

# A Pentacle Between Tentacles

So where I work's ain't exactly a zoo but it ain't exactly *not* a zoo, if you catch my drift. It's called the *Norman Parker Wildlife Experience* because that's exactly what it is—an *experience*. People come along and get to see all sorta critters they'd not normally see in their day-to-day.

We got leopards and zebras and even a mean old elephant they call Frank that fell off the back of a circus wagon or something. There's all sorts of stories about Frank, like they say he's at least one hundred years old, but I don't believe it. We also have an aviary, an aquarium and a reptile house and though I'm not much of a fan of those snakes I wouldn't mind them wrapped around my feet as a fancy pair o' shoes.

All sorta staff work here. We've got veterinarians and pooper-scoopers and regular janitors and people that work the food stalls. There's tour guides and medical workers and a marketing ideas man called Josh, whose I don't like. And, of course, there's me, who you might just say has the *most* important job of all.

Myself, Sheryl Monroe, Miss Algonquin 1977 and I've still got the pictures to prove it! I work at the front desk of the *Norman Parker Wildlife Experience Gift Shop* and let me tell you why exactly it's the most important job of all: up to 80% of the park's profits come from the gift shop and our collection of high-quality, internationally manufactured goods.

We've got everything from plush little leopards to t-shirts with ol' Frank on them and every day I gets to stand behind a semi-circular desk, checking the bounce of my perm with my fingertips and grinnin' and greetin' everyone who comes through those glass doors on their way outta the park. Y'see, you can't leave the park without passing through the gift shop and I makes *darn* sure that nobody leaves without buying at least a little somethin'.

Directly behind my desk is cylindrical aquarium tank filled with fishes; sunfish and flower fish and rainbow fish and coral fish and other fish I don't even know the names of. When I'm standin' there, right in the centre of my desk space and people come up to buy things I just know them's fish are surrounding me like an underwater halo, like I'm queen of the fishes or somethin' and that's just fine by me.

But then, not two weeks past, Benji comes storming in wearing his khakis and tells me that they are taking the fish away. Benji's the great grandson of Norman Parker, so he feels like he owns the place, but in actuality I've read the documents and know that he only owns one-third of 48%.

"My fishies," I lamented.

"You can still visit. They'll be over at the Underwater Odyssey," Benji tells me. "We have to move them so they don't get eaten."

“Get *eaten*?!” why I’d never heard such a foolish thing (and Benji says a *lot* of foolish things). Now, I might not be the sharpest axe in the woodsman’s shed, but even I know that you can’t just go eatin’ any random rainbow-coloured fish without runnin’ a serious risk of makin’ yourself sick and I don’t just mean with diarrhea.

“Anyway,” Benji says. “You’ll have a new friend soon, Sheryl. I think you’ll like him.”

So now I finds myself face-to-face with my new friend and let me tell you he ain’t *not* my friend, no sir, no way. There’s something wrong with the critter they done placed in my aquarium, for starters he has altogether too many legs than a thing can be trusted with. For secondly, I don’t like the way he looks at me with *those eyes*.

His eyes *glow*, don’t you know, like he’s got batteries plugged in there behind them somewhere. They flicker too, just the way you’d expect little globes to do. Those flickerin’ yellow eyes give me the right heebie-jeebies and that’s only when I’m lookin’ at him which I try my very hardest not to do.

But when I’m working it’s even worse, because where I’m standin’ means he’s right there *behind me* the entire time, floatin’ in that aquarium that used to be filled with fish but now only has enough space for that... *thing*.

*Rara Luxadorus Indigis Pupura* is what the Ancient Latins called it. How those Ancient Latins seem to have a name for every darn thing under the sun is beyond me. It’s a rare type of self-spawnin’ octopus which means he can make his own babies or some other blasphemous thing. Apparently in the olden times they was hunted for their dye sacs in order to make things purple, like the best way of making somethin’ purple is to squeeze it out of an octopus.

Anyway, I don’t like the octopus and the octopus doesn’t like *me*; I can tell by the way it looks at me with them flickerin’ eyes, like it’s thinkin’ all sorts of impure thoughts that I don’t even want to get started on imaginin’.

There’s a special locked door that leads behind the tank and houses all the controls needed to maintain the correct living conditions for the thing (and my precious fishies before it). Only whoever is working the late rounds has the key to that door, usually a young fella named Emilio who doesn’t speak a lick of english. Sometimes it’s an old fella named Nigel, whose I get along with okay.

