

MARIAM ABDELSAYED

The Great Mage Everglow

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Prologue

It started with a failed assassination attempt.

This was nothing new; people often fear what they don't understand, killing those who know more than them because they are a threat to their authority. Those in power fear knowledge that is wielded by the common people.

Because knowledge is power. Being knowledgeable, all-knowing to the ignorant, gives you power over them. Makes you stronger than those with riches and influence over kings. If you wield power over the masses with intelligence and knowledge, you essentially become their god.

So what happens when there is one last person in a city that refuses to bow their head to the Twelve Houses? One last person who will not give up their family legacy. One last person who will never give up the knowledge they cultivated for years on end when there is nothing else that interested them.

You get twelve assassins.

All assigned to kill one young girl.

Under the cover of moonlight, twelve assassins gather together and wait in hiding to kill this one member of the Everglow family, and her alone. They hide outside of her home, hide in the alleyways in darkness, only lantern light threatening to expose them to anyone who dares to be awake at the witching hour. The Duke made sure no one would be awake to stop this assassination. No one would come save the girl now.

Twelve men await the order. One man hailing from each of the noble

houses, each given one blade. They would all have her blood on their hands, staining and seeping into the streets when dawn comes. They would all be to blame for the youth's death; therefore, there would be no one to fight this injustice. No one would point fingers. No one would dare speak up, lest their good name be smeared and they wake up with a dagger in their back. If they all were at fault, no one would rise to take revenge. It was one life against hundreds or even thousands. It was the perfect scheme.

But on that night, something strange happened. No blood was spilled. Each of the assassins lay in wait for her to step foot outside before they drew their blades, but she never did leave that house. The night drew long, the light in that house still burning bright. There were mutters she wasn't even in that house, and many would have believed it if it weren't for the shadows dancing in the light of the window. The men grew antsy, wanting to charge in the house and kill her now, but the Duke told them to hold their ground.

He needed her to step out. He needed to be the first to hold her down as her throat got cut neat. He needed to see her with his own eyes.

And as the night wore on, the moon shining overhead, one by one, the assassins fell asleep, including the Duke. Every single one of them fell asleep where they waited.

The girl watched from the window of her bedroom as each assassin fell asleep. She breathed a sigh of relief. The spell worked, thank the gods above and below. There was a moment in her heart where she feared it wouldn't work on this many people, but seeing it worked better than expected lifted a weight from her heart. She wouldn't need to use her dagger tonight.

Though they wished it on her, she would never wish death on her enemies. An eye for an eye is never to be justified.

It wasn't her enemies she feared, though. The loss of the Old Arts was her biggest fear, that if it died with her, it would be completely erased

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by those who fear it. It wasn't right what these nobles did to her and her family, but she couldn't dwell on these thoughts for long. She needed to leave. That sleeping spell won't last forever.

She grabbed a backpack she had prepared earlier, opening it up to review her supplies.

Her Book of Lore, a white peacock quill, an inkwell of ink she made herself, a small knife given to her by her father, a small bag of black sand, an old scroll of spells she recovered from an old quill she used to frequent before it got torn down, a lucky coin her mother gifted her, a stack of parchment enchanted with protection runes, the spike allegedly from a manticore, a newer spell scroll she made herself, a wand carved from rose wood, potions such as healing, invisibility, luck, and poison resistances, an assortment of uncut gemstones such as lapis, amethyst, ruby, clear quartz, a vial of great venom from a naga her father slain years ago, a small staff with a large blue gem at the top, a magic amulet that had been in her family for generations that granted the wearer enhanced magic proficiency, the aforementioned dagger she often used for small sacrifices of blood and animal entrails, a small skull of an animal she killed as a child and finally a diamond given to her by her grandfather before he passed, asking her to only sell it if she cannot turn lead into gold.

It was very little compared to what she really wanted to bring with her, but she needed to travel lightly. She will not be returning here, and she will have to assume that everything here will be burned come morning. The girl took one last stroll around the house she grew up in all her life. A modest home despite her family's wealth, five bedrooms, indoor plumbing, a bathing room, a large kitchen where the house's maid always had some baked good cooking in the oven, a large living room where guests would be entertained and always come back for more, and her father's study, dusty and decrepit.

She remembers the countless nights they would spend pouring over

the books together, learning all they could. How she missed that dearly.

Taking a moment to steel her nerves, her heart beating in her ears and her eyes blurry from anxiety, she opened the door, taking a step and breathing in that midnight air. She shouldn't be afraid; she had no reason to be. But she was petrified. Terrified of the world she was entering. She was alone now; no one would come and save her if something went wrong. But she had to be brave. She had to be brave for her family, for the good name they once had. So with one brave step, she walked out of the door.

She walked on that familiar dirt road, looking straight ahead, catching glimpses of the assassin's silver blades in what little light there was, but she stayed firm. She had to remain stoic as she walked with her pride still intact.

'Stay firm,' her father always told her, 'so others can't take advantage of you.'

She did pause briefly to look at the one person familiar to her. The Duke, the man she knew personally and butted heads with often. His fine silk clothes were getting dirty by the dust, and his soothed sleeping form contrasted with his old, withered face. A twisted reflection of her own moonlit complexion.

She felt pity for him. He came out of his ivory tower just for her, just to return empty-handed.

She continued down her path, walking down that road, past the buildings she knew all her life, and out of the city she grew up in. She would not return home for a long time, she knew. It was not her home anymore.

Wherever the winds may take her, that is what she will claim as her home.

Wherever she is welcomed, that is what she will claim as her own.

Whoever welcomes her with open arms, those are the people she will consider her family.

PROLOGUE

And wherever that lovely paradise may be, she will search for it. A promised land of magic and wisdom, offering open arms to all where she never had it before.

No one will suffer as she had suffered.

And with that, she was gone...

As the sun rose from its nightly slumber, the Duke awoke with a start.

The assassins kick open the door to the house and rush in, shouting, screaming, asking the same question over and over, expecting a new answer.

"Where is she?! Where is she?!"

The Duke rushed into the bedroom he knew was hers, running to the bed and tearing off the bed sheets.

"Where is she?!" He shouts, staring at the empty bed with only the smell of lavender and ash in its place, "Where the hell is she?!"

"Sir! We searched the whole house!" One of the assassins ran to him, trailed by two others.

"Search again!" The Duke commanded.

"Sir, there is no trace of where she went. It's like she's a ghost!"

"Bullshit!" The man shouts. He swipes off all the papers and books from the busy desk, breaking a few beakers and flasks in the process. After a few huffs and puffs, the Duke turns to the six assassins that had gathered in that small study, the other six standing in the doorway, "I don't care how long it takes! How much do I need to pay? That witch must die for her heresy!"

"Uh... Sir?"

"One hundred gold pieces to whoever finds her! GO!"

With that, the assassins spill into the streets, grabbing their horses and gear, all to search the lands. They will find the witch; their master commanded it. They will bring her head to him.

Who would be the man to bring justice to the land against that heretic?

Who is the man who would gain fame and fortune untold?

THE GREAT MAGE EVERGLOW

Who would be the man to slay Cassandra Everglow?

I

Act I

*I evoke the elements of Earth, Fire, Water and Air. The
journey ahead is long and winding, but I am not afraid of the
dangers ahead, for I have you to protect me.*

May the Earth support my travels.

May Fire be my light.

May Water sustain me.

May Air be my guide.

*Let it be that your power protects me as I journey into lands
unknown to me.*

Chapter 1

What do you do when the world is against you? How can you survive when the world wants to watch you burn at the stake? What do you say to those who fear you for merely practicing your beliefs?

These are the questions swirling in Cassandra's head as she treks down the worn dirt road, looking over the hill at the city she left behind. A city she had known all her life and yet planned to escape from since the age of thirteen. She wouldn't be the first to want to escape, but she was the only one to succeed before she was taken to a back alley and shot.

Her heart sank and tears pricked her eyes as she turned back around to keep walking, tightly gripping the bag she carried. The weight on her shoulders was greater than the books she carries, the souls of the damned screaming in her ears as flashes of orange and red cross her mind.

Her people were slaughtered, a simple plain fact. They were slaughtered because those damned nobles didn't understand them. Those damned nobles don't understand what it is they practice. Oh, how she hated those nobles; oh, how she wished they left her alone. But it was too late. She was caught practicing. Now she needed to flee and go into hiding.

Cassandra quickly wipes the tears from her eyes and looks to where

she finds herself. The path splits off into three paths, and a wooden sign stands proud, pointing in four directions with the names of the towns each one points to.

A crossroads, the point where mortals and demons can communicate.

Cassandra smiles, her heart full once again, as she takes out her Book of Lore, as well as her wand, flipping to the incantation she desired while drawing a simple sigil into the dirt at the center of the crossroads. With the sigil drawn, she points her wand to the crossroad sign and takes a deep breath, her intentions set in her mind, as her aura changes around her, and the wand and sigil begin to glow.

“Here and now, I invoke the Air.” She speaks with authority and dictation, “As I travel near and far, guide and guard this trip. Ensure I do not slip as I travel far and near. Keep my direction clear, see me safely on my way, see me safely far from here. So shall it be.”

Cassandra opens her eyes, and the glowing stops, but the aura around her remains, ever faint, and her heart is filled.

Protection is with her as she travels, for a short while anyway. Better than nothing, she reasons.

Cassandra walks up to the sign, finally getting to read the damned thing, figuring out where to go.

Pointing to the west, the way she came, was the Kingdom Capital, and she wasn't going to step foot in that kingdom ever again, lest she wish to hang from an olive tree.

To the north was a town called Darkwell. Cassandra recalls it being quite a backwater and not a fan of the nobles. She decides to keep her distance.

To the south was Harnsey, the City of Lust and hometown of House Lovelow. While she is on friendly terms with House Lovelow, she would rather not interact with any of the noble houses, lest one loose-lipped individual let it slip she is a mage.

Which leaves the town to the east: Falcon Haven. She wasn't too

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familiar with it, but she heard it was the town hidden in the dense forest up ahead. It was a town of traders for traders and a major hub for those passing through to get food and water. A perfect place to lay low and hide among the crowd.

With her mind set, Cassandra continued her path, walking forth towards the rising sun. There was still plenty of daylight left, and she had many hours ahead of her would-be killers, but it wouldn't be enough. She knew they would catch up with her soon, especially if they were on horseback. She reasoned she was nearly six miles out of the city, and if she hid in these woods, she could make it to Falcon Haven. How far did the sign say it was? Ten miles from that sign? If she kept up this pace and powered through the night, she should make it by midnight, she reasons.

Cassandra just hoped she could make it there in one piece.

* * *

The road was long and winding, the vegetation dense with low cover and towering trees. How horses navigated such terrain was beyond her, but it didn't deter her at all. There was something surreal about traveling in nature. Though she didn't practice any nature magic, she still found solace in walking through it, feeling the innate magic flow through the trees, traveling with the winds down a brook, and back out to the open air. It was a way to recharge after long hours of study. If she wasn't on the run, she would stay here, enjoying nature. But fate played its hand.

Maybe when things calm down, she can return to the woods once again.

