

Magic of Love

By Robert V Aldrich

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

Silstri swung down from the branch and landed on the rare patch of dry, firm ground. A white tigris, the feline woman rose onto her feet and surveyed the bog. Patches of swamp grass stood out among the puddles and thick viscous pits of muddy water. Moss-covered trees towered overhead, roots deeper than even the water could go keeping them standing. The calls of ravens and other carrion eaters drifted through the lazy air.

Silstri turned around and gestured for her party to follow. From around a giant tree stepped the noble knight Jodria. In blue and white armor of the holy order, she carried her banner in her hand, her sword resting by her side. "I do not like this," the knight told the others.

"I bet not," said Faftra. The archer was almost a third shorter than Silstri and that was before he stooped over. Dressed in brown and green, he seemed at home in the swamp. "This mud isn't going to do your armor any favors."

"Quiet," whispered Lotak, the wizard. An older man with patches of pink skin dotting his deep ebony complexion, he hovered above the water's surface, untroubled by the terrain. His staff across his legs, he hovered over towards Silstri. "Do you spy anything, cat?"

"I see much. I hear even more, but I find no evidence of this witch we seek," said the woman, the ears atop her head twitching. The tips barely stuck out around the thick mane of gray and white hair. Her white fur clashed with the light green bandeau across her buxom chest. The strap of fabric was marked with darker stripes like tiger claws. The short skirt, scarcely wider than a thick belt, matched the pattern.

"She is here," Lotak assured the cat woman. "The villagers spoke with earnest when they told us of her." He floated around Silstri and looked into the woods. "I do not believe they would have misled us."

"Not deliberately, perhaps," said the catwoman. She climbed a few meters back up the tree and surveyed the swamp. Marsh and bog stretched as far as the eye could see. Rivulets of mud sputtered as gas and heat escaped from the depths. Sulfur and stench choked the air that was ominously still. "What sort of beast would make this place its home?"

"One who wishes to be undisturbed," answered a high-pitched, evil voice.

Silstri dropped out of the tree as Jodria and Faftra ran beside her. The three fell into a familiar defensive posture, with Jodria standing tall. Faftra

and Silstri took up crouched positions, ready to attack. Lotak floated slowly towards them, less worried and more suspicious.

"Who dares to disturb me?" came the cackle from the still air. "What fools enter my domain?" The mysterious voice laughed maniacally.

"We are adventurers," said Jodia, stepping forward from the others. She held aloft the banner, making clear the image of deep green with the golden circle from which five rays rose outward. Her head high, her chin raised, Jodia called commandingly, "We come to you seeking aid in the quest to defeat Sulpanier, who has risen from the darkness."

The sky was robbed of light. Darkness descended over the four as the air grew heavy. Night came abruptly over them, though without stars or moon. The swamp existed in shadow and shade. "And what concern of mine is Sulpanier? A necromancer's myth who keeps skeletons in line."

"Sulpanier is no myth," Silstri spoke to the darkness and the voice. "With my own eyes, have I seen it."

The darkness slowly parted. The unnatural nighttime receded into the multitude of shadows of the bland swampland. Light crept back across the muck and mud. The air was no longer choking and thick. More than that, however, the four were no longer alone.

A woman stood across a mud patch from them. She wore robes of black and gray, further stained brown by the wearying life of the bog. Tangled hair and chapped skin marred an older face. Her left eye was devoid of color, even as she stared fixed on the four. "What would you have of old Cassandra the Seer?"

Lotak's eyes flared wide, then he quickly looked away. He shifted in his floating seat, subtly hiding his face behind his hand.

"Cassandra the Seer," Jodria said with reverence and respect, approaching her just a few steps. With a gulf of swamp mud between them, they spoke across the gap of muck. "We have heard legend that you possess an artifact known as the Illuminated Thurible. It was forged by the light of creation, or so we have been told."

"That old censer?" Cassandra dismissed. "What use have you of it?"

"It is known that the Illuminated Thurible may lead us towards a path of smiting Sulpanier," Jodria told the witch. "With its innate wisdom, we hope that it will guide us towards weapons, tools, or some other means with which to defeat this malignancy which will otherwise spread across all the world."

"Hmmpf," Cassandra snorted. She looked passed Jodria's broad shoulder. "What say you, archer? And you, kitty-kitty?"

"Kitty-kitty?" Silstri growled, her arms crossed. The hair of her mane bristled, her ears twitching as she sneered.

