyeah, you’re right. Flower-fins just aren’t ‘you.’ I’m gonna use my original idea. Be right back!”

As Gloog crawled out the cave door I looked around the cramped dressing room again. The ceiling was obscured by layers of large dangling baubles, and painted murals showing Octopods in ceremonial clothing covered every rocky wall. There was a long driftwood rack holding small robes made to fit average-sized Common Octopods to my right. In front of me was a fanciful claw-footed wooden armoire that sagged a bit in the middle. Gloog told me it had been salvaged from a Hoptoad shipwreck.

“Here you go!” Gloog had returned with a headpiece made of obnoxiously large blossoms in her three-fingered hands.

“Uh! N-no thanks!” I backed away from the floral abomination. “That doesn’t scream ‘Lurtz’ either.”

“Wha? Yes it does!” Gloog said.

“No it doesn’t!” I said. “Flower crowns are for hippies and sad kids who like baby pink too much. If I wear one, I’ll just look...”

“Stupid?”

“Exactly!”

“Kid, you gotta stop thinking everything will make you look stupid,” Gloog said, rubbing her temples.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

Gloog smashed the flower crown on top of my head instead of answering me.

“There,” she said, pulling a full length mirror out from next to the armoire and placing it in front of me. “It’s finished.”

I looked into the mirror and a pair of bulbous yellow eyes met mine. My breath caught in my throat. It had been months since I’d transformed into an Octopod, and longer still since I’d first seen the figurine in *Dragon’s Den Gaming* that had awakened a smaller, squishier part of my soul. When I looked down at myself, I saw a chubby, grey stomach, two crimson mitten hands, and a spread of four fat red-and-grey tentacles. And yet, I somehow wasn’t expecting to see an *Octopod* when I looked in the mirror. I crawled forward and placed my hand on the glass, touching the tip of my mitten hand to the one in the reflection. Then I moved my head left and right, curling and straightening my head tentacles.

“What do you think?” Gloog asked.

“It’s me,” I said, half-distracted by the gentle way my fins flapped.

“See? Told you the flower headband was a good idea,” Gloog said.

“No, I mean it’s *me*,” I said. “I haven’t seen myself in a mirror since I stayed at Drainer’s Inn, and that was before my body changed. This is the first time I’m seeing myself as an Octopod.”

“Right.” Gloog’s voice dropped to nearly a whisper. “I keep forgetting about the hyoo-min thing.”

I raised one of my front tentacle legs upwards, pushing the beads on my robe to the side. I spent a while rotating my suckers individually just to watch them move.

“So... do you like what you see?” Gloog asked after several minutes of silence.

“It’s different,” I said. “It’s not a *bad* different, it’s just not what I’m used to.”

“I’m real sorry,” said Gloog.

“Sorry?” I asked. “For what?”

“You’ve been through, like, *everything* in the past few months. Leaving behind everything you know, having to live in a cave, getting put into a new body, joining the military and being forced to help kill a kid with your own ink. No way any of that is easy. Yet here I am, being a hyperactive Robe Master who won’t shut up. I’m a big, dumb jerk.”

“I don’t feel good about having to kill Bobbin,” I admitted. “But if I didn’t fight, *I’d* be dead. And so would Tarkle, and who knows how many other Octopods. I couldn’t just do *nothing*.”

Gloog stared at me for a while with unblinking golden eyes. Then she made a snorting noise that was so quiet I would have missed it if her shoulders hadn’t jumped upwards at the same time.

“What? What is it?” I asked.

“*You*, kid,” said Gloog. “You’re, like, a model Octopod soldier without even trying. Tentachill’s probably sheila proud of you.”

“No! Don’t say that! I’m... I’m going to quit the military!” I said, though the Octopod Pride worming its way through my veins begged me to reconsider.

“You *are* going to ask him to screw you, right?” Gloog asked.

“What? Who? Tentachill!?” I yelled.

“Yeah.”

My face burned blue.

“I can’t ask him *that!*” I said. “I’m not a high enough rank!”

“Rank means nothing,” Gloog said. “Tentachill’s cool with smashin’ anyone’s octo-pussy as long as they’re old enough. And people like to ask him during ceremonies, cuz they’re up there on stage with him. He doesn’t usually say ‘no.’”

It was like a bowling ball had spontaneously appeared in my gut, a bowling ball coated in a hot, thick layer of Octopod Pride. This was the chance I thought I’d never get -- to experience Tentachill the way my body had wanted since before Nathan’s birthday dinner all those months ago. But how could I ask him to fulfill such a stupid, selfish wish? I was just Lurtz, the simple Red Common Octopod who’d managed to get in a lucky shot. He was MC Tentachill, literal God of the Sea Cave Kingdom. I was unworthy!

Tentachill has hundreds of years more sexual experience than you do, I thought to myself. Imagine how good he is in bed! Yyyyyowza!

I’m too shy to touch him that way, brain.

Why? You’ve already cuddled with him.

He’d do that with any Octopod. It doesn’t mean he thinks I’m special.

What if he likes you? What if he’s been waiting for you to ask him for this?

He’s a God, you moron. I’m a mortal. It wouldn’t work out.

It doesn’t have to “work out,” you just have to ask him to ravage your Octo-pussy this one time. C’mon, even Flats has had sex with him.

Maybe you’re right...

“You always get the darkest blue face when you think about him,” laughed Gloog, poking me in the cheek with one of her three fingers.

“He’s just so... so... I don’t even know what word I’m looking for,” I said.

“Delicious?” Gloop suggested. I instantly pictured my little blue tongue wrapping around a flexible sucker-nipple and realized that Tentachill might taste as good as he smelled.

“That wasn’t what I was going to say, but it works,” I said in a low voice.

“He’s all sorts of sexy,” said Gloop. “You’re in for a good night.”

“What’s he like?”

“Tentachill?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you already met him,” Gloop said, adjusting the crown so that it sat on my head at a different angle. The slight tilt she’d applied made the entire outfit look twice as good.

“I did, but it was only for about an hour,” I said.

“Ooh, Tentachill’s a wild one,” Gloop said, hugging herself and shivering. “He takes you into his tentacles and just…” Gloop grabbed the air in front of her and made a scratchy noise in the back of her throat.

“Gloop, that doesn’t help,” I said.

“It’s the only way I can put it,” Gloop said. “He’s so big that he’s in you and around you and all over you at the same time. And the way he touches you!” Gloop’s face screwed up with lust as she let out a long sigh. “There’s nobody like him, really there’s not.”

“That good, huh?”

“Shell yeah. He’s got Tenta-*skills*.”

“I’ll have to think about it,” I said as I handed the flower crown back to Gloop.

“What’s there to think about?” Gloop asked as I wriggled out of the beaded robe. “He’s a literal sex god.” As soon as the words left Gloop’s mouth a memory I didn’t know I had flashed through my mind.

“I officially invite any big, sexy god who wants to make magic happen in my pants to make a believer out of me.” I’d said something like that months ago in *Lover’s Paradise*. Was I just making a bad joke, or was my body secretly longing for that certain smirking, tentacled man even then?

His influence does leak into the human world, I thought, remembering that Tentachill had managed to call to me across dimensions through a dream. *Maybe I’ve wanted him for longer than I know.*

I chewed on that idea all the way back to my den.

FINAL ACT

Chapter 29

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Why am I so stupid!?

I smashed my body into my sleeping nook and screamed into my pillow, thrashing my tentacle-legs and flapping my fins as hard as I could in the cramped space.

The Soldier Recognition Ceremony was nothing short of an incredible night. After each soldier at the training grounds was recognized by name and rank, with special mention for the soldiers who had personally brought down the Wingfolk, MC Tentachill had conjured up his turntables and begun to perform the most intense EDM DJ set I had ever seen. With a wave of his arm or a point of his finger, lights danced through the air and bursts of colored fog shot out of the walls.

We were euphoric as we danced until dawn. The electric atmosphere wasn't just because the war was over; Tentachill was using his beats to lock everyone in a dizzying trance. By the time I got back to my den, I could barely remember anything that had happened at the Ceremony. But I was sure of one thing — I hadn't approached Tentachill at all!

Why this? Why me!? I could have asked him at any time! Stupid, stupid, stupid! I thought. I looked up to wipe a fat tear out of my eye and saw my body pillow grinning from its spot next to me, half smooshed into the wall. I growled and turned the pillow around. It didn't help. Now the Tentachill on the back was staring at me from over his shoulder.

“Why do I keep obsessing over you?” I asked the pillow. “I shouldn't even care whether I sleep with you or not. I'm mortal. You're a God. You're better than me.”

“Awwww, you don’t gotta be afraid of me,” I imagined Tentachill saying.

“Shut up,” I said. “You’re not even the real Tentachill. You’re just a stupid pillow that looks like him.”

“Daaaaang. So cold,” imaginary Tentachill said. “Why you always gotta press mute when you’re in the middle of your favorite song? You know you like me.”

“I do,” I said, my cheeks tinging blue at the thought of his signature corny musical references.

“So why are you trying to deny what we got goin’ on?” he asked.

“Because we don’t have anything ‘going on,’ MC,” I said. “Nothing except a three-hundred-year age gap.”

“Then let’s start something.” The pillow’s gaze seemed to penetrate into my chest and wrap around my three octopus hearts. “Let’s make some music. Maybe your vocals will be loud enough for the real Tentachill to hear.”