Cassandra looked down at the dirt road as she walked, noticing the heavy tracks and the occasional dung pile in her path. Horse tracks, along with a caravan heavy with supplies and things to trade. She wasn't

sure how recent these tracks were, but she knew to keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary.

Perhaps they were heading to Falcon Haven as well. Perhaps she can hitch a ride with them. Cassandra taps the gold brooch she had on her person. It would be impolite not to provide coins for their services if she ended up finding them.

She continued on her way for another ten minutes or so before the sound of a horse whinnying caught her attention. She looked over into the brush and noticed a hidden path that led to a campsite of sorts. She could see past the trees, so she crept forwards towards the camp, hiding behind a tree and watching the scene unfold.

In the rather small clearing was a campsite. The fire pit was long put out, and a caravan carriage stood nearby. A man, dark-haired and fair-skinned, holding on to the reins of an agitated horse, who appeared panicked but seemed to be surprised more than anything. Standing a fair bit away was a woman, her skin dark and gut expanded, clearly expecting and wearing a long garb to remain modest. Standing with her was a small child in a dress of sorts. A daughter but had the toothy smile of a misfit little boy who had seen a fair few fights. Cassandra smiled at the scene: a simple family traveling to make ends meet for their family. A simple way to live, but they seemed happy.

The father finally wrangled the horse, to the cheers of his wife and daughter, and he turned around to see them, but his face twisted to one of concern as he and Cassandra made eye contact. Cassandra was startled when he saw her in the darkness of the trees, and she was about to call out when he was the first to speak.

“Hey! Who are you!” He rushes over to his family’s side, the horse staying put. “Speak now!”

“I am of no threat!” Cassandra steps out of the shadows, hands up to show she held nothing in her hands. “I am a simple traveler like you. I heard the horse whinny, and I was curious. I did not mean to scare

you.”

The husband didn’t seem convinced, but his wife held his shoulder. He looks at his wife, and she gives him a smile. He grunts and looks back at Cassandra.

“My apologies, ma’am. Are you heading to Falcon Haven as well?”

“Yes, I am. I was hoping to get there by midnight.”

“Do you have a horse or mule?” The wife asks. Cassandra shakes her head. The wife looks to her husband, “Joseph. Look at the poor thing. She looks like she’s been traveling for hours. It is no skin off our back if we travel with her.”

“Hm...” The man grunts, thinking it over.

“I have a coin!” Cassandra pleads, “Please. The faster I get to Falcon Haven, the better. Traveling by foot at night is not a good idea.”

“Hm... Alright.” The husband nods, walking back to the horse. “Come on now. We still have a ways to go.”

Cassandra sighs a breath of relief and walks up to the wife and daughter, mouthing a ‘thank you.’ The wife laughs.

“Think nothing of it, love. Come on now. You don’t mind being asked questions, do you?”

“Questions?” Panic hits Cassandra’s heart for a moment before the daughter grabs her wrist and starts jumping as they walk to the carriage.

“Why do you dress like that, stranger? What’s with the hat? Do you garden or something? My gram gram has a hat like that!”

“Ah... That’s what you mean.” Cassandra teases up as the child continues to ask questions of her. She prays for the gods to give her the mental fortitude to handle such a curious child.

* * *

“Why are you sitting like that?” The girl sat with Cassandra as she sat cross-legged, her eyes closed and her breath steady. Cassandra peeked

and saw the girl, who she learned was named Bonnie, was sitting cross-legged next to her, watching with those big soulful eyes. Cassandra took a glance in front of her, and sitting on a crate was the mother, Marsha. She smiled at Cassandra and gave her a nod, going back to her cross-stitching. Having permission now, Cassandra looked at Bonnie and took a breath. It had been a while since she had spoken to children. Hopefully she won't come off as weird.

"Well... I am meditating."

"Meta...tating?" Bonnie tried to parrot.

"Correct."

"Why?"

"It helps me center myself."

"Why?"

"Because I am still stressed out about my travels."

"Why? You don't look dirty."

"Bonnie." Marsha warns, "A traveler's appearance doesn't tell the whole story."

"No, no, she's correct." Cassandra waved her hand. "I hadn't traveled very far. I only left the capital a mere few hours ago."

"Wow! You came from the capital?!" Bonnie bounced a little in her seat. "What's it like? My gram gram says it's full of, whatchamacallit? Those fancy people in big poofy dresses and funny hats."

Cassandra snickers. "Yes, they are quite ridiculous outfits, aren't they? But those nobles just want to show off they can buy those items. Money is power, apparently."

"Wow... How do you know that?" Bonnie asks.

Cassandra presses her lips, counting to three, then five, then ten, calming her heart. "I... was a servant to one of the nobles. A lady-in-waiting, as it were. I did the paperwork the noble lady didn't want to do."

"Wow, you worked for a princess?"

"She wasn't a princess, but she certainly acted like one."

"Did she marry a prince?"

"She certainly married one that thought of himself as such." Cassandra groans, knowing one pair of nobles that fit this exact situation.

"What do the royals do in those big houses?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"But I thought you worked for them!"

"Just because I used to work for them doesn't mean I know what happened all the time." Cassandra shrugs, "However, I can tell you one thing: Those nobles don't know when to shut their mouths. Remember this lesson, Bonnie. Never tell a noble your deepest, darkest secret. Because they will tell everyone."

Bonnie gasps, "Even if I tell them to pinky promise?"

"Yes." Cassandra nods, "Even if you tell them to pinky promise."

Bonnie gasps again and runs up to her mother, "Mama! Mama! Did you hear that?! Did you?!"

"Yes, yes, baby." Marsha pats Bonnie's head before looking at Cassandra. "Seems like you know a lot about the noble houses, hm?"

Panic hits Cassandra's heart again, but she keeps her cool. "Yes... Like I said. The nobles can't shut their mouths. Loose lips sink ships, after all, and if you're not talking, you're listening. And let me tell you, I did a lot of listening when I was in the capital."

"You're quite resourceful, aren't you?" Marsha teased, "Tell me, though, to ease my heart. Why is it you are leaving such a high-ranked position?"

"Hm?" Cassandra felt strange. What a weird way to ask a question.

"I doubt someone as high-ranking as you would travel without an audience or even a guard. You must be fleeing, are you not? That's why you are going to Falcon Haven. It is a place for travelers."

Cassandra's heart raced, trying to find an answer. Ultimately, she saw no reason to lie, but there was no reason why she couldn't opt for some

truth.

“Well... if you must know, listeners often are seen as enemies. I simply escaped before the ax could come down on my head, as it were.” Cassandra explained, “I know it is selfish of me to leave such a position of privilege, but it was for the best. I have no family left in the court who can protect me after all.”

“I am so sorry to hear that. Prayers to your family above.”

“Thank you. Your words mean more than you think.”

Cassandra could see Bonnie’s happy face turn to sorrow, and she, ever so carefully, walked back over to Cassandra and opened her arms. Cassandra raised a brow but understood, nodding. Bonnie embraces the tired traveler tightly. As tight as a child could muster, understanding that family is everything, but to hear that someone could have none could crush any soul. Cassandra didn’t mind the comforting embrace. She only wished she could get lost in it longer.

“Hey...” Bonnie whispered, “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Of course.” Cassandra muttered back, “And I pinky promise to keep it.” Cassandra could hear Bonnie squeal at that, but she cleared her throat, serious about this secret.

“My gram gram took an ax to my pappy. I understand why you don’t want an ax on your head too.”

Cassandra chuckles, “Your gram gram sounds like a very interesting woman.”

“Shhhhhh!!” Bonnie pushes off of Cassandra and waves her tiny hands in front of Cassandra’s mouth, “It’s a secret!!”

“Oh, of course, of course.” Cassandra nods, chuckling along, “Oh, of course, Bonnie.”

* * *

Cassandra sets down another crate from the crates, stretching her arms

and straightening her back after she does. She huffs and looks at the carriage. Just a few more crates, and the family she traveled with will be unpacked. She goes to grab another crate when she spots Bonnie trying to carry a crate on her own. Cassandra laughs to herself when the poor girl can't move it even an inch.

"Oh, Bonnie, don't try and move that one. You'll hurt your back." Marsha warns, "Let Cassandra and Daddy take care of them."

"But I want to help!" Bonnie protests. Cassandra hums to herself, thinking, before looking at her bag that was still in the carriage. She lifts the crate up and calls over her shoulder at Bonnie.

"Hey! I could use some help with getting my bag! If only there was a little helper who could grab it for me."

Bonnie brightens up, and she runs past Cassandra as she brings the crate over with the rest.

"Good thinking." Marsha laughs, "Are you sure you didn't have children of your own?"

"No, no." Cassandra shakes her head with a smile, watching as Bonnie runs back with her bag. "I did interact with children before, but I worry I may be a little out of touch when it comes to them. Oh, thank you, Bonnie." She takes her bag back and slings it over her shoulder.

"Nonsense, you are wonderful. You would make a fine mother. If you plan on having children, that is."

Cassandra smiles, "I wouldn't mind that. But the right someone has to come along. And I doubt love will find me when I'm traveling like this."

"Oh, none of that. Love will find you anywhere. Why I met Joseph whilst traveling with my family."

"Did someone say my name?" Joseph walked back around, having gone to check on the horse before coming back to unload more crates. Marsha waved her hand and laughed.

"Oh, it's nothing, Joseph. I was just telling Cassandra about how we

met, oh ho! Quite the tale, really.”

“While I love to stay and hear it.” Cassandra interrupts, “I do believe we should go our separate ways now. Thank you again for your aid. You three, oh, sorry. You four will be in my prayers.”

Marsha beams, gently smoothing out her dress and taking a moment to appreciate the life she had inside her. Joseph grunts and nods, relieved to hear that someone will be thinking of them.

“You have the coin you promised?” Joseph asks.

“Of course I do.” Cassandra roots through the pouch on her person, taking out 15 gold coins. Joseph’s eyes widen at the amount being placed in his hands, sputtering a little while Cassandra looks unphased, “Hopefully this is good compensation.”

“A-are you kidding?!” Joseph raises his voice, absolute shock taking over, “Where—how?!”

“My old job paid me very well. Please accept it. It’s the least I can do as a thank you for getting me here by sunset.”

With Joseph still standing there sputtering, Cassandra turns to leave, walking off into the city to find somewhere to stay. But she doesn’t get far when someone tugs at her cloak. She looks down, and she sees Bonnie hugging her and holding her in place.

“Please don’t leave!” She pleads, “You can stay with us! You can help us with work and stuff!”

Cassandra’s heart breaks a little. She turns and crouches to Bonnie’s level, placing a hand on her shoulder. She could see the tears forming in the young girl’s eyes, despite keeping Cassandra with them.

“Bonnie.” She speaks in a low tone, “Since you shared a secret with me, it’s only fair I share a secret with you. But you must swear on your life never to tell anyone. Not even your parents.”

Bonnie nods, “Yes. Yes, I will keep the secret.”

“Good.” Cassandra took a breath. “The truth is, there is a very bad man who wants me dead. I’m not a lady-in-waiting; I am a noble who

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practices a craft the man hates. He got all of the other houses to hate me, and he wants me dead. I must hide to stay safe, so I'm sorry, but I cannot stay with you."

"But that's not fair." Bonnie pleads, watching Cassandra stand up, "You're so nice. Why does he hate you?"

