

It was a clear day in Cloudhelm City, the kind of day that's sunny and warm. People were out in droves, shopping and walking the streets, or commuting to work via their own vehicles or the city's public transportation. It was on these same streets that a young woman with long auburn hair, wavy and wild, walked toward a downtown cafe, a sort of hidden treasure amidst the other enormous buildings. She kept a leisurely pace, not in a hurry but also not trying to make her friend wait too long for her.

The cafe, The Gnome's Garden, was nestled between two brick buildings, one of which was some sort of business building and the other seemingly abandoned. The Gnome's Garden had a yellow-green awning stretching out over the sidewalk, providing shade and cover from rainfall if there were any. Lately it seemed that they might need to rename the city to Clearhelm; not a cloud had been sighted in months, though no one was complaining about the perfect weather.

The woman grabbed the large golden handle of the door and pulled it open with some effort. It creaked and set off the chime of a bell above her as she stepped inside, wiping her feet on the worn rug. She glanced around for a few seconds before spotting her friend and ambled over to take a seat.

"Meli! Finally, you're here." Sarah Toltrout, a woman around the same age as 'Meli', was short and a bit podgy, with medium length dusty brown hair and brown eyes. She grinned at the new arrival and excitedly tapped the table. "It's been so long!"

Meli, whose full name was Amelia Hale, set her phone and wallet down on the tabletop and grabbed the menu handout in front of her. She waved one of her hands nonchalantly as she replied, "It's still busy out there, you know. Hardly any spots on the transit."

Sarah nodded, taking a sip of her tea. "The elementals are all so swamped, trying to work out if we're just in a natural drought or if something else is going on."

"They should be consulting the High Mages. Surely *they'd* know if danger was near," Meli scoffed.

Elementals were mages—magic users—who controlled certain elements. Some were fire mages, water mages, earth mages, et cetera. Not only could they control the specific element they had an affinity for, but they could also conjure it. There were many levels to a mage's power, and usually the High Mages tested magic users to see where they'd be best suited in terms of a career. The High Mages were the most powerful Mages in a country, the ones who could foresee past, present, and future, the ones who could calm mass hysteria, the most important magic users in the world.

They resided in Kilwich Estate, the largest city in Edenia. It would take all day for someone to walk from one end of the city to another. Meli had never been there, but her parents had, once they came into their magic. Her little brother, Arion, had also traveled there when he was ten, a few days after his birthday and his first incident of magic. Meli remembered the look on her parents' faces, beaming as their son held a previously empty pot that had boiling water inside. It was still unclear whether he was a water mage or a fire mage, but it could be possible he had a dual affinity.

“How’s life at the shop?” Sarah asked, bringing Meli out of her mind.

Meli shrugged, “Oh, you know. The usual boring and droll.”

“Have you looked at any other jobs recently?”

Shaking her head, Meli looked back down at the menu, eyeing an ice cream soda. “There’s just nothing I really like,” she sighed, “you remember the academy fair? Well, I went through that whole fair twice, and nothing spoke to me. Granted, it was mostly geared toward magic students, but even the non-magic parts were just as boring to me.”

“As long as you’re happy, Meli, there’s nothing wrong with being a seamstress.” Sarah reached over and patted her arm.

A waiter came up and refilled Sarah’s tea, asking Meli what she would like. Meli ordered a strawberry cream soda. The waiter set down a glass and waved his hand with a flourish. Meli disinterestedly watched the glass fill with the drink she requested, bubbling and fresh-looking. The waiter bowed and walked away. “Now, would that be considered practical magic or elemental?” Meli asked sarcastically.

Sarah shot her a look that said ‘knock it off’ and took another sip of her tea. “It’s not like you’re the only non-magic person in the world, you know.”

Ouch. She was right though. Sarah’s hardworking parents were non-magic users although she herself had a touch of practical magic—being able to move things without touching, very basic magic that improved quality of life overall—and she excelled in the field she worked in. And then there was Meli, the oldest and only daughter of the Hales, and their only non-magic family member in a long line of practical and elemental mages. Meli shook her head, clearing her mind. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring the mood down.”

“Hmm,” Sarah gave a half-hearted shrug.

“Did you know Clarie Devenson had to reorder her ball gown for the Estate Fair?” Meli said, changing the subject and wanting Sarah to be happy again.