“God fucking dammit,” I whispered. “You really gotta stop talking like that.” I placed a hand on the painting’s shoulder and began to wrap my tentacle-legs around the pillow. Then I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to calm my nerves.

From behind me I heard the soft scrape of bird claws on the stone floor.

I whirled around and my eyes met a pair of clear, black eyes on a very dark skinned, very human head. The young man was tall and wore peasant-style clothes, the same kinds I’d seen Tsubasa and his friends wear at the beginning of *Eagle’s Quarry*. Patches of golden feathers were sprouting in different spots out of his skin, up and down his arms, on the sides of his face, around his wrists. His human legs ended at the knee, the bottom half changed into bird’s legs with claws at the end. Where his nose and mouth should be

was a curved hawk's beak. His eyes — the same black eyes that I'd known for almost fifteen years — were staring at me with disgust as he aimed at me with a crude slingshot.

“Nathan?” I gurgled.

The altered Nathan's eyes grew wide upon hearing his name coming out of an Octopod mouth. He lowered his slingshot a few inches.

“Nathan! It's me! Your Aunt!” I said, climbing out of the bed and raising my mitten hands in the air.

Anger returned to Nathan's face and he re-aimed his slingshot at my head. He shouted in a language I no longer spoke, stomping one of his bird feet and pointing at me. I looked back helplessly. Without the ability to speak English, I couldn't tell him what he was about to do!

“Nathan!” I said again, hoping to buy time to come up with a plan that wasn't “kill my only nephew in self defense.”

Nathan said something in a threatening tone.

“Liz!” I said, motioning to myself. Nathan kept his slingshot aimed at me, but there was confusion on his face as he tried to understand what was going on. “Liz!” I said again. Finally he lowered the slingshot to his waist and pointed at me.

“Liz?” he asked.

“Liz!” I nodded vigorously.

“Liz!?” Nathan yelled.

The air around us exploded into thick white smog with a deafening pop. When the smoke cleared, I was standing in front of Nathan in a naked, human body I hadn't been inside of in months.

“HOLY CLOUDPUFFS, WHY ARE YOU NAKED!?” Nathan screamed, quickly covering his eyes with a half-feathered hand.

“Fuck! Shit! I’m sorry!” I said, haphazardly wrapping one of the blankets from my sleeping nook around my body. “I haven’t worn clothes in forever!”

“What are you doing here, Aunt Liz!?” Nathan yelled, jamming his slingshot back into the holster attached to his belt. “Why are you an Octopod!? Fuuuuck, I almost killed you!”

“Why are you a *Wingfolk Hero!*?” I yelled back. “Didn’t I tell you the Wingfolk were actually the bad guys?”

“They’re not bad guys!” Nathan shouted, throwing his hands above his head. “When Mom and I crash-landed in the forest outside of Takako, they saved our asses! They’re good people!”

There was silence for a few seconds in the little Den.

“Nancy’s here, too?” I asked softly.

“Yeah.” Nathan was beginning to calm down. “She was a wreck for a long time. Didn’t want to leave bed. It took forever for her to accept that we weren’t going home.”

“Jerry and ‘Ji-Hun’ made it back to Earth,” I said. “MC Tentachill invoked the power of the Crystal and it opened a portal to Nancy’s house.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?” Nathan asked.

“Believe me, I wanted to go back,” I said. “The Crystal forced me to stay.”

“So you became an *Octopod*.” Nathan looked away. His gaze landed on the rolled up seaweed tube hanging on the wall between a few dangling baubles. “And a Seaweed Sniper. Fuck... why, Aunt Liz?”

“Uh, I’ve got an overactive ink sac,” I said.

“Just because your ink sac’s overactive doesn’t mean you gotta become a Seaweed Sniper!” Nathan said.

“I know!” I said. “I don’t know why I joined the military. I just... did. Felt like the right thing to do.”

“Serving Tentachill felt like the right thing to do?”

“Yeah.”

“Aaawwh, you’re brainwashed, Aunt Liz,” Nathan said, pain in his expression. “I’ve been living with the Wingfolk for long enough to know. The people of Takako *need* the Blue Crystal. It helps their crops grow and clears their water supply so they can have a good harvest. All Tentachill uses it for is to make mind control dubstep so he can keep the Octopods in line.”

“That’s not true! The music isn’t mind control,” I said. “I mean, it sort of is, but it’s not *bad* mind control. It helps us! It’s nice!”

“The music’s not as nice as you think it is,” Nathan said. “It turned you into a soldier.”

“*You’re* a soldier,” I said in a low tone. “Are you brainwashed, too?”

There was another silence in the little Den. Nathan balled his fists and his dark eyes grew misty.

“Come back to Takako with us, Aunt Liz,” he said. “Mom misses you. *I* miss you. And if you live with us—”

“I can’t go there,” I said. “Knowing that damned Crystal, as soon as I step out of my Den I’m gonna turn into an Octopod again. When I’m an Octopod I lose my ability to speak English.”

“Hey, why *did* you become a human just now?” Nathan asked. “If it was the Crystal that turned you into an Octopod, did the Crystal turn you back, too?”

I paused. Was he right? Did the Crystal turn me back? And if so, why? Was it being merciful for once, hoping that I’d get to have a happy reunion with my family?

Wait.

“Uh, Nathan?” I said.

“Yeah?”

“How many Wingfolk are here right now?”

“A lot,” he said. “Like, *over two thousand* a lot. After Bobbin came back half-dead, the Elder sent for reinforcements from Brownfeather Castle Town to get the Crystal back.”

“That motherfucking Crystal!” I yelled, accidentally dropping my blanket toga on the ground and exposing my bare ass to the cold underground air. “It’s fucking with us on purpose!”

“Wha? What do you mean?”

“It knows once I turn back, we won’t be able to talk! And then we’ll be forced to fight each other!”

“Holy fuck! Matsuya Hideki! Grey morality! *The Blue Crystal is the bad guy!*”

The air exploded again. Nathan watched helplessly through the smoke as I shrunk several feet, my eyes bulged out of their sockets, and my mouth burst outward into a thick pair of Octopod lips.

“Liz,” Nathan said as he grabbed my much smaller shoulders, He began babbling away in a language I’d been forced to forget a second time. I stared at him with a pathetic expression on my face. Then I bowed my head and squeezed my yellow eyes shut.

MC Tentachill, I prayed, hoping the fiery God would be powerful enough to hear. *If you’re listening, please... I don’t know how, but you need to destroy the Crystal! It’s keeping the war going **on purpose!***

I opened my eyes to look at Nathan and found he was also deep in prayer, hands pressed together and kneeling in a way that was so rigid and proper it would make a chill run up the Pope’s spine. I couldn’t say for sure, but my guess was that he was praying to the Goddess of Takako Village.

I was hoping to hear that deep, powerful voice growl in my ear, was wanting him to whisper something like “Chill, Lurtz. The MC’s on it.” Nathan seemed to have the same idea, staring around the room waiting for a private response from Takako’s Goddess. Instead, there was a tremendous clap of thunder that made my Den vibrate, followed by the frantic electronic synths and bone-shattering drums of Tentachill’s mind control.

I exchanged glances with Nathan. He pulled his slingshot out of his holster and steeled his expression. I grabbed my blowgun and belt off of the wall, knowing the best way to help the Octopod people would be to become allies with the Wingfolk.

Chapter 30

The journey to the surface felt like it was taking an eternity, especially with Tentachill's music pushing my sense of urgency to a fever pitch. The winding tunnels of the Underground were tightly packed with Octopod soldiers trying to make their way to the surface. As I squeezed past Mimics and Nautiluses, a single thought played on repeat in my mind:

Get to Tentachill. Get to Tentachill and tell him everything you know.

Beneath my sense of duty was worry. After seeing how many Octopods were filing into the tunnels, Nathan had decided to stay in my Den until the coast was clear and it was safe for him to leave. As long as nobody thought to check the Dens in my Den District for hidden Wingfolk soldiers, he would be fine. If someone *did* come along...

Don't think about that, Lurtz. Focus on what you can do by yourself.

At last I reached the wooden walkway leading out of the underground network of caves. I double checked my sniper belt to make sure my seaweed blowgun was still in its holster and headed into the fray.

The finest special effects team in all of cinema couldn't have produced a more intense backdrop for battle. Low-lying clouds filled the sky, so deep a color they looked purple against the choppy grey sea. The wind was thick and cold with moisture. Lightning flashed high above us, an electric warning of the weather to come.

The long, sandy beach was covered with a writhing tangle of bodies, some slimy, some feathered. Sea-glass spears clattered against sturdy metal armor. A cluster of Mimics was group-casting shielding spells to protect the others from a rain of magic attacks from a band of Wingfolk wizards atop the

bluffs. In the distance was a brawny figure, towering above the rest of the Wingfolk and Octopods and hurling green fireballs at a bronze-skinned “angel” woman high in the air.

I wove through the crowd and made my way towards the sea. My chest was tight with fear. I’d dunked myself into the sea more times than I could count since transforming into an Octopod, but I never overcame that deep-set fear of running out of breath underwater. Hell, I’d never even opened my eyes while rehydrating myself. How was I supposed to fight my “hyoo-min” instincts?

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. My three hearts quickened to match the song’s tempo.

Right, I thought, concentrating on the beat of Tentachill’s music. *Don’t think. Just do.*

I jumped into the sea. Against every thin fiber of my remaining humanity I forced my eyes open. The waters around me were warm and clear, but there were Wingfolk within them — ducks, the same kind that Ahiruko had been. They swam through the waters with ruby-red daggers in hand, eyes sharp and steely and protected by some sort of green, glowing enchantment. Other Octopods were there as well, Spear Soldiers using their siphons to dart through the waters.