"He hates what I do, Bonnie. And you're right, it's not fair. But it's the life we live." Cassandra turns around, hiding the tears she's shedding, "Please... Keep me in your prayers. Remember me. Goodbye, Bonnie."

Cassandra quickly starts walking away, leaving the family behind. They would only be a footnote in her journey, but her heart knew that she would be a chapter in theirs. Hopefully, through them, her name would be remembered if the nobleman found her tonight.

Hopefully someone would mourn her when she was gone.

Chapter 2

Cassandra's understanding of the world outside of the walls of the capital is through the books she reads. She will admit she was a sheltered girl; she was shielded from the horrors of the outside world, and while she was under her house arrest, she did her research on what the world outside of the capital is like.

She will be frank; she was scared, terrified even. The outside world had factions, hatred of others only based on whose child you are or what your skin color is. To Cassandra, it was completely illogical. Why would people think this? But then she has to remember that people aren't logical beings, at least not completely.

It's selfish of her to think humans should be flawless in their thinking. Because if everyone thought in a flawless manner, she wouldn't be in this situation.

Cassandra walks around in her own thoughts in the city of Falcon Haven, finding it almost mediocre at best. The buildings were made of wood, short and stout, but well constructed. They were tightly packed together, some having store stalls at the base of them. One quick sniff of these stalls told her exactly what they sold. Some sold general items, some sold street food such as fried dough, some were bakeries and had wrapped up operations for the night, and some had the horrid smell of raw meat, the scraps that didn't sell being tossed to the street dogs. Cassandra steered clear of those stalls.

CHAPTER 2

There were also stalls that sold various herbs and spices, both for culinary and medical purposes. Cassandra stopped at one, looking on at the piles of spices and herbs. Bay, basil, cooking ash, black pepper, salts, cinnamon, flax seeds, garlic, and frankincense resin—and that's what she could see! It was a mage's dream! She had to import or steal from the kitchens of the noble houses to get a fraction of what her spells called for! Now she had the power to buy it for herself!

She shook her head, though. No, she reminded herself she needed to find an inn first, somewhere to stay until she could plan her next move. She reluctantly moved on, looking for the inns.

She read in a traveler's book that the best way to find a place with rooms to board in are taverns that state they have rooms to spare. Lucky for her, Cassandra spotted such a building, its signage amusing her a bit: The Lucky Raven. The circular sign had a raven on it, naturally, except it appeared that the bird was hungover from the beer it was drinking. It caused Cassandra to chuckle at the absurdity; why would a bird willingly get drunk?

Looking at the large bay window, she could see a smaller sign. Getting closer, she could read what it said.

"ROOMS AVAILABLE"

Perfect!

She enters the tavern, the door swinging open, and she narrowly dodges a glass mug being thrown her way.

"Mate! You nearly hit a lady!" A big man shouts at another big man.

"Yeah? What are you going to do about it, mate?!" The other man shouts back.

Cassandra watches wide-eyed as the two men start fist fighting, the other patrons of the bar cheering on the fighting. Cassandra, a little stunned, slips by the crowd and towards the bar, sitting down on a rickety stool and actually taking a moment to look around.

It was a rustic space, one that reminded Cassandra of a hunting lodge.

Dark wood panels light up in the warm glow of a fireplace, with the head of a large stag up above it. Patrons of all backgrounds gathered at various tables and booths, staff running around to serve foamy drinks and hearty meals. The sounds of singing, fighting, and coins clanking on the wood counters. The smell of sweat and hops assaulted Cassandra's fragile nose, but she had to admit that the merriment of the place was lovely. It warmed her cold heart, and despite it all, she could feel herself getting lost in the warm light of it all. She could almost pretend she was back home with her whole family, enjoying Yule like they always would.

But reality slowly sank back in as she remembered the fires that took her family, and her core went cold again. The chatter and singing became muffled in her ears, and she looked down at the counter. No matter what, her heart will always be taken back to the fire from that night. Always coming back to that fire from that night. She will never allow herself to forget that night. It's what kept her going all this time.

A reminder to survive.

Cassandra looks up and sees the barmaid standing behind the counter looking at her. Her broad shoulders, her most notable trait, and her toasted skin decorated with freckles reminded Cassandra of a brown chicken egg. A strange comparison her mind made, but it was the best way she could describe the woman. Her maiden dress was stained with beer and ale, but nothing that couldn't be washed out. Cassandra noticed the concerned look on her face as she watched the stranger sit in silence, only now noticing her presence.

"What's going on, love?" She asked, her accent emphasizing 'love,' "Don't get many dressed like you around here."

"I am in need of a room." Cassandra states matter-of-factly, "I saw you had rooms available. How much for a few nights?"

"Oh! Well, that would be five silver a night." The barmaid explains, "It's a steep price, I know, but that includes breakfast and dinner."

“Hm...” Cassandra thinks for a moment. Gold was all she had on hand at the moment, and she didn’t mind paying a bit extra to pay in advance. She takes out one gold coin and places it on the counter. The barmaid raised a brow, and Cassandra asked, “How many nights will this get me?”

“That will get you two nights, since one gold is ten silver.”

“Hm... Acceptable.” Cassandra then takes out four more gold coins. “I presume this will get me ten nights then?”

The barmaid blinks, her mouth slightly agape, opening and closing like a fish. “Yes, ma’am...”

“Good.” Cassandra gets up. “Now, where may the rooms be?”

“Up the stairs, down the hall.” The barmaid gingerly points to the staircase on the far wall. Cassandra nods and turns, not noticing the barmaid rolling the coins into her apron.

No one paid the strange traveler any mind, though some gave her some weird glances. That didn’t matter to Cassandra. All she wanted right now was to get some well-needed rest in an actual bed. She had big plans for tomorrow.

* * *

The room was nothing special. A smallish room with a window opposite the door, a bed in the corner, and a desk and chair on the opposite wall. A well-worn rug is draped on the ground, and a chest sits at the foot of the bed. It’s modest, yes, but it was all Cassandra needed. She closes the door behind her and sets her bag down on the desk. She flops onto the bed, back first, with a huff. She opens her eyes to look at the dark wooden ceiling, plain and unassuming. She takes a deep breath in, smelling the faint smells of cooked bacon, eggs, and dust. She slowly shuts her eyes, her mind wandering into itself, trying to find something to comfort herself with. But she doesn’t find anything. Nothing but the

comforting feeling of the bed beneath her. That was some comfort at least.

A knock at the door takes her out of her self-inflicted stupor, and she sits up, staring at the door. With a sigh, she gets up, walks to the door, and opens it. Standing there to greet her was a taller man, one of the big, bushy men from downstairs who caused a scene when one of them threw a mug. In fact, Cassandra recalls this was the man who threw that mug in her direction. Her neutral expression slowly morphed into one of distaste.

“Aye, uh... Hello, ma’am.” The man nervously rubs his neck, hat in hand. “Aye, uh... Wanted to apologize for that little scuffle there. My mates wouldn’t stop pestering me for nearly harming a lady, and I do feel guilty for it.”

“Apology accepted.” Cassandra’s tone was neutral, to the point: “I expected to see such a scene when coming to a place like this. But your concern for my well-being is a welcome one.”

“Aye, good. It, uh, would seem we’re neighbors too.”

“Come again?”

“Aye, me and my mates are taking up the room next door.” He points to the door nearby, “Adventurers we are! Fighting monsters, getting riches, saving damsels.” He says with a wink.

“Sometimes the real monsters are those you keep close.” Cassandra mutters to herself.

“What was that?” The man asks.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Cassandra saves herself, “I apologize, but I must cut this conversation short, as I am quite tired and need rest.”

“Ah, right, right. But, uh, just know... Our door is always open.” He chuckles, his eyes darting up and down a bit. “Goodnight, ma’am.”

Cassandra just shuts the door, disgust plastered on her face. Perhaps in a different story, she would have taken him up on the offer. Perhaps in a different story, she would have joined them and been happy and

CHAPTER 2

content in her role. But this is not that story, and Cassandra walked over to her bag and took out a piece of parchment, jotting down a few notes.

Get a journal from the market.

Learn the man's name.

Summon Lady.

Perform a jinx on that man.

He would not be treating women like that once she was done.

* * *

The morning arrived quicker than expected; Cassandra rose up from her bed like a vampire out of the coffin. Her hair resembled a rat's nest, and her face was twisted like the undead that lurked in the ground. She was a mess, let's be clear. And she knew she was a hot mess. Perhaps that's why the first thing she did was head downstairs to the tavern to request a bucket and directions to the nearest well. The poor barmaid had to do a double take upon seeing Cassandra.

"OH! No, no, no!" She waved her hands around, "No no no, love! I will bring the bucket up to you. You'll get a rag and a hairbrush so you can freshen up. Breakfast will follow soon after. Do you have any dietary restrictions I should know about?"

"No..." Cassandra's voice sounded like gargled salt: "Tea, though... anything herbal."

"Of course, love..." The barmaid hesitantly nods as she watches Cassandra sulk back up the stairs. She wasn't sure if she saw a zombie or not.

Cassandra, for her part, struggled to go up the stairs, her mind heavy with thoughts of her next move, how to keep ahead of the people who

want to hurt her. It's not something to wave off, but she could get comfortable here, lay low, not mention her name, and skip town once too many eyes are on her. Yeah... That was a good plan. Perhaps she can go to the market once she wakes up a bit more.

Cassandra rattled the door handle, barely registering she needed to push, not pull, when an irritating noise pierced her ears.

"Ello, ma'am!" Someone down the hall called. Cassandra looked over and saw the men from next door, three of them standing just outside of their room, laughing and joking. How can they be so joyful in the morning?

Cassandra ignored them and pushed the door open, entering the room and shutting it behind her. She thought of casting a locking talisman on the door, but she remembered she didn't have talisman paper on her. So many supplies she lost when fleeing, but soon she will resupply and be able to port around more supplies easily. She really was looking forward to finding a glass maker. Perhaps they will have vials for spices and flasks for cold brew potions. Yes, the possibilities were endless, and Cassandra couldn't help but chuckle a bit.

Finally, she didn't have to hide everything. It can be hidden in plain sight.

A hard knock at the door alerts Cassandra. It was far too strong to be the barmaid. With irritation returning to her mind, she marches to the door and opens it a crack; the man from the hall who greeted her was standing there.

"I said, 'ello, ma'am." He says with a smile. Cassandra could hear the thinly veiled threatening tone in his voice: "Sleep well?"

"As a matter of fact, I did." Cassandra tried to shut the door, but the man pounded his fist against it again.

"Let me finish, let me finish." The man spoke, "Listen... Me and the lads were talking, and... we could really use a gal like you in our party."

"Oh? And just what kind of a gal am I?"

"You know, a medic!" He says excitedly, "We get bruised up a lot during fights, and we need someone to guard the campsite as well. So we were thinking... How about you join us, ma'am? A fellow traveler such as yourself must not have anywhere she'd rather be."

"Tempting offer." Cassandra growls with a forced smile, "But I will have to politely decline." She goes to shut the door quickly, but the man grips the door, forcing it open despite Cassandra's best effort. Her heart begins to race, trying to figure out his end game.