"Seek you the Thurible? Seek you the might and matters to defeat Sulpanier?" She leaned the other way to see around Jodria. "And how about..." Her words drifted off. Head darting back and forth, she tried to see around the armored warrior to the wizard subtly positioned behind her. The witch leaned left, then right, each time not quite catching glimpse of the man. Silstri and Faftra looked at each other, confused, then at Jodria. The knight likewise hedged a bit before turning and looking over her shoulder. When finally she stepped out of the way, Lotak was revealed and exposed to the witch. Her ancient eyes narrowed as she struggled to see. Once she could see, she struggled to place the man's face. And then, like a bolt of lightning, her eyes flared wide, utterly saturated with hate. "You!" she snarled.

Lotak dropped his hand, his eyes cast down. He sighed as he accepted his fate. He lifted his eyes to the witch and tried to smile. "Hey, Cassie."

"Don't you Cassie me, you wretch!" the witch shouted, murderous eyes set on him.

Jodria turned from Cassandra to Lotak and back. "Wait, what's going on?" she asked.

"Cassandra, we need your help," Lotak told her.

"I'll bet you do," she snapped at him. "I should have known better than to answer the calls of strangers. I should have smote you all before you even got into the swamp."

"Whoa, she can do that?" Faftra exclaimed. "Dude, why are we bothering with the turntable-thing?"

"Thurible," corrected Jodria.

"Yeah, who cares," Faftra said. "Hey, lady, wanna come join our team?"

"Silence, whelp!" Cassandra roared. She shoved her hand at Faftra, but nothing happened. He looked confused, then moved to ask her, when no sounds escaped his mouth. He tried to speak again, only for again no sound to escape his mouth. Silence induced panic in him

Jodria whirled around to Cassandra and, despite the bog between them, she drew her sword. "Release him from your magic!"

Silstri held up her hand and protested. "Wait, wait, let's talk about this for a second," she asked Jodria.

"Cassie, you and me are long gone," Lotak tried to explain.

"You're damn-right!" she yelled. "You left me on a mountain cliff! You placed upon me a burden you knew I could never accept! And you did it by stealing that which mattered most to me!"

"An artifact?" Jodria asked Lotak.

"Her love?" asked Silstri.

'Her virginity?' signed Faftra.

"Wait, you can speak again?" Silstri realized of the archer. "Dammit," she grumbled.

"Long have I dreamt of having my revenge," Cassandra cursed Lotak. "Long have I wished to see your hideous face once more, so that I might—"

"Hideous? Oh really? You're one to talk," Lotak jabbed.

"You try dealing with eczema in a swamp, you ass!" Cassandra yelled. "I can move moons and summon the rains but because a bitch got a dermatological condition, I'm an outcast."

"Well you look like a leper," Lotak told her.

"I'll make you a leper!" Cassandra yelled. She drew back her hand, an orb of incandescent power forming in her grasp.

Lotak sighed and told the others, "I'd run if I was you." Cassandra threw the ball, Jodria and Silstri diving for cover. Faftra leapt behind Lotak, dropping into a defensive crouch. Fortunately, the ball of light went flying off-center and struck a patch of mud well left of Lotak. "Pitch underhanded; it works better for you, limp-wrist," he insulted her.

Cassandra yelled again, absolute rage contorting her face. She created another ball of light and hurled it, this one flying wide yet again.

"What happened between you two?" Jodria asked, yelling over the explosions from the magical projectiles.

"We were familiar to one another, a lifetime ago," Lotak told her, still watching Cassandra for any sign of her aim improving.

"Translation; you hit it and quit it," said Faftra.

"Hey, you can talk again," Silstri recognized. "Dammit."

"She did not take my need to put the well-being of the world ahead of her," Lotak told Jodria.

"The well-being of the world, my hind end, you ass!" Cassandra yelled. She lobbed another orb of crackling light at him. This one seemed to fly true, so Lotak caught the ball of light. The instant it reached his grasp, it shattered into a thousand pieces, which latched onto him. He watched in terrified surprise as the glowing shards began to absorb into him. But with only a whip of his hand, he drove the light from him like so many roaches from a sudden flame.

"At least I'm not hiding out in some swamp because I couldn't stop myself from getting old!" he yelled back at her.

"At least I don't go chasing skirts young enough to be my granddaughters!"

Jodria and Silstri both turned and stared slack-jawed at Lotak. "Dude," Faftra told him with a lecherous nod of approval.

Jodria stepped between the two magic users and stamped her banner. "What is happening?" The question was rhetorical. "Do we find ourselves between two former lovers, where the flames of affection have become barbs of betrayal? Is this so base a dynamic what keeps us from our quest to save lives?!"

"You're damn right!" Cassandra yelled. She threw both her hands forward, lightning arching from her fingertips. The blasts of blue lightning struck the ground and the trees but any blast that drew near the four flowed right into Lotak's extended hand.

