

My hands combed through the desert of gold trinkets lying so beautifully in my jeweled chest. I remembered my friends' smiles. Their warmth. I wished I could re-live those times again. For the past several days, all I'd thought about was running back to the academy. Now, nestling Jeremiah's locket between my fingers in this cold attic, I felt as if I finally could.

I wanted more; I dug deep into this pile of gold, with chains of necklaces swallowing my forearms so heavily, until I found what I desired. Excitedly, I excavated several precious treasures and gleamed at them all. A cracked teacup saucer. A white alabaster plate. I was in bliss. And though I couldn't find the teacup just yet, I'd gone through my jeweled chest every day, and each time, I have always held it. I felt it nearby. But when I stroked across the sands of solid trinkets, caressing what was underneath, I touched upon something soft.

Soft?

That couldn't be. All I kept in my chest were ornaments and porcelain. I lived alone, and no one else had the key to my belongings. A terrifying thought transfixed me: What has been using my chest as if it was theirs?

I was trembling.

I brushed aside the tops of the trinkets, but wished I'd hadn't. Nestled within my jeweled box, there was a nimble and soft hand of a doll. Beneath it, I knew something horrible lay buried.

Who? Who did this doll belong to?

No, this wasn't real! I tried to look away, I tried to shut my chest tight to make it all go away. It must've been because of what I'd done. Why didn't I listen to my caretaker, my Madame? Her words came back to me:

"Have you said your prayers every night? You know you have to."

But I stopped. I had run away, I'd disobeyed them all, just like that girl Cassandra had done. I remembered asking my Madame about her story, and that was where the trouble began.

"What happened to Cassandra?"

My caretaker replied: "It is too sad of a story to tell you."

So I went to look for her myself. I was so in awe at how alike we were, so enticed by what she had done, that I never stopped to think about the consequences of our actions.

Cassandra had finally found her mother alive and well, but at a cost.

Just as my thoughts pulled me in too deep into my regret, a sense of dread pulled me out.

Humming.

From just outside the attic's muffled walls, I thought I could hear a woman humming across the hall, in my room. I shut my eyes- my Madame spoke to me in my memories once again:

"Please don't look inside."

“But it’s such a beautiful house,” I replied.

“Why won’t you trust me? Please, I beg you!”

I thought I could find the answers if I’d lived in this house. I thought I was alone. But this whole time, there was someone else there beside me.

Madame was right. She- the Unspeakable that was here to punish me- truly did come. She was the price I would pay to know the truth.

But what if she was what I needed to face to find it?

I couldn’t stay in this cold attic forever. My lips expired a frigid and fearful breath as I got up, my hands brushed down my dress to feel that I was still present, and I slowly took mellow steps towards the attic door. Each pitter and patter of my feet was gentle and polite, and the floorboards didn’t creak. But when I opened the door to leave, there was a loud grating, and the humming stopped. And the thing that was humming began to fearfully whisper in chatters.

I froze.

What lay before me was a dark and narrow corridor. It was paved with fading, pale flowers painted across its old walls, and they were my only escape as I imagined myself walking through this garden that never existed; in actuality, I was moving closer and closer towards my punishment. My eyes darted from rose to lily, my footsteps louder and less polite. I wanted to scream, but I could only utter shallow, sharp trembles. But in time, the harsh, panicked whispers of this “woman” ceased, and she began to hum again, and to sing.

When I got to the door of my room, I was astonished. Beneath her wistful song, she was crying.

However frightened I was, I knew I had to do it. I pushed into the wooden door with the palm of my hand, never letting my shaking fingers touch its oak, and I saw a sight that made me want to claw at the reverberating screams I had buried deep inside.

Her face was turned away; all that I could see was the back of her Bouffant hair. The rest of my room became engulfed in a blur. I wanted to see my bed, but I felt it falling away. I couldn’t even make out this figure’s pale red dress; I feared that she would turn towards me at any moment. I wanted to run, to see my friends at the academy again, to call for Jeremiah, to call for my Madame- but it was all too late, and now, she noticed me.

As if I was in a fading dream, a nice, pleasant tune played into my ears.

“I have been waiting for you.”

Her head turned, and no more could I shut my eyes to hide away her face.

Some time prior to before...

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A wistful choir.

Clarinets and flutes.

The bittersweet lamentings of violins.

And finally, the voices of organs, stiling a joyous tune.

An ominous shadow descended upon the solemn Kingdom; The March of the Sisters had begun.

Girls in frilled white dresses shivered as they stepped in formation past gardens haunted by disquietude; trapped within a ceremonious melody, they dared not break its cadence. Though their march was to the sounds of a jubilant aria, the night was dark, and the fogged mist was cold.