"Oh come on ma'am. An offer like this doesn't come around often, specifically to a woman such as yourself. You could be really happy with us, just sayin'."

Cassandra felt a lump in her throat, quickly swallowing it so as not to show her fear on her face. She studied his posture, trying to find any weak points. She was no pro at hand to hand combat by any stretch of the imagination, but he at least knew one prominent weak spot all men had.

Right, between, the legs.

"Oh sorry, are we interrupting anything?" The man and Cassandra look over and see the barmaid with another of the staff, she carrying a tray of food while the other had a bucket of warm water, the steam visually rising from it. The barmaid looks at the man and frowns, "Mr. Cliffore, do I need to cancel your 'appointment' with Miss Daypelt?"

"Ah- No no, keep the appointment." He steps away from the door frame, flustered, "And I take the mount is enough for the deposit, right?"

"That's correct." The barmaid leers.

"Good good. Uh... Me and he lads are heading out. She will meet us... When we get back?"

"Indeed. Now run along." She gestures to the stairs. The man, Mr. Cliffore, nods and rushes over to his friends, who appear annoyed and glancing at Cassandra. She glares back at them and they swiftly turn away, heading back into their room.

Something in her gut told her the men would be back. She would need to keep her eyes open when those men were around.

"I am so sorry about that." The barmaid apologizes, "Those adventurers don't know how to take no for an answer. Have to keep them entertained like children."

"It's alright." Cassandra responds, a strange monotone voice coming from her, "I can handle myself. I just wish to freshen up to make the morning market."

"Of course." The barmaid nods with a smile, glancing at the other worker with her, "Shall we come in?"

"Sure."

Cassandra stepped aside and once the two ladies dropped off the tray and bucket, Cassandra bid them good day and shut the door at last, locking it up. The market would be well underway, but it wouldn't hurt to pamper herself, just a little.

* * *

"By the direction of the winds, help me find my center. Chaos reigns in my body and mind. Let it not be fed. Let the light shine. Let my worries end."

That is the chant Cassandra was muttering to herself over and over as she weaved through the crowd, her bag on her front so someone could so much as touch her goods. Never in her life had she had to walk through crowds this dense before, her knowledge of safety and the spell chant to ease her mind being the only things helping her not break down. The interaction at the inn was still fresh and she kept replaying it over and over again, trying to see if there was anything she could have said differently, but the fault lay in Mr. Cliffore and his friends for not stopping him. He should have taken no for the answer that it was.

The spell chant wasn't very effective in calming her down.

Cassandra found herself back at the spice stall she stopped at before, now open for business with a few customers shopping around. Briefly forgetting her troubles, Cassandra smiles and walks in, looking around at all of the spices and herbs.

I knew for a fact she would need to get the basic healing herbs, basil, thyme, lavender, chamomile, sage, peppermint, rosemary, Aloe Vera, and, if she can find it, cannabis. That last one has been particularly difficult to get since its addictive nature has been a favorite among the high ranks of society. More often than not, her dry herb would disappear without anyone fessing up that they took it.

Regardless, she knew she wouldn't find any of that herb here, but she did find jasmine, rose and yarrow. certainly better than nothing, plus the clairvoyance properties will be a help in her chosen field of magic.

As she grabs bundles of herbs, humming the chant to ease her mind, she notices the shopkeeper looking at her in the corner of her eye. She looks over at him and he looks away. Cassandra walks over with her herbs and places them on the counter, the shopkeeper not wanting to make eye contact.

"How much for this?" Cassandra asks, noticing the small beads of sweat on the man's brow.

"Uh..." He looks down at the herbs, "33 copper, ma'am."

Cassandra blinked. That was a new currency she hadn't heard of. Though based on what she already knew about silver and its worth compared to gold, perhaps it was less than silver. Just what was the worth of copper?

Cassandra sets a single gold coin on the counter, "I shall be back to use the rest of this credit on other goods. I would like to request that you have a batch of dried marigold and witch hazel ready by tomorrow. Is that reasonable?"

The shop keeper quickly shakes his head yes. Satisfied, Cassandra takes her herbs and puts them in the bag. She walks away from the stall,

leaving the flabbergasted shopkeeper in her wake.

She really needs to figure out how much gold is worth among the common people.

* * *

The sun shines brightly on the day still, but with the morning market wrapping up, Cassandra returns to the tavern to go back to her inn room. The tavern she found had patrons, but not as many as the night before. It makes sense, in the middle of the day, people are working, it's not gonna have many people. No sign of Mr. Cliffore or his friend either, which was good. She can perform the ritual in peace. She walked towards the stairs but stopped when she heard the barmaid speak.

"Ma'am? Excuse me, love! You have a moment?" Cassandra looks over and sees the barmaid behind the counter with a smile, "The kitchen is asking what you would like for dinner."

"Hm?" Cassandra walks over, a bit surprised by this treatment, "Well what's being cooked now?"

"Oh nothing yet, but my chefs want to know if yer one of those people that can't eat certain things like nuts or dairy. We had a few cases where people had their throats close up so we want to be sure."

"Oh. Well I generally try to avoid pork but everything else is fine. Thank you for your consideration." Cassandra nods.

"Pork, anything from a pig. Got it." The barmaid walks over to a door, "Have a great day ma'am."

Cassandra couldn't understand this treatment she had been receiving. People loved her, people feared her, people wished to use her. It was so confusing. She just wished to be left alone. The common people were so emotional in interacting with her, seeing the gold she carried, and appearing shocked any time she even pulled out one coin. She had to admit, she still didn't understand how much gold was worth compared

to silver and copper... But that didn't mean she couldn't learn.

When she reentered her room and locked the door, she hurried over to the table, preparing the herbs and a candle. She would have preferred a brown candle and honey outside of her room, but this white candle would have to do for now. Lady would understand.

Cassandra lit the candle, its warm glow filling the room with a rich orange hue. Then, she took out the sage, peppermint, yarrow, and some dandelions she found growing in the cobblestone road on her way back to the tavern. She takes each of them, mixing them together in a vial. She takes a deep breath in, and begins the chant.

"Come to me, familiar. For the one we share love and loss, our souls intertwined. For we bound in this pact, two become one, blood for blood. if you are here, I call out to thee and show yourself to me! As I wish it, so it will be."

She chants this two more times, pouring the herbal mixture on to the flame. The fire roars to life, threatening to consume more than just the herbs, but Cassandra remains calm. When the last of the herbs was burned, the candle shrank back down, leaving the room in relative darkness. A moment passed, silences, other than the quiet muffled sounds of the tavern below.

Then, the fire roared, the candle melting rapidly as the flame came to life, its form morphing and changing, sporting a part of fiery wings. The beast flies around the room, its screeches sparking joy in Cassandra, as she watches the Phoenix fly around the room. It spins around like a top, landing back on the table, fire dying down and revealing the greens and reds under neither the bright fire. An exotic bird from lands unknown, a red ring of feathers around her neck. Beak fanged like a cat, a purple sigil on its back and beady little eyes that dilate at Cassandra, adjusting to the light in the room. Cassandra smiles at the bird and it squawks happily at her.

"Hello Lady." Cassandra greets, her smile warm like the fire before,

“It’s wonderful to see you again.”

Lady squawks, hopping around the table, dancing around and looking around the new room she was in. Then, she turns to Cassandra, squawking again only in a confused tone.

“Yeah... we’re not at home right now. We... Uh... Can’t go back home. A certain duke finally got the others to come after me.” Cassandra explained, followed by a screech from Lady, “I know! I know! But we just gotta find a place to hide. I’m gonna try and study up so we can hide in plain sight. For now, I just need protecting. Can you do that, my familiar?”

Lady squawks again and flies around the room a few times, before settling down on the head board of the bed. Cassandra chuckles to herself before pulling out her book of lore from her bag, opening it up to a random page to start reading. She had time to burn before dinner so might as well refresh on the basics.

Chapter 6 Section 3: Divination Through Pendulums.

Perhaps not basic, but a good read regardless.

* * *

If there was one thing Cassandra missed about being a noblewoman, it was not having to worry about people robbing her. Because she was stuck in the deepest part of the noble sector, where no one would dare think about stealing from, less they are executed by firing squad. If there were two things, it would be the ticking on the grandfather clock that sat in the hall just outside her room.

It was a lovely thing that was imported from a land far away, made of this gorgeous redwood that had scuff marks all over the edges from people walking past it and touching it. Cassandra would often sit in front of it, watching the brass pendulum swing from side to side with the audible tick, tick, tick. She would often count the ticks to see when

the hand would move, watching as, 60 ticks in and the big hand would move. Watching the big hand move around took 60 ticks of that. She always kept time in those 60 ticks. It was good to know when things were and when to expect the big bong at every hour of the day. It became her background noise at night. Something to focus on as she drifted to sleep.

Perhaps the lack of that noise made her hyper aware of the clicking coming from the door.

Cassandra laid in the bed, eyes wide as she listened to the door, metal on metal clicking. Her mind screamed to move but her body was laid, laying there, listening to the door handle twist open with the twist of metal. Cassandra quickly shut her eyes as she listened to sets of heavy footsteps walking into the room, walking slowly in order to not make much sound. She held her tongue as something touched her leg, the quilted blanket being her only barrier. She heard a grunt before the pressure moved away and the footsteps faded, tiptoeing to the other side of the room. What the intention was with that brief touch made Cassandra's heart stop and start again.

The sudden blaring of a bird screeching alerts Cassandra to sit up and glare at whoever was in the room. Standing at her desk with her bag of coins was Mr. Cliffore, standing wide-eyed, looking around for the source of the noise. Thank goodness familiars were invisible to everyone but the caster.

"Mr. Cliffore!" Cassandra tears off her sheets, to sit up, "Get out! Get out now!"

Mr. Cliffore stumbles and rushes to the door, hitting his head on the door frame, dropping the coins all over the ground before, finally, exiting the room. Cassandra gets up and sweeps the coins that had fallen outside of the door into her room with her foot, slamming to the door so all in the tavern/inn could hear. Cassandra takes a deep breath and leans back on the door, sliding down to sit on the ground.

Her heart was in her ears. Her vision blurry as she processed what just happened. She needed to leave. She needed to pack her bags again and leave. She nearly got robbed and if it wasn't for Lady alerting her, it could have been far worse. She knew the dangers of leaving home, she knew of the horrors of the outside world. But everyone was either too kind or too scared of her to do anything. The fact that someone came so close to actually hurting her?

Lady hops off of the bed frame and waddles over to Cassandra, climbing up her nightgown, standing on her knees with a concerned squawk. Cassandra looks at Lady, defeated in her eyes as she stares at the bird familiar. Lady tilted her head and cooed, rubbing her beak on Cassandra's knee. Cassandra cracked a smile at that, a little shocked by her familiar's ability to calm her down.

Cassandra takes a deep breath, closing her eyes to listen to the sounds of the night. All quiet now, all is calm, save for Cassandra's own breath and heartbeat. Starting tomorrow, she decides to be a little more careful with her spending, less another Mr. Cliffore decides to attack her once again.

Chapter 3

A refund was the last thing on Cassandra's mind. All she wanted is to leave this tavern and find a proper inn to stay at. Away from any adventurers, away from any a to be found out. should be simple! But the poor barmaid insisted on giving her a refund. For it was the proper thing to do, she says.

