

One

The first time I saw the scaly, slimily tail swooshing behind me, I knew I was different. Even in a world where a woman could perform acrobatics in mid-air with no support, and a man could simultaneously play all the instruments in an orchestra by himself, my kind was rare.

Non-existent actually.

In a way, it made sense: I was a Pisces. If any sign was to be blessed with such a trait, it was often thought it would be one whose soul was linked to the Greek God Poseidon. Yet, never before had I let anyone see my scales. I couldn't have, at least not if I wanted to lead a normal life.

All the same, I knew that if she wanted a chance in the Circus of Stars this year, I needed a basin of water.

Despite my conviction that this was true, a fact that I had spent the past few years believing to be inevitable, a shiver slithered up my spine as my toes curled around the rim of the tank that the ringleader had set up for me. And it wasn't because I was cold, and nor was it the normal competitive nerves that everyone else in the room who was also trying out in the Showcase was probably feeling.

What would my mom think once she knew? What would anyone think? I'd told them all I had no magical abilities. No matter how hard they pressed, no matter how many times they reminded me that our talents manifest at different speeds, I simply denied it.

I was surprised that no one was ever suspicious about whether I was telling the truth, because once I became a teenager, I never showed any more remorse. If I really did have no

magical abilities, I'd have likely kept crying myself to sleep most nights a week even into my teen years. Okay, maybe I would have grown out of it. And it isn't that I thought you needed such powers to have a good life, but astrological magic was so common these days it would be difficult to believe the Gods would have skipped over someone.

My mother had even suggested that the more refined, more impressive abilities often came later in life.

"I once knew a man who didn't know he could teleport until he was sixteen," she'd say. He was a Leo.

Mom was a Cancer. She had this knack of being able to focus in on someone so closely it was as if she knew exactly how he or she felt in that moment. Not just like she knew what it felt like though; it was something greater than empathy. Something deeper. I mean, she *really* felt it. So she would know exactly what to say. I imagined that even if I ever met my biological mother, she wouldn't have known what I needed to hear like Maureen did.

I could still remember when I came home from school crying because I was always picked last in gym. It wasn't because everyone hated me, but in a world where the kid next to you can control water and his friend can jump so high he nearly hits the ceiling, a girl who can barely run a lap around the room without losing her breath isn't exactly prime pick. And one day I had had enough of it.

I could so clearly remember my mom saying, "One day, Lia, you'll run faster than all of them combined. And you won't even need to catch your breath."

Even though I already knew what my magical ability was at that point, that I could transform into a creature that thrived in water and not on land, I believed her. Deep down, I had a

vision of myself running faster than all of them. Even the redhead who moved so quick she looked like she was zapping from place to place like a firefly.

The only one I never imagined myself outrunning was my best friend Sallie. She had hair like pearls and the ability to solve almost any equation, even if it involved how to sneak ice cream into the movie theater rather than numbers and decimals. Although she knew those too. She was a Capricorn.

For a while, I really did believe I had no magical abilities. Some days, I think my mother's assurance that I would find *it* – whatever that meant – soon enough, was all that kept me going. Since I'm a Pisces and people usually discover their abilities when the sun is in their sign's rotation, and there is always a way their ability can be twisted to relate to their sign, she always thought it might have something to do with water.

"It would only be fitting for the Gods to make the sea your subordinate," she once said. Magical abilities were thought to be handed down individually, with special care, from the Greek Gods. But even I knew that what she'd said was a bit dramatic. Or so I thought.

Yes, I was indeed a Pisces.

But I bet she never imagined it would turn out like this.

I certainly didn't.

It was my thirteenth birthday, and I was going on my first date. His name was Harvey, and he was Scorpio a few years ahead of me known for being able to keep secrets no one ever told him. If anyone would have suspected me, it would have been him. In retrospect, I think that was why he asked me.

I nearly choked on my almond butter and banana sandwich when he did: "So I was thinking you and I could go on a date tonight."

You could say he didn't even really ask. I think a piece of celery actually shot out of Sallie's mouth.

"Um, sure?" That was actually what I said. My response was more of a question than his original initiation.

"I'll pick you up at your place around six o'clock. Bring a bathing suit."

Another piece of celery probably landed on the table.

