

The Grand Cathedral hadn't seen so many people in its halls since God's death. Voices echoed off the vaulted ceilings in ways which for the past four years had been reserved for prayers, whispered or wailed. The priestesses had pushed all the pews to the edges of the room and where they usually stood in dutiful rows now Genesis's finest milled about with champagne glasses and affected airs.

Cassandra watched the crowd from where a few other priestesses had congregated around the High Priestess, deciding on an opportune target. It was Genesis Night, which meant that, despite the prime opportunity to rub shoulders with luminaries and dignitaries while they were at their tipsiest, the High Priestess was in one of her moods and would be no help to anyone for the rest of the night. Cassandra could tell, even despite the mask that covered Nora's face, that a vacant look had entered her eye and her mind had likely turned to thoughts of her shining deity, dead these four years. Cassandra was sure the High Priestess thought she had sufficiently hidden her feelings towards God, but Cassandra had found it obvious from the moment she'd first met Nora, all those years ago when they were both mere handmaidens.

It was not that Cassandra was unsympathetic. But there was a point at which one had to move on and face the matters at hand — matters such as the impending storm which grew ever closer to Genesis. No amount of mourning their lost god would resolve that, no matter how Nora felt.

That was the problem with the entire system. Of course the High Priestess would be Her most devout, but that had nothing to do with what was actually needed for the position. Nora had become a priestess because of her adoration for God. Cassandra had become a priestess to get things done. God had been no different from any other leader; what She needed from Her advisors was expertise, not devotion, and Cassandra had expertise in spades. But no, God had chosen Nora — pious, loyal, naive Nora — as Her top advisor. Well, that was just fine. Nora could be God's right hand, and Cassandra would assert herself as Nora's.

If the High Priestess was not going to make herself useful tonight then Cassandra would, as usual, have to take matters into her own hands. Nora had never been any good with statesmanship anyway, and Cassandra had an extensive mental list of matters that

needed to be discussed with the various higher ups she had ensured were invited to the celebration.

Her eyes scanned the hall, picking out a few individuals of note, a task somewhat complicated by the masks on every face. It was traditional at Genesis Night celebrations for everyone to wear a mask, as the High Priestess always did, to represent their connection to God; She could be behind any one of their masks, be any person at any party. Back in the day rumors always buzzed about mysterious strangers appearing at Genesis Night parties, and everyone who was anyone had an anecdote which they would go to their grave saying was a real divine encounter. Some of them could have even been right — as a priestess, Cassandra was privy to the highly guarded secret that God truly had loved a good party.

Cassandra adjusted her mask and slipped away from her fellow congregated priestesses, all of whom wore identical masks to her own. Like the High Priestess's mask they depicted a pair of hands covering the wearer's eyes, with slight gaps between the fingers to see through. The only difference was that while Nora's obscured her entire face, the lower priestesses' only covered their eyes and parts of their cheeks.

She waded into the crowd, intending to make her way towards an industrialist she knew was a refugee from the city of Palliasis, recently destroyed by the encroaching storm. If there was one thing Genesis was about to need badly it was industry. However, as she moved toward him something caught her eye at the edge of the room. A woman, tall and a little lanky, stood at the fringes of the party, holding a champagne flute and observing the room with an intense gaze.

Cassandra frowned and wandered closer to the outskirts of the crowd to get a better look at the woman, mentally running through the list of invitees. The stranger had dark skin and darker curls, a little unruly as if they had not quite dried properly. Her ensemble was well put-together but the clothes did not appear expensive, at least not in comparison to the rest of the congregation. A suit, all black but for a deep purple waistcoat, gave her a rather morbid appearance which was only accentuated by her chosen mask: black feathers swooped out from the eyes and a sharp beak poked out just above the nose. For just a moment the dark costume reminded Cassandra of the mourning robes Nora wore. The comparison died quickly, though; this woman's demeanor was not that of grief but sardonicism, perhaps tinged with disgust.

She realized she *did* know who this was: one of the last of the invitations, a scientist who had made a name for herself in the past few years with her research of the storm's arcane properties. Only last year it had been declared an official field of scientific study — electromancy, they were calling it. It was not just her theories that were making waves, however; Cassandra had heard the woman was exceptionally abrasive, having caused a bit of a commotion at a conference in defense of her work. Blasphemous, people had called her.

The priestess glanced again at the industrialist whom she had intended to speak to first. He was engaged in conversation with a small group and seemed in no hurry to disentangle himself. This strange woman, on the other hand, could leave unnoticed at any moment and deprive Cassandra of what all signs suggested would be a very interesting conversation. Another look back and forth, and then the priestess was moving to the outskirts where the woman stood near a pillar.