"You really were one for melodrama, Cassie," he said. "I'm sorry if we didn't end on the terms you might have preferred, but I had other business to attend to."

"Yeah, that other business was my student!" Cassandra yelled. She clapped her hands. When she opened them, a spiral of tentacles came roaring out, flailing madly at the four.

"Okay, that's a new one," Lotak admitted as the tentacles attacked.

Jodria slashed her sword, hacking through a tentacle with all her might. Faftra let fly with two arrows, the pinpoint accuracy scoring shots right into the tentacles and causing them to recoil in pain. Silstri, on the other hand, ran around the entire battlefield. Bounding on foot and palm, she leapt across the watery gaps between mud puddles, and came laterally at Cassandra.

Cassandra released her hands, causing the tentacles to disappear. She turned to Silstri just as the cat girl leapt at her. With a wave of her hand, Silstri froze in the air, the blades of the metal claw on her right hand just centimeters from Cassandra's throat.

The near-strike registered with the witch and she nervously rubbed her own neck. "I've let you get the better of me," she said, glancing at Lotak. "Not again," she told him. She crossed her arms and then unfurled them in a complex motion. In doing so, Silstri landed on her feet. Cassandra had disappeared entirely, leaving behind not even any footprints.

Jodria glanced around worriedly, then resolved the conflict's end was genuine. She sheathed her sword as she stood up straight. An angry pallor fell over her and she turned her ire towards Lotak. "Start talking, wizard." Lotak feigned ignorance and innocence simultaneously, but Jodria was having none of it. "Spare me your evasions. Speak quickly. Speak plainly."

Lotak's indignation fizzled out and he sighed, deflating in surrender. He finally just shrugged. "Oh, what's there to say?" he asked. "We were a thing, then we weren't. She took it bad."

"Yeah, I've dated women who 'took it bad'," Faftra said as he and Silstri came to Jodria's side. He leaned on his bow as he looked back to where Cassandra the witch had stood. "Women don't 'take it bad'. Women get treated badly and hold a usually very understandable grudge."

Silstri nodded as she joined. "What is her gripe? What grudge does she hold that she'd hidden herself away?"

Lotak stepped down from his floating, feet adjusting to the mostly-solid ground. A wet squelch came from beneath his soft-soled shoes all the same. "I'm not sure I'm to blame for that. She was always a reclusive one."

"You may not be the source of her reclusion, but you've blame to address, all the same," Silstri all but accused the wizard.

Her argument was aided by Faftra agreeing, "For real, man."

Jodria sighed and wiped her face with her gloved hand. "We need to find solid ground to camp on. We've not the time to leave the swamp, and I don't believe we can give up on the Illuminated Thurible. The threat of Sulpanier is too great."

"How do you plan on getting it?" Faftra asked their leader. "We don't actually know where this Cassie-the-Spellcaster is? She just disappeared."

"No, but we found her," Jodria insisted. She looked at the sky and exhaled with patience. "We shall merely have to find her again."

Twilight.

An orange hue covered the world. The clouds were like an umber haze over the heavens. A distant raven flew lazily through the air. The hot day had turned into a sweltering afternoon, which progressed into an insufferable evening. Humid air stuck to the skin and choked the lungs. The smell of rot and ruin was accompanied by the gurgle of swamp mud.

Faftra returned to the camp with a long frog pole, several giant toads caught in the spines. "They don't look too appetizing but they're big," he announced.

Silstri approached him, her tail swishing behind her as she walked. With her fur-covered bare foot, she nudged one of the frogs with the claw of her toe. She sneered at the dead thing, her feline nose crinkling. "How certain are you that they're not poisonous?" she asked, her ears laying back as she stared at the dead amphibian.

"Oh, they're poisonous as hell," Faftra told her as he slit the belly of one of the frogs. He used the pommel of his curved dagger to push back the woodland-green hood of his cowl and he wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "The trick is to cook 'em real good, and only after you remove the sebaceous glands. Otherwise, the heat from the cooking won't kill all the toxins."

Silstri seemed less than impressed. She turned away and muttered, "I'll stick to the hardtack."

"Your loss," Faftra told her as he continued to clean the food, squatting before the fire. A squirt of liquid caught him in the face and he fluttered his eyes. "Or my funeral," he acknowledged before resuming.

Jodria exited from the small tent; little more than an over-sized tarp propped up by a central pole. She clapped her hands and sighed, desperate for some semblance of accomplishment to the day. "Our shelter is secured. How comes the warding sigil?"

By the tree they camped against, Lotak was applying paint delicately with his finger. "The sigil is complete," he said as he worked like a master painter completing a landscape. "I am simply trying to increase its effectiveness to include—" He slapped his neck, then looked for the gnat that had gotten away. "To include more than mammals and reptiles."