You absolute dumbass! You’re dead! You’re soooooo dead! You can’t use a seaweed blowgun underwater!

Are you kidding me!?! I’m in the middle of a life-or-death battle and I’m still arguing with myself!?

Yeah, because you’re too stupid to—

Oh, shut up. My big, sexy God is out there, and I intend to get to him whether all of me is on board with that or not!

I unleashed a burst of air through the siphon on the back of my head and cut through the water. Several of the ducks began to give chase. I reached for my blowgun, but my anxious thoughts were right — the seaweed was soggy and limp. I would have to fight without it. As the Wingfolk drew closer, I readied my throat.

“Gllluuh!”

The inkball that passed my lips rivaled the one I’d smacked into Jerry’s face many weeks ago, but instead of remaining a solid mass and bowling over one of my pursuers, the inkball expanded into a huge, smoky haze.

What do I do now!? I thought. As if on cue a single high-pitched synth melody from Tentachill’s music warbled into my ear holes, giving me a moment of extreme mental clarity. As the Wingfolk smeared ink off their faces, I sunk to the sandy bottom, closed my eyes, and imagined turning brown and gritty. A prickling sensation rolled over my skin. My camouflage magic was working!

Time passed. When I finally popped open an eye, I found the ducks preoccupied with a single dancing Mimic. I jetted away, hoping to the Upper Gods that none of the Wingfolk would notice the thick stream of bubbles my siphon left behind.

Swimming with my siphon used up my remaining air sooner than I’d have liked. I rose upward to take a breath. As my face broke the surface of the water I felt something crash into my backside.

“Yaaaaaagh!” yelled Deedi, readying his spear.

“Wait! It’s me!” I yelled back, raising both of my mitten hands.

“Whatdafuck. It’s Lurtz,” said Deedi, rubbing his forehead with his free hand. “Man, you almost scared the shell offa me! Thought you were some bird-brain.”

“Deedi, I gotta get to Tentachill,” I said. “The fate of the whole Octopod race depends on it!”

“The *whole* Octopod race?” Deedi asked with a suspicious expression. “Every single one of us?”

“Literally the whole race,” I said.

“Whoa, normally I’d snark an’ sass but you seem real serious right about now,” Deedi said. “Awright, how can I help?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just need to get to Tentachill and somehow get his attention.”

“Big guy’s gonna be hard to get to,” Deedi said. “There’s a big fat wall of Wingfolk surrounding him.”

Another high-pitched synth.

“What about a Cephalogolem?” I asked. “Aren’t you a Golem pilot?”

“What!? I ain’t a Golem pilot! I’m just a techie!” said Deedi.

“Do you know enough about them to pilot one?” I asked.

“In *theory*, but I dunno if—”

“*Look out!*”

A long, heavy sword crashed down onto the top of Deedi’s shelled head. Deedi, completely unphased, slowly turned to stare the Wingfolk soldier in the face with a smug eye.

“You messed with the wrong fuckin’ Octopod, buddy,” he said before promptly slicing the jagged end of his sea-glass spear across the soldier’s face. Then he turned back to me as the poor Wingfolk man ran blindly in the opposite direction. “Guess breaking out the big boulders wouldn’t be a bad idea. Cover my ass while I get back to the Underground.”

“Got it.”

For a few brief moments, it seemed like victory was simply a matter of reaching the closest Underground entrance. We crawled side-by-side, Deedi shoving Wingfolk out of the way with a swoop of his spear as I deflected attacks from the side with inkballs.

Then a pair of hands grabbed me from behind.

“Shit! Lurtz!”

Three Wingfolk soldiers surrounded me, beaks curved into sneers and feathered arms folded. One of them jabbed the soldier on his left in the ribs and said something in English. Then he poked me in the stomach with the tip of his sword. I let out a yelp. He hadn't jabbed me hard enough to pierce my skin, but it still hurt. The Wingfolk burst into laughter. The tall hawk knight who held me in his arms said something in a mocking tone and lifted one of the tentacles on the top of my head. He stretched it upward until it felt like it was going to break in two. The other soldiers raised their fists in the air and began to chant. I closed my eyes and waited for the inevitable snap.

SPLURT!

An inkball the size of my head smashed into the face of the hawk knight. I landed atop the sandy ground and saw a Purple Common Octopod Sniper doing a parkour jump off of one of the other soldiers' chests.

“Lurtz!” Tarkle said once the area had cleared somewhat. “What the hell are you doing!?! You're a *Seaweed Sniper!* Fall back! Stay on the sidelines!”

“Tarkle,” I said. “I need to get to Tentachill!”

“Wha? Why?”

“How am I supposed to explain in the middle of a battle!?” I asked.

“This-a way,” Tarkle said. He grabbed me by the wrist and led me through the crowd, weaving through the clashing bodies with terrifying precision until we’d found a small hole in the side of the cliff to hide in.

“All right, what did you need the MC for?” Tarkle asked.

“Crystal,” I huffed, leaning against the cave wall to regain my strength. “It’s bad. It’s killing us. The war is fake!”

“Fake!?” Tarkle’s fins flapped. “What do you mean it’s fake? The Wingfolk are out there trying to take our Crystal!”

“No,” I said. “Sneaky, lying little bastard Crystal. I hate it. I hate it!”

“The fuck, Lurtz!?” Tarkle’s fins flapped faster. “Why do you keep saying things like that?” I grabbed my superior by his shoulders and leaned forward until his eyes were just inches from mine.

“Why didn’t it give the Wingfolk Hero kids an edge in that battle with us, huh?” I asked through my clenched beak. “They can kill a fuckin’ *Golem* but not a few dozen Common Octopods? Think about it. Does that make *any* sense to you!?”

“Well, no, but maybe—”

“It’s been trying to get me to kill my *own family*.”

Tarkle stared at me with his mouth in a little o. He put a mitten-hand on my shoulder and paused. Then he sighed.

“Lurtz, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but if you think we need to talk to the MC, then we should—”

Tarkle’s words were cut off by a thundering war cry. A feathered hand grabbed my arm and slammed my body onto the sandy ground.

“Lurtz!!!”

There was a deep gash across my stomach before I could even think the words “I’m dead.”

Chapter 31

I don't know what Death would feel like on Earth. But, in this unnamed world, where Wingfolk could catch a breeze and fly away and Octopods dug comfortable burrows far beneath the surface, Death felt an awful lot like having my eyes squeezed shut while laying on a pile of warm cotton.

“She’s totally dead, right? Can I wake her up yet?”

The hell? I'd just heard a voice from a child who couldn't have been older than ten years old.

“Not yet, Curiosity.” A second voice, this one rich, decadent, and smooth. “Why not go play with your toys until she rises on her own?”

“You’re too soft on him, Indulgence!” The third voice was loud and gruff and too stern to be comfortable. “Teach the boy some patience! Have him wait for once instead of telling him to go play!”

“Oh, boo. You always want to spoil all the fun, Order,” said the second voice.

“Fun!?” the third voice snapped. “Your idea of ‘fun’ is drinking until you piss yourself and spending money until you’re three years in debt! That’s only fun for *you!*”

“It’s fun for the person in a raucous, at least in the moment,” said the second voice.

“Peh! Nobody wants to be in *your* raucous and you know it!”

“Guys! Guys! She’s waking up!”

I slowly opened my eyes and was met with a grinning giant's face. He had golden-brown skin, clear blue eyes, and wild cowlicked hair that was an unnatural shade of red.

"Hiya, Miss Lurtz the Octopod!" said the giant boy, rocking back and forth on feet wearing pointed-toe shoes. He looked for all the world like an oversized anime version of Peter Pan. "I'm Curiosity. Welcome to the Afterlife!"

"The Afterlife?" I said, looking around me. Like a cartoon version of Heaven, everything was clouds: the ground, the walls around me, the ceiling that appeared to stretch over two hundred feet in the air. There were three giants in the room: the young boy who was twirling in circles a few meters away from the cloud-table I was lying on, a fat, pale woman with golden ringlet hair and eyes black as night, and a stately giant with an imposing beard who appeared to be completely made of stone. All of them had faces that seemed "off." It was as if some misguided alien designer had plucked different features from half a dozen different human ethnicities and put them on the giants at random instead of understanding how genetics worked.

"Not quite the Afterlife, dear," said the fat woman, leaning forward on her cloud barstool and accidentally spilling some purple wine out of her glass. "You'll go there soon, and we promise you, you're all set to go to a peaceful realm as your Warrior's Reward. But we wanted so badly to meet you before we sent you there. It's not often that someone from another world comes to ours."

"It's *never* that someone from another world comes to ours," said Curiosity, stopping his twirls and bending over backwards. "This is the first time it's happened! Ever! In the entire history of forever! And a whole mess of you came at once!"

“Yes, and that’s out of the usual order,” said the stately giant. “More importantly: how in blazes were you born in another world with an Octopod’s soul?”

All three giants leaned over me with wide-eyed expressions and waited.

“You’re... the Upper Gods,” I realized. “That’s why you look like humans.”

“Huuuuuumans!” the fat woman grinned before throwing back her head, laughing loudly, and spinning around on her barstool. “Of course she compares us to those ‘humans!’ They’re mere mortals, but so divine in form!”