"Please, ma'am." The barmaid insisted, digging through her small coin chest, "Let me count it out for you, money shouldn't be thrown away like this."

"Please, just keep it." Cassandra pleads, "Let it be used for the next patron. I really must go."

The barmaid stiffens a bit and slowly closes the lid on the chest. She looks Cassandra square in the eye, leaning in close, "Does this have to do with Mr. Cliffore?"

"Yes..." Cassandra nodded, looking down at the counter, "He broke into my room last night. I do not feel safe any more. Please. Just let me leave. Use the money for the tavern and inn. Don't worry about me."

The barmaid nodded and bowed, taking the chest and returning it to its safe spot. Cassandra did not wait for her to return, opting to stroll out, the small gust of wind from the door causing her long cloak to flap with a dramatic flair fit for a mage. A weight lifts from Cassandra's shoulders, a sense of freedom returning to her as the wind blows around her.

Cassandra felt her smile return as Lady with a on her shoulder, happily squawking in her ear. Freedom once again, blessed by the winds.

Of course, as Cassandra walked down the road with her bag, the morning market started back up, people avoided her. Not a big deal, though she has noticed a faint whisper among the among. She couldn't pick out particular words, but her senses told her that they weren't good. She ignored them though and walked to another street, this one home to beautiful lanterns on rope, hanging between the two sides, connecting balconies and windowsills with lanterns together. It was difficult not to keep looking up at them with awe and amusement. It felt like when Cassandra was a child and she saw a grand chandelier for the first time. That child-like wonder never quite left her now that she thought about it.

Following the lanterns, Cassandra kept her eye out for any sign for available rooms and luckily, she found one rather quickly. It was a small inn, tucked between a tailor and a cobbler, and saw its fair share of damage, but Cassandra could feel the love coming off of it. She walks in, bells chiming as the door opens. Cassandra compares these to the Witch Bells she used to have on her door before the great purge of her family, but these bells didn't look quite like those old bells. She couldn't assume anything about who owns this place. Right across from her was a desk, decorated with flowers and knickknacks. It reminded Cassandra of her mother's desk, before most of the trinkets got destroyed for the safety of the family. It didn't work of course and Cassandra suspected that destroying good luck charms may have sealed the family's fate...

Cassandra shook off this trek down memory lane and walked up to the desk, seeing no one was there behind it. She looked around, confused. There were two doors, one on each side of the room, both closed. Looking at the desk, Cassandra spots a hand bell with a sign next to it, reading "RING BELL FOR SERVICE". With hesitation, Cassandra picked up the well, and rang it, looking back and forth at each door to

see which door would open.

“COMING!” A voice from the left door shouted. Cassandra jumped a little but set the bell down, waiting for the innkeeper.

The door opened and walked out a stout individual, long blonde hair covering one eye while the other had malicious and boredom in it. They were young, Cassandra was sure, and if she was being honest, she couldn’t tell their gender due to the large clothing they wore. It interested her to say the least and she smiled as the moody teen walked behind the desk, looking boredly at Cassandra.

“What do you want?” The teen asked, their voice even being so monotone it was hard to tell their gender.

“I saw you have rooms available. I would like to rent out a room for a few days, paying in advance.” Cassandra explained.

“We got one left.” The teen huffed, “Two silver a night.”

“Two silver, hmmm...” Cassandra thinks a loud, “So if I pay with a gold coin, that will get me five nights?”

“Yeah. One gold is ten silver, ma’am.” The teen rolled their eyes, as if this was a common fact to know.

Cassandra smiled and nodded, “Excellent. I have a gold coin right here. Where are the rooms?”

“Through that door and up the stairs.” The teen pointed to the closed door, “I’ll let my parents know you’re here Miss...”

“Ah...” She couldn’t use her real name, and had to come up with a fake one, fast! She glanced at the flowers on the desk, her mind racing, “Marigold. Miss Marigold.”

“... Cool.” The teen shrugged.

Cassandra took a deep breath and placed a gold coin on the counter before going to the closed door, finding stairs there right away. She climbed them and hurried to the open room.

Hopefully this time, her neighbors weren’t creeps.

* * *

Thank the gods above that her neighbors weren't creeps. In fact, she only had a nice neighbor: a nice older man working on a book, wishing for the isolationist of a quiet inn to complete his work. Cassandra respected that and promised to not get in his way, also adding she'll keep the noise to a minimum. With that, she left for the market, excited to pick up the herbs she ordered.

The morning markets were hectic as usual but nothing stopped Cassandra from getting the herbs she per-ordered. The seller of course was scared of her but he did keep his word so Cassandra wouldn't be mad at him. Not like she would be, but she did mutter a blessing on him, just to get the poor guy to relax. Hopefully it was enough to help him through the rest of the day.

As Cassandra walked through the market, she realized how light her coin purse had gotten. Sure she didn't leave home with a ton of money, but considering how much she had spent in only three days, she needed to stop spending so much, and get more money fast, and she knew what to do. All she had to do was find a bank.

Of course, Falcon Haven was rather large and it took a few questions to find this bank. When she did, it was almost comical. It was a small space, deceptively small in fact. As when she walked in, she was greeted by a large and deep room, rows and columns of desks and chairs lining the sides with a center walkway cleared for customers. People from all walks of life were there to conduct business and complete translations. Just walking around looking for someone to help her, Cassandra overheard a landlord dispute, a business owner trying to get a loan, and a child opening their own bank account with their father's assistance. While not magical by any sense of the word, it was a miracle what power money had over people. It was a type of magic Cassandra had to, begrudgingly, respect.

A worker of the bank sees her and flags her over to his desk. Cassandra smiles and walks over, sitting down at the table.

“Just came back from the morning market, I see?” The man greets, making small talk, “I haven’t been in a while, how is it?”

“I would say it’s good.” Cassandra nods, “It’s a bit chaotic and you must be ready for pickpockets, but as long as you keep your wits, you’ll be alright.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” the man nods, before taking out his book and quill, “Now, what brings you to Falcon Haven’s bank today?”

“Well...” Cassandra takes out her coin pouch, “I need to convert my gold coins into the lowest currency you have.”

The bank worker stops jotting notes in his book and looks at her with a raised brow. He sets his quill down and snickers, “Well... You don’t happen to be a pickpocket yourself?”

“No.” Cassandra scrunches her brows, her honor being questioned, “Why would a thief come to a bank asking for money less than what they have?”

“Hm. You really aren’t one then.” The worker continues to write in his book, “and just how much are you exchanging?”

Cassandra looks in her coin pouch, counting out twenty three gold. She needs one gold to make the spell work so she looks at the worker and says, “Twenty two gold.”

The man nods and jots it down, “Right. twenty two gold translates to 2,200 copper coins. Would you like a complementary locked chest to carry all of the coins?”

“Yes, I would like that.”

“Good. I would also like to mention that the total weight of the coins alone is almost twenty kilos. Are you certain about this?”

“I’m sure.” Cassandra nods, a soft smile on her face.

The man didn’t seem convinced, but shrugged, “Alright ma’am.”

He gets up and leaves to a door, leaving Cassandra alone for a moment.

Using this moment, Cassandra looks around to see if anyone would be watching her. Upon seeing no one was looking, she takes a deep breath and mutters a blessing.

“Here and now, I invoke the Earth. Bless those who have helped me on my journey, and provide them with your bounty. Keep their way clear and their heath burning as new life blesses them. So shall it be.”

She completes the blessing and smiles. She looks over and sees the man with a small hand cart, pushing it towards Cassandra. She notes how he was putting in some effort pushing it, causing a wave of concern about what she got herself into.

“Here it is ma’am.” He gestures to the chest in the cart, “That would be 22 gold please.”

“Ah... I see what you mean now.” Cassandra slowly nods, “Well I’ve gotten this far, haha! The cart wouldn’t happen to be complementary as well, right?”

* * *

The cart was not complementary, go figure, and lugging that torso sized chest around was insulting to her status. However, it would all be worth it soon.

After spending most of the afternoon lugging the chest back to the inn, she stopped to take a break in the lobby, sitting on the ground to catch her breath, and rest her arms and back. Cassandra had suddenly gained a large quantity of respect for the people who carried her luggage when she was a child, along with everyone else’s luggage. No wonder during her teen years she saw the men as attractive. Their muscles built after years of heavy lifting.

But Cassandra didn’t get to sit in peace for long, as a familiar voice called from the counter.

“Oh you’re back, weird lady.” The teen stands up, looking over the

counter, "You ok?"

"Yeah...! Yeah I'm fine." Cassandra replies breathlessly.

"Would you like some water or...?"

They gesture to the open door. Cassandra shakes her head yes. She didn't realize how parched she was. The teen hurries to the other room, quickly returning with a wooden mug. Cassandra smiles and graciously takes the cup, greedily chugging the water. By the heavens above she was thirstier than she thought!

"Yeah it's getting hotter out nowadays." The teen sits down next to Cassandra, their uncovered eye side visible to her, "Mom said I should start offering customers water when they come back, I don't know."

"Well that is very generous of you." Cassandra smiles, "Are your parents here?"

"Nah... Dad works at the cobbler and mom works at the tailor. They had me working the counter since I was seven." The teen admits, "And even then they work long hours."

"I'm sorry to hear that. It must be pretty lonely here."

"Nah it's alright. I got friends who come over a lot." The teen pauses, "Sorry to bother you like this, mom told me to be extra nice to you. We don't get rich people around here often."

Cassandra's eyes widened a little, "Oh! No no, I'm not rich by any means." She quickly covers up, "I just happened to have worked for the rich. They paid me well to fake their finances."

"Heh. I knew it." The teen chuckled, "I knew those elites have stuff to hide."

"You have no idea." Cassandra chuckled, "You have no idea..."

They sat there in silence for a bit, the company of another wandering soul gave the other comfort. Cassandra couldn't describe it but she saw a shining part of herself in this teen. Innocent and sheltered but a bit rebellious as well. She wondered who this child would become in the future, hoping that their path ends up better than her own.

“Jester.” The teen said.

“Excuse me?” Cassandra tilted her head.

“You gave me your name, so it’s only fair I give mine.” The teen explained, “It’s Jester.”

“Oh.” Cassandra was torn between being shocked and confused.

“Yeah people said my birth was a joke.” Jester shrugged, “My parents are no longer friends with those people anymore.”

“I can imagine. It’s a pretty name regardless.”

Jester looked at Cassandra, “Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve met many jesters in my time and they were some of the kindest people you could ever come across.” Cassandra’s smile widens as she remembers those fun loving chaos gremlins, “They are witty, fun, and know how to be annoying whilst speaking the truth. No higher power could kill them; their insults were in fact true. It was a fun career if you like to watch grown men squirm in their seats as the jester jests about the infertility of the target.”

“Wow... I didn’t know that.” Jester looks to the ground for a moment before looking at Cassandra with a smile, “Thanks. For uh... Comforting me about my name.”

“It’s nothing.” Cassandra slowly gets up and brushes off her clothes, “Well I’ve talked your ear off long enough. I really should go to my room.”

“Alright. It was nice chatting with you, miss.” Jester stands up and walks back to the counter, “Have a good night.”

