

*Thud! Thud!*

I jumped and grabbed my chest. The customer for this set of prints was not expected for at least three days. Each breath came shorter. Who stood behind that door?

“Best go to the kitchen, Leith,” Papa reminded me.

After a pause, I nodded. He always had me disappear when customers came. Many would not buy from a household containing a beast aspect. The routine slowed my racing heart. I moved to the kitchen where the front door blocked any sight of me.

Papa Morvin gripped the arm of his work chair, unhurriedly lifting himself and dusting off his hands. His back arched with age, and yet his frame still filled the room.

As he made for the door, Mother strode into the room. Her skirts swirled around her thin figure as she dusted her hands off too. Either in the back sewing or taking account of the print shop’s funds, she dropped anything to greet a customer. Her reddish-brown hair gathered high in a bun, completed with her only silver pin through it.

“A new patron?” she asked quietly, without directing it to either of us.

Papa Morvin opened our shop door. His polite smile held fast, but his eyes widened. I gripped the wood of the kitchen doorway.

“Fine day to you sirs,” Papa greeted, lowering his head for this company.

“This is the residence of the Mayweather family?” one of the visitors asked.

“As you say. What do we owe the pleasure?”

“I am Stewart Ainsley, attendant to the crown and here on official business. Is Leith Mayweather home?”

“Come meet our guests, Leith,” Papa requested, pushing the door wide so everyone had full view of each other.

Though curious, my shoes felt of lead as I came forward. I rounded the doorway to reveal an assembly of three men. The one in the middle, Stewart, wore a navy coat with every button secured. His tan trousers crisped down the center, breaking only to be fitted into tight riding boots. He leaned onto a walking cane, black with studs of gold. His eyes shielded by thin spectacles.

The Royal Guards that flanked him stood at ease. One had ginger hair and a disinterested frown. The other hung further back. His black hair covered much of his face, but his gray eyes met mine without falter. Despite the summer sun, it no longer felt warm in our home.

I dropped my gaze. Though at ease, chain mail laid under those tunics and the hilts of sword and staff jutted from their cloaks. The trio filled the doorway completely.

This had to be about last night. I ran my hands along my apron, trying to dispel the sudden sweat. Though my guts twisted, I defaulted to my mother's teachings. With short steps and hands clasped together in front, I approached the door. I fell into a curtsey and lowered my head. I held it longer than appropriate before rising to look at Stewart.

Stewart's eyes widened a fraction before going dull once more. The rest of him did not waver. Few could say the same when meeting me.

"Do you have any other beast aspects?" he asked. I shook my head. His eyes held my yellow ones a few beats longer. "By birth or acquired?"

"By birth," I said, fighting to stay above a whisper.

"Hmm. We need to discuss last night," Stewart said flatly. "Sit."

Papa's tea table was sized to host two customers, so Mother pulled in a few chairs for the guards and herself to sit behind us. Papa sat at my side and we faced Stewart together. Mother left to make a pot of tea in the kitchen.

"I will get straight to the point," Stewart stated. "We received reports of mass property damage last night."

It was my turn to act unmoved. My heart pounded, but I held still. I needed to hear what he knew.

"Many light crystals were broken and an intruder escaped. The guards say they saw a lamplighter. You were the only one on record for that route." Stewart let silence fall. Did he even blink?

I shifted in my seat despite myself. My chest constricted and my hands began to sweat again. They had all the information that mattered. It led them straight here. I had no defense, only words.

“It was terrifying. I had no idea Omens could destroy lamplights like that. Truly monstrous.” I allowed the stress of the current situation to color my voice. The fact the creature escaped unnerved me, but that paled next to this visit.

“Where did you go once the lights went out? Why not make a report?”

“The guards ran after it, shouting all sorts of things. I didn’t want to get in the way, so I ran home,” I replied, running it over in my head and deciding to exaggerate. “You see, it was quite the fright. I- I just wanted to go home. Even now, I fear it will return if I speak of it.” The image of it leaping towards my face still lingered. That was enough to drudge up the panicky sound in my voice.

The whistling of the kettle broke through. The wail grew until it cut off with a clang.

“I see. It is understandable to flee from such a beast of darkness,” Stewart said. “Then, you will not mind us conducting a test?” No inflection tailed his question.

“As you say.”

“Rion.” Stewart turned towards one of the guards.

Rion pushed his ginger hair back and watched me dully. He pulled his chair close to my right side. The scent of smoke drifted by.

“This test is to detect if you would be capable of destroying the light crystals.” Stewart explained.

I could not stop my brow from raising. I thought it impossible to detect magical ability, and unheard of to determine element affinity besides witnessing it.

“Put your forearms on the table and face me, if you would,” Rion asked.