“Yes, that’s out of order, too,” the stern giant said with gritted stone teeth. “Ordinary mortals who age and die are not supposed to have divine forms. We should be working to correct it.”

“You worry too much, Order!” the fat giant said, snapping fingers with long nails and conjuring up a mug of beer in mid-air. “Have a drink! It’ll take your mind off things.”

“I refuse to cloud my mind with such swill,” said Order, though he took the mug and drank deeply anyhow. “You know as well as I do that we need to correct the physical forms of these ‘humans.’ As they are, they may use their appearance to fool the population into thinking they are Lesser Gods!”

“Can we see her ‘human’ form again, Indulgence?” Curiosity asked, bouncing up and down next to the fat giant. “Puh-leeeeease?”

“Of course you can, Curiosity. And here’s a cup of berry juice for you, too, for being such a sweet boy,” Indulgence said, snapping her fingers again. In an instant I was in my human body wearing a simple white dress and a pair of golden sandals that wrapped around my calves. Curiosity drained his juice

in a matter of seconds, then tossed aside the glass and scooped me up into his clammy hands.

“She kinda looks like you, Indulgence,” said Curiosity. “You have the same big nose.”

“Do we?” Indulgence giggled. “That’s funny!”

“Stop it! Stop acting like this whole thing is a game!” I yelled, remembering how I’d died in the first place. “This is serious! People are dying down there! Including me!”

“People die every day,” Order said, placing his now-empty mug on the cloud table. “It’s the natural order of things. Mortals are born, then they age, then, they die. Unless you become a Lesser God, there is no reason for you to live as long as—”

“That’s not what I mean, asshole!” I said, staring the stone giant directly in his grey eyes. “I mean one of the Gods is down there killing people *on purpose!*”

Order and Indulgence glanced at each other with rolled-in lips.

“Lurtz, Lurtz, Lurtz, darling! You absolutely *must* be mistaken,” Indulgence said, her thin, arched eyebrows in a knot. “That’s just not what Gods do!”

“Indulgence is correct, for once. Though we have the power to do so, it is not the duty of an Upper God or even a Divine Artifact to smite unless the situation is absolutely dire,” said Order.

“Tell that to the Blue Crystal,” I said.

“What do you mean?” asked Indulgence.

“You know what I mean. That goddamned Crystal has been keeping a full-on war going for over five hundred years just to keep itself entertained,” I said. “It tried to force me to kill my own nephew! And if you weren’t all so busy sitting around here drunk off your asses, you’d have fucking known that!”

“Liar!” roared Order. “There is no way that the entire legion of Upper Gods would neglect to correct such a gross misuse of Divine power!”

“Eh, I believe her,” said Curiosity.

“What!?”

“Didn’t you tell me a few centuries ago that Octopods don’t like to lie, Order?” asked Curiosity.

“It is very much out of order for an Octopod to lie.” Order’s voice was tense. “That much is true. However, she may not be lying, simply sharing a misinformed perspective.”

“Misinformed!? You think watching my own people get into a pointless war is *misinformed!*?” My fins flapped faster than ever. I’d transformed back into an Octopod sometime during the last ten seconds. I didn’t care. The short, squishy form suited my words better than any “human” body ever would.

“Common Octopods have *low intelligence*,” Order said, folding his rocky arms. “They do not and cannot understand the politics of war, nor why it is a necessary evil that we Upper Gods continue to allow.”

“What’s political about a fake war!?”

“Aww, Lurtz, you misunderstand,” Indulgence said, leaning forward and softly patting the top of my head with her massive hand. “It’s not a fake war, you’re just too stupid to see the bigger picture.”

A tear rolled down my left cheek and splashed against the palm of Curiosity's hand. Indulgence snapped her fingers. A small glass of pink wine was suddenly floating a few inches in front of my face.

"Drink," Indulgence said. "It'll make you feel better."

"Is this how the Gods solve *all* the mortals' problems?" I asked, batting the glass away from me with the back of my mitten hand. "With booze!?"

"Nah, that's just how Indulgence solves all *her* problems," said Curiosity, placing me back on the cloudy table. "The Gods who aren't here do other stuff."

"Well, I don't like it." I stared down at my curled tentacle legs and saw the open wound across my front. I winced. It didn't hurt now that I was in the Divine Realm, but I still remembered the sharp sting of the sword that had ripped my stomach open.

I was mad. I was so, so mad. More than anything, I wanted to bean the Upper Gods in the face with the biggest inkballs I could muster. But even if I had a blowgun with me, it wouldn't do any good against them. I had no power to do anything in the Divine Realm other than use my voice and my wits.

That was enough to get Tentachill a compromised Lesser God body, I reminded myself. Keep talking.

"Why don't you believe me?" I asked. I didn't really want an answer from Curiosity. Even if he was as ancient as the other two, he was a *child*. But Indulgence and Order were mature enough to understand what I was saying, and that they wouldn't listen made rage boil in the base of my gut.

"The reason is so simple that even you should understand it," Indulgence said, lazily playing with one of her ringlets, "You're the only person who's said *anything* about the Blue Crystal fucking things up for fun. If things were

that bad for *that* long, don't you think someone else would have spoken up by now?"

I threw my head back and screamed. Order and Indulgence stared at me with folded arms, waiting for me to finish. Then, just as my voice cracked and began to trail into silence, a second, harsh, chilling shriek pierced the walls of the heavenly room. It was Flats' scream, high-pitched, pained, and warbly, the sound of someone who'd been forced to participate in a slaughter that shouldn't have happened. More screams joined his. Some were the deep, gurgling cries of Octopods who had fallen to the Crystal's games. Others were airy, coming from Wingfolk who realized too late how they had been manipulated into their "Hero" tradition. The sound of thousands of early deaths filled the room in a thundering cacophony. It was impossible to tell how long the voices screamed for.

When the last cry faded out, I stared into Indulgence's eyes.

"Is that what you needed to hear?" I asked. "Or do we need to start screaming again?"

"Order, darling..." Indulgence said through a strained grin, "Perhaps it's time we did a little look-see on the Sea Cave Kingdom."

"Indeed," Order said, banging his staff on the floor and parting the clouds at his feet. "It seems we have been ignoring the order of the mortal world for much longer than we thought."

Through the opening at Order's feet, I could see the battle between the Wingfolk and Octopods reaching a fever pitch. At the rear of the Wingfolk army was an immense shining golden Wingfolk woman with a cruel-looking eagle's face and a blazing fireball in her left hand. On the opposite side, rising out of the sea and growing ever larger with each passing second, was a

mass of striped tentacles and unblinking eyes, twice as large as the Wingfolk colossus and infinitely more deadly-looking.

“Tentachill’s Kraken form,” I whispered. “He’s going to lose!”

“The big guy’s got the Crystal in one of his tentacles,” said Indulgence.

“How d’we get it out?” asked Curiosity. “We’re not supposed to interfere *that* much with mortal affairs.”

“Simple,” said Indulgence. “We send Lurtz.”

“What!?” I yelled.

“You mean to tell me you intend to bring her back to life?” Order asked.

“Oh, why the hell not?” Indulgence said, snapping her fingers and spawning another glass of wine in front of her face. “If that ‘DJ Tenta-cool’ or whatever nonsense he goes by weren’t there, Lurtz would have just been crowned the new Goddess of the Sea Cave Kingdom for her selflessness. Since we can’t do that, we should at least let her have another shot at life.”

“That is not the proper order of things,” Order said.

“*Fuck order,*” Indulgence said before downing the magically conjured glass of wine. “We haven’t exactly been keeping the Sea Cave Kingdom in line for half a millenium. What’s one more out-of-order thing among hundreds?”

“Fine,” Order spat. “But only on the condition that she must use this second chance to try and convince Tentachill to dispose of the Crystal herself. That way we can avoid intervening directly.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Indulgence said.

“If I need to get to the Crystal,” I said, that deep sense of Octopod duty stirring within me, “then I need to be able to speak English again. Otherwise I can’t talk to Nathan or the rest of the Wingfolk.”

“Done,” said Indulgence, snapping her fingers. “You can now speak both languages.”

“And we will grant you temporary fighting ability equivalent to what the Crystal grants to youth,” said Order. “It is only just.”

“Wait! You’re forgetting something!” Curiosity cut in.

“What’s that, boy?” asked Order.

“Curse! Curse! Curse! Curse!” Curiosity chanted. His smile was so wide I could see myself reflected in his pearly little teeth. “She *argued with the Upper Gods!* That means we gotta curse her! Just like Tentachill!”

“Just like Tentachill, eh?” Order’s lips curled into a fiendish grin. He clapped his hands twice. I felt a twitch in my throat, as if something very small had gotten caught in my windpipe. Curiosity giggled.

“This is gonna be awesome,” he said. “I can’t wait to spy on Lurtz with her new curse!”

“It’s time for you to return,” Order said. “Remember, you’ll only have the power of the Gods on your side for a short time. Don’t waste it!”

I would have said “yes sir,” but the room had already faded to white.

Chapter 32

“I can’t believe Lurtz has fallen! She was a model soldier!”

“I can. She didn’t have much battle experience.”

“Deedi, is that mutant Wingfolk kid still following us?”

“Sure is.”

“You sure you don’t want me to take him out? They don’t call me ‘Turbo-Tentacles Tarkle’ for nothing.”

“Nah. I got this weird hunch he’s on our side... Hey, Tarkle?”

“What’s up?”