“You too Jester.” Cassandra picks up the chest and struggles to carry it back to her room. She could feel Jester’s eyes staring at her for five minutes as she struggled to bring that chest up the stairs to her room.

It took another 10 minutes to enter the room and set the chest on the bed. A heavy huff escapes her mouth as she flops on the bed next to the chest. She closes her eyes only to open them again to see Lady staring at her, a beep coming from the familiar.

“Oh hi Lady.” Cassandra greets, “Ready to do some alchemy?”

Lady beeps in response.

“That’s my girl.”

Cassandra sits up and hurries to the door and shuts it, locking it with the magic she used before. Don’t want any peeping eyes on her activities. She walks to the chest and opens it, seeing how the coins are arranged and bundled. Stacks of ten, all two hundred twenty stacks. She thinks of doing five stacks at a time, so she only has to do the ritual forty-four times. It would be a long night, but nothing she couldn’t handle.

She takes five stacks and brings them to the table, setting them aside as she flips to the correct page, showing the squared circle sigil. Lady flies over and looks at the sigil, waddling over to the empty space before drawing the sigil on the table with her beak, the texture akin to chalk.

A circle, a triangle within the circle, a square within the triangle and finally one last circle within the square.

Cassandra nods and begins to take out the material: sage, some matches, and her knife. She arranges a little bit of the sage in the corners of the triangle. Then she sets the copper coins in the center of the circle, the earth she intends to transmute. She takes a match and lights it, setting the sage ablaze, the fire not daring to burn the table without the mage’s permission.

Then, she takes her knife and stares at it in the dim light. She really didn’t want to do this, but a sacrifice is needed for the ritual. She cuts her palm neat, the blade ever sharp causing her little discomfort. She squeezes her blood over the copper coins before speaking the chant:

“In the sea without lees

“Standeth the gods’ vessels

“Eating their limbs variable

“And maketh themselves yet full stable

“When all their skin be from him gone

“They standeth still here as a stone

*“Here is now both white and red
“And all so the stone to quicken the dead
“All and some without fable
“Both hard and soft and malleable
“Understand now well and right
“And thank you gods of this sight
“The gods’ vessel is my name
“Eating my limbs to make me tame”*

As morbid as the chant is, Cassandra could argue with the results. The coins glow with a fiery white, then shift hues, black, white, yellow, red, back to black again. The fire roars with passion as the room fills with the smell of sage. After a moment, the fire dies down and the coins stop glowing. Cassandra smiles as she sees their new color.

Gold. Pure gold. And all it took was some sage and a bit of her own blood. Cassandra looks to Lady, very pleased with herself.

“Fifty down, only two thousand one hundred fifty to go.”

The lady gives an annoyed squawk. This was going to be a long night.

Chapter 4

The night ran long, but Cassandra had done it. She turned all of the copper coins into gold. And the sun just started to rise. A successful alchemy session, she believed. So successful that, when she completed it, she started to laugh to herself.

“Hahahahaha! I’ve done it! They said it couldn’t be done by a single person but look at me now! How does it feel, Daegel!? How does it feel to be poorer than the girl you— Oh gods I’ve gone insane...”

Cassandra sinks down and sits on the floor next to her bed, holding her head in her hands. She really was going insane, cursing the man she was not only on the run from, but also terrified of. She really needed to rest so she doesn’t end up saying more stupid stuff saying that out loud.

Cassandra looks at her knees and sees Lady standing on them, staring up in a judgmental look. She didn’t even need to squawk or beep, the look along cu deep.

“Oh shush, you don’t even need sleep. You don’t understand how I feel.” That earned her a hard peck on the forehead, “Ow... Fine, point taken.”

Cassandra looks to the bed, seeing how comfortable and relaxing it appeared with its hard pillow and avenge sheets. She slowly blinks and weighs her options. She wasn’t particularly hungry per say, and she didn’t want to do any shopping. Plus, it would be good to lay low for a bit. Taking a nap would be a good chance to do that. Cassandra gets

up and points to the door, Lady flies over to the top of the door frame. Cassandra flops onto the bed, face down on to the pillow that mostly smelled like her but an added hint of sage from all of the burning she had done.

It wouldn't kill her to sleep a bit. Just to rest her eyes and be satisfied with the fact she had riches again. She had the freedom to go wherever now, escape from the Duke. She could hire her own body guards, find a small fortress out in the middle of nowhere so she may do her craft in peace. The possibilities had the sky as its limit.

Such a promise of a life of peace helped lure her to sleep, her eyes drifting closed as the exhaustion finally caught up and held her eyes shut.

* * *

Cassandra opened her eyes and found herself in an open space. an endless horizon in front of her with an endless sky above, stars speckle the sky like a bedazzled silk gown. Looking around, Cassandra realized she was sitting up in a meditative posture, her mind cleared like the water she sits on. No ripples, no distress. Just a calm yet surreal cosmic place.

It was a familiar plane for Cassandra; often she would find herself lucid dreaming in what she believes is the astral plane. Sometimes she would explore, discovering strange structures like planets she could jump to, or floating islands with colorful crystals shining at the bottom like roots. Sometimes Lady was there, other times not. Most times she doesn't even take the form she appears in when in the material plane, but rather a massive phoenix form she would conjure up to be before shrinking down to her material plane form. Not today though. Cassandra figured that, since Lady was guarding the door, she couldn't be here with her. That was ok though. She didn't mind being alone.

As Cassandra sat alone, wondering how long she would be here before waking up, whispers caught her ear, she turned her body to see behind her and she blinked. Four beings were standing in a circle each to one another, orange, blue, white and green, speaking softly among themselves. Cassandra gets up and walks over, their conversation becoming clearer as he approaches.

“And what of the girl?” Orange asks, its neck bent in an unnatural way, “Should we do anything?”

“Why bother?” White shrugs, its pure self cursed with a blood red core and a beating heart, “She hasn’t reached such status yet.”

“Calm yourself, friend.” Green responds, ferns and red caped mushrooms growing on its body, “I say we keep observing. You never know what may happen.”

“I agree.” Blue bows, its head floating from its body. Said head turns to Cassandra and floats over with a smile, leaving a trail of blue shine behind it, “What do you think?”

“Huh?” Cassandra tilts her head, the dream turning weird for her, “What do you mean?”

“We are discussing the nature of destiny and whether you have control over it or if it controls you.” Blue’s head explains, “What’s your stance on it?”

“Oh. Well...” Cassandra looks over, seeing the other figures watching, “Well, I think destiny isn’t predetermined. That you have control over your destiny and what the outcome is. The fates may play their hand but you ultimately are the deciding force. The thread isn’t cut until you make that choice.”

The figures look among one another and nod, muttering about whether that explanation made sense and what to take from it. Blue’s head nods as well.

“Very interesting. Thank you for this insight.” Blue smiles.

“It is no issue.” Cassandra smiles back, a little uncomfortable by this

dream now.

“In exchange for this insight, we have some of our own, before you wake up.”

“Oh? What is it?” Cassandra notes how Blue’s expression sharpens, the news most definitely going to be bad.

“He’s here.” Blue plainly states, “He’s here in the city. Take the gold you’ve made and run. Head East. You will find a small town. That’s where your journey will truly take root.”

Before Cassandra could process any of that, the water under her ripples and she sinks down below the surface, air bubbles floating up as she sees the four figures standing up there, watching her drown.

* * *

Cassandra wakes up with a start, gasping for air. She holds her neck as if water was still trapped. The edges of her vision blur and her ears ringing with a piercing sound. But as the moment comes to pass, her senses return to normal, and she remembers to breathe.

She looks at the ceiling reflecting on it. The drowning, the four figures, how real it all felt. Lucid dreams had that feeling but something told her that this dream was different, that fate was playing it hand. Could it be the fates preparing to make a cut, but giving her the chance to escape if she heeded the warning?

She decides to take his warning.

Cassandra immediately gets up and freshens up, grabbing some coins and exiting her room for the first time that day. She hurried down stairs to the lobby, passing by Jester who was reading the paper. Jester looks up at Cassandra with confusion.

“Oh you were here?” They ask, “I thought you left early.”

“I was busy last night and caught up on sleep.” Cassandra pauses before looking over her shoulder to Jester, “Jester. Where can I get a

horse around here?”

“Mister Mercer’s stable is nearby. Heard he’s got a new shipment of horses from his people.”

“Perfect. Where is his business?”

“Head right, down the road and when you see Tips and Top’s Tavern, you turn left down the alley. You’ll know you’re close when you smell the dung.”

“Thank you Jester.” Cassandra swiftly walks outside, the coolness of night contrasting with the warmth of the inn. Quickfootedly, Cassandra walks among the crowd, their whispers and mutters loud in her ear. No words she can pick out but her mind screamed that they were talking about her, that she is in danger, that the assassins could be anyone and kill her right now. But she takes a breath, and continues to walk.

Irrational choices will be her downfall. The scissors will not snip. Not yet.

Following Jester’s directions, Cassandra finds herself in an alleyway with a strong horrible smell of horse manure. She could see off to the sides shoveled piles rotting away with hundreds of flies coming in to lay their eggs and make it their spawn’s dinner. Cassandra suddenly gained a new respect for cattle herds and people who were serious equestrians. Anyone who was willingly going into who to clean out one shove scoop at a time was worthy of all her respect. It didn’t take too long for the smell to become a bi stronger and for her to spot the busyness.

It was a decent sized place, with a small office off to the side for transactions and a large barn like structure, the doors open to show the horses, mules and donkeys for sale. Some gorgeous looking horses were on display and Cassandra knew she had to get one of those ones. Quickly, she entered the office and found it was just as busy as the stable; bits and bobs of all things equestrian everywhere, lining walls, and nowhere to sit. It was an experience to say the least. And no she would most likely forget given what the night may bring.

“Hello?” The stout and broad man smiles, setting down the brass belt buckle he was polishing, before walking over the counter to help his customer, “What can I help you with?”

“I need a horse.” Cassandra states, “One that can carry a lot of weight. One of the bigger ones will do.”

“Looking for something pretty or mostly functional?”

“Can’t I have both?” Cassandra tilts her head.

The man snaps his fingers, “I got you covered.”

They both walked to the stables, where horses whined and donkeys brayed for attention. The man stopped at one stall and Cassandra’s eyes widened a little, keeping her composure. It was a gorgeous black and white horse, mane white and a tail that faded to black. Its large stature was just as tall as her from its hooves to its shoulder, and the large beast looked at Cassandra with soulful eyes, hopeful for life despite living in a bare stable. Yes. This was the horse Cassandra would get.

“This here is Ace, a gelding Gypsy Horse, around 15 to 16 hands. He’s a bit green but responds well to positive reinforcement. As long as you approach him with good intent and don’t show yourself as a threat-”

“He’s perfect.” Cassandra cuts the seller off, “How much to get him set up to ride?”

“Do you have gold?” The man asked.

“I do.”

“Then we can broker a good deal, miss.” The man nods and walks back towards the office.

Cassandra takes one more look at Ace, as he approaches the doors of the stable stall, his ears tilted forward, head reaching towards the bars at Cassandra, eyes now full of curiosity. She knew he would be the perfect travel companion for the journey ahead.