Leaning over the tea table, I laid my arms across the wood with the palms up. The gleam of a guillotine flashed through my mind before I shook it away. My palms were still discolored gray from the ink, and now turned blotchy with sweat. I told myself this may be good. I could finally learn if magic hated me as much as I feared.

The guard leaned forward, setting a small light crystal on the table between us. The crystal shone brightly. He placed his hands on my wrists and closed his eyes.

“Tea, sirs?” I jumped as Mother strode in. She halted at the scene before her. “In a bit, I see.”

“The Omen did get away,” Stewart said. The sunlight through the window dimmed. Clouds were probably moving in for a midday shower. I needed to shut the windows before our papers got damp.

With his back to the gray light of the window, Stewart’s face became shadowed. “It tore through six other guards on its path,” he stated, “and we suspect several people were cursed in the event. While we do this test, sir Mayweather, do you have a mirror you could bring here? Sometimes we can use them to detect if a curse is in play.” Stewart looked at Papa. Their faces echoed each other – brows creased and lips turned down at the corners.

“Oh, of course.” He braced his hands on his knees to stand up. Disappearing up the stairs, they creaked as he went.

My left side felt cold without him. I shifted again, willing myself to stay relaxed while held to the table.

Mother’s chair screeched as she moved it to sit. I glanced at her before switching back to Stewart. The sheen of his spectacles masked where he looked. Both of his hands clasped over the walking cane propped between his legs.

The guard clamped his grip down so much it hurt. I shouted and pulled back, but remained pinned to the table. I turned to Stewart in a panic.

Teeth and red eyes.

The Omen leapt forward. Its maw opened wide, brimming with rows of jagged teeth. Strings of blood flung from its lips. Black fur choked out all light.

*Pop!*

Heat shot through my body.

The hands that held me down let go. Someone hissed in pain.

Scrambling up, I blocked my face, chest ablaze and heaving.

Water splashed across me. I staggered back and knocked into my chair, blinking in the bright sunlight that now poured through the window. A mist hung in the air, but dissipated swiftly.

Stewart stood too, both hands gripping his cane. His mouth had parted. His spectacles flashed as he shook his head in disbelief.

“I had to be sure,” he said to no one.

“Leith!” Papa called, thumping down the stairs with our hand mirror. His eyes locked on Stewart and he rushed the last few steps. Rion moved in front of Stewart, but a quick hand stopped the action.

Stewart lowered his hand back to the cane. “I will explain. Morvin, please. I swear it.”

Papa slowed to a stop, taking in my drenched hair and surely dumbfounded expression. He glanced at Mother who still covered her face in fright. Some of the teacups had shattered on the floor. He turned to Stewart. With a gruff exhale, he approached the table and dropped the mirror onto it with a clatter.

“Explain.” His expression stoney. I worked to compose myself as well. The sense of heat faded, replaced by the chill of drops running down my back. I wrapped my arms around my chest and fell back down onto the chair, still shaking from whatever just happened.

Stewart gestured to the table. Among the splatter of water, the light crystal rested in many pieces.

“She is a mage,” Stewart stated.

“We do not have a way to measure affinity amplitude or element, so I resorted to illusory methods. This situation called for it,” he explained.

“A mage,” Mother breathed. Her hands now clasped tightly together on her dress.

“So,” Papa started while thinking, “you have water affinity... illusion magic.”

“Precisely.” Stewart gestured to the crystal. “I made her see the beast from last night in the hope she would respond similarly. I was correct.” He gestured to the guard that had held me down. “Rion is a mage that was nearby last night. He was curious as well. By touching her, he could feel magic coming from her and not some trick.”

“My hands still burn from it,” Rion said, staring at the splintered crystal.

“I had to make sure she could do this. It is a known sign of a rare affinity,” Stewart explained. His voice had the faintest imploring edge now. “I apologize for the deceit. The mirror does nothing, I only had to get you out of the area. Though a print maker now, your earth affinity is still known.”

Papa stared at Stewart. A beat passed before he finally sat down, followed by Stewart. Letting out a deep breath, Papa said “Alright.”

“As far as we know, no one was hurt or cursed last night. The Omen did get away – it went Northward. Likely towards The Wastes. We were left with the mystery of broken crystals across several streets,” Stewart explained. “This has been recorded as a sign of the greatest among us – a light affinity wielder.”

All three of us snapped to attention. I forgot about the wet clothing clinging to my shoulders. “Light?” I nearly stuttered.

“Precisely.” Stewart smiled. It looked discordant on his face. “Such an affinity only happens a few times per generation, if that. Even His Highness discovered his ability when he burned out every crystal in the castle. Such ability turns the tide of war,” he explained, composing again to neutrality. “Leith, you are to attend The Wielder Academy.”