I was in shock. "Excuse me?"

"I was thinking we could go down to the Bluff."

Of course there was more than one bluff in the world. But in our neck of the woods, the Bluff was this little section of the shoreline hidden by a sharp turn in the short cliff behind it, where the pebbly sand turned briefly pink and where lovers often went on picnics that turned into more.

I didn't know what to say. I knew he was probably trying to play it cool, but was he serious? A girl like me and a guy like him, at the Bluff?

And then his upper lip was tugged into a relaxed smile, "I'm only kidding Lia, but I was thinking we could head to the shore if you're up for it?"

"I'd love to," I said, finally mustering something legible.

The next few minutes were filled with Sallie and I goggling over what had just happened, realizing Harvey must have just recently gotten his Driver's License because we didn't remember him being much older than one month into sixteen, and debating whether it was normal to wear lipstick to the beach.

I didn't end up wearing any, but perhaps it would have been fitting for the momentous occasion I didn't know was about to occur.

The salty air made his long comb-over curls stray from his head in a charming sort of way. My purple hair was partially tied back in a braid. The doctors never did quite find an explanation for its color, but if anything once I was older it became less of insecurity. Sometimes people thought I dyed it. Other times, they just thought it was cool.

Harvey did too.

“How long have you had your hair dyed like that?” I remembered him asking as we strolled along the shoreline. It was past five, so the lifeguards had packed up for the day and things were pretty quiet apart from a few sandy stragglers and the whisper of the waves.

It wasn't yet a confidence booster though at the time, so I told him, “Only a few years now,” with a wave of the hand. Kept it casual.

But the huff of laughter hardly escaped his lips when I remembered the gift that the Greek Gods had given him.

Whether it was from nerves or admiration, I couldn't suppress a smile. “But of course you know that's a lie.”

“Just a lucky a guess,” he shrugged. “Ever find out why?”

I was usually a more reserved person, but for some reason I didn't mind that he was asking a question that could lead to a personal answer. I simply shook my head.

“Well I think it's incredible.” He'd said it like it was a fact. As much a fact as it was that, only five years later, I would end up balancing on the edge of a giant tank before hundreds of lucky spectators and my fellow competitors vying for a chance to be under those starry tents that meant you were among the best in your sign. That meant you must have been important enough to the Gods to be given a gift that made you fit for the Circus of Stars, where patrons came from afar to see what their sign was capable of, little aware of the competition going on within. Too

distracted by the one-man orchestras, the comedians that were so funny you laughed for a whole hour straight, and the woman who could tame even black bears.

To be in the Circus of Stars meant you were special indeed, but it was well-known that they sometimes picked contenders who were still impressive, but more average, just to keep it varied. To keep it a true testament of the different kinds of abilities one could receive depending on where the Sun and Earth were located when they were born. So really, in a way, you just had to be lucky. Once you made it in, that was when the real competition began. When you strove to play the best music or be the funniest because you wanted your sign to win that year. To have the chance to receive what was known to be a sacred prize when the star of Kronos, the God of Time, was directly above the star-covered circus tents: the singular, strings-attached, chaperoned chance to time travel.

That was Harvey's next question: "Where do you think you'd time travel to? You know, if you ever won."

I was taken aback. I knew what my answer was, but that was knowledge I didn't feel he was privy too yet, not like the reasoning behind my lavender-colored hair. "I don't know, I guess I haven't even given it much thought. It's not like I really have a chance, ya know."

He didn't say anything, so I followed-up. "What about you?"

"I'd want to go back to my parent's wedding. I was only four – a little ring bearer – when it happened, so I don't remember much. And my Mom is doing well for herself these days, but I don't think I've ever seen her as happy as she was then. At least according to the pictures."

That was one thing I had in common with Harvey. Me, the powerless girl with purple hair and him, the handsome boy from whom all the pretty girls begged to spill their secrets – we'd both grown up with single parents. It wasn't uncommon, but it was about all we had.

But I hadn't been expecting such an honest or genuine answer. I hadn't yet known that we shared this upbringing. "When did they split?"

I bit my tongue the moment I asked, because I knew I'd perhaps too quickly assumed his situation was like mine. That his parents had simply fallen out of love.

