

I tugged on my braid as I watched them wheel out another stone statue. Papa didn't know I was watching him and Uncle. I hid in a disguise of shadows, trying to make sense of the stone objects in front of me. No one knew where they came from, but every month, sometimes twice on rare occasions, they would show up. We had a garden glistening with stone creatures upon stone creatures.

I wanted to figure out for myself where they came from. Everyone else voiced their concerns to the head of the village, begging for answers. My papa worked closely with the head, and they were just as clueless. And maybe even just as stupid. No one had tried to figure out why. They just kept showing up out of nowhere and all they seemed to do was sit and watch, waiting in anticipation.

I viewed things differently. I knew Papa wouldn't approve of my perspective. He always told me my curiosity was a pitiable trait. He said that curiosity was the very thing that killed the cat. What cat it killed, he never answered, so I just assumed we never even had a cat.

Nevertheless, I had to disagree with him. If I had to be a cat, I would be a smart one. Not like the rest of my stupid village. As soon as Papa and Uncle left, I rushed over to examine the stone. I ran my fingers along it, taking note of the abrupt rough edges in certain places. Following the path where one of the lines indented, I realized it almost seemed to form a solid shape. I traced the pattern carefully, desperate to figure out just what it was showing me. Strangely, the pattern almost seemed to me as if it should be cloth, not stone. I took a few steps back and examined the face of the statue, squinting, as I tried to figure out why it seemed so familiar.

The color drained from my face when I finally placed what I was sensing with reality. I... I knew this person. They looked just like the seamstress that lived a few blocks down from Papa and me. Shocked, I immediately looked toward the other figures, tracing the statues around the seamstress. With every step I took, another figure from my village presented itself. There were even some of the village pets and farm animals. I made my way all the way to the back, terrified at what I was seeing. These were real people. What happened to them? Who could have done this?

I looked around the area again, noticing something strange on the rock I was standing next to. I traced the pattern with my finger, and when my finger crossed over the last line, the pattern started to glow. I jumped back as something shot out from the rock in a flash of light. When it faded, I scooted a little closer, looking into the hidden cabinet that had revealed itself. A strange book was hidden inside. I pulled it out, wiping the rubble off of the cover. The book used an uncommon grouping of letters, but my previous lessons in early language allowed me to recognize it as our village's ancient alphabet. Slowly, I discovered the book's title: An Advanced Guide to Ancient Spells. I flipped open to the first page, immediately recognizing the name on the inside and the circle around one of the chapter titles.

This book belonged to the village head, and circled on the table of contents was a chapter on turning things to stone. My... my village head was causing all of this chaos? How dare he! How in the world could he think this was ok?

Looking up at all the old members of our town, frozen in statues, I realized I had to try to warn everyone. They needed to know what was happening, even if they didn't like it. This was wrong.

I stood up, planning to exit the way I secretly entered, when I heard footsteps coming my way. I immediately ducked and hid, shoving the book into my bag. I couldn't let anyone take it. It was my only proof.

“You foolish village girl,” the head muttered as he entered the room. Shoot, had he seen me? I cowered further behind my cover, trying to keep my head clear. I would not let him win, and I certainly would not let him scare me. “Village girl, come out, come out, wherever you are. You were quite foolish not to listen to your father. Now you carry the burden of my secret, child. I’ll give you a bit more time to enjoy this silly game, but I don’t think you want your father to endure the same fate.”

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, tracking his voice and appearing behind him. “Why would you do this to your own village?”

“Oh, child, this is merely prepwork. I quite enjoy practicing and working with stone.”

“You evil excuse for a leader,” I scowled.

“Careful, village girl,” he warned. “I’m not afraid to teach you a lesson. In fact... your dear papa is probably going to come looking for you soon. He should be showing up here any minute. What do you say you and I surprise him?” The village head asked darkly.

“Never,” I retorted. “Never again will I listen to another word out of your mouth!” I curled my fists and he just laughed in my face.

“Well, this might change your mind.” His lips formed the words of our ancient language and the book flew out of my bag and into his ready hand.

“NO!” I tried to lunge for it, but he cast a freeze spell on me.

“Now you get to watch the show, village girl,” he sneered. “Get ready. I predict your dear father will be here any minute.”

No, this couldn’t be happening. I had to find a way out of this. He was not going to hurt my papa! I desperately searched my mind for any knowledge of our ancient language. If I could figure out what we covered in my lessons, then perhaps I could remember a spell. It was a slim chance out of this, but I would take whatever I could get. I knew Papa would come looking for me, and I would not let him fall to this so-called leader’s dirty schemes.

A few seconds later, he called out for the village head.

“I’m over here!” He called back, retreating to his act. He looked over at me and whispered, “he doesn’t need to see you yet.” The village head walked toward where my father called from and the two began a conversation about me. His foolish game just gave me more time to plan. I knew I learned about spells; I just had to find one that would unfreeze me. Unfortunately, the gift of time soon vanished as their footsteps approached the stone garden. Papa gasped at the sight of me. He looked around and narrowed his eyes.