I could probably make Nigel give me the key if I leant over the counter-top just so, Miss Algonquin 1977 hasn’t lost *all* her charms don’t ya know. But thankfully I don’t need to, beause there’s an *extra* key to the control room hidin’ in the back of the cash register. I found it on my first day workin’ here over twenty years ago and I’ve left it there to this very day without tellin’ nobody about it; in case of some *emergency* I suppose.

And what more of an emergency could there be than getting rid of that flailing thing that lives in my shadow, lurching and thrusting in his cylindrical prison. I don’t know *how* exactly I’ll do it of course, but my fishies taught me that if the temperature of the water is adjusted even by only a few degrees it can be deadly to creatures of the sea and so that’s what I plan to

do. I'll boil the thing alive in his own aquarium if I has to. I'll do *anything* to be free of those flickerin' eyes.

There's a peculiar peace around the park once the last of the guests are shepherded through. Usually I stay for long enough to lock up the gift-shop and head home at a sensible hour, but tonight I'm going to stay just a little bit longer. I says as much to Nigel on his way out. The octopus seemed happy enough while Nigel was there checkin' the tanks, but now Nigel's gone and it's just the two of us, and he's starin' at me again with those hate-filled eyes like he knows what I'm planning to do.

The overhead lights switch off, but the lights in the tank stay on. There's a few other lights throughout the gift-shop that also stay on, shining down like little halos on the mass-produced plushies of all gods creatures. We don't have an octopus plushie yet, praise Jesus, and after tonight I doubt that it will be deemed necessary.

I walk up to the aquarium glass, even though my skin is pricklin' just to look at the thing. And even though there's a big sign stuck on the wall that says DON'T TAP ON THE GLASS I curl my hand into a fist and with one extended knuckle I do exactly that, three times, hard enough that he *has* to hear me.

It's there in an instant. Ain't *nothin'* should be able to move that fast. And now it's just lookin' at me, eyes flickering like a children's toy. Eyes *pulsing* with life. Now those fishies were stupid and you never quite knew where *they* was lookin', but the octopus has me firmly fixed in that baleful gaze and I've got fear running up and down my spine as chills.

"I'm done with *you*..." I says to him and even though I'm trying to sound brave I know I barely raised my voice above a whisper because I am scared of the thing. And for a moment those eyes *change*, I don't know how to describe it but the light went out of them as though it was tryin' to understand my words, and then—

It raises its tentacles. It raises them up all at once and I scream and totter backwards in my leopard-print high heels. My hand reaches behind me, scrabbling for my desk but my fingers only graze it.

I can't take my eyes off of the thing, because I need to know what he does next. Those yellow eyes are flickering and it's placed the tip of one of those hideous appendages against the glass exactly where I tapped. And now, as it raises that tentacle up against the glass I feel *myself* rising up, even though I know that doesn't make any sense.

At first I think I'm just stretching but then the pressure in my ankles eases as my feet leave the ground. I am floating, I am—heaven help me—*levitating* at the whim of that hideous octopus and its flickering eyes.

I can hear the sound of the engines that keep the creature alive above all else. The hum of the generator and the pump of the water filter. And I think back to that key tied to a brown string that's still in the drawer of the cash register.

But now my five-inch pumps are grazing the top of the counter as the octopus lifts me even higher. I'd kick and scream but for some reason I can't make a noise. It's like my fear has become a dirty rag for me to gag upon.

"I should've killed you sooner," I whispers at the thing in the tank.

The octopus starts turning in circles. Tentacles spinning around it. And floating there in the air, I begin to do the same. I tumble end over end as the creature toys with me. Each time my head tips forward I am convinced I am falling; but I do not fall. I am held upright by the psychic machinations of the evil octopus and I am tossed and turned and twisted this way and that until my hair is all in disarray and tears are streaking down my cheeks. I want to sick up and my heart is beating too fast.

"Please," I say to the thing in the tank. "Please, I'm sorry, I take it back. I won't do nothin' to hurt you, I won't..."

The thing is floating towards the top of the tank now, so once again we are eye-to-eye. It's tentacles are still twisting and dancing all around it as though it is conducting a silent symphony, or perhaps, attempting to make its puppet dance.

I know I must look dreadful with all my make-up running down my face. My vision is blurry and my eyes stingin', but through my tears and smudged mascara I can see that something is *happenin'* to the octopus; the colour of its skin is changing. I'm mutterin' under my breath all those prayers I learned in Sunday school too many years ago.

For there: blazing crimson 'gainst the purple skin of the octopus, I see a *pentacle between the tentacles*.

And then, with a single flick, the creature hurls me across the room.