Jodria checked on Silstri and Faftra, then faced the floating Lotak. "I do not relish pursuing this...this path towards your jilted lover. Hopeless as it may be, I must ask, have we any other options? If we cannot find your besmirched former-lover, what else can we do?"

"There are always other artifacts," Lotak told her. "There are always other methods of combatting evil. We needn't fixate on one single avenue." He floated back from the tree to consider his work. He looked into the open air and listened for more insects but noticed the air was noticeably absent of buzzing annoyances. He smiled contentedly and began to clean his finger. "That said, the Thurible is our best bet. It is not only the surest but also the closest."

"And we are certain your romantic victim has it?" asked Silstri, arms crossed, hip cocked out, eyebrow raised.

Lotak put away his cleaning rag, setting it into the pouch on his robe's belt. "She is hardly a victim. You see the magic she wields."

"The powerful are more protected against wounds, but a wound is a wound," Jodria told him coldly. "And a wound of the heart may have few protections of any kind."

"I'm starting to get the impression you blame me for this predicament," Lotak suggested with a congenial chuckle.

Jodria didn't seem to mind the mildly-phrased accusation. But she returned the favor by stating clear, "I believe you are very capable of being indelicate with the heart of another."

Her care in speaking seemed to resonate with Lotak. His eyes fell from her and he glanced away. Jodria watched him think for a moment, then rose. "I've not always been a warrior for light and goodness," she confided to him in a quiet, thoughtful tone. "I was a wife, once. And even then, more than one man made me smile. I've known the agony of loss, and the pain of heartache." She looked into the swamp as the last lights of day faded into the recesses. "I can sympathize with one who sought to be rid of social interaction, lest the pain renew in some fashion." Jodria headed away, going to join Faftra. "No woman has found her soul scarred by love that has not considered the embrace of solitude."

Lotak continued to stare for a long time. He finally glanced into the growing night, across the fire where his three companions prepared their meal. Passed the dancing flames, passed the shadows, passed the distance, he knew Cassandra was watching. Not saw; knew.

Night.

The still air hung heavy over the marsh. A clear sky let the shine of the moon light all. Trees cast thick-canopied shadows over the churning and bubbling puddles of mud and muck. Gossamer strands hung without shifting from the gnarled branches of ancient trees.

Silstri was curled up in a ball next to Jodria. The knight slept with her hand curled around her sword, her armor oiled and drying on its rack. Faftra slept outside the tent, a dagger poised nearby as he slept with his head against the tree.

Awake and moving, Lotak floated around the camp. His magical hovering made no noise and scarcely stirred the air. He looked over his companions, then turned and faced into the swamp. He began to hover on, speeding over land and water alike. Flat, placid bogs were covered in a thin layer of muck that reflected the moonlight. Moss and peat hung from the branches of dead trees. Stagnant air was thick with odors and vapors slowly churning their way up through the thick mud that caked to every tree and plot of solid land.

He arrived at a hill of moss and scraggly grass, a sandy beach hidden behind a large, dead tree. He hovered around the tree and held up his hand. A dozen sigils carved into the wood of the tree lit up like torches. He smiled; more than amused, empathetic. He looked at the hill and exhaled slowly. "Come on, Cassie. Let's talk."

A wind with no origin and no destination blew by him, rustling his hair and his robes. It blew away a layer of sand. More than loose soil was blown away, but an illusion as well. The magical and practical obfuscation was cast away, revealing the opening of a small hut built into the hill itself. A circular door with a large iron knocker in the very center. And standing in the entry way before the door was Cassandra the Seer. Two-colored eyes glowered at Lotak, her arms were crossed over her chest. She scowled at him, her wrath less volatile but burned no cooler. "You've got some cheek, you have," seethed the bog witch.

Lotak sat to one side, setting his chin against his thumb. He studied Cassandra the way he would a mystic puzzle. Finally, he surrendered a self-aware sigh. "Look..." He started, then thought better of it. "I've killed," he told her. Her anger grew but he said more, allaying it. "Killing me won't give you the closure you think it will." He saw her realize the warning he gave her wasn't what she first thought, nor what she expected. The thoughtful softening of her brow was the sign he needed. "May I come

inside?" he asked, giving her a charming smile, one built on honesty and humility, not power. He flashed his eyebrows while simultaneously producing a flask in his left hand. "I've got some Glenn Dorniq. Aged. It's not a century yet, but it's still Dorniq."

Cassandra looked at the flask and he saw her considering. "Give me until your glass is done. If you still want your revenge...well..." He extended his hand to her, offering her the flask.