Once again, the girls worried about their clothes. White dresses with frills, covered with patterns of roses and marigolds. Each one was sewn beautifully, yet hid the labors of tired, worn hands. It was, as they all believed, the pinnacle of devotion to spend nights resisting the temptation of sleep, to stitch every single thread into perfection. They had to, lest they usher in the Unspeakable.

Suddenly, a wailing cried into the night sky. A few of the girls could not help but dart their eyes all around. Did the headmasters notice? The loosened thread on one of their dresses, dangling ever so delicately, that not even an astute owl could see? Their imaginations ran frantic. The girls trembled in place.

A curt, authoritative voice of a woman snapped at the girls: "Where is she? Which one of you witches has seen Cassandra?"

A tall witch, bound in a tight corset and a long, pale white dress, angrily stepped through the crowd, towards a girl with raven hair. But when she got close, she saw it was not a girl at all- it was a life-like doll. She grabbed onto the doll's dress and ripped it apart, and its head fell to the ground as if it was beheaded.

"She's gotten craftier this time," the tall witch muttered to herself, "I should have known."

Worry traveled through each and every one of the young witches. Most could not hide their fear of what the Unspeakable was about to do within themselves any longer. Not a single one knew where the missing girl had gone.

THROUGH a forest ran a girl with raven hair, in an unkempt, frilled white dress. Her green eyes glistened when she passed through the moonlight. A brown satchel bounced against her hip as she sprinted forth. Suddenly, she winced as a terrible thought struck her.

‘Oh no,’ Cassandra thought to herself, ‘I can’t believe I just remembered there was something different about the March this time. The academy’s gonna be more alert about looking for mannequins...’

Still, it still must only be a routine rehearsal; her punishment could not be too severe. Perhaps a few lashings, but nothing she wasn’t used to. Right now, what she was about to do was far more important. Its life depended on her.

Kassandra departed from the trees and entered a darkened, empty town. Just then, she heard a familiar voice. The girl stopped in her tracks. It was that boy again.

“Hey, Cassandra!”

She turned to the voice and saw a warlock boy from her class trotting towards her. For a moment, she could only see his purple eyes staring straight at her; when she broke out of her fleeting trance, she saw him greet her with an inviting grin. He was tall, lean, muscular, and sported a rugged stubble. The girls and the boys were forbidden by the academy to talk to one another except during designated times of ‘bevy’- for an hour, once every few days. It was then that the two would sometimes converse; he was always friendly, and had offered her to join him in the Bonfires, but she had always declined. It wasn’t because they were prohibited- Kassandra was willing to skirt around a few rules, if needed- but something about those gatherings, that she just couldn’t put into words, didn’t seem right to her. ‘Besides’, Kassandra thought to herself, ‘He’s so popular and well-liked that he probably invites everyone to these events. No loss to him if I don’t go.’

She peered behind him. In the distance was a group of witches and warlocks from the academy, with the girls wearing dresses and the boys wearing black coats with vests. They were huddled over a flickering flame, waiting for the main event to start. Kassandra wondered how the witches were able to escape from the Marches, but she never questioned them how. She just assumed, like her, they used some form of mannequins, and dealt with the punishments from the academy later.

“Wish I could, Marcus,” Kassandra answered with a sly smile, trying to keep her cool, “But I’ve got something else to do.”

"You sure? You don't have to stay long. Just enough to get a hint of what I've been telling you about."

Kassandra tilted her head away from him and let out a little laugh. She pouted, and thought for a moment. Her fingers were now prattling against one another, and she fidgeted a bit, the balls of her feet digging into the ground back and forth. She had been deadset in her answer from the start, but for just a few seconds, she enjoyed playing around with the alternatives.

"Sorry. Maybe next time," Kassandra leisurely replied.

Just as she finished, another boy strutted towards them. He was gaunt with ragged bags under his eyes. As he got nearer to the two, Kassandra saw his scruffy, dirty blonde facial hair all around his mischievous, toothy grin. She rolled her eyes. Antony. Marcus's lapdog.

"Bonfire's about to start," Antony said to Marcus. He then turned his sights on Kassandra, looking her up and down, his smile unwavering. She stared back at him with deadpan eyes.

"Gotta go, Kass," Marcus shouted out to her as he walked away backwards. "Just let me know when." Soon, he turned his back to her, and she was left with only Antony.

"So," the blonde boy spoke, "You coming along too?"

"I already said no," Kassandra brusquely told him.

"Come on. It'd be fun."