* * *

The price for Ace, a bit and bridle, a saddle with packs, and additional packs, rounded out to sixty one coins, mere copper coins to Cassandra. The man did raise a brow when Cassandra was able to pull out that many, but he didn't think too much of it. He told her he was happy to get Ace off of his hands; being a gelding meant that he couldn't use the big boy in the breeding season, whatever that meant. Cassandra wasn't listening, she was focused on getting Ace to the inn so she could prepare her way out.

She was no equestrian herself but she could ride a horse. Never a horse this big before, but with some convincing, she was able to hop up on Ace and ride off through the streets of Falcon Haven, heading back towards the inn.

The sun was beginning to set and Cassandra's eyes remained peeled, watching the crowd for any one that could be one of Duke Daegel's men or worse, Daegel himself. She did not want to have a family reunion so soon. She must keep her eyes peeled and her mind sharp, never letting doubt cloud her judgment. Luckily, no one seemed to care about her and went about their evening. Cassandra managed to get to the inn in one piece, finding a place to tie up Ace before walking in.

"Jester, darling, can you help me with-" Cassandra leads before noticing Jester wasn't at the counter alone, but a woman was standing there too, her plaid dress decorated with embroidered flowers and bees flying around them, "Oh. Hello."

"Hello?" Her expression was one of speculation and concern, "You are...?"

"Mom, that's Miss Marigold." Jester gestured to Cassandra, "The lady that is renting one of the rooms upstairs?"

"Ah. I see." Her expression softens into a smile, placing a hand to her heart and bowing a little, "Mrs. O'Donnell-Glover, at your service."

"Nice to be your acquaintance." Cassandra nods before turning to Jester, "Jester, dear, I have a fairly heavy chest upstairs I would like to

bring to my horse. Can you help me out with that?"

"Uh..." Jester glanced at their mother before walking around the counter and to Cassandra's side, "Sure, I can help."

The two begin to walk to the door to the stairs, Cassandra looking to Jester fondly before looking over her shoulder to Mrs. O'Donnell-Glover, her smile replaced by a foul scowl as she walks back to the back room. Cassandra looked dead ahead at the stairs, her mood shifting as the evil look she caught in the other woman's eye was something she did not like at all.

The two walked in silence up the stairs and to Cassandra's room. Cassandra opened the door and peeked inside. Good, she remembered to clean up before leaving. She opened the door fully and walked in, Jester close behind. She gestures to the truck on the bed, clearing her throat for an explanation and white lie.

"As you can see, this chest is quite avenging, but do not be deceived by it." She speaks with grandeur and authority, "For you see, it is very heavy and I need an extra pair of hands to-"

"It's a trunk from the bank, I know." Jester interrupts.

Cassandra sputters, off guard, "I- Uh..."

"Nah, it's ok. I only know because we've had people come here with trunks like it before. Mom didn't like me asking too many questions, ya know?"

"Ah..." Well she certainly wouldn't ask either way. She turns her attention back to the trunk, "Well then you know how heavy one can be."

"Yeah yeah, I get it." Jester looks around the room before turning their attention back to Cassandra, "Hey, Ms. Marigold?"

"Yes?" Cassandra starts to pull the truck closer to the edge of the bed, to make it easier to grab.

"You didn't do anything weird in here, right?"

Cassandra stops, trying to formulate a response, "N-... No? What

makes you say that?”

“I don’t know.” Jester shrugs, “My dad was complaining last night about a weird feeling he was getting from your room. I felt it too but not as strongly. It was probably nothing, someone like you probably doesn’t believe in magic anyways.”

Cassandra’s mind screamed at her not to say anything, but her heart yearned for the connection with a fellow magic user. If Jester had the ability to cast magic but was keeping it hidden, she did not want them to end up like her. She takes a deep breath and turns back around to the teen, concern haphazardly plastered on her face.

“Jester. It is dangerous to speak of magic. It’s against the law.”

“I know...” Jester grimaces, “But I can’t help it. Dad says those nobles don’t care for the half humans who have innate magic, and don’t care about our struggles when magic is outlawed. We- They didn’t ask to be born that way, but they are still proud of who they are.”

Cassandra nodded along. Yes, she had read about half humans, those born from a parent not native to this plane. Strange beings not human but not so different that they cannot fall in love with mere mortals. demons, the Fae, even Djinn or more humanoid elementals have been recorded coming to the plane of mortals because a human caught their fancy. The only downside is the children of those forbidden loves often get targeted, seen as a threat for merely existing.

How familiar that felt.

Cassandra looks to the floor, ashamed for not realizing this sooner, “Your father is of otherworldly heritage?”

Jester pauses but nods, “Yeah... Half demon. He only agreed to marry my mom so I can pass off as more human.”

“I can see that. But you cannot deny who you are, Jester.”

“I just gotta hide it from those who don’t understand.” Jester shrugs again, demon sadness replaced by nonchalance, “What about you? You seem cool with me admitting this.”

“You and I are on similar ships, it would seem.” Cassandra turns to the bed and trunk, clasping and unclasping the lock, “Though I do not know if my family had any time with those beyond our plane, I do practice the art. Which is why I must leave, not just for my safety, but for yours as well. You’re a bright child, Jester, I see a lot of my younger years in you. It would kill me to know you have to hide who you are because others see you as a threat.”

Cassandra looks over her shoulder and sees Jester’s face soften, threatening tears almost coming out of their eyes. They couldn’t say anything it seems. That’s Cassandra’s choice. She turns back around and unclasps the trunk, opening it and taking out a stack of 20 gold coins. She clasps the trunk and walks over to Jester with it.

“Is there somewhere in this room your parents won’t look in?” Cassandra asks, holding the stack of coins.

Jester sputters but manages to point to the desk. Cassandra looks over to where they were pointing. They walk over and move the chair. In the small cubicle where the legs rest as a small hole, barely visible in the dark. Cassandra recognized this hole and this type of desk. Jester opened it, revealing a hidden compartment. Cassandra gets on her knees next to Jester and stashes the coins inside.

“I won’t tell you how you should use the coins, but promise me you will use them wisely. You shouldn’t have to live your life in fear. No one should. I used to have the power to do something about it, but I was ignorant of the struggles of those others told me were beneath me. I see how foolish that was. Let it be known, if and when I have that power again, people like us won’t have to live in fear.”

“Your name isn’t actually Marigold, is it?” Jester gives a soft smile.

“How’d you figure?” Cassandra smiles back, closing the hiding spot.

“You hesitated the first time I asked for your name. I figure you wouldn’t tell me the truth if you had something to hide.” Jester gets up, “Turns out that hunch was true.”

"Yes. People like us have a natural instinct in locating others like ourselves." Cassandra gets up as well, "Just means we see those who have similar struggles to us, no matter social class."

"Yeah. It's a bit comforting, ya know? That there are others out there like me." Jester rubs the back of their neck before looking at Cassandra concerned, "So does this mean you're checking out?"

"Yeah, sadly. But it's for your safety too. Once I'm out of the city, the dangerous men will leave. You can tell your mother to keep the rest of the money when I'm gone, I have no immediate need for it." Cassandra grabs her bag and slings it over her shoulder, "Now, let's get this trunk on my horse."

"Alright. Count of three." Jester holds one side of the trunk while Cassandra grabs the other, "One... Two..."

"Hold on, are we going to carry it on three or right after three?" Cassandra interrupts.

"On three." Jester clarifies.

"Ah. Understood." Cassandra nods, looking at the trunk.

"Ok. One... Two... Three!" The two lift it up effortlessly, Jester's side being a fair bit faster than Cassandra's, "Wow, this is a bit lighter than I thought it would be."

"Lighter?!" Cassandra stares at the teen dumbfounded.

"Yeah, I mean do you do any lifting at all?"

"...What?"

"What the fu- You know what, never mind."

The two begin their backwards forwards walk to the stairs and carefully down them, Cassandra a bit ashamed of being seen as weak.

Perhaps strengthening the body along with the mind and soul would be a good idea when she has a place to settle down permanently.

Jester seemed smitten with Ace the moment they saw him, and Ace the same, his ears pointed forward but in a relaxed matter. Mayhaps he has never seen a fellow teen like himself before.

“I’ve never seen a horse this pretty before.” Jester commented, trying to build up the courage to pet the beast before opting not to.

“Yeah he’s a real gorgeous one.” Cassandra straps down the last of her luggage on to Ace. It would not be going anywhere now. She glances to the street for a moment, m judging when to start riding when she notices some strange being in black standing near a closed shop. They were covered head to tow, only their eyes visible. They seemed to be talking among themselves. If Cassandra wasn’t aware of the fact that the Duke and his men were in Falcon Haven, she wouldn’t have noticed them.

And it would seem they haven’t seen her.

“Jester. Get inside.” Cassandra commands.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“I have to go.” Cassandra climbs up onto Ace’s saddle, “Which way is east?”

“Uh, that way?” Jester points dead ahead through an alley way. It looked wide enough for Ace.

“Thank you Jester. And remember what we talked about.”

“Yes ma’am.” Jester nods, “Safe travels...” With that, they enter the inn again.

With a tap of her heels, Cassandra instructs Ace to walk forward. As they enter the alleyway, Cassandra looks to the people in black, spotting a familiar crest on their cloaks.

Family Everglow. Oh yeah, Duke Daegel, or at least his men, were here. But importantly for them, Cassandra won’t be here for much longer. Let the cat and mouse games begin.

Chapter 5

“**H**ere and now, I invoke the Air.” She speaks the incantation once again, “As I travel near and far, guide and guard this trip. Ensure I do not slip as I travel far and near. Keep my direction clear, see me safely on my way, see me safely far from here. So shall it be.”

By the time Cassandra leaves Falcon Haven towards the rising moon, the night was quickly approaching. The quick sound of dirt on horse shoes told her that Ace was making a dirt quick pace, a canter she believes its called, making a steady pace towards the east. The rumbling of a storm brewing in the distance told her she should probably find shelter as soon as possible, but luckily she spots a small mountain range like landscape up ahead, most likely full of caves to take shelter in. Cassandra looks over and notices another signpost. She steers Ace to it and makes him stop, reading the signs that were just below her eye level. The Grimsby Tunnel was up ahead.

Despite its name, Cassandra knew it as a lovely little town, ruled haphazardly and nonchalantly by the Lovelow House. She thinks back to her time at court, how Lovelow only keeps Grimsby running because they specialized in farming many kinds of flowers, like roses, jasmine, ylang-ylang, damiana and most sought after, saffron.

All flowers used as aphrodisiacs, the horny bastards.

The thundering became louder as Cassandra continued to read the

signs. There were also some additional side paths, it seems, leading to caves that worked as shelters. At least that's what the signs suggest. With the threat of getting caught in a rapidly approaching storm, Cassandra taps Ace to move along and they begin their approach to the tunnel.

It always amazed Cassandra whenever she read about such ingenuity among humans. Who would think of creating a tunnel straight through a mountain of rock? Who had to figure out the best way to open up such an opening? How many workers forfeit their lives to build something that saves many days of time in travel? The human will to make life earlier for so many other humans is amazing and admirable. a true wonder of the human mind to dream big and make it happen.