"Are the festivities not to your liking?"

From behind the feathered mask, dark eyes turned her way and looked her over analytically. The woman paused a moment before speaking, as if choosing her words carefully.

"It's lovely, I'm sure. Just not... really my milieu."

"No? And what is your milieu?"

Again, a pause of careful consideration. "My workshop, I suppose."

"Not a people person, then, Miss...?"

"Doctor — Ingrid Peren. Not particularly. And you, Priestess?"

She shook her head and held out a hand. "Cassandra Arvensis. No need for the title." Ingrid took the offered hand and shook it a little hesitantly. "This isn't exactly my ideal setting either," Cassandra continued. "I prefer something more direct. But we work with what we've got."

"Indeed we do."

Cassandra waited a moment, expecting that Ingrid had more to say. When it became clear she did not, Cassandra filled the silence. "I believe I've heard of you, Doctor Peren. Electromancy, isn't it?"

Ingrid straightened her spine and squared her shoulders. "That's right."

"You must have spent a great deal of time in the storm, then. Is it true what they say, about the souls out there?"

A strange, fixated look entered Ingrid's eyes and a hollowness seeped into her voice. "I've seen it myself. They forced the soul right out of my assistant. I tried to speak to the new soul... It just screamed. Wandered out into the storm and never came back." She stared past Cassandra as if she was still out there in the gale.

"You must be very lucky not to have suffered the same fate," said Cassandra softly.

"Luck is only part of it," Ingrid said, her voice turning stony. "I figured out how to stave them off after that. They only seem to recognize human faces, you see. I've taken to wearing a mask in the storm."

"Like the one you're wearing now?"

Ingrid ran a finger up the beak of her mask as if pushing glasses up her nose. "Not quite. The one I use outside covers the entire face. I'm not sure whether it's strictly necessary, but the experimentation it would require to determine that is... rather distasteful." She paused for a moment. "I would have to go through a few more assistants in the process." Another pause. "That was a joke."

Cassandra smiled despite herself. The woman's lack of charm was somehow itself endearing. "You must not be from Genesis then, if you're studying the storm. The edge of it must be two hours from here by carriage, isn't it? That's an awfully long commute."

"I started my studies while living in Coraxis, but I've been moving frequently since then in order to stay close enough to the cloud perimeter while avoiding the destruction. It would seem that Genesis is set to be the last holdout before the storm completely swallows the planet, so I believe this is where I shall stay."

"Then I hope you find the city welcoming. It's not what it was years ago, but we've been working tirelessly to keep it a haven for the displaced."

"'We' being you and your... colleagues?" Ingrid's gaze briefly drifted across the room, landing on Nora's masked and robed form. Two of the more useless priestesses still stood by her side.

"Of course."

"Of course." Again with the analytical look. "And how do you like your work, Priestess? Not exactly what you signed up for, I imagine."

Cassandra pursed her lips. "Didn't I tell you to dispense with the title? The work... The work is exactly what I signed up for. I don't think she could say the same." She looked over at the High Priestess.

"I should think not. You, though — this is what you wanted, Pries- Um. Cassandra?"

Cassandra smiled faintly at the misstep. Informality clearly came uneasily to this woman. "Did I want God to die? Did I want the storm, its destruction? No. But I wanted change." She shrugged and looked around. "And we've got it."

Ingrid tilted her head and her brow, or what could be seen above the mask, wrinkled. She looked down, swirling her champagne flute. Then, as if coming to a decision, she abruptly finished the glass and set it on a side table. "You say you prefer directness. Then perhaps you can answer something for me, Cassandra."

Now this promised to be interesting. "Ask away."

"What is the point," Ingrid gestured around the hall, "of all this?"

Cassandra furrowed her eyebrows and followed the gesture, surveying the cathedral, the party. "I'm not sure I understand. It's just a Genesis Night celebration."

"Exactly. Why are we celebrating a god who has been dead for years? Why does the date She created the world matter when we can see its end approaching?" An intensity crept into Ingrid's voice, a righteous incredulity.

Cassandra cocked her head and stared hard. Ingrid met her gaze with her own steely look, chin raised in preparation for defiance.

Tone even, Cassandra said, "Do you know that you've just blasphemed directly to a priestess, in a cathedral, on our holiest night?"

Ingrid came back with a tone just as level. "If asking questions is blasphemous, then I don't intend to be pious."

On the other side of the room the orchestra began the first notes of the Dance of Creation. The shuffling of feet behind her announced that the center of the room was being cleared for the dance. A smile slowly spread across Cassandra's face. She took a step backward and held out her hand once more.