Cassandra reached out and snatched the flask from him. She popped the cork and smelled the contents, crinkling her nose at the scent. Deciding it was valid, she glared at Lotak for a moment longer and warned, "I'm only starting with three fingers." Lotak chuckled. Cassandra turned and ducked to enter her home. Lotak floated inside, stepping down from his floating as he crossed the threshold.

Through the entry that was little more than a hole in the side of the hill, was a large dome-shaped room. A bed hung suspended from the reinforced roof, several heavy books floating in the air to provide steps to reach the bed. A recliner was next to a table on which burned several candles. Four different altars were set up at the cardinal directions. Candles and offerings were arranged in correspondence to the preferences of the altar's recipient.

Lotak stepped onto the marble floor and considered it for a second. He slid his shoe across the smooth surface and said, "This must have been a nightmare to conjure."

"I've had a lot of time on my hands," Cassandra said as she crossed the single room to the cabinet next to an armoire. She took a pilsner glass from the cabinet and poured a generous fourth of the flask Lotak had offered her. Setting the flask in the cabinet, she faced Lotak. One arm crossed under her elbow, she leaned back against the cabinet. She took a sip, then gestured for him to say his piece.

He smiled on one side of his mouth before saying, "We were friends once."

"We were more than friends," Cassandra concurred. "Then you cheated on me."

"You cheated on me," Lotak returned.

"No, I took another lover; there's a difference," Cassandra growled. "We had an understanding. We had an arrangement. Our feelings were supposed to be secure. But they weren't, were they?"

Lotak felt crushed under the silence that followed. He pivoted mentally and swirled his fingers as he looked up. As he did, the ceiling was replaced with a starry sky. The hovel in the swamp became the grand procession of a royal court. Gold and gems shone from the opulent castle. Sharply-dressed soldiers stood at attention as a symphony played. Well-dressed men in suits and decorations danced with gorgeous women in gowns of majesty.

The open-air ball was held atop the keep of a grand castle. Stars twinkled overhead as candlelight and lanterns lit up the party. Music and laughter and good spirits filled the air, almost as much as the aroma of tasty delicacies and collected flowers. Starlight and the shimmer of decorations showed off the good fortune of the castle and the royalty it held.

Up the stairs onto the main landing of the ball came Lotak. Young and bright-eyed, he was on the cusp of manhood. His dark skin matched his dashing suit as he looked over the ball in amazement. He smiled and began to stride in, only to be stopped. The Herald stopped him with a white-gloved hand. Lotak froze, terrified he'd done something egregious, when the hall master asked, "Sir? Your name?"

"L-Lotak the, uh, the Wizard's Apprentice," said the young man.

The Herald nodded, "Very good, sir." He turned towards the waiting ball and brushed down his red tabard. He adjusted the black hat atop his white powdered wig before shouting with a deep, commanding voice, "Lotak, Apprentice to Soundry, Wizard-counsel of the Throne." The Herald bowed and gestured for Lotak to enjoy the party.

"Th-thank you," he told the hall master. He stepped forward towards the perimeter of the ball, but forgot the step. He stumbled forward, catching himself. He threw scattered glances every which way to see who had noticed, but it seemed blissfully few. He adjusted his jacket and stood up straight, then resumed walking. Around him, conversation swirled as did a few dancing pairs.

A few hundred people, most wealthier than he could fathom, shared time and conversation together, wearing dresses nicer than the dawn. Handsome men of daring deeds and beautiful women of intellect and class surrounded the lowly wizard. He stopped and took a breath, trying to steel his youthful resolve. Surveying the room again, his eyes immediately fell to a fair-skinned woman in a blue dress. She giggled at his arrival, then hid her eyes behind a gloved hand.

"Oh, I still recall this moment," Lotak told Cassandra, his current self stepping out from behind the illusion of his younger self. So much older, the wizard was evident in both versions – the ancient real and the illusion of

youth. Lotak looked at his younger self and smiled, recalling in ways he couldn't fathom in that moment how beautiful he and his life truly were. He followed the young man's gaze across the floor, to the young woman who had captured his attention and his heart. "I still recall seeing you across the dance floor, seeing the picture of beauty."

"The picture of beauty," Cassandra repeated with disdain. "You saw a hot piece of action you wanted to get with."

"I saw a woman of distinction," Lotak rephrased. He turned around and Cassandra of the now strode into the party. "I saw a woman with a smile like a poem and eyes like the heavens."