When Cassandra reaches the entrance of the tunnel, her expectations for how the tunnel would look were met, and then some. It wasn't anything grand or intimidating; just an open entryway with a blinding white light at the end, but you could tell it hadn't been taken care of in a long time. Stone columns flank the entrance, the cracks in the limestone threatening to collapse but still holding firm. The toppers were dual spiraling patterns, entirely plain to Cassandra but reminded her of eyes. She recalls the term being called 'ionic capitals', though she was never one for architecture.

Flanking each side of the tunnel, next to the columns, were two small statues, though the term would be architecture, as she reasoned they were easily four feet tall. Horned beasts with soulless eyes and teeth blared like a monster scared out of its mind. A demon, for sure, but none Cassandra recognized. Perhaps it wasn't a demon at all and the people who built this tunnel just wanted to make a scary monster to guard the tunnel, scaring any invaders from going in. Effective at being ineffective, Cassandra finds out, but it's the thought that counts.

The thunder was getting louder, the hair's on the back of Cassandra's neck suddenly rising up as she jumped in her seat. She needs to find shelter and fast. Off to the side of the tunnel was an overgrown path

that led up the side of the mountain. No matter how big or imposing the mountain may be, Cassandra would need to scale just a small portion of it to find a cave.

The path wasn't impassable for the naturally bulky Ace, and the two of them start to trot up the trail, the storm now threatening to pour overhead. Cassandra managed to find one large enough opening just as the thundering finally broke the storm, and the water started to pour down in thick droplets.

Cassandra dismounts and lets Ace settle down on the ground, his ears moving as the sounds of the storm startle the beast. They were scary to Cassandra as well, as she settled down on cold stone ground. This cave isn't natural, the ground was too smooth and the dirt cut off at the mouth of the cave. The remnants of a campfire told her exactly what this cave was: a man made shelter, perfect for those hiking through the area.

The smell of dried animal feces on the walls becoming wet again disgusted her nose, but the sounds of the rain helped her distract herself from her discomfort. The discomfort extends also to the pain in her stomach, as the grips of hunger start to gnaw at her. She had forgotten to eat before she left, and she hoped Grimsby will have some food for her to eat as soon as she gets there. She reasoned she could stand going hungry tonight though; safer to not start a fire and alert anyone of her being here.

As the wind picks up and the rain continues down, nothing to do but sit and wait for it to pass, Cassandra begins to think. Thinking about that dream she had, how real and fake it all felt. About the conversation those beings were having. About destiny and what lies ahead. They spoke of a girl as well before she came by. Would that girl be herself? She couldn't be too sure. Oh how she wished she still had her tarot deck. She could really use the insight right about now.

Nothing to now than to mediate on that dream, then. Perhaps then

she will gain an insight. She sits cross legged and takes a deep breath, closing her eyes to focus on her breathing and the senses all around her. Pretty soon though, she could feel all sensation leave her, as the darkness darken even further

* * *

When Cassandra opens her eyes, she finds herself in a warm study of sorts. Walls, floor and ceiling all covered in dark oak panels, the smell of wood finish and smoke stain the room further. Books and papers litter every inch of the room, books stacked neatly on the side couch, the leather threatening to crack under the weight. Cassandra recognized the names on the spines of the books: Chavallon, Bizeret, Pinespear, Ragnes, all names of great researchers who are known for their studies of anti-mage propaganda. Oh yes, Cassandra knew this name well. They came up often in her father's notes about those who fear magic for the sake of fearing it, never understanding how it works.

The back wall was a bookshelf, filled floor to ceiling with books. So many thick leather bounded entries, the smell of old paper and ink reminding Cassandra of a library, before being taken out of the memory by the sting of tobacco. She also notes the small step stool off of the side, no doubt used to get the more well worn books at the very top.

In front of that was a blackened desk, either charred or ebony wood used, its carvings elegant and precise with symbols she cared not to know. Papers in large stacks flank each side, a large tome opened at the center with a man writing in it with a quill from a pheasant. His fine silk clothes reflected the candle light, the light casting rich shadows on his old withered face, a spark in his eyes, working diligently with every stroke of his quill.

What a hard worker Duke Daegel always was. It's a shame he hated her, the two could have been a strong team.

Daegel stops his writing and slowly looks up, staring at Cassandra as she stands before him. He breathes heavily and leans back in his chair, the chair creaking under the shift.

"Even in my dreams, I cannot stop thinking of you." His husky voice told her he had been smoking again, "I cannot work in peace it seems, even as I rest in my bed."

"I wouldn't rest easy if you wish to catch me." Cassandra notes, "I know you are after me."

"So that's why my men couldn't find you. Shame. We were sure of those girls..." His voice trails off as his gaze sharpens towards her, his brows furrowed harshly and his jaw clenches, "You're not just a figment of my imagination are you?"

"Maybe I am, maybe I'm not." Cassandra shrugs nonchalantly, "I will be honest, I'm not sure what this is. I'm not sleeping so it can't be an astral projection. I am simply meditating. Is that a crime to you now?"

"Damned witch!" He suddenly gets up, "Get out of my head!"

"Look, I'm not doing this on purpose." Cassandra pleads, "But while I have you, stop your chase for me."

"And let you remain a threat to the noble houses' authority? Hard chance."

"I already left the capital! What more do you want?"

"Your head on a pike." He leers.

"Figures." Cassandra rolls her eyes, "You were never the capital type with my father anyways."

Daegel sinks back in his chair, huffing, "Well no point in arguing with you here. Not like you'll turn yourself in, hm?"

"You would want that, don't you." Cassandra smiles, "I'm young and have means of keeping myself afloat financially. I don't mind this cat and mouse chase."

"But you don't want to, do you?" Daegel asks, stoking his chin, "Answer me this, witch. What is it you desire from this anyways?"

Cassandra pauses to think. Why was she running? She would have been safer to drop all of what she believed in to live a peaceful life. She could have kept her riches, her family would still be alive. But ultimately, her belief is what rang true to her. So she spoke, "I simply desire the survival of magic. If I die, the practice entirely dies with me. I cannot let that happen. I will keep living and keep practicing until I find others like me. Only then will I rest."

"And if you don't?"

"Then the era of the Everglows will end, along with the magic. But you won't live to see that."

"Hm... I still plan to hunt you down so I am certain that magic dies with you."

"Then I welcome the chase." Cassandra shrugs again, turning around to the door, "Oh, and Daegel?" She looks over her shoulder.

"Yes?"

Cassandra sticks her tongue out and blows a raspberry, opening the door to a white void, closing it behind her as Daegel shouts at her. She always knew such childish acts annoyed him. When Cassandra looks upon the white void before her, a sense of emptiness takes over. How fitting, the void before her is exactly how she feels right now in this very moment. Perhaps this is her clearing her mind after getting the insight she desires, or was there something deeper here.

Perhaps a thought experiment for another time, Cassandra could hear the rain starting to let up. She would travel soon.

* * *

Cassandra opens her eyes and sees the setting sun beams breaking out from the clouds, Falcon Haven finally visible from the gloomy weather with its shining lights. How small it looked from up here, how small the people all seemed from here, yet she felt just as small standing on

this mountain.

Cassandra gets up and dusts off any dirt on her clothes and she walks up to Ace, the half asleep gelding slowly blinking awake. Cassandra grabs his reins and that really wakes up the beast and he stands right up.

“Come along Ace. We have a town to get to.”

They travel down the mountain path again, careful of the mud that had just formed and started to walk down the tunnel. Cassandra briefly thought about destroying the entrance to block Daegel from trying to get to her, but she realized how awful of a move that would be for a lot of people, so she decided against it. Besides, such a move would be seen as suspicious.

The night had fully arrived when Cassandra reached the end of the tunnel, reaching the forest on the other side of the mountain. There was another man made cave nearby, so she entered it to get some sleep before continuing the path. Her sleep was dreamless, thankfully, and Cassandra was woken by the sounds of birds chirping and the sun returning once again. She lets Ace eat some of the vegetation as they stroll along. It wasn't long until they reached those massive gates.

And those gates open for Cassandra as she steadily trots along into the colorful town of Grimsby, the flowers in bloom greeting her with the rainbow. Despite being walled off, the town is small. Not a village of 100 people, no she recalls the town is at almost at a population of 3,000 people, but way smaller than the population of the Kingdom Capital. No doubt such a town doesn't desire to get too large, less there be less work to go around. She heard that these people were proud folk.

Proud and friendly it would seem. As she rides though the main street, Cassandra watches the little interactions the people were having: An exchange of roses, children running with paper kites, a girl sitting by the fountain reading a book. It was a lot more lax here than it was in Falcon Haven. With the farmers and gardeners tending to the flowers, the people who have nothing to do have their hobbies, enjoying the sun

shining above after the rolling of the storm from the night before. Bliss was the word that sprung to mind, peace in their hearts knowing their town was safe from any dangers.

If only Cassandra could know that deep down.

But she couldn't wallow in her self pity for long, as Ace whines and rears a bit. Cassandra grabs the reins and pulls back, looking around his neck to see what spooked him. Three children were running around Ace, one of them holding a black, white and orange cat by the pits of the front legs. It did not look amusing to be there but it was most likely the source of Ace's discomfort if the children weren't already irritated.

"Wow! Look at da horse!" One of the boys said, "Where did cha get da horse, Ma'am!"

"I.. Uh.." Cassandra stutters, keeping a tight hold on Ace as the children surround them.

"It's a real pretty horse, ma'am!" The girl without the cat comments, "We don't got horses like that around here."

"He looks like a calico! Like Tiny!" The girl with the cat lifted up said cat, "What's his name?"

"UH! Can someone help?!" Cassandra calls out, looking around for anyone to help her with this gaggle of children. Luckily for her, her knight in a brown tunic and green pants walked up, the children all noticing and staring at him.

"Theo, Miricle, Angelica, what's the rule about approaching horses?" The man asks the children.

"Never approach a horse from the blind spots." The children say in unison, "Always approach from the side and make sure to touch it on the neck or shoulder first."

"That's right." The man nods, "Now run along now, I think Miss Casterel has a pie ready."

The children look at each other excited and run off, disappearing into an alleyway. Cassandra sighed as the man approached her from the

side, a smile on his face, a hand on Ace's neck, gently giving him a pat, and a hand on his own waist.

"Sorry about that ma'am. Don't get a lot of strangers around these parts, let alone one with a horse like him."

"It's alright." Cassandra nods, "I was looking into staying here a while. Are there any inns?"

"Don't got inns, per say." The man scratches his chin, thinking for a moment before adding, "But the Crefort Family have a room for rent. They are well liked around these parts. If you want people to like ya, try and befriend them."

"Hm... Noted. Thank you, my good sir." She taps Ace's sides with her heels and walks a bit before stopping, slowly turning to look at the man, "Uh... Where can I find them?"

"Big house on the small hill there." He points to the distances and not too far on a little hill nearing the center of the town appeared to be that big house, easily three stories even from Cassandra's worm's eye view, "Tell them Robbie Fox lead you to them."

"Thank you, Robbie Fox. Have a good day." She clicks her heels again and begins to make way towards the center of the town, not minding and the stopping of strangers as she approaches. What she did mind were the mutters she picked up. No different from Falcon Haven she was fearing.

Hopefully these Creforts can protect her.