“You ain’t gonna believe this. Her wound just disappeared. Sealed itself right back up. Reeceeeal weird.”

“Sealed itself up? Lemme see.”

I opened my eyes to three familiar faces looming over me as I lay on my back on a sugar sand beach a half-mile away from the heat of the ongoing battle.

“What the hell!?! I thought you were dead!” Tarkle said as he half-tackled me in an enthusiastic hug.

“Awright, move over, Tarkle, I gotta hug her too.” Deedi’s long, stringy arms wrapped around me. From a few feet away I could see Nathan with tears in his eyes and a relieved smile on his face.

“I *was* dead,” I said, wriggling out of my fellow soldiers’ grip and standing back up on my tentacles. “I just talked to the Upper Gods. They’re *real* weird.”

“How the hell did you get them to bring you back to life?” Tarkle asked.
“That almost never happens!”

“The Crystal...”

“The Crystal did it?”

“No! I’m supposed to convince Tentachill to *destroy* the Crystal,” I said.
“That’s what I was sent back to do.”

“Yeesh, tall order,” said Deedi.

“You can’t destroy a Divine Artifact,” Tarkle said. “It’s *Divine*.”

“Alright, but maybe Tentachill can do something with it that we can’t,” I said. “I need to get his attention.”

“Er, that’s also impossible,” said Tarkle.

“Why?” I asked.

“He’s basically a run-of-the-mill sea beast when he’s in that Kraken form,” Deedi said. “You can’t reason with him. He’s a monster, not a man.”

“What about the Goddess of Takako?” I asked. “Is she a monster, too?”

“Uhhhh... not sure,” said Deedi.

“She might just be a Colossal Being,” said Tarkle. “She looks like a Wingfolk and not a Kraken.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” I said. I crawled over to my nephew and raised a mitten-hand in greeting.

“Nathan, I need you,” I said.

“You can talk?” Nathan asked.

“Yeah, when I was dead I asked the Gods if they could make me speak English again,” I said.

“*The Gods?*”

“It’s a long story. Can you fly?”

“*Fly!?*”

“We gotta get to the Wingfolk Goddess,” I said. “At, like, 200bpm.”

Excuse me, mouth, what does that mean?

“Uhm, I mean, I’m considered a Wingfolk Hero, so I *can* fly,” Nathan said, scratching the back of his head, “But I need both my arms to stay in the air. I won’t be able to carry you or anything.”

“Lurtz, what are you talking about with that kid?” asked Tarkle. “I don’t speak a lick of Standard.”

“Trying to figure out how to get to the Wingfolk Goddess,” I said. “This is my nephew Nathan.”

“*That’s* a hyoo-min!?” Tarkle asked, looking the half-transformed Nathan up and down. “It looks like a real big mutant Wingfolk!”

“Nah. I’ve seen enough Hyoo-mins to know that they don’t have feathers,” said Deedi. “Whatever this guy is, it ain’t a hyoo-min.”

“He *used* to be hyoo-min,” I said. “I don’t know why he’s half-Wingfolk now.”

“Weird,” said Tarkle. “But, I guess *anything* having to do with hyoo-mins is weird.”

“So the kid’s on our side?” asked Deedi.

“Yes,” I said.

“Then I got a *real* interesting idea.”



The plan was simple.

It was a terrible plan and full of holes, but it was *simple*.

Though Cephalogolems weren't supposed to be able to leave their underground chambers, there was at least one one that might have been able to break through weak spots in the rocky walls: the Wunderpus, a lanky, jewel-encrusted Golem with pointed boulders for pinpoint-pressure jabbing at the ends of its long tentacles. Once the Wunderpus was on the surface, Deedi would direct it into the crowd immediately at the feet of Takako's Goddess, scattering the soldiers and leaving only Tentachill and the Goddess in the area. That's when Nathan would swoop in, get the attention of the Goddess by flying around her head, and tell her that she needed to talk to the anxious-looking Red Seaweed Sniper standing a few hundred yards away.

"We're gonna die," I croaked from my spot behind the cloth door of a hidden bluffside Den.

"You know, at times like these, I always remember the mantra Flats yelled when he got into the pilot seat of his Golem," said Tarkle.

"What was it?" I asked.

"*Wow! It sure is a great day to worship MC Tentachill!*"

"Thanks for that," I muttered, my face turning three shades bluer upon thinking of the beefy Lesser God.

"Anytime!" said Tarkle, not noticing my sarcasm. "It's like I always say—"

Whatever he "always said" was cut off by an earth-shattering crash erupting from the side of the bluff. From out of the dust slunk the Wunderpus — long, lithe, and covered in glimmering purple and green crystals. My fins flapped a

little faster. Deedi had the Cephalogolem under control. That was a good sign!

“Let’s move out,” said Tarkle, leaving the safety of the Den.

As we approached the deities, I felt a panicked inkball forming in my sac. The Octopods may have been giving the Wunderpus a wide berth, but the Wingfolk didn’t want to leave their Goddess’ side. The Golem swung its tentacles up and down, back and forth, sloughing off the warriors that dared come close to it. Feathered bodies flew through the air, hit the ground in a burst of sand, then picked themselves back up and charged forward again. A few of them were surrounded by glowing blue auras.

That damned Crystal.

A tall, familiar figure soared over our heads.

“What the fuck, Nathan!?” I yelled in English. “It’s not safe yet!”

“Where’s he going?” asked Tarkle.

“Hell if I know!”

“Look out!”

Tarkle tackled me, moving me out of the way of a black-and-purple energy cluster just in time. Twenty feet away from us was Bobbin, his tiny body trembling with rage.

“Tsubasa... Ahiruko...” His soft words were half-choked. His spellbook shook beneath his feathered fingertips.

“Wait, Bobbin!” I said in English. “We need to talk!”

“Liz,” he said, clutching his book to his chest. He’d recognized my voice from all those months ago. “I knew it... I *knew* it! I knew you were an Octopod spy!”

“No! I’m not a spy!” I said.

“Oh yeah? Then how were you *foot soldiers* able to kill *my best friends* so easily?” he spat.

“Bobbin, you’ve got to listen. The Crystal is evil,” I said. “It’s making you and all the other Wingfolk fight us for no reason.”

“*Liar!*” Bobbin shouted, waving his hand in a circle and creating a ring of pure black fire. “Liar, liar, liar, *liar, LIAR!*”

“Run!” said Tarkle, moving his blowgun into position.

“But Tarkle—!”

“Go!”

No!

Without realizing what I was doing, I launched an inkball directly at Bobbin’s face, causing him to fall and land on his seat. The ring of fire dissipated into harmless smoke puffs. The bird-boy waved his arms around, trying fruitlessly to conjure up anything he could.

“Damn you Octopods!” Bobbin blubbered, kicking his clawed feet. “You and your stupid ink and your f-f-fuckin’ spears and your...” His words dissolved into sniffles. My stomach turned. Bobbin was having trouble fighting because the Crystal was tired of him. He had no idea what his next move should be. The poor kid couldn’t even muster up the courage to try to escape.

I crawled closer and put a mitten-hand on Bobbin’s arm. The bird-boy tensed and shuddered.

“*Octopod,*” he said.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” I said.

“Yes you are!” Bobbin squeaked.

“Cut the RPMs. I just want to ask you something,” I said.

“Fuck that! I’m not gonna answer!” Bobbin said.

“Bobbin, *please...*”

No response. He just sat there with his arms folded and his little chest puffed out.

“What are you doing, Lurtz?” asked Tarkle.

“Forget it,” I said. “His volume’s set to zero decibels.”

“Er, what?”

Why did I just say that!?

“I mean h-he’s put himself on mute,” I stammered. Tarkle gave me a quizzical look.

“*I can’t wait to spy on Lurtz with her new curse!*” Curiosity’s words rang through my mind and rippled downward into anxious tension in my back. Was this the “curse” he was talking about?

Focus, Lurtz. You can do this.

I tried to say something normal. I tried to say something like, “He’s gone quiet,” or “He won’t talk,” or even “He’s giving us the Silent Treatment.” What came out of my mouth instead was...

“He’s lifted the needle off the record.”

“Needle off the...!” Tarkle’s cheeks turned blue. I stared down at my pudgy grey stomach as Order’s words back in the Divine Realm began to make a horrifying amount of sense.

“*Just like Tentachill, eh?*”

“Aw, *eight-tracks*,” I hissed.

“Lurtz, this is no time to schmooze me with your best sexy talk,” said a flushed-faced Tarkle.

“I can’t help it!” I whined. “The Upper Gods cursed me to make *bad music entendres!* I’m not trying to wrap you in a lyrical caress, I’m just trying to whistle a simple tune!”

Tarkle swallowed and muttered something that sounded a lot like “*please be still, my goddamn-fucking-throbbing octo-pussy.*” I was too mortified to ask him to repeat himself.

Chapter 33

We crawled in silence towards the two giant beasts locked in combat at the far end of the beach. I stayed several paces behind Tarkle, a new question burning at the forefront of my thoughts:

*How is the Wingfolk Goddess going to take me seriously with a curse like **this?***

It suits your idiot brain, though, my self-criticism laughed. Now you're just as dumb as the octopus man who summoned you here in the first place.

He is not dumb.

Sure he isn't.

He isn't! Sure, he talks campy, but that's... part of his charm.

It's a curse, and you think it's sexy.

I mean...

Sheesh. It's pathetic how good you are at being a stupid little octopus.

Damn skippy.

