



Beneath the Starlit Sea

Nicole Bea

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In Nicole Bea's fantasy novel *Beneath the Starlit Sea*, a captive sorceress is called upon to fight monsters, even as the king she serves treats her like one.

Illyse lives a quiet life in a cottage until guards from King Whys kidnap her and bind her with an iron bracelet, dampening her powers and turning her into an unwilling servant of a crown that declares her kind monsters. Paired with a human doctor, Garit, Illyse is tasked with discovering what manner of monster has been killing men on the seashore.

Bouncing between examining bodies and searching old books for clues, Garit and Illyse grow close. The king's law forbids their union since Illyse is inhuman, though. Illyse has to decide whether or not to become a fugitive for love.

The magical foes whom Garit and Illyse face are crafty and numerous, forcing uneasy alliances as a final battle looms. There are bold descriptions, as of sparkling translucent water creatures and heated glances between Illyse and Garit, though not all of these deepen the worldbuilding. The laws of magical and mundane interbreeding are vague but important to the plot, while the enchantments that tug Garit from man to monster are unclear in origin. King Whys is depicted as sympathetic and deserving of redemption, despite his actions to imprison and harm sorceresses like Illyse.

But the book's charm balances out its puzzles: Illyse has a companion fox, Thierry, who lends a delightful sense of playfulness to the page, and Illyse's all-too-human temper tantrums help to make her predicaments feel real. As she and Garit orbit one another, their trust waxing and waning, Illyse begins to believe in love despite all that she has suffered.

In the romantic novel *Beneath the Starlit Sea*, a sorceress struggles with her desires and identity, finding a path towards redemption and love.

JEANA JORGENSEN (July / August 2022)

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