"Saw, saw, saw," Cassandra told him. She gestured across the party at her younger self. "You saw a woman with a chest taped up, in a dress it took me almost an hour to fit into. I could barely breathe. I looked good and you liked what you saw." Cassandra looked at her youthful self and was filled with pity and loathing. "Humans may be visual creatures, but as the sex who is most judged by appearance..." Scalding rage melted into exhausted disappointment. "You, and others, spoke of my beauty like it was some tragedy. Like I had lost the most valuable thing about me." The rage began to burn anew. "I was, and am, more than my appearance."

"If you're so bitter about how you looked, why did you dress so?" Lotak asked.

"Because it was expected!" she yelled at him. "I had no choice. Either dress the part, or you don't get to be in the play. So I dressed the part, thinking I was the only one out of sorts. I thought if I looked good, I would meet people who were as good as I looked." She spun around from her youthful visage and glared at Lotak. "This is all predicated on the ancient notion of beauty as some sort of divine blessing. When in fact, beauty is merely a mating ritual to get laid."

"Is that so bad?" Lotak asked her. He looked beyond her, his glance taking her attention. The two saw the shadows of their youth meeting for the first time, Lotak kissing the young Cassandra's hand. Around them, the ball continued, dozens of lives going on. And yet none seemed as important as the young love that was blossoming between the two illusions. Lotak grinned and turned a mischievous smile to Cassandra. "As I recall, you rather enjoyed what I had to show you."

The bog witch very grudgingly admitted, "Your oral game was on point, that's for sure."

"So was yours," Lotak praised her. The glare he got in return had just the slightest shred of a smile to it. "You're angry about sexism and

misogyny and you're taking it out on your first real boyfriend," Lotak told her. "Which is admittedly not entirely unfair, but it's not fair either."

"My gripes with you are about more the patriarchy," she told him. She waved her hand and the stars fell out of the sky like glitter dropping from above. The world grew cold and the ballroom was gone. The golden sheen of the castle was replaced with the battlements of war. Fires burned in the distance as soldiers patrolled the wall. Cassandra stormed back down the steps, leading towards the interior of the castle. "You were obsessed with work," she accused. The illusion dissolved like fresh paint in the rain. The decorations and the guests faded away in the span of a breath, replaced with the stain and darkness of the hell of war.

The castle at war was not a quiet place. The rumbling of troops, the clatter of armor, the tense whispers of fearful civilians, it all hung in the air like a poisonous smog. Through an illusion more perfect than reality walked Cassandra, leading Lotak towards the very heart of the keep. There, through doors mightier than any battering ram, the young Lotak was hanging an array of shimmering mirrors. Suspended in the air, he and a half-dozen other wizards were preparing the spectacle.

"You were here, doing this," Cassandra said, jamming her hand at the illusion. "This, this is where you needed to be?"

"The nation was at war," he reminded her. "And my master had—"

"Oh no," Cassandra warned him. "Don't you dare blame this on Sundry. I knew him. I knew him well enough to know he gave you time off. He knew war takes a toll and recreation and rest are needed. He also knew that your MOTHER had just died."

Lotak's face was a mask of wood, to Cassandra and himself. He fixed on his young self and saw him working earnestly to suspend the mirrors without string or support. A circular wave of the hands and they stayed in the air. "This was important," he whispered. He'd told himself that so many times, he wasn't sure if it was true or not. He weighed the task with the benefit of hindsight and his certainty wavered.

"No it wasn't," Cassandra argued. "And even if it was, do you really mean to tell me these other apprentices couldn't have handled this? Oh, I'm sure you shaved a half-hour off the time to complete but this didn't need your attention." Lotak turned from her, his back facing her and his own youth. "And during it all, I was left at arm's length and unable to even--"

Lotak whirled around at her, but his face was forced calm. "This doesn't concern you," he whispered protectively. He spoke quickly, almost frantically, but skillfully slowed down his words. "You didn't like that I was so dedicated to my work. I get that."

"I didn't like how easily you could focus on what you wanted, what you thought was important, to the exclusion of all else," Cassandra growled at him defiantly.

He asked delicately and carefully, "Why are you bringing this up? This didn't concern you." The pain in his voice was protected, guarded, from her now as it was from her then.

"It did concern me," Cassandra told him, honestly but no longer hatefully. "I saw the way you focused on work, when even your mother was not yet fully cold. You cried over her, yes, but...but then you went to work. You left her to be buried by the civil servants. You weren't there when she was put into the ground. You don't even know where she was buried."

"Funerals aren't for the dead; they're for the living," Lotak insisted spitefully to her.

"But I, a woman, saw the way you treated perhaps the most important woman in your life," Cassandra told him. "What less was I supposed to learn from this except that my place would forever be limited?" She sighed and looked away, turning her back to him. "Perhaps then I should have seen this coming. Perhaps I should have learned that lesson then, and not later. Not too late."