“What are you doing here? We need to leave, come on.”

“You heard him, village girl,” the head smiled.

“Papa, you need to leave,” I said instead. “Please. You have to believe me. This is a set up. Don’t you see how I’m standing? He froze me in place!” Papa took in this information and looked back over at the head, who pretended to be just as shocked at my outburst. “It’s true! I’m telling you the truth. He has awful things planned for you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Stop this foolish game.”

“I am not playing a game! This is the furthest thing from a game! Although, he is playing us as pawns. The longer you stay here, the more danger we are in.”

“Why is she talking like this? Did you do or say something to her?” Papa asked, turning to the head. “You know she takes things very literally.”

“Perhaps she did take one of my sentences as it was and not as a metaphor.” The head pretended to think. “Ah, yes, I know exactly what I said. I said---”

“NO!” I shouted as he started the stone changing spell. “PAPA!” Papa backed away, but it

was too late; the spell was nearly done.

I just hoped mine was too. When the village head neared the last word, I jumped in front of my father, hoping that the spell would hit me instead. I needed to protect him, and once he saw me do this, he would understand the urgency of warning the rest of the village. I would not let them blindly trust anyone again. The spell did, in fact, hit me, when a moment later I felt my muscles start to stiffen. I could barely move, and Papa stared at everything in shock.

“WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY DAUGHTER?!” He yelled as the head just threw his head back and laughed.

“What a noble sacrifice,” he said, giving me a few slow claps. “But quite a pointless one, village girl. Say goodbye to father now. The spell will hit you fully in just a few short seconds.”

Papa moved to stand in front of me.

“You brave, curious and ambitious girl. I will get you out of this mess, I promise. Just hang in there.” His brown eyes locked onto mine and he answered my silent question. He would warn the village. We would not let him take over. I was just able to give him one last hug before the stone wrapped around and encased me.

Being stone was quite a strange and curious feeling. The spell forced me into a strange state of being somewhat aware, and sometimes not. I didn’t think I liked being an object, but it wasn’t as bad as I would’ve imagined, just a tad uncomfortable. And that was more than generous considering I might have to spend the rest of my life like this. I just hoped Papa was able to outsmart the village head and convinced the rest of the village about how bad he truly was. Too bad I would never know the truth or the outcome. Maybe I was even standing next to all my fellow villagers.

Or maybe they were all trying to save me, I thought when the stiffness suddenly faded. After so long, my legs gave out as they returned back to normal. However, someone was right there, ready to catch me.

“Papa!” I said, looking up at him.

“Hello, daughter.”

“You did it! You saved me! What about the rest of the village? We have to break the spell on them---”

“Relax. The spell is broken. The head of the village is gone. And we all have you to thank for it.”

“We do?”

“After I watched him turn my daughter into a stone statue, I was able to do the right thing, just like you wanted. It took a little bit, but I convinced everyone of what really was happening, and together we were able to overthrow the village head. Throughout that time, your teachers were working on ways to get you and everyone else out of the spell. But once the head knew we were plotting against him, he changed the spell around you. Luckily, we were finally able to counter it today.”

“All this has happened? How long has it been?” I asked him. He just smiled, helping me up.

“It has been about a month since that day you saved me from the stone spell. And now that everyone is saved, we are going to throw a celebratory fire and burn the very book that caused all this mess. But we are also going to thank the very one who got us out,” he told me.

“What about our village? We are going to need a new leader.”

“We already have one,” Uncle said, walking up to us.

“Who?” I asked.

“Oh, I love your curiosity,” Papa said, smiling.

“You do? I thought you always hated it. You said it killed our cat.”

Papa just chuckled, responding, “Dear, we never had a cat. It’s an expression. But there’s also another very special saying about cats that would do me some good to remember.”

“What’s that?”

“Cats have nine lives,” Papa said and I smiled, laughing with him and Uncle. “And I believe you’ve already met the new village head.”

“We elected your Papa here after everything he did for us,” Uncle explained.

“And I believe your spirit will do this village some good once you’re old enough to take my place,” Papa continued after Uncle. “Perhaps if we had been a bit more curious and aware like you, this stone crisis would not have gone as long as it did.”

“You really want me to be a leader?” Papa smiled and nodded.

“You already are. You’ll see how much the village admires you tonight at the celebration.”

I never thought so many people could look up to me, but Papa was right. I really could make a good leader. And it made me even happier to see that horrid book tossed into the flames. I would never let it hurt my village again. Eventually, Papa and I were snuffing out the fire and cleaning up the village celebration later that night, when I noticed something moving in the shadows. I squinted, following the figure toward the fire. I could barely make it out, but it reached in and grabbed something, sprinting away. As the figure ran, I noticed the familiar glimmer of an ancient group of letters in the reflected moonlight. I looked back over at Papa and then back to where the figure ran off to. We thought we were done with it after tonight, but if we weren’t, I would catch the person who thought they could get away with the dreadful spellbook.

After all, what was a little danger when a cat had nine lives?