"Hey, Lurtz? Your 'neffyo' is coming back," said Tarkle. Sure enough, Nathan was floating down towards Tarkle and I.

"Aunt Liz," Nathan said once he'd landed. His eyebrows were furrowed. "It isn't working. The Lesser Goddess of Takako is too busy fighting Tentachill to listen to me."

I looked past Nathan to where the two deities were fighting. Tentachill-Kraken was relentless, spraying torrents of ink from one of its many siphons at Takako's fireball-hurling Goddess.

“Tentachill’s gonna die,” I said.

“How do you know?” Tarkle asked.

“The last part of *Eagle’s Quarry*. Tentachill is the ‘final boss,’” I said, my fins flapping faster.

“Right... that means?”

“He’s the biggest bad, so he has to die in order for you to win the game,” I explained. “There’s a fight between the deities just like this one.”

“*Blurrng*,” Tarkle gargled. “I’ll never understand those hyoo-min games you always talk about. Making us the baddies and makin’ you have to fight Tentachill an’ forcing you to side with Wingfolk. I mean, look at Tentachill — does he *look* like a bad guy to you?”

“What do we do, Aunt Liz?” Nathan asked, bouncing up and down.

“Nothing we *can* do,” I said, plopping down into the sand. “Tentachill’s about to drop to the bottom of the charts.”

“What? Why?”

“Lookit him,” I said, thrusting an arm forward. “He’s doing that supervillain thing where he gives up everything in a last ditch effort to win the fight. That *never* works.”

For a few moments, both Nathan and Tarkle were quiet.

“But we’re not in a video game, Aunt Liz,” said Nathan.

“We’re not in one of those hyoo-min games, though,” said Tarkle at the same time.

“I know!” I yelled, not caring which language I responded in. There were another few moments that would have been quiet were it not for the behemoths roaring half a mile from us and the splash of choppy waters.

“What if we used the Wunderpus?” Tarkle finally asked. “It might be big enough to distract Tentachill for at least a few minutes.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It *sounds* like a good idea, but how can I tell if it’s a good idea if we both have ‘low intelligence’?”

“We’ve got to try *something*,” said Tarkle. “And you know what they say: even a *severed* tentacle can catch a crab once in a while.”

I couldn’t argue with that.



“Let me get this straight. You want me to attack *my own God*?”

“If you say it like that, it sounds real bad,” I said. “But it’s the only way to get the Kraken to stop attacking Takako’s Goddess for a few minutes.”

“Sheeeeeeeesh,” Deedi said. “Send the Wingfolk hyoo-min kid to get my ass outta the battle, only to tell me to go right back in and fight divinity. I hate everything about this plan.”

“Do you have a better idea, soldier!?” Tarkle snapped in an authoritative tone I’d never heard him use before. Deedi stiffened his posture and bashed a mitten-hand against his shelled forehead in a sloppy salute.

“No, sir!” he said.

“Then move it, rookie!” Tarkle said.

“Got it, chief.” Deedi magically floated upward and seated himself back into the cockpit of the Wunderpus.

With Tentachill's Kraken form at its maximum size, the Wingfolk warriors and Octopod soldiers had completely dropped their battle sense and were watching the spectacle in quiet, slack-jawed awe. Takako's Goddess was hurling green fireball after green fireball at the gargantuan mass of tentacles, eyes, siphons, and mouths. Kraken-Tentachill endured every hit. He wrapped long, sinewy limbs around the Wingfolk Goddess' legs and slowly pulled her towards the deep, stormy sea.

Suddenly the Wunderpus was between them, its arms a blur as they jabbed at Tentachill. The Kraken let out a piercing shriek and loosened its grip on the Wingfolk Goddess. There was confusion all over the Goddess' feathery face as she watched the Octopods' weapon turn against its own leader.

Nathan ran forward. He spread his wings and his body lifted into the air. It was time for me to move out.

Look at yourself, Lurtz, I thought as I made my way through the thick crowd of onlooking soldiers. Look what you're doing.

*What **am** I doing, Brain?*

You're in the middle of a battlefield. You're walking up to two Gods to try to save your sister, your nephew, and a bunch of birds and octopuses. You don't even have a weapon. If you did, it would be a little paper peashooter. Yet you're charging forward anyway. You know what that makes you?

I know, I know. I'm stupid.

*No. You're **hardcore as hell**.*

Nathan was sitting on the oversized Goddess' shoulder. Her gaze turned to me. It only took three steps and a squat for the Goddess of Takako to come forward and scoop me up into her huge, feathered hands.

“WHAT SICK JOKE IS THIS?” her voice boomed. **“THE UPPER GODS WANT ME TO COMMUNE WITH A *RED COMMON OCTOPOD*?”**

“That’s my Aunt Liz,” Nathan said from his perch on the Goddess’ shoulder, “If you’ll listen to me, you have to listen to her, too.”

“DO NOT PLAY GAMES WITH ME, HERO,” said the goddess, leaning forward until all I could see in my vision was a glaring eyeball. **“THIS IS NO HUMAN, BUT AN OCTOPOD. IN FACT, IT HAS NEVER BEEN ANYTHING *BUT AN OCTOPOD*.”** The Goddess’ words caused a tingle of Octopod Pride to race through my tentacles.

“My name is Lurtz,” I said. “I’m an Octopod, but I spent thirty-five years in a human body. And, what I know concerns the Wingfolk as much as it concerns the Octopods.”

“STOP WASTING WORDS AND SAY YOUR PIECE,” said the Goddess. **“YOUR SPARKLY LITTLE TOY WON’T KEEP THAT MONSTER BUSY FOR MUCH LONGER.”**

“You need to destroy the Blue Crystal!” I said. “It’s evil!”

“EVIL?”

“Yes, it’s tricking the Wingfolk into—”

“YOU SPOUT NONSENSE. BEGONE! MAY YOUR GOD GIVE YOU A MERCIFUL END.”

With that, she tossed me into the sea in front of the five-hundred foot Kraken who had just turned a Cephalogolem onto its side.

Chapter 34

Sea Beasts are definitely uglier up close.

The monster that used to be Tentachill made a low rumbling noise as it inspected me with several of his many eyes. I scrambled to get back into an upright position. One swipe from the spike-lined suckers on his arms and I'd be sashimi!

Please, Tentachill, I prayed while staring the sea beast in one of his yellow eyes. I know you're in there somewhere. You have to get out of your Kraken form!

The Kraken roared and thwacked a tentacle against the shallow waters, barely missing me. Instinctively I did a backflip into a deeper pool of water and darted off using my siphon. As I swam away I heard the muffled sizzle of fire on flesh.

“COME NOW, KRAKEN!” taunted the Wingfolk Goddess. **“SURELY YOU'RE NOT DISTRACTED BY THAT LITTLE MORSEL!”**

The Tentachill-Kraken roared again and returned its attention to the Goddess of Takako Village. Inside my mind a single thought looped:

Now what!?

When I resurfaced far away from the Kraken, I found Tarkle and Nathan propping up Deedi as a Red Common Octopod First Aid Response Nurse applied numbing cream onto his bleeding-blue tentacles.

“You're lucky you didn't get seriously injured,” he was saying.

“Lucky?” repeated Deedi. “I won't be able to walk for at least a week. That ain't lucky!”

“Lurtz!” Tarkle had noticed me. “What the hell? How— you— it— how are you alive!?”

“Not a clue,” I said, shaking sand off of my head-tentacles.

“I’m so sorry,” said Nathan. His dark eyes were downturned and cold. “I really thought the Goddess would listen to you.”

“We all did,” I said. “It’s not your fault.” I wrapped my arms around my nephew’s knees and gave him a hug as best my tiny body could.

“I didn’t think she’d be *gross* about it.” His eyes had gone from steely to misting over. “Just because you’re not a Wingfolk, she thinks that you...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m fine, see? We’ll get through this.”

“I thought you died when the Goddess threw you,” said Nathan. “We were, like, 75 feet up in the air.”

Huh? Nathan had brought up something I’d missed: even with a rubbery, boneless body, a fall from that high up should have crushed me like a centipede under platform army boots. Yet I’d barely felt the impact. I’d even pulled off a backflip before swimming off at a high speed.

What was that other thing that Order said he’d grant me?

...

“FUCK!” I yelled in the Octopod language. “I FORGOT THAT I’M BLESSED BY THE UPPER GODS!”

“You’re what!?” asked the Octopod nurse.

“Lurtz, why didn’t you tell us you had the Upper Gods on your side!?” Tarkle asked.

“Cuz I’m a dumbass!” I said.

“Move,” said Deedi, pushing the Red Common Octopod Nurse aside. He wobbled and shook as he forced himself in a standing position. Every few moments, he winced as pain from his wounded tentacles shot through his body.

“Get me back – nnnf – to the Wunderpus,” he said.

“Are you serious?” Tarkle asked. “You can’t pilot a golem like *that!*”

“I ain’t going alone, tuna-for-brains,” Deedi said. “Lurtz is comin’ with me.”

“What?” I asked.

“You’re gonna tell me where to go with that supercharged brain o’ yours,” said Deedi. “There’s room for two in the cockpit. C’mon.”

The sandy beach was wavy from being battered repeatedly. The Wunderpus, battered but still functional, had automatically re-righted itself. Using my suckers to climb into the cockpit while Deedi floated by my side would have been a simple task if there wasn’t a 500-foot-tall Kraken in the way.