Alone together in the illusion, the pair stared away from each other. Their gazes settled on the middle distances of memory, on the negative space born by every word not said, every opportunity not taken. Mountains of regret toppled inside their respective souls as they finally confronted the emotions that had connected them to their mistakes of the past.

"I never subscribed to the notion that I could be everything to you, to anyone," Lotak maintained with a tone of wounded honesty. "We talked about this." He turned around, and in doing so, the castle was lost in a swirl of magic and memory. In its place was a rural hut. Made of local stone and topped with a thatched roof of more necessity than engineering, the hut had seen numerous renovations and expansions over the ages. What had once been little more than lean-to had become a small structure of some endurance. High on a mountain peak, a few dozen travelers shared the warm and dusty hearth along with warmed drinks. Through windows frosted by ice of the season and the altitude, the occupants looked out into the endless sea of stars.

By the window, at a two-person table, Lotak and Cassandra sat together. Holding each other's hand across the table, they were older now. Cassandra's hair had grown long, wound throughout with lace and ribbon. Her face showed the first lines of age but her experienced eyes hadn't lost their luster for life and the wide world. Lotak likewise was more seasoned,

with the first shreds of gray hair in his beard, but with plenty of boyish charm to his smile.

Around them, the occupants of the mountain escape were warming themselves. Furs and thick clothing, rough lives and abrasive temperaments didn't keep them from singing and laughing, at times raucously. Big dogs with heavy fur traveled behind the barkeeper as he carried flagons of ale and plates of meat and bread. The room smelled of smoke and spice, but the cold was kept at bay.

Lotak approached the table and looked at their youthful illusions. "I told you what I wanted to be, and what I needed you to be." He pulled over a chair and sat next to his own reflection, looking at the young Cassandra. "You needed a level of affection and care I just wasn't capable of. I said we should go our separate ways, or find a way to reconcile." He looked up from the table at the older Cassandra. "And so we reconciled."

Lotak, young and old, both looked to their right. A bard sat by the fire, playing the lute. He had a smile and wide, expressive eyes. Dressed in red and orange, he looked like a forest in autumn. And from his fingers, he drew out a song that transcended emotion. "He was handsome, I'll give you that," Lotak told her. "And I liked him. He was tender and sweet. He talked about flowers as color and emotions incarnate, not botanicals and...and..." Lotak looked away.

Cassandra watched not the illusions around her but the man seated. He didn't look at her or even seem to acknowledge her as he looked down. But in time, he whispered, "I suppose I was..."

"Jealous?" she asked.

"Envious," he corrected. "I saw how he made you smile." Lotak's eyes were watering up. "And he made you smile...in a way I..."

"Could never?" she asked sourly.

"Felt like I could never know," Lotak told her. His honesty surprised her. She looked at the illusion with a new perspective. "I didn't want to deny you that; I wanted it too." Lotak looked down at his own hand, then at the hand of his illusion which held the younger Cassandra's hand. "I envied you for it."

Cassandra's gaze softened as so many events in the intervening years fell into place, fell into a new light. "Well..." she said, as much to herself as to him. Cassandra breathed slowly. "Now it makes sense," she whispered. The illusion fell around them, dropping like curtains from a railing. The hut collapsed like sand into a beach. Overhead, a storm was brewing. A few tiny drops of rain came out of the sky, promising a torrent as soon as the

black clouds finally arrived. The coastal town was battered down, shutters secured and doors sealed tightly.

Through the pre-storm ran a young woman. Red hair trailed behind her, a scar down the right side of her face, right through her eye. She ran right passed Cassandra and Lotak, both of them turning as she sprinted. "I always felt like there was something with you and eyes. The scar through her right eye, my eyes," said the old woman.

Lotak smiled at her and said, "Eyes are mirrors into the soul."

"Windows into the soul, you old goat," Cassandra scowled at him.

"Goat means Greatest Of All Time," Lotak said with a flash of his eyebrows.

"You old hog," Cassandra rephrased, even as she failed to keep away her smile.

Several men went running passed the two wizards. The aged magic users watched them go, not needing to see the fight to hear the flashes of magic and see the bursts of might. "You saved her," Cassandra recalled. "You saved her from being strung up, and probably worse before that, and you saved her from the storm as well."

"She wasn't just..." Lotak tried to argue.

"No, I know," Cassandra promised him. "I get it, I do. There was something magical that night. And not the flimsy magic we peddle in. Something real, something unique and special. But you can't think those moments will be the norm." She stepped out of the beach-front alley they watched from and looked down the street. The black clouds overhead swirled, churning a storm that was fast approaching. "You met her in an emotional high, and then expected that to continue. And when it didn't, you mistook your own troubles for ours." She turned and faced Lotak. "I liked her, I did. She was a friend to me. Almost a sister. But when the spark of the moment faded and the passions cooled, you blamed me for what was simply inevitable."

