

Inkstains, she was late *again!*

Everys rushed out of her apartment. She only paused long enough to make sure her emergency pen was tucked in her pocket, then she flew down the stairs. She poked her head into her shop as she passed. It didn't look like anyone was lining up at the front door.

Hot air poured down her throat the moment she stepped outside. The humidity was bad enough, but with the added stench of garbage from the restaurant next door, Everys gagged. She hurried out onto the streets of Fair Havens.

She skirted around a crowd gathered by the local crier. The image of a well-dressed Grerid man filled the screens on the column as he shared the latest news. “—still no word on whether King Narius has picked a new bride. Rumor has it the palace has interviewed dozens of eligible women, but none have caught his fancy.”

Everys snorted. *This* was news? The criers rarely shared anything important, and never anything relevant to Fair Havens. Why not report on the crushing poverty most residents in Fair Havens experienced? Or the lack of education? Or how the Dynasty's bloated military budget could relieve so much suffering in Fair Havens and other neighborhoods like it? But no, obviously the most important news was about the king's love life or lack thereof.

As she slipped around the crier, she bumped into someone. She turned to apologize, but stopped short. A man with blue-tinged skin and dusky hair glared at her. A Weyfir. Not a surprise. A lot of the races lived in Fair Havens.

“Watch where you're going, scribbler.” He spat the last word like it tasted bad.

She bristled at the insult. She should have been used to such hostility and hatred, but it always stung. Every's rolled her eyes at his back, debating whether or not she should hurl a fake apology at him. But no, she was late enough as it was. So, she turned and headed down the street.

As she rounded a corner, she came up on a wall of people clogging the intersection. Every's, at least a head taller than most of the people in the crowd, popped onto her toes to see what caused the jam. Bastion constables and military police formed a ring around one of the buildings, most of them trying to disperse the crowd. That many constables in Fair Havens was odd enough. But the military too?

Then she saw why. The building was covered with a new coat of graffiti. "RETURN THE HEARTH" and "FREEDOM FOR THE COLD LIGHT" had been painted in bright green letters, along with hastily drawn pictures of the Bastion skyline burning while two large trees loomed behind it. Every's shuddered. The last thing Fair Havens needed was Cold Light terrorists. She shook her head. So much broken, so few people willing to work on solutions.

Spotting an opening in the crowd, she slipped through to the empty street beyond. She pulled her digital scribe from her pocket and checked the time. Still running late, but maybe if she hustled, she could slip in right at the end.

Something crashed in the alley to her right. Her head snapped around, and she touched the pen in her pocket, if only to reassure herself. At first, she couldn't spot anything, but then she saw five wiggats slinking down the alley. She grimaced. The vermin weren't native to Bastion. Instead, someone had accidentally imported a wiggat horde from the Ixactl highlands. Since they didn't have a natural predator, the wiggat population exploded, especially in neighborhoods like Fair Havens. Most of the residents had learned to give the creatures a wide berth, and Every's knew she should just keep moving.

But then she heard the sound of someone faintly crying for help.

Every's hesitated. It was none of her business. And she was late. But another plea and the distinct hiss of wiggats sent her jogging into the alley.

She skidded to a halt when she found the vermin. Sure enough, the winged felines had encircled an old Grerid woman. She looked near death, wearing thread-bare clothing, her dark skin pocked and creased

like it was made of water-damaged leather. She weakly swatted at the wiggats and the vermin easily dodged.

Then they noticed Everys. Five of them faced her, snarling and spitting. Everys took a step back. Something rattled above her. She glanced up. Six wiggats glared at her from their perches on the surrounding buildings. So much for retreating. She'd have to use more drastic measures.

Everys yanked the pen from her bag and snapped it in half. The ink's acrid smell filled the alley, but it was quickly, thankfully, swallowed by the stench of garbage. She daubed some ink onto her finger and hastily smeared it onto the pavement. The rune she had in mind wasn't complex: a half-circle peppered with dots along the inside, with smaller squiggles radiating from the flat side and ending in diamonds. She glanced up at the wiggats. The horde advanced on her, ignoring their original prey. Good. They were in for a rude surprise.

Everys added the trapezoid which bisected the half-circle. There. Done, though the trapezoid's angles were too loose, the radiating squiggles too sloppy. It'd work, but she could have done better. Everys pressed her hand on one of the lines and willed the spell to activate.

Fire burst from the rune's center, and tendrils slapped each wiggat, missing the woman. Everys breathed a sigh of relief. Combat runes weren't her specialty.

The wiggats, screaming their indignation, clambered up the walls to escape. Everys nodded. As tempting as killing the vermin had been, unnecessary death was a sure way to get rebuked. She braced herself anyway, just in case the Singularity objected. When nothing happened, she darted forward to the old woman.

She was in rougher shape than Everys had thought, clearly suffering from a chronic illness. Her lungs rattled, and Everys didn't even have to touch her forehead to feel the heat.

Everys drained the rest of the ink, and then threw the pen's broken pieces into the trash. Once again, she worked quickly, sketching out a lesser healing rune. While she knew a more powerful variant, she couldn't use it. Old vows, old familial promises echoed in her mind. The lesser might not be as effective, but she had no choice. She knew this one better than the fire attack, so her finger moved practically on its own. This rune was more organic, like a fern unfurling on the woman's cheek. Sworls and curls intertwined and branched

out. Every's frowned. She could only do so much without accurate information. She sketched in pain relief, strength, and healing then added a command to break the fever and clear her lungs.