Immediately, Antony bolted his hand out and grabbed onto Kassandra's wrist. His grip was tight, binding, and painful. Kassandra looked down at her wrist for a second, her expression vacant as she was trying to process what was happening, and then wrung herself out of Antony's grasp.

"I'm not going," Kassandra asserted for a final time. This must've been the fifth time she'd told him off. It was getting annoying by now.

Antony scoffed and shook his head. As he walked away with his back facing the girl, he muttered, "Your loss. You stupid whore."

"Go fuck yourself, Antony," Cassandra called out back to him. He ignored her completely, only laughing as he rejoined the group around the growing flame. Cassandra huffed, but got a hold of herself as she re-focused on her task. 'What a damn distraction', she thought, and took off running again.

AS she delved further into the town, its streets became emptier and emptier. Eventually, she reached a part so desolate, not even the lonely shuffling of a slumbering drunk's sprawled-out feet could be heard. Before her lay a foreboding alleyway. Cassandra took one long, deep breath, and ventured in. She was met with one fork after the other, but she'd seen them all by now; even with her eyes closed, she could navigate to where she wanted to go. Soon, she found just the right spot. There were slabs of old stone stacked on top of one another all throughout, and it led deeper into a pitch black passageway that the girl was itching to just walk into.

From the shadows, someone grinned. His fangs gleamed white. When the shadows passed, Cassandra saw grey-silver hair shining in the moonlight. Soon, the rest of his visage was revealed- he was a short warlock dressed in dark green rags, sitting on a pile of stone slabs, relaxed and confident, and showing off his fangs. He noticed the irritated look etched upon her face, and knew what had just transpired.

"Antony giving you a hard time?" the grey haired warlock, Jeremi, asked the witch.

"He's always trying to push me to go see the bonfires," Cassandra muttered back, "What for?"

"I heard they were fun. Won't hurt to check one out."

"As if I wanted to. I'd take this over the bonfires any day."

Jeremi leapt down from the pile of stones, and said, "Just what I wanted to hear. It's been waiting."

Kassandra turned to stare into the pitch black darkness of the alleyway. She bit her lip, her heart pounding. Was it out of excitement? For the longest time, she had been wanting to see it again. But her heart was not pounding just out of excitement. It was pounding out of a quiet fear.

The witch reached her hand towards the skin of her satchel, caressing the thick outline of an object inside. She took a deep breath, and stepped into the foreboding alleyway. Jeremi followed. The two walked into complete blackness where nothing could be seen. Faint light shone from both of their hands, just enough for them to see each other's faces, but not enough to reveal what was ahead.

"You got it with you?" Jeremi asked.

"Yeah," Cassandra replied. She unbuckled her satchel, then reached in and took out a warm slab of red meat. "I can't imagine just how hungry it must be. It can't get much nourishment from eating those tunnel scraps."

Jeremi took one glance at the slab and chuckled to himself as he shook his head.

Kassandra scoffed, "What, the food not up to your standards? It's not for you."

"No one can eat that. It's diseased; I can feel its aura. You didn't use a revelation spell on it, I'm guessing?"

"Well, I didn't need to. I plucked it straight out of- hey, I just said it's safe!"

Before she could finish, Jeremi waved one of his hands over the slab of meat, and a green light illuminated from it, revealing a colony of blue worm-like creatures crawling over it.

Kassandra yelped and immediately dropped the slab. "WHAT? Ugh, it's so gross!" She scrubbed her hands together, and a whitish-pink light illuminated forth, cleansing whatever had gotten in between her fingers. Then, she sighed. "I guess I messed up this time. What are we going to do now?"

"Don't worry, I got you." Jeremi reached into one of his satchel and took out another slab of meat. He waved his hand over it and a green light surrounded it- but this time, it was clean.

Kassandra raised her brow at her friend. "You had that with you the whole time? Then what'd you need me to take that slab for?"

"I didn't want to use this one; I've got some more creatures to feed. But I figured it can be used as back up too, just in case."

Kassandra was still annoyed, but let out a sly smile. "Well, next time I'll definitely learn how to get that revelation spell down to pat. But you know I wouldn't have gone through all that trouble if you were there." She paused for a second, then continued, "You know, you can always come back to the academy. They could use a warlock like you."

"It's just not my thing. I like thieving a whole lot more."

"One day, they're gonna catch you, and who knows what they'd do to you," Kassandra retorted with a lighthearted jostle.

Just then, tremors in the ground below pounded below the duo's feet. They came from the rumbling of large footsteps, yet were so delicate that neither one of the two had noticed them approaching. Kassandra's eyes widened when she stared at the shadows before her, and the outline of a large figure began to come into her view. The alleyway was so dark that she could not make out a single one of its features. But it was trembling- as if it was afraid.