It worked. Sarah’s eyes lit up mischievously at this information and leaned forward. “No way, really? This is what... the third time she’s had it resized? What is that old bat doing to herself?”

“Seriously, she’s eating up our tulle fabric like no one’s business!” They both laughed. The rest of the visit passed by jovially, and soon Meli was on her way to work.

Her mother’s shop, *In A Stitch*, was on the east side of the city. She recently moved her business once it began to pick up and get noticed by the more affluent population of Cloudhelm. While this was convenient for their family, it made Meli’s commute that much longer, and she now stood in the crowded train, bumping against other strangers. A buzzing in her head distracted her from hearing other people talking, and suddenly she felt sick and found herself fighting off nausea. It soon passed after the train stopped and she stepped off.

After about twenty minutes of walking, she arrived at the shop, entering through the back door. She put her phone and wallet in a small cubby and went up

front to greet her mother. Ellen Hale was a middle-aged woman with a tidier shorter version of Meli's same hair. She was talking with a customer when Meli walked up. "Hey, mom," she said.

Ellen turned to her daughter, giving a brief smile, "Hey, Meli. This is Mrs. Bradshaw."

Meli glanced up at an even older woman who had a thick head of white and gray curls. She was wearing an obnoxious feathered hat. "Hello," Meli greeted her.

"Mmph," Mrs. Bradshaw dismissed her without even a glance. "Now, Ellen, I need these pantsuits hemmed. Three quarter inches. You got that? I need them to be exact, I've got plenty of conferences coming up and I plan to wear them then. Three. Quarter. Inches."

"Yes, Mrs. Bradshaw," her mother slid over a pack of orders for Meli to go through and the younger woman grabbed them and headed toward the back of the shop.

Several hours after fixing, mending, and cutting, Meli got up to stretch her legs. She walked through the back office to the area behind the counter, smiling at a couple of women in the store looking at different displays and samples. After leaving the counter, Meli turned to walk toward the front of the shop and knocked into a mannequin, taking it down as she fell. She landed hard on the tile of the shop in a loud clatter.

The mannequin had flown forward and hit a display rack of different styles of drapes hung on hangers. One of the customers in the store was standing on the other side and yelped in surprise as the rack lurched toward them. Meli scrambled to her feet, muttering an embarrassed apology, and hurriedly fixed the rack and the mannequin. She turned to scuttle off to the back again, trying to hide her face in her mound of curls.

As she left, she heard one of the women loudly exclaim, "Well! Wasn't that just fine?"

"I know," the other one groaned, "my foot hurts from that stupid rack getting shoved into it!"

"Do you think we'll get a discount if we complain?"

"Probably. Ellen's daughter is a walking hazard! I'm sure this isn't the first time she's caused her to lose money."

They laughed and Meli froze in place, hiding on the other side of the wall behind the counter. The first lady spoke again, "Ellen! Ellen, hurry! Petra's been hurt!"

Meli saw her mother quickly approach from the workroom, walking past her and mumbling, "What happened now?"

"That clumsy daughter of yours knocked over a mannequin and it hit a rack—anyway, it damaged Petra's foot!"

"I am so, so sorry, Milna, Petra. I have a first aid kit back here that I can grab for you, if you'd like?" Meli heard the slight panic in her mother's voice.

Of course. She'd cost her money, again. It wasn't the first time her lack of balance had caused problems, and probably wouldn't be the last. Meli leaned against the wall,

feeling her heart pounding in her chest and a lump forming in her throat that painfully threatened tears.

"Are you going to pay for her medical bills if she has to go to the hospital?" Milna pressed.

"N-now, let's not jump to the extreme here. Petra, how about you follow me back and we see if there's any reason to go to a healer?" Ellen tried hard to diffuse the situation.

"Your daughter is the one responsible for this, Ellen. When are you going to fire her? Is she even going to be punished?" Milna kept cutting off any chance for Petra to actually respond.

"Can you stop bringing my daughter into this?" Ellen asked tiredly. "I'm sure it was an accident and not an attack of any sort."

"I cannot believe this! Petra, we're leaving, and we're going to take our business elsewhere. Perhaps Cindra Larson has space for us?"