"I'll be happy to discuss those questions and others, if you grant me this dance."

The calculating look in Ingrid's eye fell away in favor of utter surprise. "I- I don't know the steps," she stuttered.

"They're simple. Don't worry, I'll lead." Cassandra let a little mischief slip into her smile. "Or don't you think you can figure it out, Doctor?"

Ingrid's eyes narrowed. "That's a rather obvious ploy, isn't it?"

"That doesn't mean it's not going to work."

Ingrid blinked owlishly, hesitated, then smiled slightly. "One dance."

She took Cassandra's hand. The priestess led them to the middle of the room where dozens of other couples surrounded them, starting the first steps of the dance. Ingrid's shoulders tensed and she glanced at the crowd furtively as if an assassin hid in their midst, until Cassandra met her eyes and smiled reassuringly.

"It'll be fun, I promise. Come on, it's like this. You stand opposite to how I am." She stood sideways and put their palms together, raised between them. Ingrid jumped to follow along.

"Then we spin, see?" Cassandra began moving to pivot around their hands in the center. "And in a moment we'll turn and change directions."

Ingrid nodded, a look of intense concentration on her face as she tried to match Cassandra's steps and only failed a little. At the change of directions she turned a little too quickly, not at all the graceful spin of the other dancers. Cassandra chuckled a little.

"You were right. This really isn't your milieu."

"I tried to tell you," Ingrid hissed, which only made Cassandra laugh more.

"Never fear. The next step is even simpler."

"There's *more*?"

"Of course. You've really never seen the Dance of Creation before? It's traditional."

"Perhaps once or twice, but I cannot stress enough that this is not the kind of thing I do."

The circulation slowed to a halt and Cassandra turned to face Ingrid, who did the same, albeit with a moment's delay. "Give me your hands," said Cassandra, and Ingrid put them out haltingly. Cassandra took them and placed one on her own shoulder, then put her own free hand on Ingrid's waist, which made her flinch a little. The priestess gave an apologetic look.

"Are you ready for more spinning?" she said.

"There's an awful lot of that, isn't there?"

"It's supposed to represent... something. To be perfectly honest, I never could remember all the symbolism of the steps," she said, and started them twirling.

"Some priestess you are," said Ingrid. She didn't clarify her joke this time, which Cassandra decided to take as a sign of increased familiarity rather than seriousness.

They were in the second concentric circle of dancers which had formed, a fact which Ingrid only now seemed to be noticing; she began to glance around but was quickly

forced to refocus on the dance as the distraction took her out of step. "Do you know, this pattern of dancers is reminiscent of the alchemical formula for a waterproofing agent."

"You're an alchemist as well, then?"

"It's what I did before the storm — what I got my degree in." Evidently deciding she was familiar enough with the rhythm of the steps, she took her eyes off their shoes and made eye contact with Cassandra, a thing which she had not done much of previously. "What about you? Were you a priestess four years ago as well?"

"I was."

"Then you must have known Her."

"I did."

"What was She like? I've always wondered."

Cassandra was silent for a long time then as they whirled around the cathedral. It was not the first time she'd been asked that question, but giving Ingrid the rote responses of 'kind' or 'wise' did not seem satisfactory. Finally, she said, "She was carefree."

"That," Ingrid said, frowning, "is not what one wants in a god."

"No. But that was alright. We did Her caring for Her."

The song softened to a close and the dancers slowed, breaking apart and bowing before departing the floor or finding new partners. Cassandra released Ingrid and took a polite step back. Ingrid straightened her waistcoat and took a deep breath.

"What did I tell you?" said Cassandra. "Didn't we have fun?"

"We did," said Ingrid. "Let's never do that again."

"As you wish. In that case, Doctor Peren, I'm afraid I have other guests to attend to. You know how it is." Ingrid nodded and Cassandra began to turn away, but then thought better of it. "Out of curiosity, why did you accept our invitation?"



Ingrid's shoulders straightened. "I'd heard the Grand Cathedral has an extensive library."

"I should have guessed," said Cassandra with a smile, and pointed behind Ingrid. "Take that door downstairs and follow the longest hallway until you reach a set of double doors, and if anyone questions your presence, tell them I sent you. I recommend the Divine Dictations section. There's nothing like it anywhere else in the world."

Ingrid grinned wolfishly. "Wonderful. My deepest gratitude, Cassandra."

"But of course. Perhaps I'll see you there later — I have been meaning to catch up on my reading." She bowed, and Ingrid returned the gesture. "A pleasure to meet you, Doctor."

"And you as well."

They both turned and melted back into the crowd.