"We found it," Jeremi whispered. Without a word, he quietly placed his slab into Kassandra's palm, and the witch took a few careful steps forward.

"Hey," Kassandra whispered to the creature. There was no response, but when she got closer, she could hear heavy breathing. She continued, "We got you some food." She stopped, then knelt down to place the meat on the ground's cold cobblestones. She waited for the creature to come out of the shadows and take it.

But it did not move at all.

"It doesn't want to come out," Jeremi whispered. "It doesn't want us to see it."

Kassandra sighed. "I thought we could get a closer look at it this time. But I guess not." With the wave of her fingers, she cast a spell to gently push the meat into the shadows, and watched it slowly disappear. The darkness lay still; with each passing moment, Kassandra's fingers gripped together tighter and



tighter. But then, she heard a quiet sound. Something tearing. Something ripping. And then, she knew what it was- gruesome gnawing, as the creature used something sharp to devour the small slab of meat. Cassandra froze, and was lost in a haze; then, before she could snap out of it, the outline in the shadows began to depart.

“Wait!” Cassandra shouted at the creature. But her shouts only made it move away faster.

“Kassandra!” Jeremi whispered back, “It doesn’t want to come out!”

The witch ignored her friend, and ran into the shadows, with light shining out of her hands. Then, for a moment, she saw a glimpse of its back. Bright red, and carrying a large saddle on its back. Cassandra thrust a hand forward to try to grab onto it with a spell, but it was so heavy that she could not hold on any longer- she pulled her hand back, and when she did, the saddle shook off. Cassandra ran towards it, yet was too late. The creature had gone, and all that was left was this strange relic. The witch bent down and slowly caressed the saddle in her hands. Behind her, Jeremi had finally caught up.

“What’s that?” the warlock asked.

“It’s... a martingale. Whatever creature that was, someone must have ridden it.”

Jeremi was astounded. “Who could it have belonged to?”

Kassandra took some time to look for an answer on the satchel, and suddenly gasped. She whispered fervently to herself, “It can’t be.”

Jeremi was perplexed. “What do you mean?”

Kassandra softly ran her fingers across the outlines of the saddle, through flowery patterns sewn onto it. She continued, “This sewing pattern. Madame Pastel said my mother had designed it herself.”

“Your mother? You’re saying this creature belonged to her?”

“Yes! I know of this pattern from a brush that Madame Pastel gave to me. It’s all I have left of my mother.” As she continued to run her fingers across the martingale, she noticed its torn straps and weathered scratchings. She whispered, “But how did it get so battered?”

“Maybe it’s just old,” Jeremi said.

“No. This isn’t just from overuse. Something awful must have happened to whoever was riding that creature. Something violent.”

Just as she finished her thoughts, cathedral bells rang throughout the silent city. But unlike all the other times, these bells swung wildly and angrily, in such a violent way that made Cassandra tremble; only in dire moments of the Unspeakable would these bells do this. The academy had told her that every time she strayed from the March of the Sisters, the Kingdom would face consequences the likes which she could not imagine. She didn’t believe them at first, as she had only strayed from practice runs, and had dutifully finished all the real rituals she needed to do.

But what if she was wrong? What if even the practice runs were necessary? What if something sinister had gone on to pay for her sins, but which she was not aware of? For a long time, she had only suspected this. Now, these suspicions were becoming closer to truth.

The witch got back to her feet and stood still. Unsure of what to do, she continued to look at the martingale she was holding. As she fell into deep thoughts, Jeremi spoke up.

“Hey, I’ve gotta get going now. You should probably head back.”

Kassandra looked at her friend, her face wistful and worried.

“Why can’t I leave?” she said. “Like you did.”

“I’ve been telling you, it’s different for witches. You keep telling me that nothing that bad’s gonna happen when you disobey them, but you just don’t know what’s been happening. You’ll be safer if you repent whatever way they want you to.”

“I’ve never had to.”

“Well, one day, you’re gonna. Still, I’ve admired how brave you’ve been for meeting me here. I’ll see you soon if you find a way out again.”

Kassandra watched as Jeremi departed. Alone, she still could not make a choice. This must have been worth it. She’s never triggered the Unspeakable before. It’s all just in her head. Yet deep down, she felt that wasn’t true. Worry crept into her being, and she longed for an escape. A world where the Unspeakable did not exist. No- that would be asking for too much. But perhaps someone would know of other ways out? Did her mother ever know of such things?

“Mother,” Kassandra whispered to herself, “What ever happened to you?”