Lotak stepped out now, joining her in the street. "I see it now," Cassandra told him. "All this time, I thought you heartless and cruel. I thought you used me. You used everyone around you." She brushed his face with her hand, stroking the cheek of a man she had once fallen for. "The sadism I accused you of, was really misplaced masochism. I thought you cruel. And in truth, you were really just a moron."

"I was a man who didn't know my heart," Lotak said.

"That's redundant, my dear," Cassandra said, as she stepped close to him. Rain began to drop harder now, the torrent coming faster. Cassandra smiled bittersweetly and took Lotak's hand. "Let's," she suggested. He squinted, confused. She placed his hand on her hip as she said, "Dance. As we did, on that first night." Thoughtful memories led her to close her eyes in the illusionary rain. She took his other hand as she cupped his shoulder. She began to sway slightly. The sentimentality of it made Lotak smile and he began to step lightly as well, the two drawing close. Rain fell, pelting them, but together they danced, their bodies saying what their words could not.

With the dawn's first rays parting over the horizon, Silstri opened her eyes. Curled up in a feline ball, she scratched behind her ear and yawned wider than her jaw seemed capable of. She sat up and looked around, startled to see Lotak sitting at the fire with Cassandra. The bog witch stirred a metal bowl of thick soup. She looked up as Silstri rose in a defensive crouch and gave the cat woman a partial smile. "You're safe, kitty."

The mere hint of an unknown voice caused Jodria to leap out of the tent, still dressed in nothing but a gown. Wielding her sword, she jerked her sleep-caked gaze around for sight of the foe, but found no immediate threat. Her nose twitched as she caught whiff of the morning meal simmering over the fire. "Is that...sage?" she asked. When she finally awoke enough to notice the guest in their midst, she lowered her sword. "What is happening?"

Lotak snickered in his floating basket, hovering a couple of feet above the mostly-dry ground of the hill in the swamp. The dawn was a stark orange sky that was kept at bay by the dense humidity. A far-off buzzard called and the surface of the swamp bubbled as deep gasses churned with the movement from night to day.

"This is breakfast," said Cassandra before testing the soup. "I felt a bit ill for treating you all so poorly yesterday. It wasn't right of me to take my ire for this ass out on the rest of you." She glared at Lotak who only smirked, accepting her now-harmless condemnation. "I haven't had the chance to cook for guests in a long time," Cassandra went on in a tone within eyeshot of being friendly. "And I imagine your stomachs are turning from that fool's dinner last night. Red frogs are dangerous."

Jodria was about to answer, but she looked down at Faftra still snoring. She looked at Silstri who just shrugged. "Let the idiot sleep," the cat-girl suggested.

Jodria tossed her sword back into her tent and came to join the fire. "Quite a change of heart," she said to the witch.

"I had some issues to work through," Cassandra told her. She stirred the soup a bit more while Lotak turned and pulled from his pack the Illuminated Thurible.

A nine-sided lantern made with plates of silver and steel, it hung from a ring made of solid iron. Somehow, the artifact bigger than his head was light enough to handle with one hand. He held the intricate work of art out for her to see, then handed it to Jodria. The knight took the steel lantern-like pendulum and stared at it, unsure what to say or even what to think. She tried to speak, but confusion clashed with underwhelmed disorientation.

"A bit underwhelming, isn't it?" Cassandra agreed with the knight. "I didn't know what it was when I got it. I thought it was a lamp. I bought it at a yard sale."

"You're joking!" Silstri exclaimed.

"I wish," Cassandra muttered.

Jodria very reverently set the Thurible beside her and faced Cassandra with new intent. "Thank you," she said earnestly. "With this we can safeguard the world."

"For a time, perhaps," was Cassandra's only response. She took a quick sip of the soup and nodded. "This has animal in it; is that okay?"

Jodria nodded. "Preferable," said Silstri, already licking her chops.

Cassandra poured a serving into the first wooden bowl, warning, "It is hot but it isn't as tasty once it fully cools." She served Jodria, then Silstri, then filled herself a bowl. A bowl that Lotak thought was to be his. When she kept it and he protested, she didn't even spare him a glance as she told him, "Go catch a red frog, Merlin."

Lotak looked to Jodria and Silstri for aid, but they both sided with Cassandra. The wizard exhaled in irritation, then pulled his legs up underneath him. Hovering above the ground, he floated away to find some food.

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