"When the sickness got the better of my Dad."

"I'm sorry." But that didn't seem like enough, so I added, "I didn't know."

Even in a serious moment, Harvey knew how to play it cool and keep it casual better than I did in a lighter one. With a wink, he said, "You wouldn't have."

For some reason, despite what it was we were talking about, his manners and tone suddenly seemed flirty. My stomach bubbled.

I didn't know if he knew I was adopted, and I wanted to share something personal about myself in return, because it seemed like the right thing to do, and that was all I could think of at the moment. "Sometimes I wonder if one of my biological parents had lavender hair too."

Whether he already knew or not, he didn't say. Instead, and to my surprise, he said, "Well I can only imagine it wouldn't have looked as beautiful on either of them as it does on you."

Although I liked to think it was my own personal growth, I also knew that that was the start of when my hair became a token of confidence rather than something I was insecure about.

We took a few more steps, letting the waves give our toes butterfly kisses, before he proposed we go in. I'd worn a bikini with cherries on it. His swim trunks were the color of salmon.

My tail matched my hair.

It didn't hurt, per say, but it felt like my entire body was falling asleep.

Like it was going numb.

It had started in my feet and worked its way up.

The sensation had pulled me under the water. I think I screamed, but of course the sea muffled it, as I rolled around and felt my body become less smooth and more scaly. In retrospect, I knew that it was mostly the bottom half of me doing any work, because of the tail, but at the time it seemed like my entire being was transforming into something, some being, I did not know. Or why. Or how.

And then I saw it out of my peripheral – the lanky lavender tail. It almost sparkled. That time, I definitely screamed. But it wasn't because I'd never heard of such a thing.

I thought they didn't exist? They all died.

I remembered the panicked thoughts bubbling up inside me, rising to the surface along with the realization that I did have some magic ability after all.

I was a mermaid.

I belonged to the creatures who'd been royalty.

Who'd lived a life of grandeur, and had been chosen to lead, all because of what the stars had given them.

Who'd been murdered by the hands of the humans who were jealous, who thought their own abilities were not as great. Who thought we didn't have to work as hard as they did and that it wasn't fair.

Who thought all we had to do was step in the water.

It was true, in a way, but all abilities came with varied levels of difficulty. Some people could train to improve, others were stagnant, and others had to do little to soar to the top. But the massacre had all been so long ago, the whole thing with the mermaids and mermen. The details

were murky. Most people didn't like to think their own race capable of such a thing. Most believed us to be myth. Legend. A fairytale.

When Harvey pulled me up out of the water, he acted as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“Wave push you under too?”

I could barely speak. Underneath the water, my toes still had their chipped red nail polish.

“How long was I...?”

“Just a second. It was a big one though, it got us both! I had no idea where you go to.”

I was numb, shivering, but this time I didn't think it was the physical effects of the transformation. *So he didn't see any of it?*

“You alright? You-”

“I want to get out.”

“What?”

“Please get me out of here.”

“Lia, it was just – are you okay? What happened?”

I didn't know what to say. How to explain what was going on inside my head. So I just said, “I want to go home.”

We hardly spoke the whole way back.

I believed him at first. And perhaps I would have believed him longer, that he had no idea what had happened, and that the wave had only knocked me under for a second. But he wasn't taken aback enough by my silence. He didn't ask any more questions. And when we didn't speak to each other again, it wasn't unfounded. In fact, I thought I remembered catching him smiling at me from across the hall in school every now and then, as if nothing strange had occurred

between us at all, but every time I did a double take he was already looking the other way. One time, I thought I noticed him glancing at my notebook as I sketched my tail.

He was a Scorpio after all. He could keep secrets before anyone told him. I'd never before pondered, though, whether he could also keep secrets the secret-holder didn't yet know. But from that day on, I always suspected that Harvey knew I was born a mermaid, and he'd wanted me to know too.

I couldn't help but think of this moment as I stood on the rim of the tank that the ringleader of the Circus of Stars had set up for me, as the crowd watched in silence, wondering what I was about to do. Hold my breath for a few minutes?

That was when I saw him amongst the competitors, with his dark curls still charmingly combed-over.

I gasped, lost my balance, and toppled right into the water.