The God of the Sea Cave Domain and the Goddess of Takako Village were keeping pace with each others’ attacks, but the strain of extended battle was wearing on them. The Kraken was burnt and bleeding, moving slower than before after taking so many of the Goddess’ magic fireballs. Meanwhile the Goddess was breathing so heavily that you could see her chest heaving and her eyes squinting in pain.

The crowd of soldiers had become a crowd of spectators, both sides cheering on their respective deity and hurling slurs at the other side as if they were at an underground cage match.

“Bring the fire, Goddess!”

“Grind that devilfish into seafood!”

“Pluck her, stuff her, stick her in an oven!”

“Bock-Bock-Ba-GAW!”

THOOM!

An enormous tentacle crashed down in front of me, blocking my path to the Golem and creating another dent in the ground. I looked up just in time to see another one lowering itself above my head. I rolled forward, dodging the dangerous limb and moving several feet closer to the Wunderpus. But the monster that was once Tentachill had finally noticed that there were several small creatures running around in front of it, and it didn't like that *at all*.

“KRAAAAAAH!” the Kraken cried, wrapping one long arm around me and another around Deedi. Both of us were hoisted high into the air, held tight by tentacles with sharp suckers that pricked into our sides. My ink sac swelled and my fins pressed against the sides of my head as I watched the sand and sea grow further away.

He's going to crush us!

But Tentachill did not make an attempt to crush Deedi and I. Instead he held us in a way that was firm enough to keep us wrapped, but gentle enough where we weren't impaled by his spiny suckers.

“Deedi!” I called out to the one-eyed Nautilus.

“LOVELY weather we're having!” Deedi tittered as the arm holding him swung him close to my face.

“Deedi, I don't think Tentachill is gonna drop the bass on us!”

“Say what now?”

“Look at these suckers. He could skewer us right now if he wanted to, but he's restraining himself. Maybe we can get through to him!” I leaned over

the side of the tentacle and readied my throat. “Tentachill!” I called. “You gotta destroy the Blue Crystal!”

The Kraken only gave another screeching roar from one of its many mouths. Even if a small part of him still knew to be gentle with his own people, it wasn’t enough for him to understand speech.

From the corner of my eye I saw the glint of a familiar shade of blue, wrapped in a spiral of writhing black and grey stripes.

“There!” I yelled, jerking my head towards a tentacle a few dozen feet from where Deedi was being held. “He’s got the Crystal in that arm! We gotta to make him drop it!”

“Yeah, if you can get us out of this mess,” Deedi said.

“Gimme a beat or two.”

I’d memorized only one core video game mechanic while watching Nathan play, and it might have been just the thing we needed to save our slimy asses: bosses often had obvious weak points. If the world of *Eagle’s Quarry* was still game-like enough to include big-eyed teenage heroes, Cephalogolems, and a race of squishy, tentacled beings who looked almost identical to each other, then maybe my idea wasn’t as stupid as it sounded.

I looked up and down Tentachill’s body for anything that might serve as a weak point – a flashing red light, a crack in his side, glowing pus-filled lumps, *anything* that might explode on contact and damage him. But my gaze kept going back to those bulging yellow eyes. Even multiplied by twenty, eight times bigger than me, and stuck to the side of a horrible monster, they still held that passionate fire that had set my soul aflame all those weeks ago in a local gaming store called *Dragon’s Den*.

Those eyes.

I'd only gotten to see them up close a few times.

Those wonderful eyes.

My heart ached knowing that the last time I might see them was as part of a great sea-beast.

Those absolutely beautiful eyes.

I'd never told him how badly I wanted him.

*Those eyes... **are his weak point!***

"THAT'S IT! THAT'S IT, THAT'S IT, THAT'S IT!" I yelled, readying my ink sac.

"What's the huh!?" Deedi asked. I couldn't reply. My mouth was already brimming over with black, briny ink.

"*PWEH!*" I launched an inkball directly into the closest gigantic eye. The Kraken screeched and loosened his grip. Deedi, the Crystal, and I plummeted towards the ground. Deedi muttered something for a few moments under his breath with his eye closed. A ball of white light appeared beneath his tentacle-legs. His fall slowed and he floated towards me.

"Gotcha," he said, scooping me into his arms and pressing me close to his thin chest. We floated downwards towards the Wunderpus with massive striped tentacles spiraling all around us.

The cockpit atop the mantle of the Wunderpus had just one seat in it, but it was sized for a much larger Octopod, so there was room to spare with Deedi and I inside. At the front of the cockpit was a series of buttons, levers, and dials that would have looked more fitting in a science-fiction flick than on a magically powered rock-octopus.

"Comfy?" Deedi asked.

“Har, har, har,” I said with a strained smile. There was nothing comfortable at all about the stony seat. There also wasn’t a roof above our heads to protect us, or seatbelts to prevent us from falling out. (Deedi had assured me on our descent that all Cephalogolems were enchanted so that their pilots would stay firmly in place. I wasn’t sure I believed him.)

“Awright, here we go!” With the crank of a lever, the Wunderpus sprang to life, scrambling on slender tentacles around the Kraken.

“Any idea where the Crystal went?” Deedi asked.

“Not a clue,” I said.

“Big lug probably grabbed it again,” said Deedi. “Hang on.”

The Wunderpus lurched to the right and barreled towards Tentachill. The Kraken stretched two arms downward towards the Wunderpus, but Deedi turned a knob and the Wunderpus sprang forward like a long-armed rabbit, dodging both of the sea beast’s arms at once.

“Fireball!” I shouted as blazing flash of green filled my vision.

“On it.” Deedi yanked a lever on the floor with one of his tentacle-legs. Within seconds we were buried under the ground, only the cockpit and green gemstone eyes of the Wunderpus sticking out. Again I saw a flash of blue in mid-air.

“Right there!” I said. “He’s got the Crystal in his second arm to the right!”

Deedi didn’t say anything this time, simply pushed a button that made the Wunderpus spring high into the sky. The world around us became a blur, and Deedi’s Golem skills were fast enough to keep up with it. He punched buttons at a breakneck clip, making the Wunderpus’ arms jab with such force the air made popping noises.

A pointed boulder pierced one of the Kraken's eyes. Blood exploded outward. The Kraken loosened its grip and the Crystal hurtled towards the ground.

“IT’S MINE!”

The Wingfolk Goddess took a running dive forward and caught the Crystal in her outstretched, feathery palm. She laughed triumphantly and held the Divine Artifact high above her head as Tentachill's body twisted itself back into its smaller, humanoid form.

“LEST YOU FORGET, O WICKED OCTOPUS GOD,” jeered the Wingfolk Goddess, **“THE BLUE CRYSTAL ALWAYS RETURNS TO ITS *RIGHTFUL HOME.*”**

Uproarious cheers from the bird soldiers on the shoreline and screams from the Octopods, who made mad dashes towards the hidden entrances to the underground world in case the Wingfolk warriors decided to go on a slaughter spree. Even with the power of the Upper Gods on my side, it looked like the world of *Eagle's Quarry* was still “video game” enough where the bug-eyed “baddies” were fated to lose the final battle.

The Wunderpus lowered itself into a resting position and Deedi helped me reach the ground safely. Tentachill, covered in burns and gashes, sat in the shallow water, head in his hands, jaw clenched, tentacle-pigtails twitching in a way that betrayed his anxiousness. My three hearts sunk. I knew one day I would have to watch him fight, but I never thought I'd see him looking *helpless*.

I rushed to the Lesser God's side and placed a mitten-hand onto one of his striped tentacle-legs. He flinched and raised his head, then relaxed when he saw it was one of his soldiers.

“MC, I'm so sorry,” I said.

“I don’t remember what happened,” he said, voice quiet and unsteady.

“Th-the Crystal,” I said. “The Upper Gods brought m-me back to life to destroy it. I t-ried to tell you, b-but you... you were...”

Tentachill placed a hand atop my head and scratched between my hair-tentacles.

“S’alright. Not every song can be a hit,” he said. “Not even ones from the Upper Gods.” He tried to stand up but stumbled, drew in a sharp breath, and returned to a seated position.

“I’ll get the medics,” Deedi said, bounding away despite his bleeding legs.

“Aunt Liz, are you okay?” Nathan called as he and Tarkle rushed towards me.

Tentachill’s face contorted. He let out a confused gurgle. Nathan turned to the Lesser God.

“I’m Nathan, a human,” he said, extending a hand for Tentachill to shake. “Liz is my Aunt!”

“‘Aaaaaaant’...?” Tentachill rolled the unfamiliar word on his tongue, exactly like the Octopod First Response unit I’d encountered all those months ago.

“He’s my sister’s kid,” I said in English.

“Awww, what?” Tentachill threw his hands in the air in an exaggerated way, the ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Lurtz talks Standard now? What crazy shit went down while I was a monster?”

“A lot,” I said.

“You can say that again,” said Deedi, who’d already returned with half a gaggle of Octopod medics. “It was nuts.”

“Nuts? That’s putting it *real mildly*,” said Tarkle, jamming his hands into his hips. “It was the wildest battle I ever saw or I’m not Turbo-Tentacles Tarkle, and they don’t call me that for nothing...”

Chapter 35

It would be some time before the Blue Crystal was returned to the Sea Cave Domain. In the meantime, everyone learned to carry on without the Crystal's blessing. It was harder to harvest Zefwads, nights were colder, and the underground mushrooms didn't glow quite as brightly, but Octopods are crafty and we quickly adapted to living in a harsher environment.