But once the healing rune was done, she drew a different rune on the woman's other cheek. She had spent too much time on this already, and every extra second risked exposure. Within a minute, she had finished. She pressed her hands against both sides of the woman's face and, taking a deep breath, activated the spells.

A wave of light rippled across the old woman's body and soaked into her chest. She gasped, her back arching and her eyes opening wide, then she took a deep breath, one free of rattling. She met Every's gaze, her expression filled with confusion.

But then she sniffed the air. Her eyes widened as she looked down at Every's inkstained fingers. The woman's confusion gave way to terror.

"Get away from me!" the woman rasped. "I know... I know what you are!"

Then the second spell took hold. The old woman went limp in Every's arms.

Every's released her held breath and gently settled the woman against the nearest wall. That was about as good as she could have—

Needles blossomed inside Every's chest, and she fell onto her rear, clutching at her sides as the rebuke took hold. She screwed her eyes shut as the burning sensation clawed up her throat and blazed in her cheeks, the same place where she had drawn the runes on the old woman.

Every's gritted her teeth. This made no sense! Smacking around wiggats was fine, but healing an old woman wasn't? Or was it because of the amnesia rune? Did the Singularity want her to get caught?

Just as quickly as it came, the pain vanished. Every's took a ragged breath and checked on the old woman. The spells had consumed the ink, leaving no trace of what had happened. The old woman would stay unconscious for another minute or two as the toratropic magic erased her memories of Every's. Best leave before she regained consciousness and asked awkward questions. Every's found a rag and wiped off her hands before she hurried out of the alley, hoping against hope that she wouldn't be too late.



“You are late.”

Every's glared at the acolyte. She wasn't *that* late. Based on the low droning coming from the armory, the morning rituals were still being performed. But she knew better than to antagonize him. If she attended the morning rituals regularly, it earned her tax breaks at the shop. If she attended daily, she could even earn her citizenship. She snorted at the idea. Tax breaks were good enough.

She slipped into the armory and hustled down the long hallway to the sanctum. She walked between statues depicting the Dynasty's lesser deities. On her right, the brooding Gravedigger. On her left, the twins Chance and Chaos. Flanking the sanctum's entrance were the kneeling Sun and Moons. And squatting over the door was the snickering Trickster. Every's didn't spare them more than a glance. Like most people living in the Dynasty's holdings, she knew they weren't real. They were mostly just good for making colorful curses.

As she stepped into the sanctum, she realized that the prelate and his acolytes weren't at the rostrum but stood at the weapon rack. She hadn't just been late. She'd almost missed the entire service. She skirted along the edge of the worshipers to find a place to watch. That wasn't easy; there were at least three hundred people packed into a space that should only have held half that many. Like so many things in Fair Havens, expanding the armory was on a perpetual to-do list that would never get done.

She finally found a spot near one of the support pillars. At the front of the room was the Warrior's statue, a ten-foot-tall carving of an imposing human male with distinct Hinaen features. The statue's eyes looked upward, his expression stern. His right hand was stretched out, his hand cupped to hold something. The prelate and acolytes carried a stone sword from the weapon rack and knelt before the statue. The prelate then rose and slid the sword's hilt into the statue's outstretched hand. Once the weapon was in place, the prelate turned to the assembled people.

“Today marks the beginning of Sword, a most auspicious month. During this time, we remember how the Warrior struck down those gods who stood between him and his beloved Water Bearer. His successors, imitating his strength, have struck down many enemies. The foul mage-kings of the Siporans, the Plissk and Dunestrider barbarians, and most recently, the Cold Light. Rejoice that the Dynasty is held in such strong hands.”

Every's fought the urge to laugh. “Strong hands” indeed. She had heard the rumors about how Queen Viara had walked out on King Narius two months earlier. While she didn't know the queen's reasons, Every's couldn't blame her. The Dynasty's kings were all monsters. Violent, vengeful, power-hungry, just like the Perfected Warrior they emulated.

Water dripped on her head, and she sighed, resisting the urge to glance at the ceiling. Water sprinkled from vents in the ceiling, symbolizing the Water Bearer's blessing and marking the end of the ceremony. The people funneled through the exit where the water poured out of two spouts, each one held by a carving of the goddess. The prelate and his acolytes stood at the entrance, holding identity scanners. As each worshiper left, they pressed a thumb against the device, recording their attendance. Just her luck, Every's had to approach the acolyte who had seen her late arrival. He sneered as she passed.

“Be careful, scribbler,” he whispered. “One day, we're going to finish the job.”

Every's didn't meet his gaze, but she knew what she would have found if she did. Open hostility. Hatred. A desire to see her dead. While the Drywell Laws had been repealed forty years earlier and discrimination against her people was supposed to be a thing of the past, most of the Dynasty's citizens conveniently forgot that. As far as they were concerned, every Siporan was a potential mage-king, ready to use their dark arts to slaughter innocent people as they did in ancient times. The very notion was ridiculous.

Except Every's had used those “dark arts” before the service. Drywell Laws or not, if anyone found out, she'd be dead.