At the mention of Cindra Larson, her mother's 'rival', Meli was done just listening. Feeling incredibly upset, she turned around the corner and shouted, "That is enough!" Her hand had shot out, extended in the direction of Milna. Along with it flew several rulers, pins, and even a pair of scissors. They whizzed past Milna's face and body and embedded in the wall behind her. One pair of scissors exploded through the storefront glass, which sent shards cascading all around it.

Milna screamed. Petra's face paled. Meli's mother whipped around to gawk at her daughter.

"I-I thought you said she was a *dud*?" Petra whispered to Milna.

Immediately, Ellen ushered the women outside of the store, turned the lock, and flipped the sign to *Closed*. She summoned some plywood from the back room and used a stapler to cover the window as she quickly cleaned the glass up. "Amelie, let's go. We're going home."

"What?" Meli asked, following her slowly as her mother rushed around. Her head was pounding.

"Let's go, *now*!"

Ellen all but shoved her outside through the back door and into her old station wagon. The drive back to their home was quiet but passed in a flash. When they were inside the house, her mother turned on her. "What the *hell* was that? Since when did you start using telekinetic magic?"

"W-what are you talking about?" Meli stuttered, taking a step back.

"What happened at the store. Y-you... *threw* things at Milna. But you didn't *touch* any of those things, did you?"

"I-mom-it..." Meli didn't know what to say, and her head hurt so, so much. "I don't know."

“I cannot believe you’ve been hiding this all this time. You couldn’t talk to me? Or your dad? Even Arion? Why didn’t you say anything sooner?” Her mother pleaded with her.

Meli couldn’t take the look on her mother’s face, so she simply walked past her and headed for her room. Slamming the door behind her, she threw herself on her bed, burying her face into a soft blanket. Time seemed to tick by slowly as she emptied her mind and almost fell asleep... then there was a timid knock on her door.

“What?” She called out sleepily.

The door opened, and her brother walked in. “Meli? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” she mumbled into the blanket.

A weight sank down next to her, causing her to turn her face. Her brother smiled at her, his freckled baby face complexion bringing a small smile to her face like always. “Well, you’re not a dud, so that’s cool, I guess.”

Meli laughed, nudging him away playfully. “I still don’t know what that was about,” she said in a serious tone. “I don’t know if it was a one off, or the start of something. I have no idea where it came from, but mom is just accusing me of lying, and I... I’m hurt?”

He nodded, reaching over to pat her head. “It’ll be okay. We’ll figure it out.”

“What if we don’t? What if some soldiers show up here to take me away for unsolicited magic use?” Meli worried. There had been people before her who had hidden their magic in order to do crimes, or cause harm to innocent people. It seemed that’s what her mother had been trying to hint at.

Arion shrugged, “Then you go to jail and die.”

“Arion!”

“What? You’re the one being all doom and gloom, Meli.” He stuck his tongue out and laughed, and she pushed him again. “How about you just stop thinking about it? Go garden and play in the dirt or something. It always makes you feel better.”

Meli sighed but nodded. “Alright. Don’t follow me and bug me, or I might just toss you out of the attic window,” she joked lovingly. Arion stuck his tongue out at her again as she left her room.

Minutes later, she was sitting on her knees next to the pond, staring into the water. There were small tadpoles swimming near the surface and a flash of goldenrod let her know that one of their koi were saying hello. Meli mulled over the events of today, feeling saddened that her mother accused her like that. She felt that pang in her throat and didn’t bother to fight it.

Tears spilled over her cheeks, hot and slow. Bowing her head, she started whispering, “Gods... whoever is up there? I-I know I haven’t... been the best at practicing our faith, but... I really need to know. Am I going to be okay? What’s happening to me?”

Suddenly, a shrill piercing noise cut through the air and made her hands fly to her ears, clamping over them tightly. Just as sudden as it had appeared, it was gone.

Meli uncovered her ears and opened her eyes, looking all around her for the source of the noise. A chirping, quieter this time, sounded in front of her and her eyes snapped back to the water.

At first, she didn't understand what she was seeing. Instead of the tadpoles or a koi fish in the water, she saw trees. She saw a cloudy, dark sky. A large creature, blurred, rampaging through a forest. In her mind, she heard screams; not of other animals, but of people, people that were terrified and helpless. Her fingers quivered as she reached out to touch the surface of the water.

It happened quickly. The moment her fingers touched the surface, it rippled and then formed a funnel shape. She felt her entire body pulled forward from her navel, and she was falling, falling, falling....