Upon returning to Takako, Nathan tried to tell the Wingfolk of the Crystal's evil and of the folly of their Goddess' prejudiced ways. Most of the stubborn villagers refused to believe anything he said. How could they when Bobbin, a true Wingfolk Hero, jabbered so much about the Octopods' cruelty?

After a few weeks of tension in the little village, Nathan left in a well-stocked caravan to live in Brownfeather Castle Town with his Wingfolk boyfriend "Ugu," Nancy, and a handful of other Takako villagers who had already quietly suspected that the Crystal was not as friendly as the Goddess believed. Within a month of their departure, the Sea Cave Domain received a visit from its first Takako-born trader.

The Soldier Recognition Ceremony for the lost but valiant battle for the Crystal was more celebratory than sorrowful. Over a hundred soldiers were recognized that night, including Deedi, Tarkle, and I. Tentachill even recognized the absent "Wingfolk Hero" Nathan for his attempts to save the Octopod people.

Moments before Tentachill summoned his magical turntables to unleash his beats, I tapped him on the side of one of his tentacle-legs.

"MC Tentachill," I began. "There's something I've should have asked you a long time ago..."



“I’m here for the MC.”

“You must be Lurtz,” said the serious-faced Mimic standing outside of the entrance to Tentachill’s palace. “He’s been waiting for you. Real impatiently, may I add.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, my fins flapping three times. “I tried to make it earlier, but it’s stormy out.”

“Indeed.”

The Mimic led me down several lavishly decorated cavern corridors until we reached a familiar set of tall double doors. They were ornate, with golden octopuses, squids, and nautilus embossed in the surface. Their tentacles curled around glittering black-and-red gemstones.

Don’t tell me we’re going to fuck right in the throne room! I thought, feeling my face turn hot and blue. But the lavishly-decorated hall was empty except for the Mimic attendant and I. The attendant led me down the jewel-encrusted walkway and past the throne to a small, hidden door on the back wall of the cave.

“You may enter,” said the Mimic.

“Right.” I placed my hand on the golden door handle, which was molded into the shape of a tentacle.

“Is this going to be your first time?” asked the Mimic.

“Only my first time with the MC,” I said, turning to the attendant with a smirk on my face, “I’m no virgin.”

“Then you will be even more pleased with him,” said the Mimic. “Have fun.” They crawled away, chuckling knowingly under their breath.

The cavern behind the hidden door was romantic, to say the least. The mushrooms on the walls glowed pink and red. Around me were comfortable piles of pillows with covers made from luxurious velvets and silks. Beneath the pillows were fine plush carpets from all over the world. The only area on the floor not covered in softness was a giant gemstone octopus emblem in the center of the room.

I settled myself on top of one of the larger cushions and tapped the tips of my mitten-hands together. The room was quiet except for the quiet squish of my tentacles undulating. Anxious thoughts began to bubble up inside my mind.

He’s not coming. He’s not coming at all. You’re just going to sit here for hours and look like a fool for waiting so long.

*He **has** to be on his way. He said he was going to be here, and Tentachill isn’t a liar.*

What makes you so sure he’s telling the truth?

Octopods don’t lie.

As if to prove my point, the mushroom light began to change colors and the octopus emblem on the floor opened up like a hatch. Standing on a slowly rising platform was the eight-foot-tall immortal octopus god that had started this whole mess in the first place. He had a smirk on his lips, a tilt in his stance, and a hungry lust in those goddamned amazing eyes.

And, for the moment, he was all mine.

“Glad ya came,” said Tentachill, tossing his head to the side. His long tentacle-pigtails framed his face in a way that made him look even more imposing and powerful.

“Wouldn’t miss this show for the world,” I said. I wasn’t sure if the musical entendre I’d just made was intentional or not.

“Hm. I like that,” said Tentachill. He waved an arm in the air and his set of rune-turntables appeared.

“Wait, you’re going to be using beats on me?” I asked.

“Not if you don’t want ‘em,” said Tentachill, his clawed finger hovering over a glowing green button. “But most people like the pleasure game bumped up to 11.”

The idea gave me pause. Sex with a big cocky octopus DJ was one thing, but sex with a big cocky octopus DJ while *brainwashing music* was going on? Even though I knew he didn’t use true mind-control, was I really ready for what he had in store? Was my *body* ready?

And why do I want to find out the answer to that so badly?

“Drop that bass, MC,” I said. “I trust you.”

“*Shell* yeah.” Tentachill grinned, revealing all of his pointed beak-teeth. He jammed his finger on the button and scratched one of the faux rune-records. A low drum beat shook the room. MC Tentachill twisted a few knobs and set a few of the levers to different levels, adding a hi-hat off beat and the deepest, smoothest bass riff I’d ever heard. My fins stuck straight out to the sides as my whole body filled with warm, sensual tingles.

Tentachill stepped off of the platform and glided towards me. As he got closer I saw that even he wasn’t immune to his own mind-warping powers.

His arms were crossed and he tapped a finger in time with the music while his fins held stiffly in place.

“You look *real* cute when you’re all hot for me like that,” Tentachill said.

“Huh huh huh huh huh huh.” All of my tentacles curled inward as I buried my face in my mitten-hands. Thin tentacle-pigtails twirled around my wrists and gently pulled my arms away from my head.

“Awwww, whassa matter? Octo-pussy already bumpin’ to the beats I spin?” asked Tentachill. He already knew the answer.

“God dammit, MC,” I breathed as one of his much thicker lower tentacles snaked forward and wrapped around my body. A second one brushed against my cheek. A third and fourth wound their way around my two front legs, fondling and squeezing them gently in rhythm with the bass. I was beginning to understand what Gloog meant when she said that Tentachill was “in you and around you and all over you at the same time.”

That delicious, spicy, earthy musk that you could only smell when you were close to him was stronger than before. Every time he passed a tentacle near my eyes I was blasted with the scent, causing red-hot arousal to explode from my groin and ripple into the rest of my body. Within minutes, it became too much to bear. I had to taste him.

I grabbed the end of his tentacle and guided it into my mouth, flicking my blue tongue over the suckers on the bottom and stroking its sides deftly with my mitten hands. For one brief, wonderous moment, I saw the Lesser God’s eyes roll back as a spasm of unrestrained pleasure passed over his face. Then he went back to having that dominant grin, and he chuckled so deeply that it made my insides rumble.

“Finally figure out that I taste as good as I look?” he asked. I let out a soft grunt and nodded. The Lesser God lifted my front two tentacles upwards and

exposed my aching octo-pussy to the heat radiating from his body. He ran a clawed finger around the sensitive rim.

“Oogh, Tentachill...” My plump little chest was beginning to heave.

“Ya like that?” he asked, swirling his finger around my rim again.

“Feels good...”

“Good. Cuz your octo-pussy’s about to get some *real* personal attention from the baddest MC there is,” Tentachill said. It was hard to see what he was doing over my raised tentacles, but it wasn’t hard to guess what the muscular, slimy thing pressed against my rim was.

Suddenly he was inside of me. My hole stretched wide to accommodate the thick appendage thrusting in and out. Before I knew what was going on, I was suspended in the air, all four legs wrapped tightly in his tentacle grip to give him uninterrupted access to my octo-pussy. The MC turned and twisted to the beat of his music, music with powers that made my mind melt into a frenzy where nothing mattered but sex and lust and pleasure.

“Can’t blame you for making that noise,” Tentachill said. “Not when someone like me is loving on you!” I hadn’t even noticed the strained gargles I was making. I didn’t care, either. They let him know how good he made me feel. I liked it when he knew how good he made me feel.

“MC... fffuck, MC!” I couldn’t get myself to say anything but swear words and his name. Tentachill cackled.

“I make you hot, huh?” he said.

I replied with a moan.

“You a loyal little Octopod, right?” he asked.

“Yes...!”

“Then I wanna see you do something for me,” he said.

“What!?”

“In a few beats I’mma count from one to eight, and the bass is gonna drop,” he said. “When that happens? You cum as hard as you can. Think you can do that for me?”

I managed a weak nod between thrusts.

“Gooooood. One.”

The intensity of the music began to build.

“Two.”

The mushroom-lights around us flashed to the beat.

“Three.”

I felt the rim around my octo-pussy become even more sensitive.

“Four.”

Techno sirens wailed.

“Five.”

Tentachill doubled the pace of his thrusts.

“Six.”

The drums played at a breakneck pace.

“Seven.”

Right on the edge.

“*Eight!*”



“Tentachill?”

“Hmm?”

We’d been curled up together in an embrace for some time before I spoke up. He was sitting atop his stone throne, tentacles splayed out in a haphazard way. I was scrunched into a ball atop what could have been called his lap. It was a comfortable place for an Octopod soldier.

“Thank you,” I said.

“For what? Makin’ ya cum?”

“No, not making me cum!” I said. “For... for everything.”

“*Grrrrrruuu? Everything?*”

“Never mind,” I said, snuggling my face into his chest. “It’s too hard to explain.”

“Whatevs,” said Tentachill. He ran his fingers through my tentacle-hair again and I let out a gurgly purring noise.

“MC Tentachill!” The towering double doors at the end of the hall slammed open. In stumbled Tarkle, a seaweed blowgun in his hand and an excited expression on his face. “They’re leaving the Crystal unguarded at night again! Do you want me to go and get it?”

“We’re gonna need a little more than just you,” said Tentachill, giving me a lopsided smile and a wink.

The intensity of the Octopod Pride that welled up inside of me was immeasurable.